

Kate Cudahy comes from north-west England. She studied literature at the universities of Essex and York before moving to Poland in 2003, where she teaches English as a second language.

Kate writes fantasy fiction with an LGBT focus. Her novels *Hal* and *Hannac* follow the exploits of a young duellist, Hal Thæc, as she searches for love against the odds. Kate is currently writing a third novel, *The Firefarer* – epic fantasy with a postmodern twist.

Follow Kate on twitter: www.twitter.com/katecudahy or catch up with her on her blog at www.katecudahy.wordpress.com for reviews and news about her books.

Books by Kate Cudahy

Hal – 2015

Hannac (The sequel to *Hal*) – 2015

Leda – Part Three of *The Duellist Series* – 2018

Hannac

Kate Cudahy

Published 2015 by Kate Cudahy

Copyright © 2015 Kate Cudahy

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

Contents

- Chapter One: The Spring
- Chapter Two: Six Months Earlier
- Chapter Three: Books
- Chapter Four: Wasted Years
- Chapter Five: Barn Doors
- Chapter Six: Rats
- Chapter Seven: Cemetery Gates
- Chapter Eight: Last Will and Testament
- Chapter Nine: Bright Smoke, Cold Fire
- Chapter Ten: Old Friends
- Chapter Eleven: Old Debts
- Chapter Twelve: Hawks and Hares
- Chapter Thirteen: The Forest and its Memories
- Chapter Fourteen: The Strange Heart Beating
- Chapter Fifteen: Magda
- Chapter Sixteen: Ash
- Chapter Seventeen: Heavy Rain
- Chapter Eighteen: Shooting Stars
- Chapter Nineteen: Northern Craftsmanship
- Chapter Twenty: A Flash of Gold
- Chapter Twenty-One: Eavesdropping
- Chapter Twenty-Two: Good Hunting
- Chapter Twenty-Three: The Enemy you Killed
- Chapter Twenty-Four: Breaking Boundaries
- Chapter Twenty-Five: Unexpected Guests
- Chapter Twenty-Six: Underground

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Storm Clouds
Chapter Twenty-Eight: Pens and Swords
Chapter Twenty-Nine: Usurpers
Chapter Thirty: Sleepers
Chapter Thirty-One: Running
Chapter Thirty-Two: Caraden Revisited
Chapter Thirty-Three: Mob Rule
Chapter Thirty-Four: The Chamber of Justice
Chapter Thirty-Five: Sentencing
Chapter Thirty-Six: A Finer Thread
Chapter Thirty-Seven: Blood and Water
Epilogue: Leda

Chapter One

The Spring

The hard iron blade of the ploughshare bit into wet turf, driving open a deep groove in the dark, fertile ground of the lowlands.

“More to your right, lass!”

Hal repositioned the iron frame of the plough and clicked softly with her tongue, coaxing the shire horses across the open field.

“Aye, that’s it.” Franc pushed his broad-brimmed leather hat back onto his head and nodded to her in approval. “We’ll make a farmer of you yet!”

“Not if I can help it,” she muttered to herself, straining against the weight of metal. Sweat dripped from her forehead into her eyes and she wiped it away with the palm of her hand. The weeks spent outside learning the trades of her father’s tenants had left her tanned, leaner in appearance. For the first time since she had left the court as a child, she had allowed her hair to grow and now her fringe found its way into her eyes, forcing her to stop every now and then to rake it back with her fingers.

“This is harder than the smithy!” she complained.

“Oh, get on with it and cease moaning. I simply want you to see what it is our tenants do – how their lives change with the seasons. If you don’t understand it yourself, the place will turn to rack and ruin after I’ve gone.”

Sighing, Hal reined in the horse, wiping her hands on her shirt. “Franc, you’re not even an old man yet. We’ve decades ahead of us for you to teach me all of this.”

“Ah, there’s no point in procrastinating, lass. Especially on a day as rich as this.”

She had to admit it was as perfectly tuned a spring morning as any she could imagine. Clusters of clouds surged across a sky of the keenest blue. They were working open fields half way between Hannac and the shores of Brennac which she could make out clearly, sunlight reflecting off its water. The scent of peaty earth rose up from the land they had just furrowed, and the bleating of new-born lambs carried on the air from near-by fields.

Franc made his way over to her and offered his flask which she took with gratitude. “Besides,” he continued, “if you’re out here with me, you can’t be harassing that poor lass. She’s enough to worry about.”

“I don’t harass her, Franc. I’m trying to do my best for her.”

“Is that what you call it? All I ever see is you running around after her, fetching her food she doesn’t even want, begging her not to go anywhere without you, getting jumpy if she has the slightest ache or pain. She’ll feel much better if you just stop fussing.”

“Franc, I love her.” She turned to look back at Hannac atop the plateau, shielding her eyes against the sun. “I fear for her.”

“I’ve told you both more times than I can count. When it’s time, I’ll send word to Marta Ilenga. She’s an authority on medicine. In the meantime, you ought to give the lass a little time to herself.”

Hal sighed and turned her attention to the plough once more. She knew he was right. Meracad herself complained that Hal fretted too much, haunted by the conviction that the child’s birth was imminent. “There’s a month go to yet, Hal,” she would protest. “And you’d have me wrapped up to my eyeballs in blankets!”

But Hal wouldn’t listen. As the birth grew closer, she seemed incapable of shirking off an irrational fear that something would go wrong. And she found that the only method of keeping those anxious thoughts at bay was to devote all her time to Meracad’s well-being. Franc’s solution had been to keep Hal occupied with tasks which would steer her out of the fortress and into the fields. At least, he told his daughter, the physical exertion and fresh air might leave her too exhausted to think about anything other than her bed.

As Hal set her back into the ploughing once again, she noticed a figure riding out from below the tree line of the plateau. The horse picked up speed as it reached the level plain of the lowlands, first cantering, then galloping in their direction, clods of soft earth thrown up beneath its hooves.

Franc wafted his face with his hat, his expression impassive as he observed the rider’s progress across the landscape.

“Arec,” he said at last, straining his eyes to make out the burly figure of his chief man-at-arms.

“What is it?” Unable to quell the rising note of anxiety in her voice, she dropped the handles of the plough and picked her way across the rutted ground towards Franc.

“No idea.”

Arec thudded to a halt beside them and slid from his horse, his lungs heaving, sweat running from his bald head and down his face. “The child’s coming,” he managed to splutter at long last, inhaling long gasps of air.

“What are you talking about, man? It’s not even due yet. Hal, get back here!”

It was too late. She had already leapt astride her horse. Kicking her heels into its flanks, she urged it in the direction of Hannac.

Sighing, Franc pulled his hat back on, swinging up into his own saddle. “You’ll finish this field?”

Bent double, Arec clutched his knees, still working hard to recover his breath. He saluted in response as the Master of Hannac set off at breakneck speed across the fields in pursuit of his daughter. There’d be no living with her after this. She’d be able to justify all her worrying and fussing. In spite of his conviction that she was overreacting, a doubt gnawed at him too. The baby was early – by almost a month. And Meracad was a strong, healthy lass, but who knew what pressures the birth might exert on her young body?

He spurred his horse on, now trailing Hal up the bank of woodland below the fort. As the path narrowed, gnarled by rocks and tree roots, she jumped down and began to run, leaving her mount to fend for itself. His own horse struggled to keep up pace amid the limestone rocks and rubble which jutted from the hillside. He was lagging behind her as she sped, light-footed, grabbing hold of branches and creepers to haul herself upwards. Eventually he was also forced to dismount, dragging his own heavier frame up the steep side of the plateau.

Franc glanced up to observe her banging on the door of the main gatehouse. “Hal! Wait!”

The inner door was pulled open and she raced through without looking back. It had slammed shut before he had a chance to follow her through. He hammered on the thick oak panels with his fist. “It’s me, you fools!”

“Sorry, Sir.” A guard looked on in surprise as Franc pushed past him without a word, catching a brief glimpse of the back of Hal’s white shirt as she disappeared inside the building.

The great hall was all but deserted. Just a few tenants sat at tables, busying themselves with drinking or playing cards while Elis and a pair of maids swept rushes from the floor. Franc raced inside, in time to witness Hal tear across the room in a frenetic whirl of arms and legs before she leapt across a table at its far end and raced out the open door.

“She’ll be the death of me,” he gasped. “Water, Elis! Water!”

Elis passed him an earthenware pitcher and he drained half of it straight down, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “When did it start?”

Her brow creased with worry, Elis leant on the handle of the brush as she spoke. “Two hours ago, Sir. She wouldn’t have anyone fetch you. She said she knew Hal would panic. But Arec couldn’t sit here, listening to her groaning.”

“He’d have done better to fetch Marta Ilenga.”

“I’ve sent one of the boys out for her, Sir. She’ll be here soon.”

“Thank you, lass. At least there’s someone around here who hasn’t lost hold of their senses.”

Leaving the hall, he climbed the staircase to the girls’ room and knocked softly on the door.

“Who is it?” Meracad's voice was weak, strained as she attempted to disguise the pain under which she laboured.

“It’s me, lass. Franc.” He pressed down the handle and stepped inside. Pale of face, Meracad lay beneath a quilt on the bed, her hair plastered to her forehead with sweat. She clenched her jaw as he entered and he knew that she was fighting against a wave of agony. Hal sat at her side, her shirt dirt-stained and torn from her scramble through the undergrowth, her fingers knotted around Meracad's hand.

“Drink this, lass.” Franc lifted the pitcher to Meracad's lips. She gulped down some water and then rested her head on the pillows, already exhausted. Franc put his hand to her forehead which felt clammy and feverish.

“You see?” Hal began. “You both told me not to worry and now look. We should have sent for Ilenga weeks ago.”

“Hal!” Meracad gasped. “I’m alright. Just let me rest, please!”

“She’s not alright, Franc. You can see with your own eyes. There’s something wrong!”

“Hal!” Franc’s voice was sharp with anger. He grabbed her arm and pulled her from the room, ignoring her protests as he slammed the door shut behind them, his eyes bereft of all good humour. “Are you a midwife, Halanya? Look at me, girl! Are you?”

Her eyes sullen, she returned his gaze. “No, I’m not.”

“Am I, Hal, a midwife? Do I look like one?”

“Alright! I take your point!” She crossed her arms and leant back against the wall, defeated.

“Do you?” His voice was laced with irony. “Because the only thing we can do now is to keep the lass comfortable and wait for Marta Ilenga. Instead, you’re running around like a chicken with no head and causing her more pain. Now if you want to help her, you’ll go back in there and reassure her and hold her hand until Ilenga’s here.”

He held Hal back as Meracad let out another piercing groan. “Promise me you’ll not panic. It won’t help any of us.”

“I can’t lose her, Franc,” she whispered.

He pulled her towards him in a rough embrace. “We won’t do, lass. We won’t do.”

Hal sat for what must have been hours holding Meracad’s hand, placing damp cloths on the girl’s sweating brow, feeling herself incapable of expressing those words of comfort that she knew were so important. Internally, she hovered on the edge of desperation, torturing herself with visions of a life alone. After all they had risked to be together, was it possible that Nérac should steal the final victory by proxy, having sown the seeds of Meracad’s destruction even before she had left Dal Reniac? How cruel life must be, to give them the hope of a few precious months of life together, only to snatch it from them at the last minute. She found herself mentally retracing the events of previous months, events which had bought

them, if not a reprieve, at least a precarious freedom. And that, it seemed, was all about to be lost.

Chapter Two

Six Months Earlier

Riding across the ice-strewn plains of the lowlands, Jools tried to ignore the howls of wolves which carried on the still, frozen air. A clear night had brought the temperature well below anything tolerable for horse and rider, although she was thankful for the full moon with its reassuring light. She knew how easy it would be to stumble off course in such unfamiliar terrain, imagining her body petrified beneath layers of winter debris, only to be discovered by farmers in the spring. Tightening her grip on the horse's reins, she slammed her heels into its flanks, now desperate to reach her journey's end.

Jools had never left the city of her birth before. The crowded, urban sprawl of Colvé held no surprises for her. In fact, she thrived upon it as she made her way through the crowds, cutting purse strings or stealing from the stalls of traders when their backs were turned. Out here, though, on the wild open moors without another soul in sight, she was terrified.

The bright plains gave way to dark swathes of pine, and she asked herself how Hal could have given everything up to live out here in this wolf-infested hole. Hal had been built for city life. In fact, Jools had always been envious of the duellist's ability to shift between the court, the academy and Riverside, as if social class didn't even exist. That was an obstacle thrown in the path of others: people like herself and Kris. Who'd give a Riverside orphan the chance of an honest day's work? Your fate was decided as soon as you were out your mother's womb, fated to scavenge off the city's excess — the imperial dungeons and the hangman's noose never far from sight.

The path climbed steeply as she approached Hannac, and she dropped down from the horse, letting its reins trail on the ground as they headed up towards the glowing lights of the fort. What a place! The senator's description had been accurate. An intimidating tower of white limestone loomed directly above her.

Marc Remigius: her thoughts drifted back to the senator, and to their conversation of two nights previous. Now there was one toff she could do business with, at least. Not like the others — heartless aristos who saw her and Kris as mere vermin, to be kicked out the way as and when it pleased them. No, he had a heart, did the senator. And that woman of his — they

said she'd been a street-walker herself in the past. More of a lady than any of those in the imperial court.

It was only when she'd reached the main gatehouse that Jools hesitated. What if Hal had changed, now that she had come into her inheritance? Her father, Franc, disapproved of his daughter's friendships amongst the Riverside underworld. Supposing she was under his sway? And what of Meracad who, Jools felt, might do anything to protect her lover from harm? She blew on her frozen fingers and stamped her feet, casting a nervous glance at the portcullis which was drawn up and swung directly over her head, and at the massive oak-hewn doors which now barred her way. Taking a deep breath, she rapped on them as loudly as she could. Behind her, the horse butted its head into her back, as if urging her on. She elbowed it out the way. "Get off, you old rascal!"

A small portal was drawn back and a face peered through — a soldier's eyes — alert, watchful. "What is it?"

"I'm here to speak to Hal Thæc. I mean Hal Hannac."

"Are you now? And who might you be?"

She kept her teeth from chattering just enough to talk. "Gawd alone, mister! Let me in, would you? It's bleedin' freezin' out here!"

"I'm not letting suspicious-looking types in here until I've heard your name."

Jools released a groan of frustration. "Tell her it's Jools from *The Emperor*, would you? She'll know who I am."

The soldier's eyes opened in surprise before acquiring a cast of servility.

"From the Emperor? Well, why didn't you say?" She heard the clank of bolts drawn back and allowed herself a smile.

His face dropped as she pushed past him in her moth-eaten, woollen coat, a fur hat pulled down lopsided over her ears, dragging a scrawny nag of a horse in tow.

"Don't look much like a messenger from the Emperor to me." His voice rose in suspicion.

"If you'd been out on a night like this, you'd probably not be looking your best either, my man!" She affected the tone of a court official. "Now if you don't wish the Emperor to hear of your insolence, I'd see to it my horse receives his fair share of a warm stable and food. I trust Halanya is inside?"

He was taken in again by the brazenness of her deceit. "Yes, she is. Just through that arch into the great hall."

"Thank you." When his back was turned, she winked at the horse. "Be good, you old devil."

Jools passed beneath the arch towards a dull amber light which pulsed through the windows of the great hall. Her mouth watered as she caught the scent of roasting meat, and she rubbed her stomach in hunger. She had barely eaten since she left Colvé.

It took some time for her eyes to adjust to the smoky haze. Groups of tenants sat at intervals along benches talking in low-voices, drinking or in some cases already asleep. She scanned the room, grateful to note that the Master of Hannac was not in evidence. He would give her short shrift if he found she had wiled her way into his fortress, and she had little time to lose. She moved along one wall, attempting to hide herself amongst the shadows, peering over the shoulders of a group of card-players in the hope that she might find Hal amongst them. One man's wallet hung behind his back on a belt. *That'd be gone in a minute in Colvé.*

Perhaps it was force of habit that made her fingers reach downwards, casually pulling open the purse-strings as she feigned an interest in the game.

"Oy!" She felt a hand on her wrist.

"I was just watching your play. He's got good cards if you gents are interested." She nodded at the man who was now tightening his grip on her arm. "Oh leave it off, mister!"

"Don't want your sort round here," another of the tenants had her other arm. "I say throw her out on the plains."

"Wait!" She gasped. "I'm here to speak to Hal."

"You're here to speak to the Master's daughter? Don't make me laugh. Come on, lads. Let's kick her out before she has the shirts off our backs."

"What's going on?"

Jools recognized the voice and stopped struggling in relief. "Hal! You're looking well!" Her attempt at bravado came shy of the mark, her voice high-pitched as she strained against nerves and exhaustion.

"Jools?" Reaching forward, Hal pulled the thief's ridiculous fur hat from her head, revealing her dark, shorn locks. "Let her go!" She ordered the tenants.

"She was just taking my wallet," one of them protested.

Smiling, Hal shook her head. "Old habits die hard, eh, Jools? It's alright, gentlemen. She's with me."

"Fine company you must have kept back in Colvé, Hal."

"The very best." Hal embraced her old friend warmly. "Come on, Jools. Let's find you some food and a fire. Meracad will be delighted that you're here."

They left the great hall, the card-players scowling after before returning to their game with low, heated mutterings. Hal directed Jools upstairs and into a low-beamed solar draped with tapestries and hunting trophies. A group of young women congregated in an alcove at one end, chatting as they embroidered. Meracad was sitting by the hearth, her fair hair falling before her face as she read.

Leaning down, Hal whispered into her ear: "We have a guest."

She looked up from her book, her eyes bright, her cheeks flushed, her lips breaking into a broad smile. "Jools! What are you doing here? Hal, get her something to eat and drink. She looks exhausted. Jools, sit down before you fall down!"

Jools lowered herself into a battered old armchair beside the fire, her legs almost giving way beneath her. A plate of meat and conserves was set down before her and she attacked it without another word.

"Take it easy, Jools!" Hal laughed. "You'll choke!"

"I'm starving," she replied through a mouthful of food, washing it down with hot, spiced wine.

Drawing up another chair, Hal sat down, draping her arm around Meracad's shoulders. "So, where's Kris?"

The food turned to ash in her mouth. Jools pushed the plate aside, gripped by a sudden chill. It was always there, that thought. Even when she thought she'd forgotten, it returned, eating at her, gnawing away until she almost screamed out loud in pure panic. "That's the thing, Hal. That's why I'm here. She's gone." She stared, blinking into the fire, fingers pressed to her lips as she tried to hold back the tears.

"What do you mean, gone?" Leaning forwards, Meracad placed her hands on the girl's knees. "Jools, look at me! What do you mean? Is she dead?"

Her lips trembling, her eyes wet, she returned Meracad's gaze. "No," she breathed at last. "Not yet, anyway." She turned to Hal. "Where's your old man?"

"He's not here, he's visiting Marta Ilenga. Look, what does it matter where he is? You're not making sense."

"It matters 'cos he'll kick me out if he shows up and you're the only one who can help me and Kris now."

"He wouldn't do that. He's not a typical aristocrat."

"He is. You *all* are." She noticed Hal stiffen at her words but she no longer cared.

"I didn't realise you'd come all this way to insult me, Jools." Hal rose to stand behind Meracad, resting on the back of her chair. "Just tell us what this is all about if you want us to help you."

With a loud sniff, Jools wiped her dripping nose with her hand. "Your father's got her."

Meracad froze. "What? My father's got Kris? He doesn't even know her!"

It were as if she now teetered on the brink of a fire pit, about to fall in. Jools' jaw dropped open in disbelief as she gazed up at Hal. "You didn't tell her?"

"I thought we were talking about Kris." The duellist's voice had risen a pitch in anger.

"What am I missing here, Hal?" Meracad craned round, her face etched with concern as she stared up at the duellist.

Jools glanced across the solar at the other women who had now put down their embroidery and were clearly eavesdropping. A dull fury beat within her ears. “She didn’t tell you about the fight your father and Cara picked with her? Oh that is gold, Hal. That is pure, bleedin’ twenty-four carat gold!”

“Jools!”

“You just forgot to mention the fact that me and Kris came to your aid in what was to be a death duel?”

“Hal, is this true?” Meracad blanched as Hal stormed out and slammed the door, its thud echoing around the chamber. Then there was silence.

“Ladies, perhaps you could leave us for a few moments?” Meracad turned to the women who now huddled together, whispering in excitement. They rose with a show of reluctance and left the room. She turned back to Jools. “You seem to know how to make your presence felt, Jools. What happened?”

Her anger now cooling, Jools sighed. “Well you’d have learnt eventually, anyhow. Even if she didn’t have the guts to tell you herself. They picked Orla to fight for them. She killed Orla.”

“Spirits!” Meracad stood, holding the back of her chair for support, her book falling from her lap. “Why would Orla do that?”

“Because Hal threw her over for you.”

Meracad turned on the thief. “So this is my fault now, is it? I’m to be culpable for Orla’s death now, am I?”

Unease pricked at Jools' conscience. She shifted with discomfort. “No, Meracad. Not you. We all told Hal it was a trap but she wouldn’t listen. You know what she’s like. Cara and your old man are to blame. They used Orla to get to Hal. And they almost succeeded. She’d be dead now if the senator and Beric hadn’t turned up in time.”

Meracad drew in a long breath. “Wait here,” she said at last. “I’ll speak to her.”

“Not exactly going to get far, am I?” Jools muttered to herself. She stretched out before the fireplace, the heat making her drowsy. Her eyelids began to sink, visions of the snow-bound landscape of the lowlands rising and falling before her, the howls of wolves ringing once more in her ears. The fear, the panic, the anger and madness caved in and she was left with just one image: Kris shivering somewhere in the cold, bound and helpless. The memory stayed with her as she drifted into sleep.

Chapter Three

Loyalties

“When were you going to tell me?”

Hal was sat on their bed with her back to the door, her face buried in her hands. “I’ll strangle the little thief.”

With a sad shake of her head, Meracad climbed onto the bed behind Hal and snaked her arms around her shoulders, kissing the nape of her neck. “It must have been hard,” she whispered.

“I didn’t want you to think me a murderer.”

She froze. “Why would I think that?”

Sighing, Hal disentangled herself from Meracad’s embrace, drawing herself up to sit cross-legged beside her on the bed. “I killed Orla, Meracad. And do you know what she said to me as she lay there, bleeding to death with my sword piercing her chest? She said, ‘I hate you!’ I can hear her words now.”

She slumped forwards, burying her face in her fingers once again. Meracad reached out and put an arm around Hal, drawing her close. “It wasn’t your fault, Hal. Jools said it was Cara and my father who manipulated Orla for their own sick purposes. And now my father has taken Kris. You can hardly resent Jools for speaking the truth.”

“We all pay for our sins in one way or another.” Hal’s head sank lower, her limbs still trembling with suppressed rage and grief.

“Hey! Philosopher!” Rising, Meracad bent down and shook Hal by the shoulders. “We can’t afford to live in the past, Hal, when the future is waiting around the corner to bite us. It’s right that you should grieve for Orla but now she’s beyond saving.”

With a long, low moan Hal slumped backwards, lying stretched out across the bed. “There’s something else.”

“What?” A shiver of unease crawled up Meracad’s spine. Ever since their escape to Hannac weeks before, the thought that Hal might be holding something back had troubled her. What had happened on that maddeningly hot summer’s night when her father had forced her into that carriage, sending her north to Dal Reniac and Nérac? Why had Hal not found her way north sooner?

"Your father," Hal began.

"What did he do?" The question was pointless. Suddenly, she knew what he had done. She had seen the men whom Léac employed to carry out his 'business arrangements.' Sometimes she had encountered them waiting in the corridor of her father's house to speak to him. If Léac came out of his study at such a moment, he would send her back to her room. But she had seen enough to know that these were men from the Colvé underworld, men who carried the look of the hunted, straight from prison or bribed out of Riverside to perform those little jobs which her father needed to keep secret.

"His men took me to pieces that night. I think they assumed I was dead but I made it back to Marc's."

Meracad froze, the truth, when laid before her in such plain terms, so hard to bear. It was not enough that he had knowingly consigned her to a violent, loveless marriage. He had sealed his vengeance with an act of brutality against the one person she held dear. In her mind's eye she pictured Léac's hired thugs, blood on their hands and Hal lying unconscious at their feet. Her father would pay for that, she promised herself.

She lay down beside Hal and put her arms around her, drawing her close, kissing her forehead and then her lips, inhaling the fragrant warmth of her lover's body. "You should have told me," she whispered.

"I know. I'm sorry. I believed we had enough to worry about." Hal searched her face, the blue of her irises deepening in intensity.

"We did. We still do. But don't keep secrets from me, Hal. I can't bear it."

They drew close together, their foreheads now touching.

"I won't. I promise." They kissed again and then drew away. Hal's eyes now bore a sheen of hope. "Perhaps Orla would forgive me if she knew I'd tried to help the thieves."

In a way, it was a very childlike hope, expressed with such innocence and simplicity that Meracad's heart nearly broke at the hearing of it.

"Perhaps." Meracad bent down and kissed her. "But take care. For the spirits' sake, take care Hal. You have experienced what a cruel man Léac is. Let's not risk what we now have. Please?"

Rising suddenly, Hal said nothing in reply.

"Did you hear me, Hal?"

Meracad sat up, assailed by a sudden wave of anxiety. To her shame, she realised that she resented Jools' arrival and the way in which the thief's news had threatened what little peace they had. She knew that she was being selfish, but they had already paid such a price for that peace that she was not prepared to let it go.

"Let's just hear what she has to say." Hal turned to her as she reached the door. "It's all I ask."

Meracad sighed. "We owe her that much, I suppose." There it was again. That slight movement in her abdomen: faint, barely a flutter, but present all the same. Hal was already on her way downstairs. She watched her go for a moment, wrestling the sense of dread which seemed to rise upwards through her entire body. She nearly retched, holding onto the wall for support, her forehead beaded now with sweat in spite of the chill winter air. *For the spirits' sake, don't leave us alone.*

"Alright, what is it you would have me do?" Hal placed a candle on the mantle above the hearth, reached down and shook Jools awake.

"Oy, leave it out! Give a girl some rest would you? I thought you'd done with me," Jools snarled, rubbing sleep-red eyes.

"I will be if you keep on blurting out things I don't want everyone to hear."

The thief turned from Hal to Meracad, took a deep breath and then began. "She didn't come back from thievin' like normal. We always met at *The Emperor* when we'd finished but she just didn't turn up. I went lookin' everywhere for 'er. It was awful."

"So how did you find out Léac had her?" Hal realised she was squeezing Meracad's hand. It seemed that their enemies had no intention of leaving them in peace.

"Oh, he wanted me to find her. Didn't take long before all my questions led to his door. I went right in there and asked him, face to face like. I even begged him to give her back." Her cheeks flushed, her eyes growing wide with horror. "It's simple,' he says, smilin' just like we was doin' business together. Bring me the duellist, and I'll let your girly go."

Hal breathed out slowly, stunned at Léac's cunning, his ruthlessness, his sheer desperation. "Don't worry Jools," she said at last. "We'll get Kris back."

Meracad rounded on her. "Well, you're surely not thinking of walking into my father's house and asking for her, I hope?"

"I'm not asking Hal to hand herself over to your father," Jools protested. "But I can't do this alone."

Hal cast Meracad an earnest glance. "If what Jools says is true, Kris doesn't have much time."

"This is my father, Salius Léac we're talking about? You just admitted he had you beaten half to death in the streets of Colvé. You know what kind of man he is Hal, and you know what he'll do to you if you go down there."

"Meracad, as Jools has made abundantly clear, I owe the thieves my help."

"Not in this way, Hal. Not in this way. Let's wait until Franc gets back. If anyone can force Léac's hand, it's him."

Jools snorted. "You must be joking. He'll wash his hands of us two as soon as look at us. We've got to get her out of there. Please, Hal?" She turned back to her friend, tears now forming thin tracks down her dirt-encrusted face.

Sitting between Meracad and Jools, Hal twisted from her lover to her friend, her loyalties stretched to breaking point. "Meracad, I can't leave her to your father's mercy after what she did for me. I just can't!"

"Very well." Meracad's voice was cold, distant. "If you insist on getting yourself killed I'll come with you. He is my father after all. And I do have a weapon of last resort."

"No! You can't come! If we know anything about your father we can assume that's exactly what he wants. And you're already under enough strain as it is. Promise me, Meracad, that you'll stay here in safety."

Meracad's released a sarcasm-laden laugh. "Safe here with Nérac waiting to knock on our door? Are you out of your mind? If I come down to Colvé you stand some chance of success. Without me, you are all dead." Rising, her colour high and feverish with fury, she turned to leave the room, spinning round to face them just before she had reached the door. "Either we wait for Franc, or I'll be coming with you to Colvé to rescue Kris. Better we all go down together than I'm left up here to rue your stupidity, Hal. Good night." With a curt inclination of her head she was gone.

Jools whistled, still sniffing back tears. "Well someone's started giving themselves airs since they became a lady, ain't they?"

Hal grimaced. "She has her reasons."

"Such as?"

Hal shifted her gaze from the glowing embers of the hearth to Jools' eyes. "She's carrying Nérac's child."

Jools stared at her in disbelief. "Well this just gets better and better, doesn't it? I mean, if you were actually trying, Hal, to get yourself into more trouble I don't think you would have succeeded."

"Alright! You're not the first to have made that observation, and you probably won't be the last. I have to talk to her, that's all. She'll come round. She's just on edge at the moment."

"Well, let's hope so, Halanya. Because this is the moment when you're going to have to make a very big decision, girl. Are you still with us? Or are you just another stinkin' aristo who'll save her own hide at the expense of her friends?"

With a rough scrape of chair legs Hal sprang up, seizing the collar of Jools's coat. "Well you know the answer to that already, don't you, Jools?" she asked, her voice a low growl.

Jools shuddered beneath her grasp and then broke down, smothering her face with her hands, releasing a strained, throaty sob. Knocking a table aside, Hal stumbled from the room blind with fury and frustration, leaving her friend to weep away her grief.

Chapter Four

Wasted Years

“Wake up!”

Jools sprang from fitful dreams to find Hal shaking her awake for the second time that night. Cursing, she rubbed her eyes and peered up at the duellist who was dressed in a long winter greatcoat and woollen cap, the tip of her sword visible between her trouser leg and the hem of the coat.

“Thought we had to have Meracad’s approval.” Still drowsy, her words were snide, slurred.

“I left her sleeping. She’d never have agreed.”

“And now she’ll never forgive you.”

Hal drew out a pair of fingerless mits from her pocket and pulled them on. “Maybe. But now *you’ll* never be able to reproach me for ‘putting my own hide first.’ Let’s go, come on.” She dragged Jools to her feet.

They passed through the great hall, the air warm and thickly laden with the snores and heavy breaths of sleeping tenants. Hal snatched a hunk of bread and ham from a table as she passed. “Here, take these.” She threw them at Jools and grabbed a flagon of wine. They picked their way over prone bodies sprawled beneath tables and benches, before passing from the main building into the courtyard, the bitter winter air hitting them like a wall.

“Over there. Quick!” Hal gestured in the direction of stables to their left. Stepping beneath the shelter of the fortress walls, they stepped inside the humid, horse-scented timber shed. Disturbed at the presence of intruders, the animals stamped from hoof to hoof, steam flaring from their nostrils.

“Fill these panniers and I’ll saddle them.” A pair of leather sacks were slung in the thief’s direction and she set about filling them with the food they had stolen from the fortress hall while Hal hunted about for bridles and saddles, doing her best to calm the animals, stroking their manes and whispering to them. Ready at last, they swung themselves up into the saddles, only to find the burly figure of a soldier blocking the exit, his shadow cast on the floor of the stables, moonlight filtering in around him.

“Going somewhere, Hal?”

Hal sighed. “So it would appear, Arec.”

Franc’s chief man-at-arms entered the stable. His arms folded, his face implacable, he placed himself in front of her horse. “You know Franc won’t be happy about that.”

“He’d understand.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.”

He cast a knowing glance at Jools. She shifted uncomfortably in her saddle. “She’s just helping me, mister. We’ll not be long gone.”

“Won’t you now?” Arec caught hold of the reins of Hal’s horse. “I shall have to tell him, Hal.”

“So? Tell him if you must. You know I wouldn’t be leaving at such a time if it weren’t important.”

Arec said nothing for a moment and then released the reins. “Have it your way. But I’ll be damned if the Master’ll hold me responsible for your recklessness.”

“You can tell him we knocked you out or something. Just do us the favour of opening the main gate would you? I’ll explain it all to Franc, I promise.”

With an exasperated sigh, Arec headed back across the courtyard, ordering his men to pull open the thick oaken gate barring the southern entrance to the fortress.

Hal winked at Jools. “One of the advantages of being a ‘stinkin’ aristo’. People are more inclined to do what you ask of them.”

“Doesn’t work with me, Hal.”

“Yes, well, you’re different.” She urged the horse on and out of the courtyard, pulling her hat off to Arec in a gesture of mock salute. “I’m indebted, Arec.”

“I didn’t see the pair of you.”

“As you wish.” She broke into a canter down the steep track through the forest, Jools clinging on for dear life as she followed in Hal’s wake.

Darkness had almost entirely enveloped the room as the fire crackled away to its last ebb in the grate. Franc laid down his glass, yawned extravagantly, and stretched out his arms. “I’ve been keeping you from your bed, Marta. And it can’t be long until dawn. I’m sorry to have imposed so far upon your hospitality.”

Marta Ilanga seemed to be retreating into the gathering shadows. Franc could sense her presence more than he could see her.

“Well as your absence had been so long, Franc, I realised that you had much to tell me.” She curled a stray lock of auburn hair behind an ear. The warmth of wine and fire had brought a flush to her pale, freckled cheeks, Franc noticed.

“Had you guessed? You were always so perceptive.” He sought out her eyes but she was staring into the hearth.

“About which part? Cara Thæc, or the child?”

“About both.”

“Well, I supposed there must have been someone,” she mused. “But you were never exactly one to wear your heart upon your sleeve, Franc. And the girl? Who does she resemble more — yourself or her mother?”

Franc detected the contempt with which she uttered that final word, but decided against inquiring further. He had always suspected that Marta knew more than she was prepared to admit. “I flatter myself that she resembles her father. In every respect.”

“So there is no hint of selfishness, then? Or greed, or connivance or maliciousness?”

“You gave me every reason to believe that you neither knew nor cared about those whose affections I courted.” He cut her off sharply, shocked at the quiet rage with which she spoke.

She was silent for a moment. “I didn’t,” she replied at last, her tone subdued, “until I realised what a mistake you were about to make.”

Franc sat forward in his chair, his nerves raw, the blood beating furiously in his ears. “So why didn’t you warn me, Marta?” he asked, his own voice barely more than a whisper.

She rose and began to pace the room. He watched her as she moved back and forth, her arms folded, her eyes deliberately avoiding him. An idea unfurled itself in his mind, prompting the release of emotions which he had thought long suppressed, driven to the far reaches of his consciousness. She stopped suddenly and turned to face him. “Your affairs were no concern of mine.” She continued to stand, staring down at him as if defying him to challenge her.

“Don’t lie now, Marta.” Franc heard the hardness in his own voice, noticed how she flinched at his words, how her face registered the disappointment briefly before she took on a mask of cold pride.

“As you said, it’s been a long night, Franc. Perhaps it would be time to go to bed.”

Sighing, he got to his feet, struggling once more to dispel the sense of time wasted, years lost, of mistakes which could not now be unmade. “As you wish, Marta.” He stood before her and returned her gaze. “But you’re the Mistress of Berasé now. And you’re your own mistress. As you have been for more than twenty years.”

“We were warned from childhood that no alliance between the houses of Berasé and Hannac could ever come to any good.” He detected the strain in her voice. “I believed in my duty to Berasé.”

“As I believed in my duty to my own heart,” he murmured. He shook his head. “And I remember now how much it pained me to believe that you didn’t care.” He turned to go, pulling up abruptly at the soft sound of her laughter.

“You’re right, Franc. About one thing, I mean.”

He turned slowly to face her.

"I am a liar." Her eyes shone now brightly in the darkness. "I cared right up to the moment I crept out of Berasé one night and risked breaking my neck in the dark to ride to Hannac and to tell you so. And I was burning to explain it all to you, right up to the moment when I saw Cara Thæc's carriage in the courtyard."

He opened his mouth to speak, the words forming and then failing in his throat. With a creak and a groan the door was abruptly flung open and Marta's maid burst into the room. Marta, he noticed, seemed almost relieved at the interruption.

"A carriage just arrived, lady." The girl's eyes were troubled.

"A carriage? At this time? It must be nearly dawn."

The maid glanced up at Franc. "It bears your arms, Sir."

"My carriage is here? Who on earth would have..."

"Me, Franc." Still wrapped in her travelling coat, her hair loose about her shoulders, her face pale with the winter cold, Meracad ran into the room. "My apologies, Lady Ilena," she continued breathlessly, "but this really is a matter of urgency."

"Of course, child." Marta was doing her best to recover her composure. "Sit down, you must be frozen to the bone."

"There's no time, I'm afraid." Meracad looked at Franc, her face now pinched, contorted with fear. "It's Hal, Franc. She's gone."

Chapter Five

Barn Doors

It was a feeble sun which now emerged above the eastern horizon of the plains, its scant light shed over the ice-encrusted landscape. They had been riding for hours, their toes and fingers numb, their breath transformed to vapour. To their right lay the frozen mass of Brennac, stoic little fishing communities lining its banks, the occasional light of a candle in a window or smoke from a chimney the only signs of human activity in an inhuman wilderness.

Jools called out suddenly, and Hal was jerked from the trance-like state into which she had lapsed. Hissing with frustration she reined in her horse and turned around, expecting the thief to be just a few steps behind but there was no sign of her.

"Come on, Jools. We've no time for games!" She was surprised at the sound of her own voice in this desolate space.

"He won't move!" Jools's words floated back to her: distant, faint.

Muttering a curse, Hal retraced her steps, unnerved at the realisation that her own horse was flagging.

She found Jools tugging at the animal's bridle, trying to coax it forwards, but it stood obstinately still, trembling with cold and weariness.

"The bugger's more stubborn than you are," she complained as Hal approached.

"Well that's just perfect. We're out here in the winter and your ride has just rebelled." She dismounted and scanned the plains, taking in their white monotony and eerie silence.

"We just passed a village. Perhaps we can find them something to eat there."

Hal shook her head. "It'll take more than just a nosebag to get this one moving again. We've ridden them too hard." She sighed. "We'll have to give them a proper rest."

"No!" Jools turned on her suddenly. "The longer we wait, the more danger Kris is in."

Hal felt her temper rise as the seriousness of their predicament hit home. "Well I'd love to hear your suggestion, Jools, because if we're out here for any time without horses, we're as good as dead."

"Oh you do love to make a drama out of things, don't you? Look, we just passed a village which looked like they might have stables, and stables mean fresh horses, don't they? Use your loaf, Hal, for once in your life."

Hal surveyed the animals with a mixture of skepticism and guilt. Their heads hung low and they seemed on the verge of collapsing in the snow. "You think anyone else will exchange their horses for ours? They're at death's door!"

With an exaggerated sigh, Jools began to speak as if she were explaining things to a child. "They will if we don't leave them any choice. Come on, girl. I'm getting colder by the minute and these nags'll be good for nothing but feeding dogs if we let them stay out here for much longer."

"I'm sure Franc would appreciate you talking about a couple of his prized mounts in such a way. And I hope you're not thinking of rustling, because if word gets out..."

"Oh for the spirits' sake!" Jools had already begun to drag her reluctant horse by its reins through the snow in the direction of the lights of distant dwellings. "Shut your mouth for a change and get moving. Anyway, it's not rustling, it's liberating. Remember that and everything will seem much easier."

Hal glared after her. "You're not a nag," she whispered to her horse, before trudging through the snow after Jools.

The village seemed deserted: little more than some run-down shacks, their doors locked and bolted against the elements. A few discarded cray-fish traps and fishing nets lay strewn across the ground, their mesh enveloped in hoar-frost. A thin waft of smoke rising from a precariously-balanced old chimney pot was the only sign of life.

"Shit, only the ghosts'd think of living here, Hal." Jools kicked one of the traps in disgust, sending it rolling across the ground and crashing into the door of a low-roofed barn. To their alarm, the barn-door suddenly swung open.

"In that case, you may have just woken one of the dead," Hal whispered, feeling inside her coat for her sword. An old man hobbled out, wrapped to the neck in furs, his head encased in a bizarre array of tanned leathers.

"What do you want?" he growled, eyeing them fiercely. Jools nudged Hal in the ribs.

"Would you happen to have stables about the place, Sir?" Hal assumed a ring of northern brogue. She had learnt from Franc that the villagers resented the arrogance of visitors from the imperial city.

"Aye." He pulled a pipe from the depths of a pocket and began to draw on it, eyeing them the whole time with suspicion. "For those two wretches?"

"We've ridden a long way," she offered by way of excuse. He took another drag on the pipe and then spat a thick gob of phlegm into the snow.

"I'd horse-whip the pair of yers for getting them into that state. Alright, bring them inside."

The barn was warm and inviting after the freezing conditions they had endured over the previous hours. A pair of cows munched nonchalantly at their winter feed. Tethered beside them, Hal noticed four very fresh-looking horses leaning against each other to stave off the chill. She felt almost tempted to lie down amongst the bales of hay and sacks of grain herself, but the old man had other ideas.

"This here is a place for horses, not for the likes of you two. You'll find some soup on the stove in my shack opposite. You'll have a good long wait before these fellas are fit enough to ride again."

"But we 'ave to be movin' on!" Jools protested.

"They'll be ready when I say they're ready," he growled. "It's a long walk from here to anywhere else in the snow. Your choice."

"Come on, Jools," Hal muttered, recalling the man's earlier threat. "Much obliged to you, Sir." Ignoring the thief's protests, she drew out a few shillings from her pocket and handed them over. The old man rounded his eyes in surprise, turning the coins over in the palms of his mits, and pursing his lips as if about to speak but he said nothing.

"What did you give him that for?" Jools moaned under her breath as Hal dragged her outside.

"He could have bought up the imperial cavalry with that!"

"We're not in Colvé now where you bite before you're bitten."

"Getting quite the sentimentalist, aren't we? Sentiment will only carry you so far and it certainly won't save Kris," Jools sniffed. "'ere, where are you going?"

"He said there was soup in his shack."

"We're supposed to be movin' on, Hal. Over 'ere!"

She disappeared round the side of the barn. Hal glanced with longing at the man's humble little hut and its promise of hot soup. "What are you playing at?" she whispered angrily, catching up with her friend.

"Just wait until he comes out and then nick his 'orses."

"I said no rustling!"

"It ain't rustling, it's not even liberating see'n as how you just balanced his books for a year with that little act of charity. Just sit down and wait!" She pulled Hal down beside her.

They crouched in the snow, listening impatiently for the creak of the door. Weary, Hal rested her head against the barn wall, fighting off exhaustion. Meracad would have woken up by now and noticed that she had gone. She would be beside herself with worry or anger or possibly both.

"She'll understand." It was as if Jools had read her thoughts.

"I wouldn't be so sure. She's already on edge expecting Nérac to come after us at any moment."

Jools shook her head. "She'd never expect you to abandon your friends, Hal. She might not agree with your methods, but I reckon deep down she'd be surprised if you'd acted any differently. That's why she loves you, right?"

Hal shifted uncomfortably. "Maybe. To tell the truth I don't know why she loves me."

"Ah, you can never see it yourself, Hal. Take me and Kris for example. She found me, 'alf-starved on the streets of Colvé. We were both of us homeless, with nothing to save us but our wits or our beauty." She fluttered her eyelashes coquettishly. Hal smirked. "Well, to be honest with you, it was our wits what saved us. Anyway, she gave me all she had, which was precious little, and I was in a bad way, I can tell you." The thief's eyes darkened as she allowed her imagination to drift back to a time of hunger, of illness and abject poverty. "Kris taught me that it's better to risk the 'angman's noose than live like that. I followed her everywhere, Hal. I was, 'ow do you say it? Infatuated."

"Really?" Hal winced slightly as she moved from one leg to another in an attempt to relieve the tingling sensation in her toes. "I always assumed it was she who'd made the first move."

"Nah. It was me. I wouldn't leave her alone. I made out that I wanted her to teach me 'ow to thieve. But inside I was thinkin' much more than that. Till one day, I couldn't 'elp it, Hal. We was in *The Emperor* countin' our takins for the evening. And I just leant forward and kissed 'er. Just like that. And you know what she said?"

"No." Hal smiled and stuffed her hands deeper in her pockets. "What?"

"She says, 'almighty ancestors, Jools! What took you this long?'"

They both attempted to stifle their laughter, covering their faces with their hands. Suddenly, Jools looked up and put a finger to her lips. "Sshh!"

"What is it?" Hal sat upright.

"He's on the move. Come on!" They got up, brushing snow from their coats, and edged around the side of the barn. The old man was shuffling away in the direction of his shack, muttering to himself as he went.

"Strange one, that one." With a grimace, Jools prised open the door and they stepped swiftly inside. Daylight now leaked in abundance through holes and crevices in the barn roof. They could make out their own horses lying in the hay, sleeping off their exhaustion. Their saddles and panniers lay in a heap on the floor, having clearly been plundered for anything of value.

"The cheeky old bastard!" Jools exclaimed. "And after you'd given 'im them shillings."

"Never mind that, quick!" Hal grabbed their belongings and ran across the barn. "He'll be back as soon as he knows we didn't take him up on his generous offer of hospitality," she added, coaxing one of his horses into a strange saddle.

"Thought you were against rustling."

"According to you, it's liberating. Ready?"

"Oy!" A hoarse shout filtered through the still, frozen air towards them, followed by a series of wet, racking coughs. They both froze as footsteps crunched across the snow towards them.

"The saddle's not on properly!" Jools protested.

"Never mind that. We haven't got time to saddle up another one. Just get on behind me and ride. Now!"

They both swung up onto the back of the startled horse which reared upwards as it encountered unfamiliar riders. The old man was cursing as he opened the barn door again, just as his two erstwhile guests charged out of it.

"I'll see the pair of you hanged, you blasted thieves, preying on a poor old man with nothing left but his precious horses."

"And our kit, and our shillings!" Jools yelled back as they hurtled out in the direction of the Colvé road. "No point in locking the barn door after the horse has bolted, eh?"

It was late afternoon by the time they neared their journey's end, and what little daylight remained was fading fast. A pang of recognition struck Hal like a blow to the chest. They had arrived at the very hamlet at which she had said her farewells to Beric and Marc in the autumn. Now its humble cottages were almost buried beneath snowdrifts and it had the appearance of a place under siege from the elements.

Jools jumped down from the horse. "We'd better walk from here," she explained.

"Walk? In these conditions, are you mad?"

"Don't you remember 'ow we got you out of the city that time, Hal?"

Hal shuddered at the memory of the thieves' tunnel which had offered them an evasive exit beneath the walls of Colvé. "How could I forget?"

"Well 'orses don't take well to being dragged underground. And if we leave him out in the snow, he'll starve to death. But if you're still feelin' so cut up about cheating that charmin' old gent back there out of this one, now's your chance to make it up with your conscience." She rapped loudly on the door of one of the cottages. A young woman stuck her head out, her face wan and pale with hunger.

"'Fraid we ain't got no food here." Her tone was one of genuine regret.

"That's alright, darlin'. We're not even 'ungry," Jools lied. "See this fine fella here?"

The girl's eyes lit up at the sight of the horse.

"I reckon he'd fetch a fair price on sale," Jools continued. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Aye, he would that."

"Here, take 'im. He's yours." Without another word, she thrust the reins into the girl's hands and then, leaving her staring in stunned delight at her new possession, dragged Hal away through the snow.

"Well you are the soul of generosity," Hal muttered acidly.

"Only rob from them who can afford it, Hal. Come on girl, keep up!"

Hal groaned as Jools set off at a brisk march in the direction of Colvé.

Chapter Six

Rats

A slight wind had picked up, rustling the bare branches of The Grove. Hal could sense rather than see where they were. She willed Jools to stop if only for a moment, just so that she might mentally relive the mistakes of that wet day back in autumn - to seek some kind of release from those agonising memories. Jools, however, was in no mood for what she clearly regarded as an act of self-indulgence.

"It's the living we have to take care of now, Hal. The dead have had their chance."

She removed one of her gloves and began rubbing the bark of a tree with her hand, shook her head and then moved onto the next one and did the same.

"What the hell are you doing?" Hal asked in irritation. The re-opening of emotional wounds had left her nerves raw.

"One of these trees has a special sign cut in the bark," Jools explained. "Ah, 'ere it is. Well come on, girl and give me an 'and. Don't just stand there gawping." She began to dig away at the snow with her boots and then scraped at it with her fingers. Hal joined in until they had excavated the outline of the trapdoor. They hauled it open, Hal's heart sinking as she peered down into what might as well have been an abyss.

"Aristos first, also-rans behind." She could make out Jools' mischievous grin in the half-light.

"You're the thief, it's your tunnel. You go first."

"Bit edgy, are we? Alright, have it your way." Without another word, Jools swung herself downwards with an agility which surprised Hal. With a keen sense of regret, she surveyed The Grove one last time before following the thief under the ground. As she pulled down the trapdoor above them, her stomach gave a violent lurch. It was like being buried alive.

Jools must have sensed her unease, for she kept up a constant stream of chatter as they groped their way through the darkness, clutching at the dripping, slimy walls for support. As the roof of the tunnel grew lower and the space became more confined, Hal fought hard against a wave of panic which threatened to overwhelm her. After all, this was just a makeshift escape route constructed by thieves. How could they be certain that it wouldn't cave in around their heads?

"Are you sure this place is safe?" In spite of herself, she could do nothing to disguise the rising note of anxiety in her voice.

Jools laughed at that, apparently unperturbed by the fact that so much earth was balanced just above her head. "Well we could 'ave always gone through the main gates and saved ourselves the trouble. But I didn't think you'd fancy announcing your presence to the entire city. There's more than just Léac who'd hand you over to Nérac for a reasonable price."

"And here I was thinking I'd be welcomed back with open arms."

Jools smirked. "Oh they'd welcome you back, alright. No one passes over the chance to make a swift profit in this place. Even if it does mean sellin' others out to get it."

The air in the tunnel had altered, and Hal was relieved to catch a whiff of familiar scents - a blend of smoke and sewage - both indications that they were closer to human habitation. The smell grew in intensity until they came to the base of the rickety ladder which marked the end of the tunnel.

"P'raps you'd like to go first this time, Mistress 'annac?" Hal chose to ignore Jools's jibe and made her way as swiftly as she could to the surface, shoving open the trapdoor and hauling herself up onto the floor of the smithy which served as a decoy for the thieves' exit. The air was icy, and ripe with the reek of city life. She inhaled it with gratitude.

Jools's head emerged through the hole in the floor. She gave the place a quick look over, leaped out and closed the hatch, covering it with rushes and leaves.

"Alright, lady?" She extended a hand to the duellist, dragging her to her feet.

"Oh, leave it out, Jools," Hal moaned. "Title or no title, I'm risking my neck here for Kris, the same as you."

Blushing in spite of the cold, Jools gazed intently into her eyes. "I know, Hal. I know. And never think I don't appreciate that, girl." She put a hand on Hal's shoulder. "I'll never forget what you're doin' for me and Kris now. Let's go and find 'er? Eh?"

Taking hold of Jools's hand, Hal nodded. Then she pulled her hat down low over her eyes and turned her collar up to cover her mouth and nose. Together, they slipped out of the smithy and onto the streets of Colvé.

The snow was ankle deep and crunched briskly beneath their feet. It was a starless, cloudy night, with the threat of fresh blizzards carried on the quickening air. They encountered few others, the city seemingly sitting out the winter in front of the hearth behind locked doors. Those they did pass were clearly keen to reach the comfort of their own beds and firesides and paid them no heed. Hal barely recognised the main square, its central fountain now sealed in ice. Heads down, they turned onto a wide boulevard and made for the merchants' district.

As they skirted a corner, Hal's heart leapt into her mouth. They were beneath the base of the wall that surrounded Léac's garden. A memory rose, unbidden, of the previous summer: that

night when every fibre of her being had ached as Meracad had disappeared over the wall and climbed with astonishing grace to her bedroom window. She looked up there now. No light shone from between the curtains and the mullioned pane was closed shut.

"Wait here, Jools," she whispered. "If you should hear someone coming, whistle."

"Are you completely mad?" Jools stared at her, aghast. "We're both 'ere for the same reason, if I'm not mistaken. And that is to find Kris and get her out of there. I'm coming with you."

"I'm safer if you stay out here. If something happens you can get word to Marc."

Jools shook her head in exasperation. "Is there something in the water up north that makes people leave 'old of their senses? I'm a thief, Hal. I've broken into more 'ouses than you can count. And none of them 'ad anythin' more precious inside than this one. I came 'ere to rescue my girl, and that's what I'm bloody well about to do."

Hal sighed. There was no point in arguing with Jools. She could sense the thiec trembling with outrage at the suggestion that she should be left outside in the cold.

"Alright, have it your way. Just keep your hands to yourself. We don't want any more trouble than we need."

"As if!" Jools was clearly feigning indignation this time. "Watch and learn, Hannac." In spite of her stocky build, she shinned up the wall with remarkable ease before running swiftly along it, kicking the snow away in both directions as she went. When she had reached the side of the house she began to search with long practiced art for hand and footholds in the stonework, darkness apparently no obstacle as she edged her way up towards the window. Hal's heart raced as Jools clung to the ledge, wrapped her fur hat around her knuckles and pushed her hand into one pane of glass. Then she reached inside the window, pulled down the latch and let herself in, vaulting through the casement. Hal let out a long breath. Her turn.

She struggled up the wall and then began to edge precariously along its surface, reaching the building with relief. In the dry heat of a summer evening she had made the climb up and down to Meracad's room with relative ease, but now her feet could gain no purchase on the cold granite which was wet and slippy with snow. How on earth had Jools got up there? She clawed her way towards the window in an inelegant scrabble, grateful that darkness disguised the drop down into the garden below. As she reached for the ledge, her foot slipped, and she found herself clinging to no more than a single brick which jutted out, her legs dangling in the air. She looked up in desperation to see Jools's head peep out of the window just in time. The thief reached down and extended a hand, hauling her inside. She collapsed on the floor, her body nearly succumbing to cold, exhaustion and relief at having escaped a broken neck.

"We ain't got time for lying down, Hal. Get up girl!"

Hal groaned inwardly. Pulling herself upright, she looked around. The room was bare - stripped entirely of furniture and ornaments. Even the bed had been removed. It was as if

Léac had done everything in his power to extinguish the memory of his daughter: to eliminate every last trace of her. She felt sick with fury.

"So what's the plan?" She dragged herself to her feet.

"What do you mean?" Jools whispered.

"Well we're actually inside Léac's house. I was hoping you'd have something worked out."

Jools's eyes grew wide. "Well I've 'ardly got a bleedin' map of the place, 'ave I? I just thought we'd scout round, like."

"Scout round?" Hal stared at her in disbelief. "We're in the home of an unspeakably dangerous man and you just thought we'd *scout* round? I mean are you actually even certain Kris is here?"

Jools's forehead knotted into a frown. "Well if you've got a better idea of where she might be, Hal, you might have let on before. I'm doing what I can to find her before it's too late. And if we stand here arguin' it will be. You want a plan? Alright, 'ere's the plan: I go up, you go down, we search the 'ouse and find 'er."

Hal sighed in resignation. Jools was right: the longer they stood deliberating the more danger they were in. "Alright, have it your way," she whispered at last. "But listen, Jools, if something happens, promise me you'll get word to Meracad?"

Jools's brow unknotted itself and her eyes softened with compassion. "Nothing'll 'appen, Hal. C'mon, girl. Let's go."

She eased back the door, grimacing as it creaked. Before them lay a long, unlit corridor with a flight of stairs branching off immediately to its right. They squeezed hands briefly and then without further word, Hal began to make her way downstairs, her shadow looming, grotesque and distorted against the white plasterwork, candles flickering in their brackets above her head. She stopped for a moment. Was that a sound? The dull murmur of voices? She closed her eyes, a thin film of sweat breaking out across her forehead, and then pressed on down towards the ground floor.

Jools hid herself amongst the shadows, waiting for Hal to leave. No one around, or so it appeared. A window at the far end of the corridor let in just enough light to discern the rattan carpet laid across the floor, two doors to her left and their opposite numbers to her right. Her instincts told her that it was only a matter of time before someone came out of one of those doors. They also persuaded her that Kris was not to be found in such an obvious place on the first floor of Léac's house where any unwitting visitor might stumble across her. Léac, she reasoned, would have kept her well out of sight. Attics or cellars. Those were the places to start.

There had to be a trapdoor somewhere. She gazed up at the ceiling, but could make out nothing above her head. Perhaps it was in one of the rooms. Jools put an ear to the first door and then jumped back in alarm, surprised at the sounds of a chair being scraped across the floor and rustling as documents were shuffled into order. If he were to come out of there now...she heard wine trickling into a glass and her heart found its rhythm once again. Perhaps the room's occupant was making an evening of it.

