

Part One

The Storms

Wake up, Jesca. You'll not gain anything by sleeping your life away.

Jesca woke with a start, the sound of her mother's angry voice still ringing in her mind. She rarely dreamt of her mother, dead some ten seasons now, but when she did it always left her nervous. The dreams were usually hints that she was getting herself into trouble of some kind, but Jesca had never yet been able to figure out what the trouble was until it was too late to extricate herself from it. The last time she'd had such a dream had been before she'd been taken in by her mother's half-sister—before her aunt had also died. Before she'd left for the north to escape her erstwhile uncle's at least partially well-meaning but wholly unwanted offers of marriage. She had at least managed to make her way to Abyseh, into the lowest rank of service in the first House, among the king's family if not his own household, a measure of what had seemed like good fortune at the time. This was the first such dream she'd had since then; most nights she was too tired to have dreams of any sort.

She kept her eyes closed, distracting herself from the aftereffects of the dream by trying to determine which she liked less, the musty smell of the furs or the cold of the room beyond it. Aside from being awake while the rest of the palace's inhabitants still slept. Jesca could hear Edye mumbling softly in her sleep, and there were no footsteps in the corridor outside. The sky visible through the window was still a murky grey. Turning her face a little further back into the pillow, she decided to endure the smell rather than the cold, and eventually dozed back off to sleep.

"Jesca, wake up." The light wasn't grey; the milky blue of the winter morning seeped in. "Thyura's already up and she's in a dreadful mood. Come on!" Edye pushed at Jesca's shoulder while trying to dress and finish braiding her own hair at the same time. Jesca could hear Thyura yelling, proving that Edye was not exaggerating. *How can her voice carry through all that stone and solid wood...?*

"Alright, I'm awake, I'm awake, don't fret." Jesca sat up, but kept the furs around her shoulders, trying to breathe through her mouth. "Is there any water left?"

"Yes, I only used half."

“You go ahead; I’ll be as quick as I can. Oh, Edye, your hair—you’ve missed a bit. Here, let me help you.” The younger girl hadn’t caught up all her hair while braiding it, and several locks still straggled unkempt down to her hips. “If you appear like that with half your hair unbound before Thyura, someone will cut it off for you.” Jesca sat up, shivering as the fur slipped from her shoulders, and tugged Edye down next to her so that she could undo the braid and re-plait it. “There, go on, I’ll be quick. Tell the others I was ill, but I’m recovered.”

“Asmina will still scold you, she doesn’t—”

“I know. But there’s no point in you being late as well, go. I’ll be along soon—we aren’t to leave before midday anyway, it won’t matter if I miss the first meal.”

Edye, hair and clothes finally tamed, hurried off to help the rest of Thyura’s ladies finish packing for the journey south. Jesca listened to her friend’s footsteps fade down the corridor before moving again, but when she made it to her feet she promptly sat down again, wincing. She’d told Edye to say she was ill because her head hurt a bit and it was the first thing that had come to mind, but now she wondered if it was actually true. Her joints protested when she moved, and her vision swam. After rubbing her arms to warm them, she tried standing again and found it easier.

The pain and dizziness ebbed and flowed. She cleaned and dressed herself, and packed away the few things she and Edye possessed to take south with them, but by the time she made it out into the corridor the sick feeling had come back. She hurried down the flights of stone stairs, clinging to the groove in the wall that served for a handrail. The next thing she knew, she was approaching Thyura’s rooms, much sooner than she’d expected to—so quickly that she looked around and blinked. *I’m sure I was just in the stairwell. Perhaps I’m not ill, just losing my mind.* She could hear the other women milling around on the other side of the door.

“Where have you been?” As soon as Jesca stepped into the room, someone pushed a stack of folded cloth into her hands and propelled her toward an opened chest. She still hadn’t learned the names of most of Thyura’s senior ladies—she was new to the princess’ service, and rarely permitted to be in the royal presence except at meal times, when she was expected to keep her eyes on the floor unless spoken to—although this woman’s face looked familiar. “My lady Thyura wishes to leave in two candlemarks, and only half of her things are packed. Of all the days to laze about in bed...” with that the woman was gone, hurrying back to Thyura’s wardrobe.

Jesca knelt unsteadily, carefully laying the bundle in an empty corner of the trunk. *At least I don't have to help carry it the luggage down to the horses any more*, she thought as she pushed herself back up. She was chided for being slow and clumsy, chivvied and pushed, but no one remarked on her appearance so she supposed she must look more or less normal, if a little unkempt.

The glare of the cold winter sun woke Iestyn. He tried to rise, but realised that he was pinned to the bed by Sahne, who was using his arm as a pillow. Unable to sit up, he shifted toward her instead, running fingertips lightly over her skin until she stirred. Her eyes flicked open, and she smiled at him.

“Mm. Morning.”

“Morning. Might I have my arm back? I’ve lost all feeling in my hand.” She rolled over and he flexed his fingers. “My apologies. You can go back to sleep, if you wish.”

“Hmmp.” She closed her eyes for a moment, but when he looked down at her again she was watching him. “I can’t. What hour of the morning is it?”

“I don’t know, I’ve only just woken myself. Why?”

“My brother has decided we’re to leave for the south today.”

“He couldn’t wait another day or two until your ealdor takes his household off? Why the hurry?”

“When does my brother need a sensible reason for doing anything? Perhaps he thinks the distance will be less if others are not travelling the road at the same time.”

“Huh. Yes, I’ll wager the distance will be less, as thieves will set upon you soon enough if your caravan is meandering down the road between Esora and Ovaane without a proper escort, at least until you reach Maliis. How many men-at-arms does your brother have? Fifteen?”

“I think. Perhaps twenty.”

“That’s not enough for a household of thirty souls, never mind all the baggage. I’ll send twenty of the king’s guard with you.”

“Won’t you need them yourself, here?”

“There will be time enough for them to return before the roads become impassable—Rikard isn’t leaving for a few days yet. Make sure your fool of a brother returns with your ealdor at the turn of the season, though.”

“You talk to him, then. He doesn’t listen to me.”

“I suppose I’d better. Otherwise the thieves might steal you away—with this sun-coloured hair you’d fetch a fine price in the Eppris slave markets.” He pulled at a lock of it, brushing it across his mouth.

“You think anyone who tried to carry me off would live long enough to reach the shores of Eppris?”

Iestyn laughed. “No, I suppose not. You’d have stabbed or poisoned your captor within two sunrises.” She pushed the covers off and climbed out of his bed, reaching for the gown she’d discarded on a chair the night before. “Why is Jerrep in such a mad rush to leave, then?”

She tied the laces of her bodice in a neat bow, regarding him with hooded eyes. “You won’t like it.”

He sat up straighter in the bed, fixing her with a hard stare. “That doesn’t mean I shouldn’t know. Is it something I will need to tell Rikard of?”

“No—Jerrep and my lord Ealdor Hane will have to petition him anyway.”

“Your niece Mita is rather young for Jerrep to be marrying her off, is she not?”

“It’s not her he’s offering. It’s me.”

“You?”

“I’ve been spending some time with Wyl Teckra. I think he’s smitten—he’s been asking Jerrep some pointed questions about what I inherited from my last husband.”

“I see. He’s rather old for you, isn’t he?”

“Oh, very much so. But he has a good income from his mines in Gorhaal, and Jerrep is spending all his money on Channis. She’s in foal again, you know, and keeps demanding new silks to accommodate her swelling middle.” She hopped back on the bed and kissed him. “I know you weren’t planning on dropping me so soon, Iestyn, but don’t pretend you’re heartbroken, it makes you look silly.”

“I was looking forward to our reunion when the season turns.” He scrubbed at his face, yawning. “Oh, give me a few days, I’m sure I’ll be immensely relieved that you weren’t angling for me.” She climbed back down from the bed and resumed collecting her clothing.

“If I thought you’d ever be willing to marry any woman, I would. You do seem to have a healthy income, even if King Rikard hasn’t seen fit to settle an estate on you.”

“He’s offered. I declined.”

