1

LODGE OF THE EXILES

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Lyss's feathered fly sparkled in the sunlight before it dropped lightly onto the thrashing surface of Weeping Creek. Planting her feet, Lyss pulled back on the rod.

"Don't yank on it," her brother Adrian whispered. "Let it come to you on the current. Mayflies don't swim."

"Maybe mine do," Lyss retorted.

"If you want to pull it along, you should use a streamer fly," Adrian said. He reached for his carry bag. "I have one that you might—"

"Would you *stop* bossing me around?" Adrian was thirteen—only two years older than Lyss—so he didn't have to act like an expert on everything. Even if he was.

"*You* stop yelling, or you'll scare the fish," Adrian said, reaching for her rod.

Trying to avoid his questing hand, she stepped back from the water's edge. Her foot slipped on a loose rock and she landed, hard, on her backside. "Blood and bones!" she swore, rubbing her tailbone.

Adrian collapsed beside her on the riverbank, helpless with laughter. Lyss would have punched him, but then she realized that it was the first time she'd heard him laugh since their sister Hana died.

Still. *She* needed something to laugh about, too. So she pushed him into the creek.

He surfaced, sputtering, but still laughing, his head sleek as an otter's. He reached the shore with a few quick strokes (he was an expert on swimming, too) and hauled himself up on the bank.

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"Well," he gasped, "we may as well quit fishing. By now there's no trout within miles of here."

"Does that mean we have to eat dried venison *again*?"

"I'm not the one who scared the fish."

Lyss struggled to control her temper. That came hard. Her mother the queen always told her to think before she spoke, but thinking always seemed to happen after.

Her older brother was different. It was nearly impossible to start an argument with him. Their father always said that Adrian had a long fuse. Once lit, though, it smoldered on forever. There was no putting it out. Never ever.

They lay on their backs, side by side, squinting against the late summer sun that filtered through the shivering

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aspen leaves overhead. Adrian was shivering, too, and Lyss felt a flicker of guilt. It wasn't his fault their sister Hana was dead and her life was in shambles.

"I don't want to go back," Lyss said.

Adrian grunted in reply.

"I'm serious. We could stay up here and live off the land."

"Guess it'd *have* to be the land. We'd better not rely on fishing."

"I'm good with a bow," Lyss said. "Da says so. And you know all the plants and where to find them. We could build our own lodge before the snows fall. Or move into the ruins down there." She waved toward Queen Court Vale below. "We could call it Lodge of the Exiles."

Adrian closed his eyes and breathed out a long, shuddery breath. She could see the lines of pain in his face. They both needed to get away—she just had to convince him of it.

Sitting up, Lyss pulled her journal from her own carry bag and wrote the name down. *Lodge of the Exiles.* Then sketched it—a crude rendering of the broken summer palace, smoke curling from the twin chimneys, with the two of them looking out of the windows.

Nudging her brother, she thrust the journal toward him. He usually admired her stories and drawings, but this time he shook his head. "How long do you think it would take for the clans to find us?"

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"Until they do, somebody else will have to be queen."

"Somebody else *is* queen. Our mother isn't going anywhere. You won't even be named princess heir until your sixteenth name day. That's five years away."

"But once I start walking that path, there'll be no turning back, or to either side." She paused, eyeing him. "Why can't we have a king once in a while?"

"If you're thinking of me, the answer is no," Adrian said, giving up on ignoring her. He scooted into a sitting position and rested his back against an aspen tree.

"What about Finn?"

"Finn?" Adrian rolled his eyes. "I know you're sweet on him, but—"

"I am not sweet on him!" Lyss said hotly.

"Look, nobody wants a king, let alone a wizard king. The clans would go to war over it, and Arden would walk in and take over." He slid a look at Lyss. "Speaking of Arden, King Gerard—*he'd* love to step in."

"I didn't mean him," Lyss said, her voice trembling with rage. "He will never, ever get his hands on the Gray Wolf throne. Somehow, someday, I'll make him pay for murdering Hana." Their sister Hana had died in a skirmish with southern soldiers in the borderlands. Though the king of Arden hadn't swung the blade himself, it was his soldiers, his orders, his fault.

"Don't you think that might be easier to do if you were queen?" Adrian said. He had a habit of telling her things she knew, deep down, but didn't want to dredge up.

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Lyss closed her eyes, but it was too late. A tear escaped from under her eyelids and trickled down her cheek. "It isn't fair," she whispered, a sob shuddering through her. "I was never supposed to be queen."

Adrian reached out and took her hand.

Feeling magic trickling through his fingers, she yanked her hand back. "Stop that!" she snapped. "Stop soothing me."

Adrian frowned. "Aren't you wearing your talisman? Didn't Fire Dancer tell you that you should never take it off?"

"I didn't think I'd have to protect myself against my own brother."

"It doesn't matter who you're with, you wear your talisman," he said, going straight back to bossy. When she didn't respond, he continued, in a softer voice. "What's wrong, Lyss? What are you really afraid of?"

"Everybody loved Hana," Lyss said miserably. "She would've been a great queen. I'm just not cut out for it."

