

The loud roar of cannons filled the air again and drowned out the sounds of the weather for a moment. Both ships had fired this time. Two of the shots landed harmlessly in the water behind them while another went sailing far overhead to their right. The last fared better, blowing through the rigging and snapping lines before burying itself into the mainmast with a large shower of splinters. Trey dropped the bundle he was carrying and threw his hands up to his face. Blood could be seen seeping through his fingers.

The Jongurian Mission

Greg Strandberg

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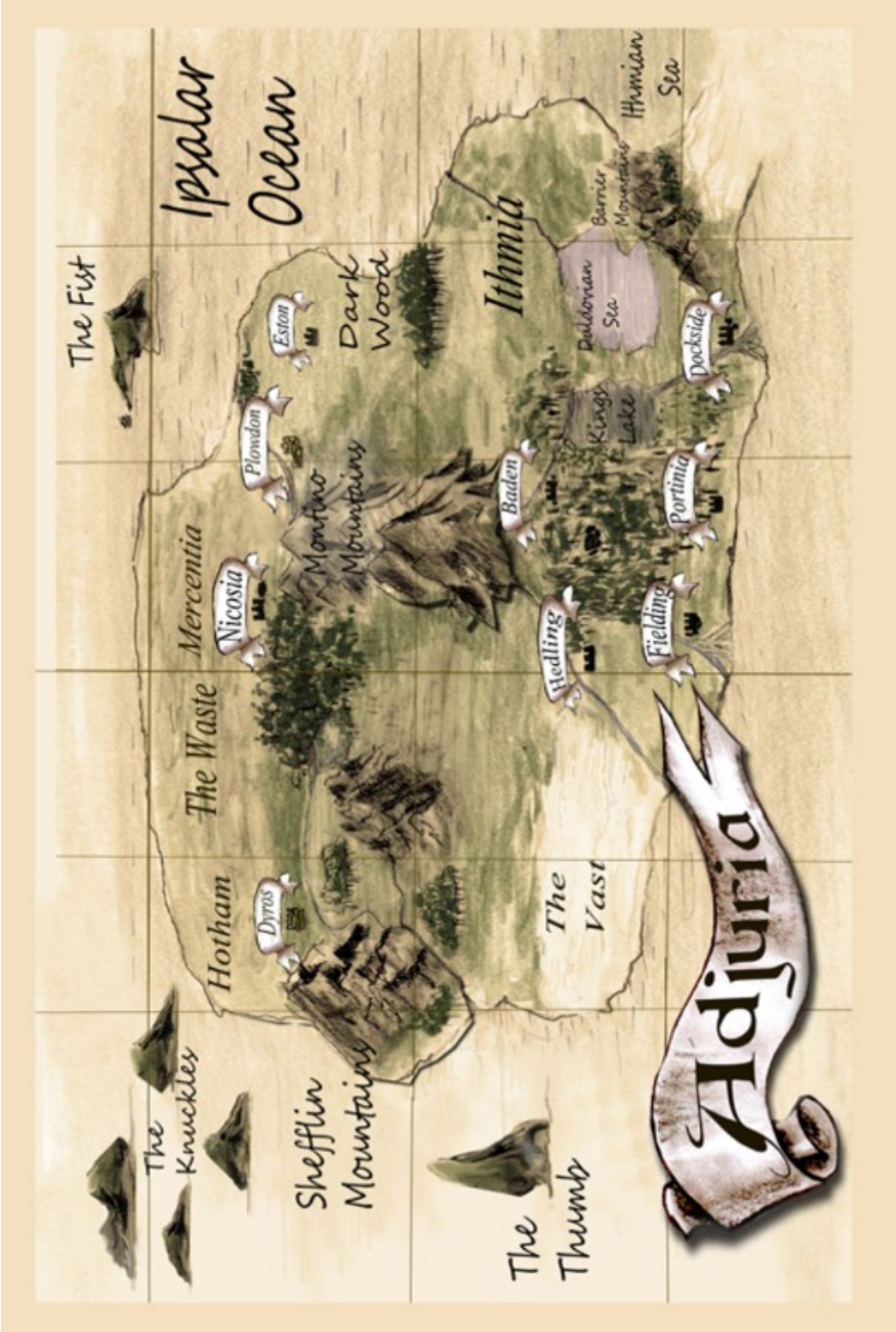
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Introduction

The wind and waves threatened to overturn the small boat for what seemed the hundredth time. Even in the dark black clouds could be seen overhead, their billowy forms swelling large and ominously. The nearly full moon was completely blocked out by their presence, and if it wasn't for the continuous lightning flashes the men in the boat wouldn't have been able to see at all. As it was, the lightning cast the island they were rowing to in an eerie silhouette, and with each new flash they could see that their efforts at the oars were pulling them closer to their goal.

Leisu Tsao sat on the prow of the boat and looked ahead. He didn't like traveling on water, but if his master bid him, he obliged willingly and without complaint. The voyage here had been anything but uneventful. What should have taken just a few days stretched into more than a week when this storm bore down on them two days into their journey. The seas were usually unmerciful this time of year, but to Leisu it seemed that this storm had a particular vengeance. Perhaps it knew of their objective and disagreed, he had pondered several days before while watching the dark clouds loom over the horizon and block out the sun. After all, if their goal succeeded the balance of nature would irrevocably be upset; their plan would embroil two continents of men, and men had a way of destroying everything around them when they were troubled.

"Pull," the man directly behind Leisu yelled to the four oarsmen in the boat.

Leisu smiled. Ko Qian was as dutiful as ever, even on this unwanted mission, and in such horrid weather.

"Pull, I said," Ko yelled again, louder this time.

It seemed to Leisu that the prodding of the men was working; they were getting closer to the shore. *What would they find there?* Leisu had been skeptical of his master's plan at first, doubting if the man they were looking for would even still be alive after this long. It had been more than five years now since he'd been exiled to this desolate island that had barely enough to survive on. While numerous species of plants somehow managed to thrive here, none were edible. Whatever animals called this place home were nothing more than small rodents. A man could live on those for some time, but five years? Leisu doubted that very much. No, when they were done searching the island, probably late on the morrow judging by how terrible the weather was, he expected all they would have found was a ragged skeleton with a few tattered remnants of clothing still covering the sun-bleached bones. While his master had no doubts that the man known as the 'False King' in the West was still alive and well and just waiting for an opportunity to get off this rock, Leisu wasn't so sure.

Grandon Fray had gambled everything during the final years of the East-West War that had embroiled Adjuria and Jonguria. Frustrated as much by the ten-year stalemate as the rest of his countrymen, and with no end to the war in sight, Grandon had decided to do something about it, whereas the other nobles merely sat back and waited for something to happen. First he had convinced his king that a grand offensive against the Jongurians was needed in the most unlikely of places: the Isthmus. It seemed farfetched at the time, and was laughable now, but Leisu had come to realize that it was necessary for the man's plan. When the offensive failed, as it was bound to do, he had done the unthinkable: he killed a king, or at least had the job done for him. Having removed the only obstacle that he saw for peace, Grandon led the rest of the Adjurian nobles in

forming a council to govern the country, much to the frustration and useless protests of the rightful young heir to Adjuria and his mother. From there he managed to negotiate an end to the war with Jonguria, setting the stage for a peace agreement. Peace came, rather too quickly Leisu thought, and the Adjurian forces began withdrew from Jonguria.

While Jonguria descended into chaos following the war, Adjuria was able to keep itself together. Grandon cemented his role as the leading noble on the royal council and then managed to have himself named king. He ruled for a few years, but his policies were disastrous and drove the country apart. *Who knows*, Leisu thought as he got closer to the island, *maybe that was all a part of his plan too.*

It wasn't long before some of the other provinces had their fill of Grandon Fray and decided that a boy for a king couldn't be any worse than this usurper. A brief Civil War broke out, Grandon's forces were defeated, and the rightful king was put back on the throne. For all of his troubles at ending the war and bringing peace to his country Grandon was exiled to the rock that would forevermore be called Desolatia Island.

Several more bolts of lightning lit up the night sky. The boat was close now, just a few minutes away from the shore. *Perhaps it'd be better if Grandon was dead*, Leisu thought to himself as the boat neared the rocky beach. The man seemed to bring turmoil to whatever he undertook, and there was more than enough of that in Jonguria at the moment. Did his master really think that more would allow him to increase his control? It wasn't the first time Leisu thought it was odd that his master, a man who would not tolerate failure, was seeking the aid of a man whose failure had divided a nation against itself and ended in his own downfall. But then Jonguria was already divided against itself, Leisu thought. There were those that supported the emperor, whose numbers

seemed to lessen everyday, and those that supported the rebels, whose numbers increased. His master was the leader of the rebels in the southwest, and if his current plans were carried out, he'd soon be the rebel leader of the entire country. Not for the first time since setting out did Leisu again wonder how Grandon Fray could possibly help bring that about.

A few large waves pushed the boat the last few feet forward and they could feel the wooden hull scrape against the rocky shore. The rowers jumped out and pushed the boat further up the beach to a more secure resting place, and then Ko and Leisu jumped out into the white surf. Leisu looked over at Ko and nodded.

“Get out the supplies and find a dry place to put up the tent,” Ko yelled.

Two of the oarsmen jumped back into the boat and began to throw down large bags to the other two, who then threw them further up onto the dry beach. Leisu walked forward to observe the land. From what he could see between lighting flashes the land looked like it could support a man indefinitely. But he knew better. The lush green foliage was useless to men and the rocky cliffs that seemed to rise straight up hundreds of feet from the island's center were a haven for poisonous snakes, spiders, and other vile creatures. *Five years*, Leisu thought once again. *There could be no way.*

A large flash of lighting lit up the sky and the immediate thunder behind it caused him to jump. He felt foolish. What was there to be scared of? This island was as desolate as its name implied. Another flash came and he thought that he saw something ahead of him. He narrowed his eyes into the darkness. It was not until the sky was again lit up again, however, that his suspicions were confirmed: there was someone, or something, moving toward him. He called back at Ko, who in turn yelled at the oarsmen.

All gathered behind Leisu, their daggers drawn. Another flash of light came and they could all see a man walking toward them. *Could it really be?* Leisu thought.

Ko called for one of the men to light a lantern. Its faint glow illuminated a small circle around them, but it was the lighting that really lit up the land. Another flash came and showed the man no more than fifty feet away. A minute later they could hear the unmistakable sound of footfalls scraping sand and rock together. A man stepped into their small arc of light. He had long grey hair going white at the temples with a matching beard that filled his entire face and crowded out the rest of his features. He was well-tanned and frail, his ragged clothing tattered and torn and hanging off him like a sail. He was above-average height for an Adjurian, and stood a head taller than any of the Jongurians, even Leisu, who prided himself on his imposing height.

“I’ve been expecting you,” the man said as he entered the light. His voice was strong and commanding, even if his appearance was not. Leisu immediately sensed the power of the man, and respected him for it. Somehow, against all odds, he’d survived where any lesser man would’ve died.

“Oh?” Leisu replied.

“Yes, I’ve been watching your progress for more than a day now,” the man said.

“Grandon Fray,” Leisu stated more than asked, and the man gave a slight nod.

“Were you expecting someone else?” he asked mockingly.

Usually Leisu wouldn’t have allowed that tone with anyone, but then he had to remember that he was in the presence of a king; even one who had had his predecessor killed to steal the throne, started a Civil War, and then been banished from his country.

Men like that were used to taking whatever tone they wanted with whomever they wanted. In their own eyes all were beneath them.

“No, I think not,” Leisu replied to Grandon’s question.

“You’re Jongurian,” he said looking them over. “I expected that my own countrymen would be the ones to free me from my prison,” he lifted his arms to indicate the land around him, “but I’ll not pass up any chance to get off this rock.”

“Good to hear,” Leisu nodded, “we’ve come a long way to find you.”

“May I ask why?”

“Perhaps we should get off this beach first,” Leisu suggested.

“I’ve walked this beach for five years now,” Grandon replied, “it won’t kill you to stand upon it for a few minutes more.”

Leisu gave the man a long look. Five years of exile had done nothing to temper his manners. He still acted much the king, but then Leisu figured that he was still a king: of all of the barren majesty this landscape could produce. He held his temper in check and explained to the reason for their presence.

“We’ve come from Jonguria at the behest of my master Zhou Lao, the man who holds the southwest of the country.” Leisu waited for Grandon to ask a few questions at that declaration, but he remained quiet, so he continued. “He wants to expand his power and influence throughout the rest of the country, and eventually challenge the emperor’s precarious position. He thinks that you might be able to help him with that plan,” Leisu finished, looking at the disheveled Adjurian.

Grandon shook his head. “I don’t see what that has to do with me at all.”

“Your nephew does.”

“My nephew?” Grandon replied questioningly, for the first time taking his eyes off them as he looked into the distance. “Jossen? What could he possibly have in this?”

“Jossen Fray is himself trying to cement his own power in Adjuria. But while we struggle against an emperor and have been for years, your nephew is just beginning his bid to wrest the throne from his king. He believes that an unstable Jonguria will help him achieve that goal, and when my master takes over the country, your nephew will have a strong ally.”

“I see,” Grandon replied, but Leisu doubted that he really did. He himself didn’t see the entire scope of the plan that his master was unveiling, and he assumed that he never would. Many things would remain a mystery to him as these great events unfolded, and Leisu would be remembered in his nation’s history for helping to bring them about. This night on Desolatia Island’s stormy beach was just one of many that he’d leave his mark on.

“Well,” Leisu replied after a few moments of silence. “Would you like to come with us or stay on your island? The choice is yours.”

Grandon looked up at them for a few moments, and then without speaking walked past them and climbed into the boat. Leisu smiled. It had begun.

ONE

“Holy hell! Damn it anyway!”

A string of curses were let loose over the rocky field as a young boy stooped down to his toils.

At above-average height, with short-cropped brown hair and a slight build, though well-muscled from countless hours of exertion in the outdoors, Bryn Fellows could at the same instant strike both an imposing figure, but also one of quiet composure. He was still quite young, only fourteen now, but a lifetime of struggling against both the elements thrown at him by nature and those by men's demands had given him an outlook and wisdom beyond his years. Still, he *was* young, and therefore exhibited many of the characteristics and traits common to all young men: quick-to-actions not thought through, disdain for authority, and a sense that the world held no knowledge which his mind did not already possess.

“For crying out loud!” Bryn yelled.

For the third day in a row now Bryn had been slaving away in this rocky, stone-infested field under a blazing sun. The field had lain unused for as long as Bryn could remember, and judging from the amount of three- and four-hand stones lying half-buried, it'd always benn that way. It therefore came as some surprise when Bryn's uncle Trun had insisted that the field be cleared and made ready for that season's planting, as if there wasn't enough work to do around the farm as it was.

Deep down Bryn knew it was necessary. Now that the country was finding its balance again following the turmoil of years past, grain prices were beginning to fall. Trun had been forced to sell-off two pigs and a prized milk cow already this spring, and unless things improved in the grain market, which seemed unlikely, more selling-off of the livestock would have to take place before winter set in. That's why the cursing stayed in the fields and ended when supper was served each night. Bryn knew if his

uncle's leg was what it used to be he'd be out here as well, sharing in the thankless job now confronting Bryn.

"Damn ye," Bryn cursed at a stone twice his width as he dropped it beside the pile of smaller stones he'd already cleared over the past two days. There were still a few hours of daylight left, and by the look of the field, Bryn still had another two or three days of hard, back-breaking labor ahead of him. Then it would be on to easier jobs like mending fences or tending the crops. He surveyed the collection of piled rocks and stones as he pulled a cloth from his pocket and began wiping the sweat from his face. Two wagons full, so far, with the promise of at least one more before he was finished. Some would be used to shore up the house, which could do with some new stones to replace some of the older, peices starting to crumble. The rest would most likely be sold off to neighbors, or taken into town to be traded for goods the farm couldn't produce. They'd not fetch much, but every little bit was a help these days.

It's funny, Bryn thought. *The country is getting back on an even footing after years of war; you'd think things would be getting better for the common people as well.* That just wasn't the case, however, as things only seemed to be getting worse. Even during the years of Civil War, which Bryn was barely old enough to remember, he didn't recall them fretting over pennies as they were now. All he heard now when the neighbors sometimes gathered or on the few times a year he went into town, was how life for the common folk had dropped to such lows over the past ten years. Things were never this bad when the previous king was in power, all agreed. Even during the war with Jonguria, prices hadn't been so low for grain. Some even spoke fondly of how prices had gone up for a time under the rule of the Regidian usurper, Grandon Fray, but those voices were

quickly silenced with deathly stares, and sometimes physical blows. All however agreed that things couldn't get worse, and would surely get better next year. But when next year came, worse was all they got.

With a deep sigh, Bryn moved back out into the field and selected another large stone and began half-hauling, half-pushing and dragging it toward the pile with the rest.

“Whoa there!” came a shout from some distance down the road behind Bryn.

He dropped the stone to the ground and turned to look, shielding his eyes as he did so. A lone rider approached, nothing more than a black silhouette in the late afternoon sun. Bryn squinted as best he could to make out more as the rider approached.

“Ho there,” the man said to his horse, pulling on the reins. The horse came to an easy stop, flicking its tail as the man sat looking at Bryn. “My, my lad, you’ve grown since I last laid eyes on you.”

The voice was familiar, but it couldn't be, Bryn thought to himself. He continued to squint, raising another hand to his forehead.

“Why, don't you recognize me boy? Has your brain become just as thick as those stones I see you hauling there?”

“*Uncle Halam?*” Bryn asked in a low, questioning voice. “Is that *you?*”

“Why, not unless your uncle's somehow found himself another brother since I've last been here.”

“Uncle Halam, it *is* you!” Bryn shouted as he ran toward the road. He wended his way through the wooden fence as Halam dismounted, then embraced each other on the road. Bryn looked up into his uncle's face. Yes, it was Halam. Taller than Bryn by a hand, Halam was also a bit wider around the waist, no doubt from the amount of time he

sat at his desk, papers strewn before him. His arms were still thick from years in the field with his brother growing up, but he lacked the sun-baked lines which his brother possessed from doing that work still. His short brown hair, balding on top, with the finely-trimmed beard of the same color covering his face, was just as Bryn remembered, although now going grey around the chin and sides. His lips were parted in a wide smile as he looked down on Bryn.

“Good to see you, my boy, it’s been far too long now.”

“Why, Uncle Halam, what are you doing in Eston?” Bryn asked. “I thought you were working for the province in Plowdon and didn’t have the time to come this far east.”

“Why, I can always make time, which I’ve not been doing enough of lately. Truth is, I’ve got something important I want to talk my brother about. Is he about?”

“Yes, of course, he’s over by the house, probably working in the garden.”

“Well, why don’t you call ‘er a day with them damned stones and come with me then?” Halam said with a smile.

“That’s the best idea I’ve heard all day,” Bryn happily replied.

* * * * *

The endless fields rolled around them as they made their way down the road. It was quite a surprise to see Halam, Bryn thought as the two rode on. The last time his uncle visited must have been three or four years ago by now. Halam had spent most of his life in the capital city of Plowdon, but he’d grown up just like Bryn right here on the small family farm not far from Eston. He’d undertaken the same drudgery in the fields day-in and day-out that Bryn now knew so well, and he’d risen above it all to something better, more dignified, official.

Following the Civil War, Halam was made a provincial trade representative, and had spent years traveling around the province, stopping in all the large towns and small villages to appraise the grain output. His tabulations and figures were then be submitted to the head trading office in Tillatia's capital city of Plowdon, where prices would be set based on the market's demand.

It'd been an easy job, good for a man still young in years who was not ready to settle down to a job in the capital or return to the fields from which he came and start a family, as so many had done after those turbulent years of war. Halam had done the job well and was always warmly accepted into each area of the province he traveled to. It wasn't long before his popularity with the people caught the attention of the senior officials in the trade office, who quickly appointed Halam to the desk job he'd done so well to avoid for so long. That's when the job became difficult, for it was the officials who set the price of grain that the people's ire was directed toward, and their grumbling curses filled the air of many a small tavern throughout the land.

Halam's carefree lifestyle and journeying around the province had come to an end with his appointment to the capital, and with it also went his well-honed and muscled physique. Years at a desk late into the evening in front of stacks of grain tallies and shipping receipts and the stress that went with being a despised government official had all taken their toll on the once jovial Halam. He was more withdrawn now and not as quick to make a boast or tell a joke.

The farm where Bryn and Trun lived was a good thirty minute walk from the field Bryn was currently working. Riding on the back of Halam's horse, however, the time

was cut down to a quarter of that. Moving up and down as the hills as the road dictated, the two rode over a final hill and before them stretched the farmstead.

There was a one-room dwelling made of stones much like those Bryn had been hauling out of the field for the past three days. The roof was made from wood thatch and straw and did a good job of keeping both the rain and cold out.

Off to the left side and a bit behind the house was a makeshift barn for the animals, another stone edifice with just three sides and a thatch roof. Straw covered the ground inside, where a milk cow stood chewing hay, lazily watching as the two riders approached.

Right next to the house was a large, well-tended vegetable garden. Cabbages, carrots, beats, turnips, onions, peppers, and tomatoes were pushing their leafy stems out of the soil, welcoming the suns' spring rays. An entire row was devoted to corn stalks, small this early in the year, but showing promise already.

Stooping down to pick weeds from between the rows of vegetables was a man resembling Halam. Whereas Halam had a sizeable girth around his midsection, however, this man was rail-thin, and possessed none of the muscled arms or legs like those of the rider Bryn sat behind. His skin was well-tanned from countless hours under the sun, and his hands were strong and rough from working the land. He was clean-shaven, with long, grey sideburns stretching the length of his face. Large, bushy grey eyebrows jutted from under his round straw hat.

“Uncle Trun, Uncle Trun,” Bryn called from the road as the horse neared the farm, “look, we have company!”

Trun bent up straight and turned in the direction of the approaching horse. He held a hoe in his left hand and with his right removed his hat to wipe away the sweat on his forehead, revealing a pate nearly bald, with some grey tufts of hair on the back and sides. He squinted into the sun, holding his hand up to get a better look.

“Who’ve you got there, boy? Trun asked. “Old Ned to come and buy those stones, is it now?”

Halam led the horse up to the edge of the garden. “Don’t think I’ll be needing stones any time soon, brother.”

“I’ll be, is that *you* Halam?” Trun asked, squinting up at the rider in front of Bryn.

Bryn hopped off the back of the horse and rushed over to stand next to his other uncle. “It sure is, Uncle, come all the way from Plowdon to see us, he has, isn’t that right, Uncle Halam?”

“That it is lad, that it is,” Halam chuckled. He’d dismounted his horse and slowly walked over to the two, stopping in front of Trun. “How are you Trun, it’s been awhile.”

“I’d say it’s been near four years at that, Halam,” Trun replied. “What brings you all the way out to Eston? Don’t tell me I’ve missed me taxes for the past year. Or are you missing the olden days of honest work and want to get your hands dirty in the soil. We could certainly use the help.”

“No, nothing like that,” Halam replied, “can’t a man come and see his brother and nephew from time to time?”

“Aye, you’re always welcome to that,” said Trun. “Now what do you say to getting out of this blasted sun and inside where it’s nice and cool? Bryn, tie up your uncle’s horse then fetch us a bucket of water and a flask of milk, now.”

“Yes, sir!” Bryn enthusiastically replied as he ran forward and took hold of the reins from Halam before leading the horse to the side of the house where he tied it up to a post near the water trough before running toward the well.

Trun began to walk toward the house, a noticeable limp in his right leg. He leaned the hoe against the front of the house and ducked his head through the door, Halam following slowly behind.

Inside the furnishings were sparse and the space limited. A small table with four wooden chairs stood in the center of the room, with a cook stove set into the back wall next to the fireplace. Two small straw beds sat parallel to each other on opposite sides of the house. It wasn't much, but it was home.

Trun limped over to one of the chairs at the table and motioned for Halam to take another. He slowly eased down into it, keeping his right leg stretched out straight as he did so, finally sitting with a loud exhalation of breath and visible relief. He put his hands upon the table and stared straight ahead of him, obviously in pain from the ordeal.

“I see the leg's still giving you grief,” Halam pointed out, sympathy writ clear on his face as he looked into Trun's eyes.

“Aye, that it is. Most days I get by well enough. She just gets stiff now and then, especially with the change in seasons upon us. But that's how it is. Can't do much to change it now, can I? To think, I made it all those years through the war in Jonguria without a scratch, then get the use of my leg's taken from me fighting my own countrymen. It just ain't right, I tell you.”

“No, no that it ain't,” Halam agreed.

Trun was older than Halam by more than five years. He was the oldest of the three brothers, and had also been the first to join in the fighting against Jonguria thirty years before. Of course they'd all been young and foolish back then. Not having seen the world and then to be suddenly offered the opportunity to not only leave Eston and travel to distant parts of Adjuria, but to actually go as far away as Jonguria, well, that had been something they just couldn't pass up.

Trun had made it through all ten years of that grueling war, being battered to hell and back again each day along the Baishur River. Halam didn't know how he'd made it. Stronger men than he had succumbed to the madness of those trenches in the first months, but Trun went the distance. But then Halam figured there were men strong of body, but others strong of mind, and Trun had the latter aplenty. He believed in the cause and had been convinced the Jongurians had made the first move against Adjuria in those first days of hostilities. No one still knew exactly how or why the war happened, but happen it did, and Halam had ended up in it as well.

Stationed well south of Trun, he'd been part of the force tasked with keeping the city of Bindao, well after it had fallen to Adjurian troops, been retaken by Jonguria, and fallen again. Halam well remembered the hell that had been, and tried not to think about it. He did his time, and made it back home, also in one piece, like Trun.

After peace had been restored between the two continents and the Civil War between the provinces broke out, both Halam and Trun had sided with the Culdovian cause. They both agreed that the Regidian usurpers had to be stopped and the rightful heir to the Adjurian throne put back in place. Their military experience wasn't discounted and both were soon commanding companies at the Battle of Baden. Halam

had thought he couldn't see anything worse than his three years at Bindao, but those three days outside the Adjurian capital proved him wrong. He tried not to think about Baden either, but the images of the battle came to him unbidden in his sleep still. Those memories would never be shaken.

It was there that Trun finally suffered the injury that he'd been so lucky to escape all those years along the Baishur River. Leading a charge into the unprotected flank of the Oschem-led wing of the Regidian army, Trun's horse had been impaled by an enemy lance. When the beast reared up, Trun was thrown to the ground, whereupon his horse fell over on top of him. It was just bad luck that a rock was under his right knee when the beast fell. The knee was shattered, but ironically the injury probably saved his life. Unable to get up, and with the now dead horse blocking him from the sight of the rallying enemy army, Trun was overlooked as his company was slaughtered in a devastating countercharge. *He'd always blamed himself for what happened to his men that day, and probably still does*, Halam thought.

"If I was only able to get up and have the men see me," he always said afterward, "the day would have been different. The Battle of Baden would have been over in two days, not three."

Halam himself had commanded a company at Baden, but whereas Trun's had met with devastation, Halam's had enjoyed triumph. For it was Halam that had rallied the men fleeing from Trun's company and enabled them to make a stand at a position on the field which proved critical for the next days offensive, an offensive which won the battle for the Culdovian army. While Halam was wreathed in the cheering adulation of royal

nobles and common soldiers, Trun had lain in a sick tent listening to a doctor tell him he'd never walk again.

It was for Halam's rally at Baden that he was given the government post in Tillatia, while Trun had no choice but to head back to the family farm and learn to walk again. There were a lot of men in his position in those days when the country was coming off of two wars. Many were in worse shape than Trun, and he knew it. He wasn't one to complain, and it was less than a year before he was back in the fields, although much slower and unable to do the same heavy work as before.

Bryn came into the room and jolted the two men from their reveries.

"That sure is a good horse you got there, Uncle Halam," he said as he put the flask of milk down on the table and headed to the stove to retrieve three cups. "Judging from the eyes and teeth, as well as the sheen of her coat, I'd have to guess she's right out of the nobles' stables in Plowdon."

"Well, you're right that she comes from the stables in Plowdon, but I sure wouldn't say there's anything noble about them," Halam replied as he grabbed the flask and began pouring the milk into the cups Bryn had set on the table.

"I reckon if we had just one horse like that, Uncle Trun," Bryn said as he settled himself into the remaining chair at the table, "we'd have no need to do any planting at all this spring. I think a horse like that would bring in more than the price of our grain for an entire season."

"Nonsense, Bryn," Trun replied, looking sternly at his nephew, but also letting his gaze fall upon Halam. "Who's having that kind of money around here these days? You know well enough how poor-off most of the folk around Eston are. Many have been hit

harder than us, and have had to sell-off far more livestock than we have just to get by, and barely at that, I might add. I'd count my lucky stars each night, if I were you, and be thankful for what we've got right here."

"Yes sir," Bryn said meekly, bowing his head at the tough rebuke.

A few moments of silence passed before Trun spoke up. "Well, brother, you say you've not come out to run us off our land or to even lend a hand in readying it for the busy season ahead of us. What is it we can do for you now?"

Halam drew in his breath and raised up his shoulders, readying himself for what he was sure would be a tough argument to come. "Truth is, Trun, I've come to talk about Bryn and most particularly about his future here in Eston."

"Have you now," said Trun, eyeing Halam questioningly. "Truth be-told, his future, and all those of Eston, isn't looking too bright to me these days, what with the price of grain what it is."

"Yes, the grain market's been bad for many years, and all know it," Halam shot back. "It's like that all over the country. Fallownia is in the same boat, and the smaller grain producing areas in other provinces are also feeling the pinch." Halam drew in a deep breath and let it out. "I've received word from the royal court in Baden that there's talk of opening up trade negotiations with Jonguria."

"Jonguria," Bryn cried out, "but Uncle Halam, we've not sent them grain since before the war!"

"Aye, lad, and there's lots of talk about changing that."

Bryn, flustered and confused, tried to argue. "But--"

“But, nothing, Bryn,” Trun shot in. “You know as well as anyone how tough times are these days.” His stony gaze moved from Bryn to Halam. “If Jonguria’s wanting our grain, I say we give it to ‘em, at a higher price than they’d be setting for us in Plowdon.”

Halam looked down at his hands. “That’s the talk in Plowdon, and from what I hear, in Baden as well.” He sighed. “What with shipping it all the way to the treaty port on Nanbo Island, or even overland across the isthmus, that cost has got to be made up for.”

“Aye, and it ain’t cheap to get it here from my fields down to Dockside, neither,” Trun pointed out.

“True,” Halam agreed. “I’d say that you could expect half again what you make now selling it to the provincial officials in Plowdon, *if* we’re able to come to an agreement with the Jongurians. But remember, we’re just in the planning stages at this point. No royal emissaries have been sent to Jonguria with the proposal, and even the royal court at Baden has yet to come to a firm agreement on the subject. This proposed deal could be months, and possibly even years away. Still,” Halam continued, looking up at the two seated at the table with him, “it is something to hope for.”

“Now, though,” Trun continued after a few moments, “I don’t see what any of this has to do with Bryn. A young boy living in the farmlands on the outskirts of the country ain’t got no impact on trade negotiations with Jonguria.”

“True, true,” Halam conceded, “but I’d *like* him to.”

“Now what are you meaning with that remark, Halam?” Trun asked, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“I mean I’d like Bryn to accompany me to Baden to see how a deal like this would move through the royal court.” Halam’s eyes moved from Trun to Bryn. Bryn’s eyes grew wide with excitement as Halam put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I want to give him the opportunity to see his country, to get off this farm and put his mind to something besides fields and stones and livestock for a change.”

“You know the place for a boy Bryn’s age is in the fields, learning the value of a hard day’s work!” Trun shot back.

Bryn rose from his chair and planted both hands firmly on the table. “But, Uncle Trun I—”

“Boy,” Trun said in terse, no-nonsense voice as he laid deathly-serious eyes on his nephew, “this conversation is between me and my brother. It might concern you, but you’ll have no part in it. Now, go out and tend to your nightly chores.”

“But I—”

Trun moved his gaze back upon Bryn, saying more with a look than he possibly could with a lengthy tirade.

“Yes, sir,” Bryn murmured, lowering his head as he shuffled out the door into the twilight of the early evening.

TWO

The two men sat without speaking or looking at one another for some time, each slowly drinking their cup of milk while weighing the words they would use to persuade the other. Halam broke the silence first.

“Trun, we’re the only family the boy’s got now, and really, I’ll be the first to admit that I’ve not been much of an uncle for him over his life.”

“That’s for damned sure! You’ve been in Plowdon, or moving around the province. But in all those travels, you never saw fit to stop by and pay us a visit, which you easily could have done more than once every handful of years. The boy looks up to you, Halam, heaven knows why, but he does.”

“Aye, I’ve not been the best uncle, not like you Trun, and my duties in Plowdon *have* caused me to lose sight of family.”

“Aye,” Trun replied.

“Now Trun, we both know the value of hard work, we’ve both our sweat these fields, and I know full well that you still do.”

“Aye,” Trun said, wiping some caked soil from his clothes. “Just because you’ve got your courtly duties to perform in Culdovia doesn’t mean there’s any task for Bryn to perform. Come harvest time we’ve got the clearing of the fields to do and the preparing for the winter to come. There’s certainly no lack of work on this farm, and I can’t do without an extra set of hands.”

“Listen Trun, the boy is smart; he can’t spend the rest of his life like you, farming.”

“And why not,” Trun answered, his anger obviously rising at the perceived sleight.

“He can go places and be more than just another of the countless farmers in Tillatia. Every time I come back here and see Bryn working he’s nearly always got his head in a book, thinking, studying, and improving his mind. There’s a place for that far from these fields.”

“Aye, and how often has he nearly upturned a whole row of freshly laid seeds with his eyes on a book and not on the work under his feet?”

Halam sighed. “Listen, this is a chance for the boy to get out of Tillatia, to see the world, a world at peace, which is a chance that neither of us ever had, Trun.”

“If the world had been at peace all those years ago, you can rest assured, brother, that I never would have left the farm.”

“Let him come with me, Trun, let him see the country he lives in, the country he’s spent so much time reading about in books. Let him walk its roads and breathe its air. A man needs to see the results of his daily labors. I’m not talking about stealing him from you forever, Trun. All I’m saying’s that I want to take him along for this round of talks in Baden. He’d be home in time to help with the harvest come fall.”

“And a fine use he’d be to me then, his head filled with all manner of courtly intrigue and politics, thoughts a-flutter with the latest gossip about the capital’s rising lords and ladies. He’d not know the back end of a hoe from the front by the time you sent him back from that Culdovian hornet’s nest.”

Halam sighed and shifted in his chair, unhappy with the way the discussion was going. His brother had always been stubborn, and he saw that the task of convincing him was going to prove much more difficult than he’d earlier expected.

* * * * *

After looking after the animals and completing his other chores, Bryn sat down on a large rock set off from the barn to rest and think. He couldn’t understand why his Uncle Halam was so interested in taking him to Baden, or why his Uncle Trun was so intent on having him stay on the farm. Bryn would love to go and see the capital of Culdovia, and

all the interesting sights along the way, but it also made him nervous. He'd never been further from the farm than the half-day's ride to Eston, and he considered that town of about a hundred people large. To travel to Baden, where the people numbered in the thousands, well, he just wasn't sure he was ready for that. It was not that he *hadn't* thought about it before. What boy growing up on a small farm on the edge of Adjuria hadn't? When Bryn thought about it, however, it simply came down to the fact that he didn't think he was cut out for the courtly and governmental duties that his Uncle Halam performed. All he'd known his whole life was taking care of animals, plowing fields, and harvesting grain. What use was there for the ability to haul stones, mend fences, and milk cows in the capital?

Bryn saw his Uncle Halam emerge from the house and walk over to the garden, stare down at the vegetables, then walk over to the barn where he leaned up against its stone wall.

"Uncle Halam," Bryn called out, waving his arm in the air.

Halam looked in the general direction of the shout, but with dark coming on fast he couldn't make out where Bryn was.

"Over here, Uncle Halam, straight ahead," Bryn shouted.

Halam squinted as he began walking in Bryn's direction. Finally, a few paces from him, he spotted Bryn and went to join him.

"Well, my boy, what're you thinking of the talk you heard between me and my brother just now?" Halam asked as he pulled a worn wooden pipe from his travel-stained coat along with a pouch of tobacco leaves which he began to push into the pipe's bowl.

“I really don’t know, Uncle Halam,” Bryn began, “it just seems like so much all of a sudden. I mean, I’ve never even been to Plowdon, and to now have the chance to go to Baden, well, it just seems so...”

“Overwhelming?” Halam finished for him.

Bryn smiled. “Yes, overwhelming.”

Halam pulled some matches from his coat, lit one on the side of the rock, then lowered it down to the bowl of the pipe. The tobacco caught fire and glowed orange and red as Halam sucked in the smoke, letting it out quickly until he was satisfied he had the pipe going strong before tossing the match at his feet.

“It’s a bit much for a man of any age who’s never seen the capital of Adjuria, no matter where he’s coming from. I remember the first time I laid eyes on her wide, bustling streets. I was awed and intimidated. All I wanted to do was run to the nearest alley and hide behind a heap of trash, hoping it would all go away. But I threw my shoulders back and held my head high, and walked those streets.” Halam smiled at the recollection, and Bryn could see him looking back into the past, seeing those streets as only a man who has walked them before can see them.

“It wasn’t easy, but it wasn’t too difficult either. After a time I got used to it, as much as a man from Tillatia can, mind you.” Halam looked down at Bryn, tousling his hair. “She’s the largest city in the land, Bryn, but we’ve plenty of smaller cities that you can see on the way that will prepare you for her immensity.”

“Which ones,” Bryn asked, his curiosity overcoming his trepidation at the thought of traveling through these wide swaths of civilization.

“Well, we’d start right here in Tillatia with Plowdon, a sizeable city in itself. From there we’d head down the King’s Road, and pass through Coria on the Tillatia-Culdovian border. From there we’d travel to Lindonis on the eastern edge of the Montino Mountains and just north of the King’s Wood. After that we’d be but a days ride from the capital itself.”

“The King’s Wood and the Montino Mountains!” Bryn said with excitement. “I’ve read about them so many times, and even seen some drawings in Eston, but to actually walk along them, well, that *would* be something.”

“Aye, lad,” Halam agree. “See, it’s nothing to be afraid of, now. What’s to be scaring you is the prospect of staying on this farm for the rest of your life, and not taking the opportunity to see the land your hard labor’s done so much to support. A man’s got to see the land he lives in, as I’ve been trying to tell my brother for the past hour.” Halam signed and tapped out the bowl of his pipe against the rock. “That’s an easy thing to be forgetting when you’ve already seen so much of your country, and another’s besides.”

Halam looked off into the distance, past the farm and Tillatia, all the way outside of Pelios, as far as Bryn could tell. He waited a few moments before venturing to speak.

“So how did the talk go between you and uncle Trun, anyway? From what I heard, he seemed pretty set on me staying here.”

“Aye, that he is, lad, that he is.” Halam put his pipe back into his coat pocket and rose from the rock. “I’m thinking it’ll be best if we let it rest for the night, give the idea some time to settle in our minds before we press it further. I don’t have to be in Plowdon for another few days, so I can wait here tomorrow, perhaps even help out with those

stones,” he said with a smile. “Now lad, I think I’ll be turning in for the night. I see you’ve just the two beds inside now, so I’ll make up something for myself in the barn.”

“Oh no, Uncle Halam, you take my bed and I’ll take the barn, it’s-”

“No lad, I think me and my brother need to spend the evening apart, let our words settle, and start fresh in the morning.”

“Well, if that’s what you want,” Bryn said hesitantly.

“Aye, that’s what I want. Now goodnight lad, and say goodnight to Trun for me as well,” Halam said as he ambled off toward the barn. Bryn sat for awhile longer on the rock, thinking of the King’s Road and all of the sights that lay along its path before he got up and headed back to the house.

He opened the door and stepped inside. The house was warm, the fire of the cook stove spreading its warmth through the small area. Trun was sitting at the table, a cup of tea steaming in front of him. Bryn moved to the stove and poured himself a cup, then sat at the table opposite his uncle.

“Halam is going to sleep in the barn tonight,” Bryn reported to his uncle. “I offered him my bed inside, but he refused.”

“Aye, that doesn’t surprise me,” Trun said. “Figured he’d like the chance to sleep out under the stars, enjoy the quiet of the night, which he rarely experiences in the big city.” Trun sipped his tea and leaned back in his chair. His gaze settled on Bryn as he sucked his lips thoughtfully, measuring his words. “So what are you thinking of these plans your uncle has for you, now, lad?”

“Well, it’s a great opportunity, one most folks around these parts will never have. Seems a shame to pass it up. But I can’t help but think that I’ve never even been to a

town larger than Eston. To go all the way to Baden, the largest city in Adjuria, it just seems different from anything I've ever thought of before."

"Aye, it is at that. She'll take your breath away, she will, and more than likely take all the money from your pockets too, whether you know it or not," Trun replied with a laugh.

"I mean, Uncle Trun, a part of me would really like to go, but another part wants to stay here and help you with the farm. We've got the planting to do soon and the sheep to shear. Once I get done hauling those stones out of the field we can take them around to the neighbors, and shore up the house and barn with the rest. And just getting that field plowed and ready for planting, whether it's this year or next, will take some time, and lots of back-breaking work to boot."

Bryn listed all the other tasks the farm needed as far as he saw it, looking Trun right in the eye in the knowing, responsible fashion of one who has an equal share in the gains and losses of their labor. Trun sat back, nodding his head at Bryn's recitation, seeming to be in total agreement with the words spilling from the boy's mouth, while in actuality he was coming to realize the truth of the words his brother had spoken earlier.

Bryn *was* ready to leave the farm and make his way in the world, and probably should have done so well before now. Listening to his nephew expound upon the necessities lying before them which would take them through to another year, Trun knew that Bryn wouldn't be here to share in their completion. No, Trun knew that the time had come to let the boy go. If he came back in the fall, so be it, there was plenty of work for a strong young man like him; and if he didn't, well, it was the world's gain, and she'd be a better place for it.

* * * * *

The stars were well overhead and the moon shone brightly as Halam sat gazing up at them from the edge of the barn's open side. He sat astride a saddle resting on a log stump, his pipe resting in his hand. The milk cow and horse were both sleeping peacefully, with the soft glow of a lone lantern issuing forth.

Halam shifted himself and turned his head as he heard a sound from the direction of the house.

"Don't worry, it's just me," Trun said as he limped into the lantern's light.

Halam jumped up from his seat, gesturing for Trun to take his arm. "Here, let me—"

"No, don't bother," Trun cut him off, limping over to a bail of hay set up against one stone wall, "I can manage." He eased himself down, right-leg outstretched just as he'd done earlier in the evening, and sat down with a noticeable grunt.

"So what do you think of this sight?" Trun asked, gesturing up at the nighttime sky. "Don't expect you see much of these stars in Plowdon unless you ride out of the city quite a ways."

"No, no you don't," Halam said, sitting down on the saddle once again. He tapped his pipe on his boot, and reached into his coat for his pouch of tobacco. "To tell you the truth, I don't much think about it anymore. Seems I'm so caught up in work most days that once I get home I'm often to bed before the stars even have a chance to come out. Then by the time I'm up in the morning before the dawn, there's just enough light out that they've already gone to bed for the day themselves." He filled his bowl and replaced the pouch in the inside pocket of his coat. "It is a nice change to see them again on this fine night, I must say."

“That it is, that it is.”

The two sat in silence, each staring up at the night sky, thinking their own thoughts, wondering and waiting for what the other had to say. Trun spoke first.

“I’m thinking you’re right in wanting to take Bryn with you,” he said, shifting his gaze from the sky to his brother. “He’s too smart to be wasting anymore time hauling stones and plowing fields in the middle of Tillatia while the world rushes on without him.” He sat and looked back up at the stars.

Halam kept his gaze on his brother for a few moments longer, then looked back up himself. Better to let Trun weigh his words and not interrupt his thoughts, he decided. He puffed away at his pipe, waiting for his brother to speak again.

Finally Trun returned his gaze to the darkness beyond the lantern’s light.

“I’d like you to take him to Baden and do whatever it is you do at these trade negotiations, but I don’t want you to bring him back come fall.”

“But,” Halam began, but he was cut-off by Trun’s outstretched hand.

“No, listen to what I’ve got to say,” he said. He looked up at the stars again for a moment, then returned his gaze to the darkness around them.

“This is no place for a lad as smart as Bryn. I want you to find him a task suitable for a young man of his learning when these talks are through, if not in Baden, then closer to home in Plowdon. Heaven knows he’ll not know the difference between the two anyway.”

“Are you sure about this, Trun, I mean, how will you get along without him?”

“Don’t you be worrying about me now, you hear? I’ll manage just fine without him. Did just that for many years before he came along anyway, and can do so still.”

Halam glanced down at Trun's right leg outstretched in front of him. He looked out into the darkness and nodded his head.

Both men stared into the darkness of the night. After some time Trun straightened out his left leg and slowly began to rise up from the bail of hay.

"You get some sleep now. I figure you'll both be wanting to set out early in the morning to get a good start on making Plowdon by the day after tomorrow." He began to limp back toward the house, leaving Halam to stare after him and wonder about the sudden change of heart.

THREE

The sun blazed brightly in the afternoon sky and the spring weather felt more like summer. Birds sang in the trees, butterflies flitted among the grass, and crickets chirped in the distance.

Bryn was thoroughly enjoying himself. This was an immense change from the drudgery of his life back home. A life on the road! It was what he'd always dreamed of, and now he was actually living it. Traveling far from home, out amidst the world, with adventure looming over the crest of every hill, what more could he possibly want?

Well, to start with, it would be nice if his clothes weren't sticking to him because of the heat. The way the saddle was rubbing him wrong on the backside he could also do without. The slight breeze swirling the dust from the road into his eyes and mouth was another nuisance. Not to mention the sheer boredom of it all.

In the adventure tales the heroes never spent hours moving down dusty roads in the sweltering heat. They set off toward their destination, and were instantly there, fresh as the morning breeze, and ready to take on the world. Bryn was just ready for a bath.

“What’s that look I see in your eye, boy?” Halam asked. “Not homesick already, I hope. We’ve been gone but half a day.”

“No, it’s not that Uncle Halam,” Bryn replied, “it’s just that I thought getting away from home and traveling the world would be more exciting, more adventurous, you know, like in the stories.”

“Ha, my boy,” Halam laughed, “it’s never like the stories in my experience. The thing to remember is that the travel part is never more than a means of getting from one point to another; there’s never any fun in it. Just be thankful we’ve got a horse under us, and aren’t walking this road like many we’ve seen this day.”

“Oh, yes sir, I’m thankful for that,” Bryn answered as he looked down at his shoes. The well-worn pair he’d had for more than two years weren’t up to the task of walking from Plowdon to Culdovia, that’s for sure.

To think, he was actually traveling the King’s Road, on his way to Baden, the capital city of Adjuria; him, Bryn Fellows, who’d never been more than three miles from Eston before. What would the boys back home say?

Usually at this time of day Bryn would be in those fields working the land, threshing the grain, plowing, bundling, and constantly moving under that hot sun. He was still moving under that hot sun, but in a new direction and toward a much larger task.

Halam had woken Bryn early that morning, well before the sun was up.

“You’ll be accompanying me to Baden after all, lad,” his uncle had told him. “Now pack what clothes you have and meet me outside.”

With sleep still in his eyes, Bryn had collected what possessions he had, which wasn’t much. An extra pair of breeches and a spare shirt were the only other clothes he owned beside the pair he was wearing. He’d taken a water skin from the stove and filled it with water from the well, and also grabbed some bread and cheese, plus two small apples. Looking around for anything else to take, Bryn had been struck by how little there was in the house between him and his uncle Trun. As he headed for the door, he grabbed a copy of a well-worn book on the history of eastern Adjuria, and stuffed it into his shabby travel pack. He took one last look at the sparse lodgings which he’d called home for his whole life and then headed out the door.

Halam had been tightening the saddle straps on his horse Juniper while making last minute checks of his travel pouches. Trun had been up and limping over from the barn with a fresh flask of milk in his hand. He’d stopped next to Halam, handing him the flask, and the two spoke a few words to each other before Trun began limping toward the house.

“Well, it’s about time you was up, lad,” Trun had said, “sun’s near ready to stick her head over that horizon and bless us with what looks to be a beautiful day for traveling.”

“Yes, sir,” Bryn had replied, “but I thought you were against me going to Baden with Uncle Halam. Last night you—”

“Don’t you be worrying about what was said last night, now,” Trun had cut in, “me and your uncle talked late last night while you was asleep, and we decided that it would be in your best interests to take this trip to the capital.”

“But what about the farm? Who will help you with the planting? And I’ve got a couple days to go still on clearing that field of stones before I can begin plowing it.”

“Don’t you worry about any of that, now, you hear Bryn? I’ll make do just fine without you. I expect when you return in the fall there’ll be scant work to keep you busy,” Trun had said with a smile on his weathered face.

“Uncle Trun, I don’t know, I mean—”

“Don’t know what, boy,” Halam had cut in, walking up and putting his hands on Bryn’s shoulders. You heard your uncle, lad. He wants you to go to Baden. Do you have a problem with that now?”

Bryn had stared dumbfounded back and forth between his two uncles, at a loss for what to say in the face of this sudden change of heart from his uncle. Just last night he’d been set on keeping him on the farm, now he wanted nothing more than to get rid of him.

“Well, I...” Bryn had began. “I mean...”

He’d stopped, his mouth hanging open, unable to fathom what to say.

“Ha, lad,” Halam had laughed, come on over here and let me give you a hand up on Juniper here. Halam had strode over to his horse and, grabbing hold of the saddle, effortlessly pulling himself up and onto the horse’s back. He’d stuck his arm out, wiggling his fingers and motioning to Bryn. Bryn had taken Halam’s hand, and with a pull of his uncle’s arm made felt weightless as he was lifted from the ground and onto the horse, just in front of his uncle in the saddle.

“Well, lad, I hope you’re ready and got all your things,” Halam had said. “Although I sure didn’t see much that looked like yours in the house last night.”

Halam had pulled on the reins and Juniper turned in a circle, giving Bryn a better view of his uncle Trun still standing on the ground in front of the house.

“You be careful out there, Bryn,” Trun had told his nephew. “It’s a mean place, the world you’re about to enter, so you keep your eyes open and don’t do anything foolish. Listen to what you uncle tells you, and you’ll be fine.”

“Yes, sir, I will sir,” Bryn had replied. He felt his eyes mist up as he looked down on his uncle, the only family he’d really had all these years. “I’ll see you in time for the harvest this fall, Uncle Trun.”

“Aye, lad, aye,” Trun had said, shifting on his feet.

A few moments had passed before Halam tightened up the reins and turned Juniper toward the road.

“Well, Trun, take care of yourself, now,” he’d said.

“Aye, I will, and you take care of the boy, make sure he doesn’t get into any trouble.”

“Will do, will do.”

“Aye!” Halam had yelled, kicking his boots into Juniper’s sides. The horse had taken a few quick steps before bolting away from the house, turning onto the road, and galloping off toward the distant horizon, the rising sun at their backs.

* * * * *

“I figure we’ll make Eston shortly after noon today. Sound about right to you, Bryn?” Halam asked.

“Aye, that sounds about right. Haven’t been there since we got done with the harvest last fall, but I don’t expect it’s changed much in that time.”

“No, and from what I saw when I passed through on the way to the farm yesterday, I don’t think she’s changed much in the past hundred years.”

Halam and Bryn both smiled at that remark. Eston had grown over several generations from a few small farms clustered around the same adjoining fields into a small farming community. Households from leagues around came to sell their grain at the provincial trade office there and to sell and trade preserved fruits and vegetables at the local market. Farmers loaded up on supplies for the winter, and swapped gossip at the local tavern. During the winter months when there wasn’t as much work to do on the farms, the families would send their children to the local schoolhouse, which was simply a spare storage room of the trading store, left empty in the winter until new shipments of farming tools and implements arrived with the spring. When the tools arrived, the students would depart, heading back to the fields with any number of books they could, or were forced, to take with them.

Eston, like much of Tillatia and other provinces in Adjuria, had been hit hard at the conclusion of the Civil War nearly ten years earlier. What everyone had looked forward to, peace after the long war with Jonguria, had turned out not be so good. Unexpectedly, prices for nearly all goods dropped, which seemed good to most people at first, but when they realized that this also meant that they’d make less money for the goods they produced and sold, whether it was guild-produced items such as candles or shoes, or agricultural items like grain and meat, they realized it was more of a curse than a blessing.

Eston was particularly hard-hit in those first years following the war, as many of the farms in the area could no longer support themselves, and the families were forced to

uproot and move to the larger cities such as Plowdon to make whatever kind of living they could. The lucky ones were able to hang-on by joining together with other families to produce cooperatives which were able to sell their grain and produce at cheaper prices while still making a slight profit. Bryn and Trun had only been able to hold on by selling much of their excess land to these joint-family farms, creating a plentiful savings which lasted them for many years. Mainly, however, they'd cut their consumption down to the bare minimum needed to survive. There were no frills on the Fiske farm: what was needed was made from what was available to them, and if it wasn't they simply went without. Any excess they produced was sold in town, and somehow they made do.

It was past mid-day when Halam and Bryn rode into Eston on Juniper. There wasn't much activity; most people out in the fields around the town were preparing for the spring planting while others inside worked on what handicrafts they could to make a little extra, or simply see their families through another year. The town rose up on either side of the Eston Road and several small two-story buildings dotted the thoroughfare. The storefronts were located on the first-floor and dealt in farming items mostly, but with a few more specialized stores selling clothing, candles, cooking items, and hardware. On the second-floor could be found the residences of the families who ran the stores.

Further down the road was the tavern, which also served as a meeting hall, provincial government office, and rumor-mill. Next to it was the trade office, where the farmers came to sell their grain each autumn harvest and get price projections on next year's crop. The general store came next, which also contained the schoolhouse as well as a few rooms on the second floor that were rented out to travelers who needed a place to sleep, the closest thing to an inn in Eston. All that was left were a few older houses,

and then the road continued on into the fields, leading northwest toward the Tillata River and the road to Plowdon. There seemed to be more abandoned buildings than were occupied, the number increasing each time Bryn came to town.

Halam steered Juniper over to a water trough near the tavern and they both got off to stretch their legs and have some of the apples, bread, and cheese that they'd taken from the farm that morning. While they stood eating the tavern-keeper noticed them and came outside onto the small wooden porch. He squinted as he approached the two, then stopped as a look of recognition appeared on his face.

“Why, is that you Bryn?” the man asked.

“Aye, Mr. Farn, that it is. Good-day to you too,” Bryn replied.

The man was short and squat with a round belly that protruded out from under his dirty white apron. He wore a full mustache which covered his mouth and his dirty black hair was cropped short in front but ran longer down his back. He moved over to the two men, taking Bryn's hand and shaking it vigorously.

“Well, it's good to see you lad,” he said, his mustache rising under a hidden smile while his eyes lit up. “What brings you to Eston this time of year? Don't usually see you and Trun until the harvest comes in fall?”

“Well, my uncle Halam and I are on our way to Plowdon, actually,” Bryn said.

“Plowdon, is that so?” he asked, looking at Halam for the first time, trying to place him. “Why then, you must be Halam Fiske, Trun's younger brother, the trade official in Plowdon.”

“Aye, that I am, good to meet you...”

“Conn Farn’s me name, he said with a smile. He leaned up against one of the posts that held up the wooden porch roof. “So Plowdon, eh? What business have you and Trun there,” he asked Bryn.

Bryn looked over at his uncle, and not seeing any sign that he should keep quiet, began to explain. “Well, Uncle Trun and I don’t have business to do in Plowdon, truth be told, sir. My uncle Halam and I are actually heading all the way down to the capital in Culdovia.”

“You don’t say?” Conn said, standing up straighter, surprise in his voice. “Baden, eh? Well, that is a ways from here, that’s for sure. What business than have you got in Baden?”

“There’s talk of opening up trade with Jonguria again,” Halam said. “Nobles from the various provinces are gathering at the royal court to discuss the issue, and I’ve been chosen as a representative for Tillatia.”

“Well, that *is* news,” Conn said, leaning up against the pole once again. “We could sure use the trade. Folks around here’ll be happy to hear that.” He stared at the road for a few moments. “What chance do you think there is that the court will agree to the venture?”

“I’m thinking we don’t have much choice,” Halam replied, taking his pipe from his coat and filling the bowl. “Ever since the Civil War ended prices for all everything have been too low. We need the Jongurian markets for our goods, especially for our Tillatian grain.”

“Aye, that couldn’t be closer to the truth,” Conn agreed. “But will the Jongurians look favorably upon trade with us again. It’s been near thirty years since we’ve traded

with them, before the war. That's a long time to go without our goods, and I'm sure they've grown used to living without them."

"That is a concern. I suppose if the court agrees to begin trading again, then a delegation will be sent to Nanbo Island to propose the deal to the Jongurians."

"Well, that *is* news," Conn said again and with as much surprise.

All three stood in silence for a time, letting the prospect of trade with Jonguria and its impact upon the families of Eston fill their thoughts. Halam finally tapped his pipe bowl onto the edge of the horse trough and straightened.

"Well, Bryn, I think we'd better get back on the road. We've still got a day in front of us before we reach Plowdon, and I'd like to be well along the Tillata River by the time we make camp tonight."

"Yes, sir," Bryn said.

"Well, good luck to you two," Conn said, shaking each of their hands. "I know when I tell the other families about this, they'll all be praying for you."

"Thank you," Halam said as he pulled Juniper away from the trough and climbed up, then reached down his arm to help Bryn up. They cantered off down the road and left Eston behind as they continued to head northwest.

* * * * *

Past rolling fields they rode, and the scenery all began to look the same to Bryn. Some fields contained tall grasses which blew in waves with the wind, while others contained nothing but weeds. Occasionally they'd pass a farm along the road, men and women working, preparing for the spring planting. They would wave and the farmers would wave back, but on they continued. Sometimes they'd pass another rider or a

wagon heading past them toward Eston. Again waves were exchanged, or a friendly 'hello,' each carrying onward to their destination. Not once did they see anyone else heading in their direction. Halam explained that it was a long road leading to the river, and that there were surly many other travelers like themselves spread out on it, just not within sight of them. The way the hills rolled up and down on the horizon limited their vision to a scant half-a league or less at all times.

The sun was setting over their right shoulders by the time they finally made it to the Tillata River. It stretched before them as the Eston Road turned into the Tillata Road, which traveled east through the Tillata Wood to the Ipsalar Ocean, and west to Plowdon. The river itself was a good forty feet across, and flowed very rapidly. The water was light brown in color, the swiftness of the river stirring up all of the sediment underneath and roiling it around. When Bryn listened closely over the river's roar, he could hear large rocks being pushed along the bottom.

Halam explained that at this time of year it was carrying all of the spring runoff from its source in the Montino Mountains and gathering force and momentum as it traveled down in elevation to the Ocean. From here until Plowdon they'd see many more farms and small towns than they'd seen on the Eston Road, as the river provided much to the farmers. They stopped to let Juniper drink her fill in the river, both Bryn and Halam dismounting to stretch their legs. The river was icy-cold when Bryn dipped his hands in to drink, but the water tasted fresh and clean. He splashed a few handfuls into his face to wash away the dust of the road, and then they were once again back on Juniper, but now riding west on a new road.

“I know a good copse of trees where we’ll camp the night,” Halam said to Bryn. They continued to ride as the sun set over the horizon in front of them, the sky overhead changing from pink, to orange, to red as the sun dipped into the ocean countless leagues away. The only sounds were the roar of the river on their right and Juniper’s hooves on the hard-packed dirt of the road underneath. It was fully dark when Halam pulled on the reins to turn Juniper off the road to their left and into a small stand of trees that Bryn couldn’t even see in the dark.

“We’ll camp here for the night, and continue on to Plowdon in the morning,” Halam said as he dismounted. He handed Bryn his water skin, telling him to fill it in the river while he got started on a fire. Bryn had to follow the sound of the river, for it was much too dark to see more than a few inches in front of him. The rising moon shone on the blackness of the river, its reflection waving on the choppy current of the water. When Bryn returned with the water Halam had a fire going and Juniper was tied loosely to a tree, grazing on the tall grasses. Halam pulled the bread, cheese, and apples out of his pack, cutting them up and passing pieces to Bryn. They ate in silence, staring into the fire.

It was some time after they had both finished eating, while they sat and listened to the crackle of the fire and the roar of the river, when Bryn spoke.

“What can you tell me about my father, Uncle Halam,” he asked.

Halam looked over at Bryn, weighing the question, then stared back into the flickering light of the fire. Quite some time passed, and Bryn figured that his uncle had nothing to say, but then Halam spoke.

“Shep, I think, was the smartest of us three brothers,” Bryn’s uncle replied, staring into the fire as he did so, “and that’s why it came as such a surprise to Trun and I when he declared he was siding with the Regidians during the Civil War. Caught us completely off-guard, it did. *Now*, however, it doesn’t seem so far-fetched.

“Shep had complained for years about how the Culdovians had governed. He was against the war with Jonguria from the start, seeing it as an end to the livelihood for countless small farmers and ordinary citizens. He turned out to be right on that one, but at the time, all most people could think of was fighting, me and your uncle Trun included.”

Halam took a deep sigh before continuing on.

“I still remember the night we sat around the table having dinner when Trun announced he’d joined the army and was heading to Jonguria to fight in the first offensive of the war, to be staged along the Baishur River. Boy how he and Shep argued over that! Shep couldn’t understand why he’d want to fight what he called ‘a rich-man’s war, and a poor-man’s fight.’ Trun couldn’t understand why Shep *wouldn’t* want to be a part of the defining moment of our lives. They argued into the night, neither able to convince the other of their point-of-view, or even to see the reasoning behind it. In the morning both were gone. Trun headed south to join up with the gathering army along the Plains River in Ithmia, and Shep headed who-knows where. It was the last time I saw both of them together for ten years.”

“It wasn’t until three years later, when I was getting ready to head-off to the front in Jonguria myself, that I saw your father again,” Halam continued. “It was one of the coldest winters that I can remember hitting Tillatia, so cold you’d swear the ice fields of

The Waste had took up residence further south for the year. All me dad and I could do was huddle inside by the fire day after day, doing our best to stay warm, counting the days until spring arrived. The thought of fighting in the hot weather of southern Jonguria had a mass-appeal for many young men living in northern Adjuria that year, let me tell you,” Halam said with a smile, looking into the fire and back into the past. “All of a sudden the door was thrown open, but instead of the wind giving us grief like we expected, there stood Shep, and with him a young girl, little older than you are now. They were damned-near frozen to the bone, they were, so we ushered them into the house and put them down right by the fire, helping them out of their cold, wet clothes and into something warm.”

“There was no mistaking that the girl was pregnant when we stripped her down to her small clothes. Her name was Lily, and she had long brown hair that fell in curls half-way down her back. Her eyes were the color of the green spring grass of the fields, and she had a face that would melt your heart. She was a sweet thing, didn’t say much, but then I never had the chance to know her.”

“They had met in Allidia, where Shep was working for the past three years on the fishing boats that trawled the Bargoese Lake, where she was a fisherman’s daughter. When she unexpectedly got pregnant, her family was outraged, seeing as how she wasn’t married and the man that had done it to her was no more than a wandering hand-for-hire. Shep decided the best thing to do was up and leave, convincing her to go with him. They headed east, doing what odd-jobs they could, until they made it back to Tillatia. It had become obvious that the only way Shep was going to be able to support her and the child was by joining the fight with Jonguria, those being the only jobs paying anything during

the war. That's what brought him back to the farm, to drop Lily off, and to head toward the front."

"It wasn't more than two days that we were all together before Shep and I had to head south to Dockside in Portinia to enlist in the army. It didn't seem to be much of a goodbye that Lily and Shep had, just a few soft-spoken words between them and a kiss, and then we mounted our horses and rode south."

"Shep and I both figured we'd end up in the besieged city of Bindao on the southern Jongurian coast, and, even though we knew the fighting there would be fierce, we were happy that we'd both be together. As it turned out, however, there had been a recent call-up for additional troops to man the defenses at Fadurk on the Isthmus, where, it was believed, the Jongurians were planning an attack. I was sent to Bindao, seeing as I had no experience in wagin' war; all that was needed there were fresh bodies to man the walls. Your father, on the other hand, was sent to Fadurk, as he'd picked up more skills during his travels. We made our goodbyes on the docks of Dockside where I boarded a ship to take me away to Bindao for the remaining seven years of the war."

"Shep arrived in Fadurk just in time for the attack by the Jongurians, who had shipped men across the Ithmian Sea and landed them on the other side of the Barrier Mountains. Fadurk had been expecting an attack, but they thought it would come from over the Isthmus, not from behind them. Nearly the whole garrison was wiped out, caught off-guard by the attack, and the city overrun. A company of men, including your father, managed to make it out of the city, setting up a defensive ring in the mountains. They fought as well as they could against the superior numbers of the Jongurians now holding the strongest defenses in Adjuria, but it made little difference. It wasn't until

reinforcements were sent to aid the former defenders of Fadurk that the city was retaken and the Jongurian army sent running for their ships on the coast. They ran to those ships not to escape, however, but to re-supply. Soon they'd set up a well-fortified base in the mountains from which to keep up attacks, as well as an area to receive fresh troops and supplies from sea."

"And that's how it was for many years. The stalemate set in, and attacks were made by both sides on the enemy defenses, but no real gains were made by either. Unrest was growing amongst the citizens, and calls were being heard at the royal court in Culdovia for the war to be brought to a swift end. There were even calls being made for a change in the royal line, something that hadn't been done since the first Civil War nearly fifty years earlier. It was decided that one more major offensive operation would be planned to shake things up, and hopefully provide the push needed to bolster the men's spirits and drive the nail into the coffin of the Jongurian defenses for good."

"That offensive was to be staged from Fadurk, across the Isthmus, against the city of Waigo. An army would be formed in Fadurk and sent across the Ithmian Desert, while an additional army would be sent by sea to land in the Ximen province in Jonguria where they'd then march overland around the Xishan Mountains to attack the city from behind. The two attacks were to occur simultaneously, allowing us to take the city, and with it a wide avenue in which to send reinforcements flooding across the Isthmus and into Jonguria."

"Since Shep had been one of the survivors of the siege of Fadurk, and played a large part in retaking the city, he was selected to lead a company of men across the Isthmus. It would be a difficult task, as that time of year was the worst possible to travel the narrow

desert waste between continents. The Ithmian Desert was harsh and unyielding at all times, but especially during the summer, when the heat of the day would cook men in their armor, and the cold of the night would freeze their sweat-soaked clothes to their bodies. Shep didn't complain, seeing it as his duty to his men and his country to lead an assault."

"Nothing went right, however. The troops marching over the Isthmus lost substantial amounts of men to the heat of the desert. Corpses lay strewn the entire length between the two cities. The march overland in Ximen proved difficult as well, but with fewer losses. Those troops arrived at Waigo first, and proceeded to attack, not knowing the other wing of the siege had not yet arrived. Able to focus their attention on only one front, as opposed to the Adjurian plan of bringing the fight to two, the Jongurians were able to bring their full might down on the attacking forces, dealing devastating losses to the Adjurians.

"When the forces marching across the Isthmus finally made it, they found that the attack from Ximen had proceeded without them and failed, the Adjurian army already fleeing south to their ships. Your father was one of the lucky ones who made it across the Isthmus to attack the city, but it proved a futile undertaking, as the city of Waigo turned its attention to these new attacks from the west, and made quick work of the few numbers that were left. A retreat was called for, and the soldiers that could headed north to the Ithmian Sea to be picked up by the Adjurian navy, while those on the Isthmus began to trek back along its coast in hopes of being picked up by the navy's boats as well."

“Your father walked back along that coast like much of the remnants of that once-mighty army, but was never picked up. So for the second time in as many months he walked the length of the Ithmian Desert. How he survived, I have no idea.”

“By the time he got back to Fadurk, the war was over. Peace had been declared with Jonguria, but a new war was about to break out between the nobles who declared a change in kings necessary for a lasting peace, and those that wanted the royal line to continue. No doubt furious with the way the Ithmian campaign had been conducted, Shep sided with the rebels, and headed to Regidia to join with their army. Trun and I sided with the loyalists and went to Culdovia to join with them. The two forces met at Baden for the bloodiest fighting I’ve ever seen. Nothing I’d seen in the war with Jonguria could compare to the way our countrymen slaughtered each other over those three days. Perhaps it was pent-up frustration at the ending of the war with Jonguria with no clear resolution, and bloodlust still fresh in most men’s minds from the failed offensive on the Isthmus. Maybe it was a desire to bloody the nobles as the common people had been bloodied for ten years in a foreign land. Whatever it was, those fields outside of the capital ran red with the blood of their people.”

“In the end the Regidian army was nearly wiped-out, your father Shep with them. He’d fallen on the second day of fighting, we learned later, taken by an arrow in the chest. We don’t know for sure, but more than likely he was slain in the charges which your uncle and I had a part in leading.”

“We carried his body back to Eston with us, and had him buried next to the grave of your mother on the farm. She’d died in birthing you not long after the two of us had left

for the fighting all those years before. Soon your granddad followed, and we had three graves where before there'd been none. Most of the country was doing the same.”

“Trun had few prospects with his war wound, and agreed to continue working the farm, and to see that you were brought up proper. I headed to Plowdon and took up a different sort of service for the government, making attacks with my pen instead of my sword, my fighting days behind me.”

When Halam was done he continued to sit and stare into the fire, smoking his pipe. He looked more tired at the end of his tale than he had at the beginning.

Bryn had heard bits and pieces of the story before, from his Uncle Trun and from townfolk in Eston, but he'd never heard the whole thing in one telling before, nor all of it, as far as Halam's account went. It was a lot to take in on one dark night beside the Tillata River.

“Well, boy, I think it'd be good if we both turned in for the night,” Halam said, breaking the silence. “We've got a long day of riding before us, and we'll want to be up with the sun to start it. Good night lad.”

Bryn figured that what Halam said didn't exactly refer to him, as he continued to sit and stare into the fire, his thoughts no doubt focused on those years of war and his lost brother. Bryn found a spot on the ground that had the least amount of rocks and lay down, his back to the fire, and his thoughts on the father he never knew.

FOUR

The sun was poking its head over the eastern horizon and the birds were happily chirping in the trees as Bryn went to the river to wash his face and fill the water skins.

He scooped up a handful of water to his mouth and drank, just then realizing how dry his mouth and throat were. He lowered his head down and drank directly from the river, gulp after gulp, his thirst unquenchable. Finally he was satisfied, and wiped his mouth, his belly now sloshing as he walked. When he came back to the camp, Halam had all of their things packed into Juniper's saddlebags and was already astride her. He pulled Bryn up, and they got back on the road following the river southwest toward Plowdon.

They rode on in silence, the sun rising behind them to warm the crisp spring morning, the river keeping up its rhythmic roar to their right. The scenery changed little. Fields rolled by on either side of the road, interrupted only by the river and the occasional small stand of trees crowding its banks. Unlike the Eston Road, which ran straight from north to south with no interruptions, the Tillata Road had several smaller roads branching from it. These led to various farms scattered over the rising fields, and to the occasional small town, really no more than a cluster of families living in close proximity.

The traffic on the road increased as they moved westward. Carts and wagons laden with goods traveled in both directions, while wains piled with hay would often join from one of the smaller offshoot roads and head on for awhile before turning onto another smaller avenue or continuing on. Some held large sacks of grain stored over the winter and now being shipped to Plowdon for sale. Others headed east to the sea where they'd supply the fishing vessels which traveled the Apsalar Ocean and the Ithmian Sea.

Occasionally they'd see another lone rider on horseback like themselves. They'd ride to catch up or slow to approach, trading greetings, asking about destinations, and exchanging news. These encounters were infrequent when Bryn and Halam had begun that morning, but as the day progressed they became more common.

They ate lunch in the saddle around noon, the same simple meal of dried bread, cheese, and apples, Halam not wanting to find a tavern in one of the small towns lying anywhere from one to several leagues off the main road. By midday they were well into the western portion of Tillatia, Halam informed Bryn, and they'd see the hills increase in size while the fields grew smaller. Houses would begin to frequent the sides of the road more often as they approached the smaller outlying towns of Plowdon. If they weren't slowed down by any more travelers, Halam hinted to Bryn, they'd be in the city by nightfall.

Bryn couldn't remember how many times he'd dreamed of seeing the capital of the province. Often while growing up he'd lie awake at night imagining being in the city, amongst its masses of people, its overflowing marketplaces, and in view of its royal palaces. He knew so much about Plowdon from books he'd read and from stories he'd been told by his uncle Trun: the population over the years, the amount of trade passing through in any given year, the various districts of the city and the people who called them home. Yet he knew that those descriptions couldn't compare to actually *being* there in person, to actually *walking* those streets.

As Halam had said, houses began to crowd into the road as the sun moved from burning their necks to stinging their eyes. The road began to widen, and where once there were nothing but rolling fields, there were now hills. The road climbed and dipped amongst them, and soon there were crowds of people thronging the road, many more people than Bryn had seen anywhere at one time before, even during harvest days in Eston.

Finally as the sky began to grow darker with passing minute, they headed over one final hill. Before them, set into a large valley, lay what could only be the city of Plowdon.

She was set like an immensity upon the land, fields surrounding her and roads leading from all directions. Bryn gaped open-mouthed at the sheer size of the city. It took up acres and acres of land. Fields were all around the walls, farmers busily working them. Countless wagons and people on horseback moved to and from the city gates, three of which Bryn could see set into the immense city walls, which towered over the flat fields around them.

Built hundreds of years earlier from stone cut and chiseled from the Montino Mountains and transported downriver on immense barges, the walls were the tallest structures that Bryn had ever seen; that is, until he looked beyond them into the city itself. Well inside of the walls, moving toward the center of the city, roofs began to push upward into the sky, reaching, and then surpassing, the heights of the walls built to protect them. Up and up they rose as they approached the city's center, where what could only be the royal pala jutting up into the sky above them. Built over several generations reaching back hundreds of years into the past, well before the walls were a shadow of their current glory, the Tillatian kings built there palace on some low hills surrounded by the choicest farm land for leagues. Begun as a defensive castle in a time when danger could come from anywhere at anytime, the palace had grown over the years to include several more buildings erected around the original castle keep. Great spires were built to reach ever higher, providing views of the surrounding countryside, as well as any possible threat of danger. Now, however, the palace held only a commanding view over

the city that grew around it, keeping a protective eye over the lives of thousands, any threats from outside being things of the past.

“Well, lad, welcome to the capital of Tillatia,” Halam said over his shoulder. “What do you think?”

Bryn had a hard time putting what he saw into words. Every description of the city he’d heard or read didn’t do justice to the sight before him. Finally he was able to utter just one word.

“Amazing!”

“Aye,” Halam laughed, “that she is lad, that she is.”

Halam urged Juniper forward on the road, and they continued down the rise of hills to the valley floor below, heading toward the main gate of the city.

Wagons laden with goods moved in and out of the city gates as they approached. Two large guard towers rose on each side of the massive wooden gate, and a thick portcullis made of steel hung above their heads as they passed through the massive doors and into the city.

Once inside the hard-packed dirt road under their feet gave way to well-worn stone cobbles heading off in a myriad of directions to form a city square. Lanterns burned from posts well above the street, providing light. Wide avenues jutted out from the main square in front of the gate, trees lining their long promenades. A large fountain made of carved stone sat in the middle of the square, fashioned to look like three women holding up offering bowls to the heavens. Numerous small stands were set up, merchants calling out their wares to passersby, offering everything from shabby cookware to fine silks from

Jonguria. People bartered and argued with the sellers, their faces hard and unyielding one minute, smiling and friendly the next.

The sheer number of people in the city was overwhelming to Bryn. Some wore rich velvets and silks of every color imaginable, servants trailing behind them with goods purchased that day in the markets. Men decked out in armor carrying hauberks and wearing breastplates with the insignia of Tillatia, a plow on a golden field, roamed amongst the citizens, looking for any breaking of the peace and keeping order simply by their presence. Men and women sporting leather armor and swords at their belts moved with confidence and ease through the streets, their heads held high. Workers hustled about everywhere, many carrying large crates of goods to and fro in their arms, their vision obscured more than not by the bulk in their arms. The well-dressed and tattered eagerly jumped out of their way upon sight of them. Beggars scurried and limped among all, small wooden and tin bowls held out before them as they smiled their toothless smiles at the crowds.

“First things first, Bryn,” Halam said. “We’ll head to the trade office so I can hear the news from Culdovia and meet with my associate Rodden.”

“Sounds fine to me, Uncle Halam,” Bryn replied.

They made their way around the busy marketplace and headed down one of the narrow, tree-lined avenues leading further into the city. Buildings rose two- and three-stories high on either side of them, most containing shops on the ground floor. They sold foodstuffs, household items, and artisan’s crafts, with living spaces for the owners and other citizens on the upper floors.

Halam led Juniper through the winding streets, making turns here and there without any clear idea of where he was going, as far as Bryn could tell, the streets becoming narrower as they progressed. As they rounded another corner, Bryn certain that they had gone in at least three circles already, a wide square opened before them. Tall buildings, some with domes, rose around the area. This square was completely different from the one they saw at the gate. There were no vendors yelling from stands set up, and fewer people moved about. Something else was different which Bryn couldn't quite put his foot on, and then it hit him: this part of the city was actually quiet, something not encountered since they'd come through the gate.

Halam headed toward one of the smaller buildings to the side of an immense domed structure.

"This is the government district," he said as he dismounted, helping Bryn down as well.

"It sure is quiet here," Bryn observed.

"Yes, most business here is conducted during the day, when the government officials are in their offices. At night all quiets down in this area of the city."

Well-dressed couples walked through the square, their shadows flickering in the lamplight. It seemed like an oasis in the middle of the city, a great place to get away from the constant barrage of noise and activity.

Halam watched Bryn looking around. "The city watch discourages unsavory characters from frequenting the government district at night," he said. "That's why you see so few people. Only those who look respectable," he gestured at a passing couple, "are allowed to stroll through this area after dark."

“If the government offices are all closed, then what are we doing here?” Bryn asked.

“Well, the offices may be closed, but that doesn’t mean that people aren’t still at work,” Halam said, pointing to the many windows with lights shining brightly inside. “I’ve a mind that my colleague Rodden is one of those people.”

Halam tied Juniper to a post and began to walk toward the building. They made their way around to a small alley toward the back where a wooden staircase led to a large oak door set into the stone of the second floor. Halam pulled a ring of keys from his breast pocket, fitting one into the keyhole, and with an audible ‘click,’ pushed the door open.

Inside was what looked to be a large library room. Shelves of books lined the walls, with binders full of papers crowding amongst them for space. Papers were stacked upon the large wooden tables set in the middle of the room, illuminated by a single large lamp glowing off to one side of the room. Chairs were set into the table, but most were pulled out and had stacks of papers sitting on them as well.

“I see the secretary is still out sick,” Halam said as he headed toward a door at the back of the room. Bryn followed, trying to look at the papers and books which lay open around him. Tables of figures stared back at him, and he caught some titles such as “Tillata River Run-off Totals” and “Grain Output of the Northeast Quadrant for years 710 to 713.”

Halam pushed open the door and went through without pause. Inside were two large desks and an equal amount of papers piled just as high as in the other room. Books lay open and scattered on the desks, chairs, and floor, with few actually still on the shelves. A large lamp stood to the side of the room near the window, illuminating the whole room.

It was nearly the same as the other room, except a man sat at one of the desks, his back hunched over a ledger, his hand moving furiously along the paper, pausing only to dip it into the inkwell at his right. He made no move to stop as Halam and Bryn entered the room and shut the door behind them, instead raising his left arm to point at the desk next to him.

“The reports on the harvests of the last three years compared to those in Fallownia are ready and on the desk there,” he said, waving his fingers up and down as he pointed. “You’ll find them all accurate and complete, and ready for official stamping.”

“Well it’s about blasted time, I should say, they should have been ready and on my desk a fortnight ago!” Halam said in a stern voice.

The man’s rapid writing came to a furious stop, and Bryn was certain he’d ruined the page he was working on. He turned his body to the side and peered over his shoulder at them. Seeing Halam, the uncertain look vanished and a wide smile broke out on his face.

“Halam,” he cried, rising from his chair and moving over toward them, “welcome back.” He clasped Halam’s hand tightly and gave him a few slaps on the back.

“Well, burning the midnight oil, I see, eh Rodden? Halam laughed, slapping the man on the back as well.”

“You know how it is these days, Halam, with the council set to meet, they need all kinds of information to keep their clerks busy, figuring this and counting that, not that we haven’t done it all for them countless times already, mind you.”

Rodden was a tall man, taller than Halam by a hand or more when he was standing tall and straight, as he was now, a great change from the initial sight of him stooped over

his desk. His hair was blonde but going to grey and cut very short, so that it stood up straight on top of his head. His arms and legs were long and wiry and he was also very thin, possessing none of the muscles of Halam, nor the large belly. He was dressed in a tight-fitting brown linen doublet with long sleeves, and matching leggings.

He smiled at Halam, and then seemed to notice that he wasn't alone. "And this must be your nephew from Eston," he said, looking Bryn up and down. "Pleasure to meet you, son," he said, offering his hand, "my name's Rodden Stor, trade official for his majesty's royal court in Culdovia."

Bryn took Rodden's hand, surprised at the strength behind it. "Hello sir, good to meet you as well."

"I trust your ride from Eston was well and uneventful," he asked Bryn.

"Yes sir, it was."

"And am I correct in guessing that this is your first time in Plowdon?"

"Why, yes sir, it is at that."

"And how do you like our fair city, may I ask?"

"I like it just fine, sir, that is, from what I've seen of it so far. Uncle Halam and I went through the gate and then came straight here, so I haven't seen much...at least, I don't think so," Bryn said, looking up at his uncle uncertainly.

"No, Bryn's not seen much yet, and I don't suspect he'll have much chance to see anymore," Halam told Rodden. "I'm intent on gathering up the needed materials and heading south on the King's Road to Baden as soon as possible."

"Well, that shouldn't be too difficult," Rodden said, "I've been working each night since you left to get all the harvest reports since the war together properly, and was just

finishing up on the last few years as you two came in. I suspect that the task will be completed by tomorrow morning.”

“Aye, that is good to hear,” Halam smiled, relief showing on his face.

“And what are your plans for the evening,” Rodden enquired.

“It’s been a long two days of riding, and I think that Bryn and I’ll get to bed early tonight, hopefully set out before the sun is too high tomorrow.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem, I’ll continue my work tonight,” Rodden said, putting his hands on their backs and escorting them toward the door, “just check back tomorrow morning and I think you can be on your way.”

“Aye, thank you Rodden, we’ll see you on the morrow then. Goodnight.”

“And goodnight to you as well,” he said as Halam and Bryn walked out the office and back through the book-filled room to the outer door. They walked back out into the night and headed toward the main square.

“We’ll go to my rooms now, Bryn,” Halam said. “They’re not much, but it’ll sure be nice to get off the ground for a change.”

“Yes sir,” Bryn said as he untied Juniper from the post and climbed on, his eyes already growing heavy as they once again joined the bustling avenues of the city.

