

EXTRACT FROM
THE
PRIORY
OF THE
ORANGE
TREE

SAMANTHA
SHANNON

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Author's note

The fictional lands of *The Priory of the Orange Tree* are inspired by events and legends from various parts of the world. None is intended as a faithful representation of any one country or culture at any point in history.

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I

Stories of Old

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.

He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended.

– Revelation 20.1–3

I

East

The stranger came out of the sea like a water ghost, barefoot and wearing the scars of his journey. He walked as if drunk through the haze of mist that clung like spidersilk to Seiiki.

The stories of old said water ghosts were doomed to live in silence. That their tongues had shrivelled, along with their skin, and that all that dressed their bones was seaweed. That they would lurk in the shallows, waiting to drag the unwary to the heart of the Abyss.

Tané had not feared those tales since she was a small child. Now her dagger gleamed before her, its curve like a smile, and she fixed her gaze on the figure in the night.

When it called to her, she flinched.

The clouds released the moonlight they had hidden. Enough for her to see him as he was. And for him to see her.

This was no ghost. It was an outsider. She had seen him, and he could not be unseen.

He was sunburnt, with hair like straw and a dripping beard. The smugglers must have abandoned him to the water and told him to swim the rest of the way. It was clear that he knew nothing of her language, but she understood enough of his to know that he was asking for help. That he wanted to see the Warlord of Seiiki.

Her heart was a fistful of thunder. She dared not speak, for to show she knew his language was to forge a link between them,

and to betray herself. To betray the fact that just as she was now a witness to his crime, he was a witness to hers.

She should be in seclusion. Safe behind the walls of the South House, ready to rise, purified, for the most important day of her life. Now she was tainted. Soiled beyond redemption. All because she had wanted to immerse herself in the sea once more before Choosing Day. There were rumours that the great Kwiriki would favour those with the mettle to slip out and seek the waves during seclusion. Instead he had sent this nightmare.

All her life, she had been too fortunate.

This was her punishment.

She held the outsider at bay with the dagger. Faced with death, he began to shake.

Her mind became a whirlpool of possibilities, each more terrible than the last. If she turned this outsider over to the authorities, she would have to reveal that she had broken seclusion.

Choosing Day might not proceed. The honourable Governor of Cape Hisan – this province of Seiiki – would never allow the gods into a place that might be fouled with the red sickness. It could be weeks before the city was pronounced safe, and by then it would have been decided that the stranger arriving had been an ill omen, and that the next generation of apprentices, not hers, must be given the chance to be riders. It would cost her everything.

She could not report him. Neither could she abandon him. If he *did* have the red sickness, letting him roam unchecked would endanger the entire island.

There was only one choice.

She wrapped a strip of cloth around his face to keep him from breathing out the sickness. Her hands quaked. When it was done, she walked him from the black sand of the beach and up to the city, keeping as close as she dared, her blade pressed to his back.

Cape Hisan was a sleepless port. She steered the outsider through its night markets, past shrines whittled from driftwood,

under the strings of blue and white lanterns that had been hung up for Choosing Day. Her prisoner stared at it all in silence. The dark obscured his features, but she tapped the flat of her blade on his head, forcing him to lower it. All the while, she kept him as far away from others as she could.

She had an idea of how to isolate him.

An artificial island clung to the cape. It was called Orisima, and it was something of a curiosity to the locals. The trading post had been constructed to house a handful of merchants and scholars from the Free State of Mentendon. Along with the Lacustrine, who were on the other side of the cape, the Ments alone had been granted permission to continue trading in Seiiki after the island had been closed to the world.

Orisima.

That was where she would take the outsider.

The torchlit bridge to the trading post was guarded by armed sentries. Few Seiikinese had permission to enter, and she was not one of them. The only other way past the fence was the landing gate, which opened once a year to receive goods from the Mentish ships.

Tané led the outsider down to the canal. She could not sneak him into Orisima herself, but she knew a woman who could. Someone who would know exactly where in the trading post to hide him.

It had been a long time since Niclays Roos had received a visitor.

He was rationing himself a little wine – a trickle of his paltry allowance – when the knock came at his door. Wine was one of his few remaining pleasures in the world, and he had been immersed in breathing in its aroma, savouring that golden moment before the first taste.

Now an interruption. Of course. With a sigh, he uprooted himself, grumbling at the sudden throb in his ankle. Gout was back once more to vex him.

Another knock.

‘Oh, do shut *up*,’ he muttered.

Rain drummed on the roof as he groped for his cane. *Plum rain*, the Seiikinese called it at this time of the year, when the air hung thick and damp as cloud and fruit swelled on the trees. He limped across the mats, cursing under his breath, and opened the door a fraction of an inch.

Standing in the darkness outside was a woman. Dark hair fell to her waist, and she wore a robe patterned with salt flowers. Rain alone could not have made her as wet as she was.

‘Good evening, learned Doctor Roos,’ she said.

Niclays raised his eyebrows. ‘I strongly dislike visitors at this hour. Or any hour.’ He ought to bow, but he had no reason to impress this stranger. ‘How do you know my name?’

‘I was told it.’ No further explanation was forthcoming. ‘I have one of your countrymen with me. He will stay with you tonight, and I will collect him tomorrow at sunset.’

‘One of my countrymen.’

His visitor turned her head a little. A silhouette parted ways with a nearby tree.

‘Smugglers delivered him to Seiiki,’ the woman said. ‘I will take him to the honoured Governor tomorrow.’

When the figure came into the light from his house, Niclays turned cold.

A golden-haired man, just as drenched as the woman, was standing on his threshold. A man he had never seen in Orisima.

Twenty people lived in the trading post. He knew every one of their faces and names. And no Mentish ships would arrive with newcomers until later in the season.

Somehow, these two had entered unseen.

‘No.’ Niclays stared. ‘Saint, woman, are you trying to involve me in a smuggling operation?’ He fumbled for the door. ‘I *cannot* hide a trespasser. If anyone knew—’

‘One night.’

‘One night, a year – our heads will be sliced from our shoulders regardless. Good evening.’

As he made to shut the door, the woman jammed her elbow into the gap.

‘If you do this,’ she said, now so close that Niclays could feel her breath, ‘you will be rewarded with silver. As much of it as you can carry.’

Niclays Roos hesitated.

Silver *was* tempting. He had played one too many drunken games of cards with the sentinels and owed them more than he was likely to make in a lifetime. So far, he had stalled their threats with the promise of jewels from the next Mentish shipment, but he knew well that, when it came, there wouldn’t be a single wretched jewel on board. Not for the likes of him.

His younger self urged him to accept the proposal, if only for the sake of excitement. Before his older, wiser self could intervene, the woman moved away.

‘I will return tomorrow night,’ she said. ‘Do not let him be seen.’

‘Wait,’ he hissed after her, furious. ‘Who are you?’

She was already gone. With a glance down the street and a growl of frustration, Niclays dragged the frightened-looking man into his house.

This was madness. If his neighbours realised that he was harbouring a trespasser, he would be hauled before a very angry Warlord, who was not known for his mercy.

Yet here Niclays was.

He locked the door. Despite the heat, the newcomer was shivering on the mats. His olive skin was burnt across the cheeks, his blue eyes raw from salt. If only to calm himself, Niclays found a blanket he had brought from Mentendon and handed it to the man, who took it without speaking. He was right to look afraid.

‘Where did you come from?’ Niclays asked curtly.

‘I’m sorry,’ his guest whispered. ‘I don’t understand. Are you speaking Seiikinese?’

Inysh. That tongue was one he had not heard in some time.

‘That,’ Niclays answered in it, ‘was not Seiikinese. That was Mentish. I assumed you were, too.’

‘No, sir. I am from Ascalon,’ came the meek reply. ‘May I ask your name, since I have you to thank for sheltering me?’

Typical Inysh. Courtesy first. ‘Roos,’ Niclays bit out. ‘Doctor Niclays Roos. Master surgeon. The person whose life you are currently endangering with your presence.’

The young man stared at him.

‘Doctor—’ He swallowed. ‘Doctor Niclays Roos?’

‘Congratulations, boy. The seawater has not impaired your ears.’

His guest drew a shuddering breath. ‘Doctor Roos,’ he said, ‘this is divine providence. The fact that the Knight of Fellowship has brought me to *you*, of all people—’

‘Me.’ Niclays frowned. ‘Have we met?’

He strained his memory to his time in Inys, but he was sure he had never clapped eyes on this person. Unless he had been drunk at the time, of course. He had often been drunk in Inys.

‘No, sir, but a friend told me your name.’ The man dabbed his face with his sleeve. ‘I was sure I would perish at sea, but seeing you has brought me back to life. Thank the Saint.’

‘Your saint has no power here,’ Niclays muttered. ‘Now, what name do you go by?’

‘Sulyard. Master Triam Sulyard, sir, at your service. I was a squire in the household of Her Majesty, Sabran Berethnet, Queen of Inys.’

Niclays gritted his jaw. That name stoked a white-hot wrath in his gut.

‘A squire.’ He sat down. ‘Did Sabran tire of you, as she tires of all her subjects?’

Sulyard bristled. ‘If you insult my queen, I will—’

‘What will you do?’ Niclays looked at him over the rims of his eyeglasses. ‘Perhaps I should call you Triam Dullard. Do you have any notion of what they do to outsiders here? Did Sabran send you to die a particularly drawn-out death?’

‘Her Majesty does not know I am here.’

Interesting. Niclays poured him a cup of wine. ‘Here,’ he said grudgingly. ‘All of it.’

Sulyard drank it down.

‘Now, Master Sulyard, this is important,’ Niclays continued. ‘How many people have seen you?’

‘They made me swim to the shore. I came to a cove first. The sand was black.’ Sulyard was shivering. ‘A woman found me and led me into this city at knifepoint. She left me alone in a stable . . . then a different woman arrived and bid me follow her. She took me to the sea, and we swam together until we came to a jetty. There was a gate at the end.’

‘And it was open?’

‘Yes.’

The woman must know one of the sentinels. Must have asked them to leave the landing gate open.

Sulyard rubbed his eyes. His time at sea had weathered him, but Niclays could see now that he was only young, perhaps not even twenty.

‘Doctor Roos,’ he said, ‘I have come here on a mission of the utmost importance. I must speak to the—’

‘I will have to stop you there, Master Sulyard,’ Niclays cut in. ‘I have no interest in why you are here.’

‘But—’

‘Whatever your reasons, you came here to do it without permission from any authority, which is folly. If the Chief Officer finds you and they drag you away for interrogation, I wish to be able to say in all honesty that I have not the faintest idea why you turned up on my doorstep in the middle of the night, thinking you would be welcome in Seiiki.’

Sulyard blinked. ‘Chief Officer?’

‘The Seiikinese official in charge of this floating scrapyard, though he seems to think of himself as a minor god. Do you know what this place is, at least?’

‘Orisima, the last Western trading post in the East. Its existence was what gave me the hope that the Warlord might see me.’

‘I assure you,’ Niclays said, ‘that under no circumstances will Pitosu Nadama receive a trespasser at his court. What he *will* do, should he get wind of you, is execute you.’

Sulyard said nothing.

Niclays briefly considered telling his guest that his rescuer planned to come back for him, perhaps to alert the authorities to his presence. He decided against it. Sulyard might panic and try to flee, and there was nowhere for him to run.

Tomorrow. He would be gone tomorrow.

Just then, Niclays heard voices outside. Footsteps clattered on the wooden steps of the other dwellings. He felt a quiver in his belly.

‘Hide,’ he said, and grasped his cane.

Sulyard ducked behind a folding screen. Niclays opened the door with shaking hands.

Centuries ago, the First Warlord of Seiiki had signed the Great Edict and closed the island to all but the Lacustrine and the Mentish, to protect its people from the Draconic plague. Even after the plague abated, the separation had endured. Any outsider who arrived without permission would be put to death. As would anyone who abetted them.

In the street, there was no sign of the sentinels, but several of his neighbours had gathered. Niclays joined them.

‘What in the name of Galian is happening?’ he asked the cook, who was staring at a point above their heads, mouth wide enough to catch butterflies in it. ‘I recommend not using that particular facial expression in the future, Harolt. People might think you a halfwit.’

‘Look, Roos,’ the cook breathed. ‘Look!’

‘This had better be—’

He trailed off when he saw it.

An enormous head towered over the fence of Orisima. It belonged to a creature born of jewel and sea.

Cloud steamed from its scales – scales of moonstone, so bright they seemed to glow from within. A crust of gem-like droplets glistened on each one. Each eye was a burning star, and each horn was quicksilver, a gleam under the pallid moon. The creature flowed with the grace of a ribbon past the bridge and took to the skies, light and quiet as a paper kite.

A dragon. Even as it rose over Cape Hisan, others were ascending from the water, leaving a chill mist in their wake. Niclays pressed a hand to the drumbeat in his chest.

‘Now, what,’ he murmured, ‘are *they* doing here?’

West

He was masked, of course. They always were. Only a fool would trespass in the Queen Tower without ensuring his anonymity, and if he had gained access to the Privy Chamber, then this cutthroat was certainly no fool.

In the Great Bedchamber beyond, Sabran lay sound asleep. With her hair unbound and her lashes dark against her cheeks, the Queen of Inys would be a picture of repose. Tonight it was Roslain Crest who slept beside her.

Both were unaware that a shadow bent on slaughter moved closer by the moment.

When Sabran retired, the key to her most private space was left in the possession of one of her Ladies of the Bedchamber. Kattryen Withy had it now, and she was in the Horn Gallery. The royal apartments were guarded by the Knights of the Body, but the door to the Great Bedchamber was not always watched. After all, there was only one key.

No risk of intrusion.

In the Privy Chamber – the last rampart between the royal bed and the outside world – the cutthroat looked over his shoulder. Sir Gules Heath had returned to his post outside, unaware of the threat that had stolen in while he was elsewhere. Unaware of Ead, concealed in the rafters, watching the cutthroat touch the door that would lead him to the queen. In silence, the intruder removed a key from his cloak and slid it into the lock.

It turned.

For a long time, he was still. Waiting for his chance.

This one was far more careful than the others. When Heath gave way to one of his coughing fits, the intruder cracked open the door to the Great Bedchamber. With the other hand, he unsheathed a blade. The same make of blade the others had used.

When he moved, so did Ead. She dropped in silence from the beam above him.

Her bare feet lit upon the marble. As the cutthroat stepped into the Great Bedchamber, dagger aloft, she covered his mouth and drove her blade between his ribs.

The cutthroat bucked. Ead held fast, careful not to let a drop of blood spill on to her. When the body stilled, she lowered it to the floor and lifted his silk-lined visard, the same as all the others had worn.

The face beneath was all too young, not quite out of boyhood. Eyes like pondwater stared at the ceiling.

He was nobody she recognised. Ead kissed his brow and left him on the marble floor.

Almost the moment she moved back into the shadows, she heard a shout for help.

Daybreak found her in the palace grounds. Her hair was held in a web of gold thread, studded with emerald.

Every morning she kept the same routine. To be predictable was to be safe. First she went to the Master of the Posts, who confirmed he had no letters for her. Then she went to the gates and gazed out at the city of Ascalon, and she imagined that one day she might walk through it, and keep walking until she reached a port and a ship that would take her home to Lasia. Sometimes she would glimpse someone she knew out there, and they would exchange the smallest of nods. Finally, she would go to the Banqueting House to break her fast with Margret, and then, at eight, her duties would begin.

Her first today was to trace the Royal Laundress. Ead soon found the woman behind the Great Kitchen, in a recess draped with ivy.

A stable hand seemed to be counting the freckles on her neckline with his tongue.

‘Good morrow to you both,’ Ead said.

The pair sprang apart with gasps. Wild-eyed, the stable hand bolted like one of his horses.

‘Mistress Duryan!’ The laundress smoothed down her skirts and bobbed a curtsy, flushed to the roots of her hair. ‘Oh, please don’t tell anyone, mistress, or I shall be ruined.’

‘You need not curtsy. I am not a lady.’ Ead smiled. ‘I thought it prudent to remind you that you must attend on Her Majesty *every* day. You have been lax of late.’

‘Oh, Mistress Duryan, I confess my mind has been elsewhere, but I have been so anxious.’ The laundress wrung her callused hands. ‘The servants have been whispering, mistress. They say a wyverling snatched some livestock from the Lakes not two days ago. A wyverling! Is it not frightening that the servants of the Nameless One are waking?’

‘Why, you have hit upon the very reason you must be prudent in your work. Those servants of the Nameless One wish Her Majesty gone, for her death would bring their master back into this world,’ Ead said. ‘That is why your role is *vital*, goodwife. You must not fail to check her sheets each day for poison, and to keep her bedding fresh and sweet.’

‘Of course, yes. I promise I shall be more attentive to my duties.’

‘Oh, but you must not promise me. You must promise the Saint.’ Ead tilted her head towards the Royal Sanctuary. ‘Go to him now. Perhaps you could also ask forgiveness for your ... indiscretion. Go with your lover and pray for clemency. Make haste!’

As the laundress rushed away, Ead smothered a smile. It was almost too easy to fluster the Inysh.

The smile soon faded. A wyverling *had* dared to steal livestock from humans. Though Draconic creatures had been stirring from their long slumbers for years, sightings had remained uncommon – yet the last few months had seen several. It boded ill that the beasts were growing bold enough to hunt in settled areas.

Keeping to the shade, Ead took the long way to the royal apartments. She skirted the Royal Library, stepped around one of the white peacocks that roamed the grounds, and entered the cloisters.

Ascalon Palace – a climbing triumph of pale limestone – was the largest and oldest of the residences of the House of Berethnet, rulers of the Queendom of Inys. The damage wreaked upon it in the Grief of Ages, when the Draconic Army had mounted its year-long war against humankind, had long since been erased. Each window was fitted with stained glass in all colours of the rainbow. Its grounds were home to a Sanctuary of Virtues, gardens with shaded lawns, and the immense Royal Library with its marble-faced clock tower. It was the only place Sabran would hold court during the summer.

An apple tree stood in the middle of the courtyard. Ead stopped at the sight of it, chest aching.

Five days since Loth had disappeared from the palace in the dead of night, along with Lord Kitston Glade. Nobody knew where they had gone, or why they had left court without permission. Sabran had worn her disquiet like a cloak, but Ead had kept hers quiet and close.

She recalled the smell of woodsmoke at her first Feast of Fellowship, where she had first made the acquaintance of Lord Arteloth Beck. Every autumn, the court would come together to exchange gifts and rejoice in their unity in Virtudom. It was the first time they had seen one another in person, but Loth had told her later that he had long been curious about the new maid of honour. He had heard whispers of an eighteen-year-old Southerner, neither noble nor peasant, freshly converted to the Virtues of Knighthood. Many courtiers had seen the Ambassador to the Ersyr present her to the queen.

I bring no jewels or gold to celebrate the New Year, Your Majesty. Instead, I bring you a lady for your Upper Household, Chassar had said. *Loyalty is the greatest gift of all.*

The queen herself had only been twenty. A lady-in-waiting of no noble blood or title was a peculiar gift, but courtesy forced her to accept.

It was called the Feast of Fellowship, but fellowship only went so far. Nobody had approached Ead for a dance that night – nobody but Loth. Broad-shouldered, a head taller than she was, with deep black skin and a warm northern inflection. Everyone at court had

known his name. Heir to Goldenbirch – the birthplace of the Saint – and close friend to Queen Sabran.

Mistress Duryan, he had said, bowing, if you would do me the honour of a dance so I can escape from the Chancellor of the Exchequer's rather dull conversation, I would be in your debt. In return, I will fetch a flagon of the finest wine in Ascalon, and half will be yours. What say you?

She had needed a friend. And a stronger drink. So, even though he was Lord Arteloth Beck, and even though she was a stranger to him, they had danced three pavaues and spent the rest of the night beside the apple tree, drinking and talking under the stars. Before Ead knew it, a friendship had blossomed.

