

Sacrifice

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*For Jeff, my best friend.
This one is for you - the one you've
always liked the most.*



I must warn that if you are easily disturbed, you should swiftly put down this document and move to other matters, for I must record with sharp detail what I saw that dark night.

I, Castus Poet-Scribe, was one of five selected to witness the terrible sacrifice of the Daughter of the Hunstons. I hereby declare it to be a true and accurate recording of the events – as I saw them – that transpired that night, 10th of Raven Month, the year 1044.

It was midnight, an hour of some importance to the Ashrone priests, when the girl was brought into the large, icy, windowless chamber with its pitched-beam ceiling and unadorned stone walls. She was already bound at the hands, but her legs were free, allowing her to walk unaided into the room between two guards sworn to secrecy. She wore a long velvet dress – white for virginity, and trimmed with black for death. Her face remained calm, regal, but as I recall, fear tainted the dark blue eyes.

From the look on the guards' faces, I knew they did not want to be here, as I did not. They directed her, through a circle

of Ashrones, to the central altar – a cold grey marble slab flecked with black veins.

She stood in front of the altar, her face to me and the four other scribes. The guards departed then. Speedily, I should add, although at least in a dignified manner.

The master priest, sturdy with a youth of thirty-two years not common to his position, stepped from within the circle and up to the girl. He faced her, his blue eyes watching everything in the girl's face, as seemed to be his habit. I noted, with a dark heart, that most of the thirty other priests, all in black for mourning, did not meet the girl's eyes. To be fair in my description, perhaps concentration claimed them.

The thirty priests of Ashrone linked hands in a chain, creating an unbroken ring around the young woman and the central altar. Their chants droned, and the air reeked of bitter plath root that bound the girl's hands tightly at her stomach. The plath root held some significance the Ashrones would not divulge.

Despite myself, I felt a shiver pass at the ominous monotone chanting. Right at that terrible moment in time, I wanted to be anywhere except here, in any role save this one. I wondered that the master priest could look the Hunston girl in her frightened blue eyes and still allow the priests to circle, to chant, to begin what could not be undone.

The chanting ceased abruptly; left a chill of silence in the air colder than a dark winter's night.

"Lower her," the eldest of the thirty priests said to the master priest.

The master, still standing near the girl, put hands beneath her arms, lifted her and helped her to sit on the altar. His hands

supported her briefly as she kicked her bare feet free of her long velvet dress. The thirty linked priests kept their circle tight as the girl tossed her head and flung her spun gold hair over her shoulder.

The master Ashrone's young hands helped lower her to a prostrate position on the grey marble slab. He spread her hair neatly for her, for dignity.

"Daughter of Kildes, do you know why you are here?" the master asked solemnly.

"I understand," the young woman said.

"Daughter of Kildes," the lean, young master priest continued, "you will die tonight for your country. Are you willing to accept?"

The girl nodded. "I accept for my country."

"Daughter of Kildes," the master said. "I ask you once more for the sake of the witnesses here in this room: do you freely accept this fate?"

"I accept."

The scribe in the raised witness box beside me shook his head slowly, but whether disappointed or disgusted, I could not be sure.

The master nodded. "Daughter of Kildes, we have tied your hands and I now tie you to the altar so that you do not escape when the fire hits your lungs." The master's hands worked on the twined root ropes. He tied her around the immovable, grey slab suspended on carved marble legs. "Are you willing to go through the pain?"

My eyes narrowed then, and I held my breath for the longest time. The girl's seeming bravery was born of ignorance. I had been told, forewarned, what the fire did to a person. The next

three minutes would remove all traces of bravery from those eyes – would even remove the eyes.

“I am willing,” the girl said, her eyes still shaped by fear – and something else. I guessed that anger lay behind the gaze, but its cause escaped me. I write this because I cannot be sure that the anger wasn’t silent protest at being held against her will. All words indicated the contrary – but they were, after all, just words. Despite the eyes, her voice remained composed, gentle. “For the sake of my people, I accept.”

The master priest exhaled slowly, and I realised he had – as had we all – expected the girl to change her mind. His hands worked the last of the ropes – tight to restrain but not painful. “Very well, child; please open your mouth.”

The girl opened her mouth, and the priests, still holding hands in their circle, started chanting again in a strange language, their eyes glazing with concentration. I was instructed that no matter what I did, I must not disturb those chants, or cause in any way for the circle to break. I was informed that no matter how much the girl screamed, or how hideous the stunning woman became, they could not afford to break the chants or it would be worse – far worse. I could not in that moment imagine what could be worse than what the girl would go through.

The master reached under the slab, to a smooth stone shelf, for the small vial. He opened it; it issued red steam. It smelled of soured milk and salty blood. He poured the crimson contents in a thin stream slowly into the girl’s mouth. He allowed her to swallow before pouring more past her lips. With a padded cloth, he wiped the excess from her mouth, giving her the final dignity she deserved, then placed a hand on her brow. “May the Almighty richly bless you for your sacrifice.”

I longed to call out a blessing of my own, to praise the girl for her courage. More than that, I yearned to beg her to change her mind, but my instructions were to remain silent, and to record with my mind for later scribing, every detail that transpired.

The master moved back as far as he could – stood just a pace within the outer unbroken circle. Even from my distance, I saw a bead of sweat run down the girl’s cheek and onto the marble.

There was nothing for a moment, just the sound of the ominous chanting that rose, quickened. Then pain started as a distant burning, I could tell, for the girl began to grow restless, edgy. Moments passed, then the girl shook, winced. She did not scream. Not yet. But she would.

In an instant, the girl’s stunning body exploded into flame. The heat shriveled the silken gold hair to the bald, blistering head. The searing started to char her dress black. She rocked her head back, arched and screamed. Flame and smoke plumed from her mouth. The fire coursed down her body, consuming everything. The blood started to boil in her body, to spit and hiss like pinesap in a forest fire. Her once beautiful features distorted into a hideous, monstrous mess that shocked me like the moments of waking from a nightmare.

She screamed and screamed and screamed, and then the fire seared up so hot, it shriveled the master’s white eyebrows. With the final shock of the heat, the girl’s life force had mercifully gone.

The chanting and unnatural flames dissipated swiftly, leaving only silence and a smoking pile of ash on the scorched altar.

Silence filled the space for the longest time, then we one by one, left the room, our eyes paying homage to the ash pile as though to the grave of a great king.

I found myself the last to leave the room, although as I stepped beyond the solid doorframe, I knew a part of me would never leave that room for as long as the Almighty blessed or cursed me with life.

Castus Poet-Scribe II

1

Emme knelt cautiously to the soil, traced a fingertip around the fresh imprint. The unusual footprints appeared frequently now and closer to the village. Whoever circled had not yet found what he or she looked for.

He, Emme decided. The footprints were too large, too heavy, to be a woman's.

Emme stood, scanned the area, eyes narrowed. Although the forest looked recently disturbed, the source remained illusive. How could anyone carelessly leave an imprint and trail, yet be so hard to find?

Emme followed the trail onward. It led to an aged tree trunk, the roots spreading with a partial rise from the earth. There the prints stopped, as though the owner had been absorbed into the tree. The cinnamon tang of bark and acorns filled the air, but no remnant of a campfire or cooking.

Emme tilted her head back, strained eyes upward. Surely the mystery man had not climbed the enormous oak and stayed there. No scuffle marks on the trunk indicated boots had clambered up the tree, and no recently displaced leaves carpeted the grass, felled from human movements within the expansive, solid branches.

Emme peered around the tree, careful to note all signs of recent movement. Only animal trails, some fresh, others long abandoned, spread from the shadowed side of the tree. Again she knelt. She selected a small piece of grassless earth from inside the footprint and raised it to her nose, sniffed once. An unknown animal-skin boot had made the print, and the tread remained unfamiliar to her. This stranger came from no village nearby.

A squirrel shot past her boots and up the trunk of the tree. Halfway it stopped, peered at her curiously, then scampered into the thick of the leaves.

Emme frowned, deeply puzzled. The trail could not possibly have just vanished, yet it always did. No matter how far she followed it, eventually it ended in a void.

Damn him. Emme scowled, kicked the trunk of the tree.

She turned to go home and flicked a glance at the sun. The end of the day neared, and Wendaya would berate Emme for their lack of supper. Not unusual; Wendaya would always find something to abuse Emme for. If not for a lack of food, it would be the first thing that came to mind, perhaps even some lie Wendaya had been fed.

Emme broke into a run and flew down the forest trail. Summer perspiration cooled on her brow as she ran. Her long, thin legs carried her with ease beyond denser woodland to the edge of the slope that fell gently to the clearing. At its base the village sat, smouldering in the summer twilight.

Emme stopped to observe the pattern of traffic. Nothing seemed untoward. The inhabitants drifted home for meals before most would leave to commune in the village drink-house. Three hunters returned from the eastern forest border, recent kills in

hand, and strode to the smokehouse. Others ambled in from tending outland crops and herds.

Tiny huts, scattered throughout the clearing, lay beneath several tree huts connected by suspension bridges. The early summer foliage of the mighty oaks and hornbeams shifted slightly, sighed in the tranquil breeze. Evening light danced between the leaves before drifting down through them to speckle the soft forest floor. It was a pretty village, spoilt only by its inhabitants.

Emme jogged down the slope, through a gap in the huts and onto the main village stretch.

“Wendaya’s looking for you,” one of the village boys called out on his way home. “She seems pretty mad, and we all know what that means.” He had the tone and sly grin of one anticipating dark retribution.

“Yeah, and let’s hope she finishes the job this time,” his companion answered as Emme ran past them. “Finally gets rid of Emme.”

The two laughed maliciously, and all the way down the street they congratulated each other for their stupid wit.

Emme dashed past the tiny timber huts. She ran down the narrow gap between two of them. Twine fences, supported by thick timber posts, marked the boundaries of each block. Everyone seemed so reluctant to share when they did not have to.

She hurried to the cluster of outdoor chimneys that were often lit when too hot to cook indoors. She knelt at one, felt inside the sooty chimney that was yet to be scrubbed by the lazy village chimneysweep. Her fingers groped for the hook that should contain . . . *Damn it.* Someone had stolen her hidden basket of berries. Now she *would* get a beating.

“Looking for something?” Serasayn, the young, burly son of the village chieftain, peered around one of the chimneys. His spiteful grin revealed he knew the answer to the question.

“You pig.” Emme snapped to her feet, stance ready and fists curled. “You stole my berries.”

“I just wanted to see what sort of bruise you would have tomorrow.”

“You vile pig. I’ll give you a bruise of your own right now if you don’t give me back my berries.”

“I’d have to vomit them. I ate them for my lunch.”

Emme launched at him, but Serasayn anticipated the movement. He bolted towards his house, shrieking his father’s name. Emme stopped. Serasayn’s father would have her thrown in the stocks and hurtled with stones if caught harming his smug little son.

Emme let out a string of curses as her enemy ran away. She stooped, picked up a rock and threw it at the retreating figure. It struck Serasayn on the back of the head with precise aim.

“You bitch.” His bulk jolted to a standstill, and his thick hand rubbed his head. He turned sideways, glowered at Emme. The thick hand gestured at her. “You’ll pay for that.”

“Right after you pay for eating my berries.” She took a theatrical step forward, and the coward dashed down the corridor of houses and into the safety of the homebound crowd. She could see just beyond the tiny gap in the houses where his fat figure paused on the main street to turn to her.

“Find a better hiding place,” Serasayn bellowed.

She briefly watched his heavy steps as he jogged from view and away to his hut. *He’ll probably run straight to a mirror where he can check his stupid looks.*

Emme sat down in the dirt and ash to think. She picked up a stick and repetitively stabbed a useless hole. She could go and find more food in the forest and receive a beating for tardiness. Or she could return home empty-handed.

Or – A better idea popped into her head, and she stood swiftly. She ducked behind houses, edged her way behind trees, until she reached Serasayn’s yard – a fenced area beneath his family’s tree hut. She carefully climbed the fence and crouched near the chicken coop. They weren’t Serasayn’s chickens; they were his mother’s. Regardless, it would mean no eggs for his breakfast.

Emme felt a moment of guilt flush her cheeks. She had never stolen before, despite those countless times the villagers stole from her and her mother.

The whole village hated Emme. They listened to Wendaya too often, and too often Wendaya listened to them. When she was a child, they had beaten and teased Emme as much as Wendaya did. When she learned to fight back, they found other, crueller ways to torment her – crueller even than stealing her food and belongings. They would report false stories to Wendaya, for they knew that the worst pain would always be Wendaya’s rage. All Emme had ever wanted was her mother’s love.

Nearly every day now, Wendaya beat Emme for something. Tonight it would at least not be because Emme had neglected to find food.

The grubby chickens squawked and fluttered when she reached in to take the eggs. She brushed off dirt and muck, then gently, almost lovingly, tucked the eggs into the animal-skin pouch around her waist. She counted them. Eight eggs – a good number for a meal. Of course, Wendaya would only eat

two. For a woman so slight, Wendaya could give such a good beating.

Emme returned home, eyes steely with resolve to cope with whatever Wendaya dished out. Emme paused at the tiny timber door, inhaled deeply and entered.

Instantly a shrill voice screamed from the back of the messy cottage. "Where have you been? You're late."

Emme knew she was not late. Not yet. Wendaya's rage would be founded on another illusive matter. Emme kicked aside a stack of Wendaya's dirty clothes that blocked the hut entrance. They struck the close timber wall and crumpled to the floor.

A sharp, shrewd face appeared from the dimness of the two-room hut. Wendaya sped towards Emme, broom in hand. Wendaya's dark hair, pulled tight off her face, made her face harsh. Still young compared to other women with daughters Emme's age, Wendaya had a speed that always caught Emme off guard.

"I've been getting us some dinner." Emme opened the pouch and carefully lifted an egg.

Wendaya swiftly swung the broom handle to Emme. It smacked against Emme's wrist and sent the egg flying across the room. The egg smashed against a timber wall, oozed sticky and orange to the floor. Pain forced a cry from Emme's lips. Emme gripped her good hand onto her throbbing wrist. *What was that for?* she wanted to scream, but nothing came out. It would not matter what it was for. It never did.

Wendaya pulled the broom handle back again and smacked it across Emme's temple. It cracked like fracturing bones through Emme's head.

She fell chest down to the floor, heard the gritty crunch as the eggs crushed inside the bag. They began to seep out the lacing. She did not cry out again as Wendaya hit her over and over with the broom handle. She simply lay quietly in the foetal position; eyes squeezed shut. *It will be over soon. It will be over soon.*

Time seemed suspended. The beating, just a few minutes, felt long in the descending darkness. The stick whacked her thigh, then no more. Emme hesitated to open her eyes. She heard scuffling about the hut, then the sounds of a fire being built and lit. Emme finally opened her eyes. Darkness hovered in the spaces the light did not reach. Wendaya would be preparing a hot tea for them as if nothing had happened.

Emme rose to her knees. Every inch of her body ached from bruises. She felt her wrists swell where the bulk of the beating had occurred. She groaned once, felt with fingertips the lump on her head, then stood.

The explanation may come. It did not always come, but this time it might. Wendaya put a hot cup on the table. She went to the store cupboard and pulled out a small sack of salty crackers. She untied the laces of the hessian bag and placed the rustling sack on the table, open for hands to reach in and grab the meagre, dull fare.

“I guess we just have tea and crackers tonight, do we?” Wendaya asked snidely.

Emme felt words thicken in her throat. What was it about her mother that made standing up for herself difficult? She could outfight almost any man in the village, could bawl insults with the best of them, and yet found herself childlike and vulnerable around her mother.

Emme stiffly sat down at the table. Silently she sipped her tea.

"I'm sorry I was so angry," Wendaya said softly as if an angel, not the devil. She always apologised, and somehow, Emme always forgave. "But I heard you were seen kissing that Serasayn boy."

I've never kissed a boy, Mother. Never. But you'd never believe that. Silence was always prudent.

"I've told you a thousand times, Mistake, men are dangerous," Wendaya continued. "They'll only take advantage of you. You don't want anything to do with men. Don't you see – that's why I'm so hard on you. Why I hit you. I want you to be tough so no man will ever take advantage of you like they did me."

Emme felt tears sting her eyes. Bitter pride swept them away. "Was it so bad that I resulted from that, Mother?" Emme's voice was barely a whisper.

Wendaya gave her a dark, hard look, and Emme knew the answer. Mistake. That's what she'd been named all her life – what she had been given at her compulsory birth ceremony. Mistake. When she was ten, Emme had taken matters into her own hands. She had shortened Mistake to M, then insisted that people spell her name E double-ME. No other spelling would do or the person would get a swift thumping. Of course, all but seven people in the village could not read or write – Emme included. But she had at least learned to spell her name, and insisted that every other illiterate person out there learn the difference too.

Wendaya still called Emme 'Mistake'. Nothing would change that, and somehow Emme felt too weak to stop her.

When would she fight back? When would she stand up to her mother? Emme was stronger than the tiny woman

who had once been the town's beauty, the town's delight. People whispered that Wendaya had been a happy, charming woman, loved by all, until one night and one drink changed everything.

Wendaya always insisted she had only ever consumed one drink at the village banquet, just one. Yet the next morning, she could not remember anything that happened. Eight months and three weeks later, Emme had been born, and Wendaya had become an outcast in a village that despised immoral women. If the father had just owned up to the child and agreed to live with Wendaya, all would have been forgiven, but no man had.

Wendaya had become bitter, angry, had hated Emme from the moment Emme was born. Had told Emme all her life not to trust men; that men were the vilest of creation and would always take advantage of women.

Emme believed her. After all, Emme was living proof of what men would do. And Emme went to great pains to see that men would not take advantage of her as they had her mother.

Poor Wendaya. Emme sharply pulled herself up. She always did that. Felt sorry for her mother and the suffering Emme's birth had caused the woman. Why did her mother make Emme feel like a vulnerable little child inside?

Emme slowly finished the rest of her mug of tea and hobbled over to her mat beside the hearth. The bag of crackers lay untouched. Wendaya packed the sack away, rinsed the mugs in a bucket of soapy water, and left without a goodnight. She shut the door to her bedroom. Emme listened for the soft clack of the lock, for the familiar scuffling in the bedroom. No doubt Wendaya would be brushing her hair for the next half-hour. Wendaya always did that; stared at the tarnished mirror and incessantly

brushed waist-length chestnut hair as if admiring a beauty long since passed. Resentment made Wendaya unattractive. Her brown eyes were no longer large, soft, but pinched and hard. Now only Emme's eyes shadowed what Wendaya's had once been.

Stiffly Emme lowered herself to the mat. Her bruises smarted terribly as they always did in summer. Winter's ice and snow from the forest soothed her stings and swells, but summer amplified the wounds. The pervasive heat and unrelenting mosquitoes, that even now whined around her ears, made it difficult to sleep off the injuries.

Emme lay on her aching back and stared at the underside of the thatched roof. She longed to run away, to start her own life. But where would she go? And who would accept her? Every village nearby knew the story of Mistake. She would be no better off there. And every neighbouring villager would only send her straight back rather than risk angering the chieftain of Underoak Village.

More than likely they would anger the chieftain if they sent Emme back. Emme laughed in the darkness, then groaned as bruises protested the violent movements. The bruises would heal, but somehow the hurt always remained inside.

She silently cursed the day some vile male had taken advantage of her drunken mother and conceived Emme's pitiful life.

Emme shook the thoughts from her head. Tomorrow, with distance between herself and Wendaya, Emme would be fiery again with a determination to make the most of her life. Yet here, on her bedmat, in this tiny, disorganised hut, she became the child who still longed for her mother's love. Not for the acceptance of

the villagers. They could go rot. But her mother – oh, how Emme longed to know what it felt like to have her mother wrap an arm around her; to tell Emme she loved her; that Emme was all Wendaya ever wanted. No, not necessarily Wendaya; it didn't have to be Wendaya. Any mother. She would accept any mother.

Emme patted the dagger in her pouch once, just to feel it was there. The egg yolk had congealed on the pelt. Emme would have to clean out the pouch, but not tonight. She was too sore, too weary to do anything but lie in the only comfortable position she could find.