Jools slid past the first room and stood outside the next, listening intently. Silence. Sucking in air between her teeth, she put her fingers to the handle and twisted, relieved to find it well-greased. She eased her head around the door, keeping one foot outside on the landing, prepared to make a bolt down the corridor, but it was empty. Slipping inside, she took in its plain, sparse furnishing. Just a bed in one corner, a single wardrobe and, she was pleased to note, an open hatch in the ceiling directly above the washstand. With practised art she crept across the room and sprang onto it, balancing precariously, legs astride the basin for a brief moment, before launching herself towards the cavity, arching her back and swinging herself upwards. She raised her legs until they were level with the attic floor and then rolled across it before jerking upright.

"Kris?" She ventured a whisper and then waited. No reply.

"Kris?" She tried again, a note of desperation now entering her voice. The silence mocked her. From beneath her came the sound of a cupboard being closed and locked. Jools froze, realising that she was directly above the first room. Light penetrated upwards through the attic floorboards. Putting her ear to the wood, she heard someone knock.

"Enter!"

Jools put her hand to her mouth, stifling a gasp as she recognised Léac's gruff tones. The door below her swung open.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Thought we should tell you, Sir, that your rat has taken the bait."

The blood was racing through her veins now and she held her breath in horror. That could only mean...

"Well, who'd have thought it?" She heard Léac sit back in his chair, caught the gulp as he drained his wine. "Never underestimate the stupidity of your enemies." He slammed down the glass. The light disappeared as he snuffed it out. "Well let's not waste any more time, boy. Lead on."

The door opened, and then she heard the key turn in the lock. She lay back down once again and flung herself across the floor in a rapid roll towards the hatch. Slipping through it she dangled for a few tense seconds above the washstand before hitting the ground in a graceful pounce and leaping for the door. A quick reconnaissance of the corridor confirmed that Léac had already gone, and she sprang along it just in time to see the tail ends of his frock coat

disappearing around a bend in the staircase. She cursed. Had Léac's men been watching them from the moment they'd approached the house?

Hal had reached a reception area on the ground floor, its plain, business-like interior lit by a few insipid candles. In spite of the cold, a skein of sweat slithered down the back of her neck, and blood pounded in her ears. She looked down to observe snow accreting on the floor from her boots and coat: evidence, if any were now needed, of an intruder. A door before her had been left ajar, and beyond it she could just make out a further flight of steps peeling away into gloomy darkness. Her instincts told her that Kris was down there. They also told her that it was too late.

The light grew dimmer as Hal approached the cellars, until it had all but dwindled to nothing. She stepped down onto what felt like a dirt floor and reached out to touch the walls but there was only empty space. The air smelt stale, musty and was laced with a slight whiff of vinegar. "Kris!" She ventured a whisper. There was no response. She took a few more steps forward. "Kris!" The sound of her own voice was startling. She had spoken with more volume than she had intended. It echoed back to her on the stagnant air: "Kris, Kris, Kris!"

She turned to go, on the verge of despair. Perhaps they had been too willing to believe that Léac would keep the thief alive. After all, he seemed to derive pleasure from crushing those who were weaker than him or less than amenable to his plans.

With one foot on the stairs she had already turned to go when she heard a noise: high-pitched, stifled, no more than a murmur, but she knew that she had heard it. Hal turned back again, almost stumbling over some old wine kegs in the process. She put out a hand and this time touched the cold dry wall of the cellar. The noise was louder now, and seemed to be coming from somewhere directly beneath her. She knelt down on the floor and reached forwards, fingers outstretched. Joy flooded her entire body - she was touching hair, warm skin, a living human being. She felt the contours of Kris's brow, gently touched her eyes, traced the line of the girl's tears down her cheeks as they soaked through the gag which had been wrapped around her face. Gently, Hal reached her hands around the back of Kris's head and untied it. The thief gasped and choked for a minute.

"Sshh!" Hal warned. "We're here, Kris. It's alright. We'll get you out."

She felt Kris give a shake of her head. "I'm sorry, Hal."

Hal's stomach twisted itself into a knot. The light of burning torches suddenly flooded the cellar. She smelt the sulphur as they were ignited and for a brief, irrational moment, had the impression that the room had caught fire. Temporarily blinded, she closed her eyes, and when she reopened them she made out Kris - pale, half-starved, slumped against the wall

with her arms bound cruelly behind her. She continued to shake her head, repeatedly whispering, "I'm sorry, Hal. I'm sorry."

It was then that she felt the blades pressed against her neck, threatening to slice it open from all sides.

"Put your hands on your head. Get on your feet."

She began to shake, rising slowly, pressing her palms onto the sodden wool of her cap.

"I know someone who'd very much like to speak to you."

She swallowed hard. "Perhaps you should let him know I'm not much of a conversationalist."

The man snorted. "Oh you will be, girl. You will be."

Chapter Seven

Cemetery Gates

Speeding alongside the icy banks of Lake Brennac, the journey down to Colvé had acquired the fraught, illusory qualities of a dream. Half dazed from lack of sleep, Franc's disordered thoughts had grown manic as he replayed the conversation with Marta only to be jolted back into reality when the carriage nearly overturned on frozen, rutted tracks. For her part, Meracad had maintained an anxious vigil, searching red-eyed through the window in the vain hope of catching sight of Hal and Jools as they headed down the Colvé road. Franc had insisted on just one change of horses at the town of Brennac itself, before continuing their nightmarish journey which had ended at an appropriately ghoulish destination: the Colvé public cemetery.

His initial thoughts had been that Meracad must have lost her wits altogether. Perhaps Hal's disappearance had pushed her to the very limits of reason. For when he had instructed the driver to head for Léac's house, she had turned to him with a look of horror.

"No, Franc. We aren't ready yet."

"What do you mean?" It had been difficult to suppress the rising strain of anger in his voice.

"You said your father has the thief. If Hal and Jools are there already, it could be too late."

Distressed, Meracad responded with a vigorous shake of her head. "No, Franc. You don't understand. If I go in there unarmed, my father will have achieved everything he wanted. He'll hand us both over to Nérac, put the thieves to death, and there will be nothing you can do about it. Trust me."

He stared at her askance. Léac's reputation for hard-nosed calculation went before him. If Hal had thrown herself into a trap, it would probably take more than brute force to get her out.

"So you have a plan?" He asked warily.

"We need to visit my mother."

Franc stared at her, his eyes wide, his entire body briefly paralysed with shock. How could she find it in her heart to joke at such a time? As he studied her face, however, the fury subsided. For the first time since they had left Hannac she seemed calm, focussed and clear. She looked at him as if what she had just said were the most natural thing in the world. Had she caved into insanity at the very moment they were approaching Colvé? He reached forward and put his hands upon her knees, hoping that the warm touch of another human being might prove consoling. "Meracad, your mother's dead."

Her face flashed with irritation. "I'm aware of that, Franc." She shifted in impatience. "We have to get to her grave."

"Her grave?" He sat back, stunned, his mouth opening and closing a few times before he could summon the strength to reply.

"I left something with her for safe keeping. It's time to take it back. And without it, we stand little chance of saving Hal or the thieves." He hesitated, and she clasped his hands in her own.

"I realise this all sounds incredible, Franc, but you'll understand soon. I promise. Right now, every minute we wait puts their lives at greater risk. Trust me. Have your man take us to the cemetery."

He felt her give his hands a little squeeze: a wordless reassurance that he could trust her. He sighed and banged on the roof of the carriage. "Make for the cemetery! Don't complain, man! Do as I say!"

The vehicle lurched into motion again, the silence broken only by the revolutions of the wheels as they crushed down fresh snow.

"I hope you know what you're doing, lass." To his disappointment, Meracad made no reply.

As they sped along snow-packed streets, the rooftops of shops and houses reflected the moon's light, as if so many candles were buried beneath the snow. Under different circumstances, he might have found such cold, stark beauty thrilling. Now, it seemed to heighten the sense that this was all some deranged hallucination from which he could not awaken, try as he might.

The horses began to slow down in pace as the carriage strained up cemetery hill on the eastern flank of the city, winding towards the desolate grounds which had been allotted for the burial of former citizens. They skidded to a halt on the icy surface of the road, forcing both Franc and Meracad to clutch at the upholstery and sashes to keep from falling. Rising stiffly, they clambered outside, inhaling the crisp, frozen air which now blended with the earthy scent of the cemetery.

"Wait here," Franc ordered his driver. The man muttered to himself, stamping his feet and folding his arms in an attempt to invite life back into frozen fingers and toes. Meracad was already disappearing in the direction of a huge pair of iron-wrought gates: the physical screen which divided the Colvé of the living from its dead counterpart. She wrenched the gates open,

their hinges releasing a rusty screech, and Franc caught a sudden glimpse of her pale, pinched face which was half hidden by the fur lining of her hood. A peculiar sense of unease clawed, spider-like, up his back. For, as she entered the territory of the dead, it seemed as if she were returning: not arriving.

He shook the feeling off and then ran, heavy-footed through knee-high drifts and followed her inside. The cemetery seemed to suck all sound from the air. Franc looked upwards at the dizzying canopy of trees which drooped and wilted beneath the weight of snow along their branches. When he scanned the graveyard again, he realised that Meracad was already far ahead of him, marching with grim determination along a wide, central alleyway. To left and right tombstones studded the snow, sticking out at strange angles, shrouded in ivy and moss. "Wait!" He yelled, his own voice the only noise to break through the still, silent air. She did not hesitate: did not turn round or reply. He cursed and ran after her again.

"I know my way around here: I used to visit mother very often," Meracad said as Franc caught up with her. Her hood had fallen back, and her long, pale locks of hair shimmered in the moonlight as they ran across her shoulders and down her back. "She knows all my secrets. I came that day, before my father sent me to Dal Reniac to marry Nérac." Her eyes carried an almost glazed expression as she looked ahead, and for the second time that evening Franc wondered if she were in her right mind.

Meracad turned to Franc briefly without breaking her stride. "I told mother that I'd found a person to love. That I would have asked for her blessing, were it possible. And I entrusted her with a gift: a present that only a devoted daughter would leave her mother. A gift that would right the wrongs of the past. We are to reclaim that gift tonight."

She had come to a breathless standstill, but before he could question her further, she darted off to the left and was disappearing amongst the stones and snow drifts. Franc cursed and then followed her, occasionally tripping over the buried stumps of trees and tombs. She disappeared from sight altogether, and he bellowed out to her once again, but the cemetery made a mockery of his words, reducing them to a muted, feeble cry. He surveyed the graveyard, fighting against a growing desperation which played on the edge of his sleep-deprived consciousness. Where was she?

From the corner of his eye he caught a flash of movement and spotted her in the middle distance crouching beside a grave, its modest headstone jutting out just above the surface of the snow. Fear gave way to a brief sense of relief and he made his way towards her, gripping the cold, rough edges of the tombs for support and clinging to the ivy which wound around tree trunks.

"I know he killed her," she said as he approached. Franc knelt down beside her and brushed snow from the jutting form of the tomb, straining with his eyes to make out the letters which had been chiselled into its plain granite twenty years before: Leda Léac. Nothing more: no

words of heart-wrung love and devotion, not even an indication that this woman had once been a wife, a mother or a daughter.

"I held in my hands the evidence that it was true and I still denied it." Meracad's voice was flat, emotionless. "But now we'll pay my debts to my mother, won't we Franc?" She looked at him suddenly and grasped his arm in appeal.

He took her hand in his and they continued to kneel for a few moments, before he said at last: "You owe her no debts, Meracad. It is not your fault that she's here in this cold, lifeless place. The debt lies with another. You say you left something with her for safekeeping. What was it, child?"

She made no response, but began to clear snow from the grave with the arm of her coat. He watched in surprise as she removed about a foot of it from just below the headstone before futilely raking at the hard, frozen ground with her bare hands. "It's no use." She stopped for a moment, breathless, pinning her fingers beneath her arms to prevent them from becoming paralysed by the cold. "I'll never get to it."

"Get to what? Meracad, what are you looking for?"

"Do you have a knife or dagger?" she asked, blinking back tears of desperation.

"Yes, of course." He reached inside his coat and pulled out a short blade from his belt. She grabbed it from him without another word and began to strike at the ground with it. Once again, Franc became convinced that Meracad had lost her grip on reality. "Stop it, girl!" He seized her arm suddenly and she turned to him with such a fierce look that he was briefly taken aback. "What in hell's name is down there?"

"A small metal box. It should be just below the headstone. Help me, Franc, please! There is such little time."

She was gazing at him now with a look of earnest appeal. "Very well," he murmured softly, and began to pull out the thick clods of clayey earth which came loose as the dagger crunched deeper into the frozen ground. Meracad plunged the blade down again, stopping at the sound of a dull thud, unable to push any deeper. Franc held his breath as she reached into the ground and began to tug at something, heaving with all her might until she had succeeded in pulling to the surface a package encased in leather.

She raised it towards him in triumph. "I told you it was there."

Relieved that Meracad had not lost complete hold of her senses, Franc watched as she tore away the leather and two pieces of hessian beneath it, to reveal a metal casket: its sheen now rendered dull.

"You kept it safe, mother." She kissed the headstone before opening the box. Franc craned over her shoulder in an attempt to make out the contents. Meracad pulled out a wad of papers and stuffed them into her pocket before closing the box with a snap and thrusting it into his hands.

"Take this," she urged, getting to her feet. "We must make haste."

"You think these papers will save Hal?" He pushed earth back onto the grave and then hid the evidence of their excavations beneath a pile of snow.

"It's our only hope, Franc. We must act now." She was already racing with fluid grace over tomb stones and back along the wide alley in the direction of the cemetery gates. He cursed and followed, once again feeling clumsy and heavy as he stumbled in her wake over the hidden roots of trees until they were once again back on the side of life, an icy wind now picking up the snow and whirling it into their faces.

They climbed back inside the carriage and Franc knocked on the roof before hurling himself breathlessly into his seat. The horses made a clean break of it as they rushed down cemetery hill and back towards the city.

"So now you're going to tell me what's in the box, Meracad?" Franc dry-washed his face with his hands, his breathing gradually settling down to a more manageable pace.

"Franc, you have to trust me just a little longer. I must ask you not to look at those documents. Please deposit them with Marc. And only when you have seen them safely into his hands, come back for us. We'll be waiting for you."

"Meracad, I have spent this night persuading myself that you had not lost your sanity. Don't look at me like that, lass!" he yelled suddenly as she started to protest. "You are now expecting me to go on some fool's mission to Marc's while you attempt to placate your father into handing Hal and the thieves over?"

"Franc! There is no time to argue. Please, just do as I say. I know that I can get them out of there, but our security rests in your hands. When you have handed the papers over to the Senator, come back for us. If my father gets his hands on those papers, then everything is lost."

She rubbed at the glass of the window and peered out through it. "We are approaching the merchants' district, Franc. Please, I'm begging you, just do as I say."

Franc's jaw worked in alarm and worry as he looked from the box to Meracad. "I hope you know what you're doing, lass," he said at last.

"Trust me, Franc. I do." She put her hands on his and gave them a squeeze of reassurance.

"Have your man stop here. If my father sees your carriage near his house he will suspect something." As the vehicle slithered to a halt she threw open the door and climbed out. "I ask this one thing, Franc. Just see that box into Marc's hands. We'll be waiting for you, I promise." With that, she slammed the door. He watched as her slight frame disappeared down the street, his heart thumping wildly against his rib cage.

"To Marc Remigius!" He yelled out the window. "As fast as you can." With a groan, the driver lashed at the horses and they set off at a dangerously wild pace down the street. Franc sat back again, numbed with cold and shock, staring at the small metal casket that Meracad had

just thrust into his hands. Every fibre of his being cried out to turn the carriage around, to head back to Léac's house and pull his daughter out of there.

A few grains of graveyard dirt still clung to the lid of the box. Disgusted, he wiped them away, and as he did so, his thumb brushed across the catch. What could be in the damn thing that was of such importance? If what Meracad had said were true and he now held all the stakes in his hands, surely he had a right to know what it was he was about to give to Marc. After all, he might be unwittingly putting the Senator in danger too.

Unable to suppress his curiosity a minute longer, Franc opened the box. Inside were several packages of letters, each held together with faded stretches of ribbon. No longer hesitating, he drew out his dagger for the second time that evening and cut through the material, almost dropping the entire contents on the floor in his desperate bid to open the first letter.

He scanned it briefly in the moonlight. Words seemed to rise from the parchment of their own free will: words which sent the temperature of his blood spiralling downwards. The vague threats of the first page had become explicit on the second, and with every sheet of parchment he read of beatings, extortion, torture and death. For a brief moment he sat, stunned, awakened to the full extent of Salius Léac's grasping ambition and the merciless cruelty with which he had stifled all competition. And he had just left Meracad to stand alone in the face of so much evil. He rose, without further hesitation, and banged once again on the roof of the carriage.

"What now, Sir?" the driver called down wearily, as he reined in the horses.

Franc opened the door and leaned out into the street. "Change of plan. Make for Salius Léac's house."

The driver sucked in his cheeks and blew out slowly, his breath forming a cloud of vapour.

"Do it, man!" Franc yelled in fury.

With a flick of his wrists, the driver pulled the horses back round once again, and Franc fell backwards into the carriage as it set off with a lurch in the direction of the merchants' district.

Chapter Eight

Last Will and Testament

It was as if the entire cellar had gone up in flames. Jools froze in horror. Had this been their plan, then? To lure Hal down into the bowels of the house from where there would be no escape, and then to burn her alive along with Kris? Her knees almost gave way beneath her before she realised that she would already have been incinerated if the cellars had caught fire. Holding her breath, Jools edged along the wall and peered around the corner. Léac and his men were standing in a semicircle with their backs to her, brandishing torches above their heads. She caught sight of Hal standing in their midst, her hands clasped together on top of her head. Kris was slumped in a shivering heap at Hal's feet. Jools could make out her lover's eyes, shadowed with rings of sleeplessness, fear and hunger. She turned back again, resting her forehead against the damp coldness of the stone work. It was not over yet, she told herself. It couldn't be. They still hadn't caught her.

"Your loyalty to your friends is touching, Thæc." Léac's voice echoed around the cellar.

"It's Hannac now, not Thæc. And I believe imprisonment without authority is a crime."

Jools caught Léac's smirk. "I'd be wary of lecturing others on points of law, girl, when you've hardly kept on the right side of it yourself. Illegal duelling, theft, and now I might add housebreaking to that list."

"I've never stolen anything."

"That same law you cite maintains wives to be property. Therefore, you're as much a thief as that whelp you've tried to save."

Jools risked another peek into the cellars. She could never take all those men on; that much became immediately clear. Her best hope would be to launch some kind of impromptu solo attack after they had begun to file upstairs. Without warning, Léac suddenly lashed out at Hal, driving his fist into her abdomen. She keeled forward, crippled with pain, a long thread of saliva falling from her lips to the floor. Two of her captors caught her before she could hit the ground and pulled her arms roughly behind her back, securing her wrists with twine. A third ripped open the front of her coat, sending a shower of buttons ricocheting against the walls. He grabbed her sword from its belt and passed it to Léac.

"My thanks." The merchant examined it in the light of one of the torches, running his finger along its edge to test the blade. "Northern. Will make a fine keepsake." He turned his attention back to Hal who was now sweating, beads of moisture standing out on her nose and cheeks.

"Now I don't believe you came here alone. And wherever you are, it seems my daughter isn't far behind. So where is she?"

To Jools' surprise, the corners of Hal's mouth twitched into a thin smile. "In this instance I think you'll find you're mistaken, Léac. The last time I saw her, she was still in my bed."

Léac's face grew hard, stony, his brow furrowed in anger. Seizing the front of her shirt, he pulled her upwards, forcing her to stand on tiptoe.

"I'd kill you right now, bitch, if it were not for my promise to Nérac that I'd hand you over."

"Well, I see you're moving on in the world." Hal's eyes were mocking. "Now Nérac's made you his errand boy."

A wave of nauseous fear suddenly washed over Jools, causing her to almost retch up the contents of her stomach. Someone was standing behind her - she could sense body heat, detect the soft tickle of breath on the back of her neck. She reached to her waist for her knife, freezing as a hand clasped around her wrist. Succumbing to panic, Jools turned slowly to face her assailant. Her mouth fell open in astonishment.

Meracad had never appeared more beautiful to her than before that moment. She stood in the half-light, her pale cheeks flushed with fear, fawn-coloured hair streaming in unruly tresses over the shoulders of her thick winter coat. She put a finger to her lips, and Jools read in her eyes an anxious warning to be silent.

"I won't ask you again!" Léac's voice had risen an octave, his temper strained to breaking point. "Where is she?"

Meracad's eyes were an open question and Jools nodded in response. Together, they stepped down into the cellar. Léac was still clutching Hal by the shirt front, his arm raised just inches above her face, ready to strike her again. Kris cowered at her feet, shaking in abject horror.

"I'm right here, father."

Twisting around, Léac's expression was one of incomprehension, his fist still hovering in mid-air above Hal's face. Jools noticed that the duellist's eyes were closed in anticipation of the blow, but it never came. Instead, Léac turned away from her altogether, to stare in astonishment at Meracad and Jools who now stood side by side behind him, apparently unarmed. Hal struggled, but was unable to throw off her captors' grip. With a pained look, she twisted around, her gaze falling on Meracad. "You shouldn't have come."

"Save it, Hal." Meracad seemed to be the only person in the room capable of maintaining a semblance of self-control. She turned back to her father.

"Let them go. All of them, before it's too late."

The shock left his eyes, his lips twisting into a sneer of contempt. "I knew you'd not be far behind her, daughter. Come to wish her farewell? Best get it said now as Nérac may not give you the opportunity."

His threats seemed to have come shy of their mark, for the look she threw him was one of disgust, not fear.

"You knew what hell you were consigning me to in Dal Reniac when you made your little pact with Nérac, and that was before you'd even heard of Hal. Everything you did was for your own mean ends. You sold me to the highest bidder. I've come here to remind you of that fact."

Léac's eyes widened in surprise. "On the contrary, daughter, I was saving you from yourself. Your mother was a whore and I didn't want you to become one like her."

Meracad took a step forwards, clenching her fists, but one of his men held her back. Jools struck out at him with her blade, gashing a deep wound into his thigh. He roared in pain and lashed out at her, before clutching his leg in a vain attempt to stem the stream of blood which already pulsed from the wound. She kicked at his stomach, but he caught her ankle with his free hand and jerked it upwards, sending her crashing to the floor. Briefly stunned and unable to resist, she lay, helpless, as her enraged assailant forced her onto her face, twisting her arms up behind her back. Jools yelled out in shock and fear.

"Tie her up and stick her with her friend," Léac ordered. "As a law-abiding imperial subject, I have a duty to hand them both over to the palace guards. The pair of them are long overdue a meeting with the hangman." Jools writhed, desperately attempting to wriggle from the grasp of Léac's man as he held her down and secured her hands behind her back. He dragged her to her feet and then threw her down again next to Kris. She rested her head on her lover's shoulder, the dull awareness of defeat now gradually laying claim to her mind and body. "I'm sorry, Kris," she whispered. "We tried." Kris managed a bare nod in response.

Léac turned to face his daughter once again. "You were about to say something, Meracad?"

She rounded on him in frustration and fury, straining against the hands of his hired thug, who still held her by the arms. "I'm warning you, father, it would be very unwise to hurt me or any of my friends."

"Oh yes? Expecting help, are you?"

"I don't need help. Did you not receive the letter I sent you when I was still in Dal Reniac?"

For just a brief moment, the look of self-satisfaction dropped from Léac's face. His laughter sounded forced, uneasy.

"Idle threats, Meracad. The final retreat of a desperate woman."

Apparently undeterred, Meracad continued. "If I or any of my friends disappear tonight, you'll find out if they were idle threats, I can promise you that. Those letters of which I wrote - all your words of extortion, blackmail, violence, murder - every last one is now in safe hands. And if my friends do not return home in safety tonight, those letters will find their way

into the homes of your business associates, lawyers, and possibly the Emperor himself. Let us all go, and I will ensure that they remain sealed and unread."

Léac stared at her for a moment, his eyes bulging. "You're bluffing," he said at last. "You treacherous little slut, I know you're bluffing. Believe me, girl, you're valuable to Nérac for one thing and one thing only - that brat of his you're carrying. And once you're delivered of that, you'll go the way of your mother, he'll see to that."

"So you admit it, then?" It was as if she finally realised that she had nothing to lose. Her voice carried an edge of triumph.

"She betrayed me, that's all. And I'll not have that from anyone - not from her, and certainly not from you!"

He took a step towards her, no longer capable of suppressing the rage which lay behind the mask of scorn, but she did not flinch. Instead, she presented him with a disarming smile.

"Check my coat pockets," she told him coolly. "Then we'll see if I'm bluffing."

Léac froze. Then, keeping his eyes on her face, he reached inside her coat and pulled out a tired looking bundle of papers. Their edges were torn and creased, and they had been secured together with a faded brown ribbon. He eased one of the documents from the pack and scanned it briefly, his fingers trembling as he clutched it.

"Well, father? I don't think you need to read them all to understand that I'm telling you the truth."

"Burn them!" Léac turned to his men, his eyes now wild, his skin pasty and greased with sweat. He held the letter he clutched up to one of the burning torches, watching as it curled up in the flames and dissolved into ash.

Meracad smiled at that. "You don't think those were the originals, do you, father?" She shook her head and tutted. "Spare me the credit of having a little foresight. In that respect, and I hope in that alone, I *am* your daughter."

Léac's voice was hoarse, gravelly, as if he were speaking through a mouthful of sand. "What do you want?"

"I already told you. Release my friends. And then we can discuss my own compensation."

He hesitated, and she replied with a mocking shake of her head. "Make up your mind, father. What's it to be? Your deal with Nérac, or your freedom? Because, given the contents of these letters, if word gets out..." she shrugged her shoulders and offered him a girlish pout.

Léac's lips curled in fury. He stood for a few moments as if rooted to the ground and Jools's heart pounded against her rib cage. Would he buckle? Would he give? How much of a coward was he?

"Release them." The words were strangled, muttered.

"I'm sorry, father, I didn't hear that."

"I said release them!" He barked out the order a second time and then turned, unable to look at her. The thief gasped as she felt a knife slicing through the twine about her wrists, the blood suddenly rushing back into her fingers. Forcing her own knife through the bonds on Kris's ankles and wrists, she cradled her lover on the floor as she released a torrent of wept throaty sobs.

"Thought I was a gonner, Jools. Thought I wasn't going to see you ever again, princess!"

Jools hushed her as she would a frightened child. "You know I wouldn't leave you down 'ere, Kris. C'mon, lover, get up."

Kris put her hands onto Jools's shoulders, attempting to lever herself to her feet, but her legs crumpled and she dropped back to the floor again.

"Hal, give me an 'and, girl." Jools cast an anxious glance at Hal. "She's as weak as a newborn."

Léac's men had released their grip on the duellist's arms. She turned to them with a relieved grin. "You might want to do as your master bids and untie me, gentlemen."

They turned to Léac expectantly. He paused for a moment, scowling, his jaw moving in silent outrage as if chewing over the decision.

"Do as I ask, father," Meracad breathed softly in his ear.

"Release her," he growled.

Her bonds severed, Hal crouched down next to Kris, who appeared ready to pass out at any moment.

"Alright, Kris? Ready?" Kris let out an incoherent grunt in response. They put their arms around her and hauled her to her feet.

"This is not the end, Meracad." Léac appeared on the verge of losing his self-control. With eyes almost released from their sockets, he trembled with rage.

"Well in that respect, father, you're right." She flashed him a sweet smile of false innocence.

"We haven't yet discussed the terms of my compensation."

"Your compensation? For what?"

"Are you being deliberately obtuse?"

He took a step towards her, his jaw jutting forwards, his fists curled into tight balls, but she edged backwards out of reach. "I warned you already. If you so much as lay a finger on me, it will be heard of and those papers will be released. I was referring to the compensation you owe me for all the years I was forced to live like a prisoner under your roof, with less rights than your servants. And, of course, the matter of my betrothal to your business partner. It's just a simple question of a few small alterations to your will, father. Just a few words here and there to assuage your guilty conscience."

"Meracad," Hal urged, casting a worried glance at Kris's weakened form. "We'd better get out of here."

Meracad turned to her in irritation. "My father's right, Hal. This isn't over. Not yet. And until I get what I came for, none of us are leaving." She turned back to Léac. "Well, what are we waiting for? What I ask is relatively painless compared with the alternative."

He stared at her in disbelief for a few moments. Then he pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket and blotted his face. "Very well, Meracad." His voice was hoarse, grating; little more than a whisper. "You have it your way, girl. For now. You run from Nérac and from me and you think you can outwit us both. I can see that. But believe me the devil will have his day, and I'll have mine before the month is out. So have your fun, girl. Enjoy your little victory, if that's how you see it. But the minute you leave here, you and your friends had better watch your backs. Because I'll have those papers back and when I do, there'll be no power strong enough in the empire to protect you."

Meracad's face paled at that, but she stood her ground. "You can make any threat you wish to, father." Her words seemed fuelled by a strange kind of cold fury. "But it would appear that I'm holding all the cards at this particular moment, and you *will* do exactly as I say. Now if I rightly recall, your will is in the safe. You lead on." She indicated the stairs which led back up to the ground floor. "I don't trust you to walk behind us. And you'll keep your thugs locked in the cellar until we're gone."

Léac grunted in response before heading in resignation up the cellar steps. Meracad followed him, while Hal and Jools half-carried, half-dragged Kris up behind her.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Hal hissed angrily to Meracad.

"It's a bit late to start worrying about that, isn't it, Hal?" Meracad's voice was accented with exhaustion and irritation. They stepped out onto the ground floor of Léac's house with its candle-lit corridors. It was almost like coming up for air after the stale atmosphere and gloom of the cellars.

"Your keys." Meracad was clearly beginning to grow into her role of assumed authority. Léac glared at her and then fumbled in his pockets and handed them over. She closed the door to the cellars and locked it. "Wouldn't want your men making any fatal mistakes, would we? Now, your safe, if I'm not mistaken, is in here." She turned to a grand pair of double doors to their right which she proceeded to unlock before throwing them open and stepping to one side. "After you, father."

They entered a spacious, orderly room with a huge desk positioned at its centre, covered in stacks of paper and pots of ink and quills.

Without breaking her stride, Meracad headed for the back of the desk, opened a cupboard beneath it and pulled out a crystal decanter filled to the brim with a rich, nut-coloured liqueur.

"Take this." She shoved the bottle into Hal's hands. "Give some to Kris. It may revive her."

They lowered the ailing thief into a high-backed armchair. In the half-light of the candles, her face appeared ashen and ingrained with the dirt of the cellar. Jools held up her head while Hal administered some of the alcohol. She drank a little, spluttered and coughed, and then lay back again, breathless.

"That's my finest Yegdanian cognac!" Léac gruffly protested.

"Such fine cognac that you've never tasted a drop?" Meracad retorted, her tone arch. "The safe, if you please, father."

Jools cast a quick glance at Hal. The duellist had been stunned into silence as Meracad turned the tables on her own father, commanding him to push aside a heavy chest of drawers and then to unlock the iron door which lay hidden behind, embedded in the wall. It was as if Meracad were growing into a new role, suddenly released after years of passivity and repression.

"Please forgive me." Hal's words came out as no more than a whisper, but Jools heard them and she knew that Meracad had caught them too, for she turned round to look at Hal and her eyes softened.

Jools had known all along just how much their rescue mission had cost her friend. Now she allowed herself a few uneasy stabs of guilt. But when she turned to look at Kris, now breathing more easily, her cheeks gradually acquiring some colour once again, she realised that it had been worth the risk.

Meracad turned back to Léac. "Your will, Sir."

He pulled a scroll of parchment from the safe and thrust it into her hands with all the bad grace he could muster. Unperturbed, Meracad unrolled the document and then scanned it briefly.

"As I suspected. Your house and wealth are all signed over to Nérac in the event of your death. A little oversight on your part perhaps, that you missed out any provisions for your own child or future grandchildren?"

"By law you're his property," Léac responded glibly.

"You cite the law when it suits your purposes, father. And I *will* have what is mine." Her voice became heated. She paused, drew breath, handed him back the scroll.

"No need to rewrite it, father. A short annex is all I require. And then, ladies, we really will be on our way." She turned back to Hal and the thieves and smiled again. For a brief moment, it seemed the future was a place they all wanted to be.

Chapter Nine

Bright Smoke, Cold Fire

Meracad snatched the will from her father's hands before the ink had even dried. She scanned it briefly, nodding her head in satisfaction.

"Take it girl, for all the good it'll do you," Léac growled. "Enjoy your little victory while you can. For I'll be writing it again in your husband's name before the month is out."

Meracad cast him an arch look. "Your problem, father, is that you don't know when to lie down and accept defeat. The future is no longer yours. It belongs to us."

Heartened by Meracad's words, Hal smiled and extended a hand to Kris, pulling the thief to her feet. "It's time to go," she urged quietly.

Léac snorted in derision. Rising from his chair, he glared in suppressed rage at Hal before turning to his daughter. "I wonder if Nérac will grant you the opportunity to mourn her death."

"Sit down." Meracad pulled the keys from the safe, addressing him in a tone of icy fury. "You will remain in here until we are gone. You will make no attempt to follow us. I have more than just evidence of your cruelty to protect me now. I have this too..." She waved the scroll of parchment beneath his nose. "The rights to your estates. And I'm sure Nérac would be fascinated to know that you've just written him out of your will."

Her words seemed to impact on Léac like a physical blow. He sank back in his chair as if the rage had been sucked out of him.

"Goodbye, father."

He did not look at her. Instead, he continued to stare straight ahead: his eyes blank, implacable, as Meracad locked the study doors and Hal and the thieves headed down the corridor towards the main entrance of the house.

"Wait!" Hal pulled the thieves back suddenly. Somebody was banging on the casement outside.

"Girls! Are you safe?"

"Franc?" Hal yelled out in surprise. The handle was subjected to a frenzied shaking and then Franc suddenly kicked open the front doors themselves and charged through, flurries of snow

whirling past him into the corridor. He grabbed Hal by the shoulders and stared at her as if convincing himself that she were still alive. "Are you alright, lass?" His eyes were wild with sleeplessness and shock, and he was out of breath.

"I'm fine. Kris is weak, though. We have to get her out."

Franc shook his head. "I'm not leaving until I've prevented that man from doing any more harm."

"Hannac!" Léac roared, his voice muffled by the closed doors of the study. Hal flinched at a sudden crash as furniture was thrown across the room, followed by a loud thwack as if a chair had been broken in two. The wooden slats of the doors shook violently, forced almost from their hinges as the merchant hurled himself against them.

"Franc, you were to wait for us. Did you even deliver the documents to Marc?" The colour drained from Meracad's face, her voice faint and high.

"I'm sorry lass. As soon as I'd seen them, I realised how much danger you were all in."

"You read them? Oh, Franc!" She began to race towards the threshold and the snow-coated garden beyond. Léac's men must have heard the developments in the corridor, for they began to shout and yell, violently buffeting the cellar door in a bid to break free.

"Where is he?" Pulling out his sabre, Franc ran for the study, just as Léac crashed through the wooden slats, tearing the handle from its fixtures. He stumbled out into the corridor in a spray of splinters and nails, brandishing an improvised weapon in one hand: the leg of the chair which he had torn apart in blind fury.

"No!" Meracad wailed again, almost sinking to the floor in despair. Hal pulled her from her father's path, leaving the thieves clinging together in fear.

"You just made the greatest mistake of your life, Hannac." Léac leered at Franc, wielding the chair leg in one hand like a club. "It'll be my pleasure to wipe you out, together with the last of your miserable line."

Franc flexed his blade with threatening purpose. "The pleasure will be mine, Léac." His voice was soft now, dangerous. A tense quietness descended as the two men faced each other, Léac's expression one of undisguised hatred, while Franc seemed to have lost his former wildness, now coldly detached and focussed on the merchant.

With an abrupt yell Léac broke the impasse, charging bull-like at Franc who jumped lithely out of reach. The chair leg crashed onto an ornate side table, crushing it. Kris and Jools cringed in terror.

"Get out of here!" Hal yelled. The thieves fled through the open doors and out into the winter's night, but Hal and Meracad's path was blocked by the two men who now circled each other, Franc's lips curled into a provocative, taunting smile.

With a grunt of anger, Léac heaved the bulk of the chair leg above his head, ready to bring it down on Franc's skull but missed again, his blow blocked by the steel of northern sabre.

Franc pulled back, only to discover that he was unable to move, his sword embedded in the wood. Further down the corridor, Léac's men wrenched at the cellar door, almost ripping it from its hinges.

Hal seized Meracad by the shoulders, peering into her frightened eyes. "Wait here!" She charged through the remnants of the study doors, leaving the girl shaking in abject terror as her father's men yelled and hammered relentlessly. Seizing a wad of papers from the desk, Hal set them to the grate until they had begun to smoke. Then, grabbing the decanter of cognac from the desk, she leapt back out into the corridor.

Léac had contorted his face into a sick grin as he whirled the chair leg above his head, frustrating Franc's efforts to pull out the sword. Still clinging to the hilt, Franc raised a foot, kicking the merchant squarely in the stomach. Léac coughed and spluttered in surprise and pain, stumbling backwards, his head slamming against the wall. Before he had chance to recover, Franc launched himself at the merchant, dropping his sword to rain down blows as Léac attempted to shield his face with his hands.

Hal flung the prized bottle of liqueur at the cellar door, its crystal splintering into minute shards, and then hurled the burning parchment down on top of the mess. Flames instantly crackled their way around the door frame, melting the veneer in a cloud of dark, pungent smoke. Léac's men made one last desperate, collective push and burst out through flames which had already begun to envelop the walls and tapestries in a speed which surprised even Hal. She dragged Meracad back up the staircase, pushing her from the fray before charging at the first man who was now coughing and spluttering as smoke filled his lungs and nostrils. Confused by the mayhem, he was caught off guard and fell backwards against his companions, smashing his head against the lowest rung of the stairs, blood immediately pumping from a deep cut on his temple.

Behind her, Léac had succeeded in twisting his legs around Franc's ankles, sending him crashing to the floor. Hal edged towards her father, but found herself in the path of two of Léac's men. Behind them their companion clutched at his leg, still trying to dislodge Jools's dagger, blood staining and soaking the linen of his trousers. He grabbed at a wall hanging in desperation, only to bring the burning fabric down on top of him. Screaming in agony, enveloped in flames, he rolled about the floor, spreading the fire further along the corridor.

His accomplices were almost upon her, and she crouched down ready to launch herself at them when a vase smashed into the face of the first, breaking his nose with an audible crack. She span backwards. Meracad peered around the bend in the staircase, her hand still raised above her head.

"Thanks!" Hal yelled, breathless.

"Your sword!"

Meracad's warning caused Hal to focus once more on her assailant, who was clutching his face, blood streaming from between his fingers, her confiscated sword still stuffed into his belt.

She reached forwards and pulled it out by the hilt, delivering him a swift kick to the stomach as she did so. He toppled backwards straight into the gathering inferno, howling as his clothes and hair caught fire and he fell through the entrance to the cellar.

Ignoring the dying screams of his comrades, Léac's remaining goon ran at Hal, forcing her to stand her ground in spite of the heat which was now unbearable. She thrust her sword forward, waiting until he was almost upon her before driving it home. With a sickening crunch it pierced his neck and drove out the other side, the tip emerging just below his right ear. His jaw opening and closing in a series of spasms he stared at her in disbelief before collapsing in a gasping heap at her feet.

Her heart now thundered in her ears, her stomach lurching at the sight of Léac pinning Franc to the floor, and at Franc's vain struggles to kick his way free. He twisted around on the ground, making wild swipes for his sword as the merchant clawed at his legs, dragging him backwards and roaring with rage. Hal kicked his sword towards him again, but it slid beyond his reach. Dropping down, she tried to prise her own weapon from the neck of her dead assailant, but fire had bathed the steel and she let it go, screaming in pain, squeezing her wounded hand between her thighs.

Behind her, Léac continued to pound Franc's abdomen and ribcage in a frenzied volley of punches, and Hal straightened up in time to see her father make one last desperate reach for his sword, catching it just as Léac seized him by the throat, throttling him. Thick veins rose on Franc's temples, his face now a vivid shade of purple as he struggled for breath, Léac maintaining the grip on his neck.

Before Hal could react, Meracad had run back down the stairs. She pulled the belt from her coat and twisted it around her father's throat, forcing him to arch backwards. Léac's fingers slid from Franc's neck, just as Franc made an uncoordinated thrust upwards with the sword, sucking in great gulps of air as he recovered from the assault upon his lungs and windpipe. As Léac writhed from side to side, trying to dislodge Meracad, Franc thrust upward again. Hal heard Meracad scream, witnessed her recoil in horror. Believing her injured, she raced forward and grabbed the girl by the arm, dragging her towards the open doors just as Franc's sword emerged out of the back of Léac's head.

Roaring and spitting in agony and rage, the merchant staggered to his feet, clutching at his blood-soaked face in a futile attempt to extract the weapon, its hilt protruding from his eye socket. Hal heard Meracad retch and pushed her through the open doors into the garden and the waiting arms of the thieves, before racing back inside to pull Franc out.

Léac tottered from wall to wall, his attempts to pull Franc's sword from his face weakening, his voice now reduced to a series of inhuman wails and grunts before he finally tripped over the burning bodies of his men and fell headlong into the flames, vocalising his last moment alive in an horrendous, drawn-out scream before the fire permanently engulfed him.

"Hal, get out of there!" She caught the sound of Jools yelling to her through the open door and looked up to see a timber beam come ablaze and work loose before crashing down from the ceiling. Franc groaned at her feet, still clutching his injured neck, the billows of smoke now making breathing all but impossible. She attempted to drag him out of the path of the fire just as an explosion rocked the entire building, its force causing part of the ground floor to crumble and cave in, taking with it the bodies of Léac and his men as fire surged up through the floor boards.

"The cellar! The kegs of spirits!" She heard Jools' frightened scream above the din and the thief rushed inside, grabbed Franc by the legs and proceeded to pull him out through the open doors, Hal running out behind them and leaping down three stairs at once before burying her wounded hand with gratitude in the snow.

Meracad crouched anxiously over Franc as he continued to inhale huge gulps of air before eventually dragging himself into a sitting position.

"Your father's gone lass," he spluttered out at last. Before she could reply, the windows blew out of the ground floor, releasing tiny fragments of glass which hurtled down onto the garden. Shouts rose up from the street as merchants and servants from the neighbouring houses rushed to witness the incongruous spectacle of Léac's house burning to the ground surrounded by ice and snow.

"Let's go!" Jools urged, hauling Kris to her feet and dragging her towards the gates. Just beyond them, Hal could make out the dark shape of Franc's carriage, the horses careering wildly at the sight of the fire as the coachman tugged at their reins in a desperate attempt to keep them from overturning the vehicle.

Picking himself up with difficulty and still clutching his wounded ribs, Franc forced himself into a half-crawl in the direction of the carriage, stumbling wildly across the garden.

"Can you move?" Hal put an anxious arm around Meracad as the girl stood, dumbstruck, watching as her former home was consumed by fire and smoke, sparks and ash spiralling upwards and hissing as they mingled with the falling snowflakes.

"Yes...yes," she murmured, staring before her as if hypnotised by the scene of carnage and destruction.

"Hal! Meracad!" Jools screamed above the noise of burning timber and falling debris. Meracad moved towards the carriage in an almost trance-like state, but Hal grabbed her arm and held her back. Meracad stared at her in disbelief, her eyes wide, the fire reflected in the dark ebony of her pupils.

"Tell me you forgive me." Hal took Meracad's hands in her own, ignoring the throbs of pain which issued from her palm and fingers.

"Hal, come on. Now!" Franc was yelling to them from the security of the carriage. The shouts and screams of neighbours out in the street had grown wilder.

"Hal I...I think we ought to go" Meracad attempted to shake Hal off but the duellist tightened her grip.

"I know I hurt you. I know I should not have left that night with Jools. Please, just tell me that you can forgive me."

Meracad strained to peer over Hal's shoulder at the house, her face now pale, exhausted. She appeared to be on the verge of breaking down.

"When I woke to find you gone..." her eyes glistened with tears as she struggled to express herself. She started again. "When I woke to find you gone, I thought that I'd never felt so alone in my entire life." She broke off again, swallowing hard before continuing. "And I never want to feel like that again, Hal. Just promise me that you'll never leave me alone."

"I promise." Hal traced the fingers along the edges of Meracad's cheek bones, sensing the coldness of her skin. "I'm sorry."

"Hal, for God's sake get in the carriage!" Franc had climbed back out again and was about to set foot across the garden to drag them away. Around them, the citizens of Colvé were turning out in their droves to watch in horrified fascination as the skeleton of Léac's house was gradually consumed inside its case of fire. With an awesome creak and groan the roof caved in on itself, causing all those assembled to let out a petrified, collective scream.

Hal pulled Meracad out through the throngs of people and they ran for the relative safety of the carriage, hurling themselves inside just as the coachman slammed the door behind them, leapt atop his post and set the horses on a chaotic, swerving ride along the streets in the direction of Marc's house.

Inside, all five occupants of the carriage dropped into a drained, nervous silence, resting their heads on one another's shoulders, gradually coming to terms with the fact that they were still alive.

"Strong stuff, that cognac," Kris piped up at last, but none of the others could summon the strength or willingness to laugh.

Still clutching his cracked ribs, Franc took a long, pained look at his daughter and shook his head.

"The next time you decide to take a midnight flit, Hal, do me the favour of letting me know."

She rested her head against the seat behind her and closed her eyes, too weary to reply. The carriage ceased to jolt with such violence, the horses slowing to a calmer trot as they moved further away from the scene of the fire, finally coming to a rest outside the house of Senator Marc Remigius.

Chapter Ten

Old Friends

"Slow down, Kris! You'll choke!"

Kris laid down her knife and fork and turning to Jools spoke through a mouthful of salad.

"I ain't hardly eaten in a week!"

"And don't talk with your mouth full, either. It ain't seemly in such distinguished company."

Jools spread her hands wide in a gesture which encompassed all those now seated around the table in Marc's private dining room. The Senator himself, his waistline having expanded as he transformed into the very model of respectable, doting husband, sat beside his new wife Lavinia. Hal noted with satisfaction that the 'former streetwalker,' as Jools termed her, had stepped into her own role as senatorial consort with a greater display of dignity and poise than any courtier she had ever known. Having shrugged off with grace the mutterings and sneers which had followed her about Colvé upon becoming Marc's betrothed, Lavinia was fast attaining a reputation as an authority on matters of etiquette, fashion and diplomacy. The irony of a former prostitute rising through the social ranks to become a source of influence on the imperial court itself was not lost on Hal.

The duellist was struggling to make it through her own dinner with just one hand free, the other still pulsing with pain and now swathed in layers of bandages. Franc had not yet made it downstairs, as the doctor was still tending to his battered ribcage and Meracad had remained in bed the entire day, sleeping off the exhaustion and trauma of the previous night.

"I don't stand on ceremony you know, Jools." Marc smiled indulgently at the thieves.

"Certainly not after the ordeal Kris has had."

"More wine, Kris?" Lavinia rose from her chair and moved around the food-laden table to fill Kris's glass. Her luxuriant golden hair was caught into a plait which swayed as she moved, plunging down the back of her emerald green dress to the waistline. Hal could barely resist a smirk at the thieves who seemed to transform into round-eyed puppies the moment Lavinia uttered a word, openly fawning upon her and raising their goblets with an attitude of coy deference.

The door swung open and Hal's father strode in, now bathed and bandaged.

"Ah, Franc. Better? Have a seat." Marc was once again revelling in his role as gracious host, having recovered from the initial shock of receiving unexpected guests the previous night.

"Much better, thank you, Marc." Franc winced a little as he lowered himself into a chair. "A few tender ribs, that's all. Your doctor tells me she's seen worse."

"I believe she's had her fair share of experience," Marc returned with a sly glance in Hal's direction. She bit her lip and decided against rising to the bait.

Franc surveyed the spread before him with a wide smile. "Roast pheasant, venison, smoked cheese...don't tell me that this is how you dine every evening, Marc!"

"Well, when I have such illustrious guests..." The senator gave a modest little shrug.

"Don't lie, Marc. You'd have the imperial forests cleared of game if it were to find its way onto your table," Lavinia protested.

"Lavinia, my dear, our guests will believe I've become an irredeemable glutton since our marriage." He leant towards Franc and dropped his voice to a stage whisper. "Hold onto your freedom, my friend. One never appreciates its true value until one has married."

Lavinia grimaced and then planted a light cuff on the back of his head. "Ow!" He ducked, too late. "You see, Franc? You see how she treats me?"

"Sure it was nothing you didn't deserve, Marc," Franc replied, lowering a filet of picked herring into his mouth. Marc sighed. "You have no idea of my suffering. None of you."

Hal turned as the door was tentatively pushed ajar once again and this time Meracad stepped into the room, wearing a black brocade dress which Lavinia had provided. It was appropriate, Marc had pointed out, that she be seen in mourning for her father, even if the display of grief were not entirely heartfelt. Her face was still pale and pinched, and she had dark shadows beneath her eyes, indicating that she was far from recovered. Hal rose, troubled by Meracad's distress, and wrapped her arms around her, holding her tight as she felt the girl tremble slightly. It were almost as if Léac's ghost had taken his place at the table; the room descended into silence.

Meracad disentangled herself from Hal's embrace and eased herself into a chair.

"Here, lass. You'll need this." Franc filled her glass with wine, and she put it to her lips, her hands giving a few erratic little twitches.

"Can you eat something?" Hal sat down beside her and indicated the feast laid out before them.

"No, not yet, Hal." She put down her glass and stared in despondence at her empty plate. "My stomach won't quite allow it."

"But you've not had anything in over a day!"

"Hal!" Franc shot her a warning glance. "She'll eat when she's ready to."

Hal sat back and gazed at Meracad with anxious eyes, her fingers drumming a restless rhythm on the arm of her chair.

"Look, I'll be alright. Believe me. It's just, well, it's not every day that your home gets burned to the ground along with all...with all those inside."

"There was no other way," Hal muttered half to herself. "He would have killed us all!"

"Only a Hannac would say such a thing." Marc shook his head in mock despair at Hal. "From what I understand, Hal, it was your impromptu rescue mission which caused all these problems in the first place!"

"He had Kris!" She protested, her voice rising.

"And that was the only possible course of action?" Marc's voice had acquired an edge of sarcasm. "You couldn't have consulted me first? I flatter myself that I do have a degree of influence in this city, you know. I could have made inquiries, pulled a few strings..."

"By which time, Kris would be dead!"

"So I suppose you consider the murder of one of the richest men in Colvé, followed by an unprecedented act of arson to be all in a night's work?"

"Stop! Please stop!" Meracad slammed her palm down on the table, causing the cutlery to jump. They all turned to her in surprise.

"I would be the first to wish that things had happened differently last night. I won't pretend that I loved my father, but... I would not have wished such a death on anyone."

"I'm sorry, lass." Franc reached across the table and held her hand for a moment. "That was my fault."

"You had your reasons for acting as you did, just as Hal had hers." She looked across at Marc. "I gave Franc evidence of my father's crimes. He was to pass it onto you as security for our lives. But when he read the documents, he realised just how dangerous Léac was, and he came to get us out instead."

"I see." Marc registered the news with a shudder. "And this information is still in your hands, Franc?"

"Aye, I have the box upstairs. I will fetch it." He rose from his seat, but Marc held him back.

"No, that's not necessary. I've heard enough rumours over the years to be able to imagine what it contains. And unless you want to run the risk of your own good name becoming blackened by your father's reputation, I suggest you destroy those documents, Meracad."

To Hal's surprise, Meracad shook her head. "What, and live with my conscience?" The slightest hint of a smile played on her lips.

Marc was incredulous. "Don't tell me you've spent so long in the North that you too are developing a dangerous inclination towards the heroic? Meracad, whatever your father's crimes were, they are not yours. And why should you suffer for them?"

"Because now I have his will. And if I take it up I will be laying claim to stolen property."

Hal noticed Jools stiffen on hearing that. "Well you seemed fairly keen on persuadin' him to rewrite it. We could'a got out sooner if it weren't for that!"

Meracad picked up her spoon and balanced it end up on the table, twirling it around for a few moments as she seemed to be weighing up her response. "I wanted revenge," she said at last. "There was no question of touching my father's heart. He didn't have one. The only place that would truly hurt him was in his wallet. I took matters out of his hands, and more importantly, out of Nérac's, who believes himself entitled to all Léac's wealth and property."

"What a politician you would make." Lavinia smiled in undisguised admiration at Meracad's chain of thought.

"I was just attempting to right a few wrongs, Lady Lavinia. Which is not, I believe, something that politicians are particularly famed for."

Marc shifted awkwardly on hearing that. "You're going to have to make up your mind, young lady. The most sensible course of action would be to burn those documents, make good your claim to Léac's property and get out of Colvé as fast as is humanly possible before any of you are implicated in his death."

Meracad displayed a wry little smile at that. "Perhaps you're right, Senator. Perhaps I have spent so long in the North that my priorities have become a little skewed. You see, I had a very different plan for that will: and I must ask you to be my executor."

"Oh God!" Marc turned slightly grey in pallor. "Pour me some wine, Vin. For some reason I feel I'm about to need it."

Hal was relieved that Meracad seemed to be recovering some of her self-assurance. She had seemed so frail after the destruction of her father's house: almost broken. And yet here she now was, taking Marc on at his own game: outmanoeuvring the famed political tactician himself.

"I would like you to locate the families of those my father wronged, and pass onto them a share in my inheritance. He had investments, warehouses, estates across the empire. There will be enough to go round."

Marc let out a groan and sank his head into his hands, allowing Lavinia to put a consolatory arm around his shoulders.

"Are you certain you want to do this?" Hal searched Meracad's face anxiously.

"My home is Hannac now. I have no need of any other."

Unable to resist the swell of joy with which her heart greeted Meracad's words, Hal flung her arms around the girl's neck, planting a forceful kiss upon her lips.

"Hal, we *are* in company!" Meracad laughed for the first time that evening and pushed her away. Hal sat back in her chair, red-faced and avoided her friends' amused looks.

Meracad cleared her throat and smoothed down her dress before continuing. "So, in view of what I was just saying, Senator, I would like to make just one personal bequest." She turned to the thieves. "You two have been on the streets for far too long, it seems to me. And the longer you stay on them, the more chance you have of getting yourselves - and Hal, it appears - into trouble."

"Hear, hear." Franc cast Hal a meaningful glance.

Kris bristled at that. "We've looked after ourselves this long, ain't we Jools? Thank you, Meracad, but we don't need no 'elp."

Meracad opened her mouth to speak but Franc cut in. "So you ladies wouldn't be interested in setting up in the import-export business?"

"Eh?" Jools stared slack jawed across the table at him.

"Well, the lass here says her father had several warehouses. And I've long thought of keeping Colvé stocked with northern corn. Particularly as Nérac has now lost his sole importer in the city. I can send my man, Degardé down from Dal Reniac to show you the ropes. You'd be earning yourselves a healthy living - as two of the richest women in town."

The belligerence seemed to fade from Kris's eyes. Jools touched her arm gently. "Well, lover. What do you say? I must admit these winter nights seem to get longer. And I know you always dreamed of settlin' down if it were ever possible. We've been runnin' all our lives, girl. P'raps it's time to leave off."

Kris looked from Meracad to Franc and then back to Meracad again. "Is it possible, what he says? You'd give us our own place?"

"Of course. And enough money to get you set up."

Kris's face lit up suddenly. "Well...I mean of course a bit of capital wouldn't 'urt, would it Jools? Just to put us on our feets, like."

"Feet, Kris. Not feets. If we're going to be business women, we'd best start talking like them."

She sat up straight in her chair, plumped out her chest and clutched her collar between fingers and thumbs, in a gesture of mock pride.

Marc sighed. "Well, I can see I have little choice, Meracad. No one else will take on the risk of being your executor at the moment - not with the potential threat of Nérac breathing down their neck."

Meracad's lips resolved themselves into a smile. "I won't forget it, Marc. And in doing so, you will be saving more than you realise."

"How so?" He rested his arms upon the table and leaned forward, his curiosity piqued.

"If I were sole inheritor of my father's fortune, Nérac would certainly attempt to restake his claim to it. But if that fortune is divided amongst so many people, it will take him years before he can ever recover it. And with my father's crimes brought to light, I doubt he would even try for fear of being implicated."

Marc sat back in his seat, briefly stunned. "Lavinia was right. I would not wish for an adversary such as yourself in the senate. But you do realise this will infuriate him even further? I would start looking to your fortress's defences, Franc."

Before Franc had an opportunity to reply, the door burst open. Hal leapt to her feet in shock, unnerved after Marc's warning, and picked up the only weapon to hand: a table knife.

"And just what do you think you're going to do with that?" She heard the others' laughter and recognised the gruff tones of the intruder immediately.

"Beric!" Hal dropped the knife and embraced her former trainer, knocking over her chair in the process.

"Steady on, girl. Let me look at you, now." He held her at arms' length and studied her face.

"Aye, I can see that healthy outdoor living suits you. Could do with a haircut, mind."

