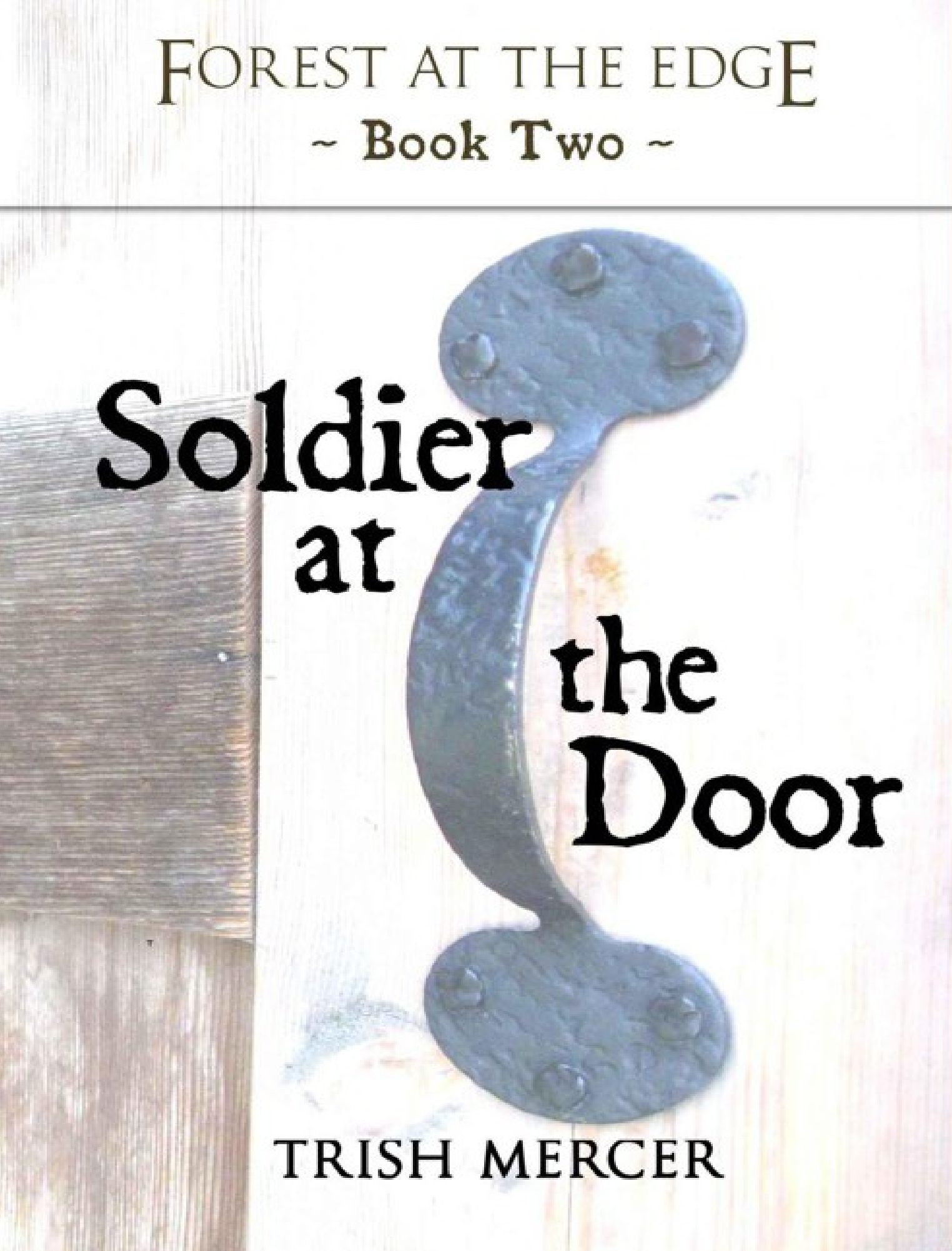
FOREST AT THE EDGE

~ Book Two ~



Soldier at the Door

TRISH MERCER

FOREST AT THE EDGE

~ Book Two ~

Soldier at the Door

TRISH MERCER

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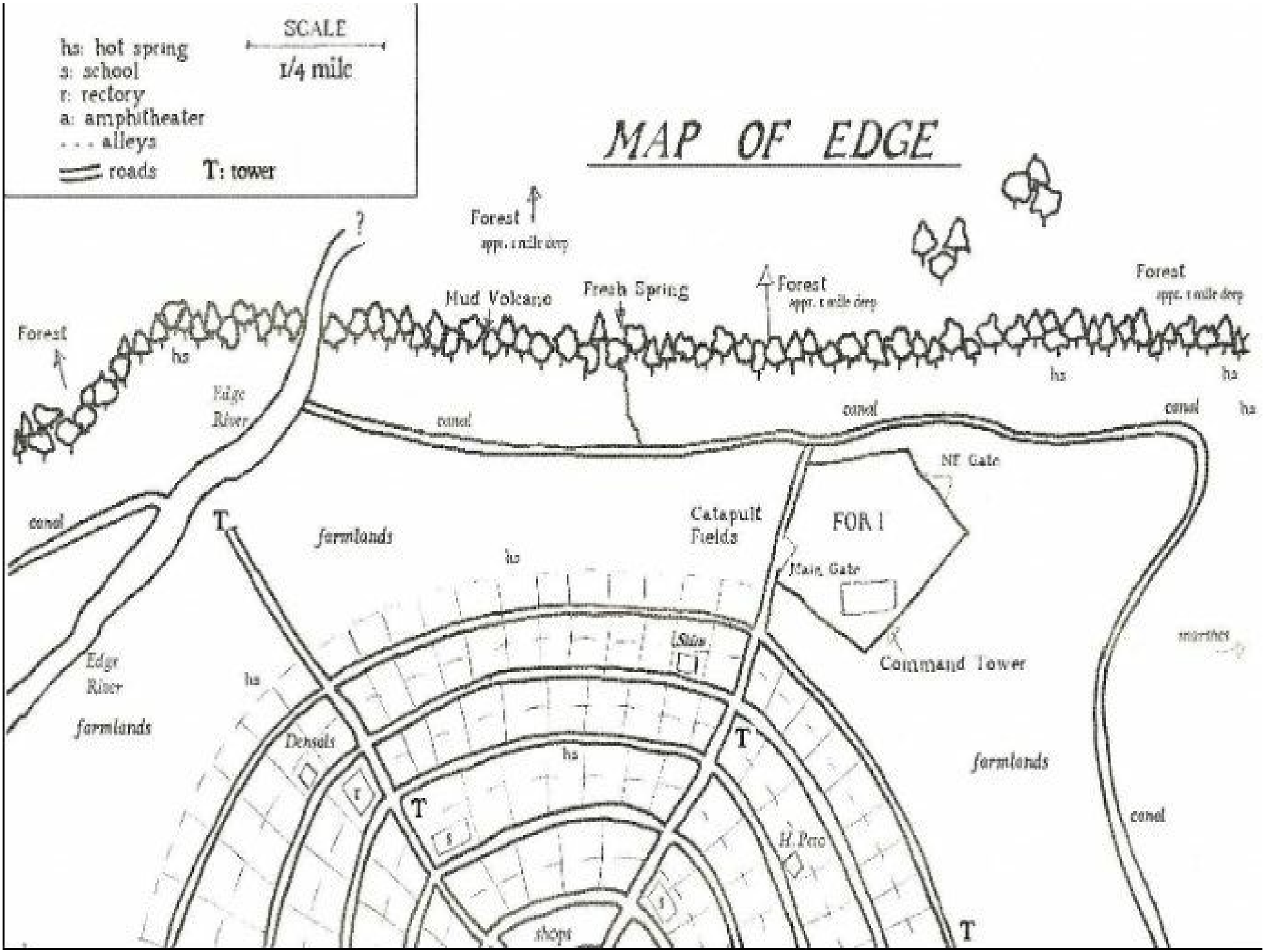
Because if the world approves of all that you do,
you're likely doing something wrong.

MAPS


hs: hot spring
s: school
r: rectory
a: amphitheater
alleys
roads
T: tower
SCALE
1/4 mile
MAP OF EDGE
Forest
appr. 1 mile deep
Mud Volcano
Fresh Spring
Forest
appr. 1 mile deep
Forest
appr. 1 mile deep
Forest
hs
hs
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Edge River
canal
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canal
NE Gate
FOR I
Catapult Fields
farmlands
Main Gate
Command Tower
Edge River
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Shops
Dwells
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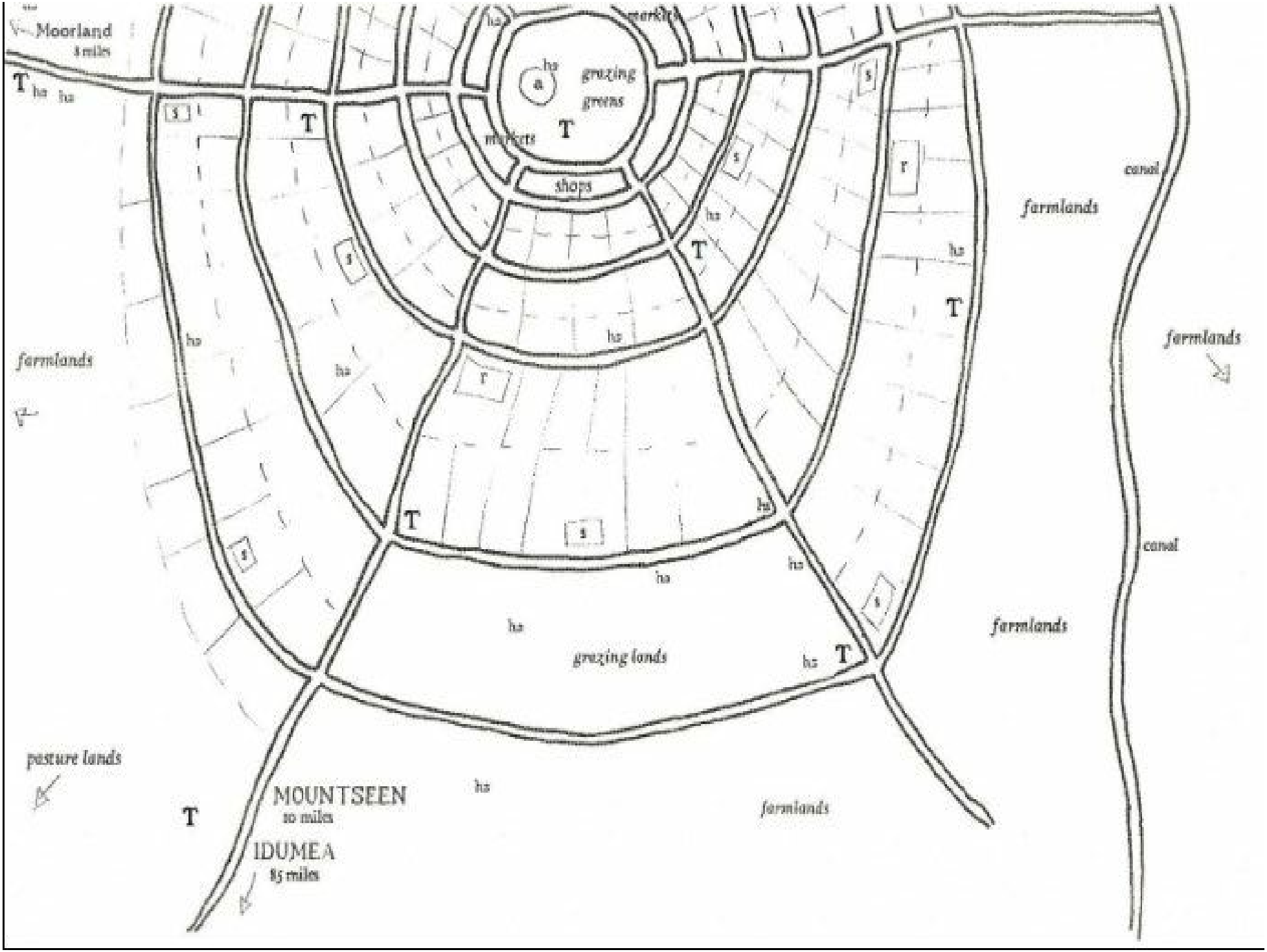
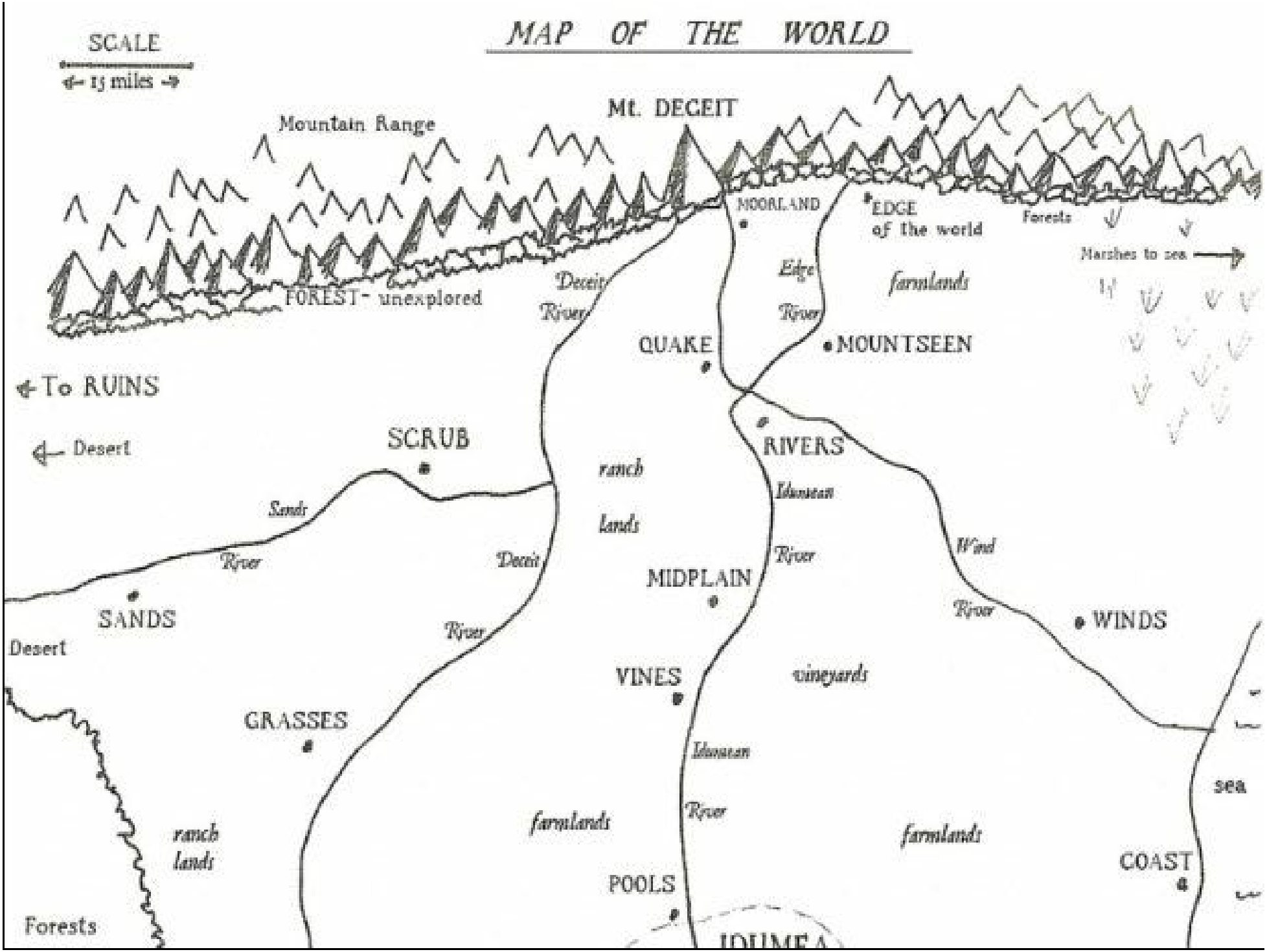

Moorland
8 miles
grazing
greens
shops
canal
farmlands
farmlands
canal
farmlands
grazing lands
farmlands
pasture lands
MOUNTSEEN
10 miles
IDUMEA
85 miles


MAP OF THE WORLD
SCALE
15 miles
Mountain Range
Mt. DECEIT
MOORLAND
EDGE of the world
Forests
Marshes to sea
FOREST - unexplored
Deceit River
Edge River
farmlands
QUAKE
MOUNTSEEN
To RUINS
Desert
SCRUB
RIVERS
ranch lands
Idunnean River
Sands River
Deceit River
Wind River
MIDPLAIN
SANDS
WINDS
Desert
VINES
vineyards
GRASSES
Idunnean River
sea
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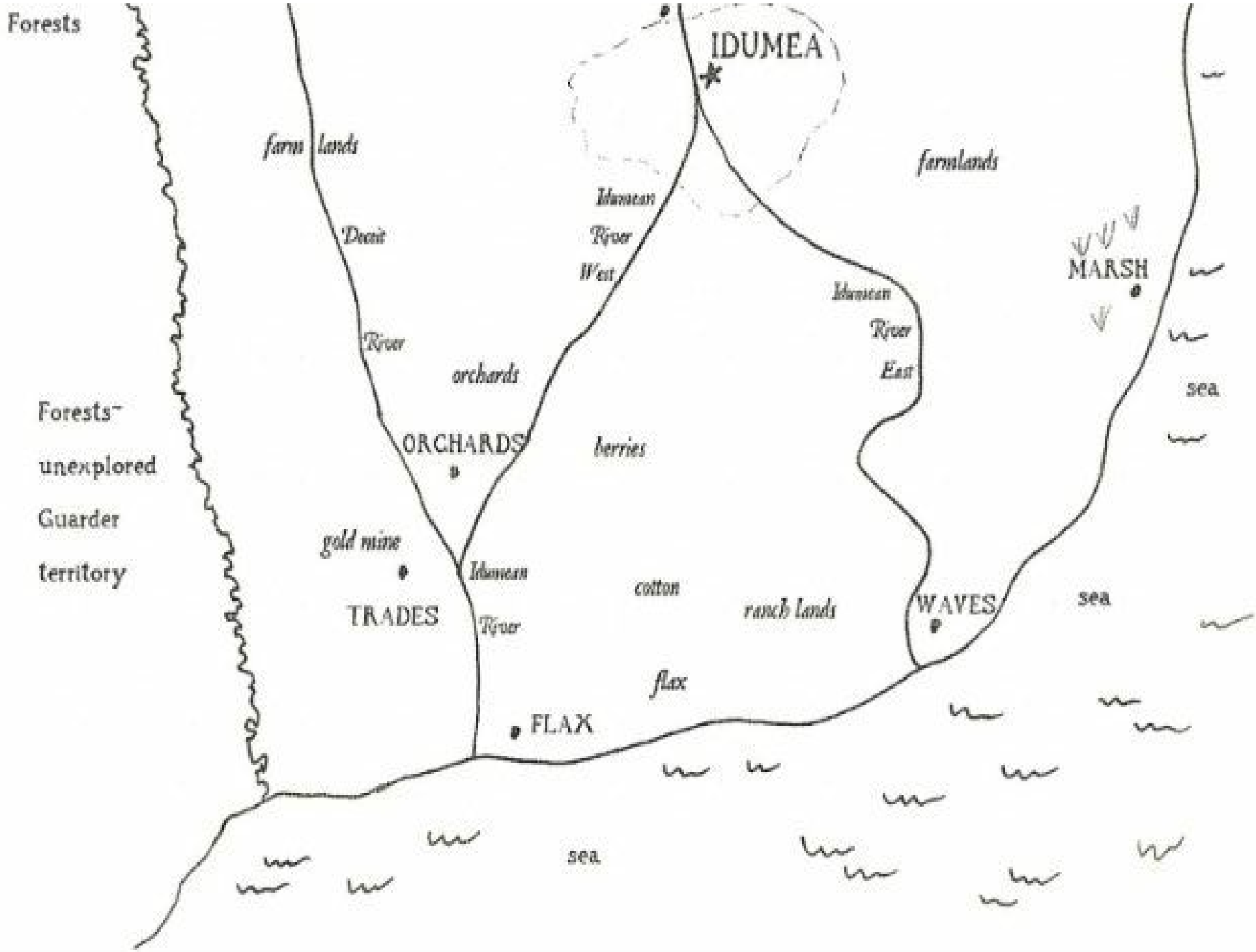
ranch lands
POOLS
COAST
Forests


Forests
IDUMEA
farm lands
farmlands
Idumean
River
West
Idumean
River
East
Deant
River
MARSH
orchards
sea
Forests-
unexplored
Guarder
territory
ORCHARDS
berries
gold mine
Idumean
River
cotton
ranch lands
WAVES
sea
TRADES
flax
FLAX
sea

A pronunciation guide to some of the more unusual names . . .

Nicko Mal	NEE-koh MAL
Querul	KWER-el
Idumea	i-doo-ME-uh
Hogal Densal	HOE-gal DENS-al
Mahrree Peto	MARR-ee PAY-toh

Cephas Peto	SEE-fus PAY-toh
Hycymum Peto	HIE-si-mum PAY-toh
Jaytsy	JAYT-see
Hierum	HIE-rum
Tuma Hifadhi	TOO-muh hi-FOD-hee
Sonoforen	sun-uv-OR-en
Terryp	TARE-up
Brisack	BRIZ-ak
Gizzada	gi-ZAH-duh
Shem Zenos	Shem ZEE-noss
Qualipoe Hili	KWAL-ee-poe HEE-lee
Hegek	HEG-ik

For background information on all character names and derivations, visit **forestedgebooks.com/characters**

A brief recap of Book One: *The Forest at the Edge of the World*

Captain Shin found much more than he expected at his first command in the small northern village of Edge of the World. Not only did he find Guarders—the mysterious enemy of the world—plotting in the treacherous forests above Edge, but he also found a school teacher plotting so ruthlessly to distract him from his duty that all he could do about it was to marry her.

But Mahrree Peto Shin would tell that story differently.

What she wouldn't argue with her husband is that Chairman Nicko Mal and the twenty-two Administrators ruling the world from Idumea weren't as altruistic as they seemed, tightening their hold on the world that was so eager to see the reign of stupid kings come to an end that the citizens eagerly embraced the edicts of their new rulers, when they should have been questioning them instead.

But the Shins have worries closer to home. Soon after their marriage, Captain Perrin Shin faced his first Guarder attack. Breaking the first rule in the High General's book, he barged into

the forbidden forest to find answers about this strange group of people who dress in black, steal their goods, and kill their citizens with no reason or explanation. Perrin didn't find answers, but more aggravation.

He also unwittingly aggravated Chairman Mal who secretly controls the Guarders to research the animalistic behavior of humans, but more to punish those who speak out against his government. That this arrangement also allows Mal to torment a former arrogant student turned captain in Edge isn't entirely coincidental.

A warning sent anonymously by Dr. Brisack, Mal's research partner, told Perrin of a second Guarder raid intended

to kill Perrin's expecting wife Mahrree and their nine-moons-old daughter. To keep that a secret from his wife, Perrin again flouted the laws of the Army of Idumea and spent several cold nights in the snowy forest to wipe out the dozen Guarders sent to destroy his happiness.

But he didn't know that there were actually fourteen Guarders sent, the last two also failing to take him out, but leaving him with a scarred back and an excuse to fabricate for his wife and his father.

And Perrin also doesn't know that there were even more men in the forest, and that they also have their eye on the Shin family . . .

Chapter 1 ~ “Deceit, my dear young men, is indeed an art.”

Early in the morning of the 64th Day of Raining Season, 320, Tuma Hifadhi leaned on his cane to watch the young men as they filed before him.

Behind the elderly man stood several middle-aged men, their arms folded, watching critically. Last week's failed raid in the forests above Edge brought everyone out in the snow sooner than they expected.

Things were different now, and the time had come.

Hifadhi evaluated the young men as they lined up in the field covered with new snow, the light of dawn just reaching them. Some of them were as large and strong as draft horses. Others were as quick and sneaky as coyotes. Still others were as quiet and subtle as deer. And each one of them was sharp, clever, and focused.

These ten had been selected out of

several dozen, and now each waited patiently for the next stage. The weeding process had been most thorough. Even one of Hifadhi's grandsons had been rejected, but it wasn't because of his size or ability; it was because he was married and a father. Whomever Tuma chose would lead a life very different than he had known, and he couldn't have any ties that might influence him to neglect his duty.

Hifadhi smiled at the confident faces that tried to conceal their apprehension. Some were more successful than others. He looked up and down the line, his gaze pausing for a moment on one young man a little taller

and a little broader than the others.

Draft horse.

Hifadhi tried not to say anything with his eyes, but he suspected the young man could read them anyway.

He would be the one.

In some ways it was obvious why. There was no one with a more innocent face than his. His clear sky-blue eyes, smooth chin that would likely never grow a beard, and soft light brown hair created almost a baby-like quality to his face.

But his quick grin and quicker mind were what would secure him the position. His father, Tuma smiled to himself, would forgive him eventually.

Hifadhi cleared his throat to get

their attention, but it wasn't necessary. Each young man was already focused on him.

"Congratulations on making it to this point, men. You are indeed some of the greatest we've ever trained. And because of that I promise each of you will have a place to serve."

The young men smiled and glanced at each other in relief.

"However," Hifadhi continued, "while we usually assign pairs, considering the nature of the upcoming assignment, it seems most prudent to send in only *one* man."

A few of them raised their eyebrows at the unexpected change.

The draft horse with blue eyes, however, didn't. He already understood.

"Two men going in together may draw too much attention," Hifadhi explained. "And after what happened—well, things are going to have to be very different. Last week's incident with the captain and his fourteen attackers was far too deadly. It's obvious we need eyes on the *inside* of the fort. Therefore whomever we send needs to be the most capable. He will be responsible for getting as close to Captain Shin as possible. We need to know everything—his strengths, his weaknesses, his goals, his fears, what he loves, and what he hates. Knowing him intimately will

allow us to accomplish great things."

The elderly man slowly paced in front of the ten hopefuls, his shuffling pace causing only a slight build-up of snow in front of his boots. He recalled being one of them, so many decades ago. A part of him wished he were younger so that he could choose himself. Not because he didn't trust the young men, but because he hadn't been on an adventure for so long.

Still . . .

"We can't risk being exposed," he reminded them—but mostly himself—unnecessarily. "To do so would destroy everything. It's a delicate balance we need to establish, and the opportunity of a lifetime. We've recently learned that

Captain Shin will be undergoing more changes in his personal life, suggesting that he is, indeed, the one we've been watching for. We hope to have someone in place when that change occurs, we guess near the end of Planting Season. How you perform in this next round of training will decide who is chosen. Is this understood?" He stopped his shuffling and looked sternly at the young men.

They nodded.

Hifadhi broke into an easy grin. "Good! Now, Hew Gleace will begin with you today in your first lesson which you may find a little unusual, but very necessary. Hew?" He turned to the men

behind him.

Gleace, a pale middle-aged man of muscular build, nodded to Hifadhi and approached the line.

"There are many ways a man gives himself away. Today we're going to begin training you to do just that: deliberately give yourself away in such a manner that those who work with you believe they've actually discovered your true identity. However, you will still be concealing it. It's not easy. You have to maintain complete control over your *true self* in order to appropriately let slip your *feigned* 'true self.'"

Several of the young men blinked in confusion.

But the draft horse grinned in

anticipation.

Gleace glanced at Hifadhi to see if he noticed.

He did.

Gleace smiled at the line. “Deceit, my dear young men, is indeed an art. Good thing we have about twelve weeks’ time . . .”

Chairman Nicko Mal stood in the hallway of Command School, his hands clasped behind his back, and a small, somewhat unnatural, smile on his face.

As the young men marched orderly out of their classrooms and towards the

mess hall for their midday meal, they each paused in their stride, stunned to see the man with white hair, long red coat, and black trousers.

"Hello, men!" he said with unusual cheeriness. "Fine group of officers we're teaching here, I see. Don't mind me, go get to your meal. Can't have our future leaders weakening now, can we?"

A few purposely caught his eye, but he didn't focus any additional attention on them, so they continued on. But one lieutenant did receive a prolonged gaze from the Chairman, and it caused him to drop his books.

"Oh, let me help you with those, son," Mal said brightly as he squatted to help him gather his scattered notes.

The rest of the soldiers picked up their step, eager to get past the hapless soldier who garnered the attention of Nicko Mal.

"Thank you, sir," the young man said, fumbling to stack his books again, "but I'm sure I can handle it."

"Now, now, Lieutenant Heth, what kind of leader would I be if I didn't take care of those who *serve* me?"

Heth risked a timid smile as the last of the soldiers entered the mess hall. He and Mal stood up in the corridor, and Mal placed the stack of pages on Heth's pile of books.

"Still haven't heard from your younger brother?" Mal whispered.

“Been over a year since his late night visit to you, isn’t it?”

Mal had asked him—no, *shouted*—that same question in a raging fit just a couple of nights ago in Lieutenant Heth’s dormitory room. Perhaps the leader of the world thought the answer would change if he asked it again in a different time and place.

Heth shook his head, almost imperceptibly. “Since he left I haven’t heard anything from him.”

“Neither have I,” Mal grumbled. “Not sure what to make of it. It’s almost as if he’s vanished. Keeping very low and quiet.”

“Maybe he changed his name,” the former Sonoforen suggested. “Would be

wisest."

"I considered that as well," Mal nodded once. "Which would make him as difficult to locate as *the other* missing son of the last king," he said with a deliberate squint.

The young man who should have been king after his father's execution—had he not been illegitimate and in hiding—only nodded at the current leader of the world.

"Should you hear anything, you'll be sure to notify me immediately," Mal told him.

Heth nodded again. "Absolutely, sir. In the meantime, is there anything else—"

“No,” Mal cut him off. “Not yet.”

“I could leave school early, and—”

“Oh no, Lieutenant,” Mal said firmly. “You of all people definitely need to finish Command School.”

Heth’s expression fell.

Mal smirked. Every future officer thought he was something special; otherwise, he wouldn’t be in Command School.

“But eventually the time will be right, Heth. Currently we’re priming the pump, shall we say. Discovering how to create the ideal set-up.”

“And I’ll be your first choice when your research is done?”

Mal smiled thinly at the eager mutt.

“Men who have personal motivation are far more effective than those who are merely curious or simply following orders. I have shelves of studies to prove it. And anyone with a personal vendetta against the officer who had his father killed will likely be far more driven than just a regular soldier. You *will* be the first choice.”

“So . . . anything?” Perrin asked many weeks later as he watched his wife closely. Their now one-year-old daughter Jaytsy was asleep in bed, and her parents finally had a moment to

themselves.

Perrin put a hand on Mahrree's enormous belly and waited.

Mahrree just stared at him, her mouth hanging open and her eyes unblinking.

Perrin tried to jiggle her immovable belly. "It's been thirteen weeks since the forest incident, little kicker. It's safe to come out now!" He looked up into his wife's face again.

She still hadn't budged, simply too shocked.

"Hmm," Perrin frowned. "I thought for sure that—"

"THEY WERE AFTER *ME?!*" Mahrree suddenly bellowed.

"And *now* it's sunk in," Perrin

smiled. He put his other hand on her belly. “So at any moment . . . any moment . . . remarkable. Nothing. I thought for sure the truth would start birthing pains, but no tightening, no—”

“THE FOURTEEN GUARDERS WERE AFTER ME?!”

“Uh, yes. I think I just told you that. Mahrree, please blink. Your eyes will dry out—”

“PERRIN! THEY WERE AFTER —”

He put a finger on her lips. “You, yes. And Jaytsy, but don’t wake her up,” he added quietly. “The fourteen Guarders were actually after my family, not me. Hogal still has the message if

you want to see it. I decided it was best left in his hands until now. Ah, well at least you blinked. Now let's see if we can't get the stubborn little kicker here to __"

"Oh, Perrin!" Mahrree exclaimed, and started to weep. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He sighed. "I thought it was obvious—to keep you from birthing too early. But now that you're ready it doesn't seem to have any effect. Why are you crying?"

"You've had three moons to get over this, but I'm barely learning about it now!" she wailed.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. Well, as close as

her bulging middle would allow.

"You're right," he sighed. "I didn't think about it that way. My back's been healed for several weeks now, so in my mind it's all well in the past."

At least his back *felt* fine. He was even able to finish the new baby's addition on the house last week, and before that erected a fence around the front yard when Jaytsy discovered how to walk shortly after her first birthday.

But how his back *looked* was another matter. He saw the scar only a few times in the surgery, when the surgeon positioned mirrors for him to admire it. He thought the jagged raw line was an ideal badge of honor.

But it took Mahrree weeks to stop whimpering whenever he undressed. Occasionally he noticed her biting her lip when she saw the thick white scar that would forever mark him.

"You did it all for me?" she asked quietly. "The long nights, the bow and arrows and long knives, your slashed back—my scarf!" she suddenly remembered.

"Of course," he chuckled. "And your scarf is somewhere in the middle of the forest. I got too hot. Sorry. It was truly Guarder snatched."

"What's a silly old scarf, anyway!" she blubbered.

He put a hand back on her belly.

“You’re really not feeling any pain at all?”

She sighed. “No, nothing, I’m afraid. In fact, maybe now you’ve scared the baby into wanting to stay inside permanently. Why come into a world that’s out to get him?”

“Because he has a father that can conquer the world!” Perrin declared. “With a little help, that is,” he admitted.

Mahrree finally smiled. “Yes, he does.” She kissed her husband. “So, have you told your father the truth?”

Perrin groaned. “Sent the confession this morning. Should reach him by tomorrow. And then . . . we’ll likely hear him bellowing all the way from Idumea.”

“If not him, then probably your mother.”

Perrin shut his eyes momentarily.

“*My mother!* Please, little one,” he said to his wife’s expecting bulge, “Come out now and be a distraction to your grandparents’ wrath.”

“Oh great,” Mahrree sighed. “Now it’ll never be born.”

It was near the end of Planting Season, in the new year of 321, when Relf Shin opened the envelope with the familiar writing on the outside.

“So am I a grandfather again,

Perrin?" the High General smiled as he opened the message. He pushed aside the other messages on his desk to pay full attention to this one. His smile diminished as he read. His left hand clenched into a fist, he pressed his lips tightly together, and he closed his eyes to stop seeing the words.

"Son, son—you *stupid* boy!" he whispered.

The General opened his eyes again and continued to read, the faint smile reforming on his lips.

"But fantastic, Perrin!" he said a few minutes later. "Why did I know you went further into that forest than a few paces? But *now*," he sighed heavily, "what to do with you? What will Mal

___”

Relf Shin pondered.

“Fourteen Guarders dead, no soldiers or citizens hurt, your wife preserved, and you were the only one injured, and not by a tree branch . . . Sounds to me as if your twenty stitches were punishment enough. And since this is an army matter,” he said with a sly smile, tossing the message into the fireplace where the flames consumed the confession, “the head of the army will take care of it.”

He pulled out a piece of parchment and began writing.

As High General of the Army

of Idumea, I must inform you, Captain Perrin Shin, that your behavior in deliberately entering the forest a second time three moons ago—although for noble and commendable reasons—violated the firm admonitions sent to you by General Cush. I hereby officially reprimand you with a strict warning to never reveal your activities that night to anyone else. Not even to your mother. This is not a matter to be celebrated or boasted about, but one to feel great shame and embarrassment, as you undoubtedly do, thus prompting your most remorseful, albeit delayed, confession to me . . .

The High General chuckled the entire time.

Captain Shin stared the formal-looking message from Idumea two days later. He held it at arm's length as if waiting for it to bite.

"It's *his* handwriting, isn't it?" Sergeant Major Grandpy Neeks said, stopping in the process of opening another message.

Lieutenant Karna looked up from the latest announcement he was scanning to look at his commander.

“Yep,” was all that Shin said as he slowly unfolded the parchment.

Karna and Neeks exchanged worried looks as Captain Shin started to read the High General Shin’s response to the report—the *real* report—of what happened in the forest a season ago.

The men held their collective breath as the captain read, his eyes revealing no emotion until he got to the end. That’s when he finally blinked and folded the letter again.

“Well?!” Neeks nearly burst out.

Shin swallowed. “My father is very disappointed in me. I’ve been reprimanded. I should never brag about that night, nor reveal to anyone else what

I did, so that no other commanders or soldiers feel the need to replicate my deplorable actions. He's *so* disappointed in me that he won't even reveal the enormity of my 'success' to General Cush or Chairman Mal. Or even my mother. I am officially on notice."

Neeks scowled. "Notice? Never heard of an officer on 'notice.' What does that mean?"

Shin smiled. "Absolutely nothing at all."

Then he started to chuckle.

Two weeks later in the evening of

the 89th Day of Planting Season, in the forests outside the small village of Edge, several men stood in a thick stand of trees. All but one of them was dressed in concealing clothing, allowing them to blend into the woods. The one who didn't was younger than the others, and wore clothing like the villagers.

They had been watching the erratic patrols all evening, trying to predict the pattern. One patrol went by, followed by another. Then another.

Realizing it would be impossible to choose a perfect moment, the young man suddenly nodded once, then darted across the dark, barren field unnoticed.

Tomorrow, the fort at Edge would

receive a new recruit.

On the 90th and almost last day of Planting Season, Captain Shin jogged up the stairs of the command tower in the late afternoon.

Lieutenant Karna looked at him expectantly.

The captain shook his head. “False alarm. Again. Might as well finish out the day. But I don’t know how she can get any bigger. She bumped into the corner of the table last night and I fully expected to hear a large popping sound.”

Karna chuckled. “You spend over a

season helping her to *stop* the pains, now you can't get them started again?"

Perrin shook his head soberly. "It's hopeless. Nothing will scare that baby out."

"Now, not being a father or married, I won't confess to knowing anything about children," Karna began, "but if her expecting is any indication of the kind of baby she's about to birth, that will be one stubborn, annoying child. Probably a boy, much like his father."

Perrin chuckled and rubbed his eyes wearily. "That's what my uncle Hogal said last night! Brillen, I'm not sure how much more of this I can stand. We were up half the night counting the minutes before the pains suddenly stopped. I

thought she was going to explode from disappointment. Then the same thing happened at midday meal. I've got Corporal Yip patrolling the alley behind the house so she can holler to him if anything happens."

"Poor Captain," Karna smiled and patted his shoulder sympathetically. "Maybe this is why people have only two children."

Shin smiled sadly. "Not for population control, but for sanity preservation! I couldn't imagine doing this a third time."

The men chuckled and Captain Shin headed for the command office.

"Sir," Karna stopped him. "There's

someone in there waiting. Said he wants to be a volunteer for a time. I was just about to go interview him, but—"

Shin frowned. "Volunteer? I'll take care of him." In a whisper he added, "Something must be wrong with him if he wants to work for me without wages."

Karna laughed as Shin went into his office. Inside stood a strapping young man, already at attention.

Shin nodded a greeting. "Captain Perrin Shin," he held out his hand in introduction. "And already I doubt your ability to be of service."

The young man with light brown hair swallowed hard as he shook the captain's hand. "Sir?"

“You want to do this without pay? What does that say about your intelligence? Not a great deal.” Shin winked at him and sat down at his desk. He gestured for the hopeful volunteer to take a seat across from him.

With a hesitant smile the large boy sat down.

Shin shifted some neat stacks of paper needlessly around on his desk before launching into his routine of subtle interrogation. There were only a few other cases of volunteerism he had ever seen, and each one ended up with the prospect taken in chains to incarceration. The army was no place to hide from law enforcers, difficult

parents, or expecting girlfriends. Even if he didn't sign up officially, someone's still going to write down his name.

"So," Shin said, finally looking up at him once he was sure the young man had grown uneasy with waiting, "my lieutenant says you're interested in volunteering?"

The hopeful cleared his throat. "Yes, sir, I am. For two, maybe three seasons, sir. Just to see if I really want to stay."

Shin squinted. "Two seasons? Work half a year without slips of silver?"

"To be honest, sir—"

Deceit frequently begins with the words *To be honest*, Perrin thought to

himself.

"—I'm not sure I'm up to being a soldier. But I'm very interested in helping track down the Guarders. I'm good at tracking. My father has a herd of cattle that are always escaping. I can find a lost calf anywhere."

Shin nodded once. "Good skill. But Guarders don't moo. And we're not allowed to track into the forest."

"But sir, I can tell you if someone has come *out* of the forest, then gone back *in*."

Shin couldn't help but smile at his confidence. "Well, I'd be foolish not to accept your help, then. I can let you stay in the barracks and eat in the mess hall,

but I can't issue you a uniform if you're not official."

The young man began to smile back. "That's all right, sir! Don't need one. And I have a little bit of savings, so I don't need slips of silver."

Shin pulled out a clean paper. "Well, then, I don't have a stamped form to fill out for volunteers. You must be the first. But I do need some information. Name?" He would check it, along with variations, with the chief of enforcement later.

"Shem Zenos, sir."

He offered that up easily, Perrin thought. Usually young men stammer a bit with a false name, even if they practiced it.

Still . . .

Shin furrowed his brow. “Zenos? Never heard that last name before. Not from Edge, are you?”

“No, sir. I kind of wanted to get away from home. So I came north.”

“Understood,” he said casually as he wrote the name. “Where are you from? Mountseen? Quake? Rivers?”

“From between Flax and Waves, sir.”

Shin blinked, completely taken aback. Even though he knew the villages were at the furthest southern edges of the world, still he turned to stare at the large map of the world that hung on the wall.

“Really? Talk about getting away

from home. You can't *get* any further than that."

Zenos shrugged. "I know, sir."

Perrin's suspicions rose, but he remained relaxed. "Take you a long time to get here?"

"*Weeks*, sir," he sighed. "Sold my horse down in Trades to have enough silver to get up here, so I wouldn't have to touch my savings. Walked the rest of the way."

Shin watched him for a moment. "Sold your *own horse*?" Few young men owned their own horses. Only very wealthy families could take on the expense of an extra animal.

Even Perrin had never owned his own horse, he remembered with the

smallest twinge of jealousy, although he ‘claimed’ one or two over the years that the stables at the garrison allowed him to ride.

And although he was allowed to choose a horse at the fort to be designated his own, he had yet to do so. None of the animals were the right blend of strength and speed to match Perrin’s build. If a stallion was fast enough, it also grew tired too quickly. If a mare was sturdy enough, it couldn’t keep up. Perrin alternated between three different animals, occasionally wishing he could find the right one.

And this overgrown boy in front of him had his very own?

He also realized that farmers often owned a horse in conjunction with their oxen, and ranchers—yes, very successful ranchers frequently had several horses to keep up with their cattle.

But why would a father allow his son to sell such a valuable animal?

Or perhaps, he *didn't*.

Shin watched the young man for signs that the sale hadn't been sanctioned, but he met the captain's steady gaze.

"Yes, sir, I did. So I could come chase Guarders. No forests near Waves, sir. Only salty water."

Shin leaned back in his seat,

intrigued. “There are places closer to your home where Guarders are attacking. In fact, there was that raid just a few weeks ago on Coast. Guarders came in on canoes. Might be coming to Waves in canoes, too.”

Zenos smiled cautiously. “And they’ll have just as a difficult time. The water is rougher at Waves than at Coast, sir.”

The captain nodded as he appraised the large boy, still unconvinced that he travelled so far. It was common knowledge that the waves in Waves were much stronger than Coast. The name was a bit of a giveaway.

“That it is,” Perrin said. “I’ve been to both villages. I’m not in the least bit

surprised the Guarder canoes all sank, although I was rather disappointed. I was hoping someone might be able to catch one of them alive. Guess it would be rather hard to track on the water, wouldn't it?"

Zenos nodded. "I imagine they've abandoned that strategy, sir. I'm confident the village of Waves will be safe from future water attacks."

Shin watched him again for a moment—the young man held his penetrating gaze remarkably well—before Shin looked back at the map.

"A lot of people have speculated about where they launched their canoes. Around here folks are guessing they

somehow managed to make a home in the marshes east of here and went south. But then they would have had to travel for quite a distance."

"It's not really *that* far, sir," Zenos suggested.

Shin turned his attention to boy. "About fifty miles in a canoe isn't 'that far'? Few people would agree with you, Zenos. Anywhere more than ten miles away might as well be one hundred."

Zenos swallowed. "Sir, you said you've been all the way south, so you've travelled, right?"

"Yes," Shin said slowly.

"Surely you would agree that travelling one hundred twenty miles isn't that much harder than travelling ten

miles. Just . . . do it longer. Most people have never tried it, so they don't know. You simply keep going. You don't die from it. You rest, eat, walk, sleep. Every village has a market with food, and there are inns and taverns to stay in. Even some barns if no one's looking," he confessed, a little uncomfortably.

Perrin smiled.

The boy's demeanor changed significantly when he confessed to sleeping in barns. He didn't have to reveal that information, but apparently he didn't know how to hold back on the truth. So, likely, he did come from a long distance.

The next question then was, why.

"You're right," Shin said, "I don't understand why people fear travelling, but then again, now that I've settled down, I'm rather content to be where I am. Why *leave home* when all that I want is right here?"

"Yes, sir," Zenos looked down at his hands and started rubbing them as if trying to remove unseen dirt.

Shin noticed the boy's previously confident manner vanished completely, replaced by guilty behavior.

"Well, we'll provide you a horse to chase Guarders with, but it may be rather dull here for a time. Been exceptionally quiet for over three moons now. More recently they hit Trades

again, just north of Flax, out of the forest about there." He pointed to a spot on the map. "You could have stayed near home to find Guarders," he hinted again.

Zenos swallowed again. "But I also wanted to see the world. Saw most of it walking north, sir!" he chuckled anxiously.

"And a very long way to walk it is, Zenos." Shin smiled genially.

Zenos smiled cautiously back.

In the same casual tone, Perrin got right to the point. "Trouble at home, son?"

Zenos shook his head rapidly. "No, sir. None at all. Not really."

Shin put down his quill to show he wasn't about to record anything more.

“Was she pretty?”

Zenos’s eyes grew big. “Sir?”

Shin raised his eyebrows in suggestion. The boy needed to hide for two to three seasons. Long enough for anything that might be *developing* to *arrive.*

Zenos blushed a deep shade of red. “Sir, no girl! I promise! I’ve never, *never*—”

Shin raised his hand to stop the young man’s frantic defense. He didn’t need *that* much honesty.

Zenos bit his lower lip to silence it.

Perrin considered him. There was no deceit in his clear blue eyes, so there must have been something else. While

Zenos's body was surprisingly broad and muscular, his smooth, almost gentle face looked like it belonged to a twelve-year-old.

"Do you have your parents' permission to be here?"

Zenos furrowed his eyebrows. "Sir, I don't have a mother anymore, and my father wasn't too happy about me leaving, but he's getting over it."

"I may need a signature, Zenos."

Zenos's mouth dropped open. "Sir, I'm of age! I'm twenty. My birthday was at the beginning of the season!"

Shin smiled dubiously. "Really."

Zenos rubbed his smooth chin. "My father can't grow much of a beard either, sir. I assure you, I am of age. Have been

for two years."

If a single hair emerged on his chin, the boy probably would have thrown a celebration.

"Well, no crime in not growing a beard. Saves you some time each morning. While the rest of the army is shaving, you'll be first in line for breakfast. But if you choose to sign up later, I may need a verifying signature from your father."

Zenos shifted uneasily. "Would take some time to get that but . . . yes, sir."

So it was likely his age. Nothing else made him as uncomfortable as that. Perrin would send a message to the chief of enforcement asking if any villages

were missing a younger-than-legal boy. Until he received word back, there was nothing else he could do except let him stay and work for food. At least he'd be safe at the fort.

Perrin went back to writing, hoping to elicit something about Zenos's relationship with his family. "Your father owns cattle, you say? Between Flax and Waves?"

"Yes, sir. Large herd. Even brought some of it up to Idumea once to sell. May do it again when he has a big surplus."

"The garrison is always looking for good beef." Shin continued to write.

"My father sold his last surplus to the garrison, sir. About a year ago."

Perrin nodded as he took careful notes on the paper, stalling to come up with another tactic to gather more information about the boy's father.

Zenos leaned forward a bit to see what the captain was writing.

Perrin looked up abruptly, but didn't focus on the young man who froze in alarm that he'd been caught snooping. Instead he watched the door.

A moment later it swung open.

There stood a wide-eyed corporal, panting. Realizing that he'd opened the door without knocking first, he lamely did so then. Then he looked at the door in complete confusion as if trying to work out what he was doing.

“Well, Yip?!” Shin demanded.

The corporal turned immediately to the captain and nodded.

“Said she’s positive this time,” he gasped. “Something about water rupturing? Mrs. Peto arrived and said to come get you. Midwives are on their way.”

Shin slammed down the quill and stood up.

“Zenos, welcome to Edge,” he said hurriedly. “You’ll have to excuse me, but Karna will show you around and get you a cot. I’m due at home. I need to take my daughter for a very long walk.”

“*Second* child, sir?” Zenos asked.

“Yes!” Shin shouted as he ran down

the stairs.

Lieutenant Karna chuckled from the outer office. “About time, Captain! Good luck!” he called. “Zenos, I’ll be with you in just a moment.”

“Yes, sir,” Zenos called back. “Take your time.”

All alone in the office, he looked around and took quick mental notes. He was there for research, after all.

Although the documents on the desk were organized and tidy, the fort didn’t seem overly formal, and the lieutenant and the captain appeared to be on easy terms judging by the laughter he heard before the captain came in to interview him, and the casual send-off the lieutenant shouted as the captain left.

Zenos admired the overly large, clear windows of the command office, which revealed a great deal of the forest to the east and west, and the village in the south. The enormous windows in the forward office also afforded an unobstructed view of the forest directly to the north. Much more than he expected, but that was exactly what he needed to find out.

Through the western window he spied the captain sprinting, at an amazing pace for such a burly build, out the fort's gates and down the road south towards the village. Yet another piece of crucial information: the captain was a very fast runner, and wholly devoted to his

family. And either today or tomorrow, another Shin would be born.

There was a great deal to be learned here, and already new developments.

“Looks like I got here just in time,” Zenos whispered with a smile.

Two men sat in a darkened room.

“Any news?” Mal began.

“You mean, any more bodies or canoes wash ashore?” Brisack smirked. It really had been one of Nicko Mal’s more ridiculous ideas.

Mal clasped his hands so tightly his

knuckles turned white. “We weren’t to bring that up again, remember?”

“That’s what *you* decided, not me,” the good doctor pointed out. Mal was an easy target tonight.

“What I was asking was, any news *from Edge?”* Mal tried to recover his casual tone.

“What kind of news, specifically?” Dr. Brisack said with teasing smile.

Mal sighed loudly. “You know what I mean! I saw Relf leaving the Administrative Headquarters, and he was smiling. I didn’t have time to ask him myself so . . .?”

“Yes, he’s a grandfather again. Got the news this afternoon,” was all Brisack told him. Antagonizing Mal was

one of the simple joys of his life.

"Well?!" Mal steamed.

"Well," Brisack said slowly, enjoying the tension building in his companion's face, "it's a good thing Mrs. Shin survived your little Guarder raid. She's delivered a healthy son. Another male Shin that can grow up to become a High General Shin. Just what you wanted, correct? He could be the fourth general."

Mal growled quietly and massaged his hands.

"Shin got lucky," he mumbled. "He always gets lucky. Speaking of women delivering babies, did you finish your research about the dangers of women

birthing too often?"

"That's nearly finished," Brisack smiled at the shift in topic. "Just need to summarize the findings and print it for the villages, should anyone *else* question the need to keep families small."

Mal shrugged at that. "Still think you made too much of it. Gadiman had things under control—"

"Under *control?!*" Brisack spat, his joyful moment over. "He was ready to execute that midwife! How's that 'under control'?!"

"That's why we have him, my good doctor. To sniff out potential threats. Question those who question us. Find those who would unravel the cloth that weaves our society together," Mal

slipped into a practiced speech. “Yank one thread inappropriately, and it all comes apart.”

“I know the rationale,” Brisack said impatiently, “I helped you write it! But people simply want knowledge. They’ll follow laws more willingly if they understand *why* they exist. It’s not merely about population control. What I’ve done is demonstrate to that midwife, and everyone else, that childbirth truly is a grave danger to women. That’s why I never let my wife subject herself to it.”

Mal opened his mouth in a vain attempt to stop the speech he dreaded was coming, but once Brisack started, it was easier to end a stampede.

“We improve women’s lives by birthing fewer babies!” the good doctor exclaimed. “To birth once is a tremendous risk. Twice? It’s nearly unconscionable to submit a woman to such strain and suffering. To allow a woman to endure it a third time? Through accident or an oppressive husband or her own misguided sense of duty or desire?” He shook his head sadly. “Expecting *changes* a woman’s mind. Have you ever heard a new mother talking?”

The bored frown of Mal told him the question was completely unnecessary, and Brisack should have known that.

“Well—” Brisack continued undeterred and eager to reveal his findings.

Mal just made himself comfortable for the duration.

“—I’ve heard enough of them state how their entire view of the world changes once they become a mother. I realize they generally mean it in a constructive way, but child birthing alters their mental state, turns normally logical women into emotional creatures that can’t think clearly. Such irrationality is manifested even more dramatically after the birth of the second child, moving some women to become so severely imbalanced so as to desire the

experience *again*, even while knowing the government strictly forbids it."

Mal examined his fingernails, as if he could see them in the dark.

"And on occasion they drag their husbands into this state of defiance," Brisack blathered on, "and he becomes as manic as she does in a desire for a third child, despite all evidence, all laws, and all logic! Tragic." He sighed sadly.

Mal nibbled at a hangnail.

"So unnecessary. Amazing, really, that they can even *raise* their children to adulthood after such alterations," Brisack said in genuine wonder. "I simply can't figure out why they put their bodies through so much torment and their

minds into such a state of frenzy. Can you imagine the frame of mind of a woman with four children? Or eight? She'd be a lunatic!"

"Most women already are, Doctor," Mal intoned lazily. "You're just too prejudiced to notice."

"Well, we'll have far fewer challenges once all the midwives in the world understand," Brisack ignored the accusation, "and can make the women they treat realize that they're under the duress of their conditions. The Drink certainly is the only—and best—course of action. That's why I spend so much time perfecting it years ago."

"No need to convince me of

anything, Doctor." Mal spat out his hangnail. "It sounds like *you're* the one wrestling with a prick of conscience."

"I'm not!" Brisack declared. "I truly feel this is the best. And now every woman in the world can understand why, too."

"Except for that midwife," Mal sniggered.

Brisack went pale. "What do you mean, *that midwife*?"

"She's missing," Mal said dismissively, picking up some pages to signal he was ready to move on to another subject.

"No!" Brisack gasped. "Gadiman?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters! You

promised me nothing would happen to her!"

Mal shrugged easily. "I really don't know what happened. I just received a note from Gadiman saying that when he went for another interrogation, she was gone."

"You don't know what your weasel did with her?!" Brisack bellowed.

"She may have left on her own," Mal said, unruffled. "Hiding somewhere. That would be the most sensible, wouldn't you think?"

"She did nothing wrong!" Brisack protested. "She was only was wondering. Since when do we punish for that?"

“She wasn’t punished, Doctor. At least, I don’t *think* she was,” Mal said, unconcerned. “What does it matter, anyway? Just another woman. The world is crawling with them. They’re inconsequential beyond their ability to entertain men and birth another generation. And maybe bake a pie.”

“And people wonder that you never married,” marveled Brisack.

The forest grumbled and belched and trembled. The trees masked bottomless chasms that stank of sulfur, fountains of scalding hot water that shot

into the air, and seemingly innocent patches of bubbling mud that burned. The forest was known to devour animals, people, and—the stories said—hope.

The midwife should have been terrified to be there, but she wasn't. In fact, for the first time in far too long, she felt safe as she picked her way through the dense foliage.

She'd been too vocal in Idumea—she knew that, and would have to explain herself. But if she could do the math, anyone could.

Their population was dying, albeit slowly.

That could be fixed by allowing the request of a very few parents. But her

ideas proposal had garnered the attention of Administrator Gadiman himself, the biggest mistake she could have committed.

Keep a low profile and your name quiet. Make no lasting connections. Avoid drawing attention to yourself—

But she *had* to try. And now, fear of that weasely man had sent her running.

Home.

Chapter 2 ~ “My wife, you are insane.”

“Captain, do you have a moment?” Karna asked through the partially opened office door. “Zenos made contact again.”

Perrin quickly snatched up his quill and grabbed a clean piece of paper. “Of

course! Send him in!”

Zenos came in, dressed in regular work clothes and wearing an eager grin. “Saw him again, sir! Just before the eastern canals.”

“I pulled back the patrols when I realized Zenos was talking to someone in the trees,” Karna explained. “I should get back out there—”

“Certainly,” Shin gestured to him, “Go, go! See if we have any other confused Guarders out there.”

Karna grinned, winked at their volunteer, and bounded back down the stairs.

“Sit, Zenos,” Shin told him as he dipped his quill into the ink bottle. “Tell me everything he said, no matter how

bizarre. He still thinks you're some farmer's son?"

"Yes, sir. I was strolling at the edges of the fields they just planted, hoping to catch sight of him again. Since I'm not in a uniform—"

"—is precisely why I recommended some changes last year," Shin grumbled. "We could learn so much more if we weren't so obvious! But the Command Board . . . well, never mind. So Zenos, what did he say?"

"He was a bit more coherent this time," Zenos explained, "I think because I fed him, first." He winced in apology. "I'd taken an extra beef sandwich from midday meal and had it in my pocket in

case I got hungry, and . . . well, the Guarder seemed half-starved . . .”

The captain shook his head. “I have no problem with you feeding him, Zenos. It’s a sandwich well spent. If he sees you as a provider, he’ll become more comfortable with you and perhaps reveal what’s going on.”

Zenos’s face relaxed in relief. “I was hoping you’d feel that way, sir! I kind of already told him I could give him more tomorrow at the same time.”

Shin smiled. “Well, bring more than a sandwich. It’s a proven fact that the people will follow whoever will feed them. I’m hoping he’ll eventually follow you all the way to this office.”

Zenos shrugged. “I’m not sure I’m

that skilled yet, sir."

"If you joined up officially, I could train you," the captain hinted. "I need men like you."

"Thank you, sir. I know," Zenos shrugged again, looking down at his hands in bashfulness. "It's just that . . ."

Captain Shin sat back to analyze his volunteer of three weeks. Zenos often demurred like that, as if intimidated by himself. But he was far more naturally skilled than any soldier Perrin had met. And so far there had been no responses to the inquiries about a missing younger-than-legal boy. Nor had there been any reports about a girl looking for her run-off boyfriend.

The boy *was* as innocent as his face, which didn't even have the decency to sprout any pimples. Perrin saw Zenos in the market place a few days ago grinning at the sellers, and receiving many shy and hopeful smiles from Mahrree's former students, but he was so naive he didn't even notice them.

The boy was simply so *pure*.

Perrin would snag him, eventually. He just needed the right lure. But in the meantime—

He picked up his quill and poised it over the paper. "So Zenos—your report?"

Zenos quickly looked up from his hands and he sat back at attention.

He even did *that* better than most soldiers.

"Sorry—yes, sir. At first he told me we were planting our corn all wrong."

Perrin's quill hesitated over the paper. "He what?"

Zenos nodded. "He'd been watching the farmer the other day, and said we should be planting the corn in small hills instead, with a cut up fish to nourish the plants. Much greater yields than planting the corn in rows."

Shin put down the quill, perplexed. "Why would he be concerned about our plantings?"

"I thought it was an interesting idea," Zenos offered. "Maybe the

Guarders know something about improving crops?"

"Why would they? Or, maybe he's planning to steal those crops in Harvest Season, and thinks it's easier to hide in the small hills rather than rows?"

Zenos pondered that. "Probably right, sir. Still, would be interesting to try, don't you think? At a farm away from the forests, to see if he's right?"

Perrin growled quietly. "I'm not accustomed to taking agricultural tips from our enemies. What else did he say?"

Zenos cleared his throat. "Well, this won't be too helpful either, then. But maybe . . . uh, he said that improving yields are crucial to feeding the

population. We have lots of fallow land, and even small gardens could be used for vegetables and fruit trees."

"Our population is fed just fine," Perrin squinted. "We're at a stable and maintainable rate, we never have a lack, especially since the crop controls were established. He's interested in our population rates?"

"Maybe because they need our food?" Zenos suggested. "He said that their women have so many children now __"

Perrin pointed at him. "They *are* looking to raid our crops. Very good, Zenos. Now we know to keep our farms more carefully guarded, especially once

Harvest comes around." He quickly scrawled down some notes.

Zenos smiled to have been some use.

"I'm curious," Perrin paused, tapping his quill on the ink jar, "Just how many children? Did he say?"

Zenos nodded. "Well, in the middle of his rambling he said there was a woman who recently had her fifteenth child—"

Perrin's mouth dropped open.

"—then he said something about most of them have smaller families, averaging about six or seven children. Then he started on about something with teaching chickens to fly—"

But Shin was shaking his head

slowly. “A ‘small’ family is six or seven children? Unbelievable. Likely have so many to replace their population. I can only imagine how many of their people die each year. Fourteen here just last year.”

Zenos nodded soberly. “Yes, I’ve heard all about that, sir, from some of the men. Makes my back itch to think about it.”

Shin chuckled.

“I also started thinking, sir,” the young volunteer began hesitantly, “you’re a father, and seem to be a devoted one at that—if you could have more than two children, would you? Considering that it seems apparent

Guarder women still have so many—”

Perrin stiffened. “Do you know the name of Gadiman, Zenos?” the captain asked brusquely.

Zenos blinked rapidly at the captain’s abrupt change in tone. “Uh, sounds vaguely familiar.”

“Perhaps you’re more familiar with his title: Administrator of Loyalty?”

Zenos gulped. “Ah, yes sir. *That* Gadiman.”

“Would you like to meet the Administrator of Loyalty, Zenos?” Shin’s tone was cold as death.

Zenos gulped again. “No, sir?”

“That’s right—you don’t. But asking such kinds of questions will earn you a one-way journey to Idumea and an

extended discussion with Gadiman. To answer your questions, Zenos: no, I've never considered the thought of having more than two children. That is the law of the land, and I've sworn to uphold it. Querul the First recognized that our population couldn't exceed one million people, or we'd run into the same divisions and shortages we suffered under the Great War in 200—"

"I know all about that, sir," Zenos tried diplomatically to cut him off.

"If you did, you wouldn't need a history refresher right now!" Shin snapped. "After the war, Querul told families to maintain only a replacement population, that women should birth only

two children. When his son Querul the Second took over, he enforced that law ruthlessly. While the First turned a blind eye to the occasional woman who had three or even four, his son made sure that any woman expecting a third time never birthed that baby. *If* she survived the soldiers and their brutality, she certainly could never conceive again!"

Zenos swallowed hard, but the captain wasn't finished yet.

"Fifty years ago The Drink was developed to ensure no accidental violations of the law occurred, preventing women from having more children after the second. Not only has it kept our population in balance, it has preserved women from the difficulties of

expecting. I've seen it twice, Zenos, first-hand. It's an enormous sacrifice, and nothing a woman should have to endure too often!"

If the captain thought his lecture would scare the large young man into silence, he was mistaken.

"Sir, I know the sacrifices," Zenos said gravely. "My older sister has two daughters. I saw her suffer. I also saw her joy when she held those newborns, and how much she adores her girls now. I know for a fact that she's said the pain and suffering were nothing compared to becoming a mother. I didn't mean to be disrespectful to the laws, I merely wondered if you had ever considered

that maybe there could be *another* way."

Perrin sat back, stunned by the boy's boldness. "As I said before, Zenos —no, I've never considered violating the laws of the land. At least, not *that* one," he confessed with a small smile.

Zenos hazarded a small smile too, but it seemed to have a sad undertone. "Understood, sir. I shouldn't have . . . well, never mind. That's about all I have for you today." He made to get up out of the chair, but Perrin was struck by a thought and held up his hand to stop him.

"Zenos, one question: exactly *how* did the Guarder know the farmer was planting corn? He would have been across the upper canal there. For all he knew the farmer was dropping peas or

pumpkin seeds."

Zenos hesitated. "Too late in the season for peas, and pumpkins aren't sown in rows."

"But would the Guarder know that? If we plant corn in rows, might we not plant everything in rows?" Shin pressed. "I'm not exactly a gardener, as you might have guessed, but I do know that seeds are very small and difficult to identify from a distance."

Zenos looked perplexed for a moment. "Maybe he went out at night and dug up the seeds, just to see what had been planted?"

Shin pondered that, along with the odd look his volunteer tried to conceal.

He seemed to be worried that he hadn't asked the Guarder how he knew what seeds were planted.

"Possibly," Perrin decided. "You're dismissed, Zenos. Remember—extra food for our babbling Guarder tomorrow. Let's see if sweet bread doesn't loosen his tongue even more."

Zenos stood up, apparently relieved. "Thank you, sir! Hope I have something promising tomorrow."

After he left the room, Perrin whistled under his breath. "Six or seven children?" he whispered.

He sat quietly for a minute, lost in thought.

Then he forced himself to shake the traitorous thought out of his head.

The second year of Mahrree and Perrin's marriage had flown by even more quickly than their first. It was a nauseating, exhausting, sweet, gratifying, terrifying, sleepless, fantastic blur.

There were many events and funny things Mahrree had decided she should would write down, but she always forgot until it was in the middle of the night and she was up with someone small, or using the washroom, or was awakened by the churning in her belly or the snoring of her husband, or by an irrational fear, or by a legitimate

concern, or simply up because nothing *had* waken her up and she was worried that nothing *was* waking her up. That's when she thought she could record what she wanted to remember, especially those days in the last Raining Season when she and Perrin sat on their bed on the floor in the gathering room and did nothing but watch Jaytsy and tend to his stitches. But even then she kept putting off stepping away from it all just to record it for later.

Before she realized it, it was the 38th Day of Weeding Season again, 321, and the evening of their second wedding anniversary. This year the Shin family was celebrating. Half of the family was

asleep; the other half would be soon. The sky was a magnificent combination of swirling deep reds, purples, and blues, but Mahrree was the only one who noticed it.

They were on a blanket in the middle of their now very small yard in a bed of yellow weedy flowers. Their garden had shrunk considerably since the latest addition to the house was completed several weeks ago. Perrin had done most of the work himself after his stitches had healed.

Tonight Jaytsy kept leaving the blanket to practice her new trick of walking. She loved to hoot after the occasional cart and driver that passed.

Five-week-old Peto, born on the

91st and last day of Planting Season, with thick brown hair and pale blue eyes, slept snuggled into his mother.

Mahrree sat next to her husband who lay on the blanket with his eyes closed. He promised he wouldn't fall asleep but Mahrree knew what his slow deep breathing meant.

They *had* been talking about the amazing changes that had happened in the past two years, but neither could stay coherent enough to complete a complicated thought. A few moments ago Perrin's words had dribbled away in a slur of slumber.

If anyone had asked them to debate now, Mahrree concluded, it would have

been about whose turn it was to change which child's soiled cloths. And halfway through the discussion they would have asked each other what they were talking about.

But Mahrree's mind was quite fully occupied tonight, and she'd spent many weeks—moons, actually—trying to find a way to express all that cluttered her mind. Lack of sleep disorganized her, but also seemed to embolden her.

Tonight, on their second anniversary, she decided it was time to confront Perrin. She couldn't wait for them to not be tired. She'd be a grandmother by then.

Besides, her husband should be used to ambush situations.

“Perrin?” she said, glancing at the gate to make sure Jaytsy couldn’t escape the yard.

He grunted drowsily.

“Have you ever wondered what it would be like if we could have more than two children?”

That woke him up. She knew it would and she fought down a smile.

“What did you say?” he blurted out as he rolled over to look at her. His eyes were bleary as he tried to focus them. “You birthed Peto barely five weeks ago, and . . . *what did you say?*”

“I said,” she began, and realizing there was much he wasn’t going to understand this evening, tried a different

direction. “I’ve been thinking. About the village. About families. About . . . what if families were allowed to have more than two children? If they could have as many children as, as, as the Creator allowed them? If women didn’t have to take The Drink after the second child?”

Perrin propped himself up on his elbow and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. “Oh, *that’s* what this is about. You’re worried about The Drink. I told you I’ll come with you. Don’t worry—the mixture has improved since our mothers’ time. It’s supposed to be quite painless now. I didn’t realize that was on your mind.”

“No, I wasn’t worried about *taking* The Drink until now, and I thank you for

reminding me about it," she said grimly. "But actually, I was thinking about something *more*. We got our two children so quickly, and just as quickly it will be over. Not that I won't be happy to sleep again, but somehow it doesn't feel right to me."

Perrin watched her for a moment, as if trying to work out her direction. "I don't remember you ever talking this way before."

"I never dared before," she admitted, "But now I must. When I was a teacher, parenting a child or two seemed such a great burden. But now that I'm a mother I see what an adventure it is. My view of the whole world has changed in

only one short year. But Perrin, why does the adventure have to be so restricted?"

He sat up and eyed her sternly. "For the good of the community! You know that. Do you need a history lesson? I feel like I've been giving those a lot lately," he added in an odd mumble to himself.

"No, I don't!" she snapped.

"Mahrree," he said firmly, "you know The Drink's far better than what the kings used to do to women who kept having babies. Besides," his tone turned matter-of-fact, "we'll run out of space if people have too many children, and women's bodies can't birth more than two children without permanent damage. The Administrator of Family Life's

studies proved that. Notices were everywhere."

"Yes," Mahrree said with a dangerous gleam in her eye, "Dr. Brisack did that, correct? Quite convenient, don't you think, that a study verifies the very practice they've already engaged in for the past fifty years?"

Perrin stared at her, recognizing her debating voice. They fell in love debating each other over two years ago in public, but his expression hinted he knew he wasn't about to enjoy what was coming. "What is this all about?"

"I find it *very* difficult to believe that Brisack's study verifying that

women can only safely birth two children was completely unbiased and objective," she announced.

"Mahrree," Perrin sighed, "as Administrators go, if we were forced to have one over for dinner, he'd be my first pick. He's actually a very decent man."

"And you could cook that dinner yourself," she declared. "The *very decent* Administrator of Family Life is perpetuating a *very convenient* lie."

"You're accusing the Administrators of *lying?*" His eyebrows rose. "Are you sure you're not still experiencing the lingering effects of birthing? The Commander of Edge can't have a wife speaking traitorously," he

said, only half in jest.

Mahrree sighed. She *had* to tell him everything she was thinking. She was quite confident how he would react, but she couldn't keep quiet. That was what he loved about her, wasn't it? Her passion about speaking her mind? Her ability to think of things in new ways? That she cared for no one's opinion but the Creator's? That's what he told her at their wedding two years ago. Tonight it was time to see if it was still true.

Besides . . .

"You've admitted yourself that the Administrators aren't always forthcoming," she reminded him. "You've shown me enough of your

father's messages about the 'color of the sky.' And it's not traitorous talk. It's just . . . well, have we really evaluated all our options? There *must* be more places for us to settle! I mean, there's so much land, yet the Administrators limit us to only this region. Why not go west to where the ruins are? We can build *around* them. Every report that comes back says they're poisoned, but I simply can't believe that. Terryp didn't go crazy from poison 138 years ago—he went crazy with eagerness! And there are no more people there simply because their time is over. Their Test was finished! They didn't die because of poisonous ground or air. It doesn't make sense. If they died, then where are their bodies?

Shouldn't there be some kind of bones or remains?"

Perrin just stared at her, absently running a finger up and down his son's tiny arm.

Mahrree wasn't sure what she saw in his eyes. She knew her words were disloyal, but if she couldn't trust her husband with her thoughts—

She took advantage of his stunned silence and plowed on.

"And the mountains, what's on the *other* side? No one's tried to find out. I'll admit I'm not sure how to traverse that boulder field—could take a few days, I imagine—and getting up and over the mountains would undoubtedly be

difficult, but you told me yourself a few weeks ago that going through the forest wasn't what you expected, and was actually *comforting*. What if the boulder field is the same way? And the mountains? We don't know because we've never tried! The only thing in our way is the Guarders! And Perrin, what if you eliminated every last Guarder above Edge? If any survived, maybe they're gone, or frightened of you. Can't we try to take advantage of your success?"

Perrin continued to stare, seemingly absorbing only half of what she was saying. His voice was quiet and low when he finally spoke.

"How long have you been thinking about this?"

“Getting to the other side? It’s been building in my mind for a several moons now.”

“That’s a long time to think,” he replied, still with an unreadable expression.

Mahrree felt she was about to burst. “Perrin, tell me honestly: isn’t there *any* way to work with the remaining Guarders? Any way to get around them?”

“My wife, you are insane,” he whispered, searching her eyes for evidence. “Do you have *any idea* what you’re suggesting?”

“I do, and I’m not insane. Why do men assume women are unstable when

they're expecting or have just birthed?!" she exclaimed, exasperated. "We shed a few tears, fret for a bit, and you—and *Dr. Brisack*—" she sneered at his name, "conclude we're going crazy. Simply because we react differently than men?" She scoffed. "I'd *love* to see how a man would respond to the dramatic changes in his body if he were expecting. Frankly, I think our sex handles it and recovers remarkably well, and we emerge even more focused and determined!"

"So I see," he murmured.

She exhaled. "Just . . . humor me for a few minutes. Please? Can we work with the Guarders?"

He twitched. "The ones I

encountered in Raining Season weren't interested in talking. They were interested in *you*."

She swallowed at that, the same way she had repeatedly when he finally told her the truth about that night.

"But," he continued reluctantly, "something new *is* happening in the trees. If it's a result of what happened last season or not, I really don't know. It seems that there's a lost Guarder. And he *does* talk. I have a new volunteer named Zenos, who happened upon him quite by accident at the fresh spring, and for the past two weeks they've been talking. Since Zenos isn't in uniform, the Guarder thinks he's a local boy and he's

become quite eager to see him, especially since Zenos brings him food from the mess hall."

Mahrree's eyes grew big with expectation.

Perrin tried to shut it down as soon as he saw it. "But what you're proposing is . . . is *ridiculous!* Unheard of!"

Jaytsy plopped down on her father's legs and began to suck her thumb.

Mahrree sat up taller. "And?! What about the Guarder? What does he say?"

Perrin shook his head. "Nothing really useful. He's lost and confused, and we think it's made him rather unstable. He blathers on incoherently. Zenos reports to me what he says, and

it's mostly nonsense. What I *can* tell you is . . .” He exhaled, obviously not wanting to divulge but likely feeling the need to be honest with her, “Zenos mentioned that the Guarder told him their women have many babies. Even as many as fifteen.”

Mahrree's mouth dropped open so large Peto's fist could have fit neatly inside it.

“Fifteen?” She couldn't even imagine. “That's . . . that's far more than I imagined, but I knew it! Yes! I read that report from the Office of Family—I'm sure they didn't think anyone would take the time, *but I did!*” her voice was full of spite. “And it said their studies

showed women couldn't safely have more than two before causing permanent damage, but that doesn't make any sense. *Who* have they studied to know this?! Oh, but fifteen!" She fixated on the possibility. . .

Perrin noticed. He looked at her suspiciously as he ran his fingers through Jaytsy's stringy light brown hair. She lay down and used his lap as a pillow. "Why does that interest you so much?"

"Because it's proof!"

He shook his head, bewildered. "It's proof of *nothing,* Mahrree. It's from a disoriented Guarder who's *not* the most reliable source of information. And if it were true, which I doubt, it demonstrates only that they're

uncivilized and cruel, destroying their women's bodies merely to replenish their population. They give birth to creatures that attack us at night, steal our goods, and threaten our families. That's why *I kill them*."

Mahrree flinched. After a quiet moment she meekly said, "But they still have many children."

Perrin scoffed. "Because they live in the wilderness, skirmishing among themselves, struggling to survive, watching their mates die, their children starve—"

His descriptions were too much, and yes—she was still feeling some irrational effects of birthing. "Stop it!"

Mahrree exclaimed in a loud whisper.

Perrin clamped shut his mouth and analyzed his wife. “What is this all about, Mahrree?”

She couldn’t put it off any longer. Her time was growing short. The date was already set.

“Perrin, what if I don’t take The Drink? What if we have a third baby instead? I don’t believe my body would be maimed or my mind destroyed. If other women can still have fifteen, then I’m sure I could handle a third. I just need to rest first, then—”

Perrin was suddenly right in her face, on all fours straddling her, and glaring with horror and confusion.

Jaytsy lay sprawled on the blanket

wondering what happened to her pillow.

"Mahrree Peto Shin, I must inform you that are sounding at this moment like a traitor." His voice was cold and fierce. "*Not* my wife. Not *my* wife!"

Mahrree had expected this response. He played it out quite as she imagined he would. A part of him —*Captain Shin*—was loyal to the Administrators, and she knew the captain would rear up as soon as she confessed her idea. But she didn't burst into tears or shrink away.

Perrin's eyebrows furrowed in surprise at her lack of it.

She was overly calm, like a crazed person who had been planning a bizarre

scheme for seasons.

Which she had.

"Perrin," she said steadily, "just consider it for a moment. The Writings tell us to bring more into the World, so all can have an opportunity to go through The Test. We should have more children __"

"Why are you saying these things?!" he whispered severely, and looked around to see if anyone was near enough to hear.

"Because our ancestors had many more than two," she insisted. "And there are others that still have up to fifteen! I've done the math—*I know* I'm right."

He shook his head.

"Only consider this for a minute,

please," she begged. "The world began with one thousand and the Creator. Then He paired them up to populate the land."

"Yes," he said slowly, trying to put his shock in his back pocket for a moment.

"Now, one thousand people means five hundred pairs. If they have an average of 6.5 children in each family __"

"Where did you get *that number*?" he whispered fiercely.

She was a bit startled by his exclamation, but decided it was a natural reaction to the onslaught she was throwing at him. "It's just an average, all right? You can say six then, or seven—"

“Still, six?!” he exclaimed hoarsely. “You can barely keep track of Jaytsy while Peto is feeding! How could anyone keep track of six children?”

She would not be deterred. “Couldn’t the older help care for the younger?”

He looked down for a moment. “I suppose,” he conceded, “but how would they know what to do?”

“Learn from their mothers? I don’t know. That’s not the point. Besides, some could have less, and some could have more.”

Perrin stared at her, wild-eyed.

“So at a rate of 6.5 children—I ran scenarios for four and eight as well,”

she explained, “but this seems to be the most accurate average—”

“You really *have* been thinking about this.”

“There’s little else to do when I’m nursing a baby! So, 500 couples have 6.5 children for 3250 people. Pair them up for another generation and at 6.5 children per couple, that becomes about 10, 500. The third generation at the same rate becomes around 34,000. The fourth generation is, what was it? Oh yes—110,500. Fifth generation means almost 360,000, and by the sixth generation we have over a million and one hundred thousand people. Give or take.”

Perrin only blinked.

“The Great War broke out during

the seventh generation. Perrin, how many people were in the world then? Does the army have any good estimates?"

He shook his head slightly, likely trying to catch up to her calculations and frantically trying to figure out the dangerous direction his wife was headed. "Uh, not any better than anyone else. Well over a million people. At least two hundred thousand died over those five years. If it weren't for the war, we'd have far too many people now. One million is all the land can support."

Mahrree ignored his rationale, cultivated into him by his Idumean education. "Yes! Over one million

people! Now the only way we got so many was because families *were bigger*. Now Perrin, consider this—what if the world is already supporting more than only us? *Somewhere else?* Perrin, how many Guarders might there be?"

He blinked rapidly and thought for a moment. "Uh, no one's sure. When they left there were maybe 2,000. But they can't be more than 10,000 now, according to some of the estimates my father has been given. That's still a large number to battle, especially if they arm their wives and children. That's why we're increasing the army to 15,000."

"Has anyone ever encountered an armed woman or child?" she pressed.

Perrin paused. "No," he said

slowly. “Just the rumor.”

Mahrree was unimpressed. “*Rumor*. Since when do you believe in rumors?”

His eyes flared, and she realized she’d nudged awake the captain again. “*Rumor*, Mrs. Shin,” he said in a low voice, “was how we knew the Guarders were becoming active again. You might even say *rumor* is also how I found out about you being marked last season.”

Mahrree scrunched up her mouth, realizing she was losing that debate. So she shifted it.

“Then I suppose you should also believe the *rumor* that Guarder women can have up to fifteen babies. So, with

birth rates like that, might there not be more Guarders? Maybe even *tens* of thousands?"

"Surviving in the *wilderness?*" Perrin challenged back.

"Why not? Didn't our ancestors live in a kind of wilderness at first and have many children?"

Perrin shook his head to clear out the fog. "Mahrree, what's your point?"

"That the Creator made us capable of having more children!" she nearly exploded. "In order to have reached over one million people in six generations, families were much larger. No one remembers, or even thinks about it, because all the family line records were destroyed. That fire can't have

been an accident. King Querul the First did it on purpose, so generations later no one would remember!"

He stared at her with what she thought might have been fear. But having never seen fear before in him, she didn't know how to interpret the look that tried to penetrate her mind.

"Perrin, if we remembered—had *any* records left—as to how many children our ancestors had, we would know we could bear more children. Our bodies haven't changed in merely one hundred twenty years to produce only two children safely. The Office of Family is wrong! Can't you see?" she pleaded.

If she wasn't holding her newborn she would have gripped his shoulders and shook him.

"It's a lie, Perrin! A lie started by the kings and continued by the Administrators. I don't know why they want to keep the population down and refuse to let us explore, but they're doing i t *on purpose!* I've searched The Writings and I can't find anywhere that the Creator said, 'And when this people has reached one million, cease to multiply!' We are only replacing now. And many couples aren't even doing that. But we can! My body can do this!"

"Mahrree, Mahrree!" he whispered urgently. "You've got to stop! You don't

know what you're saying—what you're imagining. Yes, there are questions about the loss of family lines, but we can't deal with that now. We just have to live with it."

He wasn't holding a baby, so he did grip her shoulders and shake her gently.

"Everything you're saying—you must realize—is traitorous! Wanting to go against the edicts of the Administrators?! Please, Mahrree, if you love your family, *just stop*. Remember, the Administrators don't hold much to The Writings. I've heard Nicko Mal say that those who are believers have ceased being thinkers."

That was the wrong thing to say.

Perrin's face immediately

registered his mistake as Mahrree began to fume.

"That has to be the most illogical, stupid thing I've ever heard! We believe *because* we think! We *choose* to believe, which indicates a great deal of thought went into the decision! What, if Mal *believes* he has a mind, does that mean he no longer *thinks* with it?! Obviously!"

She never was skilled at holding her tongue. Not even with her fingers.

But she had to shake off the narrow-mindedness of Nicko Mal to get back to her point. "But they've told us *we* can still believe! And is *not* continuing to multiply *against* our beliefs? Couldn't

we argue that we must follow our hearts?" she implored. "Besides, my mother had only one, and so did your mother. They could've had two. Think about this: what if we have the two they didn't?"

His eyes nearly popped out.

"Now you want *four* children?!" he screamed in a whisper and looked around quickly. It would have been much safer to have the conversation in the house.

In a closet.

Under a blanket.

Into a pillow.

"Woman, what is *with* you tonight?!"

"But couldn't we make that

argument?" she pushed. "That we want to have the children our mothers had a right to, but didn't? With your father's connections, couldn't he get us permission from the Administrator of Family Life—"

He shook his head violently as if that would change the view he saw of his wife. It didn't.

"The High General challenging the Administrators?" he asked as if to make sure he heard her correctly.

"You defied them *all* by going in to the forest again!"

"That was different! Mahrree, this . . . this—I can't think of a *worse* idea! Do you know of anyone who deliberately

had more than two children? I mean besides the occasional twins or triplets?"

"No, not really. But I think that's because no one has tried—"

"No, it is not," Perrin said darkly. "Many *have* tried. I don't know about this village, but I've seen the families from other villages who've attempted it."

A smile began to grow on Mahrree's face. "So it's possible?!"

"No! It's not!" Perrin repeated in a panicked whisper. "Physically, maybe yes. But in no other way!"

He sighed and sat down in front of her.

"When I was in Command School, I

served for a time in the King Oren's courts building, as all future officers did. I saw several families come in with two children and a mother large with expecting. Mahrree, they were *broken apart*." His voice became husky as he saw the tears building in her eyes. "A court would evaluate the parents, always find them unfit to care for so many, and disband them. The father would be incarcerated for not ensuring his wife took The Drink—"

Mahrree's chin began to quiver.

Perrin tenderly tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "The mother would be sent to a building which houses the mentally ill because she was unfit to

care for *any* children. And their children __”

Tears were already streaking down Mahrree’s face.

“—the children and the new baby would be given to different sets of parents, people who found themselves unable to have babies. The Administrators merely took the kings’ Office of Family and put Dr. Brisack over it. Nothing there has changed.”

Mahrree shook her head in anguished grief. “The Roons claimed as their own a four-year-old only a few weeks ago,” she whispered. “The little girl said her family travelled to Idumea, then they disappeared.” She closed her eyes and sighed. “Saysha was told the

girl's parents and younger brother were taken by Guarders. *Guarder snatched*. Oh Perrin, they weren't, were they? Her mother may have been expecting again!"

He smoothed her hair. "Don't tell Saysha your suspicions," he warned her softly. "Just let her enjoy becoming a mother. That's all that can be done now." He kissed her cheek. "Do you understand why we can't risk this? Even if my father merely mentions your idea we might be under suspicion. Our babies could still be taken. I love our children, too. Let's be grateful we have them, and desire no more than we should."

"Oh, I wish I could, but I can't! Because I . . ." She faltered as she

sobbed. She'd had it all figured out, too. It could have worked. *It could have* . . .

But now?

"Because you what?" he asked quietly.

"Because I dream!" she burst out. "I dreamed the night we were engaged, and the night Jaytsy was born and again when Peto was born, and a few other times, too—Perrin, it sounds crazy, I know, but I was sitting with children all around me. And there was a huge house, with weathered gray wood, and window boxes and herb plants growing in them. We needed something so large for all the family. And there were mountains. And the children were *ours*. Lots of them. Over a dozen, I think. And I was so

happy!”

Perrin’s face showed no new emotion. “Mahrree, a dream’s simply a dream. The coincidence that it came on significant nights for you is, is, is . . . just a coincidence.”

Mahrree was stunned that he didn’t seemed moved by her revelation. In fact, he seemed to think nothing of it at all, and that bothered her intensely. It’d been so important to her, so comforting, so exciting, so glorious—

So nothing to him.

“Are you sure it’s not a gift from the Creator?” she tried again. Maybe it was the captain that was in charge of his mind right now, not her husband. She

had to find her Perrin again. “Are you sure a coincidence isn’t really a miracle? In The Writings there are accounts of people having dreams that came true.”

He sighed. “Mahrree, I don’t think it happens anymore. I like to believe they did, but now . . . have you heard of anyone recently dreaming, I mean, dreams with *meaning?*”

“Oh Perrin, people don’t share such dreams lightly. It took me more than two years to dare tell it to you.”

Perrin sighed again. “Tell me more about it. What else is there? Any landmarks, any activity?”

Mahrree hesitated, but he did seem open to the idea, even if only a little.

“Well, there *is* something else. I guess this is the part that makes it seem truly unbelievable.” She paused then rushed on. “I was sitting in a garden, a big one, and I was weeding it and I was happy!”

Perrin burst out laughing, startling his daughter who was drifting off to sleep on the blanket. “Well there you have it! Ridiculous! What kind of garden was it?”

Mahrree sighed miserably as she confessed, “Vegetables.”

He grinned as if he’d just easily won a complicated game. “Ah, well, then. You know what I think it is? It’s ‘your condition’ playing tricks on you.”

His smugness insulted her.

“I was not in ‘my condition’ when we became engaged!”

“Ah, but you were dreaming of the time you would be, right?” He smiled virtuously. “You went to bed that night dreaming of the day you could hold your own little baby. Come now, I know the minds of women well enough now.”

Two years of marriage had made him an expert.

Mahrree felt as if a crushing boulder had just rolled on top of her hope, and it made her chest tight and achy.

“I hate to admit it, but that’s a bit true,” she murmured. “That night we decided to marry, I was thinking of you.

Of a family."

But the dreams had seemed so real, so vivid that she could even make out from which direction the sun hit the house. She couldn't let it go so easily. Maybe it *could work*, if only he'd think about it—

"Do you *really* think it was only my imagination and coincidence?"

"Definitely," he said in a tone that suggested she never speak of it again.

"Now," he continued, suddenly cheerful, "I suggest we get these sleepy children in the house and catch a nap ourselves before Peto's next feeding which should happen, by my estimation, in seventeen minutes."

And just like that, it was over.

Her dream house, her garden, her hopes for more children—all of it wiped away as if it were merely a drawing in the dirt.

Perrin the deluge destroyed it all.

Well, not so much *him*, she admitted grudgingly as the ache in her chest sharpened into genuine pain. It was the Administrators, it was their world—it was everyone. He was merely reminding her of all the obstacles that stood in her way. He didn't create them, just pointed them out.

Still, couldn't he have looked a bit harder for a way around them?

She watched Perrin as he gently scooped up his little girl, wrapped her in

the blanket, and kissed her sleeping form. Mahrree loved him, she was sure of that. But he seemed further away tonight. Not so much the most perfect man in the world.

She almost forgave him as he tenderly carried Jaytsy into the house. But she couldn't let this go.

Women have a list in their brain that keeps a tally of *everything*. The title of a list which she'd made some time ago materialized again in Mahrree's mind: "Ways in which Perrin's mind is *n o t* like mine." Underneath *Dogs are better than cats,* and *Boots do belong on the eating table,* Mahrree recorded, *Dreams are nonsense.*

They didn't talk much that evening

after Perrin put Jaytsy to bed. Just brief, civil exchanges before he went to his study. And during Peto's last feeding Mahrree fell into a deep sleep, fed by exhaustion mixed with absolute despair.

She despaired that there was nothing she could do about the date, already set for next week. The midwives had made the appointment when they reported to Idumea the names of all the women who had recently birthed a second time.

Then next week a coach carrying an assistant from Family Life and several vials of the drink would stop at a small, windowless building right outside the market, as it did every two weeks.

Mahrree had seen the assistant's arrival a couple of times before. She was a brutish woman, nearly as large as Perrin, likely chosen because she was both female—allegedly—and powerful enough to strong-arm any woman who had a sudden last minute change of heart.

Mahrree had also seen the mothers waiting for their turn, usually a handful each time. Some were there voluntarily after their first babies, not wanting to endure the experience of birthing again. But none of them ever looked up, as if some oppressive and invisible hand from the building forced their heads down to inspect the gravel at their feet. Then they were ushered, one at a time,

into the wooden building accompanied by their own mothers, grandmothers, or the occasional brave husband.

The mothers didn't look any different coming out again after swallowing down a concoction of bitter herbs and a burning liquid—the brutal recipe created by Dr. Brisack. No, the effects didn't occur for about another hour, Mahrree had been told. That's why the women went straight home, because the brew soon made its way into the womb and cramped into a useless nothingness.

Perrin had said the Guarders were cruel to force their women to have so many children, but she was sure that deliberately killing the part of her body

that made new life was crueler.

Now she was rethinking her decision to have Perrin, with his current attitude, accompany her instead of her mother.

Then again, while Hycymum had been most attentive and helpful during birthing, she also had a way of multiplying Mahrree's anxiety. Being concerned about each pain was one thing, but gasping in worry and rushing to horrible conclusions was quite another. Hycymum meant well, but Mahrree was quite sure that the constant reassurance that everything was going to be all right was supposed to go from grandmother to birthing mother, not the

other way around.

Maybe, Mahrree thought glumly as her heavy head nodded that night, she'd just go by herself to take The Drink. She already felt utterly alone.

Perrin hadn't bothered to come to bed yet either, nor would he. They'd done too much fighting that night to consider anything like an *argument*.

As she drifted off to sleep, her infant tucked securely next to her, she didn't know that a candle remained lit until the small hours of the night on their eating table until it eventually extinguished itself.

Nor did she know her copy of The Writings and old maps lay open next to several pages filled with dates,

calculations, cross outs, notes, and more calculations.

Nor did she realize that Perrin snored peacefully with his head on the table, and a quill balanced in his fingers.

Early in the dark morning, Mahrree padded wearily down the stairs in search of clean changing cloths. Both children were in her bed, again. It was simply easier to keep Peto within arm's reach during the night, and now Jaytsy was braving the dark to climb the stairs and scale the side of the massive bed to sleep with her parents. Now while the bed was big enough for eight soldiers, it somehow wasn't large enough for two small children when they stretched and

rolled, pushing their parents to the very edges.

That was likely the real reason Perrin hadn't come to bed. Jaytsy had kicked him so hard a few weeks ago she actually bruised her father's ribs. He felt safer on the small sofa.

In the light that poured into the side window from the full Greater moon, Mahrree saw him sprawled on the sofa, snoring softly. She made a mental note that they should buy something that could accommodate his long legs and broad shoulders.

As she turned by the table she saw The Writings and notes. Why all of those were out, she couldn't imagine, and she didn't really care right then. She had

only a few minutes before her babies would be waking and . . .

She found herself stopping and turning back to the table. Noiselessly she shifted the papers and bent closer to make out the notations in the dim light. Something burned in her aching chest as she read Perrin's writing and recognized the other pages.

References to The Writings.

Calculations of Guarder population growth in varying circumstances.

Minimum dimensions of land needed to house different population sizes.

Maps from his collection.

Calculations of the Idumean world

population, before and after the Great War.

The words *weathered gray* and *window boxes*.

Mahrree looked over at Perrin. She was tempted to rush over and kiss him, but knew he needed the sleep almost as much as she did.

Her husband. That's who he was right now. *Captain Shin* had been there the night before, growling at her like a rabid wolf, but he was gone now. She lived with two men, both too large to be contained in one body at the same time.

Captain Shin had stood on the podium shouting at her during the debates, but it was Perrin she fell in love with away from the platform.

Captain Shin was the man with the sword and the barely-controlled temper raging through the forests, but Perrin was the man who pulled his babies out of her arms the moment after he took off his uniform jacket.

Captain Shin was the one who declared her thoughts traitorous, Perrin was the one who tried to see if anything could be done about her dreams.

She could live with both of them, as long as Perrin was around more than the officer.

She pulled out her mental list and did her best to blot out *Dreams are nonsense* as she took the clean cloths back upstairs.

Nothing had changed, she knew. There was no more hope for her, for a bigger family, for any alternatives. The Drink was still in her near future. But she felt as if her husband had spent the night lifting off that crushing boulder and heaving it away as far as he could. Granted, he couldn't send it far at all, but the point was, *he had tried*.

She got up again an hour later as the sun was rising, and carried both babies down the stairs balanced on each side. The pain in her chest had subsided to a dull ache, but she could live with that. Not surprisingly, the eating table was completely cleared and Perrin snored in a new position on the sofa.

She smiled sweetly at him and dropped his babies on his chest.

"Let me guess," he mumbled as he slowly opened his eyes and put a steadying hand on each child. "It's morning already."

"According to some farm animals, yes." She bent over and kissed him.

He grinned sleepily. "Mm, not that we have any time to *argue*, but I'm curious—what was that for?"

"For being *my husband*."

Perrin struggled to sit up with his children—his baby cradled in one arm

while his toddler sat unhelpfully on his belly—as his wife went into the kitchen to start breakfast. He righted himself and glanced in a quick panic at the table, then sighed when he remembered he had already cleaned up his work.

He didn't need her seeing it.

Not again.

No one would see his calculations and notes again, now smoldering on the hearth.

He couldn't shake Hogal's words to him in Raining Season, right after he was injured. Hogal had said that not only was the Refuser after Perrin, but his family, too. And why?

Because Mahrree could someday prove to be a very dangerous woman.

Perrin had thought maybe some year, or decade, but not within a few moons! But there it was: Mahrree could see what no else bothered to look at. She already *was* the most dangerous woman in the world.

That's why Perrin burned all his notes. He didn't need written evidence of that lying around.

Her calculations had been correct. Her suggestions of how many Guarders there could be somewhere else, even at conservative birthrates, were staggering.

And there was nothing he could do about it, he realized. Maybe send some of the ideas to his father to suggest 15,000 in the army might *not* be enough?

But the notion of going somewhere *else*? Exploring? Increasing their own family size?

People simply weren't supposed to think like that. There were *rules* and *limits* to their world—

Why was he suddenly thinking like an Administrator?

For a brief moment he envisioned his grandfather glaring at him in disappointment. Wasn't it General Pere Shin who told him to go over the wall, invade the forest, do what no one else could do?

Perrin *did* many things no one else had done, but he simply couldn't do *this*. There was no way he could see successfully doing what Mahrree

dreamed. He tried almost all night, but no possibility he entertained ended happily.

Everything ended in Idumea.

He adjusted his small children on his lap and kissed each one of them as they stared up at him with eyes far too wide awake for such an early hour. One pair was a dark chestnut brown, the other pair was pale blue, turning gray.

Annoy and anger the Refuser.

According to Hogal, these two soft little faces would someday annoy and anger the Refuser. Perrin sighed at his babies and tried to smile. Maybe Hogal was mistaken. He'd been up the entire night before he told Perrin his

impressions of his family, and he must have been exhausted. Perrin Shin and his family were no threats to anyone—

But the words sounded hollow in his mind. Rector Hogal Densal, in all his 82 years, was never wrong. And he had dreams too. He'd never told his nephew *how* he knew the Refuser had a personal grudge against lowly Perrin Shin, but Hogal's dreams were so vivid he couldn't deny them.

And now Mahrree was having dreams.

But Perrin considered them nightmares.

Chapter 3 ~ “Such a document would be too dangerous to discuss.”

Although it was Hycymum Peto’s day off from cooking at the Inn, she was busy in her kitchen working on a new confection she decided should be called

mer-ang. At a critical moment in its whipping, she heard an urgent knock on the front door.

Conflicted, she looked into her bowl, decided whipping it even more in a minute might be a good idea, then took off her third best apron with the little caterpillars stitched on it, and went to the front door. When she opened it she was surprised to see her son-in-law, his infant son cradled in one arm, his daughter held in his other, and his face etched deep with concern.

“Mother Peto, could you please come check on Mahrree?” his deep voice quavered. “I’ve never seen her like this.”

Hycymum blinked several times to

make sure her massive son-in-law wasn't actually cowering just a bit. Then a terrible thought struck her.