"That's not true. Just because you're not Hana doesn't mean you won't be a great queen," Adrian said. "You're strong in your own way."

"Such as?"

It took him a minute to come up with anything. "You tell the truth."

"Maybe I do," Lyss said, "but it only seems to get me in trouble."

"You don't put up with scummer."

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"That's what queens have to do all day long. Plus shovel some of their own."

He laughed. "See? You know a lot about being queen already."

Lyss just grunted. She saw no humor in her situation—none at all.

After a moment, Adrian started in again. "You're a rum observer—you notice everything. You're great at tracking game, good on horseback, and a deadeye with a bow. And you're really good at writing and drawing and playing the basilka. The songs you write go straight to the heart."

It was true. When she put things in writing, it gave her time to think and edit. Unlike when she opened her mouth.

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"Maybe I'll write King Gerard a nasty note," Lyss said, rolling her eyes. "That should send him packing. They can put that on my tomb: 'Better on the Page.'"

"Is that what you're afraid of? What people will say about you?"

"That's part of it," Lyss said. "The queendom has been here for more than a thousand years. I don't want people to remember me as the queen that ruined it."

"If the queendom is ruined, it won't be you that does it," Adrian said, his jaw tightening.

"I'll get the blame. I need to be queen during a boring time—not when we're in the middle of a war."

"There's no boring times around here. Things were a

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mess twenty-five years ago, when our mother took over. They're a mess now." He waited, and when she didn't say anything back, went on. "The war can't last forever. Anyway, you have to do it, there's nobody else."

"What about Julianna? At least she *looks* like a queen."

Julianna was her cousin, her aunt Mellony's daughter. She was slender and graceful, and she always seemed to say the right thing. People loved Julianna.

Adrian snorted. "You really think she would be better than you? She doesn't have the backbone that you do. Or the heart."

Anybody would be better than me, Lyss wanted to say, but she knew it wasn't true. Maybe she didn't want the job, but she didn't know who else should fill it.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Adrian said. "You've just had your eleventh name day, and Hana was twenty when she died. You've got to stop comparing yourself to her."

"Everybody else does," Lyss muttered.

"You'll probably be an old woman when you take over," Adrian said. "You'll have a lot of time to figure it out."

"It's easy for you to say," Lyss said, though she knew that wasn't true. "You can do what you want. You'll go off to Oden's Ford and never give us a thought."

Adrian scooped up a flat skipping stone and sent it skittering all the way across the river. "I don't know if that's even going to happen now."

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Lyss stared at him. "What do you mean? I know it's a few more years until you're old enough to go to Mystwerk, but—"

"I'd like to go now, and train with the healers," Adrian said.

"A wizard schooling with healers? I never heard of that."

"That's what everyone says when I bring it up. And now, since Hana was killed, Mama won't even talk about Oden's Ford."

Lyss found her own stone and side-handed it, but it only skipped twice before it disappeared into the water. "She'll change her mind."

"Why is it always easier to be optimistic about somebody else's worries?" Adrian said with a bitter laugh. "Anyway, we didn't come up here to talk about me and my problems."

Lyss bit her lip, feeling selfish then. "We can, if you want."

He shook his head, his blue-green eyes fixed on her face. "I didn't bring you here so you'd have a better hideout. I brought you to the old capital because you descend from a line that ruled the entire continent from here. Sometimes you have to get away to remember who you are. Believe in yourself, Lyss. You're strong and smart enough to do this job. Never let anyone tell you different. You love these mountains, and our people. You're honest, you know what's right, and you don't back down. You're tough, and

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you're not full of yourself. That's the kind of queen we need. I'd rather have one of you than fifteen Juliannas. Or five hundred Finns."

Lyss felt a spark of hope that quickly sputtered out. "I just keep having these dreams, where everyone's dead and I'm all alone on Hanalea Peak, just me and the wolves."

"You won't be on your own. Mama will teach you, and Da will help, and you'll have a bound captain like Captain Byrne. And I'll help you, too, any way I can, whatever you want. Even if I do get to go to Oden's Ford, I'll come back and help when I've finished."

I'd rather *help* the queen than *be* the queen, Lyss thought. Still, it would mean a lot to know that her brother would be at her side. She came up onto her knees, facing him.

"You promise?" she said, taking both his hands. "You promise you won't leave me on my own?"

"I promise," he said, looking straight back at her. "You will write your own story as queen, and I'll play whatever role you give me."

It was like a benediction. They remained, knee-to-knee, for a few more seconds until he said, "Now we'd better find a good camping spot before the sun goes down."

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2

WEEPING CREEK

HarperCollins

Lyss dipped a cup of water from Weeping Creek and used it to wash down a dry mouthful of cheese and waybread. She wished she could wash down her memories as easily.

The rest of her squadron was sprawled around her on the creekbank, grabbing a quick rest and a bite, once they'd made sure that their ponies were well watered.

Lyss followed the waybread with a few strips of leathery venison and a handful of dried fruit and nuts. She was so bloody tired of campaign rations. An army on the move had no time for hunting or roasting fresh meat.

Just four years ago, Lyss and her brother Adrian had camped on the banks of this creek after Hana died. Four years ago, her brother had made her a solemn vow.