"I sent for Master Beric while you were all sleeping yesterday," Marc explained.

"Aye, well, I had my suspicions you'd be here anyway after Léac's house burnt down." Without waiting, he picked up Hal's chair from the floor and, squeezing himself into it, grabbed a chicken leg and proceeded to devour it.

"And why would you immediately assume I was to blame?" She asked in a tone of mock menace, leaning on the back of his seat.

"From what I've heard you tend to leave a trail of destruction wherever you go these days," he said at last without turning round.

"You should see what she did to my whorehouse!" Lavinia added.

Hal scowled and then threw herself into an armchair by the fireside. "It's true things got a little out of hand," she admitted.

Franc snorted. "A little out of hand? Is that what you call it?"

Beric shredded the chicken down to its last sinuous slivers, wiped the grease from his hands onto his trouser legs and then offered a hand to Franc. "If she ever gives you too much trouble, Sir, you can always send her back down here. Put quite a hole in my budget, Hal, your disappearance - even if it does pain me to say so."

"Ha! I knew it." Hal's face shone with self-satisfaction. "Didn't I always say you'd be lost without me, Beric?"

The old trainer cast her a withering look. "I didn't say you were irreplaceable. I just suggested you brought in the shillings. And from the way you've been carrying on, it wouldn't surprise me if you burnt the academy to the ground the minute you returned."

She scowled again and slumped back into the chair, her arms crossed. Beric turned his attention to Meracad, his expression softening. "You've got your hands full too, lass. I'm sorry for your loss. Although I can't pretend to have thought well of your father. He took a dear friend from me once."

Meracad's face clouded. "He was the cause of much misery in this city, Master Beric. I am not ignorant of that."

"Aye, it wasn't your fault, girl." He put a bear-sized paw out and placed it on her shoulder and then gave a gruff little cough, evidently embarrassed by his own show of emotion. "And from what I've heard, you've all done your fair share of inviting trouble. And it will be bringing itself to your door soon enough, I expect." He turned to Franc again. "If Lord Nérac chooses to take out his vengeance on Hannac, I want you to know that you can count on my help."

Franc's eyes widened in surprise. "Ah, we couldn't expect so much from you, Sir. If Nérac does make the decision to attack..."

"You mean *when* Nérac attacks Hannac," Marc interrupted.

Franc sighed. "Alright. When that happens....I can't guarantee the safety of anyone inside it."

Beric pushed his plate away, poured himself a huge glass of wine and swigged it back in one gulp. "I'm getting old, my friends," he said at last. "Hal has been telling me that for years, although I never really listened to her. I was a soldier in my youth, and a good one at that. Now I'm just another man of business, squeezing coins out of penniless citizens. I'd rather finish with a good honest sword stuck through my chest than die alone in my bed, wheezing, gout-ridden and flatulent."

"Well a sword is as good a cure for flatulence and gout as any I've heard," Hal muttered from her place in the corner of the room. "Oh come on, Beric. You're hardly in your dotage."

"Ah, lass, you were ever the optimist. And I must admit I'd rather cheat death a little longer if I can do so. But just remember my words, Master Franc."

"I appreciate it Beric. And if the time comes, I'll send word."

As the evening progressed and the drinking and banter picked up in pace, their spirits seemed to lighten. The thieves, now full of plans for a life off the streets, chattered excitedly with Franc. Hal was relieved that he was offering to help her Riverside friends. She had sensed his disapproval of them long before she knew him to be her father.

Lavinia and Marc, the very model of marital bliss, sat entwined in one another's arms. Hal smiled across the room at her own lover, who seemed to be making a gradual recovery, and she coaxed Meracad into laughter by goading Beric, until he took aim at her with an apple, hitting her square on the arm.

"Ow! Your aim's as bad as ever, Beric!"

"Well there was no point in aiming for your head, Hal. You probably wouldn't have felt it!"

They all laughed at that and she suppressed a grin as she leaned back in her chair and gazed sleepily into the fire. Her imagination seemed to conjure up strange shapes and forms amongst the scarlets and ambers of the grate. A building rose before her, its walls ravaged by heat and flame. A log gave a sudden pop, and she shuddered. It had not been Léac's house that she had witnessed disintegrating in the hearth. It had been Hannac.

"Do you think Marc wanted to impress us?"

Meracad was admiring the magnificent wall-hangings and ancestral portraits that decorated the walls of their bedroom. Before her hung an oversized painting of a long-deceased Remigius sat astride a horse, dressed in a faintly ridiculous hunting outfit.

"He doesn't even give it a second thought." Hal was standing behind her. She wrapped her arms around Meracad's waist. "He just appreciates the finer things in life. As do I."

Closing her eyes, Meracad leaned back against Hal, who rested her chin upon the girl's shoulder, her words trickling like syrup into Meracad's ear. Her body seemed to have acquired the qualities of a reed, resonating to the slight, explorative touch of Hal's fingers.

"That dress really doesn't suit you, you know." The duellist kissed her neck just below the earlobe before planting a playful little bite on Meracad's wine-warmed skin.

"Lavinia says it does."

"She's a terrible liar."

She felt Hal unfasten the buttons which led, one after another from her neckline down to her waist. The dress fell in a soft, crumpled heap on the floor.

"And I never did care for shifts, either." Again, Meracad arched her back in pleasure and raised her arms obligingly as she felt the flimsy material lifted over her head. In spite of the comfortable warmth of the room, goose bumps raised along her limbs. Hal's bandaged hand scratched her skin ever so slightly as she traced her fingers over breasts, ribs and down to her stomach, where she suddenly stopped, cupping her hands around the swelling plumpness of Meracad's abdomen.

"Can we?..." Her voice trailed away.

Meracad gave a throaty laugh and twisted round in Hal's arms, kissing her squarely on the lips.

"You idiot, Hannac. Take me to bed."

Hal grinned, apparently embarrassed, and taking hold of her hand led her to the grand four poster bed positioned in the very centre of the room. Still fully-clothed, she sat down beside Meracad amongst linen sheets and velvet coverlets. Their kisses were light to begin with, speculative even, but soon acquired a passionate intensity. Meracad allowed herself to be gently pressed down down amongst the hot luxuriance of the bed clothes, and closed her eyes as Hal's lips brushed across her naked throat, along the furrow between her breasts and over the curve of her abdomen. With a faint rustle of material, Hal crawled backwards off the bed, slithering down onto the floor, and Meracad sensed the duellist kneeling before her.

"Don't stop, Hal, or I'll scream the place down!"

With a brief laugh, Hal slid her hands between Meracad's legs, parting them as she placed kisses and light, teasing nips on the sensitive flesh of the girl's inner thighs. And then Meracad released herself to the moment, her entire body bucking as she reached the point of climax, biting down upon her own fingers to avoid yelling out into the darkness of the night. She collapsed, exhausted and fulfilled, unable to speak as Hal clawed her way back onto the bed and lay beside her, wrapping her arms around her and pulling her close. They kissed, this time with a depth of emotion which threatened to overwhelm Meracad for a second time.

"I have to visit someone tomorrow morning." She heard Hal whisper in the dark and wondered if she were already dreaming. "Don't worry if I'm not here when you wake up. I'll be back before breakfast."

Meracad opened her eyes and raised herself onto an elbow, looking down at her lover. "Where are you going? Let me come with you."

Hal groaned and turned over onto her back. "It's for the best if you don't, believe me. Don't worry! It's nothing dangerous, I promise."

"This whole city is dangerous, Hal. You said you wouldn't leave me again."

"And I won't. But this is something I must do alone. I'll explain later." She rolled over onto her side again and smoothed down Meracad's hair. "I love you, Meracad. Just trust me, please. For once!"

Meracad shook her head, the possibility of Hal's absence in the morning already making her fearful.

"Do you have any idea how difficult it is to trust you, Hal?"

"I know! I'm sorry. It's hard enough for me to trust myself sometimes. But please, allow me this. I'll be gone and back again before the city is even awake. You will understand later."

Meracad sighed and climbed beneath the heavy throws and covers on the bed. "Alright. Do what you have to. But if you're not back by breakfast, I'll be sending out a search party."

Hal grinned, stripped off her shirt and trousers and clambered in beside Meracad, enfolding her in her arms once again. "You're as bad as Marc. You know, somehow I don't feel so tired anymore."

Once again, Meracad felt her warm skin begin to tingle as Hal ran her hands across the length of her body. She smiled as she gave into the slow, sensual rhythm of their love-making once again.

Chapter Eleven

Old Debts

It was still dark when Hal woke that morning. After a furtive hunt around the bedroom for her clothes she got dressed and then padded over to Meracad who was still sleeping and planted a light kiss on her forehead. Meracad moaned and Hal retreated into the shadows, afraid that she had wakened her, but the girl rolled over onto one side, her hair half-covering her face in a tangled web, and went back to sleep.

Hal grabbed her hat and greatcoat from a chair and sneaked out into the corridor, pulling them on as she tiptoed down the stairs. She stopped for a moment and held her breath, convinced that a floorboard had just creaked above her. No further sound ensued. Lack of sleep had left her on edge, she decided.

She had been unable to relax after their lovemaking. Awakened and restless, her mind had flitted inconstantly between the destruction of Léac's house and the prospect of what the morning would bring. Rubbing at sore eyes, she let out a sharp little exhalation of breath. The house was sleeping. She carried on.

Knowing better than to risk the main doors, Hal continued downwards towards the kitchen, her nose following the enticing scent of baking bread. She stood on the threshold for a few moments, observing the busy figure of Lira, Marc's maid, as she bustled about preparing trays of cold meat and cheese for breakfast.

She realised that it would be impossible to elude Lira's watchful gaze. The girl was brisk, sharp and brooked no nonsense - as Hal had discovered to her cost during her period of convalescence in Marc's house the previous summer. And so as Lira reached into a cupboard to pull out a plate of sweet pastries, Hal sallied across the room, grabbed a croissant and headed for the door.

"Oy! Give that back!" The maid slammed down the plate and tugged the cake from out of Hal's hands before she could take a bite. "That's for the breakfast table. And where do you think you're going at such an hour?" She put down the plate and stood, hands on hips, glaring at the duellist.

"Just taking a walk, Lira." She shrugged her shoulders and flashed what she hoped resembled a naive grin.

"Just taking a walk my arse!" Lira turned her attention back to the table, garnishing a tray of cheese as she spoke. "I shall have to tell Master Marc."

"Now, Lira, we both know how Marc feels about being woken early. And we both know you're not going to say anything to him for that reason." She moved over to the table, slipped an arm around Lira's waist and gave her a light peck on the cheek, seizing a slice of cheese from the tray and stuffing it into her mouth.

"In that case I'll have to let on to Miss Meracad that you were flirting with me. And we'll see what she thinks about that!"

Hal smirked and headed once again for the door. "Just our little secret, eh, Lira?" She winked and was on the street in time to hear Lira let out a colourful array of expletives.

The smile faded from her lips as soon as she was outside. Burying her hands in her pockets, she turned to her left and trudged through the snow in the direction of Riverside. The wind had picked up once again, flinging ice and rime into her face and eyes. She lowered her head against the onslaught, occasionally glancing upwards to check her bearings, dimly aware of the dawn's approach as the skies paled in colour. Convinced that she could hear snow crunching beneath feet behind her, she stopped once or twice to scan the street but no one was there. The prospect of what lay before her must have set her on edge.

She turned off the main road and took a circuitous route along a maze of backstreets. Dwellings and shops became progressively plainer, poorer, in need of repair, some with gaping holes in their roofs or cracked windows allowing the winter to encroach upon their defenceless inhabitants. And finally, it was before her. The debtors' prison: austere and forbidding, a reminder of those whom the city would have preferred forgotten. Somewhere inside that building with its thick stone walls and barred windows was her mother: Lady Cara Thæc.

The guard on the main door was a man who gave the impression of not being entirely satisfied with his job.

"And what would you be wanting at this time in the morning?" he growled: a grizzled, world-weary face stuck on a pair of hunched shoulders.

"I'm here to see Cara Thæc."

"Cara Thæc is it?" He scratched at the stubble on his right cheek. "Wait a minute!" He peered at her closely and then leant back in his seat, stroking his chin. "Well, well, well. If it ain't the errant daughter. And I'd be a fool not to inform the authorities now wouldn't I, what with Lord Nérac all restless over the loss of his wife and Léac's house just burned to the ground and *you*..." he jabbed a bony finger into her chest "and *you* just happenin' to be in the area at the time."

"Yes. You would," she said to his surprise. "But you'd be an even bigger fool not to take this." She fished a handful of coins from her pocket. "A month's wages there at least, I'd say. Providing..." he reached forward for the money but she snatched her hand away. "Providing, of course, that you never saw me."

"Well...I'd say in the dark, one washed-up aristo can look like any other." She nodded and passed him the money. "But just make sure you're quick in there. I can't account for my colleagues being so...understanding, like."

"Of course. The consideration for my personal safety is much appreciated."

He did not reply but slid down from his perch and proceeded to pull back a series of bolts before opening at least three locks with a bunch of keys which were nearly the size of his head. She stepped through into the main body of the prison.

Once inside, she discovered that the ground was littered with the sleeping bodies of prisoners, many of whom clung together in an attempt to stave off the cold. No cells were allotted for the inmates of Colvé's debtors' prison or "reform" as it was optimistically termed. Instead men, women and - she was appalled to note - children lived, ate and laboured together in a futile bid to pay off their debts. Scant light filtered through a few tiny windows high above the sleepers and the atmosphere was heavy and putrid. She gagged as she crossed the room, aware of the fetid stench which rose up from the rushes on the floor. Who would not escape disease in such a place?

And how would she ever find Cara? Hal picked a precarious course amongst the prisoners, tripping over outstretched legs and arms, provoking a few curses and groans until she had found herself at the opposite end of the room. Faces were covered with worn, half-shredded blankets, rags clutched tight to shivering bodies. The courtier was just one amongst the hundreds of human tragedies lying sprawled at her feet.

"So you've come, have you?" Cara's voice rang out from somewhere in the shadows. A few prisoners moaned in protest at the disturbance to their precious hours of oblivion. Hal froze for a moment, the courtier's high-pitched, nasal tones invoking a response she had long hoped buried; a genuine fear which started in the pit of her stomach and spread throughout her entire body until it paralysed her.

"Where are you, Cara?" She strained her eyes, peering through the grainy light of the prison until she had picked out the figure of a woman leaning against the wall with crossed arms. Cara must have been watching her from the moment she came in.

Her mother was barely recognisable in her grey prison smock, her hair loose about her shoulders. Still unable to make out her Cara's face in the semi-darkness, Hal threaded her way back across the hall until she was finally standing opposite her. The courtier continued to stare at her defiantly, her head held high, her lips thin and tight. They stood gazing at each other for a moment in silence. Stripped of her mask of makeup, Cara now seemed frail and old with her pallor-less cheeks and line-creased brow. The dirt of the prison had become etched, ingrained into her skin; her fingernails were black, her hair thin and greasy.

"And have you seen what you came to see? Are you satisfied?" It was Cara who broke the impasse.

"I'm sorry to find you like this."

"Oh don't lie, girl!" Her mother's voice was a hiss. "It was you who put me here. You and your merciless friends - Remigius and his whore of a wife. And that sly little slut Inæc."

Hal remained silent for a few moments. She had expected to find Cara broken, chastened, changed in some way. Yet the experience of public humiliation, bankruptcy and imprisonment seemed to have hardened her resentment of the world around her. Hal sensed the same restless fury in her mother's voice.

"Still so much hatred after all this time, Cara?"

"Hatred?" Cara sounded incredulous. "I suppose I should be grateful to find myself in this filthy, disease ridden hole when I should be ending my days in the court apartments to which I am entitled."

Hal took a step forward and it gave her a strange, awkward satisfaction to witness her mother flinch. "It was your own weakness that brought you down, Cara. You can't blame that on anyone but yourself. For years you scorned me in public because of the women I loved, the company I kept, the duels I fought. But you couldn't wait a moment to get Asha Inæc into your bed."

Cara let out a low hiss and turned her back on Hal.

"You're a hypocrite, Cara. A liar, and a hypocrite." She had raised her voice, eliciting a few howls of complaint from the stirring prisoners.

"Idiot!" Cara span round again to face Hal, her fists and teeth clenched. "After all this time and you don't realise one simple fact. It's not what you do in this city that matters. It's what you are *seen* to do that counts. If you'd had the decency to keep your dalliances a secret, I may perhaps have been more lenient. If you'd dressed as a courtier, never picked up a sword, or at least hidden away from public view, perhaps I might have forgiven you."

"Forgiven me? What would I want your forgiveness for? Don't fool yourself, Cara." A lifetime of repressed anger was threatening to unleash itself and Hal was fighting hard against the urge to seize Cara by the throat and shake her. "We both know what you saw in me. You saw Franc Hannac."

To her shock and disgust, Cara hawked and spat onto the straw on the floor. Any pretence at courtly manners had vanished; it were as if all those animal instincts which had been hidden for years behind a veneer of good breeding had finally broken free.

"I suppose it was he who sent you here to satisfy himself of my downfall!"

"I came of my own free will."

"But no doubt you'll tell him what you've seen. And the two of you will have a tale to dine out on for the years to come!" She reached out with dirty, long-nailed fingers and clutched Hal's arm. "Isn't that right, Halanya? You'll both have a good long laugh at my expense!"

"No!" Hal shook her off and backed away. "He doesn't even know that I'm here. In fact, I came to offer you help, Cara. I have money enough to pay your debts. My old house in Riverside is still empty...." She broke off on hearing Cara's disdainful laughter.

"I don't need your help. I do have some pride left after all. I'll not take money from the Hannacs."

"You were happy enough to blackmail it out of Franc in the past."

"That was different. It was my entitlement for having to bear his nasty little secret." Hal winced as if Cara had just struck her. Cara's lips curled upwards into a smile upon registering the pain implicit in her daughter's reaction. "Tell me, Hal," she continued, rubbing salt into the wound, "does he still moon after that Ilenga woman?"

"What?" Hal stared at her in amazement.

"Oh, he never told you? He loved her, you see. And she loved him, I suppose. Their parents well, you know these provincial aristocrats - forever jealous of their few square miles of turf - they tried to keep them apart. But it was an open secret at court that the two pined for each other. Marta's mother was only too pleased, I believe, that I stepped in and put an end to their little tryst."

Hal's jaw dropped open. For a few moments she stared in abject horror at her mother, attempting to control the violent shaking of her hands. Cara saw it and laughed again.

"And is that why you made Franc believe you loved him, Cara? Just to stand in the way of two people you barely even knew?"

Cara shrugged. "Of course not," she snapped. "He had money and I didn't. It was as simple as that. He was too stupid to see what I was doing, that was all. He deserved everything he got."

Once again, Hal felt an almost murderous impulse charge through her veins and she realised that the longer she talked to Cara, the greater the risk that she might act upon it.

"Do it if you like!" It was as if Cara Thæc could read her thoughts. "You can still swing for murdering a prisoner, Halanya. And revenge from beyond the grave is still revenge."

Hal's appetite for violence left her and was replaced with a feverish wave of nausea. She forced herself to look at her mother for what she knew would be the last time. "I hope they leave you to rot, Cara," she said quietly, and turned on her heel as the courtier let out a high-pitched, vicious laugh. The prisoners had all woken now and many glared at her in unconcealed anger as she stepped over them and headed back out of the prison hall and up the stairs. Above her the guard waited, slouched against the door and grinning, entertained by the drama that had just played itself out before him.

"You were an accident!" Cara's piercing voice suddenly echoed around the stone walls, hitting Hal like a knife between the shoulder blades. "You were never anything but an accident!"

Hal did not turn round, but closed her eyes and fought against the urge to race back across the room, hurl Cara to the floor, place her hands around her mother's throat and throttle her

until she could no longer utter another spiteful word. She put a hand inside her pocket and jangled the purse of money which had been intended for Cara's release.

"Here." She opened her eyes, ignoring the guard's intrusive gaze, and pulled out the pouch. "Have a few drinks on me." She slapped it into his hand. His expression transformed itself into delight upon receiving what amounted to a small fortune. "Thank you, Miss." His tone was now cloying and servile. "The generosity of the Hannacs is..."

"Just let me out," she whispered.

"Of course." He pulled back the bolts and bars and swung open the door. She stumbled outside into the cold morning air, into the tepid rising light of the pale winter sun and sank down onto her knees. Unable to restrain the heaving in her guts, she retched violently, the contents of her stomach splattering across the icy ground.

When the vomiting had subsided, Hal remained kneeling for several minutes, the legs of her trousers soaking through with melted snow as she inhaled great gulps of frosty air. At last, gripping hold of the wall for support, she pulled herself upright and scanned the street. Still too early for many people to be about. No one to see her in such a state. She dry-washed her face and attempted to pull herself together.

"You had to go, didn't you?"

"What?" Still nauseous, still trembling with shock, she screwed up her eyes against the low sunlight. Franc had emerged from around the side of the prison. She groaned and leant back against the wall, unwilling to look at him.

"You followed me?"

"Aye. I heard you leave and thought it a tad early in the morning for a stroll."

He handed her a hip flask and she took a grateful swig, gasping as the hot, potent spirit slithered down her throat. Franc surveyed her critically and then took the flask from her and knocked it back himself.

"When I saw where you were headed I decided against joining you. I didn't relish the prospect of a family reunion."

"Oh you would have loved it, Franc. Father, mother and estranged child together at long last."

With a rueful smile he shook his head and offered her his arm. Still uncertain of her legs, she leaned on him for a moment, and he drew her back in the direction of Marc's house.

"I'm alright," she said after a while, embarrassed at her own weakness. She let go of his arm and he cast her a grave look.

"Did you think she would change, Hal?" She balked at his question, reluctant to give vent to feelings which, she was well aware might overpower her.

"Well?"

"Well, Franc, strangely enough, I did think the experience of imprisonment might have had some effect on her."

An intense grief entered his eyes, and she regretted her sarcasm.

"Ah, Hal, you should have known better."

They carried on again in silence, Hal doing battle with the turbulence of her emotions until she could bear it no longer.

"Why, Franc?" She blurted out at last. "Why Cara. Why not Marta?"

He stared at her, his face strained, the sinews at the edges of his jaw line twitching.

"She told you?" He asked at last. His voice was thick and gravelly.

"She knew that you loved Marta, and you let her break you apart."

"Oh lass you were always the one to see things so simply. It's true that I loved Marta, but her parents were set against it and she played the obedient child so well, I assumed there was no chance."

He drew a hand down across his face and she could see that he was fighting against tears. He put the hip flask to his lips once again before offering it to her. She shook her head.

"I was desperate, Hal. I thought that I could provoke Marta, make her jealous enough to love me...God knows what I thought. I was young...we both were."

"It's not too late, Franc."

"I know. And that night you left for Colvé, she told me what I had most wanted to hear twenty years ago."

"So what keeps you, Franc?"

He scratched his chin and head and as he looked away from her, she caught the fleeting trace of an embarrassed grin. Lurking somewhere beneath the defensive layers of irony and reserve were the remnants of a sensitive younger man. Hal saw that now with such clarity.

"Tell her," she urged.

"You think I should?" He seemed almost sheepish, and she allowed herself a sly little laugh at his expense.

"Come on, Franc. Marc will be tearing the place apart looking for us."

He grinned like a lunatic and threw his arm around her shoulder, almost knocking her over.

"Ay, well - we wouldn't want the old devil worrying about us now, would we?" he asked, breaking into an energetic stride in the direction of their friend's home. She watched him go for a moment and then, convinced that her stomach was not about to release any more unpleasant surprises, ran after him to catch him up.

As Hal had predicted, Marc was frantic and Lavinia was having a difficult job calming him down.

"Where have the pair of you been?" He fumed, witnessing their attempt to sneak past him

through the entrance hall. He rolled his eyes as Franc did his best to suppress a smile and a puddle of melted snow accumulated round Hal's wet boots and soaked into the carpet. "The city is crawling with guards following your impromptu bonfire, the word on the street is that the Hannac carriage was seen close to the event itself, and you two choose to take an early morning walk!"

"Now, Marc, I don't think we need to over-dramatise the situation." Franc's placatory tone only served to infuriate the senator further.

"Over-dramatise the situation? Over-dramatise? My entire life seems to revolve around limiting the damage caused by the Hannacs and you accuse me of exaggeration?"

"I think you may have just proved Franc's point, Marc," Hal protested. "Look, we'll be out of your way very soon, I promise."

"Not that I don't appreciate your company, Hal, but I think that may be for the best," Marc sniffed moodily. "Some imperial guards paid me a visit this morning and they seemed very interested in the fact that your carriage is parked in my courtyard. Of course, I told them that you were all with me on the night of Léac's death, but under the circumstances, I suggest you get out as soon as you can - via the Eastern Gate. You'll attract less attention that way."

Franc gave a sober nod. "I appreciate your help, Marc."

"Yes, well..." Marc seemed to have relaxed a little. "You'll stay for breakfast?" Hal felt a slight wooziness in her belly, but her father clapped her on the shoulder. "Of course!"

"I was worried too, Hal." Meracad had joined them now, her eyes troubled as she surveyed Hal's bedraggled form.

"I'm sorry." Hal embraced her, almost succumbing to exhaustion in her arms.

"You seem to be saying that a lot recently. Oh God, Hal where have you been?" Meracad wrinkled her nose as she inhaled the stench of the prison on Hal's coat.

"Just some family business," Hal offered by way of excuse. Meracad cast a puzzled look at Franc but he shook his head.

"Well," Meracad said, returning her attention to Hal, "I think you'd better take a bath before we leave. I'm certainly not spending two days sat in a carriage with you in that condition."

Having bathed and acquired some fresh dry clothes courtesy of Marc, Hal made her way down to breakfast. The rest of them had already finished, but she didn't relish the prospect of eating anyway, and forced down some bread and tea. Then, the carriage packed and waiting, they gathered in the courtyard to say their goodbyes.

"Thank you, Hal." Kris threw her arms around Hal's neck. "I owe you girl."

"Me too," said Jools. "For a stinkin' aristo, you turned out alright."

Hal laughed and they embraced. "And what will the pair of you do now?" She asked them.

"Well, the Senator and Lavinia have been good enough to offer us their 'ouse while we find accommodation more suitin' to our status as women of import," Kris explained.

Hal grinned. "Look to your silver, Marc."

"'ere! None of that. We're respectable now, ain't we Kris!"

"'course we are, Jools. 'Owever could you say such a thing, Hal?"

Smiling, Hal turned to Marc. "Goodbye old friend. Of all the people to whom I am indebted, it is to you that I owe the most."

"Waxing lyrical, Hal?" Marc raised an eyebrow. "That's rather unlike you."

"Hal's become quite the philosopher since she left Colvé," Meracad joked.

"Really?" Marc's eyebrow crept even higher. "I hadn't noticed."

Lavinia took a step forward. "Take care all of you." She embraced them in turn. "And I promise to take care of him." She smiled, casting a sly glance in Marc's direction.

"Ah, you're doing a grand job, Lavinia. Come on, girls." Franc herded Meracad and Hal towards the carriage. "We'd best be gone."

They climbed inside, the driver slammed the door shut behind them, and then the vehicle trundled its way across the courtyard and out onto the streets. The city had now wakened and their passage was hampered by the throngs of passers-by, adding to their anxiety as they approached the Eastern Gate. It seemed that Marc had been right about his influence, however, for the guards waved them through without comment, having evidently received a hefty bribe for their troubles.

And then they were out at last and the carriage picked up pace as it skirted the city walls before passing into open countryside and heading towards the moors. Franc contented himself with the remainder of his hipflask, while Hal, exhausted through lack of sleep and memories of her earlier encounter with Cara, rested her head on Meracad's shoulder and fell asleep, not waking until they had reached the shores of Brennac.

Chapter Twelve

Hawks and Hares

Bruno Nérac lay sprawled across his wife's bed, still dressed in the clothes he had worn on the morning's hunt. He let out a low groan and then, rolling over onto his chest, he buried his face amongst the pillows, inhaling deeply. Was it possible that after all this time her scent still remained on the linen? It were as if she had somehow impressed her essence upon the room and for that reason he had refused to change a detail since that day...that abysmal day that she had run out of it with the Hannac whore. Meracad would be back soon. He would make sure of that. And this would be a sign of his forgiveness. Everything in its place, and life would continue as it had done.

Nérac turned over onto his back again and sat on the end of the bed, his face buried in the palms of his hands. At first he had wanted to kill her - he had dreamed of snapping her neck between his fingers like a brittle twig or reed. But the days had passed, the nights too, and with each successive hour a greater yearning for her had swamped his heart. Her neck was too precious to break, he realised; her body too perfect. A body which now carried the future of Dal Reniac: his child. A shiver ran down his spine as he remembered how she had resisted him, how she had struggled beneath him. And she would do so again.

You'll marry, Bruno, one day. For the sake of the family. But don't make the mistake of thinking that you love her. A woman will take advantage of such weakness. Don't marry for love. Marry for Dal Reniac. I'm the only one who'll love you. Remember that.

His mother's words. How right she had been. Nérac had told himself that his marriage was a mere business arrangement, that as a merchant's daughter Meracad would feel indebted to him for raising her so far above her status. She would play the role of devoted wife and mother and submit to his demands without hesitation. It was only after she had left that he had begun to feel the unravelling of the fabric of his heart. And that frightened him more than anything else could do. His mother's words tormented him night and day: "A woman will take advantage of such weakness."

A knock at the door.

"Go away," he ordered, the bass tones of his voice flat and level.

"It's Letræc, Sir. He says it's urgent."

Nérac sighed and hauled himself upright, opening the door to witness the page's tense, nervous face. "Tell him I'll meet him downstairs."

He knew better than to ignore Letræc. Nérac doubted the Emperor himself could boast of a better spy-master: intelligent, discrete and possessed of an almost brutal efficiency, Letræc

kept Nérac fed with information from across the empire. And Nérac was not blind to the fact that if Letræc considered his efforts to be unappreciated, his allegiances could change very quickly. He bent over for a moment and stared into the mirror above the dressing table. His eyes, framed by shadows, returned that hard, haunted look. His dark curls were tangled and unkempt. He raked his fingers through the stiff, unruly locks, grimacing upon the discovery of a few stray grey hairs. Straightening again, Nérac took a last look about the room before locking the door behind him and heading back down the stairs.

Letræc was waiting for him outside the office in which Nérac conducted his most private of business. In his early fifties, with a lean wiry body, closely cropped hair and beak like nose, Letræc reminded Nérac of one of his hawks. And he knew that the man could strike at his target with the same deadly accuracy.

"So you are back, from Colvé?" Nérac waved his spy into the room; light, cold and austere. Its only furnishing a desk and two wooden chairs at its centre, a simple portrait of Nérac's mother adorning one wall. Nothing more.

"Yes, Sir." Letræc waited for his master to sit down before pulling up a chair opposite.

"And how did you find our business partner? I had expected him to have delivered upon his promise by now. But a month has passed and still no sign of my wife, or the Hannacs. It is almost as if he didn't care." Nérac's smile was chill, brief, vanishing the minute it had touched his face.

"Sir, he doesn't care."

"What?"

"He does not care because he cannot care. He is dead."

Nérac knew that Letræc was now scrutinising his reaction as the words struck home. His mind sank beneath racing waves of thoughts, fears and hopes which plunged and resurfaced until he was almost lost amongst them.

"How did it happen?" He heard his voice utter a question that he did not want answered.

"His house was burned to the ground, Sir. He was inside."

Nérac levelled his gaze at Letræc.

"His house was burned? It was no accident then?"

This time it was Letræc who shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "It is not certain, Sir. But there is a rumour that the Hannac coach was seen near the house on the night of the fire."

"Is there? A rumour, you say?" Nérac sat back with his elbows resting on the arms of the chair. Pressing the tips of his fingers together, he touched them lightly to his lips, taking his time before he spoke.

"My wife will be inconsolable, I am sure," he said at last. "And if this rumour is in fact the truth, it only serves to confirm that she has been led very far out of her depth by the Hannacs."

"Indeed, Sir." Letræc's eyes were troubled. Nérac could sense that there was another level to this story; something which his spymaster had yet to reveal.

"Well, it is tragic news." Nérac leaned forward once again across the table, hoping to coax the information out of Letræc. "And of course if the Hannacs are implicated, it would appear they are set on a course of self-destruction. And if that is the case, who am I to stand in their way? In fact, I have every intention of sending them to hell." He allowed himself the same wan smile again. "But my business partner's demise is, in certain respects what might be called a fruitful loss. The terms of his will and our contract determined so much. Letræc, I will be in need of an executor. What belonged to Salius Léac I now claim for myself. Every single shilling."

Letræc said nothing in reply, apparently formulating his response. Nérac watched him, a cold, chill sense of unease crawling its way up his spine. Yes, there was something else. Something very bad.

"Lord Nérac," Letræc raised his head at last and held his master's gaze. "I am afraid that there will be no need for an executor."

"What?"

"There is no need for an executor," Letræc explained, "because it would appear that Salius Léac rewrote his will on the night of his death. In his daughter's name."

A cold, clammy fever seemed to take control of Nérac's body. It were as if his head had been caught between the jaws of a vice. For a few moments he sat transfixed, barely capable of breathing.

"And who," he asked at last, "is her executor? Where is the proof that what you say is true?"

"Her executor is Senator Marc Remigius."

"Remigius." He repeated the name, turning it over in his mouth as if it were something sour that he might spit out. He had heard much of Remigius: of the man's influence, his expensive tastes and, more recently of course, of his close connection with the Hannacs.

"I'll break them," he growled. "All of them. Even her. I kept her room for her, Letræc!" He slammed the palm of his hand into the desk with such force that it hurt. But at least physical pain would ward off the alternative: tears.

"Sir, I flatter myself that you value my judgement."

Nérac shot back a look of wounded confusion.

Letræc shifted forward in his seat, the better to gain his master's attention. "Sir, if you have valued my judgement in the past then I ask you to do so again. Your fury will consume you and we will lose this fight."

Nérac's eyes acquired a hard, desperate cast. "Tell me what you have in mind, Letræc."

"If you attack Hannac now, you risk losing your child along with your wife. And we cannot tell how the other Eagles' Nests will follow. We may be able to bribe Pæga, but Ilenga will almost certainly side with the Hannacs. Besides, who would wish for a siege in the winter?"

Nérac got to his feet and walked across to the window. Looking out, he realised that Letræc was right. A siege in those conditions while the Hannacs sat warm inside their fortress? He turned to his spymaster. "And so what do you propose?"

"The child is due in the Spring, is that correct?"

Nérac nodded.

"And so we have several months to make good our preparations. And with the child born, even the emperor himself would not deny a father the right to take back his own heir."

Nérac allowed himself a brief moment of optimism. Letræc's reasoning was flawless. And he could wait. If there was a quality Nérac prided himself upon it was his patience. He sat down again, drew in a long, deep breath and then let it out in an explosive rush.

"You are right, Letræc. As always, you are of course right. But just promise me one thing."

"Anything, Sir."

"I want my wife and child alive. And I want the heads of the Hannacs gracing my battlements before the summer. And of that bitch Ilenga too, if she steps in my way. Is that clear, man?"

"As the snow upon that window ledge, Sir."

"Good. I'm glad we understand one another. I want you to plan me a siege, Letræc. A siege we can't possibly lose."

Letræc bobbed his head in compliance. "As you wish, Sir. I may go now?"

"You may. And you will report to me every week upon our preparations. I give you free rein of my men and resources. Do with them as you think best."

With a brief nod, Letræc was gone. Nérac got up again, went over to the window and leaned on the sill, staring out across the courtyard. Yes, he could sit quiet - unlike these northerners with rebellion in their very blood. He could wait, as he had done on that morning's hunt, his hawk hovering upon the wind, waiting for the hare to run. And then there had been a rush of air as the bird swept down from the sky, the screams of the hare, the tearing up of fur and tendons and the snow absorbing the animal's blood before Nérac had taken it from the ground and stuffed it into his hunting sack. Yes. He could wait.

Chapter Thirteen

The Forest and its Memories

She wouldn't come. He had been a fool to believe that she would. Franc surveyed the landscape with a heart as heavy as the sodden branches of the conifers behind him. It was amongst these trees — many of them saplings back then — that he and Marta had played as children, chasing each other through the undergrowth with its ankle-high coating of pine-needles. He seemed to hear her excited laughter as she hid behind a patch of ferns, taunting him as he stumbled his way through the woodland in search of her. And then with a faint rustle of leaves and branches, she would spring up from her hiding place behind him and blindfold him with her hands. "I caught you!"

Franc allowed himself a smile at the memories he shared with the forest. He bent down and patted his horse's head. The animal had begun to make impatient stamps at the slushy path, jerking its head around and snorting out vaporous little clouds through its nostrils. Icy drops of melted snow dripped from the broad brim of Franc's hat and he gave an involuntary shiver.

"Alright, fella. I'll not be keeping you out here any longer."

He reached for the reins and then froze. A long keen sliver of polished steel was hovering just beneath his left ear. Gripping the flanks of the horse with his knees to keep from falling, Franc raised his hands just above his head.

"I've nothing of value on me." He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the path ahead, attempting to ignore the pounding of his own heart against his ribcage.

"I caught you!" The sword was removed and, letting out a long shaky breath, Franc lowered his arms.

"Marta, I'm too old for such games."

"You're not in your dotage yet, Franc." Marta Ilenga dropped the sword back into its scabbard as she rode up alongside him and for a few moments they both sat, wordless, facing each other. Swathed from head to foot in a scarlet riding coat, her wiry auburn hair caught behind her head in a long plait, Marta smiled and shook her head. "But you are a fool. No wise man would be out here alone, with the wolves hungry after the winter."

"I didn't think you'd come," he said, ignoring the criticism.

"Oh I had a little trouble getting out, that's all. My men at arms seem to make sport for themselves by preventing me from leaving my own fort."

"They're just doing their job, Marta. Making sure you don't come to any harm."

"Hmm. Doing their job you say? Making my life difficult, that's what they're doing. That's what you're doing too, Franc." She raised her head sharply and searched his face as if challenging him to respond. Franc bit his lip and looked away.

"Well, Master Hannac, I'm sure you didn't drag me all the way down here for a game of tag," Marta said at last. "What is it that you want?"

Franc kept such a tight clench upon his horse's reins that his knuckles turned white. He cleared his throat.

"It's something of a delicate matter, Marta. Perhaps we could ride on a little?"

"Do you think the trees have ears, Franc? I'm already too far from my fort for comfort."

Franc let out a resigned sigh. "The lass is pregnant."

"Who? Hal?"

He snorted in amusement. "No, Meracad. It's Nérac's child."

Marta let out a low whistle, a sound Franc recalled from their childhood. The discovery of a bird's nest amongst dense foliage or a narrow escape from the wild boar that roamed the forest was always followed by that same flute-like note.

"Well, Franc, you certainly have stored up trouble for yourselves if that's the case."

"Maybe." He turned to her again, doing his best to ignore the impatient little stamps and paces of his horse. "But my more pressing concern, Marta, is keeping both Meracad and her child alive. And you're the only person I know who has knowledge of such matters. Will you help us? When the moment comes?"

"Ah, Franc, I'm no doctor. I read a little, that's all. I've helped some of the lasses in Berasé through their labour. But I'm no physician."

"You're the closest that we have to one around here, Marta. Help us. Would you?"

Marta gave a soft little click of her tongue and her horse began to move down the path away from him. He watched go for a moment before calling out to her: "Well? Will you at least come and advise my girls as to what they must do?"

"I'm thinking," she yelled back without turning round. "I can't think with you nagging me, Franc."

Franc cursed but was unable to stop himself from smiling, and with a slight nudge to his horse's right flank he set off after her down the track. Marta came to a sudden halt just as he caught up with her.

"You do realise what this will cost me, don't you, Franc?"

He was taken aback by the note of anxiety in her voice. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that if Nérac finds out that I've helped to deliver his child on your estates, it won't just be Hannac he comes for. He's not a man to make careful distinctions between his enemies."

"Marta, he doesn't have to know." Franc reached out and touched her arm for a moment.

Marta smirked but her eyes were serious. "He'll know, Franc. Believe me, he'll know. However..." she gave a graceful, cat-like stretch of her back, "I do believe he's had his way for too long. And you know me, Franc. I don't particularly like to be ordered around by any man. You're all so arrogant, the lot of you."

"Well thank God you're above arrogance, Marta," Franc muttered to himself.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking that there weren't enough wilful women in my life, that's all."

"Am I in your life, then, Franc? I wasn't aware of that."

This time, Franc urged his horse down the track away from her at a trot. "That remains to be seen," he called back over his shoulder, grinning inwardly, aware of the fact that she would probably now be fuming behind him.

"I've already had enough of your insolence for one life time, Franc Hannac," she yelled at his departing back. "And if I do turn up at Hannac again, it'll be for the lass's sake and not your own." He was gripped by a strange fear on hearing the soft thud of her horse's hooves as she began to head away from him down the track towards Berasé. Pulling up his own mount, he jerked the animal back round in time to see the scarlet of Marta's riding coat disappear between some pine trees.

"Marta!" He waited for a moment but there was no response. "Ah for God's sake! Marta!"

Nothing but silence and the slow fall of snow from the boughs of trees. Without really knowing why, Franc suddenly tilted his head to the sky and let out a long, rising growl of frustration. And then, sliding down from his saddle, he struck out at the nearest tree trunk with his fist, punching it again and again until he had torn the leather from his gloves and blood was seeping from his grazed knuckles.

"I don't think the tree enjoys that, Franc."

He stopped, span round and noticed her standing on the middle of the path, clutching her horse's reins and surveying him with a curious look of sarcasm and concern. Franc looked down at his hand, suddenly aware that he was bleeding.

"It makes me feel better, though."

"Does it?" She stepped forward. "Show me your hand, Franc."

Ashamed now, aware that she had witnessed his moment of madness, Franc stretched out his arm towards her. She took hold of his fingers, examined them on one side, then the other.

"Can you still bend them?"

He demonstrated that he could.

"Nothing broken then. And so..." keeping hold of his hand, she looked at him, her expression becoming softer, the sarcasm fading from her eyes. "Was there something else you wanted to tell me? Or have you just taken to boxing with trees in your old age?"

Franc felt the reassuring warmth of her hands as they clutched his own injured fingers. The words were there, somewhere, but they refused to take form.

"Well?" She took a step closer. He could sense her body heat now, feel her light breath upon his face, draw in the scent of her hair which reminded him of freshly cut heather.

"I love you, Marta." The words had taken form at last and once they were out they seemed so simple. "And I'm sorry for those wasted years, for all of them." He dissolved into tears as he drew her at last towards him and buried his face on her shoulder, ashamed of himself and yet incapable of self-restraint. At last, his grief subsiding, he felt Marta shift in his arms as she loosened herself from his embrace. She placed her hands on his face and she was drawing him towards her and then he was astonished by the coldness of her lips and it felt as if he had stepped out of time altogether and nothing mattered but Marta and the woods and the cold.

Marta pushed his head backwards and studied his face. "Well, you took your time, Franc Hannac," she said, a little out of breath.

"I hope that it was worth the wait."

"That remains to be seen," she smiled, the golden brown of her eyes now blazing with an intensity Franc had not seen since they were children. She raised her fingers to his temples and then traced them across the contours of his face. "We must tread carefully, Franc. As I said, you've stored up trouble for yourself. I'd not have you invite more. Let us keep this moment for ourselves. Perhaps we have better times ahead of us."

"Aye, Marta." He pushed his hat up and backwards away from his face, and looked down at her with red-rimmed, melancholic eyes. "You're right. And to tell the truth, it's not the wolves in this forest I fear at the moment." In his mind's eye he saw Nérac sat alone in his great fortress in Dal Reniac, brooding, waiting, plotting...

"I had best be gone." Marta stepped away from him and took hold of her horse's reins before swinging herself into the saddle. Franc looked up at her, nursing his wounded hand.

"Perhaps you might pay me the honour of a visit, Marta."

"Perhaps I might." She flashed him a grin and then set off at a gallop, snow spraying out like foam from beneath her horse's hooves. Franc watched her go until he could no longer make out the vivid red of her coat amongst the dull greens and browns of the forest. And then, unable to hold back any longer, he let out a deep, resounding yell of utter joy.

"Sorry, fella." He hauled himself back onto the saddle of his startled horse. "I had too, you know?"

The horse whickered as if in response and he set off along the path towards Hannac, smiling and whistling to himself and listening intently to the bird song and the gurgling sound of melt water coursing downwards through the trees. And from somewhere high up in the forest above him came Marta's laughter; a sound he had not heard in over twenty years.

Chapter Fourteen

The Strange Heart Beating

"You're squeezing my hand!"

Hal loosened her grip on Meracad's fingers. "I'm sorry."

The memories slipped away: her midnight run to Colvé, Léac's house in flames, Cara's restless undefeated fury. All were forced out by the painful reality of the present. She looked down at Meracad's exhausted face. The girl's hair was matted and plastered to her head with sweat, the strain visible in her expression as she fought against waves of agony.

"Hal," she whimpered suddenly, "I'm very frightened."

Hal felt her own fear wash over her, paralysing both mind and body. She had never been so scared in her entire life. Reaching out, she touched Meracad's forehead, which felt clammy and hot.

"It's going to be alright," she whispered, cursing herself immediately for a liar.

The look of pain on Meracad's face intensified. "You spent the last few months worrying, and now you tell me it will be alright?"

Well what else can I say? Hal asked herself, wrestling with another rising tide of panic.

"Meracad, promise me you won't leave me."

She regretted the weak, selfish words immediately. Meracad let out a loud, straining groan and her breathing grew faster, more laboured, as a fresh contraction racked her body. Hal hunted around in desperation for wet cloths she might place across her suffering lover's forehead, or some wine or spirit that might ease the pain. She moistened a towel in the water jug, folded it several times and then laid it on Meracad's brow. The girl moaned and opened her eyes for a moment, but seemed unable to focus upon Hal. Then her eyelids closed again and the duellist could only look on, helpless, as Meracad retreated into the prison of her own body.

The door suddenly swung open and Marta Ilenga stepped into the room, still dressed in her riding coat, her face flushed from contact with the raw spring air outside.

Franc followed behind her, nervously clutching his hat between his hands. He fixed his gaze on Meracad, his eyes grave and troubled.

"How is she?" He asked Hal.

"I...I don't know." Her words cracked a little as she spoke, and she realised that she was in danger of breaking down.

"Out. Now." Marta's voice was stern, uncompromising. Hal looked at her, not quite comprehending what had been said.

"But she needs me!"

"You'll do her no good fussing, Hal Hannac. I need someone who won't get in my way. Franc, send me that girl Elis. At least somebody in your fortress knows how to keep her head on her shoulders. And the two of you had best keep yourselves out of this room until I send for you."

"No!" Hal protested. "I'll not leave her."

Beside her, Meracad gave a moan and struggled to speak. "Marta's right, Hal!" She gasped. "You've done all you can."

The girl's eyes pleaded with her to go. Leaning forwards, Hal planted a light kiss on her mouth. "Fight for me, Meracad. I'm begging you."

Meracad merely nodded a response and then Hal followed Franc out, conscious of Marta's angry glare as she left the room. As they reached the base of the stairs she heard Meracad scream and turned to go back, but Franc grabbed her arm and hauled her out of the building. The bright sunlight was blinding after the shadows and gloom of the bedroom.

The sound of rushing feet and subdued voices filtered through windows above the courtyard as Marta corralled the servants of Hannac into service. Hal turned again for the door, only to find Arc standing in front of it, his arms folded, his face impassive.

"Franc, please!" She begged. "She needs me!"

"Right now, Hal, she needs you as much as I need Nérac sitting outside my gates. You're in the way and you're making her fret."

"If that child kills her..."

"Hal!" Franc bellowed at her with such force that she stared at him as if he had thrown a basin of water over her. "You know full well that if anything happens, that child is innocent — no matter who its father is." He stalked across the courtyard towards her and for a moment she thought he might strike her, but he stopped and placed his hands on her shoulders and shook his head. "No child should suffer for their parents' mistakes, Hal. You ought to know that more than anyone else. Marta would never admit it, but she's the finest physician there is in these parts. She will do her best for Meracad."

"And what if her best isn't enough?" Hal's voice was plaintive, almost childlike.

"Then we will honour Meracad's memory by protecting her child."

Her face crumpled, but Franc shook her with such force that he almost knocked her off her feet.

"Don't cry!" His voice was fierce, furious. "Your tears won't help her, lass, anymore than your words. How can I believe that when the time comes, you'll stand by Hannac and fight for all of us if you fall apart now?"

"Of course I will defend it!" She wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve.

"Then prove it." He took a few steps backwards and then nodded to Arec, who pulled a pair of sabres from his belt. The first he threw to Franc, who caught it by the hilt. The second landed at Hal's feet.

"Pick it up!" Franc ordered.

"What?" She looked at him in horror, and then at Arec who nodded in the direction of the sword.

"You expect me to duel? Now?"

"Prove to me that you won't buckle when the time comes, Hal. Everyone has fears - only a fool is not afraid. But it's a coward who lets those fears consume her. I never took you for a coward. Until now. Pick it up."

He kicked the sword towards her. She bent down for it, realising as she did so that her palms were sweaty and her stomach a knotted ball.

"I'm Nérac," Franc said. "I'm at your gates. And you are all that stands between Hannac, Meracad and the child. What are you going to do?"

From deep within the building, she caught the distant sound of Meracad's wail. She turned towards the door again and as she moved, Franc caught her across the upper arm with the flat of his blade.

"Ow!" Her fear now fused with anger she span round to face him.

"Nérac won't use the flat of his blade. And it won't be your arms he aims for, it will be your head. Now fight, damn it!"

Her anger piqued by the blow and Franc's charge of cowardice, she raised the blade.

"That's good, Hal. That's good." Franc's voice was soft, almost predatory. "I'm going to take everything from you. Everything and everybody you love. Try and stop me..."

Before he could say another word she had lunged for him, and he blocked the blow with a swinging arc of his sabre.

"A good try. But not nearly enough. Because now I'm coming for your head."

He swept his blade down towards her neck. She twisted away and jumped backwards, bringing her own weapon upwards to counter his move. The guards who had been leisurely patrolling the ramparts now looked down in interest as Franc and Hal fought their way around the courtyard, the clash of their swords resonating off the stone walls.

From time to time her attention was claimed by the sounds of distant shouts and screams. Then Franc rained down stinging blows across her legs and arms with the flat of his blade, summoning her back into the duel. Hal realised that he would not give up: that he was set upon making her fight, and as she re-entered the fray, she seemed to discover a strength she had never known before when duelling; a strength which came from the fight with herself, not Franc.

The sun worked its way across the sky, and their shadows lengthened, midday fading into midafternoon. They stopped only to drink long draughts from the pitchers of water which Arec provided. Then, wordlessly picking up their swords they continued, and when exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her, Hal rallied herself with the thought of Meracad's suffering, and somehow found the strength to continue.

At last, as the sharp spring light began to wane and their shadows stretched across the length of the courtyard, Franc stopped and rested on the hilt of his sword, staring up at a window behind Hal's head. She turned to see Elis, her face unreadable, looking down at them. Hal felt Franc's hand touch her shoulder. "It's time, Hal."

In spite of the pain which seemed to emanate from every muscle in her body, Hal raced for the door, wrenched it open and charged up the steps. She heard Franc running behind her, hard on her heels as she almost fell into the bedroom. Meracad was lying on her back, her face taut and pale, her breathing erratic. Hal sank down at her side. "You're alive!" She gasped. Meracad said nothing. Instead, she shifted her head upon the pillow and looked across the room at Marta, who was bent over the child. Something was wrong, Hal realised. She had not heard a baby cry. Straining to look, she caught sight of tiny feet, bluish in colour and lifeless.

"She's not breathing," Meracad whispered behind her.

Hal rose with difficulty. The baby was lying upon her back amongst towels and blankets, her skin mottled and slippery, a severed blue stump of umbilical cord issuing from her stomach. Marta took the wrinkled little face in her hands, turned it upwards and then placing her own lips upon those of the child's, she breathed out. Nothing. She tried again and still the baby lay: wet, still and lifeless.

Behind her, Hal heard Meracad whimper in despair. "Try again!" She urged Marta. "Please try again!"

Hal knew at that moment that there was nothing she would not give to save the child's life. Marta turned towards them, her eyes hopeless, but she bent down again, took in air and then breathed down the child's throat. Suddenly she pulled back and stared down at the infant. Hal followed her gaze. The lips, which had been dark, appeared to have paled slightly. Marta's eyes opened wider. A pair of miniature fists were clenching and unclenching. And then Marta Ilenga turned to them again, relief written across her face, as the pink little body began to writhe amongst the blankets. Eyes the colour of a spring sky flickered open, and from somewhere deep inside fresh, tender lungs a scream was released, rising in scale until the baby began to cry.

Hal heard Franc choke on tears of joy, and she knelt back again beside Meracad who was weeping, her face streaming with tears.

"Give her to Meracad, Hal." Marta passed her the squealing child wrapped in a blanket. Hal looked down and saw a face screwed up like crushed parchment, a dusting of light coloured hair upon a pink scalp, tiny hands and feet waving ineffectually. "She's beautiful," she whispered in amazement. She laid her in Meracad's arms. "She's beautiful, like her mother." "Leda," Meracad spoke at last through her tears, looking up at her. "She's called Leda. After my own mother."

"Leda," Hal repeated. She reached out and touched the baby's face, the skin soft and hot beneath her fingers. "Leda Nérac?"

Meracad smiled. "No. Leda Hannac."

Chapter Fifteen

Magda

Magda was rarely allowed beyond the ground floor of the keep. The higher levels were for pages and high-ranked men at arms, master craftsmen, Lord Nérac and his guests. But Old Maré was even lazier than Garth had been. Why trouble her ancient bones when she had young fools to run errands for her?

“The Master has a guest,” she told Magda. “That strange one with the hawk shaped face who flits about the place like a ghost. Gives me the creeps, that one does. I’ve no mind to take him his breakfast when there are fit young things like you standing idle.”

She pushed the platter towards Magda, who grabbed it before it crashed to the ground. “Take it! And then there’s vegetables to be peeling, so quick about it!”

“course, Miss Maré.” The maid dropped into a low curtsy. Magda knew that Maré liked such gestures, even if they had no place in the kitchen. The creases and wrinkles on Old Maré’s face rearranged themselves into a smile. She must have been young and pretty once, Magda decided, before a life of pot washing and hard graft and Garth had put paid to all her hopes. Maré raised a gnarly, twisted hand and pinched Magda’s cheek. “That’s my girl.” Then the smile disappeared and she was once again the hunchbacked little crone who had spent her entire life sat beside the hearth turning the spit.

Magda reached one end of the corridor and started up the stairs, taking a few moments to steal a glance through an arched window onto the courtyard below. The place had become so busy since the winter, with Nérac calling on his reserves from outlying villages. Together with the master’s own guards they trained and toiled all day, the fortress humming to the twang of arrows and crossbows, the clash of swords. They whirled spiked, metal balls about their heads on chains, or charged at stuffed targets with spears, straw spilling out onto the ground in place of guts.

The worst thing was that Magda blamed herself for the violence. She could have let Garth live; it was as simple as that. When she had seen him reel from the kitchen that day, cleaver in hand, she could have played the innocent. After all, why risk her own neck for Hal, who probably didn’t care about anyone’s happiness but her own? Magda could not quite explain it to herself. Perhaps she had done it for Meracad? She had always suspected that the master

did not command his wife's heart. And Meracad had seemed so lifeless, so dead to the world until the day that Hal had shown up and turned the place upside down.

And now all of this. Magda watched as a group of men hurled spears into monstrous targets: human-like forms hewn from wood. She could do nothing to save Hal or Meracad from such force. They had brought this upon themselves, she decided grimly. Better to sit out her days in the kitchen with old Maré than risk her neck to warn them. Surely they must have known what Nérac would do?

Magda turned her head from the window and continued up the stairs. Hawk-face's bedroom was tucked away somewhere on the first floor at the far end of the corridor, Old Maré had said. Up here it was dark, just a few narrow windows letting in faint slits of light. Perhaps the Master's guest really was a ghost, haunting such dark, distant corners of the fortress.

"We have enough men and supplies to last the entire spring if necessary. And I do not expect the Hannacs to hold out for more than a few days. Their stocks will be low after the winter and they cannot call on more than a handful of tenants as reserves."

Magda stopped in her tracks. That was Lord Nérac's voice. Maré had not said he would be here.

"Only give the word, Sir. The men are ready and willing."

The voices were coming from the furthest end of the passage. That must have been Hawk-face, Magda realised. She stepped back deeper into the shadows, far from the room yet still within ear-shot.

There was a pause in the conversation and then Nérac said "Remember, Letraec: first we crush Hannac. Then we may turn our attention to the other Nests. But not a word to the men. I do not want word of our further ambitions to reach the Emperor's ear. It may rouse him from his apathy."

"I understand, Sir. And once all the Nests fall to you, he will have no choice but to recognise your strength."

"I will have the North as a bargaining chip, Letraec. Such opportunities fall to a man but once in a lifetime. And my wife will look upon the ruin her betrayal has wreaked - that in itself will be sweet to witness."