Slowly Emme's eyes closed, and she fell into a shallow, fitful sleep. In the morning, she woke early. Peering out the window, she quickly deduced another hot cloudless day lay ahead. She donned an angora singlet-top, her thin deerskin pants and stiff pigskin boots, and tiptoed out of the house before Wendaya woke.

Emme had a task to complete. Find this mystery man. Of course, Wendaya would be angry that Emme had not told the villagers of the tracks sooner, but Emme did not want the villagers thumping through the forest trying to find the illusive stranger. Not one of the rotten villagers had the tracking skills Emme had and would only make it obvious to a man who did not want to be seen, that he was being pursued.

After washing her pouch in the river, Emme jogged along the forest trail, eyes focused for any unusual signs. No recent strange prints marked the forest floor. She veered down a left trail, leaving the main trail to wander where it willed. If she knew anything about her mystery man, he did not take key routes. She carefully chose a few more trails, some to the right, most to the left, then stopped abruptly.

Her eyes observed where the forest floor had been heavily disturbed as if something large had pushed through the undergrowth to find a track. The disturbance seemed to begin from nowhere as if the creature or person had suddenly appeared. Her eyes ran along the forest floor and noted where the disturbance met the path.

Emme knelt at the junction and smiled grimly. Many footprints, all careless, led along the path where it inclined upward. Cautiously she followed the imprints. This trail led to the caves. Perhaps the group had gone there. Whoever they were, they were neither villagers nor neighbours.

What foreigners would be out wandering through this part of the forest overnight? For that matter, was her mystery man one of them?

Nearing the caves, she heard voices. The trees provided ample cover as she inched her way to a better viewing point. She glanced up at the caves ahead. Five men, all dressed in similar and unusual clothes, stood around a fire. They stared at it, stretched hands over it to ward off the early morning chill. The enticing smell of cooking meat hung in the air. They muttered words to each other that Emme strained to hear.

Emme immediately detected the abnormality of the men. Solid knee-high black boots, brown woollen jumpers and thick pants clashed with the brilliant summer weather the forest had been enjoying. Each wore a tiny tight white cap on his crown that made Emme want to laugh despite the danger. If they hoped those caps would shield them from the hot sun, they were gravely mistaken. She noted the hands of some who poked sticks into the fire. Dark green and brown designs coloured the back of each right hand – a tattoo perhaps – unrecognisable from where she stood.

Emme slid the dagger from her waist pouch. The simple bronze dagger, normally intimately familiar to her palm, felt faintly foreign. Puzzled, she glanced at the bolted bone handle, then scowled with realisation. Although she had cleaned the pouch early that morning, the dagger still felt sticky from the egg that had crushed through the bag.

Stealthily Emme moved to within earshot. Sheltered by silver fir trunks, she picked her way over clusters of broken cones.

“Well, hello there.” A voice behind Emme startled her. She spun, sticky dagger curled back over her shoulder ready to throw.

An older man, early fifties, and adorned with the same tattoo and cap, stood with a pile of thick sticks in his arms. Swiftly he raised hands, releasing the sticks. The clatter of wood against wood alerted his companions. The five men around the fire stopped their conversation and looked to the disturbance. Eyes noted the dishevelled, abandoned stick pile, then the face of the man above it. They tried to follow his line of sight but from their position, could only see the tree he seemingly stared at.

“We mean you no harm,” the unaccompanied man said to Emme. “My friends and I are just camping here the night.”

A soft-eyed man called from beside the fire, “Anderson? What is it? What have you seen?”

“A woman here with a knife.” The men around the fire shifted at the response and caught their first glimpse of Emme.

Emme stared defiantly from the group to the man. “Who are you all, and what are you doing here?”

“We’re just passing through,” the man before her said.

“Passing through? From where? You don’t look like men from around these parts.”

The isolated man seemed to notice something on Emme's arm still curled back ready to throw her weapon. His eyes narrowed slightly before his expression changed to an odd friendliness that sent a sharp prickle down Emme's back. "Will you come and share some breakfast with us?" He gestured to the fire.

"No. Tell me where you're from or I'll report this to my chieftain."

"We're from . . ." The man faltered. "Very far away. You wouldn't know the place."

"What are you doing here?"

"Passing through," he replied. "Wouldn't you like some breakfast? We promise we're not going to harm you."

"No one has ever passed through. There is nothing to pass through to. I've never seen anyone who isn't from the nearby villages."

"Could you possibly put that dagger down?" the man asked. "It's making me nervous."

Emme considered briefly. "I'll put it down, but not away. I'm very quick with a dagger, you know."

"I don't doubt it. Will you come and share our fire? We'll tell you all about where we're from."

No one spoke for some time. Not even the silver fir needles stirred. "Very well then," Emme said, all caution gone. She turned and walked confidently to the tall fire, boots cracking the fir cones. She knew if she had to, she could run faster than these old men. Besides, she wanted to know if her mystery man was one of them.

She walked to the fire and feigned interest in the meat roasting over the coals whilst she glanced at their feet. No, not

her mystery man, but more than likely connected. In her twenty-two years, she had only ever seen one stranger. Now she had seen six with a seventh out there somewhere. The events were entirely too unusual to be anything but related.

She briefly noted them all, their strange linen and wool clothes, no animal skins, no furs. Most had dark hair – some with flecks of grey – and white skin. Only one had hair so grey it was almost white. No tans like the villagers. The youngest seemed fifty, the eldest, at a guess, late sixties. The tattoos were of nothing notable; just a swirling, twisted design, like ropes tangled into a complex, symmetrical pattern. Difficult to copy, yet each appeared identical.

“So where are you all heading to?”

“Do you know the country well?” one of the dark-haired men asked.

“No.” With the forest her whole world, she only knew the surrounding villages.

“Well then, it’s no use explaining, is it,” the man replied with a thin smile.

Emme glared at him. “Try me.”

The man she had first threatened – Anderson they had called him – turned and whispered something to the white-haired man beside him. The white one’s eyes lit briefly, then to the others he tapped his wrist. Although clearly intended to be covert, it did not go unnoticed by Emme. She began to wonder how these heavy-booted, incompetent men managed to catch that creature on the fire in the first place. Especially with no weapons, Emme noted for the first time. A creeping sense of dread started to empty her insides.

She pretended not to notice the reaction to the clandestine tapping of the wrist. The men clearly knew exactly what the

gesture meant, and their faces reacted with thoughts Emme could only guess at. This was entirely too suspicious. She backed away a step, feigning a reaction to the heat of the fire.

“So tell us about yourself,” Anderson said.

“Nothing to tell. I come from Underoak Village. That village just over there.” A hand waved with more casualness than she felt. “My chieftain is the most powerful chieftain of Oakwood Forest.” She placed intentional emphasis on ‘powerful’. They did not need to know he was too far away to hear any cries for help.

“And your parents?” one man asked.

Emme’s face closed over. “I believe I am asking the questions here. You are intruding on *my* forest. Now, why are you travelling?”

The men exchanged questioning glances, seemed reluctant to speak.

“Are you chasing someone?”

Anderson flinched faintly. “Why do you ask?”

“Because there are another man’s tracks, and he’s circling the forest. Are you trying to find him?”

“A man?” Anderson asked. “How do you know it’s a man?”

“Pl-*ease*.” Emme rolled her eyes at him. “I am quite skilled at tracking. I found all of *you*, didn’t I?” *Not that it was hard, you careless thugs.*

“Is he a villager?”

“No - he has unusual shoes. Like yours but not quite. A much more impressive sole.”

The men turned and whispered to each other. Hands gestured strongly. Long frustrating moments passed. But for the low voices, Emme could easily have supposed they had

forgotten about her. She guessed she could have just walked away and left them to their quiet arguing, but the few intriguing phrases she caught, phrases that made little sense, kept her grounded with curiosity. "But we have no time." "Not if he's here." "But then she might . . ."

They finally seemed to reach some verdict.

"Child," the grey, almost white-haired man said.

"I'm not a child; I'm twenty-two winters."

"Of course." The man smiled gently. "Madam, this is -"

"Madam is even worse. Don't call me madam."

"What may I call you, then?"

"I'm Emme. Spelt E Double-M E."

The man smiled faintly, then the smile faded. "Emme - this is going to sound rather strange, but you are in danger. We cannot say why, but we must hurry. We do not have much time before he finds you."

"Before who finds me?"

"I'm afraid we cannot tell you his name."

"Why?"

"We can protect you from him, but you must let us. You must let us take you somewhere safe."

"Safe? My village is safe. The chieftain is the most powerful of any of the villages."

"I'm afraid, child - Emme - that your chieftain is of no use here. The matter is far more complicated than that."

"Then you'd better explain it."

"We can't," the man called Anderson said. "It will only endanger you if we do. But we can take you to a place where we *can* actually explain it to you. You just have to trust us and say that you are willing to go."

Emme took another step back. Her hand tightened on the bone handle of the dagger. "Go where? Where is this place?"

"To our city."

"Your city? What's a city?"

"It's like a very big village," one of the older men said. "Like a thousand of your village in size."

Emme laughed curtly. "Places like that don't exist."

"Yes, they do." Anderson furtively looked around as though expecting dangers any moment. He turned back to Emme. "Please, madam - Emme. I know it's a big ask, but you must trust us or he will find you. And he only means you harm."

"Who? Why are you saying all of this?"

"That we cannot tell you either, but you must trust us. You are in danger."

Emme took another step backwards. "You don't even know who I am. You didn't even know my name. You didn't even know what village I was from. You must have the wrong person."

"No, we don't have the wrong person." Anderson took a step forward, hand outstretched as if to take hers. "Please, all can be explained, if you just come with us."

Fear and determination shot like a potent drug through Emme's veins. She turned and bolted down the path.

"Someone stop her," Anderson ordered.

Behind her she heard running, the crunching of sticks, fir cones and brittle bracken. Foliage of undergrowth hissed as swift legs pushed past. Many men followed. She quickened her pace. Her long legs leapt swiftly over undergrowth and into the dense heart of the forest where every tree, every tall shrub, every vine, provided perfect shelter.

She easily lost them. Her speed and knowledge of lesser-known tracks gave her a superior advantage. To be safe, she tucked the dagger in her pouch, gripped the thick low-lying branches of a pine and scrambled up the scratchy trunk. She hoisted up into the highest branches and sat, puffing.

What was that all about? Surely they had the wrong person. She pitied the person they were talking about. Those six men may have acted politely on the outside, but something sinister lay beneath the surface of their intentions. Well, she would just stay out of their way until they found whoever it was they looked for. But at a distance, she would keep an eye on their comings and goings. The sooner they left Oakwood Forest, the better.

She wondered then if she should tell the chieftain. It was her duty as forest tracker to report any incidences, no matter how minor, but those village thugs would probably march in here and destroy the strangers before she had a chance to find out answers. The chieftain always opted for violence over cunning.

Emme shifted around on the spiky branch and looked out through dark green pine needles behind her. A faint ribboning rise of smoke caught her attention. It seemed too thin, too controlled, to be the beginnings of a forest fire. Most likely it belonged to a single campfire.

Emme's brows dipped, puzzled. No village lay that way. The forest was too dense, too wild, for permanent habitation. But several trails wound through there, mostly used by hunters from other villages. However, a hunter rarely risked a fire that would scare away the game. Only winter demanded fires to ward off frostbite.

She scanned the rich-green tree line flecked with yellow sunlight. No other signs of movement caught her attention.

Perhaps the hunters smoked out their game. Occasionally that occurred, but mostly in winter when the baking summer sunshine had not ripened the land for a forest fire. Still, it was worth investigation.

She waited more moments until sure she was safe from the strange men, then climbed down the tree with graceless ease. Her feet thudded onto the soft needle blanket beneath the mighty pine.

She patted the trunk as though it had deliberately provided protection for her. Then she peered around and darted into shadows.

She found a thin trail, overgrown slightly with new fern fronds and lantana shoots. The tufts of grass growing under the shady shelter of the fronds had recently been disturbed. She knelt, felt the ground. Her mystery man.

Dark excitement stirred. With careful skill, she manoeuvred through the thick woods to where the smoke rose. She stopped at the edge of a small, leaf-strewn clearing and peeped around the trunk of a young elm.

A handsome man, possibly in his late thirties, squatted trying to get a fire going that poured smoke into the atmosphere. Early morning light had not yet dried the dew from the clearing that was edged by curly fronds and soft balls of yellow flowers. The fire's rock-edged bed was neither new, nor recently used. Forest gatherers in winters past must have warmed hands and feet over the sooty circle. She noted that the stranger had courage to be occupying a spot he could not have known was no longer used. Courage, perhaps, or ignorance of brutally maintained territorial rules.

So this was her mystery man. The man stopped poking at noncompliant sticks, calmly ran a hand through his dark, neat

hair. A short brown beard hugged his chin and offset apple-green eyes. His all-cotton clothes, no skins or furs, confirmed her suspicions. He was somehow connected to the other strangers. He wore a cotton tunic with elaborate woven designs Emme had never seen before, tucked in by a sword belt oddly empty of a sword. His pants were thick but smooth. He looked muscular, strong, as he knelt beside the fire, poking more green sticks into it. She smiled faintly at his poor forest skills.

Still staring at the smoking sticks, the man said, "Well, don't just stand there laughing at me. You could at least come and help me."

Emme stiffened. Was there another person about? Her eyes darted sideways as she scanned the shadows.

The man looked up from the fire, directly at her. "You can come out from behind that tree. I know you're there."

Emme frowned. Her skills seemed to have greatly lapsed today. No, they couldn't have. She could out-spy, even at close range, the best trackers of any village. He must have been talking to someone else.

"I would really appreciate a hand with this fire. I'm very cold from the dew that fell this morning." He was looking straight at her, despite the heavy shadows enveloping her. Emme noted warily his well-pronounced words and polite sentences, the smooth voice so different from most of the gruff male villagers. He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Emme straightened and stepped from the trees. "All right, I'll help you with your fire. Your sticks are too green and the wrong kind of timber. You need to find darker wood that looks like..." She looked at the ground around her feet for a specimen. "None of this wood is any good."

The man sat back onto the ground, leant back on immaculate hands – hands that could not have done even a day of hard labour. “Is that what my problem is?” His eyes seemed to be smiling.

Emme turned behind her and swept up a few dry sticks. Thicker hornbeam branches, a dry, very hard timber, lay a few paces away. She picked them up, ears all the while alert to any sound of movement near the fire.

She stepped back into the clearing, branches in hand. She squatted on the other side of the fire, winced briefly as stretched bruises ached on her legs, then piled the sticks onto the fire. Soon a fine blaze replaced the smoke. The sweet scent of baking timber filled the tiny clearing.

“Thank you,” the man said, and Emme knew he had never removed his eyes from her.

“How did you know I was there?” she asked.

The man only smiled as though hiding a pleasant surprise. “I’m Jaimis, by the way.” He stretched out his hand politely.

Emme ignored the hand. “Emme. Spelt E Double-M E.”

The man’s brow arched neatly. “How else would you spell it?”

“So, what are you doing here in these woods? You’re obviously not from around here.”

“I’m running away from some very bad people who hope to harm me.”

“Would that be six men?”

The man nodded. “Yes. Have you seen them?”

“Back there.” She gestured broadly behind her. “Why? What did you do to them?”

"It's all very complicated, and you'll have to forgive me if I don't want to talk about it. Let's just say that I'm trying to stop some very bad things they are doing in my city, and so now they are trying to stop *me*."

City - the big village the men spoke of. "I see. They did seem a little bit sinister."

"You spoke to them?"

Emme nodded.

"Did they ask about me?"

"Why would they think I know you?"

Jaimis watched Emme briefly. "I only meant perhaps they'd asked if you had seen me around."

"I mentioned that I had. I'm sorry if that gets you into trouble, but you people have got to stop sneaking around my forest. Wherever you came from, you should take the issues home with you."

"Perhaps you're right. I am going back to my city, today hopefully."

"How far away is this city?"

"Very far."

"And they followed you all the way here? You must have really made them angry."

"Yes - I did." The man turned to his pack and began rummaging through it. Emme's hand instantly went to her pouch, ready to remove the dagger. At last the man drew out a sack of food. "Listen, I have some salted meat here. Would you like to share some? You don't look like you eat much."

"What do you mean? I eat just fine."

"Where I come from, you would be considered too skinny."

"I'm a perfectly acceptable size in my village. Maybe I don't have hips and breasts like the other girls, but who wants that?"

A smile curled half his mouth, and his eyes danced a little. "I would have thought that girls do."

"I'm not a girl - not one that a man can take advantage of anyway."

"I see. So do you want some?" He pulled the meat from the wrappings and held it up for her to see.

"What sort of meat is that? It looks strange."

"Beef."

"Beef? What's beef?"

Jaimis watched her for a moment, as though trying to guess at her question. "Beef is from cows."

"What's a cow?"

His brows shot up. "You don't know what a cow is?" The brows lowered. "No, I don't suppose you do in this forest. Do you have buffalo?"

"No."

"Oxen?"

"Yes."

"It's the same animal family."

"You eat your oxen? What pulls your ploughs?"

"Well, no, we don't eat our oxen as such. And mostly our horses pull our ploughs."

Emme laughed. "Horses? You've got wild horses pulling your ploughs? Now I know you're lying."

"Well, they're not wild where I come from. They're quite tame."

"Is that what you're wearing on your feet? Cowskin?"

Emme openly studied the stiff glossy black boots that laced up to his knees over the neat brown pants.

“Yes. We don’t call it cowskin; we call it leather. So do you want to try some?”

Emme nodded. He broke off a chunk and passed her some. She settled onto her bottom and chewed. “Tough. It tastes like . . . hmmm, not like deer, but close.”

Emme pulled back a little against the heat of the fire.

The man stared at her arms. “You have some very nasty bruises there. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Emme stiffened slightly.

“You don’t look fine. Did someone hurt you?”

“I said I’m fine.”

“That mark on your wrist. That’s not a bruise, is it.”

“This?” She held up her wrist to the light. “This is a birthmark.” She inspected the unusual brown mark that had adorned her slender wrist since birth. Shaped like a small wobbly cauldron with its handle up, the mark made Emme’s wrist look dirty, even after she had scrubbed herself clean with pumice stone and soap. She shrugged to herself and tucked her hand back in her lap. “So tell me about this city.”

“I can help you with those injuries, you know. I have a salve here.”

“I’ll be all right. I always heal.”

“Always? Does this happen to you all the time?”

“It’s my mother. She does it when I make her mad.”

“She shouldn’t treat you like that, you know. No one should treat anyone like that.”

Emme stared at him. Of course – he did not know about the circumstances of her birth. He most certainly would not be

so seemingly concerned if he knew. She decided to enjoy her anonymity, however brief it was.

“So tell me, Kara, how long has your mother treated you like that?”

“My name is Emme.”

“What did I say?”

“Kara.”

“Ah yes – sorry, Emme. My mistake.”

“The names are very different.” She stared at him coldly.

“My sister’s name is Kara. You look a lot like her.”

“Then your sister must look very different to you.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Yes, she does; she’s a half-sister.”

“Only one sister?”

“Only one.”

“Brothers?”

“None.” The two watched each other briefly, then Jaimis added, “Will you let me rub a salve into those wounds? I’ll feel much better if you’ll let me.”

Emme scowled. “You can damn-well keep your hands to yourself, you pervert.”

Jaimis blinked once. “Very well, if that’s the way you feel.” His face relaxed. “You shouldn’t have to put up with that, you know.”

“I wouldn’t if I had anywhere else to go.”

“Don’t you have any towns you can travel to?”

“I only know this forest.”

He seemed to be considering something. Finally he said, “Why don’t you come with me to my city.”

“Where is this city?”

“It’s difficult to explain. It’s very far away.”

“Why would I want to go there?” Emme’s mouth was flat, but her eyes were faintly curious.

“It’s a great place. I have a lot of influence there. I could help you get some work, find you a house.”

“Perhaps you should first tell me about these bad men. Whatever those six bad men are doing, it does make me wonder if your city is such a great place to live.”

Jaimis surprised Emme by laughing.

“That’s hardly a funny question.” Her acorn-brown eyes blazed.