FIVE

The sun was shining brightly through the narrow windows when Bryn awoke the next morning. Glancing around at the small room which served as Halam’s living quarters in a house off the government district, Bryn realized he was alone. He figured

his uncle must have gotten an early start so as to ensure all was ready for their journey later in the day.

He got up and stretched, looking around the room. It was a single room, with two windows, one opposite the heavy door, another on the wall next to it. A single large bed crowded up against most of one wall, and bookshelves filled to capacity occupied another. A makeshift cot was set up on the floor against the bookshelves, which was where Bryn had fallen asleep.

They'd come to the room after having a small meal in one of the local taverns close to Halam's office. The serving woman had known Halam by name, and they'd joked quite a bit while Bryn looked at all the interesting people who filled the common room. Most had looked to be officials or merchants of some sort or another, judging by their fine clothes and the snatches of conversation he'd been able to overhear. They'd been served roasted mutton with dark bread and had washed it down with a tankard of even darker ale. Halam didn't talk much except to say that he'd go to a few different offices early in the morning to ensure they were prepared with all they needed for the council in Baden. The council was to meet in a week's time, so they didn't have to rush down the King's Road, which he thought would be good for Bryn, giving him a chance to see his country at a leisurely pace.

By the time they'd arrived at Halam's room Bryn was so exhausted from the long day on horseback and the sights of the city, not to mention the ale, that he was asleep on the cot before Halam had even had a chance to close the door.

Bryn headed to the small washstand and threw cold water on his face to wipe the sleep from his eyes. He ate the last of his small apples from his travel pack as he

browsed the books lining the shelves. More government reports on agriculture, mostly, but a few book on the history of Adjuria as well. Bryn pulled down a book dealing with the aftermath of the East-West War, as the war with Jonguria was called, and the Adjurian Civil War which followed. He began to read the last few chapters.

The war with Jonguria had dragged on longer than anyone had anticipated, the book said, and the ranks of the army and navy had grown thin. Peasants with no previous military experience were called up to fight, forcing them to leave their homes and families to an uncertain future. Nobles began to question the king's strategy at court. It was clear when the stalemate developed that the current strategy had failed. The king was unwilling to admit this and argued that the fight must continue, as he was very militarily-minded, having grown up in Mercentia and been trained as a soldier. He could not understand why his armies were unable to defeat the Jongurians, and believed that if only more troops were thrown at the enemy, victory would come.

The king was persuaded to keep these views by his councilors, many of whom cared only for the trappings of power and were unconcerned with the heavy losses among the citizenry. A small group of Regidian advisors viewed the growing discontent over the war among the citizenry as a chance to secure more power for themselves.

Regidia sought out the same supporters she had when the succession crisis and previous Civil War had erupted fifty years earlier. Promising favor and royal positions of power to high-ranking nobles, Regidia enticed the provinces of Equinia, Allidia, Hotham, and Oschem to join in the intrigues, and a coup was set into motion. The provinces of Fallownia and Shefflin could not be persuaded to go along with Regidia, seeing their agricultural and mining interests too important to jeopardize, while

Mercentia was not even considered in the proposal as the current royal line hailed from there.

The conspiring nobles waited for the right opportunity to act, viewing a large military failure on the battlefield to be the propitious moment. For this reason, pressure was put on the king to stage a massive military strike to end the stalemate. It did not matter to the conspiring nobles whether Adjuria won the war or not; indeed, it would be far easier to establish a new royal line if Jongurian interests did not have to be dealt with, as they would were the Adjurians to be the victors.

The king was pushed into a risky military move, called the 'Breakout,' which entailed a joint strike against the city of Waigo from two fronts simultaneously. The 'Breakout,' however, proved a massive failure, and the nobles acted swiftly. With peasants on the point of rebellion because of further increases in conscription to keep the war effort going, peace was called for throughout the land, a call which the nobles encouraged. However, peace was not enough. The nobles wanted more: a complete change of the royal line. The Regidians were the main voice in this chorus, seeing themselves as the beneficiaries of such a change. The court was split upon this, however, and it looked as though the current king would continue to rule after the peace negotiations concluded with Jonguria.

Seeing their well-laid plans going by the wayside, the Regidians knew that the time for drastic measures had arrived. They would dispose the king themselves. An assassin was dispatched into the royal palace dressed as a Jongurian soldier. Equipped with a Jongurian-made crossbow with a Jongurian poison on the tip of the bolt, the assassin, with the aid of the Regidians, gained entry into the king's chambers and shot the king in

the chest, escaping undetected. The poison was an unnecessary measure: the bolt killed the king instantly.

The king's assassination was set to renew the war, but the now Regidian-controlled court called for a cooling of tempers, and an end to hostilities. They made the claim that evidence indicated it was not in fact a Jongurian soldier who killed the king, but a Shefflin mercenary, an accusation made because of the province's refusal to go along with the Regidian intrigues. Most people did not believe this, but it was still enough to put doubt into many minds. After ten years of war draining the country of men and resources, everyone was ready for peace and the dubious claim was accepted so that the war might end.

The Regidians pressed their claims to the throne, but it was agreed by a majority of the provinces that the current royal line would continue to rule. This meant that the king's ten-year old son would assume the throne, to be overseen by a regent until coming of age. The Regidians would have none of this, and called for a nullification of the rights of succession, the devastating war the main reason for their arguments against the royal line. With the assistance of the conspiring provinces, the Regidians rode into Culdovia with a sizeable army and forcibly took the new king prisoner, putting one of their own on the throne, Grandon Fray. There were few able to contest this. Many of the other provinces, remembering the devastating failure of the 'Breakout' agreed with the Regidians' argument about the unfitness of the royal family. Also, the Adjurian army and navy were still in the process of extricating themselves from Jonguria, and could do little to dispute this latest move. The only token resistance came from Mercentia, which sent all the soldiers it could to Culdovia, but it was no match for the army the Regidians

had been building in secret for many years in anticipation of this moment. The new king, Grandon Fray, established their court, and things looked to be well for a time. The majority of the army and navy was disbanded and began to head toward their various provinces.

Seeing in this latest political development shadows of history, not all provinces were content to let this plot continue. Montino remembered all too well the outcome of the previous Regidian court in power, and decided action was called for. A small army was formed with the support of Mercentia and Shefflin. The province of Duldovia also managed to raise troops and even convinced a sizable portion of the garrison from Fadurk to join them. This joint force moved south toward Baden, the capital city of Culdovia.

Having disbanded the royal army so as to lessen any chance of a military coup against themselves, the Regidians were caught off-guard. They did all they could to swiftly raise an army from their loyal supporters and had it march toward Baden.

The conspiring provincial armies of Regidia, Equinia, Allidia, Hotham, and Oschem met the loyal armies of Mercentia, Montino, Shefflin, and Duldovia north of Baden, and battled each other for three days. The conspirators were defeated, and the Regidian royal line came to a swift end when King Grandon Fray was captured. Many called for his death, but several of the nobles on the royal council still had some loyalty to their former leader. So instead of death he was exiled to Desolatia Island and would forevermore be called the 'False King.'

Instead of putting the ten-year old king back on the throne, it was agreed that a time of transition was required. The royal court would take over the task of governing, with

all of the provinces having an equal say in matters. The five conspiring provinces were not allowed to join at first, but were assured if they swore their loyalty to a united Adjuria, they would soon be welcomed back.

A time of uneasy peace developed. After a ten-year war with Jonguria, and a brief civil war amongst themselves, the country was ready to put down her arms and get back to the day-to-day process of living peacefully.

Bryn put down the book as he heard the door open, and saw Halam enter the room.

“Good, you’re up,” he said as he strode into the room, his arms full of papers, Rodden trailing behind, trying to catch those that flew loose from his uncle’s grasp. “We’ll be setting out soon, now. I’ve secured you a horse of your own from the province’s stock so we won’t have to share Juniper anymore, and I’ve got a clerk set to meet us at the gate with the supplies we’ll need to see us to Baden.” He set the papers down into a pile on a table against the wall, a good amount of them spilling to the floor. Rodden came up behind him, stooping down to grasp the papers and rising again to throw them on the table with the rest. While he began to put some order into them Halam turned to Bryn.

“Adjurian history, eh?” he asked, eyeing the book in Bryn’s hands.

“I figured you’d want me to wait when I woke up, and this looked like an interesting book,” Bryn said, a trace of guilt in his voice.

“Well, most would say that old politics are best forgotten, but I suppose there might be something of interest there.” He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his brow. “And whatever will keep you from getting lost in the streets is also fine by me.”

Halam seemed agitated and a bit on edge this morning, and Bryn felt that it was more than just the last minute arrangements of their departure which were causing him stress. He didn't want to say anything that might increase his ill-will this morning, so he kept his mouth shut.

"I think I can sort these and have them bundled while Bryn gets ready," Rodden said as he began thumbing through the pages on the table, the pile now collected into a neat stack before him. "I don't think there's anything too important in them, but it'd still be good to double-check them to ensure we haven't missed anything."

Halam grunted, and turned to Bryn. "So are you packed and ready then?" he asked.

Bryn stood up and grabbed his bag, putting the book back in its place on the shelf.

"I'm ready, uncle Halam," he said, determination on his face.

* * * * *

Halam, Bryn, and Rodden rode their horses toward the South Gate, which would lead them to the King's Road and south toward Baden. Bryn's new horse was a dapple-grey dun with a flowing mane and a tail of darker black. His name was Ash, and he seemed much larger to Bryn than Juniper had, but that could simply be because he was now riding alone. Rodden rode a red-brown gelding with a large white nose named Brick.

The streets were much more crowded this morning than they were last night. People dashed and shuffled every which way with no apparent motive to their hustle. The city looked a lot different as well. The early morning sun cast a bright sheen onto the buildings, the stone, brick, and plaster reflecting back into his eyes. They made their way from the government district in the center of the city south toward the gate. The markets

were much more crowded, and they had trouble getting their horses through the crowds. Men and women were yelling at the top of their voices, crying out goods and prices in all manner of accents and dialects.

“Get your Fallownian wool here, the finest wool from the south. Allidian woodcarvings for sale, only top-quality workmanship. King-size mackerel today only, fresh from the Duldovian Sea only yesterday.”

There was so much noise that Bryn looked forward to getting back to the peace and quiet of the road.

Somehow they managed to wend their way through the crowds of the marketplace to approach the city walls. They were larger this morning than Bryn had remembered them. Mighty rocks of all shapes and sizes were mortared together to form the wall, which towered over all the surrounding structures. Massive crenellations were spread out along the width of the wall, guards posted to look out into the surrounding countryside. Like the gate leading to the Tillata Road, the South Gate was also surrounded by a large square with many different stands set up, sellers yelling out their goods. It began to seem to Bryn that most of the goods were identical and wondered at the people scampering to buy them, having no use for any of them himself. Guards lined the gate on both sides, and like the gate the day before, this gate too had a mighty portcullis looming large overhead.

When they rode near the gate a young man came running up to them, a large sack in his arms, shouting to Halam.

“Ah Corrick, good to see you here on time,” Halam said to the man as he walked Juniper over to him.

“Yes sir, I’ve got the goods you wanted. These provisions should see you to Baden with some left over, I imagine,” he said as he handed the sack up to Halam.

“Aye, that’s good to hear,” Halam said as he got off Juniper, handing the reins to the man. He opened the sack, revealing two loaves of black bread, a large wheel of cheese, several apples and pears, and a string of red sausages. He walked over to Rodden and opened one of the saddle packs strapped to Brick. He put the bread inside it, then came to Bryn and did the same with the cheese and sausage, before putting the fruit in his own packs and remounting Juniper.

“I thank you, Corrick” Halam said as he wheeled the horse in the direction of the gate once again, “now we’ll be heading out.”

They steered their horses through the people flooding in from the countryside to sell their wares for the day, rode through the city gate, and were soon making their way down the King’s Road.

Leaving the great city of Plowdon was much the same as arriving. The road, which had become wider as they approached, now grew narrower as they departed. The hubbub of farmers and travelers on wagons and afoot lessened as they rode on. The hills rose and fell as they had on the approach, but after a while the ground began to level-out, and rolling fields dominated the landscape for all around.

“Well, Bryn, what do you think of the countryside of Tillatia?” Rodden asked as he rode up alongside him. Bryn figured that he was dissatisfied with trying to get a pleasant word from Halam; whatever setback or rebuke he’d suffered in the morning was still troubling him.

“It all pretty much looks the same to me ever since we left the farm outside of Eston, sir,” Bryn replied.

Rodden laughed. “That it does. There really isn’t much to our province, now is there? Just a lot of fields, farms, and livestock. If it wasn’t for the Tillata River cutting the province in half, you wouldn’t know if you were in the north, south, east, or west.” He chuckled to himself, finding some amusement in his own words.

“I assure you, however, young Bryn,” Rodden continued, “the landscape will change much on our journey over the next few days. Not much today, mind you, and probably not much tomorrow either, but soon we’ll reach the plains of northern Culdovia, part of the vast Klamath Plain. The Plain stretches from the Apsalar Ocean all the way on the far reaches of western Shefflin across the entirety of Adjuria to the Ipsalar Ocean off the eastern coast of Ithmia. It touches nine of Adjuria’s thirteen provinces, and covers some of them almost entirely.” He stopped to think for a moment, then gave Bryn an inquiring glance. “Tell me Bryn, do you know which?”

Bryn looked up at the sky, thinking. He had read about the Klamath Plain, covering thousands of leagues of land, and had even seen a map or two in some of those books. He straightened his posture on Ash and looked Rodden in the face.

“Shefflin, Oschem, Allidia, Equinia, Montino, Mercenia, Culdovia, Duldovia, and Ithmia,” Bryn said, putting up a finger for each name he recited. “And if I’m not mistaken, sir,” he continued, “I think some of southern Hotham is touched by the Klamath Plain as well, in the areas where the icy tundra of The Waste doesn’t go further south.”

“Very good!” Rodden shouted, a smile large upon his face. “Really quite impressive. I think you do have me there on Hotham, now. Really, Halam,” Rodden shouted up to Bryn’s uncle, “this nephew of yours has quite the head on his shoulders.”

Halam gave a grunt from ahead of them, but other than that continued to ride on in silence.

“What’s the matter with Uncle Halam today?” Bryn asked Rodden.

The smile slowly faded from Rodden’s face and he looked ahead at Halam. He reined Brick in closer, leaning in to talk to Bryn, his voice little more than a whisper.

“He learned today that Jossen Fray will be representing the Regidian interests at the council in Baden.”

“Who’s Jossen Fray?” Bryn asked.

“He is a noble in the ruling family of Regidia. During the war with Jonguria he and your uncle were both stationed at Bindao, but Jossen was called back early to Adjuria. It was a rare thing, and we found out later it was because he had a direct part in the plans which would lead to the Civil War. They met again on the battlefield at Baden, and although I’m not really sure what occurred between the two men there, Halam has hated him ever since.”

“If he had a part in bringing about the civil war, then why wasn’t he tried and sent off to Desolatia like the False King?”

“Well,” Rodden said, “a lot of things were hard to prove, especially those things behind the scenes in Regidia. It was easy to send Grandon Fray into exile since he was the head of the Regidian royal family; it wasn’t so easy to send all the others involved.”

They rode on in silence for a while, both thinking of times and peoples past. After a time Rodden spoke up.

“This talk of war’s made me forget about the geography,” he said. “I think I had just mentioned that the Klamath Plain would come across our path in a day or so, and when that happens, we’ll know that we’ve entered Culdovia. Shortly thereafter, we’ll see the Montino Mountains to our west, but they’re a shadow of their majestic glory. To really get a sense of how mighty and imposing those mountains are, and why the Montinos are able to stay in them and thus out of politics, you have to travel further west. They rise like daggers from the valley floors, straight up into the heavens. You know, Bryn, they stay snow-covered all year long.”

“Yes,” Bryn said, “I’ve read that Montino has the longest independent history of any of the provinces because it has its mountains to keep the world out.”

“Precisely! The Montinos have nothing to fear from the rest of Adjuria, and it’s actually Adjuria which should be thankful. The Montinos have gotten the rest of the provinces out of a bind on more than one occasion.”

“They were the first ones to raise an army to challenge the Regidian seizure of the throne,” Bryn exclaimed excitedly.

“Correct again, my boy,” Rodden shouted so Halam could hear. “So tell me, young scholar, what will we see next on our journey?”

Bryn thought for a few moments before speaking. “We’ll continue along the Klamath Plain, but the Montino Mountains will lessen on our right, eventually disappearing altogether. Further on, the King’s Road will meet the Montino River coming out of the mountains, and we’ll follow it all the way to Baden.”

“Right again. I can’t slip anything by you, young man,” Rodden said smiling. “But tell me, is that all?”

“No, when we meet the Montino River to our west, we’ll also see the King’s Wood on our east.”

“Yes, when the King’s Wood is upon us we know that we aren’t but a day away from Baden.”

“Yes, but before we get to Baden, while still following the river, we’ll also begin to see another forest to the east of us, the Baltika Forest which covers most of Regidia.”

Bryn looked down at the road for a moment then up to Rodden. “Does King’s Road go through the forest, or is it cut back from the road?” he asked.

“There are some sections of the road which are clear, but for the most part we’ll be traveling through forest. Whether it be the King’s Wood or the Baltika Forest I know not, but the trees will crowd in on us so thickly overhead that in some areas it’ll seem we’re traveling at night even though the sun shines brightly somewhere overhead.”

A chill went up Bryn’s spine. He hadn’t read that in any of the books. Surely there was nothing to be concerned of, though.

“You’ve traveled the King’s Road to Baden many times, Rodden?” Bryn asked.

“Yes, many times. An official for the Tillatian government *will* tend to travel a lot, giving reports on grain, discussing trade, and generally letting the rest of the world remember we’re not all farmers lying by idly in our fields,” he said with a laugh.

“So is the King’s Lake right next to the city then,” Bryn asked.

“Oh yes, it goes right up to one portion of the city walls. Large docks are there with all manner of fishing boats and transport ships. The lake’s large enough that many of the

goods arriving from the northern provinces are sent across the lake by ship to Portinia rather than overland around the lake. It saves much time, and is cheaper as well. Some of the boats are small enough that they can even manage the King's River all the way to Dockside on the coast.

"It truly must be a sight, one I can't wait to see," Bryn replied.

"Well, you won't have long to wait. In a few days time we'll be there, and you'll be marveling at the lake yourself."

The conversation trailed off after that and the three rode on in silence for most of the afternoon. Fields and more fields stretched as far as Bryn could see. They would pass wagons loaded with grain and goods bound for Coria, Lindonis, or Baden, or maybe even all the way down to the coast where they would have their choice of Dockside or Fielding, or any of the lesser towns along the way. Bryn found that he could make the time go by better when he speculated on where they were coming from and where they were bound to. Sometimes riders on horses would pass them in either direction, moving at a gallop to get somewhere fast. They would move to the side of the road, letting them pass. Other times it would be a single peasant or farmer walking along the road.

The sun began to go down over the fields on their right, and when they passed a lone tree off in a field, Halam indicated they'd pull off of the road a ways and make camp for the night. There was no wood to be found anywhere, so they did without a fire. Bryn tied the horses to the tree and the three huddled around, eating their dry bread, sausage, and cheese while talking little. Halam still seemed to be in a gruff mood from the morning's news, and this ill-humor was rubbing off on Rodden, who also chose to say

little. When it grew dark, Bryn decided he would turn in early, and rolled his bedroll out to lie down, staring up at the stars until sleep overtook him.

SIX

The sky began to grow dark with rain clouds the next afternoon. All day it had appeared that Halam's bad mood was still upon him, and it'd now spread to Rodden as well, for he hadn't said anything that morning, all traces of his joyous outlook from the day before gone. Bryn was content to ride with his thoughts and let the others stew in theirs. He wondered what the council meeting in Baden would be like. It was obviously important, judging from the amount of materials his uncle and Rodden had taken along. He finally decided to ask Rodden as the afternoon wore on.

"What will the royal council be like?" he asked.

Rodden continued on as if he'd not heard, Halam even glancing over at him as the question was left unanswered. When Bryn was about ready to forget about the chance for any talk this day, Rodden took a deep breath and spoke.

"All fourteen provinces will have emissaries at the meeting," he said. "It will be much the same as a normal trade meeting held in the royal council, except this one will be discussing the possibility of opening up negotiations with Jonguria again after all of these years, a prospect which all the provinces should be eager to see occur." He looked over at Halam to see if any affirmation of his words was forthcoming, but when that appeared unlikely, he continued, dealing with each province in turn.

"Shefflin will be eager to have a new market for its steel after all these years," Rodden judged. "There're only so many uses for the material, which lasts practically forever here in Adjuria, and the demand in Jonguria must be quite large after so long an

absence. Oschem would like to have additional buyers for its handicrafts, and Hotham for its minerals. Allidia will be eager to have additional purchasers for her wood products from the Tirana Forest, as well as the produce from the Bargoes Lake. Mercentia is an interesting case. She has always been the best producer of weapons in the country, and I'm positive that her emissaries will argue that it's well past time to trade arms once again between the two nations, though I'm not sure the rest of the council will look favorably on the idea."

He paused for a moment in thought, and then continued.

"Equinia will want to get rid of her surplus horses, sheep, and wool, while both Tillatia and Fallownia will be more than happy to supply grain for the vast Jongurian Empire. Regidia I should think'll be most cunning in ensuring that her wood supplies find better markets across the Isthmus than Allidia, and we can expect a rigorous debate between the two provinces. Portinia will trade what produce she can from her long coastline, but I think her real profit will lie in shipping the goods by sea. Culdovia and Duldovia will both profit from their freshwater fish and bounteous plains produce, as well as the precious stones from their mines. Ithmia will, as usual, remain neutral; while what Montino will do I haven't a clue."

He wound up his expectations of the provinces' trade ideas and fell quiet. Bryn was amazed at how knowledgeable Rodden was, and even Halam gave a low whistle at the recitation.

The storm clouds grew thicker overhead as evening began to draw near. Fields continued to be the only thing in sight in all directions. None of them relished the idea of a night outdoors in a downpour.

“Let’s press on a little faster and make it to Coria before these clouds grow any worse and decide to open up on us,” Halam said over his shoulder to the other two.

“Sounds good to me,” replied Rodden.

They put their heels to the horses and began a steady gallop down the road, the dust rising in clouds behind them. The sky grew darker as they rode on, and a few flashes of lightning appeared on the horizon. The tall grasses in the fields blew in waves with the wind, and a few drops began to fall on them.

“We’re still quite a few leagues from Coria, if my memory serves,” Rodden shouted over the sound of the horses’ hooves and the growing wind. “If we’re lucky we’ll make it before the heavens open up on us.”

He misspoke. Loud peals of thunder sounded, and the rain came, slow at first, but quickly turning into heavy sheets. The road began to darken from the increased amount of water now falling, and the riders did the best they could to bundle their coats tighter about them to keep dry. With no break on the horizon it was becoming apparent that they’d soon be drenched if this rain continued before they reached Coria for the night.

On they rode, the rain coming down in torrents. All three were now soaked and miserable, but they had no choice but to continue. There were no copses of trees anywhere in sight where they might find a respite from the weather. Each hoped that the next rise in the road they passed over would show Coria in the distance.

Then she was there. They came over a low hill, and the city stood in front of them, the most welcome sight they’d seen all day. It was not a large city, compared to Plowdon, but it was certainly the second largest that Bryn had laid eyes on. A large wall surrounded it, made entirely of large logs thrust into the earth. Battlements sprouted

along the length of it, and in the center was a large city gate, two large wooden doors framing it. A small keep rose high from the center of the city, the only structure to tower higher than the walls.

They kicked their horses into a fast run and were soon approaching the gates to the city. They ran through past the guards and continued on down the muddy streets. There were low buildings, none more than two-storeys, and most were shut tight against the rain, which was now coming down in buckets. Halam led them down a few narrow streets, and eventually they stopped at an establishment that appeared to be an inn. The sign outside proclaimed it to be the "*Lazy Plow*." Halam dismounted and moved quickly for the door, throwing it open and stepping inside before the other two had a chance to get off their horses. He was back out in a moment, a young boy trailing behind him.

"The inn's full up," Halam said upon returning, a sour look on his face. "Seems the rain's driven everyone off the roads. I managed to secure us a place in the stables, however. Give your reins over to Seldin here and he'll show us the way," Halam said, motioning to the boy, "he'll take the horses around back to the stable where they'll be fed and groomed."

They did as they were told, and were soon led toward the back of the tavern. A large stable stood before them, the doors thrown open and a single lantern illuminating the inside. Straw covered the floor leading to different-sized stalls. Some looked like they could barely hold a horse, while others could probably hold several bulls, by the look of them. The stableboy led their three horses to adjoining stalls and set out a pail of oats in front of them. There were quite a few horses altogether, but it was clear that there was also empty space.

“There, milord,” Seldin said, pointing toward a stall in the back. “All cleaned out this morning, fresh straw and everything.”

“Thank you lad,” Halam said as the boy went back to his post in the warm common room.

Halam motioned for them to make themselves as comfortable as possible, telling them to get what sleep they could, for he wanted to be out of this barn as early as possible and back on the road. He expected to cover a good amount of distance on the morrow, and they’d ideally be sleeping on the fringes of the Montino Mountains when the next night came. Bryn looked around and picked the best spot he could. It wasn’t much, but it was dry. The other two settled themselves with horse blankets and mounds of straw, and the three listened to the rain hitting the streets outside, eventually drifting off to sleep.

* * * * *

Bryn awoke to the sounds of horses whinnying, straw ruffling, and water dripping. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, looking around. Halam and Rodden were both up and looking to their mounts. Seeing the ground outside, Bryn saw that the street had been turned to mud with large puddles everywhere, although those puddles showed no signs of raindrops this morning. They would ride this day.

“Good, you’re up,” Halam said, looking down on Bryn. “We’ll go into the inn to eat and then get back on the road.”

After the horses were readied, the three headed back into the common room. The fire was just embers now, having died down in the night. The room was nearly empty save for a table with two mud-spattered men who were most likely ready to set out early

as well. Rodden calling to the serving girl, who looked as though she hadn't slept a wink yet.

"What's the food here in the morning?" Rodden asked the girl.

"We have porridge, bread, and eggs for three coppers," she said.

"We'll have three plates of that with some milk too, if you have it," Halam said to her.

"Yes sir," she said, heading back to the kitchen.

A few moments after she'd gone and they'd adjusted themselves on the benches, Halam spoke up.

"Road'll be bad today, with all the rain we had last night."

"I know," Rodden agreed, "I don't think I heard it let up until early this morning, not more than an hour ago."

"It'll slow us for sure," Halam said, frustration showing in his voice. "But there's not much to be done for it. We'll have to do the best we can and hopefully the weather will be kinder to us today."

"I just hope we can find another dry spot to sleep if it does continue," Bryn chimed in.

"No worry about that lad," said his uncle, "we'll soon be nearing the mountains, and there'll be lots of small stands of trees thick enough to keep the weather off our heads for a night."

"Another night of sleeping on the ground?" Bryn asked.

Rodden laughed. “Your nephew is beginning to learn the truth of the traveling life. It’s not all fancy rooms and fine meals, now is it? No, most of the time it’s the hard earth and even harder bread.”

Even Halam got a chuckle out of that, and Bryn smiled as well. It wasn’t so bad, he figured, interesting for sure, and it certainly beat hauling stones or threshing grain.

Their food arrived with three tall glasses of milk, and the three set to their plates. The eggs were hot, the bread fresh baked, and the milk cold. When they’d finished, Halam paid the serving girl and the three headed back round to the stables to collect their horses.

The horses’ hooves made a strange sucking sound when they moved through the muddy streets and toward the gate of Coria. Unlike Plowdon, Coria only had one large gate on the western side of the city facing the King’s Road. Although the sun was not yet over the horizon, the streets were already astir. Citizens were opening the shutters on the street-front businesses, getting ready for the day’s trade. Vendors were readying their stands, piling fruits and vegetables high from carts and wagons arriving from the surrounding countryside. People of all types and in a variety of clothing, from the most fine to the worst fitted, moved this way and that as they headed off to whatever work they did. The three moved through it all at a steady trot, eager to be back on the road. They should have been much further south by now, well onto the plains of Culdovia. They would need to make up that time on today’s ride.

A few hours after leaving Coria the seemingly never-ending sight of field after field finally came to an end. The rolling hills gradually flattened out so that Bryn could see to the horizon without interruption. The fields they traveled along became uncultivated and

home to more weeds than crops. Eventually the weeds thinned out, revealing a rocky ground underneath. The earth around them went from shades of green to yellow to brown. Soon they were surrounded on all sides by a rocky environment of dirt.

“Welcome to the Klamath Plain, gentlemen,” Rodden said loudly, opening his arms out in front of him in a showman’s gesture. “This rocky wasteland unfit for life’ll now be our constant companion until we pass Lindonis in, oh, I’d say two days time.”

Bryn looked around him. He’d grown bored and weary of the landscape of Tillatia, but had had no expectations that the Klamath Plain would be so desolate. Pebbles, small stones, and a smattering of larger rocks dotted the landscape. Weeds grew everywhere that rocks weren’t, with a few patches of a yellowish-brown grass here and there that grew as if some malevolent giant had scattered bad seeds this way and that.

“How does anything *live* here?” Bryn asked.

Rodden chuckled. “Well, lad, there are all manner of creatures that call these plains home. Many live burrowed underground, and most come out at night. You might not think so by looking at it, but those weeds are really quite nutritious, and many of the wild herds that wander these plains devour them thankfully.”

“Wild herds?” Bryn asked.

“Oh yes,” Rodden continued. “There are large herds of horses that wander about, as well as deer and antelope, many types of rabbits, and countless kinds of rodents.”

“You must remember, Bryn,” Halam added, “that not all of the Klamath Plain looks like this. Many areas in the west have more shrubs and grasses, and small rivers and streams flow through. This particular section in northern Culdovia just doesn’t fit that description.”

“Yes,” Rodden went on, “I think it has something to do with the effect of the Montino Mountains being so close. For once we get further south tomorrow, we’ll see much more in the way of grasses and shrubs, and even a few smatterings of trees. It’s just that today’s journey will be rather bleak.”

Bryn didn’t like the sound of that, but there wasn’t much he could do about it but press his heels into Ash and continue on down the road. He daydreamed about what Baden would look like. Tall spires stretching so high they almost touched the clouds; the lake of clearest blue teeming with fish, ready to be plucked right out by hand; marketplaces overflowing with goods, so much that the beggars even had too much.

The dreaming ceased when they ate lunch around midday. The scenery was still the same, and they rode on. The leagues passed under their horse’s hooves, but in the distance the horizon began to lose its flatness. What appeared to be hills grew into mountains, their tops white.

“The Montino Mountains,” Rodden said, pointing. “We’ll be near their base by nightfall.”

The mountains gradually went from specks on the horizon to significant shapes ahead of them. They grew ever larger as the day wound to night. The landscape grew more rocky, and the ground less flat. Soon the mountains were towering on their right, gray slats of stone, jagged and sharp, pushing ever upward toward the clouds. It began to grow dark, but they continued on, even when the road became difficult to see, although Bryn had no worries about stumbling off of it since it had followed a near straight line all day. The mountains loomed up, becoming lost in the shadowy darkness, but Bryn knew they were growing closer and closer. By the time it was near pitch darkness and the only

light was that of the half-moon in the sky, Halam pulled a stick and some cloth from his bag, wrapped them together, then took a dagger and struck some sparks on his flint stone to make a torch. The road brightened around them, a small globe of light surrounded by darkness. Halam led them off of the road for quite a ways, and soon they were rising in elevation ever so slightly. He came to a stop and got down from Juniper.

“This seems like a good spot to sleep for the night,” he said. “We’ve come about as near to the base of the Montinos as we will, and it’s getting too dark to continue on.”

They pulled their bedrolls from their saddlebags and sat down to another night of bread, cheese, and sausage. They decided not to make a fire as the night was warm and they were all tired. After eating, Bryn lay down and was soon asleep.

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The sun was rising when Bryn woke, and he was startled to see the land around him. Sometime in the darkness of the night they had reached the very base of the mountains and now before him lay an immense wall of rock, rising near straight up from the dirt and weeds of the plains around him. They had apparently made camp where large round rocks began to rise from the valley floor, slowly growing higher and forming loose piles of smaller stones, until they suddenly jutted straight up toward the heavens. There was nothing gradual about their ascent. Bryn figured that there were hundreds of feet of sheer rock wall that rose straight up, interrupted only by the rocks moving inward a few feet, then continuing to rise a few hundred more feet before doing the same, all the way to the top, which he couldn’t even see because of the swirling clouds obscuring his view.

Rodden stepped over to Bryn and looked straight up with him. “They rise sheer from the floor and reach thousands of feet,” he said. “The scholars believe it’s from a

transition in the rocks, with an escarpment forming that causes them to jut straight up like this. Quite a sight, eh?”

“Amazing,” Bryn replied. “They just shoot straight up like needles. Do people climb these?”

“Oh, I suppose they do, but I wouldn’t think so unless they had to, at least that’s how I would feel about it.”

Bryn agreed. He couldn’t imagine trying to climb up these sheer faces, or climbing down the hundreds of straight feet with only a rope. Just looking up at them began to make his stomach queasy; he didn’t want to think how looking down from that height would make him feel.

“We’d best get back on the road,” Halam said as he climbed on Juniper for another day in the saddle. Bryn and Rodden did the same, and they rejoined the road, the same dreary plains on their left, but now with the majestic mountains on their right, rising higher and higher, taking away the boredom of the landscape.

The mountains followed them as they continued to move south. The peaks were never revealed due to the cloud cover, a swirling mass that kept the unimaginable heights from their gazes. Bryn could understand now why the Montinos had been left to themselves for much of Adjurian history; why would anyone want to tackle those mountains if they didn’t have to? It seemed ludicrous to him to think that the Regidians actually thought they could invade Montino during the first Adjurian Civil War. Did they actually think they could succeed in driving the people from their mountain homes? There were passes that made traversing the mountains easier, Bryn knew, but he couldn’t

fathom how the sight of these jagged towers to either side of invading army could do anything but decrease morale.

They kept up a good pace, and Halam mentioned that if the weather stayed good, they'd reach Lindonis by nightfall. Little changed throughout the day, and few words were exchanged. Most conversation had been exhausted in the first couple of days. There was not much Bryn could say; his life had been so uneventful. Halam was not talking, his head on the business that was now little more than a day ahead of him, and Rodden had run out of topics touching on geography and history with which to test Bryn's knowledge.

As the sun began to descend over the mountains, Halam led them off of the main road and down a smaller tract to their left. "It'll be nice to have a hot meal tonight," he said, the others quickly agreeing.

The road wound away from the mountains, but could not escape their towering gaze, and soon farmhouses and other settlements began to sprout from the plains around them. They saw more and more people, and then a large city was spread wide before them. Unlike Coria, Lindonis had walls made of large stones, with battlements evenly spaced along their length. A large gate was set in their center, an iron portcullis raised up around it. They entered the city, and Bryn thought that it was about the same as the other two he'd now seen on the journey. Market stalls were spread out here and there, people milled about on whatever business they had, while guards patrolled the streets, no doubt bored from their routine patrols.

They wound through the streets until arriving at an inn called the '*Peak's Rest*' where they handed their reins to the stable boy and headed in to find a table in the near-

empty common room. They ordered hot plates of potatoes and greens with a beef stew and a large tankard of ale. There were no worries about sleeping in the stables this night; the inn had rooms aplenty. When the meal was finished they retired to a large room with three beds, cleaned up at the washbasin, and lay down on something much softer than ground.

They got up early as usual and broke their fasts on milk, fresh bread, and bacon. Halam bought an extra loaf to replace their dry bread from Plowdon, and soon they were out the door and on their well-rested and fed horses, heading out of the gates. They traveled back the way they had come on the winding road heading toward the King's Road, and were soon heading south once again.

Rodden was excited this morning.

"We'll be in Baden tonight," he said, a grin on his face."

"Although I don't think we'll have much time for rest once we get there," added Halam. "I've a mind that the council'll be meeting on the morrow or the day after."

"Yes, more than likely," Rodden agreed. "I'm sure many of them are already in the city, talking amongst themselves at dinner parties, gauging the other representative's feelings, and anticipating any problems that may arise."

"While we've been on the road making no progress in gauging the others' intentions," Halam snorted.

Bryn had a feeling that Halam and Rodden would be in a better position to begin their negotiations if they'd had more time to spend in Baden before the conference began. As it was, they would have a day, maybe, but probably no more than a night's rest, depending on how the road treated them today. If Halam hadn't come all the way east to

Eston, then he would have already been in Baden for a good three days by now. Bryn was thankful his uncle had come to get him, but also felt a little guilty at the inconvenience his presence had no doubt caused.

When the sun was high in the sky they ate the last of their sausage and cheese with most of the loaf of fresh bread they bought that morning, washing it down with water from Lindonis's wells. Bryn wondered how the journey back to Eston would fare when the council was completed, and what food they'd eat then. He hoped they weren't in such a hurry, and that perhaps they could travel just half a day, while exploring the cities he'd barely seen on the way south. Maybe they could even travel east from Baden and visit the Duldovian capital of Pardun before heading north back to Plowdon. It'd be nice to visit the Duldovian Sea, even if it was just the small portion that touched the city.

A while after lunch Rodden pointed out a feature on the horizon to their right. They had passed the last of the Montino Mountains earlier that morning shortly after leaving Lindonis, their much smaller peaks still clouded behind them.

"We'll be on the Montino River in no time," he said, pointing ahead of him. "It'll be running strong and swift this time of year, flush with the snowmelt deep in the mountains."

Sure enough after they'd gone further, a roaring sound filled their ears, growing louder and louder as they continued on, until ahead of them on their right the first signs of a fast-moving river, blue waves flecked with white, rushed along to meet the road. It was nearly two hundred feet across, Bryn judged, and moving faster than a galloping horse. The sound was deafening. It bent at an angle, and the road turned to follow its southeastward course.

Not long after, scatterings of trees to their left began to break the monotony of the plains that had been their constant companion over the past two days. The King's Wood, Rodden pointed out as the scattered trees turned from thickets to copses, then into a heavily wooded mass. Tall oaks and sycamores seemed to battle with the dirt and stones of the plains, eventually winning as they continued on. Elms and beech trees were nestled amongst stands of grass, and now and then Bryn was able to see a deer flit about their edges, or a hawk circling high above. Rich green grasses now surrounded the road, the bright blue and white of the river contrasting sharply with the dark greens of the forest.

Bryn was struck by how quickly the landscapes could change. Not an hour earlier they had been surrounded by the same ugly depressing plains that they'd traveled for nearly two days. Now they were in the middle of an enchanting setting straight from the books of princely tales. Even if the conference in Baden proved to be a total bore and the city uninspiring, both of which he greatly doubted, he'd already seen enough amazing scenery over the past week to more than satisfy him for many years to come when the time finally did come to return to the flat farmland around Eston.

SEVEN

The sun nearing the horizon when the travelers crested a hill affording them a clear view of Baden. The King's Wood and Baltika Forest both fell back to reveal a large valley of rich green grasses. The King's Lake could be seen in the distance, the city touching its southeastern edge. Large walls were erected around the city. Unlike the walls they'd seen in the other cities, the walls of Baden didn't stretch along straight.

Instead they were made up of segments, each no more than twenty-five feet in length, and set at a different angle than the segments next to it, giving the city the appearance of having hundreds of different sides. Guard towers rose from the walls at each of these changes in direction, their turrets made from the same stone as the walls, a flag fluttering atop each.

Peasants milled about on the final section of the King's Road leading into Baden from the north, carrying materials in and out of the city, talking amongst themselves, and going about their business. There were no fields to be tended outside of the city walls, just flat grassland in all directions. The lake was teeming with boats of all sizes, many with sails but some with oars. Most were smaller fishing craft, some hauling in or throwing out nets; others with lines cast from long poles firmly attached to their decks and railing; many heading toward the docks to unload their catch or going back out for a chance at more. The docks were not clearly visible from the hill, but they appeared to be a bustle of activity, people running every which way in a made dash to carry out their commercial activities.

On the western side of the city another road led outward over the fields and into the Baltika Forest. Bryn was told earlier when he asked about the city that this was the Western Road, which led to the Regidian capital of Atros, before pushing on to Hedling, over the vast Klamath Plain of Equinia and Oschem to Tullin; then up to Warren on the edge of the Shefflin Mountains, the most western city in Adjuria. Before the King's Road reached the large city gate, another road branched off to head eastward. This was the Eastern Road, stretching to Pardun in Duldovia, then skirting around the Duldovian

Sea before plunging southeast toward the Ithmian garrison city of Fadurk. Way off in the distance the King's Road continued south away from the city to Portinia.

Three gates led into the city: the South Gate, leading further on down the King's Road, the West Gate to Warren, and the North Gate, which lay open before them. Two immense turrets rose up on the walls where the gate's opening was, larger than the towers spaced out elsewhere on the wall. A walkway stretched between them over the open space of the gate, which itself was comprised of two thick wooden doors, currently opened inward into the city. A portcullis rose above the doors and became lost in the stone walkway above the gate.

"One journey ends...another begins," Rodden said as the three sat in their saddles staring down on the city they had traveled hundreds of leagues to see.

Bryn turned his gaze from the city to Rodden, an inquiring look on his face. Rodden turned his eyes to Bryn.

"I mean, lad, that we've a much more difficult and perhaps even dangerous journey ahead of us now." He looked from Bryn back to the city below. "The royal council will hold all kinds of machinations and pitfalls, scheming and maneuvering, intrigues and politicking. Isn't that right, Halam?"

Halam too was staring down at the city, but he shifted in his saddle at Rodden's question. "Aye, that it is." He paused, blowing out his breath, before continuing. "It will be a trying few days, maybe longer, as we try to move forward amicably toward renewing trade with Jonguria. I've a mind that most of the provinces favor it, so what I'm seeing as the problem is reconciling the conflicting attitudes the different provinces have toward each other."

Bryn thought a few moments as Halam went silent, then spoke up.

“But Uncle Halam, if all of the provinces agree that they want to trade with Jonguria once again, then what’s the problem? It seems to me that there’s really no need for a conference at all if that’s the prevailing attitude.”

Rodden chuckled. “I wish it were that easy, lad, I truly do. You see, Bryn, the thing is, most of the provinces are still nursing their wounded pride from the Civil War. Sure, they all agree about renewing trade with Jonguria, they need it, but they don’t want any of their neighbors to have better deals than they do, especially those they fought against not too long ago.” He too blew out his breath in a sigh of exasperation. “No, it will be a contentious conference, to say the least, with lots of old animosities and grudges brought back up to the surface. I’ll be happy to see it end.”

“Aye,” Halam agreed as he heeled his horse on down the final stretch of road before the gates, Rodden following close behind.

Bryn waited a few moments, thinking about what the two men had said. He’d seen a lot over the past week, more of Adjuria than he thought he would ever see. Now he’d see the inner workings of the government, a prospect which somehow seemed equally dull and exciting at the same time. His journey through the lands of his country was coming to an end, but his journey into the hearts and minds of his countrymen was just now beginning. Bryn dug his heels into Ash and together they sauntered down the hill toward the capital.

Halam led the way through the North Gate and along the cobbled streets of the city. Lots of people milled about the gate: sellers unable to get a stall in the market district were hawking goods from distant provinces; peasants from the surrounding countryside

sold fruits and vegetables; citizens browsed for goods or waited on others; beggars begged.

The streets held nothing new to see, as far as Bryn was concerned. They made their way through the jumbled mass of people and onto some side streets heading further into the city, the horse's hooves ringing on the rounded cobbles as they sauntered past. After winding through the streets a ways, they came upon another city wall, made in much the same fashion as that which surrounded the city, but smaller in size. This time the gates held doors made from strong steel and covered with large metal rivets for added support. Several guards stood about manning the gate, watching passersby, and inquiring as to the business and intentions of anyone wishing to pass through. They were garbed in resplendent white uniforms of metal greaved-leggings with a well-spun white tunic under shiny breastplates bearing the sigil of Culdovia, a diving eagle with talons bared. As they approached the guards tensed up.

"Ho, there," called Halam to the nearest man. "We've need to enter the government district. We're here on business concerning the trade conference."

"Is that right," the guard responded, looking all three up and down. "A little late, aren't ye?" he asked, a questioning look on his face.

"The conference hasn't convened, has it?" Halam responded, concern in his voice.

"Not if you count eating the city's larders bare and draining the royal wine cellar convening," the guard replied. "The council is set to officially get to business tomorrow morning."

Halam and Rodden looked at each other in surprise. "I had no idea that they would begin this early," Rodden said. "I thought we still had a few days to ascertain the makeup of the council and judge the representatives."

"Well, now we've got one night to observe them in their revelry," Halam said with disgust.

"I'll be seeing your papers then if you're wanting to pass," said the guard. Halam withdrew a few sheets of paper from his breast pocket and handed them to the guard, who quickly put his head down into them, squinting at the words.

"Aye, alright," he said after a few moments, handing the papers back up to Halam, "You can go through." He signaled to the other guards behind him who stepped out from in front of the gate.

They rode through the gate, and were surrounded by buildings of a much finer design and build than those outside the inner city walls. Large trees lined the avenues, and flowers sprouted from well-tended plots spaced between the buildings. It was much cleaner and quiet than the busy streets in the outer part of the city.

They rode down the main avenue for a ways, and then turned off onto a side street, stopping in front of a two-story building which looked like a home. No lights were on inside, however. Halam dismounted and went up the few steps to knock on the door. After a time he knocked again, but there was no answer.

"It would seem that Orin is with the rest of the council members," he said as he climbed back onto Juniper.

"They must be in the palace feast hall," Rodden surmised.

They rode back to the main avenue, and all the way down it, coming to a large palace. The building was resplendent in parapets and towers, and covered in a bright white sheen. Whether paint, varnish, or some kind of gilt enamel Bryn could not tell, but the whole structure seemed to glow. A large company of guards patrolled the grounds around the palace, and again they were stopped, but ushered to continue on after Halam had shown his papers. They came to a side entrance, where they dismounted and handed their horses over to one of the guards before climbing a long flight of stone steps leading to a wide set of double doors fitted with ornate knobs and fittings.

Several guards lined the entranceway. Large swords hung ready at their belts in scabbards with fancy gold and red scrollwork etched down their length. Their faces were shielded by helmets of the same type of steel which made up their breastplates and leggings, and they did quite a good job of concealing any attempt at reading their faces. White cloaks covered them from head to foot, completing their majestic, yet domineering demeanor.

One of the guards came toward them as they climbed the steps toward the doors, approaching Halam who was in the lead.

“What is your business at the palace,” the guard said in a gruff, no-nonsense voice.

“We’re here for the trade conference,” Halam replied in a stern, authoritative voice, his shoulders thrown back and his chest stuck out. “We’re the representatives from Tillatia.”

The guard looked them over for a few moments, taking a few extra moments to size up Bryn. Their clothes were rumpled and travel-stained from the several days they’d

been on the road. Bryn thought that if he were a guard at such a grand palace, he'd be hesitant to let them in. Finally the guard spoke.

“Do you have any identification papers?”

“Of course,” Halam said, reaching once again into his breast pocket and taking out the same sheets of paper as before and handing them to the guard.

The guard did not take his eyes off of Halam as he took the papers and motioned behind him. Another man dressed just the same came down the steps and took the papers from where the guard held them over his shoulder, and began to look them over.

“Both representatives from the Tillatian trade office,” said the second guard. “The boy is not listed.” He looked up, handing the papers back to the first guard.

“My nephew, from a farm in Eston,” Halam said, pointing toward Bryn. “I thought this would be a good opportunity for him to get off the farm and see his country, learn how his government works.”

“A noble idea,” a voice called down loudly from atop the steps. Another man was coming toward them now, but he was not decked out in the armor and accoutrements of the other two guards. He wore a fancy white leather jerkin with the Culdovian seal, but no cloak or steel leggings. He too had a sword strapped to his belt, but it was shorter and the scabbard was less ornate, containing another copy of the provincial seal.

“I've always thought that educating the country's youth about their government was a fine idea, and one that should be done more often. I'm glad that I am not alone in that opinion.” The man extended his hand to Halam. “Connor Morn, the captain of the guards. And you must be Halam Fiske.”

“Aye, that I am,” Halam said, a bit surprised at the man's familiarity.

Connor shook Halam's hand, and then extended his to Rodden. "And Rodden Stor, I presume, also of the trade office in Tillatia."

"That is correct sir, I am impressed at your knowledge of two humble government servants," Rodden said as he shook Connor's hand.

"Well, I wouldn't be much of a captain of the guards if I did not know of all of the people that come and go from the royal palace, now would I?" Connor said with a slight smile. "Besides, with the trade conference set to begin tomorrow, there are all sorts of new people here, and as you can see, security has been tightened." He held up his hand and motioned around him at the guards lining the entranceway.

"So the conference begins tomorrow then?" Halam stated more than asked.

"Yes, you two are the last delegates to arrive. I'm a bit surprised, seeing as how you are just to the north of us. The delegation from Sheffield arrived more than a week ago," he said, arching up his brows in a questioning manner. "But I suppose if you took it upon yourself to travel to Eston to pick up your nephew for an education, I can see why you would be late."

Connor looked over at Bryn for the first time since he had spoken. "And who might you be now, young man?" he asked as he walked over to stand in front of Bryn, looking him up and down. "Come to learn about trade, have you now?"

"Yes sir," Bryn said in as strong of a voice as he could manage, which he suspected came out much meeker than he intended. "My name is Bryn Fellows, sir, and I promise that you'll have no trouble out of me."

"Ha!" Connor laughed, throwing his head back. "I wish all of our guests this week were as so forthright as you, and stuck to their word as well. No Bryn Fellows, I think

that we will not have much trouble out of you,” he said, turning back toward the two guards still standing on the landing.

“I’ll escort these three to the banquet hall myself, Jur,” he said to the first guard that had spoken to them.”

“Yes sir.” Both guards headed back to the top of the stairs to stand alongside of the doors.

He began to head up the steps toward the doors, and the three fell in step behind him. The guards atop the steps threw open the doors ahead of Connor, and as they walked through Bryn’s mouth fell open. An immense hallway lay before them, stretching for hundreds of feet. The ceilings rose high above them and were painted with large hunting scenes. The walls held giant tapestries interspersed with large portraits of noble looking men in fine clothing who could only be previous members of the royal family. Large sconces enameled with gold inlay lined the walls between the paintings and tapestries, their flickering torch flames illuminating the greatness of the corridor before them. A richly worked rug of red and gold nearly covered the entirety of the floor, tapering off only toward the walls, where beautifully smooth tiles reflected the light of the torches above them.

They headed part way down the long hallway, and then turned onto another, this one equally impressive and ornamented just as thoroughly as the entranceway. Two large wooden doors with steel studs stood at the end, two guards holding a vigil by their sides. As they got nearer Bryn could hear the muffled sounds of voices coming from behind the doors, as well as music and singing. When Connor got near, the guards threw open the doors, and Bryn was flooded with aromas that immediately set his mouth to watering.

Inside was a sight he'd never seen before. Before them stood an immense hall, the ceiling half again as high as the hallway they had walked down. On it were painted huge frescos of lords and ladies decked out in fanciful dress in scenes that had them hunting, attending court, and frolicking in their grandeur. The floors were made of huge stone slabs chiseled down to a smooth, even surface. The walls were covered in tapestries from floor to ceiling, displaying the seals from all fourteen provinces of Adjuria in a myriad of colors, with the same type of sconces holding torches as he had seen in the hallway. Huge candelabras were suspended by mighty chains from the ceiling and reached down to within twenty feet of the floor. A large raised dais, empty at the moment, took up the far wall opposite the doors they had come through, a throne set in its center. It was high-backed, and had a golden shine which reflected the torch light. It seemed to be made entirely of gold, but Bryn could not believe such a thing possible. It must be a gilt finishing, with perhaps some tracings of gold, he thought. Still, it was spectacular, and he could not wait to see the man who sat in it. The great hall itself was filled with tables and benches, and contained a few hundred people, although there was no way that Bryn could count them, as they were constantly moving about.

The tables contained a wide variety of dishes to feed the people. There were platters of roast fowls and braised beef; plates overflowing with vegetables and fruits; bread was piled so high that the topmost loaves had tumbled down to fall on the floor.

The people were loud and boisterous, and primarily men, although some females could be spotted here and there. Large groups congregated around a few tables in the center, talking loudly; with smaller groups of people at the tables set on the sides of the

hall speaking quietly amongst themselves or simply sitting back and taking in the atmosphere.

Serving men and women scurried about the hall, dodging drunken revelers as they tried to carry trays piled high with dirty plates to one of the side doors out of the hall, or fresh trays of food and drink into it. They rarely made it to their intended destination without half of the contents they carried being picked off by the hungry and thirsty crowd.

Many dogs lay about on the floor. Some were eating scraps from the tables, others blatantly reaching right up to the plates on the tables when there was no one around to stop them. Quite a few lay sprawled out, their bellies filled to capacity and their only desire being sleep. None fought over food; there was more than enough to feed the whole city, by the look of it.

All three stood amazed by the sight before them; this didn't look like a group of people set to decide critical issues of trade for their provinces. It looked like a group of drunken sailors come ashore for the first time in months and set on letting loose. As they watched, a serving girl did her best to maneuver through the crowded center of the hall toward a table that remarkably thought itself in need of more food and drink. Her best was not good enough, for she was grabbed by the arm and spun about by a rather loud and obnoxious man who took her for a few spins around the floor near where the minstrels played. Another did her best to get back to the kitchens with a tray of dirty dishes. She succeeded, but only after being fondled by half-a-dozen men who loudly backslapped each other on their achievement.

“Gentleman,” Connor said, viewing their looks of open-mouthed surprise with a smile on his face, “I give you the opening feast of the trade conference.” He turned on his heels and headed back toward the door, pausing to look over his shoulder at them one more time. “Do enjoy yourselves, now,” he said with a smirk, and then was through the doors which quickly closed behind him.

EIGHT

The three turned their gazes from Connor’s exit back to the hall, still taken aback. Several minstrels with lutes, pipes, and a harp were now into a bawdy drinking song favored by the lower classes, several of the more inebriated guests joining in with their voices, creating a rather discordant melody that was thankfully partially drowned out by the mixed sound of numerous conversations taking place at once.

Rodden turned to look at Halam, who was still wide-eyed at the sight before him. “This resembles a harvest feast more than a trade conference,” he said.

“Aye, that it does,” Halam said, not taking his eyes from the room. A small dog dropped the hunk of meat it was chewing on and began to chase a court jester around some tables, fastening its teeth on the lower hem of the jester’s tunic, much to the laughter of the men who saw. “I find it hard to believe that on the morrow we’ll be sitting around the negotiating table with many of these men.”

“I find it hard to believe many of them’ll be able to get out of their *beds* come the morrow,” Rodden answered.

Halam scanned the hall, his eyes narrowing as he searched among its occupants.

“Do you see anybody that looks familiar?” he asked. “Orrin should be around here somewhere, although I think this scene is beyond even his threshold for debauchery.”

Rodden put his hands on his hips and cast his gaze out into the crowd. Bryn thought that it must be incredibly difficult to track down one person in this room; people were constantly moving from their tables to the center of the room to talk or dance or grab more to drink, and then moving back again. All of the servants hustling about the crowd didn't help matters either. Perhaps Rodden could pick out a familiar face better than Bryn; after all, he knew no one here.

Rodden's face lit up in recognition. “Orin,” he shouted toward a far corner of the room, his arm waving above him. “Orin Dale!”

Bryn looked in the direction he was waving. A small group of men stood clustered around a table covered in empty plates and glasses. One man seemed to perk up at Rodden's shouting, and began to look around him. After a few moments he looked in their direction, and spotting Rodden. His face broke into a smile and he waved his arm, moving out of the group he was with and toward them.

Bryn judged the man to be in his mid-sixties. He was shorter than average, and wore a light cotton shirt under a burgundy tunic with matching pants, his belt doing more to hold his bulging stomach in than keep his tight trousers on. He had stark white hair, but was near bald on top, just a fringe of hair around the side and back of his head. He made up for this with large bushy sideburns and eyebrows, and a substantial amount of hair coming from his nose and ears, but other than that was clean shaven.

He ambled over to them, and held out his hand as he approached.

“Good to see that you, Rodden” the man said, his wrinkled face becoming more so as he broke into a wide smile. “I was beginning to think that you wouldn’t make it.”

They shook hands and Rodden gave him a familiar slap on the back. “Well, we’re here now, and it looks as though we haven’t missed much.”

“Just the usual letting off of steam before the important decisions are made,” he said with a chuckle, moving over to Halam. “My good, man, how are you?”

“Quite well, Orin,” Halam answered, “and you?”

“Oh, the usual aches and pains of a body getting beyond its use, but my mind’s as sharp and quick as ever. It’s *good* to see you.” His smile turned to a look of concern as he looked over Halam’s dusty clothes. “I trust the journey was not too arduous now, was it?”

“No, not at all. We would have arrived sooner in the week, but I wanted to make a side trip first,” Halam said, motioning toward Bryn.

The man turned his attention to Bryn for the first time since coming over, a quizzical look on his face which quickly changed to a reassuring smile as he came over and offered his hand.

“Orin Dale,” he said, “Royal Representative to the Province of Tillatia.”

“Hello sir,” Bryn stammered, “my name is Bryn Fellows, from Eston, sir.” He pointed toward Halam. “Halam is my uncle.”

“Of course, of course,” Orin shook his head knowingly. “Your uncle mentioned a short time back that he was thinking of bringing you along. So tell me, how was your journey here? First time out of Tillatia, I imagine?”

“Yes sir, it is. First time out of Eston in fact,” Bryn said, blushing a little and looking down a moment. “The journey was quite good. I’ve always wanted to see what Adjuria looks like.”

“Well, there’s still a lot out there for you to see, lad.”

Orin turned his attention back to Halam and Rodden. “So gentleman, what do you think?” he asked, holding his arms out toward the room before them.

“Seems more of a circus than a trade delegation to me,” Halam said.

“Oh no, sir. Many of these men are just unwinding and forgetting their concerns before the serious business begins. You forget that you’ve just arrived. Most have been in the city discussing matters privately amongst themselves for several days now. The Sheffield delegation arrived more than a week ago, in fact.”

The sound of a dozen plates and glasses shattering on the floor caught their attention from the middle of the hall as a serving girl went down, either from bending away from an unwanted hand on her bottom or slipping on the copious amounts of spilled ale and wine which covered the floor.

“Unwinding?” Halam said with an arched eyebrow and a bit of disgust in his voice.”

Orin let out a loud laugh. “Come now Halam, don’t worry. Many of the men in the hall tonight aren’t those that’ll be sitting around the table discussing trade with you for the next several days. Most of these people are members of the various provinces’ entourages.” He let out an audible sigh before continuing. “An ungodly amount of people have accompanied the various provincial delegations into the city. Scribes and pages, knights and squires, advisors and servants; for each provincial representative it seems there are a dozen official men to support and help him make his decisions, and for

each of them another dozen to mend clothes, cook the meals, see to the horses, and heaven knows what else. Not that we don't have more than enough men and women in the palace to do all of that ourselves, mind you, but they couldn't reduce their perceived importance by coming to the capital unescorted."

Rodden snorted. "We had no trouble in that area."

"The only exception I've seen so far, and the government thanks you for it," Orin said with a smile. "Now gentleman, you must be tired and hungry after such a long journey. Let us retire to one of the far tables and see you are properly fed and watered. I can fill you in on some of the discussions I've heard over the past week, and what the likely intentions are of the various members. Come." He motioned them toward an empty table at the side of the room, far enough away from the boisterous crowds in the center of the hall that they could have a quiet conversation.

Halam and Rodden took one side of the table while Orin and Bryn took the other. They sat down on the rough wooden benches which Bryn thought seemed very out of place in such an extravagantly decorated hall. Then again, judging from the antics of many of the men, he no doubt guessed that most of these benches had to be replaced after such feasts, either stained or damaged beyond repair. Orin waved at a passing serving girl, and a short time later they had large plates of roast fowl, steaming vegetables, and an assortment of fruits in front of them. To wash it down they had a choice between dark red wine or foaming mugs of ale. They quickly set to their meals. Even though all three had eaten a hardy meal at the inn a short time earlier, the days on the road had caused their appetites return quickly. Orin sat back and let them eat, content to take sips from a large glass of wine. He had eaten more than enough earlier in the day at the lunch feast,

he explained, patting his swollen belly. In fact, he said, many of the men in the hall were still here from the lunch feast, and probably had no idea that they were now well into dinner. There were no windows in the immense hall, it being set in the middle of the palace, so there was no way to tell time, which Bryn thought the men didn't show much concern for anyway.

Their meals finished and washed down with ale, the three sat back to savor the best meal they'd had since setting out nearly a week before. It was the best meal Bryn had eaten since last autumn's feast day in Eston, in fact. They each took a glass of wine from a passing serving girl and watched the room around them.

"Well, Orin, what have you heard over the past week?" Rodden asked as he sloshed his wine around in his cup. "We're the last of the provincial delegates to arrive. Now that everyone is in the city, what's the mood among the participants? How do the common people feel about our little get-together? Regale us," he finished with a smile.

Orin smiled. He set his cup down and folded his arms on the table. "I've heard quite a lot, but also very little. As to the common people, all seem to agree that trade needs to be resumed. And from what I've gathered from reports on other provinces, this seems to be the view held over all of Adjuria. As to the other delegates, well, some are quite talkative, while others are more close-mouthed."

"How so?" Halam asked.

"Well, the intentions of Culdovia and Duldovia are well known; they're the ones who've organized the conference in the first place. Both provinces want to resume trade, but I think they were both taken aback by the demand expressed by the other provinces.

Now both of them favor a more cautious approach to opening relations. They want to ensure that trade is carried out in a more regulated fashion this time around.”

“Anything to reduce the smoldering animosities of before,” Rodden said.

“Before?” Bryn asked, looking at the three older men, unsure of what Rodden meant.

“Yes Bryn, you see, before the war with Jonguria thirty years ago, healthy trade existed between the two countries, but in different ways. Jonguria is ruled as an empire, which means the emperor decides all things. They declared that all goods that the citizens wished to trade with Adjuria be sent to imperial officials, then the officials would make the arrangements to trade them to Adjuria. This way it was the government that really made the trade policy.”

“In Adjuria,” he continued, “each province will set trade regulations and standards. Because the central government has no real control over how the provinces administer their trade, each tries to obtain the most lucrative deal that it can. It’s really province against province because of this.”

“You see Bryn,” Rodden said, taking up the explanation, “before the war, trade was a very cutthroat enterprise. Take Tillatia and Fallownia as an example. Both provinces produce the most grain in Adjuria, and whatever surpluses they have after selling on the local markets, they tried to trade to Jonguria. Well, since there was no regulation by the central government, each sought out the best deal with the Jongurian trade officials that they could.”

“Most of the time,” Halam continued, “Tillatia would get the better deal. We were closer to Jonguria, and could therefore reduce our shipping costs and the delivery time

much further than Fallownia was able to. It was natural that Jonguria would then come to us first for an agreement, while Fallownia was forced to sell at a significantly lower rate.”

“Unless she sent her goods overland or by sea to a port closer to Jonguria, or even to Jonguria itself, to get the better deal,” Orin said. “This happened quite often, but cut into the province’s profits quite a bit.”

All three looked at Bryn and laughed. He was frantically trying to process all of this information and somehow make sense of it.

“Don’t worry,” Rodden said, slapping Bryn on the back and laughing, “it’s not the easiest thing to understand. That’s why we have provincial trade offices, to make sense of it all. The important thing to take away from our overlong explanation is that many provinces developed animosities toward one another because of the deals they struck with Jonguria. Tillatia and Fallownia still have a rather acrimonious relationship today because of the way trade was conducted before the war.”

“Yes, even though there is no trade at all now, so we all suffer,” Halam said.

“Well, that’s why we’re all here, to come to some sort of understanding,” Orin said. “All of the provinces agree that the time is long past to continue trading, but nearly all of them disagree on the best course to take.” He paused to take a drink from his wine, and then looked at Bryn before continuing. “One of the factors in the Civil War, Bryn, were these disputatious trade agreements with Jonguria. They in no way caused the war, mind you, but they did play a large part in determining who rebelled and who sided with the crown.”

“Yes,” Rodden said, taking over, “there are many provinces that step on each others’ toes besides Tillatia and Fallownia when it comes to trading the same type of goods.

Shefflin and Mercentia compete over the weapons they produce, Oschem and Hotham with their mining and mineral wealth.”

“Regidia and Allidia with the products that come from their large forests,” Halam added.

“Culdovia tries to find better markets for its products out of Bargoess Lake, while Duldovia competes with her on what’s pulled from the Duldovian Sea,” Orrin said.

“And Equinia seems to be in competition with everyone over livestock and horses, about the only thing she has in abundance, as do most other provinces,” Rodden finished with a laugh.

“How many of the other delegates are in the hall tonight?” Halam asked Orin, changing the topic.

Orin picked up his glass of wine and looked into it for a few moments before taking a sip. He set it down in front of him, and then looked around the hall before speaking.

“Not too many at all, actually. There were quite a few at the lunch banquet, but I think many of them feel a good night’s rest is better preparation than feasting and drinking into the early hours of the morning.”

“Not a bad idea,” Halam said as he looked around the hall. “I’ve a feeling there’ll be a lot of sore heads come morning.”

Orin smiled in agreement, then nodded his head, directing their gazes toward a table set against the far wall across the hall. “Over there is the representative from Duldovia, Willem Pritt,” he said.

Halam and Rodden turned in their seats to look behind them, while Bryn stared over their shoulders. The man that Orin pointed out was seated at a table with several other

men around him, but seemed to only occasionally speak to one seated across from him. He appeared to be of medium height and looked to be in his late-forties. His shoulder length brown hair was tied behind his head, and he wore light brown pants and shirt, with a darker russet-tinged jerkin that bore the Duldovian seal of a wind-chopped sea. His arms were thick and strong; the body of a man who knew a hard-day's labor in his youth, but which had become stocky with age. His face was probably very handsome once, but years of exposure to the elements had hardened his features, giving him a more toughened, yet dignified appearance.

“Willem Pritt, the name does sound familiar for some reason,” Rodden said, looking to Halam and Orin for confirmation.

“It should,” said Orin. “It was Pritt that led the final charge on the third day at Baden, the charge that ended the resistance, and the war.”

“That's right,” said Halam, the memory coming back to him. “There were many who said that he should be declared king after that battle, but he refused, saying he was only defending the honor of Adjuria.”

“Yes,” Rodden continued, “and people also thought he was crazy for turning it down and heading back to his fishing boats on the Duldovian Sea.”

“He said that all he wanted to do was to reclaim the honor Duldovia lost when she was still part of Culdovia fifty years earlier. I'll say one thing for the man,” Orin said as he raised his glass high, “the man knows his history, even if most of Adjuria does not.”

The three men raised their glasses up and they clinked together above the table. Bryn looked up at Orin in confusion, and seeing his face, Orin continued.

“You see Bryn, back during the first Adjurian Civil War nearly one hundred years ago, Duldovia and Culdovia were one province. They were only split into two following the resolution of hostilities. Several Culdovian nobles went along with the Regidian designs on the throne, thinking to secure more power for themselves. For their treason, the king split them off into a separate province. That is the wrong that Pritt was trying to alleviate when he talked of restoring honor following the Battle of Baden.”

“All so long ago,” Rodden said as he stared into his wine. “I’m surprised anyone remembered the events of the first civil war while the second was raging.”

“Oh, it was easy for Pritt to remember it,” Orin said, “his family was one of the leading families in Culdovia at that time, before they threw in their lot with the Regidians. Afterward they had their noble status stripped, and the family was forced to take up fishing the Duldovian Sea. Since then they have risen, in no small part to the role that Pritt played running supplies to the Baishur River and taking part in several successful naval battles during the war with Jonguria, but I don’t think that he’ll ever let the fall of his family leave his thoughts.”

The time passed as the four let their thoughts settle on events of the past, many of which occurred before they were born. After a time Rodden broke the silence.

“What exactly are the feelings of Pritt toward renewing trade with Jonguria?” he asked Orin.

“Well, he thinks that renewing trade is a good idea, but he’s concerned with how quickly the other provinces have clamored for it following the decision to hold this conference. He has reservations about how quickly things should progress, and how the trade should be divided up between the provinces, if at all.”

“Does Culdovia then feel the same way?” Halam asked.

“Yes, both provinces have nearly the same outlook. I think that Brun and Pritt met to find common ground before they agreed on a conference. It wouldn’t do for the two most influential provinces to be on separate pages.”

“Where is Pader tonight?” Rodden asked, referring to the Culdovian representative. “I don’t think I see him in the hall.”

“Oh, he was here earlier today for lunch,” Orin said, “but I guess he thinks one appearance a day is sufficient.”

“I don’t understand,” Bryn spoke up. “Why is it that a different man than the king is representing Culdovia?”

Orin’s eyes rolled back in his head at the question. “Is there no education in Eston these days?” he asked with a chuckle.

Bryn felt embarrassed and held his head down. “Sorry sir, it’s just that we don’t often talk of things other than livestock and the harvest back home. All this talk of trade and politics and history and war is new to me.”

Rodden tousled Bryn’s hair. “No need to apologize, lad. I think half of the people in Culdovia don’t know why the king doesn’t represent them.”

“You see, Bryn,” Orin proceeded to explain, “the royal family lost a lot of credibility following the civil war. Many people in the country felt that if the king wasn’t strong enough to protect himself from a Regidian coup, then he could probably do little to protect them.” He took a swallow of wine before continuing. “Over the past hundred years there’ve been many challenges to the royal authority. First was the succession crisis which led to the first civil war and a new king. Following that was the war with

Jonguria, the assassination of the king, and the second civil war. After the Battle of Baden, people began to loudly voice their concerns with the monarchy, and its hold, or lack thereof, on the country. With a new king on the throne, not more than a boy at the time, it was decided that the provinces would be given a great deal more autonomy. The king would henceforth be more of a figurehead of the country, exercising little real power. For that reason, Culdovia is represented by Pader Brun at the conference.”

“Well, in that case,” Bryn asked, “why do we still have a king at all? If the task of governing Adjuria falls to a council of provincial representatives, what’s his use?”

“A fine, question lad, and one that many of us are still struggling with,” Orin said.

“It was agreed at the end of the civil war that the royal council would govern in a temporary capacity until it was felt the king was old enough, or perhaps strong enough, to rule the nation once again,” Rodden explained. “Although now it’s been several years, and the king *is* old enough to assume his historical function as the head of the government.”

“I don’t think many of the council members would be so quick to take up that argument, however,” Orin said.

“No I think not,” Rodden agreed, his body slumping back from the table “but at some point Rowan Waldon will demand a stronger say in governing the realm, one that is his right by birth.”

“What is the king like?” Bryn asked, sitting up on the bench once again, eager to hear about this disgraced noble.

“He’s a very strong young man,” Orin said, “and there’s no mistaking he’s from the Waldon line. He prefers to be out in the woods hunting, or in a boat on the water, to any

courtly function, as most nobles do; but he has never missed a royal council session. He listens more than he speaks, but when he does open his mouth, people listen, as what he says holds wisdom beyond his years.” Orin paused to drink from his cup, then continued. “He has a deep-seated hatred for the Regidians, it is said, and I’d be surprised to hear otherwise. You see, Bryn, when the Regidians staged their coup, they held Rowan hostage, taking him back to Atros, where he stayed in captivity for four long years before being restored and allowed to come back to Baden. He also doesn’t look favorably on those provinces which supported Regidia during the conflict, but knows that if he wants to resume his role as a true king, he needs to overlook past transgressions in favor of present realities. Altogether a fine young man, not much older than you are now.”

“I couldn’t imagine being a king at my age,” Bryn said. “I wouldn’t know the first thing about running a country.”

“Well, then it’s good we have the royal council,” Halam laughed, the others, including Bryn, joining in.

“You have to remember, Bryn,” Rodden said, “he’d been trained from a very early age in the duties expected of him. He was twelve years old when he was taken prisoner, and all that time he still expected to rule Adjuria. It was only five years ago that his role as a sort of king-in-waiting came about.”

“He hides his anger, if there is any, quite well,” Orrin observed. “I’ve no doubt he’ll make a fine king, and not make the mistakes that those who came before him fell into. If those mistakes were made again, the inability to control provincial power schemes, trade animosities, or war lust; I feel that Adjuria would do away with the monarchy altogether.”

Loud hoots and hollers from the center of the hall caught their attention. A deep-throated voice was demanding that the minstrels play a drinking song popular among the peasants. The calls were soon taken up by others around, until the minstrels could do nothing but obey. The lutes and pipes began a merry jig, and many of the men and the few women there were began to grab arms and dance around the hall, with many a serving girl unwittingly ushered into the dance as well.

“I can see Flin is still going strong this evening,” Orin said with some disapproval in his voice. He looked over at Halam and Rodden, whose attention was still on the center of the hall. “The delegate from Oschem, he’s been here all day, and by the look and sound of him, he’s been enjoying himself every minute.”

The man that Orin described was just then finishing off a large leg of turkey that he had pilfered from one of the passing trays. When he was done he wiped his greasy fingers on his dirty tunic, then grabbed a tankard of ale from the hand of a dancing nobleman.

“That’s who Oschem chose to send?” Rodden said with a bit of surprise and humor in his voice.

“Andor Flin,” Orin said. “He’s been representing Oschem in trade deals since I was a boy. His family has always had strong connections in trade and government, and Andor has continually taken advantage of them.”

Bryn looked at the man as he upturned the tankard to get at the last drops, spilling a stream of ale down the front of his clothes, which he then wiped at with his sleeve before looking to a serving girl for another cup. He was in his mid-sixties, as far as Bryn could judge, and looked to have never done a day of physical labor in his life. His belly was

quite large, and since Andor was a short man already, it appeared to dwarf him in size. He was completely bald on the top of his head, but had white hair on the back and sides. His eyes were large and seemed to bulge out of his head much like his belly bulged out of his body. His small mouth was enclosed by large, floppy jowls and a big round nose. He wore a light tan shirt and tunic, both accented in green, with darker brown pants. They appeared to be well-tailored, but with all of the food, wine, and ale stains down the front, it was hard to judge. On his belt, if indeed he wore one, as it was hard to tell with the immensity of his gut hanging down, was strapped a large dagger with an ornate, gold-inlaid hilt. The scabbard bore the seal of Oschem on it, a dusty plain beside a sandy desert.

“Of all of the delegates that will be present at the conference,” Orin said, “Flin is the only one who fought in neither the East-West War nor the Civil War.”

“You’re kidding,” Halam said, his eyes wide with surprise as he looked at Orin. “Nearly everyone who was old enough clamored to fight against Jonguria, and most felt it a sense of duty to choose one side to fight for on returning home.”

“Yes, I know,” Orin said. “Flin had good family connections, and he managed to stay out of both conflicts. I don’t see how he could have helped much anyway; I don’t think the man has ever had a day of proper military training. I’d be surprised if he even knows how to properly hold that dagger at his belt.”

“So most of the delegates fought in one, or both, conflicts then?” Bryn asked Orin.

“Yes, most did. Many were too young to fight against Jonguria.” He pulled at his bushy sideburns with his eyes cast upward in thought. “Oh, let’s see now. There’s Jocko

More from Sheffield, Doth Hane from Equinia, and Pader Brun. Also, Whent Auro didn't participate, as is the usual custom among Montinos."

"And the Civil War?" Rodden asked.

"Let's see, the civil war. Most who were too young to fight in Jonguria were the first to take sides in that conflict. When a young man misses out on fighting, you can be sure he'll be the first to join in on the next," Orin said with a disapproving shake of his head. "Nearly all of the delegates fought that war. There's Fryst Bahn of Hotham," Orin began, raising up a finger for every name he ticked off, "Klyne Surin of Allidia, Dolth Hane of Equinia, and Jossen Fray of Regidia. All fought for the usurpers and lost."

Bryn looked up at Halam at the mention of Jossen Fray's name, but there was no reaction from his uncle.

"On the allied side of the conflict," Orin continued, holding up his other hand now to count off the names, "there was Shefflin's Jocko More, Iago Cryst of Mercentia, Whent Auro of Montino joined in this time," he said looking across the table at Rodden before continuing, "Millen Fron from Fallownia, Pader Brun from Culdovia, and Willem Pritt from Duldovia, he finished." He looked down at his fingers, silently mouthing the names and moving each finger, searching his mind for one more name. "Ah yes, he said, putting his hands down and breaking into a smile, "And Halam Fiske of Tillatia, present in both conflicts."

Halam looked down at the table. "Not that it did me any good," he said.

"Oh nonsense, my good man! I doubt you'd be here representing your province if you'd not shown such fine valor on the field during those three days."

"Perhaps not," Halam begrudgingly admitted.

“What about you, Rodden,” Bryn asked, looking across the table at the man.

“Didn’t you fight in either war?”

“Oh yes, Bryn, I sure did,” he said with a smile. “I fought the Jongurians tooth-and-nail every night in my dreams,” he laughed, slapping Halam on the back.

“You see, Bryn,” Halam said smiling, “Rodden was too young to fight in the first war, and I give him grief about it constantly.”

“I did manage to see a bit of action at Baden,” Rodden said, becoming serious again. “I was part of the allied charge that was bloodily repelled on the first day. I got very lucky; many of the friends I made in the army were not so fortunate.” He looked down into his wine glass, thinking back on those days.

A few minutes of silence passed at the table as each man thought about the friends and acquaintances they knew who had fought and died in both bloody wars. Except for the past five years, Adjuria had been at war for nearly twenty years. Many promising young men and boys had perished in both conflicts. People still grumbled that nothing had come out of the conflict with Jonguria and that life was better when the two countries could trade freely. Not too many spoke that way about the Civil War.

“Perhaps we should think about calling it a night soon,” Halam said after a time.

“Yes, it’s been a long day,” Rodden said. “What time does the conference convene in the morning, Orin?”

“Early,” Orin replied. “Breakfast will be served here shortly after dawn. The delegates will then convene in the war room.” He thought for a moment, looking upward toward the ceiling. “Sorry, the name has recently been changed to the ‘map’ room. I keep forgetting.”

“I hope things don’t get that out of hand,” Rodden said with a smile. “After all, trade disputes have been known to lead to fighting.”

“Yes, let us hope it doesn’t come to that,” Orin said with a laugh. “No, the reason that room was chosen is that it is large enough to accommodate all of the delegates plus a few retainers each, and no more. When Brun and Pritt saw how many people were traveling with the delegates as they began to arrive last week, they knew that a space was required to keep out the overflow of guests.”

“Good,” Halam said, “this is a conference of trade. There will surely be all sorts of people who have other agendas now that relations are set to be restored with Jonguria and we don’t want those distracting us from the main purpose of our being here.”

“I think that most of the other delegates feel the same as you do, Halam,” Orin said as he rose from the table. “Now, if we exit from those side doors that the serving women have been using all night I’m sure we can find some guards to show you to your rooms.”

Halam and Rodden finished off their drinks and then stood up, Bryn not far behind. They kept close to the walls as they made their way across the room, avoiding the more lively guests in the center of the hall. The wooden doors they came to swung both ways to accommodate servers with their hands full with trays of plates and glasses. One swung open as they approached, a young woman bringing yet more wine into the room. Rodden smiled at Orin at the sight, but Halam only looked on disapprovingly.

On the other side of the doors stretched a much smaller hallway than the one they had used to enter the great hall earlier in the evening. The walls were not so tall, nor the furnishings as lavish. On their right were two large doors that contained the kitchens within, judging from the sounds of pots and pans clattering about and the smells of

roasting meat and baking bread coming from within. Several guards stood in a group down the hall from the kitchens, and as the four men entered the hallway, two of them walked down to greet them.

“Good evening sirs,” the one in the lead said. “Would you like to be taken to your rooms now?”

“Yes we would, but we’re not sure where they are,” Halam said to the guard.

“Not a problem sir, we have that information. If you’ll just follow me.”

Orin grabbed Halam by the shoulder before he set off down the hall. “I’ll bid you men goodnight now. I think I’ll go back in and have a few more conversations this night. I’ve no real responsibilities at the conference in the morning, so the lack of sleep doesn’t bother me.”

“Well, goodnight then, Orin,” Halam said, shaking his hand. “We’ll see you tomorrow then, if not at breakfast than perhaps later at the conference?”

“Oh yes, breakfast more than likely,” he replied, turning from Halam to shake Rodden’s hand as well, then turning to Bryn. “Well, Bryn, I hope that you do not have a completely bad impression of nobles and their ways after seeing some of the goings-on back there tonight,” he said, nodding over his shoulder at the great hall. “I’m quite sure you’ll have an entirely different picture after the proceedings tomorrow.”

“It’s been all very interesting so far, sir,” Bryn said, shaking his hand. “Thank you for explaining so much about government and history this evening.”

Orin laughed. “It was my pleasure, lad; a nice change from the usual tavern talk I find myself in these days. Well, goodnight then,” he said with a final wave before turning to head back into the great hall.

Halam motioned for the guard to lead them to their rooms, and they set off down the hallway. They took several turns both right and left. The hallways were all of the same size now, and Bryn thought they must be in a different smaller part of the palace. After a while several doors began to appear on both sides of the hallway, with no discernible marks to differentiate them. The guards must count them, or judge them somehow, Bryn thought, as they continued past. After a few more turns, they stopped in front of a door which looked the exact same as all the others they'd passed by.

“Here we are gentlemen,” he said, producing a ring of keys and selecting one to fit into the door. “You’ll find the room quite accommodating for all three of you, I believe.” The door swung open into a large room. A fire was burning in the large fireplace on the wall opposite the door, illuminating most of the room. Inside was a large rug of the same red and gold that had decorated the hallway at the entrance of the palace. The walls were decorated with paintings of fields of grain and rolling plains, as well as some richly woven tapestries of dark blues and greens. The paintings reminded Bryn of Eston, and for a moment he felt a little homesick, but it soon passed. Three large beds lay against each of the walls, and a large washstand was set close to one of them. A large armoire and several smaller tables were pushed up against the walls, and two large writing desks took up the center of the room. They must have left the center of the palace and come closer to the edge, for unlike the great hall, there were windows to let in light, although several sconces still held unlit torches on the walls.

“We took the liberty of taking the saddlebags from your horses and putting them on the tables beside the beds,” the guard said. “Is the room to your satisfaction?”

“Oh yes, quite so,” Halam said quickly, stepping inside. “This will do just fine.”

“Good,” said the guard. “In the morning whenever you’re ready for breakfast just leave your room. Guards will escort you back to the great hall and then to the conference.” He stood a few more moments in the doorway as the three men entered the room and looked around. “Will there be anything else this evening, sirs?”

“No, we are quite alright,” Rodden said.

The guard stood at attention for a moment, then spun on his heels and left the room, closing the door behind him.

They each found which bed had their possessions, and put everything in order. Rodden went to wash up at the washstand, while Halam took out a few shirts to hang in the dressing closet. Bryn had nothing important to hang, but washed up when Rodden was done. Halam grabbed the poker next to the fireplace and adjusted the logs so that the light in the room diminished to a faint glow.