Magda fought hard to hold back a snort of contempt. Perhaps it was true what they said: the Master's veins ran with ice, not blood.

"We can be ready to ride tomorrow, Sir."

Magda caught her breath. So soon?

"Tomorrow?" Nérac gave a low, hollow laugh. "By tonight, Letraec. I do not wish to give Ilega or Paega too much time to think. And I wish you to send them a very clear signal of intentions."

"What kind of signal, Sir?" Letraec sounded wary.

“Some of the crofts on the moors pay lip service to Dal Reniac but trade with the Nests.”

Magda’s pulse quickened. She thought of her parents and her younger brother and sister scraping by on the meagre rations of potatoes and peaty water they took from the moors. Her own freedom had been sold to Dal Reniac as proof of their loyalty.

“I want them burnt. Save the young men - they’ll do for our reserves. The rest - you can do what you like with them. Just make sure that the Nests hear of it.”

Magda laid the platter down on the floor as gently as she could and wiped the sweat from her palms onto her apron. Letraec was speaking again.

“I’m not sure the Emperor will...”

“Do you think the Emperor cares about serf scum?” Nérac’s words boomed out, echoing down the corridor. Magda put her hands over her mouth to hold back a scream. “I want those villages smoking by dawn tomorrow. You will then take your men and prisoners to the northern slope of the plateau and begin the assault, as we agreed. I will meet you there. Is that clear, Letraec, or are you having second thoughts?”

“Of course not, Lord Nérac,” Letraec said hurriedly.

“Then do as I say, man.” The door handle was folding downwards. Magda did not wait to hear anymore. She slid the tray against the wall, picked up her skirts and then ran, taking the stairs two, then three at a time. Her ankle twisted over as she landed on the ground floor and she almost collided with two pages who were in her path. “Watch where you’re going! Scullery slut!”

She pushed them out of the way with both hands, knocking one of them to the ground before hopping for the kitchen and falling against the door, swinging it back again into the other boy’s face as he attempted to follow her through.

“You took your time.” Old Maré looked up as Magda swung herself around one end of the table, showering a basket of apples across the floor. “Oy! Pick those up!”

Maré began to rise from her seat, but Magda was already out the backdoor and sprint-hobbling along the tunnel which separated the keep from the bailey wall. Once out in the courtyard, she ran headlong into the sea of weaponry and armour, ducking in terror as swords and shields swung together about her head, dodging horses’ hooves and supply carts before slamming breathlessly into the timber frames of the stables. She scanned the yard, drawing in great gulps of air, dizzied with fear and confusion. So many men - what had she been thinking of? She would be seen, dragged back to the kitchens, taught her place...she wiped the sweat from her upper lip, turning her head to see the two pages from the keep rounding the corner, Old Maré stumbling along behind them. Instinctively, Magda slipped around the door and into the dark, dingy security of the stables. A few bales of hay might serve as a hiding place until the search party had passed her by. Eyes straining, she peered

through the humid gloom, making out the dim shapes of horses tethered to posts, some bags of winter feed still piled up in one corner. It was then that she realised she was not alone.

“Takin’ me up on my offer, are ya?”

Magda could have wept. Why did he have to be here?

“You don’t want to be in my way, Jono!” She grabbed the nearest weapon to hand - a manure encrusted metal fork - and pointed it in the direction of the stable hand. The boy's laughter was coarse.

“Like it rough, do you? They all do, the kitchen sluts. I said I’d ‘ave you sooner or later, and here y’are.” He spat into the hay; skinny and blonde, pieces of straw sticking off his cap at strange angles, his face a permanent sneer.

“And what do you know about women, eh, Jono?” Her voice curdled with contempt. “You haven’t had any of us, for all your bragging. Old Maré said she tried you, but you stink too much of horse shit for her taste.”

The sneer became fixed, harder and he took a step towards her. “I’ll take you, you bitch. I’ll take you with that fork you’re holding.” He reached out for her but she sensed his uncertainty.

“I’ve killed before, Jono, and I’ll do it again.”

“You?” He hawked up another gob of phlegm and sent it hurtling off into the mangers. “You won’t even take a cleaver to the chickens, you coward. I’ve seen you.”

Magda jabbed the fork towards him and he flinched. She laughed at that. “Want to risk it, Jono? Who do you think it was did Garth?”

“That was the Hannac girl.” She could see him pale a little. “Everyone knows that.”

“Well how come Garth had a knife in his back if she was coming out the door? Who d’you think done that, eh?”

She thrust the fork in his face again and he stepped backwards, faltered and fell into a pile of hay. “That’s right, Jono.” Magda experienced a strange surge of power jolt her body. “You just take off your clothes like a good lad now, and I promise I won’t hurt you.”

“What?” His expression was almost hopeful. She almost laughed.

“Take ‘em off, Jono. I haven’t got much time.” The sneer fell from the boy's lips, his body tensed suddenly and he launched himself from the floor at her. She swept the fork towards him and felt it grind through skin, bones, tissue. Looking down, she saw that she had pinned him through the ankle. Jono fell back heavily, the bone severing with a snap, and he screamed.

“No one’s going to hear you above all that din, Jono. Now take ‘em off unless you want me to do your other leg for you.”

His face had become a milky white and she realised that he might faint. Magda ripped the fork from his leg and threw it to one side. Blood pulsed in heavy slicks from his punctured flesh. Jono's eyes rolled backwards and he passed out amongst the bales of straw.

"Well I expected more stamina from you," she whispered as she dragged off his jacket and shirt before tugging off his boots and a pair of worn, flaxen trousers. "Thought this was what you wanted. You and me, naked together in the hay."

She threw her own head scarf onto the ground, long chestnut locks spilling about her shoulders, before drawing her dress and shift off together in a lithe sweep. It was somehow thrilling to stand there naked amongst the horses; a mad, burning freedom coursed through her veins. Then a vision of her parent's croft flashed before her eyes, and she wrestled her way into Jono's reeking clothes. At least, she decided, anyone who stood downwind of her would give her a wide berth.

Magda peered around the stable door, pushing a few wayward strands of hair up out of sight beneath Jono's cap. The idea of crossing the yard no longer seemed so daunting. Walking out as a kitchen girl would have been impossible. But walking out as a stable hand? After all, she thought, Hal and Meracad did the same. And who'd miss me?

She took one last look down at Jono's prone figure. Had it not been for the pool of blood rising around his feet, he would have looked asleep.

"Wouldn't be in your place when you come round," she muttered. "*If* you come round." Magda took a long breath and then stepped back out into the fray. The thought of home was becoming less a dream and more a possibility.

Chapter Sixteen

Ash

Leda screamed, waking Meracad with a start. Propping herself on one elbow, she squinted through the darkness towards the crib. Hal stirred beside her and rolled onto her back, groaning. "Again?"

"She's probably hungry."

"She's just eaten. How hungry can she be?" Rising, Hal swung her legs out of the bed and stretched her way onto her feet, her naked body silhouetted against the moonlight. Meracad watched her for a moment, eyes tracing the lean contours of her lover's body, taking in the cat like grace with which Hal stalked over to the child's cot and pulled out the squirming mass of blankets.

"Are you hungry?" Hal suspended Leda at arm's length. The baby grew a little quieter and Meracad stifled a laugh. Hal always talked to the child as if she were an adult.

"No? Lonely then?" The duellist gave Leda a few gentle rocks before pulling her close to her chest and kissing her head. Ear-tingling howls gradually subsided into breathless whimpers. Meracad smiled, shaking her head. "Give her to me."

Hal lowered the baby into her arms and then sat beside her on the bed. Leda mewled, contorting her face into a series of scowls and grimaces, and then her eyes closed once again and she slept. Meracad felt Hal's sleep-warm arm creep around her shoulders, and then lightly-parted lips brushed across the length of her collar bone, before working their way up to her ear lobe.

Several loud raps on the door ruptured their peace. Meracad froze, her hands tightening in protective instinct around Leda's tiny form as Hal sprang from the bed. The baby gave a few angry twists and then released another rasping scream.

"What is it?" Hal hunted around the room for clothes, dragging her shirt over her head and pulling on her trousers.

"You'd best come quick, Miss. There's a girl to see you. Says she has to speak with you." Elis sounded worried, tense.

"What's happening, Elis?" There was no reply. The maid had already run back downstairs.

"I'll come with you." Ignoring Leda's protests, Meracad laid the baby on the bed and seized a nightgown.

"No." Hal clutched her arms. "Stay here with the child."

"She's already awake, Hal." Meracad fastened the gown and then hauled Leda up and into her arms.

She noticed the strain in her lover's face, but Hal said nothing more, tore open the door and leapt barefoot down the stairs. Doing her best to quieten the frightened child, Meracad pushed her feet into a pair of slippers and headed down to the great hall.

A dull rush of conversation rose upwards, and candles had been lit along the stairwell and corridors. Small pockets of men, women and children sat slumped along benches, exhausted. She spotted tenant farmers amongst them; people who had wintered at Hannac before returning to their farms for the spring. They should not be here, she realised, her anxiety mounting.

Their clothes were blackened with dirt and ash; some were injured, cuts gashed into faces and across arms, blood congealing around untreated wounds. Meracad searched desperately for Hal, clutching Leda to her chest. She noticed children sitting alone, their soot-darkened faces streaked with tears. The wails and cries masked even Leda's screams.

Hal was crouched in front of a young woman who sat on the floor staring vacantly into the middle distance. Her clothes were dirty and torn to shreds, her hair matted and wet, her face plastered with layers of grime. A small boy leaned against her shoulder, his eyes closed. His breaths rattled and wheezed their way out of a pair of taut, pale lips. Clearly they had spent at least a night out on the moors to have arrived in such a state. And there was something uncanny about the girl. In spite of her mud-spattered clothing and the wildness of her appearance, Meracad was sure she recognised her. But how was that possible? Perhaps this was one of the tenants who had wintered at Hannac. She rose, thankful that Leda had now screamed herself to sleep again and craned over Hal's shoulder in order to study the girl's face. And then she saw who it was, and she almost cried out in surprise.

"It's all gone, Miss. They killed them all." Magda's eyes were glazed, her face drained of emotion. The boy at her side stirred, shivered and then sank his head upon her shoulder once again. "I found him...my brother, Edæc. He was hiding amongst the ruins of the croft. Ma, Da, my sister, they'd..." Her voice trailed off and she began finally to weep, great throaty howls of remorse. "I was too late," she spluttered.

Hal rose, her expression stony. Gripped by a sudden onslaught of fear and sickness, Meracad sat down on a bench before her legs gave out beneath her. "So he is coming." She mouthed the words, but no sound came out.

"I heard him, Hal." Magda looked up at the duellist who crouched down in front of her once again and, reaching forward, brushed the tears from the kitchen maid's cheeks. "Who did you hear?" Hal asked. "Nérac?"

"Yes." Magda's eyes rippled with anger. "He said he'd destroy all the Nests. Starting with Hannac. And he thought it would be a sweet thing for you to see, Miss." Meracad flinched under her gaze.

"Hal!" They both turned at the sound of Franc's voice. Already dressed in a shirt of chain mail, his legs encased in plates of steel, he passed amongst the weary groups of crofters towards them.

"Who is she?" He peered down at Magda. Her brother had now curled into a ball beside her and was sleeping on the floor.

"Magda saved my life once, Franc." Hal rose to greet her father. "She ran from Dal Reniac when she heard what Nérac would do to the crofts. She was too late."

Franc bent over and scooped up Edæc, laying him on a bench. The boy stirred briefly but did not wake. Then he hoisted Magda to her feet and deposited her beside her brother, pushing a cup of wine towards her. She gripped it, hands trembling, and took a few tentative sips.

"Magda says Nérac will not stop until all the Nests have surrendered, Franc," Hal said. "He plans to crush us first and then turn his attention to Berasé and Pæga."

Franc's eyes grew troubled and he scratched his chin with long nervous fingers. "Is that so, lass?"

"I overheard him, Sir." Magda's voice shook as she spoke. "He's hell-bent on taking the North for himself."

"Well we'll have to stop him, won't we?" Franc's smile was thin, vanishing almost as soon as it had appeared. "Hal, come with me. I've something for you in the armoury. Meracad, take care of them. All of them." He placed his hands on her shoulders and studied her face. "We've little enough food as it is." His voice had almost dropped to a whisper. "Don't let anyone take more than their fair share. Hunger is the most powerful weapon Nérac can command. And he *will* use it."

She nodded, already fearful. Franc must have sensed that, for he gave her shoulders a slight squeeze. "You must be strong, child. For all our sakes." He glanced down at Leda. "Hal! Come with me."

Hal caught hold of Meracad's hand as she followed Franc out.

"Be careful," Meracad urged, aware of the strain in her own voice.

"I will." Hal left the hall at a half run. Meracad slumped down on the bench opposite Magda, who was, like many of the tenants, now sleeping with her head resting on her arms. Others simply slouched, glassy-eyed, their bodies locked in postures of fatigue and despair. Anger swelled within her, as if her heart were a freshly-stoked furnace. She thought of her child,

peaceful in her innocence, a mere pawn in her father's brutal game. She thought of Hannac and its occupants, their lives and freedom set on a knife edge, and of Franc who would lay down his own life to protect theirs. And then she thought of that evening at Marc's when she had seen Hal for the first time and it had been as if a single thread had unfurled, wrapping its way around her and binding her to the duellist. And for the first time since their escape from Dal Reniac, she realised that it was a thread which could be broken.

Chapter Seventeen

Heavy Rain

"Is all this really necessary, Franc?" Hal lumbered her way up towards her father who was already on the northern walls, hustling crossbowmen and archers into position.

"It is if you want to keep your arms and legs." He did not turn round to speak to her, but continued supervising the movement of his men.

Franc had instructed his smiths to forge the armour for her specially, aware that her frame and build were slighter than many of his guards. Her chest, back and arms were encased in heavy plate and a neck guard restricted any quick movement of her head. The steel shin guards felt like millstones around her legs.

"Helmet, Hal." Franc turned to her at last as she joined him high up on the curtain wall walk. Sighing, she raised what seemed to be the final indignity: a hammered dome of steel, thin strips of metal forming a visor across her face.

"I'll never lift a sword in all of this."

"Stop moaning. You'll get used to it."

Sounds reached her from the glen below; sounds she was now familiar with. The rustle and sway of pine trees in the night air, the sluicing of the river as it swept through the valley below, dividing the plateau from the moors. Yet a new set of noises also carried on the night wind: men calling to one another through the darkness, the distant whinny of horses being dragged up through the forest, and the insistent, threatening pulse of drumbeats. They were out there now, Nérac's men, staking out the ground in preparation of their siege. She gripped part of the wall, attempting to peer out from between the battlements but Franc reached forward and gave a sharp tug to her shoulder, forcing her backwards.

"Just because you can't see them, doesn't mean they can't see you. Stay behind the wall!"

"They haven't fired a shot yet."

"They're preparing, Hal."

The echoes of axes being driven hard into tree trunks began to ring up through the forest. For some reason she found that sound more disturbing than the throb of the drumbeats. It were as if Nérac's men were already attacking the very fibre of her home. Then came a thunderous

wrench as one of the pines toppled under the barrage of blades, crushing through other trees as it fell.

"What are they doing?" She whispered to Franc.

"I don't know. Perhaps clearing space for their camps."

The light of good humour had disappeared from his eyes, his face was tense and serious. "I want you on the east wall, Hal."

"The east wall?" She threw him a baleful look. "Nothing will happen there, Franc. You said so yourself. They'll never scale those crags."

The plateau jutted to a point on its eastern side; a pinnacle of slimy, mossy rock spiralling down to the forest below. No one would be insane enough to attempt an assault up that, surely.

"That's why I want you there." He searched her face. "This isn't a duel, Hal. This is a siege, and if I'm not mistaken, you have no experience of warfare. You'll watch, you'll learn, and when I've decided that you've seen enough, then you'll fight."

"You need as many swords as you can get."

"I need you alive, not dead!" he snapped back. She opened her mouth but sensed the futility in protesting. Apparently satisfied that she had understood him, Franc continued. "Arec will take the south wall. They've not rounded that side of the plateau yet, but there'll be work enough for him when they get there. And Beric has command of the west side." His lips peeled back into a grin; the first time he had smiled that night.

She winced. "Beric?"

"Aye. Do you not remember the promise he made to us in Colvé? He's not a man to break his word, Hal. And I can certainly use his experience." He turned to her again. "I don't want you baiting him, Hal. We've not luxury enough for rivalries. If we don't run together, we're finished."

A horn blast from the south wall cut through their conversation.

"Pæga and Berasé!" Arec yelled from atop the barbican.

"Let them in!" Franc called back. Hal could make out torches moving across the courtyard, but not the men who carried them. With a grinding of windlasses, the portcullis was winched upwards into the walls. The burning brands assembled around a small party of riders. Hal made out Marta, her auburn hair flashing gold in the firelight, sitting astride an ivory coloured horse. The burly figure beside her had already begun to scramble down from his saddle. With a creak and groan, the portcullis was let back down, sealing them within the fortress.

"Come on, Hal." Franc nudged her arm. "But leave the talking to me."

Sighing, she followed her father down the steps of the curtain wall. Franc's lack of trust was beginning to grate.

"Hannac!" The stout rider manoeuvred his way between the ring of torch bearers towards Franc, Marta following in his wake. Hal took in Marec Pæga's girth, his huge, flushed face with its wide expanse of snot-speckled moustache, and decided that she did not like him.

"This yours?" Pæga eyed her, she felt, with scorn. She extended a hand towards him, but he ignored her. "No mistaking her parentage, Franc. That's for certain."

Hal fumed inwardly at the snub, but Franc shot her a warning glance.

"Well, it seems you've got yourselves into a tight spot here, Hannac." Pæga wiped his moustache with the back of his hand. "Marta seems to see things a little differently to me. She seems to think we owe you some kind of allegiance."

"You don't owe me anything, Marec." Franc's voice was flat, emotionless.

Pæga looked at him in surprise. "Well, precisely. That's what I told her."

"But if you're not going to help us, I'd plan a speedy retirement to Colvé. Because there won't be anything left of Pæga worth living in."

"What?" Pæga spluttered, his face turning crimson.

"Franc's right," Marta said. "If Nérac takes Hannac, his ambitions will grow."

"He's already decided he wants all the Nests, Marta." Hal could not miss the look her father cast Marta Ilenga at that moment. It was of near desperation, and in an instant she realised what must have passed between them. She was assailed by a sudden pang of guilt. At least she now shared a roof with Meracad. Franc could do nothing to protect Berasé while Hannac was under attack.

"The gossip of panic stricken tenants, no doubt." Pæga snorted in contempt.

"From a girl I'd trust with my life!" Hal was struggling to maintain a grip on her temper. Franc put his arm across her chest to prevent her from taking another step forward.

"Really?" Pæga screwed his face up into a derisive sneer. "Well it seems to me, Franc, that if you'd kept your whelp on a shorter leash, none of us would be in this mess at all."

What little was left of Hal's patience evaporated. And as she pushed against Franc's restraining arm, the sound of familiar, hoarse laughter rang out across the courtyard behind her. She span round in fury to witness the white flash of Beric's teeth grinning at her through the darkness. He stepped forward until his robust outline was in full view, a visored helmet in one hand, a sabre in the other.

"You find that funny?" She snarled at him.

"I was just thinking to myself that if Master Pæga knew you half as well as I do, Hal, he would have chosen his words with a little more care. Franc Hannac is right, Sir." He planted himself in front of Hal and turned his attention to Marec Pæga. "I'd not set any stock in Lord Nérac's benevolence. He's not a man known for his mercy."

Pæga's nostrils flared and his eyes appeared to bulge from their sockets. "I didn't ask for this war." He blasted the words out from behind clenched teeth. "And I'll not risk my neck for the sake of a fool girl who can't learn her place."

He marched back to his horse, pulling himself up into the saddle. Marta groaned and buried her face in her hands. "I'd almost persuaded him, Franc. You've just undone my work."

Franc curled an arm around her shoulders and drew her close. "We live and die by our decisions from now on, Marta. Perhaps he's right. Nérac may yet show you lenience if ..."
"If we stand by and do nothing." Her voice was bitter. Hal could see her eyes glistening in the dark.

"It might keep you safe, Marta."

"And am I to just watch from the walls of Berasé as he pounds you all to dust, then?"

"Marec's right. You didn't ask for this war."

Marta pushed him away, her expression one of outraged shock. "What devil has possessed you, Franc Hannac, to believe you'll brave out this battle alone? And how can you think I'd not take up a sword in your defence?"

Franc reached towards her but she was already turning to leave.

"If my help counts for nothing, I'll be heading back, Franc. To defend my fort."

"For God's sake, Marta! I'm not rejecting your help."

She swung herself up into the saddle and leaned down to speak to him. "Then what are you doing? If you decide you need me, Franc, I'll be over there." She gave a curt jut of her chin in the direction of Berasé. "Now I'd be thankful if you'd let us out before Nérac's men reach the southern bank."

Franc said nothing for a moment, but stood clutching her saddle, his face unreadable.

"Let me go, Franc." Marta's voice was gentler this time. With obvious reluctance, he released his hold and called out to Arec, "Let them out!"

Once again, the massive metal frame groaned its way upwards and Hal stood beside her father, watching until Marta's white horse had drifted, ghost-like into the night. She understood his silence and decided not to break it. Marta Ilenga would no longer risk further contact with Hannac so long as Nérac's men were at their gates. And Pæga's help, which she knew Franc had secretly counted on had just been lost.

"To the walls," he said at last, his voice suddenly that of an older man. Hal wanted to comfort him at that moment, but words seemed inadequate. She caught Beric's eye, but he shook his head, his face grim. There was no more to be said.

The very night air itself seemed thick with dread as they crossed the courtyard, heading for the stairs of the curtain wall. And that was when she heard it; over the rustling of pines, the men shouting and the horses whinnying in the dark came a hissing sweep as hundreds of arrows screamed above their heads. The wind itself seemed to part, splintered by blades, and

Franc pushed her against the wall just as a guard came careering down the steps towards them, clutching his hand to his neck, the shaft of an arrow jutting out from between his helmet and armour. He fell halfway down, crumpling as he tumbled sideways, his body twisted into an unnatural angle as he hit the ground.

Franc dragged her up the steps before pushing her to the right. "The east wall!" he yelled, throwing himself forwards onto his face as arrows rained down again, bouncing off the stonework about their legs. Franc's men scrambled to load crossbows and pull arrows from quivers, firing blindly back into the forest. Head down, Hal skirted beneath the level of the battlements, her breath sticking in her throat as a man fell from the curtain wall before her, landing in the courtyard with a sickening scream. The east tower was up ahead. She scrambled up the steps and ran across it, no longer so conscious of the weight of her armour, hurling herself down the other side and landing on hands and knees. A pair of guards caught her arms and dragged her to her feet. Twisting round, she saw the moving mass of armour and weaponry now behind her, archers firing shot after shot into the night sky, crossbow bolts released and reloaded, orders yelled out above the mayhem. To her right, the east wall plunged down into an awesome chasm; crags which not even Nérac would be mad enough to scale. Did Franc expect her to just sit and watch from a distance as Hannac was torn apart? She looked around at the men on her watch, and read the same frustration in their faces. "Well?" She screamed at them. "What are we sitting here for?"

One man spat over the battlements into the void below. "Master said we're to wait."

"Wait for what?" Another yelled back. "We're just sat here bouncing arrows off our arses."

As if to prove his point, a shaft sliced the air to his left and he deflected it with his shield. "See?"

Hal broke into a grin, buoyed by a strange energy. Perhaps she had felt something like it before a duel: a fear-fuelled thrill. But that was nothing to the excitement which now laid claim to her entire body. "Should we lend them a hand?" She jerked her sword in the direction of the northern wall.

"Sure the Master won't complain."

"Well what are you waiting for then?" She heard them whoop and yell as she raced back the way she had come, back into the fray of men and weapons, aware of the guards following in her wake.

Chapter Eighteen

Shooting Stars

At first, Hal thought they were shooting stars. A series of burning red globes screamed across the early dawn sky. She craned her head back as far as her helmet would allow, watching as they peaked high above the fortress walls and began to peel downwards. And only then did she realise what they were.

"Fire!" Frantic screams rose up from the courtyard behind her and she turned to witness the rain of flaming arrows as they buried their way into the thatch of the smithy and stables. Tenants spilled out of the keep, risking their unarmoured necks to put out the blaze. There was a clattering of wood upon stonework as many of the shafts missed their mark, landing on the cobbles to be stamped out by the crofters. She forced herself to look as one man took a shot to the stomach, his clothes and hair burning as he clutched at the arrow protruding from his guts, vainly attempting to wrench it free. His companions threw some blankets over him but his screams grew fainter, his movements weaker and eventually he was dragged into a dark corner of the courtyard and placed amongst the rows of other bodies.

Hal span round just as an arrow thudded into the arm of the guard next to her. He sank to his knees, dropping his crossbow and putting his good hand up to his shoulder. "Man wounded!" Her words were lost in the fray. Further along the wall she could make out Franc, his armour now red with the blood of injured men, doggedly yelling out orders to fire back. Guards raced along the walls bearing fresh supplies of arrows and bolts, carrying back casualties and the dying. As they ran past, they took hold of the stricken man at her feet, ignoring his screams as they dragged him back down the steps of the curtain wall.

A pair of armour plated hands appeared on the battlements before her. Nérac's men had begun to climb siege ladders, strapping together the trunks and branches of pine trees. She hacked at the scrabbling fingers. Her unseen assailant yelled out in pain, the hands released their grip and she heard him cry out as he fell. She imagined arms and legs scrabbling in desperation at the air as the forest rose up to meet him. Yesterday, that thought might have caused her to shudder. Now she simply gripped her sword between two hands and waited for more of Nérac's soldiers to scale the wall. The next man crested the battlements as she sliced

at his neck with her sabre, the blade scraping over armour before sinking through flesh and bone. She stepped back expecting him to fall but he still clung, writhing, to the ladder. Hal brought the sword down again for a second blow, gasping as her face was sprayed with the hot, metallic stench of his blood. For a brief moment he seemed suspended in the air, his black eyes fixed on hers, rounded in fury and panic. And then he fell backwards with an unnerving silence.

She waited, panting, sword raised once again in readiness for the next onslaught. Franc was standing behind her: she heard his laboured breaths as he fought against exhaustion. Her father had spent the night rallying his men, calling out for reinforcements, exchanging blow after frantic blow with Nérac's assailants. She knew that he must be feeling the strain.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" Each word sounded like an effort. Before she could reply, he had brought an axe down onto the top rungs of the ladder, the soft pine splintering beneath the blade. A few howls of desperation moaned up from the walls below as Franc began to attack the wood with a kind of insanity, bringing down the axe in a series of wild, heavy swipes, apparently oblivious to the arrows which bounced off the walls about his head. Having dispensed with the top rungs, he slashed at the rails with a ferocity which shocked Hal. With a loud crack, the two sides of the ladder split apart, eliciting further screams and curses from below the walls. She risked a glance over the battlements to see at least three men flung, hurtling like slung stones into the forest. Franc's men had thrown pots of boiling oil down upon the attackers and now some of the pine trees were enveloped in fire, the silhouettes of men appearing to dance before the flames. To her left she counted three more siege ladders, soldiers urging each other upwards only to be met by the bolts of crossbows to their chests. The first pale streaks of dawn were beginning to filter light across the forest, revealing dead men lying along its perimeters as if washed up and left there by a tide. She was suddenly aware of a gradual down pace in the battle's intensity and, raising her head, looked expectantly at Franc.

"Don't be fooled," he warned, as if reading her thoughts. "They're not retreating: they're just rearming. They'll be back. And they haven't even started to the south."

He sighed. "Go down, Hal. Get some rest. You'll need it."

She shook her head stubbornly.

"Hal!" His voice was sharp with anger. "Go down or I'll have you dragged down. If you were anyone else, insubordination would have already cost you a kick over the fortress walls."

Excitement, exhaustion and the harshness of his words all served to weaken her resolve. She had risked her life, as he had, in the defence of Hannac. Did that count for nothing? Perhaps he noticed the way her eyes grew wet with tears of shame, her shoulders now sagging as she gave into hopelessness. He sighed and gave her a rough hug. "I'm proud of you, Hal. But remember what I told you. We run together or we're finished."

She nodded, too distraught to speak, and made her way wearily along the curtain wall. The sun was clawing its way upwards, bleeding light across the horizon as it broke through the darkness. A few arrows strayed over the battlements, but the relentless volleys of the previous night now seemed a distant memory. Across the courtyard, Arec and his men maintained their vigil along the southern wall. And looking backwards to the west, she watched as Beric yawned and stretched as if greeting the rising sun, apparently none the worse for spending a night atop the battlements.

Hal trudged down the steps, pulling off her helmet, aware that her hair was now plastered to her forehead with sweat and blood. The dead lay in the dark recesses beneath the curtain walls, a long line of soldiers and a few tenants. Some seemed so peaceful they might have been asleep, but most faces were contorted in agony, the moment of their death preserved in their expressions. She stood, staring at them for a few moments, her mind now numb with tiredness and silent grief.

The previous night, the great hall had opened its doors to horror and confusion as the tenants had spilled in with their tales of murder, rape and destruction. And so Hal was now surprised to find the place almost quiet and orderly in contrast with the chaos she had just witnessed. Tenants and their families had surrendered to sleep and lay huddled together on the floor around the edges of the room. She noticed a few soldiers who had also been sent down to rest, still sitting in armour and staring morosely into their tankards. Hal's heart lifted as she spotted Meracad following Elis around the room with a pitcher of ale. Then she caught sight of Magda, now wearing one of Meracad's dresses. The kitchen maid sat with Leda in her arms, singing quietly to the baby while her brother clung, wild eyed to her waist. Hal experienced a strange stab of irritation upon witnessing the scene, but she could not identify its source and was too tired to allow it any purchase upon her muddled thoughts. Instead she sank onto a bench, the weight of her armour now becoming unbearable.

A flagon was set before her and she smiled in relief on finding Meracad's arms curling around her neck. Hal rested her head on the girl's shoulder for a moment, drained and speechless. Now on the brink of sleep, she blinked her eyelids open.

"Franc sent me down to rest," she said at last. "But I don't think I can take this armour off. Could you?" She raised her head and looked at Meracad in expectation.

"Of course." Meracad began to unfasten straps and buckles, removing the plate steel from her arms and legs before pulling at the back and breastplates until Hal was left in leggings and a thick, dark brown gambeson. Elis slopped a bowl of grey, watery soup before her. Hal poked at it with her spoon and a few chunks of gristly meat and offal floated to the surface.

"Sorry, Hal. You'll get the same as anyone else," Elis called back over her shoulder, already dishing out the broth to other soldiers. "Your father said we're to conserve the meat."

Hal nodded, ladling the tasteless mush into her mouth, suddenly aware of just how hungry she was. "You should go upstairs and get some sleep," Meracad said as Hal lifted the bowl to her lips and drained back the dregs. She scrubbed at the dirt and blood on Hal's forehead and chin with a wet cloth, her face careworn and serious.

"I'll sleep down here. I don't know when Franc will need me." Hal stretched out on the bench, no longer able to keep her eyes open, aware only that Meracad was laying a blanket across her and kissing her forehead. Sleep felled her with a silent blow.

"Hal!" Franc was shaking her awake. Hal groaned and fell off the bench, yelping in pain as aching muscles made contact with the floor.

"Get up, Hal! It's midday. They've regrouped and they're coming back for more on the southern wall."

She struggled to her feet, already dreading the prospect of encasing her body in metal plate once again. "Have you not slept?" she asked, noticing the rings around Franc's eyes and the dark spread of stubble across his cheeks. He shook his head. "I'll step down when it's safe to do so, Hal."

"You can't carry on forever."

"Just worry about yourselves." He glanced at Meracad who had joined them. "And I'll take care of myself. Now follow me, both of you. I've something to show you before we go up top again."

The midday sun streamed in through the high windows of the great hall as they followed him. Guards were strapping on armour or being helped into it by tenants. Hal caught the distant swish of arrows, the clash of metal on metal as the battle broke out around the fortress walls again. She was surprised when Franc headed down towards the cellars and threw Meracad a questioning glance. Meracad shook her head, clearly as oblivious to Franc's intentions as she was.

He was standing at the base of the steps holding a clay lamp above his head.

"If you wanted to prove that our stocks are low, Franc, you only had to say." The dim light revealed several kegs of ale and wine, a few sacks of grain and some joints of meat hanging from the ceiling.

"It's not about that," Franc muttered in irritation. "Here, hold this." He passed her the lamp and then proceeded to roll aside one of the kegs, grunting as he strained against the load.

"Look," he said at last, pointing.

"At what?" Hal peered downwards, but could see nothing more than granite slabs strewn with rushes.

"Here!" He gestured with impatience at a slight break between the floor and the wall. She bent down to look, aware of Meracad craning over her shoulder. Three parallel lines had been etched into one of the slabs. "What does it mean?" Meracad asked in surprise.

Franc rose to face them. "There's a tunnel down there," he explained, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Your great grandfather had it constructed, Hal - during the times of trouble between the North and the Emperor. It leads down and then out under the plateau - beyond the tree line of the forest."

"Why are you showing us this?" Hal stared at him in confusion.

"Because if things get bad, I mean really bad..." he looked at Meracad "you'll take the child and you'll make your way to Colvé."

Meracad started to protest, but he ignored her. "And if that happens, Hal, you'll have to make a decision. You can stay here and defend Hannac - or you can leave for Colvé with Meracad."

Hal shook her head, anger swelling her heart.

"I'll not leave," Meracad said, her voice choked. She curled her fingers around Hal's.

"For God's sake!" Franc's eyes were wild with sleeplessness and fury. "This is as much about the child as about anyone else! Are you blind, girl? I do not want to think what will happen if you and Leda fall into Nérac's hands!" His lips were dry from lack of water, spit flecked the corners of his mouth. It was with a flash of sudden insight that Hal realised that Franc was almost at breaking point. And before she could respond, a sound akin to thunder seemed to rock the very walls of the fortress.

They all cringed for a moment, and then there was a second ear-splitting boom, followed by the frantic shouts and screams of guards and tenants as they raced into position.

Franc was already charging back up the cellar steps, Hal and Meracad racing after him. They rounded the entrance arch and were outside, just as the fortress resounded to another horrific blow. Hal looked across to the southern wall to see a chunk of rock hurtle from the battlements, scattering men down into the courtyard. A lump of masonry flew through the air, landing within a few feet of the keep. Meracad screamed and slipped back behind the relative shelter of the door. Arec was still standing, desperately bellowing out orders to his men to stand their ground, but the next missile was fired not at the battlements, but at the wall itself. Hal heard it slam into the side of the building, forcing loose the mortar which shed across the ground. As Arec's men attempted to reform, another hail of arrows cascaded downwards, ripping through tendons and muscles, blood seeping into the stonework of the walls.

"What is it?" Hal yelled to Franc.

"Siege weapons," he replied with grim certainty. "Trebuchet." Another missile must have struck beneath the battlements again, for the ground seemed to shake beneath their feet and then some stones from the inner side of the wall were dislodged and fell, smashing into pieces

on the ground. A narrow sliver of daylight pierced its way through the stonework. Franc turned to Hal. "Well, lass?" His eyes searched her face. "I think it's time you made that decision."

Chapter Nineteen

Northern Craftsmanship

"Men to the breach!" Franc's voice was hoarse as he barked out instructions.

Guards from Beric's command swarmed downwards, forming a loose semicircle before the widening chinks in the wall, their swords drawn in readiness.

"Well, Franc, it seems we have a problem." Beric's terse summary of the situation left Hal open mouthed. "A problem?" she gasped.

"Aye. Came across siege weapons in the South as a lad. Fearsome, dangerous things they are."

Franc cast him a withering look. "I think we realise that, Beric." Another blow rattled the walls, breaking open further cavities in the fabric of the building.

"Of course they do have their weak points," the old training master continued in the same careless tone.

"Such as?" Franc stared at him.

"I do recall one particular siege in which we hurled hot pots of oil down on them. That stoked the buggers up well and truly. But of course Nérac's men have got the camouflage of the trees above them. So unless you want to incinerate the entire forest..." He shrugged his shoulders and gave his beard a contemplative stroke.

"Thank you, Beric." Hal said acidly. "Franc was right when he said we could count on your experience." She flinched as another lump of fortress bounced across the courtyard before piling into the smithy, bringing the timber-framed construction crashing to the ground.

"Give me a chance, lass." He frowned and turned to Franc. "At the first battle of Yegdan some brave young men of my acquaintance managed to smuggle themselves out of the fort during the siege. They got themselves behind the enemy and shot off a few rounds of flaming arrows at the tension straps on the trebuchet. Made quite the bonfire, I can tell you."

That seemed to catch Franc's attention. Rubbing at tired eyes, he asked Beric: "and did your young friends make it back to the fort?"

"Sadly, no. They were caught and hung. Terrible waste." He shook his head, his eyes glazing over for a moment. In spite of the surrounding chaos, Beric appeared lost in nostalgic reverie.

Hal let out a shrill note of surprise. "Franc!" she gasped. "The tunnel!"

He shook his head. "I know what you're thinking. Absolutely not, Hal. It's too risky."

"What's that?" Beric asked, snapping out of his trance.

"There's a tunnel leading out of the cellars and beyond the tree line!" Her voice was edged with excitement.

Franc seized her by the arm and dragged her back beneath the arched entrance, pushing her against the wall. "Hal, that is a family secret. You know full well why I showed you that tunnel."

She folded her arms, her expression sullen. "And you really think we can afford to keep family secrets at a time like this? I won't be running to Colvé, Franc. You can rest assured of that. Just give me a chance. We can use the tunnel to our advantage. A few archers - that's all it will take."

Her words dried up as Meracad hovered into view. Franc, however, had his back to the hall and did not see her. "It's suicide you're talking of! Even if you made it back through the tunnel you'd have Nérac's army on your tail."

"What's happening?" Having recovered from the earlier shock of the bombardment, Meracad now stared at Hal, her face creased with worry.

"Nothing." Hal bit her lip and looked away.

"Don't lie to me!" She looked up at Franc. "What do you mean by 'suicide'? What madness are you speaking of?"

Franc sighed. "Hal thinks she can destroy Nérac's trebuchet by taking a few men along the tunnel and shooting fire at them."

Meracad's lower lip trembled slightly, but her voice remained calm. "You can't let her!"

"There's no other way," Hal began.

"There's always another way, Hal! Franc's right. This *is* suicide you're speaking of." Outside, another rain of arrows washed into the courtyard. Hal caught the shrieks of the freshly injured and dying as the shafts drove home.

Beric had evidently been eavesdropping for he now stood in the entrance, a looming shadow in helmet and armour, backlit against the raw daylight of the courtyard. "Ah, you should know by now lass that when Hal's made up her mind there's no talking her out of it. Isn't that right, Franc?"

Hal caught her father's eye and noticed his reluctant nod. Her spirits lifted.

If Beric's intention had been to placate Meracad, he failed. "Don't listen to him!" She grabbed hold of Hal's wrists. "Beric acts as if we have nothing to lose."

"Well that's because we don't," Beric cut in. "If we don't destroy Nérac's siege weapons, we may as well sit down and wait for him to smash down the walls. And while we stand here arguing, that's exactly what he'll do."

"Well why must it be Hal?" Tears now streamed freely down Meracad's cheeks.

"Because this is my home, Meracad." Hal cupped the girl's face in her hands. "And I'd not have others put their lives at risk for my sake."

"Besides, I'll be with her." Hal looked at Beric in surprise. "You're coming too?" She asked.

"Oh aye. Wouldn't miss this for the world."

"Heave!" The granite slab made a crunching sound as crowbars were shoved underneath it and then wrenched upwards. Franc's men strained against the load, hauling the slab back before lowering it with a muffled thud onto the cellar floor. A sudden rush of putrid, musty wind blew out of the hole at their feet, forcing them against the walls of the cellar, hands covering faces in disgust.

"It's been closed for nearly a century," Franc explained, choking on the foulness of the air. Hal peered over the edge, but could make out no more than the top of a crumbling staircase and a few cobwebs which rode up and down on the subterranean breeze.

"Ready lass?" Beric clapped her on the back and she almost fell in. He caught her arm as she tumbled forwards.

"I will be if you don't kill me beforehand," she muttered. Her memory dredged up images of the thieves' tunnel beneath Colvé with its slimy, dripping walls; tonnes of densely-packed earth above her head had threatened a living burial beneath mud and earth and tree roots. A sudden chill coursed down her spine and her teeth chattered.

"These are two of my best archers." Franc introduced a pair of blonde-haired youths, both wearing the same eager, intelligent expression, both sporting quivers of arrows and bows across their backs.

"Olæc." The taller of the two stretched out his hand and Hal grasped it. "And this is my younger brother, Luc."

"An honour," she murmured, shaking the boy's hand in turn.

"The honour's ours, Miss," Luc said, smiling. "To be chosen for a mission such as this."

Hal turned to Meracad who stood at the base of the cellar steps, her hair knotted behind her head in a long, pale plait, her face gaunt and tense.

"Here, take this." Meracad pressed something sharp into her hand, and she uncurled her fingers around the shark's tooth. "Put it on," Meracad urged.

Hal attempted a grin but it faded from her lips as soon as it had appeared. "You think it will protect me?"

"No, but I want you to wear it." She locked Hal in an embrace which almost knocked her from her feet. "There's still chance, Hal. You don't have to go."

"I do." Hal knew that it was, at least in part, a lie. There were others who could go: others with far more experience of battle and warfare. And yet once that tiny kernel of an idea had planted itself in her mind, she could not let it go. The prospect of destroying Nérac's advantage was tempting in itself. But she knew, deep down, that there was another reason why she wanted to get outside Hannac. Nérac was out there somewhere, standing on the very rocks and amongst the very trees that she called home. And if she found him, all those obstacles which had been set before her would finally disappear. She would be free to live in love with Meracad. Perhaps Franc might even stake the family claim to Dal Reniac.

"I have to," she repeated. With slow and gentle purpose, she disentangled herself from Meracad's arms. Her lover's eyes grew wet, the blood draining from her lips. She whirled around and ran back up the cellar steps without another word.

"Come on, Hal." Franc tapped her on the shoulder and she turned to face him, her heart now playing out a throbbing, untameable rhythm against her ribcage. He scrutinised her with tired, bloodshot eyes. "Remember what I said, as soon as those arrows are released you make it back along the tunnel. But destroy the entrance first. I don't want Nérac's army under my cellar."

"I understand, father."

He smiled at that. "Father. That's the second time you've used that word."

"Well if this all goes to plan, I may even use it for a third time."

He laughed, catching her in a brief hug. "Don't let her talk you into anything foolish, Beric," he said, letting her go. Olæc and Luc had already begun to descend the steps, impatient to be off.

"It's a bit late for that, Franc," Beric threw back. "Ready, whelp?" The old training master's head disappeared below the level of the floor before she could launch herself at him. She grimaced and lowered herself through the cavity, following the bulk of his outline down stone steps which seemed so brittle with age they might grind to dust beneath her feet. Looking back, she saw the oblong of light from the cellar fade from view, and she had plunged into darkness by the time she reached the base.

She worked her fingertips across the walls, relieved to find that unlike the dank rock of the thieves' tunnel, these were dry and rough. So dry, in fact, that a few chips of stone worked free, snapping into fragments on the floor. Nerves on the verge of explosion, she yelled out into the darkness: "Beric!"

"We're down here, lass. Hurry up!" Beric's gruff tones issued forth in echoes from somewhere behind her head. Hal jumped around and ran in the direction of his voice, grateful not to be encumbered with armour. Their plan, Franc had explained, would depend upon them 'acquiring' some of Nérac's livery. She could hear her own breathing, sharp and erratic as she sped down the passage, occasionally making painful contact with the walls before running

full tilt into Beric who let out a loud curse. "Slow down, girl! You'll break your neck before we're even through the tunnel! Lads, light one of those arrows up so we can see where we're headed."

A spark leapt from flint onto an oily rag which Olæc had wrapped around the butt end of an arrow. He lifted it above his head as if it were a torch. Their faces flickered into view, distorted and grotesque in the darkness, like the ogres and goblins Hal had read of in fairytales as a child. Before them, the tunnel curled onwards into the void, its roof supported by identical rows of wooden joists held in place with oaken pins.

"Beric, I think there is something I ought to say." Her teeth chattered as if they had a life of their own.

"What is it, lass?"

"I don't like being underground."

Beric snorted. "Well you chose a fine time to tell us that. Don't be daft, girl. I've seen you duel with men twice your size and you're worried about a little dirt over your head?"

"It's quite a lot of dirt, actually." The joists were set at intervals about a foot apart, interspersed with crumbling chunks of rock and earth.

"Oh I recognise northern craftsmanship when I see it." Beric beamed her a patronising smile.

"You see, Hal, your great granddaddy really knew what he was doing." He took out his sword and prodded at the timber beam above their heads. A few fragments of limestone worked loose, splintering as they hit the floor. Her stomach knotted itself into a ball.

"I think I'll carry on if you gentlemen don't mind." Hal set off in front of them down the tunnel, Beric's laughter ringing in her ears. "D'you see that, fellas?" He jibed. "Afraid of the dark! What next, Hal? You'll be telling me there are monsters beneath your bed!"

She ignored him, striding with long, determined paces towards what she hoped must be the end. Behind her, Luc and Olæc joined in Beric's laughter at her expense. Anger claimed her for a moment, but soon gave way to a panic which seemed to slosh around in the pit of her stomach. She broke into a run, aware that Beric and the archers were now following, still smirking as they wandered down the tunnel. And then she heard it. A distant scattering of stones and pebbles on the ground and a popping, snapping sound. She whirled around. The men had heard it too for they stopped suddenly, the last weak flames of the oiled rag flickering out of existence. Then there was silence. Beric let out a long sigh. "No need for alarm. You've given us all the jitters, lass. Come on, boys." Hal detected a slight quaver to his voice. She set off again without another word and they trudged along in silence behind her. Again the sliding and shifting of shale onto the tunnel floor, this time louder, faster, and then another beam split open with an audible crack. Now they were all running, pushing each other towards the end of the tunnel as joist after joist burst, a century's worth of rock and rubble flung downwards as the shaft collapsed about their heads.

Hal sucked in a mouthful of chalky earth, coughing and spluttering as she clawed her way through the tide of debris. A shred of light emerged through cracks in the roof up ahead, only to disappear behind a release of soil which hit her square in the face. She stumbled on, eyes screwed shut, circling out her arms as if she were swimming in a vain attempt to push away the dirt. And then she seemed to stop choking, the air she took in was no longer thick with dust, but was driven by a breeze which bore upon it the fresh, lush scents of the forest. She could almost have screamed out in relief had it not been for an awareness that she was now rolling at rapid pace through the briars of the undergrowth. Trees and sky hove into view and then span with dizzying speed out of sight as the ground rose up to meet her. Again and again she turned, her body gathering motion, thorns ripping through her clothes and across her face. With one last lurch she felt herself fall, this time dropping vertically. She reached out with her hands in a desperate attempt to gain purchase on roots or branches before she landed on whatever was below, but it was too late. Hal thumped down with a strangled curse onto a sodden patch of moss and ferns, the breath shot out of her lungs and she lay, winded, bruised and battered, staring up in dumb surprise at the canopy of tree tops and the fast moving clouds that scudded across the sky above them.

The low murmur of men's voices carried downwards from the bank over which she had fallen. She twisted her head around, attempting to gain her bearings. A stream ran to her right, to her left the treeline petered out into low scrub and grassland. At least Franc had been right about the tunnel; she had not emerged in the middle of Nérac's camp. She levered herself up onto her elbows, scanning the undergrowth. There was no sign of Beric or the archers. Had they perished: crushed and suffocated by the weight of dusty earth? Was she now trapped behind her enemy's forces alone, her route back to Hannac buried beneath the forest floor?

The voices were getting closer. Hal caught the sound of twigs snapping under men's boots. She grabbed hold of a creeper which curled around the bank of the stream, hauling herself upright. A seam of pain opened up along her back, fanning out across the breadth of her shoulders, but she ignored it. Survival now would depend upon being one step ahead of an entire army.

A sword whipped through the creeper, severing it in a single blow. She dropped backwards, failing to reach for her own sabre, releasing a yelp of rage and pain as she hit the ground for a second time, then swallowing hard as a blade was placed against her throat.

Letrac's beaked face hovered into view on the peripheries of her vision, his head seeming to widen out of proportion as he crouched down on the wet ground beside her and peered into her face. Around him, four guards drew their swords, the tips pointing downwards towards her neck and chest.

"If I were a religious man, I'd say that God had chosen to answer my prayers. Our enemy falls from the heavens."

Letræc stroked his chin, his eyes coldly amused. Hal stared back up at him, her body surrendering to the clammy embrace of fear.

"Do you pray, Halanya?" Letræc asked, the thin trace of a smile playing at the edges of his lips. "Because it's never too late to start."

Chapter Twenty

A Flash of Gold

Hal's imagination flowed through the consequences of capture. "Finish this now," she said at last. Her voice sounded quiet and limp in defeat.

"Would that I could." Letræc's expression was almost sympathetic. "But I believe my employer would have my hide for such disloyalty." Feigning a reluctant shrug of his shoulders, he rose from his crouching position at her side and released an extravagant stretch. "Pick her up and take her to Nérac."

He yawned, now apparently bored with the whole business. "I need to check if any more of our enemies have thrown themselves upon our mercy."

Hal struggled against the hands which reached down to seize her arms and legs. They were dragging her to her feet now. She let out a hiss as their grip tightened around the tender, bruised flesh of her back and limbs. And then she saw Letræc's mouth rounding in shock. A low growl of pain issued from his throat. He looked downwards, frowning as if trying to study the arrow which sprouted from his chest, before tumbling backwards.

His men dropped to their knees, felled by consecutive shots. The last to go down attempted a scream of alarm, but was silenced when Beric's knife drove into his larynx. Hal reeled around, shaken and confused, encircled by corpses.

"Well, lassie, I think you owe us." Beric's hand slapped down on her shoulder. Her brow furrowed, her mind numb and blank. She stared vacantly into his grizzled, hairy face.

"No need to thank us, Hal. You can save your breath. I never heard a word of gratitude from her, lads. Not once."

He turned to Olæc and Luc who were both grinning at his taunts as they slung bows and quivers across their backs. The jibe brought her to her senses, fear now in retreat as anger took its place.

"Northern craftsmanship?" she sneered. "Your granddaddy knew what he was doing? Perhaps if you hadn't gone poking your sword in that joist we'd still have a route back to Hannac."

"And perhaps if you'd used your brains for once, you'd have followed us out the end of the tunnel instead of charging straight through the hillside and getting yourself caught!" He emphasised his point by jabbing a stubby index finger into her chest. She thrust his hand away.

"Ssshhh!" Olæc pulled them below the level of the bank, his brother flattening himself against the steep sided wet earth. Sounds filtered down through the trees: the tramping of boots, the sharpening of swords across whetstones, men's shouts. Olæc raised his head and sniffed the breeze.

"Smells like they're roasting meat up there."

Hal heard her own stomach grumble in protest, and recalled the thin broth Elis had served up: her one ration of the day.

"Basic siege strategy," Beric whispered back. "Nérac knows we'll starve. If the crofters catch a whiff of their own sheep roasting, their resolve might weaken."

He glanced at Hal, his eyes no longer mocking but serious, intent. "We need to get moving now, Hal, before we end up with Nérac's army upon us. Our way back is blocked. If we want to get close to Hannac again, we need to keep hidden."

He passed a calculating gaze across the bodies of Letræc and his men and then looked back at her. "Hope we can find something your size."

"Ready, lads? Hal?"

There had been little time to root around amongst the corpses for a good fit. Hal had stripped Letræc of his back and breastplates, before pulling on a tabard bearing Nérac's livery - a black hawk, its tongue long and red, its wings spanning her chest. She seized another man's helmet, lowering the visor. It was too large; she felt as if her head were encased in a bucket, but at least it kept her face hidden. Olæc, Luc and Beric were similarly attired in the enemy's armour, having plundered Letræc's men for swords, knives and arrows. They covered the bodies beneath layers of brushwood. Someone would find them eventually, but it could be later rather than sooner.

"We're Nérac's men now," Beric stated flatly. "Remember that," he added with a pointed glare in Hal's direction.

"Why are you looking at me?" she asked, her words muffled by the metal around her face.

"Because we've no business with heroics," he said, pulling on a helmet. Beric raised his sword and made a few preparatory swipes at the air. "We get up there, find the trebuchets, make the shots and then run like hell. Perhaps we'll make it to Berasé. If we're lucky. Franc will never

risk opening his doors at the moment." Hal saw his eyes narrow as he peered at them through the slits in the visor. "There's still chance to run," he added, his voice goading as if in dare.

Luc, Olæc and Hal gave a collective shake of their heads.

"Alright then," the older man stated with grim satisfaction. "Come on."

They followed the stream as it looped around trees, filing over a mossy mound of earth which led them deeper into the forest. At first the shouts of Nérac's men were distant echoes, disembodied voices which only hinted at the carnage that was taking place above them. A noise of rustling leaves and branches left Hal on edge but it was followed by the thin shape of a deer springing across their path, its own peaceful existence also shattered by war.

She was blinded for a second by the glint of late afternoon sunlight on polished metal and realised that they were now on the enemy's fringes. Hal cast a nervous glance at Beric but he pushed on without breaking his stride.

They made their first contact with Nérac's men after a few more paces; a tight little circle of soldiers sinking their teeth into the roasted haunches of a lamb, the juices dribbling down their cheeks. Hal attempted to ignore the protests of her empty stomach as the spiced scents of the meat wafted from the fire.

Beric hailed Nérac's men in silent salute. She stared after his departing back in surprise, before raising a hand to them as he had done. Luc and Olæc follow suit. The guards acknowledged them with a slight dip of their heads: nothing more. Her confidence somewhat bolstered, she continued upwards through the trees. If Nérac's men were more interested in fattening their bellies than fighting, they might stand a chance.

The enemy lines were more populated now; the outer rings straggling, looser, in some cases composed of injured men who had stepped back into the fray. Hal caught the whinny of horses as they strained against carts carrying fresh supplies, the twang of restrung bows. Turning to her right, she noticed a pair of pavilions, the striped canvas of their walls billowing outwards. A table had been set in front of one of them, its surface strewn with maps and diagrams. She stopped for a moment, rooted to the ground. The flaps of the doors were pushed aside by hands coated in chainmail. A man strode up to the table, his armour a burnished gold in colour, curling black locks of hair sweeping backwards from his brow, greying at the tips. It was Nérac. Hal's hand itched its way towards her sword.

"Letræc and his scouts not back yet?" He addressed an attendant who stood, wash basin in hands, waiting while his master splashed water across his face.

"No, Sir."

Nor likely to be. Hal smirked inwardly, her fingers curling around the hilt of her sabre.

"Strange. They've been gone for hours. Send someone out to find him. The breach has opened up. We'll be inside Hannac by nightfall." He wiped his face on a towel.

What little self-possession Hal could lay claim to suddenly deserted her. So Beric had been right about one thing - they had been sitting targets in Hannac. Now, however, everything seemed different. Her enemy was no more than a stone's throw away, unprepared if not unarmed. His hateful machines could be brought down, his own life extinguished within a heart's beat. Her hand rose and with it came the sword. She drew behind the leafy shelter of a sycamore, her gaze never leaving N rac as he leant over the table smoothing out a map, his dark, arrogant eyes reading victory on it.

Hesitation would cost her everything. Her sword now fully drawn, she edged her way out of the shadows. It all seemed so easy: just to raise the weapon above that sloping neck, to bring it down at a single stroke. No resistance, no struggle. Only the thud of his head hitting the table, the blank spaces of the map absorbing his blood....

Beric was in front of her. Over his shoulder, she saw N rac roll the map up with a brisk flick of his wrists, swing round and duck back beneath the canvas of his pavilion. The old training master gave a sharp push to her chest and she reeled backwards. Seizing her by the arm, he dragged her further up the slope, stopping only once they had reached a secluded patch of undergrowth.

"You had to, didn't you?" Beric's eyes bulged with anger. "I said no heroics, and there you are trying to take a swipe at the man himself!"

"But if I'd killed him..."

"Exactly. What if you'd killed him?" Beric spat out his words from behind the barrier of his visor. "Would they all have stopped fighting and gone home? Our aim, in case you'd forgotten, is to put the trebuchets out of action." He rapped on her helmet with his knuckles. "You were born a halfwit and you'll die a halfwit."

Her veins swelled with shame and resentment. She was no longer amongst his duellists, to be humiliated and scorned into submission. Her fists bunched into balls. She opened her mouth, preparing to protest, just as two of N rac's guards wandered past.

"Having trouble here?" The question was addressed to Beric who they had clearly mistaken for a higher ranking officer. That galled even more.

"Nothing that can't be handled," he muttered.

"Well we're to take ourselves to the walls. N rac expects the enemy to fall before dusk."

They passed on and Beric let out a long, explosive sigh of relief. "Come on! You heard the gentlemen," he chided, his tone laden with sarcasm. "We'll be back in Hannac before nightfall."

