GATES AND PASSAGES

IRINA REMPT
Gates and Passages
This one is for Felix. Because he loves my writing.

Thanks go to my beta readers (in alphabetical order) Eleanor, Lucy and Zeborah, whose comments I read in their entirety and chose to mostly cheerfully ignore, even when they made sense. One thing I tried because I thought it made perfect sense but it turned out not to work so I undid it; other things fell under “but it’s not this world’s past at all! Why measure it by that?” so I didn’t even start. But having beta readers made me think hard about what I was actually doing, so it was useful after all.

Also, I’d like to thank the small crowd of fellow writers on Twitter, you know who you are, for your unfailing support and encouragement. May your darlings thrive forever as mine did.

Irina Rempt irina@valdyas.org
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Chapter 1

Vauri

"Why ever not?"

He was seven years old. He had a wooden sword in his hand. He was very much a prince.

"Alieth and Meruvin can. Why not me?"

"You are too young, your highness."

Vauri was itching to seize the weapons master and strangle him, but her training was too strong. She didn’t have to, anyway: the prince’s sister got in first.

"Nonsense."

"What?"

"I wasn’t any older when you started teaching me."

"Your brother was only a little older than you, your highness.” Vauri suppressed a snort. “It seemed expedient at the time to teach both of you together.”

"So you can teach me together with them, can’t you?” The little prince was shaking with agitation, but his voice stayed calm. Good for him.

"You would have to start from the beginning, your highness. Your brother and sister have some skill already.” Well, that was true, but it didn’t have to be an impediment. “Moreover, there is no sword in your size.”

“I can use the one Alieth started with,” the prince said, reasonably.

"It was too large for her."

"I managed with it all right,” the princess said. “You can have it, Valain, it’s in the rack in the armory. Come on, I’ll show you.”

Vauri got out of the way before they would pass her. She didn’t have any desire to be in on the oldest prince’s lesson. Miallei Meruvin astin Velain was a promising sword-fighter —she had to grant him that— but much too arrogant for his own good. She suppressed a sudden violent wish that something would happen to him so Alieth would inherit the crown.

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Prince Vegelin, Vauri wrote in her report to the queen, is making good progress with the sword and will soon be ready to move on to more challenging lessons. He shows the talent and determination befitting a child of the House Velain.

“More so than his brother does,” she remarked to her commander. “I’ve seen Meruvin sparring with Ervan, and I don’t know how much bad form I’d want him to unlearn if the queen had given me that one to teach too.”

“I wish that boy was gifted so we could teach him a thing or two here,” Orin said. “What about Alieth?”

“She’s going into the Temple.”

“Of Naigha? That’s news to me.”

“She only told me today. I don’t think even the queen knows yet.”

“But is she gifted at all?”
“Probably. Valain, too.”
“He’s only eight! Can you tell yet?”
Vauri put down her pen and looked at Orin with a grin. “Just wait.”

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“Master?”
“That’s ‘Vauri’ for you. Names only in the Order, remember? Besides, I’m not a master yet. It would be silly to call me ‘journeyman’. Or for me to call you ‘Your Highness’.”

The prince giggled.
“Talking of that, shall I call you Vegelin or Valain?” He answered to both, and she’d been using both indiscriminately.

“Valain, please.” His face went scarlet, a strange contrast with his red hair. “Vegelin is only for the court. When we’re doing official things.”

This, Vauri thought, was almost an official thing. The queen had invited her to Princess Alieth’s going-away celebration. It was one thing to be sword teacher to the princess and her younger brother, quite another to appear at court more or less officially.

At least, in uniform, she didn’t have to worry what to wear.

Alieth had quit sword training the moment that she’d made her vocation known. She’d come to lessons with Valain —the queen, quite rightly, didn’t let him out of the palace without an escort anyway— but sat aside, demurely. Strange, because ‘demure’ was the last word Vauri would have thought appropriate for Alieth when she first came to train, a wild impetuous girl with as much spirit as her little brother had. She must have had a revelation from Naigha, because it seemed to be a real calling, no pressure from anyone except the goddess.

Now, at her going-away party, she already looked like a priestess: she was even dressed in grey. Not in shapeless robes yet, but in a severe style that made her look fragile. Like her younger brother she had the Velain look, slight and pale, while Meruvin was tall and rugged in his father’s image.

The prince consort was away on Guild business, Vauri knew; she’d been there when Orin sent him. Pity, because Ruvin was one of the few people at court apart from Prince Valain who she’d have been halfway comfortable with. The queen was forbidding, Prince Meruvin haughty, Princess Alieth distant. Of the others she knew only a few, and then only by name. Most were noble, but there was a middle-aged priestess of Naigha with her arms full of pinpricked snake designs, a man dressed as a wealthy merchant, and several people who looked like scholars. Nobody except herself in the Guild of Anshen, strangely. You’d expect at least a few in a gathering like this. Come to think of it she’d expected Serla or Ferin or possibly both. On the upside, there was nobody in the Guild of the Nameless either, but then they knew they weren’t really welcome at court even though the queen was carefully impartial.

There was food, and good wine, and talk of court matters. Vauri listened closely and tried to remember what she heard to be able to tell Orin, but most of it didn’t seem to go beyond gossip.

Valain came to stand next to her. “When I have a party,” he said, “I want music and dancing and only people I like. Not the people Mother thinks ought to be there.”

“Isn’t there anyone here that you like?”
“Well, you, of course. Mother wanted to invite Master Orin for the Order but I said that you are our swordmaster, so you ought to come.”

“Thank you.” Perhaps Orin would have been more at home in this gathering, but at least now Valain had someone to talk to. And if she was going to succeed Orin as he intended, she’d have to
learn to move in court circles, however stuffy.

“And I like Ferin Brun, but he couldn’t come. His brother’s all right, though. Ayran, over there, with the little red hat.”

It was a pity that Ferin Brun couldn’t be here. She wouldn’t have been the only one in the Guild. Ferin’s brother Ayran was about as gifted as a rock.

“... and Serla,” Valain was saying. Vauri realised with a shock that she hadn’t been listening for a while. The lack of Ferin and Serla had been worrying her, too. “Meruvin went and made sure that they could at least send someone from the family,” the prince said.

As everybody was leaving the party, Vauri spotted two people in the crowd who hadn’t been in the room. Ferin and Serla: they must have come late, unannounced, hidden. Vauri manoeuvred next to them. “We have to talk, I think. Not here.”

“I’ll buy you both an ale at the Dog,” Serla said. “I’ve been cooped up in that library far too long. Waited for Ferin while he was waiting for me.”

“One moment.” Vauri spoke to the prince and he ran away like a boy released from school. “He’s been cooped up far too long too,” she said. “So, what kept you waiting?”

“Someone sent us both a note that the party was off— must have been the same person, but Ferin’s note looked as if it was from me and mine from him.”

“Not here,” Ferin said. “Vauri was right. Let’s go to the Dog.”

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At the Spotted Dog, nobody objected if you put up protection. People were having private talks all the time. Serla dropped something over the three of them that looked like a translucent blue-grey veil.

“Gods, Serla, can’t you do invisible?” Ferin asked.

“Can. Won’t.” She bit into her bread with a vengeance.

“What’s come over you?”

“Someone has it in for us. Makes me angry.”

Ferin nodded. “Someone didn’t want us at the party. Who else ought to have been there?”

“Valain said that the queen wanted to invite Orin but he insisted on me,” Vauri said. “Valain did, I mean, because I’m his and Alieth’s sword teacher. I didn’t get a warning-off note.”

“But perhaps Orin did? Let’s ask him.”

“Wait a moment. Valain told me that he’d seen his brother writing and sealing letters. With different seals.”

“Meruvin wrote the letters?” Serla was aghast.

“If that’s what Valain saw him writing, but I don’t think he’d have any other reason to seal with different seals. Do you have the notes with you?”

They produced them. Same hand, same style of wording, different seals. The one on Serla’s note was an ordinary Brun seal, such as anyone in that family might have, and the one on Ferin’s was a palace library seal.

“Oh!” Serla clapped a hand to her mouth. “That’s where it went! I thought I was growing senile. It turned up again the same afternoon, but I was sure I’d looked in that place.”

“But why?”

“Beats me. Perhaps to make Alieth feel that she wasn’t wanted.”

“That people in the Guild didn’t want her,” Vauri said. “I was the only one. And I think Meruvin
didn’t know I was coming. He looked at me as if I was something the cat dragged in.”

“Alieth is a little gifted,” Ferin said.

“More than a little,” Serla said, and Vauri, at the same time, “A lot.”

“But Meruvin isn’t,” Vauri went on. “Not that I can tell, at least, and at his age if it hasn’t shown yet it probably won’t. Not with a younger sister and brother who both show early.”

“Valain, too?” Ferin asked.

“Definitely.”

“Meruvin resents it?”

“Could be that, could be that he doesn’t want anyone to tell Alieth for some reason. I don’t know whether she knows it herself yet. She’s bound to find out in the Temple, though.”

Ferin called for another round of ale. “What do we do,” he said, “expose him now and risk a scandal, or wait and see whether he does anything we can really catch him on?”

“I don’t think we can risk a scandal,” Serla said. “Not now they’ve just lost the spare heir and the third is still too young.”

“It’s not as if he’s actually hurt anybody,” Vauri said. “I think it’s more than just a prank, but it didn’t do any harm except that you’ve missed the party. And, believe me, if you’d been there you’d know that that’s a good thing.”

Ferin laughed. “I believe you.”

Orin, indeed, had had a note as well. “From the court secretary— isn’t that you, Serla? This isn’t your writing.”

“No, it’s probably Prince Meruvin’s writing. Valain saw him writing and sealing letters.”

“With different seals,” Vauri said.

“What does yours say?” Ferin asked.

“That someone else was invited in my place. It didn’t surprise me because I knew that Vauri was going. I thought it was to confirm that.”

“Now who else ought to have been there who wasn’t?” Serla ticked off names on her fingers.

“You, Ferin, me. Ruyin is in Lenyas. Was the high priestess of Naigha there, Vauri?”

“No, only some kind of senior priestess, snakes to the elbows. Probably the novice mistress. I didn’t talk to her. If she’s gifted at all she wouldn’t be in the Guild anyway. I think they have something else for that in the Temple of Naigha.”

“It might be interesting to know whether the high priestess had a note like mine,” Orin said. “I think I’m the right person to inquire. I’m meeting her tomorrow, anyway.”

When Ferin and Serla had left, Orin motioned for Vauri to sit. “What do you think of it? A boyish prank?”

“It’s too deliberate for that. Too much directed at specific people. If he’d known that Valain had invited me he’d have tried to prevent me coming as well, I think.”

“Why would he want to keep gifted people away? Is he in the other Guild?”

“He still doesn’t look gifted at all. There was nobody from the other Guild at the party either.” Vauri had looked hard at everybody she didn’t know well, especially Meruvin’s swordmaster who she’d never liked. But that was probably prejudice because he hadn’t wanted to teach Valain.

“If he plays pranks like that,” Orin said, “whether pointed or not, I doubt he’ll be fit to rule.”
He was right, Vauri thought: the prince was old enough to know better. If he was keeping gifted people away from his sister’s farewell party, it was for some purpose. It would be bad for the country to have a king who was sly, dishonest, or prejudiced. They’d have to keep their eyes wide open.

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“What do I have to do to get into the Order of the Sworn?” Valain asked Vauri at the end of the next lesson.

That was a complication she should have foreseen. In other circumstances she’d have been pleased, but now... Well, perhaps he still could, if Meruvin grew up bearable and had sensible people around him.

“You need to be a journeyman in the Guild of Anshen,” she said. “That won’t be until you’re, well, fifteen or so. If at all.” It might very well be younger with Valain, but she wasn’t telling him that. The youngest ever to be admitted to the Order had been just short of thirteen: she herself, in fact.

“And when can I be sure that I’m in the Guild then?”

“That’s a difficult question. Can we talk about it after I’ve washed?”

That gave her some time at least. She cleaned up, put on a fresh shirt and dropped by the temple on her way back to the training ground. Anshen, guide me! She was sure that the boy was gifted, though it didn’t show clearly yet. And if he had the calling... She could hardly tell him that it might be necessary for him to take his brother’s place as heir to the throne.

Valain was waiting patiently when she came back. He looked as if he hadn’t moved at all. There was a glimmer of power around him: the first time Vauri actually saw that instead of only sensing a hint of it.

“Come, let’s sit down.” They sat on the bench, Valain’s feet dangling. “Do you think you’re gifted?” Vauri asked.

“I don’t know. Sometimes I think I see things and other times I think I’m only seeing things.”

Vauri laughed. “What kind of things?”

“I can tell if people are honest. If they’re lying they — they’re a different colour. Or they smell different or something.” He balled his fists and punched the air. “Like when Mother is angry she goes all grey, but Father goes red and hot. Only it’s not — it’s not what their face looks like, it’s what they look like inside. Can’t put it any better, sorry.”

“It’s perfectly clear to me.” She took him into the temple. “What do you see?”

“You mean not the things but what they look like, right?”

“Right. And also what you hear, smell, feel, anything. I promise I won’t laugh at you, whatever you say.”

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Valain

Valain had been in the temple of Anshen before, of course. Many times, with his father, with the whole family at feasts, when a sword lesson came just before or after a service. Always with a lot of other people. Now, with only Vauri hovering in the doorway, it was different.

He felt the cold of the stone floor creep through the soles of his boots, but that wasn’t the kind of
thing Vauri wanted to hear. He opened his eyes —only now did he notice that he’d closed them— and saw a ray of light coming through one of the little windows near the peak of the dome. Dust motes floated around in it. There was a lot of light, really, and some of it didn’t seem to come from anywhere. No, it did come from somewhere: from the wrought iron brazier in the middle of the temple. There wasn’t enough fire in it to give so much light, but the light was there anyway.

There was no way he could tell that to Vauri. He didn’t have words for it.

He started to notice a buzz in the air as well, as if hundreds of voices were whispering to him. He didn’t understand a single word, but he knew that there were words in the sound for him to hear when he learned to understand. And somehow that had to do with the light from the brazier. If he could stretch out his hands just a little more, he’d be able to grab it, the light or the sound, that was the same thing.

He stretched out, and a little more, further than the hands of his body could reach, and took power in his hands. It glittered like a double handful of snow in the sun on a winter morning.

“Vauri?”

She was at his side at once, as if she’d been waiting for him to call her. Well, of course she had.

“I can’t tell you. I don’t know what to say.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She cradled his head in her hands. Suddenly it was much easier to let her know what he felt and thought, as if he could take her by the hand and show her everything. He threw the glittering stuff into the air as if they were having a snowball fight, scattering it over himself and Vauri, laughing with exultation.

It couldn’t last, of course. Winded, he sat down on the cold floor. Vauri came to sit beside him.

“I guess I really am gifted, right?”

“Right.”

“Do I have to have lessons for that?”

“Yes. I can teach you if your parents and Orin say it’s all right.”

More lessons from Vauri wouldn’t be so bad. It was the prospect of more hours in the library with Serla, on his best behaviour, that didn’t appeal to him. “And if they don’t say it’s all right? Won’t I learn anything or will Serla or someone else have to teach me?”

“Oh, you will learn. From your father if he won’t let me teach you. But I’d like to.”

Chapter 2

Vauri

“Ah, Vauri,” the prince consort said, coming into Serla’s workroom where the two women had been talking. “Good that you’re here, I wanted to see both of you anyway.”

If Ruyin wanted to see both of them, it was probably a Guild matter. “Shall I call Ferin too?”

“No, it’s about Valain, I just need his teachers. I’m going to take him away for a few weeks. Until Midsummer, I expect.”

“Where are you going?” Serla asked. “Linyas again?”

Ruyin nodded. “It shouldn’t be dangerous. Just talking to some people. It’s time that he gets a taste of runner’s work.”
Vauri wondered whether he had thought that through properly, but she knew better than to challenge him; it would only make him more stubborn. “I’ll fill you in on what we’ve been doing.”

“That’s what I came for, yes. If he needs something you haven’t covered I’d like to know that too.”

Vauri was surprised that so much of Serla’s part of the teaching came into it; mostly history and geography. Ruyin was pleasantly surprised that Valain could read a map.

“I should have taught him that myself. I’ve been away too much. After this assignment I hope I’ll be able to stay in Valdis more. Those boys need a father.”

Yes, especially Meruvin, but Vauri didn’t want to be the one to tell him that. She went over her teaching with Ruyin: she seemed to have taught Valain the right things. Fighting with the sword, the dagger or bare hands for the past four and a half years, to begin with. And *semsin* skills: to protect himself, to see people’s intentions, to speak to someone with his mind. To be inconspicuous, though he wasn’t good at it. Perhaps Ruyin would know how to teach him that.

“Am I seeing things, or is he very close to his journeyman’s trial?” Ruyin asked.

“Yes, very close. He may do it on the way.”

“Anything I have to be specially alert for?”

“You’re the runner,” Vauri said, “you probably know that better than I do. I’ve told you everything I know. But he’s not so good at hiding and camouflage, you may want to work on that.”

“He gets that from his father,” Ruyin said with a laugh. “You should ask Orin about me sometime. He used to make me sit in his office and keep out of his sight. It took me years to get the knack. And see how I ended up.”

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“I always want to like Ruyin and I always end up disliking him,” Serla said.

“You too? I never noticed until he started coming back to Valdis more often and taking an interest in his sons.”

“Taking the boy away just like that. As if only his interests count. Ruyin’s, I mean, not Valain’s.”

“Well, it’s probably good for him to get some hands-on training,” Vauri said. “Valain, that is, not Ruyin. When Meruvin is king and he’s the heir, he probably won’t be able to get out at all.”

“Speaking of heirs, have you heard that Meruvin has a sweetheart?”

“No, who? One of the queen’s hopefuls?”

“You’d never believe it, she’s Master Ervan’s daughter.”

“Can’t be much more than twelve, can she?”

“Well, perhaps fourteen, but still just a little thing. They really seem to have something going, though.”

Vauri snorted. “I hope he’s sensible about it.”

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“This seems to be the right time for you to go to Lenay,” Orin said. He looked worried, Vauri thought. Older, with more lines in his face.

“To keep an eye on Valain?”

“To find out if it’s at all possible to set up an Order house there. I’ve wanted to do that for a long time, and this is the perfect excuse for you to be in Lenay so you can keep an eye on Valain without
being too conspicuous about it.”

“You are an old fox,” Vauri said.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Orin said with a glint in his eye. “It’s not that I don’t trust Ruyin, mind you. I sent him to Lenay myself for other negotiations. But Ruyin is only one man. If anything happens to him Valain is on his own and he’s not even a journeyman yet.”

“No I wear uniform?”

“I wouldn’t travel in uniform if I were you, but take it in case you need to look official. It’s not an undercover assignment. I don’t mind people knowing that we want to set up a house.”

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Valain

Valain had never really travelled until he travelled with his father. He thought of himself as a good rider; but he still got saddle-sore, and stiff from sleeping on the hard ground wrapped in his cloak, and thirsty when they had to look after the horses before they could look after themselves. But he loved every mile of it.

It had been easy until Tal-Sorn —they’d even slept in a proper bed at the toll-house there— but after that there was a long stretch of open country with only a few farms. Most farms could supply food, and some let them sleep in the shed or in the haystack, but it happened often enough that they were too far from anywhere and had to make camp in a copse or any other sheltered place. Valain learnt to make a fire, to pry stones out of horses’ hooves, to tell which berries were edible. His fair skin burned, peeled, burned again without ever tanning like Ruyin’s.

Now they were almost in sight of Lenay, setting up their camp in a stand of oaks on the high shore of the Valda because they didn’t want to risk the gate closing on them. The river ran far below in a crevice that Ruyin said it had worn out of the rocks over the centuries. Valain could hardly believe that a river could wear down rock— it was water after all, all soft!

“You run down to get water,” Ruyin said. “There’s a path, see? Don’t go in your bare feet, it’s all thorns. I’ll take care of the fire.”

He didn’t run; if he had, he’d probably have fallen into the Valda. Not only thorns, but slippery bits especially towards the bottom where the water had sprayed the grass and plants growing over the path. He found a place where he could easily dip the bucket, drank his fill of water and let it wash over his hands. Yes, there’s strength in that. He remembered Vauri telling him in a lesson that he could get power from water, that that was his particular strength. How? The water pushed at him. He tried to hold it back and it flowed around. That’s what water does, came a sudden clear thought that he didn’t quite understand yet.

He filled his bucket and started up the path carefully. No use having to go back because of slipping and spilling everything. Something startled him— a bird? No, a voice in his head, his father’s voice. Valain. I need you. There were other voices too, but they weren’t in his head, they were on the bank. He climbed faster, still holding on to his bucket with determination.

Stay out of sight, Ruyin’s mind-voice admonished. Valain hid behind a bush and saw two men advancing on his father, knives in hands. Ruyin’s sword and his own were with the horses, on the other side. Could he get around without anyone seeing him? Perhaps he’d better create a diversion so they’d have time to get their swords, or mount and flee. He tried to reach Ruyin but Ruyin was too busy holding the two men off.

The horses were grazing some way behind the fighting men, uncaring. Could he get them to pay attention? Horses had strange minds, and he’d never been able to get around one to make it do
something, but he might be able to spook them. He sent out a tendril of thought and found nothing but muddled incomprehension.

Call for help? It would be too late; even the calling itself would make him too late to do anything. He edged around the bush, careful not to make a noise. *Father said stay out of sight. I can do that.* He was confident that he could: they’d practised a lot on the way. He let an invisible cloak of force fall around him, hiding in it. Closer, still closer to the men fighting Ruyin, the bucket clutched in his hands. When he created the diversion he wouldn’t be able to hide any more.

This was the moment. He threw the water over the nearest man who, drenched and startled, wheeled round and turned out to be a woman in hose and a short leather jacket. Valain stepped back—thorns scratched his skin through his clothes, but that couldn’t be helped—trying to get away. There was no way to go, not even through the thorn bush: he’d fall into the river.

*Anshen, help me!* And he had power, power like water, and he hurled it at the woman in a great flood. She crumpled and fell at his feet. The other one was distracted for a moment and Valain could see from the corner of his eye that Ruyin managed to trip him; the man fell heavily, and there was a cracking sound as his head hit a rock.

Ruyin wasn’t looking well. In fact he was looking horrible. Valain rushed to his side and was just too late to keep him from falling. “Did he hit you? I’ll try to get help.”

“Too late for me,” Ruyin said. “Got me just before I got him.”

He didn’t look very badly wounded, but when Valain tried to lift him he moaned and his shirt soaked through with blood. “Got me in the side.”

Valain peeled the shirt away. The wound wasn’t large, but very deep. He put his hand on it and felt his power flow. Now for a way to fix it—trying too hard would kill Ruyin as surely as not trying at all. There... he cursed himself that he didn’t know how to do it, he hadn’t learned that yet. But he knew how a whole, healthy body looked from the inside, and he could at least try to make it so.

“Valain,” Ruyin said barely audibly. “Behind you.”

The woman was stirring. She had almost reached her knife. In an instant Valain was on top of her, trying to pin her to the ground with his slight weight. The anger was gone; he couldn’t summon power as quickly as he’d done before. She was about to throw him off when he got hold of it and knocked her out again. He got the rope from the saddle-bag to tie her up, and for good measure started to tie up the man as well.

*Valain,* came Ruyin’s weak thought. He was back at his father’s side at once. Ruyin’s face was ashen and his mind was clouded. *You’ll make a good king.*

“What?” But Ruyin was too far away now to say anything more. It still took him some time to die. Valain didn’t know how long, it seemed like hours, but finally he shivered from the cold swish of Naigha’s mantle as she came to take Ruyin’s spirit from his body.

Valain sat beside Ruyin’s body for a while, trying to decide what to do. They were very close to the road: someone would pass. But on the other hand, they had seen very few travellers the past few days. He should probably go to Lenay to get help, but he couldn’t leave his dead father, and what about the other two? The woman was bound and the man was either dead or so unconscious that it made no difference. He didn’t think he’d be strong enough to lift them all three on the horses; anyway, he wasn’t tall enough.

*Oh!* Vauri hadn’t taught him for nothing. He might be able to reach to Lenay with his mind. He only had to be careful that he didn’t speak to the wrong people. Ruyin had warned him that Lenay was full of the Guild of the Nameless and he didn’t want to speak to *those.* He reached out and looked for familiar patterns.

One jumped out at him immediately. *Vauri?*
Vauri

Just out of sight of the north gate of Lenay, Vauri stopped to collect herself. The first impression would count most. If the Guild of Anshen in Lenay saw her as the uppity young grand master from Valdis come to tell them what to do, her whole mission would be useless. On the other hand she shouldn’t appear weak or indecisive.

She cast around for someone to announce herself to. Orin hadn’t known who was head of the Guild in Lenay, only that the previous one had been killed in a fight. The first thing that struck her was a voice she knew very well, but subtly different—

Valain! You’re a journeyman! What happened?

His tone was desperate. Father was killed. Please come and help me!

He was quite close. Vauri got a fleeting impression of the place: she’d passed it earlier, noting that it was a much better camp-site than the one she’d camped at herself. Strange to think that they’d been hard on her heels. They must have been hiding themselves very well or she’d have spotted them in her nightly scouting sweeps. On the other hand, they hadn’t spotted her either. Obviously her protection was effective as well.

She turned her horse around and went to Valain’s aid.

Ruyin had been killed? Who had killed Ruyin? It had to have been a fight, not an accident, or it wouldn’t have made Valain a journeyman. That felt so fresh that it was unlikely to have been longer than a few hours ago.

She reached him when it was almost completely dark. He was keeping watch beside Ruyin’s body, wrapped in a cloak so much too large for him that it must be Ruyin’s. Two other dark shapes lay a short way off, one alive and one dead: obviously the attackers. The living one was bound hand and foot and tied up with some kind of protection. Look at that later; Valain first.

Vauri sat down next to him, not touching him yet, waiting for him to notice her. When he did, his face wavered between bravery and despair, then he broke out crying. She held him against her until he was quiet.

“I couldn’t do anything,” he sobbed. “He was wounded, and I was trying to fix him, and then she started to wake up and I had to go and tie her up and Father died while I was doing that. Well, he didn’t quite die yet, but he went so far away I couldn’t reach him.”

“Suppose you hadn’t tied her up? You’d both have died.”

He nodded. “I know. But still. I ought to have done something.”

“Suppose you hadn’t tied her up? You’d both have died.”

He nodded. “I know. But still. I ought to have done something.”

“You did a lot of things,” Vauri said. “That’s a good seal on the rope.”

“I didn’t know how to do it because she wasn’t inside something, but I couldn’t let her loose because she’d have fought me with her mind. So I put it on the rope. As if it was a door.”

“Clever.”

He shrugged. “As long as it works.” He was almost his own self again.

Vauri stood up and helped Valain up too. “Shall we go to Lenay, to the Temple?”

“That’s a long way, isn’t it?”

“Most of the night on foot, I think. Can you do that?”

“Yes!” He looked relieved more than anything. “Much better than staying here.”

Vauri let Valain go ahead, leading his own horse with the unconscious captive lying across it. She realised belatedly that he probably hadn’t eaten since mid-day— neither had she. Well, the horses
would get tired and they’d have to stop, even if the people could push themselves onwards.

As they stood waiting for the gate to open their captive started squirming. “I think she’s trying to say something,” Valain said. “Shall I let her loose a bit? Only you’ll have to take care that nothing happens, I don’t think I can any more.”

He was indeed swaying on his feet. Vauri nodded and took out her dagger.

“If we go in like this we’ll all hang,” the woman said as soon as she could. “They’ll give us to the baron. You have to let me walk on my own feet, and say that the men fought and killed each other and we’re taking them to the Temple of Naigha together.”

Vauri didn’t really trust it. Why couldn’t they have fought a couple of crooks, killed one and captured the other? But this was Lenay, and she’d been warned. “What do you want for that?”

“You lives for mine,” the woman said. “I get you through, you let me go.”

“Only if you’ll tell us everything,” Valain said.

“Not quite everything,” Vauri conceded. “But who is behind this and why, yes. Otherwise we’ll take you to Valdis and turn you in to the Order of the Sworn. And we want your oath that we can leave Lenay without harm. Not from you, not from anyone you send after us.”

The woman nodded cautiously. “I swear.” Valain took the rest of his protection off her, then untied the ropes. Vauri helped her to the ground. The sun rose a little higher. The gate opened.

“I’m Aine,” the woman volunteered.

“Vauri.”

“Valain.”

“He is — was, I should say — Radan. My brother.”

“That’s my father, Ruyin. But you probably know that.”

They went through the gate, Valain and Vauri camouflaged in order not to show that they were in the Guild of Anshen or even gifted. The guard was in the Guild of the Nameless, as Vauri had expected, and he looked suspiciously at the two dead bodies.

“That one,” Valain said, “fought with my father and stabbed him in the side, but Father tripped him and he hit his head on a stone and died.”

Well done, Vauri thought to him.

“Know where the Temple is? Follow the river here, turn right at the bridge, can’t miss it. Oh, and commiserations on losing your father.”

Valain hung his head unhappily. “Thank you.”

The priestesses, too, wanted to know what happened. “How did he die?” the one who let them in asked.

“He was killed in a fight,” Valain said. “With a knife. Why do you want to know?”

“It makes a difference in the prayers.”

“I never knew that.”

“His name? Age?”

“Ardeyth Ruyin. Forty-one, I think.”

“Any other family?”

“Yes, my mother and brother and sister in Valdis.”

“Do they know — no, of course not. Shall we send someone to notify them, or will you?”
“I’ll take care of it,” Vauri said. She didn’t want the Temple in Lenay to know exactly who Ruyin and Valain’s family were; not yet, anyway.

-*- Valain couldn’t go with Valain to his father’s funeral, or with Aine to her brother’s. Instead, she found an inn, got a room and stabled the horses.

As she was waiting for Aine and Valain in the Temple forecourt, a young priestess came and sat beside her. “Are you the one the Order of the Sworn sent from Valdis? The commander was going to, wasn’t he?”

A priestess of Naigha in the Guild of Anshen? Vauri looked closer, and saw that she was gifted but not in one Guild or the other; trained, though, and clearly on the side of good. “I didn’t hide myself well enough, I assume.”

The priestess laughed. “I can see a lot of things that others can’t. Comes with the job. Anyway, the head of the Guild of Anshen asked me to keep an eye open.”

“You’re right, though,” Vauri said. “Orin sent me. But I didn’t expect anything like this to happen on the way.”

“I didn’t think you did. Who’s the boy?”

“Do you have to tell everything we’re saying to your high priestess?”

“Goodness, no. I was just wondering. There’s something about him— well, there might be a grand master in him, to tell the truth.”

“He’s my apprentice. I don’t think it’s wise to tell anyone who he is, but we know what he is all right.”

The priestess whistled between her teeth. “Does the Guild of Archan know it too?”

“I sincerely hope not.”

“What about the other man’s sister? She’s in the Guild of Archan, right?”

“I don’t know what she knows yet. She’s promised to tell us when she comes back.” And Vauri found herself telling the whole story, starting with Valain’s revelation in the temple when he was eight, as if the priestess had been her friend as long as Ferin or Serla. Gods, she must be feeling the effects of her lack of sleep. It was a good thing that Orin wasn’t here.

The priestess nodded thoughtfully when Vauri was done. “If we— if I can do anything, send me a message. My name is Jinla.”

“I’m Vauri. I’ll probably be in town for a couple of days, at the Black Swan. Oh— who is the head of the Guild of Anshen here? That would save me a lot of searching.”

“Meran, he’s a swordsmith. You’ll find him across the bridge, on the east bank.”

“Thanks.” They sat in silence for a while, side by side, until both funeral parties came back.

-*- Valain came to his senses in the arms of a priestess of Naigha. “Am I dead?” he asked.

“You only fainted,” the priestess said. “In the vault.”

“I don’t remember anything.”

“You will, in time.”
"You can put me down now."
She didn’t. “How long since you’ve had any sleep, or anything to eat?”

"Forever." He thought for a moment. “We did eat when the horses had to rest. You can really put me down. I can walk on my own feet."

“I’m used to carrying bodies,” the priestess said. “Living bodies are easier. And you’re not very heavy.”

He arrived at the Temple still in the arms of the priestess, who sat him at a table and gave him a bowl of soup and a piece of bread. He was halfway through the food when he noticed Vauri next to him.

“I’ve got a bed for you at the inn,” she said.

“I could drop right here.”

“Then I’d have to carry you, and I’m not as good at that as priestesses are. Besides, I want to fall into bed myself.”

“Fall into our guest beds,” said the priestess who came to collect the plates.

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Valain had disturbing dreams, mostly about his father but also about his brother coming at him with a knife.

“Why are you doing that?” he asked.

“Because I want to be king,” the dream-Meruvin said.

“But you’re the king already, aren’t you?” Valain said, and woke up in a cold sweat. He sat up and took in the unfamiliar bare room: whitewashed walls, two narrow beds, a chest, a table that Vauri was sitting at writing something.

“I dreamt that Meruvin was the king,” Valain said. “And he was going to kill me with a knife.”

“Your mother is the queen,” Vauri said firmly, “and I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you if I can help it. Nightmares are just that.” She sanded her writing. “This is a letter to your mother. Do you want to write a couple of words?”

Valain took the pen, but couldn’t think of anything to write. At last he wrote: “I’m safe. Vauri is taking care of me.”

It turned out to be early morning. “Have I slept a day and a night?” Valain asked, confused.

“Half a day,” Vauri said. “You didn’t go to bed until mid-day.”

In the refectory of the Temple the priestesses were finishing breakfast. Aine was sitting at a table, eating porridge. A priestess passed Valain and Vauri and said, “I’ve kept her back for you.”

“I’d have trusted her to keep herself back, but thanks anyway,” Vauri said.

They sat down with Aine to eat. When they’d all finished the refectory was empty except for the three of them.

“Will you do what you promised now?” Valain asked Aine.

“What do you want to know?” she asked. “And what authority do you have to ask?”

“It’s my father you killed,” Valain said.

“Radan killed him.”