“We should get some sleep,” he said, “we’ve got an important day before us and it’s already late.”

“Aye,” Rodden agreed as he stripped of his tunic and pants and began to adjust his bed.

Bryn did the same, putting his shoes under the bed and taking off his travel-stained clothing. He hoped that he would be able to find a time to wash them over the next few days. It would be quite uncomfortable to ride back to Tillatia with them still dirty. If nothing else, he figured he could find a good stream or river to clean them in on the way back. The three said goodnight and lay down in their beds, which Bryn found too soft after a week on the road, but in a few moments all was forgiven as he fell asleep.

NINE

The early morning sun shining through the room's small window slits woke Bryn. He sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. The fire from the night before had burned down to glowing embers. Bryn pulled out the cleanest shirt and pants from his travel pack, wiping off the dust stains as best he could before putting them on. He took a cloth from near the washbasin and wiped at the mud stains on his shoes. He wanted to look his best today, or as good as he could with his limited supply of clothing.

As usual, Halam was already up and dressed, trimming at his beard in the mirror above the washstand, while Rodden was just getting up out of bed.

"Morning," Rodden said to Bryn as he stood up and did some stretches. "The big day is upon us at last," he said smiling.

"I shouldn't think we'll have any trouble getting you into the hall this morning, Bryn," Halam said over his shoulder as he tilted his head up to get a better angle on the whiskers under his chin. "From what Orin said last night, each delegate will be allowed a couple of advisors into the meeting with him. It sounds like most of the delegates brought half of their provinces with them, so they'll have some tough choices to make; but for us the task'll be quite simple."

Bryn saw his uncle's beard move up in a smile at the last remark. He wondered how interesting the conference would be. The way Orin had made it sound last night, all the provinces were in agreement on restarting trade. Would they all sit down in the hall and take a vote on who wanted to trade, and with all arms going up in the air, quickly bring a close to the meeting and head home? No, that would be silly, Bryn thought. People didn't travel the length and breadth of Adjuria to simply raise an affirmative hand on the trade issue. The situation was much more complicated than that.

As if reading his mind, Rodden patted Bryn on the shoulder. “You should be in for quite a lively debate today, Bryn. While everyone will want trade, the question will be how much of it they can get, and how much of it they have to give over to their neighboring provinces.” He smiled as he turned to look at Halam’s reflection in the mirror. “We’ll have it quite easy, I suspect, only having to negotiate with Millen Fron. Other provinces’ trade goods overlap with more than just one province.”

“Aye, I hope you’re right,” Halam replied. “I’d rather not get into a shouting match over grain prices and shipping costs with Millen. That’ll lead nowhere.” He put down his scissors and splashed a few handfuls of water onto his face. “I intend to be as civilized and as gracious as possible toward the other provinces. There is no reason this meeting should descend into a chaos of falsities and recriminations,” he said turning toward Rodden and Bryn while wiping his face with a towel. “Now if you two are ready, I’d like to get this day started.”

Rodden finished dressing and pulled his boots before splashing some water onto his face. “Ready,” he said, and Halam opened the door and they stepped into the hallway. A guard was there right away.

“Good morning, sirs,” he said as he produced a key from his pocket and locked the door behind them. “I’ll show you to breakfast this morning.”

They fell in behind him and were once again making their way through the twists and turns of the palace toward the great hall. Many other men dressed in fine clothes were also being escorted by guards from their rooms in the palace. Bryn looked from them to himself and felt underdressed. Halam may have sensed his apprehension, for he put his arm around Bryn’s shoulders as they walked down the hallways, smiling down

into his face as he did so. Halam wasn't dressed much differently from himself, still wearing the same clothes that he'd worn when he sat at the table with him and Uncle Trun back in Eston. If Halam felt comfortable with what he was wearing in the company of these men decked out in all their finery, then Bryn decided he'd not let it bother him.

They came to the same double doors they'd exited the night before. The kitchens on their left sounded full of activity and mouth-watering smells spilled into the hallway.

The guards standing at the entrance to the great hall threw the doors open upon their approach. The scene was markedly different from the night before. While previously Bryn had estimated the number of people to be around three hundred, this morning it seemed there was double that. Every single table and bench was full, and it looked as though more had been brought in from other areas of the palace to accommodate the large numbers. There were no minstrels playing this morning, nor any shouts coming from the center of the hall, which was now occupied by tables full of men breaking their fasts and talking quietly. A low hum of voices hung over the hall, a big difference from the laughing and shouting of the dinner feast.

The same serving girls scurried busily about, depositing fresh trays of food onto the tables and taking the empty plates and glasses back to the kitchens. Bryn's mouth watered at the sight and smell of food. There were piles of crisp bacon and mountains of still-sizzling sausages; fried potatoes and eggs cooked in every way imaginable; loaves of wheat, rye, and sweet breads spread out on each table; and large plates of strawberries, bananas, apples, oranges, and grapes overflowing around them.

A hand shot up from one of the tables and waved frantically at them as they stood by the entrance. Rodden squinted, then smiled.

“There’s Orin,” he said pointing.”

They did the best they could to shuffle between the small amounts of space between benches of hungry men devouring their morning meal. Orin was in the near-center of the hall. As they approached he patted a few men on the back who were sitting at the table, and they grabbed their trays and moved.

“Good morning, how’re you feeling today?” Orin asked, a large smile lighting up his face.

“Very good, thank you,” Rodden said as they approached, clasping Orin by the hand. “And you?”

“Oh, I could’ve done with a bit more sleep, but other than that I feel quite good.”

“I imagine that not everyone here this morning can say the same,” Halam said as he took Orin’s offered hand.”

“No, no indeed,” Orin replied with a laugh. “I’ve heard quite a few grumblings about headaches from too much wine last night, and quite a few more about the early hour.”

“Well, they’ve never done a hard day’s work on a farm, then,” Bryn said as he made it through the crunch of benches to stand beside them.

“No, I imagine most of these men wouldn’t know the difference between a plow and a pole-axe,” Orin said with a smile as he clasped Bryn’s hand. “Now, please, take a seat and dig into this wonderful food that’s been prepared for us this morning.

It didn’t take any prodding from Orin. Despite the fact Bryn had stuffed himself the night before on all the fine foods the palace had to offer, a hunger rumbled in his belly. Maybe it was the lack of food on the journey to Baden, or that he’d never eaten like this

at home; but it could also just have been that he was hungry, and a bit nervous as to what the day held for him.

Rodden and Halam seemed equally hungry themselves, and took bacon and sausages from the platters in the center of the table, tore off large chunks of hot bread, and grabbed handfuls of fruit. Once again, Orin just sat back and watched them eat.

“Not hungry again this morning, Orin?” Rodden asked, seeing the older man watching them eat with a smile of satisfaction on his face.

“Oh, I got here early, before this hall was half-full, and had my fill then. No, I’ll be fine until lunch, and probably hungry quite a bit before.”

“I hope that when I’m your age I’ll be able to stay up all night and get up before everyone else,” Halam said through bites of sausage and bread.

“You mean to say that I’m not younger than you?” Orin said with a quizzical look of dismay on his face.

Halam tossed the crust of his bread at Orin, who easily batted it to the floor, laughing as he did so. “No, gentlemen, you know how I relish conversations—”

“Gossip more like it,” Rodden cut him off.

“Well, be that as it may,” Orin said with a sideways glance that told Rodden he was correct, “someone has to take the pulse of the various delegations that are in the palace.”

“And how does that pulse sound today?” Halam asked.

“Right now, very steady. But I have a feeling that it could quicken considerably as the morning progresses.” He waited a few moments while Halam and Rodden looked up from their plates to study his face for clues as to what he might mean. “Tempers may

flare up when the delegates start talking of trade. After all, this was a contentious topic before the war.”

“But that was more than twenty years ago,” Rodden scoffed, “surely there’s few who even remember some of the squabbles that occurred back then over such mundane things as freight weights and expected delivery times. You’d think that two wars would have made people realize that there’re more important things than squabbles over trade.”

“Let us hope so,” Orin replied. “Nearly five years, however, have passed in which there’s been peace without trade. In that time many of the provinces remembered what they had before the wars, and they look back on that time with nostalgia, but also in many cases with a sense of having been wronged. It’s those good times we hope to coax into the memories of the delegates today, and the bad which we want to do our best to keep out of sight and out of mind.”

Quite a few of the men around them were getting up from the tables and moving toward the main entrance to the hall as well as to the side doors. Serving girls did the best they could to dart between them to clean up the empty plates as the men moved. It was evident that more men were leaving now than were coming in.

“Well,” Orin said looking around, “it looks like many have a mind to get this conference underway.”

“So where exactly is the map room?” Halam asked as he dipped the last of his bread into the grease and juices on his plate. “This whole palace seems like a maze to me, and the lack of windows sure doesn’t help any.”

“It can be reached from the main entrance to the hall we’re in now, or the side entrance over there,” Orin answered, pointing toward the twin doors on their right,

opposite those that led to the kitchens. “There’ll be guards to show the way, but I think you could just as easily find it by following the steady stream of people that are now leaving.”

“They can’t all be going to the conference,” Bryn said. “I thought you said each delegate was only allowed a couple of advisors.”

“Yes, that’s right, Bryn,” Orin answered him. “But I’m sure that many of these men will be close by, in adjoining halls or in the hallways, talking to their counterparts from the other provinces, soaking up as much information, whether true or false, to supply to their superiors. We’re now playing an information game, Bryn; knowledge is power, and he who has the most will come out the winner.”

“Well, shall we then begin to play this game ourselves?” Rodden asked, pushing his empty plate away from him and getting up from the table. “I’ve been thinking of this conference for weeks now, preparing reports and compiling figures until my eyes have ached; I’m ready to get in that hall and get it over with.”

“Well, by all means then, let us proceed and make Tillatia proud,” Orin said in a gruff, authoritative voice that could be heard over the clatter of plates and chatter of small talk from the nearby tables; a voice that was more mockery than seriousness. “We’ll show these people what trade is all about.” Several people at the nearby tables chuckled, and a few raised their glasses. Rodden and Orin shared a laugh, while Bryn smiled widely beside them, but Halam didn’t look impressed. He was all business this morning, and his serious mood quickly rubbed off on the others. Orin and Rodden straightened themselves up and headed toward the side doors leading out of the great hall and into the hallways, Bryn and Halam close behind.

As before, there was a guard to meet them, but it was clear that all they had to do was follow the other people heading in the same direction, so they told him they could find the map room themselves.

After walking for a few minutes they came to an ornate set of double doors at the end of one hallway. There were two large hauberks set on the wall above the doors, their metal gleaming in the torchlight at this end of the palace. Several guards stood well in front of the doors with papers in their hand, stopping each group of men as they approached. They exchanged a few words and the guards checked their lists. At that point they'd make a mark on the page, exchange a few more words, and then the men would proceed toward the large double doors where they would be admitted by yet more guards, while the others were then escorted back down the hall to another destination.

Orin led them down the hallway, with Rodden at his side, and Halam and Bryn right behind. As they approached the guards, Orin said a few words before the guard turned toward Halam.

“Halam Fiske, from Tillatia?” he asked, looking up from his paper.

“Aye, that’s correct,” Halam confirmed.

“And who will be accompanying you into the hall?” the guard asked.

“Orin Dale, Rodden Stor, and Bryn Fellows,” Halam replied.

“The guard ran his pen down the list, making a few notations, then looked up at Halam.

“Very well, sir, you may proceed.”

They passed by the guards and the other groups of men, and headed towards the doors.

“That was easy,” Rodden said as they passed the guards.

“Don’t get used to it, things will only get more difficult from here on out,” Halam replied as they got to the large double doors. The guards opened one door, and motioned for them to enter.

The room they walked into was large and rectangular. Bryn could tell immediately why it was called ‘the map room.’ Every inch of space on the walls was covered by one map or another.

“Oh my,” Rodden said as they entered, his mouth falling open at the sight of so many maps crowding for space along the walls.

“When they said map room, boy, they weren’t kidding!” Halam said, equally in awe over the overwhelming types and sizes of maps.

Many of the people who’d entered the room before them were circling around, staring up at all the sights they’d for the most part had only heard or read about. Bryn, Halam, and Rodden unknowingly joined the clusters of people wandering the room with their heads staring upward.

There were maps of Pelios as far as the world was known. They showed detailed descriptions of the terrains of Adjuria and Jonguria, as well as the oceans and seas that surrounded them, and were divided between the two longest walls based on country.

Several maps were devoted entirely to cities, and Bryn could see Baden, Pardun, Atros, Fadurk, Dockside, and Bargoese displayed prominently at eye level. Further up toward the ceiling were maps of the King’s Wood, the Baltika Forest, and the Tirana Forest. Near the ceiling on the far wall opposite the entrance was a good-sized map showing The Vast, the desert which took up all of southern Oschem. Next to it was a

map showing details of the entire Klamath Plain stretching the length of Adjuria. Nearby hung a map with various routes through the Montino Mountains, and another showing the same for the Barrier Mountains in Ithmia. A rather non-descript map highlighted the terrain of the Isthmus, or lack thereof, for it was rather barren and desolate, much like the stories he'd read and heard about the place. One that Bryn found particularly interesting was a map showing the full extent of The Waste, the icy tundra that covered more than half of the three northern-most provinces. Much like the two desert maps, this one was also quite empty, and Bryn could almost feel a chill creep into his bones just by looking at it.

On the other long wall were maps that Bryn had a hard time recognizing. These were the maps of Jonguria, and except for a few of the names, they were completely unknown to him. The four great eastern cities of Fujing, Bidong, Xi'lao, and Bindao were all shown in exquisite detail. Next to them was a map showing Waigo nestled among the Xishan Mountains. The Dashao Desert was given a particularly large map, even though there were few terrain features to highlight. Another was devoted entirely to the immensity of the Bailochia Forest and close to it was another showing the wildly fluctuating terrains of northern Loajing with tundra, plains, desert, and grasslands all taking up space. A map labeled as southern Pudong showed the Shannan Mountains as well as the Shanbu Jungle. Bryn had never seen a jungle before; none existed in Adjuria, and he thought it would be quite a sight to see. A portion of the wall was given over to a group of maps which showed the five islands of Jonguria. The three largest were, Shanfeng, with its jungles and mountains; Jiebing, covered entirely with forest; and Senlin, desolate on the coasts, but forested on the interior. The two smaller islands,

Yanshide and Nanbo, were given just small spaces. The three lakes of Jonguria, Pulong, Kumou, and Shuiyan, took up less area than the entirety of the Duldovian Sea, Bryn thought as he looked at the map.

The room seemed to have every map imaginable; there was even one detailing the far-off island of Desolatia, where Grandon Fray had been exiled following the Civil War. Even the ceiling was covered with a huge map of Pelios, showing the entirety of both continents, as well as the seas and oceans.

Only after they'd circled the room and were once again standing in front of the entrance did they feel a little foolish at being swept away by the sights of the room.

"Really quite amazing," Rodden laughed, "I could spend all day in a room like this just staring at the maps, lost in thought."

"Me too," Bryn agreed, still looking with wide-eyes at all the room had to offer.

"Well, we'll be in the room all day, but it won't be for the purpose of staring at maps," Halam said, his awe at the initial sight of the room now replaced with determination at the task ahead of them.

"Let's take our seats," Orin suggested, pointing toward the table.

It was easy to forget that the room held anything but maps when first entering. The center of the room was taken up with a massive oaken table which must have come from deep in the forests to be so long and wide without a break in the wood. There were fifteen high-backed chairs with deep-red cushioning set into the table, fourteen evenly spaced on each side, with one at the table's head opposite the entrance. Behind it stood the only window in the room, a large plate-glass affair which took up more space than some of the maps, and stretched nearly to the ceiling, casting the early morning sun down

onto the table below. Several other chairs were placed behind the fourteen on the sides and head of the table, and Bryn figured these must be for the various advisors and counselors that the delegates had brought along. It felt odd to think of himself in that capacity; what could he possibly advise his worldly uncle on anyway? Perhaps there'd be other people simply observing the proceedings in some of the other chairs. But no, Bryn thought, this was too important of a conference for anyone without a purpose to take up space. *So what is my purpose, then,* he thought?

Orin led them down the right side of the table. He stopped near the middle of the table at a spot that contained a piece of paper labeled "Tillatia."

"Here you are, sir," he said to Halam as he motioned for him to take the high-backed chair at the table. "Make us proud," he added with a smile.

Several other delegates were also taking their seats, although just as many were wandering the room still looking at the maps or talking to their advisors. Rodden held out his arm toward the chairs behind Halam, and Bryn sat down in the center chair, with Rodden taking the seat on his right. Orin went to talk to a few clusters of people still standing. He sure seemed to know a lot of people, Bryn thought as he watched him smile and laugh with several men gathered about the room. After a time he came back and sat in the other chair next to Bryn, still chuckling a little to himself about whatever had been discussed.

Most of the other delegates were seated now, with a few people standing beside the empty chairs still talking. The guards at the doors closed the two doors and stood beside them, their heads held at attention. With that action the few remaining people quickly took their appointed seats, and a hush fell over the room. The only empty chairs now

were those at the head of the table. A few quite mumblings could be heard around the room. Bryn looked up at Orin seated next to him. As if reading his thoughts he bent down to whisper into Bryn's ear.

"The king," was all he said.

As if on cue, a small side door set into a space on the long wall behind them toward the window opened and a young man entered the room and headed for the chair, with two men and a woman trailing behind him. The delegates and advisors around the table rose from their chairs at his entrance into the room.

He looked little older than Bryn, with wavy blonde hair and above-average height. Long cheekbones framed his face, ending in a square jaw and a prominent chin. His nose and mouth were small, and he was clean-shaven. Bryn judged him to be quite handsome, and thought that he must have a hard time keeping the ladies away. He was dressed in a light blue cotton shirt and brown pants with a dark brown leather jerkin. Strapped to his belt was a simple-looking dagger in a leather sheath with the seal of Culdovia on it. He possessed a strong, muscular build and strode with a purposeful gait. Reaching his chair, he turned to acknowledge the delegates standing around him with his eyes before taking his seat, the rest of the room doing so as well.

The woman who took one of the chairs directly behind the king must have been his mother, Bryn thought. She too had long wavy blonde hair, and her facial features were very similar to the king's. She was quite beautiful and still very young, not twice the age of the king, in Bryn's opinion.

Beside her were seated two older men. One was rather stern looking, with a wrinkled face and gray hair, a long scar down his left cheek from the eye to the chin,

which caused his mouth to slant downward on that side in a perpetual frown. The other was a bit younger, with dark hair showing signs of grey at the temples, and a calmer visage. As the delegates seated themselves, he rose to speak.

“Gentleman,” he began, addressing the hall stretched out before him, “thank you for coming to this conference on trade held in Baden by the grace of his majesty, King Waldon. My name is Tullin Atow and I am counselor to the king. I have a few short words for you, and then we can begin introductions and get the conference started. The delegates all clapped for a few moments while the king looked a little restless.

“This conference,” the man continued, “is being held on the express recommendations and planning of the delegate from Culdovia, Pader Brun.”

He motioned toward the far end of the table, opposite Bryn. The man rose at his name, and the delegates again clapped. He was in his early-forties, tall, but looked to have recently put on some weight. He had a square jaw with ruddy cheeks, and a thin mustache that he kept close-trimmed to his upper lip and which was the same dirty blonde color of his hair. He was wearing loose cotton pants and shirt of a matching light blue tone. He sat down, and Tullin continued.

“As well as the delegate from Duldovia, Willem Pritt,” Tullin said. The man that Orin had pointed out the night before rose to acknowledge Tullin and the clapping from the delegates. He seemed to be wearing the same clothing as the previous evening, which made Bryn feel good. At least he wasn’t the only one in the hall who packed light.

“These two men did much to present the idea to the king and royal council of renewing trade relations with Jonguria,” Tullin said after Pritt sat back down. “Our purpose here over the next several days is that issue. Many of you have differing

opinions as to the best course of action to take with our neighbor to the east. I assure you that we'll listen to all opinions and discuss each in a civilized fashion befitting the dignity of this setting."

Several delegates murmured their support, and a few clapped their hands.

"It is important to remember," the man continued as he began to circle the table of delegates, "that we have not yet sent any emissaries to Jonguria with our thoughts on this issue. We thought it best to ascertain the views of the provinces first. When, *and if*, we successfully conclude our meeting here, delegates will be selected to travel to Jonguria to present our proposals to the proper authorities. Let us hope that we can once again have a healthy and vibrant trade between our two nations."

The delegates all applauded at that last remark and Tullin smiled before continuing on.

"Gentleman, the room that we are in was not chosen by accident," he said, raising his arms to showcase the great maps around them. "It was chosen not just for its size in accommodating all of you, but to make you think as well about the immensity of size and variation between the two nations of Pelios. For the longest time our world was at peace, but only recently was it stricken with war, first with a foreign power, and then here at home amongst ourselves. Yet peace has returned once again, and with it the chance to renew old friendships soured by the scourge of war. Gentleman," Tullin continued, putting his hands down on the center of the table, "let us put away our past differences and forge a common path toward the future, one which holds the promise of prosperity for all Adjurians."

The room erupted into clapping and a few hoots and howls from those seated behind the delegates.

“Well, we’re off to quite the raucous start,” Orin said over his shoulder to Bryn and Rodden. “Let’s hope it stays that way.”

Tullin walked back to stand near the king. “Now, I know that many of you are acquainted with your fellow delegates.” He paused to look at the seated faces around the room. “Perhaps you live in neighboring provinces, or have common positions within those governments. Maybe you fought alongside each other in Jonguria, or against one another on returning home. Be that as it may,” he said with a wave of his hand to stifle some discontented murmurs caused by his last remark, “many of these faces in the room may be unknown to some, many, or all of you. For that reason, let us go around the room and present the delegates of the conference.”

Once again he began to walk around the table as he spoke. “Besides the two honorable men from the two provinces I’ve already mentioned, we are delighted to have the following delegates.” He was nearly behind Bryn when he raised his voice for all to hear. “Representing the interests of Regidia is Jossen Fray.”

The man across the table from Bryn and next to Pader Brun of Culdovia rose and bowed to some scattered clapping from the delegates along his side of the table, but quite a few grumblings of displeasure and a large deal of silence from Bryn’s side of the table. The man was in his early fifties and had a squeaky, high-pitched voice. He was short, with a sneering mouth that looked deceptive and cunning when he smiled. His nose and eyes were small, and his hair was jet-black, as was the goatee that framed his mouth. His clothing was of a fine cut, made from leather and wool and nearly all black except for a

dark-orange trim. A dirk was fastened with an ornate hilt to his belt, the sheath bearing three large oak trees, the seal of Regidia.

Bryn remembered the bad mood that Halam had been put into when he learned from Rodden that Jossen would be representing Regidia at the conference. He couldn't see his uncle's face now, but he imagined that his teeth were firmly clenched together and that his fists were balled tight under the table. He wouldn't let any of his anger show, he was much too dignified for that, but to have a man he so obviously disliked, if not downright hated, seated across from him surely caused his blood to boil. Bryn made a mental note to question Orin later about the history between his uncle and Fray.

When Jossen had taken his seat Tullin continued.

“From the dusty plains of Equinia comes Dolth Hane.”

More people on Bryn's side of the table clapped for Hane than did for Fray. He must be liked more for some reason, but then he didn't play a large part in bringing about the Civil War as Fray had done, Bryn remembered as his eyes wandered up to the map of Desolatia Island high on the wall across the hall. *What would it be like to live out your days alone in exile on that place?* he thought.

Dolth stood and gave a low bow to his peers seated around the table, and they in turn clapped for him. Of medium height with blonde hair cut close to his head and looking to be in his early thirties, Dolth was surely one of the youngest delegates to the convention. He wore snug leather pants and coat, both dark brown in color. The seal of Equinia, a horse running across the plains, was displayed prominently on the right breast of his coat. If that wasn't enough to remind everyone where he came from, the horse whip on his belt surely was.

Bryn chuckled a little when he first saw it, and nudged Orin.

“Careful, he knows how to use it just as easily on men as he does on beasts,” Orin said with a smile.

“From the shores of the Bargoese Lake in Allidia,” Tullin continued when Dolth was seated, “Klyne Surin.”

Klyne stood up and nodded his head to those gathered around the table. The applause that accompanied his name dimmed when he stood, and whispers could be heard in the hall. His dark brown shirt was cut short and sowed together just above the elbow where his right arm ended in a stump. Klyne himself didn't appear to mind the whispers which were directed at his missing arm; he actually seemed to bask in them. Bryn nudged Orin and asked what had happened.

“Klyne was wounded, some thought mortally, during the charge he lead on the second day at Baden,” Orin said. “He was still in delirium when they took off his arm, and most were sure he wouldn't make it through the night. But his will to live was stronger than any thought, so here he stands.”

He couldn't have been much older than forty, Bryn thought as he looked at the youthful features of the man who stood smiling as the room whispered. He was tall with straight brown hair kept combed back. Muscles could be seen bulging from beneath his brown clothing. Obviously his lack of an arm didn't hinder his ability to stay in shape, something which the majority of the hall probably couldn't achieve with four arms. Secured to his belt was a small hatchet in a leather sheath which bore the Allidian seal of a large pine tree towering over a lake. When the whispers died down, Klyne resumed his seat, and Tullin continued with the introductions.

“From the far western regions of Adjuria comes the delegate from Hotham, Fryst Bahn.”

Fryst rose and smiled, turning completely around so the whole room could get a look at him. Bryn immediately liked the man, with his easy smile that invited camaraderie. He was in his early-forties, Bryn judged, and had long dark brown hair tied in a ponytail which hung half-way down his back. His clothing looked worn and shabby, and was made from rough homespun wool. It appeared that Fryst went to some pains to try and clean his garments before the conference; there were some stains, partly rubbed away, showing here and there on his light brown pants and shirt. Instead of a weapon like many of the others had at their belts, Fryst had a small mining pick, the odd accoutrement only adding to Bryn’s interest in the man. It appeared that most in the hall felt the same way, for the applause seemed to go on longer for him than it did for any of the previous delegates.

Orin leaned down to whisper in Bryn’s ear.

“Nearly everyone likes Fryst,” he said. “He’s always backed the common man, and knows work, having put his time in down in the mines. When he fought against the allies at Baden, it was said that he purposely held his troops back since he didn’t agree with the usurper cause, but couldn’t stand against his province. As a result Hotham suffered the fewest losses during those three bloody days.”

“From the large province of Oschem,” Tullin went on, “I present to you Andor Flin.”

Andor was slow to rise from his chair, the extra pounds from today’s breakfast perhaps weighing him down. The room clapped for him as they did for the others

presented so far, and Andor gave a few halfhearted waves around the room before sinking back into his chair. He wore different clothing from the night before, Bryn noticed, still the same well-tailored yet ill-fitting light tan coat and breeches heavily accented in green. There were sizeable bags under his eyes, probably from staying in the hall drinking and carousing well after most had left.

“From the steely edge of Adjuria comes the delegate from Shefflin,” Tullin said, proceeding down to the end of that side of the table, his introductions seeming to become more fanciful and pun-filled as he went along, “Jocko More.”

Bryn thought that the applause was less for Jocko than the other delegates, and noticed that many of those seated across the table who'd already been introduced were clapping less. It could be that they had some issues with Shefflin, he thought, but then the reason occurred to him. The five provinces that joined together to begin the Civil War were all seated together across the table from Bryn. Whoever had done the seating arrangements must have overlooked this obvious detail, or else had a sick sense of humor.

Jocko stood and flashed a smile of incredibly white teeth to the hall, in no way taken aback by the lack of applause from his side of the hall. Bryn judged the man to be in his mid-thirties. He was trim and athletic in his black pants and doublet, his muscular arms evident under his dark purple jerkin. His jet black hair was oiled to a considerable sheen and swept back over his head. His nose was small and his large mouth and white teeth were considerably accented by his dark black mustache, the ends of which were waxed into sharp points. A longsword was strapped to his belt, and Bryn noticed the pommel

was etched with an anvil over an orange flame, the seal of Shefflin. Jocko yelled out his thanks to the hall before sitting back down.

Tullin moved down and around the table so that he was now standing opposite the king and next to Pader Brun from Culdovia.

“From the cold reaches of Adjuria’s north comes Iago Cryst of Mercentia,” he said loudly to the hall.

The man Tullin pointed out stood to the clapping of the delegates. He was by far the tallest of the men that’d been introduced thus far, Bryn realized as he looked at the large man. He was in his early-fifties, and was in amazing shape for his age. Not an ounce of fat could be seen from beneath his white cotton shirt and brown studded-leather jerkin; the only protrusions were deep chords of muscles along his arms and legs. Even his neck was heavily muscled. Iago’s eyes were deep blue, his nose and mouth prominent. A large scar ran straight down the length of his left cheek, while another crossed diagonally along his right. His right eyebrow was split in two by yet another scar running from below his eye to his forehead. He didn’t smile or do anything to acknowledge the applause of the crowd, merely stood with a straight back and his arms at his sides with his palms resting on the pommel of the ornate ivory hilt of the longsword fastened at his belt. A sword and shield insignia could be seen on the weapon’s sheath, the seal of Mercentia.

Tullin moved to stand behind Jossen Fray as he introduced the delegate seated next to Haram.

“From the high impenetrable reaches of Adjuria comes our next delegate, Whent Auro of Montino.”

Whent took his time getting up, and Bryn could see why. The man had to be in his late-sixties judging by the wrinkles around his eyes and forehead. He was remarkably slim for his age, of medium height, and still possessed a full head of rich grey hair. His small green eyes looked tired, and his round mouth and nose were obscured by the beard that covered much of his face. Whent's thick wool coat matched the color of his hair, trimmed with some type of fur Bryn didn't recognize. On his belt was a dagger with the seal of Montino, an ice-capped mountain.

No sooner did Whent stand up than he sat back down, and Tullin moved further down the opposite side of the table, causing Bryn's excitement to rise; his uncle was the next delegate to be introduced!

"From the verdant hills and fields of Tillatia comes our next delegate," Tullin intoned in his deep voice, "Halam Fiske."

The clapping that accompanied Halam's name was quite loud, and even the delegates seated across the table from him seemed to have a favorable opinion of the delegate from Tillatia. Bryn looked down the table to see what Jossen Fray's reaction was, but the man showed no sign of any problems and clapped along with the rest.

Halam rose and gave a few short bows to the delegates seated around the table and to the men seated behind him. He met Bryn's eyes and gave a small smile before turning around and resuming his seat.

Tullin was now standing directly across the table from where Bryn was seated behind Halam.

"From the verdant hills and fields of Fallownia," he said with a smile as a few chuckles could be heard around the hall, "Millen Fron."

“Millen stood to the smattering of applause, turning in a circle to nod to all assembled in the room. Looking to be in his early-forties, Millen had short brown hair, a large mouth and nose, and penetrating green eyes. He had a small beard which covered only his chin. His breeches were light grey, as was his cotton coat which he wore over a beige cotton shirt. Unlike many of the other delegates, Millen didn’t have a weapon at his belt, and Bryn couldn’t detect the seal of Fallownia, which he knew to be a wavy field of grain.

There were only two delegates left to introduce, and Tullin wasted no time in getting to them.

“From the southern-most province of Adjuria comes our next delegate, Edgyn Thron of Portinia,” his voice rang out loudly.

Edgyn seemed to be in his late-fifties and wore sailor’s pants of light brown with a loose-fitting white shirt. Like Jocko before him, Edgyn was quick to smile, and his white teeth gleamed out at the others in the hall as he turned in each direction, bowing to all. His hair was dark and combed back over his head, but without the overabundance of oil Bryn had seen some of the other men wear. He had a small nose and his large mouth was framed by a dark goatee. A simple cutlass hung from his belt, and nowhere on his simple attire could Bryn find the seal of Portinia, a ship anchored at dock. When the clapping subsided, Edgyn sat back down and Tullin once again stood at the end of the table near the king.

“And last but certainly not least, from the Barrier Mountains that protect Adjuria, comes the delegate from Ithmia, Palen Biln,” Tullin intoned.

The man that Tullin introduced was tall and looked serious as he stood, neither waving or bowing to the room, nor turning completely for those behind to get a good look at him. Bryn judged him to be in his early-fifties, and from his vantage he could tell that Palen had short-cropped blonde hair and was clean shaven. His face was rather gaunt with a small nose and mouth, and deep-set grey eyes. He looked to be the type of man who smiled little and expected those around him to do the same. Bryn could tell from pictures he had seen in books that Palen wore the garrison uniform of Fadurk; dark-brown leather pants and coat, with a light green heavy woolen shirt underneath, and the insignia of Ithmia prominently displayed on the breast, a single castle tower on yellow sand, water on each side. A longsword, so different from the weapons the other delegates carried in that it was neither elegant nor ornate, hung from his belt. It looked to Bryn to be a sword that had seen battle, unlike the ceremonial blades that many in the hall carried. The clapping for Palen was the loudest heard yet, and continued on for a few moments after he'd resumed his seat.

With the lengthy process of introducing all of the delegates now complete, some restless chatter began to be heard in the room. Tullin paid it no mind as he walked over to stand next to the king.

“And now, esteemed guests, let me introduce one final member of our conference, the King of Adjuria, Rowan Waldon.”

All in the room stood to applaud the king, who rose from his chair to give a few quick bows to those at the table, before motioning for everyone to resume their seats.

“Esteemed guests,” he said to the people in the room, his deep voice ringing around the hall, “I thank you for coming to Baden for this conference. Some of you have

traveled very far to be with us here, while others have come from nearby. Many of you had to leave your work in the fields or the mines of your provinces, while nearly all of you had to depart from your families.”

He paused, and Bryn saw that some of the people in the room were nodding their assent at his words.

“It is my sincere wish,” the king continued, “that we can complete our business here in a swift, yet thorough, manner, so that you may return to your duties as soon as possible. I know that this is a great inconvenience for many of you, but rest assured that it’s of the utmost necessity to your country that we decide here over the coming days a substantial trade policy with Jonguria. It has been ten years now since the East-West War has ended, and twenty since trade between the two countries flourished. The fortunes of all of Adjuria have diminished with the absence of trade, and we are here now to put the matter right. I urge you to keep in mind the many small families, hard-working shop owners, and the many folks toiling day-in and day-out in the fields and mines, lakes and rivers, and mountains and oceans of Adjuria. For them, let us put aside whatever differences we might have, and work toward the common purpose of making the lives of all Adjurians better through our actions here in this hall.”

He took his seat to the vigorous applause of those in the room. All seemed impressed with his words, and while Bryn had a hard time imagining a man barely older than himself sitting in the tall chair at the head of the table as being king. After hearing his words, however, Bryn had no doubt that he was qualified for the position he held.

The room erupted in chatter as the delegates resumed their seats, and Orin leaned over to Rodden and Bryn.

“He may not look it, but that young man has what it takes to be a king,” he said, a large smile on his face.

“Yes, it’s one thing to see him,” Rodden agreed, “and quite another to hear him talk.”

“Let’s hope that the hall heeds his advice and works toward a common policy that everyone can agree on,” Orin said. “While I’ve no doubt there’re some here that’d like to prolong this conference as long as possible so as live off the hospitality of the palace for as long as possible, it would in no way serve the interests of Adjuria. No, what we need is quick action and a sound policy.”

“Yes,” Rodden said, “and let us not forget that we’ve still got to present that policy to Jonguria and have them agree with it, if anything we do here is to have any significance.”

TEN

The talk of trade echoed off the map room walls as the morning progressed. The delegates rose one-after-another to present their province’s needs and wants in regard to trade. The presentations were civil and the reception courteous. It seemed as though the delegates had taken the king’s speech to heart, and that the conference wouldn’t degenerate into a giant shouting match as many had predicted. The problems and prospects of Culdovia and Portinia were heard, and it seemed whatever worries the delegates may have entertained had proven baseless. This notion was quickly dispelled, however, when Jocko More was given the chance to highlight the needs and desires of Shefflin.

“We all know how important Shefflin steel is to the world economy,” Jocko said as he walked around the table. “Before the war it was one of the most lucrative products that Adjuria exported, and the demand was always high. Unlike many of the other provinces’ products, the steel of Shefflin cannot be produced in Jonguria. Its uses are many; the forging of weapons, the production of tools, support beams for construction, and the list goes on. I think many of you know that it’s one of, if not *the* most, important resources that our nation possesses, and it’s my belief that it’ll be the driving force in opening trade once again.”

He finished and returned to his seat amidst a cacophonous amount of disapproval from most of the advisors and many of the delegates.

Tullin began to rise to ask for comments as he’d done after the other delegates had spoken, but wasn’t half-way out of his chair when Iago Cryst began to speak loudly from his end of the table.

“If it’s weapons you’re talking about, Jocko, then all of Adjuria knows that the best are made in Mercentia. Yes, we use Shefflin steel, but many other types of steels as well.”

He began to pace about the room to the sound of encouraging voices from those who agreed with him.

“In the twenty years that Jonguria has been without our resources, don’t you think she’s found other materials to fill the gap left by the absence of our goods? Sure, Shefflin steel has its uses, and no one can deny that it *is* a far superior metal than can be found anywhere else on Pelios, but if Jonguria has done without it for so long, what makes you think they’re so eager to have it back?

He finished and headed back to his chair to the scattered applause of those in agreement.

“The same could be said for the weapons of Mercenia,” Jossen Fray said as he rose from his chair. “How many of our countrymen were killed with Mercenian weapons during the war with Jonguria? Do we really need to supply them with more so that they can do it again?” He leaned on his chair for support as the men seated around him murmured their approval. “I’d much rather see Shefflin steel sent across the sea as opposed to weapons which we may one day regret.”

“That is nonsense!” Iago said, rising from his chair before Jossen had a chance to sit down. “You talk as if they’re still our enemy. Well, they are not. And a sword can be used for many things besides battle; for hunting, or used for training in military schools, or for simple ornamentation.”

“*Ha!*” Jossen laughed. “Do you really believe your own words Iago? By your slow tone I think even you have a hard time believing the drivel spilling from your mouth.”

Many in the hall laughed at Jossen’s rebuke while Iago sat down, his face red with anger, which caused his white scars to become all the more evident. It was not an auspicious turn for the conference to take so early in the morning. As the laughter died down and no one charged out of their seat to challenge the words of the two further, Tullin had a chance to stand and address the hall.

“Gentleman, gentleman,” he said in a conciliatory tone, his arms spread out before him. “Let us not descend to the level of children squabbling in the schoolyard. Let us remember the words of our king and speak to one another civilly and with respect.” He paused for a few moments to look over the delegates as a father would look at a group of

misbehaving children. “Now let us continue. Millen Fron, would you like to illuminate for us the troubles facing Fallownia?”

A little taken aback that he would be chosen to speak next, Millen was slow to get up, but once standing seemed to find his bearings.

“His majesty spoke of old animosities earlier this morning,” Millen began, his hands on the back of his chair as he looked at the delegates seated around the table. “He wisely warned us not bring those up, but I’ve a feeling that many of us have already forgotten his words, or perhaps had no intention of heeding them altogether. It is no secret that the only product which my province trades in is grain. Or that our only competition in this regard is the province far to the north of us, Tillatia,” he said, holding his arm out toward Halam.

“In the past, Tillatia was always able to get a better deal than us because of their closer proximity to Jonguria, which made it cheaper and faster for them to send their excess grain across the sea. We Fallownians had to work very hard to create lucrative deals for ourselves with the Jongurians, and our profits could in no way be compared to those which Tillatia enjoyed.” Millen moved away from his chair and began to walk around the table. “Many Fallownians came to regard Tillatia as the enemy, and we had a lot of animosity toward them. Why?” He looked to the room before continuing.

“Because of some fluke of geography that put them in a better position to trade than us? Aye, that’s one reason, and not one we could do much about, I’ll add. No, gentleman, I think the main reason that we didn’t like the Tillatians was because there were no regulations in place that allowed us to trade with Jonguria on as equal a footing as Tillatia. That’s something that we need to address in this conference. Instead of arguing

back and forth about past wrongs, let us set up a new system that will ensure those wrongs are not committed again. I propose that we have a system in place similar to that of Jonguria, with the provinces dealing with the royal government in Culdovia, much like the Jongurians defer to their imperial officials. We all get a fair price for our goods, and then the government can take over the task of negotiating the deals with Jonguria.”

Millen returned to his seat and sat down, taking out a pocket handkerchief to wipe at his brow, obviously relieved to be done speaking. Several of the delegates applauded him, none more loudly than Halam, who stood to address the hall.

“I am in complete agreement with what the delegate from Fallownia has just said,” Halam told the hall while looking at Millen. “Let us not make the mistakes of previous years when provinces’ undercut one another to secure the most advantageous deals possible. Under that system each province might win, but Adjuria loses. For too long this country has identified itself more as a group of provinces with a common outlook as opposed to what we really should be, a strong nation that works together to ensure that all benefit from what the nation produces.”

He paused as the hall clapped at his remarks before continuing in a softer tone.

“While we sit in this room bickering over which province produces the best and most sought after goods, those goods do nothing but pile up in warehouses in our individual provinces. Without a common thread to bind us together, there can be no trade, and that will benefit no one. We will always have differences; that is part of living in different parts of the country and leading different lives. But we need to overlook those and join together to make this country better. There is more than enough trade for all of the provinces to benefit, and if we keep that in mind over these deliberations, then

we'll come out of this conference with a policy that we can look back on with the pride of a job well done."

The hall applauded vigorously as Halam resumed his seat.

"Well, well, well," Orin said with surprise. "I didn't think that we could expect such passionate positions from your uncle." He looked over at Bryn. "I didn't think he had it in him."

"Neither did I sir," Bryn replied. He was as much taken aback as Halam seemed to be. Looking over at Rodden, however, it appeared that perhaps his uncle's outburst of indignation hadn't quite come out of the blue.

"Did you know about his position on this?" Bryn asked Rodden, who was still smiling and clapping.

"We had discussed the possibility back in Plowdon a few weeks back," Rodden responded. "Halam knew that there'd be a lot of arguing back and forth between the provinces which had opposed one another during the Civil War, and also between those that had traded against each other long before." He paused and put his head down as if thinking whether he should divulge more. After a moment he decided to continue.

"It was your uncle's idea to send a letter off to Millen Fron in Fallownia to discuss an amicable presentation between him and your uncle here at the conference. Millen agreed right away. They both thought that if two provinces which were known to have been fierce rivals during the trading days were seen to be in agreement at the conference, it would pave the way for others to put away their differences as well."

"Well, you two sure are the cunning ones, aren't you now," Orin said with a sly smile.

Rodden chuckled. “We both agreed that a little deception wouldn’t hurt anyone, the ends justifying the means and all.”

Bryn looked around the room. The hall’s spirits had been lifted by the performance of the two delegates whose provinces’ had comprised the entirety of Adjuria’s grain exports to Jonguria twenty years earlier. While the other delegates represented a wide variety of tradable goods, their sheer amount could never rival that of Fallownia and Tillatia. If these two provinces were now on equal terms, then there was a chance that this conference could prove successful, and most knew it.

He saw the king motion behind him and Tullin rose to stand at his side. He crouched down and looked ahead of him as the king whispered into his ear for a few seconds, then rose back up and approached the table.

“Gentleman, gentleman,” he yelled out in his deep voice. It took a few minutes, but the chatter of voices gradually died down to where Tullin could be heard. “It would seem that we have made some progress this morning,” he looked over at where Halam and Millen sat as he continued. “I’ve always felt it was a good idea to quit while you were ahead, or in this case, just take a break for lunch.”

Many voices roared their approval at that statement, and several of the advisors stood up from their chairs. All of the delegates remained seated, except for Andor Flin, who rose quicker than Bryn thought a man of his size could manage.

Tullin raised his arms to settle the hall.

“The king feels that the conference would be better served if it was not constantly harassed during the day by the overabundant amount of advisors that have clamored to Baden with you all. They are welcome to have lunch in the great hall. It has been

decided, however, that lunch will be served to conference delegates and their advisors in a nearby hall, one much smaller than the Great Hall of last night and this morning. We hope that this does not prove to be an inconvenience,” he finished, a wide smile showing on his face.

Nearly everyone besides the Tillatians were inconvenienced by the change to the lunch arrangements, Bryn figured as he looked around the small hall the delegates and their advisors occupied. At first there were loud rumblings and charges of interference; for how could the delegates continue if their rumormongers were not able to report to them what they’d learned from the other delegates’ rumormongers? When it became obvious that there would be no changes to the new lunchtime venue, the loud rumblings grew into quiet voices of discontent then ceased altogether as hunger began to outweigh wounded pride, and everyone was shown to the lunch hall.

The room was a short distance from the map room and just a bit smaller. The walls and ceiling were still high, although it was the first hall that Bryn had seen so far in the palace which didn’t contain an elaborate panting looking down upon him as he looked up. Large slanted windows crowded close together near the top of the room, letting light spill down. In a complete change from all of the other areas of the palace, this room showed paintings of peasants in the field, citizens tending food stalls in the city, and artisans at work on craft goods. It was a nice change from the regal scenes of hunting and carousing that dominated the other areas Bryn had seen.

Three long tables were set into the center of the hall with chairs closely bunched together along their length. There were already loaves of bread and rounds of cheese spaced along them when the delegates entered and they did much to quiet the grumbling

voices, and stomachs, of those still affronted by the sudden change of venues. Serving women soon entered the hall from a pair of side doors, bringing fruit trays and large flagons of wine, which went further in soothing the sprained egos.

Bryn, Halam, Rodden, and Orin were some of the last to enter into the hall. They'd been postponed by all of the other delegates and advisors that had wanted to come over and shake Halam's hand after his speech to the hall. It seemed there were many who agreed with his words of reconciliation and moving forward, even if many of them couldn't say so themselves. Two of the tables were therefore already full upon their arrival, but a hand shot up accompanied by shouts at them, and they soon found themselves sitting with Millen Fron and Pader Brun.

"Really, Halam, I must commend you on your speech before the hall just now," Pader said while popping grapes into his mouth. "I was worried as to the course things were taking until you spoke; now I think that this conference has a chance of success."

"Thank you, but it was really nothing," Halam said, looking down into his wine. All of the flattery was making him uneasy, for he wasn't one accustomed to being the center of attention, and didn't like it much.

"Oh, you're too modest by far, my good man," Pader said with a laugh, causing the edges of his mustache to rise.

"Really, I couldn't have said what I did without the words that Millen said before me," Halam said, nodding his head at the Fallownian delegate seated across from him.

Millen smiled, and it looked to Bryn that he was just as much out of his element amid all of the attention as his uncle was.

“I said nothing more than what needed to be said,” Millen offered in way of explanation for his earlier remarks, his bearded chin rising as he shrugged his mouth. “I don’t know how much longer I could go on listening to the various provinces’ batter each other over the actions they’d taken twenty years before, while sitting by and doing nothing as those same actions were set to repeat themselves before us here today.”

“Rightly so,” Orin said through mouthfuls of bread and cheese.

“I’m sure that many of the other delegates felt the same way,” Rodden offered.

“Well judging by the ovation you two received, it would appear so,” Pader said. “It leads me to believe that we can go on to make some progress this afternoon.”

The serving women came and put down a sizeable roast pig in front of them, a large red apple stuffed into its wide mouth. Pader took the carving knives from the tray and began to serve out portions to the men around him, the conversation slowing as they filled their bellies.

“And what policy would you like to see come about to govern the provinces’ trade?” Rodden asked Pader after they’d eaten a bit.

Pader leaned back with his wine glass in his hand and pondered the question for a few moments before answering.

“One that ensures that squabbles like we saw earlier this morning no longer have any reason to occur,” he said, his light blue eyes staring into an empty space in front of him. “A policy that ensures each province gets their fair share of trade, no matter if their goods are the same as some of the other provinces’ or not.” He sat forward in his chair once again and looked at those around him. “We need the central government to have more control. Whether this means giving more power over to the royal council, or

forming a new council wholly devoted to the issues of trade, so be it. After watching the proceedings this morning, it became obvious to me that the provinces aren't able to deal fairly on this issue by themselves alone."

The other men seated around the table went silent at his remarks. It would seem that Pader's strong words were too much for many of them to take this early in the conference. Most of the province's had grown used to greater autonomy since the civil war ended and the king had been reduced in power.

After a few moments Halam spoke up. "I agree with you, Pader. We need to give the government more control. Most of the provinces won't like it, but I feel it needs to be done." He paused to look at Pader before continuing. "Do others share your opinion on these matters?"

"For now I think it's just us three," Pader said, indicating Halam, Millen, and himself.

The men sat staring into their wine, thinking what would be the best course of action to take to convince others of their views.

"We'll need to convince more delegates that our idea is sound and the right course for Adjuria to follow," Rodden said, breaking the silence. "The way I see it, there are fourteen delegates, and it'll take a majority of them to decide on a trade policy that'll be binding to all. Therefore, we need a minimum of eight delegates to agree on a policy for this conference to end as a success."

"We don't know what other delegates already have plans," Orin said. "Could be that other groups are already trying to form a majority of their own to back whatever ideas *they* have in the works."

“It could also be that there are no plans, and that we’re the first,” Halam replied. “For that reason we should begin to spread our idea to the other delegates this very afternoon.” He looked around at the others. “Now, who else is likely to go along with us?”

“I’ve a feeling that Willem Pritt will agree with us” Pader said, “and I think I may be able to persuade a few of the other delegates whose province’s have been undercut in the past when it came to trade.”

Halam leaned back in his chair to consider Pader’s words.

“Which other delegates do you have in mind?” he asked after a few moments.

Pader leaned back as he continued. “Well, let me think.” His eyes moved from point-to-point along the ceiling while he looked at the various delegates in his mind’s eye. “There’s Dolth Hane for sure,” he said, leaning back with his hands behind his head. “The Equinians have always seemed to come out bad on trade, since their province does not produce much that others do not already have. I’m sure Dolth will go along.”

“So that’s now five of us,” Millen said. “Not enough to have a strong say in matters.”

“Aye,” Orin chimed in, “but a good start.

“With only three more you’ll have a majority in the conference,” Bryn added to the approving looks of his uncle.

“Aye, that’s what we’ll need,” Pader agreed, “a majority. To convince the delegates to give over more control to the government we’ll need a firm majority of voices in support of a unified policy; a strong voice that the rest of the delegates can’t argue against.”

“It may be hard to pry away the province’s that went along with Regidia in the war,” Orin said.

“That it might,” Pader agreed, but they’re only five, and I’m sure that we can convince Equinia to come along.”

“And we know that Fryst Bahn never really believed in that conflict,” Rodden added, “he may not believe in sticking with a lost cause.”

“That’s right,” Halam said, patting Rodden on the back. “Fryst would surely listen with an open mind to our proposal. After all, Hotham has always competed with Oschem when it came to the products of their mines. He’ll surely see the sense in a more level playing field.”

“The way that Jocko More and Iago Cryst were arguing this morning,” Orin went on, “leads me to believe we may be able to pull one of them over to our way of thinking.”

“Yes, there’s no love lost between those two,” Pader agreed.

“I think Cryst would be the easier of the two to convince, but it’d be best to share our ideas with both men,” Rodden said. “I think that one will do whatever the other will not, so it’s a good bet that one of them will agree with us for no other reason than to spite the other.”

They all smiled and laughed at that, taking the edge off of their serious talk for a few moments.

“Perhaps Whent Auro could be persuaded to throw his lot in with the provinces for a change,” Orin said, “instead of just sitting back in the mountains and watching us argue amongst ourselves.”

“It’s a stretch, but you can never tell what Whent is thinking.” Pader replied. “I’ll have a few words with him later this afternoon.”

“I’m sure Edgyn Thron will go along with whatever will get trade moving the quickest,” Millen offered. “From what I’ve heard he’s chomping at the bit to get his ships sailing to Jonguria once again.”

“You can’t blame him for that,” Orin said. “I don’t think anyone profits as much as he does when trade flourishes. Most trade goes by ship, and most ships sail from Portinia.”

“Aye, and most Portinian ships are owned by Edgyn’s family,” Pader added with a laugh, the others joining in. The mood had certainly changed, Bryn noticed. As they thought of more men that could be persuaded to join their trade alliance, their spirits rose and the outlook brightened.

“So that’s seven, half of the delegates,” Halam said. “We still need one more.”

The table fell silent as the men thought of who else could join them. With just one more they would have enough votes to turn their policy idea into a policy reality. But who else could they convince?

“What about Palen Biln from Ithmia,” Bryn offered up after a few minutes of silence around the table. “It seemed that during the introductions this morning that he received the most applause. If everyone has so much respect for him, then his voice will add a lot of authority to our plan.”

He looked questioningly up at the others around the table, and after a few moments of silence figured that he’d have done just as well to keep his mouth shut. What did he know about this conference after all?

“That just might be the best idea yet,” Orin said, looking around at the others. “Ithmia has never traded and always has stayed out of the conflicts between the provinces. If we can somehow convince him to go along with us, it’ll do much to convince the conference to proceed with our policy.”

“Even if he gives us a majority,” Pader added, “his voice will do much to assuage the doubts held by the delegates who don’t join us.”

“Very good, lad,” Halam said to Bryn with a large smile, “very good.”

ELEVEN

The afternoon proceeded much the same way as the morning had. Andor Flin got into a heated argument with Fyrist Bahn over the quality of minerals produced in Oschem compared to Hotham, which seemed to drag on for hours. In reality it lasted a mere fraction of that before Tullin rose to suggest that they move to another issue, much to the relief of all present, including, Bryn thought, the two delegates themselves.

Next came an attempt by Willem Pritt to usher into the proceedings some of the same conciliatory tones that had been heard that morning between Tillatia and Fallownia. He began by discussing Duldovia’s vast wealth of products which came from the Duldovian Sea, and how in the past this often undercut the lesser products, in quantity, but by no means quality, he was quick to point out, of those coming from Allidia. Sensing some type of challenge, Klyne Surin rose from his chair to challenge Pritt’s words. For the next several minutes the two shouted across the table at one another; Klyne arguing that the Bargoess Lake produced goods just as good, if not better, than those coming from the Duldovian Sea, with Willem simply trying to assure everyone that

he'd inno way tried to make that claim in the first place. In the end they both sat down flustered and frustrated.

After that exchange Jossen Fray had a chance to speak. He began by suggesting that the delegates work in closer harmony with one another, but this quickly turned into a diatribe against the delegates sitting across the table from him. It ended when he began to speak of the superiority of the Regidian wood products, whereupon Klyne had to rise for a second time to defend the perceived sleight to Allidia's honor and her substantial wood products industry. Again the hall grew silent after Tullin called for a halt to the discussion and both men sat down red-faced and angry. At that point it was suggested by the king that they call a halt for the day and reconvene in the morning. No one found any fault with those remarks, the first time such had occurred all afternoon, and the delegates happily rose to leave the hall.

"Well that sure went nowhere fast," Rodden said to Orin and Bryn as they stood up from their chairs.

"Aye, that it did," Orin agreed. "No conciliatory approaches this afternoon, for sure. It would seem that they've all forgotten how good they felt at hearing your and Millen's words this morning," he finished as Halam approached them from the table.

"They're quick to remember sleights to their provinces from twenty years ago, but easy to forget friendly tones just a few hours old," Halam said, obviously frustrated with how the afternoon had come off.

Millen walked over to them. "It appears that we have a couple of hours before dinner is served in the great hall. This would be a good opportunity to share our ideas with other delegates that may be sympathetic to our cause."

“You’re right,” Halam said, “but after witnessing how things went over just now, I’m wondering how many actually *want* a trade policy to come out of this conference.”

“Come now Halam,” Orin said, patting him on the back, “don’t let the course of the afternoon dissuade you. We had a good plan today at lunch and it’d be a shame to not carry through on it.”

Pader came over at that moment to join them. “Feeling a little frustrated, Halam?” he asked, catching the last of the exchange between him and Orin.

Halam just looked up at him, his words having hit the mark.

“I think we’re all feeling a little taken aback at how the afternoon went, especially after such a good start this morning,” Millen offered.

“I agree,” Pader continued, “but we can’t let that discourage us. We have some time now to talk to other delegates before their entourages get a hold of them tonight and convince them once again of how right *they* are and how wrong everyone else is.” He looked at them all before continuing. “Let’s each of us try and convince another delegate of our plans before dinner. At the least, we can put the idea in their heads that some of us are trying to come out of this thing with a united policy. Word will spread, and some that we may have already written off might see our proposal as a chance to add their names to a successful policy.”

“It’s worth a try, I suppose,” Halam finally said.

“Good. Now this is what I’ve been thinking,” Pader said. “Tillatia and Mercenia are both neighbors. Halam, why don’t you talk with Iago and try to convince him to come along with us.”

“I’d not have the slightest idea where to begin,” Halam scoffed.

“Tell him that he can one-up Shefflin, or that you prefer his weapons to all other provinces’. I don’t know. Just talk to him so that we can get things moving.”

“Alright, I’ll give it a shot,” Halam finally said.

“Good. Now Millen,” Pader said, turning to face him, “you talk to Edgyn Thron.” He held up his hand to stop any argument. “I know that you two don’t know each other, but the way I see it, most of Fallownia’s grain is sent overland to Portinia to be loaded onto ships bound for Jonguria. Perhaps you can use that to convince him that it’s time for a trade policy and that we need his support.”

“I’ve nothing to lose,” Millen said a little uncertainly.”

“Orin,” Pader said next, turning to face the man. “Can we count on your powers of persuasion to move Dolth Hane over to our way of thinking?”

Orin tugged on his whiskers for a few moments, thinking. “Consider him already ours,” he said at last, a smile on his face.

“Now that’s the spirit,” Pader laughed, and the others couldn’t help but smile at Orin’s confidence.

“Alright, I’ll talk with Willem. I’m sure that we can count on Duldovia’s support.” He looked around at the already thinning crowds still present in the hall, and then each of the men in turn. “We may have to visit some of these men in their quarters. I suggest you ask them to take a walk with you, anything to get them away from their advisors. This kind of talk needs to be man-to-man.”

He waited a moment to see if they all understood. Certain that they had, he continued.

“We have about two hours to present our case. We’ll meet for dinner to discuss our progress.”

* * * * *

Bryn’s stomach rumbled as he sat on the bed in their palace room. Rodden paced from one wall of the room to the other, his hands behind his back and his eyes staring at the floor.

“Well, I think it’s a good sign that they’ve taken this long,” Bryn said, breaking the silence for the first time in nearly half an hour. “If the other delegates wouldn’t listen or just flat out refused the idea, then Halam and probably Orin with him would have been back in the room long ago.”

Rodden continued to pace as if he hadn’t heard, and Bryn slumped down onto the bed, further discouraged.

Just then the door opened and Halam stepped through. Rodden stopped his pacing and Bryn perked up on the bed.

“Well?” Rodden said after a few moments when it appeared that Halam wasn’t going to tell them what had occurred.

“It took some goading, but in the end the man relented,” Halam said smiling.

“That’s wonderful news!” Rodden shouted.

“I didn’t think I had him,” Halam continued, his face perking up with excitement. “I went to his rooms and it took quite a lot just to speak to him alone. He dismissed his advisors, and we talked. It was easy to tell him of the rancorous relations between the delegates; he’d witnessed it just as we had earlier today. So with that, I began to tell him of our plan to form a majority of delegates to vote in favor of a unified policy giving the

government here in Baden more power to regulate the trade of the provinces.” Halam pulled a chair from the wall and sat down before going on. “He was much more reticent to go along after learning that Mercentia would have to make some concessions. But I pressed on, telling him that without those concessions, the same problems as before would come up again, and he would continue to have men like Jocko More as thorns in his side. He wasn’t convinced,” Halam finished.

“So how’d you convince him then,” Bryn said excitedly, nearly falling off of the bed in his eagerness to hear the rest of the encounter between his uncle and Iago Cryst.

“Well,” Halam said, smiling at Bryn’s exuberance, “what did it in the end was convincing him that he could make Jocko look the fool while he was viewed as doing the right thing for Mercentia and Adjuria,” Halam finished.

“That’s it?” Rodden asked, a bit surprised.

“That’s all it took. You see, Shefflin and Mercentia have a long history of dispute. It’s a wonder they both fought with each other at Baden,” Halam reflected before continuing his explanation. “Anyway, I made him realize that supporting a successful trade policy, and reaping the benefits for the Mercentian arms industry in the process, would do more for Mercentia than pointless wrangling with Jocko at the conference table. In the end he seemed to think that the news coming out of the conference would be all about how Iago Cryst bested Jocko More,” Halam ended with a loud laugh. “I’m sure we can count on his support.”

Bryn was grateful to see his uncle happy, especially after seeing him so frustrated just an hour earlier. “Any word from Orin?” he asked when his uncle had finished.

“No, when we left the map room we all went our separate ways. They seem to have many of the delegates spread out quite a ways along these hallways, so there’s no telling where he and the others are. I figure we’ll see them in the great hall for dinner.”

“Yes, well, speaking of dinner,” Rodden said motioning toward Bryn, “our stomachs have been growling at us for the past hour.”

“Aye, mine too. Let’s go eat and hopefully find out that the others have fared just as well.”

* * * * *

The great hall was as packed for dinner by the time they arrived, even more so than it had been for breakfast, Bryn thought as he looked around upon coming through the double doors. The revelers from the night before had obviously slept off their headaches and were ready to partake again, filling the tables to near-capacity. They looked around to try and locate Millen, Pader, and Orin, but it was nearly impossible to pin down three individuals with so many people moving about. After a few more fruitless minutes of scanning the hall, Halam decided it’d be best to head to a far table that had quite a few empty benches and let the others come to them.

They seated themselves and a serving woman brought over three glasses and a flagon of wine, as well as a plate of bread, cheese, and fruit.

“What opposition do you think there’ll be when we present our plan to the whole conference?” Rodden asked Halam as he filled their glasses with wine.

“Well,” Halam said after taking a sip, “first we need to secure enough support. Without the agreement of eight delegates, I don’t think there’s any point in presenting the plan.”

“Not even to let the whole conference know that a plan is in the works?” Bryn asked.

“I’d much rather keep it a bit quiet. I don’t think there’ll be support from the provinces that fought against the crown,” Halam replied.

“But what of Equinia?” Rodden asked between bites of cheese. “I thought that it was a sure thing we could count on their support.”

“There are no sure things when it comes to negotiations like this,” Halam replied. “We could have eight delegates with us after this evening and present the plan to the whole conference tomorrow morning, only to find that half of them have decided to renege on their previous commitment and leave us hanging in the wind.”

“We’ll have to make sure that we have their firm commitment then,” Rodden replied.

Just then Orin came to their table and sat down, waving to a serving girl to bring another glass of wine.

“So how did your conversation with Hane go?” Halam asked eagerly.

“It was none too difficult convincing him,” Orin replied as he reached for the bread and cheese. “When I made it clear to him that by supporting our policy the surplus livestock of Equinia would be bought right up, he couldn’t come along fast enough.”

“It was as simple as that?” Rodden asked skeptically.

“It was as simple as that. I told Dolth that this would mean a central authority in Baden would have more power over trade,” Orin went on, his arms now gesturing in front of him as he told the story. “He didn’t seem to mind so long as Equinia was given a

fair price for her livestock, something which has not always been the case before. No,” Orin finished, “I think we can count on Equinia’s support.”

“Great,” Halam replied. “With Mercentia with us we have the support of five provinces.”

“So Iago agreed then?” Orin asked.

“He came along. He was a little reticent when he realized that Mercentia would lose some say over the matter to the government in Baden, but in the end it was the chance to look better than Shefflin that convinced him.”

“Ha,” Orin laughed, “I should’ve known it’d be that easy.”

A serving woman came over to their table, a large platter of beefsteaks in her arms. She set the dish down, and waved to a nearby girl to bring plates, knives, and forks to the table, while she grabbed the empty wine flagon and headed back toward the kitchens.

“Ah, I could eat a cow, and I see they’ve brought me one,” Rodden said, not waiting for the girl to finish laying down plates before he grabbed the large serving knife from the platter and began cutting one large steak into smaller pieces. The others waited until they had plates in front of them, then they too jumped upon the steaks.

“Save one for me,” Millen said as he came over to the table and sat down next to Bryn. “I never thought that negotiating trade deals could work up such an appetite.”

“Aye, that it can,” Halam replied between bites of steak. “So, did everything go well with Edgyn?”

“Perfectly,” Millen said as he stuck his fork into a rather large steak and dropped it onto the plate in front of him. “I think if you told Edgyn that the Jongurians were taking

over the country with our deal he would agree to it, so long as it meant Portinian ships could ship goods once again.”

“That easy?” Orin asked?

“Too easy,” Millen said as he busily cut up his steak into smaller pieces. “He was just waiting for some type of coalition of delegates to form, he told me, so that a deal could be pushed through the council. The way things were going this afternoon, he was beginning to give up hope of ever seeing that happen. So you can imagine his relief when I knocked on his door and presented my plan. He happily went right along with it.”

“Splendid news!” Orin said.

“And how about you two?” Millen asked between mouthfuls of steak. “Did you manage to persuade Dolth and Iago?”

“We did,” Halam replied.

“Dolth was easy, but Iago took a little more convincing,” Orin explained, looking to Halam for confirmation.

“Aye, that he did,” Halam said. “But in the end I managed it.”

The talk around the table ceased as the men gave all of their attention over to finishing their steaks. The serving woman came back with another flagon of wine, and Bryn took the liberty of filling the glasses. They leaned back with their drinks, satisfied with how far they’d come with their plans since the afternoon.

“Gentleman,” a voice said behind them, “may I join you.” They turned in their seats to see Willem Pritt.

“By all means,” Rodden replied, moving over to make room on the bench.

“Pader told me of your plan to form a majority of delegates to present a unified trade policy before the conference,” Willem said once he had taken a seat.

“Yes, right now we have the support of Tillatia, Fallownia, Culdovia, Mercenia, Equinia, and Portinia” Halam explained. “And we’d like to add Duldovia to that list as well.”

“I’d like to hear more of what exactly you plan to present to the conference first,” Willem responded.

The men looked around the table at one another, not sure who should proceed with the explanation. Halam put down his cup and sat up straight, locking eyes with Willem.

“We plan to tell them that by supporting our policy all of the provinces will see their excess goods traded to Jonguria for them,” he said. “We plan to carry this out by giving the government in Baden more power to negotiate trade with Jonguria, thus removing that burden from the individual provinces.”

Willem shifted a little on his bench. “Many of the provinces won’t take kindly to giving up more power to the king. They remember all too well fighting a war just a few years ago to take power *away* from him.”

“I understand that,” Halam replied, “but it’s obvious to many of us that the provinces can’t agree on a trade deal that wouldn’t undercut each other just like in the past. It’s specifically because they did everything in their power to profit over their neighbors once before that we’re seeing all of these arguments”

“Yes, I understand that,” Willem said, “but I don’t think that’s enough to convince many.”

“If you join us we’ll only need one more province to have a firm majority,” Rodden said.

“A majority is one thing, but you must remember it leaves in its wake a minority; a minority which is often disgruntled at losing out to those it thinks opposed to its interests. Creating a minority of province’s that don’t like the trade policy could lead to the type of problems the policy is trying to alleviate.”

“If we could have all of the provinces agree with us on this policy, I would be grateful,” Halam said, “but I just don’t see that as happening.” He took a sip of wine before continuing. “Who knows, by now the word must be out that several provinces are working on a deal; maybe we’ll have a majority larger than just eight provinces.”

“What I’m afraid will happen is that the provinces that fought with Regidia against the crown won’t go along with the plan, and then they’ll just become further alienated from the rest of the provinces.” He let out a sigh before going on. “I’m not sure if Adjuria can afford to have those provinces seething with resentment once again.”

“I agree with what you say in that regard, Willem,” Halam said passionately, “but I just don’t think it’s fair to Adjuria to let this opportunity to unite the provinces under a trade deal slip through our fingers just because we’re afraid a few people won’t like it.”

Adjuria cannot afford to be divided against itself once again!” Willem said forcefully.

“Gentleman, gentleman, please,” Orin cut in as Halam and Willem sat back, letting their rising tempers cool. “We all want what’s best for Adjuria, there’s no doubt about that. Some of us just have different views on how to bring it about is all.”

The six men around the table sat without speaking for a few moments before Bryn decided to break the silence.

“When uncle Trun and I ride into Eston for harvest days, we hear the views of the farmers and townsfolk,” he began slowly, unsure whether it was a good time to speak or not. “Many of the people agree that it’s better for them to have a greater say in their affairs than the king in Culdovia, who doesn’t know a thing about what problems face Tillatia. They seem happy to have more power now, following the Civil War. But I don’t really see how having more power has made their lives any better.”

He paused and looked into the men’s faces around the table before continuing. “Having more power in Tillatia than in Culdovia has not increased the price of grain that the farmers get each harvest time, nor has it driven down the cost of buying new livestock every few seasons. More power hasn’t helped put up new fencing or decreased the time or expense of moving goods from field to town to city,” he went on, feeling more confident as the others around the table perked up at his words. “I think the only thing that will address those issues is trade. Ever since I’ve been a little boy I’ve heard the people around Eston complain of how much worse things are since they can’t trade their goods to Jonguria anymore. Before the war there were twice as many markets for Tillatian grain, and we have a chance to make that happen again. I think it’s more important for the small farmers of Tillatia and others like them around the country to benefit from trade, than it is for the men sitting around this hall to complain about government power.”

He leaned back, finished with his speech, which proved much longer than anything he’d intended to say when he began. The others glanced from him to their wine, knowing

that what he said was true; and for the first time since the conference began, they felt truly foolish for squabbling over the issues they thought were important when what truly mattered had just come from the mouth of a young boy.

“Well said, Bryn,” Halam quietly said from across the table.

“Yes, Bryn, you really have a way with putting the truth forth,” Orin added, while Rodden tousled his hair, bringing a smile to his face.

“The boy does seem to sense what is important here,” Willem admitted, looking back up at Halam. “The arguments over power seem petty when put into the perspective of struggling families all around Adjuria.”

“Aye, that it does,” Halam agreed. “So are you with us than? Will you stand by us when we’re ready to present our policy to the conference?”

“You can count on my support,” Willem said, rising from the table. He and Halam shook hands, and then he turned to join the other Duldovians.

“So now we are seven,” Rodden said as they watched Willem go.

“Are we still planning to talk with Whent and Palen about joining us?” Millen asked.

“Those two still seem the most likely to me, but also the most difficult,” Orin said as he looked at each man around the table. “Montino has always prided itself on staying out of the affairs of the rest of the provinces, while Ithmia doesn’t trade anything, producing just what she needs to maintain the garrison at Fadurk. Both will be tough to convince.”

“We’ve got to try,” Halam replied. “After all, we only need one, though both would be better.”

The talk ceased as they collected their thoughts, going over the various possibilities they could present to the other provinces in a bid to have them join. The hall was beginning to empty once again, the delegates and their various advisors heading back to their rooms to discuss whatever plans they'd present to the conference in the morning.

The serving women were busy moving about the room, clearing the tables of empty plates and glasses when someone walked up to their table.

"Good evening gentleman," a high-pitched voice said from behind them.

They all looked up. It was the delegate from Regidia, Jossen Fray. He stood before their table with the help of a cane in his left hand. His beady dark eyes seemed to bore into them as his small mouth twisted up into a sneering smile. Bryn looked from the man to his uncle, and he saw Halam's jaw clench tight. Finally, he thought. Ever since the moment on the road from Plowdon he'd wondered what the relationship between these two men was like, and now he was about to find out firsthand.

"Jossen," Halam replied simply to the greeting, turning his body back toward the table after doing so. Bryn thought that Jossen's smile twisted upward ever more at Halam's response.

"I've heard that you've begun gathering delegates in support of a policy which aims to give more power to the government in Baden," Jossen said to the men, although he was really directing the question to Halam.

"You've heard right," Rodden responded. "Would you care to lend your support?"

Jossen's smile widened even further. "Oh no, not at all. You see, my purpose in coming over was just to confirm what I've already heard, and to tell you that I don't think

it's such a good idea to give more power to a government which has in the past proved incapable of holding onto it."

"You mean incapable of keeping power-hungry provinces from storming in and taking that power by force!" Halam nearly shouted as he turned on the bench to face Jossen once again.

"Come now Halam, that isn't what I meant at all," Jossen replied, showing no signs that Halam's sudden anger had flustered him.

"Then what *did* you mean?" Millen asked.

"I simply think that the authority to trade with whom and on what terms is a right the provinces need to keep for themselves. There's no telling what may happen if that's taken away and given over to some bureaucrats here in Baden."

"We've already got the support of half the delegates to the conference," Orin explained. "I think that shows that many agree it *is* time to try a new approach."

"And I disagree," Jossen replied.

"That's fine," Halam said in a controlled tone. "If you think that you can come up with a better policy, then present it to the conference."

"I plan to do just that. Now, gentleman, it's growing late. I bid you good evening."

Jossen turned around to walk away, leaning heavily on his cane in the process.

He left them wondering what he meant. What plan could Jossen have for Adjuria that a majority of the provinces would go along with? Many still didn't trust the Regidians; the memory of the Civil War that they started was still too fresh in the minds of the people. To go along with a trade policy put forth by them, however good it may sound, would seem to most as joining with the enemy.

Halam was obviously upset by the encounter, Bryn realized as he looked across the table at his uncle. He frowned into his cup of wine before throwing the last of it back in one massive gulp, then rose from the table.

“Gentleman,” he said, his voice a mixture of tiredness and exasperation, “it’s been a long day, and tomorrow will prove to be even longer, I’ve a feeling. I think I’ll turn in early.” He turned to walk away, the others hastily saying their goodnights to his back.

“Jossen’s appearance seems to have upset him,” Millen said to the others after Halam had left the hall.

“Yes, that it would seem,” Orin replied before taking a sip from his wine.

“I wonder what plan he could possibly have,” Rodden said as much to himself as to the other three. “I just don’t see the whole of Adjuria supporting a plan the Regidians have such a large stake in.”

“Nor do I,” Orin replied. “It could be that he’s bluffing, trying to unnerve us before tomorrow. He no doubt knows by now that we’ve got a near majority supporting our proposal to increase the government’s power over trade, and we know that Jossen’s never liked the government in Baden. He may just be trying to scare us.”

“Or maybe he’s speaking the truth, and has a policy worthy of the conference, perhaps one that could gain more support than ours,” Millen said. “After all, it wasn’t too difficult to convince Portinia to go along with our plan; I think that Edgyn would go along with any plan that had a chance of success.”

“That would nearly ruin our chances,” Orin said. “For Jossen to come over and state his intentions tonight tells me that he already has support for his plan, perhaps as much as we do.”

“He most likely has the support of the three provinces that backed him in his bid for the crown five years ago,” Rodden said.

“If Oschem, Hotham, and Allidia are indeed with him,” Orin replied, “then they’ll put the pressure on Equinia to join as well. They’ve always stuck together before, I see no reason for them to stop doing so now.”

“But I thought that you convinced Dolth Hane to support us,” Bryn said to Orin.

“Aye, Bryn, he said he would support us, but that was earlier this evening. In the time since then he could have been approached by any number of Jossen’s supporters and felt the pressure to switch. Perhaps they made him some kind of deal or simply reminded him of whom his friends have historically been. No,” Orin said, leaning back on the bench with his arms folded in front of him on the table, “I suspect that we’ve already lost the support of Equinia.”

“Well that’s just great,” Rodden said loudly. “That means that they have five votes before the conference while our seven have been reduced to six.”

“What’s more,” Millen said, “we cannot be so sure that Mercentia will stick with us either. Iago was very tough to convince earlier by the way that Halam told it. Perhaps Jossen will pull him away from us as well.”

“That’s a possibility we must consider,” Orin agreed. “It would be best if we already thought of Jossen as having six votes, since whichever way Mercentia goes, you can be sure that Shefflin will go the other.”

“So all we really can be sure of is that we have four votes then.” Rodden sighed. “Tillatia, Fallownia, Culdovia, and Duldovia,” he counted off on his fingers, “that puts us in the minority.”

The table fell silent as they brooded on the prospect of having come so close to working out a deal only to have it wither while within their grasp. Millen finished his wine and rose from the table.

“Well, I don’t see what else can be done this night. We did well gathering votes earlier. It’d do as all good to remember that nothing has changed so far that we know of. Let’ not jump to conclusions and wait to see what tomorrow brings.” He gave them a reassuring smile before heading toward the doors.

“I suppose he’s right,” Rodden begrudgingly said, “but it doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“Nor I Rodden, nor I,” Orin replied.

“Well, sleep does sound like a good escape from the doubts now crowding my mind,” Rodden said, smiling as he rose. “Bryn, are you ready to call it a night?”

Bryn looked from Rodden to Orin, thinking. So much had happened in just the past several minutes that his mind was racing with thoughts. Even if he went back to the room with Rodden, he didn’t think that his mind would slow enough for him to sleep; and lying awake with questions he couldn’t answer wasn’t an appealing prospect.

“No, I think I’ll stay just a little longer, if that’s alright with you sir,” Bryn replied, looking to Orin for an answer.

“Aye, that’s just fine with me Bryn,” Orin replied.

“Well then, I’ll see you in the morning. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” they both said as they watched Rodden head off toward the hallway.

The hall was now filled with only those who were intent on drinking more wine and

carousing, their usefulness to the conference diminished now that the delegates were separated from most of their retinues during the day.

“Orin,” Bryn said a few minutes after Rodden had left and a serving girl had refilled their cups, “what can you tell me about Jossen Fray?”

“What would you like to know?”

“Well,” Bryn began, “it seems to me that he and my uncle don’ really like each other.”

Orin laughed. “That’s quite the understatement, my boy.”

“After we left Plowdon on the way here,” Bryn continued, “Halam learned that Jossen Fray would represent Regidia at the conference. For the next couple of days his mood was so bad that he’d barely speak. I figured there must have been something in their pasts that caused this kind of reaction.” He paused for a moment. “Rodden mentioned that they served together in Bindao during the war with Jonguria, and then met one another on the battlefield here at Baden.”

Orin looked from Bryn to his wine. He sat still for a few moments before speaking.

“Jossen and Halam were friends during the time that they spent together in the hell that was the besieged city of Bindao. Halam had been sent to the city shortly after he joined the Adjurian army. The city had fallen early in the war to our forces and by the time Halam arrived it had already been retaken by the Jongurians to fall yet one more time to the Adjurians. It was a bloody mess is what it was,” Orin said with a sigh, drinking from his cup and looking at Bryn.

“Jossen had been a commander from early on, and had played a key part in seeing the city fall the first time. It was through no fault of his that the city was retaken; two

armies had marched south from the Jongurian heartland to retake the city and they both met up for a joint attack which had no chance of being repulsed. Jossen knew this and made the decision to pull out many of his troops and have them board ships on the coast. Boy, did the wrath of his superiors come down swiftly on him when they learned of this after the city had been retaken. But to Jossen their reprimands fell on deaf ears, for no more than a fortnight after the city was retaken did he summon his forces from the ships to launch another siege. This one proved much bloodier than the first, as there were now twice as many defenders than before. But Jossen dug in, and with the help of reinforcements, he was once again able to capture the city.”

“After that the stalemate set in and nothing would happen for the rest of the war. The soldiers didn’t know that, however, so they dug in, expecting the Jongurians to try and retake the city again. The Jongurians led assaults of course, but none had the force or determination that their first successful push achieved. Years of boredom set in for both sides, worse for the Adjurians, as they were in a foreign land far from their friends and families and anything they knew. It was into this situation that Halam was sent.”

Orin paused then to drink his wine and flag down a serving girl for another cup.

“Somehow an unlikely friendship developed between the commander of the city’s forces and a young farmer from Tillatia,” he continued. “I’m not sure how it happened, but Halam was subsequently promoted through the ranks because of it, and was soon leading corps’ against the sporadic Jongurian assaults. He was promoted yet again when Jossen suddenly announced he was resigning from command of the Adjurian army and heading back to Regidia. He gave no reason and hastily left.”

“Halam served out his time in Bindao and after hearing of the disastrous Breakout Campaign on the Isthmus and the subsequent peace treaty, was sent back home to Tillatia. Because of the high rank he’d attained and the influential friends in the army he’d made, your uncle was given an important government post in Plowdon. It wasn’t long, however, before the Regidian’s seized the crown and the Civil War started. When Halam learned that Jossen was a leading player in this treasonous turn of events he was shocked. This was not the brave and courageous Jossen he’d met and befriended at Bindao, but some other person in the guise of his friend. Events, however, moved swiftly, and Halam found himself leading the Tillatian-wing of the allied armies at Baden.”

Orin paused for a few minutes to stare into his wine, and Bryn dared not interrupt his thoughts. He’d never heard the details of the story that Orin was telling him now. He knew that his uncle had served at Bindao and fought at Baden, but that was the extent of it. These elements he was hearing now were new and exciting, but also unsettling. He waited for Orin to continue.

“The first day of the Battle of Baden went poorly for the allies,” Orin explained. “They were nearly driven from the field and it looked to many observers that perhaps the Regidian’s claims to the throne were justified. After all, the royal family had done little to assure success in the war with Jonguria. Now they couldn’t even keep the army from defeat against a threat to their very existence. While the usurpers toasted their success on the battlefield and looked forward to finishing off whatever opposition remained the next day, the allies planned late into the night.”

“The second day proved a complete reverse from the first. Once again the usurpers took the field first and charged, and it looked to all that a repeat of the previous days performance was all but assured. It was not in the cards, however. The allies rallied and pushed back, driving the usurpers back. Horses were shot out from under men by the archers on the hills and most of the fighting on the field took place hand-to-hand, the earth quickly becoming slick and red with spilled blood. The battle went on all day and into the evening, and by the time the sun went down it was clear the allied army had inflicted the same defeat upon the usurpers that they’d experience the day before. By the third day it was obvious that the usurper army was a shadow of what it had been on the first, and with Willem Pritt’s successful charge to begin the day, their hopes at retaining the power that they’d come to enjoy vanished on the blood-soaked fields of Baden.”

Orin sat back, his story finished. “It was a different time then, Bryn. People were different; more idealistic and hopeful. Then the war came and a mood of pessimism set in which still retains a strong hold on much of the country. Those were hard years, and while we may no longer be fighting with swords, the battle of words still rages on.”

A serving girl came to refill Orin’s cup once again, but he shooed her away with a wave of his hand.

“Well, Bryn, I think it would be best if the two of us returned to our beds for the night.”

Bryn nodded and he and Orin rose from the table and headed toward the doors. Once in the hallway, a guard approached to lead the way, but Orin waved him off just as he had done with the serving girl. “I know the way,” he said, and gestured for Bryn to start down the hallway. How anyone could have memorized the maze of hallways which

led to the rooms was beyond Bryn, but then he'd come to learn that Orin was a man of strong wits and a keen intellect whose outward humorousness belied a shrewd and resourceful intellect.

As they took turn after turn on the way to their rooms, Bryn decided to ask the question he'd wanted answered since he'd first seen Jossen approach their table.

"Orin," he began, "how did Jossen get that limp? Was it during the Battle of Baden, or earlier in Bindao?"

