

MARDAN'S MARK

MARDAN'S MARK SERIES: BOOK ONE

by

Kathrese McKee

*Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken,  
and the prey of the tyrant be rescued,  
for I will contend with those who contend with you,  
and I will save your children.  
--Isaiah 49:25*

## PROLOGUE

Kaedan Palace, Kingdom of Southern Marst

The king knelt at the feet of Azor, the alligator god, staring at the idol's jagged teeth and narrowed eyes. Incense smoke shrouded the cramped stone crypt.

Azor's priest, clad in black with an alligator tattoo on his right cheekbone, stood near the wall. "Drink more of the potion, Your Majesty. It will open your mind to the truth."

The king lifted a silver goblet to his lips with trembling hands, never looking away from the god's likeness. Embers burned in a hammered bronze brazier, casting more shadows than light. A witch, as shriveled as old shoe leather, sat on the floor behind the statue, chanting as she drew symbols on the floor with a charred stick.

"Azor is bright," the king said. He set the goblet aside and reached toward the idol. "He shines."

The priest moved closer. "Your Majesty, whom do you wish to consult?"

"I want to see Mardan, the first king."

The witch waited for the priest to translate the request into Norlan and then added "Mardan" to her chants.

The priest prodded the burning coals, and brilliance flared up on the brazier, sending up a dark cloud of smoke. The sickly sweet aroma in the vault increased a hundredfold.

"You must add your voice, King Baydan," the priest said.

"Mardan. Mardan." Baydan's voice croaked, halting and slurred. "Mardan."

A form took shape in the haze. At first there were only stray wisps of smoke, but as the moments passed, the specter condensed and took on color. Baydan's eyes rounded. "Mardan."

Baydan seemed oblivious to the witch's horrified cry and the priest's hoarse shout.

The apparition grew to the size of a tall man, robed in splendid garments. Bright blue eyes, piercing and awful, glared down at Baydan. The spirit's voice thundered around the room. "Who dares to call me?"

"I I I ... am King Baydan, my ... my lord."

The fire in the brazier flared high, then dimmed.

"My son, you are cursed for seeking counsel from spirits. Since you have bowed the knee to Azor, El has turned his face from you."

Mardan's spirit vanished without a trace. Baydan stared at the statue of Azor as though seeing it for the first time. Silence fell like a pall over the room's occupants.

The priest ventured to speak. "Your Majesty--"

"No!" Baydan stood on shaky legs and faced the man. His voice rose in a frenzied shriek. "No, I won't do as you ask. You can't make me!"

"Your Majesty, wait--"

"No! No! You're evil!" Baydan pressed his palms over his eyes, and a loud moan escaped his white lips. "What have I done?"

A cool voice from the far corner spoke for the first time. "Kill him."

Baydan flung his hands from his face and whirled, groping for the sword at his waist. "You would not dare--"

A short scuffle ensued, but King Baydan was no match for the priest.

The cool voice continued. "You make a convincing priest, Captain Rozar."

Rozar didn't look up as he wiped his dagger on Baydan's tunic. "That's not surprising. I used to be a priest when I was young and naïve."

"Not so young and naïve now, eh?" The voice paused. "There is one other minor problem to deal with. After that, board your ship and leave quickly. We will communicate in the usual way." He sighed. "It's a pity about Baydan, but this will work to our advantage."

## CHAPTER ONE

The *Cathartid*, off the coast of Southern Marst

Aldan crept past the sleeping crew members drooping in their hammocks, his bare feet soundless on the well-worn boards. One of the men mumbled. Aldan froze, the daggers hidden in the belt beneath his ragged tunic pressing into the small of his back. The pirate turned his head, but his eyes stayed closed.

*Keep moving.* The skin between his shoulders itched. *Nobody's there. Stop imagining things.*

Dawn's dull gray fingers poked through the latticework of the hatch in the deck above--barely enough light to maneuver around the sea chests and discarded clothing littering the deck. Aldan ducked into the dark passageway and down to the pitch-black hold. The hot, musty air closed in around him.

He stopped and held his breath. The skitter and scrape of a ship's rat in the beams reassured him. The gulf slipped past the ship's hull, a constant rush of water. Satisfied, he hurried to the forsaken space reserved for Captain Rozar's slaves in the hold near the stern, picking his way by memory through the maze of barrels, crates, bolts of sailcloth, and coils of rope.

"Sam. Linus. Wake up." He shook Sam's shoulder and received a grunt in reply. Aldan pushed harder. "Get up."

"Go away."

"You've got to see this." He reached out to wake Linus and found an empty hammock. "Where's Linus?"

A quiet voice answered near his ear. "I'm behind you."

Aldan whirled around with a hiss. "Don't *do* that." He sagged onto the foot of Sam's hammock. "I think my heart stopped beating."

Sam's bass voice rumbled in the darkness. "How's a man supposed to get any sleep around here?"

"Never mind sleep. Linus, light the lamp so you can see what I found."

A tiny spark jumped from the flint to the char cloth, sizzling bright in the depths of the hold. A single point of red light glowed, followed by the birth of flame in the lamp as Linus held the cloth to the wick.

Aldan looked into the obsidian glitter of Linus's eyes. "Where have you been?"

"Behind you."

"How long?"

"The whole time."

Aldan blew out a breath and pushed his hair away from his forehead. "I woke you?"

"Indeed."

Aldan shook his head and dropped the subject--Linus would do whatever Linus would do. "Look." He drew three daggers from the back of his belt and handed one to each of his fellow slaves. He unsheathed the remaining blade and ran his thumb along the edge.

"I could do some damage with this," Sam whispered. He struggled to swing his legs over the side of his hammock and straightened to his full height. Sam was the most heavily muscled of the group and the oldest at twenty-three summers, but he wasn't as tall as Aldan, four years his junior.

Linus, younger and taller than the others, re-sheathed his dagger and made no comment. He reached into his tunic's neckline and drew out a small leather pouch. He loosened the cord, and five gold pieces clinked into his palm. They gleamed against his brown-black skin.

Aldan jumped to his feet. "Where did you get that?"

"Fratz's sea chest."

"What?" Aldan and Sam asked in unison.

Linus shrugged. "I saw Fratz steal it from Biscuits."

A grin split Sam's face, and his red beard bristled. "So Fratz can't cry about losing the gold pieces he wasn't supposed to have in the first place." Sam punched Linus's arm. "Well done."

Aldan frowned. "Are you out of your mind? What if you'd been caught?"

Linus leveled a meaningful stare. "What if you'd been caught?"

"It's not the same," Aldan said. "Nobody's counted the weapons we captured yesterday. Not Captain Rozar. Not Scar. So nobody will know they're missing. But even if he can't say anything, Fratz will know the gold is missing. And he's going to look for it."

Linus shrugged again. "I'm good at hiding things."

"He's got you there," Sam said, and he grinned. "That means we've got weapons and gold. Now all we have to do is figure out how to get ashore."

Aldan rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Aye, that's the problem, isn't it?"

"You think? We're stranded in the Great Gulf, leagues from any shore." Sam's mouth pulled down at the corners. "Our chances of getting off this cursed ship are almost nil."

"We'll think of a way. We must." Aldan took the dagger from Sam's hand and gave both weapons to Linus. "Hide these and the gold. I've got to get things ready for Rozar before Scar figures out I'm not where I'm supposed to be."