“No, you’re right. You needn’t worry about those bad men. I know how to handle them, and you won’t find them a problem.”

“So how long a walk is it to this city?”

“Do you want to come?”

“I’m warming up to the idea.”

Jaimis slid the leftover beef into the food sack. He dropped the sack back in his half-empty bag. Not a lot of belongings for one who had travelled so far from this – this city. “Well, I’ll tell you what: you say you’ll come with me, and I’ll tell you all about it on the way.”

“And if I don’t like the sound of this city after you’ve told me about it? I can’t exactly go home once I’ve run away. The beatings will be even worse.” She popped the last of the strange meat into her mouth and swallowed.

“I can assure you that my city and what awaits you there, is far better than those beatings you receive all the time. Far better. Emme, do you have any other family other than your mother?”

“No.”

“No one in nearby villages?”

She shook her head.

“Do you have friends in the village?”

Emme’s stony silence spoke volumes.

“No? Then what have you got to lose? You have nothing back there.”

Emme stuck her chin out. “I have my forest.”

“Is it worth going through beatings just to live in this forest?”

Emme faltered. “No – well, I guess not.”

“So do you want to come with me?”

Emme felt a flush of courage. How long had she yearned to run away? Now here was her chance. And if he turned out to be a rotten travelling companion, she could always find out where this city was and go on her own. He couldn’t possibly treat her any worse than her mother did, unless he took advantage of her; but he would have one hell of a fight on his hands if he tried anything. She was well able to hold her own against a man like Jaimis.

“Well?” Jaimis asked.

“All right, then. I’ll go with you.”

Jaimis grinned, and his eyes gleamed as though she had just handed him a nugget of gold. He stood swiftly.

“We’re not going now, are we?” she asked.

Jaimis ignored her and took a step to her. She snapped to her feet, fingers at the mouth of the pouch. Jaimis began to murmur something.

“Speak up, I can’t hear you.”

Again he ignored her. The mumbling continued. A hand traced a pattern in the air, and she felt something unnatural stir

behind her. She turned fully to see a swirling, tumbling black image appear, like a large oval mirror that reflected a bleak night sky. It sounded like a rushing, howling wind, and it pulled at her as though she were water and it was a black cavernous mouth sucking her in. She steeled back against the pull, dug her foot into the dewy soil, stretched her muscles to take a step back against the current. "What the -"

Without warning, Jaimis stepped to Emme's back and pushed at her, dislodged her balance of locked posture. She felt the pull grow stronger, felt herself fall; fall forward and towards the black space. Something caught her before she fell to her face - a violent up-current. Soon she was rushing into the void, like a body trapped within a fiercely flooding river. Then the void swelled to become a confined, choking universe within a universe. Within terrifying seconds her forest, her whole world, had completely disappeared.

2

Emme felt everywhere and yet nowhere all at once. Pulled as though through time itself, the alien sensations made her ill. She stared, stunned, as blackness, the emptiness that had displaced her forest, grew to a long, pulsing tunnel. She felt herself rush through the tunnel, a mere leaf caught on a raging torrent of air. The speed, that almost sucked her insides right from her body, shocked all screams from her mouth. Then dazzling light appeared at the other end. The light swelled. Did it grow, or did she approach it? Something hidden, yet as real as the wind, flung her rapidly out of the tunnel, through the light, and into the strangest room she had ever seen.

Too stunned to be frightened, Emme could only stare openly at the plush room. A four-post bed, each post opulently carved and draped with heavy, red fabrics, rested against a tapestried wall. Solid stone formed the floor of the room, and carpet – plump, red – copied the floor’s shape. A hearth of polished grey rock, marked with black veins, sat on the opposite wall. The void still pulsed and yawned beside the hearth, but it no longer pulled at her. An enormous fire curled inside the hearth, indifferent to the void beside it, and warmed the entire room but for a draught from the left window near the head of the bed.

Alien tables and chairs filled remaining spaces. Patterned fabrics, with threads of red to match the bedspread, hugged contours of obese chairs. Timbers of tables, ornate, smooth, and glassy on top, reflected dull light from the window. Used to rough, knotted, and hammered furniture, to Emme the heavily carved legs, posts and corners seemed ridiculous, as though pattern and form mattered in the place of stability and function.

Unnecessary paintings, tapestries, needle-worked cushions, gold candlesticks, and silver goblets on thin sculpted legs, decorated the room. Even the wash jug beneath the gilded mirror, one of the few practical objects in the room, boasted an excessive floral design.

Emme felt and heard air rush behind her, a shot of wind against her bared arms. She spun on heels to see Jaimis materialise in the room from the vortex, then the void behind him shrank itself out of existence.

Emme flung at him, punched him on the chin. It made a thick, thudding sound. He staggered back, eyes wide.

"You bastard. You tricked me." She swung at him again. He dodged her fist. It missed his face and hit his shoulder.

"Now hang on." He threw up hands to protect himself. "I can explain."

"You'd better." Eyes blazing at him, she put knuckles on hips.

"This is the way we travel from place to place here. I thought you might be frightened if you heard how we had to get here."

"How far did we come?" she demanded loudly.

Jaimis felt his chin for damage, tested the jaw for movement. "Very far. Across the sea even. We're in a totally different country."

“What the hell were you doing in my forest in the first place?”

Jaimis’ fingers still played with his sore chin. He winced slightly as he tried to get proper movement in it. “It’s a long story, but it was the best place to hide.”

“And why did you bring me here?” Her hand cut the air; indicated the lavish space. “Is this your bedroom?”

“My quarters, yes. It’s where I left. I didn’t expect to have you with me when I returned.”

“So can I leave now? I don’t like being in a man’s bedroom.” Her tone left no room for refusal.

“Yes. You are not a prisoner here. But there is something I have to do first.”

“What’s that?” Her eyes narrowed.

“Let’s see. Do you know what a prince is?”

“Yes.” The wariness did not leave her face.

“Well - you see, I’m a prince here in this country, and this is my castle.” With the hand not testing his chin, he gestured to the walls. “And if you go running around in here, especially dressed like that -”

“What’s wrong with the way I’m dressed?”

“Nothing as such. It’s just that we don’t dress that way here, and if you go running around looking like that, the guards are likely to think you are here to harm me.”

“You should have thought about that before you brought me here. I want to go back.”

“Before you’ve had a look around?” Jaimis finally stopped playing with his chin, satisfied it was not broken. “I would like to show you around first, then perhaps you can decide if you want to go back or not. But before that, I just need to go out

there and tell my guards and my people that they can expect you. Then you are free to roam around." Jaimis gave her a look of a boy pleading for sweets. "Do we have a deal, Emme?"

Emme inhaled slowly, thought carefully. "Very well, then. Go and tell people I'm here."

"Wonderful." He clapped hands together once. "Oh, and no more hitting me. You could be killed for doing that here."

"You'd have to catch me first."

Jaimis laughed. "You are feisty, aren't you." He studied her face a moment, the smile still touching his lips. His eyes took in every detail, then seemed satisfied with something. "It will take me a while to get used to you."

"Why do you have to get used to me?"

He smiled secretively, waved the comment away, then walked to the door. "Make yourself at home." His fingers reached to a small hook beside the door. A fat, black key hung on its circular head from the rusted hook. He took the key in hand. "Now - I'm going to lock the door. Not because I don't want you getting out, but because I don't want anyone to get in and discover you before I tell them about you. A lot of people walk in here: maids, guards, my advisor, my chamberlain. But if I lock the door and take the key, people know they are not to try to enter. So don't be alarmed if you hear the door lock, okay?"

Emme's eyes narrowed with fleeting suspicion, then she shrugged. "Whatever."

"Good girl." He turned before he caught Emme's scowl at his patronising praise. The door opened, and he closed it behind him. Emme heard the key scratch at the lock, the soft click as it turned. Metal gently grated metal as the key withdrew from its

socket, then footsteps disappeared down what she guessed was a stone hallway.

She put hands on hips and studied the room. Despite swirls, colours, and richly woven tapestries, it felt dull, detached. She imagined more character lay in one corner of her dinner table than existed in this entire room.

A crusty parchment and thick book with browned edges lay on a turned-leg table. An inkwell with a protruding pure white feather, a mound of red wax, and a candle sat beside the parchment. Her village had one book – the book of the law – but only the chieftain and his smug family could read it. Served them all right having to sit for hours and hours learning the boring skills of reading and writing. If that was part of being the village leaders, they could have the job. What good was reading and writing amongst trees, rivers, squirrels, badgers, deer, or birds? And what could the book of the law teach them that oral tradition had not?

A prince. Jaimis was a prince. She had heard of princes and their castles – those strange rock fortresses they insisted on living in. Her country had a prince, but they never actually heard from him. He didn't care about the outlying forests of his province. She knew the prince was rich though, and powerful. But he could be the cruellest prince in the world and she wouldn't care. As long as he left the forests alone, the rest of the country could do what it liked.

She wondered what nature of prince Jaimis was. A good prince? He must have been if he abhorred Wendaya's beatings. Any prince who was against a beating, had to be a good prince. No wonder he didn't fight back when Emme punched him. The village boys would be all over Emme by that point. Of

course, she could give as good as she got, but they often won with numbers. But she could outrun them – all of them – and they knew if they called her a coward, she would find ways to prove them just as gutless. A chunky spider down their shirt, or a dagger aimed to fractionally miss their heads, would always force them to retract their insults.

Emme smiled to herself and drifted over to the open window. She wouldn't have to put up with them anymore – not if this city was a worthwhile place to stay.

She leant against the wide stone sill, peered down at a dull grey courtyard. She jolted. Snow. There was snow on the ground, and no leaves on a drab tree tapping the nearest windowpane. A severe chill swept up into her face, made her hair stand straight as straw. Tiny bumps rose along her entire bare arms. Winter? Was it winter here? How could it possibly be winter?

She watched people shuffle through the snow. Some dragged deep furrows with sliding feet. Others punched black boots down into the fine grey powder, lifted legs high, then punched down again. Emme noted clothes not nearly as impressive as Jaimis' outfit. Jaimis had patterned colours, fine fabrics and tight knits. These people wore rough weaves, thick knits, browns, greys, and dirty beiges. Some clothes had stains and rips to match weatherworn faces and coarse, aged hair.

She wondered why they did not wear thick furs and skins for warmth. Instead they clutched cloaks about their bodies. Woollen caps and white bonnets protested the wind. The women waded through the snow in impractical fat skirts and tight bodices of drab colours. Stiff aprons, smeared with the dirt of labour, wrapped their waists.

Some carried stacks of firewood, others baskets of laundry or winter root vegetables. One carted a weighty vat Emme supposed contained alcohol. A metal bucket holding scrubs, brushes and rags, swung from the closed hand of another.

Curious, she listened as some stopped to talk to each other. Voices, as dull as the weather, discussed the mundane. A garden needed tending to. Washing, left in a strategic spot, awaited collection. The chamberlain had given a certain order that morning. A particular room had not been cleaned in a while.

A beautiful slender woman in a textured red cloak stepped from a side building. She flowed around the ice-compacted courtyard edges. The cloak parted when a breeze tugged at it, revealing in full, her glossy-green, stout skirt. Long honey-blond hair, neatly brushed and shiny, fell to her petite waist.

The village women wore dresses at celebrations. Other times they worked in loose straight skirts and unadorned angora tops. Even at their best, with draping dresses and plunging necklines, the village women never looked as striking as this woman. Emme had never seen such an ornate or full dress before. She wondered what was stuffed up the skirt to make it sit so wide. Emme chuckled quietly with the thought that maybe the woman's thighs held the skirt out.

An elderly man, greying but upright and strong, exited a door on the other side of the courtyard. He wore no cape or woollens as if he did not expect to be outside. He seemed as well dressed, as impractical as the woman. The two noticed each other, and the man waved a gesture to bring her closer. They met in the middle of the courtyard beneath the grey smudged sky.

The man bowed subtly.

"You have news for me?" the lady asked.

"Yes, My Lady. Your brother has returned. He has asked to see you, urgently."

Brief alarm flitted across her pale, sculpted features. "Is Jaimis all right?"

"Fine, My Lady, apart from a bruise forming on his chin. He says it is a matter of great importance. He's in the library."

"I'll see him at once, then."

The two walked towards a door opposite Emme's window. Their footprints meshed through many trails made since the last snowfall.

Emme straightened. Sister. That was Jaimis' half-sister. And she looked nothing - *nothing* - like Emme did.

Emme had short, shaggy rough-cut hair; always totally unbrushed. Her hair and eyes were the colour of autumn acorns, and her brows were dark, thin on a tanned face. That woman was blonde, feminine, pale as the snow, with light-pink lips and a tiny, curvy body.

"Lady Ennika; my Lord Chamberlain; please wait," a man called from the other side of the corridor. Wearing clothes of a lesser quality, the man possibly held the position of a high-ranking servant - like the ones who waited on Emme's chieftain. The chamberlain and the lady stopped, turned.

"It's all right, I've already told her," the Chamberlain said. He and the lady went on their way.

Ennika - her name was Ennika. Not Kara. Emme felt her heart thump in her thin chest. If Jaimis had lied about that, what else had he lied about? Maybe he wanted to kill her, or worse, violate her. Damn it. That's why he had locked her in his bedroom.

Fear shocked Emme into action. She had to get out of here. Fast. She tried the door, but it was securely locked. She kicked it hard several times, but the rusty lock refused to give.

She spun to face the room. Her eyes darted for anything that would pick the lock. A feather maybe? Too brittle. She frowned. Even if she found something suitable, picking locks was the least of her skills.

Think, Emme. What are your skills? Climbing. Climbing was one of her skills. She loped back to the window and peered outside. I need a way to climb down that wall. Jutting stones – anything.

She scanned the wall for irregularities, but the large stones of the wall were smooth with very little grouting. No – wait. A vertical strip of square stones extended out from the rest like flat steps. Odd. If she could put her toes on each one, and hang onto ones above with fingertips, she could probably scramble her way to the bottom. Eyes measured the horizontal distance. The stones seemed within easy reach.

She waited until most people had cleared the courtyard, then swung over the window ledge, reached out a foot to the nearest overhanging block of stone. Bravely she let go of the ledge and held onto the block above her. Beyond the warmth of the room, biting cold hit her.

She glanced up at the enormous wall that rose, grey rock to grey sky. Up close, she could see grooves and gashes of stonemason marks on the carved blocks. She realised the room was part of a square tower, four storeys high. Beside the tower, to her left, a wide roofless corridor branched from the square courtyard. A possible way out.

Surprised by the ease of the vertical pathway, she swiftly

climbed down the blocks. From a leap, she landed in snow. The icy powder closed in on her ankles. She jumped out from the foot holes pounded into the snow and ran left. Astonished, several people watched her flight.

Too bad if they had seen her. Let them try to catch her. Angry fear made her fast despite the hindering snow.

Emme followed the left edge of the stone tower. The courtyard expanded to more outdoor areas between buildings, towers and rooms. She shot through open spaces until she reached the castle's outer wall. A quick decision, and she turned left. With her right hand on the stone slabs of the wall, she ran, hoping to make it to an entrance or exit. The stone beneath her fingers felt cold, coarse, like sand particles.

Five guards, with fancy red pinafores over shirts and trousers, and flamboyant rapiers, stood at a colossal half-raised timber gate studded with iron spikes. It arched up into its rock frame. A hefty metal chain dangled from one side. Was that how the gate opened? Beyond the gate, she could see a snow-covered slope down to a vast, overwhelming array of houses and buildings. Able to see a great distance, she realised with a jolt of alarm, that this place, this city, was entirely alien to her.

The guards openly gawked at her, their eyes freely roaming her body. Her tanned arms began to flush red from lack of cover. Angora singlet-tops were for summer, not this wintry cold. Her deer-hide pants were a strong contrast to their coarse cotton pants. She knew about cotton, but only the important wore it – never as pants. Not when animal skins were so protective and comfortable. And her tough pigskin boots looked entirely different from the guards' velvety boots. Their boots, tops folded over, reached their knees. Their wide-brim hats possessed a useless feather, and their

tunics had a strange animal on it with big teeth, a mane and sharp claws. Each wore a well-groomed goatee as though an essential part of the uniform. They looked more like they should have been performing plays at village feasts, not guarding anything.

Emme's fists tightened. "What are you all looking at?"

One of the guards stroked his black, pointed chin beard as if pondering a decision. "What in the devil are you wearing that for?"

Emme glared at him, then realised she had no time to explain. "I'm going to the city, and this is what I want to wear." Was that an adequate excuse for leaving this place? Maybe they had already heard about her and would make leaving difficult. She glanced again at the rapiers. Although the hilts swirled in excessive shiny patterns, she doubted the thin blades were as impractical.

They only laughed at her. It seemed they were little concerned about those leaving, and more concerned about those attempting to come in. One of the guards turned to interrogate an old man bearing a lumpy sack over slumped shoulders.

Upon request, the man opened up the sack to reveal knobbly dirt-crusting potatoes. With gnarled spotted hands, the old man produced well-worn papers from a pocket. The guard waved permission to enter the castle, and the old man shuffled through the gate, his back humped under the load.

Emme squared shoulders and marched through the snow past the chuckling guards. She forced herself to walk, not run, down the long slope to the city. Large housing blocks, richly carved, lined the road. Each rose two, some three storeys high. Although joined by a single roof line, occasionally a slim covered

lane separated buildings. The lane of steps led down to more buildings behind.

She caught glimpses of plush furniture behind jutting, lead-lined windows. People milled in their houses. Some sipped steaming drinks. Others in simple clothes carried baskets and trays through rooms. Could everyone afford servants here?

Expensively dressed people clustered quickly at their diamond panes, and gossiped and gaped at her as though she were a play for their benefit. Two young women with glittering gold ribbons through neat hair, pointed at Emme, then turned to each other and whispered, giggled. They watched Emme with amused disdain. She wanted to run to their glass window and threaten to smack the smug looks from their faces, but knew now was the worst possible time.

She neared the bottom of the slope. Shouting made her turn. Someone yelled, pointed to her.

Damn it! It was Jaimis.

The guards started to run towards her. She turned, loped down the street until a side lane offered itself. She swiftly turned onto it and ran down its winding slope. The tall, old buildings rose up like a carved rock corridor.

The lane levelled out to an ancient, grand staircase. She took the stairs then pelted down the street beyond. Through the timber panels of a high fence on either side of her, she glimpsed a substantial garden area where people bent over snow-drowned vegetable patches, tended to unruly goats that kicked snowballs, or gathered eggs from elevated chicken pens. Several looked up as she ran past. They stopped to stare, faces blank.

Steam gushed from her mouth as she ran. She knew the bite of cold would sting her when the warmth from her run

dissolved away. The snow tried to stick her feet to the ground, but her long strides fought against it.

The streets began again, these not so opulent as the ones leading from the castle. Smoke poured from multiple chimneys on the stretches of rooftops. She rushed into lanes and streets crowded with passersby. She knew that everywhere she went, she left an impression on people who would be asked if they had seen a strange woman running past. She had to get into the back streets. But where? This place was enormous.

In the snow, one stone building looked like another. Shops, houses, halls, streets, alleys, lanes, all faded into a blur of grey and dirty, sludgy snow.

She heard a commotion behind her. Without even looking, she knew the guards tried to push through the crowd. Damn it. Her lack of knowledge of this place had allowed them time to catch up. No more tactics. It was time just to run.

She fled through the snow, pushing anyone, old, young, male, female, out of the way. She darted around creatures and carts being pulled through the snow. A man sidestepped her, and a basket of firewood scattered at her feet. Her long legs took her over it with ease. The man bawled a curse at her. She ran on.

The wind began to pick up and rush down through the corridor of the streets. The words, "Stop her," caught up with her, then general shouts and animated conversations closed in on the distinct command.

A dutiful citizen reached out, trying to grab her. She swung her fist. It contacted with something on the way past. A face maybe? She heard a string of curses from the man, but he did

not chase her. His curses began to fade, then the wind swept the last of them away.

I need a building to hide in. She glanced at every shop, every house. All seemed too obvious, too open. And there was a risk that someone inside might hand her over to the guards behind.