Now he was gone, and there was only one explanation. Loth would never have left court of his own accord – certainly not without telling his sister or asking leave from Sabran. The only explanation was that he had been forced.

Both she and Margret had tried to warn him. They had told him that his friendship with Sabran – a friendship struck up in their childhood – would eventually make him a threat to her marriage prospects. That he must be less familiar with her now they were older.

Loth had never listened to reason.

Ead shook herself out of her reverie. As she left the cloisters, she stood aside for a group of retainers in the service of Lady Igrain Crest, the Duchess of Justice. Her livery badge was embroidered on their tabards.

The Sundial Garden drank in the morning light. Its paths were honeyed by the sun, and the roses that trimmed its lawns held a soft blush. It was watched over by the statues of the five Great Queens of the House of Berethnet, which stood on a lintel above the entrance to the nearby Dearn Tower. Sabran usually liked to take walks on days like this, arm in arm with one of her ladies, but today the paths were empty. The queen would be in no mood for a stroll when a corpse had been found so close to her bed.

Ead approached the Queen Tower. The woodvines that snaked up it were thick with purple blossom. She ascended the many stairs within and made her way to the royal apartments.

Twelve Knights of the Body, clad in gold-plated armour and green cloaks for the summer, flanked the doors to the Privy Chamber. Floriated patterns covered the vambraces, while the Berethnet badge took pride of place on their breastplates. They looked up sharply as Ead approached.

‘Good morrow,’ she said.

The moment of caution waned, and they stood aside for a Lady of the Privy Chamber.

Ead soon found Lady Katryen Withy, niece to the Duke of Fellowship. At four and twenty, she was the youngest and tallest of the three Ladies of the Bedchamber, possessed of smooth brown skin, full lips, and tightly curling hair of such a deep red it was almost black.

‘Mistress Duryan,’ she said. Like everyone else in the palace, she wore greens and yellows for summer. ‘Her Majesty is still abed. Did you find the laundress?’

‘Yes, my lady.’ Ead curtseyed. ‘It seems . . . duties to her family have distracted her.’

‘No duty comes above our service to the crown.’ Katryen glanced towards the doors. ‘There has been another intrusion. This time, the knave was far less of a blunderer. Not only did he reach the Great Bedchamber itself – he had a key to it.’

‘The Great Bedchamber.’ Ead hoped she looked shocked. ‘Then someone in the Upper Household has betrayed Her Majesty.’

Katryen nodded. ‘We think he came up the Secret Stair. That would have allowed him to avoid most of the Knights of the Body and get straight into the Privy Chamber. And given that the Secret Stair has been sealed since—’ She sighed. ‘The Serjeant Porter has been dismissed for his laxity. From now on, the door to the Great Bedchamber must *never* be out of sight.’

Ead nodded. ‘What would you have us do today?’

‘I have a particular task for you. As you know, the Mentish ambassador, Oscarde utt Zeedeur, arrives today. His daughter has been rather slack in her manner of dress of late,’ Katryen said, pursing her lips. ‘Lady Truyde was always neat when she first came to court, but now— why, she had a *leaf* in her hair at orisons yesterday, and forgot her girdle the day before that.’ She took a long look

at Ead. ‘You appear to know how to attire yourself in a manner befitting your position. See to it that Lady Truyde is ready.’

‘Yes, my lady.’

‘Oh, and Ead, do not speak of the intrusion. Her Majesty does not wish to sow unease at court.’

‘Of course.’

As she passed the guards a second time, Ead sliced her gaze over the blank slates of their faces.

She had long known that someone in the household was letting cutthroats into the palace. Now that someone had given them a key to reach the Queen of Inys while she slept.

Ead meant to find out who.

The House of Berethnet, like most royal houses, had seen its fair share of premature deaths. Glorian the First had drunk from a poisoned cup of wine. Jillian the Third had ruled for only a year before being stabbed in the heart by one of her own servants. Sabran’s own mother, Rosarian the Fourth, had been slain by a gown laced with basilisk venom. Nobody knew how the garment had entered the Privy Wardrobe, but foul play was suspected.

Now the cutthroats were back for the last scion of the House of Berethnet. They inched closer to the queen with every attempt on her life. One had given himself away when he knocked over a bust. Another had been spotted as she stole into the Horn Gallery, and another still had screamed hateful things at the doors of the Queen Tower until the guards had reached him. No connexion had been found between the would-be murderers, but Ead was sure they shared the one master. Someone who knew the palace well. Someone who could have stolen the key, made a copy, and put it back in the space of a day. Someone who knew how to open the Secret Stair, which had been locked since the death of Queen Rosarian.

If Ead were one of the Ladies of the Bedchamber, a trusted intimate, protecting Sabran would be easier. She had waited for a chance at the position since her arrival in Inys, but she was

beginning to accept that it would never be. An untitled convert was not a suitable candidate.

Ead found Truylde in the Coffin Chamber, where the maids of honour slept. Twelve beds sat cheek by jowl. Their quarters were more spacious here than they were at any of the other palaces, but uncomfortable for girls who had been born into noble families.

The youngest maids of honour were fooling about with pillows, laughing, but they stopped at once when Ead entered. The maid she sought was still abed.

Lady Truylde, Marchioness of Zeedeur, was a serious young woman, milk-pale and freckled, with eyes like bone black. She had been sent to Inys at fifteen, two years ago, to learn courtly ways until she inherited the Duchy of Zeedeur from her father. There was a watchfulness about her that put Ead in mind of a sparrow. She could often be found in the Reading Room, halfway up ladders or leafing through books with crumbling pages.

'Lady Truylde,' Ead said, and curtsied.

'What is it?' the girl answered, sounding bored. Her accent was still thick as curds.

'Lady Kattrien has asked me to help you dress,' Ead said. 'If it please you.'

'I am seventeen years old, Mistress Duryan, and possessed of sufficient wit to dress myself.'

There was an intake of breath from the other maids.

'I'm afraid Lady Kattrien thinks otherwise,' Ead said evenly.

'Lady Kattrien is mistaken.'

More gasps. Ead wondered that there was any air left in the room.

'Ladies,' she said to the girls, 'find a servant and ask for the washbasin to be filled, if you please.'

They went. Not with curtsies. She outranked them in the household, but they were noble-born.

Truylde gazed at the leadlight for a few moments before rising. She deposited herself on to the stool beside the washbasin.

'Forgive me, Mistress Duryan,' she said. 'I am ill-humoured today. Sleep has eluded me of late.' She folded her hands in her lap. 'If Lady Kattrien wishes it, you may help me dress.'

She did look tired. Ead went to warm some linen beside the fire. Once a servant had brought water, she stood behind Tryde and gathered her abundant curls. Cascading to her waist, they were the true red of madder. Such hair was common in the Free State of Mentendon, which lay across the Swan Strait, but unusual in Inys.

Tryde washed her face. Ead scrubbed her hair with creamgrail, then rinsed it clean and combed out every tangle. Throughout it all, the girl said nothing.

‘Are you well, my lady?’

‘Quite well.’ Tryde twisted the ring on her thumb, revealing the green stain beneath. ‘Only ... irritated with the other maids and their gossip. Tell me, Mistress Duryan, have you heard anything of Master Triam Sulyard, who was squire to Sir Marke Birchen?’

Ead patted Tryde’s hair with the fire-warmed linen. ‘Not a great deal,’ she said. ‘Only that he left court in the winter without permission, and that he had gambling debts. Why?’

‘The other girls talk ceaselessly of his absence, inventing wild stories. I hoped to silence them.’

‘I am sorry to disappoint you.’

Tryde looked up from under auburn lashes. ‘You were a maid of honour once.’

‘Yes.’ Ead wrung out the linen. ‘For four years, after Ambassador uq-Ispad brought me to court.’

‘And then you were promoted. Perhaps Queen Sabran will make me a Lady of the Privy Chamber one day, too,’ Tryde mused. ‘Then I would not have to sleep in this cage.’

‘All the world is a cage in a young girl’s eyes.’ Ead laid a hand on her shoulder. ‘I will fetch your gown.’

Tryde went to sit beside the fire and finger-comb her hair. Ead left her to dry.

Outside the room, Lady Oliva Marchyn, Mother of the Maids, was rousing her charges with that crumhorn of a voice. When she saw Ead, she said stiffly, ‘Mistress Duryan.’

She enunciated the name as if it were an affliction. Ead expected that from certain members of the court. After all, she was a Southerner, born outside of Virtudom, and that made the Inysh suspicious.

‘Lady Oliva,’ she said calmly. ‘Lady Katryen sent me to help dress Lady Truyde. May I have her gown?’

‘Hm. Follow me.’ Oliva led her down another corridor. A spring of grey hair had escaped her coif. ‘I wish that girl would eat. She’ll wither away like a blossom in winter.’

‘How long has she had no appetite?’

‘Since the Feast of Early Spring.’ Oliva tossed her a disdainful glance. ‘Make her look well. Her father will be angry if he thinks the child is being underfed.’

‘She is not sick?’

‘I know the signs of sickness, mistress.’

Ead smiled a little. ‘Love-sickness, then?’

Oliva pursed her lips. ‘She is a maid of honour. And I will have no gossip in the Coffer Chamber.’

‘Your pardon, my lady. It was a jest.’

‘You are Queen Sabran’s lady-in-waiting, not her fool.’

With a sniff, Oliva took the gown from the press and handed it over. Ead curtsied and retreated.

Her very soul abhorred that woman. The four years she had spent as a maid of honour had been the most miserable of her life. Even after her public conversion to the Six Virtues, still her loyalty to the House of Berethnet had been questioned.

She remembered lying on her hard bed in the Coffer Chamber, footsore, listening to the other girls titter about her Southern accent and speculate on the sort of heresy she must have practised in the Ersyr. Oliva had never said a word to stop them. In her heart, Ead had known that it would pass, but it had hurt her pride to be ridiculed. When a vacancy had opened in the Privy Chamber, the Mother of the Maids had been only too happy to be rid of her. Ead had gone from dancing for the queen to emptying her washbasins and tidying the royal apartments. She had her own room and a better wage now.

In the Coffer Chamber, Truyde was in a fresh shift. Ead helped her into a corset and a summer petticoat, then a black silk gown with puffed sleeves and a lace partlet. A brooch showing the shield of her patron, the Knight of Courage, gleamed over her heart. All children of Virtudom chose their patron knight when they reached the age of twelve.

Ead wore one, too. A sheaf of wheat for generosity. She had received hers at her conversion.

‘Mistress,’ Tryde said, ‘the other maids of honour say you are a heretic.’

‘I say my orisons at sanctuary,’ Ead said, ‘unlike some of those maids of honour.’

Tryde watched her face. ‘Is Ead Duryan really your name?’ she asked suddenly. ‘It does not sound Erysi to my ear.’

Ead picked up a coil of gold ribbon. ‘Do you speak Erysi, then, my lady?’

‘No, but I have read histories of the country.’

‘Reading,’ Ead said lightly. ‘A dangerous pastime.’

Tryde looked up at her, sharp-eyed. ‘You mock me.’

‘By no means. There is great power in stories.’

‘All stories grow from a seed of truth,’ Tryde said. ‘They are knowledge after figuration.’

‘Then I trust you will use your knowledge for good.’ Ead skimmed her fingers through the red curls. ‘Since you ask – no, it is not my real name.’

‘I thought not. What *is* your real name?’

Ead eased back two locks of hair and braided them with the ribbon. ‘Nobody here has ever heard it.’

Tryde raised her eyebrows. ‘Not even Her Majesty?’

‘No.’ Ead turned the girl to face her. ‘The Mother of the Maids is concerned for your health. Are you quite sure you are well?’ Tryde hesitated. Ead placed a sisterly hand on her arm. ‘You know a secret of mine. We are bound by a vow of silence. Are you with child, is that it?’

Tryde stiffened. ‘I am not.’

‘Then what is it?’

‘It is none of your concern. I have had a delicate stomach, that’s all, since—’

‘Since Master Sulyard left.’

Tryde looked as if she had struck her.

‘He left in the spring,’ Ead said. ‘Lady Oliva says that you have had little appetite since then.’

‘You presume too much, Mistress Duryan. Far too much.’ Tryde pulled away from her, nostrils flared. ‘I am Tryde utt Zeedeur,

blood of the Vatten, Marchioness of Zeedeur. The mere idea that I would stoop to rutting with some low-born squire—’ She turned her back. ‘Get out of my sight, or I will tell Lady Oliva that you are spreading lies about a maid of honour.’

Ead smiled briefly and retreated. She had been at court for too long to be rankled by a child.

Oliva watched her leave the corridor. As she stepped into the sunlight, Ead breathed in the smell of fresh-cut grass.

One thing was clear. Tryde utt Zeedeur had been secretly intimate with Triam Sulyard – and Ead made it her business to know the secrets of the court. If the Mother willed it, she would know this one, too.

East

Dawn cracked like a heron's egg over Seiiki. Pale light prowled into the room. The shutters had been opened for the first time in eight days.

Tané gazed at the ceiling with raw eyes. She had been restless all night, hot and cold by turns.

She would never wake in this room again. Choosing Day had come. The day she had awaited since she was a child – and risked, like a fool, when she decided to break seclusion. By asking Susa to hide the outsider in Orisima, she had also risked both their lives.

Her stomach turned like a watermill. She scooped up her uniform and wash bag, passed the sleeping Ishari, and stole out of the room.

The South House stood in the foothills of the Bear's Jaw, the mountain range that loomed over Cape Hisan. Along with the other three Houses of Learning, it was used to train apprentices for the High Sea Guard. Tané had lived in its halls since she was three.

Going outside was like stepping into a kiln. The heat varnished her skin and made her hair feel thicker.

Seiiki had a scent to it. The perfume of the heartwood in the trees, unlocked by rain, and the green on every leaf. Usually Tané found it calming, but nothing would comfort her today.

The hot springs steamed in the morning haze. Tané shed her sleep robe, stepped into the nearest pool, and scrubbed herself with a handful of bran. In the shade of the plum trees, she dressed in her

uniform and combed her long hair to one side of her neck, so the blue dragon could be seen on her tunic. By the time she made her way indoors, there was movement in the rooms.

She took a small breakfast of tea and broth. A few apprentices wished her luck as they passed.

When the time came, she was first to leave.

Outside, the servants waited with horses. In unison, they bowed. As Tané mounted her steed, Ishari rushed from the house, looking flustered, and climbed into her saddle.

Tané watched her, a sudden thickness in her throat. She and Ishari had shared a room for six years. After the ceremony, they might never see each other again.

They rode to the gate that separated the Houses of Learning from the rest of Cape Hisan, over the bridge and past the stream that ran down from the mountains, joining the apprentices from elsewhere in the district. Tané caught sight of Turosa, her rival, sneering at her from his line. She kept hold of his gaze until he kicked his horse and set off at a gallop towards the city, shadowed by his friends.

Tané looked over her shoulder one last time, taking in the lush green hills and the silhouettes of larch trees against the pale blue sky. Then she stitched her gaze to the horizon.



It was a slow procession through Cape Hisan. Many citizens had woken early to see the apprentices ride to the temple. They threw salt flowers on to the streets and filled every pathway, craning for a glimpse of those who might soon be god-chosen. Tané tried to concentrate on the warmth of the horse, the clop of its hooves – anything to stop her thinking of the outsider.

Susa had agreed to take the Inysh man into Orisima. Of course she had. She would do anything for Tané, just as Tané would do anything for her.

As it happened, Susa had once had a liaison with one of the sentinels at the trading post, who was keen to win her back. With the landing gate unlocked, Susa had planned to swim to it with the outsider and deliver him to Orisima's master surgeon, with the

empty promise of silver if he co-operated. The man apparently had gambling debts.

If the trespasser did have the red sickness, it would be trapped in Orisima. Once the ceremony was over, Susa would anonymously report him to the Governor of Cape Hisan. The surgeon would be whipped raw when they found the man in his home, but Tané doubted he would be killed – that would risk the alliance with the Free State of Mentendon. If torture loosened his tongue, the trespasser might tell the authorities about the two women who had intervened on the night of his arrival, but he would have little time to plead his case. He would be put to the sword to contain any risk of the red sickness.

The thought made Tané look at her hands, where the rash would appear first. She had not touched his skin, but going anywhere near him had been a terrible risk. A moment of true madness. If Susa had caught the red sickness, she would never forgive herself.

Susa had risked everything to make sure today was as Tané had always dreamed. Her friend had not questioned her scruples or her sanity. Just agreed that she would help.

The gates of the Grand Temple of the Cape were open for the first time in a decade. They were flanked by two colossal statues of dragons, mouths open in eternal roars. Forty horses trotted between them. Once made of wood, the temple had been burned to the ground during the Great Sorrow and later rebuilt with stone. Hundreds of blue-glass lanterns dripped from its eaves, exuding cold light. They looked like fishing floats.

Tané dismounted and walked beside Ishari towards the driftwood gateway. Turosa fell into line with them.

‘May the great Kwiriki smile on you today, Tané,’ he said. ‘What a shame it would be if an apprentice of your standing were to be sent to Feather Island.’

‘That would be a respectable life,’ Tané said as she handed her horse to an ostler.

‘No doubt you will tell yourself that when you live it.’

‘Perhaps you will, too, honourable Turosa.’

The corner of his mouth twitched before he strode ahead to rejoin his friends from the North House.

‘He should speak to you with more respect,’ Ishari murmured. ‘Dumu says you score better than him in most combat.’

Tané said nothing. Her arms prickled. She was the best in her house, but so was Turosa in his.

A fountain carved into the image of the great Kwiriki – the first dragon ever to take a human rider – stood in the outer courtyard of the temple. Salt water poured from his mouth. Tané washed her hands in it and placed a drop on her lips.

It tasted clean.

‘Tané,’ Ishari said, ‘I hope all goes as you desire.’

‘I hope the same for you.’ They all desired the same outcome. ‘You were last to leave the house.’

‘I woke late.’ Ishari performed her own ablutions. ‘I thought I heard the screens in our room opening last night. It unsettled me ... I could not sleep again for some time. Did you leave the room at all?’

‘No. Perhaps it was our learned teacher.’

‘Yes, perhaps.’

They proceeded to the vast inner courtyard, where the sun brightened the rooftops.

A man with a long moustache stood atop the steps with a helm under his arm. His face was tanned and weathered. Clad in armoured sleeves and gauntlets, a lightweight cuirass over a coat of darkest blue, and a high-collared surcoat of black velvet and gold-brocaded silk, he was clearly both a person of high rank and a soldier.

For a moment, Tané forgot her dread. She was a child again, dreaming of dragons.

This man was the honoured Sea General of Seiiki. Head of Clan Miduchi, the dynasty of dragonriders – a dynasty united not by blood, but by purpose. Tané meant to have that name.

Upon reaching the steps, the apprentices formed two lines, knelt, and pressed their foreheads to the ground. Tané could hear Ishari breathing. Nobody rose. Nobody moved.

Scale rasped against stone. Every sinew in her body seemed to tighten.

She looked up.

There were eight of them. Years she had spent praying before statues of dragons, studying them, and observing them from a distance, but she had never seen them this close.

Their size was breathtaking. Most were Seiikinese, with silvery hides and lithe, whip-like forms. Impossibly long bodies held up their splendid heads, and they each had four muscular legs, ending in feet with three claws. Long barbels swirled from their faces and trailed like the lines of kites. The majority were quite young, perhaps four hundred years old, but several carried scars from the Great Sorrow. All were covered with scales and ringed with sucker marks – keepsakes from their quarrels with greatsquid.

Two of them possessed a fourth toe. These were dragons from the Empire of the Twelve Lakes. One of them – a male – had wings. Most dragons were wingless and flew by means of an organ on their heads, which scholars had named the *crown*. The few that did grow wings did so only after at least two thousand years of life.