"That sea serpent." Sam's fists clenched at his sides. "Scar's getting bolder every day and the men listen to him. Rozar had better watch his back, and we'd better be gone by the time Scar makes his move. Once he's the captain, we're dead."

Linus nodded. "Indeed."

Aldan swallowed and looked away. *And I'm at the top of Scar's list.*

#

"Aldan, bring wine!"

Aldan stopped polishing the brass lantern in his hands and hung it back on its hook. Wine? In the middle of the day?

A watchful silence fell over the pirates on deck. Captain Rozar rarely drank and never before nightfall. Aldan turned to see what held the crew's attention and noticed a tiny sailboat approaching from the west.

Rozar glared around at his men. "Get back to work, you lot." The captain's attention swung back to the sailboat. Scar, the first mate, was out of sight. Aldan took the chance to linger near the hatch.

The craft drew up along *Cathartid's* port side, and a stranger in riding boots and a green tunic climbed the ship's ladder, greeted the captain like an old friend, and spoke near Rozar's ear. A wicked smile bloomed across the captain's face.

Aldan slid down the ladder without touching the rungs and hurried to fetch wine and two goblets on a tray from the galley. Biscuits, the cook, delayed him with questions, but Aldan broke away, promising to talk later. He reached the captain's stout door and listened hard. The door masked most of the words, but they were speaking in Marstan instead of Norlan. He knocked on the door, waited for Rozar's answer, and swung it open.

"Ah, Aldan. Come in, come in." Rozar laughed and rubbed his palms together.

Aldan set the tray on the captain's table and backed into the corner to watch, as stealthy as a ship's rat, taking care not to rap his head against the angled beams.

Rozar poured a liberal amount of wine into each vessel. "Join me in a toast, my friend."

"With pleasure," Green Tunic said. He took the proffered drink and waited.

"You've brought me the best possible news at exactly the right time." Rozar set aside the flagon and lifted his goblet. "To Fortune! May she shine as brightly on you and me as Sol shines today."

"Hear, hear," Green Tunic said, lifting his glass to touch Rozar's. "To your success."

Rozar took a long sip. "Mmm," he murmured.

Wait until Sam and Linus heard about this. Aldan dug his bare toes into the captain's prized silk rug and relished the cool sea breeze flowing through the open porthole. He studied the

stranger, memorizing every detail. A golden wolf's head adorned his uniform's left breast. What was the man's name? If the stranger was Rozar's friend, why hadn't they seen him before?

Rozar took another swig of wine and thumped his goblet down. "Please, sit with me a few moments before you cast off again." His dark gaze darted to Aldan, and he snapped his fingers. "You. Out. Wait outside the cabin door until I call."

Aldan bowed himself out of the cabin and pulled the door closed. He didn't dare listen through the keyhole. No news was worth a thrashing. He put his back to the beam across from Rozar's cabin and listened to the sounds of the pirate ship and her crew.

*Cathartid* creaked and groaned around him, complaining about being too close to land when she could be hunting in the Great Gulf. A shadow fell over him, and he ducked in time to avoid Scar's beefy fist.

"You got time to stand around, do you? I know you have work to be doing, you layabout." The first mate grabbed Aldan's wrist and gave it a vicious twist. "Well? Why are you still standing here?"

"Captain Rozar's orders," Aldan said through gritted teeth. He met Scar's bloodshot eyes glare for glare. Every detail of the mate's disfigured face sprang into sharp focus, including Azor, the alligator god, tattooed on his cheekbone.

"Oh, that's likely." Scar gave his arm a wrenching yank and let go. "You know Marstan. What did they say?"

Aldan shook his head. "They drank a toast to Fortune, and Rozar told me to get out and wait here. That's all I know."

"Don't know much, do you?" Scar spit at his feet.

Aldan didn't answer or move a muscle.

"Stupid slave." The first mate turned on his heel and ascended the nearby ladder to the deck above.

Aldan checked both ways before he grimaced and rubbed his throbbing wrist. A whisper of sound captured his attention.

Linus emerged from the space beneath the ladder. He wore unrelieved black. Combined with his ebony skin, his clothing acted like camouflage in the ship's gloomy interior.

Linus paused, tilting his head to listen. "That one is the son of a devil," he said.

Aldan nodded. "His mother was a squid."

"Indeed." Linus gestured to Rozar's closed door. "No news?"

"Not yet. Rozar's half-crazed, he's so excited."

His friend heaved a solemn sigh. "Someone will suffer."

"Better clear out before anyone sees you, Brother." But Linus was already out of sight, gone without a sound.

#

An hour passed while the captain entertained his guest. Rozar called Aldan to clear away the drink tray and the empty flagon. Green Tunic departed, and as soon as the visitor's sailboat pulled away, the captain shouted orders to set the ship in motion.

“Bring her about, north by northeast. Look alive, you worthless curs! Scar! Get those sails trimmed.” Rozar didn't quit giving orders until he'd set every hand to work. “Aldan, come here.” He lowered his voice. “Get me down the ladder. Don't know why I ever touch wine.”

Aldan half-supported, half-carried the captain to his cabin. Rozar hummed a tune under his breath and settled onto his berth with a muzzy smile. “Ish good you've grown up a bit or I'd be . . . hmm . . . hmm.”

Aldan stared at the captain who'd fallen asleep the moment his head hit the pillow. “It's a good thing I'm the same size as you or you'd have broken your neck coming down that ladder.”

He stole a moment to watch the waves through the porthole. *Cathartid's* hull vibrated with life under his hand. This ship possessed a soul of her own, an evil soul set on destruction. *Cathartid* made the most of the wind in her swept-back sails, slipping through the waters of the Great Gulf like the deadly predator she was, barracuda swift and shark hungry, the fastest ship in King Dzor's pirate fleet with a captain and crew to match her ruthless nature.

A short nap later, Captain Rozar took the helm. Aldan took his normal place--out of reach but near enough to take orders. Rozar summoned him with a snap of his fingers.

“Find Sam and clear out the cabin across from mine. Tell the cook to make a fresh batch of the sleeping potion. Don't make me wait.”

Aldan found Sam in the galley. No surprise there. His best friend had long ago discovered he could earn extra food scraps if he acted as cook's drudge. Sam needed all the help he could get maintaining his extra-large form.

Mirza, the ship's resident witch, was in the galley, too, preparing some unspeakable sacrifice of fish entrails, strong spices, and spoiled eggs for Azor. The stench was unbearable. Aldan's stomach rolled over, and he tried not to breathe through his nose. He relayed the captain's orders to Biscuits in one breath.

“Sam. Come with me.” Swallowing a gulp of air, Aldan raced through the narrow space to reach the fresh breeze flowing through the hatch overhead.

Sam emerged a few moments later, munching on a stale piece of bread. He held more pieces in his other hand.

Aldan stared as Sam popped another crust into his mouth with relish. “How can you eat when she's making Azor's stew? That's disgusting.”

“Mirza's disgusting, but the bread's pretty good. I'm hungry. Besides, it's not even moldy.”

Aldan snorted. “I'm so glad the bread isn't moldy. It's your ability to eat around Mirza that's disgusting. Hurry up.”