"A good question, Bryn," Orin responded. "No, he didn't receive his wounds at Bindao. Many men made it home safely from that campaign." They walked on in silence for a few moments while Orin thought. "It was during the second day at Baden that he was injured. The particulars are not well known except to Jossen and your uncle. They both met on the battlefield that day, and when they came off of it Halam did so at a walk while Jossen had to be carried on a stretcher." They stopped in the middle of the hallway. "That would be a question that only two men know the answer to," Orin finished before pointing toward a door. "Well, here we are. I believe these are the Tillatian delegation's quarters." How Orin could tell one door from another, or even one hallway from another was beyond Bryn, but all he could do was say goodnight as Orin quickly turned and began walking back the direction they'd come.

Inside the room both Rodden and Halam were already asleep and the fire was burning low, giving off just enough light for Bryn to wash his face and undress before lying down. His thoughts settled on the delegates sitting around the table in the map room and the various ways they might vote before sleep finally took him.

TWELVE

Halam and Rodden had woken early, before the sun was yet up, although Bryn had a little more difficulty wiping the sleep from his eyes. A small price to pay for learning more of his uncle's past, he thought to himself as he laced up his boots and followed the others into the hallway. The great hall was as empty as they'd had ever seen it, although the smells from the kitchen were as strong as ever. They took a seat close to the doors and were quickly served hotcakes, sausages, bread, cheese, and a large plate of fruit. A pitcher of cider was set in the middle of the table with three cups, as well as a bowl of syrup, and Bryn poured as Rodden served up the sausages.

"How late did you and Orin remain in the hall last night?" Rodden asked as he tore off a large heel of bread for himself, dipping it into the juices from the sausages.

"No more than an hour after you left," Bryn replied through mouthfuls of hotcakes dripping with maple syrup.

"There didn't seem to be too many delegates left in the hall when we left," Halam said as he sliced off a large hunk of cheese from the wheel. "I'm surprised the hall is so empty this morning."

"Perhaps they all decided to get an early start this morning, and are sitting in the map room at this moment wondering where the delegation from Tillatia is," Rodden chuckled.

"Highly unlikely," Halam replied with a smile.

More people began to trickle into the hall as they finished their breakfast and headed toward the map room. Once there they were surprised to see no one was in a rush to start

this morning, as only a quarter of the chairs around the table were occupied. Besides them there was only one other delegate in the room so far, Fryst Bahn of Hotham.

After nearly an hour of waiting and the arrival of only three other delegates, Halam began to grow restless. “What can be keeping them?” he leaned over to ask Millen, who was sitting next to him at the table.

“I’ve no idea. Perhaps many are held up in last-minute negotiations on whatever proposal Jossen intends to present this morning.”

“You think he’ll present it today, then?” Halam asked.

“That’s how I took it when he mentioned it to us last night,” Millen said. “He knows that we’re close to a majority, so besides some backroom deal-making, I think his best chances of success lie in presenting his policy to the whole conference.”

“Did you chance to hear anything from the other delegates this morning on our deal or Jossen’s?” Halam asked.

“No. There were still very few people in the hall when I finished eating, and none of them were delegates,” Millen replied.

They sat back and continued to wait. After a while Jocko More and Klyne Surin both entered the hall together, their advisors trailing behind them, nearly doubling the occupants of the room in the process.

Palen Biln was the next to enter the room. Unlike the rest of the delegates, Palen had no advisors to assist him at the conference. Since it was well known that Ithmia stayed out of Adjurian politics and didn’t trade, there was no need for any. The three chairs set behind him at the table remained conspicuously empty during the proceedings, a reminder perhaps of Ithmia’s solitary role as defender of Adjuria’s only land border.

“Do you still entertain notions of gaining Ithmia’s support?” Millen asked Halam when they saw Palen enter.

“It wouldn’t hurt to try, and the way things are likely to change very quickly, we may need him,” Halam replied as he watched Palen head toward his chair. After a few moments he got up and walked over to the man.

“Good morning, Palen,” he said upon approaching.

“Halam,” Palen replied simply as he looked up before returning his gaze to the wall across from him.

“How do you feel about the progress of the conference so far?” Halam asked after a moment, pulling up one of the empty chairs to sit down next to Palen.

“It’s about what I expected,” Palen stonily replied.

This would be more difficult than he’d thought, Halam realized. Palen parted with his words begrudgingly and didn’t appear to have any interest in what Halam might have to say. He figured it would be best to get right to the point.

“The reason I ask is that a group of us are trying to gather a majority of delegates in support of a trade policy.” Palen turned to look at him for the first time since he came over, giving Halam the encouragement to push forward. “I know that Ithmia doesn’t trade any goods herself,” he continued, “but I’d still appreciate it if we could have your support. With a strong show of support from most of the delegates, our policy will not only have the support of the conference, but hopefully the people as well.”

“The way that you all bickered back-and-forth yesterday makes me believe that any outcome from this conference besides failure is a remote possibility,” Palen replied.

“Still,” he continued after a moment, “tell me of your plan.”

Halam drew in his breath. He would have just this one chance to convince the man, so he'd better do his best.

“The plan would give more power to the central government here in Baden,” Halam began. “Whether that'd be the royal council or a new council devoted entirely to trade, we don't know at this time. What we do know is that the provinces by themselves are unable to come to any kind of agreement on trade which doesn't hurt other provinces. By giving more power to the government,” he continued, “we're assuring that the petty squabbles between the provinces, and the animosities that they produce, will be a thing of the past. All goods'll be sold to the government at fair and competitive prices, and from there the government will carry out the negotiations with Jonguria.” He finished and looked at Palen hopefully.

“It sounds like a fair policy,” he said, “but one that I don't think Ithmia can support.”

“And why not?” Halam asked

“We've always remained out of the affairs of the provinces. It would not do to wade into those waters now. I do indeed hope that your proposal makes its way through the conference,” Palen continued, “if for no other reason than another group of delegates doesn't have to come to Baden to bicker further.” He let out a sigh, whether from tiredness or frustration, Halam couldn't tell. “I agree that reducing the animosity between the provinces is needed. However, it doesn't fall to Ithmia to make that happen.” He gave Halam a look that said this conversation was finished, and Halam had no choice but to head back to his place at the table.

“So how'd it go?” Millen asked when Halam sat back down.

“The good new is that Jossen won’t have Palen’s support,” Halam answered, “but neither will we.”

Millen could tell from Halam’s tone that it wouldn’t do to question the matter further, so both men once again stared at the maps on the walls. While Halam had been talking to Palen, several more delegates and their advisors had entered the hall. Now there were only a few empty seats at the table. Orin came into the room and sat down next to Rodden and Bryn.

“Good morning,” he cheerfully said, “what is the news of the day so far?”

“Well,” Rodden replied, “Halam asked Palen for Ithmia’s support. I don’t think it went too well, however, judging from the look on Halam’s face when he sat back down.”

“Oh, well that *is* unfortunate,” Orin said as his smile was replaced with a frown.

“Did you hear anything more about what Jossen’s intentions are this morning?” Bryn asked.

“I heard that he intends to present his plan to the conference first thing this morning,” Orin said. “He wants his proposal to be the first the joint conference hears, hoping it will give it a better chance of success. It seems that he does indeed have the support of a few provinces already, though I’m not sure which.”

“Perhaps we could present our plan first,” Rodden offered.

Instead of answering, Orin got up and leaned down to whisper a few words in Halam’s ear. Halam turned his head to listen, nodded, and then Orin sat back down.

“I’ve just passed your idea on to our spokesman. What he does with the suggestion we’ll soon find out,” Orin said as he pointed toward the door.

Jossen Fray and Dolth Hane entered the room with their advisors close behind and took their seats. Now that all of the delegates were present, a guard knocked lightly at the door by the window and a moment later King Waldon strode forth to take his seat at the head of the table, his two advisors and the queen mother close behind.

Once the king was seated and the hall quieted down, Tullin rose to address the delegates.

“I’d like to thank all of you on behalf of the king for attending the second day of this trade conference,” he began. “Yesterday saw a lot of contention between the various provinces. There was far too much arguing back-and-forth over what had happened in the past and not near enough substantive discussion on ways to proceed in the future. I hope today that can be remedied.” He paused to look at all of the delegates seated around the table before continuing. “It has come to my attention that there are two different proposals being discussed amongst you. Both seek the support of a majority of the delegates to this conference, thus ensuring passage. The number of delegates required, therefore, is eight. I know for a fact that neither proposal has garnered the necessary votes at this juncture, and for that reason I think it prudent to present both plans to the conference this morning. The merits and faults of both can then be discussed. Perhaps we can hold a vote on either or both this afternoon, wait until tomorrow, or through negotiation combine the two plans, or even scrap both and come up with something entirely new. The process is in your hands gentleman.” Tullin held his arms out in front of him, beckoning the hall to heed his words to ensure that the conference produced results.

“Now, to the proposals,” he said, gesturing toward Jossen Fray. “The first policy proposal will be submitted for your consideration by the delegate from Regidia, Jossen Fray.”

The hall politely applauded as Jossen slowly stood up, his left hand clutching his cane for support while his right he held a sheaf of papers.

“Mighty king, honored queen, esteemed delegates, distinguished gentlemen,” Jossen began, turning to look at all the people around the room, “we meet here this morning to create a lasting policy of trade with Jonguria.” He paused a moment to let the anticipation for his remarks build, laying the sheets of paper down on the table in front of him. “I think it’s obvious to all that an agreement will not come about without serious compromises made between us. But those compromises shouldn’t come at the price of a province’s livelihood. Too often in the past one province has suffered while another has prospered. No longer can we allow this disparity to occur; and by supporting my trade policy, we will ensure that it does not.”

A smattering of applause from Jossen’s side of the table greeted his remarks, and he paused, the sneering smile appearing on his face as he continued.

“My policy would continue to allow the provinces to trade with Jonguria freely. No powers would be taken away from them. To ensure that all provinces are able to trade on an equal footing, however, I propose that we divide Adjuria into two zones of trade: a northern and a southern. The purpose of this would be to ensure that there are not any disputes between provinces which produce similar goods. The northern section of Adjuria would contain all of the provinces north of the Montino Mountains and Tirana Forest. These would be Shefflin, Hotham, Allidia, Mercentia, Montino, and Tillatia. The

trade from these provinces would be shipped by sea from the ports along the Tillata River in Tillatia or overland across the Isthmus.”

“The remaining provinces would comprise the southern section of Adjuria,” Jossen continued. “These provinces are Oschem, Equinia, Fallownia, Regidia, Portinia, Culdovia, and Duldovia. The goods from these provinces would be shipped by sea from Dockside or overland across the Isthmus. Because the goods from the two sections would be going to different regions of Jonguria, the amount of competition between the provinces should drop substantially, or cease altogether. What I think is most important about this deal, however, is that the authority to trade remains within the provinces and is not taken away by the government here in Baden. Gentleman, I urge you to consider the benefits that Adjuria will reap under such a sectional trade policy.”

The room applauded, much louder this time, as Jossen took his seat. Several of the delegates talked excitedly to each other and their advisors. It was obvious to Bryn that a lot of people liked the plan, and he had to admit it did seem to have merit. Perhaps a policy which divided Adjuria into two geographical sections could solve the trading problems of the past.

Tullin rose from his chair behind the king and raised his arms for the room to quiet down once again. “Gentleman, now we will hear the second proposal for your consideration this morning, which comes from Halam Fiske of Tillatia.”

The delegates and advisors clapped politely as Halam rose from the table. Unlike Jossen, he had no notes to read from, nor papers in front of him to guide his words. On the matter of trade, Halam would be speaking from the heart. The hall quieted to hear his words.

“I’d like to begin by thanking the king and queen as well as my fellow delegates and their advisors for allowing me this opportunity to speak,” Halam began, his voice tense. “I have to admit that at first hearing, Jossen’s trade plan sounds good.” This drew a few mumblings from Halam’s side of the table and several smiles and chuckles from Jossen’s. “However,” Halam continued, “Jossen’s plan does nothing to ameliorate the animosities between the provinces that trade has had such a large part in creating. Just because goods are now being shipped from the north and south of Adjuria doesn’t mean that all of our problems will be solved, far from it. In the past all of our goods have shipped from Portinia and traveled by sea to ports in southern Jonguria. From there the imperial government portioned them out based on where the need was and sent them to the different areas. If we begin to send goods from north and south, the same will occur, just in two different locations this time instead of one. In no way will this decrease the competition between the provinces. Jonguria will still trade first with those provinces closest to her shores.”

He paused before continuing to take a look at Millen sitting beside him. “I don’t see how the rancor over the grain trade between my province of Tillatia and the province of Fallownia will be solved under Jossen’s plan. Each province will have to work out a trade deal, then send their goods to their area of the county for shipping. Tillatia’s, being closer to Jonguria, will continue to arrive quicker and at a cheaper price than Fallownia’s. Jonguria knows this, and will seek out our goods before Fallownia’s. As in the past, resentment will occur between the provinces that obtain good deals and those that don’t.”

“What I propose gentleman, is that the government in Baden be given greater authority to regulate the trade of the provinces.” A few mumblings and disgruntled

remarks met Halam's declaration, but he continued on. "Many of you do not like the idea of giving more power over to the government, especially since a war was fought just a few years ago which took power away from the king and gave it to the provinces. But I tell you gentlemen, it is sorely needed. Watching the discussions yesterday, it was obvious to me that the provinces, if left to their own devices, will continue to undercut one another, and if we allow that to continue, I see nothing short of open hostilities breaking out between the provinces."

"My policy would allow the provinces to sell their goods to the government at fair market prices, and from there the government would negotiate a trade deal with Jonguria. Besides reducing animosity between the provinces, I believe this will increase the prices the provinces receive for their goods. Furthermore," Halam went on, "the shipping costs that the provinces had to bear will now be taken on by the government. Only the cost of getting the goods from the provinces to Baden will factored in, eliminating the need for expensive shipping costs overseas. The choice before us is great. We have the opportunity to open a new path to trade, or we can continue to tread the same tired road. The choices are before us; let us choose that which is not only beneficial for Adjuria economically, but also one that does not create an atmosphere of discontent between neighbors."

Halam resumed his seat to the applause of the delegates. Bryn heard quite a few murmurings of consent to Halam's proposal, more so, he thought, than were heard for Jossen's.

Tullin rose once again to address the hall. “Well gentlemen, you’ve now heard both proposals. I think this would be a good time to adjourn. Talk amongst yourselves; ask questions; debate. Let us meet again in this hall following lunch a few hours hence.”

The hall exploded with the sound of voices as delegates and advisors rose from their chairs and began to debate the merits of the two plans. Halam stood to shake Rodden’s and Orin’s hands, while Millen came up from behind to pat him on the back as Pader also walked over to offer his congratulations.

“I think that went over quite well,” Pader said to Halam as he approached.

“Now the question is which plan a majority of the delegates will support,” Halam replied.

“If it comes down to the provinces that supported the king during the Civil War and those who supported Regidia,” Rodden said, “then we’ll have more delegates.”

“Yes, more delegates, but not a majority,” Orin said. “It seems that both Ithmia and Montino are content to stay out of the process entirely.”

Halam looked to Orin. “Ithmia I can understand; I talked to Palen earlier and he won’ budge. But Montino as well? Does Whent really think that by staying neutral he can secure what’s best for his province?”

“From what I garnered talking to some of the other advisors earlier, Montino was approached by those supporting Jossen’s plan, and he flatly refused to even hear it,” Pader said.

“Yes, well that’s Jossen’s plan,” Rodden replied. “It’s no secret how Montino views the Regidians. After all, they were the one’s who first rose up against the seizure of the crown in both Civil Wars.”

“Yes, just because Whent won’t throw his support to Jossen doesn’ mean he won’t give it to us,” Halam agreed.

“He’s a stubborn one,” Pader admitted, “but not without reason. I’ll have a word with him and do what I can to pull him to our cause.”

Willem Pritt walked over from where he was speaking to some of the other delegates and advisors across the room.

“I’ve just asked Dolth what he thought of Jossen’s proposal,” he said, “and he told me that it appears very sound.” The others looked up at him with worried eyes, but he continued before they had a chance to speak up. “I reminded him that yesterday he’d agreed to support us, which he quickly assured me still remains his intention. He added that Jossen’s plan was appealing in that the provinces would still retain their authority to negotiate with Jonguria themselves.” He stopped to look around at the others. “I don’t know. If we had to rely on Dolth’s support alone for our proposal to pass, I’d be worried.”

They looked across the hall to where Dolth and his advisors stood talking and laughing with the Regidian and Allidian delegations.

“I agree,” Pader said, “I’m not sure how much longer we can count on Equinia.”

“And what of Mercentia?” Millen asked. “Can we still number Iago as one of our supporters?”

“I’m not sure,” Halam replied. “We’ll have to talk to him again to see. That goes for Edgyn as well. I’m sure that under Jossen’s plan the Portinian’s will find some way to profit from shipping in both the north and south. That will appeal to Edgyn’s money-seeking ways.”

“So we have our work cut out for us this afternoon,” Orin said, and they all nodded. “Let’s talk with who we can. It’d be best to not write anyone off. Discuss our deal with those we think are already supporting Jossen’s plan. It’s worth a try. But the most important thing is to keep the support we still have.”

“Millen,” Willem said, turning toward the man, “you talk to Edgyn again. Convince him that his support is critical to our success.”

“I convinced him yesterday,” Millen replied, “I’ll do the same today.”

“Halam,” Willem continued, “talk with Iago again. Get his firm support.”

“Aye, I will,” Halam replied.

“Orin, we’ll need you to do all you can to keep Dolth with us. The man must be convinced that we have his interests more at heart than Jossen does.”

“I’ll do my best,” Orin replied.

“Pader,” Willem said, “there’s got to be a way to pull Whent off the fence. We need his support. There must be some way to persuade him to end this ignorant view that Montino can somehow remain aloof from the affairs of Adjuria.”

“I agree,” Pader replied. “I’ll speak with him. It should be easy; looks like Jossen’s written him off.”

“I’ll speak with Jocko,” Willem said. “I’m not about to write Shefflin off just because we have the support of Mercentia. It’s high time those two provinces put aside their differences for the common good.” He paused to look at the men again. “When you aren’t talking to our supporters, follow Orin’s advice and talk to Jossen’s. Do what you can to convince them that our plan is better. Win them over.” They all nodded their agreement to the Duldovian’s words.

“Now, we have a few hours of morning left. Let’s use that time to our advantage and then meet in the great hall to discuss our progress at lunch.” They all nodded, already working out strategies for winning over the delegates still skeptical toward their plan.

THIRTEEN

A few hours later the men sat around a table in the great hall staring into the dishes in front of them. The main course this afternoon was spit boar from the King’s Wood. Several had been hunted down the day before and now graced the tables of the men crowding about the noisy hall. Myriad conversations sounded all around them, but the men whose support lay with the Tillatian trade policy remained quiet. Finally Bryn decided to break the silence.

“We can’t be certain that Jossen did any better gathering a majority than we did,” he quietly said.

After a few moments of silence Rodden looked across the table at him. “No Bryn, we can’t.”

Bryn and Rodden had been the first of the men to arrive in the hall for the lunch feast. Since they were the only ones now around the table that hadn’t had any delegates to persuade, they’d spent a rather boring morning wandering the halls of the palace looking at all of the different tapestries and paintings that lined the walls. With their stomachs growling and the smells from the kitchen beginning to waft by their noses as they took in the great scenes, an early arrival to the hall seemed entirely reasonable. They, like other advisors with nothing else to do, had wandered to the hall to enjoy the

different plates of fruits, cheeses, and sweetbreads that preceded the main course. When the food arrived, but not the men whose results they so eagerly anticipated, anxiousness set in. As the minutes went by, both began to worry that the only reason for their absence was that the negotiations hadn't been successful in convincing the men.

Finally after what seemed an eternity to them, the others began to arrive. First came Orin, and none too happy by the look of him. Next was Millen, who appeared satisfied, followed by Pader, who did not. Halam and Willem were the last to arrive, both walking over together to sit down. When it appeared that none were eager to report their morning's results first, Rodden went ahead and asked.

"Were you able to pull Whent down off that fence," he asked of Pader.

Pader rubbed his eyes and let out a sigh. "He wouldn't budge." Pader reached for the flagon of ale and a cup set in the center of the table and poured as he continued. "I tried to tell him that by not supporting Jossen's plan he may as well support ours, but the man wouldn't listen. He kept saying that Montino had no need to insert herself into the affairs of the provinces, like he was part of some separate country. I tried to argue that the profits for the minerals mined from the Montino Mountains would only be greater under our plan, but it didn't seem to concern him. He only waved his hand and said it wasn't of importance."

"With Whent and Palen remaining on the sidelines," Rodden pointed out, "that means there'll only be twelve delegates voting."

"So we'll only need to have seven votes for a majority," Bryn quickly pointed out.

“Alas, Bryn, it won’t be that easy,” Orin replied, looking up from his cup of wine for the first time since sitting down. “The majority will come from those delegates present, whether they vote or not; we’ll still need to have eight votes for our plan to pass.”

“Were you successful in keeping Dolth with us?” Pader asked.

Orin took a long swallow from his cup before speaking. “No, the man’s decided to follow the Regidians once again.”

“No!” Halam said loudly.

“But he just ensured us we had his support only a few hours ago,” Millen said.

“Aye, that he did,” Orin replied. “Something changed his way of thinking in that span of time, however, for now he believes that Jossen’s plan will do more to benefit Equinia than ours. Nothing I could say would convince him otherwise; his mind was already made up.”

“So we’re down to six now,” Pader said, looking over at Millen. “Is that correct?”

“We still have Edgyn,” Millen responded, to smiles and sighs of relief from the table. “While he said that Jossen’s deal has its appeal, he was quick to add that he’d given his support to us first, and that as a man of his word, he intended to stay with us. Portinia will side with Tillatia in this fight.”

“That’s certainly good to hear,” Halam said. “Iago said much the same.”

“That’s wonderful,” Willem said.

“Jossen’s plan had its appeal, he told me, but he remembered the rancor of yesterday and didn’t think that dividing the country into two trading zones would stop the disputes between the provinces.” Halam paused a moment, looking down at the table before looking at the men again. “Mercentia will stay with us.”

Their eyes turned next to Willem at the far end of the table. He looked down, folding his hands in front of him, then looked up again.

“I wish I could bring good news,” he began, “but I wasn’t able to convince Jocko to go along with us. He knew that Iago supported us, and he said that he couldn’t go along with a plan that Mercenia was a part of; the people of Shefflin would never forgive him. I tried to convince him that Jossen’s plan would do nothing to ease the battle that Shefflin and Mercenia face on the open market, as they would still be part of the same trading zone under the Regidians’ plan. This didn’t seem to concern him,” he said, looking around the table. “And when I tried one last attempt to appeal to his sense of honor by bringing up Shefflin’s role in fighting against the Regidians during the Civil War, he only laughed, saying that was in the past.” He shook his head a few times after finishing and stared back down at his hands.

“Well,” Orin said, “some men just can’t be convinced no matter what.”

“What else do we know of Jossen’s support?” Rodden asked.

“Before I came to the hall I inquired about that,” Pader said. “He had Oschem, Hotham, and Allidia with him.” He stopped, looking over at Orin and Willem. “We can put Equinia in that category now, as well as Shefflin, giving him six votes, the same as us.”

“So we’re still pretty much deadlocked, then,” Halam said. “So long as none of us goes over to him, and none of his supporters comes over to us, then neither plan will pass and the conference will be a failure.”

“The hopes of both plans therefore reside with Whent and Palen,” Pader said.

“There must be some way to bring them over to our side.”

“We’ve tried,” Halam said, his frustration bringing an edge to his voice. “And we know that Jossen tried. Neither will budge. They’re useless!”

Quiet descended on the table then as the men stared at the boar in front of them, uncut and with the large red apple still stuck in its mouth. None of the men had much of an appetite this afternoon. The hall began to empty as people headed back to the map room for the afternoons discussions and the vote on the two plans.

“I’m just not that hungry this afternoon,” Halam said, “I think I’ll head back to the conference table and hope that some development occurs that brings us success.” He gave a half-hearted smile as he said the last, then rose from the table and headed toward the doors.

“Some development,” Pader said. “Yes, that would be good but I don’t see one on the horizon.” He stood and paused to look around the men at the table. “I hate to say it, gentleman, but we may have to go along with Jossen’s plan. I don’t like it any more than you do,” he said quickly as the others began to voice their protests, “but we have to do what’s best for Adjuria, and leaving this conference without a trade deal isn’t it. Let us hope that Halam’s wish comes true, but I deal in realities, gentleman, and the reality is that we did our best, but it just wasn’t good enough.” He too headed for the doors, leaving the others at the table shocked and downhearted by his sudden confession.

“He may be right,” Willem said to the shock of the others. “I don’t like Jossen anymore than the rest of you, but his plan would bring trade back to a country which badly needs it.” He too rose from the table to leave. “If we don’t have the votes after the first few attempts,” he said looking at Millen, “then I think it best that we give our support over to the Regidian plan. We need a trade deal, and one that passes the

conference with the support of as many of the delegates as possible will do much to heal the wounds of this country.” He looked at each in turn before leaving the table.

“Well, this *has* been a very depressing lunch,” Orin said as he finished his cup of wine. “I thought the boar had it bad, but now I realize that we’re the ones who have been spitted.”

“All hope is not yet lost,” Millen chimed in. “Anything can happen in that conference room this afternoon. Perhaps when confronted with a deadlock, one of the delegates of Jossen’s will come over to us. And I know it’s farfetched, but Whent or Palen could still change their minds. The worst thing we can do is to think that all’s lost when we’ve come so far.”

Orin and Rodden gave him a reassuring smile, but both Millen and Bryn knew that there was no real hope behind them.

“Well,” Millen said after a few moments, “I guess I’ll go back to the hall as well.”

“I see no point in sitting here staring at this pig any longer. I’ll go with you,” Orin replied, and Rodden said the same. “Bryn, are you coming?”

“I’ll stay just a few more minutes,” Bryn said. “I’d like to have a little more of this fruit first.”

Rodden smiled. “We’ll see you in a few minutes, then.”

The three headed toward the door and Bryn was left alone at the table with only the boar to keep him company. In truth, he had no desire for any more fruit; that was simply an excuse to stay in the hall for a while longer. He had spotted Palen sitting alone at a table across the room, and although he was nothing of a diplomat like the others who

he'd just been sitting with, he figured it couldn't hurt to plead their case one more time to the delegate from Ithmia.

Palen was finishing off the last of his lunch when Bryn approached his table. An empty plate sat in front of him, the juices from the boar shining red from the torchlight on the wall overhead. Palen was soaking them up in a heel of bread, and Bryn was about to clear his throat to draw the man's attention when Palen spoke.

"You're a long way from Tillatia, young man," Palen said, still looking down at his plate as he wiped it with bread. "And I see that your entourage has already headed back to the map room. So pray tell, sir, what are you still doing here?" He looked up at Bryn, his light-grey eyes seeming to bore into him as he waited for an answer.

Bryn took a deep breath as he steadied himself and gathered his thoughts. What could he possibly say to this man whose life was devoted to protecting the welfare and ensuring the safety of the citizens of Adjuria? How could he, a mere peasant from Eston, hope to do what his uncle and everyone who supported him could not? Finally, after what seemed an eternity to Bryn, he found the words.

"I've come to ask for your support for my uncle's trade policy," Bryn managed to say, his eyes locked on the plate resting on the table.

"I've already been asked to support your uncle's plan as well as Jossen's," Palen replied, sticking the dripping bread into his mouth, "and I'll give you the same answer that I told the others: no."

Although he was nervous and felt out of his element, Bryn pushed on. "Why won't you support one plan or the other?"

“Ithmia does no trade with the rest of Adjuria, nor did we do so with Jonguria before the war,” the man explained. “We produce all our own goods and guard the Isthmus against any threat to the country, as we’ve done for countless generations. We’ve found over the years that it’s best to remain out of the political affairs of the provinces. Too many times we’ve seen nothing but heartache and despair for those who wade into those waters.”

“I can understand that you protect the provinces from threats from without,” Bryn said, “but what about threats from within? Right now, when the country is not trading with Jonguria, the people are suffering. The country is in a rut because there are not enough markets for the goods that’re produced here at home, and people’s livelihoods are threatened. By sitting back and watching from your towers,” Bryn said, pointing at the Ithmian insignia on the breast of Palen’s uniform, “the country you talk so much about protecting is under assault from forces far more numerous and deadly than any enemy army. Your indifference is doing more to hurt Adjuria than your sword could ever hope to achieve in its protection.”

He finished, surprised that he’d just lectured the highest-ranking member of Fadurk’s garrison, and the delegate most looked-up to and admired at the conference. Shamed at his outburst, Bryn turned quickly on his heels and ran toward the doors and away from the shocked Palen.

He burst through the double doors and into the hallway, nearly knocking over a serving girl in his haste to exit the great hall. He stood breathing heavily for a few moments before a guard approached.

“Are you alright, lad?” the man asked.

Bryn nodded quickly. “Yes, thank you sir, I’m fine. Can you show me the way to the map room please?”

“Right this way, if you’ll just follow me,” the guard replied, turning to walk down the hall. Bryn followed close behind and after the usual twists and turns which he still couldn’t follow he was ushered into the nearly full conference room. Most of the delegates and their advisors were already present and talking together around the room. Bryn spotted Orin and Rodden in their usual spots and crossed the room to join them.

“Get your fill of fruit, then lad?” Orin asked as Bryn sat down.

Bryn’s brows furrowed down, unsure what Orin was talking about, before realizing the reason he’d given for staying in the great hall.

“Yes sir,” he quickly said. “We don’t have so many different varieties of fruit back home.”

“Aye, that’s right,” Orin said absently. “Best to sample as many as you can before heading back.”

Bryn thought he heard a bit of sadness in Orin’s voice, but his attention was suddenly drawn toward the doors where Palen was entering the room. He strode to his seat just a few chairs down from where Bryn was sitting, paying no attention to him or any of the others in the room as he sat down and stared in front of him, waiting for the afternoon proceedings to get under way. Bryn gave a sigh of relief. After his outburst, he thought it a strong possibility that Palen would charge into the room and beat him senseless where he sat. He wished he’d never have had the fool notion of speaking to Palen in the first place. What possibly convinced him that he could make the man see their dilemma any clearer than Halam had? *What an idiot I am*, Bryn thought to himself.

It would be better for all the sooner he was back in Eston clearing fields and mending fences.

As had happened before, when it appeared that all of the delegates were present, a guard knocked on the small rear door and the king strode through to take his seat at the table, his advisors close behind. Tullin rose to address the crowd and get things underway.

“Gentlemen,” he began as usual, “I hope lunch was to your satisfaction and that while you filled your stomachs with food you also filled your minds with thoughts on the two policies presented this morning. To reiterate, we have a policy presented by Jossen Fray from Regidia which would divide Adjuria into northern and southern trading zones, with goods being shipped from each to markets in Jonguria. The hope is that this will decrease the competition between provinces with similar goods by diverting them to markets where they cannot compete.”

“The second policy is presented by Halam Fiske of Tillatia and would take away the authority of the provinces to trade with Jonguria independently, instead giving that power to a government council here in Baden. The aim of this policy is to have the government negotiate trade deals with Jonguria on behalf of the provinces. The hope is that this will create more profits for the provinces while decreasing any bad feelings produced from the provinces acting independently, and often in their own self-interests.”

After presenting the two plans in terms more succinct than the two delegates had done earlier, Bryn thought, Tullin continued.

“It’s now time to vote on these two proposals. A majority of the delegates seated at the table will be required for one or the other plan to pass and become policy. Voting

will be quite simple; if you agree with the policy and want to support it, simply raise your arm up and be counted. We will continue voting until either policy has a majority, or until it is clear that neither policy has a chance of acquiring a majority of votes, at which point we will adjourn.” He looked around at all the delegates and advisors in the hall, letting his words sink in. It was clear what he was saying, Bryn thought. If neither of these two plans obtained a majority of votes, the conference would end in failure.

“Since the policy of Regidia was presented first this morning, we will vote on it first. All of those in favor of the Regidian policy, please show your hands.”

All of the arms across the table from Bryn went up except one, that of Pader Brun. As was expected, Shefflin, Oschem, Hotham, Allidia, and Regidia all voted for the plan, with Dolth Hane of Equinia throwing his support behind it as well. After a few moments, Tullin spoke.

“Six votes for the Regidian policy,” his voice rang out, “not enough for a majority.” Mumbblings rose from around the table as he continued. “We will now vote on the policy of Tillatia. All of those in favor of the Tillatian policy, please show your hands.”

Halam’s arm shot up first, followed by Willem’s, Millen’s, Edgyn’s, Iago’s, and from the other side of the table, Pader’s. As expected, Whent and Palen did not participate in the voting.

“Six votes for the Tillatian policy,” Tullin recorded, “not enough for a majority.” The mumbblings around the table were louder this time, and Bryn noticed that quite a few of those supporting the Regidian policy across the table were smiling to each other, certain that they’d succeeded.

“We will have another vote,” Tullin said. Let us wait a few minutes so that the delegates have some time to consider changing their vote. Across the table it was almost as if the Regidian plan had already passed. The men were laughing and congratulating themselves. On the other side of the table the mood was somber, and the delegates looked from one to the other for any sign of what to do. Bryn remembered Pader’s words during lunch. If it looked like Halam’s plan had no chance of success, he would change his vote in the interests of Adjuria. Looking at the Culdovian delegate staring down at his lap, the weight of the world seeming to weigh on the man’s shoulders it looked like that was about to occur, Bryn thought.

“Gentleman,” Tullin’s voice called out, bringing the hall back to order. “Once again we will vote. Please show your hands if you support the Regidian policy.”

Again, all the hands across the table went up. Bryn looked eagerly at Pader, but his arm remained at his side, as did all of those on his uncle’s side of the table.

“Six votes for the Regidian policy, unchanged,” Tullin called out. He waited a few moments as the anticipation in the hall built. It seemed to Bryn that many in the hall were now expecting one or more of the delegates who had supported Halam to switch their votes in favor of Jossen. The hall fell deathly quiet.

“Please show your hands if you support the Tillatian policy,” Tullin called out, his voice seeming to echo off the maps on the walls.

Again, Halam was the first to put up his arm, and he did so with a strength that hid any doubts he may have privately held concerning the outcome. As before, all of the undeclared delegates but Whent and Palen joined him, with Pader putting up his hand

across the table as well. Halam looked to each side of him, but it was clear that no other votes would be forthcoming.

“Six votes for the Tillatian policy, unch—”

“Wait,” a deep voice called out, interrupting Tullin. The whole room looked down the table at Palen, who slowly raised his arm up into the air. A collective gasp was heard from the room, as most couldn’t believe that the Ithmian would support either plan.

“Seven votes for the Tillatian policy, one vote more than the previous ballot,” Tullin said loudly, “but still not a majority.”

Behind Tullin, the king coughed loudly into his hand, drawing the hall’s attention. When Tullin turned around, the king too raised his arm up into the air, to a gasp even louder than that received for Palen’s unexpected vote.

“Eight votes for the Tillatian policy,” Tullin called out. “With a clear majority of votes, the Tillatian policy passes the conference.”

The hall erupted into chaos as those around Halam rose up to clap him on the back and celebrate their amazing success, while across the table the delegates and their advisors shouted at Tullin and anyone else that they’d been robbed, that the king was not a delegate and therefore had no right to vote, and anything else that would reverse the results. Jossen simply sat in his chair, that sneering smile on his face as he looked across the table at Halam.

FOURTEEN

Bryn still couldn’t get over it. Here he was, a mere peasant farmer from Eston, sharing a sumptuous meal with the King of Adjuria, Rowan Waldon. Well, it wasn’t just

him; his Uncle Halam and some of the other delegates had also been invited to dine with the king that evening.

The scene from earlier in the afternoon was still fresh in Bryn's mind. Loud cries of disapproval had been heard from the delegates and advisors who had supported the Regidian trade policy. No one, it seemed, had any idea that that the king would, or even could, vote in the conference. The fact that Palen Biln had broken with countless years of Ithmian tradition by entering into the political debate of the provinces had come as a huge shock, but then for the king to join that debate as well proved too much for many to take. When Tullin managed to restore some semblance of order to the hall after several fruitless minutes of trying, he'd reminded all present that the king was not just a ceremonial figurehead of the country, but the actual representative of Adjuria to its people and the rest of Pelios. Indeed, he'd went on to tell the crowd, the king had full voting rights on the royal council, so why should they think that his role would be any different for the trade conference? Loud grumblings and many complaints had followed those pronouncements, but there was little that the delegates could do, and they knew it. The Tillatian trade policy had now become the law of the land, and would soon be implemented so that Adjuria and Jonguria could begin trading with one another as soon as possible.

As Bryn had watched his uncle be congratulated by all of those delegates who'd supported his plan, as well as many who'd not, he too had felt the success and adulation. Most had come over to shake Halam's hand, with many giving a friendly slap on the back or warm hug. Iago Cryst of Mercenia went so far as to hoist Halam off the floor and raise him up in a well-natured shake, much to the surprise and delight of all

who saw. Halam had taken it all in stride, downplaying any leading part he may have had in the success of the plan which bore his province's name. It was a joint effort of many of the provinces who sought better trading conditions, he'd explained to those who gathered around him, and the praise needed to be shared among all of them equally. But the delegates weren't buying that for a minute. They knew who'd come up with the plan and who'd done the most to see it through the conference. Halam was being hailed as the master politician of the hour, but to Bryn it had seemed like he just wanted to get back on Juniper and ride home to Plowdon.

The only moment of tension that arose following the initial shock and resolution of the two unexpected votes had come when Jossen appeared from across the room to offer his congratulations to Halam. Leaning heavily on the cane in his left hand as he was always forced to do when walking, Jossen had been given a wide berth by the crowd of delegates and advisors crowding around Halam in his moment of glory. Many in the hall knew something of the disputatious relationship between the two men which stemmed from the Civil War, and a tense hush fell over the hall. Jossen had limped over to stand in front of Halam and offered his hand, which Halam took.

"It would seem that the better policy has passed," Jossen had said, shaking Halam's hand. "I congratulate you on your success."

"Thank you Jossen, your plan was also worthy, and you put up a good fight. I didn't think that we'd have the votes."

"Nor did I," Jossen had said sneering, "nor did I."

Halam had only smiled in return as Jossen continued.

“How you managed to win Palen over to your side will perhaps always remain a mystery,” he had said, looking around the room. Palen was nowhere to be seen, having exited the hall during the tumult which occurred soon after the voting concluded. “And to have the king on your side as well,” Jossen had trailed off, shaking his head. “My Halam, you do seem to have a wide assortment of friends.”

“I’m a lucky man,” was all his uncle had said before he turned to give his attention to some of the delegate’s advisors.

Jossen had slowly turned and limped toward the doors leading out of the hall, the empty space given him soon filling up with more men wanting to shake Halam’s hand.

No sooner had one side of the crowd around Halam close up with Jossen’s exit, than the other had opened for the approach of the king. Rowan Waldon had strode up to Halam, looking more regal than his young age implied.

“Congratulations on your success, sir,” Rowan had said as he shook Halam’s hand.

“Thank you, your grace, but my success would have been certain failure without your support.”

“That it may have been, but now we’ll never know,” the king had replied with a smile.

Halam had smiled back, not quite sure how he should answer, and at a bit of a loss for words as well. It wasn’t everyday that a provincial trade official was thanked by the king for a job well done.

“I would like it if you and some of the other delegates would dine with me this evening,” the king had continued after a few moments.

“I would be honored, your majesty,” Halam had said, giving a slight bow.

“I think it would be appropriate if all of the men who supported you were present,” Rowan had continued, his voice louder now so that all of the other delegates gathered around could hear. “And perhaps some of your more important advisors,” he’d finished, his eyes falling on Bryn as he said the last.

“It would be my pleasure, sir,” Halam had replied.

“Good, I will have the guards escort you shortly.”

With that the king had turned and headed toward the back door of the room, the crowd parting to let him pass, Tullin, the queen mother, and his other silent advisor fast on his heels.

Halam had let out an audible sigh at the king’s exit, and many of the men around him laughed. He’d broken into a smile and wiped away an invisible sheen of sweat from his forehead in a mock show of relief at being out of the royal spotlight, much to the amusement of all around. Shortly after that Halam had excused himself, saying that he needed to freshen up and find some decent clothes for his audience with the king later that evening. The hall had cheered him once again as he, Rodden, and Bryn left the map room for the last time and headed down the hallways toward their small room.

All three had been surprised upon entering to see that their travel-stained clothes which they’d journeyed to the capital in had been freshly washed and laid out for them on the beds. They’d changed out of what they were wearing, the only other set of clothes each had with them, the feel of the clean clothes a pleasant change and another reminder of their earlier success. There hadn’t been much time to wash up or talk before there came a knock on the door, and they found themselves once again led down the hallways, this time to a royal dinner with the king.

They'd been shown into the large dining hall, which was longer than it was wide, and the only windows were high up from the floor and gave little light into the room. Large candelabras hung down from the high ceiling suspended by thick chains, the flames from them illuminating the hall. The walls contained the same type of paintings and tapestries Bryn had seen so often in the palace hallways over the previous days. Lush hunting scenes and portraits of royalty hung next to provincial and royal insignias. Some of the tapestries were old and tattered, and Bryn couldn't recognize their coat-of-arms, while many of the portraits had paint peeling from them, leaving the royal visages with odd, flaking skin. The carpets were a rich red with gold borders, and covered nearly the whole of the long floor, tapering only as they neared the walls where the flagstones could be seen, their surfaces glossy and well-polished from centuries of use. The table was made from thick oak and painted with a dark brown coating to seal it against the elements. Long and narrow, it stretched from one wall nearly to the other, and Bryn figured that it exceeded a furrowed field from back home in length. Several high-backed chairs were set into it, and there had already been several men sitting in them.

Orin was present, sharing a cup of wine with Pader Brun from Culdovia and Willem Pritt of Duldovia, both laughing at something that Orin had said, their worries of earlier nothing more than distant memories. Iago Cryst of Mercentia was having a conversation with Millen Fron from Fallownia and Edgyn Thron of Portinia, and although Bryn was unsure what Iago was saying, he was nearly certain it had something to do with weapons or war. Bryn was surprised to see Palen Biln of Ithmia occupying one of the chairs. He sat next to Iago but took no part in the conversation, obviously content to sit with his own thoughts. After his hasty exit from the conference earlier, Bryn was certain he wouldn't

see the man again, and was rather glad for it. The lecture he'd given him earlier still sent shudders of regret up his spine at the audacity he'd shown, even though it may have done much to sway the man's thinking.

As the had three entered the hall, all of the men stopped talking at once and rose up to come over and offer another round of congratulations to Halam. Hands were shook and backs slapped all over again, the delegates overjoyed at their earlier success. Palen remained aloof, and Bryn figured he was the only one paying the Ithmian any attention, primarily to be certain that he always kept another body separating them, which ensured no conversations would occur. While the men had been talking and laughing and recounting the events of the conference earlier, the large double-doors to the hall opened and the had king entered with Tullin and his other advisor trailing behind, the queen mother nowhere to be seen. Rowan strode right up to Halam and shook his hand again, then did the same to each of the other men in the room, Bryn included, saying how happy he was to see a proposal pass the conference so quickly, and one that he was honored to support. With that he'd gestured for the men to sit at the table and await dinner, which would be served shortly.

The king had taken the seat at the head of the long table at the end opposite the doors, and had gestured for Halam to take the seat on his right and Orin his left. Rodden and Bryn had seated themselves across from each other in the next two chairs at Tullin's direction, then came Pader and Willem; Iago and Millen; and Edgyn and Palen, with Tullin and the other man taking the final two chairs, although the table and chairs still stretched on down the room half again as long as the few spots they all took up. And it was there that Bryn now sat, still amazed by it all.

“Gentleman,” the king began, “I think you all know each other quite well by now,” he said, gesturing toward them, and they all smiled their acknowledgement. “My advisor Tullin introduced himself to the conference,” Tullin gave a nod of his head to the other men, “but I don’t think that my other advisor has been properly introduced.”

The man seated in the last chair rose. He appeared just as stern-looking as he had at the conference, Bryn thought, and his face still had that perpetual frown from the large scar stretching from eye to chin on his left cheek. He was old; probably the oldest man in the room, judging from his wrinkled face and grey hair slowly fading to white. His dark-brown eyes looked each of them up and down; measuring, judging.

“Gentleman, I would like you to meet Mito Durin.” The men all nodded their heads toward Mito, before the king went on. “Mito advised my father as king and now I’m lucky to have him do the same for me. I trust his council and I think his views may be rather helpful for us tonight as we discuss how we will go about renewing trade with Jonguria.”

The king took his seat and four serving women and two men came into the room from the main entrance, carrying trays of food before them. The main course was pheasant, shot down in the King’s Wood earlier that day, with roasted potatoes and a thick red cranberry sauce. Two large plates of fruit were set on each end for the guests to sample; the selection included apples, oranges, melons, and berries. A plate containing an assortment of nuts was placed in the center of the table, and next came a tray with several kinds of olives and pickled cucumbers. Loaves of bread and wheels of cheese appeared, followed lastly by two large flagons of wine and two of ale. When the food was laid down, the men set before each guest a plate, knife, and fork while the women

placed a cup and filled it with ale or wine as dictated. With everything laid out before them the serving women left the hall, leaving the two servingmen to take up position against the walls in case they were needed.

“I’ll certainly miss the hospitality of the palace,” Rodden said as he grabbed a handful of olives and began popping them into his mouth.

“Aye, that’s for sure,” Iago agreed while piling his plate high with pheasant and potatoes. “We’re not used to such royal fare back at the academy in Nicosia, just thin oat gruel and horseflesh.” The men around the table laughed.

“How is the academy these days, Iago,” Rowan asked while slicing an apple with his knife.

Iago straightened in his seat. “Our training continues smoothly, your grace, and we continue to adhere to the ancient codes of battle.” He paused, looking at the plates of food on the table. “The demand for our services has fallen off substantially since the war ended, as you can imagine, but we make do.”

“Tell me Edgyn,” Tullin said, changing the subject, “is the fleet of ships at Dockside up to the task of supplying Jonguria with our goods once again?”

Edgyn was a few moments in answering while he finished his mouthful of pheasant and took a sip of wine. “Yes, sir, I believe we’re more than up to the task. It’s true that many of our transport ships have been tied up for these many years past, but they’re all seaworthy and can be trusted to move any and all goods safely to their destinations.”

“That’s good to hear,” Tullin replied to the man next to him as he reached for his cup of wine. “And what of your own ship, the…”

“The *Comely Maiden*,” Edgyn finished for him. “She’s in fine shape, indeed. While I’ve not taken her on any runs to Jonguria since the war ended, I do keep her sea legs in shape by moving goods from Dockside to Shefflin and even up north into Tillatia from time to time. Many find it much cheaper to send their goods by ship when the alternative is a journey twice as long by the kingdom’s roads.”

“The *Comely Maiden*?” Willem asked. “That wasn’t the same ship that you used during the war, was it?”

“Only the closing days of it,” Edgyn responded. “For the first seven years I sailed the *Apsalar Princess*, but on a mission to supply the troops in Bindao three Jongurian ships soon appeared off my bow. I was able to outmaneuver them for a while until a storm came up, at which point I thought it best to turn back toward home to fight another day. They didn’t feel the same way, unfortunately, and I soon found myself run aground off the Barrier Mountains. Instead of letting the Jongurians have the cargo we lit the ship up and used the inferno to hide our escape.” He paused to take a drink of wine. “I tell you though, we sure were lucky to make it past the Isthmus before we had to scuttle her. As it was, the walk back to dockside was a long one, but it could have been much worse.”

“And that was the only trouble you ran into during the war?” Pader asked.

“Aye, the only worth mentioning, anyway. I caught and boarded more than my share of ships, but that was the only time the Jongurians got the better of me.”

“Did anything similar happen to you Willem?” Rowan asked the Duldovian.

“Nothing near as exciting, your highness,” Willem replied. “While Edgyn was supplying Bindao in the south, I did the same for the Baishur River area in the north. I fought my share of battles, for sure, but I was lucky and made it through the war

unscathed. You must remember that my ship was much smaller than Edgyn's, and while not able to carry as many soldiers or supplies, she was fast on her feet and able to outrun most pursuers. You see," he continued, "the *Sea Nymph* was intended for the gentler waters of the Duldovian Sea, not the terrible northern storms that the Ipsalar Ocean will throw at you in winter."

"You managed to get her back to the Sea, then?" Orin asked as he sliced off a good-sized chunk of cheese.

"It took some doing, but I managed to bring her back home, although I was forced to wait two full seasons for the Plains River to flow high enough for me to sail her back up it."

"And how is the Apsalar Ocean to sail this time of year?" Tullin asked Edgyn.

"It's as calm as any mountain lake in Montino," Edgyn answered. "If you want to sail, this is the best time of year for an uneventful voyage. The winds aren't as harsh as in the winter months, but the seas are calmer, making the voyage, while not as fast, much more pleasant."

"That is good to hear," the king said from his seat at the head of the table. "I think most of the men around the table will praise the calm seas; it'll make their voyage to Jonguria that much more pleasant."

Rowan sat back in his chair, a slight smile on his face, as the other men looked around at one another questioningly, unsure of what was just said.

"Excuse me, your grace," Rodden stammered after a few moments, "but did I hear you correctly? Did you just say that most of us will be sailing to *Jonguria*?"

“That I did, Rodden,” Rowan replied, his smile now a little larger at the obvious discomfort this had caused around the table.

“But your grace,” Millen said anxiously, “My place is in the fields of Fallownia, seeing that the seeds are planted and the harvest brought in. I’ve only been on two boats in my life, both to the Baishur River, and neither of those trips are fond memories.”

Several of the men chuckled despite themselves at Millen’s obvious discomfort.

“Millen, I don’t think that Fallownia will cease to function properly if you’re absent for a few weeks on important government business for the king himself,” Tullin assured him from across the table.

“But...” Millen managed, trying to think of some rebuttal but coming up short.

“I know that most of you expected to head back to your provinces following the trade conference,” Rowan said loudly to the men, his voice echoing off the high wall of the hall, “but there’s more work to be done now that we have a policy in place.” He paused to see that he had everyone’s attention; satisfied, he continued. “While we’ve taken the first step by bringing the provinces to an agreement, we’ve still to notify the Jongurians of our intentions to open up trade. The only way to do this is to sail a ship to a port on the coast or trudge across the Isthmus to Waigo. Now,” the king paused, looking at the Millen, “I think most of you will agree that taking a ship is far more preferable to braving the Isthmus.”

Bryn looked over at Palen to see if he reacted in any way to the king’s words about walking across the isthmus, but Palen was like stone as he listened to his ruler give his speech.

“But why us, your highness?” Halam asked. “Surely there are men more acquainted with Jonguria and better able to report our desire to renew trade.”

“We’ve not traded with Jonguria for more than twenty years, Halam,” Rowan responded. “In the past the provinces oversaw trade on their own, and many of the men whose role it was to carry that out are no longer capable, whether from age, death, or some other circumstance. We’ve looked around the country for such men, but have found them to be lacking in all regard to the purpose.” He looked around the table at the men seated, many still wary about the words pouring from their king’s mouth. “I understand that many of you are reticent and feel unequal to the task I set before you. But I believe you’re just the men that the situation calls for. You all somehow managed, against great odds, to push a trade policy through this conference; and all of you hold positions dealing with trade within your own provinces. Gentlemen, there is no one better qualified in Adjuria than yourselves to convince the Jongurians to come to the table.”

“Will all of us be going then?” Orin asked after the king’s words had sunk in for a few moments.

“Not you Orin,” Rowan replied. “You sit on the royal council, and we will need you there to represent Tillatia for government business to carry on.” He looked down the table at Palen. “That goes for you as well Palen. You’re much too important to the garrison at Fadurk for you engage in this business.” Palen gave a simple nod, and the king looked over the other men around the table. “Besides Orin and Palen, the rest of you will be expected to go.”

“You can’t expect Bryn to go, he’s just a boy,” Halam said.

“I do expect Bryn to go,” Rowan replied. “He was instrumental in ensuring the passage of the provincial trade policy.”

Halam, as well as most of the other men around the table, looked surprised. “What did Bryn have to do with its passage?” he asked, unsure exactly what the king was implying.

“Why, Halam,” Tullin answered, “he did what neither you, Jossen, or any of the other delegates and their advisors were capable of doing: he convinced Palen to support you.”

“What— I—” Halam could not seem to find any words to say to that, and he looked around speechless at the other delegates, although they too shared his surprise.

“Before the final voting took place, Bryn took it upon himself to approach Palen in the great hall and try what many other men in loftier positions had already attempted to do: convince Ithmia to go against years of tradition and get into provincial politics,” Tullin explained. “In the end it was the lecture from a Tillatian farm boy that accomplished what promises and platitudes could not.”

Halam looked from Bryn to Palen and back again. “Is this true, Bryn? Did you lecture Palen?” He said the last in a quiet tone, as if he’d be struck down for saying such a vile thing.

Bryn looked from Palen to his uncle to the king, before settling his gaze on Halam and answering.

“It’s true, Uncle Halam. I thought it was worth a try earlier today at lunch to talk with Palen one more time. I honestly didn’t expect anything to come from it, and was

ashamed with myself afterward for taking such a tone with a delegate.” He looked down the table at Palen who returned his gaze. “I’m sorry sir.”

Palen laughed, and the men around the table were caught off guard almost as much as they were by Bryn’s sudden admission. “Your words held a truth my ears have needed to hear for a long time,” Palen replied, “and they reminded me of another man who questioned my judgment in the past: your father, Shep.”

“You knew my father?” Bryn blurted out, surprised.

“Aye lad, we got to know one another quite well when we braved the Isthmus together during the war,” Palen replied.

Bryn stared down at his plate, at a loss for words, before the king continued.

“And without Palen’s vote, I wouldn’t have been able to offer mine,” Rowan explained. “There had to be a near-majority for me to exert my power as king, and only by casting the deciding vote was I ready to lend my support.”

“So if that one extra vote had gone to Jossen…” Orin began, looking at the king.

“Then it would be Jossen and his supporters sitting at this table tonight instead of you,” Rowan finished for him.

“No matter what his role may have been,” Halam said, ignoring the latest exchange, “the southern shores of Jonguria are no place for Bryn.”

“Much has changed since the days when you fought at Bindao,” Tullin replied, “and I doubt that Bryn will be in any greater danger than the rest of you.”

“So you expect danger, then?” Iago asked.

“Not at all,” Mito said from the end of the table. It was the first any of the men had heard him speak, and his voice was strong and authoritative, a sharp contrast from his

aged appearance. “We do, however, know that there is trouble in Jonguria. The emperor’s hold on the country has weakened since the war ended, and rebel groups have risen up in different areas. We don’t think this will be anything to worry about during your trip to Nanbo Island, however.”.

Many of the men shifted in their chairs uncomfortably at Mito’s words. None of them knew what the political situation of Jonguria was, but the fact that there was a fair amount of instability in the country only increased their concerns about the task at hand.

“What we expect is that the Jongurians will be happy to renew trade with us and that this first mission will simply be an opportunity to get things moving,” Rowan said from the head of the table. “It will simply be a short while longer before things return to where they were before the war, once our intentions are known to the emperor.”

“You mean that we hope it’s that simple?” Rodden asked.

“I don’t see why it shouldn’t be,” Rowan replied.

The table grew silent as the men pondered this latest development in a day fraught with such. Bryn most of all was taken aback. Not only did the king, and now the rest of the delegates, know of his exchange with Palen, but they actually praised him for it. He couldn’t believe it. And now they wanted him to accompany an exhibition to Jonguria? It was more than he ever thought possible while reading of the distant land on cold winter nights huddled close to the fire on the farm in Eston. But most of all he thought of the father he never knew and Palen, the man who had fought with him during the war.

FIFTEEN

Following dinner the men thanked the king for the hospitality shown to them over the previous two days, wished each other goodnight, and went back to their rooms. In the morning they were to meet on the palace grounds where they'd be outfitted for the journey south to Dockside, whereupon Edgyn was tasked with finding a ship suitable to their purposes of sailing to the small island of Nanbo, off Jonguria's southern coast.

It had been an eventful day, so Bryn was glad for the chance to head back to the room for some much needed rest. Once back, washed up, and with his clean clothes neatly folded on a chair next to the bed, it didn't take long for sleep to come.

In the morning they were shown to the great hall one more time for breakfast. Many of the men who had come to Baden for the conference had already left the city, but enough remained for the hall to be half-full. They spotted Orin, Millen, and Edgyn at a far table and walked over to join them.

"Good morning, gentleman," Edgyn said, "I hope you slept well, for tonight may be one of your last nights spent sleeping in Adjuria for a while, and certainly the last sleeping in the royal palace for some time."

The table held plates of sausage and eggs, oatcakes and honey, and sliced melons and grapes, with hot apple cider to wash it down. They sat down on the rough wooden benches and began serving themselves.

"It's too bad that we'll spend that last night sleeping on the hard ground next to the King's Road," Rodden said, breaking an oatcake in two and liberally pouring honey on it.

"Oh, we'll not be sleeping on the King's Road," Edgyn replied with a sly smile. "On one of king's ships perhaps, but not on his road."

“You mean that we’ll be taking a boat across the King’s Lake and down the King’s River to Dockside then?” Halam asked between bites of sausage, the juices dribbling down his chin and into his beard as he ate.

“Aye, it’ll be quicker than on horseback and’ll take us right to the piers in Dockside; we’ll have no need to traverse the city streets. I expect it’ll save us half a day,” Edgyn mused.

“How does that sound to you Bryn? Never been on a boat before, have you?” Orin asked from across the table.

“No sir, I haven’t.” Bryn replied. He’d thought about it many times, especially on those occasions when he’d traveled as far as the Tillata River as a boy and seen small boats sailing down to Plowdon or up to the Ipsalar Ocean. Now he’d actually have a chance to travel down one of the busiest rivers in the kingdom to the wondrous city of Dockside, where he’d then transfer to a larger seagoing ship for a once in a lifetime trip to Jonguria. Sometimes it was just too much to think about!

“Well, you’ll be fine on the river, but the Ocean’ll be another matter,” Orin said with a chuckle. “I well remember the first time I took passage on a sailing ship; spent most of the voyage heaving my lunch over the side when I was lucky, and below decks when I wasn’t.”

All of the men laughed except Millen, who frowned at Orin’s story and looked a little queasy as he pushed his plate of half-eaten sausage and eggs away.

Pader, Willem, and Iago came over to their table and joined them, grabbing plates and forks as they sat down.

“We’re to report to the palace entrance when we’re done eating,” Pader said as he scooped a large pile of eggs onto his plate. “From what I hear, the boat that’ll take us down to Dockside is being outfitted as we speak.”

“With any luck we’ll be in Dockside early tomorrow morning,” Willem said between sips of cider. “The winds are blowing favorably to the south, and with the winter runoff pouring down from the Montino Mountains we should make good time.”

“Any plans for when we arrive in Dockside, Edgyn?” Iago asked while chewing an oatcake.

“I sent word to the city last night to have the *Comely Maiden* prepared for a long voyage,” Edgyn answered. “I expect she’ll be having her holds filled with provisions as we speak, her deck and sides washed and scrubbed down, and her sails inspected and re-rigged. By the time we arrive tomorrow morning we should be able to do a quick transfer from the river boat to the ship and be heading east before the sun is halfway in the sky.”

“How long will the voyage take?” Halam asked.

Edgyn tugged on his pointed goatee as he thought. “With calm seas and a fair wind, I’d say we could reach Nanbo within a week.”

“A whole week at sea,” Bryn said, surprised that the journey would take that long. From the books he’d read and the stories he’d heard he expected the trip to take a couple of days. But then in the stories the heroes never had to sit around killing time in the middle of the ocean while they waited on the wind to blow them to their destination.

“Aye,” Edgyn replied, spearing melon slices with his knife and sticking them in his mouth. “We’ll head southeast for a few days skirting the Ithmian Sea before we reach the southwestern edge of Ximen province. From there we’ll head straight east for

another few days until we reach Nanbo. We may come in under a week, we may come in over. It all depends on the winds.”

“It’ll give us plenty of time to think about how we present our proposal to the Jongurians,” Halam said.

“Do we even know if an imperial representative still resides in Weiling?” Pader asked.

“That I’m not sure of,” Edgyn replied. “We know from the Jongurian fishing vessels which we trade news with from time to time that Weiling is still heavily populated and provides the southern Ximen and Pudong provinces with most of their seafood. It’s not as bustling as it was before the war, when it was the center of commerce between the two nations, but I expect that some of the old imperial representatives still reside there, if not in an official capacity, than with enough authority still to put us in touch with the those who are.”

“From what Tullin and the king said last night,” Millen added, “it doesn’t seem like we’ll have to spend much time there. Just make it clear that we want to trade again is all.”

“I don’t think it’ll prove much more difficult than that,” Pader agreed. “There may be some negotiation of terms, but with us so uncertain as to their representation, and with them not even expecting us, the meeting will probably be short. No, Millen, in all likelihood we’ll be heading back to Adjuria shortly after we sail into Weiling. I’d give the trip two weeks, tops,” he finished, looking to Edgyn for confirmation.

“Sounds about right, if the meeting *is* only one day,” Edgyn replied.

“How can we be so certain that the Jongurians want to trade with us again?” Bryn asked.

“That’s a good question Bryn. We can’t,” Orin said, looking around at the other delegates. “It’s been more than twenty years since we’ve traded with one another, and in that time the Jongurians could have grown accustomed to relying on their own markets for goods. I think it’d be wise not to expect too much from this initial foray.”

“He’s right,” Rodden agreed. “We’ve no real idea of how the Jongurians feel about renewing trade relations, and they’ve given no indication over the years that they even *want* to trade again. Remember, we’re coming to them, not the other way around.”

“When the peace was made following the war,” Pader explained, “it was stipulated that any future business between the two countries would be carried out either in Weiling or across the Isthmus in Waigo. That leads me to believe that the Jongurians were leaving the door open for future relations.”

“It’s been too long without a dialogue between the two countries already,” Iago said. “We should have had this conference right after the war and begun trading then, not waited nearly twenty years to do so.”

“Well, you can blame the Regidians for that,” Pader said. “With all the tumult of them taking over the crown and then the war that ensued, not much time was left to think about trade.”

“I know, I know,” Iago said, “it just seems like the country could’ve been much better off these past years with trade between the two nations in place.”

They all nodded their heads in agreement. It was no secret that the nation had been in hard economic times following the war with Jonguria, and things were not made any

easier when the Regidians made claim to the throne. Their policies of raising taxes on the provinces while curtailing trade between them had driven the country further into the ground, and the resulting war, while lasting only three days, had done little to help matters. While the royal council had done much in the past few years to undue those ruinous policies, the country had been slow to respond, and many remained worse off than they had been twenty years before.

“Well, men,” Halam said after a few minutes, “I’ve about had my fill of the royal kitchens. Are we ready to get underway?”

“I think so,” Pader replied, looking around the table at the men’s faces.

They rose from the table and headed toward the double doors that led to the hallway. The guards informed them that their possessions were already being loaded onto the boat that would take them to Dockside so there would be no need to return to their rooms. Happy to not make the twisting walk through the palace hallways yet again, the men smiled and motioned for the guards to take them to the palace entrance. Bryn stared up at the paintings and tapestries on the high walls as they passed by, certain this would be his last chance to see them. He didn’t feel sad at the prospect; walking the palace halls was more than most people in the country ever had a chance to do. For the rest of his life he could say that he had dined with the king. In the span of just a few days he now had enough stories to tell for a lifetime back home in Eston, and the coming two weeks would provide even more.

* * * * *

By the time they made it to the large doors that marked the main entrance to the palace, Connor Morn was there to meet them.

“Good morning, sirs,” he said with a smile as the men approached, “good to see you made it through the conference unscathed.” He still wore the same fancy white leather jerkin as when they’d arrived, the Culdovian seal displayed prominently on it. The longsword strapped to his belt swayed as he walked up to them and offered his hand to each. He smiled and looked Bryn in the eyes when his turn came, the shake firm and strong.

“Good to see you again, Connor,” Willem replied. “I trust we weren’t too much for you over the past few days?”

“You weren’t, but some of the men who accompanied the other delegates got a little out of hand at times. I’ve told them before many times that stopping the flow of wine at a reasonable hour would do much to ensure the security of the palace.”

They all laughed at that, and Connor turned to lead them out the doors and into the bright sun of the palace courtyard.

“I’ll see that you make it without incident to the docks and the boat that’ll take you south,” Connor said in a more serious tone as they headed down the high steps and away from the palace.

Instead of taking the same way that Bryn, Halam, and Rodden had three days earlier when they entered the palace grounds, Connor took them on what appeared to be a tour of the royal gardens. They passed well-tended rows of flowers evenly spaced along the stone walkways. Deep shades of purple, red, and orange were interspersed with lighter shades of white, pink, and yellow as they walked. Many varieties of small trees grew from square plots of soil while fountains bubbled nearby. Larger trees overhead cast

shadows downward, and it seemed at times they were walking through a peaceful forest and not the home of the king.

“This route is much shorter than taking the city streets,” Connor said over his shoulder as they made their way through the foliage, “and much better to look at as well.”

After a time the walls that marked the boundary between the palace grounds and the rest of the government district appeared before them, and they walked through a small gate tended by a single guard who straightened as they passed through. Outside they found themselves on a quiet tree-lined street amid two- and three-storey buildings. They wound between several of them, changing directions frequently as Connor led them further to the south and east. Eventually the quiet gave way to the bustle of people and the sound of voices. Soon they could glimpse sails between the buildings and even the light of the sun reflecting off patches of water in the distance. After a final turn the group found themselves on a wide avenue which led down to a busy series of docks set next to a massive body of water.

Sparkling blue waters stretched along the horizon for as far as Bryn could see. Countless boats dotted the lake’s surface. Many had fishing nets trailing behind them from large wooden scaffolds erected on their sterns, while others had long poles attached to their railings with lines stretching down into the water. Most of the boats had sails of all shapes and sizes; some were small and triangular while others were large and square. The smaller boats only had one sail while the larger crafts sported tall masts with sails unfurled along their lengths. Most of the sails were a drab, sun-faded tan color, almost white. Some were more bluish, while one boat sported a bright red sail. Many had patches sewn into them so that it was uncommon to see a boat with a completely solid

colored set of sails. One small boat he saw contained so many patches of different colors that it looked like some wild checkerboard dreamed up by a crazed artisan.

The boats that didn't have sails instead sported oars. These were few and found only on the smallest of boats. Most were two-oared row boats, which contained just a single man and a pole and sometimes a net. A few were longer and had several oars stretching out into the water on each side. Bryn saw one longboat with eight oars on each side and thought that the men must take the boat to the edge of the horizon and back each day, their arms were so muscled.

As the lake neared the land it ran into the docks: a large wharf with a series of wooden piers and landings stretching out into the water. The piers stood high above the water and were erected with large wooden pilings which extended out into the lake. The larger one-and-two mast boats were tied up to these, men busy on their decks checking nets and sails or unloading barrels and crates of fish. The smaller landings were simply logs or thick boards fastened together which stretched out into the lake and bobbed on its surface. The smaller boats were tied to these with men hustling about preparing them for work on the lake.

The docks ran as far as Bryn could see on either side of him, interrupted only by buildings which came down right to the waters edge where the two battled for space. Countless vendors were set up along the avenue leading down to the water and their shouts filled the air as they yelled out the names of fish and prices.

“Deep lake bass, three coppers; southern pike, one silver; lake sturgeon, two silvers; rock fish, three bits; river eels, a copper apiece,” their voices rang out.

Their small stands were crowded with buckets and large bowls containing their wares. Bryn saw large black pike and small mackerel as he walked by. There were buckets containing small guppies by the dozens and buckets devoted solely to one large fish. Small bowls contained mussels, oysters, and clams while larger bowls held shrimp, prawns, and eels. Larger wooden troughs contained many varieties of crab and lobster; some had large protruding eyes and massive claws while others were smaller and seemed to draw into their shells as he passed by.

Storefronts all along the wide avenue leading down to the docks displayed items for use on the lake or goods taken from it. Nets and fishing poles were the main items, with stores selling those exclusively. Bryn hadn't thought it possible for so many varieties of fishing hooks to exist, but he soon found he was wrong. All manner of shapes and sizes were on display in the small shops, from hooks no larger than Bryn's little fingernail to great massive hooks which would have little trouble hoisting two men up together at the same time. Others contained everything a man on a boat could want in all kinds of weather, from thick hooded cloaks to keep the rain off to round straw hats to block out the sun. Coveralls with suspenders seemed to be the most common item in the shops and on the men who worked around them, with short-sleeved cotton shirts worn underneath. Thick leather boots seemed to be preferred among the men, their shafts stretching up to the knee and sometimes beyond. Quite a few stores specialized in boot and coverall combinations, the two sewn together to ensure that all water would be kept out of the wearers clothes except if it came from above.

Connor led them through the masses of people going about their business, most giving way willingly when they spotted the white tunic and royal insignia he wore. They

threaded their way around the vendors' stands and in front of the storefronts down to the larger piers. The buildings became less crowded together as the avenue led downhill and became wider as it neared the water. Soon the buildings receded entirely and the stone cobbles gave way to wooden planks as they approached the water, the thump of their boots echoing as they stepped onto the boards. They climbed a set of rickety wooden stairs and were atop the wharf, a massive wooden structure stretching hundreds of feet in either direction and a dozen more into the lake. From the wharf the large piers stretched outward like fingers from a massive hand, except this hand had twice the normal amount of fingers.

Bryn hurried his pace so that he was walking close behind Connor.

"How many boats does the King's Lake contain?" he asked as they headed down the giant wharf.

"Well, lad, let's see," Connor said, thinking for a moment. "It changes all the time. Boats are taken off the lake for repairs or are scrapped altogether. Many sail right out of the lake and into the river, bound for Dockside, while others fight against the river's strong current to come into the lake. Much depends on the season as well; violent winter storms and raging thundershowers can quickly capsize both smaller and larger boats, sending both to a watery grave." He smiled down at Bryn as he said the last before continuing. "If I had to put a number on it, I'd say that there're no less than five hundred different boats on the lake at any given time."

"Five hundred!" Rodden gasped. "I didn't think there were that many in all the oceans surrounding Adjuria!"

“We’ve more than twice that number year-round on the Duldovian Sea,” Willem pointed out. “But then we’re more than twice the size of the King’s Lake.”

“Fishing is one of the principle industries of Culdovia,” Pader said as they continued further down the wharf. “Not only does a large portion of Baden’s population eat the lake’s bounty each day, but much of Regidia, Montino, and Equinia as well.” He looked over at Edgyn. “Even some of our catch reaches Portinia where the lake’s southern edge meets the border.”

“Nonsense,” Edgyn scoffed.

Pader only smiled before continuing. “And it’s not only seafood that the lake produces. While you can’t see them here, most of the lakes shores are covered in an assortment of shells. From these the people produce jewelry, buttons, combs, and many other items which find their way all over the provinces.”

Connor turned onto one of the long piers stretching out from the wharf. Large boats were tied up all alongside of it, their masts towering high above them. Some were long and had two large masts and a dozen sails, while others were smaller, sprouting just one mast and a few sails. They were each painted different colors, with a lighter tone for the majority of the craft and darker for the trimming.

The Laughing Lady was painted yellow and had a single mast with sails that could be let down on its front or rear. *Lake Dancer* was blue with two masts and a large bowsprit extending from her prow. Two men sat smoking pipes on her railing and watched silently as they passed by. *The King’s Cousin* was a grey vessel with one mast that also had oars fastened to the inside railings. *River Wisp* was green and had a small mast set near the front of the ship instead of the center, which was taken up by an

enormous cabin that covered the whole deck. Men sat on top of it mending nets and sewing sail.

When they began to get near the end of the pier Bryn knew they must be close to the boat which would take them to Dockside. They passed the *Baden's Bounty*, *The Sea Horse*, and *Queen's Delight* before Connor came to a halt in front of the final boat on the pier. The name painted on the side of the bow proclaimed her as the *The Silent Bard*, and she was painted a dark brown and possessed a single tall mast with two square sails furled-up, their edges gently flapping in the wind. A small cabin was set in the middle of the boat just ahead of the mast and a large steering-wheel sat in front of that on the boat's bow. There was no fancy ornamentation or long bowsprit as there were on some of the other boats; this one seemed built for one purpose only, and that was sailing the lake and bringing up fish. Several long oars were tied up and fastened to the inside railings like Bryn had seen on some of the other boats, with large metal rings spaced out to serve as oarlocks. Several tall fishing poles were strapped to the outside walls of the cabin, as well as a few handled fishing nets. Larger fishing nets were coiled and bunched up on the stern deck.

Connor turned to face them. "Well gentlemen, this is the boat that will take you down to Dockside. She's not much to look at, but she's fast and reliable and'll see you safely on your way." He turned back toward the boat and put his hands to his mouth. "Del," he shouted at the boat, "Del, get yourself on deck, you're needed."

They heard some sounds from inside the cabin and after a few moments the door swung open and a short squat man emerged. He wore the dark blue boot-coverall combination that Bryn had seen in the storefronts leading to the docks, with a grey cotton

shirt underneath showing numerous stains. His face sported a half-week's worth of stubbly beard of dark grey with patches of white around the chin and ears. His grey hair was bunched up under a dirty blue cap which was pulled down close to his small brown eyes. His nose was crooked and looked to have been broken half-a-dozen times, and a pipe smoked from between his thick, chapped lips.

“So this be the lot that I’m to take down to Dockside, eh?” the man asked as he crossed his arms over his chest and placed his hands in his armpits as he stood staring at them.

Bryn was surprised that the king would hire this man and this boat to take them to Portinia. He had been expecting a grand vessel with many sails and clean, well-dressed men who reflected the grandeur of the crown. Instead they had a dirty old sailor with nearly the worst boat he’d seen on the pier.

“Yes, these are the men that will be accompanying you to Dockside. Have their possessions arrived yet?” Connor asked.

“Aye, they came early this morning, as did the extra provisions.”

“Good, so you are all set to sail.”

“Not quite yet,” the man said as he walked over to the railing. “I’m still waiting on me son to bring back a few items we’ll be needing for the return trip. He shouldn’t be long now, though.”

He stood staring at each of them before he decided to take his hand out from under his arm and offer it up to each.

“Del Hoff,” he said in a gravelly voice, “and this be me ship, *The Silent Bard*.” He motioned with his other arm at the boat around him. “She may not be much to look at, but I assure you she’s one of the best on the lake.”

Bryn agreed that she wasn’t much to look at. The brown paint was peeling in several places and the small windows set into the front of the cabin were all cracked. The wooden decks were becoming warped with age and wear, and a few of the boards had sprung loose from where they were nailed down. Bryn saw countless crustaceans clinging to the outer hull as the boat bobbed up and down in the water, and highly doubted Del’s claim that she was one of the best boats on the lake. Several of the same thoughts seemed to be going through the heads of his companions as he looked from the boat to them, but without much choice in the matter, they walked up the narrow gangplank joining the boat to the pier.

“I’ve got four bunks set up in the main cabin there,” Del said to them as soon as they were all aboard, “but it won’t be enough for all. Some of you’ll have to put down bedrolls on the deck or on top of the cabin. Me and Cren’ll do the same.”

“That’ll be just fine,” Halam said. “It’s only for one night.”

“Aye,” Del agreed. “We should be pulling into Dockside on the morrow.”

They heard loud footfalls coming down the pier toward them, and turned to see. One of the tallest men that Bryn had seen strode toward them, his huge feet echoing off the wooden boards. He had dark brown hair that hung down shaggily around his face. A half-week’s worth of beard of the same dark brown showed up in patches around his mouth and cheeks, which were long and drawn. He wore the same boots and coveralls

that Del wore, although they were slightly cleaner. He carried a large box in his arms with spools of tangled fishing line and netting sticking out.

“Me son, Cren,” Del said as the man got to the boat and easily stepped over the railing and into the boat.

Del’s son gave them a nod, then ducked into the cabin emerging a moment later without the box. He walked to the rear of the boat and began to undue the ropes that tied them to the pier.

“We can be on our way now,” Del said as he approached the mast and began to untie the ropes that would let down the sail.

“Well, gentlemen, good luck and peace be with you,” Connor said from the pier. He gave them a slight bow and then turned and walked back the way they’d come.

There wasn’t much for them to do besides get in the way, so Halam, Rodden, and Millen went into the cabin to look around, while Pader and Iago took up spots on the back of the boat. Willem and Edgyn spoke a few words to Del, and were soon assisting him and Cren in letting down the sails and pushing the boat away from the pier with the oars that were tied to the railings. Bryn decided that he would climb to the top of the cabin to sit and watch as they headed out onto the lake.

The early morning sunshine was giving way to clouds and a brisk wind was picking up as they floated out into the lake. Soon the two sails were full and they were heading south toward the King’s River somewhere off in the distance. Bryn was able to get a much better idea of the enormity of the docks running along the lake when they got out further. They must have stretched half-a-league or more along the water’s edge before giving way to more buildings and eventually the city wall. Baden became smaller and

smaller the further they pushed out into the lake, and soon it was little more than a distant dot on the landscape.

There was still no sign of the lake's edge in front of them, but to the west Bryn could just make out the shoreline, no more than a hazy smudge of color battling with the horizon for appearance. The boats around them became fewer the further they sailed out into the lake. Most were happy to stay closer to the city to do their fishing. Some of the larger boats with two masts were pushing south with them, perhaps heading to good fishing spots they knew in the middle of the lake. Soon all other boats were distant dots on the horizon and there was nothing more for Bryn to see around him but the blue-black water of the lake. He decided to climb down from atop the cabin and see how the other men were faring.

Del had both hands on the steering wheel in front of the cabin while Edgyn stood next to him, no doubt talking about sailing. Cren had unfurled a large net at the back of the boat and was busily at work mending tears in it. Pader, Willem, and Iago must have gone into the cabin and Bryn opened the door to head inside.

It was dark when Bryn entered, but his eyes soon adjusted. The two small windows opposite the door that looked out onto the bow did little to let in light, but one of the men had lit a small lantern which now hung from the ceiling, swaying with the motion of the ship. Two small bunks were built against each wall one atop the other, but they seemed little more than converted shelves. The large box that Cren had carried onto the boat earlier was sitting at the foot of one of the bunks, and many more like it were scattered around the small cabin. Fastened to the middle of the floor was a table with two benches

where Halam, Rodden, Millen, and Pader sat. Willem and Iago were both seated on the lower of the two bunks along the walls. When Bryn entered Rodden was speaking.

“It’s enough that we just make our presence known,” he was saying.

“You think that’ll be enough?” Millen said from across the table.

“I don’t see why not,” Rodden replied. “Right now, they have no idea that we’re coming and therefore there’ll be no way they can agree to anything. They need approval from the emperor for anything to get done.”

“That’s right, Iago said from his spot on the bunk. “Even if there are imperial representatives still living in Weiling, I doubt very much that they’ll have any authority to officially renew relations.”

“That’s no reason for them not to give us approval to return to Adjuria with permission to trade, though,” Willem said.

“It might be,” Halam answered. “They could tell us to sail home and come back when *they* are ready to hear *us*.”

“I see no reason why we couldn’t then bring trade goods on that return voyage,” Millen said. “It doesn’t make any sense to keep sailing back and forth to talk about trading when we could be doing it.”

“I agree,” Halam said, “but the Jongurians can be prickly about these things. It’s best to see what they say when we get to Weiling and take it from there.”

The discussion continued, but Bryn was becoming bored so headed back outside. Cren was still mending the net, but now Edgyn was steering the boat while Del walked around glumly inspecting the peeling paint all along the boat. When he saw Bryn exit the cabin he came up to him.

“You’re rather young to be heading to Jonguria, ain’t ye?” he asked, the pipe in his mouth moving up and down as he spoke.

“Yes sir, I am. I’m Halam’s nephew. He took me along to Baden for the trade conference, but we had no idea that we’d be heading to Jonguria.” Bryn paused and looked down for a moment before deciding to continue on. “The king decided it would be a good idea for me to come along.”

“Did he now,” Del said, chuckling. “Well I’m just a lowly fisherman and if the king’s men want me to take you to Dockside with payment up front, then I take you to Dockside, nothing to it.” He grabbed his pipe with his right hand and placed the other under his arm while he leaned back on the railing and sized Bryn up for a few moments. “Ever done any fishing, boy?”

“Well sir, me and a few of the other boys from Eston once put a few lines into the Tillata River one summer. It was no more than twine tied to tree branches, though, and we didn’t catch anything,” Bryn admitted.

“I’d imagine not.” Del moved over to the side of the cabin and wedged into the little bit of space there was between it and the railing. He looked over a few of the fishing poles fastened to the side before pulling one down. “Here, try this out for size,” he said, handing Bryn the long pole.

Bryn held it awkwardly in his hands, before Del grabbed the narrow top end. “This here’s then end that goes in the water, you know that much right?” Bryn shook his head affirmatively. “Good. This here is the reel, and this little switch’ll start or stop the line from running,” he said, pushing the lever back and forth. “Other than that, you just hold the pole and wait.”

Del went to the back of the boat, stepping over the net his son had strewn about, and opened one of the wooden boxes built into the side of the railing. He pulled out a small fish, no more than the length of Bryn's finger and came back over, grabbing the hook on the pole and sticking one prong of it into the fish's eye, while he twisted the line around it, then dug the rest of the hook into the body. He checked the small weighted stones tied up near the hook, then nodded.

"Good, you're all set, now just throw her out."

Bryn looked at Del questioningly.

"Alright, I'll do it for you this time, but don't think I'll be getting in the habit of it," he said as he took the pole from Bryn. He held it in his right hand and with his left motioned for Bryn to step back behind him. He looked to either side of him, then satisfied, waved his right arm outward toward the water and the small hooked fish went sailing out to plop into the lake a dozen feet in front of them. He held the pole out over the railing and walked back to the rear of the boat, kicking Cren's netting out of the way.

"Give the boy some room here Cren; we'll make a fisherman out of him yet!" Cren moved his netting closer to the other side of the boat while Del stuck the end of the pole through one of the metal rings fastened to the railing and held the pole out for Bryn to take.

"There you are. Now just wait for a bite," he said as he went back to inspecting the peeling paint along the cabin.

Bryn wondered how long that would take. Would he even have a chance of catching anything with the sails full and the boat moving at a steady clip across the lake? He'd never been on a boat before and this was a lot different than tying twine to some branches

back home, so he had no real idea about the fish or the time it would take for the boat to reach the river, and then Dockside. He leaned up against the railing and looked out at the lake. This was pretty easy work, he figured, being a fisherman, but boring. There wasn't much to see or do, and he realized now why Cren was so quick to grab up the netting and start mending. Still, he reminded himself, he was a long way from the fields of Eston, and the work he had there wasn't anymore interesting than this.

The sails remained full well into the afternoon and Bryn couldn't see the shore on their right or even the small dot that had been Baden on the horizon behind them. Water and clouds were all he could see in every direction, and occasionally another boat would dot the distant horizon in front of them. It was quiet too; the only sounds were the water slapping against the sides of the boat and the sails rustling in the wind. He'd given up on catching anything after more than an hour had passed, but glancing down at the pole still fixed to the railing did relieve his boredom somewhat. After a while Willem came out of the cabin and walked over to him.