“That doesn’t matter, you were both in it. Why did you attack him?”

“Hinla paid us for it.”
“Who is this Hinla?” Vauri asked.

“Hinla back home. The head of the Guild in the village.”

“And which village would that be?”

“Valdie Erday,” Aine said reluctantly. “I don’t suppose I can go back there. Ever.”

“How much did you get?” Valain asked.

“Fifteen riders up front and we were going to get twenty-five more afterwards.”

“Fifteen is probably enough to go somewhere and start something,” Vauri said. “I suppose you’ve got Radan’s share as well now.”

“The priestesses gave me all his things, yes.”

“Then go to Veray—I seem to remember that your Guild is on top there—and set up as a shopkeeper or whatever you’re good at. Hinla need never know.”

Aine nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, you might have a point. Don’t they make wine in Veray, too? I know something about that.”

“Why did Hinla tell you to attack Ruyin, though?” Vauri asked. “Did she give any reason, or was it just work for hire?”

“Kill the father, bring in the son, she said.” Aine turned to Valain. “Don’t ever go near Erday if you can help it.”

Valain didn’t think he’d have reason to go to Erday soon; for all he knew it was south of Lenay.

“What would they want me for? For ransom?” he asked. “I’m not worth all that much. It’s not as if I’m the—”

Vauri put a finger to her lips.

“I don’t know what for,” Aine said.

Valain looked searchingly at her. “I believe you,” he said.

-**-

“Do you trust her?” Vauri asked Valain when Aine had gone.

“I think so.”

“How do you know? Doesn’t it seem likely that she’ll betray us after all?”

Valain knew that she was testing him. He thought carefully before he said anything. “She’s afraid of her own Guild. She’s not going home to that Hinla. And she promised not to harm us.”

“She still could, you know. She might break her word to get back into her Guild’s good graces.”

Valain felt himself blush. “But I could see it.” He thought some more. “And if she’d been going to do it she’d have done it already, she wouldn’t have been sitting here eating porridge with us and telling us everything.”

“I think you’re right,” Vauri said. “But that doesn’t mean we don’t have to be on our guard.”

“Father said Lenay was dangerous,” Valain said, and suddenly everything came back to him, and he started to cry again and couldn’t stop crying for a long time.
Chapter 3

Vauri

Vauri held Valain until he managed to pull himself together. She realised, perhaps for the first time on this trip, that he was really only eleven years old. And he’d just lost his father. Vauri herself had never really known hers: Sedi had raised her almost from infancy, until she lost her at twelve. Valain’s grief hit her right in the stomach.

“Let’s see if you can wash your face somewhere,” she said when he had stopped crying. Come to think of it, she wanted a wash herself. That done, they set out to see the swordsmith Meran.

The east bank was definitely not a good part of town. All the small businesses that made noise, or a mess, or stank, seemed to be concentrated there. They picked their way around heaps of rubbish and through vile-smelling mud, asking for Meran at every corner. He must be hiding himself very well, because Vauri couldn’t see him with her mind. Eventually they found him in a dead-end alley, hammering away at a half-made sword blade in his forge in front of his house.

He looked up from his work. “One moment, please.” A few more strokes, then he put the iron back into the fire. “I’ve been expecting you. Though not both of you together.”

They introduced themselves. “Have you heard about Ruyin?” Vauri asked.

“Yes, Jinla told me.” He pulled Valain close. The boy tensed for a moment and then relaxed. “Young for a journeyman, aren’t you?”

“I couldn’t help it,” Valain said with a shrug. “I called to Anshen to give me the power and he did.”

“Because you needed it, I expect. Rava!” A broad young woman in a leather apron came out of the house. “Watch that”—pointing to the iron in the fire—“and see that it doesn’t overheat. Come to think of it, you can finish drawing it out, good practice for you. I’m away on Guild business for an hour or so.”

Inside the house it was surprisingly cool. Meran lit a candle—the windows were too small to let in much light—and made a gesture as if to seal the door. “You do it, Vauri,” he said, “your seals are probably stronger.”

“Do they watch your house a lot?” Vauri said as she made her seal.

“I don’t think so. They think I’m not a threat because I live here.”

“But that’s stupid!” Valain said. “Don’t they know what you are? Who are ‘they’, anyway, the Guild of the Nameless?”

“Yes. They probably know you’re here now too. Perhaps not in my house, but in town.”

“But Aine wasn’t going to say anything! Do you mean she broke her word?”

“If you light a lamp in the night, will people not see it? You’re shining like a beacon, boy.”

Valain hastily threw some protection about himself, blushing. Meran laughed. “You don’t have to hide from me, you know.”

“I should have known to hide.”

“I think you forgot it when you took your trial so suddenly. And afterwards both of you were too tired to pay attention to it. Now, Vauri, this is not a social visit, I suppose?”

“Orin sent me,” she said. “He wanted to know whether it would be possible to set up an Order house in Lenay. Though from what I’ve seen I’d think it wouldn’t. Well, perhaps possible, but not wise.” And, privately, I think he really sent me to keep an eye on Valain.
I think you’re right. Meran’s thought was distracted, as if he was paying attention to at least three things at once. “Very difficult at least,” he said. “It would be like being under siege.”

“Yes,” Vauri said. “If we had a small group here to clear the way—but I think Orin would want to send me, and I’m afraid I can’t be spared in Valdis at the moment.”

“What’s up?” Meran asked.

It was an embarrassing moment. This wasn’t the time to find out whether Meran actually knew who Ruyin had been. And, by extension, who Valain was. “Some people there might be after Valain when they find out how gifted he is. He’s my apprentice, I’m responsible for him, especially now that he doesn’t have his father any more. —What did Ruyin tell you?”

“Only that he was coming, and that he had something to discuss. I don’t know what, it may have been the Order plan, but I don’t see why Orin should send him and you separately for the same thing and not let either of you know. And he wanted to introduce his son to me.”

They were silent for a while, Meran studying Valain as he sat shuffling his feet with embarrassment.

“I’ll take Valain back to Valdis,” Vauri said at last. “And tell Orin that the time isn’t right.”

“I’ll try to clear the ground a little for you,” Meran said. “Have you talked to Jinla?”

“She talked to me, rather,” Vauri said with a laugh.

“You can safely tell her everything. She’s one of us.”

“I know. —I did, already.” Meran needn’t know that ‘everything’ was more than Vauri had told him.

“Yes, she does that to people. I’ll ask her to speak to the rest of the Guild—confound it, I wish priestesses of Naigha could be in the Guild, she’d be worth her weight in gold.”

A thought suddenly occurred to Vauri. “If I want to get a message to you without half the town knowing, can I send it through the Temple of Naigha?”

“If it’s not urgent, sure. They don’t travel much.”

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Valain

On the way back to Valdis, Valain noticed that everything was different. Whether it was because he was a journeyman now, or didn’t have a father any more, or was travelling with Vauri instead, he didn’t know; but it was as if the colours had changed, the smells, the feel of the wind on his face. And his body seemed to have got used to riding, which was a good thing. Perhaps the only good thing.

They travelled fast, also unlike the way from Valdis to Lenay. Valain wondered whether Vauri’s letter was on its way ahead of them, and which would be worse: having to tell the news to his mother himself, or coming home to a house in mourning.

“Will you come with me to speak to Mother?” he asked Vauri when they saw Valdis on the horizon.

“Of course. I can speak to your mother without you, if you’d prefer.”

“I think I should at least be there. I’d look silly if I wasn’t.” He wouldn’t want to face his mother—and all her court!—alone, but standing in the hallway while Vauri brought the bad news would be worse. Much worse. Even without considering his brother’s abuse afterwards. “I’ll tell her myself. But stay with me, please.”

The palace was strange. It smelt strange. Something prickled his skin. The very stones were
watching him. The air was thick with silence, as if the whole house was waiting.

Queen Mialle was in her writing room. Fortunately not in the audience chamber, or at high table. Valain suddenly felt like a child again. He hadn’t felt like a child since his father’s death. He’d been grown up for sixteen days.

“Mother,” he said. Vauri was right behind him. The queen looked up from her papers and turned to him.

“Valain! You’re back soon. Where’s your father?”

So they’d overtaken the letter. He took a deep breath. Don’t blubber, he told himself. There was a hard knot of pain in the pit of his stomach.

“We were set upon by robbers,” he said. “They killed him.”

Mialle’s left hand clenched on her pen and it snapped in two. She stretched out her other hand and gathered Valain to her. Everybody wants to hold me, he thought, but he didn’t mind when it was his mother. He could feel her heart beating fast under his ear.

“Were you there?” she asked. He nodded. It was a pity that she wasn’t gifted and he couldn’t show her.

“Thank the gods that you’re still alive.”

He almost started crying again, but now he had to be strong while his mother cried. Vauri stood at the door as if she was standing guard. She probably was.

Later, he told the whole story. He told it to his mother, to Orin because it was a Guild matter, to Serla because it had to be written in the history books. He told it to Meruvin who wouldn’t believe that it had happened the way Valain told it— surely an eleven-year-old boy couldn’t have captured a grown woman all by himself? He told it to his mother again, this time with his sister present who listened silently, in the priestess way, so she could tell it in the Temple.

He told it to himself, alone in his bed at night, to make sure that he still knew exactly what had happened, not only as a story he had made up because that was easier in the telling.

Orin alone had asked him to show it. Not even Serla, who was in the Guild too; she’d wanted it in words because that was more convenient to put in a history book.

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Midsummer almost caught Valain unawares. He’d been looking forward to coming home from Lenay for it, at Ruyin’s side, and going to the Feast with him— secretly hoping that he’d be a journeyman by then so he could go to the Guild meeting as well. And here he was, a journeyman, entitled, no, expected to go to the Guild meeting, without Ruyin to take him there.

Orin sent him an official invitation. When he showed it to his mother she offered the Guild the great hall of the palace for the Feast. “It would be a fitting memorial for Ruyin,” she said. “You can write that to Master Orin. No, go to Master Orin and tell him, I’ll write him a note.”

He had an appointment at the Order house anyway: a fencing lesson with Vauri. Even fencing felt different now that he was a journeyman, as if he had to learn new reflexes.

The bout didn’t go well. His arms and legs wouldn’t obey him.

“Stop!” Vauri called. “Stand there and find yourself.”

He laid his sword on the ground and stood on the flat soles of both his feet, trying to feel the flow of power. It was the first time that he’d done that, he realised, since he had become so different. True, Orin had looked him over, but it wasn’t as if he’d thought of looking himself over.

There seemed to be more of him. That figured, of course, and he’d used it before so he could be
sure it was truly his. Feet, ankles—he absently eased a pull in a calf muscle—knees, thighs. Buttocks pulled in. He stood straighter, positioning his hips not for fencing but for standing tall. Waist, ribs, shoulders. Arms. They should hang loosely from his shoulders, not stand out strained. Neck straight, head held high. His spirit flowing through and around him like water. Should he stretch himself? No, Vauri had only told him to find himself. Well, here he was. He longed for rain to fall on him as he stood there, but there was only the relentless almost-Midsummer sun.

“That’s very good,” Vauri said. “You look years older,” said Orin, who came from the main house just at that moment.

Valain grinned. “Thank you.” He fished inside his shirt for the paper with the royal seal. “Mother sent you this.”

Orin read it, lifting first one eyebrow and then the other. “That’s very generous of Her Majesty.”

“I don’t know what she writes. I just know you can use the great hall for the Feast.”

“Say we—you’ll be there this year. And not only the great hall, but as much candlelight and fire as we need and the work of a dozen palace servants. We have to bring our own food, but we won’t have to cook and serve it. She says she wants it to be a memorial for Ruyin.”

“Yes, that’s what she said to me, but I didn’t know about the candles and the servants.”

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Valain had been in the great hall of the palace almost every day of his life, but now, with more than a hundred people from the Guild of Anshen in it, he saw it with fresh eyes. He was glad that Orin had made it clear that they were the queen’s guests; otherwise Valain would have felt that they were his guests and that he was obliged to do something to make them welcome. Now he could just keep close to Vauri and try to avoid feeling uneasy.

It would have been different to go to a Guild meeting in the Order house, or anywhere at all except his house. And in someone else’s house he could have offered to help, but here there were servants—his servants. Well, his mother’s servants, but it came to the same thing.

It was a relief when Orin called for silence and asked the servants who weren’t in the Guild to leave the room. The air was full of currents of power. Valain was so occupied with trying to see how exactly they flowed that he didn’t hear a word Orin was saying until his own name was called.

“Valain, the invocation, please.”

Yes, of course, he was the youngest journeyman. He came to himself with a shock and started, “Great god Timoine...” He’d never done it in the great hall before, but as he chanted he became aware that it wasn’t the first time that it had been done here. There was power in the very walls that responded to him. The other invocations washed over him while he concentrated on that power, called to it, tried to figure out what it was and where it came from. In his own house, and he’d never noticed!

The invocations done, the room sealed—by Vauri, to Valain’s surprise, he’d expected Orin to do it himself—they settled down to Guild business. Ruyin’s death was still news to many people. Everybody wanted to touch Valain, to comfort him, to look at his new status as a journeyman. He steeled himself: he was a prince. It wouldn’t do for him not to be able to cope with people’s attention. But that didn’t mean he had to like it.

At the end of the formal meeting Vauri lifted the seal and they started celebrating. That was much better, especially as it allowed Valain to grab something to eat and drink and sit quietly in a corner with it.

He could shut out the crowd now, but still use the power that came from such a large gathering of
the Guild. This was his opportunity. When the hall was in use by the court again he wouldn’t get a
chance like this. Yes, it was in the walls: the walls had been built containing power, the way they
contained stones and mortar. If he wanted to know exactly, he’d have to find a builder in the Guild;
there was bound to be one. He’d ask Orin later. Orin knew everybody.

He extended his mind further, to span the whole of the room. Someone had brought his mother in
to join in the feasting. A good thing, she would like that. He’d have to go and talk to her, but not at
once. And there, in the minstrels’ gallery— Meruvin! Who had invited him? Surely Orin or Vauri
wouldn’t have, and he hadn’t done it himself, and if his mother had brought him she’d have had him
at her side, not sent him upstairs to look down from the gallery.

No, it was likely that he was spying. But what was there to spy on? It wasn’t as if they were doing
special Guild things any more. They were eating and drinking and talking and dancing, just as anyone
would when they celebrated Midsummer.

*Don’t fret,* Vauri’s mind-voice said. *I know what you’re worried about, but he can’t do anything,
he isn’t even gifted.*

That was true: he wasn’t. And he didn’t have anybody with him either, not even his sweetheart
who Valain suspected was in the other Guild. He was probably only peeved that nobody had thought
of inviting him.

*He’s prying,* he said to Vauri. *I don’t like it.*

*Nothing to be done about that now. There’s not much for him to see anyway.*

It was reassuring that Vauri thought the same thing as himself. But with Meruvin there he was too
self-conscious to investigate the power in the walls. He’d talk it over with Vauri when he got the
chance. He went into the crowd and asked his mother to dance.

**Chapter 4**

**Vauri**

“Meruvin is getting married, did you know that?”

“I was expecting it,” Orin said. “A Midsummer wedding?”

“Yes.” Valain’s face fell. “This time it’s him who gets to use our great hall.”

“It’s not a meeting of the other Guild, is it?” Vauri asked. “Just the wedding.”

“Mother would never approve that. She’s let us use the hall three years running in memory of
Father, she wouldn’t let Father’s enemies have a Guild meeting there.”

“Ah, but how much does she know?” Orin asked.

“If she doesn’t know the difference between the Guilds she hasn’t been listening to me!” Valain
said hotly. He stood up and shouldered his bag. “Ought to go. I haven’t been home for too long.”

“If my conscience wasn’t in the way I’d ask him to come and join the Order,” Orin said when the
prince had gone. “I’ve never seen a journeyman so well suited. Well, you, perhaps.”

“He’s better than I ever was,” said Vauri. “I hope he decides soon. He’d make an excellent
commander for Valdis, and then I could go to Lenay.”

“How long until he’s a master, do you think?”

“I can’t say. It could be quick and sudden if something pulls him in, like his journeyman’s trial.
On the other hand he’s very young and it could be years.”
“Pity that he doesn’t have any more siblings,” Orin said. “If anything happens to his brother... The cousins are much too distant to be any use.”

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Valain

Valain crept along the gallery, noting in passing that if he couldn’t see into the main hall nobody in the main hall would be able to see him. At the moment, there was nobody in the hall to see him anyway. He followed the currents of power that he could feel and almost see— that he could see when he put his mind to it. He’d gone up to investigate after his first Guild meeting three years ago, though it had been much harder on his own without all the other minds concentrated on the power of Anshen. Then he’d been so busy with other things that he’d almost forgotten his search, but now he’d suddenly thought of it and nobody happened to be watching him, as good a time as any.

There: an impression in the stone banister, worn by time, scrubbing, people’s hands touching it, but still recognisable. It was a source of power the way a lamp was a source of light. A round medallion with the old Velain device: three ears of corn tied together with a fourth. Serla had shown him a potsherd with the design stamped on it, older than he could imagine, older than any writing even Serla had ever seen, but even then there had been a Velain family. They hadn’t adopted the crown until a Velain became the first king. Obviously, someone had cared enough about the old device to decorate the banisters with it when the House Velain was already the royal house.

There was a Velain-device medallion every few yards on the banister, but most were only pictures and didn’t carry power. Five did, evenly spaced along the walkways on either side and the minstrels’ gallery. They didn’t seem to be different from each other. Clever of the old Velains to have their seals ready to set up in the great hall – the medallions did feel like the fixed points of a seal. There hadn’t been a gifted king for a hundred years or more, or it would have been in the history books, but the great hall was the oldest part of the palace, it had probably been the palace all by itself when it was first built.

People were coming into the hall: his brother with some of his attendants and the steward, talking about tables and seating arrangements.

Valain hesitated for a moment. He didn’t want to eavesdrop even on his brother. The talk was all about bringing in more trestles, and whether they needed an extra table to put the food on, and how many chairs and how many benches: not even about who was to sit where in order not to offend anyone. If it came to that, Valain would be even more uncomfortable overhearing it.

He used the minstrel-gallery door, which he could count on to open and close soundlessly. Turning to the stairs, he started as he almost bumped into someone. She was about his age, gifted, no taller than he was, with hair even redder than his own that flowed loose to her waist and beyond.

Valain put a finger to his lips. The girl nodded. He was completely sure that she’d come up here for the same purpose that he had: to study the currents of power. She didn’t look like the enemy, though she was not clearly of Anshen. Not at all of the Nameless, though. Would someone send a fourteen-year-old girl as a spy? No, he rather thought she was like him: intrigued, without any malicious purpose.

He built a soundproof seal around the two of them, carefully, like Vauri had taught him. “We can talk now,” he said. And then, of course, he didn’t know what to say.

Obviously she didn’t know what to say either. They sat down on the floor and stared at each other for a while.

“You live here, don’t you?” she asked at last.
“Yes.”

“So you know about the stuff in the walls?” A clear mind-image came with it: the power itself, not
the medallions. She could hardly have seen them yet: from the great hall they were too high up to see
clearly.

He nodded. “For a couple of years now. That I’ve known, not that it’s there. As far as I know it’s
as old as the palace.”

“Hundreds of years, right?”

“Right.”

They were silent some more. “Look,” he said, “it’s too busy down there now, shall we go and
investigate when they’re not lugging tables? Like, after the wedding? I’d like to avoid my – to avoid
being seen up there.”

“All right.”

He took her to the kitchen to share a jug of ale. They sat at the scrubbed table while cooks and
servants milled about and ignored them.

“Call me Lédú,” she said. “I have a lot more names but nobody here can pronounce them
anyway.”

“Where are you from, then?”

“Vélihas. Mother sent us to the wedding. Father and my sisters and me.”

Valain tried to remember the invitations list he’d seen. “You’re one of the princesses! Your mother
didn’t come, did she?”

“No, she’s back home looking after things. It was supposed to be only Father going, but Mother
thought us girls had better go along to catch husbands.”

“Don’t you have any young men where you come from?”

“We need new blood, she says.” She really had an infectious laugh. And it was easy to talk to her.
He’d have to be careful with what he said until he was really sure of her.

“You’re the groom’s brother, aren’t you?” she asked. “The younger prince. Let me think—
Vegelin.”

“Valain, please,” he said, blushing. “But yes, you’re right.”

“I knew it must be you because there’s nobody else here one bit gifted.”

“Ferin? Serla? Liase, come to think of it?”

“Not like you. Or me, for that matter.” She looked decidedly smug. “And if that Liase you’re
talking about is the bride I’m glad it’s not you marrying her. She’s a creep.”

That was a relief. She definitely wasn’t on the wrong side. “Have you met Vauri? No, you
wouldn’t have, or you wouldn’t say there was nobody gifted here. Unless you mean at court, of
course.” He was rambling. He shouldn’t ramble when talking to someone as nice as Lédú. And he
still wasn’t sure that she wasn’t a spy.

“I’ve only looked around at court, I’m afraid,” she said with a laugh.

“Then you’ve seen nothing.”

“Well, it’s not that nobody is gifted. But most who are —I don’t know how to put it, your
language doesn’t have the words— it’s like bad handwriting. Everything is there but it’s the wrong
shape.”

“You should talk to Halla. She gets mad about bad handwriting. But she’s not gifted either. If she
was, she’d probably have a mind as ordered as her desk.”

“It’s not order,” Lédú said. “You don’t have an ordered mind. But it’s beautiful.” She showed him.
Patterns he’d never seen before but that he knew were his own, a heady clarity like the sun breaking through rain clouds in spring.

“Is that me?” He knew that it was. He wanted it to hear it from her, to hear it in her voice.

“It’s you. I like you for it.”

He got up from the table to hide his blush and tried to ask someone for bread and cheese, but it was as if nobody could see him. He was about to catch a kitchen maid by the sleeve when he saw something like a curtain fall down around him, something he’d never noticed when it was there. He shook his head, trying to dislodge the spider-webs that seemed to have stuck there; as if his ears opened after being water-clogged from swimming.

“You did that!” he said, scowling at Lédu, who was laughing. He couldn’t stay serious in the face of that, and he laughed too, sprawling over the table helplessly. “You made them not see us!”

They were seeing them now, of course, mightily confused because they suddenly realised that the prince and one of the guests were there, laughing their heads off, and wondering whether they’d been there all the time. Valain took Lédu’s hand and they fled from the kitchen, from the palace, into the streets of Valdis where the sun beat down on them. He suppressed an urge to apologise for the weather.

Where are we going?
To the Order house. I want you to meet Vauri.

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Vauri

Valain arrived at the Order house flushed and out of breath, accompanied by a young woman with fiercely red hair. Vauri handed them the jug of water a journeyman had just given her and, as an afterthought, the towel as well.

“Escaped?” she asked.

Valain nodded. “And I wanted you and Lédu to meet.”

Vauri tried very hard not to be too inquisitive. The name rang a bell: this must be one of the princesses from Velihas, the youngest as far as she knew. Clearly as gifted as Valain was, if not more — it was hard to see because the training was so different. She’d have to hold back— but on the other hand she was sure that Lédu was observing her. She had nothing against that, really. Let her learn other people’s ways. If she stayed longer than just the few days until the wedding, they might even have time to study and explore together.

In the end, it was Valain who talked: about the medallions in the banisters in the great hall of the palace. Lédu listened as attentively as Vauri. “I saw that!” she said. “I was looking for it when you came through that door.”

“We’ll get our chance yet,” Valain said. “When the hall isn’t full of— well, when my brother isn’t there. Or his bride.” That made Lédu giggle, and Valain caught her by the shoulder and laughed with her.

They made a beautiful couple, Vauri thought. If she’d had to choose a bride for her prince, she’d have picked this one.
Chapter 5

Lédu

In the few days between meeting Valain and his brother’s wedding, I didn’t get a chance to explore any more. Every time someone wanted me somewhere else, and anyway the palace was full of people doing preparations. They don’t actually get married in public here — it’s done in private, at a sanctuary of the Great Mother, by an old woman — but that doesn’t mean there’s no feasting and ceremony. Frankly, to me it looked more like I imagined a coronation than a wedding, though the queen was there at the head of the table.

There’s no king — no, I should say that there’s no consort: it’s not like with us, you don’t become queen by marrying the king or king by marrying the queen. Someone killed Valain’s father on a journey when Valain was eleven. He was there at the time. There’s still a big wound inside him because of it. I wish I was a healer so I could do something for him; I’ve seen some healers here, but none who could heal that, not even Laran at the Order of the Sworn.

They put me with Father and Kisif and Pái at one side of the high table, too far from Valain to do more than catch his eye. He was with his mother and brother and new sister-in-law, and I could have spoken mind to mind to him but I didn’t know how much the sister-in-law would catch of that. She made my skin crawl, especially the way she was sitting there as one of the family. Well, she was one of the family now, of course, married to the crown prince. Valain looked very pale. She was likely making his skin crawl as well, probably worse, because he was much closer to her than I was.

I tried to keep my mind off the princess by watching people and patterns, but that didn’t keep the uncomfortable feeling away. Kisif and Pái weren’t squirming as much as I was, but I could see they were uncomfortable too. Father’s face was impassive. I knew that look: he was trying to ignore being deaf and blind. Perhaps Kisif and Pái were, too.

It was a strange chaotic sort of meal: people kept coming up to the newly married couple to present themselves, or if they were very important they brought a servant or an apprentice to present them. I wondered how anybody managed to eat anything. If I ever marry someone who is important enough to need a presentation, I’ll insist on having the presentation separately, not at table.

At some time during the evening we finished eating and servants took the tables away, except for one where you could get something if you were still hungry or thirsty. There was music from the gallery and dancing — too crowded to dance, really, but if you wanted to dance people made room. Valain came and danced with me. I had to get the steps from him, of course, but he was clear enough. Only we were so busy getting the dancing right that we didn’t really talk until he took me off the dance floor, to the food table, still holding my hand.

The Mighty Servant fainted, he said.

Did you do it?

I think it’s the power in here. It gets the other Guild.

Vauri had told me a bit about the Guilds. Why didn’t it get your brother’s bride, then? Isn’t she in the other Guild?

She’s probably stronger. Or she knew it and shielded.

That made sense. I wished fervently that we could go somewhere out of the crowd and really talk. Valain must have heard that, because he said, We’ll be able to get away later. Then his brother called
him away and I hovered near the table doing some more people-watching. There was someone in the uniform of the Order of the Sworn, but she wasn’t Vauri: this was a much older woman, small and trim, her mind as neat as her body. She was talking sword-fighting with the man next to her.

Valain came back with a face that looked as if it could break into uncontrollable giggling any moment. “Meruvin thinks I’m doing it, too. He’s— requesting me to leave. Let’s go.” He said a few words to the uniformed woman, who nodded. “Vauri can put us up at the Order house. I’d rather not be in the palace when the storm breaks.”

On our way to the door we passed Kisif, cradling someone’s head in her lap. It was a young man in noble clothes who looked as bad as the Mighty Servant had. “Gods, it’s Lyan Eraday,” Valain said. The young man smiled apologetically at him.

“He fainted,” Kisif said, “just like that, while we were dancing. Probably too hot for him.”

*The power in the walls affects some people really badly,* I told her. *Take him away and he’ll be all right. A long way away.* He would definitely be all right, I thought, in the arms of Kisif.

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**Valain**

“What did he say?” Vauri asked.

“He said he’d noticed that I was making his guests faint, and please would I leave his wedding feast. So we did.”

“And now they’re dropping like flies, I suppose,” Lédu said, still giggling.

“I was trying to keep it down,” Valain said. “Only there were so many of the Guild of the Nameless, I couldn’t shield them all from it.”

“Do you think it’s a defence against them? Originally?” Vauri was becoming interested.

“You should have asked me to help,” Lédu said.

Valain felt a hot blush rise in his face. “Yes, I should have. Never thought of that.” He turned to Vauri. “I don’t know. Perhaps. It’s—I think it responds to people, to minds. Remember when we had the Guild meetings there? We all felt it in the air and nobody could tell what it was. We thought it was just us, all our minds together. If the Guild of Anshen built it, and it responds to a lot of gifted people in a Guild of Anshen way, I can imagine that people in the Guild of the Nameless are taken queer.”

“Hmm. Could those stone medallions be the defence?”

“Probably. Part of it, at least.”

“Poor apologetic nobleman,” Lédu said.

“Who? Oh, Lyan Eraday. At least your sister’s taking care of him now. She likes him, doesn’t she? Lyan is a good sort. I always feel that he’s in the Guild of the Nameless by mistake because he was born Eraday and not Hayan or Brun.”

“Well, what shall we do?” Vauri was glowing with barely hidden glee. “Let the palace do its job? Meruvin will be so annoyed. More to the point, Liase will be annoyed.”

“Mother will be annoyed,” Valain said. “Embarrassed, more likely. I think I’d better go back and explain.”

“Not in the middle of the night,” Vauri said, and Lédu, at the same time, “Not on your own.”

Vauri became very businesslike and bustled them to bed. “I’ll put you in with the journeymen. You in the bed you’ve had before, Valain, and Lédu on the other side with the women.”

Valain lay awake for a long time, listening to the breath of five sleeping young men and worrying
about his mother. How embarrassed would she be? Shouldn’t he have gone home after all? Was she
lying awake too, wondering what had caused some of the wedding guests to be taken ill? Or would
she have had someone in the Guild to tell her? Her old sword-master Aule, perhaps, the only person
from the Order who had been there; she’d probably have guessed at least part of it. He hoped
Meruvin hadn’t told the queen that it was his, Valain’s, doing: it would be very hard to disabuse her of
that.

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“Meruvin is convinced it was you who caused the trouble,” the queen said.

*Oh no, she does think I did it.*

“But four more people were taken ill after you and your young woman had left, so I don’t think it
could have been.”

“She’s not *my* young woman,” Valain protested weakly. *She’s her own young woman. Very much
so.*

“Never mind about that. Aule says it was a *semsin* effect, but she couldn’t say exactly what caused
it. Do you know more?”

Valain told her about the medallions, haltingly, trying to find words his mother would understand.
“Our ancestors must have been in the Guild of Anshen. And they built it as a defence. So when there
was a large gathering of the other Guild in the hall, the defences engaged and people started feeling
uncomfortable. I think it’s designed to chase them away, most of all.”

“It didn’t actually hurt anyone, that’s true. Everyone who left was perfectly all right within the
hour. Tell me, *could* you do it?”

“Cause the same effects? On my own? I don’t think so. I’ve never tried.” He could perhaps work
with the power in the walls if he put his mind to it, but he hadn’t tried that yet either.

“Meruvin was very assured about it,” she said. “I wasn’t surprised when he tried to blame you, I
know of his ill feelings against you. You haven’t done anything to anger him, have you?”

“I’m in the wrong Guild,” Valain said. “That’s all.” Now was the time. He took a deep breath.
“And I’m about to go into the Order of the Sworn.”

Mialle looked at him as if she saw him for the first time. “I... knew that,” she said slowly. “But
isn’t it a little early?”

“I’ve been a journeyman for years. I’ll be fifteen by the Feast of Mizran.”

“And what about the girl from Velihas?”

“I don’t have any intentions,” Valain said. “Lédu and I are friends. It’s not as if I have to secure
the succession.” *Anyway Liase is pregnant already.*

“The succession doesn’t seem to be a problem, I’m not worried about that. But have you told her
about your plans to join the Order of the Sworn and remain celibate?”

“Of course I have. She was there when I talked to Vauri this morning.” She had been a little
wistful, but she’d understood that it was what he must do.

“Are you in love with her?”

That made him blush. And stammer, he noticed to his embarrassment when he tried to answer. “I...
I think so.”

“And is she in love with you?”

“Yes. Probably. She understands, though.”

Mialle snorted. “She says she does. Send her to me.”
Lédu would never say something she didn’t mean. Valain knew her well enough by now to be sure of that. But she’d probably like his mother; he’d suggest it to her.

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It wasn’t even strange not to go home every night from the Order house. It wasn’t much different from all the times Valain had been there before. Then, as now, he had been a journeyman among journeymen, without any privilege except those that came from his own abilities. He fenced with people several years older, even some of the younger masters. Vauri gave him some of his *semsin* lessons privately, but he was in classes with his peers too and enjoyed it: here, unlike at home, he wasn’t the odd one out. And now he didn’t have to go back. It made him feel like a child again, carefree on a country ride. Doing things he liked without worrying about his obligations: such obligations as he had were clear and easy to fulfill. There wasn’t the constant guessing at other people’s wishes and hidden meanings.

There was only one thing niggling at his mind. Lédu. Whenever he thought of her he felt a pang of — he didn’t know what it was. Had he really left her for Anshen, or had he chosen a life without her that he enjoyed every bit of over a life with her full of responsibilities? Or was that the same thing?

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*Lédu*

Valain’s mother wanted to see me. I knew what she wanted to see me about. We hadn’t actually said anything to one another about it, but I was sure that Valain had come to love me as I had come to love him, in only a few days. And now he was going into the Order of the Sworn.

She asked me searching questions: what were my intentions? Didn’t I care that her son had resolved to remain celibate? Did I love him? Could I stand losing him like that? Did I think that he was doing it to escape from his responsibilities?

I had been right. She didn’t understand, as I did, that you can’t argue with the gods.

“And what will you do now?” she asked me.

“Stay here for a while,” I said. “Learn from Vauri. And I’d like to study your palace, if I may.”

“Study my palace?” A completely blank look. “What’s there to study?”

Did she think I wanted to learn to be a builder or something? “There’s a force built into the walls — the thing that made people ill at the wedding.”

“Oh, that!” Valain had told her; had she forgotten already? Or was she not interested, or merely thinking of other things? “Go ahead. If anybody bothers you, you can say that you have my permission. Will you need anything?”

“Your permission is enough, thank you.”

The queen’s face twitched. I couldn’t read her at all: if she’d been gifted it would have been much easier. When her smile finally broke through it reminded me of Valain’s mischievous grin.

She called for wine and seed-cakes and a plan of the palace. “Do you know how to use this?”