The winged dragon was largest. If Tané had stretched to her full height, she might not even have been able to reach between his snout and his eyes. Though his wings looked fragile as spidersilk, they were strong enough to whip up a typhoon. Tané spied the pouch beneath his chin. Like oysters, dragons could make pearls, one in a lifetime. It never left the pouch.

The dragon beside the male, also Lacustrine, was close to his stature. Her scales were a pale, clouded green, like milk jade, her mane the golden-brown of riverweed.

‘Welcome,’ the Sea General said.

His voice rang out like the call of a war conch.

‘Rise,’ he said, and they obeyed. ‘You are here today to be sworn to one of two lives: that of the High Sea Guard, defending Seiiki from sickness and invasion, or a life of learning and prayer on Feather Island. Of the sea guardians, twelve of you will have the honour of becoming dragonriders.’

Only twelve. Usually there were more.

‘As you will know,’ the Sea General said, ‘there have been no hatchings of dragon eggs for the past two centuries. Several dragons have also been taken by the Fleet of the Tiger Eye, which continues

its repulsive trade in dragonflesh under the tyranny of the so-called Golden Empress.’

Heads bowed.

‘To bolster our ranks, we are honoured to receive these two great warriors from the Empire of the Twelve Lakes. I trust this will herald a closer friendship with our allies to the north.’

The Sea General inclined his head to the two Lacustrine dragons. They would not be quite as accustomed to the sea as Seiikinese dragons, since they preferred to live in rivers and other bodies of fresh water – but dragons from both countries had fought side by side in the Great Sorrow, and they had ancestors in common.

Tané sensed Turosa looking at her. If he became a rider, he would say his dragon was the greatest of them all.

‘Today, you will learn your destinies.’ The Sea General took a scroll from his surcoat and unravelled it. ‘Let us begin.’

Tané braced herself.

The first apprentice to be called forward was raised to the noble ranks of the High Sea Guard. The Sea General handed her a tunic the colour of a summer sky. When she took it, a black Seiikinese dragon huffed smoke, making her startle. The dragon wheezed.

Dumusa of the West House also became a sea guardian. The granddaughter of two riders, she was of Southern descent as well as Seiikinese. Tané watched her accept her new uniform, bow to the Sea General, and take her place on his right side.

The next apprentice became the first to join the ranks of the scholars. His silk was the deep red of mulberry, and his shoulders trembled as he bowed. Tané sensed tension in the other apprentices, sudden as a rip current.

Turosa went to the High Sea Guard, of course. It seemed a lifetime before she heard her own name:

‘The honourable Tané, of the South House.’

Tané stepped forward.

The dragons watched her. It was said they could see the deepest secrets of a soul, for human beings were made of water, and all water was theirs.

What if they could see what she had done?

She concentrated on the placement of her feet. When she stood before the Sea General, he looked at her for what seemed like years. It took all her strength to remain standing.

At last, he reached for a blue uniform. Tané breathed out. Tears of relief pricked her eyes.

‘For your aptitude and dedication,’ he said, ‘you are raised to the noble ranks of the High Sea Guard, and must swear to practise the way of the dragon until you draw your final breath.’ He leaned closer. ‘Your teachers speak very highly of you. It will be a privilege to have you in my guard.’

She bowed low. ‘You honour me, great lord.’

The Sea General smiled.

Tané joined the four apprentices on his right side in a stupor of bliss, blood rushing like water over pebbles. As the next candidate stepped forward, Turosa whispered against her ear, ‘So you and I will face each other in the water trials.’ His breath smelled of milk. ‘Good.’

‘It will be a pleasure to fight against a warrior of your skill, honourable Turosa,’ Tané said calmly.

‘I see through your mask, village chaff. I see what’s in your heart. It’s the same as what’s in mine. Ambition.’ He paused as one of the men was sent to join the other side. ‘The difference is what I am, and what you are.’

Tané glanced at him. ‘You stand on equal ground with whatever I am, honourable Turosa.’

His laughter made her neck prickle.

‘The honourable Ishari, of the South House,’ the Sea General called.

Ishari made her slow way up the steps. When she reached him, the Sea General handed her a roll of red silk.

‘For your aptitude and dedication,’ he said, ‘you are raised to the noble ranks of the scholars, and must swear to devote yourself to the furtherance of knowledge until you draw your final breath.’

Though she flinched at the words, Ishari took the parcel of cloth and bowed. ‘Thank you, great lord,’ she murmured.

Tané watched her go to the left.

Ishari must be distraught. Still, she might yet do well on Feather Island, and she could eventually return to Seiiki as a master teacher.

‘Pity,’ Turosa said. ‘Wasn’t she your friend?’

Tané bit her tongue.

The principal apprentice from the East House joined their ranks next. Onren was short and burly, her sun-browned face sprayed with freckles. Thick hair fell to her shoulders, stripped dry by salt water and brittle at the ends. Shellblood darkened her lips.

‘Tané,’ she said, taking the place beside her. ‘Congratulations.’

‘And to you, Onren.’

They were the only apprentices who rose without fail each dawn to swim, and a kind of friendship had risen from that foundation. Tané had no doubt that Onren had also hearkened to the rumours and stolen out to immerse herself once more before the ceremony.

The thought unsettled Tané. Cape Hisan was scalloped with small coves, but fate had made her choose the one the outsider had arrived in.

Onren looked down at her blue silk. Like Tané, she was from an impoverished home.

‘They are marvellous,’ she whispered, nodding at the dragons. ‘I take it you hope to be one of the twelve.’

‘Aren’t you too small to ride a dragon, little Onren?’ Turosa drawled. ‘You might be able to perch on one’s tail, I suppose.’

Onren looked over her shoulder at him. ‘I thought I heard you talking. Have we met?’ When he opened his mouth, she said, ‘Don’t tell me. You’re plainly a fool, and I have no interest in befriending fools.’

Tané hid her smile behind her hair. For once, Turosa closed his mouth.

When the last apprentice had accepted his uniform, the two groups turned to face the Sea General. Ishari, whose cheeks were tear-stained, did not look up from the cloth in her arms.

‘You are children no longer. Your paths are before you.’ The Sea General glanced to his right. ‘Four of the sea guardians have performed above expectations. Turosa, of the North House; Onren, of the East House; Tané, of the South House; and Dumusa, of the

West House – turn to face our elders, so they might know your names and faces.’

They did. Tané stepped forward with the others and pressed her forehead to the floor again.

‘Rise,’ one of the dragons said.

The voice made the ground quake. It was so deep, so low, that Tané hardly understood at first.

The four of them obeyed and straightened their backs. The largest Seiikinese dragon lowered his head until he was at eye level with them. A long tongue lashed from between his teeth.

With a great push of his legs, he suddenly took flight. The apprentices all threw themselves to the ground, leaving only the Sea General standing. He let out a booming laugh.

The milky-green Lacustrine dragon displayed her teeth in a grin. Tané found herself locked in those wild eddies of eyes.

The dragon rose with the rest of her kin over the rooftops of the city. Water made flesh. As a mist of divine rain streamed from their scales, soaking the humans below, a Seiikinese male reared up, gathered his breath, and expelled it in a mighty gust of wind.

Every bell in the temple rang out in answer.

Niclays woke with a dry mouth and a fearsome headache, as he had a thousand times before. He blinked and rubbed a knuckle in the corner of his eye.

Bells.

That was what had woken him. He had been on this island for years, but never heard a single bell. Niclays grasped his cane and stood, his arm trembling with the effort.

It must be an alarm. They were coming for Sulyard, coming to arrest them both.

Niclays turned on the spot, desperate. His only chance was to pretend the man had hidden in the house without his knowledge.

He peered past the screen. Sulyard was sound asleep, facing the wall. Well, at least he would die in peace.

The sun was sweating too much light. Close to the little house where Niclays lived, his assistant Muste was sitting under the plum tree with his Seiikinese companion, Panaya.

‘Muste,’ Niclays shouted. ‘What in the world is that sound?’

Muste just waved. Cursing, Niclays jammed on his sandals and picked his way towards Muste and Panaya, trying to ignore the sense that he was walking to his doom.

‘Good day to you, honourable Panaya,’ he said in Seiikinese, bowing.

‘Learnèd Niclays.’ The corners of her eyes crinkled. She wore a light robe, white flowers on blue, the sleeves and collar embroidered in silver. ‘Did the bells wake you?’

‘Yes. May I ask what they mean?’

‘They are ringing for Choosing Day,’ she said. ‘The eldest apprentices at the Houses of Learning have completed their studies, and have been placed into the ranks of the scholars or the High Sea Guard.’

Nothing to do with intruders, then. Niclays took out his handkerchief and mopped at his face.

‘Are you well, Roos?’ Muste asked, shading his eyes.

‘You know how I loathe the summer here.’ Niclays stuffed the handkerchief back into his jerkin. ‘Choosing Day takes place once a year, does it not?’ he said to Panaya. ‘I have never once heard bells.’

Not bells, but he had heard the drums. The inebriating sounds of joy and revelry.

‘Ah,’ Panaya said, her smile growing, ‘but this is a very special Choosing Day.’

‘It is?’

‘Do you not know, Roos?’ Muste chuckled. ‘You have been here longer than I have.’

‘This is not something Niclays would have been told,’ Panaya said gently. ‘You see, Niclays, it was agreed after the Great Sorrow that every fifty years, a number of Seiikinese dragons would take human riders, so we might always be prepared to fight together once again. Those who were chosen for the High Sea Guard this morning have been given this chance, and will now endure the water trials to decide which of them will be dragonriders.’

‘I see,’ Niclays said, interested enough to forget his terror about Sulyard for a moment. ‘And then they fly their steeds off to fight off pirates and smugglers, I presume.’

‘Not *steeds*, Niclays. Dragons are not horses.’

‘Apologies, honourable lady. A poor choice of word.’

Panaya nodded. Her hand strayed to the pendant around her neck, carved into the shape of a dragon.

Such a thing would be destroyed in Virtudom, where there was no longer any distinction between the ancient dragons of the East and the younger, fire-breathing wyrms that had once terrorised the world. Both were deemed malevolent. The door to the East had been closed for so long that misunderstanding about its customs had flourished.

Niclays had believed it before he had arrived in Orisima. He had been half-convinced, on the eve of his departure from Mentendon, that he was being exiled to a land where people were in thrall to creatures just as wicked as the Nameless One.

How frightened he had been that day. All Mentish children knew the story of the Nameless One from the moment they could fathom language. His own dear mother had relished scaring him to tears with her descriptions of the father and overking of all fire-breathing creatures – he who had emerged from the Dreadmount bent on chaos and destruction, only to be grievously wounded by Sir Galian Berethnet before he could subjugate humankind. A thousand years later, the spectre of him still lived in all nightmares.

Just then, hooves thundered across the bridge into Orisima, jolting Niclays from his musings.

Soldiers.

His bowels turned to water. They were coming for him – and now the moment was at hand, he found himself light-headed rather than afraid. If today was the day, so be it. It was either this, or death at the hands of the sentinels for his gambling debts.

Saint, he prayed, *let me not piss myself at the end.*

The soldiers wore green tunics beneath their coats. Leading them, of course, was the Chief Officer – handsome, ever-so-good-natured Chief Officer, who refused to tell anyone in Orisima his name. He was a foot taller than Niclays and always wore full armour.

The Chief Officer dismounted and strode towards the house where Niclays lived. He was surrounded by his sentinels, and one hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

‘Roos!’ A gauntlet-covered fist rapped on the door. ‘Roos, open this door, or I will break it down!’

‘There is no need to break anything, honoured Chief Officer,’ Muste called. ‘The learned Doctor Roos is here.’

The Chief Officer turned on his heel. His dark eyes flashed, and he walked towards them.

‘Roos.’

Niclays liked to pretend that nobody had ever addressed him with such contempt, but that would be a lie. ‘You’re very welcome to call me Niclays, honoured Chief Officer,’ he said, with all the false cheer he could muster. ‘We’ve known each other long en—’

‘Be *quiet*,’ the Chief Officer snapped. Niclays shut his mouth. ‘My sentinels found the door to the landing gate open last night. A pirate ship was seen nearby. If any of you are hiding trespassers or smuggled goods, speak now, and the dragon may show mercy.’

Panaya and Muste said nothing. Niclays, meanwhile, did brief and violent battle with himself. There was nowhere for Sulyard to hide. Was it better to declare what he had done?

Before he could decide, the Chief Officer motioned to his sentinels. ‘Search the houses.’

Niclays held his breath.

There was a certain bird in Seiiki with a call like a babe beginning to wail. To Niclays, it had become a torturous symbol of his life in Orisima. The whimper that never quite turned into a scream. The wait for a blow that never came. As the sentinels rummaged through his house, that wretched bird took up its cry, and it was all Niclays could hear.

When they returned, the sentinels were empty-handed. ‘Nobody there,’ one of them called.

It was all Niclays could do to stop himself sinking to his knees. The Chief Officer looked at him for a long time, his face a mask, before he marched to the next street.

And the bird kept calling. *Hic-hic-hic*.

West

Somewhere in Ascalon Palace, the black hands of a milk-glass clock were creeping towards noon.

The Presence Chamber was full for the Mentish visit, as it always was when foreign ambassadors came to Inys. The windows had been thrown open to let in a honeysuckle-scented breeze. It did little to flush out the heat. Brows were glazed with sweat and feather fans waved everywhere, so that it seemed as if the room was full of fluttering birds.

Ead stood in the crowd with the other Ladies of the Privy Chamber, Margret Beck on her right. The maids of honour faced them across the carpet. Truyde utt Zeedeur adjusted her carcanet. Why Westerners could not divest themselves of a few layers of clothing in the summer, Ead would never know.

Murmurs echoed through the cavernous hall. High above her subjects, Sabran the Ninth watched from her marble throne.

The Queen of Inys was the portrait of her mother, and her mother before that, and so on for generations. The resemblance was uncanny. Like her ancestors, she was possessed of black hair and eyes of a lucent green that seemed to fracture in the sunlight. It was said that while her bloodline endured, the Nameless One could never wake from his sleep.

Sabran took in her subjects with a detached gaze, lingering on nobody. She was eight and twenty, but her eyes held the wisdom of a much older woman.

Today she embodied the wealth of the Queendom of Inys. Her gown was black satin in deference to the Mentish fashion, laid open to the waist to show a stomacher, pale as her skin, glistening with silverwork and seed pearls. A crown of diamonds affirmed her royal blood.

Trumpets heralded the coming of the Mentish party. Sabran whispered something to Lady Arbella Glenn, Viscountess Suth, who smiled and laid a liver-spotted hand on hers.

The standard-bearers came first. They showed the Silver Swan of Mentendon displayed on a black field, with the True Sword pointed down, between its wings.

Next came the servants and the guards, the interpreters and the officials. Finally, Lord Oscarde, Duke of Zeedeur, walked briskly into the chamber, accompanied by the Resident Ambassador to Mentendon. Zeedeur was heavysset, and his beard and hair were red, as was the tip of his nose. Unlike his daughter, he had the grey eyes of the Vatten.

‘Majesty.’ He bowed with a flourish. ‘What an honour it is to be received once more at your court.’

‘Welcome, Your Grace,’ Sabran said. Her voice was pitched low, rich with authority. She held out her hand to Zeedeur, who mounted the steps to kiss her coronation ring. ‘It lifts our heart to see you in Inys again. Was your journey an easy one?’

Ead still found the *our* jarring. In public, Sabran spoke for both herself and her ancestor, the Saint.

‘Alas, madam,’ Zeedeur said, his expression grim, ‘we were set upon by a full-grown wyvern in the Downs. My archers felled it, but had it been more alert, there could have been a bloodbath.’

Murmurs. Ead observed the looks of shock that swept across the hall.

‘Again,’ Margret muttered to her. ‘Two wyverns in as many days.’

‘We are most concerned to hear this,’ Sabran said to the ambassador. ‘Our finest knights-errant will escort you back to Perchling. You will have a safer journey home.’

‘Thank you, Your Majesty.’

‘Now, you must desire to see your daughter.’ Sabran cut her gaze to the maid in question. ‘Come forward, child.’

Truyde stepped on to the carpet and curtsayed. When she rose, her father embraced her.

‘Daughter.’ He took her by the hands, smiling as if his face would break. ‘You look radiant. And how you’ve grown. Tell me, how is Inys treating you?’

‘Far better than I deserve, Father,’ Truyde said.

‘And what makes you say that?’

‘This court is so grand,’ she said, indicating the domed ceiling. ‘Sometimes I feel very small, and very dull, as if even the ceilings are more magnificent than I will ever be.’

Riotous laughter filled the chamber. ‘So witty,’ Linora whispered to Ead. ‘Is she not?’

Ead closed her eyes. These *people*.

‘Nonsense,’ Sabran said to Zeedeur. ‘Your daughter is well liked at court. She will be a worthy companion to whomsoever her heart chooses.’

Truyde dipped her gaze with a smile. At her side, Zeedeur chuckled. ‘Ah, Your Majesty, I fear Truyde is too free-spirited to be wed just yet, much as I desire a grandchild. I thank you for taking such good care of my daughter.’

‘No thanks are necessary.’ Sabran held the arms of her throne. ‘We are always pleased to receive our friends in Virtudom at court. However, we are curious as to what brings you from Mentendon now.’

‘My lord of Zeedeur brings a proposition, Majesty.’ It was the Resident Ambassador to Mentendon who spoke. ‘A proposition we trust will interest you.’

‘Indeed.’ Zeedeur cleared his throat. ‘His Royal Highness, Aubrecht the Second, High Prince of the Free State of Mentendon, has long admired Your Majesty. He has heard tell of your courage, your beauty, and your stalwart devotion to the Six Virtues. Now his late grand-uncle has been entombed, he craves a firmer alliance between our countries.’

‘And how does His Royal Highness mean to forge such an alliance?’ Sabran asked.

‘Through marriage, Your Majesty.’

Every head turned towards the throne.

There was always a period of fragility before a Berethnet sovereign got with child. Theirs was a house of daughters, one daughter for each queen. Their subjects called it proof of their sainthood.

It was expected of each Queen of Inys to marry and get with child as soon as possible, lest she die with no true heir. This would be dangerous in any country, since it would pitch the realm into civil war, but according to Inysh belief, the collapse of the House of Berethnet would also cause the Nameless One to rise again and lay waste to the world.

Yet Sabran had so far declined every offer of marriage.

The queen reclined into her throne, studying Zeedeur. Her face, as ever, betrayed nothing.

‘My dear Oscarde,’ she said. ‘Flattered as we are, we seem to remember that you are already wed.’

The court fell about laughing. Zeedeur had looked nervous, but now he grinned.

‘Sovereign lady!’ he said, chuckling. ‘It is my master who seeks your hand.’

‘Pray continue,’ Sabran said, with the faintest shadow of a smile.

The wyvern was forgotten. Clearly emboldened, Zeedeur took another step forward.

‘Madam,’ he said, ‘as you know, your ancestor, Queen Sabran the Seventh, was wed to my own distant relation, Haynrick Vatten, who was Steward-in-Waiting to Mentendon while it was under foreign rule. Since the House of Livelyn ousted the Vatten, however, there has been no formal knit between our countries, except our shared religion.’

Sabran listened with a look of indifference that never quite touched on boredom or contempt.

‘Prince Aubrecht is aware that his late grand-uncle’s suit was declined by Your Majesty... and, ah, also by the Queen Mother’ – Zeedeur cleared his throat again – ‘but my master believes he offers a different sort of companionship. He also believes there would be many advantages to a fresh alliance between Inys and Mentendon. We are the only country with a trading presence in the East, and with Yscalin fallen into sin, he believes an alliance that espouses our faith is vital.’