She had been twisting a strand of tiny red pearls back into a lock of hair, but let her arms fall to her sides. “Sacred seas and springs, Iestyn, what for?”

“I have enough to do with acting as Castellan and Master of the Treasury along with being Chancellor, until Rikard makes up his mind to appoint someone else. If I had my own estate to manage as well, I wouldn’t have time to eat, let alone enjoy the occasional night with you. Rikard pays me well enough; I’ll accept an estate when I feel like retiring to the countryside.”

“You’ll die on your feet in the Hearthall before that happens. What if you lose Rikard’s favour? He’s cast off others before now.”

“Rikard gets bored with people who fawn all over him solely for what he can give them.”

“I’ve never noticed him being averse to the women he takes as mistresses.”

“He likes to be adored because he’s handsome and a good horseman and because he’s king, not because it’s within his power to turn anyone but an ealdor into a pauper, or vice versa.”

“Aren’t those last two much the same thing?”

“Not in his eyes. The rights a king holds and the fact of being king are quite separate, to him. The former is the means by which to keep order in the realm, the latter is a birthright.”

“It’s a pity you’re illegitimate. You’d have been a better king than him.”

“That there, Sahne? That’s the sort of offense one has to commit to be cast out of court. Don’t let me hear you say it again—and for the love of all that’s sacred, don’t ever say something where Rikard might hear of it.”

“Calm yourself, darling. You know very well I meant no harm—I’m a loyal subject, etc., etc.”

“I should hope so.” He finally rose from bed himself, pulling on a robe and belting it securely. “Are you certain you couldn’t wait another season or two to arrange this marriage of yours?” He reached for her, but she pulled away.

“Very. There are already whispers about us among Channis’ handmaidens. I have no intention of allowing rumours to quash my chances of a second marriage—Ylon didn’t leave me enough to survive my remaining decades watching Channis convert everything Jerrep has into green pearls and brocade.”

“You think you will find House Teckra a more pleasant home than House Plenth?”

“Well, it’s a step up rather than a step down in terms of prestige, that’s a start.”

“The rankings of the Houses don’t mean as much as they did when we were children, Sahne, you know that. Ealdor Plenth has a greater income—and more men at arms—than Teckra. Or Avynel, for that matter.”

“*Jerrep* has a greater income than Tathen Avynel. The house will be extinct in another generation unless Rabb finds himself a wealthy wife.”

“Why not consider him as a husband?”

“I don’t mind an older husband, Iestyn, but Ealdor Avynel is old enough to be my grandfather.”

“No—” Iestyn sighed. “Rabb.”

“Rabb is seventeen, Iestyn.”

“You might do worse. You’d be lady of an entire House, not just in name.”

She pulled a pillow up from the bed and threw it at him. It landed with a plop halfway between them, falling far short of its target. He narrowed his eyes at her. “What was that for?”

“If you’re going to offer suggestions, you might make an effort to come up with useful ones.”

“I thought that was a useful suggestion. Being lady of a House is worth more than what Wyl Teckra could afford to settle on you.”

“A House of three souls, with an attendant household of perhaps twenty retainers? Wyl Teckra’s own household is larger th—”

“House Avynel’s lands are the same size that they were three generations ago. Ealdor Tathen could do better at managing them, but he has not parted with a league.”

“I’m looking for a marriage so that I will have less to worry over, Iestyn, not more.”

“Pity.” He poured himself a cup of water. “I suppose it would be indiscreet to bid you farewell in the courtyard as you’re leaving? I promise not to lay a finger on you.”

“It would still be too obvious.” She flashed him a dark look before turning to size herself up in a mirror. He walked over to her, slipping his arms around her.

“If you do make this marriage with Wyl Teckra, will you come back to me when you get bored?”

She batted roughly at his hands. “Stop it, Iestyn, you’ll muss my dress.” He released her and she sprang away from him, still glaring. He stiffened.

“I bid you farewell, then, lady Sahne. May your journey to Ovaane be swift and uneventful.”

Finally all the trunks and baggage were filled, closed, and carted down the back stairs to be trundled across the courtyard to the waiting fleet of carriages and wagons. Jesca shuffled behind Edye and Sibba, the entire morning an exercise in concentration to avoid stumbling or dropping the princess's precious belongings. Now she was concentrating on not bringing back up the little food she was able to swallow during the brief meal they'd been allowed before being loaded into the carriages themselves.

The procession was some three candlemarks from Abyseh when Jesca realised that, whatever the illness was, she was losing the battle against it. She said nothing, trying to ignore the waves of dizziness and cold, pulling her cloak tighter around her shoulders and grateful for the first time that screens of the carriage kept the light out, even though she felt like the air within was running low.

"What's the matter with you?" Sibba, most senior of Thyura's waiting women, looked sharply at her. "Are you ill?"

"Yes, mistress, I think I am." She tried to look up, but her head felt as though it were made of stone. "I'm certain it shouldn't feel so cold in here, with so many of us."

"Stop the wagon." One of the women sitting at the front opened the grill and poked the driver in the back. "Stop the horses, we have an ill woman in here."

"We'll reach an inn in another two candlemarks. She can rest there." The driver's voice through the screen was muffled, but carried the same annoyance that had affected most of the household that day.

"I said stop the horses. She can't stay in here, else we'll all be ill." Jesca could hear the driver swearing, but he complied, pulling the wagon to a stop. The other vehicles behind them followed suit, blocked on the narrow road. Sibba stepped out of the carriage, blinking in the bright sunlight. She and another woman helped Jesca out of the compartment, dragging as much as guiding her, and Sibba waved at two of the guards, motioning them to come over.

"This woman needs to return to the palace, she's ill."

"My lady Thyura can't spare men—"

"We haven't come far. You can take her back and catch up to us by nightfall, we'll stop when we reach the next village."

"And when are we supposed to eat, my lady?"

“Would you rather stop further down the road to bury the girl? Take her back, she needs a physician.”

“I will go with her, mistress.” Edye climbed down from the high step of the carriage. Thyura, having been informed of the problem, had emerged from her own carriage at the head of the caravan and was bearing down on them, a handkerchief pressed to her mouth.

“What is the matter?”

“One of your waiting women—” The guard started, but Sibba cut him off.

“Mistress Jesca is unwell.”

“Can’t she manage until we reach Kero?”

“I fear not, my lady Princess. She can hardly keep upright.”

“We can’t spare men to take her back, my lady Princess, we’re already stretched thin as it is.”

The guard who had spoken earlier frowned down at them from his horse.

“I will go with her, my lady Princess.” Edye repeated, this time keeping her eyes on the ground.

“What makes you think I don’t need my ladies as much as I need my guards?”

“I’m sorry, my lady Princess...” Jesca looked up, squinting against the sun, leaning heavily on Edye.

“My lady Princess, if we keep her with us we’ll all fall ill. She must be sent back.”

“We cannot spare the guards, my lady P—”

“Oh, stop bickering!” Thyura glared at everyone she could see. “Sibba is right, she’ll make everyone ill if she stays with us. “You go with her—” she pointed at Edye, and then at a guard, “and you escort them. I suppose I have no choice but to spare one of you for a few candlemarks. Surely you can catch us up by the evening?”

“I can’t take both women on my horse, my lady—”

“Why not? The both of them together probably weigh less than you do with that armour on. Alright, you—” she pointed at another guard “—get up with the driver. We’ll get a fresh horse in Kero.”

The second guard dismounted and helped Edye and then Jesca up onto his horse. Jesca closed her eyes against the light and concentrated on keeping her grip on the saddle as the horses picked up speed to return to Abyseh.