She turned left down a narrow lane. The houses began to look older, drabbier. Dull colours, rips, stains and dishevelled, greasy hair indicated that poorer people wandered the streets. The snow made everything look clean, but she knew, in summer, the streets would be dirty and unkempt.

She flung into an alleyway with a dead-end. A wide stone staircase ascended to a narrow side door. A body lay in the snow beneath the stairs. How long it had been there, Emme could not tell. The chill of cold preserved it in its blue slack-jaw state.

She quickly studied the corpse. The clothes were tatters. A green alcohol bottle lay in his arms. His beard was long, scruffy. A stuffed sack hung at his back. Perhaps the man was a forgotten citizen, left to die in the cold.

She winced at the idea that flashed into her mind. She made a mess of prints in the snow in all directions at the alley entrance before going up the stairs and sliding down the rail. Then she propped the body to cover the lower wedge behind the stairs, and ducked down into shadows. There she sat, waited.

Time seemed momentarily suspended. She longed to peer around the edge of the stairs and see what was happening. The dead man in front of her, blocking out light and view, made her shiver more than the cold.

She began to make out voices that suggested a disturbance of some kind.

“This way. I think she went this way,” a bass male voice said.

She heard voices at the entrance to the alley. “Only a dead street serf down here.”

“Lots of prints though,” a second voice said.

“Going up the stairs. Come on. Let’s try the next alley.”

Emme waited an aching long time. They could be roaming every street, checking every shop. She would have to be patient. Soon her fingers grew numb. The cold crept into her thin boots and made her toes sting. She felt if she stood, the brittle bones in her feet would snap. The cold made her sleepy. Heavy eyelids slid down, and she snapped them open with an angry thought.

She noticed again the sack the dead man carried. She tugged it off his snap-frozen shoulder and rummaged inside. Just dirty rags, an untouched bottle of alcohol, and a moth-eaten jumper.

It would have to do. She pulled out the jumper, noted the rather large hole on the back and down the left shoulder. Stiff from the cold, she worked it on. It clung to her skin. Clearly this was a jumper stolen from a child. In that moment she felt grateful she was thin up top. Of course, the bandages that wound her breasts helped with that – bandages that held the bruised rib Wendaya had given to her a few weeks ago.

Emme shivered and thought of her mother. Wendaya would probably be hand-sewing more of those garments she bartered for food at the village. She would be sitting in the warmth of the summer sun, sipping hot tea and wondering what she could yell at Emme about that evening.

Wendaya would be watching the people go by, lamenting her outcast status, and the life that Emme so cruelly took from her.

Right at that moment, Emme did not miss Wendaya, but she missed the forest and the sunshine. She missed the familiarity. Early that morning, she had been moving through the forest, tracking strangers. Now she was sitting under a cold stone stairway, her bottom in slushy, biting snow, a dead body her only protection from a large gathering of soldiers who wanted to find her. Why would Jaimis possibly bother to bring her here? Maybe this was the man those six weird men had warned her about. She shivered against the cold. Not that the six strange men would have been the better choice to trust, that much was certain.

Emme waited patiently, then warily exited the underside of the stairway. She peeped around the edge of the alleyway. The street was clear of all movement but a woman in a knitted shawl and bonnet turning down a nearby street. Emme scanned as best she could from her position. Perhaps another alleyway would be her safest choice.

She wished she had warmer clothes. That dead man could have chosen a better jumper to steal.

Emme spotted a break in the buildings. Was that a tiny passageway between the houses? It was worth investigating.

She made a decision and stepped from the cover of the alley, then broke into a run. She heard a little bell tinkle as a door opened.

“There she is,” a man’s voice said.

Emme glanced over her shoulder to see two red guards exit what looked to be a shop. She broke into a run. She dashed down the main street, past the alley she had hoped to investigate, and aimed solely to pick up speed. Her cold, aching legs hindered her run, but she managed a speed still faster than the guards behind her.

She turned down a side street. A quick glance behind told her she had one chance to hide before the guards rounded the corner and saw where she went. She flew down a thin side alley. Slime covered the walls on either side of her, and the stones of the buildings were rough-cut and odd-shaped. Thick, cheap grouting filled the gaps the irregular rocks left.

A cat jumped out of her way. Clothes flapped from a clothesline above her – just a stick that jutted from a tiny ice-frosted window. She followed the alley. A building stood at the end of it, but the alley turned sharply right. She took the right-hand turn, then swore. A dead end.

The sound of shouting on the street made her realise she had left clear prints down the alleyway. They would quickly find her down here. And if she turned back now, the guards would see her. She would have to climb the wall ahead and go into that narrow window at the top. A gutter edged the roof above her, two storeys up. It jutted out far enough to prevent snow reaching the thin edge of the tiny corridor between the houses. A grated drain sucked down snow spills.

She turned and backtracked a few steps, making sure she left clear prints in the snow, then leapt to the cleared, cobbled edge. Her boot clanged as it struck the drain's metal grating. If lucky, it would seem she had turned around, then followed the edge all the way out of the alley. She slid against the cleared stone, her belly to the wall. She felt the chill of the stone through her angora singlet and the newly acquired jumper. The biting cold stone made her arm-hairs stand and teeth chatter.

She continued sliding sideways along the wall. Shouts close by made her pace quicken.

She neared the far wall and looked quickly for the roughest stones, hoping that handholds and footholds would stand out. The gutter and drain ended, leaving no cleared edging; just three paces of snow between her and the wall. She would have to leap across the snow to vertical slabs of grey sandstone in an attempt to climb.

“Down here,” she heard a voice call out. They had found her prints. She had no more time to squander. She had to clear the wall before they found her.

With a lunge of all strength and speed she had, she leapt to the wall, hoping against hope that her feet and hands would grip something. She braced herself for the smack of the wall against her bruises.

The instant she jumped, a concealed door opened up in the wall, and she crashed into half-darkness on top of someone who yelped in surprise.

“Shut the damned door!” Emme scrambled to her feet.

She grabbed the edge of the thick stone door and swung it shut. It boomed in the gloomy space. A single candle on a wall bracket guttered and nearly died. When it recovered, it illuminated a tiny, empty room with no other doors than the hidden one.

The young man, flat on his back on the seamless stone floor, sat up, blinked once, eyes wide. “Who in the name of the Almighty are you?”

“I should ask the same about you. What kind of a ridiculous house is this?”

Voices outside forced them into momentary silence. Both watched the doorway guardedly.

“She must have back-tracked out of here,” she heard a man say.

“No prints,” a second replied.

“She must have slid around the side to avoid making prints.”

“Let’s go, then.”

The snow muffled the steps of the guards. The two waited quietly in the room until sure the guards had gone.

The sandy-haired, young man finally stood. Shorter than Emme first assumed, he stood a head height below her. Emme stared at the young man for the first time. He straightened his drab but tidy brown jumper with fastidious attention. He smoothed every crease as if expecting important visitors, then seemed to remember Emme again. The grey eyes locked onto her.

The two just stared at each other until the young man’s pink cheeks turned red. He gripped his left and only studded wristband in his other hand, turned it over and over whilst he looked down at the floor as if confused by it. “How did she find our door? I mean, it’s very well hidden, and she’s not one of us, but she might be new, but then Kye would have told me about her, and –”

“Who are you talking to?” Emme waved a hand in front of his face. “I’m right here. You can ask me directly, you know.”

The young man seemed not to hear. “I was going outside, wasn’t I? Yes, that’s right. I was going outside. And then you . . .” He looked up at her. “Then you came in the door. How did you find the door?”

“I didn’t. I was jumping onto the wall, and you opened the door at the right time.”

“Jumping onto the wall? Why would you jump onto the wall? There’s nothing out there.” He stared at the floor again,

still trying to piece bits together. He continually turned the treated animal-skin wristband.

"I don't see what the problem is," Emme said. "It's not that hard to work out. I was about to climb up a wall to escape the . . . And what do you have that secret door there for anyway? It's not like there's anything special in this room."

The young man looked up again. "Who was after you?"

"People."

"What people?"

"None of your damned business."

The young man let go of the wristband and swiftly held up palms. "I don't mean any harm by the question. I just might be able to help you. That's what I do. That's what we all do. Were they city guards?"

"What does a city guard look like?"

The freckled, sandy-haired young man blinked. "You don't know what a city guard looks like?"

"Just answer the damned question."

The young man seemed confused about who was questioning who. "City guards wear blue."

"Blue what?"

"Pinafores over their uniforms, and tall suede boots, and they have rapiers too. They like their rapiers."

"These wore red."

"Red? You mean the prince's own guards were chasing you? You must have done something really bad. Are you from the castle?"

"Maybe. Would it matter if I was?"

The young man looked her up and down. "Is there any reason why you're wearing those clothes?"

"I always wear these clothes."

"But women always wear . . . well, they wear modest dresses, not pants. I mean, men wear pants, and not those skin pants you've got. And certainly not tight pants like yours. I mean, not that they look bad or anything, quite good actually." He leered.

Swiftly Emme walloped his stomach with her knuckles.

A whoosh of air escaped his surprised mouth. He doubled over, winded. "What –" He sucked in air. "What was that for?"

"For staring lewdly like that."

"I only meant –" he sucked in more air, "I only meant to be nice." He blushed bright red.

"Well don't bother. Now tell me how to get out of here."

The young man caught his breath and slowly straightened. "It depends on whether you want to go back out onto the street or not."

"Of course I want to go back onto the street. There's no other way out of here."

The young man grinned. "Ahh, looks are always deceiving." He looked her up and down again. "Of course, I would like to show you how to get out of here, but you might be a Black Band, and then I'd be letting in trouble. But you don't look like a Black Band. They'd never dress so obviously. And a city spy wouldn't either. So maybe you're safe."

Emme rolled her eyes. "Stop prattling, and tell me what you mean."

"I suppose if I take you to our quarters and you end up being one of them, we'd have to imprison you."

"Whatever. Just please help me to get out of here. I'm new here, I don't know anything about the city, and someone is after me, and I don't know why."

The young man nodded once, firmly. "Yes – you're exactly the sort of people we try to help. Or should that be 'person'? Well, follow me, then." He spun on his heels, took a single step towards the back wall, and traced a hand down a track of stones. His hand contacted a rough protrusion, and he pushed it. A thin, hidden door swung towards them, revealing a dimly lit passage beyond.

The boy blew out the candle on the wall and walked through the deep doorway.

"Well, well. Looks can indeed be deceiving," Emme said. She followed after young man. He hit a button on a nearby wall, and the solid door closed behind them, leaving them alone at the landing of a candle-lit staircase. Their shadow stains shifted along the walls as the candle guttered briefly.

"By the way, I'm Dusty."

Emme stared at him blankly. The young man waited for some recognition. Finally Emme said, "Oh, I see; that's your name. I thought you were telling me you had dusty clothes or something because I leapt on top of you."

The young man let out a laugh that lay between amusement and relief. "No – I was called Dusty because when Kye found me on a dirt-pile as a baby, that's what I was – dusty."

Emme raised a brow fractionally. "Found?"

"I'm an orphan. Most of us are. And your name is?"

"I'm Emme, spelt E double-M E."

The young man, Dusty, watched her curiously for a moment, seemed about to say something, then changed his mind. "Follow me." He headed down the stairs.

"So tell me about this place," Emme said as they stepped.

"We're the street kids – the street rats." His tone belied a belief that Emme would know exactly what he meant.

“The who?”

“You haven’t heard of us? Well, we used to be Black Bands, or heading for it, but Kye pulled us out. He’s an amazing guy. I’ll take you to see him because he’ll know if you’re one of them or not. He’s clever like that.”

The stairs met another landing, then veered right. At the bottom, Emme could see the beginnings of a hallway.

“Black Bands?” Emme said. “Who are the Black Bands?”

“Goodness, you are from far away. When did you get into the city?”

“This morning.”

Dusty stopped swiftly, stared at her. “This morning? There’s no way you could have walked the entire city in one morning. It takes me nearly a full working day from here, but I know all the shortcuts.”

“One day? I thought you people used those black void things.”

“What black void?”

“Never mind. So tell me about these Black Bands.” The two started down the stairs again.

“They’re the people that society rejected; the orphans, the abused, the poor. The tough ones, the skilled ones, join the Black Bands, and they steal and murder for a living. They don’t choose the Black Bands; the Black Bands choose them. They’re responsible for just about all of the city’s corruption.” The stairs reached a T-intersection. “They practically own the place.”

“And this Kye – he pulled you out?” An unsealed doorway to their left guarded a large room crowded with rows of tables and chairs. A display reminiscent of her village square at a feast, Emme decided as she stepped into the room.

She had a brief moment to notice the spacious kitchen area straight ahead, partitioned by a bench below a square arch, before Dusty moved to a second door two paces to her right.

Dusty opened the chipped door for her. "Yep. He teaches us things. Teaches us to read and write in the hope that one day we'll get back into society. Helps us make an honest living."

Emme stepped into the junction of dim windowless corridors stretching directly ahead and left. Straight ahead, uniform doors lined the left of the passageway; a boot-scuffed straight wall marked the right. Several children, tidy despite drab clothing colours and styles, entered and exited the doors. Some stopped to observe her, then went on their way.

Dusty took her down the shorter passageway, empty but for one left door. No windows, only half-used candles lit the cold space. She realised she was underground in an immense, sophisticated furnished basement.

"Honest? If it's so honest, why are you hiding?" Emme tried to peer through the gap in the door on their left before being forced to continue past it.

"The Black Bands stop us from going out much. They try to kill us because we try to stop *them*. We try to sort out the Black Band issue, and until we do, we have to hide down here. But we don't kill, and we don't steal anymore."

The straight path of the shorter corridor met a rough white-painted corner, then resumed right. She turned with Dusty and followed him along a mirror image of the room-lined corridor. "We have to be quiet down here. Red and Timus are sleeping."

They drifted down the hallway. Emme soon realised the rooms behind the time-scarred doors were bedrooms with rows of bunks. "So, this Kye - was he a Black Band?"

“No one knows, and he doesn’t say and so no one asks. We don’t really care, you know. He’s a good guy, and it doesn’t matter what he’s done in the past. Kye always says that to us. That it doesn’t matter what we’ve done in the past; it matters what we try to do with our future.”

“Sounds like a bit of a bore,” she muttered.

Dusty seemed not to have heard. “Hey, Lydia.” A lithe girl with golden curls stopped before she entered her room. “Where’s Kye?”

“Gone up top with Davis. Some problems with the Black Bands. Who’s that with you, Dusty?” The girl looked Emme up and down.

“Emme. She needs our help. Did Kye say when he’d be back?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Thanks.”

The girl nodded, her lustrous curls bobbing, then entered her confined room. Emme briefly heard a group of giggling girls, then the closed door sealed in the sound.

“He’s gone up top - to the city,” Dusty said.

“I do believe I was standing right next to you when the girl said that.”

Dusty blushed bright red. “Yes. Silly me. I’m a bit scatter-brained sometimes, you know.”

“I noticed,” Emme said dryly.

“Well, I’d best show you around for now, I suppose. Would you like to see it all?”

“I guess so.”

Dusty turned to retrace steps. “Follow me, then.” As they strolled, he pointed to the identical hallway doors, now on

their left. "These are the bedrooms. There are two corridors of bedrooms. That room at the far end of this corridor," he thumbed behind him, "is Kye's office. His bedroom is off that."

"How many people live here?"

His chest puffed out slightly. "Sixty-two, and we grow every year."

"And you all used to be Black Bands?"

"Not all. I wasn't. Kye found me as a baby – but I said that, didn't I – and he brought me here. Kye and I are like brothers. He practically raised me."

"No wonder you go on about him."

"Oh, I'm not the only one. We all like Kye. He saved us all and gave us a new life. There isn't a single person down here who'd speak badly of him. Not a single one of us. You'll like him too. It's hard not to like him."

"Why? Is he made of gold?"

Dusty's brows dipped; his lips flattened, thinned out. "You don't seem to like people, do you? I don't have Kye's keen eye for these things, but I can at least tell that about you."

"People are nothing but trouble." Emme's brown eyes flickered darkly.

"You're a person."

"Yes, and I bring nothing but trouble. Just ask my mother."

"So you're not an orphan?"

"Why would I be an orphan? Is it only orphans who get in trouble with the guards?"

"I just wondered why you were in the city alone, that's all. It's not an insult down here to be called an orphan. Maybe up there in the real world, but not down here. It's a badge of

honour. Is your mother in trouble too? If she is, Kye will go and find her. He's good like that. He'd send whoever it took to see that people were safe."

"My mother is just fine. In fact, come tomorrow morning, she'll be the happiest woman alive."

"Why tomorrow morning?"

"When she realises I've gone."

Dusty's brows shot up. "Did you run away?"

"Yes - no. Well, it's complicated. So what's this place?" They re-entered the room with disorderly rows of diverse tables and chairs.

"This is where we all eat. Kye insists we all eat together. And we play games in here too, and talk. Sometimes we dance. Some of the people here play instruments. We're all a big family in here. It's not often we get to eat but when we do, we all share the food. No one is to be selfish and keep food to themselves, and the weakest of us get the food first if there isn't enough to go around. Kye makes sure of that. Kye's always -"

"You do talk a lot, don't you," Emme cut in.

Dusty merely grinned widely. "Yes, I'm always being told that. You'll get used to it. Everyone else has."

Emme stared at the long timber bench separating the dining area from an enormous dull stone kitchen. Tarnished copper pots hung from a chopped ladder suspended from the ceiling. A vast fireplace sat empty, neglected. Beside it, a fire in a smaller hearth licked at a generous pockmarked, black pot hanging from a hook in stone bricks. Wicker baskets of onions and garlic sat on timber shelves opposite the bench.

"Anyway, I'll show you the rest of this place." He took Emme out the other door and down the first corridor, past the base of

the stairs. Beyond the staircase, the hall stretched straight, the right side adorned with nine timber doors. Dusty opened each one. Three held baths and washbasins, two tight rooms were latrines, and one room contained sheets, towels, spare clothes. The rest were storage areas heaped with weapons: rapiers, daggers, whips, broadswords, spears and barbed metal balls on chains. Heavy iron hats, metal replicas of the guards' feathered wide-brim hats, sat in stacks. An open chest of dangerous three-pronged spikes rested nearest one of the doors.

Emme wondered that they could afford so much iron here. Although used by her village, bronze and bone remained the most common.

"All confiscated from the Black Bands," Dusty explained. "We try to stop them getting weapon supplies."

Dusty led her to the door at the far end of the hallway. They stepped inside a large muggy laundry where two young boys and a girl Dusty's age worked over open vats of boiled water to wring out clothes and sheets. Another young woman beat a rug that hung over a thin piece of rope strung from one end of the room to the other. Dust plumed from the rug, momentarily visible before heavy steam camouflaged it. The smell of pitch, used to seal the timber wash barrels, clashed with lemon and caustic soda. A large fire in an enormous hearth to Emme's left, scorched the bases of three colossal iron pots.

The damp heat of the room contrasted with the dry chill of the corridor beyond, and Emme felt fingers and toes begin to defrost and sting.

Dusty took her back down the chilly corridor, through the empty dining hall, then out the second door. There he turned

left and left again through the next door. They entered a room full of bookshelves, most empty. Tables met into squares, totalling seven squares, each with its own black candelabrum of candles burning low in their sockets. An empty, sooty fireplace, framed by black stone, sat on the far wall. The room held a single damaged tapestry of a feast of fruit against a backdrop of hills. Green, blue and red rags converged in a thick rug that blanketed the middle of the room.

Children and young adults intently read books parted beneath candles. Four girls giggled and gossiped in a corner, books covering their faces where hands might have been. Their animated conversation ceased abruptly when they noticed Emme. They whispered whilst their eyes peered secretively at Emme from above their books.

“This is where we all learn and read,” Dusty said. “It’s our quiet area for anyone who is studying or discussing things.”

“What are you looking at?” Emme said loudly, and the girls jolted, startled. They hid faces behind books, pretending sudden interest in the words on the page. All other heads flicked up from books to stare.

“You’ll get a lot of stares dressed like that, Emme,” Dusty said, then swiftly took a step back, hands raised. “Don’t hit me.” Emme’s hands had not moved. “I only meant to explain. But you’ll need to forgive people. No one here judges others, really. Well, some might, but we’ve all been misunderstood by people up top at one stage, and so we know what it’s like.”