Some murmuring followed this statement. Not long ago, the Kingdom of Yscalin to the south had also been part of Virtudom. Before it had taken the Nameless One as its new god.

‘The High Prince offers you a token of his affection, if Your Majesty would be gracious enough to receive it,’ Zeedeur said. ‘He has heard of your love for pearls from the Sundance Sea.’

He snapped his fingers. A Mentish servant approached the throne, carrying a velvet cushion, and knelt. On the cushion was an oyster, cracked open to reveal an iridescent black pearl, big as a cherry, tinged with green. It shone like folded steel under the sun.

‘This is the finest dancing pearl in his possession, caught off the coast of Seiiki,’ Zeedeur said. ‘It is worth more than the ship that carried it over the Abyss.’

Sabran leaned forward. The servant held the cushion higher.

‘It is true that we have a fondness for dancing pearls, and a dearth of them,’ the queen said, ‘and we would accept this gladly. But to do so is not an acceptance of this suit.’

‘Of course, Majesty. A gift from a friend in Virtudom, no more.’

‘Very well.’

Sabran’s gaze flicked to Lady Roslain Crest, Chief Gentlewoman of the Privy Chamber, who wore a gown of emerald silk and a partlet of white needle lace. Her brooch showed a pair of goblets, like anyone who took the Knight of Justice as their patron, but hers was gilded, showing that she was the blood of that knight. Roslain made a barely perceptible sign to one of the maids of honour, who hastened to take away the cushion.

‘Although we are touched by his gift, your master should know of our disdain for the heretical practices of the Seiikinese,’ Sabran said. ‘We desire no parlance with the East.’

‘Of course,’ Zeedeur said. ‘Even so, our master believes that the origin of the pearl does nothing to dull its beauty.’

‘Perhaps your master is right.’ Sabran settled back into her throne. ‘We hear His Royal Highness was training to be a sanctarian before he was High Prince of Mentendon. Tell us of his other . . . qualities.’

Titters.

‘Prince Aubrecht is very clever and kind, madam, possessed of great political acumen,’ Zeedeur said. ‘He is four and thirty, with hair of a softer red than mine. He plays the lute beautifully, and dances with great vigour.’

‘With whom, we wonder?’

‘Often with his noble sisters, Your Majesty. He has three: Princess Ermuna, Princess Bedona, and Princess Betriese. They are all eager to make your acquaintance.’

‘Does he pray often?’

‘Three times a day. He is devoted most of all to the Knight of Generosity, who is his patron.’

‘Does your prince have *any* faults, Oscarde?’

‘Ah, Majesty, we mortals all have faults – except for you, of course. My master’s only flaw is that he tires himself with worry for his people.’

Sabran grew serious again.

‘In that,’ she said, ‘he is already one with us.’

Whispers spread through the chamber like fire.

‘Our soul is touched. We will consider this suit from your master.’ A smattering of tentative applause broke out. ‘Our Virtues Council will make arrangements to further this matter. Before that, however, we would be honoured if you and your party would join us for a feast.’

Zeedeur swept into another bow. ‘The honour would be ours, Majesty.’

The court undulated with bows and curtseys. Sabran made her way down the steps, followed by her Ladies of the Bedchamber. The maids of honour walked in their wake.

Ead knew Sabran would never marry the Red Prince. This was her way. She strung her suitors along like fish on a line, accepting gifts and flattery, but never surrendered her hand.

As the courtiers dispersed, Ead left by another door with her fellow chamberers. Lady Linora Payling, blonde and rosy-cheeked, was one of the fourteen children of the Earl and Countess of Payling Hill. Her favourite pastime was dabbling in gossip. Ead found her a thorough vexation.

Lady Margret Beck, however, had been her dear friend for a long time now. She had joined the Upper Household three years ago

and befriended Ead as quickly as her brother, Loth, who was six years her senior. Ead had soon discovered that she and Margret had the same sense of humour, knew from a look what the other was thinking, and shared the same opinions on most people at court.

‘We must work fast today,’ Margret said. ‘Sabran will expect us to show our faces at the feast.’

Margret looked so much like her brother, with her ebon skin and strong features. It had been a week since Loth had disappeared, and her eyelids were still swollen.

‘A suit,’ Linora said as they walked down the corridor, out of earshot of the rest of the court. ‘And from Prince Aubrecht! I had thought him far too devout to be wed.’

‘No prince is too devout to marry the Queen of Inys,’ Ead said. ‘It is she who is too devout to wed.’

‘But the realm *must* have a princess.’

‘Linora,’ Margret said tightly, ‘a little temperance, if you please.’

‘Well, it must.’

‘Queen Sabran is not yet thirty. She has plenty of time.’

It was clear to Ead that they had not heard about the cutthroat, else Linora would look more serious. Then again, Linora never looked serious. For her, tragedy was merely an occasion for gossip.

‘I hear the High Prince is rich beyond measure,’ she continued, not to be put off. Margret sighed. ‘And we could take advantage of their trading post in the East. Just imagine – having all the pearls of the Sundance Sea, the finest silver, spices and jewels—’

‘Queen Sabran scorns the East, as all of us should,’ Ead said. ‘They are wyrm-worshippers.’

‘Inys won’t have to trade there, silly. We can buy from the Mentish.’

It was still a tainted exchange. The Mentish traded with the East, and the East idolised wyrms.

‘My worry is affinity,’ Margret said. ‘The High Prince was betrothed to the Donmata Marosa for a time. A woman who is now the crown princess of a Draconic realm.’

‘Oh, *that* betrothal is long since dissolved. Besides,’ Linora said, tossing her hair back, ‘I doubt he liked her overmuch. He must have been able to tell she had evil in her heart.’

At the doors to the Privy Chamber, Ead turned to the other two women.

‘Ladies,’ she said, ‘I will take care of our duties today. You should go to the feast.’

Margret frowned. ‘Without you?’

‘One chamberer will not be missed.’ Ead smiled. ‘Go, both of you. Enjoy the banquet.’

‘The Knight of Generosity bless you, Ead.’ Linora was already halfway down the corridor. ‘You are so good!’

As Margret made to follow, Ead caught her by the elbow. ‘Have you heard anything from Loth?’ she murmured.

‘Nothing yet.’ Margret touched her arm. ‘But something is afoot. The Night Hawk summons me this evening.’

Lord Seyton Combe. The spymaster himself. Almost everyone called him the Night Hawk, for he snatched his prey under cover of darkness. Discontents, power-hungry lords, people who flirted too often at the queen – he could make any problem disappear.

‘Do you think he knows something?’ Ead asked quietly.

‘I suppose we shall find out.’ Margret pressed her hand before she went after Linora.

When Margret Beck suffered, she suffered alone. She hated to burden anyone else. Even her closest friends.

Ead had never meant to be among those friends. When she had first arrived in Inys, she had resolved to keep to herself as much as she could, the better to protect her secret. Yet she had been raised in a close-knit society, and she had soon ached for company and conversation. Jondu, her sister in all but blood, had been by her side almost since she was born, and to be suddenly without her had left Ead bereft. So when the Beck siblings had offered their friendship, she had given in, and could not regret it.

She would see Jondu again, when she was finally called home, but she would lose Loth and Margret. Still, if the silence from the Priory was anything to go on, that day would not be soon.

The Great Bedchamber at Ascalon Palace was high-ceilinged, with pale walls, a marble floor, and a vast canopy bed at its heart. The bolsters and coverlet were brocaded ivory silk, the sheets

were finest Mentish linen, and there were two sets of drapes, one light and one heavy, used according to how much light Sabran wanted.

A wicker basket waited at the foot of the bed, and the chamber-pot was absent from its cupboard. It seemed the Royal Laundress was back to work.

The household had been so busy preparing for the Mentish visit that the task of stripping the bed had been postponed. Opening the balcony doors to let out the stuffy heat, Ead removed the sheets and the coverlet and slid her hands over the featherbeds, checking for any blades or bottles of poison that might be stitched inside them.

Even without Margret and Linora to assist her, she worked fast. While the maids of honour were at the feast, the Coffe Chamber would be empty. Now was the perfect time to investigate the familiarity she suspected between Truylde utt Zeedeur and Triam Sulyard, the missing squire. It paid to know the affairs of this court, from the kitchens to the throne. Only with absolute knowledge could she protect the queen.

Truylde was noble-born, heir to a fortune. There was no reason she should take any great interest in an untitled squire. Yet when Ead had insinuated a connexion between her and Sulyard, she had looked startled, like an oakmouse caught with an acorn.

Ead knew the scent of a secret. She wore it like a perfume.

Once the Great Bedchamber was secure, she left the bed to air and made her way to the Coffe Chamber. Oliva Marchyn would be at the Banqueting House, but she had a spy. Ead crept up the stair and stepped over the threshold.

‘What ho,’ a voice croaked. ‘Who comes?’

She stilled. Nobody else would have heard her, but the spy had keen hearing.

‘Trespasser. Who is it?’

‘Wretched fowl,’ Ead whispered.

A bead of sweat trailed down her spine. She hitched up her skirts and drew a knife from the sheath at her calf.

The spy sat on a perch outside the door. As Ead approached him, he tilted his head.

‘Trespasser,’ he repeated, in ominous tones. ‘Wicked maiden. Out of my palace.’

‘Listen carefully, sirrah.’ Ead showed him the knife, making him ruffle his feathers. ‘You may think you have the power here, but sooner or later, Her Majesty will be in the mood for pigeon pie. I doubt she would notice if I wrapped *you* in pastry instead.’

In truth, he was a handsome bird. A rainbow mimic. His feathers blurred from blue to green to safflower, and his head was a brash pink. It would be a shame to cook him.

‘Payment,’ he said, with a tap of one claw.

This bird had enabled many an illicit meeting when Ead had been a maid of honour. She tucked the knife away, lips pressed together, and reached into the silk purse on her girdle.

‘Here.’ She placed three comfits on his dish. ‘I will give you the rest if you behave.’

He was too busy hammering at the sweets to answer.

The Coffin Chamber was never locked. Young ladies were not supposed to have anything to hide. Inside, the drapes were drawn, the fire stanch, the beds made.

There was only one place for a clever maid of honour to conceal her secret treasures.

Ead lifted the carpet and used her knife to pry up the loose floorboard. Beneath it, in the dust, lay a polished oak box. She lifted it on to her knee.

Inside was a collection of items that Oliva would have merrily confiscated. A thick book, etched with the alchemical symbol for gold. A quill and a jar of ink. Scraps of parchment. A pendant carved from wood. And a sheaf of letters, held together with ribbon.

Ead unfurled one. From the smudged date, it had been written last summer.

The cipher took moments to break. It was a touch more sophisticated than the ones used in most love letters at court, but Ead had been taught to see through code since childhood.

For you, the letter said in an untidy hand. *I bought it from Albatross Point. Wear it sometimes and think of me. I will write again soon.* She picked up another, written on thicker paper. This one was from over a year before. *Forgive me if I am too forward, my lady, but*

I think of nothing but you. Another. My love. Meet me beneath the clock tower after orisons.

Without dwelling for too long, she could see that Truyde and Sulyard had been conducting a love affair, and that they had consummated their desire. The usual moonshine on the water. But Ead paused over some of the phrases.

Our enterprise will shake the world. This task is our divine calling. Two young people in love could not possibly describe such a passionate affair as a ‘task’ (unless, of course, their lovemaking failed to match their poetry). *We must begin to make plans, my love.*

Ead leafed through pillow talk and riddles until she found a letter dated from early spring, when Sulyard had gone missing. The writing was smeared.

Forgive me. I had to leave. In Perchling I spoke to a seafarer, and she made me an offer I could not refuse. I know we planned to go together, and perhaps you will hate me for the rest of our lives, but it is better this way, my sweetheart. You can help where you are, at court. When I send word of my success, convince Queen Sabran to look kindly upon our enterprise. Make her realise the danger.

Burn this letter. Let none of them know what we are doing until it is done. They will hail us as legends one day, Truyde.

Perchling. The largest port in Inys, and its principal gateway to the mainland. Sulyard had fled on a ship, then.

There was something else beneath the floorboard. A thin book, bound in leather. Ead skirted one finger over its title, written in what was unquestionably an Eastern script.

Truyde could not have found this book in any Inysh library. Seeking knowledge of the East was heresy. She would get far worse than a scolding if anyone found it.

‘Somebody coming,’ the mimic croaked.

A door closed below. Ead hid the book and letters beneath her cloak and returned the box to its nook.

Footsteps echoed through the rafters. She fitted the floorboard back into place. On her way past the perch, she emptied the rest of her comfits into the dish.

‘Not a word,’ she whispered to the spy, ‘or I will turn those lovely feathers into quills.’

The mimic chuckled darkly as Ead vaulted through the window.

They were lying side by side under the apple tree in the courtyard, as they often did in the high summer. A flagon of wine from the Great Kitchen sat beside them, along with a dish of spiced cheese and fresh bread. Ead was telling him about some prank the maids of honour had played on Lady Oliva Marchyn, and he was laughing so hard his belly ached. She was part poet and part fool when it came to telling stories.

The sun had lured out the freckles on her nose. Her black hair fanned across the grass. Past the glare of the sun, he could see the clock tower above them, and the stained-glass windows in the cloisters, and the apples on their branches. All was well.

‘My lord.’

The memory shattered. Loth looked up to see a man with no teeth.

The hall of the inn was full of country-dwellers. Somewhere, a lutenist was playing a ballad about the beauty of Queen Sabran. A few days ago, he had been hunting with her. Now he was leagues away, listening to a song that spoke of her as if she were a myth. All he knew was that he was on his way to near-certain death in Yscalin, and that the Dukes Spiritual loathed him enough to have set him on that path.

How suddenly a life could crumble.

The innkeeper set down a trencher. On it sat two bowls of pottage, rough-cut cheese, and a round of barley bread.

‘Anything else I can do for you, my lords?’

‘No,’ Loth said. ‘Thank you.’

The innkeeper bowed low. Loth doubted it was every day that he hosted the noble sons of Earls Provincial in his establishment.

On the other bench, Lord Kitston Glade, his dear friend, tore into the bread with his teeth.

‘Oh, for—’ He sprayed it out. ‘Stale as a prayer book. Dare I try the cheese?’

Loth sipped his mead, wishing it was cold.

‘If the food in your province is so vile,’ he said, ‘you should take it up with your lord father.’

Kit snorted. ‘Yes, he does rather enjoy that sort of dullness.’

‘You ought to be grateful for this meal. I doubt there will be anything better on the ship.’

‘I know, I know. I’m a soft-fingered noble who sleeps on swans-down, loves too many courtiers, and gluts himself on sweetmeats. Court has ruined me. That’s what Father said when I became a poet, you know.’ Kit poked gingerly at the cheese. ‘Speaking of which, I must write while I’m here – a pastoral, perhaps. Aren’t my people charming?’

‘Quite,’ Loth said.

He could not feign light-heartedness today. Kit reached across the table to grasp his shoulder.

‘Stay with me, Arteloth,’ he said. Loth grunted. ‘Did the driver tell you the name of our captain?’

‘Harman, I think.’

‘You don’t mean Harlowe?’ Loth shrugged. ‘Oh, Loth, you *must* have heard of Gian Harlowe. The pirate! Everyone in Ascalon—’

‘I am patently not everyone in Ascalon.’ Loth rubbed the bridge of his nose. ‘Please, enlighten me as to what sort of knave is taking us to Yscalin.’

‘A legendary knave,’ Kit said in hushed tones. ‘Harlowe came to Inys as a boy from far-off shores. He joined the navy at nine and was captain of a ship by the time he turned eighteen – but he bit the hook of piracy, as so many promising young officers do.’ He poured more mead into their tankards. ‘The man has sailed every sea in the world, seas that no cartographer has ever named. By plundering ships, they say he had amassed wealth to rival the Dukes Spiritual by the time he was thirty.’

Loth drank yet again. He had the feeling he would need another tankard before they left.

‘I wonder, then, Kit,’ he said, ‘why this infamous outlaw is taking us to Yscalin.’

‘He may be the only captain brave enough to make the crossing. He is a man without fear,’ Kit replied. ‘Queen Rosarian favoured him, you know.’

Sabran’s mother. Loth looked up, interested at last. ‘Did she?’

‘She did. They say he was in love with her.’

‘I hope you are not suggesting that Queen Rosarian was ever unfaithful to Prince Wilstan.’

‘Arteloth, my surly northern friend – I never said she returned the love,’ Kit said equably, ‘but she liked the man enough to bestow on him the largest ironclad ship in her fleet, which he named the *Rose Eternal*. Now he calls himself *privateer* with impunity.’

‘Ah. Privateer.’ Loth managed a slight chuckle. ‘The most sought-after title in all the world.’

‘His crew has captured several Yscali ships in the last two years. I doubt they will take kindly to our arrival.’

‘I imagine the Yscals take kindly to very little nowadays.’

They sat in silence for some time. While Kit ate, Loth gazed out of the window.

It had happened in the dead of night. Retainers wearing the winged book of Lord Seyton Combe had entered his chambers and ordered him to come with them. Before he knew it, he had been bundled into a coach with Kit – who had also been marched from his lodgings under cover of darkness – and shown a note to explain his circumstances.

Lord Arteloth Beck—

You and Lord Kitston are now Inysh ambassadors-in-residence to the Draconic Kingdom of Yscalin. The Yscals have been informed you are coming.

Make enquiries about the last ambassador, the Duke of Temperance. Observe the court of the Vetalda. Most importantly, find out what they are planning, and if they intend to mount an invasion of Inys.

For queen and country.

The note had been jerked out of his hands within moments, and presumably carried off to be burned.

What Loth could not work out was *why*. Why he, of all people, was being sent to Yscalin. Inys needed to know what was happening in Cárscaro, but he was no spy.

The hound of despair was on his back, but he could not let it buckle him. He was not alone.

‘Kit,’ he said, ‘forgive me. You have been forced to join me in my exile, and I have been poor company.’

‘Don’t you dare apologise. I’ve always rather fancied an adventure.’ Kit smoothed back his flaxen curls with both hands. ‘Since you’re finally talking, though, we ought to speak about our . . . situation.’

‘Don’t. Not now, Kit. It’s done.’

‘You must not think Queen Sabran ordered your banishment,’ Kit said firmly. ‘I tell you, this was arranged without her knowledge. Combe will have told her you left court of your own free will, and she will have doubts about her spymaster. You must tell her the truth,’ he urged. ‘Write to her. Disclose to her what they have done, and—’

‘Combe reads every letter before it reaches her.’

‘Could you not use some cipher?’

‘No cipher is safe from the Night Hawk. There is a reason why Sabran made him her spymaster.’

‘Then write to your family. Ask them for their help.’

‘They will not be granted an audience with Sabran unless they go through Combe. Even if they are,’ Loth said, ‘it will be too late for us by then. We will already be in Cárscaro.’

‘They should still know where you are.’ Kit shook his head. ‘Saint, I’m beginning to think you *want* to leave.’

‘If the Dukes Spiritual believe I am the best person to find out what has transpired in Yscalin, then perhaps I am.’

‘Oh, come, Loth. You know why this is happening. Everyone tried to warn you.’

Loth waited, brow furrowed. With a sigh, Kit drained his tankard and leaned in closer.

‘Queen Sabran is not yet married,’ he murmured. Loth tensed. ‘If the Dukes Spiritual favour a foreign match for her, your presence at her side . . . well, it complicates things.’

‘You know Sab and I have *never*—’

‘What I know is less important than what the world sees,’ Kit said. ‘Allow me to indulge in a little allegory. Art. Art is not one great act of creation, but many small ones. When you read one of my poems, you fail to see the weeks of careful work it took me to build it – the thinking, the scratched-out words, the pages I burned in disgust. All you see, in the end, is what I want you to see. Such is politics.’