It wasn’t the style of map I was used to, but it was easy enough once the queen had pointed out where the audience room was where we were, and what markings meant stairs going up or down, and doors, and secret passages. For there were secret passages in the palace; perhaps meant not so much to be secret as for servants to get from one place to another out of sight. “Oh, thank you!” I said.

“May I keep it for a while?”

“Keep it as long as you like. It’s a copy. I had it made when I was a little younger than you.”
I could well imagine the young princess Mialle exploring every part of the palace she was going to be queen in. She hadn’t found any nodes of power, of course, because she didn’t have the gift; but she had marked one passage that clearly hadn’t been in the original.

“That’s a real secret passage,” she said. “But if you want to use it, warn me beforehand. It comes out in my bedroom.”

We laughed about that, and drank some more wine, and talked of Valain and of the court and of my parents’ court. “Mother would like you,” I said. “She couldn’t come, because someone has to stay behind, and it was Father’s turn to go.”

“I know your mother,” she said. “She came to my wedding.”

I hadn’t known that, but it made sense: that must have been Mother’s turn to be away.

I came away from the audience with the queen in a very different mood than I’d come in. She was a splendid woman. I could understand how Valain had become the way he was. I did wonder why it hadn’t taken with Meruvin. Meruvin and the queen weren’t gifted, after all, while Valain was, as was his sister who was a priestess of Neha. I’d seen her only once, not long enough to really understand her, but there seemed to be little wrong with her, allowing for the Valdyan strangeness. That made it even stranger that Meruvin was like that; was it only his wife, then? But Valain had told me some things about the time before Meruvin met her, and he hadn’t been much better then.

Chapter 6

Valain

“We’ll have your swearing-in on the Feast,” Vauri said to Valain.

“The Feast of Anshen?”

“Would you like to wait until Mizran, then?” Vauri’s eyes danced with glee. She was the youngest commander that the Order had ever had, and as far as Valain knew the merriest.

“But—”

“No buts. You’re more than ready. I’m surprised that you’re not a master yet. We’ve been expecting it for years. Waiting for us to make the move, I suppose.”

“Who, me or Anshen?”

“Either of you. I don’t mind.”

“It’s only three weeks!”

“As I said, you’re more than ready. I know that Orin would have wanted to wait until you were a master, but we seem to be stalled, so let’s force it.”

Valain bit his lip and nodded, not trusting himself to say anything.

“Don’t forget it’s your turn to patrol.”

He took his time saddling his horse, checking a strap here, a buckle there, talking to the grey gelding. “This is really forever. Once you’re sworn in there’s no going back, no getting out.” One more pull at the saddle-blanket. “You wouldn’t know, of course. You know only this. I wish I were you.” It wasn’t as if he hadn’t chosen to join the Order forever, but it still scared him.

Valain rode out, sending his mind ahead to scout. He reported to Vauri, No danger from the south. The formal reply: Praise Anshen. Gods, he would miss this. Masters didn’t do the perimeter patrol, that was journeymen’s work. Next time he’d take Jerna along to teach her the ropes.
No danger from the west. Well, except for the thundercloud that would probably reach Valdis by evening. Praise Mizran, came Vauri’s mind-voice.

The sweaty smell of the horse and the motion of riding did much to ease his discomfort. No danger from the north. — Praise Naigha. The day was so clear that he could have seen Valdie Liorys if Arlyn’s Hill hadn’t been in the way. His mother was there, away from the stifling heat in the city. Meruvin was having a field day practising to be king. She would be back for the Feast, of course, especially when she knew that he was going to be sworn in.

No danger from the east. Lédu had been back home in Velihas for a while, but she was in Valdis again now, drawing diagrams of the palace. Praise Timoine. There was never any danger from the east: Velihas wouldn’t attack. There was never any danger from the south, the west or the north either. If there was any danger to Valdis it was from inside, where they didn’t patrol so much as being watchful all the time.

The horse was restive —it didn’t like the heat any more than Valain did— and he tried to put it at ease by wiping it down, currying and brushing it. For the last time. He started. What was he thinking? It might have been his last solitary patrol, but he wasn’t going to stop riding or looking after horses. But there was the swearing-in coming up, and he’d been told that one in a hundred died in the ritual. Anshen, are you trying to tell me something?

He went to see Vauri.

“Some people die, yes,” she said. “We know what they die of, it’s one of the ingredients of the potion we use. But you won’t.”

“How do you know?”

She smiled. “You’ve had it already. Remember all the things we tried in runner training?”

Poison training. It made Valain shudder. He’d been sick for days several times, all in a good cause. “Yes. I suppose I was just imagining things.”

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Lédu

Of course I didn’t come back only to make more drawings of the palace, even though I’d talked to people at home who knew more about that kind of thing than I did. I came back for Valain. He was inaccessible, in the Order, and he would be even further away when they’d sworn him in, but I’d found that it was hard to live without him, and this way I’d be close to him at least, feel his mind somewhere near.

Valain’s mother knew. The moment she came back from the castle outside the city, where she’d been to flee from the heat —and it was hot, had been since spring, worse than the summer when I’d first met Valain— she made me come to her to talk. She wanted to talk about him as much as I did. We both knew that he couldn’t have done otherwise; we both missed him badly.

“People die of being sworn in sometimes,” she told me. I hadn’t realised that; just that we would have to give him to Árankhaen, Anshen as they called his light side here. Giving him to Neha wasn’t an option for me. Not for Mialle either, it seemed. She’d asked me to call her by her name, even before I went back to Velihas. I’d told her all my names and she’d stumbled elegantly over Lástalfái, and less elegantly over the titles, and decided to call me by my short given name only, the way people do in Valdyas. Her own name could almost have been one from my own country: no stumbling for me.

“Walk in my rose garden with me,” she said the next morning. I loved the rose garden because of its smells, which made me homesick but at the same time reassured me. It belonged to Mialle and
nobody else: she did all her own gardening there. The wall bordered on the river Ilda, the quick and splashy one of the two rivers coming together at the palace, and on the other side of the Ilda there was the bustle of one of the busiest parts of the city, but you’d never know that when you were among the roses.

Mialle snipped off dead flowers and put them in the little basket she carried, let bright red tickle-bugs—much prettier than the drab yellowish ones we have—crawl on her fingers to put them where they could find the most aphids to eat, bent this flower and that toward me to smell. We didn’t even talk of Valain, only of the roses. I dawdled behind after a while, daydreaming, while Mialle did some serious gardening that I couldn’t grasp anyway.

That caused me to miss most of what happened. There was something coming over the wall, a man, dropping heavily to the ground; and Mialle screaming, and then Valain’s brother came running from nowhere in particular and pushed me aside into the rose-bushes and threw himself on the intruder. I tore my clothes and scratched my skin trying to pull myself out of the thorns, and when I was finally free everything was over, and Meruvin stood there bleeding, two dead bodies at his feet.

Someone had climbed over the wall, probably from a boat, and killed Mialle.

Meruvin had seen him coming and run to help her, but too late. He’d only managed to kill the assassin after the deed was done.

Nobody was paying attention to me, so I hid in my room—still Valain’s old room that Mialle had given to me when he went into the Order and I stayed to study the palace—and reached out to him.

Lédu! What happened?

I showed him. I had no words to tell him.

I’m coming.

I hadn’t dared ask him to come, let alone tell him to come. I was shaking, perhaps with relief.

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**Valain**

Valain ran, never mind his uniform, or rather the lack of half of it because he’d been changing into his training kit. The guard at the gate had orders to let nobody in.

“Don’t you see who I am?” He hated having to do this. “Miallei Vegelin astin Velain. Call my brother if you’re not sure.”

“I’m sorry, your highness.”

“You’re sorry about what? That you didn’t know who I was, or that you’re not letting me in?”

“I can’t let you in. His M—... his H—... Lord Meruvin said to let only the priestesses of Naigha in.” The guard was looking decidedly uneasy. Sweat trickled from under his helmet. It could have been the heat, but he was standing in the shade.

“I’ll speak to Lord Meruvin,” Valain said.

“You’ll understand that I can’t leave my post.”

“Ring that bell I see behind you, then.”

“That’s for emergencies only. We’ll have the full guard here if I do.”

“Never mind, I can make him come here.” He called to Serla. She was in the writing-room, where he’d expected her to be. The guard won’t let me in. Meruvin will have to come to the gate.

He’s likely to have given orders not to let you in, specifically. Try the scullery door. I’ll open up for you.
“Did Lord Meruvin name any names?” Valain asked the guard.

“Well...”

“Well?”

“Lord Meruvin said to let the priestesses in, and I’d have been willing to let you in as you’re family, but then my lady came and...”

Valain had never been so close to striking an innocent man, though it was really Liase he wanted to strike. “Don’t say it. Let me guess. Lady Liase came and told you not to let me in? Or perhaps not to let in anybody from the Order of the Sworn?”

“Anybody from the Order of the Sworn, and you and Master Vauri in particular.”

“I’ll speak to my sister-in-law about that. You go on doing your duty.” He turned sharply and walked until he was around the corner out of sight of the guard, then ran again.

He heard the bar on the scullery door being lifted as he ran over the plank bridge. Serla was there and, behind her, Lédu as well. He was in her arms as soon as he stepped inside. They didn’t even speak mind to mind, only held each other. Serla closed the door and dropped the bar again, then left them to it.

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Vauri

“I smell a rat,” Vauri said. “I smell a whole nest of rats. Lédu, let’s go through it in detail if you can stand it.”

“Mialle asked me—ordered me, really—to come and walk in the garden with her.”

“Did you think this was her usual time to be in the garden?”

“She goes there most mornings to care for the roses.” She winced. “Used to go there.”

“Usually alone?”

“I think so. We walked together for a while, and she showed me things, and then I got distracted by a thought and she went on ahead of me.”

Vauri nodded. “How far ahead?”

“About half the length of the garden, Ten, twelve yards. I was in the middle of the garden and she was on the path that runs along the wall. Then the man dropped down from the wall—it’s the wall that borders on the Ilda.”

“Was Meruvin outside then?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure where he came from. Either from the house, the door we’d come through, or through the little gate from the herb garden.”

“Did you hear the door? Or the gate?”

Lédu closed her eyes and balled her fists. “A door. I think it was the door, not the gate. The gate creaks more.”

“Now this is hard, and I know you’ve told me before, but what did you hear first, the man hitting the ground or the door opening?”

More hard thinking. “I really don’t know. I’d say the door opening, but that doesn’t make sense.”

Valain had been silent all the time, but now he spoke up. “But it does make sense!”

Vauri silenced him with a gesture. “Later.” And to Lédu, “What then?”

“I couldn’t see much, the bushes were in the way. He jumped in front of her, and she screamed,
and it was about that moment that Meruvin pushed me aside. That’s all, really, nobody paid any attention to me so I went to my room and called Valain.”

“Meruvin must have been in his own room,” Valain said. “It’s right above Mother’s, it looks out on the garden. He must have seen the man climbing as soon as he was at the top of the wall. You can almost see the Ilda from that window.”

“Yes,” Vauri said. “That was the rat I smelt.”

“I wish we could prove that Meruvin arranged it,” Valain said.

Vauri sighed. “It makes so much sense. The assassin is in a boat on the Ilda. He climbs the wall. Meruvin is in his own room and signals when Mialle is within reach. Then he runs down and arrives just in time— just too late to kill the attacker before the attacker kills the queen.”

“Only there was me in the way,” Lédu said.

“You were easy enough to push,” Vauri said. “He must have had tremendous patience to wait until Mialle was near the wall and you were far enough away, though. I’ll bet he wasn’t counting on you.”

She shuddered. Perhaps there had been someone on the other side of the wall for days, waiting for the perfect opportunity.

“I wonder why nobody thought it strange that someone was climbing the wall,” Valain said.

“From the other side, I mean. The Ilda side.”

Lédu said, “They’ve been cleaning all the outer walls lately. He must have looked like a workman. He did look like a workman. I saw him.”

That would have been a good excuse to go along the walls in a boat and use a grappling hook. If he’d scraped a bit at the stones beforehand, nobody would have looked twice. Vauri put her face in her hands and groaned.

“Doesn’t sound like Meruvin,” Valain said. “Sounds like Liase.”

As they sat in silence, pondering that, there was a knock at the door.

“It’s Jerna,” Vauri said. “It must be really urgent, I told her not to disturb us except for emergencies.” She lifted the seal. “Come in.”

It wasn’t only Jerna, but a very wet and bedraggled woman with her, wrapped in a blanket. “She says that someone attacked her with *semsin*,” Jerna said. “At the palace. I thought that counted as an emergency.”

Valain offered the wet woman his chair and she sat down, dripping and shaking.

“Jerna, can you find her something dry to wear? Valain, Lédu, I think this concerns you too, please stay.”

The woman looked from one to the other with a fearful expression on her face. “It’s all right,” Vauri said. “They’re my apprentices. My name is Vauri, I’m the commander of the Order of the Sworn.”

“The boatman said to go to you,” the woman said. “I’m Selevi.”

“Can you tell me what happened to you?”

“I don’t remember everything,” Selevi said. “I got hit on the head.”

“Whatever you do remember will help,” Vauri said. “Why were you in the palace?”

“To get my husband’s wages. He was killed doing a job there.”

Vauri raised her eyebrows. “Was it such a dangerous job?”

“It was only cleaning the river walls. But then someone thought he wanted to kill the queen and they killed him.”

Lédu started. Vauri sent a warning thought to her, *Not yet.*
“And did he? Want to kill the queen?”
“I don’t know anything about that!” Selevi protested. Vauri realised that she probably really didn’t. The woman was scared and shocked, but she didn’t give the impression of being guilty.

Vauri nodded. “I can see that whatever it was, you weren’t in it. What happened at the palace?”
“I talked to the guard and he got another guard and she took me inside to Lady Liase. And the lady said she’d give me Arin’s wages, and some extra money because he’d been killed, and she asked me to come to her room with her. I thought how nice of her, but she didn’t give me any money, she glared at me and it was like she’d hit me on the head, and next thing I knew I was on a boat in the middle of the Valda. The boatman said he’d fished me out and he’d take me to the inn where he was lodging so I could dry up and have a warm bath or something.”
“But he took you here instead?”
“Well, he wanted to know how I ended up there and I told him about her hitting me on the head without touching, and he said I’d have to tell you because you handle that kind of thing.”
“We do, yes.”
“My Arin didn’t kill anybody, did he?”
“I’m afraid he did,” Vauri said. “Lédu here saw it.”
“Not very clearly,” Lédu said. “Was your husband a big man? A strong heavy man?”
“Yes, strong and broad.”
“I saw a big man climb over the wall when the queen was walking along it, and then the queen screamed, and Lord Meruvn killed the man but the queen was already dead.”
Selevi burst out crying. She was already so wet that it didn’t make much difference, but Vauri handed her a handkerchief anyway.

Jerna came with dry clothes and towels and Selevi dried herself, crying all the time. By the time she was dressed she was still sobbing a little. “He never wanted to kill her!” she wailed. “Someone put him up to it.”

Vauri put a hand on her arm. “That’s more or less what we think, too.”
“You do? Who?”
“We’re not sure,” Vauri said cautiously. “But with what you can tell us we’ll probably discover it. Where’s the boatman now, back at his lodgings?”
“I thought you’d want to talk to him before he talks to everybody else,” Jerna said, “so I gave him a mug of ale and some bread and cheese in the kitchen.”

“Excellent.” She’s shaping up well. “Let’s have him here.”

The boatman was tall and pale and blond: a northerner. He held his cap in both hands, shuffling his feet. “Rythei Seran, at your service, madam. ... Master?”
“Vauri’ will do,” Vauri said. “Thank you for rescuing Selevi here. How did you make such a catch?”

That made him grin broadly. “Strange fish to haul up from the Valda, eh? Most of ’em don’t come that big. I heard a splash as I went past the palace, and there she was. Knocked out completely.”

“Where was she? On which side of the river?”
“Well, I thought it was strange, she was too far from the bank to have fallen in. Like she’d fallen from a window. In the palace, I mean. And she said she’d been in the palace and someone had glared at her and knocked her out, so that figured.”

“And you thought it was a matter for the Order.”
“Well, yes, if someone knocks you out by glaring at you, it’s misuse of semsin, innit? That’s what
the Order is for, innit?”

“Good thinking,” Vauri said. “Especially as you’re from Rizenay, I presume?”

The man shrugged. “One gets around. Been to Valdis more often than I can count. Even to Lenay. Bound for Lenay now with a load of slate.”

Vauri nodded. “You can tell everybody that you dragged up a woman from the river and saved her life. But please don’t tell them that she came from the palace window. Let’s let people think she fell from the bank. You don’t have to lie, you just mustn’t tell the whole truth. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly clear.” He grinned again. “Is there— any foul play about this? Secret stuff?”

“Definitely.” Vauri grinned back, fished a coin from her purse and gave it to Seran. “You deserve a reward, of course.”

“A whole crown! Six riders!”

“Not by far the worth of a life, of course, but the Order could never afford that. Jerna, go with Seran and pay for his board, please. Or would you rather stay the night here?”

“I’d rather be at the inn,” Seran said. “I want to treat my mates now I’m a rich man.”

Jerna left with Seran and Vauri sealed the door behind them. “Do you realise that you’re in danger of your life now?” she asked Selevi. “You’d better stay here until we’ve sorted this business out. The Order will protect you. Are you sure it was Lady Liase?”

“I heard one of the guards say that. And she looked like a lady.” Then the full import of what Vauri had said seemed to register. “Will she come and try to kill me again? When she hears that I’m still alive?”

Vauri nodded. “She may. She can’t enter the Order house, though. We’ll prevent that.”

She called for someone to install Selevi in a guest room and two others to get her clothes and other things from her house. “What kind of work do you do?” she asked.

“Glove-maker. If they get my work-basket and the two baskets in the back room I can work here.”

“I might order a pair if you make riding gloves,” Vauri said.

“I do,” Selevi said, with the first smile Vauri had seen from her, and left the room.

“Well, Valain,” Vauri asked, “what do you think?”

“I think Meruvin or Liase promised to pay this Arin a lot of money to kill my mother,” he said. He looked bitter. “Only they didn’t realise that he’d leave a widow, and that the widow would care.”

“Would that be enough to get them on?” Lédu asked.

“If she’ll testify,” Vauri said. “You, too, Lédu.”

Lédu nodded. Valain said, “Before the coronation, so we can—” He stopped, confused. “That means— it means I’ll have to— doesn’t it?”

“It does, I’m afraid.” Vauri was very calm; much calmer than she felt. “You’ll find yourself well prepared.”

Chapter 7

Valain

Well prepared indeed. Valain looked back over the years that he’d been a journeyman in the Order, and the years before that when he’d been learning from Vauri and Orin, and Serla and Ferin too. And
his father. Every lesson they’d taught him could have been a lesson for a Guild runner— or for a
king.

He was fuming. He was shocked. He was confused. He had to admit to himself that he was afraid.

Vauri had called off his swearing-in, of course. It would be awkward, though not impossible, to
swear him out again if —when!— he was called upon to take the crown. And the nearest Velain
cousins hadn’t had the same lessons. Everybody had counted to three and stopped worrying.

Valain had counted to three himself and stopped worrying, confound it. He’d seemed so safe, so
free to follow his calling. Alith had followed hers, and it was too late to get her back to do her duty
to the country after all— the last time he’d seen her, she’d had snake markings halfway to her elbows.
Naigha wouldn’t give up what was hers as readily as Anshen seemed willing to give up what was his.

The kingdom was in mourning, but that would end, and then Meruvin would be crowned king if
they didn’t prevent it. Someone would have to take power and bring Meruvin and Liase to trial. And
it seemed that the someone was himself.

Vauri intended to ask old Ayran astin Brun to act as judge. She would start by accusing Liase of
misuse of semsin, trying to kill Selevi, and build it up from that. Valain wouldn’t have to testify. He
hadn’t seen anything of the assassination or of the attempted murder, and humiliation at Meruvin’s
hands was years ago. Lédé would, though, and he trembled in sympathy.

He threw his riding gloves on the cabinet savagely. His foreboding about it being the last time that
he groomed a horse in the stable of the Order was about to come true. When he was the king, his
horses would be groomed for him, and he’d never see the stable of the Order from the inside again.

“You know,” Tyan said behind him, “even if Vauri doesn’t swear you in on the Feast, you’ll still
be a master soon enough. I can see it.”

“I’m just angry.” Tyan was all right, but perhaps a little hasty in his assumptions. “I never wanted
this. I wanted to be a master in the Order, and a runner, and forget that I was ever in the House
Velain.”

“Your father was a runner, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, and only in the House Velain by marriage.”

“Speaking of marriage, are you going to marry that girl with all the red hair?”

“Probably.” He wouldn’t be able to escape getting married, and when he did marry he’d choose
Lédé above all others.

“Lucky you.”

Valain shrugged. Yes, he supposed he was lucky. He’d given up Lédé for Anshen, and she was still
there now that he had to give up Anshen.

He went to the temple and sat staring into the fire. In here it was cool, almost cold, compared to
the sizzling Midsummer heat outside. The fire gave off some warmth, but he shivered, wishing he’d
brought a cloak. There was no consolation in the flames.

The voice in his mind took him by surprise, though he had been waiting for it, yearning for it to
sound. Why would you have to give me up? Marry your princess. Bring up your children to serve me.

-**-

Vauri

They had to go to Valdie Liorys for the court sessions. The palace wasn’t neutral enough ground.
Nowhere else, except possibly the Temple of Naigha or of Mizran, was large enough; not even the
refectory of the Order house. Another advantage was that Ayran Brun was at home here: sleeping in
his own bed would make the old man much less cranky. And the hall wouldn’t be flooded with
gawkers, except for the occasional castle servants and village people who wanted a look at this man
who was, for the moment, their new king.

It was a miracle that Meruvin had assented to the trial: he could just have seized power, or rather
hung on to the power he’d got. He must be very sure of himself, going into it with the conviction that
people would think him a hero. A false accusation against the king and his consort would get Vauri
thrown from her position as commander, perhaps from the Order itself, at the very least. If she even
survived it. She had only two witnesses, unless the boatman Seran came back from Lenay soon
enough—there were people looking out for him at the inns, in the harbour and on the river to send
him to Liorys the moment he turned up.

One more night. She couldn’t afford to make mistakes.

Her body wanted to pace, but there was no room for it in the tiny attic where she had been billeted
with Lédu, Selevi and the two women among their escort of masters of the Order. They could have
had a much more comfortable room—several much more comfortable rooms—in the castle, but
Vauri hadn’t wanted to be too close to the defendants. She was sealing the room at night as it was.
Perhaps she should let Lédu do it as practice.

Lédu was sleeping coiled up like a cat, face hidden under her hair and one freckled arm. She
would wake in the morning all at once, not a sign on her face of having been asleep moments before.
Vauri envied her that: she herself would be bleary-eyed for hours, well into the court session. It didn’t
affect the quickness of her wit, but people tended to think that she was still half asleep and to take her
less seriously for it. But I can use that, she thought. Let them think I’m not listening.

Being safe under the seal didn’t make it any easier to sleep, wedged in between Rusla, who was a
large woman, and Selevi, splayed out on her pallet. Eventually she did fall asleep, with disturbing
dreams she didn’t remember a thing of except that they’d been disturbing. She woke early. Not too
early to get up, fortunately; she wouldn’t have been able to get to sleep again. She crept down the
ladder silently, sealing the room again behind her—not very strongly, Lédu would be able to
persuade it to open, and probably Rusla or Arvi as well.

Valain was sitting on the low wall opposite the door.

“You couldn’t sleep either, I see,” he said.

“Not any more, anyway.”

They walked up the hill in the direction of the castle. “They’ve sealed up their room,” Valain said.
“Ayran will be furious.”

“I’d have done the same. I have, in fact.”

“Yes, but not with a seal that screams that it is of the Nameless. I’ve never seen a Brun who was
on the other side.”

“Ayran isn’t, at least,” Vauri said. “He asked me to take the morning service. In an hour or so, I
suppose. He’d do it himself otherwise.”

They came to the eight-sided tower that served the castle as temple of Anshen. There were piles of
stones and slates lying about, and buckets and sacks, as if the Bruns were about to start building
something. Valain knew what it was: “They’re going to connect the tower to the house.”

“Pity,” Vauri said.

“Why?”

“Makes it impossible to circle the temple. We’ll never be able to use it to swear anyone in any
more.”

“You do?”
“Well, not us, but the first Order house was here. Three hundred years ago when the Order was founded.” Orin had told her that in her first year. She ought to start teaching the new ones the history of the Order when she came out of this. If she came out of this.

Valain put his hands flat on the wall of the tower, then on the nearest wall of the house. “No power in the house,” he said. “If Liase faints in court we’ll know it’s for effect.”

“And the tower?”

“It’s a temple of Anshen. What do you think?”

Vauri grinned. She carefully pushed at the door: it was open. There was someone inside, an old woman in a grey robe, praying at the fire. As Vauri came in she got up from kneeling, laboriously. Vauri hurried to support her. “It’s not often that a high priestess of Naigha turns to Anshen,” she said.

“Aking for justice never goes amiss,” the high priestess said. Old as she was, her eyes were young and lively. “And from one high priestess to another, I say that Anshen is the one on the side of justice here.”

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Valain

“I just thought of something,” Valain said to Lédu. “But I need you. I don’t know if I can reach to town on my own.”

“They’ve just started, anyway.” And indeed, they could hear Vauri’s voice, “...the charges, of which the first and lesser is...” Lédu wasn’t allowed in until she was called, and Valain had chosen to stay with her rather than to sit in the hall and get angry at his brother and sister-in-law. He wasn’t sure whether he would be able to contain himself if he did.

“Let’s use the temple,” Valain said. In the cool and crisp air of the eight-sided tower it would have been easy to do semsin work even if the spirit of Anshen hadn’t been everywhere around them. He held Lédu’s hands and felt her power augment his; sent his mind out of the temple, to the south, into Valdis, looking around for someone to speak to. It was a pity that Serla was here in Liorys to take minutes, because she would have been the perfect person.

Jerna, at the Order house. She would have to do.

Valain! I thought you were at Liorys!

I am. Can you do something for me?

Sure. Jerna’s mind-voice sounded surprised, a little incredulous.

We need another witness. Can you find out who hires and pays workmen at the palace —I think it’s still Rovin— and get him to come here as soon as possible? Today, if he can. You can mention my name and promise a reward.

I’ll try.

Valain came back to his own body—he hadn’t realised he’d left it completely—and collapsed on the flagstones.

Lédu stroked his forehead. Are you all right?

“Yes, just very tired. Did you catch that?”

“Not all of it. Have you asked her to send somebody?”

“The paymaster at the palace. He’ll know whether Arin was a real workman.”

“Oh, Vauri will like that!”

“That was the idea. Let’s see how far along she is.”
Valain found Liase defending herself against the charge of attempted murder. She couldn’t deny that she’d tried to knock Selevi out, but it looked as if she wasn’t going to admit to throwing her out of the window. And if the boatman Seran didn’t turn up, there was no way for Vauri to prove that; Selevi could have wandered about in a dazed state and fallen, which was what Liase was claiming. “I only wanted to warn her off. She was getting obnoxious, telling lies.”

He went out again before he said something he’d regret and told Lédu. “They’ll be adjourning soon, I think. Liase and Meruvin have to get their act together, and everybody is probably hungry.”

“I am hungry! Aren’t you?”

“Ravenous. Why does semsin work make one so hungry?”

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Vauri

It wasn’t going badly, Vauri thought as she sat down at one of the trestle tables they had put out because the hall was currently a courtroom. She kept Selevi close to her side, shielding her from Liase who was glaring from the other side of the table.

“I’ve never seen so many noble people in one place,” Selevi whispered.

“They’re not all noble,” Vauri said. “I’m not, for one. And the high priestess of Naigha isn’t, as far as I know. Her family are cobblers.”

“But still. Did I do all right? I was terrified. I thought they’d all laugh at the way I talked.”

“You were perfectly all right,” Vauri said. Lord Ayran, at least, had believed Selevi’s version of what had happened. “I don’t think I’ll need you any more today. You can do what you like as long as you stay around in case I do need you. I’ll ask Rusla to guard you.”

“I wish I’d brought some work,” Selevi said. “I get fretful doing nothing.”

“We can do something about that, I think.” Rhani? Could you come here a moment?

Not much later the chatelaine of Liorys Castle sat down beside them. “Did you need me?”

“This is Selevi, she’s a glove-maker without any work to do. Would you have anything that needs repairing?”

Rhani took Selevi away, Rusla trailing along behind them as a guard. Vauri put her head in her hands and sighed.

“You’re not eating,” said Valain’s voice.

“I’m too tense to eat.”

“If you don’t eat you’ll fall over in the middle of the session and we can’t have that.”

“You may be right.” She grabbed a piece of bread and sat toying with it.

“Eat it!” That was Lédu. “Here’s some cheese to go with it.”

“I hope Rhani feeds Selevi,” Vauri said as she ate the bread and cheese. “I clean forgot to make sure. Lédu, I’m going to need you next.”

“I thought so,” Lédu said. She didn’t look as tense as Vauri felt by far. She was eating bread like someone starving. So was Valain— had they been doing Guild work? Well, if it left Lédu relaxed and cheerful, it couldn’t hurt.

---
It was surprisingly hard to tell everything again. Not the telling itself, but not to make it into a set story. I caught myself slipping into storyteller’s mode once or twice and could only stop it before someone noticed because I wasn’t speaking my own language. Vauri was having trouble too: she tried to phrase her questions differently, but there was only so much she could ask.

Lord Ayran was a very attentive listener. That, in itself, would have been enough to set off storyteller’s mode, but there were all those other people too, and the hostility from Liase and Meruvin that I was warding against.

When I’d finished, the world seemed to stand still. Then, in the expectant silence, there was one voice. Liase’s voice: “She’s lying!”

A long moment more of silence, then everybody broke out talking. Lord Ayran stood up and waited, exuding quiet, until the din died down.

“Lédu,” he said, “will you show it to me?”

I had no problem with that. It was as easy as showing Valain. Easier, in fact; it didn’t hurt Lord Ayran so much.

“She is speaking true,” he said. Vauri stood glaring at Liase like a forest-cat about to make a kill. I could almost hear her thinking “I told you so”. Liase didn’t dash away like a rabbit would, though; she glared right back.

“So,” Meruvin said, “this man climbed over the wall and killed my mother before I could stop him. What of it?”

“The charge is,” Vauri said, collecting herself, “that you hired him to do it.”

“Balderdash!” Meruvin was on his feet, making a grab for me as the nearest of his enemies, but someone in the uniform of the Order of the Sworn was on top of him before he could reach me.

“Order in the court, please!” Now Lord Ayran was also furious, but he was containing himself very well.

Meruvin sat down, flanked by two of the Sworn. He was still grumbling under his breath, looking at Vauri as if he wanted to throw himself at her too. Liase sat as still as a tree, glowing with hatred. Another one of the Sworn watched her closely, ready to suppress anything she tried.

“Did you, either of you, pay or promise to pay Ernei Arin to carry out any job for you?”

“It’s not my task to pay workmen,” Meruvin said. “Or to know their names.”

“You can ask the paymaster,” Valain’s voice came from the door. He had an old man with him: Rovin, who had told me some of the history of the palace once.

Rovin’s testimony was simple and unambiguous. Yes, he had hired some men to clean moss and dirt from the outer walls; no, none of them had been called Ernei Arin or answered to Ernei Arin’s description. And it was very irregular and annoying that a workman’s widow who came to ask for her late husband’s wages would not be referred to him, he didn’t know what that guard had been thinking of.

Most likely the guard had been in Liase’s pay, I thought. Easy enough: if anyone comes inquiring for the man killed in Her Majesty’s garden, bring them to me at once, I’ll reward you for it. If bringing in Rovin didn’t work, someone would have to go to Valdis and find the guard.

Lord Ayran called for adjournment. Vauri came to sit with us.

“If he wasn’t the king, near as makes no difference, he’d be whipped for insolence at the very least,” she said. “I’ll need something stronger now. That the payment didn’t go through the paymaster doesn’t prove that Meruvin hired the assassin. Or even that an assassin was hired at all. I wish one of
them would forget themself and say something unfortunate. I’m not nearly nasty enough to actually set a trap for them.” She looked more tired and more annoyed than I’d ever seen her.

“That’s a good thing,” Valain said. “If you made the trap too nasty you would be whipped for insolence. Let’s play by the rules, even if they don’t.”

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Vauri

It was only mid-afternoon, but Liase asked to defer the session until the next day, claiming that she wasn’t feeling well. She retired to her room, Meruvin in her wake, and sealed it.

Vauri didn’t mind— some time to think would only be useful. She could imagine that Liase wasn’t feeling well; she wouldn’t feel well herself if she was standing trial for something she was so clearly guilty of. She had Arvi and Jilan stand guard outside the room, just in case they tried something.

With Liase out of the way, Selevi appeared, looking much better than ever since she’d entered Vauri’s office soaking wet. “I’m staying here for a few weeks,” she said, “there’s plenty of work, and Rhani likes me to do it. It’ll be a change. I needed that.”

“I’ll have someone fetch your things from Valdis,” Vauri said.

“No need, Rhani’s sent someone already.” She was cheerful, almost smug. Vauri wished she had something to feel cheerful about. On second thoughts, what she needed most now, rather than time to think, was not to have to think.

She went for a swim in the river with some of the people from the castle, then had a long warm bath, washing herself clean of Liase and Meruvin and all their works. Food, a cup of wine with the high priestess of Naigha, then to bed early. She had the attic to herself: Lédu was off somewhere with Valain, Rusla and Selevi were in the room the chatelaine had given them in the main house, Arvi was guarding Meruvin and Liase’s room. She could have paced if she’d wanted to, but she preferred to sleep now.

Chapter 8

Vauri

Vauri was woken by someone banging on the door. Coming awake slowly, she saw that it was Lédu. Had she made the seal so strong that Lédu couldn’t pass? “Come in.”

Lédu’s face looked spooky in the light of her lantern. “They’re gone.”

“Who?”

“Liase and Meruvin. Valain and I decided to relieve the guards and we found them knocked out and the room empty.”