“What else do you want me to see?” Emme said, face tight. She pushed past Dusty and out of the room.

Dusty showed her the other corridor where doors lined the left wall. “All just rooms. In case you’re confused, beyond that

wall there," he pointed down the corridor, "is the laundry. We access it via the hall on the other side of this wall." He patted the solid white wall to his right. "And in the laundry, there's another hidden door and another staircase leading to a room at the top. We have three of them. The one you came in, the one in the laundry, and one off the library. I would have pointed it out but you marched off so quickly."

"And that's it?"

"That's all we need. Just a library, bedrooms, eating area and laundry. And the storage and wash areas."

"It's more than I have. So I've seen it all, then?"

"Actually, you haven't seen Kye's office. Or his room. His room is the door at the end of the other sleeping quarters. I was taking you there, but then Lydia told me that Kye had gone up to the city and . . . but you were there, of course."

"So what now?"

"Well, we sit and wait for Kye to return. He could be hours; he could be days. Depends what the trouble was. Maybe I should show you to a room; you could be here a while. And would you like some warmer clothes? We're on wood rations here, so we only light the fires at night. It does get cold down here, doesn't it."

"Not as cold as up there."

"Yes, well, that's true. Winters are really bleak here in the city, in this part of the country. So would you like a hot drink? One thing we always have in abundance is hot drinks. We have hot mint and tea."

"Tea. I would kill somebody for a tea."

Dusty's brow arched faintly. "I hope you didn't mean that literally."

"Of course not."

“Thank the Almighty. Follow me.” He led her back to the kitchen to the tiny fire smouldering in its socket.

“If you’re on wood rations, how come this one is lit?” Emme asked.

“Kye insists on having it running all the time for hot water. That and the laundry fires for baths. We may not always have lots of food but Kye insists we stay warm with hot drinks and hot baths. He won’t have anyone freezing to death for the sake of a few bits of wood.”

“Makes sense, I suppose.”

Dusty opened an under-bench cupboard, drew out two honey-coloured timber mugs. He placed them on the bench, then retrieved a large metal canister of mixed tealeaves and sugar. He put a generous pinch in each mug, then ladled hot water and handed a mug to Emme. “We don’t have strainers here, so it’ll be lumpy.”

Emme took the mug, grateful to the tea for its existence. “I’m used to it.”

“Have a seat anywhere you like.” He gestured to the many mismatched chairs and bench-seats beyond the kitchen counter.

Emme chose a hard-backed chair closest to the weak warmth from the fire and inhaled the fragrant steam drifting from her drink. The mug’s heat began to defrost her fingers; the slow sting made her wince.

Dusty attempted questions about her home, but Emme ignored them pointedly. He soon ceased probing. Slowly they sipped tea whilst Dusty nattered about some of the people living in the strange semi-darkness of this headquarters, as Dusty called it. Emme stopped listening to him whilst she savoured the warmth and aroma of her drink.

A few sips of tea remained when the golden-haired girl, Lydia, burst into the dining hall. "Kye's back," she puffed, "if you still want him. He's in his office."

Dusty stood at once, his drink forgotten. "Let's go," he said to Emme.

"Wait a minute - I haven't finished my drink."

"Well, hurry up, then," Dusty said with an excited impatience.

"Anyone would think you were about to catch a glimpse of the Almighty you keep mentioning. Sit down. I'm going to finish my drink at my own pace."

Dusty plunged hands into a fold over his chest and slumped onto the bench-seat with a childish scowl.

Let him think what he liked. Emme needed time to sort her thoughts before she went to visit this mysterious Kye. Too many strange things had already happened to her today. The last thing she needed was to meet one more enemy unprepared.

3

Dusty halted before the narrow iron-decorated door at the corridor's end. "I'd better go in first." He knocked lightly on the scratched oak. A polite male voice called out permission to enter. Dusty opened the door partially, squeezed through the gap and secretively closed it behind him.

Emme allowed Dusty his clandestine indulgence without comment. She heard unintelligible voices, one animated, the other calm, quiet. The voices spoke for some time, and impatiently she began to pace. A little way down the hall, two older boys strolled from their room, hands stuffed into pockets. They stopped swiftly, stared at Emme until Emme's return stares unnerved them. They hurriedly feigned brave disinterest and made their way to the library.

At last Dusty opened the door; put his head around the thick timber edge. "You can come in now."

Emme shoved the door back and, shoulders squared, stepped into the room. Her eyes locked with a pair of soft blue-green eyes. Dark red lips sat flat, unresponsive, but those blue-green eyes watched Emme curiously. His eyes did not roam her body as every other pair had. He simply gazed at her face.

Emme felt a shock of betrayed expectations. Nothing like

she had imagined, he was young, possibly late twenties, calm, gentle-looking. She had visualised a rugged, middle-aged male with a bulky frame, loads of weapons on his belt, and a scruff of dark stubble or a thick beard. Only an elegant rapier sat against a wall in its casing with a brown sword belt still attached to it; and his defined jaw was entirely too smooth, his softly curled dark, almost black hair too neat, his hands too well-kept, to be a man of action.

“Come in, Emme,” he said calmly. His steady, kind voice blew away the last of her presumptions. “Have a seat.” His flat, upturned palm pointed to a high-backed chair opposite the desk his legs were tucked under. Two bookshelves, with mismatched collections of books, guarded his back. A lantern, hanging from a ceiling hook, illuminated the desk and its globe and neat stacks of papers. The lamp gently lit a sizeable, detailed brown map on the left wall. A closed door to her right, probably leading to the bedroom Dusty mentioned, sat mostly in shadows.

Emme hesitated. Dusty excused himself and left the room, closed the door carefully behind him. The soft click of the metal latch sent a prickle over Emme’s skin. She could run if necessary, but she would have to waste time on the door first.

“I just want to talk to you,” the handsome, dark-haired man said. “Nothing sinister.”

Emme scraped the chair as far back from the desk as possible without creating suspicion, and sat down. “So you must be the Kye that Dusty boy keeps prattling about.”

The man’s lips curled into a faint smile. “I’m Kye, yes.” He offered his hand, thumb up. Unsure of what to do with it, Emme slowly mirrored his movements. He gripped her palm

and shook it. She swiftly retracted her hand as if he had burnt it. Unperturbed, he said, "I hear you're in trouble, Emme. Do you want to tell me about it?"

How much should she tell him? Just enough. He could be the enemy. "I arrived in the city recently. I ended up at the castle - it's a long story - and then these guards with red tunics on started chasing me. I ended up here. Another long story."

"I'm going to need to hear that long story, Emme. My advice to you is to just be honest. There isn't much that shocks me anymore, and I can't help you if I don't know the full story."

"And you just expect me to trust you?"

"Do you have anyone else you can trust?" The question was genuine. "Perhaps I can help you get to some people you feel more comfortable with."

Emme weighed his apparent authenticity with a critical squint. Jaimis had been more than convincing - for whatever reason he had chosen to lie to her. Nothing had been as it seemed all day.

"I - I don't know anyone here."

"What about outside the city?"

"I don't know anyone outside the city either."

"Where do you come from, Emme? Can you at least tell me that?" His tone held a tremendous amount of patience. He did seem to really want to help, but then, Jaimis had too.

Emme sighed. "I wish I knew where I was from, but I can't tell you that until I find out where I am."

Kye's eyes narrowed slightly. He seemed to be considering her statement. "You're in the city of Endoria."

"What country?"

"Kildes. Have you had an accident, Emme?"

"No - why?"

"I was wondering about the bruises on your hands and neck, and you seem to have lost some of your memory."

Emme found herself feeling self-conscious. She reached up to attempt to cover the bruises on her neck but only exposed the ones on her wrists. A flush of hot pride stiffened her. She had not felt self-conscious since childhood and was not about to start now.

"Tell me something," Emme said. "Do you like your prince?"

Kye considered his response. "I don't have a love for him, no. Not many of us do. He isn't an honourable man."

Emme warily assessed Kye's face for honesty. "You're not just saying that?"

"You could be killed for saying that in this country. We don't mention his name unless we're prepared to take the consequences. And we certainly don't say it in context of not liking him. It's too dangerous. I'm telling you this because I'm hoping it means you will trust me."

Emme relaxed back into the chair. "He's the pig who brought me here."

"Who? The prince?"

"Yes. Prince Jai -"

"Don't say his name, Emme," Kye cut in. "It's too dangerous. Just call him the prince."

"Why? Is Dusty going to report you?"

Kye's brows dipped fractionally. "You're really not from around here, are you."

She shook her head.

“So how did the prince bring you here and why?”

“How? Through one of those black portal things you use. And why? I haven’t worked that out yet. This morning I was roaming around in my forest, tracking intruders, when I came across these six strange men, and they kept going on about ‘him’ finding me, whoever ‘him’ was, and how they would keep me safe. I ran away, and then I found Jai – the prince, and he said he’d help me run away from my mother, who gave me the bruises. Then he opened up this black hole and pushed me in. I ended up at the castle. He locked me in his room, but I ran away.” Emme took a breath to chase away welling indignant anger. She deflected with, “I’m starting to sound like that Dusty boy.”

Kye took a moment to think over her words. “Okay, let’s go back a little. You came from a forest. Do you know which forest?”

“No, but it’s summer there; not this cursed winter.”

Kye’s brows rose slightly. “Now you’ve surprised me. You must live very far away indeed. Do you know anything about the world and how the seasons work?”

“No.”

He stood, showed Emme the faded globe on the end of his desk. His index finger tapped his country, a large brown spread across the sphere. Slowly he explained how winter in the northern hemisphere occurred at a different time of year to the southern hemisphere. He pointed to the unmapped seas below the globe’s midline. “Your country must be down here somewhere. To sail it by ship would take months, possibly years.”

Emme gaped. “No – you must be mistaken.”

Kye shook his head and sat down neatly in his chair. He shifted the chair into position at the desk. "I'm not mistaken. I don't know how the prince got you here, or why, but it troubles me very deeply that he was able to. I will have to look into that. So do you know the name of your country?"

"I once heard it was called Saschuwa."

"That doesn't mean anything to me. It must be the uncharted lands. Do you have a prince or country ruler?"

"Yes."

"And do you know his or her name?"

"No. Why would I need to know that?"

He watched her curiously. "I take it politics don't touch you where you live."

"Politics? You mean like when clan chieftains war?"

"Something like that." He seemed to be thinking to himself for a moment. Then he leant elbows on the table. "Now, tell me about those other six men."

Emme described them, their clothes, mannerism, hand tattoos. "And one of them was called An-something."

"Anderson?"

"That's it."

Kye leant back in his chair and exhaled slowly. "The Ashrones - high priests of sorts. Also very bad men. You did the right thing to run away from them. So you don't know what they wanted with you?"

"I haven't got a clue. I was just minding my own business this week, and then the strange prints appeared. They seemed to materialise from nothing. All week I tracked them, and now this -" She gestured to the room around her.

"So, do you want to go home?"

Emme considered briefly. "Not necessarily. I don't like home very much. My forest, yes, but home, no."

"Why did your mother beat you?" Kye seemed more concerned than curious.

Emme remained silent. Oddly, her fingers began to fidget in her lap.

"So, tell me what happened when you arrived in the city." Emme knew Kye had tactfully changed the subject.

"Well, I arrived in the man's bedroom. He told me he had to go and tell others I was here or guards might try to kill me. Then he locked me in his bedroom. I knew something wasn't right when I looked out the window and saw Jai - the prince's half-sister. Are you sure I can't say his name?"

"He'll know it if you do."

Emme frowned, puzzled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'll explain in a minute. Go on."

"Well, the prince described his half-sister one way, but she looked totally different. I knew he was lying and wondered what else he had lied about. I thought maybe he'd brought me to his room to violate me and that's why he'd locked me in there. So I escaped."

"Well, I'm not sure what all of that means, or what you mean by his half-sister, but I'm sure I can get to the bottom of it. So how did you end up here with Dusty?"

"First tell me how the prince will know it if I say his name."

"He's the heir to the throne of Kildes, an Endorian - a family who've ruled Kildes for centuries. The eldest child of each family has the ability to hear when others talk about him or, in some extreme cases, think about him. It's enough of a risk

to mention the term, 'the prince', but Kildes has many princes, and as Kildes has about ten-million people, there are probably many people every day who use the word 'prince', and it can often confuse him. His name, however, is a very different matter. Down here, in this place, we are not in too much danger because the thoughts are buried a bit. But we never risk it. And you would do well to try and not visualise his face - especially if he's looking for you."

"Why would anyone need a ridiculous ability like that?"

"It's a very valuable ability if used properly. Now, tell me about how you found us here, Emme."

Emme briefly explained, and Kye smiled his soft smile. "A humorous story." He ran the story around in his mind before adding, "Now, is there anything else you can think of that you should tell me?"

"No. That's it."

"Maybe you'd better tell me about yourself, then - your home and your family or background. Perhaps there's a clue there."

"There's not much to tell. I come from a large village. My chieftain is the most powerful out of all the forest chieftains. I don't know my father, but my mother isn't very popular in the village."

"What about your mother's background?"

"My mother used to be the daughter of an important couple in the village. They died of a fever when I was a little girl. She was very well liked and beautiful. She was supposed to marry someone in the village. I don't know who. But she's alone now."

"Why?" The blue-green eyes followed Emme as she pretended interest in the features of the room. "Well, perhaps

when you get to know me better, you can trust me with that story.”

Emme met his gaze again. “So what should I do now?”

“Well, I can find you a room. Are you a good sleeper?”

“Yes.”

He watched her face briefly, seemed to search for truth as if it really mattered.

“I usually sleep on a thin mat in front of the fire or under a tree in the forest. I can sleep anywhere.”

“Good, because I was going to give you the room next door to this one, and the room on the other side of it is full of young girls who giggle and chatter throughout the night. The walls aren’t very thick between the bedrooms.”

“So how are you going to find out about me and why I’m here? Do you know the prince?”

“I have some connections in the city. If anyone will know what’s going on, they will. Would you like me to get you some sheets and blankets so you can set up your bed?”

“I guess so.”

Kye stood, then halted briefly when Emme said, “I have nowhere to go, you know. I don’t know how long I’m going to be here.”

“You can stay for the rest of your life if you need to. The rest of us probably will. Although, my aim is to have most of the young ones back in society before they’re too much older.”

“But you can’t because of the Black Bands?”

Kye nodded. “Yes, that’s right. Dusty told you about them, did he?”

“He did.”

“Well, there’s probably a lot you’re going to have to learn about this place, but I won’t tell you all about it now. It will only confuse you. Perhaps you’d like to meet again tomorrow when I get back, and we’ll talk some more?”

Emme shrugged. “Whatever.” She stood, then stopped, eyes narrowed. “Why – what are you doing this afternoon?”

“I think I might go talk to my contacts. Some of them are an inn-stay away.”

“An inn-stay?”

“One of those many things to explain.” Kye moved around the desk and gestured politely to the door. “After you.”

She moved out of the room, waited just beyond the doorway in the dim lantern-lit hall. Kye opened the door to the nearest bedroom for her, and she peered into the darkness.

“I’ll have Dusty bring a lantern for you. The beds are comfortable, but you might want to dust them off a bit. They haven’t been used for a long time. I’ll just go and get you some sheets.”

Emme nodded and watched Kye walk away down the hall. He was tall, taller than he had seemed from his sitting position. Over six foot, with strong, wide shoulders and a straight body. His long legs took almost graceful strides, not the robust strides of the village men. But then, the men of the village walked like they had something to prove, as if their manhood depended on it. They would walk, chew grass roots, and spit out the excess.

Emme might prefer to dress like a man and engage in men’s jobs and men’s fights, but she abhorred the spitting. That and the drinking.

Emme noted Kye’s clean clothes, the buttoned white shirt, the brown pants, the black boots. How different he was from

the males in the village with their rugged skins, furs, and food-stained clothes over bulky frames.

Emme tugged at the ragged jumper on her body. She knew she did not fit in here, but it would have to do. It was home now. At least until Kye worked out what she was doing here.

Dusty turned up with a bright lantern and slung it on a rusted hook near the door. It lit up a very narrow room; long, with just a double-bunk on the left wall and a cupboard beyond that. Between the bunks and the wall, Emme had just enough room to walk the length without touching anything. Beyond the cupboard with its back to the left wall, was a narrow space, unfilled despite room for at least a second bunk. She might be able to bring one of the dining room chairs in here so she could sit somewhere without anyone staring at her.

“Not bad, getting a room to yourself,” Dusty said. “Of course, Kye does, but the rest of us don’t. Not that we mind.” He placed a flintbox and a bottle of lamp oil on the floor beneath the lantern. “We’re used to sharing. It’s nice to have people to talk to. I could imagine it would get very boring down here if we didn’t.”

“It’s not very fair that Kye gets his own room.”

“Well, Kye’s always up late and having meetings and the like, and some of the meetings are private, and we wouldn’t want to interrupt them by walking through the office all the time to get to our room. And Kye doesn’t come out of his office much during the day. He’s always reading and thinking. We’d get distracting for him. No, we’d *be* distracting. Kye’s always teaching us to speak properly. Anyway, so Kye doesn’t really like anyone taking this room so he doesn’t keep anyone awake when he comes and goes a lot.”

“Do you ever have a sentence without Kye’s name in it?” Emme ran a hand along the bunks. She lifted her palm and inspected it. Not too much dust.

She heard Dusty laugh, then say, “I’m just so proud of him. He’s like my brother, you know. But then, I did say that earlier, didn’t I.”

Emme walked to the cupboard. “How old are you, Dusty?” She pulled back the creaky mahogany doors and peered inside. The shelves lay empty.

“Nearly seventeen. Why?”

“You don’t act it.” Emme closed the cupboard and examined the space beyond it. Dust and a dead cockroach lay on the floor.

“Well, they do say that to me a lot. But none of the girls seem to mind. I still attract the girls, you know. More than the others do.”

Emme turned and peered at Dusty from beneath her brows. Dusty blushed brightly and grinned.

“How old are most of the people down here?” Emme went and sat on the lower bunk and bounced a few times to test the softness. It gave a little, then held with the timber slats underneath.

“The youngest is five. She’s a sweetie. The oldest is Halder. He’s fifty-five. He helps Kye a lot. There are six around Kye’s – oh, and your age. The two girls teach us. They live in the building in that alley you first came down. That means they’re the only ones who see us coming and going. One of them has a boyfriend.” He smiled to himself. “It’s very sweet. The four guys go with Kye a lot. The rest of us are my age – under twenty. It’s only ever the younger ones that want to get out of the Black Bands or don’t

want to get involved in the first place. The older ones are too set in their ways. And too risky, as Kye would say. They could easily be spies. Black Band spies who could tell them where we are and give us away."

"You don't think the younger ones could possibly be spies?"

"They have to go through some pretty tough tests before we let them down here. Of course, they don't know they're being tested. But Kye's really good with that sort of thing. He just seems to know if someone's a spy or not. He's very streetwise - for someone of his social class."

"What social class? He's down here too, isn't he?"

Kye returned, ending the conversation abruptly. He placed sheets, blankets, a pillow, and a fresh jumper on the bed. Emme stared at the pillow. She had never had a pillow in her life - a luxury her mother refused her.

Emme ran her hand over the striped pillowcase. She had often wondered what it would be like to sleep with one. Now she would find out. In that moment, it struck her that she was finally free of her mother - no more of her mother's cruel ways and unreasonable demands.

"Dusty can help you make the bed," Kye said. "Then I might get him to continue what I sent him up top for in the first place." The statement seemed a gentle reminder.

Dusty slapped his forehead. "I clean forgot. I was supposed to be buying food. We're a bit low at the moment," he explained to Emme. "Some of the young girls earned some money with some cleaning work they did yesterday, and Halder was paid some money he was owed."

Kye was watching Emme. "I'm going to see what I can find

out about you, Emme. I hope to return tomorrow with some news. Don't worry; we'll get to the bottom of this."

"Whatever," Emme said with a casual shrug.

"You're most welcome." Kye's lips turned into slight smile. His eyes danced at her briefly, then he disappeared down the hallway.