Loth puckered his brow.

‘To ensure an heir, the Dukes Spiritual must paint a certain picture of the Inysh court and its eligible queen,’ Kit said. ‘If they believed your intimacy with Queen Sabran would spoil that picture – dissuade foreign suitors – it would explain why they chose you for this particular diplomatic mission. They needed you gone, so they . . . painted you out.’

Another silence fell. Loth clasped his ring-laden fingers and set his brow against them.

He was such a fool.

‘Now, if my feeling is correct, the good news is that we may be allowed to sneak back to court once Queen Sabran is married,’ Kit said. ‘I say we weather the next few weeks, find poor old Prince Wilstan if we can possibly manage it, then return to Inys by whatever means needful. Combe will not stop us. Not once he has what he wants.’

‘You forget that if we return, we will be able to expose his scheming to Sabran. He would have considered that. We will not get near the palace gates.’

‘We will write to His Grace beforehand. Make him some offer. Our silence in exchange for him leaving us in peace.’

‘I cannot be silent about this,’ Loth bit out. ‘Sab must know if her Virtues Council machinates behind her back. Combe knows I will tell her. Trust me, Kit – he means for us to be in Cáscarro for good. His eyes in the most dangerous court in the West.’

‘Damn him. We will find a way home,’ Kit said. ‘Does the Saint not promise that all of us will?’

Loth drained his tankard.

‘You can be very wise, my friend.’ With a sigh, he added, ‘I can only imagine how Margret must feel at this moment. She may have to inherit Goldenbirch.’

‘Meg must not burden that brilliant mind of hers. Goldenbirch will not need her as heir, because we will be back in Inys before you know it. This mission may not *seem* survivable,’ Kit said, back to his jocular self, ‘but you never know. We may return from it as princes of the world.’

‘I never thought you would have more faith than I do.’ Loth took in a deep breath through his nose. ‘Let us rouse the driver. We have tarried here for long enough.’

East

The new soldiers of the High Sea Guard had been allowed to spend their last hours in Cape Hisan in whatever way they chose. Most of them had gone to bid farewell to friends. At the ninth hour of night, they would set off by palanquin to the capital.

The scholars had already left on the ship to Feather Island. Ishari had not stood on deck with the others to watch Seiiki disappear.

They had been close for years. Tané had nursed Ishari through a fever that had almost killed her. Ishari had been like a sister when Tané first bled, showing her how to make plugs out of paper. Now they might never see each other again. If only Ishari had studied harder – given more of herself to her training – they could have been riders together.

For now, Tané had to turn her mind towards another friend. She kept her head down as she wove through the clamour of Cape Hisan, where dancers and drummers were out to celebrate Choosing Day. Children skipped past, laughing, painted kites flying above them.

The streets heaved with people. They mopped at their faces with flat-woven linen. As Tané dodged merchants peddling trinkets, she breathed in the spice of incense, the scent of rain on sweat on skin, and the waft of sea-fresh fish. She listened to the tinsmiths and traders calling out and the gasps of delight as a tiny yellow bird warbled a song.

This might be the last time she walked in Cape Hisan, the only city she had ever known.

It had always been a risk to come here. The city was a dangerous place, where apprentices might be tempted to act in ways that would corrupt them. There were brothels and taverns, card games and cockfights, recruiters sent to press them into piracy. Tané had often wondered if the Houses of Learning had been built so close to all this as a test of will.

When she reached the inn, she let out her breath. There were no sentinels.

‘Excuse me,’ she called through the bars.

A tiny girl came to the gate. When she saw Tané, and the blue tunic of the High Sea Guard, the child knelt at once and set her forehead between her hands.

‘I am looking for the honourable Susa,’ Tané said gently. ‘Would you fetch her for me?’

The girl scurried back into the inn.

Nobody had ever bowed to Tané that way. She had been born in the impoverished village of Ampiki, on the southern tip of Seiiki, to a family of fisherfolk. One crisp winter day, a fire had sparked in the nearby forest and swallowed almost every house.

Tané had no memory of her parents. She had only avoided sharing their death because she had chased a butterfly out of the house, to the sea. Most foundlings and orphans washed up in the land army, but the butterfly had been interpreted by a holy woman as intervention from the gods, and it was decided that Tané must be trained as a rider.

Susa came to the gate in a robe of white silk, richly broidered. Her hair poured loose over her shoulders.

‘Tané.’ She slid the gate aside. ‘We must speak.’

Tané recognised the notch in her brow. They slipped into the alley beside the house, where Susa opened her umbrella and held it over them both.

‘He is gone.’

Tané wet her lips. ‘The outsider?’

‘Yes.’ Susa looked nervous. She was never nervous. ‘There was gossip in the market earlier. A pirate ship was sighted off the coast

of Cape Hisan. The sentinels looked all over the city for smuggled freight, but when they left, they had found nothing.'

'They searched in Orisima,' Tané realised, and Susa nodded. 'Did they find the outsider?'

'No. But there is nowhere to hide there.' Susa glanced towards the street, her eyes reflecting its lanternlight. 'He must have escaped while the sentinels were distracted.'

'No one could cross the bridge without the sentinels noticing. He *must* still be there.'

'The man must be half ghost if he can hide himself so well.' Susa tightened her grip on the umbrella. 'Tané, do you think we should still tell the honoured Governor about him?'

Tané had been asking herself the same question ever since the ceremony.

'I told Roos we would collect him, but ... perhaps if he stays hidden in Orisima, he will be able to avoid the sword and slip away on the next ship back to Mentendon,' Susa went on. 'They might mistake him for a legal settler. He was no older than us, Tané, and perhaps not here by choice. I have no desire to condemn him to death.'

'Then let us not. Let him make his own way.'

'What of the red sickness?'

'He had none of the signs. And if he *is* still in Orisima – and I cannot think it otherwise – the sickness cannot go far.' Tané spoke quietly. 'Further association with him is too much of a risk, Susa. You took him somewhere safe. What happens now is up to him.'

'But if they find him, will he not tell them about us?' Susa whispered.

'Who would believe him?'

Susa took a deep breath, and her shoulders dropped. She looked Tané up and down.

'It seems all of the risk was worthwhile.' Her smile made her eyes sparkle. 'Was Choosing Day everything you imagined?'

The need to talk had been welling up for hours. 'And more. The dragons were so beautiful,' Tané said. 'Did you see them?'

'No. I was asleep,' Susa admitted. She must have been awake all night. 'How many riders will there be this year?'

‘Twelve. The honoured Unceasing Emperor has sent two great warriors to raise our numbers.’

‘I have never seen a Lacustrine dragon. Are they very different to ours?’

‘They have thicker bodies, and one more toe. It would be a privilege to ride with any of them.’ Tané pressed closer under the umbrella. ‘I *must* be a rider, Susa. I feel guilty for wanting so much when I have already received so many blessings, but—’

‘It has been your dream since you were a child. You have ambition, Tané. Never apologise for that.’ Susa paused. ‘Are you afraid?’

‘Of course.’

‘Good. Fear will make you fight. Don’t let a little shit like Turosa get the better of you, whoever his mother is.’ Tané gave her a scolding look, but smiled. ‘Now, you must hurry. Remember, no matter how far from Cape Hisan you fly, I will always be your friend.’

‘And I yours.’

The gate to the inn slid open, making them both start. ‘Susa,’ the girl called. ‘You need to come inside now.’

Susa glanced towards the house. ‘I must go.’ She looked back at Tané, hesitated. ‘Will they let me write to you?’

‘They must.’ Tané had never known any commoner to maintain a friendship with a sea guardian, but she prayed they would be the exception. ‘Please, Susa, be careful.’

‘Always.’ Her smile quivered. ‘You won’t miss me so much. When you soar above the clouds, we will all seem very small down here.’

‘Wherever I am,’ Tané said, ‘I am with you.’

Susa had risked everything for a dream that was not hers. That sort of friendship was something not found more than once in a lifetime. Some might not find it at all.

The space between them was fraught with memory, and their faces were no longer damp only from rain. Perhaps Tané would return to Cape Hisan to guard the eastern coast, or perhaps Susa could visit her, but for once in her life, nothing was certain. Their paths were about to pull apart, and unless the dragon willed it, they might never meet again.

‘If anything happens – if anyone names you in relation to the outsider – come with all speed to Ginura,’ Tané said softly. ‘Come and find me, Susa. I will always keep you safe.’

In a cramped excuse for a workroom in Orisima, a lantern guttered as Niclays Roos held a phial into its light. The stained label read KIDNEY ORE. It was all he could do to keep Sulyard from his mind, but the surest way to manage it was to lose himself in his great work.

Not that he was getting much work done, great or otherwise. He was perilously low on ingredients, and his alchemical equipment was as old as he was, but he wanted one more stab at this before he wrote yet again for supplies. The Governor of Cape Hisan was sympathetic, but often checked in his generosity by the Warlord, who seemed to know everything that happened in Seiiki.

The Warlord was almost mythical. His family had taken power after the imperial House of Noziken had been destroyed in the Great Sorrow. All Niclays really knew about the man was that he lived in a castle in Ginura. Every year, the Viceroy of Orisima would be taken there in a locked palanquin to pay tribute, offer gifts from Mentendon, and receive gifts in return.

Niclays was the only person in the trading post who had never been invited to join her on the journey. His fellow Ments were civil to his face, but unlike the rest of them, he was here because he was in exile. The fact that none of them knew why did not endear them to him.

Sometimes he wanted to unmask himself, just to see their faces. To tell them that *he* was the alchemist who had convinced the young Queen of Inys that he could brew her an elixir of life, removing any need for marriage or an heir. That he was the wastrel who had used Berethnet money to prop up years of guesswork, experiments and debauchery.

How horrified they would be. How scandalised by his dearth of virtue. They would have no idea that even when he had made his way to Inys ten years ago, a walking tinderbox of pain and anger,

he had remained faithful, in some hidden chamber of his heart, to the tenets of alchemy. Distillation, Ceration, Sublimation – these were the only deities that he would ever praise. They would have no idea that while he had sweated at the crucible, certain he could discover a way to set a body in the prime of its youth, he had also been trying to melt the knife of grief that had been buried in his side. A knife that had finally led him away from the crucible, back to the comfort and oblivion of wine.

He had not succeeded in either venture. And for that, Sabran Berethnet had made him pay.

Not with his life. Leovart had told him he ought to be grateful for that so-called kindness from Her Enmity. No, Sabran had not taken his head – but she had taken everything else. Now he was trapped on the edge of the world, surrounded by people who despised him.

Let them whisper. If this experiment worked, they would all be knocking at his door for the elixir. Tongue pinched between his teeth, he poured the kidney ore into the crucible.

It might as well have been gunpowder. Before he knew it, the draught was seething. It bubbled over, on to the table, and belched a thunderhead of evil-smelling smoke.

Niclays peered desperately into the crucible. All that was left was a tar-black residue. With a sigh, he rubbed the soot from his eyeglasses. His creation looked more like night soil than the elixir of life.

Kidney ore was not the answer. Then again, the powder may not have been kidney ore at all. Panaya had bought it from a merchant on his behalf, and merchants were not renowned for their honesty.

The Nameless One take all of this. He would have given up on making the damned elixir if not for the fact that he had no means of escaping this island but to buy his way back to the West with it.

Of course, he had no intention of giving it to Sabran Berethnet. She could hang. But if he made it known to any ruler that he had it, they would see to it that he was brought back to Mentendon and allowed to live out the rest of his life in luxury and wealth. And *he* would see to it that Sabran knew what he could do, and when

she came to him, pleading for a taste of eternity, there would be no sweeter pleasure than denying it to her.

Still, he was a long way off that happy day. He needed the costly substances that long-dead Lacustrine rulers had sought to stretch their lives, like gold and orpiment and rare plants. Even though most of those rulers had poisoned themselves trying to live for ever, there was a chance that their recipes for the elixir might spark a new flame of inspiration.

Time to write to Leovart yet again and ask him to flatter the Warlord with some pretty letter. Only a prince might be able to coax him into handing over his gold to be melted.

Niclays finished his cold tea, wishing it was stronger. The Viceroy of Orisima had barred him from the alehouse and limited him to two cups of wine each week. His hands had trembled for months.

They shook now, but not with the need for oblivion. There was still no sign of Triam Sulyard.

The bells clanged in the city again. The sea guardians must be on their way to the capital. The other apprentices would be packed off to Feather Island, a high isle in the Sundance Sea, where all known wisdom about dragonkind was stored. Niclays had written to the Governor of Cape Hisan several times, requesting permission to travel there, but had always been rebuffed. Feather Island was not for outsiders.

Dragons might yet be the key to his work. They could live for thousands of years. Something in their bodies must allow them to keep renewing themselves.

They were not what they had once been. In Eastern legend, dragons had possessed mystical abilities, like shape-shifting and dream-making. The last time they had exhibited these powers was in the years following the end of the Great Sorrow. That night, a comet had crossed the sky, and while wyrms the world over had fallen into a stone-like sleep, the Eastern dragons had found themselves stronger than they had been in centuries.

Now their powers had dwindled again. And yet they lived on. The elixir incarnate.

Not that the theory would help Niclays much. On the contrary, the realisation had driven his work into a dead end. The islanders

saw their dragons as sacred. Consequently, trade in any substance from their bodies was outlawed on pain of a particularly slow and hideous death. Only pirates risked it.

With gritted teeth and a pounding headache, Niclays limped from his workshop. As he stepped on to the mats, he gaped.

Triam Sulyard was sitting by the hearth. He was soaked to the skin.

‘By the Saint’s *codpiece*—’ Niclays stared. ‘Sulyard!’

The boy looked wounded. ‘You should not take the Saint’s intimate parts in vain.’

‘Hold your tongue,’ Niclays snapped, heart pounding. ‘My word, but you are a lucky wretch. If you’ve found a way out of this place, say it now.’

‘I tried to leave,’ Sulyard said. ‘I managed to evade the guards and slip out of the house, but more were by the gate. I got into the water and hid beneath the bridge until the Eastern knight left.’

‘The Chief Officer is no knight, you fool.’ Niclays let out a growl of frustration. ‘Saint, *why* did you have to come back? What did I do to deserve you turning up to threaten what little I have left of an existence?’ He paused. ‘Actually, don’t answer that.’

Sulyard was silent. Niclays stormed past him and set about lighting a fire.

‘Doctor Roos,’ Sulyard said, after a hesitation. ‘Why is Orisima so closely guarded?’

‘Because outsiders cannot set foot in Seiiki on pain of death. And the Seiikinese, in turn, cannot leave.’ Niclays hooked the kettle over the hearth. ‘They let us stay here so they can trade with us and absorb odds and ends of Mentish knowledge, and so we can give the Warlord at least a hazy impression of the other side of the Abyss, but we cannot go beyond Orisima or speak heresy to the Seiikinese.’

‘Heresy like the Six Virtues?’

‘Precisely. They also, understandably, suspect outsiders of carrying the Draconic plague – the red sickness, as they call it. If you had taken the trouble to do your *research* before you came here—’

‘But they would surely listen if we asked for help,’ Sulyard said, with conviction. ‘Indeed, while I was hiding, I had a thought that

I might simply let them find me, so that they might take me to the capital.' He seemed not to see the appalled look Niclays dealt him. 'I *must* speak with the Warlord, Doctor Roos. If you would only hear what I have come to—'

'As I said,' Niclays said tartly, 'I have no interest in your mission, Master Sulyard.'

'But Virtudom is in peril. The *world* is in peril,' Sulyard pressed. 'Queen Sabran needs our help.'

'In terrible danger, is she?' He tried not to sound too hopeful. 'Life-threatening?'

'Yes, Doctor Roos. And I know a way to save her.'

'The richest woman in the West, venerated by three countries, needs a squire to save her. Fascinating.' Niclays heaved a sigh. 'All right, Sulyard. I will indulge you. Enlighten me as to how you plan to spare Queen Sabran from this unspecified peril.'

'By interceding with the East.' Sulyard looked determined. 'The Warlord of Seiiki must send his dragons to help Her Majesty. I mean to persuade him to do this. He must help Virtudom put down the Draconic beasts before they fully wake. Before—'

'Wait,' Niclays cut in. 'Do you mean to say that you want ... an *alliance* between Inys and Seiiki?'

'Not just between Inys and Seiiki, Doctor Roos. Between Virtudom and the East.'

Niclays let the words crystallise. The corner of his mouth twitched. And when Sulyard continued to look grave as a sanctarian, Niclays threw back his head and laughed.

'Oh, this is wonderful. Glorious,' he declared. Sulyard stared at him. 'Oh, Sulyard. I have had precious little entertainment in this place. Thank you.'

'It is no *joke*, Doctor Roos,' Sulyard said, indignant.

'Oh, but it is, dear boy. You think that you alone can overturn the Great Edict, a law that has stood for five *centuries*, just by asking nicely. You really are young.' Niclays chuckled once more. 'And who is your partner in this splendid endeavour?'

Sulyard huffed. 'I know you are mocking me, sir,' he said, 'but you must not mock my lady. She is someone for whom I would die

a thousand times, whose name I cannot tell. Someone who is the light in my life, the breath in my breast, the sun to my—’

‘Yes, all right, that’s quite sufficient. Did she not wish to come to Seiiki with you?’

‘We planned to go together. But when I visited my mother in Perchling in the winter, I met a seafarer by chance. She offered me a place on a ship bound for Seiiki.’ His shoulders hunched inward. ‘I sent word to my love at court . . . I pray she understands. That she forgives me.’

It had been a while since Niclays had indulged in a bit of court gossip. It spoke volumes for his boredom that he was all but salivating for it. He poured two cups of willow tea and sat on the mats, stretching his sore leg in front of him. ‘This lady is your betrothed, I take it.’

‘My companion.’ A smile touched the cracked lips. ‘We took our vows.’

‘I assume Sabran gave her blessing to the match.’

Sulyard flushed. ‘We . . . did not ask Her Majesty for permission. No one knows of it.’

He was braver than he looked. Sabran dealt harsh punishments to those who married in secret. It was where she differed from the late Queen Mother, who had been fond of a good love story.

‘Your lady must be of a low station if *you* had to marry her in secret,’ Niclays mused.

‘No! My lady is noble-born. She is as sweet as the richest honey, as beautiful as an autumn fore—’

‘Saint, enough. You’re giving me a headache.’ One had to wonder how Sabran had kept him around without having his tongue ripped out. ‘How old are you, exactly, Sulyard?’

‘Eighteen.’

‘A grown man, then. Old enough to know that not all dreams should be pursued, especially not dreams conceived on the featherbed of love. If the Chief Officer had found you, you would have been taken to the Governor of Cape Hisan. Not to the Warlord.’ Niclays sipped his tea. ‘I will humour you again, Sulyard. If you know Sabran to be in danger – so much danger that she needs assistance from Seiiki, which I doubt – then why not tell her?’

Sulyard hesitated.

‘Her Majesty mistrusts the East, to her own detriment,’ he finally said, ‘and they are the only ones who can help us. Even when she is made aware of the danger she faces, which will no doubt be soon, her pride would never allow her to ask for Eastern aid. If I could *only* talk to the Warlord on her behalf, Tryude said she might realise the—’

‘Tryude.’

The cup shook in his hands.

‘Tryude,’ he whispered. ‘Not— not Tryude utt Zeedeur. Daughter of Lord Oscarde.’

Sulyard was frozen.

‘Doctor Roos,’ he began, after an agony of stammering, ‘it must be a secret.’

Before he could stop it, Niclays laughed again. This time it had an edge of madness.

‘My, my,’ he cried, ‘but you are *quite* the companion, Master Sulyard! First you marry the Marchioness of Zeedeur without permission, an act that could destroy her reputation. Then you abandon her, and finally, you let slip her name to a man who knew her grandsire well.’ He dabbed his eyes on his sleeve. Sulyard looked as if he might faint. ‘Ah, how worthy you are of her love. What will you tell me next – that you left her great with child, too?’