"Wait—was it *today?*" She could already see the answer. "Why didn't she tell me?!"

Perrin's face went wretched. "She didn't want to bother you—"

But Hycymum was already grabbing a sweater without worrying if it matched her skirt. "You left her alone?!"

"It's been only a few minutes," he defended feebly. "I—"

Hycymum pushed past him. "And I here I thought you were supposed to be a *smart* man! Stay here!"

Several minutes later Hycymum,

panting at her effort to run down the road —an activity she hadn't engaged in for over forty years—pushed open the front door of her daughter's house. She listened for a moment, then did her best to move up the stairs as quickly as possible for a woman her size and age.

In the bedroom she found her daughter curled up like a squirrel, sobbing.

"My poor girl!" Hycymum rushed over, climbed onto the bed with a grunt, and cradled her daughter's head. She rocked and soothed, "I'm so sorry it hurts. I'm so sorry it hurts," while Mahrree's gasping body shuddered and shook.

After a while, neither woman could

say how long, Mahrree sobs finally slowed. Between gasps she asked, "Where are my babies?"

"Safe, with your very worried husband, at my house."

"Your house isn't very safe then, is it?" Mahrree whispered.

"Don't you worry about that. I can always get more seashells."

Mahrree trembled. "Mother, no one said it would feel like *this*."

"No one ever will, my poor girl. And I am so sorry about that," Hycymum smoothed her hair. "We never speak of it. It wouldn't help if we did."

"I don't mean the pain, Mother," Mahrree said hoarsely, "I feel some

cramping, but nothing unbearable. What I feel is, what I feel is . . .” She began to sob again.

Her mother hugged her head awkwardly. “I know what you feel. The pain of what *could have been*. You’ve lost the ability to give more life.”

Mahrree sat up with effort and wiped her wet face. “I knew I would feel some sorrow, but *this*—This is far worse than I imagined! Why didn’t you tell me?” she demanded between sniffles.

Her mother shook her head apologetically. “For the same reason you won’t tell little Jaytsy when it’s her time. Could you have gone through it—willingly—had you known?”

Mahrree hadn't considered that.

"No. I was already having some doubts," she confessed. "But then of course we hear from the *Office of Family*," she spat contemptuously, "that the herbs are *safe*, that there's *little pain*, that it's *our duty*." She wiped her nose on her sleeve.

"It *is* safe," Hycymum admitted bleakly, handing her a handkerchief a bit too late. "I don't know of any women who died. But were depressed or grief-stricken? Yes, all of them. For a few, dying might actually have been easier." She scrunched her mouth and looked at the ceiling.

Mahrree could tell she was

searching for the right words. It wasn't really her strength, but the dear woman was trying.

"It hurts . . ." Hycymum began, paused, then said, "it hurts because the Creator can't work through us anymore. When we become mothers we enter into something like a sweet bond with Him. Oh, expecting and birthing is painful, and it's ridiculous to see how our bodies become shapes we no longer recognize! But there's . . . there's still something *sweet* about it all. And then it's taken away. Forever. And that's agony."

Mahrree had stopped crying, amazed at her mother's insight. She thought her head held only cotton.

And fine linen.

And a bit of worsted wool.

"Oh Mother, that's it exactly!"

Hycymum sat a little taller. It wasn't often she got a compliment from her daughter.

Mahrree stared at the woman who seemed to get a little smarter each year.

"I just realized how selfish I am to complain. Here I have two babies, and you had only one. I'm so sorry." Because her eyes were finally clearing up, she looked at her mother properly for the first time. Her gray and brown curls were in disarray, her sweater didn't match her dress, and bits of white sugar clung to her round face.

And her mother went out in public

like that?

Of course she did, for her daughter.

"Thank you, Mother. I don't think I say that enough. Sometimes we're so different, but I do appreciate you." She brushed some of the sugar off her face.

Hycymum rubbed her other cheek and frowned at the sugar on her chubby fingers. "That bag cost three slips of silver this week. Ah well. I'm merely doing what mothers do," she said dismissively, and with a tinge of embarrassment.

To get a compliment from her daughter was quite unexpected, but gratitude as well? Hycymum could barely take it all in.

"You make up for what was lost,"

she added mysteriously, wiping her nose for sugar grains.

Mahrree cocked her head. Something in the tone of her bubble headed mother sounded as heavy as a boulder. “Lost? What did you lose?”

Hycymum stopped fretting about sugar and sighed loudly.

A depth of pain Mahrree had never seen before on her mother erupted and filled her eyes with sudden grief. “I think now you can understand, Mahrree. We lost your sister,” she confessed. “You weren’t quite two. She was born early, like Jaytsy, but even smaller. I had pains just as you did with Peto, but we couldn’t stop them. Her tiny little lungs .

. . they weren't ready yet." Tears slid down her face.

Fascinated and dismayed, Mahrree sat up and took her mother into her arms. "I had no idea! You *did* have a second child?"

Hycymum began to weep softly. "I shouldn't be burdening you with this. I thought I was over it, but today, seeing you . . . it just all came back," she squeaked out between sniffles.

Mahrree handed her back her moist handkerchief. Some things can be shared between mother and daughter.

"A member of the king's Family Services visited me the day after," Hycymum said damply. "I was still resting at my mother's. That

representative had The Drink. She said it was obvious I couldn't birth healthy children. I was half delirious with fever, pain, and exhaustion. My mother, your Grandmother Sakal, tried to stop her . . ." Hycymum shook her head. "I never got to replace my lost baby."

"Oh, Mother," Mahrree breathed. She felt guilty that she had two beautiful babies that came out yelling as loudly as their parents. She closed her eyes and wished for something helpful to say. Instead, all she came up with was, "How did you bear it?"

She felt her mother chuckle under her arms. That was the last thing Mahrree expected. Then again, nothing

she was hearing or feeling today was anything she expected.

Hycymum pulled back and was actually smiling. “Cloth!” When Mahrree looked at her blankly she said, “No, really. I met another woman who also lost an early baby. Together we made a blanket for our babies. We spent days looking at the market to find the right cloth, and oh! We never had sewed something so beautiful before!” Hycymum smiled tearfully at the memory. “Then together we buried it near the unmarked graves of where Family Services buried our babies. Wouldn’t even let us do *that* on our own,” she added with a bitter tone Mahrree had never heard from her

mother before.

"And then," she continued, a bit more brightly, "we found other grieving mothers. We helped them make blankets. Then we helped each other make clothes for our surviving children. Then we made curtains and pillows and everything else."

Mahrree smiled, not realizing she could still do it. "Your decorating friends! All of them lost someone?"

She nodded with a sad smile. "Yes, each one. I guess you feel as much pain for losing a child as you do when you lose the *possibility* of a child. Mahrree, you've joined our club, filled with women forced to take The Drink. And in

our club is every mother who's lived in the past fifty years. They'll be here again, to help until you get over this. Because they understand."

Mahrree shook her head in amazement, seeing her mother with new eyes, and seeing her fondness for decorating everything in a different way.

"So it took me only thirty years to finally understand you?"

Hycymum laughed softly and kissed her daughter's cheek. "You're doing better than me. I still don't understand you!"

They sat in silence few moments, both sniffing and passing the soggy handkerchief between them.

"I wished I could have seen

Grandmother Sakal trying to take on the official," Mahrree said eventually.

Hycymum smiled. "My mother was special, much like you. She knew losing my baby didn't mean I couldn't have more." In a softer voice she said, "Did I ever tell you she was expecting five times? She lost three of her babies before she could carry them full term, but was able to carry my twin brothers and me. That's why she believed I could have more." She sighed.

Mahrree sighed too. She'd often forgotten her mother had two younger brothers who died as small children from a fever and pox. Suddenly Mahrree wondered if she needed to worry about

her own babies—

Oh, there were simply far too many things to worry about today. She was already drowning in dread.

Fortunately her mother spoke again.

"She tried to tell the representative, but of course she wouldn't listen." Hycymum reflected for a moment. "Mahrree," she said in a tone Mahrree had heard from her teenage students when they had news they were sworn to keep secret—except only after they shared it just this once, "I have something I think you're ready for."

Again surprised by her mother's changing demeanor, Mahrree smiled warily. "Might as well, Mother. I'm rather expecting anything now."

Hycymum glanced around as if someone could have been hiding in the bedroom. “It’s about your great-great-grandparents, Kanthi and Viddrow. About the time King Querul the First was asking for the family records. I don’t know if you remember that time __”

“Mother, I teach *history*,” Mahrree interrupted. “Three hundred twenty years is a lot to remember, but I *do* know about the family records collection. The goal was to create a complete family histories, everyone’s father and mother. They wanted to trace their lines to the original Five Hundred Families to put into The Writings. It should have

happened right before the division."

"*Supposedly* that's what they planned," said her mother flatly.

Mahrree had to grin. She'd never seen her mother like this before.

Sly. Cynical. Mysterious.

If only she didn't still have bits of sugar in her eyebrows that made them look frosted, she would have been quite alarming.

"Why do you say that, exactly?"

"That's not what my great grandfather Viddrow believed," Hycymum said, glancing around again for extra ears.

Mahrree couldn't help herself. Ludicrously she peered out the window.

"I never told you this," Hycymum

continued, feeling sure the Administrator of Loyalty wasn't in the wardrobe, "but he had a dream. Quite vivid. The next night he had the dream *again*."

Dreams!

Mahrree felt the familiar warmth seize her above her heart. Someone in her family dreamed! And she didn't even know about it until now. There *were* dreams, unrevealed to the world.

"It was only days before the king sent his official for the festival," Hycymum told her. "There was a festival in every village, with food and songs and a great presentation ceremony where the head of each family walked up to the visiting official and handed him

all the copies of their family papers."

Hycymum huddled in closer, nearly crowding Mahrree off the bed.

"Viddrow told Kanthi to secretly make a copy of their lines," she whispered. "Kanthi questioned why, since all of it would be compiled and she'd not only have their records but the records of everyone else. This was before paper was being produced so cheaply, so all they had was expensive parchment, and they didn't have much silver to their names. But he insisted. 'Copy the records, and tell no one about them.' They hadn't been married very long, and Kanthi wasn't about to doubt her new husband. So she made a copy and secured it in her collection of

recipes."

Mahrree gasped. "Where are they now? Do you have our family lines? You know who our first father and mother were?" Chills of delight ran up her arms.

"Yes, I do!" Hycymum whispered. "And what a blessing that was, considering what happened. Great grandfather Viddrow never believed the fire that destroyed all the records was an accident. In the dream he saw the fire, knew all records would be destroyed, and it was all because of a design fashioned by men who wanted to control the population, in many different ways. My great grandmother told me this when I was just a child, before she showed me

the copy kept in my mother's recipe book."

"I knew it!" Mahrree whispered back, clapping her hands. "Everything that was destroyed was intended to keep us in the dark! So we forget who our parents are, where we came from, what we once were."

Almost immediately, her enthusiasm faltered. Maybe her mood shifts were a result of The Drink, but she reflected on the fire with a new feeling of poignancy, feeling as if it had just happened. She closed her eyes in distress remembering all that was lost.

The additional writings of the guides not yet included in The Writings. Scientific surveys of surrounding lands.

Theories of past civilizations. Evidence of natural phenomena not witnessed by anyone alive. Maps. Stories.

All the important writings of the day in one secured stone vault, and engulfed by one mysterious fire. An *intentional* fire.

Her heart ached.

Fortunately her mother broke into her thoughts before she thought too much more. She already felt dehydrated from too much weeping.

"Mahrree, did you know that your great-great-great—" She paused to count on her fingers, shrugged, then said, "A grandmother long ago had thirteen children? Her mother before her had

nine. Kanthi and Viddrow had seven. Your father's line was prolific too! He knew that his great-great—" Again she hesitated, lost in the greats. "Well, one his grandmothers had at least eight. Expecting didn't destroy those women. Losing babies didn't mean they were defective or deformed. Yes, some women struggled to have only one. And some mothers died in birthing. But rarely. And no one—no matter what that silly Administrator claimed in his report—went crazy from having babies!"

Mahrree blinked in surprise.

"Yes, I read it!" Hycymum proclaimed proudly. "Or tried to. Most of it. The important parts. But you see, no one *remembers* anymore. But," she

leaned conspiratorially towards her daughter, "*we do!*"

Mahrree squeezed her mother's arm. "I knew it! Do you think anyone else still has their family histories?"

"I wouldn't know," Hycymum confessed. "Such a document would be too dangerous to discuss. I like to believe others may have been warned too. When you're feeling better, though, I want you to make a copy to keep safe. Add our names, and the names of your children."

"Of course!" Mahrree beamed. "My recipe book could use a few additions."

"And Mahrree," her mother said somberly, "I hope you understand when I

say this—I don't think you should tell Perrin. Not that I don't trust him, but . . . I don't think his position as corporal will allow him to keep such a family secret."

Mahrree stifled a smirk at 'corporal' and nodded.

"I've seen that already," she said sadly. "And Mother? Thank you, for everything today. And for trusting me."

Oh, the secrets women keep, she thought to herself. If only we had the power to *organize* them.

"I'm just glad I actually helped," Hycymum said, sounding as if she'd passed her first math exam in thirty years. "You know, being a mother is so much easier when your babies are

small."

Mahrree groaned. "Oh, you did *not* just say that . . . Really? I've been thinking nothing could be more difficult than two small children!"

Hycymum shook her head. "My poor daughter, I'll never understand how someone as bright as you can be so dim."

Mahrree's recovery from the effects of The Drink was really quite simple. She reminded herself how blessed she was, how adorable her two babies were, that she had a caring mother and a

wonderful husband, and once she put her mind to it she could get over her deep sense of loss and easily move on.

Except her heart didn't believe a word of it.

So Mahrree spent the next several weeks living in a pit of hopelessness.

She half-heartedly nursed her son, vaguely watched her daughter, and stared at her house from her bed or from the sofa.

Without any comment, mothers and grandmothers—most of them Hycymum's friends—came in each day and straightened up Jaytsy's messes, took her for walks, or cradled Peto while Mahrree napped. This service had been given to them as well. They knew

the pain.

They also knew that in a few weeks the heavy sorrow would start to lighten, Mahrree would begin to sit up more often, watch her children more carefully, and begin to smile again.

In the meantime, the women took turns in her home until Perrin returned each evening. They would touch him on the arm, tell him what was cooking for dinner, and inform him who would come the next day. Hycymum came in daily to brush her daughter's hair, do the washing, and add herbs to the dinners.

But Perrin was at a complete loss.

"No one told me this would happen," he said resentfully to Tabbit

when she came over with loaves of bread four days after Mahrree took The Drink. “I’ve already received two letters from my mother telling me to wait. Wait for *what*, Auntie? This has destroyed Mahrree!”

She lay on the sofa, staring at nothing, not noticing the conversation between her husband and his great aunt in the eating area. She only hazily watched Jaytsy tearing paper that might have been important, while Peto slept in the cradle.

“She’ll come out of it, Perrin, I promise. I’ve seen it happen dozens of times before. Eventually, her heart will come to terms—”

“Why didn’t anyone warn us?” he

snapped at her.

"What good would that have done, Perrin?" Tabbit said, remarkably composed considering the commander of the fort was threatening to explode.

Then again, when you've changed someone's soiled cloths as a baby, that tends to lend you a bit of authority over them, no matter what their position later in life.

"No man *really* wants to know," she told him evenly. "Certainly not the Administrators or anyone else in authority. Women don't fight battles, or hold positions of power, or even challenge the Administrators. We're not a threat, but barely an asset. So what

happens to us is irrelevant."

"Well, I don't feel that way!" he said, softening slightly.

"No, Perrin, you don't, for which I thank the Creator. Neither does Hogal, nor did Cephas, and neither does your father. Your birthing was quite difficult on Joriana—more than two days, because you were an enormous baby! Relf was quite distressed to see how much your mother suffered with you, so he convinced her to take The Drink early so as to not risk another expecting. He, too, was stunned and angry at how deeply The Drink affected her. I know because I was there. Your grandmother had already passed and I knew Joriana would need my help."

Perrin rubbed his forehead. “I never knew that.”

Tabbit kissed his elbow, as high as she could reach on him. “Perrin, individually men care enormously about their wives. But collectively, a world ruled by men sees women as mere support for their efforts, and a surplus at that. And *surplus* support is, as I think the army would put it, expendable.”

He sighed heavily. “I’m sorry, Auntie Tabbit,” he whispered. “I don’t see it that way.” He looked at his very still wife. “Here I’ve been upholding the Administrators’ doctrine, their *noble* and *proven* explanations as to why women can’t have more than two

children, but really, what would have been wrong with her trying to have three or even four? Why is it someone else's decision as to how many children we have? She wanted more, you know. We could have handled it—"

"Perrin, *Perrin*," Tabbit tried to quiet him, but he was as easy to calm as a cornered rattle snake.

"The house is big enough! I earn enough!" he plowed on, but he knew the argument was as useless as pushing the rain back into the clouds. Still, he felt the need to shake his fist at the darkened sky.

"Grandpy Neeks never wanted to get married. There's two children we could have had in his stead," his voice

wavered as the rationale struck him, far too late. “And Gizzada,” his voice turned into an anguished mumble. “Likely will never marry. Two more children. Could have been six,” he whispered. “Or seven.”

Tabbit hugged his arm.

“I never understood why couples risked punishment to have a third child,” he said quietly. “I thought it was selfish. But now I see they were willing to defy even the government to do what their hearts told them was right.”

Tabbit leaned against his arm. “Please, Perrin—you have to let this go. There’s nothing that can be done now. You of all people shouldn’t say such

things!”

“Even my mother knew this would happen,” he spat, momentarily full of venom again. “Do you women keep secrets about everything?!”

“Actually, we do,” Tabbit smiled sadly. “But we’re not purposely secretive. It’s just that men don’t care about what we discuss, or worry about what we go through. As long as we keep your clothes clean and your food cooked, whatever else goes on in our world can stay in our world, well beyond your concern. You know what I mean,” she added gently when she saw the hurt look in his eyes.

Perrin squinted, surprised and unsure of what to do with her evaluation.

"So that's true for all women?"

Tabbit shrugged and nodded.

Her nephew groaned quietly. "I can't help but think *I* took her to have it done."

"You didn't do this to her! You were *saving* her," she assured him. "They keep records, you know. The midwives report who's had a baby, and when they've taken The Drink. If you hadn't brought her in, they would have come to force you to obey the law. *Especially* someone with a name like yours. Be the example to the village and all that."

"Just last season I broke the laws, over and over, by going into the forest to

save her and our children," he whispered as he watched her prone form. "Then, five moons later, I break her instead."

"What else could you have done, Perrin?"

I could have tried, he thought despondently. I could have argued that the population is likely decreasing, since many don't have children, and we *could have*—

"Nothing!" his aunt cut into his pointless planning.

She's right, he concluded glumly. Any appeal would have gone through Dr. Brisack, who *supposedly* proved that women couldn't safely birth more than twice. And any inquiry would have

drawn the personalized attention of Gadiman—or worse, Nicko Mal.

While Perrin was confident Mal remembered him only sporadically, why give the paranoid man reasons to stay up all night stewing about his ideas?

"Now, Perrin," Tabbit said soothingly, "what you *can* do is help her recover. Sit with her. Kiss her. Talk to her. Love your babies. Give them the attention she can't give them. And just wait."

There really was nothing else he could do, he realized that night as he sat next to her. His anger wasn't constructive or restorative. He had to somehow let it go so that he could reach

her.

She dimly asked about the fort, and he tried to answer her cheerfully, but she didn't seem to really hear him.

The damage was done, Perrin understood, but that didn't mean it would destroy her forever. His back was permanently scarred with a jagged slash, but he felt as strong as before again. Maybe, somehow, she could recover too. There would always be a scar, but she could still be strong again. He had to focus on bringing back the woman he fell in love with.

For now she was merely a shell.

So each evening he sat awkwardly next to Mahrree as she distantly asked about the soldiers, and he wondered

how to wipe away the shadows that covered her. He bounced his children, read reports from Idumea, watched neighbors go to the night's entertainment, and waited.

He felt guilty about going to the fort where he knew the busyness of the day would help him forget the misery at home. But once he came home he was greeted by two little children who filled him with joy while their mother could not.

Although he always liked children, he was surprised by how much he loved his. He never knew how entertaining one-year-olds could be. Watching his little girl with big dark eyes explore the

house, empty the bookshelves, and try on his cap was the best time of his day. When she giggled as she tried to put both her legs into one of his boots, he surprised himself by whispering, "Absolutely adorable!"

He held his little boy and watched with delight as his son attempted his first grins to match his father's. More than once he muttered, "That's so cute!"

Then Perrin would glance over to his wife who seemed to see right past her children, or noticed only half of how amazing they were. He prayed that when she came out of it she wouldn't know what she had missed.

After two weeks he finally identified the pang in his heart: he

missed her.

He missed their conversations, their fights, and their *arguing* afterwards.

He needed her stubbornness, her refusal to see things his way, and her ability to make absolutely perfect sense of things he failed to recognize before.

But as she stared off into nothingness, it didn't seem that she missed him.

But still he waited.

One night, about three and a half weeks after The Drink, Mahrree dreamed again.

Beautiful land. Lush garden. Mountains. More than a dozen children. Gray wooden house. Window boxes filled with herbs.

She woke and sat up in her bed in the dark, alone. Perrin spent his nights in the gathering room on the sofa now, Jaytsy hadn't come up the stairs, and Peto was still down in his cradle.

She was completely alone.

The only thing to do was cry. But before Mahrree could, she felt her father unexpectedly close and startlingly clear.

Mahrree, it's not too late. You see too small a view, imagine too small a life. You're so limited now. But the limits will expand until they disappear.

"Oh, Father," she whispered miserably to the dark. "You just don't understand."

The words came gently, fervently.

My beloved daughter, it's <u>you</u> who does not understand. The Creator knows your emptiness, and He'll fill it to overflowing. But in His time. He has ways you can't understand, but you will.

The warmth that appeared in her heart when she remembered her father expanded beyond the confines of her chest. She felt her body fill completely with heat and energy that reached even the darkest regions of her soul, flooding it with light. And the light brought

something with it.

Joy. Pure joy.

She was so surprised by it she actually laughed in spite of her tears. Pain and sorrow leaked mercifully away, replaced with sublime anticipation.

"You promise, right Father?" she said out loud.

He was there—she knew it. She couldn't see him or hear him. But she could *feel* him, and that was stronger than any other sense. He surrounded her.

Of course I promise. You have a glorious future with this sweet family. You don't need to sorrow anymore. Never doubt your husband. Remain faithful and don't fear. You are

surrounded by help, always.

The next morning Perrin awoke to the unmistakable sounds of someone making breakfast. He checked his attire to make sure he was covered enough to greet whatever gray-haired woman had snuck past his sleeping form and was in their kitchen so early. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and tried to shake himself awake as he walked quietly to the kitchen door, then gently pushed it open.

"You!" he said, a little too loudly.

Mahrree jumped and dropped an egg. She turned to him, smiled, and said,

“Were you expecting someone else?”

“Actually, yes,” he smiled tentatively and walked over to her.

The light was back in her eyes. Not only light, but hope. He stopped in front of her.

“Someone a bit older, with more wrinkles,” he said as he gingerly touched her face. When she didn’t shrink back he stepped closer and took her face in his hands. “Someone with white hair and a marvelous gift with yeast and eggs. But,” he sighed dramatically, “I suppose I’ll have to settle for you.”

She grinned at him.

He glanced down at the floor to avoid stepping in the egg mess and then kissed her gently.

She kissed him back. “Hmm. And how many of these women did you greet this way each morning?” she teased.

He cocked his head towards the door. “Just take a look outside and see the line of gray-hairs waiting for their turns!” His face softened and his eyes became damp. “Oh, it’s good to see you back!”

He squeezed her so hard he was worried for a moment he might break her. But she was solid. He saw that in her eyes.

“They said you’d come back,” he whispered in her ear as he lifted her, “but that it takes time. I don’t know what changed, but I did pray for you.” He put

her down and beamed at her.

"My father," she whispered.

Perrin looked at her, confused.

"He said all would be fine," she explained—sort of, "and that I didn't have to be sad anymore."

"I wished I could have met Cephas," Perrin said reverently. "He's the one you heard argue that the blue sky is an illusion, isn't he? The one who surmised the true color of the sky is black?"

Mahrree nodded. "He always saw further and deeper than I ever could."

"Further and deeper than *anyone*," Perrin whispered. "I wished I had his strength. He could reach you when no one else could."

“You would’ve liked him,” she said, running her hand through his black hair. “After all, he’s always liked you.”

Chapter 4 ~ “Send in our man. Officially.”

That Weeding Season flew by as fast as bees. But oddly, the days crawled as slowly as slugs.

“That’s the definition of

parenthood," an old man called to them as he watched, amused, near the pond at the village green one evening. "Everything seems opposite of what it should be."

Perrin was chasing yet again after his exploring little girl while Mahrree tried to calm down their fussy two-and-a-half-moons-old son. It seemed the only time they ever saw anyone else was in brief encounters like these. Hycymum dropped by frequently, but the volume of her two grandchildren usually sent her home within fifteen minutes, and on Holy Days they visited the Densals in the evening to find out what they missed as they stood outside the congregational meetings, bouncing their noisy children.

That was the extent of their social world.

Excursions to the large green near the amphitheater were the most entertainment they could handle right now, but getting out as a family at least a few times a week felt important. The Shins simply didn't have time to care about anything else like politics or the topics of the latest debates that went on without them.

Someday they would have time again, but now nothing was as important as their children. Their goal each day was to make sure their babies made it to bedtime with fewer bumps than the day before. They had yet to reach that goal.

The old man shuffled towards them, but stooped down and caught Jaytsy with unexpected agility as she tried to charge past him. He held her tenderly and continued his slow walk to Perrin, who jogged over to retrieve his daughter. The stooped gray man, whose face and hair were probably as dark as the richest soils when he was younger, chuckled as he sat down on the bench next to Mahrree. He wasn't disturbed at all by Peto's whining.

"They amuse you and aggravate you and amaze you," he said as he stroked Peto's soft hair. "They grow too fast, then not fast enough, then far away. They won't talk, then they won't stop talking,

then they won't talk to you at all. You want them to walk, then you want them to sit down, then they walk away."

Perrin sat down next the man, but before he could speak he made the mistake of putting Jaytsy down again. She took off like a bolt of lightning, excitedly yelling "Dog!"—her label for anything that moved.

With a groan Perrin leaped back up to prevent her from grabbing an unsuspecting goose.

The old man chuckled, patted Mahrree on the shoulder, and said, "May I try?" He held out his hands for Peto.

Over her son's arched and writhing body, Mahrree looked at sweet expression on the elderly man's face.

“Are you sure?”

He seemed sincere, but Peto was far too much to inflict on anyone, especially that old.

The man didn’t answer but carefully lifted wailing Peto, put him over his shoulder, and patted him rhythmically and more firmly than Mahrree would have dared. But by the time Perrin returned with Jaytsy, who had narrowly escaped a pecking death by goslings, Peto was asleep.

“It takes a grandfather’s touch sometimes,” he smiled at the astonished parents.

Perrin shook his head in admiration. “But unfortunately our children don’t

have grandfathers in Edge."

The old man's eyes glistened as held Perrin's gaze. "I'm sorry about that. I believe grandfathers are the most important influence in a child's life, after mothers and fathers, of course. Sometimes a grandfather can do and say things to a child no one else can. It may even be that at times a grandfather's voice will be the only one he ever listens to. But what would I know," he sighed. "I have no grandchildren in Edge. So I steal others' grandchildren." He closed his eyes in contentment as Peto snuggled into his wrinkled neck.

Mahrree smiled at the lonely grandfather. "Well, you're welcome to ours any time, especially when they're

crying!”

Perrin nodded in agreement. “Quite a touch you have there. What’s the secret?”

The old man opened his eyes and shrugged. “No secret. Simply experience.” He reluctantly handed Peto back to his grateful mother, but not before sniffing in his baby scent. “Beautiful family,” he declared as he stood up.

He turned and put his hands on Perrin’s and Mahrree’s shoulders. “May the Creator always bless and preserve this family.”

He smiled at them and slowly shuffled away, missing the perplexed

expressions of the parents he just left.

Hew Gleace watched the window anxiously from his seat behind the desk. He didn't like sitting there. It wasn't his desk to claim, but it was his to watch over while its true owner was away. He tried to read the papers resting on it, but couldn't concentrate.

He gazed out the window again. Eventually he saw a cloud of dust and the appearance of eight horses and riders.

Gleace exhaled and got up from his seat. He darted outside just in time to

see some of the younger men helping an old man off his horse.

"Tuma!" Gleace exclaimed when he saw how weary he was. "Are you all right?"

Tuma Hifadhi smiled. "Of course! Of course! Wonderful excursion. Now, if you could help me sit down on something that's not moving . . ."

"Yes, yes," Gleace said as he led the old man back into the small building. Two younger men guided him to sit down on a cushioned bench.

Tuma sighed as he put up his feet on the bench. "Much better!"

To the younger men he said, "Please tell my daughter I've returned, so she'll stop fretting. She'll inform

everyone else."

The men nodded and headed out the door.

Gleace pulled a chair over to sit across from Tuma. "If your wife were still alive—"

"She'd be as overly worried as my daughter, I know."

Gleace shook his head. "So? Did you succeed in your little adventure?"

"I'm not a rebellious seventeen-year-old, you know!" Hifadhi chuckled.

"You acted like one, you know! Taking such a risk—"

"Now you sound like my father!"

"Well, maybe an eighty-seven-year-old needs to listen to a father!"

Tuma wiped a tear of laughter from his eyes.

Gleace smirked. He couldn't keep up his angry pretense. "So?" he asked again.

Tuma beamed at him. "I saw him! And her! And their children! I even held both of them."

Gleace's mouth fell open. "Really? But you were there for such a short time __"

"I knew exactly where to be and what to do."

"And you said whatever it was you wanted to say?"

Tuma smiled and nodded.

"There were easier ways, you

know," Gleace chided him.

"But easier is rarely better," Tuma reminded.

Gleace sighed. "I hope you've satisfied your curiosity now. And Tuma, I hope you were careful."

Hifadhi waved that off. "Of course I was careful. It's been a few years, but I still know how to cover my tracks. They'll remember me only as a lonely old man, *if* they remember me at all. And yes, Hew—I've satisfied my curiosity. It's your curiosity I worry about now."

Gleace chuckled and shook his head. "I'm not curious in the least bit. I'm just glad you're safely back."

"So am I!" Tuma admitted and closed his eyes. "And now I have no

doubt. I looked into his eyes—it *is* him. The one we've been watching for."

Gleace closed his eyes too, absorbing Tuma's words.

After a restful moment Tuma Hifadhi whispered, "Hew, send in our man. *Officially*."

It was almost the end of Weeding Season, Captain Shin noticed as he wrote the date on the document that sat in front of him on his desk. The 90th Day. He had been a father to *t w o* small children for three full moons now, and so far they were both still alive. He and

Mahrree must be doing something right, he thought proudly to himself.

He smiled at the anxious young man seated across from him, and he put the document into a file. “And now all that’s left to say is, Welcome to Fort Edge,” he said to his newest recruit.

The thin, sickly pale young man with stringy dirt-colored hair nodded to the captain as he rose from his chair. “I hope I won’t disappoint you, sir,” he said in a shaky voice as he shook the captain’s offered hand.

“Oh, I’m sure you won’t,” Shin lied genially as he came around the desk and opened the door to his office.

But he was sure he would. The boy was barely heavy enough to meet the

weight requirement, and Perrin could have snapped his spindly arms like kindling with only one hand.

Then again, if the recruit didn't pass the next two weeks' of training, Perrin wouldn't have to worry about any of that.

"I understand you're nervous, but that's why we prepare you," he said brightly. "We'll teach you to not be afraid of your fears."

It was always good to practice the words, even if he didn't think they would apply.

He put a comforting hand on the young man's shoulder and gently directed him out to the large forward

office. Shin stopped and looked around the empty tower.

"Hmm," he said. "Neeks was supposed to be here." He turned to the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. "Ah, Private Zenos. Have you seen Master Sergeant Neeks? I have a new recruit here that needs to be outfitted and given a tour."

The next-to-last official recruit—convinced after only three moons of volunteering that soldiering was the life for him for the next two years—nodded as he came to the top of the tower stairs.

Everything had checked out on Shem Zenos, to Perrin's surprise. He had no criminal record and he really was twenty years old, according to the

piece of parchment Zenos produced last week that was signed by someone named Boskos Zenos. Perrin chose to believe the signature was authentic. Over the last few weeks he'd found himself quite taken with the perennially pleasant young soldier.

Private Zenos smiled cheerily at his commander. The boy was always beaming, as if he simply couldn't help himself.

"Yes, Captain. The master sergeant was called away unexpectedly. He asked if I'd come up here to make his apologies. He hopes he won't be too long."

Captain Shin sighed at the new

recruit. “I don’t want you to sit around wasting time, Private. I could give you the tour, I suppose—”

“Sir?” interrupted Private Zenos. “If I may, I can give him the tour. I just came off of duty, and I’m sure you have far more pressing matters.”

The new recruit gave Zenos a scowl that the private ignored.

Shin smiled. “You haven’t been here that long yourself, Zenos, to know *everything* about the fort.”

The young man grinned. “Not officially, sir, but as a volunteer I learned more about this fort than I think you’d want to know!”

Shin folded his arms. “I have to admit, Zenos, you do have a way of

getting around. Private," he said to the new recruit who glared at Zenos, "don't trust this man's innocent face and boyish ways. Private Zenos is the best scout I've ever met. He sees things no one else sees, and I swear the forest talks to him."

Zenos nodded soberly, but his eyes were twinkling. "Oh, it does sir, it does."

Shin shook his head. "Don't make me regret getting you to sign up officially, Private. It's talk like that that gets you regular visits with the surgeon." He tapped his head.

Zenos chuckled. "Don't worry—I can't understand the trees' language yet.

But when I do, then I'll be sure to schedule an appointment with the surgeon. The tour, sir?"

The new recruit's glare hardened to granite.

Shin didn't notice. He shrugged and said, "Zenos, our newest private is all yours. Just get him back here so Grandpy can get him outfitted."

The new recruit slowly turned to Zenos, his brown eyes boring holes through him.

Zenos just smiled broader. "Let's start with the outer perimeter, then work our way in back to the office. I promise, Private, you won't be disappointed!"

"Already am," the new recruit mumbled under his breath, and he

followed Zenos down the long stairwell to the main receiving area.

"So," Private Zenos said as they exited into the compound of the fort, "this is the fort!"

"Really?" the recruit said, unimpressed. He also no longer seemed nervous. "I couldn't have figured that out by myself."

Zenos grinned, ignoring the sarcasm. They walked towards the northeast entrance that faced the large fields before the forest. "Over there, where the horses are, are the stables. The smith is right next to it."

The recruit merely rolled his eyes at the obvious.

“Out here, beyond the gates, we have the feed barns to the east.”

They marched out of the northeastern gates as Zenos gestured.

“Beyond that is the beginning of the canal system that connects to the Edge River. It waters the farms here and extends all the way to the southern reaches of the world.”

The recruit groaned with annoyance as Zenos blathered on about grasses and trees, and then became irrationally excited when he saw a gopher watching them from the cover of a bush.

The recruit’s gait slowed slightly, however, as he realized Zenos was heading straight for the forest.

“And in front of us is the most feared enemy of the Army of Idumea.” Zenos held out his arms wide as he marched straight to the trees.

“Hey, *hey!*” called the recruit who stopped suddenly in his tracks.

Zenos stopped as well, several paces ahead of him and right before the tree line.

“Where do you think you’re going?!”

Zenos looked at him innocently. “Why, to show you the fort. In a way, the fort grounds extend all the way to the tree line. You should know it better than anything else here. Why? Are you scared?”

The recruit folded his twig-like arms. “Of course not! It’s just that, I thought the rules were that no soldiers were allowed in the forest.”

Zenos smiled. “I didn’t say I was giving you a tour of the *forest*, now did I? I only want to show you some features along the *edge* of it. Plenty to see. Quite fascinating, really. There’s even a fresh spring where the captain has us water the horses when we’re on patrols. Look down the line and you’ll see three groups of soldiers patrolling along the edge. But if *you’re scared,* well then—”

“I’m not scared! How ridiculous.” The recruit walked briskly up to Zenos. “Show me.”

Zenos grinned and slapped him on the back. “Follow me and I’ll show you what’s called a mud volcano. Right over here. Not too impressive, is it? Just a pile of mud that bubbles every few seconds. Blub, blub, blub, blub. I swear you could keep time by it. Now, follow me down here. About thirty paces away, right over there is the fresh spring I was telling you about.”

Zenos led him down a gentle slope towards a marshy area. “The water is really quite good.” He took a few deliberate steps into the forest by the trickling stream.

The recruit paused at the edge of the trees, watching.

The private squatted near the head of the spring, cupped his hand, dipped it in, and took a drink.

"I promise, best tasting water you'll ever drink. Just come try it. This really isn't off limits. It's the only part of the forest that isn't."

The recruit sighed and walked easily into the trees and over to Zenos. He squatted by the spring and—

Several of the trees moved.

Before he could gasp, a cloth was shoved into his mouth and quickly secured by a cord tied around his head, while his hands were bound behind his back.

Zenos stood calmly by, watching

the forest incapacitate the new soldier.

The recruit flailed against his attackers as they tied his feet together, but it was useless. His captors, four of them, were far larger and stronger than he was. In their mottled green and brown clothing they melted into the forest.

The recruit's eyes darted around him in a panic and he saw several more hidden men, some even covered in leaves and sticks, surrounding the area.

Zenos shook his head slowly. "For someone trained to know the forest, I'm a little surprised you were so hesitant to walk in. The captain's right. The trees *do* talk to me, and they've told me your intentions. I'm sorry about this, really. Understand, I don't exactly have an

aggressive nature. But it seems there's been a slight communication problem. You see, Shin is mine." Zenos stepped closer to the shocked young man.

His reluctance and fear had returned, this time genuinely.

"And Shin will be mine for quite some time. Your presence is no longer required. I'll make your apologies to the captain. You were spooked by the noises from the woods and decided to go to someplace like Vines where there are no trees. Don't worry, *soldier*, I have things well in control here. I'll take care of everything, especially Shin. I wish you a good journey."

Zenos nodded to the men who

picked up the recruit and jogged him deeper into the woods and out of sight. He saluted sloppily to those who remained as they stepped quietly back into the trees and dissolved into them.

The private took another drink from the spring, wiped his hands on his trousers, then walked back to the fort.

"I should be able to figure this out!" Mahrree groaned, but no one would've heard her over the wails of her son in the baby sling strapped to her front. She bent over carefully so as to not disturb him further—as if the infant could have been

more irritable—and grumbled as she picked up the small new potatoes that rolled on the ground.

Jaytsy had just thrown them, *again*, from the miniature wagon she was riding in.

"I've been a mother to two small children for three moons. You think I should know what I'm doing by now!"

By the glares she was receiving in the market, others were thinking the same thing.

But she *couldn't* figure it out. When was the right time to go to the market when both children were never content at the same time? When Peto was happy with a full belly, Jaytsy was growing fussy and wanted a nap. When Peto was

ready for a nap, Jaytsy was waking up and ready to go for a walk or a ride in the small wagon her father made.

Mahrree could never get the timing right, and she tried a different time every week. Once both children were happy at the same time, but then two days later at the same time of day they were both wailing at the top of their lungs while she tried to haggle over the price of carrots. She was ready to shove one into each crying mouth to see if that would quiet them until she finished at the butcher's.

Today she tried going to the market right before Peto's nap time, hoping he'd be lulled to sleep as Mahrree walked,

but once again her plan failed. He was grumpier than ever, and now, moments ago, Jaytsy learned to throw.

Mahrree was gathering the last of the rolling potatoes when she looked up to see Jaytsy holding a small red projectile in each chubby fist. She cocked her right arm and let fly another potato.

"No!" Mahrree moaned, but Jaytsy beamed proudly. Mahrree watched as the little potato flew in the opposite direction and landed in the hand of someone wearing a blue uniform.

"That's a great arm!" the catcher said encouragingly. "Try the other one now."

Mahrree's mouth dropped open as

Jaytsy smiled at the stranger and threw her other potato. Its trajectory wasn't as impressive, but the young soldier stepped up quickly and caught it before it hit the ground.

"She must be right-armed," he chuckled.

Mahrree still didn't know how to respond to this soldier encouraging her daughter to throw food.

"Any more potatoes for me?" he grinned at Jaytsy. She began to look around the wagon, but Mahrree already had the rest in her cotton bag. "Then I'll give these to your mother," he said, walking over to Mahrree.

"Uh, thank you," she said, surprised

as she opened the bag to let him drop in the potatoes. The soldier didn't even seem to notice Peto's wailing.

"Any time, ma'am," he tipped his cap. "I'm rather an expert at cleaning up thrown food messes. Was a bit of a rambunctious child myself. You're Mrs. Shin, aren't you?"

"Uh, yes—yes I am." She evaluated the handsome face that smiled at her. His light brown hair was nearly the same color as hers, and he had big happy sky-blue eyes. Mahrree wondered how old he might be. His looks seemed too boyish to be a soldier, yet his build was surprisingly large and strong. Not as big as Perrin, but then again, no one was as big as Perrin.

He tipped his cap again. “I’m Private Shem Zenos, ma’am. Just signed up officially with your husband earlier this week.”

Mahrree smiled. “That’s right!” She lowered her voice, although it wasn’t necessary because no one in the market around them would have heard her over Peto’s continued crying. “You were volunteering for him before. You’re the one who’s spoken to the *Guarder!*”

Zenos was surprised. “Uh, yes, ma’am.” He leaned in closer to her. “I didn’t realize you knew about that.”

Mahrree shrugged. “I’m probably not like the typical officer’s wife, and I’m very intrigued about Guarders.”

Zenos looked around quickly, clearly uncomfortable to be discussing Guarders in the market. “How about I help you get home, ma’am? I can pull your daughter in the wagon while you calm down your son.”

Mahrree was tempted. As much as she wanted him to walk her home so she could ask him some questions, it was far beyond his responsibility as a soldier. “I appreciate that, but it’s not fair of me to ask that of you.”

Zenos grinned, and it was almost dazzling. “You didn’t ask it—I *offered* it!” He bent down and picked up the tongue of the miniature wagon, then took the bag of potatoes out of her hand.

Before Mahrree could protest he started pulling Jaytsy along.

"But Private—"

"But nothing!" he smiled back to her. "I insist on helping you home."

"But you're doing a terrible job of it," she told him. "I don't live east, I live north!"

The private stopped suddenly, blushed, and gestured for her to lead the way.

Mahrree chuckled and pointed in the correct direction. She took Peto out of the sling and tried holding him in another position. He arched his back uncooperatively.

The private winced in sympathy as he walked alongside, pulling the wagon.

“He looks hungry.”

Mahrree glanced at him. “And you know this because . . .?”

He shrugged. “Because he’s a boy, and boys are always hungry?”

Mahrree nodded. “I’ll believe that.” She turned Peto so he faced away from her, and instantly he stopped wailing. “Or maybe he wanted to see where he’s going.” She smiled in relief that her ears now had a break.

The soldier nodded back. “Not much fun never knowing where you’re going, is it?”

Mahrree glanced around her to make sure no one was near. They had left the market and were now heading

north along the neighborhoods. “Now that he’s quiet, Private, can I ask you some questions?”

Private Zenos blinked. “I suppose so, ma’am.”

“I want someone else’s opinion. Tell me about *Guarders*,” she whispered the last word.

Zenos pursed his lips. “Tell you about Guarders? What do you want to know?”

“Do you think all the stories about them are true?”

“Stories?”

“Yes, *stories*. My husband’s reluctant to share much with me, probably because I tend to go off a bit at times,” she admitted, “But there are

always *stories*. So are they true?"

"Which stories?"

Mahrree grumbled. "How long has my husband been training you?"

"Ma'am?" he looked at her.

"Training you to evade questioning by answering every question with another question!"

Private Zenos smiled bashfully, likely understanding what Mahrree meant by "go off a bit."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn't realize I was doing that. Try again. I'll see if I can give you a better answer."

"All right then," Mahrree said. "How fearsome are Guarders, Private?"

Zenos thought for a moment. "I've

only spoken with one, ma'am, and he's not too fearsome. He's a little strange, to tell you the truth."

Mahrree sighed. "I already know that. Captain Shin told me several weeks ago about some of the odd things he told you."

Zenos nodded. "Although I think planting corn in small hills with a piece of fish, instead of in rows, is worth trying."

"Corn?" Mahrree asked. "I didn't hear about corn. Or fish."

Zenos just shrugged.

"I guess what I really want to know is," Mahrree said in a low voice, "can they be *negotiated* with?"

He gave her an odd look.

“Negotiated with?”

Mahrree glared at him for his inadequate answer again.

“Sorry, ma’am.” He cleared his throat. “It’s been my experience you can negotiate with anyone, if you offer the right enticements.”

“But that’s the key, isn’t it, Private?” she groused. “Knowing what to offer so your opponent capitulates to your will? But if you know *nothing* of your opponent, what do you entice them with? Negotiations are useless, then!”

Zenos smiled and looked at her askance. “Yes, you *definitely* know more than the average officer’s wife.”

She didn’t notice him looking at

her. “I’ve had to negotiate with my husband on numerous occasions,” she murmured. “So how do we find out what they want?” she wondered, forgetting to keep her voice low. “I mean, it’s too late for me, but not for others—”

Zenos squinted, trying to understand what she meant by that.

“—if we can only make it *through* their lands . . .” She paused, biting her lower lip in thought.

Zenos glanced at her waiting for her to finish her sentence so he could figure out what she might be talking about it. He was going to be disappointed.

When she continued again she had already jumped ahead. “So how do we negotiate with Guarders?!”

Zenos shook his head and shrugged. "I suppose that's what I'm for, ma'am. I'm trying to learn what I can. We have that lost one I've been feeding from time to time. It seems they usually work in pairs, but this one lost his companion and is pretty erratic. Sometimes he's gone for weeks, then he's back again for several days."

"So what else has he told you?" Mahrree whispered earnestly.

He cleared his throat again. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I don't think I'm allowed to tell you. If your husband won't tell you, then—"

Mahrree kicked a stone in irritation. "So you *have* learned something

interesting, haven't you?!"

Zenos exhaled. "I . . . I don't really know what would qualify as interesting __"

"Come *on*," she whispered. "Tell me why they're here! What do they want from Edge? From the world? What would make them leave the forests?"

Zenos looked over at her again, this time a little alarmed at her intensity. "Ma'am, um, I really don't know . . . yet. But I'm working on it."

"Well, you better be!" she said firmly. She looked over at him and noticed he was grinning again. "What?"

"You . . . you're just not anything like I imagined you would be. Ma'am," he remembered to add.

Mahrree furrowed her brows. “And what did you imagine me to be?”

He blushed. “Uh, I guess like all the other women around here.”

“Hmm.” Mahrree thought about his evaluation. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

He chuckled. “That’s what it was meant to be!”

Mahrree gestured to turn at the next road. “My house is the second one on the left there. The one without a proper garden.”

Zenos nodded. “Now who decides what’s a ‘proper’ garden?”

“It’s about time you gave a good response, soldier—my thoughts exactly!

I'll forgive you that you phrased it as a question again, though. But you're right—it's proper to me. But it's not proper to my mother," she added.

They walked across the road and Mahrree opened the low gate for the private.

"I thank you for your help," she smiled as he pulled the wagon into the front yard. "And I'm sure my neighbors and everyone else at the market who've heard enough of my wailing babies also thank you."

She expected him to tip his cap and leave her, but he didn't. Instead he lifted Jaytsy carefully out of the wagon and set her down.

"I can stay and watch your daughter

while you feed your son, ma'am. I'm off duty right now, and you have enough rocks in your 'proper' garden that I can teach her how to 'properly' throw them," he suggested.

Mahrree bit her lip. Another tempting offer. Usually Jaytsy emptied the lower levels of the bookshelves while Mahrree put Peto to sleep.

But she felt odd about letting a soldier watch her little girl.

Then again, Perrin *did* say he was impressed with him. That's why he was so pleased when Zenos signed a two-year commitment. Maybe she *could* trust this sweet-faced young man who was now watching her little girl pick up

small stones.

Jaytsy started to put one in her mouth, and the private quickly stopped her and showed her how to throw it instead. She giggled when it bounced on the ground.

There had never been another soldier who had ever offered to help. In fact, every other soldier she'd encountered took one look at the children and sidled away; even Yip, who ran the fastest and was appointed to be Perrin's messenger to the family. The soldiers were probably worried someone small would drool on their uniforms.

Private Zenos crouched and handed pebble after pebble to Jaytsy, grinning at

her in genuine pleasure. Mahrree couldn't remember the last time she had ever seen a young man enjoy a baby.

Mahrree shrugged. "All right, Private Zenos. I think I'll take you up on your offer. Her name's Jaytsy, although she responds more frequently to 'Puppy Dog.' I should only be a few minutes—"

"Take all the time you need," Zenos said, not shifting his gaze from Jaytsy as she picked up another rock, considered if she should taste it or toss it, then gave it a worthy heave. "There's plenty of rock to keep us occupied for hours."

Mahrree nodded and brought Peto into the house. In his bedroom she positioned the rocking chair so that she

had a view out the window. She could see the image of the private through the thick wavy glass, and the smaller smudge that was her daughter. She never took her eyes off the window while she fed Peto.

It wasn't that she didn't trust the soldier, but . . . well, all right—she didn't trust the soldier. Why was he *so* willing to be helpful?

Mahrree pondered that while she nursed Peto who, within ten minutes, was sound asleep. She laid him in his cradle then went back outside.

From the front porch she watched as the private tried to show Jaytsy how to throw the rocks into a ring he drew in the dirt. It was a little too complex for

Jaytsy to understand. Apparently she saw rings everywhere and was redistributing rocks throughout the garden.

The private looked up at Mahrree. “Ma’am! You’re finished sooner than I expected.”

As she walked down the stairs Mahrree wondered what he expected. “Peto was exhausted.”

“That’s his name? Peto? Rather unusual.”

Mahrree cringed inside, wondering if she should have revealed her son’s name. She already told him her daughter’s, but she had no reason to not trust the private.

“Yes. Peto’s my maiden name. My father never had a son to carry on his legacy, but we thought this could be a way to honor his name. It was actually the captain’s idea.”

Zenos nodded. “I’m sure your father’s very proud that you gave your son your family name.”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “He passed away when I was a teenager.” She flinched inside again. Why was she saying so much to this boy?

Zenos looked down at Jaytsy. “I’m sorry about your father, ma’am. I lost my mother when I was very young. If ever I have a daughter I’ll name her Meiki, in remembrance.”

Mahrree was surprised at how much sympathy she suddenly felt for him, but she did nothing more than smile slightly. “That’s a nice idea, Private.”

“Well!” he said suddenly and looked up at her. His blue eyes looked a little damp, but his engaging grin was back. “I suppose I’ll be on my way then, ma’am. It was good to meet you and your children. They’re adorable!”

Mahrree laughed. “Really? If you think flattering me will get you promoted more quickly—”

Zenos turned red. “Oh no, ma’am! That’s not my intention!”

“I know, I know!” she chuckled. “I was only teasing you.”

“Understood, ma’am.” He grinned again in such a manner that any woman under twenty-five would have swooned. Probably many over twenty-five as well.

Mahrree’s mind ran through all the girls she knew, wondering which one might be an interesting match for him.

“I hope you have a good evening,” he said as he let himself out of the gate. “And a good evening is when both babies are asleep for an hour at the same time.”

Mahrree pointed at him. “Now, how would you know that?” She raised her eyebrows. “Are you a father?” Maybe it was already too late for her former students . . .

He shook his head quickly. “No, no—not at all! Maybe someday, but . . .” He looked flustered. “It’s just, it’s just what an older woman in my congregation back home used to say. I remembered it because it sounded funny.”

Mahrree nodded. “Well, she’s right. And Private Zenos, thank you again.”

That evening when Perrin came home, Mahrree told him she met his latest recruit.

“Really? Because he deserted almost as soon as he signed up.”

Mahrree's mouth fell open. "Zenos *deserted?!*"

Perrin's face relaxed. "No, not Zenos. A new boy I had come in today. Most skittish thing I've ever seen. I have to confess, I'm not disappointed he left. I had a feeling he'd be monopolizing my time. General Cush sent a message only last week detailing how commanders need to help along the reluctant soldiers, how we're 'each responsible for making the recruits feel *needed*.'" He rolled his eyes. "Bit of a relief to realize I won't have to follow Cush's advice and spend an hour each day turning that trembling thing into a hardened soldier. What are boys like that even thinking when they

sign up?"

"That you would take him under your wing like a mother hen, I guess. And then spend an hour each day with him? That doesn't sound like your father's idea."

Perrin glowered. "It sounds like the *Command Board's* idea, if you ask me. Three Administrators is three too many. My father sent a note suggesting I discourage, in a most *careful* way of course, those soldiers that take an inordinate amount of time to train. According to Zenos, the forest discouraged him all by itself." His face brightened. "So, speaking of Zenos, what did you think of him?"

"He actually walked me and the

children home, and taught Jaytsy how to throw rocks. We better make sure she's not aiming for the windows."

Perrin chuckled. "That sounds like Zenos."

"He seems to be a nice young man. Never had a soldier volunteer to walk me home before. Besides *you*," she smiled. "And even you didn't walk me *all* the way home from the market when we were debating."

"He is unusual," Perrin said thoughtfully. "I must admit, he's fast becoming one of my favorites. Walking my family home certainly helped solidify his claim."

Earlier Mahrree had a few

fluttering doubts about him, but if he was one of Perrin's favorites, she could let those doubts fly away.

"Mahrree, I just had a thought—what if I make him my messenger to you?"

"He'd be better than Corporal Yip. The last time he came by Jaytsy was throwing a temper tantrum, and by the distressed look on Yip's face you would have thought she was a Guarder committing suicide."

"All right, then," Perrin decided. "Our children require someone with a sterner stomach than Corporal Yip. I guess Zenos is our man."

The patrols the next night went out in staggered formation, as instructed by the captain, in a new, irregular pattern. Along the forest's edge the soldiers rode two, four, three at a time.

Past the fresh spring rode one group of three, allowing their horses to pause to get a drink in the run-off that trickled down from the forest. After a moment the soldiers clucked their horses to continue.

Unnoticed to anyone, a small rock slipped off the saddle of the last soldier, falling into the thick grasses.

Two minutes later a figure dressed in green and brown mottled clothing

dropped out of the trees. The man picked up the rock, then slipped back into the forest.

Through the trees he meandered, skirting a steam vent, taking a wide path around a gaping cavern, and creeping over a ridge that sounded hollow under his boots before he finally slid into a secluded ravine.

There he nodded to several other men and one of them lit a candle. They unwrapped the paper tied around the rock and smoothed it.

Been to house. Have met all. Know all names.

Been made personal

messenger to Shin family.

The group of men smiled.

“Excellent work, Private Zenos!” one of them whispered.

Two men sat in a dark room of an unlit building.

“I received the message today,” Dr. Brisack announced. “Our man is in position, officially.”

Mal nodded. “Good, good. I hope the extensive training will be worth it. It’s a little later than I was expecting but I suppose it will have to suffice.”

“There are others willing and ready to go to other forts,” Brisack suggested. “We could place them as well.”

“Not really necessary yet,” Mal said easily. “Not until I see the kind of results we get out of Edge.”

“And what kind of results are you hoping for?”

“I’m not really sure,” Mal smiled thinly.

Brisack was suspicious. “That’s rather unusual for you, to not have a well-thought out plan of action.”

“Oh, maybe we’ll be surprised to see what happens with our captain and his new private,” Mal’s tone was thick with planning.

Brisack blinked. “What have you done?!”

“What makes you think I’ve done anything?”

“You’re not that good at concealing your intentions, Nicko! What have you done?”

Mal chuckled. “Just gave our private permission to do whatever is necessary to get close to the family. Flatter Mrs. Shin. Pretend to like babies. Compliment the captain. Become their favorite soldier.”

“And then?”

“Well, then, we’ll have to see, won’t we?” Mal’s tone turned icy. “He’s there to gather information, find out

about the captain, and discover what provokes and terrifies him. Until I know more about this horse, I won't know how to break it."

"So," Brisack began to breathe a little easier, "nothing for now. Just . . . information gathering?"

"And then I'll form my speculations in an unbiased, objective manner. Satisfied?" Mal sneered.

"Yes, actually I am," Brisack said.

Chapter 5 ~ “They made us watch how a worm moves.”

It was so late in Harvest Season that the Harvest Celebration was last week, but mercifully the Rainy Season storms had yet to arrive. That meant

Mahrree could still take her babies outside in the cool but sunny afternoon.

Jaytsy, wearing a new sweater knitted in such a wild pattern that only her Grandmother Peto could have designed and named it pays-lee, picked dried weeds and tossed them over the low fence. Mahrree sat on her front porch holding Peto who had just dozed off. Maybe it was thanks to the blanket he was wrapped in that looked suspiciously as if it was made from the same dark blue wool used exclusively for dress uniforms, compliments of Grandmother Shin.

The sky was such an intense blue that it had shades of purple in it. The trees along the road, with the last of their

yellow and orange leaves still clinging to the branches, stood out against the sky as a vivid complement. Mahrree pointed out the blueness of the sky to her daughter, but her nineteen- moons-old girl was far more interested in the dirt. Her almost six-moons-old son also didn't notice the sky, but instead smiled in his sleep.

That was good enough for Mahrree—she thought nothing could be more ideal than that moment.

It took a long time to get there, though.

Peto was wearing his third dirt-colored dressing gown of the day because he didn't like mashed anything

Mahrree tried to feed him. While Peto continuously spat out his food his mother tried so hard to keep in him, Jaytsy was in the kitchen experimenting to see what was in each of the eggs they had gathered from the neighbors' chickens the day before. It wasn't until Jaytsy was on the eleventh egg that Mahrree realized that her daughter had been quiet for some time.

Her parents had already learned the hard way that silence from a toddler was never a good thing.

After Mahrree had cleaned up the mess—Jaytsy helpfully pointed out sections of the kitchen her mother had missed and saying, "Ewwww! Ucky"—Mahrree heard Peto fussing. He had

learned at that moment how to roll continuously. Although Mahrree had left Peto securely in his napping blankets, he was now in the study, stuck underneath a chair.

While Mahrree rescued and comforted her startled son, Jaytsy announced another “Ewww!” and lead Mahrree to a new spot in the gathering room she ‘accidentally’ left. Mahrree realized then that she was out of clean washing cloths and trudged out to the washing rack in the back yard, with both children in her arms to prevent any new developments, to find something dirty to mop up the latest spill.

That’s when she decided it was

time for her daily break.

Someone had told her that quitting her teaching job, shortly before Jaytsy was born, would leave her with too much time on her hands and no purpose. She was still waiting—and looking forward—to that day.

As Mahrree sat soaking up the last of the sunny weather before the dreariness of the Raining Season showed up, she congratulated herself on getting out. It had been her goal to spend some time outside with her children each day, even if it was for a few minutes. It gave her time to reflect and chuckle about what had her life meant now.

Every day held some kind of surprise, usually good, occasionally

revolting. And not all of them derived from the children.

She glanced over at the black blob resting under a twiggy bush and grumbled. That was one of the worst.

Three moons ago Perrin came home, a little later than usual, with a large item in his arms wrapped in an old army blanket. Through the wavy glass she couldn't quite tell what it was, but when she opened the back door for him she gasped.

"No!"

"Ah, Mahrree . . . give it a chance!" He pulled back part of the blanket and immediately Mahrree recoiled.

"What *is* that?!"

He chuckled. “What do you think it is?”

“Perrin—a bear cub?! Are you insane? How can the children—”

“It’s not a bear cub—it’s a puppy!”

“That’s a, a, a *puppy?!*” she stammered. Already its head was as large as hers. She looked at the black muzzle that was remarkably bear-like, the dark droopy eyes, and the black floppy ears—

Bears didn’t have floppy ears.

But puppies were supposed to be small, the size of a cat at most, and not so large so that her burly husband strained under the weight of it.

He set the ‘puppy’ on the ground

and finished unwrapping it to reveal a completely black animal with ragged fur. It looked up at Mahrree with the most forlorn eyes she had ever seen.

She decided that was one conniving creature.

"Look at his paws. See how large they are?" Perrin said eagerly. "That means he has to grow into them, so he's still only a puppy!"

Mahrree swallowed. The paws were as large as her hands. "Where did this come from?"

Perrin shrugged. "Well, Private Zenos found him along the canal all alone and filthy. Looks pretty sad, doesn't he? We washed him up, dried him with the blanket here, and I think all

he needs is some love and food, right boy?" He bent over and scratched the creature behind the ears.

It looked up at him with dripping eyes.

Mahrree's upper lip curled. "And to think I liked Private Zenos. Thanks for nothing, Messenger! Are we supposed to *keep it?*"

Perrin beamed. "He'll be a great watch dog! I'm going to name him Barker. Now you and the children will always be safe. Any Guarder passing our garden will think twice about coming in when he sees an animal like that!"

"Now *I'm* thinking twice about

staying here with an animal like that," she murmured.

"He'll grow on you," Perrin assured her as he petted the beast that trembled nervously in his new surroundings.

"Uh-huh," Mahrree said dubiously. "He'll grow on me, over me, around me . . ."

Perrin squatted down by the animal masquerading as a dog. "Look at that face, Mahrree. How can you send it back out in the cold?"

"It was hot enough today to cook bacon on the cobblestones!"

Perrin scrunched up his face to look remarkably like the animal, his dark eyes nearly as pitiful and pleading.

Mahrree exhaled. “You train it, clean up after it, and don’t make me touch it.”

“You won’t regret this!” Perrin grinned as he kissed her.

In the past season she regretted the *thing* every day. Especially when Jaytsy began to discover some of its droppings that Perrin hadn’t yet cleaned up. At least all it ever did was sleep and eat whatever Peto flung on the floor, licking the wood with such fastidiousness that he would soon create a groove around Peto’s baby chair.

And so far, he was a remarkably silent dog. But someday he would live up to his name, and then Mahrree would

announce it was time for him to go.

Undoubtedly Barker knew that, so he never made a sound.

The animal, now twice as large and still growing, looked up at her as if trying to understand her glare for his adding to the messes she had to clean up each day. There was absolutely no malice in the dog's eyes. Just pleading for acceptance.

Mahrree nodded at it once—the most she could manage—and Barker put his head back down to enjoy the last of the fair weather. Mahrree rolled her eyes at him and looked back up at the road.

A child was coming down the road heading towards the main fort road, one

of her former morning students.

"Hello Mr. Hili!" she called cheerfully. "Where are you off to on this glorious afternoon?"

Qualipoe smiled and bounded up the road to her house. He let himself in the gate and awkwardly accepted the weed Jaytsy offered him.

Barker didn't even twitch his nose at someone coming in the gate. Guard dog, indeed.

"You don't have to eat Jaytsy's weed, even though she finds them tasty," Mahrree assured Qualipoe.

He nodded in relief. "I'm going to watch the soldiers do their drilling," he said as he came and sat down on the

steps below Mahrree. Immediately he stood back up, brushed the stones carefully free of any dirt, then sat down again.

Mahrree had wondered about his clothing as he had approached. Under his woolen jacket was a shirt of shimmering pale yellow that set off his light brown skin, and his pants were a dark fabric more tightly woven and finely spun than Perrin's dress uniform. Even his thick black hair was carefully combed. Qualipoe sat stiffly.

"I don't think I've *ever* seen such a fine set of clothing before, Poe."

He sighed as heavily as his nine-year-old lungs would allow. "It's called an *outfit*," he explained. "And I am not

supposed to get it dirty."

Mahrree cringed in sympathy. "Kind of hard to throw dirt clods in, I guess."

"Yes," he said miserably.

"May I ask why you are wearing such nice clothing?"

"Because it's what everyone at the seaside villages are wearing this season."

"So," Mahrree ventured, "why do you think *you* are wearing it? We're days away from the sea, and people usually only visit it once in their lives."

He looked at her with dismay.

"Obviously you haven't been out to the new shops," he said in a

sophisticated tone that startled Mahrree. “This is what *everyone* is wearing now. Except you.”

Mahrree nodded amusedly and fingered the rounded collar on his shirt. “No, I haven’t gotten out much lately. That feels amazing, I must admit. What’s it called?”

“I think it’s silk.”

“I’ve heard of silk, but never saw any before. Guess it’s finally arrived in Edge.”

“It’s really gross to think about,” Poe said, pulling a face. “It’s actually worm droppings, or something like that.”

Mahrree’s fingers immediately stopped moving on the collar. “I think it

may be something a little different than *that,*" she suggested as she let the collar go.

"All I know is, I can't play. I have to sit and look like a handsome young man."

"That *is* a burden," Mahrree agreed. "Is that what your mother said before she sent you out this afternoon?"

"It's what she said before she went to work and I left for school. She said she'd be home by dinner time."

That troubled Mahrree. She knew Poe's mother had started working since her son was now in the new Full School system implemented in Edge, 'only as trial basis,' the Administrators had

assured. About half of the parents had signed up their children, and soon after began working further from home. But she hadn't expected Poe would be left on his own.

"No one's home for you right now? You're all alone?"

"I'm sitting here with you!" he said brightly. "And I'm going to meet my friends at the fort."

"Still, that's a bit of a walk from your home. You know, you can stay here with me until dinner time. We can talk."

"Talk about what?"

"Oh, all kinds of things. What are you learning about in school?"

"Angles," he said glumly.

"Ooh, angles are important. You

can measure things with angles and you certainly can't make a proper catapult without understanding angles."

"We're not making catapults this year, we're just talking about them." He kicked the dirt by his shoe.

"Not making them!" Mahrree was aghast. Catapult Day was a village tradition that was coming up in only two weeks. "Well, how are you going to launch the gourds this year?!"

"We're not. Remember last year, when one of the girls got hit with a piece of pumpkin and cried and cried and cried?"

"Yeesss." Mahrree didn't like the direction this was going. "It didn't even

leave a mark," she remembered.

Getting hit on Catapult Day was an unwritten tradition. You were truly a member of the village if you caught a bit of vegetative shrapnel. While the event was officially a day for the children from all the schools to come together and put into practice elements of math and science they learned over the year, much of the village would sit alongside the field with their offerings of spoiled gourds and vegetables to be thrown. Picnics were brought by mothers and friendly bets were placed by grandparents.

Often the extensive participation of the fathers revealed that little of the catapults were their children's designs.

But since the purpose was to observe how all kinds of forces worked, including the force of competitiveness, the teachers had long since turned a blind eye to parental involvement.

During the Great War, catapults had been used to throw rocks from one village towards the approaching soldiers of another. At times the fighting became so desperate that villages threw gourds, melons, and even an occasional piece of ugly furniture.

After the war the catapults were destroyed by King Querul, hoping that such weaponry would never again be needed. A couple of decades later some teachers in the northern villages,

intrigued by the mathematical properties of the catapults, helped their students create small-scale devices to learn about angles.

Only Edge, Mountseen, Moorland, Quake, and Scrub held Catapult Day, and the Army of Idumea never saw reason to be concerned with a village's ability to throw an eggplant over one hundred paces.

Three years ago Mahrree was hit by an entire acorn squash when a catapult was prematurely released while she was measuring the distance of a thrown melon. No one took blame—or credit—for the launch. She had an enormous bruise on her thigh for weeks that caused her walk with a noticeable limp. She

wore it as a badge of honor.

Two years ago, at Perrin's first Catapult Day, a few moons after their wedding and shortly after his excursion into the forest, she conspired to have him hit.

He had appeared at the competition astride a horse and looking very official. Since the abandoned fields were adjacent to the fort, he told Mahrree he was there as a goodwill gesture to the village, but she knew he was actually intrigued by the designs, and a bit envious of the fathers manning the catapults.

Despite the efforts of many children and even more adults, he successfully

dodged each hastily launched item. By the end of the day the new objective was no longer to send a spent vegetable the farthest, but to find a way to hit the captain.

Last year he showed up halfway through the competition on a horse and brandished his sword to fight off attacking zucchini.

Mahrree didn't say it to Poe, who was already disappointed, that she couldn't imagine her children not experiencing Catapult Day. Maybe something could still be done . . .

"So they're not going to have Catapult Day because a girl was crying?" Mahrree tried to clarify. She noticed Jaytsy experimentally taste a

bug. Maybe she'd feel more protective for her children and fret about every little thing as they got older.

But wasn't life an adventure that should be experienced in every way not certain to end in death?

Jaytsy spat out the bug and next tried a leaf.

"We don't want anyone to get hurt," Poe explained in the same tone it was probably told to him. "Besides, it takes a lot of time to plan and get stuff together, parents have to help out a lot and that's a problem because lots are working, so it's just not that important."

Helping their children *not* important? "Who decided this?"

“Some old man. From the department.”

“You mean the Department of Instruction? In Idumea?” Mahrree wondered why their arm reached so far north.

“He said that since we weren’t going to be tested on it, it wasn’t something we had to do. They might bring it back next year, though.”

“So if you’re not to be tested on it, you do not have to learn about it. I understand,” Mahrree lied.

The testing Captain Shin had warned Edge about at their first debate had been, *according to the Administrators,* such a success in its

first year that all children throughout the world were to have the ‘opportunity’ to take it as well.

Mahrree still didn’t understand how the test was deemed successful. Did it improve the students’ learning? Not surprisingly, there hadn’t been any explanation on the notice boards, but a vague and enthusiastic announcement that, Full school and testing were successful!!! And it was spreading to all villages!!! And all children could participate!!!

And Mahrree wondered if they had asked a teenage girl to write the notice because she’d never seen so many exclamation points used before!!!

But nearly everyone else seemed to

believe that full school was the way to go. It was as if parents were so willing to see the Administrators succeed and reverse the oppression of the kings that they were also willing to embrace every new idea they proposed, with no question or discussion. Few parents came to Mahrree wanting her opinion. The ones who did wanted assurance from her that this new educational program was only temporary. But she and Perrin knew no more about it than anyone else.

Mahrree wondered about such unquestioning unity of the new ideas. No one, as far as she knew, had debated the testing or full school. If something is a

good idea, debating its merits and drawbacks would only reveal its integrity. But if debate is avoided or even discouraged, as was the case with Full School—the Administrators told all villagers they didn't need to 'waste their time' discussing their decision but only accept it, for now—might it be that even the Administrators were unsure of its conclusion?

Or might it be that the conclusion drawn by the parents would be not so favorable?

Even Perrin had been surprised with the swiftness which Full School and testing had come to Edge. The last he had heard was that it was at least five years away. He confided to Mahrree that

he couldn't imagine the Administrators loosening their hold in education once they held it all. If all the parents agreed to letting the Administrators 'help' in the decisions, the Administrators could eventually have more influence over the rising generation than their parents.

It was an excellent tactic for establishing loyalty to the growing government. Win over the children when they're most teachable. Mahrree noted with satisfaction that Perrin was disturbed by this strategy, rather than impressed with it.

"There they are!" Poe's call brought Mahrree out of her thoughts. He brightened up as he saw two of his

friends making their way down the road. One of them had a silky shirt like his, in purple. He looked like a violet looking for trouble.

"You're going to just sit properly on the fence, right?" Mahrree reminded him. "Come back tomorrow, Poe, and tell me more of what's going on in our edge of the world."

He smiled. "I will Miss Mahrree. You're good to talk to." He patted sleeping Peto on the head and took another proffered weed from Jaytsy before hopping over the fence.

Later that evening at dinner time, Mahrree looked out the window to see Perrin walking down the road with Qualipoe and his friends. They each had

a long stick and were practicing parrying and thrusting as they made their way.

In front of the house Perrin stopped to give them additional pointers. The boys saluted sloppily and ran home. Mahrree smiled to think they found something they could do without getting dirty.

Perrin came in the house and immediately swept up his little girl. "Did you see those boys' shirts?" he asked as he kissed Jaytsy on the cheek. "I haven't seen something that fancy since I left Idumea. Poor boys looked miserable."

"But handsome," Mahrree countered.

Perrin huffed. “What little boy wants to be handsome?”

“That’s not the worst of it,” and she told him about Catapult Day.

Perrin was crestfallen. “I was going to bring Private Zenos this year. I told him all about it when we were mapping some of the forest edge. He’s a bit of a food thrower himself, from what I’ve seen in the mess hall. What are they going to do with all that rotten vegetation? It was kind of fun to see what would grow in that field the next year.”

“You’re missing the important parts —these children can’t experiment because it takes time and isn’t going to

be tested on anyway, and someone might get hurt!"

Perrin stopped and considered that. "I thought getting hurt was part of being a child. At least, part of being a boy."

Mahrree paused. "Getting hurt *intentionally* is not part of it," and noticed that the look his face suggested otherwise.

The next afternoon she was ready when Qualipoe bounded by again. He grinned as he saw her and readily sat on the porch stairs.

After wiping them clean first, of course.

"Tell me the news, Poe," Mahrree greeted him.

"Nothing too exciting," Poe

reported. “We’re getting ready for tests from Idumea and it’s really dumb.”

“What kind of tests?”

“Tests to see if Full School is succeeding.”

“I guess that sounds important,” Mahrree nodded. “But you’ve only been doing it for a full season now.”

“It sounds boooring!” Poe said loudly, startling the baby. “Sorry,” he whispered.

“It’s all right,” Mahrree assured him as Peto fell back to sleep. “Why is it boring?”

“Because all we do all day is write down things. And what things mean. We never talk about things like we did when

you were our teacher. We just have to remember the things we write down. Boring."

"But when you have the discussions, you certainly—"

His head, slowly shaking, stopped her.

"You don't have discussions? What about debating?"

He kept shaking his head sadly.

"Well, surely you must still act out —"

His head didn't stop moving.

"No more play acting? Building models! You *must* be still building models of everythin—"

Her voice trailed off when she saw that Poe's eyes were absolutely dismal.

“Drawing?”

Poe slumped down.

“Singing?” Not that it was her favorite, but many of the children liked songs. And whatever was good for the children—

Poe didn’t even look at her.

“Experiments?” Oh, they *h a d* to still do experiments, with so many hours in school—

Poe sighed heavily. “They made us watch how a worm moves.”

Mahrree shrugged. Not the most creative project, but “At least when you went outside.”

“They didn’t let us outside,” he droned drearily. “They brought the

worm—only one worm—into the class and set it on a desk. Then it wouldn't move."

Mahrree frowned.

A small smile dared to grace Poe's face. "Then a teacher started poking it to make it move. He poked it so much, it broke in two!"

Mahrree cringed. That should have at least provoked a few laughs, she thought. And when children laughed, they remembered the lesson. "Well, I suppose that was interesting—"

"It wasn't! Right after that they sent us back to our desks to write about what *should* have happened!" Poe scoffed in disgust. "That stinking blob you grew a long time ago moved a lot more than that

stupid worm."

Mahrree smiled. "You still remember the blob?"

"I still have bad dreams about that!" He grinned and shivered with delight. "I bet that blob could have eaten that worm!"

They both laughed, happy for the opportunity.

Then, just as quickly, Poe's face fell again. "It's nothing like that anymore, like when you were my teacher. It's all day long now. They don't even let us outside. Too distracting, or something like that. We even eat midday meal at our desks."

Mahrree was almost in tears for the

poor boy. How can children learn by merely sitting and copying words?! No, that couldn't be *all* of it. "So you sit and . . ."

"Copy what they write down," he said drearily.

Well, maybe that *was* all of it.

"What about questions?" she wondered.

"Get this—they ask US the questions!"

"What?!"

"Yeah, like they can't remember what they just told us. I asked a question once, and the teacher said not to worry about it, because it wasn't on the test! And Miss Mahrree, it's *so boring* that I stopped thinking of questions to ask my

teachers. There are four now, too."

"What are their names?" She hadn't talked to the other teachers since Jaytsy was born, but she could track them down and see if something couldn't be improved.

Poe didn't even bother to give that a complete shrug, but simply a little shoulder shake. "Don't know. Some people from Idumea. Specially trained to start full school."

Mahrree rolled her eyes. "Oh, *specially trained*, are they?" The hair on the back of her neck rose up. Anyone from Idumea, and *specially trained*, deserved a great deal of scrutiny and cynicism.

Poe looked at her worriedly. He must have heard the sarcasm in her voice, but didn't know what it meant. Something like nervous loyalty hovered in his eyes. "Captain Shin was specially trained in Idumea too, wasn't he?"

She had to smile at that. "Yes he was, Poe. Thank you for reminding me. Captain Shin was trained by *other people*, though, and you can certainly trust him."

Poe smiled, visibly pleased that the respect he felt for the captain could grow into full blown hero worship.

But Mahrree's shoulders sagged at what Poe had said about his school. The nameless teachers had the children all

day long, and they didn't move or talk or build or . . . or do *anything*?! The children didn't have any questions? Since when do children *not* have questions?! What did those four teachers do all day with the children? Just *lecture* to them?

How dreadful.

"You know, I have to agree that full school sounds boring," Mahrree said. "But I think I have a solution for you. You need something interesting to read." When he pulled a face as if he had smelled Jaytsy's changing cloths, she nudged him with her elbow. "No, really, I was pulling out some of my favorite stories from when I was your age, for Jaytsy, and I have a few you'd enjoy."

Poe looked at Jaytsy. She was putting her finger in her mouth, then drawing in the dirt with it. "What will she do with stories, lick them?"

"True, she's a little young still, but you aren't. I have one you'll like, with all kinds of theories about the world, how it moves in the sky, what keeps it from falling."

"We already talk about that in school. Where the world came from? It was like a big explosion," he said flatly. "Stars, moons, sun. Boom—all that. Had to memorize it. Boring."

Mahrree thought about his brief explanation. She hadn't heard that one before. "Interesting . . . and what were

the other stories they told you?"

Poe frowned. "That's the only one. The only *right* one."

"The only right one?!" Mahrree exclaimed, almost forgetting about her sleeping baby.

The nine-year-old looked at her apologetically, as if any of this could possibly be his fault. "It's so that we know what the right answer is. For the test."

Mahrree scoffed loudly, and amazingly her son slept through it. "Who decides what story is the right one?!" she demanded of the world in general. "What professor or administrator has the nerve to declare how things really are?! What's the point of having a populace

that thinks exactly like everyone else? They really want us to be as dull and non-thinking as mules?"

But only a little boy with a worried expression on his face was there, his lip curling in dread that she was actually expecting him to answer that. She'd asked him many difficult questions in the past, but this?

"Uhh . . ."

"Sorry, Poe," she said with a weak smile. "Don't mind me. I'm just an old lady, rambling."

"Whew," he sighed in relief and nodded in agreement.

Mahrree chuckled to herself. Nine-year-olds were agonizingly honest. "Did

they at least teach about the version in The Writings?"

Poe pondered for a moment—this was something he *could* answer—then shook his head.

"I can't believe they didn't teach *all* the stories," Mahrree grumbled under her breath. "Supposed to let you draw your own conclusions—"

"What kind of stories?" Poe interrupted her cautiously.

"Oh you remember," she told him and hoped that he did, "like the one about how a large man holds the world on his back, or—"

"Wait, wait. No man *really* holds the world on his back, Miss Mahrree."

"Well, of course not. It's only a

story, see? It's something to make you think of different possibilities. Like the theory that the world is dragged by large a elephant, bear, turtle or squirrel, depending on the time of year."

Poe looked at her as if she was an idiot. "Now that's just silly." But he couldn't help himself. "Squirrels? How big?"

Mahrree smiled sadly. "You really don't remember this? Well, it *was* three years ago." And he was only six then, she thought dejectedly, so it's not unexpected that he forgets if he's not reminded—

"Wait, Miss Mahrree," Poe interrupted her brooding, "Elephants? I

seem to remember something about elephants."

Mahrree smiled with tentative hope. "Those were some of the beasts that are mythological."

When Poe's face indicated he was lost in the syllables of that word, Mahrree clarified.

"Pretend. But we're really not sure. You see, Terryp, the man who wrote the stories of how the world moves, wasn't just an old story teller. He was a historian. We talked a little about him in school."

Disappointingly, Poe's face still didn't register any memory, so Mahrree backtracked.

"A long time ago, over one hundred

twenty years now when our land was becoming too crowded during the Great War, we sent scouts to the west looking for new places to live. Terryp went with them. He was a historian and went as their recorder. After weeks of traveling they came upon the Ruins: big ancient stone buildings, crumbling and falling apart. But many of them still stood seven a n d eight levels high! Terryp was fascinated by the carvings on the great stones. What he found was astonishing—representations of things none of us have ever seen! He wrote down every character in their writing, and traced every strange beast and shape. The scouts continued to search the

surrounding areas, but Terryp refused to join them. He wouldn't leave the ruins. There was so much he didn't know and desperately wanted to study. So the scouts would go out during the day and return to their camp at night to find he was still writing. He wrote so much he even ran out of paper and started taking notes on his clothing and the clothing of the scouts!"

Poe's eyes were enormous.

"I bet the scouts didn't like him writing on them," he said soberly. "Their mothers would get very angry."

Mahrree nodded and suppressed a smile. "You're right, they did *not* like it. They thought he was losing his mind. He wouldn't sleep, he wouldn't eat. He

would merely mumble as he ran from stone to stone. Sometimes he would cry out and jump up and down in excitement!"

"Like I do on the last day of school!"

Mahrree was momentarily diverted by that comment, but then decided she'd too feel that way if she was forced into full school. "Well, all right, I suppose. But Terryp felt such a need to understand what he saw, and he felt he couldn't waste a moment. When he began to write on his flesh in desperation for a way to record all he saw, the scouts were convinced something evil was in that place making him crazed. They decided

that since he was the only one among the ruins all day long, only *his* mind was affected. I'm sorry to say they hit him over the head and dragged him away from the ruins. By the time he woke up, he was two days' ride from the ruins and in extremely poor health. He nearly died from being so tired and hungry."

"He nearly died from trying to write down what he saw?" Poe asked in astonishment.

"He nearly died from trying to understand what he thought might be new truth," she clarified. "Something he thought could benefit everyone. People have given up their lives for far less important things than that."

Poe was silent for a moment. "So

Terryp saw elephants?"

"He saw carvings of them, on the ruins. And he wondered, why would there be carvings of something pretend? We've always had stories of elephants and other fantastic beasts, but here were actual pictures made by someone who may have *seen* them. Terryp saw depictions that showed twenty people could sit on top of one elephant!"

Poe was completely awestruck.

Mahrree continued, "They had these long noses that water could come out of, and ears taller than you, and it seemed like they could flap. Terryp wondered if maybe they could fly like an enormous insect. Maybe the people that lived there

even flew away on the elephants."

"That would help keep the world up, wouldn't it?" Poe considered. "Big flying elephants?"

"Maybe," Mahrree said. "And those weren't the only animals he saw."

Poe's eyes lit up even more, if that were possible. "What else?"

"He saw drawings of tall animals with long necks that could eat from the tops of trees."

"Wow!" he breathed.

There were moments that Mahrree missed teaching. She missed watching a child's imagination erupt. Oh, there was so much to tell him, and full school —*fool school*—had no idea how to do it.

But it really was easy. Since children naturally enjoy learning, simply lay before them the world with all its mystery and wonder, and they'll gobble it up. No need to force-feed it.

"There were horses that had stripes," Mahrree continued, her own enthusiasm building when she considered how eagerly her own children would feast on these ideas in a few years, "and—"

"I remember, I remember!" Poe cried, jumping to his feet. "There were those hairy little things, with long tails that would swing from tree to tree! Like little fuzzy children!"

"Yes!" Mahrree grinned. She knew

having them act out the animals would help them remember. Poe had been a perfect mon-kee when he was six. He laughed, and he remembered.

"Now why don't they teach us things like that at school," Poe said, his grin fading, "instead of just making us remember boring things over and over?"

His question stung Mahrree. She didn't know how to answer him, but he deserved a response. "We *did* teach those things, and you're supposed to be learning them again, in greater detail. I'll be sure to ask the parents if you can discuss Terryp," she promised.

"Oh, you won't have to worry about that," Poe sat down again, carefully straightening his wool trousers. "My

mother says the men in Idumea do all that now. Parents don't have to bother. It's better that way," he added matter-of-factly.

Mahrree bit her lower lip, trying to make sense of why parents no longer decided what their children would learn, and how that was *better*.

Poe brightened. "Can I borrow the book of Terryp, I mean, all of the stuff he saw and wrote about?"

Mahrree always hated this part of the story.

She shook her head. "There's no book of Terryp, besides his stories for children. That's all he wrote in his later years." She didn't want to explain the

rest, but she believed children deserved the truth, no matter how disgraceful.

"You see, shortly after he returned, all his maps, notes and papers were destroyed in a fire right after the Great War, along with many other records we considered important. Terryp was a very sad man for a very long time after that."

Poe's eyes narrowed and he stated gravely, "I bet that wasn't an accident, that fire."

Mahrree was charged by his insight. "Why do you think that?"

His face screwed up as he thought about his answer. "Because maybe what Terryp found would have changed a lot of stuff. Maybe people don't like to change what they know, even if they

know it's wrong. Even if the new stuff is really amazing! Does that make sense?"

"Absolutely!" Mahrree said proudly. "Ah, Poe, I have great hope for you! Don't let Full School destroy your ability to think and reason."

Confused by her advice he frowned at her, blinked in confusion, then likely decided she was simply rambling again.

"By the way, Poe—what color is the sky?"

To her delight, he looked at it first.

"Blue with long white clouds, Miss Mahrree. Oh, and bright white where the sun is! Why?"

He remembered to mention the sun, Mahrree thought, duly impressed. Rarely

do people remember the sun as part of the sky.

But Poe did.

Voices from down the road caught his attention. “My friends are here!” he announced and stood up.

“Poe, when you’re done at the fort today, come by and I’ll let you borrow the stories. There are some good ones in there. Then we can talk about them some more.”

He nodded and waved good-bye.

Poe remembered the sun, Mahrree sighed. That boy could go a long way some day.

That evening Perrin came home accompanied by his short soldiers who were chatting excitedly. One of them

was wearing Perrin's cap which swallowed more than half his head. Poe ran up to the door to get the stories from Mahrree and bounded off down the darkening road. Perrin retrieved his cap from the forgetful boy, came to the door, and picked up his daughter.

"Looks like you have discovered a new recruiting technique," Mahrree said as she watched the boys scamper off, "adopted from the Administrators. Win them over when they're nine, and wait a few years until they're old enough to sign up. The Administrators will find you very clever, Captain."

He shot her a glare before he smiled sadly. "They just sit on the fence

watching the men. They should be rolling in the dirt instead. But I have to admit, when the soldiers see their young audience, they seem to sharpen up. All the way home those boys had so many questions. What do you do when a Guarder sneaks up on you? What if you don't like dinner, does someone force you to eat it? Has anyone cut off an arm by accident with their sword?"

Perrin's smile dimmed. "What they really need is someone to talk to. I thought something like this would happen, just like it did a few years ago when they first started Full School in Idumea. As soon as the parents saw the teachers did all the teaching, they thought they were no longer needed. After the

first year lots of parents were working all the time. Sure, businesses and farms started producing more. But what's more important, goods or children? All day the boys have teachers drilling them. Children don't need someone *to* talk at them, but *with* them. I'm sorry, Mahrree, but I don't think teachers can talk to children as well as their parents can. And if the parents don't talk, then . . ."

He stopped and looked at Mahrree who had been staring at him adoringly during his little speech.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm remembering how you said your mind was like my mind. Have I told you lately how you're the most perfect

man in the world?"

"No, you've been quite derelict in that duty. But you're making up for it," and he kissed her on the lips. "Mahrree, promise me we'll always remember to talk to our children. By the way, what was Poe taking from you?"

"I wanted him to read the *Stories of the World*. He didn't seem to be familiar with many of them, and the teachers aren't bothering to teach them! I learned about those in school several times when I was young."

"And who was your teacher?" Perrin reminded her.

"My father," Mahrree nodded. He always explored the furthest reaches of what was known and what could be

imagined. That didn't seem to be the purpose of schooling anymore.

Mahrree thought about Poe's description of school now, and she grew restless merely thinking about *memorizing stuff* all day long.

It was sadly remarkable, she decided, that in such a short time full school had taken the world—as captivating and full of wonder as it is—and diminished it into something merely dull.

It takes a worrying kind of intellect to do that so efficiently. And she was just starting to think there was no intellect among the Administrators.

Apparently there was, just the

wrong kind. And who did that intellect belong to?

Mahrree didn't know the answer, but at least Terryp's stories would make Poe's evenings worth remembering.

"I had a copy of those stories," Perrin remembered as he put down Jaytsy who was squirming to be released, and scooped up Peto instead. "I loved the one about the giant that holds the world on his back. I used to imagine that land tremors were because he had an itch he couldn't reach." He smiled at the memory. "And then," his voice became lively, "I figured when it was thundering, that was when he sneezed!"

"Eww, now that's not very

appetizing right before dinner!" Mahrree sneered. "So what was the rain?—Oh, never mind."

"And then," Perrin wasn't finished yet, his eyes looking twenty years younger, "I decided that when he had intestinal pains it was—"

"Nothing I want to know about!" Mahrree shut him up.

Perrin gave her a disappointed look. "You may not want to know about it, but I am sure little Peto here would. Right, my son? The bodily functions of giants are fascinating to little boys," Perrin held up his son and rubbed noses with him until he giggled.

"And right now, *you* are that giant."

After dinner there was a knock at the door. Mahrree opened it to see Qualipoe's robust mother standing there looking radiant. She wore a gown that took Mahrree's breath away. It was the same shimmering fabric of Poe's, but with stripes of pink and burgundy which seemed to shine even in the dark of the evening. A long coat of finely woven black worsted wool, which matched her glistening black hair, protected her from the growing chill.

"Good evening, Miss Mahrree—I mean, Mrs. Shin," Mrs. Hili apologized

with a smile.

"Oh, it's always Mahrree. Come in, please!"

"Actually, I won't, I'm on my way to the concert tonight. I just wanted to return this," and she handed Mahrree *The Stories of the World*. "Qualipoe won't be needing it right now."

"Why not?" Mahrree asked, disappointed. "He seemed excited to read it. I'm sure if I talk to him I can convince him to—"

"No, he *wanted* to read it," Mrs. Hili interrupted. "But I told him he probably shouldn't, at least not right now. I don't want him to have too much on his mind before the testing next week."

Mahrree narrowed her eyes. “Are you saying that reading this book will . . . make him forget what he needs to know on the test?”

“See, I knew you’d understand!” she breathed easier. “If he remembers this nonsense,” she gestured to the stories, “but then doesn’t remember the numbers and facts he’s memorized, well then, there’s a problem.”

“Oh, I am sure he won’t confuse flying arrows from another people assaulting our world, with the definition of an acute angle!”

Mrs. Hili did not look amused. “You may not realize it, but if the children perform well on the test, the

school will receive funding from the Administrators."

"The children get paid for learning? My, maybe *I'll* go back and be a student," Mahrree said mischievously. "But I don't see why we need money. The school house—"

"Is in shambles!" Mrs. Hili exclaimed.

"Really?" Mahrree blinked. "What happened to it?"

Mrs. Hili rolled her eyes. "Come now, you know what it looks like—stone walls, wood floor, log supports, so basic, so . . . tasteless."

Mahrree was completely lost. "Exactly how is that tasteless?" The description matched her own house.

“You really haven’t been out lately, have you?” She glanced down to Jaytsy who was hanging on her mother’s skirt. There was unidentified food and patches of dirt smeared on her face and dress.

“Cute little girl,” Mrs. Hili said, unconvinced of her own evaluation. She looked back up at Mahrree. “You haven’t even seen the new building project, have you? The new home development, on the south side? They’re building with blocks now, and the structures are astoundingly innovative!”

“Innovative, huh?” Perrin came up to the door to join the conversation. “They’ve had block buildings in Idumea for about seven or eight years now. I

admit they are sturdy and *possibly* safer in a land tremor. But honestly, I find them rather bland. Every building looks the same—same gray color, same square shape, each block poured to look exactly the same. Anything with variety is broken down and recast. Now stone and log buildings—those have character!" he smiled.

Mrs. Hili did not. "What some call character, others call provincial."

By the blank reaction on his face it was obvious the distinction was lost on Perrin.

Mrs. Hili decided to educate him. "Captain Shin, consider the wisdom in building with block. You can have smooth walls and any kind of shape you

want!"

"As long as it is roughly the same shape as the house next door," Perrin pointed out. "I've seen what they're doing in Idumea. And you have to hire men specially trained to build them."

"Well it's easier and faster to build all of them the same shapes." Sensing that she was losing the argument, she turned to Mahrree, "You should come see them. I think you'll be impressed. It's what *everyone* wants this year."

"Not me," Perrin said shortly.

"But you should!" Mrs. Hili insisted.

"Why?"

"A grand house would prove how

important you are to the community! To show your position!"

"My uniform does that," Perrin said coolly.

"Not well enough," Mrs. Hili countered with the air of a woman truly in the know. She glanced around their gathering and eating room that showed the remnants of the dinner, washing, and playtime. "This is *hardly* the way to impress others."

Mahrree shrugged, never having been much concerned about Mrs. Hili's opinions. "I'm not worried about impressing others. I don't even know who I should worry about."

Mrs. Hili rolled her eyes in her plump face. "You need to impress

everyone! You need to get ahead! Attention! Progress! My goodness, what does a captain need to do to become a major?"

Perrin folded his ample arms across his broad chest. "Kill someone."

Mrs. Hili went deathly pale.

As much as Mahrree approved of her husband's answer, she chuckled to lighten the mood. "Not *exactly*. He trains the men well, has them prepared for attacks—" and, because she couldn't help herself, she added, "I mean, he's *already* killed a dozen men."

Mrs. Hili began to swoon backwards.

Perrin smiled smugly.

Gripped with guilt, Mahrree groaned and caught Mrs. Hili by the arm before she fell over. “What I’m trying to get at is, we’re simply not *worried* about impressing people. We’re more concerned about what the Creator thinks of us.”

Mrs. Hili shifted her gaze from the terrifying captain to Mahrree’s deliberately sweet expression. She snapped out of her reverie.

“Yes, yes of course. Although I think you’re completely wrong, Miss Mahrree. I mean yes, we worry about the Creator’s opinion, but we *live* in the *world*. We have to *impress* the world.”

“Why?” Mahrree genuinely wanted

to know.

Mrs. Hili blinked. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

“What I don’t get,” Perrin started, while Mrs. Hili looked at him uneasily, “is why people would spend so much money on those houses? They cost three times what our home cost.”

“At least!” Mrs. Hili puffed up proudly, straining the seams on her dress. “And the increasing values will multiply capital within the safe realm of speculative ventures.”

Perrin and Mahrree both stared at her.

“What does *that* mean?” Mahrree asked, not able to bear the suspense anymore.

“I’m not entirely sure,” Mrs. Hili confessed. “Our money manager explains it so much better than I do. You should come by and look at the houses.”

“No,” Perrin said resolutely. “I don’t see the reason at looking at something I know I don’t want.”

“Oh come now,” Mrs. Hili said. “What would it hurt?”

“A lot,” he said. “After I met Mahrree, I didn’t go looking for any more women. I was satisfied with what I have. Same with my house. Why look for something more if I have all that I need?”

“And you’re *from Idumea?*” Mrs. Hili asked incredulously.

“I barely escaped in time,” he deadpanned.

Mahrree snorted and made a mental note to kiss him later. “Besides,” she said to Mrs. Hili, “the new houses are too far away from the fort.”

“That’s not a problem!” Mrs. Hili said with a chubby finger in the air. “There are plans to build another housing development on the old catapult fields!”

Mahrree’s face fell. “You can’t! What about Catapult Day?”

Mrs. Hili scoffed. “Nonsense. Housing is far more important.”

“Maybe, but I won’t allow anyone to build there,” Perrin told her.

"Why not?! Who are you to say who can build there?"

Mahrree had seen that look in Perrin's eyes before, but only directed at an obstinate mule. She gently squeezed his hand in a useless attempt to calm him.

"I am the commanding officer of the Administrators' Army of Idumea, ordered to protect the citizens of Edge," he declared in a worrisome tone. "The area is unsafe and would present an inviting target to Guarders looking for food, weapons, animals and . . . unsuspecting women wearing *silk*." His voice dripped doom. "They *love* silk."

Mrs. Hili began to swoon

backwards again. “I’m . . . I’m sure it will be rethought, Captain. It was only a suggestion by some of the developers, you see . . . when they were looking for land for new school buildings, they noticed the catapult fields across from the fort—”

“Wait a minute,” Mahrree interrupted her. “Developers are *already* looking for land?”

“Of course! Our children will undoubtedly perform well on the test, and we’ll get our building.”

“And if they do poorly on next year’s test, do they have to give back the bribe?” Mahrree asked in all seriousness.

Jaytsy pulled on her mother’s dress

and began to holler for her attention.

Mrs. Hili shook her head. “This is so hard for you, I can see. Don’t worry, Mahrree,” she said as Mahrree bent down to pick up Jaytsy, who had sprung a leak from her nose. “This difficult time will be over soon enough, then you can get back to living in the world with the rest of us.”

Mahrree was bewildered. “What do you mean, this difficult time will be over soon enough? What time?”

“The time you’re tied up by demanding little children! Truly, you’ll soon forget how difficult this was once they’re old enough to go to school.” She winced as Jaytsy demonstrated her high

pitched scream and ability to kick in all directions at the same time.

Mahrree tried to hand her to Perrin, and Jaytsy added flailing to her list of skills. Perrin took Jaytsy, held her at arm's length to avoid being bruised, and walked her back to the kitchen.

Mahrree sighed and said, "It's bathing time, but I guess that's obvious. My children have me tied?"

The thought had never occurred to Mahrree. True, her life was completely different now. And she didn't participate in anything outside of the house. And she hadn't thought about the condition of her hair in nearly two years. Or the condition of her clothes. Or her house. Or garden.

But caring for these little children, who she thought were funny more often than frustrating, loving more often than loud, was an honor. It said so in The Writings, and she'd chosen to believe it from the moment she knew she was expecting her firstborn. And choosing to believe it had made all the difference in her attitude as a mother.

Were they difficult? Yes.

Demanding?