Sam walked at his side, bumping Aldan's shoulder with every other step in the narrow passageway. “I have two more pieces. Want one?”

Aldan looked at the bread. His stomach rumbled. “Oh, all right.” He snatched a crust from Sam's hand and stuffed it into his mouth. “Thanks.”

“Do you have to walk so fast?”

“Just hurry,” Aldan said. “If Rozar decides to check on us, we'd better be done.”

#

Ten bells rang after Sol went to bed beneath the western horizon. Aldan leaned over the stern railing to savor the end of the day. The surface of the Great Gulf rolled back from the hull, murky and mysterious with traces of luminescence from the *Cathartid's* wake.

Rozar's shrill whistle echoed through the ship. Aldan turned from the railing, ran to the captain's cabin, and knocked once on the frame of the open door.

"Help me out of this coat," Rozar said with a snap. "Where were you?"

He didn't answer. Long experience told him the question was probably rhetorical. As soon as the door was closed, the captain launched into his nightly soliloquy in Marstan. Rozar enjoyed talking to him as if they were friends. As if they were more than jailor and captive, master and slave.

"What a day. Can you believe it? We're to take the richest prize imaginable in two weeks. Our provisions will be stretched, to be sure, but this will be the most profitable voyage of my life."

Aldan strove to keep the interest from showing on his face. Perhaps Rozar would say what was going on. He reached out and grasped the collar and one sleeve of Rozar's finest coat as the captain tried to shrug out of it.

"Have a care, boy. That's my hair you're pulling."

"Sorry."

Rozar extract his other arm from the fitted garment. "I'll make you sorry." The threat sounded half-hearted at best.

Aldan placed the garment on the bed, bundled his master into a dressing gown of scarlet silk, and waited as the captain sank into his favorite chair.

Rozar chuckled. "Yes. King Dzor, Azor bless his soul, will likely give me the deed to my family's old estate as a reward."

Aldan knelt and grasped Rozar's boot in his hands, and the captain allowed him to pull it off. He put it aside and took the other boot Rozar pushed off. With the boots in one hand, Aldan retrieved the boot blacking from a shelf on the wall, sat on a low stool, and set to work.

The captain chuckled. "You just don't have a clue, do you, Aldan?"

He glanced up.

Rozar's dark eyes twinkled with malice. "You remember nothing before you came to me. Isn't that right?"

Aldan looked down at the leather of the boot he'd been buffing. *It's true.* Hadn't he tried hundreds of times to remember his life before becoming Rozar's slave? Marstan was his native language. He'd learned Norlan from the crew in the school of hard fists and swift kicks. Rozar used Marstan with Aldan "to stay in practice."

"Well, boy? You've been aboard my ship a dozen years. Don't you remember yet?"

The captain usually didn't want or expect answers. Apparently, he did now. "I only remember the language."

"Ha! What a jest!" Rozar laughed again. "If only you knew-- But no, I don't believe I'll

tell you. Suffice it to say, there's nothing like being paid twice for the same work. In your case, I might be paid more than twice if the stars align the right way."

Aldan's eyes widened. Had someone paid to make him a slave?

"I've really confused you now." The captain gasped and sputtered, pounding his knee in apparent glee. "You should see your face."

A knock at the door cut the captain's laughter short. "Enter." The alligator tattoo on Rozar's cheek seemed to bristle with outrage.

Linus came in bearing a tray laden with food, and Rozar's dark expression lightened.

"About time."

Linus placed the tray on the table at the captain's elbow. The smell of wonderful, spicy soup filled the air, and Aldan's mouth watered. Linus poured the captain's favorite tea into a heavy mug.

"Out." One word, in Norlan.

Aldan hid a smile as Linus closed one eye in a sly wink, and his spirits rose. The joke was on Rozar. Linus and Sam had learned Marstan long since, but the captain always used Norlan for their benefit.

Linus let himself out of the cabin, and the door latch clicked quietly into place. Aldan finished with the first boot and moved to the second one.

"Bet you didn't know I was raised to be a farmer," Rozar said. "That's how I plan to spend my old age, just watching the crops grow on my father's old property. I can afford to pull down the manor and build a new one. Who knows? Maybe I'll even get a wife or two and father some brats."

Similar nonsense followed. About different crops. About horses and cattle. Such a strange state of mind--the captain had become more unpredictable each passing year. What would happen to them when Rozar went completely mad?

*How did I become the one he talks to? He's already mad.*

Rozar mopped up his soup with a crust of bread. "It all depends on Dzor and what he thinks of my prize, of course." The captain switched topics to the weather, sails, and supplies.

After completing his duties, Aldan closed the door and let out a deep breath. What prize would Rozar be so eager to take? A rival pirate's treasure? A shipment of slaves? A rich merchant ship? Now he had more questions than ever.

#

Aldan saved the scraps from Rozar's meal and wheedled more food from Biscuits in exchange for pleasant speculation about the meaning of the new orders. The cook lived for gossip of all kinds. Tonight, Biscuits doled out food for the brothers with a generous hand, and Aldan paid close attention to everything the cook had to say. Especially anything about Scar. At last, he left the galley and descended to the hold where Sam and Linus waited.

"You should have heard Rozar going on and on about cows and sheep and such," Aldan said. "I think he means to give up the ship if King Dzor grants his wish to get his land back."

Sam frowned. "Makes you wonder what he plans to do with us."

“Yes, it does.”

“I’ll tell you one thing,” Sam said, lowering his voice and switching to Marstan. “I’ll drown myself before I stay aboard with Scar. We have got to get away from this ship.”

Aldan nodded. “Scar will feed us to the sharks, one piece at a time.”

Linus, who sat right up against Aldan’s side on the hammock, shuddered. “Indeed.”

“I know we’ve talked about getting away before,” Aldan said. “We have to do it soon. I feel it. If King Dzor is pleased with this prize Rozar means to take, there’s no telling what will happen to us.” He rubbed his forehead. “Maybe Rozar plans to take us with him to his estate, but more than likely, he means to take me. Only me.”

Linus pressed closer to his side in silent protest.

Aldan hesitated. “Of course, he could mean to sell us in Port Azor, but it sounds like he has plans for me.”

“I sure wish I understood what he meant about being paid twice,” Sam said. “But I don’t think Rozar has that much time left. Scar has to hold off until we capture this great prize Rozar’s raving about. But after that . . .”

“You’re probably right. We can’t wait until we get close to Port Azor. We have to figure out a way to get one of the longboats over the side without getting killed or captured.”

“We can’t row across the Great Gulf.”

“You just said you’d rather drown than be under Scar’s command.” Aldan glared at Sam and then at Linus. “So we’ll take the boat and take our chances. Unless you have a better idea.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Twelve years later, Kaeson Palace, Kingdom of Northern Marst

“A storm is coming, Your Highness.”

Srilani turned to the freckled youth beside her. “This is the last arrow. We’ll be inside the palace before the rain gets here.”

She drew back the string of her bow, pulling it to the corner of her mouth, and aimed at the farthest target. A gust of gulf wind brushed her cheek, and she waited for a moment of calm. *Breathe out, breathe in, hold . . . release.* The arrow flew to the target and hit the center with a satisfying thud.

Srilani glanced to the east. The brilliant light of Sol sparkled on the Great Gulf’s waves, but a line of dark clouds swarmed toward Kaeson Palace. Typical. The moment she had some free time, a summer shower would force her indoors.