‘No, no—’ Sulyard crawled towards him. ‘I beseech you, Doctor Roos, do not expose our transgression. I *am* unworthy of her love, but . . . love her I do. It hurts my soul.’

Niclays kicked him away, disgusted. It hurt *his* soul that Tryude had chosen such a pail of Inysh milk for a companion.

‘I won’t be exposing *her*, I assure you,’ he sneered, making Sulyard weep harder. ‘She is the heir to the Duchy of Zeedeur, blood of the Vatten. Let us pray that, one day, she weds someone with a backbone.’ He sat back. ‘Besides, even if I were to write to Prince Leovart to inform him that Lady Tryude has secretly wed beneath her station, it would take weeks for the ship to cross the Abyss. By that time, she will have forgotten you existed.’

Sniffing, Sulyard managed to say, ‘Prince Leovart is dead.’

The High Prince of Mentendon. The only person who had tried to help Niclays in Orisima.

‘That would certainly explain why he ignores my letters.’ Niclays raised his cup to his lips. ‘When?’

‘Less than a year ago, Doctor Roos. A wyvern burned his hunting lodge to ashes.’

Niclays felt a pang of loss for Leovart. No doubt the Viceroy of Orisima had known the news, but chosen not to pass it on.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘Who now rules Mentendon?’

‘Prince Aubrecht.’

Aubrecht. Niclays remembered him as a reserved young man who cared little for anything but prayer books. Though he had been of age when the sweat took his uncle, Edvart, it had been decided that Leovart – Edvart’s own uncle – would rule first, to show tender-hearted Aubrecht the way. Of course, once Leovart was on the throne, he had found excuses not to vacate it.

Now Aubrecht had taken his rightful place. He would need a will of iron if he meant to control Mentendon.

Niclays pulled his thoughts away from home before he could fall into them for good. Sulyard was still looking at him, face blotched with pink.

‘Sulyard,’ Niclays said, ‘go home. When the Mentish shipment arrives, stow away. Go back to Truyde and run away to the Milk Lagoon, or . . . wherever lovers go these days.’ When Sulyard opened his mouth, he said, ‘Trust me. You can do nothing here but die.’

‘But my task—’

‘Not all of us can finish our great works.’

Sulyard fell silent. Niclays removed his eyeglasses and cleaned them on his sleeve.

‘I have no love for your queen. In fact, I roundly despise her,’ he said, making Sulyard flinch, ‘but I doubt very much that Sabran would want an eighteen-year-old squire to die for her.’ A quake stole into his voice. ‘I want you to leave, Triam. And I want you to tell Truyde, from me, to stop involving herself in matters that could undo her.’

Sulyard dropped his gaze.

‘Forgive me, Doctor Roos, but I cannot,’ he said. ‘I must stay.’

Niclays looked at him wearily. 'And do what?'

'I will find a way to put my case before the Warlord ... but I shall not involve you any further.'

'Having you in my house is involvement enough for me to lose my head.'

Though Sulyard said nothing, his jaw was set. Niclays pursed his lips.

'You seem devout, Master Sulyard,' he said. 'I suggest you pray. Pray that the sentinels stay away from my house until the Mentish shipment arrives, so you have time to come to your senses on this subject. If we survive the next few days, I might just pray again myself.'

West

When she shunned the Banqueting House, which was often, the Queen of Inys supped in her Privy Chamber. Tonight, Ead and Linora had been invited to break bread with her, an honour customarily reserved for her three bedfellows.

Margret had one of her headaches. *Skull-crushers*, she called them. Usually she refused to let them keep her from her obligations, but she must be sick with worry about Loth.

Despite the summer heat, a fire crackled in the Privy Chamber. So far, nobody had spoken to Ead.

Sometimes she felt as if they could smell her secrets. As if they sensed she had not come to this court to be a lady-in-waiting.

As if they knew about the Priory.

‘What do you think of his eyes, Ros?’

Sabran gazed at the miniature in her hand. It had already been passed between the women and scrutinised from every angle. Now Roslain Crest took it and studied it again.

The Chief Gentlewoman of the Privy Chamber, heir apparent to the Duchy of Justice, had been born only six days before Sabran. Her hair was thick and dark as treacle. Pale and smalt-eyed, always fashionably dressed, she had spent almost her whole life with her queen. Her mother had been Chief Gentlewoman to Queen Rosarian.

‘They are agreeable, Your Majesty,’ Roslain concluded. ‘Kind.’

‘I find them to be a trifle too close together,’ Sabran mused. ‘They put me in mind of a dormouse.’

Linora tittered in her delicate way.

‘Better a mouse than some louder beast,’ Roslain said to her queen. ‘Best he remembers his place if he weds you. He is not the one who is descended from the Saint.’

Sabran patted her hand. ‘How are you always so wise?’

‘I listen to you, Your Majesty.’

‘But not your grandmother, in this instance.’ Sabran looked up at her. ‘Lady Igrain thinks Mentendon will be a drain on Inys. And that Lievelyn should not trade with Seiiki. She has told me she will voice this at the next meeting of the Virtues Council.’

‘My lady grandmother worries about you. It makes her overcautious.’ Roslain sat beside her. ‘I know she prefers the Chieftain of Askrdal. He is rich and devout. A safer candidate. I can also understand her concerns about Lievelyn.’

‘But?’

Roslain offered a faint smile. ‘I believe it would behove us to give this new Red Prince a chance.’

‘I agree.’ Kattryen lay on a settle, leafing through a book of poesy. ‘You have the Virtues Council to caution you, but your ladies to embolden you in matters such as these.’

Beside Ead, Linora was drinking in the conversation in ravening silence.

‘Mistress Duryan,’ Sabran said suddenly, ‘what is your opinion of Prince Aubrecht’s countenance?’

All eyes turned to Ead. Slowly, she set down her knife. ‘You ask for *my* judgement, Majesty?’

‘Unless there is another Mistress Duryan present.’

Nobody laughed. The room was silent as Roslain delivered the miniature into her hands.

Ead considered the Red Prince. High cheekbones. Sleek copper hair. Strong brows arched over dark eyes, a hard contrast to his pallor. The set of his mouth was somewhat grave, but his face was pleasant.

Still, miniatures could lie, and often did. The artist would have flattered him.

‘He is comely enough,’ she concluded.

‘Faint praise indeed.’ Sabran sipped from her goblet. ‘You are a harder judge than my other ladies, Mistress Duryan. Are the men of the Ersyr more attractive than the prince?’

‘They are different, Your Majesty.’ Ead paused, then added, ‘Less like dormice.’

The queen gazed at her, expressionless. For a moment, Ead wondered if she had been too bold. A stricken look from Katryen only served to feed her misgiving.

‘You have a quick tongue as well as light feet.’ The Queen of Inys reclined in her chair. ‘We have not spoken often since your coming to court. A long time has passed – six years, I think.’

‘Eight, Your Majesty.’

Roslain shot her a warning glance. One did not correct the descendant of the Saint.

‘Of course. Eight,’ was all Sabran said. ‘Tell me, does Ambassador uq-Ispad ever write to you?’

‘Not often, madam. His Excellency is busy with other matters.’

‘Such as heresy.’

Ead dropped her gaze. ‘The ambassador is a devout follower of the Dawnsinger, Majesty.’

‘But you, of course, no longer are,’ Sabran said, and Ead inclined her head. ‘Lady Arbella tells me you pray often at sanctuary.’

How Arbella Glenn conveyed these things to Sabran was a mystery, since she never seemed to speak.

‘The Six Virtues is a beautiful faith, Majesty,’ Ead said, ‘and impossible not to believe in, when the true descendant of the Saint walks among us.’

It was a lie, of course. Her true faith – the faith of the Mother – blazed as strong as ever.

‘They must tell tales of my ancestors in the Ersyr,’ Sabran said. ‘Of the Damsel, especially.’

‘Yes, madam. She is remembered in the South as the most right-wise and selfless woman of her time.’

Cleolind Onjenyu was also remembered in the South as the greatest warrior of her time, but the Inysh would never believe that. They believed that she had needed to be saved.

To Ead, Cleolind was not the Damsel.

She was the Mother.

‘Lady Oliva tells me that Mistress Duryan is a born storyteller,’ Roslain said, giving her a cool look. ‘Will you not tell us the tale of the Saint and the Damsel as you were taught it in the South, mistress?’

Ead sensed a trap. The Inysh seldom enjoyed hearing anything from a new perspective, let alone their most sacred tale. Roslain was expecting her to put a foot wrong.

‘My lady,’ Ead said, ‘it cannot be told better than it is by the Sanctarian. In any case, we will hear it tomor—’

‘We will hear it now,’ Sabran said. ‘As more wyrms stir, the story will comfort my ladies.’

The fire crackled. Looking at Sabran, Ead felt a strange tension, as if there were a thread between them. Finally, she rose to take the chair beside the hearth. The place of the storyteller.

‘As you wish.’ She smoothed her skirts. ‘Where shall I begin?’

‘With the birth of the Nameless One,’ Sabran said. ‘When the great fiend came from the Dreadmount.’

Katryen took the queen by the hand. Ead breathed in, steadying the roil within her. If she told the true story, she would doubtless face the pyre.

She would have to tell the tale she heard each day at sanctuary. The butchered tale.

Half a tale.

‘There is a Womb of Fire that churns beneath this world,’ she began. ‘Over a thousand years ago, the magma within it came suddenly together, forming a beast of unspeakable magnitude – as a sword takes shape within the forge. His milk was the fire within the Womb; his thirst for it was quenchless. He drank until even his heart was a furnace.’

Katryen shivered.

‘Soon this creature, this wyrm, grew too large for the Womb. He longed to use the wings it had given him. Having torn his way upward, he broke through the peak of a mountain in Mentendon, which is called Dreadmount, and brought with him a flood of molten fire. Red lightning flashed at the summit of the mountain.

Darkness fell upon the city of Gulthaga, and all who lived there died choking on pernicious smoke.

‘There was a lust in this wyrm to conquer all he saw. He flew south to Lasia, where the House of Onjenyu ruled a great kingdom, and settled close to their seat in Yikala.’ Ead took a sip of ale to wet her throat. ‘This nameless creature carried a terrible plague – a plague no humans had ever encountered. It made the very blood of the afflicted burn, driving them mad. To keep the wyrm at bay, the people of Yikala sent him sheep and oxen, but the Nameless One was never sated. He lusted after sweeter flesh – human flesh. And so, each day, the people cast their lots, and one was chosen as a sacrifice.’

All was silent in the room.

‘Lasia was ruled then by Selinu, High Ruler of the House of Onjenyu. One day, his daughter, Princess Cleolind, was chosen as the sacrifice.’ Ead spoke that name softly, reverently. ‘Though her father offered his subjects jewels and gold, and pleaded with them to choose another, they stood firm. And Cleolind went forth with dignity, for she saw that it was fair.

‘On that very morning, a knight from the Isles of Inysca was riding for Yikala. At the time, these isles were riven by war and superstition, ruled by many overkings, and its people quaked in the shadow of a witch – but many good men dwelt there, sworn to the Virtues of Knighthood. *This knight,*’ Ead said, ‘was Sir Galian Berethnet.’

The Deceiver.

That was the name he now had in many parts of Lasia, but Sabran had no idea of that.

‘Sir Galian had heard of the terror that now abided in Lasia, and he wished to offer his services to Selinu. He carried a sword of extraordinary beauty; its name was Ascalon. When he was close to the outskirts of Yikala, he saw a damsel weeping in the shadow of the trees, and he asked why she was so afeared. *Good knight, Cleolind answered, thou art kind of heart, but for thine own sake, leave me to my prayers, for a wyrm doth come to claim my life.*’

It sickened Ead to speak of the Mother in this way, as if she were some swooning waif.

‘The knight,’ she pressed on, ‘was moved by her tears. *Sweet lady*, he said, *I should sooner plunge my sword into my own heart than see thy blood water the earth. If thy people will give their souls to the Virtues of Knighthood, and if thou giveth me thy hand in marriage, I will drive this fell beast from these lands.* This was his promise.’

Ead paused to gather her breath. And suddenly, an unexpected taste entered her mouth.

The taste of the truth.

‘Cleolind told the knight to leave, insulted by his terms,’ she found herself saying, ‘but Sir Galian would not be deterred. Determined to win glory for himself, he—’

‘No,’ Sabran cut in. ‘Cleolind *agreed* to his terms, and was grateful for his offer.’

‘This is as I heard it in the South.’ Ead raised her eyebrows, even as her heartbeat stumbled. ‘Lady Roslain asked me to—’

‘And now your queen commands you otherwise. Tell the rest as the Sanctarian does.’

‘Yes, madam.’

Sabran nodded for her to continue.

‘As Sir Galian battled with the Nameless One,’ Ead said, ‘he was gravely wounded. Nonetheless, with the greatest courage of any man living, he found the strength to thrust his sword into the monster. The Nameless One slithered away, bleeding and weak, and tunneled back into the Womb of Fire, where he remains to this day.’

She was too aware of Sabran observing her.

‘Sir Galian returned with the princess to the Isles of Inysca, gathering a Holy Retinue of knights along the way. There he was crowned King of Inys – a new name for a new age – and for his first decree, he made the Virtues of Knighthood its true and sole religion. He built the city of Ascalon, named for the sword that had wounded the Nameless One, and it was there that he and Queen Cleolind were joyfully wed. Within a year, the queen gave birth to a daughter. And King Galian, the Saint, swore to the people that while his bloodline ruled Inys, the Nameless One could never return.’

A neat story. One that the Inysh told again and again. But not the whole story.

What the Inysh did not know was that it was Cleolind, not Galian, who had banished the Nameless One.

They knew nothing of the orange tree.

‘Five hundred years later,’ Ead said, softer, ‘the break in the Dreadmount widened again, and it let out other wyrms. First came the five High Westerns, the largest and cruellest of the Draconic creatures, led by Fýredel, he who was most loyal to the Nameless One. So too came their servants, the wyverns, each lit with fire from one of the High Westerns. These wyverns made their nests in the mountains and the caves, and they mated with fowl to birth the cockatrice, and with serpent to birth the basilisk and the amphiptere, and with ox to birth the ophitaur, and with wolf to birth the jaculus. And by means of these unions, the Draconic Army was born.

‘Fýredel longed to do what the Nameless One had not, and conquer humankind. For more than a year, he turned the might of the Draconic Army on the world. Many great realms crumbled in that time, which we call the Grief of Ages. Yet Inys, led by Glorian the Third, was still standing when a comet passed over the world, and the wyrms fell suddenly into their age-old sleep, ending the terror and bloodshed. And to this day, the Nameless One remains in his tomb beneath the world, chained by the sacred blood of Berethnet.’

Silence.

Ead folded her hands in her lap and looked straight at Sabran. That cold face was unreadable.

‘Lady Oliva was right,’ the queen said eventually. ‘You do have the tongue of a storyteller – but I suspect you have heard too many stories, and not quite enough truth. I bid you listen well at sanctuary.’ She set down her goblet. ‘I am tired. Goodnight, ladies.’

Ead rose, as did Linora. They curtsyed and left.

‘Her Majesty was displeased,’ Linora said crossly when they were out of earshot. ‘You told the story ever so beautifully at first. Why in the world did you say that the Damsel rejected the Saint? No sanctarian has *ever* said that. What a notion!’

‘If Her Majesty was displeased, I am sorry for it.’

‘Now she might not invite us to sup with her again.’ Linora huffed. ‘You should have *apologised*, at least. Perhaps you should pray more often to the Knight of Courtesy.’

Mercifully, Linora refused to speak after that. They parted ways when Ead reached her chamber.

Inside, she lit a few tapers. Her room was small, but it was her own.

She unlaced her sleeves and removed the stomacher from her gown. Once she was out of it, she cast away the petticoat and the farthingale, and, finally, off came the corset.

The night was young. Ead took a seat at her writing table. Inside was the book she had borrowed from Truyde utt Zeedeur. She could not read any Eastern script, but it bore the mark of a Mentish printer. It must have been published before the Grief of Ages, when Eastern texts were permitted in Virtudom. Truyde was a blossoming heretic, then, fascinated by the lands where wyrms basked in human idolatry.

At the end of the book, on a flyleaf, was a name in fresh ink, scribbled in a curling hand.

Niclays.

Ead thought back as she braided her hair. It was a common name in Mentendon, but there had been a Niclays Roos at court when she had first arrived. He had excelled in anatomy at the University of Brygstad and was rumoured to practise alchemy. She remembered him as gorbellied and cheerful, kind enough to acknowledge her where others did not. There had been some trouble that had concluded in his departure from Inys, but the nature of the incident was a closely guarded secret.

In the silence, she listened to her body. Last time, the cutthroat had almost beaten her to the Great Bedchamber. She had not felt the flicker of her warding until it was almost too late.

Her siden was weak. The wardings she made with it had kept Sabran safe for years, but it was finally dying, like a candle at the end of its wick. Siden, the gift of the orange tree – a magic of fire and wood and earth. The Inysh in their witlessness would call it *sorcery*. Their ideas about magic were born of fear of what they could not understand.

It was Margret who had once explained to her why the Inysh had such a fear of magic. There was an ancient legend in these isles, still told to children in the north, of a figure known as the Lady of the Woods. Her name had been lost to time, but the fear of her enchantments, and her malice, had knitted itself into the bones of the Inysh and seeped through generations. Even Margret, level-headed in most things, had been reluctant to speak of it.

Ead raised a hand. She mustered her power, and golden light sputtered in her fingertips. In Lasia, when she had been close to the orange tree, siden had glowed like molten glass in her veins.

Then the Prioress had sent her here, to protect Sabran. If the years of distance extinguished her power for good, the queen would always be vulnerable. Sleeping at her side would be the only way to keep her safe, and only the Ladies of the Bedchamber did that. Ead was a long way off being a favourite.

Her restraint had cracked at supper, telling that story. She had learned to play a game over the years, to speak Inysh falsehoods and utter their prayers, but telling that butchered story herself had been difficult. And though her moment of defiance might have hurt her chances of rising any further at court, she could not quite regret it.

With the book and letters under one arm, Ead climbed on to the back of her chair and pressed at the strapwork on the ceiling, sliding a loose panel to one side. She stowed the items in the alcove beyond, where her longbow was hidden. When she was a maid of honour, she had buried the bow in the grounds of whatever palace the court occupied, but she was confident that even the Night Hawk could not find it in here.

Once she was ready for bed, she sat at her table and wrote a message to Chassar. In code, she told him there had been another attack on Sabran, and that she had stopped it.

Chassar had promised he would reply to her letters, but he never had. Not once in the eight years she had been here.

She folded the letter. The Master of the Posts would read it on behalf of the Night Hawk, but he would see nothing but courtesies. Chassar would know the truth.

A knock came at the door.

'Mistress Duryan?'

Ead put on her bedgown and undid the latch. Outside was a woman wearing a badge shaped like a winged book, marking her as a retainer in the service of Seyton Combe.

‘Yes?’

‘Mistress Duryan, good evening. I have been sent to inform you that the Principal Secretary wishes to see you at half past nine tomorrow,’ the girl said. ‘I will escort you to the Alabastrine Tower.’

‘Just me?’

‘Lady Katryen and Lady Margret were both questioned today.’

Ead’s hand tightened on the door handle. ‘It is a questioning, then.’

‘I believe so.’

With the other hand, Ead drew her bedgown closer. ‘Very well,’ she said. ‘Is that all?’

‘Yes. Goodnight, mistress.’

‘Goodnight.’

When the retainer walked away, darkness took back the corridor. Ead shut the door and set her brow against it.

She would have no sleep this night.