For some reason that word just didn't seem right. It suggested that she and Perrin hadn't invited them to be part of their family. An infestation of roaches suddenly filled her mind.

Mrs. Hili shook her head gently at

Mahrree's mystified face. "You *really* need to get out once in a while. Captain!" she called past Mahrree. "Find someone to stay with your children one evening, and take this poor thing out to see the world."

Perrin poked his head out the kitchen door. In his arms was Jaytsy, squirming to put back on the clothes Perrin was trying to take off. "Are you volunteering?" he asked with a wicked smile.

Mahrree knew he would never want Mrs. Hili watching his children, but he was never one to pass up an opportunity to tease an unsuspecting citizen. Mahrree sighed to herself.

It was useless to ask her mother to

watch the children. Hycymum was the kind of woman who loved the *idea* of children, but struggled to know how to deal with the actual manifestations. She lavished clothing and gifts on them, but she couldn't stand their noise, energy, constant demands, sticky parts, and wet patches.

Their great-great-aunt loved them too, but Tabbit was slowing down considerably to the point that Peto could now out-crawl her.

When Joriana had visited at the end of Weeding Season for a few weeks, Perrin and Mahrree actually escaped a few times to the concerts. Mahrree enjoyed getting out, albeit for only an

hour at a time because she worried about her babies, but now with her mother-in-law gone there was no else they trusted.

Perrin certainly didn't trust Mrs. Hili, but Mahrree knew he was looking forward to her reaction.

She turned almost as red as the burgundy stripes on her dress. "Gracious, no!" she flustered and fanned herself despite the cold outside.

Perrin smiled in satisfaction.

"I have too many things to do," she tried to explain. "But certainly you can find someone to help poor Miss Mahrree. Now, I really must go. The performance will have started."

Mahrree stood at the door for a few moments watching Poe's mother glide

down the cobblestones in a hurry. She wondered what Poe was doing now. And where was his father?

From the kitchen she heard the sounds of Jaytsy in the large washing basin, splashing and giggling. For all the fussing she did before it, the moment Jaytsy's toes hit the warm water she loved her baths. It was as if she forgot each day that baths were a favorite activity. Getting her out again would be yet another battle, one that Perrin was well suited for.

Mahrree glanced down at her dress, faded in parts, mucked up by a variety of smudges and smears. True, it was her daily work dress, so it should look like

this. She did have a few others, and one was even in good condition. She wondered if she really *w a s* missing something, spending every day and night with her babies.

Yes, there were days she was frustrated to tears by the never-ending messes and crying. But she also knew that the never-ending *would* end, sooner than she would want. Despite it all, she found herself fascinated by her remarkable children. As they discovered the world, she felt she was seeing it new herself.

Take, for instance, just this morning. Mahrree realized to her chagrin that she hadn't swept under the sofa since before Peto was born, nearly

seven moons ago. So while her babies were unraveling balls of yarn from their Grandmother Peto, Mahrree bravely slid over the sofa and braced for the worst.

It was a practical warren of dust bunnies. She quickly swept it together, but not before Jaytsy toddled over, crouched, and *oohed!* at the pile of dust, soot, and—

Mahrree peered closer, suddenly panicked—

No, no that *was* only a clump of black Barker fur.

In his odd crawling technique, Peto skooched himself over to stare in wonder at the pile, and Mahrree realized it actually was a fascinating sight. She

watched her budding little scientists stare in rapt interest and tried to remember where her notes on the moldy blob were. In a couple of years, Jaytsy and Peto would undoubtedly find that a most enthralling experiment.

Then, the children reached simultaneously for the pile of black dust, their mouths already opened for a taste —

And Mahrree briskly swept up the mess before anyone choked on Barker fur. Perhaps regrowing the blob should wait for at least ten more years . . .

And that was yet another thing that intrigued her. Why was it that her babies were so eager to taste anything, except the food she cooked for them? Yet

another amusing mystery to ponder.

Oh yes, being their mother was, by far, the most difficult work she'd ever undertaken.

And it also was, by far, the most satisfying.

At the end of the day, she *knew* she'd accomplished an enormous amount of work, even if the house looked as messy as it had in the morning. At this point of her life, messy meant success. Things *happened.*

To look forward to the day she no longer found surprises in Jaytsy's changing cloths or when Peto no longer spewed half of his meals? The thought already made her sad. It was such a

short time. Only a few years . . .

She didn't notice the blue uniform standing directly in front of her in the open doorway.

The soldier looked at her worriedly and knocked lightly on the door frame. "Mrs. Shin? Are you all right?"

Mahrree's head snapped up and she found herself face to face with Private Shem Zenos. She shook her head a little. "Oh, oh, yes. I'm sorry—just a little lost, I suppose."

Private Zenos took her by the arm and turned her gently back into her house.

"I think I understand, Mrs. Shin. They call it sleep deprivation. It was a form of warfare used during the Great

War, back home near Waves." He closed the front door behind him as he explained. "Villagers from Waves would capture female cats that were in season—" he blushed briefly, "secure them in baskets, then hide them around the village of Flax after nightfall. Naturally, the male cats would come seeking them and start caterwauling in desperation to find their new loves. The residents spent most of the night trying to shut up the cats and find the females. By morning they were exhausted and that's when Waves attacked them."

Mahrree, now fully out of her daydream, folded her arms. "Cat warfare?" she said dubiously.

“Absolutely,” Zenos said solemnly. “I understand it was suggested by a man who was father to triplets. Meowaaaaah!” he demonstrated a mix between meowing and crying.

Mahrree looked at him in disbelief until she couldn’t hold it in anymore, and she laughed.

“How do you keep such a straight face? I never know when to believe you! If there was a contest for lying, Zenos, you’d take first prize! What are you doing here this evening? Come, sit down.”

He didn’t sit, but stood at ease in the gathering room, his happy sky blue eyes twinkling at her. “Thank you,

ma'am, but I was wondering if I could have a moment with the captain. I'm sorry to have come so late to your home, but—"

"It's not a problem, Private. And it's not late. But you'll have to wait your turn. He's already busy in the other room with a female, and I strongly suspect she's *undressed*," Mahrree said gravely.

The private's eyes flashed in shock and his mouth began to open.

Mahrree winked at him.

Perrin called loudly from the kitchen, "I'm just giving Jaytsy a bath. Don't listen to her, Zenos! Haven't I told you that before?"

The private broke into a wide grin and said, "Yes, sir! That's why I keep

finding excuses to come here. It reminds me of home."

Mahrree laughed. Private Zenos was not only Perrin's favorite soldier, but hers too. If ever she had a little brother, she imagined he would have been exactly like Zenos.

Perrin emerged from the kitchen with Jaytsy wrapped in a thick cloth. His tan shirt was nearly as wet as her wild hair. "And cat warfare? While I'd like to believe that, since I hate cats, I have to tell you—I never read about that in any of the history books, Zenos."

"The best things never are remembered, sir," Zenos declared earnestly.

Perrin chuckled. “I suspect that’s true. Peto’s turn for a bath,” he said to Mahrree. “There’s still a corner of the basin clean enough for him.”

On cue Peto began to roll from his playing area. Mahrree caught him and walked with him towards the kitchen.

“Mahrree, where are Jaytsy’s bed clothes?” Perrin called to her.

Mahrree stopped. “Oh, I forgot. They must still be upstairs on our bed.”

Private Zenos held out his arms to Mahrree. “I’ve been meaning to ask for a while, and now seems the right time: Can I hold Peto while you find the clothes?”

Mahrree’s eyebrows rose at his

offer. Maybe it was because he was from the southernmost areas, but Private Zenos was so unlike the men of the village. The last several weeks he had been happily serving as their messenger demonstrated that.

He always first delivered Perrin's message, then added an outlandish story or joke to make Mahrree laugh. She looked forward to his visits, and if Perrin hadn't sent a message for three or four days, she told him in the morning he needed to, because she thought of something new to say to the young private to tease or embarrass him. Half of the time she succeeded. The other half he would startle her instead. He must be always thinking up ways to get her back,

just as she planned on ways to get him first.

Whenever he dropped by, the children usually stopped whatever they were doing when they heard his voice and hooted eagerly at him. Zenos always took a moment to tickle Jaytsy or make faces at Peto.

And now Zenos was offering to hold Peto. Mahrree had met only one other baby-snatching man in her life: her husband. Now there seemed to be another in the world, and he was only twenty years old.

Mahrree said to Perrin a couple of weeks ago that she thought Zenos was the sweetest soldier she had ever met.

Perrin had glared at that and said to never, *ever* call a soldier "sweet" again.

Or adorable.

Mahrree evaluated the sincerity of Zenos's offer. His blue eyes were completely honest. "Peto's a little sticky," she warned him.

"That's how babies should be, ma'am." Zenos smiled and took Peto confidently.

Peto stared at him with big eyes and reached up to grab his nose.

Perrin looked at Mahrree. "Better run and get the clothes before Peto claws his face. We don't want to ruin a good thing here."

Mahrree nodded and went upstairs

leaving Perrin to watch his young recruit who sat down on a chair and easily bounced laughter out of his son. She soon came down the stairs in time to see Zenos tipping Peto upside down and flipping him back up again. Alarmed she asked, “Is that safe?”

“None of the babies in our family have had permanent damage yet, ma’am!” he assured her and flipped Peto yet again, to his giggling delight.

Perrin held his gaze for a moment, then sat down on the stuffed chair near the hearth and started to put a changing cloth on Jaytsy by the warmth of the fire.

“Perrin!” Mahrree exclaimed. “Not in front of the private!”

The soldier grinned. “I promise I

won't peek, Mrs. Shin. But it's really nothing new to me. I have a sister who has two little girls, and I was always the one who stayed with them and even changed their cloths when she needed to go to the market. They loved their Uncle Shem." He nuzzled Peto's neck as only someone who was completely comfortable with babies knew how to do. "Yes they did!" he crooned as Peto giggled and grabbed clumps of his short light brown hair in his chubby fists.

Mahrree stared. Even in Hycymum's most relaxed moments she would only drop cookies on their heads from above.

But, Mahrree thought, wild ideas

running in her mind, he's a *young man*. Why would a young man agree to . . . ?

She continued to stare at him.

Zenos didn't notice—his face was buried in Peto's neck, making a bubbling noise which made Peto howl uncontrollably with laughter.

It would make sense, really. Should anything happen while they were away, having someone who knew how to handle a sword would be the best choice for defending the captain's children.

But *still*, Mahrree thought.

Now Zenos had Peto lying in his lap doing something called "eentsy weensy beetle" up his body and tickling him under his chin. Then he lifted Peto and impulsively gave him a kiss.

Mahrree smiled. No matter what Perrin insisted, Zenos *was* sweet.

And adorable.

Mahrree and Perrin exchanged the same look. Then they shrugged at each other. Then they gave each other an it-couldn't-hurt-to-ask look.

"Private," Mahrree began slowly, "what I am about to ask, I say as a friend, not as the wife of your captain." She glanced back to Perrin who nodded. "Would you ever consider, as a *friend,* you see, when you have free time, maybe coming over here and . . ." She couldn't get the rest of the words out.

Zenos squinted. "Stay with your children? Let you get away a little bit?

‘See the world,’ as that lady in silk said to you? Yes, ma’am, I was waiting and listening in the bushes for a time,” he explained to Mahrree’s questioning expression.

Mahrree turned to her husband. “Why did you name that dog Barker when he never barks? Not even when someone’s hiding in our bushes?!”

Perrin merely rolled his eyes at her as tried to get his daughter’s arm into the sleeve of her sleeping gown. The dog was staying, as ineffective as he was.

Zenos chuckled. “I’d be honored to watch your children, Mrs. Shin.”

“Really?” Mahrree sat down. “You’re an unusual young man, Private Zenos.”

“You better just call me Shem, ma’am. That’s the custom where I come from. Especially if I get to care for your children.” Then he turned to Peto. “Did you hear that? I get to come play with you!”

Peto giggled and clawed at his face. Zenos didn’t even flinch.

But his commander stared in wonder.

Somewhere in the forest, Perrin thought to himself, a mountain lion just rolled over in submission. That was the kind of influence that boy had. It wasn’t his words so much as it was his manner, his *being*. And he didn’t even realize it.

Mahrree shook her head. “I mean,

it's a little odd, I know, asking a soldier."

"Nothing odd about it, ma'am. So, when do you want me to come over? I have it in pretty good with the captain, and can probably get him change my duty shifts," Zenos said soberly, but the corner of his mouth tugged upwards.

A bear would have sat down on its haunches, Perrin mused, fascinated by the boy's sincere exuberance.

"Private Zenos, I'd like you here on duty day after tomorrow, after midday meal," he ordered with a wink. "These children should be ready for a nap then."

"So soon?" Mahrree asked in a panic.

"Well when were you thinking?

That's my first day off."

"I was thinking much later, like when Peto—"

"—is five years old?" Perrin interrupted.

"Yes!" Mahrree agreed.

Perrin shook his head and worked Jaytsy's second arm into a sleeve. "Peto likes to drink from a mug and eats *tolerably* well. He'll be fine. I think we really need to get out," he said steadily. "Private Zenos, in two days?"

"Sir, I can only do that if you'll please call me Shem when I'm in your home. That just seems right," he said carefully, almost sweetly.

Lambs would've followed him

anywhere.

His captain smiled at him. “All right, *Shem*.”

Mahrree looked at Zenos thoughtfully. “Perrin, I know what this young man needs—he needs a wife! He’d be a wonderful father. Do you think we can help him?”

Perrin laughed at Zenos’s disturbed expression.

“Mrs. Shin, I’m afraid I’m not here to find a wife. I came here to serve your husband. I’m not the marrying type. Yet.”

“I spoke those words once before, too,” Perrin said kindly. “Only days after I arrived here. I changed my mind. You might, too.”

The private paused before saying

intently, “Perhaps someday, sir. But right now my obligation is only to you and your family, until I’m released from this duty.”

Perrin stopped trying to button Jaytsy’s sleeping gown, since she had gone uncooperatively limp over them, and asked, “What do you mean, ‘released from this duty’?”

Zenos hesitated. “Why, released from watching over your children. When they’re grown, I guess then I’ll have to get some of my own, sir.” He grinned broadly, and somewhere a garden of flowers unexpectedly bloomed in the night.

Perrin shook his head slowly.

“Shem Zenos, you *are* an unusual young man. I need to keep an eye on you.”

“Sir, I certainly hope you will.”

It wasn’t until Zenos was replacing his cap and heading out the door, after involving Jaytsy in an introductory game of Tie up Your Uncle, that Perrin remembered. “Private, why did you come here tonight anyway?”

Zenos stepped back into the house and noiselessly closed the door behind him. He glanced towards Jaytsy’s room where Mahrree had just taken the children after Peto’s bath. When he was assured all was secure he spoke. “You wanted to know when my Guarder contact finally returned. He’s back, hiding in the forest. I spoke with him

then came straight over here."

"Zenos!" the captain snapped. "Why'd you wait so long to tell me?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Zenos winced. "He left quickly back up into the woods. I couldn't imagine that we'd see in what direction, especially after dark. I thought at first not even telling you until morning. I realize now I should have acted more hastily in speaking up. I actually forgot, sir, with the children and all." He bit his lower lip. "I *am* sorry."

Perrin sighed. "It's all right. I need to develop protocols for such scenarios. The Guarder, I mean, not the children." He gave him a forgiving smile. "The army has never encountered a situation

like this before. So, are our suspicions correct?"

Zenos nodded. "Yes, he claims he's a spy, but he wants out. He says he's been in new training for the past few weeks. They're trying to teach them to lie without blinking, but he doesn't understand why. Nor would he tell me where this training is occurring. I think we need to treat him carefully. He started getting edgy when I was asking him questions, and he says they're watching him."

"A half-hearted defecting spy," the captain shook his head. "We'll see what we can do with him. Keep feeding him and getting him to talk. Did he tell you anything we should be watching for?"

Zenos's expression turned pained, as if he'd been told to kiss a pimply cousin. He'd been dreading this moment, and, when Perrin heard the report, understood why the young soldier was initially hesitant.

"He said the woods were quiet tonight, but he has 'existed' in them for only moments. The forest is not 'speaking' to him right now, but it has been 'singing', so he promised to listen to it."

Captain Shin didn't respond to the odd message—he'd heard weirder from soldiers sogged by a bad batch of illegally brewed barrack mead—but instead stared at the ground, deep in

thought. “I’m sure there’s a pattern in the chaos of his scared mind. We may find all we need in there if we can just organize it into something we can understand . . .”

He pulled out of his contemplation and looked decisively at Zenos who still wore an apologetic wince.

“Tomorrow morning have Karna block out some time from my schedule. The three of us are going to plot how to work this Guarder. We’ll also draft some guidelines on how to treat spies and send it to the High General and his advisors. We’re going to need their approval. Thank you, Zenos,” he said, returning the private’s salute.

Then he gripped the soldier’s

shoulder and smiled. “And I expect you on these steps again, out of uniform, in two days’ time, Shem.”

That night Perrin lay in bed, worrying.

Why was it that when Zenos was around, Perrin felt completely at ease with him, but when he left, Perrin found his thoughts full of cold, dark doubts?

Can he really be trusted?

Those words would come to his mind in solitary moments, which struck Perrin as odd. He believed he was a good judge of character. Whenever he

met someone that didn't *feel* right, a tightness in his chest warned, *Keep an eye out for this one*. And he was never wrong.

But he never felt that way about Shem Zenos when he was around.

And so now you're leaving your children with him? Your most prized possessions? Your own lambs?

It was only at times like this, usually in the dark, when a coldness whispered in his mind, *The boy doesn't deserve your trust*.

Perrin didn't get it. That wasn't the way he usually felt the Creator's promptings.

He rubbed his forehead and stared at the timbers criss-crossing the dark

ceiling, trying to deduce what Zenos may have done to trip this trap of worry in his mind.

Nothing came.

You're the bear he's tamed. Now consider—why would mountain lions roll over in submission to him?

Not even Hogal picked up anything unworthy about the boy. Perrin had made a point of inviting Zenos to Holy Day services, and to his surprise, the young man was eager to go. No one else from the fort ever went to listen to Rector Densal, but Zenos did, with rapt attention.

After the first meeting Perrin introduced Zenos to his great uncle, and

then he watched Hogal as the two of them chatted. No one was a greater judge of character than Hogal Densal, and later he pulled Perrin aside during the congregational midday meal.

"Excellent young man there, Perrin! I see wonderful things in his eyes."

"Really?" Perrin was surprised, and relieved. Already he had been taken by the boy, but he wanted a reason—and at the same time *didn't*—to be suspicious of him. "The name hasn't struck you as interesting?"

Hogal shrugged. "Haven't heard it come up, but I'll do a bit of asking around if you'd like."

That was exactly what Perrin had wanted. The rectors throughout the

world had their own communication system, quietly outside of the forts and law enforcers. Few people besides the rectors and their wives knew about that, and Perrin was one of those few. He understood that not every missing wife wanted to be found, not all runaway children should be returned to their parents, and some young men weren't really out simply to "explore the world."

But apparently Shem Zenos was. No one yet had sent word to Hogal that Zenos was wanted elsewhere.

So Perrin had allowed himself to be won over by the perennially cheerful, astute, and charismatic young man. Zenos never let him down.

So why the worry?

He cleared his throat loudly next to his wife dozing next to him, and Mahrree automatically mumbled, "Peto's crying?"

"No, but I'm glad you're awake. I've been thinking . . . about Zenos watching our children."

She chuckled groggily. "I can't believe he agreed to that. In a way, I wish we could spy on him the entire time to see how well he does."

"That's not a bad idea," he nodded in the dark. His spy glass at the fort could come in handy.

"Perrin," Mahrree said, now more awake and with an earnestness in her

voice. “Can I say something about the private?”

Perrin tensed next to her. Here it comes. She could evaluate character as well.

“You may not like what I have to say, but I just can’t keep it in any longer.”

He nodded again, even though he knew she couldn’t see him. He needed to hear it from someone else, and not only from that unfamiliar voice in his mind. He needed confirmation that he should be suspicious, that Shem Zenos—

“Here it is,” Mahrree announced. “While I was watching him with Peto, I couldn’t help but think, ‘Shem Zenos is THE most adorable soldier I’ve ever

seen!”

She giggled as Perrin groaned. That wasn’t exactly what he was expecting.

Then again, as he continued to pretend he was annoyed with her evaluation, he realized that *was exactly* he was hoping to hear: Mahrree liked Shem Zenos, too.

“I still think we should find him a girl,” Mahrree decided. “Some of my former students are his age. One of them might be a good match. I know—Teeria!”

Perrin cringed. “The giggler?”

“No,” Mahrree said. “That’s Sareen.”

“So the hair-tosser, then.”

Mahrree sighed in exasperation. “I told you—Hitty’s visiting her grandmother for a few seasons.”

It wasn’t as if keeping up with the comings and goings of teenage girls was the biggest priority in his life. “So . . . the smart one?”

“Yes! Shem strikes me as the kind of boy that would appreciate a thoughtful girl like Teeria.”

Perrin pursed his lips. “She’s rather *calm*, though.” That was a nice way of saying dull, sober, and as vibrant as a rotting cabbage.

“And a good balance for his exuberance, I would think. Teeria would be a good match for such an excellent

young man.”

Excellent young man.

Everyone thinks that, Perrin thought to himself.

So why wouldn’t the doubting voice leave him alone?

Chapter 6 ~ “We’re *trying* to make a good impression!”

Leaving the house two days later happened in starts and stops. Mahrree had hoped for an early snow to cancel their plans, but the late Harvest day was sunny and the cold was tolerable. Before they left, Mahrree had to kiss her babies.

Then kiss them again.

Then check their cloths which she had just changed.

Then remind Shem, for the fourth time, all about feeding them if they should return late.

Then she was about to do something else that no one would ever know about, because that's when Perrin finally picked her up and hefted her over his shoulder like a bag of grain. He carried her to the open wagon he borrowed from the fort while Jaytsy happily waved and called "Bye-bye" to "Ma" and "Dog!" from the door. Shem held Peto, who didn't even notice her leaving. He was too busy poking Shem's face to make him say "Ow!" in silly ways.

Perrin plopped his wife on the front bench of the wagon.

"Stay!" he commanded in the same voice he used on the dog, and she sat there obediently, albeit grumpily. He never took his eyes off her, as if she might bolt if he did, and he climbed in next to her and slapped the reins on the horses. Soon they were off towards the south end of the village to see what all the new house excitement was about. Mahrree was sure she could hear her babies crying in the distance, but Perrin refused to turn around.

"This will be good for you, I promise."

"How?" Mahrree asked miserably.

“I’m not sure yet, either,” he said, fighting the urge to glance behind him.

Mahrree noticed. Her husband was always slightly paranoid; it was part of his job. Maybe he was concerned about Guarders visiting his home when he wasn’t there.

“The private—I mean, *Shem*—didn’t wear his sword,” she massaged her hands. “And he won’t know where yours is hidden.”

Perrin patted the long knife secured in his waistband under his brown leather jacket. “I’m sure he has his long knife somewhere on him. And I showed him where the other knife is in the secret drawer of the eating table.” He began to

smile. “Then Zenos put on that overly-grave expression of his and said, ‘Sir, I don’t believe in letting children play with knives.’”

Mahrree couldn’t help but chuckle. “He’ll be all right with them, won’t he?”

Perrin shrugged and nodded at the same time. “Said he has more experience with children than I do. That might be true, depending on how much he watched his nieces. I suppose our two most important possessions are safe. He’s becoming quite skilled with the sword. Nearly bested me the other day in practice. I’ll have to sharpen up a bit.”

Mahrree sighed. “It’s not that I don’t trust Shem, but I feel like I’ve

abandoned our babies."

"Maybe we can remember what it was like when we were courting," Perrin suggested.

"Courting? We never courted properly!" Mahrree reminded him. "We debated until you got tired of losing to me, then you showed up on my doorstep when you got tired of missing me. Now we're both just tired!"

Perrin smiled and wrapped his arm around her. "Now *this* is something I haven't been able to do for awhile without someone small becoming jealous."

It took her some time, but eventually Mahrree agreed that it was pleasant to

look up and around her for once, instead of always down and into someone's changing cloths. As the horses trotted through the village, she and Perrin realized how much they'd been missing. Poe wasn't the only young man in fancy clothes. Scattered here and there were other people in 'outfits' in vibrant colors and extravagant textures. Mahrree had seen some people dressed up at the market in the late morning, but now in the afternoon there seemed to be even more examples of impractical clothing.

Then again, she was never one to pay attention to what people wore. It didn't seem worth noting, unless someone wasn't wearing anything at all.

When they passed a man in bright

purple suit coat and trousers, Mahrree nudged Perrin. “Do you think you’re a purple man?”

Perrin glanced down at his rough cotton brown trousers and his comfortably worn leather jacket. “Do I *look* like a purple man? I didn’t even know that was a color you could wear! Maybe they think that’s ‘progress,’ but I certainly don’t. No, I don’t want to worry about mussing up my ‘outfits.’ And I like knowing exactly where my clothing came from. Did you hear that silk is worm vomit?”

Mahrree curled her lip and gave him a withering sidelong glance. “First, that purple suit wasn’t silk. It looked

more like worsted wool. And second, I doubt silk is worm vomit! How do these stories get started, anyway?"

He grinned. "That's how I explained the origination of the silk cocoons to Poe. He confided to me that he was worried about where his shirt was *really* from. His friends kept telling him it was bug droppings. He was rather pleased to hear it came from the *other* end."

Perrin glanced down at her plain woolen gray skirt.

"So, tell me," he started slowly, "are you at all interested in silk? I couldn't help but notice you admiring Mrs. Hili's dress. That really was something, I suppose."

Mahrree thought about that. “Yes, it was *something*. But not something I think I could see myself in. The fabric feels like thin water. I touched Poe’s collar to see. But if I don’t feel comfortable feeding a baby or gathering eggs in it, I don’t think I’d enjoy it.”

They travelled past the more expensive shops where they never bothered to go before. Mahrree saw more odd colors in clothing—even orange—and she wondered how many carrots and pumpkins were sacrificed for the dye. Maybe that’s why they weren’t having the catapults. The eggplants were needed for men’s purple suits.

Of course her mother would correct that notion and tell her something ridiculous, such as the purple dye came from boiling seashells or something.

Finally Mahrree said aloud, "I wonder how much the silk costs?"

"About a week's salary for some of the fancier dresses," Perrin said casually.

"That's madness!" she decided. She turned sharply to her husband. "And how would *you* know that, Mr. I-think-silk-is-bug-droppings?"

"Worm vomit. I said 'worm vomit.'"

"Still, how did you know?"

"I was just checking, in case you . .

. I don't know. Felt like you needed something," he hedged. "We're not rich, but the army pays enough, and we do have some stashed away in the cellar, and we're not exactly poor people, and . . ." Perrin didn't know where to end his rambling.

Mahrree was suddenly very aware of the green pea smudges on her faded tan tunic, and pulled her cloak around her tighter to hide them. "Perrin, do you think I need a dress like that?"

"I don't really know what you need," he admitted uncomfortably, "but I want you to have something nice, something that you'd like. You could choose something today, if you wish."

She saw the damp spot on her skirt.

She stopped trying to identify damp spots when Jaytsy was only a week old.

"Do you want me to look like Mrs. Hili? I mean, I know I don't look exactly like I used to. I think I know what 'frumpy' means now, but I can change that. If you wish," she added lamely.

Perrin was quiet before he shook his head and chuckled. "Do you know what this conversation reminds me of? How awkward we were when we ran into each other the first time in the market, and we flattened your bread between us. Remember? But Mahrree, I learned to tell you exactly what I think. And so here it is: No, wife. I *definitely* don't want you to look like Mrs. Hili."

She turned and kissed his shoulder.

"She's far too heavy," he added. "I could never pick her up without straining something vital."

Mahrree laughed. "You're terrible, Perrin!"

Perrin grinned. "Maybe dresses for you would be cheaper, since you'd require only half the cloth."

"Now, stop! You're just being rude."

His mouth dropped open. "And she wasn't rude to us? Did you hear how she was talking to us the other night about the children? Or were you really taking a nap there on the front porch?"

Mahrree shrugged wearily. She

really didn't want to revisit that conversation.

Perrin continued. "Now, my wife, do you want to see me in purple? Or orange? Or—" he offered a fake shudder, "—pink? Because *for you*, my wife, I would wear it," his voice was full of sarcastic solemnity. "I will wear pink worm vomit for you."

Mahrree was laughing so hard she couldn't answer.

"Right over there," he suggested as the horses trotted past a new shop with striped suits displayed in thin, clear windows. "On the way home, just for you. We'll stop and you can outfit me however you wish."

Mahrree finally recovered enough

to protest. “If you wear pink bug droppings or worm vomit or whatever it is, I’ll find me another man in uniform! Please, please, don’t do it. What would be next, men in skirts? Women in trousers? No, keep your leather and your cotton. All traditional and safe sources of clothing. I’m really not that progressive!”

The rest of the way to the new houses they shamelessly laughed at ‘outfits’ they passed. They nearly fell off the carriage when a man emerged from a shop with a hat nearly as tall as his head. They were still giggling uncontrollably like children—or two adults who hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep in well over a

year—when they pulled up to the new houses.

Nothing here was humorous as they took in the peculiar scene before them.

A small tidy shed with the word "Office" painted neatly above the door sat near the entrance of a wide road which led to several homes under construction.

While the house shapes varied slightly one from the other, the overall effect was to suggest that a giant artist had been making very proper and precise—yet wholly unimaginative—blocks of gray. And because Mrs. Giant didn't like them, he decided to drop his enormously dull sculptures on the world at exactly the same distance apart.

None of the gardens around the houses were completed, revealing the sandy-gray colored soil, but several borders were edged in more gray symmetrical blocks. The new neighborhood gave one the impression that all colors had run out when the Creator came to this part of Edge.

A painting on a large sign showed what the future of the community could be: lush flower beds, different kinds of roofs, and even some houses painted in different colors. But no amount of embellishment could cover the sameness of the designs.

“Just like Idumea,” Perrin muttered in disappointment. “I promise you, I do

NOT want that."

"I agree," Mahrree whispered. "Let's drive on."

But before they could, the door of the small shed flew open and a woman in a black and white bustled out.

Mahrree and Perrin tried their hardest not to, but still they burst out laughing, not at her shimmering dress which, in a blur, would also be gray, but at the enormous hat with a huge feather standing on the top of it which must have been plucked from the largest, ugliest bird in the world.

Desperately trying to regain control of herself as the woman huffed angrily up to their wagon, Mahrree covered her mouth and pinched Perrin hard, causing

him to slip a bit off his seat. Almost immediately Perrin plastered a completely somber look on his face. It was one of those times Mahrree was envious of his training.

The woman marched up to them and demanded, "What's the meaning of all this noise!" Her feather bobbled alarmingly as she practiced her best I'm-as-angry-as-an-ugly-bird impersonation. "I'll have you know we are expecting someone very important, and you must move this, this *excuse* of a wagon immediately!"

Perrin was the very model of composure. "Absolutely ma'am. I'm very sorry to have disturbed you. We

were only wishing to drive past your *lovely* homes here."

Mahrree kept her hand over her mouth. The woman's feather waved unpredictably even though she had stopped moving, and Mahrree felt spasms of laughter fighting in her chest.

Perrin nodded to her head. "Incidentally, ma'am, a bird of some rather large and aggressive species seems to have impaled your hat. You may want to look into it."

Mahrree would never admit to snorting in her entire life. But today not only did her husband and the black and white woman hear her, so did half a dozen workers dutifully stacking gray blocks on top of more gray blocks at a

nearby house. Several actually stopped working and turned to stare at the noise that originated loudly from Mahrree's nose.

Perrin took his convulsing wife's head and pushed it firmly down to her knees. She gratefully took the suffocation in her skirt.

"You'll please excuse my wife. She hasn't been well lately. That's why I've taken her out to get some fresh air. Obviously she still needs some more."

Mahrree was aware that her skirt was developing a new damp patch from the tears of her suppressed laughter. She took a few deep breaths and promptly sat up. If Perrin could do it, so could

she.

"I *am* very sorry. Will you please forgive me?" she asked with her best straight face.

The woman softened a smidge. "Yes, of course," she said hurriedly. "Now please move your wagon. We've heard that the captain of Edge and his wife may be coming by, and we're *trying* to make a good impression!"

That was more than Mahrree could handle. She voluntarily put her head back down on her lap and began convulsing again.

Perrin's voice was full of sympathy and regret. "I am, so very, *very* sorry for this. *Of course* we will move immediately."

Suddenly the door of the shed burst open again, and another woman, massive and jiggling, came flying out.

Mrs. Hili.

Perrin growled quietly and readied to slap the horses into a gallop.

"Captain Shin! Miss Mahrree!" Mrs. Hili panted as she approached them. "I believe there's been some misunderstanding."

The black and white woman turned gray as she looked at them "Captain?" she whimpered.

"Yes, ma'am," he said coldly back.

"But you're not in uniform!"

"On my days off I prefer old leather," he said tonelessly.

“Of course,” the woman nodded eagerly. “A man like you *must* be old leather.”

Perrin looked at his wife, wondering what that meant. She could offer no explanation.

Mrs. Hili rolled her eyes. “Mrs. Shattoe, why don’t you go back to the office. I can help the Shins.”

Mrs. Shattoe nodded and seemed happy to get away from the captain as quickly as her tight skirt would allow her to wiggle back to the shed.

“How about a little tour?” Mrs. Hili said with batting eyelashes and the overly-eager tone of someone sure they were about to wheedle gold out of one

who claimed they didn't have any.

Perrin and Mahrree were ready. "We're not interested in a tour. Only out for a drive today."

"But surely you want to stretch your legs?" Mrs. Hili went on in a practiced voice, as if their excuse was one of many she was prepared for. "Let the horses take a rest on such a hot—," she shifted scripts, "I mean, *cool* day?"

"The horses are quite warm," Perrin pointed out with the beginnings of a sneer, "so stopping them now would not be a favor to them."

"They can enjoy our stables, Captain! You see, here at Edge of Idumea Estates, we have—"

Sensing the prologue to a much

longer speech than Mahrree wanted to endure, she cut off Mrs. Hili with, "How's Qualipoe doing today? I'm afraid I might miss his visit later this afternoon if we don't get back on time."

That comment threw Mrs. Hili completely off her script. It took a moment for her brain to reengage. "What? Qualipoe? He visits you?"

Mahrree suspected, and feared, his mother had no idea what he did each day.

"I really enjoy his company. I'm wondering what he'll do when it gets colder, though. I'd love for him to see me *every* afternoon, until you're home again."

Mrs. Hili looked surprised. “Why, I didn’t know he was a frequent visitor.”

“Only every day this past week, when he’s on the way to the fort.”

Mrs. Hili’s eyebrows shot upwards. “The fort? He goes to *the fort?*” She looked at Perrin for confirmation.

Perrin smiled smugly. “He and his friends watch the soldiers drilling.”

When Mrs. Hili looked confused as to why the soldiers were involved in woodworking, Perrin clarified.

“Practicing. Bow and arrows. Wrestling. Sword play.”

Mrs. Hili eyes grew big.

“Don’t worry,” Perrin assured her.

“No one gets hurt, if they do it correctly.”

“Where does he sit?”

“On the fences.”

Mrs. Hili nodded. “So he stays clean. Good boy.”

Mahrree chuckled. “I thought you were worried that he was watching the soldiers! I realize they may not be the *best* influence—” She stopped as both Mrs. Hili and Perrin glared at her.

Mrs. Hili put her hands on her wide hips. “Who is it, you told me yesterday at the market, that is watching your children today?”

Mahrree knew she was blushing. “A soldier. Look, what I said didn’t come out right.” She tossed Perrin an

apologetic glance.

He showed no emotion.

"What I really meant was," she started hesitantly, then knew what to say. "When it gets colder, the fort won't be a safe, or rather a *clean*, environment. Mud and everything." She glanced quickly at her husband who didn't seem completely satisfied. "Could Qualipoe stay with me in the afternoons?"

"That's an interesting offer, Mrs. Shin," Mrs. Hili said slowly.

Inspiration hit Mahrree like a round rock fleeing the square block invasion before her. "I could tutor Qualipoe to get him ready for the Administrators' testing."

That hit its target.

"What an interesting idea," Mrs. Hili mused. "You know," her mind starting racing, "you could even have more children over. You could even charge a fee for it!"

She had raced too far, and her face reflected it. Now she was suggesting pay for something that would was free just seconds ago.

"Oh there'd be no charge for Qualipoe, Mrs. Hili," Mahrree promised.

Mrs. Hili's entire body slid into relief, and continued to wobble a bit as she spoke. "I could tell others about your tutoring, to help cover your costs."

Mahrree shook her head. “I don’t see any costs with being a helpful neighbor, Mrs. Hili. I think I would feel awkward taking pay—”

“Oh, you simply don’t get it!” Mrs. Hili cried. “This is wonderful opportunity for you to work at your home!”

“But I’m already working—I have two children. I just want to help. Isn’t that all right?”

Mrs. Hili studied her for a moment. “It’s wonderful that you want to help. Really it is,” she said as if trying to explain to a three-year-old why mud pies were inherently inedible. “But there’s nothing wrong with earning a

little more on the side, is there?"

"But if we don't *need* more—"

"Everybody needs *more*, Mrs. Shin!"

Mahrree was about to argue when a new sofa visited her mind. It dropped seemingly out of nowhere and had big cushions made of strong thick cloth. Her entire family was sitting on it, waving to her. It was long and broad enough to accommodate a bear—or her husband who seemed nearly the same size—and the dog. She tried to shake Barker out of her mind and off the sofa. She could barely move him. But the Perrin on the sofa looked amused by the effort.

"You may have a point, Mrs. Hili," Mahrree said dreamily, until she heard a

loud throat clearing noise from her husband.

She looked at him and he held up his hand in questioning.

“I’m sorry, I guess I’m not used to being out in the fresh air,” she chuckled uneasily. “Mrs. Hili, tell Poe he can come by my house anytime, and he can bring his friends, too.”

Perrin tightened his grip on the reins. “We best be moving on, keep the horses warmed up. Thank you for your time, Mrs. Hili.” And he slapped the horses into a trot.

They drove through the new housing division along needlessly winding roads that twisted absurdly. Some even ended

abruptly in odd circles, as if making the roads different would help the residents forget their houses were all identical squares.

"So," Perrin said unexpectedly, "what was all that back there?"

"All what?"

"About needing *more?*" His voice was losing its insulted edge. "I mean, are you . . . dissatisfied? Don't I provide enough?"

She clutched his arm and hugged it. "More than enough, Perrin! I don't know what came over me. I guess just the thought of, I don't know, maybe doing something more to help you? Our family?"

"We're fine, Mahrree. We even

have slips of gold and silver hidden the cellar, enough to see us through for several seasons or . . . to buy a fraction of one of these houses," he said slowly.

For a few minutes they drove wordlessly by the new houses, both lost in thought while observing the activity.

A few large homes that could house two dozen people already had occupants. In front of one, standing in their sandy gray dirt, was a couple who were trying to position straggly little trees in interesting ways. It would be years before they could hope for any shade from them, but even so they were optimistically angling the thick sticks to make the most of the anemic shadows

they cast on the house.

Mahrree found herself wrestling with an odd mixture of feelings as she observed a group of builders constructing a tall, perfectly smooth wall going up to heights she had never seen dared before in a house. She inexplicably imagined herself moving her whole family into one of those monstrosities and considered how to place their books and Perrin's maps along the walls in such a deliberately artful arrangement that even her mother would have been proud. She even mentally tore one of Perrin's ancient maps to fit better in a narrower space between two windows.

Something snapped in her brain.

Why would she do *that?!* She tried to shake the guilt out of her head for considering tearing Perrin's map and consigning their best friends—their books—to serve as mute works of art on tall shelves. Why would she suddenly picture herself in the largest house in Edge? For what purpose?

She squirmed.

To find herself so immediately gripped with envy and desire surprised her. These houses weren't worth it. Worth *anything*, she reminded herself. *Her home* was made by the villagers and now also her husband. Each board reminded her of someone who helped sand it down or nail it in. Each lopsided

glop of mortar on the stones seemed to have a story associated with why it was that way. Every irregularity of the rock reminded her of the diverse personalities who helped place it.

But these *ordinary* houses? They had no character at all, and they probably cost ten bags of silver rather than only one.

It seemed unfortunate to place such a high value on uniformity.

Another house they passed was being painted by two workers under observation of a husband and wife around the age of the Shins. Of all the colors the Creator made to lighten and brighten the world, the owners had chosen a shade of gray slightly darker

than the blocks.

Leaning against the house waiting to be installed were shutters that seemed to be utterly inadequate. They were not nearly wide enough to actually shield the windows in case of a severe storm or heat. And the color of them was an even darker shade of gray.

A bright yellow, Mahrree thought, would be so much more interesting. Perhaps even a deep red, or a pale blue. But gray? What kind of mentality—

"That's absurd!" Perrin muttered suddenly. "*Gray paint?* Who actually spent slips of silver on *that?*"

Mahrree laughed as his disparaging tone. "Thank you!" she sighed. "I needed

that."

"Why? What were you thinking?"

"About . . . moving here," she confessed. "Only for a moment."

Perrin leaned away from her and looked her up and down as if she was a complete stranger. "Why?!"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I suddenly pictured myself here and started thinking how much we could really do with a place like this."

"Such as use four times as much wood to heat the house?"

"Well, no, I hadn't considered that. Of course it's ridiculous. But it's so strange, I didn't even know this place existed days ago, then within minutes I suddenly find myself wanting it. I mean,

why would I be so quick to fall in love?"

Perrin gave her a sidelong glance. "Clarify, please."

Mahrree laughed and nudged him. "I meant, fall in love with these houses! Not you. It took me several weeks to decide to love you."

He smiled slightly. "I thought you loved me the first time you saw me. I remember very well that look on your face when I first stepped on the platform."

"What I felt was *attraction*. It took me a few weeks to decide if I wanted to love you."

Perrin chuckled. "So, being

attracted to one of these gray blocks imported from the dubious home of creativity known as Idumea—does this mean you're no longer satisfied with what the Creator has chosen to bless us with?"

"Well, when you put it *that* way now I feel doubly guilty," she confessed. "We have exactly what we need, don't we?"

"Yes, we do," he said, his voice a little unsure. "For now."

Mahrree turned to look at him. "What do mean, *for now*?"

His shoulder twitched and he sat taller, looking around the gray landscape.

"What are looking for?"

"Administrators," he mumbled. "This place feels so bleak that for a moment I wondered if we drove too far south and were in Idumea."

"Not yet," she smiled. "Why?"

"Well, when you were talking about Poe with Mrs. Hili, it got me wondering . . . you miss teaching, don't you?"

She shrugged. "Not so much, but I do miss knowing what's going on. I feel like a dull knife. I used to be sharper. I'm completely out of touch. Having children like Poe around, I can at least gauge what's happening in the school. Maybe I *should* take Poe and some other children in for the afternoons. It seems so strange," she added vaguely.

Perrin waited for her to finish. When she didn't—too lost in her own thoughts where he couldn't interrupt her and force her to draw different conclusions—he said, "What's strange?"

"All the changes, and so quickly. Maybe it's been happening gradually and we simply didn't notice because it was all around us, sneaking up slowly. But since we've been away for some time in our own little world with the children, it's as if I can see things differently now. And I don't like it, Perrin."

He sighed in agreement. "I know what I've seen in Idumea and it just didn't feel *right*. Just my gut feeling. Not

a very logical argument, I know. And now it seems it's coming here. I guess there's no stopping 'progress'."

"There's nothing wrong with following a gut feeling, Perrin. Sometimes that's the best guide," she decided. "True, feelings aren't *logical*, but if they're from the Creator, you best follow them. He tends to know a bit more than we do."

Perrin was silent as the horses plodded out of the development and along the dirt road between the wide open fields outside of Edge. "Well, I hope my feelings *are* from the Creator. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish."

Mahrree thought about that. "Do you regret following your feelings to Edge?"

“No,” Perrin answered instantly. “Never.”

“Then you followed the right feelings, correct? And if everything turned out well, the feelings were inspired by the Creator.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” he whispered mysteriously. “Mahrree,” he continued, his voice unexpectedly heavy, “speaking of children and school . . . have you considered Jaytsy going to full school? That will be the only option when she’s six, I’m sure of it.”

Mahrree pulled away from his arm and stiffened. She purposely didn’t think about it, just as she didn’t contemplate her own death, because there was

nothing do about it but observe its approach and weep.

"I think neither of us has a lot of faith in the Administrators' school," he said quietly. "But then again, who knows, maybe they might surprise us with—"

"—engraved invitations to move to Terryp's ruins in the west?"

Perrin sighed. "Yes, something remarkably well done like that. Mahrree, we have some time to see what happens. But if not . . ." He couldn't find the words.

"What are you trying to say, exactly?" she prompted.

"I'm not entirely sure myself, but . . ." He exhaled and looked around again.

“This morning I told you our most precious possessions were safe with Zenos. But they aren’t—”

“Our babies AREN’T safe?!” Mahrree squealed, twisting absurdly to look behind her as if she could see her children sobbing from miles away.

“Mahrree, Mahrree,” he chuckled, “I mean, they aren’t *our possessions*.”

Mahrree breathed deeply and patted her chest to catch her breath.

“Sorry,” he kissed her on the cheek. “Zenos is fine with them, I’m sure of it.” His face grew solemn. “But it’s been pressing deep into my mind, ever since I called them our possessions. It’s just that . . . Mahrree, we’re told in Command

School about the duties of soldiers and citizens. One thing we had to recite was that sending children to school was the citizens' responsibility to the government."

Mahrree blinked at the odd phrase. "Our *duty* to the *government?* To hand over *our* children to *their* care?"

"That was one of Querul the Second's statements, and the Administrators never abolished it. After all, citizens earn money which is then taxed and given to the government. In a way, the government—and it doesn't matter whose—sees themselves as *owning* the people. They don't *serve* us," he whispered harshly, "but instead, *we* work for *them*. Without our taxes,

they're nothing. They're especially interested in the children, because if they're successful, then so will be the government. Or perhaps I should say 'wealthy,' instead of 'successful,'" he grumbled in annoyance. "It all comes down to riches and power. You know that. None of this is publicly stated, of course. But Mahrree, that combination of words—children and duty and government—always sounded wrong."

His wife nodded so vigorously in agreement that, had she been wearing the ludicrous bird hat, it would have launched into flight.

"No government owns our children," Perrin growled under his

breath. "*We* don't even own our children! They belong to the Creator. Parents are guides, not possessors. And as their father, I'm responsible to the Creator for leading our family. I answer to no one else."

She grabbed his arm and kissed his shoulder. "How did I end up with such a man like you?"

Perrin smiled and groaned at the same time. "A man whose talk could be considered dangerous to community's welfare should the Administrator of Loyalty hear him?"

They both instinctively looked around again the gray landscape for a flash of red. All that looked back at them were black and white cows, none that

appeared to be spies in disguise.

"What does that administrator look like, anyway?" Mahrree fretted.

"Ever seen a weasel?"

"Yes."

"One that's been in a fight with a dog, in a rainstorm, then rolled in the mud and hasn't eaten for three days so it's a bit on the testy side? That's Gadiman."

"In other words, someone fun to have over for dinner."

"Indeed," he sighed. "I guess what I'm getting at, Mahrree, is maybe in five years if the schools aren't what we feel is best, we could look at doing *something else*." He took a deep breath

and looked around again.

"Like *what?*" Mahrree asked, her interest piqued.

"I'm not sure."

"Like what we did before the Great War?" Mahrree was all energy now as her history lessons unfolded. "Of course! No one sent their children to school! All the parents took turns and spent a part of each day teaching their children and their neighbors' children at their homes, then worked with them in their shops and fields. We merely modified that after the end of the war, but . . . *why* did we do that?"

Her face contorted in trying to remember. She really didn't expect Perrin to answer, and he couldn't have

supplied one. She squinted in the distance as if reading a far away text for an answer, and the answer came rushing to her.

"That's right! The first king! Querul wanted to make sure everyone learned the same things, so he instituted teachers in the villages to help work with the parents. Ohhh," she said, the beginnings of an idea formulating. "Ohhh, yes. Yes, it could be done! Perrin! The schools are a *holdover* from the period of the kings. We could do what was done *before*, since the beginning. We could approach the Administrators and, and, and . . . petition to not follow an old edict of the kings, but teach our children ourselves!

Oh Perrin, you're smart!"

"Mahrree," he started cautiously, "you make an excellent point, but I'm not sure the Administrators would see school as an 'antiquated holdover'."

"But couldn't we ask? What would be the harm in asking?"

Perrin thought for a moment. "I can see the harm in asking about other things, but teaching? We'd be easing the burden on *their* school system, as long as our children are successful and still later pay taxes . . ."

"I'll even write the petition!" Mahrree said, full of energy. "Let's keep your name out of it. I'll sign it alone, as a teacher asking for this option if a child is frequently ill or immature or slow or

something. If we could get permission for one child, then we could maybe later get it for our own. Let me do this, please!"

Perrin thought again.

"I really can't think of a reason why we shouldn't try," he responded.

But somewhere in the back of his head a tiny part of his mind flinched as he remembered the words, *Most dangerous woman in the world.*

Late that afternoon Mahrree wrote a carefully worded and logical letter. Several wheels had been turning in her

mind for the past few moons, and they came all together in the message she didn't show to her husband before she sealed it. She didn't want him to feel any responsibility, nor did she want to feel any of his influence. Once the children were down for a nap, she brought it herself to the messengers' office north of the markets and walked home feeling rather satisfied.

But before any of that, she interrogated Shem extensively about what her babies did every minute while she was gone. She couldn't decide if she was happy or disappointed that the three of them seemed to have had a wonderful time. Peto even began to cry when Perrin took him from Shem, and Jaytsy kissed

Shem on the cheek as he got up from the floor to leave.

Shem noticed Mahrree's disillusionment and Perrin's suspicious glare.

"This is what my uncle taught me to do," he explained. "Win over the children so that they always have another adult they can turn to when their parents get too difficult to handle," he winked. "Don't worry, they still love you more. I'm merely a new plaything. So," he said with a teasing look as he took his jacket from the chair. "Did you two have fun? See anything interesting? Plot against the Administrators? Learn anything new?"

Perrin and Mahrree looked at him blankly, neither quite sure how to answer him.

"All right," Shem said slowly as he put on his jacket. "So how about I come back in two weeks and let you two out again so you can change the world?"

The Shins exchanged a meaningful look.

Shem grinned. "What in the world did the two of you *do* in just three hours?!"

"Thank you, Private," Captain Shin said. "I'll see you in the morning. That will be all."

Late that night Barker, the ‘puppy’ which was growing so large and heavy that he already out-paced every other full-grown dog in Edge—and gave smaller ponies an inferiority complex—snored inside his dog house that was the size of a small shed. He was consigned to sleep outside whenever the weather wasn’t freezing.

Until he smelled the bacon.

His eyes perked open, his nose sniffed the air, and he lumbered out of the dog house towards the scent that came from the back fence by the alley.

A man in a black jacket lurking in the shadows tossed Barker one slice,

then a second. As the dog gulped them down, the man came up to the fence. Gingerly he reached over and started to pet the massive dog's head.

"Well done," he whispered. "Well done."

The Administrators in Idumea receive hundreds of letters each week. All are sent to the Division of Letter Readers who skim the contents and prepare one of several different pre-drafted responses. The Junior Letter Skimmers practice their best handwriting as they create stacks of

prepared answers, waiting for the Senior Letter Skimmers to fill in the specific blanks and send the form letters back to the hopeful citizens.

Form letter number one contains the phrase, “We will look into your issue and respond as we see fit.” This was the most popular letter in the department and had the effect of making the recipient feel listened to, understood, and maybe even important.

But its real value lay in the fact that the wording allowed the Administrators to never have to send any more correspondence if they didn’t “see fit.”

And they didn’t “see” most of the time.

Another version reported that, “We

appreciate your concern and assure you that the Administrators are doing all that they can," which also vaguely negated the call for additional action while making the recipients feel the need to proudly hang the letter on their cooling cabinets.

Then there were the, "We do not become involved in local issues such as chicken thievery or loud neighbors. Consult your local magistrate and/or fort" letters, and the occasional, "We are certain the birth of your child [insert name here] was a joyous occasion for you" forms.

But some letters catch the skimmers' eyes and are sent on ahead to

the Main Skimmer, who then sends them on to the head of the Letter Readers. Some lucky letters leave this division to go to the specific departments, such as Office of Family, or Commerce, or Farming.

And every once in a great while a few of those letters move on, after visiting the full hierarchy of their intended department, to the Administrators themselves and the desk of Mr. Gadiman, Administrator of Loyalty.

This particular day a letter from the little village of Edge sat in front of Gadiman. His mouth twitched as he read and reread the words.

It was borderline.

The writer *could* have been sincere in her desire to help children that, as she phrased it, "would benefit from an alternative form of education."

Yet something in the very idea of questioning the Administrators' educational policies had alarmed the Department of Instruction.

Perhaps it was the subtle insinuation that the current school system seemed like a remembrance of the era of kings that the Administrators were trying so hard to eliminate.

Or maybe it was the suggestion that current educational procedures may be unsuitable to meeting the needs of some children.

Or maybe it was the assertion that parents could make decisions about their children, freeing the Administrators from any liability in their education.

Or maybe it was because an annoying woman was pointing out the faults of the Administrators.

Nothing in the letter specifically, however, suggested undermining the government—the Administrator of Loyalty's primary concern.

But he could never understand people's need to be *different*, only to be difficult. It was like herding hogs, the diverging ways some people insisted on going. They were all destined for the same fate at the butcher's, so Gadiman

couldn't understand why they fought it so much.

He tapped the feathered end of his quill on the letter as he pondered it.

The idea that someone was thinking beyond the bounds of what the Administrators advised was slightly troubling. Most likely nothing would ever come of this woman's letter. She was merely a small teacher in a small village.

Still, small things had the disturbing tendency to grow larger.

Especially when such things had such *connections*.

Administrator Gadiman made some notations on additional pieces of paper.

One note recommended that the first

form letter be sent to the writer with a signature from some junior assistant in the Department of Instruction.

The second note indicated that the writer was the wife of the commanding officer in Edge.

Captain Shin's file sat in front of him. Next to his name was a blue dot of paint indicating perfect compliance and noteworthy performances. Gadiman leafed through the pages of the file and found nothing alarming. He didn't expect to, considering whose son he was.

The Administrator of Loyalty set the file aside and picked up a new, empty one. In large bold letters, he printed a name along the top. He placed the

original letter and his notations in the file, then put a drop of yellow paint next to the name.

Mahrree Peto Shin was now officially Watched.

Gadiman was going to have to get another crate. His office was filling with files full of yellow and red dots. Or he needed a bigger office.

Two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

"Question," asked Mal. "What kind of a *woman* writes a letter to the Department of Instruction?"

Brisack held a piece of parchment. "*Mrs.* Shin?" he said, looking at the writing again and shaking his head.

Mal nodded. "Yes. And look, she signed it alone. I hadn't considered her as more than an appendage to her husband, but she's demonstrating independent thought."

"I realize you may not know this, but many women are not *always* completely under the control of their husbands and frequently do things without them," Brisack said with a smirking hint of approval. "Besides, would our Captain Shin marry anyone who didn't?"

"I suppose not," Mal said with a

slight glare. “You know, it sounds as if your appreciation of *our captain*, and now *his wife*, is increasing. Objectivity, my good doctor?”

Brisack waved that off. “Oh, come now, didn’t you ever feel a bit of personal interest in your research subjects?”

Mal sighed. “Only occasionally, for a moment. But once that personal connection is recognized, it can be dealt with and destroyed. I’m warning you—don’t get too attached to Shin. Or his wife. All research subjects will eventually be terminated. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” Brisack said reluctantly while Mal scowled. “But I

can't help but wonder, might *you* be intrigued by Mrs. Shin?"

The older man shrugged grudgingly. "While I hadn't considered observing her, she just might be worth our attention. Now, read the *entire* letter." An odd, somewhat sickly smile appeared on his face.

It was as if Nicko Mal wasn't used to demonstrating genuine happiness, and it nauseated him.

Seeing him truly *happy* about something naturally put Brisack on edge. The good doctor held the letter up to his eyes to read it in the dim light.

"This is really quite bold, suggesting that the Administrators are

extending the practices of the kings. But it's subtly worded, so I'm surprised Gadiman noticed it. Only an intelligent woman could craft such a sentence," his voice warmed without his noticing. "No wonder the administrator over education couldn't recognize it." He chuckle softly. "Something concerned him about the letter, but he couldn't discern exactly what."

Mal nodded. "Initially I wondered, is she truly intelligent or did she accidentally write the wrong words?"

"Sounds like another question for us to test," Brisack grinned. "I wonder if her husband knows what kind of thinking she's committing. Look at this line, suggesting that parents be allowed to

supervise their children's education and not hold the government liable!" He chuckled as he shook his head. "No, it's not accidental. She's far too clever, and too often."

His tone grew so appreciative it dangerously approached adoration.

"Indeed, she's a little *too* perceptive. No wonder her letter made it all the way to the top."

Mal sat back in his chair, watching his companion's growing ardor with amusement. "Keep reading. I don't think you've reached *the end* just yet." His smile took on an uncomfortably pleasant, yet also intestine-knotting, quality.

Brisack squinted to read the neat,

careful handwriting. A moment later his breathing stopped. His eyes quit moving across the page. His chest inflated and his lips pressed tightly together.

Mal's smile turned positively diarrheal, spreading all over his face.

Breaking their rule, Brisack grabbed a candle and lit it in order to make sure he actually read the words correctly.

He did.

"Why, that little . . . *sow!*" the good doctor swore in aggravation.

Mal's eyebrows went up, never before hearing his companion use that vulgar term for women, and his smile grew to epidemic proportions. "I see you found it."

“How dare she?!” Brisack spluttered. “Did Gadiman notice this?”

“He didn’t mention it,” Mal said easily, almost cheerfully. “He was more concerned about what the Administrator of Education pointed out to him. I suppose that since that section was also so *subtly worded*, he didn’t notice it. But apparently you did.”

Brisack flattened the letter on his lap and read the sentences out loud that caused his face to contort and his language to burn.

“‘I therefore request that I be allowed to conduct such a trial, the results of which I would happily share with the Administrators and Chairman.

While what I am requesting is untested, it is only through conjecture, then trial, that we can see if such an alternative to education would be beneficial for this small segment of our citizenry. After all, it is through conjecture that we have accepted that the rest of the world is poisoned and uninhabitable, and it is through conjecture that it is assumed women are unable to safely bear more than two children.' *Conjecture?! Assumed?!"* Brisack exploded.

Mal wiped a bit of Brisack spittle off his face.

"I proved *conclusively* that women can't bear more than two children! How dare she question my research methods?!"

"Keep reading," was all that Mal said, his smile settling in for a long pandemic.

Brisack's eyes bulged and he turned back to the letter. It took only a moment for the next explosion to occur.

Mal had pulled out his handkerchief in preparation.

"'If you allow me to conduct this test of teaching very small groups of children in the home, I will do so using only volunteering parents and children. The results should be measurable, which should please the Administrators who have in the past year accepted other research conducted without the use of any volunteers—' She's alluding to *my*

research, isn't she?! Why, *that little*—"

Mal stopped him with a raised hand.

"Not that I don't appreciate you making a diversionary case for keeping our population down—it's not as if suddenly the women of the world had an outbreak of baby hunger and each wanted to have an unconscionable amount of children—but I'm curious, Doctor: who *d i d* you evaluate in this study of yours? I'm afraid I never took the time to read your full report, I only glanced at the notice we sent out. And since we don't *have* any women that have more than two children, at least, not for *long* . . ." He waited for the doctor's explanation.

Brisack guffawed, scoffed, and smacked his lips.

Mal grateful he still had the handkerchief available.

Brisack finally blurted, “Why, why I *couldn’t* study anyone in particular, now could I? Not without permanently maiming the mind of some poor woman, or destroying her body! Who’d volunteer for that? Instead I employed a method of exponential application.”

“Ah, the more syllables it has, the more legitimate your made-up *conjecture* is?” Mal leered.

“No, it’s valid,” Brisack said defensively. “I looked at the effect one child has on a mother, then, based on the

few women I could find with two children," his voice sped up, "extrapolated the effects of continued childbearing by applying a logic sequence that I created—" his tongue was now running a race with his lips, "—to gauge the changes and distortions to mind and body that one could reasonably and exponentially expect to occur with subsequent birthing!"

He paused only to take a breath, then exclaimed, "It was all quite carefully constructed!"

Mal's smile continued to infect his entire body. "I have no doubt, my good doctor. But she makes an interesting point—*you have no real proof*. Nothing measurable, no one to really evaluate. It

was all simply pure *conjecture*. Interesting—for a woman in the throes of the insanity caused by birthing *two* children in such a short amount of time, she's rather insightful. Isn't she?" Mal actually fluttered his eyelashes.

"How dare she?!" was all Brisack could froth.

"Yes, yes," Mal said with malicious merriness, thoroughly enjoying his companion's fury and divining new ways to prolong it. "I can't help but consider, *before* child birthing, we never heard from the woman. And now, after two children, we get this most carefully crafted letter with alarming insights and subtle intimations that men

with lesser minds couldn't recognize."

He tapped his lip as if in deep thought.

"Almost . . . *almost* as if giving birth has made her *more intelligent*," Mal said slowly. "As if that letter on your lap has invalidated your study because everything you just claimed about the affects of birthing on women, she's just proven to be—" his stomach-churning grin returned, "—*completely false*."

It was the light that was bothering him, Brisack concluded later.

The vast library that used to be a throne room was always dim or dark when they met. But that night the faint glow of the candle cast an odd hue on

every feature, causing shadows to occur where they never were before, making nothing look the way it should look, or the way the doctor *assumed* they should appear.

Instead, the tiny light that hurt his eyes twisted everything into different and strange shapes, yet at the same time they were also distantly familiar, and that threatened everything.

He blew out the candle.

The world became black enough for him to think again without annoying distractions, allowing him to see things precisely the way he needed them to be seen.

“In every study there’s an

anomaly," he declared, once again in complete control of his faculties, "which won't conform to the norms and defies the accepted truth. Anomalies must be tossed out to clarify the study and develop the irrefutable results."

"She's also challenging the most recent findings of the expedition sent west by the Administrator of Science," Mal reminded him. "Although Hitchin wouldn't care. Like a good scientist he looks at the carefully selected evidence, makes up his mind about what it all means, then listens to nothing else than his own intelligence." He almost chuckled.

Brisack looked back at the letter. "No one thinks about that land beyond

the western desert anymore. Maybe only a handful of people. Who was it that mapped it years ago? Someone named Terryp?"

"I believe so. All his maps were destroyed. I made a thorough search when I took over four years ago. Nothing's hidden in any cabinets anywhere."

Brisack stared at the carefully penned letter. She didn't rethink a single word. "Doesn't mean there isn't something still remaining," he whispered more to himself. "What did Hitchin's men do out there for two seasons anyway?"

"I actually read that report," Mal

said, examining his fingernails. “Had to. Needed to make sure the argument for containment was made correctly. The ‘research team’ camped at the edge of the forests outside of Sands, watching the desert for a full season. If they had seen any animals come out, then they would have gone in.”

Brisack stared blankly, no longer seeing Mrs. Shin’s writing. “So Hitchin concluded that the western land was still poisoned because . . .”

“He used sound scientific methods as you did, Doctor,” Mal smiled coldly. “He extrapolated that there was nothing coming from the *other* side of the desert, so there *was* nothing alive on the other side to come through. The land to the

west is still dead, and therefore so would be anyone who was foolish enough to go there. I believe he said he may have employed some kind of logic sequence. Maybe the same one as you?"

"She saw right through his so-called research," Brisack whispered. "That's why she listed it here. She can *see* . . . somehow she *knows* . . ."

"You were right earlier—she's an anomaly. So is he," Mal said steadily. "So when do we eliminate 'the anomalies' that plague both of our research?"

Brisack felt his composure slipping out of his grasp again. One part of him was enraged by Mrs. Shin's doubts

about his studies, and it demanded revenge for her arrogance.

It was ready to shout, *Today!*

Yet another part, the side he was more familiar with, that listened to reason and stepped back frequently to watch the world that swirled around him pleading to be put into some kind of order, quietly nagged him. *Then you'd never know. There's simply too much potential research here to eliminate just yet. There must be a way to prove they can conform. A way to force their conformity.*

"It could be done," Mal continued in a soothing tone. "Even though you went to such lengths to get a message to her husband to ensure she remained

alive last year. It's not too late to reverse your ways. I'm curious, Doctor—any regrets about saving her now?

"I did it for the babies," Brisack said, not particularly sure if that was an honest answer. Not completely sure of anything just yet.

"And not for her?"

"I don't know," the doctor reluctantly confessed. "Babies need mothers, after all. Otherwise, they're a burden on society."

"But mothers like *this* one?"

"Husbands need wives," Brisack tried again, hoping the statement would feel true. "Well, *some* men think they need wives."

Mal shook his head slowly. “So you did it for *him*, did you?”

Brisack sighed. “He does seem to love her, from what I’ve heard.”

“She’s a potentially dangerous woman, Brisack,” Mal pointed out.

“She hasn’t done anything wrong. Yet,” the doctor pointed back.

“A letter will be wanted in Edge in response to this,” Mal gestured to the parchment still on Brisack’s lap. “We can send a few *other* things in response as well.”

“It’s too early to eliminate,” Brisack whispered, although he wasn’t sure why. The words just came out of his mouth, bypassing his brain which was

still too confused to formulate a speculation as to why. "We can *still* see what it would take to break this horse and his mare. Perhaps they're not anomalies, but extremes of what we're proving. They still may be within our research, simply on the edges. We have to prove that. They *are* just like everyone else."

Mal grinned, and had the candle still been lit, it would have been snuffed out by the darkness of his smile. "I couldn't agree more. All of this has thrown a most stimulating twist to all our assumptions. She'll receive an answer, form letter number one, as recommended by Gadiman. She'll be thrilled with it until her husband points out that

everyone receives the same letter. Then we'll see what she does next."

"Agreed," Brisack nodded, the letter tight in his hands. He was grateful that someone else provided an answer, laid before him a path that he could take, since he couldn't find any path for himself.

Any route is better than none when you can no longer find your way. Everyone knows that.

"But we can't allow her to think she knows anything, that she's as intelligent as she believes she is," Brisack pointed out. "She must be put in her place."

"I propose that we begin new research, a test of Mrs. Shin," Mal said.

"Let's see how curious, intelligent, and *nosy* this creature truly is. I suspect she may be a cat. Most females are. This letter may have just been some feminine whim which will die away just as quickly, proving that she's as flighty as every other woman. But if she writes *again*," Mal's voice developed a sharper edge, "and demonstrates that she's passed our test, then we may have to develop some news ways of proving her."

"What kind of test do you have in mind?"

"I've been thinking—she's opposed to Full School, and a few quiet rumors have been floating that others may be unhappy as well. But we can drown

several cats in one well here, so to speak. The Department of Instruction is already drafting a document expounding upon the finer points of Full School—" Mal's sickly smile returned, "—and its goals for the future. That will demonstrate to any questioning citizens how little they really understand. Should anyone respond to it—and *how*—we'll have a clearer picture of who we need to further humble.

"But I doubt anything will come from it," he said, almost disappointedly. "People are stupid. And they're too stupid to know they're stupid, until someone points their stupidity out to them. This document will do that.

Earlier this evening I read through the first drafts. It's fantastic."

Brisack's shoulders relaxed that no decisions were his that night. "How long until it's ready?"

"A few weeks, at least. Probably more." Mal gestured to the letter. "We'll wait on the Form Letter, too. Let her stew for a time."

Brisack nodded. "There's something else. I nearly forgot the reason we're here—I haven't heard anything from our new man in Edge. There should have been some kind of contact in the past four moons."

Mal nodded slowly. "Not sure what happened to the new recruit I selected. I'm still waiting on the north about that.

Communication has become exceptionally spotty up there. But it seems we still have an inside man, someone our observers in Edge likely put in, not knowing we had someone else chosen. Word filtered up recently through the relays that the other man will not make contact unless absolutely necessary. He sees his task as keeping Shin 'in the game.' To do so, he's chosen to keep a low profile."

"Hmm. If he's *too* quiet, we won't get much information, will we? Do we want to encourage this?" said Brisack.

"I realize it's not exactly what *you* wanted," Mal said, "but we have other sources until we find out what happened

to the other new recruit. Let this ‘quiet man’ keep his low profile until we’re ready to demand something more.”

Brisack nodded and stared deep into the shadows of the room, willing them to stay in their places.

Chapter 7 ~ “Someone *like* her, but *not her*.”

Perrin remembered the date: the 16th Day of Raining Season.

It was four weeks since Mahrree sent her letter to the Department of

Instruction and, he was secretly relieved, she had yet to receive a response.

As he walked briskly home in the falling snow that evening he hoped again that if she did get an answer, it would be one of the form letters. The moment she'd left the house to put that envelope into the message carrier's bag, Perrin had begun to regret it. She likely hadn't said anything seditious or threatening, but merely the fact that she said anything at *all* could be construed as something *more*. That was just the way they thought in Idumea, as if the water in the city—specifically the springs that fed the red and orange Administrative Headquarters—caused paranoid delusions.

But then again, she was only a little wife from a tiny village and no one in the world would ever think twice about her.

The more he told himself that along his damp jog home, the closer he came to believing it.

He trotted up the front steps where snow was just beginning to accumulate, and paused before opening his front door, prepared for almost anything. He took a deep breath and pushed. The door stuck partway.

"Not surprising," he mumbled, trying to shove it open. "Knew I should have tried the back door." He slipped his body in as far as it would go, but it

wasn't far enough. His broad chest lodged securely between the frame and the door, and he realized he should've taken off his overcoat before trying to force his way in.

"Mahrree?" he called hesitantly.

There was no sound from the surprisingly quiet house.

He took a deep breath and shoved open the door the rest of the way. The sound of chairs tumbling to the ground behind it made him cringe.

On the floor he saw what had jammed the door: one of his work shirts was wedged in the gap. He worked it free and dared to examine the rest of the room.

"Oh, boy," he groaned. "Or rather,

boys."

He took a step, felt something give way and crumble under his boot, and immediately chose not to look down. He had done that last week, and regretted it.

"Not that I don't appreciate the effort," he muttered as he picked his way through the mess, "but it really *is* a small house—"

Giggles stopped his forward progress. He froze in place to identify the sound.

"Now *girls?*"

The giggles floated to him again, from the kitchen.

He exhaled. "It's about time!" He plowed through the rest of the gathering

room, past the eating table that was buried under too many things for him to identify, and opened the door to the kitchen.

It was bursting with females.

Mahrree was just about to open her mouth to say something when she saw her husband. "Oh, is it that time *already*?"

"Yes," he said slowly, looking at the two teenage girls who stared back at him uncertainly.

"Perrin, you remember Sareen and Teeria? They were my students when we first met."

"I do," he lied, but smiled at them anyway. "Don't tell me *t h e y* need watching after school, too?"

Sareen, holding Peto, giggled.

That's right, Perrin thought to himself. The Giggler. The other must be The Smart One. There was a third one, The Hair Tosser, but she's gone to some other village to spend a few seasons with her grandmother.

"No, Captain Shin," Teeria rolled her eyes and she wiped Jaytsy's runny nose. "We're here to clean up and start dinner for Mrs. Shin."

"You were right," Mahrree sighed. "I do need help in the afternoons. So I hired me some."

He looked around the empty kitchen devoid of any smells suggesting dinner. "Ah. And they've done an excellent job,

too."

Mahrree gently slapped his arm. "You're such a tease. I haven't seen the girls in many moons so we're catching up first."

"Understood," he said, pulling up a chair and sitting down.

Sareen's giggle strangled in her throat.

Jaytsy slid down out of Teeria's tense arms and climbed up on her father's lap.

"Oh, don't mind me," Perrin said cheerily to the shocked girls as he cuddled Jaytsy. "Since I have a daughter, I need to learn how women talk. Besides, after spending all day around only soldiers—"

Sareen got a dreamy look in her eyes, and Teeria actually sighed longingly. Mahrree looked at her former students with amused concern.

Perrin blinked a few times. "—I need something to entertain me until dinner's ready."

"I was going to start on that," Mahrree promised him. "The girls will get to work on the gathering room. It's not too bad, is it?"

Perrin's eyebrows went up. "Ever see any twisters up here in Weeding Season?"

Mahrree chuckled and shook her head. "Too close to the mountains, I guess."

“Well, I’ve seen the aftermath, north of Orchards,” he told her. “And in our gathering room, ten twisters touched down, didn’t they?”

“Only nine,” Mahrree told him. “Poe was ill today. Not that his mother was too happy about having to miss a day at the Edge of Idumea Estates to *care* for her *son*,” she said in a pinched tone. “She wanted to leave him here in our bedroom.”

“No Poe today?” Perrin nodded. “That explains why the ceiling was still relatively clean.”

“That wasn’t Poe’s fault last week!” Mahrree laughed. “That was Shem’s. I’m not taking any more of his

ideas."

"Just mine?" he grinned.

"I'm wondering if I should listen to *you* anymore now. Having the boys act out Terryp's Large Man Who Holds Up the World? They tried to hold up everything, unsuccessfully."

Perrin chuckled. "But they went home happy?"

"Very!" Mahrree beamed. "And guess what? All of them passed the Department of Instruction exam."

"Well done, Mrs. Shin!" Perrin beamed back. "Told you they'd need only half an hour of instruction each day."

"And then two hours of *de*struction?"

Teeria looked at her former teacher with alarm. “You spend only half an hour tutoring them? I thought they were here for two and a half hours!”

“They are,” Mahrree said. “But honestly, girls, can you imagine trying to keep ten boys, ages eight to thirteen, seated for two and half hours studying? After all day in school?!”

Teeria shook her head. “I’m so glad I finished last year.”

Sareen exhaled a sad giggle. “And I still have to finish this year. I couldn’t imagine sitting around for another two hours *after* each day.”

“See? And I heard from one of their teachers that all of them passed a few

points higher than the rest of the children." Mahrree nodded at them triumphantly.

"You'll have to start letting in girls then, too," Teeria warned her.

"There's no room!" Mahrree exclaimed. "But maybe someone else will see the need and fill it."

"Miss Mahrree," Teeria started shyly, "Did you say *Private Zenos* was helping you?" Her normally serious eyes glowed with hope.

"Yes," Mahrree said, eyeing the eighteen-year-old. "He comes by once a week to spend the afternoon with the boys. He's planning next week to send them all on a relay race if the weather is cooperating."

"Does he run, too?" Teeria breathed as her face flushed. "*Fast?*"

Perrin looked down at his daughter, slowly shook his head, and groaned softly.

"I'm not sure, Teeria," Mahrree struggled to keep her face sober. "Perhaps you'll want to come by earlier that day and *watch* him."

It was her little whimper of amorous anticipation that made Perrin look up at Teeria. The poor girl flushed red, glanced at the captain, turned purple, and headed for the kitchen door.

"I may have to consider that. I best see to the private—*gathering* room. Come, Sareen."

Sareen squinted after her friend who fled out the door.

"I pointed him out *first*," she muttered as she handed Peto to Mahrree, grabbed a pail and cleaning cloth, and headed out to the eating table.

Perrin and Mahrree covered their mouths to conceal their snorts, but tears of laughter leaked from their eyes.

"I better warn Zenos!" Perrin chortled in a whisper.

"Don't!" Mahrree giggled. "Let's see how well he handles an ambush." She placed Peto on Perrin's other knee.

"And how are my little ones?" Perrin asked, kissing each one on the forehead. They leaned into him, bonked

their heads against each other instead, and both burst into tears.

Mahrree smiled in sympathy as Perrin soothed them. "They're exhausted. They seem to think they have to keep up with the boys. They *were* dirtier, but the girls already cleaned them up."

"So hiring the girls—I'm assuming this means that all the parents agreed to pay you for this After School Care?"

She nodded. "I was really surprised. I thought they would be more opposed to it, but they seem desperate for someone to take in their sons."

"Well, if they do at their homes what they've done to *this place* . . ."

"There's enough to pay the girls,"

Mahrree said, chopping carrots and potatoes, "Teeria's saving up to go to the college at Mountseen next year, we can cover our expenses, and still save up for a long sofa."

"You've got it all figured out, don't you?" Perrin smiled as Jaytsy, thumb in mouth, snuggled into his chest, and Peto tried to kick her off his father's lap.

"Except that I'm ready for a nap as soon as dinner's over," she murmured wearily, plopping the vegetables into a large pot.

"Would you want your life any other way?"

She shook her head. "I think my life is as close to perfect as I could ever

have imagined it. Now, if I could just find some time to still read."

"You can read when these two," he held his daughter and son, each in an arm, just out of reach of the other, "go off to Mountseen for college. Until then, I had an idea for the boys."

Mahrree bit her lip. "Why does my chest always tighten when your eyes glow like that? Let me have your latest idea for Education, Shin Style."

"Catapults!"

Her eyebrows went up. "Those take a lot of work, times ten."

He shook his head. "Don't make them so big. Something smaller, simpler. You don't need to throw pumpkins to demonstrate the principle. Only

snowballs."

Mahrree grinned. "I love it! Just yesterday two mothers told me in the market that they didn't want their boys throwing snowballs at each other, because they might mess up their outfits."

"That's why you've pulled out all my old work shirts, isn't it? Took some out of the rag bag to protect their precious clothing?"

"Yes, and now we can allow them to launch snowballs," she grinned impishly, "and if a snowball happens to hit another boy, they can blame the invention and not the friend. I can't understand why these parents won't let

their boys act like boys!"

Perrin's eyes glowed. "I absolutely love the way your mind works, my darling wife."

"That's because our minds are so much alike," she winked at him.

"After dinner I'll work on that sled and harness for Barker. Then he'll be able to pull the children up to the fort when you bring your Ten for their tour week after next."

Mahrree glanced at the great black beast lying against the back door, a puddle of drool forming on the ground under his mouth. Barker was as tired out as the children, having been one of the many items the boys attempted to pick up for two hours that afternoon. Otherwise,

he would have been crowding Perrin's lap as well.

"Sure he couldn't pull all of us?"

Perrin shrugged. "He could probably pull you."

"Right into the river," Mahrree shivered. "Never mind."

"Oh, you can control him," Perrin said. "He's slow enough."

"In his mind, yes. With his responses to commands, most definitely. But when he sees water? Nope."

Perrin chuckled. "Any messages today?" he tried to say casually.

"Nothing," she sighed, dropping several pieces of beef into the pot. "I suppose the Department of Instruction is

swamped by letters. Can't read all of them in a timely manner."

"Yes," he said, trying to keep the relief out of his voice, "most likely."

"Not as if I'd have time to do my study right now anyway," she sighed again. "But I really was looking forward to trying."

"You're already doing it, in a way," he pointed out. "Just keep notes of what you're doing with the boys, especially when you tutor them in their lessons, then record the results. That they scored higher than the rest of their class already suggests that teaching at home has potential."

She shrugged. "But that's only a small part of what I was hoping to test.

To do this right, I really need to—”

“Not add yet *another* project,” he said firmly. “Mahrree, it’s enough. And don’t worry about schooling just yet. We have plenty of time still. Jaytsy’s not even two yet.”

“I know, I know,” she admitted as she stirred the pot. “But recently I realized how quickly time rushes by. Do you realize that in a few weeks it will have been a whole year since you had Gizzada go shopping for a white coat?”

The long scar on his back itched to remind him. “I see what this is all about,” he said gravely.

She cocked her head in questioning.

“You want a white rabbit fur coat,

don't you? A little jealous of how *lovely* I must have looked?"

She snorted and laughed. "No, not at all! When I'm feeling down, I imagine you in it quite vividly and I'm cheered up for hours. No, it really *is* that time's going by so quickly. Peto pulled himself up today! Well, not for long. But he's only seven moons old."

"I wondered where the new bruise on his forehead came from," Perrin said, kissing it lightly.

"Before we know it, Jaytsy *will* be six years old and trudging off to school. I feel like I'm running out of time."

"I sometimes feel it, too," he confessed. "But more like a *sense of change* in the air. As if things will be

shifting soon, somehow."

"Oh, don't say that," she cringed. "It's not the coming of Planting Season already, so what we're feeling is probably a warning from the Creator."

"You know, most people would be *grateful* to receive warnings from the Creator."

Mahrree shrugged guiltily. "I am. It's just that I worry what it portends."

He nodded slowly. "Me, too. We have to make sure that—"

A crash in the gathering room made both of them wince.

"I can fix it!" Sareen called in a frantic giggle.

"I didn't realize we had anything

left to break," Perrin said, his eyebrows furrowed.

"Give it a few more weeks," Mahrree said. "We may be surprised what can still break."

After five more weeks, anything else that could possibly break did. Which made their lives much easier, now that they didn't have to worry about preserving anything intact. Even so, each time Perrin came home he'd warily open the door, bracing himself for just about anything.

And on the days that Zenos was in charge, that 'anything' could be truly nerve-wracking when the cold snows and icy rains of Raining Season forced them all inside. But Teeria always

showed up early those days to sit on the stairs and watch with adoring eyes the large, handsome young private who easily held the enthralled attention of all ten boys.

And at the end of those days, Private Zenos would shyly tip his blue cap at her and Sareen, and say, "Good evening, ladies." Then he'd rush out the door, much to the girls' weekly disappointment.

"Captain Shin," Teeria bravely approached him one afternoon, "can't you *order* him or something?"

Perrin folded his arms across his chest. "Order who to do what?"

Teeria gestured to the retreating

jacket of Private Zenos, who was out the door in a flash. “Him! To *talk* or something!”

“What kind of *something* are you hoping for?” Perrin asked slyly.

Teeria turned bright red and mumbled, “Never mind,” as she stormed off to the kitchen to help start dinner.

One night, Perrin noticed when he arrived home as the boys were leaving, Teeria didn’t even try talking to Shem, but was banging some pots noisily in the kitchen.

So instead Sareen was giving it a worthy go as Shem gathered the arrows and bows he had brought to introduce the boys to archery. Next week Mahrree would bring them up to the indoor

training arena at the fort, and four more soldiers would help Shem supervise the boys' first attempts at shooting arrows.

Actually, Perrin realized as he looked around his gathering room, *today* was their first attempts, if the three arrows lodged in the oak ceiling were any sign.

"I mean, what's it *like*, riding along the forest's edge, never knowing when someone could pop out at you with a dagger?" Sareen giggled at Zenos who was crouched on the ground putting the arrows back into the quiver. The seventeen year-old hovered over the soldier like an eager bee waiting for Planting Season.

“Just . . . nothing much,” Zenos said, shrugging. He glanced up and regarded his commander with a combination of relief and dread in his eyes. “Sorry about that, sir,” he gestured to the ceiling.

Perrin stared at the odd sight of the fletching of an arrow just at his eye level. His gaze followed the shaft that went straight up into a timber.

“Remarkable that it’s my ceilings that suffer the most when it’s Zenos Day.” He yanked the arrow out, pursed his lips, and looked down at his cringing private.

“The boys—they get a little over-eager,” Zenos explained anxiously as he

took the arrow out of the captain's hand. "Mrs. Shin stepped out of the room to try to put Peto down for a nap, and since the wind was blowing quite fiercely today . . . I suppose it wasn't the best idea to bring these *in* to the house."

Perrin winked forgivingly at him. "That's all right. It'll look like some more knotholes once I pull them out."

"Like the doors, sir? Can hardly tell, can you?" he asked hopefully. If he noticed Sareen so close to his side that she was practically crawling into his uniform, he gave no indication.

Perrin's eyebrow arched. "Just *how many* went into the doors, Zenos?" He looked around.

Zenos snatched up the two bows on

the ground. “I’m on duty in an hour, sir. Best get up to the fort for dinner—”

“You could stay here!” Sareen offered. “Eat with us!”

Perrin blinked at that. The girls never stayed to eat. That was probably why Sareen was avoiding his questioning glare.

“Have to get my sword,” Zenos said without looking at Sareen. “At least I’m wise enough not to wear *that* down here. Mrs. Shin?” Zenos looked past his ardent admirer and called to the kitchen, “I’ll be leaving now. Again, sorry about the arrows.”

Mahrree poked her head around the kitchen door. “You know my

philosophy: if there's no bloodshed—well, at least not a lot—then it was another successful day. Thank you, Shem!"

"Good-bye, ladies," Zenos said, still not looking directly at Sareen.

A loud scoffing sound came from Teeria the kitchen, and Sareen gripped Zeno's arm. "Good-bye, Private. Or may I call you *Shem*?"

Perrin held open the door for his private as Zenos's ears turned pink. Without another word he charged out of the house, and Perrin shut the door behind him before Sareen could follow.

Sareen smiled in triumph. "I get to call him Shem!" She grinned and set off to tidy the gathering room.

Perrin shook his head. “I’ve got a lot to learn about teenage girls before Jaytsy becomes one,” he whispered to himself as he made his way over to the eating room table. A folded piece of parchment caught his eye. Before he could pick it up, Mahrree came through the door.

“Look what finally came!” she beamed as she unfolded it. “Dated three days ago, the 49th Day of Raining Season, and all the way from Idumea!”

Perrin held his breath as he took the letter from her hands. A moment later he sighed in relief.

“Isn’t it wonderful? They’re going to consider my proposal! ‘We will look

into your issue and respond as we see fit'."

He folded the letter again and handed it back to her. "And you're responding precisely in the manner they want you to: believing they really care. This is form letter number one, Mahrree. I'm sorry. A senior letter skimmer read your message, and a junior letter skimmer filled out this reply. If you look at the style of handwriting for your name, then the body of the response, you'll see that they don't match. They have stacks of these letters, waiting for the names to be filled in."

"Oh," was all she quietly said, and Perrin felt a stab of regret for her disappointment. But it was safer this

way, it really was.

It took her only a moment to recover. “I’m going to send another letter,” she decided. “Telling them all about After School Care, and how other villages could benefit by having homes set up for children to have a place to go when their parents are still working.”

Perrin shrugged. “Maybe you’ll get form letter number two to add to the collection.”

“Your faith in me is overwhelming,” she said, her voice heavy with discouragement.

He put his arms around her. “We still have plenty of time. And Mahrree, honestly I feel much safer with your

failures than your successes."

He didn't add, *because I suspect you may be the most dangerous woman in the world.*

Barker was waiting that night. He watched the movements along the alley with drooling expectancy until finally the man in the black jacket appeared with the bacon. Barker leapt to his feet and trotted happily to the fence.

"Well done, well done," the man whispered, giving Barker the bacons strips. "Tonight, something new," he said as he scratched the dog's head. He

patted his chest. “Up, up, up.”

Barker hesitated, remembering how often he received a knee in his chest for jumping up on the captain and his wife.

Another slice of bacon appeared, held up high by the man.

There was only one way for Barker to get it. He slowly reared up on his hind legs and reached over the fence, his big front paws landing on the man’s chest.

“Up, up, up. Well done, well done.”

Two men sat in a dark room of an unlit building.

“Mrs. Shin must have fired this one

off the day after she received form letter number one," Brisack chuckled as he waved the parchment. "Had a taste of 'success,' so she wants more?"

"Perhaps," Mal tipped his head. "Or maybe she was told by the captain that she didn't get a personalized response."

"Maybe," Brisack said, reading the letter again. "Or maybe her husband doesn't even know she's sending letters."

"You think she's acting *secretly?*" Mal made a face, obviously never before entertaining the thought.

"A woman acting behind her husband's back? What an unusual development!" Brisack barked a laugh.

Mal's expression remained unchanged.

"I know you never married," Brisack smirked, "but did you ever have a sister?"

"No."

"Mother?"

"Died when I was four."

"Aunt? Cousin? Grandmother?"

"No."

"Girlfriend?!"

"Once. She was too silly."

"I see," Brisack nodded slowly. "That explains your complete lack of knowledge of women. All these years you've assumed they are merely watered-down, washed-out versions of

men, haven't you?"

"Are you trying to make a point, Doctor?" Mal clasped his hands impatiently.

"Yes," Brisack couldn't help but chuckle, "but not one I think you'll ever understand!"

Mal glared. "So you're suggesting that perhaps Mrs. Shin is sending letters without her husband's knowledge."

"It's a possibility," Brisack acknowledged. "She may think someone's taking her suggestion seriously."

"And that's the wonderful irony, isn't it?" Mal's lips formed the slightest smile. "We *are* taking her seriously, just not in a way she expects."

"Then again, maybe she *does* know it's a form letter," Brisack suggested. "Maybe the captain *did* see it and tell her. So maybe this is a test of her own. Oh, how wonderful! And to think, just a short time ago was getting bored with all of this. She's making it interesting again."

Mal blinked. "A test of her own?"

"I had a colleague once observe a group of children taunting a teacher," Brisack smiled in recollection. "He was young and nervous and for a time he ignored their tossing small rocks at him. But after about half an hour, and several well-thrown pebbles, the teacher lost his composure and whipped three of the

boys."

"Dr. Brisack, has anyone ever told you that you don't make your points very well?" Mal sighed.

The doctor chuckled. "*My point is*, the boys were trying to push the teacher to acknowledge them. He was obsessed with getting through his lesson—probably because he knew my friend was there observing him—and he was trying to proceed at any cost."

"So you're suggesting that she's going to keep sending letters until someone takes her out behind the school building and whips her," Mal intoned.

"In a matter of speaking," Brisack nodded. "I think she simply wants a personal message, to believe someone's

actually listening to her."

"Hmm," Mal grunted. "You know, I have a wide variety of whips that I use on the horses and dogs. Could try a cat . . ." A sneer grew on his face.

"I have no doubt that you do," Brisack responded coldly. "When will your test of her be ready?"

Mal rolled his eyes. "I don't think there's any department in all of government more slow to act than the Department of Instruction! If the world ended tomorrow, their committees wouldn't be able to 'formulate an educational strategy' for 'teaching it most effectively' for another twenty years."

Brisack smiled at Mal's attempt at sarcastic humor. "Which, of course, would be utterly unnecessary since the world *no longer existed*."

"I'm putting pressure on them," Mal said ominously enough to wipe the smile off of the doctor's face. "There's no logical purpose for them to take so long. It's as if they are always waiting for someone to give them permission to do the next thing, to check off every little detail before they continue. Without someone hovering over them, they don't work!"

"Sounds like the effects of Full School already," Brisack muttered.

"Which is what we want, I agree,"

Mal said, agitated. "We *want* the citizenry to hesitate before they act, to seek permission for every little thing! That's the only way to keep them contained and controlled. But I need *more* from their leadership! I need people willing to experiment, to dare, to innovate, to take the *initiative*—"

"Someone like Mrs. Shin?" Brisack waved her letter like a banner. "After School Care?"

In an uncharacteristic display of exhausted exasperation, Mal rubbed his temples with fingers. Through clenched teeth he said, "Someone *like* her, but *not her*. Send her form letter number two, in about four weeks. The Department of Instruction should be finished by then.

Or I'll finish them myself!"

"I suspect she'll keep throwing stones," Brisack warned.

"Let her. No one has more whips than me."

He's right, Mahrree thought to herself five weeks later as she watched from the front door the message carrier ride by her house yet again without dropping off a response to her second letter. Perrin kept reminding her that they did still have time. The end of Raining Season and the year 322 was just around the corner, but Jaytsy wouldn't be

turning two until halfway through Planting Season. And then it was *still* another four years.

Four very short years.

She shrugged that off and turned to admire again the latest addition to their family: the longest, widest, sturdiest sofa she could afford to have built, complete with very thick brown cloth that the furniture maker assured her would stand up to the abuses of ten rowdy boys, one very large captain, two small children, and even the unwieldy black dog that climbed slowly on to it and resisted all efforts of Mahrree to drag him off.

One should never own a dog that weighs more than one's self.

That's where he was again,

Mahrree grumbled to herself. Barker had taken over the sofa once more, since the children were napping and Mahrree had been working at the table. The only reason she tolerated the animal was because Perrin loved him so much. And her heart softened a little towards the beast when Shem confessed that it was actually him who brought the large black puppy to Perrin. Shem had found him abandoned, muddy, and whimpering along the canal by the fort. Perrin kept him for two days in the stables to make sure he would live before he brought him home.

How could Mahrree demand he be thrown out again? She had two old

blankets that she alternated throwing over the new cloth to keep it clean. Most of his body fit on it, except for his big paws and sharp nails.

"Just don't drool on it," she glowered at Barker as she passed him on her way to the kitchen.

He only twitched a black eyebrow.

Mahrree was starting to wash the dishes from midday meal when she saw Perrin hopping over the back fence.

"That can't be promising," she whispered. He always sent Shem with messages, unless—

The back door flew open and he smiled his practiced grin. "Hello, my darling wife!"

"What is it?" she asked tonelessly.

He leaned over and kissed her. "Can't I come home in the middle of the day to check on my wife and her new sofa? Oh. Wait. I see. There's someone *else* here, isn't there? What's his name? Out with it." He folded his arms and glared at her severely.

"You're right, Perrin," she tried to keep her face solemn as she wrung her hands. "I should have told you this before, but . . . there *is* someone else. Has been for some time. I've regretted the relationship from the beginning, and I never should've agreed to it. But now I'm trapped. No matter what I do, I can't get him to leave me alone. He resists all my attempts and . . . well, he's on the

sofa right now, *staring* at me."

Perrin nodded slowly. "Well, I'll take care of that. BARKER!"

They heard his claws on the wood floor eagerly scrambling to come to the only human he ever obeyed. He plunged through the door and sat obediently at Perrin's feet, the dog's melon-sized head even with Perrin's belly.

Perrin petted his head and opened the door for him to go out.

"Right into the muddy back garden!" Mahrree whimpered. "Not exactly what I was wanting. Well, you're far less gullible than Shem was last week when I pulled the same thing on him."

"That's because he told me about

it," Perrin chuckled. "Said he was so nervous that you might be serious about an unwanted man on your sofa that he nearly dropped his long knife. He still dreads using his sword, unless it's in practice."

"So, I'm still wondering why you're here . . ." she hinted.

His pastry smile returned. "There are, indeed, changes to the education of the world!"

For a brief moment her heart leaped, then it fell back into place when she realized his voice was far cheerier than his eyes.

"What have they done?"

"After *such* a successful debut on a

trial basis, Full School is now mandatory throughout the world, beginning with the upcoming Harvest Season. Isn't that wonderful?!" He could have frosted cakes with his grin.

Mahrree bared her teeth.

"That'll never do for a convincing smile, by the way," he gestured at her face. "Work on lifting the corners of your mouth, like this." He pointed to his own stiff grin.

"I'm not smiling," she assured him.

"Obviously." He sighed as he pulled out some folded pages from his jacket. "Thought you'd want to know as soon as possible. Teachers will no longer need to worry about consulting parents about what their children will

learn," he said, holding up the document in his hands. "Since it's *such* a *burden* . . ."

Mahrree snatched the official parchment from him. Forts always got news from Idumea a day before the village magistrates received their bundle to post on the notice boards. Maybe it was to hint to the army that trouble may erupt the next day.

Mahrree was near to boiling as she read out loud. "'All directives in children's education will now come directly from the Department of Instruction, under the supervision of the Administrator of Education.'" She let out a low whistle.

"There's more," he pointed. "But only if you feel compelled to read it."

She grunted. "Like running across a the remains of a mouse after Barker's had at it—as gruesome as it is, you feel *compelled* to see it all . . . 'All schools will now be under the guidance of Directors of Education, up to three depending upon the size of the village. These men will oversee school construction, teacher selection, and curriculum implementation, thus removing the responsibility of parents to worry about, for even one moment, their children's education.'"

"*What?*" Perrin said, moving behind her to read over her shoulder.

“I added the last part,” Mahrree confessed between her clenched teeth. She continued reading. “‘In order to improve management of the schools, new Educational Regions will be established to oversee the Directors of Education—’ So that’s two more levels of supervisors?”

“Well, there’s the Administrator, then the Head of the Department of Instruction, then the Overseers of the Educational Regions, then the Directors of Education—”

“Oh, this is insane!” Mahrree spat. “At least they can’t add any more levels, because I think they’ve exhausted the amount of titles they can come up with.”

Perrin shook his head wretchedly. "I can think of a few more, depending on how many more friends need pointless jobs. Give them time. They'll find a way to complicate this even further."

"Next they'll choose a representative for the parents who alone can discuss concerns with the Director, who then can send a message to the Overseers, who *might* pass it along to the Head of the Department, who *maybe* will remember to show it to the Administrator!"

"Ideas such as After School Care?" Perrin suggested.

"No. No new letter about that," she said in disgust.

Perrin pulled another envelope from his jacket.“This was brought to me by mistake.”

She dropped the document on the work table and snatched the envelope out of his hands, tearing it open in the process.

The writing she sneered at was frustratingly familiar. “‘We appreciate your concern and assure you that the Administrators are doing all they can . . .’”

“Form letter number two,” he tried to say brightly. “Your co llection is growing.”

She threw it down on the work table. “I’m completely voiceless!”

“That’s debatable,” he said daringly.

“You know what I mean!”

“Maybe you shouldn’t read the rest.” He subtly slid his hand over to the announcement about education.

But she was quicker to snatch it up.

“Each class will have twenty-five students?!” she declared a moment later. “Madness! How can a teacher get to know each child intimately enough to help him if she’s wrestling with twenty-five of them? Eight to ten was difficult enough!”

He only sighed.

“More?” she demanded.

His sickly-sweet smile returned and

he nodded to the document.

A moment later her upper lip curled. "They ARE making schools here! Big ones! Out of block! Oh, how *lovely!*"

"I believe it's deliberate," he said tapping his lips with his finger. "You see, the schools I saw in Idumea are very square, very plain, and very gray. Surround children with that much dullness so that their imaginations die, then a classroom of twenty-five *depressed* students will feel the same as ten *normal* lively children."

"That's probably true," she said, her eyes squinting in fury. "Our new director of schools, along with the new curriculum, will be arriving by the

middle of Planting Season," she said as she scanned the rest of the document. "So where's he going to stay?"

"I was asked to give him our study," he said.

"WHAT?!"

"Just teasing, just teasing!" he said, pulling her into his arms. "He's probably going to take a storage shed at one of the schools as his office."