The guard rode with them until they were within sight of the palace gates. Halfway there they'd had to stop so that Jesca could be tied to saddle with a strip of cloth from Edye's skirt, because Edye was afraid she wouldn't be able to hold the half-conscious woman if she started to slide to the ground as they rode. As soon as the guard saw the gleam of the copper gates in the distance, he turned his horse around and left them to finish the journey alone. Edye's mount first tried to follow suit; eventually she persuaded the animal to turn back in the right direction, nervous without a guard despite the sun still bright in the sky. It took them another candlemark to reach the gate, despite all Edye's promises of hay and oats when they made it to the stables. The horse slowed gradually to an amble when they reached the courtyard, less because of fatigue than Edye's inexpert guidance and recognizing familiar surroundings, but it absolutely refused to halt, no matter what Edye said to it. The courtyard was crowded with guards, servants, and nobles, all of whom were apparently too busy to notice two women on one horse that neither could manage.

Iestyn, busy reading a letter as he waited for his guards to finish saddling their horses, did not notice the horse at his back until it put its nose over his shoulder, for all the world as though it was reading the letter as well. He jumped, surprised, and reached out for the animal's bridle before turning to see whether it had a rider.

"Is there some reason you can't keep control of your mount, girl? What are you doing hanging around here—don't you think there's enough to do, with so many households departing for the south this day?" Iestyn glared up at Edye, whose worry over Jesca and fear of the horse were edging her into panic. She had obviously been crying for some time. She pulled at the reins, to which the horse responded by tossing its head, pulling away from Iestyn's loose grip and narrowly missing his nose.

"Don't do that, you damn fool, you're hardly riding at a gallop!"

"I'm sorry, my lord, the horse won't obey—"

"Which witless groom put you up there, then? Whoever it is obviously shouldn't be trusted in the stables—"

"It wasn't a groom, my lord, we're attendants of the Dowager Princess Thyura's household—"

"Then you're meant to be in Kero. What are you doing back here?"

“Mistress Jesca fell ill on the road, my lady Thyura sent us back to—” At this point the dark-haired woman behind her slumped over in the saddle and began to slide toward the ground; the knot in the makeshift restraint had worked itself loose. Edye tried to hold Jesca up, but she wasn’t strong enough; Iestyn stepped over to catch her, easing her down. Her dark hair, loosened by the ride, caught on his sleeve.

“What is wrong with her?”

“I don’t know. She was slow to wake this morning, and on the road to Kero she said she felt cold and she went awfully pale. The Princess insisted she be sent back. I’ve been trying to wake her, but she won’t respond to me—” Iestyn touched the back of his hand to her forehead; she was burning with fever.

“Maath!”

“Yes, my lord?” He was startled to see the captain of his guard standing at his right shoulder. “Send one of your men to help me, and fetch a physician. This woman is ill.”

“Yes, my lord.”

He looked back up at Edye, who was still perched on the horse. The sunlight behind her made him squint. “Aren’t you going to come down?”

“I don’t know how, my lord—I’ve never ridden a horse before—but my lady the Princess required that I should go back, catch up to them on the road.”

“And do you know the way to Kero?”

“Is there not only the one road?” Her eyes filled with fresh tears.

“I don’t suppose Princess Thyura thought to give you a purse before sending you back here?” He looked back at the unconscious woman, whose head he still cradled against his shoulder because he didn’t have a hand free to disengage the hair that had caught on the buttons of his sleeve. She looked familiar, but he couldn’t place her.

Two of his guards finally appeared. “Finally. Here, help this woman to the physicians’ chambers, if any are still in residence—tell whoever you can find that she is to be attended to, and taken back to the Dowager Princess’ chambers when she can be left alone, don’t leave her lying in the infirmary unattended. I will see that any expenses are paid.” The two men lifted Jesca to her feet, supporting her between them, while Iestyn pulled her hair free from his clothing. She could walk, apparently, with help, although she said nothing and her eyes fluttered. The two guards bore her back to the palace. Iestyn stood, brushing off his trousers. He still held one of the horse’s reins

in his hand. The other he held out to the younger girl. When she didn't respond, he sighed, putting his hands around her waist. "I'm going to lift you down, alright?" She nodded, and at least helped by not resisting when he pulled her down. Once back on her feet, she smoothed her hair and tried to dry her face with the back of one hand. She made him a stiff bow, reaching too close to the ground.

"Now catch your breath, and stop crying, you aren't in any trouble." He tried to soften his expression, without much success. She blinked fiercely. "What is your name?"

"Edye, my lord."

"You have no family name?"

"No, my lord."

"I see. And she is?" He waved a hand in the direction the guards had gone with her companion.

"Jesca Londe."

"You are of Princess Thyura's retinue?"

"We are handmaidens, my lord. My lady Princess lately raised us from waterbearers to attend her in her chambers."

"But she has a family name."

"Yes, my lord." He was waiting for her to explain why, but evidently she had no idea why a woman of family should be reduced to serving as a handmaiden, even to a dowager princess.

"My lady the Princess wishes you to meet her on the road to Kero."

"Yes."

"Well, you will need a fresh horse. Surely sh—my lady the Princess sent a guard with you?"

"She did, my lord, but he turned back as soon as we were in sight of the gates."

"How long were you riding?"

"Two candlemarks, my lord, I think—"

"And do you know the name of this guard who abandoned you on the road?"

"He meant us no harm, my lord, my lady Princess commanded his return—"

"Whether he meant it is not the point." Iestyn gathered the horse's other rein, pulling them back over its head and beginning to walk toward the stables. Edye remained rooted to the spot until he gestured to her to follow. "If my lady Princess can be so careless with your lives, she can do without your service for a night. The day wears on, it will be dark before you reach Kero at this

point. Stay here this night, help the physicians with your fellow handmaiden. On the morrow you shall have a fresh horse and a guide to see you back to the Princess' caravan."

"My lord, I have no means to pay—"

"I will send someone with everything you will need. My lady the Princess can settle the account upon her return." They had reached the stables; a groom darted forward to take the horse before Iestyn had even held the reins out. "The horse needs feeding and rest. This is Mistress Edye, who will need a fresh mount in the morning to take her Kero, and someone to show her the way. If there are no men to be spared, please inform your master that he should let me know this night, so that there should be no delay on the morrow." The young woman curtsied to the groom, who nodded to her and bowed to Iestyn.

"Yes, my lord Chancellor. Is there anything else you require?"

"Not at present. I shall return after nightfall. See that someone is about to see to Kelevet, and my men's mounts."

"Yes, my lord." The groom bowed again, and led the horse away. Edye, who had blanched at the mention of Iestyn's title, stood rooted to the spot. When he realised she had again fallen behind him, he gritted his teeth to avoid swearing, and looked back at her. "Go to the infirmary, girl, see to your friend. If you have any other difficulties, send word to my captain, Maath. He will see that you are looked after." She bowed again, deeply enough to salute the king himself, and to Iestyn's relief scurried off into the palace.

Iestyn looked around for Maath, only to see him already approaching. He strode forward to meet the captain. "Perit and Doros are taking the sick woman to the infirmary, and the other one has finally gone back to the Princess' chambers. Hopefully that's the last we've heard of her, she's unbearable. If she sends word of any difficulty, would you be so kind as to deal with it? I must be off, if I am to return before midnight. I will take four men with me."

"Who are the women, my lord, if I might ask?"

"Two of Thyura's retinue. The tight-fisted old fool sent them back with a single guard, who turned back as soon as he caught sight of the gates. The black-haired one is too ill to sit on a horse and the fair-haired one has never been on a horse before. Jenta and Edye, I think their names are. Idiots, the lot of them. At least Mistress Edye will be able to return to Thyura's service on the morrow; I suppose the other will have to stay here for the storms. Find her an appropriate chamber

in the catacombs, will you? We've only a few more sunrises before the storms arrive, there won't be enough time for them to reach Innves before the first storm hits."

When Jesca managed to push her eyes open, the light in the room was dim as usual, but the air smelled clean, and it was unusually quiet.

"Edye?"

"Oh! You are awake." A brown-haired woman she didn't recognize was standing next to a table, pottering with vials and small flasks.

"Where...?"

"You are back in Abyseh, in the infirmary. I am Ryset, one of the journeymen physicians."

Jesca tried to raise her head, but decided she didn't want to. "How did I get here? Was it this morning?"