"So how's sailing treating you, Bryn?" he asked as he grabbed the fishing pole, let some line out, gave it a few tugs, then put it back into the metal holder.

Bryn looked around him at the empty horizon. "Well, to tell you the truth sir, it's a bit boring."

Willem gave a deep laugh. "You can say that again! There sure isn't much to do when you get out onto the water and there's nothing around you."

"So how can you do it in Duldovia all the time?" Bryn asked.

Willem folded his arms and leaned forward onto the railing as he stared out at the lake rushing by behind them. "Well, Bryn, when you're raised up working on the water

your whole life, it just becomes a part of you. It's probably much like you and farming in Tillatia, I'd imagine. You get up each day and do it, knowing that's your place in the world."

Bryn thought that wasn't much of an answer, but instead asked if Willem would like to bait his own pole and try his hand at fishing. Surely he would have better luck than Bryn, being an old hand at it.

"No, no, I'm fine. I've done enough fishing in the Sea to the point that it's not much fun anymore."

"Does the Duldovian Sea have different fish than the King's Lake?" Bryn asked.

"Some, but not many," Willem answered. "Since the Sea is larger, we do have some bigger fish, but most are the same." He straightened up and looked over at Bryn. "You know, they say that thousands of years ago the King's Lake was part of the Duldovian Sea, and that both took up twice the area they do now, stretching from the base of the Montinos all the way to the Barrier Mountains."

"Really, what happened that caused them to break apart and become smaller?"

"Land changes, it's like a living thing itself, just with a much longer lifespan. I don't think anyone knows for sure, but if you walk around the Klamath Plain looking at rocks, you can see some with seashells imprinted on them, so we know it's true."

"I've often thought that Adjuria and Jonguria was one continent before as well," Bryn said.

"More than likely," Willem replied.

A few minutes passed where they both stared out at the horizon. Finally Bryn got up the nerve to ask Willem a question he'd been wondering about for the past few days.

“Willem,” he began a little nervously, “they say that you could have claimed the throne as your own after the Battle of Baden. Why didn’t you?”

Willem continued to stare out at the lake as if he hadn’t heard the question, then let out a loud sigh. “We’d just fought against the Regidians and their allies, and we called them the usurpers. I didn’t want that name applied to me.” He checked the fishing line, flicking the switch to let out a little more line, then put it back again. “Sixty years ago when Duldovia was still a part of Culdovia my grandfather had cast his lot with the Regidians in their first attempt to take the throne when the king died. They managed to hold it until they made the mistake of invading Montino and bringing all of Adjuria to war. I’ve always thought that if he would’ve remained loyal to the Culdovian line like the other nobles then that war would never have occurred. You see, he was one of the most powerful and well-regarded of the nobles, but after the province was split in two his status was stripped away and my family was left with nothing. It took us many years to climb our way back up, and I’ve always vowed I’d never let those mistakes happen again.”

Just then the pole shuddered and Willem and Bryn both looked at it in surprise.

“Well, don’t just stand there, grab the pole Bryn!” Willem yelled.

Bryn did just that, taking a firm grip with both hands on the thick butt of the pole as he slid it out of the metal holder. There was a lot of force on the other end of it, and the pole bowed under the weight of whatever fish had bit down on the line.

“Can you reel her in?” Willem asked, excited.

“It’s heavy, but I think I can manage,” Bryn said as he went to work reeling in the line. It was difficult and it seemed that for every few inches of line he reeled in the fish

took twice as many back with it into the lake. He kept at it however, and soon the line had moved from out in the lake to right under the pole.

“You’ve got her now,” Del said excitedly as he came up behind them with one of the long-handled nets from the cabin wall. “Just keep at her slow and steady now, lad.”

Bryn wound and wound the spool with all his might, and soon the water under the pole was a maelstrom of splashing from the large fish fighting for its life. With just a few more turns Bryn had the fish out of the water and into the net. Del held the net down on the deck so they could get a better look at the fish thrashing about. It was large, the largest fish Bryn had ever seen. It was too big for the net even; that was obvious at it thrashed about the deck, and Cren took one of the oars from the railing and smacked it on the head a few times before it lay still.

“Well, boy,” Del said with a smile as he bent down to take a closer look at the massive fish, “you’ve just caught the largest sturgeon I’ve ever seen.”

“Look at the size of it,” Willem exclaimed as he stood over it. “I’d say it’s at least five feet long.”

“Aye, at least,” Del agreed as he untangled the fish from the net and laid it out.

The cabin door swung open and the others spilled out onto the deck.

“My oh my,” Rodden said looking down at the lifeless fish, “what have you caught here?”

“Not me, this was all the boy,” Del said, pointing at Bryn.

“Well, I’ll be,” Halam said. “That’s the biggest fish I’ve ever seen.”

“Aye,” Iago agreed.

“We’ll be well fed tonight,” said Pader, “unless you want to wait until we get to Dockside and sell it. I’m sure she’d fetch a fancy price.”

“That she would,” Willem agreed. “I’ve heard of fish that large being taken from the Sea, but have never seen one before.”

They all looked up at Bryn. He still had the pole clutched in his hands and all he could do was smile back at them. “I think it would make for a fine supper,” he said.

SIXTEEN

That night they dined on fried sturgeon and potatoes, cooked up on the small stove Del had in the cabin. There was more than enough for each man to have two large helpings with some left over. Shortly after eating they reached the King’s River. During dinner the southern shore of the lake could be seen off the bow, and a while after they could make out the river with trees and plains on either side. The boat gathered speed as it approached the river, and the swift current was easily seen. Whereas on the lake the going was slower, their movement determined solely by the wind, on the river the current pushed them along at a good pace. Small waves dotted the river’s surface, creating a continuous noise all around them. It wasn’t the thunderous roar that Bryn had heard along the Tillata River the week before, more of a low humming.

The river was quite wide, and two boats would have no problem moving down it, with still a third probably able to squeeze in between. Occasionally a large boulder would jut out in the middle of the flow, but they could always be seen clearly by the foaming white waters churned up around them. The banks of the river rose up high on either side and then leveled off; so that it appeared they were sunk down below the

surrounding countryside. On their right was verdant grassland while on their left plains stretched on endlessly.

It began to grow dark by the time that everyone had eaten and the lake was a distant mass off the stern. Bryn decided that he'd grab his bedroll and sleep atop the cabin under the stars. Del informed them that with the river's current pushing them faster they could expect to make good time. Everyone was satisfied by that, and with little else to see or do, most decided to call it a night. Halam, Rodden, Pader, and Iago slept in the cabin bunks, while Millen, Edgyn, and Willem joined Bryn on top of the cabin. Del and Cren took turns sleeping on the deck while the other manned the boat. Bryn stared up at the stars and listened to the hum of the river and the waves slapping against the hull as he slowly drifted off to sleep.

He awoke the next morning with the sun shining brightly in his eyes. The other men were also waking up so they all broke their fasts on bread, cheese, and apples as well as the little amount of fish that still remained from the night before. During the night they had left the plains behind so that now grassland surrounded them on either side. The banks had lowered too, allowing them to see clearly in all directions. The river had widened with several smaller channels branching off here and there while the strong current from the night before had weakened. Instead of rocks and dirt on the riverbanks, now they could see fine yellow sand, a sure sign that the ocean was close by.

Edgyn was standing at the railing near the bow looking ahead. Bryn decided to go up and ask him about Dockside.

“We must be close by now,” Bryn said.

“Aye, not more than an hour away,” Edgyn replied. “You can tell by the amount of sand on the banks as well as the smaller channels shooting off the river. The closer we get to Docksides the more of those we’ll see.”

“What’s Docksides like?”

“It’s a wondrous place, Bryn.” Edgyn folded his hands together and leaned his arms on the railing. “She’s a very large city, but well spread out along the water. All these little channels we see forming off of the river,” he pointed, “well they all grow larger the closer we get to the ocean. Many are small rivers by the time we get to Docksides, and each is used by boats coming and going from the sea. The King’s River is the largest, however, and that’s where the largest of the ships debark.” He straightened up again and looked down at Bryn. “You see Bryn, Docksides isn’t actually on the Apsalar Ocean at all. The King’s River forms a delta as it approaches the sea, and there’re dozens of different routes that can be taken. The city itself is set back many leagues from the ocean, but small settlements continue to follow the rivers down to the coast, with quite a few smaller villages set up right on the beaches. Collectively they are all known as Docksides, but you’ll see in hour what I’m talking about.”

Edgyn walked off to talk with Del about their exact destination in Docksides, leaving Bryn to wonder how the city would look. He’d seen two great cities now in little more than a week. Plowdon was large and breathtaking; the first city he’d ever truly seen. Baden was much more regal, being the seat of the royal council and the home to kings. After seeing Plowdon and the lesser cities of Coria and Lindonis, however, Bryn had grown accustomed to a city’s appearance. He wondered if Docksides would have anything new to show him. From what he’d heard and read, most of the city was raised

up high off of the water, but he had a hard time picturing exactly what that would look like. At the same time he doubted that it would inspire much awe. A city was often nothing more than a mass of buildings crowded too close together with too many people crammed into them.

As Edgyn said, the arms and channels branching off the river grew larger, becoming little rivers themselves as the King's River widened further. If they continued on its path it would eventually taper off completely and they'd be on the ocean. The grasses grew half-as tall as a man on their banks and were so bunched together that Bryn couldn't see the ground they sprouted from. The first sign he had that they were near the city was smoke rising into the air from numerous chimneys. Soon after that small houses began to pop up along the river and its offshoots, with small boats tied up to docks thrown together from white sun-bleached driftwood. The houses appeared more and more as they moved down the river, and soon they were lining both banks with little space between them. Bryn could see that behind the houses the channels which formed from the river stretched far off into the distance on both banks, with smaller channels sprouting from them. More houses surrounded them, giving the landscape a strange checkerboard pattern of houses separated by river and grass, then more houses, then more river and grass.

The river was very wide now, and it wasn't long before some large docks appeared on their left. They were actually piers raised up high above the water so that they could service large ships. And large ships there were. Bryn saw the masts long before he saw the ships, the tall wood and sails towering above everything else on the horizon. Bryn could understand now why none of the boats around Baden had been called ships. These massive vessels towered high above them. The smallest had at least one mast while the

largest had two or even three towering masts with sails stretching to the tops and along the whole length of the ship.

Smaller docks were lower in the water and able to service the boats coming from the King's Lake and it was at one of these that Edgyn told Del to steer toward. They threw their lines out to a couple of men on the dock, and within a few minutes they were secured. Bryn grabbed his pack and eagerly jumped off of the boat and back onto land, if standing on a wooden platform swaying in the water could be called that, excited to be in Dockside, the southernmost city of Adjuria.

The others were not quite in as much of a rush, so took their time pulling their packs out of the cabin. Del shook each of their hands and wished them well. They gave a final wave then walked along the wooden dock toward the larger wharf set further off of the river. They climbed its sturdy wooden stairs, and Bryn saw his first glimpse of exactly what Edgyn was talking about on the boat. The whole city seemed to be constructed on wooden palisades so that it could tower over the land around it. On closer inspection Bryn realized this was necessary; if built on the same level as the river, the city would have the same patchwork aspect he'd seen while on the boat. It was necessary for the city to be built wholly on wood for it to truly call itself a city.

They were not too far off of the ground, only six to ten feet, Bryn figured. They headed into the city and onto some wide streets, Edgyn leading them.

“We've got to get around some of these smaller docks meant for the King's River,” he shouted over his shoulder as they waded through the press of people. “The larger docks that service the ocean-going ships are still further to the south of us.”

They continued on down the crowded streets, never quite leaving the sight of the river. Buildings crowded in on each side of them, all made of wood, the same as the streets, which were nothing more than a series of interconnected boards nailed together. The whole city seemed to be one large dock, and Bryn realized that its name meant it was more than just a city that was located next to the docks: the docks were the city. Between the buildings he could see the river and beyond it the tall grasses growing from the mounds of sand which lined its banks. Tall ship's masts towered above the buildings, none of which exceeded two storeys, and most of which were only one. It must have cost a lot to build this city, Bryn thought. He'd seen no large trees for most of the day, so the city must have gotten most of its wood from the Baltika Forest in Regidia. Surely it was not all constructed out of driftwood.

After a time they were walking on the raised platforms which ran along the river, large ships tied to the tallest of them. Stacks of crates were seen everywhere, and these did tower over most of the buildings. Bryn had no idea what they contained, but figured that it must be something other than just fish. He remembered Edgyn explaining how many of the southern provinces bordering Portinia sent their goods overland to Dockside. From there they'd then be loaded onto ships and sent by sea to many of the northern provinces. It was cheaper and faster to send them that way than if they were sent by land, and Edgyn mentioned that since the war he often sailed to Fallownia, Shefflin, and even sometimes as far north as Tillatia to deliver goods from the south and take back goods from the north. Since the war with Jonguria, the only type of trade that occurred in Adjuria was between provinces, and Portinia had a large stake in it.

Most of the crates were being loaded onto the ships with large wooden cranes. They walked through the bustle of crates and cranes until they came to a large ship. Edgyn said a few hasty words to one of the men standing next to it who quickly ran off. Edgyn then turned to address them all.

“Here we are gentlemen, *The Comely Maiden*. She’ll see us safely to Jonguria.”

The ship was a massive thing, with two tall masts rising high above them, its sails tied up along their lengths, while in front a large bowsprit shot out from the bow over the river underneath. There was no paint on it that Bryn could see, the dark brown wood of the trees she came from being the only color evident. A large cabin dominated the area in front of the masts. A narrow gangplank led up the few feet that separated the dock from the ship’s deck, with men carrying sacks and small crates onto the ship.

“Come,” Edgyn said as he headed up after the men, “let me show you your home for the next week or two.”

They followed him up and were soon standing on the deck of the ship. The wood was planed and smooth on every spot of the deck, railings, masts, and cabin, a big difference from Del’s boat. The cabin had several windows on each side and over the door was a small set of stairs leading to the top of the cabin, which was in actuality another deck entirely. Between the two masts was a large hole cut into the deck which led down into the ship’s hold. Behind it the deck stopped and another cabin began, with two small staircases running up on both sides to a smaller deck set up at the same height as that above the forward cabin, although this one had the ship’s steering wheel set atop it.

“The first cabin,” Edgyn said, pointing toward the front of the ship, “is the guest quarters. It’s spacious enough for all of us, and six bunks can be pulled out from the walls.” He turned and pointed behind them. “The aft cabin is the captain’s quarters, also spacious, but capable of accommodating only two.” He walked around the hole in the deck. “Here is the ship’s hold, which will be sealed-off with this trapdoor when we get underway,” he said, motioning toward the large metal grating that lay on the deck next to the gaping hole. “Below are all of the provisions we’ll need for the voyage, which is not that many, I have to admit.” Bryn lowered himself down so that he could peer into the dark hold. It was a cavernous space that ran the entire length of the ship and was quite deep, but was surprisingly empty, he saw. The two men who’d been carrying the sacks and crates deposited them near the ladder fastened to both decks and then climbed up it to stand on the main deck.

“I’d much rather be sailing a ship full of crated goods like we just passed on the pier” Edgyn continued, “but I suppose that’ll not be too far off now that we’re on our way to Jonguria, eh?” He smiled at them, then looked up toward the two tall masts. “These masts each will hold two large sails, one which runs up the length of the mast to the crosstrees, and another smaller sail which unfurls above them. With all four sails out we’ll be able to move at a speed of around eight knots, although I think we’ll stick closer to five or six.”

Bryn stared up at the two tall masts. The large one closest to the back of the ship was the tallest, and went up about fifty feet into the air, with the crosstrees, a long horizontal mast extending to both sides, jutting out at around forty feet up. The second mast, closer to the cabin at the front of the ship, only rose about forty feet above the deck,

or about as high as the crosstrees of the first mast. Attached and spread down and outward from both of them were hundreds of feet of rope which secured the sails and stretched all the way down to the ship's railings, as well as to the bow and stern. More ropes were coiled up into piles along the deck, and set on each side of the ship close to the railings were two small row boats turned on their sides. Lifeboats, Bryn judged, hoping he'd never have to trust his fate to one on the open ocean.

The man that Edgyn had sent scurrying earlier now returned, another four men close behind. All wore tight-fitting woolen shirts and trousers of light blues and grays and were well-muscled. Surprisingly, Bryn thought, they all looked like younger versions of Edgyn, especially since most sported either a mustache or a goatee.

"My crew," Edgyn said as the men strolled up the gangplank. They lined up in front of the railing, the two from the hold joining them. "They're Flint, Dilon, Fess, Trey, Jal, and Conn," Edgyn said, pointing them out from left to right. "And this here's my first mate, Sam." Edgyn put his arm around the man's shoulders and the sailor gave a grudging smile which lacked several teeth. He had dirty-blond hair and small scar under his right eye, but other than that looked the same as the other men that Edgyn had named off. "Well, men, are we ready to shove off?"

"Aye, captain," they said at the same time, then began to move around the ship, each following a separate path. Some headed to the railings to untie the ship while others climbed the masts to let loose the sails. Sam took hold of the large metal grate and laid it over the opening to the hold, then headed up toward the steering wheel.

"We'll be getting under way then," Edgyn said as he too headed toward the wheel. "You men can put your things in the fore cabin, then come out on deck to see Dockside

slip away. We should be out of the river shortly and on a southwesterly course toward Jonguria in no time.”

The men did as he advised, stowing their packs into the cabin. Bryn handed his to Halam so that he wouldn't miss any part of the process now underway to see them on their way. The two top sails were unfurled now and flapping in the wind and the ship's bow was pointed out toward the river. The wind caught and filled the sails and they picked up some speed, passing by the docks on their left as they headed down the widening river to the sea. After a while they'd left Dockside behind and only houses crowded along the banks of the river, just as they had when they entered the city. Bryn could smell the salty sea air, and then the land gave way to ocean, the waves crashing onto the sandy beaches on either side of the river. Two long rows of jagged black rocks stretched out into the waves, and they sailed straight out between them.

“The jetty,” Willem said as he approached the railing that Bryn was leaning on. “They protect the ships from the harsh storms that kick up around here during the winter and keep them from crashing into the rocky shores when they sail back into the river.”

When they cleared the jetty the crewmen let down the other two larger sails which quickly caught the wind. Edgyn steered them so that they were running along the coast but also away from it. The waves crashed against the ship's hull, and it wouldn't be long before they were out of sight of land entirely.

The other men took up spots along the railing to watch the land go by, which was soon nothing more than a brown line on their left with ocean surrounding them in every other direction.

SEVENTEEN

The storm abated and the skies cleared on the voyage from Desolatia Island. After five years of exile on a deserted island, Leisu was surprised how easily Grandon seemed to take to the sea. The heaving and rolling of the ship as it moved among the waves didn't bother him in the slightest. He'd grown up in Regidia, the most heavily forested province of Adjuria, which had a few small rivers and streams, but nothing large enough to put a boat into. Perhaps, Leisu thought, he'd spent considerable time in the water while on the island; he would have to if he wanted to survive: most of the edible plant and animal life would cling to the rocks and shoals surrounding the island. He considered asking the man, but Grandon was content to spend the majority of his time standing at the bow of the ship and staring out at the distant horizon for hours and hours, his attention drawn away only when one of the crewmen informed him it was time to eat.

The few times that Leisu had managed to draw Grandon out of his reveries had not produced any new insights. But how could they? The man had been gone from the world for the past five years and his knowledge of events was therefore quite limited. On their first full day at sea Leisu had tried to initiate a conversation.

"How did you survive on that island for so long?" he'd asked that afternoon while Grandon stared off of the starboard side of the ship.

"You mean why didn't I die after a few weeks like everyone in Adjuria expected that I would?" Grandon had replied.

"If that's how you would like to look at it."

Grandon had given him a hard look then peered back out at the sea. "I knew that at some point I would be taken off of that island. At first I believed it would come soon.

My countrymen would realize their mistake in crowning the young boy king and come rushing back to the island begging me to take the throne once again. I entertained those delusions for the first year, and then I began to think that my fellow Regidians would send a small ship to take me back to my province to live out my days in peace. For two more years I looked forward to that happening. After that I stopped looking toward the sea for my salvation. I began to construct my own boat out of the materials the island could provide. It wasn't much. Thick wood is rather sparse on the island, as I soon found out. I quickly realized that the best I could manage would be to lash some thick branches together into a makeshift raft. It took me several months to get it completed to my satisfaction and equipped with enough water and food to sail."

Grandon had sighed and gave a slight smile before he continued with his tale.

"I chose a clear day and at low tide pushed my little raft out into the surf. I made it out into the large breakers and was hurled back toward the shore, my raft torn to splinters by the force of the waves even at their weakest. I was utterly dejected, but all I can do is look back and laugh now. My Adjurian opponents were quite brilliant in choosing the location for me; there was no way that I was getting off that island by myself. So I put away all hopes in that regard; they would do nothing but weigh me down, I thought. I continued to live day-by-day, but deep down I suppose that I secretly still hoped, and even expected, that someone would not forget about me and that a ship would be sent."

Grandon had looked over at Leisu at that moment. "And it would seem that someone has not forgotten about me, although I'm a bit surprised that it's a Jongurian that has sent for me. I never would have expected that."

“Well,” Leisu had said, straightening, “it’s as much your nephew as it is us. I don’t know all of the particulars as to his and my master’s plan concerning you, but from what I do know it was he that approached us first.”

“Yes, Jossen always did take after me in that he could see an opportunity and grab it,” Grandon had replied. He had turned to Leisu then. “So there is nothing more that you can tell me about this plan that my nephew and your master have for me then?”

“No, I know little of it myself, I’m afraid.” Grandon had turned back to the sea at that, but Leisu had pressed on, trying to placate him. “I’m sure that more will be made known to you when we arrive in Weiling,” he’d said.

Grandon didn’t respond to that so Leisu had left him to his thoughts. That had been three days before and they’d said little since. Now, however, they would approach Nanbo Island and the answers that they both sought.

After several days of nothing but blue seas all around them, Leisu was happy to see the barren rocks of Nanbo Island appear on the horizon. There wasn’t much to the island except several small fishing villages and the larger town of Weiling where the imperial trade offices were located. This was where Adjurians and Jongurians used to meet to hammer out deals acceptable to both for their various goods. Now, however, those imperial offices remained vacant and unused, and had been ever since the war and the cessation of all trade between the two countries nearly twenty years before. Leisu heard someone’s footsteps draw near on the wooden planking of the deck and turned, surprised to see Grandon coming to stand beside him.

“What business do we have in Weiling?” Grandon asked as he put his hands on the railing and stared out at the approaching island, still far off in the distance. His long hair

had been cut back and tied into a small tail at the back of his head, Leisu saw. The beard which had covered his entire face was now trimmed neatly into a small goatee, though it still did a good job of hiding the man's nose and mouth.

"None, really," Leisu replied. "We'll dock and unload some fish that was caught over the past few days and take on some extra provisions. It's all really for show. It would be suspicious for a ship to sail past Nanbo for so long a time and then bypass it altogether when seen again."

"I see. So we'll be just a few hours in port then?"

"I don't think it'll take much longer."

"Will I be permitted to stretch my legs on shore?" Grandon asked, turning to look at Leisu.

Leisu returned his gaze and thought for a moment. His master had been explicit that Grandon was to remain out of sight until he was safely delivered. Even taking him from the docks to Zhou's residences in Bindao was to follow a painstaking process. Grandon was supposed to be tucked away in a crate or hidden in the back of a wagon; whatever it took to ensure that he was kept out of sight entirely. Leisu hadn't mentioned this yet to Grandon, and was not planning to do so until they were within sight of Bindao's harbor. It now appeared that the news could wait no longer.

"My master was adamant that you not step foot off of this boat until we reach Bindao, and then you are to be hidden from view," Leisu said to Grandon, returning the man's unnerving gaze without trouble.

Grandon was quiet for a moment, his brows bunched up in thought. "I see. And how are you to make sure that this order is carried out, may I ask, Leisu?"

Leisu knew that Grandon only used his name when he was sure of getting his way. He'd spoken his name the first day on the ship when Grandon insisted on standing at the rail and looking out. Leisu had approached to suggest he may be more comfortable in the captain's quarters or below deck, out of the glaring sun and gusting winds. Grandon had listened to his entreaties with his ears half-shut, then when Leisu had grown more firm in his protestations, Grandon had turned to look at him, and without even a change of expression, had turned Leisu's blood cold.

"Leisu," Grandon had said, "I am sure that your master has told you many things in regard to me, and most of them were uttered with the best of intentions. But I tell you, Leisu, neither you nor your master knows me. If I want to stand at the railing and look out at the sea, then I will do so."

He had turned and done just that, not sparing another moment for the Jongurian. Leisu hadn't argued with him, seeing little harm in the man's eccentricity. Now, however, as they approached Weiling, Leisu's orders had more weight. He steadied himself and drew in a deep breath before answering Grandon's question.

"Why, sir," he calmly replied, "I have a ship full of armed men that will ensure that my orders are carried out."

"And you would do me harm then when I decide that your orders do not concern me?" Grandon replied.

Leisu had to think for a moment. The only thing that his master had been more adamant about than Grandon not being spotted was that no harm was to come to him. He looked down for a moment then quickly met Grandon's gaze again.

"No, we wouldn't harm you, but—"

“Well, it’s settled then,” Grandon interrupted, “I’ll take a short stroll around the docks when we land and nothing more.” He smiled at Leisu and walked back the way he’d come, leaving the Jongurian more perplexed and frustrated than ever. He was a great warrior who’d proved himself countless times during the war with Adjuria. He’d struck down men in battle that were far greater than this puny Adjurian. But what could he do? While he would have killed any lesser man, and even some greater, for talking to him like that, there was little he could do to punish, discipline, or even scold the former king. Leisu gritted his teeth and returned to the bow to watch their progress toward the island.

The sun was not yet halfway through the sky when they made it to Nanbo Island and turned west to reach Weiling, located on the island’s far western point. Several small fishing boats crowded around the rocky shores with nets spread out and long poles fastened to their decks, the lines cast out and trailing into the water around them. Few of the men and women looked up at their approach and even fewer seemed to show them any interest. Good, Leisu thought, there’s nothing here for them to concern themselves with. Most of these people’s lives had changed very little over the previous centuries. When war had come between the two mighty nations they were unaffected, and Leisu doubted they cared who called himself emperor in Fujing, and would little notice when their country proclaimed a new ruler in a few months time.

It didn’t take them long to see the tall buildings of Weiling rise from the rocks ahead of them. It wasn’t so much the buildings which were tall, few were more than one storey and only a couple actually had a second storey, but the cliffs which rose high from the water. As those cliffs opened and grew inward the ship turned, heading into the small

bay that took up one side of Weiling and was the reason for its existence. Their speed slowed with the raising of sails, but with the ship's momentum and the push of the tide they were able to glide into an open spot along the nearly deserted docks and piers. The crewmen of the ship threw out their lines to men waiting on the docks and soon they were tied up and secure. Leisu gave the order for their goods to be unloaded and new provisions to be taken on, then looked around for Grandon. He still had some words to say to the man about his planned trip around the town.

He found him standing on the railing overlooking the men from the pier who were securing a gangplank to the ship. Several of them looked and pointed at the Adjurian in their midst, so much so that more gawking was being carried out than any actual work. Leisu approached and barked a few quick words in Jongurian and the men scrambled back to their task. Grandon didn't so much as turn to acknowledge his approach.

"It's really not much," he said as he continued to look down at the men. "From all of the importance applied to trade over the years, I assumed that Weiling would be a bustling port city. Now here I find it's nothing more than a few ramshackle huts dotting the waterfront."

Leisu grinned despite himself, but quickly regained his composure, happy for once that Grandon had a tendency to never look who he was talking to. "No, it's not much, and never really was," he admitted.

"So then why build all the docks and piers?" Grandon asked. "There must be enough space for twenty or thirty ships in this small bay, and dock space for twice that."

"From what I've heard, before the war the goods from the Adjurian ships were unloaded and just as quickly reloaded onto Jongurian ships. Before the Adjurians could

get out of the harbor with their return goods, we would already have our ships halfway to Bindao.”

Grandon scoffed. “I doubt that.”

“Trade has always been highly valued in Jonguria,” Leisu continued, unperturbed by Grandon’s disbelief. “Much of my country derived its livelihood from the goods that could be shipped to Weiling and then to Adjuria. And the goods that we received in return were highly sought after. People didn’t want to wait long for them to reach the mainland.” Leisu stretched his arms out toward the town. “That’s why you see few buildings. There was never any need for warehouses to store the goods that were brought over. The ships acted as the warehouses, and no goods were held for long in their holds.”

“If it was so important for the goods to get to the mainland,” Grandon said, “then why even bother with Nanbo at all? Why not have the ships head directly to Bindao, or even a port city on the northern coast?”

“I agree, but that was a decision made by an emperor long ago and carried out until the war disrupted all commerce.”

“So why haven’t you tried to start up trade again?” Grandon asked, looking at Leisu for a change.

“I could ask the same of you,” Leisu replied. “There have been no overtures to Jonguria since the war ended twenty years ago. And unfortunately in some things we Jongurians are a very stubborn people. Trade is one of them. We won’t come to you asking for trade, but instead wait until you’re ready to come to us.”

Grandon laughed. “That sounds like a recipe for disaster to me. Look around you. This town, if you can even call it that, has obviously seen better days. How it has hung

on without trade for two decades is beyond me.” He straightened up and looked at Leisu. “If I were you, I’d prepare a ship for Adjuria and tell them you want, no, need, to trade again.”

Leisu smiled at the man’s total lack of knowledge of his country. He knew that however easy that seemed to the Adjurian, it could never happen. Jonguria was too proud. She was still angry over the war’s beginning twenty years before. The Adjurians had claimed that it was a Jongurian vessel which fired the first shot at an unarmed Adjurian fishing boat, but it was as absurd a notion to Leisu now as it had been to the entire country so long ago. Most had reconciled themselves to never knowing exactly how the war had begun, but begun it had, and things had never been the same. It wouldn’t do any good to get into a conversation with this former king about that, however, so Leisu simply smiled at the man’s comment.

Both stood at the rail watching the barrels of fish being unloaded and the crates of provisions being carried aboard for a moment before Grandon spoke again.

“So I’d like to take my first step on Jongurian soil now, if that’s alright with you and your master.”

“I’ve told you how my master feels about that,” Leisu replied. Having thought over the man’s words as they came into the harbor Leisu had realized that there was little he could do to control this man who’d been, and still seemed to be, so used to controlling others. He sighed and looked at Grandon, who perked up at the attention.

“But you are right, sir. There is very little that I can do to stop you. I think it is a mistake for you to leave the ship before we reach Bindao, and the protection that city will afford you under my master’s control, but you are free now from your island prison, and

thus able to do as you please.” Grandon gave a slight smile and nodded and began to move toward the gangplank before Leisu’s hand shot out to hold his arm. “But I advise you,” he continued in a hushed tone, “be careful and keep out of sight as much as you can. It wouldn’t do to have word spread that an Adjurian fitting the description of the False King Grandon Fray was spotted in Weiling.”

“I doubt that anyone would recognize me here,” Grandon said, brushing Leisu’s hand out of the way and continuing off the ship.

“You never know,” Leisu said quietly to himself as Grandon moved down the gangplank and onto the pier. “You never know.”

EIGHTEEN

The voyage went fast and each day saw favorable winds and clear skies. Edgyn’s seven crewmen’s actions in handling the ship were deft and efficient, and the *Comely Maiden* moved through the seas with a grace and ease that saw them well away from the sight of land on their first day out of Dockside. The second and third days followed a similar routine of tedium for the men. They arose from their bunks early and had a bland breakfast of oatcakes, cheese, and small beer, then watched the crewmen at work. When they tired of this they could stare out at the sea around them. When that proved unbearable they could converse amongst themselves, but with little external stimuli on the ship, the conversations had nowhere to go and quickly fizzled out. In the end each man was left to find a comfortable place on the ship to spend alone with his thoughts.

Bryn had taken to asking numerous questions of the crewmen right off and soon knew many aspects of the ship. Dilon told him the difference between the mainmast and

the mizzenmast, Trey helped him name off all of the sails on the ship, and Conn even helped him calculate the speed of the ship using a long rope with several knots tied into it. After Fess saw him staring up into yards and rigging of the masts, he convinced Bryn to climb up to the top with him. It was slow going after he'd gone up a dozen feet and made the mistake of looking down at the swaying deck and the waves crashing about it underneath, but he'd somehow marshaled his courage and pressed on. Soon they made it to the crosstrees, and then it was just a few more feet up to the very top. Fess showed him how to twist the ropes around his hands and feet so that he'd be secure, and Bryn had found his new favorite spot on the ship. Before he headed back down to his other duties, Fess handed Bryn a small metal spyglass, telling him he could use it to see further on the horizon, maybe even spotting land if he stayed up long enough. He stayed up for hours after that watching the distant horizon through the glass before Halam finally shouted up at him to come down and eat dinner.

On the third day they spotted land. Jal was the first to see it from his spot up in the rigging, and he called down to them on the deck.

“Land ho!”

They all rushed to the port side railing to have a look, but could see little at that point. Bryn climbed up the mast to have a look for himself, but it wasn't really anything special, he decided, and soon climbed down. It was already late in the day and the sun was about to go down when the call was made, so the men resigned themselves to getting their first look at the Jongurian coast on the morrow. For many it would be their return to a land they'd only known ravaged by war and which had changed their lives entirely.

Dawn saw the fourth day as bright and clear as the previous three, but now instead of ocean on all sides, they had land on one. Edgyn had the ship skirting the coast half a dozen leagues out. To Bryn it looked much the same as the land they'd left behind; there were green hills and what looked to be darker green trees. He still couldn't make out much at their distance, even when he climbed up top.

On the fifth day they saw a large river draining into the ocean from the coast, and Edgyn informed them that they were passing the Xishui River, the first of two massive rivers which drained out of the Xishan Mountains on parallel paths through the grasslands of southern Ximen province. Bryn asked how he knew all of these different names, and Edgyn just laughed. He had several maps, both on paper and in his head, from making the voyage countless times during the war and before when he traded. On the morrow they'd pass by the mouth of the Dongshui River as they got closer to land.

Edgyn was true to his word, and early on the sixth morning out they passed the river and prepared to step onto dry land once again. They would reach Nanbo Island sometime that afternoon and would sail into the southern port city of Weiling where in the past the Adjurian trading ships had unloaded their goods and taken on Jongurian goods for the journey back. The men were still uncertain as to how their reception would be. Over the past two days they'd spotted several large fishing boats off the southern Jongurian coast, but none had attempted to flag them down or send a message. Many had been ahead of them and could have made it back to Ximen or Pudong provinces with news of an Adjurian sailing ship off the southern coast. The men were therefore certain that news had reached Weiling as to their approach.

The southern coast began to recede inland as they continued on their course, and in the afternoon a small speck appeared on the horizon, their first glimpse of Nanbo Island. As they got closer they saw several of the same single-masted fishing boats plying the waters off the island that they'd seen over the previous days on the southern coast. Again, none made any move to intervene on their approach to the island, and as they got closer it didn't seem the people on the boats paid them much attention at all.

The island grew larger as the afternoon wore on, going from a speck to a sizeable mass of land ahead of them. The island was shaped like an arrowhead whose tip pointed west, Edgyn told him, and Bryn could see the resemblance as they got closer. The sharp, rocky tip of the island tapered off on both sides and spread outward as they neared. They headed south and Bryn saw that the island was almost completely made of rock. There were some gnarled, wind-whipped trees sprouting on the few areas of dirt scattered about, but mostly it was jagged black and brown rocks. They ran right down to the sea and Bryn saw no way that a ship, or even a small boat, could possibly make an approach.

As the island widened, however, they found themselves approaching a small bay where several of the fishing boats they'd seen were anchored. The rocks still came right down to the water but there were long docks and piers constructed to lessen any danger. Wooden buildings were constructed close to the piers, but Bryn couldn't see much of anything behind them due to their height above the ship. The rocks fell steeply into the bay, and while the docks were lashed together right on the water, the piers were supported by tall wooden pilings, some of which were at least a dozen feet tall. They led to wooden staircases set against the rocks which led up another dozen feet to the buildings. Like the piers in Dockside, wooden wheel-turned cranes stood about, derelict

and abandoned from lack of use. No trees or any other signs of life besides the people on the fishing boats could be seen in the desolate landscape.

Upon their entrance into the bay, several of the smaller fishing boats threw out oars and unfurled sails, quickly moving to get out of the larger ship's path. Edgyn had called for the two large mainsails to be brought down and tied to the masts when they approached the island, and now it was just the smaller topsails filled with wind that guided them into port. Edgyn pointed to a spot next to the only other large ship tied up along one of the piers and they steered toward it. They made a slow approach, and several men came out onto it to assist them.

Bryn had never seen a Jongurian before. Where the Adjurians were light of skin and had fairer complexions, these men had a darker skin tone as if they had spent considerable time in the sun. Their hair was all black and their eyes were smaller and slanted downward at the outer edges. They were smaller, having thinner arms and legs, but also less fat, and seemed shorter to Bryn than the average height of men back home, standing no taller than shoulder-height to an Adjurian.

Five of them caught the lines thrown to them by Edgyn's crewmen and tied up the ship to metal rings fastened to the wooden pier. Edgyn told Sam to take down the sails and inspect the ship, making sure it was in top shape for their voyage back to Adjuria. Next he walked over to the railing where the Jongurians now stood silently staring at them. He spoke a few sentences in a language Bryn couldn't understand, and two of the men ran off toward the buildings set higher up on the rocks.

"I've told them that we're here to see an imperial representative," Edgyn informed them all.

“I didn’t know that you spoke Jongurian,” Rodden said.

“It helps when you trade with them,” Edgyn smiled. “A difficult language to pick up, that’s for sure, but well worth the effort.” He looked at the other men. “How many of you can speak it?”

“I do,” Pader answered, looking at the others.

“I picked up some during my time in Bindao,” Halam said, “but I can’t carry on a decent conversation.”

“How about the rest of you?” Edgyn asked, looking at Willem, Iago, and Millen.

They all shook their heads.

“Well, it’s no matter. One of us can carry on the negotiations while the other translates. Most of the time in the past the imperial representatives spoke Adjurian, although they may be a rusty after all these years, but then so am I.”

One of the men that had delivered Edgyn’s message returned and motioned for them to step onto the pier. “Come,” he said in Adjurian as he waved his arm at them to step off the boat.

Edgyn looked back at them then stepped onto the pier. The rest of the men looked at one another nervously, then Halam, Rodden and Bryn followed, the others close behind.

* * * * *

They were in port no more than an hour before the Adjurian ship sailed in. Its two tall masts gave away its approach long before they could see it move into the bay, but even so, Leisu felt a premonition that something bad was going to occur when he saw them. There were no more than a dozen men aboard her, Leisu figured as he watched the ship, named *The Comely Maiden*, glide into a berth along an empty pier beside them.

Some of them scurried about pulling at the rigging and securing the sails, but most only stood at the railing and watched the docks grow closer. By the look of them they weren't sailors. Most were well past middle age and a few had graying hair. Only one carried a weapon that Leisu could see; a mighty longsword that was sheathed at the belt of one of the more thick-set ones, muscle turned to fat no doubt. Several of the same men that had taken the ropes of Leisu's ship now took those of this new visitor. Leisu wondered what a group of Adjurians could possibly be doing in Weiling as he walked down the gangplank of his ship and moved over to have a better look.

One of the Adjurians, a man with a bright black goatee, spoke a few words in Jongurian to one of the men that had assisted with the ropes, and he ran off toward the town. Leisu sidled up to one of the dockworkers to get a better idea of what was happening.

"They want to see the imperial representative," the man told Leisu after he asked what was said between the two men.

The imperial representative, what could they possibly want with him? Leisu thought. Could these men be more than just some amazingly ignorant sailors who'd lost their way? Were these the very men that he and Grandon were discussing on the ship just an hour earlier, men coming to start up trade between the two nations once again? It was an intriguing thought, and one that would be good for the country, but it couldn't have come at a worse time. Why did Grandon have to go out to explore the town now? He turned and began walking down the pier toward the large wooden staircase that would take him toward the imperial offices. He needed to find whoever was in charge of the emperor's interests here and persuade him that these men must be gotten rid of quickly.

But perhaps more importantly, he needed to find Grandon and get him back on the ship immediately.

The imperial office was the first large building just above the stairs from the pier. The man that had carried the Adjurian's message from the pier was just coming down the wooden porch steps when Leisu approached and walked up and in the front door without so much as knocking. He moved through the small entrance room to the main office, coming to stand in front of a large man with oily hair and ash marks all down his shirt from the pipe lodged between his lips. The man looked up from whatever paperwork he was doing and began to raise an arm in protest at Leisu's sudden intrusion, but was cut off before he'd had the chance.

"There is right now a group of Adjurians on the dock who would seek an audience with you," Leisu began, staring down at the man in his desk. "These men must be dispatched with immediately."

"And who are you to be telling me what to do?" the man asked angrily, sitting up as straight in his desk as his large belly would allow.

"My name is Leisu Tsao and I report directly to Zhou Lao."

The man sank in his chair at the mention of the rebel leader's name. He stared at the far wall for a moment before answering. "Zhou wishes that these Adjurians be dispatched?"

"Get rid of them," Leisu replied. "I'm on important business of Zhou's. I'll be in port for another hour at the most, and can't have these Adjurians about."

"I will send them on their way immediately," the man replied, rising from his chair.

"Good," Leisu said and strode back to the door.

He emerged onto the small porch to see the Adjurians coming up the staircase and heading straight toward him. He quickly walked down the steps, across the street, and into a narrow alley between two smaller buildings. He hung back and watched as three of the dockworkers led the Adjurians to the office, taking up positions on the porch when the men went inside. There were eight of them, all grown men and past their fighting years by the look of it, except one, who was just a boy. *What could he possibly be doing here?* Leisu thought.

Leisu's thoughts turned back to the man in the office. he had no idea who the man was, but he'd obviously known and feared the name of Zhou Lao. He knew that his master's reach extended far, even into some of the northwest provinces, and it would seem that he had some influence in Weiling as well. Seeing him react the way he did, Leisu had no doubt that the man would get rid of the Adjurians as quickly as he could.

He straightened and looked around. He had to find Grandon, get back to the ship, then pull out of this port and get to Bindao. He began to walk the wide streets of Weiling in search of the Adjurian. The townsfolk would really have something to talk about now. A ship full of Adjurians in port for the first time in twenty years, word of that would spread quickly. It was just as well, Leisu thought. Now anyone who happened to have seen Grandon earlier wouldn't remember that he was separate from the others. All Adjurians would look the same to these fishermen, so it was well in a way that the ship had come when it did. Still, Leisu told himself, the sooner they were on their way the better.

Three of the Jongurian men led them up the wooden staircase to the buildings that Bryn had seen. If this was Weiling, then it wasn't much, he thought. There were perhaps a dozen buildings, all laid out on flat boards over the uneven rocky boulders. The two closest to the staircase were two-storeys tall, while the others were only a single-storey high. The ground was worn and dusty on what passed for a road between the buildings. There were very few people around, only an old woman washing some clothes in a large wooden barrel and a middle-aged man sitting on a bench outside one of the buildings further down the road. The three Jongurians walked up the wooden porch steps that led into the first tall building after the staircase and opened the door, gesturing for them to enter.

Inside, the building was nearly as bare as the outside. They walked into a small, empty room off of the porch, and they turned to look back at the Jongurians, who gestured for them to move into the larger room to the right. It contained a small table in the middle of the room with four chairs set into it, while along the side wall there were another five chairs, all covered with dust. The room was dominated by a large wooden desk, made from the same wood that everything else in Weiling was made of. A large man sat in it, a long pipe clamped tightly between his teeth. He had dark, oily black hair, a thin black mustache and several long hairs on his chin which dangled down, although there were not nearly enough to qualify it as a beard. He had the same small facial features as the other Jongurians, but whereas they were small of body, this man was large. He had massive arms and a belly which stretched out far in front of him. His shirt was a dark blue, though faded by the sun, and he wore an equally faded grey vest over it. Both were covered in ash from the pipe he smoked.

“Welcome,” he said in Adjurian when they’d all squeezed into the room. “Please, have a seat.”

Halam, Edgyn, Pader, and Willem seated themselves at the table while Bryn, Rodden, Millen, and Iago took the chairs against the wall, wiping the dust off with their hands before sitting down.

“My name is Yuan Jibao and I represent the emperor here in Weiling. Now tell me, what to what do I owe the pleasure of an unexpected visit from an Adjurian ship,” the man said in a deep voice, the pipe bobbing up and down between his lips as he spoke.

The men seated at the table looked to one another. After a moment, as if some silent agreement had been made as to who would represent them, Halam stood up.

“Sir, my name is Halam Fiske, and I’m a trade representative from the province of Tillatia. Each of us,” he said, turning and putting his arms out to indicate everyone sitting behind him, “holds a position dealing with trade from a different province of Adjuria. We’ve been tasked by the king and royal council to let it be known to you that we wish to open up trade between our two great countries once again.”

Several moments passed by in silence as Yuan seemed to weigh Halam’s words. Finally he spoke.

“It’s been more than twenty years and one long war since our two nations have traded, why do you come to us now?”

Halam put his fist on the table and looked down for a moment before addressing the man. “For many years after the East-West war Adjuria had several internal problems which eventually led to a Civil—”

“Yes, we know about your war,” Yuan interrupted impatiently. “What I want to know about is *trade*.”

Halam seemed to tense up a moment at the sudden interruption. “It’s been only recently that matters have come to a sufficient point where we feel we’re able to trade once again.”

“Nonsense,” Yuan replied. “You’ve been needing to trade for some time now, if our reports are any indication. Much of your country’s population is living very poorly and has been for some time. You think that by reopening trade with us that this problem will be solved.”

Halam could tell this man was better informed about Adjuria than they were of Jonguria, and there was no point in trying to argue with him about his country’s situation. “That’s right, sir.”

“Of course that’s right, it wasn’t a question.” Seemingly satisfied that he’d gotten the upper hand in the discussion so far, Yuan leaned back in his chair, which creaked noisily under the strain. “Did you ever think *why* it was that we’ve never come to you, like you come to me today, begging for trade to be resumed.”

Halam thought for a few moments before speaking, not wanting to anger the man anymore than he already had. “We thought that perhaps you no longer had a pressing need for our goods after such a long absence.”

“A pressing need?” Yuan laughed repeating the words. “No, we have no pressing need. I will tell you sir, we’ve come to realize that we never had a need for your goods and are doing quite fine without them.”

Halam looked at the other men sitting at the table. Pader rose to speak.

“Surely sir this cannot be the majority opinion of the imperial government.”

“I am the imperial government as far as you’re concerned,” Yuan said loudly, quickly jerking upright in his chair once again. “Who are you to presume to know my government’s opinions?”

“My name is Pader Brun from Culdovia, sir, and I don’t presume to know anything,” Pader said, standing up from the table to speak.

“Yes, that is good,” Yuan said, settling back in his chair somewhat. “None of you need presume anything about Jonguria. How could you possibly know anything about what goes on in this country? No Adjurian has stepped foot on Jongurian soil since the last of you packed up your camps and left the Baishur River and Bindao.”

“Sir,” Edgyn said as he got up from his chair and stood in front of the table. “My name is Edgyn Thron from Portinia. Before the war I made countless voyages between our two countries, the holds of my ship overflowing with goods, goods which were highly appreciated at the time.” He looked down for a moment before meeting Yuan’s eyes. “With all due respect, sir, I cannot believe that there is no longer any demand for what Adjuria produces.”

“Have you Adjurians no sense? Do your ears not work properly?” Yuan bellowed, rising from his chair. “I’ve just told you that we don’t want your goods. How can I make myself any more clear?”

Before Edgyn could respond, Willem stood up. “You’ve made it very clear that you have no desire for us to be here or for our goods to be sent. We are sorry to have troubled you this morning and will be on our way. Thank you for your time.”

“That is the most sensible thing I’ve heard from your mouths today,” Yuan replied, sitting down again.

Pader and Edgyn began to voice their disagreement with Willem’s sudden declaration, but he silenced them with a sharp look.

“Let us head back to the ship gentlemen, our role here is done.”

He raised his arms up in a gesture for them to head out the door and back toward the wooden staircase leading to the pier. Bryn took one final look over his shoulder at Yuan. He seemed to be clenching his teeth around his pipe stem harder than ever, his face growing red.

Once back in the empty front room Edgyn and Pader let their discontent be known. “How could you just stop the negotiations like that?” Pader angrily asked Willem.

“You call that negotiations?” Willem replied just as angrily, closing the door to Yuan’s office. “That was more like a chastisement. It was clear that he wanted nothing to do with us.”

“But we should have kept pressing. I cannot believe that this man speaks for Jonguria when he says that he has no desire whatsoever for a renewal of trade,” Edgyn angrily said. “That makes no sense at all!”

“He said he was the imperial representative, and you said that was how it worked here, Edgyn,” Willem replied. “The imperial representative speaks with the voice of the emperor, right? Well, from the way his face was reddening it was obvious that our polite attempts at negotiation, as you call it, were doing nothing more than angering him.”

“So you would have us head back to the ship and sail for home just like that?” Pader asked. “I can’t agree to that. I didn’t sit on a ship for the past week to just turn around at

the first small obstacle in our way.” He paused, taking in a few deep breaths. “We need to give them more time to think on it. I’m sure it was a shock to see us; he said himself that we were unexpected!”

Bryn listened to the men argue back and forth between themselves. He was surprised at the reaction they’d received, and wondered what they would do next. He didn’t like arguing however, having heard enough of it over the two days at the conference. He decided there’d be no harm in him waiting outside on the porch for the mens’ tempers to cool.

The three Jongurians were still standing on the porch when he stepped out the door, but his gaze immediately went to the two men in the street heading toward the docks. Bryn was startled, because he immediately recognized one of them as an Adjurian. The man was old, with dark hair going gray and a large goatee, but it was the eyes that really caught Bryn’s attention. They were the same eyes he had seen staring back at him from the book in Halam’s house in Plowdon. Bryn was looking right at Grandon Fray, the False King. His eyes went wide at the sudden realization and he found that he couldn’t move.

Both men quickly stopped right in the middle of the street and stared up at him. After a moment the Jongurian accompanying the man moved his hand to the sword at his waist, causing a chill to run up Bryn’s spine. He turned and went right back through the door into the small empty room where the men were still arguing.

“If he wanted to see us again, he would have said so,” Halam was saying. “It was obvious from his manner that he had no wish to speak with us at this time *or* at a future date.”

“Uncle Halam, Uncle Halam!” Bryn nearly shouted as he came back into the small room. “I just saw—”

“Not now Bryn,” Halam said as he brushed Bryn off, obviously upset with how things had gone in the meeting.

“But—,” Bryn began, tugging on his uncle’s sleeve.

Halam looked down, his anger now directed at his nephew. “Bryn, what did I just say? Can’t you see that we’re busy discussing something important here?”

Bryn backed-off at the cold look and kept his mouth shut. While he had no doubt that what he just saw on the street was important, his uncle, and the rest of the men by the look of things, were not in the mood to hear of it.

“Is there no one else that we can talk with?” Rodden asked after a moment, looking over at Edgyn.

“Each time that I’ve had to negotiate the contracts and go over the trading manifests in the past, it was in these buildings,” Edgyn replied, waving at the wooden structures outside. “I’ve never met this Yuan Jibao, but he’s the first imperial representative I’ve talked with who has acted this way. Most bend-over backward to make you feel at home and speak quite humbly. They would be embarrassed to talk with anyone, especially a foreigner, in such a way.”

“It’d be a shame to get back on the ship and sail right back to Adjuria when we’ve been here no more than an hour,” Millen said. “Perhaps it would be best if we returned to the ship and let things cool. Maybe our sudden appearance brought up bad memories for the man.”

“Millen’s right,” Rodden replied. “We cannot just turn for home. Let’s wait on the ship. I’d be surprised if they didn’t send to us for another audience, perhaps with another representative.”

“Do the rest of you agree?” Edgyn asked.

They nodded their heads and Edgyn shrugged.

“Well, then we’ll wait on the ship until we hear otherwise.”

* * * * *

Leisu had walked down all of the streets and through most of the narrow alleys between buildings at least once before he finally found Grandon on a small rise at the edge of town, staring out at a small pool of water that probably served as the only freshwater source for the town. Grandon looked over his shoulder at Leisu’s arrival but then turned his attention back to the water when he saw him.

“Like I said earlier, I’m quite surprised Weiling is as small as it is,” Grandon said as much to himself as to Leisu.

Leisu walked right up to Grandon and put his hand on the back of his arm. This gesture caught the man’s attention quickly, and he turned to scowl at Leisu. Before he could say anything, however, Leisu was already pulling him back toward the town.

“We have to go now!” Leisu told him as he turned the Adjurian back toward the town. “A ship full of Adjurians has just arrived.”

Grandon stopped suddenly and Leisu was forced to turn around and look at him.

“A ship full of Adjurians?” Grandon asked, confusion showing plainly on his face.

“Why?”

“It would seem that they’re here to see the imperial representative about trade issues,” Leisu replied, taking Grandon’s arm once again and pulling him back toward the street.

Grandon shrugged off Leisu’s grasp and began moving quickly toward the docks on his own. “Well, that *is* something. We were just speaking of that this morning.”

“The important thing is to get you back aboard the ship as soon as possible.”

“Oh, don’t be so worried,” Grandon said, showing Leisu a slight smile. “I’m sure these men are harmless. Besides, the last thing they’ll think to see is their False King walking the streets of Weiling.”

Grandon chuckled, but kept up his quick pace. Even though he gave the appearance of aloofness, Leisu saw that the news had shaken him. Pictures of the man had been seen in Jonguria when he’d had his brief reign; no doubt they would have been much more widely known in Adjuria during that time. The men that he’d seen enter the office were of the right age to have fought in the East-West War, Leisu knew, and they would no doubt recognize Grandon on sight.

Leisu steered them through the back alleys and to the main street. He was relieved to see that the three dockworkers were still standing on the office porch; the Adjurians were still in their meeting. He allowed himself a small smile at their good fortune and motioned for Grandon to step out into the main street and toward the staircase. They were passing directly in front of the office when the small boy that had accompanied the older Adjurians suddenly stepped out onto the porch. The boy’s gaze immediately fell upon Grandon, and he froze in the middle of the street when he saw him. Leisu could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand on end, and he reached his hand down to the

pommel of his sword as he assessed the situation. The boy stared right at Grandon for a moment and then his brows rose up as if a sudden realization had come upon him. He stared for a moment longer then turned quickly and went back into the office.

Leisu pushed Grandon forward and down the street. "He saw me," was all the Adjurian could manage as he walked the last few feet to the staircase. Grandon was silent the rest of the way to the ship, but once they were safely aboard he turned to Leisu.

"The boy saw me!" he said, his voice anxious and forced. "Did you see his eyes? He knew who I was. How a boy that age could know I have no idea, but I'm telling you, he knew!"

"Are you sure?" Leisu asked. "He is just a boy after all. It could just be that he was surprised to see another Adjurian is all."

"No," Grandon said, shaking his head, "I could see it in the way his brows shot up and his eyes grew larger. He knew that he was staring straight at the worst villain in Adjurian history from the past fifty years."

Leisu lowered his head in thought for a moment then looked up at Grandon. "I'll take care of it," he said, then walked back toward the gangplank. He told one of the crewmen that no matter their state of readiness, they must get out of this harbor before the Adjurian ship sailed. He turned back to Grandon. "It would be best if you now took my advice and retired to the captain's cabin."

For once Grandon listened. With a nod he turned and headed to the cabin at the rear of the ship and went in. If only he would have done that earlier, Leisu thought with some disgust. This Adjurian was becoming more trouble than he was worth, he thought as he headed down onto the pier. He flagged down a passing dockworker.

“Do you report to the imperial representative...”

“Yuan Jibao,” the man finished for Leisu.

“Yes. Tell Yuan that the Adjurians are not to make it back to Adjuria.”

The man looked at him for a moment, then slowly nodded his head and headed toward the staircase. Leisu didn't like to have to take that route. A ship full of Adjurian government trade delegates gone missing wasn't good. It would raise unwanted questions. Inquiries would be made. This man Yuan would be questioned. It would come out that a large Jongurian ship, not built or equipped for fishing, had sailed in from the south just before their arrival. The fact that one of Zhou's lieutenants was aboard it would be reported. This could only end badly. But what was the alternative? Let the Adjurians return to their country with news that they spotted Grandon Fray in Weiling? Leisu thought about it for a moment. The idea was farfetched. And it would come from the mouth of a boy. What harm could there possibly be in that? Who'd believe that he'd done anything more than read one too many histories and had his nerves rattled in a foreign port? Leisu decided that killing the Adjurians would create more problems than the overactive imagination of a young boy. He began to move toward the staircase to follow the man he'd just spoken to when Ko's voice came calling down to him from the ship.

“We're ready to depart, sir.”

Leisu stopped and looked toward the staircase. He warred with his thoughts for a moment before a dockworker came scurrying past him from behind.

“You there,” he called out. The man stopped and meekly walked back to stand before him. “The man I just spoke to, do you know him?”

The man nodded without looking up so Leisu continued.

“Tell him to forget about what I just told him,” he said, then turned and headed back toward the ship.

The lines were being untied and the sails unfurled when he got back on the deck. The gangplank was pulled back to the pier and they cast off. Leisu stood on the railing and stared back at the receding town of Weiling and the Adjurian ship that’d had such bad timing. No matter, he thought to himself, in little more than a day they’d be in Bindao and all their troubles would be over.

NINETEEN

Halam led the group away from the trade office and back toward the wooden staircase and pier. The large ship that was tied up next to theirs when they’d entered the bay was just then leaving, turning back into the sea. They walked down the stairs and were soon back on their own ship, which was busy with activity. The crewmen were busy scrubbing down the ship’s deck when they returned and Edgyn stopped to have a few words with Sam while the others headed into the cabin. Bryn decided that since none of the others wanted to hear what he had to say he’d climb up into the rigging for a better look at Weiling, perhaps catching another glimpse of the Adjurian he was sure had been the False King.

Bryn was able to see nearly the whole island when he got up to the crosstrees on the mainmast, including the tip of the island to the west, the waves making the black rocks white as they crashed over them. The site of Weiling was well chosen. The island tapered off creating a natural bay here, the high cliffs forming a bowl to keep the ocean

waves out. Past the small bay and harbor were more wooden buildings set on the rocky shores. The city itself wasn't much and couldn't rightly be called a city at all, Bryn thought, and he decided that he'd call it a town from now on. The main street that the buildings crowded around tapered off after just a few hundred feet and the buildings with it. There wasn't any vegetation to be seen at all, and only a small pool of water set further behind some of the buildings, whether fresh or saltwater he couldn't tell. He looked down at the imperial office building they'd just left and wondered what they'd do. Everyone had expected the Jongurians to eagerly jump at the opportunity to trade again. At least that was the opinion at the trade conference in Baden, and they'd shared the assumption all way to Jonguria. It was a rather hard slap in the face to have their assumptions shattered this morning by the imperial representative. It just made no sense to Bryn for the man to act that way. Surely someone else would come forward, pardoning his colleague's rude behavior and urging them to sail back as fast as they could, and with many ships full of goods for the Jongurian markets.

Bryn put away the spyglass. There was no sign of the man he'd seen. He looked over to where the small bay turned back into the sea. The large ship that'd left when they came back to the docks was moving steadily away from the island and heading west. The tall masts already had all sails unfurled. Could the man he saw, Grandon he was sure, be on that ship, perhaps heading back to Adjuria in another attempt to seize the throne?

What would Grandon Fray be doing here anyway? Bryn wondered as he looked at the ship grow smaller in the distance. He knew that the man had been exiled to Desolatia Island following the Civil War more than five years ago. Could he have been mistaken? No, there was no way. He'd looked right into the man's eyes, and that had startled the

man, Bryn could tell. It was as if the man had known that Bryn knew who he was, and didn't know what to do about it. If the last thing that Bryn expected to see was another Adjurian walking the streets of Weiling, then surely this man did as well, he thought. He had to tell somebody about what he saw. Slowly he climbed down from the rigging, still a bit flustered at the man's appearance.

The crewmen were still going about their work on the ship when Bryn came down from the rigging, so he decided to enter the cabin and see how the discussions were going between the men. He stepped through the door to see Pader talking and pacing while the others sat and listened.

"It's obvious that this Yuan Jibao doesn't like Adjuria," he was saying. "I don't see any way that we're going to get anywhere with him."

"What makes you think there's someone else here to talk to?" Millen asked from one of the bunks.

"If this man Yuan says he's the imperial representative," Edgyn said quickly before Pader had a chance to respond, "then he's the man we want to talk to. In the past it's always been as such!"

"Surely there's another representative here," Iago added.

Edgyn stroked his goatee. "In the past, yes, there were often a few of them here at any given time. But that was when several ships were coming in each week, sometimes each day. Now with trade having been suspended for so long, we should consider ourselves lucky to've found one here at all."

"Yes, we were very 'lucky' to have this man speak to us so kindly," Pader said sarcastically.

“Perhaps we could go to the mainland and find a more willing audience,” Halam offered after a few silent moments passed.

Edgyn shook his head. “Out of the question. Even when we traded in the past it was very clear that ships could only land on Nanbo Island. The Jongurians were very explicit that Adjurians were to remain *out* of their country. I doubt very much that anything’s changed.”

“So we just sit here and hope that this Yuan has a change of heart about the matter, is that it?” Pader asked.

“I don’t see what else we can do,” Edgyn admitted.

“If we hear nothing by tomorrow, then I suggest that we all go back and talk with him again,” Willem said from the table. “If his mindset’s remained the same, we head home.”

“Aye, it would appear that those’re our only options,” Halam said.

The men seemed to sink down into their chairs in frustration and defeat, the prospect of sailing home empty-handed weighing on them heavily. They’d done so much to wrangle a trade deal out of the conference the week before, and that was expected to be the more difficult task. Talking to the Jongurians would be easy, everyone thought. That was quickly turning out not to be the case, and the men were at a loss as to what to do next.

A knock at the door broke them out of their brooding, and Sam walked into the cabin.

“Captain,” he said, “the Jongurian men are at the ship requesting an audience.”

They all looked at one another with eyes fast filling with hope, their frowns turning to smiles.

“Well, that didn’t take long at all,” Rodden said.

“I told you,” Millen said, “memories of the war probably came flooding back to him when he saw us and his temper took hold. We’ll be discussing how many ships to send now that he’s had a chance to cool-off.”

They headed out onto the deck. Two Jongurian men different from the three that’d escorted them to the office stood at the ship’s railing. They stood taller as they saw Edgyn approach.

“Can we have another chance to talk with Yuan?” Edgyn asked them.

One of the men stepped forward and spoke a few sentences in Jongurian. Edgyn and Pader looked at one another and then back at the man. Edgyn said a few quick sentences back to the man, but he shook his head to whatever was asked of him.

“What are they saying?” Iago asked.

“They say that we’re to leave Weiling now and sail back to Adjuria,” Pader replied.

“What!” Rodden exclaimed. “Can’t you tell them we want another talk?”

Edgyn turned to look at them. “I’ve asked that, but he’s adamant that there’re to be no Adjurians in the country, and that we leave now.”

“But I saw an Adjurian in the middle of the street while you were in the office arguing about Yuan,” Bryn said quickly.

The Jongurian man that had spoken turned to look at him and stared for a few moments before repeating Bryn’s words to Edgyn.

“Wait,” Edgyn said turning to Bryn and holding up his hand to stop the Jongurian, “what do you mean you *saw* and Adjurian?”

“After we were told to leave by Yuan I went out onto the porch” Bryn explained. “Walking in the middle of the street were a Jongurian and an Adjurian. He had a goatee like yours, but grey instead of black, and he was taller than the Jongurian man that walked behind him.”

The Jongurian said a few sentences to Pader.

“He says that we’re the only Adjurians on the island and that it’s time for us to go,” Pader translated.

“So he can understand us, then?” Iago said. He turned to the Jongurian. “Tell Yuan that we want to have another talk!”

“You must have been mistaken, Bryn. Maybe the beard threw you off. Some Jongurians can grow quite a bit of facial hair,” Edgyn said, ignoring Iago.

“No, I saw clearly. He had eyes like ours, not slanted downward at the corners like the Jongurians.” Bryn paused for a minute. He decided that now was as good a time as any. “It was Grandon Fray, I’m sure of it.”

“Grandon Fray, you say? The False King?” Pader said urgently, turning his attention back to Bryn.

“I’m sure of it” Bryn immediately responded.

The men looked from one another before the Jongurian spoke to them again, this time in Adjurian.

“It is time for you to go,” he said in a thick accent. “No Adjurians here. Only you. You need to go now.” A few other Jongurians had appeared behind the men as the conversation carried on, some with large fishing knives at their belts.

“Alright, we heard you,” Edgyn said, turning his attention back to the man. “We’ll leave.”

“But we haven’t had a chance to talk with Yuan again,” Pader protested.

“And we won’t be getting that chance,” Edgyn said. “It’s clear that they want us gone, and I mean to do as they say before any trouble arises.” He turned to Sam who still stood behind them. “Prepare the ship to sail.”

“Yes captain,” Sam said as he hurried away to tell the other crewmen.

“We can’t just go without another audience!” Pader said to Edgyn. “I mean to have another talk with that man before we leave this island.” He shoved past the two Jongurians blocking the gangplank and stepped down onto the pier. Two of the Jongurians that’d gathered around the ship drew the knives at their belts and held them up threateningly toward Pader.

“You go,” one of them said in Adjurian.

“I just want to talk with Yuan Jibao!” Pader said to them, repeating the words in Jongurian.

The other Jongurian flicked his knife with his wrist, gesturing for Pader to get back on the ship.

“Pader, get on the ship!” Edgyn yelled.

As if seeing the knives for the first time, Pader slowly walked backward to the gangplank and got back on the ship. The two Jongurians sheathed their knives while the other two on the ship returned to the pier.

“You go!” the man said again as he stood on the pier.

“Yes, we know. We’re going,” Rodden said to him. They seemed satisfied and walked back further down the pier, although they stood by the staircase and watched them.

Edgyn turned back to Bryn. “Perhaps you did see an Adjurian, Bryn, but it appears we’ll not be given the chance to find out.” He turned and walked back toward the steering wheel.

“Well, that was a short trip,” Iago said angrily.

“Aye, really a waste of time, it would seem,” Halam agreed. They headed back toward the cabin, Millen and Rodden following close behind. Pader seemed to just be realizing that only moments ago he’d had two large knives in his face, and looked to be shocked. He silently went back to the cabin as well. Willem stayed near the gangplank with Bryn.

“He looked like Grandon, eh? That *is* very interesting,” he said after a few moments, still looking at the Jongurians on the pier.

“I’m certain that is was an Adjurian,” Bryn repeated. “I wondered what he’d be doing here, and thought that maybe he was a lost fisherman, or a victim of a shipwreck.”

“No Adjurian ships would be sailing these waters,” Willem said. He turned to look at Bryn. “How can you be so sure it was Grandon? *You’ve never seen the man.*”

“I’ve seen his picture in books before” Bryn said.

Willem looked at him skeptically. “Books, eh?”

“I’m telling you Willem, it was him. His eyes rose up when I saw him, and...well, I just know,” Bryn said, frustrated that no one would believe him, or even seemed interested.

Willem scratched at his chin. “The Jongurians have a hostile attitude toward us and want us to leave, but then secretly they are sheltering an Adjurian? I find that very interesting, don’t you?”

“It does seem a bit strange,” Bryn admitted.

“Yes it does,” Willem agreed. “Who could this mystery man be, and what is his purpose here? Why are the Jongurians so insistent that we leave with no discussion of trade having taken place? Who benefits from this?”

“I don’t understand,” Bryn said after a moment.

“Let’s suppose for a moment that you really did see Grandon Fray in Weiling,” Pader said. “That could do a great deal to explain why the Jongurians are so eager to be rid of us.”

“So you think it may have been him?” Bryn asked?

Willem folded his arms and leaned onto the ship’s railing. He stared up at the small buildings above the wooden staircase and a few moments passed before he spoke.

“I’ve underestimated you before, Bryn,” Willem said with a smile as he rose to head back to the others in the cabin, “and I don’t mean to now. I have a feeling that the False King may have just reared his traitorous head in Weiling.”

TWENTY

They weighed anchor and headed out of the harbor less than an hour after the Jongurians told them to leave. It was already late in the day and in only a few hours the sun would be setting behind them. To the west thick black clouds could be seen forming.

“It appears that our week of fine weather is coming to an end,” Edgyn said from his place at the wheel, pointing at the sky ahead of them. “We’ll be having us a storm tonight.”

They had no problem moving out of the harbor and were soon making their way back along the island the way they’d come earlier. It was disappointing to leave with nothing to show for their week at sea, but nothing could be done for it now. Bryn’s thoughts settled back onto what Willem had said. Could it really be possible that Grandon Fray was the man that he saw emerge from the trade office back in Weiling? There must be some mistake, he thought; everyone knew that Fray had been exiled to Desolatia Island following the Civil War. He’d been the main cause of it, all had agreed. During his brief reign the country experienced a rapid decline in its fortunes, which could be directly attributed to his harsh tax and trade policies. The provinces began to blame their problems on one another, and this was one of the contributing factors which led to the Civil War. If Grandon Fray was loose from his rocky exile and now living in Jonguria, Bryn was certain that something bad was about to happen.

But there was really nothing that he could do about it. The only one who’d shown any interest in Bryn’s sighting, besides the Jongurians, was Willem. His uncle and the other men were skulking in the cabin, feeling depressed about how the events of the day had turned out. They weren’t in the mood to hear anymore about it.

Rain began to pelt the sails by the time they reached the pointed edge of Nanbo Island and Sam brought out thick leather raincoats for the crew to wear. The dark clouds had become larger by that point, and when they cleared the island the wind increased, throwing up great walls of spray from the waves crashing against the ship's hull. Edgyn called for the topmasts and the mainmast to be taken down, and the crewmen quickly climbed up the rigging to lash them securely to the mast and crosstrees. Only the foremast remained to propel them onward, but with the wind as fierce as it was, they still pushed on at a good speed. Bryn considered going into the cabin to stay dry, but the prospect of missing out on the only storm at sea he'd have a chance to witness firsthand kept him on the deck. He walked over to stand by Edgyn and Sam at the wheel.

"Best put this on lad if you mean to stay out here," Sam said, handing Bryn one of the raincoats.

Bryn quickly pulled it on, glad to be out of what was fast becoming a heavy downpour. The ocean around them was covered in tiny dots as thousands of rain droplets fell upon it. The sun had disappeared, whether over the horizon or behind the clouds Bryn couldn't tell.

"How long will this last?" Bryn asked Sam.

"Hard to say," Sam yelled over the sound of wind and rain. "Could last all night and into tomorrow, or blow itself out in a few hours."

"Would be best to head into the cabin and have something to eat before the seas get too rough," Edgyn shouted to him.

Bryn decided that wasn't a bad idea and started to head across the deck and down the small stairs. He had to hang on tightly to the railing as the ship swayed in the wind.

The deck was slick with rain so Bryn slid more than stepped his way to the cabin door. The winds were so stiff that he had to put all of his weight into pulling the door open.

Inside Halam, Pader, Iago, and Willem were crowded around the table eating bread and cheese. Rodden and Millen were both lying down on the bunks, Millen moaning loudly and holding a small wooden bucket over his stomach while Rodden had his arm over his eyes. Bryn did his best to walk over to the table, but it came out as more of a stagger as the ship rocked in the rough seas.

“How is it out there?” his uncle asked when Bryn made it to the table, his wet raincoat dripping puddles onto the floor around him.

“Sam says the storm could last all night and into tomorrow, or for just a few hours. He’s not sure,” Bryn replied, repeating the crewman’s words. Millen moaned louder at that, while Willem and Pader smiled to each other across the table.

“Well, all we can do is sit tight and ride it out, I suppose,” Iago said between bites of bread.

There wasn’t much talk around the table after that, so Bryn ate his bread and cheese silently, hoping that the combination of the food in his stomach and the stormy sea didn’t send him to his bunk, as was the case with Millen and Rodden. The other men finished eating and then stared off at the cabin walls, every once in a while looking up as a particularly large wave seemed to crash into the ship or a peal of thunder sounded outside. Once he was dry, Bryn decided that he was bored enough to get wet all over again, so he shakily headed back out the door.

The wind howled and he thought the door would blow away when he opened it, but he managed to hold on to it and shut it firmly before carefully walking back to the stairs

with his arms outstretched to keep his balance. Sam had the wheel now while Edgyn intently looked through a spyglass at the sea behind them, taking it from his eye as he noticed Bryn approach.

“We’ve got company,” he said, pointing out at the dark sea over the stern.

Bryn squinted and put his arm up to his forehead to keep the blowing rain out of his face, but he couldn’t make out anything. Just then a flash of lightning illuminated the world around them and he caught sight of two large sails several leagues to their rear. He quickly jerked his gaze up to Edgyn after seeing them.

“Two ships, a bit larger than us,” Edgyn answered his worried look. “Fess caught sight of ‘em when he was securing the sails high up on the mainmast. I figure they’ve been following us since we left Weiling, but took advantage of the storm’s low visibility to gain on us. They haven’t lowered their mainsails yet.”

“What does that mean?” Bryn asked, unsure exactly what Edgyn was getting at.

Edgyn looked from Sam to Bryn, then put the glass to his eye and turned his attention back to the ships. “It means they’ll try to overtake us.”

Bryn looked up to Sam. “You mean catch us and stop us?”

“Aye, it would appear so,” Sam replied, his fists clenched tightly to the wheel.

“But why would the Jongurians want to catch us if they just sent us away?” Bryn asked.

“I don’t think they mean to apologize for kicking us out of their country, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Edgyn replied with a laugh.

“So they want to hurt us then?”

“It would seem that way, yes.” Edgyn said seriously, putting the glass back in his pocket and looking down at Bryn. “I’ve no real idea as to their intentions, lad, but I’ve had Jongurian ships on my tail before and can tell the difference between the good-intentioned and the bad. These look bad to me.” He looked out over the ship. “I don’t think we have a chance to outrun them in this storm.”

“So what will happen then?” Bryn asked, and Sam also looked to Edgyn for an answer.

Edgyn looked up at the rigging for a few moments more before turning his eyes to Sam then Bryn. “Best go and inform the others as to the situation, Bryn,” he replied, pulling the glass from his pocket to stare behind him once again, “this could get rough.”

* * * * *

The men took turns sharing the two spyglasses that Edgyn and Bryn had, silently staring through them for a few moments, then passing them to the next man. Very few words were said, each quietly thinking through the odds in their head. They could still outrun the ships if the storm let up. Edgyn didn’t dare unfurl all the sails in this wind; the chance of losing one of the masts or crosstrees was just too great. So that meant that if the storm continued at its current rate, they had about an hour before the other ships would be within striking distance.

“I figure they’ll open up with their bowshots when they’re within a few knots of us,” Edgyn had explained to them when they all came on deck and the gravity of the situation was made clear to them all. “From then it’s only a matter of time before they put enough holes in our stern to take off the rudder, and then we’ll be unable to steer. That’s *if* they

don't disable enough of the rigging to send down our sails first, in which case we'll come to a near standstill."

"You don't think it would be feasible to turn and bring the battle to them?" Rodden had asked, his shirt and raincoat stained from the bread and cheese he'd heaved over the side.

"No, we'd be no match for them. They've got twice the guns as us already, and by turning we'd lose enough ground to them to close the gap so their guns could score some critical hits on our exposed side. Even if we managed it and came straight at them with our bowshots blazing away, we'd still run into them before both, or even just one of them was disabled."

"So we keep running then?" Pader had asked.

"That's the only option I see," Edgyn had replied. "This storm shows no signs of letting up."

"Shouldn't we take the chance and put up some more sails?" Willem had asked.

"Right now with only the mainsail flying they're catching us is inevitable. We'd better take the chance in losing a mast. If we don't, we'll lose the ship."

Edgyn had looked them over then turned his gaze to the ship around them and the rigging above. The mainsail was full and going strong, and the mast looked like it could take a great deal more from the storm.

"Alright, you've convinced me. I said I'd never lose another ship after I lost the *Apsalar Princess* during the war, and I don't mean to lose *The Comely Maiden* tonight. Sam, have the foresail and the two topsails unfurled, we'll try to outrun them yet."

Their faces had broken into smiles at Edgyn's sudden gamble and the despair they'd felt at hearing their chances of escape turned to hope as the crewmen set about climbing the rigging to let down the other sails.

That had been nearly an hour before, and in that time they'd increased the distance between themselves and their pursuers. The sails remained full and the masts held. It appeared that their earlier worries were unfounded. Still, the men remained on the deck passing the glasses back and forth, staring intently at the two ships that wouldn't give up the chase. Men could be seen scurrying about their decks, and it was clear that their numbers were far greater than their own. If it came to a pitched battle, they'd stand little chance. It'd already been agreed that if it came to that the men would throw down any arms they had and peacefully surrender. The ships flew no flags, but were large enough that Edgyn took them for Jongurian naval ships. He was certain they weren't facing pirates, who'd likely kill them, so giving up without a fight didn't seem so bad. With the odds they had, it was their only option.

Iago asked about the two small lifeboats that were fastened securely to the starboard railing. Edgyn quickly said that it would prove almost fatal to take their chances in those boats in a storm like this, and all talk of abandoning the ship to try and sneak away off into the vastness of the ocean quickly ended.

Edgyn stared through his spyglass, then returned it to his pocket and looked at the men. "We're still putting distance between us. If some of you want to go back to the cabin to dry off, now would be a good time. We'll let you know if anything changes."

Millen and Rodden were happy to hear that and did the best they could to keep their balance while walking down the stairs as the ship tossed. Iago and Pader looked through

the glasses for a few more minutes as if to make sure that the ships were truly further behind them then they were an hour earlier, then they too headed down the stairs and toward the cabin door.

“Do you know where we are in relation to the land?” Halam asked Edgyn after the others had left.

“I can’t be certain, but I think we’re about ten leagues off the coast.” He looked up at the sails again as if he could will them to stay strong with only his thoughts. “If I had to guess where on that coast we are I’d say somewhere south of Bindao or the Dongshui River, but I couldn’t be certain.”

“So we wouldn’t even be back in Adjurian waters for a few days, then.” Halam said.

“Aye, more like a few days to get to the mid-point of the isthmus.” He looked at them and flashed his bright white teeth in a wide smile. “So let’s hope that the wind stays at our backs.”

As if the weather were mocking him for speaking too soon, a loud crack split the air around them. They looked up to see that the foremast crosstree had snapped leaving the foretopsail whipping in the wind.

“Sam, get up there and see what you can secure, and be quick about it,” Edgyn said in a calm voice, although he had to yell to be heard over the roar of the wind and waves. Sam, Fess, and Dell all began to scramble up the rigging as fast as they could to ascertain the damage done to the ship. Before they were able to make it up to the whipping sail, however, another loud snap was heard, and the top of the foresail came loose. The shroud whipped about and caught Dell, sending him flying through the air. He landed with a loud splash in the water off the starboard side.

“Take the wheel, Bryn,” Halam said as he and Willem moved over to help Edgyn. The men had a line over the side within seconds and were pulling soon after that. They put all their strength into it, and it paid off. After a few minutes they had Dell back on the deck coughing up half the sea out of his lungs. Flint and Conn had gotten over by then and helped him to the cabin while Edgyn took over on the wheel. Jal came up and pointed to the rigging.

“The foremast crosstree is finished,” Bryn heard him shout over the wind, pointing up at the damaged topmast. “Sam has managed to get the mainsail fastened down, but the line’s broken. It’ll take a while to get another one up and the sail unfurled again.”

Edgyn nodded and handed him the wheel, turning to look back at the ships behind them, which Bryn had nearly forgotten in the sudden excitement. He pulled out his spyglass and stared back at the two ships fast approaching now that *The Comely Maiden* was down to just two sails. The ships were much closer now and he didn’t need the glass to see the men on the ships. There was a large group of them huddled about the bow of each staring back at him. They had surely seen the incident that had just occurred with Dell and the distance it had gained them. After a minute Edgyn put the glass down and turned to them.

“They’ve gained on us considerably with that turn of events,” he said. “I don’t think we can outrun them.”

After that things moved quickly. Bryn was sent back to the cabin to tell the other men, who were already aware that something had occurred when Jal was escorted into the cabin soaking wet and coughing up seawater. When told that Edgyn thought their chances of escape had vanished, the cabin became a flurry of activity. Packs were

quickly found and what weapons they had were made ready. There weren't many. This had been planned as a peaceful trade mission and any need for weaponry hadn't even been considered. Only Iago regularly carried a longsword strapped to his belt, and that would be little help against two full ships of men bent on their destruction.

"We'll be needing weapons, then," Iago said to Sam who stood helping Jal dry off.

"We've few of those, I'm sorry to say; just wasn't expecting any need for them. Still, Edgyn has always thought it best to be prepared, so there should be some stowed away down in the hold. I'll check." He headed back out onto the rain-swept deck.

"I always carry a few extra daggers just in case," Iago said, pulling three small ivory-hilted blades in leather sheathes from his pack. He handed one each to Rodden, Millen, and Pader.

"I've got my own," Pader said as he was handed the blade. He pulled out a small dirk from his pack, a simple leather-hilted blade in a matching sheath. "Give that other one over to Bryn. He'll need it as much as the rest of us."

Iago handed Bryn the knife and after a moment he pulled it from the sheath. It was finely-worked Shefflin steel he saw at once as the blade caught the lamplight in the cabin and shined. He put it back in its sheath and fastened it to his belt, then picked up his own pack and secured it to his back before heading back out on deck.

Conn still had the wheel and Edgyn was anxiously looking through his glass at their pursuers.

"Where'd you get that," Halam asked, pointing down at the knife on Bryn's belt.

"Iago gave it to me. He gave two others to Millen and Rodden as well. Sam's down in the hold now, looking for more weapons," Bryn reported.

“Do you think it’ll come to that?” Halam shouted so that Edgyn could hear.

Edgyn put his spyglass down again and fingered the hilt of the cutlass sheathed at his side. “It becomes more and more likely with each passing minute. Without all four sails up we’ve no chance to outrun them.”

“We don’t yet know their intentions,” Halam yelled. “I’m not ready to declare war on the high seas without provocation.”

As if the Jongurians had heard him, two loud booms rang out in the air behind them, and a few seconds later they saw the distinctive splash of two cannonballs hitting the sea just off their stern, each sending up large white columns of water behind them.

“Is that provocation enough for you?” Edgyn asked. “Conn, go tell Flint, Dilon, and Trey to ready the lifeboats. Make sure they’re well-stocked with provisions.”

“Aye,” Conn said, returning the wheel to Edgyn as he hurried down the stairs and climbed up the rigging to the other men desperately trying to secure the crosstree.

“I thought you said that it would be fatal to take a lifeboat into a stormy sea like this,” Halam shouted over the wind.

“Aye, but it’ll be just as fatal to stay on this ship while the Jongurians blow us out of the water. At least in the boats we have a chance.”

The other men from the cabin came back onto the deck and joined them at the wheel. Rodden and Millen looked sicker than ever bundled up as they were in two large raincoats.