Emme scowled after him.

Dusty grinned at the space left by Kye as if the man still stood there with his teasing eyes.

"And what are you grinning at?" Emme glared at him.

"He doesn't often joke like that, you know - he's so serious all the time. No, not serious. More just thoughtful. He always seems to have something on his mind, but that's perfectly understandable with all the things going on in the city at the moment. Well, better get going and get us some food or we won't have any dinner."

Emme watched him go, then gratefully closed the door behind him, leaving herself alone in the dimness. The smell of musty mattresses and dust swelled in the confined space.

She held the woollen jumper up to lantern light. Weighty and a little oily with lanolin, it was neither feminine nor masculine in fawn. It would suffice.

She yanked off the shredded jumper, made a brief inspection of her bruises. Stale, yellow-green splotches interspersed with fresher blue-tinged stains. New or old, now that the numbing cold wore off, each reminded her terribly of their presence. She shrugged and worked the new jumper on, felt the instant warmth of the prickly wool. She rolled down the tall neck of it, then flattened onto the bed.

She lay, completely bored for what seemed hours, until a commotion carried down the hallway - voices, scurrying.

Someone pounded on doors and shouted into rooms. She lay very still and listened as the bellowing voice worked its way down the hall. Finally someone banged with the padded side of a fist on her door. It rattled in its loose socket. "Dinner's up," a deep, gruff voice shouted.

Emme sat upright and listened warily for further sounds. "Did you hear me?" the voice called loudly. "I said, 'Dinner's up'. Dusty asked me to bring you to the dining hall."

Emme got up and opened the door, stared up at a giant man dressed entirely in black. A black head of shaggy hair flecked with grey, and a stark black beard on white skin, added to his burly appearance. She wondered if she had been tricked and this was the Kye she had imagined.

"I'm Halder." The man grabbed Emme's hand, smothered it totally in his expansive one and shook it roughly, warmly. He reminded Emme of a bear turned into a man - tame but not harmless. "Good to meet you, Emme, spelt E double-M E." He broke into a huge grin of large, yellowing teeth and spun on his big feet. "Follow me."

Emme blinked and watched the man's heavy departing steps. She could almost see the air part in his wake.

He did not seem to have noticed she was not following. She shrugged to herself, ran to catch up.

Animated people, laughing and gesturing excitedly, quickly crammed around the old, scratched tables.

"Any table will do, Emme," the man-bear said. "You can sit with me if you like." He swung tree-trunk legs over the bench-seat and slid to the middle, patted the space next to him.

Emme sat down cautiously, knowing that people in the room stared.

“They always stare at newcomers,” the man announced to her. He smiled a large, warm smile. “You’ll be fine. Just be yourself.”

She turned a cold face to him. “I don’t intend to be anything but.”

The man slapped Emme playfully on the back. Her body lurched forward under the force of it. “Good for you,” he said loudly, then turned to the kitchens and roared, “Bring on the food.” Several boys exited the kitchens and positioned baskets of bread and timber trays of boiled potatoes beside dishes of butter on the tables. Ruttled metal plates were swiftly passed around, and people dove for the food. Laughter and intense excitement filled the room.

“They don’t get much food,” Halder explained loudly in her ear. She flinched at the volume.

“You don’t need to shout,” she said, face sharp.

Halder seemed not to have heard. He reached for the bread and tore off a generous chunk from the nearest loaf. He peeled the portion into two. With a crooked fork, he skewered a potato and shoved the potato between the halves of bread. Using the same fork, he dunked it into the butter and scooped a substantial slab of it. He wiped it onto the hot potato, jabbed the fork back into the potato pile as if killing it, then sat down and bit through the huge sandwich.

“Help yourself, Emme,” he said with a mouth engorged with food.

Emme pushed a youngster out of the way and repeated Halder’s movements. She hungrily ate every last bit of bread, then launched back for seconds. She matched Halder’s movements when he went back for seconds by groping for thirds.

“My, my – you have a massive appetite for a girl,” Halder said, eyes grinning. “Good to see. Although you might find it a little tough down here with irregular meals.”

“I can cope with irregular meals, just not small ones.” She bit into her thirds.

Several older girls began to stack plates, and Emme swiftly grabbed another wedge of bread before they whisked the basket away.

“Fourths. I’m out-eaten.” Halder’s lips parted into a huge grin that showed potato in the gummy corners of his teeth. “I haven’t been out-eaten in here before.”

Emme held her bread close to her chest as if any minute one of the servers would try to take it away. She tore chunks and stuffed the portions in her mouth. Minutes after the last of the food had been consumed, Halder belched noisily. Emme laughed at the open disgust on several girls’ faces at the table. She might not belch like a man, but she at least refused to be so alarmed at their table habits.

Halder’s after-dinner manners set off a crude competition amongst the boys at the table that quickly spread through the room. Not much changed from country to country, she noted with a roll of her eyes. Halder guffawed and outranked them all with a second belch.

A symbolic rhythmical tapping on a metal plate swiftly silenced the room. Emme peered around to see who made the sound.

All eyes seemed to be looking at Dusty and his table crowded with young girls. Dusty stood, and the many pairs of female eyes at the table gazed up admiringly at him. He cleared his throat. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said formally,

and a chuckle broke out. His eyes smiled as he said, "I wish to introduce to you our newest member. She has come to us from very far away and could be staying with us for quite some time. I want everyone to make her feel welcome. Her name is Emme, spelt E double-M E." Dusty gestured to Emme, and she glared at him for the attention.

The room broke into a mix of applause and the sound of implement butts banging against tables.

"Okay," Dusty said, "bring on the drinks."

The room launched into an uproar of cheers.

"Cider," Halder bellowed in her ear, making her jump.

"Will you stop doing that," she snapped loudly. "I'm right here; you don't need to shout."

He only grinned, his large, slightly crooked teeth showing in all their yellow splendour.

"We don't get cider very often," the boy beside her said. "It's a real treat when we do."

"Only wish Kye is here," another boy said.

"Was," the first boy corrected. "Was here."

"No, *were*," a sharp-eyed girl put in haughtily.

The two boys shrugged it away.

"They're all learning to speak correctly," Halder said not so loudly. "It helps them up there." His eyes flicked upwards as if the ceiling were the city.

Hands eagerly passed around metal mugs and flagons of cider. Even the youngest of them held up dented mugs for some of the mild alcoholic drink.

"Not having any, missy?" Halder asked when Emme declined.

"Don't touch the vile stuff."

“Good – more for me.” He poured himself a generous amount, then filled her mug and slid it over to his. He seemed little concerned for her reasons, and Emme felt momentarily grateful she did not have to evade.

Dinner ended, replaced by conversations that continued long into the night. Emme left early, disturbed by the number of people wanting to talk to her, to ask her questions. No one in the village had ever wanted to talk to her other than to utter snide remarks or impart important information to their forest tracker.

She began to grow wary of their niceties and interest in her. She wandered back to her room, heard her lonely boots on the untreated pale oak floor. The sound unsettled her, reminded her that her boots should be crunching the dirt road to her cabin, not clacking on a timber hallway.

She entered her cold room, heard voices through the thin right wall – young, female voices – but could not distinguish words. The girls had returned to their room before she did, and, it seemed as she listened a little longer, had invited male guests.

She lay down on the unmade bed, inhaled dust discharged from the mattress by her movements. She stared at the bunk above and immediately a whirl of thoughts flooded her mind. Had she done the right thing to talk to Kye? No one was ever nice to anyone for no reason, at least not to her. That prince had been no exception. The cool green eyes of Jaimis flashed from her memories, and she quickly tossed the image away. If he could sometimes sense when people thought of him, then she did not want to be the one who alerted him to this place.

No wonder the man had known of Emme’s presence behind

the tree in the forest. She had been staring straight at him, and he could hear her thoughts. With no one else in her country that could possibly be thinking of him, bar the six disturbing men, how could he not hear her thoughts.

No, she shouldn't be thinking about him like this. She tried to think of other matters, but the mystery of her strange arrival in – where was it? – Endoria? – kept pushing into her mind. The more she tried to suppress it with other thoughts, the more it longed to rise to the surface like an apple in a water barrel being held under by a hand.

She hoped Kye would find out something. There had to be a simple explanation for it all, although it escaped her why a man would travel through a strange black gate all the way to the bottom of the world just to get her. For that matter, why would six men – Ash-somethings – be bothered to come and get her too?

It must have been a mistake. They must have been looking for someone else and grabbed the wrong girl. They probably got lost in that black tunnel and found themselves in the wrong forest. Yes, that must have been it. Mystery solved.

But did they know that? Would they keep looking for her thinking she was the girl they wanted? Or perhaps they had realised their error and she was safe to move about the city again.

She decided tomorrow she would go up to the city and see, maybe listen a little. If it seemed the guards were still looking for her, she could run back here. If they weren't interested in her, she would know they had realised their mistake. Simple. She was sure Kye would return to confirm her words.

She patted the dagger in the rarely removed pouch, then tucked hands under her head and sighed. Yes, tomorrow she would go out to the city and look around. She just might find out something for herself.

4

Emme woke to an alien darkness, the sound of laughter. She sat up abruptly, sensed the confines of something above. Groping, she felt slats of timber overhead. The laughter swelled, then dissipated to grating high-pitched giggling. Nothing smelled right – the rank odour of mould, dust and stale mattress fused with fresh linen.

Memory returned, and she fumbled from the bed to the door, almost smacking the dead lantern off its hook in her careless haste. She felt for the handle, then flung open the door and gasped as though just discovering air in the room. The pale light of sickly lanterns spilled into the doorway where sunlight should have been.

The sound of the giggling increased. The group next door, she realised. What time it was, she could not tell. Her senses stumbled in confusion. Eyes longed for a sun or moon, anything that could tell her how long she had been asleep.

The space confined, suffocated. She fled down hallways, through the dining room where people startled from leisurely hot drinks, along the echoing second hallway and up the flight of stairs. At the final landing, she pounded every stone until one forced the door open. She dashed to the next door, slapped her

palm against the rocks, ignoring the stab of stone protrusions. The door creaked open. She stepped out into icy snow, inhaled deeply and felt faint early morning light on her eyes. Her mind screamed that the sun had it wrong; that dawn should have spread across the sky two hours ago. Perhaps time played differently in this place.

“You all right, Emme?” A voice behind her made her spin, fists ready for action. She released her fingers.

“How can you stand the darkness down there?” she said to the unfamiliar black-haired boy.

He shrugged unusually broad shoulders for one so young. “You get used to it. There’s an hourglass in the library that helps us keep track of the time. Do you want me to show it to you?”

“I want to stay right here.”

“Well, I’ll have to ask you to close the door. We can’t leave it open for long, or someone might discover it.”

“Fine. Close the damned door, then.”

The boy shrugged again and shut the door behind Emme, leaving her to the cold and silence. Fresh snow had fallen on the alleyway, concealing yesterday’s prints. Only a cat had wandered the alley since the snowfall; it sat under the eaves licking its mottled fur. The tabby watched her briefly with icy green eyes, then returned, disinterested, to its cleaning.

Emme leapt to the snowless alleyway border. The cat flinched, ready to flee. Briefly she squatted to smudge her deep footprints, then stood, caught her balance on the jagged cobbles. She scraped along the drain’s grate, and the cat skittered away down the alley.

The cold bit through exposed skin. Breaths of air visualised with each exhale. The new woollen jumper kept out most, but

not enough of the chill. She would have to go for a run later to warm up.

She slid to the alley entrance and peered around the sides. All was quiet, still. The dawn had only just turned the black sky to a dark-grey smudge.

Smoke rose lazily from many chimneys. A light flickered on down the road, and in the distance a dog barked. Further down the street, lantern light squeezed between shutter slats. People were rising to begin the drudgery of a new day.

It seemed a perfect time to investigate the city, but for the fresh snowfall that would highlight her lone tracks. She wondered if, even at this hour, guards traversed the streets. She supposed crimes did not confine themselves to the waking hours, but rather, flourished under the blanket of darkness.

Oh well. If she left it any later to find a concealed place to listen, too many eyes might note her – eyes that would know how alien she was to this vast city.

Emme calculated the risk, then with a flush of bravery, straightened, stepped from the alleyway and jogged down the street. She spotted the tabby cat that padded carefully across the snow, barely making a dent in the powder. Perhaps she could follow it and discover some of the quieter alleys the creature was sure to know.

The cats in the village, immigrants from outer forest lands, knew where to laze unseen without drifting too far from anticipated dinner summons. Cats in this foreign world would surely be no different.

She shivered, less from the chill than from nervousness of the unfamiliar scene. Her feet crunched down into powder like

boots over glass shards. The buildings were dark grey monoliths watching her in the dawn quiet.

The cat turned down a side street, and she followed it. Large metal bins sat empty in the lane, a possible sign that the street's inhabitants could afford to waste little.

"Falling!" The cry shattered the stillness.

Emme jolted to a standstill and stared up at the noise's source just as liquid muck surged from an open window to the white snow. The yellow fluid quickly stained the snow, then dissolved into it. An unseen person retracted a white pot through the window, worked closed a rickety glass windowpane, then yanked down a blind.

"That's disgusting," Emme yelled up at the unknown individual behind the glass. "Don't you people have proper hygiene in this vile city of yours? I should make you come down here and clean this up."

Everyone knew that if you didn't bury it, you got sick. Surely these people weren't that stupid.

The blind recoiled, and the stiff, painted window jerked upward. "What you yelling at?" a woman asked as she curved out the window.

"You, you foul woman. You don't throw that sort of thing onto the street."

The weatherworn woman's lips curved into a sneer, revealing several black teeth. "And who might you be? Prince Jaimis himself?"

A chill loped down Emme's spine. "Damn it. Why did you have to go and say his name? Do you know what you've done?" He might hear his name, might know the woman looked at Emme.

A gruff man's muffled voice squeezed around the stout woman. "Who you yelling at?"

"Bitch in the street complaining about the way we dump our waste."

"You want me to go down there and give her a walloping?"

"Yeah, just you try it," Emme yelled, but knew now was not the time to settle this. She had to get out of here. Fast.

She turned and walked calmly from the street. If she ran, they would think she was a -

"Coward," the woman bawled and slammed the window shut against any reply.

Emme felt her fists tighten. She hated - *hated* - being called a coward. For twenty-two years she had endured Wendaya's beatings, the villagers' cruelty, the pranks, the abuse. No coward could do that.

When she reached her own prints at the lane's entrance, she glanced over her shoulder, noted that the woman had pulled down the blind. She waited patiently, then when sure the woman would not look from her window again, Emme turned and fled the other way down the street. If pressed, the vulgar couple might point guards in the opposite direction.

Emme began to find the labyrinth of streets overwhelming. This place had no logic or pattern to it. Everywhere there rose three-storey buildings of grey rock with dark oaken doors. Occasionally the line of joined houses broke, revealed an alleyway or street, but where those convoluted alleys or streets led, was nearly impossible to tell. Some were dark corridors of stairs leading down to lower levels of the hilly city, or up to the elevated districts. Others were streets and

alleys that curved sharply into the unknown, or split into more streets.

She needed a wider view than the closest houses or bend in a road. She glanced up to rooftops, and a crafty smile curled her lips. *What I need is a way to get to a roof.* Up there, she could listen to conversations, avoid notice and get her bearings.

She cleared a bend in the narrow road and stopped still. It was all too easy. A white ladder reclined against a dirty, dark grey wall. At its top, it tapped the eaves. She investigated the ground at the ladder's base, but no recent prints spoiled the snow. The ladder looked new, the white paint unworn by boots. Sharp, translucent icicles did not dangle from the rungs as they did the gutter above. Oddly, the recent snowfall had not buried the base of the ladder, yet no prints existed to indicate someone had put it there after the night's flurry. It all seemed somehow unnatural, yet no sinister explanation could be conjured.

She tested the first rung with the toe of her boot. It seemed sturdy. Warily she climbed the ladder. It sank swiftly into the snow under her weight. She waited until it settled, then continued to climb. When she reached the top, she peered, eyes just above the gutter, for any signs of use, but the pitched rooftop lay empty of people and prints. Not even a feline print marred the snow. The gentle incline stretched, snow-covered, for the expanse of the entire housing block. The other side of the roof fell away along the narrow width of the rectangle. Chimneys, irregular shapes and sizes, jutted, and filmy smoke from stale fires filled the air with a tang.

She climbed onto the roof, careful to not slip on the ice. It seemed a perfect vantage point to watch the streets. Right foot higher than the left, she manoeuvred across the slope and

positioned herself at the apex beside a fat square chimney. She pressed palms to it to fight the chill, but no warmth emanated from the bricks. Cold seeped into her trousers. If only she had her warm winter furs and skins on, then she wouldn't feel a hint of this cold.

The frigid air and snow competed heavily with the vestiges of her body heat. Soon billowing smoke replaced the dribble from the chimney beside her, and she knew the owners were awake and stoking their fire.

From up here, facing east, she could see a vast array of rooftops and a few streets. The city rose quite steeply to the south. Row after row of buildings stretched up the rise before disappearing over the other side. The north seemed just rooftops and chimneys. A break in the northeast rooves, filled by the stick branches of treetops, suggested an area of vegetation, but whether practical or for some rich person's private viewing, she could not tell.

As the sun lightened the dreary grey sky, the street started to come alive. Lights flickered on, smoke thickened within chimneys, and blinds and curtains retracted. People bustled from their doorways, some with empty bags, others carrying loads. Some turned metal-plate signs around that hung from their front doors; possibly shops indicating they were open.

Emme scowled as the cry of "Falling" echoed all too often, followed by the unwholesome removal of refuse. *Barbarians, all of them*. For all their fancy buildings and clothes, they had a lot to learn about health.

Before long, a troop of soldiers in blue pinafores exited a nearby building through a timber door that had flat wrought-iron fixtures. Emme wondered if the troop had spent the night

drinking like the village warriors did, or if the building was a communal lodging. The last in the group closed the timber door, then jogged down the stairs to the snow. A second band strolled from somewhere down the street. Their casual disorderly gait did not deceive Emme; the many eyes were alert and ready for duty.

From her elevated position, the large feathered hats looked ridiculously impractical. When the first group passed directly beneath her, the hats almost obscured their entire body, so that it seemed six blue hats went by. She wanted to laugh out loud, but knew it would be folly.

Emme listened for mention of her, but the troop said nothing as it passed. It seemed more concerned with making its way somewhere.

The second troop progressed slowly. It knocked and conversed at many doors. At some, people produced and exchanged papers; at others, people answered questions. What questions, Emme could not tell until the troop came closer. The troop did not ask about Emme; they assessed the city's daily concerns and the honesty of its citizens. Still, she would not relax until she was sure.

Soon merchants with open cartloads of goods, pulled by sturdy horses, moved down the street. Briefly Emme conceded that the prince had at least not lied about horses tamed for labour, then pushed the dangerous memory from her mind.

One merchant delivered bottles of milk to most doorsteps. Another called out, "Timber. Buy some more timber. Good dry timber." A third steered a cartload of frozen carcasses around a side street, then pulled up at someone's front door. Before the wagoner even dismounted, another man, thickly built, opened

the door from the inside. A mound of snow, caught by the lintel, splattered at his feet. He glanced up, uttered something Emme could easily guess at from his dark expression, then stepped down snow-covered stairs to the newcomer. The first alighted, and the two spoke briefly. Soon the two dragged the carcasses off the wagon, slung them over strong shoulders and offloaded them somewhere inside the building. When the entire load had been relocated beyond the door's shadows, coins changed hands, then the wagoner went on his way. The remaining burly man stared down the street briefly as though expecting someone, then went inside and closed the door.

Moments later, two women wearing bonnets and full russet dresses, turned up at the man's doorstep and entered. A short time after, they bustled out with brown paper parcels tucked under their arms. They hastened into the house next door. A few minutes later they exited with more string-tied packages. Chatting all the while, they visited the building beneath Emme. Emme caught a drift of fresh oven pastries and suspected she sat above a baked-goods house of sorts.

Before long, the whole street thrived with activity. More carts rolled deep furrows through the snow or navigated the slushy dirty edges of the street. Some stopped at houses to unload goods; others continued to distant destinations. People scurried in and out of houses, their parcels growing more numerous with each stop.