“Now you may retrieve the arrows,” she said.

Her assistant, aged six, galloped down the range with his dog close at his heels.

Srilani called after him. “Please be careful of the fletching!”

Behind her, Captain Olson’s voice sounded amused. “How much do you pay him?”

“Olson!” She spun to face her good friend and sometimes teacher. “When did you return?”

Sunlight burnished the captain’s iron gray, close-cropped hair and highlighted the light brown eyes beneath his bushy brows. “Just now. Please excuse my dirt, Your Highness.”

“If you’ll excuse mine.”

The dog barked and drew their attention to the boy for a moment.

“How much, Blue Eyes?”

Srilani's lips lifted at the corners. How long had it been since she'd heard that nickname? "He's satisfied with sweets from the kitchens. I've worked out an arrangement with the head cook."

"I remember paying you the same wage when you were a little girl."

She laughed. "I learned from the best."

He coughed and looked pleased, but then his grin faded. "I need to report to your father. Can you arrange for Judge Elison to be present at two bells this afternoon?"

"It's that important?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I'll do my best." With an effort, she kept worry from showing on her face. "His Honor has good days and bad days. Hopefully, he'll feel well enough to attend."

Olson held out his arm, and she clasped it in the traditional salute of the Palace Guard. "I know I can depend on you, Daughter." He released her forearm. "Even if Judge Elison isn't able to attend, please come to act as his eyes and ears."

"I'll be there." Life would be much easier if Olson really was her father. She pushed back a strand of blonde hair and tucked it into her braid. "Thank you for including me. You know how Father is."

"I do." Olson's voice turned gruff. "Your father is blind where you're concerned."

#

Two hours later, Srilani dipped the tip of her quill into the ink pot and resumed taking notes. She sat at Judge Elison's elbow in the War Room and listened intently. Outside, the promised storm had arrived, and the small window set high in the stone wall streamed with rain.

Captain Olson's report concerned his covert mission along the Norland border and down the coast. He spread his hands out to his sides and let them fall. "Your Majesty, I know you have other worries, but the facts are alarming. My men and I have verified over one hundred people taken by the Norlan troops and pirates in border and coastal raids."

Srilani could remain silent no longer. "One hundred? Since the winter solstice?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

She pulled the quill's feathery end through her fingers as she did some quick calculations in her head. "That's almost one per day."

The captain nodded, his brows forming a deep V. "Not counting the scores of reports we haven't been able to verify."

Srilani glanced at her father. King Terson sat near the middle of the long table, looking across its surface at the captain. Usually, he discouraged her from taking an active part in his meetings. He hadn't objected to her first question, so she pressed on. "Is there any kind of pattern to the raids? Do the locations have anything in common? Whom do they prefer to abduct?"

Judge Elison, her law teacher and mentor, nodded. He'd taught her to pay attention to details, to analyze facts, to think logically, and to ask questions like a master of the law.

Olson paced in front of the table. "In fact, the raids concentrate on villages far from the barons' estates."

That made sense--go where the people are but stay away from the protected areas.

The captain continued, "Occasionally, the Norlanders take random people from the countryside, probably as they have the opportunity. As far as the types of people, the raiders usually steal men and women fifteen to twenty-five years old. Young, strong, and fit for hard labor."

Srilani's stomach clenched. They might enslave the young men to work in their fields, but the young women would be lucky if that was all they were made to do. She'd heard whispered tales of captivity in brothels. *El, why are people so cruel?*

She feigned interest in writing her notes, but all her attention was focused on her father. The silence stretched out, punctuated by a rumble of thunder. She suppressed the urge to fidget.

From under her lashes, Srilani watched her younger brother, Prince Jamson. He sat at their father's right hand, inching a piece of parchment back and forth. Jamson was a thirteen-year-old version of Father--straight brown hair, strong jaw, and snapping greenish-brown eyes. His face gave every indication that he was following the conversation with interest, but Srilani would bet her prized longbow that his mind was far, far away from the War Room. He was too young to care about these issues.

At last, her father spoke. "What are your recommendations, Captain?" His voice sounded disinterested. Remote.

How could he be so detached about this?

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, the barons need extra men to help them guard the northern border. Invest more of your men at the Cauldron Fortress. Assign extra patrols for a few of your ships. At least that would make those twice-cursed Norlan pirates more cautious about approaching our shores. We might even sink a few of their ships."

Srilani finished writing the last point and raised her quill, ready for more. Olson's suggestions made perfect sense. A flash of light outside highlighted her father's face for an instant, and a crackle of thunder followed. Why didn't he say something? What was he waiting for?

King Terson lowered his eyes to the parchments, maps, and scrolls that covered the table. "We're already stretched thin because of the southern threat, Captain. I don't believe I can dedicate more resources away from the capital city and the Marst River forts."

Her father's words repeated in her mind. Just like that? Hadn't he heard anything Olson was saying? Pressure built behind her eyes.

King Terson turned to Judge Elison. "What say you, Your Honor?"

Elison's ancient, milky eyes were hooded, his wizened face pinched with pain.

Srilani bit her lip. Surely, Father would heed Elison.

Elison looked in the king's direction even though he was now completely blind. "Captain Olson has given you wise suggestions, my son." The counselor spoke with authority. "I've told you that my visions show a son of Mardan uniting the Twin Kingdoms. I've told you this before. The true threat is from our old enemy, King Dzor of Norland."

The corners of Terson's mouth turned down, and his gaze briefly went to Jamson's face.

He shook his head. "I believe what you say is true, Your Honor, but it was you who taught me that El's timing doesn't always line up the way we want."

Elison's hands tightened on the head of his cane, but he didn't interrupt.

"Currently, the only living son of Mardan is either me or my son," Terson said. "It seems unlikely that either of us has the ability to unite the Twin Kingdoms. Perhaps your visions are about Jamson's son or grandson."

He straightened the parchments in front of him. "One thing is clear--Habidan is gathering an army in Southern Marst, and their only possible target is us. Many Southerners grew up hearing stories of the Twin Kingdoms War. Some of the old Southerners took part in the fighting. There are still so many hard feelings."

A fire ignited deep inside Srilani. How could her father brush off a vision from El? If she hadn't been present to hear him say the words, she would never have believed it. He'd directly contradicted Judge Elison. She clamped her lips together and tried to recite genealogies. *Mardan begat twin sons, Kaedan and Kaeson. Kaedan begat a son and three daughters.*

Captain Olson clasped his hands behind his back and rocked from his heels to his toes. "What will you do to stop the raids, Sire?"

Her father rapped his knuckles on the table like he always did before he made a royal pronouncement. "We will take your recommendations into consideration, Captain Olson, and make our decision after the Solstice Festival."

"No!" The objection burst from Srilani's lips before she could stop it. Judge Elison flinched at her side and the captain froze. Terson and Jamson stared, two pairs of hazel eyes boring into her face.

She shook her head. "You can't possibly mean to wait that long, Father."

His expression hardened, and she rushed to make her point. "The Solstice Festival is almost three weeks away and more people will be stolen. It's like condemning them to death--only worse." The fire inside raged and the words boiled up. "Why can't we ask for volunteers to ride the frontiers? What would it hurt? We can't stand by and let this situation continue unchallenged."