"I hope the roof leaks on him," she snarled.

"That's my sweet, kind, compassionate wife," he said, stroking her light brown hair. "I knew you'd be open-minded and fair about this."

"I hope the roof leaks, the floor

floods, his desk molds, and trees collapse on it. Then a land tremor strikes, opens a crevice in the ground, and devours it all."

"And here I thought you would be small-minded and petty, wishing horrible things upon someone you don't even know. Some poor, hapless puppet of the Administrators who's doing his best to deal with a daunting situation—"

Mahrree could only grumble.

Chapter 8 ~ “It’s really quite progressive, as you can see. Lots of pages.”

The new educational director over Edge arrived right on time several weeks later in mid Planting Season, right after Jaytsy’s 2nd birthday. Perrin

brought Mahrree the news that Karna had met the newest arm of Idumea to punch into Edge and escorted him to his new office at the site of Mahrree's old school. Mahrree decided to give him a fair chance by letting him get settled for two weeks before he encountered the wrath of Mrs. Shin.

Besides, Perrin wouldn't *let* her meet him until Mahrree promised she would be polite and present the name of Shin properly.

And no, that didn't mean she could go wearing a sword or a hidden long knife.

It was a beautiful Planting Season afternoon when Mahrree left her two children napping while Mrs. Hersh sat at

the house, to meet Mr. Hegek. Mahrree needed to know, after all, what her After School Care boys would be tested on in the next year. That was the excuse she could give, in order to bypass demanding to know what terrible things the Administrators had done to education.

When she pounded on the thin wooden door of the office and opened the door, she wasn't quite prepared for what she found.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" a timid voice behind a pile of papers asked.

Mahrree peered into the shack, the one in which she and Perrin had shared a kiss the day after they were engaged. A

too-large desk was crammed in there, and the walls were now lined precariously with stacks of pages, not rakes and spades.

"I certainly hope so," she said crisply, craning her neck to find the person that belonged to the mousy voice. "I understand the Administrators have decided to tell us what our children should be learning in Edge. I'd like to see a copy of the plans."

Mahrree evaluated the man the peeked cautiously between two stacks to see her. Mr. Hegek was perhaps in his mid-thirties and only slightly larger than Mahrree, with black hair that could be ratty if not combed constantly, a nose too pointy, green eyes that were far too

small for his head, and arms not much thicker than hers.

Yes, she could like take him in a fist-fight. Perrin had taught her a few defensive moves that could easily turn offensive.

He raised his eyebrows as he searched his desk overflowing with stacks. “Of course, of course,” he said cheerily, which grated on Mahrree’s ears. “I have them here somewhere.” He stood up and looked through folders and pages. “And what age is your child?”

“I don’t have any in school yet. My oldest won’t be ready for another four years. I’m planning for the future.”

Mr. Hegek stopped searching his

desk and slowly looked up. “Then why are you worrying about it now?”

Mahrree smiled as sweetly as she could, although her eyes were poisonous. “Shouldn’t I be worried about what *all* children in our village are learning?” her voice dripped syrup. “As a concerned citizen, I should be aware of what my future shop keepers, lumberjacks, and weavers are being taught, shouldn’t I?”

He stood fully—but *shortly*, Mahrree noted with hostile approval—and looked her in the eye. “I suppose so. I only haven’t heard anyone expressing interest yet. I’m not so sure I can give you a copy.”

“*No parents* have expressed

interest?" She was stunned. Just as recently as three years ago, the last time Mahrree started a new school year, *she* was being briefed by her students' parents on what they expected her to teach their children. Now complete strangers were deciding what their children should learn, and not one parent was concerned what that might be?! To have so much trust in leaders they didn't know . . .

Mahrree struggled to remain sweet while a bitter taste grew in her mouth. "So why can't I have a copy?"

"They're for the parents," he shrugged. "Of children in school now," he clarified.

"And *no other* parents have come in inquiring about their children's education?"

Mr. Hegek, perhaps recognizing he was not much larger than Mahrree, tried to look a little taller. "Well, none *so far*—"

She sharpened her glare. "When did the parents first hear about the new lessons?"

"Perhaps five or six weeks ago." His stature slowly began to shrink.

"And how long have you been here, with the copies of those lessons?"

"Two weeks now," he melted.

"And in that time *no one* has come for a copy? How many do you have?"

Mr. Hegek cleared his throat. "Forty. I believe."

Mahrree gave him half of a genuine smile. "Certainly you can sacrifice *one* copy for me, then?"

"Look, Mrs. . . . Mrs. . . ?"

Time to represent the name properly, but likely not in the way Perrin intended.

"*Shin*," she said as heavily as an army.

Mr. Hegek's eyes grew big as he shriveled another two inches. "As in *Captain* Shin? *High General* Shin?"

Mahrree smiled fully, thoroughly enjoying the effect. "As in Mrs. *Mahrree* Shin, but yes, some connection there.

You see, I taught in the past before my first baby was born, and I most likely will return to teaching again someday __"

She didn't elaborate to say, *In my home, teaching only my children*.

"—and I merely want to know what to expect in the future. I also tutor ten boys."

"Of course, of course," Mr. Hegek said nervously. "For you, *Mrs. Shin*, I'm sure I can make an exception." He rummaged around his desk for another moment, held up a finger in remembrance, and turned to a large crate next to his desk. He pulled up several thick documents. "Do you want the full version for parents, or the shortened

version for the teachers?"

"Two versions?" Mahrree stared wide-eyed at the volume of papers involved for one year's planning of school. She could usually keep all that she was going to do with her students summarized on two sheets of parchment.

Mr. Hegek shrugged apologetically.

Mahrree sighed. "I'm feeling ambitious. Give me the full version." Why the parents received a larger version than the teachers made her intensely suspicious.

Mr. Hegek smiled as he handed it to her. "It's really quite progressive, as you can see. Lots of pages."

"Mm-hmm," she said dubiously as

she eyed the document stamped on thin papers. "And as everyone knows, volume certainly must connote quality, therefore *progressiveness*."

He beamed in agreement.

She groaned to herself, rapidly losing faith in the Administrators' man who didn't notice her sarcasm. "And what have you thought of it so far?" she asked as she thumbed through the dense text.

"Uh, well, I uh . . ." he stammered.

Mahrree looked up at him critically.

"I, uh, haven't read it *all* yet," he confessed. "Quite a bit to do around here reorganizing all the schools, you see . . ."

"I guess that's why you have the

Weeding Break, right? To catch up on all this light reading?"

He coughed a tense laugh. "Yes, of course."

Mahrree nodded. "How about I read through it and bring you a report in a few weeks? Give you a head start on the project."

Mr. Hegek gave her a real smile. "That would be most welcome, Mrs. Shin. I'd appreciate hearing your reaction to the new lessons."

"I'm *sure* you will."

Mahrree sat down the next afternoon when her children were napping, filled with eager anticipation to begin studying the thick stack of papers.

She got as far as page three before she fell asleep.

And she wasn't even that tired.

That evening she asked Perrin to read it without telling him about her failure to endure all sixty-two pages. He got to page two before he began rubbing his eyes and looking closer at the writing.

"What *is* this?" he exclaimed tossing it on the table. Then he picked it back up and began to read in his most official voice.

"'Resolved: That the youngest children, youngest being those who turn six by the appropriate date established by the Director of Instruction or the local

Director of School Regions, whichever authority is recognized at the date of inception of school during that present year, shall be taught in the methods and facts of numerals which designate values to assigned qualities, and the grouping of such numerals and the removal of such numerals.'"

He threw it on the table in disgust and gave her a look that demanded explanation.

She had one. It had taken her a few minutes when she first read it, then reread it. By her fifth attempt she began to understand.

"I think it means, 'Six year-olds will learn how to add and subtract numbers.'"

Perrin picked up the papers again and read through the sentence with battling subjects once again. He slowly shook his head. “Then why not just say that?”

“I was hoping you could tell me.” Mahrree sat down across from him. “You speak Idumean, don’t you? Skip to page three, at the bottom. That one’s by far my favorite. Then again, that’s only as far as I’ve read,” she admitted.

Perrin turned the pages and cleared his throat. “I feel like I should be wearing a red coat and some ruffles . . . ah, here we go. ‘Resolved—’”

He stopped.

“What’s with this ‘resolved’

nonsense? All right, I know, I know—just read it. 'Resolved: that the upper level students, those being students within the ages of fourteen and seventeen, including those that turn seventeen within the school year but have not yet completed the full educational program, therefore remaining in the school until it terminates for the school year—'"

Perrin paused to catch his breath and roll his eyes.

"'—will be instructed in the memorization and commitment to the mind of facts—' don't those phrases mean the same thing?"

Mahrree nodded. "But you'll never finish the sentence at this rate," she

pointed out.

He shrugged in acknowledgement. “‘—of facts concerning all matters of historical significance, whether real or *perceived*—’”

He raised his eyebrows at her.

She motioned for him to keep going and yawned dramatically.

He grinned and continued. “‘—whether real or perceived, but rather focusing on those matters more real such that the students may recall the issues committed to memory in a comprehensive and all encompassing __’”

He decided not to comment on that redundancy in an effort to finally get to

the end of the sentence.

"'—final test to determine their ability to progress from one age level to another, notwithstanding their age at the time of taking the final test.' Whew! Explanation?"

Mahrree said in a bored tone, "Teens memorize the facts. Spit them out on a test. If they pass, they move on."

Perrin skimmed through the sentence again. "Impressive. Should the ancient spy groups that the founders of Idumea created ever resurface, I can use you to break their codes."

She smiled. "Try the next one. I'm sure you can figure it out. All you need to do is add about five extraneous words for each important one."

Perrin chuckled. “Let’s see, ‘The practice of deliberating and analyzing issues to the extent of establishing conclusions, intended or accidental, shall, in the interest of maintaining efficiency and eliminating ambiguity, no longer be of necessity within the studies of various subjects, specifically those subjects addressing accepted historical essentials and acknowledged scientific developments.’”

He stopped and stared. “You thought I could figure that one out? I’m flattered. Can you give me a few minutes?”

“Of course. I’ll give you a hint if you want.”

"Not yet," he said leaning over it as if it were a complicated math puzzle. "Let me see . . . 'deliberating and analyzing issues' . . . could mean . . . establishing conclusions . . . is this debating?"

"Very good! Now the next part."

"Establishing conclusions, maintaining efficiency, eliminating ambiguity, well if they *really* wanted to eliminate ambiguity—" But he shook his head and continued, "'no longer be of necessity . . .'"

He stopped.

"Whoa."

He looked up at Mahrree with sudden understanding.

“Debates are not needed,” he said. “They take up too much time and confuse students.” He quickly looked down. “So no debates about history and science?” he asked incredulously.

“Hmm, you cracked that faster than I did.”

“I’m in the army, remember? Sometimes we use ambiguity in messages that have the remote chance of falling into the wrong hands. Or be read by nosy privates. Or Administrators,” he smiled ruefully. “My father and I have been sending each other messages about ‘the weather’ for years. But we’ve never used ambiguous verbiage this ambitiously. Ugh. Now *I’m* starting to

sound like them."

"Apparently all historical evidence has already been 'accepted' and needs no more interpretation, and all scientific developments are 'acknowledged' and need no more theories."

Perrin stared at the sentence again as if trying to understand a mooing horse. "But this only applies to the upper aged students, right?" His eyebrows furrowed. "Or . . . is the sky always going to be blue in Edge?"

Mahrree shrugged. "I really don't know. Still have fifty-nine more pages to go," she said gloomily.

Perrin cringed. "You really don't have to do this. You're not teaching this, and no one's asked you to read it."

She sat up taller. “If I don’t read it, who will? No parents have expressed interest, yet. At all!” Her eyes turned stony with determination. “The poor director had a glazed look in his eyes when I asked what he thought of it. I hate to admit it, but he only seems like an overwhelmed and slightly clueless man. Not administrative at all. We might be able to work with him. He seemed quite grateful for my assistance.” She shook her head. “Perrin, if I don’t figure out what our children might have to eventually learn, who will?”

Perrin’s eyes softened as hers hardened. “That’s why I married you, isn’t it? Read it. Find out. We can ask

Corporal Zenos to come by to watch the children and give you some uninterrupted time. You need to get to the bottom of this."

Mahrree spent a couple of hours for the next several days staring at the baffling language, deciphering the ridiculously long sentences, and musing as to why nothing was plainly stated. Sometimes Jaytsy and Peto napped, other times Shem came by and took them for a walk so she could concentrate in silence. But sometimes it didn't matter if she was undisturbed or not. The entire document was completely ludicrous.

So ludicrous that one afternoon she could no longer fight the urge anymore.

She wrote a third letter.

As per and in reference to the previously distributed documents detailing the declarations in educational developments—

She was sure someone among the skimmers might enjoy her attempt at writing like the Administrators. Their lives must be so dismal, so dull, so dreary.

—I am moved by concern and interest and a sense of duty to the children, offspring, and descendents of the world to express my thoughts and ideas about the aforementioned

document.

Perhaps, she reasoned, if she *wrote* like them then someone might actually *read* it. Perhaps they simply couldn't understand her previous letters, with her direct tone and manner of getting right to the point. They enjoyed repetition, redundancy, and the same thing said in different ways in order to make sure the reader got the message on at least one of the attempts to communicate the ideas so critical to express in very long sentences with many irrelevant and unnecessary additions.

Besides, after reading their writing, she couldn't formulate a sentence that

didn’t take up at least three lines of parchment.

I am compelled to suggest and propose that the guidelines detailing and delineating what children will be taught and instructed in Full School be written more concisely, precisely, and nicely.

It was as contagious as a stomach ache, and just as nauseating. She did feel better once it was all up and out, though.

Two men sat in a dark room of an

unlit building.

"I see she got a copy of your 'test,'" Brisack couldn't help but snort. He tried to keep it in, but if he did he would have felt nauseated.

Mal was gripping the armrests of his chair before Brisack even finished reading it. "She's *mocking* us!" the old man snarled.

"Not *us,*" Brisack pointed out. "But the Department of Instruction. Quite cleverly, too," he grinned in appreciation. "*Almost* concisely, certainly *precisely*, and a bit *saucily*." He bobbled his head, proud of his own construction.

Mal was not amused. "You can be replaced, you know."

The doctor waved that out of the room. “Gadiman isn’t nearly as much fun as I am, and you know it.”

“How can you be so casual about this?!” Mal exploded. “Don’t you see? She’s *getting* it!”

Brisack leaned forward. “Wasn’t that the point? To see if she *did?* But she still may give up, just like others have. The Department of Instruction hasn’t received any other letters besides this one,” he shook it. “Hers is the first, and maybe the only one. Everyone else has dropped out of your little test, Nicko. They concede they’re too stupid to understand. Great victory for the Administrator of Education!”

“I don’t appreciate your cynical tone, Doctor.”

Brisack scoffed. “What kind of tone did you expect? It *is* rubbish! Even you declared it so. And we’re pushing this forward anyway. Every school in the world is affected simply because *you* wanted to teach a lesson to an insignificant teacher in Edge.”

Mal firmed his grip on the armrests, as if they were real arms. “I’m not *that* narrow. You know full well this is for the best for everyone. As I said, we’re drowning many cats in one well.”

“Well, this cat is still swimming,” Brisack said, slapping the letter down on a side table. “And what will you do if

she makes it to the top?"

"We'll wait to see if she does," Mal hissed. "In the meantime, form letter number one goes back to her. In four weeks."

Three days after Mahrree sent off her third letter, Shem took the children for her but returned earlier than she expected. In one arm was a sleeping Peto, and in the wagon he was pulling, a snoring Jaytsy.

Mahrree went out to the front garden to help him bring them in.

"How do you *do* that?" Mahrree

whispered enviously as she took Peto from him.

He chuckled quietly as he scooped up Jaytsy and followed Mahrree into the house. They put the dozing children in their bedrooms and met again in the gathering room.

"Well, Zenos?" she demanded. "It's mead, isn't it? You get my babies drunk, don't you?"

He groaned. "My secret's out. Who told you, the barmaid at the inn your mother works for? One of your former students, is she? She looked deep into my eyes and said, 'This is our little secret.' But as my father said once, never trust a cross-eyed girl."

Mahrree snorted at his stoically

solemn face that didn't even twitch. "Seriously, how do you do it?"

"Well, I simply think very sobering thoughts, then I—"

"Not your face!" Mahrree laughed. "I mean, get the children to fall asleep!"

Corporal Zenos shrugged. "Just run them ragged, Mrs. Shin. Just like I do with the boys each week."

"Well, so do I," she grumbled, "but it never works. *I'm* the one always ready for a nap and they have more energy than ever. But Shem, thank you."

"Anytime, ma'am. I really do enjoy playing with them. I'll be on my way, then—"

"You don't have to go already, do

you?" Mahrree said. "I've hit a particularly difficult passage and I could really use a break. Care for pie?"

Shem didn't mean to, but he licked his lips.

Mahrree pointed at his face. "I'll take that as a yes! Sit down and relax a bit before you go back to the fort. I know you have the evening shift again."

"I think I will," he smiled as he pulled out a chair at the table. "Sometimes your children tire me out."

"*Only* sometimes?" Mahrree grinned as she went to the kitchen. A few minutes later she came out with two plates of pie, and set the larger one before the corporal seated at the table. She sat down next to him as he thumbed

through the thick document.

"May I borrow this when you're done? Sometimes I have a hard time getting to sleep when I get off duty in the middle of the night."

Mahrree scoffed. "Might as well. Puts me to sleep in the middle of the day."

Shem took a big bite of pie and shook his head as he skimmed a page.

"Reads like the codes Poe told me he and the boys pass to each other during class. Usually about someone stinking like . . . well, never mind. This *is* odd," he said, reading between bites. "If they mean, 'All ages will learn to write coherently', why don't they write that

coherently themselves?"

Mahrree leaned over to look at the passage he was referring to, and her mouth fell open. "How'd you figure that out so fast? That's where I got stuck!"

Shem blushed. "Just . . . um . . . I don't know," he shrugged.

Mahrree looked at him hard. "Don't dismiss yourself, Shem. You're exceptionally bright. I see it in you all the time."

He turned even redder and took another bite of pie.

Mahrree squinted at him. "Ever thought of going to Command School? You'd be an excellent officer. You could easily pass the entrance exam, I'm sure."

"Oh, no, no . . ."

"If it's a question of money, we could help you find a sponsor, and Perrin and I would love to—"

Shem shook his head vigorously. "Thank you, ma'am, but *no thank you*. I'm not officer material. And I could never bear to live in Idumea!"

"You *are* officer material, Zenos. My husband even said so, and he's never wrong. It'd be for only three years, Shem. Two, if you pass the advanced intelligence exam, which shouldn't be a problem for you. Then you could come back here and serve with Captain Shin. I'm sure my father-in-law could—"

She didn't expect him to become so distressed. "Please, Mrs. Shin—you're

very kind, but . . . that's not what I can do."

She pursed her lips in disappointment. "Because of your father?"

Now Shem squinted. "My father?"

"He wouldn't care for it?"

He smiled faintly. "That's part of it. He told me I could join the army as long as I never went to Idumea. He hates the city. Really, I'm flattered, but after my two years here are up, I think I'll be done with the army."

Mahrree scrunched up her face. "That means I lose my baby tender and my favorite soldier, doesn't it?"

He chuckled. "Maybe not. Mrs. Shin, it's all too far in the future for me

to worry about right now."

"Hmm," Mahrree said, picking at her pie. "It's only next year so *I'm* worried about it now."

Shem smiled at her and cleaned off his plate. "Uh, did the captain really say that? About me?"

Mahrree nodded. "Last week. Said even the older soldiers respect and listen to you, that you always make the best decisions, and . . ." She hesitated, but just couldn't keep back the juiciest part: "he confessed you nearly beat him when the two of you were sparring last week. Wrestling or something?"

Shem burst into a grin, in spite of himself. "I did? Really?!"

“But you didn’t hear that from me!” She giggled. “He said you really keep him on his toes.”

Shem sat back in his chair. “*No one* beats the captain! I don’t know how he does it, but he always seems to be half a step ahead of everyone else, anticipates the movement right before it happens.

“But you know,” his eyes got a faraway look, “I *thought* I nearly had him. I finally got him into a hold and was ready to throw him to the ground, when suddenly he made this quick twist and the next thing I knew I was flat on my back looking up into his smirk.” He grimaced at the memory.

Mahrree elbowed him gently. “He

claims no one's faster than him. I guess that's true?"

Shem nodded. "It's true, all right. Although it's become my goal to best him in *something* some day." He looked at her worriedly. "I mean that *respectfully*, ma'am! I don't mean—"

Mahrree laughed. "I know a little bit about men and competition, Shem. I think he's made it his goal to never be bested by you! Perhaps you'll have to stay in the army until you finally break him?"

Shem shook his head. "I don't ever want to break him, ma'am. I just want to be as good as him, that's all. He's an unusual and remarkable man."

Mahrree smiled. "Yes he is. And

you know what, Shem? So are you."

Shem turned purple. "Thank you," he whispered and stood up abruptly. "I better let you get back to work."

She watched him for a moment. "Why do I get the feeling that if I handed it to you, you'd be able to read and decipher it all in just minutes? When we first met, you said I knew more than the average officer's wife. But *you* know much more than the average corporal, don't you, Shem Zenos? "

He shook his head soberly. "I don't know what possibly gave you that impression, Mrs. Shin. I thank you for the pie, ma'am."

Mahrree drummed her fingers in

thought about the reticent corporal for several minutes after he left, then reluctantly went back to her reading.

It took her a couple of weeks, but at the "bottom" of it all was a list she made to elucidate and disambiguate—

Clarify what the Administrators were advising. Whenever she got stuck or tired while trying to decipher the intricately convoluted—

Needlessly complicated language, she asked Perrin for ideas, and also received a few more insights from Shem. She discovered that the changes in instruction were only an advisement—for now. In the nebulous "near future" it would all be compulsorily mandatory—

Unavoidable.

And in the end she wasn't as infuriated with the findings as she thought she would be, much to her disappointment. She finished compiling the list one afternoon and had time to stare at the results. "Uncle" Shem had taken the children for a walk and she could think without interruption. Some subjects were unfortunately reduced and even eliminated, like practices in drawing and exposure to melodies. And there was a vague reference to a new civics and loyalty class she'd have to inquire about.

But she was reluctant to admit that having a *progressive* set of guidelines for all children to follow might even be

a *good* idea. At least this way every child would be exposed to the multiplication tables by age nine, and would read competently by age ten. And by seventeen each young adult would be readying for a job or a university.

And yet, it seemed strange to her that the so-called authorities in education assumed all children of the same ages were at the same levels of learning. She'd never met, in all her years of teaching, two seven-year-olds —or seventeen-year-olds or adults for that matter—that were at the same level of readiness as their same age peers.

It was almost as if those in the education department knew nothing of children and their development, which

Mahrree had a strong suspicion was the case. So the department telling her and children's parents what to teach students was a ludicrous as Mahrree advising farmers on how to weed their farms. She'd never presume to tell those who actually worked in the dirt, who know each plant, and who observed the changes from day to day, what they should be doing next.

But, she had to grudgingly acknowledge, this *was* an experiment—although experimenting on children struck her as appalling—and only in the testing stages. Even The Writings told her all things needed to be tested. So maybe the guidelines *were* a good idea,

even though no parents or teachers were consulted as far as she could tell, but deep down she had already drawn her own conclusions. Maybe, in just a year or so, it would be discovered that all of this was a bad idea and abandoned in something more likely to foster a thinking, creative populace.

Such as what they *had* been doing for the past three hundred years.

She was also bothered by the idea that intellectual progress would now be measured by the ability to memorize and restate numbers, dates, and definitions—much of which struck Mahrree more as trivial than useful.

It seemed far more essential that students learned how to decide for

themselves what was important, rather than rehearsing "accepted facts" and "ideas imperative to the good of the world" that could readily be looked up in a book. It was what was *put* into those books, and by whom, that required one to carefully think about it. What one couldn't find in a book was a step-by-step procedure on how to *think*. And *that* was what schooling was supposed to do.

At least, that's what it used to do.

Two more things still troubled her.

One was that the original document had been written so confusingly. She kept mulling over Perrin's reasons for the garbled language: to keep the wrong

sets of eyes from fully understanding.

But who would the Administrators want to confuse? She generously considered that the Administrators wrote in such a manner as to eliminate misreading. She suspected some overambitious, or perhaps lazy, legal advisors may have had a hand in it.

But wouldn't someone somewhere realize it was now incomprehensible? It didn't make sense. She was missing something.

The other thing that saddened her was that the Administrators didn't see a need for debate, at any age. The sky *was* officially blue in Edge. Sunsets would never be the same, and storms would never be noticed. She wondered if that

development bothered her so much because she was so partial to debating. It was, after all, how she met her husband.

And even though she knew she shouldn't, she derived a great deal of satisfaction in winning an argument. She still relished the day at the university when she reduced a legal student to blustering when she proved that men really weren't needed in society except to propagate the species. Occasionally the women's college interacted with the men's portion of the university, and Mahrree had enjoyed the debating class that was co-educational. She intimidated every man there.

As she sat at her table, she revisited that debate from ten years earlier in Mountseen. She didn't know why she suddenly remembered it. Maybe the idea that a legal advisor had mucked up the document she just finished was what brought back the memory.

And that memory now hit her with unexpected shame.

Had she *really* felt men were unnecessary? She certainly didn't feel that way now. She closed her eyes and thought. No, she really hadn't believed it then either, but she had just returned from yet another visit home. Her last words to her mother had been in a nasty argument about the need to find the right

man. Even the long walk back to Mountseen didn't reduce her anger. All of it had surfaced at that debate.

Mahrree sat up in her chair in alarm as a terrible realization occurred to her.

She'd argued for a point that she didn't really believe in, and had *won*.

She tried to remember how many people had attended that debate where she demonstrated to a young man that he wasn't anywhere near ready to argue before the Administrator of Law. Mahrree closed her eyes again in mortification.

Several dozens—maybe even a hundred—students had heard her manipulate information and twist definitions into a logic that no one could

recognize, so no one could counter it. Their only option was to accept it or admit their ignorance.

Afterwards, the professor had suggested that she consider a career in legal issues. True, no women were in the study, but he was sure he could make allowances. She'd refused but had been flattered by the offer.

Flattered that she could argue anything, whether she believed in it or not.

Mahrree closed her eyes and groaned. That's what debating had accomplished? Maybe destroyed a young man's confidence ten years ago—or doomed him to write drivel for the

Department of Instruction—and convinced many others that men were unnecessary? What about the debates with Perrin? Hadn't he frequently argued for ideas he didn't believe in, and left them both so angry they were ready to burst into flames at the sight of each other?

She looked again at the list she'd extracted from the mangled ruins of paragraphs.

Confused students.

Inefficient use of time.

Facts misunderstood.

Maybe, just maybe, the Administrators had a point.

Stupid men.

Perrin hadn't been so quick to accept his wife's conclusion about the 'debate' debate. After the children were put to bed that night he comforted his wife.

"You really convinced your audience men weren't necessary?" He laughed. "Oh, I would have loved to have seen that! Actually, I'd like to take a shot at countering that right now. So what was your main premise?"

"No, you don't understand! I was *awful!* The first student I was up against conceded quickly, and two other young men next in line after him refused to take

the podium against me. I said horrible things and no one could out-argue me. That's what I worry about. Is it possible to think so much that you think your way *out* of the truth?"

Perrin pondered that. "Yes, it is. But you were acting out of anger, not logic."

"And that changes things?"

Perrin sighed. "No, of course not. But I think it makes it harder to see the real issues. Anger, or fear, or whatever, distorts the problem. But Mahrree, debates are not being discouraged because of the young man you humiliated! Although I must admit it would be a fascinating chain of events to find out if he *is* working for the

Department of Instruction. Do you remember his name?"

"Perrin!" Mahrree said sharply, not at all amused.

"Another Perrin? I thought I was the only one," he grinned. "Maybe you have a thing for taking on men named Perrin."

When he saw she was still not smiling, and quite possibly mentally revisiting the merits of her argument, he smiled gently at her.

"Mahrree, you know as well as I do that without debating people don't think. They simply accept what's given to them and never question if it's right. Even the Creator told us 'to test all things, as we are tested'. Right?"

She nodded sadly.

"So we debate all ideas, even if we believe in them, to be sure of their truth. Just as The Writings say, 'In testing the truth is revealed, the weaknesses are recognized, and the falsehoods are exposed'."

"So why did no one discover *my* falsehoods?" she fretted. "And why did I want to punch you in the stomach on our second debate? Why couldn't we come to a resolution?"

Her face was so earnest Perrin was a little startled. He didn't have a ready answer, but he tried anyway.

"Don't you think that after your 'Victory Over Men,' students eventually

dissected your arguments enough to see where you'd deceived them? Or that I would have run out of ideas to hit you with on the second debate?" He chuckled softly. "Actually, I was quite relieved for the abrupt ending Hogal staged. I didn't have much left to say, and I simply couldn't imagine accepting defeat."

She managed a feeble smile and her eyes brightened slightly. "Do you really think I didn't do any permanent damage?"

Perrin shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe that man you defeated left that class full of resolve to never be caught off guard again. In that case, he most likely *was* named Perrin."

That made Mahrree smile. “We still need the debates, don’t we?”

“Yes, we do. Some things we take on faith. Other things we study to find the correct answers. How else do we find the truth?”

“But people can still be misled.”

“Yes they can. So tell me, what was your first point in the debate? Let’s see how my sweet wife set about to destroy Menkind.”

“I wasn’t out to *destroy men*,” Mahrree sighed impatiently. “I was trying to prove we would be better off without them in charge.”

She looked at her husband and hoped his sense of humor would remain.

She took a deep breath.

"Now remember, I was young and also very emotional at the time—"

"Not too much has changed."

She glared at him playfully. "And I was still reeling from my visit home. I began with something like, our world would be better off if men weren't in charge because they cause all the battles." She breathed out and hoped the captain still loved her.

He pressed his lips together until they contorted, then his face began to quiver, and he burst into a big grin.

"Seriously? You came back from a *fight* with your own dear *mother* to claim that *men* are the source of armed conflict? And people believed that?!"

“No one knew I just came from a fight,” Mahrree defended, a bit embarrassed. “No one knew I was fighting another battle elsewhere.”

“Interesting,” Perrin mused. “You were fighting something else entirely, but put the burden of it on innocent bystanders. And so your opponent responded . . . how?”

“I’m trying to remember. I know he was surprised—I think he stammered for a bit before asking how women would resolve a prolonged conflict.”

Again Perrin grinned. “I know how—they’d gossip about with their friends and bring it up again and again to prolong it even further. I’ve listened to

you and your little friends enough!" he said in response to her insulted look. "I think I know that poor man's problem. He probably didn't have a sister or female friends. He actually trusted your assertion that women wouldn't go to a battle."

The light hit both of them at the same time.

"He *trusted* me!" Mahrree marveled. "He didn't even challenge what I said, but accepted it blindly and asked what a different solution would be!"

Perrin nodded. "You surprised him, and he missed the very issue he should have argued. Women *do* battle! In different ways, but just as frequently as

men, I dare say. Did he know you before this? Have any reason to trust you?"

Mahrree shook her head. "No, not really."

"That's it, Mahrree. He trusted when he shouldn't have. Maybe if he were a friend or knew about your tactics, he wouldn't have been caught off guard." His voice softened. "If you'd known me better, and the way I think, you would have been able to discover my deceits far more quickly as well. I could never pull on you now what I did three years ago."

"The Creator said there are some things we need to take on faith," Mahrree said slowly, "but everything

else we can test though questioning and examination."

He nodded.

"So Perrin," she said pointedly, "why do the Administrators *not* want us to teach our children how to test for the truth?"

He exhaled. "I'm not sure," he said heavily. "But I don't think that's something you should ask them in a letter. It might even reach the Main Skimmer. And," he added with a slightly different tone to his voice, "I'm going to pretend the Captain of Edge didn't hear you ask that."

She bit her lip as thoughts of her father suddenly filled her mind, along with another idea. She could feel Cephas

Peto so closely as if he was standing right next to her, and his message nearly overwhelmed her.

"Then the captain better not hear this, either. Perrin, the Administrators and Department of Instruction have done this," she held up the thick document, "on purpose."

Perrin squinted. "What do you mean?"

"They *deliberately* wrote this to be confusing and difficult. Any parent who happens to read it will feel stupid. *Too* stupid to be *smart enough* to teach their own children. They'll think that obviously the Administrators know more than they do, in order to write such a

highly intelligent document with so many big words and such long sentences. So the Administrators better be in charge of teaching it!"

Perrin released a low whistle. "Good thing the captain's out on a very long walk so he can't hear you accusing the Administrators of manipulation. And you said Hegek hadn't read this yet?"

"This isn't for him or the teachers!" Mahrree shook the document in fury. "They get something much smaller, about a fourth the size, probably written with words and sentences as small as their minds! But I can see the truth, and I'm not afraid to reveal it. I will *not* let Idumea get away with this!"

She grabbed a clean piece of paper

from a shelf and started for a chair.

Mahrree . . . Mahrree—

She knew the source of her name. Her father was still nearby, but she was too full of venom to heed him as she yanked out the chair from under the table.

"What are you doing?!" Perrin demanded.

"I'm going to teach the Administrators a little lesson of my own! I'm going to write to—"

Mahrree, NO! Perrin, stop her—

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Perrin said, grabbing her arm before she could sit down at the table. "The captain is due back any minute, Mahrree. You need to

cool down."

"You said the other day that I needed to get to the bottom of this!" she said fiercely, wrenching her arm from his grip. "Well, here it is: Parents are stupid, Administrators are smart. Hand over your children to the Administrators with no questions debated so they can pour their *own ideas* into the children's minds, while parents worry about nothing else except getting more gold! Gold which they then hand over to the Administrators in higher taxes. Ooh, *very clever*! The Administrators get richer while families fall apart!"

Perrin's mouth opened and shut several times, but he knew that when his wife was on a rant, there was no safe

way to interrupt her.

"And *then* what happens to the children?" she gestured wildly. "Give Idumea a few years, and I'm sure they'll be telling the children what jobs they can have, so they make sure *our* children make *them* enough gold and silver!"

Perrin lifted a finger, likely to try to interject that she had an intriguing point, but he pulled it back in a moment later when she began to froth. His contribution could wait.

"Next they'll dictate where we can live!" Mahrree exclaimed. "And what we can do, and where we can go—Oh, *wait*. They *already* tell us that! Can't go to Terryp's land or anywhere else on

this vast sphere! Well, I've had enough. I'm going to give them a piece of my mind so they can see how intelligent mine really is!"

Sensing the end of the rant, and possibly the beginning of something even more threatening, Perrin stepped up quickly and took her by the arms.

"Mahrree, breathe slowly and think about this. If you send a letter to the Administrators expressing *anything* we just talked about, it might *make it to someone*," he said darkly. "And if it did, it would not be comfortable for *anyone* with the last name of Shin."

"Who's telling me that? My husband, or the captain?" she spat.

"The captain's at the door,

Mahrree. So both of us, because we both love you."

"And you both *f e a r* the Administrators?" she accused.

Perrin bristled, his eyes turning stony. "There's *twenty-three* of them, Mahrree, and significantly fewer Shins. I'm *only* a mere captain in the smallest fort. And you're *only* my wife. Not only are we powerless, we're insignificant. I know how Nicko Mal thinks. He's high-minded and superior, until someone challenges him. Then he focuses all his attention on demeaning and eliminating what he perceives as a threat. Trust me, Mahrree; we do *not* want to draw his attention! I did that too many times as an

immature student. And Mal has a very long and spiteful memory."

Mahrree squinted. "You may think you're unforgettable, Perrin Shin, but I sincerely doubt the Chairman of the Administrators sits up at night thinking about how much you irritated him when you were twenty!"

The corner of Perrin's mouth tugged upwards. "You're probably right. He's forgotten all about those childish outbursts we shared. But Mahrree, *I'm* also right. What would you hope to accomplish by sending a temper tantrum in another letter to the Department of Instruction?"

Mahrree blinked a few times, slowly coming out of her rage. "Uh, I'm

not entirely sure," she confessed. "And I was going to address it to Chairman Mal."

"Ha!" Perrin barked. "Good thing the captain got here to hold you back, Mrs. Shin."

Good catch, son. Mahrree, listen to your husband. He's right.

Mahrree sighed hopelessly, at both her husband and her father, who seemed to stand very close to both of them.

"There's nothing we can do, is there?"

Perrin exhaled. "No, not really. You can give your findings to Hegek, but other than that? Well, at least the Administrators don't have any eyes or

ears in this house. We can say and think whatever we want, as long as we keep it to the house."

Mahrree's shoulders fell, completely deflated. "I don't like the direction of any of this, Perrin."

"Neither do I, Mahrree. I escaped Idumea for a reason. But now it seems it's expanding even to Edge. I guess that's progress for you."

Mahrree did send a fourth letter, but to the Department of Instruction, as neutral, direct, and short as she could make it.

As a school teacher, I am wondering if you can give me the reasons why, in the future, all children will no longer learn to debate.

Surely something that short would elicit an original response.

Chapter 9 ~ “There have been some changes . . .”

Two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

“She did it!” Brisack breathed in a dazed monotone. “Incredible!”

“And shockingly insightful in her brevity,” Mal twitched. “The only way

she would've known about eliminate debating was if she read to the very end. Not even the Administrator of Education has bothered to accomplish that yet." His voice grew louder and higher. "She's not a teacher anymore, nor does she have any children in the schools, so *why does she care?!*"

"Well, that's one intelligent, independent, persistent—"

"Annoying!"

Brisack shrugged in reluctant agreement, "—annoying cat."

" A l w a y s *hated* cats," Mal mumbled.

"So what kind of response will this receive?"

"Perhaps," Mal said, holding up a

finger, "she should receive a *personal* one this time."

Brisack's eyebrows rose. "Are we now finding the north appealing again?"

"He hasn't conquered that forest, although I'm sure he believes he has. They need to learn who is truly in charge of this world. *I am!*"

Brisack nodded slowly. "I suppose that's the only answer. But . . ."

"But *what*, Doctor?" Mal sliced into his hesitation.

"I can't stop thinking that all she's done is send four letters. We're going to eliminate someone because of *four letters*?"

"We've eliminated some after only

one letter, Doctor," Mal said steadily. "Remember the pestering father of that captain in Grasses? The one who blamed the Administrators for losing his cattle herd to the new mandates on production? You'd think the man would've been grateful to move to the village and nearer to his son. His son's quit the army, by the way. You may want to study his descent into depression after having lost all his family. Truly tragic. But *here*," he gestured to Mrs. Shin's final note, "here we have a woman who's sent *four letters*, and we've let her go. Not only that, but she's questioned your research methods, Doctor. She's mocked the Department of Instruction—"

"Well, if we're going to target someone because of *that*," Brisack chuckled nervously, "then *I* should be watching my back—"

"She's questioning our Administration!" the old man burst out. "The Administrators that discovered the return of the Guarders! That ordered the army to put a fort in Edge. That *gave* her a husband! And *this* is how she thanks us for such attention to an undeserving woman in a meaningless little village?"

"As you just pointed out, Nicko," Brisack said in his best calming voice, "she's small and insignificant."

Mal jabbed his finger at him. "Everything big began as something

small, Doctor! Perrin started that way, too, as a boy with an over-sized ego. Then you should have seen him when he was thirteen and already taller than Relf. Strutting around the garrison with girls trailing behind him." His shoulder twitched more violently. "By the time he was sixteen he practically had a horde of women. Then he came to the university and started Command School."

Mal stared off into the distance, his head nodding, then shifting into bobbling and shaking. "Suddenly he was all seriousness, all focus, all study. But I knew what he was up to. He was plotting, even then, as a nineteen-year-old. He analyzed and thought and argued about everything!" Mal began to

massage his hands, not realizing that he was frothing around the corners of his mouth.

The good doctor noticed, but wisely didn't point that out.

"He's been *plotting*, that one has," Mal continued. "I had him his second year, and beginning Day One he challenged something I said, countering it out of The Writings of all things! I promptly shut him down, but I saw something in the eyes of his fellow students. They *admired* him," he said as if uttering the filthiest word in the world. "The next week he took me on again, with even more irrational and unproven arguments, and for even longer. And his

fellow students? They were *smiling*." Mal's eyes squinted so severely he probably lost all sight.

Brisack swallowed and calmly said, "He was an arrogant boy, Nicko. I heard the stories about him. Those students, they mistook his bravado for genuine bravery. They probably admired him because they—"

"Saw him opposing authority?!" Mal spewed. "Saw him fluster me on more than one occasion in front of all of them?!"

Brisack's mouth formed a small o. "He *embarrassed* you? Nicko, he was only a boy—"

"He hadn't looked like a boy since he was thirteen!" Mal protested. "And

he was never *only a boy*. He's been a plotting egomaniac long before he ever came to Command School!"

Brisack exhaled. He knew he'd regret asking, but curiosity was pushing him. "Nicko, plotting *what?*"

Mal leaned closer. "To take over the world," he whispered darkly.

The good doctor would have snorted if it hadn't been for the deadly serious look in his companion's eyes that terrified him.

"Nicko, you can't really believe—"

That was a stupid thing to say, and Mal's glare made that very clear.

Brisack swallowed again. "What evidence do you have that he's trying to

take over the world?"

Mal scoffed. "Look what he's done in the forests! Look how he's defied the laws! Oh, there's so much more to it . . . You never heard his arguments, but I did. He fully believes in the old prophecies that an end of some kind will come, that the wicked will be destroyed, that the followers of the Creator alone will be saved! He had entire passages memorized, and recited them in class! I'd go back to my office and look them up in a borrowed copy of The Writings to see how correct he was, and he never deviated. He acted as if he really believed that nonsense, and I promise you, my good doctor: only a man intending to *be the one* to save the world

would pay such close attention to so-called prophecies telling him how! The weak minded of the world believe that twaddle, and they'll throw their support behind the man that claims he believes it too!"

Mal stood up abruptly and marched to a bookshelf, violently shifting pages and dropping a few on the floor in a frantic effort to find something in the dim light.

"I'll prove it to you," he mumbled as Brisack remained in his chair, taking mental notes about Chairman Nicko Mal's stability. "I've kept it, to remember, just to be sure that . . . ah!" He held up a snippet of parchment and

waved it around like a small banner. “Allow me to read to you, my good doctor.”

Mal stepped closer to a gap in the curtained window, where faint torchlight from the stables reached him.

Brisack bit his tongue and continued to evaluate his companion, his current situation, and the level of his own involvement.

He immediately went back to evaluating only the chairman.

Mal squinted as he held the parchment he held close to his eyes. “‘Before the Last Day even the aged of my people will strike terror in the deadened hearts of the fiercest soldiers. On the Last Day those who have no

power shall discover the greatest power is all around them. On the Last Day those who stayed true to The Plan will be delivered as the destroyer comes.' Ha! There you have it!"

"There I have it," Brisack nodded once. "I'm not exactly versed in The Writings. What, precisely, do I have?"

Mal stepped closer to his friend and breathed heavily. "He quoted this to me on more than one occasion. Some people read The Writings for comfort, but others read for anarchy!"

Brisack glanced dubiously at the parchment clutched in Mal's fist. "This is anarchy?"

"Or so he'll convince the world.

He'll convince them there's trouble, such great trouble that even the soldiers are afraid! But then he'll swoop down, as High General or something, and save the world before they're destroyed."

"I'm . . . not entirely sure that's what the passage means—"

"*Who cares what it means!*" Mal ranted. "There is no 'meaning' except what we place on it! And the meaning he will construe is to make himself king and take away my power!"

It made sense, really, Brisack considered. What's the most powerful man in the world worried about? Another man becoming more powerful than him. People probably thought that having all power meant a life of

security, but it's exactly the opposite. You never know when that security will be compromised. Every man needs something to fight against, or he withers away. Even insanity is better than indifference.

"You see it, don't you?" Mal nodded at Brisack's silence.

"I'm beginning to see a *few things*," Brisack said vaguely. "So this is what motivates you? The fear of losing your hold on the world?"

Mal scoffed at the obvious and plopped down in his chair with impatient aplomb. "But it's *my world*, not Perrin's. He thinks that prophecy will be fulfilled, and it will be fulfilled

—by me! Listen again. ‘Before the Last Day even the aged of my people will strike terror in the deadened hearts of the fiercest soldiers.’ Well, my friend, when Perrin meets his last day that fierce soldier *will* be terrified, because I will be the aged striking that terror! He won’t know it was me, but *I will!* Perrin Shin will face his destroyer and whimper like a whipped dog begging for mercy, but he won’t get it. He WILL die, and all of his plans with him, because Nicko Mal is in charge of the world!”

Brisack sat as far back in his chair as possible to avoid the infectious spewing that flowed from Nicko Mal. There comes a moment in a man’s life when he realizes his course is set, his

future cast in stone and that there's no way to escape it, but to hope he can still duck at the right moments.

Right now he was ducking so low he could inspect the wearing down of his boot's heel.

"I see," was all he could think to say.

Mal nodded once in satisfaction, his tight face relaxing ever so slightly. "I'm glad that you do. And now you see why anything that touches Shin is just as affected as he is. Including, obviously, his wife!"

Brisack felt his mouth go dry. There was tragedy, and then there was outrage. But they were now somewhere so

beyond that he couldn't even recognize the terrain. When he got back home, he'd refocus his own research by observing one very determined, very paranoid, subject.

The doctor was lost in his thoughts for too long.

"Oh, I see what it is," Mal sneered when he received no response. "You're still intrigued by her, aren't you?"

Brisack could only shrug as his mind came back to the darkened room. "Never encountered a woman quite like her," he admitted as he looked at the letter still in his grip, rereading the one sentence.

Mahrree Shin was remarkable. Remarkable enough for Perrin Shin.

Mal clasped his hands in front of him. "I think you're failing to see exactly what's happening here, my good doctor. But Gadiman even noticed this one when he brought me that letter this morning. That letter that you are now *ogling* as if you were holding Mrs. Shin *herself*—"

Brisack blushed and set the letter down on his lap guiltily. "She's only a small voice."

"As Gadiman pointed out, the most violent of thunderstorms begin as a quiet rumble *in the north*," Mal snarled. "The world's attention must not be drawn to such rumbling, or it may begin to *listen*. Small things, Doctor, grow larger under the right conditions. We must change the

conditions. As long as the world believes the sky is blue, it will disregard signs of approaching storms and even ignore the thunder that skirts the edges of their villages."

Brisack was already shaking his head. "They can't ignore *every* storm, Nicko. Especially the ones hailing down on them!"

"Oh, but that's the fascinating part, my good doctor: they *will*. As long as the hail isn't hitting *them*, they'll go on about with their dull lives. Why run for cover when it's the other village getting wet? The sky is blue above *them*, and if it's not, it *will* be blue again, very soon. We can divert storms, Doctor."

Brisack remained back up against

his plush armchair, but the cushioning behind him felt hard and cold. “Nicko, you can’t control everything!”

“But I can create the *illusion* that I can,” Mal smiled thinly. “It’s the perception that matters, not the reality. We *make* the meanings. People believe what they want to believe, what they’re conditioned to see. Already children are being taught the sky is blue and that anything else in it is a passing anomaly that will quickly vanish and the true blueness of the sky will return once more. King Oren was taught that, as were his sons, by one of my *more* brilliant colleagues. Had he not died a few weeks after Oren, he’d be sitting in

your chair, proving with me that the citizenry of the world is stupid enough to believe that the sky is always blue, the grass is always green, and it's a lovely Weeding Season every day. Then we can do whatever we want to, and no one notices."

Brisack sighed, took up the letter again, and clutched it securely. "But Nicko, she was right. My research *was* flawed. I've been thinking about it, and I should go back and look for volunteers __"

"NO!" Mal bellowed. "There's no ROOM for that! And no room for HER! Not in our world! The Shins will not take my power nor dispute my work! Time to eliminate the

anomalies!”

There was no reasoning with that adamancy. Brisack could only keep ducking. His back was beginning to ache. “So what are you planning?”

“A massive storm of our own,” Mal said with a thin smile. “One that I control.”

Brisack shook his head slowly. “I told you, keep this to tragedy, and you can continue it for years. But as soon as this evolves into outrage, people *will notice*—”

“There are storms brewing *everywhere*, my good doctor,” Mal said in genial tone.

“What are you talking about?”

“There are rumors that Guarders are infiltrating the villages. So much success recently in the south? Because of inside help!”

“Oh,” Brisack whispered. The next step. He’d likely already taken it. “Are you suggesting—”

“We can’t trust the magistrates and the chief of enforcement, my good doctor. One or two of them may be enemies to our world.”

Brisack suppressed a moan. It was too much, too soon. Too tight a hold on the world. Someone else might balk. “Nicko, the world will not tolerate—”

“The only way to truly secure each village,” Mal continued on with the

sturdy determination of an overweight boy laying hold upon every piece of sugared candy in the sweet shop, "is to give the forts complete control over the villages. The few where there are no forts yet, the army will send representatives to help secure their villages."

The transformation was already taking place. Brisack envisioned a caterpillar growing into a massively repulsive and sticky creature no one expected, with rows of teeth no one anticipated. "But Nicko, electing their local leaders has *always* been—"

"The people *believe* they knew who they could trust," Mal plowed on as if no one else was there except for a few

cockroaches scuttling around shelving, "but soon they'll see that they can't. There are *spies* living among them whose knowledge is so intimate that even entire families could be wiped out with one massive, calculated, Guarder *attack in the north."*

Brisack could only swallow.

"And when the Guarders hit with full force—three villages at the same time targeting specific families—the world will realize how dependent they are upon the Army of Idumea and the Administrators who foresaw such a terrible outcome. Only the Administrators, directing the army, can ensure the sky always remains blue."

“You still have Wiles’s map of Edge, don’t you?” Brisack whispered. “The one marked with Perrin’s house, his mother-in-law, and his great aunt and uncle?” He clenched Mrs. Shin’s letter protectively in his fist.

“I do,” Mal’s smile transformed into a sneer. “As well as a few other maps. Terrible storm on the horizon, one that none of them will see coming, correct Doctor? Because, you see, I know where you and your wife live, too.”

“Are you *threatening* me?” Brisack breathed.

“No,” Mal chuckled humorlessly. “*I* wouldn’t do such things. But Gadiman

would.”

Brisack closed his eyes and nodded once, his thumb caressing the letter. He knew this time he couldn’t send a warning to its author, unlike over a year ago. Indeed, now he felt to be in more danger than the Shins.

“Don’t be so worried, my good doctor!” Mal said in a sickly sing-song voice. “If Shin is as skilled a commander as you suppose he is, all will be well in Edge! And if he isn’t, then you’ll have a great deal to analyze about how people deal with extreme grief.”

“But if all of the Shins are dead,” Brisack whispered, his eyes still shut, “who will grieve them?”

The doctor heard the smile in Mal's voice. "Besides you? Why, the High General and his wife, of course! I've always wanted to watch an alpha wolf crumble."

Brisack's eyes flashed open.

"I do believe this is one of my most brilliant plans. We'll be sorting information for *years* . . ."

A week before Peto's first birthday, on the 84th Day of Planting Season 322, Mahrree went back to Mr. Hegek with her list in hand. He appreciatively studied it.

“This is a bit different than the shortened version they sent to the teachers, Mrs. Shin. I read through that thoroughly—”

His tone suggested someone who was hoping to appear as responsible as possible for someone of such small stature burdened by the Administrator of Education to carry the entire weight of the Department of Instruction. Just the titles alone were exhausting.

“—but some of these future changes aren’t in there. I wonder why . . .”

His voice trailed off as he sat behind his desk. He put her paper down on an untidy stack and tapped the list. “Hmmm.”

Mahrree didn't have to see her notes to know what part he'd reached.

"No need for debating? I can see how it would save time, but still," he looked up to her, "seems kind of a let-down, doesn't it?"

Her faith in the little man began to increase.

"I think my favorite debate in school was about who created Nature's Laws, and why." Mr. Hegek got a faraway look in his eyes. "True, we got a little bit silly at times. One of my friends nearly had the class convinced it was our teacher who devised them, and she created the law, 'All things want to be on the ground' to keep us in our seats.

She said she would've rewritten it more powerfully to keep us flat on the ground!" He chuckled at the memory. "But even so, it really got me thinking about forces and who's in charge."

A smile grew on his face.

Mahrree felt one reluctantly growing on her face, too. The man wasn't as bad as she hoped he'd be. Despite all her effort not to, she almost felt some compassion for him.

"You know, Mrs. Shin, these are only guidelines—not mandated, yet. I know they're trying to be progressive, but for now do you think Captain Shin would have a problem if we continued allowing debates?"

Mahrree was a mixture of relief and

confusion. “I think continuing the debates is a wonderful idea! As long as you still cover everything on that *test*,” irritation snuck into her tone. “And Captain Shin was a great debater himself, but why would his approval be needed?”

The director’s face went from pleased to looking as if he’d accidentally uttered a very nasty word. “It’s only that he’s the *authority* here and—”

“Captain Shin’s the authority?” Mahrree chuckled. “Mr. Hegek, I thought *y o u* were. And the authority for the village is the elected magistrate. Captain Shin merely keeps the Guarders away, and he’s done that quite admirably.”

The director chewed nervously on his lower lip. “I see, Mrs. Shin. Of course.”

He sat up and straightened some papers which only disrupted several stacks in front of him.

“And I’ve heard about your After School Care program,” he said brightly, changing the subject. “I’m suggesting to the Department of Instruction that they consider implementing similar programs.”

“I already have, many weeks ago,” Mahrree sighed. “I received form letter number two. But maybe you’ll have better luck, since you’re the director of schools here. I’ve sent two more letters

merely to see if anyone bothers to read them. Chances are I'll only collect more forms. People in Idumea don't care about the opinions of little women in tiny villages like Edge."

Perrin came home much later than expected that night. Mahrree panicked briefly before remembering that he'd send Shem or another messenger should anything drag him away for an extended time again.

Jaytsy waited impatiently by the door calling for "Fodder!" and Peto dragged his at-home boots around the

gathering room in anticipation.

When Perrin did finally come home, he greeted his little ones with a grim expression. “Mahrree,” he called to her in the kitchen where he heard her washing up. “There have been some changes . . .”

“Does it have anything to do with you being the ‘authority’ in Edge?” Mahrree called back casually.

His mouth dropped open. “How did you know?”

“They should have told you before they told the director of schools!” She came out of the kitchen with a plateful of food, grinning.

But he didn’t return it.

That’s when Mahrree felt a cold

heaviness in the house. It was if Perrin brought it with him as a wave and it just now hit her, dark and menacing, as she clumsily put his dinner on the table.

"Perrin, what's wrong?"

He sat down at the table and couldn't seem to get comfortable.

"Did you, *at all*, tell *anyone* about our discussion the other night?" his voice became very low and terrifyingly serious. "About your theories as to why the Administrators would not want debates? Or why they wrote the documents as they did? Anything to Zenos? Your mother? Other teachers?"

"Of course not!" Mahrree whispered. She looked around, but

wasn't sure why. She thought briefly about her last letters, but couldn't see how there was anything dangerous in those.

Annoying, possibly. But dangerous?

"Perrin, what's going on?"

He absent-mindedly picked up Jaytsy who tried to get his attention by blowing on his face. "An edict came this morning from Idumea stating that all villages that don't yet have a fort will have one built in the next two seasons. I'm supposed to send temporary reinforcements to Moorland immediately. There are eleven forts so far, but each village is now required to have one."

He paused.

“So . . . ?” Mahrree tried to draw him on, wondering why more forts was so troubling. In some areas the Guarder activity had increased significantly. On the south side of the world there were weekly incursions and murders of citizens.

He pursed his lips before continuing. “Each fort is to have a commanding officer that will not only supervise the soldiers, *but also* act as the eyes, ears, and voice of the Administrators.” He looked solemnly at Mahrree to see if she understood.

“Eyes, ears, and voice?” she whimpered, remember how only last week Perrin said the Administrators

didn't have any eyes or ears in their house.

Maybe, maybe *not*.

"The local magistrates will now be accountable to the commander of the forts," he continued tonelessly, "and all legal and criminal issues will be ultimately under the commander's jurisdiction."

Each of his words fell like cold buckets of water in the house. Even Jaytsy sat quietly now in his lap, and Peto stopped dragging his father's boots.

"The commander of the fort will now be, essentially, *in charge of the village as well?*" Mahrree asked incredulously. She felt like she was beginning to drown.

"In a sense, yes," Perrin said darkly. "The magistrate still does his job, so does local law enforcement, but the commander can override their decisions. And if the Administrators demand it—or the commander sees a need—he can take control of any situation, and require any kind of action. To the extent of a *complete* army takeover," he said slowly.

Mahrree tried to comprehend the magnitude of that phrase. She wasn't sure what it meant, except that the issue of debating suddenly seemed trifling.

"And the commander of the fort of Edge . . ." she began, hoping the rest of that sentence would not be, *is Captain*

Shin. It seemed too much authority for a lowly captain.

"Must hold at least the rank of major."

"Ah," Mahrree said, feeling a little bit of breathing room.

With the same heaviness Perrin added, "I've been promoted."

The words seemed to suck the remaining air out of the room.

"Congratulations, Major Shin," Mahrree choked out. This moment hadn't come as she expected it. She'd planned it to be accompanied by cake.

After a frigid moment, she asked, "Why?"

Perrin slowly shook his head. "I'm not entirely sure." He sighed deeply as if

he hadn't breathed properly all day. "It came from the Administrators, not the garrison. The Administrators believe that members of the village may pose future threats. The reason Guarders have so much strength in the south might be because of inside help. Even local authorities in some areas are suspect. Only the commanders in the forts seem to be above suspicion, for now."

"What's your father have to say about this?"

"I haven't heard from him," said Perrin worriedly. "He's been inspecting forts. This wasn't his doing, Mahrree."

Mahrree felt a chill, followed by a sudden sense of panic.

"Perrin, I've sent only four letters! No one reads them. I talk only to you! I didn't cause this," she gasped. "Is that what you think? Somehow this is my fault?"

Perrin shook his head quickly. "No, no, no, not at all! No one's going to be concerned with someone like you. *You know what I mean*," he said in reply to her hurt look. "The only reason I asked is because that's *precisely* the kind of talk I'm supposed to be listening for!" he said in an earnest whisper. "Anything that *might* suggest anyone is *considering* opposing the Administrators. I didn't want it to come back to me that I should start keeping a file on my *own wife*!"

Isn't that what she predicted, three years ago in that second debate where she shouted at an army captain about the Administrators taking away their freedoms? She'd been right. And back then, she would have gloated that she was right.

But tonight?

Tonight that army captain —*major*—tightly cradled his little girl who played quietly with the shining buttons on his uniform's sleeve. He didn't notice her lick them, because his gaze darted around the table in deep, troubled thought.

And tonight, Mahrree didn't feel any sense of triumphant anger, but

instead was absorbed by a sense of dread—a foreboding that told her that what she didn't understand now, she's wasn't going like once she did.

"I don't know what all of this means either," he said quietly as if he could read her mind. "And now I'm the eyes and ears of the Administrators!" He shook his head at the absurdity of it all.

"And voice," she reminded him feebly. "Gadiman's private army? How progressive. I talked to the director of schools," Mahrree suddenly remembered. "Perrin, Mr. Hegek asked if you'd approve of his allowing debates."

"What'd you tell him?" His still stared at the table while his daughter

rubbed his buttons with her finger.

"I told him I thought you'd approve, but that I didn't know why he needed your permission. Oh, but now I do. Will everyone need your permission to do anything?"

He dropped his head into his hands while Jaytsy wriggled off his lap. Other buttons on his jacket needed shining up, and her tongue was out and ready.

"I'm praying no. I'm late because the magistrate and the chief of enforcement were in my office all afternoon, and I had to finish drafting guidelines as to how to execute this stupid new mandate. Mahrree, it was pathetic—two panicked men, old enough

to be my father, trying subtly not to ask if I was about to oust them."

He looked up, exasperation on his face. "I didn't sign up for this! I want to teach boys how to channel their aggression into something useful. I don't have all day to assure a nervous magistrate and his furious chief of enforcement that I'm not about to take over their village. And I told them that, repeatedly. Just keep everyone in the village in line, and I'll keep myself happily to the fort. I hate politics!" he boomed.

"Major Shin!" Mahrree hushed him. "Stop or you'll have to start a file on yourself!"

She had meant it seriously, but the

ridiculousness of it all caught them both by surprise.

Mahrree cracked a smile.

Perrin began to chuckle.

Then he laughed.

Then he shook his head.

Then he pounded his head on the table repeatedly so that his plate rattled.

Finally Perrin groaned into the table, whether out of pain or aggravation or both, Mahrree wasn't sure. She didn't know what to do as she sat helplessly across from him.

But Jaytsy giggled and patted his head. "Fodder funny!"

“Tell me the color of the sky today, Dormin,” Rector Yung asked over their late dinner.

The last son of King Oren smiled at the nightly routine that he never grew weary of. “It began as solid black, because of the cloud cover. When the sun rose, the black faded to a dull gray which remained until midday meal. Then the clouds parted, the white sun shone, and sections of the sky were a deep blue. By late afternoon most of the long stretched clouds were gone, replaced instead by big fluffy white ones. At sunset, many of those clouds hovered at the horizon. The sky behind them was a

washed out blue with hints of green, while the sky in the east was so deeply blue it bordered on purple."

He took a deep breath and plowed on.

"Then the sun dipped behind the clouds, darkening them but blazing all around, like a pillow on fire, but warm and relenting, like mashed potatoes lined with bright white. Then it all faded to pale blue, and is now becoming black again, with white stars beginning to show."

The rector and his wife beamed at each other.

"He could be an artist, with an eye for color and detail like that," Mrs. Yung said approvingly.

“Certainly not a poet,” the rector commented. “Clouds like burning pillows? Mashed potatoes?”

“I’m tired and hungry!” Dormin declared, digging into his dinner.

The three of them laughed.

“Besides,” Dormin said after he swallowed down a mouthful, “I could never be an artist. I can’t draw a straight line.”

“Oh, Dormin,” Mrs. Yung chuckled, “that’s not a problem. No one wants to see a straight line in a painting. You see very well now, more than you ever did.”

“I must confess, once I quit assuming I already knew the truth, the truth was much easier to recognize.”

“With a mind like that, you could do about anything, Dormin,” the rector said.

“You keep saying that,” he bobbed his head. “But I still think you have too much faith in me.”

“Well, someone has to,” Mrs. Yung said, sliding him the basket of biscuits. She nodded once to her husband.

He nodded back. “Dormin, did you hear what happened today? About the fort commanders?”

“How could I not!” Dormin took three biscuits. “Everyone was talking about it while we were clearing out the debris from the collapsed bridge. Even the soldiers redirecting carts were surprised by the change. And everyone

has a different theory of what it means."

After a moment he asked, "What *does* it mean?"

"We're not entirely sure ourselves," the rector admitted. "I was actually hoping you might have an insight or two."

Dormin shook his head. "Sorry. I was clueless during my years in Idumea. I never paid attention to the politics of anything."

Rector Yung exhaled. "Then we should probably anticipate the worst. Mrs. Yung and I discussed it and, Dormin, it's time to explain a few things to you."

"All right," he said, not too concerned as he took a big bite of his

biscuit. “You’ve explained so much to me in the past year—”

He stopped when he saw the exceptionally grave expressions on the couple’s faces.

“Dormin,” Rector Yung began quietly, “you’re aware that we know about the so-called servants that your ancestors held, right?”

He nodded slowly.

“Your grandfather Querul the Fourth freed them,” Mrs. Yung reminded him. “Thirty-three of them. Then they were moved, by High General Shin. The older one, not the one now.”

Dormin stopped nodding. “I didn’t know that,” he whispered.

“They were moved here, to Winds,” she explained.

Dormin swallowed. “Oh . . . no. Are, are . . . are you two—”

Mrs. Yung shook her head rapidly. “No, we’re not their descendents, Dormin.”

He sighed in relief. “For a moment there, I thought—”

“Dormin,” Rector Yung cut him off gently, “they were brought here to Winds and taught by some teachers how to do what everyone else takes for granted. How to buy things at the market, how to earn gold and silver, how to read and write. And they did learn, very well.”

“That’s good,” Dormin said,

perplexed as to where this was going.

"Dormin, have you ever wondered *where they are now?*"

He hadn't, and he didn't know what bothered him more: that he didn't know where they were, or that he'd never given them a second thought.

"I . . . never thought of that before," he admitted.

Mrs. Yung leaned towards him, her blonde locks streaked with gray falling on to her face. Seasons ago Dormin decided she was what his grandmothers would have looked like—the ones who, had they lived, would've snuck him sweets and read him stories when he was a child.

"Dormin," she said intently, "would

you like to know?”

Chapter 10 ~ “I know who you are-- *really* are-- and why you’re here in Edge.”

Edge was scared.

Just the very next day the entire

village that used to embrace *Captain* Shin suddenly feared *Major* Shin.

He knew there was trouble by midday when he came home for his meal and saw Poe Hili. His parents' new house was finished in the Edge of Idumea Housing Estates, and since he'd be living on the other side of the village he'd no longer attend Mahrree's After School Care.

Perrin was approaching the house when he saw Poe trotting down the front stairs.

"Mr. Hili!" Perrin shouted to his little friend.

Poe stopped dead in his tracks in the front yard and stared at him.

"I heard you were moving today.

Come to say good-bye? We're going to miss you around here." Perrin hopped the fence and ruffled Poe's black hair.

Poe remained motionless.

"Poe? Are you all right?"

"Y-y-yes sir!" Poe said, trying to stand at attention.

"No, you're not. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, sir!" Poe exclaimed, "I've done nothing wrong!" and he took off like a spooked horse.

Perrin, flabbergasted, turned to Mahrree who had come to the door. "What do you think that was all about?"

Mahrree bit her lower lip. "He told me he felt bad that you now had to be an Administrator. He said he used to like

you, but now?" She shook her head. "I'm so sorry. Poe said his parents were worried, and the notices posted all over the village this morning certainly didn't phrase the change very well."

She pulled out a scratch piece of paper from her apron pocket.

"'As of immediately, the commanders of the forts are now the official eyes, ears, and voices of the Administrators. Any and all activity, of any remotely suspicious nature, will immediately be reported to the commander for immediate investigation. As of immediately, the village magistrates and chiefs of security are under the immediate jurisdiction of, and now report to, the Commanders of the

Army of Idumea'."

"You *copied* the notice?" he asked, incredulous.

"I've never before seen anything in writing with one word so overused. *Immediately* I knew I wanted a copy of it." She smiled apologetically.

"And sometimes you think *I'm* odd?" He shook his head. "I'll visit the Hilis later and try to clear this up. I am *not* an Administrator."

Mahrree raised her eyebrows. "You think visiting their home is going to make them feel better? You're not exactly Mrs. Hili's favorite person to begin with, you know."

"It's not like I'd go in uniform."

“Maybe wait a little while, let the news sink in first. No one really knows what it means. Everyone is edgy in Edge right now.”

She was right, Perrin decided. The notices of the new edicts and his promotion had gone up only that morning, but as Perrin walked back to the fort two groups of people switched to the other side of the road to avoid having to acknowledge the new major as he walked past.

At dinner he asked Mahrree how her day went.

“I started a catalog in my mind to record the different looks I received at the market this afternoon,” she said with

an air of disgust. “They ranged from sympathetic to petrified. People hardly knew what to say to me, probably afraid I might report it to you.”

“This can’t last,” he groaned.

“You mean, you *hope* it won’t last,” she pointed out. “It ‘can’ do all kinds of things we don’t want.”

Chairman Mal was expecting the visit, although it wasn’t planned on his daily itinerary. He could hear the angry footsteps far down the hallway and the sound of citizens scattering well before his door flew open with a bang.

Mal looked up from his desk with a slick smile. “High General Shin! Did you have a pleasant trip inspecting the fort at Waves?”

Shin marched straight up to his desk and leaned across it. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“Asking a question about one’s trip? We call that politeness, High General. Civility. Good manners. Obviously you’ve heard of none of these things.”

Shin slammed his fist on the desk. “The *change!* And how did I find out about it? From the lieutenant colonel at Waves, when he received the message!”

Mal sat back and interlaced his

fingers together, resting them on the desk. “I don’t understand your anger, Relf. Why, this is giving you and the army even *more* power.”

“No it’s not,” Shin whispered fiercely. “It’s making the world terrified of the army again! You’re undermining all the good we’ve accomplished—”

“That’s why the order came from me, my dear General,” Mal said with a far too confident smile. “If it came from you, it would have indicated a breach in our cooperation. But now the world sees that I trust the army implicitly, and that the safety of the world is our utmost concern.”

Shin regarded him for a moment.

“Doesn’t make any sense,” he

murmured. “Since when do you want to share power? No, no,” he said slowly as his eyes darkened, “this is all about you seizing *more*, isn’t it Nicko? You had no hold on the magistrates and chief of enforcements, but if the commanders are in charge of them, and I’m in charge of the commanders, and *you’re* in charge of *me* . . .”

The High General stood up and straightened his jacket.

“Well done, Mal. You’ve just made yourself king, haven’t you? That’s what you always wanted anyway.”

Mal rolled his eyes. “You’re becoming the most paranoid man in the world, you know that? You’re going to

make Gadiman jealous. You could see a seditious motive in the presentation of a birthday pie." The Chairman shook his head and leaned forward. "You know as well as I do that the magistrates are, for the most part, shallow men seeking to be popular. All they care about is people looking up to them. They don't care one bit about the conditions of their villages. And the chiefs of enforcement? They're only tinsmiths with sticks. Simply unbridled egos and a false sense of superiority—"

Mal didn't understand the penetrating look the High General was giving him.

He continued. "But Relf, our soldiers are far more adept than those

who want to be in control. Threats are increasing—"

"I haven't seen any evidence," Shin cut him off.

Mal just blinked at him. "Of course you haven't. The rumors reach my ears, not yours."

Shin folded his arms. "Exactly *why* is that, Chairman? Shouldn't I be hearing the stories too?"

Mal shrugged. "I don't know why your men are less competent about hearing important news. But at least one of us knows what's going on in the world. And now your commanders—even your own son—have more authority to truly secure the world. Why

aren't you pleased by that, Relf?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Shin admitted. "That's why I'm so uneasy."

Mal sighed loudly. "No, that's why you're so unprogressive."

Ten minutes later Relf Shin stood next to his horse, writing out a quick message to be sent to Edge and trying to figure out what was going on.

Nicko's solidifying his hold on the world, Relf considered. Or he's trying to subvert the authority of the local magistrates. Or he's trying to increase loyalty to his regime. Or—

That was likely it. The increase of Guarder activity *had* also increased whispering in the world, but not the kind Mal was suggesting. Shin had heard it—or heard *of* it—from some of his commanders.

Why were the Guarders more active now? They hadn't been under the reign of kings. While Oren was an idiot, at least the world was relatively quiet while he was in power. But for the past couple of years? Guarders were everywhere, striking nearly every village on the borders of civilization.

Relf stopped in his writing.

Why *were* the Guarders so active now? What in the past three years had

changed in their society to make them so bold and aggressive? Never before in their history had they struck so often and so violently. If only he could capture another one alive. If only Perrin could—

Relf exhaled and shook his head. He couldn't send his only son back into the forest to find an informant. Twice he risked his life, twice he was unsuccessful in capturing any alive. The army simply had no way to know.

He crumpled up the message he was writing, the one that rambled as aimlessly as his thoughts.

Instead he wrote,

A great many storms have been seen here, son. Keep your eyes on the horizon. Not sure when they will all

pass.

It was a pointless message, he knew. But everything seemed pointless right then.

Three days later, Edge was still edgy.

"The Eyes, Ears, and Voice of the Administrators," Perrin announced officially as he sat down to dinner on the fourth day, "has not been looked at, talked to, or given more than a passing nod. Not as if I was ever what one might consider a *sociable* person—"

His wife snorted into her soup.

"—it's just that I don't enjoy being regarded as a ravenous bear out for a stroll in the village."

"Perhaps it's because the village hasn't had the opportunity to see you as they remember you. Have you tried smiling at people? Not your scary smile, but your real one that showed up a few times when we were debating."

"I smile all the time, Mahrree," he said stiffly.

She bit her lip. "Uh-huh."

"But I'm working on a plan."

"Oh, good. What kind of plan?"

"The Plan." He bit into his bread.

"As convincing as your smile, no doubt."

“Finally received a message from my father. He’s been in Waves and just got back to Idumea.”

“And what did he say?” Mahrree held her breath.

Perrin only sighed. “He wrote about storms, and he doesn’t know when they’ll pass. He’s as perplexed as I am.”

After dinner he sat doodling for ideas at his desk in the study. He didn’t have anything useful yet because he hated having to make people *like* him. That struck him as a childish—or political—waste of time.

But somehow he had to remind the people, whose hearts and minds he won almost three years ago, that he still was

Perrin Shin and nothing had changed. Not even his uniform, and although he'd received a message from his father that the new jacket was on its way, he wasn't going to don it until he absolutely had to.

Perhaps next year.

"What have you got so far?" he heard Mahrree whisper into his ear.

"Uh," he covered some sections with his hand. "Nothing much, yet. Why don't you go do something?"

"I've come to inspire you." She kissed him on his neck.

"Wrong kind of inspiration, Mrs. Shin."

"I just hate seeing you so intense."

He paused. "When am I *not* intense?"

“Intenser than normal, then,” she said and abruptly slid his arm off his writing. “I knew I saw something there!”

“It’s . . . something I wasn’t really going to use. Rather silliness. Only—”

“‘Don’t run, I’m Perrin Shin, not an Administrator,’” Mahrree read out loud the words he had sketched out in the form of an insignia.

He turned a little pink. “Just was thinking if I had a patch reminding people who I am, then . . .”

“It’s too big, too many words,” Mahrree said in a mock critical tone. “Ah, but I have it! Take the first letter of each word and put them together, so the phrase is reduced to the word.”

She took the quill out of his hand and wrote it out.

"Look, it would turn into DRIPSNAA. Oh, I like that. You could shorten it even further to Don't Run, I'm Perrin Shin, and you could be DRIPS."

She smiled at him, rather pleased with her invention.

He looked at her.

"That's even sillier," he declared. "Reduce a phrase to only a representative word? The army would never go for that."

She pursed her lips, and he nearly forgot what he was in his study for. "You don't like any of my ideas, do you?" She pouted purposefully.

“That’s not going to work, woman. I need to concentrate.”

“All right, DRIPS.” She kissed him on the lips.

He didn’t accomplish a great deal that night, but he had a few ideas.

In the morning he found a note next to his plate. “Dogs Ruin Important Papers, Sir,” along with the wet remains of Mahrree’s ‘immediate’ note that it seemed didn’t agree with Barker’s stomach.

That afternoon, when he retrieved his midday meal from his tin, he found another note. “Don’t Run In Peto’s Shorts.”

“Cute, Mahrree,” he mumbled, “and

not too helpful." He crumpled it up for the fire.

At dinner he found, "Dinner's Ready—It's Pork Sandwiches," and on his desk that evening when he went back to work he saw, "Daughter's Rambunctious in Playing Soldier."

The next morning he saw another message at the table. This one he smiled at, folded carefully, and later put in his quill drawer at the fort.

"Debate Results; Im-Prove Sanity."

That night he announced to her, "Phase One of The Plan will begin next week on my day off, to kick off Weeding Season."

"I hope it's more engaging than its name," she said.

He grumbled at her. “You want to help, right?”

“Right!”

“Then we’ll begin by visiting every family we know in the congregation, assuring them I’m still the man they know and lov—, well, they *know*. I thought that if you, me, the children, and Barker took a few long walks, chatting to people, letting them see me, *not in uniform*, with my family, that they might . . .” He bobbed his head back and forth.

“Realize you’re still the same large commander of the fort that they’ve always known and who’s killed a dozen men?”

“Y—es,” he said slowly.

“Great idea!” she beamed at him. “What’s phase two?”

“Depends upon the success of phase one.”

A couple of days later, with Edge still on high alert whenever they saw the new major, he set out for an all-day leisurely stroll around the northern half of the village with his wife, his children in a small wagon, and his massive black, drooling dog harnessed to pull it. Wearing a brown shirt, beige trousers, and as genuine a smile as he could muster, Perrin Shin and his family stopped and chatted with wary neighbors in their gardens or farms, all in the attempt to demonstrate that the Shin

family was not to be feared.

Hogal and Tabbit did their best as well to spread the word in their neighborhood, but along Hycymum's road, pretending to be sociable was much more difficult. For some reason, none of Hycymum's neighbors would say more than two words to them, until they discovered why from the Arkys.

"Don't worry, Major," Mr. Arky winked at him as the Shins walked up to his fence. "I believe Hycymum, that you aren't a spy for the Administrators."

Perrin's eyebrows flew upwards. "She said *what?*"

"That no matter what anyone said, you really weren't a spy. At least, you wouldn't be a very good one, since you

hadn't been by to get any good gossip off of her yet."

Mahrree gripped his arm in a futile gesture of calming.

"Mahrree . . ." Perrin growled.

"I'm on it!" she promised, and jogged next door to her mother's house where her sewing ladies were just arriving. Their nervous glances fell frequently on the major who stood glaring at his mother-in-law's house, his arms folded and his stance tense.

Several minutes later Mahrree came out and over to her husband and family. "She's agreed to not try to help us anymore, but only if you'll come over to her club meeting and sample her new ee-

clares in front of all her ladies—”

Mr. Arky chuckled as Perrin groaned.

“*Mahrree* . . .”

“And tell her friends how *much* you like them.” She squinted meaningfully.

He had to admit later they were rather tasty, even though the women giggled at him when cream filling dribbled down his chin in an undignified manner.

“*Undignified* is precisely what they needed to see,” Mahrree assured him as they walked home that warm afternoon, the children lying on top of each other and dozing in the wagon. “You were much more a long-suffering son-in-law than a fearsome commander. That goes a

long way with the gray hairs."

"Hopefully it goes all the way through the rest of the village," he sighed.

"Give it a few weeks," she said, hugging his arm. "Let Edge talk amongst themselves as they weed this season. People love to gossip when they're hands and knees in the dirt. Let's see what stories grow and then go on from there."

"Stories," Perrin whispered as if it was a disgusting word.

"Yes, people *believe* stories. They *like* stories, much more than they like facts," Mahrree insisted. "And today the story is, Perrin Shin is a devastatingly

handsome man with an utterly charming wife, two adorable children, a hideous dog, and he is—best of all—nice to his mother-in-law. You're golden."

"The whole village doesn't see me the same way you do." He smiled.

"Right there! *That* smile. Get rid of that stiff, fake one and let others see that one."

He raised an eyebrow. "You don't need that kind of competition, my wife."

She laughed.

His smile faded. "You're right about stories, Mahrree. But too often they twist the wrong way. Nothing even has to change—and actually, nothing *has*—but everyone *perceives* there's been a change, and their imaginations

create far worse ‘facts’ as to what that means. They could just as easily assume that Perrin Shin is a devious man who uses his family to make a good impression. Then, when the people trust him again, he sweeps in with his army and takes over the village! Just like the army did when they rebelled against King Querul the Second.”

Mahrree exhaled. “I don’t think people know history well enough to remember that happened. And it was only for several moons that the army and the king sparred against each other. There wasn’t even that much bloodshed, only a lot of posturing and assuming and insinuations—”

“Just like now,” he said dully.

She groaned. “Can’t think like that. Keep smiling. And waving.” She demonstrated by waving to a couple of girls walking a cow along the side of the road opposite of them.

They smiled timidly at Mahrree.

She elbowed her husband. “I said smile, soldier!” she hissed.

He attempted a sort-of-handsome-but-trying-too-hard-so-it-was-actually-creepy grin and waved reluctantly.

The girls broke into a nervous jog, dragging the complaining cow behind them.

Lieutenant Heth marched smartly up the wide white stone stairs into the Administrative Headquarters, nodding to the pages in short red jackets who held open the doors.

Another Command School student was marching out at the same time, slightly pale. His bi-annual interview with Chairman Mal must not have gone as well as he hoped.

Heth smirked and continued on down to the Chairman's office, and was soon ushered in.

"Sit, Heth," Mal said simply as he perused a document in his hands. "You know which chair."

“Yes, sir,” Heth said, taking a seat directly in front of Mal’s large desk. He waited, sitting at attention. Part of the interview was the waiting. Mal liked to see how long it took a young man to squirm.

“I’m looking at your marks here,” Mal said after several minutes.

“May I explain, sir?” Heth licked his lips. “You see—”

Mal looked up at him. “Did I give you permission?”

Heth gulped. First failure, already. He shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Truly surprising,” the Chairman said slowly rereading the page. “Well, then, I suppose all that’s left to say is,

Congratulations on graduating early."

Heth was stunned silent, his eyebrows furrowing. "Uh, but sir, my marks—"

Mal tossed the page into the fire.

Heth had wondered why Mal had a fire burning on his hearth on one of the hottest days of the year.

"Oh, dear," Mal said plainly. "Well, I knew the numbers on that. Lieutenant Heth, you will retrieve your things from the dormitories and move into your new room tonight."

Heth dared to smile. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir! Who do I report to at the garrison?"

"Not the garrison," Mal smiled thinly. "My mansion."

Heth couldn't have prevented his eyebrows from shooting upwards even if both hands were holding them down. "The mansion, sir?"

"Been a few years since you've been there, hasn't it, *Sonoforen?* Thought you might enjoy staying there again."

"I would, sir, I would! My father had a guest room for me—"

"Which has remained untouched, I assure you. A bit of cleaning, but otherwise . . ."

Heth grinned fully now. "Dormin will be so jealous—"

"Where is he?" Mal said, his cutting tone suddenly so frosty it nearly

extinguished the fire.

"I still don't know," Heth admitted. "Haven't heard anything from him. But if I do, you'll be the first to know."

Mal nodded once. "Now, you understand I'm not letting you stay at the mansion as a reward, but so that I can train you more fully."

"Oh. Yes. Of course, sir." He licked his lips again. "Does this mean the time is getting ripe?"

"There's something being planned right now, yes. But that's not what I want you for. Twice already my testing of a certain general's son has produced unsatisfactory results. Despite all my efforts, there's a slim chance there will be a third failure, so that's why you'll be

in place for the fourth attempt. You'll be my fail-safe."

Heth smiled formally. "Thank you, sir. I look forward to serving you *and the general* in any ways that I can."

"Well said," Mal nodded. "Now, I want you to keep very quiet and to yourself. Now more than ever it's essential that we keep your identity unknown. No one in my mansion has ever seen you before, and it will be known that I have selected you, along with another new officer, as additional guards because I'm feeling insecure about my safety."

"Understood, sir."

“Good. Now, when you arrive at the mansion, I’ll have someone waiting who will prepare you for the next situation.”

“Yes, sir. How will I recognize him, sir?”

“Everyone can recognize Gadiman, Heth. Ever seen a nauseated weasel?”

“So,” Perrin said with the weight of boulders as he trudged into the kitchen for dinner. “Heard any new stories today?”

Mahrree bit her lip. “Unfortunately yes,” she sighed. “What *is it* with these

people? Did you know that the commander in Winds has supposedly stationed soldiers at every intersection? And in Coast, anyone coming to see the waves at the shore has to sign a form first? And no one knows why, but *soldiers* are holding the forms!"

Perrin groaned and slumped down on a chair in the kitchen. "I know why those things are happening, but what's the rumor in Edge?"

"The soldiers are plotting," Mahrree said mysteriously, "And no one knows what, but it's creeping to Edge, just you wait and see! That major is plotting something!" She rolled her eyes. "Edgers are the most suspicious people in the world."

He shrugged. “Sounds like people in Winds and Coast are suspicious, too.”

“So, what are the facts?”

“Not nearly as interesting as the stories. Except for maybe Coast,” he added thoughtfully. “You see, some visitors there a few weeks ago were actually wading in the water—”

“They went *in?*” Mahrree was aghast.

Even the bravest fishermen never waded in the salt water if they could avoid it. What dangers it held, no one knew. It was no wonder that the Guarders that tried to attack by sea several moons ago drowned in it.

Perrin nodded soberly. “Then the

strangest thing happened. These huge fish, larger than people, came right up to them. Had these tall fins on their backs and blew air out of a hole on top of their heads. They even seemed to be trying to communicate, making these squeaking sounds."

"Did the people die?" she asked breathlessly.

"No, they ran right out of there. The giant fish swam off, a few even leaping in the air, as if patrolling the waters to make sure no people go in. So yes, there are a few soldiers posted there to watch for any more incidents, and to warn people. Several visitors have even given their names and home villages to the soldiers in case something happens to

them and a giant fish rushes out of the water and eats them or something."

Mahrree exhaled. "The soldiers are there *protecting* them. But that's not what the world wants to believe, is it?"

"And in Winds, they've had some problems with too many wagons on the roads. The main bridge over the Wind River washed out, so soldiers were redirecting wagons to other roads, which caused a few jams. Until the bridge is repaired, yes, soldiers are on a *few* intersections trying to prevent accidents."

"Well, there goes all the mystery from *that* story," Mahrree said. "But no one in Edge will believe it. And giant

fish? They'll think that's a diversion from the real story—the commander at Coast is taking over!"

"Ha," Perrin said mirthlessly. "The commander at Coast is a fat colonel older than my father who wants nothing more than to eat crabs and watch all the old men walk along the shore with their old wives for their twentieth wedding anniversaries." He rolled his eyes. "The only thing he'd ever take over is the best bench."

Mahrree blinked. "You think we'll b e *old* at age forty-eight for our twentieth anniversary?"

"You know what I mean."

She went to stand behind him and massaged his broad, tight shoulders. "I

think you're going to have to do something."

"Our twentieth anniversary isn't for seventeen more years. We just celebrated our third, remember? Shem came over to watch the children and—"

"No!" she laughed. "I mean—"

"I know what you mean," he said, dejected. "Phase Two. I have to put a stop to this, at least here in Edge. I have to win their hearts and minds all over again."

Mahrree cringed. "I really don't want to debate in public again. It's been so long—"

"I *was* thinking about a debate, but I wasn't thinking about *you*," he assured

her.

"Why not?" she asked, suddenly feeling insulted.

"There's someone else who needs to make himself known here, too. And for that, I'll need your help."

It was with almost perverse pleasure that Mahrree knocked on the door of the small shed the next afternoon. She held her breath with anticipation.

"Come in?" called the timid voice.

Mahrree threw open the door, hitting the large desk as she did so.

“Ah, Mrs. Shin!” Mr. Hegek was visibly relieved as he stood to greet her. “I thought you were someone else looking for another shovel.”

“No, no. You’re exactly the man I want to see. You see, I have a problem —” She leaned towards him, friendlier than she ever had before.

The poor man actually attempted a small smile.

“As it is, the *entire village* has a problem, and I believe you’re the man who can help fix it.”

His smile vanished as his little green eyes tripled in size. “Me? Are you sure?”

“Oh yes, absolutely. You see, Edge

is . . . well, *edgy* right now. Administrative changes to the schools, the forts, the magistrates—everyone is imagining the worst about people they used to know and *don't know at all*," she hinted.

"Are you talking about me?" he whispered.

She really didn't know what people thought of him, but she knew what *she* thought. "I swear you live in this shack, Mr. Hegek."

He glanced nervously around as if she could tell.

She suddenly felt enormous sympathy for him, and regretted ever thinking him to be an arm of the Administrators. He was barely a

fingernail, and a clipped one at that.

"Mr. Hegek," she smiled sweetly, sincerely, "let's give Edge an opportunity to get to know and *trust* you. You're in charge of all the schools that begin again next week, but how many parents have you met?"

"A, a, a, a few," he stammered.

"You're going to meet them all, and this is how: you mentioned that you enjoyed debating as a boy, right? Well, no one here has dared have a public debate since the changes were made with the fort. I think everyone's afraid they may say something wrong."

"With, with, with . . . your husband now, now in charge." He nodded too

frequently.

"He's not happy about any of this either, Mr. Hegek," Mahrree confided quietly. "And he also enjoys debating. He hasn't had a worthy opponent since we married, and I think he may be a bit rusty, but that's all right—"

"Wait, wait, wait . . . whoa, *hold on*," Hegek held up his hands to stop her. "Are you suggesting that I debate . . . debate . . ." His hands moved, but his mouth couldn't anymore. Slowly he sank back into his chair.

"My husband, yes. On the 63rd Day of Weeding, the day school starts next week. It will be perfect—you can go to each of the schools, introduce yourself,

tell them that you expect to see all the children and their parents in the amphitheater that night—”

That’s when Mahrree realized that many parts of the director still hadn’t moved. His hands were still up, failing to stop any of her words, and his mouth twisted oddly.

She bit her lip as his chin began to tremble.

“Oh, Mr. Hegek, he’s really a *big softy!*” she assured him, hoping her voice didn’t carry out of his office-shack. “This will be good! It will allow the village to get to know you better and show that Major Shin approves of debates. You have yet to meet my husband. I promise his reputation is

much more fearsome than the real man. People used to love him, up until several weeks ago."

Mr. Hegek's hands finally came together to start massaging each other.

"I, I, I, I . . . understand he's *killed a dozen Guarders,*" he whispered as if it were a great secret.

Mahrree leaned in closer. "There's some debate about the actual number *single-handedly*," she whispered back, "but . . . are you a Guarder?"

He gasped and blinked. "No! Of course not!"

Mahrree stood back up and smiled. "Then you have nothing to worry about! Perrin?"

The director nearly slid out of his chair in terror when his door flew open, catching again on the great desk. Ducking so as to not crack his head on the low door, the major marched into this office with a big smile and an outstretched hand.

“Good afternoon!”

“Major!” Hegek whimpered. He braced himself with his toes and tried to push himself back up into sitting position. He looked at Perrin’s still outstretched hand and, deciding he should probably stand in his presence, looked for a clean spot on his desk to push himself up. Instead, he knocked over a large stack next to the edge of the

desk and a landslide of directives floated aimlessly to the floor.

Perrin stepped quickly around the desk, grabbed the traumatized director's hand, and pulled him effortlessly to a standing position.

"Just call me Perrin," he said as kindly as he could.

Mr. Hegek, shriveled to shorter than Mahrree, looked up into Perrin's face and nodded. Then he turned to Mahrree with pleading in his eyes.

"I'll leave you two alone to decide a topic. You don't need me meddling!" and she closed the door. A distinct whimper leaked from the shed as Mahrree walked briskly onto the school grounds to start giggling. Once she

composed herself she circled the shack for several minutes, trying to hear what the muffled voices were saying.

Eventually she heard a distinct laugh from Perrin.

A few minutes later she heard an unfamiliar laugh; Perrin had won over the director.

About ten minutes later they emerged like old friends.

“Until three nights from now, Major Shin! And don’t be too confident. I may be only as tall as your wife, but I do more than flutter eyelashes to win a debate.” Mr. Hegek waved to Mahrree and walked back into his office with what Mahrree thought was almost a

jaunty little step.

Mahrree turned on Perrin as they walked home. “Well done! And what did he mean by that, ‘flutter eyelashes’? What did you say to him?” She jabbed him gently in the ribs.

“I only gave him my version of our debates,” he said. “I told him I didn’t want any tricks played, and he became so nervous I thought every paper on his desk would slide away. So I told him what *kinds* of tricks I was talking about.” He winked at his wife and put his arm around her. “He lightened up considerably after that. I was sure you wouldn’t mind.”

“Well, when you put it that way, what can I say? What’s your topic?”

“I suggested we revisit an old favorite of his, and he suggested we twist it a little. We’ll argue the merits of repealing or altering the First Law of Nature, and who should be responsible for it. He’ll go around on the first day of school, tell all the children they should be there, and since the major has requested it . . .” Perrin sighed. “Honestly, I’ve never been so nervous for a debate in my entire life! There’s so much at stake, Mahrree.”

“Even more than when we were debating?”

“Yes, even more than that. I knew I’d eventually win you over. Just a matter of time,” he said offhandedly.

“But this is the whole village. I have to be the major and still be their neighbor. I don’t know if I can restore that balance.”

“If anyone can, it’s you.”

The lone figure of a young man made his way up into the forest, heading in a northerly direction, one hundred twenty-six paces from the fresh spring at the edge of the woods. It was well past dark, and the figure’s dark clothing hid him well. He sat down on a large rock by a hot bubbling spring and waited.

Moments later another figure approached him from the north, dressed

in green and brown mottled clothing, and sat down next to him.

"The forest has become very active this week. Something big is coming soon. Do you think you're ready?"

The younger man sighed. "It's what I've been waiting for, for over a year. I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

The older man next to him nodded. "And now for the real question—is *he* ready?"

"Oh, absolutely! There's no one more prepared than him. He can take on the world!"

The man smiled at his companion's enthusiasm. "Now, think carefully and honestly. This is important. Is he *really* ready, or is your closeness to the

situation clouding your objectivity?"

The younger man stared into the bubbling spring, not at all concerned by his close proximity. They'd been watching it for decades, and all it ever did was bubble.

"I may be close to the situation, but I've never met anyone quite like him, or his wife." He looked up at the man. "Isn't he the reason I'm here? Is there any doubt?"

The older man shook his head. "No. There's no doubt. Just caution. And concern. Some of it may strike a little close to home for him. There's also concern for you as well."

The younger man smiled. "I know

I'm doing the right thing. This is where I'm supposed to be. Is there anything else I should be doing?"

"No, you *are* doing the right thing. And I don't think there's anyone more apt for the position than you, Zenos."

Shem nodded. "Then let them come. We're ready."

Rector Densal smiled as he looked at the tables and chairs crowded with congregation members eating, talking, and laughing. He loved Holy Days because each felt like trip away from the world, a day lifted out of time each

week where everything was *different*, when cares were set aside, and everyone in their neighborhood came together to discuss The Writings and life, and ready themselves for another week.

Not only was this Hogal Densal's love, but his life. He couldn't have imagined doing anything different with the time the Creator allotted him than to remind those he loved about the Creator who loved them.

It was an unusual moment for him. No one was rushing up to speak to him, or asking to meet with him for "only a few minutes" in his office, minutes that frequently turned into hours as sorrows, troubles, and concerns spilled out unheeded, the confessors desperately

hoping Rector Densal could help them find a way to clean up the mess. He always could.

But he also knew exactly why he had this rare free moment and what he was to do with it.

He searched the packed congregation hall where, three hours ago, the benches were filled with those to hear his sermon, then moved aside to bring in tables for eating. Now that most of the food everyone brought to share was gone, his congregation began to change the seating arrangements yet again for an afternoon of conversations. Near the middle, towards the left, he saw them.

Mahrree was at one table talking and laughing with some other young mothers as they bounced their babies or discreetly nursed them. Jaytsy played nearby on the floor with other toddlers and a pile of soft knitted toys that older women brought each week to entertain the little ones.

At a table close by sat Perrin and Corporal Shem Zenos, the only two blue uniforms in the entire hall, with several other men. Usually on sunny afternoons such as this one, the corporal would be outside with the older children organizing them in games or challenging them to races. But lately he sat next to his commander, watching him with the

admiration of a younger brother thrilled to have been saved a spot at the men's table.

For the past two moons, ever since Perrin became the highly suspect Eyes and Ears and Voice, Zenos had stayed closer to him on Holy Days, his happy, gentle face acting as a bridge between the neighbors and the major they now feared. Gradually members of the congregation began to realize nothing had changed with Perrin and warmed up to him again, thanks to Corporal Zenos's unwavering dedication. Still, Perrin held back in the conversations about Idumean politics in which he was usually the loudest voice.

But today he back was in the thick

of the conversation with about a dozen other men. The discussion had turned to the idiocy of King Oren, and one man claimed he'd heard Oren had stabled his horses in the throne room during a particularly harsh Raining Season.

Perrin, the only man in Edge who had ever met Oren, and had been in that throne room at least a dozen times, jumped in with an elaborate description of it to prove he'd never seen any horses stabled there.

And next to him sat Shem Zenos, beaming unabashedly at Perrin Shin.

Hogal could read him as if he was a notice on the messenger boards.

The rector watched his great, great

niece toddle over to the loud men's table, in search of one wearing a dark blue uniform. She stopped between Perrin and Shem, looking at each of them. Since her father was leaning forward in a vivid description about the polished stone floor of the throne room which no horses would ever tolerate stepping on, Jaytsy looked up at Shem instead.

He saw her, grinned, and picked her up to sit on his lap. She leaned against his chest sleepily and popped her thumb into her mouth. Shem cuddled her, putting his lips to the top of her head, but stopping before actually kissing her dark brown hair.

From her table, Mahrree looked

over to see where Jaytsy had wandered off to. When she saw her daughter on Shem's lap, she smiled. Shem nodded to her, and Mahrree went back to her discussion with the other mothers.

Shem continued to watch Mahrree for a few moments, a small smile on his face.

Perrin didn't notice.

But Hogal did. The boy was as transparent as the windows on the command tower, and Hogal could see right in.

After a minute Jaytsy, rested up, wriggled down from Shem's lap and went back to the other small children playing. Shem returned to listening to the

major describe how the mansion stables were more elaborate than even the houses at the new Edge of Idumea estates.

Hogal slowly walked in the direction of the table, and Shem looked away from Perrin to see Hogal nearing. Rector Densal raised an eyebrow at him and cocked his head slightly. Zenos blinked in surprise, nodded once and quietly pushed away his chair.

Perrin didn't see his greatest admirer leaving the table to join Hogal.

"Corporal Zenos, might I have a moment of your time?" he said softly as he put a hand on the large boy's shoulder. He had to reach almost as high as he did when he put his hand on Perrin.

“Of course, Rector Densal. Can I help you with something?”

“Indeed you can, my boy. Let’s go into my office.”

He directed him towards a small room off the kitchen area of the rectory. When they went in, Hogal shut the door and gestured to two plain chairs before a small desk. “Have a seat, Shem.”

Hesitantly Corporal Zenos sat down, rubbing his palms on his trousers. “What can I do for you, Rector?”

Hogal sat down opposite of him and smiled. “I don’t have much time. Someone will be pounding on that door soon, so I’ll get right to the point: I know who you are—*really* are—and why

you're here in Edge."

Hogal knew he had it right because the corporal, unprepared for that opening, dropped his jaw nearly to his chest.