"I wish," Luc muttered with a sideways glance at Hal. She swallowed back her angry words and followed them up the steep side of the plateau and into the deepening rings of soldiers.

They passed amongst the outer ranks of cavalry, horses hoofing the ground and snorting, impatient to be on the move. Hal knew that N rac would not even use his knights unless

Marta Ilega launched an assault out of Berasé. And the possibility of that happening was seeming less likely with every passing hour. Further up, forming a tighter, more disciplined line were the infantry, pressing forward with axes, swords, spears and bows. Hal caught a distant glimpse of the white base stones of Hannac through the trees and watched in near despair as the serried ranks marched onwards, some men picked off by arrows while others stepped over the bodies of their fallen comrades.

Beric gave a slight nod to his right and left, spreading out his arms as a caution to stop and herded them back into the undergrowth. Crouching amongst the briars and ferns, Hal craned her neck backwards to see two enormous wooden contraptions jutting out over the lines of foot soldiers, their highest points almost level with the tops of the pines. Her pulse gained in speed as she considered the latent force of such machines. Enormous beams hinged between timber-framed skeletons; ropes and pulleys balanced counterweights the size of a croft at one end, a massive leather sling at the other. A tight knot of men hovered around the trebuchets, some heaving back on a winch, dragging up the counterweight which swayed dangerously above their heads.

"Olæc and Hal, take the machine to the right," Beric whispered, removing his helmet for a moment to wipe the sweat from his face. "Luc and I'll take the other one. Try to fire from behind the lines and over their heads at the frame. That might give you enough time to run back down through the forest before they've realised who was responsible. Maybe we'll be able to make it back to Berasé. If not, make sure your death was worth all of this. Ready?" He pulled his helmet back on. Hal nodded, her earlier resentment at his harsh words now fading from memory. Their next actions would determine the future of Hannac. She felt the shark tooth pressing into the skin of her throat and in her mind's eye she saw Meracad running away from her up the cellar steps. That was not how all of this had to end.

They shook hands briefly and then parted. For once, Hal was grateful for the weight of her helmet as she and Olæc headed towards the assembled mass of foot soldiers. Nérac's men might not recognise her as the heir to Hannac, but she wasn't willing to gamble on that fact. Olæc appeared calm, focussed, as he picked his way amongst the dregs of the infantry, stealing covert glances at the trebuchet in order to establish the best position for firing. Hal could only wish that she blended in amongst the ranks of men as well as he did.

Olæc raised a cautioning hand and stopped. They were almost directly opposite the main beam of the siege weapon; the counterweight gave another wild swing as it was hauled upwards into position, ready to be dropped with a force that would send rocks the size of a man's head hurtling into the walls of Hannac. Olæc gave a stiff nod and she knew that it was time.

"Oy!" A soldier's cry rang out behind them.

"Do it, Olæc!" Hal urged from between clenched teeth. Olæc began to raise his bow.

"What the hell are you two doing here?" The guard's hands were on their shoulders. Olæc kept his bow trained upwards.

"We need archers at the front, idiot." He slammed his hands into Olæc's back, sending the archer stumbling forwards. Hal had no choice but to follow, as Olæc was propelled forward in a series of sharp shoves from Nérac's men, their voices laced with menace.

"No slackers round here!"

"Coward!"

"You'll take your chances with the rest of us!"

Now they were in front of the trebuchet itself, caught in the current of soldiers as they swept on up towards Hannac, the fortress walls looming above them and the whole of Nérac's army at their backs, blocking any last hopes of escape.

"For God's sake, Olæc, just shoot and run!" She yelled to him.

"Grab the flint - it's on my belt," he screamed back. They were almost pulled apart as men ran up between them. She lost sight of him for a moment and then he was in view once again. Olæc drew two arrows from his quiver and fitted them to his bow, the oiled rags wrapped around their shafts flapping like flags in the breeze.

Hal delved into the leather pouch on his belt, pulling out a jagged piece of flint and a small knife. She struck the two together with no effect.

"Hal! Quickly!" Olæc shouted. She jumped out of the way just in time, as one man almost ran into her at full tilt. To their left came an eruption of furious shouts, and she turned her head to see Luc's arrows burrowing their way into the top ropes of the other trebuchet. Olæc allowed himself a proud grin. "He's a good shot, my brother. Quickly!"

Nerves now ready to snap, Hal brought the knife down on the flint in a last desperate blow, igniting the oiled rags in a spray of sparks. Olæc twisted around and in the same sleek movement, drew back the bow and launched the arrows straight through the wooden cage of the trebuchet and into the winch.

"Run!" He screamed, already sprinting up the slope as their act of sabotage began to take effect. Black palls of smoke billowed from the rope which was already melting, its skeins fraying and splitting in the heat.

Amidst the uproar and confusion, Hal broke into a chaotic run. The trebuchet had been anchored to the slope at its front by two fat lengths of cordage which were now also beginning to burn. Racing past, she brought her sword down on them: first one rope and then its twin.

If Nérac's guards had been oblivious to her presence, they were now hard on her heels. She heard the frame of the trebuchet shudder and groan, caught the scent of molten twine and fibre, and risked a last glance over her shoulder to witness the entire machine lurch backwards. The counterweight swung like a massive pendulum over the heads of startled

men at arms, before plunging to the ground in a fiery mass of ropes, timber and pulleys, crushing those who had been unlucky enough to stand in its way.

A strange thrill possessed her as she turned back towards the slope, Olæc's lithe figure now high above her, winding around rocks and trees. She twisted to her left, and was surprised to see Beric and Luc also crashing through the foliage and undergrowth some fifty feet above her. Clearly they had also failed to make it back down through the forest. The force of men behind them had been too great. She heard the excited calls of Nérac's men below, trailing her as she scrambled up the slope:

"There they are!"

"Take a shot at 'em, lads!"

Hal was stifling in the helmet, her breathing restricted, sweat pouring down her face and stinging her eyes. They were closing in on her anyway: what difference would it now make to reveal her face? She pulled off the helmet and hurled it to the ground, wiping her plastered hair from her eyes as she ran.

Hannac was now in view; she could see the mass of men pressing in towards the breach like worker bees at a hive. The trebuchets had done their job, she realised with a sudden sinking of the heart. The southern wall was missing battlements, its stonework ruptured. The breach was now the width of several men, and Franc would be hard pressed to defend such an obvious weakness. Perhaps their destruction of the trebuchets had been in vain.

"Hal!" Beric's voice rang out over the carnage and she caught a glimpse of him up ahead. Her strength was now at an ebb; the light had begun to fade from the forest and she realised that evening was approaching. This seemed to have been the longest day of her life.

Beric was nearer now, waiting for her amongst a clump of pines to the south west of the breach. She was running, stumbling, clawing her way upwards over the bodies of fallen men, every breath an agony as her lungs strained against her ribs. He was screaming at her, yelling, and then his expression transformed itself into one of sudden shock, horror, rage even.

Hal was still moving, but something seemed to have sapped the last ounces of strength from her veins. It was almost like a dream in which she tried to run but her legs took her nowhere. Beric was mouthing words at her she didn't understand, his lips opening and closing around vowels and syllables that made no sense. And then pain suddenly sliced its way through her left arm and she understood. As he dragged her upwards to join the archers amongst the pines - their last possible place of refuge - she looked down at the arrow that had plunged its way into her flesh just above the elbow, blood already staining her gambeson with a fine red streak.

"My God!" She sank to her knees in front of him, the words stealing their way out of her mouth against her will. "Beric! We're going to die out here!"

Chapter Twenty-One

Eavesdropping

“Olaec lad, take a quick look and tell me how far away they are.” Beric pushed Hal upright and scanned her face, his expression grim.

Olaec raised his head and then quickly bobbed back down again below the rise of the undergrowth. “Any minute, Beric. There’s at least a dozen of them headed our way.”

“I’m sorry, lass,” the old trainer muttered, half to himself.

“Sorry for what?” Hal slumped back against the trunk of a tree, sensing the blood drain from her face.

“For this.” Before she was even aware of it, he had sliced through the arrow shaft with his sword, cutting it in half. She felt the blade grate against bone, and bit back on a scream.

“You’d never run with that thing sticking out your arm,” he explained. “And if I pull it out now, you’ll bleed to death.”

“Run?” Was she delirious now? Was he still talking of running? Perhaps the pain was wreaking havoc with her senses.

“Aye, lass. Your only chance now is to try and fight your way back through the breach.” To her surprise he drew her towards him and kissed her forehead. “You’re the bravest woman I ever met, Hal. You’ll do it.”

“What do you mean, I’ll do it? What about you?” She stared at him, her eyes half wild, the torment in her arm passing through nerves and translating itself into a feverish nausea.

“Well, child, it seems I have an assignation elsewhere.” He got to his feet and patted down his chainmail as if smoothing out the creases in a silk shirt. “Gentlemen,” he saluted the archers.

“It’s been a pleasure. And now I suggest you run.”

“No!” Hal screamed, his intention now obvious, but it was too late. As Olaec and Luc hauled her to her feet, Beric charged back down the bank, his broadsword raised high above his head, straight into the path of their pursuers. Hal heard the blade of his sword crash against enemy steel and struggled to release herself from the archers’ grip, but they dragged her on towards the breach.

“Don’t let his death be in vain, Hal!” She caught the tension in Olaec’s throat. “Beric is dying to give us a chance.”

His words seemed to pump fire into her veins. Beric had always wanted the last word, it seemed. But if she lived, she would tell Franc of their old friend’s sacrifice. And only then would she grieve.

Sensing her fresh leash of strength, Luc and Olaec let go and they hurled themselves into the dense cluster of soldiers around the breach, now packed in so close together that many were fighting chest to chest. Her arm flashed and throbbed, the pain acute, but it seemed as if she could isolate that part of her body: as if it no longer belonged to her. Hal drove her sword into the nape of a man’s neck. He crumpled in a series of coarse spasms and she moved in deeper amongst the enemy ranks, aware that their focus was set on what lay before them and not behind.

Olaec and Luc fired shot after well-aimed shot into the backs of unsuspecting soldiers, before pulling out the knives and axes they had taken from Letraec’s men and launching themselves into the melee.

Hannac seemed so close now; she caught glimpses of the courtyard and of Franc’s guards as they pushed back against the waves of intruders. To her right, Olaec had already reached the fragmented walls of the breach itself and was clambering across them, leaping with a light spring over the other side and into the waiting arms of his friends. She pressed on, relieved for the archer but fearful for his brother. One of Nérac’s man fell backwards, almost on top of her, an axe embedded in his face. Hal jumped aside just in time, and found herself face to face with Arec.

At first she did not recognise the captain of the Hannac guard. His eyes were murderous. Having lost his axe, he wielded his broadsword with ferocious, wild swipes at her head and chest. She parried and blocked, screaming out his name in the hope that he would see her but he seemed almost a man possessed.

“Arec! Stop! It’s me! Hal!” Still his sword rang down blow after blow until she had neared exhaustion. Her mind detached itself from her body, registering the irony of the situation: to have come so far only to be killed by Arec. And only then did a flash of recognition light up his face. His eyes rounded in surprise and, grabbing her by the arm, he pulled her back amongst the Hannac men, hurling her back through the breach. She landed on her stomach on the dry, dusty earth of the courtyard, her vision now blurring, a strange incessant ringing noise in her ears. Hal felt herself being rolled over onto her back and then Arec’s head floated into view, just inches from her face.

“Hal! You’ve got an arrow in your arm.”

“Yes. I know that.” She was no longer sure if she was actually speaking.

“Those things are sharp, Hal.”

“Yes. I know that too.” Her head swam, and it seemed as if the fortress walls were moving closer together, she was being squashed between them. And then everything went black.

Meracad leant back in her chair, her mind a strange fusion of relief and anxiety. Relief, because Hal had come back. Against all the odds, she had fallen like an injured bird through the breach. And now she lay on their bed, stripped to her underclothing, Arc's stitches in her arm and a bandage soaking up the blood which still leaked out in thick, crimson drips onto the blankets.

Anxiety, because Franc had said the wound could fester, burn and ooze; Hal's life still hung in the balance. And above all else there was that nagging, bitter thought that seemed to have plagued her ever since Hal disappeared into that tunnel below the cellar. Hal had left her again. Of course she had dressed up her reasons in courageous terms. It was for the good of Hannac. Who else should defend the place she now called home? And yet, Meracad realised, Hal had not been honest with her. She knew now, for certain, that risk courted Hal's attentions as much as love did. And that thought brought Meracad almost to the brink of despair.

There was a soft knock at the door, and Magda entered. Meracad managed a thin smile on witnessing the kitchen maid now dressed in shirt and trousers, a sword hanging loosely at her waist, her hair fastened in a tight knot behind her head.

“How is she?” Magda whispered.

“I don't know. She hasn't woken.” Meracad leant forward and took Hal's limp hand in her own, squeezing it as if to inject it with life. She turned to Magda, her expression unreadable.

“Are you going to fight?”

“What else can I do?” Magda would not look at her, it seemed. “Master Franc says that he needs every sword he can lay claim to. I know I'm no soldier, but I once put a kitchen knife to good effect.”

Meracad nodded, casting her mind back to their escape from Dal Reniac. The girl was strong, brave - there was no doubting that.

“And I'm quite handy with a pitchfork too,” she smirked. Meracad threw her a sideways glance but Magda was giving nothing away. What other secrets did she keep cloistered behind those dark, furtive eyes, she wondered.

“I don't know why you let her go,” Magda said suddenly, with a slight dip to her voice. Meracad looked at her in surprise.

“I had to,” she replied. The words tasted like lies.

“Why did you have to? Her place is here with you, not out there in the forest with the enemy. She’s so...selfish.” Magda bit her lips and looked down at the floor, clearly recognising that she had overstepped the mark.

Meracad remained silent for a moment, chewing over the girl’s words.

“You’re right,” she said at last.

Magda stared at her in surprise. “I didn’t mean...”

“She is selfish. God knows she has faults enough for us all and more to spare.” She smiled a little at that, and then got up, bent over the bed and kissed Hal’s lifeless lips.

“But something inside me finds her so beautiful, that I could forgive her for all those faults and for all the trouble that she causes and for all the times she has wrung my heart, and I would still have room for forgiveness.” She watched as a shadow fell across Magda’s intense face and a sympathy stirred within her.

“I’m going. I have one thing to ask you, Miss.” There was a slight bias on that last word. Meracad flinched.

“Please, Magda. You know my name.”

“You were my mistress in Dal Reniac, as you are here. But I would still like to ask a favour of you. If something happens to me, my brother, Edaec...” her voice trailed away, but Meracad knew what she wished for.

“I’ll look after him as if he were my own,” she replied. “But you will come back to us, Magda. As Hal did.”

Magda shook her head, her eyes grim. “Not as she did.” She pulled back the door and was gone. Meracad groaned, burying her face in her hands. Her memory raced back to Dal Reniac, to that captive time when Magda had been perhaps the only friendly face, passing her in a corridor or serving her with wine in the great hall. And always those same, deep interrogative eyes, as if she were probing Meracad’s very soul. How could she have been so blind?

“Has she gone?” Hal’s words sliced through her thoughts and she looked up, sharply.

“You’re awake! God, I thought you’d left me for good.” Bending over the bed, she drew her fingers lightly across the briar-scratched mess of Hal’s face. This time, Hal’s lips responded to her kiss.

“No, I’m still here,” Hal said, her voice quiet and strained. “With all my faults and more to spare.”

“You overheard!”

“Eavesdropping. There’s another flaw. The list just continues.” Hal’s dry lips cracked into a smile. Meracad released a mock groan of frustration. “Let’s just say you’re incorrigible and leave it at that. But I love you anyway.”

"Thank God." Hal raised herself on her good arm with a wince. "But I don't think that's what Magda wanted to hear. Now we know why she was so helpful in Dal Reniac. It certainly wasn't for my sake."

"Are you jealous?" Meracad stifled the urge to laugh.

"No. Of course not."

"You are! I can hear it in your voice, Hal. If what you suggest were true, she wouldn't have helped us, would she? She would have betrayed you to N rac."

Hal closed her eyes for a moment as if considering this a possibility. "No, she's a good woman," she said at last, lying back down again with a light grunt of pain. "She doesn't have it in her." Silence descended on the room like the shadow of a cloud across fields. The distant sounds of the siege filtered through their windows, but it all seemed somehow very far away, as if it were happening to other people in another time.

"I saw him," Hal whispered at last, her voice a raw croak.

"N rac?" Meracad experienced a brief pang of terror, mixed with hatred. Even his name had the power to conjure up emotions she had hoped lay dormant.

"He had his back to me. I could have killed him. Beric stopped me." Meracad noticed how Hal's lips quivered a little on speaking of her old training master; how tears stood out in her eyes. She put her hand against the duellist's face, her palm becoming wet with Hal's hot tears.

"He was a wise man," Meracad murmured, not really knowing quite what else to say.

"He was a bloody idiot!" Hal exclaimed, hiding her grief behind a show of bluster. "He could have made it back through the breach with us."

"The archers say otherwise."

"The archers are fools too."

"Brave fools."

"Perhaps."

She sniffed, drawing her good arm across her eyes, wiping away the tears. Meracad reached down and picked up the shark's tooth which still hung around Hal's neck, rolling it between her fingers. "You still have it."

"Of course." Hal clutched Meracad's hand in her own. "I thought I'd never touch you again. That I'd not hear your voice. Or be able to feel guilty once more about letting you down," she added with a wry smile.

"You feel guilty?" Meracad leant down again and kissed Hal's forehead, inhaling the slight tang of sweat on her hair, the scents of the forest, of bracken and grass still lingering on her skin. "Well, let that be a punishment, Hal. You can have no idea how I felt while you were out there in the forest." She stroked some wayward locks of fringe out of the duellist's eyes. "For all I said to Magda, I'm not sure that I can forgive you for that."

Hal blinked back a few stray tears. "Nor should you," she whispered.

Meracad rose, clearing her throat. "You must be hungry. I'll have Elis bring up some broth."

"Delicious."

Meracad caught the sardonic chime to Hal's voice. "Our stocks are low, Hal. And some crofters are giving what little they have to their children."

"I know, I know. Nérac's men were roasting their sheep out there in the forest."

A small seed of anger unfurled itself deep within Meracad's thoughts. She gripped the end of the bed as she turned to leave, her knuckles turning white under the pressure.

"He'll pay for this, Hal. He'll pay for everything."

Hal stared up at her, eyes rounding in surprise on catching the venom in Meracad's words.

"I hope you're right," she said at last.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Good Hunting

Marta Ilega stared in disgust and disbelief at the guards and tenants gathered before her. Striding across the dais at the far end of Berasé's great hall, she peered down into a crowd of sullen faces and shaking heads, of mutterings and grumblings and protest.

Marta cut through the drone of mumbled words and disaffection with a sharp slice of her hand. Eyebrows were raised, arms crossed, eyes brimmed with scepticism and resentment. She clenched her jaw and jutted her chin forwards. This was not going to be easy.

"So that's it, is it?" Her words fell across the silence like pebbles dropped into a deep well. She caught sight of a suite of statues beneath the interior columns of the hall: hunters and their prey frozen in marble. Even they seemed to mock her.

"Our brothers and sisters would rather die than surrender Hannac. And we'll just sit here and wait for our turn. That's what you all want?" Her lips curled downwards in contempt.

The air was thick with angry, restless whisperings, above which rose a single, strident voice: "It's not our fight, Marta."

Ilega twisted round, recognising immediately the lean, wiry crofter with his dark mop of hair, his swarthy face, the drawl of his voice.

"It's not our fight, you say, Roderæc Lemar? Not our fight?" She glared at him, the light from distant windows glinting off the silver details on her armour. He held her gaze and then looked away, swatting at the air as if to emphasise the futility of argument.

"Those are our friends, Lemar." Her voice was tight now with repressed rage. Perhaps she ought to turn him out of Berasé altogether for his insolence.

"Well one of them certainly is, Marta." Lemar was warming to his theme, buoyed on the supportive nods and murmured agreement of his fellow crofters. "*Your* friend."

A few skittish peals of laughter echoed around the room. Lemar grinned up at her, daring her to challenge him.

"Yes, he is my friend." Marta's quiet words cut through the air of nervous amusement like a knife. The laughter ebbed away into silence.

"I said Franc Hannac is my friend." Her voice raised this time, the words seemed to ring from pillar to pillar. "He is the friend of Berasé. If any of you doubts that, have the courage to say it to my face."

She stalked across the dais to stand directly before Lemar. His dark eyes grew less settled, the scorn fading. He looked away.

"Well, Lemar? Or perhaps you believe Bruno Nérac is our friend? A man who has treated the Nests with nothing but contempt, who has seized this opportunity to serve his own ambitions, and who will put everyone of us to the sword, no matter whether our homes be Hannac, Pæga or Berasé?"

The atmosphere seemed to alter as she spoke. She heard a few faint hums of agreement. Some of her people must have guts, she assured herself.

"Pæga won't help us." Lemar's face had darkened, his lips a razor's width between a scowl and a smirk. "And I'll be damned if I'll fight for the Hannac girl's folly."

Marta's scornful laughter drowned out his words. "So it's a fool who falls in love, Lemar? Well if that be the case, who in this room now will admit they are not fools?" She glanced out again at the people of Berasé. Fervour had entered some eyes, mouths upturned into smiles, no longer scoffing or doubtful, but proud.

"It's a coward who won't fight for their love's sake," Marta continued, sensing her confidence grow as the tide of sentiment rolled in her direction. "Are you a coward, Lemar?" She leant forwards, thrusting her face almost into his as she spoke. "Or perhaps you fancy getting into bed with Bruno Nérac? A fine couple you'd make, the pair of you, I'm sure."

Her mocking words elicited a roar of raucous laughter from the assembled tenants and Lemar's cheeks glowed red with shame. Marta straightened up, a smug curl to her lips. Now to gain on her advantage.

"If any of you are of a mind to sleep with our enemy, declare yourselves and I'll let you go. I'll harbour no traitors."

The laughter died away again. All eyes were on her now. Marta had prepared for this moment as best she could, putting her artistic talents to effect. She was aware of the morning sun streaming in through the high windows above her, her hair lit up like gold in its rays. Her armour, polished to resemble wrought silver and inlaid with the white hart of the Berasé crest had been forged for this very day. She glanced to right and left, to the portraits adorning the walls of the hall: of her mother, father, grandparents, and she prayed that she would now live up to her ancestral name.

"I am going out there to fight. Now you can all sit here, if you like. You can all nestle together, tight and cosy around Berasé's warm hearth, stopping your ears to the sound of Hannac's fall. And make no mistake, it will fall without our help. When they have reduced that ancient, noble building to a pile of rubble, cut off the heads of Franc Hannac and his daughter, taken

Meracad Nérac and her child back to a life of misery, enslaved all the crofters who are left or put them to the sword, when that moment comes, Bruno Nérac will turn his head to Berasé and Pæga. He will tell himself he is not safe with two such powerful houses as ours still living to bear witness to his cruelty and his ambition. He *will* come for us. For all of us. What will you do then?"

She cast a stern gaze around the room, reading the outward signs of terror: faces paling, eyes wide open and wild, parents clutching their children's hands. Only Lemar turned away, shaking his head, his lips set in a derisive sneer.

"I'll make you a bargain, Lemar!" Marta called out to the crofter's departing back. He stopped but made no effort to face her.

"You can sit here minding the children, while we go out to fight. And if we're all killed out there, you can shake Nérac's hand when he steps over the threshold and welcome him into Berasé. And perhaps if you lick his arse enough, he might just let you live."

She could not resist a smile. Lemar's bearing suggested that he was struggling against the urge to throw her insults back in her face. His shoulders trembled under the weight of suppressed rage, she could see the back of his bullish neck turning a vivid shade of red. And then he pushed his way through the crowds, swung back the double doors to the hall and marched out, slamming them behind him. The sound of his footsteps reverberated down the corridor. Marta let out a hard, guttural sigh of relief.

"So," she said at last, drawing her sword and raising it in the air. "Do we fight?"

There was silence again. Her heart almost broke. Was there not another weapon in Berasé to command besides her own? She looked to left and right at the family portraits once again, this time offering up a silent apology.

"We're with you, Marta."

"What?" She craned her neck, peering out into the mass of living portraits. A single old man, his hair grey and matted, his face crumpled with time spoke again. "I said, we're with you." He lifted a gnarled wooden staff above his head.

Marta smiled. "I'd consider it an honour to fight at your side, old father."

Another hand was thrust into the air, this time clutching a spear. "It would be my honour too, Marta Ilenga."

She recognised the guard, a young man who had entered her service from the crofts. "I praise your courage, Sir."

More hands were raised, some clutching swords, knives, bows, others the tools of their trade: shepherd's crooks, rakes, hammers. A sharp thrill, a quiet sense of wonder seemed to work its way up Marta's spine as the people of Berasé rallied to the defence of their home, breaking the silence and tension with battle cries and calls to arms.

"Are you with me?" She yelled out above the sudden chaos.

"Aye!" They responded in a single voice. Marta threw back her head and laughed.

"Then let's take this fight back to Nérac himself. Follow me!" She jumped down from the dais and ran amongst them out of the great hall, out into the courtyard where her horse was held in readiness by grooms. She launched herself up into the saddle, turning round to witness men and women spilling out of doors on every side of the courtyard to join her.

"Open the gates!" Marta screamed. Guards raced forwards to pull back bolts, raise the portcullis, heave open the massive doors to Berasé. She swung her heels into the stallion's flanks, forcing it out onto open moorland, the war-torn walls of Hannac just visible on the far end of the plateau.

Nérac squinted against the light, taking in the steep, moss-ridden heights of the crags beneath Hannac's eastern wall. His officers had done their best to persuade him that they were unassailable. Stunted trees clung to jagged, splintered outcrops, the gnarled fingers of their roots working their way into crevices and around boulders. Perched above it all, an eagle astride its nest, was the fortress itself, its stonework rising thirty feet above the rock; the ancient masterpiece of ancient masons.

He turned to the guard beside him, a bloated, red-faced oaf, who had so far done nothing more than lord it over their prisoners from the crofts.

"Tell them to climb," Nérac stated flatly.

"Sir," red-face stammered, his skin now the colour of a ripe beet, "no one would get more than a few feet up that. The shale runs off it like water."

"If we send enough of them up there one should succeed," Nérac snapped. His gaze fell on the lines of men and boys seated on the ground in rows, tethered like animals with rope and cordage.

"But we'll never get ladders up it," the guard whined.

Nérac's face was now taut and white with anger.

"I would not waste ladders on the swine anyway."

"And if they will not climb, Sir? I mean, who would? It's suicide."

"Precisely why I'll not waste any of my men on it, soldier. Give me a bow."

"Sir?"

"I said give me a bow!" His patience all but gone, Nérac bellowed into the guard's ear. The man's heavy jowls trembled. He bent over with difficulty and retrieved a bow from a pile stacked beneath a tree, handing it to Nérac with fat, white, shaking hands. Nérac approached the crofters.

"You were saved for a reason," he said. They looked up at him, their faces blank, all trace of hope gone. "And that reason was not to put a drain on my supplies. You will take bows, knives if we can spare a few, and you will climb those crags. If you reach the walls of Hannac, you will climb those too. Then you will attack our enemies on their eastern side, where they will least expect it."

He surveyed the rows of upturned faces, noting with dull dispassion the horror which now crept into their eyes. Some of them were already struggling against their bonds.

"I see that my plan does not impress you." Without warning, he set an arrow to the string and fired it into the chest of one of the crofters, a thick-set farmer of middle age. With a series of agonised splutters and convulsions he rolled onto his side, blood flecking the corners of his mouth. His fellow captives froze, watching as his life leaked away and he was gone.

"Line your men up behind them," Nérac informed the guard, who was almost on his knees in fear. "If they show any sign of hesitating, fire at will. Now cut them free."

He turned his back to the howls and screams, the crofters' desperate pleas. How they would be his loyal servants if he spared them; they would fight with courage, pledge their lives to his service, only please not the crags - they were certain death. The voices merged with the general sounds of the siege: a dirge, a drone which he would put behind him as soon as he had cleared the end of the plateau and was back in his pavilion on its southern flank.

A squire waited for him on the outskirts of the forest, holding his horse by the reins. There was danger to be had in spending too much time beyond the natural cover of the trees: often as not from stray arrows bouncing back off the fortress walls. Yet Nérac now stopped before the tree line and tilted his head to one side, listening intently. A horse thudded towards him; he caught the rustle of bracken and briar as they were crushed under the weight of hooves. Breaking through the edge of the woodland in a sudden flash of steel and leather, a knight now stopped before him, already buckled into his armour and a metal glove curled around a raised lance. Nérac frowned. Strange. He had given no orders to his cavalry.

"What is it?" He looked up at the horseman, his pulse quickening.

"Sir, Marta Ilenga has just ridden out of Berasé with her people and is headed for the western walls of Hannac."

For the first time that morning, Nérac smiled. "Well if Ilenga wishes to play games with us, I should hate to disappoint her." He clambered up into the saddle of his horse and pulled it back to face the rider. "Go ahead and inform the cavalry. They will wait until she has reached Hannac and then crush her against its walls."

The knight nodded and left through the forest at a gallop. Nérac watched him go for a moment before urging his horse towards the shelter of the trees with a slight flick of the reins. With a sudden rush of feathers, his hawk slammed down onto his gauntlet, the remains of a half-eaten sparrow hanging from its beak. He stopped in surprise, waiting for the bird to gulp

down its prey before placing a hood over the jet-black beads of its eyes. There was good hunting to be had in the forests around Hannac.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Enemy You Killed

"Give me something to do, Franc. I'm going mad!" Hal clambered up the stairs onto the west curtain wall.

"You could go back to bed." He continued to gaze over the battlements, scanning the horizon. "I've neither the time nor the energy to nursemaid you, Hal. And what the hell are you doing up here without armour on anyway? Nérac's rearming. He hasn't given up."

Hal groaned and sat down on the stone slabs of the walkway beneath the ramparts, drawing up her knees and resting her arms on them. Her father shook his head in irritation, let out a long, low sigh and raked his hands through unkempt locks of hair.

"I mean it, Hal. Your attack on the trebuchets gained us some time, but he'll be back. And I've not enough men if he opens up another breach."

She picked up a discarded arrow shaft and threw it petulantly off the side of the walkway. "Then let me fight, Franc. The longer I lie there, the more I feel my arm. If I were busy, I'd ignore it." She raised her good hand to the sleeve of her shirt, tracing the swathes of bandages beneath. The wound throbbed and pulsed.

"You're lucky you didn't lose your arm altogether, Hal. I should say a few more days in bed is not such a hardship after all."

"Under the circumstances..." her words faded away on noticing Magda returning from another bout at the breach, trailing her sword behind her in exhaustion. Hal knew that it was a sight she ought to welcome. This was not the first time Magda had risked her own life in the defence of others. And yet for some reason, she found herself unable to join in the general praise of Magda's selflessness and courage.

"What's she doing out there? She'll get herself killed," she asked, unable to curb the note of resentment in her voice.

"Who?"

"Her." Hal indicated Magda with a curt flick of her head. Franc twisted round, amusement entering his tired, red-rimmed eyes.

"She's a natural, that one, Hal. We're lucky to have her. As soon as Arec put a sword in her hands she was ripping ribbons out of the enemy."

"Well it obviously makes a welcome change to peeling potatoes." A current of pain swept down Hal's arm as if punishing her for her thankless words. She rested her head against the cool limestone of the wall, biting her lip.

Franc raised an eyebrow. "I'm surprised at you, Hal. You almost sounded like Cara then."

"What?" She gasped, glaring up at him. He smiled, evidently aware that his gibe had hit home, and went back to surveying the moors. Hal looked on moodily as Magda disappeared inside the great hall, and then turned to her father on hearing him whistle in surprise.

"What is it?" She struggled to her knees and peered through the embrasure.

"There! Can't you see?" His voice was hoarse and unsteady. She followed the line of his outstretched arm as he indicated a distant point on the plateau. Hal sucked in her breath. A faint line of horses were powering their way across the moors, fanning out around the swampy ground and then regrouping as they headed directly for Hannac. She bent over the wall to observe a few straggling units from Dal Reniac break into a panic upon witnessing the charge, scrabbling for weapons.

Hal cupped her hands around her eyes and stared. A motley assortment of men and women ran behind the riders. Some appeared to be wearing armour, others were dressed as if for work in the fields. In front of them all rode a woman astride an ivory-coloured horse, the late morning sun glinting off the silver on her breast plate, her hair flying out behind her on the wind like an auburn banner.

"Is it Marta?" Hal asked, incredulous.

"Who else?" Franc sank his head into his hands. "What is she doing?"

"Trying to save our skins, by the looks of things."

Franc raised his head and let out a quiet howl of anguish. "I told her not to even try."

The men and women of Berasé drew nearer, and Hal saw that some of them were clutching pitchforks and shepherd's crooks in place of swords and spears.

"It's suicide," she whispered in horror. "They've left themselves completely exposed."

Marta bore a look of wild, passionate fury as she and her riders collided with Nérac's men who now had their backs to the wall, their weapons raised in a pathetic posture of defence. Ilenga span around on her horse, heaving down her sword on the heads, shoulders and faces of the men below her.

"Olæc!" Franc called. "Get your archers over here now!"

Within minutes, Olæc, Luc and a brace of bowmen had lined up along the western wall and were slinging down shots into the backs and limbs of the beleaguered remains of Nérac's forces.

"He won't stand for this, Franc," Hal urged. "She's out there on her own."

Nérac's men lay in limp heaps along the base of the walls now. Marta's guards and crofters had already begun to celebrate, laying down their makeshift weapons and picking blades and bows from the bodies of the slain.

"Marta!" Franc called down to her. She looked up at him and smiled, her face streaked with blood. "Didn't I tell you, Franc Hannac? You need my help."

"Marta turn back before it's too late!"

She shook her head, the smile gone, a quiet rage entering her eyes. "I told you, Franc. Berasé will stand together with Hannac until the end."

Far away, from somewhere in the forests came the distant bellow of a horn. Hal's heart quickened. "Go back, Marta," she urged.

"A fine one you are to urge caution Hal," Marta sneered and turning to her followers, she yelled: "Let's rout these rats out of the forest!"

High on their victory, now armed to the teeth, they began to cheer and move south in an undisciplined rush beneath the wall.

It was then that the ground seemed to shake beneath the weight of hundreds of stampeding horses, and Nérac's cavalry crested the plateau from both sides. Marta whirled around, her face suddenly draining of colour. She screamed at her supporters to turn back, but it was too late. The Dal Reniac horsemen rode across their backs, encircling them in an arc which left them stranded between Hannac and the open moorland.

Hal heard Franc moan and he seized a crossbow from the hands of a guard to his right, letting loose a futile stream of bolts across the heads of the Berasé defenders and into the chests and faces of their enemies. The weak line of tenants, crofters and farmers were already being picked off in slow, methodical fashion, some standing helplessly and waiting for death to take them.

"Fight back!" Marta's helpless appeals were lost amongst the screams and howls of the dying. Franc threw back his head, roaring in frustration and despair, and punched the wall.

"Franc, we've got to get out there and help them!" Hal urged, seizing his shoulders.

"You're right, Hal." He threw her a weak smile. "Better to die on our feet, eh lass?"

She extended a hand towards him and he passed her a sword. "Ready, child?"

"Ready."

Hal turned, on the verge of running back down the steps, when Olæc yelled out to them, "stop!"

"What is it?" Franc growled, swinging the crossbow across his back.

"On the horizon. Someone's coming. I think it's Pæga!"

"Don't be an idiot, lad! He said he wouldn't help us."

"Well who's that, then?" Trembling with excitement, Olæc pointed with the neck of his bow at some shapes coalescing on the horizon.

Franc peered over his shoulder and scanned the moors. "It can't be," he said in a half whisper.

Marec Paega and his men were gaining ground, moving with steady determination in tightly packed phalanges across the moors. Paega rode at an almost casual pace, his red face encased beneath a fur lined helmet. Behind him, his horsemen had attached pairs of arching wooden frames to their backs which bristled with the feathers of eagles and swans. The faint rustling sounds of wind whipping across the plumes gained intensity as the riders approached. A sudden thrill of excitement coursed its way down Hal's spine. She had never seen anything like this before.

"Maybe a bit of sense finally pierced through Marec's thick skull." Franc released a random bolt into the hostile crowds. "There's a first time for everything. There'll be no living with him now though," he concluded with a grimace.

Paega lowered his sabre in an order to charge mere yards from the Dal Reniac forces. His men sped forward, lances outstretched between the breaks in their shield walls, the feathered horsemen ploughing into the back of Nérac's army who imperilled themselves with panic, now caught between the forces of Berasé and Pæga. Hal turned to Franc and saw that his face was streaked with tears as the long, sleepless hours of fear, physical deprivation and responsibility finally took their toll.

"It'll all be over soon, Franc," she said, aware of the weight of her own emotions.

He managed a trembling smile in return. "I know, Hal. I know."

Marta had lost her sword. Desperate, she clung to her horse's reins, attempting to steer her way out of trouble. But trouble seemed to have lost some of its interest in her. For the lines of enemy ranks had turned their attention away from her stricken bunch of followers and appeared to be attempting a retreat, risking the points of rakes and pitch forks to their unarmed backs.

What could be happening? Did Nérac have further surprises in store? Had he elected to claim the prize of Hannac before he dealt her a final, fatal blow? She calmed her horse and rose in her stirrups, craning her neck to stare over the heads of the opposing forces. And then with a wild shriek of delight, she realised what was happening. As the front ranks of Marec Paega's charge slammed into the Dal Reniac lines, Nérac's men splintered, branching off in chaotic streams of knights.

She looked up at the walls of Hannac and caught a glimpse of Franc's face, his tired eyes flooded with relief and tears. Marta returned a wan smile and then twisted away, hiding her emotions behind a mask of grim determination. It would be over soon, she told herself, now

Marec had waded into the battle. And then she could help Franc rebuild Hannac, celebrate their victory, make up for all those years of wasted opportunity. But as long as Nérac still lurked in those woods they would know no comfort.

Marec Pæga's units had now ripped through the remnants of Nérac's unsuspecting cavalry, the white feathers on his riders' backs stained red with blood. Pæga himself rode up to her with almost casual ease, as if he were out hunting and not in the midst of battle.

"Marta." He acknowledged her with a nod of his head.

"Thank you!" She gasped, suddenly conscious of how little her thanks were worth.

"Well, I saw none of you were going to make it without my help." He flattened down the ends of his moustache beneath thumb and forefinger with self-important pride.

Marta felt her temper rise. "If you knew we were all so lost without you, you could have offered your help sooner and saved a few lives, Marec. Don't lie, man. You saw the way the wind was blowing and you knew you had no choice. It would have been us next."

Pæga's face darkened and his eyes grew fierce. "My men have put their lives at risk the same as yours for this farce, Marta," he hissed, with a swift glance up at the walls of Hannac. "And God knows what the consequences of all of this will be, so you'll have to forgive my lack of enthusiasm for this battle. And now if you don't mind, I'll take my men down the south bank and clear up this mess you've all made. If I were you, I'd head north and do the same."

He gave a loud click of his tongue, his horse broke into a gallop, and he followed his men into the forest as they chased down the remainder of Nérac's forces. Marta watched him go, her own unlikely band of foot soldiers staring up at her in expectation.

"Well..." she scanned their eager faces. "You heard the man. Let's remind Nérac that the Nests are not his for the taking."

"I don't suppose Marta will begrudge our help now." Franc lowered the crossbow. The enemy had all but dispersed. Only the dying and injured lay scattered across the moors, their comrades hunted down by the vengeful forces of Marta and Marec Pæga.

Hal weighed the sabre he had passed her earlier, testing it with a few swipes against the air.

"And if Nérac's still down there?"

"If he's still stupid enough to have lingered, then I'd say he takes his chances with the rest of his men." He drew his own sword. "But I'd stake what remains of Hannac on reaching him before you do, Hal."

She was already on her way down into the courtyard. "Hannac's coming to me anyway Franc," she called back over her shoulder. "So save your breath. I'll find him before you do."

She was almost at the bottom of the steps before she realised he wasn't following her. "Franc?"

Hal turned around and looked up at the western wall. He was nowhere to be seen. "Franc, come on! Let's finish this!"

Still nothing. A cold shiver of concern prickled its way across her skin. She turned and ran back up the steps.

"Franc, this is no time for sitting down." She didn't quite know why she had said something so stupid. Franc sat slumped against the wall, his face white, sweat pouring from his forehead. She crouched down beside him. "Franc, get up," she whispered.

An arrow had pierced the chainmail beneath his arm, perhaps at the moment that he had raised it to flex his sword. Franc's breathing was growing shallow, forced out in short, sharp gasps. He gave a cough and blood flecked the corners of his lips. The arrow head had clearly punctured a lung.

"It's going to be alright, Franc." Somehow even she couldn't quite believe the lie. "Arec will stitch you up like he did me. We need to get you down into the keep."

He shook his head, a single drop of blood now trickling its way down his chin. "Bad luck, Hal. And on such a day."

He narrowed his brow, his forehead creasing into lines of thought as he struggled to understand what had happened. His eyes fixed on the opposite side of the courtyard. At first she thought he was losing consciousness, but she twisted around to see an archer on the eastern wall. The figure seemed too frail to have even drawn a bow, his fingers still curled around his weapon as he stared back at her. Plastered with the stains of moss and mud, his face was twisted into an expression of dull surprise, as if he had just shot a rabbit or a bird by mistake. She was dimly aware of Olæc spinning round, of an arrow flying across the courtyard. The young man seemed to watch, almost fascinated as it flew towards him and buried its way into his chest. Then he plunged head first in silence from the wall walk, his body crumpling as he hit the ground.

Hal's mind felt numb. Reality seemed suddenly muted, unravelling with the senselessness of a dream. Olæc and Luc were now crouching on either side of her father, shielding him from further harm; a futile mark of respect, but she was grateful to them nevertheless. Olæc unbuckled Franc's breast plate and placed an ear to his heart.

"I think you'd better say goodbye, Hal," he said.

She shook her head. Everything seemed to have gone very still. She could no longer even hear the clamour of battle as Marta and Marec routed Nérac's forces from the woods. Luc's eyelashes were wet with unshed tears and she wondered why she felt nothing.

"It'll be alright, Franc," she whispered again. The corners of his lips seemed to roll upwards into a smile of irony.

"No, lass." His voice was the ghost of itself. "Tell Marta what happened, would you? Tell her I'm sorry." He let out another wet, blood-choked cough and then sucked in air, desperate to give himself a few more seconds. "Hannac's yours now, Hal. Take good care of it." His head slumped to one side, and he closed his eyes.

"Father?" She pressed a hand down on his shoulder but he did not move.

"Perhaps he just passed out," she said to Olæc. "We should get him inside."

"Hal, he's gone. Franc's dead." Olæc placed his hands on her shoulders and searched her face, imploring her to understand. The paralysis which had laid claim to her mind and heart seemed to loosen its grip. Luc was now openly weeping, tears washing away the dirt of the siege from his cheeks, and still she wondered why she could not cry. Instead, rage seemed to rip through her body, and all her thoughts were reduced to a single image: that of Franc's lifeless form.

She rose. The sounds of the battle below returned, this time amplified to a roar. Olæc called out her name as she ran back down the steps but she ignored him. Horses were being saddled as Hannac prepared to join its allies in the forest. She swung herself up onto a rider-less mount.

"Hal! Stop!" Again Olæc called down to her, but she had already crossed the courtyard, reining in the horse as she approached the gates. Arec loomed before her.

"Arec, open the gate." She could barely hear her own voice above the sounds of battle raging outside.

His face was bleak, his eyes stained with grief. He did not move.

"Arec, open the cursed gate!"

"Open it, Arec." Men at arms surrounded her, pressing forward, desperate to be outside and on the offensive. "We've been cooped up in here for days."

Arec glanced up at the walls, at Luc who still crouched in silent vigil beside Franc's body, and then at the corpse of the fallen crofter, the arrow blade sprouting from his back. He gave a slight nod and began to heave against bolts and bars as the portcullis ground its slow way upwards behind them. Hal sat and stared at the widening break between the gates as the greens of the forest hove into view. She squeezed her horse's reins between her fingers and the leather bit into her skin. The gates drew apart, the sky a dizzy whirl of clouds and treetops and the flash of sun on armour, as she galloped down the side of the plateau.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Breaking Boundaries

The forest flew past in a blur. To right and left the charred remains of the enemy's camp, burnt to cinders in retribution by Paega's men, released choking clouds of smoke into the air. Hal's horse leapt over rocks and tree roots, hurtling down towards the plains, sweat lathering its flanks, foam gathering around the corners of its mouth.

Franc's death had been so senseless - the croft boy's too, she realised. No sane person would have willingly scaled those crags and walls to reach Hannac. All of this was the result of Nérac's greed, his appetite for revenge. His rape of Meracad, his destruction of Hannac and now this: the death of her own father. All of it was his fault. But she would teach him that the world would no longer bend to his will.

Franc's voice seemed to call out to her as she darted between oaks and pines, cautioning, urging restraint. "Hal, turn back for God's sake. Where do you think you're going, unarmoured and alone? Have you lost your mind, child?"

Had she lost her mind? She wanted to kill, to open wounds and feel flesh against the blade of her sword. She knew that the feeling should terrify her. It was a sign that she was no better than her enemy. And yet she surrendered to it. If her heart could hold no place for grief, then at least murderous rage was still an emotion. Better than the chill numbing of her mind that had accompanied Franc's death. To let blood, to hack at her enemy, tear him to pieces if she could with her hands: her life had suddenly focused on one very simple aim.

Hal gave a sharp tug to her horse's reins as she approached the clearing in which Nérac's pavilion had stood. There was nothing left, of course. Blackened and smoking, the wooden frame had been all but burnt to the ground, a few flapping rags of gaudily striped canvas hanging from it like strips of flesh on a carcass. Around it, picked up on the breeze or caught on the branches of trees were shreds of parchment, torn and torched either by the retreating army or Paega's men — it was impossible to say. She wasted no time, slamming her heels into the flanks of her suffering horse and urging it further down the bank. Not a single, solitary knight was left in this part of the forest. The corpses over which her horse now leapt were testament to the fierceness with which Paega had driven their enemy from the plateau. She

passed the bank over which she had fallen on her escape from the tunnel with Beric. The waters of the brook below it ran red.

Emerging from the shade of the trees, she headed out eastwards across the plains. Palls of smoke rose in the distance, the glint of sun on raised swords, the screams of horses and dying men: Marec had run Nérac's army to ground with ruthless efficiency. Hal was aware of the wind whipping her hair into her eyes, the scent of forest fire and the utter absence of fear. Her horse plunged into the outer rings of the battle, amongst loose squalls of men now reduced to fighting on foot, the relentless ring of steel on armour.

Where was he? Had he escaped the field of battle, leaving his men to fend off Paega's cavalry alone? It did not matter. She would still find him. An axe fell, just a foot before her face. She ducked and swerved, the horse screaming in terror before springing over a pair of soldiers who grappled together on the ground. Its hooves sank into the moist soil of the lowlands, across freshly ploughed fields. If the tenants of Hannac returned to their farms, they would find that blood had fertilised the ground.

A sudden glint of sunlight on gold commanded her attention. Who wore gold armour on the battle field? Surely not a man who intended to fight. She remembered Nérac leaning over the table in the woods studying maps of her homeland, the plate on his back and chest polished to shining perfection. Hal pulled out her sword, swinging it at arm's length as she sent her horse hurtling through the straggling remnants of her enemy's army. There he was, outriding the carnage astride a chestnut stallion, flanked on either side by personal guards. Had it not been for Franc's death, she would have thrown back her head and laughed.

Standing in her stirrups, she yelled out, "Nérac!" Her voice was faint against the ebb and flow of the battle.

"Bruno Nérac!" She screamed again. Almost in unison the line of horsemen slowed and wheeled around. Hal lowered herself back into her saddle and waited.

"Have you come to kill me, girl?" Nérac fixed her with hollow, dark-ringed eyes; the shadow of stubble spread across his chin and cheeks. His men notched arrows to bows, training them on her unguarded chest and face, but he waved them down.

"I thought to give you the chance to die with honour on the battle field, Nérac. I see you prefer to run like a coward."

"Your generosity is overwhelming." Nérac snorted in contempt. "And it's to be matched only by your stupidity."

His soldiers flexed their bows again, but he shook his head. "No. Let her try, if she wants to - outnumbered, unarmoured and untried. You made a mistake today, Hannac, leaving behind the remains of your home. Don't worry. You won't live to regret it."

Her horse panted and shook with exhaustion. She rose once again on her stirrups and lashed her sword through a series of swift arcs before bringing the flat of the blade down on the

animal's right flank. It bucked, and ran in a wild charge towards the line of men at arms as Nérac urged his own mount towards her, soft clods of soil spraying outwards from beneath its hooves. The battle seemed to fade from sight and thought; she no longer felt pain in her arm as she gripped the reins in one hand, her sword now raised at the level of her waist. All she saw was Bruno Nérac bearing down upon her, his own blade slicing through the wind, now rising upwards once again to sever her head from its body.

They collided with a ring of steel against steel. She had brought her sword up to block his within a hair's breadth of their meeting, the force of the blow almost slinging her to the ground. She slumped back down, clinging on with her thighs, turning around just before her horse careered into the line of men. Foam flecked its muzzle. The animal was on the verge of collapse, quivering and shaking, its breathing laboured. As long as Nérac remained in his saddle he had the upper hand, and he knew it; wasting no time, he thundered back across open farmland towards her.

Hal inhaled the raw, rich scent of the air, releasing it in a low-pitched growl and kicked her mount into motion once again. It leapt forward, drawing on final reserves of strength as it forged its way across the ruts of the field. She clung low in the saddle, bracing the sabre tightly beneath the crook of her arm while she steered the horse directly into Nérac's path. He gripped his own sword on his left, thrusting it outwards like a lance in order to slide it between her ribs. He was gaining ground, so close that she could make out the beads of sweat and furrowed lines on his brow, his eyes hard cast and furious. Just yards away, just a few moments from disaster and she twisted, leapt and threw herself bodily to the ground, the rich, dense soil breaking the impact of her fall. Hal raised her head in time to see her horse plough straight into Nérac's stallion, which reared upwards, screaming in horror, its legs flailing at the air. Yelling out in fear and anger, Nérac clung to the reins as he was flung about like a rag on the wind. Then the beast plunged downwards, stumbling over the body of Hal's own horse which had given up its last seconds of life in a pitiful series of grunts and groans as it sank to the ground.

Nérac hit the earth with a thud and a curse, his stallion performing a strange, spooked dance as it fled across the battle field, running for the shelter of the forest with nervous little bucks and whinnies. Winded and bruised but otherwise uninjured, Hal sprang upright, scabbled around for her fallen sword and then charged across the field, leaping over the body of her dead horse. Nérac was struggling to his feet, half-stunned and weighed down by his armour. Seizing her advantage, she brought her weapon down towards his face, but he rolled away and reached for his own sword, bringing it up to meet hers just as she swung for a second time. She pressed down on the blade, hoping to break the block, but he overpowered her with a painful kick to her right calf, and she crumpled to the floor.

From the corner of her eye, Hal saw him attempt to rise. She could sense her own strength fading, and was dimly aware of the Dal Reniac horsemen riding forward to enclose both herself and Nérac within a tight circle. Whatever happened now, she would not be leaving the battlefield. But any instinct for survival seemed to have deserted her. Nothing mattered so long as he was still alive. Rolling across a patch of stones and thistles, she wrapped her arms around his leg, felling him with a crash of gold plate and steel. Groaning, he reached for his sword, but she had already pinned him to the ground, gripping his polished breastplate beneath her knees as she raised her sword above his face and prepared to slice it across his throat.

A laugh escaped her lips. "If only Meracad could see you now."

His eyes grew round and bright with panic, his adam's apple working up and down as he swallowed in fear.

"Stop her, you fools!" The words came out as a whine, strained and nasal.

Hal hissed in contempt. "You coward," she whispered, swinging the blade down towards his throat in a loose swipe. She felt something break the sabre's arc: a blow which almost caused her arms to vault from their sockets, and the weapon flew through the air, knocked from her hands by the low blow of a mace. She continued to kneel, dazed, staring at her empty palms as the shadows of Nérac's men converged around her. A kick delivered to her spine sent her keeling over in pain, and then they seized her, holding her fast before hauling her upright.

Still shaking, wild-eyed and trembling, Nérac struggled to his feet, clutching his throat between both hands as if to reassure himself that she hadn't touched him.

"I said you made a mistake today in coming here."

She winced as the arrow wound on her arm was squeezed between mailed fists.

"I was prepared to grant you one redeeming feature, Nérac: courage. But I just heard you whine like a child. So did your men. And nothing you do to me now will change that."

He hit her across the face, the steel rings on his glove gashing a line across her cheek. The blood trickled downwards, warm and wet like tears.

"Tell me, Hannac, what does defeat feel like?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"Take her," he ordered. "She's more use to me alive than dead." His lips curled upwards into the thin ghost of a smile. "For the time being."

She tripped, confused, as they dragged her away, a void cracking open inside her chest and swallowing her heart. Every step took her further from Meracad, from Leda and from the body of a father she ought to have been burying. She would have wept if only she'd known how.

They had stopped. They were turning back again: she couldn't understand why. The ground seemed to shake and tremble beneath her feet. A breeze had risen; the forest broke into

ripples of leaves. She was suddenly aware of how silent everything had become; the only sounds those of wind whistling across the bodies of dead men and their horses, of bird calls high overhead. Hal narrowed her eyes against the glare of late afternoon sun. Her captors were now themselves encircled, Marec Pæga's men casting long, misshapen shadows across the fields.

"You should have run when you still had chance, Lord Nérac." Pæga had lost his helmet. Sweat plastered what little hair he still possessed to his forehead; small, swinish eyes peered out through a mass of ruddy flesh and beard.

"Let me take my prisoner and go, Master Pæga. I only came here to claim what are mine by right: my wife and child. Who would deny a man his family?"

Pæga scratched at his balding pate as if in contemplation. "That's not what I heard."

"That witch Ilenga poisoned your mind against me. I am here to rescue my wife from this insanity that has gripped her. Nothing more."

"And you needed an army to do that?" Hal sneered. "If she wanted to, she'd come back of her own accord."

"I'd keep your mouth shut, you whore-born bitch!" Nérac took a step towards her, but Pæga lowered his sword to his throat.

"You seem to have got yourself into a mess, Halanya." Pæga turned to look at her, still pressing his sabre against Nérac's naked skin. "You'd be better served paying your final respects to your father than playing at soldier out here."

Nérac's lips parted in surprise. "You mean to say..."

"Aye. It may be no more than idle gossip, but my men have reported Franc Hannac dead. Shot in the side by a stray archer on the east wall."

A fleeting glow of vengeful triumph warmed Nérac's cold eyes. "So that's why you scurried out of your hiding place today, rat. You thought to avenge your father's death."

"I choose to face my enemies when I fight them. I don't shoot them from behind when they're defenceless." She struggled against the vice-like grip of hands, but they drew her back.

"You may lower your sword, Master Pæga. I won't run. You have my word - as one nobleman to another."

"Noble!" Hal spat out the word as if it had been a bitter taste.

"Yes. Noble. Something you wouldn't understand." Nérac put a tentative finger to the blade at his neck and pushed it away. Pæga frowned, but lowered his sword.

"I see you are a man of reason, Master Pæga. Perhaps we might even understand one another if you would only be prepared to listen."

Pæga slid his sword back into his belt and folded his arms, his face stern and impassive.

"Speak, Sir," he commanded. A deep, chilling sense of unease crawled its way across Hal's skin.

"Franc Hannac is dead you say. His bastard is the last of his miserable line."

Pæga looked across at Hal, his eyes narrowing to thin slits. "She is," he agreed.

Her brow broke out in a fresh, feverish sweat. "Marec!" She gasped. "Don't listen to him. He would have taken Pæga just as he tried to seize Hannac."

She was silenced by a sudden blow to the face: a blow which would have sent her crashing to the ground, had it not been for the hands which held her upright.

Pæga looked on as if merely curious. "Go on, Sir," he said at last. Hal closed her eyes, wishing she could somehow stop her ears as well.

"If I take Hal Hannac, my wife will follow. She is...besotted..." Nérac spread his hands apart as if at a loss for words, feigning an impression of naivety and confusion. "I cannot explain it, Sir. She has been deceived, charmed, cursed perhaps by this half-woman you see here."

"Marec, please!" Her strength now at an ebb, she could barely manage a whisper.

"With my wife and child gone, who could dispute your most just claim to the Hannac estates? Who better than yourself, first in the nobility of the Nests, to assume those lands? And I would do everything I could to further your cause. The Emperor, Sir, would hear from your lips as well as from my own that I came here only to take back what has been stolen from me and..."

"Enough, Sir!" Pæga cut through the semblance of honesty and reason within which Nérac had framed his words. "You have bled and scarred these lands, Lord Nérac. Bled them dry and scarred them beyond repair. Lands to which you have no claim. None whatsoever."

The mask of sincerity fell from Nérac's face. He made to protest, but Pæga shouted him down. "But you, Hal Hannac — you brought him here. You took what was not yours to take."