"This requires thought and planning, Srilani."

"I know. I know it does, but you're consciously choosing to delay." She waved her hand in Elison's direction. "And how can you contradict Judge Elison?"

"I don't appreciate your tone, Daughter." A vein throbbed in her father's temple. "And I didn't contradict Judge Elison."

"You did. When he said the threat is from Norland, you said it was from Southern Marst."

"Obviously, there are two threats, Daughter." He bit off each word. *Daughter* sounded more like a curse than an endearment. "I said I would take Olson's recommendations into consideration."

"But--"

"You're out of line."

She stared at her father's forbidding expression. When had he decided she wasn't worthy? Why didn't her opinions count? He'd insisted on educating her to think like a leader, but he didn't want her to act like one. He wouldn't even listen to her ideas.

"How? How am I out of line?" Srilani's heart beat so hard that it hurt her ears. She'd never spoken to her father in this way. "All I'm saying is that you shouldn't wait so long. Our people need our help."

"What's clear to me--"

She raised her voice over his. "To wait is negligent. It's a terrible thing to do--practically criminal." Her fingers bent the quill until it snapped, splattering her hand and wrist with ink.

Terson's chair flew back as he stood up. "Out." His voice was low, controlled, and coldly furious. A long rumble of thunder reverberated through the floor and walls as if to emphasize her father's anger. "Get out of my sight."

She stared at the black ink drops dripping like old blood from her pale skin.

Captain Olson came to her side, brought out a handkerchief, and wrapped it around her hand. He urged her to rise with a hand beneath her elbow. "Come, Daughter. Let's go find your maid."

Her father picked up her notes and passed them to Jamson. His voice was noticeably warmer as he said, "Get a fresh quill and finish the notes, Son."

She raised her chin and straightened her shoulders. She refused to look in her father's direction as Olson led her out into the corridor, but once the doors were shut, she stopped and her shoulders slumped. Unshed tears brimmed, and she stared hard at the beamed ceiling above, blinking rapidly.

"What did I do?"

Olson gave a weak chuckle. "You said what I wanted to say." His fingers squeezed her wrist. "May El bless you, Princess."

#

"No, Anna, not this dress. I'm meeting Lieutenant Greyson today, and this dress . . . I'm sorry. Let's make it the one with the lace at the neckline." Srilani turned away from her looking glass as she unfastened the gown. She sighed. White. The curse of being a princess of Marst--white clothes.

Anna bit her lip and lowered her eyes. "Yes, my lady."

"Be careful of my hair. It's perfect like it is."

"Yes, my lady."

Anna worked efficiently to exchange the first dress for the second, and Srilani peered at her reflection in the mirror. After she was married, she would never wear white clothes again.

*Praise El.*

Would Greyson like her? Would she like him? Her father seemed exceptionally pleased with himself this time, and soon she would have to make her final choice.

Since her sixteenth summer, King Terson had introduced her to one potential husband after another at every Third Day banquet. Some of the men were as young as she, some were

older, and one had been nearly as old as her parents. She suppressed a shudder. What had they been thinking?

Now that she was seventeen, her time to choose was almost up. She would turn eighteen in the autumn, an old maid by most standards.

A soft knock drew Anna to the door of Srilani's sitting room. She admitted sixteen-year-old René carrying their baby sister, Audrilan. René's maid followed them inside.

"Shur-ee! Shur-ee!" Audrilan held out her arms, straining toward Srilani. René set the little girl on her feet.

"Audri. Come here to Sister," Srilani said, crouching with outstretched hands. She scooped Audri into a hug, kissed her plump cheeks, and stroked her blonde curls. "How's my favorite girl?"

Audrilan launched into an unintelligible story. Srilani sat with the child in her lap. She asked silly questions to make Audri laugh and stole more kisses.

René laughed too. "Nobody at court would recognize you if they saw you playing with Audri. You're like an entirely different person in this room."

"The court expects me to act like a princess." Srilani pulled Audri close. "This is the real me. How was your day? I miss having lessons with you."

"Not as much as I miss you. Maelan only cares about horses, dogs, and the garden." René rolled her eyes. "She's a wretched student. They should have paired her with Jamson so they could compete against each other." She leaned forward and studied the lace on Srilani's gown. "This is lovely. Are you excited to meet Greyson again?"

"Yes. Although Greyson would be a better match for you than for me. You're both so beautiful."

"Don't call me that." René's brilliant blue eyes narrowed. "I can't help the way I look. And don't--whatever you do--call Greyson beautiful. He's a man." She grinned and raised one slender brow. "Possibly the best-looking man who has ever walked on the earth, but not beautiful."

Srilani smiled back at René. "But is he smart? Can he make me laugh? Do we have other things in common?"

"For your sake, I hope so. I think Father is growing impatient." René turned to the maid who stood nearby. "Anna, you did a wonderful job of dressing Srilani this evening. I love the way you arranged her hair."

"Thank you, my lady."

Srilani's brow puckered. Had she even thanked Anna? Why couldn't she be as thoughtful and gracious as René? Audrilan snuggled her head into Srilani's shoulder, and she bent to kiss the child's forehead.

"We'd better go. Father sent a message that I'm supposed to arrive early."

Srilani, René, Audri, and the maids entered the Solarium together. The afternoon storm had passed and the evening's warm rays bathed the room's soaring white walls and arches in rich

amber. Many chairs, couches, and benches were arranged in small groups among the columns supporting the high ceiling. Tall windows facing east and west flanked the room.

Lady Kaelan, their mother, looked up from her customary rocking chair. She had married their father while his mother was still queen, and she had never been comfortable with the title of queen even after Grandmother had passed away. She held out her arms to receive Audrilan. "My dears, you all look lovely."

"Thank you, Mother," Srilani said. Her eyes drifted to her father who sat in the large armchair next to her mother. "May El bless you, Father."

Slowly, his eyes rose to her face. His usual expression had altered in some subtle way she couldn't identify. He set aside the roll of parchment he'd been reading. "Your mother reminded me of an item that was overlooked after your grandmother passed away." His voice, too, seemed cool to her.

Srilani's heart skipped a beat. "I beg your pardon?"

Her father stood, took her elbow, and guided her to a spot by the windows away from the others. She studied his face. Was the coolness she sensed a product of her imagination or the lingering effects of their confrontation?

He cleared his throat. "When my mother died, you were so young that we put this away." He drew a leather pouch from his pocket and poured a lovely silver chain into her hand. "I believe you should have it now."

A large oval aquamarine pendant, framed with crystals and pearls, winked back at her. "I remember this necklace," she said. "Grandmother used to let me play with this in her dressing room."

He glanced out the window toward the Great Gulf, visible from this vantage point, even though it was a couple of leagues away. "I had forgotten it entirely, but as I said, your mother brought it to my attention."

She hesitated. "Would you fasten it for me?"

"Of course." She turned around and he worked the clasp.

She twisted the pendant back and forth to catch the light in the stone--fire trapped in pale blue ice. She turned back to her father. "I love it."

"My mother specifically willed it to you." His voice sounded solemn. "You are very like her."

"Thank you, Father." She reached out to him, and he permitted her a brief embrace.

"There's something else, Srilani."