The *Rose Eternal* rocked on the water, tilted by the east wind. It was this ship that would bear them across the sea to Yscalin.

‘This,’ Kit declared as they walked towards it, ‘is a fine ship. I believe that I would marry this ship, were I a ship myself.’

Loth had to agree. The *Rose* was battle-scarred, but very handsome – and colossal. Even on his visits to see the navy with Sabran, he had never laid eyes upon such an immense ship as this ironclad man-of-war. She boasted one hundred and eight guns, a fearsome ram, and eighteen sails, all emblazoned with the True Sword, the emblem of Virtudom. The ensign attested that this was an Inysh vessel, and that the actions of its crew, however morally dubious they might appear, were sanctioned by its monarchy.

A figurehead of Rosarian the Fourth, lovingly polished, gazed down from the bow. Black hair and white skin. Eyes as green as sea glass. Her body tapered into a gilded tail.

Loth remembered Queen Rosarian fondly from the years before her death. The Queen Mother, as she was known now, had often watched him at play with Sabran and Roslain in the orchards. She had been a softer woman than Sabran, quick to laugh and game-some in a way her daughter never was.

‘She’s a beauty, right enough,’ Gautfred Plume said. He was the quartermaster, a dwarf of Lasian descent. ‘Not half as great a beauty as the lady who gifted her to the captain, mind.’

‘Ah, yes.’ Kit doffed his feathered hat to the figurehead. ‘May she rest for ever in the arms of the Saint.’

Plume clicked his tongue. ‘Queen Rosarian had a merrow’s soul. She should have rested in the arms of the sea.’

‘Oh, by the Saint, how beautifully put. Do merfolk really exist, incidentally? Did you ever see them when you crossed the Abyss?’

‘No. Blackfish and greatsquid and baleens, I’ve seen, but nary the cap of a sea maid.’

Kit wilted.

Seagulls circled in the cloud-streaked sky. The port of Perchling was ready for the worst, as always. The jetties rattled under the weight of soldiers armed with long-range muskets. Row upon row of mangonels and cannon bursting with chainshot, interspersed with stone mantlets, stood grimly on the beach. Archers occupied the watchtowers, ready to light their beacons at the *whump* of wings or the sight of an enemy ship.

Above it, a small city teetered. Perchling was so named because it perched on two great shelves that jutted halfway down the cliff-side, joined to the top of the cliff, and to the beach, by a long and drunken stair. Buildings huddled like birds on a branch. Kit had been amused by its precariousness (‘Saint, the architect must have been wondrous deep in the cups’), but it made Loth nervous. Perchling looked as if one good squall would blow it clean into the sea.

Still he drank it in, committing it to memory. This might be the last time he looked upon Inys, the only country he had ever known.

They found Gian Harlowe in his cabin, deep in letter-writing. The man the Queen Mother had favoured was not quite what Loth

had imagined. He was clean-shaven, his cuffs starched, but there was a bitten edge to him. His jaw was set like a sprung trap.

When they entered, he glanced up. Smallpox had pitted his deeply tanned face.

‘Gautfred.’ A mane of pewter hair gleamed in the sunlight. ‘I take it these are our . . . guests.’

Though his accent was firmly Inysh, Kit had mentioned that Harlowe came from far-off shores. Rumour had it that he was descended from the people of Carmentum, once a prosperous republic in the South, which had fallen in the Grief of Ages. The survivors had scattered far and wide.

‘Aye,’ Plume said, sounding jaded. ‘Lord Arteloth Beck and Lord Kitston Glade.’

‘Kit,’ came the prompt correction.

Harlowe put down his quill. ‘My lords,’ he said coolly. ‘Welcome aboard the *Rose Eternal*.’

‘Thank you for finding cabins for us at such short notice, Captain Harlowe,’ Loth said. ‘This is a mission of the utmost importance.’

‘And the utmost secrecy, I’m told. Strange that no man but the heir to Goldenbirch could attend to it.’ Harlowe studied Loth. ‘We set sail for the Yscali port city of Perunta at dusk. My crew are not accustomed to having nobles under their feet, so it might well be more comfortable for us all if you keep to your cabins while you’re with us.’

‘Yes,’ Kit said. ‘Good idea.’

‘I’m full of those,’ the captain said. ‘Either of you been to Yscalin before?’ When they both shook their heads, he said, ‘Which of you offended the Principal Secretary?’

Loth sensed, rather than saw, Kit jab a thumb at him.

‘Lord Arteloth.’ Harlowe barked a coarse laugh. ‘And you such a respectable fellow. Clearly you displeased His Grace to the point that he would rather not see you alive again.’ The captain leaned back in his chair. ‘I’m sure you’re both aware that the House of Vetalda now openly declares its Draconic allegiance.’

Loth shivered. The knowledge that a country could, within a few years, go from following the Saint to worshipping his enemy had shaken the whole of Virtudom.

‘And all obey?’ he said.

‘The people do as their king commands, but they suffer. We hear from the dockworkers that plague is all over Yscalin.’ Harlowe picked up his quill again. ‘Speaking of which, my crew won’t be escorting you ashore. You’ll use a boat to reach Perunta.’

Kit swallowed. ‘And then?’

‘You’ll be met by an emissary, who will take you to Cárscaro. No doubt its court is free of the sickness, since nobles have the luxury of barring themselves into their fortresses when this sort of thing occurs,’ Harlowe said, ‘but try to avoid touching anyone. The most common strain is passed from skin to skin.’

‘How do you know this?’ Loth asked him. ‘The Draconic plague has not been seen in centuries.’

‘I have an interest in survival, Lord Arteloth. I recommend you nurture one, too.’ The captain stood. ‘Master Plume, ready the ship. Let’s see to it that my lords reach the coast in one piece, even if they do die on arrival.’

West

The Alabastrine Tower was one of the highest in Ascalon Palace. At the top of its winding staircase was the Council Chamber, round and airy, its windows framed by sheer drapes.

Ead was escorted through the doorway as the clock tower struck half past nine. As well as one of her finer gowns, she wore a modest ruff and her only carcanet.

A portrait of the Saint gazed down from a wall. Sir Galian Berethnet, direct ancestor to Sabran. Raised aloft in his hand was Ascalon, the True Sword, namesake of the capital.

Ead thought he looked a thorough dolt.

The Virtues Council comprised three bodies. Most powerful were the Dukes Spiritual, each from one of the families descended from a member of the Holy Retinue – the six knights of Galian Berethnet – and each of those was the guardian of one of the Virtues of Knighthood. Next were the Earls Provincial – the heads of the noble families who controlled the six counties of Inys – and the Knights Bachelor, who were born commoners.

Today, only four members of the council sat at the table that dominated the chamber.

The Lady Usher tapped her staff.

‘Mistress Ead Duryan,’ she said. ‘An Ordinary Servant of Her Majesty’s Privy Chamber.’

The Queen of Inys was at the head of the table. Her lips were painted red as blood.

‘Mistress Duryan,’ she said.

‘Your Majesty.’ Ead gave her obeisance. ‘Your Graces.’

‘Do sit.’

As she took a seat, Ead caught the eye of Sir Tharian Lintley, Captain of the Knights of the Body, who offered a reassuring smile from his post by the doors. Like most members of the Royal Guard, Lintley was tall, robust, and had no shortage of admirers at court. He had been in love with Margret since she had arrived, and Ead knew she returned his affection, but the difference in station had kept them apart.

‘Mistress Duryan,’ Lord Seyton Combe said, eyebrows raised. The Duke of Courtesy was seated to the left of the queen. ‘Are you unwell?’

‘Your pardon, my lord?’

‘There are shadows under your eyes.’

‘I am very well, Your Grace. Only a little tired after the excitement of the Mentish visit.’

Combe took the measure of her over the rim of his cup. Close to sixty, with eyes like storms, a sallow complexion, and a near-lipless mouth, the Principal Secretary was a formidable presence. It was said that if a plot was hatched against Queen Sabran in the morning, he would have the accomplices on the rack by noon. A pity the master of cutthroats still eluded him.

‘Indeed. An unforeseen visit, but a pleasant one,’ Combe said, and a mild smile returned to his lips. All his expressions were mild. Like wine tempered with water. ‘We have already questioned many members of the royal household, but we thought it prudent to leave Her Majesty’s ladies until last, busy as you were during the Mentish visit.’

Ead held his gaze. Combe might speak the language of secrets, but he did not know hers.

Lady Igrain Crest, the Duchess of Justice, sat on the other side of the queen. She had been the chief influence on Sabran during her minority after the death of Queen Rosarian, and had apparently had a great hand in moulding her into a paragon of virtue.

‘Now that Mistress Duryan has arrived,’ she said, with a smile at Ead, ‘perhaps we can begin.’

Crest had the same fine bone structure and azure eyes as her granddaughter, Roslain – though her hair, frizzled at the temples, had long since turned silver. Small lines were notched around her lips, which were nearly as pale as the rest of her face.

‘Indeed,’ Lady Nelda Stillwater said. The Duchess of Courage was a full-figured woman, with skin of a deep brown and a head of dark curls. A carcanet of rubies glistened around her neck. ‘Mistress Duryan, a man was found dead at the threshold of the Great Bedchamber the night before last. He was holding an Yscali-made dagger.’

A parrying dagger, specifically. In duels, they were used in place of a shield, to protect and defend the wielder, but they could also kill. Each cutthroat had carried one.

‘It seems he meant to kill Her Majesty,’ Stillwater said, ‘but was himself killed.’

‘Terrible,’ the Duke of Generosity muttered. Lord Ritshard Eller, at least ninety, wore thick furs even in summer. From what Ead had observed, he was also a sanctimonious fool.

She schooled her features. ‘Another cutthroat?’

‘Yes,’ Stillwater said, her brow creasing. ‘As you will no doubt have heard, this has happened more than once in the past year. Of the nine would-be killers that have gained entry to Ascalon Palace, five were slain before they could be apprehended.’

‘It is all very strange,’ Combe said, musingly, ‘but it seems sensible to conclude that someone in the Upper Household killed the knave.’

‘A noble deed,’ Ead said.

Crest snorted. ‘Hardly, my dear,’ she said. ‘This *protector*, whoever it is, is a killer as well, and they must be unmasked.’ Her voice was thin with frustration. ‘Like the cutthroat, this person entered the royal apartments unseen, somehow eluding the Knights of the Body. They then committed a murder and left the corpse for Her Majesty to find. Did they intend to frighten our queen to death?’

‘I imagine they intended to stop our queen being *stabbed* to death, Your Grace.’

Sabran lifted an eyebrow.

‘The Knight of Justice frowns upon all bloodshed, Mistress Duryan,’ Crest said. ‘If whoever has been killing cutthroats had only come to us, we might have forgiven them, but their refusal to reveal themselves speaks of sinister intent. We *will* know who they are.’

‘We are relying on witnesses to help us, mistress. This incident happened the night before last, about midnight,’ Combe said. ‘Tell me, did you see or hear anything suspicious?’

‘Nothing comes to mind, Your Grace.’

Sabran had not stopped looking at her. The scrutiny made Ead a little warm under her ruff.

‘Mistress Duryan,’ Combe said, ‘you have been a loyal servant at court. I sincerely doubt that Ambassador uq-Ispad would have presented Her Majesty with a lady who was not of faultless character. Nonetheless, I must warn you that silence now is an act of treason. Do you know *anything* about this cutthroat? Have you heard anyone expressing dislike for Her Majesty, or sympathy towards the Draconic Kingdom of Yscalin?’

‘No, Your Grace,’ Ead said, ‘but if I should hear of any whispers, I will bring them to your door.’

Combe exchanged a look with Sabran.

‘Good day to you, mistress,’ the queen said. ‘Attend to your duties.’

Ead curtsayed and left the chamber. Lintley closed the doors behind her.

There were no guards here; they waited at the base of the tower. Ead made certain her footfalls were loud as she walked to the stair, but stopped after the first few steps.

She had sharper hearing than most. A perquisite of the lingering magic in her blood.

‘—seems truthful,’ Crest was saying, ‘but I have heard that some Ersyris dabble in the forbidden arts.’

‘Oh, rot,’ Combe interjected. ‘You don’t really believe in talk of alchemy and sorcery.’

‘As Duchess of Justice, I must consider *every* possibility, Seyton. We all know the cutthroats are an Yscali enterprise, of course – no

one has stronger motivation than the Yscals to see Her Majesty slain – but we must also root out this *protector*, who kills with such manifest expertise. I would be very interested to speak with them about where they learned their . . . craft.’

‘Mistress Duryan has always been a diligent lady-in-waiting, Igrain,’ Sabran said. ‘If you have no evidence that she was involved, perhaps we should move on.’

‘As you decree, Your Majesty.’

Ead released a long-held breath.

Her secret was safe. No one had witnessed her entering the royal apartments that night. Moving unseen was another of her gifts, for with flame came the subtlety of shadow.

Sound from below. Armoured feet on the stair. The Knights of the Body, carrying out their rounds.

She needed somewhere less open to eavesdrop. Swiftly, she descended to the next floor and slipped on to a balcony.

‘. . . is of an age with you, by all accounts very pleasant and intelligent, and a sovereign of Virtudom.’ Combe. ‘As you know, Majesty, the last five Berethnet queens have taken Inysh consorts. There has not been a foreign match for more than two centuries.’

‘You sound concerned, Your Grace,’ Sabran said. ‘Do you have so little faith in the charms of Inysh men that you are surprised my ancestors chose them as consorts?’

Chuckles.

‘As an Inysh man myself, I must protest that assessment,’ Combe said lightly, ‘but times have changed. A foreign match is critical. Now our oldest ally has betrayed the true religion, we *must* show the world that the remaining three countries who swear allegiance to the Saint will stand together, come what may, and that none will support Yscalin in its misguided belief that the Nameless One will return.’

‘There is danger in their claim,’ Crest said. ‘The Easterners venerate wyrms. They may be tempted by the idea of an alliance with a Draconic territory.’

‘I think you misjudge the danger of that, Igrain,’ Stillwater said. ‘Last I heard, the Easterners still feared the Draconic plague.’

‘So did Yscalin once.’

‘What is certain,’ Combe cut in, ‘is we cannot afford *any* signs of weakness. If you were to wed Lievelyn, Majesty, it would send a message that the Chainmail of Virtudom has never been tighter.’

‘The Red Prince trades with wyrm-worshippers,’ Sabran said. ‘Surely it would be unwise to give our implicit approval to such a practice. Especially now. Do you not agree, Igrain?’

As she listened, Ead had to smile. Already the queen had found an issue with her suitor.

‘Though producing an heir as soon as possible is the bounden duty of a Berethnet, I do agree, Your Majesty. Wisely observed,’ Crest said, her tone motherly. ‘Lievelyn is unworthy of the scion of the Saint. His trade with Seiiki shames all Virtudom. If we imply our tolerance of this heresy, we may embolden those who love the Nameless One. Lievelyn was also – lest we forget – engaged to the Donmata Marosa, who is now the heir to a Draconic territory. An affection may remain.’

A Knight of the Body walked past the balcony. Ead pressed herself flat to the wall.

‘The engagement was broken off the moment Yscalin betrayed the faith,’ Combe spluttered. ‘As for the Eastern trade, the House of Lievelyn would not trade with Seiiki unless it were essential. The Vatten might have brought Mentendon into the faith, but they also beggared it. If we gave the Mentish favourable terms in an alliance, and if a royal match were on the horizon, perhaps the trade could be broken off.’

‘My dear Seyton, it is not necessity that compels the Mentish, but greed. They *enjoy* having monopoly on trade with the East. Besides, we can hardly be expected to prop them up indefinitely,’ Crest said. ‘No, there is no need to discuss Lievelyn. A far stronger match – which I have *long* advocated to you, Majesty – is the High Chieftain of Askrdal. We must keep our links with Hróth strong.’

‘He is seventy years old,’ Stillwater said, sounding dismayed.

‘And did Glorian Shieldheart not wed Guma Vetalda, who was four and seventy?’ Eller piped up.

‘Indeed she did, and he gave her a healthy child.’ Crest sounded pleased. ‘Askrdal would bring experience and wisdom that Lievelyn, prince of a young realm, would not.’

After a pause, Sabran spoke. 'Are there no other suits?'

There was a long silence. 'Rumour of your familiarity with Lord Arteloth has spread, Majesty,' Eller said, his voice tremulous. 'Some believe you may be secretly *wed* to—'

'Spare me, Your Grace, from baseless gossip. And from talk of Lord Arteloth,' Sabran said. 'He has left court without reason or warning. I will not hear of him.'

Another tense silence.

'Your Majesty,' Combe said, 'my intelligencers have informed me that Lord Arteloth has boarded a ship bound for Yscalin, accompanied by Lord Kitston Glade. Apparently, he discovered my intention to send a spy to find your lord father . . . but believed himself to be the only man fit for a mission that touches Your Majesty so closely.'

Yscalin.

For a terrible moment, Ead could not move or breathe.

Loth.

'It may be for the best,' Combe continued into the stillness. 'Lord Arteloth's absence will allow rumours of an affair between you to cool – and it is high time we knew what was happening in Yscalin. And whether your lord father, Prince Wilstan, is alive.'

Combe was lying. Loth could not have just *stumbled* upon a plot to send a spy to Yscalin and decided to go himself. The idea was absurd. Not only would Loth never be so reckless, but the Night Hawk would never allow such plans to be discovered.

He had contrived this.

'Something is not right,' Sabran finally said. 'It is not like Loth to behave so rashly. And I find it exceedingly difficult to believe that none of you guessed his intentions. Are you not my councilors? Do you not have eyes in every corner of my court?'

The next silence was as thick as marchpane.

'I asked you to send someone to retrieve my father two years ago, Lord Seyton,' the queen said, softer. 'You told me the risk was too great.'

'I feared it was, Majesty. Now I think a risk is needful if we are to know the truth.'

‘Lord Arteloth is *not* to be risked.’ There was marked strain in her voice. ‘You will send your retainers after him. To bring him back to Inys. You *must* stop him, Seyton.’

‘Forgive me, Majesty, but he will be in Draconic territory by now. It is quite impossible to send anyone to retrieve Lord Arteloth without betraying to the Vetalda that he is there on unsanctioned business, which they will already suspect. We would only endanger his life.’

Ead swallowed the tightness in her throat. Not only had Combe sent Loth away, but he had sent him to a place where Sabran had lost all influence. There was nothing she could do. Not when Yscalin was now an unpredictable enemy, capable of destroying the fragile peace in a heartbeat.

‘Your Majesty,’ Stillwater said, ‘I understand that this news has pained you, but we must make a final decision on the suit.’

‘Her Majesty has already decided *against* Lievelyn,’ Crest cut in. ‘Askrdal is the only—’

‘I must insist upon further discussion, Igrain. Lievelyn is a better candidate, in many respects, and I would not see him dismissed.’ Stillwater spoke in clipped tones. ‘This is a delicate subject, Majesty, forgive me – but you must have a successor, and soon, to reassure your people and secure the throne for another generation. The need would not be half so urgent if not for the attempts on your life. If you *only* had a daughter—’

‘Thank you for your concern, Your Grace,’ Sabran said curtly, ‘but I am not yet recovered enough from seeing a corpse by my bed to discuss its use for childing.’ A chair scraped on the floor, followed by four others. ‘You may question Lady Linora at your leisure.’

‘Majesty—’ Combe began.

‘I would break my fast. Good morrow.’

Ead was back inside and descending before the doors to the Council Chamber opened. At the base of the tower, she walked down the path, her heart beating hard.

Margret would be devastated when she found out. Her brother was too naïve, too gentle, to be a spy in the court of the Vetalda.

He was not long for this world.

In the Queen Tower, the royal household danced to the dawn chorus. Grooms and maids criss-crossed between rooms. The scent of rising bread poured from the Privy Kitchen. Swallowing her bitterness as best she could, Ead edged her way through the Presence Chamber, where petitioners were packed tight, as always, waiting for the queen.