That was news to wake a person up thoroughly. Vauri realised that it was still night, pitch dark. “When?”

“We noticed just now. It’s about three hours past midnight. They must have gone much earlier, because we couldn’t find them any more and Valain can reach to Valdis.”

“And Arvi and Jilan were still out? Great Anshen!” She was pulling on bits of uniform, rushing headlong down the ladder half-dressed.
They found Jilan still unconscious, with a nasty-looking wound on the back of his head. Arvi was sitting up weakly, rubbing her temples. Liase had struck her down through the closed door, and presumably either she or Meruvin had hit Jilan on the head with something hard when he came to help Arvi. No time to call for help; nobody near enough to notice. And not even Vauri had thought of locking the door: if someone seals herself in it seems silly to lock her up.

Someone had fetched the midwife as the closest to a doctor that Liorys had. She tutted over Jilan and cautioned them not to move him until he woke up. “Concussion, most likely. Can’t say until he can speak for himself.” She cleaned the wound, but wouldn’t stitch it up. “That would jiggle him too much.”

Vauri found Valain in the temple, still trying to find Liase. “She’s vanished!”
“How far have you been? Which way?”
“I thought she’d go north, so I looked there first, can’t tell how far because I’ve never been there.”
“And Valdis?” Vauri asked.
“I don’t know if she’s been there, but she isn’t now. Everybody’s asleep, of course, I haven’t managed to wake Ferin to ask if he’s seen her in the palace. Anyway, he wouldn’t know to look out for her.”
“That’s true. Have you tried the Ildis road?”
“Yes, first after the north road. Wherever they are, Liase has hidden them really well.” He hid his head in his hands. “I’ve had it, I think. And I can’t go back to sleep because everybody will look to me in the morning.”

“You can have a few hours,” Vauri said. “Right here in the temple if you like. I’ll keep watch and wake you in time.”

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Valain

“This is a clear admission of guilt,” Ayran astin Brun said. “I pronounce Miallei Meruvin astin Velain and Serlei Liase guilty of the murder by proxy of Ruslei Mialle astin Velain, the murder of Ernei Arin, and the attempted murder of Alysei Selevi and Arnei Jilan.”

Valain shivered; it might only have been the cold draught that went through the hall. The high priestess of Naigha looked up, seeming to listen to something that only she could hear. Her hands clenched on the table in front of her. “The murder of Arnei Jilan,” she said very quietly.

Vauri went up to Ayran and whispered in his ear. He nodded. “Rusla, twenty-nine strokes, please,” she said.

Ayran said, as the temple bell started to ring, “Therefore...” but stopped when the sound of the bell drowned his voice. Several people were visibly counting as the years of Jilan’s life were rung out. After the last stroke, Ayran went on, “Therefore, by the authority vested in me, I sentence Miallei Meruvin astin Velain and Serlei Liase to death.”

“Long live the King,” someone said at the back of the room.

Valain stood up when it became clear to him that he was meant. “Long live Queen Ailin,” he said. “I’ll take the regency.”

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“That was brave,” Vauri said to Valain when they’d escaped from the confusion and noise of the
“What else could I have done? I can’t very well take the crown while Meruvin’s heir is alive. Well, he’s likely to be alive too, but I’m not counting him at the moment. It doesn’t do to blame a three-year-old girl for her parents’ crimes.”

“Poor little Ailin,” Vauri said. “She will be blamed.”

Lédu touched Valain’s arm. “I’ll help you bring her up,” she said.

Gods, that was true. It would be hard. All he’d heard about Princess Ailin pointed to that. The few times he’d seen her, too. She couldn’t be blamed for her parents, but she’d been formed by her parents even at that age. He nodded miserably, not trusting himself to speak.

“Let’s go to Valdis right away,” Lédu said. “Be there before the news arrives.”

That would be a good idea. They probably couldn’t arrive in Valdis before anyone knew what had happened, but they should be able to get to the palace before the news was all over the town. And they could be the first to tell Ailin that her parents weren’t coming back.

Vauri stood at the gate when they were about to leave, all packed, an hour later. “The kingdom was calling louder than Anshen, after all,” Valain said to her.

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“Really?” Lédu asked. “Was the kingdom calling louder? Or were you considering different things?”

“People,” said Valain. “I was considering people. Someone else can do Anshen’s work. Not many other people can do what I’m about to do. Anyway, it’s still Anshen’s work. He told me so.”

“Can you go back in twelve years? To the Order?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know how much being regent will change me.” That was his greatest fear: that it would change him too much, just now that he was getting to know himself. He tried to push it out of her mind: he was riding alone with—yes, he had to admit it to himself—the woman he loved, for what could very well be the last time before he’d be surrounded by guards and courtiers and meddlers every day of his life. He was still in uniform: he could pretend he was the one doing the guarding.

It should really rain on a day like this, but it steadfastly refused to. A few unconvincing clouds hung in the sky; one cast a shadow in the valley between Arlyn’s Hill and Valdis.

“She’s a right handful, you know,” he said.

“I know,” Lédu said. “I’ve seen more of her than you have lately. We’re going to have our work cut out for us.”

When they passed the Little Valda Gate it was still early afternoon. “Let’s eat something first,” Valain said. He was ravenous; they’d plain forgotten to eat at Liorys.

They sat down outside the first inn that advertised pies. “It feels like playing truant from lessons,” Lédu said.

“That’s more or less what I was thinking when we were riding down the hill.” He sipped his ale and ate his pie, not thinking of princesses and regencies.

It couldn’t last, of course. They made their way to the palace. There was a different guard at the gate, who let them through without even blinking. Serla wasn’t there; she was still in Liorys, writing up her minutes. Several other people were also in Liorys. The palace seemed strangely empty without them. There were almost as many people as otherwise—servants who kept everything running—but there was nobody for them to serve.

Meruvin and Liase’s apartments were completely empty. No sign of the little princess either, not
even of most of her clothes and toys. After a while, Valain caught a linen-maid.

“Gone,” the girl said, “early this morning, with her nurse and a guard. Lady Liase requested it.”

“She was in no position to request anything,” Valain scowled. “She was under guard in Liorys.”

“We couldn’t have known, could we, my lord?”

It would have been all through the palace. “Perhaps you did know.” Lédu gave him a mental nudge. “But none of you could have stopped them.” A thought came to him. “Which guard was it?”

“Why, it must have been Lan because I heard Ayrin complaining that he wasn’t there. She’s walking out with him.”

“Do you know where they went?” Lédu asked.

“Away, the nurse dressed her in riding clothes and they took a chest full of other clothes and toys and things. They’re going to live somewhere else, she said.”

Valain sighed, started to turn away, gave the maid sixpence after all. “Thank you. You’ve been helpful.”

“Very helpful,” Lédu said. “Give her a shilling, Valain.”

He gave the maid another coin. “Still, we don’t know where they are.”

“I think,” said the maid, “—may I?”

“Of course you may think,” Lédu said. “What do you think?”

“They may have gone to Ildis, my lady. I heard the nurse asking the princess if she would like to eat fish tonight, and there’s an inn on the Ildis road that has the best fish, well, between here and Ildis.”

“How would you know?” Valain asked.

“Why, my mother keeps it, my lord.”

“Send to your mother, please, and ask her whether a man, a woman and a little girl have eaten at the inn today. I suppose we can’t hope that she’s seen my brother and his wife too.”

“They wouldn’t use an inn,” Lédu said. “Much too risky. Perhaps we can ask Vauri to send someone to Ildis?”

Valain would have kissed her, but that seemed improper, especially with the maid present. “As soon as she gets back,” he said. “If they’ve gone to Ildis they won’t move from there soon anyway. Only, in the meantime we’re without an heir.”

“Let’s start one of our own,” Lédu said.

It took a while for Valain to realise what she meant. “Is that a proposal?”

“Yes,” she said with a smile.

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Lédu

So we didn’t have a coronation; we had a wedding instead. Valain thought it would be a good idea to give the people a celebration when they expected one, and where he would be able to hold a speech without being too self-conscious.

It was hard to find someone to officiate. It seemed strange to me at first that a priestess of the Mother would need to be a barren woman, but the more I thought about it, the more sense it made. It’s traditional to have the bride’s or the bridegroom’s mother or grandmother, but all our grandmothers were dead, as was Valain’s mother, and getting my mother from Velihas would take too
long, if she could even get away.

In the end we asked Serla. Barren by choice rather than age, but Valain said that it didn’t matter. She took us almost to Liorys, where there’s a spring feeding a little stream that flows into the Valda with much joyful splashing, and joined our hands. It was a beautiful and simple ceremony and I could feel the Mother’s presence— rightly so, because we had lost our virginity to each other a few days before.

That had made Valain a master. It had taken both of us by surprise, because we’d been expecting it to happen in a fight or a confrontation or anything that he’d need more anea for than he had, but when we were joined completely at last, minds and bodies alike, he could grasp the whole world, it seemed, and make it do his bidding.

And so could I.

I hadn’t been brought up to expect anything like a trial, and Vauri and others had been counting me a master already, but my world expanded almost the way Valain’s did.

Before, it had always been easy for me to see whatever I wanted, and to use ryst —as they call the solidified force here— to protect myself and other people even from sight, but very hard to affect the physical world at all, even my own body. Now I fancied that I could reach inside a flower in the bud and make it turn from pink to yellow or, more usefully, reach inside someone’s broken leg and make the bone whole.

It wasn’t that we had gained each other’s capabilities: I still couldn’t gain power from water, and he was still bad at hiding himself. Each of us had grown in our own way.

The great hall with all its ancestral seals was ours again. I realised with a shock that the last time I’d seen it used for a feast this size had been at Valain’s brother’s wedding. I thought of Mialle who had been so friendly when I was young and confused. I could see the empty spot she left in the hall as if there was really a Mialle-shaped hole there.

Chapter 9

Vauri

Vauri had sent Jerna to Ildis, and Jerna had been turned back at the gate. She hadn’t tried to sneak in, thinking it better to send someone the guards hadn’t seen yet.

“Wise of you,” Vauri said. “I think it needs a master anyway. I’d go myself, but they know me too well.” Obviously, nobody could go who had been at the trial, though Rusla and Arvi both volunteered.

The mere fact that they’d sent Jerna away for being in the Guild of Anshen —for there was no doubt that that was the cause— was almost sure proof that Meruvin and Liase were in Ildis. The Guild of the Nameless had always been strong there, but they’d never found it necessary to keep anyone out before.

Eventually she sent Laran, dressed as a travelling doctor, with Tyan as his assistant. Laran could disguise them both; it would be easy to get into town, and once they were there, to keep out of sight.

All she could do now was sit back on her haunches and wait. She wasn’t good at waiting. She wanted to act— but she could hardly go and act herself. Not even only because she was too conspicuous; she had to stay in Valdis to look after Valain as she’d promised Orin.

She still wasn’t sure how much of an effort they should make to fetch the little princess back to
Valdis. Her parents would surely consider it kidnapping, and the child was reputed to be difficult. In
fact, she’d heard some people in the palace saying that they were relieved that she was gone. Valain
could just as well take on the regency with the princess absent along with the outlawed king.

At least everybody seemed to be happy with the regent and his spouse. The wedding had been
magnificent, using all the preparations that Meruvin had made for his coronation. Lédu a radiant
bride, Valain without any of his customary self-consciousness, both cloaked in new-found anea. Serla
had told Vauri that the Mother’s spring had unbound Valain’s power. “He ought to have married years
earlier.”

Swearing him in would probably have had the same effect. Vauri couldn’t tell how Valain felt
about missing that opportunity, and she hadn’t had the chance to talk to him except a very few words
at the wedding. Not since the trial, in fact.

No use procrastinating. She went to see her prince.

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Valain was writing a letter when she came in. “Just the person I wanted to see,” he said, sanding it
and handing it to her.

It was an invitation to sit on the regency council. “If you hadn’t turned up just now, the messenger
would have been at the Order house in half an hour and you’d have had to come anyway. The first
meeting is this afternoon.”

“Who else is on it?”

“Serla, the high priestess of Naigha, Ayran astin Brun —the younger one— and Lédu. The people
I trust, basically. I’d like Ferin but I can’t very well have Ferin and Ayran both, and Lédu thought it
would be a good idea to have someone who isn’t in the Guild so it doesn’t look like a Guild affair.”

“Good decision. And Ayran is the better strategist.”

“Yes, he is. I’m making him royal general.”

“Do you expect war?”

“Definitely. Perhaps not soon— they have to get up troops first, and I intend to make it very hard
for anybody to go into or come out of Ildis without us knowing.”

“It’s hard to go into Ildis already, going by Jerna’s story.” Vauri told him what had happened.
He clicked his tongue. “Quick, that brother of mine. Or perhaps my sister-in-law. —Do you
accept?” he said, as an afterthought.

“Of course I do. Were you expecting otherwise?”

He grinned. “What was it that you came to see me about, by the way?”

“Just to congratulate you on becoming a master. And to see how you were doing.” If he was sad or
angry at all, he was hiding it so well that Vauri didn’t want to pry.

“Thank you. I didn’t think getting married would be so good for me. I suppose it’s because of who
I married.”

“You both looked very well at the wedding. You’re still looking well.”

“I didn’t expect that I’d like being regent. I’m surprised that I do. I seem to be rather good at it,
too. It took me a while to see that you’ve been training me for it. I thought you were only teaching me
things.”

That made Vauri laugh. “We were only teaching you things. It’s just that those also happen to be
the things you need to rule a kingdom.”

Valain put his pen and ink away. “Would you like to come and talk to Ayran with me? You and he
are the only military commanders I’ve got at the moment."

"Four hundred here in Valdis," Ayran said. "Two hundred in my own regiment in Veray. How many can you bring in, Vauri?"

"Forty," she said. "Twenty-five if you want only trained masters."

He wrote it down. "Let’s say two hundred from Lenay."

"Lenay is likely to be on the enemy’s side," Valain said. "At least they were eight years ago."

"Strike Lenay, then." He considered his map. "Essle is too far away."

"So is Veray, if you reason that way," Vauri said.

"You have a point. If we send to my cousin in Veray today, and to Tilis and Essle, we can have eleven hundred troops here in seven or eight weeks."

"Is that just the regular troops?" Valain asked.

"Those in training now, yes. I can levy about four times more if it’s necessary. Six times more if it’s really necessary, but that’s farmhands with flails and pitchforks and barely a leather jerkin to their name."

"The question is," Vauri said, "do we go and try to take Ildis with eleven hundred troops, or do we isolate them and let them sit there until they rot?"

"There are nine thousand people in Ildis who have nothing to do with Meruvin or the Guild of the Nameless," Valain said. "I don’t want to let them rot. But if we can keep Meruvin from getting up an army of his own..."

"I’ve sent people to Ildis to reconnoitre," Vauri said. "I’m expecting them back in a week or two."

"I’ll send messengers to Veray and Essle and they can bring back carrier pigeons," Valain said. "If we need the troops they’ll be here in half the time."

Ayran gave him an appreciative look. "Good thinking."

The newly-assembled regency council unanimously voted to send troops to the forest south of Ildis to prevent Meruvin building up an army in the town. There were two reasonable routes from Lenyas to Ildis, and one was through Valdis; any troops coming to Ildis would be more likely to take the west road. Vauri provided half a dozen officers, Ayran half the Valdis force, two hundred strong. "That ought to be enough for now," he said, "and we can’t leave the city undefended."

Privately, Vauri thought that Meruvin was the only one likely to attack the city, and that he couldn’t have much yet to attack the city with, but she agreed with Ayran that two hundred ought to be enough to block the roads.

Messengers went to Veray and Tilis and Essle. They had a stack of copies of a letter to leave at every town and village on the way, urging the people to take up arms and prepare to fight if it became necessary. The crown would give aid if a place didn’t have the resources.

"I wonder how many requests I’ll get," Valain said. "And whether I can afford to answer all of them."

"They’ll be too proud to ask for help," said Lédu, who had drafted the letter. "Unless they’re really so poor that they can’t even afford leather jerkins. It’s just that they’ll be more willing to do it if they know they can count on the king."
“I’m not the king,” Valain said. “I’m only the regent.”

“People in villages in Ryshas or wherever won’t know the difference.”

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“I have a message from Laran,” Vauri told the regency council. “They’re staying the winter. There’s trouble brewing, and they want to be there so they can report.”

“What kind of trouble?” Valain asked.

“People organising themselves against Meruvin. They’re staying with a silversmith on our side and he’s at the head of it. Frankly, I read between the lines that Laran and Tyan would like to have my permission to meddle.”

“And are you going to give your permission?”

“If you— if the council agrees.”

Lédu’s barely suppressed mirth, Ayran’s grin, Serla’s chuckle and the amused look on the high priestess of Naigha’s face told her enough. Valain’s expression was unreadable, but he said, “As long as they don’t put themselves or Ailin into danger.”

“Everybody will be in danger anyway. If they leave Ildis now, they’re in danger of being followed or pitched into the swamp. If they get to help with an uprising the rebels will have two more good men on their side, one a doctor. They can use any help they get. And we’ll have the news first-hand.”

“You don’t have to defend them,” Valain said. “We’ve said yes already.”

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Lédu

My child will not have just one name as is the custom here in Valdyas. She will be called Mialle after Valain’s mother, and Ardyth after Valain’s father’s mother, and Ranaise because that is the name my mother calls herself by when dealing with Valdyans. She will have more names when she is older. I have seven names, and my mother twenty-three, all belonging to different parts of life, different ways of being.

But in daily life, we will call her Ledui Ardyth astin Velain.

It’s considered unlucky here to say the name aloud between the birth of the child and the naming, because then the Nameless can come and seize it. The name, that is, not the child, though he would probably give the child a hard time as well. I’ve seen enough of the dark side of Árankhaen to know that I don’t want him to give my child a hard time. It makes me think of poor little Ailin, too, who we can’t get away from her parents without unleashing the war now instead of later, when we’re better prepared for it.

She is growing. She is taking up more of my body, more of my mind. I can’t help Valain prepare for war as much as I would like, but I know that it’s inevitable: this is something only I can do, and the things we could do together have to take second place.

There were actually four villages that sent a request for help because of my letter. Two only wanted money for equipment and Valain gave their letters to the paymaster because the requests were reasonable. One wanted to send their young men and women to Valdis to join the army, and we had to write a very careful letter saying that the important thing was to have people able to fight in every village, because the war could come everywhere, but they could send two or three and we’d train them and send them back to teach the rest. After all, we’re not calling up the whole army yet, and we didn’t think it wise to tell them at this moment that we might.
And the fourth, and most touching, asked for someone to come and teach their youngsters to fight because there was nobody who could teach and many who wanted to learn. Only a year ago Valain would have gone himself, but now he had to refer it to Vauri and Vauri sent Tyan, who had become a master in the Ildis uprising.

It wasn’t a very effective uprising: it didn’t result in any substantial change. The only thing it accomplished was to make the situation very clear. The city of Ildis considers Meruvin to be the rightful king in exile and little Ailin to be the rightful crown princess. That is, it does now; the uprising of people who didn’t was knocked down. The doctor of the Order was killed while tending to the wounded. Tyan would have brought the silversmith who led the uprising to Valdis if the man hadn’t been too stubborn.

I wanted to know more about Ildis, so I talked to Halla while she worked. Valain talks to Serla the same way, except that Serla is gifted and Halla isn’t, not at all, like Ayran. I still can’t really get used to it that people can be like this and not be regarded as in some way crippled. But Halla is the junior court secretary and historian’s apprentice, and Ayran is Valain’s trusted general, second only to Vauri in his esteem when it comes to military matters.

“Uprisings in Ildis happen,” Halla said. “It’s famous for it. They never come to anything. I don’t know why the Nameless has so much of a foothold there, but it’s been like this for three hundred years.” And she showed me the history books, the older ones written in a crabbed hand that I could barely read but much more understandable when she read it aloud to me—that was the language I learnt as a child, the language of the books in Mother’s library. Halla’s own writing is beautifully clear and I intend to ask her to teach me to write like that, perhaps along with my daughter when she is of an age to learn.

But yes, uprisings in Ildis had happened relentlessly every few decades like a pendulum coming back to its lowest point. And every time the Nameless had come out of it stronger than before. Not stronger every time—that would have been very sinister indeed—but stronger after a period of weakening, as if there was a certain amount of adherence to the Nameless that Ildis needed. “Do you think that’s why Liase chose Ildis?” I asked and, when the words left my lips, knew that I already knew.

“Certainly.”

-Vauri-

“I tolled fifty-two strokes on the market bell for Laran,” Tyan said. “I thought it was the right number.”

“Fifty-three, but I’m sure he wouldn’t have minded.” Vauri could imagine Tyan making his way to the bell in the middle of the chaos, pushing everybody out of his way and keeping the crowd away by sheer willpower as he counted the strokes. It hadn’t only been a proper tribute to Laran, it would also have confused people even more than they already were.

“It was a very good thing to do,” she said. “Are you up to your swearing-in the day after tomorrow, or shall we wait another week?” He was a master now; they shouldn’t wait too long. On the other hand, his mind still looked ragged and his wounds had barely healed. He had stayed in Ildis for a whole season, not fit to travel.

“I’m up to it.”

Vauri nodded. “I’ll want you to tell the council what you’ve told me, but that can wait until afterwards.”
She would send Tyan to Rychie Nesh to teach fighting, far away from Ildis and the war, but still a master’s assignment. He needed a rest, or at least a change, and something useful to do. And when they needed the army, he could bring all of the Ryskas force.

It seemed impossible to take Ildis now, whether they arrived at the gates with two hundred, eleven hundred or eleven thousand. It was far too easy to defend. Also, now that the uprising had failed they could be sure it was full of the enemy. Taking it from within would still work, she thought, but that would take much more time. Better get the army up in case Meruvin did succeed in raising his own army; at the same time they could keep troops from reaching Ildis from the south.

Six of her masters, led by Aine, and half of Ayran’s Valdis troops had been entrenched in the forest between Ildis and north-western Lenyas since the end of the winter. Ayran, though he wasn’t gifted, had wanted gifted officers. She’d have liked to go herself. She was a fighter, not a pen-pusher. No, she was an organiser, a leader; that entailed some pen-pushing at least.

With a sigh she put her mind to Tyan’s swearing-in in two days. She’d done it before, of course, four times in the five years that she’d been commander, but it was still something she needed to study. She didn’t have Laran to make the potion; that was an added complication. It was all here, in the book, and the last four times she’d been at his side when he mixed it, but still. People had died of the potion. Granted, most people didn’t, and if they did it wasn’t because of not mixing it properly but because they were sensitive to some of its components.

She shouldn’t worry that much. It wasn’t usual for her to worry that much.

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Lédu

The midwife had given me a herbal tonic to keep my strength up, and whenever I took it I could feel it working inside my body: each herb on its own as well as the way they worked together. I had been needing it more often lately. Only about three weeks to go; that would finish the two bottles I had left.

The tonic was nasty. Rhaye, practical like all midwives, didn’t believe in sweetening the stuff because that would only dilute it and cause one to have to take more. Though this bottle seemed to be subtly different, more mint, less vervain—

Wait. This wasn’t the usual tonic. Either Rhaye had changed the formula, or—

Valain was there the moment I called him. He must have been very close. He half-carried, half-dragged me to the gallery above the great hall— had I asked him to? I must have, so I could use the sources of power there to counteract the poison. I knew this poison; if I let it do its work it wouldn’t hurt me much, but it would hurt my child, likely kill her. Valain called the midwife, I suppose, because she came and started to fuss over me. Well, Rhaye doesn’t fuss, she bustles.

Valain was keeping me alive and I was keeping the child alive. Now it fell to Rhaye to bring the child into the world. She showed me what my body needed to do and asked me if I could do that deliberately.

It would have been easy if I hadn’t been fighting the poison at the same time. Strength from the medallion flowed through me, and I’d practised controlling my body so often —make a hand or foot cold, grow one lock of hair silver instead of copper, that kind of thing— that I could have forced my womb to contract on demand as well if it hadn’t been for the damn poison. If I concentrated on the one, the other would take its natural course. The child was almost ready to be born yet: strong enough to thrive.

Valain?
I’m here.
I showed him where the poison was, and how I was keeping it back. *Can you do that? Just for one moment?*

He could. Just for one moment. It was enough. I caused the first strong contraction, the way Rhaye had put into my mind, then another, and after that my body seemed to have noticed that it was giving birth and I didn’t need to pay so much attention any more.

Eventually it was Rhaye and Valain who delivered the baby: I was busy all the time. I don’t know how long— it must have been hours. Servants milled about, Rhaye sent her apprentice here and there to fetch this and that, and I saw it all from the corner of my eye, on the surface of my mind, working frantically to keep the poison from reaching my womb before the child was safe.

I heard my daughter’s first thin wail just at the moment that I could hold out no longer.

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The first thing I noticed was pain. I hadn’t felt any pain at all while fighting the poison, I had been too much occupied with making my body do my bidding. Now the pain was everywhere, almost unbearable but I knew that it wouldn’t kill me. In fact, that it hurt so much was a sure sign that it wouldn’t kill me.

_Are you there? _That was Valain. The second thing I noticed.

_Is she all right?_

_Perfectly all right. Very small, but strong and healthy. She’s tired, though, sleeping most of the time._

_It hurts._

_The poison?_

_Everything._

“Rhaye is still here,” Valain said. “Shall I ask her if she can give you something for it, or would you rather deal with it yourself?”

I didn’t care one way or the other. Rhaye came and gave me something to drink that tasted nasty, but it helped: after a while my body wasn’t _all_ pain any more. She also brought our daughter and put her on my chest, sound asleep. “She’ll need a wet-nurse for a few days,” she said. “Your milk is no good now.”

I tried to nod but it hurt too much. “Full of poison.”

“The milk hasn’t come in yet anyway, because she was born so early. But it will, I’m sure of that.”

It did, after a few days, causing more discomfort but in a good cause. There was still poison in it, though; Rhaye showed me how to press it out of my breasts to make room for good milk. It was the wet-nurse, a round cheerful woman with a small baby of her own, who gave our daughter her first nourishment.

I couldn’t stand up yet for the name-giving. It was worrying. I wanted my child to have a name; the names I wanted to give her were fighting their way out of my head. “Can’t you do it?” I asked Valain in desperation.

“Officially, only if you were dead,” he said. I didn’t intend to die, but he did the name-giving anyway, showing little Ardyth to the people at the same time.
**Chapter 10**

**Lédu**

I was ill for a long time. My body wouldn’t cooperate. After a few days I had wholesome milk and could feed Ardyth myself, but my legs weren’t strong enough to carry me and my belly was full of fire. Rhaye said that the pain would go away eventually, but the poison had destroyed my womb and I would remain barren.

That was better than being dead. And Ardyth was alive, too.

“I want to get to know your cousins,” I said to Valain. “Let’s foster a few when Ardyth is older. I don’t want her to grow up alone, and if we need other heirs it’s good to have some ready.” We had always had foster-children at home, even though there were three of us princesses and Mother had only to choose. She hadn’t chosen yet, but I knew that I was out because of marrying the prince-regent of Valdyas. If Mother died without making a choice it would be Kisif, because she was the eldest. Well, perhaps Kisif’s apologetic nobleman wouldn’t make a great king, but he might well be an adequate and inoffensive one.

Valain liked the idea. “We’ll look into it after this is over,” he said. “I’m tempted to send you two to a safe place. I don’t know whether the war will come to Valdis, but it might.”

I didn’t want to be away from Valain, from the palace, from the council, but I did want to keep Ardyth safe and if going somewhere else would keep her safer than in Valdis, we ought to do that.

There had been news of outbreaks of fighting in Ildis, skirmishes with the watchers to the south. And somehow Meruvin had been able to gather troops to him. Not many —perhaps they’d trickled in as merchants and students—but enough to worry Vauri’s informants.

The council met in our rooms, because I couldn’t go down the stairs yet. I could barely sit up for a whole meeting. If Valain sent me somewhere safe, how would I travel? Ryshas was safe enough, but that was weeks away with a wagon. Anyway, it was winter and travelling was awkward at best. The palace was easy enough to defend. The only danger could come from within.

We still didn’t know how the poison had come to be among the bottles of tonic. Someone who didn’t know Rhaye might have suspected her —though she wouldn’t have had a motive—but she was as outraged as I was. We tried to find something to trace, a suspicion of someone’s handling it, but the perpetrator either was a master of secrecy or, more likely, wasn’t gifted at all.

“We could ask Torin,” Valain said. “He uses bottles like that, he probably knows where whoever filled it can have got it.”

Rhyae went to ask the doctor and came back angry and puzzled. “He practically threw me out of the room, as if I was accusing him of poisoning you!”

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**Vauri**

How Meruvin had got up anything like an army was a mystery. Perhaps they had all come in individually, got up like innocuous travellers. They’d have to watch the Valdis road as well.

Vauri was still chafing to go to the army herself. It became worse in early spring when a message from Aine came that bands of soldiers were coming out of the town to try to clear the road. They’d almost done it once, too. Two of Aine’s division had been killed and Aine herself wounded, not dangerously, but making her lose the use of her sword arm for a while.
“Go, then,” Jerna said. “You’re driving yourself mad. Rayin will hold the fort for you.”

“Hmm, perhaps you’re right. Would you like to come as my adjutant?”

“That’s an honour. I suppose they won’t let me in this time either, but we’ll be openly the enemy so it doesn’t matter.”

“I didn’t plan on actually going in, in fact,” Vauri said. It was only that she wanted to be with her officers who were doing something, not to sit in Valdis waiting for news of their doings. Valain and Lédu could look after themselves, or at least after each other, and there were other people on the regency council to plan strategy. The high priestess of Naigha turned out to be surprisingly good at it.

Spring meant that the surroundings of Ildis were wet, wetter than usual. Even to the south the ground was soggy, high as it was. They had to dismount at times because the horses were too heavy with a rider.

Fortunately the army was on even higher ground. Vauri remembered the place from picnics and outings when she was a child. She had played tag under these trees. It was strange to see the camp set up here, rain falling steadily on it, in and out of sight as the road bent.

“Halt! Who goes there?” The patrol had been completely silent. Now they were in the middle of the path: two men and a woman in the colours of the House Velain.

“Arnei Vauri,” Vauri said. “Commander of the Order of the Sworn.”

“Serlei Jerna of the Order of the Sworn.”

One of the men nodded to the others and went off in the direction of the camp. Presently he came back with Aine, her shoulder bandaged and her arm in a sling.

“Vauri! It’s so good to see you. If you’d called me I’d have let you through without a hitch.”

Vauri grinned. “It’s nice to see that your patrols are efficient. And I didn’t want to run the risk of alerting the enemy. We don’t know what they can see and hear.”


“Probably not, but I might be able to notice it going on.”

Aine gave them ale and hard bread in her tent. “We’re waiting for supplies,” she said. “Ale is about the only thing we have enough of. We’ve found a brewer just outside the walls who is glad of the extra custom and doesn’t like Meruvin either.”

“There’s a wagon coming right behind us,” Vauri said. “Our horses could go faster in the mud than their ox. Has the weather been like this all the time?”

“Worse, mostly. You’ve come at a good time.”

“If this is a good time I don’t envy you,” Vauri said with a scowl.

“Come on, you’ve been envying them all winter,” Jerna said.

“You wouldn’t have liked it,” Aine said. “It’s only the last week that anything’s been dry, and now it’s raining again. I have the troops digging ditches as well as latrines.”

As they were inspecting the camp the supply wagon arrived, accompanied by another patrol. The driver sported a big grin. “They thought I was the enemy,” he said, “but when they saw I was bringing the food I was their friend. You the general?”

“One of them,” Vauri said. “I won’t be in your way. I’m glad you made it through all that mud.”

Over supper Aine filled them in. There had been cautious charges from Ildis every couple of days, with no casualties to speak of on either side, until the series of more daring forays at the end of winter. Meruvin hadn’t shown himself, of course.

“I wish we could draw him out somehow,” Jerna said. “I feel like standing at the gate and blowing raspberries at him.”
“Hmm,” said Aine’s second Mernath. “We could. I think I just did, come to think of it.”

They hadn’t noticed him before, but there he was, his long legs stretched out between Vauri and Aine, his uniform dishevelled as if he’d been crawling through the shrubbery.

“When did you come in?” Aine looked at him searchingly. “And what did you do?”

“Just now, and I caught one of the stragglers from the last raid. Whacked him a few, let him go.”

“You let him go?”

Mernath shrugged. “If I’d taken him back to camp we wouldn’t have known what to do with him anyway. I thought I’d let him run to their highnesses to tell the tale. There were eleven of them and we beat them back with five. I whispered a thing or two into his ear about how we can do that every time.”

“Can we?” Vauri asked.

“Let them think so. Even the time Aine was shot and we lost Erian and Selle, they were worse off.”

“I think it’s time to let Ayran know that he should bring the levies in,” Vauri said. “Can you get up a force of about a hundred tomorrow or the day after?”

“Sure,” Aine said. “Hassle them a bit?”

“That’s the idea.”

“I wish I could be in on it myself.” Aine tried to shrug and winced. “There’s a doctor of our Guild in town, confound it. If you happen to get through, tell her I’d like to see her.”

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**Valain**

Valain met Torin in the dining hall and sat down next to him. “Why were you so abrupt to Rhaye?”

“I didn’t mean to, Your Highness. But she was very— strong-minded, let’s call it that. I almost thought she suspected me of the poisoning.”

“She only came to inquire where you buy the bottles, because the poison bottle was the same kind, slightly different from the ones she uses. If we can find the supplier of those bottles we’ll have somewhere to start looking.”

“I must admit that it’s likely to have been one of mine. Some went missing a few weeks ago. My thought was that a servant had broken them while cleaning, because I found some shards on the floor. It didn’t seem worth mentioning at the time. They were empty.”

Valain wished that Lédu were there. He was sure that the doctor was lying, or at least not telling the whole truth, but he didn’t have a leg to stand on. Torin’s smooth talking didn’t mean that he was guilty. But something was niggling at his mind, something subtly wrong. He didn’t want to invite Torin to their rooms— suppose he was guilty, then taking him to Lédu in her present condition was a very bad idea.