You won't be on your own.

And then, just a few months later, at Solstice, her father and her brother were ambushed in the streets of Fellsmarch. Her father was murdered, and her brother Adrian carried off, leaving his blood-smeared remedy bag on the cobblestones.

They'd buried her father next to Hana in the Cathedral Temple, then waited on tenterhooks for news of Adrian. What they expected was a demand for an impossible ransom from the king of Arden, or some grisly token proving his death. What they got was . . . nothing. After four years with no word, Adrian was presumed dead—by nearly everyone but Lyss. Despite evidence to the contrary, she still believed in miracles. She couldn't help hoping that he might be alive, held captive, perhaps, in a southern dungeon, even though common sense told her that he'd be better off dead than Arden's prisoner.

If he was dead, I would know it.

At first, she'd seethed with plans to go looking for him. Her mother had strictly forbidden any adventures of that sort, and had assigned a full-time guard to her sole surviving child to make sure she didn't sneak away.

Eventually, over Lyss's strenuous objections, they'd held a funeral for Adrian. Eventually, Lyss grew up enough to know that, even if Adrian lived, she'd have no idea where to start looking.

She still had dreams that he showed up at their door,

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demanding to know why no one had come looking for him.

This is the land of broken promises, she thought. Get used to it. I've been kind of busy since you left.

Lyss skipped a stone across the water, but it sank before it reached the other side. Next to her, Sasha dug in her kit, no doubt hoping to surface some scrap of food she'd missed. Nobody in this mixed bag of soldiers had an ounce of fat on them, but Sasha was big, and she had an appetite to match.

"Here," Cam said, tossing her a sack of dried berries. "I've had my fill."

Sasha tossed it back. "Eat up, Private. I've got a lot more meat on my bones than you do."

It was true. Cam always looked like he could use some feeding up—he was thin as a reed, with hands and feet that hopefully he'd grow into one day.

Sasha Talbot and Cam Staunton were the two members of the queen's Gray Wolf guard assigned to Lyss during the marching season. Though they wore the spattercloth of the regular army, they had one purpose and one purpose only—to keep the heir to the Gray Wolf throne alive. That job was getting harder and harder as the war dragged on and Lyss's patience eroded.

Staunton was relatively new to the guard. His mother had been a corporal in Lyss's squadron. She'd been killed in the Fens the previous year, leaving Cam to support two younger brothers.

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The funeral fires were barely out when twelve-year-old Cam came to Lyss, asking to enlist in the Highlanders. "I'd like to fight for you, ma'am," he said, chin up, shoulders back, already at attention. "Everyone says I'm sure to see some action if I'm with you."

"Stay at home a little longer, Cam," she'd said. Though Lyss was only two years older, it felt like decades.

"You was fighting in the war at twelve," Cam said. "Mama told me that. When you was thirteen, you grabbed the Gray Wolf banner from the cold, dead hands of your commander and led the charge that drove the southerners into the sea at Hallowmere. And, just last year, you—"

Lyss held up both hands. "Don't believe everything you hear," she said. "Stories have a way of growing. And there's a lot they leave out."

Cam clenched his jaw. "There's lots of my age-mates in the Highlanders. The only reason I never signed up is Mama wouldn't let me. She always said I had to look after my brothers."

Lyss knew that any other commander would have signed him right up. He was likelier than many they had in the field. There was nothing to stop him from going elsewhere if she refused.

"Who'll look after your brothers if you go to war?" she'd said.

"I have older cousins near West Wall," Cam said. "They can stay there during the marching season."

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"What about school?"

"I'm pretty much finished at the Temple School. But I'll study hard, when I'm home."

Lyss sighed. She knew what happened to that kind of promise. "Why do you want to go to war? Find an apprenticeship. Something you can carry on with, after the war."

"After the war, ma'am?" Cam looked baffled. "Do you really see an end to it anytime soon?"

And Lyss could not lie to this boy who'd lost so much already. "I don't know," she said.

"Then I want to help," he said. "I want to go after the ones that killed my mother."

In the end, Lyss had put in a word with Captain Byrne, and Cam had been allowed to sign up with the Gray Wolves. That would keep him off the battlefield, and he could be posted close to home. This summer, though, he'd managed to get assigned to Lyss, so he'd found his way to the battlefield, anyway.

Who's to say the Vale is any safer? Lyss thought.

The queens of the Fells were bound by blood and history to the Spirit Mountains. Their Gray Wolf ancestors were the guardians who dwelt in the forests and high mountain passes. The peaks had always stood as an impenetrable barrier to the south, holding evil at bay. Twenty-five years ago, when her mother, Raisa, was a young queen, the monstrous Gerard Montaigne, king of Arden, had breached that barrier. His armies had marched all the way

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to the gates of Fellsmarch, demanding surrender.

They'd driven him off then, and reinforced the borders, and through twenty-five years of war they had kept him at bay. Then, four years ago, the killings began. They started with her father and brother, but were not limited to the royal family. It was most often wizards, but included military officers, clan warriors, government officials, and members of the nobility. What they had in common was their importance to the war effort, or their close connection to the queen.

How were they supposed to protect themselves against an enemy who could be anywhere, and might strike at any time?