Two more cannons sounded behind them and they looked back to see the white clouds of smoke rising from the bow of the lead ship, followed quickly by two large splashes in the water behind them.

“They’re getting closer now,” Edgyn said. “A few more shots and they’ll hit the stern.”

Sam and Jal appeared then with two large canvas bundles in their arms. They laid them on the deck and unfolded the canvas to reveal a cache of weaponry. There were four bows, each with a sheaf of arrows, as well as an assortment of small swords, dirks, daggers, and two small hand-axes.

“Well, it’s not much, but certainly better than nothing,” Iago said when he saw the weapons. “Do you think there’s any chance of us lighting up fire arrows in this weather?”

“None at all,” Edgyn replied. “They’d go out as soon as we lit them, or while sailing through the air. Besides, the sails of the ships are so wet right now that nothing would catch.”

“Even if we got close enough to fire at them, with the weather what it is and their greater numbers, it wouldn’t make much of a difference,” Pader said.

“So we take the lifeboats then?” Willem asked.

They all looked up at the two boats that were now lying flat on the deck. Flint and Trey were carrying bundles from the cabin and the hold and securing them under the canvas coverings as they watched.

“I don’t see as we have much choice,” Edgyn replied, his jaw clenched in frustration.

The loud roar of cannons filled the air again and drowned out the sounds of the weather for a moment. Both ships had fired this time. Two of the shots landed harmlessly in the water behind them while another went sailing far overhead to their

right. The last fared better, blowing through the rigging and snapping lines before burying itself into the mainmast with a large shower of splinters. Trey dropped the bundle he was carrying and threw his hands up to his face. Blood could be seen seeping through his fingers. Flint got him down on the deck and ripped a piece of canvas sail to use as a bandage. He twisted it around Trey's head, and they were soon stocking the boats again.

“So how do you suggest we proceed with abandoning ship, Edgyn?” Pader asked after they watched the bloody spectacle.

Edgyn kept his hands firmly gripped on the wheel, but threw quite a few glances over his shoulder before speaking.

“We'll put seven men in each boat,” he answered after a minute, staring forward at the sea ahead of them. “Your only chance is to head toward the coast, which is a good ten leagues or more over the starboard side. The boats have a small mast and sail that can be put up or you can use the oars fastened to the sides.”

He looked back at the two ships as another round of cannonballs were thrown their way. Two fell short while the other two landed in the water to either side of them. He returned his gaze to the rigging above.

“Our best chance is in catching them off-guard. They'll not be expecting us to take to the lifeboats in weather like this, and so won't be looking for it. If I can grab their attention by swinging the ship around to come at them head on, the boats can be lowered in the water from the port-side when their view is blocked. The surprise will buy you enough time to get clear.”

“You're not coming with us,” Willem said more than asked.

“I’ve stood on a lifeboat and watched one ship go down, I don’t mean to see another.”

“But that’s suicide,” Millen shouted.

“No, it’s suicide to have all of us take to the lifeboats and have those two ships bear down on us in a matter of minutes. We’d be sitting ducks for them. This way you men have a chance, and there’s a possibility they might just take me captive, if I give up without a fight.” Edgyn said the last with a large smile, and Bryn knew that he wouldn’t live out the night. The other men seemed to sense that as well, for they only nodded at his words.

“Now get over by those boats and get ready,” Edgyn yelled at them. “I’ll make the turn as long as I can, but I want to still have some distance between us when I’m coming at them. You’ll have to be quick getting those boats over the side.”

He motioned for Sam to come closer and spoke into his ear as they quickly moved down and helped the crewmen push the boats across the deck to the railing, and then halfway up it. They tied ropes to the metal rings fastened on the bow and stern of each, and then fastened the other ends to the railing, looking up at Edgyn when they’d finished. He flashed them his white smile once again, then began to turn the wheel hand-over-hand hard to the right. The ship began to turn under them so they had to move fast. Pader, Willem, Halam, and Iago pushed one boat up and over the railing while Flint, Sam, Dilon, and Rodden pushed the other. Fess, Trey, Jal, and Conn each held one end of the rope tied to the boats in their hands and slowly lowered them down toward the water. When they were just a few feet above the waves they stopped, and Flint, Sam, and Dilon

tied the ropes securely to the railings so the boats would remain in place halfway down the ship's hull and with the waves licking their bottoms.

The sound of cannons firing continuously filled the air around them, and Bryn could feel the ship shudder as a few of the shots hit the hull below deck. Rodden and Conn were the first to throw their packs down into the boats and then climb down the ropes after them, and the others quickly followed. The ship was still turning, but they would soon be facing the other way. They needed to move quickly to get the boats into the water before their port-side was visible to the Jongurian ships. Bryn climbed down the rope as fast as he could and dropped the last few feet to land in the boat beside his uncle and Fess, then quickly moved out of the way so Willem could do the same.

As they began to come out of the turn only Sam and Trey remained on the deck. Edgyn appeared beside them and motioned for them to climb down the ropes. Once they were both in the boats, Edgyn grabbed the cutlass at his belt and hacked at the ropes securing the rear boat to the railing, dropping it several feet to land with a loud splash in the water while the ship quickly moved past it. Bryn looked up to see Edgyn give them one final wave before cutting the ropes of their boat. They fell through the air for a moment before splashing down into the water and very quickly the ship was past, leaving them in its wake. He saw Edgyn hurry back up to and straighten out the wheel, and the *Comely Maiden* was suddenly sailing straight at the two Jongurian ships.

The cannons continued to pound away as they floated in the sea. It appeared they managed to pull off their escape successfully, for the Jongurians didn't send any shots their way. They were too busy firing at the ship sailing straight toward them. The rigging of the *Comely Maiden* was falling apart around it and Bryn could see several

large holes in the starboard side. A few more sails fell away with a few more shots and the ship slowed considerably. The two Jongurian ships were close enough at that point where it wouldn't be long before they were able to board their prey.

All of a sudden flames began to lick up the fluttering sails that still remained on *The Comely Maiden*, and they soon spread into the ropes and rigging around them. Bryn saw a flurry of activity from the two Jongurian ships as the men tried desperately to lower their sails, but it was too late. They glided in beside the flaming ship and soon their sails were alight as well. The night was quickly filled with the bright orange-red glow of fire.

“What happened?” Bryn asked as all of the men on the small boat stared in shock at the growing conflagration.

“Edgyn told me to bring up all the lamp oil that was below deck after the crosstree snapped,” Sam replied. “While the other men were up in the rigging assessing the damage and doing what they could to fix it, I was pouring oil over as much of the rigging, sails, and masts as I was able. I figure when Edgyn came out of the turn he must have doused a cloth in oil, lit it, then simply thrown it up. With that much oil it was bound to light somewhere, and it sure did.”

They watched for a few minutes as the *Comely Maiden* burned and spread the flames to the other ships, and then took out the oars. The winds seemed to be on their side, and the waves pushed their two small boats toward land, located somewhere far ahead of them. There were enough oars for four of the men, and they pulled on them with all of their strength. Soon they were well away from the ships, all three of which were now engulfed in flames.

The wind and rain continued all night and into the next morning and still they had not sighted land. After the flaming ships had faded over the horizon or sunk down below the waves, they couldn't be sure due to the low visibility, they'd managed to row hard enough to bring the two boats together. The men were cold and wet, but they had to come up with some sort of plan.

"Edgyn told me that we were most likely off the coast of Bindao or the Dongshui River," Halam had said, every inch of him drenched with water.

"Our only chance is to get to land," Trey had told them, his bloodied head bandages now soaked through with water.

"Are you crazy?" Millen had shouted. He was in bad shape. The sickness he'd felt on the ship was much worse on the small boat. "The Jongurians were ready to kill us, and you think that we should head onto their coast, right next to a city we besieged during the war?"

"Trey is right," Sam had said. "Our only chance at surviving is to get to land. What we do then is anyone's best guess, but if we stay in these boats the storm will do us in or the sea will swallow us up."

No one had argued with him after that. Out of all of them Sam was now the one with the most seafaring experience, and he and Trey became the undeclared captains.

The two boats managed to stay within a close distance of one another after that. They could yell to each other if they needed to, but there was nothing to say. Each man knew that they had to get to land and to do that they had to put their backs into an oar and pull with all their might. Talking didn't make that any easier. Fess and Sam had tried to rig up the small mast on their boat, but the sail nearly blew away on them so they were

forced to take it down. The storm might die down enough for another try, and the last thing they needed was to be floating about without anyway to harness the wind; their spirits were low enough already. All they could do was continue pulling at the oars and hope that land appeared soon.

It did. While the rain didn't let up any, the clouds did part to make the visibility better. Jal was the first to call out land from his spot on the bow of the lead boat. At first it was just a distant line on the horizon, but Bryn passed his spyglass around and each man took a good look. They could see a sandy beach with forest behind it. The relief at not spotting Bindao was great, and Rodden was the first to point out that they could probably hide in that forest for a long time if need be. The sighting gave a boost to the men's strength and they pulled at the oars with a greater purpose.

It was still more than an hour before they were within reach of the beach. The waves picked up as they neared the sandy shore and drove them in. Sam was able to guide his boat into the shore without a problem, and they pulled it up high enough so that it was out of the waves with no chance of being pulled back out to sea. They didn't know where they were and might still have need of the boats, they figured.

Trey didn't fare so well. His boat got spun sideways in the raging surf and flipped, causing the men and all the contents to spill out into the waves. The others rushed into the water to help them ashore and to grab as many of the sacks of provisions that they could, but several washed further out to sea. They were in no state to try and retrieve them; they had used all their strength through the night just getting this far. They managed to pull the boat up into the surf and flip it over, then drag it up onto the beach next to the other. After that it was all they could do to stagger off of the beach to the

edge of the forest and out of the rain. Once there they collapsed from exhaustion and quickly fell asleep.

TWENTY-ONE

The rain had stopped falling when Bryn awoke but the sky was still drearily overcast with thick grey clouds, and the wind continued to blow hard and cold. Pader, Conn, and Iago were busy walking around the edge of the forest collecting what dry wood they could find, while Halam and Willem used a flint and steel to urge a fire into existence on a dry patch of ground just within the forest's edge. It was more jungle than forest, really. Trees, most of which were unfamiliar to Bryn, crowded together while below a thick tangle of undergrowth covered the forest floor. Several thick vines hung down from the trees while overhead the light was barely able to penetrate through the thick growth.

The waves continued to crash onto the sandy beach in front of them. They appeared to have landed in a large, naturally-occurring bay. The land swung inland over several leagues in a round bowl-shaped formation and Bryn was able to see the points far away on either side stretching far out into the ocean.

Halam managed to strike a spark on some dried grass and twigs and soon a large fire was burning. The men all eagerly gathered around, holding out their hands to the flames to get warm and dry.

“Do you think it's such a good idea to have a fire this close to the shore?” asked Millen, who was shivering a great deal. “What if another Jongurian ship sails by and sees us?”

“Maybe an Adjurian ship will sail by,” Rodden said.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Pader replied. “No Adjurian ships have sailed this far east for twenty years. It’ll be another week before our absence is felt in Dockside, and then it will be a few more days before they think that something may have gone wrong.”

“So are we to just sit on the beach until then?” Iago asked. “Doesn’t seem like the best plan to me.”

“The chances of an Adjurian ship coming this way, even if they do think us missing, are slight,” Willem said. “As to a Jongurian ship seeing us, I think that’s all too likely. Until we figure out what we’re going to do, I suggest we move further into the forest. It’d also be a good idea to pull those boats up further onto land, or at least cover them up somehow.”

“I agree, but first things first,” said Halam. “The most important thing for the moment is getting warm. We’ve got to get these clothes dry. The last thing we need is to get sick.” He looked over at Millen when he said that. The Fallownian didn’t look to be improving any. His initial seasickness had turned into something far worse over the course of the night spent in the cold rain. He was coughing and shaking considerably.

“It won’t take long for the Jongurians to realize they lost two ships chasing after our one,” Sam said. “That’ll tell ‘em that some type of battle took place. Two ships don’t go missing if their prey outran them. I’d give it another day before we start to see ships dotting that horizon and poking their noses into this bay.”

“Aye,” Halam agreed. “I wouldn’t doubt that they’d tell all of the fishing boats in the area to keep their eye out for us as well. It’d be best to get those boats moved and cover up the drag marks in the sand.”

“Maybe they’ll think that we all went down with the ship,” Rodden said hopefully.

“That’s a possibility,” Pader admitted, “but I don’t think they’ll be satisfied with that idea for long. The chance that some of us survived and made it to land is too great. If any of us were to get back to Adjuria with the news that we were attacked by a Jongurian ship while on a peaceful trading mission, well, the Jongurians wouldn’t want that to happen, let’s just say that.”

“I don’t think they’ll spend too long searching the sea,” Trey added. “There’s only so far a small lifeboat can get. When they get done searching that area they’ll turn their attention to land. It’d be best if we were long gone from here by then.”

“But we have no idea where we even *are*,” Rodden pointed out.

“We should be somewhere around Bindao or the Dongshui River, at least according to what Edgyn told me last,” Halam said. “We can’t be sure which, but if we continue to head west, staying well-enough inland but within easy reach of the sea, we’ll eventually reach a river or a city.”

“Bindao is the last place we need to go,” Conn pointed out.

“I agree,” Halam replied. “But if we run into the city, we can edge around it. We’ll find no support there and most likely’ll be put to a slow death if spotted.” He turned to Sam. “How far east do Adjurian fishing boats go these days?”

Sam thought for a moment before speaking. “They’ll often head out to the end of the Isthmus, and perhaps a little farther if their holds are not yet full.”

“So if we make it to the Isthmus we have a good chance of being spotted by a friendly ship,” Halam said, looking at the weary faces around the fire.

“The *Isthmus*? But that’s got to be hundreds of leagues away, and over the Xishan Mountains besides,” Millen anxiously said.

“Does anyone else have a better suggestion?” Halam asked, but no one responded. “Alright, it’s settled then. We’ll head west, for now at least. We’re lucky that the only major city is Bindao, which we can stay clear of. Any smaller towns or settlements along the way we’ll have to watch out for and avoid. I think our best bet will be to stay near the coast where the land will be flat, but then we’ll also have to be on guard against Jongurian patrols.” He looked over at the pile of sacks, bundles, and travel packs they’d taken from the ship and gotten ashore on the lifeboats. “What do we have for supplies?”

Willem, Pader, Sam, and Trey got up and began to move the pile about, opening and sorting as they went.

“It looks like we have a good quantity of hard cheese and harder bread as well as enough salt pork to last a while,” Willem reported after a few minutes.

“There are several sets of spare clothes, bandages, a few salves, some fishing line and hooks, a good quantity of rope, and some smaller miscellaneous items,” Pader replied.

“For weapons we have the four bows and their arrows, two hand-axes, two small swords, a dirk, and two daggers,” Sam said.

“Alright, let’s move all of those items besides the weapons into the few travel packs that we have. We need to move as light as possible.” He turned to look at the men around the fire. “Who has the most expertise with those weapons?”

Iago stood up. “I can use them all.”

“As can I,” Willem replied, and Pader said the same.

“Was never much with a bow but I’ve been in a few knife fights in my time,” Fess said.

“I used to hunt with the bow when I was growing up around the Baltika Forest,” Dilon added.

“Good,” Halam said when it was clear no one else would be speaking. “Iago, Willem, Pader, and Dilon, you men each take a bow and sheaf of arrows. We’ll need those for our food, so I hope you’re good shots. Whoever thinks they can best handle the swords and the dirk, grab them. Now, who else doesn’ have a weapon? Those two daggers and the hand-axes will go to you.”

The men rose from the fire and walked over to the piles. Willem took the bow and arrows and grabbed one of the short swords while Halam took the other. Pader took one of the bows as well as the dirk, while Iago and Dilon grabbed the last two bows. Conn and Flint each grabbed a hand-axe and the two daggers went to Sam and Trey. Only Jal and Fess were without weapons, since Bryn, Rodden, and Millen still had the daggers that Iago had given them on the ship, so they took the heavier packs and swung them over their shoulders. The rest of their items were parceled out among the remaining three packs, which Halam, Sam, and Trey swung over their shoulders.

“Now, let’s get those boats pulled up as far as we can,” Halam told them.

They dropped their items back on the ground and headed back to the beach. Millen was in no shape to push a boat, so he stayed close to the fire. The rest took up positions on each boat’s stern, and on the count of three, pushed with all their might. The boats moved a few feet further, but it was difficult and they were forced to stop.

“They’re just too heavy,” Iago said as he spat disdainfully on the sand next to the boat. “We’ll have to cover them with that canvas and as best we can.”

“Alright,” Halam said. He wasn’t happy to leave the boats on the beach like this, but they had little choice.

“Bryn, Rodden, Conn, Trey, you grab some of those fallen tree branches and sweep away our footprints from the sand as best you can. Make sure you do a good job getting those furrows from the boats covered up as well. As for the rest of us, we need to get that extra canvas out from the packs and do the best we can to hide these boats.” He turned to Jal. “You and Millen put that fire out and cover the ashes with sand. We’ll be heading out as soon as we’re done here.”

Bryn grabbed a suitably large branch with lots of leaves still attached and headed down toward the surf. Thankfully they had all come ashore in the same area, so it was easy to cover the footprints up. Conn and Trey kicked sand into the two large furrows left from dragging the boats up the beach while Rodden followed them clearing away any sign of their passing. A few gulls cried and circled overhead and Bryn looked up for a moment to see them pass by. As he was returning his eyes to the sand he spotted a dot on the horizon. It was a large ship. Bryn dropped his branch and pulled the spyglass from his coat. Peering through it he saw that it had two masts and looked the same as the two ships that had chased them the night before. It was heading straight into the bay and judging by the sails and wake around the bow, it was coming in quickly. He put the glass back in his pocket and ran up the beach.

“A ship, a ship!” he shouted as he ran, pointing at the ocean behind him. Rodden, Conn, and Trey stopped in their tracks and looked out to where he was pointing.

“A ship, and it’s coming straight into the bay,” Bryn said, breathing heavily when he got up to them.

They all four turned and ran up the beach toward the boats, yelling for the others to hear. When they got their attention they pointed out the ship.

“Bryn says it looks like the two that were on us last night,” Trey repeated when they got near the others.

Bryn handed Halam the glass. He looked through it, frowned, then passed it on to Willem.

“Aye, they’re Jongurian, I’d say.”

“It looks like they spotted the fire and are turning in to have a closer look,” Willem said.

“Let’s get that fire out quick and get into the forest,” Halam said. “There’s nothing we can do with these boats now. Best to figure that they’ve spotted us and’ll be sending out men to comb the forest. We need to get as far from here as we can before that ship puts a boat ashore.”

They raced up the beach toward the fire. Jal and Millen had kicked enough sand onto it to put it out, but the burnt wood still showed. It was no longer a concern; the men in those ships had already spotted the fire and probably the boats on the beach as well. Willem and Trey were the first to enter the forest, choosing an area with the least amount of branches, vines, and undergrowth to slow them down. The canopy was thick overhead so there was little light, especially with the clouds obscuring what sun there was.

Their long column of fourteen stretched quite a ways behind them. Although Willem and Trey tried to move as fast as they could, the growth was so thick that any movement faster than a quick walk was impossible. They were constantly forced to step over fallen branches and tangled roots while at the same time brushing vines and tree

limbs from their faces. Willem soon took out his shortsword and began to hack his way through the thick growth in front of him. It didn't do much good; the blade had not been sharpened in some time, so most of the branches were just bent enough to be out of the way.

After they'd walked for some time Halam called for a halt, and they turned to their left, then began moving again. While they wanted to get away from any men that may be following their path from the beach, they also wanted to stay close enough to the sea that they wouldn't run into any settlements further inland. It wouldn't do to flee from pursuers in their rear only to stumble upon them in their front.

The noise that they made cutting and hacking their way through the forest would surely have given them away to anyone who was near. At this point, however, it was deemed more important to put distance between themselves and the beach.

When several hours had passed, the column came to a halt.

"We need to rest," Willem said as they all gathered together in a small clearing. The men dropped down where they stood, leaning against tree stumps or large rocks for support, or simply laying down on the ground. When they'd set out their clothes had been wet from the ocean, but now they were damp with sweat. The forest was keeping the rain from their heads and protecting them from the strong winds off the coast, but it was also stifling them with its heat.

"Pass the water skins around, and let's serve out some of that bread, cheese, and salt pork," Halam said when they were all seated on the hard, wet ground. The men ate quickly and in silence, keeping their thoughts to themselves. When they were finished

they lay back and rested some more. The silence was broken when Iago asked about their plans.

“It’s certain that we’ll soon be followed, if we’re not already,” he said, looking around at the tired men lying around him. “But what’ll we do when they catch us?”

“What makes you think they will?” Rodden asked.

“It’d be folly to think otherwise,” Iago replied as he unsheathed his longsword and began to run it over an oily cloth. “We’re fourteen wet and tired men in an unknown land whose only destination is beyond a chain of ragged mountains with nothing but a lifeless desert beyond ’em. Half of us are old, slow, and well past our prime while the other half are young and unseasoned. You figure the odds.”

“So we just wait here until they come for us and hope they don’t kill us where we sit, is that it?” Pader asked incredulously.

“We could stand and fight like men is what we could do!” Iago nearly shouted.

“We don’t even know that they want us dead,” Millen said.

“They have a funny way of showing that, firing at my ship like they were,” Sam responded with a laugh.

“Perhaps they were only trying to disable us. They could’ve planned to take us back to Weiling, or even Bindao. We don’t know for sure that they meant us any serious harm,” Millen tried to reason.

“I agree with Sam,” Halam said. “I’d like to believe you’re right, Millen, but firing on an unarmed ship doesn’t convince me their intentions were anything but hostile.” He turned to Iago. “And I also agree that most of us are old and slow, but that won’t help us

in a fight that'll surely see us outnumbered. I propose we keep moving and fight only if necessary.”

“I agree that we don't fight,” Trey said, “but what about heading to Bindao. We may find a different set of circumstances there, even an imperial representative that we can tell our story to, or if nothing else, at least find passage on a ship. This idea of traveling overland to the Isthmus just doesn't sound feasible to me.”

“He's got a point,” Pader said. “We don't know that all of Jonguria wants us dead. This could just be some personal grudge held by that Yuan Jibao fellow in Weiling. He may have it in for all Adjurians and be acting without any higher authority.”

“So we just walk up to the gates of Bindao and say ‘Sorry, we're some Adjurians. We were attacked by two of your ships. Can you please send us home?’” Iago mocked. “Don't be silly, that would be the death of us!”

“Not anymore than continuing through a land we don't know and in a direction we're only slightly certain of,” Fess spoke up. “If the rest of Jonguria is like this,” he said, pointing at the forest around them, “then taking our chances at Bindao doesn't seem so bad.”

“I can't believe I'm hearing this!” Iago said. “I'm telling you, it would be better to slit our own throats.”

“We'll get nowhere arguing like this!” Halam shouted. “We'll have to take a vote on it. All in favor of continuing on toward the Xishan Mountains show your hands.”

Pader and Millen were the only two delegates not to raise their hands, while Conn, Jal, and Fess chose not to side with their crewmates.

“Well, there you have it,” Halam said. “Only five votes for going to Bindao versus the nine that think it best to continue on toward the mountains.”

“I still think it’s better to take our chances in the city than out in the wild like this,” Pader said, “but so long as I’m in the minority I’ll go along with you toward the mountains, for now at least.”

“You never know Pader, we may not have to go all the way to the Isthmus,” Rodden said with a smile. “We could all be captured and slaughtered first.”

There were a few nervous and forced chuckles to that, but Pader’s face remained frozen in a frown. They rested for a few more minutes before picking up their packs and weapons and trudging on into the forest, Willem’s shortsword hacking at trees the only sound besides the beating of their hearts.

They traveled until it was too dark to see clearly, then found an area where the undergrowth was not so thick and made camp for the night. Dilon had spotted a few rabbits during their trek and been quick enough with the bow so that they had something besides salt pork for dinner. Halam allowed a small fire and after eating they huddled around it for warmth. The forest became much cooler when the sun went down and the sweat in their clothes began to stiffen and grow cold. Not much was said that night. Bryn felt that the group was beginning to split between those wanting to try their luck at Bindao and the others who wanted to go all the way to the Isthmus. Currently the vote was nine-to-five, but with each passing day that they had to grope their way through this forest the chances of more men changing their minds and choosing to go to Bindao would only increase.

TWENTY-TWO

“Raise that sail and secure those lines,” a crewman shouted to the men scattered about the ship’s rigging.

Leisu stared up into the mass of ropes that secured the ships sails to the tall masts and was thankful that he’d chosen the life of a soldier over that of a sailor. He’d never much liked heights and the sight of the men hanging, swinging, and rushing about overhead unnerved him. He was glad to now be done on the deck.

The teeming docks of Bindao stretched long and mightily before them. The contrast between Weiling and Bindao could not have been more striking. While Weiling had had more docks and piers than it did buildings, Bindao swelled in size the further it stretched out from the sea. The city occupied a flat plain which rose up from the coast so that those buildings located the furthest from the sea had the clearest view. From the ship Leisu could see the entirety of the city. The docks teemed with activity: large ships were coming to unload their goods and going with more taken on, fishing boats from small to large darted in between the large ships to head out to sea or just further out into the harbor to take in their daily catch, and countless workers scurried about to see to them all.

Their ship sailed slowly into the harbor that was made from hundreds of large boulders thrown into the sea that stretched in a wide arc from the west of the city well past its middle. Some men on the docks guided them to an open berth along one of the tall piers that stretched out into the water and a short time later they were secure. Leisu told Ko to gather their things while he went to the captain’s cabin to fetch Grandon.

Ever since he’d been seen in Weiling, Grandon had remained in the cabin and refrained from staring out at the sea as he’d done since they’d taken him on several days

before. Leisu was a little troubled by this, but also felt a little glad about it as well. It served the man right for ignoring his advice to stay out of sight. If only he would have listened to him before getting off of the ship then both their minds would have been much more at ease. Truthfully, however, Leisu was not overly troubled by what had occurred on Nanbo. Unlike Grandon, who was convinced the boy had recognized him somehow and already gotten word back to the entirety of Adjuria, Leisu took a more relaxed view of the encounter. The boy, while perhaps convinced himself that he had seen the False King, would be less likely to convince the men that he was with. That was highly unlikely as well, though, Leisu had told himself after they had left Weiling. The boy was merely surprised and caught off guard by the sight of another Adjurian where he was told there'd be none. The men that accompanied him would put his story down to an overactive imagination and the incident would be forgotten. Not for the first time was Leisu happy he had changed his mind and given word for the ship to have safe passage back to Adjuria. There was little to fear from those men, but so much more to be lost by interfering with them.

Grandon was sitting at the small table fastened securely to the cabin floor and looking out the small window at the city.

“So now I will meet this mysterious master of yours,” Grandon said without looking over as Leisu entered the cabin and closed the door behind him.

Leisu stood squarely with his back to the door and his hands crossed in front of him. “A small group of men will escort us through the city to him. I know it’s hot, but I would like you to wear a hooded cloak as we move through the busy streets.”

“As you wish,” Grandon replied. Leisu had expected some argument from the man. Before Weiling he’d given him the impression that he wanted to stand tall on a high wagon for the whole city to see, happy to once again be the center of attention and proclaiming to the world that Grandon Fray was back and ready once again to seize the reins of power. It appeared, however, that Weiling had had a very sobering affect upon him, and Leisu was thankful for that aspect of the incident at least.

A slight knock came at the door and Leisu turned to open it. Ko stood with two small packs hanging behind each shoulder and a long, thick woolen cloak hanging from his arm. “Sir, the men are ready to take us through the city now.”

“Very well, we’ll be down in a moment,” Leisu replied, taking the proffered cloak from Ko and closing the door behind him.

“Quite kingly,” Grandon said mockingly as he looked at the drab brown attire.

“Yes, fit for the king of beggars,” Leisu said as he handed over the cloak.

“Smells too,” Grandon replied as he began to wrap the garment around himself.

“How do I look?” he asked when he was done putting it on.

It covered him from head to toe and with the large hood drawn Grandon’s face wasn’t even visible. “Like a man that no one would pay a moment’s notice to,” Leisu said as he opened the cabin door once again and gestured for them to head out onto the deck.

Grandon stepped past him and they were soon across the deck and walking over the gangplank and onto the pier. Ko stood waiting for them near three other men. Leisu recognized them as low-level guards for his master.

“If you’ll follow us, sir,” one of the men said as they walked toward them, indicating the end of the pier.

Ko fell in behind them and Leisu and Grandon followed a few paces behind. They made it to the end of the pier and onto the wooden boardwalk which separated the docks from the cobbled streets. The crowds of people increased, but few if any paid Grandon any mind, Leisu was pleased to notice, while any who might have thought to approach them to sell their wares or beg a coin were quickly dissuaded from such an act by the striking snake emblem that the three guards wore on their left breast. It was well-known that Zhou Lao controlled much of Bindao and that he wasn’t a man to trifle with.

They came to the streets, crowded with the traffic of carts and wagons, livestock and people. They were led to a small cart with a single horse held by yet another guard. The men motioned for them to climb into the back. It was a tight fit with five of them crammed in and the other two on the narrow bench behind the horse, but they were soon moving and Leisu knew that it would only be a short while longer before he was in front of his master, his task complete.

The streets twisted and turned as they gradually moved up the gentle rise of the city. If Grandon was impressed with the amount of people and the sheer volume of activity he didn’t let it show as he sat implacably next to Leisu in the wagon, bumped and jostled all the way. When they neared the center of the city the wagon moved off of the main streets and down a few smaller lanes. Fewer people moved about them, and with another few turns they were completely alone. The buildings looked the same as all of the others that they had passed coming up from the docks, and that was the beauty of it, Leisu knew. No one would guess that the most powerful man in all of Bindao resided here, and that

was how he wanted it. Leisu was happy to have such an unassuming master; a man whose attentions were not wasted on the frivolities that power could bring, but instead on the aspects necessary to keep that power.

The wagon came to a stop outside of a two-storey building and they all rose up and jumped down the narrow lane. Two of the guards led the horse and wagon away while the other two moved to the door. It was opened for them before they were a few steps in front of it and the men walked in and up the narrow staircase set just opposite of the entryway. They were led up to the second floor where one of the guards moved off to the left and down the hallway. The other motioned for them to keep following him. It was all unnecessary; Leisu had been here countless times, but he knew that his master was a creature of habit, and that this protocol must be followed. The guard showed them to the door at the end of the small hallway and knocked twice, then took a few steps back and stood against the wall. A moment later the door opened and Leisu walked into the room with Grandon behind him and Ko taking up the rear.

“Leisu, you are back already,” a voice said loudly from the swivel chair behind the large desk in the center of the room. The chair was turned so that it was facing the large windows behind the desk, hiding the man who occupied it.

“Yes, master, I’ve returned from Desolatia Island as you bid me, and have brought back the man you requested,” Leisu said. He and Ko took up positions directly in front of the desk with Grandon between them. Both stood tall with their hands at their sides and their heads held high. Even Grandon noticed their posture and emulated it somewhat, though he had a tendency to shy away from overt displays of subservience, thinking his own authority sufficient to withstand any displayed by another.

The man in the desk turned his chair around to face them, and Leisu noticed Grandon flinch for a moment at the sight of him. It was obvious that Zhou was tall even sitting. He had broad shoulders and a thick neck, and the body under his close-fitting tunic and shirt were obviously well-muscled. His black hair was tied in a neat top-knot and allowed to cascade down to the back of his neck. Leisu knew that what made Grandon jump for a moment, however, was not Zhou's body, but his face. A long scar ran from the top of Zhou's head above the forehead and all the way down his face. It ran through the left eyebrow, shearing it in two, where it vanished behind a large eye-patch that covered Zhou's left eye. The scar resumed its course along his cheek before disappearing off of his face an inch away from his pointed chin. Zhou had fitted his eye-patch with a large emerald which nearly matched his right eye in both color and shape. It was rare for Jongurians to have any other eye color than black or brown, and that sight alone was unnerving. But to now stare at another green eye of sorts on the patch of his missing eye made Zhou both intimidating and fearful to look upon. Leisu knew that there were few men who were able to even meet his frightful gaze, let alone hold it.

Zhou stood up from his chair and came around the desk. He walked up to Leisu and grasped his shoulder with his right hand, smiling into his face, then moved over a few steps and did the same to Ko. He was now standing directly in front of Grandon. He looked the man up and down for a few moments, taking his measure, then offered his right hand to him while locking his 'eye's' onto Grandon's.

"Zhou Lao. I am very happy to have you here your highness," Zhou said.

Grandon put out his hand and they shook. "Thank you for having me," Grandon replied in as meek of a voice that Leisu had yet heard from him.

“Please, have a seat,” Zhou said, gesturing to a hard-backed chair in front of the desk. Grandon sat down and Zhou moved around the desk to retake his chair. Leisu and Ko both moved to stand against the wall beside the door.

“I’ve no doubt you are wondering exactly what it is you are doing here in Jonguria,” Zhou said as he reclined back in his seat, eyeing Grandon with the edges of his mouth drawn up in a slight smile.

“Well, your man Leisu has told me a little, but not much,” Grandon replied, turning with his body to look toward where Leisu stood by the door. “Is it true that my nephew is hatching some plots in Regidia?”

“In all of Adjuria, actually, if my understanding of the situation is correct.” Zhou put his hands behind his head and looked up at the ceiling as he explained. “Like much of my own country, Adjuria has been slowly suffocating under the lack of trade these past thirty years. It was not so pronounced while the war was being fought, mind you. Then there was enough work to keep everyone who was not fighting quite busy and rather well-off. These past ten years since the war has ended, however, have been particularly cruel, to my country most especially.”

“Yes, I knew of the reality of this while I was king,” Grandon replied, “but what has all of this got to do with me now?”

“The poor economy which has plagued my country for these past ten years is just now beginning to be felt more in Adjuria. Your nephew is stirring up that resentment quietly, and with little or no connection to him, all across the country. More and more people begin to question a king that will do nothing to assuage their growing concerns over a worsening economy.”

“But I thought that something *was* being done. While we were in Weiling an Adjurian ship appeared full of trade representatives ready to discuss the possibility of renewing trade.”

“Yes,” Zhou said, his eye moving from Grandon to Leisu for a moment, “I know all about that ship.” He leaned forward and fiddled with a pen on his desk for a moment before looking at Grandon once again. “From what I understand, a trade conference was recently held in your capital city of Baden. The idea was put forth by the provinces of Culdovia and Duldovia, and they convinced a delegation from each of the other provinces to attend. Your nephew Jossen headed up the Regidian delegation. He came very close to having his plan adopted by the conference, but his efforts were thwarted at the last minute and a plan put forth by the province of Tillatia was agreed to. If it wasn’t for that, then Jossen would have been on that ship you saw in Weiling.”

Grandon looked down at his feet for a moment. “Was that part of my nephew’s plan,” he finally asked, looking up, “to come to Jonguria himself?”

“It was one plan,” Zhou replied, his level gaze boring into Grandon, “but there are others.”

A few moments went by while Grandon digested what had been said. It was a lot of information to process, Leisu thought from his spot along the wall. Much of it was new to him. He had no idea that his master had known about the sailing of the Adjurian ship, or the conference that had sent it. But then he realized that it was really that *he* who did not know. There was much that Zhou kept from him. The look that he had been given at the mention of the ship, however, gave Leisu the impression that Zhou knew about the incident with the boy. But did he know that Leisu had ordered that the ship be sunk, and

then had changed his mind? Which course of action would his master have agreed to? Leisu's thoughts were broken when Grandon looked up and spoke once again.

"I still don't quite understand why you wanted me off of that island," he said.

Zhou leaned back in his chair once again. "That was more your nephew's desire than mine, I must confess. He thinks that you would be of aid when he begins to make his move against the throne." Zhou put up his hand to stop Grandon from speaking, as he seemed about to do when he suddenly leaned forward. "None of this will be happening any time soon, I think," Zhou said, casting another glance toward Leisu.

"I don't see what aid I can be to him in Jonguria," Grandon replied.

"Nor do I." Zhou got up and moved from behind the desk to its front, sitting on the edge closest to Grandon. "You see Grandon, I'm trying to cement my own power here in the southwest of Jonguria. Very soon I will make a move against some of the other warlords to the north and east of me. If I'm successful, which I have no doubt I will be, then I'll be in a good position to challenge the emperor. You can help me in this, Grandon. You have experience usurping a king, and I can use your perspective. While it's true that your nephew has plans for you in his grand design, those won't come to fruition for some time yet, I think. While you're waiting I hope that you'll act as an advisor to me."

Zhou's words hung in the room for several moments while he looked down at Grandon. The man seemed to be weighing his options, but Leisu was in no doubt as to the choice he would make. To side with Zhou held the promise of wealth, power, and success, while to go against his wishes held only the promise of a painful end. Grandon seemed to come to that conclusion himself and looked up at Zhou.

“It seems that I’ve been given a second chance at life and I don’t mean to pass it up. If you would seek my council in matters, then I would gladly give it.” It was Grandon this time that put his hand up to stop Zhou from speaking too quickly. “All I ask in return is that I be given more information concerning my nephew’s plans and my place in them, as well as how you fit into them. An alliance between Adjuria and Jonguria, even at a level such as this, is unusual, you must admit. I know there’s more that you’re not telling me, but I also know that there’s a time for everything.”

“Precisely,” Zhou said, edging off the desk. Grandon took that as his cue to rise, and both men shook hands again. Zhou put his arm to Grandon’s back and began to escort him toward the door. “Now, if you would excuse me for a moment, there are a few things I need to discuss with Leisu. Don’t worry, it’s nothing to concern yourself about, just some frivolous matters pertaining to our operations here in Bindao. Ko will see you out and to your quarters.”

Grandon nodded and Ko opened the door for him. Zhou stood smiling as they both exited, then looked over at the other guard, who quickly left the room and closed the door behind him. Zhou turned around, the smile having been replaced with seriousness. He moved around the desk and motioned for Leisu to take the chair that Grandon had vacated. When they were both seated he looked across the desk at Leisu for a few moments before speaking.

“Tell me what happened with that ship in Weiling. I’ve heard the account, but now I want to hear it from you.”

Leisu sat up straight and steadied himself. He hadn’t been expecting thankfulness or praise in his retrieval of Grandon; he knew that Zhou did not give such things. Either you

pleased him and continued in his employ, or you did not, and weren't heard from again. Leisu hoped that his handling of the incident in Weiling pleased his master.

Zhou's emerald eye seemed to bore into Leisu as he answered the question. "We were finishing the process of taking on supplies when the ship came in about an hour after we arrived," he recounted.

"What was Grandon doing off of the ship. I gave explicit orders that he was to remain hidden until he got to Bindao."

"He would not listen, master," Leisu explained. "The man is used to having his own way, and five years of exile has done little to change that. I told him that he was to remain on the ship and he asked me what I planned to do when he did not. He suggested that my only option would be to physically restrain him or harm him, and I knew that neither of those options was prudent. There was little I could do."

"So what happened with the boy?" Zhou asked after a moment.

His master really did know all of that had happened there. Leisu hadn't mentioned the boy to anyone, so how did Zhou know? He had little time to think it over, as the cold, emerald gaze from across the desk demanded an answer.

"All of the Adjurians had gone into the town to meet with the imperial representative, a man name Yuan Jibao. I found Grandon and ushered him back to the docks, but when we were outside the offices the boy suddenly came out and saw him. It only lasted a moment, then he ran back into the building. Grandon was convinced that the boy knew who he was, however, and not just some unknown and mysterious Adjurian, but the False King. After that it was easy to get him back to the ship, although he was already sure that the damage had been done."

“And you?” Zhou asked.

“I wasn’t so sure,” Leisu said, his eyes darting down to his hands for a moment before meeting Zhou’s once again. “I thought that the boy was too young to correctly identify him and that when he recounted what he saw to the others, they would simply write his story off as an overactive imagination.”

“So what did you do then?”

“At first I was uncertain as to what action to take, troubled as I was from Grandon’s sudden change in demeanor after the encounter.” He looked up at Zhou. “It...troubled me.”

“Go on.”

“I stopped one of the men about the docks who I’d seen escort the Adjurians to Yuan. I told him to deliver a message to the man telling him that I wanted their ship sunk before it could return to Adjuria. When I thought it over for a few minutes, however, I realized that that might cause us more harm than good. A missing ship full of Adjurian diplomats is quite another thing entirely from a young boy’s outlandish tale about an exiled king. I decided that the former would draw more questions, so told another dockworker to find the man I’d just spoken to and have the order rescinded.”

“And was it?” Zhou asked, his eye narrowing as he looked to his lieutenant.

“I’m not sure, master. I wanted us to get out of Weiling and to Bindao as quickly as possible. We had weighed anchor and left the harbor before the Adjurians had even returned to their ship.”

“I see.” Zhou said as he once again put his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. “So you know nothing else of the matter, then, I take it?”

“No, I assume the Adjurians are on their way back home by now,” Leisu said.

“I only wish that was the case, but it appears not to be.” Zhou leaned forward in the chair again. “It would seem that your second order did not reach the man who you had given the first to.” Zhou paused and stared at Leisu for a few moments before continuing. “Two ships were sent out with orders to sink the Adjurians shortly after they’d left Weiling. I know from reports that not a single cannon was seen on the Adjurian ship, so it’s puzzling to me why the two ships did not return by the next day.” Zhou raised his eyebrows in a questioning manner, but Leisu knew enough not to speak. “When another ship was sent out to enquire as to their whereabouts, it returned with word that it had seen wreckage indicative of a sea battle involving several ships. Word was put out to the local fishermen to begin scanning the southern coasts for any sign of survivors from the three vessels.” Zhou leaned forward and folded his hands onto the desk in front of him. “Word came just an hour before your arrival that several Adjurians meeting the description of those that were seen in Weiling had been spotted on the coast north of Nanbo and to the east of Bindao.”

Zhou leaned back in his chair once again. Leisu was not sure what to say to the news. It was so much information so fast. His first reaction was to be angry at the man that did not carry out his second order, but there was little for that now. It was obvious that Zhou was unhappy with how the events had unfolded.

After a few moments Leisu straightened in his chair and in a slow, careful voice, went over the options that were quickly forming in his head.

“There is nothing to do now but hunt these men down,” he said. “They should be unarmed and easy to find.”

“Not rescue them and send them on their way back home with our heartfelt apologies at such an outrageous accident?” Zhou mockingly asked in a raised voice.

“It’s true that pirates could have come upon their ship and attacked it, but it’s also unlikely, and the blame would still lie with Jonguria,” Leisu said.

“Which could work out for us,” Zhou responded. “More pressure on the emperor.”

“Yes, but the Adjurian boy’s tale of spotting Grandon will now have more credence with the botched attack upon them. Most likely they’ve already decided that was the only likely cause for such provocation.”

“I agree. These men mustn’t be allowed to get back to Adjuria. Before the boy was rather harmless, but now that’s all changed.” Zhou folded his hands up under his chin and peered down at the desk for a few moments before speaking. “Since you’re responsible for this situation, I’m sending you out to remedy it.”

Leisu made no protest, glad that he was not being punished further. “And what would you have me do when I find them, master?”

Zhou leaned forward and the light from the window behind him caught his emerald eye, causing it to twinkle. “Kill them,” he said.

TWENTY-THREE

The next morning a heavy mist covered the forest floor and the sky was still cloudy and overcast above the thick canopy. They broke their fast on the same bread, cheese, and salt pork from the day before and washed it down with water. They had found a small spring the night before so they filled up their water skins and washed away some of the dried sweat from their faces. The fire had gone out in the night and the charred wood

was damp with dew. They scattered the ashes and burned logs and did their best to make the clearing look as undisturbed as possible before continuing the push westward. Iago took up the lead of the column, his longsword better suited to hacking the vines and branches, while Willem followed behind to clear away what he missed.

The going was a little faster than the day before. Around midday the forest seemed to take pity on them. The trees grew further apart and the undergrowth wasn't as dense. Overhead the canopy became thinner and more light shone through. They were able to see further ahead and to the sides, and Iago and Willem put away their swords. An hour later the forest abruptly came to an end in front of them and a well-worn dirt road could be seen beyond its edge. Iago called for them to stop, and after a few quick words, Willem, Halam, and Sam headed up to the forest's edge to get a better look.

"It's a well-used road that seems to go from north to the southwest," Iago said when they came back a few minutes later.

"I'd bet anything that it leads to Bindao," Willem said. "There'll probably be a lot of traffic on it, so we best stay clear of it."

"If it goes to Bindao this is our chance to stop this madness," Pader said. "How much longer do you think we can scramble through these woods before someone gets injured or our luck runs out?"

"Whether that road leads to Bindao or not," Rodden said, "You can be sure that if there're men out looking for us, they'll be sending patrols up and down it. They know we'll have to cross it eventually."

"Then I think that we should wait for one of these patrols and inform them of our plight," Millen said.

“We took a vote yesterday and decided that we’d continue on past Bindao,” Halam replied.

“That was yesterday and this is today. I say we take another vote.” Pader looked around at the others. “Who’s ready to stop running scared through these forests and go to Bindao?”

He put his arm high into the air and was followed by Millen, Conn, Jal, and Fess, the same as before. After a moment Flint put his arm up as well.

“I’m sorry, but I’m meant for the seas, not the forests,” he said wearily.

“Well, it’s now six-to-eight, so we still continue on,” Halam said when it was evident that no one else was going to change their mind.

“So how do you propose that we get across this road without being spotted, then?” Pader asked.

Halam looked them over for a few moments before speaking. “I think that we go by groups of four at a time. Run across as fast as you can, then get well into the forest on the other side before stopping. After a few minutes have passed, the next group goes.”

“That sounds good to me” Iago said. “Who goes first?”

“Bryn, Rodden, Sam, Flint,” Halam said, “are you ready?”

They nodded that they were and headed up to the edge of the forest. They waited a few minutes and looked down the road as far as they could to make sure that no one was coming in either direction, then Sam counted to three and they bolted out of the forest at a sprint. The road was quite large, wide enough for two full-size carriages to go down abreast, Bryn figured as he dashed across the hard-packed dirt. There was about ten feet of clearing on the other side before the forest thickened up again and they dashed through

and well past it without slowing, finally coming to a stop a good fifty feet or more past the tree line. They smiled at each other. They were breathing heavily and their hearts were racing from the excitement as much as the exertion.

“Now that wasn’t so hard was, it?” Sam said. “Kind of fun, actually.”

They laughed and looked out past the road from which they’d come, ready to see the other groups follow. A few minutes passed and then Halam, Pader, Jal, and Fess ran out and were by their sides a few moments later, panting and breathing heavily, but smiling all the same. Dilon, Conn, Iago, and Willem came after, leaving only Millen and Trey on the other side of the road. A few minutes went by, and then they two rushed out into the road.

They were half-way across it when a cry went up somewhere to their left. They both were frightened to a halt by it, and stood for a moment looking down the road. When they turned their heads back to the forest their faces were a mask of fear and they ran all the faster to get to the forest’s edge. The sound of horses’ hooves beating on the road could be heard from within the forest, and suddenly four horsemen appeared on the road ahead of them. Those in the forest crouched down among the bushes and tall grasses and hid behind some trees. Iago and Willem pulled their swords from their scabbards and Dilon unslung his bow.

“No,” Halam said quietly but forcefully. “We don’t know who they are or what they want yet.”

“They want to kill us is what they want,” Iago said, continuing to pull out his sword.”

Halam stayed his wrist and looked into his eyes. "If you do that we may *all* die," he said. "Wait a moment."

Iago stared back for a moment then slid his sword back into the scabbard. "A moment, then," he said.

Bryn was able to see quite well from the hiding spot he'd chosen. The Jongurians wore faded brown leather jerkins and hide pants. Two of the men had their hair cropped short while the other two's grew long and well past their shoulders. Two of them had bows slung over their shoulders and each had a shortsword sheathed to his belt. Their horses were black and a heavy sheen of sweat showed on them as if they'd been ridden hard all morning. The two men with long hair followed Millen and Trey off of the road and to the edge of the forest and called out something in Jongurian. They obviously wanted the two men to stop, and seeing that their companions had crouched down somewhere ahead of them in the forest, they did as instructed. The men jumped down off their horses as the other two men cantered up behind them and headed toward the two Adjurians. Millen looked down meekly at his feet but Trey stared intently at the men as they approached. Some words were said quickly in Jongurian to the other two men still on the road, then one of them gave a quick back-hand smack to Trey and he crumpled to the ground under the unexpected blow. The other came up to Millen but only laughed when he saw Millen staring at his feet. He pulled out a short length of rope and tied Millen's hands together, then did the same to Trey, pulling him back to his feet when he finished. Bryn could see a trickle of blood coming from Trey's mouth as he stood up. The Jongurians pulled them up to the road and got both of them up on one of the horses, handing the reins to one of the other horsemen.

The two men on foot then pulled the shortswords from their scabbards and began to slowly walk into the forest. Bryn met his uncle's eyes, and Halam put his finger up to his mouth for Bryn to be quiet while he slowly pulled the shortsword from its sheath at his belt. Bryn pulled his own dagger out and fingered the hilt nervously as the two men got closer. They moved slowly, looking all around them and brushing aside the undergrowth with their feet as they moved further from the road. They were thirty feet away, then twenty, and Bryn could feel his heart beating rapidly in his chest.

The sound of a galloping horse could be heard in the distance, and Bryn peered through the grasses to see a rider slow to a stop by the other two men. They exchanged some quick words, then the horseman who'd suddenly appeared turned and galloped off down the road the way he'd come. One of the other Jongurians called out something to the men in the forest, and one of them turned and began to head back toward the road. The other kept coming on however. He was not more than ten feet away from Bryn, then only five. Bryn squeezed the hilt of his dagger tightly and could feel tears coming to his eyes. He looked over at Halam, but he only motioned with his hand for Bryn to stay down.

Another shout came from the road, and the man stopped, standing still while he took a long look deeper into the forest, then turned and headed back to the road at a quick walk. Bryn let out a sigh of relief as he watched the man jump onto the horse with the other man who had entered the forest. All four horses then turned and galloped off down in the same direction that they'd come.

After a few minutes Halam rose from the brush and called out for the other men to gather round.

“They took Millen and Trey,” Conn said. It was obvious that he was frightened.

“Aye, and they would have taken more of us if that rider had not come when he did,” Halam replied.

“They were only four, we could have taken them!” Iago said loudly to Halam.

“And what would we have done when that other rider appeared to see us butchering his friends?” Halam asked.

“I would have put an arrow through his heart,” Iago replied.

“Perhaps,” Halam admitted, “but perhaps he would have rode away and brought more men down on us.

“What are we going to do about Trey and Millen?” Willem interrupted. “We can’t just leave them.”

“No, we can’t,” Halam agreed. “We follow the road from the forest to wherever those men took them and assess the situation. I’d like to resolve this without bloodshed, if at all possible.”

“They’ve already spilled Trey’s blood, didn’t you see?” Iago said angrily.

“And let’s make sure that’s all that is spilled!” Halam shot back.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” Rodden said, stepping between the two men, “let’s follow the road and see where it leads us. They headed north, not south to Bindao, so there must be some small town or village, or perhaps only a camp. We follow these men to it and figure out our options then. For now I suggest we get moving.”

Halam and Iago kept their eyes locked for a few moments longer then Iago broke off his gaze, angrily storming off into the forest in the direction the horses had gone, the others falling in behind him.

They followed the road for quite a few hours and dusk was approaching when they heard the sound of voices from up ahead. Willem and Iago motioned for silence and the group crept forward. Several hundred feet ahead of them the forest broke into a small clearing set next to the road. Three canvas tents were erected around a large fire and several Jongurians sat around it passing wineskins while they talked. The five horses they'd seen on the road, as well as two others, were hobbled and grazing on the clearing's grasses. There was no sign of Millen or Trey.

"Those are the four we saw on the road," Willem said, indicating the men that sat around the fire. "We know there's at least one more, and judging from the horses, probably another two. They must be in the tents."

"That's most likely where Trey and Millen are, then" Conn said.

"Twelve against seven seems pretty good odds to me," Iago said, stroking the sheath of his longsword. "Don't tell me that you're going to let another fine opportunity pass us by Halam."

Halam gave the man a hard look. "I don't want us to be the first to shed blood. We don't even know for sure if they took Millen and Trey here or not. Could be this is where these men chose to stay the night while some other men took both of them further on up the road somewhere."

"Maybe we should send someone to sneak into their camp and have a peak in those tents," Fess suggested.

"Wouldn't be too hard the way those four are carrying on," Pader pointed out. The men were talking loudly and occasionally they would let out bellowing laughs at

something that had been said. “If we give them a while longer with those wineskins, they’ll be sleeping soundly and we can walk right through their camp.”

“I’d say it’s about thirty feet from the trees to the tents in each direction,” Willem pointed out. “They’ve the tents behind them blocking one direction, and the horses off to another side of that giving more room. Once it gets darker the light from the fire will only illuminate an area of about ten feet.”

“Someone could sneak in from behind those tents at that point,” Pader said. “You wouldn’t even have to come around to the front, I bet. You could just peek under the flap.”

“It’ll still be dangerous,” Halam said. He looked around at the men staring back at him for guidance. “So who should go then?”

After a moment Bryn spoke up. “I’m the smallest,” he said.

“Aye, and also the least experienced, lad,” Iago said. “It’d be much too dangerous and the chances of something going wrong are too great.”

“I can do it,” Bryn replied adamantly.

When no other objections were sounded, Halam looked down at his nephew. “Do you really think you can pull this off, Bryn? You would have to be as quiet as a mouse, and as quick.”

“All I have to do is look under the tent flaps. How hard can that be?”

They all looked at him and smiled. “He’s a brave lad, I’ll say that much,” Jal said.

“Best take this then,” Pader said, pulling his dirk from his belt.

“I still have the dagger Iago gave me,” Bryn replied, showing them the ivory-hilted blade. “Besides, I don’t think I’ll be getting close enough to use it, and no one’ll be looking for me.”

“Alright,” Halam agreed. “We’ll wait until it gets darker, then have ourselves a look.

It only took an hour for full darkness to come upon them. The men around the fire were louder than ever, and another had come from one of the tents to join them. There was little chance that anything could be heard over their talk and laughter, so Willem, Fess, and Bryn circled around to the back of the camp from the edge of the forest. It was nearly pitch-black without the light of the fire.

“Are you ready, Bryn?” Willem asked one last time.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Well, good luck, and move slow and quietly. It’s not a race.”

Bryn nodded his head and got down on his hands and knees. He crawled until he was ten feet from the back of the tents, then got down on his belly to creep along the grass until he was right behind the first tent. The horses were near but they didn’t seem to pay him much mind, satisfied as they were with their grazing. He looked back toward the forest, but could only make out the faint outline of the trees. Satisfied that he couldn’t be seen, he reached under the heavy canvas and lifted it up, peering slowly into the tent within. It was as dark inside as it was without, so he slowly crawled behind the center tent. Light poured out into his face when he slowly lifted the flap up, and when he looked in he saw two tall Jongurian men with long black hair standing in front of Millen and Trey who were sitting on the ground, their hands tied behind their backs. Bryn

couldn't see their faces, but he could see that blood was matted in Trey's hair on the side of his head. The Jongurians seemed to be questioning them in their own language, and Millen and Trey both shook their heads that they didn't understand. One of the Jongurians began yelling at Millen, then came up and slapped him hard across the face with the back of his hand, sending him falling to the ground. Both the Jongurians laughed while Millen struggled to sit back up. Having seen enough, Bryn crawled over to the last tent, but it too was empty, so he crawled back toward the forest, getting on his hands and knees for the last ten feet.

"They're both in the center tent," Bryn reported when he got back to Willem and Fess. "Both are tied up and they're being beaten. It looks like the Jongurians are questioning them. There are only two in the tent with them, and the other two tents are empty."

"Good work, lad," Willem said, tousling Bryn's hair. "Now let's get back to the others."

The rest of the men were where they left them, anxiously awaiting their return. Halam grabbed Bryn in a strong embrace when he walked up.

"I was worried about you, lad," he said when he let go.

"It was easy," Bryn replied with a smile.

Willem told them what Bryn had seen and they began to formulate a plan.

"We'll have to wait until they go to sleep," Pader said. "More than likely they'll place a guard or two at the tent's entrance, and perhaps inside as well."

"And you're still set against using force," Iago said to Halam.

"Aye, not unless they use it first," he replied.

“What do you call beating two men whose hands are tied behind their backs, then, if not force?” Sam said angrily.

“The force I’m talking about won’t let you wake up in the morning with bruises,” Halam replied. “Until they do anymore than use their fists, then we’ll do the same.” He turned to look at the camp for a moment. Besides the moon and the glow of a lantern from inside the center tent, the fire was the only light around for leagues. “We’ll need to wait for these men to go to sleep and then hope that they put out that lantern. If they do decide to post guards inside the tent, then it will be easier to subdue them in the darkness.” He looked to Iago. “Do you have any ideas on that?”

“Besides killing the men you mean?” he mockingly asked. “Driving the butt of a dagger down atop their head will knock them out for some time, I’d think. Then it’d be an easy thing to tie their hands and gag them. If we’re lucky they won’t be discovered until morning.”

“We’d better have the bows trained in front of that tent in case something goes wrong and the others wake up,” Willem said. “I know you don’t want any killing, Halam, but if it’s us or them, we can’t hesitate.”

“I agree. Willem, Iago, Pader, and Dilon, you men stay here with your bows trained on that tent. If those Jongurians wake up and move in, take them out.”

They nodded their heads and fingered their bows.

“I figure we’ll need at least two men at the tent,” Halam went on. “One’ll have to go inside and untie Millen and Trey, the other will need to cut a hole in the canvas and serve as a lookout. Do you all agree?” No argument came, so Halam continued. “Now we just have to decide who it will be. Any volunteers?”

“I’ll go inside,” Sam said.

“I’d like to go too,” Fess added.

“Alright, Sam. You’ll have to be very careful once inside. If you can manage it, get them untied without waking the guard, if there is one. If you don’t think you can, then you’ll have to knock him out cold. You have a dagger, right?”

Sam nodded that he did.

“I have this dirk that you can use as well,” Pader said, handing it to Sam.

“I like the butt of this dagger better. Give the dirk to Fess, he’s got nothing,” Sam said as Pader offered him the weapon.

“Don’t you think that I’d better crawl up to the tent with them, uncle?” Bryn asked.

“You did well the first time Bryn, but the chances of something going wrong are just too great to risk it a second,” Halam replied.

“I think the boy has a better chance of crawling up to that tent unseen and unheard than any of us,” Willem said.

“Aye, he’s got a point there,” Iago added.

Halam stroked his beard and thought for a moment. “Alright, Bryn, you go too, but stay outside the tent. At the first sign of trouble you get back to the forest. We’ll have men on that side of the tents as well.” He looked up at the sky then back at the tents.

“Now we wait.”

* * * * *

Halam broke the men up shortly after they’d made their plan. Pader, Willem, Iago, and Dilon found positions that gave them a clear view of the center tent, taking out their bows to wait. The rest headed around the clearing to the rear of the tents. When it was

clear that all the Jongurians were asleep, Halam would head over to give the men the go ahead. When they'd gotten Trey and Millen out, they were to run back into the forest and meet up, then move as fast and silently as they could further into the forest while still following the road. The bowmen would circle around after Halam came back to tell them that all'd went well, or after a time they deemed sufficient if something went wrong.

Soon after they'd gotten into position two Jongurians that had been in the tent came out to join the men around the fire. They took some pulls from the wineskins, but then quickly got up to head into one of the side tents. They said something to the men before going in, and one of them got up and went into the center tent. It was another couple hours before the other men tired of their wine. Three of them got up and headed to the empty tent, leaving one man to sit outside on watch. It wasn't long before they heard loud snoring come from the tent the three men had gone into, and shortly after that the man they left outside fell asleep as well. Things couldn't get much better for them, so Halam headed around to inform the others that it was time.

Bryn headed out into the clearing first, getting down on his hands and knees like before, Sam and Fess close on his heels. When he got within ten feet of the tent he began to crawl on his belly again, even though it probably wasn't necessary with all of the men asleep, but he didn't want to take any chances.

A glow was still coming from inside the tent when Bryn got up next to it. He lifted the flap up a bit and peeked inside. Trey and Millen were stretched out on the floor as best they could manage with their hands and feet tied. They appeared to be sleeping. The guard that Halam had told them about was also asleep by the entrance, snoring softly. Bryn waved his hand for Sam and Fess to come up and have a look. They nodded

to one another after doing so, and Fess took out the dirk Pader had given him and slowly slid it through the canvas and sliced upward, the sharp blade moving smoothly. When he was satisfied that the slit would be large enough for them to come out of standing up, he nodded at Sam, who took hold of his dagger and slowly crawled into the tent while Bryn and Fess watched.

He moved to Trey first, who quickly awoke when he felt the rope being cut from his hands. Sam quickly put his hand over Trey's mouth, and when Trey nodded, moved down to cut the rope at his feet, then motioned for him to head out of the tent. Millen had also come awake by then and stared over at Sam pleadingly. After taking a quick look at the guard to make sure he was still asleep he waited for Trey to make it out of the tent, then moved to cut the rope from Millen's hands. Millen moved to sit up and kicked his legs out for Sam to cut the rope from his feet, but his boots made a noise as they scraped together. The guard stirred and opened his eyes for just a moment, and then, realizing what he saw, jerked up and went for the shortsword sheathed at his belt. Sam moved quickly to thrust at the man with his dagger, but the Jongurian proved quicker, dodging out of the way of the incoming blade while yanking his sword from its sheath. Sam was thrown off balance by the unexpected move, and stumbled forward. The Jongurian didn't hesitate. As Sam turned to face the man, ready to thrust again with his dagger, the Jongurian stabbed him through the stomach with his shortsword. Sam let out a gasp as he looked down at the man's sword, then fell to his knees, blood pouring from his mouth. The Jongurian removed his blade, his gaze falling on Millen as Sam toppled to the ground, his life pouring from him.

Millen's feet were still tied, so he began to crawl frantically with his arms toward the slit in the tent. The Jongurian took a step after him and was reaching down to grab Millen by the hair when Fess came through the slit in the canvas. The guard caught a glimpse of movement and began to look up, but Fess was already swinging the dirk in front of him. The blade caught the guard full in the face, slashing a deep red gash where his nose was and sending a spray of blood over the walls of the tent. The Jongurian dropped his sword and fell to the ground, whimpering in agony as he clutched his face. Fess quickly bent down to slice the rope holding Millen's feet. He helped him stand up then ushered him through the slit in the tent. He was following quickly behind when he let out a cry of pain. The Jongurian had picked up his shortsword and slashed the back of Fess's leg below the knee. Fess turned and parried a thrust from the man who was still on his knees, then drove the dirk straight down into the top of the man's head. When he pulled it loose it was wet with blood. The guard slumped over dead as Fess limped out of the tent. He stopped for a moment to pull Bryn to his feet. He'd watched it all happen in what seemed a blink of an eye. Fess put his arm around Bryn's shoulders and they hurried as fast as they could to where the other men were standing in the forest.

"Is he dead?" Millen was the first to ask.

"Aye, he's dead," Fess replied gritting his teeth in pain. "Not before he slashed my leg, though." He showed them as best he could in the moonlight the gash on his leg.

"Can you walk?" Conn asked quickly.

"I'll manage,"

"And what about Sam?" Jal said.

"Dead," Fess replied.

“What happened in there?” Halam appeared with the bowmen close behind him. “When I saw the blood spray inside the tent I knew something had gone wrong.”

“The guard woke up and put his sword through Sam’s belly,” Fess replied, obviously in shock as he went over the details. “I charged in before he could get to Millen and slashed him across the face. That was the blood you saw. We turned to run, but he got my leg, so I drove my dirk into his head. He’s dead now, same as Sam.”

Iago came up and took Fess’s arm, giving Bryn a break from supporting the man. “We’ve got to get out of here as fast as we can. West is it?”

“Aye,” Halam replied, “we head west and hope that the rest don’t wake until morning.”

TWENTY-FOUR

There was no more talk of heading to Bindao after that. They trudged west without complaint, save for Fess who continuously groaned at their pace. It wasn’t that they were moving fast; the darkness and the trees wouldn’t allow that. It was just that they were moving.

The cut on Fess’s leg was deeper than they’d earlier thought. After moving for less than an hour Fess yelled out in pain and they were all forced to a stop. He crumpled to the ground and Iago knelt down to get a better look at the damage. The loose cotton trousers around the wound were wet with blood, and Fess’s boot was filling with it as well, so that whenever he stepped on that foot it made a squishing sound.

“It’s worse than I thought earlier,” Iago said as he peeled away the piece of canvas they had wound around the cut. “You’re still bleeding heavily. How do you feel?”

“Tired, and a bit dizzy,” Fess replied.

Iago turned to look up at Halam. “He won’t be able to walk much longer.”

Halam looked at the others in the darkness. “A crutch from a tree branch won’t serve?”

“It might’ve an hour ago,” Iago replied, “but not now.” He looked up at Halam for an answer. They all knew full well that with each passing minute dawn grew closer and their chances of escape diminished. As soon as the rest of the Jongurians awoke to find one of the number dead and their captives missing they’d be combing the woods looking for them.

“We’ll have to fashion some type of stretcher from tree branches then,” Halam replied to Iago’s stare. “Let’s find some suitably strong limbs and get them tied together with the rope we have.”

The men began to look around for branches as the forest grew lighter. The sun was coming up somewhere behind them which made seeing easier but would also mean that they’d have to move that much faster. After several minutes they’d gotten two thick tree branches tied together with some length of rope at one end and another thicker branch tied to each end so that they were joined. The branches were long enough that two people could grab the ends and haul it while the other end dragged against the ground.

“That will have to do with the materials and the time that we have,” Halam said as he looked over their work. “Hop on Fess and let’s see if it supports you.

Fess gingerly limped over to the makeshift stretcher and sat down, raising his injured leg up as best he could so that it wouldn’t drag. He looked up and nodded that it would serve. Jal and Conn took up the two ends and they all moved out again.

The morning light made it easier to see and the forest was not as thick as it had been. There were more small clearings between trees and less undergrowth. After another hour the forest ended entirely and a large grassy plain stretched out ahead of them. The ground rolled as small hills formed so that the terrain was not completely flat. Larger hills loomed on the horizon.

“The going will be faster, but our chances of being seen will increase,” Willem said when they stopped at the edge of the forest.

“We don’t know that they have followed us in this direction, either,” Pader pointed out. “Could be they chose to follow the road in either direction, or even head east.”

“It’s just as likely that they’re moving through that forest behind us right now,” Iago said. “They know that we need to head west to get home.”

“We’ll just have to pick up the pace and hope that the rolling landscape will obscure us some,” Halam said. “Once we get to those hills on the horizon we’ll be good.”

They rested for a few minutes and ate some more of the cheese, salt pork, and the last of the bread. They drank sparingly from the water skins, not knowing when they would find another source of fresh water. When they were done eating they got up and left the forest behind. The plains were covered in short grasses and wiry brush. They started out at a quick walk, but when Halam looked back and saw how open the land was compared to the forest they left behind, he ordered them into a slow jog. It was hard on Fess, as his stretcher bounced along the ground sending pain shooting up his leg, but the others didn’t complain. They knew the alternatives to tiredness just by hearing the grunts of pain coming from the man behind them.

The hills in the distance grew larger as the morning wore on. They got into a rhythm of jogging for most of an hour then walking for ten minutes and then jogging again. Rodden and Dilon took over carrying the stretcher during that first hour, then handed it to Flint and Willem when they all took their break to walk.

“Do you think it’s just those seven men, well six now, that are after us?” Flint asked the others as they jogged through the grasses.

“Let’s hope so,” Pader replied. “If it comes down to them catching up with us, we have a good chance. Anymore than those six, however, and our odds decrease.”

“Why do you think they’re following us in the first place?” Bryn asked after a few more minutes of silence passed.

“That’s the ultimate question, Bryn,” Willem replied ahead of him. “Are these men some of the same that might have seen us in Weiling? Did that representative Yuan send these men after us when his ships didn’t come back that night? I don’t know.”

“We have to entertain the possibility that these men are acting alone,” Pader said. “I still can’t believe that the emperor would allow this to happen.”

“Nor can I,” Halam replied, “but perhaps he doesn’t know. Jonguria is a large country, larger than Adjuria. There are many things bound to happen that the emperor doesn’t know about.”

“So there’d be no cause for war when we report this back in Baden?” Rodden asked.

“Aye, if we make it back,” Iago said with a laugh.

“If we make it back to Baden and tell the king what has occurred here, we have no proof that it was anything other than some pirate ships that attacked us at sea and a group

of local brigands who hunted us through the woods. The same happens to ordinary citizens in Adjuria all the time and no one hears of it,” Pader said

“The difference is that we are in Jonguria and members of a royally sanctioned trading expedition,” Halam pointed out. “There *will* be consequences.”

The talk stopped after that as the men grew tired from jogging and saved their breath. There was some wisdom in those words, however, Bryn thought. If they did make it out of this and back to Baden, they’d have no way to prove that this was anything other than a random attack. If they were to drag the whole empire into this, they would need some proof as to its involvement.

They pressed on, their pace slowing as their lack of sleep caught up with them. The morning turned to afternoon and they neared the base of the large hills that took up so much of the horizon. The grass tapered off as the ground began to rise, turning instead to looser dirt and brush. There were a few small stands of trees but more bushes and brush as they started into the hills. Further up the trees began to grow in small copses, thickening with elevation until the top of the hills were covered by them. Large rocks were strewn all around them and quite a few boulders dotted the rising landscape. They chose a rain-washed gully to make their ascent. The grade was too steep for them to continue at a jog, but Halam still kept a steady pace. They wound their way along the narrow passage and soon the grassy plains stretched out below them, the large forest they’d come through now just a large blot of green far behind them. The clouds parted and the sun beat down on them causing the sweat to roll off their faces in rivulets. Their shirts were soon stuck to their chests and backs. Halam called for a rest when they’d made it to a level amount of ground.

“Tossed about in the sea, running through forests, and now hiking up hills, this is really quite the outing,” Rodden jested after they’d eased out of their packs and began to pass the water skins around.

“Fun isn’t it?” Pader returned. “Remind me to do it more often.”

“What’s that,” Millen said, breaking the light moment.

He pointed out onto the grassy plains near the edge of the distant forest. The men squinted and held their arms up against the sun.

“Bryn, hand me your spyglass,” Willem said. Bryn reached into his jacket pocket and handed the glass over. Willem put it to his eye and stared for a moment, then passed it to Halam. “They’ve found our trail.”

“What! How could they?” Pader said, jumping to his feet to stare out at the land below them.

“Well, thirteen men going through a dark forest while dragging a stretcher will tend to leave traces,” Iago said as Halam handed him the glass.

“How many are there?” Pader asked. “Still just six?”

“Yes, still six,” Halam replied. “They’re coming on strong with their horses.”

“At that pace, I’d say they’ll be at these hills in no more than an hour,” Iago said, turning to look at Halam. “You’re still not set on the non-violent approach, I hope.”

“No, that hope vanished when they killed Sam. Now we do whatever we can to survive.”

“So we make a stand here then, right?” Millen asked. “If there’re only six of them and thirteen of us, it shouldn’t even be a contest.”

“Aye, and we have bows,” Dilon pointed out. “We can hit them while they climb up to us.”

“They’ll have to leave their horses at the base of the hills, either tied up or with someone to watch them,” Willem said.

“Could be also that they have more men coming up the other side of these hills as we stand here now,” Trey offered.

“That could be, but I don’t see how they could’ve gotten word out so quickly,” Halam replied. “No, I think for now it is just these six.” He thought for a minute before going on. “I think that we should climb higher and try to get up more into those trees toward the top. There’ll be more cover for us up there and our chances’ll improve.”

“Aye, that’s good thinking,” Iago agreed.

“Alright, then let’s move,” Halam said, shouldering his pack once again and taking the lead.

They climbed higher and were soon surrounded by the small copses of trees. They would provide some cover, but after another hour they’d be near the thicker trees of the summit. Every few minutes they’d turn and look down at the plains. The horsemen continued to ride hard, covering as much distance in a few minutes as had taken them an hour. They’d reach the hills and begin the climb sooner than any of them had previously thought. Sensing this, they moved faster.

By the time the copses thickened into groves and then swelled to woods, their pursuers had reached the base of the hills. Instead of dismounting and continuing on foot as they’d thought, however, the men rode their horses right up the same narrow gully they;d taken earlier.

“They’ll be on us a lot quicker than I realized,” Iago said when they saw the men still ahorse.

“Let’s get ready then,” Willem suggested. “The trees’ve thickened enough. We can take up positions with the bows and hope to shoot a couple of them out of the saddle before they’re upon us.”

“Alright,” Halam agreed, “Let’s make four groups of three. Those first shots with the bows’ll be decisive. Make them count. Let’s hope that only one man comes to each group. If not, aid the men nearest to you. Bryn,” he paused to find his nephew, “you stay close to me.”

Willem, Millen, and Conn took up a position on the far right amidst a thick stand of trees with several large bushes in front that provided good cover. Pader and Rodden dragged Fess over with them to a small copse to the left of them. Halam, Bryn, Dilon, and Flint took up a middle position around some trees growing thickly together while Iago, Trey, and Jal found a spot on the far left amidst a few large boulders and some trees. They were all spaced about ten feet apart from each other and the area in front of them was a largely open space with trees interspersed throughout; overall an ideal place to make a stand. They hunkered down to wait, their blades and bows at the ready.

After what seemed a long wait but in actuality was only minutes, they heard the sound of horses’ hooves on the dirt and rocky ground. The horses would have to wend their way between a thick copse of trees and a few boulders to come through a narrow path that the archers could focus in on.

The first horse came through at a quick trot and its rider was quickly taken by an arrow in the right breast just below the shoulder while a second later another arrow

landed in the horse's left flank. The animal reared up and spilled its rider to the ground before it ran off toward some trees. The man was only wounded and grasped the arrow with his hand, breaking the shaft off close to where it'd entered his chest. He quickly yelled something in Jongurian and another rider came through the narrow passage at a gallop, with yet another close behind. Two arrows sailed out to meet the first rider but both missed and he continued on toward them as a third arrow struck his steel breastplate and harmlessly bounced off. The second rider was not so lucky; an arrow struck him right in his unprotected chest and sent him sailing off the back of his horse to land with a loud thud on the hard ground, dead.

After that Bryn had a hard time keeping track of exactly what occurred. The rider that made it through rode up to the trees where Pader, Rodden, and Fess were and proceeded to swing down at them with his shortsword. Two more riders made it through unscathed, but the third was unhorsed when an arrow went through his leg and into his mount, causing the animal to rear up, throwing the man as the arrow snapped off in the beast. The Jongurians shouted out to one another and quickly identified the four areas that the men were hiding at. The other two horsemen fanned out to their right and each rode toward a group of men. The man that took the arrow in the chest came on toward Willem, but he put another arrow next to the first, and this time the man fell to the ground and didn't get up. The man with the leg wound came up behind the other man fighting on foot, taking his own bow out.

To the right, Halam pushed Bryn to the ground behind him as the man on horseback savagely swung his longsword down at them. Halam parried as best he could with his shortsword and tried to return some blows, but his shorter blade was no match for the

man a horse, and his blows fell short. Flint came up with his hand-axe and tried to slash at the animal's legs, but the horse was bred for war and kicked and bit at him while the Jongurian knocked his clumsy blows aside. Dilon raised his bow and knocked an arrow, taking his time to aim carefully. His first shot had landed harmlessly on the man's breastplate, so he wanted to get a shot at the man's exposed throat or face. He was about to let loose when an arrow took him in the stomach and he fell to the ground clutching at the arrow in pain.

Iago was having more luck blocking the attacks of the mounted Jongurian in front of him, his longsword being more equal to the task. The Jongurian swung at them with a shortsword. Trey and Jal were not much help with their daggers, but they tried to slash at the animal's legs, to no avail. Iago yelled for Jal to take the bow at his feet and try that, but as Jal lifted it up from the ground the Jongurian caught it with his shortsword and sliced it in half.

To the left, Pader swung his dirk as best he could to block the swings from the Jongurian's shortsword. The man was still a horse and swinging wildly with no concern for accuracy. Rodden cowered behind him and tried to block Fess, who could only lie by helplessly and watch. Willem, Millen, and Conn rushed over from their position to help. Willem had better luck blocking the wild blows of the man and even getting a few return thrusts in while Conn swung away with his hand-axe. He managed to slice the man in the leg, but it was as if he didn't feel the cut or didn't care, for he kept swinging wildly, although he appeared to slow somewhat. Willem blocked another few swings then managed to slice the man's arm above the elbow, causing him to yell out in pain. Seeing an opening, Millen rushed in with his dagger to stab the horse, but the Jongurian was

quicker. He swung down with his sword and sliced Millen clear through the shoulder and half-way down his chest before the blade stopped and the man pulled it free. Millen toppled to the ground, blood pouring out around him.

Angered, Willem and Conn came on faster. Conn was able to hit the man in the leg again, nearly taking it off below the knee. That gave Willem an opening, and he slipped his shortsword up between the man's ribs. All of the strength left the Jongurian at that point. He gave a few more feeble swings with his sword, then kicked his horse away, returning the way he'd come.

Rodden bent down to see if there was anything that could be done for Millen, but his wounds were too grievous and he was dead, his lifeless eyes staring up in silent surprise. Rodden and Conn grabbed hold of Fess's stretcher and pulled it further back from the fight while Willem and Pader ran to help out the others against the two Jongurians still attacking from horseback. Willem made it over to Halam and Flint and began to block the swings of the horseman there.

Pader moved further on to get to Iago, Trey, and Jal, but before he could move too far and he felt his dirk drop to the ground and he looked over to see an arrow sticking from his right shoulder. He moved his gaze outward and saw the Jongurian with blood coming from his leg knocking another arrow and getting ready to take aim. Pader took his own bow and grabbed an arrow from the sheaf at his back, all the while grimacing in pain. The Jongurian fired but Pader was able to dodge behind some trees. When he came out he had an arrow knocked. The Jongurian was in the process of pulling another arrow from his sheaf when Pader's arrow took him square in the chest. Blood came from

the man's mouth as he fell forward onto his face, breaking the arrow in half as he struck the hard ground.

Pader grabbed the shaft of the arrow in his arm and broke it off, then rushed over to aid Iago, who was tiring quickly. It was only him against the horsemen as Trey and Jal's daggers were of little use. Constantly blocking the powerful downward swings of the Jongurian was becoming more difficult for the old Mercenian, and he didn't think he could keep it up much longer. Pader rushed over, but with the broken arrow shaft still protruding from his right shoulder he was barely able to raise his arm over his head to swing at their attacker.

Halam was having the same problem with his opponent. It was all he could do to block the attacks, and he and Flint had few chances to swing in return. Willem came to their aid, but they were still overwhelmed. When they tried to stab at the horse so as to even the odds, it proved just as fruitless. They were tiring quickly while the Jongurians' attacks showed little sign of slowing.

From nowhere an arrow buried itself up to the fletches in the Jongurian's throat. Halam and Willem gave pause and looked about, wondering where the arrow had come from, but could see no one. The Jongurian clutched at his throat as blood spilled down his shiny breastplate, then kicked his horse to ride away. He didn't make it far before he slumped over then fell completely from the saddle, landing hard on the ground to lay still.

Now only the one horseman in front of Iago and Pader remained. He gave a few more swings of his sword, but he too had seen the arrow sail out to take his companion, and looked around cautiously. As he readied his arm for another swing an arrow slammed into it. He dropped his sword and clutched at his arm with his other hand, an

angry scowl appearing on his face as he glanced about the trees further up the hill. He kicked his horse and steered it back the way he'd come. Another arrow sailed past his head as he turned around the boulders and vanished from sight.

The men kept their weapons ready while they turned every which way looking for where these attacks had come from and who it was that had chosen to aid them.

"You can put your weapons down now, I think," a voice said from further up the hill. "I don't think those two will be coming back."

They turned to see an Adjurian step out from behind some trees. He was dressed in brown woolen pants and shirt. His jacket and boots appeared to be made from some type of hide and were also a light brown. He had a longbow slung over his right shoulder and a shortsword sheathed at his belt.

"Who *are* you?" Pader asked as the man stepped out of the trees toward them.

"The name's Jurin Millos," he said as he approached, meeting each of their eyes. His hair was brown and long, tied in a topknot and spilling down past his shoulders. He was clean shaven, but had many small scars spread around his face and another larger one around his throat where it had obviously been slit sometime in the past. They only added to his mysterious aura. His eyes were small and brown and piercing. He walked right past the men without saying anything else and knelt down next to one of the fallen Jongurians. He grabbed the man's chin and turned his face toward him, then dug around in the man's pockets for a minute.

"Is that really necessary?" Rodden asked him.

He turned and gave Rodden one of the coldest looks that Bryn had ever seen, then turned back to the man's pockets. He scattered through some loose coins, looked at a scrap of paper for a moment, then having found nothing of value, he stood up.

"Necessary, no," he replied, wiping his hands together. "I was just curious as to who would want you dead is all."

"You're an Adjurian," Bryn blurted out, then immediately felt silly for stating the obvious.

The man gave a slight smile as he looked at Bryn. "You're quick, lad."

Halam stepped up toward him and the man tensed. "We thank you for coming to our aid. Those men were too much for us alone."

"I could hear that half-a-league off," he replied, "and could see it as soon as I approached."

"Do you know these men?" Halam asked.

Jurin looked down at the body again for a moment. "Aye. Not personally, but I know who they are." He looked up at Halam again then passed his gaze over the others. "Tell me, why would Zhou Lao want you men dead?"

"Zhou Lao? We've never heard of the man," Pader answered.

"Well, he seems to have heard of you," Jurin chuckled. "He never sends men to kill unless he has a reason."

"We're sorry, but this is all a bit much," Halam said after they thought about what the man had said for a minute. "We just fought for our lives and lost one of our friends and a few more of us are injured."

“Yes,” Jurin said, seeming to notice Millen crumpled up and laying in a puddle of blood for the first time. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to make it sooner.” He looked over at Pader. “How’s your arm?”

“I’ll manage,” Pader replied.

“Will your friends there?” Jurin asked, pointing toward Dilon and Fess.

“How are you, Fess?” Rodden asked, moving over to look at his leg up close. It had begun bleeding heavily again during the fight.

“I’m cold,” he replied, his lips quivering.

“Blood loss,” Jurin said, bending down to take a look at the leg himself. “Looks like the cut is close to the artery.”

“Dilon’s hurt real bad,” Conn said further away as he crouched down beside the wounded man. The arrow that had struck him was embedded half-way up the shaft in his stomach. Blood was everywhere and Dilon was breathing frantically.

Jurin looked over at Halam and Pader. “He won’t make it.”

“Wait a minute,” Pader said, coming up to the man. “We don’t even know who you are. And what is an Adjurian doing in the middle of Jonguria?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Jurin replied with a smile.

“This isn’t funny, people are dying here.”

“Aye, and more will die if we choose to stand around here getting to know one another better. I suggest that we head out of here and do it fast. Those men won’t be the only ones after you, and once that rider gets back to Zhou, you can be sure that you’ll have a lot more men fast on your heels.”