“We’ll be looking for a thief as well as a murderer, then.” Was that relief that he saw in Torin’s face?

He went to talk to Lédu. “I don’t trust him one bit,” he said. “I’ve never liked him, even when I was little, but Mother thought the world of him.”

“I don’t think I like him either. Not that I’ve seen much of him. Rhaye could do everything, we didn’t need a doctor. We could do with some midwives like that in Velihas.”

“Do you think it was him?”
“I don’t know. Do you?”

“Frankly, yes, but I don’t have anything on him that I can prove it with. I keep telling myself that it can’t be true, it’s only that I don’t like him. Anyway, why would he do it?”

“Perhaps Meruvin is paying him. Or threatening him.”

“Then he’d kill me, not you.”

Lédu snorted. “Whoever it was didn’t want to kill me. They just wanted to keep our child from being born. No rival for little Ailin.”

“That’s silly. Ailin is the heir. And I think she has a baby brother or sister by now.”

“How does it work—if Meruvin dies, is killed, whatever, does the succession go to your line? Will Ailin be out of it too?”

“I don’t know. We should ask Serla, she knows that kind of thing.”

“You go and ask Serla. I have work to do. Rhaye showed me how to set some things right.”

“Do you need me to keep watch?”

“I can protect myself,” Lédu said with a smile.

She could, too, far better than Valain could. He kissed her, blushing, and left her to her own devices. Going out, he noticed an armed guard at the entrance to the royal apartments. Clearly Lédu was even better at protecting herself than he’d assumed.

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Lédu

I protected myself, but not before I had protected Ardyth fiercely. Not a mouse would get into her cradle.

I’d have to go very deep into myself this time. Nothing in the world can bring something back to life that’s been killed. Parts of me were in that state, but Rhaye had said that most could be salvaged. I would never have more children—the poison had done a thorough job there—but apart from that I could be whole again. It would take work, though, that I’d been too weak for until now.

Weakness aside it was painful to see the wreckage, so soon after I’d got to know my body intimately on becoming a master. I was almost too desperate to even try to repair anything. Rhaye believed in me, though; I ought to believe in myself.

Working inside myself was harder than making a lock of my hair grow out white. And now there was a real penalty for getting it wrong. I felt sweat dripping off my forehead and came up for a moment to see if there was a cloth handy.

There was a presence.

It wasn’t Valain, who I’d have expected, or Rhaye. It didn’t look like a gifted presence at all. It probably wasn’t one of the servants because it wasn’t moving.

I came out of the trance all the way and opened my eyes. Torin was standing in the middle of the room, a pillow in his hands, looking halfway between confused and angry. His face changed as soon as he noticed that I was looking at him: now it was between confused and apologetic.

It took a while for my voice to do my bidding, and I spent the time watching him get ever more uncomfortable. Eventually I trusted myself not to sound silly.

“Which of us have you come to kill this time?”

He tried to find words. I wasn’t even ashamed of making him squirm. “I didn’t—I came to—”

“Yes?”
“You were lying in an uneasy position. I thought to make you more comfortable.”

“I’m surprised that you even got in. The prince-regent must have left the door open. I wonder how you got past the guard, though. I’m not at all surprised that you couldn’t put your pillow anywhere. I did all I could to prevent that. You tried to smother my baby, didn’t you? But you couldn’t get through my protection.”

He was sweating now, squirming harder.

“I would entreat you not to enter my rooms ever again, even if the door is open, even if the guard lets you through. If you have business with the prince-regent, you can conduct it elsewhere. You will not have business with me. Ever.” I wasn’t as coherent as I’d have wished, but he seemed to understand. He threw the pillow on the crib—it slid off the dome of protection and fell to the floor—and rushed from the room.

Valain!

I expected him to be in Serla’s workroom. He wasn’t. I looked around the palace, then in town, and found him at the Spotted Dog with Serla, deep in conversation.

Lédu! Are you all right? What happened?

Torin tried to kill us.

I’m on my way.

When Valain arrived, Serla in tow, I was still shaking. “Didn’t you seal the door?” I asked.

“You already had. I thought it would be silly to put another seal on it.”

I must have lifted the seal myself, then. I couldn’t imagine Torin breaking through it. I frantically tried to recall what exactly I had done and couldn’t find a single moment when I could have lifted the seal, unless I’d released it without noticing when I released a flow of power in my body. Come to think of it, that was very likely.

And I’d put a guard at the door. “What about Geran? I told him not to let anyone in except you.”

“Ryath was on guard,” Serla said. “I’ll get her.”

Apparently I’d been in there for longer than Geran’s watch and Ryath had relieved him. “It was the doctor and he said he had an appointment with you. I knew you were ill, my lady. I had no reason to think there was anything wrong!”

“No, you didn’t,” Valain said. “You couldn’t have known. Dismissed.”

Ryath fled, confused. I resolved to seek her out to make amends; after all, it wasn’t her fault. Geran should have told her only to let Valain in, but I couldn’t blame him either. I’d felt too safe in our own rooms to think of it.

“Next time I’d like you to keep watch, please,” I said to Valain. I grasped his hand and held it very tight.

“We’re sure, aren’t we?” Serla asked.

“I’d say yes,” Valain said. “We still can’t prove the poisoning, and this time he hasn’t actually done anything, but he as good as admitted it. I’m sending out people to catch him.”

“I’m not sure if he meant to kill me or Ardyth,” I said. “He was kind of hovering between us.”

Serla snorted. “Likely that he wanted to kill you both, couldn’t decide which to do first.”

“He couldn’t have killed either of us. No way to reach us.” Ardyth was still sleeping under my protection. I retrieved the pillow from the floor and tossed it on the crib again; it slid off again.

Serla raised her eyebrows. “That’s impressive.”

I couldn’t suppress a grin. “If only I’d done the door that way, too.”
**Chapter 11**

**Vauri**

In the woody landscape, a hundred men and women looked like a daunting force. Vauri didn’t know what they would look like in the open.

Aine sent Mernath to the west with half of them. “Do you want to go?” she asked Vauri. “I’ll let you take the rest east. You can have Faran’s command if he doesn’t mind.”

“Not for a moment,” Faran said. “Meruvin probably wouldn’t even recognise any of us. It’s much more impressive if the commander herself shows up.”

They had to go in single file as soon as they left the wood; there was only one way through the swamp on this side. They crossed a shallow arm of the Ilda and were suddenly on higher ground again. It wasn’t dry enough for the town to have spread to it, though there were some shacks and a larger building that must be the brewery because the wind brought a whiff of beery scent from it. To her left Vauri could see Mernath’s division crossing the water. They, at least, looked like a large enough company, so Vauri’s must too.

Jerna touched her elbow. “May I blow the raspberry— I mean the horn?”

Vauri gave it to her with a grin. “If you can.”

The first attempt was pathetic, but eventually Jerna managed to get a passable signal out of the horn. She was so pleased with it that she repeated it. It brought people from the shacks and the brewery, but there was no movement on the town wall.

“Once more?” Jerna asked, panting.

“Let’s wait. It might be a trap.” Vauri cast out with her mind, but couldn’t see any activity behind the walls except normal town life. Well, rather more people in the Guild of the Nameless than there would have been in another town, but this was Ildis, after all.

*Try the gate?* Mernath asked.

The gate on this side was small and unremarkable, only large enough for a brewery cart. Vauri wouldn’t have liked to try to storm the main gate with a hundred, but this one would be easy. And it didn’t look as if it was well-defended at all. *All right. Let’s talk to the brewer. He probably knows how to get in.*

Vauri and Mernath met the brewer outside his house among his gaggle of small children. “Come to drink my ale at the source, eh, Mernath?” he asked. “I don’t think I have enough for so many. Who’s the lady?”

“I’m Arnei Vauri,” Vauri said.

“She’s my commander from Valdis.”

“Well, I can spare a pint for your commander. And for you, too, of course.” The brewer winked. “Arin! Bring us two mugs from the barrel in the corner. Oh, and you might fill mine while you’re at it.”

The eldest child ran, his sisters trailing behind him.

“So,” the brewer said after he’d introduced himself as Jeran, “what are you really here for? I suppose it’s not my ale, much as I like to be flattered. I think it’s my connections, right?”

Vauri nodded. “Yes, you could call it that. We’d like to pass that gate.”

“All twelve dozen of you?”

“It’s only a hundred —don’t tell— but yes, eventually. Probably not all at once, though.”
When the children arrived with the ale, Jeran motioned for Vauri and Mernath to come inside. “Better sit down with that. —You won’t be able to do it on the sly.”

“We don’t intend to do it on the sly.”

The brewer’s face changed to incredulous. “Arin, get your mother. You stir the mash for a while, that’ll give you strong arms.”

Jeran’s wife came in wiping her hands on her apron. She had strong arms already and a red face from standing in the steam. When she saw Vauri and Mernath, she dropped her camouflage and Vauri could see that she was a journeyman in the Guild of Anshen, close to being a master, but unstable, her anie full of ragged patches. She was very young, barely old enough to be the mother of Arin, who looked about eight.

“Now you know why we live here instead of in town,” Jeran said. “We tried, but it drove Alyse bonkers. Even here she’s hiding most of the time.”

“That will probably be easier when you’re a master,” Vauri said.

“That’s what the doctor said,” Alyse said. “Erne, you know.”

If this was the Erne she’d known as a child, Vauri did indeed know. She nodded.

“Are you going to besiege the town?”

“Well, not besiege so much, there’s only a hundred of us here. Think of us as a swarm of hornets.”

That made Alyse giggle and look younger still. Jeran put a huge arm around her. “I told you they’d come.”

“I’d better get back to my mash tun, Arin can’t manage for long.” She left a noticeable gap when she had gone.

“We married when she was thirteen,” Jeran said. “She hadn’t even noticed she was gifted. Only came out when she was with child.”

He didn’t look all that much older than Alyse himself. Vauri could picture them, a teenaged couple very much in love, trying to make the best of life. And then it turned out that one of them was gifted. “How did she end up in the Guild of Anshen, here in Ildis?”

“It was the midwife and the doctor who got her in the Guild. It’s all for the best, I think. The other Guild are a creepy bunch.”

Mernath’s dry laugh cut through Vauri’s musing. “You can say that.”

“Well.” Jeran stood up. “Do you want to get into town with all of your troops, or only the two of you?”

Vauri and Mernath looked at each other. “Just the two of us for now,” Vauri said. “We can worry about the troops later. We’ll spread the rumour that there’s a large force at the south gate and if anyone comes to look they can catch them.”

“Do you want to get to safety before that happens?” Mernath asked. Jeran shrugged. “The field’s full of soldiers.”

“If there’s fighting here your house may not stand afterwards,” Vauri said. “Our army isn’t the only one around. I’ll send you to our camp with an escort so you’ll be safe unless we’re completely overrun.”

“Send Alyse and the children. I want to be here.”

“All right. We’ll need you to get us into town anyway.”

In the end Alyse left on a large wagon loaded with barrels, Arin and his sisters riding on top. Arin wanted to stay and fight. “When you’re fifteen,” Vauri said firmly. “Now I need you to take care of your sisters. Can you do that?”
The boy nodded earnestly. “I look after them all the time.”
“Good. And look after your mother, too.”

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Valain

“I can’t say for certain,” Serla said. “I don’t have a precedent. It simply hasn’t ever happened before. Logically, I’d say that nothing can touch Ailin’s right to succeed except her own actions. That means you remain regent until she’s of age and either wants the throne back or turns out to have joined the insurrection.”

“If she turns out to have joined the insurrection, doesn’t that make us the usurpers?” Lédu was sharp as usual, her wit not diminished by the fright she’d had.

“It does, sort of,” Valain said. He felt like a usurper already. He’d taken the regency without any idea of what it would be like. Now he knew: all the responsibility of being king without any of the benefits. If he’d said no, he’d have been safe and sound in the Order.

No, that wasn’t true; either he’d have been married to Lédu instead of in the Order, same as he was now, or he’d have been in the Order and far from safe. If he hadn’t been the regent, he could have gone to Ildis himself. It was very frustrating to have to sit on his hands while other people — Vauri!— did all the work. There wasn’t any real work to be done in Valdis at the moment, nothing that made a difference.

There were guards after Torin, but Valain still wanted to do something himself. He cursed the man for not being gifted so he couldn’t find him easily.

He wandered aimlessly through Torin’s workroom, vaguely trying to find a clue in the objects the doctor had left behind. It gradually dawned on him that there was a distinct lack of objects. In fact, very little of what he’d expect a doctor to have in his workroom — jars of medicine, instruments, bandages— was there.

He almost ran to Torin’s bedchamber, but remembered his dignity just in time. The bedchamber wouldn’t run away. In the bedchamber, though, it was even more clear that Torin himself had done just that: run away.

There was a bell-pull at the door. Valain rang it. The servant who appeared was the old man he’d seen following Torin around to carry his medicine basket. “My lord?”

“I’m looking for the doctor, but he seems to have left.”

“There was a family emergency, my lord. He left not an hour ago.”

“Did he say where?”

The servant wrung his hands. “Not to me, my lord.” Nervous, but probably not lying.

If he hadn’t told his own assistant, he probably hadn’t told anybody. Ildis was likely, of course. The guards were searching in Valdis itself, and the Order would have sent someone to Ildis in better times, but everybody who could be spared was in Ildis already.

The old man was still hovering. “Anything else, my lord?”

Valain shook his head. “Thank you for your help, anyway.”

Well, it had been help of some kind. It confirmed what he’d already thought.

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“Not an hour ago, his servant said. He didn’t know where. I wish I had someone on the Ildis road,
because that’s where he probably is.”

“I’ll hold you. You go,” Lédu said quietly.

Valain tried to suppress the sinking feeling that the thought of being out of his body still gave him. He was a master, after all; he could do this. “Yes.”

Lédu held his hand. She was his lifeline, his anchor. He sent his consciousness out, his inner being. He could see himself slumped over the bed, his head in Lédu’s lap. Don’t stay. Go. He didn’t know whether he was telling that to himself or Lédu was telling him, but he went, over the West Gate, hovering above the Ildis road like an invisible bird.

It was surprisingly easy to find Torin. He was on the Ildis road indeed, riding a piebald horse that Valain didn’t recognise —probably from a livery stable, or he’d bought it for the purpose— at breakneck speed. Valain wondered how long the horse would bear that pace. Even though Torin hadn’t gone far yet, they’d never overtake him at this rate. At least there was hardly anywhere to go except Ildis on that road.

Valain came back into his body all at once, giddy with the relief of doing something hard that had turned out to be easy. When he had pulled himself together he saw Lédu looking at him expectantly. “He’s away to Ildis,” he said.

“I think we should let him go for now. At least we know where he is. It’s not as if he can get away unseen or do anything to us from there.”

“All our enemies in one place.” He stood up, weak-kneed. “I’ll send Vauri a message, at least.”

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Vauri

Vauri was in no position to receive any messages. Jeran had taken her and Mernath into Ildis heavily camouflaged, in nondescript clothes, rolling barrels. He’d told the guards that he’d had to call in some help because he didn’t have his wagon, which was of course completely true.

They left him as soon as he could take care of the remaining barrels himself. “Can you—” he asked. “Yes, of course you can. Good luck.”

The inn was just opening. They sat down in front and ordered some of the last of the previous barrel. The landlord apologised profusely that he had to let the new one settle, but it was excellent nevertheless.

“Of course you can, he said.” Mernath’s scowl came through in his voice. “Did you feel those seals? Lady Thing must be protecting the whole town.”

“She’s probably got her people for that. I can’t imagine her doing it all by herself. Even if she was a grand master, and she isn’t, she simply couldn’t keep it up.”

“Hmm.” He sniffed the air. “Smells like Lady Thing, anyway.” He got up and walked down the street one way, then the other. “I can’t see any of ours. They must hide themselves as well as we do. What shall we do, split up and spread the word?”

“Good idea. I’ll tackle the silversmiths. I don’t mind them knowing whose daughter and sister I am.”

“I’ll submerge myself in the market.” He went inside to pay and came out with a grin on his face. “One.”

“What did you say?”

“That I’d heard the royal army was outside the gates. He said it was high time.”

“Did he have the right royal army in mind?”
I think so. Meruvin’s army is already in town, not outside. He said something like ‘that’ll teach him’, too.”

Vauri hadn’t been in Ildis since she was twelve, but her feet found the streets without any trouble. That was a good thing, because she needed most of her attention to keep hidden. The silversmiths’ quarter was as crowded as it had been twenty years ago, but there were many more of the Nameless’ servants now. Now that Meruvin and Liase had set up court in Ildis, the town seemed to be even more of a stronghold of the enemy.

She ended up at her own old house. Father’s workshop, Sedi’s workshop. A portly man was just going in. Vauri stood in the doorway, leaning inside. “Would you be Rhyn, Fine Silverware?”

He laughed. “If I were I’d be selling myself, wouldn’t I? But yes, Rhyn is the name, you’ve read my sign right. Come in. How can I help you?”

“I was born in this house.”

Rhyn looked her up and down. “You’d be Sedi’s little sister, then, by your age. Wait— I know— Vauri.”

“Exactly.”

The silversmith shut the door behind Vauri. “Sorry, closed,” he said to nobody in particular in the street. He made as if to seal the doorway, but hesitated. “Will you?”

He’s one of us. They sat down, he on the workbench, she on a rickety chair.

“You’ve come a long way,” Rhyn said. “Last time I saw you you were such a little thing.”

“I don’t remember you at all,” she admitted.

“Sedi and I were apprentices together. Both ways. I rather fancied her, but she had little use for men. Good to work with, though.” His eyes glazed over in remembrance. “But you haven’t come for old time’s sake. I suppose it’s Guild work.”

She nodded. “Are you the head of the Guild here?”

“Nah, that’s Erne, you’ll meet her yet. She’s better at getting people together. I’m just one of her minions.”

The thought of Rhyn being anybody’s minion was so absurd that Vauri couldn’t help laughing.

“Seriously, I’m doing quite a lot of the work. A silversmith’s life is easier than a doctor’s. I’m not being called out at all hours.”

“Good. We’re here to spread the rumour of a large army at the gates, but I’d like to muster the Guild too if I can.”

“I can introduce you to some people. And we’ll spread your rumour on the way. How large an army?”

She felt the blood rising to her face. “Two hundred at the moment. But the prince-regent’s general is bringing at least five times more.”

“The prince-regent is young Vegelin, I presume? Who is his general?”

“Ayran astin Brun. Not gifted at all, that’s his brother’s province, but the best strategic mind we have.”

They went out into the street. Vauri had been so occupied with protecting herself that she hadn’t looked around properly. Now, at Rhyn’s side, she was free to do it. People were going about their business as she remembered from when she’d lived here herself, but there was a subdued quality about the bustle as if everyone was watching their steps. Also, it was one of those silent windless days, when any sound is muffled by some agency of the weather.

Creepy, she remarked to Rhyn.
It’s been like that since they’re here.

It must be Liase’s seal, then. She grinned when she remembered Mernath calling her ‘Lady Thing’. That reminded her to look for Mernath; they were getting close to the market quarter.

He wasn’t far: just ahead of them in a crowd of young men. There was some commotion, much jostling, people being pushed, raw power flying about. “That’s for joining the enemy!” someone shouted. Then the crowd cleared and a man was left lying on the ground. Mernath. She thought for one horrible moment that the others had killed him, then realised that they’d only knocked him out. He had an ugly head wound, though, as if he’d been hit with something hard and sharp-edged.

“I’ll get the doctor,” Rhyn’s voice said somewhere above her.

It was some time until the doctor arrived. Vauri threw protection around herself and Mernath, hiding them as a matter of course. It was successful: people tripped over them. She didn’t want to move him, though, not with that wound.

“Let me look at that,” said the doctor. “Easy, now— we don’t want to jolt him. Airath, no less, well, he had it coming to him.”

“Mernath,” Vauri protested. “He’s called Mernath.”

“What?”

Vauri looked up and saw the doctor bending over them. That face was familiar. Very much so.

“Erne?”

“Yes, who else did you expect? Right, we can move him now. Gently.”

Between them they got Mernath into a draper’s shop, where he bled on a bolt of cloth. “Hey!” the draper shouted.

“I’ll pay for a yard of that,” Rhyn said. “And we’ll have half a yard of fine washed linen for bandages.”

“You stink of the Nameless,” the draper said, but he took Rhyn’s money regardless and cut the linen, grumbling. “I know you. You’re the one who led the uprising against the king.”

Yes, of course, Vauri thought. That had to have been Rhyn.

She held Mernath’s head for Erne to stitch and bandage. “You’re right, he can’t be Airath, he doesn’t have the stitches I did last time. Nasty gash. A finger’s breadth lower and he’d have lost that eye. Well, he’ll have an interesting scar for the girls to gape at. Hand me those shears, please, Vauri.”

The draper didn’t even protest. When Erne had finished the bandage she put the shears into his hands, thanking him, and looked at Vauri properly for the first time.

“Well, I never. It’s so normal to see you here that I never noticed it was you. You’ve grown.”

Vauri laughed. “I’m quite a bit older.”

“It’s not just that and you know it. Say, can we go somewhere we’re not in the way and talk? We’ll get a cart or something for this man who isn’t Airath. You know who he is, don’t you?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Rhyn had already secured a hand-cart; it smelt faintly of apples. They made a strange little procession going through the narrow streets, Rhyn wheeling the cart with the still unconscious Mernath, and Vauri and Erne following.

“That smell is making me hungry,” Vauri said. “I don’t think I’ve eaten anything since this morning.”

“Here, have an apple.” Rhyn took one out of his pocket, end-of-season wrinkly, and another one for Erne. “The cart wasn’t quite empty when I borrowed it.”

“Er, Rhyn,” Erne asked, “did the fruit-seller know you were borrowing it?”

“Definitely. It was Morin and he was almost sold out. As long as I bring it back before tomorrow
Erne’s house stood out in its street: she had bought and rebuilt a house in the poor quarter to start her own practice in just as Vauri was leaving for Valdis. It was much larger and neater than its poky, tumbledown neighbours. There was a small crowd in front of it.

“Emergency,” Erne said. “Let us through, please.” She gave the key to Rhyn and went to talk to some people in the crowd who looked as if they had emergencies of their own. Vauri trailed after her as she’d done as a child, before she’d turned out to be cut out for neither doctor nor silversmith and had gone to Valdis to join the Order. Eventually, everything seemed to be resolved. Erne took Vauri inside, where Rhyn had already carried Mernath to a convenient cot.

“First things first.” Erne went to examine him. “Still out, probably concussed. Can’t do anything for him now except wait until he wakes up. I don’t know how much he’ll pick up if we talk in this room— anything we’re likely to say that you don’t want him to hear?”

Vauri shook her head. “He’s one of mine. Master in the Order of the Sworn.”

“Yours?”

“I’m commander of the Order now.”

Erne’s eyes grew wide. “Great Anshen. Sedi would have been so proud of you.”

“Er, do you still need me?” Rhyn asked. “I have work to do.”

“No— yes, but not right now, I think. I’ll call you when we need you here.”

“It doesn’t hurt if you tell people about the army at the gates,” Vauri said. “Friend and enemy alike. Better confuse them a bit.”

Rhyn’s grin was positively boyish. “Will do.”

“So,” Erne said, “it’s been a long time. I must say that I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.” It was true; she hadn’t known until she said it. Her childhood in Ildis hadn’t been easy, but Erne had been one of the bright spots in it.

“Now tell me, who is this man if he’s not Airath?”

“Mernath, one of the masters I sent here from the Order, second-in-command of the army. He grew up here, perhaps you’re confusing him with one of his family.”

“He could be Airath’s twin. Oh!— perhaps he is. I know Airath has a brother somewhere.”

“That would explain why the people who beat him up thought he’d joined the enemy. They must have thought that he was Airath, as you did.”

“We’ll have to wait until he wakes up and ask him. Or round up Airath and ask him.”

They laughed about that, twenty years fallen away between them. They didn’t really have to talk about old times, but eventually they did; mostly about Sedi. The talk came round to the present state of the town, and Vauri realised that it was getting late.

“I didn’t just come here to see you, you know,” she said.

“I knew that. You said you’d sent the army. Are you in command of it?”

“No, that’s Aine, I’m just here to inspect.”

“But you couldn’t resist doing things yourself, could you? Same old Vauri,” Erne said with a grin.

“You know me far too well.”

“You haven’t changed all that much. Grown, as I said. In all things.” She got out bread and a hard dry sausage and they ate, still watching Mernath who was beginning to stir. Outside, it grew darker. Erne lit a lamp and put a screen between it and Mernath’s cot. “I can’t eat in the dark. Let’s hope it doesn’t bother him too much.” She went to stir the kettle that had been over the fire since they’d come in, pronounced it done and poured the concoction through a sieve.
Vauri sniffed it. “Willow-bark, vervain, lavender, what else?”

“Pennyroyal, sage, some honey to take the bitterness away. I admit that it tastes awful, but it does wonders for headache.” As if that had been the cue, Mernath opened his eyes and groaned.

“Light. Head hurts.”

“Sure your head hurts, someone hit you on it with a sharp thing. Here, drink some of this. It’s horrible but it works.”

“Stitch me up?”

“Yes, I did. I’m Erne. Heard of me?”

“Doctor.”

“Exactly.” Erne held the cup for Mernath, who made a face at it. He drank half the cup, then turned his head away. “That’ll do,” Erne said. “Now let me look at you.” She shone into his eyes with the lamp, making him wince. “Hmm, better than I thought. How many fingers?”

“Three.”

“Right. What’s your name?”

“Mernath. Arvei Mernath.”

“Not Airath?”

“’S my brother. Thought I was him.”

“Who thought that?”

“Dunno. Guys.”

“We’ll leave you alone now so you can sleep. Vauri and I are right on the other side of that screen if you need us. Don’t get out of bed, just call. All right?”

“Yes.”

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**Chapter 12**

**Lédu**

You wouldn’t think that a grand master would have any trouble going out of his body and coming back safely, but Valain was mortally afraid of it. It was about the only thing that he was afraid of. I had to carry him, more or less, to be his fixed point to cast off from. He could do it, no problem at all, and once he was underway everything went well, but he was still afraid.

I could have gone out if I’d been fit, but my body and mind were still not in one piece. Also, I didn’t relish the thought of meeting Torin on the road, even if I could be invisible. Valain intended to take Torin to task anyway, so if Torin saw him it wouldn’t matter. I expected Valain to be fully capable of fighting Torin, even without his body, and winning. Not that I thought Torin, who wasn’t gifted as far as we knew, would see him; perhaps Valain would only give him goosebumps.

Vauri will have the message in a few days. It won’t arrive before Torin reaches Ildis, of course; however fast the messenger’s horse it can’t overtake him. And the question is whether Vauri will be able to do anything— it’s not as if we have anything definite to charge Torin with. Challenge him, perhaps, but that’s for me and Valain to do, not for any proxy, not even Vauri. But it doesn’t hurt if she knows, if only so that she can watch out for him.
All we can do now is wait. I don’t like waiting, and Valain doesn’t either. He’s pacing in the library: a bad sign. I tried to get him to go to the Order house to do some sparring, but all his usual sparring partners have gone to Ildis and the people still here aren’t in his league. How do you occupy a regent if he can’t leave his capital and everything that’s going on is going on outside it?

If we have a full-blown war he’ll probably go to Ildis after all. The way it looks now it’s likely that I’ll still be nursing then, so I’ll have to stay here with Ardyth. The stories about famous queens in history going into battle with infants at their breast are just that: stories.

Ardyth is growing fast. She can roll over by herself and grabs at everything she sees. Her hair is red, red, red. She gets it from both sides, of course, but I’ve never seen hair that red on the head of someone that young. When she grows up she’ll be stunning. Come to think of it she’s stunning now, but we probably think that only because she’s ours. I’m wondering about little Ailin, who has brown hair and a temper, and the baby sibling I’ve never seen. If the army captures or kills Meruvin and Liase we’re likely to get them to foster— will I be able to cope with Ailin? Well, solve that when it happens.

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Valain

“You will stop pacing,” Serla said, “or do it somewhere else. You’re driving me crazy.”

“The whole thing is driving me crazy,” Valain said, but he stopped pacing and sat down on a table.

“There’s nothing I can do.”

“Oh yes you can. Ayran is due back with the first of the levies in a day or two.”

“I didn’t know that!”

“I didn’t know either until I read this letter just now.” She waved it at him. “Letters go faster than troops but he was already in Erday when he sent it.”

“Erday? Is that Valdie Erday in Lenyas?”

“Yes, he got up some troops there, even if most of Lenyas is on the enemy’s side.”

“Let me see the letter, please.”

It was a terse message. Ayran was on his way to Valdis with the levies, about two thousand men and women, and would need temporary accommodation. Nothing about the troops from Erday. Valain looked at Serla questioningly.

“The messenger told me about Erday,” she said. “He’s still here, do you want to see him?”

“Yes, if I can.”

Serla sent him to the kitchen, where the messenger was eating cold chicken. He was a thin young man with untidy brown hair and an air of nervousness about him. Valain sat down across from him at the table.

“Thank you for bringing the message,” he said, and when the man looked up, “I’m Vegelin astin Velain.”

The young man’s eyes widened. “The prince-regent himself!”

“Quite,” Valain smiled at him. “You’re from Erday, aren’t you?”

“Lenay, actually. I went to Erday when Lenay became ...well... uncomfortable.”

“And you’re not even in the wrong Guild for Lenay.” Valain hadn’t noticed until he said it, but it was as clear as the dirt on the messenger’s boots. He was a journeyman, protecting himself with difficulty, and nervous about being in what he could probably only see as a stronghold of the enemy.
“Guild doesn’t matter when people want you gone.” He grinned uneasily. “Ainei Fian, at your service.”

“I’ll gladly accept that.”

“But you’re...”

“A grand master in the Guild of Anshen, yes. Guild doesn’t matter to me either, not if you want to serve the kingdom.”

Fian ran his hands through his hair—that’s how it got so untidy, Valain thought—and shook his head. “It’s just— Well, all my folks are on the k—, Lord Meruvin’s side, but I knew there must be something fishy about it for him to run away like that. And I don’t like his wife.”

“You’ve seen her?”

“Father took us to Valdis for the wedding.”

“I don’t like her either,” Valain said with a grin. “And she doesn’t seem to like me much. But I did meet my wife at that wedding.”

“She’s one of the princesses from Velihas, right? My cousin married her sister.”

“Lyan, is it?” If they were cousins it was likely that Fian was of the House Eraday too. Well, if he didn’t say so, he probably didn’t want to flaunt it.

Fian nodded with a shy grin.

“Good for him. Last I heard of them they’re as happy as we are.”

“Last I heard of them, too.”

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A few days later Ayran sent another messenger to say that the army was at Tal-Sorn. The camp outside the town walls was almost ready; the soldiers would have to do the rest. Valain rode out with Fian to meet them. He’d become fond of the shy young man. They were probably of an age, but Fian had clearly seen much less of life. If Fian hadn’t been in the Guild of the Nameless, Valain would have wanted him for an aide.

“Valain!” Ayran came rushing at him as if he was his long-lost brother. “Come and look at my army. Well, your army.”

“Your army, I’d say. You did all the work gathering them.” The army was like an anthill. Valain had never seen two thousand people with a common purpose before. “Impressive. Are there any more coming?”

“As soon as I send for them. About fifteen hundred more. I can get up another three thousand, but that will take time and they won’t be so well trained. There are reinforcements in training all over the country. Well, those in Lenyas mostly aren’t ours, of course,” he said with a glance at Fian. “I think I’ve taken everyone from there who is.”

“Come back to town with me and we’ll have a council meeting. I suppose you’ve got your deputies to lead the troops to camp. We put you in the fields outside the South Gate. Water, grazing, and Serla got in supplies. Gods, this is going to cost us. I intend to get every penny back from my brother when this is over.”

“Or your brother’s estate,” Ayran said with a wry grin. “And that’s likely to be you.” He sent Fian to his unit with a wave of his hand and mounted his horse. “Let’s go and talk to the council.”

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We didn’t know how Vauri was doing in Ildis. We did know that Ayran had two thousand troops ready to go and help her.

“I don’t think we should wait for a message,” Ayran said. “Either we’d be too late, or we’ll end up being eaten by midges. I’d prefer to go while it’s still spring. There’s quite a number of troops from Lenyas already on the way – for the other army.”

The high priestess of Naigha had been sitting at the table silently, apparently in thought.

“Vegelin,” she said suddenly, “how far can you reach?”

Valain was startled. “I don’t know.”

The high priestess lifted an eyebrow. “You don’t?”

Should I come to his rescue? But he said, “I can always try.”

I couldn’t tell whether the high priestess knew how brave it was of him. I said, “I think I might make it to Ildis,” but the high priestess shook her head and said, “Not you, my girl, or you’ll be under my care sooner than I’d like.”

“Confound gifted high priestesses of Naigha,” Valain said.

She raised the eyebrow at him again. “We all are. It’s a prerequisite.”

Ayran was looking from the high priestess to Valain, and from Valain to me, with a bewildered look on his face. That was the one to rescue. “Her Eminence means for Prince Vegelin to go to Ildis out of his body to spy for you.”

Ayran blanched. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“No more dangerous than going out on a horse to spy,” Valain said. “Less dangerous, in fact, because there’s much less risk of being seen.”

“Yes, but—”

“Your spies would be expendable because they wouldn’t be the prince-regent? I don’t believe that any one person is more expendable than another.” I tried to signal to Valain that he was becoming over-heated, but he was already too far gone to notice. “I can do this. Nobody else can. Vauri, I suppose, but she is already in Ildis. Lédu could if she were fit, but not now.”

“You can have the Temple,” the high priestess said quietly. “Unless you prefer the temple of Anshen at the Order house.”

I shuddered inwardly at the thought of doing any out-of-body work so close to Naigha, especially if one was as insecure about it as Valain was. Obviously Valain was of the same mind: “We’ll ask Rayin if we can use the temple at the Order house, but thank you anyway.”