Lyss dipped her waterskin into the bone-chilling creek, refilling it for the ride ahead. The streams that ran down from Alyssa Peak were always cold—fed by snowmelt that ran from spring until the new snows cloaked her rocky summit in late summer. The southerners had a different name for her—the Harlot, because she was a mountain that broke men's hearts.

Ardenine hearts, maybe, Lyss thought.

Over the past several days, they'd ridden hard from Way Camp to join the rest of their salvo in Queen Court Vale. The queendom's eyes and ears had sent word that the Ardenine general Marin Karn had landed a large force at Spiritgate. Their intended target could be Fortress Rocks to the north or Queen Court Vale, which spread out in

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front of them, a checkerboard of small farms in the middle of the harvest season.

"Somebody's coming," Sasha said, pointing over Lyss's shoulder. Her eyes narrowed in disbelief. "It looks like Shadow Dancer."

"Really?" Lyss said. "I thought he was still at Demonai Camp." She turned to look, squinting against the morning sun at the horseman riding hard from the direction of the command tent across the Vale. "You're right. It *is* him. I wonder what he's doing here."

Shadow reined in next to Lyss, saluted, dismounted, and produced a dispatch tube with a flourish. "From General Dunedain, ma'am," he said.

Lyss threw her arms around him, ignoring the dispatch for the moment. The scent of flux and charcoal and metal said that he hadn't been too long away from the forge. "What are you doing here?"

"I dropped off a load of new gear to your quartermaster," Shadow said.

That made sense. At sixteen, Shadow was already one of the most talented flashcrafters in the queendom—clan artisans who made weaponry and magical tools in support of the northern war effort.

That still didn't explain why he was delivering dispatches. "Since when are you playing messenger?"

"I heard that there might be a chance to kill southerners today, so I decided to extend my visit." The many braids

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in Shadow's hair were evidence that he rarely said no to a fight, and that he usually came away with a kill. Though the work he did in his shop was critical to the war effort, it was all but impossible to keep him off the battlefield. He was the fiercest metalsmith in the queendom.

Shadow had a private's colors knotted around his neck, as much of a uniform as he'd ever put on. He might have inherited his gift for flashcraft from his clan-born, gifted father, but his looks and reckless, independent spirit came from his Southern Islands mother.

Cat Tyburn had been spymaster for the queendom, until two years ago, when somebody cut her throat and dumped her body in the Dyrnnewater. Cat was the savviest street-fighter in the realm. Lyss couldn't understand how she'd been caught unawares.

Cat might be gone, but she lived on in her headstrong, mercurial son. Lyss and Shadow had been inseparable as lýtlings, but these days their paths rarely crossed in the marching season. And now . . .

"I would have thought that you'd have better things to do," Lyss said. "Didn't I hear that you're planning a wedding?"

Shadow nodded, a bit of color staining his dark cheeks. "News travels faster than I do, it seems."

"Have you set a date?"

He shook his head. "My father wants us to wait another year or two. Aspen and I are buried in work, anyway, so it

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likely won't be until sometime next year. Don't worry—you'll get your invitation as soon as I know when and where it will be."

Lyss had met Shadow's betrothed, Aspen Silverleaf, several times at clan markets. Aspen was known throughout the Seven Realms for her fine leatherwork. Her workshop was in Fortress Rocks, a midsized town to the north and east, where she looked after four younger brothers and sisters.

We are a land of orphans, Lyss thought, doing the work of dead parents.

Aspen was steady, practical, and wiser than her years. She'd been good for Shadow. In the time they'd been together, he'd begun taking better care of himself.

Still, Lyss was having a hard time with the notion of Shadow marrying and settling down, even if it might keep him alive a little longer. For years, even when they were apart, they'd been comrades, focused on a common goal: keeping the king of Arden's army from overrunning their homeland. Wasn't it tempting fate to be settling down to a life with this war still going on?

"Where do you think you'll live? After you're married, I mean." If he moves to Fortress Rocks, I'll never see him, she thought. Which she knew was selfish.

"One thing at a time," Shadow said, laughing. "I'm still getting used to the idea of getting married." He waved the dispatch tube under her nose. "Don't you want to read this

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after I've carried it all this way?"

Lyss unfurled the paper inside, scanned it, and crumpled it in her hand.

"What?" Sasha said, instantly alert.

"The gutter-swiving mudbacks have committed themselves," Lyss said. "They are heading for the pass. Mason and Littlefield are meeting us there."

Sasha pulled out her spyglass and scanned the shoulder of the mountain. "How many?"

"She doesn't say, but they must have slave mages with them. They're sending Finn along with us."

"Sul'Mander's here, too?" Shadow looked from Sasha to Lyss, his expression flat and unreadable. "Last I heard, he was in the borderlands with the queen."

"He was," Lyss said. "He was wounded back in the spring, and he's been in hospital since. He just arrived from the capital. They must think we can use a little more talent."

Even though Shadow and Finn were distantly related (Shadow's grandfather was a Bayar), Lyss always got the impression that he somehow disapproved of Finn. Lyss didn't think it was the old mistrust between uplanders and wizards—Shadow's father was a wizard, after all.