“Where should we go?” Halam asked.

Jurin looked at them all for a long moment, then shook his head, seemingly upset. “I know a place that’s close by that will be safe, but after that I can’t promise anything.”

“We’d be grateful for whatever assistance you can give us.”

Jurin looked hard at Halam for another moment before turning and heading back up the hill and into the trees. After a few moments he turned back to them all. “Well, are you coming or not?”

“Just like that?” Halam asked. “Can’t you give us a minute? We’ve got three wounded men here.”

“No, just two,” Jurin said, pointing down at Dilon for a moment before turning up the hill. “That one’s dead.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Jurin led them further up the hill. When asked where he was leading them, his only reply was that it was someplace safe and not far away. It was all they could do to fall in behind him and trust what he said. Iago took a look at Pader’s shoulder while they moved. They were lucky that the arrowhead was not barbed and they were able to pull it out, covering and binding the wound as best they could with a length of cloth ripped from one of the raincoats they’d stored in the packs. Jurin wouldn’t allow them time to bury Dilon and Millen, not if they wanted to follow him at least, so they quickly grabbed the bow and sheaf of arrows from Dilon and the dagger that Iago had given Millen before leaving the area. In less than a day they’d already lost three members of their party. How many more would they lose over the next day, Bryn wondered as he looked back at the bodies scattered over the bloody ground.

Fess groaned less and less as they came down the back side of the hill. His face was growing paler and no matter how they wrapped his leg the blood wouldn't stop flowing. Conn and Jal picked up and carried the stretcher for a time, keeping the leg elevated as much as possible to see if that would slow the flow of blood, but it did little to help. They had no needle and thread, or they could have stitched up the wound. That knowledge only made the situation more frustrating. If they didn't get him some help soon he'd not make it through the rest of the day.

When they reached the top of the hill they were able to get an idea of what lay ahead. All around them on the other side were more hills covered with trees which gradually flattened out into grassy plains that stretched far into the distance.

"It won't be much further now," Jurin said as he started down.

"You seem to know this area well," Pader said from behind him as they began the descent. "How long have you lived around here?"

"Oh, I'd say for the past ten years or so," Jurin replied.

"Ten years in Jonguria, that is something. How did you come to be here in the first place?" Pader continued.

"The same way that most Adjurians came to be here, the war. When the fighting was done instead of going back, I stayed."

"Why would you do that?" Trey asked.

"There wasn't much for me for me to go back to in Adjuria," Jurin replied.

"But after the war one of the stipulations of the peace treaty was that Adjurians wouldn't be allowed in Jonguria without permission," Halam said.

“Aye, those first few years were a bit tough. Jongurians have long memories, so when they saw me, most often they’d try and attack me. So I took to the forests and the hills rather quickly. Been here ever since.”

“Where did you fight in the war?” Iago asked. “I was at the Baishur River myself.”

“There was some heavy fighting there.” Jurin looked over at him. “No, I was a lowly soldier in the king’s army stationed at Bindao. Didn’t see much fighting.”

“Bindao, that’s where I fought,” Halam said.

“Aye, and many like you,” Jurin replied, moving further on down the hill.

Halam frowned at that but kept his mouth shut. Jurin certainly wasn’t much for words, so it wouldn’t do much good to press him.

Willem broke the silence. “Tell us about this man Zhou...”

“Zhou Lao,” Jurin finished for him. “He’s trouble.”

“Well, we know that much already,” Pader said. “But we don’t have any idea who the man is or why he’d want us dead. The only Jongurian we’ve had a face-to-face meeting with while here was a man name Yuan Jibao in Weiling. He claimed to be an imperial official, but flatly refused our requests to renew trade or speak with anyone else. Shortly after that he made it clear that we were to get back on our ship and leave Jonguria immediately.”

“Trade, eh? That’s what this is all about?” Jurin replied with a slight smile.

“We were delegates to a trade conference in Baden which met to discuss the possibility of opening up trade relations with Jonguria again,” Halam explained. “It’s been twenty years and most of the country is eager for it. We came up with a plan that a majority of the provinces could agree on, then were sent by the king to present our

proposal to an imperial representative in Weiling. We thought that we'd get a more receptive audience than the one we received."

"I've never been to Weiling and have never heard of this man Yuan, and sure don't know much about trade," Jurin replied. "But I do know that what you say is not enough to have Zhou's men after you."

"There is something else," Bryn said. When they turned to look at him he pressed on. "In Weiling we might have seen Grandon Fray."

Jurin stopped and turned to look at Bryn, then the others. "Grandon Fray, eh? Well, that could lead to some trouble now couldn't it."

"Well, we don't know that for sure," Pader admitted. "The boy saw a man that looked like an Adjurian that resembled Grandon, that's all."

Jurin continued on down the hill. "Of all you've told me, that's the only thing that might explain why Zhou is hunting you down. If Grandon Fray got off Desolatia and is now in Jonguria, something big is going on. A boy that spotted him in Weiling might be just enough of a concern to him to want you all dead. And in this part of Jonguria if you want someone dead without the emperor knowing about it, you go to Zhou Lao."

"Tell us about this man Zhou," Willem said.

Jurin took a deep breath. "Where to begin," he said, pausing a few moments before he spoke. "Zhou was a young peasant when he joined the imperial armies at the start of the war. They sent him to Bindao where he somehow survived the siege. He was part of the force that retook the city for a time before again being pushed out. After that he led a unit that specialized in hit-and-run tactics against the supply wings of the Adjurian army. He was very good and caused a lot of damage."

“When the war came to an end Zhou wasn’t quite ready to stop fighting. Lots of hardened fighters were kicked out of the army and told to go back home to their fields. After ten years of fighting you can imagine that didn’t appeal to many of them. There was a lot of anger directed toward the emperor about how the war was waged, especially in the southern provinces. He’d lost a lot of face with the people over how the war with Adjuria turned out. It wasn’t seen as a victory by most people, even though the Adjurian armies had withdrawn. His hold on power was fragile after that, and several attempts were made on his life, including one spectacular military coup that nearly succeeded before the plotters were discovered and put to death. After that it was all that the emperor could do to secure his areas of power in the north.”

“We had no idea it was that bad in Jonguria following the war,” Pader said.

“I’m not surprised,” Jurin said. “It’s not the kind of news the emperor would want known.”

“Then what happened?” Bryn asked eagerly.

“Well, let’s see,” Jurin said, thinking for a few moments. “Many of the disgruntled soldiers who suddenly had nothing to do and a lot of time to do it in formed into rebel groups which opposed the imperial government. But in reality they spent most of their time terrorizing the countryside. For the past ten years large areas of the south have largely been controlled by one rebel group or another. Most often they fight against one another more than they fight against the emperor, but lately their attacks against each other have lessened while their cooperation in concerted attacks on the government have increased. It’s as though there’s some kind of new leadership binding them together,” Jurin said.

“This man Zhou,” Willem said.

Jurin said nothing, just kept walking down the hill.

“So you think that this man Zhou was tasked by Grandon Fray to kill us before we made it back to Adjuria to report that we think the boy in our group may have spotted the False King? I’m sorry,” Pader chuckled, “but it just seems a little far-fetched to me.”

“That may be,” Jurin replied, “but we know that it’ Zhou’s men that you killed back there. You see, each rebel group marks itself in some way, sort of like a badge of honor to identify them to the people. Those back there had the striking snake mark of Zhou branded onto their horses.”

“Maybe some other men had stolen those horses,” Flint said.

“Highly unlikely,” Jurin replied. “No, you have Zhou after you. And he won’t stop until you’re dead, that’s for certain. Now that you’ve killed four of his men, he’ll hunt you all the way into Adjuria if he has to.”

“Five,” Rodden said quietly, “we’ve killed five. Another man we killed last night in their camp.”

“Five then, it makes no difference. If you kill one of Zhou’s men, he will hunt you down. He’s very protective of his men and because of that they are very loyal to him. He’s one of the fiercest of the rebel leaders, but also one of the most respected.”

“Is there any way that we could reason with the man?” Halam asked.

Jurin laughed a deep throaty laugh. “No, no chance of that, I’m afraid. Zhou never negotiates. He saw what negotiations brought Jonguria after the war, nothing but despair for the majority of the people and a government that is more mistrustful of any perceived threat to its power than ever.”

“So what are we to do then?” Willem asked.

“You’re best bet is to somehow get back to Adjuria before Zhou catches up with you. Catching a ship out of Bindao is out of the question; most in that city are loyal to Zhou and word’ll have already spread that he’s looking for a group of Adjurians. You could try to make it to a northern port, but most likely you’d just run into some northern warlord and have the same problems. Your best bet lies west toward Waigo. That city still firmly supports the emperor and stays out of all regional politics, much like your province of Ithmia and the city of Fadurk. It just may be possible that you can find a reasonable voice there to help you. Wen will know more about that.”

“Wen?” Halam asked.

“Wen Wubai,” Jurin replied. “He’s the man I’m taking you to now. He helped me out when I was in a similar situation ten years ago. We’ve had a bit of a falling out since then, and I haven’t seen him in several years, so I can’t be sure.”

“Any help you or he can give us we’ll kindly take,” Halam replied. “You’ve already done more than enough by helping us out back there. Thank you.”

Jurin gave a slight nod over his shoulder then moved down the hill. Bryn’s head was awl with all that Jurin had said. Like most Adjurians, he had no idea that the emperor was so weakened following the war. None of this news had ever reached past the Isthmus, and the idea that there were rebel groups and warlords that virtually controlled large areas of the country came as a big surprise to him. Of greatest concern, however, was this man Zhou Lao. From what Jurin had told them, this was a man that you did not want to anger. They’d already done that by killing five of his men. Bryn took some small satisfaction knowing that they’d killed two more of his than he had of

theirs, but then he quickly thought that they were now eleven when they had been fifteen just two days before. The way Jurin talked, after another few days they might all be dead. If only he hadn't spotted Grandon Fray, or the man that he at least thought was Grandon Fray. It was becoming more and more likely as events unfolded, however, that the man he saw was actually the False King, freed somehow from his exile on Desolatia. All of their troubles seemed to be stemming from that one brief moment and for more times than he could now count Bryn wished again that he had never left Eston.

* * * * *

Dusk was approaching when Jurin brought them to a stop. They had come completely down the backside of the hill by then and had spent the past several hours winding around the base of several other hills in a narrow valley. The hills rose up steeply around them and were blanketed by an immensity of small rocks which had rained down from above to completely cover the ground around them. Higher up large pine trees soared toward the sky. Several of these steep hills formed one after another to create a myriad of narrow and winding canyon paths between them which caused the travelers to feel as though they were trapped between walls enclosing them from all sides.

"We'll find Wen around here," Jurin said to them. It took another hour of poking into one small gully after another before Jurin finally seemed to think that they were on the right path. They walked through an especially narrow passage between two steep hills which came to an abrupt dead-end in a small clearing. Large pine trees crowded together and through the darkness they could see a small wooden cottage with a faint light coming from the small window set next to the door.

Jurin motioned for them to remain back while he went to the door and slowly knocked. “Wen,” he said loudly to the closed door, “you home?”

“When aren’t I home,” a voice said from behind them in Adjurian. The group turned suddenly, startled that someone had somehow come up behind them in such a small area, although Bryn wasn’t able to make out the man standing somewhere behind them in the darkness of the narrow canyon.

Jurin walked away from the door and back toward the way they’d come. “Wen, is that you? It’s Jurin.”

“I figured that out when I heard you tramping through these hills hours ago,” the voice answered. “You never did learn how to move silently.”

“I’m still trying,” Jurin replied before turning to motion at the group behind him. “These men were attacked by Zhou’s men. Two are injured, one quite badly.”

“While another two lay dead beside the four you felled.”

“So you were there then?” Jurin asked the darkness.

“I saw.”

“Will you help us, then?”

An old man stepped out of the darkness at that point. “And bring down Zhou’s wrath on me?”

Jurin didn’t answer. The man looked them over slowly and thoughtfully. He was Jongurian, Bryn could tell from his slanting eyes. At first Bryn thought the man must be in his late-sixties or early-seventies judging by the whiteness of his hair which hung down past his shoulders, but his face also possessed a smoothness indicative of a much younger man. A large white mustache grew between his small nose and lips, the ends of

which hung down in long strands well past his chin. He wore dun-colored pants and shirt made of wool with a thicker vest that was darker in color. He didn't appear to be carrying any weapons at all.

After the man had judged them silently for a few moments he moved over to where Fess was laid out on the stretcher. He was shorter than them all by a good few inches and appeared a little stoop-shouldered, but he moved gracefully, Bryn saw, and he got the impression that the man could be much older than he originally thought, but just as easily much younger.

Fess had been nodding on and off for the past two hours as they moved down and around the hills. The man kneeled down and put his fingers to Fess's neck to check the heartbeat, then gently unwrapped the bandaging around the leg. He shook his head and stood up to look at Jurin. "He's lost too much blood already. I don't think he'll make it through the night."

Jurin nodded, but Pader spoke up.

"There must be something that you can do for him," he said loudly, pressing around the others to stand in front of the man.

"If I could I'd go back and tell him not to have let his leg get cut," the short Jongurian replied straight-faced.

"Do you make light of us then?" Pader said angrily, thinking that he was being made fun of.

"Not at all. You men are far from home and in a lot of danger. There's no humor in that at all."

"There's nothing you can do for him?" Halam asked in a more conciliatory tone.

The man shook his head. “If you would have made it here a few hours ago and I sewed up the wound, there may have been a chance, but then he would have had to stay here and rest for several days. From what I saw this afternoon, you don’t have that much time.”

“So you saw those men attack us then, but did nothing?” Iago asked.

“Did nothing? No. I watched, and waited. Jurin was nearby, and he’s always had a soft spot for those in trouble. Besides,” he said, spreading his arms down around him in a sweeping motion, “I’m unarmed, what help could I possibly be.”

Jurin scoffed but said nothing.

“Is there no help that you can give us then?” Halam asked.

“I can fill your water skins and give you a bit of food. That shoulder could use some looking at,” he said, pointing toward Pader. “But other than that, no, I don’t think I can help you much. You men are already dead.”

“What do you mean by that?” Willem asked, but the man was already moving between them and toward the cottage. He stepped through the door, leaving it open behind him. Willem began to move quickly after him but Jurin caught his arm.

“No,” he said, looking into Willem’s eyes. He turned to look at Pader. “We’ll get that arm stitched up,” he said, then turned to Jal and Conn. “Bring your friend inside; there may be something we can do for him yet. The rest of you, find a comfortable spot to rest outside. There’s a small spring that flows down those rocks behind the cottage, and I’ll bring some food out in a bit.” He motioned with his arm for Pader to come with him inside, and Jal and Conn picked up the stretcher and followed behind.

Bryn looked up at Halam after the door closed. “It looks like we’re still on our own, uncle.”

“Aye lad, that it does,” Halam said as he tousled Bryn’s hair. “But don’t you worry about it, we’ll be just fine. Use tonight to get some sleep and we’ll start out west again in the morning.”

“Will we do like Jurin says and head to Waigo?” Bryn asked.

“We’ll head in that direction, aye. Whether we go into the city or not, I’m not sure. I think we still need to talk that one over between us all.”

The men sprawled out onto the grass beside the cottage for some much-needed rest. Bryn and Trey walked around collecting all of the water skins and filled them from the bubbling spring that flowed down between the rocks of the hill. Behind the cottage was a small pen with a couple of goats and chickens grazing quietly. A few rows of vegetables were planted a few feet away, and Bryn could make out a few tomato plants growing tall in the darkness. After a time Pader, Jal, and Conn came out of the cottage. Pader no longer had the bloody cloth around his arm where the arrow had entered. Jurin or Wen had sewn up the hole and now a small line of thread around the red and puffed up skin was all that marked the wound. Jal and Conn carried a handful of apples and some cheese to them, laying it out on the ground around them where it was soon eaten up by the hungry men.

“So he helped with your arm at least,” Iago said between bites of apple.

“He did that much,” Pader replied. “I was finally able to convince him to sew up Fess’s leg as well, but he still insists that it won’t do any good. Says the blood loss is just too great, and I think Jurin agrees with him.”

“We should be grateful that he’s doing that much,” Halam said. “It’s a great risk for him to aid us. This man Zhou that is after us doesn’t sound like the type to ignore something like that. If he learns about the help we received here, this man will be hunted down the same as us.”

“I have a feeling this man is more than he seems,” Willem said. “A man his age living alone out here in an area that sees marauding rebels? I think he can take care of himself better than any of us think.”

“You got a good look at him inside that cottage, Pader” Iago said, “what does he look like?”

“Well, he’s an old man,” Pader replied. “But he moves quickly. There was no shake to his fingers when he stitched me up, as I’d expect from a man his age.” He paused for a second and looked up at the night sky. “I thought that I’d be able to tell more about him in the light, but I couldn’t. He looks old but seems young at the same time. There are no lines on his face as I’d expect from a man with hair as white as his, and yet his hands are gnarled with age, but also quite strong. While he walks and sits with a stoop in his shoulders, he bent down over Fess with no trouble at all.”

“So he’s more than he appears,” Rodden said.

Pader said nothing, just looked around at the rest of them and they were each left alone to puzzle out their thoughts as to the mysterious man that they’d just met. After a while longer the light inside the cottage went out and Jurin came outside and sat down next to them on the grass.

“Fess will stay inside tonight, but I don’t think he’ll improve any. He’s asleep now, but Wen doesn’t think he’ll wake up in the morning.” He looked around at them. “How are the rest of you holding up?”

“As good as can be expected, I suppose,” Rodden answered.

“Aye, it’s been a trying day, best to get some sleep. We’ll have a long trek ahead of us tomorrow.”

The men spread out and tried to find as comfortable a spot as they could. Bryn took a spot next to Jurin.

“Who is this man Wen?” he asked when they lay down.

“I’ve asked myself that question many times over the years, lad,” Jurin answered. “I’ve known him for ten years now but he’s still as mysterious to me as he probably appears to you now.”

“How did you meet him?”

“That is a long story and would best be told after you’ve gotten some rest.”

“I’m not tired,” Bryn lied, turning to lie on his side and face Jurin.

Seeing that the boy wouldn’t take no for an answer, Jurin let out a deep breath and stared up at the stars for a few moments before speaking.

“After the peace was concluded, the soldiers at Bindao boarded ships for the voyage back to Adjuria. Most were excited and couldn’t wait to get back, but I felt apprehensive about it. There was nothing for me to head back to. I had no family to speak of and no prospects. Most likely I’d trade the squalor of the battlements for the squalor of the city streets. So I decided to stay in Jonguria. In the confusion of the turnover it was easy to don a dirty cloak and blend in with the Jongurians spilling into the city. I hid out until

most of the soldiers had departed, then I too left the city, although by the back gates, not the docks. I had no idea where I would go or what I would do, so I headed toward the forests and the hills.”

“Much of the countryside surrounding Bindao had been devastated by the war. No attacks had taken place here, but the landscape was stripped of anything that could supply the armies camped around the city. Death and starvation were everywhere. To compound matters, the soldiers that had laid siege to the city decided for the most part not to go back to their homes and rebuild. This is when the various rebel groups began to form. They were small at first, just a few bands of former soldiers who chose the easy life of plunder over the more rigorous task of farming. As they rode around terrorizing the land, their numbers swelled, primarily from the dispossessed that their actions, as well as the war, had created. When I first took to the wilderness after leaving Bindao I had plenty from hunting and fishing to keep me satisfied, and lived well for more than a year. With the swelling number of refugees from rebel raids, however, I soon found myself competing with peasants. The forests began to fill with wandering common folk. The emperor did nothing to help them; he was embroiled in his own struggles around the capital and couldn’t pull his attention away to focus on the problems in the south. It wasn’t long before my presence became known.”

“Soon the rebels began to tire of just tormenting the peasants on their farms and turned on those that had fled into the forests and hills. When it was learned that an Adjurian soldier had taken refuge in this same area, the rebels couldn’t hunt me down fast enough. The attack came one day while I was fishing along the Dongshui River. Out of nowhere I was struck in the back by an arrow, which had been delivered with such force

that it punched all the way through my side before coming to a bloody rest on the ground before me. More began to rain down around me, so I fled. I was no match for the men on their horses though, and they soon ran me down. I knew little of the Jongurian tongue at that time, so whatever questions they asked of me I couldn't understand. The leader of their small group ran me through with his sword and tossed my body into the river.”

“Somehow I managed to stay alive and after several miles of floating down the churning river was able to pull myself out onto the bank. I had two holes completely through me at that point so I found a spot that seemed nice and lay down to die. It didn't take long for my eyes to close and the darkness to take me. Much to my surprise I awoke to find a Jongurian crouching over me and tending to my wounds. The blood loss had been great enough that I passed out, but not enough to kill me. He spoke Adjurian and told me to lie back, which I did, passing out again. The next I awoke I was in a small cottage and heavily bandaged.”

“Right here,” Bryn said anxiously.

“Aye. The man that found me was Wen. He spent the next couple of weeks keeping a close eye on me as I recovered. If he'd not happened upon me on that riverbank when he did I'd surely have died of my wounds. I asked him many times why he chose to help me that day, but he has never yet given me a clear answer. When I was strong enough to head back to the forests, he urged me to go back home to Adjuria. ‘The country had become too dangerous since the war, even for its own citizens’, he told me, ‘and especially for a foreigner.’ I didn't take his advice and was soon hunting and fishing in the same spots as before. It wasn't long for roving bands of rebels to find me again. This time I was able to hear them coming. There were four of them armed with

shortswords and bows, while all I had was a bow and a dagger. In all of the years that I was stationed at Bindao I saw little fighting, since that was the nature of a siege, and had no formal training before the war. Needless to say, those rebels made short work of me, slashing my throat after they had driven their swords into me several times.”

“So that is how you got that scar,” Bryn said, holding his hand up to his own throat.

“And many more besides it,” Jurin answered. The night was growing cool and the moon had moved quite a ways through the sky, but still Jurin continued his tale.

“Again I was left for dead but somehow survived, and again Wen found me and nursed me back to health. He didn’t seem at all surprised or angry that the same fate had befallen me. I quickly found that Wen was a man of few words. Where he learned Adjurian, I still do not know, and even though he can communicate with a foreigner, he doesn’t do so very often.”

“When I was healed up for a second time and ready to depart, Wen stopped me. He told me that I would be attacked again, if not in a week or a month then in a year, for as long as I continued to stay in this land. I wouldn't be so lucky to have him find me again, he made it clear. ‘Don’t worry, I can take care of myself,’ I assured him. ‘That’s what I’m afraid of,’ he replied. As I smiled and turned to walk away he blocked my path with a long stick. When I tried to walk around he brought it down on my other side. I chuckled, and turned to walk another way, but each way that I turned he was blocking my path with that stick. Growing tired of this childish game, I went to grab the stick, but faster than I thought it possible for a man his age to move he had brought the stick out of my reach and down on my back, knocking me to the ground. I angrily got up and lunged at him to take the stick, but he effortlessly blocked my feeble attempts with barely more

than a flick of his wrist. As I was knocked down again I noticed bruises forming on my arms and legs, and some of my fresh wounds had come open, staining my shirt red. Wen told me that if I was so ready to die than I could leave now, but if I wanted to survive in this land than I needed to stay. That was the day that my training began.”

“What did he teach you,” Bryn said excitedly, barely able to wait for the story to continue.

“I think that’s enough for tonight, lad,” Jurin replied. “We’ve already been talking for far too long when what our bodies really need is sleep.”

“But I’m not tired,” Bryn argued as he stifled a yawn.

“You will be in the morning,” Jurin said as he rolled over on his side, ending the discussion.

Bryn lay down on his back looking up at the stars while in his mind he imagined the old man inside the cottage thrusting a stick back-and-forth at the Jongurians they fought earlier in the day, defeating all of them without so much as breaking a sweat. He smiled and soon drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

The sky was still dark when Bryn was shaken awake.

“Come on Bryn, wake up, it’s time to move out,” Halam was saying over him.

Bryn sat up and wearily rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He felt more tired than he had in days. Looking around he saw that he was not the only one moving sluggishly. Rodden and Trey were shuffling around while they tried to get everything they could into the four packs they had. Iago leaned against a nearby tree with his eyes closed, while Flint was kicking at Jal and Conn while entreating them to get up, without much result.

A faint light could be seen in the sky above them, the sun dawning somewhere to the east. Bryn turned to see that a light was shining from the cottage, and a moment later Pader and Jurin stepped out, closing the door behind them. Pader walked up to Halam and they exchanged a few words, then Halam called for everyone's attention.

“Fess died sometime in the night. Wen did what he could to sew up the wound on his leg, but the blood loss was too great. That leaves only ten of us now since we came ashore three days ago.” He paused for a few moments to look around at the men. Most were not surprised that Fess had died, and probably expected that more of them would share the same fate during the coming days.

“After hearing that this rebel Zhou has wide support in Bindao, I think it is out of the question that we head further south. Jurin has explained to me that we are now well north of the city and between the two main roads that run from Bindao to the cities of Xi'lao and Waigo. I think that our best chance lies in passing the westernmost road and meeting up with the Dongshui River. We can follow it to the base of the Xishan Mountains and from there make our way to Waigo, where we may find some help. The emperor still enjoys the support of that city, and our chances of finding an audience sympathetic to our plight is higher there than anywhere else. If that plan doesn't work out, we'll still be close to the Isthmus. If we can get over the mountains there is a good chance we can flag down a passing Adjurian fishing boat.” Halam paused, letting the words sink in. “I think this is our best chance to stay alive.”

No one said anything. Perhaps it was because it was so early in the morning and so much had happened over the previous few days or that no one else had a better idea of

what to do. Either way, no voices were raised in protest. Of the five men that had wanted to head to Bindao, one was dead and the other four kept their mouths shut.

Halam motioned toward Jurin who stood slightly behind him. “Jurin has agreed to show us the way to the river, and may accompany us to Waigo as well. Our chances of running into Zhou’s men once we get to the river and head north will go down. They mainly stick to the areas around Bindao. So today will be critical and that is why we are starting so early. If we can get to that river before midday, then all of us may yet get back home.”

“What about the old man?” Conn asked, and a few of the others nodded their head.

“Wen has given us what help he can,” Jurin replied. “He’s loaded us up with enough food to see us to Waigo so that we won’t have to forage along the way and given us some medical supplies so that if there are more injuries like those that Fess had, they won’t prove fatal. This is all that we can ask of him.”

A few of the men grumbled, but otherwise kept quiet. “Alright,” Halam said, “let’s gather up our things and get moving. We’ve got a long way to go today, and the chances of being spotted by Zhou’s men are high.”

They picked up their things, which weren’t much, and moved back through the trees the way they’d come. The narrow canyons were very dark, but Jurin took the lead and they made good time. By the time the sun had risen enough so that they could see well in front of them they had left the steep canyon walls behind and entered an area more valleys than hills. Bryn’s feet were already tired and all he wanted to do was sit down and rest, but each time he felt that way he made himself think about the scar that ran the length of Jurin’s throat and his feet continued to step one after another.

It was midday when they came to the road. They'd seen it from the last hill they came down, stretching as far as they could see both north and south. It looked just like the road from three days ago, all hard-packed dirt and well-worn. Bryn remembered all too clearly what had happened the last time they crossed a road, and hoped beyond reason that the same fate wouldn't befall them this time. There were no trees running to within ten feet of the road as there were with the last one. After that final hill only grassy plains stretched on into the distance. If there were any of Zhou's men, or any Jongurians for that matter, coming down the road, there would be nothing that the men could do to hide themselves.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Iago said when they began trudging down the hill. "There's no cover to speak of in all directions once we get down in those plains."

"What, not so quick to pull that sword out again, Iago?" Rodden quipped. "That's all you talked about for the day before we were attacked."

"Aye, and during that attack I found out my sword arm isn't quite what it was ten years ago," Iago replied. "It is one thing to train soldiers from the safety of a yard and quite another to be in the thick of battle once again."

"There's nothing that we can do," Halam interrupted, indicating the road. "If any Jongurians come, then they come. We'll deal with it as it happens."

No Jongurians did come. They came down the hill and walked across the grassland then all crossed the road at the same time. There was no point in doing it in groups or posting lookouts. If someone was around they would see them from a league off. But no one did come, and they were soon crossing the grassy plain on the other side of the road.

“We should be at the Dongshui River in less than an hour,” Jurin told them. “It’s a very wide river, and I wouldn’t want to attempt crossing it this time of year. Although the Xishan Mountains don’t get much snow, they get enough to still produce a powerful runoff.”

It was actually less than an hour that they came to the river. Traversing such flat ground, they saw it well before they came to it. As Jurin said, it was wide, fast-moving, and loud. After filling their water skins and splashing the cool water on their faces, the men began to follow it north.

“Why is it called the Dongshui River,” Bryn asked Jurin as they walked.

“It’s Jongurian,” Jurin replied. “It means east river.”

“And Xishan Mountains, what does that mean,” Bryn asked.

“‘Xi’ means west, and ‘shan’ means mountain,” Jurin answered.

“So west mountain,” Bryn replied.

“Or western mountains,” Jurin said. “Jongurian is not too difficult to learn when you get some of the basics. It is the pronunciation that still plagues me to this day, not that I have many opportunities to practice it on anyone, mind you.”

“Did Wen teach you?” Bryn asked.

“Yes. I picked up some basic words and phrases during my time at Bindao, but nothing substantial. While Wen taught me weapons and the martial arts during the day, he was adamant that I train my mind at night.”

“Martial arts?” Bryn asked confusedly.

“Yes, the art of using your body as a weapon. The fists and feet can be more powerful and much faster than any weapon.”

“Can you teach me?” Bryn said excitedly.

Jurin laughed. “Perhaps when we stop tonight I can show you some basics.”

The river stretched north just the same as the road did. They were far enough away from it to not be seen, but the land was flat and so they were cautious just the same.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just keep heading west until we reach the sea, then skirt the coast to the mountains?” Pader asked. “Surely the mountains are easier to cross where they approach the sea and flatten out, and that way we could avoid Waigo altogether.”

“You were so adamant about going to Bindao,” Rodden said, “now you want to avoid cities altogether?”

“I’m just not sure how well received we will be in the city is all,” Pader replied.

“The mountains stretch right down to the water,” Jurin said. “They’ll be impossible to cross there. There is a natural passage at Waigo that would be much easier, if we need to go that route.”

“So you are going to accompany us then,” Willem said.

“Aye, I’ll see that you make it safely to Waigo. After that I can’t make any guarantees. While Wen thinks the city will be receptive to your plight, I have my doubts.”

“Why?” Halam asked.

“While it is true that the emperor’s grasp remains firm on the city, especially at the higher levels, there are still those that support the various rebel factions.”

“So there is a possibility that Zhou’s men will be able to find us there,” Pader said.

“If they don’t find us before,” Jurin grimly replied.

Gradually the river began to bend slightly to the west while the road continued on. The sun began to go down, blanketing the land in twilight.

“We’ll keep following the river,” Jurin said when the road was out of sight. “Less chance we’ll run into anybody that way.”

“We’d best find a spot to make camp for the night,” Willem suggested.

They continued on until they came to a spot along the river that had a few trees. Jurin wouldn’t allow a fire. They hadn’t seen the road for some time, but he said that the risk was too great. Jal and Conn parceled out the last of the apples they had received from Wen, as well as some more of the same dry salt pork they’d been eating for several days. Halam said that he wanted them to get an early start before the sun was up, so most of the men lay down right after eating. Sleep came quickly after the long day of walking.

TWENTY-SIX

“What do you mean they killed five of you?” Leisu asked the man angrily. For the second day in a row now he was hearing bad news concerning the Adjurians. Just the day before word had gotten to him that two of the Adjurians had been captured by a group of riders while coming out of the forest and onto the road north of Bindao. It was late enough it the day that the men had decided to make camp instead of coming immediately back to the city. Sometime during the night the other Adjurians had managed to free the two men, killing one of their captors, but also losing one of their own in the process. What should have been a quick, easy task was instead turning into a serious headache that was taking up in inordinate amount of Leisu’s time; time that should have been spent seeing to Zhou’s consolidation of power throughout Jonguria.

Why did Grandon have to get off of that ship, he asked himself again for what seemed the hundredth time. Now Hui, who was normally an able military commander, was in front of him saying that these Adjurians, twice the ages of the men sent to hunt them, had prevailed. It was not what he wanted to hear.

“We tracked them into the hills west of the road,” Hui explained in a quick voice. He was nervous and a few thick beads of sweat could be seen forming on his forehead. “They must have seen us coming, for when we came upon them they had taken up defensive positions behind a small clearing with good cover for them and none for us. We were forced to come through a small passage between some large rocks, and that’s when they attacked. One man was killed by their arrows and another was unhorsed. After the momentary surprise we were able to charge their positions. We killed one of them and seriously wounded another, but they injured one and killed another two of us in the process. By then, however, it was only a matter of time. Two of us on horses proved to be too much for them, and they were tiring quickly. Suddenly an arrow sailed into Hu’s throat from somewhere above, killing him. I fought on, keeping a wary eye on the trees above, when an arrow took me in the arm.” The man held up his heavily bandaged forearm for Leisu to see. “Being alone and with an unknown attacker sending arrows from above, I retreated. I managed to catch up with Jin further down the hills, but he was dead on his horse. After that I rode as quickly as I could back to Bindao.”

The man seemed to be relieved to tell of the events and visibly slumped in his chair when he finished. He’d failed, that much he had admitted, but Leisu understood the circumstances. They were outnumbered to begin with; he simply should have sent more

men. He hadn't even considered that the task would be a challenge. He'd obviously been mistaken. It would not happen again.

"You have no idea who this attacker from above may have been?" Leisu asked.

"No sir, I did not see him. But the arrow that I pulled from my arm was of a Jongurian make."

"Really, do you still have it?" Leisu asked, sitting forward in his chair.

The man reached down to his pack and pulled the arrow out. It was broken in half and blood covered the upper portion of it, but Leisu could tell immediately from the fletching that the craftsmanship was native to Jonguria.

"It would appear that our Adjurians have a homegrown friend helping them," Leisu said as he turned the arrow shaft over in his hands.

"Or another Adjurian who just happens to live in that area," Hui said.

Leisu looked from the arrow to Hui for a moment then stared off toward the wall behind him. The man was right. It was well known that the Adjurian soldier named Jurin Millos lived around those hills. If he had come to their aid, which was not at all unlikely, then it was also possible that he would have taken them to Wen. That was an interesting thought to consider. It had been ten years since Leisu had seen his former master, and that occasion had not been amicable. If Jurin and Wen were now traveling with the Adjurians he would have to send more men out to deal with them, a lot more.

After a few moments Leisu focused on Hui once again. "Do you need time for that wound to heal or are you ready to gather some more men together and finish what you started?"

“I am yours to command sir,” Hui said without pause, as Leisu knew he would. The man would fight to the death next time instead of coming back to report failure for a second time.

“Very well,” Leisu said then rose from his chair and walked around to the front of the desk. Hui stood at attention as he approached. “I want you and a few other men to find their trail and follow it. Don’t risk another attack. If they are now traveling with Jurin and Wen it would prove too risky. We need to choose the ground next time. Send word when you have spotted them and report where they are heading. I will organize a larger force here in Bindao and lead it personally when I hear from you.”

The man looked up at that last, for it was well known that Leisu was a skilled fighter that any man would want next to him on the field. It was becoming rare, however, for him to actually lead men in a fight; he usually sent out others to do his and Zhou’s bidding.

“Yes sir,” Hui replied, and moved toward the door, stopping as Leisu’s voice rang out once again.

“One more thing, Hui,” Leisu said, and the man turned slowly to face him. “Do not fail me again.”

Hui nodded with downcast eyes then opened the door and vanished into the hallway. Leisu moved back to his chair behind the desk and Ko left his spot against the wall to sit in the chair that Hui had left.

“We both know how formidable a fighter Wen is,” Leisu said from his chair as he turned the broken arrow shaft in his hands once again. “And Jurin is trained by him, so that makes him nearly as dangerous.”

“We’ll need at least three times as many men as before, then,” Ko said.

“Maybe more,” Leisu replied, looking across the desk at his deputy.

“And you’re right, the field of battle will have to be chosen by us,” Ko said. “We cannot allow them to take up defensive positions again. They got lucky the last time by being in the hills, putting us at a natural disadvantage as their pursuers. With Wen and Jurin with them they must be caught by surprise.”

Leisu rose and looked out the windows behind his desk to the narrow alley below.

“Where are they going, Ko?”

“They’ve been moving north and west since they were spotted on the beach. If they are indeed going to Wen, then they’ll have to move further north.”

“And what does that tell us?”

“We know they want to get back to Adjuria. If they’re not moving toward Bindao, which will most certainly not be the case with Jurin and Wen to steer them right, then their only other option is to head north toward Waigo and the Isthmus.”

“If they make it to Waigo before us they could secure passage on a fishing boat to Yanshide Island, and from there they would have no trouble getting onto an Adjurian vessel,” Leisu said, turning from the window to look at Ko once again.

“So we stop them before they get to Waigo then,” Ko said.

“Or we stop them in Waigo,” Leisu replied. “We know that if they go there the chances are good that only a few of them will enter the city. If they divide their forces they’ll be easier to cut down.”

Ko nodded, following Leisu’s train of thought.

“If we could capture the men they send into the city, who will most likely be accompanied by either Wen or Jurin, perhaps both, and then lure still more in after them, we’ll have them.” Leisu slammed his fist into his open palm as he finished.

“And if they fight their way out?” Ko asked after a moment.

“Then we follow them into the mountains,” Leisu said. “There’s no way they’ll be able to get through to the Isthmus from Waigo, it’s too well defended and no one’s allowed to pass. Wen fought there during the war, however, and he knows the mountain’s secrets. They won’t hesitate when they’re that close to home.”

It sounds feasible, sir,” Ko said.

“Ko, I want you to gather some good men and prepare for our trip north. We’ve already lost six against this rabble; I don’t mean to lose anymore.”

“As you command,” Ko said, rising from his chair and heading toward the door. When it was closed Leisu sat back in his chair and looked down at the arrow shaft once again. He’d wanted to kill his former master for these ten years and now through a chance of fate he’d been given the chance. Leisu tightly grasped the broken arrow in his hands and snapped it in two, then leaned back and stared out the window.

* * * * *

They made several leagues before the sun crested over the hills in the east the next morning. Jurin led the way along the river. He told them that they’d probably see the mountains before midday, but wouldn’t reach them until the next. Bryn hustled up to the head of the column to ask Jurin about the land.

“What will the Isthmus be like?” he asked as he sidled up beside the former soldier.

“Well, I’ve never seen it myself,” Jurin replied. “I know that we can’t reach it by any other way than going through Waigo, though. The Xishan Mountains stretch right down to the sea, their cliffs stretching up hundreds of feet above the waves. They are just as daunting along the rest of their length. Beyond them lies the thick Xi’Tsong Jungle. The foliage is so thick that it’s been said to swallow men whole,” he said, looking down on Bryn and giving a smile when he saw the alarm in the boy’s face. “After that it’s a bit of grassland and prairie like we’re on now, then the desert stretches on and on for leagues.”

“I met a man who crossed it once,” Bryn said. “In Baden for the trade conference was Palen Biln who represented Ithmia.”

“I heard about that march while I was still at Bindao,” Jurin replied. “How those men survived walking across that desert I’ll know. Most were not so lucky.”

“My father also marched across it, and back again when the attack on the city failed,” Bryn said after a moment.

Jurin looked down at him. “Your father was a very strong man, then,” he said.

“Not strong enough,” Bryn replied, “he was killed on the second day of fighting at Baden.”

Jurin didn’t reply to that and quite a few minutes passed by in silence before Bryn spoke again.

“How will we get across the isthmus? Walk?” Bryn asked.

“Just hope that you don’t have to,” Jurin replied. “There’s a good chance that we can secure a ship for you in Waigo.”

“But if we can’t?” Bryn asked.

“Then your uncle’s idea of flagging down a passing fishing boat seems the best chance. Many boats still travel to Yanshide Island to fish, I’ve no doubt. Most likely some’ll be far enough south to spot you on the Isthmus. Trust me lad, the last thing that you want to do is walk across that barren land.”

Bryn thought about what it would be like to cross through the Isthmus of foot. Palen seemed to be a very tough man. He’d have to be to survive that. He led the lead detachment of the disastrous Breakout campaign that sent hundreds of men swarming across the isthmus to strike at Waigo from the rear. When they failed to take the city there was no choice but to head back the way they’d come. They’d also pinned their hopes on catching a ship sailing along the Isthmus. Many were lucky, but more were not. It was believed that more died coming back from Waigo than had fallen at the city’s walls.

“What is Waigo like?” Bryn asked after a few minutes.

Jurin thought for a few moments before answering. “It’s nestled in the mountains and takes about half a day of hiking up the base of the hills before you reach it. The mountains give the city natural walls on two sides, while the side facing the Isthmus is protected by immense stone blocks which were chiseled from the mountains hundreds of years ago. Beyond the city the road narrows and stretches into the only navigable pass through the mountains. It takes nearly two whole days to travel it, I hear.”

“But if it’s in the middle of the mountains, then how can we find a ship there?” Bryn asked, puzzled.

“True, there are no docks at Waigo, but the city does control some further north along the sea at the base of the Xishans. It’s another two days to reach that.”

“So why do we even need to travel to Waigo at all, then?”

“It’ll be necessary to secure passage in Waigo. The city has a lot of clout with the surrounding area. It’s also there that we can get an official government audience.”

“Do you think that the emperor knows of the attacks on us?” Bryn asked.

“I doubt it. The emperor doesn’t have much actual power anymore, I’m afraid. In fact, I don’t even think that Jonguria would be able to trade with Adjuria at this point. The country’s not as centralized as it once was, and the warlords exert the most power in each region. I’m certain that the man you talked to in Weiling swears fealty to one of the southern warlords, most likely Zhou, even if he does purport to be an imperial official.” Jurin paused and looked down at Bryn. “Tell me, are you certain that this Adjurian you saw in Weiling resembled Grandon Fray?”

“I think so,” Bryn stammered. “I’ve seen a picture of what he looks like from a book about the war, but that was drawn ten or twenty years ago. He looked a lot like the Regidian from the conference though, Jossen Fray.”

“Jossen is his nephew,” Jurin said, “and from what I’ve heard they do look alike.”

“But what would Grandon be doing in Weiling?”

“I don’t know. It could be that one of the southern warlords wants to use him to bolster their own prestige. What Grandon would get from the deal I’ve no idea.”

“Could he be planning to take over the throne again?”

“That seems unlikely. I haven’t been in Adjuria in more than ten years, but I don’t think that he was the most popular character when he first tried for the throne.”

“Could Grandon have even survived that long on Desolatia?” Bryn asked. “And even if he did, wouldn’t he be so old now that he couldn’t do much?”

“Aye, I would think so. He was your uncle’s age when he tried for the throne. He’d be an old man now.”

“I think that the sooner we get back to Adjuria and tell the king what has happened, the better,” Bryn said. “I’m sure that a ship will be sent right away to Desolatia to check on Grandon. Most likely he’s still there.”

Jurin nodded and they lapsed into silence as they trudged on along the river. They ate salt pork for lunch while they walked and some berries that Trey found in some bushes by the river and which Jurin said were edible. By the time the sun was high in the sky they could see the Xishan Mountains looming in the distance, little more than specks on the horizon ahead of them. They were dark grey in color with spots of white at the top.

“Maybe Zhou has given up on us,” Pader said after they’d eaten.

“I have to admit I’m surprised that we made it all day yesterday and well into today without any trouble,” Jurin replied.

“It could just be that they’re laying a larger trap ahead of us,” Iago said.

“If they took the road to Waigo they’d be traveling faster than us and could be waiting before the city,” Willem said. “They do have horses. What’ll take us three days they could accomplish in a little more than one.”

“That’s why it’s best not to let your guard down,” Jurin advised. “One of the advantages of being in the open like this is that we’ll see an attack come. That’ll not be the case as we get closer to the mountains.”

By nightfall the mountains were towering walls in front of them. Cracks and fissures could be made out in the immense rock monoliths while the sheer steepness of

their sides was clearly evident, even from such a long way off still. Again they found a spot by the river that had a few trees and did their best to find a comfortable spot to sleep on the hard ground.

It was the middle of the next day when they made it to the base of the mountains. The river had grown narrower as the mountains grew taller, eventually becoming little more than a small stream by the time they made it to its source. The hard grey stone seemed to grow straight up from the valley floor, rising hundreds of feet into the clear blue sky before receding back to rise even higher, but not so steeply. The river flowed from a small lake at the base of the mountains which was fed by a large waterfall that fell straight down for more than a hundred feet from the rocks above. Leaving the river behind, they followed the mountains north. Trees grew more abundantly and the air was cooler in the shadow of the large rocks. There was no way that these mountains could be climbed unless one had hundreds of feet of rope to somehow tie into the hard stone face of the rising cliffs. Bryn could understand now as he stared straight up why going through the mountains at any other location besides Waigo was such an impossibility.

“What most worries me now,” Jurin said as they walked, “is the approach to the city. Two roads come together at Waigo, the one leading from the south that we crossed two days ago, and another coming from the east. If we can expect any kind of ambush, then that would be the most likely place.”

“Would Zhou’s men travel that far north?” Halam asked.

“Aye, they might. But it’s not just them that we have to worry about now. There are many different northern warlords that will have men wandering the roads looking for easy prey. Any one of them could attack us as well.”

“What about the garrison at Waigo?” Pader asked. “If the city is anything like Fadurk on the other side of the Isthmus, then there’ll be a large contingent of troops stationed in the city for border protection.”

“Yes, they’ll be there, but I don’t think we’ll have as many problems with them.”

“It’s not everyday that a large group of Adjurians comes stumbling into the city travel-worn and tired,” Trey pointed out. “Our presence won’t raise any eyebrows?”

“I don’t think it’d be wise for all of us to go into the city at first,” Jurin answered. “In fact, I think all but two of us should stay out of the city entirely. I’ve never been in the city before, so I have no real idea of what possible dangers there could be. If something happened within the walls, it would be better for everyone not to be there.”

“What could happen?” Halam asked.

Jurin thought for a few moments before answering. “While I don’t think that we would have any problems with the authorities, I may be wrong. It’s still forbidden for foreigners to travel in Jonguria without permission; has been ever since the war. While we can do our best to cover our faces with hoods, there is still the chance that we may be seen. A guard could spot us, a rebel could chance a look upon us, or even a beggar may decide there might be a few coins involved in reporting us to the city watch.”

“I thought that we wanted to report ourselves right away,” Bryn said.

“To the right people,” Jurin answered. “With enough coin we can secure passage on a fishing boat to Yanshide Island, and from there it would be easy for you to get on an Adjurian vessel.”

“We have plenty of Adjurian coins,” Conn pointed out. Edgyn had been smart to keep a small pouch of gold with the other supplies that went into the lifeboats. “They may not be what they use in Jonguria, but I’m sure that they still appreciate gold.”

“But what about reporting our attack to imperial officials?” Halam asked.

“The more I’ve thought about it over the past few days the more I think that may not be the best idea,” Jurin answered. “While there may be some honest officials in the city, just as many could be taking bribes from any number of warlords. They’d listen to your story with a sympathetic face and assure you that all of your problems are at an end, then report you to the rebels the first chance they got.”

“All of the officials can’t be like that,” Halam replied. “You said the emperor still had a firm hold on the city.”

“To the best of my knowledge, he does. But my best knowledge is not much. I live in the south and Waigo is in the north. Any number of complex situations could be happening in the city that I don’t have the slightest idea about.”

“If that’s the case,” Pader said, “then we better just book passage on a ship then get out of the city as fast as we can.”

“By getting passage I’m sure that we can also get a wagon to take us to the docks further north,” Jurin said. “There’d be less chance of being spotted that way.”

“So who goes into the city?” Rodden asked.

“I’ll have to go,” Jurin replied. “I speak the most Jongurian among you, so if we are stopped and questioned by anyone we won’t have to worry about that. You’ll have to decide amongst yourselves who else’ll go.”

They walked on in silence for awhile, each of them thinking of who would be the best choice to go into the city.

“Pader, you and Halam speak more Jongurian than the rest of us. If something were to happen, that might be the difference between life and death,” Rodden said to break the silence.

“I don’t think my Jongurian would fool anyone,” Halam replied with a smile.

“You’re the unofficial leader of our party,” Flint said. “Ever since the ship went down you’ve been calling the shots.”

Before Halam could answer Pader spoke up. “And that’s exactly the reason why he should stay with all of you outside the city. If something should occur I think your best chances of getting north to the docks lies with Halam.” Pader paused to look over at the Tillatian for a moment. “He’s gotten us all this far.”

“Not that I’ve done a very good job of it,” Halam objected. “Three of us are dead.”

“And many more could be if things’d gone a little differently,” Willem pointed out.

“I’ll go with Jurin into the city,” Pader announced. “Most likely these fears of ours are unfounded.

The rest of the men agreed, so Pader and Jurin would be the men going into the city. They walked in the shadow of the mountains until darkness came yet again. Jurin allowed a small fire for the night since they were nowhere near the road, and Flint began to cook up the two pheasants that Iago had been fast enough to shoot down earlier in the day. The break from salt pork and the easy travel did much to raise the men’s spirits higher than they had been in days. They were close to getting back home and they knew it. As long as everything went according to plan in the city, they’d be on a boat bound

for home in little more than a day. They joked and laughed around the fire late into the night, finally laying down to sleep for what they hoped would be their last night on the hard Jongurian ground.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The rain finally began to fall. Leisu had been staring at the dark clouds all morning. They'd started innocently enough far off on the horizon, but as the day progressed and they rode further north the clouds had increased in size, grown darker, and moved closer overhead. It was only inevitable that they would begin to pour forth water; it was just a question of when and where. Now less than a half-a-day's ride from Waigo and with the sun already past the midpoint in the sky, they had decided to unleash their fury on the travelers below.

Leisu heard a horse's hooves loudly approach and turned to see Ko ride up beside him.

"I thought we might've made it to the city," he said as he pulled his cloak tighter around him. The rain was coming down quite hard and steady now.

Leisu eyed the thick trees at the base of the mountains just a few leagues away and thought about turning his men that way to escape the weather's onslaught, but decided against it. They were a few hours hard ride from the city, and cowering under some trees would not make the weather any more bearable or do much to keep them dry. Most of the men were already soaked anyway.

"We'll keep riding, if anything the weather will increase our speed," Leisu said. "Once the men know that I intend to press on to the city, they'll push the horses."

Ko didn't say anything to that, but he didn't ride off either. Leisu looked around at the men. They were thirty-strong, all chosen especially by Ko. About half of them were known to Leisu, but the others he didn't recognize. If Ko vouched for them, however, he knew they were up to the task. They were all mounted and had no wagons with them to slow their journey north. They had left Bindao two days earlier after word had reached the city via carrier pigeon from Hui. He wrote to say that he'd caught the trail of the Adjurians. After coming down from the hills they had followed a series of narrow canyons to where Wen resided. They had apparently stayed the night then set out early, their course a steady walk to the northwest, well away from the roads and toward the mountains. At their current rate of speed Hui expected that they would reach Waigo in about four days. They were indeed in the company of the soldier Jurin Millos, but of Wen he saw no sign. Leisu was disappointed to hear that, but he didn't let it bother him too much. If he knew the old man, he was probably following Hui who was following the Adjurians. He chuckled at the thought and Ko looked over at him.

"Is everything all right, sir?" he asked.

"Just a thought about Wen, is all," Leisu replied. He too pulled his cloak a little tighter about him. The rain was coming in at a sideways angle and the drops stung when they hit his face.

They rode on for a few more minutes with only the sound of the rain hitting the ground around them before Ko broke the silence.

"Sir, there is something that I've been meaning to ask you since we left Bindao," he began.

“What is it?” Leisu asked. He allowed Ko a great deal of latitude, and even encouraged him to ask questions and formulate his own opinions. Leisu knew that when his master had secured most of Jonguria under his firm control that he would need strong men that he could trust in key areas of the country. Leisu was sure he would be one of those men, and he too would then need a strong lieutenant that he could trust. Ko was being groomed especially for that role.

“Your former master Wen,” Ko said slowly, “why do you hate him so much?”

Leisu glanced over at Ko then returned his gaze to the road. It was a fair question, and one the man deserved an answer to. There was nothing reckless about Leisu’s desire to see Wen’s death, preferably at his own hand, and he didn’t go out of his way to bring it about. It had been ten years since he’d seen his former master, and as the years passed by he’d thought of him less and less. Still, the thought of the man helping the Adjurians didn’t sit well with him, and his old feelings of animosity toward his former master came flooding back.

“After the war I left the army for a time like so many other dispossessed and confused soldiers,” Leisu said. “I didn’t know what it was that I wanted to do, but after seeing so many trusted friends die due to a lack of training, I decided that I needed to learn how to fight.”

Leisu paused and looked up at the clouds again then over at the trees far off the road. Perhaps it would be a good idea to head toward their cover, he thought again, but then tightened his cloak and gave an extra kick to his horse, and Ko did the same.

“I asked around about accomplished masters that were looking for students,” Leisu continued. “I eventually heard of a man that’d just returned home from defending

Waigo, so I set out into the hills north of Bindao to find him. It was he who found me, however, and almost killed me in the process. I managed to find the network of small canyons that led to his home when he jumped out at me. Before I could react there was a sword digging into my throat. He asked me what I wanted and I told him that I wanted to study fighting. He laughed and walked away. Troubled by this, I followed at a safe distance and came to his home. For three days and three nights I sat outside without food or water waiting for him to approach me. I prayed for a rainstorm such as this during those three days,” Leisu said with a smile.

“So he took you on then,” Ko said.

“Yes, on the fourth morning he came and my training began. It was rigorous and all I could do at the end of the day was fall into my straw bed and fall fast asleep. I didn’t think I could continue for long, and began to regret my decision to come to the man. But somehow I pressed on. The days passed and the weeks turned into months. What was hard became easy and what had been tiring became effortless. I was becoming a fighter. It wasn’t only fighting that Wen taught me, though, but philosophy and morals as well. The time he spent at Waigo during the war had shown him the value of a man’s life and he was now firmly of the opinion that no man’s life should be wasted needlessly. From what I had seen at Bindao, I agreed.”

The rain began to ease up and the sun even peeked through the thick clouds overhead. The roads had taken a beating, however, and Leisu imagined that it would now take them another few hours to reach the city because of all of the mud.

“That doesn’t seem like much to hate a man for,” Ko said when it looked like Leisu wouldn’t continue.”

“No, it was a lot to be thankful for, however. Without Wen’s training I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

“So what happened?” Ko asked.

“After a year I began to grow restless. I’d wanted to be trained, and I felt as though I had been. The lessons with the sword decreased while those of the mind continued. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my days in the hills with an old man spouting philosophy, so I began to argue with him more and more. He saw what was happening and urged me to go. As a falling out, it wasn’t much of one. We both had come as far as we would with one another and the time to go our separate ways had arrived. So I left.”

“It was that simple?”

“It was that simple. I walked back the way I’d come with no idea where I would go or what I would do. I’d let the winds take me where they willed. It wasn’t long after I got back out onto the wide plains, however, that I was beset by a large group of men. They looked like former soldiers, and I learned later that many like them were roving the countryside terrorizing the population and generally wreaking havoc. They spotted a lone traveler and considered me easy pickings. They thought wrong; with my training I was a match for any of them alone or in small groups, but ten of them together proved too much for me to handle. They beat me mercilessly and left me for dead after they took my sword and the few coins I had. All I could think to do was crawl back to Wen, for I couldn’t even walk, the beating had been so bad. I made it within a few leagues of the canyons when he found me. I’ll never forget the look of disdain on his face as he looked down and shook his head then simply walked off. I knew that I would receive no further help from him, but instead of curling up to die in some rocky crevice, I decided to live,

his indifference emboldening me. I managed to crawl back out toward the plains with no idea of what I really planned to do. When I saw another few men approaching, this time on horseback, I was sure that it was the end of me. Instead the men took pity on me and threw me over one of their horses and rode me back to their small camp in the forest.

That was how I came to meet my new and current master,” Leisu finished.

“So Wen left you to die and now you will kill him,” Ko said after a few moments.

“It’s that simple,” Leisu replied.

Ko looked over at Leisu once again then kicked his horse and rode off to see how the other men were faring. The weather had improved even if the roads had worsened, and the sun shone down through the opening clouds. They rode on for another few hours. The mountains on their left grew closer and closer and soon they were at their base. The road turned into a narrow pass between them and rose steadily higher. The way was narrow and rocky and grew steeper the further they advanced. The column of men was forced to ride single-file through the steep switchbacks that led higher into the mountains. Leisu had never been to Waigo, but a few men who had had assured him that the way wouldn’t be much further. The sun had passed over the mountains to the west and twilight was descending by the time they came up one last steep rise and found themselves looking down on a small circular valley nestled into the bowl of the mountains, Waigo staring back at them.

Ko rode up to report. “We should have no problems in the city,” he said. “Many of the men fought here during the war and have friends. There are also many sympathetic to Zhou’s cause, although not as many as we would like. The emperor still has a firm grasp on the city; it prides itself on its role as defender of the nation’s border and views itself as

above politics.” Ko looked over at him. “We should still be able to find an area suitable to ambush the Adjurians when they show up in a day or two.”

“Good,” Leisu said. “Let’s head into the city and get settled then.” It’d been a long three days on the road and he was eager to get cleaned up and changed out of these travel-worn clothes. A hot bath would certainly be nice, but all of those things could wait. The most important thing was to find a suitable spot with which to lure the Adjurians while also remaining below the notice of the formidable Waigo garrison. Those men were hardened fighters, having repelled the Adjurian advance across the Isthmus during the war, and Leisu didn’t want to anger them. In fact, it would be best if he could keep themselves separate from Zhou’s name entirely. Any further connection between the Adjurians and his master would not be wise.

A few of the men that knew the city well kicked their mounts and headed down the hill toward the city gates while the others hung back for a few minutes. Better to let them announce their presence to whatever friends they had, Leisu thought, and wait to be summoned. The north was not the south, and Leisu’s influence here was minimal. His instructions to Ko back in Bindao had been to choose some men with experience and connections here, now he would find out if his deputy had succeeded.

After waiting for what seemed no time at all two of the riders came back through the gates and up the hill. They reported to Ko, who then rode over to Leisu.

“We have arrangements in a little used warehouse on the west side of the city close to the mountain wall,” Ko said. “The building is on a back street and out of the way. I think it’ll serve our purposes well.”

“Good, let’s head into the city then,” Leisu said.

The men were happy to leave the road for the city, even if it didn't promise much in the way of relief from their task. They would still have to be on guard and prepared to fight, but at least they'd no longer have to sleep on the hard ground at the mercy of the elements. They passed under the wide gate and steered their mounts left over the cobbled streets. After turning off of a main street and winding around some back alleys for a few minutes they came to a halt in front of a large building beside the mountain. Ko and many of the other men dismounted, so Leisu did the same.

"This is it, sir," Ko said walking over. "There are stables one street over that'll see to our horses."

"Let's see what this place looks like," Leisu said, motioning toward the building. It was a two-storey windowless and unremarkable building set behind many others that looked the same. Several large crates were piled up around its walls and even up to the city wall not far away. There was one large door on the ground level and a wooden staircase that led up to a smaller door on the second floor. Ko and a few of the men walked up to the large door and a man produced some keys and unlocked the large lock. A lantern was lit and they stepped inside. The area was large and nearly empty, with only a few crates stacked up against one wall. Leisu nodded, and they headed back out and went up the staircase. The door was unlocked and the inside was much the same as the lower level, except that there were several offices near the back, separated from the larger floor space by thin walls."

"This is what I think will be the real treat," the man with the keys said, walking over to the far wall. There was a small metal ladder bolted to the wall and a trapdoor above it. The man climbed up, unlocked the lock that secured the door, and threw it open. Ko and

Leisu followed the man up the ladder and found themselves standing on the building's roof, a clear view of the valley floor outside of the city walls before them.

Leisu smiled. "This has a lot of potential," he said to Ko.

"When we catch some of the Adjurians we can tie them up and display them for their friends on the rise to see," Ko said. "Notice how the other buildings block the view of this roof from the rest of the city."

Leisu looked around him. It was true. The other buildings, while only two storey's like this one, rose a little higher and obscured their roof from view. It was a perfect place for what they intended.

Leisu walked over to the man with the keys and slapped him on the back. "Well done," he said, then turned to Ko. "See that the men get some rest, but have them do so in shifts. Send a few men out immediately to keep an eye on the gates for any sign of the Adjurians, and keep another two on this roof to look out at the approach to the city. We have to know when they arrive and intercept them before they can get any help from the authorities."

Ko nodded and he and the other man both went back down the ladder into the warehouse. Leisu remained standing on the roof looking out into the small valley for a few more minutes. In a day or two he'd be heading back to Bindao, these Adjurians a distant memory.

* * * * *

The sky was as grey as the mountains they followed when they started out the next morning. Clouds crowded together overhead promising rain any minute, Bryn thought.

The high mood and good cheer of the night before disappeared as they broke camp. If the weather was any indication of how the day would progress, it wasn't a good sign.

The rain began to fall less than an hour after they began walking. It came down lightly at first but soon grew into a heavy downpour. It was all they could do to tie their coats tighter and pull the few raincoats they still had from the packs to keep dry. The trees overhead provided some protection, but it was little. Soon all were wet and the mood was sour. It didn't improve any when the last of the salt pork was pulled out and passed around for a sparse and unappetizing lunch.

Well past midday they came to a large road that ran from the east, wet and muddy from the falling rain.

"Be on guard now," Jurin told them. "If any rebels have been on our trail, they'll attack somewhere around here."

No attack came, however, and they turned west and followed the road. It wound through a large canyon that cut right through the mountains and most of the road had to cut back and forth in small switchbacks as it progressed higher and higher, the grey stone walls towering high above them. Their progress was slow due to the steepness of the road and the rain that continued to fall. They saw no other travelers, however, which was a measure of relief to them all. After several hours of nothing ahead of them but road and rock, the mountain walls abruptly receded and after one more rising switchback they were looking down on a large city nestled into the mountains.

At first it was hard to identify as a city. Its large walls were made from the same stone as the mountains, and besides being smaller and jagged from where they were cut, looked no different from the walls that naturally formed on either of its sides. Small

houses and buildings, most often made from stone blocks, but sometimes of wood, stretched right up to the walls, sometimes rising higher than the stones that were meant to protect them, which were only built about fifteen feet high. There were only two walls that Bryn could see; the one in front of the city that faced them across the small valley floor, and another a couple hundred feet behind it at the rear of the city, which was made of larger stone blocks and rose much higher. The second was not as long as the first, as the two mountain walls that the city was nestled between crowded closer together as they cut off and enclosed the valley further to the west. Those mountains were the true walls of the city, for nothing could get by them.

A large open space had been cleared leading up to the city gate, which itself was constructed of immense logs that looked to have been felled from some ancient forest of giants, so tall were they. The gate was open outward and several carts and wagons sat idly outside, large tarps thrown over whatever cargo they contained. There was very little movement at all really, and Bryn figured it was probably because of the rain that there was not the same kind of bustle that he had seen at other city gates.

The sky was already dark because of the clouds and the rain, but it was growing even darker. The mountains rose so high on either side of the city that the sun was already behind them before they had even started following the road an hour earlier. Now it was becoming difficult even to see the road as it continued to the gates. Torches were already lit along some of the city streets and within many of the buildings.

Jurin looked over at Pader. “This would be a good time for both of us to enter the city. It’s early enough that the gates are still open, but getting dark so that most people won’t have a chance to get a good look at us.”

“Sounds fine to me,” Pader replied. “I’m just following your lead here.”

“Halam, you and the rest of the men should go back down the road a ways,” Jurin said. “When trees begin to grow plentiful on the sides of the road, find a good spot well out of sight to make camp for the night.” He looked up at the darkening sky. “I know that it’s cold and raining and that it may continue all night, but it would be safer not to make a fire.”

“Aye,” Halam agreed. “How long can we expect you two to be?”

“Hopefully we can make some arrangements tonight, but don’t expect to see us again until morning. We’ll either spend the night in the city or find a spot along the road ourselves.”

Halam nodded and wished them luck, as did the rest of the men, then Jurin and Pader got back on the road and continued down the slight hill that would lead them to the city gates. Bryn couldn’t help but think that under their confident exteriors they both were a little on edge about entering the city. Pader had wanted to go to Bindao several days earlier, but after they were attacked in the hills, all talk of that ceased. With Jurin to lead the way, however, they should be safe. And they did have a large pouch of gold coins. Money would do much more to get them out of trouble than fluent Jongurian. Still, Bryn had to admit to himself that he’d feel much better when they came trudging down the road to meet them in the morning, or better yet, if they were riding in the back of the wagon that Jurin said they’d have a good chance of securing to take them to the docks.

Willem and Iago led the way back down the road they’d already traveled, and shortly before it branched south they headed into the trees for half a league and found a

somewhat dry spot to bed down for the night. There was no more salt pork to share around, or anything else, so they all went to bed hungry, hoping that Jurin and Pader would bring food with them the next day. Bryn huddled up in his coat as much as he could to keep out the nighttime chill and drifted off to sleep with thoughts of the fields in Tillatia running through his head.

* * * * *

“Two of them are heading down the road and into the city,” Ko said quickly as he rushed into the small office.

Leisu immediately threw his legs off the desk and stood up. “Just the two?” he asked as he walked past Ko and grabbed his cloak from a peg on the wall.

“We had glasses aimed up at the rise above the city,” Ko replied, “but we couldn’t see anything with the boulders and the darkness.”

“Well, this is what we expected they would do,” Leisu said as he threw his cloak around him while walking quickly across the warehouse floor toward the door, Ko trailing behind. “How many men do you have posted about the area?”

“We’ve got three at the gate and another ten spread out in groups of three and four along possible routes they may take,” Ko answered. “Most likely they’ll head toward the market district. If they do, then we have them.”

“Good, let’s get to the gates then.” Leisu threw open the door and stepped quickly down the stairs. After a brief pause the night before, the rain had once again started to come down hard that morning. It made for a boring and restless day of sitting around the warehouse office waiting for word of the Adjurians to come. Leisu had sent men all over the city in the off-chance that Jurin would somehow lead them in at a point he hadn’t

thought of. It was highly unlikely, but he had enough men with nothing to do and didn't want to take any chances that he may miss them. He'd been seriously considering going to bed for the night when Ko burst in and gave him the news. It was already dark out and the moon shone brightly down on the cobbled streets as they rushed to the city gates.

"Is Jurin with them?" Leisu asked over his shoulder as they made their way through the nearly empty streets.

"The man couldn't tell," Ko replied. "Most Adjurians look the same to him, and they have their hoods pulled down tightly to hide their faces.

"But we know it's them for sure?" Leisu asked more vehemently this time.

"Yes, we had one of Hui's men come in just a few hours ago saying they'd made it to the road leading to the city."

Ko took a few quick steps and was beside Leisu. "Here sir, we're nearly to the gates now." He held out his hand for Leisu to stop then motioned for them to get closer to the edge of the building they were next to. They crept to its edge, then Ko held up his hand once again and pointed.

"Right there is the main square in front of the gates. That street there will lead to the markets, where we think they'll go." Ko pointed toward one of the streets that led off from the square. "We've got men on these side streets, so there's no chance they'll slip by us."

Leisu moved closer to the edge of the building and peered out to the square. Although it was late in the evening, several people were still walking about. A few merchants were closing up small booths on the edge of the square and several guards stood bored near the gates, ready to close them for the night.

“There they are,” Ko said, putting his hand on Leisu’s shoulder.

Two men walked slowly through the gates, the hoods of their cloaks pulled tightly about them. They paused when they were on the edge of the square and seemed to say a few words to each other. One of them nodded his head in the general direction of the street Ko had pointed out and they both moved off that way.

“They’re doing just what we want them to,” Ko said. “Let’s follow and see what happens.”

Leisu stepped away from the building and followed Ko into the square. He was more than willing to let Ko take the lead in capturing the two men. He’d given him the task of assigning the men around the city; now it was only fitting that he witnessed the conclusion of his work. The two Adjurians had made it across the square and onto the main street heading further into the city. There were fewer guards, Leisu was happy to note, but some still stood about. If they wanted to take the two men without drawing attention then they would have to get them onto one of the side streets. Ko seemed to read his thoughts and spoke over his shoulder.

“I’ve told the men to lure them into an empty street then make their move.”

Just as Ko finished speaking Leisu saw a man he vaguely recognized, but knew was theirs, approach the two men and say a few words. The Adjurians stopped, and the man motioned toward one of the narrower streets. The men hesitated for a moment before moving, so the man waved them off and began to head down the street himself. The Adjurians must have said something, for he turned back and they followed him. Ko motioned for them to both get up to the narrow street quickly, and when they got closer Leisu could hear the sounds of a struggle. They turned into the street and Leisu saw six

Jongurians surrounding the men. It was a tight fit in such a narrow back street, but the two Adjurians had already drawn their swords and were trying to defend themselves.

“Don’t harm them!” Ko shouted to the men in Jongurian.

Both of the men turned to look in their direction at the shout, and that was enough time for one of the Jongurians to get close enough to hit one of the Adjurians across the head with a thick sap. The man immediately crumpled to the ground and then the others moved in with clubs and heavy sticks in place of swords. The Adjurian was able to stab one of the men with his sword but the others quickly closed in and beat him over the head several times and continued to do so when he fell to the ground. Ko had to rush up and physically pull the men away from the downed man who already had a small pool of blood forming around his head on the cobbles.

“You better not have killed him,” Ko said, bending down to check the man’s pulse.

“He stabbed Lu,” one of the men replied.

Ko gave him a hard look and the man backed away. “Tie their hands and get them to their feet.”

Ko moved over to the wounded Jongurian, who had a nasty wound to his stomach which already covered the front of his tunic in blood. He looked at the wound and motioned for another two men to help the man. When they had the two Adjurians up and leaning heavily for support on their captors, they began to move through the narrow alleyways toward the warehouse. Leisu was happy at how well the situation had gone. Ko had planned well. The two men were captured with nothing more than one man wounded. Leisu wouldn’t have minded if ten men were killed so long as he had the two Adjurians. He looked up at the moonlit sky. It was already too late to do anything

tonight, he decided, but first thing in the morning the two Adjurians would be staked to the roof of the warehouse in full view of any of their companions still looking down on the city. Leisu smiled. It was only a matter of time now.

TWENTY-EIGHT

By the next morning the two Adjurian prisoners had been tied tightly to two posts atop the warehouse in full view of anyone looking down on the city from the ridge. Both had been beaten more severely than Leisu first thought. When they got the two men back to the warehouse and into the lantern light the full extent of their wounds could be seen. Black and purple bruises covered each of their faces and it was obvious that too much movement caused them pain. Leisu had ordered that the two men be thrown into one of the empty offices on the second floor with a heavy guard to keep watch. Even though their weapons had been taken and the two men seemed lifeless, Leisu wasn't about to take any chances. He was quite happy, however, to see that one of the two men was Jurin Millos. That would significantly decrease the fighting power that the remaining men had when they tried to free their friends, which he had no doubt they'd try to do.

The men hadn't even struggled when they were carried up the small ladder to the roof, although Jurin tried to question the men that tied him up. He'd wanted to know who they were and what they wanted with the Adjurians, but he'd received no answers. Leisu wasn't at all interested in questioning the two men; their purpose in Jonguria was not important to him, just the fact that they be eliminated from any other interference with his master's plans. Ko didn't agree, saying that the men may have some valuable information, and that a cursory interrogation of them should be carried out. Leisu was in

no mood for arguments, however, and after a few hard looks that got his feelings across rather quickly, nothing further was heard on the matter.

All they could do once the two men were tied atop the roof was wait. Leisu retired to the office that he used and after a time Ko came in to discuss matters of defense.

“Sir, how do you proceed now that the two men are secured,” he asked after sitting down in the chair across from the desk Leisu occupied.

“I’m sure that their companions will give their friends at least half a day to secure some kind of travel arrangements in the city,” Leisu said. “Once a sufficient amount of time has passed and they’ve not returned, the others will grow worried and send some men back to the city. They will see their two friends and then go back to their companions and discuss their options.”

“You’re sure that they’ll attempt a rescue?” Ko asked.

“I’ve no doubt about it, Ko,” Leisu said matter-of-factly. “After all, they did the same when two were taken on the road north of Bindao.”

Ko nodded, and Leisu continued. “The Adjurians are very loyal to their friends, and once they realize that the two they’ve sent into the city have been captured they’ll send in a few more to rescue them.”

“Not all?”

“I don’t think so. They’ll certainly not send in the boy, and they won’t leave him alone either. What did Hui report? There are eleven of them?”

Ko nodded. “Yes, that’s how many he followed north.”

“Well, we have two so that leaves them with nine. Minus the boy and at least one other, and they have seven men that they could send into the city. I don’t think they’ll send that many in, though. It would surprise me if we had to deal with more than five.”

“So where would you like most of our forces concentrated then, the warehouse?” Ko asked.

“Without a doubt,” Leisu replied. “But it’d also be good to have a few men stationed near the city gates. We don’t know exactly what will happen, and I don’t mean for these men to achieve their rescue.” He leaned back in his chair and put his legs on the desk. “Remember Ko, now that we have the two for bait, we no longer have a need for these men alive. Our goal is to kill them.”

“Yes sir,” Ko said as he got up, “I’ll make the necessary arrangements.

“Thank you Ko, you’ve handled things very well so far,” Leisu said before his deputy left the office. The man was quite capable of acting on his own, and Leisu was happy that he had his help. He understood the amount of freedom his role gave to his own master. It was much easier to give orders than to carry them out. Soon he would be done in this border city and back south where his real job was. Leisu leaned back in his chair and stared off into space, waiting for the Adjurians to show up.

* * * * *

The next morning Halam sent Conn and Jal out into the rain to survey the road once again. This time Jal came racing back to camp after little more than an hour.

“We’ve seen them,” he eagerly reported, panting for breath. “They’ve been captured.”

“What!” Rodden exclaimed, and the other men quickly gathered around.

“Conn decided that he’d head back up the hills to the city and have another look. He came running back down the road shouting for me, so I thought that he’d been spotted and that we both were going to be captured. But it turns out that he’d spotted Jurin and Pader in the city. Both are tied to posts atop one of the wooden buildings next to the mountain wall.”

“Tied to posts?” Halam asked. “What do you mean?”

“I didn’t see it myself, sir. Conn went back up to the city to keep an eye out, but said that I’d better send for you to have a look.”

The men looked at one another and then wordlessly gathered up their things and started back toward the road. By the time they made it back up the hills to the city overlook afternoon was already approaching. Conn whistled from behind a few large boulders to the left of the road and they joined him and Halam there.

“They’ve been tied up like that all morning,” he said, pointing toward one of the buildings close to the mountain in the western section of the city. “It looks like they’ve been beaten quite severely, hanging motionless the way they are.”

“Bryn, let me see that spyglass,” Halam said to his nephew. He took it and put it to his eye then passed it over to Iago. “It looks like they’re barely conscious.”

“Aye,” Iago agreed, “whoever it is that’s captured them has really done a number on them. They’ll not be walking off that roof.”

“It has to have been Zhou’s men,” Willem said as he looked through the glass.

“Why would the city watch do such a thing?”

“I agree,” answered Halam. “The watch would most likely throw them in a gaol, not display them atop a building like this. Somebody wants us to see them.”

“And chance a rescue so that we can be caught and displayed alongside them,” Trey said. “If whoever did this didn’t think that there were some of us still out here, Jurin and Pader would be dead already.”

“We’ve got to go in and get them,” Bryn said.

“Aye,” Willem said and Iago and Halam nodded their agreement as well.

“And risk being captured as well?” Flint asked. “We are way over our heads here. We know nothing about this city or who could’ve done this.”

“We can’t sit idly by and watch those two men die down there,” Willem said. “Jurin risked his life to save us and bring us this far. You want to repay him by leaving him to die on some rooftop?”

Flint ashamedly looked down at his feet before Trey responded. “I think what Flint means is that the odds are not in our favor here. Jurin knows the most about Jonguria and if he was taken so easily, what chances do the rest of us have?”

“Besides,” Jal pointed out, “it’s obvious to me that someone is just waiting for us to try and free them. We wouldn’t make it within one hundred feet of that building before we were spotted.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take,” Willem said.

“And I,” Iago replied.

“Our chances of getting out of Jonguria alive are decreasing fast,” Halam said.

“Jurin is our best hope for getting home. While it will be risky to free him, I see no other option.” Trey and Flint said nothing to that and once again the men looked to Halam for leadership. “It’ll be dark soon and I assume that somebody will come and bring both men back inside that building. We’ll have to act soon, then. I suggest that a few of us go

through the city gates like we're any other ordinary citizen. If we follow the wall we'll eventually come to the point where it gives way to the side of the mountain. From there it's only a short distance to the building where Jurin and Pader are being held. Once we stake out the perimeter and get a feel for the place, we can move in." He looked around at the faces gathered close. "I expect it to be bloody and we may suffer some casualties. If we're able to free them, then we'll have to rush back to the city gates and down the road. Most likely we'll be followed all the way."

"Won't it raise some suspicions when several Adjurians are running toward the city gates with weapons drawn while being chased by armed Jongurians?" Rodden asked with a chuckle.

"Do you have any other ideas?" Halam asked, annoyed.

"One of you can take this rope we've been carrying and use it to scale the city wall. With the cover of darkness, there's a much better chance of getting out of the city unseen by the watch," Conn said.

"That wall can't be more than fifteen feet high," Jal said. "You shouldn't have any problems throwing the rope over or scaling the wall, so long as the other end is anchored securely."

"We can send someone down to a spot outside the walls to secure it and possibly provide cover with one of the bows in the likely chance that you're being followed," Flint said.

"Alright, it sounds like an idea," Halam agreed. "This is all being thrown together rather fast, so if anyone else has any suggestions, please voice them now."

“I like the idea about the rope,” a voice said from behind them. The men spun around to look for who’d spoken. They were shocked to see Wen leaning up against a boulder not more than ten feet from them. He was wearing the same dun-colored pants and shirt made of wool as they had seen him in several days before, although he had a thicker leather tunic now to protect against the rain. A long curved blade was sheathed at his belt and a bow was strapped across his back, the arrow fletches blending in with the whiteness of his hair. He casually picked dirt from underneath his fingernails. “Less chance of being spotted at the gate that way,” he finished, looking up at them.

“Have you been following us this whole time?” Willem asked after a few moments had passed.

“Aye, you leave an easy enough trail. I’m surprised that you weren’t attacked by Zhou along the way. He was following you too. But then I guess his plan here,” Wen motioned at the two men atop the roof, “wouldn’t have come off.”

“Zhou’s been following us?” Halam asked with surprise. “But we saw no sign that anyone was following us.”

“Zhou’s men, at least,” Wen said. It was easy enough. Not all men need to travel by the light of day when the whole world can easily see them.”

The men all looked at each other, amazed that this old man, and he appeared quite old standing there in the rain, was able to follow them this far and sneak up on them just now. Not quite sure how to respond to his sudden appearance, they just gaped before Bryn spoke up.

“So you’ll help us then,” he said to Wen with a large smile.

Wen smiled back. “Do I have much choice? The sooner you folks get back to Adjuria the sooner my life can return to peace.”

“Do you have any ideas, then?” Halam asked.

“Seems to me that your plan will work just fine,” Wen replied. “Get into the city, get your friends, and get out.”

“I don’t think it’ll be as simple as that,” Conn said skeptically.

“No?” Wen said. “I don’t see why not. You *do* know how to use that axe at your belt, don’t you sir?”

Conn looked down at the small hand-axe he had been carrying since they washed up on the beach. “It’s better for chopping kindling than for fighting,” he said.

“Aye, that it is,” Wen replied. “Perhaps you had better stay outside with the boy then.”

“But I want to come,” Bryn said excitedly. He pulled out the dagger that Iago had given him. “I think this is better than any axe,” he said, holding the blade up proudly.

The men chuckled and Wen smiled as well. “But have you ever looked at the life go from a man’s eyes after you have stuck it in his chest, lad?”

“No,” Bryn meekly replied while he looked down at the ground, “but I could.”

“But not tonight, lad, not tonight.” Wen looked at Halam. No more than three men should accompany me into the city. Any more than that’ll draw suspicion. We’ll need at least two to hold a position waiting for us outside the wall. The rest can stay up here until we’re done.”

“I’ll go,” Iago said first, fingering the hilt of his longsword.

“As will I,” Willem joined in.

Halam looked around at the other men. He didn't expect that anybody else would volunteer. The rest were sailors who knew the sea, not fighting. Rodden had spent most of his life behind a desk in Plowdon, and Bryn was far too young for anything like this. Not for the first time did he regret ever taking the boy from Trun. "I'll go too, then," he said at last, looking at Wen.

"Good, three strong fighters with experience in war." The three men looked at one another for a moment and were about to ask how he could have known they'd seen battle, but he continued before they'd had a chance. "Now who will go down to the wall?"

"I think Flint and I will," Trey said, and Flint nodded.

"As soon as we get the men over that wall," Wen continued, "run as fast as you can back toward this spot." He looked at the four men who would be staying. "You'll be ready to run with us down that road. We'll head toward a spot that will lead to a complex of narrow canyons and which few men know about. They will lead us around Waigo and through the mountains to the Isthmus."

"There's a way around Waigo?" Iago asked.

"Make sure you watch my back in there and I'll show it to you," Wen replied.

"Now take a few minutes to make sure you're ready. It's dark enough now for us to go and I expect those two will be taken off that roof soon."

Iago and Flint separated their remaining arrows into two equal piles then put them in their sheaves while Halam and Willem checked their shortswords. Flint took the long coil of rope they'd taken from the ship and went over it before putting it back in a pack and handing it to Willem. When they were finished they nodded at Wen.

“Alright, we’ll all head toward the gate together, but halfway there you two turn left and follow the wall to where it meets the mountain,” he said to Flint and Trey. “We’ll get the rope up the wall and down to you before we head to the building where the men are being held. Try and secure it to a heavy stone, or else fasten it around your waist. We’ll need to run and grab it, and can’t be worrying that it won’t hold our weight. Remember, we’ll be moving fast out of that city. After that just wait and do nothing. It shouldn’t take us more than a few minutes to get in and get out. Most likely you’ll hear us coming by the shouts of men dying not far off.” He smiled and looked around at the men one more time. “Now let’s move.”

Wen headed toward the road and was already walking down the hill before the others jumped up to follow him. He seemed confident of a successful outcome, Bryn thought as he watched him walk away. That was good; he had his doubts. Any men that were able to capture Jurin, who’d done so much to survive in Jonguria since the war, had to be tough. But then he remembered that Wen was the man who supposedly trained Jurin how to fight, and he felt better.

Trey and Flint separated from the other four and walked across the valley floor toward the end of the wall and the spot where the mountain rose up high above the city. Bryn tensed up and held his breath as Wen, Willem, and his uncle approached the gate, but with little more than a nod at the guards from Wen they were through. Trey and Flint took up their positions and a few minutes later the rope flew over the wall as promised. They took hold of it and Trey helped to tie it around Flint’s waist. After that Trey and Flint sat down next to the wall to wait and the men on the ridge had no choice but to do the same.