I thought, briefly, that we could just as well use the medallions in the great hall, but those were sources of force, of ryst, not so much of Anshen’s protection. Gods, I missed Vauri. We’d have to trust someone else standing guard for us. Serla wasn’t a fighter, and Ayran was a fighter but not gifted, and we couldn’t very well ask the high priestess: not only wasn’t she a fighter either, but she must be eighty years old at least.

In the end we took Ferin to the Order house and had him stand guard together with Rayin. We didn’t really expect Valain to be attacked in Valdis: everybody who had it in for him was likely to be in Ildis. But still, while I was watching over his mind it was a good thing to have someone to protect his body. The temple of Anshen was a good place for it, too; we spent most of the night praying and preparing and stayed for the morning service before getting to work.

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Vauri slept fitfully, on a straw pallet beside Mernath’s cot. Her conscious mind knew she was safe in Erne’s house under seals of Erne’s and her own, but whenever she drifted off to sleep something in her started to panic and woke her up. It wasn’t so much worry about Mernath—he was going to be all right, no doubt about that now—as something else niggling at her, as if she ought to have done something that she’d clean forgotten.

When she couldn’t bear it any more she went out into the yard, picking apart the seals carefully. Either Erne had made her seal so that Vauri could get out, or she was better at this than she’d thought, because she had no trouble at all with it.

It was false dawn; the town was waking. Vauri smelt the air, sent her mind out. Pitifully few of the Guild of Anshen and all of them in hiding. More of the Guild of the Nameless than she’d thought, especially in the north-west of the town—it had to be the army. That was the stronghold, there, under strong protection; impossible to see inside unless she went there bodily and touched the walls. She didn’t want to do that if it wasn’t absolutely necessary. And there, from the east, there was something coming, no, someone she knew very well.

Valain?

Vauri!

What are you doing here?

Spying for Ayran. To see if you need help.

Gods, yes, I need help. I’m about to try to take Ildis with two hundred troops.

Ayran is on his way with reinforcements. Are you in any danger now? No, I can see that you’re not.

Mernath was injured but he’ll be all right. She could see that he was strained; surely he hadn’t come all the way from Valdis? But he had: he could hardly be any closer without running into either the army or the enemy’s scouts. The army is on the other side of town, she told him, not knowing whether it was superfluous. And your brother is holed up there, too.

Thank you. And he was gone, like a breeze. Vauri shook her head to clear it. In the direction of where she thought Valdis was the real dawn started to show, rose-tinted. With it came a chill. She shivered and went back inside, not minding Erne’s seal.

Erne was up, stirring porridge in the kitchen. “I left it open for you,” she said. “Not for anyone else, though.”

“I thought it might be that.” She ate absently, wondering whether to tell Erne about Valain, and what to do next. Help was coming, she was sure of that now. First of all she had to warn Aine of that so Aine could stop worrying. Taunting Meruvin would have to wait until Ayran’s forces were almost there, so they could trap him. She’d find out how many troops the enemy had. It would be harder than if the incident with Mernath hadn’t happened, because people had seen her with Rhyn and Erne and probably sussed out what she was, but she could go in disguise. She still knew enough silversmiths’ jargon to pass as a silversmith from Valdis.

“Right,” she said and got up. “Can I borrow some clothes from you? I’d like to look a bit more—well—civilised.”

Erne laughed. “You’re about my size. Take your pick.”

She ended up dressed in a dark red robe, like a doctor at a formal gathering, but close enough to a silversmith on business away from home. Erne rubbed walnut juice into Vauri’s hair to make it dark brown instead of fair, and gave her a battered satchel with some sheets of paper and a silver writing set. “Sedi made that for me,” she said. “Take it for luck.”
Now for a place to talk to silversmiths. Rhyn, whom she’d have asked, wasn’t at home. Vauri found him eventually in an inn called The Three Cups: a silversmiths’ haunt, it turned out. She sat down at his table and touched his hand surreptitiously. You don’t know me.

I wouldn’t have known you if you hadn’t spoken.

Good. She only hoped that she was so well disguised in other respects as well.

Apart from Rhyn there were a man and a woman at the table, neither of them gifted at all. That made it easier. She introduced herself as Arni from Valdis, looking for inspiration in this town full of fine silversmiths. The three others had known each other for years and seemed to have an ongoing discussion about what made for good workmanship: after the initial small talk all Vauri had to do was sit back and wait for an opportunity to steer the conversation in the right direction.

“It’s getting harder to find apprentices, though,” the woman said. “Two of mine went to join the king’s army.”

“Frankly, Lyse, if they’re army types they’re not craft types anyway.” Vauri silently applauded Rhyn for saying that.

“But your apprentice ran away too.”

“Yes, to her family in Valdis, because the air was getting too thick for her. Rumours of war are only good for the weaponsmiths. Leshan here, his brother is a weaponsmith, richer than he is.”

“What about the rumours of war?” Vauri asked. “At home we never hear any news from Ildis.”

“Well, that figures, when the court was in Valdis it was us who never heard any news,” said Leshan. “Now that the king is here it won’t be long before Ildis is the capital.”

Vauri decided to play the innocent just a bit longer. “But he’s been deposed, hasn’t he? Only his brother doesn’t want to be called king, he’s just the prince-regent.”

Leshan scowled. “If he wants to depose his brother he should go all the way. Not say that it’s just a regency. Regencies are bad for the kingdom.”

Vauri couldn’t remember a single regency in all the history of the kingdom she knew, but she didn’t say anything. Arguing about history was pleasant among friends and nasty with strangers. “The little princess will grow up soon enough,” she ventured.

“Why settle for the regent and the little princess when we have a perfectly good king right in our own town? I’ve heard that the prince’s army is at the gates, but it’s only about a hundred strong and the king has a thousand or more.”

“That many?” Vauri asked.

“Don’t look so incredulous. I’ve seen them with my own eyes. Lyse too—she went to see her apprentices, and I my son, in the camp.”

“Where do you put a thousand soldiers in this town? I’d think there wouldn’t be room enough. And around the town there’s all swamp, isn’t there? Are they staying in people’s houses?” It was hard not to use military words; she hoped she didn’t come over too stupid.

“There’s a large dry area just outside the north wall,” Leshan said. “It’s a bit cramped, true, but they’ll be moving soon enough.” He was talking with obvious pride. There was a possibility that he was exaggerating because of that, but Vauri didn’t think so. And they had heard of the army at the gates; they even had the number right. Faran must have moved.

A thousand. Moving soon enough. Please, Anshen, not too soon. Not before Ayran arrived with the reinforcements. She’d been stupid not to ask Valain how many, but she’d been startled so much by his sudden appearance that it hadn’t occurred to her.

“Arni?” She started. That was supposed to be her name. It was Lyse, waving a hand in front of her face. “You were so far away.”
“I was thinking of someone back home,” she said. She felt herself blush. Well, no problem: let Lyse think she was in love.

More ale, more talk about workmanship and the shortage of apprentices. Leshan had a plate of tiny savoury pies brought to the table. Vauri took one and pretended to be very interested in it, while she cautiously sent her mind out to where she’d first seen Meruvian’s forces. Suppose that one in ten was in the Guild of the Nameless, she could easily believe a thousand. She thought briefly of asking Leshan or Lyse to show her the army camp, but that would only raise their suspicions. Her best course of action was probably to leave town the way she’d come in, dressed as though for work, and report to Aine and Faran.

Unless, of course, Faran had really moved to the main gate. It would be easier to go out of the main gate dressed as she was now. It didn’t seem wise to try and reach any further out of town now, among strangers and in an inn that was clearly of the enemy, for all that Rhyn was there.

“I’ve got to be going,” she said.

“Yes, work to do,” Rhyn said and got up. “If you’re going my way—”

“I’m lodging at a relative’s, near the Thin Bridge.”

“Then we’re indeed going the same way.” He threw his cloak around his shoulders and followed Vauri out into the street.

“I have to apologise,” he said as soon as they were out of earshot. “I think I’ve done my work too well. But it’s worked, they hadn’t told even me about the size of Meruvian’s army yet. Probably thought I was too much of the enemy to tell.”

She stood still. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“I spread your rumour about the army at the gates. I didn’t talk about numbers, though. Someone must have gone and looked.”

“I’ll have to go back and tell my officers. Do you think it’s accurate? That number of a thousand?”

“Probably. Well, perhaps only eight hundred, but you’re outnumbered, that’s a sure thing.”

“Aine has another hundred in the woods. And Ayran is on his way with reinforcements. I’ve had some news from Valdis.”

“How?” Rhyn asked, frowning.

“I’ll tell you under a seal.”

-**-

**Vauri**

“He did what? All the way from Valdis?”

“I didn’t know he could do it either.”

“He probably set off all Liase’s warnings coming in.”

Vauri hadn’t thought of that. Very likely, though. She’d have to move fast if she was to move at all. “Can you keep me safe while I try to reach the army? If I think I’m going to set off the warnings again I’ll back off.”

“They’re on the alert now anyway. Barge through all you like, I’d say.”

But she was careful: no use risking other people’s lives. Lady Thing’s —Vauri couldn’t help thinking of her that way— protection was still over the town, but there was a different quality to it: to keep people out rather than in, and to deter rather than to warn. If she could find only one weak spot she’d be able to slip out unnoticed.
Now that she was looking at the seal more closely, she saw that it was composed of several different patches. As she’d suspected and said to Mernath, Lady Thing didn’t keep up the whole seal all by herself. There must be weaker points at the joins; or else, distracting just one of the people maintaining the seal would let her get through.

*Rhyn? Can you create a diversion?*

*Show me where and I’m your man.*

That wasn’t as easy as it had looked. She couldn’t find any actual people to distract, and when Rhyn tried to push at the seal his nudge slid off like water from oiled cloth. Vauri herself was probably strong enough to break through, but if she created her own diversion there was no point to it. She sighed. She’d have to go back to the army herself.

Rhyn took her back to Erne’s house, but Erne wasn’t there; out visiting, probably. Mernath was still on his cot under strict orders not to get up until he had no trace of a headache left. “Will you be all right?” Vauri asked as she put on her working clothes again.

“As long as I don’t go out into the street,” he said with a wry grin. “I don’t feel like facing Airath’s friends again in this state. Erne wants me flat on my back for a week anyway.”

“If all goes well the town will be ours soon. That’ll take care of Airath’s friends.”

“Vauri.” He held her by the arm. “When I caught a scout and let him go.”

“Yes?”

“That was Airath. I couldn’t kill my own brother.”

Vauri nodded thoughtfully. “It’s possible—likely, even—that someone else will kill him.”

“I have no problem with that. It’s just—well, I couldn’t.”

“I understand.”

“I did tell him that we can beat them, though.”

Vauri couldn’t help grinning at that. “I just hope we can. I’ll try to get a message to you as soon as I can.”

### Chapter 13

**Vauri**

The gate was closing. It was dusk already, after all. Vauri wondered whether she could get through if she ran or shouted, but just at that moment the guard let the bar fall with a decisive thud.

She wandered around for a bit, thinking. She could go back to Erne’s house, of course, but this was the perfect opportunity to find out more. Ildis was small enough to reach the north side before it was completely dark. And she was in working clothes; she fitted in perfectly with all the people finishing jobs with the last of the daylight and heading home after work.

She passed the west gate, as closed as the south gate. The Old Stone House, right next to it, was glittering with power. As a child she had often wondered who lived in that house with its round tower and walled yard, but now she didn’t have to wonder any more: everything about it said ‘Lady Thing lives here’. It was so well protected that she couldn’t look inside, especially not without breaking her own protection.

The army camp was very close, right on the other side of the wall. Shouts and rattling and the smell of cooking fires made that all the more clear. A cart was being unloaded in the little square in
front of the house. People were picking up sacks and carrying them into the yard. Vauri took one on
her shoulder—it was heavy but yielding, probably grain—and followed: past the house, through
another door that was really a little gate out of town. Whoever had built the house a few hundred
years ago had wanted a private entrance. Or, more likely, a private exit.

The soldier at the little gate wasn’t guarding, but counting. Vauri’s sack was the twenty-second.
She plonked it down on the growing pile. If she went back now, would she be able to pick up another,
have another look at the house to see if there was a way in through the yard, and come back here? She
didn’t want to risk it. Camouflaging herself even more—everybody gifted here was in the Guild of
the Nameless—she hid behind the nearest tent. There were more people in civilian clothes here,
though most wore at least an attempt at uniform: dark blue rather than Velain green or the grey and
sky-blue of the Order.

Inside the tent she heard a man’s and a woman’s voice arguing about whose turn it was to cook,
complaining that the cooking became more work every day because of all the new recruits, “and who
does all the work? The old hands!” Vauri listened some more, but nobody mentioned any names or
numbers. She went farther on. Even in the gloom it was obvious that this army camp was
overcrowded. And beginning to smell, because there was no room to dig new latrines. A thousand
troops? Easily; perhaps twelve hundred. It didn’t look as if they were standing by to fight yet.
Clotheslines were stretched between tents and random pieces of armour and equipment scattered
about. Vauri had to take care not to trip over anything and make a noise.

She’d have to stay the night in the camp, but that should be easy: even if she couldn’t stay out of
sight there were so many new recruits that it didn’t matter if nobody knew her. As long as she didn’t
show the mark of the Order on her arm, or let it show that she was in the Guild of Anshen, she’d be
safe.

“Hey, you!” So much for staying out of sight. “Come and pull your weight. New here, eh? What’s
your name?”

“Arni,” Vauri said. She recognised the voice: it had said earlier that the old hands had to do all the
work. With a resigned sigh Vauri picked up a sack identical to the one she’d carried into camp and
emptied it into a bin. Golden cracked wheat streamed out, spreading dust that made her sneeze.

“It doesn’t all go in,” she said.

“Doesn’t matter, I think I’ll need that much.” The cook took the sack from her and poured the rest
of the wheat into a cauldron that was already half full of water. “I’m not going to check for stones,”
he said. “Nor you either,” taking Vauri’s indecision for hesitation. “Back to your unit with you.
Who’re you with?”

“Er, can’t remember his name,” Vauri said. “Tall fellow with brown hair.”

“Really tall and a hook-nose?” Vauri nodded. “That’ll be Lochan, over by the stream. That way,
just keep going. I don’t envy you, you’re on the soggiest ground. Only for a few days, though. Last I
heard we’re moving the day after tomorrow.”

- * -

“Lochan astin Eraday,” the tall hook-nosed man said. “You’re the latest new one? They’re sending me
all the raw recruits.”

“I’m Arnei Arni,” Vauri said with a grin. “And I’m not all that raw.”

“Hmm, at least you’re not fourteen years old like all the rest.” He rummaged in a pile of clothes.
“Let’s see, this might fit you.” Vauri was kitted out in the enemy’s uniform in no time. Fortunately
she was wearing a sleeved undershirt, or she’d have had to feign more modesty than she’d got.

“Can you handle a sword?” Lochan handed her one. She weighed it in her hand experimentally,
scowled at it. Lochan raised an eyebrow.

“It’s a bit short for me and the balance could be better, but it’ll do.”

“You’re not at all raw, are you? Well, if you prove to be as good as you appear to be I may make you my adjutant.”

Other recruits started coming in. They weren’t all fourteen years old as Lochan had said, but yes, many were very young and almost all looked very raw. They must be taking on anybody now. Lochan hadn’t asked Vauri any questions either, which pointed to that, too: in normal times any commander worth their salt would be at least a little suspicious of a trained woman in her thirties enlisting as a recruit.

“Right,” Lochan said. “You and you, take that kettle and this sack and go get the food. The rest of you, make yourselves a place to sleep tonight. There’s straw in that corner. Not a lot of blankets, I’m afraid, any of you who have a cloak use that. Don’t forget the two who aren’t here. I’ll have a pallet near the entrance, here, and I want Arni on the other side, there.”

By the time they’d finished making the pallets, the other two came back with a sack of bread and a kettle of soup that was hardly more than water with bits of vegetable floating in it. Vauri was so tired by now that she didn’t care as long as it was warm. The bread was decent, at least.

She listened to the talk around her: all eager young people who sincerely felt that it was their duty to fight for their king. And especially for their princess. Someone seemed to have spread the rumour that Valain intended to kill little Ailin when he got his hands on her, in order to put his own child on the throne.

“Hey, Arni, you haven’t said anything, why are you here?” That was one of the more eager ones, a boy with protruding ears and a freckled face.

She shrugged. “Seemed like the right thing to do.”

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Once again Vauri found it hard to sleep, in a tent full of people tossing and turning or else snoring. Eventually she did sleep, but not deeply enough to really rest. She was still maintaining her camouflage as well. She just hoped it wouldn’t break under stress. It was a blessing that Lochan wasn’t gifted: it would have been too hard to hide from someone who was, to all intents and purposes, her superior officer. The rest, if they noticed at all, wouldn’t think twice.

She was woken far too early by someone blowing a trumpet about as competently as Jerna could blow the horn. People were already milling about: someone had fetched a pot of gruel for breakfast, probably from the cauldron she’d seen the cook filling the evening before. Lochan was handing out swords. “If you don’t know what to do with it Arni will show you,” he said.

So now she’d have to teach the enemy to fight.

They were children, she told herself. In one day they wouldn’t turn from clumsy recruits into fearsome killers. In the battle — for she was more and more sure that there would be battle — they would be the first to fall.

Unless.

“Everybody who’s never handled a sword before, come with me,” she said as soon as she’d scraped the bottom of her bowl.

Four boys and two girls, none of them older than seventeen, each one of them much less mature than Valain had been even at eleven. Two were wearing leather jackets and leggings, the others had only their uniform. She taught them how to hold their sword, where to put their feet in order not to trip over them. When they could do that, she paired them up and made them do simple drills. Then
she had them stand in a circle around her.

“Can anyone tell me what’s the most important thing in battle?”

“To win,” one said. “To kill the enemy,” said another. “To hold out longer than the other guy.”

“That last is almost right,” Vauri said. “To stay alive. Defence is much more important than attack. Killing is not important. Not being killed is. Who said that?”

“Me,” said the boy with the protruding ears.

“Rovan, right? Come here and I’ll show you.”

He was already tired, of course. She’d been working them hard for hours. But he tried valiantly: at first she hit him every time, with the flat of her sword on his leathers, but it became harder the more she showed him how to defend himself.

“Right,” she said, realising how much like Lochan she sounded. “Practice that. Pull your blows, we don’t want you cut up before battle starts and we don’t have any practice swords. Remember, defending yourself is the first thing.” She called another recruit from the circle, a lanky girl at the leggy-foal stage of adolescence, and made her try to get through various kinds of blocks. “See how it works?”

They dutifully nodded and went to work. Vauri stretched, feeling every muscle in her body. She hadn’t worked so hard with the sword since— well, since Valain had been learning this. Rovan and the lanky girl and one other probably had real promise. Pity that they were of the enemy.

She could, of course, have taught them all the wrong things, but that wouldn’t only make Lochan suspicious, it went against her pride as a teacher as well. No, teach them to keep themselves in one piece so they could walk away from the battlefield and start living their lives.

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“I must say that I’m impressed,” Lochan said over another bowl of watery soup. “I didn’t think they’d get into any kind of shape at all.”

“They’re eager to learn,” Vauri said. “Shall I take your bunch tomorrow?”

“I want you to run an errand for me. If there’s still time after that, sure.” He put his bowl away, took a piece of parchment from a roll and started to scribble on another. Vauri craned her neck: it was a map.

“Lenyas,” Lochan said. “To be exact, my bit of Lenyas. More than likely crawling with the enemy at the moment. Her ladyship will want to know the likely spots for ambushes. I trust you with it— I don’t want the striplings losing it because they’re clumsy or careless.”

“Do you want it delivered right away?” It was already late. Lochan was working by the light of a guttering lamp.

“No, first thing tomorrow will do.”

She actually slept that night. It wasn’t only that she was exhausted after two short and fitful nights, but also that, though she was in the midst of the enemy, she felt completely safe. Once again the trumpet woke her before she was done sleeping, but at least she’d got in a good six hours.

Washing at the stream, Vauri noticed that it was getting muddy. Good thing that we’ll be out of here in a few days. She caught herself: was she thinking like a soldier in this army already? If it was up to her she’d be out of here in a few hours. Lochan’s errand couldn’t have come at a better moment.

Lochan handed her a map case and a note with his seal on it. “This will let you through. If they ask awkward questions, you can send them to me.”

Vauri pocketed the pass and slung the map case over her shoulder. As soon as she was out of sight
she examined what she’d got. The pass said that she was Lochan’s adjutant Arnei Arni on legitimate business for him, allowed to go anywhere without hindrance. Useful thing to have on her. The map case contained not only the map she’d seen Lochan draw, but also a large overview map of all of Lenyas. Well, that wouldn't tell Lady Thing much more than she already knew, and with luck Ayran would be in Ildis before the enemy had time to get to Lenyas.

The back gate of the Old Stone House was open and more supplies were coming in. She must have looked so much like someone’s adjutant on legitimate business that nobody challenged her, not even at the door of the house itself. It had a guard, but he was talking to one of the people in charge of the supplies.

*It's too easy,* she thought, and stopped in her tracks when she heard a familiar voice. Meruvin. He was just beyond the bend in the corridor. Vauri didn’t dare cast out with her mind to see who he was talking to; if it happened to be Liase, she would be bound to notice and probably recognise her. She tried the nearest door: it yielded. Just as she pushed it closed behind her she saw Meruvin coming around the bend with a man in dark blue uniform. *Probably their general.*

She leant against the door and pulled herself together. Her heart was still racing, her legs weak with relief that it hadn’t been Liase. She looked around the room while her body got back to normal.

This was a large square room with a high ceiling: close to a perfect cube. Small windows high up let in the light. Half the walls were covered in scaffolding. Two men in painters’ smocks stood high against the opposite wall, plastering it. The parts already done were splendidly bright, reflecting the light from the windows through the whole room. She wondered if it was only the white of the plaster against the grey of the bare walls, or if there was indeed something shiny in it.

“Lost your way, soldier?” one of the plasterers asked.

“Wrong door, I’m afraid,” Vauri said. She was standing upright now, hoping that the men wouldn’t notice her agitation.

The workman wiped his hands on his smock and descended. “Where were you going?”

“Delivering this to Her Ladyship,” she said. “Someone told me second on the right.”

“It’s right at the back, up the stairs. Can you manage or shall I show you?”

“I’ll find my way now, thank you.” She smiled at him. “It’s a beautiful room. What’s it going to be?”

“Temple, of course.” The look on his face was proud. “There wasn’t a proper temple to Archan in town until His Majesty and Her Ladyship came.”

Vauri’s blood ran cold. Good thing that the temple hadn’t been consecrated yet.

“Impressed, are you? Come back when it’s finished.”

“I may not live to,” Vauri said. “I am a soldier.”

“Ah, you’ll win that battle. Her Ladyship means to consecrate the temple to celebrate.”

Vauri cocked her head. “Can’t be sure to win, can we?”

“Well, we’ve got fifteen hundred and the enemy only a few hundred, how can we not win?”

“Been spying on the enemy, have you?” She did her best to keep her tone light.

“Nah, been working here for some time, one hears things, no? And there’s no need to spy, you can see the enemy from the walls now and there’s really only about two hundred of them. You lot will sweep them into the Ilda in no time. Wish I could go, but I’m fifty-seven come Midwinter and they’ve got enough young ones.”

Fifteen hundred? The plasterer must be exaggerating. Or perhaps not: lots of new recruits had been coming in even in the one day she had spent in the camp. She sent a silent prayer to Anshen — strange to do that in a temple about to be consecrated to the Nameless — for Ayran to be on time.
“I have to go make my delivery now,” she said, “or I’ll be back late and my captain won’t like that.”

The passage was empty again. She shouldered the map case a bit more jauntily and went in search of the stairs. Now she’d have to get as close to Liase as possible without Liase seeing her; ideally to the door of her room. She passed a few people who looked like servants and didn’t even seem to notice her. They were probably used to soldiers in the house.

Upstairs there was a landing with several doors, some of them open, giving different views of people bending over maps, writing, talking, handling clothes and equipment. She saw more servants and some people in uniform. Nobody likely to know her, though she spotted a few who had been in Liase’s or Meruvin’s service in Valdis. At the end of the landing there was a double door with a soldier in front of it.

Brazen it out, or be cautious? She felt confident. “Excuse me? Dispatch for Her Ladyship from Captain Lochan.”

“She can’t receive it now. Wait on that bench.”

Vauri sat down, map case in her lap. From where she sat she could see that the door was open a crack. Sloppy. It wasn’t sealed either. Liase must feel very safe, or be very distracted. Vauri extended her senses just a little —the soldier at the door was gifted, but not paying attention, only keeping people from barging in— and could hear Liase talking with someone who sounded like an old woman at first, but was probably an old man with a high whiny voice. “Are you sure you can? We would do it, no problem at all. Have you done it before?”

“I’m certain that I can,” Liase’s voice said, “and Archan will help me. You go and prepare everything. It’s my house, I have the right.”

Gods, the old man must be a priest of the Nameless, and they were talking about consecrating the temple. “Yes, you do, but the power!”

“I have the power. Go, prepare everything.” Vauri heard a chair being scraped back decisively.

She realised that her turn was next. And she would like to see Liase, if only to assess how dangerous she had become, but would her disguise hold?

The door opened completely and a small old man in threadbare clothes came out. If this was the high priest of the Nameless in Ildis, she didn’t think much of the state of his worship. He was a master all right, but not a grand master by far; Liase probably came closer to that. He looked at her as if trying to measure her, but shook his head and left.

“I’ll see if Her Ladyship can receive you now,” the soldier said, but before he could do that Liase herself came to the door. “I don’t want to be disturbed for the next hour,” she said and closed the door. And sealed it.

Vauri didn’t know whether to curse or to cheer. She was safe for now.

The soldier shrugged and grinned apologetically. “Her Ladyship has much to do.”

“I understand,” Vauri said and clenched the map case. If she waited and went in and her disguise didn’t hold, would she be able to escape? And even if she escaped, Lady Thing would know that there had been a spy in her army. Poor Lochan; he was a good man, only on the wrong side, and he would take all the blame. She couldn’t to this to him. On the other hand, if she left now all she had would be what she knew about the army. She concentrated on the fleeting image of Liase from seeing her close the door. If she could fix that firmly in her mind, she’d probably be able to recall it later, when she was really safe, and see details.

Around her there was the bustle of the office. She relaxed her muscles —she hadn’t realised until now how tense she was— and schooled her face into boredom while trying to hear what people said. Not much different from what they’d have said if they had been hers: numbers of troops, names of
commanders. She pricked up her ears when she heard Lochan’s name.

“Best have Lochan’s unit in front so they think we’re a pushover.”

“That adjutant of his seems to be some bitch. And he’s not exactly weak himself.”

“They’re only two. The rest are raw children.”

Vauri almost let her outrage get the better of her, but she clenched her teeth and sighed. To any casual observer that must look like boredom or impatience or both.

Now she would have to go back to Lochan. Or back to her own people to warn them that the front line was weak but the rest was stronger. And she wanted to make sure that as many of the youngsters as possible survived the battle.

If she went back to Lochan she’d be stuck on the wrong side of the battle. If she went back to Aine, Rovan and the others wouldn’t be warned. Unless she could reach someone in the camp—Lochan wasn’t gifted, but the lanky girl was, and some of the others too. Not from here, it was far too well shielded and much too close to Lady Thing, but it might work from town.

She stood up abruptly and thrust the map case at the soldier. He took it with a puzzled frown.

“Can’t stay any longer,” she said. “Captain wants me back.”

“Is there any message with it?”

“In the case. It’s a map of Lenyas, from Captain Lochan.”

“I’ll tell Her Ladyship.” He put it against the wall next to the door.

“Thank you.” She retraced her steps past the open doors, the closed doors, the servants and soldiers. Down the stairs. Every step was danger. She knew that Liase was behind a sealed door, but not where Meruvin was. It had seemed much safer to sit waiting for Liase to call her in. Through the corridor, past the door of what she now knew was going to be the temple —she thought with some fondness of the plasterer, another good man who happened to be on the wrong side— and out of the house. One moment of doubt, then she turned firmly in the direction of the gate into town.

“Halt!” Now there had to be a suspicious guard. Vauri fumbled the pass out of her pocket. “Errand for my captain.”

“All right, be back before sundown or you’ll be locked out.”

She didn’t run. Not even when she was out of sight of the house. She walked all the way to the other side of town, to Erne’s house. It wasn’t until she’d knocked, and Erne had let her in, and seen that it was her after her initial alarm at the uniform, that she collapsed and let down her guard and cried in Erne’s arms, as she had done when she was a child and Erne already a woman.

Chapter 14

There was a different guard at the gate. This one looked middle-aged and bored. The young ones must all have joined up. Vauri didn’t try to go past him right away, but waited at the high bridge over the Ilda until a man rolling an empty barrel came by. She could see Jeran’s mark on the end. She helped him handle the unwieldy thing; conversation came naturally after that.

“I might as well take that barrel,” she said. “I have business with the brewer anyway.”

“If you would— He’ll give you a shilling for it. Threepence for you for taking it out.”

She counted a half-shilling and three pennies into the man’s hand. “Thank you.”

The guard at the gate looked, if anything, more bored. She tipped her cap at him. “Boss makes me
He opened the small door in the gate for her. “Sure you want to go out there? There’s soldiers.”

“They’ll understand that a person has to do her work. Soldiers drink ale, too.”

“Please yourself,” he said with a shrug, closing the door behind her.

There were indeed soldiers. Faran had moved closer to the town walls, using every bit of cover to spread out and sit behind. It looked like much more than a hundred troops— Aine must have sent the rest of her force as well. Vauri abandoned her barrel and made for the brewer’s house. There was a flag on it now: they must be using it as command centre.

An arrow whistled just past her ear. A second grazed her earlobe. Not from the town; from the army.

“Halt!” That was Jerna, stepping out from behind a shed. It figured: of all the people she knew only Jerna could aim at a moving person’s earlobe and hit it. Another arrow was already on her bow. “My next shot won’t miss.”

“Jerna, it’s me, hold it!” She realised belatedly that she was no longer in Lady Thing’s house and could call with her mind with impunity. It’s me. Vauri.

So you are. I didn’t recognise you.

And Jerna was at her side, touching her walnut-stained hair, laughing, dabbing at her bleeding ear with a cloth. “Sorry I shot at you. But you did look like the enemy.”

“I did? Rolling that barrel?”

“Well, you left it at the gate. We thought it must have been camouflage.”

“It was, frankly. But for the other side. You should have seen me in my enemy uniform.”

“What?”

“Tell you later. First I have to speak to Aine. And Faran.”

Aine was inside with Faran: all the extra troops must indeed be hers. “I came the moment Faran told me you’d gone into town,” she said. “I thought that might speed things up.”

“Meruvin has at least twelve hundred troops,” Vauri said. “It may be as many as fifteen hundred.” Aine drew breath sharply. “And they’re about to move. But Ayran is on his way, he ought to be here in—” she counted on her fingers. “—three days at most.”

“How can you be sure?” Aine asked. “Jilan, get Mernath, he should hear this.”

“Mernath? How did he come back before me?”

“He came back the next day, but he’s been resting. Someone knocked him on the head in town and he’s not himself. I wondered why you weren’t together, but he said that you had things to do and sent him ahead.”

“‘Not himself’ is the right word! Aine, that’s not Mernath, it’s his brother. Mernath is in Erne’s house under orders not to move for another couple of days. I left him there hours ago.”

Aine’s eyes grew wide. “You mean— So that’s why—” She strode out, Vauri and Faran in her wake.

The man on the camp bed did look like Mernath, but there was a subtle difference about the set of his face. As for differences in his anie, Vauri couldn’t judge, because he was camouflaged much as she had been in Ildis.

She was tempted to kick him, but nudged him with a hand instead. “I saw your brother in town,” she said.

“How is Airath?” It came out smoothly; rather too smoothly.

“Wrong question. You ought to ask ‘How is Mernath?’”
He tensed, sprang up from the bed and tried to push himself between Vauri and Faran. Faran caught him easily with one outstretched arm.

“So you’re the spy in this camp,” Vauri said. “I was wondering. They knew far too much in town.”

“Put him in the cellar,” Aine said. “Under a seal, please. I don’t want to see him while we decide what to do with him.”

When Airath had been taken away Aine turned to Vauri. “You’ll be starving, I expect.”

“Yes! Had to live on watery soup and gruel. Proper bread, though.”

“We have venison. Some of the archers used the deer for target practice. And Jeran said we can drink his ale as long as we don’t get too pissed to fight.”

They ate and drank and talked. Vauri was already giddy with relief and it got worse with two mugs of strong ale after two days of short rations. “I declare that I am too pissed to fight right now. Imagine, I actually thought I’d warn those kids I taught to fight that they’re to be in the front line so we can tire ourselves out mowing them down like so many grain stalks. Erne talked me out of it.”

“Wise of her. But are they? To be in the front line?”

“Definitely. What I taught them was mostly to stay alive. Shall we be easy on them? Take them alive and let them go afterwards?”

“That sounds like a good idea if we can pull it off.” Aine had probably had a bit too much strong ale too; they’d have to ask level-headed people like Faran what they thought of it.

They forgot all about Airath until the talk turned to Mernath’s run-in with his brother’s friends.

“We ought to kill him,” Aine said. “But I can’t.”

“I don’t think I can either,” Vauri said. “You’re in charge here, but I rank you. Which of us will have to do something she can’t do?”

“What if we keep him in there until after the battle, and let him go when there’s nothing to spy on any more?”

They clasped hands on that. It wasn’t a definitive solution but at least it was an elegant one.

“Shall we tell him?” Vauri asked.

Aine shook her head, “It wouldn’t be opportune.”

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Vauri had gone to sleep in Aine’s tent. It had seemed natural; after all the ale, and all the talk, even walking across the camp to find the tent she had shared with Jerna before she went into town —and which had moved along with the rest, to a place she couldn’t possibly find in the dark except by looking for Jerna with her mind— was too much of an effort. When she woke up Aine was gone, and it was broad daylight, and there was noise outside.