Maybe it was because they were both intense, in different ways.

"Let *me* ride with you," Shadow said, fondling the bow in his saddle boot. "*I* have talent."

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"I know you do," Lyss said, rolling her eyes. "But can you follow orders?"

"I can follow orders as well as any Demonai," Shadow said, which was setting a pretty low bar. "Anyway, General Dunedain already said yes."

"Fine," Lyss said, irritated that he'd gone around her. "Just remember—I don't want to hear whining when the going gets tough." She didn't say aloud what else she was thinking—that this Ardenine offensive must be a bigger threat than they'd thought if Dunedain was recruiting their flashcrafter.

"Let's go!" she said, rousing the rest of her squadron. "Get ready to ride!"

By the time Lyss had loaded her gear, she saw another lone horseman galloping toward them, his pale hair glittering in the slanting morning sun.

Finn. Lyss's stomach did its usual somersault. She'd had a crush on Finn sul'Mander since she was eleven years old. She'd often see him with Adrian and his friends, at a time when her worship of her brother extended to everyone around him.

Back then, she'd tried to pump Adrian for information in her clumsy way. "Is he really your friend, Adrian?" she'd ask.

He raised his eyebrow. "Of course he is. I wouldn't spend so much time with him if we weren't friends."

"But he's a Bayar," Lyss said. "Da says we shouldn't trust Bayars, right?"

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"He's a Mander," Adrian said. "Anyway, he's different. He's not like the rest of them at all."

Lyss didn't know what he meant by that, but it was enough to ease her mind. She'd always thought of Finn as solemn, intense, mysterious, and deep. That hadn't changed. In wartime, many of their age-mates fought young, loved young, and died young. Some tried to live a lifetime before they turned twenty. Despite plenty of opportunities, Finn didn't seem to play the romantic games that others did. If he'd had sweethearts in the past, it was a closely guarded secret.

Maybe that was why Lyss liked him. Wooing and romantic banter were not in her arsenal, either. When you fall in love with somebody, they just go and get themselves killed. When I marry, she thought, I'm going to find somebody with an army and some warships and a big bag of money. Then I'll do my dancing on the battlefield.

Finn hadn't been around much these past four years—he was always either away at the academy at Oden's Ford, or fighting in the borderlands. The stories Lyss had heard about his steady courage under fire did nothing to diminish his appeal.

She'd had lots of crushes back when she was eleven. This was the only one that had lasted.

"Lieutenant Gray," Finn said, reining in and saluting her. "I am, as always, at your service."

For a moment, Lyss was speechless. Finn was still handsome by any measure, but his time in the healing halls had

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changed him. He looked thin and haggard, his black eyes undershadowed with weariness and pain, his skin nearly as pale as his hair.

Lyss leaned in to take a closer look, worry squirming inside her. "Are you all right? I mean, I heard you were wounded."

Finn tightened his reins so that his horse danced a few steps back. "I'm well," he said, his tone of voice and expression telling her to back off.

"Good," Lyss said, lifting her chin. "Glad to hear it."

Finn grimaced, and said more gently, "Isn't that what soldiers are supposed to say, whether we are or not?" He sighed. "It's just . . . so many have died, and for what? We can win every battle and still lose the war. It's such a waste."

"Is there something you think we should do differently?" Lyss said.

"Everything," Finn said. "I'm willing to give my life for the realm, but I don't see that making a difference." He looked away. "Never mind," he said. "I shouldn't have said that."

"I'm glad you did," Lyss said. "My father had a saying: 'If you keep doing what you've been doing, you'll get what you've been getting.' In our case—an endless war."

Finn turned back to her, studying her. "You *do* understand," he said.

"I don't just understand," Lyss said. "I agree."

Finn smiled, and Lyss melted. She knew a dozen girls

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who would kill to win a smile from Finn sul'Mander, but he bestowed them sparingly.

"We'd better go," she said. "Mason and Littlefield are meeting us at the near end of the pass."

Lyss wheeled her horse, and Finn wheeled with her, so he was riding beside her. Sasha and Cam took their usual positions, one just ahead of Lyss, the other just behind.

As they rode east, the early sun disappeared behind the shoulder of the great mountain, and the air grew noticeably cooler, sending a finger of chill down Lyss's back.

"There's something else I should tell you," Finn said, leaning closer. "I'm not going back to the academy this year."

"You're not?" Was this the reason for his unusually gloomy attitude? "Why not?"

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"I'm going to stay home. I've decided to train with Lord Vega in the healing halls," Finn said.

"But . . . you always talk about how you *love* Oden's Ford."

"I *do* love Oden's Ford," Finn said. "But it's time to stop being selfish and do what I can for the realm."

"Finn . . . you've been a major asset on the battlefield," Lyss said. "You were seriously wounded fighting for the queendom. That hardly seems selfish to me."

Finn shrugged that off. "I just think I need to contribute to the war in a different way. After spending months in the healing halls, after seeing the important work they do there, I realized that's where I belong. Lord Vega has truly been a mentor to me."