Then Hogal hit him again. "I've done all I could to prepare Perrin for the Creator, and I'm sure you'll understand when I say that I won't allow *anyone* or *anything* to interfere with that."

"Sir, I . . . I . . . think you *may* have me confused with someone else—" Zenos stammered.

"No, Shem Zenos, I do not. Years ago the Creator told me what he intended for Perrin. He was only eighteen then, just a little younger than you, and not heading in the right direction. It was my

task to change his heading. We spent some time together, and he grew a great deal in those weeks. I kept writing to him, hoping he would want to serve in Edge. He eventually did, and I couldn't have been happier about it. These past three years have been wonderful, but I'm simply growing too old to keep up with him anymore, and I know I won't be around forever."

Corporal Zenos couldn't even speak.

"So I'm leaving him to your care, Shem Zenos," Hogal said in the heaviest tone he'd ever used. "I expect you to watch out for him. He's now your responsibility. And I expect you to keep

a close eye on *only him*, from now on."

The poor young soldier could only gulp.

Hogal grinned that the message was received, waggled his eyebrows, slapped him on the back and said, in his normally cheery voice, "Good luck, my boy!"

Then he stood up, opened the door, and escorted a dumbfounded Corporal Zenos out.

Chapter 11 ~ “Are you *going* somewhere?!”

Nearly the entire population of Edge came nervously to the center of the village the next evening, the 63rd Day of Weeding Season, 322.

When the amphitheater began to fill,

Mahrree could feel the tension swirling around her at the front row with the heat of the evening. She sat with the Densals, her mother, and Jaytsy and Peto. Perrin had insisted his children come to remind anyone who saw the two-year-old and one-year-old that he *was* a family man. Fortunately Peto took a late nap and dozed contentedly in his great-great-uncle's arms, while Jaytsy was happy to sit on the ground dumping out the contents of her grandmother's bag. Even Hycymum realized now wouldn't be a good time to get upset that her yarns were rolling to front of the platform's stand, even if it *was* Tabbit who good-naturedly kicked them for Jaytsy's entertainment.

Hogal, sitting next to Mahrree, looked around him carefully so as to not disturb Peto. “Where’s Corporal Zenos tonight?”

There were about twenty soldiers in the amphitheater, some sitting in the audience, a few standing at the exit stairs, all trying to look friendly and casual. They weren’t doing a good job of it, judging by the wary looks of the villagers. Even Staff Sergeant Gizzada, who had a naturally pleasant face, seemed to be trying too hard to exude relaxed joy, suggesting instead that he’d had one too many pies after dinner.

Perrin must have given them lessons in smiling, Mahrree fretted.

“Shem’s on patrol tonight, at the forest’s edge.” Mahrree glanced at Hogal and saw great concern in his eyes. “Why?”

“Suppose that’s right, then,” Hogal muttered under his breath. The usual sparkle in his eyes was gone, until he looked at Mahrree. Some of it tried to return, but fizzled. “Don’t you worry about Shem Zenos. In fact, I recommend that you and Perrin always keep him close to you.”

Mahrree grinned. “We do! Haven’t you noticed? He’s right next to us every Holy Day in your congregation—”

Hogal’s eyes remained uncharacteristically serious. “Mahrree,

keep him close. He's young, but a most excellent man, and the finest I've ever known after Perrin."

Mahrree sobered too. "That's high praise coming from you."

"I trust him, Mahrree. So should you and Perrin. With everything. Promise me you will?"

Mahrree could only nod at Hogal's grave expression.

Then he looked down at the ground, saw a ball of yard in front of him, and gave it a worthy kick that made Jaytsy laugh and Hycymum fume. He waggled his eyebrows at Mahrree and chuckled, as if the last conversation had never taken place.

A few minutes later Major Shin

took the stage, with his new jacket and insignias that he realized he had to finally wear, and the murmuring audience fell to a frightened hush.

Mahrree smiled encouragingly at him as he glanced down at her. He winked and she couldn't help but sigh. He looked fantastic, as always, but she'd seen him only once from that angle before on the platform and forgotten that it made him seem larger than life. She realized with a mischievous giggle that probably most of the women who attended their debates over three years ago didn't come for the words but for the view.

But tonight Mrs. Shin was confident

her husband winked only at her.

When Mr. Hegek joined him he looked comical in comparison. He seemed to shrink even smaller under the nervous gaze of over four thousand villagers. But then Major Shin put a friendly arm around him and announced the beginning of the debate.

Forty-five minutes later the audience's demeanor was significantly altered.

The change happened around the time Mr. Hegek, who proved to be a fair match for Perrin once he got over his fear of the crowd, suggested that the only person in Edge capable of changing Nature's First Law was Major Shin himself. He went so far as to dictate an

amusing letter the major should send to the Administrators. He proposed how altering Nature's forces could keep the citizens *in line*—quite literally—if the force was applied in a narrow enough focus.

The high point of the evening was when the two of them pulled several teenage students from the audience and practiced queuing them up to find the most appropriate "lines." Purposely choosing very lively teens who playfully refused to stand still, even when the major "ordered" them and their new director "threatened" them, was a shared stroke of genius.

By the time the two men began to

teasingly argue about the problems of other forces, such as attraction and repulsion, then illustrated the problem cleverly by lining up the uncooperative teenagers and alternating them boy-girl, they were wholly claimed by the laughing audience as native sons of Edge.

Mahrree had to wait in line to talk to her husband after the debate, but she didn't mind. She just beamed at him as he glowed in his victory. He didn't win the debate, but handily won over Edge, which was a far more significant accomplishment. Many men slapped him on the back and a few assured him they never doubted he was always "one of them." Mahrree overheard a few women

tell him they had missed watching him on the platform and hoped he would return again for them to admire his *abilities*.

Mahrree smirked when she saw Perrin blush briefly. She made a mental note to pay a few neighborly visits to his admirers in the near future. She caught his eye and he made his excuses to join her.

"You're not going to stay for the acrobatics? They're from Idumea. I saw them years ago. They're quite amazing. Jaytsy and Peto would love it."

He glanced down at his children sitting in their little wagon. Jaytsy was rocking back and forth trying to get it to

move, and Peto did his best to climb out of the ropes Mahrree had fashioned snugly around him to keep him in place. “Look, Peto’s ready to join them!” Perrin grinned.

Mahrree hadn’t seen him this happy in weeks. She shook her head but smiled.

“Maybe another time. They’ll be exhausted in half an hour anyway and the whining competition will begin. No one here wants to witness that! I can get them home and into bed. You finish taking your compliments, and keep track of the names of the women.”

She gripped his arm and tiptoed to reach his ear.

“Tonight was exactly what

everyone needed," she whispered. "I see by the crowd of well-wishers that even our new director has made some new friends. Well done, Major!"

Perrin kissed her quickly. "Thanks. I'll be home soon, I promise."

Corporal Shem Zenos and the corporal assigned to him that evening guided their horses along the tree line, just as the sun was setting. They had been watching the forest, as they always did, when Shem noticed the movement out of the corner of his eye.

"This is it," he exhaled quietly.

“And right at sundown. That’s different.”

He glanced over to the other corporal to see if he noticed anything, but the soldier was looking south towards the village at that moment. Shem looked over to the trees again and felt his mouth go dry. He was about to be put to the test.

They burst out, at least twenty, as one great dark smear in a fast dash south.

“Corporal!” Zenos shouted. “Back to the fort! Warn Karna!”

Then Zenos kicked the sides of his horse and rode towards Edge, alone.

It was an hour after the debate when Mahrree opened the window of Jaytsy's bedroom to let in the cool evening breeze that came off the mountains. The sun had just set, changing the sky to a deep orange with green cloudy strips through it, and her daughter slept soundly in her small bed, as her little brother did in his.

Mahrree thought nothing was more beautiful than the sight of her children. Except her children freshly scrubbed and softly snoring for yet another peaceful night. Since they both began to sleep solidly, Mahrree's belief in the mercifulness of the Creator had doubled.

She turned to leave Jaytsy's room

when she heard an odd sound outside. It stopped as abruptly as it began. She walked quickly to the window to try to discern what it was. Then it came faintly again.

A scream, high-pitched, from somewhere in the area of her mother's neighborhood.

Tonight, Mahrree, the world really IS out to get you. MOVE!

Mahrree clutched the window frame as her father's words filled her head to toe.

"Dear Creator!" she whispered. "My husband's not coming home tonight, is he? Please, help him!"

Much can be done in five minutes. Mahrree had practiced it, so she knew.

Every window can be shut and barred with the exactly fitting iron reinforcements. Two sleeping children can be moved to their parents' large bed upstairs which was secured with rails to prevent them from rolling out. The door to that room can be locked at the top and the bottom. The front and back doors can be bolted and secured, and Mahrree could still have time to kneel in prayer by the front window with the iron rod from her bedside clenched firmly in her hands. Barker was in the back garden, but she knew he'd be useless. Unless Guarders were afraid of drool.

Fast approaching horses' hooves stopped suddenly behind her house. Her

eyes flew open.

"Thank you!" Mahrree murmured to the ceiling and rushed to the back door. She saw a soldier leap over her back fence and run to the door. He ran right past the dog who rested, unperturbed, in his shelter. Mahrree opened the back door.

"Mrs. Shin, I have been sent by the fort to . . . Are you *going* somewhere?!"

Major Shin had been trying to go home for the past half hour, but each time he finished a conversation with one person, another took his place. Most of

the residents of Edge were either staying to watch the acrobats or had gone home for the evening. But a few people still hung around the exit to the amphitheater waiting for their few congratulatory minutes with the major.

Perrin felt a bit guilty for being so late. He was sure his wife would understand about his having to win the hearts and minds of the people *again*. But now, for the past few minutes, he was feeling agitated.

A sudden flood of concern overwhelmed him. His left hand automatically patted his sword strapped to his side. Twice at home he had taken it off, thinking that a debate was no place to be armed. But each time as he

removed it, a gnawing in his belly forced him to put it back on. Part of the uniform, he rationalized to himself as he finally left the house with his family, the heavy steel glinting at his side. Now he was thankful it was there, but he wasn't sure why.

Something in the air felt wrong. The sun had set, but something else was changing the atmosphere besides the cool breeze coming from the north. Again a wave of concern overcame him, and in his mind he saw clearly Hogal and Tabbit. He knew he was no longer concentrating on the conversation he was having with a young miller. He couldn't think of anything but his sword and the

Densals.

The feeling came a third time so powerfully he started shaking his head at the confused young man.

“I’m very sorry, but you must excuse me. I need to—”

He didn’t finish his sentence. Instead, he sprinted his fastest across the village green towards the Densals’ house.

Mahrree was fastening her black cloak around her neck. This was not a time to be sitting in the house fretting. Something was happening near her

mother's house, she was sure of it.

"Yes, I'm leaving," she said calmly to the soldier who stared at her in shock. "Now, Private, upstairs in the bedroom are the major's children, asleep. They'll most likely not awake until dawn—"

"Mrs. Shin," the soldier sputtered, "I am here under strict orders to protect —"

"The major's family, correct? Well, his family's upstairs, where you should be."

She ignored his wide open mouth which she could see clearly, even though it was growing dark.

"Don't count on the dog for any assistance. Won't even bark, as I'm sure you noticed. Now, every window is

barred, and you'll secure this door behind me. The main bedroom window is impossible to reach from the outside. All other entry points can be seen from the landing at the top of the stairs. That's where I suggest you draw your sword and wait. No one gets to that bedroom, understand? Only the major or me. *Do you understand?*"

He nodded his head in surprise. "Yes ma'am, but, but . . ."

"But what, soldier?" she asked impatiently.

"I'm . . . I'm a *soldier*, not a baby tender!"

"Where's Corporal Zenos?" Mahrree demanded, already knowing the

answer.

"Most likely on patrol, ma'am."

"Then you're my new baby tender this evening! *Now draw your sword!*" She'd been practicing that commanding voice for the past year, matching the cadence her husband employed on the dog whenever he was on the sofa. It rarely worked.

But it worked on the soldier. The private drew his sword immediately and stared in surprise that he was obeying a woman.

Mahrree stepped out of the back door and glared at the young private. He nodded in startled obedience. Mahrree shut the door and heard it latch securely behind her. She turned around in time to

see two more soldiers come running down the alley and jump over her fence. She wondered why she even had a gate.

"Mrs. Shin! We've been sent by Karna and Neeks to—"

"I know, provide protection. Very good. One of you take the front door," she said authoritatively, "the other take the back. And don't let the private that's locked in my house out until the danger's passed, even if he's got a crying baby."

The soldiers looked at each other in amazement as Mrs. Shin slipped quickly past them and down the alley into the night.

She heard a frantic, "Mrs. Shin! You can't leave!"

But she was already out of their sight.

Perrin knew the fastest route to his great aunt and uncle's house. North past the village green, between the rows of shops, up to the northwest along the road, turn west at the third intersection, then two houses down the alley to their back door. No, maybe he should go to the front instead, although he never used that door—

He saw the route over and over as he sprinted, wishing his legs would travel as fast as his mind. He leaped

over a small fence, darted around another corner, and just as he came into view of the Densals' house, he saw a figure in dark clothes dash to the back door of the Densals. It glanced his way before turning and kicking in the door.

"NO!" Perrin roared.

The figure lunged through the open door into the kitchen of the Densals.

Perrin was only seconds behind him, but seconds was all the intruder needed. As Perrin rushed to the opened back door he saw the Guarder punch the old rector in the jaw. Hogal slumped to the floor just as Perrin burst into the kitchen.

With a swift kick Perrin knocked the legs out from under the man in dark

clothing, grabbed him around the throat, and dragged him, gasping for breath, out of the house to the back garden. The writhing Guarder produced a jagged dagger and twisted to slash Perrin. But Perrin kicked him in the chest, knocking the wind out of him.

In one smooth motion practiced thousands of times for this very moment, he swiftly drew his sword and plunged it into the man's heart.

The Guarder was dead.

Mahrree's bravery lasted until halfway to her mother's house where she

stopped to catch her breath and wonder what in the world she thought she was doing! She slipped into the relative safety of a large bush and tried to calm her heart that was beating far too rapidly.

"My mother," she reminded herself as she took deep quiet breaths. Perrin's duty was to Edge, her children were watched over, but her mother . . .

She peered out of the bush and looked cautiously around. What was she even running from? Or into? What was the danger that caused Karna or Neeks to send soldiers to guard her? Mahrree chided herself again for not asking the soldiers what was going on, but she knew if she went back now they'd never

let her leave again. Major's orders.

Somewhere in the distance glass tinkled, as if a large window had shattered, and she heard another cry for help.

Perrin pulled out his sword with grunt of satisfaction and spun back to the kitchen. "Hogal! Are you all right?" he shouted as he rushed in.

Tabbit was already on the floor next to him, sobbing silently.

Hogal opened his eyes. "I'm sorry, my boy. You were right. I should have kept that door locked."

Perrin shook his head as he crouched down next to him and carefully touched his cheek that was turning purple.

"That's all right," he said gently. "That's what I'm here for." He looked up at the open door, then quickly around the kitchen. "Always in twos . . . so where's the other one?"

Tabbit fell into Perrin's arms and he cradled her small, shaking body.

"It's all right, Auntie. You're safe now. I'm not going to leave you alone. You're both coming with me."

Mahrree peered out to the road. For some reason she thought it would be busy, but it was unnervingly still. She strained to see any activity and realized with a shudder that not every person running in the dark might be coming to her *rescue*. She thought of running back home but then remembered three armed soldiers were guarding her house.

Her babies were safe. Her mother wasn't.

Mahrree took a deep breath, wished she had relieved herself at home before she left, and ran across the cobblestones in her best quiet run. Focused only on reaching her mother's house, she heard a dog barking, then a distant shout on

another road, but kept running.

I'm the brave wife of the major, she repeated to herself. I'm the brave wife of the major.

If she kept thinking it, she might believe it. To the right and a road or so away she heard men shouting. In front of her, two soldiers darted across the road towards the voices.

At least, she *hoped* they were soldiers.

I'm the brave wife of the major . . .

She surprised herself with how quickly she reached her mother's. She ran first to the front door then changed her mind and crept around to the back. Through the windows she saw several candles were lit and she wondered how

to enter the house without terrifying her mother. She peered through the new expensive, thin clear glass windows her mother had just installed and saw Hycymum already had company in the form of her neighbors, the Arkys, sitting around the kitchen table.

Mahrree stopped, strangely disappointed. Here she had run, *bravely* she reminded herself, and her mother was . . . entertaining guests?!

Then another thought struck her. Maybe her mother wasn't in trouble. Maybe she didn't even know anything was wrong. They were probably in there gossiping and Mahrree had run in dead terror to interrupt their dessert!

She sighed, feeling a little foolish, and knocked on the back door. Without waiting for a response she walked in.

"Merciful Creator!" her mother cried out. "Child, I thought you were one of them!"

The pale look of surprise on Hycymum's face told Mahrree her mother *did* know there was trouble. That made her feel better, and a bit self-satisfied.

"Intruders don't knock, Mother!" Mahrree insisted, shutting the door and locking it. She pointed at the door. "And why wasn't that locked?!"

"How would you know intruders don't knock?" Mrs. Peto demanded, now

fanning herself.

Mahrree stopped. “I don’t know, I just assumed.” She shook her head in exasperation and latched the door herself. “I came to see if you’re all right. I heard a scream—”

That’s when she looked at closely at the Arkys for the first time. Mr. Arky was holding a thick wet cloth that was slowly growing red around his arm. His face looked bruised and cut, and he was visibly shaken, but he offered Mahrree a weak smile. Mrs. Arky was quietly sobbing as she took another cloth and dabbed small cuts around his face with it.

“Oh no!” Mahrree sat down on the remaining chair. “What happened?”

“They were in our house!” Mrs. Arky sniffled.

Her husband tried to pat her on the arm soothingly as she wiped his face again. He shifted uncomfortably in the chair, but Mahrree was sure it wasn’t because of her mother’s new lilac colored sheepskin covers.

“Who?” Mahrree looked at her mother.

“They’re still after him.” Hycymum shook her head. She stood up and picked up a large bowl which Mahrree hadn’t noticed until then. She dumped the water in the sink then pumped fresh cold water into the bowl and replaced it on the table. Mahrree was surprised at her

mother's relative calm, and the fact that she didn't care blood was staining her second best table cloth or her third best kitchen cloths.

"We all came home from the debate together," Hycymum explained. "By the way, Perrin looked so handsome up there tonight in his new jacket. It's about time his father sent that. I'm sure I saw a few women swooning—"

"Mother!"

"I'm sorry. We came home together and the Arkys went into their home to find—," her mother stumbled on the words, her voice suddenly becoming emotional, "—men fighting in their gathering room."

"It was in shambles, Mahrree!"

Mrs. Arky sobbed. “I don’t know if the Guarder did it or if fighting with the soldier did it.”

“Guarder!” Mahrree gasped. “Are you sure?” Guarders had never made it into the village before; Perrin had always stopped them at the forest’s edge.

But not this time.

Mr. Arky nodded. “He wore dark clothing and even had something smeared on his face to make it shadowy.”

“I think it rubbed all over the sofa when the soldier slammed him down on it,” Hycymum shook her head sadly. “We’ll have to spend some time on that

stain, I'm afraid." She picked up another cloth, soaked it in the water, and handed it to Mrs. Arky. As she wrapped her husband's bleeding arm, Hycymum took the reddened cloth to the sink and wrung it out.

Mahrree was beside herself with anxiety. "So what happened?!"

Mr. Arky stopped his wife's wiping for a moment and gently held her arm. He was a man who liked to get right to the point.

"We saw the door was opened when the three of us came home. Your mother was going to join us for some dessert. We looked in, saw two men throwing each other around the room—"

Mahrree put a worried hand to her

face.

"—my wife screamed, your mother gasped, my wife screamed again—"

The two screams she heard, Mahrree thought. She nodded her head for him to continue.

Mr. Arky plowed onward. "—The soldier and the Guarder continued fighting, I tried to help," he held up his arm lamely in illustration, "and was shoved through the large window," he pointed to his cut-up face. "Then the Guarder," his voice grew husky as he recalled the image, "smashed the head of the soldier into the corner of the table —"

Mahrree winced and put both hands

in front of her mouth. When Mr. Arky said the word "soldier," she felt as if she had been hit in the stomach.

"As the soldier tried to stand up, the Guarder ran out the back door," he continued, and seemed to be losing his breath. "Two more soldiers came out of nowhere in the alley and chased him down the road. I don't know where they went. The soldier that was hurt . . . well, he wouldn't even stay for us to help him. He had quite a gash on his head."

Mrs. Arky started to sob again and Hycymum wiped a tear from her own face.

"He couldn't run, or even walk straight," Mr. Arky whispered. "He looked in bad shape as he stumbled from

the house. I wished I could have stopped him, but," Mr. Arky's lip quivered as he tried to regain his composure. He shook his head and tried to smile instead. "Your husband's men did a fine job tonight, Mrs. Shin."

Mahrree sat with her hands covering her mouth, as if she could stop the terrible stream of words that were uttered. She half wished he hadn't reached his point so quickly.

"Mahrree," her mother said softly, tears falling down her face. "The soldier fighting the Guarder, I wished I could have helped him, but by the time I thought to go find him, it was too dark."

"Well Mother, you shouldn't have.

You didn't know who was out there! The Guarders always work in twos, so the other one could have been—"

"But Mahrree, I think the injured soldier was your Shem."

Mahrree felt another punch to her stomach.

"Oh, Mother, no!" But she already knew. She knew it as soon as Mr. Arky mentioned a hurt soldier. Mahrree looked out the dark window, wondering if maybe her favorite corporal was lying out in the garden, or if she dared run out into the night again . . .

"Mahrree, I'm so sorry," her mother's words cut into her thoughts. "It's too dangerous to consider going out again."

Mahrree turned quickly to her mother.

"Yes, I know what you're thinking. If you were foolish enough to come find me, you'd be foolish enough to go out looking for Shem. Don't do it, Mahrree! Just stay here with me. Please?"

Mahrree hadn't noticed before how fearful her mother's eyes were. "Of course, Mother! That's why I'm here. Three soldiers are watching the children, and Perrin wore his sword—"

She felt her chest tighten and suddenly into her mind flashed a horrible vision of Perrin lying on the ground in splashes of red. What she imagined must have reflected on her

face.

Her mother reached over and grasped her hand. “He’ll get them, Mahrree! I have complete faith in our Perrin. You should too.”

Mahrree nodded her head and blinked back worried tears. She was the brave wife of the major, after all. She shouldn’t think of Perrin right now. Or their children, or of Shem. Or of anyone or anything else. It was no use. She was powerless to change anything, no matter how much she worried. She was stuck there. It would be worse than foolish to try to leave again alone. She felt chaos swirling throughout the village like a demented twister, and wondered how far it would travel before it died away.

She looked at the back door and suddenly knew what to do. It must be part of every woman's constitution, because for generations women have done the same thing when faced with a crisis they were powerless to prevent or fight. Besides, it would give her an opportunity to look at the gardens for a blue uniform.

"Mother," Mahrree said, "do you feel the need to *clean* something?"

Hycymum slapped the table. "Absolutely! Mrs. Arky, we'll be at your house tidying up while you two rest here."

Perrin surveyed the village green. The bonfire was burning well, bathing the Densals in heat and light as they shared a large blanket while huddled together on the grass. They weren't the only ones there. A dozen or so more people shared the fire, bruises, and stories they related to the enforcement officers that took notes of what happened, with more villagers rushing over every minute.

A few paces away Staff Sergeant Gizzada, Perrin's very round and normally jovial supply master, held out his sword tenuously. The former cook always kept it sheathed, and he

continued to glance at it as if it would turn on him at any moment. His demeanor was exceptionally somber, and his dark skin paled to gray as if realized he was easily the largest target in the area. The acrobatics at the amphitheater ended early when it was realized the Guarders were attacking. Villagers who lived south of the green cautiously made their ways home in large groups for protection. But many who lived in the north decided to remain at the village green, and eagerly fled to the bonfire behind the rotund staff sergeant, feeling far more confidence in him and his trembling sword than he felt in himself.

Perrin noticed Gizzada frequently

looking over at him, as if he took his bravery from the major who shouted orders to the soldiers that brought him reports. Perrin nodded back assurance to Gizzada, who seemed to grow braver once half a dozen soldiers came to help him guard the increasing mass of citizens, and his grip on his weapon became more secure.

The night was fully dark now and Perrin walked quickly over to two soldiers that rushed to the area. They were carrying a third.

“Major! The private took a knife wound to the side. But we killed the Guarder, sir! Sergeant Robi is staying with the family until someone can

retrieve the body."

"Excellent," said Major Shin. "Bring the private over to the other side. We're setting up a section for the wounded by the second bonfire being started. We don't need the citizens seeing more blood."

As Major Shin escorted the soldiers over to the more secluded spot, one of the village doctors jogged to the green, his bag in hand. "I came as soon as Chief Curglaff notified me," he panted. "I understand we can expect more coming in?"

Major Shin nodded. "My surgeon should be joining us soon. I think the private needs attention first, but then when you're finished, please check on

Rector Densal."

The doctor nodded and went to work.

Another soldier ran out of the darkness and up to the major.

"Well?" Shin demanded.

The soldier shook his head reluctantly. "No sign, sir."

"Are you sure?! Did you go to the right house?!"

"I'm sure, sir," he shrank a little under the fury in Major Shin's eyes.

The major looked around in the dark, his lips pressed together. He groaned and looked sharply again at the soldier.

The soldier anticipated his

question. “The three soldiers *are* there, sir, dispatched by Lieutenant Karna. The children are safe but . . . there’s still no Mrs. Shin. It seems she *left*, sir. On her own.”

Perrin rubbed his forehead and nearly forgot his pledge to Hogal that he would never swear. He looked around again and didn’t see what he was looking for.

“Get three more soldiers. Go in pairs. The four of you don’t stop until you find her, even if it means checking every inch all the way to the forest, understand?!”

The soldier saluted and ran his fastest into the dark.

Perrin groaned. “Mahrree, what do

you think you're doing?!"

When the small hours of the night arrived, the Arky gathering room looked almost as if nothing had happened. Once they got the sofa scrubbed clean, the women went to retrieve Mr. Arky. The neighborhood had been quiet for some time, so Mahrree felt confident that the second Guarder, if there had been one, was long gone.

Mr. Arky seemed to have more injury than only to his arm and face, because as they stood him up he felt a sharp pain in his ribs and his leg refused

to move properly. Mahrree and Mrs. Arky supported him between them, slowly walking him across the dark gardens to his house, while Hycymum made a bed for him on their sofa—easier than trying to get him upstairs to his bedroom.

Once they gently lay him down, Mrs. Arky pushed up her husband's trouser's pant leg to discover an enormous bruise forming on his shin. Mr. Arky also had difficulty breathing, probably from cracked or broken ribs, but the idea of venturing into the night to find a doctor was unthinkable. Mrs. Arky bound her husband's wounds as best she could and Hycymum gathered several pillows. Together the women

found a way to try to keep Mr. Arky comfortable until dawn.

As Mr. Arky tried to rest, Mrs. Arky helped her friends sweep up glass, pick up books and scattered papers, stack broken objects carefully on the table to consider for repairing later, and discuss the most mundane things they could to keep from thinking about anything else. They speculated unemotionally about the substance used to blacken the man's arms and face to hide himself in the shadows. They commented about the lack of quality in the vases that were cracked and broken, since they really should've stood up better. And they noted how much more

work they seemed to get done in the middle of the night when there were no other distractions.

When the gathering room was put back together again, and the broken windows covered with old blankets, Mrs. Arky took inventory. Along with most of her silver forks and knives, she noticed that several small clay statues of pigs, covered in gold and accented with red clear stones for eyes, were missing.

“The Golden Ruby Herd,” sighed Hycymum sadly.

“They were always tacky,” Mrs. Arky declared. “My mother-in-law gave them to me, probably as a commentary on my family. I never liked her anyway.”

Next they began working on the

kitchen floor and table, scrubbing the wood to remove the drying blood that Mahrree tried to imagine wasn't Shem's. She also tried again to not think about her husband and what he might be doing right now, and to not think about her children whom she prayed every five minutes were still sound asleep and not needing her.

Her mind was positively full of things not to think about.

Suddenly Mahrree heard horses' hooves. She froze and looked at her mother and Mrs. Arky.

They reflected her alarmed expression.

Mahrree stood tentatively and

looked out the side window over to her mother's house.

Two soldiers rushed to the front door of Hycymum Peto's and knocked. "Mrs. Shin, are you there?" they called loudly.

Mrs. Peto and Mrs. Arky stared at Mahrree, unsure of how to respond.

"Mother, I need to go." Mahrree bent over and kissed her mother on the cheek.

"Please be careful!" Hycymum said.

"And thank you. And thank the soldiers," added Mrs. Arky.

Mahrree quickly slipped through the back door, then opened it again.

"When will you women learn to

lock these doors!?" She waited until she heard Mrs. Arky latch it.

She walked quickly through the identical gardens that used the same gardener. She strained in the darkness to see anything that looked like a body lying in the bushes or crushing the flowers. Seeing nothing that was shaped as Shem Zenos, she trotted to the soldiers who were beginning to go to her mother's back door. They looked at her, then at the house in confusion.

"Ma'am? Mrs. Shin? We thought this was your mother's house," one of them asked.

"Yes," she answered, "but it wasn't the one broken into tonight, was it?" She

sounded far braver than she felt.

The soldiers exchanged relieved looks, then smiled. “The major’s been looking for you, ma’am. He demands that you be brought to him immediately.”

Tears filled her eyes. He was looking for *her*.

Mahrree remembered the words of her mother-in-law: his duty is first to his village. She’d assumed she wouldn’t see or hear from him until it was all over, whenever that might be. She’d be the last he’d seek out, she was sure of it.

But she was wrong. She *was* part of the village, so he must be concerned about her as well. Yet she knew it was more than that. She wasn’t last on his list.

She nodded at the soldiers in agreement, and as one of them helped her on the horse she realized just how exhausted and terrified she was. While the first soldier took his mount, the second soldier climbed up behind Mahrree and put his arm gingerly around her waist.

"It's all right, soldier. You better hold me tighter. I'm not exactly a horse woman, and I'm a bit tired right now. The major will never forgive you if I fall off."

The soldier seemed grateful for the permission. "Yes ma'am!" With a much firmer grip around her, he kicked the horse.

That's when Mahrree remembered how much she hated riding. She would've complained about the jostling and the speed had she not also realized that the faster the horse moved, the sooner she could get off of it.

Within minutes they were in the center of Edge and fast approaching the fields surrounding the amphitheater. Mahrree saw two large fires and many shadows walking or sitting around them. It was an exclusive campout that the northern part of the village was invited to, but there wasn't any singing or laughing.

As the horses slowed to a trot, then stopped, Mahrree surveyed the crowd,

looking for Perrin. She didn't immediately see him, but she recognized many of her neighbors and friends in the firelight. All of them wore expressions similar to the Arkys.

Stunned. Frightened. Angry. Weary.

And eerily quiet.

Mahrree initially thought maybe there'd be howling and shouts and loud sobbing, but every face she saw appeared too drained or simply too shocked to do much more than sit and breathe and maybe weep.

Women sat on logs next to the fire crying softly, and some held their sleepy children close to them. Men stood in small groups near their wives and spoke to each other earnestly in low voices.

Beyond the first fire was a second, where several people lay on the flattened grasses and were attended to by doctors. Surrounding it all were a dozen soldiers, swords drawn, joined by several enforcement officers holding long knives, likely borrowed from the soldiers.

Even gentle, lumbering Gizzada wore an imposing look of readiness as he pointed his sword and waited for something more aggravating than an overcooked steak sandwich.

The soldier released his grip on Mahrree, slid off the horse, then helped her down. She could barely stand. So many people! More than two hundred,

which must have meant there were more than fourteen Guarders this time. Mahrree sickened at the thought.

Several people looked her way and gave her weak smiles or nods.

From the corner of her eye she saw someone approaching her from the shadows of the trees, silhouetted against the second fire. The massive figure moved swiftly and menacingly. She recognized the gait and almost dreaded turning to him. As much as she wanted to see him, she didn't want to see him like *this*.

Perrin grabbed her arm and spun her roughly to face him. "Where did you go? And why are *you* issuing commands to *my* soldiers?"

Mahrree bit her lower lip and tried to contain her own frustration as she looked up into his angry face.

"Major Shin," sang a shaky voice from the fire that cut through the darkness. "You know you thank the Creator she's well. Why don't you give her a hug and a kiss? Make an old man happy?"

Several people laughed softly, grateful for an excuse to do so.

Mahrree glanced towards the fire and saw the Densals sitting huddled together. He heart ached at the sight of them. Hogal was bruised and Tabbit held a cloth to his face, but he nodded encouragingly at Mahrree.

She looked at her husband's eyes and recognized the worry under his anger.

"The children are all right, aren't they? They have three soldiers still, right?" she asked timidly.

"Yes!" he said crossly. Then his face softened slightly and he sighed. "But from what I've heard, I don't think Private Aims will recover too quickly, being forced into *baby tending*."

A smile was trying to form around his lips, but he killed it. He took her by the shoulders.

"Don't you ever, *ever* do that again! We've discussed what to do. We've practiced it. You secure the house, and

you *stay!*"

He'd forgotten he had an audience until he heard his great uncle say sharply, "Perrin!" His soft gentleness was gone, as was his patience with his nephew.

Startled, Mahrree didn't dare peek to see the expression on Rector Densal's face that matched his reprimand.

Without taking his eyes off his wife, Major Shin raised his voice. "Tabbit, can't you do anything about your husband?"

"I'm afraid not," she replied feebly. "You best make him happy, Perrin."

Perrin glanced at his relatives then looked back at his wife who was doing her best to look apologetic.

Mahrree saw a familiar spark in his eye, dimly.

He turned her roughly again, this time positioning himself between her and the villagers.

“Just to make the old man happy,” he said, “but he doesn’t get to watch.” He kissed her quickly and gave her a hug so tight that he squeezed tears from her eyes. “Don’t make me have to worry about you like that again!” he said in her ear.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!” she whispered, grateful to feel his arms around her. One storm passed, she thought briefly, while another still raged.

“Ahh, that’s much better!” Hogal’s

cheerful voice came to them again from the fire.

A few chuckles accompanied him.

Perrin and Mahrree pulled apart to hear the rector say, "And that, my friends, is how they *should* have ended that nasty second debate of theirs—in each other's arms! Well, as they say, best now than never was. Now, Tabbit, I can die a happy man."

Perrin turned and glared at him, but gave him a quick wink. Mahrree giggled nervously and sent a look of thanks to Hogal.

He nodded back briefly, waggled his eyebrows, then winced slightly as the motion reminded him of the bruises spreading on his face.

Tabbit immediately placed the damp cloth on his cheek again.

Perrin turned to Mahrree with a completely different face. Major Shin was back on duty. “Can you help?”

Mahrree shook the exhausted fog out of her head. “Yes, yes. What do you need?”

“Help with the wounded.”

He led her to the other side of the second fire where close to twenty people lay on fort-issued blankets. Two men, with numerous gashes and cuts, were trying unsuccessfully to rest on the ground, while their wives received instructions from one of the village doctors on how to treat their wounds. An

older man cradled his adult daughter's head as the fort's surgeon gently pressed around her belly, and she cringed in pain. A child with extensive bruises huddled quietly in his mother's arms, sniffling as she stroked his hair, and several soldiers lay side by side, with a variety of body parts wrapped and splinted.

Further in the distance, beyond the glow of the fire, were three bodies covered completely.

"Oh Perrin," she stopped in her tracks when she saw them. "Who?"

"Guarders," he said coolly. "And, so you don't have to ask me later, two by my hand. One was at Tabbit and Hogal's, the other was here trying to get

into the trees. Fortunately for me he was a poor climber for someone raised in the forests."

Mahrree hadn't looked at his clothes yet, but in the flickering bonfire she could see splashed evidence of what Perrin had done. The first thing her weary brain thought was, That new jacket's going to need a lot of soaking—

"Over here," he pulled her away. "This one needs your special attention."

Mahrree stopped suddenly at the quiet body lying at her feet, and she whimpered softly as she gazed upon the almost-unrecognizable face of Corporal Shem Zenos.

The fort surgeon joined them. In his

blunt way he said, “Mrs. Shin—obviously found to be safe. Good. Corporal Zenos here suffered severe head trauma, not sure how. Soldiers found him stumbling aimlessly a few roads away from here.”

“I know how he got hurt,” Mahrree whispered.

Perrin looked at her quizzically.

“In the Arkys’ house. He was fighting the Guarder. Shem’s head was . . .”

Mahrree couldn’t use the same words Mr. Arky had.

“—into the table. The corner of it. I was about to clean the table when you sent for me.”

Perrin nodded in understanding.

The surgeon nodded too. “That’s consistent with the trauma. Mrs. Shin, stay with him and watch him closely. Change his bandages, monitor his bleeding, keep a finger on his pulse. Tell me when he gets worse—labored breathing or slowing heart rate. Talk to him. Let me know if he regains consciousness. Major, looks like we have more coming in.” The surgeon jogged away into the darkness.

Mahrree gulped hard at the words “*when* he gets worse . . . *if* he regains consciousness.”

She knelt down and peeled back the cloth to more clearly see the swelling on Shem’s head. She was grateful the

lighting was so bad.

Perrin squeezed her shoulder then strode away after the surgeon.

She vaguely heard him shouting to another group of soldiers that rode into the camp. Something else was happening, but Mahrree had no more energy to worry about it. She could think only of Shem. She took new bandages and carefully laid them on the bulge on his forehead that slowly oozed.

"Shem, Shem," she whispered. "You look terrible. What happened to you?" Her lip quivered. The more she thought about his misshapen forehead, the more she realized how serious his condition was.

"Shem, you can't go now! I haven't

found you a wife yet. I promised you."

She quit fighting the tears and let them fall on his bruised face. She guiltily wiped them off with the hem of her cloak then wondered what else she could do. For as close as he was to them, she knew very little about him. She'd asked him a few times about his family, but all he said was that he had an older sister and two nieces. His mother had passed away when he was young, but he still had a father. He said he didn't like to talk about them much because then he missed them more. Mahrree prayed they were safe. Then she prayed for Shem, and wondered how she could contact his family if . . .

No.

She wouldn't *let* it happen. Not if the Creator would let him stay.

She sat down more comfortably in the dirt. The surgeon said talk to him, she reminded herself. She searched for the right words. None came, but she had to say *something*.

"Shem! My children still need an uncle," she whispered earnestly. "Their only grandfather sees them only twice a year, and even then he doesn't hold them because he says his medals will scratch their faces." She chuckled sadly. "I *need* you!"

She thought she saw the corner of his mouth twitch slightly.

Encouraged, she tried some more. Leaning closer she said, "Shem, they need an uncle to tie up! We need to train you for your own family. Don't you dare go, you hear me? What would I say to your father? I've never even met him."

She watched the edge of his mouth closely.

Nothing.

She sighed and leaned against a log that stood nearby. She had no idea what to do next. "Ah, Shem. Please, don't leave us. I don't have much confidence in Aims. He'd be a terrible replacement." She sniffed and sighed again. "Shem, who am I kidding? No one could replace you."

She took up his still hand and was comforted that it felt warm. She slid a finger over to his wrist to feel his pulse. Still there. She noticed Perrin watching her from across the fire and she shook her head.

He gave her a quick nod, then turned back to discuss something with the chief of enforcement.

She searched for things to say, but felt silly talking out loud. But then again, no one else was near enough to hear.

“He has plans for you, Zenos. When your two years are up, he wants you to reenlist, long-term. He needs you, too. The major thinks you have great potential, Zenos!” She watched his

mouth.

Nothing.

She exhaled. She knew what she wanted to say, but hesitated. She looked at the bulge on his head, then closed her eyes. She'd always regret not telling him if she didn't do it now, if it became too late. She took a deep breath and squeezed his hand.

"Shem, I want you to know, you're like . . . you're like the younger brother neither of us had. We both feel it. We didn't even know we needed a brother until you came along. Not merely because we use you as a baby tender," she chuckled sadly, "but because you *fit* with us. I think Perrin sends us messages just to see you and give you a reason to

visit the children and me. Last week, when you came by at dinner with that message from the fort and finally agreed to stay to eat with us, it felt so natural. You feel like family, Shem. *Our* family."

Mahrree looked around, feeling embarrassed to have revealed so much out loud. No one was around that was conscious enough to hear her. She looked at Shem's face.

Still nothing.

She squeezed his hand again. "Now, for your family, Shem Zenos, open your eyes. Let me know you're all right then we can both sleep a while."

She paused.

"As an annoying older sister, I

demand you give me a sign you are in there. Call me Mahrree, and I'll let you sleep!"

Nothing.

"All right, as the *wife of your major*, I insist . . ."

She gave up.

"Oh Shem." She rubbed his hand absent-mindedly and wondered what a big sister would do to take the dried blood off it. She didn't want to leave his side, even for a moment, to get a wet cloth from the surgeon's aid. She smiled as an idea came to her.

"Did I ever tell you about our last debate and what Rector Densal did to us? Since you can't interrupt or protest, you're going to hear about it. He started

off by getting suggestions from the children for debates, or so he *said* . . .”

For the next hour and a half Mahrree talked to the still figure of Shem, telling him in detail about the topics Hogal had lined up for them, including the suggestion that they debate about continuing the debates as husband and wife.

She ignored the arrival of additional wounded and dead Guarders. It was only when Perrin stood over her that she looked up. Behind him the coming dawn lightened the sky. Mahrree saw soldiers walking behind him carrying another wrapped body.

“Mahrree,” Perrin’s voice was

heavy. “That Guarder body they’re bringing in was just taken at our house. The soldier at our front door was wounded. We were fortunate that two passing soldiers brought down the Guarder, or else. . .” He shook his head not wanting to finish the sentence.

“Perrin,” Mahrree gasped. “Our babies!” She struggled to her feet, barely remembering to place Shem’s hand back carefully on the ground.

“They’re still safe,” he said, taking her in his arms and kissing her quickly on her forehead. “But the corporal here will take you home.”

For once Mahrree wished a horse could have travelled faster. She didn’t even wait for the corporal to help her off

as they stopped in front of her house. She fell gracelessly on the cobblestones and scrambled to her front door. Mrs. Hersh was already in the yard trying vainly to sweep the blood off the weedy dirt.

The soldier at the door saluted when he saw her. "Ma'am, no one's gone in or out."

"I know. Well done, Private!" She walked up to the door and tried to open it. "Aims!" she shouted. "It's all right! Let me in. I relieve you of duty."

She heard footsteps come down the stairs and a moment later the door was unlatched and the iron bars shifted.

Private Aims opened the door, his sword still at the ready. "All is quiet,

ma'am. Has been all night. And I thank you for helping me realize that I'm not yet ready to marry or be a father." Then he marched out smartly.

Mahrree rushed up the stairs and quietly entered her bedroom. Her two children continued to sleep peacefully, sprawled on the large bed. Mahrree sighed a prayer of gratitude and crawled into bed between them. She wrapped an arm around each little body and fell into a gloriously deep sleep.

Three hours later, with the sun climbing the morning sky, a bleary-eyed

mother and her two happily awake toddlers secured in a wagon made their way through the quiet yet surprisingly busy roads. People stood in small huddles of discussion all along the way. No one, it seemed, had slept in Edge, and it showed in their haggard faces.

Two soldiers accompanied the little family outing to the village green, and stood guard once the mother nodded her thanks to them. The bonfires had died away, but half the village was now there, giving reports to enforcement officers and Lieutenant Karna, who had come down from the fort.

Mahrree knew this wasn't the best place to bring her family, but she suspected Perrin would feel better

seeing that his children were safe. Edgers comforted their friends and neighbors, fashioned ways to carry the wounded back to their homes, and—she noticed with no small sense of pride—looked at the major with immense respect.

As she made her way slowly through the quiet crowd to the make-shift command center, several people stopped her for a hug and patted her children's heads. For as terrible as the night had been, many seemed to realize that it could have been far worse. She picked up snatches of conversations as she passed.

"The soldiers were right there—the

Guarder couldn't do much but fight them."

"It seems there were at least twenty of them."

"Only in the first group! I heard that one scout saw them come running out of the woods west of here and was immediately on their trail. Without him, who knows . . ."

"I have to admit, my faith in the Administrators just increased. They really knew what they were talking about."

When Mahrree heard that her stomach churned unexpectedly.

Sometimes, it all seemed so *convenient*.

She shook the thought out of her

head, too weary to think.

There was a clearing between the villagers and a small group of people which consisted of the magistrate, Perrin, and the two other rectors and their wives, all in deep conversation. The women had lists and Mahrree suspected more cleaning details were being formed.

She glanced over to the wounded. All of the soldiers were still lying on the ground, but wagons were approaching to convey them back to the fort. She heard familiar footsteps behind her, and they weren't nearly as angry as a few hours before.

"Mahrree!" Perrin said, and she

turned to give him her best smile. His face looked more like a weary husband and father now rather than the Commander of Edge. He hugged her and sighed. “The children look well,” he whispered in her ear. “How are you?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” she whispered back. “The major did a wonderful job last night. How are *you?*”

Perrin pulled away and shook his head slightly. They would talk later, Mahrree knew. He crouched down and hugged his children who tried to get out of the wagon to be with him.

“In a moment, I promise.” Then he reconsidered and quickly untied their ropes. His eyes were damp as he scooped up his daughter and son and

held them close in each arm.

"Let's go check on Zenos," he said to Mahrree. "I've spent some time with all of the wounded, and I'm confident each will recover, since Grandpy Neeks already told them they would. They seem to be in reasonably good spirits. But Zenos . . . he's still unresponsive."

She'd dreaded this moment. They made their way to the soldiers lying on the ground and stopped at Shem. Mahrree couldn't see any change in his condition. And fortunately his face was so bruised and swollen that Jaytsy and Peto didn't recognize him, or they would have interpreted his prone position as an invitation to wriggle down from their

father to jump on his stomach.

Mahrree knelt down by his side and looked under his bandages. The swelling seemed to have gone down a bit, and the oozing had dried, but he was far too still.

"Oh, Shem," Mahrree whispered miserably.

Perrin kicked his boot gently. "Up, Corporal! No more of this lounging around. You think you earned a rest last night? Simply because you saw them first? That wasn't my deal. I said a day off for the man who first sees a Guarder *after* the conflict was over. Not in the middle of it!" Perrin exhaled and looked at Mahrree.

She raised her eyebrows at him.

“You really think he would want to wake up for *that?*” she scolded.

“Lies,” someone whispered.

Perrin and Mahrree looked quickly at Corporal Zenos.

The corner of Shem’s mouth tugged slightly. “Major lies,” he whispered and his face contorted into a pitiful smile.

“Shem!” Mahrree cried and grabbed his hand.

Perrin crouched down by his side, trying to balance his children on each knee. “Shem, what are you trying to say?”

Their favorite soldier slowly opened the one eye that wasn’t swollen shut. “You, sir, *lie*,” he whispered

slowly. “Sheep can’t build houses.”

Perrin stared at Mahrree, flabbergasted.

Mahrree’s mouth fell open in understanding. The fifth debate. The house-building sheep and wolf story Perrin had made up to describe why stone was better than wood in house construction. Shem heard what she had said to him during the night.

He may have heard *everything* she said to him.

Perrin looked at Mahrree, devastated. “Brain injury?” he mouthed.

Mahrree laughed softly. “No Perrin, I think he’s going to be all right! And actually,” she said worriedly, “we may now be in even bigger danger.”

Perrin turned fully to her, quite a feat considering he was still balancing a child on each bent leg. “Exactly *what* did you say to him last night?”

“Enough to get him up, right?” Mahrree shrugged.

She squeezed Shem’s hand and he tried to wink at her with his one good eye. It was such a pathetic attempt that Perrin and Mahrree both laughed.

“Shem,” Perrin whispered so that no one else could hear, “don’t you ever scare me like that again. You understand?”

The corporal smiled faintly. “You’ve just called me Shem twice, sir,” he mumbled slowly, “and we’re

both in uniform and not at your house. May have to report you for that."

Perrin grinned. "Yep—he's going to be fine. Not sure that's a good thing, now . . ."

The surgeon verified their optimistic diagnosis a few minutes later, and three soldiers carefully loaded Zenos into a litter to bring him back to the fort.

Mahrree noticed one of the village doctors standing by silently watching them. She didn't think much of it until he approached them after they said farewell to Shem.

"Would you follow me please, Shin family?" he said kindly.

They would have followed him

over the mountain had he asked it. The world had a little bit of justice again, Mahrree decided. The Guarder threat was fully contained. None of the young men who fought for the village had perished, all villagers were accounted for, albeit many were injured and terrorized, and even Zenos was still willing to risk life and limb to tease his commander.

And that commander, now replaced by a relieved father, alternated kissing the foreheads of his children to make them giggle. An enormous burden seemed to have lifted as Perrin carried his little ones, and he smiled easily. Mahrree put her arm contentedly around

her husband as they walked. The Guarders may have infiltrated the village this time, but Major Shin was still victorious.

The doctor led them over to the smoking remains of the bonfire where a few tired villagers remained. Tabbit sat quietly on the matted grass with Hogal's head cradled peacefully in her lap. Perrin and Mahrree stopped suddenly when they saw their favorite nosy old couple. Tabbit's eyes were red and she gave them a courageous smile.

Her husband was unnaturally still.

"It's all right, Perrin," she said. "Remember, Hogal *did* say he could die a happy man."

Chapter 12 ~ “You want to save the world? Then let’s save it!”

It wasn’t until well after midday meal time that Perrin finally came home and sat dully at the table. He didn’t even

notice his food Mahrree placed before him, even though he hadn't eaten since the day before.

Mahrree sat down across from him and reached out to touch his hand.

He pulled it away.

"I did get there in time, Mahrree," he said dully, staring at some distant point on the wall. "I had a very clear thought. And I ran. I arrived only seconds after the Guarder did. I saw him break through their back door. He punched Hogal. I surprised him from behind and dragged him out of the house. He pulled his dagger. I disabled him with a kick to his chest, then I drew my sword. One clean thrust, it was done. Exactly how we train for it. Perfect."

He stared at the wall as if he could bore a hole in it if given enough time.

"It was too quick. I see that now," he decided. "I should've made him fight. I should've made him identify himself. I should've just started cutting off limbs to get him to talk—"

"PERRIN!" Mahrree snapped.

He stopped and focused on her horrified eyes. The hard lines on his face began to soften. He stared at her for a few moments before he slowly shook his head.

"I did the right thing, I know. The doctor said he thought it was his heart. He was eighty-four, after all. Not up to taking surprises. I couldn't have gotten

there any sooner. That's not the way to die," he finished in a whisper.

"Yes, yes it is, Perrin!" Mahrree told him. "His heart failing while being attacked by a stranger—*that's* not a way to die. But peacefully in the arms of his wife? He *did* say he was happy, Perrin. You made him happy, remember? It was simply his time to go. The Creator said we each have a time to live here, and then we return. And you made that return peaceful, not terrifying. You did everything right."

He sighed. "Sometimes I think I understand the Creator, but then there are times like . . ." He paused. "I almost felt it this morning when Zenos . . . I was praying for Shem and the other soldiers,

but I should have been . . . I didn't even *think* that Hogal—" He stopped again and went back to boring a hole in the rock with his eyes.

"Just wait," she said earnestly. "You'll feel something different soon. Don't doubt what you were prompted to do. No matter what was happening today, he most likely would've died. It was the *manner* of Hogal's passing that you assured. Just *feel* him, and you'll know he's well on the other side."

Mahrree could see in the darkness of his eyes that he didn't believe her. Or *want* to believe her. But she couldn't understand why. Already that morning she felt Hogal's distinct presence

nearby, along with her father's. Sometimes Mahrree wondered if Paradise wasn't actually all around them. Today, the air was thick with it.

"I've felt him," she told Perrin gently. "He's not sad or angry—he's joyful! He's still with us. Oh, I wished I could have seen the reunion between him and my father!" Mahrree smiled, recalling the sense of cosmic chuckling that accompanied their presence. "I'm sure they have plenty to catch up on, probably about how they got the two of us together."

Perrin searched her face, but his own expression was as cold and hard as a boulder.

"Perrin, death isn't the end,"

Mahrree tried again. “It’s only a change. And there’s no tragedy in death, only tragedy in failing the Test.” Desperate to see anything else on his face besides his morbid bitterness, she pleaded, “You know that, now *believe* it! Hogal Densal didn’t fail, Perrin. And you didn’t fail Hogal.”

Perrin’s eyes brimmed with a depth of sorrow she’d never seen before.

“I need to sleep,” was all he said. He pushed the plate away, stood up, and went upstairs dragging the full weight of Edge with him.

As Mahrree spoke to Mr. Metz, Hogal's assistant, a few hours later in the gathering room, she couldn't stop shaking her head. "Why does something so awful sound so right?"

Mr. Metz smiled gently. "I know exactly how you feel. But considering they were married for sixty-three years, I actually would've been disappointed in old Hogal if he *didn't* come get her. There she sat, on the sofa, her friends on either side to help her plan the burial. They said they had a distinct feeling that Hogal came into the room. Tabbit looked up at nothing, smiled, closed her eyes, and was simply gone."

Mahrree kept shaking her head,

trying to keep her sniffling under control. "It was only on rare occasions that they were ever apart in life. Why should death be any different? But how can I feel such sorrow and such joy at the same time?"

Mr. Metz gave her a quick hug. "Personally, I'm a bit jealous of them. Think of everything they're experiencing now, without us! Oh, the questions Hogal could answer for me now," he grinned.

But then his grin faded.

"What about the Major?"

"He's trying to get some sleep right now," Mahrree wiped her tears. "I'll break it to him, somehow, when he wakes."

“Would you like me to stay and help?”

“I appreciate the offer, but I really don’t know what his state of mind will be when he comes down those stairs. I don’t know if I want to subject you to that.”

Mr. Metz squeezed her shoulder. “If you change your mind, send one of those soldiers guarding your house to come get me. I’ll be at the Densals the rest of the evening helping with the arrangements.”

By the time Perrin slowly came down the stairs later that evening, Mahrree knew both Hogal and Tabbit were fine and exactly where they needed to be. Each time she sobbed that

afternoon, she found herself laughing a moment later. Mahrree didn't weep for the Densals; they were far too happy where they were. She could feel their joy so immensely it was almost unfair.

She had cried for herself, her husband, and her children whose memories of the Densals would be only hazy fragments.

But she didn't know how to break the news to Perrin. He didn't look at her or the children while he ate his first food in over twenty-four hours. He eventually gave Peto a little smile when he climbed on his lap. Peto grabbed his father's face and gave him a slobbery kiss on the lips. That drew a soft chuckle from Perrin as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

Mahrree practiced in her head a variety of ways to tell him about Tabbit. But his spirits seemed so weak she couldn't imagine crushing him already. She watched him play half-heartedly with his son for another moment. As Peto scrambled to get back down she knew it was time to deliver the blow, and prayed the right words would come out.

"Perrin, Mr. Metz came by earlier when you were sleeping—"

"I know," he said flatly. "Tabbit's gone too. I overheard." Perrin forced a small smile. "Actually, I feel much better about that. I couldn't get out of my head the thought of Auntie Tabbit living

alone. Especially after what happened. But how could I be there all the time to protect her?"

He brushed a crumb off his plate on to the table and watched it.

Mahrree just watched him.

"And I couldn't imagine moving her to my mother's in Idumea. The trip is so long for such an old woman. She seemed frailer this past year, too. Then I thought, maybe she could come live with us." He scoffed at the idea. "But I worried that this house would be too noisy for her. We could have used the last piece of garden for her addition." He smiled briefly.

She nodded and sniffled.

He nudged the crumb to the center

of the table.

"Then I figured, I could post guards at her doors, pay for it ourselves, but she'd feel like she had to feed them all the time." He chuckled softly. "Then I pictured the soldiers getting too fat and not strong enough to fight off anyone else, or too preoccupied looking at her paintings of trees. She always liked trees."

He studied the crumb, flicked it with his finger, then crushed it into powder with his thumb.

"Every option I thought of didn't sit well. I didn't know what to do for her. Now I know why. The Creator already had it all figured out. I was trying to fix

everything, and I don't think I ever asked for His guidance. He already worked out her plan."

He finally looked up at his wife. "And I couldn't have imagined a better solution for them. A perfect end."

That night Barker looked out at the alley and waited. It was time, but there was no man. The dog whimpered quietly, and even got up and went to the fence, looking up and down. He sniffed the air, the fence, the ground, but there was no bacon anywhere. There wasn't any last night or the night before, either.

Probably none earlier than that too, but his memory got fuzzy after that.

Barker sat down and whined at the alley.

Nothing came.

After about an hour, Barker turned around and walked disappointedly back to his doghouse, laid down, and fell asleep.

The next morning Perrin gripped the handle of a shovel, waiting for Mr. Metz to finish the service. He felt split in two. One half of him was disturbingly fine with what had happened. Almost in spite

of himself, he felt comfort, late last night.

He'd left bed again to check for the third time on his sleeping children, making sure one more time that the bars in their windows were secure. Then he went to the front door to latch the lock again, and that's when they arrived.

It was unmistakable, as if the air on either side of him thickened with warmth and joy.

Hogal was on his right, Tabbit on his left. In life, they were small and stooped, but it seemed in Paradise they both stood a bit taller.

Tears filled Perrin's eyes, and his hand dropped helplessly from the lock. "I'm so sorry," he whispered to them. "I

failed you—”

The response was also unmistakable.

Oh, you did not, my boy! And you know that. We’re happy, my boy. Perfect and together and happy.

Please, Perrin, don’t worry about us. We couldn’t be prouder of you!

The last response was from Tabbit. For some reason at that moment he also smelled berry pie, and he almost smiled.

He let the tears dribble down his cheeks. “How do I go on without you?”

Now, my boy—who says you’ll be without us?

He stood there, with his chin trembling and shoulders shaking, feeling

the two thicknesses envelop him in warmth. He didn't cry for them, but for himself. The Densals were exactly where they needed to be.

After a sweet and gentle minute, they faded away.

Reluctantly Perrin trudged back to bed, where his wife held him tight and stroked his hair and didn't say a word as he quietly wept.

But then there was the other half of him . . .

The *other half* that awoke early this morning.

The other half didn't feel it deserved to be comforted. Instead it felt raw rage. Perrin once saw a caged bear and now he knew exactly how infuriated

it felt. He wanted to roar at the trees, claw them all down, then tear into the flesh of whatever he found alive—

But he was caged. And instead of claws, all he had was a skimpy shovel and an open grave.

He wasn't listening to the supposedly comforting words Mr. Metz offered to the hundreds of villagers surrounding them. Perrin was lost in his own head. At times like this he wondered if the reason his build was so large was because he was actually two men shoved into one body. So often he felt divided, as if his heart and head couldn't agree.

One part of him tried to follow The

Writings and was even occasionally jealous of Hogal's position. His life was all about knowing the Creator and helping others to find Him. He'd done that for Perrin, too, and Perrin wondered if the only way he could keep on that path was to devote his entire life to studying it as much as Hogal had.

But he couldn't, because of his other part—the part that was a soldier, almost since the day he was born. This was the part that defended people and governments from those who would destroy. This was the part that knew the ideas of the world, clearly and intimately, and could argue anything around The Writings, just as he did when he first arrived in Edge.

And that's what most concerned him. He couldn't reconcile the two parts. Usually they resided in different sections of his heart and head, and didn't come in conflict.

But then there were days like this where both sides glared at each other, and fought like starving dogs, and he couldn't kill either of them. No matter how fiercely they contended, both sides still remained, slinking back to their corners and eyeing each other, waiting for the next moment when his heart and head would ferociously disagree.

The hardest part of it was, it was the soldier he wanted to destroy, but soldiering was his best skill. Yes, there

were other things he could do. He truly enjoyed building the additions to the house for his children, and he could see himself becoming a builder—

But that wasn't what he was.

To his core, he was a soldier—a destroyer. He'd killed well over a dozen men already, and he wasn't even yet thirty-two. The problem was, he was *so good* at it. Even as a boy when his father gave him his first long knife, the handle felt so comfortable in his palm. He knew precisely what to do with it. Holding a sword was a natural extension. Slicing, stabbing, thrusting—it was all second nature. He practiced only because he loved the feel of the power of the blade, not because he feared becoming rusty.

Fighting was easier than breathing.

And so while last night he felt the warmth and comfort of his great aunt and uncle in his heart, this morning his head had taken over. He was harder, rougher, and meaner. If they truly knew him, they wouldn't have come last night. At his core, he wasn't a builder of souls or houses, but a defender—

No, not even a defender today.

A *destroyer*.

He feared that was the most he'd ever be, but he had to stretch himself beyond destruction. Two more men had died two nights ago, by his hand. Two *more* Guarders. No one else was that deadly, and it was draining his soul.

He had to shift from destroyer to defender. He had to be better. He had to *prevent*. He had to protect everyone—not only his family, but his neighbors, their children, his soldiers, his favorite corporal who still lay weak and unable to move properly.

Mr. Metz was now on his knees, asking the Creator to keep safe the grave until the Last Day.

But Perrin didn't hear the words. He gripped the shovel tighter and out of the corner of his eye noticed his children, held by his wife and mother-in-law, looking at him. They'd been remarkably quiet this early morning, as if they felt the gravity of the day. Jaytsy

leaned for him, but Perrin didn't respond to her.

Destroyers don't hold children. Not until they become defenders again. The rage was hot and angry in his head, and now also in his heart. For once they worked together, and it was savage and wrong. He was only an animal right now, and he had to work the animal out.

Mr. Metz finished the prayer, struggled to his feet, and nodded to the workers with shovels, but none of them dared move.

Perrin knew why. He had a way of taking up too much space, of making others feel there wasn't enough room next to him, even if they were twenty paces away.

He marched over to the pile of dirt and plunged the shovel's blade into it with a violent *thunk*.

He was supposed to keep *them* safe, he thought bitterly as he twisted his body to drop the shovel full of dirt on the large wooden box. It hit with a dull *splud*.

That was part of the reason why he came to Edge—to watch over them. *Thunk*.

They were so old, so frail. This was personal. *Splud*.

It was his responsibility. His fault. *Thunk*.

Perrin shut out everything else but the dirt, the shovel, and the wide box in

the hole five feet below him. Early this morning the burial grounds diggers started two holes. He insisted on one. They would go together. They were always together.

And this was the only way he could keep them safe. *Splud.*

It was an overly wide coffin designed for an overly large body. Together their small remains would huddle until the Last Day. *Thunk.*

It didn't matter what Mahrree thought. He could feel her staring at his back. He was taking away the burial diggers' jobs, she whispered to him earlier as he had grabbed a shovel. *Splud.*

The crowd of hundreds was also

stunned silent to see the major step up to the hole. *Thunk.*

Family and friends were supposed to watch and pray. Not shovel dirt. *Splud.*

It didn't matter to Perrin what they thought. What Mahrree thought. He knew the truth. This was personal. *Thunk.*

It's not about power. It's about protection. He *did* fail them. Hogal and Tabbit Densal, dead. Because he failed to secure Edge. *Splud.*

He began to sweat in his woolen jacket. He didn't care. Someone came after his family. *Thunk.*

How did they know? How did they find them? He had to secure them. Was

this was the only way, under piles of dirt and rock? At least *they* were safe until the Last Day. *Splud.*

Only he could do this. No one else. Others held shovels, but they had no idea how to use them properly. *Thunk.*

No one else in Edge could secure the village. He didn't want power. He only wanted to protect. It was all on his shoulders. All his responsibility. Every last one of them. *Splud.*

Only him. Only him. Only he could do this. No more destruction. *Thunk.*

He wouldn't lose any more. No one else in Edge would die because of him. He alone had to save Edge. Only him. Only him. *Splud.*

Mahrree had always suspected her husband was actually two men shoved into the same body, but as she watched him furiously shovel earth over the large coffin, she changed her evaluation.

She was actually married to a restless bear, disguised as a man.

And he wasn't going to be easy to live with.

The High General of Idumea had already planned to go to Edge after

receiving the urgent message about the raids late in the evening of the 64th Day. But when word came from their son the next afternoon about Joriana's aunt and uncle, his wife moved up his timetable and they were on the fastest garrison coach available that evening.

But first, he paid a visit to the Administrative Headquarters.

"Nicko, let me give him permission!"

"Relf, no," the Chairman said casually, as he shifted around some pages on his large desk, bigger than any other in Idumea. He'd made sure of that.

"Why not?!" High General Shin pounded on the desk.

Mal's eyes slowly travelled up to look at the High General, since his fists on the stacks of paper made moving the pages impossible.

"He's right, Nicko! For what purpose do we sit on the edges waiting to be hunted? Let him go in and hunt! He'll sign a waiver, we won't hold the government or the army liable should he not come back again, and he'll take with him only volunteers. We can put an end to this nonsense, once and for all!"

Chairman Mal rubbed his tear duct to remove a speck of dirt. "Relf, *Relf*," he droned in a bored manner as he looked at the smudge, "we've been through this before. I'll not give your son

permission to enter the forests. The time he dragged that poor lieutenant with him, they were both exceptionally lucky. But it set a very dangerous precedent. Perrin may believe he's cautious, but what about citizens? Teenagers? Children who might follow in his example? We can't even assume *his* luck will hold—"

"He did it a *second* time," the High General interrupted in a quiet voice.

Mal stopped staring at the invisible speck and immediately shifted his gaze upwards. "I know he did. I saw Neeks' report—"

Shin shook his head. "Neeks didn't know the whole truth. Perrin had a suspicion something was up, and he didn't go in only a few paces, as Neeks

reported. Perrin confided in me that he spent several long, cold nights in the forest waiting and watching until the threat appeared. He killed those eleven Guarders himself, all deep inside the forest. It was dark and snow-covered, and he not only survived but he succeeded—fantastically.

"Nicko," Shin suddenly leaned towards him, bracing himself on the desk to face the Chairman whose set face barely contained his fury, "*my boy* can conquer that forest! I know it! He can train his soldiers and the commanders of other forts, and within a year the Guarders could be eradicated. Think about, Nicko: under *your* rule, with your

direction, the world would finally become peaceful. How would *that* look in the history books under your name?"

"You're more manipulative and deceptive than Querul the Third," Mal said steadily.

The High General arched an eyebrow.

"Your son purposefully went against General Cush's admonitions, allowed Neeks to file an inaccurate report, and here you're pretending he did nothing wrong!"

"Yes, he violated the first rule again, but there were extenuated circumstances—"

"There's NO reason to disobey the rules!" Mal shouted. "Even if he *could*

eliminate the Guarders, what would he do about the bottomless crevices? Hot water? Poisonous gasses? And those are only the hazards we can see from the edges. What might be further in? He *might* be able to rid the forest of the Guarder danger, but he could never cure the rest of it. And the citizens, believing that the army and government have made everything safer, will wander into those forests and not come back out. That happened before the Great War, High General, and you know it. So how would *that* look in the history books, eh? Under the rule of Nicko Mal, thousands of citizens died because they erroneously believed the forests in the north were

suddenly safe!”

The High General stood back up, scoffed, and took a breath to tell the Chairman how wrong he was, but Mal kept going.

“I know what this is really about, Relf. You never cared about those forests until your son moved up there. Now you act as if you’re worried about safety. But the truth is, you see a way for him to distinguish himself. If he conquers that forest, as you naively believe, not only would he be out of danger and *his son* as well, but who could deny him to become the third High General Shin? Or his son to be the fourth? You want to create your own little rule here, don’t you, Relf? Querul and his descendents,

now Shin and his descendents?"

Shin threw his hands in the air. "Ludicrous! You really think I'm that petty and greedy for power?"

"I do," Mal said simply. "We all are. We merely dress it up in the name of altruism. But we're all the same. We wouldn't be in our positions if some part of us didn't crave the power. That's what all of this is about, Relf."

"This isn't about us," Shin said, sidestepping the accusation. "But about Perrin. You know he cares nothing for Idumea. He doesn't see power as you do. Every time I bring up his coming back here to serve, he shuts that right down. He *requested* to go to the smallest

village with a fort available. This has nothing to do with making a name for himself, but everything to do with making the world a safer place. And yes, *for his son,* and his daughter, and his wife, and everyone else."

"High General, I don't know why you persist in wasting my time," Mal sighed loudly. "I've already given you my answer, and nothing you've said has changed my mind. In fact, the revelation that he went into the forest a *second time* has me quite livid! He violated the first rule of the army, *again*. If it were any other officer, he would've been ushered right back to Idumea for retraining or dismissal, as he was warned. But, High General, *you* didn't do that," Mal's tone

developed a dangerous sharpness. “Not only did you not discipline your son—”

“I didn’t know about it at the time,” Shin said calmly.

“But you found out later, didn’t you?”

Shin didn’t answer.

“Obviously. So not only did you not discipline your son, you also *withheld* his deliberate disobedience from me, making you just as culpable.”

Shin’s jaw shifted slightly, but otherwise he didn’t move.

“For your irresponsible and deceptive behavior, I should remove you from your post immediately!” Mal seethed. “You should be demoted down

to lieutenant and given no greater responsibility than counting the horses at the garrison each evening! And at the very *least,* I should insist that you bring that rash boy of yours back to Idumea where I can keep a closer eye on him *and* you!"

High General Shin stood at attention. "Major Shin withheld the information of what he did to protect his wife, who was struggling with her last expecting. There was concern that the child would be lost if she experienced excessive stress," he related formally. "Perrin kept his doings secret from everyone for three moons. Once I learned the truth, I chastised him severely and even threatened him with

losing his position. I felt that I handled the situation appropriately and didn't see any reason to trouble you with *army* discipline."

"That's where you were wrong, High General," Mal told him. "Everything and everyone in the world is my concern!"

"I was not aware that you felt the need to know everything, Chairman," Shin continued in his official tone. "From now on I will provide you details of my days, including all correspondence, communications, my midday meal, and the timings and contents of my bowel movements, if you so desire."

Chairman Mal glared at him.

Shin glared back.

The High General was far more practiced it at, so Mal looked down at his desk after only a few seconds and started shifting pages around.

“While I see no reason to *not* immediately remove your willfully disobedient son, I’m sure others wouldn’t agree with me. There are those who believe that the army and the Administrators are finally putting up a united front, and considering the tensions in the world right now, it seems to be in the world’s best interest to not give the impression otherwise. Therefore, against my better judgment, I will allow Major

Shin to remain in Edge."

He held up his finger to stave off the subtle smirk of the High General.

"But *only* if he can be trusted to follow all the rules of the army, especially the first one. Otherwise, he'll be demoted and removed—along with you—and the *two* of you can enjoy your new positions as stable hands in my barns!"

"If there's nothing else," Shin said unemotionally, "I'll be on my way to Edge. I'll be sure to give Perrin your respects." And the High General headed out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

The page holding the door wished he'd had a chance to let go of it first.

In the coach High General Shin thought nothing more of his disappointing conversation with Nicko Mal, and instead read messages and reviewed reports from the north.

Three villages had been attacked on the same night. The High General sent two advisors to Mountseen and Quake to see for themselves the aftermath of the raids there, and to investigate the response time of the forts. Of utmost importance was devising strategies for securing the villages more effectively. The attacks were a highly coordinated

show of Guarder strength, and the general hated shows.

The numbers were remarkable and immense. According to an update he received when they changed horses, Edge, Mountseen, and Quake had a total of twenty-nine residents killed, over one hundred citizens wounded, twenty-two soldiers dead, and forty-one soldiers injured. Twenty-three Guarders were killed by soldiers, and another three by citizens. The general wasn't sure how to record the numbers of injured or captured Guarders that took their own lives. He would have to make a new column on the forms he'd already printed in order to list the forty-seven troubling suicides.

“You’re rather quiet this trip.”

He was surprised to find himself saying that to his wife, rather than the other way around, as it usually was.

Joriana had been looking out the window for several hours as the scenery sped past. She wiped away another tear.

“I just can’t believe they’re gone,” she whispered. “She was like my second mother, he was my other father. Perrin’s last ‘grandparents’.”

She sniffled.

Relf, knowing what was expected, fidgeted uneasily, put his stack of papers on the seat, and moved to the other side to sit next to his wife. After a moment he put an arm around her. He had many

strengths, but tenderness wasn't one of them.

Joriana leaned back against his arm, then rested her head against chest, a wisp of her hair catching in one of the many medals, but she didn't notice.

"We could have lost them *all,*" she said softly as her husband awkwardly patted her arm.

"But we didn't," he reminded her.

"The little ones! Relf, what if they got our grandbabies?!"

"But they *didn't*," he said firmly.

"They're so vulnerable! Why doesn't he move them to the fort? Why doesn't he come back to Idumea? He could be second in command at Pools, couldn't he? Marsh is always quiet, and

not so far for us to travel."

Relf glanced around the empty coach for witnesses before kissing his wife on top of her head. "He won't leave Edge. You know that."

"Maybe he will now," Joriana said, struggling to sit up.

Her husband deftly untangled the lock of hair caught in a brass star on his uniform. She smiled as he tried to tuck it back into her bun, abandoning his effort only a few seconds later.

"Thank you," she whispered, and gave him a quick kiss.

He hesitated to return it before remembering no one else could see into the coach. "I'll talk to him," he

promised. “They know where he lives—surely that ought to scare some sense into him.”

Joriana sighed and leaned against her husband again. “He’s as brave and determined as you are, so you won’t get anywhere with him.” A moment later she asked, “What did you discuss with Nicko?”

Relf groaned and rubbed his smooth chin. “Nothing much.”

“You always say that when it’s something big or disappointing.”

“How would you know?”

“Women know these things.”

“That’s why I rarely take you along.”

Late the next afternoon High General Shin took off his cap and dropped it unceremoniously on the large desk in his son's office.

Perrin had already shut the door and flopped down in a chair, having told his staff in the outer office to head down the stairs for a while. From previous experience, Perrin was sure the conversation to follow might get a bit loud, and they'd still be able to overhear the best parts even down in the reception area.

His father sat down next to him, exhaled, and casually put a boot up on

the desk.

"I expected it to be worse, by the number of incidents reported," he told his son.

Perrin scoffed. "I thought it was pretty bad as it is!"

Relf shrugged slightly. "I guess what I'm trying to say is, you did an excellent job containing the situation. All the men did. And no deaths here, either."

"Except for Hogal and Tabbit," Perrin whispered.

"Yes," Relf sighed. "Your mother was going to spare no expense on their burial markers. At least they went together. Your mother felt great comfort about that."

“So did I,” Perrin said.

“And that Corporal Zenos—he’s your baby handler, right?”

Perrin chuckled softly for the first time in days. “Baby *tender*, yes. I’m still amazed he stood at attention for you at the surgery wing. First time he’s gotten up on his own since he was injured.”

Relf nodded. “I’ve been known to bring even dying men to their feet,” he said soberly.

Perrin snorted.

“The village is putting forth a valiant effort to clean up. Physically, they seemed to be in relatively good condition. But mentally? Perrin, I saw a lot of scared eyes out there on our tour.”

"I know," said Perrin quietly. "Twice we've kept the Guarders confined to the forests, but this time? Failure."

Relf reached over and bounced a fist lightly on his son's leg. "Twice *you've* kept the Guarders confined to the forests, but this was only a matter of time. You've got an immense task in front of you. You've won over the villagers again, I could see that much. They looked at you today with such awe," he winked with pride at his son. "But to make them feel secure again? That's going to take some doing."

Perrin nodded. "Mahrree said the same thing to me. We'll come up with

something, I'm sure."

"Son," Relf began, "I've been thinking a great deal about this on the way up here. You know how sometimes people joke that the world's out to get them? In your case, that's true. It knows where your family is, and you're the only one in the world that can keep them safe. This was far too calculated on their part. Never before have I known Guarders to be so organized to coordinate this in three villages at the same time. And they're no longer working in pairs, either. Something's changed—their methods, their leadership . . . something."

"So we need to change too, Father. Our current strategies are useless. But I

do know something that would work."

The High General squinted. "What?"

"Let me go into the forests to find them!" his son whispered. "I know the woods—"

"NO!" Relf cut him off. "Traditionally we have—"

"Why should that matter?!" the major demanded. "And since when do *you* care about upholding the traditions of the army? I'm telling you, the forests are not what we've been led to believe. The trees are actually the *safe* parts, it's easy to see where the dangers—"

Relf exhaled loudly. "Major Shin, we've been through this before. The

Command Board has specifically—"

"*Why* is there a committee deciding *your* every move, High General?" Major Shin's voice was thick with irritation.

"ENOUGH!" the High General bellowed at him.

His son didn't recoil, but met his glare. "Yes, it *is* enough. Enough of our sitting around and waiting like impotent, incompetent—"

The High General pointed at him. "You watch your mouth, *boy*! Things are better now than they ever were under King Oren. I have more influence—"

"Then prove it!" his son challenged. "Give me permission to go into the forests, let me find them, eradicate—"

"Are you insane?" the general

hissed. “You really think Nicko Mal would allow that?”

“You just said things are better, so are they?”

“I said better, but not *perfect,* son!”

Perrin grumbled and turned to face his father. “Why do you let him push you around?”

Relf arched an angry eyebrow. “*What did you just say?!*”

Perrin clenched his left fist.

So did his father.

“Why do you do whatever Nicko Mal tells you? You’re head of the entire army! Stand up to him! Insist that—”

“Insist WHAT?!” High General Shin bellowed. “That I be in charge?!”

"That you do your job!" Major Shin shouted back, glad that no one was in the outer office. "That you secure the world! Look, you have 15,000 men now; let's take, say, five thousand of them and *swarm* that forest! I can teach the men the hazards, then we go in there and eradicate the Guarders once and for all."

"Nicko would never agree—"

"Forget Mal!"

"I can't!" the High General shouted. "Take a few guesses what would happen if I went directly against his orders!"

"You'd succeed!" Major Shin said with a devious grin.

"He'd see it as a direct challenge to his leadership!"

“So challenge him! You have 15,000 men, General!”

“And then what, Perrin? Then what? Who’s in charge next? Who sets himself up as leader of the world, with the army backing him?”

Perrin continued to grin manically at his father.

Relf recoiled. “I will not be King Relf, Perrin,” he said quietly. “Nor should *you* be the next king.”

Perrin’s grin fell and he scoffed. “That’s not what I want.”

“It better not be. No one man can handle all that power. We have plenty of evidence of that.”

His son brooded as he slowly

deflated. "I'm only suggesting that you would do a much better job. *Mahrree* would do a much better job—"

"It's complicated" Relf cut in. "We don't have to go through this again. There was a reason I insisted on so many Administrators. Mal intended to take the throne with two advisors. He wanted to be king himself—I've told you that. I've spent the past years keeping him and his ambitions under control. I told him I wouldn't support him taking over from Oren unless the power was spread out among twenty-two others. I figured with that many men he just might choose three or four that were thoughtful and wise enough to talk sense into the others. So far it's been functioning. Not

perfectly, but acceptably."

Perrin's shoulders drooped. "I know," he whispered. "I agree. Sort of."

His father nodded. "We'll never have a perfect system. Only if the Creator were in charge would everything be equal and fair, I suppose."

"Nicko Mal is no Creator!" Perrin pointed out.

"Neither am I," Relf reminded him. "No one is. Maybe a Guide could have done it, but those are long gone. I keep Nicko Mal in check, Perrin. And he keeps me in check. The Administrators and the army watch each other like two hawks guarding a field of mice. For the past five years it's been working better

than anything we had under the kings. And Nicko Mal has upheld your grandfather's very wise law: No man is allowed in the forest. And . . . I uphold that law too."

Perrin clenched both fists in earnestness. "Father, let me go *one more time*, in secret—"

The High General's face twisted in red rage, but his voice was low and threatening. "Major Shin, you do it again not only will *you* be thrown out of the army, but *so will I!* And then who can we trust to keep the northern border here safe? Who then will keep Nicko Mal in check in Idumea? Not Cush, I assure you that. He's practically Nicko's lap dog. If the two of us go down, so will the rest of

the world. Guarders or no Guarders, we're back to the reign of kings, and neither of us would be in position to fix it!"

Perrin slumped back into his chair and exhaled loudly. "There's *got* to be *something*—"

"There's NOTHING, boy! Get that through your head! We're trapped, but we still have influence as long as we work within the system! You care about this village? About Edge? Your family? Then work within the laws! You want to save the world? Then let's save it! The *legal* way!"

Major Shin sat in gloomy silence for a minute, staring out the windows.

Eventually he rubbed his forehead. "Grandfather wanted me to go into the forests."

Relf's mouth twitched. "How do you know that?"

"He told me. When I was twelve. He told me about freeing Querul the Fourth's servants."

His father nodded slowly. "One of his greatest successes, and only a handful of people in the world know about it. I'm surprised he told you."

"It was because he thought I might some day . . . have your position," Perrin said uncomfortably. He couldn't say the title. Not for the first time, the idea of becoming High General left a foul taste in his mouth. "He wanted me to know

that sometimes there's only one man who can go over the wall to find out what's really happening, and put a stop to it."

"He went over the wall," Relf said appreciatively. "Literally. Climbed up and over that stone wall around Querul's compound—now Mal's—to show the servants there was no danger on the other side. Quite a deed for a man of his girth," he added with the smallest of smiles. "They followed him most reluctantly. Then, a couple of moons later, they all wrote him letters of gratitude. He showed me the letters. Told me *that's* what it meant to be the High General: to rescue the abused, to protect the innocent, to safeguard the

citizenry."

"Exactly!" Perrin smiled. "I'm trying to follow Pere's example."

"But he never told you *specifically*," Relf's tone turned sharp, "to enter the forests, did he?!"

Perrin refused to meet his father's intense gaze. "It's what he intended me to do. What he was alluding to in our conversation."

"But it's not what he *said*!" Relf bellowed.

Perrin closed his eyes in exasperation. With his eyes, yes. But not with his mouth . . .

"No," he finally admitted.

The men sat in frustrated silence until Perrin finally broke it. "So I need

to fix this, but I can't go back into the forests? No one's safe—that much is clear. Not the world, not Edge, not my family—"

"I know that," Relf said, now also more composed. "And I have a proposition. The fort at Pools needs a new major. You'd be third in command, but very soon you could be second—"

"Pools?! So close to Idumea?"

Relf smiled partway. "Your mother would love to have you and your family so close by."

Perrin shook his head. "It's so crowded! And Hycymum—"

"Bring her along," Relf said. "She'd love it and you know it."

Perrin kept shaking his head. “But Mahrree wouldn’t, and I *certainly* wouldn’t! You know how I feel about the city—I want to be as far away as possible from it. I’m staying in Edge, and that’s all there is—”

“So move Mahrree and the children to the fort,” Relf interrupted, “if you’re so worried about their safety. There’s room. You can even take Hycymum. Put them in the guest quarters for now, until you can build a proper house in the compound. Something large, impressive —”

“No, Father. Not the fort! Mahrree would never agree to that—”

“Even to save her children’s

lives?!”

“I don’t want my children raised in the fort!”

“Why not? You were!”

To avoid that debate, Perrin sighed. “Father, you’re missing my point. I can’t only secure my family—I need to secure *all* of Edge. Our house was actually safe during the raid. Even if they killed the soldiers on guard, there’s no way they could have made it into the house—”

“Consider moving to that new housing area they’re building,” Relf cut him off again. “They’ll be putting in an eight foot high block wall around it all, and it will have a gate—”

“Not the house again . . . Look, that housing area is too far from the fort, and

you know that. No, Father," he closed his eyes and groaned. "I can fix this—all of this. If only I could just—"

Relf's eyes softened. "Perrin, even if Nicko Mal wasn't in the way, I won't allow it. Not as High General, but as your father. Son, you were lucky before, maybe even protected, but now? It's suicide. We don't even know how many Guarders got away. Considering how many they attacked with, the forests and mountains may be teeming with Guarders, and even if I gave you thousands of soldiers, we may still be *outnumbered!*" he whispered.

"Now," he said in a normal tone again, "your family needs you. Edge

needs you. So does your mother, and so do . . .” His voice trailed off, but Perrin knew what the end of the sentence would have been.

“So how can I secure Edge from an enemy I can’t even flush out?” he groused.

Relf allowed for one of his rare smiles. “There’s a reason you were made the youngest captain ever, and now one of the youngest majors ever. I have complete faith in you that you’ll solve this problem, *without* doing anything dangerous that would risk your life, or garner the attention of Nicko Mal, or cause me to lose my position.”

Perrin narrowed his eyes. “He’d really do that? Remove you?”

Relf nodded once. “Promised me I’d be working his mansion’s stables if I gave you permission to go back into the forests. I already asked him. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too. I didn’t realize that Mal had . . .” He sighed in disappointment. His father had been thinking along the same lines. Had Pere Shin ever told his son Relf to go into the forests? Perrin couldn’t help but wonder. Still, Relf was right; Nicko Mal had the power to remove both of them, and then where would the world be?

There was no other option but to work within the system, as flawed as it was.

“I’ll do what I can to make you

proud, Father."

The High General had looked down at his hands and whispered, "I already am, Perrin."

That night as Perrin and Mahrree laid down in bed, they both sighed heavily.

Mahrree chuckled sadly. "I think yours was heavier. So what did he say to you?" She'd been preparing for the worst. For the past three days Perrin had been growling, snapping, and planning. When he came home late that night, he seemed a bit mollified—or maybe it was

dismayed—and it was the first time he hugged his children since the burial. High General Shin's inspection had changed something.

"I'm guessing the same thing she said to you," Perrin smiled sadly. "What did my mother want us to do?"

"Move away," Mahrree sighed again.

"To?"

"Idumea. Their house. She said it was large enough, and you could be posted to the garrison," Mahrree shuddered.

Perrin chuckled. "Well, that's far more ambitious than what my father suggested. He wants to repost me to Pools, just north of Idumea. Said we

could even move your mother with us."

Mahrree scoffed. "She'd never leave all her friends, and she'd never let us leave without her! So," she started hesitantly, "what did you tell your father?"

"That I'm not leaving Edge."

Mahrree rolled over and grabbed his arm to squeeze it. "Thank you!"

He kissed her. "So I'm assuming you told my mother we're not going either, right?"

"Of course! Um, but I *am* curious," she started slowly again, "What did he say about your idea of taking several thousand into the forest? Since you haven't said anything, I'm assuming that .

. . ”

Perrin stiffened next to her. “Request denied.”

“Why?”

He grumbled quietly. “Because we don’t know their numbers. They may have far more than we do, and we could be overwhelmed.”

“They may *not*, too,” she pointed out. “Not that I *want* you to go back into the forest,” she assured him, “but if there were thousands of you, your chances at success seem rather good. I mean—”

“He’s right,” Perrin whispered in defeat. “I’ve been thinking about it. We have no idea what’s beyond the boulders, how many are hiding up in the mountains. There could be tens of

thousands, just waiting to ambush us. Every last one of us could be wiped out. Then the world would be overrun, and then . . .”

Mahrree propped herself up on her arm. “So that’s why we should find out what they’re up to *now!* It’s completely unjust—their society is having problems, so they’re stealing and killing *us* to fix their crisis? And we’re letting them? Maybe . . . maybe we could even help them. If we could only uncover the truth, only find one to interrogate and figure out what all of this is about, we could change everything! You’ve told me before, it just takes the right man to go into there and—”

“The rule is,” Perrin interrupted resignedly, “no man is allowed into the forest. Who I am to go against my grandfather’s laws?”

A thought was forming in Mahrree’s mind about her husband, but it was too disgusting to utter. Instead she blinked at him in the dark, but he seemed to be studying the ceiling.

“But you violated that law last year —”

“Prevailing circumstances overruled that law,” he cut her off. “At least in my mind they did.”

Mahrree was stunned by his sudden spate of rationality. “So why not now?”

The previous thought she tried to

ignore grew stronger and more repulsive in her mind. She felt her upper lip curling, but fought down the idea that came with it. He was her husband, after all. He was the bravest officer—

At least, he *was*.

"What went on in that conversation with your father?"

He didn't respond. He just lay there quietly. Brooding. Spineless.

She hated seeing him like that.

He could do so much more. He'd ventured into that forest twice before and came out successful, knew its secrets and hazards, and with the right amount of men, he could eliminate all threats and even change the world. He only needed the right kick to his

conscience.

"Perrin, I can't believe I'm about to say this, but I've never known you to be c—"

"Cowardly?!" he snapped.

His tone startled her. He could have burned down the entire forest with his heat.

"*Cautious*," she clarified in a frantic back peddle. "I was about to say *cautious*. That's never been your style."

"Well it has to be *now!*" he said bitterly, and rolled away from her.

Mahrree just stared at him, utterly perplexed and disillusioned.

He wasn't cautious.

He *was* c—

Chapter 13 ~ “Are you that Guarder spy?!”

The next day Joriana hugged her grandchildren, then hugged them again until they giggled and squirmed to be released.

“Oh, I wished we could stay longer.” She sniffed as she stood up and watched her grandchildren toddle off to Peto’s bedroom in search of his squishy ball.

Mahrree put an arm around her mother-in-law. “So do I, Mother Shin. At least this was an unexpected and pleasant visit for unpleasant reasons.”

“You can still come with us. We can have soldiers help you pack up, and you can be moving in by the end of next week—”

Mahrree shook her head. “Mother Shin, we’ve gone over this. You know how Perrin hates Idumea. He’d be miserable, and then so would everyone

else. He'll find a way to make Edge safe. I know it."

Joriana nodded and hugged her daughter-in-law. "If ever you change your mind . . . Well, Relf and I will stop at the burial grounds on our way out. Make sure they get the head stones placed properly. I'll give my regards to your father, since Hogal and Tabbit are close neighbors of his now."

Mahrree smiled. "Thank you. I—" But she stopped when she heard the coach pulling up in front of the house.

The women smiled sadly at each other and hugged again.

"Guess it's time to go," Joriana sighed. "Jaytsy! Peto! Say bye-bye to Grandmother! Grandfather will be

coming to the door soon."

The children ran out of the room with their arms in the air for one more hug while Mahrree walked to the front door to open it for her father-in-law who would soon be standing there. He never came in, but would tip his cap to her and his grandchildren, who stared at his shiny medals and large sword, while he called for his wife.

When Mahrree opened the door she saw the soldier acting as footman already picking up Joriana's bag that was waiting on the front porch, and the High General was coming up the walk, with Perrin right behind him.

Instead of stopping at the door

though, the High General paused. Then he walked in to the small gathering room, which shrank even more in relation to his presence. He watched as his grandchildren gave their grandmother one last hug.

Perrin came in behind him and shrugged at Mahrree, unsure of why his father had come into the house.

Relf took off his cap, swallowed, then walked over to his grandchildren.

The toddlers both released their grandmother and stared at him instead.

He never stood a chance against them, their soft round cheeks framing their massive questioning eyes, one set dark brown, the other pale gray.

Abruptly he knelt down and

scooped Jaytsy into his left arm and Peto into his right, pulling them close.

Joriana's eyebrows went up, and Mahrree and Perrin couldn't even speak.

The children giggled. They didn't mind his medals at all.

Grandfather Shin kissed each one quickly on the head, squeezed their little bodies, and released them. He stood up, gave them a formal nod, caught Mahrree in a succinct hug, then replaced his cap.

"Come, Joriana," he cleared his throat of unfamiliar emotions, "Long drive back to Idumea, and we have the burial grounds to stop at first."

Two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

“A rousing success, I’d venture to say.” Brisack sifted through stacks of notes in front of him. “The largest amount of men ever coordinated, the most ambitious effort ever staged, three villages completely shocked and dazed, and the rest of the world fully panicked and embracing their forts and commanders! They’re even sending messages of gratitude to the Administrators. Apparently many villages are reporting ‘suspicious activity’ to their commanders, bypassing the magistrates and enforcement officers

completely."

Mal merely shrugged. "Not a *complete* success . . ."

But Brisack was still smiling. "And another benefit—since so many Guarders were killed, what we have to pay out to the survivors will be even less. Taxes won't have to go up so high next season after all."

"Oh, they'll still go up," Mal intoned. "Pay for new schools, new levels of educational supervisors, forts for the last villages—"

Brisack looked thoughtful. "But we could probably reduce the tax rate *a little*—"

"—the improvements of the Administrative offices," Mal continued,

“additional assistants for each administrator—”

Brisack bobbed his head back and forth.

“—funds for improving personal libraries and assistants to run those personal libraries—I’ve included yours in that as well, Doctor.”

The good doctor reluctantly nodded. “I *could* use an addition to my library. Something of stone, to keep all my original records safe?”

Mal smiled smoothly. “Would need some expensive artisans to construct it . . .”

Brisack kept nodding, slowly. “But it gives men work, doesn’t it?”

“Working in stone like that—it would be a pity to not let a sculptor or two work some embellishments,” Mal suggested. “Would raise taxation maybe only . . . a quarter slip of silver per citizen to make something truly beautiful.”

Brisack’s mouth formed an o as he envisioned a stone sculpted library in his own home. “With all that effort, I should likely make it big enough for both of our collections.”

Mal waved that away. “Nah, I think I’ll just have one made myself. Make it half a slip of silver, then. I’ll send a message to the Administrator of Taxation to adjust the rate increase for

‘miscellaneous building projects.’”

Brisack had the decency to look a bit embarrassed. “It’s only that all my research needs to be protected. It *is* benefitting the entire world. Once it’s completed,” he added, knowing full well they had never discussed when the project would be ‘complete.’

Mal’s smooth smile continued. “No need to justify anything to me, my good doctor. The world is here to serve us, after all. That we give back to them is simply *mutual kindness*.”

His companion smiled more readily. “Plus we’ll need the increase in taxes to finish building forts and adding soldiers. You know, when you think about it all, I dare say this was almost

too easy!" he chuckled.

Mal did not. "So if it all was so easy, why is *he* still alive?" His smooth smile vanished, replaced by an indignant scowl. "His wife and children? Even his mother-in-law? I knew this would fail again."

Brisack held out his hand in amazement. "Look at these numbers! Look at what we accomplished! It's astounding! Haven't you whipped enough dogs and horses? Yet all you can do is obsess over one man and his family?"

"What I want to know is, good doctor, why aren't *you?*"

"I didn't warn him, if that's what

you want to know!" Brisack spat. "He did this all on his own."

Mal eyed him. "You sound almost *relieved* by that."

Brisack shrugged briefly.

"You *are!* You're happy that our men failed!" Mal sneered.

Brisack held up his hands in surrender. "Not entirely. It's just that . . . the past few weeks I've been thinking that . . . it would have been sad had those young children—"

Mal pulled a face. "*Would have been sad!* Don't tell me you were starting to feel *guilty?*" he hissed.

Brisack only looked at his hands.

Mal rolled his eyes. "Why did I choose you? Gadiman would never feel

guilty. He'd never let such an infantile tendency cloud his judgment or cause him to feel anything *remotely* like regret. Man's greatest weakness! Guilt, regret, feeling *bad* about behavior," he simpered and shuddered. "I thought you were beyond such base emotions. This is how humans are *worse* than animals. It's a forced condition, you know. Shame about a misdeed. Sorrow for causing offense. A behavior *taught* to humans that can, *and must*, be overcome! Ignore it long enough, it dies away as simple as that. I even taught a sense of shame to the dogs I experimented on. Within a season I could condition any ferocious dog into a cowering beast—"

"Reacting to abuse is not the same as feeling regret," Brisack murmured.

"What was that? Abuse? Ha! Humans abuse *themselves*. With guilt. With regret. It holds them back, makes them feel as if they owe some duty to others, as if there should be some level of behavior all should aspire to. Well, there isn't! Look at you. Nothing tragic even happened to those snotty children, and still you're wasting time to feel guilt for something that didn't even happen. Pathetic."

Brisack shook his head. "No one's forced me to feel guilt. And I *don't* feel guilt. I merely would have felt loss at the end of an intriguing study that *you*

insisted on cutting short."

"You wanted to as well! Said you were getting bored a while ago, remember?"

"Another base human behavior," Brisack contended. "Animals never feel boredom, and neither should I. I was merely being infantile, as you claimed, by being bored. But now I see how much more can come from studying the Shins. The major still lost his great aunt and her husband. Even the High General was so shaken that he and Mrs. Shin left immediately for Edge."

Mal scoffed at that. "The High General didn't care. He was simply reacting to his wife as an obedient dog should. Wasn't his family, it was *hers*.

Relf has a few other concerns on his mind right now," he said vaguely.

"So," Brisack said crisply, "why wasn't the raid up to your expectations? Were Major Shin's soldiers really that well trained, or was our leadership in the north that ineffectual?"

Mal nodded, recognizing the shift in topic. He went along with it. "There'll be many questions asked. And my first is, why hasn't our quiet man in Edge reported back yet? This is precisely the kind of incident where he should remain in contact. No soldiers died there, so he must be still alive."

"Maybe injured?" offered Brisack.

Mal shrugged. "If he is, then he's

showing an extreme amount of dedication to remain in character. Perhaps we should send him some assistance."

Brisack nodded. "I think you're right—let's slip in some help with the new soldiers going to Edge. I'm more concerned about him becoming *too* dedicated. Perhaps he may have had something to do with the ineffectiveness of the raid. We should consider," he hesitated to continue his sentence, "that we may be losing him to the major."

Mal squinted. "I'm more concerned that I may be losing *you* to the major. Gadiman keeps asking when he can join our level. Perhaps I need to start considering that."

“Only if you want complete failure,” Brisack said darkly.

Ever since the loss of his great aunt and uncle, and the High General’s visit, the major had been solely focused on fortifying Edge. Until he had a new plan developed and implemented, his single-mindedness wouldn’t let anything else interfere. That’s why his temper was nearly non-existent when someone knocked on his office door unexpectedly three weeks after the attack on the 84th Day of Weeding Season.

Major Shin had been sitting in his

office going over his ideas with his lieutenant. They'd analyzed the flaws of their response to the raid and were finalizing the first step of a new system to improve soldier reaction time. That the Guarders infiltrated so quickly and deeply into the village was troubling. Major Shin wasn't about to let that happen again. Lieutenant Karna was just standing up to leave when the soldier on duty in the forward office opened the door uncertainly.

"Sir, the magistrate and chief of enforcement are here. And no, they don't have an appointment," he said, anticipating the major's question.

Karna looked at Shin.

"Stay, Karna. I want your input.

Private, send them in."