She cautiously tried sitting up. Except for a lingering headache she was in much better shape. Dropping the camouflage must have done it. Just thinking about it almost made her put it on again; she should wean herself from that. She contemplated putting on her brewer’s-apprentice clothes, rejected them and borrowed hose and a tunic from Aine— a bit large on her, but they would have to do.

Outside it was a madhouse. When she’d sorted out what was actually happening it turned out that everybody was after just one man: Mernath. No, it must be Airath, of course. He was swinging a piece of chain three feet long, defying anybody who tried to come close. Several people were already lying on the ground, apparently from having been hit by it. Aine was trying ineffectually to bring him to reason.
Vauri caught her by the shoulder. “What can I do?”

“Catch him? We should have told him what we planned to do with him, on second thoughts.”

“Too late for that now. I’ll see if I can knock him out.”

Someone in such a rage was impossible to reach; she should have known that. Her attempts to knock him out bounced off him as if from polished metal.

Vauri? That was Jerna. May I shoot?

Great Anshen, did she have to ask? What are you waiting for?

The first arrow went wide and stuck in a tent pole. Vauri heard a muffled curse from the direction it had come from. Imagine Jerna missing something she wants to hit. The second arrow hit Airath in the left eye. He froze. His face took on an expression of surprise. He stayed upright for an unconscionable time before he toppled and fell.

Aine was at his side right away. “I can’t do anything for him,” she said, and Vauri felt a gust of cold wind and shivered.

“Do we have a priestess of Naigha here, or will we have to get one from town?”

But there was a priestess, about Vauri’s age, round-faced, strong-looking, gifted. “I know you,” Vauri said. “We met in Lenay. You’re Jinla.”

“Indeed,” the priestess said. “Ayran sent me ahead. Or rather, he talked to me and I sent myself.” She set to work, singing and doing incomprehensible things. People backed off, mystified and perhaps a little scared.

“What happened?” Vauri asked Aine. “The noise woke me up and he was already out of the lock-up and gone mad.”

“One of the lads went to bring him breakfast and Faran had to take the seal off. He knocked them both out, the boy with his mind and Faran with his fist.”

“That must have been some blow.”

“Yes, absolutely.” Faran was there, rubbing his head. “Got me smack on the temple. He hit Jichan first and I went to help him so I wasn’t paying attention. Stupid of me. When I came to my senses he was wreaking havoc in the camp. I suppose he knew we’d kill him and he wanted to take as many as possible with him.”

“Did he actually kill anybody?” Vauri asked.

“Rusla has a bad head wound, but she’ll live,” Faran said. “The others he hit with that chain just have bruises. They’re a tough lot.”

Vauri found Jerna crying. “I can’t believe I missed! I could have killed somebody!” She rubbed her eyes on her sleeve. “Well, I did kill somebody and I meant to. But I could have killed one of us!”

“You didn’t. And you hit him on the second try. I couldn’t get hold of him at all, if that helps any.” She put her arm around Jerna’s shoulders and held her close.

“You know what’s so awful,” Jerna said when she was coherent again. “I know that I’m good. I can hit almost anything on the first shot. Until now it’s been targets and clay pigeons. And rabbits. And now Airath. It’ll be people next. More people. Airath was people too, of course.” Vauri started to say something, but Jerna went on: “Is that what war is like?”

“I’ve never been in a war either. But yes, I think so. It’s not just moving targets.”

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Jinla found the place where Ildis buried its dead—something that looked like a little town of artificial hills—and they took Airath’s body there without asking permission. “I wouldn’t know who to ask
apart from the Temple in Ildis,” she said, “and they’d say yes anyway, so I won’t bother.”

“Sensible woman,” Faran said to Vauri under his breath.

“They’re all sensible in the Temple of Naigha. At least all the ones I’ve met.”

Jerna was still tense. She’d been wearing herself out with target practice until Vauri enlisted her to help carry the body. “You don’t need any more practice. You’re plenty good enough.”

“I missed.”

“And then you hit, and I don’t know anybody else who would have hit in that situation.”

“Still.” She took the rear end of the bier and followed Jinla, still brooding.

There was a strange quiet in the camp after they’d gone. Silence before the storm, Vauri thought. She busied herself with inspecting armour and weapons, checking battle plans, things a general did. She didn’t want to usurp Aine’s command, but Aine was all too ready to sign it over to her. “I still can’t fight worth anything,” she said, “so I’d better keep out of the battle. I’ll stay here with Jinla and mop up. And if you can get that doctor here, all the better.”

“Erne would come if I asked her,” Vauri said. “But there are people in town who need her more at the moment. Ayran will bring a field surgeon or two. Probably gifted ones too.”

“True.” Aine thought for a moment. “What shall we do, wait and hope that Ayran will be here before Meruvin attacks us, or try to draw them out?”

“I don’t think we’ll need to draw them out. If they don’t attack today, they’ll attack tomorrow.”

-Lédu-

“I saw the army,” Valain said. He was still shaking, though he’d been back for a while. He hadn’t been able to speak until now.

I stroked his head. “How big is it? Bigger than ours?”

“Smaller than Ayran’s, I think. But Vauri told me she’s trying to take the town with two hundred, and if she tries that she’ll be squashed.”

“You spoke to Vauri? Great!”

“It was hard. I could barely get through. And I think they saw me.”

“Who, Liase?”

“Or her minions. Someone did, because they tried to slam the seal shut on me. If I’d had a tail it would have been caught in it.”

“Did they notice it was you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.” He drew his cloak closer around himself and sat nearer the fire.

“Gods, I’m cold. And hungry.”

“Let’s see if Rayin or whoever else has something hot to eat.”

The Order house was strangely quiet with half the masters gone to Ildis as officers or enlisted with Ayran. We sat in the empty refectory —breakfast-time had come and gone while we were working—with bowls of steaming porridge. Ferin had gone back to the palace, Rayin was still in the temple. Valain was silent, frowning.

“You’re brooding. It doesn’t suit you.”

He grinned uneasily. “I’ve done something I thought I couldn’t do.”

“Is that a reason to brood?”
He shook his head. “What if Vauri is killed? What if Meruvin comes and takes Valdis?”

“He won’t take Valdis. Ayran would never let him.”

“There are people who think he’s the rightful king. Even here.”

“Not here at the Order house, surely.”

“Here in Valdis. And there are people who think that I am the rightful king.”

“I can live with that,” I said.

“Don’t you think it would be living a lie?”

“Why would it? You were better suited than Meruvin from the start.”

“Anshen wanted me.”

“You can serve Anshen just as well when you’re king as when you’re in the Order. He told you that himself, didn’t he?”

“He told me that I wouldn’t have to give him up. And he told me to marry you.” And then he kissed me, and if he didn’t stop brooding at least it didn’t bother him so much any more.  

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Valain has sent out people—I think we should call them spies, though they think of themselves as servants—to ask around in town who they think is the king, and who should be the king. It sounds like a cushy job, going to drink and talk in an inn at the court’s expense, but I think it may be more dangerous than most of them expect. Valain did warn them that some of the people they talk to may not like it, and some might even want to fight them over it, but none of the ones he sent thought that a problem.

Well, I would have gone myself if I’d been able.

I’m much better now than a while ago when I could barely stand upright, but I’m still not completely myself; mind and body still disjunct, so much that I can’t leave my body even for a moment, which I used to be able to do so easily. It will probably come back. I feel more whole already after keeping Valain whole in the temple. Not that it would be wise to do more of that—not only does it wear him out, but it’s too dangerous for a prince-regent who may have to be king.

For it looks as if he’ll have to be king eventually. The longer little Ailin is in Ildis under the influence of her parents, the harder it will be for us not to treat her as one of the enemy and, more importantly, the harder it will be for her not to be one of the enemy. Meruvin and Liase will waste no opportunity to set her against us.

I’ll go and talk to Vauri when she comes back. It’s probably a good idea to talk to Halla first, if only to get my thoughts ordered. Halla tends to do that to one because she’s so precise herself.

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**Valain**

Valain dressed in workman’s clothes, tied his hair in a tail, almost went to tell Lédu what he was going to do but decided against it at the last moment. She’d only worry. Perhaps she’d even want to keep him from it. As an afterthought—Lédu had gone to talk to Halla and taken the baby—he pinned a note to the cradle-clothes: *Gone to the Windmill, back soon, don’t worry.* He hesitated whether to go the Spotted Dog instead, because that was where he would go to drink, but there would be many more people there likely to recognise him. The Windmill was full of craft journeymen and junior clerks, exactly the kind of people Valain needed the opinions of right now.
The problem was that he didn’t have a trade. He was a fair fighter and more than half a Guild runner, but he could hardly pose as that at the Windmill. Clerk and messenger, that would probably work; and having been away—to where? Oh, Lenay, of course, he could use what he’d heard from Ayran—would explain that he wanted to know the latest gossip. A battered purse, muddy boots, a satchel smelling of horse, a knife at his side, and a smear of dirt on his face and hands. Good thing that he’d kept in training: no lily-white Court hands to give him away.

Luckily the town was full of gifted redheads. He didn’t have to disguise himself much, only play down the extent of his gifts a little. He felt excitement run hot in his veins: runner’s work again at last. Vauri, I wish you could see me! But Vauri would probably disapprove, want him to stay in his place. Well, she hadn’t, harrying off to Ildis to meddle with the army.

The Windmill was quiet in the middle of the afternoon, between the mid-day rush for food and the after-work rush for ale. Valain sat down at a table near the tap and called for a mug of the best. A serving-man—a boy, really, he was fifteen at most, for all he was trying to grow a moustache—brought it to him and looked him over with interest.

“Been travelling?”
“Yeah, just in from Lenyas.”
“Is it really that bad there?”
“Depends on what you call bad.” He took a deep swig and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “They don’t have proper ale, for one thing.”
“Well, that figures, it’s wine country, isn’t it?” The boy pointed at a barrel clearly labelled ‘Erday’. “They’d have proper wine. Did you taste any?”
“Not much, I was too busy to sit down most of the time. Getting up the army with Lord Ayran astin Brun.”
“The king’s army?” The boy was starting to look excited. “I mean, the proper king? Not the impostor in Ildis.”
“Well, most of Lenyas is on the man in Ildis’ side. Or rather, his lady’s.”

The boy spat on the ground. “Vile woman.” He made a face and scuffed the spit with his foot. “Sorry about that.”
“It’s all right,” Valain said with a grin. “I don’t like her much either. Don’t like her at all, in fact. But we only got a handful of people out of Lenyas. The rest have all gone to join her in Ildis.”
“Do you know—” He stopped and bit his lip. “The army’s gone now, aren’t they?”
“Did you want to join up?”
“Well, if I still can.”
“You’re a bit young.”
“I’ll tell them I’m sixteen. Wouldn’t be far wrong, anyway.”
“You could ask at the Order of the Sworn. There are still some troops camped in their training field. Didn’t you have a recruiting drive? It’s not as if the prince needs only people from outside Valdis.”

Had they really forgotten Valdis completely? Valain racked his brain but couldn’t remember what they’d said at the council meeting. They’d need people in Valdis to fight if—when—the war came here. It wouldn’t hurt to recruit and train them now. He’d talk to Rayin at the Order; perhaps they could still have a recruiting drive. He wouldn’t mind organising much of it himself. At least it would give him something useful to do instead of waiting for whatever was going to happen in Ildis.

More people had come in, and still more kept coming: it must be the end of the working day. Valain found himself in the centre of a large group of people his own age and a little younger. The
serving-boy was so busy getting ale and food for everybody that he didn’t have time to talk or listen, but there were others in his place. Valain found himself telling the same story over and over again, answering the same questions, hearing people say the same things. They wanted to fight for the proper king. For him. At least among the regulars of the Windmill there wasn’t a single one who thought Meruvin had any right to the kingship.

He tried to leave several times, but every time there seemed to be someone else who wanted to hear the call to arms out of his own mouth. *This is getting out of hand. I wish Lédu was here.* He couldn’t call her either, because that would blow his cover immediately; he’d tried it from under his disguise but it hadn’t felt as if it worked.

“I really have to go,” he said once again. “Home to the missus. She was visiting a friend this afternoon with the baby but she’ll be back now.” He didn’t have much more hope than the previous couple of times that he’d actually make it to the door, let alone outside, but he found that people parted before him.

No, not before him: before the apparition that was coming in, clothed in radiance, with hair like flames streaming behind her. *Lédu!* She cut through the crowd like a hot knife through butter and was in his arms, still shining, enveloping him in the light.

*I thought you needed me.*

He didn’t know what to say. Someone else did: “*If that* is your missus I see why you want to go home!”

They were in the street before the crowd stopped laughing. The light around Lédu shaded into strong protection. *Let’s get home.* They didn’t say anything until they were in their own apartments in the palace.

It was hard, even then, to find something to say that wouldn’t be the wrong thing. Lédu found the words for him. “That was rash. But I’d have done the same thing if I’d been fit.”

“You did more than that! Only, now everybody knows it was us.”

“Do you think I wasn’t in disguise? They’ll only remember the light. They’ll think they saw Timoine, or the Spirit of Light himself.” That threw Valain a little, but then he realised that she was using the old form of Anshen’s name which meant exactly that. And that he’d only recognised Lédu because she looked like that to him most of the time, only not so strongly. “Everybody will keep talking about what they saw, and it will grow into something that was never there. The stuff that legends are made of.”

“Halla would disapprove.”

“Halla wasn’t there. I left her at home to look after Ardyth.—You had trouble calling me, didn’t you? I could hardly even see you under your seal.”

“I couldn’t reach out to you properly without blowing my cover. Did you hear any of what they were saying?”

“No, they fell silent as soon as they saw me.”

“Everybody thinks I’m the proper king. At least, they think the prince-regent is the proper king. I think if they’d known that I’m him they’d have rallied to me at once. They want to fight for me. Did we really forget about setting up a force in Valdis when we had that meeting about levying the army?”

“Ayran thought at the time that half the normal regiment would be enough. Two hundred.”

“I’d rather have two thousand. And if the Windmill is any indication I can get them, too.”

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Lédu

I’d never thought I’d use what Mother had taught me: to be so impressive that people remember only the sheer splendour and not the substance. I didn’t even think I was much good at it until I needed it.

When I found Valain’s note it made me angry at first —why hadn’t he told me!—, then solicitous: he might tell me not to worry, but it was still a worrying thing, Valain on his own in a strange inn. He hadn’t told me that he planned to play one of his own servants. Anyway, even if he had, I wouldn’t have kept him from it.

It didn’t occur to me to meddle. I’m not that kind of a wife. But when I heard his call I couldn’t stay at home and wait for him to find another solution. He didn’t seem to be in actual danger, only worried and anxious; bowling over whoever was causing the anxiety would probably work. And it did.

I didn’t know whether his effort, or our combined efforts, would set the rallying in motion all by itself. Perhaps we’d only created fertile ground to sow it in. But something had happened; I’d seen it happen. Valain had said what people needed to know, and I had provided the mystery. I didn’t know whether to feel comfortable with that, but it felt good.

“Perhaps I should do impressive things more often,” I told Valain as he was in the bath washing off the sweat and dirt and stale inn smells.

“I wouldn’t mind,” he said, muffled by soaping his hair. “Are you supposed to be like that? I mean, is that the way you’re intended to be all the time, and do you have to tone yourself down for living in Valdyas, for being married to me?”

That was something I had to think about. The gift of presence was not to be used lightly, or overmuch, or it would be lessened. It was true that the last time I’d worn anything like my full power before today had been at our wedding. Well, and to scare Torin with, but that was different. And Mother did it more often, too, but that was different again: she was the queen.

“Not really,” I said. “No more than a little.” Realising that that would be unclear, “It’s a skill, a gift. A sensen, like working outside your body or making protection. I was born with it—it runs in our family—but I had to learn to use it. I don’t tone myself down, but I don’t use it as often as I would if I were living at home.”

He didn’t say anything, and the look on his face didn’t change, but I knew he’d understood.

“You can learn it too, I think.”

That was new to him. He sat up suddenly, shaking water all over the room like a hound. “Teach me?”

“Of course I will.” I handed him the towel. “It’s very useful.”

Chapter 15

Vauri

“What are they waiting for?” Vauri was pacing, as much as the brewer’s house allowed. “For our reinforcements to arrive? They can attack whenever they like. It’s not as if they’re not ready.”

“Perhaps Lady Thing is waiting for the right position of the stars,” Faran said with a scowl. All the officers had taken up Mernath’s usage from Vauri.

“I have half a mind to go and taunt them,” Jerna said. “Shoot an arrow over their heads with a note
pinned to it, ‘come here, cowards!’”

“They’ll be here soon enough.” Aine was glum. Jinla had bound up her shoulder more tidily, but she still couldn’t hold a sword. “Bother. I wish I was right-handed.”

“They’d have got you in the right shoulder then,” Faran said.

“Probably true.”

“You still get to give the orders,” Vauri said. “That I’m here doesn’t mean that you’re not in command any more. I’m at your service.”

“You can take my section,” Aine said, “and Lydan Mernath’s. Jerna is taking Lydan’s archers. I already briefed Jerna while you were away. Do you need any specific orders?”

“I suppose we’ll want to keep them busy until Ayran arrives.”

“That’s more or less the idea. If we can wear them out or discourage them, all the better. What about those recruits of yours?”

“Yes, the ones I trained to stay alive. If we capture them instead of killing them, as many as we can, they might even come over to our side.”

“Try, if you think you can. If you can’t, there’s no help for it.”

“Where do we put them?”

“Here, in the shed. Rusla and I can’t fight but we can guard captives.”

Vauri nodded. “I’m going to do another sweep,” she said. “Not that it helps any.”

Lady Thing’s army was moving at last. Vauri didn’t dare come too close—if she could do a sweep, so could they. At the rate she could see them moving, it would be a matter of hours until they arrived at the south gate.

“Let’s get ready,” she said. “They’re on their way.”

Now that something was happening they were almost cheerful. Faran slapped Aine on her good shoulder. Jerna shouldered her bow and quiver with a determined grin.

“I’ll see whether I can find Ayran yet,” Vauri said. “If he’s in range he’ll be here within a day.” She reached out to the south and east, and there he was, not even far away any more. As long as he didn’t decide to camp well away from the town and get an early start—They needed them now; she had to tell someone. There was hardly anyone she knew in that army. Those in the Order that she hadn’t sent to Ildis were still at the Order house. But Ferin was there, which rather surprised her. She smiled at the idea of Ferin not having been able to resist.

Ferin?

Vauri! He was as surprised as she was. Well, he knew that she was here, didn’t he? But perhaps he hadn’t expected her to call him.

*They’re about to attack us. Can you fight the moment you’re here?*

She felt him hesitate, probably confer with Ayran. *If we must.*

*I think you must, or they’ll sweep us off the map.*

-**-

It was the ultimate act of defiance, Vauri thought, to hold a service for Anshen just outside the gate of a city that was completely of the Nameless. She almost hoped that Lady Thing’s army would arrive before they were finished. They were running late enough: the fire had been hard to light on the soggy ground, and it had started to drizzle. This was Ildis, after all; rain was its normal state.

She’d never thought that she would have to give the soldier’s blessing for real. Every year on the
Feast she gave it to anyone who came asking for it, for courage from Anshen. As she smeared each person’s forehead with charcoal she remembered something Serla had once told her: in the old times, before there were kings, it would have been a brand. Marked with fire. The more markings, the more battles, the more courage. This mark would wear off, if not with the rain, then with sweat. One battle ought to be enough.

She smeared the last of the charcoal on her own forehead and sang the final blessing, voices joining in around her. Not only the Sworn, but some —most!— of the soldiers as well. They were one army now, one force, one rock for the enemy to break on.

And the enemy came: as a breeze carried the last words away they saw the vanguard of Meruvin’s army appear around the far wall of the city.

They barely had time to regroup before the fighting was upon them. For what seemed like hours, Vauri parried one blow after another, struck at arms and legs and helmets, kept opponents from hitting her. Every now and again she thought she recognised someone, but they were all strangers. Until she came face to face with a young man who had lost his helmet or had never had one, ears sticking out on the sides of his head. Rovan. She stopped short. He was so baffled that he dropped his sword; she let him pick it up.

“If you can make it to that house there’s someone there who will keep you safe,” she said.

“Are you really— Which side are you on?”

“This side. Go tell Aine, she’s the woman with the bandaged shoulder, that Vauri sent you.”

“Arni?”

“Yes, but Aine doesn’t know that name. Take the others if you can. I promised to keep as many of you alive as I could.” And she lost him, fighting someone who attacked her from the left. She turned and struck; her sword was in his side before he knew what had happened. He fell heavily, almost across her feet, and his helm and leather cap came off, and she saw his face.

Lochan.

She couldn’t read the look on his face. There was too much pain in it. He was dying, that much was clear; she’d struck hard and true. In a reflex she protected herself and him, making a place that the fighting couldn’t reach. She knelt down beside him and took his hand.

“Arni? Is it really you?”

She nodded. “My name is Vauri.”

He squinted at her uniform. “You’re in the Order of the Sworn?”

“Commander of the Order of the Sworn.”

“I didn’t know—” Pain racked him, and she tried to protect him from it, taking some of it on herself.

“Of course you didn’t.”

“Why did you train my kids?”

“So they could stay alive. Lady Th— Lady Liase’s strategists planned to send your troop in first to be killed, to wear us out.”

“I knew that.” His breath was coming in short raspy bursts: it couldn’t be long now.

“We won’t kill them if we can help it.”

He tried to nod but couldn’t. A last spasm went through his body, and Vauri covered her ears and closed her eyes for a moment. She would have stayed to cry over him, but other things were more urgent: she dropped the protection, leaving Lochan’s body to be trampled by fighting, and threw herself back into the fray.
There was no neat division of sections and units any more. It was a chaos of men and women trying to stay alive, trying to kill the enemy. They were being driven back. There was no longer a clear way to the brewery. She saw Faran with a sword in each hand—he must have taken one from a dead enemy—fighting two opponents at once, pushed her way to him, took down one and was set upon by two others immediately. They were being driven back. She had to step over a dead body and saw that it was Lydan, hacked almost in two by what had to be a two-handed sword. She was bleeding now from several wounds, none of them serious, but all of them painful. She almost bumped into Jerna who was picking up arrows wherever she could, her own long spent, and sending them into clumps of fighters with deadly precision.

They were being driven back inexorably. The enemy were no longer six to one—they’d taken out a lot—but four to one still, and they wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer. If only she could find someone with a horn who could blow it reliably and wasn’t shooting arrows, she could call the retreat.

A horn sounded behind her. It wasn’t the retreat; quite the contrary, it was the call to arms. Ayran had arrived.

She let herself be driven back then, into the lines of Ayran’s army, where she could be just one of so many fighters and not have to worry, only to stay alive as she’d taught her charges no more than days ago.

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Someone must have hit her on the head, because the next she knew she was on her pallet in her tent with a splitting headache. Jerna was sitting up on the other pallet, lovingly polishing an arrow in the light of a flickering lamp. She was singing tonelessly, or reciting to herself, in too low a voice for Vauri to hear any words. When Vauri stirred and moaned, she looked up from her work.

“Ah, you’re back. Erne said you’d live.” She gave the arrow another wipe.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. You were here before me.”

“I mean, what happened? Did we win?”

“Sort of. We chased them away. Meruvin is dead.”

Vauri wanted to sit up, but her head didn’t let her.

“I’ll always keep this arrow,” Jerna said dreamily. “It’s my lucky arrow. It’s the arrow that killed Meruvin.”

“You killed Meruvin?” She couldn’t resist propping herself up on one elbow. Ouch. There was a cut on that elbow, too.

“Me and Eldan. Eldan had him down, and he rose to strike back, and I finished him off.” She put oil on the cloth to polish the arrow even more. “I’ll never shoot this arrow again.” Her voice sounded flat and far away.

“What’s wrong with you? You sound funny.”

“I had the killing rage. Erne gave me something to take the edge off. It’s supposed to make me sleep, but I’m too awake to sleep.”

“Erne is here?”

“At the house, I suppose. All the really badly wounded are there. We’re not badly wounded so we’re in our own tent. I think you got knocked on the head. And you’ve got a lot of little cuts. I’m still whole.”

“You should try to sleep regardless,” Vauri said. “I’m getting some more sleep myself.”
The next time she woke, Jerna was sound asleep and the headache was almost gone. Thin early-morning sunlight streamed in through the tent opening. Vauri sat up and found that she was only a little dizzy; that could even be hunger, because thinking about food made her stomach growl. She threw on some clothes, noting in passing that someone had washed her wounds and put a far too large white shift on her. No uniform to be found: it must have been destroyed by the fighting. She wished she’d brought a spare after all.

The camp was quiet, but to reach the house she had to cross the battlefield and that was far from quiet. Priestesses of Naigha had descended on it like a flock of ravens and were moving bodies to one side, sending each one off with a cursory prayer. They would either have to put up a whole new artificial hill, or resort to wartime manners and build a pyre. From what the priestesses were doing — taking a lock of hair from each of the slain— Vauri supposed the latter. She nodded to Jinla, who was working among her sisters as if she belonged here.

In Jeran’s kitchen there was an impromptu officers’ meeting going on. Aine was there, Faran, Ayran with a bandaged leg, several of Ayran’s officers who Vauri didn’t know, and, to her surprise, Mernath. He must have come with Erne. She grinned at him, talk to you later.

“Good morning,” Aine said. “Glad to see you in one piece.”

Vauri grabbed a piece of bread from a basket and sat on the table, because all the chairs and benches were taken. “Glad to be in one piece. Did you lot get any sleep at all?”

“Most of us are just up early,” Ayran said. “I didn’t get much sleep, though, I’ll have to learn to lie on my other side until this heals.” And he was worried about something, which he wasn’t talking about. Never mind, that would come in its own time.

“We’re taking the tally,” Aine said. “Forty-seven of ours, two officers.”

“I almost tripped over Lydan on the field,” Vauri said.

“And Ruzyn just died in the infirmary.”

Vauri bowed her head and breathed a quick prayer to Naigha. Forty-seven out of two hundred. It seemed a lot, but they’d been outnumbered six to one. “Ayran? What about yours?”

“About a hundred, and some wounded who may not make it. And someone I brought from Lenyas found his father dead on the field— he was an officer in the other army.”

“That’s sad,” Vauri said. “Did you hear that I was in the other army for a day? My commander was from Lenyas, too.”

“Don’t tell me that it was Lochan astin Eraday,” Ayran said, frowning.

“Yes— gods, did his son enlist with you? Is he with us?”

“In the other Guild. But yes, with us.”

“His father was a good man. Pity I had to kill him.”

“Was that you?”

“He attacked me from the side, I don’t think he knew who I was before I turned and hit him. If I’d known I’d have hesitated.”

“And he would have killed you,” Faran said.

Vauri nodded slowly, thinking. Perhaps he would have. Perhaps he’d have hesitated just like she would, and they’d have had to fight a long anguished duel and ended up killing one another. Perhaps he’d have listened to her and gone to the house like his subordinates.

Ayran’s voice cut through her thoughts. “Vauri? Can you manage a thanksgiving service?”

“What, right now?”

“I was thinking this afternoon, when the priestesses have finished clearing up and everybody is
more or less awake.”

She sighed. It came with the job. “Yes.”

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The brewer’s shed had been cleared as much as possible to make room for the wounded. Erne was there, bossing some young people around— Vauri recognised Rovan and several more of her pupils among them. They’d made it. And they were doing useful work instead of being imprisoned. It made Vauri smile. Mernath saw it and raised an eyebrow. She’d told him about her exploits in Ildis, but of course he wouldn’t recognise anybody.

“They’re the ones I trained. Some of them, anyway.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“Make them work for their keep, then let them get on with their lives.”

“Don’t you think they’ll bite the hand that feeds them?”

Vauri shook her head. “Not now. Not any more.” She made her way to the far corner, where Erne was kneeling at the side of Ferin. In between sending people about jobs, she was cleaning a great gash in his side. His shirt and jacket had been cut away completely; it looked as if the weapon that had caused the wound had done most of that work already.

As Vauri came to stand next to her she looked up and shook her head. “It’s no use.”

“Anything I can do? I’m not a healer, but—”

“You’re a grand master. Perhaps. I can’t stitch up his _insides_.”

“You stitch up his skin. I’ll see what I can do.” She dropped to her knees too, taking Ferin’s hand in hers. His mind was very far away. She dared not put him under any further or she wouldn’t be sure of getting him back. _This is going to hurt. Don’t slip away._ She called Mernath over, asked him to keep an eye on Ferin and warn her if he did slip away, so she could work on his body without distraction.

It had been something long and sharp that had torn open Ferin’s side; presumably the same two-handed sword that had cut Lydan in half. They’d found the sword on the battlefield, and also the man who must have wielded it, a seven-foot giant felled by about a dozen arrows. She called the sword to mind: sharp, shiny, no barbs, most likely no poison. The wound looked clean, too, without any ragged edges. And —thank Anshen— the sword had narrowly missed a big artery. Ferin could easily have been as dead as Lydan.

“Gods, how did you keep him alive this long?”

“Didn’t start bleeding like this until just now. Someone wrapped him in a spare shirt. I think I tore something when I took it off and started suturing.” Erne finished stitching up the outside wound; now it didn’t look as if there was anything wrong on the inside, but Vauri knew better. Erne moved over to make room for her. Vauri put one hand on the sutured place, the other on Ferin’s other side to balance the power. Ferin moaned and tried to move. _Keep still._ “Erne, can you help with the pain?”

“No right now. I’m clean out of poppy juice. —Oh!” She put a hand on Ferin’s forehead; her face took on a look of concentration. Ferin relaxed.

“Thank you.” Now to assess the damage. It was mostly flesh, and that would heal by itself, but some blood vessels had been severed and the point of the sword had pierced his liver. Take care of that first. She pushed with her mind, encouraging the sliced flesh to become whole, to come back together. _I’ll never eat liver again._ She let go; it held. Barely. It would have to do. Now for the blood vessels; more tricky, because internal bleeding would kill Ferin much more quickly than a nick in his liver would. In fact it was killing him now: he’d be dead within the hour if she couldn’t pull this off.
Anshen, guide my hands! She remembered what Aine had said, “I wish I was right-handed”, and swapped her right and left hands, the right on Ferin’s injured side. It might just make a difference.

It did. She could sense the wound under her hand as clearly as if it was still lying wide open. She found herself as impassive as if she was fletching an arrow. This goes here. Attach it where it belongs. Now give a gentle tug and see if it stays in place.

Ferin’s blood once more flowed where it should.

The world seemed to stand still for a moment. Then Vauri, Erne and Mernath let out the breath they’d been holding, all at once.

Vauri’s headache was coming back. She put a hand to her forehead.

“I should never have let you do this,” Erne said, all solicitous doctor again.

“And let Ferin die? I’m glad I could do something. I’ll survive a bit of headache.”

Ayran was outside the infirmary, leaning on a pair of crutches, trying not to show his worry. Vauri hadn’t seen him on the way in; he must just have arrived.

“He’ll probably live,” Erne told him. “If he doesn’t do outrageous things like trying to get up in the next four weeks or so.”

“Can I see him?”

“See him, yes; disturb him, no. Rovan!” The boy was at her elbow almost at once.

“This is Ayran, he’s Ferin’s brother—the one we were working on just now. Take him to see him and make sure he doesn’t touch any stitched-up bits, or wake him up.”

Ayran went after Rovan with a shrug and an uneasy grin.

“I want to see his face when he realises that Ayran is the general,” Mernath said.

“He probably won’t until the thanksgiving service,” Vauri said. “At least I have something to be thankful for now.”

The thanksgiving service took much more out of Vauri than the blessing had. Not only because she was tired, and wounded, and had just been doing exacting semsin work; but it was a mixed joy, giving thanks to Anshen for their victory—a very mixed victory!—and for sparing their lives, while there were so many whose lives had not been spared. The priestesses of Naigha would hold their own service later to commemorate the dead. It comes with the job. When she became commander of the Order, she hadn’t realised that it made her in effect the high priestess of Anshen. That became much more substantial when there was actual fighting.

Afterwards, they had a real officers’ meeting, again in the kitchen but with enough chairs and benches for everybody. Jerna had emerged from their tent and joined the service in the middle. She was there now, still looking groggy. Vauri let Ayran preside; she was almost too tired to think.

“I’m waiting for my spies to come back,” Ayran said. “I expect them any moment. They’ve gone to the north of the town to see what happened to Liase and her children.”

“Do we wait for them, or can we begin?” Faran asked.

“Well, it depends on what they find, in part, what we’re going to do. But I propose keeping a small force—say four hundred—to hold the town secure. I don’t see my way to actually taking the town right now. We chased Meruvin’s army away, but we didn’t reduce their strength by much.”

“Won’t they come back and flatten us when we’re only four hundred?” Mernath asked.

“Not without Meruvin,” Vauri said. “Unless Lady Thing herself takes charge.” She’d seen fierce loyalty to the man the enemy thought to be the real king, but it had been loyalty to the person himself.
Without a figurehead to rally to there would be much less rallying.

They talked about practical things for a while. Ayran had brought people from Tilis, who could build in a swamp, and would build barracks. If any substantial army was going to stay, they’d need more permanent quarters. Supply lines had to be set up. It must be decided who would stay and who would go; there were probably more than enough volunteers. If five hundred elected to stay, would they keep them? Six hundred?

Aine would stay and command the garrison. Ayran himself would go back to Valdis with whoever wanted to stay in the army, but wouldn’t be in the garrison because he was needed for Valain’s main force. Vauri had to go back— to swear in Jerna, for one thing. She’d been a master since before they’d left for Ildis, but everything that had happened had delayed the ceremony.

“Can I have Jerna as captain of archers?” Aine asked.

“When I’m done with her, sure,” Vauri said. “If she agrees, of course. Jerna, will you?”

Jerna winced and looked at her feet. “I don’t know if Lydan’s boots fit me. It would be a good memorial for him, but—” She looked up, straight at Aine. “I get the killing rage.”

“Only in battle,” Aine said. “This will be protection, patrol. And if there is battle again, you’ll have people around you who know.”

Jerna nodded, looking confused. “Yes. Probably. If you think—”

Aine smiled widely. “Yes. I do.”