Ead sensed her warding as she approached the Great Bedchamber. They were laid like traps across the palace. For the first year at court, she had been a tattered nerve, unable to sleep as they rang with movement, but little by little, she had learned to recognise the sensations they sparked in her, and to shift them as if on a counting frame. She had taught herself to notice only when someone was out of place. Or when a stranger came to court.

Inside, Margret was stripping the bed, and Roslain Crest was shaking out plain-woven cloths. Sabran must be near her blood – the monthly reminder that she was not yet swollen with an heir.

Ead joined Margret in her work. She had to tell her about Loth, but it would have to wait until they were alone.

‘Mistress Duryan,’ Roslain said, breaking the silence.

Ead straightened. ‘My lady.’

‘Lady Katryen has taken ill this morning.’ The Chief Gentlewoman hooked one of the cloths on to a silk girdle. ‘You will taste Her Majesty’s food in her stead.’

Margret frowned.

‘Of course,’ Ead said calmly.

This was punishment for her deviation during the storytelling. The Ladies of the Bedchamber were rewarded in kind for the risks they took as food-tasters, but for a chamberer, it was a thankless and dangerous chore.

For Ead, it was also an opportunity.

On her way to the Royal Solarium, another opportunity presented itself. Tryude utt Zeedeur was walking behind two other maids of honour. When Ead passed, she took her by the shoulder and drew her aside, breathing into her ear, ‘Meet me after orisons tomorrow evening, or I will see to it that Her Majesty receives your letters.’

When the other maids of honour looked back, Truyde smiled, as if Ead had told her a joke. Sharp little fox.

‘Where?’ she said, still smiling.

‘The Privy Stair.’

They parted ways.

The Royal Solarium was a quiet haven. Three of its walls jutted out from the Queen Tower, providing a peerless view of the Inysh capital, Ascalon, and the river that wound through it. Columns of stone and woodsmoke rose from its streets. Some two hundred thousand souls called the city their home.

Ead seldom went out there. It was not proper for ladies-in-waiting to be seen quibbling with merchants and toeing through filth.

The sun cast shadows on the floor. The queen was silhouetted at her table, alone but for the Knights of the Body in the doorway. Their partizans crossed in front of Ead.

‘Mistress,’ one of them said, ‘you are not due to serve Her Majesty’s meal today.’

Before she could explain, Sabran called, ‘Who is that?’

‘Mistress Ead Duryan, Your Majesty. Your chamberer.’

Silence. Then: ‘Let her pass.’

The knights stood aside at once. Ead approached the queen, the heels of her shoes making no sound.

‘Good morrow, Your Majesty.’ She curtseyed.

Sabran had already looked back at her gold-enamelled prayer book. ‘Kate should be here.’

‘Lady Kattryen has taken ill.’

‘She was my bedfellow last night. I would know if she was ill.’

‘Lady Roslain says it is so,’ Ead said. ‘If it please you, I will taste your food today.’

When she received no reply, Ead sat. This close to Sabran, she could smell her pomander, stuffed with orris root and clove. The Inysh believed such perfumes could ward off illness.

They sat in silence for some time. Sabran’s breast rose and fell steadily, but the set of her jaw betrayed her anger.

‘Majesty,’ Ead finally said, ‘this may be too bold, but you seem not to be in high spirits today.’

‘It is far too bold. You are here to see that my food is not poisoned, not to remark upon my spirits.’

‘Forgive me.’

‘I have been too forgiving.’ Sabran snapped her book shut. ‘You clearly pay no heed to the Knight of Courtesy, Mistress Duryan. Perhaps you are no true convert. Perhaps you only pay empty service to my ancestor, while you secretly hold with a false religion.’

She had been here for only a minute, and already Ead was walking on quicksand.

‘Madam,’ she said carefully, ‘Queen Cleolind, your ancestor, was a crown princess of Lasia.’

‘There is no need for you to remind me of that. Do you think me a halfwit?’

‘I meant no such insult,’ Ead said. Sabran set her prayer book to one side. ‘Queen Cleolind was noble and good of heart. It was through no fault of hers that she knew nothing of the Six Virtues when she was born. I may be naïve, but rather than punishing them, surely we should pity those in ignorance and lead them to the light.’

‘Indeed,’ Sabran said drily. ‘The light of the pyre.’

‘If you mean to put me to the stake, madam, then I am sorry for it. I hear we Ersyris make very poor kindling. We are like sand, too used to the sun to burn.’

The queen looked at her. Her gaze dipped to the brooch on her gown.

‘You take the Knight of Generosity as your patron.’

Ead touched it.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘As one of your ladies, I give you my loyalty, Majesty. To give, one must be generous.’

‘Generosity. The same as Livelyn.’ Sabran said this almost to herself. ‘You may yet prove more giving than certain other ladies. First Ros insisted upon getting with child, so she was too tired to serve me, then Arbella could not walk with me, and now Kate feigns illness. I am reminded every day that none of *them* calls Generosity their patron.’

Ead knew Sabran was angry, but it still took considerable restraint not to empty the wine over her head. The Ladies of the Bedchamber

sacrificed a great deal to attend on the queen around the clock. They tasted her food and tried on her gowns, risking their own lives. Kattryen, one of the most desirable women at court, would likely never take a companion. As for Arbella, she was seventy years old, had served both Sabran and her mother, and still would not retire.

Ead was spared from answering by the arrival of the meal. Tryyde utt Zeedeur was among the maids of honour who would present it, but she refused to look at Ead.

Many Inysh customs had confounded her over the years, but royal meals were absurd. First, the queen was poured her choice of wine – then not one, not two, but *eighteen* dishes were offered to her. Wafer-thin cuts of brown meat. Currants stirred into frumenty. Pancakes with black honey, apple butter, or quail eggs. Salted fish from the Limber. Woodland strawberries on a bed of snow cream.

As always, Sabran chose only a round of goldenbread. A nod towards it was the only indication.

Silence. Tryyde was gazing towards the window. One of the other maids of honour, looking panicked, jabbed her with her elbow. Jolted back to the task at hand, Tryyde scooped up the goldenbread with a coverpane and set it on the royal plate with a curtsy. Another maid of honour served a whorl of buttersweet.

Now for the tasting. With a sly little smile, Tryyde handed Ead the bone-handled knife.

First, Ead sipped the wine. Then she sampled the buttersweet. Both were unmeddled. Next, she cut off a piece of the bun and touched it with the tip of her tongue. A drop of the dowager would make the roof of the mouth prickle, dipsas parched the lips, and eternity dust – the rarest of poisons – gave each bite of food a cloying aftertaste.

There was nothing but dense bread inside. She slid the dishes before the queen and handed the tasting knife back to Tryyde, who wiped it once and enclosed it in linen.

‘Leave us,’ Sabran said.

Glances were exchanged. The queen usually desired amusement or gossip from the maids of honour at mealtimes. As one, they curtsied and quit the room. Ead rose last.

‘Not you.’

She sat again.

The sun was brighter now, filling the Royal Solarium with light. It danced in the jug of sweetbriar wine.

‘Lady Truyde seems distracted of late.’ Sabran looked towards the door. ‘Unwell, perhaps, like Kate. I would expect such ailments to strike the court in winter.’

‘No doubt it is the rose fever, madam, no more. But Lady Truyde, I think, is more likely to be homesick,’ Ead said. ‘Or . . . she may be sick in love, as young maids often are.’

‘You cannot yet be old enough to say such things. What is your age?’

‘Six and twenty, Majesty.’

‘Not much younger than myself, then. And are *you* sick in love, as young maids often are?’

It might have sounded arch on different lips, but those eyes were as cold as the jewels at her throat.

‘I fear an Inysh citizen would find it hard to love someone who was once sworn to another faith,’ Ead answered after a moment.

It was not a light question Sabran had asked. Courting was a formal affair in Inys.

‘Nonsense,’ the queen said. The sun gleamed in her hair. ‘I understand you are close to Lord Arteloth. He told me the two of you have exchanged gifts at every Feast of Fellowship.’

‘Yes, madam,’ Ead said. ‘We are close. I was grieved to hear he had left the city.’

‘He will return.’ Sabran gave her an appraising glance. ‘Did he pay court to you?’

‘No,’ Ead said truthfully. ‘I consider Lord Arteloth a dear friend, and want no more than that. Even if I did, I am not of a fit station to wed the future Earl of Goldenbirch.’

‘Indeed. Ambassador uq-Ispad told me that your blood was base.’ Sabran sipped her wine. ‘You are not in love, then.’

A woman so quick to insult those beneath her must be vulnerable to flattery. ‘No, madam,’ Ead said. ‘I am not here to squander time in pursuit of a companion. I am here to attend the most gracious Queen of Inys. That is more than enough.’

Sabran did not smile, but her face softened from its stern cast.

‘Perhaps you would care to walk with me in the Privy Garden tomorrow,’ she said. ‘That is, if Lady Arbella is still indisposed.’

‘If it gives you pleasure, Majesty,’ Ead said.

The cabin was only just large enough for two berths. A burly Ment delivered them a supper of salted beef, a thumb-sized fish apiece, and ravelled bread, stale enough to splinter their teeth. Kit managed half his beef before he fled to the deck.

Midway into his bread, Loth gave up. This was a far cry from the sumptuous offerings at court, but vile food was the least of his worries. Combe was sending him to his doom, and for naught.

He had always known that the Night Hawk could make people vanish. People he perceived as a threat to the House of Berethnet, whether they behaved in a manner that disgraced their positions or craved more power than their due.

Even before Margret and Ead had warned him that the court was talking, Loth had known about the rumours. Rumours that he had seduced Sabran, that he had wed her in secret. Now the Dukes Spiritual sought a foreign match for her, and the hearsay, however baseless, was an impediment. Loth was a problem, and Combe had solved him.

There had to be some way to get word to Sabran. For now, however, he would have to concentrate on the task at hand. Learning to be a spy in Cárscaro.

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, Loth thought of all he knew about Lord Wilstan Fynch.

As a child, Sabran had never been close to her father. Neat and bearded, military in his bearing, Fynch had always seemed to Loth to embody the ideals of his ancestor, the Knight of Temperance. The prince consort had never been given to displays of emotion, but he had plainly cherished his family, and had made Loth and Roslain, who were closest of all to his daughter, feel that they were part of it.

When Sabran was crowned, their relationship had changed. Father and daughter often read together in the Privy Library, and

he had counselled her on the affairs of the queendom. The death of Queen Rosarian had left a space in both their lives, and it was in that space that they had finally befriended one another – but that had not been quite enough for Fynch. Rosarian had been his guiding star, and without her, he had felt lost in the vastness of the Inysh court. He had asked Sabran for permission to take up residence in Yscalin as her ambassador, and had been content in that role ever since, writing to her every season. She had always looked forward to his letters from Cárscaro, where the House of Vetalda ruled over a joyful court. Loth supposed it must have been easier for Fynch to bury his grief away from the home he had shared with Rosarian.

His final letter had been different. He had told Sabran, in as many words, that he believed the Vetalda had been involved in killing Rosarian. That was the last anyone in Inys had heard from the Duke of Temperance before rock doves had flown out from Cárscaro, declaring that Yscalin now took the Nameless One as its god and master.

Loth meant to find out what had happened in that city. What had caused the break from Virtudom, and what had become of Fynch. Any information could be invaluable if Yscalin ever declared war on the House of Berethnet, which Sabran had long feared it would.

He wiped his brow. Kit must be boiling like a coney on the deck. Come to think of it, Kit had been on the deck for rather a long time.

Heaving a sigh, Loth stood. There was no lock on the door, but he supposed there was nowhere for the pirates to lug the travelling chest of garments and other effects that had been on the coach. Combe must have sent his retainers to collect them while Loth was oblivious in the Privy Chamber, sharing a quiet supper with Sabran and Roslain.

The air was cool above. A breeze scuffed over the waves. As the crew moved hither and thither, they bellowed a song, too quick and drenched in sea cant for Loth to understand. Despite what Harlowe had said, nobody took any notice of him as he ascended to the quarterdeck.

The Swan Strait divided the Queendom of Inys from the great continent that held the West and the South. Even in high summer, perishing winds blew through it from the Ashen Sea.

He found Kit hanging over the side, wiping vomit from his chin. ‘Good evening to you, sirrah.’ Loth clapped him on the back. ‘Did you indulge in a little pirate wine?’

Kit was pale as a lily. ‘Arteloth,’ he said, ‘I don’t think I’m at all well, you know.’

‘You need ale.’

‘I dare not ask them for it. They’ve been roaring like that for the whole time I’ve been up here.’

‘They’re singing shanties,’ a husky voice said.

Loth started. A woman in a wide-brimmed black hat was leaning against the gunwale nearby.

‘Work songs.’ She tossed Kit a wineskin. ‘Helps the swabbers pass the time.’

Kit twisted off the stopper. ‘Did you say *swabbers*, mistress?’

‘Them that clear the decks.’

Going by her looks and accent, this privateer was from Yscalin. Deep olive skin, tanned and freckled. Hair like barley wine. Eyes of a clear amber, thinly outlined with black paint, the left eye underscored by a scar. She was well presented for a pirate, down to the sheen on her boots and her spotless jerkin. A rapier hung at her side.

‘If I were you, I’d be back in my cabin before it gets dark,’ she said. ‘Most of the crew don’t care overmuch for lordlings. Plume keeps them in check, but when he sleeps, so do their good manners.’

‘I don’t believe we’ve made your acquaintance, mistress,’ Kit said.

Her smile deepened. ‘And what makes you think I wish to make *your* acquaintance, my lord nobleman?’

‘Well, you did speak to us first.’

‘Perhaps I was bored.’

‘Perhaps we’ll prove interesting.’ He bowed in his extravagant way. ‘I am Lord Kitston Glade, court poet. Future Earl of Honeybrook, to my father’s chagrin. Delighted to make your acquaintance.’

‘Lord Arteloth Beck.’ Loth inclined his head. ‘Heir of the Earl and Countess of Goldenbirch.’

The woman raised an eyebrow. ‘Estina Melaugo. Heir to my own grey hairs. Boatswain of the *Rose Eternal*.’

It was clear from Kit’s expression that he knew of this woman. Loth chose not to ask.

‘So,’ Melaugo said, ‘you’re heading for Cárscaro.’

‘Are you from that city, mistress?’ Loth enquired.

‘No. Vazuva.’

Loth watched her drink from a glass bottle.

‘Mistress,’ he said, ‘I wonder if you could tell us what to expect in the court of King Sigoso. We know so little about what has happened in Yscalin over the last two years.’

‘I know as much as you, my lord. I fled Yscalin, along with some others, the day the House of Vetalda announced its allegiance to the Nameless One.’

Kit spoke again: ‘Did many of those who fled become pirates?’

‘*Privateers*, if you please.’ Melaugo nodded to the ensign. ‘And no. Most exiles went to Mentendon or the Ersyr to start again, as best they could. But not everyone got out.’

‘Is it possible that the people of Yscalin do not *all* bow to the Nameless One, then?’ Loth asked her. ‘That they are only afraid of their king, or trapped in the country?’

‘Likely. Nobody goes out now, and very few go in. Cárscaro still accepts foreign ambassadors, as evidenced by your good selves, but the rest of the country could be dead from plague, for all I know.’ A curl blew across her eyes. ‘If you ever get out, you must tell me what Cárscaro is like now. I hear there was a great fire just before the birds flew out. Lavender fields used to grow near the capital, but they burned.’

This was making Loth feel more uneasy than he had before.

‘I’ll confess to curiosity,’ Melaugo said, ‘as to why your queen is sending you into the snakepit. I had thought you were a favourite of hers, Lord Arteloth.’

‘It is not Queen Sabran who sends us, mistress,’ Kit said, ‘but the ghastly Seyton Combe.’ He sighed. ‘He never liked my poetry, you know. Only a soulless husk could hate poetry.’

‘Ah, the Night Hawk,’ Melaugo said, chuckling. ‘A suitable familiar for our queen.’

Loth stilled. 'What do you mean by that?'

'Saint.' Kit looked fascinated. 'A heretic as well as a pirate. Do you imply that Queen Sabran is some sort of witch?'

'*Privateer*. And keep your voice down.' Melaugo glanced over her shoulder. 'Don't misunderstand me, my lords. I've no personal dislike of Queen Sabran, but I come from a superstitious part of Yscalin, and there *is* something odd about the Berethnets. Each queen only having one child, always a daughter, and they all look so similar . . . I don't know. Sounds like sorcery to—'

'Shadow!'

Melaugo turned. The roar had come from the crow's nest.

'Another wyvern,' she said under her breath. 'Excuse me.'

She vaulted on to the ropes and climbed. Kit ran to the side. 'Wyvern? I've never seen one.'

'We don't *want* to see one,' Loth said. His arms were prickling. 'This is no place for us, Kit. Come, back below deck before—'

'Wait.' Kit shielded his eyes. His curls flew in the wind. 'Loth, do you see that?'

Loth looked askance at the horizon. The sun was low and red, almost blinding him.

Melaugo was clinging to the ratlines, one eye to a spyglass. 'Mother of—' She lowered it, then lifted it again. 'Plume, it's—I can't believe what I'm seeing—'

'What is it?' the quartermaster called. 'Estina?'

'It's a—a High Western.' Her shout was hoarse. 'A High Western!'

Those words were like a spark on kindling. Order splintered into chaos. Loth felt his legs become stone.

High Western.

'Ready the harpoons, the chainshot,' a Mentish woman called. 'Prepare for heat! Do not engage unless it attacks!'

When he saw it, Loth turned cold to the marrow of his bones. He could not feel his hands or face.

It was impossible, yet there it was.

A wyrm. A monstrous, four-legged wyrm, over two hundred feet long from its snout to the tip of its tail.

This was no wyverling prowling for livestock. This was a breed that had not been seen in centuries, since the last hours of the Grief

of Ages. Mightiest of the Draconic creatures. The High Westerns, largest and most brutal of all the dragons, the dread lords of wyrmkind.

One of them had *woken*.

The beast glided above the ship. As it passed, Loth could *smell* the heat inside it, the reek of smoke and brimstone.

The bear-trap of its mouth. The hot coals of its eyes. They wrote themselves into his memory. He had heard stories since he was a child, seen the hideous illustrations that lurked in bestiaries – but even his most harrowing nightmares had never conjured such a soul-fearing thing.

‘Do not engage,’ the Ment called again. ‘Steady!’

Loth pressed his back against the mainmast.

He could not deny what his eyes could see. This creature might not have the red scales of the Nameless One, but it was of his like.

The crew moved like ants fleeing water, but the wyrm appeared to have its mind set on another course. It soared over the Swan Strait. Loth could see the fire pulsing inside it, down the length of its throat to its belly. Its tail was edged with spines and ended in a mighty lash.

Loth caught the gunwale to hold himself upright. His ears were ringing. Close by, one of the younger seafarers was trembling all over, standing in a dark gold pool.

Harlowe had emerged from his cabin. He watched the High Western leave them behind.

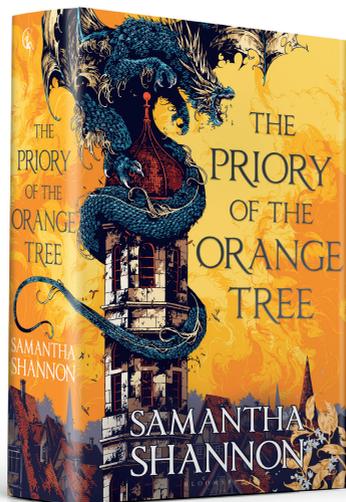
‘You had better start praying for salvation, my lords,’ he said softly. ‘Fýredel, the right wing of the Nameless One, appears to have woken from his sleep.’

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