"It was two days past. The chancellor's men brought you, apparently you were thrown on their mercy at the palace gates. You've had a dreadful fever, and I'm told you fell off your horse. We worried you'd struck your head on the cobbles and would never wake up."

"You've stayed with me this whole time?"

"Well, I haven't been keeping vigil by your bedside, but someone had to look after you. Most of the physicians have followed the ealdors south for the season."

"Thank you. I'm sorry to be a burden."

"It is no great difficulty. I'm not pledged to a House, and the Chancellor is paying me well to stay here to help look after the workers needed to repair the buildings." The woman put down the things she was fiddling with and wiped her hands on her apron. "May I have a closer look at you?" She gestured at Jesca's face, and Jesca nodded. Ryset pushed her eyelids up, felt behind her ears and under her jaw, and laid a hand on her forehead.

"You are improving, but the fever hasn't left you yet."

"I feel a good deal better—" She pushed her hair back from her forehead. "Although I don't imagine I'm much worth looking at."

"I will have a bath drawn, if you wish."

“No, do not—I thank you. I do not think I have the strength yet.” She tried again to pull herself up, with a little more success.

“Would you like an extra bolster instead?”

“I thank you, yes.” She pulled the coverlet up closer around her, then looked down at it, realising it was not the usual stinking pelt Thyura had given for her and Edye to share. *That must have gone to Innves with the rest of the household.* She now lay under a clean linen sheet and a clean, if rough, wool blanket.

“Is my lady Thyura—did she send money back so that I might pay you?”

“No, mistress. My lord Chancellor Sintar is covering your expenses, he has sent everything he thought you might need.”

Panic seized her as she realized what Ryset had said. “How much did he send? How am I to pay for it? He must know I shall have no wages until I return to Thy—the Princess—”

“He said you shouldn’t fear the cost, it is a gift.” Ryset pushed her up as she laid the bolster behind her.

Jesca settled back against it, running her fingers under the cloth again. “Is it wise to accept gifts from strange men, mistress?” If Ryset heard her, she evidently had no intention of responding. Jesca closed her eyes, first cursing Edye for leaving her in Abyseh alone, then feeling guilty for her own lack of gratitude. “What else did he send, then?”

“There is wine and food, bedclothes, a gown to supplement the one you rode in wearing, candles and two oil lamps, and the herbs you need for your fever.”

“How kind of him.”

“He asked to be kept informed of your healing.”

“Th—my lady Princess didn’t instruct him to look after me, did she?”

“No, she hasn’t sent any messages.” Ryset looked at her as though she were a child asking an absurd question.

“Oh.” Colour returned to her cheeks, alleviating her pallor, as embarrassment joined the fatigue, irritation, and guilt. “I shall have to go thank him, when I am on my feet again. Why he should take such trouble, though? Am I to go meet my lady Princess when I can travel?”

“That you shall have to ask the Chancellor; I have no idea. I shouldn’t think it could be managed, though—the first rains have already arrived, the roads won’t be passable in a day or two, and the storms will be upon us soon enough. We’re to move to the catacombs on the morrow.”

“What am I to do, with no household to serve for the season?”

Ryset laughed. “I’m sure I don’t know—that is another question you must save for the Chancellor. Certainly there are no households left in residence to serve. Haven’t you ever been in Abyseh during the storms?”

“No—I came up from the borders during the last Sun. Do so many workers get injured, to keep you busy for the whole season?”

“Enough do, even when they’re careful. It is quiet with the court away, to be sure, but there are only four of us who stayed this season. The Chancellor’s household is here, a few servants from each of the Houses, and guards enough to man the walls between the storms. Plenty of duties for four physicians not yet pledged to a House.”

“I see.” She looked at the table. “May I have some wine, as I can’t send it back?”

“Of course.” Ryset poured a cup full, much more than Jesca could drink. She sipped at it, then pushed it precariously back onto the stool next to the bed. Ryset snatched it before it could fall off, placing it securely on a nearby table.

“Do you want to eat something?”

“Not right now. I think I need to go back to sleep.”

“I think that’s wise. Someone will be here when you wake, even if I am gone. I will wake you on the morrow when we are to move to the catacombs.”

When she woke again it was night. The moon was so bright she didn’t need a lamp to see. Someone she didn’t recognize was asleep in the bed against the far wall; a page, possibly, the girl looked too young to be even an apprentice physician. She felt more alert than she had since before the fever. After trying to go back to sleep for what must have been more than a candlemark, watching the moon slide slowly across the space visible from the window, she crept out of bed as quietly as she could and shuffled the two steps over to the table where Ryset had laid out all the things the Chancellor had sent. Bottles of wine, stacks of biscuits wrapped in paper, small baskets of early ripening berries and nuts, bags of flour, barley and oats, and pots of preserved fish in oil. A loaf of bread that had already been cut. Flasks and tiny bottles of oils and tinctures ordered by the physician, together with little paper packets of herbs that she could smell without opening them. A couple of books and a stack of cards were laid out on another small table next to the other

door, with a large basket beneath presumably containing linens and clothing. *Who does the Chancellor think I'm going to be able to play cards with?* Turning back to the table she sat beside, she picked up a jar she hadn't noticed before, prying out the wide cork stopper. Preserved ginger rolled in sugar. She stuffed a large piece in her mouth greedily, unable to resist, suddenly ravenously hungry. She ate three more pieces before she was able to stop herself and close the lid again. After that she pulled off a chunk of bread, dribbling some oil on it, and finished off the wine that Ryset had poured for her when she'd first woken. Hunger sated, she stared out the window at the stars, wondering how she could repay the Chancellor's uncommon generosity.

The master physician pulled and prodded at her as though Jesca was a side of beef she was considering buying but wasn't sure how many people it would serve. She pushed back her eyelids, made Jesca stick out her tongue, thumped her back, pinched her arms, and demanded that she walk across the room. Jesca obediently stood up and took five tottering steps before her legs gave way beneath her. The page, Aned, reached her before she fell.

"You'll do." The physician briskly deposited her flasks and bottles back into the pannier she'd brought, leaving only a single large paper packet out. "You'll be weak for some time. You must see about getting decent food, which is going to be harder during the storms. You cannot possibly ride out to meet your mistress' party at this point; you're not strong enough, even if the roads were dry. Fish will do—the only beef here is likely to be dried, and you need fresh. Take a pinch of this in wine every evening—" she brandished the packet "—before you sleep. There is enough here to see you through the season. I will be leaving at dawn, but Myrten Paj will remain here for the season, he can help if you have any further difficulty." She fixed Jesca with a stern gaze, ignoring Ryset and Aned altogether. "Of course, it will go better for you if you avoid getting ill again before you are fully recuperated. You seem to be strong enough by nature, but that was a dangerous few nights you had. Fevers like that have finished off many here in these last few snows."

"I didn't choose to be ill, mistress."

"No one chooses to get ill, but there are those who choose to be careless as to where they go and how hard they push themselves."

"You must not deal with many servants."

“Most of those I see make it to my door before someone has to carry them there.” The physician didn’t bother with a formal farewell, but simply marched off, wooden heels clacking on the stone flags.

Ryset and Aned helped Jesca limp back to the bed, where she sank back onto the bolster with a ragged sigh. “I hate being this weak.”

“It will take time to get your strength back, after so many days of fever. At least you are eating again.”

“How am I to get to the catacombs?”

“There are chairs with wheels that we use in the infirmary for cases like yours. Two of the stable boys will bring it as soon as they have finished moving the horses into the caves for the season. I will stay until they come—they won’t know where to take you otherwise, they all seem to be terrified of going too deep into the catacombs.”

“I’m not greatly looking forward to it myself.”

“They’re no less safe than the Hearthall, and far safer than being anywhere in the palace during the worst of the storms.”

“The walls of the palace are thick as my arms is long on the upper floors; they must be much thicker closer to the ground. How could any wind damage a wall?”

Ryset laughed. “The risk isn’t that a wall will fall in on us—not in the palace, anyway—but in the debris that could be driven through the windows. We can pile sandbags over the smaller ones, but even those are blown down in places every year. It’s less trouble to move into the catacombs for the duration, and easier on the animals.”