Magistrate Cockalorum, a thick squatty man in his sixties with a propensity for perspiring, entered the office nervously. Shin kept a sharp eye on him. The last time Cockalorum was there was a full season ago, then to hear how Major Shin was now the ultimate authority in the village. Much had changed in three moons, and in a way Perrin was glad that this dithering man was more concerned with his image than with the realization that the village was actually under Major Shin's control. He never had much faith in men who wanted to be known as leaders.

Cockalorum glanced out the

windows and dabbed his handkerchief over his pale bare forehead, wiping off sweat he likely generated huffing up the long stairwell to the tower. Perrin hoped he realized that nothing in Edge was beyond his sight.

Chief Curglaff stood behind Cockalorum, his demeanor not nearly as nervous, but his jaw set in determination. In his early forties, the chief was in far better physical condition. His belly paunch wasn't nearly as exaggerated as the magistrate's, and his light-soil-brown skin was tanned a deeper brown from his many hours in the sun.

The major rose from his desk and extended his hand without his usual

smile. “What brings you all the way up here today, Magistrate? I assume it’s important enough to not schedule my time?”

Mr. Cockalorum shook his hand, then stepped back to let the Chief of Enforcement acknowledge the major.

The chief hesitated for a moment, then stepped forward and reluctantly took his hand.

The major eyed him. Something definitely had changed. Three weeks ago most the village saw them arm in arm in the morning of the aftermath talking like brothers. But given time, distance, and the power of pernicious thinking, any familial relationship can disintegrate.

“Well . . . actually . . . Major, there’s something that’s come up,” the magistrate began haltingly. He looked around for a chair and took a seat only after the major did.

Major Shin looked at the chief who remained standing, staring at the lieutenant.

“Does he need to be here?” the chief asked sharply, his brown eyes narrowing.

Karna, who was leaning against a cabinet, stood up and looked at the major.

“I’d prefer that he does, Chief Curglaff, unless you feel otherwise?”

“I do,” the chief said flatly. “What

we have should be for your ears only." He sent a withering glance to the lieutenant, who only looked amused at the attempt to intimidate.

"Apparently, Lieutenant Karna, my guests would feel more comfortable if you waited in the forward office. I'll send for you if I need you," the major said coldly.

Karna nodded and promptly left, shutting the door behind him.

The major indicated the empty seat and Chief Curglaff sat down with a glower, the purple banner of Edge on the wall behind him acting as a far too colorful background. The chief had a well-practiced gaze, firming the muscles in his tight face and turning his mouth

into a subtle scowl.

Shin folded his hands in front of him on the desk in a manner to suggest he was open to anything, but his face said otherwise.

"As I was beginning to say, Major —," began the magistrate again, automatically wiping his forehead although nothing as there, "—there's been some, shall we say, that is, that is, that is . . ." Cockalorum stumbled.

Maybe it was the height of the office, Perrin considered smugly. The weight of his words couldn't quite reach the height of his mouth to come out. All he could manage was froth.

Chief Curglaff sighed impatiently.

“Major, there seems to be some . . . some . . .” Now that Shin’s stony look was aimed at him, the chief found sudden empathy for his babbling companion, but he had more fortitude.

“Rumor,” he said in his usually brusque manner.

“*Rumor*,” the major repeated.

“Yes,” Curglaff said more confidently. “Some, Major, have suggested the raids were *convenient*.”

The major leaned forward slightly. “For who?”

“For proving the Administrators were correct in giving you so much power. As a message to the village, for *you*.” Curglaff swallowed hard and waited for the response.

The major's mouth twitched slightly. "Convenient . . . for *me*," he stated dully. His hands came together more tightly.

"Yes, well, you see," the chief continued bravely. "You see, the *rumor* is that what happened was to prove the Administrators were right. Putting you in charge of everything and everybody because of a threat of Guarders from the *inside?* Well, who's going to believe that? Never happened before. People are upset. They wonder what it means, you and the fort in charge. So the attack proves the decision was correct!"

His shoulder twitched as his tone became sarcastic.

“Certainly the Chief of Enforcement can’t recognize the Guarder threat in the village. The magistrate doesn’t know who to trust. So there you have it! Only the major and the fort, which have been here for only a few years and know next to nothing about the village, can take care of it!”

Major Shin still didn’t move.

“It was the timing, you see,” Curglaff’s voice began to lose a little confidence under the motionless stare. “Convenient.”

“Tell me, Cockalorum—,” the major turned suddenly to look at the magistrate.

The magistrate looked quickly at the

chief, wondering how he suddenly became the target. A new bead of sweat broke out on his shiny scalp.

"—was your family in any danger the night of the raids?"

"No, Major. We live on the far south side. The Guarders never made it past the village center. Once they encountered our brave soldiers and enforcement barricade, that was the end of their progress!" He seemed only dimly aware that his answer was sounding like a campaign speech.

"And Major," the chief said, "wasn't it fitting you *happened* to be in the village green after the debate—which *you* scheduled—when the Guarder attack was first noticed?" The

chief practiced his own rock-hard glare.

"You're questioning the location of the command center?" Shin scoffed. "We turned the village green into the command center because you and I were *both* there, remember? It was the most logical and central place to bring the victims and wounded. I don't recall you offering any other alternatives. And I also saw the readiness of your men. What did they expect to accomplish with their sticks? They were useless until we armed them with long knives. Had the soldiers not arrived when they did, Chief, I doubt there'd be much left of Edge today. Now tell me, Curglaff, how close to your home did the Guarders

come?”

The chief knew where the major was going with this, but he had no other answer than, “Two roads away,” he scowled.

The major sat back in his chair. “How many villagers died as a result of the raids?”

“None directly, but . . . Rector Densal and his wife were counted as related losses,” the chief admitted.

“You may not be aware, Chief, but Tabbit Densal was my only blood relative in Edge, besides my children. But you are aware that I killed the Guarder that entered their home.”

The chief’s jaw shifted slightly. He wasn’t going to give up just yet. “And it

w a s *fortunate* you arrived when you did, wasn't it Major? How opportune that you knew where to go and when."

The major ignored his implication. "The Guarders also visited *my* home, Chief."

Curglaff was prepared. "Yes, and you had two soldiers waiting and ready."

"No," the major said evenly, "I had three. One was in the house. It's my prerogative to guard my family."

He reached to the table behind him filled with files and books, and pulled out a thick stack of tightly bound papers. He tossed it casually on the desk.

"New directives from Idumea,

issued last season by the Command Board. The commanding officer of the fort may assign a soldier to protect each member of his family in time of crisis. Actually, the wording is quite a bit longer, but that's the condensed version. You're welcome to read it. Page 39. Excellent reading for those nights when sleep is elusive." He pushed the directive toward the chief in challenge.

The chief only nodded curtly at it.

"They also attacked the house next to my mother-in-law's," the major continued. "I admit I, too, find that a *convenient* coincidence. Or perhaps it was a sloppy case of mistaken identity. Both houses are of similar design and use the same gardener." His voice grew

agitated. “So considering the violence with which the Guarders attacked, had we not been prepared, I may not have any family left! How convenient would that be for the commander of Edge?!”

The magistrate and chief shifted uncomfortably in their chairs as the major slowly rose out of his seat to lean across the desk. With his face dangerously close to theirs he said, “Chief Curglaff, Magistrate, if any man in Edge has reason to suspect the raid was ‘convenient,’ it would be me!”

The magistrate took the bitter tone of the major’s voice, and the fact that he was on his feet, as an invitation to stand up as well. Wetness immediately formed

on his forehead.

Chief Curglaff reluctantly joined the magistrate and folded his arms.

The major stood up tall and straightened his jacket with a forceful jerk. “Anything else, gentlemen?” he asked quietly, suggesting they would regret saying yes.

The magistrate simply couldn’t abide disharmony. “You understand, Major Shin, this wasn’t *our* accusation, it’s merely something we’ve heard. And in Edge, you know we strive for a united citizenry—”

If Cockalorum broke out his ‘Unity in Edge’ campaign speech, Perrin was going to punch him.

And no one would mind.

"—We wanted you to be aware of the accusation yourself, Major, so you can deal with it in your usual effective, no-nonsense approach. Ah, I have it! Another debate. We could schedule . . ."

With both the chief and the major glaring at him it was a wonder Cockalorum didn't collapse on the spot. He just coughed politely and nervously folded his dabbing handkerchief.

Chief Curglaff cleared his throat, his tanned face tightening again. "One more thing, Major." His tone was cold and calculated. "Consider, *for one moment*, that the young soldier who frequents your home—your selected favorite—also was the first to see

twenty Guarders come out of the forest. According to *my* investigation," Curglaff emphasized, as if it mattered, "he sent his companion back for help while he went on the chase. The Guarders were on foot. He was on horseback. He didn't catch up to them until the Guarders went their separate ways at the village borders. That could be considered 'convenient'."

"Corporal Zenos was severely injured. Even my wife's mother witnessed that," the major said just as icily.

The chief nodded. "Of course she did. How *fortunate*. I saw him too. But he also seemed quite jovial as I passed him on my way up here. Amazing

recovery for such a traumatic head injury. He'd appeared to be near death only three weeks ago. But appearances, being what they are—"

Major Shin's eyes flashed like lightning. The air around him was charged like a thunderstorm. But his voice remained in control.

Barely.

"Chief Curglaff, I trust Corporal Shem Zenos as much as I trust you. I leave it up to you to decide just what that means." Major Shin took a step towards the door. "Lieutenant!"

The door flung open and his lieutenant stood ready with a small but smug smile.

"Will you please see that our guests find their way out of the fort? And incidentally, *gentlemen*," Major Shin didn't mean that title and he made sure his tone reflected that, "later today you'll both receive a report concerning our plans to secure the village. In the next few weeks soldiers will be visiting each home to find out the names and ages of the occupants. We'll also implement a labeling system for each home, shop, field, and open hot spring. The next time there's trouble, and the word comes that Chief Curglaff's home's under attack, I want my soldiers to know exactly where to go to rescue his wife and thirteen year-old son. Unless . . . you have any

objections?”

Curglaff squinted when Shin mentioned his son, but Cockalorum saw his opening.

“An excellent idea, Major!” he beamed. “It would be like a map? May I have a copy? I imagine the chief would appreciate one as well. Marvelous idea.”

Chief Curglaff glared at the major, but it was the hollow glare of a man who used to know where he stood in the world, but lately had to acknowledge it was all shaky ground. He pushed past the magistrate and lieutenant.

“I can find my own way out. Good day!” he said without meaning it, and he was down the stairs.

The magistrate smiled his best smile practiced for such occasions, took the major by the hand and pumped it a bit too eagerly. “Glad to see all is worked out. I look forward to your report!” and he followed after the chief, wiping his forehead as he went.

When their steps left the stairwell, Shin said, “Lieutenant, in here.”

Karna closed the door behind him and stood in front of the major.

“Brillen, what do you think?” Major Shin asked.

“I think it was wise of you to ‘keep forgetting’ to have those two holes in the walls repaired,” Karna smiled. “Place that chair just right, I can hear

everything. The purple banner of Edge your mother-in-law stitched hides them quite nicely, doesn't it?"

Then, more seriously, he added in a low voice, "Major, I can't believe a word of what they suggested. Yes, there are coincidences, but that doesn't mean anything. Who'd betray you and target your family? And why?"

That's what Perrin had been wondering for the past ten minutes.

No, actually for the past three weeks.

Dozens of houses were hit, but that two of the houses belonged to his family, and a third was right next door to his mother-in-law, had seemed blatant. No other houses near them had been raided

by the approximately sixty Guarders.

He could put together enough reasons of 'why.' He was the commander of Edge, after all, and hitting him would send a clear message about the Guarders' knowledge of the village.

But it was the question of 'who' was sending that message that gnawed at him.

And old familiar suspicion rose up in his mind, cold and dark. Perhaps this was why it had been there since the beginning, demanding that he reconsider his feelings about a certain young soldier.

"Karna, get me Zenos. NOW!"

A few minutes later Corporal Zenos bounded up the stairs two at a time and knocked lightly on the major's door.

"Come in!"

Zenos opened the door and leaned in casually. His happy blue eyes sparkled. "You wanted to see me, sir? Any messages I can deliver?"

"At attention, Zenos!" the major barked.

The corporal's face went gray and immediately he stood stiffly.

Major Shin stood up and walked behind him to slam the door shut. He positioned himself to stare at Zenos from

the side.

Zenos swallowed nervously and Shin waited until the corporal began to sweat under his gaze.

Quietly Shin spoke. “I’ve just had two visitors, Corporal, who made some very serious allegations.”

“Yes sir?” Zenos said, trying unsuccessfully to hide his worry.

“There have been rumors in the village that perhaps the raids were assisted by someone *inside* Edge.”

Zenos said nothing.

“Do you have any insight into those allegations, soldier?”

“No sir! I can’t imagine who would do such a thing, sir.”

“Corporal Zenos, your name has

been connected to the raids."

That drew a response. Zenos turned sharply to face Major Shin, forgetting all about attention and protocol and his position. "Sir! Never! I'd give my life for you, for Jaytsy, for Peto, for Mahrree __"

"THAT'S *MRS. SHIN* TO YOU!" the major bellowed in his face.

Zenos abruptly went back to standing at attention. But his face wouldn't obey. His eyes grew wet and his smooth chin trembled. "I would give my life for Mrs. Shin, sir. And even her mother. All I do is to save lives, sir."

"Corporal Zenos," the major's voice was menacingly unemotional,

“there were three groups of Guarders that left the forest that night. You noticed the first one, approximately twenty, by *your* count, who ran on foot. You were on horseback, yet didn’t catch up to them until the village, where you *abandoned* your horse and pursued on foot. Why?”

Zenos’s jaw shifted. “I was watching for the different directions they went, Major Shin. So I could report their progress to the other soldiers. And I did, sir. Remember, I told you that I reported the movements to the soldiers coming home from your debate before I followed the intruders to the Arky house. So that the other soldiers could be in pursuit as well. Sir.” He swallowed hard again.

“There’s something else that has troubled me, Zenos,” Major Shin said, maintaining his glare. “When you were in the Arky home you didn’t draw your sword. Three witnesses said you fought the Guarder, but you didn’t use any weapon. Why is that, soldier?”

“All I do is to save lives, sir,” he repeated.

“That’s not good enough!” the major yelled. “Being in the army means *taking* lives when necessary, Corporal! You’ve been trained, you were in a deadly situation wherein you nearly lost your life. There was a very real possibility that the intruder could have taken the lives of three Edge citizens

because YOU failed to do your DUTY! Two other soldiers had to complete the job you refused to do. Why did you refuse to do it, Zenos?!"

Zenos couldn't answer. He gulped and shook his head.

The major considered him for a moment. Zenos had remarkable access to Edge. His natural charm and cheerful face seemed to get him anywhere, even in the butcher's before it opened and the bakery after it closed.

Even into the very home of the commanding officer of Edge, unsupervised, and with completely unrestricted access.

The major scolded himself for such carelessness, such unmitigated trust in

someone barely older than a boy. The major half closed his eyes when he considered how often he had left his own children in Zenos's care. How often he sent him to his wife, alone. He'd had his suspicions, but he'd decided to ignore them because he *liked* the boy. He had trusted his family *completely* in the hands of . . .

Shin shook his head slightly. "Corporal Shem Zenos, I expect an honest answer: Are you a Guarder?"

The answer was swift and loud, "No sir!"

"Corporal Shem Zenos, where is the spy you used to feed in the forest?!"

"Gone, sir! Three seasons ago.

Remember, sir, we both looked for him. I haven't seen him since, sir!"

"Corporal Shem Zenos, are you that Guarder spy?!" Shin yelled.

"No sir!" Zenos shouted louder.

"Corporal Shem Zenos, *can you prove it*?!" Shin bellowed in his face.

Zenos's breathing became more shallow and rapid. A disobedient tear slipped down his cheek. "I . . . I don't know how to, sir!"

"You could have proved it by drawing your sword!" Major Shin stared at him until Zenos began to tremble. "Or were you afraid of hurting one of *your friends?*"

Zenos quaked. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Granted."

Zenos's eyes darted to see his accuser, but the rest of his body continued to face forward. "I can't prove anything to you. All I can say is, you *must* have faith in me. Sir, have I ever, *ever* done anything you couldn't trust?"

"No, Zenos, you haven't," the major admitted. "But I want further proof!"

Zenos slowly shook his head. "I have nothing to offer. But sir, there's one way for you to know. Ask the Creator. He can tell you if I should be trusted. And sir, if I may be so bold, I believe He already has."

"That is too bold, Zenos!" Major Shin shouted.

The tension was so thick even a sword didn't have a chance to ding it. The air sat heavily around the two men, threatening to swallow them.

"And so what's the answer, sir?" Zenos asked courageously.

"You *are* brash, soldier!" Shin shouted.

The major growled under his breath in aggravation. Neither spoke for several moments as the air in the command office squeezed them.

Shin stared at Zenos.

Zenos stared straight ahead and trembled.

Perrin couldn't fight the feeling anymore. How it came to him, he wasn't

entirely sure, but it was everything that was Hogal Densal, and it was something he'd heard before.

My boy, trust this boy.

The words came with softness and warmth. Perrin's suspicions, in contrast, always came in cold darkness. Those suspicions, he realized now, came from someone *other* than the Creator. But Perrin could always trust Hogal, who suddenly seemed so close that Perrin could almost feel his eyebrows waggling in encouragement.

In a voice barely above a whisper Perrin said, "Zenos, sometimes I think you are the only man I *can* trust. I wished I knew why."

"Thank you, sir!" Zenos exhaled in

relief, his shoulders sagging as he forgot about standing at attention. "You can, sir, with anything."

"Then, *Shem*," Perrin asked quietly, "why didn't you draw your sword?"

Zenos's face contorted. "I'm sorry, sir. The truth is, I didn't want to. I never believed in taking a life. I was sure I could stop him some other way. But sir, I've never encountered someone so violent before. I misjudged the danger." He firmed his stance. "It won't happen again, sir. I see now too much is at stake. In the future I'll draw my sword, and even use it."

"Shem," Perrin said gently, "you don't have to kill the man. Only disable

him. Give him something to remember you by."

"Yes, sir. I'll remember that, sir."

Major Shin moved over to sit at his desk. He gestured to the chair across from him and Zenos sat down, looking ill and pale.

In a barely audible voice Perrin said, "I'm sorry, Shem. I had to eliminate the idea. I know you're not a spy, but I had to be sure."

"I understand, sir," Shem's trembling diminished to a minor tremor. "Sir, is there really someone *here* targeting your family?"

"I don't know," the major sighed. "I have so many questions. They knew which houses contained my family,

almost as if they had a map. But when we can't capture any Guarders alive to interrogate, we get no answers. Rather efficient process they have—commit suicide before questioning. Almost admirable if it weren't so depraved . . ."

Major Shin sat thinking about that for so long that the corporal became visibly uncomfortable.

"Hmm," the major finally broke the silence. "Zenos, can you do something for me?"

"Yes sir, anything!"

"Would you deliver a message to my home?" Major Shin began to smile.

Zenos burst into a relieved grin. "I live to serve, sir!"

“Just tell her the storm has yet to pass, to keep her eye on the horizon and watch the color of the sky. She’ll know what it means. Then you take a thorough look around the area, to appease me, and report back.”

Zenos nodded and stood up to leave.

“And Zenos,” the major added, “I’m going to tell her that you called her by her first name. I may require an explanation about that later.”

Zenos grinned. “Yes sir!”

Perrin sat back in his chair as Shem closed the door.

“So Hogal,” he whispered to the room, “who wants to destroy my family?

I could really use your insight right about now.”

His office answered him nothing.

Mahrree watched Shem walk up the alley and back down again for the fifth time, after he circled the house four times. She’d kept track of his patrolling as she cleaned up her children’s efforts to rearrange every item in the house located waist-high and lower. There were no creatures in the world quite so good at hiding things as toddlers. Mahrree was just replacing in the kitchen a pair of tongs—scrubbed clean

—that she found in the washing room behind the privy, when she spotted Shem again from her window. He didn't notice her watching him, but when she stepped out on to the back porch, he glanced over and nodded formally.

"Corporal," she waved him over.

He shook his head.

Mahrree put her hands on her waist and raised her eyebrows in reprimand.

The corporal sighed and hopped over the fence. Barker came out of his house to greet him, and Shem petted him on the head half-heartedly. Slowly he walked up to the back porch.

"Ma'am?"

Mahrree rolled her eyes. "Something's up besides a *storm report*.

You're going to talk. Now get in here, *Shem!*"

She didn't know why he looked so gray as he obediently walked into the house and went to the gathering room, but she had a suspicion. The surgeon had declared him fit for duty only a few days ago, but Mahrree thought the surgeon would clear a dying man too, simply to improve his turnaround numbers.

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked, reaching up to gently touch the healing scar at his hairline. "It's too soon for you to be patrolling again, I know it. You look terrible."

Corporal Zenos tensed at her touch. He shook his head slightly and stood at

attention. “I’m fine, ma’am.”

“Oh, stop that!” she smacked his arm. “We’re alone. Even the children are napping. Now, what have I told you? You’ve been doing it so well, too. No one’s around. Come on, Shem, you can do it.”

“Sorry . . . *Mahrree*.” He winced as he said her first name.

She nodded and grinned. “Much better. See? That’s not so hard. Now, what’s going on? My little brother doesn’t keep secrets from me now, does he?”

Shem exhaled and relaxed his stance. “Um, your husband . . . he, uh . . . thought I was . . .”

Mahrree took his arm. “Perrin

thought what, Shem?"

He shuddered. "Do you have *any idea* how frightening he can be, Mahrree?"

She smiled in sympathy. She knew more than anyone. "A bit, yes. He's been rather bear-like for the past few weeks. The children and I have been staying well out of his way."

"Someone told him someone in Edge was behind the attacks," Shem blurted. "And the first person he questioned was me!"

Mahrree's mouth dropped open in shock. "No! How dare he?! Why, why, *you* of all people? You . . . you're here all the time! You take care of our

children! You even come for dinner and sit with us at the congregational meetings! You're our favorite soldier __"

She stopped, but kept her hand on his arm.

"Which, if you *were* a spy, *would* give you remarkable access and knowledge about our family." She looked at the floor, lost in thought. "Hmm."

Shem made a choking noise in his throat. "But I'm not one of *them!* Please, Mahrree!"

She snapped out of her thoughts. "Oh, Shem—of course you aren't! I just can see how someone might *think* that. No, no . . . you're *Uncle Shem!*" She

gave him a one-armed hug and pushed him gently to sit down on the sofa.

"He scared me near to death, Mahrree," he stared at the wall as he remembered it. "He apologized afterwards, but I've never seen his eyes so hard. I don't think he entirely believed me."

Mahrree sat next to him. "Ever since he lost Hogal and Tabbit he hasn't quite been himself. Give him some time."

Shem nodded. "I miss them, too. Rector Densal had a great way of explaining things. In fact, there are a few things I wished I could ask him about."

Mahrree patted his shoulder.

“Hogal really liked you, you know. He wanted us to keep you close. Told us several times that you were a most exceptional young man.”

Shem turned pink. “That’s only because I’m the only other soldier in the entire fort that went on Holy Days.”

“It was much more than that, Shem. Don’t worry too much about Perrin. I think once he sets his new plans in motion, he’ll become easier again. He’s taking all of this very personally and snapping at everyone.”

He’d even barked at Barker, which amazed Mahrree, but only made the black beast blink.

Shem nodded. “That’s what Lieutenant Karna told me, after. That

even Cockalorum and Curglaff said the attacks were ‘convenient’ for the major.”

Mahrree cringed. And she was just beginning to hope he was softening again. “Oh, he’s not going to be much fun tonight. I was thinking of having you over for dinner,” she patted his leg, “but __”

“I’m on duty until midnight, anyway.” He stood up abruptly, pushing her hand away. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be doing this, sitting and talking with you *like this*. I’m on duty right now!”

The poor boy, Mahrree thought. Perrin really had him shaken.

“Part of your duty is informing me

of what's going on at the fort, especially with my husband!" Mahrree winked at him. "You *are* a spy, and with more than one commander. Don't you realize that?"

Shem turned pink again. "Yes, I'm *well* aware of that, ma'am. Mahrree," he corrected himself.

"Tomorrow night then, Shem. You come over for dinner. I don't want you going home for leave without the two of you on better terms. He's only doing his duty—it's not about you. Tomorrow he'll be better. If not," she bobbed her head back and forth, "I'll let you know."

Corporal Zenos took a more formal stance. "Yes, ma'am! I best get back to the fort. This house is secure. I'll make my report to the major." Shem paled a

little at the thought.

Mahrree chuckled. “Chin up, soldier! You’re a hero, remember?”

Shem looked positively wretched.

Chapter 14 ~ “Shem, I don’t know if you realize what you’re asking.”

The Administrator of Loyalty sat in his office late at night reading again. Gadiman’s office used more candles than the entire floor combined. Across

his desk came news from all over the world. And there was no better way to spend his days, evenings, and nights than making sure he was aware of every incident in Idumea and beyond. Nothing could be more important.

His wife never understood that, and now he was no longer burdened with trying to make her understand. In fact, he wasn't entirely sure exactly when she left. He noticed a few weeks ago that the shelves were getting dusty and bare of food, the dishes overflowing in the basin hadn't been washed, and that his house had been pleasantly silent for at least a moon's full phase, maybe even two.

He turned the pages of the file secretly retrieved from the garrison after

the High General of Idumea had left for the evening. The full report contained the details of each of the raids and the aftermath. Now every village without a fort was clamoring for increased speed in constructing theirs, and those with forts wanted reinforcements. The three villages targeted would receive fifty more men, and the other forts an additional twenty-five until recruitment numbers could be increased. And now, Chairman Mal—*and* General Relf Shin—were receiving stacks of letters from citizens praising their "forward thinking" in giving so much power to the commanders.

Gadiman seethed.

It was his idea! All of it!

Well, *most* of it, about giving more power to the commanders.

But he told it to Mal, and Mal shared *his* idea with that worm of a man, Doctor Brisack. Brisack didn't deserve to have that other chair! He didn't deserve to be Mal's left hand. That was Gadiman's position!

But since Gadiman was only a *law assessor*, not some heady scientist who conducted experiments with grass and bark and sulfur, he wasn't "good enough."

Oh, he was *good enough* to judge the loyalty of the world, to identify which citizens were getting just a bit full

of themselves and needed to be knocked down a notch or two. Mal depended heavily on his reports, but still Brisack sat in *his* chair. How much longer would Mal put up with him?

Gadiman quickly—but precisely—jotted down numbers and names and locations for his own comprehensive report. So many dead, and not the correct ones. If Gadiman had been in charge, there'd be no Shins left alive! He would've seen to that.

Brisack, what did he do? Gave vague messages, obscure suggestions, and hoped everyone did everything right. He couldn't even make contact with their so-called Quiet Man. In the last three incidents, Shin wasn't hurt beyond a

scratch on his back.

That was Brisack's failure. And Gadiman was keeping track of all the *good doctor's* failures. Every last number and detail.

Gadiman wouldn't fail.

He knew precisely what to do, and that lieutenant he was training was hungry enough to follow Gadiman's every command. *He* could pull this off. He'd succeed where the others failed.

Gadiman only had to wait for Mal to finally be fed up. And he would be, probably by tomorrow. And then the Administrator of Loyalty would demonstrate his immense loyalty by presenting the ultimate plan for

destroying Shin.

Whichever Shin Mal wanted destroyed.

"Finally!" a large man in dark mottled green and brown clothing breathed as he saw the lone figure walking up to the hot spring. He rushed over to the young soldier and embraced him. "You have no idea the worry you've caused."

The young man chuckled and sat down on the log. "Nice to see you again too! I *am* sorry, but I haven't been able to leave before now."

“Understandable.” His companion sat next to him. “We had assurances you would recover, but still—” He took the corporal’s head and looked at the scar healing on his forehead. “I suppose that’s the best they could do. At least it’s at the hairline.”

“So it won’t ruin my boyish good looks?” the young man grinned.

The large man shook his head. “No, no you haven’t changed a bit. Feeling all right?”

He sighed. “Yes. Bit of a difficult day with Major Shin, but I think we’ll come out of it all right.”

“So you still want to continue? We can pull you out—”

“No, absolutely not!” he said. “There’s nowhere I want to be more than here. I’m making excellent progress with the family. It’s almost like they’re mine. My second home,” he added quietly.

The large man eyed him closely. “Some may not be happy to hear that, Shem.”

He nodded apologetically. “I know. Phrase it however you need to. Just let them know I have no intentions of leaving. Certainly not now.”

The large man nodded. “Still going to return on your leave that’s coming up? Are you up to it?”

Zenos nodded. “Yes, I’ll be up to travelling. I’ve been thinking a great

deal about everything and I need to ask a question."

"Hifadhi will be expecting you."

Barker's head snapped up late that night, and he ran to the fence by the alley, his tail wagging so wildly it slapped the fence.

"Missed you too, boy," the man in the black jacket chuckled quietly, tossing him a large piece of bacon. "I've got extra tonight. Now, up, up, up!"

Barker immediately stood up and put his paws on top of the fence.

It was going to be a good night.

Chairman Mal looked up from his desk in his mansion. The young officer he sent for stood at attention in the doorway. “Sit, Heth.”

The lieutenant sat down at a nearby chair. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Yes,” Mal said. “You’ve read the report?”

“I’m assuming that was your third test of Shin, correct?”

Mal nodded once.

“And it seems he passed it?”

Mal folded his hands on the desk.

“Which wasn’t exactly what you

were hoping for," Heth said with a small smile that wanted to be a snigger, but he held it in. "Which means . . . I get my chance, don't I?"

"Lieutenant, I've been thinking, and I realize I'm coming at this from the wrong angle," he said with detached analysis.

But he couldn't keep it up.

"I want to see Major Shin brought to his knees!" he snarled. "I want him struck so close to home that he feels threatened even in his own bedroom! I want to prove to him he can crumble like everyone else! And I want *you* to be the one who gets revenge on the Shin family for what they've done to you and your family!"

"With pleasure, sir!" Heth said proudly. "Just tell me what to do."

"Apparently Gadiman has a plan, and is anxious to prove his worth to me," the Chairman said, rubbing his hands. "Brisack has his own plan, but I'm assuming it will fail as everything else has. We have an insider, but so far he's been *too* quiet and hasn't contacted us. So you and Gadiman have the backup plan. Realize this is not only a test of Shin, but of you and Gadiman. You pass this test, you'll both be in most enviable positions."

"Sir, was that an '*if* we pass this test,' or a '*when* we pass this test'?"

"It better be a '*when*', Lieutenant.

An '*if*' will see you sharing the same grave as old Master Sergeant Wiles."

Tuma Hifadhi sat at his desk looking out the window, watching for the horse and rider to arrive. When they did, he smiled and stood up to begin his slow shuffle out to the main room. The front door opened a moment later and the young man beamed when he saw the old man.

"Sir!"

Hifadhi smiled at his army greeting. "Come here!" he said holding out his arms. "Let me see that head, Shem!"

Shem grinned and walked over to him. Hifadhi caught him in a quick embrace, then pushed him gently to sit down on a chair. Shem sat obediently as Hifadhi brushed back his hairline and looked at the scar. He pressed carefully, but Shem flinched.

"Sorry, son," Hifadhi said. "Seems you'll have an indentation there for the rest of your life."

Shem nodded. "That's the same conclusion the doctor, my father, my sister, and everyone else who has pushed on that spot came to."

Hifadhi chuckled and sat down in a chair next to him. "So good to see you again! I must say, that was a close call."

Shem shook his head and smiled. “I was fine, sir. Always was! Sir, I have something to ask.”

“Oh?”

Shem swallowed hard and licked his lips. “Sir, I want to ask permission to . . . go back.”

Hifadhi nodded. “You still have about eight moons—”

“No sir,” Shem interrupted. “I mean, go back *indefinitely*.”

Hifadhi sat back and sighed. “Shem, you know we allow for only a two year commitment—”

Shem leaned forward and took the old man’s hands. “Sir, please—this is different. I *must* stay with the Shin

family!”

Hifadhi looked at him hard. “I read the report. You said they’re like your own now?”

Shem shrugged and looked at his feet.

“Anything *else* I should know about?” Hifadhi asked leadingly.

“Sir, I . . . I feel a great need to stay with them.”

“For how long, Shem?”

“For as long as it takes,” he said simply.

Hifadhi raised his eyebrows. “Shem, I don’t know if you realize what you’re asking. ‘As long it takes’? None of us knows how long that is.”

Shem looked back up at him. “Sir,

this is my life. It *needs* to be my life—”

Hifadhi held up a hand. “We keep the commitments to only two years for a good reason. After that, people tend to lose their perspective. The possibility that they begin to drift to the other side —”

Shem stood up. “I won’t do that!” he insisted. “I’m strong enough! Please, make an exception in my case.”

Hifadhi raised his hand again. “How can you be so sure you won’t be like others, Shem Zenos?” His voice was still quiet, but his tone was firm. “Do you realize what would happen if you forget your purpose?”

Shem nodded, now much more in

control of his emotions. “I do, sir. I also know what might happen to the Shin family if I’m *not* there. They need me. And, to be honest, I need them.” He kneeled down in front of the old man. “Nothing’s more important than this family.”

Hifadhi’s normally kind eyes squinted into something far more penetrating and severe. “To *you*, Shem?”

“Yes, I’ll confess—to *me*, sir.” He met Hifadhi’s sharp gaze. “But also to *all* of us. I know the balance that must be maintained. I have incredible access to the family and their home. I can keep myself separate, and I *am* keeping my perspective. I can *do* this, sir. Have I done anything to lose your confidence

yet?”

Hifadhi shook his head slowly. “No, Shem. You’ve been exemplary.” He sighed. “We’ve been discussing your unique situation at length. Consider, we could send someone in with you for a time, then—”

“No! No one else. It’s too risky. Please, let me stay. Until . . .” his voice dropped off.

“Until when, Shem?”

Shem shrugged. “The end?”

Hifadhi watched him for a moment. He stared deep into his eyes and saw what he wanted to see.

But he said, “You’d have to keep a low profile, and your name quiet. Make

no lasting connections with anyone else. Become as anonymous as possible. Avoid drawing attention to yourself . . . We've had some in the past struggle to keep quiet," Hifadhi told him sternly, "and put themselves *and others* in great peril, even once drawing the attention of the Administrator of Loyalty—"

"I know, sir," Shem said, his anxious eyes so pleading they could have made a puppy seem hostile. "But, please?"

Hifadhi couldn't torment him any longer.

"Shem Zenos, if it were any other man than you, I wouldn't be saying this: Tell your father I'm sorry, then tell Major Shin you'll re-sign, long term.

You've decided the army is your career."

Shem leaped to his feet. "YES!"

Hifadhi put a finger in his ear and wiggled it dramatically. "I know I'm old, but my hearing is still sharp . . . or it was."

Shem looked at him apologetically. "I'm sorry, sir, I just—"

Hifadhi grinned. "I know, I know. And actually, that was the response I was hoping to see. It *is* the correct decision, Shem. I'm glad I see it's what you really want as well."

Shem nodded, then his face fell. "I just realized—I have to tell my father now."

Hifadhi nodded slowly.

"Sir? Would *you* consider . . ."

"Telling your father?"

"Yes!" Shem smiled.

"No!" Hifadhi smiled back.

Shem's mouth dropped open. "Why not?"

"If you can survive a Guarder attack, surely you can survive your father's response to your news."

A week later, on the 7th Day of Harvest, Corporal Zenos and Private Aims had finished their rounds of Edge and were starting back to the fort in the

afternoon when Aims kept turning around.

"We're being followed," he whispered to Zenos.

"Just figured that out, did you?" Shem smirked. "He's been following us for nearly ten minutes now. I come off of leave and already it begins . . ."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Wondering how long it would take for you to notice!" Zenos grinned.

Aims glanced back again, not too subtly. "It's annoying."

"No, it's called hero worship," Zenos said. "Unless you don't want to be a hero, then—"

"Well, it's dangerous then!" Aims scowled. "He shouldn't be tailing us like

that, jumping from bush to bush. If there was a real threat, he could be in trouble."

"I agree," Zenos nodded. "So follow my lead."

Zenos walked on for a few steps then stopped abruptly, grabbed Aims's arm, dramatically pointed down a road, and took off running down a back alley. Aims followed, sniggering as they went. Zenos cut to the right and ducked behind a shed, and Ames followed him.

Then they waited.

Only seconds later their follower caught up, looking wildly around him.

Zenos burst out from behind the shed, wrapped one on his arms around

their tailer, and put another in front of his mouth. He picked him up and dragged the flailing hostage behind the shed. There he plopped him on the ground.

"Qualipoe Hili! What in the world do you think you're doing?" Shem demanded of the ten-year-old who stared up at him with terrified eyes.

"Come on, Zenos! What was that all about? Scared me nearly to death. Almost wet my trousers!"

"Almost?" Aims squinted, staring at Poe's legs.

Poe scrambled back to his feet and brushed his blue silk shirt free of debris. "Making me into a mess—"

Shem grabbed his arm. "Answer

me, Hili—what're you doing?"

"Just . . . just wanting to see what you were doing," Poe sighed.

Shem released him. "Playing soldier?"

"Not playing—*planning*. I want to join up!" Poe declared.

"You're still a bit young, you know."

"I know," Poe shrugged. "It's just that . . ."

"Just what, Poe?"

"Not much fun around here," he mumbled.

"Edge of Idumea Estates? Or your new After School Care?"

Poe nodded sadly. "No soldiers.

No Terryp. Only . . . work."

Shem put his arm around Poe. "Well, we miss you too. It's not the same without you at the Shins."

"Miss Mahrree's was the funnest," Poe whispered.

"You know, you can still come by to visit," Shem suggested.

Poe shook his head. "My mother won't let me go north of the village green. She's afraid of Guarders."

"Ah," Shem nodded. "And so the Shins' home is . . ."

"Off limits," he murmured and blinked back tears.

Shem knew how tough future soldiers all of 10 years old are, but still he hugged him—in a manly sort of way,

of course.

"I'm so sorry, Poe. Maybe . . . maybe I can do something about that. I have connections, you know."

"My mother doesn't like soldiers, either," he whispered. "Sorry."

"Have you told her you want to join up when you're older?"

Poe scoffed. "Are you kidding? She'd make me wash my own silk!"

Shem was about to suggest that perhaps Poe tell her anyway, because ruining his silk shirts wasn't exactly a punishment, but Aims rolled his eyes impatiently. "Zenos, we need to be getting back."

"I've always got a few minutes for

Poe Hili." Shem squatted to look Poe in his dark brown eyes. "I'll find a way for you to visit Mrs. Shin again. I know *people*. There's that meeting tonight everyone's supposed to go to. You can try running into the Shins there. And whenever I'm patrolling in Edge of Idumea, I'll try to come by and throw a rock at you."

Poe smiled dubiously and nodded. "Thanks, Zenos."

That night Corporal Shem Zenos did his best to stand at attention, but he knew everyone was looking at him, and

it made his skin crawl. His palms sweat. His stomach clench. His tongue thicken. Every time he looked up at the packed amphitheater he wished he could be swallowed up by a cavern in the forest. If only they would quit *smiling* at him.

And winking.

There she was again, Shem sighed. Even after seasons of ignoring her, Sareen was still persistent. Teeria had given up long ago, and was now in Mountseen at college and doing something productive with her life. But Sareen—the girl just couldn't take a hint. He rarely looked at her, but every week at the Shins she kept looking at him. And winking. And giggling. And now, *everyone* was looking at him.

Just get it over with . . . just get it over with.

But Magistrate Cockalorum kept droning on and on about the remarkable skill of the soldiers five weeks ago, the dedication of the major, the unity of Edge . . .

Zenos wasn't even standing on the platform yet—only in front with several other soldiers acting needlessly as guards that night—but he wondered if he wouldn't crumble under the pressure before he got up there. He decided to focus instead on the magistrate's words.

That was a bad idea.

" . . . but all of that wouldn't have happened if it weren't for the bravery,

the presence of mind, and the determination of the soldier who noticed the Guarders first, observed which directions they ran, warned the other soldiers, then headed off by himself to the Arky home where he single-handedly prevented the Guarder from doing more damage than they did. And then, with a serious head injury, he stumbled his way to the village green. For his outstanding efforts of the night of the raid, we proclaim as hero of Edge—and although he's not from here, we're going to claim him as our own—Corporal Shem Zenos! Come up here, son!"

The applause was far louder than Shem expected. With his head down to inspect the stairs, he plodded up them to

stand next to the magistrate.

"Look at him, ladies! Can hardly see where he was injured, can you now? And he's single and twenty-one!"

Now there was laughter along with the applause. Shem kept his head down, until he felt a large presence next to him.

Major Shin put a hand on his shoulder and placed his thumb at the base of Shem's neck. He applied just the right amount of pressure to make Shem lift his head up to reduce the sharp pinch in his neck.

"Smile and wave, Corporal," Shin muttered good-naturedly into his ear.

Shem smiled feebly at the audience. They applauded louder.

“I said *wave*, soldier!”

Shem raised his hand half-heartedly and gave a little wave.

A row of girls eagerly waved back and giggled.

“That was *pitiful*, Shem!” Shin hissed, but amused. “Now count to five, then go sit back down. Count *slowly*.”

Shem kept his plastered smile on his face as he counted, until he felt the major’s hand release him. Shem nodded to the crowd, then started to bound back down the stairs, almost forgetting to shake the hand of the magistrate before doing so.

Mrs. Shin was chuckling at his embarrassment as he reached the bottom

of the stairs, and she gestured for him to sit next to her. He gladly went up the aisle, picked up Jaytsy from the bench, and sat down with her on his lap. He hid behind the toddler as the applause began to die away.

Finally he could breathe again. Cockalorum started droning on again, but Shem wasn't listening.

"So," Mahrree leaned over to whisper in his ear, "did you ever imagine you'd become the claimed Hero of Edge? You realize they put off this Heroes Celebration until you returned from your leave."

Shem shook his head miserably.

"You just love attention, don't you?" Mahrree nudged him. "Wonder

what your father will think? What your friends might think!"

"I promise you," he whispered back, "no one where I'm from would *ever* have imagined this!"

She patted his back and chuckled.

Shem exhaled and closed his eyes.

This wasn't exactly the best way to keep a low profile or remain anonymous.

Barker knew what to do, and he was a most obedient dog, especially when bacon was involved. With his tail wagging he trotted over to the back fence

and sat obediently before the man in the dark jacket who stood on the other side in the alley. He was hidden by the shadows from the overhanging tree and practically melted into the night.

"Well done, well done," the man said softly. "Up, up, up," he commanded.

Barker put one heavy paw on top of the fence, and then the other. It was getting his back paw in the correct spot which caused him to scratch the fence repeatedly until he finally found the gap between the boards.

"Well done, well done," the man repeated. "Up, up up."

Barker strained and lifted and heaved, finally pulling himself over the low fence that stood between him and

freedom. With a weighty splat he made it to the other side of the fence.

"Well done. End down," the man said, but Barker was already sitting, anticipating the command.

The man chuckled softly and scratched him behind the ears. "Yes, you deserve a treat," he said quietly, pulling out a piece of dried beef and holding it in front of the dog's nose. "Jerky tonight. Hope you don't mind."

Barker didn't. He didn't even taste it as he gulped it down.

The man looked around slowly, watching the end of the road in the east, then across the way to the west until he felt confident all was quiet. He

readjusted the dark floppy felt hat with the wide brim that many villagers wore, even though there was no chance of rain or sunshine that he needed to block.

"Well done," he said to the dog, then turned to head east. "Alongside, alongside."

Barker immediately walked on the man's right side for his late night stroll, occasionally watering a bush that seemed in need of attention until the road intersected the alley.

"Alongside," the man commanded, and Barker dutifully kept to his side as they turned south onto another road. Amiably the man nodded to two soldiers on patrol, walking quietly on the opposite side of the road. He even

employed a friendly dog-wants-a-walk-again-in-the-middle-of-the-night-don't-you-know-it attitude in his step.

The soldiers nodded back. They didn't recognize the exact size and shape of the animal trotting alongside the man whom they also couldn't see under the shadows of the hat. Then again, that man had been seen walking his dog late at night before. The man softly whistled a mindless tune as Barker stopped to befoul a flower garden. His walker waved casually at the soldiers in a slightly embarrassed manner.

The soldiers continued on.

A moment later Barker and the man continued on towards the center of the

village. They turned down another alley and the man stopped. Barker stopped right next to him and sat automatically.

"Well done, well done. Now," the man said, crouching down and pointing, "Away from me," and he pushed Barker.

The dog immediately trotted in the pointed direction, going on without accompaniment. About a minute later the quietness of the air was punctuated by the sound of a squirrel being disturbed. Its high-pitched chipping stopped Barker in his tracks. He turned around and lumbered back to the man in the black jacket, whose ability to mimic animal sounds was uncanny.

"Well done, well done!" and Barker received another chunk of jerky,

which he choked on momentarily in his rush to swallow it whole.

"Don't you dare die on me—I've spent so much time training you. Best give you smaller bits, I suppose. A few more, all right? Then I'll leave you for the night. Now," he crouched down and pointed in another direction, "Away from me," and Barker performed perfectly again.

Thirty minutes later the man walked Barker, tired from his excursions, into another neighborhood and stopped in front of a large home at the Edge of Idumea Estates.

"This looks like the right one. Well done, well done. Halt. End down."

Barker sat in the front garden of the unfamiliar home.

“All down,” the man commanded, and Barker lay down.

“Remain.”

Barker put down his head, sighed, and closed his eyes.

“Well done, well done.” The man in the black jacket scratched behind Barker’s ears, then slipped into the night.

“OH!”

The woman’s loud and annoyed exclamation carried throughout the Edge

of Idumea Estates.

"What is *THAT?* A dead bear?!"

In the dim light before dawn it was hard to tell, especially since she was peering out of a crack in the door.

"It's Barker!" her son called cheerfully, pushing past her. He bounded out the front door and down into the garden.

"Poe, get away from that thing!"

"He's really gentle!" Poe called back as Barker lumbered to his feet, his whip-like tail wagging, and his jowls drooling in pleasure.

Mrs. Hili shuddered and grimaced when the dog licked her son. "Well, get rid of it!"

"So I can visit Mrs. Shin?! There's

no school today," he reminded her.

Mrs. Hili nodded quickly. "Yes, right now—before breakfast. Return that *thing* to the major! And don't mess your outfit—ew, is that drool on your shoulder?! I'm sending your clothes to the major for cleaning. And stay away from the soldiers! They're supposed to be swarming Edge today."

"But I like the soldiers." Poe laughed as Barker nuzzled him so powerfully the ten-year-old nearly lost his footing.

"For the life of me, I don't know why. If ever I saw you in a blue uniform, I'd just . . . just . . . For the love of silk, get that beast *off* of you, Poe!"

Poe pushed Barker down and started out to the road. “Come on, Barker!”

Barker only sat there.

“Barker, COME!” Poe commanded again. He shook his head, walked back to the dog, and pulled on the thick fur around his neck. “You still can’t learn any basic commands? ‘Come’ means, ‘follow me,’” he said, tugging on Barker’s neck.

The dog, feeling his stomach rumble, decided to see if the boy knew where he could find some bacon.

Chapter 15 ~ “Get To Know Your Friendly Soldiers Day?”

It was the morning of the 8th Day of Harvest as Mahrree stood behind her husband and put her arms around him. He was sitting in a chair eating his

breakfast so early in the morning that the children weren't yet up. Mahrree kissed his thick neck.

"No time for *arguing* this morning, Mrs. Shin," he said as he swallowed down his eggs.

Mahrree giggled. "Wasn't really planning on it. You realize that for the past five weeks you've been a complete bear, right?"

He grunted. "So that's why everyone within a ten mile radius has kept their distance?"

"A bear that's come out of hibernation—"

Mahrree she kissed his neck again, a strategy that usually mellowed him but didn't seem to have any effect this

morning. Instead, a vein bulged there and threatened to pop.

"—and sees the village as a beehive. Yes, you've been terrifying, my wonderful husband."

"That's because almost 5,000 people—I'll know the exact number later today—look to me to keep them secure." He inhaled nearly an entire slice of ham. "And the High General of Idumea has tasked me with improving the army and our defenses," he garbled formally as he chewed.

Mahrree sat down next to him. "And your new measures will do exactly that, Perrin. I have no doubt. You'll change the world with your innovations.

Your father will be very proud, and the Guarders will be very stunned."

He only grunted again as he gulped down the last of his breakfast. "Is there a purpose to this discussion?"

Mahrree sighed. "You're going out in public today. All of the soldiers. Get To Know Your Friendly Soldiers Day?"

"That's not the official title, Mahrree."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about. You need to *ease up* a bit."

He looked up from his breakfast and twisted to see her. "*Ease up?!*"

"Only a *bit*," she emphasized. "Perrin, this is going to succeed. All of your changes. Just . . . relax, a tiny bit." She put a hand on one of his broad

shoulders and massaged it. "You're so tense."

"Now's not the time for relaxing, Mahrree!" he said impatiently and stood up, shoving his chair behind him. "Remember to stay here until you're visited."

"But Perrin, I have a suggestion—"

He was already out the door.

"This *isn't* going to work," she muttered.

"Well," she said a moment later, "I better make sure it does."

She put on her cloak, went next door to ask Mrs. Hersh to sit at her house with the sleeping children until she returned, and headed up to the fort.

Only momentarily did she wonder where Barker was that morning, but he'd show up again sometime. He always did. Exactly how he got out of the yard each night, she didn't know. There were no holes under the fence, and the only other way would be to climb. But who ever heard of a climbing dog? She had far more important things on her mind that an undisciplined, impossible-to-train dog.

Perrin's plan was good. Excellent, actually, Mahrree thought proudly as she headed up the fort road in the cool, dark morning. Far up ahead she could barely make out her husband's bulky shape as he strode through the western gates of the fort. She still had several minutes

before she reached it, and maybe Perrin would have considered her suggestion.

Otherwise, he would not be happy at all to see her there.

Today was the first stage of his Plan Edge Awareness. He'd been working on it tirelessly day and night for weeks. Mahrree tried to help him as she could, but after she suggested he try her phrase reducing technique to avoid writing "Plan Edge Awareness" over and over, he quit taking her advice.

"Ha-ha, Mahrree. Very funny," he snarled when he wrote the shortened phrase one night. "Yes, I can get the men to rally around 'PEA'. But not without a lot of sniggering!"

Normally he probably would've laughed at PEA, but she hadn't heard him laugh since Hogal and Tabbit died. She and the children tried to give him his space as he spent each evening in the study writing and rewriting the plans he then brought to the fort each morning to work on some more.

Today would be Stage One, as Perrin blandly named it. Mahrree liked her title better, but if she didn't get to the fort before the soldiers went out, it wouldn't happen that way.

For the past week the citizens of Edge had been told someone should be at their homes today in order to meet the two soldiers that would be coming.

Names and ages of all occupants in the houses would be recorded to identify if anyone was missing in the future. Each house would be numbered, odd numbers on one side, even on the other. Each road would also be numbered or named alphabetically, as the residents decided, so as to create a system whereby the soldiers could quickly identify a specific house in case of another raid.

The villagers seemed to warm up to the idea only after they were assured that the numbers assigned to their houses could be decorated in any way they wished. Hycymum had already contacted a blacksmith to create a variety of wrought iron numbers to put up on her house once she received her designation.

She planned to give the extra numbers to her neighbors for a “consistent look” in the neighborhood.

But it was the reaction of the people to two soldiers standing at their front doors that worried Mahrree. True, just last night Magistrate Cockalorum had honored the fort and embarrassed poor Corporal Zenos nearly to tears, but even proclaiming the soldiers as the heroes of Edge didn’t erase the fact that they were coming to houses wearing swords. Ever since the attack, the villagers realized that the soldiers were strong, skilled, and just a bit intimidating.

But Perrin didn’t understand Edgers’ trepidation, and Mahrree was

going to fix that.

She entered the gates of the fort just before dawn and noticed soldiers pouring into the large indoor training arena, most likely for their assignments. She avoided the crowded main doors and instead slipped into a side door adjacent to a long hallway right outside of the arena, where a few straggling soldiers hurried from the mess hall. She waited for them to pass, then she timidly crept up to one of the open doors at the front of the room and peered in.

The training arena was the largest enclosure in the fort, constructed of wide planked boards for the walls and high ceiling, but with a packed earthen ground which more easily soaked up the

blood, her husband told her—only half in jest—the first time he showed it to her. Dozens of bales of hay that normally stood against the walls were this morning lined up in rows across the room to serve as seating for the soldiers. Usually the bales were positioned to cushion—as far as a bale could be considered a cushion—falling soldiers who were thrown during a wrestling match, or to catch the arrows behind the targets of soldiers practicing their aim. The bales also a few times caught the wildly stray arrows of a group of ten boys, and also became makeshift mazes for them to crawl through and over on exceptionally cold days.

In the front of the arena was a wide raised wooden platform, where Major Shin demonstrated combat techniques and delivered lectures as brief as he could make them. Whenever she visited or passed the noisy arena she usually heard shouts, cheers, or laughter coming from it, often accompanied by a stern lecture, then guffaws pointed at a less-than-effective soldier.

But today, the training arena was surprisingly quiet, considering the amount of men it held. That was because in front of the whispering soldiers, many still filing in, stood an imposing Major Shin on the platform with his arms folded and his demeanor stern.

Mahrree groaned softly. He definitely needs softening, she thought, a bit hopelessly.

The major noticed her movement at the door and glanced over, then did a double-take. His glower sharpened.

Mahrree tried to smile, but she found herself whimpering too much to make it convincing.

The major's eyes bulged as he strode off the platform and straight for his wife standing in the hallway.

She froze in place and cringed as he growled, "Mahrree, what are you doing here?"

A handful of almost-late soldiers passed them and tried not to snigger.

Mahrree assumed her presence was almost as bad as having one's mother show up to school with one's purposely forgotten jacket. And then having that mother kissing one on the cheek in front of all one's friends.

"I know it's inappropriate for me to be here . . ."

She bit her lip nervously, but forced herself to find her courage. This was *her husband*, after all. She'd even seen him *out* of the uniform!

"Perrin, this isn't going to work," she told him. "They look too, too . . . I don't know, *soldiery*."

"What?!"

"Please trust me on this. I know this village—some people are going to feel

very nervous about opening their doors to *them*."

Major Shin raised one eyebrow at her. "They're the Heroes of Edge. That's why I scheduled this for the day *after* the Heroes Celebration, while their status is still fresh on the villagers' minds."

"I know," she said trying to stay calm in the face of an irate bear, "but still, can't you . . . soften them up a little?"

"*Soften soldiers?!*"

He wasn't taking this well.

"Just to make it easier on everyone. It's one thing to see them come running in the night with their swords drawn to rescue you. But it's something different

entirely to see two of them standing in front of your door."

"People *respect* the uniforms. Besides, they'll be holding *paper,* Mahrree, not swords."

"People also *fear* the uniforms, especially if they are *wearing* swords."

"Major Shin?" Karna interrupted, coming to the door. "The men are ready, sir. And Major, she may have a point."

Mahrree beamed at Brillen. Karna had been promoted to captain only two weeks ago, and it seemed to make him a little bolder.

Perrin squinted. "What do you propose? I'll listen, but I'm not promising anything."

"Well," Mahrree said, "I might

need a soldier to experiment on."

"What?! Not me! Mahrree, this is __"

"Sir," Captain Karna bravely interrupted again, his brown eyes a bit mischievous. "Just let her try? On someone else, of course. Could be kind of fun—*interesting*," he corrected himself. "We want the men to be seen as heroes, remember? Nice and friendly gesture to the village, we're the *good* men?" Karna bobbed his head with a quirky smile.

The major gave him a look that told him he was considering rescinding the promotion.

Mahrree suppressed her snort, but

winked appreciatively at Karna.

Perrin turned to his wife. “Your mother’s not involved with this in any way, is she?”

“Goodness, no! This is all my doing.”

“Hmm,” he grumbled, “that may be worse.” He sighed. “All right, come with me.”

As the major and the captain took to the podium, Mahrree stood along the side of the wall in the training arena. She felt extremely self-conscious as one hundred pairs of eyes tried not to notice her.

“Men, you know the plan, and you’re here for your road assignments, but there’s a concern. Some argue that

maybe you will appear to be too . . . too . . .”

Mahrree could tell he was struggling to find an alternative to “soldiery,” and it made her lips twitch.

“—much like soldiers,” he finally said. “Mrs. Shin believes she has a solution.” He turned and cocked his head for her to come to the podium.

Mahrree was surprised she was on already, and she took a deep nervous breath as she walked up to the stand. As she gazed down at the soldiers she was amazed at how similar they looked packed into a room, with their short hair and shaved faces and identical blue uniforms. The only one who stood out

was Grandpy Neeks, who was posted by a table in the back and scowling, but trying to be polite about it.

"I, uh, need a volunteer, please."

Private Aims was sitting resolutely in the front row, until someone behind jabbed him severely enough to make him leap off the bale of hay. The men laughed and Mahrree smiled kindly at him.

"I see you're conscripted to deal with me again, Private. I'm sorry, but I also appreciate your spirit of volunteerism." She waved him onto the stand as he turned bright red and sent a dirty look to the soldier sitting behind him.

Corporal Zenos grinned and held up

his hands in innocence.

Mahrree positioned Aims to face the soldiers and analyzed his uniform as she circled him. Several men tittered and chuckled at his nervousness until the major cleared his throat loudly.

“The sword has to stay at the fort, men,” she announced. “Please remove it, Aims.”

Aims looked at the major for confirmation.

“I don’t think any of you will run into any problems out there,” Shin said reluctantly.

Grandpy cocked his gray head in surprise.

“And actually, sir,” added Karna, “I

think the sword may *cause* problems. How many of you would have loved to get your hands on one of those when you were fifteen?"

Many of the soldiers had guilty grins on their faces. Aims removed the sword and handed it to the major.

Mahrree ignored Perrin's steely glare. "The sheath and belt should go as well, Aims," she said. "No good without the sword."

He halfheartedly undid the buckle and handed the belt to the major. Grandpy's expression hardened, but Perrin ignored him.

"Still too . . . formal." Mahrree decided as she turned to her husband. "What about them unbuttoning the top

few buttons? A more relaxed look?"

The major's raised eyebrows told her it was unthinkable.

A daring voice from the back of the room thought otherwise. "We'd be most grateful, ma'am!" The outburst of laughter sufficiently hid the guilty man.

Neeks guffawed at the insubordination, but Karna had a small, traitorous smile forming.

Mahrree couldn't help but smile, too. "One button?" She gave the major her best pleading eyes.

He softened ever so slightly and held up one finger.

Grandpy Neeks, at the back of the room, threw his hands in the air and

turned to glare at the wood planked wall.

Private Aims eagerly undid the top button at his throat. Several of the men whistled and whooped their approval as they quickly followed suit. Private Aims couldn't have turned any redder.

"Now—" Mahrree began again.

"They are *ready!*" Major Shin insisted.

Grandpy gave a firm agreeing nod and cleared his throat so loudly it echoed in the room.

"Please, just one more thing?" Mahrree bravely asked. When she saw the severe expression on her husband's face she added, "Nothing with the uniform—I promise."

Grandpy, at the back of the room, folded his arms more noisily than should be possible, and Major Shin nodded almost imperceptibly.

Mahrree turned back to the soldiers. "The thing is," she started haltingly, "the thing is . . . Edgers know you only as soldiers. But if they could see you as something *more*, then all of these plans to secure Edge will happen much more smoothly. They need to see you as sons, grandsons, brothers—"

She couldn't help but glance at Shem, and he was beaming back at her.

"—and as nephews, then . . . then all of this will be much better."

Not very articulate, she knew, but

the stares of all those soldiers were starting to get to her, just as she knew they would get to the villagers.

Corporal Zenos raised his hand.

Relieved to make eye contact with a friendly face, Mahrree nodded at him. "Corporal?"

"Mrs. Shin, what are you suggesting that we do today?" His easy smile told her that while he understood what she was trying to say, no one else would.

"Well, do what you see needing done. If someone's gathering wood, take half a minute to fill up the bucket and bring it into the house for them. Maybe someone's calf won't go into a pasture, so go over and help . . . herd it." She assumed that was the proper term, not

really knowing much about cattle except how to cook them.

She didn't dare look at Perrin, but she did catch Grandpy's glare, and noticed that he wasn't as angry as he had been a couple of minutes ago.

"Just let Edgers see you as something more than young men who . . . *beat up people*."

A few soldiers sniggered proudly at that.

And Mahrree knew she had to use that.

"Exactly," she grinned. "Prove to them that while you're certainly skilled fighters, you're also *better* than the Guarders, in every way. Guarders only

destroy. But *you*—you men assist, serve, protect, build."

She scanned the crowd of faces and saw a mixture of responses. Some were skeptical and bored, but more were understanding, interested, and—increasingly—proud.

A deep voice rumbled next to her. "Mrs. Shin has a point, men," Major Shin told them. "We need to demonstrate that we're the better men. So do what you can, but don't be all day about it."

Mahrree realized that was her signal to move off the platform, and she did so as quickly as possible while her husband continued to address the soldiers.

"You may remove your swords and

leave them on the table in the back by Neeks as you go out. Keep the handles of your long knives concealed, and remember, unbutton only one button."

"And smile!" added Captain Karna with a full faced demonstration.

Even though Mahrree was now at the side of the room again, she could hear Major Shin growling quietly. He glanced over at her, and she gave him a look of gratitude. A smirk crept to the edges of his mouth.

That was about as easy as he was going to get that day.

Ten minutes later Perrin mounted his horse for the morning—someday he'd have to find a creature with enough strength and speed to last him all day—and sat by the gate observing fifty pairs of soldiers leave the fort to head in different directions towards Edge, paper in their hands, and no swords on their bodies.

If Mahrree thought that would make him more "easy" she was very much mistaken.

The forest was quiet, as it had been for weeks, but things could change in an instant. This was a very risky move. Most of the soldiers were now armed only with a long knife secreted

somewhere on their bodies, making them merely equal in strength to the Guarders. Only Perrin, Karna, Neeks and Gizzada, all mounted on horses to supervise the day's activities, still wore their swords.

Perrin wasn't going to leave the compound until he was sure his wife was on her way home. He wondered again why he deferred to her in front of his entire army, but deep down he already knew.

It wasn't because she kept kissing his neck this morning, which nearly drove him to distraction and, for the first time in five weeks, momentarily put him in an entirely different frame of mind. Maybe it was because today he felt like he was finally accomplishing something,

and depending on how everything went, he may have to start an *argument* with her later tonight.

And they had *plenty* to argue about.

It wasn't because he thought her exceptionally brave to stand in front of those soldiers, most of who were nearly twice her size, and try to turn them back into boys. That small woman had no idea just how determined and powerful her voice was, and he found that even more endearing.

It wasn't even because of those piercing gray-green-brown eyes that looked at him so fearfully yet confidently when he accosted her in the hallway. She certainly still had an effect on him,

one that he hoped he never got over.

It *may* have been *somewhat* because her pink lips did that little pursing thing since she was anxious, and then she bit her lower lip, which always had the effect of turning his brain into something like hot oatmeal—

No, he knew why he took her advice. He hoped to his soldiers it looked like he was deferring to an Edge native, but it was something much more.

No, he deferred to her because when the most dangerous woman in the world recommends something, even the snarling commander of the fort better follow that advice.

He spotted her walking behind the soldiers approaching the gate. She gave

him a flirty, apologetic smile.

Oh yes. There'd be *arguing* tonight.

He winked back. She meant well; she always did. Even when she was trying to get him to 'PEA' on all of it. She grinned at him and he nudged the horse to approach her.

"Would you like a ride back to the house?"

She scoffed at the horse, the only animal she hated more than poor Barker. "Would you like to experience childbirth?"

That did it.

He couldn't help but chuckle, probably for the first time since the raid.

"You need to get back before the

first soldiers reach the house," he reminded her. "What kind of an example are you setting for our neighbors if you're not there obeying the edicts of Major Shin?"

"I'll be there in five minutes," she promised. "Bring me a report tonight, all right?"

"Since when do I report to you, Mrs. Shin?" he frowned, but knew she saw right through it. She always saw through everything, which—in quiet moments when he thought about it—made him slightly worried.

"Since the day we married, Mr. Shin. Admit it: I'm more fearsome than the High General." She tried to raise a menacing eyebrow and failed amusingly.

Perrin winked at her again. “I’ll probably be late for dinner.”

Mahrree nodded. “Just promise me you’ll remember the advice of Captain Karna—smile!” She batted her eyelashes.

He chuckled again.

“And Perrin?” she said quietly. “Thank you.”

He smiled at her in a way that hinted at a future argument, then kicked his horse out the gates towards Edge.

“Poe?” Mahrree called as she neared her home, seeing the boy jogging

alongside Barker. “My goodness, Poe—you’re up early this morning! And with Barker?”

“Hi, Mrs. Shin,” he said cheerily. “He was sleeping in my front garden this morning!”

Mahrree blinked rapidly. “All the way on the other side of Edge?”

Barker gave her only a fleeting glance and sat down by the front gate.

“What in the world were you doing so far south?” Mahrree demanded of him.

He didn’t even turn his drooping eyes to look at her.

“Well, I was thinking,” Poe said scratching his chin and sounding very grown up, “that there’s that fluffy white

dog down the road from us. I guess to a dog, she'd be rather attractive."

"Ugh," Mahrree sneered. "Not again, Barker."

"So he gets around, I take it?" Poe said maturely. "You know, any rancher would have a solution to that *problem*."

Mahrree looked at him. "Poe, the things that come out of your mouth sometimes! I've missed you." She chuckled, ruffled up his black hair, and gave him a quick hug. "Want to stay for breakfast? You've come so far, I'd hate to send you home already."

Poe grinned at the offer.

"But first," Mahrree held up a finger, "a question."

Poe groaned.

Mahrree chuckled. “Tell me, Mr. Hili—what color do you think the sky will be today?”

Poe’s mouth automatically opened, then he shut it and looked up at the sky.

Mahrree beamed in approval. He wasn’t the Administrators just yet.

“I don’t see any clouds . . . You know, today the sky might actually be blue!”

“I agree,” Mahrree said. “Sometimes, the sky really *is* blue.”

Mahrree had called it “Get To

Know Your Friendly Soldiers Day," but that's not the way it started. Perrin could see the curtains twitching anxiously in the windows as citizens waited for the soldiers to reach their front doors. Then those doors opened cautiously, and people spoke through the cracks.

Mahrree had been right, Perrin was reluctant to concede as he rode along the first northern neighborhood. The villagers *were* nervous about the soldiers coming to their houses.

"But we're the *good* men," he whispered to himself as he saw another door open only far enough to carry on a conversation. "Why are they afraid of us? Ah, Hogal–what would you do? If only you were still here . . ."

He sighed and tried to ignore the ragged hole in his chest left by his great aunt and uncle. In the past five weeks it hadn't gotten any smaller. Despite his knowledge that they were fine and happy, he couldn't get his heart to accept it. He didn't need comfort; he needed *them*. He couldn't do this by himself. True, he had Mahrree, but he'd come to rely on Hogal to be his 'guide,' and Tabbit to be his 'conscience.' Without them, he felt as if two ropes of the three holding him in line had snapped. If Hogal had been there, he likely would have said something such as, *The Creator knows you're capable of going on without us. That's why we were*

allowed to go home.

But Perrin had far less faith in himself than Hogal Densal did. And he still couldn't help but feel their loss was partially his fault.

But he would tolerate no more.

He wheeled his horse around to go down another road to check on the soldiers' progress. As he turned the corner he saw, halfway down the road, a milkman and his cart approaching. Suddenly the mule pulling the cart stopped, as if something had blocked its way. Startled, the animal darted erratically, backed up, and—ignoring the protests of the milkman—pushed the cart back into the ditch along the side of the road.

At that moment two soldiers came from the porch of a nearby house, having recorded the names of the residents. They stopped short when they saw the cart spilling out cheeses and corked jugs. They hesitated, and Perrin, trotting his horse to the scene, whistled at them. He pointed to the cart, and the soldiers jumped into action, catching the last of the wrapped cheeses sliding out of it. By the time Perrin arrived, they were already righting the cart while the milkman hefted a covered jug and smiled to see its cork had remained secure.

"Why, you boys should be patrolling the roads in full force all the time," the milkman said as he placed the

jug in the cart. The soldiers picked up the rest of his goods and stacked them in the small wagon as the owner of it grinned. “At least until I can replace this mule. Thank you again. Major, you have some fine soldiers!”

“Yes, I do,” Perrin smiled. “The Army of Idumea is here to serve.”

It was a cheesy line, but seeing how lovingly the man cradled a salvaged wheel of cheddar, Perrin was sure he appreciated it.

He nodded approval to the soldiers and smiled to himself.

One citizen won over, only five thousand or so to go.

As he watched the two soldiers walk to the next house, Perrin had a

thought. He looked back at the mule that seemed to him rather sedate, as mules go. But it had reacted so abruptly, almost as if it had experienced something unexpected.

A corner of Perrin's mouth went up. Would Hogal be the kind to upset a poor, innocent mule so the soldiers could do something useful?

Perrin remembered Hogal's mischievous, waggling eyebrows.

Yes. Yes he would.

He was about to swing his horse around again when he heard a woman's voice coming from across the road.

"Soldiers! How good are you at chasing dogs?" It was a young mother,

standing at her open front door, with a little boy maybe four years old hiding behind her skirt.

One of the soldiers straightened up and said, with perhaps a bit too much eagerness, “Oh, I’m quite skilled at that, ma’am!”

“Good,” she said, “because I’ve got two dogs bothering my chickens in the back, and my hens aren’t laying because of them.”

Perrin heard, in the mixture of morning noises, the muffled sound of two yapping dogs and many fretting chickens.

The two soldiers looked over at their major for consent.

“Go fetch!” Perrin ordered.

The soldiers grinned, set down their papers on a rock, and jogged to the back garden.

Just a moment later two mangy dogs came yipping at a full run, and the soldiers emerged with smug smiles on their faces. As they went to the front porch, the little boy cheered and his mother happily held the door open for her poultry rescuers.

Perrin chuckled. “All right,” he murmured to himself as he walked his mount down the road, “now they’re not only known for beating up people, but beating up nuisance dogs as well. Well, I suppose it’s a start. And it’s your doing, isn’t it, Hogal? Service first,

leadership later. Isn't that what you used to tell me when I was younger? Not that you would *cause* chickens to be bullied by dogs, but you would make sure someone was there to save them, wouldn't you?"

Before he could listen for an answer to that, he heard another voice calling to him.

"Major!"

He saw a very full, middle-aged woman standing in her doorway. Her thick hands were on her waist and her sizable bosom was heaving in pent-up frustration.

Perrin nudged his mount to head over to her house, and he braced for whatever was about to come.

“Yes, ma’am?” he called as he neared. “What can I do for you?”

“I saw what happened down there, with those filthy dogs,” she accused.

Perrin reined the horse to a stop at her front gate, the yipping sound fading away as the dogs headed towards the river.

“Yes, ma’am?” he repeated patiently.

“About time something was done with those beasts,” she declared, adding an emphatic huff. “Been complaining to Chief Curglaff for several moons about them, but he said there’s nothing to be done.”

Perrin sighed internally. But now

wasn't the time to get into a discussion about the failed duties of the enforcement officers. Instead he nodded to the woman.

"So what I want to know is this." She took a deep breath that caused her to nearly fill the entire doorway. "If I see them dogs again, can I call your soldiers to do something? I mean, *really do something* with them?" Her voice became so deep and demanding that Perrin considered that the alarm he suddenly felt was similar to how people may react to him.

But he also felt a smile growing on his face.

"Ma'am, if those dogs bother this neighborhood again, just let one of my

soldiers know and I assure you—we'll take care of them."

To his surprise, she burst into a gappy grin. "Good! Now I'll feel better paying my taxes this year, knowing that at least someone at the fort takes seriously the threat of untrained dogs!"

Perrin smiled, tipped his cap, and decided not to reveal that he also was the owner of an untrained dog. But since his dog would likely only ever lick a chicken, then attempt to take a nap with it, he didn't see any reason to divulge that information.

He kicked the sides of his horse to check on another road. A minute later he was surprised to find a sergeant carrying

a large cushioned chair from one house to another, and receiving the most useless directions from two elderly women. The sergeant shrugged apologetically to the major when he saw him, but Perrin shook his head and smiled.

"Carry on, soldier. Just don't carry the entire household. We do have a schedule to keep."

The sergeant nodded and continued on to the gate where the women gave him the completely wrong advice for heading up the stairs. Fortunately for the soldier, the chair was very well cushioned.

His companion remained at the door of the neighbor's house, talking

with an elderly man who seemed most grateful the chair was gone.

Satisfied that the set of soldiers understood how to be helpful in somewhat hazardous ways, Perrin set off down the road again. At the western edge of the village, he stopped again at a farm and stared in amazement.

Three soldiers stood knee-deep in a mucky canal, digging out a blockage. The farmer who owned it leaned on his crutch, his broken leg still healing from the Guarder attack, while the fourth soldier took down information about his household. More residents stood in line, waiting to give their information, and also to call out advice to the soldiers

whose uniforms would need cleaning tomorrow.

The three of them looked up at their commander apprehensively, but Perrin smiled his approval.

“I had no idea soldiers were so useful,” one man a little older than Perrin said to him. “I only thought they were good for chasing a man in black every now and then.”

Perrin pulled out his cheesy line again.

“The Army of Idumea is here to serve.” This time, however, Major Shin felt it a bit more sincerely.

As he rode away he smiled up to the sky.

“See Hogal?” he murmured. “I

learned a few things from you. I still could use you here, though."

Perrin fancied he heard a response, but it was likely just his memory fulfilling a wish.

No you don't, my boy. There's nothing more I could teach you. Well done, Perrin.

It was well past dinner time when Perrin finally came through the back door. He looked exhausted but—for the first time in weeks—a little bit pleased.

Mahrree smiled tentatively at him.

"So I've been hearing stories all

day. Apparently you gave someone a ride to fetch a midwife?"

Perrin nodded. "I did. Heard on my way home it was a healthy boy."

"And Shem was tasked by a widow to fix her wobbly gate?"

Perrin began to smile. "And her fence, and she wants him back again tomorrow for a leaky window."

"And several other soldiers helped move hay, chase down a stray calf, hang a barn door, patch a leaking roof and a host of other tasks?" Mahrree recited. "Sounds like Stage One turned out to be, 'Get To Know Your Friendly Soldiers Day' after all! Or maybe, 'Pull Out The To-Do List, Here Come The Soldiers Day'?"

“More like, ‘Feed the Soldiers to See Whose Cake They Judge is Best Day’. Somehow Gizzada started that, and I don’t think there’s a crumb of cake left anywhere in the village!” Perrin laughed.

He actually laughed! Mahrree sighed in thankful amazement. It had been weeks since she heard that sound that reminded her of deep, happy bells.

“Oh, I’m so relieved! Well done, Major.”

“You know I didn’t do anything,” he shook his head. “I have to admit, *you* had a rather good idea there. And Hogal thought so as well. I could feel him, Mahrree. He was influencing the

soldiers and showing them how they could do some good first."

She grinned. "And maybe Tabbit was reminding the villagers what needed fixing?"

Perrin chuckled. "Probably! That was the lesson they always tried to teach me. Service first, leadership later. Edge loves the soldiers now."

"That should make Stage Two easier, shouldn't it?"

"It might make it *more* difficult, if people keep finding odd jobs for the soldiers. Stage Two is all about speed, not finishing off people's to-do lists!"

"So when's the first *Race to Edge?*" Mahrree asked excitedly.

"That's *not* what it's called, by the

way," he said, slightly aggravated. "Neeks will have the map and designations finished day after tomorrow. So in three days," he began to grin again, "Edge will experience *Stage Two* and be invaded once more. This time by soldiers."

"Now," Perrin said in a sudden shift of tone mixed with annoyance and something else Mahrree couldn't quite discern, "exactly what possessed *you* to *barge* your way into *my* training arena and alter the uniforms of *my* soldiers?"

Mahrree bit her lower lip.

Her husband started to smile when he saw that.

"Are you still mad about this

morning?" she fretted.

"Are the children asleep?"

She nodded.

"Then let's say there are a few things about this morning we need to *discuss*."

Mahrree giggled.

Two men sat in a dark room of an unlit building.

"Exactly what is he doing up there in Edge?" Mal asked, his hands clasped in his lap.

Brisack shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure. We have only a few left in the

forest up there. Still no word from the Quiet Man, but," he hesitated as Mal glared, "help *will* be in place at the fort in the next few weeks. I've thoroughly prepared him, explained to him the importance of this assignment, and have the utmost confidence he'll be successful. We *w i l l* see interesting results."

Mal sighed. "I better. I have my doubts, leaving this one all up to you. Did you see the report from the High General? Major Shin is proving to be quite the busy bear. An identification system for the entire village? A map with each house labeled and the number of residents recorded? He's finding a way to keep an eye on every citizen."

Brisack nodded in admiration. "Sounds like he's taken his position as Eyes and Ears and Voice of the Administrators to a fascinating level."

"Yes," Mal said slowly. "Innovative."

"Very progressive, I'd say," Brisack agreed.

"*Progressive*?" Mal said in a slight growl. "Progress comes from the Administrators, not the citizens!"

"Shin isn't a citizen," Brisack pointed out. "He's an officer."

Mal stared out the black window. "Just what are you doing, Perrin?"

Chapter 16 ~ “But bears don’t innovate!”

Mahrree was hanging the laundry out on the line in the back garden when she saw Grandpy Neeks jogging down the main fort road. She waved to him, and he cut down the alley.

“Mrs. Shin,” he nodded as he

approached.

"And where are you off to on this beautiful afternoon?" Mahrree asked him.

"Off to be rescued, of course!" He grinned playfully, his gnarled face adding even more distinctive wrinkles.

Mahrree knew he had forgiven her for her "softening" of the soldiers earlier in the week. Rumors had gotten back to her—via her mother, naturally—that a few older single women thought the "poor" master sergeant looked like he needed some fattening up and maybe even some tender loving care, and would Mahrree know if he were available? Until Mahrree could be sure of just how old Grandpy Neeks was, she

didn't know which of the names to pass along to him. Perrin's claim that Grandpy was only in his early forties seemed preposterous. And his further claim that he would not become involved in Grandpy's potential love life—"So don't you dare think of asking me, Mahrree!"—was also disappointing.

But yesterday Mahrree mentioned to Grandpy in passing that a few Edge women were interested in him, especially one who he helped with a stubborn cat in a tree on Get to Know Your Friendly Soldiers Day.

Grandpy had looked pleasantly startled by that, then said, "Well, since she reminded me so much of my own

dear grandmother—”

Mahrree had been too stunned at that response to know how to proceed with suggesting he pay her a visit. Perhaps she wasn’t cut out for making matches.

But at least Grandpy was smiling at her again.

“I heard you’re the first victim, and I can hardly wait!” Mahrree chuckled. “So who’s running the first Race to Edge?”

Grandpy raised his eyebrows. “Zenos got you calling it that too?”

“I got *him* calling it that! Perrin wouldn’t come up with anything more interesting, so I named it myself.”

Grandpy grinned. “Well, the whole

fort is calling Stage Two 'The Race' now, much to the major's disapproval."

"Zenos is a good gossip," Mahrree nodded in approval. "And I thought the soldiers might enjoy getting to know every corner of Edge if they realized it *was* a race. Get egos involved, and I've discovered men will do just about anything."

"Indeed they do!" Neeks laughed.

"When's the race beginning?"

"About half an hour. Sit on your front porch with the little ones and enjoy the chaos."

"How many pairs is he starting with?" Mahrree asked.

"Three today, with himself, Karna,

and Gizzada following them on horseback. You know how the major likes to shout his little bits of encouragement to the men," Neeks said soberly, but with a wink.

Mahrree grinned. "Which means, if any of the men get lost he'll be hoarse with screaming at them by the time they find and 'rescue' you."

"Oh, I'm *counting* on it. This first race will be exceptionally confusing, and I fully expect to see at least two veins bulging on his neck. No one does angry quite like a Shin," Neeks drawled with devious anticipation. "Have a good afternoon, Mrs. Shin!" He smiled as he waved and continued his jog into Edge.

Mahrree rubbed her face. "Ooh,

boy. Hope Perrin gets it all out of him by the time he comes home tonight."

Half an hour later Mahrree sat eagerly on her front porch, with Jaytsy and Peto fresh up from their naps, and cheered as the first racers ran past her house. Perrin, on horseback, followed closely and was already shouting.

Mrs. Hersh, pulling weeds out of her garden—and subtly tossing them over into the Shins' overgrown yard—looked up in alarm.

"An attack?!" she called over to Mahrree.

"No," Mahrree chuckled. "It's Stage Two—the Race to Edge? It's been announced at the amphitheater for the

past few days."

Mrs. Hersh nodded slowly as if she just remembered.

Another two soldiers ran past, with Karna following them and yelling.

"Oh, my," Mrs. Hersh mumbled.

Mahrree giggled to herself. "I wonder how much of Edge forgot? I suppose they'll remember just as quickly."

That night when Perrin came home, he was all smiles.

"It went that well?" Mahrree said.

"Not exactly," he scowled briefly.

“But in hindsight, it *was* amusing.”

“I saw Grandpy on his way to the village. He said he made the first location purposefully confusing.”

Perrin grinned. “He sent the soldiers to find the tailor’s.”

“Oh,” Mahrree began to chuckle. “Which one?”

“That’s when it got interesting,” Perrin laughed. “All six of them ran straight for the tailor shop where they do alterations for the army. But no Master Sergeant.”

“Oh no!”

“So after terrifying the customers in the shop by running around frantically to find Neeks, they all rushed out and into the next tailor shop, filled with *women*.”

Mahrree burst out laughing.

"After several screams," Perrin continued, chuckling, "the six of them ran out of *that* shop—"

"I'm guessing no one in Edge remembered about the race today?"

"None that I could tell. The market was in full panic!"

"And you were there, on horseback, screaming at the soldiers, right?"

"Of course I was!" Perrin exclaimed. "It was embarrassing! They started hysterically running into every shop, looking under every cart, and one even looked under a hat on display as if Neeks could be hiding under it."

Mahrree was laughing so hard she

was wiping tears off her face. “So where was he?”

“*Tayler’s* Sweet Shop! He was sucking on his second syrup drop and sitting in the middle of the shop on a stool by the time the soldiers finally found him. I’ll tell you, he has the head-shaking-in-disappointment motion down to an art form.”

“I should have followed the soldiers!” Mahrree laughed. “At least it wasn’t Gizzada in there, or the sweet shop would have been cleaned out. So when’s the second Race to Edge?”

“Day after tomorrow. And Magistrate Cockalorum better be ready. I already sent him a message that he’s going to be ‘saved!’”

Two days later all of Edge was ready. Mahrree wasn't the only one sitting on her porch with her children; the whole neighborhood was cheering on the runners as they ran through Edge on their way to the south of the village, Perrin and Karna on horseback following the chase and shouting.

Mahrree knew the best new entertainment had just arrived in Edge. Soon everyone else would catch on, too.

By the end of the week, they had.

Perrin came home for dinner and announced, "Now we're getting requests for soldiers to run through family parties, surprise someone for their birthday, or terrify a relative visiting

from somewhere else!" He tried to say it with exasperation, but his eyes were twinkling.

"Well done again, Major!" Mahrree grinned and kissed him. "Although, I do have a question about a certain 'home invasion' two of my After School Care students told me about?"

Perrin chuckled. "Yes, *that*. It seems that to save some time, two soldiers ran *through* a house, even stealing a turkey leg in the process and tracking mud from the back door to the front. Mrs. Peerce was not amused when she came up to the fort to complain."

"But her sons were. Now all of the boys want to be on your routes. And really, it might be a good idea to

accommodate some of those requests," she hinted. "Remind the citizens the soldiers are there *for* them?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps, perhaps. Even if they shout the wrong directions at times, the villagers *have* been good about the soldiers jumping over their fences and running through their gardens. So far Corporal Zenos has won the three races he's run. Every soldier wants a chance at either being his partner or beating him."

"Sounds like a good motivational tool, Major," she winked. "As long as there's no wagering."

"Only bragging rights," he winked back. "And I never realized a man could

be so humble in bragging. Shem's an unusual person."

Mahrree wrapped her arms around him. "And so are you, Major Shin! So one more success?"

He nodded. "And then I think Edge *just* might finally be as safe as I can make it. Aside from building a massive stockade fence around it."

Two men sat in a dark room of an unlit building.

"Races?" Mal asked. "*Races?*"

Brisack nodded. "Quite progress—uh, I mean, *innovative*, don't you think?

The soldiers are learning the intricacies of the village as well as if they'd been raised there. Even new soldiers can find their way around with his labeling system. Fascinating! I wonder that no one thought of this before. Perhaps the intensity of the raids have pushed him to such tactics."

"Are you suggesting that *we've* caused this?" Mal bristled.

Brisack shrugged with a smile. "I suppose we have. He's become quite the aggressive bear, hasn't he?"

"But bears don't innovate! They fight! They designate territories—"

"Isn't that what he's doing? Improving the army's ability to fight? Marking his territory?"

Mal groaned in frustration. “He’s making things very difficult. This was completely unanticipated!”

Brisack waved that off. “So then *we* innovate and counter his movements. It’s like a game of dices. He makes a call, we make another, he places a bet, we place another, then we see who really rolls the best numbers. That’s all.”

“How can you be so casual about this?” Mal seethed. “Don’t you see what he’s doing?!”

“Yes. He’s forcing us to be progressive, too. I must say, he’s making all of this far more interesting, isn’t he?” Brisack said, his eyes shining.

“He’s *ruining everything!*” the old

man shouted. “He cannot be allowed to succeed, or he puts in peril all that we are attempting to do! Bears don’t innovate!”

“Perhaps,” Brisack ventured, “Shin really isn’t a bear. Maybe he’s merely a clever man up to the challenge.”

“NO, HE’S NOT!” Mal bellowed. “And I want him STOPPED!”

Suddenly a stream of profanities erupted from the Chairman.

“Slagging Shin! Son of a Sow! What the slag have you done?!”

Brisack blinked in mild shock. He’d seen Mal become irate before, but never heard him use *slag* in such a filthy way. Normally “slag” was the throw-away bits left over from smelting, except

in the way the army said it, their tone turning it into foulest word in the world, and one rarely uttered.

As for *son of a sow*? Oh, that was just every day muttering for Mal.

But what surprised the good doctor even more was Mal's excessive fury.

"The problem is . . .?"

"Do you realize what he's done?!" Mal spat.

Brisack sighed. "Tell me."

"He's undone US! Think about it—if his little procedure for recording the names of *all* residents goes throughout the *entire world,* and soldiers can *race* to a person's house within minutes . . ."

Brisack slowly nodded. "Ah, I see.

A few people that turn up missing may actually be *somewhere* else doing *something* else—for us. Interesting," he mused. "I suppose this is why most people don't play dices against themselves. Gets hard to remember which side you really want to win."

"*W e* win!" Mal shouted, then looked perplexed. "I mean, 'we' being —wait . . ."

The good doctor smirked. "One side will always win, and the other always lose. Which half of *you* do you want to succeed?"

Mal exhaled loudly and started a quiet monologue consisting mostly of words beginning with, as far as Brisack could discern, the letter "s."

“SlaggingstupidsonsofsowsShins___”

Brisack let him natter on like a mad old woman before he cleared his throat. “Whenever you’re ready, I may have a solution.”

Mal shut right up.

“You realize that Shin’s recording procedure will only fly in villages that were attacked,” Brisack pointed out. “After terror, the people are willing to forfeit all kinds of freedoms to ensure their security. That’s something we may want to remember, by the way. But everyone *else* will see this as a further intrusion of the forts, especially when they see how quickly a soldier can be

standing at their door."

"I'm listening," Mal said, hope lighting in his eyes.

"The world is still conflicted, grateful the forts are helping, but also wary of their magistrates and enforcement men losing power. Something like this happened before, back with Querul the First."

Mal's eyes grew bigger. "Exactly! Querul instituted a registration program when the first Guarders were running away! Everyone had to tell him where they moved to, and in to what house, so that he could track families and bring the Guarders to justice! HA!" he boomed. "We can knock this down by saying Perrin's resorting to Querul-like

tendencies!" He clapped his hands loudly, then rubbed them together. "Perfect!"

Brisack massaged his chin thoughtfully. "*However*, there's some merit to knowing the names of people in each house. In the past, Gadiman occasionally had problems finding out exactly where someone lived. The messenger services don't even know where most people live. Using Perrin's system, *we'd* have ready-made maps of every single village in the world."

Mal held up a finger and paused, as if stuck in thought.

The good doctor tried not to smirk at his companion's internal quandary.

Perhaps Mal was trying to figure out which side—the Administrators or the Guarders—should win this toss of the dices.

A smile formed on Mal's face. He'd made a decision as to this round's winner.

"Record only the last names. *That* will make the forts feel better, knowing who lives where. But no first names or the number of people in a household. *That* should keep the citizens from feeling we're going too far."

Brisack nodded back. Both sides were going to win. That was always the way Mal played things—until he won. He never gave up. If he sensed he was losing at something—be it an argument

or a government—he'd keep pushing and going and changing the rules until he was winning again. Nicko Mal *had* to win. There was nothing else for him in the world, except to win it all. He saw himself as a high-minded and intelligent leader, doing the world a service by demonstrating how animal-like it was and studying its responses.

But that was all a cover.

Because Mal was, at his heart, simply the most competitive man in the world. Everything he ever did was about proving he was better than anyone else. It was childish, really, Brisack considered as Mal begin to blather on about how he was turning the tables on

Perrin Shin's so-called brilliant ideas. The doctor wondered if, as a boy, Nicko had been on the small side, abrasive with others, but arguably the smartest boy in the school. And, despite his excellence, he was overshadowed by the tall, handsome, charming boy that every peer and teacher couldn't help but admire.

That would explain a lot, Brisack decided as Mal ranted about arrogance of army officers. It wasn't too difficult to figure out who Mal saw—and hated—as Mr. Popularity.

People think competition it a good thing, Brisack considered as Mal now stood up and gestured wildly about how he would always prevail, no matter what

tactic Shin threw at him. But at what point does friendly competition develop into maniacal despotism?

Maybe—Brisack decided—that's like asking when tumbling pups become ravaging wolves.

When's our man going in?!" Mal barked, shaking Brisack from his thoughts.

"With the fifty new soldiers," Brisack sighed. "Later this week. He'll find our Quiet Man, discover what he knows, and guarantee that Shin fails—I promise you."

Barker didn't even need bacon. He saw the man and was over the fence in less than a minute.

"Well done, well done. Something new tonight. Alongside."

Hycymum had been very busy for weeks sewing constantly and boasting to her friends that the security of Edge rested squarely on her shoulders. Her son-in-law *needed* her talents, and she couldn't be bothered with anything else until her duty to the Army of Idumea was completed.

One afternoon Perrin came home

from the fort for midday meal, annoyed.

"If one more of your mother's sewing friends ambushes me again, I may have to issue a mandate that no women over forty years of age is allowed to talk to me."

"Why? What do they want?" Mahrree asked.

"To help secure Edge! What in the world is your mother saying to them?!"

Mahrree laughed. "I'm not sure, but she said she'll be done at the end of the week with your project."

"Good," Perrin said, calming down. "We'll test them early next week, then."

"I'm rather excited!" Mahrree said.

"Well, I was too, but not anymore," Perrin grumbled. "The first men to test

the system have already been decided."

"Who?"

Perrin groaned.

"You?!" Mahrree squealed. "It's about time. What happened?"

Through clenched teeth he said, "*Zenos* happened."

Mahrree didn't get to hear anything more about that until Shem came by later that afternoon with the message that Perrin would be home late again. That's when Mahrree found out what occurred at the fort that morning.

"He had no choice," Shem grinned at her. "He *had* to accept! I know you've wanted to watch him run, so I set him up."

“Shem, once again you’ve solidified your status as my favorite soldier. So how did you do it?”

“Wrestling,” Shem said, twisting his own muscular neck as if it were still kinked. “You know how he likes to motivate us by insisting that no one is stronger, tougher or faster than him? Well, he brought fifty of us to the training arena for a sparring challenge, and I stepped up to be the first to take him on.”

Mahrree shook her head. “I’ve told you—take him on after the eighth man. That’s when he starts to get tired, and someone as large as you will have a fair chance at beating him.”

"I didn't want to beat him. Although I was close." He sighed wistfully. "*This* close . . . then, there I was again, flat on my back staring up into that cocky grin of his. But I knew I had him. I stood up, looked him in the eyes, and said, 'You know, *sir*, there's one way to prove you really are the strongest soldier. And I find it interesting that of all the soldiers in the fort, you're the *only* one who has yet to participate in it.'"

Mahrree grinned and clapped her hands. "Perfect, Shem!"

"Well, he folded his arms and gave me that haughty look of his. 'What are you going on about, Zenos?'"

His impersonation was good

enough that Mahrree snorted.

"'I'm talking about the Races to Edge, sir,' I told him. 'Even Captain Karna has run in two of them, but *you* never leave your horse.' I even folded my arms to try to look as intimidating as him. So he raised that angry eyebrow of his and said, 'I'm on a horse so I can track progress, Corporal, and make sure none of *you* cheat.' So I told him, 'Oh, I don't think that's the entire reason, *sir*. I think you know you'd *lose*.'"

Mahrree covered her mouth briefly before she said, "Oh Shem, you're the bravest man in the fort!"

He shrugged modestly. "About half the soldiers took several large steps backwards at that point. So then the

major glared at me and said, 'I don't race you soldiers because I don't want to humiliate you. No one's faster than me, Zenos. *You* know that.'"

Mahrree kept giggling.

"That's when the 'oohs,' began, and the *rest* of the men took a large step backwards. So I looked your husband in the eye and said, 'Check the race postings, sir. No one can beat me. I think I'm ready for you, so I challenge you to a race. No teams, just you against me. We'll see who the strongest soldier really is!' What else could he do?"

Mahrree burst out laughing. "Brilliant!"

Shem laughed too. "Then he said it

would be *his pleasure* to humiliate me."

"He's sure he'll humiliate you?" Mahrree rubbed her hands together. "Ooh, I can hardly wait!"

Shem chuckled. "I kind of hope he's behind me, chasing. Even though it's been several weeks since he accused me of being a Guarder, Mahrree, he sometimes still scares me near to death!"

Perrin passed several carpenters and nodded amiably as they waved to him. His mother-in-law wasn't the only person busy on his latest project. He stepped into the shadow blocking the

afternoon sun, stopped, looked up, and grinned. Now that they were nearing completion, his latest ideas looked even grander and more imposing than when he first sketched out their dimensions late one night in his study.

For the past several weeks a small army of lumberjacks, carpenters, and craftsmen had been building twelve tall, covered towers just like this one, in strategic locations in Edge. Each was a wooden structure rising higher than any surrounding trees, and capable of holding two men who could hoist signal banners during the day or light a fire in a metal cauldron on the roof for nighttime warnings. The furthest tower was a quarter of a mile south of Edge, along

the main road to Mountseen and Idumea. Additional towers surrounded the village and several were within, including one at the center of the village green. With the addition of fifty soldiers that were coming from Idumea, Perrin had calculated there would be more than enough men to operate the towers day and night.

The views from the top were remarkable. At first the carpenters were frightened to build to such a height, until Major Shin took all of them to his command tower to show them that the air was still as breathable as it was on the ground.

Within days of the first towers

reaching their final height, he had the opposite problem—keeping people *off* of them. Everyone wanted to see how well their back gardens could be viewed, and how much of their neighbors they could spy on. It didn't matter that the ladders going up through the middle weren't yet complete; daring Edgers simply climbed up the lattice work on the side, just as the builders had done.

Perrin had to implement a strict rule: only workers allowed on the towers, and when they were completed, only the soldiers assigned to them. Security of Edge, specially trained men, potential hazards to the citizens, and all that. Since it came from the major, the

man who protected Edge so well that the only deaths from the recent raid were those that most directly affected him, Edgers obeyed. Usually.

Perrin held his breath as the ladder in the middle was heaved into place by several burly men, to the cheers of another dozen or so citizens watching the progress. Tomorrow each tower, nearly completed, would also be equipped with Hycymum's creations which he was on his way to inspect: long banners that could be hoisted in a moment's notice to signal the fort.

Red banners would mean Guarder activity had been spotted; yellow, fire; blue, official visitors were on the way;

and orange, the Chief of Enforcement requested back-up assistance.

Perrin imagined that one would be going up most frequently since a couple of enforcement officers revealed to him they were losing a bit of confidence in the chief, and could they sign up to be soldiers? The station hoisting the banner would also denote the general area where the trouble was.

The whine of an eighteen-year-old broke into his admiration of his creation.

"Are you *sure* three carts are necessary, sir?" asked one of the privates waiting behind him, pulling a wooden cart.

The other two privates, also manning the small wagons usually pulled

by mules, looked at him with warning in their eyes. It was rare that anyone questioned the judgment of Major Shin.

But fortunately for the new soldier, the major was in an excellent mood. Edge was becoming more secure every day and he was finding it easy to smile again.

"Believe me, Private—cloth can weigh a great deal. Don't worry. This is really quite an easy assignment. But if you prefer, we need some latrines dug by each of the towers to service the men working there . . ."

"No, sir. I'm sorry, sir. This assignment is just fine."

"Oh, I'm *so glad* you feel that

way."

A few moments later they arrived in front of Hycymum Peto's house, and Perrin groaned. He'd been dreading the assignment more than his three privates. He knew she'd make this complicated.

"And there they are!" his mother-in-law squealed as the crowd of neighbors turned and applauded. "And you know what an event like this calls for, right Perrin? Cake!"

"No, Mother Peto," he rubbed his forehead and mumbled, because he knew she'd never listen to him, "it does *not* call for cake."

But already the three young privates had happily abandoned their carts and were being escorted to a table by

Hycymum's gray-haired friends.

"No, no, no," Perrin cringed, "first we need to—"

"Oh, Perrin, look at them—so pale and skinny!"

Perrin squinted at the three soldiers—each a different hue of brown, and two of them a bit on the hefty side—and wondered if Hycymum needed her eyes examined.