"She came out of choice!"

"I don't care why she came, girl!" Pæga's words thundered out across fields now silent and motionless. "There are boundaries. There are laws that must be obeyed. Without those boundaries, our world becomes a chaos. This..." he indicated the battlefield. "This is what happens when those boundaries are broken. You destroyed that order. And you will pay the price."

Unable to keep her despair in check a moment longer, Hal let out a long, hoarse scream of fury and grief. The trees and fields and sky disappeared behind a wall of tears.

"You will take her, Lord Nérac," Pæga continued, apparently oblivious to Hal's anguish. "And I will persuade your wife of where her duty lies. Or if not her duty, at least her love."

Nérac nodded and let out a long, slow sigh of relief.

"I see you are a man of honour, Master Pæga."

"I have not finished! I will keep your daughter as hostage to your good behaviour. If you so much as set foot near the Nests again..." he left the threat hanging on the air.

"But I have never even seen her!" Nérac's voice broke this time with genuine grief.

"And nor shall you, until I am assured that you mean what you say: that it is your wife you seek and not our lands. Now take your prisoner and go. I will see to it that your father has a good burial, Halanya."

"And I'll see you once again in hell, Pæga." She would have said more. She would have shouted and screamed and railed against his treachery. Yet for some reason the words choked within her throat. Tears ran into the wound on her face, the salt water mingling painfully with the blood. And that void which had opened up and swallowed her heart seemed now to devour her whole, reducing her body to a dry, empty husk.

The light was fading, evening beginning its slow approach. She turned to catch a last glimpse of Hannac rising out of the treetops, its limestone walls merging with the darkness. Then someone gave a sharp shove to her back and she stumbled forwards across the fields as they headed north towards Dal Reniac and death.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Unexpected Guests

Leda wouldn't sleep. It was as if she could sense Meracad's anxiety. Squirring in her mother's arms, her cheeks turned a vivid shade of crimson as she screamed angry wails into the night air. Meracad whispered to her, rocked her, planted quiet kisses on her forehead, but nothing seemed to work. And the longer Leda fretted, the more her own fears grew, until she was no longer sure she could bear them.

At first, she had railed against Arec, making him the object of her frustrations. Why had he let Hal go? How could he have opened the gates, allowing her to ride out alone and unprotected? Arec had endured the outburst in silence. When it was over, and her invective had run its course, he had placed two firm, heavy hands on her shoulders, turning her round to face the west wall. Luc and Olæc were carrying Franc's body down the steps. That was the moment she had understood.

"Quiet, Leda!" The child's shrieks echoed around the courtyard, as if there were three Ledas, not one who now cried. Meracad enfolded her in blankets and held her close, focussing on the grief-stricken figure of Marta Ilega who bent over Franc Hannac's lifeless form, her auburn hair tumbling in loose streams down her back and across Franc's face. Meracad ventured a few hesitant steps towards Marta and then stopped. The mistress of Berasé was furious in her grief, haranguing Franc for his lack of care and stubbornness.

"You idiot, Franc Hannac! You could've taken my help. You might've spared me the pain. We'd be drinking your wine now and laughing at what's passed. Instead you left me here alone without so much as a goodbye, you bastard."

"He could never have foreseen what was to happen." Ignoring Leda's protests, Meracad moved to stand beside Marta. They had laid Franc out in his armour on a trestle from the great hall. Four torch bearers stood at each corner, holding silent vigil. His eyes were closed as if in sleep; as if he had merely succumbed to exhaustion and might get up at any moment to put his house in order. For a brief moment, Meracad understood Marta's resentment. She could not quite accept that Franc was gone.

"If Berasé and Hannac had stood together from the beginning, none of this would have happened." Marta's eyes were red against the pale, taut skin of her cheeks. Her lips trembled. "But he'd have it his way - as always. I should've known not to trust him. It's not the first time he turned his back on me." She dissolved into deep, throaty tears, clutching Franc's hand in her own as she kneeled at his side. Meracad could only look on, helpless. Leda screamed, Marta was weeping and all the time a voice nagged at her conscious thoughts: was Hal alive? The sharp, jarring blast of a horn from the south wall told her that someone was coming. She jumped, her heart picking up pace as it already had done so many times that evening. Every time the horn sounded she held her breath, waiting for the moment that Hal would be brought back to lie in death beside her father. Sometimes Meracad would permit herself hope, visualising Hal traipsing back into the fort, wounded, perhaps: tired but alive. Then she would look on, the brief illusion of hope shattered, as some of the Hannac guards staggered home, more often than not bearing their own dead in their arms.

Clenching tight her jaw, she watched as a pair of riders passed beneath the portcullis. Something was different about these two. They were clean, dressed not in armour but in long cloaks with soft caps in place of helmets. And then behind them came the rattle of cart wheels, the creaking of wood over cobbles, and a carriage rolled into the courtyard, the portcullis lowering behind it.

Meracad's mind refused to grasp reality. She looked on, rooted to the ground, as the vehicle rumbled to a halt in front of her. Nothing seemed to make any sense. Her thoughts just came up against an invisible barrier, as if a pane of glass had inserted itself between her and reality. Even Leda's cries seemed far away. She focussed on the door of the carriage as it swung open and a tall, familiar looking figure clambered out, swathed in a long, dark woollen greatcoat.

"Marc?" Meracad stared in disbelief at the Senator. His eyes were grave, his expression grim. Hobbling a little after the discomfort of the journey, he caught her in a brief embrace.

"Meracad, where are Franc and Hal?" he asked, letting her go. "I couldn't reach Hannac. This infernal siege has kept me stuck on the shores of Brennac for days now. What is it, child?"

She stared at him, at a loss for words, and then turned her head across the courtyard. He followed her gaze. Marta remained kneeling beside Franc, still clinging to his hand like a drowning woman.

"Ah. Old friend." Marc's voice shook a little as he approached the trestle, removed his glove and took Franc's other hand to shake it, as if they had just met in the street. "My message came too late."

He pulled off his cap and then shook his head. "He was the best of men, Lady Ilenga. I am sorry for your loss. He always spoke so well of you."

"That's poor consolation now he's gone, I'm afraid, Sir." Marta drew her sleeve across her eyes. "I'd rather he were still alive to say such lovely things to my face. But he threw over his chance, the fool."

Marc opened his mouth as if to reply but clearly thought better of it. "And Hal?" He asked Meracad, his face appearing to pale in the torch light. "Is she...?"

"Marc, I don't know where she is." Meracad fought against the urge to break down beneath the weight of uncertainty. "I was not here when she...they told me that she went out of her mind when Franc was killed. She seized a horse and rode out."

"To find Nérac?"

"I fear so." Leda had cried herself to sleep and the courtyard was now eerily quiet.

"I'm sorry, Marc. You must be tired and thirsty after your journey. Come inside. Marta, you would feel better for some wine, I think."

"I'm alright where I am," Marta growled.

"As you wish." Meracad balanced Leda in the crook of her elbow and threaded her other arm through Marc's, leading him towards the keep.

"You look worn out yourself, dear girl," he said, peering down at her as they entered the comforting warmth of the great hall. "This has been a trial for you all."

"I won't rest until she's back."

She passed Leda to Elis now that the child was quiet, and the maid took her away to her cradle. The atmosphere was heavy with loss, the room dark save for the weak, flickering light of a few candles set along the tables. Guards and tenants alike slumped on benches, tending to their wounds. Others nursed pint pots of mead and ale, their eyes glazed, their heads drooping. Meracad caught sight of Magda in a far corner, sleeping with her head on the shoulder of her small brother, Edæc. Her sword lay at her side and her clothes were torn, but she was alive. Well there was one who had made it back at least. For a brief moment, she wished it were Hal and not Magda who had returned, but regretted the thought just as quickly. Hal would come back. She had to.

Meracad poured Marc a cup of wine and he took it, she noticed, between shaking hands. He swallowed down a few mouthfuls, placing the cup back down with delicate care and then looked at her, pinching the end of his nose in thought.

"You will be wondering what I'm doing here," he said at last.

"Marc, this whole day has been a dream — a nightmare in fact — and I'm not entirely sure I'm awake."

"You are, dear girl. You are very much awake. Or if not, we are both now dreaming. God, wouldn't that be a relief?" He took another swig of the wine and cleared his throat.

"I'll be plain with you, Meracad, for there is little time left. When the Emperor got wind of just how serious the situation had become between the houses of Nérac and Hannac, he sent

me up here. His imperial majesty Diodiné seems to believe he has enough problems defending his southern borders without the north descending into chaos. Although why he sees those Yegdanian barbarians as a threat is anyone's guess."

Meracad held her breath. The Emperor himself was now wading into the fight? What had they done?

Marc placed a hand over her own. "Calm yourself, child. Diodiné is far too subtle a politician to send his troops up here unless it is absolutely necessary. He sees this more as a domestic squabble than an internecine feud. Although in that respect, he is, I believe, also mistaken. It was hatred of Dal Reniac as much as love for Franc which brought these men out to fight, I'm sure." He turned his head round to take in the rows of weary men and women in the hall.

"Well that's certainly true of those whose crofts Nérac burnt." Meracad stole another glance at Magda. "What does he want?"

"He demands to see yourself, Franc, Hal and Bruno Nérac in Colvé before the month is out. He is determined to resolve this matter in court. Although it would seem he is to be deprived of the pleasure of Franc's company." Marc grimaced. "And as for Hal..." his face fell and he busied himself once again with his wine.

"She's coming back, I tell you." His lack of tact cut like a knife. Meracad seized the wine from his hands and drained the cup back to the dregs as Marc looked on in surprise.

"That was thoughtless of me. I'm sorry. I am to drive on to Dal Reniac now Nérac has left the field, to inform him of this audience with the Emperor. And I promise you I shall ask after her in every village I pass through, and on every corner of every street."

"Thank you, Marc. You are a true friend."

Another strident horn blast sounded from the southern wall. The chill wave of nausea nearly felled her this time. Meracad made to rise, but Marc pulled her back down, his expression bleak.

"Wait," he counselled. "I understand what you must be feeling, Meracad, but let's not indulge ourselves unwisely with hope. There's too much at stake."

"You think she's dead, don't you?" She had not given actual voice to her fears before. The words seemed to bring the possibility even closer.

"I didn't say that. I would just like to save you more pain."

"Marc, over the last year I've gone through every kind of pain imaginable. I'd say I've almost grown accustomed to it."

She turned at the sound of heavy footsteps, digging her nails into the palms of her hands in nervous suspense. A few soldiers wandered wearily into the great hall and sank down on benches. She did not recognise them, but noticed that some still bore the arching frames of false wings on their backs, and she realised they must be Marec Pæga's men. Then the master of Pæga himself stepped across the threshold. She rose to greet him.

Meracad had been aware of Hal's dislike for Pæga, and there was something about the man that instantly riled. He strode into the room with an almost proprietary air, his bulk apparent even beneath the layers of fur and armour in which he was encased. It was as if he took up more space than was necessary.

"Lady Nérac." He acknowledged her with a curt nod.

"I beg your pardon, Sir?"

"I was merely stating a fact. You are, I believe, Bruno Nérac's wife?"

"On paper."

"And therefore in the eyes of the world, his wife. Girl! Some mead!" he yelled at Elis's departing back. Meracad noticed the serving woman's eyes flash fire at being summoned in such a way.

"If you believe me to be his wife, why were you out there fighting today?"

Pæga tugged at the wolf skin hanging across his shoulders, dumping it on the floor, and grabbed the cup from Elis's outstretched hand. "You would all have plunged the Nests into chaos. Someone had to save you from yourselves. Too late for Franc Hannac, more's the pity." The words came out muffled by the wine as he spoke and drank at the same time, before slamming the cup back down on the table.

Meracad took a step towards him, ready to unleash hours of pent up anxiety in a torrent of words, but Marc put his arm out to stop her.

"Franc's daughter, Hal, has not returned from the battle field. Would you happen to know of her whereabouts, Master Pæga?" he asked, shooting Meracad a warning glance.

Pæga's eyes were hard, contemptuous. "And what would she be doing out on the field of war when her place was back here, I'd like to know?"

"I asked you a question, Sir." A rising note of impatience had entered Marc's voice. "And it is in all our interests — including the Emperor's, I might add — that you should answer it. Did you see Hal? Can you tell us if she is still alive?"

Pæga's lips thinned beneath his moustache, turning white as he chewed on them for a moment.

"She's still alive, I believe," he said at last. "For the time being."

Meracad let out a long sigh of relief and hid her face behind her hands. "What do you mean for the time being?" she whispered.

"My men inform me that your husband took her prisoner."

She spread her fingers wider and peered out from between them. "My husband?"

"Yes. I did not see it myself, but Jæc tells me it is so." He nodded in the direction of an ill-favoured looking soldier, whose receding grey hair was plastered in long greasy locks away from his forehead.

"Aye." Jæc spat into the rushes on the floor. "She was too far away for us to do anything."

"Too far away!" Meracad almost shouted. "You were on horseback, and you outnumbered my husband's men. How could you not stop him?"

Thread veins bulged on Pæga's nose and cheeks. "Is it my business, madam, to save incompetent, irresponsible women from their own stupidity? No! I was out there fighting to save the Nests from destruction. And small thanks I take for that, it seems."

Marc laid a steadying hand on Meracad's shoulder before she launched herself at Pæga. "Irresponsible, perhaps," he said. "But incompetent? You clearly don't know Hal as we do, Sir. And if you did, I am certain you would have done everything in your power to save her."

Muttering to himself, Pæga poured another glass of wine. Meracad observed him for a few moments, wondering whether she had the authority to turn him out of Hannac. "There is nothing left for you here, Lady Nérac," he said as if reading her thoughts. "With Franc and Halanya gone, I will take on the burden of Hannac. With great reluctance, I might add. And your best course of action would be to throw yourself on your husband's mercy."

"After all this... all the destruction and death, and you want me to go back?" She laughed, incredulous.

"Well I see no reason for you to linger. Do you?" He leant forward, thrusting his face into hers. She backed away in disgust.

"Master Pæga, if this is not my home, it is certainly not yours. Only one person has a true claim to Hannac and that is Hal. And I intend to bring her back here."

Pæga stared at her for a moment, his eyes almost protruding from their sockets in surprise.

"So you mean to go to Dal Reniac?" He breathed finally.

"Yes, I do. I will bring Hal back here and you can explain to *her* why you believe you have a right to her inheritance."

"I mean that she is as good as dead. And she will not be returning. I can assure you of that."

"You seem very certain. Perhaps you know more than you are prepared to let on."

Pæga's face darkened and he squeezed the cup of wine between the plump fingers of his bear-like paw.

"Meracad, this is unwise." Marc seized her by the arm and drew her to a corner of the room.

"Nérac is sitting in Dal Reniac waiting for you. I have no doubt of it. He'll put Hal to death the moment you show up at his doors, and you will imperil not only yourself, but Leda too."

"Leda will stay here with Magda. I'll not put her in the way of harm. Marc, I have been set within boundaries my entire life. First my father, then Nérac. I will not be lectured to, restrained, manipulated or held against my will by my husband, Pæga or even by you."

He hissed in anger, but she continued. "I will accompany you to Dal Reniac. And I will bring home the woman I love."

"Should I start packing for you now, Lady Nérac?" Pæga's jibe elicited sneers and derisive howls from his men.

"No need Sir," she replied, now calm and focussed for the first time that evening. "I shall not be gone for long."

"I'll take the child in your absence." Meracad twisted around at the sound of Marta Ilega's voice. Marta leant against the doorframe, her eyes swollen and red-rimmed, her armour exchanged for a dark woollen gown. The fierceness of her grief had given way to apparent exhaustion. She seemed diminished — fragile, even.

"Thank you, Marta. That is kind of you. I know that Leda will be safe in your hands."

"It would be better not to move the child, I think." They all turned to stare at Pæga who seemed suddenly less sure of himself.

"And what would you be wanting with a babe?" Marta shrugged herself away from the door and walked over to him, her hair tumbling to her waist, golden against the dark, home-spun dress. "Or do you think those big teats of yours are enough to suckle the infant, Marec?"

Her lips curled into a bitter smile as she raised her hands to cup imaginary breasts. Roars of laughter broke out around the room. Marc covered his own mouth with a hand, disguising a grin.

"Curse you, woman!" Pæga's face was beet red. "I merely propose the child remains under my protection until she can be safely returned to her father."

"So why not under my protection? I helped bring her into the world, after all. Or perhaps Meracad is right — perhaps you're keeping something back from us all?"

Her hand lashed out suddenly and she caught hold of his beard, forcing him to bend low as she tugged his face towards hers. He gave a grunt of pain. The hall fell silent.

Pæga clasped his fingers around Marta's wrist, attempting to release her grasp, but she clung on.

"Keep her then," he groaned. "Take her to Berasé. But if she disappears..."

Marta let go and stepped away from him, arms folded, eyes hard and bright. "What if she disappears? Why does she mean so much to you, Marec?"

"She's the heir to Dal Reniac. Her safety is..."

"my chief care. You don't need to worry about that." She turned to Meracad again. "I'll take her tonight. Get to Dal Reniac, girl. Bring Hal back here. And if you must, give your husband this. With my compliments."

Marta loosened her sleeve and dropped a sharp sliver of steel into Meracad's hand. She unfurled her fingers to reveal an ornate dagger, its hilt embossed with the crest of an eagle astride its nest.

"I will, Marta," she said at last. "I promise."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Underground

Hal's first thought was that they had buried her alive. She came to in absolute darkness, aware of nothing more than the smell of dank, wet air and the weight of iron on her wrists, her arms pinned together behind her back.

The walls were close. So close that she could touch them with her shoulders. When she stretched out her legs, her feet came up against solid rock.

A memory of the tunnel beneath Hannac plagued her thoughts. She was back there again, blindly tearing a path through falling debris and rubble.

Hal panicked. She twisted and turned and struggled. Dizziness set in, her pulse quickened, her breaths grew short and shallow. It was only when the fear had brought her to the brink of paralysis that she became aware of subtle changes in the light around her. Dull greyness filtered through an iron grille no more than a foot above her head. She tilted her face upwards and opened her mouth, hungrily drawing in the air. Somehow it tasted different: fresher, not so musky. Her breathing slowed, her pulse settled, she sank back against the wall.

Hal had no idea how she had landed in the pit, or how long she'd been there. The first leg of the journey to Dal Reniac came back to her with all the fragmented illogic of a nightmare: bound, gagged and blindfolded on the floor of a supply cart, only the disembodied voices of her captors for company. They had stopped once. She'd caught the scent of heather, the singsong of curlews, and realised they were on the moors. They raised her head, pulled away the gag and poured water down her parched throat. She could remember nothing after that, but the throbbing of her right temple told its own story. They must have put her out with a single blow.

Blood beat a monotonous rhythm against her eardrums. She thought of Meracad, Leda and Franc and howled out her pain to the unfeeling walls. The sound of her voice came back to her – mocking, defeated.

Muffled noises followed: a door swinging open, footsteps clipping on the stone floor above her head. A face peered down through the grate – shrouded amongst the shadows, yet she knew who it was.

“How do you like my oubliette, Hannac? I reserve it for my most special guests.” She could hear Nérac breathing, even caught the scent of wine on his breath.

“I’m honoured.”

His laughter was hard and low. She shifted, so far as she could, chains biting into the flesh of her arms.

“You might take the irons off. I’m not going anywhere.”

Again the harsh note of cold mirth. “I might. But I won’t.”

A few torches flickered into existence in the chamber above her, the light so intense it caused her to blink.

“Bring her up.” Nérac’s voice again. Bolts slid back, fingers pushed through breaks in the grille, wrenching it open. Hal flinched as hands reached down to haul her from the pit. For a few moments she was resting, disoriented, on her knees on the floor of the dungeon above, her eyes struggling to adjust to the contrast in light before they pulled her to her feet with a violent jerk.

It took her some time to discern between solid forms and shadows. The chamber was low of ceiling. Burning brands now hung from a few squat, robust pillars. Other than that, the room seemed to vanish into a void, and the prospect of what might be hidden from sight made her stomach churn.

Nérac stepped out of the gloom towards her. He had washed and shaved, but his eyes spoke of frustration and defeat: black holes in his face. Hal shuddered.

“You look the worse for wear, Hannac.” His hand shot forward and he seized her by the hair, pulling her head backwards and forcing her to look at him. “You have taken so many things from me. My wife, my child, my reputation. But I will have your life.”

“You could have taken that on the plains of Hannac.”

“I prefer to do it here. And I prefer to take my time.”

He plucked at her shirtsleeve, peeling it away from her arm. The material tugged at the raw skin around her arrow wound, the bandages now loose, frayed and soaked in blood. Hal closed her eyes and sucked in her breath.

“You’ve been shot. This kind of injury will fester if it remains untreated.”

He worked his fingers in circles across her torn flesh, almost in a gesture of care or concern. And then he pressed down, squeezing her arm between his thumb and forefinger.

Hal bit back on a scream. Pain mapped out a relentless course across the endings of her nerves and a thin film of sweat broke on her brow. If she cried out he would stop, she was certain of it. But all she had left now was self-control. Once that broke, he had her: mind as well as body.

Nérac tightened his grip, and she let a curse slip out between the bars of her teeth. Frowning, he let her go. The room pursued a dizzying orbit around her head. She drew in long, heavy breaths, almost sinking to the floor as the pain subsided. His guards forced her upright.

Nérac contemplated her, his fingers stroking the line of his jaw as if engrossed in thought.

“Why you?” he asked at last, lowering his hand and folding his arms. “Why did she run with you?”

“I have no answer to your question. I ask it myself every day. I can only say that I am grateful that she did so.”

“But you,” he continued, as if he had not heard her. “Not quite a woman but certainly no man. A bastard to boot. Your mother a court whore, your father the son of rebels. She passed over the love and protection of the most powerful house in the North for you. She plunged these lands into turmoil for a mere duellist.”

Hal smirked in spite of the pain. “My friends would say I’m arrogant enough, Nérac, without your flattery.”

“I’ll wipe that smile off your face, bitch, when I have her watch you die.”

“Oh she’s too cunning for you. You’ve lost her for good now. That’s what you never understood about her. She was never going to play your game. Countless people are dead because you couldn’t realise that.” For a brief moment she was back on the western wall, helpless to save Franc as he died in front of her. Nérac seized her shirtfront and the memory vanished.

“Those lives are on your head, not mine, Hannac. You stole her. All I did was love her.”

“You loved her!” She felt his grasp tighten around the linen of her shirt as she spoke. “Do you know what she told me, Nérac? Every time you raped her – because I don’t believe she ever invited you once to her bed – she bathed for hours to try to wash away your stench. That’s how much your ‘love’ was worth to her.”

He let her go and drew away for a moment. His face seemed to crumple, his eyes glisten, but it could have been a trick of the torchlight. When he stepped forward again the stone mask had returned.

“You know, Hannac, I wouldn’t normally soil my hands on a prisoner. But I can make an exception in your case.”

He launched outwards with his fists. She heard the crack of bone, felt a tooth work loose, tasted the salt tang of blood. Time seemed to stand still, reality condensed into the blows which now rained down on her face and into her chest and stomach. And then it seemed as if she had stepped outside of time altogether; she was nowhere and she was everywhere. She was at court and Cara had slapped her. She was in the forest and an arrow had pierced her arm. She was lying on a street in Colvé, shielding her face from the assault of Léac’s men. She was a prisoner in Dal Reniac. Which time was the real time?

Nérac loomed large above her. He was speaking – at least his mouth was opening and closing – but the words were distant and distorted.

Now they were pulling her, dragging her along the floor. She was aware of being raised and then forced down again, and she was under water: immersed to the shoulders. She struggled, sought the power to resist as it filled her nose and lungs, but they forced her head downwards. Far beneath her, a light seemed to be forming. It expanded, drawing nearer. Something told her that when it reached her, everything would be over.

The light was almost upon her now: alive, it seemed, expanding and unfurling as it glided upwards. And then there was a sharp tug to the back of her shirt, they ripped her from the water and she was inhaling the earthy air of the dungeon. She took in big, greedy gulps, choking up water, almost crying in relief, and then they seized her hair, forcing her back down again.

She struggled, yelled and lashed out with her feet, but they held her beneath the surface as she screamed out air, and again that light glowed up through the depths, moving towards her with all the steadfastness of fate.

Why fight against it after all? Why spend her final hours and days in a hole in the ground, brought up only to be tortured into insanity? Why not, in a final act of will, choose to die? She thought of that evening at Marc's when Meracad had stood, glass in hand, her fawn-toned hair wrapped in rings about her head, that black dress spilling down onto the floor. Hal clung to that memory, peered down into the light and gave herself up to it. There was a sense of sudden peace, of the earth dropping away, of distant voices - she thought she heard Franc and Orla. Then the world rolled over on itself, and it was air she breathed again. They hauled her from the barrel and slung her down onto hard stone where she lay, spluttering and coughing. A boot levelled at her stomach forced her to vomit up great streams of water and bile.

A hand reached down, seized her sodden shirt front and wrenched her up until she was on her knees. She was aware of a fist hovering over her cheek, but she no longer cared. Spoken words entered the sphere of her consciousness once again, but this time they came from the living, not the dead. She waited, hopeless, for the blow to fall, but it didn't. From the edges of swollen eyes she made out a door opening, light cutting through the darkness, a figure silhouetted against it. Again the flow of jumbled, senseless words. Hands released her, she dropped back to the floor and watched with dull dispassion as Nérac left the chamber. With a sudden rush the earth vaulted away beneath her, and she surrendered up her consciousness in relief.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Storm Clouds

A light rain had set in. Meracad listened to its persistent tap, tap, tap on the roof of the carriage as they wound their way up hill. Raising the blind, she peered out as the streets of Dal Reniac retreated into the half-light of dusk. Nothing seemed familiar. Nérac had never permitted her to leave the fortress, and her escape with Hal had been too fraught with danger to take stock of the alleys and streets along which they had run. It was the bitterest of ironies which now led her to reverse that flight and cast herself at the mercy of her husband's cruel will.

Could those be storm clouds blocking out the sun's last rays as it sank behind the city's walls? She turned to look at Marc who sat, his chin resting on his hands as he leaned forward, subdued and locked in thought.

Meracad put her fingers to the dagger that Marta Ilenga had given her, tracing the carved detail on its hilt. When she looked up again, Marc was watching her. He shook his head. "That will solve nothing."

"Marta seemed to think it is our only hope."

"Marta is a desperate woman."

"And are we not desperate, Marc?" She surveyed him coolly. He sighed, but said no more and she slipped the dagger between the folds of her dress.

A distant growl of thunder accompanied their arrival as they pulled up in front of the barbican. With a stretch and a lazy, extravagant yawn, a guard approached the carriage. He peered inside and observed her for a moment, his mouth curling into a thin sneer.

"Let them through." He slapped the palm of his hand down onto the door of the carriage and she jumped. The man sidled away with a laugh. "Mistress is back. Just like the Master said she'd be." The carriage lurched into motion and they rolled into the courtyard, stopping just before the keep.

She turned her face to the sky as she climbed out, grateful for the thick droplets of rain which splashed onto her warm skin, rinsing away some of the fever and tension. The keep's dark mass seemed somehow bolstered by the anvil shaped clouds which were now mustering

behind it. For months it had supplied both home and prison — a prison to which she was now willingly returning.

Bolts were drawn back, doors swung open, and they were led down draughty corridors deep into the heart of the building, until at last they stepped into the great hall. Meracad caught herself wondering if they would leave the place with the same ease, but pushed the thought from her mind almost as soon as it had occurred to her. Fear would help no one.

She turned around, taking in the high ceiling which ran above a series of narrow slits in the walls, a few flickering candles supplying the only sources of light. At Hannac, the sun's rays streamed in through great mullioned arches which ran from floor to ceiling. Dal Reniac resembled a lair, she thought, not a home. And Hal was somewhere in that lair, trapped beneath great blocks of sandstone and granite.

Footsteps echoed from a distance, drawing nearer. The temperature took a sudden pitch downwards and yet her face was so hot it might have been burning, and she was grateful for the comforting weight of Marc's hand upon her shoulder.

Meracad barely noticed Nérac enter the hall until he had reached the dais at its furthest end, flanked on either side by torchbearers. He stood in silence for some time, watching her, registering Marc with a brief flicker of irritation before recovering his cold poise. A page stepped forward holding up a low basin of water. Nérac rinsed his hands and then took a long, black frock coat from the arms of another servant, pulling it on to conceal dark stains on the front of his shirt and the hem of his sleeves. Meracad's pulse quickened.

"Sit." He indicated a pair of varnished, oak framed chairs set at a table on the dais. Marc grunted his disapproval at Nérac's commanding tone, but gently took hold of Meracad's arm and led her to the platform. Her husband lowered himself into a high backed seat opposite them.

"Wine?" Unsmiling, he held up a flagon. She shook her head.

"Perhaps something to eat, then? You will both be hungry after your journey." He pushed a platter of fruit towards them.

"Lord Nérac, I did not come here for the pleasure of your conversation."

Meracad noted the arch tone to Marc's voice.

"Well, I wonder, Senator, why you did come here. I'm sure my wife would have had no difficulty returning of her own accord. She has demonstrated remarkable independence of late."

Meracad gripped the arms of her chair, her nails digging into its veneer. "You know why I'm here. Give her back to me."

Nérac raised a metal goblet to his lips and sipped. "Who?"

“No games, Nérac.” There had been a time when her hatred of the man had been matched only by her fear of him. Now that fear had gone, and she was left with no more than a deep and abiding loathing. “Hal is here. You have her.”

“I have her?” He feigned surprise. “Now what led you to that conclusion, I wonder?”

“Marec Paega.”

“Ah. Paega. Well, they do say every dog will have his day.” He glowered into his goblet and then drained the contents. Meracad seethed, words forming in her mouth and then crumbling to pieces before she could release them.

“It might surprise you to hear that I’m willing to forgive you everything,” he said at last. He set down his cup, folded his hands beneath his chin and rested on them, staring at her.

“What?” She almost choked.

“I’ll forgive you the slur on my reputation, the wastage of lives — you see, what I want you to realise, Meracad, is that my love for you is such that I will take you back. But you must do something to prove your loyalty first.”

“I think you mistake me. I have no intention of returning to you. I’d rather die.”

“Well that is, of course, the alternative.”

Marc shifted uneasily in his chair. “Lord Nérac, we came here to plead for our friend.”

“Not to plead for her!” Meracad spat. “He will give her back!”

Nérac’s laughter rang up to the rafters. “On the contrary, my love, you will give the order for her death. And in doing so, you will prove to me that you have freed yourself from this insanity. Do you not see, Meracad?” He leaned across the table towards her, his eyes now earnest, “she tricked you, duped you, used you. She’s descended from bad blood — the Hannacs were always rebels — she’s a freak, a witch even. She’s held onto you for a long time now, but you can release yourself. It will hurt. I understand that.” He placed his hands over hers and she pulled away. Ignoring her, he continued. “But when you cleanse yourself of her, you will free yourself. You will be my wife again, we’ll watch our daughter grow, there will be more children.”

She backed away, horrified, turning over the chair as she rose. Marc raised an arm to pull her back down, but she was already around the table, the dagger was out, she was sliding it towards his neck. Nérac caught her wrist and the weapon clattered to the floor. He continued to hold her, her flesh turning white beneath his fingers as he squeezed. “I know this will be hard. But years from now, you’ll thank me.”

He let go. She looked down at Marta’s dagger which lay between them amongst the rushes. Nérac picked it up and placed it on the table before him. “Perhaps you will find use for it yet this night, Meracad. But not on me.”

The growls and moans of thunder were drawing nearer. “I’d sooner stab myself than use this on anyone but you,” she whispered.

"And if to kill someone with it were an act of mercy? If you do not give the order for her death, I will torture her beyond recognition. And then I'll kill her anyway." He turned to Marc. "Your coming here tonight was unlooked for and unwanted, Senator. If you wish to watch your friend die, then do so. If not, I suggest you leave my wife and I in peace."

With a sudden snap of his fingers, he called out to the torchbearers. "Bring Hannac up here." He turned back to her as soon as they had left the room, a tight smile stretched across his face. "You'll find her somewhat changed my dear. I've taken a few liberties with her face."

Hal came round for a second time and immediately wished she hadn't. Half delirious with pain, she managed to roll over onto her back, her damp shirt clinging to her chest like a skin she had yet to shed. From time to time, the feet of a guard passed over the grate above her, reminding her that she was still in the realms of the living and not the dead. Her face glowed with heat and throbbed with pain; she was almost grateful that she couldn't touch it. The sharp taste of blood remained in her mouth and when she ran her tongue across her teeth, one broke loose and she spat it out. It fell to the floor with a faint clink.

Voices carried downwards, and then the grate ground open. Hal screwed her eyes against the sudden light as she was hauled from the hole again, her stomach threatening to force up what remained of its contents.

"You're to take a walk, Hannac." A guard thrust his face into hers.

"Where?"

"You'll find out," he smirked, and pulled a hemp sack down over her head. She struggled, exhausting her last reserves of strength as her world was once again reduced to a few muted sounds and the utter absence of light. She knew then what was about to happen. They would take her up to the courtyard, force her to kneel and then with a single blow to the neck it would all be over. Nérac would be there to witness it: she was certain of it. She was almost relieved. At least there would be no more pain: no more teeth cracked, or pits underground, or bones broken. But then she imagined Meracad sitting anxiously by the hearth, Leda in her arms waiting for her to return, and the thought almost reduced her to tears.

Someone shoved her forwards and she landed on her knees, a few snorts of laughter accompanying her fall. They were dragging her up what must have been a steep flight of steps; her shins made painful contact with sharply angled stone. The air grew fresh and brisk; she must be above ground. They stopped for a moment, and she waited amongst muttered whisperings and the clicks of keys turning in a series of locks before they pushed her outside.

Wind hurled rain at her head and limbs, soaking the sack, drenching her already sodden clothing. The air itself seemed to let out a roar of fury, and in the intense, raw flash of light

that followed she made out the looming shape of the keep through the net of her blindfold before all descended once more into darkness. Hal shuddered, anticipating what was to come.

"Scared of the storm are we?" With hoarse, guttural barks of laughter her captors dragged her on. They were out of the wind and rain. She caught the scent of molten wax and sweet rushes and realised they had entered the keep. So she was not to be executed in the courtyard? What torments now lay in store for her?

Nérac's low, laconic tones floated down the corridor towards her, and then another man spoke, his voice lighter yet insistent. Was that?...It could not be...

They had stopped again. She froze, confused and exhausted, her heart beating out a frantic measure against her rib cage. The sack was pulled from her face and she blinked into the scant light of candles, her eyes refusing to focus after hours spent in darkness. Three figures she made out, shadows seated at a table above her, one of whom seemed to rise: fawn coloured hair, slender limbs draped in the loose folds of a travelling cloak. This was a dream, surely. A hallucination — the issue of wrought nerves and hunger and pain. Even so, she could not hold back the name which now escaped her lips. "Meracad?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Pens and Swords

Hal stepped forward but was jerked back with such force she barely remained on her feet. Meracad stared down at her as she stood between the two guards, the jarring clink of chains echoing to silence around the hall. So she was still alive, at least. For a moment Meracad experienced what might have been relief. But then she took in her lover's injured face and realised how misplaced her hope had been. Hal's hair clung to her forehead and cheeks in lank, wet strands; her face was smudged with dirt and crusted with dried blood. Worst of all, however, were her eyes, and what Meracad read in them. Sunk beneath layers of bruises, their blue intensity was lost, replaced by helplessness, defeat and worst of all, resignation.

Marc spoke at last, his voice tight with suppressed rage. "I hope I shall never have the misfortune to count you as my host, Lord Nérac."

Pouring himself another cup of wine, Nérac leant back in his chair and gave the liquid a speculative swirl around his goblet. "I treat my guests according to their deserts."

"What have you done to her?" Meracad span round to face him.

He shrugged. "I merely taught her a lesson that was long overdue. Too bad she won't live to reap its benefits."

A pulse of lightning pushed its way through the narrow strips of windows. Against the sudden flash of brightness, Marc seemed locked in an attitude of hatred, Nérac as unliving as a statue, Hal sealed amongst shadows. Once again, semi-darkness descended on the room. Nérac flicked his fingers at the dagger, sending it spinning across the table towards Meracad, who caught it before it hit the floor. "You have the power to set her free forever, Meracad. And yourself too. Just one thrust with this. That's all it will take. Her pain will end, yours too." He gave Hal a brief look. "I don't think she'll put up much resistance."

"Never."

He shrugged. "Have it your way." He gave a barely perceptible nod to one of the guards, and Hal released an agonised groan as a curled fist was planted into the lower half of her spine. Her back arched, her legs gave way, she hung limply between her captors. Desperate,

Meracad jumped down from the dais before Marc could stop her and ran across to Hal to stand in front of her, the dagger outstretched. "If you touch her again..."

"What will happen, Meracad? What will you do? Hmm? Set on my men with that dagger of yours?" Nérac scooped up an apple and proceeded to skin it. "I'd as soon use it on this fruit." His laughter was hard and low. A long snake of green peel dropped to the table.

"Lord Nérac!" Marc slapped the table with the palm of his hand in frustration.

Nérac looked at him, his eyebrows raised. "Still here, Senator? I suggest you save your breath and go home."

Hal had picked herself up again. "What are you doing here?" She whispered into Meracad's ear.

"I'm taking you home."

"It's pointless. You shouldn't have come."

Meracad turned around and cupped Hal's face in her hands. "You're all I've got, Hal. I'm not leaving without you."

Tears brimmed on the bruised rims of Hal's eyes. "You shouldn't have come," she repeated.

"Ssh, Hal. Be quiet for once." She sounded more confident than she felt, but Hal forced her lips upwards, attempting a smile. Meracad turned back to face the dais again.

"I believe you are telling only half-truths, Lord Nérac," Marc was saying.

"How so, Senator?"

"I would say that opportunity was the meat to your ambitions. You don't really love your wife, Lord Nérac. At least, not in the way she deserves. You love power; you love land and privilege. Meracad's flight with Hal gave you every excuse you needed to attack the Nests."

"The Nests were a law unto themselves. The Emperor has endured their insolence for long enough. I would have pacified them for his sake." Nérac sank his teeth into the apple, its juice spattering down on the platter.

"And do you not think the Emperor might care to be consulted before you go about setting fire to the North?"

"The Emperor has his own battles to wage in the South. He would thank me, I believe, for bringing the North to heel. And he would certainly have no wish to come between a man and his wife."

"You second guess his majesty Diodiné with a degree of certainty. Are you so sure he would be at ease if he were to wake up one morning and discover the northern stretch of his empire under the control of a single man? If I were him, I would take such a development to be a sign of overweening ambition."

Thunder seemed to pick the keep up and shake it. In the ensuing flare of light, Meracad thought she saw a trace of fear in her husband's eyes.

"His majesty's judgement is more discerning than your own, Senator, if you will forgive me for saying so. He would understand the strength of my loss and respect my course of action."

Marc's smile was faint and chill. "In that case, your being so mindful of our noble Emperor's good judgement, you will have no objection to answering his summons — to the letter."

Frozen, Nérac held the apple before his face as Marc pulled a creased parchment from inside his coat. In the dim light, Meracad made out the Emperor's seal.

"What is this?" Nérac's eyes narrowed to thin slits.

"The Emperor requests that you, Meracad, Hal and Franc Hannac be present at court before the month is out to answer for the confusion into which the North has been plunged. It is, I know, too late for Franc. But then again, he died in battle — tragic but hardly remarkable. If, however, the Emperor were to discover that you had executed Hal after opening this summons, now that would be a different matter." Marc spread his hands wide and shrugged, as if to indicate how helpless the situation would be. "Of course, you appear to know the Emperor's mind before he has even made it himself, Lord Nérac. And so if you believe he will be satisfied with the news that you have taken justice into your own hands, you have no reason to be afraid." He turned around to look at Meracad. "Does he, Meracad?"

"I should say he does not," she murmured, taken aback by Marc's manipulation of Nérac's words.

"You know my Lord, I do feel a thirst after my journey. If you don't mind..." Marc curled his fingers around a goblet. He poured himself some wine, casting an anxious glance in Hal's direction. Nérac tore open the seal and read the parchment by candlelight, slinging the document onto the table in disgust.

"And if I don't give up my prisoner, or allow my wife to travel south? Could this matter not be solved in person with Diodiné?"

"I'm surprised you ask, Lord Nérac. You had almost led me to believe you were acting with the Emperor's blessing."

This time, the clap of thunder was distant. The hall fell silent. Meracad stared at Nérac, watching, waiting. Would that cold arrogance finally crack, she wondered? She had always suspected that his cruelty and contempt masked a fearful heart.

"You seem to have lost your voice, Lord Nérac." Ignoring the tension in her own throat, Meracad spoke. "Strange. You seemed so certain a moment ago to all your claims — to Hal's life, to my body, to the Nests. I'm surprised to see you hesitate."

"I want justice. That is all." His face had grown grey, his voice quavered slightly.

"And you don't believe you will get it from the Emperor, Sir?" Marc sounded incredulous. His chair screeched as he rose. "Well if that is the case there is no more to be done, I am afraid."

Marc clambered down from the dais, Nérac observing him warily. "I wonder how the Emperor will receive this news of how you rate his justice, Lord Nérac. Coming after your

recent attack on the Nests, I should say you may want to look to your own defences.” He began to fasten his coat and walk towards the door.

“Wait!” Nérac’s plea carried a strain of high-pitched panic.

Marc stopped and slowly turned around. “Yes?”

“You’re wrong, Remigius.” Nérac walked over to Hal and reached into the pocket of his coat. Meracad held her breath, but he drew out a key. “You think I have no respect for the Emperor’s justice. You think I do as I like and laugh in his face.” With a few twists of the key, Hal’s chains fell to the ground.

“You seem to have friends in high places, Hannac,” he growled into Hal’s ear, pushing her forwards. She sank to her knees. “But I have every faith in the Emperor’s justice. Diodiné is a man who values order, who demands respect. And he’ll have you strung up in the market square like the rebel you are. And as for you, Meracad...” he strode towards her, but she refused to flinch. “When Diodiné makes you my wife again, you will learn what it means to serve me, your husband, and you *will* love me!”

She shook her head, appalled. “You are sick,” she said. “Sick with hatred. But I have faith in the Emperor’s good judgement too.”

Meracad reached down and extended a hand to Hal, pulling her to her feet. They clung together for a moment. Hal smelt of grime, sweat and blood; she trembled with relief and shock. “Come on, Hal,” Meracad whispered. “It’s time to go.”

She slipped an arm around Hal’s waist, but the duellist shook her head. “I’m alright.” She disentangled herself from Meracad’s grasp and raised her arms above her head with a wince, stretching out cramped muscles. “As obliged as I am, Nérac, I won’t impose on your hospitality.” She favoured him with a lop-sided grin.

“You’ll find no sympathy from the Emperor, Hannac,” Nérac snarled. “And I’ll watch with pleasure when you’re dancing on the end of a rope.”

She said nothing in reply, but turned and headed for the door. With a slight bow, Marc followed her out, pulling Meracad along by the arm. “Let’s get out of here before he finds his courage and changes his mind,” he muttered through clenched teeth. Hal was already at the end of the corridor, grabbing hold of the wall for support before she passed through into the courtyard. They caught up with her to find her leaning against the wall of the keep, her face turned upwards, rain splashing the blood from her cheeks.

“Get in the carriage Hal,” Marc said after a few moments. She tried to move, but her legs gave way and they half-dragged her inside until she was lying across the seat, her head resting on Meracad’s lap.

“Drive, damn it!” Marc banged his fist several times on the vehicle’s roof and the horses broke into a canter. For a few tense minutes they waited below the barbican, and then Meracad felt

her heart beat again as the portcullis drew upwards and they passed onto the streets of Dal Reniac.

The storm had all but died away. Just a few faint flashes of light far beyond the city walls indicated that it had moved westwards, leaving a fine drizzle in its wake. Marc fussed around beneath the seats and drew out a leather flask of water which he put to Hal's lips, but she pushed it away.

"I've had enough water, Marc." She managed a rueful smile. "Perhaps you could see your way to finding something stronger?"

"I don't think that's a good idea. You're weak enough as it is."

"Entirely for medicinal purposes. Don't think I don't know about that bottle of cheap brandy you keep hidden beneath the seat."

Marc sighed. "You'll be the death of me." He rooted around once more in the darkness and pulled out a clay bottle plugged with cork. "You might want to take a swig of that yourself, dear girl," he said, passing it to Meracad.

She smiled for the first time that evening, uncorked the brandy and trickled a small amount into Hal's mouth before drinking some herself. The spirit was hot and strong; she felt it hit her stomach, warmth kindling through her entire body. Hal coughed and spluttered and let out a groan.

"What did they do to you in there?" Meracad raked her fingers through Hal's wet hair.

"Nothing. I'll be alright."

Marc caught Meracad's eyes and he shook his head. She nodded and said no more. Hal would speak when she was ready; that much she understood. She set down the brandy, and taking the flask of water, soaked the corner of her cloak, wiping away some of the blood and dirt from Hal's face.

"How did you know I was still alive?" Hal tilted her head backwards and looked up at Meracad, her lips still trembling with shock. Marc passed Meracad a blanket and she wrapped it around the duellist's shaking form, holding her tight against her own chest.

"Marec Pæga told us you'd been taken by Nérac."

"Pæga?" Hal's face grew even paler beneath the plastered layers of dirt. "What did he say?"

"He said that he'd been too far away to stop Nérac. We left him at Hannac, Hal. He seemed to think he had some claim to it with you gone — I couldn't stop him."

"What?" Hal breathed out a howl of despair, her pupils dancing wildly in eyes which seemed to have regained some of their fire. "Give me that brandy, for God's sake." She forced herself upright, clutched the blanket to her chest, and plucking the bottle from Meracad's fingers, proceeded to drain its contents.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Usurpers

As soon as Hal opened her eyes, daylight assaulted them. She screwed them shut, her mind racing and struggled to remember where she was. Somewhere it had been dark: there had been pain, she had felt fear and great loss. The pain was still there — her entire body seemed to be composed of bruises — and now her head also throbbed with such intensity she could have screamed. And yet where was the darkness?

She could move freely if she dared. That was strange too. Had it been a dream then, those long sightless hours underground: the sensation of being trapped, of a living burial?

Hal twisted to her right and fair hair cascaded downwards onto the swollen mess of her face, tickling her raw skin. That was when she discovered that she was draped across the legs of another sleeper, her head nestling against the soft warmth of her fellow passenger's stomach. She reached upwards to trace the contours of Meracad's face: the high ridges of her cheek bones, the curves of her lips. Meracad moaned and continued sleeping, resting her head against the upholstered backrest of the carriage seats.

Hal allowed her body to rise and fall in time with Meracad's deep, drowsy breaths, the stillness broken only by the occasional cries of birds high overhead and a delicate wind which set the blinds rustling.

Fragments of memory seemed to jostle for position now, gradually attaining some kind of order, although whether they were real or not Hal was not certain: flashes of lightning, Meracad standing before her clutching a dagger, the harsh bark of Nérac's laughter. Marc too — had Marc been there? That must have been a dream, for he was not in the carriage with them now.

She forced herself upright, her head swam and she opened the carriage door, submitting to a violent bout of vomiting. Hal knelt, panting, spitting out strings of saliva as the heather and moss below her soaked up the bile-streaked contents of her stomach. Then she looked up, half-stupefied, and stared in dumb surprise at the open stretch of moorland that lay before her.

“Well thank god you didn't hit the paint work.”

Marc's voice seemed to rise out of the air itself. Hal pushed herself back inside the carriage and sat on the floor.

"Why have we stopped?" Hal asked, dragging her sleeve across her mouth. Marc's face was lined with disgust as he stepped gingerly across the fouled patch of heather and climbed inside the carriage. He slung a linen bag onto his seat and pulled her to her feet, setting her down next to Meracad who stirred, stretched and woke.

"Strange though it might seem, Hal, you need to put more than brandy in your stomach. When was the last time you ate?"

"Don't ask such complicated questions."

Sighing, he pulled a hunk of bread, a smoked cut of cold lamb and a clay flagon from the bag. "I just acquired these from a local croft," he explained. "And we're not continuing until you've eaten."

"I've gone past the point of hunger, Marc."

"Nonsense." He handed her the clay flask. Wary, she uncorked it and sniffed the contents.

"Water," he stated flatly. "You drank all the brandy."

"I did?"

"Why you thought that a hangover would be the solution to your problems is quite beyond me, Hal. Drink it."

Hal pressed the vessel to her lips, suddenly realising how thirsty she had become. The water ran down the sides of her mouth as she drank, stopping only to draw in great gulps of air.

"And now eat."

She looked despondently down at the cold plasters of lamb stretched across thick wedges of hard, brown bread and shook her head. "Marc, I'll just bring this straight up again."

"We're still several hours' journey from Hannac. If you want it to take even longer, be my guest."

Pulling his hat down over his eyes, he crossed his arms and went back to sleep.

Hal turned to Meracad with what she hoped was a pleading expression. "I can't eat this," she whispered.

"Hal..." Meracad threaded an arm around her shoulders, "I'm exhausted, I'm very far from home and I really would like to see my daughter. So please, just do it for me. Hmm?" She tilted Hal's face towards her and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

Hal stared at her and then looked back down at the food. "This is going to be a very long journey," she said.

It was late afternoon by the time the carriage worked its slow passage up the steep bank of the glen towards Hannac. Spring sunlight pierced the foliage and the air seemed thick with the buzz of insects and bird song. Hal rested her head on Meracad's shoulder and watched as they crested the plateau and the limestone walls of the fortress towered above them. Already, Dal Reniac seemed so far away it was almost unreal — a nightmare which occasionally resurfaced to trouble her conscious thoughts. It was now the prospect of what lay before her which most disturbed her: Hannac without Franc's forceful presence. The responsibility of leadership without his guiding hand. And the thought that Marec Pæga, the man who had sold her to her enemy, was now inhabiting her family home.

The carriage crunched its way beneath the familiar shadows of the main gate tower and then ground to a halt in the courtyard. Meracad took Hal's hand and squeezed it. "You're home," she whispered.

"Thank you." They clung to each other for a few moments until Marc cleared his throat.

"You too, Marc." Hal turned to her old friend. "I owe you. Twice. Three times, in fact! I haven't forgotten..."

"Yes, yes, yes...save it, Hal." Marc raised his hands as if to block her words. "Right now, we have pressing issues afoot." He frowned, and she noticed the dark shadows ringing his eyes. "Nérac may have been right about the Emperor's skewed sense of justice. And if I'm not mistaken, a cuckoo has just made Hannac his new nest." He twisted his head in the direction of the keep. "You may thank me when you can afford to do so. Can you stand up?"

She nodded glumly.

"Good. Let's get this over with." He pushed open the door and climbed out.

"Come on, Hal. I'm here. Don't forget that." Meracad rose, still clutching Hal's hand, and pulled her upright. Hal gritted her teeth against the rising swell of pain which immediately laid claim to her entire body, seized the frame of the carriage door and swung herself down into the courtyard. With a light leap, Meracad pounced down beside her.

Hannac rang to the clink of chisels and masonry hammers as tenants repaired the torn southern walls of the fortress. Guards paced the ramparts; she caught sight of Elis rushing inside the keep to pass on the news of their return.

"We thought you were gone for good, Hal!" Arec's round grinning face emerged above the walls of the gatehouse and then he powered his way down the steps towards them, thudded across the cobbles and caught her in a rough hug. She gasped as bruised limbs were squeezed beneath the vice-like hold of his embrace.

He released her and she sank back against the carriage for a moment.

"Sorry, Miss." Arec's cheerful expression resolved itself into one of remorse. "I was forgetting myself. With Franc gone you're..."

"Don't worry," she wheezed, clutching her aching sides. "And don't 'Miss' me, Arec. It's Hal, remember?"

"Of course. Hal."

He stepped aside to let Marta Ilega approach, Leda in her arms. Still wearing her homespun dress of black wool, Marta seemed somehow to have aged in days, her golden eyes now bearing a haunted cast. She placed Leda into Meracad's outstretched arms and Meracad held the baby against her chest for a few moments and kissed her head.

"I'll not leave you again, Leda," she whispered. "Thank you, Marta."

"It was no chore. She stopped me thinking about..." Marta squinted against the late afternoon sunlight and turned to Hal. "We had to bury him, Hal. We couldn't wait. We didn't know if you'd ever be back."

"I know, Marta." Hal placed a hand on Marta's shoulder. "And I thank you, too, for all your help."

Marta eyed her critically. "Looks like Nérac had a few words with you, Hal."

"You could say that."

"And my dagger?" Marta turned to Meracad. "Did you use it?"

Meracad shook her head.

"More's the pity. Keep it. You may have use for it yet. Pæga's drinking Hannac dry. What few stocks your father had left in store are gone, Hal. He seems to have assumed you're not coming back."

"Really? I wonder how he reached that conclusion. Well let's persuade him he was wrong, shall we?"

In spite of the rich sunlight, the great hall seemed hazy, as if the air itself had been coated with a thick, heavy film. Hal almost choked on the smoky fumes of roasting meat, the reek of stale, spilt ale. She scanned the room, expecting to find Pæga sat at table carousing with his men, but he was nowhere to be seen. Instead, a drunken clique of his hussars accosted Elis with appeals for food and drink, slapping the thighs of unwary maids as they walked past. Hal watched them for a moment, gnawing at her split lips, painfully aware that her next actions would be scrutinised by her own guards and tenants. This, she realised, would be the first real test of her authority.

"I see you gentlemen are enjoying yourselves." She picked her way around overturned benches and discarded beer tankards to stand at their table's end, her arms crossed. Two of them had already descended into sleep, their heads lolling on the table. The others were

absorbed in a game of dice, or in raucous, curse-strewn conversation. None of them looked up.

Hal waited for a moment, her blood simmering. "I said, I see you are enjoying yourselves." She seized a tankard of beer and flung it across the hall. It landed in the fire pit with a violent hiss and a spray of steam.

"Oy!" Hands reached for swords, furious faces swung round in her direction, angry expressions immediately transforming into attitudes of surprise — even of horror.

"What's the matter, gentlemen?" Hal searched the rows of wild, beer-befuddled eyes. "You perhaps believe me to be a ghost. I almost was, thanks to you and your treacherous master. Where is he, by the way?"

"In bed," one man stammered.

"Sleeping?" Hal allowed a note of incredulity to creep into her voice. "But it's late afternoon!"

"The master keeps late hours."

"I'll bet he does. Listen..." she placed her hands flat down on the table and bent over them. They craned forward to catch her words. "I'll cut you a deal, seeing as it's deals that you and your master seem most fond of. Especially deals with Nérac. Tell me where Pæga is. Then take your sorry carcasses out of my home and leave Hannac for good."

"And if we don't?" One man rose, pressing his face close to her own, his lips hardening into a sneer. He seized a joint of roast meat and tore at it with his teeth. "I like it here," he said as he chewed, the juices trickling into his beard.

Without another word, Hal seized the sword at his side and pressed it to his throat, holding back his head as he choked on the meat.

"As long as my guards believed your master had a claim to this place, you were tolerated." She pressed the blade deeper into his skin. A thin trickle of blood raced down his neck. He coughed and spluttered, his face turning a vivid shade of purple.

"If you don't leave now, they will tear you to pieces, chew you up and spit you out again as you are about to do with this meat."

She took the blade away. He put his hands to his neck, attempting to force up the half-eaten mouthful of pork, but she seized his hair again, took a tankard of ale from the table and proceeded to pour it down his throat. "Some beer to accompany your meal perhaps?"

His comrades backed away, fumbling drunkenly for weapons, but found themselves surrounded by Arec and his men.

"Hal!" Meracad had rushed across the hall, Leda still in one arm while she plucked at Hal's sleeve with the other. "You'll kill him!"

"That's the idea," Hal growled, releasing Pæga's guard. He fell backwards over the bench and rolled across the floor, spitting up clumps of fat and gristle.

"Usurpers! All of them!" Still clutching her victim's sword, she turned towards his comrades, who backed away. "Where's your master?"

"In the turret room."

"In Franc's room!" Her anger on edge once again, she made for the door but found Marc blocking her way.

"Hal!" He seized her shoulders and shook her. "Franc believed in justice."

"So do I!" She yelled as she fled from the hall.

Chapter Thirty

Sleepers

As long as the anger still pulsed through her veins, Hal did not seem to mind the pain. It were as if the bruises and cracked bones and swollen, throbbing lips belonged to another person — someone who had passively submitted to her enemy's blows as she waited for death. Now she felt strong again, furious, almost invincible as she charged up the spiral stairs of the turret tower towards the private quarters which had once belonged to her father, the sword of Pæga's guard in her hand.

It was only when she had reached the iron studded door that she paused, putting her ear to the wood. Deep, rasping snores shook their way out into the stairwell, penetrating several inches of thick oak. In spite of her rage she smiled, pressed down the door handle with slow, careful purpose and slipped inside.

Franc's bed was stationed in the centre of the room, a rickety old four poster contraption which looked as if it would collapse under the weight of Pæga's snoring mass. The floor was littered with emptied wine bottles, half-eaten plates of food, tangled heaps of clothing and discarded armour. She stood for a moment, observing the steady rise and fall of Pæga's belly beneath piles of blankets and bed clothes.