“What about the people from the city?”

“The merchants, farmers, and wealthier people have followed the Houses inland for the season—the court is their livelihood, anyway. The smallholders and everyone else have quarters in the catacombs as well.”

“How large are the catacombs?”

“You’ve seen the mountain—I’d wager a good quarter of it has been hollowed out. Not all in one place, and not by us. Some stretches are thought to be from the time of the first men, before the palace was built.”

“I thought the tales of the first men were a myth.”

“Perhaps; some parts of the stories, maybe. But we must have come from somewhere, musn’t we? If everyone on the isle was of one origin, we’d all have the dark skin and black hair of the south, like you and your borderlands folk.”

“The black hair and dark skin comes from ten generations of kings and nobles intermarrying with those from Teyr, across the sea. It isn’t a native trait.”

“Then how is it so many of the peasantry of the borderlands have inherited the look?”

“Kings and princes have bastards, who don’t inherit their sires’ wealth. They often end up poor. My grandfather was one such.”

“Really?” Ryset look genuinely shocked, so Jesca schooled the sarcasm from her tone.

“Yes—what else is left for them?”

“Any child born to a royal or an ealdor would be cared for here, even if not the product of a sanctioned marriage. Inheritance and succession would be out of the question, but gifts are always made, marriage into some other respectable house. No lord or lady would see their offspring starve.”

“Your rules must be different here. In Deravos, descent may not be recognized without a parent’s—the better-born parent’s—acknowledgment.”

“Good job you came up here, then, isn’t it? You’re a handmaiden now—any comfortable merchant would be happy to have you as match for his son.”

“Yes.” Jesca sighed inwardly at the prospect, but Ryset was right; it was unlikely that she would advance much further up the ranks of service in the palace, and only those servants most intimate with their lords and ladies retained their places as they approached middle age. She’d have to start spending more time in the city in two or three years if she was to have a chance of making a life for herself in the north, unless she wanted to return south to be a farmer. *No. No, I do not want to return to gathering rice and weaving cloth.* “This life does suit me better, even if I still never get enough sleep.”

Despite having done her best to pay attention when she was wheeled from Thyura’s quarters to the catacombs, Jesca felt entirely lost when she first ventured from her assigned room some days later. It took her the better part of a candlemark to get her bearings. She found the refectory,

apparently deserted, and headed back in what she thought was the direction she'd come, only to hear—and smell—what she thought must be the stables nearby after another quarter of a candlemark of wandering. Turning again to a long corridor leading to her right, she had to stop pages on four occasions to ask where the Chancellor's rooms were. She finally reached her destination only to be stopped by two guards crossing their great axes in front of her at the mouth of a short corridor.

“What is your business with my lord Sintar?”

“He saw that I was cared for in my illness, and I would like to thank him. I have brought back what he loaned me.” She stared back at her interlocutor, hoping that the heat in her cheeks would be taken for exertion and not as evidence of her failing courage.

“Let her in, Doros. I don't think she's come to beg for anything,” he called from within the chamber. She felt her cheeks flame warmer. The guards uncrossed their weapons to allow her to pass. She made her way in, trying to keep her cane from tapping too loudly on the stone flags.

“I came to thank you for what you have already given me, not to ask for more.” Pride feebly reasserted itself over the chagrin. He surprised her by smiling.

“I did not mean any offense. I told Doros and Shef to keep out anyone who came to ask me anything, as I've been savouring my morning of quiet. I am only granted such solitude during the storms, when the palace is empty. Are you quite recovered from your fever? You did not hurt your leg as well?” He looked at the cane she carried.

“No. I am just a little weak, that is all.” She lifted the basket and set it on his desk, as there was no other table within reach. “I brought back your books, and the empty jars and such—I thought they might be valuable—”

“Mistress, the things I sent were a gift, not a loan. Do you keep them—they're of no use to me, but might be to you.”

She very badly wanted the floor to open up and swallow her. Her hands slowed and then settled to the desk. “I have not the means to return the favour, my lord.”

“That is what it means to give a gift.” She would not look up at him; she was sure he was trying not to laugh at her.

After a moment she reached in and withdrew a small parcel, holding it out to him. “I also made you some sweetmeats, as I could not think how else to show my gratitude.” He took it from her

and she finally looked back up at him. He wore a slight smile, but he looked more concerned than scornful.

“Thank you. My meals are rather dull now that the king has taken his best cooks south with him.” He tugged the cloth open, picking up one of the small spiced crackers and placing it in his mouth. He emerged from behind the desk as he chewed. “Very fine. Will you not stay, mistress, and take a meal with me?”

“I could not impose—you have just said how much you value your solitude. I wished only to thank you, which I have done, so I will leave you in peace.” She tried to bow, felt dizzy, and quickly pulled back up. “You must excuse me for not showing the proper courtesy, my lord, some movements are still difficult for me.”

“Very well then. But you must return later when you are feeling stronger—there will be little enough company beyond the palace guards.”

“That is very kind of you, thank you.” She gave another unsteady bob and shuffled away, carrying the basket. Iestyn watched her from the doorway until she’d turned a corner, then gestured to Shef. “Go after her—quietly—make sure she reaches her own chamber without falling down the stairs or fainting. If she cracks her head I doubt the physicians will be able to save her a second time.”

For the first time in her life, Jesca had nothing to do. She’d arranged the herbs given her by the physician and what remained of the food that the Chancellor had sent her on a low table against one wall and made the bed. She’d read bits of the two books, but found them hard going at times, full of unfamiliar words and passages of text in a language she didn’t know. She had no one else to attend, and no one else to talk to when Ryset and Aned were busy with their duties setting up the temporary infirmary. With the workmen employed during the storms to build replacements for the furniture and stonework damaged by the winds and the rain so often cutting themselves and breaking bones in the course of their work, it was unlikely she would see much of the physician and her page until the season was over.

She walked to strengthen her legs, making several circuits of each stretch of corridor she came across until she was certain she wouldn’t become lost. Once in a while she came across someone

hurrying to one destination or another, but for the most part the part of the catacombs she'd been lodged in seemed abandoned during the day. She didn't like to think what might happen if she got lost in the corridors and couldn't find someone to set her right; she knew only that the catacombs were older and stretched far larger than the palace, carved into the depths of the mountain. Some of the chambers were panelled in wood, like the chambers in the palace, but no one had thought it worthwhile to waste the stuff on the corridors themselves. Much of the territory near the refectory had been refined into straight walls and domed ceilings, some of the walls were even plastered and painted. As she made her way outward, however, she found that the elegant decoration gave way to rough stone that still leaked water in places; the path became narrower, the ceiling lower. The cold seeped through her cloak, pressing down on her from the dark. Suddenly she felt overwhelmed by the immensity of the stone above her. She turned and hurried back to the refectory.

The catacombs had only the one kitchen, built at one end of a vast cavern, so meals were taken in the same place, at long tables built to accommodate all residents, regardless of rank. There were small covered areas provided for those of higher status, but Iestyn usually ate with Maath and the others of his guard. This night, however, he'd sent them to deal with a disagreement over whether it was safe to send one of the king's fishing boats out, and so sat down to an empty table in one of the screened alcoves to eat.

"Water for your meal, my lord?" He looked up to see Jesca standing in the doorway.

"You are not a waterbearer, why are you carrying the pitcher?" He stood to take it from her.

"I was a waterbearer for the first season before my lady the Dowager Princess took notice of me."

"You are not so now. Don't slip back into servitude you have stepped above; others will use it against you."

"I should abandon common gratitude to those who have done me a kindness?"

"Before others, yes, you should. Everyone remaining in Abyseh is down here in the catacombs. Anyone might walk by."

She made a courtesy. "Then I beg your pardon. I'll leave you to your meal."

"No, please." He was still set the jug down on the table. "Sit and share my meal. My men are otherwise occupied." He pulled a stool out from beneath the table; the noise echoed from the walls.

“You’re accustomed to better-born company than me, my lord.”