Mernath and Faran debated in friendly rivalry which of them would stay as Aine’s second, until Aine silenced them with “I’ll have you both.” She looked at Vauri for confirmation. Vauri nodded absently. She didn’t need masters of the Order in Valdis as much as they were needed in Ildis, and these three —and Jerna— had proved themselves already, and proved that they could work together.

“Now to clean up the mess,” Ayran said. “Why does that have to take so much longer than the battle itself?”

If there was an answer to that, it was never given. The door opened and there were a man and a woman who Vauri didn’t recognise, but it was clear who they were: Ayran’s spies. Neither of them was gifted, which explained why they hadn’t heard from them earlier. She wondered whether it was clever of Ayran to send people who wouldn’t be suspected, or thoughtless to send people who couldn’t communicate except in person. She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“She’s gone,” the woman was saying. “Taken the brats and gone north. We couldn’t go after them, everybody was going in the other direction and we’d have stood out like a sore thumb.”

“But they can’t be farther away than Nesile, or Glan at most,” the man said. “It’s all thick forest north of there. They’ll probably be back in town as soon as the danger is over.”

“The danger won’t be over for them soon,” Faran grunted.

“Have you seen their army regroup?” Ayran asked.

“There’s about four, five hundred sitting in the camp licking their wounds,” the man said.

“As we are sitting here licking ours. Where did the rest go?”

“Every which way,” the woman said. “I can’t count the bands of stragglers. How many did you kill, anyway?”

“Less than half, I think much less. But some of them were only in it for the prince, and the prince is dead.”

“Ah, really? That wasn’t a rumour?”

“I killed him with my own arrow,” Jerna said.
Chapter 16

The memorial service hadn’t only been for their own army, but for all the dead of the battle. There weren’t many people who hadn’t lost a friend, a sibling, a lover, a cousin. Vauri saw Rovan with his arm around a young man who looked enough like Lochan to be the son that Ayran had talked about, both of them in tears. Vauri’s own tears were for Lydan and Lochan, for Ruzyn, for those of her pupils who hadn’t made it to safety as Rovan and a few others had.

Later, she found Rovan packing his scant belongings. “Are you going home?”

“I can’t go home. I’ve disgraced myself.” He sounded matter-of-fact about it, but Vauri could sense that he wasn’t as indifferent as he seemed.

“So where are you going?”

“Lord Ayran offered me a place in the army in Valdis.”

“But do you want to stay in the army?”

He looked down at his feet, shaking his head dismally. “Not really.”

“Do you have a trade?”

“Yes, tinsmith’s apprentice.”

“I’ll bet there are dozens of tinsmiths in Valdis. You can go there and see if one of them will take you on.”

“But I want to stay with Fian. —Well, for now.”

“Go with Fian then, and once you’ve arrived where you’re going find a tinsmith to apprentice yourself to. Ayran will sponsor you if you need it, or Fian himself. It’s not as if you won’t ever see him again when he’s in the army and you’re living in town.”

He looked thoughtful. “You’re probably right.”

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They took Jerna’s arrow back to Valdis. And the two-handed sword, which nobody was big and strong enough to use anyway, not even Faran. They would look impressive as trophies in the Order’s weapons room.

“We should have a sign engraved ‘Two-handed sword that cut Lydan in half’,” Jerna said.

“And don’t forget ‘Arrow that Jerna killed Prince Meruvin with’,” Vauri added.

They’d been giggly all the way to Valdis. It was fortunate that they’d decided to travel ahead and not wait until Ayran and the bulk of the army were ready, or they’d have annoyed people immensely.

The sight of the town walls sobered them. Jerna turned to Vauri and said, “I can’t imagine that I won’t be working with you after you swear me in.”

“You’ll be working with Aine.”

“Aine’s not you.”

No, she wasn’t; and all the journeymen Vauri would have in Valdis weren’t Jerna either. She felt the way she imagined a mother would feel when her last child left home. “Well, but do you want the job?”

“Yes! If it was under you, it would be exactly what I wanted.”

“See it as training for succeeding me,” Vauri said.

“I’m not a grand master.”
“As long as I don’t have a grand master apprentice to step in my shoes, I’ll have to make do with the best I can get, won’t I?”

Jerna scowled. “When you’re too old to be commander, I won’t be young any more either.” There were eleven years between them: not quite enough.

“I could die of something else than old age.”

“Well, don’t. Please.” Jerna suddenly looked like a girl again, the girl who had appeared on the doorstep seven years ago begging to be allowed in the Order. She was a grown woman now, twenty-one and a master, a champion archer and not bad with a sword either. I love her as much as I love Valain, Vauri thought. And I had to let Valain go, too.

The Ilda Gate was closed. It hadn’t been closed when they went out through it. It hadn’t been closed in daylight for as long as Vauri could remember. She knocked. The small door in the gate opened a crack; a face looked through, a young face with something that looked like a slapped-together uniform under it.

“May we come in?”

“Depends on who you are.”

“Vauri, commander of the Order of the Sworn, and Jerna, master in the Order of the Sworn.”

The door opened completely. “I don’t have any way to be sure, but there’s no need to be that suspicious yet,” the doorman said. He was really very young: in the middle teens. He looked more like a craft apprentice than a watchman.

“Has someone been organising the defence of the town?” she asked.

The boy grinned. “Yes. We have.” He was obviously very proud of the ‘we’.

Valain

“Armei Vauri of the Order of the Sworn,” the servant said. “And Serlei Jerna.”

“Yes, let them in, please.” Valain was pleasantly surprised: Vauri was early. She was also dirty and dishevelled, wearing drab nondescript clothes. Jerna, at least, wore the uniform of a journeyman in the Order, though that too was torn and stained.

“We came here right away.” They smelt of travel: sweat and horse.

Valain called Lédu, who was there almost at once as if she’d been waiting for it. And perhaps she had.


“Clean clothes,” Jerna said with a sigh. “I don’t think I’ve worn anything except this since before the battle.”

Valain laughed, and sent someone to the Order house to get clean uniforms, and called for a tub and bath-water and for good measure food and ale as well, and made small talk, but didn’t ask the question that was burning on his lips. Lédu had to ask it for him.

“He’s really dead, isn’t he? The messenger said so, but she hadn’t seen it happen.”

“I saw it happen,” Jerna said.

“She’s being modest,” Vauri said. “She made it happen.”

Jerna took Valain’s and Lédu’s hands and showed them her memory. “Who’s the man with the sword?” Valain asked.

“Eldan, he’s one of Ayran’s men. He stayed in Ildis.”
“It’s not proper to reward members of the Order, is it? I want to give you something. You and him.”

Jerna looked at Vauri, then smiled at Valain. “You could kit me out in master’s things. Vauri is going to swear me in.”

“Eldan can probably do with new kit, too.” He forced himself to see the scene again in his mind: Meruvin down, rising to strike, Jerna’s arrow hitting him full in the chest. There must have been tremendous force behind that to pierce his breastplate; Valain knew that Meruvin had a copper one, and he couldn’t imagine that he hadn’t worn it in the battle.

Vauri finished dressing and buckled on her sword belt. “What else did the messenger say?” she asked. “Anything about Liase?”

“She seems to have taken the children and gone north,” Valain said.

Vauri nodded. “We can safely assume that she has forfeited any claim that Princess Ailin may have had to the throne.”

Valain’s breath stuck in his throat. To make it worse, Vauri knelt before him. “Your Majesty. Do you accept my fealty?”

“Vauri, don’t do this to me. I need you at my side, not at my feet.”

“Do you?”

He took a deep breath. “I do. Now get up, for Anshen’s sake!” But he had to take her hand and raise her before she was willing to stand.

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“There’s no precedent.” Serla took another volume of history from the shelf and turned the pages starting at the back, going back through the years. “None of our kings or queens was ever deposed, before or after their coronation. Speaking of coronations—”

“No,” Valain said. “Not until I have Ferin back.”

“Someone else can do it. I could, if necessary.”

“I want Ferin,” Valain said stubbornly. “I’m not happy with this anyway, and it would be worse without my own master of ceremonies.”

Serla shrugged and went back to her books. “No law or ruling that deals with the children of a deposed king. But I think Vauri is right and we shouldn’t count on the little princess. A regency is always weaker, and we need strength now.”

“Any precedents of regencies that make you so sure?”

Serla went into a lengthy exposition of child-kings in the early years of the kingdom, which lost Valain almost immediately. “Never mind. I don’t doubt that Vauri is right. But I won’t be crowned without Ferin.”

“At least have yourself proclaimed. The people want a king.”

She might have a point, at that. He remembered the young people at the Windmill, every one of them convinced that he, Valain, was the proper king. “Can you write a proclamation? Oh, and don’t forget to say that Meruvin was killed in the battle. It’s going through the town like wildfire and I’d like it to be said officially.”

“Yes, of course,” Serla said with a grin.

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Serla wouldn’t budge, of course. Ferin or no Ferin, Valain would be crowned on the Feast of Anshen. She had already appointed herself master of ceremonies for the occasion, when I thought of something: why not bring Ferin from Ildis in a horse-litter, install him in a room near our apartments, and let him give orders from his bed? After all, I’d been confined to my bed myself for weeks, and it hadn’t kept me from being on the council. The council had simply come to me.

It was done; and it made Valain much happier. I let Ferin watch Ardyth when I had to do things that I couldn’t take a noisy active baby to, and that made Ardyth and Ferin happy too: she liked her new uncle and he liked her. She was crawling now, and though Ferin couldn’t get up to catch her when she crawled too far he could control her with his voice. With his mind too, I suspected.

We needed a new court physician with Torin gone. I still wanted to know exactly where he had gone; presumably to Liase, but we hadn’t heard anything of him since we’d seen him on the Ildis road on his piebald horse. I didn’t think the message had ever reached Vauri; as far as I knew it had arrived in the middle of the battle. But, as I’d said then and still believed, Torin could wait. At least we knew he wasn’t at court. Instead, we got Serla’s nephew Arvin, young, eager and in the Guild of Anshen. The first thing he got to do was to look after Ferin and make sure he didn’t overexert himself. Erne had written a three-page letter about what had happened and what they’d done.

“Four more people in this state back in Ildis,” Ferin said. “She’s got enough to do without me.” He could half-sit now, propped up with pillows, but he wasn’t supposed to use the muscles in his side for fear of tearing what had been mended. What I hadn’t known was that some of the mending had been Vauri’s doing. According to Ferin, she thought it was all in a day’s work.

We set to preparing for the coronation. Halla assigned herself to Ferin as his secretary and most of the leg-work fell to her and me. And about half the thinking, it turned out. Who would crown him? Halla consulted the history books, but annoyingly it usually didn’t say. “When I write a history book,” she said, “I’ll put it in!”

Vauri, perhaps? “That would tell them that the king serves Anshen,” Halla said, “but it does look like a conspiracy. He wants to be king for both Guilds, doesn’t he?”

“I don’t think he wants to,” I said, “but he’ll have to.”

“Look to the House Velain,” Ferin said. But try as we might, we couldn’t find anyone in the House Velain with enough authority to do any crowning. Except possibly Valain’s sister, but a priestess of Naigha would be entirely the wrong person.

Eventually it was Valain himself who came up with a solution. “What about your father?” he asked Ferin. Old Ayran astin Brun, the judge in the court case. The only problem was that he had been avowedly against Meruvin: people might think that he was biased. But he was the head of one of the most important families and old enough to be above suspicion of conspiracy.

One thing that the history books were clear about was that one had to invite the high priests of all the gods. Naigha, Mizran and Anshen were easy; it didn’t seem necessary to cover the other side of Árankhaen as well. The One didn’t have any priests, but Halla said that it didn’t matter. Timoine didn’t have any priests either, but we’d get a child from the House Velain to officiate. If Valain had had a young brother or sister they could have done it. Ardyth was too small: the child would have to carry something in the procession and chant the First Invocation. I had a fleeting thought that little Princess Ailin would be perfect for that if they’d been able to bring her from Ildis, but of course if they’d brought her from Ildis she’d have been the one crowned.

That left the Mother, who didn’t have priestesses in Valdyas except the women who took on a priestess’ authority when they officiated at weddings. “But we do,” I said. “My mother is a high priestess of the Mother. Shall I ask her?”
“I will,” Halla said. “I was going to invite your family anyway. And it will look good, having someone from Velihas in the ceremony.”

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Valain still wasn’t confident, not even now that everything was ready. This was the right time to teach him to use presence. I took him to the great hall, up to the gallery. He knew what I was up to, of course, and smiled.

“What didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you were preoccupied.”

I tried to recall how Mother had gone about teaching us. I could hear her voice in my mind: *Stand and be.* Well, Valain could already do that; it wasn’t as if he was three years old and just beginning to learn. I told him the same thing, just in case.

“Vauri calls that ‘find yourself,’” he said, looking surprised. “Easy.”

“Good. If that’s easy the rest will not be hard.”

He found himself; stood and was. The ragged edges of his *anie*, caused by worry and sudden change, smoothed out. He looked a size larger already.

“Now see if you can fill the hall.”

“What with?”

“With *yourself*, silly. Your essence.”

I felt him starting to protest when he remembered the medallions. I hadn’t taken him to the gallery for nothing. He touched the nearest one and stood still for a moment, taking the power into himself. So much, in fact, that he could barely contain it. When he extended himself fully it was almost too much for me to bear. I only could because I knew him, because we had been one.

He was revelling in it, celebrating it. Vauri had told me how she had first seen that Valain was gifted, as a child, when he had taken anea in his hands and played with it as if it was a handful of snow. This must be the grown-up version of it. Light streamed from his hands, from his body, filling the hall with a golden glow. If he could tame that, wear it like a cloak, it would be the most impressive thing a king could bring to his coronation. He enveloped me in it, drawing strands of light all around me, exhilarated, laughing like a little boy.

We played with the power for what seemed like hours. Then suddenly Valain sat down, spent. He was still filled with it, but he had no command over it any more, at least for the moment.

“Come,” he said, and took me up to the bedroom as I had taken him up to the gallery.

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**Valain**

Lédu’s hair was spilling over Valain’s bare chest. He picked up a handful and let it run through his fingers, the one silver lock with it that she’d let grow just because she could. He twirled it around a finger and the silver came out on top of the copper every time; it was just a little more springy.

He moved because her head was lying uncomfortably hard on his shoulder, and it woke her up. She yawned and stretched, reclaimed all of her hair and shook it. Valain tossed her her shift that had somehow ended up on his side of the bed.

“I want green,” Lédu said, squinting at the white thing before she put it on.

Valain was baffled. “A green shift?”
“No, we should wear green for the coronation. Or is there a traditional colour for coronations, like red for weddings?”

“No, I know, and we’ve been reading so much history that we’d have found it. I like it. Let’s find a tailor. Green with gold embroidery, how about that?”

“That would go with your anie. Perfect.”

That reminded him. “That light I saw— what would people see who aren’t gifted? Did I see it with my mind’s eye, or with the eyes of my body?”

Lédu thought for a moment, eyes closed, as if she was trying to see it again. “I don’t know! Let’s go and show Halla and ask what she sees.”

Halla wasn’t sure. She did see something, but couldn’t put into words what it was. “You look older. No, larger.”

“More kingly?” Valain asked.

“Pff, as if I would know.” She scowled. “I haven’t seen anything kingly in my life. Well, your mother, but I was so young then that I was easily impressed. Anyway, she was queenly. And not gifted, was she? Perhaps that makes a difference.”

“I think it does,” Lédu said quietly.

Valain wondered whether he’d show himself to Ayran too, but this was probably enough. At least now he was sure that he’d be able to impress everybody at the coronation. The gifted would know what he was doing, and if the rest didn’t they would still be touched. He took a deep satisfied breath and squeezed Ledu’s shoulder. Thank you.

Chapter 17

Vauri


“Dagger?” Jerna pulled Vauri’s cloak straight once again. “Brush your hair?”

“I don’t need a dagger. If there’s any danger I’ll use my sword.”

“Better take it anyway. Are these the boots with the sheath?”

“Right side. And yes, brushing my hair is a good idea.” Her hair was still short from cutting it for battle, and it was sticking out to all sides.

“Did you think he’d be king?” Jerna asked.

Had she thought that? And if so, since when? “I’m not sure. I think I was planning for getting Ailin to Valdis and educating her.” She pulled the brush through the wayward hair. It didn’t grow back fast enough to satisfy her impatience. If it didn’t become manageable soon, she’d cut it all off again. She envied Valain, whose hair was thick and gloriously red and long enough to tie in a tail. But then if Valain had been in the battle it would probably have been as short as hers.

“I don’t believe we’d have had much success with the little princess,” Jerna interrupted her thoughts. “It’s much better this way. We need a real king.”

Yes, he would be a real king. Vauri had taken care of that herself, in part. And she’d be
instrumental in bringing it to completion today. She was looking forward to working with the high priestess of Naigha. Tylse, she thought. She was probably one of no more than a dozen people to whom the high priestess had given her name.

Who else would be there? Ayran astin Brun standing in for the whole country. The Mighty Servant, of course, pompous as came with his station, but a decent enough man. Radan astin Velain, nine years old and very proud to have been chosen as priest of Timoine. And Lédu’s mother, the queen of Velhílas; as high priestess, not as queen, but she would still make an impression. It could only go well for her king.

Jerna was finishing her own outfit, testing the draw of her sword. She’d be Vauri’s guard, at her left hand in the procession and ready to defend her so she wouldn’t have to be alert when the crowning itself was underway.

“I’m glad I swore you in when I did,” Vauri said. “Or I wouldn’t have had you for a guard.” Jerna would be away to Ildis before long. Vauri didn’t like to think about that. She ran a hand through her hair—it jumped up again immediately—and allowed Jerna to brush it back. “Let’s go.”

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Most of the procession was already assembled in the palace courtyard. Vauri found her place in it, just behind where Valain and Lédu would be, not only as a symbolic bodyguard but an actual one. There were more of the Sworn there, farther to the back, near the groups of black-clad priestesses of Naigha and robed servants of Mizran. Vauri wondered how many of the people in the procession, like herself, had celebrated the Feast of Anshen in the night and slept only a few hours or not at all. Valain for one wouldn’t have slept at all: a coronation entailed a vigil, just like a swearing-in.

There was no sign of the king yet. The anticipation in the courtyard grew. At last the great doors of the palace opened, which were hardly used at other times. Radan astin Velain came out first, carrying a large green branch, a solemn look on his freckled face under the wreath of flowers in his hair. Behind him Valain —King Vegelin!— and his consort, dressed in green and gold. Valain had a wreath like his young cousin and Lédu’s hair was plaited with flowers. Ardyth, on her mother’s arm, didn’t have any flowers, probably because she would have eaten them. Both Valain and Lédu seemed to be enveloped in golden light.

The king took his place in the procession, bent over to whisper something in Radan’s ear, and the column started to move.

It had never taken Vauri so long to walk through Valdis. They went at a pace that even the high priestess of Naigha could keep up with, and when the old woman got tired two younger priestesses slung a linen sling over their shoulders for her to sit in. The people of Valdis, it looked like all of them, had come out to cheer their king. Valain didn’t look uneasy any more; apparently whatever caused the golden glow around him also made him confident. Lédu must have taught him that. Vauri wondered how other people saw him; from the Mighty Servant’s reaction, people in the Guild of the Nameless saw about the same that she did.

She tried to listen to conversations from the wayside, but to really understand anything would have taken concentration that she needed for keeping guard. It made her fall into old habits, treating the sweep she was doing as a journeyman’s perimeter patrol.

No danger from the south.

Praise Anshen, came Valain’s mind-voice, unexpected. There was a laugh in it.

While the procession had been going through the town, a high dais with a throne had been built in the courtyard. There were benches around the throne for the other people in the ceremony to sit on— gods, they’d rehearsed it almost to death, determining exactly who was to sit where.
For now, they all stood. Radan’s invocation hushed the crowd and made them all pay attention. Then it was Vauri’s turn: she could see her intention taking shape around the people on the dais. It wasn’t quite a seal, but it was still ryst, a force to keep them safe. The Mighty Servant took over from her and filled the place with a feeling of plenty, almost over-rich, but there was enough room for it. Tylyse’s old voice, not wavering for one moment, made it complete.

Valain stood in front of the throne and swore his oaths. To govern the country according to law and custom, to cause justice and order to be maintained and executed, to keep the laws of the gods to the utmost of his power. Not that he’s new to it, Vauri thought. She noticed that Lédu silently said the words with him and exchanged a look and a smile with the queen of Velihas.

Ayran astin Brun made the king sit down for the giving of gifts. Radan relinquished his green branch; Valain held it above his head for a moment before laying it at his feet. Ardyth, who had been sitting quietly in Lédu’s lap, stretched out her hands for it and Lédu put her on the ground to play with the leaves.

Vauri gave Valain his own sword, which he’d given to her the previous day to keep in the Temple of Anshen for blessing. Perhaps it ought to have been a new sword, but Valain hadn’t wanted any other. He had to stand up to receive it; she belted it around him and he drew it and held it up to the people under their loud cheering. He looked as if he was going to say something, but he sheathed the sword instead and sat down again.

Should I have said “this is to defend you with”?
he asked Vauri.

I’d say that was clear enough.

There was some commotion in the crowd. A small man tried to push through, was restrained by the Sworn, pulled free and almost succeeded in climbing the steps, but Vauri had him at swordspoint.

Great Anshen. I recognise him.
It was the priest of the Nameless from Ildis. He was carrying something bulky in a linen cloth.

“I come to bring a gift!” he shouted.

Vauri looked at Valain, who nodded. “Let him come.” His hand was on the hilt of his sword. Lédu picked up the protesting Ardyth and held her close. Vauri didn’t put her sword away; not yet. She sat down, though, in her appointed place between Lédu and the Mighty Servant.

The priest came up the final step, threw his parcel at Valain’s feet with a crash and pulled off the cloth. It was a copper breastplate with a clean round hole in the middle, piercing the Velain device.

“You who call yourself a king,” he said, “you accused your brother of having your mother murdered, and then you had him murdered in revenge!” His voice rose as he spoke; there were murmurs from the crowd.

Valain stood up. He wasn’t any taller than the priest, but he seemed to dwarf him nevertheless. “My brother was killed in fair battle, a battle that he wasn’t obliged to join. His forces attacked; ours only defended.”

The priest froze. Before he could reply, Valain went on: “I appreciate your gift of my vanquished enemy’s armour.”

Excellent, Vauri thought to him. He had unstrung the situation before it could snap; taken the little priest’s weapons out of his hands.

“I regret that we neglected to invite you for the ceremony. I intend to repair that. Now that you have given your gift, please take your seat between the commander of the Order of the Sworn and the Mighty Servant.”

Vauri and the Mighty Servant made room and the priest sat between them, gingerly, as if the seat was studded with pins. If he felt as uncomfortable as he made Vauri feel—but he was probably more uncomfortable. At least the Mighty Servant was in his own Guild. He sat there, frozen with fear or embarrassment or a mixture of both, while the Mighty Servant put the crown in the king’s hands and
the high priestess of Naigha laid a mantle on his shoulders. It was midnight blue, Naigha’s colour, and he wouldn’t wear it again until the day he would be buried in it.

Lédu’s mother was the last to give her gift: a basket full of bread and fish, the yield of earth and water. She knelt at Valain’s feet, though she was a queen in her own right. The priest of the Nameless cringed even more. Vauri could imagine: this wasn’t only a priestess of the Mother, but of Anshen as well — and of the Nameless, the two united or never separated.

Ayran astin Brun took the crown from Valain’s hands and showed it to the people. “Is he worthy?”

Vauri felt rather than saw the priest of the Nameless move, bend down, put out a hand to the top of her right boot. Without looking she grabbed at it and caught his wrist. The dagger was in his hand. Around them, everybody was shouting “Worthy! Worthy!” and cheering.

“Drop it,” she snapped. He shook his head in grim determination. She was about to take the dagger from him, but the Mighty Servant was first: in one fluid motion —he moved very fast for such a large man— he got hold of the dagger and plunged it into the priest’s side. The priest doubled over, holding his side and moaning. Vauri moved him out of the way behind the bench. Jerna? Take care of him.

It had all gone so fast that hardly anyone had noticed anything. Vauri and the Mighty Servant moved back to their old positions, as if the priest of the Nameless had never been there. “Thank you,” Vauri whispered.

“He may be in my Guild but that doesn’t give him the right.” The Mighty Servant looked indignant. “Anybody can see that Vegelin is the king.”

The crown was on Valain’s head now; they’d completely missed the coronation itself. He was standing on the edge of the dais with his arms in the air, as if he wanted to embrace all the people cheering him. He drew Lédu close, took Ardyth on his arm, and the cheering doubled.

Vauri looked behind her, where Jerna and two others were trying to get the little priest off the dais without hurting him more. She relaxed a little, but didn’t drop her watchfulness yet; she probably wouldn’t, now, until the end of the feast.

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Lédu

Valain had done very well. I’d never doubted it, though he had. Now there wasn’t even a shadow of doubt in him. He’d let go of most of his presence, but still looked very much like a king, and it wasn’t only because of the crown on his head.

They would have kept us on the dais and brought food and drink to us, but I wanted to be in the crowd and feel people’s thoughts. Everybody loved us. Well, perhaps not the priest of Archan, but all the people in the courtyard. I had to protect Ardyth strongly so not everyone would try to touch her.

I met Mother near one of the tables laden with food. She’d been in Valdis for days, but we hadn’t spoken properly yet: both of us had been too busy all the time. I didn’t realise how much I had missed her until we were embracing, our essences intermingling.

You’ve chosen well. It was so good to hear my own language again. I spoke aloud, not that it was necessary with her, but for the sheer joy of tasting it on my tongue. “Thank you. I think so, too.”

She found the disturbance in my body and I felt her anger; not at me, of course. Whoever has done that to you, when I get my hands on them, they’ll wish they were dead. Ardyth, who had been falling asleep on her grandmother’s shoulder, started to cry, roused by her fury. It was the fury of Árankhaen, thick and dark. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have lost my temper. But I can’t help being angry when someone tries to kill you.”
“He wasn’t trying to kill me. He was trying to kill the heir of the House Velain.”

Mother was silent while that sank in. Then she hugged me tight, making Ardyth cry again because she was squeezed between us. “I taught you well.”

“I remembered your teaching.”

We held each other for a long time. I can’t make you whole, Mother told me, but I can stop it hurting. I am a high priestess of the Mother after all. And the warmth and light of the Mother filled me, taking away the pain that still remained. I’d learnt to live with that pain; it had become part of me in these ten moons. Being without it, just like that, was emptiness as much as relief. A part of me had suddenly disappeared. It made me giddy and I had to sit down. Mother steered me to the the nearest bench.

It was the one the Mighty Servant was sitting on. He offered me his cup of wine. “Tired?”

“A little dizzy. Perhaps I shouldn’t have wine.”

“This is the best Ryshas, straight from Lord Ayran’s cellars.”

I sipped it experimentally; it was really very good, and the strong taste pulled me together. I took another sip and gave the cup back. “Thank you.”

This was the Mighty Servant. I remembered what he had done not an hour ago. I looked around for Mother, but she wasn’t next to me any more, taken up by the crowd while still carrying Ardyth, being claimed by someone else who wanted to talk to her. It was up to me.

“Thank you for what you did, too.”

His smile was almost bashful; strange on that haughty face. “Glad to be of service to my king.”

I took a deep breath. “Doesn’t it bother you that your king is in the other Guild?” There. I’d said it.

He raised an eyebrow. “Why should it? Does it bother merchants from your Guild that their Mighty Servant is?”

“I suppose not.” I’d never given any thought to that, to be honest. “But Mizran doesn’t care, as far as I know.”

“Good woman! Let me get you a cup of wine of your own.” He laughed heartily all the way to the barrel and back.

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Vauri

As soon as the ceremony was over and the celebration started, Vauri looked for Jerna and the priest of the Nameless. She didn’t see either of them. Jerna must have taken the priest away. Just as Vauri was about to look further, Jerna came back. “He’s under guard at the Order house,” she said. “Arvin stitched him up. It’s not serious— the Mighty Servant managed to miss everything vital.” She held out Vauri’s dagger. “I’ve cleaned it.”

Of stray anea as well as the little priest’s blood, Vauri saw. “I don’t really know what to do with him,” she said, putting the dagger back in its sheath. “It’s not as if he’s actually done anything.”

“Except disturb the ceremony.”

“Valain handled that very well.”

“I think we should give him a good scare and let him go home to tell Lady Thing about it,” Jerna said.
“That might be an idea. I know the very person to give him a good scare.” She went to look for the queen of Velihas.

It was easy to find her, but hard to get to her; it seemed that everybody wanted to talk to Vauri as she passed. When she finally got within calling distance, the queen and Lédu were clearly doing something very private. Ah well, it would keep. She talked to some of the people who hadn’t been able to catch her earlier, and when she next looked the queen was standing on her own with the little princess on her arm.

Now, should she be blunt or circumspect? If it were Lédu, she’d expect frankness, but this was the queen herself. On the other hand, this woman had brought Lédu up to be who she was.

“Excuse me,” Vauri said. “I believe we haven’t been introduced. I’m Arnei Vauri. Commander of the Order of the Sworn.”

“High priestess of—” She clearly groped for the name. “Anshen, is it?”

“Quite.”

“You can call me Ranaise, it’s what I go by in this country.” Now that they were face to face, Vauri noticed that the queen was shorter than she was and her red hair was peppered with silver. She looked like an older and more seasoned Lédu.

“You saw what happened at the coronation, didn’t you?”

“With the priest of— what do you call him here?”

“We don’t usually, but his name is Archan.”

“Yes. Who was he trying to attack?”

Frankly, Vauri didn’t know. She’d supposed Valain, but thinking back it didn’t seem so clear. It could just as well have been Lédu, or herself, or even the Mighty Servant. “I’m not sure. I thought it was the king.”

“Perhaps he didn’t even know himself.”

That could also be true. He hadn’t seemed very focused on anything at all. Perhaps he’d tried to take the dagger just in case.

“I’ll come to the point,” Vauri said. “We have him in custody, and we think it would be best to give him a scare and send him on his way— so he’ll report to Lady Liase that we’re too strong for him. And I wonder if you could —well— speak to him. As high priestess of his god, of course.”

The queen’s face moved in barely controlled mirth. “Not right now, obviously. Can I come tomorrow?”

“I’ll send someone for you. Are you staying here in the palace?”

“Yes, in Queen Mialle’s apartment. It looks out on the garden. Very pretty.” She shifted the baby to her other shoulder. “The last time I was here was at her coronation. I must have been about your age then.”

That made Queen Ranaise older than she looked, even with the greying hair. “I was still in Ildis at the time,” Vauri said. “Missed all of it, until the news finally came to us.”

“Ildis is a bit isolated, isn’t it? Even though it’s not far away.”

“It’s always been a stronghold of the Nameless. Of Archan. —You know how that is, with us?”

The queen nodded. “Lédu told me parts of it. And my other daughter married someone from that side.”

Kisif and Lyan astin Eraday. Vauri wondered if Lyan would really be king of Velihas when Queen Ranaise and her husband died or wanted to retire, but she refrained from asking. She could always ask Lédu.
Valain

Valain found himself in the middle of a crowd of people who all wanted to see him from close by, touch him, talk to him. Was he so different from an hour ago when he hadn’t been the king yet? His work wouldn’t change, only his title. And, perhaps more importantly, Ardyth would rule after him, even though she was still too young to start learning that.

He extricated himself from the crowd, jumped on the edge of the dais and sat there with his feet dangling, next to someone whose feet dangled even higher than his own: Radan astin Velain. Radan was eating meat pasties and the smell made Valain very hungry.

It must have shown on his face. “Have one,” the boy said. “You’re not fasting any more, are you?”

“Thanks. No, I’m not, that was only this morning. Did you have to fast, too?”

“I had porridge.” Radan made a face. “I’d rather have had bread but they’d run out and I didn’t have time to wait for the batch that was in the oven.”

“Makes sense. Not that you couldn’t wait for the bread, of course, but that you didn’t have to fast. After all, it wasn’t you who was crowned king.”

Radan shuddered. “No, fortunately not. I’m glad I’m so far from the throne.”

“How far are you?”

“Fourteenth or something. I’d have to ask Father.”

Valain nodded. “I thought I was safe, too. But I was only third.”

“I think you’re going to be a great king,” Radan said. “You looked splendid this morning.”

“Looks aren’t all,” Valain said, laughing. “But I’ve had great teachers, and I’ve got Lédu if I don’t know what to do any more.”

Ferin came and sat on the steps, almost at Valain’s feet. He looked exhausted. Radan took one look at him and went off to get some more food and drink.

“That was good work,” Valain said, lowering himself to sit next to Ferin. “I think everybody was impressed.”

“Ah, but were you impressed?”

“Definitely. Well, I can’t judge, of course, being the subject of it.”

“It’s what I was made for, I think. Finally found my calling. Good thing, too, seeing that I’ll never fight again.”

Valain was about to say that Ferin shouldn’t be so cynical when he realised that it was probably the bare truth. “There will be lots more ceremonies, I’m sure. Not that I like them, but other people do, and kings have to suffer. That’s a fact of history. Ask Halla.”

“I did ask Halla. That’s how we came up with what we did.”

Radan came back with wine and more pasties. Valain ate like a nine-year-old boy, but Ferin had little appetite. “I’ll go to bed, I think,” he said. “Too tired to eat.”

“Shall I send the doctor to you?”

“He’ll only say that I need rest. I’ll be all right tomorrow.”

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“You were great.”
“You were great, too.”
“But I didn’t have to be great. I only had to look after Ardyth while you got yourself crowned.”
“Poor Ferin. He looked positively grey.”
“But really really satisfied.”
“Remember when we talked about fostering a few cousins? I’d like to have Radan.”
“If he likes the idea, why not?”
“As long as we make it very clear to him that it doesn’t move him up in the succession. Though I wouldn’t mind that either. But he would.”
“Hmm, yes. Are you too tired to do anything but sleep?”
“Yes.”
“I’ll wake you up early, then.”

THE END