For a few hours Emme watched, then a group of children appeared in padded jackets and earmuffs, carrying grubby satchels on their shoulders. They threw snowballs at each other, before a gloomy-faced adult yelled at them to move on. They scurried away like scolded dogs and darted into a building up

the street. Soon more children carrying small sacks appeared from nearby houses and streets and entered the same building. Emme wondered what they would be doing in there. An elderly female appeared in the doorway and waggled a bell. The crisp ringing seemed to attract children from all over who ran as though risking a beating if they did not. They jostled for space in a congestion that squeezed through the doorway, then the elderly woman shut the door.

Curious, Emme decided to investigate that one later.

A group of redcoat guards appeared. Emme stiffened. The prince's guards. They rapped on doors and asked pointed questions of residents that had some shrugging and others waving fingers down the street. A second unit of redcoats advanced down the road. Eventually the two met in the middle close to Emme's post.

"Found out anything?" one of the left redcoats asked. He caressed a pointed chin beard that did not distinguish him from the others.

"Nothing. The prince said she was around here somewhere though. He had a lead this morning."

"Someone is bound to have seen her. She's hard to miss."

"You would think so. Well, we'd best keep looking, then, before the trail runs cold."

Feathers bobbed as the two men politely inclined heads to each other, then the troops passed, rapiers swinging by their sides and pompous knee-high boots soundless in the snow.

Damn it! Surely the prince had realised his error by now. Maybe she should go to him, make him see that she was a nobody of a nothing lineage, from a forgotten forest in a country that according to Kye, wasn't even charted yet.

Curiosity satisfied, she stood up, clambered across the rooftop to peer over the other side. Nothing interesting; just more of the same thing.

“Hey!” A voice startled Emme. “This is *my* territory. What are you doing here?”

Emme spun to a black-clothed kid whose hand clutched the pole of a massive wire brush. Blue eyes peered out from his sooty face – a stark contrast.

“That your ladder?” he asked sharply. “This is my street. Go get your own.”

“Go get my own? To do what?” Emme remained unsure if the kid posed any threat. The sturdy, long-poled brush could easily push her off the rooftop, but soft fresh snow might catch her – if carts and feet hadn’t already compacted it to ice.

“*I’m* doing these chimneys here. You can go and get your own customers.”

Emme scowled at him. “Do I look like a damned chimneysweep?”

“You don’t look like you’re out for a weekend picnic. Now, is that your ladder back there? ‘Cause you can just go and remove it.”

“No, it’s not my ladder. I saw it and chose to use it. You can have it, for all I care.” She waved her hand as if shoos the boy back to the ladder.

The boy’s sternness dissolved instantly to mild curiosity. “So what are you doing up here?”

“Looking around. Is that a crime?” Emme addressed the boy with a cold gaze.

“Looking around for what?” Something lit in the boy’s

face. "Almighty save me. You're that woman they're all looking for. You exactly match her description."

Emme tensed. Eyes darted for the nearest escape route. The boy still blocked the path to the ladder. "No one is looking for me. I don't know what you're talking about."

The boy half-jumped, half-jiggled. "I found you. I found you. They're offering ten gold for any news about you. That's five years of my wages." He turned, sped to the gutter of the roof, hollered over the edge. "Guards, she's up here. The wild woman - she's up here."

"Wild woman? I'll give you wild woman, you little brat." At the nearest crossroads, a group of red-tunic guards turned, came running back. "Damn you, you little bastard." Emme whirled away from the boy, fled along the rooftop. The boy lowered his large brush, swept it horizontally. It collided with her feet, dislodged them from the roof. She slapped onto her chest. White snow mashed against her lips. She felt a shock of pressure on bruises and her damaged ribcage, then her vision fractured as roof and sky blurred to one. She felt snow on her shoulder, then her back, then her other shoulder. She was tumbling. A moment when her stomach pushed up into her throat and air left her lungs, then her back slammed down onto the compacted snow of the street below.

"Down there," the boy cried out. "She's down there. And I want my money. I'm coming down."

Several people began to cluster around her, peer down at her as though inspecting a dead animal.

"You all right, miss?" the only kindly face amongst them said. The elderly man knelt beside her.

"Yes - fine." Emme sat up swiftly. Her head spun momentarily, and she gasped again for air. If she didn't have so many, many bruises and a healing ribcage, that fall would not have been nearly so difficult to recover from.

"She's hurt," a woman said. "She's got bruises on her."

"What a revolting outfit," a wealthy, snooty, pointy-nosed woman responded. "Who is she? A troubadour?"

"One of bad-taste if she is," her equally snobbish companion responded.

Emme stood just as the redcoats raced around the corner, their feathers trailing back in the icy breeze that howled down the corridor of houses. She pushed roughly through the crowd gathered at her expense, and fled down the street.

"Stop her," she heard someone yell.

"Hey, that's the girl worth ten gold," someone else yelled.

The crowd rose to a greedy frenzy and hurtled after Emme in the street. More people joined in the chase that swelled to over twenty.

Grateful that the same snow that hindered her hindered them, Emme's speed seemed her only advantage in this city of enemies.

A group of large, strong men appeared as if from nowhere up ahead. Shoulder almost to shoulder, they formed a solid barricade across the street, their eyes sharply trained on her. Damn it. She would be trapped. She stopped, looked about quickly and saw her only chance - a thin side alley leading to the city's higher levels.

She fled down the rank print-scuffed alley. Without warning, an arm snaked out from what seemed the very wall itself, yanked her backwards through a secret door edged

with ragged stone as if random stones had parted to make an opening. The wall-door swung shut with a hollow boom leaving total blackness. Emme turned to face her attacker but could see nothing. She swung fists, but someone faster, someone with strength, caught each blow, then snapped her around, away from him, grasped her from behind to thwart her desperate retaliations. His unyielding arms enclosed her, compressed her own arms at her sides, impeding contact with her dagger. Emme lurched back to force him off her. Her assailant off-balanced and, still joined, the two fell backwards to their bottoms. His tight body locked in a sit to prevent momentum smacking them back to the hard floor. Speedily the aggressor adjusted position, and she found herself tangled up in a prison of her own arms and legs held down by her assailant's arms and legs. She yelled curses, but a hand clamped over her mouth. "Be quiet or they'll find you," a stern, quiet voice said in her ear.

She knew the male voice, but who? She lay still, every joint locked ready to strike out. For long minutes they sat there, the heat from her assailant pressing through to her chilled back, her mouth turning hot and moist from the hand clamped over it. She could feel the assailant's calm breathing, feel his hot breath on her hair, and knew that her own erratic breaths outnumbered his.

She heard the frenzy of the crowds. Above the excited babble of her pursuers, she heard, "This way. She turned down this alley."

"That gold is mine," a young voice exclaimed loudly. That damned chimneysweep kid.

The noise died away down the alley, then a voice said in her ear, "I'm going to release you and light a candle. Don't kick out or yell."

With the hand still over her mouth, Emme could only nod. Slowly the assailant unwound his legs and arms from her. She stood swiftly and spun around ready for action.

The shadow slowly rose, felt in his pocket for something, then struck a flintbox to a fat candle on the wall. Instant light defined a tiny cold stone room with no markings, no furniture, just a single candle on its flat iron candleholder and a large stack of candles on the floor beneath it - like logs for a fire. She glared venomously at the face of her attacker, then softened.

“For goodness sake, Kye,” she said exhaling. “Why didn’t you just say it was you? And where did you come from?”

“I was coming back from my visit to my contacts,” Kye said. “I saw you fall off the rooftop and knew what was happening, so I organised those men to barricade the street to force you down this alleyway.” He looked around at the walls. “We have lots of these secret rooms in the city for moments like these.”

“Why didn’t you just say your name and I wouldn’t have swung at you?”

“I wasn’t sure if you thought I was the enemy or not. I can imagine you don’t know who to trust right now.”

Emme felt a small stab at the truth in his words. Who to trust? Probably not a single soul in the city - not even Kye. When he found out who the prince thought she might be, he might turn her in himself.

Kye sat down onto the stone floor, rested against a wall. His easy mannerism suggested she was safe, but it could have been a ploy. Did he know about her? What would be his next move if he did?

"Now, what were you doing out in the city? I gave strict instructions to Dusty to keep you out of sight until I could find out what was going on."

"Dusty probably doesn't know I'm out here. Well, he does now, but I went out before everyone got up."

Kye's brow rose fractionally. "Were you leaving?"

"No, I just wanted to look around." Emme slumped down ungracefully against the opposite wall.

"Emme, you strike me as someone intelligent. Surely you could see that was an unwise thing to do."

Emme glared at him. "It was better than -" She stopped. Admitting weakness was unnecessary.

"Than the darkness?"

Emme shot up straight. "I'm not afraid of darkness."

"No, not afraid; but the darkness is hard to get used to at first. We all went through it. Even burly Halder, and he's probably the bravest man I know - *and* he lives upstairs."

Emme relaxed back against the wall. As long as he didn't think her weak because she was a woman, she could probably admit it. "I just needed to see light, real light."

Kye nodded but said nothing.

"So what now? Should we go back?"

"No. It's too dangerous. You're very obvious out there - even if you had my cloak on. We'll have to wait until nightfall, and then go back."

"Nightfall?" Tension tautened her body again. "You want me to wait in this tiny room until nightfall?"

"Or we could go out there and find out what the prince wants with you and make someone ten gold pieces richer. That's the alternative." Despite the sharp words, his

tone remained gentle, his eyes soft as they watched Emme carefully.

Emme sagged. "So you didn't find out anything?"

"No - no one has a clue as to who you are or what the prince could possibly want with you. Or for that matter, why the Ashrones are after you." Emme's eyes narrowed. It was difficult to tell if he lied; his face remained calm, confident. Would he tell her if he knew? Maybe it advantaged him to keep it from her. "Although one did offer a rather unsettling suggestion."

"Which was?"

"To go and ask the Black Bands. Whenever there is something going on in this city and with the prince, the Black Bands usually know about it."

"So let's go and ask them."

"It's not that easy."

"Why not?"

"If I send any one of us to the Black Bands for information, my street kids will end up dead or followed - and either way, we won't know any more than we do now. The only way to get information from them is to find one of them, capture them, and force them to talk."

"Then let's do that."

"It's very rare to go up against a Black Band and come away alive and with information. Finding them is difficult, subduing them is even harder, and getting them to talk can sometimes be nearly impossible."

"But worth the risk, surely."

"I'm still trying to decide that."

"What - don't you want me to know why I'm here or why my whole world has been turned upside down? Maybe

you know about me and don't want me to know what you know."

Kye seemed totally unruffled by her tone. He watched her with steady, calm eyes. "Maybe - maybe not. Sooner or later, Emme, you're going to have to pick who you want to trust. You won't last if you're alone in this city. Now - I have shared my home with you - a home that most don't see until after a lot of investigation on our behalf. I have shown you a world I have spent a lifetime building. If I expose you, you could expose me. I would say we have a mutual basis for trust, even though it is a forced basis."

Emme considered his words for some time.

"Do we have a partnership, Emme?"

She eventually nodded.

"Good."

Silence replaced words briefly, making the walls seem suddenly heavier, closer than before. Emme began to fidget restlessly and peer furtively at the walls.

"So tell me about your homeland," Kye said, and she suspected he attempted to distract her from the oppressive space.

"Well, I live in a forest." She stopped and watched the walls. Her heart began to beat faster in her chest. Her hands grew clammy.

"Describe it to me," Kye said, his eyes, his face, a steady presence in the room. "I want to know everything."

Emme began - distracted at first - then memories flooded and she conversed eagerly to a perfect listener. She described her favourite lofty, broad trees; painted word-images of the generous river that coursed by their village - a river she often

swam in on idle summer days. Her mind raced to the myriad of tracks she would follow; to the dark, dry caves; cliff edges where she could see the whole world – *her* world.

She told him of her large village with its neat tree and ground cottages, and her passionate dislike for the people in it.

“And then there’s the chieftain and his family.” Emme expressed mild disdain as she explained about the chieftain, the nearby villages, and the fights that sometimes took place between them. “I’m in charge of tracking the forest, reporting suspicious behaviour and reporting when other villagers are out of their territory and hunting on my village’s land. Every village owns lands; mine owns the largest.”

At that, Kye offered up exhaustive questions, seemed to want to know everything he frequently labelled ‘politics’, then settled back to let Emme continue.

She described the chill of winter that did not seem to bite as deeply as Kye’s winters. Her furs, the thick round fur hat, tough skin pants with fur turned inside, and fur-lined boots, all kept her so beautifully warm in winter. Even the coldest days, going into the forest remained a pleasure. She pictured out-loud the winter-bare trees, the white gleam of snow on the tracks, the thick ice that set across the river and sometimes in the well if the villagers were not diligent with pouring boiling water down it. Children made flat shoes out of polished timber cuts and slid playfully across the river’s ice. Emme never joined in, although she regularly investigated the ice’s scratches, for in winter, crossing the solid river was an easy way for other villages to breach territory rules. And in winter, other villages grew hungry enough to take the risk.

The village relied almost solely on meat, salted and smoked in the smokehouse, to survive the winter. Occasionally they found nuts, and ground down an abundant sweet bark to mix with goat's milk and honey. Emme recalled one winter when the smokehouse supplies dwindled dangerously, and the chieftain had ordered two meals to be replaced with the sweet drink. They had all grown thin and irritable that winter, and Emme had never really put weight back on after that.

Kye listened with an interest that initially produced scepticism. At first Emme supposed he had nothing better to do than listen, but his questions were numerous and detailed, and she realised he took in every word she said.

"Your home sounds beautiful," he said when the descriptions slowed.

"I don't know how you can live in this place. Just grey sandstone and dirt and filth. And you people throw your refuse out the window. That's just disgusting."

"The poorer people do - those who can't afford to build latrines and connect to the main sewerage system. We get charged a hefty tax for the privilege. A lot of people illegally dig their own connections to the city pipes like we did, but it requires skill and knowing who to ask to supply you with black market city maps."

"The Black Bands?"

"Connected to them, but not direct members. Only selected people in the city get to talk directly with the Black Bands. It keeps them anonymous."

"And the Black Bands make money from the sales, I suppose."

Kye nodded once. "You can pay a lot of money for those maps, but it's less than a lifetime of taxes."

"Is this the poorest end of town?"

"No - this is one of the main business districts. You always get a mix of poor and moderately wealthy. The really wealthy live in their own pockets of town, and the terribly poor, the ones not living on the streets, live on the outskirts of those pockets and beg for scraps."

"And the prince does nothing to help them?"

"No - why should he?"

"Because loyal happy subjects will serve him in times of war with other villages - cities. Even our arrogant chieftain knows that." Emme's brown eyes flickered darkly. "And you agree with him, do you?"

Kye regarded her coolly. "I strike you as someone who would agree with the prince, do I?"

Emme glanced at her hands. Heat rose to her cheeks. "No. It just sounded like you were saying . . . Well, you know what I mean."

"I was merely pointing out that when our hard-hearted prince has no personal gain to help anyone, he doesn't. The prince has his King's Guard to help him in times of war, and the City Guard defend the city during sieges. The people know they depend heavily on the prince for protection during those times, so no matter how much poverty they're living in, they'll support their prince during times of war."

"Do you fight much with other cities?"

"Not for over a hundred years. All trouble is internal now, but we won't talk about that here. We'll wait until we're underground."

“That gift the prince has?”

“Partly, and partly because you never know who is listening to us.”

“Even in here?”

“Walls are never as safe as you think in this city. You will need to remember that.”

“So how did you end up with the place you’ve got? Did you build it yourself?”

“Ours is not the only one, and they’ve always existed. They were built for times of war to hide or shelter people but were long forgotten. When I was a young man, I was fortunate to come across someone who knew about them. She told me about them before she died – it was a secret handed down to her by her family over many generations.” Kye seemed lost in thought for a moment before he continued. “It took me six months of scouting to realise they were well and truly abandoned.”

“Don’t the people in the house above you hear you all making noises and wonder?”

“The houses down the street were abandoned shops and warehouses, destroyed by a fire that swept through the whole area. When I met Halder – Did you meet Halder?”

Emme nodded.

“Halder agreed to help me rebuild parts of the street, and he lives in the house above us. Now anyone living down that street is loyal to us. Our two teachers – Illina and Ada – live in the building that guards over the alley you first came down. Our contacts down the street help with duties in the city and report Black Band activities to us.”

“Were they all Black Bands?”

“Some were, but not all of them.”

“Was Halder?”

“No – there’s a lot to Halder, but I probably shouldn’t go into it here.” Kye reached into his pocket and pulled out a cloth-covered parcel. He unwrapped the cloth to reveal a segment of half-eaten cheese. “Would you like some cheese?”

“I never say no to food.” She leant over and took a portion of the cheese, swallowed it hungrily. “How much longer do we have to wait?”

Kye smiled faintly. “We’ve only made lunchtime.”

Swiftly the walls became oppressive again. “Can’t I just go outside, just for a few minutes?” She pleaded with her eyes.

Kye pondered an idea for a moment. “I could probably find a way to get you back onto the rooftops. We could sit up there for a while. But it *is* cold out there.”

Emme leapt to her feet. “Let’s go.”

Kye’s gentle smile widened fractionally. Double smile lines appeared around his closed lips. He watched Emme until his stares caused her to fidget. At last he said, “Will you be all right if I go outside and scout for a while to work out the best place to sit? We’ll need to pick a roof where chimneysweeps have finished their job.”

Emme sighed. “Well, if it means getting out of here, then do what you must.”

Kye nodded, stood and placed his ear to the cold wall bordering the alley. He listened carefully for any echo of disturbance. He turned an eye to a crooked crack in the wall. Kye seemed in no hurry to open the door, and many seconds passed before he finally pushed the false stone, activating the switch. The door parted partially at the grouting between the stones, leaving an edge like an unfinished brick wall. Kye pulled the door the rest of the way.

“Please don’t go anywhere,” he entreated before he disappeared behind the door.

Long minutes elapsed. Emme paced restlessly, felt as if the air diminished with every breath until she would suffocate in here. Her palms grew sweaty, and her legs trembled. She had never felt like this before – never known this curious, invasive fear of confinement.

The walls became torturers waiting to close in on her and pin her down to inflict hideous cruelties. She almost thought she could see eyes, faces, leering at her from the irregularities of the grey stone.

“I have *got* to find a way out of here,” she said to the silence. The thick door behind her swung open. She turned to the door, lips parted to express gratitude that at last Kye had returned, but the words fell unspoken. Apprehension shot the hairs up on her arms. “Kye?” she whispered to the empty doorway. “Kye – are you there?”

No reply came. Emme crept to the doorway, anticipating an impending ambush. She propelled an arm beyond the doorway and snapped it down in a chopping motion, hoping it might stir the assailants beyond the door. But no one moved.

“If this is some kind of joke, Kye, then it’s not funny.”

No response, just the cold quiet of the alley beyond.

Warily she peered around the jagged edge of the frame, but the alleyway and the street on either side stretched empty, devoid of even shoppers scurrying away to the next store. Frowning deeply, she stepped from the doorway to the snow just as Kye rounded the corner from the street to her right. He saw and stopped, eyes staring, then sprang into movement. He bolted down the alley and thrust Emme back into the room. He

forced the thick stone door closed. Crisp air propelled from the door movement to the tiny space. The candle fluttered on its base, causing the long shadows in the room to jump until the flame steadied.

“What were you doing?” Despite the demanding tone, his eyes held no anger or malice.

“What do you mean, what was I doing? You’re the one who opened the door, then ran off.”

“I just got back to the alleyway then, to find you standing in it.”

Emme’s jaw and fists tightened. “Well, I was minding my own business when the damned door swung open on its own.”

“That’s impossible,” Kye said genuinely, a faint frown on his face.

“Is it?” Emme’s eyes seethed. “Well it happened, so it’s not as impossible as you think.”

“Did you see anyone run past?”

“No - no one. I heard no one, I saw no one. It just opened.”

Kye looked beyond her to the back wall, thought carefully. “I think maybe we’ll have to stop using this area for a while until we can find out what happened. It might be a faulty mechanism.”