* * * * *

Nothing happened all that day so Leisu had Ko take the prisoners down for the night and put them back into the small office.

Where were the other Adjurians? He could understand that they might not have much loyalty toward Jurin, but their other companion that had traveled all the way from Adjuria with them must surely be of some importance to them. It could just be that their friends were still waiting. They may have agreed that they'd give the two men a full day to make arrangements in the city. It could also be that they'd spotted them and decided the risk was too great and continued on north.

He ordered Ko to send ten men out of the city and further north along the road toward the docks that Waigo controlled on the ocean. The more he'd thought about it through the afternoon the more he'd realized that the men just might leave their friends behind. It would be important to them to get back to Adjuria and report what had happened to them here. By staging a risky rescue their chances of getting home were much more unlikely. Ko had begun to argue with him that it was not a good idea to send a third of their force away, but Leisu waved off his complaints. Twenty men was more than enough, he had told his deputy. After all, they had Jurin, whom he believed to be the most accomplished fighter amongst the small group of Adjurians. Ko was not happy with the order, but he carried it out nonetheless.

Afternoon stretched into night and still no sign of the other men was seen. Leisu decided that he'd put the men atop the roof until noon the next day; if they didn't see any sign of the other men, then he'd have them taken down and executed. The rest of the men would then head north, leaving just a few men behind in case the Adjurians tried

once again to get into the city. Leisu was getting angry with the situation. His place was not in the north hunting a band of middle-aged diplomats that were of no real consequence to Jonguria. If his master would've stayed away from all dealings with the Adjurians in the first place and never have sent him to free Grandon Fray then none of this would have ever happened.

It was late and these thoughts were getting him nowhere. He decided to douse the lamp and lay down on the dirty straw mat once again to get what sleep he could.

He was rudely awoken when the door to the office was thrown open and Ko came in quickly with a lantern.

“Sir, we’ve spotted three of the Adjurians coming into the city. Wen is with them,” Ko said as he shone the lantern down on Leisu and started to help him up.

Leisu rubbed the sleep from his eyes and jumped to his feet, grabbing his sword from the desk to fasten to his belt. “Wen is with them?” he asked.

“Well, it’s a Jongurian, we know that much, and I don’t think these men would have anyone else’s help. He must have followed them north from Bindao,” Ko said.

Immediately Leisu regretted his decision to send ten men further north. If Wen was aiding the Adjurians then they’d need all the men they could get.

“Where are they now,” Leisu asked as he began to head out of the office and toward the door leading to the wooden staircase.

“They were just coming through the gates. They must have spotted the men sometime today so are probably on their way here now.”

“Where are our men at?” They were walking down the stairs along the outside of the warehouse and Leisu wanted to make sure that they had a sufficient force to stop the men before they reached their friends.

“We have ten spread out around the city gates and the other ten are here in the warehouse,” Ko answered. “I’ve already ordered that all men return to the warehouse.”

“Good. Have three good men guard the office where we have the two Adjurians. Send another three to the city gate in case they make some kind of escape. The rest we should place on the first floor of the warehouse; that’s the first place the Adjurians’ll check.”

“Sir, do you really think we should divide our forces like that? Those other six men could prove decisive in the fight,” Ko said.

“Both of us will prove quite decisive, I think,” Leisu answered.

They reached the door on the ground level of the warehouse and Ko gave a knock. A moment later it was opened and they headed inside to see ten heavily armed Jongurian soldiers. They had all manner of swords, several had bows slung over their shoulders, while two of the men held crossbows instead of swords. Leisu had never liked the weapon, he thought it took too long to reload, but he knew that the garrison forces here in Waigo liked them. Some of these men had served in Waigo during the war so had probably grown fond of the weapon. Whatever got the job done was fine with him.

Ko barked a few quick orders and three of the men went out the door, their footsteps audible as they moved up the creaking stairs outside. Another knock came at the door and Ko answered and exchanged a few words.

“I’ve told some of the men to head back to the gates,” he told Leisu.

Leisu nodded. "Where are they now," he asked, referring to Wen and the two Adjurians that'd come into the city.

"They're coming this way through the side streets along the wall," Ko told him.

"Prepare yourselves," Leisu said to the men gathered around the door. "Find a good spot to defend against an attack. As of now there are only three men coming, but one of them is an accomplished fighter and should *not* be underestimated."

The men spread out around the warehouse floor, taking up what defensive positions they could behind the few crates and large boxes. Leisu and Ko headed toward a large crate set against the same wall as the door and leaned down against it.

"Now we wait for them to come to us," Leisu told him as he looked toward the door.

After a few minutes Leisu heard something bump the outside of the door, then a moment later he could hear the wooden stairs outside the building creak as if someone was stepping on them. More creaking soon followed, and it was obvious that more than one man was heading up those stairs. He waved over at several of the men nearest the door to find out what was going on. They got to the door and tried to open it, but it wouldn't budge.

They looked over at Leisu and Ko. "Something is blocking the door," they shouted. Several more men came to their aid and pushed against the door. It budged some, and they could see that a large crate was blocking the door from the outside while two wooden doorjambs had also been pushed under the door. Just then a few shouts could be heard from the second floor of the warehouse. The Adjurians had made it to their friends it seemed, and were now attacking the three men guarding them. The men at the door pushed with more force and soon there was a larger crack in the door as the crate was

pushed further away. Suddenly an arrow sailed through that crack and took one of the men right in the throat. Blood sprayed all over the door and the men around him jumped back as they too were covered in it. The man was dead before he hit the floor. Another foolishly went up to the door and peered out the crack and another arrow sailed through taking him right in the eye. He fell atop the other man, just as dead.

Two men in just a few seconds, Leisu thought, and he didn't even know what was happening upstairs or outside. How could they have known that the Adjurians were being held upstairs? It was useless to think that now, the damage had been done.

“Well, what are you waiting for, get that door open,” Leisu yelled at the men staring at the blood-soaked door. No one moved toward the door, so Leisu pulled his sword out. “Get that door open, I said.”

This time three men moved toward the door and began pushing on it. It budged slightly, but they were staying as far from the crack as they could, so their efforts weren't accomplishing much. One of the men began to kick at the two jambs stuck under the door, and it seemed he got one, for the door suddenly opened a few more inches. He began to kick again when an arrow sailed in and struck him right in the leg. He fell howling to the floor and another man came to drag him back toward the crates. More creaking could be heard from the stairs outside and it sounded as though several men were now descending the stairs.

“Get that door open!” Leisu yelled. Two more men rushed up to the door and hit it with all of their force. It opened another few inches and one of the men thought the gap sufficient to test. He squeezed himself partway through the half-open door when an arrow struck him somewhere in the part of his body exposed outside the door. He yelled

out in pain and tried to squeeze back into the warehouse, but he was stuck. Another arrow took him in the throat and he feebly tried to grasp at it with the arm that was stuck outside the door.

“Hack it down,” Leisu yelled at the men, and they drew their swords and began to swing them wildly at the door sending splinters flying everywhere. The door was thick and heavy, however, so their efforts quickly proved useless.

“Stop!” Ko yelled, holding up his hand toward the men at the door, and their swinging ceased. “Listen,” he said.

Leisu strained his ears as best he could. There was no sound from overhead where for the last few minutes there’d been shuffling and bumping. The stairs outside no longer creaked but were silent. The only sound was some faint gurgling noises coming from the man with the arrow in his throat who was still wedged between the door and its frame.

“They’re gone,” Ko said a moment later looking at Leisu.

Both men immediately rushed to the door and pushed on it with all their might. The two men who’d just been hacking at it joined them and after it opened a few more inches the dead man fell from the door into the warehouse. They pushed a bit more and then Ko slipped out. Leisu could hear him charging up the stairs and then his footsteps on the floor above. Leisu motioned at the other men in the warehouse and they too rushed to the door. Soon it was open far enough that they all could get out easily. Leisu came out just as Ko was descending the stairs.

“They’ve killed the three above and taken the two prisoners,” he said, “but they lost one in the process.”

“One of the prisoners?” Leisu asked.

“Yes, the Adjurian,” Ko answered.

“They can’t have gotten far,” Leisu said to the men around him. “Fan out, head toward the gates, they’ve got to be leaving the city.”

The men all ran off toward the side streets. Leisu turned to Ko.

“They killed six of us, freed their two friends, and only lost one in the process,” Ko said. “Most likely any of the men I sent to the gates to stop them are dead too and they’re already heading toward the canyons that lead around the city.” He paused and looked at Leisu for a few moments. “What would you have me do, sir?”

Leisu thought for a minute. Ko was right; most of the men he’d brought with him from Bindao were probably already dead. He had fourteen left in the city, maybe less, where just a few minutes ago he’d had twenty. Ten more were heading north and completely useless to him. He was just about to speak when one of the men who ran off suddenly came around a building and ran up to them.

“They didn’t go through the gates,” he said between gasps for breath. “Three men followed them a ways from the gate when they first came in and saw them throw a rope over the wall. One of them came to tell us before they reached the warehouse, but they killed him before he got to us. The other two stayed, waiting for us to send reinforcements. Instead they saw four men come back to the rope and scale the wall. One of them grabbed onto the rope when it began to be pulled back over and managed to shoot one of them and kill him, but he was then shot through with an arrow. The rope was pulled over before the other man could get over.”

Leisu slammed his fist into his palm. “Damn.”

* * * * *

For ten minutes nothing happened as Bryn looked through his spyglass to where the rope hung down from the city wall. It was a dark night but the moon was half-full and the lights from the city spread outward from the wall, allowing him to see a little.

“They’ve been captured too,” Jal said from where they crouched down behind some boulders on top of the ridge overlooking the city.

“Give it time,” Rodden said.

Then through the glass Bryn saw Trey and Flint stand up as if they’d heard something, and he saw the rope move.

“Something’s happening!” Bryn said excitedly.

As Bryn watched, Flint grabbed the rope around his waist with both hands and planted his feet firmly in the ground. A few seconds later Jurin came over the top of the wall, pausing for a moment to look back down the other side before starting to climb down toward Flint, dropping the last few feet to the ground. Trey helped him up, and it was obvious to Bryn as he looked on that Jurin was injured. He held his right side and wasn’t moving very fast. Then suddenly Halam came up from behind the wall and came down the other side. He sprang to his feet after dropping and immediately went to Jurin, putting the man’s arm around his shoulders and helping him toward the road. Willem was over immediately after and also went to Jurin’s aid. A few more tense moments passed while he waited for Pader and Wen to appear. It looked like Trey called something up to the top of the wall, and then a moment later Wen was visible. He swung over the wall and dropped down to the ground, motioning and talking quickly to both Trey and Flint. Trey began running to catch up with Halam, Willem, and Jurin while Flint started to untie the rope from around his waist as Wen pulled it over the wall.

“They don’t have Pader,” Rodden said when it became clear that Wen was pulling the rope back over the wall.

As Bryn looked on Wen tensed. The rope was caught on something, or someone. He gave it a few more yanks, but it wouldn’t budge. All of a sudden a different man appeared at the top of the wall, the rope in his hands. He stood up on the wall and pulled a loaded crossbow from behind his back, took aim, and fired. The quarrel dug itself into Flint’s chest and he collapsed to the ground. Wen had already begun to take the bow from behind his back at the sight of the man and just as Flint hit the ground an arrow embedded itself into the man’s chest, quickly followed by another. He toppled backward off of the wall and into the city. Wen crouched down to examine Flint, but just as quickly stood back up. He began pulling on the rope once again, this time bringing it up and over the wall. After coiling it into a circle around his arm he ran across the ground toward the road.

“Someone else came over the wall and shot Flint!” Bryn said. “I think he’s *dead*.” Bryn suddenly felt a little queasy.

“No!” Conn shouted, snatching the glass from Bryn’s hands to have a look. It wasn’t easy to see in the darkness, but Conn saw enough to convince him that Bryn spoke truly, and he handed the glass back wordlessly, a look of shock on his face.

“Let’s get moving toward the road,” Rodden said. “We need to meet the rest of them.”

They got up and began running. Trey was there to meet them and Halam, Willem, and Jurin weren’t far behind.

“What happened?” Rodden said to Halam when they got close.

“We had to fight our way into the building,” Halam replied between deep breaths. He was breathing heavily and sweating as he and Willem helped prop up Jurin.

“We managed to free Pader and Jurin,” Willem said, “but in the fight to get back outside, Pader was killed.”

“How many men are after you?” Jal asked.

“There were more men in the building, but we blocked the door before we went after Jurin and Pader. It kept them off of us long enough and Wen shot some, but I’m sure they’re out by now,” Willem said. “I don’t know how many he might have killed so can’t be sure how many are still after us.”

“One came over the wall behind Wen and shot Flint,” Bryn said.

The four men looked at him for a moment and then Trey spoke.

“Is he dead?”

“Aye,” was all Bryn said, looking down at his feet.

Before anything else could be said Wen came running up.

“Let’s move as fast as we can,” he said. “More are behind us on foot, and it won’t take long for horsemen to come as well.”

They raced down the road as fast as they could. Jurin even managed a slow jog, his eagerness to get away from their pursuers overriding any pain he was feeling from his multiple bruises. Bryn could see the faint outline of some trees ahead and Wen steered them off of the road before they reached them. They headed south for a while over rocky ground, the mountain walls getting closer and closer with each step. It was incredibly difficult to see in the darkness, even with the moon high above them; Bryn could not imagine how Wen managed to guide them. It was all they could do to stay close together

so they could follow the man directly in front of them. Finally they were at a steep mountainside. Wen took the coiled rope from around his shoulder and began to pay it out on the ground. He handed one end to Halam, then tied the other around his waist.

“I’ll have to climb up this wall and anchor this rope at the top. It’s about one hundred feet up,” he said while he took off his boots and handed them to Willem.

“Have you done this before?” Trey asked.

“Many times, but never in the dark,” he said as he walked to the wall and looked up. He climbed up a few feet and then looked back down to the ground, shaking his head. “Too dark,” he said as he climbed back to the ground, “can’t see enough to find good handholds.” He pulled a thick piece of wood from his pack and wound a damp cloth around it. With his curved sword he struck some sparks against the mountain wall and soon had the torch burning. After sheathing his sword he stuck the torch between his teeth and started to climb up the wall once again.

It was slow going while he searched for purchase on the jagged rock, but the torchlight helped and he steadily moved higher up, the rope dangling down to the ground behind him. Soon they were staring at a small circle of light high up above them surrounded by darkness. Several of the men looked from Wen to the trees behind them, not sure which sight made them more nervous. At one point Wen misplaced his foot and slipped, and the men collectively gasped, but he was somehow able to hold on and was quickly climbing once again. Bryn couldn’t say how long it took him to reach the top of the wall and pull himself over onto a narrow ledge, but when he did the rope came down followed by a shout for them to start climbing up.

Halam came up to Bryn. “You’ll go up first, lad. Just put one hand in front of the other and don’t look down.”

Bryn nodded, taking the rope gingerly in his hands. He began to pull himself up, keeping his feet on the rock wall as he did so. Shouts of “Aye, that a boy” and “You can do it” came from below as he progressed steadily up the side of the mountain. It was dark all around him and he couldn’t imagine how Wen managed to climb up this wall unaided, even with the light of the torch. By the time he was halfway up the rope Bryn’s arms ached something fierce and his legs were getting sore from constantly being stretched out in front of him. When he saw Wen’s face emerge from the darkness ten feet above him, he didn’t think that he could make it further, and Wen, as if reading his thoughts, pulled the rope up the rest of the way.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you,” Wen said as he pulled Bryn up onto the narrow ledge.

The ledge that Bryn found himself on was less than five feet wide. The area was illuminated from the light of the torch that Wen had laid on a rock. Looking up, he saw that the mountain rose up further than he could see in the dark. Looking down all he could see was blackness. The rope quivered and he knew that someone else was climbing up. A few minutes later Rodden appeared out of the blackness and climbed the rest of the way to the ledge.

“My, that is some climb!” he said, shaking the ache out of his arms.

The rope still moved so Bryn knew that someone else was coming up behind. A few minutes later Conn came up, followed by Jal a few moments after that. The men were not waiting any longer for each to make it to the top before another started up. In quick succession Trey, Iago, and Willem appeared. It was a few more minutes after that that

Jurin appeared below the ledge with Halam right on his heels. They moved slowly and every time that Jurin put his right arm further up the rope his face contorted in pain. Halam voiced encouraging words behind him, and the rest of the men grabbed hold of the rope and pulled the others up the rest of the way. Wen went about pulling up the rope and coiling it around his arm while the others helped Jurin to the mountain wall. He collapsed in a heap against the cold stone, sweat beading his brow.

“What exactly happened in the city?” Rodden asked Jurin after he’d managed to catch his breath.

“They caught us almost as soon as we walked through the gates,” Jurin said as he wiped away the sweat from his forehead. “They beat us quite badly in the process then brought us to that warehouse and stuck us on the roof.”

“Did you catch any names?” Wen asked as he stuffed the rope into his pack.

Jurin gave him a hard look. “It was Leisu,” he said, and Wen stopped coiling the rope for a moment and looked up. He nodded, then put his attention back to the rope.

“They didn’t ask you any questions?” Iago asked.

“No, they kept us in a small room when we weren’t on the roof. No attempts were made to interrogate us, which I thought was rather odd,” Jurin said.

“We should get moving,” Wen said. “This spot isn’t known to many, but someone in the city surely knows about it and that means that Zhou will soon as well. We need to put as much ground behind as possible before it gets light.”

Halam and Willem helped Jurin to his feet and tried to support him but he shoed them off. He was adamant that he could walk on his own, but after his first few steps that seemed unlikely. They went to his aid again as he stumbled, but he halted them with a

word, and was soon stepping well on his own. Still, Halam stayed close behind him to help if need be.

“We’ve a lot of distance to cover,” Wen said as he grabbed the torch and headed to the front of the column to light the way. “Most of it will be narrow ledges like this that climb higher up into the mountains. At a few spots we’ll need to climb the rope again, but nothing like we just did. I hope you got enough sleep last night, because you won’t be getting any tonight.”

The men lined up behind him and set out into the darkness.

* * * * *

“We’re now down to twelve men,” Ko said, “not counting ourselves.”

Leisu looked up at his deputy. For once he wasn’t happy with how independent he’d become. He was right, however. They were now twelve men against ten. While one of those ten was only a small boy, the fact that Wen and Jurin were with them tilted the odds in their favor.

“Sir,” Ko said again, “they’re getting away as we stand here doing nothing. By that time another four men had come back from the city gates. They obviously had found out that the Adjurians had gone over the wall; some may have even seen them flee up the road outside of the gates.

“Ko, I want you to gather some local men who know how to fight,” Leisu said.

“Ask the men who know of the city for help if you have to, but get them fast.”

Ko nodded and ran in the direction of the gates.

“You there, what’s your name?” Leisu asked the man who’d run up out of breath a moment before to report the Adjurians had gone over the wall.

“Xu, sir,” the man said.

“Xu, you know this city, right?”

“Yes sir, I was stationed here during the war and lived here for some time after before heading south.”

“Good. I want you to gather half of the men we have left and head out of the city toward the narrow canyons that lead around this city. I trust you know the spot where the Adjurians were caught in a bottleneck and slaughtered during the war?”

Xu looked at Leisu in a questioning manner for a moment. “Yes sir, the Oval we called it.”

“Yes, that’s it. Anyone who wants to reach the Isthmus without going through Waigo will have to go through this Oval, won’t they?”

“Yes sir, they will,” Xu said, seeming to suddenly understand what Leisu was proposing.

“That’s right. And these men’ll have to go through that area tonight or early in the morning. I want you to get there first and cut them off. Kill them if you can, but if not, hold them to that spot for as long as possible. I’ll come through the canyons behind them. They’ll not get out of that Oval alive!”

TWENTY-NINE

All through the night they had crept along narrow mountain ledges, traversed gaping chasms in the rock, and at a few points used the rope to climb still higher up. Each time that they stopped to allow one man at a time to go up, down, or around a particularly tricky spot Bryn thought that he’d collapse from exhaustion and be asleep before he’d

even had a chance to sit down. Somehow, though, he was able to rouse himself when it was again time to walk and they moved further and further into the night. Bryn had no idea where they were at or even where they were going. They pushed higher up for an hour then seemed to spend the next hour climbing down. Wen told them that it wouldn't be much longer, and in the last hour before dawn his words seemed true; they'd been walking on nearly level ground for some time in an area that was wide enough for three of them to walk abreast.

“How far exactly do we need to go before we get out of the mountains?” Rodden asked.

“Not too much further now,” Wen replied. “We've been taking the circuitous route around Waigo, but we'll meet up with the canyons that lead from the city to the Isthmus sometime this morning.”

“There isn't some other way that's more concealed?” Halam asked.

“No, I'm afraid not. Waigo was well chosen along the only path through the mountains. We were lucky to get around the city from above, but now we'll have to follow the path that everyone else must take.”

“Do you think Zhou's men will be waiting for us in those canyons?” Jal asked.

“I'm almost certain of it,” Wen replied.

After that the men walked in silence. So they'd all have to fight, Wen made it sound. For what seemed the hundredth time that night Bryn fingered the hilt of his dagger. Would he actually have to *use* it against another man this day?

With their stomachs growling something fierce and the sun rising somewhere over the mountains behind them, the men finally made it to the canyons that Wen had talked

about. The mountain walls had constantly loomed higher on either side of them, but now their height became much more pronounced. As if they'd crossed some invisible line, the walls shot up an extra hundred feet around them and became closer together at the same time. Bryn thought back to some of the narrow hallways in the palace at Baden when he saw what lay ahead of them; but whereas those hallways had been well-lit and framed with tapestries and paintings, these hallways were nothing more than cold, jagged stone which the sun was barely able to penetrate.

“We’ve reached the canyons now,” Wen said, even though the men didn’t need the announcement. “They’ll wind around through the mountains, steadily falling down to sea level. If we keep up a good pace we can be through them before dark.”

They could walk two abreast through most of the canyon, but many times they had to stop and go through single-file, the walls grew so close.

“How will we fight in here?” Willem asked Wen.

“Very carefully,” Wen replied. “If Leisu’s discovered that we’ve taken the roundabout way to these canyons then he’ll send men in after us. That is *if* he hasn’t already sent men in before us.”

“So we won’t even know of an attack until it’s upon us, either from the front or the rear,” Iago said.

“That’s right,” Wen nodded. “The only advantage these canyons have is that they favor the defender. If an attack does come, we can hunker down and fight.”

“If they have us pinned from both sides we’ll be hunkered down for some time,” Trey pointed out.

“Aye,” Iago agreed. “Is all of the way like this, walls of rock so close you can touch ‘em? Or are there some areas that’re more open and easier to defend?”

“In a couple hours we’ll get to a crossroads of sorts,” Wen said. “It’s called the Oval due to its shape, and several canyons like this come together in one area, although most of them just lead to dead-ends further into the mountains. The area’s much more open than this and there’re several large boulders lying about. If men *are* waiting for us that’ll be the place.”

“Shouldn’t we develop some kind of strategy then?” Willem asked

“We have four bows,” Iago said, “those’ll be our most important weapons if an attack does come.” He turned to Wen. “Can men attack us from above in this spot of yours?”

“The walls are still too high,” Wen replied. “Most of the attacks will come from behind the walls that branch off from the main route and from behind the many boulders strewn about.”

“What exactly will this area look like when we come upon it?” Halam asked.

Wen fingered his narrow beard as he thought for a few moments before answering. “The walls’ll be about as close together as they are now before they dramatically fan outward to create a large oval of open space. I’d say that there’s a good two hundred feet before the walls come together again and the path continues on toward the Isthmus. It’s in that space that the other canyons open up along the walls.”

“The way to the Isthmus is a straight path from where we’ll enter this open area?” Willem asked.

“Aye, just walk straight like the open space is no different from the enclosed path we’ve been following.”

“Well, all we can really do then is keep moving toward this area,” Jurin said. “If an attack comes we’ll meet it as best we can.”

They walked on after that, each man anticipating and readying himself for the battle that they were certain was awaiting them. The sun was shining down into the canyons from above when Wen motioned for them to stop.

“The Oval is right up around this next turn. If my memory serves, there’ll be several large boulders at the entrance, with more spread out ahead and side canyons further on. If there are men waiting for us, they’ll be hiding behind those boulders and waiting in those canyon entrances.”

The men nodded and Wen pulled the bow from behind his back and nocked an arrow to it. Willem, Iago, and Jurin did the same while Halam unsheathed his shortsword and Conn took the small hand-axe from his belt. Trey, Jal, and Rodden still only had daggers, but they took them out and grasped them tightly.

“You men pick up any larger weapons that you can manage,” Wen told the three with daggers. “Most likely they’ll come at us with bows and crossbows. Any man can fire a crossbow, so pick one up if you get the chance.”

Bryn took out his own dagger which had comforted him so much since Iago had given it to him aboard *The Comely Maiden* before all of their trouble had began.

“Bryn, you stay close to me and keep your head down,” Rodden said, and Halam gave them a reassuring nod.

Wen looked to each of them again, then moved close to the canyon wall and crept forward. Bryn saw him disappear around the curving wall, followed by Iago, Willem, and Jurin. Halam, Conn, Trey, and Jal went next. Rodden and Bryn hung back, moving only after the others were around the wall and out of sight. When Bryn at last moved around the wall he could see the open Oval where the mountain walls spread out. It stretched on ahead of him for quite some time but he wasn't able to see all the way across it to where it ended, although he could tell that the walls did become closer together once again. As Wen said, there were several large boulders laying all about, their edges sharp and jagged from where they'd split off from the walls above. Several smaller rocks lay all about from where they broke off from the larger boulders upon the sudden impact with the canyon floor.

Wen, Iago, and Willem had put some space between them and the rest of the men, mainly because Jurin was moving a bit slower. They advanced at little more than a crawl, steadily getting closer to the first large boulder that partly blocked the entrance to the Oval. Suddenly Iago let out a yell and began to fall to the ground. Before he'd landed Bryn saw Wen loose an arrow then dive into a rolling crouch further up along the wall. He pulled another arrow from his sheaf and waited patiently for another shot. The rest of the men crouched down against the canyon wall, unsure of where the attack had come from.

Iago let out another cry of pain as Willem slowly crawled over to him and pulled him close to the wall and further back toward the other men. That is when Bryn saw the crossbow quarrel stuck in Iago's chest, just below his left shoulder. His face contorted with pain, he let out another cry as Willem tried to pull it out before stopping suddenly,

either because the bolt was embedded too deep or the attempt to remove it was causing Iago too much pain.

“How is he?” Trey asked as quietly as he could while still being heard.

“The quarrel is in deep, all the way up to the fletches,” Willem replied. “I don’t think I can pull it out.”

“Then don’t lad,” Iago said painfully. “I can still swing my sword arm. We’ll pull it out when we get through these men.”

“Did you see how many of them there are?” Jal asked.

Ahead of them Wen let loose with the arrow he had held ready, and a cry rose somewhere ahead of them. Two crossbow quarrels clattered harmlessly into the canyon wall over his head before he crawled further up and out of sight.

“I didn’t see anything,” Willem replied as he turned his attention away from where Wen was and readied his bow once again. “Trey, you can handle a bow, right? Take Iago’s, I don’t think he can fire with his wound.”

Trey crawled up along the wall and took the bow and sheaf of arrows from Iago. He knocked an arrow as best as he could while partly crawling further up toward where Wen had crouched. When he reached the spot where the crossbow bolts had struck, he turned back to look at them. “Wen’s made it up to the first boulder,” he said before advancing further out of sight.

Willem put his hand on Iago’s shoulder then crawled further up the wall and out of sight. Another crossbow bolt clattered along the canyon floor and Bryn heard another shout of pain come from somewhere up ahead. Jurin and Halam moved up to where Iago lay. Halam said a few comforting words while Jurin peered around the wall.

“Wen, Trey, and Willem are all crouching behind a large boulder,” he said back to them as he looked forward. “I can see one dead Jongurian lying in front of their boulder.” He turned to look back at them. “I’m going to get up there.”

He crept around the wall and was gone from sight. Conn came up to take his place next to Iago.

“What do we do?” Bryn heard him ask Halam.

“I don’t think there’s enough room for all of us behind that boulder up ahead,” Halam said. “We’ve got our four bowmen up there now. All we can do is lay back and let them open up some more space for us. When they give the word, we can move up.”

Conn nodded and leaned back against the mountain. From around the wall Bryn heard another shout of pain. It was followed a moment later by another, this time accompanied by the sound of a sword clattering against the ground. Rodden slapped Bryn on the back and smiled, sure that that last cry was yet another man that Wen had handled with his bow. A wave of relief swept over him as he realized that their chances weren’t that bad after all. Then the sound of a high-pitched horn sounded out from further ahead in the Oval and he became nervous once again. When another horn sounded from behind them a few moments later his knees began to shake.

* * * * *

When Liu told Leisu that they were nearing the Oval and would be there in just a few minutes he ordered that the horn be sounded. One of the other men from Waigo smiled as he pulled the large horn from his pack and put it to his mouth, blowing as hard as he could into it. The sound was deafening in the narrow canyons, but Leisu smiled.

He knew the effect it would have on the Adjurians' morale to hear such a sound from behind them when they were pinned down from the front.

Ko, with the help Xu, who knew Waigo well, had managed to track down this man Liu who had agreed to find them men and guide them through the canyon, for a price. Leisu was angry to have to pay, but he was in no mood to negotiate or threaten, so he promised the man what he'd wanted. Liu had provided another ten men, so with the six that remained after Hui had left the city to head to the Oval they had a total of nineteen men, counting Ko, Liu, and Leisu. It wasn't as many as he would have hoped for, but it would have to serve. The Adjurians were too close to escaping and he'd throw each of these men's lives away before he let that happen.

THIRTY

Now that it was clear that another group of Jongurians were coming up behind them, Rodden and Bryn moved up closer to where Iago lay.

"We've got to get up to those boulders," Halam said, looking at them all. "From the sound of that horn, whoever's behind us isn't far off." He looked over at Jal. "How does it look out there?"

Jal crouched down and crawled around the protective wall. He came back a few moments later. "They've moved up to another boulder further into the open," Jal said. "It looks like they've killed a few more and might be pushing the rest back."

"Can we move up behind one of those boulders then?" Halam asked.

"I think so," replied Jal.

Halam looked down at Iago. “We’re going to have to drag you up to the boulders, Iago.”

“No you’re not!” Iago said. He moved to sit up, his face awash in pain. He fought through it, however, and was soon getting to his feet. “I can move just fine, now lead on.”

Halam nodded, and looked at the rest of them to make sure they were ready. They nodded their heads, so he moved out around the wall, followed by Conn and Jal. Iago went next, the pain he must have felt in his chest and shoulder not slowing him any. Rodden urged Bryn forward while he followed close behind.

When he came around the wall that’d been blocking the view of the fighting, but also protecting them from the Jongurians, Bryn saw that they were indeed winning the fight. Two Jongurians lay dead behind the boulder nearest to the mountain wall. One had an arrow through his throat, the other through his eye. Pools of blood collected around their heads. Bryn was able to see that Wen, Trey, and Willem had moved up to crouch behind the third boulder out from the entrance to the Oval. Another dead Jongurian was lying next to their position, a crossbow quarrel sticking out of his chest. Jurin, Jal, and Conn were directly behind them crouching next to another boulder, not more than a few feet from the larger rock protecting the first group, and about ten feet from the first boulder that Halam and Iago now leaned against. A little bit further ahead and twenty feet to their left were two more dead Jongurians laying beside another large boulder, both killed by arrows like the first two.

Rodden and Bryn came up to sit next to Halam and Iago.

“Looks like they took out the first two nests of Jongurians,” Iago said. “There are three more a good thirty feet ahead of us hiding behind that cluster of boulders in the center of this space.”

“It won’t be long before more men come up behind us,” Halam said. “We need to get out of the open.”

“We’ve three crossbows now,” Jal said, coming up to them and handing one of the weapons to Halam. “These Jongurians don’t need them anymore.”

“Jal, you need to get up to Wen and tell him that we’ll have more men coming up on our rear any minute now,” Halam said. “We’ll be fighting on two fronts then, so we need to get some bows pointed toward that canyon we just came from.”

“Aye,” Jal said as he crawled back up to the furthest boulder they had wrested from the Jongurians.

“Give me that crossbow,” Iago said, taking the weapon from Halam’s hand. “I’ll be of the most use right here firing at anyone who comes out of that canyon. If I can’t stop them with this,” he said as he began loading a quarrel into the crossbow, “I’ll stop them with this.” He patted the longsword that was unsheathed and laying across his legs.

“We can’t leave you here,” Rodden said.

“You can come back and get me when we’ve killed all these men,” Iago said with a smile. “Until then you three need to get out of this place. Get back to Adjuria. Tell them what happened here.”

Jal came back around the boulder with Trey behind him. “Wen wants us to stay and fend off whoever is behind us,” Jal said as he dropped a sheaf of crossbow quarrels onto the ground in front of him.

“I’ll be staying right here to do the same,” Iago replied. He looked over at Halam and Rodden. “Move up closer to Wen. He’ll get you out of here.”

Halam put his arm on Iago’s shoulder. “Thank you, friend,” he said, then looked back at Rodden and Bryn and moved around the boulder.

Bryn gave one more look at Iago and the man smiled at him, then he followed his uncle around the boulder. Jurin and Conn were crouching next to the large boulder in front of them. Halam continued up to where Wen and Willem were another few feet past them. He exchanged a few words with the two men, then came back to sit down next to Jurin.

“Wen’s going to provide some cover for Willem to move over to that boulder across the way,” Halam said, pointing toward the large rock where two of the dead Jongurian’s lay.

“That’s got to be at least thirty feet of open ground he’ll have to move across,” Jurin said.

“I think it’s Willem’s idea,” Halam said. “He wants to provide a target to draw out some of the enemy, giving Wen a better shot.”

“He’s crazy,” Jurin replied. “But it might be just what we need right now.”

“He wanted me to tell you to get ready to fire. He’ll be running across in just a minute,” Halam said.

Bryn looked up to where Willem crouched down behind the boulder. He was taking off his pack and loading one of the Jongurian crossbows. He looked back at them and nodded, then said something to Wen before dashing out into the open ground. Several crossbow bolts sailed out at him, but they all landed just behind him as he ran. Wen

stood up and fired his bow, and Bryn saw one of the Jongurians far ahead drop down with an arrow in his chest. Jurin also rose up a moment after Willem set out and he too managed to hit a man with the crossbow, sending him to the ground with a loud shout of pain as the bolt entered his shoulder. An arrow flew right in front of Willem before he dove through the air over the last few feet to land safely behind the large boulder. He looked back at them and smiled. His gamble had paid off; two more Jongurians lay dead or dying ahead of them.

Their moment of joy was short-lived; from behind them Iago shouted up that they had company. Bryn spun around and peered over the boulder that he and Rodden were crouching near. Several Jongurians could be seen shuffling into the open ground through the narrow canyon that they had just emerged from. An arrow from Trey went sailing through the air to take one of them in the chest while the man next to him went down hard to the ground grasping at a crossbow bolt in his stomach, compliments of Iago. Both crouched back down behind their boulder to reload and smile. When Iago had another bolt ready to fire he stood up to look, but the men in the canyon had learned quickly and were now wary of showing themselves. From further out in the open area of the Oval an arrow sailed through the air. It hit the boulder that Iago was leaning against and he immediately hit the ground for cover.

Trey spun around to level his bow in the direction the arrow had come from and a crossbow bolt struck the boulder just inches from where he was crouching. A Jongurian had crept up along the mountain wall to get a better position on the three men blocking the entrance into the open field of battle. Jal leveled his crossbow at the man and fired, taking him in the side as he tried to get back to the entrance. The man let out a cry of

pain and kept on crawling, but Trey took aim with his bow and sent an arrow into his upper back. The man fell forward onto the ground and lay still.

“That was close,” Bryn heard Iago say as he looked over at the dead Jongurian. More movement came from the canyon and Trey sent an arrow into it but it bounced harmlessly off the stone wall.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” Conn said beside Bryn. “The Jongurians’ll steadily get closer from both directions until they have us.”

“Wen, any ideas?” Jurin shouted.

“We could run for it,” Wen called back.

“We may have to,” Halam said loudly. “They’re closing in on us.”

* * * * *

After quickening their pace for another minute after the horn had been sounded, the narrow canyon walls suddenly spread out into a large open space. Leisu could clearly see why they called it the Oval, for it took on exactly that shape as it stretch on for a couple hundred feet ahead of them before the walls narrowed once again. The men were still moving quickly when the opening appeared and a shout was heard from up ahead. An arrow sailed out and struck one man in the chest followed by a crossbow bolt a moment later, taking another in the stomach. Both men collapsed to the ground, although the one with the bolt in his stomach flopped around some.

“Get back,” Liu yelled at them, and the men pressed back into the canyon quickly. One man tried to crouch down and help the fallen man writing on the ground in pain, but an arrow struck the canyon wall just above his head and he quickly moved back.

“Well, we know that we’ve got them pinned between us and Hui’s men,” Ko observed as they huddled close to the canyon walls. Every so often a man would peek too far out and an arrow would clatter against the stone wall.

“Yes, but they have us in a tight spot as well,” Leisu said. He turned to Liu. “We need to see what’s going on, can’t you get one of your men close enough to the entrance to report back?”

“I’ll try,” Liu said, then turned to a man close to him. The man took the sword from his belt and the bow from his shoulder and got down onto his stomach. He crawled right up the wounded man and put his hand on his mouth as he tried to speak, then crawled further ahead and out of sight. A few moments later he came crawling back and got to his feet.

“They’ve got three men crouched behind a large boulder directly in front of the entrance,” he said. “It looks like another few are spread further out into the Oval. I saw a few of Hui’s men dead on the ground around where the Adjurians are.”

“We’ve got to get in there and finish them off!” Leisu said.

“I’ll not waste my men’s lives by charging out into a hail of arrows,” Liu said to Leisu with a cold look.

Leisu returned the look, but knew that he could do little to force the man. He looked to the few men that he’d brought. “Get in there and clear a path,” he said.

One of the men crept up to the canyon wall and crouched down. He passed the wounded man and was out of sight, but a moment later they heard a cry and he fall back into view, an arrow sticking from his chest. He tried to pull at it, but quickly died. More cries came from further in the Oval.

“Those sound like Jongurian cries,” Ko said. “They’re far enough in the distance that they can’t be the Adjurians, unless they’ve made it much further in just the past few minutes.”

“They know we’re here and’ll be taking more chances to get out of that deathtrap,” Liu said.

“Which means that we need to take more chances getting in,” Leisu snapped back.

Liu gave him another hard look then turned to his men, nodding his head toward the Oval. Four men crouched down onto their knees with their bows out. Two of them crept along the wall and advanced toward the entrance while the other two hung back. Several arrows sailed out at them, but the shots were too high and bounced off the walls. They moved forward a bit more then ducked back as more arrows came at them. They waited and then advanced once again. Leisu had to admit that they were brave, or else heavily motivated by the money that now weighed down Liu’s pockets. When they got as far as they felt comfortable with, which was close to the three dead men, they raised their bows and fired while the other two men rushed over to the wall on the other side. No return fire came and they crept up a little further, quickly vanishing from sight.

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From up ahead Bryn saw a Jongurian run from one of the side canyons on the left to join another man behind one of the boulders in front of them. Willem tried to get a shot off at him with his bow but missed, and while he got back down to reload a Jongurian from a side canyon on the right ran out to take up a better position behind a boulder fifty feet in front of him.

“There’s still another boulder between Willem and those two men in front of us,” Jurin said loudly for all around to hear. “If we can send him running up to it we might be able to draw them out and get a shot.”

“Aye,” Halam said, and he began waving at Willem, getting his attention quickly. He motioned with his hands that they wanted him to run up to the next furthest boulder. He nodded back that he understood and readied his crossbow. A moment later he nodded again then sprang up into a fast run. Several arrows sailed out from the canyon entrance behind him but they landed in the dirt at his heels. Trey jumped up and took a shot, hitting a man in the chest with an arrow and sending him to the ground. Jal aimed at another with his crossbow but the man was able to duck the bolt and get off a shot with his bow, sending the arrow too high. The two men that were taking shelter behind the boulder in front of Wen and Halam anticipated what Willem was trying to do, however, and remained crouched down for protection.

“Not so lucky that time,” Jurin said when Willem reached the boulder safely. “They didn’t take the bait.”

“We still got two behind us,” Rodden reminded him, but Jurin shrugged his shoulders as if that were little consolation.

Willem was now in a precarious position. The boulder he was hiding behind left him open to the men in the canyon thirty feet to his rear. Iago realized this and Bryn heard him tell Trey and Jal to keep a close eye out for any movement in that direction. Only ten feet ahead and to his right were the two more men that Willem had tried to draw a shot from when he made his dash. Both remained out of sight in their position and there was little that he could do to draw them out without himself drawing fire from the

man who had come out of another side canyon and was now taking shelter behind a boulder twenty feet ahead and to his right. He seemed to sense his predicament and kept low to the ground to create as little of a target for the many bows aimed in his direction.

“We’ve got to get him out of there,” Halam said to the others around the two boulders where he sat.

“Any suggestions?” Jurin asked.

“What if we send another man to run to the position that Willem just left?” Rodden asked.

“Too risky,” Wen called back. “They’d be expecting that. Anything we do now to draw fire away from Willem will just as likely put him in greater danger.”

“What if we send him right up to the other side of the boulder that those two men are hiding behind?” Halam suggested.

No one said anything for a few moments then Wen nodded. “That just might be our only option.”

Halam nodded and leaned out from the boulder to his left so he could get Willem’s attention. Willem gave a weak smile and Halam waved at him to move up some more. Willem shook his head that he didn’t think that was a good idea, but Halam kept on waving at him, so he relented. Drawing out his shortsword he inched toward the edge of the boulder. When Jurin sent an arrow sailing toward the two men to strike the boulder he dashed out and made the ten feet without drawing a shot from any direction. He didn’t waste any time stopping but let his momentum carry him to the far edge of the boulder so that he could take a shot at one of the men with his loaded crossbow. He must have hit him, for Bryn heard a loud groan and saw the other man stand up straight. Wen sent an

arrow sailing into his chest and the man grabbed at it for a second before falling forward to slump over the boulder. At the same moment another Jongurian from the side canyon emerged and sent an arrow toward Willem while the man from behind the boulder thirty feet ahead and on the right of the Oval did the same. One struck the boulder just inches from Willem's head and he ducked down and began to whirl around to get back behind the boulder, but he wasn't fast enough. The other arrow slammed into his leg above the knee and he let out a loud groan. Jurin jumped up and sent an arrow toward the side canyon, taking the man in the chest.

"Quick," Wen yelled out, "move up to Willem!" He waved at Conn, Bryn, and Rodden, and pushed Halam out into the open beside him. Halam had little choice but to run if he didn't want to remain an easy target, so he dashed quickly ahead toward Willem.

"Go!" Jurin yelled at the other three, and Bryn felt Rodden pull him to his feet and push him forward and out into the open.

All three ran as fast as they could. Bryn stole a quick glance back and saw Jurin up and firing an arrow behind him toward the canyon entrance while Trey, Jal, and Iago all did the same from their position. They must have hit a few for he heard some cries of pain come from that direction. Arrows sailed out from behind them as they ran, but most landed ahead of them and to the sides. Bryn thought he heard a thump from behind him, but kept running as fast as he could. Just before he went into a sliding dive to get behind the boulder that Willem was at he saw the Jongurian further ahead of them ready a shot with his bow. An arrow hit the boulder just inches beneath his stomach and he crouched down quickly without taking a shot, however.

Bryn slammed into the boulder hard with his shoulder. He must have been running faster than he realized, he thought as Halam grabbed hold of him.

“Thank the heavens you’re safe lad,” Halam said as he held Bryn close to him.

Rodden was breathing heavily beside him and Halam patted him on the shoulder, but Conn was nowhere to be seen. Bryn looked back and saw him laying not more than five feet from the boulder that Wen was behind, two arrows sticking out of his back. Halam saw Bryn looking back in shock at the sight of the sailor lying dead on the ground and hugged his head close to his chest.

“We’ll get out of this yet, lad,” Halam said as he rubbed Bryn’s back, and Bryn looked up and gave a weak smile.

“How’s your leg?” Rodden asked Willem.

The arrow was embedded deep into Willem’s upper thigh and a steady stream of blood poured from the wound. His pants were already soaked red.

“It’s not good,” Willem replied, “but I’m not finished yet. As long as we can get that sewing kit from Wen and stitch me up, I’ll be fine.”

Bryn thought that Willem was being a bit too modest, but Rodden just nodded his head and looked back behind them. Jurin had moved up to crouch down beside Wen while Iago, Trey, and Jal were still pinned tight behind their boulder, unable to move because of the men in the canyon who were just waiting for them to make a mistake.

“We’re in quite a bad situation,” Willem said. “We’ve got at least two in front of us over there to our right, and who knows how many in that canyon mouth to our rear.”

“We’ve made it this far,” Halam replied. “If we can just get those last two men, then we can make it out of this area.”

Bryn looked over the boulder. Ahead of them more than a hundred feet the mountain walls once again grew closer together and a narrow canyon led out of the Oval. His uncle was right, if they could just cover that last hundred feet they'd be out of this nightmare. It was pivotal that they take out those last two Jongurians, however. The ground ahead of them was largely open. There were a few large rocks, but nothing big enough to hide behind until they neared the canyon that would lead them out.

“If we can just get to that side canyon over there we have a chance at an open shot at the man behind that boulder,” Willem said, pointing to the spot where the dead Jongurian lay on his side with Jurin's arrow in his chest.

“Well you're in no condition to run, so I guess it'll have to be me,” Halam said. He turned to look at Rodden. “You make sure you get Bryn out of here safely.”

Rodden nodded and Willem handed his bow to Halam. “The crossbow won't reach all the way to the man so you'll have to use this.”

“Aye,” Halam said as he slung the bow over his shoulder and took the sheaf of arrows. “Just make sure that Jurin and Wen know what I'm doing.”

Willem nodded and he and Rodden began to wave back to where the two men were taking cover. They nodded when they saw the waves and again when they understood Willem's motioning at Halam and then toward the side canyon. Jurin waved back at Iago, Trey, and Jal then both readied their bows to fire at the man far ahead of them.

“Whenever you're ready,” Willem said, and Halam nodded.

“Now,” he said, then sprang to his feet and ran toward the side canyon. Several arrows came from the canyon further behind him and hit the mountain wall while another two shot out from across the Oval. Bryn looked up in time to see one of the arrows from

somewhere behind him sail out toward the man behind the boulder, this time landing a few inches higher to take the man in the stomach. The man dropped his bow and fell to the ground, his upper body exposed. Willem shifted his weight onto his good leg and leaned over the boulder far enough to fire a crossbow bolt into the man's chest, ending his agony.

Halam reached the canyon wall and crouched down behind a large boulder that lay a few feet from its entrance. He waved back at them to tell them he was alright, then took the bow from his shoulder and began to knock an arrow. Suddenly from somewhere a crossbow bolt took him in his upper back near the left shoulder and he dropped the bow and grasped at his arm. Bryn looked from his uncle to the field and saw that the Jongurian that had taken the arrow in the shoulder was lying on the ground and loading another quarrel into his crossbow. Rodden grabbed the crossbow that Willem had set down by his feet and after taking aim, fired. The bolt slammed into the ground inches from the man's head. The shot fazed him, but he kept winding up his crossbow for another shot.

Willem grabbed the crossbow from Rodden and began to do the same as both men raced against the other. There was no way that Wen or Jurin could get a clean shot, Bryn saw; the man was too well hidden behind the boulder for them to see. It was only ten feet away and the man was nearly ready to fire once again. Bryn gripped his dagger tightly and rushed out toward the man. He was only a few feet away when the man had finished loading and began to raise the crossbow up. Bryn took two more steps then threw his body forward into a slide with his right leg. His boot hit the man squarely in the face and he could feel the nose break under his heel. He didn't hesitate for a moment. The ivory-

hilted dagger slammed down into the man's back again and again until the man lay still. Bryn had little time to think before an arrow sailed into the boulder just above his head. He looked out to see their lone Jongurian opponent nocking another arrow into his bow from the side canyon. Before the man could even begin to crouch down to take what little cover there was, an arrow landed in his chest, then another, and yet another after that. The man's fingers went limp and the bow and arrow fell from them as he toppled to the ground.

Bryn began to cry. The tears that had been building up for the past several days all came rushing out at once. The chase at sea, the burning of the ships, the lifeboats, the Jongurian camp, running through the hills, seeing friends die, and now this attack in the canyon and watching his uncle get wounded; it was all too much for him to handle. He broke down sobbing beside the man that he had killed with his own hand. How had things gone so wrong, his mind cried out? A couple of weeks ago he'd been plowing fields in Eston, eating dinner with his Uncle Trun, with not a care in the world. Now he was lying on a rocky mountain floor in a foreign country. Men who wanted him dead were no more than a few feet away. And the only man that he had to protect him had just been shot in front of his eyes. He couldn't tell how long that he wept before he felt arms around him and looked up to see Jurin over him. Bryn immediately threw himself into his arms and embraced him tightly, crying all the while.

"It's alright Bryn," Jurin said as he brushed Bryn's hair with his hand. "It's over now, you're alright." He raised Bryn's head up and pointed toward the side canyon. "Look, Halam is just fine."

Halam kneeled in the canyon mouth and waved over at them. Bryn could see his face flush from the pain that he must have felt in his shoulder and back, but his uncle put on a brave face for his nephew.

“But what about all of the Jongurians still behind us?” Bryn asked.

“There’s nothing we can do about them but hold them off,” Jurin answered. “The way ahead of us is clear now. We can get out of here.”

Bryn looked up at the man then out into the Oval. They still had more than a hundred feet to go to get to the canyon leading out, but Bryn could see no further sign of Jongurians blocking their path. Behind him he could still see Trey, Jal, and Iago firing occasionally at any movement that caught their eye in the Oval’s entrance.

“Come on Bryn, let’s get up and get out of here.” Jurin said as he pulled Bryn up next to him so they both crouched behind the boulder. When Jurin nodded down at him they sprang up and ran the ten feet over to where Willem and Rodden were still taking cover.

“Oh, Bryn, you scared me there,” Rodden said as he took Bryn in his arms for a strong embrace.

“That was very brave what you did, Bryn,” Willem said. “Very foolish, but brave.”

“Will you be able to walk?” Jurin asked Willem.

Willem got into a crouch and then put weight on both of his legs as he tried to stand. He was obviously in pain but was able to do it. “I’ll manage to get out of this deathtrap that we’re in, but after that I’m not sure,” he said.

“You three get over to where Halam is,” Jurin told them. “I’ll get back to the others and tell them we are heading toward the canyon leading out of here.”

“What about the others?” Bryn asked. “How will they manage to get past the Jongurians coming in?”

“I don’t know lad,” Jurin said. He nodded at them then took off running toward the boulder that Wen was still crouching behind. An arrow sailed out toward him but was way off. Another arrow fired from where the other three men were huddled, but it hit the canyon wall. Jurin made it to the men who were now largely grouped together around the first two boulders inside the Oval. He waved back at them, and Rodden helped Willem to his feet then all three took off running toward the side canyon where Halam was. A few arrows came after them, but the other men gave good cover and none of them even came close. Bryn was the first to get to the canyon and he saw his uncle leaning up against the wall with his good shoulder, the left-side of his shirt covered in blood. He ran up to him and threw his arms around his neck.

“Oh, careful there lad,” Halam said with a grunt of pain. Bryn lessened his embrace and looked at his uncle.

“Will you be alright, uncle Halam?” Bryn asked, the tears beginning to well up in his eyes once again.

“Aye, I’ll be just fine, Bryn, don’t you worry.” Halam smiled but Bryn could tell that it was forced and that the pain was greater than he was letting on. Still, he would have no problems running, Bryn thought, so should be able to make it to the far canyon without trouble.

Willem looked at the bolt sticking from Halam’s back. “I don’t think we’ll be able to pull it out now,” he said. “I’ve already tried with this one in my leg. They go in deep.”

“We’ll deal with it later when we’re out of here,” Halam replied. He looked at Bryn once again. “I don’t want you to ever do anything that foolish again, do you hear me? You could have gotten killed back there, and you’re lucky you didn’t.” Two tears fell from Bryn’s eyes and he hastily wiped them with the back of his hand. “Still,” Halam continued in a gentler voice, “that was a very brave thing you did there, and I’m proud of you.” Bryn threw his arms around his uncle once again and this time did not lessen his grasp when Halam let out a groan of pain or as the tears fell hot onto his cheeks.

Jurin ran into the mouth of the canyon, an arrow clattering against the wall behind him. He was breathing heavily and took a few moments to catch his breath before speaking. He had his hands full with two of the enemies crossbows, his own bow, and two packs, one his and the other belonging to Iago.

“The other four are going to stay and cover our escape,” he said when he’d caught his breath. “Iago’ll stay in the same spot, but Wen, Jal, and Trey will each fan out to a new position. They hope that by seeing us escaping, enough of the Jongurians will be drawn out of the canyon and into the line of fire.”

“But they could be pinned down there for some time,” Rodden said. “We don’t know how many there are in that canyon.”

“I said that to Wen,” Jurin replied. “He told me to get you four out of here and to the isthmus. He would take care of these men here.”

“What’s the plan then?” Halam asked after a moment.

“Wen thinks it would be best for us to follow the wall of the Oval all the way up to that far boulder, oh, about sixty feet in front of us,” Jurin answered, pointing further into the Oval. “From there we take cover for a minute, then proceed on to the next boulder.

After that the canyon leading out of here is only twenty feet away.” He looked over at Willem. “Can you manage that?”

“Aye, I may not be as fast as you four but I can make it.”

Jurin nodded. “Good, then get ready.”

Jurin and Rodden each swung one of the packs onto their back and picked up the crossbows. They let Willem take a moment getting up then lined up behind him at the canyon mouth. Willem would go first, followed by Jurin, Halam, Bryn, then Rodden. Each was to move as fast as they could along the wall to the boulder. When they were ready Jurin waved at Wen who had been watching them. They ran out from the two boulders closest to the Oval’s entrance toward the boulder nearest the other wall. Arrows sailed out at him, but he made it unscathed. At the same time Wen crept back to take up a position further to the left of the entrance. Iago and Jal remained where they were.

Seeing Wen wave back to indicate they were ready, Willem limped out into the Oval. His steps were slow and staggered, but he managed to pull off a shuffling-run. Jurin stayed behind him with his bow ready, but the other three dashed out ahead. Bryn didn’t try to look back this time but kept running hard. Faster than he thought it would take he was to the boulder and around the other side to crouch down, his breath coming in gasps. Halam and Rodden came in right behind him, then Willem and Jurin a few moments later. Willem was flushed and sweat cascaded off his face, but he smiled.

“We made it,” he said with a small laugh.

“Let’s not waste time,” Jurin said, “the other boulder is only twenty feet away then it’s a clean run to the canyon out of here.”

The others took a moment to catch their breath then were all running again. Bryn was the first to reach the next boulder and he moved around to the other side to take cover, which was no longer really necessary. They were far enough away from the Oval entrance for the Jongurians to even attempt a shot. The others came up a moment later.

“Now just a few more feet and we’re home free,” Halam said, rising to make the last quick run. He looked down at Bryn and smiled when a crossbow bolt slammed into his chest and he fell against the boulder, his face a picture of shock as he looked down at the bolt sticking out of him.

“There! Willem shouted, pointing toward the last side canyon directly across from them.

A Jongurian crouched down against the mountain wall reloading his crossbow. Jurin took his bow and nocked an arrow to it before taking careful aim. The man looked up for a split second, fear clearly writ on his face, and the arrow took him right in the eye. The force of the shot threw him back a couple of feet and he crumpled up against the canyon wall, his undamaged eye wide and lifeless.

“Uncle!” Bryn shouted as he crouched down next to Halam. He was afraid to touch him, the wound looked so bad.

Halam looked up at Bryn. “I’m afraid they got me, lad,” he said with a slight smile.

“You’ll be fine,” Rodden stammered, “you’ve had worse than this.”

“Halam grabbed Rodden’s hand. “You get Bryn back to Adjuria,” he said looking up at his friend’s face.

Rodden nodded as tears welled up in his eyes.

Halam turned his attention back to Bryn, putting his hand on the boy's shoulder. "I love you, Bryn."

"I love you too, uncle Halam," Bryn managed to choke out through his sobs.

After that Halam leaned his head back against the boulder and lay still. A moment later Willem leaned over and closed his lifeless eyes.

* * * * *

Leisu could still see two of the men that Liu had sent forward toward the Oval, and suddenly they jerked their bows up and fired a couple of arrows.

"Another one just rushed forward," one of them yelled back.

Liu motioned for another couple of men to follow the four that'd gone forward and they too made it further toward the Oval entrance without drawing fire.

"Perhaps they made it out," Ko said to Leisu, referring to the Adjurians.

"Not likely with my men still firing," Liu replied. He nodded toward the man who had first crawled forward to report back and he once again got onto his belly and disappeared around the bend in the canyon wall. After a few moments he returned.

"There's no more movement ahead," he said. "I could see a few more dead Jongurians but nothing of the Adjurians. They may still be there, but they could be out of arrows."

Ko looked to Leisu. "He may be right. How long can they keep firing at us before they run out?"

"They'll still have their swords," Leisu answered, but then turned to Liu. "Perhaps you should send another few men out, but this time at a walk."

"I don't think so," he replied. "That's just too risky."

Leisu looked around at the men. Only four remained from Bindao. “Which one of you wishes an easy promotion,” he said. “All you’ve got to do is walk a little ways into the Oval.”

The four men looked around at one another uneasily, but said nothing. A moment later one of Liu’s men spoke.

“I’ll do it for fifty gold,” he said, stepping forward.

“Fifty gold! You must be crazy,” Ko said, standing up to face the man, his fists clenched.

“No,” Leisu said, stepping between the two men. He looked up at the man. “You’ll have your fifty gold when you return.”

“Fine,” he said, and moved toward the Oval. He slowed as he got to the bend in the wall, then stepped forward and out of sight. A few moments later he came back, a large grin on his face. “No one fired at me,” he said. “I’ll take that fifty gold now, if you please.”

“How do we know you went out far enough?” Ko asked.

“Because I saw him,” another one of Liu’s men said as he walked up. “He walked right past where I was crouching down and halfway to the nearest boulder. Not an arrow came at him. Either those men vanished right under our eyes, or they’re out of arrows to fire at us.”

Leisu looked from the man to Ko then Liu. “Let’s move in, then,” he said.

Liu nodded and motioned for his men to move forward. Although they’d just seen their companion emerge from the opening to the Oval unscathed, they were still wary and

advanced slowly. The man who'd gone first asked again for his gold but Liu gave him a hard hit to the head and he quickly grew silent on the matter.

The Oval opened up in front of them and the first thing that Leisu noticed was all of their dead men lying about. Several were spread out with arrows and crossbow bolts sticking from them all around the Oval's entrance and near the first few boulders. Further out amongst the boulders and side canyons he could see more laying dead. Then one of the men ahead of them cried out.

"Here's one!" the man yelled back and several other men including Leisu rushed up to see. An Adjurian lay up against a boulder, an arrow sticking from his chest near the shoulder. The wound had covered him in blood, but he was still alive and grasped his sword tightly.

"I'm right here, come and get me," the man said, but it was obvious that he was in no condition to fight.

"No," a voice called out, and another man further out and behind a boulder rose and began walking toward them. Leisu immediately recognized the man: it was his former master, Wen. "You're no match for these men, not in your state."

He looked up at Leisu. "I see that you've chosen to follow Zhou."

"That's right," Leisu replied. "And I see that you've chosen to aid our enemy."

"Enemy?" Wen asked. Why, because they are Adjurian? Or because they know your master has freed the False King?"

"Does it matter, old man?" Leisu asked. Two other Adjurians had risen from behind boulders by then and walked over to stand around the wounded man. Liu's men kept

their bows aimed at them, but most of their attention was directed toward the two Jongurians speaking, both obviously near to blows.

“It always matters,” Wen said. He dropped his sword and bow to the ground.

“Well, what will it be Leisu? Will you kill us now, or deliver us to your master?”

“I’ll kill you then decide what I’ll do with these men,” Leisu replied, pulling his sword from its scabbard. “Pick up your sword.”

“Sir, is this wise?” Ko asked, but Leisu raised his hand for him to stop.

“Ko, you stay out of this!” Leisu said, then looked around at all of the other Jongurians. “That goes for all of you here. I want no interference in this.” He turned back to Wen. “Pick up your sword, I said. I’ve been wanting to have a real swordfight with you since we first met, and now I’ll get my wish.”

Wen stared back at Leisu for several moments and then shrugged his shoulders. “As you wish,” he said and leaned down to pick up his sword.

Before he even had the hilt firmly grasped in his fingers Leisu was charging toward him.

“Look out!” one of the Adjurians yelled, but Wen had expected the rush and rolled out of the way as Leisu’s blade sliced through the air where he’d been standing. He came quickly to his feet as Leisu regained his balance.

“You’re still quick, I see,” Leisu said as he lunged forward once again.

Wen blocked the blow with his sword and the two men were soon moving back and forth. The canyon walls echoed with the sounds of their swords striking against one another and the men moved back, forming a circle around them. For a few moments Leisu pressed Wen toward a boulder, but just when he was about to be caught between it

and Leisu's sword, he spun right and had Leisu pressed back to the large rock. Leisu was able to offer a few quick parries, however, and they were soon both out in the open once again, neither of their blows lessening in speed or severity. Sweat began to bead on Leisu's forehead and his teeth were bared in a savage grin, but Wen remained calm and showed not the slightest concern as he quickly dodged and parried Leisu's blows, then moved into his own counterattacks. It became a quick dance as the two combatants whirled around the sandy ground. Once or twice the men around them let out a gasp as one of the men's blows looked close to landing, but each time the other dodged out of the way or met the attack with an upraised sword.

Suddenly Wen lost his footing when he stepped on an arrow laying in the sand and stumbled back a few steps, both of his arms raised up above his head for balance. Leisu saw his chance and moved forward with a few savage swings and managed to slice Wen's tunic, which soon showed a thin line of red. Wen was quickly able to regain his balance, however, and the fight went on, the slash barely slowing him.

Leisu began to feel his arm grow tired from all of the swinging. His attacks slowed and he spent more time blocking Wen's thrusts. He was no longer able to push Wen around, but was instead going where the older man's attacks sent him. He knew that if this pace continued, he'd be done.

"Ko, shoot him!" he said loudly, but Ko only planted his feet more firmly in the ground and continued to watch the battle.

"Somebody shoot him!" Leisu called out after a few more moments. Wen's attacks were increasing in frequency. The man barely seemed to be tired at all.

“Fifty gold to the first man that fires an arrow at this man!” Leisu called out again when it was clear no one was coming to his aid. “One hundred gold!” he called out, louder this time.

“Any man that fires an arrow I’ll kill myself,” Liu answered.

Leisu knew that he’d lost. There was no way that he could continue to block Wen’s attacks for long. He looked up at Wen, whose face showed nothing. It angered him even more, and he gritted his teeth and let out a loud growl, then lunged forward. Wen easily swatted aside his efforts and on the last swing pushed Leisu’s sword far out to the right. In a quick flash Wen extended his arm forward and Leisu could see then feel his former master’s sword enter his stomach just under the breastbone then slide right back out. He brought his sword back for another swing, but Wen just stepped back from him and lowered his sword to the ground. Leisu took a couple of stumbling steps forward before his legs gave out and he fell to his knees, his sword falling from his fingers. He could feel blood begin to trickle down his chin and wiped his hand across his mouth then brought it before his eyes. It was bright red. He lowered his hand to look up at Wen, but his face was just registering the same expressionless look that he’d seen nearly ten years before when the man had left him for dead. He gave a slight smile than fell forward.

Wen threw his sword down at his feet and Ko walked over to Leisu and crouched down, putting a finger to his throat. After a moment he shook his head and rose, looking at Liu.

“He’s dead,” was all he said.

“And these men?” Liu asked, motioning toward the three Adjurians huddled together, Wen standing close by them.

Ko looked over at them for a few moments then began to walk back toward the Oval's entrance.

“Tie their hands; they're our prisoners now.”

“The old man too?” Liu asked with surprise.

Ko turned back to look at Wen. He stood staring back, seemingly unperturbed by the death of his former pupil. “All of them,” he said, then moved into the canyon and out of sight.

CONCLUSION

They made it out of the canyon and through the mountains. There was no sign of any Jongurians following them, but neither was there any of their companions either. They asked Jurin what he thought had happened to them back in the Oval, but he only shrugged when the question was put to him. After a while they no longer asked. Bryn was numb the whole time and noticed little. All of them were silent as they moved further out of the mountains and into the forest that lay at their base. When darkness fell Jurin lit a torch and they continued on. Bryn couldn't care whether they slept or not at that point; all he wanted to do was lie down and die.

They stopped to sleep for a few hours before dawn, then began again. None of them thought that the Jongurians had given up their pursuit, so to the men it felt very much like a chase still. They pushed themselves hard, even Willem, whose leg required that he use a makeshift crutch to walk with. Jurin had taken the crossbow bolt from his leg and stitched up the wound sometime after they'd left the Oval, but Bryn couldn't really be

sure where or when it had occurred. All he noticed was that Willem was always in the rear, but no matter the pain he must have been feeling he managed to keep up.

The forest gave way to grassland and then to prairie. The tall grasses steadily grew shorter as they pushed further westward and eventually became sparse and thorny brush then small weeds and then little in the way of vegetation at all. Jurin had turned them in a northwestward direction as soon as it was clear they were entering the Isthmus. The plan was for them to still reach the northern coast and flag down a passing boat. The consensus of the men was that they would try to get the attention of the first boat they saw, whether Adjurian or Jongurian; they all wanted this nightmare to end.

Sometime in the afternoon on that first full day out of the mountains they reached the Ithmian Sea. The smell of saltwater in the air was heavy and the sun beat down on them mercilessly, forcing them to shed all unnecessary clothing. The beach was made of fine-grained sand and stretched on for leagues. Small waves lapped up against the shore.

“Do we just wait here then until a ship passes?” Rodden asked when they got to the water’s edge.

“That could be a long wait,” Willem said, “it would probably be best if we kept walking west.”

“I agree,” Jurin said. “There’s no telling how close the Jongurians are behind us. Best to keep moving.”

“We don’t even know that there are Jongurians behind us,” Rodden said.

“I don’t want to sit here and wait to find out,” Jurin replied.

That ended the discussion. They picked up their packs and began walking along the edge of the beach where the sand ended and the dry, cracked ground of the plains began.

The sand of the beach continually encroached further up into the plains and soon they were forced to walk along it if they wanted to keep the water within sight. Willem asked if they should do anything about the footprints they were leaving behind them, but Jurin just shook his head. If the Jongurians were after them they wouldn't need footprints to find them, he said. They didn't spot a single ship all that day and into the evening. The sun went down somewhere over the flat horizon far ahead of them, turning the skies above the water a dark purple then bright orange before the black of night took hold. Jurin called for a stop. They needed to get some rest if they wanted to put the leagues behind them the next day. They drank sparingly from the water skins, the only nourishment they had. Bryn fell asleep almost immediately after putting his head down, the dull sound of the waves washing ashore a soothing relief to his numbed mind.

They woke early the next morning as the sun was just beginning to crest the mountains to their rear. Once again they started another day with no food. The biggest problem would be the sun, Jurin told them. They all wrapped an extra shirt or some cloth around their heads to protect against its bombardment, but nothing could be done to assuage the heat they felt. It was as if they were baking in a large oven hour upon hour. There were no trees or even any large rocks to provide shade. There was nothing to do but keep putting one foot in front of the other and press on.

That afternoon Willem said that they only had one full water skin left for the four of them. By nightfall it was only half-full. Jurin told them that their best chances at getting through the desert were to travel by night when the sun was not so hot. They took an hours rest while the sun set over the western horizon then got back to their feet.

There was no reason to light a torch: there was nothing ahead of them but flat sandy ground and they could see the faint outline of where the waves crashed against the beach. The moon was still large enough to impart enough light that they had no trouble seeing. The unrelenting heat of the day gave way to a deep coldness at night. There were no clouds to speak of overhead to keep in the warmth of the day, so as soon as the sun set, the temperatures dropped. The sweat in their clothes grew cold, and instead of being a welcome relief to them it was much more of a burden. All of them were shivering as they moved through the darkness. The first rays of dawn put smiles on their faces and they pushed on another hour before the sun was beating down on them and they were sweating once again. They planted the swords and crossbows into the sand and tied extra shirts, pants, coats, and anything else together to create a makeshift shelter to keep the sun off of them while they slept through the day. After walking all of the previous day and through the night they were fast asleep.

They drank the last of their water before setting out that evening. Rodden asked Jurin and Willem how much further they'd have to walk, but neither had an answer for him. Their morale had been dropping since the end of the first day when they hadn't seen a ship. It grew worse each day that the sea remained empty. At one point during the second day Willem shouted and began waving at what he thought was a passing ship far out on the horizon. It turned out to be just a seagull flying far off in the distance, however, and they returned to their silent walking. By the third day they rarely bothered to even look toward the sea. All hopes for catching a passing fishing boat were gone. All they could do was continue walking, and even that became difficult. Their pace slowed considerably as they shivered through the night and they stopped well before dawn to

erect their makeshift shelter and collapse into sleep. Jurin woke them all when the sun was still high and said that they needed to keep moving. Without water time was now as much against them as the sun; it wouldn't do to sleep more than a few hours each night now.

Their bodies began to break down. First their lips became dry and cracked from lack of water. All of them had severe sunburns which were little more than a nuisance at first but eventually inhibited their movement, the pain was so bad. They became lightheaded and disoriented, even more than they'd been from the lack of food. Often times after they would resume walking after taking a short rest break, one of them would invariably begin moving in the wrong direction without knowing it. The flickering heat waves began to play tricks on their minds and all of them had begun to see things that weren't there. The most often sight was a distant pool of water just over the horizon. Sometimes they'd all get excited at how adamantly the claim was expressed and their pace would increase for a time until it became obvious there was nothing. Another hour or two would pass and the process would repeat itself. It was all each man could do to just focus on his feet and somehow will them to move.

The sun was high when they stopped for the day. They didn't even bother staking up their shelter; instead each man took a shirt or coat and draped it over himself for protection. The hunger pangs and the dryness of their throats made sleep nearly impossible, but nobody wanted to move anymore either. They just lay there in misery.

The fourth day began like all the others. The sun shined straight down on them as if laughing at their plight. They pulled themselves up and moved, but shortly after starting out Willem fell to the ground and didn't get up. Jurin moved back to pull him to his feet

and he made it a few more steps before crashing down to the ground again. He said he couldn't go on and just needed a little more rest. They urged him to get up, but he couldn't be convinced. They pressed on without him, telling him to just catch up when he could. After a while he disappeared behind them and it was almost as if they' always been three moving across this vast desert. Colors began to swirl in their vision and walking in a straight line became impossible. They were no longer even following the sea Bryn noticed when he looked over to his left at one point. Fine golden sand completely surrounded them in all directions.

At some point that afternoon, or morning, or perhaps close to evening, Bryn couldn't tell anymore, Jurin just sat down and stared off into the distance. Bryn and Rodden didn't even slow their shambling gate to ask him what he was doing, they just kept moving.

There was no sound in the desert around them except for a steady ringing in their heads which they thought could only be the sound of the sun slowly killing them. Bryn began to think that it would've been better to die in the Oval with the rest of the men, and he hoped that Iago, Trey, Jal, and Wen didn't make it out so that they wouldn't have to move through this hell. The sun began to set and Bryn turned to Rodden to suggest they sleep for a few hours, but Rodden wasn't there. He slowly turned to look around him, but he could see him nowhere. He was completely alone. He fell to the ground and would have cried if his body had enough water to spare for tears, which it did not. Somehow he managed to fall asleep or pass out.

He woke with the sun shining painfully in his eyes. He decided not to get up. What was the point? This would be the fifth day that they'd been in the desert he thought, but

couldn't be sure. The other three men were lying down somewhere behind him, dying slowly. He would quietly join them. As he stared up at the clear blue sky above, Bryn thought about the rolling green fields of Eston. He would never see them again, but it didn't seem to bother him that much. He was beyond caring about anything. A feeling of peaceful serenity filled him and all of his cares vanished. The pain in his stomach grew less and the taste of water didn't constantly fill his thoughts. He knew that he must be close to death, and welcomed it.

Death himself must be walking toward him now, he thought, when he heard what sounded like footfalls approaching from the distance. The sound grew louder and then suddenly a shadow stretched over his face and then a man leaned over him to block out the sun. He had a white towel wrapped around his head and a loose fitting type of robe around him. He put a water skin to Bryn's lips and he was filled with such a feeling of joy at his first taste of water in three days that he began to cry.

"It's alright," the man said as he rubbed Bryn's hair back. "Who are you and how have you come to be here?"

Bryn's voice came out harsh and cracked and seemed barely audible to him. "Bryn Fellows, from Tillatia," he croaked. "We were attacked by Jongurians."

"Are there anymore of you?" the man asked him.

"Yes, three more behind me somewhere," Bryn managed to say. It was harder to speak than he realized and it drained him. The man gave him another drink of water and Bryn got a look at the water skin. It had the Ithmian insignia on it, a single castle tower on golden sand surrounded by water. A huge smile crept onto Bryn's face at the sight

causing his lips to crack painfully, but he didn't care. He pointed at the water skin and looked into the man's eyes.

"Palen," he said before losing consciousness.

THE END

About the Author



Greg Strandberg was born and raised in Helena, Montana. He graduated from the University of Montana in 2008 with a BA in History. He lived and worked in China following the collapse of the American economy. After 5 years he moved back to Montana where he lives with his wife and young son.

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Trouble in Jonguria Preview

Jossen leaned heavily on his cane as he moved away from the window. The muscles of his left arm flexed and tightened as he firmly gripped the cane's ivory handle. The arm had grown larger than his right over the past ten years as he was forced to rely on the wooden implement to help him move around. Ever since the second day at Baden when he had been wounded in his fight with Halam Fiske he had been forced to use the thing, and he inwardly smiled when he thought of the man's death somewhere in Jonguria. It had been three weeks since the end of the trade conference and his brief encounter with the man, who he had not seen since that day on the battlefield all those many years ago. Not for the first time since he had been informed that the men whose trade plan had been approved by the conference had left Docksider did he wonder how many of them still lived.

He made his slow shuffle over to the large table and took his seat at its head. Four of the men that had supported his plan at the conference sat around the table, each of them having arrived in Atros over the previous day or two.

"So why exactly have you called us here?" Jocko More asked, his oiled black hair shining in the lamplight of the room. "There are matters I could be attending to in Shefflin right now, but here I find myself in Regidia. Our plan at the conference failed, I see little more that we have to discuss."

"I agree," Andor Flin said from his spot at the table. His large jowls moved when he spoke and Jossen was filled with a brief moment of disgust as he looked over at the large man from Oschem.

“I’ve called you here not to discuss trade, those matters are concluded, but something infinitely more important: the future of Adjuria,” Jossen said to the four men seated around the table.

“Since it was agreed that we would begin trading again, I think that the future of Adjuria looks quite bright,” Klyne Surin said. The Allidian sat up straight in his chair, his still muscular frame noticeable under his tight-fitting brown clothing.

“Even though our plan didn’t pass the conference, trade will resume nonetheless,” Dolth Hane added, his loud voice echoing about the room. “I’m not so uncertain about Equinia’s fortunes, now that the promise of trade once again assures a steady market for our excess goods.”

Jossen reached his chair and gingerly lowered himself down into it, his actions slow and deliberate so that he would in no way inflame the pain he constantly felt in his left leg any further. He looked about the four men seated at the small table, pausing a minute to meet each of their eyes before he spoke.

“Gentlemen,” he began, a slight smile coming to his face, “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I don’t think that Adjuria and Jonguria will be trading anytime soon.”

“What do you mean,” Jocko scoffed. “You saw the same things at the conference as we did. Halam and the rest of the men that came up with the trade plan have already left for Jonguria. Most likely they’ve reached Weiling by now and have already spread the news up through the proper channels that we wish to trade again.”

“No doubt the emperor is considering the best course to ensure a speedy resumption of commerce as we speak,” Dolth added, smiling and returning the nods from the other men around the table.

“I don’t think that the men’s trade plan will ever reach the emperor’s ears,” Jossen said.

“What are you getting at Fray,” Klyne said, sitting up even straighter in his chair.

“Do you know something that we don’t? If so, please, let us know.”

“Very well,” Jossen said, shifting in his chair, the Allidian’s posture encouraging him to correct his own. “I received word more than a week ago that Halam and the rest of the men that accompanied him left Weiling soon after they arrived. Two Jongurian ships left the harbor a short time later heading in the same direction. A couple of days after that, ship debris began to float up on shore around southern Jonguria.”

“Are you implying that the Jongurians sent two ships out to sink Edgyn’s vessel?”

Jocko asked, looking around the table at the other men. “I myself find that notion absurd.”

“I agree,” Andor said. “Why would the Jongurians want to cause trouble with Adjuria at this point? Most likely if any debris is washing ashore it is from those two ships. Most likely Halam and the rest of the men will be coming into Dockside any day now.”

“They probably headed to a city on the Jongurian mainland,” Dolth added. “Perhaps after finding a cold reception in Weiling they tried for Bindao.”

“If they would have headed to Bindao I would have been informed of it,” Jossen said.

“No, the men sailed from Weiling after their offer of trade was refused and headed back toward Adjuria. That being the case, they should have arrived back at Dockside more than a week ago.” He looked around at the men. “As it stands, there has been no sign of them.”

“How are you getting this information?” Klyne asked, his small eyes bunching up as they peered at Jossen.

“Let’s just say that I have my sources,” Jossen replied with the same slight smile that so resembled a sneer.

“I think that we are entitled to hear of these sources,” Jocko said, “seeing as how you dragged us all here in the first place.”

All eyes went to Jossen at that. He thought for a moment. If he indeed wanted these men to support his plans to take the throne from the young king then he would have to tell them all eventually. The question was how much to tell them and when to tell it. To give them all of the information at once, and when they hadn’t even been informed of his ultimate intentions, would be too much too soon, he realized. It was a fine line to tell them just enough to pique their interest and have them stay to learn more. Doth and Andor seemed willing to live off of the hospitality that the palace in Atros had to offer, but Jocko and Klyne seemed much more inclined to get back on their horses and return to their own provinces as fast as they could. He had to make it worth their while, and the next few moments would thus be critical to his overall long-term plans.

“For the past several months I’ve been communicating with the rebel leader who controls most of southern Jonguria,” Jossen began. He raised his arm up to silence the men who were obviously shocked at what he had just revealed. “Let me continue, please, I will answer all of your questions in a moment.” He cleared his throat then continued.

“This man, Zhou Lao, is in the process of expanding his power to further areas of Jonguria in the hopes of eventually overthrowing the emperor and assuming power over the whole country, and I think that he will succeed in his plans. Jonguria has been very

fragmented since the war. Rebel leaders cropped up like weeds once the fighting stopped and we brought our troops home. The emperor proved incapable of suppressing them, but they spent most of their time fighting each other at first so that they were not a real threat to him. Now, however, the strongest have prevailed and they pose much more of a threat. After following the situation for many years I've realized that Zhou has the best chance of bringing the others together to challenge the emperor, and I've agreed to help him in his endeavor."

Jossen stopped and folded his hands on the table. The men looked at each other but said nothing, each of them digesting what had just been revealed to them. Finally Klyne spoke.

"So you are planning to embroil Adjuria in Jonguria's civil war, is that it?"

"Not at all, Klyne," Jossen answered. "In fact, I don't think Adjuria will be pulled into the conflict in Jonguria at all."

"But you just said that you've agreed to support this man Zhou," Andor said. "How can you do that without sending an army to Jonguria?"

"How could you even send an army?" Klyne quickly added. "Only the king has that power now, and I don't see Rowan Waldon lending any support to either side in a civil war in Jonguria."

"But what if Rowan Waldon wasn't the king anymore?" Jossen said.

The question hung in the air for several moments.

"You of all people should know where that talk leads to," Klyne said quietly.

"Desolatia Island," Jocko said. "Replacing a king didn't work out too well for him, Jossen."

“That’s because my uncle went about it the wrong way,” Jossen said. “I don’t plan to make the same mistakes as he did.”

“So you’re serious about this,” Dolth said. “You really think that you can overthrow Rowan?”

“I don’t see why not,” Jossen said. “The country is not in a very good place right now. Most people are suffering as the economy continues to falter. Many cannot find enough to put on their tables each day, and there is nothing like hunger to drive the masses to rise up.”

“The whole intent and purpose of the trade council was to alleviate those problems,” Andor said. “And it looked like we had a good chance of succeeding, that is unless what you told us about Edgyn’s ship tonight is true.”

“Oh, I’m quite sure that it is,” Jossen said. He did not bother to tell them that he also had received word that the Adjurians had been seen on the beach east of Bindao, and had even managed to kill some of Zhou’s men. There was no need for them to question him now.

“I don’t know if I can be a party to another campaign to usurp the king,” Klyne said. “The last one did not go so well, as most of you will remember.” He looked over at Jossen then at the cane that leaned against the table. “None more so than you Jossen; you have a daily reminder never more than a foot away.”

Jossen moved his left hand to the handle of his cane. “Oh, believe me, Klyne, I have not forgotten.” He gave his slight smile once again. “This time, however, I will not fall on the battlefield.”

“So you want to embroil all of Adjuria into another civil war,” Jocko said. “If you do that I don’t think that any who follow you will be treated so leniently this time. The consequences will be more severe than lost seats on the governing councils. Most likely it will be the splitting of provinces much like occurred following the first civil war nearly one hundred years ago.”

“If we lose,” Jossen said. “If we win, then there will be nothing to worry about.”

“If *we* win,” Klyne repeated. “You think that the rest of us will go along with your plan? Just because we supported your trade policy at the conference doesn’t mean that we’ll risk our lives and the lives of thousands of our countrymen so that you can avenge your family’s honor.”

“I think you are making a mistake by being so hasty in your decision,” Jossen said as he looked over at the Allidian. “I wish that you would stay and listen to my plan first before you commit one way or the other.”

“I have no intention of listening to any plan that would involve moving against the king of Adjuria,” Klyne said, rising from his chair.

“Are you sure that you want to do that, Klyne?” Jossen said. “After everything that I’ve told you here tonight, I’m not sure it would be wise for you to return to Allidia without pledging your support. How could I be sure you would not report what I’ve said here to the king?”

“Are you threatening me?” Klyne asked in a hard voice, his fists clenched tightly at his sides.

“Not at all,” Jossen said in a calm voice, moving his hand up as if to flip away the silly comment.

“What harm could it do to listen to what Jossen has to say?” Andor said.

“I think it would be better to listen than to spill blood,” Dolth added.

Klyne looked at the two of them then back at Jossen before slowly returning to his seat.

“Very good,” Jossen said, sitting up and leaning his arms on the table and drawing the others in with his actions. “This is what I have planned.”

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