She stepped back, but he retained one of her hands. "You're almost eighteen. You need to make a choice from the men I've presented to you." His voice seemed to come from a long way off. "Lieutenant Greyson is the last one I plan to introduce. If there is another man you would like to meet, you must let me know. If you cannot choose by the time you turn eighteen, then I will choose a husband for you. Do you understand?"

She nodded. He would take the choice out of her hands. Her lips firmed. Not if she could help it.

“Do you understand?” Terson repeated.

“Yes, Father. I understand.”

Sol's golden light faded to mauve, and Srilani struggled to be patient. Soon, eight bells would toll--time to go into the Great Hall. She turned to her parents. “Where are the twins?”

“Late, as usual,” Terson said. His fingers beat a tattoo on the arm of his chair.

“Well, don't blame Patience,” Kaelan said. A mischievous smile lit her beautiful face. “She's dealing with Maelan. Your daughter is just like you, you know.”

Terson's hazel eyes twinkled as he met Kaelan's glance. “Maelan has my coloring, but she inherited her sauciness from you, my dear.”

Srilani's fingers closed around the pendant of her grandmother's necklace. Her parents' marriage was a love match, not an arranged marriage like the one she faced. The difference between being a prince and a princess came down to choice--her father had been free to choose a wife for himself. He spoke of her “choice” of husband, then gave her a deadline for love. If only El granted her request for a marriage founded on mutual respect. Certainly, she prayed for more respect than she received from Father.

The guards opened the Solarium doors to admit the twins and Patience, their nurse turned keeper. Jamson looked irked and out of sorts. Maelan, his twin, wore an identical expression on her face.

Jamson stationed himself in front of his mother. “Why do we have to go to the banquet?”

Maelan stood at his side and pushed her straight brown hair behind her ears. “We were watching Midnight Star have her foal, and--”

Jamson finished Maelan's sentence. “--we don't even know if it's a colt or a filly.”

“I wonder if it's black like Midnight Star.”

“Or chestnut like Sol's Light.”

“When can we go back to see it?”

“Hush, and let Mother answer,” Srilani said with a snap.

Lady Kaelan stood and handed Audrilan to the nurse. “Thank you, Patience. You've lived up to your name once more.”

“You're welcome, Madame.” Patience's rich, soothing alto voice belied her iron will. She gave the twins a stern look. “Mind your manners. Nobody would guess you're almost fourteen, the way you're acting. I will ask someone to find out about the foal for you, and you may visit Midnight Star and her new baby after breakfast tomorrow.”

Maelan opened her mouth to object, and Patience held up a hand for silence. “No arguments, or you'll wait longer.” She joggled Audrilan on her hip and left the room like a ship under full sail.

Srilani's eyes met René's, and they shared a smile. Jamson was heir to the kingdom, but Patience still ruled the nursery.

The giant bell in the center tower tolled--eight slow strokes echoed through the palace. Their mother smoothed Maelan's hair and examined Jamson's appearance one last time. “Come

along," she said. "It's rude to be late."

Jamson's mouth formed a mutinous line. The twins put their heads together as they followed their parents out of the Solarium and started an intense conversation in undertones.

René shook her head. "Were we ever that young?"

"Oh, like you're such an old lady at sixteen," Srilani said. "You'll need a cane soon."

The sisters followed their parents and younger siblings up the middle aisle between the long rows of tables arranged in the Great Hall. The hall was full. Barons, their families, visiting dignitaries, servants--all the people stopped their activities to rise and pay homage to the royal family.

Srilani ignored the crowd. Instead, she searched the small group of Palace Guard officers standing on the dais. Her great friend, General Bertson, came to attention beside Lieutenant Greyson's father, Captain Corson. Next to the captain, interested in everything around him, stood Greyson--blond, breathtaking, and mysterious.

"There he is," René whispered.

"I know." The thumping of Srilani's heart behind her breastbone reached an uncomfortable velocity, and her lungs burned. She released her breath in a quiet whoosh, working hard to keep her face serene.

René leaned toward her. "Enjoy the banquet. Give me the sign if you want to be rescued."

Srilani took her place behind her chair, keeping her eyes lowered. Greyson's boots were shiny and new-looking. Her sleeve was a bare inch from his. His hands folded together and she almost missed her cue. She pressed her hands together and raised them to her forehead as Judge Elison proclaimed the benediction. The prayer ended, but Greyson continued to pray for some moments longer. Then his eyes--blue as the sea--opened and stared directly into hers. Unbelievable. The man was even more glorious up close.

"Daughter, you've met Lieutenant Greyson before, I believe."

Her father's voice brought her back to earth, and she broke away from Greyson's spell.

"Yes, Father." She gathered her wits and extended her hand to Greyson. "It is a pleasure to meet you again after so long, Lieutenant."

He took her hand to his lips, the lightest of salutes, and released it with an admiring smile. "The pleasure is mine, Your Highness. May El bless you."

Training came to her rescue. "May El bless you." *Stop staring like a child of four, and follow the routine.*

Greyson pulled out her chair. She sank down onto it and busied herself with the meal, stealing occasional glimpses at her dinner companion. Of course, Elison had briefed her about the lieutenant--twenty-three years old, heir to Merripan, latecomer to the Palace Guard.

She possessed a ready store of conversational gambits but let the moments pass until the servants brought the second course. "Do you like the barracks? Are they comfortable?"

Face serious, he turned in his chair. "Naturally, I miss Merripan, but I do enjoy living in the barracks. Besides, home doesn't seem like home without Grandfather. He was my best

friend.”

Srilani's fingers tightened on her napkin. Just her luck to choose a poor topic right off.

“I've heard of your loss, and I am sorry if I caused you pain by reminding you.”

“Don't worry. Grandfather's murder grieves me, but I like to talk about him, to remember the time we had together.”

“You must take comfort that your father is in the Palace Guard with you.”

“No.” Greyson shook his head. His lips thinned and his face looked severe, almost angry. “My father and I agree on nothing. Not one thing.”

Srilani lifted her goblet of wine and took a sip, a way to let the moment pass. At least she could relate to Greyson's apparent conflict with his father.

Greyson ate a few bites of the meal before he continued in a warmer tone. “I have enjoyed being here among those my own age.” He lowered his voice. “Our steward had no sons, and all the other boys my age were servants, working with their fathers. Hanna, the steward's daughter, was the only friend my age.”

“I met Hanna a couple of years ago,” Srilani said. Was he trying to hint her away because he had an affection for Hanna?

“Grandfather didn't permit us to spend much time together because . . . well, he had his reasons. Besides, she left the estate when she married at fifteen.”

“I thought she was widowed.”

Greyson shrugged. “Yes and no--her first husband died during their first year together, but fortunately for Hanna, another man offered for her.”

Greyson didn't seem to miss the company of Hanna the steward's daughter. Good. “You are new to the Palace Guard. I haven't seen you on duty yet.”

A flush worked its way across his smooth cheeks. “The sergeants have to break me first.” She smiled at his rueful look.

“You know what breaking involves, I see,” he said and gave her a conspiratorial grin. “This is the first time I've been allowed to eat a full meal in weeks.”

Srilani laughed. “I do know. My father has told me of his experiences in the Guard.” She raised her glass and met his eyes over the rim. “To a full meal.”