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This was almost as surprising as Finn's decision not to go back to the academy. Lyss recalled Adrian complaining about Lord Vega, and she'd heard much the same from his friend Ty Gryphon. According to them, the wizard was definitely not the mentor type.

Well, she thought, good for the both of them. Vega's been griping for years about the lack of recruits to the healing service. Either he's realized that his own behavior is the root of the problem, or at least he's found somebody who'll put up with him.

Lyss tried to keep an open mind about Harriman Vega, but, to be honest, she despised him. She hoped it wasn't because she couldn't forgive him for failing to save her father's life. He'd been the one to pronounce him dead in the street.

"Does General Dunedain know? That you're leaving the Highlanders?"

Finn shook his head. "I plan to tell her when we return to the capital in the fall."

"It goes without saying that we'll miss you," Lyss said.

Finn smiled. "Go ahead," he said. "You can say it anyway."

Lieutenants Mason and Littlefield met them at the near end of the pass, along with Captain Starborn, the commander of the salvo. Starborn was one of the rare Demonai warriors who'd enlisted in the regular army.

"Good news!" Starborn said, with a broad grin. "We have many, many flatlanders to kill today."

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"Typical Demonai," Sasha muttered, shooting a worried look at Lyss.

"How many?" Lyss said.

Starborn rocked his hand. "Our scouts think that it might be a full brigade."

"A *brigade*!" Littlefield turned an odd shade of gray.

Starborn nodded. "So." He rubbed his hands together. "There'll be plenty to go around."

"Shouldn't we wait for reinforcements?" Littlefield persisted.

"We can't afford to wait," Starborn said. "We have to keep them in the pass—that way we'll face only a few at a time. If they spill out into the Vale, they can use their numbers against us."HarperCollins

Lyss leaned forward, and Mincemeat shifted under her, sensing her impatience. "Shall we ride, then, sir? My squadron can take the forward position, where Finn will be at his most effective."

Starborn eyed her appraisingly, then nodded. "Carry on, Lieutenant Gray. We'll be right behind you."

Lyss waved her troops forward, settling into the lead with Sasha and Cam on either side of her, Finn and Shadow just behind.

"Do you always have to take the forward position, Lieutenant?" Sasha hissed. "Could you try and remember who you are, sometimes?"

"I never forget who I am," Lyss said. "That's why I take the lead."

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3

MATELON

HarperCollins

Halston Matelon would never admit that he was looking forward to a fight—but he was. After an endlessly frustrating season watching his back in Delphi, the prospect of leading an army into battle seemed positively appealing. Even if it wasn't a fight he would have chosen.

A soldier doesn't choose his battles, Hal's father always said. *His job is to win the one before him*. By that measure, Hal was a good soldier. He'd moved up quickly in the empire's army. At seventeen, he was already a captain. His men were good soldiers, and loyal, and he won more battles than he lost. Only that, all of a sudden, was a problem.

Nine months ago, at Solstice, he'd received new orders—King Gerard was relieving him of his command

and sending him to the conquered city of Delphi as the administrator of martial law.

"Why would he do that?" Hal had asked his father over his second tankard of ale. "I've been a good soldier. Why would he send me to do a job I have no preparation for?"

"Right now it doesn't suit King Gerard for you to be a successful soldier," Lord Matelon said. He rubbed his chin with the heel of his hand. "That's likely my fault. I've been too outspoken in my criticism of the war."

"But . . . if he wants to win the war, why would it make sense to make a boneheaded move like that?" Hal took a quick look around to make sure no one was in a position to overhear. This even though they were sitting on the terrace at White Oaks, the well-fortified Matelon holding in the countryside.

"King Gerard doesn't want you marching around at the head of an army if he makes a move against me," his father said, with a sour smile.

"Do you think that's a possibility?" Hal said, lowering his voice anyway.

"It's what the king thinks that's important," Lord Matelon said. "King Gerard is always short of money, especially now that the council has tightened the purse strings. One way to resolve that—temporarily, at least—is to name one of us a traitor to the crown and seize his holdings. Right now I'm likely at the top of his list."

Hal glared out over the green hills and forests of the

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estate he called home. Just below, he could see his mother and sister—moving spots of color—gathering winter blooms in the garden. He needed to protect them, this place, this sanctuary. "If he comes after you, I'll give him reason to regret it," he said grimly.

"I dearly hope so," Lord Matelon said, with a hoarse laugh, "but that's precisely what King Gerard's afraid of." He paused, leaned in. "We also have to consider the possibility that he means to make sure that you never get out of Delphi alive."

Hal slammed his hands down on the table. "And you *still* think I should go?" To Hal, politics was that thing you did when you were too old to be of any use on the battlefield. Though he had to admit, his father had always been good at both.

"You must go," Lord Matelon said. "You cannot give King Gerard an excuse to take you into custody and hold you hostage against my good behavior. Delphi is a nasty place, but the king's gaol is nastier. So, yes, I think you should go, with your eyes open to the danger you're walking into. This is not the battlefield you're used to fighting on. Don't trust the King's Guard—they serve the king. Take a half dozen of your best soldiers with you, and trust no one else. People die in Delphi every day, and you don't want to be among them."

Hal rose and began pacing back and forth, seething. "Do you think there's a chance the king will realize that

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posting me to Delphi was a mistake?"