“It’s going to give things away a little if it swings open again of its own accord and shows everyone these spaces exist.” Remnants of anger still tainted Emme’s tone.

“Yes. I’ll have to send people to keep checking it for a while.” His eyes returned to Emme’s face. “Are you ready to go?”

“What sort of a question is that?”

He smiled at her, yet to himself. "Then let's go." Kye took off his thick russet cloak and handed it to Emme. "You'll need to wear this or you'll definitely be spotted."

Emme raised a hand to take it, hesitated. "But you'll get cold."

"My jumper is thicker than yours, so I'll be fine. This city is always cold, even in summer."

Emme wrapped herself in the cloak and flicked up the hood. They waited at the door, one still and calm, the other fidgety, until Kye indicated it was safe to go. Emme let out a long, unambiguous sigh as they exited the building.

Kye took her along ancient, seldom-used lanes that twined up and up to the city's summits. They hurried up a wide pathway of stairs that ascended the breadth of terraced houses either side of it. At the top, they encountered a road that followed the back of those terraces, making the three-storey apartments, built against rock, appear single storey. After turning left, they stopped at the very last terrace, faced the back wall.

"Most chimneysweeps in this area get onto other rooves via this lane," Kye explained. "You'll need to climb those bricks there, but I don't think that will be a problem considering you got onto that other roof earlier today."

Kye went first, up the jutting stones. He pulled himself easily over a solid stone railing rimming the roof, landed lightly onto the flat rooftop beyond. He turned to help Emme.

"I can do it," Emme said stubbornly. "I don't need help."

Kye retracted his hand and said nothing. Emme hauled herself ungracefully onto the thick fence edge and leapt off onto a level roof.

"Why the half wall around the roof?" she asked Kye.

“It makes this useable space; although the weather tends to ruin that idea.”

Emme followed Kye to the opposite walled edge of the building. They stood near two chimneys that exuded clouds of light smoke. Kye leant wool-wrapped elbows against the snow-coated wall and peered over the edge.

“How do you know the chimneysweeps won’t be back?” Emme asked.

“If they were still working in this district, they would have climbed on this roof at dawn to get to other areas. But as you can see, the snow is smooth.”

Emme rested her waist onto the wall and gazed out. She could see so much of the city from this place. Rows upon rows of white-dusted rooftops stretched further than she imagined she would see from up here. Smoke, pouring from countless chimneys, muddied the air.

Kye pointed to the distance. “Can you make out the city wall?”

Emme nodded. The bulky, towering wall, soaring above the three-storey houses, wrapped around the city’s distant edges. Beyond that, she could just make out mountains shrouded in mist.

“And behind us,” Kye turned and Emme followed, “is the castle.”

Emme’s brows rose, an indication the mighty fortress on its high rock ledge impressed her. The highest structure in the city, it stood higher even, than the great protective wall enclosing the city. Behind it, the city still stretched out, vast and overwhelming until it met the city wall. Beyond the wall, more mountains materialised through the smoky haze, these closer

and clearly snow-covered. The sky seemed vast and grey from up here, endless in its dreariness.

To her left, a line of bare-branch trees on the other side of the street, partially overlaid the view of the city where it rose to the castle road – the lavish street she had first fled down.

“Would you like me to point some things out for you?” Kye asked.

“Of course.”

Whilst they faced the castle, Kye pointed. “That road leading from the castle is where all the prince’s officials, and the major players in this town live. The closer you are to the castle, the more important and wealthy you are.”

“I see,” Emme said. “I remember that road very well.”

Kye pointed to the furthest edge of the castle. “That natural rock wall at the back of the castle is one fourth of a mile high. Do you know what a mile is?”

“Of course,” she said haughtily, but she didn’t. Well, she did now. It was as long as four of that vast, sheer rock wall at the castle’s rear.

“At the base of that rock wall are the worst of the city’s slums. Apparently in times of old, kings used to throw down lavish food wastes over that wall, and the poor people used to pick up anything worthwhile and take it home. The slums grew from that.” Kye’s outstretched pointer finger moved left to the huge garden area beside the wealthier castle road. “That’s one of the city’s agricultural areas and parks. It belongs to the prince, and his servants tend it for him. In summer, the wealthy get out there and have their picnics and their social gatherings, and the prince sometimes wanders down there to get out of his castle grounds. The prince has no shortage of castle and city

gardens he's claimed for himself." A hint of bitterness edged Kye's voice. "Guards swarm those parks at night to stop thieves from helping themselves to the vegetables."

"How does the rest of the city get vegetables?"

"Merchants come to the city every day from the farmlands beyond the wall, or from other states. There are three main entrances." Still facing the castle, Kye pointed straight ahead, to his right, and behind him to the distant mountains. "The one behind us, or south, is the closest gate to us. They deliver the food to the shops and the shops add their profits and sell their goods. Only firewood vendors are allowed to sell directly to people, as no one wants to own a firewood shop. The poorer people usually go out and get their own firewood, sleep out in the farmlands, then return the next day."

"Who forces merchants to sell to shops?"

"The prince's law does. It's too hard to control food and supply taxes when you don't know how much vendors are selling. When the food arrives in shops, the guards regularly check shop inventory, and the shop sellers are required to pay a tax on all the money they make. I've heard a few reports of people paying guards to look the other way on some earnings, but I don't know how true that is."

"We don't pay taxes back home," Emme said. "We don't have money or shops, although the village next to us does. We all do our share, and if we do, we get to eat the food the hunters bring in. If we don't, we get smaller shares, or none. We can barter goods and services with those who have chickens and vegetables and useful things if we don't grow our own."

"Sounds fair. Although, it would be a little tricky to do in a city this size." Kye turned to face south. Emme followed and

looked out to where his gaze fell. "That," he pointed to a large spired building, "is the main cathedral."

"The main what?"

"Cathedral, church."

Emme looked at him blankly.

"Place of worship."

"Oh right. That Almighty you all keep mentioning."

"That's right. What do you call Him?"

"Creator."

"And you don't worship anywhere?"

"We worship everywhere and anywhere. All of life belongs to the Creator, not just a building like - what did you call it?"

"Cathedral. Or church. So you don't worship together?"

"At festivals we do. Or *they* do."

"They?"

Emme waved the question away. "Never mind. What were you saying about the cathedral?"

"Ah yes. The ministers - you probably don't know what a minister is. They're the ones who teach people the ways of the Almighty. The ministers answer to the Ashrones, and the Ashrones are supposed to be the guardians of religion." Again a hint of bitterness edged his voice. "But not many go to church nowadays since . . ." He glanced at Emme briefly. "Ask me to tell you about it later."

Curiosity would demand it from him, Emme was sure.

He spoke on, his finger all the while pointing. "There are many lesser churches over the city. You can see their spires jutting up above the rooftops. And you'll probably see many breaks in the city - more park areas. Some are for people to just go and see nature for a while; others are more of the prince's agricultural blocks.

“This area just below us is one of the many commercial areas in the city. Most people run their business from their house. This area is the food centre. Beyond that, you start to get the tailors, the blacksmiths, the tallow makers, builders, bankers, taverns and inns, and other such businesses. There are many divisions within the city, each with a different name, like a separate town or village within the same city. Each division has its commercial area, its own wealthy, its own poor, its own barracks, and its own boundaries.”

“Barracks?”

“Soldiers’ quarters – housing for guards. We’re in the Royal Centre – that’s its name. Most goods are not as cheap in these parts because the very wealthy live here and merchants charge a lot of money because they know most people can afford to pay it.” He lowered his arm to his side and leant again on the edge of the balcony.

“You said something about an inn-stay. What did you mean by that? What’s an inn?”

“Even from here, the middle of the city, it’s a long trip to the city gates and beyond – mostly because of all the winding roads and limited routes to the gates. If you want to make it to the city gates and back again, you either travel all day, or you do half a day, stay somewhere overnight and travel again the next day. There are places set up that offer beds and a bath for a fee. Then you can get a meal and a drink in a tavern. Many merchants rest at inns before moving on to other areas of the city or back out again. And often farmers have to come to the city for business and stay over.” Still leaning over the edge of the balcony, he looked at Emme. “I take it you don’t get very many visitors to your village?”

“We got one once when I was about ten. He came to the village and said that he wanted to rest for a while. The chieftain had him over at his house. He told us about the prince and the castles and some of the things that were going on.” She realised he had taught her much of what she understood, but had never seen, about this kind of place – this city. “He said he wanted to live in our village, to build a home. And everyone thought that was great because he was new and exciting and had so much information about the outside world. But then he got to know me and was actually nice to me, and the villagers didn’t like that at all. So they threatened to stone him if he stayed in the village, and he had to go. He was the only visitor we had until those Ashrone men and Jai – the prince arrived.”

Kye watched her carefully, his blue-green eyes focused on every expression. “Why would your villagers not want him to be nice to you?”

“They don’t like me. They never have.” Her tone was casual, unaffected.

“Why?”

“They just don’t. You got any more of that cheese?”

Kye continued to watch Emme for a moment, but she held her hand out expectantly, determined not to answer his question. “I only have a little bit,” he said, and handed her the remaining slither.

Emme took the cheese and turned away, studied the city. Kye seemed to respect her, to acknowledge her as a valuable human being. She was not going to spoil it with her past.

“How old are you, Emme?”

“Twenty-two winters; but sometimes I feel so much older than my years.” From the corner of her eye, she could see him

study her expression. She misread his face and said, "Yes, don't worry; I know I'm a bit immature sometimes. It's just that sometimes I feel old, deep in my bones, like I've lived another few years inside my mother's womb that haven't counted to my age."

He leant back over the brick railing and stared at the city. "Strange," he said to the scenery.

"No, not strange. Rather stupid really." She faced him. "And how old are you?"

"Twenty-eight. And yes - I guess sometimes I feel older than that; like I have a lifetime of weight on my shoulders."

"At least *you* act older than your age." She turned from him to the cityscape.

The two stared silently out over the city, the chill wind blowing their hair and making their faces cold. Together they watched all day whilst people roamed the streets, cartloads came and went. Then the last of the people hurried inside and locked doors as the darkness fell very early in the evening.



A hooded figure walked down the spacious stone corridor. Early evening light, the last of the endless dismal grey, drifted through glass-enclosed, arched windows to his right before dissolving into the unlit corridor.

"My apologies," a startled servant said as the cloaked figure floated by. The servant's flintbox spark roused the nearest wall candle. "I'm late to light the candles this evening."

The hooded figure did not reply but continued down the corridor, his cloak billowing like a grey sail behind him.

The man stopped at a heavy, timeworn door and rapped on it with a deliberate and complicated pattern.

"Come in," a muffled voice called behind the door.

The man entered, briefly stopped by the brightness of the room, then spotted his target – Jaimis – sitting in one of the prince's plush reading chairs with a thick, leather-bound book in hand. The newcomer closed the door, sealed the two of them in the room.

"You're late," Jaimis said. "I sent for you yesterday."

"I was on business – you know that." The tall, straight-backed man drew off his hood with gloved hands to reveal close grey hair, a neat grey beard, and slender, grey brows – a stark contrast to his sharp, dark-brown eyes and lean, harsh nose.

"Did you hear I found her?" Jaimis asked, keen green eyes watching the man expectantly.

"Right before I heard you lost her."

Jaimis shrugged. "Not for long, now that you're here."

"Do you think that one of my skills?" the man demanded sternly. "If I could find one woman in a city of hundreds of thousands, then I should be able to find our street rats who keep eluding us."

"It's only because you refuse to use your power."

"Yes, and you know very well why. And now without my power, the girl might get away."

"Relax. She won't get far. She's entirely too obvious."

"And what fool of a person put it into your head to go and find her ahead of time?"

"I thought now was the perfect time with you distracting the Ashrones on that futile expedition to the southern kingdoms."

“Well, we left behind just enough Ashrones who could try and stop you. Your use of the travel gate over and over gave them enough time to know that power was being used, and not by them, and to try and impede you. And now they know that there is a traitor amongst them.” The man pulled off his thick gloves to reveal a distinct tattoo on his right hand. He muttered to himself, “I should never have shown you how to use that travel gate.” He tossed the gloves on the royal bed and took long, elegant strides to the padded, red chair beside Jaimis. He tucked his cloak to his flesh and sat down, then smoothed the legs of his pants with meticulous care. “And what did you hope to do when you brought her here? You couldn’t do anything without me.”

A sly grin spread across Jaimis’ face. “I hardly think I’ll need your help with *that*.”

“Idiot,” the man snapped, and Jaimis’ smile abruptly faded. “There has to be witnesses, and there is a lot that needs to be done before you can use her. There is protocol. There always has been. Didn’t you listen to anything I said?”

“You did say a lot more than is normal for a man to take in,” Jaimis taunted.

“And now you’ve gone and alerted the Ashrones. And if we drag her in ahead of time, it gives the Ashrones more time to find a way to stop us. Not only that, but no one will be able to leave the premises without being watched. It will no longer be easy for me to come here and instruct you.”

“Then maybe it’s time you left them. You’ve avoided using your power for years to prevent them discovering the truth. Why not stand up and announce which side you are on. Your power is stronger than theirs. Be proud of it.”

The man stroked his grey beard. "Perhaps I might. After all, we're all looking for the girl now. There is no point in hiding our plans any longer. And we may need my power to stop the other Ashrones getting to her first."

"Good," Jaimis said. "Then it is settled. You can come and stay with me, and start to use your powers to the full. And you just might find a way to track down this girl before she dies out there on the streets."

"If I use my power to track her down, I will track her down just enough to make sure she *doesn't* die on the street. If she is safe, we will leave her there until the time is right. We must wait for a full moon – a visible full moon."

"Damn that for a joke." Jaimis slammed the book pages together. "That could be months in this cursed grey city."

"Yes, Jaimis, months." The man regarded Jaimis coldly. "Which is exactly why we must leave her where she is and have her think she is safe. She will not expect our attack and she may surface, making it all the more easy for us to go and pick her up when the time is right."

"So I should call off the guards and the Black Bands?"

"After I find her, yes. And retract that ridiculous price you have put on her head. Do you want the Ashrones to hear of her every whereabouts when the villagers cry out that they've seen her?"

Jaimis' face darkened. "You have to remember, old man, who is heir to the Kildes throne. Do not treat me as an idiot. I am well aware that the people have less love for the Ashrones than they do for me. And even if they did have love for the Ashrones, they have more love for gold. They would not let the Ashrones come in and take her, when they can turn her in

to me and receive a tidy sum. The Ashrones might hear of her whereabouts, but *I* own the soldiers who will ultimately capture her when the people find her and turn her in."

The newcomer picked a piece of fluff from his trousers. "I do see your point. But you do see mine, I hope: that pulling the price from her head and letting her relax a little is exactly what we want. You can instruct your Black Bands to make sure the Ashrones are well-watched and distracted from any attempts to find her - at *all* costs."

"Ruthless," Jaimis said with a sly grin. "I will concede to your plan. And who knows, we may just find a street rat or two in the process."

"Oh, we will find them; I have no doubt about that. When they catch wind that the Black Bands and soldiers are after a strange girl, they will be sure to try and find her for themselves and unwittingly reveal themselves to us."

Jaimis rubbed his hands together. "Very good. I will have all my desires at once. I will send word out to the city tonight." He reached up beside his chair and yanked a tassel. Somewhere in the castle, a bell rang. The grey-haired man replaced his hood to hide his face, tucked the hand tattoo within the cloak edge. Shortly after, a servant arrived. "Get me Captain Toussen." The servant nodded and disappeared into the dimly lit hallway.

The captain arrived, a bit of food still in his goatee from the dinner he was enjoying when the summons came. The captain bowed his feathered hat to the prince. As he straightened, his eyes fixed momentarily on the shadowed stranger. He scanned for possible danger, then turned to his prince. "You wanted to see me, Your Highness?"

"I want you to send word tonight to the King's Guard and the City Guard, and to the Black Bands." Jaimis quickly outlined the retraction of the monetary reward and a change in directives.

"Very well, Your Highness. I will send it out at once." The captain waited, hoped for more.

"You're dismissed," the prince said, and brief disappointment played on the captain's face. For two days now, the guards had been hoping for an explanation of the girl. But they would not get it; not until the entire plan had been carried out. The captain turned and left, shutting the solid door behind him.

The grey-haired man flicked back the hood with mild relief. "So, Jaimis, do your Black Bands know who she is?"

"No. And it would be highly foolish of me to tell them. I doubt they would serve me so avidly if they knew."

"I doubt they would believe you if you told them. People will have to see the results before they accept the truth." The two men regarded each other briefly, then the grey one continued. "Tell me about her. Tell me everything, and don't leave a single thing out. It may be important for when we have to break her."

Jaimis nodded once and began.



When total darkness shrouded the landscape, and with no signs of movement for some time, Emme and Kye, who had sat close to each other all afternoon to fight off the terrible chill, left the rooftop and headed back down the alley towards home.

"I really don't want to go back, you know," Emme whispered to Kye's back in the thin, dark passageway.

Without turning, he said, "Just think of a hot tea, hot bath, and a warm bed."

"Okay, so that all sounds rather good. But only if I can wake up outside in the morning."

Kye stepped beyond the thin passageway onto a connecting lane, then stopped, waited for Emme to catch up. "I always wake early. Maybe I could wake you and we can go outside and watch the dawn."

"You'd do that for me?" Emme asked before she realised the weakness that sentence carried.

Kye smiled in the quiet darkness. "Anything to stop you running off into the path of soldiers."

The two continued down the laneway whilst dark clouds swirled above them. Soon snow began to fall. Kye shivered, and Emme knew how cold he must be without his heavy woollen cloak. He refused to take it – had refused all afternoon. What kind of a man put a woman, put *anyone* else, before himself? She couldn't think of a single man in the village who would do that, not even for their wives and children. Emme had protested, saying she was no weak woman that needed a man's cloak; but he had told her it was to stop her drawing attention to him. He had made it up; she knew it. No one would see them on the rooftop. But the lie allowed her to save face, and she was silently grateful for it. Still, he puzzled her. There must have been some underlying sinister reason for him to be kind to her. No one was ever nice to her without some thought of return.

Maybe it was the deal they had struck – he didn't expose her, she didn't expose him. If he were nice to her, she would be less inclined to betray him. Maybe – but she doubted that would go as far as a cloak donation. It was entirely unnecessary.

Kye directed her back to the headquarters via a path she did not recognise. "We never take the same way twice consecutively," he whispered to her. His cold hand on her back guided her quickly to a thin laneway on their right. Several tabby cats sat licking themselves on rows of bins. The wind briefly swept the stench of garbage into her nostrils, then away down the alleyway after two of the less brave cats.

"Disgusting," Emme said. "Don't they know to bury their rubbish?"

"We pay to have our rubbish collected by special farmers," Kye explained quietly as they wandered past the large metal canisters. "Once a month the farmers take the rubbish to the farmlands and bury it in big holes. The poor –"

"I know, I know. Do it themselves."

A shadow flitted across the end of the open laneway. Kye stopped, his hand tight on Emme's arm, a warning to make no sound.

He leant close to Emme. "Wait here. I'm going to go and look."

"Not without me," Emme whispered.

Kye swiftly shook his head. "Two are more easily noticed than one. Wait here – please." He stole away before Emme could protest, his hand on his rapier hilt.

She watched as Kye dissolved to a silhouette in the darkness. Then the silhouette peered around the edge of the alleyway before disappearing beyond it.

Four men sprang from behind the large bins. The cans clattered and tumbled, spilling rubbish onto snow. Cats hissed and skittered away in fright. Emme yelled, bolted. She dashed down the alley after Kye, but a leg launched from the last bin.

Her feet snagged on the human log, and she smashed down into the bitter snow. Emme cried out, enraged, as a man dove on top of her and wrenched her arm up her back. She bucked and struggled. More hands, uncountable hands, pinned her to the snow. Her hood was ripped from her head and someone meshed taut fingers through her hair, yanked her hair backward to tilt her head. A gag was stretched around her mouth with pinching tightness. She heard a dagger whisk from a pouch – she knew that sound all too well. Then an echoing crack like a breaking bone in a cavern. Her head exploded. Darkness.