“That may be, but they’re rarely so pleasant to look at or listen to. Please, sit.” He waved to a passing page, who scurried to fetch another place setting. She hovered in the doorway a moment, then finally sat down as requested. He poured a cup of wine for her.

“There are a great many ladies finer to look on than me.”

“If there are, they aren’t here. The ladies allowed into the Hearthall by their families are all of a type these days, and often as not as dull as paint. Anyway, they have all fled south for the season. It is refreshing to come across one with preoccupations other than fashion and seduction.”

“Ryset is convinced that you are intent on seducing me, and that I should avoid meeting you in person.”

Jesca regretted the words as soon as they were out of her mouth—flirtation had not been one of her goals in approaching the chancellor—but she could hardly take them back. If he was startled or offended, however, Jesca didn’t see it. He swallowed his wine smoothly. “Bedclothes and bags of grain are hardly love tokens.”

“I think she might be misconstruing the sweetmeats and wine.”

“Does she think I should have left you to starve, after you’d healed from your fever?”

“It is unusual for someone of my rank to be noticed by someone like you, my lord.”

“Perhaps—but it is hardly unheard of.” He refilled his own cup while Jesca sipped slowly at hers. “Nevertheless, noticing and seducing are quite different things.”

“Is being seduced at court a dangerous position to be in?”

“It can be.” He took a bite of his meal, swallowed. “I suppose it depends on how many enemies the person doing the seducing has.”

“What if the person being seduced is the one with the enemies?”

“I suppose—if it was known that the one being seduced cares for the suitor. If someone courts you but you don’t care for him, and he is harmed by your enemies, why should it matter to you?”

“Because it is unfair to the person doing the courting, to be injured or threatened just for being in love.”

“People are forever being injured and threatened for trying to hold onto what they love. You can’t save all of them.”

“I didn’t know I was being called on to save any of them—I was only telling you that Rysset misinterpreted your gifts.” She looked at him with an odd expression, half amusement, half concern. He smiled in spite of himself.

“So you were. Excuse me.” He poured more wine into her cup, although she’d only consumed half of what was there to begin with. She picked up a fragment of meat with her fingers, sliding it between her lips. He handed her a fork. “Don’t use your fingers, mistress.”

She looked back up at him, surprised, blinking. “My lord?”

“Use a fork to pick up your food with. It is not done, putting your fingers on meat—you will stain your gown.”

Her cheeks flushed, but she succeeded in keeping her expression neutral. “This gown is not worth preserving—it is already stained.”

“Then consider the finer feelings of those sitting with you at table. If you are invited to dine with a lord or lady of one of the Houses, you would wish to display a thorough command of court manners, would you not?”

“My lady Thyura is not likely to permit me to accept any such invitation, my lord.”

“The Dowager Princess may not always have charge of you. Do you remember that.”

“Then you shall have to teach me court manners, my lord. I know little of them as yet, beyond the deference due to my betters.”

“That—” he lifted another portion of meat, depositing it onto her plate “—would be a most pleasant way to pass the evenings while we are cooped up in here, if you have no other calls on your time. What say you?” Now she was convinced that he was flirting, but nothing in his expression confirmed it.

“I would be very grateful.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. “Please have done with the gratitude, to me if no one else—I am not given to doing things I dislike when it can be avoided, and neither of us is beholden to the other. You’ll be saving me from a great deal of boredom, so we could consider the account settled?”

She ran through a number of responses in quick succession before determining that refusing yet again would just be awkward, and besides, she wanted very much to accept. *If he treats me as more than a handmaiden, how can Thyura stop him? Is he not her equal?* “Should I meet you here for the evening meal on the morrow?”

“Yes. I’ll send a message if I am called away for any reason.”

“Mistress? Mistress, are you there?” A boy’s voice called from outside her door. She opened it. A page of perhaps eight winters staggered beneath a large basket. “This is for you, Mistress Londe.”

She took it from him; it was quite heavy, even for its size, and covered with a green cloth. “Who is it from, young master?”

The boy grinned up at her. “The Lord Chancellor, Mistress. But he said I wasn’t to tell anyone but you.”

“Well then. See that you don’t.” She gave him a coin from her pocket, and the boy trotted off back down the corridor. She took the basket into her chamber and pulled off the cover.

She’d never been given so much at one time, not by anyone. She pulled each item out one at a time: flasks of water scented with flowers; vials of perfume; a flagon of brandy; a length of violet linen, as fine as gauze, another of heavy undyed wool; a sharp knife in a plain brown scabbard; more boxes and parcels of sweet preserved fruits, savoury cakes, nuts, rice, and lentils. A handful of books, their pages still uncut. Beneath these was a final large item wrapped in coarse brown paper. She unwrapped this to find a coverlet of glossy grey goat’s wool, woven in a pattern of undulating waves. She had never held such valuable cloth, let alone owned it. When she shook it out, a note fell to the floor. She picked it up.

This should at least keep you warmer of nights.

He did not sign his name, but his sigil of a heron was scrawled hastily at the bottom. She folded the note and laid it in the box where she kept the few valued things she owned.

The mistress of the cloth and most of her household were gone for the season. Jesca had found an apprentice to cut the cloth for her and supply her with needles and thread on credit, but she’d have to sew the gown herself. Like most daughters of the border farms, she’d often had to make her own clothes, but it was not one of her greater talents. On the borders no one cared if a hem was straight, but the same could not be said of the court at Abyseh. Jesca concentrated so hard on

keeping her stitches even and straight as she worked on the wool that the knock on the door made her jump.

“Come in!” The door swung open to reveal Ryset, her physician’s pannier over her shoulder.

“I came to check on you. You were not at the midday meal.”

“I didn’t realize it was so late in the day. I’ve been trying to sew the skirt of this gown—I need something else to wear.”

“You need to eat, Jesca, and you need to walk, if you are going to rebuild your strength.” Ryset fixed her with a stern gaze, to which Jesca was oblivious, having turned her eyes back to the cloth to finish the stitch she’d started.

“I had plenty to eat this morning, and yesterday I walked around the catacombs for most of a candlemark, unaided.”

“With your cane.”

“I carried it. I did not lean on it until I turned back from the cave where they’re keeping the horses.”

Ryset raised an eyebrow, but Jesca still refused to look up. “There is to be music and dancing in the refectory this night, after the evening meal. Will you come?”

“Everyone is invited to take part?” Jesca finally bit off the thread she was working with and looked up.

“Yes—would I have asked otherwise.”

“No, I suppose not. Very well—I will stay for a time, at least to hear some of the music. I am not skilled at dancing, and I doubt I’ll be able to manage more than one set anyway.”

“You won’t need to be—it will be reels and fiddle music, most likely, not a court masque.” Jesca shook out the folds of the cloth, looking critically at how the skirt fell along her feet. “The Chancellor may be there—I heard him mention it to his captain. If you were wanting to speak with him.”

She kept her eyes carefully turned down, hoping her voice did not betray the alarming flash of hope Ryset’s words inspired. “Really? I wouldn’t have thought he would bother with an informal gathering.”

“With the rest of the court gone, do you expect him to live like a hermit for the entire season?”

“I suppose not. You’d think it would create problems for him when the season turns, to associate with the workers of the court.”

“Does my lady the Dowager Princess ever speak directly to you, or does she have her ladies in waiting deliver all her instructions to the rest of the household?”

“The ladies in waiting deal with us—the handmaidens and the rest of the Princess’ household. Why would she speak to us?”

Ryset, who had been holding back a laugh, sobered. “She really never speaks to you?”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Sacred seas and springs. I thought all the rumours about her were exaggeration.”

“What rumours?”

“That she thinks herself of better birth than the king, that she continues to complain about King Abardet’s edict abolishing serfdom in the realm, for all that it happened long before she was born—and she was not born Akayosi.”

“I’ve never heard her speak ill of my lord the king. She does complain that she cannot bring people from her own lands to court to fill her household. She does not like spending money where it might be avoided.”