She allowed him to savor the food for several minutes before launching into a new topic. “What do you think of Kaeson?”

Third Day banquets extended long into the evening hours--course after course--but this night, the time flew by. Terson and Kaelan rose from their places at the head table and descended from the dais to signal the end of the meal.

René stood ready to rescue her if Greyson turned out to be a bore, but Srilani shook her head ever so slightly. René would tease her later, but spending more time with Greyson would be worth the aggravation. Before she could ask him to escort her around the Great Hall, Greyson made his own request.

“Princess Srilani, would you do me a favor? Would you introduce me to some of the

other guests?"

Her eyes narrowed. Was he being clever? If he thought to use her because she was First Princess, she would be sure to correct him. Greyson's eyes were clear and guileless as he waited for her answer.

"Fine." She placed her fingertips on his extended arm. Better to give him the benefit of the doubt. Her maid trailed them around the enormous hall, a silent witness to every conversation. Better not to think of the awkwardness of that fact.

Tonight, everyone seemed determined to greet her and her handsome escort. Avid curiosity permeated each short encounter. Captain Corson, Greyson's father, and a stately older woman approached them near the back doors.

"Do you know Lady Goslan, my father's cousin?" Greyson said.

"Yes, I do. She's a frequent visitor at court."

Srilani was seven years old when she figured out the true reasons for the Third Day banquets--to maintain power, to stay close to friends, and to keep an eye on potential enemies. Each week, Judge Elison took pains to advise her on topics for discussion and how to approach the most difficult personalities of the court.

Greyson offered a small bow to the captain. "Father."

Corson nodded once, his answer clipped and cool. "Greyson."

"How do you do, Cousin?" Greyson bowed over Lady Goslan's bony hand. Srilani hid a smile. He moved with innate dignity at odds with his age, as if an old man were trapped inside his young man's body.

"I am well, Cousin Greyson." Her bright eyes were on Srilani as she spoke. "Your Highness, I'm happy to see you in such good looks tonight." The older woman dipped into a curtsy. "May El bless you."

"Thank you." Srilani had always admired Goslan's poise and sense of style. The baroness was handsome in a severe way, every hair in place, dressed in an elegant gown that disguised her twig-thin figure.

Goslan's watchful gaze slid back to Greyson. "Corson, you didn't mention that your son had grown so very delightfully handsome. It's been far, far too long since I've seen you, young man." She stepped back to study him from head to toe. "You couldn't choose a better looking man as your lover, Princess."

Srilani inhaled sharply, and the blood drained from her face. Greyson's arm grew taut beneath her fingers. Behind them, Anna's gasp sounded like the hiss of a cat.

Lover. Not beloved. Not suitor. Srilani stiffened her knees to keep from swaying. Outrageous. Insufferable.

Goslan smoothed the sleeve of Greyson's other arm. "No, no, Cousin, relax. I meant no offense. I was merely commenting on what a striking couple you make--you both have such a look of Mardan about you."

Greyson extracted his arm from beneath his cousin's hand. "You are embarrassing the princess, Lady Goslan. Please excuse us--there are others waiting to speak to Her Highness." He

bowed to his cousin and father. "Good night."

Srilani allowed him to lead her away. The old biddy. Surely Lady Goslan knew that rumors about a princess could prove fatal. If officers of the Palace Guard thought the gossip was true, she could be executed without so much as a trial.

Greyson covered her hand on his arm. "I apologize for my relatives, my lady. My father is a cold fish, and Lady Goslan always says exactly what she thinks. Now I remember why I try to avoid her."

"I would never--" Shame choked off Srilani's response.

"I know."

"How could she--"

"I'm sorry."

Srilani forced her emotions into the secret place where she hid them from public view. Bitter experience had taught her that most people wanted to believe the worst of her without the least bit of evidence. She raised her eyes to search his. Nothing in his steady gaze suggested doubts about her purity. Gallant to the end.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome, my lady." Greyson cleared his throat. "So . . . I haven't met the general, yet. Would you introduce us?"

## CHAPTER THREE

Srilani stooped to turn over a shark's eye shell, perfect and unbroken, at the edge of the surf. She picked it up and handed it to René.

The sea shimmered like glass on Sol's brightest, longest day. Far to the south, the pavilions of the Solstice Festival, tiny and colorful, flickered in the waves of heat rising from the white beach sand. To the north, a wall of limestone shielded their destination, the private grotto reserved for the royal family.

Her earliest recollection of this place was from before she could read. Her father and mother and her grandmother, too, had come to the grotto to play in the surf. The memories seemed unreal now, especially after the last three weeks of silence from her father. He'd spoken to her only when necessary.

"Why the long face?" René dropped the shell into her drawstring bag. "Are you sad Greyson isn't part of our escort today?"

"Not in front of the twins," Srilani whispered. "And not when *he's* around."

"The twins aren't listening." René glanced over her shoulder at Captain Corson, trailing them as they walked. He was one of four guards--a small group by normal standards. "He's too far behind us to hear."

"Still. Don't talk about Greyson in front of his father."

René lowered her voice. "The captain can't read lips. I think General Bertson fixed the duty roster so Greyson would be assigned to you every day." She grinned. "Well, every day until today. I never suspected the general of being a romantic person."

Srilani sighed. René couldn't leave the topic of Greyson alone--no detail, no look or touch escaped her attention. "Be realistic," she said. "If Bertson altered the duty roster, his reasons were more rational than promoting true love."

“Huh. The end result would be the same.”

“You’re forgetting that Captain Corson is the officer of the watch this quarter. Corson created the duty roster.”

“So?” René grinned. “General Bertson approved it.”

“Can we talk about something else?” Srilani bent down to examine another group of shells. The opinions of the senior officers had to be factored into her decision about accepting or rejecting a marriage proposal from Greyson. Bertson probably did approve of Greyson or he would have re-assigned the lieutenant to other duties. Greyson’s father, too, must approve of the match. She couldn’t read Captain Corson--he rarely spoke to her and never put himself forward in her presence.

She stood and brushed the sand from her hands. “Do you want to sail out in the *Skylark* before the day is over?”

“Yes. If Mother and Father ever return. They love that boat.” René shook her head. “I like sailing, but I don’t love it. Not like they do.”

Srilani shrugged and adjusted her belt to keep her linen tunic from billowing in the warm sea breeze. “Sailing in the *Skylark* reminds them of their courtship. They love the memories, so they love sailing.”

René’s beautiful smile turned mischievous. “So years from now, you’ll love the Third Day banquets. Right?”

“Hush. You know, not many people would suspect how annoying you can be. Let’s catch up with General Bertson and the twins.”

Jamson and Maelan flanked the general on the path ahead. Their other two guards reached the entryway and vanished around the bend. Srilani and René struggled to make up the distance.

Srilani glanced back. Captain Corson walked twenty paces behind them, close enough to see them but far enough away to give them privacy. They reached the wall of rock leading to the grotto. The limestone rose into the sky, standing between them and the surf line and cutting off the breeze.

René fanned her face. “I’ve changed my mind--I would love to be out on the *Skylark* with the wind in my face.”

Srilani kept her thoughts to herself. Sailing couldn’t compare with a cool bath in the shade of her room and preparing for the Third Day Banquet tonight. Greyson would dine with her again--a special feast since it coincided with the end of the Solstice Festival.