Hal tiptoed forwards until she was standing beside him, staring directly down at his head. Pæga gave the strange impression of being irate even while he slept with his flushed, livid face: red veins threaded across a bulbous nose. She raised the sword and put the tip to his right cheek, slicing off one end of his moustache. Pæga released a muttered growl and shivered slightly, but continued sleeping.

"Get up." With a flick of the blade, the other end of the moustache was gone. Pæga stirred, grumbling in his sleep as he brushed at the loose whiskers on his cheek.

Lowering the tip of the sword she trailed it along the edge of his beard, snipping away tufts of hair. "I said get up!" Hal slapped the back of her hand across the sleeper's face before climbing onto the bed, her feet planted astride Pæga's chest, the sabre pressed down against his neck. Spluttering and roaring like a wounded boar, Pæga opened his eyes which grew wider with every passing second.

"Halanya!" He gasped at last.

"Did you think I was a ghost, Pæga? I'm sorry to disappoint you but I'm very very real." He twisted, struggling to clamber out of bed but she dug her heels into his ribs, pinioning him into place.

"Look what they did to me, Marec." She pointed to her swollen face. "You knew what Nérac would do and yet you sold me to him for the price of my father's home. And Meracad. And Leda. You sold us all."

"Now, Halanya, I..."

"My name is not Halanya." The air shot out of his lungs as she dropped down onto his chest and sat on his ribcage, still maintaining the pressure of the sword against his neck. "My name is Hal Hannac and you are a troublesome guest in my home who has more than outstayed his welcome. And so as much as it pains me to say so, I am going to have to ask you to leave."

She clambered off the bed, her blade now hovering dangerously close to his eye. "I said get up!"

The veins on Pæga's nose seemed to pulsate, his pupils dilating — but whether from fear or rage she couldn't tell. He seized the bed clothes between pink, puffy fingers and drew them up to his face. "Alright, Hal," he muttered. "I was only looking after the place for you..."

"Looking after it!"

"But turn your back if you would." His voice was almost wheedling.

"You deceived me once, Pæga. You won't do it again. I've heard enough of your voice for one day already. Now for the last time, get up!"

She snatched the bedclothes from his hands and ripped them off him, then stepped back raising her hand to her mouth in disgust.

"I tried to warn you," he protested.

Sprawled naked across the bed, Pæga's folds of flesh rippled when Hal kicked the mattress. He struggled onto his side and then, clutching hold of the bedstead, evidently still quite drunk, hauled himself to his feet.

"Just allow me the dignity of..." he bent over to hunt for clothes.

"As you allowed me dignity?" She brought the flat of the blade down against his raised haunches. With a swinish squeal, Pæga fell forwards.

"Come on, Marec." Hal pulled him to his feet and pushed him towards the door. "Let's get you back home, shall we?"

He hovered, shivering at the top of the stairs and turned to her with pleading eyes. "Don't do this, Hannac. My men..."

"Your men are already on their way. You'll catch them up if you hurry. Here, let me help you." She raised her foot and kicked him hard in the buttocks. Pæga tottered for a few moments in

an unsuccessful attempt to regain his balance, before plunging head first in an uncontrolled cartwheel.

"Such a long set of stairs, Marec," Hal commented airily as she followed his naked spinning limbs downwards. "I wonder why Franc liked sleeping up there so much."

Pæga had become lodged in an alcove and was attempting to stand, clawing his way up the wall.

"No, no, no." In spite of herself, Hal laughed. "We'll be here until nightfall if you try to get down these steps alone, Marec. Anyway, why walk when you can fly?" She raised her foot again and slammed it into his ribcage. Pæga peeled off sideways with an anguished grunt and continued his chaotic descent downwards, landing on his back amongst groups of tenants and guards who had gathered at the bottom to witness the expulsion. Hal traipsed down after him, resting her sword on her shoulder, a crooked grin stretched across her face.

"What the hell are you trying to do?" Marc pushed his way through a group of guards who were dragging Pæga to his feet.

"I'm merely ridding my home of vermin."

"Hal, this is very badly done." Marc's eyes blazed. "Do you wish to set the whole world against you?"

"And why should I want such animals on my side?" She pushed past him. "Arec, tie Master Pæga up and set him on his horse would you? I should hate to think of him alone and on the moors after dark. The wolves would feast for months."

"Right you are Hal," Arec grinned. "Come on, lads. Let's not keep the Master waiting."

In spite of Pæga's protests and cries for help, Arec and his men hoisted him aloft and bore him out into the courtyard, securing his hands and feet with rough twine before hoisting him like a sack of grain onto a horse's back. Hal noticed Marta Ilenga step from the shadows of the keep to watch, a faint smile twitching about her lips.

Seizing the horse's reins, Hal led the animal towards the main gatehouse and out onto the plateau and then stopped. Pæga's face had turned a dangerous shade of crimson and he was delivering a steady volley of curses upon her, upon Hannac, upon the memory of her father and upon Nérac for having let her go.

"Now, now, Marec. If I were you, I'd save your breath. It's a fair distance across the moor before you reach home and it won't be easy steering a horse from the position you're in, I'd say."

Raising a hand, she shielded her eyes against the sun as it sank behind the outlines of Berasé and Pæga. "Off you go now." She brought a hand down on the horse's right flank. It bucked with a whinny of surprise, threatening to fling Pæga off into the heather before bolting wildly westwards. Hal watched for a few moments, half amused as he clung desperately to the saddle, his two hands knotted before him, his jolting mounds of flesh quivering upon impact

with the leather. Then she turned to find every last man, woman or child spilling out of the main gates or lining the western walls, shouting and cheering. She gave a mock bow, suddenly feeling very tired, and headed back towards the fortress, looking up at the walls as she passed inside. She had been mistaken. Not everyone was cheering. Marc glowered down at her, arms crossed, his lips sealed tight in disapproval. And when she re-entered the courtyard, Meracad stormed out of the keep, beckoning to her.

Hal sighed as Arc patted her on the shoulder. "Now you're in real trouble, Hal," he whispered.

Meracad had already reached their room by the time Hal climbed upstairs, and she was sitting with one foot perched on the base of Leda's cradle, gently rocking the baby to sleep. She looked up as Hal entered, her face white and taut with anger. Hal sank into a chair, now drenched with exhaustion. With gradual, mischievous intent her injuries came back to haunt her like malevolent spirits. She had felt herself to be so powerful, so strong as she had watched Pæga's painful descent of the stairs. Now her entire body seemed to be in revolt against her once again and she had barely the strength left to speak.

A bath tub had been placed in the middle of the room. The steam rising from it bore the scent of curative herbs. She watched the wraiths of vapour rise to the ceiling and wondered how much it would hurt to get in.

"Pleased with yourself?" Meracad's hazel eyes danced furiously.

"Meracad, I..."

"What, Hal, what? Did you seriously think that kicking Pæga down some steps would solve our problems?"

"No, but I...I was angry."

"Angry." Meracad shook her head in despair, her laughter bitter. "You're always angry, Hal. Angry with the world. Angry with yourself, I sometimes think."

"Meracad, I'm very tired."

"Now you're tired. Now!" Leda squirmed and mewled in her cot and Meracad dropped her voice to a harsh whisper. "You didn't seem to be tired when you were forcing beer down the throat of Pæga's guard."

"You weren't there!" Hal half-closed her eyes, wishing the conversation would go away.

"Where?"

"On the plains of Hannac. You didn't see what happened, Meracad! Pæga had the chance to set me free. Instead he allowed Nérac to take me so long as he kept Hannac. And Leda."

Meracad stared at her for a moment, and then, horror stricken, reached down into the cradle and pulled Leda from it, holding the complaining child to her chest. "So that's why he was so desperate to keep Leda here."

"Franc's dead, Meracad. Nérac killed him." Hal turned to her, unable to keep in check the tears which now coursed freely down her face. "He had his back to the boy, he had no chance, he just sank down there and then, all that strength, all that warmth just gone in minutes..."

She sank forward, her face resting in the palms of her hands and gave way to grief. A part of her realised that this was how she should have felt when she was on the western wall, watching as the life bled out of Franc's injured body. Now, the release of emotion seemed like the lifting of a burden that she had carried with her ever since that moment – a weight that had been even heavier than the irons Nérac had placed around her wrists. Leda was crying too now, woken and sensing her grief. She experienced a strange sense of solidarity with the child and rising, took her from Meracad's arms, the tiny body shaking against her own as the two cried in unison. Standing beside the window, she watched as fragmented pieces of the setting sun were divided amongst the mullioned panes of glass and felt at last her grief subside.

Meracad had snaked her arms around her waist, and was pressing her chin into her shoulder, resting her head against Hal's cheek. "Bathe and sleep, Hal," she whispered.

Hal nodded and passed Leda back to her, the baby now quiet, and ran her sleeve across her eyes. "I can't control myself sometimes, Meracad. I didn't know what else to do with Pæga."

Meracad pressed her fingers to Hal's forehead. "Start using what's in there more, Hal. Hannac is yours now. The tenants will look to you for leadership. And just swinging your sword around or kicking your enemy down a flight of steps might not be the answer to their problems. You have to learn to listen, to think!" She kissed Hal's lips. "And you really need to take a bath."

Hal peeled off her torn, bloodstained shirt, grateful to be out of it. "I think that we'll probably burn that," Meracad commented as she lay Leda back in her cradle. Hal nodded glumly in response and then shook herself free of her trousers and stared in suspicion at the water. Her mind stirred with a distant memory of drowning.

"I think I'd rather not," she mumbled.

Meracad sighed. "Get in the bath, Hannac." She took Hal's arm and guided her to the tub, shaking her head as the duellist reluctantly clambered in. "What did they do to you?" Her voice registered shock on witnessing the mottled web of cuts and bruises encrusting Hal's body.

Hal gritted her teeth as her injured flesh made contact with the water, rendering her almost dizzy with pain. "Nothing."

"Nothing! I have eyes. I can see." Meracad knelt down beside the bath and rested a hand behind Hal's head, gently ruffling her hair.

"If you can see you don't need to ask." Hal strained forward to kiss Meracad's lips again. The heat, the steam itself seemed to wind its way into her body, working inside her toes, along her legs, her fingers and arms, travelling upwards until her mind itself seemed blissfully empty and full of no more than steam.

"Hal. Come on. Hal!" Meracad's voice seemed very far away, distant echoes from another room as Hal felt her eyelids flutter and sink and she drifted off into a place which she prayed would resemble sleep.

Chapter Thirty-One

Running

Franc's grave still lacked a headstone. Only a mound of sandy earth marked the place of his burial, high up on a spur of land overlooking the forest. On the distant horizon, Lake Brennac gleamed like an enormous jewel embedded in the plains.

Hal sat beside the freshly cut turf, watching as a lark soared above the moors until it was out of sight, its song scattering downwards through the clouds. A light wind ruffled the heather and her hair. She wrapped her coat closer around her chest, taking in the precarious angles of her ancestors' graves, the stones leaning towards each other as if in conversation. Many of the inscriptions were hidden behind wreaths of lichen and moss: she could make out only a faint, crumbling 'Han' or 'nac'. With a shock of recognition, however, she traced the letters of her own name upon a plain square of white marble: her grandmother, she realised, buried in the same stretch of ground as her husband, Jonac Hannac. A long wait she must have had, to lie once again beside her husband after that fatal fall he had taken from his horse on the very night of Franc's birth. But here they were once again, reunited in death if not in love.

"I'm sorry, Franc." Hal pulled a clump of peaty earth from the grave and rolled it around in her hand, watching as it oozed out between her clenched fingers. "If I'd not just run when I did, if I'd turned around in time..."

She drew her knees up beneath her, resting her arms on them, and brushed the dirt from her hand onto her trousers. "I don't know what to do here, Franc. You had a lot left to show me. And I was so unwilling to learn." A few tears slipped out of the corners of her eyes and she wiped at them angrily with the cuff of her sleeve. "A year ago I knew nothing more than Colvé — my quarters in Riverside, the duelling academy, the Circle. And now all of this..." with a vague gesture she stretched her arm back in the direction of Hannac as if she really were talking to him. "What am I supposed to do with these people, Franc? I don't know anything about farming. And I certainly know nothing of diplomacy, it seems." She picked up a small pebble and flung it over the side of the spur. "Or at least that's what Marc tells me."

Marc had spent breakfast berating her for her treatment of Pæga on the previous day.

"You're about to face N rac at the imperial court itself, Halanya!" He'd thundered. "The last thing we need now is another enemy who can personally testify to your lack of self-control!"

"If P ga has any self-respect he'll keep away."

"A man like that will not just suffer such an indignity, Hal. Did N rac knock out the last shred of sense you had?"

She had stamped her way out of the hall at that, leaving Marc and Meracad to finish their breakfast without her, and found herself inevitably heading in the direction of Franc's resting place. Perhaps, she reasoned, the dead would be more understanding than the living.

"He was a good man, your da."

Hal froze. So enwrapped had she been in her own thoughts that she had not heard Magda approach. The wind tugged at the girl's brown hair, which she now kept braided and tied back. Dressed in a long, dark gambeson and leather leggings, her sword belted to her side, she stood with her back to the edge of the spur. The kitchen skivvy had gone: disappeared forever. In her place stood a soldier of the Hannac guard.

"What do you want?" Hal asked moodily.

"I have something to ask you. Or perhaps I need your permission to leave the fort, now you're the Mistress of Hannac?"

Hal chose to ignore the irony Magda placed on the word 'mistress.' "No. You don't have to ask permission," she said.

"Good." Magda settled down cross-legged on a patch of heather. An uneasy silence ensued. Hal fixed her gaze pointedly on the forest.

"Looks like N rac went to work on you," Magda said at last.

"Really? I hadn't noticed." Hal clenched her cracked jaw, choking back on a curse as pain gripped the side of her face. She wished that Magda would take the hint and leave her alone.

"I want to come with you," A note of urgency had entered Magda's tone.

"What?"

"I know you're all going down to Colv . I want to go too. I've decided there's nothing left for me here. My parents are dead, the croft is burnt, I'm fairly certain I'll not find employment in Dal Reniac again, and here..." she fixed Hal with an intent gaze, her eyes two deep, dark wells "here, I have to see *her* every day. You know who I mean."

It was a declaration rather than a question. Hal was at a loss for words.

"She loves you, Hal." Magda poked at the turf with a dried twig. "Well, I would be a fool to think that she might give you up for me. A kitchen maid." She snorted in self-contempt. "And the worst thing is, Hal, I sometimes think you can't see just how much she loves you. I would do anything...anything to have her look at me the way she looks at you." Magda sounded almost desperate. "And what do you do? You run. Why can't you stop running, Hal? Why can't you just sit down beside her for once and rest?"

Hal pushed herself to her feet and turned to go. After her argument at breakfast, this was the last thing she wanted to hear, but Magda called after her. "You see, Hal? You see? You're at it again. Running. That's all you ever do. And the worst thing is, she thinks that one day you'll run away from her for good."

Already marching across the springy turf towards Hannac, Hal swerved back round. "What did you say?" She asked.

"Meracad thinks you'll run from her one day. I can see it in her eyes. It terrifies her."

A cold hand gripped its clammy fingers around Hal's heart. "How can you tell that?"

"Ha! So busy running you can't see it. She begged you not to go down that tunnel into the forest to destroy those trebuchets, but you still went. You ran out onto the plains when Franc was killed. She would have held you back if she'd been there. And yesterday — all she wanted was for you to put your head on a pillow beside her and sleep. No wonder she was so angry."

"Oh God." Hal sank down beside Magda again, her mind drifting back to that night in Colvé: fire consuming Léac's house, the flames reflected in Meracad's eyes as she had made Hal promise never to leave her again.

"Don't waste your love Hal," Magda said as if reading Hal's thoughts.

There was silence again. Wind set the treetops shivering below. A distant clamour of metal on stone drifted up from the fort, accompanied by the high-pitched screams of saws.

"So you want to go to Colvé," Hal said at last. "What about Edæc?"

"Edæc will stay here. Meracad has agreed to that. The city is no place for such a young child."

"And you? What will you do? You're better off here, Magda. You fight well, and you were raised on a croft. The north is in your blood."

Magda let out a short, low laugh. "I fight well. Perhaps I could fight as well as *you* did. Your father seemed to think as much."

"Franc thought..." A suspicion took root and began to grow. "You want to duel?" Hal asked, hearing the surprise in her own voice.

"Why should you find that strange, Hal? You lived by your sword yourself before you left Colvé."

"Go on then." Hal grinned for the first time that day and leant back on her elbows, watching Magda.

"Go on what?"

"Show me what you can do. I assume Franc taught you a few moves if he was in on this plan the two of you were hatching."

"Alright. But I'll need an opponent."

Hal pursed her broken lips and frowned. "If Marc or Meracad caught me duelling now I'd never hear the last of it. They'd point out that I'm in no state to fight."

"Strange. You kicked Pæga out of bed and yet you're too weak to hold onto a sword."

"Stop it, Magda."

"I wonder if you've lost the appetite for it. Or perhaps you think it's beneath your dignity to duel with a kitchen maid?"

"I said enough!"

Magda bounced onto her feet, drawing out her sabre in the same stroke. "Too bad Nérac put out your fire, Hal. Let's just hope the good citizens of Colvé don't forget how well you duelled after they've seen what *I* can do."

"Magda, my ribs are cracked, I've got a broken nose, two blackened eyes and so many bruises I've lost count. But I can still beat you." Hal clambered to her feet with a grunt of frustration, aware of Magda's mocking gaze, and pulled out her own sword. "Alright, kitchen girl. Let's hope you've been practising."

For a few tense moments they paced back and forth between the graves before Magda swiped her sword down in the direction of Hal's waist. Hal twisted away, but felt ribs grate against each other and clutched at her side with her free hand. Magda lowered her blade. "Are you alright?"

"Yes. I'm fine. Carry on." Straightening up, Hal lashed out to the left, but Magda was already there to block the blow, bearing down on her blade with such intensity that Hal was forced to retreat. Nearing the edge of the spur, she cast a brief look downwards at the series of quartz-seamed chalky blocks which thrust out of the long grass below. She span back round to face Magda, just as the girl arced her sword in another long sweep towards Hal's left shoulder. Hal ducked, avoiding contact, but found herself forced backwards until she was teetering on the brink of the spur. As she stepped forward to recover her balance, she thrust her sabre up to meet Magda's, overawed by the power which lay behind the girl's strokes. A searing heat seemed to emanate from her chest and she found herself wheezing, choking almost. Magda had released the pressure on witnessing Hal's discomfort, and perceiving an opening, Hal thrust her sword towards Magda's chest, only to find it smashed out of her grasp by a two-handed sweep which sent the sabre looping over the forest behind them before it plunged down amongst the trees.

Magda gaped at her, open mouthed, evidently stunned by her own victory. "I'm sorry, Hal, I didn't expect..."

"Hal!" They both turned to witness Marc picking his way across the moor towards them, his tired face sporting an expression of weary resignation. "I might have known."

"Magda was just trying to show something to me, Marc." Hal slumped, bent double against a gravestone, and wrapped her arms around her chest as if holding her body together. She glanced up at Magda who stood, her hand covering her mouth, still evidently shocked.

"Hal," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I didn't realise."

"I should have done. It's alright, Magda. You just taught me a valuable lesson." She turned to Marc. "Magda's coming with us, Marc. To Colvé."

"Really?" Marc raised an eyebrow. "That's just what we need, the pair of you and your swords together in a confined space like a carriage. Very well. I'm sure you have your reasons for coming with us, Magda. But you, Hal, are going to have to do me a favour if you want me to keep the news of this little duel of yours from reaching Meracad's ears."

"Sometimes you almost sound like a politician. What must I do to buy your silence?"

"Precisely nothing, Hal. I want you to do just nothing all the way to Colvé."

"Nothing?"

"That's right."

She raised her hand to her ear and scratched it, screwing her face up as if in deep concentration. "I'll try," she conceded.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Caraden Revisited

There was little room in the carriage for the five of them. Even if Leda was a baby, she seemed to take up more space than was rightfully hers, squirming out of her mother's arms, giggling, crying and at last, thankfully, sleeping. Now Marc clutched her tiny frame between well-manicured hands as if she were a delicate vase or ornament that he had just saved from a fall. Magda shifted beside him in discomfort, her thighs and back aching after many hours spent bumping along the road to Colvé.

Meracad smiled at the Senator. "You look good with her, Marc. Have you never thought of having children of your own?"

Magda noticed a slight tension rise in his eyes.

"Lavinia is ... well we're both a little old for that, Meracad." He fixed his gaze out of the carriage window as they skirted the rising gold of a wheat field. "It's a strange thing. You all seem like the closest I've ever had to my own family."

"Well, Marc, perhaps in that case you could be Leda's honorary uncle."

Hal spluttered out of the half-sleep into which she had lapsed. "Marc? An uncle? He'll be teaching her wine connoisseurship by the age of five!"

"There are worse things to learn Hal," Marc returned acidly.

"Snuff taking?" She threw back.

He sighed, ignoring her, and turned to Meracad. "Thank you, my dear. I'm sure Lavinia and myself would be proud to serve as honorary relatives." He bowed his head and kissed Leda's cheek.

Something strange seemed to be welling in Magda's heart — something she had never experienced before and was not sure she could bear. She soaked up Meracad's image, aware that once they had reached Colvé, there would be no more chances to do so: those brown intelligent eyes, her long, fawn-shaded locks of hair now slightly mussed after the journey cascading over her shoulders. Her voice — not roughly accented like Magda's own, nor lilting with the twang of city speak like Hal's. No, Meracad spoke as Magda had always imagined an aristocratic woman must do, her words a long, fluent melody. Was it her voice, then, that

Magda had fallen in love with? Or perhaps it was the fact that Meracad's waifish, thin-limbed body was wrapped around a resolve set in steel. In that respect, Magda decided, Meracad was more powerful, much stronger than Hal.

The duellist leant with her head pressed into Meracad's shoulder, a hand resting on her lover's knee. Split, swollen lips formed an uneven grin as she baited her friend, the Senator. Magda admired certain things about Hal. She admired her confidence, her quick tongue and quicker temper. She admired her courage and her gift for swordplay. Magda even regretted provoking Hal into their mismatched duel earlier that morning. She had seen the look of disappointment enter Hal's eyes, forced to admit defeat. It was not, Magda suspected, an emotion that Hal was used to encountering.

And yet there was so much about Hal that she equally disliked. That confidence, those quick wits could so easily stray into an arrogance, a selfishness which hurt those closest to her. A selfishness which apparently blinded her to the suffering of others. The possibility that Meracad might fear her leaving had evidently come as a shock. To Magda, it was obvious. She saw it in Meracad's eyes every day. And it grieved her to the quick.

"Almost there." Meracad shook herself free of Hal. The carriage plunged into welcome shade as they travelled beneath the walls of Caraden. She inhaled deeply and smiled. "You smell that?" She asked. "The scent of summer."

"Really?" Hal yawned and stretched.

"I love it," Meracad continued in the same dreamy fashion. "Cut grass and hot, rich air. What a shame we're leaving it behind for the city."

"Colvé does nothing but reek in the summer," Hal moaned.

"I see we're becoming quite fond of country living." Marc's face was serious, but his eyes lit up briefly in amusement. "For a woman raised within the walls of Colvé, that's quite an achievement."

"Well if nothing else, Marc, it gives me the rare the satisfaction of proving you wrong about something."

"And what would that be?"

Hal sat up straight and stroked her chin, emulating Marc's careworn dignity. "*Hal, please, the city's in your blood. One whiff of that fresh northern air and you'd be hammering at the gates begging to be let back in.* I believe those were your words."

"Well done, Hal. Well done." Marc's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Yes, you proved me wrong. Once. Consider that an achievement if you must."

"I do. I can assure you." She sank back in her seat and folded her arms, pleased with herself.

This was the furthest south Magda had ever been and she was keen to leave the confines of the carriage and take in her new surroundings. Sheep-studded moors had given way to the marshy plains around Brennac, and then they had travelled through sprouting fields of corn,

wheat and barley. Now they were approaching the smooth sandstone walls of the town in which Marc had decided they would spend the night.

"We already have a head start on Nérac," he'd explained. "And I'd sooner not spend too much time waiting around in Colvé for him. Besides, Caraden can boast its own attractions." She noticed him wink at Hal when he said that. The duellist's eyes grew wide in surprise.

"You're not seriously suggesting we spend a night at the Serpent? With Leda?"

"Hal, Hal, Hal..." Marc shook his head with mock gravity. "She's not the first child that place will have seen, and she certainly won't be the last. Besides, since when did you become such a moral, upstanding imperial subject?"

"What is The Serpent?" Magda asked, her curiosity piqued.

"The Serpent, Magda, is the finest whorehouse in the entire empire," Marc replied. "It has a very special place in my heart for many reasons and it offers the most palatial rooms we can expect to find in Caraden. So, Hal, if your suddenly acquired appetite for moral rectitude prevents you from staying there, feel free to search for your own accommodation. Meracad, Leda, Magda and myself will be spending a very pleasant evening in the company of my wife and Asha Inæc."

"Have it your way," Hal grumbled.

"I usually do."

After wrangling with the town guards, Marc begrudgingly tossed some coins out of the carriage window. They passed through the gates and into a town of homely, low-roofed dwellings and warm sandstone walls, quite unlike the cold grandeur of Dal Reniac. Magda relaxed somewhat. As unfamiliar as this place was, she felt immediately at home.

The carriage trundled its way along tidy streets until they reached the main square, where a small fountain bubbled away surrounded by a strange, uneven collection of shops and houses. The carriage door opened and they were greeted by a tall, willowy-framed woman, her amber-gold hair twisted into a thick plait which ran down to her waist. Marc passed Leda back to Meracad before jumping out of the carriage and embracing her.

"Vin! I'm glad you could meet us."

The woman's face clouded slightly. "It wasn't easy, Marc. I'll explain later." She planted a kiss on Meracad's brow and observed Hal with a grave countenance before enfolding her in her arms. "Let's get inside," she said with a swift, anxious look around the square.

"Patræc!" Marc yelled to the coachman who was already jumping down from his perch, a gleeful cast to his eyes.

"Yes Sir?"

"Whatever you're planning, forget it. We're here on business, not pleasure. Besides, we both know your wages won't stretch to a night at The Serpent."

"Wasn't even thinking about it, Sir," Patræc mumbled, his brow wrinkling into a frown.

"This is Magda," Marc explained to the red-haired woman. "A Hannac guard travelling with us to Colvé. Magda, this is Lavinia. My wife."

Magda permitted herself a sudden surge of pride. It was as if she had finally shed all trace of the Dal Reniac kitchen girl. Here in Caraden, and later in Colvé, she could be whomever she wished.

Lavinia took her hand and led her beneath a low, moss-stained arch and into an internal courtyard, balconies gracing its warm yellow walls, another small, raised fountain singing at its core. She ushered them through chambers draped with swathes of silk and velvet, rooms lushly shaded in rich purples and crimson reds. The final remnants of sunlight crept through crooked panes of glass, and candles flickered in alcoves and on tabletops. Magda twisted her head, looking about her in wonder as they passed from hall to hall, eventually entering a low-ceilinged dining-room where a group of lavishly-dressed women sat at a table weighted beneath plates of fruit, bread, roasted meats and flagons of wine.

"Asha!" Hal had already flung her arms around a young woman who sat at the head of the table. Her white skin and frosty blue eyes gave her a slightly haughty appearance, yet she returned the embrace with equal warmth.

"Hal, I can't breath! Don't squeeze so tight." She pushed the duellist away but kept a set of delicate, ringed fingers on Hal's shoulders as she studied her face. "I see life hasn't been too kind recently, Hal."

"I'll live." Hal slid into a chair. "I never had the chance to thank you for...for what you did. Both you and Lavinia."

Asha cast a worried glance in Lavinia's direction and said, "she doesn't know."

"I don't know what?" Hal turned to the older woman, the smile fading from her lips.

"Hal, Cara's dead."

"What?" She sank lower into her chair, suddenly deflated. "What do you mean? Did you know about this, Marc?"

"Of course not," he snapped back. "How could I, holed up on the shores of Brennac for days? Vin, what happened?"

"No one survives the Debt for long," Lavinia replied. "If hunger doesn't get to them first, disease will eventually."

Hal stared at the floor, biting on her lips. "I offered her money," she said at last.

"Hal..." Asha extended a hand towards her, but Hal shrugged her away, filled a glass with wine and drank it straight down. The blonde woman's face hardened. "Don't let me think you a hypocrite, Hal. She made your life hell. Mine too, as it happens. The bitch is dead. You can pretend to mourn for her all you like, but I certainly will not."

Meracad had slipped into a chair beside Hal, having surrendered Leda up to the eager attentions of the other girls. "Asha's right, Hal. Cara brought her fate upon herself. And she

was too proud to accept your help. Why mourn for a woman who caused you nothing but pain?"

"Because she was my mother." Hal poured herself another glass. "Not much of a mother admittedly, but the only one I had."

"Well if the truth be told, Hal, you've always been something of an orphan anyway," Marc said, pinching the end of his long, refined nose. He leant across the table and pulled the wine cup from out of her reach. "And the last thing I want is you throwing up over my carriage again, so if I were you I'd think twice about drinking any more wine. Unless, that is, you fancy walking to Colvé."

As she listened to the conversation, Magda's feelings ran from sympathy to irritation. Her own family had been close, loving. She was stirred by the fact that, for all Hal's aristocratic upbringing, the duellist had never known such comfort. And yet that surely did not entitle her to be so selfish. For here she was again, consuming the attentions of those around her, Meracad sharing in her grief. And what grief? Magda thought with bitterness. Asha Inæc was right. Hal was playing the hypocrite. Even a fool could see that.

She caught the blonde woman observing her and edged further from the table to avoid her gaze.

"Join us," Asha indicated a chair at her side. "You must be hungry after the journey."

She was, she admitted, ravenous. Magda slunk down beside Asha and proceeded to attack the food with relish. Ever since the siege, the Hannac guards had subsisted on nothing more than gruel, offal and the dregs of the ale. She had not eaten fruit in weeks, she realised, sinking her teeth into the sweet juice and fibre of an apple. Asha looked on, her cold features barely masking her amusement.

"There's something else you need to know," Lavinia was saying. "Marc, I had difficulty even getting out of Colvé this morning. The front gates were surrounded."

"Oh God." Marc scratched at the lines on his forehead. "That's all we need."

"What do you mean?" Meracad asked, alarmed. "What's happening there?"

"Meracad," Marc touched her arm, "The mob, I mean the good citizens of Colvé, well they love nothing better than a scandal. Vin and I can testify to that as well as anyone, I suppose." Lavinia nodded solemnly in agreement. "Your escape with Hal, the fire at your father's house, the siege of Hannac — you've become the subjects of gossip across every dining table in the city, from aristocrats to artisans. They're singing ballads about you both, for God's sake. And to tell the truth, they're not exactly complimentary."

Hal's face had drained of colour. "And is this their business?" She asked.

"Hal, you of all people should know that Colvé thrives on gossip. As far as they're concerned, Meracad ran from the protection of a loving husband, and you were responsible. With the Emperor's decision to bring you all down to Colvé, they're baying for blood. Your blood."

"And you were going to tell us this...when, exactly?"

"I'm telling you now, Hal. So be prepared. They must have realised you've nowhere left to go in Colvé other than my house."

Meracad's hand was trembling, Magda noticed, as she raised her glass to her lips. It was all Magda could do to stop herself from rising to put her arms around the girl and comfort her. The food in her mouth now tasted dry and ashy. She swallowed it hurriedly, dropping her knife back down onto the table.

"You look tired." Asha scanned her face. "Perhaps you would like me to show you to your quarters?"

"Yes," Magda replied. "I would like that very much."

She was not tired. But she could not bear to sit there any longer watching Meracad suffer, enduring the incessant banter that passed between Hal and Marc. They were all on a road to hell, she had decided, and she had joined them by mistake. Her mind wavered back to their departure. She had lied to Edæc, explaining that she would return: that he was to do everything he was told and she would bring money from Colvé to rebuild the croft. He had cried, but his round, four-year old eyes had been filled with trust. She hated herself for it.

Asha rose and led her from the dining room. Hal nodded good night, Meracad summoned the barest ghost of a smile. She followed the pinpoint of light from Asha's oil lamp, ascending a staircase so narrow she had to twist sideways to climb it. Floorboards groaned and complained beneath her boots as she entered a windowless chamber which flickered into vision the moment Asha balanced the lamp on a shelf. They must be below the roof, she realised, for the ceiling leant to a point above her head. A neatly made bed lay to her right, a simple washstand to her left. So much for Marc's talk of palatial rooms. Clearly, even in a whorehouse, wealth and status counted.

"Will it do?" Asha asked, her eyes never leaving Magda.

"Of course."

She wished that Asha would leave her to sleep away her bitter thoughts in peace. But the blonde woman simply stood there, gnawing on a fingernail and gazing at her. Magda's stomach grew tight. She lowered herself onto the bed.

"You don't like her, do you?" Asha asked finally.

"Who?"

"Hal. I can see the way you look at her."

Magda grimaced and slumped backwards, her shoulders resting against the cold plaster of the wall.

"I know why," Asha continued, ignoring Magda's silence. "She has a habit of irritating people. But you have a particular reason to dislike her. Isn't that the case, soldier?"

Magda balked at that. "I'm no soldier," she said carefully.

"You look like one. You wear a sword and a gambeson. Marc said you are a guard."

"A kitchen maid more like," Magda spat back. "I was a kitchen maid in Dal Reniac."

"No. You're a soldier. I can tell."

Asha sat down on the bed beside her and for some reason, Magda found herself assailed by dizziness. She fixed her gaze on the washstand, aware that the tightness was spreading from her stomach to her entire body.

Asha's leg brushed against her own and she flinched.

"I want to show you something."

Hot breath tickled Magda's ear. Something was unravelling within her. She imagined Meracad whispering those words in the same way and turned at last to face Asha.

"What do you want to show me?"

"Meracad's the first, Magda." The cold metal of the rings on Asha's fingers made contact with her warm skin as the blonde girl traced her hands across Magda's cheeks and along the lines of her jaw. "But believe me, she won't be the last." She leant forward, her lips hovering just in front of Magda's. "Should I?" She whispered.

Magda nodded, unsure as to what was about to happen and yet desiring it all the same. Asha's lips sank onto her own, and all the bitterness, the morose, unkind, angry thoughts dissolved like salt in water. Asha's tongue explored the lines of her lips, ran along the tips of her teeth and then the very edge of her tongue. Hands tugged at the lacing on the front of her gambeson. Magda sucked in breath as the chill evening air worked its way beneath her clothing.

Asha stopped for a moment, drew away, looked at her. "Should I continue?" She asked, her irises now alight in the semi-darkness like two pale blue flames.

Magda nodded and lay back on the bed, as all her thoughts of Hannac, of Edæc, Dal Reniac, Hal and even of Meracad were stripped away.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Mob Rule

The road widened as they approached Colvé, and they passed other travellers moving to and from the city. Some wore the homespun woollens and linen of crofters, traipsing on foot balancing bundles of wares on their backs. Farm boys lazed in heat-dazed stupors on the floors of empty carts dragged along by mules and shire horses. Then there were the aristocrats who, like themselves, journeyed in the relative comfort of a carriage, perhaps leaving the stifling city heat for the shade of country estates.

Meracad envied them. What wouldn't she have given for the chance to turn the carriage around, to head back to Hannac for a summer spent beside Hal, watching Leda grow? Instead, with the eyes of the city upon them, they were to justify their very existence before the Emperor himself. And possibly, to surrender their happiness for the sake of civic laws which had long benefitted men like Nérac and her father.

She sensed Hal's unease and it fuelled her own misery. The duellist sat, slumped in a corner, her chin buried in the palm of her left hand, her fingers drumming out a relentless rhythm against her cheek. Meracad slid her arm across the leather of the seat, taking hold of her lover's right hand. Hal managed a thin smile in response, before resuming her nervous tapping.

Only Magda seemed calm: strange, as she had appeared so sullen and distant the previous day. She sat to Meracad's right, humming softly to Leda who, quiet for once, gazed up into the croft woman's eyes, releasing an occasional mewl or giggle. Magda grinned down at her, long braided hair teasing the baby's soft skin.

The city walls loomed shadows across the roadside and at last they ground to a halt. A guard ambled up to the carriage and thrust his head through the window, dry flaky lips folding upwards into what might have passed for a smile.

"Well, if it ain't Lord Nérac's runaway bride and Mistress Hannac," he snorted. "Finally come to see justice done. About bloody time."

"I don't see what business that is of yours," Hal snarled, letting go of Meracad's hand.

"Oh, it's all our business. It's the whole city's business, Mistress Hannac." He began to sing, in a gravelly baritone:

*And Nérac screamed, "my wife she's gone!
Through bolted doors and walls clean flown"
And from Dal Reniac starts to hunt
The other woman who's at her...*

"Yes, alright soldier! That will do!" Marc pressed his hand to the man's mouth. "There are children aboard, for God's sake. Hal, sit down!" He sighed. "We are here at the Emperor's instruction, Sir. And if you obstruct us, he will hear of it. Now if you value your life, not to mention your job, please let us pass."

The guard's bald head creased into a series of furrows. Blackened teeth chomped away on a quid of tobacco which he promptly spat out into the dust of the road. "Alright, boys." He nodded in the direction of the gates. "Let 'em through."

He peered back into the carriage and leered at Hal. "I can still come and watch the 'anging, anyway. We all will, won't we, lads?"

Meracad felt Hal shudder beside her. The guard slapped the side of the carriage and they both jumped. Then, to her relief, the vehicle began its slow roll through the gates.

Lavinia, who had joined them in Caraden, pulled down the blinds. "At least there'll be no more prying eyes," she explained. "We should avoid the main entrance, Marc. We'll have to try to get in through the kitchens."

"Let's just hope our mob doesn't have the entire house surrounded." Marc pulled out a handkerchief and dragged it across his brow. With the blinds closed, the interior of the carriage became a furnace. Meracad's dress stuck to her legs, her head swamped with heat and dizziness. For all that she had spent her life in Colvé, she had no idea which streets they now passed along. She was aware only of the monotonous grinding of carriage wheels on cobbles, the drone of distant conversations, the foul stench of city air. She wondered how she could have borne these things for so long, growing into her lonely existence as her father's daughter, ignorant of the open moorland and lush forests to the north. It were as if she had spent her life in what she had once thought to be a palace, but now knew it for a gilded cage.

The carriage gave a violent swerve to the right and then another to the left and she realised that they were heading away from the main streets and along cramped alleyways. Beside her, Hal's nerves appeared to have transferred themselves from her fingertips to her right knee, which now jerked up and down erratically as if it had a life of its own. Meracad looked at Marc and Lavinia, both of whom wore strained, tense expressions. Marc risked pushing aside the blind and a welcome stream of cooler air worked its way inside.

"Nearly there," he said, setting the canvas back in place. He looped an arm around Lavinia's shoulders and kissed her head. "Nearly there," he repeated, as if to reassure himself.

From his perch above them, Patræc gave a sudden yelp of alarm and the carriage lurched, almost keeling onto its side.

"Patræc! What's going on, man?" Marc tried to stand, gripping the door handle for support. Semi-bestial howls and screeches erupted all around them, and then a piece of cobble ripped through the blind, clipping Marc on the chin before slamming onto the floor. The screams now resolved themselves into discriminate words: "whores!" "rebels!"

Marc staggered backwards and fell into his seat, a thin trickle of blood working its way down his chin. "My crest is on the carriage," he gasped. "They must have seen it."

A hand gained purchase on the window frame as the carriage careered wildly along the street, and without even thinking, Meracad seized the dagger that Marta had given her and plunged it through skin, nerves, tendons, pulling it free, ready to plunge again, but the hand was gone, its owner releasing a high-pitched curse as he or she fell to the ground.

She lowered herself back against the seat, aware of the others' amazed gazes, blood now dripping from her blade and seeping into her dress.

"Don't they realise there's a child in here?" She asked, breathless, and plucked Leda from Magda's arms, the baby's wailing masked by the din outside.

The carriage gave a heave to the right and they all slithered downwards, desperately grabbing hold of upholstery, window rails and fittings to keep themselves from falling. Just before it tipped over, unseen hands pushed in the opposite direction, sending them hurtling to the other side. Meracad sheltered Leda's head inside the crook of her elbow, and crouched down on the floor, biting back against the urge to cry out. Outside, the horses screamed in fear, and the carriage was dragged forward a few paces, its sides colliding with walls as the animals bucked and bolted.

"How close are we?" Hal yelled.

"Streets away." Marc put an eye to the blind, pulling back just before another cobblestone ripped apart what was left of the canvas. "And they're surrounding us. Patræc?"

There was no reply. "Patræc!" Marc's voice now carried a nervous, almost hysterical edge.

"He must have fallen," Lavinia whispered, horror stricken. "They'll tear him to pieces."

The carriage was swinging on its axles now, rocked and pushed by the swelling crowd. One man had actually forced his shoulders through the window. Magda smashed her boot into his face and he let out a yelp of pain, tumbling backwards. She drew her sword and made for the door, but Lavinia pulled her away. "There are too many of them. There's nothing you can do."

"There must be something!" Magda wailed, staring at them in desperation.

A woman, red-eyed and scant of teeth, greying hair plastered to her face beneath a cloth cap, now attempted to climb in on the other side. Meracad screamed as Hal wrestled her back

through the window. The assailant lost her grip, releasing a strangled moan as she fell with a sickening crunch beneath the carriage wheel. And still the mob kept coming, the rising scales of screams and shouts like waves breaking on the sides of the carriage.

And then, Meracad became strangely aware of the voices fading, of men and women rushing away from them, of whistles blowing and of the carriage finally coming to rest, the horses apparently halted by some unseen force outside. She risked looking up and saw Hal, white and shaken clinging to her seat. Just as immediately as it had all begun, so the nightmare seemed to end. Meracad whipped her head from side to side, staring in confusion at her fellow passengers but they too had been stunned into silence. Someone was thumping loudly on the roof of the carriage. She looked up again in terror. A mounted soldier peered in at them, the white plume of the imperial guard waving from his helmet.

"Alright in there?" He asked, dark, serious eyes working anxiously above a trim moustache.

"I, I think so, Sir," Marc stammered. "Vin, are you..."

"I'm fine, Marc. But the child?"

Meracad felt hot tears break as she crushed Leda to her breast. "She's alright," she whispered. The guard cleared his throat. "I'm to escort you all to the palace. The Emperor decided it would be safer for you there than anywhere else, Senator. And under the circumstances, it appears he was right."

"Are we under arrest, then?" Hal asked, still visibly shaken.

"No, Mistress Hannac. It's for your own safety. You can take your mother's old suite for the night - it's still empty." The man gave Marc a curt nod. "Don't take all of this too much to heart, Senator. The mob are wild in the heat. Anything'll tip 'em over the edge. If it weren't all of you, it'd be something else."

"And am I to take that as some consolation, Sir?"

"You can take it anyway you like." The guard turned his horse to go and then looked back. "Your man," He indicated the roof of the carriage. "I'm afraid there's no hope for him. You'd best be coming with us."

Warily, they clambered into the street, which was now almost empty - there was little sign of the mayhem that had just erupted about them. A few cobbles were worked loose, ready to serve as impromptu missiles, blood coursed in thin rivulets into the gutters, but there was no sign of those who had shed it. Marc's carriage had been destroyed beyond repair, its woodwork cracked and splintered, the wheel spokes snapped. One horse had evidently bucked so hard that it had broken free of its harness, leaving its distressed companion behind, the animal's mouth flecked with blood and foam. Lavinia gave a sudden gasp and pointed up at the roof. His body crumpled over on itself, Patræc still somehow clutched the reins, the coarse blade of a carpenter's chisel buried up to its hilt in his back.

Meracad put her hand to her mouth and stared, speechless. It were as if the driver had simply swooned in the summer heat and might raise himself at any moment to resume the journey. But, of course, he never would do. A dark, wine-coloured stain fanned out across his shirt.

"He's been in my service since he was a boy," Marc said in a half-whisper. Patræc's body was a grotesque silhouette against the fading light of the late afternoon sun. The Senator pulled himself up onto the carriage and then, with Magda's help, they lowered the corpse into the street.

"Excuse me!" Marc sounded frailer, much older, Meracad thought, as he hailed the soldiers who were now waiting to escort them to the palace. "Could you...could you take him home?" His voice faltered and he turned his face from them.

"Of course, Senator. Now if you'd all come with us."

The imperial guards fell into position, encircling the distraught party of travellers, and they trudged along roads and alleyways which had now grown quiet, almost eerily so. Meracad scanned the corners of streets, noting that the mob had slunk away like so many phantoms back into the recesses and cavities of buildings. And yet she still felt their eyes on her, those awful words of hatred still rang in her ears.

They had approached the merchant's district, now. Was it the soldiers' intent that they passed the charred remains of her father's house? Blackened timbers remained hanging at precarious angles from ragged brick work, the garden that she had once played in as a child had grown half-wild, weeds choking the pathways and the gates bolted with a huge padlock. She was aware of the guards observing her as they passed, and thought: *they want me to stop, to give myself away. The Emperor has told them to watch me.*

Then she thought that her mind had weakened under the weight of the mob's curses. For they had to pass this way, after all, to reach the palace. Perhaps this was just her own imagination, driving her half mad, her conscience pricking her like the point of a blade. She bit down on her lips and refused to look any longer. Her father had died, the victim of his own lust for power and money. It was not her fault.

They climbed the final broad stretch of boulevard to the palace, its dizzying spires and turrets spiking out at impossible angles from garishly ornamented walls. Meracad stole a glance at Hal and noted the tension in the duellist's posture, the way she nervously drew her fingers through lank, black locks of hair which had now grown down to her jaw line. If Léac's home had been a cage, so too had the imperial wards' dormitories been for Hal. And she had done everything to escape them, only to be brought back here and tried before the eyes of a court which had only ever seen her as an aberration, as a subject for their scorn and gossip. Meracad's heart sank. It seemed as if every corner of the city were now against them, from Riverside to the Palace. And all they had to rely on was the Emperor's mercy.

Escorted now through grand, iron-wrought gates into the cavernous depths of the building itself, along a winding confusion of corridors, they finally stopped outside the suite that had once belonged to Cara Thæc. The guard threw open the door and then left them. Hal stepped inside first, her eyes troubled, her brow creased.

"I've never been here before," she said as she crossed the threshold.

"You wouldn't recognise it anyway, Hal," Marc said, following her inside. "They stripped it of everything your mother owned to pay off her debts. And even that wasn't enough."

Both rooms were empty, no tapestries gracing the walls as Meracad knew their ought to be in court apartments, no rich rugs or carpets, no furniture save for a pair of mattresses stretched out across bare floorboards. For some reason, she was relieved. Had the rooms still contained evidence of Cara Thæc's malign presence, she was not sure she would have slept.

Three sharp raps on the door. Meracad sucked in her breath and opened her eyes. Beside her, Hal moaned and stretched, still dressed in filthy travelling clothes. Marc's groans reached them from the far side of the room. Bleary eyed, Meracad watched as he rose, still dressed quite comically in his frock coat and trousers, and padded across to the door. She clambered to her feet to rescue Leda from the mass of blankets and sheets upon which they had lain her.

She could hear Marc opening the door behind her, observed Magda uncurl herself and raise her head as the sound of voices drifted in from the corridor.

"Lord Nérac has arrived, Senator. And the Emperor believes this matter should be settled as soon as possible. He will see you all below in the Chamber of Justice within the hour. You should bring the child."

She heard Marc clear his throat and say, "Sir, we may need some time to..."

"Now, Senator!"

Heels were brought together in a neat, military click, followed by the brisk stamp of marching feet fading into distant echoes. She held Leda tight, nausea pinching at her tightening stomach.

Hal sat and drew her legs up in front of her, raking long, nervous fingers through her hair. She turned to Meracad at last, her face drawn and pale. "And so it begins," she said.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Chamber of Justice

As a child, Hal had once sneaked inside the Chamber of Justice. The wards had always been confined to their own quarters, cloisters and gardens, under strict instruction not to enter any of the palace's grand state apartments, salons, halls or galleries. That was just the kind of rule Hal had loved to break as she tested the limits of her own freedom.

It had been her mother who caught her, of course. It always was. Cara must have observed her skulking from one ante-chamber to the next, until she had found Hal gazing up in awe at the ceiling's lattice of plasterwork and frescoes.

"Just as well for you there's no court in session," she'd shrieked, seizing her daughter by the ear and dragging her from the room. In spite of the ten year old child's tearful protests, Cara had insisted on a harsh punishment: a night locked inside a wardrobe in an abandoned corner of the palace. "Just hope I don't lose the key," she'd spat through the lock as she left Hal to silence and darkness, her knees drawn up to her chest, praying that all the ghost stories whispered on the dormitory at night weren't true. That was the moment she'd decided that she would sooner live on the streets than remain a ward.

Now, courtiers were filing into that same Chamber of Justice, hustling for space along low benches set at intervals down the length of the room. Hal recognised many of the faces which turned towards her with prying eyes and wagging tongues. She didn't need to hear what they were saying. The air of ill-will was almost palpable as she passed between them.

She wrapped an arm around Meracad's waist, leading her to the front of the hall. "Don't show them you're afraid." She dropped her lips to the girl's ear as she spoke. "They'll never forgive you for it."

Meracad responded with a tight nod, her lips thinning to white, narrow lines as she bit down on them. She seemed more vulnerable than ever, Hal thought, with her hair stretched back into a girlish plait, and that plain old black dress she was wearing: a simple swathe of silk which plunged to the floor. Where had she seen it before?

Some perverse, wayward impulse tempted the duellist to seal Meracad within her arms, to kiss her in front of all those smug, vicious faces, to confound their narrow-minded hypocrisy

with a single expression of love. Then she looked ahead to see Marc waiting for them, his back to the platform upon which the imperial throne had been raised. He'd already suffered enough on her account, she concluded. She could not now provoke the court for the sake of her own selfish ends.

Marc indicated a row of high backed seats which had been set directly below the Emperor's dais. She sat down next to Meracad, Magda following them with Leda in her arms. And then they waited. Behind them, the stilted whispers and snickers of scorn rose into a crescendo: an intense, feverish rush of half-muttered angry words. She fixed her eyes on the gold-leaved carvings of the throne, her back resolutely turned against the intrusive gaze of the court. The atmosphere grew tense, stifling even, and she sweated in discomfort beneath the leather layers of trousers, vest and jacket that she now wore in place of her dishevelled travelling clothes.

At the door of the chamber, the clerk knocked three times on the floor with his staff, courtiers lapsing into expectant silence as the deep booming thuds reverberated off marble pillars.

"Bruno Nérac, Lord of Dal Reniac."

As Nérac was announced, Hal wrapped her knuckles around the edge of her chair, clinging to it as if for dear life. His footsteps rang ever louder as he approached, until at last there was silence. She did not meet his gaze as he stared down at them.

"My daughter." The words were uttered as a statement of fact, not a question.

Meracad cleared her throat. "Yes. She is."

He reached down to take Leda from Magda's arms but the soldier drew away, bending over the child in a protective embrace. The courtiers hissed and shook their heads, indignant.

"I wish to hold my child." Nérac's words were addressed to the court.

"He's playing with us, and with their sympathies," Hal whispered to Magda. "Let him hold her."

With an exaggerated display of reluctance, Magda raised Leda up for Nérac to hold. For the briefest of moments, Hal thought she detected a rare flicker of compassion enter his eyes, but then they became stones of jet and the lines around his mouth hardened.

"I'll have her back." He studied Meracad as he spoke. "And I'll give her brothers."

Hal could not be sure of the extent to which his words moved Meracad. She turned her head from Nérac as he spoke, her eyes blank, her face as controlled and measured as a statue.

Nérac thrust Leda back towards Magda and stalked away from them, planting himself on the opposite side of the chamber. Bending forwards, Hal rested her elbows upon her knees and dragged the palms of her hands down her face, just as the clerk brought down his staff once more, crying out: "Marec Pæga, Master of Pæga of the Eagles' Nests."

She turned to Marc, her jaw dropping open in shock, but he simply spread his hands and raised an eyebrow as if to say, "I told you so."

Pæga shuffled his way down the hall, accompanied by a few snorts of derision. Evidently, word of his undignified eviction from Hannac had already reached Colvé. Hal now found herself looking up into his chalky moon of a face, his girth bulging beneath the wrappings of an outmoded doublet, a velvet cap perched at a curious angle upon the shining mass of his bald head.

"You'll pay for what you did, Hannac." Saliva formed at the corners of his mouth as he spoke, a single drop crystallising as it fell on her trouser leg. She flicked it away in disgust.

"So you said before, Marec." She managed a weak smile. "And yet here we all are." She stretched her legs out before her and folded her arms across her chest, adopting as careless an attitude as she had the gall to muster. With boiling cheeks and the veins on his nose pulsing, he swung to the side to seat himself beside Nérac.

Marc leaned across Meracad and muttered: "You're not making yourself any friends, Hal."

"I wasn't aware I had any here to begin with."

"Just do yourself a favour and keep your mouth shut!"

She shrugged, setting her jaw at a tight clench. She understood his concerns, but if her enemies were to ruin her, she was not about to go down without a fight.

The dull murmur of courtiers' voices had risen again as Pæga confronted Hal, but silence descended now: so thick it could have been cut with a knife. Hal knew without looking that the Emperor himself was waiting at the doors to be announced, his diminutive frame casting a very long shadow. Sure enough, the clerk brought his staff down three last times upon the floor and declared: "His imperial Majesty Diodiné, third of that name!"

Her cracked ribcage seemed to squeeze around her lungs. As a ward, she had seen the Emperor on numerous occasions, of course. Sometimes it had just been the tail end of his ermine train sweeping behind him as he entered a chamber of the palace. At others, she had sat through the interminable speeches he gave at state functions to which the wards, as future members of the court had been invited. One thing she had learnt in all those years: the Emperor was a living paradox. The only thing that could be said of him with any certainty was that he was unpredictable. She had witnessed him bestow land and blessings upon a particular aristocrat, only to harangue and humiliate the same individual the next day before the entire court. His temper was renowned, his whims legendary.

She found herself rising, along with the rest of the room. Aware of her shaking hands, she slid them into her pockets, then realising how disrespectful that might appear, she knitted her fingers together in front of her waist. Marc was standing, she noticed, with his arms locked down to his sides, his back as straight as a plumb line and so she copied him. By the time she had looked up again, the Emperor had taken his stance on the dais, in front of the throne.

At first sight, Diodiné was an unprepossessing man; short and bulky, with black hair thinning away from a widow's peak. He sported a near permanent scowl, his eyes glaring out from beneath a bushy pair of eyebrows, his nose seemingly too large for his face. If he had been dressed in the clothes of a working man on the streets of Colvé, Hal might not have paid him a second glance. Now, however, in gem-studded frock coat and breeches, a gold band of laurels wrapped around his head, the scrolls of justice in his hands, he seemed the embodiment of imperial power itself.

The Emperor lowered himself into his throne and all took their seats, the room once again plunged into a heavy, uncomfortable stillness. At last, he spoke.

"Lords and Ladies of the court, Senators," he nodded in Marc's direction, "visitors from the North..." here, he looked at Nérac. "You are all aware, I am sure, that we face a grave enemy on our southern borders." He paused, apparently savouring the sound of his own voice and authority. "Our Empire is imperilled by these Yegdanian barbarians, these people who are not capable of appreciating the blessings that our culture, our civilisation might bring them. They refuse it, shun it, my lords. They will not have it. They attack our strongholds, butcher our people, burn down their property."

The courtiers sighed: indignant, despairing. Heads shook in regret, words buzzed about the chamber like angry insects: "Shame!" "Barbarians!"

Hal thought of Orla fighting on the southern plains, pitching her tent beneath wide, star-specked skies, drawing the blood of those who had never even sought a war. She shifted in irritation.

"It is hard to believe, I know, my lords," Diodiné continued, carried away on the strength of his own rhetoric, "that not so many years ago, the people of the North also resisted the blessings of civilisation. Had it not been, in fact, for my Grandfather's siege of Dal Reniac and the timely assistance of some of the wiser members of the northern nobility, they would all still be living like beasts amongst their bogs and upon their moors!" This elicited a few smirks of laughter from the courtiers. Hal felt her face growing hot and red.

"And so what should I think, my lords and ladies...what should I think when, at the same time that I defend the integrity of our empire to the south, the North should once again descend into chaos, into anarchy?" The warm nostalgia of his earlier address disappeared, his words now cold and edged with steel. "I hear of feuds and sieges, of marriage vows broken, of the bonds between parents and their children severed. I hear of a North which is sliding back into its barbarous, undisciplined ways and I do not like it!" His voice had risen a pitch. "Today, we will conclude this sorry business once and for all."

Hal found herself perched unwittingly on the very edge of her seat, nerves ripping a maddening course through her body. She was aware of the weight of the Emperor's gaze upon her, and it almost felt as if he could see through her, deep into her very heart.

"Halanya Hannac," her name seemed to drip off his tongue. "You appear somewhat the worse for wear."