“The other Houses—sacred seas, even the *king* is not like that, Jesca. Other nobles make favourites of their servants all the time. The dowager princess’ own grandfather was a clerk of the Treasury at the Sorinyan court, and they say that her mother was in truth the daughter of a groom here in Abyseh.”

“What does being a favourite bring one, then?”

“Depends on the master or mistress you serve—gifts, patronage, a better position. I’ve not seen the king invite any of his retainers to sit down to a meal with him, but he has been known to settle homes, even lands on them—one or two made marriages among the lowest ranks of Houses Teckra and Starel, but that was long before my time here. It may have been the last king who arranged that.” Ryset turned to the door, then back to Jesca, as though she couldn’t make up her mind about what she was doing. “I should go. One of the carpenters nearly took an arm off yesterday, and we might have to amputate it to avoid infection.” She moved toward the door with more assurance, then looked back at Jesca. “The Chancellor seems to like you. If you don’t find him entirely repellent, you shouldn’t be afraid of his company—I’ve never heard that he’s so much as touched a girl against her will, even a waterbearer, and he’s often free with his favours. Of course, he may only be cultivating you as a spy in the dowager’s chambers—but if that’s the case he’ll be sure to compensate you well for it.”

“A spy?”

“He’s the Chancellor. He keeps eyes and ears all over the realm, never mind Abyseh.” And with that Ryset hurried from the chamber, as though she feared to stay longer.

Iestyn heard them before he saw anything, a man and woman talking, the discussion rapidly escalating into something more as he neared the corner.

“Come on, lass, you’ll not get in any trouble, no one will tell your mistress—”

“I have other calls on my time, I cannot come join you—” Their words were strangely civil despite the rising fear in her voice and, when Iestyn could see them, the man’s hand on her arm. Jesca pulled, but being slight and still weak, would not be able to fight him off if he became violent.

“Just the one drink—”

Iestyn laid a hand on his sword. “I believe the lady has refused you, twice. Take your hands off her.” The floor of the cave was mostly sand, and their voices had masked his footsteps altogether; both Jesca and her assailant were surprised by his presence. If she was relieved, he couldn’t tell. He closed the distance between them, drawing his sword.

“I bade you release her. You *will* do as I say.” He levelled the blade at the man’s throat.

“She’s no concern of yourn,” the man slurred. He looked at Iestyn warily, but kept his grip on Jesca’s wrist.

“You evidently haven’t the slightest idea who I am or who she is, so how would you know what she is to me? Now, if you wish to keep your arm, release her.” The man hesitated a moment more, then let her go. Jesca let her arm fall slackly to her side, as though she had no strength left.

“Who are you?” The man was still intent on starting an altercation of some sort. The sharp odour of badly made spirits surrounded him like a lady’s scent.

“I’m the Chancellor of this realm. This woman is under my protection. You appear to be an unpledged soldier. What is your name?”

“No concern of yourn...” The man repeated, less stridently. Iestyn blinked at him.

“Not telling me your name is not going to save you; you’re only making it worse for yourself. Do you know his name?” He looked at Jesca.

“He might be called Surth, but that may be the name of someone else he was with, I couldn’t tell. There was dancing after the meal, but I decided not to stay—he wanted me to dance, but I said

no, I still have not the strength. He must have followed me...the others he was with went off toward the mouth of the cave, that way." She waved a hand behind her, opposite from whence they had come.

"I see. Well, off with you, Surth, unless you're going to fight me for her." He smacked the man's arm with the flat of his blade, hard enough to send him staggering. He refused to turn tail, however; he lurched back at Iestyn, dragging his dagger from his belt. Iestyn sidestepped him neatly, placing himself between the drunk man and Jesca.

"Mistress, be so good as to go to my chamber and fetch Maath for me, will you? You recall where it is in this dark?"

"Yes, my lord." She dipped a curtsy, which no one saw, and hurried in the direction of the chamber.

Maath, once located, commanded her to remain in the chamber with the door bolted until either he or his master returned. She did not have to wait long. Iestyn returned in a fraction of a candlemark, brushing off a smudged sleeve as she pulled the heavy door open for him.

"The man won't trouble you again, mistress. He's in the stocks for now, and will be reassigned to the quarries in east when the season turns. Did he hurt you?" He reached for the arm that the soldier had held her by, pulling the sleeve up gently.

"I am quite well, my lord, there is no need—"

"Your arm is bruised."

"I was a waterbearer for two seasons, my lord, and I grew up on a farm before that. The bruise will fade quickly enough." She pulled the sleeve down and stepped back.

"I will send for a physician if you wish."

"There is no need."

"At least sit and have a cup of wine."

"I do not wish to impose."

"I thought we had set aside the notion of imposition and being beholden." He poured wine into one cup and set the flagon down. "Do you have more pressing matters to attend to?"

"No."

"Then sit. Please." He held the cup out to her. Reluctantly she accepted it and sank into the seat he'd indicated. "I don't understand why you always refuse what you are offered."

“You said that neither of us are beholden to the other, but that is not true—I have no means to repay the expenses of the physician’s care during my illness. I’ve had no pay from my lady the princess yet, and she’ll likely cast me off once the season turns, due to my absence.”

“She’ll still be responsible for paying for your care. You were in her service when you fell ill, and it was her decision that you return here. I will recoup whatever money I have laid out from her, I promise you.”

“And when I have no household to employ me? My lady Thyura will be livid when she hears how familiar I have become with you, she will make sure no one else offers me a place—”

“My lady Thyura will do no such thing. It is not for anyone of any house to judge how I spend my time—that privilege belongs to my lord the king—and I assure you, I spend no more time away from my duties than I can afford.” He poured himself a cup of wine and sat down opposite her. “Thyura should not have let you get into such a state. Does she always neglect her companions when they are ill?”

“I could not say, my lord. I have only been her service a short time, since the end of the last Sun. She made me a handmaiden before the Snow.”

“You began service before the Snow? That was brave of you. The Snow is the most hectic of seasons in the palace. Did you get any sleep?”

“Enough. Just.” She smiled in spite of herself, then tried to hide it with a cough.

“How did you find your way into the dowager Princess’s service? Was there no other lady needing a companion?”

“My lady Thyura once knew my father, when they were young. He was a groom. I had nowhere else to go, and she was kind enough to take me as a water-bearer.”

Iestyn recalled the question that had been bothering him since his conversation with Edye after the half-conscious Jesca had been carried off to the infirmary. “Your father was born to high enough a rank to know a royal intimately as a youth and to leave you a family name, and she made you a waterbearer?”

“My father was not born to any estate or House. He was illegitimate, the child of Prince Veyek of Deravos and one of his sister’s handmaidens. He did not see fit to legally acknowledge that my father was his child, although he never denied it when asked—at least, that is what I was told. When he died, my father came here, and worked as a groom to my lord the king’s father. My mother was a handmaiden in House Hether. When they married they travelled south, bought a

farm. I grew up there. He died when I was but two winters, and she died ten seasons ago. I stayed with my mother's younger sister for a time, but it wasn't a comfortable arrangement. I came here, and my lady Thyura accepted me as a waterbearer."

"You haven't explained how she knew your father."

"When she came to the palace as a bride, my father was assigned to care for her horses until a household of her own was arranged. I think he rather turned her head, from what my mother used to tell me of it. She never behaved inappropriately, but she was always kind to him. When he left with my mother she gave him a purse of gold, which allowed them to buy the farm."

"Why aren't you back on your parents' land? Why did you have to go to your aunt's?"

"My mother was never able to maintain the farm's production after my father died. She sold it, and we only stayed on as tenants. When she died, I couldn't stay on my own unless I wished to enter the new owner's household as a maid. I decided I'd rather sleep in the loft of a kinswoman than in the cellar of an almost-stranger, at least to begin with."

"I say that was badly done, to let the child of a prince become a groom and his daughter a waterbearer. I know illegitimacy is a hardship—I'm the product of such a union myself—and that it's worse in Deravos, but Veyek might at least have done better for your father than to drive him to seek menial employment at a foreign court."

"I don't know any more of the story. Perhaps my grandmother was a difficult woman to deal with."