"Let them have some cake, first," she said, patting his arm. "It's your favorite, by the way," she sing-songed at him. "And I won't tell Mahrree you had dessert before dinner!"

It really would have appeared tyrannical to drag the three soldiers

away from the cake table in front of the crowd of sixty people enjoying the impromptu afternoon party. Instead, Perrin took a deep breath and walked into his mother-in-law's house to inspect the folded banners stacked in tall piles throughout her gathering room.

Once he did, he was glad he was alone.

"Since when did I request black? White? Green . . . oh, and here's purple. Of course. So *cheery*, isn't it," he grumbled, "to announce the first flowers of the season perhaps? This is so ridiculo—"

He stopped, stunned as he discovered the next unasked-for banner color.

"Oh, she *can't* be serious," and he counted the folds. "Twelve. She actually expects me to . . . Mahrree, where are you?!"

"So what do you think?!" he heard his mother-in-law's voice ringing behind him.

"These," he turned to her and pointed to the stack of red, blue, orange, and yellow he had requested, "look perfect. Strong, lightweight cloth that will easily catch the breeze, and as long and wide as we discussed. The Army of Idumea and I formally thank you, Mrs. Peto. But Mother Peto, this—*this?!*"

"Oh, there's always new emergencies coming up, aren't there?"

She grinned as she came over to straighten a stack of additional banners. "I decided to anticipate the need and make you extra colors now!"

"But, honestly, Mother Peto, *this* one?!"

He held up the shocking banner. It unfurled before him, the tapered end unrolling on the ground to reveal its full twenty foot length. He flopped the wide end over his shoulder and held out the banner.

"Pink?! With *dark pink* stripes, no less?" He shook it at her. "What kind of emergency in the world would require a pink striped banner? Attacking flower sellers?! Belligerent out-of-work jesters?!"

Hycymum put her hands on her full hips. "Or the arrival of special entertainment at the amphitheater? Or new goods at the market from Idumea? Perrin, I got that cloth at a very good price. You'll see that on the bill. And it hangs so lovely from a pole—"

"*PINK?!*"

"Perrin, I'm beginning to suspect you don't *like* the pink."

"I didn't ask for this!" he tried to keep his bellow down.

Hycymum blinked at him. "But surely you'll think of some use for it. Look at the dye job! Really quite lovely."

Perrin opened his mouth to give his

explicit opinion of said dye job when he saw his three privates come into the gathering room, finishing off their bits of cake. They stopped when they saw their commander with the pink striped banner draped over his shoulder and cascading in front of him.

"It *is* lovely, sir," one of them said bravely. "Complements your black hair."

All three soldiers snorted.

The only thing that preserved their lives at that moment was the arrival of Hycymum's sewing friends coming to 'ooh' and 'aah' over the banners, and to finger the pink striped one that Perrin couldn't seem to find a way to put back on the pile.

Nearly an hour later, as the privates trudged with their heavy carts into the compound of the fort, Major Shin gestured to Captain Karna.

"In these carts you'll find the four colors of banners we requested, as well as a few others that can be put into storage. But at the very bottom of this cart," he pointed to the offensive one, "You'll find a banner for which I will never, *ever* find a use. Dispose of those *discretely*!"

"How will I know which banner that is?" Karna smirked.

"You'll know," Perrin said heavily.

Lieutenant Heth brushed down his horse in the stable, and couldn't help but smile. He hadn't owned a horse in years, and the dappled gray was steady and strong. Everything was shaping up exactly as he had dreamed. His old guest bedroom was the same as he left it years ago, and the food was even better than he remembered.

Or maybe it was because after so much dormitory food—each meal with an oddly persistent gray tinge to it—anything else tasted like a Harvest Day Feast.

Even his new companion was tolerable, another newly graduated

lieutenant with *extra training* provided by Administrator Gadiman.

That was the only downside—the ever hovering presence of Gadiman. All training was done at night, and Heth wondered if the Administrator ever slept. Maybe he didn't, which would explain his pasty skin, bloodshot eyes, and permanent sneer.

But he could put up with Gadiman, because of what was coming next. Using Lieutenant Walickiah was Brisack's idea, but with Mal counting on his failure, there would be Heth.

And then, there would be *everything else*.

Heth didn't notice the scruffy-looking man wheeling in the bales of hay

until he came up next to him and patted the mare on her flanks.

"Nice looking animal. Must have come from the Stables at Pools. Of course, only the best for Mal's officers. Or," he added in a whisper, "for the *son of a king*."

Heth stopped in mid brushing and looked over to the man next to him.

"Dormin!" he gasped at his younger brother who he hadn't seen in over a year.

"Shh," Dormin whispered. "Just like you I've changed my name. Call me . . . Ted."

"Ted?"

"Took me a while to find you again.

In King Oren's former mansion? Whew. This is plucky. I don't know what game you're playing, but I have a feeling you don't know all the rules."

"*Ted?*"

"Obviously Mal knows who you are and placed you here. But for what reasons, I can't quite fathom. Intriguing, though. How long do you plan to stay here?"

"Ted!"

"Yes, Ted. What, it's better than Heth. Is that a first or last name, anyway?"

"What are you doing here?" Heth finally hissed at his younger brother. He looked frantically around, but the other stable hands were too busy with their

work to think anything of a lieutenant talking with the straw man.

"I've come to say good-bye," Dormin-Ted whispered. "At first I wasn't sure why, but now seeing you in that uniform and in these stables—well, I think it's obvious."

"When I saw you last you said I'd never see you again. Come to break your promise, Doorknob Ted?" Heth was recovering from his shock.

Dormin didn't show any reaction to the jab. "Have you given any thought to what I talked to you about? The Writings?"

Heth rolled his eyes. "Doorgirl, of course not. So many better things to do."

He straightened his uniform jacket proudly.

Dormin didn't even look at it. "And what're you going to do? Take back our old mansion?"

"I'm not going to *take it*, Doormouse; it's going to be *given* to me."

"*Given*," Dormin repeated calmly. "Why?"

Heth chuckled quietly. "Wouldn't you like to know. But you won't, until you hear about it, and then it will be too late, and not one of those rooms will be for you, Door-for-brains!"

His brother nodded slowly. "None of those rooms will be for you, either, Heth. I have an idea of what you're

about to do, and I promise—it will fail. I'll never see you again because you'll be dead."

Heth scoffed. "You're always been so serious and dull. And you have no idea what I'm about to do!"

Dormin sighed. "Please, Sonoforen, change your mind. It's not too late. I know of things you simply can't imagine! Everyone here thinks they know, but . . . well, take this for instance. Sonoforen, what color is the sky?"

Heth rolled his eyes. "Blue!"

"You didn't even look, did you? You just assumed you know, but did you actually *look* at it?"

With a dramatic sigh, Heth glanced

out the open stable doors to see the tiny patch of sky available. “See? Blue. Right there.”

Dormin pressed his lips together. “That’s precisely right, isn’t it? See the part that you *want* to see, assume it applies to everything else, and stop thinking. But it’s all wrong, Sonoforen,” he whispered. “So much is wrong! Please, come with me, and let me show you—”

“The door, Dorminhead!” Heth said, gesturing to the stable exit. “I’ve had enough, and I’m due in for dinner soon.”

“You’re sloppy, and it’ll kill you,” Dormin warned in a low voice. “The only way for you to have the High

General's mansion is if there's *no more High General*."

Heth swallowed, realizing that as vague as he thought he was, he obviously wasn't enough.

"I'll miss you, Sonoforen," Dormin said bleakly. "I'm not sure why, though. Maybe I'll miss the relationship we *could've* had. If only you'd come with me, but . . . I suppose not. Good-bye, then, Lieutenant Heth."

Heth stared after him as slinked out of the stables.

"Dead-head Ted!" he shouted, but Dormin didn't even turn around as he pushed the empty straw cart away.

“You’re quiet for once,” Lieutenant Xat commented as he and Heth ate their dinners in an anteroom to the main dining hall.

Mal always ate alone, poring over pages and notes that were spread over the kings’ massive banquet table. His guards ate at small tables in attached rooms with a clear view of the Chairman constantly at work. Securing, but not interfering.

“Sorry,” Heth said absent-mindedly cutting his steak into small pieces in the proper manner of a future king. “Only a

little distracted."

It was the flash of motion that he saw out of the corner of his eye that saved his hand. He withdrew it nearly too late as Xat's fork came down on it.

"What's that for?!" Heth exclaimed as he examined his nearly-tined hand. There was a slight scratch mark on it, and a thin line of blood where the fork caught him.

"That's what happens to the distracted!" Xat pointed his fork at Heth's hand. "Failure! You're lucky you have such fast reflexes. But I don't want to narrowly escape death, Heth. I plan to succeed where no one else has, and if I don't think you'll be the best partner, I'll tell Gadiman tonight."

Heth nodded, grudgingly apologetic. “You’re right, you’re right. I’ll be more focused.”

“*Completely* focused,” Xat emphasized. “You’ll not ruin this for me.”

“Nor for *me*,” Heth said with a solid glare.

“So what is it?” Xat asked, stabbing his steak with his fork and tearing off a piece with his teeth. “As your partner, I should know everything in order to keep you centered on our mission,” he garbled.

Heth grumbled. “Just had an unexpected visitor this afternoon.”

“From your past?” Xat tore off

another chunk of meat.

"Yes. Someone I thought was gone."

"We're to eliminate all connections with the past, remember?" Xat chewed noisily.

"I had, but his person found me, not the other way around."

"Uh-oh," Xat sneered as he swallowed. "How much did you owe him?"

Heth paused, trying to think of how to avoid discussing his brother. Dormin had seemed *different*. And once again, Heth had been more interested in insulting him than in finding out anything about him. It was obvious Mal couldn't use him, but the Chairman wouldn't

believe that. Besides, if Mal used Dormin, that'd be competition for his mansion, and the last person in the world Heth would share that mansion with was his brother. He'd sooner allow the Shin family to move in, if any of them survived.

"Four slips of silver," Heth eventually said. "He forgot I repaid him last year."

"They always do," Xat said, shoving the rest of his steak in his mouth. "Anything else?" he tried to say without dropping bits of meat.

"Nope. He's gone. Especially when I showed him the only silver I'd give him was my long knife."

Xat nodded in approval. “Dying to use it, aren’t you?”

“That I am,” Heth said, stabbing his steak.

Chapter 17 ~ “That’s part of his unpredictability.”

Fifty new soldiers and their commander rode to Edge, only three days before the first Strongest Soldier race. Lieutenant Walickiah, a slender

and gangly man with reddish-blonde hair and a crooked nose that had experienced too many fights, saw the southernmost tower long before they approached. He shook his head in wonder.

"He *has* been a busy bear, hasn't he?" he murmured to himself.

"Sir," called one of the soldiers behind him. "What *is* that?"

"Major Shin's newest strategy to improve the security of the villages. According to the High General, he calls it a tower station."

"Well I could have guessed *that*," said another soldier.

Walickiah smirked, but since he was at the head of the line, no soldiers could see it. "Show respect, soldiers!

This is your new commander you're referring to, and many of you will be stationed at the tops of those towers."

"You can see for miles from that," said a sergeant next to him, his voice full of awe as they neared. "Brilliant! Guarders will never be able to take the army by surprise again."

"Yes," Walickiah said ponderously. "Should be interesting to see how they deal with these obstacles."

The soldiers' banter picked up as they closed in on the tower, and Walickiah stopped his division so they could inspect it.

"Bit of a climb up there," said one portly, middle-aged master sergeant,

furrowing his brow. “About the height of a three or four level building, I’d guess. Think they’ll use towers everywhere in the world?”

Walickiah shrugged. “If Shin finds them successful here, and the High General agrees, I assume every village will be building these. So if you’re thinking of putting in for a transfer to somewhere less grueling, think again.”

The soldiers laughed as the sergeant turned pink. “I can get up that tower, sir! I’ll prove it right now.”

“No, you won’t,” Walickiah said.

“Yes, I will!”

“How? Jump?” He gestured to the workers over in the field assembling long poles, obviously for the ladder that

was not yet installed.

The sergeant cleared his throat. “Guess I’ll have to prove my prowess at another time, Lieutenant. Now, I imagine the major is waiting for us?”

Walickiah rolled his eyes. “You knew the ladder wasn’t there yet. But I’m sure I can find you a tower that *is* ready. Onward, men. We have a new home to get to.”

When Walickiah arrived with his fifty that afternoon, he slipped easily into character. After Karna showed him to his new quarters, he took the captain by

the arm. In a sufficiently worried manner, paling lighter than his already fair skin, he said, "Off record, Captain —what's he like? The major?"

Karna smiled at the apprehension of the newest officer. "You've experienced High General Shin, right?"

Walickiah sighed. "Oh yes. And he was an *experience*. Twice my last year! He taught two courses in command. I wasn't sure I'd survive his one-on-one final exams."

Karna winced knowingly. "Well, I've seen Major Shin be as determined, regimented, and fierce as the general. For the first few weeks after the Guarder attack, he was a real bear. No one in the command tower dared smile until we got

his plans for securing the village finalized."

Walickiah pulled a pained face.

"*But*," Karna added, "whereas the general can't seem to quit, Major Shin will suddenly surprise you. He's unpredictable. You never know what he's going to do, or allow, or insist on next. Makes this quite an interesting assignment. You'll never be bored. Now that we've got the village towers in place, he's been a little less fierce, but still I recommend watching your step."

"I heard he's married, even has *two* children?" Walickiah shook his head in sympathy. "I couldn't imagine having a Shin for a father."

Karna laughed. “That’s part of his unpredictability. Just wait. You’ll see.”

Walickiah did see, the very next day. Early in the morning he reported for duty at the command tower and *experienced* the major. For the next fifteen minutes the major questioned, challenged, and intimidated him. Shin was most definitely a bear.

Then, abruptly, the major changed completely as he smiled, shook Walickiah’s hand warmly, and said, “Welcome to Edge! You’re going to enjoy your posting, I promise.”

It was going to take time to fully understand the major and his moods. The rest of the day Walickiah could see by

their faces which of his new men had just descended from the tower. They wore looks that were a mixture of shock, worry, and outright confusion.

That evening after the major had gone home, Walickiah and Karna sat at the large desk in the forward command office going over the records of the new soldiers. Heavy footsteps coming up the stairs startled them both.

"Captain!" a familiar voice called before it reached the top.

Walickiah stiffened in anticipation, wondering which mood was about to appear—the bear or something else.

"I know you and the lieutenant are still here," Shin's voice carried. "Let's take a look at the tower station map

again. I was thinking we need to redraw the lines for the granary district, and it would be good for the lieutenant to see our plans . . . what?"

As he appeared at the top of the stairs both officers were staring at him. Or rather, staring at what he was carrying.

The major beamed. "Since Peto here is fifteen moons old now, I thought it was time to show him where I go every day."

The brown haired boy with pale gray eyes wore a small dark blue jacket in the same style as his father's uniform. He seemed smaller than a normal child, probably because his father was much

larger than a normal man.

Walickiah memorized the child's features instantly. While his hair and eye coloring were nothing like his father's, the shape of his face—nose, eyes, mouth, ears—was all Major Shin, in miniature.

The baby waved cheerfully at the two officers.

They felt obligated to wave back, albeit hesitantly.

The proud major grinned. "Pretty good, huh? Jaytsy couldn't wave properly until she was a year and a half. She kept doing more of a slap. Could get rather dangerous if you were holding her in the wrong way. Of course, now at nearly two and a half she *can* wave, and also talks up a storm. Can't understand

half of it, but my wife usually can. It'll be easier once she learns to make an 's' sound. Fortunately yesterday I decoded 'Fodder, watch—I gream!' and covered my ears just in time. She's going to be as loud as her mother. But Peto's my good little boy, usually. Only has a habit of climbing everything. He made it to the top shelf of a bookshelf earlier this evening, so I decided to get him out of the house so my wife could clean it up without his help. Because as the saying goes, 'There's no job too tedious that can't turn terrifying when a toddler tries to help.' So, the map? Since I'll be in Moorland tomorrow inspecting their new fort, I wanted to make sure we get

this done tonight."

Walickiah blinked.

Then he blinked again, trying to figure out what the monologue was about and still puzzling out the meaning of "I gream!" It was if he was staring at a completely different man. The terrifying major from the morning was replaced with this proud papa that was . . .

Well, certainly *no one* would actually apply the term to Major Shin, but if he were any other man it wouldn't be a stretch to say he was actually *babbling*. The bear had turned into a veritable puppy dog as he spoke about his children.

That was very good to know.

Another reason, Walickiah realized

later, that he was staring so hard that Karna had to elbow him three times was that he'd never seen an officer holding a child, at least not voluntarily. But Major Shin, running his fingers through his son's thick hair to smooth it to the side, couldn't have looked happier.

The captain retrieved the map and brought it into the major's office, and Walickiah followed. In his office Shin leaned over the map, but his son tried to grab it.

"No, no, no Peto. Not this. Here." He placed the little boy on the floor. "You can have . . ."

He looked around, then picked up a message from the Administrators and

grinned.

"You can have *this*. Nicko Mal signed it himself. You know what to do with it."

Walickiah watched in horror as the major's son put the official message in his mouth and tore it with his tiny teeth.

"Don't worry, Lieutenant," the major told him upon seeing his expression. "I know what it said. Peto's more effective at destroying paper than my dog. And he doesn't choke on the bits anymore, he just usually spits them out. He's *fine*. Now, what I was thinking over here was . . ."

It took Walickiah another minute to focus on the map over the sound of disrespectful ripping underneath him.

Since the major whipped between subjects so quickly, Walickiah found himself feeling a little light-headed. The three men pored over the map for about ten minutes, redoing station reporting territories and explaining the system to Walickiah.

Suddenly Major Shin looked up in surprise, then down at the floor. The message from Mal was scattered in wet shreds, but the boy was nowhere to be seen.

The major looked at his officers in alarm. “Uh, I think my son’s absent without permission. The stairs!” he cried and ran out of his office, with Karna right behind him.

Walickiah knew enough to join them.

There was no baby in the forward office, or going down the stairs. The major groaned.

"Need help, sir?" Karna asked.

"Yes! He could be anywhere! He knows how to do stairs," the major called as he ran down them. "And I gave Mahrree such a hard time when she lost him at the . . ."

But they didn't hear the rest because the major was already gone, his heavy footsteps sounding like thunder as he ran. Karna and Walickiah followed him.

At the bottom of the stairs, the large main receiving area was quiet as it

usually was this time of day. Most of the soldiers were either eating dinner or getting ready for their night shifts. Major Shin stood at the main door anxiously looking out into the darkening compound. A soldier saluted as he walked past.

"Private! Did you see a little boy?"

"Today, sir?"

The major groaned again and turned around. "Karna, check the hallway to the barracks. Walickiah, go to the mess hall. I'll look out here."

Walickiah looked at Karna who raised his eyebrows in a 'Get moving!' manner. Walickiah rushed out the side door down the corridor to the mess hall, not sure what he would do with the baby

if he saw it.

This was most telling, Walickiah considered. The major was nearly hysterical simply because his little boy was missing. How weak and easily panicked Shin was. He may be as large as a bear, but he was as wretched as a butterfly.

All kinds of scenarios played out in the lieutenant's mind. He hadn't been told specifically what to do in Edge, because he was to take advantage of any situation that presented itself. Walickiah didn't understand why he was told his assignment would be difficult. On the contrary, it would be quite easy. So many situations were presenting

themselves he would have thought it was his birthday. And if they didn't like the results that happened with one child, there was another at his disposal.

What kinds of chances would a small child have in the forest, should it happen to get 'lost'? That would make for a most interesting study . . .

And what if *two* vanished, in different parts, without a trace, and their mother was also—

Walickiah was startled out of his contemplation when he saw a strapping corporal carrying the little boy and walking towards him. The soldier appeared to be exceptionally young, but was surprising large in build. Perhaps it was the extreme innocence of his face

that gave him such a youthful look.

Such a carefully *practiced* look.

"Sir," the corporal nodded to him. "I'm assuming the major lost something?"

Walickiah slipped back into character and sighed exaggeratedly in relief. "Yes! I think he's about to rip apart the fort."

The corporal chuckled. "Do you want to bring him Peto, or shall I?"

Walickiah held up his hands. "I wouldn't know how to hold him."

The corporal smiled and continued walking down the hallway, Walickiah behind him. The young soldier seemed quite capable of holding the child. The

baby started making an odd grunting noise that sounded like “Unk! Unk!” He wasn’t in the least bit upset or wailing.

Walickiah took note at how the corporal held him, so that he could copy the position.

In the main reception area the major came running in just as the corporal arrived. Major Shin’s shoulders sagged in relief when he saw the corporal with his son.

“Unk! Unk!”

The major smiled. “Yes Peto, you found your Unk. Zenos, thank you!”

“I keep telling you, sir, he’s going to grow up to be a scout,” the corporal smiled. “He toddled right into the mess hall as if he knew what he was looking

for. No fear at all."

The major laughed. "Looks like he made off with a part of someone's pear, too," he said as he took his son and gave him a big kiss on the cheek.

Walickiah tried not to stare. Major Puppy Dog was quite the disappointment.

"Unk!" Peto waved the pear at his father.

Karna ran into the reception area, the anxious look on his face evaporating.

"Unk's pear. Yes!" Shin nodded, and turned to the corporal. "Would you do me a favor?" he said with surprising casualness.

"Let me guess—don't tell your

wife?" the corporal responded, equally as informal, and not even adding "sir" to his answer.

"Exactly!" Shin pointed at the corporal and winked, while Walickiah's eyebrows furrowed in frantic analysis of the situation. "Peto, your mother should be finished cleaning up your mess. How about we go home?"

The major nodded good night to his men as Peto waved his little hand at them again.

Walickiah again felt obliged and waved half-heartedly. He should make himself known to the child somehow, so he wouldn't make undue noise in his presence in the future.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw

the corporal waving like a maniac. Walickiah stared at him and dropped his arm.

"Bye-bye! Say 'bye-bye'!" the corporal crooned in a high-pitched voice.

"Bye!" the little boy said softly.

The major spun around.

"Did you hear that?!" His question was obviously directed at the corporal, because he didn't make eye contact with anyone else.

"I did!" the corporal squealed like a teenage girl. "He finally said it!"

"Oh, good job, son," the major kissed his baby again.

"My condolences, sir," the corporal

grinned. “He’s going to be as talkative as his sister!”

“I’m afraid you may be right.” The major chuckled and headed out, trying to get his son to repeat the word, oblivious to everything else.

Walickiah turned slowly to the corporal who was still smiling at the empty doorway. His suspicion increased, and if he could verify it, his superiors would be most impressed with his efforts on his first full day.

“I don’t think we’ve met yet,” he smiled thinly. “I’m Lieutenant Walickiah,” and he held out his hand.

The corporal took it. “And I’m the Unk. Good to meet you!” He winked and jogged down the hallway.

Walickiah's mouth dropped open. That wasn't the response he was expecting. In fact, there wasn't *anything* appropriate about that response, and he was sure he said his part correctly.

He looked confusedly at Karna. "The Unk?"

Karna nodded. "Baby tender for Major Shin," he said offhandedly. "*Uncle*. Some of us think he should get a special medal for changing their dirty cloths."

"A soldier baby tender? *For the major?*" His hunch grew stronger.

"Naturally," Karna smiled. "I told you, this fort is a most interesting assignment. Do you want to be a back-up

for Unk?”

Walickiah thought about that. How much easier would his task be if he became the back-up baby tender? Never mind that he knew nothing of children, it’s not as if he would be doing much for long—

He considered the possibility too long. Captain Karna took his delay as a response.

“I’m only teasing you. They wouldn’t trust their children with anyone else than Shem Zenos.”

Lieutenant Walickiah smiled faintly and followed the captain back up the stairs, satisfied.

How perfect. In the fort for only a day and a half, and already he had

identified the Quiet Man.

Shem Zenos walked back to the mess hall, picked up his dishes, and brought them to the washing station. Then he idly wandered back to his barracks, lost in thought and worry.

Lieutenant Walickiah. So this was the next stage.

Major Shin was in major trouble.

And now, so was Shem.

For someone who had never stolen

a thing before in his life, Dormin made off quite well with the horse, he thought to himself. Maybe he *did* have a talent.

What he *didn't* have was more time.

He'd already wasted too much in Idumea looking for his brother, and now he had to get back on schedule and to Winds. As he rode the black horse along the dark roads, he tried to justify in his mind what he'd done by taking the animal. The words wouldn't come. Everything sounded either feeble, or something his brother would say, which was pretty much the same thing.

But it was over now, he was sure of it. Sonoforen had chosen his fate, Dormin was now choosing his. But only

by riding all night and day and night again would he meet his fate on time.

He just might have to steal a few more horses.

It was a sunny and cool afternoon in the middle of Harvest Season, the 46th Day. Perfect weather for the Strongest Soldier Race.

"Actually," Perrin clarified to his wife for the umpteenth time that morning over breakfast, "it's to test Stage Three, the Tower Banner Notices. *Not* to see who the strongest soldier is. So please *stop calling it the Strongest Soldier*

Race!"

"But everyone else in Edge is calling it that," Mahrree defended sweetly.

"Because you got them to!"

"Yes," she giggled, "I did, didn't I?"

The day should have been declared a holiday, Perrin decided later. The towers which had captured the citizens' attention as they were constructed were now fully manned and readied. It seemed most of the population of Edge put their work on hold to come watch the first trial of the system, especially since they heard that the Commander of the fort would be racing the young Hero of Edge.

Also probably Mahrree's doing as

well.

It was early afternoon when Perrin approached at the village green tower on horseback from the west, having made sure the towers in that quadrant were ready for their first test. Corporal Zenos was coming to meet him from the east, and Captain Karna from the south, with verification that the towers in those quadrants were readied as well.

What the three men hadn't expected was the festival atmosphere that greeted them by the amphitheater. Over a thousand adults and children were milling around, chatting, and even selling food and drinks as they waited for the race.

Perrin shook his head at the unexpected scene. A cheer rose up when the three men arrived from different roads, converging at the village green tower. Major Shin nodded to the crowd and waved politely before walking his horse over to his captain.

"Karna," he said in a low voice, "this is madness! We posted bulletins to forewarn the citizens, not to be their entertainment."

The captain chuckled. "Remember Major, you're winning hearts and minds, and that's important since you're now also the Administrators' Eyes and Ears and Voice."

Perrin shook his head and mumbled,

“Only a few body parts remain my own.”

“Don’t worry,” said Karna,” You can borrow some of mine. I’m still your third and fourth hands, and second mind.”

Perrin winked in gratitude.

Corporal Zenos looked around nervously from atop his mount. A group of young women, with their own homemade cloth banner proudly sporting the name of ZENOS, caught his eye. They waved enthusiastically. Sareen was one of them, and Perrin noticed Zenos wincing as the silly girl giggled.

“Major, maybe we shouldn’t do this today—the race I mean,” Zenos said quietly giving sidelong glances to the

girls who called for him and waved more boldly.

He waved timidly back.

They squealed.

He blushed.

Captain Karna shook his head. "That would be a bad idea, Zenos. Those girls have been waiting for nearly an hour to see you," he warned him. "If we cancel now we'd most likely have an angry mob on our hands. Major, perhaps that could be the signal for the purple banner?" He grinned.

Major Shin smiled in agreement. "Then I guess you best be on your way to the fort, Captain. You have a relay race to finish setting up. We'll be up shortly

after we've checked the last two stations."

"I'll have the surgeon waiting on standby for you two. *If* you're able to complete what I've set up for you, neither will be walking well for a week!" Karna laughed, kicked his horse, and headed to the fort.

Shin looked over to Zenos. He was staring at his horse's mane trying not to notice the crowd, and especially trying not to look at the girls who kept calling for him.

Sareen and another girl had taken off their cloaks, despite the chill of Harvest Season, and slid their short sleeves down to reveal their bare shoulders, and even a bit beyond.

‘Cleavage’ was a new Idumean fashion, a trend Perrin told Mahrree she didn’t need to adopt.

By the redness of Zenos’s ears, Perrin knew he had seen the girls’ efforts to attract his attention.

“Let’s go over to the tower to make the announcement,” the major said to him.

Zenos clucked his horse to match the major’s gait. The men made their way to the twenty foot perimeter of low rocks ringing each tower to remind the children—and their curious fathers—that they weren’t allowed any closer.

“I understand your concerns, Corporal,” Major Shin said leaning over

and patting him kindly on the back. Now that they were out of earshot, he could gauge the corporal's readiness in relative privacy. "Not feeling up to it? No problem. Just concede defeat now. You did look a little tired on the sofa the other night."

Zenos narrowed his eyes and gave him a stern look. "I was tired, *sir*, because you and Mrs. Shin didn't get home from inspecting the Moorland fort until well after midnight. I was *sleeping*."

The major glared at him. "Sleeping on my favorite pillow!" he whispered.

Zenos matched his glare. "The one *your wife* gave me, when she warned me the two of you would probably be late.

She said you had two more. And," he added smugly, "it was quite comfy, sir. I enjoyed drooling on it."

The major fought a tug at the side of his mouth. "So that's why you stayed there all night?"

"You could have woken me up, sent me on my way," Zenos said, his face starting to twitch.

"No I couldn't. I tried! Your sergeant was right. You *are* impossible to wake unless you smell breakfast cooking. Besides," his face became as soft and mushy as he could make it, "Mahrree thought you looked so *sweet* sleeping there."

When Perrin said 'sweet' he knew

he was starting to lose. The smile he meant to provoke on Zenos was sneaking around his mouth instead.

Zenos saw it, and likely thought he could seal his victory. “Just how ‘sweet’ did I look, sir?” But it was too much. He snorted.

Perrin pointed at him and grinned. “You did that to yourself! No noise, remember? Ha! That’s not the first thing you’ll lose today, Zenos.”

Shem laughed. “It was ‘sweet’ that did it. I saw you starting to lose too!”

“Doesn’t matter who *starts* losing, it’s who actually *loses*. That was your rule, remember?”

Over the past several weeks this competition had become almost an

obsession with the two men. The day after the major interrogated the corporal in his office, a timid Shem came over in the evening. During dinner—and with Mahrree's prodding—Perrin and Shem talked over the ridiculousness of their confrontation the day before. Soon they were re-enacting the incident for Mahrree, this time with laughter and teasing about who should have broken down first.

Somehow over the next few days a competition evolved to see who could stay sober the longest, no matter what the other said. They were becoming adept at watching each other's eyes and faces for clues that one of them was about to

break into a genuine smile or a laugh. At first Shem lost quickly, but in the past two weeks his ability to match the major's glare had improved. It was that skill that allowed him to remain sober while challenging the major to the race. But he still struggled with stifling his laughter that always insisted on coming out as a snort.

"Well, Major Shin, we'll see who loses next!" His corporal tried his glare again. "Go make your announcement."

Perrin nodded, got off his horse, and climbed the tower until he was about fifteen feet off the ground.

Everyone gathered at the green quieted when they saw him.

"Citizens of Edge," the major

called to them, "I appreciate your coming out, but I'm not sure why you're here. The race will include each of the towers and, from what Captain Karna has revealed to me, even some of your homes. Apparently certain 'disasters' will be visiting you. Besides the corporal and me, that is," he added.

The crowd began to laugh.

The major shook his head. "But if you're all *here*, who's going to be 'in danger' and give Corporal Zenos or me our notes proving we reached you?"

The villagers looked at each other and nodded in understanding.

"So I ask that each of you return to your homes. Zenos and I will be starting

the race in less than an hour, beginning at the fort. In order for us to accurately determine the effectiveness of this new system, I ask that none of you impede our progress—”

He glanced down at Shem.

“—even if Corporal Zenos agrees to try your cookies. Once he starts, he just doesn’t stop.”

Insulted, Zenos exclaimed, “It was only two cookies, sir! And they were different kinds! And I was far ahead in that race anyway!”

Edgers laughed and a few patted Zenos on the leg.

The major grinned. “Mrs. Reed? I trust Captain Karna didn’t put you on the route this time. And if he did, remember

—no baking."

The older woman in the middle of the laughing villagers blushed and waved at the major.

"We will accept drinks of water, however," the major continued, "but nothing else. Mr. Arky, I'm talking to you, sir."

The crowd roared again and Mr. Arky nodded guiltily. His exceptionally potent 'secret' mead batch—and its effects on Mr. Arky, several innocent bushes, and one unfortunate and now balding cat—had been the talk of his neighborhood for the past week.

"Now if you'll all head home, I promise we'll do our best to reach each

of your areas. Don't make me order you!" he added with a slightly cheesy smile.

The crowd cheered and started to leave.

Major Shin climbed down the tower and climbed back on his horse.

"Winning hearts and minds, Major. You could teach all the lessons," Zenos chuckled at him.

"Basic diplomacy, Shem—emotionally manipulating your audience," the major said quietly. "What my wife called 'officers charm school.' The trick is to get them laughing. If someone laughs *with* you, then they assume you're their buddy. They don't realize you've already gained the upper

hand."

Shem grinned. "I'm going to remember that, sir."

"Oh, I'm sure you already knew that."

And Perrin was *quite sure* about that. The corporal was far cleverer than he let on, almost as if he was embarrassed by his quickness. And that was also why Perrin kept him close, just as Hogal had told him. He needed a boy like that on *his side* in everything.

The two soldiers walked their horses towards the edge of the green, but a cluster of young females pushed their way through dispersing crowd like a flock of gibbering geese, and rushed up

to Shem.

"We're cheering for you, Corporal! Make us proud!" Sareen winked and giggled.

Perrin didn't bother to stop his horse as Corporal Zenos politely did, but nudged it out of the way of Sareen's *flock*, he decided it might be called, that had grown larger and didn't even notice the second horse and rider.

"Don't mind me," he muttered quietly as he guided his horse around the sudden obstacle. "Only the commander here, trying to secure Edge. Certainly don't want to get in the way of something as important as *flirting* . . ."

Sareen's friends—half a dozen now, and all looking strangely similar

likely because females this age tended to preen together—started giggling at Shem, as if senseless giggling were also a new fashion trend. Out of the corner of his eye, Perrin caught the motion of two of the girls hurriedly sliding their sleeves off of their bare shoulders. He immediately looked away, and chuckled in pity for his corporal.

Behind him, Perrin heard Shem's pained grunt before he addressed the gaggling assembly. "I'll do my best not to disappoint you ladies," and he chirruped his mount to catch up to major.

Perrin glanced back and saw the girls giggle yet again and wave in unison as Shem's horse trotted away from them.

The young soldier looked rather desperate.

Perrin considered the situation, and when his corporal caught up to him a moment later he said, “You know, Shem, I do allow my soldiers to marry. I encourage it, even. Lot of advantages to marriage, you know.”

Shem shrugged and nodded half-heartedly. “Someday I’ll find the right woman, sir.”

“There are quite a few around here who’d like to volunteer for the position.”

“I’m not sure they’re my type, Major.”

“Oh, I don’t know. One type had

blonde hair, another black, another brown—”

Shem chuckled. “I mean, um, they aren’t . . .” He fumbled for the right words, then tried a different tactic. “Major, I want a girl that would . . . that my sister and Mahrr—*Mrs. Shin* would both like.”

Perrin noticed he started to say Mahrree again, but fixed it. Only someone that was *his* would feel such a familiarity, and also feel the need to conceal it.

Shem continued as if he hadn’t slipped. “Someone they would be friends with. Back home there were a couple of girls that, well, if they’re still around in a few years . . .”

"Ah, I see," Perrin said slowly. "I don't recommend waiting too long, Shem. I was lucky Mahrree was still single when I came here. But you can't wait around simply hoping."

"I know."

"So you really don't think any of those girls with their Zenos banner—"

"Sir, would you have wanted to marry your wife if she were . . ." Shem paused to try to phrase it correctly, "*minimizing her clothing in public* to get your attention?"

Perrin chuckled. "Mahrree was never that kind of girl. At your age she was still scaring off men, not trying to attract them. There's much more to her

than her looks."

"That's what I mean! I want more than just looks, but all they have is—" Unable to find the right words, he instead wiggled his shoulders like Sareen had and rolled his eyes in disgusted embarrassment.

Perrin winced in agreement. "Rather relieved you're not interested in her. That giggling—I never knew a sound to be so grating. And I'm stuck hearing it every evening as she cleans up after the boys. I'm afraid Jaytsy might start picking it up."

Shem chuckled. "Sareen's incredibly persistent. I don't want to be impolite, but—"

"Keep being polite," Perrin

advised. “Rudeness simply isn’t your nature. But also be *very* brief. Eventually she may lose interest when she realizes you’re not expressing any.”

“Did that work for you?”

Half of Perrin’s mouth lifted into a smile. “Now what makes you think I ever had young women infatuated with me?”

“Just stands to reason,” Shem shrugged. “I imagine that with your father’s position and that fact that you’re . . . um, I suppose that women found—or rather, *still* find you . . . What I *mean* is __”

Perrin chuckled as his corporal grew red.

“Enough digging your own latrine, Zenos. But yes, there was a girl or two. And occasionally you have to firmly tell one that you really aren’t interested, but usually they pick that up on their own.”

Shem sighed. “I sure hope so. She’s getting a bit annoying.”

“To put it *politely*,” Perrin said. “Well, there are some nice girls at Luntings’ congregation.”

Shem nodded reluctantly. “I’ve seen a few. But it’s hard to meet them. Rector Lunting doesn’t have those smaller meetings like Rector Densal had. Everyone’s just packed into that large barn now. Maybe we can convince a third rector to move here, with smaller

meetings again, or get Mr. Metz to come back and start a congregation?"

Perrin looked down at his horse as it plodded to the next tower station.

"Shem," he began hesitantly, "I think the problem may be Mahrree and I. Maybe you shouldn't sit with us, or take the children out when they fuss. Since we're the only soldiers there, maybe we should spread out a little. Let some of those girls find their way next to you?"

"Actually, sir," Shem watched his horse too, "sitting with your family is the best part of my week."

Perrin would never admit it out loud, but it was his favorite part, too. If ever he'd had a little brother, he would have been exactly like Shem.

"Sir, I'd hate to sit alone," the corporal said. "Besides, most of the girls aren't really listening, always passing little notes to their friends," he murmured. "They're not quite right either. What I want is a girl that thinks, that cares, that talks to me like . . . like . . . like . . ."

"My wife?" Perrin suggested carefully.

"Yes! But probably younger, sir. Oh," Shem cringed. "That did *not* come out right—"

Perrin laughed. "It's all right, Shem. I'd be more concerned if you *didn't* say that!"

Shem glanced at him to make sure

the major's amusement was genuine. He sighed in relief. "And someone like my sister, sir. She and your wife are so alike. And their opinions are very important to me. Almost as important as yours."

Perrin smiled. "She feels the same way about you, you know. Mahrree thinks of you as a little brother." He didn't feel the need to admit anything more than that.

"I know sir, and I appreciate that. It makes being away from home easier. I never had a mother that I remember, but my sister took care of me the same way your wife does." He chuckled. "A few weeks ago when I visited them, my sister gave me my brother-in-law's pillow to

sleep on!"

"Ah, so you're used to stealing other men's pillows," Perrin glared at him playfully. "How old is your sister?"

"About the same age as you and Mrs. Shin."

Perrin nodded thoughtfully, surprised to finally hear something about Shem's family. He rarely spoke about them. "That's quite a range between children."

"Not *that* much. Ten years. But it turned out well. My sister helped care for me after my mother died when I was two. I often thought the Creator did that span in our ages on purpose. Still, my father complains he had to wait ten years

to get his boy."

"Patient man."

"Usually, yes," Shem said. "But when I went home on leave he said, 'Waited ten years for my boy, and now he lives as far away from me as he can! Where have you been all this time?'" Shem laughed, a bit sadly.

Perrin stared straight ahead, a thought forming in his head that he didn't like at all. But it would've been dishonest to not share it.

He cleared his throat. "Zenos, the fort in Flax will be completed in the next few weeks. I know the colonel who's taking it over. He's still looking for men. If you want to transfer closer to your father, to those girls . . . Consider, you

could always transfer back here again later—”

Shem had turned abruptly in his saddle halfway through the major’s proposal. “No, sir! This is where I belong!”

Perrin leaned back in his saddle, surprised by Shem’s earnestness. “Just consider it, Shem. As much as I’d hate to lose you—and I suspect that Mahrree wouldn’t let me back into the house should I let you go—perhaps this is what your father needs.” His voice became quiet. “I can’t imagine how I’d feel if Peto left me and I didn’t have Mahrree anymore. I’d probably get on Jaytsy’s nerves.”

Shem smiled. “Sir, I appreciate the thought, but my father’s fine with where I am. He’s just a big tease like me. He knows who you are and wouldn’t want me serving anywhere else.”

Something in those words struck Perrin oddly. “He knows who I am?”

Shem nodded. “By association, I mean. One year he travelled to Idumea to sell some of his herd to the army, and he ran into the High General. They spoke only for a few minutes, but my father was impressed. When I told him I wanted to re-enlist long term, he said he’d be fine with it as long as I was always under your command.”

“Even if you could live closer to

home?"

"Especially if I could live closer to home!" he laughed, but then sobered. "*Please*, Major Shin, let me stay here?"

His tone was so worried that Perrin was stunned. "Of course, of course. Wouldn't want to upset Mr. Zenos now, would I?"

Shem sighed. "I'm fine here, sir. Really. And if you really don't want to upset my father, you will not *cheat* in the relay race today. That is, after all, the only chance you have of beating me, *Grandpy*."

Perrin's mouth dropped open, shocked at the sudden insubordination, but he immediately closed it.

Because the game was on.

“Thirty-one years old is hardly a grandpy, *boy*.”

Zenos glared at him. “We’ll see,” he said briskly. “You’re birthday is in five days and I’ve been invited over for cake. You’ll be thirty-two, and that’s *old*.”

He was already improving at stifling his snort.

Chapter 18 ~ “All that cheering wasn’t just for you, Corporal!”

Forty minutes later two soldiers stood ready, watching out large windows in the forward office of the tower.

But they didn't stand still.

They bounced and nudged and jostled each other as they surveyed the skyline in the south and west. Their eyes darted from one new tower to another, anticipating the first signals. Captain Karna waited in the compound below them, with Neeks and Gizzada on either side him. The three had faced their horses towards the main gates to follow the racers once they left.

Lieutenant Walickiah, in charge of ensuring a fair start and monitoring the banner changes, shook his head as he evaluated the situation before him. Shin *was* unpredictable, and now the relationship Walickiah saw between the

major and the corporal explained a great deal as to why the Quiet Man hadn't been talking. Walickiah had yet to get him alone, and now he suspected why: either they were losing him to the major, or he was even more duplicitous than even Walickiah. And that was saying something.

The major and the corporal had already shed their caps, jackets, and weapons, and left them sloppily on the large desk behind them. The race was no longer a test of the new system, nor to see how quickly a soldier in full uniform could respond.

It was personal.

Besides, the major had reasoned out loud a few minutes ago, it would be

easier for the soldiers in the stations to see them coming in their white undershirts. And Zenos could take his off to signal his surrender when he was ready to quit.

That's when the poking started.

Walickiah *had* been standing between Shin and Zenos to make sure it was a fair start—Karna's orders. But when the major made that comment about the corporal surrendering, Zenos leaned behind the lieutenant and poked the major hard in the ribs while muttering something that sounded like "grandpy".

Walickiah had frozen in shock. Even out of uniform, one does not *poke*

one's commanding officer. He didn't know where that was written, but he was sure it had to be somewhere. There was no other option but to cancel the race and throw the corporal into confinement. What else could an officer do?

Apparently poke back, for starters.

Maybe if Walickiah hadn't been so startled he would have reacted more quickly.

Shin squinted severely at his corporal and lunged to poke Zenos, who was bouncing erratically. The major missed and Walickiah caught the furious finger in his ribs instead. Shin tried to utter an apology as Zenos snorted a laugh, and Walickiah was starting to say, "Oh, not a problem, sir," when he took

another jab, this time from Zenos.

Survival instinct finally kicked in as Walickiah raised his hands and moved to the back of the office to watch from a safe distance.

Now the two grown men were punching each other's shoulders like thirteen-year-olds, still trying to keep their eyes on the village towers.

Walickiah almost considered the situation amusing, if it weren't so immature. The men acted more as brothers than as a commander and a mere enlisted man.

As he observed the major and his baby tender start slapping each other as they tried to cover the other man's eyes,

he had to agree—this was a most interesting assignment. Very little of what *really* was going on in the fort was known beyond Edge.

Yet he'd never heard of another fort where morale was so high. Every soldier was eagerly awaiting the race, stationed throughout Edge. Several unofficial bets had been placed as to the outcome, and there was even a rumor that cake would be served afterwards.

A flash of orange cloth unfurling in the distance caught Walickiah's eye, followed immediately by a flash of blue just beyond it.

The two men scrambled over each other to be the first down the stairs. The Unk was first and leaped down the last

six steps. He stumbled as he landed awkwardly, and the major rushed past him.

"Hey, no pushing, *sir!*" Zenos yelled.

Shin laughed. "You're just clumsy, *boy!*" His voice faded away as he ran out to the compound.

Walickiah quickly stepped over to the window. By the time the men reached the gates they were running shoulder to shoulder.

Karna looked up to wave at Walickiah, and then he, Neeks, and Gizzada kicked their horses to follow the runners.

All alone Walickiah finally

allowed himself to smile. This was a most unusual fort, and it certainly wasn't going to be a boring assignment. In many ways, Major Shin almost seemed like a man worth getting to know.

It was almost too bad Walickiah was there to destroy him.

Perrin cut across a road littered with crunching red and yellow leaves on his sprint towards the orange banner. Shem had parted ways with him as they entered Edge, and he now raced towards the blue banner. They each knew the pattern of the colors they were to watch

for. Which tower would hoist the next color—that was for them to discover.

Perrin saw the soldier standing at the base of the tower, the one closest to his home. He was smiling as he held out the small piece of paper.

"Major Shin," the soldier yelled as Perrin approached. "Chief of enforcement needs help finding a *lost child* in the neighborhood. You need to go to this location for your next note!"

Perrin slowed to grab the note and jogged as he read the location. He groaned, shoved the paper in his front pocket, leaped over a low fence and sprinted through two gardens, to the cheers of his neighbors. Then he ran up the road to a house he knew all too well.

Mahrree stood on the front porch waving a piece of paper, Peto in her arms, and Jaytsy jumping up and down and clapping. As Perrin bounded up the stairs to snatch the note, she held it back.

"I understand there's a story behind this 'lost child'? Promise to tell me?"

"I will! Now hand it over!"

She grinned and gave it to him. "Go, Perrin!" she called as he ran out of their yard towards the next tower in the northeast section of Edge, which now showed a red banner.

Karna, don't get too comfortable in that new captain's jacket of yours, Perrin thought as he slowed his gait slightly to pace himself over the next

several roads. True, he'd told *only Shem* not to mention anything about Peto's wandering off, but . . . well, Brillen was shaping up to be a clever officer.

No wonder he'd sent Gizzada to follow him instead of accompanying the major himself. Initially, Perrin had thought it an intentional insult when realize his accompaniment would be hefty Gizzada, mounted on a massive plow horse with astonishing stamina. It wasn't the swiftest animal, but it could certainly handle ten miles at a steady trot.

But now Perrin realized Brillen was likely trying to preserve his career. After that first stop, Perrin would have demoted him to lieutenant, right on the

spot.

By the end of the race, if this first stop was any indication, Brillen would have found himself reduced to Private Karna.

Shem ran easily towards the middle of the Edge, a route he knew well. He was to report to the village green tower he and Perrin had just left, now flying a blue banner. Several hundred people still stood around and a loud cheer arose as he approached. At the base of the tower stood one of the soldiers assigned to it.

“General’s arrived, Zenos! You’re to greet him and retrieve your next note.” The soldier grinned and pointed as Zenos looked in vain for the paper that was to be in the sergeant’s hands. Shem spun quickly to see where it was, and he tried not to whimper.

The Zenos banner girls beamed at him.

Sareen was wearing a borrowed soldier’s cap and waved a small piece of paper, her shoulders and areas below still exposed to the cool air. Shem rushed over to Sareen, but she thrust the note behind her. She grabbed Shem’s undershirt with her free hand, pulled him close, and planted a big, wet kiss on his

mouth.

Probably something she learned from Barker, was the only thing Shem could clearly think at that moment.

But he'd also learned a few things —unofficially—about being a soldier in the past year and a season. The first was not to be surprised by anything. Even if you *are* surprised, do your best to pretend you're not. The second was to never forget your main objective. The third was to never close your eyes, if you can help it, no matter what's thrown at you.

Corporal Zenos remembered it all.

His reach was longer than Sareen's, and faster than she could finish her kiss he snatched the note out of her hand,

pulled out of her grip, and took off towards a yellow banner he saw at a distant tower. He ignored the other girls' cries of, "Not fair!" and "I didn't get a turn!" as he ran west.

Grandpy Neeks, following him on horseback, laughed.

"Great race, eh Corporal?" he called. "I think the captain's trying to throw the race for the major. At least you'll have had a good time losing."

Shem didn't respond, but began to plan revenge on Karna. No wonder he chose not to follow him.

When Perrin eventually reached the tower station south of the village, he wondered again why he'd thought the distance of a quarter of a mile past Edge seemed like a good idea. He had now run the full length of Edge, from the north to the south, with zig-zagging stops in between. But that last quarter mile was the worst. He was panting harder than he anticipated and gratefully took the jug of water offered to him by one of his dozen soldiers. Another handed him the note which he shoved into his pocket with the others.

"Private, where's the next banner?" he asked as he bent over, breathing heavily.

"Um, sir, it's um, well—"

"Well *what*?"

"There are *three,* sir. All yellow."

Major Shin shook his head. "*Three?* He's out to kill me, isn't he? Karna's planning a takeover, I know it. He's waiting for me to drop." He took another quick drink of water then poured some of it over his head.

"Well, sir, fires *do* have a way of spreading . . ."

Gizzada leaned over to him from his horse. "I believe *you* were the one who told him to make it a real challenge, sir. Karna was only following your orders. But don't worry. I see three more towers displaying red. Zenos is chasing

a Guarder invasion!”

“I meant a challenge for *Zenos*,” Shin muttered. The major stood back up, waved once at his men, and started a fast jog back to Edge, pushed along by the cheers of his soldiers.

Zenos knew his route would take him to the edge of the forest. A private that had helped measure the course accidentally revealed that nugget of information, for which Shem was most grateful. Guarder invasions begin at the forest, after all. He saw the distant tree he was to tag, as well as the ten soldiers

that stood waiting there to encourage him on. He'd have to be careful. He'd get only one chance.

As he sprinted across the buffer field to the soldiers, he began to limp. His face contorted into a grimace as he continued on to the forest.

"Run it out, Zenos! Shake off the cramp! You've still got miles to go!" another corporal shouted to him.

Zenos nodded as he reached the soldiers. Then, just as he was to tag the tree, something caught his foot and he went down, hard.

"Zenos!" Neeks cried from atop his mount. "You all right, son?"

Zenos got up, panting. "Only wounded my pride, Grandpy. Give me

my note!" he said as he slapped the tree.

The soldiers applauded, gave him his verifying note, and Zenos turned to run back to Edge with the soldiers following and shouting support.

Several minutes later, two men in green and brown mottled clothing crept up to the edge of the forest. They were confident no one else had seen the small rock that Zenos threw into the shrubs as he tripped and fell. And they were also confident the rock was intended for them. They lay on the ground inspecting the foliage and patting the dried leaves that fell off the trees and covered the forest's floor.

After almost ten minutes of

searching, one of the men discovered the rock. Then they crept to the seclusion of a large boulder, unwrapped the small paper tied around the rock, and read the small handwriting.

One out. F.S.

"He's certainly become concise in his messages," one man observed.

The other man nodded. "But it would've been helpful to include a time. We best get to the fresh spring."

Zenos paused when he arrived at the tower waving the second red banner so he could shake out a cramp in his leg.

This one was painfully real. One of the soldiers gave him a flask of water and a note with a location.

Zenos groaned. “I just ran past that family’s house! I think Karna’s made my route longer than the major’s.”

The soldier smiled. “Nope, they’re the same. The captain had two different groups measure the distances to be sure. You each have ten miles.”

Zenos bent over to massage his calf. “I’ve gone east to west to east again!”

“But the major was sent all the way to the far south tower,” Neeks pointed out. “He’s already hit his second yellow banner coming back north. It just went down.”

“No!” Zenos moaned, looked at the

note again, ignored his cramp and took off in a sprint back in the direction he came.

Major Shin reached the last ‘tower on fire’ to the whoops and cheers of dozens of villagers who were waiting, with Gizzada still riding behind him. The sergeant’s horse was looking as exhausted as Perrin. Despite the cool temperatures of Harvest Season, the major was sweating as if it was the middle of Weeding. A severe pain in his side refused to let him stand up straight. His lungs burned so badly that he

couldn't imagine going another step.

He'd been hoping someone would have the news that Zenos had quit and was being carted away by the surgeon. Then Perrin could drop to the ground in honor and not move again for two days.

But there was no message about Zenos.

He grabbed the note offered by a sergeant and called up to the tower. "Where's the white finish banner? Can't see it from here," he panted. "View's obscured."

One of the soldiers, cringing, yelled down to him. "Sir, there's not a white banner, but there is a *pink striped* one. At the village green."

The major slapped his forehead and

forgot all about his pain.

"KARNA!" he roared and took off in a lumbering jog to the center of Edge.

At the forward office at the fort, Lieutenant Walickiah watched the banners go up and down. He timed how long the intervals were between each, signaling that the runner had reached his destination. He watched as the last of the yellow and red banners came down, and saw the final one rise up in the middle of the village. He squinted and looked at it again. Then he took the spyglass to verify . . .

Yes. It was pink stripes.

This was the most unusual fort.

He picked up the banner code sheet the major had left, but didn't see anything coded for pink. Then Walickiah noticed a different handwriting at the bottom of the page. He remembered that as the major and corporal were taking off their uniforms, Captain Karna had added something to the paper. He waved it to the major, asking if he wanted to review it, but the major was too preoccupied in insulting the corporal. The captain only grinned, nodded at Walickiah, put down the paper, and went downstairs to take his position.

Walickiah glanced around before

allowing himself to respond to the last code.

"Pink stripes: mother-in-law sighted, bringing cake."

He chuckled.

Too bad she was on his list. Walickiah loved cake.

Corporal Zenos, having 'saved' three citizens in different areas from Guarder attacks, was now sprinting towards the middle of Edge and smirking at the pink striped banner. The major was going to *love* that, he was sure. Shem almost forgave Karna for his

first kissing stop.

The crowd at the village green was even larger than when he and the major had left it a couple of hours ago. Shem was still weaving through the nearly abandoned marketplace when he was spotted by people on the perimeter of the green. A huge cheer erupted. Shem would've grinned, but he didn't want to risk unnecessarily expending any energy. He had a major to beat.

He rounded the last corner, barely hearing the hooves of Neeks's horse behind him because of the shouts of the villagers. They parted for him to have a straight shot to the tower in the middle of the green. Shem saw a blurry group of blue uniforms in front of him, and a few

sitting on horseback. His lungs burned, his leg seized, but nothing could stop him.

The noise was deafening as Zenos ran up to the tower and slapped it happily.

“YES!” he cried to the roar of the crowd.

Captain Karna, atop his horse, was laughing. He clucked his mount to take a few steps so Zenos could see what the animal was concealing.

“NO!” he cried again, this time in anguish. He slumped against the tower and closed his eyes in frustration, then opened them again and stared in disbelief.

Major Shin laughed.

Or at least he tried to.

It caught in his throat since he was leaning over and wheezing. He waved feebly at Shem and winked.

Panting, Zenos looked up to Karna. “By how much?”

Karna shook his head. “Maybe just fifteen seconds. All that cheering wasn’t just for you, Corporal!”

Shem dropped his head into his hands.

Karna waved to the villagers closing in on the racers. “Ladies and gentlemen, please give them some time to catch their breath before you overwhelm them with congratulations

and sympathy! If you will all make your way over to tables by the amphitheater doors, I assure you the major and the corporal will join us shortly."

The captain led the crowd while several soldiers stood guard in front of Shin and Zenos and urged well-wishers to follow.

Gizzada and Neeks, still chuckling, set their horses to corral errant Edgers.

Shem still held his head, amazed. If he hadn't 'tripped' near the forest and spent that time getting back up, he would've won the race. He smiled briefly to realize he really *was* the strongest soldier.

But there were far more important things in the world than winning a

competition.

"So close. *So close*," he moaned as he slid down the tower to the ground and flopped his head wearily against the lattice work. "It's the captain's fault! If Sareen hadn't kissed me—I couldn't think clearly for at least a minute after that."

That made the major stand back up. He put his hands on his waist and hobbled over.

"So I tell you no cookies, and instead you start kissing girls? At least you're growing up!" With a weak chuckle, Shin slumped on the ground next to Zenos.

"How'd you do it, Major? How'd

you beat me?"

"Shem," he whispered, and Shem noticed that the major—*Perrin*—was increasingly calling him by his first name, "it nearly killed me. May have to hitch me up to Gizzada's horse and have it drag me home. I was about to give up at the second to last tower. But then I found out about that pink atrocity and, well . . . that was *incredible motivation* to get here and GET IT DOWN!"

Shem laughed weakly with him. Neither of them noticed the figure walking up to them whom the soldiers didn't stop.

"I have a feeling neither of you are going anywhere soon. Should I bring you pillows and blankets and let you sleep

here for the night?"

They wearily looked up and Mahrree grinned back at them.

"Quite an exciting finish!"

Perrin smiled. "So who were you cheering for at the end?"

"For you, of course!" But she winked exaggeratedly at Shem who winked back. "Did you like the last banner?"

Perrin covered his face with his hands. "What was he thinking?!"

"He was thinking you'd need an extra nudge at the end. Obviously it worked. Now, come, both of you. If you don't move, you'll stiffen up. People want to see you, and my mother's been

baking for two straight days. She's brought over enough cake for the entire village. That's where everyone left to." She cocked her head toward the amphitheater.

"Cake?" The major's hands came off his face. "Again she made cake? For the initial test of a new army protocol? *Refreshments?!*"

Shem chortled.

Perrin elbowed him.

Mahrree rolled her eyes and sat down on the dried grasses in front of the men.

"This was hardly a protocol. This was a race of egos, and you both know it. We'll have to make it an annual event. You brought out more people than

Catapult Day used to, and no one gets dirty or smelly but you two. It's a brilliant way to get the village to rally around the army. Now, you *are* expected to come over and get cake and win over those last hearts and minds. Perrin, don't roll your eyes at me. My mother is holding the children hostage in their wagon until you come over. And when you see the tablecloths she made, not ONE word of comment about them. Understand?"

"Oh Mahrree, I already feel weak and nauseated," Perrin moaned. "*What* did she do for tablecloths? And who needs tablecloths?!"

Well," his wife smiled, "she had

some leftover cloth from tapering the banners, so . . .” Mahrree’s eyebrows rose in suggestion.

“Let me guess—the pink striped is prominently in the middle?”

“You *are* smart. Now I see how you got to be the major.”

Shem burst out laughing, but rolled away fast enough that the major’s elbow caught the wood of the tower instead of his corporal.

Cringing in pain, Perrin allowed his wife to help him to his feet. Mahrree turned to offer a hand to help Shem up, then she put her arms around both of their waists and pretended her small frame could support both of their large ones as they limped along.

As the three of them approached the crowd, the people parted and cheered. Even Magistrate Cockalorum and Chief Curglaff were grinning and applauding, and Shem noticed that neither of them seemed to regard him as a ‘convenient spy.’

Winning hearts and minds. Yes, Shem knew the lessons too, and could probably teach a few things to the major.

Karna, now standing next to Mrs. Peto behind a table, was the only one not clapping. Instead he held up a piece of cake, took a big bite, and nodded at the racers.

The major pointed an accusatory finger at him. The corporal glared at

him.

Karna only shrugged innocently.

As Mahrree led them to the tables, Perrin groaned. The tablecloths were miniature banners stitched together to make one large, colorful mess of cloth. Over the head of his wife he looked at Shem. Shem returned the same look of, *For crying out loud*. Then they both smirked painfully.

But they kept their promise to Mahrree, and neither one of them said a word.

It was a rare moment for Mahrree.

No children were clinging to her—they were being tended to by some of her former students. Her mother had refused to let her help serve the cake—Hycymum wanted all the praise for herself. So Mahrree took advantage of the quiet moment, stepped back to lean against a tree, and watched "her boys" from a non-meddling distance.

The crowd loved—completely and absolutely *loved*—Edge's Strongest Soldiers. They sat on chairs in the middle of the dying grasses, recently nibbled short by sheep, so that the hundreds of well-wishers could dote on them.

Captain Karna had really captured the spirit of the day, Mahrree decided.

Not only had he sent a wagon and a couple of soldiers to help her mother bring all of the cake to the green, but he'd also set up the winner's circle. Perrin was perched on a large chair covered in thick red cloths. Up close you could tell they were typical drying cloths he could use to wipe himself, but from a distance they looked suspiciously like the red cloth the kings reportedly had covering their throne.

The loser's chair, however, was a tiny thing—looked like a child's stool, actually—with one dingy gray rag on it. When Shem sat down on it, as ordered by Karna, the contrast to Perrin's "throne" was absurd. Shem's head was

far lower than Perrin's, and he had to balance to keep from toppling over. Edgers had been laughing steadily at the scene for ten minutes now. Shem, to his great credit, took it all in stride.

Mahrree just grinned as she watched the flow of people swarm Perrin and Shem. If Edgers had been afraid of Major Shin, they didn't seem to be now. In fact . . .

Mahrree squinted to focus on individual faces.

In fact, many of the women seemed *quite taken* by him. Mahrree scrunched up her lips before deciding she didn't have to be jealous. It hadn't occurred to her before that the majority of women in Edge didn't have such a specimen of

manhood at home, so naturally they were admiring hers.

Perhaps it was because Perrin's jacket was at the fort, and the thin sleeveless undershirt he wore clung to him so well. He was drenched—likely from sweat and from pouring water over his head at some point—which only made the white cotton hug his form more distinctly. Mahrree chuckled to realize that even his damp round shoulders seem to catch the light and glisten in the sun. His solid chest and stomach stretched the shirt to its limits, and the muscles of his arms, normally hidden by his jacket, bulged with extraordinary definition.

The women noticed.

Their eyes traveled all over him as they waited for their chance to speak to him. Maybe Perrin didn't know what it meant when a woman chewed on her lower lip, took extra deep breaths, licked her lips, or dragged her fingers over her arms or throat . . .

Oh, yes he did, she smiled to herself.

But—and she loved him all the more for it—he looked only into the eyes of those who fawned over him.

Mahrree noticed something else, too. Those who approached her husband did so still a bit hesitantly, and others didn't even try—most notably the *husbands* of the admiring women.

Instead, those men clustered nearby with uncertain scowls on their faces as they waited for their distracted wives. Everyone knew Major Shin had killed over a dozen men, and now he was officially The Strongest Soldier. While certainly attractive, he was also still intimidating.

Perrin had a presence, a way of carrying himself, that maybe was inherited from his father and grandfather, or instilled into him by his upbringing—but whatever it was, his presence commanded respect, awe, and a bit of fear.

None of these people knew what Mahrree did, that when he came home he rolled on the floor with his children and

giggled like they did, kissing and tickling them, and sometimes snuggling with them until they collapsed into a deep sleep. No one else knew that he could be so tender and gentle and sweet, even. That was her secret.

They just felt his presence, and it was immense.

But, interestingly, Mahrree noticed as her gaze shifted to the younger soldier, Shem Zenos also had a presence.

People were *drawn* to him, as she and Perrin had been. And now that he was "one of their own," Edgers each wanted a few minutes with the corporal. He grinned enormously at each new

friend, his sky blue eyes shining happily to receive so much consolation, and the villagers were thrilled to pour it on him. He was almost *more* charismatic than Perrin, Mahrree thought. While Perrin was a bit threatening, Shem was so utterly approachable. Oddly, she was struck momentarily with an amusing idea —Shem on the "throne" with Perrin as his guard dog.

But soon Mahrree noticed that women—of a wide variety of ages—were also lined up to speak with Shem, and their eyes were taking in his build. For the first time she realized that his body shape was rather similar to Perrin's. Same full round shoulders and arms—also glistening, for the benefit of

the women who couldn't get a clear view of Perrin—broad chest, and defined stomach muscles. Perhaps they were alike because Perrin put his soldiers through his training regimen.

Yet, Mahrree considered, no soldiers were quite as massive as Perrin or Shem. Karna was certainly a bundle of muscle, she noted as the captain worked his way through the crowd to them, but not nearly as bulky.

Karna asked loudly if anyone in the crowd had seen the expression on Major Shin's face when he first learned about the pink banner.

A man standing nearby raised his hand, then with great drama acted out

Perrin's look of shock and fury, followed by a slap to his forehead.

The crowd—several hundred—exploded in laughter, and even Perrin had to join in.

Mahrree grinned, then noticed something more. Shem and Perrin even laughed alike. It was hard to pick out their voices in the mass, but their faces contorted in the same ways, and they moved at the same rhythm.

Perhaps it was because they were becoming friends, Mahrree decided. She'd seen that before—close friends mirroring each other's laugh.

But maybe, *maybe* it was because they shared a common ancestor, one who passed down his massive frame and

deep belly laugh that sounded like cheerful bells clanging.

If only Shem had black hair and eyes like Perrin, instead of light brown hair like hers and those sparkling blue eyes, she would've been bold enough to declare they must have been distantly related.

Mahrree bit her lip in dreadful anticipation as she saw Sareen weave her way through to Shem. The poor girl had been trying so hard to get him to notice her, but he didn't. He didn't seem to notice anyone but the Shin family.

Shem was drying himself off with the dingy rag Karna had left as Sareen reached him. He glanced at her, then

looked at Perrin with what seemed like pleading in his eyes.

Perrin grinned, took one of the thick red cloths from off his chair, and tossed it to his subordinate.

Shem's expression told him that wasn't exactly what he was hoping for, although Mahrree wasn't sure what he wanted.

Sareen, beaming and bouncing, with her tunic still embarrassingly low, kneeled in front of Shem in obeisance.

Mahrree rolled her eyes. The girl was hopeless.

Shem made quite a business of rubbing his short hair with the red cloth, as if not realizing Sareen was there. Perrin's loud throat clearing finally

made him stop. He set the wide cloth around his shoulders, and Mahrree wondered if he intentionally tried to cover parts of his muscular anatomy to dissuade the eyes of his admirers, some of whom regarded him with less-than-pure appreciation.

Then he had no choice but to look down at Sareen.

Mahrree considered the angle, and winced in empathy for Shem. Sareen had made sure she planted herself right where she could make the most of her exposed—

"Oh honestly, Sareen!" Mahrree murmured in exasperation. "Where's your cloak?"

Despite the chill in the air, Sareen seemed determined to show Shem exactly what she had to offer. Not surprisingly, several soldiers had converged around Shem to share in the view.

"Oh Sareen, this is just becoming *sad*," Mahrree muttered, wishing someone would point out to the girl—maybe Sareen's mother, who didn't seem to be around—that her displaying behavior was most inappropriate. Mahrree was about to march over there herself when . . .

Shem was remarkable, Mahrree realized. While he appeared so young, he possessed a maturity and strength far

beyond his age. His gaze had never wavered from Sareen's face, Mahrree noted, even though only inches below it was a sight to make any infant thirsty and any man forget how to blink. It seemed, from Mahrree's angle, that he wasn't even looking at her eyes, but likely her forehead. And while Sareen displayed nearly all her full and heaving wares before him, he wasn't shopping.

Instead he was suddenly taken with a fit of coughing that sounded to Mahrree a bit contrived, but most convenient. He even fell off his little chair as he doubled over to control his convulsing.

A moment later someone rushed a flask of water to him, which he readily accepted.

Another moment later the coughing fit ceased, Shem stood up, and immediately began a conversation with his rescuer, Mrs. Reed, who had also brought him a box of her cookies.

Sareen, forgotten and still kneeling in front of the wobbly chair, grumpily stood up and stormed away.

Two dozen soldiers followed closely after her. They *were* shopping, and were *not* interested in her forehead.

"Well done, Shem Zenos," Mahrree smiled in approval.

To her surprise, Shem looked deliberately in her direction, as if he heard her. But she knew the distance was too great. He nodded once at her

before beginning a conversation with another older, safer villager.

Sareen, now with her own little audience, spoke loudly about something silly, Mahrree was sure, likely hoping Shem would notice and become jealous. For the moment, Sareen was happy for the attention that, someday, she'd realize she didn't really want.

Mahrree understood Sareen, she hated to admit to herself. She'd come to a difficult realization some time ago: if there had never been a Perrin Shin, and had the age gap been a bit smaller, she too would have hoped for the attention of Shem Zenos. Maybe it was his presence, and his sweetness, and his boyish handsomeness, and his

impressive build—

But for Mahrree, there *was* a Perrin Shin, and he'd absolutely spoiled her for any other man, thank the Creator. While she saw the appeal of Shem—gentle and even adorable—she found more alluring the raw power of Perrin, the massive guard dog. She realized that occasionally she may find other men attractive, but she'd always remember that her own husband was far superior.

Mahrree chuckled softly as that husband teasingly commanded Corporal Zenos to sit back down. His head was now higher than Perrin's, and that wasn't appropriate, he announced loudly.

Shem crouched obligingly, to the

laughter of the villagers, but Perrin shook his head slowly, pointed to the little chair, then raised a menacing eyebrow.

More laughter.

Shem slunk dejectedly to the demeaning seat, sat down with a loud sigh of resignation, and blinked sadly at the cluster of little boys—Poe Hili among them—that now stood in front of him as his new adoring fan club.

The crowd cheered loudly, and Perrin threw another red cloth at Shem, covering his head completely.

Mahrree laughed out loud, caught her husband's eye, and winked.

He winked back and raised his eyebrows briefly in suggestion. He had

an idea for an *argument* that night.

She shook her head and chuckled.

Oh, those women might ogle him with eyes too full of their own desire—and it was a good thing he hadn't run in only his shorts, Mahrree decided, because seeing his calves and thighs would have sent some of those women into such fits of swooning that their husbands would have had no choice but to preserve their honor by challenging the major, which would have sent him into fits of laughter—but that afternoon Major Perrin Shin would be going home with *her*.

And tonight, she'd help him undress, probably help him bathe, get

that magnificent man into bed . . . and then listen to him whimper and complain about his aching muscles all night long.

Chapter 19 ~ “A little over-excited about towers and flags, are we?”

“Lieutenant!” Corporal Zenos said, grinning widely. He sat down across the table from Walickiah, grimacing in pain, just as the lieutenant

was finishing his dinner in the mess hall. “I didn’t get to thank you yet for your assistance today, nor apologize about jabbing you in the ribs.”

Walickiah leaned back and analyzed the corporal. His forwardness and friendliness were, again, not what he was expecting.

“Not a problem,” he answered casually. “I understand the race was very close.”

“Oh, it was,” Zenos nodded. “I’ve never run so hard in my life. Right now I’m feeling every muscle, and each is complaining loudly!” He chuckled pitifully. “Fortunately Shin scheduled me to have the next few days off so I can recover. I should’ve won that race,

Walickiah. A few things slowed me down, though. The first was an unexpected kiss at the village green."

Walickiah smiled half way. "Heard about that. I understand a few soldiers offered to take your place when the rest of your disappointed admirers didn't get their opportunities with you."

Zenos smiled. "The second," he said, focusing on a mug in front of him and turning it slowly, "was an unexpected man in the forest." His voice was barely audible above the dull roar of the soldiers around them talking and eating. "I had to tag a tree on the edge of it, and there he was. You know what that man said to me, Lieutenant?" Zenos

looked up into Walickiah's eyes with a piercing glare.

Walickiah swallowed. "No one else mentioned seeing someone in the forest, Corporal."

Zenos nodded slowly. "No one else noticed. Too caught up in the race, I suppose. But that man seemed to be expecting *you*."

Walickiah's eyes grew large. "This is not the place to speak," he hissed.

Zenos looked around at the noisy mess hall and gave Walickiah an easy smile. "No one can hear anything," he said quietly. "I've tested it many times. But I agree. I have a better place for us to speak."

He stood up abruptly and walked

out of the mess hall.

Walickiah followed him a moment later. He stepped into the hallway and saw Zenos walking stiffly out of the main reception room and towards the darkening compound. Walickiah maintained his gait several paces behind Zenos as the corporal headed out the quiet and darkening northeast gates.

The lieutenant glanced around before following. No one paid him any attention.

Outside the gates Zenos didn't slow down but continued to head for the forest. Walickiah trotted to catch up to him.

"Zenos," he whispered loudly,

“where are you going?”

“Where no one else goes,” he said as Walickiah caught up to him.

“Because if you saw a Guarder, you should’ve reported it immediately. It didn’t matter if it was a race, the safety of the village is more important—”

Zenos stopped and spun to face the lieutenant. “No one can hear us. You can drop the act. I know who you are and why you’re here. Now follow me. I know you’re not afraid to.” Zenos took off again in a march, as quickly as his exhausted body would let him, to the fresh spring at the edge of the forest.

Walickiah glanced around again, saw no patrols nearby, and caught up to Zenos who headed straight into the trees.

The lieutenant followed him into the forest without breaking his stride.

"Look, Corporal, I've been hoping for an opportunity to speak with you. I've been assigned to help you with—"

Something clamped onto the lower half of his face. He couldn't even yank at it, because his arms were pulled roughly behind him, and a thick rope tied his wrists firmly together. The enormous dark brown hand holding his face suddenly let go, only to shove a piece of cloth into his mouth, then secure it with another rope around his head. It wasn't even possible to kick, because something was wrapping tightly around his lower legs.

Zenos stood calmly at the edge of the spring watching as six large men in green and brown mottled clothing rendered Lieutenant Walickiah, in a matter of seconds, immobile and silent.

The corporal nodded once at the lieutenant who lay on the ground stunned, but growing furious.

“Sorry about this. Really not in my nature. But then again, that’s what I told the last man sent to interfere. Shin’s mine, and I don’t need any assistance. You’re resigning your commission as of tonight.

“You really are very sloppy,” he said, taking a step closer. “There was no man at the edge of the forest. That you

fell for that so easily demonstrates you're not ready for this assignment. Tell me honestly, has Shin seen your handwriting?"

Walickiah stared at him for a few moments until what the corporal was saying made sense in his mind. Finally he shook his head.

"Any messages sent to him? Anything in your permanent file?"

Again Walickiah shook his head, now baffled. He was resigning?! There had been *another* man? And who were *these* men?!

"But they'll have a signature on file," Zenos said, pulling a piece of parchment out of his jacket pocket. He unfolded it to show to Walickiah. "And

your signature looks like this?"

Walickiah's eyes bulged.

Zenos nodded in satisfaction. "So obviously I forged it well enough. So sorry to hear you've decided the army just isn't for you," he said, reading Lieutenant Walickiah's resignation. "All that training and education, wasted. Oh well." He folded it again and slipped it back into his pocket. "That's all right, *sir*. I'm sure your new life will be far more interesting than you could've imagined. I'll make sure your things are sent to you." Zenos nodded to the six brawny men standing around their captive.

Without a word they effortlessly

hoisted the squirming Walickiah and hustled him deeper into the forest.

Zenos kneeled down by the spring —forgetting for the moment that his muscles weren't going to be happy about that—and groaned as he scooped up a drink of water in his hands. "Best water in the world," he said to no one in particular. "At least, in *this* world."

With a pained grunt he stood up and walked out of the forest.

Barker lifted his head as he heard the quiet footsteps in the back alley. This late at night he knew what it was. He

eagerly hauled himself up and lumbered to the back fence where a piece of bacon was waiting for him.

"Well done, well done," the man in the black jacket said, scratching the giant dog around the ears as he gulped down the bacon. "Up, up, up."

Mrs. Yung opened the back door hesitantly. In the middle of the night, one is never quite sure what to expect, even when one is married to the rector. Not everyone knocking at the door is wanting only advice.

She sighed loudly. "Thank the

Creator you're back!" and she grabbed Dormin's arm to pull him into the dark house. "We expected you back two days ago. I was ready to make my way down to find you myself!"

Dormin hugged her in the dark kitchen. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you, but it took longer to find him than I thought it would."

"But you found him again? Remarkable, Dormin! Truly."

"No progress with him though, as you might imagine," Dormin muttered. "But I did say good-bye."

"Oh, I hope you did so carefully," Mrs. Yung fretted. "We don't encourage that, you know. People start asking questions—"

“He wasn’t interested in questions, Mrs. Yung. Instead, he was more worried about giving himself away. He’s up to something, and I need to find someone to tell. I was hoping the rector __”

The door to the gathering room opened, and the shadow that came in was the size of Rector Yung.

“Dormin! My prayers are answered!”

“Rector Yung,” Dormin paused to accept his embrace, “I think I’ve discovered a problem, but I don’t know who to tell.”

The door opened again, and Dormin held his breath as two more dark

shadows, much larger than the small rector, came into the small kitchen.

"You tell *us*, Dormin, son of King Oren," one of them said.

Dormin didn't dare exhale until Mrs. Yung patted his back. "It's all right, Dormin. We've been expecting them. You can trust them."

"Try us right now, Dormin," said the other large man. "What's your news?"

"It's . . . it's my brother," he stammered. "He's a guard—a lieutenant—in Chairman Mal's mansion, but I don't think he'll be staying there."

In the dark Dormin could barely make out the two men looking at each other. "Where do you think he's going?"

one asked.

"He has his heart set on taking back our mansion. The High General's mansion," he whispered.

The men seemed to nod to each other. "What name is he using?"

"Lieutenant Heth. I'm afraid I don't have anything else to give you."

"It's enough, Dormin," said the other man. "We have our own connections. We'll be watching for Lieutenant Heth. And now, it's time to go."

Dormin swallowed hard. "Tonight?!"

"It must be tonight," Mrs. Yung said gently, squeezing his arm. "It's not just

about us, you know. There are others with more pressing needs."

Dormin sighed. "Of course. I'm ready to leave Winds. And everything else."

Two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

"*'I'm the Unk, good to meet you'*? That's not in the codes!" Mal said, perplexed.

Brisack shrugged half-heartedly. "No, it's not. Then again, they *were* in public."

Mal shook his head. "Doesn't

matter! There's nothing revealing about the response, 'I think we might have met before.' He didn't even give a proper response considering he was addressing an officer!"

"Lieutenant Walickiah assumed the response was intended to reveal who he is and the nature of his work there," Brisack explained flatly.

Mal shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "That *can't* be our contact. None of our men would stoop to such base familiarity. Baby tender, indeed! Tell him to look again. He's a *very* quiet man. He needs to interrogate all of the soldiers that were injured last season. Take them to the privacy of the north if necessary!"

Brisack took a deep breath, but he couldn't put off the news any longer. "And therein lies the problem."

"What *problem*?" spat Mal.

Brisack hesitated. "Since his initial report, the lieutenant seems to be . . . missing. He's gone."

"Gone?!"

Brisack nodded miserably. "Just like the new recruit we sent last year who we've never heard from again. The garrison received a message today from Shin asking about Walickiah's background. He was there for less than a week, then . . . vanished. The major was wondering if the High General might know why. Relf came by and asked for

his medical records, looking for clues."

Mal's mouth hung open in shock. "*Resigned?*" he finally whispered.

Brisack shrugged again. His own astonishment had worn off a couple of hours ago, replaced by stupefied consternation. "Major Shin found the letter on his desk a couple of mornings ago. Our contacts haven't heard from the lieutenant either."

Mal's eyes grew bigger. "Not even *our* contacts? No one goes back on the oath! *No one!*"

Brisack held up his hands in a futile attempt to calm him. "Actually, this would make *two*. Both in Edge."

Mal gripped the sides of his chair. "Why? Why Edge?!"

“I don’t know,” the doctor whispered, looking down at his hands and massaging them. Strangely, that gave him comfort. “I’m stunned myself. Walickiah was so steady and solid, especially after his fantastic success in eliminating the parents of that captain in Grasses and beating his sister near to death. I really thought that—” He examined his hands.

Mal was quiet for a few moments before he spoke. “So *you failed*, my good doctor.”

Brisack’s head snapped up. “What?”

“How much is your heart in this study, Brisack?”

The doctor's mouth dropped open. "I really wanted this to succeed! I spent hours each day for weeks with Walickiah, giving him strategies, showing him ways of getting into the inner circle, to get close to Shin, to find out—"

"As I said: you failed."

Brisack's shoulders sagged. "I don't know what went wrong. He took care of Grasses so well, I thought this would be a simple assignment for him. I told him it would be difficult, only to keep him sharp, but really . . . I just don't know."

The good doctor rubbed his hands again, wondering what he missed doing.

While he told the lieutenant to take advantage of any situation, he really had been directing him to take out the mother-in-law. She'd lived a long enough life, her death would've been close enough to the family to have made some impact, and the children would have been spared . . .

Brisack stopped massaging his hands.

Was the Quite Man *really* the baby tender? The children. What in the world was he trying to accomplish with them?

Suddenly, Brisack wanted nothing more than to have five minutes alone with him, which he knew would never happen.

Still . . .

“There’s still the Quiet Man,” he reminded Mal, but wasn’t sure what to do with that. “While two others have vanished, he’s remained loyally at the fort.”

“But what good is he doing us?!” Mal snapped.

Brisack shrugged again, the only gesture he seemed to know that night. “Maybe he’s doing more to keep Shin involved than we realize. He’s still there, devoted, while two others have abandoned us. Maybe we should just let him do his work. I see no reason to do anything more with Edge,” he decided. “We still have so much to analyze from the attacks on the three villages to keep

us busy for—”

The Chairman shook his head. “No. He’s getting too cocky up there. And now these towers?! The maps, we could work with. But how will we ever sneak into the villages, undetected, with men watching in towers?! I can’t even get a message to the Quiet Man because communication in the north is breaking down again! No,” Mal said with severe resolve, “Shin *must* be broken. If the Quiet Man *is* the baby tender, he’s in a perfect position to complete Walickiah’s mission. Wait until he’s watching the children, claim there was a raid—”

“How?” Brisack asked, panic tightening in his chest when Mal mentioned the children. “You just said

we can't get him a message. No, we need to come up with a new strategy for breaking Perrin Shin. And since he's manned the towers, I don't know either how we can get someone in to reach his family or even the mother-in-law."

"All right, Brisack," Mal said smoothly. "Since you're so averse to anything involving his children, there's someone else we can get." His voice was thick with planning. "Someone else close to him whose death would devastate the great Perrin Shin and bring him to his knees."

Brisack pointed at him. "I already told you—no. It's too risky. That would be crossing the line from tragedy to

outrage, and I refuse to be found in that pit with you!"

"It's the *only* way, Doctor. Nothing else has worked. But this *will*," Mal said calmly.

Too calmly for Brisack's tastes.

"I refuse to be a part of that! No!"

"Fine," Mal shrugged with a movement that suggested easiness but meant business. "I have someone who *will*. Someone else with a plan, and with men readied, who will *not* fail me."

Brisack stood up abruptly. "It's your grave, Nicko!"

"I doubt it," he smiled thinly as the doctor stormed out of the library.

A moment later Mal said, "Gadiman."

A door that led to a back hallway opened into the darkened room.

"Did you hear?" said Mal, not bothering to look in the direction of the quiet squeak of hinges.

"Oh, I heard!" said a voice that sounded rather like a weasel that just happened upon a trapped warren of rabbits. "I told you he'd fail!"

"Yes, you did," Mal intoned, but even Gadiman wasn't going to annoy him tonight. "Tell your men to get ready. The Guarders are about to strike their most shocking and focused blow. Ah, the world will never be the same . . ."

Barker woke up and stretched lazily. He looked around at the neighborhood. It wasn't his. He sniffed the cold fog that rested on Edge that morning. Without another thought he stood up and started trotting towards the main road before the sun rose.

"Whoa, look at the size of that dog!"

"I know whose that is—that's Major Shin's dog. Sniffer. Or Digger. Drooler . . . something like that."

Emerging from the fog were two soldiers, just coming off duty from patrolling the village. Barker continued to trot, realizing that while they were

dressed in blue, they didn't smell like the Major.

"Should we walk him home?" asked one of the soldiers.

"Might as well. His home is along the way to the fort. But I get the feeling he's walking *us* home. Whiner?" he tried, but the dog didn't look at the soldiers trying to keep up with him.

"Certainly seems to know where he's going, doesn't he? The major always lets him run loose?"

The other soldier shrugged. "He has a fence around his garden. Not a very tall one, but certainly not something this dog could jump. Jumper?" he tried again to guess the dog's name.

Barker paid no attention to the

soldiers. He was finding his way home. He turned down one road, then cut across to another alley, with the soldiers right behind him.

"That's got to be the most determined and quiet dog I've ever seen," one soldier said. "His name certainly isn't Barker, then."

Barker's black floppy ears twitched slightly as he continued home.

Corporal Zenos walked into Edge's Inn and smiled at the older man standing behind the bar. Since it was the middle of the afternoon, most of the tables in the

eating area were emptied, just waiting for a soldier in need of a snack.

"Let me guess, Corporal—pie?" the man asked with a smile.

Zenos chuckled. "I'm that predictable, am I?"

"I value my steady customers, son. I count on you being predictable!"

Zenos grinned. "I've got a short race I need to run later today, so I thought I'd get a little something to ensure a win. Is Mrs. Peto in?"

"I am, dear!" called a happy voice from the kitchen behind a partially closed door. She peeked out of the door, her round cheeks smeared with bits of flour as if she had been brushing it off, but only added more instead. "What are

you in the mood for today, Corporal?”

Shem pondered that for a moment, waiting for the serving girl to make her way past him. She was deliberately slow about it, as she always was, bumping him in a purposeful sort of way.

It was because she was afflicted with a severe case of cleavage that Zenos kept his eyes on the ceiling as if in concentration.

“How about you tell me what’s available, Mrs. Peto?” he suggested.

The serving girl gave him a saucy look which he almost missed.

Mrs. Peto stepped into the doorway with an eager smile. “Tell me how fresh peach pie sounds?”

“Absolutely perfect!” Shem grinned. “You know, your daughter makes a good pie, but it’s not quite yours yet, Mrs. Peto.”

Hycymum beamed and ducked back into the kitchen.

Zenos leaned against the serving bar and looked around the eating room. At one table along the wall sat a middle-aged couple enjoying a drink and a leisurely afternoon. He smiled genially at them and they smiled back.

Across the room from them, at a table in the corner by the windows, sat a young man around Shem’s age, slowly pushing food around his plate and lost in deep thought.

A moment later Mrs. Peto popped out again with a large piece of peach pie. “I hope you like it, Corporal,” she winked at him.

“It looks perfect, so I’m sure I’ll love it!” he winked back at her.

The serving girl grumbled quietly that there were no winks for her. Shem turned and walked over to the table with the middle aged couple.

“So, enjoying your stay in Edge?” he asked as he sampled the pie.

“We are, thank you for asking,” said the man. His black hair was streaked with gray, and his narrow dark eyes twinkled cheerfully.

“Anything I can help you find

here?" Shem offered.

The woman sitting across from him, with her blonde and gray hair twisted into a loose bun, smiled sweetly. "No, no, we're fine. We're spending a few days to get to know the village. That's my nephew over there. He's recently lost his parents and is looking for someplace new, without so many *difficult memories*," she said quietly. "We came to Edge to see if this might be what he's looking for."

Shem nodded slowly. "Maybe I can answer some questions for him. Do you think he'd mind?"

The couple shook their heads.

"Go ahead," the husband said.

Shem smiled and walked over to

their nephew, who was still oblivious to anything but the remains of the stew he swirled around on his plate.

Shem cleared his throat. “May I join you?”

The young man looked up abruptly, startled. “Uh, well, I was kind of expecting—”

Not concerned about what he was expecting, Shem sat down and nodded at the plate. “Didn’t enjoy the mutton stew?”

“Oh no, it was quite good.”

Shem nodded and took another bite of pie. “Then you should really try this for dessert.”

“Don’t have much appetite,” the

young man sighed.

"Hard to eat when you're looking for a new home, is it?"

The young man blinked rapidly.

"Your aunt and uncle told me," Shem explained. "Thought maybe I could help you a bit. Anything I can tell you about Edge?"

"Uhh," the young man began, but stopped as he saw the serving girl come over to wipe down a nearby table. She intentionally leaned forward on the surface to make the most of her affliction, and watched the two young men talking, oblivious to the crumbs she kept missing.

Under his breath and without moving his lips, Shem muttered, "Don't

look at her, Dormin."

That snapped the young man's attention back to the soldier in front of him.

"Fishing's great!" Shem said loudly with a big grin. "The Edge River is just to the west, and the trout are enormous. But I need to warn you, if you fish too close to the forest, you might find yourself wrestling for your catch with a bear."

The serving girl rolled her eyes at the conversation, stood back up, and went to the kitchen.

"How'd you know my name?" Dormin whispered.

"I'm your contact," Shem said in an

equally low voice. But his manner was casual and cheery, as if enjoying a meaningless chat. “And don’t worry. No one can hear us, not even your ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle.’ The thick curtains here absorb much of our conversation, and the way the sun hits the windows creates a glare, so no one will even see us together. Watch.” He turned to the windows and waved goofily. “Hi!”

But no one passing noticed, because of the glint of sunshine blinding them.

“That’s why I choose this hour at this time of year. We have less than ten minutes before the angle shifts,” he said nonchalantly as he took another bite of pie, “so you can tell me what’s going on. The moustache and beard look good, by

the way."

Dormin nodded slightly, still unsure of the situation. "It was Mrs. Yu—"

Shem gave him a severe look.

"I mean, my *aunt's* idea. Said I look less like my father this way."

"Well, she's one who would know," Shem said quietly. "The problem is?"

"It's my brother," he whispered.

"Uh-huh, Uh-huh," Shem interrupted loudly. "Yes, we *do* have great hunting."

The serving girl passed again with a disgusted sigh.

"He's in a uniform," Dormin said softly as the girl bustled to the kitchen again.

“Nothing wrong with that,” Shem winked, and took another bite.

“He’s making *plans*.”

“Alone, or with someone?” Shem said as if they were only discussing the amount of snow in Edge.

“Not sure. Probably not alone, because he has no patience. Someone else is likely in charge.”

“He has another name?”

“Heth,” Dormin whispered, as if it was profanity.

“What’s his plan?” Shem asked between bites.

“Not sure either, but he wants a mansion. *Our* old mansion.”

“The Shins,” Shem breathed. For

the first time his face tightened in concern.

"Yes, the High General—I'm pretty sure," Dormin said, taking a bite of his cold stew just for show.

"General Shin's on his way here now, to inspect the new security measures in the village."

Dormin blinked in surprise. "My brother might be with him!"

"I hope you're not planning a family reunion," Shem warned.

"Not at all. I already made my peace with him."

"Good, because if he *is* with the general, he's not here to make peace."

Dormin sighed. "You have to stop him, if at all possible."

"I'll do what I can." In a louder voice he said, "I hope that gives you some perspective about Edge. And," he leaned over in a conspiratorial manner, "the serving girl certainly gave you *another* perspective of Edge." Shem stood up. "You need any more questions answered, I'm at the fort. Feel free to come by any time."

"Thanks," Dormin said, surprised that suddenly the conversation was over.

Shem brought the plate over to the serving bar and set down a small slip of silver. He nodded over to the couple at the table. "Hope you enjoy your stay in Edge. If you need help finding a home __"

“We have a home already,” the man said easily. “We’re trying to get one for my wife’s nephew now.”

“I’m sure you’ll succeed,” Corporal Zenos said. To the kitchen he called, “Thanks, Mrs. Peto. Better than Mrs. Shin’s, but don’t tell her I said that!”

And he went on his way.

Perrin sat at his desk in the Command Office reviewing the next week’s duty rotations. When he heard the private in the outer office shout, he smiled.

“Blue banner, sir! Far southern

tower! General's coach has been sighted."

"Very good," Shin called out to him. He put aside the rotation schedule and tidied up his desk. Ample warning now. The way it should be.

Another minute later he heard, "Blue Banner up at Edge of Idumea Estates, sir!"

He wished he'd had ten minutes' warning three and a half years ago when his father showed up in front of Mahrree's house to meet his future daughter-in-law. Already the tower system was proving its worth.

After a couple of minutes came the call, "Now . . . the village green has spotted his coach! Their banner just

went up."

"Thank you, Private. No further updates are necessary."

"But it's working, sir!"

"Yes, that seems to be obvious, doesn't it?" He smiled patiently as he came out of his office and into the forward command office.

The private flushed a darker, embarrassed brown. "It's . . . rather fun to watch, sir. Oh look! Another blue banner!"

Perrin chuckled and jogged down the stairs to await the arrival of the coach. He walked leisurely out of the reception area into the compound and stood casually with his arms folded.

A minute later the garrison coach, surrounded by eight guards on horseback, drove noisily into the compound. The coach had barely lurched to a stop when the door flew open and High General Shin hopped down.

"They're bigger than I thought, Major!" he said excitedly as he bounded over to his son. "Those banners must be at least fifteen feet long each!"

Perrin grinned as he saluted his father. "Closer to twenty, sir. They have to be that long so we can see them from the fort. And with the constant breeze off the mountains, the banners are always unfurled. I knew of your approach ten

minutes ago."

The general belatedly remembered to return the salute. "Excellent work, son. I'm impressed!"

Perrin beamed. "Thank you, sir. And eight guards? That's new."

The High General scoffed. "Nicko Mal thinks the world should see I'm fully protected 'at such a dangerous time as this, and in such a dangerous place as this'. Waste of manpower." He started for the command tower, grinning. "Now I want to see your map—"

"Uhh," Perrin said, not following his father but glancing at the coach, "I didn't realize you were coming *alone*."

General Shin stopped suddenly and his smile fell. He immediately spun

around and marched back to the coach. Perrin kept his face very still, saving his outburst of laughter for later when he relayed to Mahrree what happened next.

Mrs. Joriana Shin stood at the open door, one eyebrow raised and a hand on her waist. As her husband sheepishly walked over to help her down—the footman stood ready but she ignored him—Joriana said quietly to her husband, "A little over-excited about towers and flags, are we?"

Perrin couldn't tell what his father responded, but when he turned around he wore an overly-grave expression, one that he reserved only for the rare times he was embarrassed.

Perrin's mother walked over to her son and embraced him.

"Your father's been excited the entire ride, son," she whispered into his ear. "Now be a good boy and let him play on one of your towers, all right? He'll pout all the way home if he doesn't."

"Of course, Mother!"

Perrin escorted his mother to his home to visit her grandchildren before he, the High General, and the eight guards went on their tour of the new system.

By the time General Shin climbed down the third tower he inspected, he was beaming. "Every house in every

village will be labeled, the residents' names recorded, and towers just like this one erected everywhere, Major Shin. I defy the Guarders to find a way to strike us now!"

Several of his guard nodded in agreement, except for two lieutenants who were climbing down the tower. Everyone, it seemed, needed to inspect the view.

"I'm glad to hear it, General," Major Shin smiled. "There are still some problems we need to consider, such as posting the banners in villages that don't have a constant breeze—maybe vertically? But—"

"But nothing. You'll work it out. I want copies of your plans and tower

dimensions before we leave for Idumea in four days. Seventeen copies of each, Major. Get some men on it as soon as we get back to the fort. I also want detailed explanations of how you taught the men to know the village," the High General said in a tone as cheerful as he'd ever attempted, and started walking back to the fort with his guards and son.

"As for the names of each resident, Mal's already told me he has a few concerns about recording more than a family name," the High General told him, "but I'll work on him. And I also want the procedures for conducting the Races to Edge. That Zenos certainly is fast, isn't he?" He hadn't stopped

grinning since he arrived.

Perrin chuckled, partially because of his father's nearly exuberant behavior. "Yes, sir, he is!"

Corporal Zenos caught up to them just as they turned onto the main fort road. He was still winded and sweaty, despite the cool temperature, as he saluted the general.

"Sir, I hope the race was satisfactory in demonstrating how we, um, traverse the terrain in order to uh, to uh . . ." He struggled to find enough official-sounding words.

High General Shin actually chuckled as he patted Zenos on the back, then put his hand on his shoulder to steer the corporal to walk with them.

Perrin simply shook his head in amazement.

"The race was very entertaining and effective. Yes, Zenos, good run. But I must admit, I think I would've enjoyed watching *my son* race you instead. I heard from my daughter-in-law it was quite an exciting finish last week."

Perrin winced.

Zenos dared to smile. "It was, sir. Major Shin is very fast."

"He always was!" the High General bragged to his guard.

They nodded politely to him.

Perrin cringed and blushed.

"No one could beat him," the general announced, happily squeezing

Zeno's shoulder.

The corporal shrugged a little from the unintended pain of Relf Shin's good mood.

"Perhaps you can run the race again next year, Corporal, and I can come observe it myself."

Perrin noticed Shem's discomfort, and was starting to feel some himself. "Father, I *really* don't think that—"

The High General held up a hand to stop his son. "We'll discuss next year's race next year. Now, Major, I have a question about communication between the towers—"

He released Corporal Zenos to gesture to a distant point, and Perrin heard the corporal exhale quietly in

relief.

Shem's relief didn't last. Before he could drift away from the High General and his accompaniment to massage his shoulder, a lieutenant caught his arm.

"Walk with us, Corporal. The general said your name is Zenos?"

"Uh, yes sir."

"I don't think we've met before. I'm Lieutenant Xat."

Zenos blinked. "Uh, no sir. Since you're new, I'm fairly certain we haven't met before. Corporal Shem Zenos."

Lieutenant Xat glanced over to another lieutenant who also now walked with them. The six other guards surrounded the High General, but the two lieutenants and the corporal remained a few steps behind.

"So," Xat said, "you've gained a bit of a reputation for yourself. First to notice the Guarder raid here? Severely injured? One might wonder why you chose to serve so far away in Edge, considering the dangers. Perhaps it's that you simply find the north appealing?"

Shem was so confused by the odd question that for a few moments he didn't know what to answer. Eventually he blinked and smiled uncomfortably at

the two young officers.

To his surprise, they smiled back.

After another awkward pause, Shem eventually said, “I suppose so. I mean, there’s more snow in the north, but Weeding Season isn’t as oppressive as it is in the south. The air isn’t as heavy. Drier. Better.”