She stood unsteadily, her mind racing. Nérac balanced a chill smile across his face.

"My horse threw me, your Majesty," she ventured, aware of how shrill her voice must sound.

"Your horse threw you?" He peered at her again, incredulous.

"Yes, your Majesty. Several times." Laughter peeled around the chamber, rippling into silence when the Emperor knotted his eyebrows in disapproval. Hal looked across at Nérac. "The animal is somewhat wild and unyielding, Sir. But I believe he can be broken in, given enough time."

Nérac scowled and crossed his arms. The Emperor grunted.

"Your tongue is sharp, Hannac. Remember your place."

"I will endeavour to so, your Majesty."

"You will not endeavour. You will do as you are bid."

Her face glowing again, she nodded and sat down.

"This is the Nérac child?" Diodiné pointed with a scroll at Leda.

Meracad cleared her throat. "Yes, your Majesty. Yes she is."

"Bring her to me."

Trembling, Meracad rose and took Leda from Magda, presenting her to the Emperor. The child squirmed and twisted but did not cry, perhaps overwhelmed by her strange, new surroundings.

"A blessing, for both you and your husband, Lady Nérac." Diodiné got to his feet, the entire court rising with him. He placed the scrolls of justice on the throne and took Leda into his arms. "I wonder that you should wish to risk such joy, such harmony as you surely must have known with your husband, to risk the fate of your child for..." he looked at Hal again.

"Your Majesty..." Meracad began, her face pale with alarm, but he cut her short.

"Madam, you know where your duty lies. This child is the heir to the Nérac dynasty, the most powerful house in the North."

"Yes, my Lord, but..."

"Lord Nérac," Diodiné continued, ignoring her. "The South has lost its faith in the North of late, wouldn't you say? Perhaps this child could heal that rift."

Nérac took a step forward, stroking his chin as if in contemplation. "What did you have in mind, your Majesty?"

"I mean to ensure Dal Reniac and Colvé reach one final understanding: to ensure that you never again feel the need to take justice into your own hands. I ask you to promise your daughter in betrothal to my nephew. To the imperial line."

Nérac was already smiling his response. Hal felt as if the floor were about to give way beneath her, the pillars and frescoes now spinning in a dizzying dance about her head. And all she could hear was Meracad's raw, pained howl of "No!" ringing around the chamber.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Sentencing

Diodiné twisted around in surprise, his eyes bulging, his lips moving, but the stream of words appeared to have dried up. He thrust Leda back towards Meracad. She was grateful for the baby's reassuring warmth against her own body.

"What did you say?" The Emperor finally gasped.

"Your Majesty," Nérac was approaching the platform. "My wife is not herself. She is under the influence of this half woman you see here..." he pointed at Hal. "Of course she will agree to such a match. And even if she does not, it is not her choice to make."

Meracad searched Hal's face, but even the duellist seemed stunned into silence. A curious sensation of peace engulfed her body. She would sooner die than return to Nérac — of that much she was aware. And so what difference would it now make if she enraged the Emperor to the point where he had her thrown into prison, or worse? Without Hal, without Leda, there was nothing left anyway.

"My husband is mistaken, Sir." She spoke with steady, clear purpose now, all fear drained away. "I am utterly myself. I have never been more myself than I am at this moment."

"I advise you to choose your words with care, Lady Nérac," Diodiné demanded, sinking back onto his throne as if he had been winded. The courtiers took their seats once more, the low, expectant hum of conversation dropping away as Meracad spoke.

"I wish my daughter to marry whomever she chooses, Sir. I do not intend to slight your family: I understand that such a match would be an honour for Leda. But *my* father promised me to a man I'd never met."

Standing on the dais beside the Emperor, she looked down at Nérac who opened his mouth to speak, but Diodiné shook his head. "We will hear the Lady first, Bruno. Your turn will come."

"Of course," Meracad continued, "my father did not know at the time that I had already made my choice." She smiled at Hal. "It was not, your Majesty, Hal Hannac who bewitched me, as my husband would have you believe. *I* sought her out, *I* persuaded her of my love. It was *I*, in fact, who seduced *her*. And when my father found out, he had Halanya almost beaten into an early grave for it."

Hal looked down at the floor, running her hands through her hair.

"I was taken to Dal Reniac against my will," Meracad continued. "And my husband was...all kindnesses and graces. He insisted that I was to be his partner, his advisor, his equal. He gave me the keys to his library and told me that I was to treat it as my own."

"You see!" Nérac snarled, unable to contain himself. "She admits it! She admits that I was nothing but honourable and loving!"

"And then he raped me." She scanned the room, observing the attitudes of horror, hearing the collective intake of breath. Several courtiers made public expressions of disgust at her words, the benches screeching as they rose and left the room. The Emperor turned to her again, appalled.

"This is absurd, Lady Nérac. How can a man rape his own wife?"

"I did not choose to marry this man, your Majesty! As I already told you, I had made my choice. On my wedding night, when all his kindnesses were ended, he forced himself upon me. And when I struggled, when I fought against him..." a bilious nausea rose in the pit of her stomach as she forced herself to remember, "when I fought against him, he beat me."

"Lies! Slander!" Nérac screamed above the rising cacophony of howls and catcalls and whistles which had broken out around the Chamber of Justice.

"Silence! All of you!" Diodiné's words thundered above the din. "There will be silence in this Chamber." The noise dwindled away again.

"It's true. What she says." Meracad was startled at the sound of Magda's quavering voice. The soldier now rose unbidden, her eyes troubled, her lips trembling.

"And who might you be?" The Emperor peered at Magda as if she were an unusual species of animal or insect he had almost trodden on.

"She's nothing," Nérac cut in. "No one. A traitor. A Dal Reniac kitchen maid who also fell under Hannac's influence."

"I seem to have proved rather charming of late," Hal smirked drolly.

"I ran to Hannac because I had no where left!" Magda protested. "Lord Nérac and his army had destroyed my family's croft, Sir. They burnt the whole village to the ground and murdered everyone."

"Is this true?" Diodiné swivelled around to face Nérac. "You destroyed the crofts?"

"I dealt with traitors, Sir."

"Traitors to whose cause, Bruno? Yours, or mine I wonder?"

Meracad's heart lifted at the Emperor's words. Perhaps Marc had been right. Diodiné was as slippery as an eel, and trusted no one. His brow contorting into a frown, he said: "Well go on, then. Have your say, girl."

Magda shifted from foot to foot and then she spoke. "We saw her, Your Majesty. The kitchen workers, I mean. We saw Lady Nérac. Almost every week she had some new bruise on her

face, or her arms were red. Of course, she tried to cover them but we saw them all the same. And we knew that Lord Nérac wasn't treating her as a husband should treat his wife. And some of us..." she looked up at Meracad, tears running openly down her cheeks. "Some of us would have given anything to help her, Sir."

Meracad nodded. "I know," she said, putting aside memories of those hellish days in Dal Reniac as they rose unchecked. "I know that, Magda. And you did help me."

Diodiné released a long, world-weary sigh. "Sit down, girl," he said to Magda. She stumbled as she sank back into her chair. A few courtiers laughed. Meracad would have gladly wrung their necks.

"Lady Nérac, the law would have it that your father and your husband had every right to act as they did. And perhaps, that being the case, the law itself is therefore at fault." Diodiné turned to Nérac, who blanched.

"If that is the case, your Majesty, I beg you to let my daughter choose, when the time comes, who it is she should love."

Diodiné studied her for a moment. "We shall see," he said at last. "Please return to your seat. Your husband has borne public insult and it is only right that he be given chance to defend himself."

"Insults!" Hal spat as Meracad descended the dais.

"Yes, insults." The Emperor levelled his gaze at Hal. "And you will do well to remember, Mistress Hannac that I have not yet given you permission to speak."

Hal crossed her arms and stared in sullen bad humour at the floor.

"Lords, Ladies, Your Majesty," Nérac had risen to take his place beside the Emperor. His lips flickered upwards into the semblance of a smile. "As I have, I hope, already made quite clear, my wife is not in control of her wits. Otherwise, I am sure she would understand very well where her duty lies."

Meracad's blood grew feverish, but she remained quiet.

"And I wonder at the court even allowing a kitchen slut to pass through its doors, much less to listen to her slander."

Magda rose to counter his words, but Meracad pulled her back down. "They'll throw you out if you don't keep quiet!" She breathed into the soldier's ear. "It's what he wants!"

The smile now fading, Nérac continued. "Gentlemen of the court, I want you to think of your homes, of your wives, your children, of the love that you bear them and they in turn bear you. And now I want you to imagine that happiness torn to shreds. Ripped apart by an intruder, who steals the very things you cherish the most and tramples on your love." A single tear slid, unchecked down his cheek. Meracad felt Hal shaking with suppressed laughter, her hands covering her mouth to prevent it from escaping. The Emperor rose, indignant.

"Hannac, you will treat this meeting with respect, or you will find yourself confined for the remainder of it!"

"I apologise, your Majesty." She sank lower, biting on her knuckles until they were white. Marc glared at her, furious.

"I think we can see from this display of utter disregard for the dignity of the court to what I am referring." Nérac made a display of wiping the tear from his cheek. "What, your Majesty, was I to do? To allow Hannac to slap my face, to steal my wife and child and remain unpunished for it? Lords and Ladies of the court, I put it to you that I only did what any self-respecting man would have done. I set out to bring my family home, and to teach the Hannac whore a lesson!"

"Bruno!" The Emperor warned.

"I am sorry, your Majesty, but my strength of feeling is such — I simply cannot keep my words in check."

"I see." Diodiné frowned again at Hal, who was now drawing in deep breaths in an effort to forestall the laughter. "I understand your suffering, Lord Nérac. Although your wife seems to believe the insult was on her side. But why an army? Why such force? Surely you could have come and asked for my advice, my assistance. Or was it perhaps the case that you saw an advantage in taking care of this matter alone?"

"I don't understand you, Sir," Nérac said, his face all naivety and surprise. "As I explained, I was so furious, so impelled to protect what was mine."

"So impelled that you waited several months before you took action? Just enough time, in fact, to pull an army together?"

"I fail to grasp your meaning, Sire." Nérac's voice had grown chill. "Surely under the circumstances, you would expect a man to look after his own interests."

"Oh I would, Lord Nérac, and in fact I *do* expect men to look after their own interests." Diodiné appeared to measure out each of his words.

"Your Majesty surely cannot believe that I would..."

"Do not tell me what I can or cannot believe, Sir!" Diodiné's words thundered around the room. Meracad jumped. "All grievances are to be brought to me, as well you know. Do not think me such a fool that I would not believe a man of power such as yourself, might twist such an occasion to his advantage?"

"Such an occasion?"

"You heard me, Sir. Return to your seat."

The courtiers' mutterings and whisperings had changed in tone, Meracad noticed. She detected a note of urgency, even of fear replacing the expressions of scorn and derision. Her hopes rose.

"Master Pæga, we have not seen you at court in years." Diodiné's voice had dropped again, but his eyes retained their fury. "What brings you here?"

"Your Majesty, I..." Pæga now seemed somehow deflated, less buoyed on his own confidence. He turned to Nérac whose threatening look propelled the older man forward. "I came to confirm Lord Nérac's claims, Sir."

"Lord Nérac's claims to what exactly?" Diodiné leant forward, the fingers of his right hand pressed to his temple, suddenly all deep contemplation and wisdom.

"No, no you misunderstand me, Sir. I do not mean that Lord Nérac had pressed his claim *to* anything. I meant his claim to love his wife. It is true, Sir. Under the circumstances, I would have acted just as he did."

"I see." The Emperor sat back on his throne, closing his eyes for a moment, steeping his fingers beneath his chin. "And you are here to support Lord Nérac purely out of a desire to see justice done, I suppose? Purely out of support for Nérac, and not to seek redress for your own grievances?"

"Grievances, Your Majesty?" Pæga pulled off his velvet cap and proceeded to mop his face with it. "I have no idea of what you speak." A few low barks of laughter erupted behind him, but he continued. "Your Majesty, I liked Franc Hannac. He was a good man. A man who knew where his responsibilities lay — to the Nests, and to his people. The Nests were at peace for years. That all changed when his bastard showed up."

Rising, Marc said, "Halanya may have been Franc Hannac's bastard, Sir, but I would remind you that she was also his only heir."

"So far as you know, Sir," Pæga replied.

"Believe me, Master Pæga, after bedding Cara Thæc, Franc was not likely to make the same mistake twice."

Laughter broke out openly around the court. Even Diodiné's lips appeared to rise into a smile for a few brief seconds, before his eyebrows contorted into a glower and the room lapsed once again into strained silence. "Senator, if you would return to your seat," he said to Marc.

"Of course, your Majesty." With a gracious bow, Marc sat down.

"You were saying, Master Pæga?"

Pæga paused, fixing his gaze on Hal before he spoke. "She brought calamity on the Nests, your Majesty. If it hadn't been for her, the North would be at peace, and Franc Hannac would still be alive!"

"Liar! You're a liar, Pæga!" Hal screamed, jumping up from her chair. "If anyone sold out the Nests, it's you. If you'd come to Hannac's aid sooner, Franc would still be alive!"

"Mistress Hannac, sit down!" Diodiné ordered.

"Why don't you tell the Emperor of how you sold me out on the plains of Hannac?" She took a few steps across the room towards Pæga. He edged backwards. "Why don't you tell the court of the little deal you carved out with Nérac? Why don't you..."

"Hannac!" Diodiné stood fuming, the throne pushed back, the scrolls of justice rolling across the floor where he had flung them. "When I give you permission, you will speak. I have not yet given you permission. Believe me, I have plenty of empty cells in this palace that are in want of filling. Do you understand?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

Across the room, Nérac shook his head in a display of righteous indignation. Hanging her head, refusing to look up, Hal made her way back across the room.

"Oh, and Mistress Hannac..."

Hal pulled herself up sharp at the Emperor's words. "Yes, your Majesty?" She slid round to face him.

"I have heard rumours of your ill-treatment of Master Pæga. Would there be any truth in them?"

Hal crossed her arms and stared up at Diodiné, for once at a loss for words.

"I asked you a question, Hannac. You seem very quiet, all of a sudden. Is it true that you kicked him naked out of Hannac and sent him back to Pæga trussed across the back of a horse? Because I would remind you, as much as I would remind Lord Nérac, that it is I and I alone who determine justice in this Empire."

"Perhaps your Majesty might ask Master Pæga himself..."

"I am asking you, girl!" Diodiné's voice had risen to such a volume that it seemed to fill the entire chamber.

Hal hung her head once more. "Yes, Your Majesty. I did."

"In that case, we will take that into our reckoning when we decide upon this matter."

Meracad noticed a look of genuine sadness, of regret enter Hal's eyes. "Don't give up, Hal," she whispered, but the duellist didn't turn round.

"Master Pæga, sit down," Diodiné said. "And in future, I advise you against making strange men's beds your own."

"I will, your Majesty," Pæga mumbled as he returned to his seat and to the soft, contemptuous laughter of the court.

"Mistress Hannac, as you are still on your feet, we may as well hear your part in this sorry story." Diodiné appeared to have lost some of his bark, if not his bite.

"Yes, Sir," Hal said, climbing onto the dais to stand beside the Emperor's throne. Biting her lip, she stared out across the heads of the courtiers, her eyes all anger and wounded pride.

"Well, Mistress Hannac?" Diodiné tapped on the arm of his chair with his fingernails. "We are waiting."

"Your Majesty, my friends often accuse me of opening my mouth at the wrong time." She rubbed her chin nervously. "And now I can't seem to open it when my life depends upon it."

"Which it does, Halanya." The Emperor's voice was grave.

"I know. I realise that. It's just...your Majesty, you will make your decision. Perhaps you already have. Whatever I say will change nothing."

"It is not for you to second guess me."

She sighed and looked at Meracad. "I have made many mistakes, your Majesty. Both my friends and my enemies constantly remind me of them. But if I could change one thing, it would only be this...that I have not always shown Meracad how much I love her."

Meracad tightened her hold on Leda's warm frame and the baby mewled in protest. Suddenly it was as if she could hear nothing but her own heart attempting to pound its way out of her rib cage.

"I set out to find her because I knew that my life would be empty without her. I knew that I wouldn't be able to rest until I was with her again. I would have broken into Dal Reniac a thousand times if it had meant bringing her back." Tears ran freely down her face now, and Meracad realised how close to breaking Hal must have been earlier, her outbursts of laughter and furious confrontation with Pæga merely masking her fraying nerves.

"Your Majesty," Hal continued, "you will make your decision today, and I must respect it. It is true that I have not always considered the consequences of my actions, and I suppose such thoughtlessness must be paid for. And so while I still have air left in my lungs to speak, I will declare one thing before this court. Meracad, if you ever doubted my love, I am truly sorry for it. Because every moment we spend apart is a moment wasted."

She ran the palms of her hands across her face in a furious bid to rid herself of tears. Meracad sat, open mouthed, aware of the salt water which now trickled down her own cheeks.

"Is that all you wish to say, Hannac?" Diodiné's voice was thick and gravelly.

"It is, your Majesty."

"Very well. You may sit down."

She half fell from the dais and slumped down in her seat, burying her face in her hands. Tentatively, Meracad curved an arm around Hal's back and pulled her towards her, burying her face in the slope of her neck. Diodiné rose.

"Lords and Ladies of the court," his eyes were troubled, his face tense. "This matter disturbs me. I will not deny it. Nor do I doubt Hal Hannac's strength of feeling."

Meracad felt Hal shaking beneath her arm as she struggled against the release of emotion.

"And yet we cannot afford to put private interest before public good." He surveyed the room.

"If the experiences of the North teach us anything, it must be of the damage that can be wrought when nobles seek to seize on my prerogative, and take justice into their own hands. And so I propose the following solution, which I deem simple and fair, and perhaps would

serve as a lesson to any who might seek to undermine my authority in the future." He scanned the court before he spoke.

"Under my father's reign, death duelling was forbidden. It caused, it was said, too great a disturbance among the populace. Too many lives were needlessly lost. But I intend to revoke that law on this one occasion. Hal Hannac, your reputation as a duellist goes before you."

Hal could not even summon a nod in response, but Diodiné continued. "Lord Nérac, your own prowess with a sword has not gone unnoticed. You will both meet tomorrow upon the Circle and this matter will be solved on the points of your blades."

Meracad found herself rising, protesting. "Your Majesty, as you observed, Halanya is not herself, she has been..."

"Lady Nérac, I will brook no arguments. She was well enough to kick a grown man from his bed, she's well enough to duel. And I would remind you that I would be well within the law to have her hung in public for theft, subversion and adultery!"

The court seemed to spin. Meracad's mind froze in horror.

"If Halanya Hannac is killed," Diodiné now peered across at Nérac who was grinning openly, "then Leda Nérac will be returned to her father who will determine her future husband as he sees fit. Lady Nérac, you however, will be free to live on at Hannac as its Mistress."

"No!" Now Nérac had stood, enraged. "She is my wife!"

"Lord Nérac, I could also have you imprisoned at the least for your decision to lay siege to the Nests. You will respect my judgement, Sir!"

Nérac continued to stand, open mouthed.

"If Lord Nérac is killed," Diodiné passed a critical glance across Hal's weakened form as if already denying the possibility of such an outcome, "Halanya Hannac and Meracad Nérac may continue to live out their days at Hannac, and Senator, you will take charge of Dal Reniac until such time as the child comes of age."

Marc nodded his head in grave response.

"Very well. That will be all. We will be present at The Circle tomorrow morning!" He stood, leaving the scrolls of justice lying in disorder upon the floor. The courtiers managed to maintain their silence as he swept from the Chamber of Justice. And then the room erupted into a chaos of benches scraping backwards, voices raised in excited, frantic conversation. Leda was screaming, Hal sat, convulsed in tears, and Meracad felt herself sinking down, down, down until the last strains of consciousness gave out and she hit the floor.

Chapter Thirty-Six

A Finer Thread

Half-blinded by her own tears, Hal witnessed Meracad's fall just in time. She caught her, lowering her gently to the floor as Magda scooped Leda from her arms.

"Meracad! Meracad!" The duellist pressed her palm to Meracad's forehead. It was cold and clammy. Almost driven into a frenzy by this new sensation, the courtiers hemmed them in on all sides like a human wall.

"Give her some air!" She looked up in desperation. A pair of black riding boots had planted themselves before her. Craning back her neck, she found herself staring up into Nérac's face.

"Is she alright?" His eyes were ringed and hollow, the skin of his cheeks stretched taut across the bone.

"You...you ask that?" She cushioned Meracad's head upon her knees. The girl groaned, her eyelids flickering as she came round. "Of course she's not alright!" Pure, cold anger forced out all her grief. "You've taken everything from her. Everything!"

The concern drained from Nérac's eyes and his face closed like a book slamming shut. "We'll settle this tomorrow, Hannac." he turned on his heel, pushing his way back through the crowds.

"Ladies! My Lords! Please!" Marc was now doing his best to handle the confusion. "Please give the Lady some air!" The clerk of court had stepped in to assist him and together they herded the courtiers away, their excited chatter dwindling to a distant murmur as they filed out along the corridors of the palace.

"Leda!" Meracad sat up at last, her eyes wild and frightened as she searched the room.

"It's alright. I have her." Magda lowered the child into Meracad's outstretched arms and she bent over the baby's squirming body, weeping.

"He's going to kill you!" She said at last, resting her head against Hal's shoulder.

"He won't." Hal kissed her hair, wondering how convincing she sounded. "He's not a duellist. How can he?"

"You're not well enough!"

Hal said nothing in reply. She caught Magda's glance and held it a few seconds before looking away.

"Can you stand?" She whispered in Meracad's ear.

"Yes. I think so." Passing Leda back to Magda, she forced herself onto her feet, clinging to a chair for support. Hal wrapped her arms around her, pulling her close and put her lips to the girl's forehead, wrestling with another wave of tears that threatened to overwhelm her.

"In need of some 'elp, ladies?" The words floated across from the other side of the chamber, a familiar voice....a pair of female courtiers dressed in ridiculously oversized hooped skirts sailed towards them, powdered breasts half exposed above tightly laced bodices, faces heavy with makeup, bouffant wigs rising like clouds above their heads. Behind them walked a tall, dark, serious man in a simple black frock coat and breeches bearing a trim ash walking stick.

"Jools?" She sniffed back her tears. "Kris? Degaré?"

"It's been a while, ain't it?" Jools pulled out a lace fan and proceeded to waft Meracad with it.

"Lord, I'm not surprised you came over all woozy in this stinkin' place. And they say Riverside is a cesspit!"

"How did you get in?" Hal stammered.

Kris rubbed together the forefingers and thumb of her right hand. "Money, Hal. Readies. 'Ow d'you think? 'ard-earned cash. We 'eard what was 'appening and thought you might be in need of some moral support. Didn't we, Jools?"

"Yes. We did. And looking at the state of you lot, seems we were right. Come on, lady." She offered her arm to Meracad. "Let's get you out of here."

Meracad threaded her hand around Jools's elbow and the thief led her from the room. Hal turned to follow, but Degaré stood before her, blocking her path.

"They're fine people to work for, your friends," he said, unsmiling. "Shrewd. Half the merchants in this city run in fear of them."

"I'm sure they owe it all to the quality of your advice, Degaré."

"Not at all. They fleece merchants just as they fleeced people's pockets. Now their theft is legal. That's the only difference." He stroked his chin, his eyes thoughtful. "Franc would have been proud of you," he said at last.

"Proud?" She shook her head. "Furious, I expect."

"No, Hal. You defended Hannac and the people you love. You've risked your life to do so. He would have done the same."

She recalled, then, that day in Dal Reniac — the unfathomable cast to his eyes. His words to Franc as he had played his part in their mad escape: "I'd not do this for another soul." Suddenly, she understood.

"You loved him!"

He grimaced, chewing on his lip. "Yes. I did."

"Did he know?"

"If he did, he never said." He rested on his cane, leant forward and put his face close to hers.

"Kill Nérac," she heard him say. "For Franc's sake, kill Nérac."

No sooner had Marc Remigius occupied the chair outside the imperial apartments than he rose again, turned and paced the corridor. The two guards stationed outside the door surveyed him with undisguised amusement. Marc suspected their function to be decorative rather than defensive. Young, handsome and bewigged, they had clearly been chosen to suit the aesthetic tastes of the Emperor and his wife, both of whom were rumoured to share a penchant for the more virile inhabitants of the imperial court.

Marc reached one end of the corridor, turned on his heel and marched back again. Coming to a halt in front of the two youths, he narrowed his eyes and looked them up and down with what he hoped resembled an air of authority. Sweating out this long wait was bad enough without having to do so under the supercilious gaze of these two greenhorns. Unable to withstand Marc's ferocious stare any longer, one of the guards coughed nervously and then looked away. The Senator gave a curt nod of approval before commencing another lap of the carpet.

Without warning, the door was flung open with a violence which almost knocked the two young guards off their feet.

"Well don't just stand there, Remigius. If you've come here to plead for your friend, you can save your breath but I find your company tolerable so you may as well join me."

Marc sighed inwardly and followed Diodiné through into the Salon of Light. High-ceilinged and windowless, just a few pale candles lit the interior, the artful hanging of mirrors deceiving the eye into seeing a thousand flickering flames. The illusion was enhanced by gold leaf sewn into the wallpaper and upholstery. It was like being inside a hive of glow worms.

With an exaggerated groan, Diodiné lowered himself into a fragile looking ornate chair and tugged at the wreath of golden laurels he still wore around his head, dumping it carelessly onto a table beside what appeared to be a bowl filled with raw liver and tripe.

"Well have a seat, man. Don't just stand there."

Marc stammered a response and then occupied the chair indicated, staring warily as he did so at the bowl of offal. The imperial dinner? His Majesty must have a strong stomach. But Diodiné suddenly set his fingers to his lips and let out a sharp whistle. Marc heard a scrabbling of paws upon the polished marble of the floor, and to his alarm a massive black

dog loped its way over to its master, saliva already hanging in long strings from the sides of its mouth.

"Oh don't be alarmed, Remigius. Apollé is an old softy at heart, aren't you Apo?"

To Marc's slight disgust, the Emperor bent down and nuzzled the dog's head with his own, allowing the animal to lick his face with a loud smack. He then picked up a long, red slice of liver and dropped it into Apollé's waiting jaws. The Senator wrestled with a rising wave of nausea as he heard the dog's teeth sink into the meat before swallowing it in a single, wet gulp.

"Your Majesty, I am not here to question your judgement."

"I should hope not." Diodiné's hand hovered precariously above Apollé's gaping jaws, but the dog made no attempt to lunge for the meat. Marc felt the contents of his own stomach threatening to make an unhelpful contribution to the discussion.

"I merely beg you to postpone this duel for a month. Hal is not herself, she is..."

He stopped, flinching inwardly beneath the weight of Diodiné's scrutiny. It was said that the Emperor was a dilution of the divine. If that were the case, might he not, as it was rumoured, possess a god-like ability to see inside the soul?

The Emperor dropped the liver into the slavering mass of the dog's mouth. Then he sat back again, wiping his greasy, meat stained hands on a cloth. "Senator, let me ask you a question. You were attacked, were you not, on your journey to the palace?"

"We were, Sir."

"An angry mob, was it? On the streets, baying for the Hannac girl's blood?"

"I assume so, Your Majesty."

"You assume so."

Marc could feel a slight sweat building on his brow. Apollé seemed to give him a curious look, if it were possible that a dog could do such a thing.

"Between you and me, Remigius, I owe my power to that mob. And to the court, and to every damned individual in this Empire. Do you know what would make them all happy right now?"

Marc shook his head.

"If I strung Hal Hannac up in the city square. That would appease them. That would mean that you could ride home today without the fear of having your carriage attacked again."

"But they don't even know her, Your Majesty! Why would they want her dead?"

"Interesting. Such an astute politician and you don't understand that?" Diodiné raised an eyebrow and then dropped another sliver of offal into his dog's waiting jaws. "Our Empire needs safety. It needs security. People like your friend — or her ancestors for that matter — destroy all of that. They have no concern for structure or authority. Halanya Hannac and those like her demonstrate a complete disregard for the laws that bind our society. They

laugh in the face of everything the court and the city hold dear. And so..." the last cut of meat disappeared down Apollé's gullet, "they have to pay."

"But your Majesty, surely Nérac is the real threat here...you said as much yourself just now in the Chamber of Justice. He used this situation to his advantage...and had he defeated Hannac, I have no doubt that he would have taken the other nests, and then..."

Diodiné raised his hands, cutting into the flow of Marc's argument. "I know, I know, Remigius. He could have staked his claim to the North. And I hope that my judgement today has sent him a very clear message. I have clipped Nérac's wings — his wife will live out her days at Hannac, whatever happens tomorrow. Her story moved me more than you might think. And this duel will deny him the satisfaction of Hannac's execution. Besides, if Hannac were to kill him on the Circle tomorrow..." he shrugged. "Well, my hands would be clean, wouldn't you say?" He reached out to scratch the dog's panting head. "But if I were to favour Hannac over Dal Reniac, what message would that send to the nobility? Order, Remigius. Authority, hierarchy. That is what keeps this great empire of ours together. Nérac is Lord of Dal Reniac. Hannac a mere upstart and a bastard. At least I'm giving her the chance to die on her feet."

The nausea curdled in Marc's stomach. He opened his mouth to speak, but words seemed to elude him.

"Strange, Senator," Diodiné said. "I always thought you a pragmatist, but you turn out to be quite the idealist. An upholder of lost causes, even. I never realised."

"Me, your Majesty? I'm no idealist. But I prefer to think that this great empire of ours is woven of a finer thread than mere politics. Might I be permitted to leave?"

Diodiné surveyed him for a few moments, his dark eyes boring their way under Marc's very skin it seemed, his eyebrows dropping into a v-shape. Marc held his breath.

"Yes, Remigius," the Emperor breathed at last. "Yes. You may go."

The city seemed calm for once, as if it were holding its collective breath. But, Hal realised, that was just her own vanity persuading her that whatever happened tomorrow really mattered to these people. Yes, they had attacked her and Meracad. And the courtiers had turned out in their droves to witness the Emperor's judgement. But once all of this was over...they would find another source of entertainment and turn to that just as eagerly.

The air was thick with the hot, heady scents of the summer night - the piercing sweetness of honeysuckle wafting upwards from the palace gardens, roast meat, spilt ale, and the mud and silt of the river as it snaked its lazy passage through distant corners of the city.

She twisted away from the window. Moonlight threw into relief the bare, raw bones of Cara's apartments - rooms which had once been so luxurious and warm, now stripped and cold. Meracad sat on a mattress in the very centre, arms locked around her knees which were drawn up close to her chest, her hair spilling across her shoulders and down her back.

"It was good of Magda to take Leda for the night," Hal said. The soldier had carried Leda off into the adjoining room, allowing them to be alone. Hal was grateful for the gesture, uncomfortably aware that if she had been in Magda's shoes, she would not have been capable of such selflessness.

Meracad made no reply as Hal sank down on the mattress beside her. Hal raised her fingers to the girl's hair, laying a few stray locks behind her ear before slipping her arm around Meracad's waist.

"Don't do this, Hal. There's still time. We can run!"

Hal allowed herself a smile.

"You find this amusing?" Meracad's voice was tinged with desperation.

"No. Of course not. It's just something Magda said a few days ago. Meracad," she turned to the girl, cupping her chin between her hands. "We can't run. The time for running is over. And to be honest, I'm tired of it anyway."

"But he'll kill you!"

"It's a relief to hear that you have such confidence in me." She rose, aware of the fractures and cracks and bruises that seemed to grind and pulse and burn with every move.

"Hal, for my sake don't do this." Meracad pushed herself off the mattress and moved to stand behind Hal, wrapping her arms around the duellist's waist and squeezing so tight she almost forced the air from her lungs. "If it's for some high-flown ideal - if it's about honour or pride - you've already risked your life time and time again for Hannac. Let's just run now, take Leda, live out our lives in disguise on some croft or in some distant village. We escaped from Dal Reniac, we can escape from the palace too!"

Hal slid around to face her. "Whatever happens tomorrow, Meracad, you'll be safe. The Emperor has made his judgement clear. Even if we could run, how long do you think it would be before they found us?"

Meracad's face creased into tears, and Hal found herself on the brink of breaking down again, but forced her tormented feelings in check. "I'm not the same person I was a year ago, Meracad. Then, perhaps I would have run. But now? The only thing I can do is to ensure that you are safe. And the only thing that will decide that is this duel." She smiled in spite of herself. "It's a win, win situation!"

"How can you say that?"

Meracad flung herself down onto the mattress and lay on her back, her body convulsed in sobs.

"Listen," Hal knelt beside her. "If the worst should happen tomorrow, Meracad...I should hate to think that we spent our last night together in this way."

"How would you have me behave, Hal?" Her words came out half-slurred and distorted with grief.

"Do something for me."

"What?"

"My hair, it's...it's grown so long and it seems to get in my eyes and I worry that I won't be able to see tomorrow when I duel." She fought once more against a swell of tears. "Do you think you could cut it for me?"

"You want me to cut your hair?"

"Yes. I know it sounds stupid but...Marc suggested I find the court barber but I said I'd prefer you to do it. He gave me these..." she rooted around in their canvas travelling sack and pulled out a pair of delicate, finely welded scissors. "Could you?"

Meracad stared at her for a few moments, and then she nodded. "You'll have to sit down," she said. "And hold still."

Hal curled herself into a cross-legged position on the mattress. Anything, she thought, anything to curb Meracad's grief, to direct her attention away from the dawn's slow approach and the pain it carried with it. And so, closing her eyes, she sat in moonlight, her locks of hair falling like dark feathers to the floor and no sound but the metallic snip of the scissors.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Blood and Water

Hal had never realised it was possible to squeeze so many people into the duelling arena. With a sinking sense of dread she wheeled around taking in the angry leers, the screams and howls, the furious fusion of sound.

"Now I'm glad Lavinia took Leda home with her," Meracad yelled above the din. Hal nodded, running a shaking hand over tightly-cropped hair, icy sweat pricking at her skin. In some distant recess of her mind Beric growled at her, cursing her for a half-wit to fear so much before a duel, still wet behind the ears for being so afraid.

And yet it was not, she realised, fear of death itself that tied her guts in knots. After all, death had seemed the only constant over the past year, taking first Orla, then Beric and finally Franc. No, it was rather the prospect of leaving Meracad for ever that almost paralysed her with despair. She told herself that whatever happened now, Meracad would be free and safe, but it was no real consolation. After everything — after their escape from Dal Reniac, after the horrors of siege and imprisonment, after all of that, it would take the finest sliver of steel between her ribs to break the bond between them.

Marc ushered them forwards, guards holding back the crowds until they were standing at the very edge of the Circle. There was no sign of Nérac yet, nor of the Emperor. She raised her head, fixing her gaze on the imperial balcony. Perhaps he was entertaining a reprieve — she knew Marc had done his best to persuade him against the duel. Or maybe he had changed his mind again, settling on her execution after all. She slumped down on the platform, her mind at swim, flooded with possibilities.

"Come on now, Hal. On your feet."

She had not heard that voice in months. Hal looked up unsteadily as Finn offered her his hand and she took it, rising and pulling him into a tight embrace. Gravely he studied her, his green eyes working with worry.

"You haven't changed, old friend!" She said.

"Don't lie, Hal. You have no idea how difficult it's been since Beric died."

"I'm sorry," was all she could think of saying.

"And now this..." he waved his arm at the Circle. "This piece of theatre. Hal, you can't possibly go through with this."

"I can. I have to. The Emperor's judgement, remember?" She put a hand on his shoulder.

"You of all people might have a little faith in me, Finn."

"Hal, you're not fit to fight!"

"So people keep telling me. And so you told me once before. Before I..."

"Before you killed Orla. Yes. I know. But you can't tempt fate twice, Hal."

She sighed. "The city, it would appear, needs entertaining. The Emperor gives the people what they want. And who are we to question his judgement?" She shrugged, feigning a lack of concern she did not feel. "Finn, there's one thing you might do for me before I fight."

"A last request?"

Ignoring him, she plucked at Magda's sleeve and pulled her over. "This is Magda. A fine hand with a sword. She put me out of a duel."

Finn eyed Magda appraisingly. "Is that so?"

Magda opened her mouth to speak, but Hal cut in. "I'd like you to teach her, Finn. Beric always said that female duellists draw the crowds and, well, she's a strong arm. She saved my life."

"It'd be an honour," Finn grinned at last. "Would you care to join myself and the cadets while we watch the duel, Magda?"

"Yes, Sir. I'd appreciate it."

He laughed. "It's Finn, not Sir." He held out his hand and she took it. "Agreed, Magda?"

"As you wish...Finn."

Hal relaxed briefly. At least, she felt, life would continue after the duel. In so many new and surprising ways, life would carry on. She caught Magda's arm as the girl turned to go. "Listen, Magda..."

"Yes?" Magda's face was taut with nerves. "Thank you, Hal, for what you just did. You didn't have to."

"I did. I am indebted to you Magda, for many reasons. And there is one more favour I'd like to ask of you."

Magda searched her face, making no answer.

"If the worst should happen now...I mean if I..."

"If Nérac kills you?"

"Yes...if that happens, I'd like you to watch out for Meracad. To make sure she's alright. I couldn't bear it if I thought that..." Her defences close to breaking, she stopped.

Magda nodded. "I understand, Hal. You have no need to worry. You know full well what I would do for her."

"Thank you." Hal bit down on her lip, flinging her arms around the girl. Then they parted and Magda followed Finn to join the cadets.

On the opposite side of the arena, the noise grew in intensity until it was almost a roar. Imperial guards cut a swathe through the spectators, pushing them aside as they surged towards the Circle. They parted as they reached its edge and Nérac stepped from their midst to loud applause and shouts of support.

He was dressed like Hal in the bleached linen shirt and tanned leather trousers of a duellist. His face closed, unreadable, only a slight tightening in the muscles of his cheeks and the flexing of his fingers indicated any tension on his part.

"Are you prepared, Hannac?" His words were clear, steady and chill.

"To duel? Yes, I am." The arena lapsed into silence as spectators craned forward to hear their exchange.

"For death, I meant."

"This is my place, remember, Nérac? The Circle on which I fought all those years. Why should I fear you?"

"You know why. Today I'll finish what I started in Dal Reniac."

He stepped up onto the Circle and scanned the crowds. "There is, after all, something rather poetic about the Emperor's judgement, wouldn't you say? Those people who once cheered for you now applauding me." His smile was tight and brief. "You know, when all this is over, I may make a few more visits to the duelling Circle. I find I rather enjoy it."

Marc laid a hand on her shoulder. "He's trying to unnerve you."

"I know that, Marc," she growled through gritted teeth.

Doors behind the imperial balcony swung open, and Diodiné emerged above them, resplendent in a gold brocade frock coat, a slim circlet twisted around his dark hair. Awed and hushed, the spectators sank into bows or awkward, untrained curtses, silence descending like a wall.

Diodiné inclined his head, peering down at the Circle below. Hal stepped up to stand beside Nérac, dread racing through her veins with all the slick abandon of poison.

"You are both here to see my justice served?" The Emperor's rich baritone rang around the chamber.

"I am, your Majesty," Nérac replied with the faintest flicker of a smile.

"Yes, Sir," Hal said, embarrassed at how shrill her voice now sounded.

"Very well. We will waste no more time. You may begin."

With that, Diodiné lowered himself into his chair and the chamber buzzed once more with expectant whispers and mutterings. Hal crossed the Circle to stand before Marc. Jumping down, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

"We'll have a party this evening, Hal. To celebrate your success."

She heard the words choke in his throat, noticed stray tears forming at the corners of his eyes. "Of course we will, Marc." She squeezed his arms between her fingers. "Thank you, old friend."

"For what?"

"For turning a blind eye to my faults. For your open heart and your patience."

"Fight well," was all he could say. She nodded, turning to Meracad.

"I have something for you." Hal put her hands to the line of cord which encircled her neck, raising it to reveal the shark's tooth.

"You still have it?" Meracad's eyes rounded in surprise.

"They never found it. Back there, in Dal Reniac. Take it. It's yours — I gave it to you."

Meracad's hand enfolded around her own. "No, Hal. Keep it. You can give it me after the duel."

"I love you." Hal struggled to keep in check the strain in her voice.

"I know you do." Meracad smiled, her eyes dry, blazing with an intensity Hal had never witnessed before. She lowered her hands to Meracad's face. Their lips came together — she tasted the herby sweetness of Meracad's mouth, ran her tongue across the tips of the girl's teeth, ignoring the howls of scorn and indignation that accompanied their kiss.

"If you please, Mistress Hannac!" Diodiné yelled down.

"I have to go," Hal said. They broke apart and she took a step backwards.

"I'm waiting, Hannac," Nérac barked down from the Circle. She climbed up to meet him.

"Enjoyed that last kiss?" he drawled as cadets stepped up bearing rapiers. She took one, whipping it through the dense stillness of the air, aware of how light it felt after months of swinging a sabre. "You know she tastes much better forced?"

Hal's stomach churned. She looked back at Meracad, but if the girl had heard Nérac's words, she showed no sign of it.

"Hardly anything to brag about, is it Nérac?" Hal arched an eyebrow. "That the only kisses you ever took from here were stolen?"

His sneer resolved itself into a snarl and he paced around the Circle, twisting the blade through a few cursory arcs.

"Begin!" The Emperor's impatience boomed out across the heads of the spectators once more, the scattered yells and catcalls dying down and she found herself face to face with Nérac, the entire world in retreat, everything reduced to this one time and place. The hilt of the rapier grew slick with sweat in the palm of her hand, she was keenly aware of the pulsing of bruises, of torn flesh and unhealed wounds. A brief memory of her duel with Magda intruded on her conscious thoughts — she was slumped against a grave stone, her limbs sagging, her energy sapped. And then he lunged.

She blocked, the first clash of steel on steel ringing around the arena. Two hands clutching the hilt, calves already straining, cracked ribs groaning, she pushed back as he brought the weight of his forearm to bear upon her sword. He drew away, his lips curling upwards into a careful smile. If he wore her down, he would win. Her only hope, she realised, would be to trick him, to catch him off guard, to end the duel before he had a chance to strip her of her final reserves of strength.

Nérac swung his rapier through a series of menacing arcs. She crouched lower, waiting for an opportunity to spring but he forestalled her, lunging once again. She span low and to the right, the tip of his sword catching the bandages around her far-from-healed arrow wound, opening it once more. Hal cursed as blood marked a sluggish course down the sleeve of her shirt. The spectators cheered, Nérac's smile grew broader. "I'll take you apart piece by piece, Hannac."

Unable to afford the luxury of a response, Hal gritted her teeth against the pain. Nérac swung his rapier towards her waist. Twisting out of reach she tripped, saving herself just in time from a headlong sprawl, the point of her rapier splintering the pine floor of the platform. Beric would have docked her winnings for that, she remembered — for blunting the tip of her sword.

She span around, heaving it from the wood just as he charged at her once again. In reflex she lashed out, inserting her rapier beneath the hilt of his, sending it flying beyond his reach amongst the spectators. Grunting in rage, Nérac flung himself from the circle, the crowds swallowing him up as he dived amongst them.

Leaving him no time, she jumped after him, but found backs turned against her, shielding Nérac as he scabbled for his sword. The crowds then parted to reveal him waiting for her, weapon in hand.

It were as if she were fighting the entire arena now as spectators pushed and jostled Nérac, propelling him forwards, whisking both duellists further from the Circle. He managed to elbow his way towards her, raining down a series of savage blows which she only just managed to block, the singing of swords mingling with the cries of the crowd. Now they were forced up along the benches, spectators screaming and running from the onslaught of crashing blades. Hal barely had strength left to raise her sword and still he bore down on her, relentless, a cold fury to his eyes, his arm swinging and thrashing with almost mechanical precision.

She was up against the edge of the arena — no place left to retreat. To her right, a few feet below, were the doors to the public baths. She slid along the cold plasterwork of the wall, fighting the current of the crowd, sensing the grainy touch of wood to her back, pushed...and fell, the crowd bursting in around her.

Now she was lying on the stone floor of the baths. The excited cries of spectators echoed off marble. The air was damp, tasting of steam and brine. She lay for a few moments, half-stunned, her life leaking from the wound in her arm. Blood ran down cracks in the tiles, dripping off the sides, reforming as red clouds in the pool. And then he was upon her again.

She kicked at his stomach as he dropped towards her, sending him reeling away amongst the courtiers and artisans, the cadets and soldiers all now gathered around the baths, their screams splintered and distorted by the acoustics of stone and water. They were closing in around her, pushing her towards the water's edge — and once in, she knew it would all be over. Nérac had forced his way back towards her — she scrabbled on the wet glaze of the tiles for purchase but lost her grip on her rapier. It skittered across the stone floor, plunging into the water and then she was tumbling after it, hitting the surface and rolling under.

Her sword had already sunk to the bottom — she pulled herself downwards, seized it by the hilt and swam up, only to find hands pushing her back down again.

Hal panicked, memories of the torture chamber in Dal Reniac floating up to the surface of her consciousness like the bubbles of air that now escaped from her mouth as she screamed into the water. He was in the pool with her, she realised — she made out the dark leather of his trousers through water stained red from the release of her own blood. He pulled her up by the collar of her shirt. She rose, coughing and spluttering, but still clinging to her sword.

"Seems you developed a taste for drowning, Hannac," he growled into her ear. "I'm only too happy to oblige."

As she sucked in a mouthful of air, she caught sight of the black silk hem of a dress at the pool's edge. Meracad? What would she not give for a last sight of her face? But Nérac's hands were on her shoulders again, forcing her beneath the surface.

As her ears and nose filled with water once more, the screams of the crowd grew muted and subdued. She swung hopelessly with her sword, unable to see for the plumes of blood, the water turned to froth by her wild, frantic struggles. To her relief, he loosened his grip. She gasped and wheezed as she broke the surface. Nérac was dragging himself from the pool, the leather of his trousers ripped open to reveal two level gashes across his thighs where her sword had made contact. Hal reached for his legs, aiming to haul him back in, but he kicked out, the sole of his right boot smashing into her mouth and nose, shattering already broken bones. She screamed out her agony, blood now thinned by the water and running in sheets from her face, hands shaking so much from exhaustion and pain that she dropped her sword again.

With a half-sob, she made to dive once more for it, but Nérac's arm shot forwards, curling around her neck. Now sat on the poolside, he trapped her shoulders between his thighs, his forearm tightening across her larynx. She dug her fingernails into his arm, squeezing, piercing the skin, but his grip was iron.

The bathing chamber began a dizzying, chaotic spin around her head, its colours blending until all she could see were whirls of black and white punctured by stars. The screams of rage, of excitement, the urgent clamour of the crowd was distant — everything suddenly so far away. Her arms grew limp, dropping like useless weights to her side and all sounds had dipped until there was almost silence.

And then the pressure on her neck was gone and she found herself falling. She hit the water again, went under, rose... and Nérac was in the pool, clutching his side, his mouth opening and closing in a grotesque mockery of speech. He drank in water and blood, sank, rose again. She swam to him, ducking beneath the surface. He twisted his left arm across his chest, vainly pulling at something embedded between his ribs — but what it was, she could not see. Hal slapped at his hand, wrapping her fingers around the hilt of a blade jutting out beneath his right armpit — something squat and level and flat. With a twist she dragged it from his flesh and slid it into the pocket of her trousers. Nérac screamed, his face collapsing into a contorted series of grimaces as blood gushed freely from his side and into the water. The bellowing and shouts of those on the side amplified as she regained a greater hold on her own awareness. She slid down, trailing her hand across the bottom of the pool until her fingers met the metal of a sword which she carried back to the surface. Nérac was making a last, frantic bid to swim for the side, but found his access blocked by the crowd who, scenting failure, had begun to turn against him.

He pushed away, only to find Hal blocking him, sword in hand. They stared at each other for a moment, his mouth opening, the words freezing within it.

"I hope you'll take this knowledge to the grave, Nérac," she breathed into his ear, and with her last shreds of strength plunged the sword through water and then through fabric, through flesh and muscle. "*She* killed you. Not me."

Nérac's lips continued to open and close, his irises rolled upwards and he slumped face down into the water, the tip of his own rapier protruding from his back, a cloud of blood fanning out around him, like ink blotting on parchment.

Hal sank forwards, aware only of hands clutching her arms, dragging her from the water, the crowd moving to give her space as she lay on her back on the poolside, her chest heaving, lungs burning, blood streaming from her nose and arm. It had grown quiet once more, perhaps because of the steady leakage of her own consciousness. Then two faces peered down at her. Water blurring her vision, she made out the glittering circlet around the Emperor's head.

"It can't have been her, Your Majesty," she heard someone say. "One minute Nérac was strangling her, the next he was toppling into the pool. Someone else did it!"

"And did you see who, man?"

"Well, no, Sir. Everyone was pushing in around him. I couldn't see anything, your Majesty."

"Well then. Senator Remigius. What do you say?"

Hal heard Marc clear his throat in a half cough which echoed around the stillness of the bathing chamber.

"I'd say, Sir, that as far as any of us know, Hal Hannac must have killed him. I mean, after all, the man's got a rapier pushed through his chest."

"Mistress Hannac, are you well enough to sit?"

Hal spluttered that she was, hands guiding her upright.

"Hannac, the truth now. Did you kill Bruno Nérac?"

Hal looked at Nérac's lifeless form, now floating like felled timber on the surface of the pool, and then at the door. The groups of observers had stepped aside to reveal Meracad clutching the frame, her eyes bright and wet with tears of relief, her black silk dress soaked at its hem. Hal turned to the Emperor.

"Yes, your Majesty," she said. "I killed him."

They sat side by side on the floor of the balcony, watching stars pierce the darkness. The sounds of conversation, of laughter, drinking and eating drifted up from the salon of Marc's town house. But Hal and Meracad had made their excuses and crept upstairs to their room, laying Leda in a cradle to sleep away the night in peace.

Hal rested her back against the wall and smiled as Meracad poured two more glasses of wine from the carafe they had taken with them. She took a sip, the alcohol mingling with exhaustion and the exhilaration of still being alive, her mind cushioned by the pleasant sensations of warmth and drunkenness.

"Are you sleeping?" Meracad plucked at the fresh linen of her shirt.

"Of course not," she said, her eyes still closed.

"That's good."

Hal opened one eye. "Why is that good?"

Meracad just laughed.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?" Hal asked in suspicion.

"I hope I don't have to."

Smiling again, Hal leant forward and kissed Meracad, tasting the wine rich flavour of her mouth, inhaling the fresh, natural scent of the girl's skin.

"Of course you don't," she whispered, giving Meracad's shoulders a squeeze. "I have something I meant to give you — something you might have lost."

Meracad looked on, puzzled, as Hal reached behind her back, pulling something from her belt — a tapering blade, its handle inlaid with the insignia of an eagle. She continued to stare down at Hal's open palm, the dagger stretched across it.

"No," she said at last. "I believe I left that in its rightful place."

Hal swung the weapon like a pendulum between her thumb and forefinger before working its point into the gaps between the balcony's stone slabs. "Maybe. But I think that if it had been found on Nérac's body, the Emperor would be asking you some serious questions."

"He was about to kill you!"

"Not for the first time." She passed the dagger back to Meracad who now took it, turning it over in her hands, candlelight catching its edge.

"And it was not the first time you saved me either." Hal's fingers crept up Meracad's cheek, working their way across the girl's lips. "Thank you," she said, simply.

"So does this all mean we are free?" Meracad asked. Voices spilled from the taverns and homes of Colvé, the story of the duel with Nérac no doubt being told and retold across the entire city.

"I believe it does." Hal drew her legs up to her chest, tired muscles protesting in waves of pain. She winced. "Marc advised me not to leave Hannac for some time. But I don't think that will be too difficult. Do you?"

She turned to look at Meracad again, her eyes tracing the outline of the girl's high cheekbones, the graceful curve of her jaw.

"I never want to leave it," Meracad said with a fervour which surprised Hal. "I want to stay there with you forever, Hal. I want to see Leda grow, to watch the seasons change, to drink wine with you, to grow old beside you."

Hal bent her head, tugging at the cord around her neck, and removed the shark's tooth. "This is my promise to you, Meracad. My promise that I'll not leave you. I'll not run, there'll be no more fighting or pain. I'll hang up my sword..."

Meracad snorted with laughter.

"What?"

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Hal." She took the pendant from Hal's hands, dropping it around her own neck. "It's enough to know we'll be at Hannac. That we don't have to leave it. That we'll be safe and free, and so will Leda. I couldn't ask for more."

Hal rested her head on Meracad's shoulder. "Do you want to go inside?" She whispered into her lover's ear.

"Yes. But first I want to listen to the city. I want to bid it goodbye."

And so they remained leaning against each other, peering through the gaps in the balustrade as the city ran its nightly course below and the stars whirled above them in their orbits.

Epilogue

Leda

To my parents

I am certain that by the time you find these two books I will be far away, beginning my new life as Lady of Dal Reniac. At least, I hope so. That's why I took the precaution of hiding them beneath my bed! The last thing I wanted was to find Hal chasing us across the moors, two leather bound volumes under her arms, wanting to know how I could have taken such liberties with your story.

But I hope that when you read them, you'll find I haven't really had cause to stray from the truth, or to embellish a past which was wild and beautiful enough without the interference of my poor imagination. These are, after all, tales that I've heard since childhood — and besides, I was never in want of assistants to help me complete my secret task. When Marc discovered that I was writing your story, he was only too happy to offer me his version of events. As were Marta, Magda, Arec, the thieves ... they all know about this gift that I'd planned to leave for you.

I hope that it will serve as a bond between us, now that I am leaving Hannac. We always knew this day would come, but even so it has been hard — you have no idea how much I will miss this place. I am sure that I will long for the clink of steel in the courtyard as Hal duels with Arec or Edæc. I will miss your warmth, mother, and our conversations about books and politics and history. Above all, I will miss watching both of you, so very much in love after all these years, sharing a life which was very nearly denied you. And as much as I love Dal Reniac — and all the fascinations of city life — I will dream of our crags and heather, of the forests and the distant glint of Brennac far away on the horizon, I am sure of it.

But Marc has decided that he is too old for the burden of his duties as castellan of Dal Reniac. Lavinia, he says, complains constantly of the harsh, unforgiving nature of northern winters. And his aging mind has become too addled for politics, or so he would have us think. Deep down, I believe the sly old fox dreams of ending his days amidst the luxuries and pleasures of Colvé. Yet we cannot ask much more of him — he has already put the happiness of our family before his own on so many occasions.

He claims that I am now ready for the role that awaits me — and I must admit he schooled me so well in the arts of politics and rhetoric that I feel I understand what is expected of me. I know, mother, that in that respect, you fret. But I promise that I shall do everything in my power to serve the North with true justice and honesty. And I believe I have heard enough about my father to understand that I have not inherited his cruelty. Besides, as you said yourself, the only thing I owe him is my dark hair and eyes. The rest of me is — well, it's all you. My love of books, my skinny frame and secretive ways.

In case you hadn't guessed, my intention in writing these books was to thank you. Once the words of your story are on paper, recorded for future generations, your legacy will never die. And I could not think of a better way of expressing how grateful I am for that legacy — for the sacrifices you made which have ensured my freedom. Above all, for the great joy of being able to love whomever I choose, and to live without compromise.

I remember, for example, Hal, how well you hid your disappointment when you discovered that I had no talent for duelling. But my hands were made to hold pens, not sabres, and you understood that. After hours of hopeless practice, you wiped away my tears of frustration and you said, "it doesn't matter, Leda. You're a scholar, not a soldier — a lover of words, like your mother." There was no bitterness in your voice when you said that, I remember. Just acceptance.

And then came the day when I had to confess my love for Edæc. I rehearsed my lines for hours: "Mother, Hal, there's something I want to tell you..." I was convinced that you would forbid me from ever seeing him again. A crofter's boy from the moors as the future consort of Dal Reniac? The Emperor would be outraged. My voice shook when I told you, my hands trembled. And then, mother, you just said "We know, Leda. We've known for months." And that was it. There was no fury, no regret. You didn't force Edæc to leave our home, as I thought you might. You simply wished us happiness together.

And I am happy. Happier than anybody has a right to be, I sometimes think. At first, I loved him because he was my friend. We spent our childhood together, playing in the snowy woods around Hannac as Marta and Franc must have done. But then I started to love him for different reasons — for the skill with which he rides a horse or ploughs a field. For his gentleness, his wit and the light melody of his laughter.

He is watching me now, as I write these final words to you — as I bid you farewell and as we leave the place of our childhood to go out into this strange, dangerous world together. He smiles at me as he reaches across the desk to take my hand in his. And at this moment I know that I would give it all away — Dal Reniac, Hannac, the North itself — for that smile.

The Firefarer

Kate Cudahy's next novel, *The Firefarer* will be released in 2016.

Ash covers the homes of the Ahi, flames consume their lands. Their hopes rest in Hori, a young boy who seems able to channel the destructive powers of the fire mountain. Through him they hope to carve out a new life across the sea, enslaving the artist enchanters of the Pagi and taking their land. But the Ahi are not the only people to covet the Firefarer and his powers...

www.katecudahy.wordpress.com

www.twitter.com/katecudahy