Not that she loved Greyson in a romantic way--yet--but his friendship and respect were better than any of her other options. Perhaps love would develop over time. Her brow crinkled. Greyson’s behavior indicated a growing and warm affection toward her. Was it fair to encourage him? What if she were a cold person by nature?

“Stop.”

“What?”

René hopped a couple of times on one foot. “I have a pebble caught in my sandal and it

really hurts.”

“Oh, sorry. Here, hold onto me and shake out your shoe.”

By the time René finished, General Bertson and the twins were out of sight. Srilani looked behind them. Corson had stopped too, maintaining his distance.

A scream echoed among the rocks. *Maelan!*

Srilani broke into a run, laboring over the deep sand. René panted at her heels. They reached the entry to the hidden bay. One of their guards--Luke?--sprawled, face to the ground, dead or dying. His crimson blood glistened on the dirt. Their other guard fought against two large men. Bertson was pitted against three, valiantly trying to reach the twins. Jamson and Maelan struggled against a pair of brigands apiece. The men held them down on the ground, binding them with blankets and ropes. Two longboats rested nearby.

“Pirates.” Srilani looked for Corson. He hadn’t entered the grotto yet. She raised her voice. “Corson! Help!” She shoved René. “Run. Get away from here.”

Srilani raced to Luke’s body and grabbed his sword from the damp sand. Surprise was on her side, and she managed to wound one of the ruffians attacking Bertson. Her blade left his flesh with a squishing sound, and bile rose in her throat. The pirate fell to his knees, cursing and grasping his sword arm.

René screamed. She screamed again.

Srilani blocked a blow from another pirate. Sweat streamed down his naked torso as he fainted toward her with a wicked-looking dagger. In his other hand, he brandished a stout club that he used to parry her counter-attack. She skipped back, circling to the right, trying to take in the situation. Bertson’s tunic was ripped and bloody. He staggered.

Her opponent lunged at her again. A huff of pain announced the defeat of their fourth and last guard, and Srilani fought with renewed desperation. She retreated a few steps to draw the pirates away from the officers.

Jamson shouted. “Look out!”

Hairy arms encircled her from behind, and a club struck her temple. Black darkness pulled her into a never-ending void.

#

The *Cathartid*, off the coast of Northern Marst

Aldan leaned over the ship’s railing. Three figures, cocooned in bright Norlander blankets and secured with ropes, reposed in the bottom of the first longboat. Two girls and a boy. The second longboat held another young woman, bound like the rest. He released the rail and turned away. All around him, the crew gloated and jeered over their latest haul.

Sam joined him at the rail. He let out a low whistle. “Take a look at those girls. Have you ever seen the like?”

“No.” Aldan frowned and kept his back to the action below.

“What? That’s all you have to say?” Sam punched his shoulder. “I haven’t seen women like those since I was a boy in Port Azor. It doesn’t hurt to look, does it?”

“Not as long as Rozar doesn't catch you.”

“It'd be worth a thrashing for a closer look. What's wrong with you?”

Aldan turned to watch the crew raise the younger boy and girl over the side of the ship in a net. The brother and sister were copies of one another. Twins, fast asleep thanks to the captain's sleeping potion.

Of course. It wouldn't do to damage the merchandise.

The twins were lowered to the deck. Several seamen moved away from their vicinity, and one man waved his hand in a warding gesture. Why were twins considered such a bad omen? Aldan snorted. The numerous, conflicting superstitions of the crew were entirely illogical.

The next captive appeared to be a very young woman, perhaps fifteen or sixteen summers, and without a doubt, the most beautiful female Aldan had ever seen--fair, blonde, and curved in all the right places. Her head lolled back as they placed her beside the others.

“They've ruined her life,” he said. He glared at Sam. “Don't you feel any pity?”

Sam shrugged. “I guess.”

“I know, I know. Pity does them no good, but I hate this.” He pointed. “They injured that one.” The last girl, older than the rest, had a purplish bump forming on her temple, just beneath long blonde curls. Her eyes were closed, but Aldan would bet his next meal they were blue. Fair hair and light-colored eyes, uncommon along the coast of the Great Gulf, brought the highest prices in the slave market.

“Yeah, well . . . I heard she put up a fight. She'll recover.”

Captain Rozar glowed with triumph as he stood over his prizes. “Step lively. Get those longboats aboard. We need to be in Port Azor yesterday.” The men responded with a roar of excitement. The captain scanned the crowd of men and beckoned to Aldan and Sam.

“Samazor, you take that one. Aldan, take the boy.” He paused, frowning. “Where's Linus?”

“Here.”

Rozar spun about with a snarl. “Drat you, Linus. Always were a sneaking, black shadow. Take the youngest girl.” Rozar sent another man to fetch Mirza.

“I'll do the honors with this beauty. Follow me.” The captain lifted the young woman with the bump on her forehead. Without ceremony, he slung his burden over one shoulder and descended the ladder.

Aldan eased the boy into position. Below deck, he laid the boy in the cabin they'd prepared weeks ago. Sam entered the cabin and seemed to take extra care not to thump the girl's head on the planks as he put her down. Linus brought up the rear with the other twin. The captives bore a strong family resemblance in spite of the difference in hair color.

Rozar ran an experimental finger over the knot on the oldest girl's forehead. His walnut skin grew dark with temper. “I should flog that good-for-nothing Fratz for hitting her. We're lucky he didn't kill her, but now she has a bruise.”

The captain had reached boiling point by the time Mirza shuffled into the cabin in her usual lethargic fashion. “Witch! If you weighed more, I'd use you for an anchor. You know I

hate to wait." He jabbed a finger at her skinny chest. "Take care of my prizes."

"But--"

"It has to be you because you're the only woman aboard. Earn your keep. And don't jabber on about your so-called spiritual duties. We both know you're a fraud."

Rozar strode to the door before turning to his slaves. "Aldan, stay here and make yourself useful. Samazor and Linus, why are you just standing there? If you don't have enough work, just say so. Out."

Mirza took the only chair in the cabin and settled back for a nap.

"Shouldn't we unwrap them?" Aldan said.

"Boy, when I want your advice, I'll ask. Be quiet and let me rest."

"Like always."

"Shut it, or I'll make your life a misery."

"Like always."

She glared at him for a moment, then shut her eyes.

He slouched against the wall by the door, closed his eyes, and woke with a start, drenched in sweat. He glanced at the captives. The young beauty moaned. Aldan pushed off the floor and poked Mirza's shoulder.

"What? Oh, it's you." Her mouth screwed up in a lemony pucker. "Why'd you wake me up for?"

"One of them is awake."

"So?"

"They'll all be awake soon, and they're getting too hot in those blankets. Rozar will be angry if they smother to death because you left them wrapped up."

Mirza's laugh sounded more like a cough. "So unwrap them."

"I'm not getting a beating for your laziness, Mirza."

"Afraid to touch them, *eh?*" She grinned, showing all of her missing teeth. "I could say you did anyway."

Aldan adopted a casual stance, arms crossed, leaning against the door. "Rozar wouldn't believe you."

The witch cocked her head to the side like a crow, studying him with her beady black eyes. He refused to look away, and after a few tense moments, she gave in. "Oh, all right! Get away from me. Can't a body get no rest around here?"

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