"Aye, there's a chance," Lord Matelon said. "There's a chance that an earthshake might swallow him up. Just don't try to hurry it along by failing on purpose. Even if the job you're assigned is not to your liking, a Matelon will see it done."

Of course. Hal had been hearing that all of his life. By now it was engraved on his bones.

"Other than watching my back, do you have any other advice about how to succeed in Delphi?"

"As military commander over a district, you need to make yourself visible and accessible. Listen to what people have to say. Let them know what the rules are, and then enforce those rules consistently. Be ruthless when you need to, but be fair about it. They still won't like you, but they'll respect you, and that's the best way to stop trouble before it starts."

Now, nine months into his posting, Hal was finding that following his father's advice was easier said than done. It seemed that whenever he made a little headway toward a working relationship with the Delphians, the King's Guard undid it through cruel, vindictive, and arbitrary tactics. As the police force in the city, they were the face of Arden to most citizens, and it was an ugly one.

During his first four months in the city, Hal had also survived three assassination attempts. Once, it was poison; once, an ambush in the streets; and once, someone had

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carefully frayed the cinch strap on his saddle. He didn't know whether the perpetrators were Delphian Patriots or agents of the king, since the blackbirds never caught them.

After that, Hal moved his headquarters into a compound north of the city. His excuse was that he wanted to keep a closer eye on the mines and the northern border. That was true enough, but that was only part of it. This way, he could keep his soldiers away from the city and avoid being pulled into criminal and civil disputes. Some would say it was a coward's way out, but he had no stomach for beating people into the ground. What's more, he had no plans to die in Delphi, and he was more likely to survive when he didn't have to walk through the city's crowded streets.

Why is it that when a man is successful on the battlefield, they ruin his life by making him an administrator?

But now, in a twist of luck, the war had come to him. General Karn had landed an entire brigade at Spiritgate in an attempt to wring a small victory from a bitter stalemate of a summer. Karn was desperate to win a little territory in order to placate the Thane Council. Hal's father wasn't the only one losing interest in funding King Gerard's grudge match against the witch queen of the Fells.

The plan was to march across the Alyssa Plateau, around the flank of the Harlot, and straight into Queen Court Vale. Karn was in need of an experienced commander who knew the territory. At least that was the reason given when Hal was detailed to join this late-summer offensive.

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Hal was cautiously optimistic. Maybe it meant that the king had realized that he couldn't afford to send good soldiers to the backwaters of Delphi to die. He hoped it represented a chance to demonstrate his value to the empire.

He met up with the army at Spiritgate. Karn put him in charge of an entire battalion—a third of the brigade. Hal had brought his half dozen seasoned men with him, but he soon discovered that the rest of the soldiers in his command were raw recruits from the down realms, men who scarcely knew how to cock a crossbow. They were as green as grass, with less than a week until they marched.

Hal called his handful of veterans in and said, "Good news. You're all being promoted to lieutenant."

They looked at each other, shuffling their feet, murmuring thank-yous, waiting for the rest of it.

"I'm going to split this battalion into five columns of twenty-four. Each of you will take charge of a column. You'll march with them, eat with them, sleep with them, get to know who's who, and surface any talent you can. Until we engage, I want you to drill them hard. Focus on crossbow drills, the five standard orders, fighting formations, and the care of weapons. Once we engage, I want you to do everything you can to keep all of your scrips alive."

"But Captain," now-Lieutenant Cousineau protested, "what about you? Who'll watch your back if—?"

"Do it," Hal said, and turned away.

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Once Hal's hurry-up boot camp began, his men were up at dawn, drilling, every single day, while the other battalions slept in.

Part of the mission was to undo the damage done to the recruits already. The newlings had been stuffed full of stories by the veterans—tales of the sorcerous land up north, of the witch queen and her terrifying twin daughters who drank the blood of the faithful and rode saber-toothed horses naked through the skies. Of the northern warrior they called the Gray Wolf. Impossible to kill, he turned into a huge gray wolf when the battle fever took him, savaging any poor soldier unlucky enough to cross his path.

Hal wasn't going to rule anything out, but he'd fought several campaigns in the north and had seen nothing of the sort. There *were* wolves in the mountains—Hal had seen and heard them. He reasoned that any wolf looks like a giant when he's bearing down on you, and grows considerably after, in the telling.

"The northern soldiers are just men," Hal told the men in his command. "And women," he amended. "When you cut them, they bleed, just like us."

It was true that northern women fought as fiercely as the men—so fiercely that, on the battlefield, it was difficult to tell them apart. Several times in the past, Hal had discovered that the man he'd just killed was actually a woman. He just couldn't get used to that. Maybe that was the root of the rumors—it was easier to think you'd killed a witch

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or a ghost warrior than a woman.

They left Spiritgate a week after Hal's arrival. The countryside they marched through had been stripped of anything edible or useful. Many of the farms and villages had been destroyed and abandoned over the course of the war. And yet the northerners kept on fighting, year after year. The church said it was because they'd been enslaved by their sorcerous queen, and the true sons of Malthus would be welcomed as liberators.

Hal was still waiting for that.