"Your grandfather was a prince. That should hardly have mattered." Iestyn left the thought unfinished. "Oh well. It is over now, and not my family to worry over. We shall have to see if we can do better for you up here, in the dreary uncivilised north."

Jesca laughed. "Is that what you call yourselves?"

"That is what the ambassador from Deravos is always muttering under his breath when he is here. They don't like us very much, especially since the rebellion, but they do like our pearls."

"They can't all be cherishing a hatred for an event that occurred so many generations before they were born. Unless that is why my father chose to come here—knowing how it would discomfit the prince."

"Well, I am sorry for his hardships, and yours. But I'm glad you've grown up a daughter of the north, rather than the indolent south."

“A daughter of the wild borders, more like.” The smile gradually fell from her face. “I suppose I should go back there, when the season turns and the roads are passable again. I begin to wonder if my lady Thyura will take me back into her service, after a whole season doing nothing.”

“We shall find you some other place, mistress. Do not think of leaving—at least not on Thy—the dowager princess’ account.”

“That is very kind of you, my lord.”

“Kindness has nothing to do with it. You’re intelligent, unassuming, and graceful; you’ll be an asset to any house. I will make enquiries when the season turns.” He stood, reaching a hand out to her. “I will see you back to your chamber, if you like.” She nearly refused, out of habit, but managed to close her mouth on her demurral, nodding instead. She took the offered hand, and rose.

She realised, in the brief moment that he held her hand, that no man had offered her such a courtesy since she was a child and her father used to help her climb steps and fences still too large for her. This man seemed to be doing a great deal of that these days—all of his words and gestures to her were couched in a quiet forthrightness that appealed to her, despite her constant worry that she was only buying trouble for herself when the many households of the court returned to Abyseh.

She liked the feel of his hand under hers. His skin was smooth and dry, but not soft like the hand of a clerk, which surprised her; he had calluses from the frequent handling of a sword, and the grip promised strength, not indolence. She withdrew her own hand to pick up her skirts instead, following him from the room.

Jesca woke to the sound of someone knocking rapidly on her door. She sat up stiffly, thinking for a moment that Thyura must have returned and she was wanted for the inevitable dressing-down. “Yes? Come in.”

It was Ryset, however, not an angry Sibba—or a guard. Jesca frowned at her. “Since when do you stop to knock? I thought you being a physician meant that you could just come in.”

“Since you are recovered enough for me not to have to fear you lapsing back into a fever with no warning. It’s about time you started acting like a functional member of the court again.”

“I may not be a functional member of the court once Thyura returns.”

“Ach, some other lady will take you as a waiting woman. You’ll get a better position, too, coming from the dowager princess’ household.”

“Do people do that? Just migrate from mistress to mistress?”

“I know Thyura kept her household under tight control, but does she really never allow you to speak to people from other households?”

Jesca finally pushed back her coverlet and rose from the bed, grimacing at the residual stiffness of her joints. “She’s always concerned that we might spread gossip, and we’re all assured that if we choose to leave her service without her agreement we’d best leave Abyseh altogether, because she’ll do what she can to make our lives difficult.”

“I suppose it’s a blessing that she never had the raising of any children, it sounds like she wouldn’t have let them out of her chambers until they were of age.” Ryset frowned, her hands on her hips. “You know, if she really is so ridiculous about who you and her other women are permitted to speak to, the Chancellor probably does want you for a spy. He probably thinks he can divide your loyalty early.”

“If that’s true, he assumes too much on the chances of Thyura not turning me out when she returns to Abyseh.” Jesca poured water into a basin to wash her face. “If you didn’t come to make sure I hadn’t expired in the night, what did you want?”

“To tell you that the sky is clear today, the season is beginning to turn. We get little breaks like this from the storms, and it’s better to take advantage of them while they last, the rain will likely resume by nightfall. I thought we could take some food and break our fast on the cliffs to the west, they offer a fine view of the coastline that you can’t see from the shore.”

“They’re not very narrow, are they? I’ve no desire to perch on the edge of a rockface with the gulls.”

“They are quite broad and dip inwards, you won’t slip and fall.”

“Very well. I need to wash and dress—should I meet you at your chambers?”

“Come down to the refectory. Don’t be long.”

Iestyn returned to his own chambers from checking on Kelevet in the stables to find Maath waiting for him. “I hope you haven’t been sitting there long. Please, help yourself to some wine.” Iestyn unbuckled his sword belt, laying the weapon across a chest pushed against the wall. “Is anything the matter?”

“No, just a listing of the day’s progress on the repairs that will be needed.” Maath handed Iestyn a roll of paper before picking up the wine to pour himself a cup.

“Any new damage?”

“Some shutters were torn from the fourth and eleventh houses, and a tree has come down in the park inside the ninth house, crushing a couple of hedges. And that statue of Gymmet Starel.”

“Oh, sacred seas, really?” Iestyn looked up, grimacing. “Lady Berenna will have kittens when she finds out, she’s convinced herself that Gymmet’s widow had that carved.”

“It was that old?”

“No—it was done less than a hundred snows ago, I’ve shown her the books of expenses where the stoneworker’s fees were paid, but she insists that the ledger is a forgery. She’ll think that we did it on purpose, Ealdor Starel has been trying to have it moved for twenty seasons, but she won’t let him.” He looked back down at the papers. “Have the men clear away the tree, but don’t touch the remains of the statue, otherwise she’ll accuse us of having hidden it somewhere. Were there any casualties?”

“A dozen or so bad cuts, they should be able to work again in a few days. Two more severe injuries—one man lost an eye when a splinter caught him, and another has lost his leg below the knee, a block of stone fell on him when he and two other men were trying to lever it onto a cart.”

“Ask them if they want to continue working in some other capacity when they’ve healed; if they don’t, see that they have money enough to see them back to their homes and through the next four seasons. And tell the men to be more careful when moving any stone larger than one man can carry.”

“Yes, my lord. Will there be anything else?”

“Do you have sufficient coin to pay for your men’s meat and drink, or do you need anything else?”

“You’ve given me enough to see us through another ten or twelve days, my lord.”

“If you—if any of them—need anything, do say.” He didn’t look up, running a thumb across his jaw as he started to pace, still looking down at the papers he held. “Oh, I need you to go to the weaponsmaster on the morrow—Mistress Jesca needs a knife.”

“Did you not already send her one, my lord?”

“Not for her meat—a weapon, something she can wear at her waist. Master Yareth must have a few in stock, the ladies are always requiring new ones when they return from the snows, a few

are invariably left behind when they leave their estates. Nothing jewelled—an enamelled hilt will do.”

“You like this woman, do you not, my lord?”

“Hmnn?” Iestyn looked up to meet Maath’s eyes.

“Mistress Jesca. You seem quite taken with her.” Iestyn shrugged and looked back down at his paper.

“She’s interesting, and pleasant company while we have to lurk in this rabbit warren for the season.”

“Will not my lady Sahne be put out?”

“My lady Sahne made it most clear that she won’t be gracing my bed again upon her return, she’s decided to marry above me.” Iestyn looked back up. “I don’t know that I want the girl as a lover—she’s not...she’s unspoilt, somehow. I fear that the court would eat her alive, if she became too much a part of it.” He realised, even as he spoke, that his words were an attempt to convince himself as much as Maath that she meant nothing to him—and from the look on Maath’s face, his captain was no more taken in than he was. He changed tack, suddenly finding the conversation distasteful, and returned his gaze to his papers. “Why, did you have designs on her yourself?”

“Kier asked me if she was under your protection, or if he might pursue her.”

“She *is* under my protection, at least until the season turns.” Iestyn looked up again, stern. “But I have no claim on her. Just make sure your man knows she’s not to be trifled with. And Maath—” he finally put the papers down on his desk, remembering the drunken Surth, “—if I ever hear of you or any of the guards pursuing a woman of this court against her liking, whether she be waterbearer or one of the Queen’s own ladies, that man will get far more than the rough side of my tongue, do you understand?”

“Yes, my lord.”