They met little resistance, save the usual copperhead hit-and-run attacks. Karn made no attempt to pursue, apparently considering the loss of a few soldiers here and there the price of making good time.

Hal's battalion was still more likely to kill one of their fellow soldiers than to give the northerners anything to worry about. It gave Hal plenty to worry about, though.

They were young, too—many had not yet got their growth. Some didn't even speak Common. Hal set about to try to learn their names. Ty. Bakshi. Raynaud. Skye.

The only veterans attached to his battalion, aside from the ones he'd brought himself, were four captive mages. One of them was a blade-faced man named Pitts. Every time his droop-lidded gaze brushed over Hal, it gave him the chills. The mages had little to say to Hal, despite his attempts to engage them. That wasn't unusual. Collared mages were often sullen—resentful of being ganged into

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the southern army. Hal usually got on well with them once he won them over—but that took time he didn't have.

Hal couldn't help wondering why these men had been sent into the fighting so soon after recruitment, why they had been assigned to him, and why he and his were marching ahead of the veterans to the rear.

He didn't know for sure, but he had some theories.

They'd reached the eastern end of the pass before Hal managed to corner General Karn.

"Sir. I've been evaluating the men assigned to my battalion and I'm worried that their inexperience might endanger the brigade and interfere with the mission," Hal said, the words tumbling out quickly before he could be dismissed.

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"So you're *worried*, Captain Matelon," Karn said, planting his hands on his hips. "I hope it's not keeping you up nights. As you should know, we're dredging the bottom of the barrel when it comes to new recruits. You'll have to work with what you have, just like the rest of us."

"Sir," Hal persisted, "I'm not complaining about the quality of the men under my command. I believe they can become good soldiers with time. I'm concerned about their youth and—"

"You're scarcely dry behind the ears yourself, and you've done all right," Karn said.

"I've been fighting for the empire since I was eleven," Hal said. "What most concerns me is their lack of training

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and experience, coupled with their concentration in one unit. It seems to me that if they could be mingled with more experienced troops in all three battalions, they could learn from their comrades and the veterans could help them survive until they develop some skills."

"Are you questioning my orders, Captain?"

Yes, Hal thought, I definitely am.

"No, sir, I'm merely suggesting that—"

"I need my veterans to fight, Captain, not to babysit new recruits," Karn said. "I've organized my battle plan to make the best use of all my assets. Everyone keeps telling me you're a brilliant field officer. That's why I put these scrips with you. You and your battalion will have an important job to do."

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"Which is?"

"Your battalion will take the lead in the invasion of Queen Court Vale," Karn said.

If it had been anyone else, Hal would have assumed he'd somehow misunderstood. But when he looked into Karn's face, when he saw the sneering triumph there, he knew that he'd heard right.

"Could you . . . elaborate, sir?" Hal said. Somehow, he managed to keep his voice calm, steady, matter-of-fact.

"You will fight your way through the pass," Karn said, as if Hal were too stupid to divine his true meaning. "Once through, you will clear the valley of civilians, loot the town of all valuables, and burn everything to the dirt."

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Karn paused, as if he expected a hearty thank-you for this suicide assignment.

Hal straightened, broadened his stance, and looked the general in the eye. "And after that?" he said evenly.

For a long moment, Karn was at a loss. Hal knew he hadn't made a plan for after, because Hal and his battalion weren't supposed to survive.

"After that, you'll . . . await further orders," Karn said.

"If I may ask, sir, what will the other two battalions be doing in the meantime?"

"We will be right behind you," Karn said, with a predator's smile, "sending replacements up as needed." The general paused long enough to let that sink in. "Now, Captain, you'd best get some rest." With that, Karn turned and walked away, not waiting for a salute. Which was good, because Hal was not about to give him one.

His father's words came back to him. *Right now it doesn't suit King Gerard for you to be a successful soldier.*

Hal added his own coda to that.

But it does suit him for you to be a dead one.

He was boxed in. If he refused Karn's orders, he'd be court-martialed and executed. If he deserted, he'd be hunted down and executed. He could turn traitor, and throw himself on the dubious mercy of the witch queen. Any of those options would disgrace his father and help build the king's case against him.

If Hal walked off a cliff, would that be a virtuous death?

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What would happen to his battalion? Would Karn fold them into his other forces or would they be sent out to slaughter on their own? Truth be told, Hal wanted to live, and he wanted to save as many in his battalion as he could. He was just beginning to learn their names.

Even if the job you're assigned is not to your liking, a Matelon will see it done.

Hal considered his options. He had just a handful of mounted soldiers—the vast majority were infantry. But in the narrow pass, the terrain was a double-edged sword. It would protect his flanks, but it would also prevent him from using his numbers, which was the only card he had to play. His best hope was the element of surprise. He needed to get his battalion through the pass and into the open field before the northerners could block their path. Then he could do with numbers what he couldn't do with talent and skill.

"Sir!" he called after Karn.

The general stiffened and turned. "Yes, Captain?"

"Permission to march now, sir."

Karn blinked in surprise. Eyed him suspiciously. Then bared his teeth. "Captain," he said, "you can march whenever the hell you want."

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