The lieutenants smiled at each other and seemed to relax.

“Well, we find the north appealing as well,” said Xat. “People talk about how disfigured and fearsome the mountains look, but when you see them up close, you have to be impressed by their *strength* and *power*. Perhaps that’s what makes people in the world nervous —the sheer might of the north?”

Zenos shrugged. “I always thought the mountains were rather pretty. Especially when the sun is setting and it casts shadows on the rocky tops. Really quite something to see. Of course,” he rambled on, “the sun *rise* is also good. On the mountains. Shadows, again. Partly cloudy days are good, too. More shadows.” He bit his lip to make it stop moving.

Xat put a hand on Zenos’s sore shoulder and chuckled at his nervousness. “Glad to find someone who shares a common love. Not many of us in the world, are there? We need to *stick together*, Corporal.”

“Yes, yes we do,” Shem smiled. He

nodded to the other lieutenant who hadn't spoken. "I didn't catch your name, sir."

"Heth," he said shortly, as if he weren't allowed to say much.

Zenos nodded slowly. "Well, it's been good to meet you, sirs. I need to get back to my duties. I'm on an evening patrol shift. Got to get my horse ready, my pack, my sword . . . oh, I already have my sword. One less thing to worry about!" he guffawed. "Good evening to you both."

The lieutenants watched as the corporal jogged off towards the stables.

"He missed the first code, but responded correctly to the second about finding the north appealing," Lieutenant

Xat observed.

"And for a 'quiet man,'" Heth scoffed to his companion, "he certainly talks a lot."

Shem jogged over to the stables clenching and unclenching his fist, his Shin-pinched shoulder forgotten. They would remember him as a nervous, babbling idiot. Which, he admitted to himself, he pretty much was right now.

He hadn't expected this so soon. Walickiah had been whisked away only last week, and now there were *two* to replace him.

High General Shin was in trouble.

Actually, *everyone* at the fort was in trouble.

And Shem was feeling just a bit overwhelmed.

Chapter 20 ~ “Know this, Zenos, that I know.”

They say it’s the luck of the draw, but Shem Zenos never believed in luck. Or in coincidences. Everything happened for a purpose. So when he

drew the ‘single rider’ straw, he knew exactly why.

“Ooh, Zenos is riding alone tonight!” several soldiers sniggered.

“What a waste,” a sergeant growled. “He doesn’t even have a girlfriend to make it interesting! Wanna trade?”

Zenos shook his head. “Nope. I rather enjoy being the lone man. Gives me time to think, to ponder the weightier issues of life . . . such as Gizzada.”

The other nineteen men going out on patrol with him laughed.

Zenos really did enjoy being the lone rider. The men went out in groups of twos, threes, fours, and the random one, in order to confuse anyone who

might be lurking in the forest. Because where's there's one, there's always another close by, right? Some soldiers made *other* use of their time as the lone rider, the sergeant being one of the main offenders, and a few men were nervous about being out there by themselves for six hours.

But not Zenos. He actually did ponder the weightier things of life, and not once did Gizzada ever cross his mind.

But tonight something else would occupy him.

It wasn't until his second hour along the dark forest's edge that he saw his opportunity. While no other soldiers

were near, Zenos clucked his horse to the fresh spring and tied him securely behind a boulder and out of sight. Then he lined himself up with the boulder and marched twenty-seven paces, turned, went another thirteen paces, turned again, and continued on until he saw the steam rising and the man waiting.

"What're you doing here?" the startled man in green and brown mottled clothing asked Zenos. "Everything all right?"

"Nope," Shem said, noticing that a few more camouflaged men came out of the shadows to greet him. "General Shin came in with eight guards, and two of them aren't right. One called himself Xat, and the other, Heth—Dormin's

brother."

The men looked at each other and nodded.

"Heth?" one large man said. "Definitely trouble. But two of them?"

Zenos sighed. "What should I do?"

"We'll get working on a plan. In the meantime, do your best to keep a close eye on them."

Zenos held out his hands, exasperated. "That's it? Nothing else?"

One of the men gestured back to him in the same way. "We'll be working on it! Now get back on duty!"

It was well after midnight when Corporal Zenos, fresh off his shift, made his way from the stables to his barracks. The long, low building was attached to the guest and officers' quarters by a wide hallway. That hallway also connected to the surgery wing, the mess hall, the command tower, and supply buildings, so that in the cold snows of Raining Season no one needed to walk outside unnecessarily. Wet, cold soldiers, Major Shin and the surgeon believed, frequently became sick, useless soldiers.

Slowly ambling to the barracks building, Shem was lost in thought—as he had been all evening—trying to

understand how he would deal with the problem that two of High General Shin's guards weren't exactly there to *guard* him. How could he lure both of them to the forest, or away from the general?

He couldn't handle this alone, but for now he had no choice. Help wouldn't be coming until tomorrow, *if* those in the forest came up with a solution.

The towers *were* a bit bothersome.

Shem always felt so brave up in the forest, but down here much of his resolve slipped away, because he was alone. He couldn't reveal his concerns to anyone. Once he considered heading over to Major Shin's home, but how do you wake someone up in the middle of

the night to say you have a “gut instinct” about something? The lieutenants were officers, after all.

So how in the world did Guarders infiltrate the Command School?!

Shem glanced up and was surprised to find himself heading towards the guest quarters, instead of his barracks. He shook his head and turned to the left. Consumed again by worry, he wandered.

He couldn’t let them succeed, at whatever—or whenever—it might be. He had to come up with plans himself, in case he didn’t have until tomorrow.

After several minutes Shem again looked up and blinked, stunned to find himself in front of the hall to the guest

quarters again. Somehow he'd walked in a circle.

There are no coincidences.

There was a reason for this.

He swallowed hard and opened the door to the hallway of the guests' quarters. He crept quietly into the dimly lit passage and shut the door noiselessly. Suddenly he felt an immense desire to get to another passage that intersected the main one. As he snuck down the corridor, he heard a slight sound coming from the hall he was approaching.

He peered around the corner and saw two dark figures standing before a door, as if in intense, quiet conversation.

Shem's stomach twisted nauseatingly, but he also knew why he

was there. He'd been directed. Reluctantly, he felt for the hilt of his sword, but instead remembered Major Shin's advice. He didn't have to kill them, only give them something to remember him by.

He'd never caused a death before. That was the real reason he hadn't drawn his sword during the raid last season. He just couldn't.

He *wouldn't*.

And he'd never tell anyone that. How could he be in his position and refuse to take a life?

Actually, that was an inaccurate phrase—*take a life*. It's not as if one claims it for himself. Rather, it should be

end a life. Everyone loses. Shem wore the sword only for show. And most days, he never slipped the long knife into his boots. He'd rather lose his own life before ending someone else's.

But as his mouth went dry, he realized he might have to abandon his creed.

Shem watched the two men in what seemed to be an earnest and hushed argument, and wondered what he could do. Then it came to him—a clear image in his mind of what needed to happen—and his stomach lurched at the idea.

But before he could think his way out of it, before he could list all his arguments as to why he shouldn't be doing it, he suddenly was.

He ran down the hallway faster than during the Strongest Soldier race. The two men—each holding their long knives, and one of them with his hand on the guest bedroom door—couldn't comprehend what was rushing at them until it was right on top of them.

"You!" Lieutenant Heth whispered.

Corporal Zenos saw the glint of the blade rising up as he caught the man's arm. Instantly he twisted Heth's arm and shoved the knife into his throat before he could speak again. Zenos then spun, caught Lieutenant Xat's thrusting knife, and forced it into his chest, silencing him.

In less than five seconds both men

were on the floor, long knives protruding from their bodies, right outside of the High General and Mrs. Shin's door.

Shem gasped and fell to his knees. "Dear Creator, *what have I done?!*"

His stomach churned violently as he stared at the still bodies. Only give them something to remember him by, right? That's what the major told him. They could still be . . .

In the clammy dark, he looked closely at the lieutenants.

He scrambled to his feet and took off running down the hall and back to the main corridor. He ran blindly, trying to keep the need to retch down in his belly, but knowing it was going to come up. He turned down another hall, and then

another, and burst through the door of the surgery wing. There he vomited all over the floor of the reception area.

The surgeon's assistant on duty scowled. "We have buckets for that, Corporal!"

Shem crumpled to the floor terrified, exhausted, and still nauseated. The assistant brought over a bucket and dropped it with an annoyed thud next to Shem, then retrieved cleaning supplies from a closet. Shem was only vaguely aware of another man in bedclothes coming up to him as he emptied he stomach again in the bucket.

"Corporal Zenos, that doesn't look pleasant," the surgeon said in a slightly

bored manner. “Let’s get you to a cot.”

Shem nodded weakly as he struggled to his feet, the surgeon helping to pull him up. With his free hand the surgeon picked up the bucket and led Shem to the large treatment room lined with thirty beds. None in the room dimly lit by a handful of lanterns were occupied tonight.

“Certainly hope this isn’t the beginnings of an outbreak,” the surgeon said as he lowered Shem on to a cot, and placed the bucket on the floor strategically by his head. “This room will be overflowing with all kinds of unpleasantness by morning if it’s the cook’s fault again” he murmured. “May need to find more buckets.”

Shem shook his head. “I ate in the village today,” was all he could mumble. He *did* eat dinner at the fort, but everything in his mouth tasted of rancid peaches, and he knew he’d never again be able to stomach peach pie. And he certainly couldn’t tell the fort surgeon he was ill because he just stabbed Guarders in disguise. Instead he flopped his arm over his eyes and tried to calm his stomach, but it wouldn’t calm.

He had *just stabbed two Guarders in disguise*!

He could still see their bodies, patches of blood growing around them on the floor that some still-rational brain part of his brain steered him to carefully

avoid as he inspected them—

They *might* only be injured.

As the rush of his horribly successful moment dissolved in his body, terror replaced it. Someone would figure it out soon. It was only a matter of minutes, surely. The other guards would arrive and . . .

The thought made his stomach convulse again, but there was nothing left for the bucket. There were always the two guards stationed before the High General and Mrs. Shin's guest room, and two additional guards making a wide sweep through the area. That Shem didn't run into the other two guards as he dashed through the halls was extraordinary. But they'd be back in

front of the guest quarters soon.

And then what happened—*what he did*—would be known. He thrashed wearily to his side, tears of regret slipping out of his eyes. This isn't what he wanted to do.

Trained to do, yes.

But *wanted*? Never.

He always believed there were alternatives—no matter the person—that while blood may occasionally be shed, it didn't have to be wasted. They'd told him that wouldn't always be the case, that he had to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice of ending a life and living with that knowledge. He'd said that he would, but he was lying. But by

then he'd already been trained to lie so well that he was sure everyone believed him when he made the vow.

Except that Hifadhi had looked at him in a way that only he could—right into the core of Shem's being, into his transparent soul.

The surgeon placed a cool wet cloth on Shem's head. "That will help a little. The rest of it is waiting for it to work its way through your system. If you __"

"SURGEON!" someone in the reception area shouted. "Two injured officers! Long knives!"

The surgeon ran out of the treatment room.

Shem took deep breaths as he heard

shouts in the hallway. All he could do now was wait.

It didn't take long. It seemed to be only seconds, but must have been closer to five minutes. Through the treatment room doors four soldiers hurriedly barged in, carrying in the two limp bodies of the lieutenants.

"On the other side of the room," the surgeon ordered. "Soldier over there is already nauseated. And bring in more lanterns, so we can actually see something!"

Through the slits of his nearly-shut eyes Shem saw the soldiers set the two officers on bunks on the opposite side of the room. Two more surgeons'

assistants, rubbing sleep out of their eyes, rushed in to start attending to one lieutenant while the surgeon examined the other, and a private hastily brought in extra lanterns in each hand.

"He's dead," the surgeon said simply after only a moment of evaluation, not needing extra light to reach that conclusion.

Shem gulped.

High General Shin, who had rapidly dressed, judging by an unfastened button, a few skewed medals on his jacket and his lack of cap, strode into the treatment room.

"Dear Creator!" he breathed as he saw Heth with the long knife protruding from his throat. He looked over to see

Lieutenant Xat with the knife coming out of his heart.

The assistants looked at him grimly and shook their heads.

Shem squeezed his eyes shut tight. He'd been trained too well. He tried not to listen anymore, but the general's voice could've probably penetrated even the Dark Deserts of Death.

"Both dead! What happened?" Shem heard the general demand.

"Sir, we're unsure. We found them on the floor like this," someone, likely one of his guards, said.

"I think they had a fight," another guard suggested. "I've heard words between them before, sir."

General Shin paused before he announced, “The only way this could have been the result of a fight was if they stabbed each other at precisely the same time, which is highly unlikely! Did anyone hear anything? Any arguing? Fighting?”

Shem held his breath as someone else said, “We didn’t, but we sent Master Sergeant Neeks to see if anyone heard anything. We’ve also sent for Major Shin, sir, and Captain Karna is searching for witnesses.”

The High General grumbled quietly, and Shem heard what sounded like someone stroking a chin ripe with stubble. “Right outside my door. Neither

I nor Mrs. Shin heard anything. Why would they draw their knives—”

A loud disturbance in the reception area halted General Shin’s musing.

“I saw the blood on the floor, and I want to know why!”

Shem peered his eyes open to see Joriana Shin burst through the treatment room door, a dressing gown wrapped around her bed clothes, and her brown hair in a long braid. She stopped when she saw the bloodied bodies of the lieutenants.

“Joriana, I told you to wait in our quarters! Two guards were—”

“—ineffective in keeping me there! Oh Relf, what happened?” she whimpered as her husband put a bracing

arm around her. The guards assigned to her had followed her in and looked apologetically at the High General.

"That's what we're trying to piece together. No one knows. Except . . ."

Shem shut his eyes again in a vain attempt to control his breathing, so he didn't notice that the High General had moved until he heard, "Zenos!"

Shem's entire body flinched. Panicked, he opened his eyes and thought he would retch again as he looked up into the hardened face of the High General looming over him. It was like seeing a gray rock falling slowly at him, and it was furious.

"Sir?" he squeaked.

"How long have you been here?"

"Not long, sir."

"He came in just before the officers were discovered, General," the surgeon explained. "Vomited on the floor. I'd stay back a pace or two if I were you. Not sure yet what ails him."

The High General nodded once. "Came in just before . . . Corporal, did you hear or see or notice anything? *Anything* unusual, whatsoever?"

Shem's breathing became rapid. "Sir, all I noticed was the direction of the surgery. I just came off duty and was walking to my barracks when I could feel something was wrong in my belly."

"How many soldiers came off duty

at the same time as you?"

"Twenty, sir."

The High General clapped his hands. "Twenty potential witnesses! Where are they?" he asked the men behind him.

"Likely drinking, sir," Shem mumbled. "Usually head over to the tavern until it closes. No one's coming back for another hour or so."

Half a dozen soldiers poured into the treatment room in a bit of a daze. One of them looked around, confused. "Captain told us that since we were awake we were supposed to—" He stopped when he saw the dead officers, and the expressions on his companions' faces turned to mild panic as they took in

the sight.

General Shin pointed at them. “To the Command Tower—now! I’ll be questioning you each. There have to be clues somewhere. I find it difficult to believe they killed each other simultaneously!”

“*Guarders* do, sir,” someone in the group bravely muttered.

In the shocked silence that followed the suggestion, everyone looked to the High General and breathlessly awaited his response. Shem was glad it wasn’t him who mentioned Guarders. Mrs. Shin whimpered briefly before putting a hand in front of her mouth to hold the rest in.

“That’s true,” General Shin said

firmly, not in the least bit shaken. “They do. But *not* like this!” He turned to his wife. “Joriana, go back to our quarters. I’ll send extra guards, but I assure you, you’ll be safe.”

Mrs. Shin nodded anxiously and took the arm of one of the guards, just as Captain Karna came running into the treatment area.

“Can’t find anyone else who would have been in the vicinity.” His eyes bulged as he saw the lieutenants.

Shem closed his eyes and prayed Karna didn’t recognize him. A moment later he heard a cloth-like sound, as if the bodies were being covered by blankets, and then Karna called for the soldiers to follow him to the Command

Tower.

After the sounds of soldiers scuffling away ended, a hush seemed to overcome the treatment room, dank and dark as a grave.

Shem trembled on the cot, his head swirling and his stomach still spasming. Across the room lay two bodies, still and forevermore silent.

Did he *really* do that?

"Well, all's quiet again." Shem heard the surgeon's impassive voice above him, and felt the damp cloth replaced on his head. "Not exactly the most calming atmosphere for someone with a queasy stomach, is it?"

It was morning when Shem opened his eyes again. Somehow he'd fallen asleep, likely out of horrified fatigue. But his dreams were plagued with terrible images and sounds that, when he woke up, he realized were actually memories.

The sun wasn't up yet, but the area was slowly brightening. He looked to the other side of the room and saw that the two bodies had been moved. Maybe that meant they knew their deaths were his fault.

Shem shook his head. That didn't make any sense at all.

Sometime during the night he came to some conclusions. At least two people were going to die last night, as if some being full of hatred and darkness had decreed it and nothing would prevent the loss of life.

All Shem had done was made sure those less worthy of life were the ones who lost theirs. He didn't start the chain of events, he merely redirected them to a more fitting end. In a small way, it made him feel a bit better—

No, 'better' wasn't the right word. He'd never be 'better' about this. But he did feel absolved.

The treatment room door opened and Major Shin walked in ponderously,

his eyes red with exhaustion and his uniform untidy.

"Doing all right, Shem?" he asked amiably. "You were sleeping when I came by earlier to look at—" He gestured to the empty bunks.

Shem pushed himself up to a sitting position. "I'm sure you're safe. My stomach feels calmer. Any luck finding out what happened last night?" Then he clenched every muscle in expectation.

Major Shin sat down wearily on a bunk next to Shem's and held his head in his hands. "No, nothing. No evidence, no clues, no witnesses—it's maddening."

Shem sighed. He hoped his relief sounded like sympathy.

Perrin rubbed his face. "Doesn't

make any sense. Something else is going on, and I'm afraid we'll never find out what. I met them only yesterday, but I can't help but think: what a waste. I remember being a lieutenant," he said softly, looking out the window where the sunlight was slowly growing. "I had so many plans, so many dreams . . . I looked at their bodies and thought, 'I wonder what dreams they had that will never come true?' They spend years working and training for such an opportunity and suddenly . . . it's all over. Just like that." He snapped his fingers. "One brief night. So tragic. Makes no sense."

Shem swallowed hard before

saying, “Maybe the Creator knew their dreams, that they weren’t as noble as yours, Major. Maybe it’s better their lives *were* cut short.”

Perrin turned to him. “What are you getting at?”

“Sir, a couple of soldiers last night suggested that . . . they may have been Guarders.”

Major Shin shook his head quickly. “No. Not at all. Not Guarders. We have records and histories of all officers—”

“That could’ve been forged?”

“No!” Perrin blurted. “That would mean Guarders are working *within* the army! That can’t be.”

Shem had to let him know. At least get him *thinking* about it.

"Sir, I know you don't want it to be, but what we want rarely coincides with what we're given. And it's the given we have to deal with. Only consider for a moment: because of all your new measures, their only way into the villages and forts now would be going in as one of us, in disguise. If it *were* Guarders, maybe this was meant as a message to you, to prove they can still reach you and your family. Your parents seem to have been the target, sir."

Perrin covered his face again. "I must confess, when we lost Wiles—he was before your time—but when we lost Wiles, just vanished out of a carriage, I had the thought of, 'What if Guarders

were among us, in blue uniforms?’”

Shem cleared his throat gently.

Perrin took his hands off his face to look at his favorite soldier.

Shem shrugged his shoulders in a manner that said, Would it really be so difficult to imagine?

“Oh, Shem,” Perrin sighed wearily, “then *none* of us have a prayer.”

Shem shook his head. “We always have a prayer, sir. Maybe it was the last two Guarders in the army that killed each other last night, instead of killing your father and mother. Wouldn’t they send their best after the highest officer? Now they’re gone.”

Major Shin seemed to have frozen in place. When he looked at Shem it was

with an expression of misery mixed with hope. “Let’s pray *that’s* true, Shem.”

“Already have been, sir.”

A movement at the door drew Shem’s attention.

“Perrin,” the High General said quietly as his large frame filled the doorway. “Go sit with your mother until Mahrree arrives. She’s not doing very well right now.”

Perrin stood up immediately.

“Yes, sir,” he said to his father. He winked good-bye at Shem and went out the door.

General Shin closed the door behind him, but remained in the surgery treatment area alone with the corporal.

Shem tried to sit in some semblance of attention, realizing that the High General's presence wasn't a promising development.

"Sir?"

Slowly, with his boots thudding loudly on the wood floor, General Shin walked over to him.

"Feeling better, Corporal?" The words were friendly, but the impatient tone made it clear this was merely obligatory small talk.

"Yes, sir." But Shem's stomach started churning all over again. The High General usually wore a grave expression, but astonishingly his face was even harsher this morning.

General Shin stopped at the foot of his cot and clasped his hands behind his back. “You’re an interesting young man, Shem Zenos,” he said in a low voice. “I’ve yet to figure you out. I’m considering transferring you to the garrison just so I can get you know you better.” He walked down one side of Shem’s cot, keeping his eyes on him.

Shem had to crane his neck awkwardly to meet his hard gaze. He knew enough to realize the angle was intended to cause him pain, which would distract him from his concentration, which would then let the formidable officer see right through him. Shem ignored his discomfort.

“Although I think my favorite major and his wife would be greatly displeased if I did,” General Shin added.

Shem tried to keep his breathing steady as the general turned and slowly paced away. He stopped abruptly at the end of the cot, his dark eyes cold and his face as relenting as stone as he faced Shem again. Major Shin’s glare was nothing compared to his father’s, who had twenty more years to perfect it.

“You seem so innocent, so boyish, so gentle,” General Shin said coolly. “But I’ve known many innocent-looking men who were foxes dressed up in feathers making themselves a nest in the

henhouse. I have no evidence of you either way, *Shem Zenos*."

Shem couldn't help but squirm. The way the general said his name made it sound filthy.

"And so I look at you and wonder—are you really as good as my daughter-in-law claims? Or are you like my two lieutenants—biding their time and waiting for the opportune moment? The problem is, *Shem Zenos*, I have no way of knowing until it may be too late."

Shem feared he was going to retch again.

The High General squinted as if reading his face. "You know what happened last night. I have no doubt. I can read the layers in men's eyes, *Zenos*.

In yours I see terror and worry, but underneath those layers I also see a wall of deceit. You're hiding things, Corporal, but years ago my father put measures in the code of the army that prevents me from using more effective methods of discovering exactly *what* you're hiding. Your deceit may be nothing more than the fact you are nowhere near the age of twenty-one that you claim to be. Or your deceit may be that you are *nothing* at all as you present yourself."

Shem kept his eyes on the general as he walked back up to his head. It was in moments like these that he was grateful for his training that conditioned

him to go rigid until a threat had passed.

General Shin bent down and picked up off the floor the damp cloth that had been on Shem's head most of the night. Shem stopped breathing as the general's hand went for Shem's throat, but Shem didn't think he could choke him with only one hand.

But then again, he *was* the High General.

The general only wiped the cloth under Shem's chin, then stood back up, examining it.

"Know this, *Zenos*," he said, staring at the cloth, "that I *know*. And when I have more evidence, I'll be back for you."

He was about to say something else,

but mercifully the treatment door swung open again. The general purposely dropped the cloth on Shem's hand, and Shem's fist enclosed it.

"Oh, General! Are you all right?" Mahrree rushed over to her father-in-law as if she was going to embrace him, but she only gripped his arm. "I can't believe no one told me until this morning! Perrin's been gone half of the night, and only now did someone send for me. Where's Mother Shin?"

"In the guest quarters. I'll take you to her, Mahrree." The general nodded at the corporal and led Mahrree away.

She sent a fleeting and confused glance to Shem, but still Shem couldn't

move.

Only after they left the room did Shem relax, unclench his fist, and look at the cloth.

“No!” he gasped.

High General Shin had wiped off a minuscule drop of dried blood from under Shem’s chin. There it was, a small red smear revitalized by the dampness of the white cloth.

He frantically wrenched off his jacket and inspected it in the growing morning light for blood splatters.

Nothing.

He glanced at his cap on the floor, but it, too, was clean. He stood up and hurriedly made his way to a mirror above a wash stand at the front of the

treatment room. His face was completely clear. Nothing either in his hair, throat, or ears.

High General Shin had noticed, in the dim morning light, the one bit of evidence that Shem had been near the lieutenants. And he'd given that bit of evidence to the corporal.

Shem sat down clumsily on a nearby cot. The only reason the general did that was because he was sure he would find something more compelling to accuse Shem with later.

Then it would all be over.

Shem would have saved the High General's life, but also would have failed in *saving* them.

Stay anonymous, keep a low profile, connect with no one . . . that's what Tuma Hifadhi had told him to do. He had failed in all of that, too.

He was definitely in over his head.

"General," Mahrree said circumspectly as they walked down the hall, "why were you speaking to Shem?"

"Just asking questions, Mahrree. I'm full of questions today."

She firmed her grip on his arm. "Surely you don't suspect that Shem—"

"Right now I suspect everything and everyone. Even Perrin's dog."

Well, that would've been too convenient, Mahrree considered briefly. "I realize you don't know much about Shem beyond what we tell you, but you have to believe me—he's innocent."

"And why should I believe that? Because he willingly changes the soiled cloths of your children? Because he has the face of a child himself? Because he goes with you to the congregational meetings? None of that means anything. He's a skilled, strong young man. He was exceptional in the race I saw him run yesterday, and you told me yourself that he barely lost to Perrin last week. Only a man equal in power to Perrin could come that close to besting him. I'm

telling you—he's not what he seems."

Mahrree scoffed at that. "Why, he may be strong, but he barely touches his sword! Perrin's *still* trying to get him comfortable with a blade. Shem Zenos is a sweet boy that's no more capable of killing anyone than . . . than I am! And you know how squeamish I am. I pay the butcher extra to debone my chicken. Shem may be even worse!"

"Which would explain why—*had* he killed two men—he was in the surgery wing *vomiting* last night," the general said with a slight edge to his voice.

Mahrree's mouth dropped open in surprise, and she stopped walking until her father-in-law pulled her along.

"Surely not, General! Why—*why* would he do it? No. Absolutely not. Ridiculous. I think the other story is more plausible. They got in an argument, and they both were deadly at the same time. It seems unlikely, I agree, but certainly not impossible. And there's no evidence of bloody footsteps leaving the scene, according to what Grandpy Neeks told me. Perrin said only yesterday that four of your guards were new soldiers you don't even know—"

"And you don't know Shem Zenos!" the general interrupted her sharply.

But it wasn't sharp enough to shut her up. "Sir, *I know him better than you!* Right now you're grabbing at any

possibility, which means you've lost your impartiality. You don't want the truth. You only want convenient answers!"

"Truth?! I've lost MY impartiality!" he bellowed.

Just as the general was about to round on Mahrree and let her know exactly what he thought, she stopped him with, "Did you trust Hogal Densal?"

General Shin blinked, startled out of his fury by the odd question. "*What?*"

"Hogal Densal—did you trust him?"

The general sighed, slightly calmer. "I did. We didn't see eye-to-eye on many things, but Hogal was an excellent judge of character, and noticed things no

one else could."

"Hogal *trusted* Shem," Mahrree told him. "So do we. He told us repeatedly to keep Shem close to us, and said he was the finest young man he ever knew, after Perrin."

General Shin looked down at the ground for a moment. "Hogal said that?"

Mahrree nodded. "High praise coming from him, wouldn't you agree?"

The general was quiet for half a minute, staring at the floor, and Mahrree shifted in worry for her favorite soldier.

"Come, Mahrree," the general eventually said. "Joriana needs a woman's presence right now."

Mahrree smiled primly as the

general led her to their guest room.

Changing the subject was as close as the general would get to conceding defeat in anything.

That afternoon a bleary-eyed Perrin came home and sat down at the eating table. Mahrree was glad the house was quiet, because he looked like he needed it. She'd sent her After School Care boys to join with another group for the day, just in case there were more surprises for the Shin family.

That morning Mahrree had brought a fretful Joriana to their home—along

with two guards who stationed themselves at either door—and shortly before midday meal Hycymum came over, curious as to why her daughter's house was "soldiered." Hycymum came up with the *wonderful* idea to distract Joriana from the events of the night by taking her to the market so she could help her find the latest Idumea fashions, and Joriana decided her two grandchildren needed new clothes, too. The soldiers gave each other passing looks of dread as they followed the party of four to the markets. Mahrree couldn't think of anything more distracting for Mother Shin than to try to shop with Hycymum and their two grandchildren.

When she finally returned, she

would need a very quiet place herself.

Perrin supported his head in his hands and sighed as Mahrree put a plate of late midday meal in front of him. He hadn't eaten since last night. He never ate when he was absorbed in a problem.

"Anything new?" she asked.

Perrin shook his head. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. All evidence—well, what there is of it—points to a fight between the two men. Maybe that's all that happened."

Mahrree sat down across from him. "You don't sound as if you believe that. Why?"

His hands came off his face. "Shem was sick last night. I spoke with him for

a few minutes this morning. He suggested the most extraordinary thing."

"What?" Mahrree bit her lip.

"That the lieutenants may have been Guarders, trying to kill my parents."

Mahrree gasped. "Why . . . why that's . . . that's . . ."

"Pretty much my initial response too," Perrin agreed with her stammering. "But all morning I've been thinking about it. And then my father revealed to me one detail." He shook his head again. "Mahrree, when he opened his door to discover the two officers on the ground, the door handle had *already* been unlatched, as if someone was about to enter his room, but stopped."

"Meaning?" Mahrree breathed.

"The lieutenants may have already had their knives drawn. Perhaps they *were* going into my parents' room. Perhaps . . . someone stopped them from whatever they were planning."

Mahrree held her hand over her mouth. "But if someone stopped them, wouldn't that person tell you what happened? He'd be quite the hero, you know. Recognizing a plot to assassinate the High General then stopping it—"

"Unless," Perrin whispered, "whoever saved the High General is *not* someone who *enjoys attention*."

Mahrree's chest tightened. "Perrin, when I found your father, he was in the hospital interrogating Sh—"

“Don’t say it, Mahrree,” he cut her off. “Don’t put his name with this.”

That puzzled her. Normally Perrin would be the first to analyze every possibility. And not so long ago, he interrogated Shem himself and concluded he wasn’t a spy. Shem proved to be a hero in the Guarder raid, and if he had now stopped an assassination, he certainly would be looking at another round of applause at the amphitheater.

“But why not? Perrin, if he did do this, then—”

“Mahrree, think it through,” he said steadily. “If it *is* who we suspect, then how would he have known they were Guarders? How would he have known

what they were up to?"

Mahrree paled with realization.

"No," she said shortly, as everything she thought of her claimed little brother threatened to unravel in her head. It was worse than the notion that Guarders infiltrated Command School. Was Perrin actually hinting that a Guarder may have even infiltrated their family?! "No. No way that he is. He's *not* one of them, Perrin! I would *never* believe that. NO!"

"Mahrree, Mahrree," he reached over and patted her hand, "I agree. He's not one of *them*, and that's why I refuse to put his name with this. But Mahrree, for one moment, consider this question with me: *if* he did this, *how* did he know

to do it?"

"But he didn't! He—"

"The surgeon said only a very strong man could have plunged in those long knives to their handles."

Tears filled Mahrree's eyes. "Stop with this game and TELL me what you suspect about Shem Zenos!"

"He did it, Mahrree," Perrin whispered bleakly. "He saved my father and mother, and he doesn't want anyone to know. Because he's hiding something more from us."

Mahrree closed her eyes briefly and whimpered. "*No.*"

"When I look into his eyes," Perrin continued, his voice growing husky,

“they’re like deep blue pools. But my father taught me how to read people. His ‘pools’ are very shallow. He blocks me, quite subtly. But Mahrree,” he said now with a more optimistic tone, “Shem *is* on our side. I’m sure of it. I don’t know where he came from, but he’s ours *now*. I still trust him, just like Hogal. And as Hogal said, we best keep him very close. He may be our only chance to survive.”

“But we have to find out the truth of who he is,” Mahrree whispered.

“Are you sure you want to know the truth?” he prodded.

“What kind of question is that?” she scoffed. “Of course I do!”

“But Mahrree,” he said with sudden

sharpness, "with truth comes responsibility, too. You can't live in the existence you've crafted for yourself if the truth conflicts with it."

She recognized his debating voice, and she developed a dangerous gleam in her eye. "But if that existence is a lie, then isn't it better to find the truth?"

"I really don't know," he muttered, abruptly giving up. "This may sound juvenile, but I like the world we've created with our favorite soldier. I don't want to lose any of that. Do you?"

She lost her debating energy too. This wasn't an academic argument; this was about their little brother.

Then again . . .

"Are you sure the truth would ruin it?" she whispered. "I'm not. We *have* to find out, Perrin!"

"So what are you going to do?" he challenged. "Ask Shem Zenos who he *really* is? If he knows something more than he's letting on to? My father's interrogating him right now. If he endures that and comes out clean, there's nothing more you'll get out of him."

"I'll just wait for the right moment," she decided. "When his guard's down. My little brother doesn't keep secrets from me."

"What if he does to *protect* you, Mahrree?" he asked. "To protect all of us?"

She pondered that for a moment. “Lies don’t protect,” she declared. “The truth is always better.”

“Oh really?” Perrin raised an eyebrow. “Remember telling me that had you known the Guarders had you and Jaytsy marked almost two years ago, you probably would have been so terrified you might have birthed early and we wouldn’t have Peto now? My lie kept you and our son safe.” He folded his arms and waited for her retort.

She pursed her lips. “You may have a point,” she had to admit. “But you didn’t keep that secret for long, and I also suspected something more was going on than simply a dare gone wrong.

Shem's smart, but not *that* clever. We would've caught him by now."

He sat back and studied her. "You've already made up your mind about him, haven't you? Just listen to you. You've already decided he's innocent."

"No, I haven't," she defended, her tone not nearly as convincing as her words. "And just listen to yourself! So have *you*!"

"I didn't say he was *innocent*, only that he's . . . not . . . " he fumbled for the right words, "only he's not *against* us." He shrugged hopelessly. "Oh, I don't know. All I *do* know is that I want to follow my heart and believe Hogal and trust Shem, but my head keeps getting in

the way with too many questions about his involvement. Or lack of."

He closed his tired eyes and rubbed them. "Just when I thought I was on top of everything again . . . Just yesterday, when I showed my father all our improvements, and watched him grin—I've never seen him so happy. So when I think I've got a handle on everything . . . suddenly I can't seem to grip anything."

Mahrree reached across the table and squeezed his arm. "You've done remarkably well, Perrin," she said earnestly. "You do have a handle on things. This was all completely unexpected. But think about this—if they *were* Guarders, just how desperate have

you made them to try something so daring? You've got them on the run, Major Shin!"

"Wonderful," he said drearily. "My extreme measures have pushed them to insane measures, which means at some point they're going to succeed insanely as well."

"No it doesn't!" she insisted. "Because they've failed! And this failure's going to hurt them—"

"Or make them even angrier," he countered. He massaged his eyes again. "And we don't even know if they were Guarders. Likely never will. But if they were, how does a certain young soldier fit into all of this?"

Mahrree exhaled and shook her

head. “I don’t know.”

“Math,” Perrin said dully.

She blinked. “What?”

“It’s like a complicated math problem,” he intoned. “When you have symbols instead of numbers and you have to figure out what numbers are supposed to be there.”

“Oh, I hate those,” Mahrree mumbled.

“I love them,” Perrin smiled feebly at her. “Still do. It’s a challenge, defying you to solve it while it keeps its secrets to itself. But you poke it and test it and experiment until it begins to fall apart, and you get one number, and then another, and suddenly it all becomes

yours. You know its secrets, and you've conquered it!"

She looked at him appreciatively. "That's how you see the world, isn't it? As one big equation that you have to solve?"

"Frequently. It used to even be fun," he admitted, but then his smile faded. "Until recently. Until the equation eliminated Tabbit and Hogal, and tried to smudge out my parents. And now there's a variable it's tossing around named Shem Zenos, and I'm afraid to stick a number there, in case I hate the way it all turns out. Ah, Mahrree," he sighed as he stared at his untouched meal, "there are too many unknowns, too many variables, and this time . . . I'm

afraid it's beating me," he confessed in a whisper.

Mahrree was struck dumb. She hadn't seen him so despondent since the Densals died. And he'd come so far, accomplished so much, struck a blow to the Guarders in so many ways, and now he feared—*feared?*—they were striking back. The world really was out to get them.

She realized then, as he now held his head in his hands again, that she'd never before heard him use the word "afraid" to refer to himself, and it unsettled her. How was it that he could accomplish so much, yet then despair so easily?

For a moment she glimpsed a solution to it all, but it was a solution High General Shin had already dismissed. Yet there was no other alternative—Perrin had to go into the forest and find out, once and for all, just what all of this was about. There was simply no other way to end it.

But, as she watched the man she adored, that nasty word starting with a *c*—and that word wasn't *cautious*—popped into her head again. She clenched her fist in frustration, angry that the world, the Guarders, the events of the previous night, and even her favorite soldier were somehow conspiring to turn her husband into something less than

he was.

Even though by all accounts he was a successful commander, he was *afraid*, and he wore it miserably.

Normally they would have been in a dark office of the unlit building.

That's where they began but, upon reading the urgent message from Edge about a bizarre incident that ended with two dead lieutenants, Mal found himself unable to speak. He also could no longer breathe regularly, but clutched his heart and began to sweat profusely.

Brisack rushed him, with the help of

two of his guards, to his immense bedroom formerly belonging to kings.

"Get to my house!" he shouted at the guards. "My emergency bag. Tell my wife the heart one. Run!"

It was fortunate for the chairman that Dr. Brisack lived only three houses down, because the guards came running back with the correct bag in only minutes.

"Empty the bag on the table," Brisack shouted, still pushing rhythmically on Nicko Mal's chest as he had ever since they left, "then retrieve two of my assistants."

The guards quickly dumped the bag spilling out bandages, small glass bottles of various colors and sizes, along with

leaves and berries wrapped in white cloth, all of which disrupted papers scattered over the bedside table. They left the room even faster, shutting the large oak double doors behind them.

"Stupid, stupid man!" Brisack mumbled as he snatched up a smaller uncorked bottle rolling in a slow circle on the table, gripped the cork with his teeth, spat it out, and held the bottle to Mal's gray lips. "Drink this—it'll calm you. Of course, had you not pursued this course—which I TOLD you not to—you wouldn't be needing this, now would you?!"

The weakened Mal dribbled some of the brownish liquid on his chin, but

Brisack was satisfied enough went down his throat.

He set down the bottle and tore open Mal's ruffled white shirt. Then Brisack grabbed another larger bottle before it rolled off the table, uncorked it, and poured some of its contents on the gasping man's chest. The thick brew which bubbled from the bottle packed with leaves, bark, and shriveled berries smelled simultaneously like an herb garden and a rotting forest.

"And where's Gadiman right *now?* Probably hiding in his office again with the doors locked? Is *he* here helping save your pitiful life? No, of course not! No one will see him for days, probably. The weasel hiding in his hole. No

wonder.”

He straddled his patient and massaged the liquid into his chest over his heart while the old man could do nothing but gasp and perspire.

Brisack turned, keeping one hand in the same constant massaging motion, and with his other twitched open a wrapped white cloth to reveal several red berries.

“Lucky for you some late hawthorn berries are still on. Gives me an opportunity to test if the fresh ones applied topically will work in conjunction with the ones I just administered orally, although I don’t know if you deserve it.”

He crushed the berries roughly in

his hands, then plastered the juice and skins on Mal's chest.

"Three lieutenants gone in one season. Three!" he grumbled as he worked the juices into Mal's narrow gray chest. "You've nearly exhausted our supply of new officers. The next batch won't be ready for another two years, yet. And now we can't even use them because the army will realize Guarders have infiltrated Command School! Such waste! So much gold!" he seethed as he massaged. "I could have told you this wouldn't work. Oh, wait. *I did*. But you listened to Gadiman. So bent on getting what you want you'll listen to any fool who tells you what you want to hear. You didn't break the Shins,

you've only made them more powerful. Why, look at what they've survived! Right now Relf and Perrin must think they're invincible! You idiot!"

He continued to massage the berries and tonic over Mal's heart, watching for when his lips would turn pink again. The good doctor complained loudly all the while since no one could interrupt him.

"The most far-fetched, impulsive undertaking. Everything we planned for by using officers in the army is completely destroyed. The next five years? Gone! Well done, Nicko. Brilliant."

With one hand he grasped the old man's wrist and checked his pulse while

he continued to massage with the other. After a minute the doctor sighed with exhaustion and slid off his patient and the bed.

"Excellent work, Dr. Brisack. Your patient's heart rate has stabilized and his color's coming back, too. He'll live."

He plopped into a chair, clearly not satisfied with the prognosis.

"When my assistants arrive they can clean up this mess," Brisack said, gesturing to the bottles, berries, and liquids spilled around the bed and side table. He started to wipe his wet hands on his red jacket, sighed in exasperation, and instead glared at the Chairman.

Nicko Mal couldn't say anything, far too frail to move. He only blinked at

the doctor.

"Things are going to change, Nicko," Brisack said quietly. "You've ruined everything, an incredible waste of gold went to pay for Command School, and now we no longer even have those officers. Every two weeks our men wake up and find more gold than their work should ever have earned them. They've been spoiled for only a few days' work each season. But no more. Agreed? Blink once if you agree, twice if you don't."

It took him a moment, but eventually Nicko Mal reluctantly—stubbornly—blinked once.

Brisack nodded back. "Now then,

here's what we're going to do: we stop paying them."

Mal blinked twice, then twice again.

"Worried they'll revolt, are you? But they can't leave the service without their comrades killing them for breaking the oaths. So I propose we cut them off, like a parent cuts off a leeching child. Make them earn their own ways. With no options, I speculate they'll become very inventive. And *that* will be fascinating to observe. As the saying goes, desperation drives discovery. What methods will they employ to discover new ways of funding themselves?"

Mal opened his mouth to try to speak, but his lips only parted slightly.

"That's the relaxant at work," Brisack smiled slyly. "I recently added that to my heart tonic. You remain conscious but unable to do anything so that your body can rest and your heart can heal. One of my better concoctions, and I thank you for being one of my first *human* volunteers to test it. My wife's dog just runs when she sees me approaching now. She must think I'm you. I'll be recording your reactions to the relaxant over the next several hours. But think about my suggestion, Nicko, and tell me you're not intrigued. We test the *testers*. We continue to gain research and be entertained, but keep our remaining gold to ourselves until this

situation stabilizes itself in five, maybe ten, *years*. I see it in your eyes. You're seeing the wisdom in this, aren't you? Blink once for yes, twice for no."

Again Mal was slow to respond, and it wasn't because of the relaxant. Eventually he blinked once.

Brisack gave him a half smile. "Didn't you once study what happens to abandoned young of different species? Some grew exceptionally strong, others became depressed and died? I referenced some of that for one of my studies once. You can do it again, *but with humans*. How will these sucking 'children' survive when we cut them lose and let them struggle on their own?"

Mal blinked once, quite quickly.

“All right,” he whispered.

Brisack shook his head. “I didn’t give you enough. You shouldn’t be able to speak at all. Or maybe you’re just exceptionally stubborn.”

Mal blinked once again.

“And by the way,” Brisack said as he stood up to cork a bottle, “about saving your life? You’ll be getting my bill in the morning. Guess this proves you have a heart. And you’re welcome, you selfish son of a sow!”

Administrator Gadiman sat at his desk, candles burning all around him,

with *the file* in front of him. It sat apart from several others stacked neatly on his large desk.

It was late again. The sun had set hours ago, but Gadiman still had work to do. He could work all night if necessary. And the next day. And the next, for however long he needed to be there. No one would bother him here. No one would *dare*.

He tried to concentrate on the task before him but his anger boiled up inside again, threatening to froth out in another fit of temper. But he couldn't let that happen again. It took him almost three hours to reorganize all the files. But as he gathered up the files he dumped furiously out of boxes, one had fallen

open to reveal a page he knew he could work with. *This* was the way he could get his revenge and prove his worth.

The file sat open in front of him as a bright and redeeming light in contrast to a dark and stupid night.

Those two lieutenants were ready, he knew it! Something went wrong in Edge, but it wasn't his fault. Something — o r *someone*—else interfered, and because of that failure, Gadiman would be dropped from the inner circle before he even got a chance to be part of it. It wasn't fair! Everything should have worked out perfectly! So who ruined it?!

He took a few deep cleansing breaths, noticed that they didn't cleanse

anything, and grabbed the thick file. He flipped the pages over, past the High General's comprehensive report, past the testimonies from citizens of Edge, and past the explanation from the Administrators as to why, despite all the progress Major Shin had made, he certainly couldn't be promoted *again* after only *one season*, but here were several medals and patches instead to decorate his dress uniform, along with the proclamation of Major Shin as Officer of the Year.

He stopped flipping through the file only when he came to Captain Karna's daily reports. He moved those pages to the top and turned to the second page.

There it was, obvious for anyone to

see, *if* they were willing to see. Why no one wanted to, Gadiman couldn't understand. Yet here was his salvation. He would still prevail, and prove to Chairman Mal he was far more adept than that self-righteous doctor.

He took another file from the side of his desk that had a yellow dot next to the name. He opened the file and carefully copied information from Captain Karna's report for a second record that he alone kept.

He closed the file, pulled out the orange paint and placed another dot on top of the yellow.

He wouldn't ignore it like everyone else.

If they wanted Shin brought to his knees, Gadiman would find another way to do it—legally, publically, definitively. It might take some time, but knew he had all the time in the world.

For disarming the *entire* army in front of her husband and with his *reluctant* approval, then sending the soldiers out in 'casual' uniform to the village—which Captain Karna claimed had "charming effects on the citizens," but was a phrase that made Gadiman involuntarily shudder—Mrs. Shin's new orange label meant Beyond Watched, but not yet Traitorous.

No woman should have that kind of influence over an officer. Any more

power and she'd be one of the most dangerous women in the world.

And she was.

Gadiman could see it in the four letters she sent. She had potential, this one. Far more than any other file in his very full office. And she had the ear of the son of the most powerful officer in the world.

She was a glorious disaster simply waiting to happen, to fully ripen and explode right in front all of their faces. And Gadiman would be the one to call their attention to it. He saw it, right from the beginning. He had written proof, and he would be there at the end when she destroyed herself and everyone else with the last name of Shin. They would all go

down hard and loud and messy, and Gadiman would be there to sweep it all up, pour it into a bag, and hand it proudly to the Chairman.

Then he'd set his eyes on the next target, the one file he kept even more heavily guarded than Mrs. Shin's. In it was only one item of evidence so far, but it was most revealing. He would just wait for the right moment.

Unable to stop himself, he slipped the file out from the secret drawer under his desk and opened it up. There it was, still dark and crisp in the clear scrawl unique to doctors.

Captain Shin, a dozen

will be awaiting in the shadows to assist in the care of your wife and daughter.

Gadiman was no doctor, but he was intelligent enough to know to send a *copy* of that message to the captain, and to keep the original—in Brisack's own handwriting—for himself.

He would be next, after Mrs. Shin.

Gadiman painstakingly set a precise orange dot next to Brisack's name. The orange paint was his only victory for the day.

That very wrong, very stupid, very

disastrous day.

Dormin was ready, waiting in the dark in his room at the Inn at Edge. He paced nervously, knowing that the time had come, and now was past. Something must have happened—

The door opened quietly and two figures slipped in.

“Rector Yung? Why haven’t we left yet? Where are the others?” Dormin began to fumble with a match until he heard Rector Yung.

“No light, son. We have to keep quiet for another few days yet, it seems.”

“What?” Dormin exclaimed. “I thought there was this great rush—”

“There is!” Mrs. Yung said, clearly exasperated. “But there’s been an incident at the fort, and now the patrols have doubled, round the clock. There will be no movement until things quiet down again. Probably four or five more days.”

Dormin exhaled loudly. “But that’s —”

“Hardly a worry for you!” Mrs. Yung snapped in an angry whisper.

Dormin clamped his mouth shut. He’d never heard her so testy before.

“Remember, Dormin,” Mrs. Yung said, trying to calm her voice, “this isn’t

all about you. You can sit around here for weeks without a concern, but others are in far greater danger. I didn't mean to get snippy with you," she added apologetically. "It's only that . . . oh, the timing just couldn't be worse."

Dormin saw her take a chair at the small table and plop down in it worriedly.

Her husband stepped up behind her and seemed to massage her shoulders. "We have to trust the Creator knows our plight, my dearest. He will fix everything, somehow."

"I know, I know," Mrs. Yung said impatiently. "It's just that—"

"The Creator knows our plight," Rector Yung said again, still calm and

gentle.

Mrs. Yung exhaled loudly, partly in aggravation, partly in apology. “I know,” she said quieter. “I know. I’m sorry.”

In the dark, Rector Yung seemed to smile at Dormin. “All will be well,” he said with such surety as if to guarantee it. “We’ve faced trickier situations—”

A loud scoffing sound from his wife begged to differ with that assessment.

“Dearest?” Rector Yung said in a remarkable blend of innocent questioning and firm admonishment.

Mrs. Yung sighed again. “Sorry, sorry. I can’t help but get anxious at this point.”

“And yet every time all goes well,

doesn't it?" her husband said with such sweetness that Dormin wondered if the man were half sugar.

"Yes, you're always right," Mrs. Yung growled quietly. "And so is the Creator."

Rector Yung chuckled quietly and took a chair next to his wife.

But Dormin clenched his hands into nervous fists. "So . . . what happened at the fort? Why is everyone more anxious than usual?"

The Yungs looked steadily at each other before Rector Yung cleared his throat.

"Dormin, sit down, son," the rector said somberly. "There's something you need to hear."

Chapter 21 ~ “I never once remember laughing in Idumea.”

Mahrree looked at the brand new collection of blank paper, tightly bound and protected with a leather cover. Her own book. At least, it would be soon.

Joriana, who had left yesterday for Idumea with her husband and two fewer guards, had bought the beautiful book for her when she endured an arduous but highly distracting outing at the market with Hycymum, two toddlers, and a couple of long-suffering soldiers. When she handed the undoubtedly expensive gift to Mahrree, her eyes were damp.

"Whenever I was deeply troubled, Uncle Hogal told me to write about it. He said we don't know what we're thinking until we see it in our own writing, then we're able to grapple with it. He gave me my first blank book right after my parents died and I realized I was expecting Perrin. I was actually

surprised to see that Edge even carries something so fine," she said as she ran her hand gingerly over the swirling patterns imprinted on the leather, the grooves darkened with inks.

"Oh, Mother Shin—I can't accept this!" Mahrree had breathed, not daring to take the book. Nothing else in her house could be declared as *fine,* and less than one minute with either of her children would render it *dismal*. "It's . . . it's . . ."

"It will fit quite well in your extensive collection," Joriana said with finality, nodding to their full bookshelves.

"But shouldn't you keep it? I imagine you have plenty to write about."

Joriana smiled sadly and held up two more, just like it. “You’re right—I do have a lot to write about. Mine will be dreary enough, so Mahrree, create something memorable!”

Last night she only fondled the cover, not daring to muss any pages.

“Just use it,” Perrin told her. “Really, my parents can afford it. They can afford a dozen of those.”

Mahrree squinted. “Just how much silver is paid to the High General anyway?”

He squinted back. “He’s paid in gold. And realize, that’s not a job I *ever* want—especially now—so you can stop your planning—”

“I don’t want you to have that job either! I’m only . . . curious.”

He glared at her, not entirely convinced that curiosity was all there was to it. “Enough to keep their house stocked and their servants well paid.”

“They have servants?!” Mahrree exclaimed. “How big is their house?”

He shrugged dismissively. “Big enough to be garish. No one in their right mind would want it, including *you*.”

So early this morning Mahrree stoked the fire in the gathering room, dragged one of the stuffed chairs over to it, and settled down with her book next to a small table with a mug of water, ink, and quill to write something *memorable*.

After five minutes of staring, she realized it wasn't that easy. Too many things were on her mind, all fighting to be recorded, then each suddenly deciding it didn't want to be the first to blot the beautiful buff pages.

She was wasting time, and she hated that. Soon her children and husband would be waking, she'd have breakfast to make, then the morning chores to do, then midday meal to ready, then put down her children for naps, and then prepare for her After School Care boys.

This afternoon they were heading to her old school's orchard. Recently she noticed no one had picked the apples.

Many were still hanging heavy on the low branches, but more had dropped to the ground, becoming food for whatever creatures stole them in the night.

At first, she was irate. This was the school orchard! Every year for decades the fruit was harvested by the students and sold in the market. The silver slips earned went to improving the school building, purchasing wood for the fire in the Raining Season, and paying the teacher. Every student's family helped, and it was a neighborhood tradition all over Edge—gather to harvest, sell, and take care of our schools.

But now?!

Mahrree had tried to put her irritation in her apron pocket and

decided to chalk up the neglect of the school orchard—and the five other school orchards in Edge, Perrin told her glumly last night—to the Guarder raid, the changes to the village, and the recent bloodshed at the fort. People just had other, more worrying, things on their minds.

So why was it that, when all the events of the past several moons had most directly affected her family, her family was the only one still concerned about the school orchards?

She repeatedly shoved aside the nagging suspicion that no one cared for the apples because they knew the Administrators were now paying for the

teachers and new, larger buildings. Just like the lessons that no parents worried about, the orchard was ignored because *someone else* was taking care of it.

And she definitely refused to visit the notion screaming in her head that her After School Care boys were also at times being neglected by their parents because *someone else* was now taking care of them all day at school, and even afterwards.

Why do the work when *someone else*—and it doesn't matter who—will do it for you?

Those were aggravating attitudes Mahrree tried not to dwell on, but instead quietly fought against. They'd harvest those apples this afternoon and

give them to Director Hegek. They were "his" property now, after all, even though he likely didn't realize it. The neighborhood school now belonged to the Administrators, and no one outside of the Shin household seemed to think that was yet another tragic turn of events.

Mahrree thought again of what Joriana had said about her own blank books, and decided that maybe she need to follow Hogal's advice as well. The rich, thick pages would be darkened with her own frustrations, musings, worrying, and venting. It seemed a poor way to treat such a treasure, but nothing else came to her mind.

Since it seems that The Writings are actually the records of families and what they experienced, perhaps I too can create my own “Writings” on these pages given to me by my mother-in-law, Joriana Shin.

She smiled at the words. “Not a bad beginning,” she murmured, and continued on.

So much has happened this past year that I almost worry what more can occur, because we’re only nearing the end of Harvest Season, and a long Raining Season is still to come. The year started quietly

enough, until Weeding Season came bringing with it strange changes to the education of our children and a raid by the Guarders which resulted in tragic consequences, especially for Perrin's great aunt and uncle, Tabbit and Hogal Densal.

It would have been worse though, I'm sure, had Corporal Shem Zenos not

Mahrree stopped.

Exactly how much should she say about Shem and their suspicions? It was barely over a week ago the two lieutenants were found dead in the hallway of the guest quarters. Shem even volunteered himself to be interrogated

by her father-in-law, and only an hour later an exasperated High General sent him out of the command tower. Perrin told Mahrree he had never seen his father so frustrated, nor had he seen Shem so relieved to be exonerated, again.

Two days after the attack, files came by the Administrators' messenger service from Dr. Brisack. It seemed there had been a girl both lieutenants had pursued when they first arrived at Command School, one that played both of them before chasing after a graduating officer. There was bad blood between the two lieutenants which they chose not to reveal, both eager to serve the

Chairman and High General. The files were accompanied by a note from Dr. Brisack personally apologizing for not recognizing the potential problems with the young officers and allowing such ill-disciplined men to serve so closely to the High General.

Later Perrin told Mahrree over dinner that his father confided to him that Dr. Brisack was the only decent one among the Administrators, but he'd never own up to saying that.

"And I read the note from Brisack, Mahrree, and thinking on the off chance that maybe . . ." He shrugged when he said that, and looked at her hard to see if she could finish the sentence.

It took her a minute. "If maybe . . .

he was the one who sent you the warning a year and a half ago?! About the twelve Guarders? An Administrator? How would he have known?!"

Perrin shook his head quickly. "I know, I know. And the writing didn't match, not one bit. It was ridiculous to even think it, but . . . Well, at least the mystery seems to be solved. The lieutenants did kill each other at the same time. Brisack confirmed he had seen a case of that before. Shem was so relieved he was no longer a suspect that he practically danced out of the office."

"So," Mahrree sighed happily, "we can be absolutely sure we know the truth about Shem Zenos?"

Her husband only swallowed and went back to his dinner.

That's why Mahrree stared now at her new book, wondering exactly what to write. Shem had been over the afternoon and evening before, staying with the children so that she could go with Perrin to do the final inspection of the new small fort in Moorland. She didn't even think twice about leaving Jaytsy and Peto in Corporal Zenos's devoted care. Shem was their little brother, after all. The children called him Unk and ran into his arms whenever they saw him.

The three of them were sound asleep together on the sofa when she and

Perrin returned late last night. The sight of her children snuggled in Shem's ample arms was so adorable that Mahrree committed it to memory.

"He really is the sweetest soldier ever, isn't he?" she said to her husband, who merely sneered good-naturedly at her.

But still Mahrree was plagued with suspicion.

Was it *really* just coincidence that Shem noticed the Guarder raid first that Weeding Season? Or had he been *watching* for it? And if he had, why did he let them succeed in reaching the village? Just how much on Mahrree and Perrin's side was he then? Was he more now?

She tapped the feathered end of the quill on the paper.

Shem was theirs, she was sure of it. In fact, the question hadn't even entered her mind again until she started thinking about it just now.

She shrugged and started writing instead about Hogal and Tabbit's passing, about Shem's injury, and about Perrin's new measures that were now being implemented throughout the entire world.

She chuckled as she wrote about High General Shin's suggestion to put a simple log cattle fence at the edge of the forest to slow down the Guarders attempting to run across the barren field,

and her husband's dumbfounded reaction that he hadn't thought of that himself. Yesterday he set two crews of soldiers to begin felling timbers along the river for the long beams.

Mahrree's writing strayed into the Shins' visit and the assassination attempt, that really wasn't officially an attempt, but Mahrree and Perrin had wondered if maybe—

She scribbled out the last two sentences she wrote.

"Oh, *that's smart*," she shook her head. "Yes, put down in writing that you suspect Shem Zenos to be something . . . *else*. That the lieutenants were something . . . *else*. Don't even know if it's the same 'else'! Should this ever fall into

the wrong hands . . . Sorry Shem, I simply lost my head for a few minutes." She dropped her quill and folded her arms. "I wonder if the guides ever struggled with knowing what to reveal."

She looked sadly at the page where she'd so carefully recorded, then so violently crossed out, words that could do far too much damage. There was only one thing to do.

Cringing, she tore out the first two pages of her beautiful new book and threw them into the fireplace.

"Sorry, Mother Shin. Well, this is hardly a promising beginning," she chuckled sadly, looking at her now-blank book again. "Maybe this is why

people don't always keep their own writings. Whatever isn't boastful is embarrassing, or shameful, or libelous. And if it's none of those things, then it's downright boring!"

She sighed loudly and looked over at her worn copy of The Writings on a shelf, wedged between other books. There were many incidences in their ancient history which were less-than-glorious, but certainly memorable. Maybe that really was the purpose of The Writings: to show not everything is charming, funny, and happy every day. She read the set-backs and failures of her ancestors so she could see how they endured those dark days to see the sun shine again. And it always did.

She shut the cover on her own bound pages, retrieved her copy of The Writings from the shelves, and sat back down.

How did their ancestors write about difficult things?

She opened the book to the saddest words in The Writings, the last warnings from Guide Hierum, the first guide chosen by the Creator. She had hoped, when her mother gave her the copies of her family lines, that she would see she was descended from the Great Guide. But to her disappointment, she wasn't. Still, she admired him more than any other man who had lived. Her chest burned, either with the power of his last

words or the dread of them. They always seemed timely, no matter what time she read them.

I warn you now that we cannot continue in the ways we are now. Our lives and existence on this world are not forever. An end will come.

In the arguing among our people I see the seeds of antipathy and apathy that will grow to destroy the

world we are striving so hard to create. We're drifting from the structure the Creator left us, and if we continue on this path our descendants will not be found faithful at the Last Day when the test ends. What we do today affects our children and their children. For their sakes, we can't continue down this way you are planning. I

know your secrets, and they will destroy us all. I beg you to abandon this!

You know as well as I do that the Last Day will find each one of us facing either the reward of Paradise to enjoy the company of our family and friends for the next one thousand years and beyond, or the misery of the Dark Deserts to endure the torture of knowing we failed

to do His will.

When that Last Day comes, no one knows but our Creator, and its arrival will surprise those that fight against the Creator's people.

On that day do not be one of those surprised to find yourself on the wrong side.

On that day do not find yourself with a blade in hand ready to charge your

brother or sister.

On that day be one of the many standing with the guide, having seen the signs and recognizing what is coming.

Before the Last Day will be a land tremor more powerful than any ever experienced. It will awaken the largest mountain and change all that we know in the world. Those changes

will bring famine, death, and desperation to the world. And that desperation will cause the world's army to seek to destroy the faithful of the Creator.

Be among those faithful to the Creator!

Be among those standing firm for what you know, having not so quickly forgotten His words to us!

Be among those who see

the marvelous deliverance from the enemy the Creator will send us! For He will send deliverance before He sends destruction to those who fight Him!

Don't destroy His structure for our survival. What you're planning to do will ruin—

There was more he was trying to say, but he wasn't allowed to. Mahrree read the following account of those who rushed the Great Guide—as he was

remembered—while he stood on a large rock to address the people who came to him demanding changes to their world. With knives and stones they attacked him, shoving him off the boulder, then stabbing and beating him as he cried out for understanding and faith in what they had learned not so long ago. They didn't like his words, so they silenced them.

No one came to his aid. Everyone else fled in fear, hiding in caves to avoid the confrontation. It was the first violence their ancestors had ever experienced, and bravery wasn't something they had yet learned. They hadn't yet made the connection that faith and courage were opposite ends of the same stick.

Each man who attacked Guide Hierum had personally known the Creator, had sat at His feet and learned from Him. But they chose to ignore all His teachings and words, as if overtaken by the power of the Refuser, and wanted to destroy the man who wouldn't let them forget. The Last Day, they had reasoned, would be thousands of years away. Now was the time to live the way *they* wanted to live. If necessary, they could apologize for any wrong-doing later. It would be easy to get forgiveness, they rationalized. After a slap on the hand for their disobedience, the Creator would surely allow them into Paradise. He said He truly loved

them, so why would He deny them what they truly wanted?

The only witness to the horror was one of Guide Hierum's assistants, Clewus, who eventually became the next guide. He was hiding silently and safely in a tree by Guide Hierum's command. The assistant wept as he wrote the Great Guide's last words and watched his death. It was the first murder, and it was the end of the gloriously perfect peace they had enjoyed for the six years they had existed in the world.

The men who attacked the guide created a secret order of oaths they developed to control the most coveted piece of land they found. It was "eastward," the only specifications The

Writings gave to its location.

Mahrree was always intrigued by that. Didn't that mean they used to live "westward"? Might their people actually have *started* in Terryp's discovered land in the far west, beyond the desert of Sands? Might that have been one of the amazing discoveries Terryp made, that the king didn't want known? The Writings were vague about the location of where the Creator had first placed them, and all of the other records kept from that time were destroyed in that fire so many years ago. So much lost, Mahrree sighed again in frustration. So many details about their origins and first years, gone forever.

Their ancestors had a better way of living, she was sure of it. But no one knew it now or even cared to rediscover it. There were hints and suggestions scattered all throughout The Writings, but no one bothered to put them all together. Mahrree frequently tried, as she did again that morning, but knew she was missing key pieces to an intriguing puzzle.

Perrin didn't know any more than she did, and Rector Lunting actually skipped that section when he covered it a few weeks ago. Everyone always seems more interested in what the "awakening" of Mt. Deceit might mean, so useless speculation was all that was

discussed that Holy Day.

Mahrree occasionally wondered if Shem might have any insights about how their ancestors first lived. He was constantly surprising them with his understanding and knowledge. Among other things.

Her eyes travelled again to Guide Hierum's warnings.

> On that day do not be one of those surprised to find yourself on the wrong side. On that day do not find yourself with a blade in hand ready to charge your

brother or sister.

Right now it was obvious which side was the right side—opposite of the Guarders. But both sides, the army and the Guarders, held blades and charged each other. The only way someone could be "surprised" would be because they were sure they *were* on the Creator's side, but weren't.

That worried Mahrree.

What if they were *already* on the wrong side and didn't recognize it? They certainly would be "surprised." Guide Hierum had called "the world's army" the enemy. But how could the Guarder side be the right one? They hadn't

“guarded” since they betrayed the last guide. All they did was terrorize.

“Perrin’s right,” she murmured. “A complicated math problem with too many unknowns and variables. Oh, how I hate those unknowns.”

She shook off the detestable notion of doing math so early in the morning, and instead continued reading the account of what happened to the first families.

After the Great Guide died, a large group followed the six men and their families “eastward” to the new city. New villages popped up everywhere around it, given designations based on the terrain—Sands, Grasses, Winds, Marsh, and Rivers.

But the original six rebellious men named their city after themselves and their new order of trade. They called it Idumea, taking a letter of each of the six men's names to produce the name. Guide Clewus didn't record their individual names, hoping that those who read The Writings many years later wouldn't seek out those of similar names, either to take revenge or to take the oaths. The men of Idumea established rules, forcing settlers to hand over goods and nuggets of gold to secure their chosen plots and to ensure security from the six holders of the land.

Ironically, Mahrree often considered, the only ones at the time

threatening violence *were* those six men and their associates. People were buying protection from their aggressors, handing over their gold and silver to make sure they wouldn't come steal it later. Mahrree still puzzled over why so many first families agreed to such a manipulative system. It was exactly what the Great Guide was trying to warn them about, that destroying the Creator's order of government would ruin their prosperity. Perhaps the early families agreed to the extortion out of fear.

Or maybe, from lack of faith.

"In either case," she muttered sadly, "they were all cowards."

Not all families moved eastward with the founders of Idumea, but

eventually everyone found themselves in the city or the surrounding villages. And soon the influence, attitudes, and way of 'business' these six men created filled each village and the entire world, despite the pleadings of Guide Clewus.

The land was meant for everyone, he tried to remind them, given freely from the Creator—just like the apples in the orchard that grew of their own accord and sat waiting for whomever needed them. The land and its products weren't meant for people to horde and sell. That was the Refuser's influence.

But no one listened to his words.

Today they still ignored those pleas, Mahrree realized. Guide Hierum

died saying his words in vain. No one listened then, and no one lived the Creator's way anymore now. Everything had a price. From a grain of wheat to the death of a man, the right amount of gold nuggets or slips of silver could secure it.

Mahrree felt a chill go through her, despite the heat coming from the fire. Always when she read that passage she felt a deep sense of loss. Their way of life was now considered only commerce. Even Mahrree gave a large bag of silver slips to the daughter of the widow who owned her house before her, so Mahrree could make sure no one else could lay claim to it.

On the one hand she could see how it was considered fair—she gave pieces

of something shiny taken from the ground in exchange for another piece of ground.

But on the other hand it seemed *peculiar*.

The man who claimed that piece of land where her house stood decades before didn't pay anyone for it. He just took it. Was it right that he should demand the widow to pay for it simply because he was the first one there?

And the family who owned the mine in Trades from which the gold nuggets and silver slips were cast didn't *make* the nuggets or veins. They didn't even find or dig them out. Their ancestors just claimed that piece of land, had other men and women labor to get the shiny

bits out for them, and took the majority of the earnings for something they didn't create, earn, or even pay for. It wasn't destiny that they found that line of gold in the rock and laid claim to it all, but they acted as if it were. That was the way of the world, Mahrree considered, as unfair and exploitive as it was.

And a gnawing in Mahrree's heart said, *This wasn't the way it was supposed to be.*

Guide Hierum knew it, and Mahrree knew it too. But she didn't know what to do about it.

She stared at the page, not really seeing it, but still pondering the pleas of Guide Clewus: this world was freely given, and meant to be freely shared.

Her thoughts travelled back to Idumea. While all that she heard about it, that Idumea was the pinnacle of progress and achievement—except in Perrin's eyes—there was no denying it: Idumea was founded by traitors and murderers who restructured the entire way of life the Creator established for them.

And, Mahrree suspected, Idumea was *still* run by traitors and murderers who ignored the Creator's teachings. Maybe that's why Perrin hated the city so much. He likely felt the evil that still lurked there, lying in disguise beneath every distinctive building and unique feature. The elaborate garb of the power-hungry kings was now replaced

by the red coats and white ruffled shirts of twenty-three Administrators. Even evil can appear lovely in the right hat.

She shook off the thought, disappointed that she couldn't think of any way else to honor or follow the early guides.

Except . . . maybe harvest neglected apples and give them away.

Mahrree noticed the water in her mug on the side table begin to tremble. She instinctively grabbed the sides of the table to steady it and glanced around the room. Some of the books stored loosely on the shelves began to shiver, and the floor beneath her chair rolled ever so slightly. She waited patiently, looking back again at the words in The Writings:

. . . a land tremor more powerful than ever experienced.

Tremors like this one happened at least once a season. Her family would sleep through this one, as would most of Edge. During Perrin's first year in Edge he always woke up when the ground shook, unaccustomed to the force and frequency of land tremors in the north. Pools and Idumea, where he was born and raised, noticed the land shift only a couple of times a year. And in the far south of Flax and Waves, where Shem

came from, land tremors were rarely felt.

But Mahrree never dove under the table like her husband and their favorite soldier did when the ground moved. She could tell from the outset just how bad each one would be. Her main concern right now was making sure her water didn't slosh out and dampen any of her papers. She lifted the mug to lessen its shaking. The motion around her finally slowed, then stopped, without water spilling anywhere.

Mahrree smiled stiffly and patted The Writings. "Definitely not the Last Day yet, is it Guide Hierum!" A land tremor in early Weeding Season was much stronger, allowing everyone in

Edge, Moorland, and Quake the opportunity to rearrange their shelves and wipe up the dust shaken down.

But in the back of her mind a sense of immediacy gripped her, just as it had when she read Guide Pax's words about the Last Day on the morning after Perrin had proposed to her, more than three and a half years ago. The words from that later prophecy bounced around her mind again, committed to her memory despite her effort to not remember.

> Before the Last Day even the aged of my people will strike terror in the deadened hearts of the fiercest

soldiers.

On the Last Day those who have no power shall discover the greatest power is all around them.

On the Last Day those who stayed true to The Plan will be delivered as the destroyer comes.

And, even more tragically:

On that day be one of the many standing with the

guide . . .

There were no guides, not anymore.

And Mahrree didn't know what to do with that terrible truth. Maybe it meant to stand by their words, what they'd said in the past, to remain faithful to their memories—

She sighed. Why did the Creator allow the last guide to die at Mt. Deceit? What was the purpose of that? Surely they still needed guidance, didn't they? Why would the Creator suddenly decide, "I've said enough. Go figure out the rest on your own"?

They still needed guidance, and protection, and . . .

For some strange reason she found herself remembering the old stooped man from last year, the one who caught Jaytsy as she ran past him at the village green, and patted Peto to sleep in a way she and Perrin could never replicate. His dark skin was faded, his curly gray hair was thinning, but there was something bright and lively and intense in his eyes. And he said . . . what was it? Something about the Creator preserving their family?

The ground shifted abruptly again, sloshing a bit of water on to Mahrree's new book. Growling under her breath, she snatched up Jaytsy's dirty dress from yesterday, still lying on the floor, and

quickly mopped up the spill.

"Will wrinkle the pages," she mumbled in aggravation. "Only thing worse than complicated math problems are wrinkled pages!" She looked outside her window and towards Mt. Deceit in the west, pretending her view wasn't obscured by the Hershs' house. "Any more little quivers and quakes this morning?" she asked crossly. "Because I have a few things to do today, and I'd like to get all of this trembling over with!"

The ground remained still for one minute, two, three.

Mahrree nodded. "Thank you," she said curtly to the west, set her new and still empty book down where the pages

could dry flat, and headed to the kitchen. It wasn't the Last Day yet, so it was time to make breakfast.

As she pushed through the kitchen door, she tried to leave behind a new thought, bearing the distinct mark of coming from her father. Try as she might she couldn't ignore the impression.

Just know, Mahrree, that the Last Day is not thousands of years away. It's far sooner than you think.

And Mahrree, you ARE on the right side.

For now.

Mahrree stood in stunned silence for at least a minute until she heard the early morning whimpers of her son

waking up.

There was one good thing about Barker, Mahrree decided that afternoon as she watched the dog plod along pulling the wagon containing her two children and a stack of ten slate boards. He was exceptionally mellow. Or ridiculously exhausted, she wasn't sure which. But each day he lounged around, as if he'd been up all night wandering the world.

Or meeting pretty little female dogs who didn't get a good look at him in the daylight to realize he

wasn't much to pant after.

Whatever it was, Barker always seemed tired, which made him slow enough to not turn over the wagon which he dutifully pulled.

But there were times like this that Mahrree wished Barker could go just a tad faster. She had to catch up to her After School Care boys who charged ahead noisily on their way back to their schoolhouse. At least it was for now. The Administrators had already sent builders and wagons of bland block to begin construction on a new gray, dull, square building. Mahrree had refused to go see it.

She reached the school house grounds just in time. The orchard

that filled the side property and surrounded Mr. Hegek's office-shack was heavy with apples, and the boys were already snacking.

And Mr. Hegek was standing in the door of his shack, puzzled. When he saw Mahrree approach with Barker and her children, he smiled.

"Ah, thought I was being overrun at first . . ." His face paled. "I heard rumors about an incident up at the fort?"

Mahrree smiled back. "Everything's fine, Mr. Hegek."

"It's only that the word was that your in-laws—"

“—are now safely on their way back to Idumea. No threat to the village,” she said confidently and tried to change the subject before she got dragged into any more rumors.

She often worried that maybe she accidentally started some in her conversations, but she was sure the village knew all about the incident last week from Hycymum and Joriana’s tour of the market.

“We’re here for one of our projects, Mr. Hegek. These apples used to be sold each Harvest Season, and the money went to improving our school house and purchasing supplies for the next year. The money from these apples will now

go to you—”

“That won’t be necessary,” he said brightly. “Because all funding comes from the Administrators now!”

“And where do the Administrators get that funding?” she asked as sweetly as she could.

Hegek faltered. “Uh, I suppose they get the funding from . . . careful management of gold and silver slips—”

“Taxes,” she cut him off, but kept her tone from going nasty. Almost too late she remembered that’s how Hegek was paid, as well as her husband.

“Now,” she said kindly, “If you’ll excuse me for a moment?” She clapped her hands and the boys immediately

lined up in front of her. “Take your slates from the wagon,” she directed, “set them over by Mr. Hegek’s office so we can check your estimates when you’re finished—”

She waited for them to stop shoving each other for prime placing position, while Mr. Hegek watched, amused.

“—then, when I give the word, you know what to do. Now . . . Ready . . . Start!”

The boys exploded off the line and rushed to the side of the shack, snatched up baskets that sat there neglected all year, ran to the trees, climbed them expertly, and started grabbing apples as quickly as possible.

“Remember,” Mahrree called to them, “no bruises! Apples don’t heal like boys do.”

Mr. Hegek grinned and stood next to Mahrree. “They’ll have the orchard cleared in an hour, I dare say! I was wondering what to do with these apples . . .” His voice trailed off as he likely hoped the conversation wouldn’t go back to taxes and Administrators.

But Mahrree just chuckled as she undid the ropes securing her toddlers. Barker had already plopped to the ground for a nap.

“Turn everything into a competition, Mr. Hegek—that’s the key to working with males, I’ve discovered.”

Jaytsy climbed out of the wagon and claimed an apple dropped by a careless 11-year-old. Peto wailed to join her, and Mahrree set him out on the brown grass as well. Another boy purposefully dropped an apple near him, and Mahrree pretended it didn't bounce and bruise before Peto picked up the shiny red ball to gnaw.

Mr. Hegek winced a little, but didn't comment. "So the purpose of this activity today is . . .?"

"Take a look at their slates," Mahrree suggested.

He squinted as he tried to make out their scribbles and numbers. "Looks like . . . bets? You're teaching them

betting?"

Mahrree shook her head. "While some fathers might approve of that, what we're really doing is *estimates*," she whispered the last word.

Mr. Hegek frowned. "You say that as if it's a bad thing. They are *supposed* to be learning about estimating right now. The objective—"

"Shhh!" she hushed him, and pulled him out of earshot of the boys. "Don't say 'objective' in front of them! They don't know this is *a lesson*," she hissed.

"I don't understand."

Mahrree smiled. "Nothing kills a lesson faster than thinking you have to *learn* something from it, Mr. Hegek. Look, they've made guesses—bets, if

you want to go that far—about how many baskets each of them can fill, and how quickly. There are rewards for the boys who fill the most, have the most accurate *estimates*, and who demonstrated the most thought in arriving at his guess. Bet. Estimate."

Hegek nodded thoughtfully. "Interesting, interesting . . . what's the reward?"

"The winning boys get to ride with Corporal Zenos along the forest's edge at dusk."

Hegek's mouth dropped open. "That sounds terrifying!"

Mahrree shrugged. "That's what they're hoping. Don't worry—there'll be

several other soldiers, full of scary stories—and all of the parents have already given permission. I think a couple of fathers are hoping to go along as well."

Hegek chuckled and shook his head. "So how is this teaching estimating?"

"When we get back to my house later, with our counts completed, then we'll discuss how some estimates were way off, and why others were more accurate. Timing, loads, effort—none of that's important to them right now, but later? When they see who wins? *That's* when the boys will really be interested to know how to better estimate next time. That's when they'll learn the lesson, and quite quickly."

Mr. Hegek grinned. “That’s slightly brilliant, isn’t it?”

“What, applying principles to actual activities? That’s not brilliant; that’s simply life,” she declared.

“So what are the girls doing? Don’t you have an associate taking care of girls?”

Mahrree nodded. “Miss Alrick. Right now my mother’s over at her place teaching the girls the secrets of her cake recipe.”

“The, uh . . . the cake at the Strongest Soldier Race?” Hegek almost seemed to drool the words.

Mahrree hid her smirk. “Yes, it is! The girls will each make a number of

smaller versions, then bring them to the market tomorrow and make guesses as to whose will be most successful, who will sell more, who will bring home the biggest profit—"

"Wait," the director of schools said, alarmed, "that's basic business practices. They won't be learning that for another moon or two, and the *objective*—"

"Would you please stop using that word?" she snapped pleasantly. "And so what if they learn concepts out of order? That 'order' is randomly decided anyway. Everything in the world connects, Mr. Hegek. Like the spokes on a massive wheel. You can't see one spoke properly without seeing how it

connects to the wheel, so why pretend it's not part of it? They'll still understand it all. Really."

Mr. Hegek tilted his head and pondered that. "I suppose . . . I suppose you're right."

"Of course I'm right," she said dismissively. "And by the way—the key to working with females is to show them they're appreciated. My husband's already planning to send a couple of soldiers to the girls' cake stand tomorrow to buy out whatever doesn't sell until the end. Girls this age need to feel success in order to realize they can be much more than merely something pretty to look at. And soldiers will buy

and eat just about anything, especially if their commander's given them the silver for it."

Mr. Hegek laughed. "Both of you are brilliant."

He was about to say something else when Mahrree shouted, "Oy! No bruises, remember? On the apples OR each other! Sticks DOWN!" Then she held up one finger, remarkably threatening.

The boys stabbing each other in the treetops hung their heads and reluctantly dropped the dead branches they were using on each other.

Mahrree nodded, smiled forgivingly, then pointed at the sun—they were still being timed. They hurried back to picking apples.

“I’m impressed,” Hegek said quietly. “You only held up a finger, and they stopped fighting?”

“The finger was a warning,” she told him. “First warning. If I get to a third warning, joy is lost.”

Hegek frowned. “Joy is lost?”

“That’s how to discipline boys,” Mahrree explained. “No sense in keeping them after school, or making them write lines—what does that accomplish? But temporarily take away something they love, and they remember. They discover that their behavior doesn’t earn them punishments, but decreases their joy.”

Hegek slowly shook his head. “You

should be teaching this at the directors' training conference. So I have to know—what's the 'joy' they lose if they misbehave?"

"They lose their Zenos day. Corporal Zenos won't come do an activity with them that week if they reach the third finger of warning."

"That's the soldier who barely lost to your husband in that race, right?" Hegek smiled. "And that threat works?"

"*Loss of joy*," Mahrree reminded him. "And yes. I've only had to implement it once for the boys to realize I was serious, and for them to realize how long and dull a week is without Zenos day. It was as painful for me as it was for them, to be honest. If I had them

write lines as a punishment, I have a feeling we'd be doing that every day."

Hegek looked at her with sudden and intense fervor. "Mrs. Shin, I *need* you!"

Mahrree, stunned, blinked before she said the only thing she could think of. "Uh, but I'm already married, Mr. Hegek."

Hegek went red and shook his head vigorously. "I mean, *as a teacher*."

"Oh, of course—"

"Mrs. Shin, you could accomplish so much if you returned to teaching."

"I think I accomplish a great deal already," she said, a bit taken aback, and turned her attention to her toddlers

sitting next to each other in the dying grasses. They nibbled on their apples, then Jaytsy dropped hers, eyed Peto's, and pulled it out of his hands. Peto didn't wail, because he was already lunging for the apple his sister dropped. They took tiny bites from their new apples, then the process started again. Jaytsy thought Peto's looked better, and Peto wanted the apple she dropped again.

She watched them to avoid saying the words that the idea of going back to school was one she never entertained. And the thought of sending those darling children—who traded apples yet again but were now eyeing each other suspiciously as if realizing their sibling

was really a thief—well, the thought of sending them to Full School made her gut twist.

She couldn't say the words because the small figure standing next to her with an air of hopefulness was really, at his core, quite a very nice man. That was the trouble. It was easy to be angry and rant against the Administrators and Mal because there were beasts that lived far away. Distance makes it easier to demonize.

But poor Mr. Hegek, with loneliness in his eyes that watched the children with what Mahrree suspected was actually longing, was simply trying to do his job, to do what he thought was

the best thing for the world. He used to be a teacher himself, she found out, down in Orchards. Then he answered a call for teachers wanting to 'improve the world' and found himself at director training in Idumea. He wasn't a malicious, conniving or callous man; he was just a good man doing a stupid and unnecessary job.

How could she say that to him?

She heard him chuckle softly, breaking the uncomfortable silence between them.

"I think they figured it out," he gestured to her toddlers. "They've finally discovered they're eating the same two apples!"

Jaytsy and Peto were now glaring at

each other, with the sweet fury only toddlers possessed, and clutched their nibbled fruit in defiance of the other. At any moment now Jaytsy would declare, "Mine!" and Peto would yell, "No!"

Mr. Hegek said, as cheerfully as he could, "How old's your youngest—the boy?"

"A year and a half."

He sighed. "So . . . another four to five years, right? Until I can hope you'll consider my offer and come back to teach? Once they're both in school themselves?"

Mahrree could only groan softly before looking into Mr. Hegek's eyes. She was reminded of a sad, damp mouse

begging her to take the last of his grain.

"How about we discuss this in four years?" was all she could say. She wasn't about to tell him she hoped a great many things would change in four years.

Such as the Administrator over Education realizing all of this was a ridiculous idea, or the system drawing too much taxes, or a cavern opening up to swallow all of Idumea . . .

Mr. Hegek chanced a small smile. "I suppose I'll have to be content with that."

Mahrree smiled back. "Well, I imagine you must have a great deal of work to do," she hinted, hoping to leave the topic of schooling, her, and her

children far, far away—

"Actually, I'm awaiting a cart from Idumea. Rather important shipment," he said uneasily.

Mahrree had intended to walk away to supervise her students, but Hegek's words—and his tone—intrigued her. "Oh, really? What is it?"

Mr. Hegek squinted down the road. "Ah, looks like it's here!" His voice tried to be enthusiastic, but his eyes looked pained.

Mahrree was intensely curious as a horse-and-cart with a driver pulled up and stopped in front of the shack.

"You Mr. Hegek?" the driver called.

Under his breath the director murmured, "*Are* you Mr. Hegek. My goodness, the language we use—Yes," he said loudly while Mahrree chortled in approval. "Is it a lot?"

The driver scoffed. "—'Slot, he wonders. 'Spect I unload, he wonders next," the driver complained as he climbed down from his perch.

Hegek scowled at Mahrree. "Should we give him a lesson in diction before we let him leave?" he whispered. "You don't 'spect' the boys can hear him, do you? He could set us back moons in education."

Mahrree just laughed as the director walked over to the cart to sign whatever

form the driver was waving around.

No, Mahrree thought again, there's no way I can tell him what I really think about all of this. Just listen to him—he actually made a joke. Outside of Perrin and me, I doubt he has any friends in Edge.

Then she had an idea, and it made her grin.

Mr. Hegek walked back with a crate in his arms, trying to appear as if he were strong enough to carry it, despite the wobbling of his knees. Behind him the driver was carrying two more crates, rather easier. Mr. Hegek set his crate down on the ground in front of her, and stood up looking sheepish.

"It's actually a bit more than I

anticipated. I'll need to make some space in my office, first. Just set them down by the door," he instructed the driver. "And the next two crates, by those two."

"Five crates?" Mahrree said, and gasped quietly as Hegek pried off the lid of the first crate. "All paper?! There'll be no more forests above Scrub at this rate."

"Actually," Hegek said as he lifted a stack from the crate, "they've been reusing the paper from the Administrative offices. They can shred it, pulp it again, and make new paper from old."

"That's amazing!" Genuinely

impressed that Idumea did something right, she fingered the paper which was a bit murky in color, but still quite functional.

"Yes," Hegek said enthusiastically, "someone complained to Idumea, and they agreed that the last thing we want is to decimate the forests."

That struck Mahrree oddly. Wouldn't decimating the forests—and the Guarder threat—be exactly what Idumea would want?

But before she could think more on that, the words stamped onto the paper caught her eye. "May I see this?"

"Uh," Hegek began, then slowly handed the bundled pages over to her. "Since I hope you'll someday be a

teacher for me . . . I suppose you should see this now."

Mahrree thumbed through the pages. "Lesson plans?"

"Uh, yes," the director said hesitantly. "It seems that while we did well enough for the Administrators to give us new schools—"

"—Schools that *we* will pay for, in higher taxes no doubt," she interjected as she continued to scan the pages.

"Yes, heh-heh, likely that," he responded uncertainly with the fakest laugh Mahrree had ever heard, "while we did well, we didn't do quite so well as, say . . . Pools."

Mahrree glanced up. "Why do we

care about Pools?"

Hegek coughed politely. "Heh-heh, why indeed? Well, because our averages __"

"We shouldn't care about *averages*," Mahrree said sourly as she stopped scanning and focused on a bolded word. "We should care about individuals!"

He sighed. "That's why I need you," he whispered so intently that Mahrree's eyebrows went up, as well as her gaze.

The director cleared his throat and looked down at the pages. "Well, you see, Pools lead the averag—*scores* in testing, so the Administrators decided Pools knows the best way to teach."

Mahrree squinted hard. “The best way to teach is to teach individuals, not crowds!”

“I know that as well as you do,” he whispered back and looked around nervously, the same way Perrin sometimes did.

Must be a condition of having lived in Idumea, Mahrree considered. He’s likely worried that around the corner may be a man in a red jacket listening in.

“But to help our numbers improve, a group of teachers at Pools has sent each school . . . *help*.” Then he held his breath.

Mahrree knew why, as soon as she read the words on the paper. She had

purposely looked for the heading "Estimates." She couldn't help but read out loud what followed.

"'Good morning [or afternoon, as the case may be] students. Please take your seats. Today, students, the objective of our lesson is to understand, manipulate, and use estimates.'"

Mr. Hegek was cringing when Mahrree looked up, her eyes smoldering in fury. "This must be a joke. Please tell me this is a joke."

Mr. Hegek swallowed hard. "I never once remember laughing in Idumea."

"They've SCRIPTED what each teacher is supposed to say?!" Mahrree exploded.

Her toddlers dropped their apples, surprised at their mother's volume.

Several of her students did as well.

"Every grade, every subject, every minute," Hegek droned gloomily.

"I'm still TIMING you!" she bellowed at the boys who were staring at them, and they obediently continued picking.

Mahrree's toddlers tried to steal each other's apples, and succeeded.

Mr. Hegek cleared his throat and attempted to carefully take the paper out of her clenched fist. "I'm sorry. Perhaps this isn't the best—"

"Isn't it bad enough that we can't decide *what* to teach our children—"

Mahrree didn't relinquish her control of the pages crinkling in her grip, but snarled quietly, "—now we can't even decide *how*?!"

Quietly, but not calmly.

Mr. Hegek stopped trying to retrieve his documents and instead rubbed his chin anxiously as Mahrree crushed the script as if it were the Administrator of Education's writing hand.

"They're going to dictate *everything* from Idumea?!" she screeched in a whisper. "Can you imagine someone standing in front of those boys and stating, in all seriousness, 'Today our objective will be the discussion of estimates.'

Outrageous! They don't even *need* teachers with this nonsense! Only script readers! Is that what they're trying to do? Eliminate all possibility of adults having intelligent discussions with children!?"

She finally regained enough of herself to focus on Hegek's eyes, and she stopped when she noticed how miserable he looked. None of this was his fault, but his eyes were turning red and his chin was close to trembling.

"This wasn't my idea, Mrs. Shin," he said in a low, dejected voice. "But if I don't implement it, I'll be reported."

A light went on in Mahrree's head, and to Mr. Hegek's surprise she

suddenly began to smile. She shoved the vile script into his hands.

"Think about it, Mr. Hegek: who will report you, and *to whom*?"

Hegek gulped, his eyes darted around, and then the light came on for him as well. "I don't know who would bother to report me, but . . ." A smile forced its way on to his mouth. "I would be reported to Major Shin!"

Mahrree burst into a grin. "Take these papers, Mr. Hegek, and the other crates, and hide them as far away as possible. I'm thinking *the fort* might be a safe place. My husband may have an idea or two of where to heave them," she winked and Hegek beamed. "I'll do my best to get these boys' scores even

higher than last time—or maybe we should let the scores drop, so the scripts seem to have caused more problems than they cured? In any case, Idumea will never know what we did or didn't do. They really don't care about what happens in Edge anyway."

Now Hegek's chin was trembling, but happily. "See why I need you, Mrs. Shin?!"

Mahrree's grin remained as she remembered her idea from earlier, before the arrival of the wretched papers.

"Mr. Hegek, there's only so much I can do with this small group of boys. There are other after school care

programs like mine, and if you spoke with their instructors, I'm sure they'd be willing to help us avoid this 'help' as well. In fact, may I recommend that you begin first with my friend who's working with the girls near here?"

Hegek nodded. "Mrs. Alrick, was it? A few houses down from Mrs. Peto's?"

Mahrree shook her head. "That's *Miss* Alrick—"

Early thirties, she recited in her head, pleasantly plump, sweet smile, long red hair, used to be a teacher, patient demeanor, loves children, but far too shy around men for her own good—

Hegek began to grow pale.

For a moment Mahrree wondered if

this was such a good idea after all. It could be a very, very quiet meeting.

Unless . . .

Unless *Hycymum* was still there. They couldn't find any women young enough for Grandpy Neeks, but maybe . . .

"Remember, they're making cake today," Mahrree added. "I think you should inspect what she's doing and maybe . . . sample a piece? Show the girls—and *Miss* Alrick—that you recognize their efforts?"

Hegek cleared his throat. "I know I've already said this," he began in a low voice, "but I really—"

"Yes," Mahrree cut him off before

the poor man became too emotional, "I know. But actually what you *really* need is to try my mother's recipe. *At Miss Alrick's*. Their attempts should be cooling right now."

Go before my mother leaves, Mahrree added in her head. These two are going to need all the mindless chatter—and purposeful meddling—they can get.

Hegek gulped again, smiled apprehensively, and headed to the road, forgetting about the crates by his shack.

Major Shin had a couple of soldiers pick them up later that evening—since they contained such valuable information that, if in the wrong hands, could prove to be . . . well, *not good*—and put the

crates in the back of the armory where broken weapons were stored and usually forgotten.

By the time Mahrree crawled into bed that night it was very late. The suggestion from her father bounced around in her mind frequently that day, and she wondered how—or even *if*—she should explain it to Perrin. But how does one tell one's husband that, according to a quiet idea placed in her mind, they might someday be on the wrong side? She wasn't even sure she fully understood it. By the time it was

bedtime, she had shelved the thought far back into her mind, unsure of what to do with it. Besides, she needed to concentrate on more important matters that evening, because first she was on a spider hunt.

Poor Jaytsy had this problem at least twice a week. Ever since she saw a spider crawling on her pillow over a season ago, she frequently woke up screaming about “Biders!” crawling on her. Mahrree was ready to go to bed an hour ago, but the panicked squeal of two-year-old Jaytsy told her she was hunting “biders” first. She spent half an hour with a candle showing Jaytsy every corner and edge of her bedroom, assuring her that there were no spiders.

That wasn't entirely true. Mahrree *did* see two spiders on the floor which she subtly squashed under her feet before her worried little girl saw them. Mahrree wished she was wearing her shoes. Or at least her stockings. But that was yet another example, she decided, of the depths of a mother's love.

And yes, occasionally there were times one needed to lie to let someone believe they were safe.

Not that she'd confess that to her husband, already asleep upstairs.

She finally appeased Jaytsy and she drifted off to sleep while Mahrree told her the simplified stories of Terryp that her father Cephas always told her.

Mahrree gave each one a happy ending. What was the point of the story otherwise? There were enough worries and darkness in the world that they didn't need any more.

When she finally got into bed, after washing her feet, she cuddled up to Perrin and breathed in the comfort of his closeness.

"My wife, the mighty Bider Hunter!" he rumbled quietly. "I think I'll be sad when Jaytsy finally figures out how to make an 's' sound. But maybe not. The other day in the command tower I happened to say, 'Ooh, I better go get that *bider!*' and promptly smacked the thing with a stack of parchment and as much pride as if it were a Guarder. The

two sergeants on duty just stared at me."

Mahrree chuckled. "Didn't know you were still awake, or I would have had you come help."

"I shooed away the spiders last time, remember?"

"I think that was *two* times ago."

"But you still love me anyway?"

She giggled and was about to kiss him when an urgent pounding came at the door.

"Oh no," she whimpered as he leapt out of bed and into his trousers and boots in record time. Perrin ran down the stairs simultaneously buttoning his jacket and fastening his sword while Mahrree looked out the back window.

There didn't seem to be any dark blobs of horses or soldiers waiting.

She went to the landing at the top of the stairs to listen as Perrin opened the front door. Soldiers always came to the back porch door, so something else was up. She hoped the loud knocking didn't disturb their sleeping toddlers. She strained to hear who was at the door, but Perrin's low voice was too quiet for her to pick up any conversation. A minute later he closed the door, paused to hear if Jaytsy and Peto were still asleep, then plodded back up the stairs, complaining under his breath.

Mahrree sighed in relief. "So you're still mine tonight?"

He chuckled. "The forest is still

quiet, the children are quiet, the spiders are quiet, so yes: I'm all yours."

"Good! Because if whoever it was at the door woke up Jaytsy, I would have made him come in and search for spiders."

"That would have resulted in even more nightmares for our little Jayts. It was a stupid Administrators' messenger."

Mahrree cringed. Whenever the little men in red uniforms arrived, it was with yet another new way that something would be altered in the name of progress. "Now *I'm* going to have nightmares. What was so important that he came so late?"

"It *wasn't* that important!" he said with irritation. "Just delivered news to the fort that there was going to be another tax levied beginning in the next season. Expenses of the world, and all."

"Oh, I think I know what those expenses are."

They went back to their room, both grumbling.

"And for that he came so late?" Mahrree complained as she got back into bed and Perrin replaced his sword and belt carefully by the bedroom door.

Perrin scoffed as he undid his jacket. "He was afraid there might be violence that came with the news. He wanted me to be prepared for tomorrow

evening's announcement. Said we should emphasize to the village that much of the tax would be going to improving the world for the next generation. It's all in the *wording,* you see—"

Mahrree imagined he was rolling his eyes at the advice.

"—if we really want the next generation to succeed, we need to be willing to pay for it. After all, the *best* education is also the *most* expensive education. I was ready to punch his little smarmy face myself. If he *really* wants to avoid violence, then he shouldn't bother me when my wife is about to kiss me."

He set his trousers exactly at the right angle on the seat of the desk's

chair, to be snatched and put on in another moment's notice.

Mahrree smiled. "Remember, you should never kill the messenger. Idumea might notice us. So the best education is the most expensive? The best education happens when someone really wants to learn and someone is eager to share what they know! No amount of money will change that."

"So Full School is actually *Fool School*," Perrin muttered, placing his boots in precisely the landing-into-them position.

"Ooh, be careful, *Major Shin!*" she smirked.

"I left the major at the fort," he said

draping his jacket exactly over the back of the chair and getting into bed. "I can complain about whatever I want in the privacy of my own bedroom. I promise you, the money's not going only for education or for teachers or buildings or books, but also to the best buddies of the Administrators who've been put in place to oversee every new little program and regulation they can come up with. I didn't tell you yet what my father said before they left. The Administrator of Law was hiring more than one hundred new law assessors. And they'll be helping with army law as well. Nice, huh?"

Mahrree's mouth dropped open in shock. "Why that's . . . that's probably

one man to every law! *Unless,*" her voice quieted, "there are going to be *more laws*."

"My father suggested the same thing. For what other reason would they need so many assessors? Except to give one's friends an easy income, which is probably half the reason. If we thought the kings were overzealous, just wait until we see what the Administrators come up with next. Now that they're well entrenched and the world has embraced them, they'll push that acceptance to the very limits. Although it takes them weeks of discussions and committees to enact something new, I suspect they won't let the process keep

this government from bloating like a dead cow."

"Lovely image for me to dream about, Perrin. Thank you."

"Well, it's true. The larger the government gets, the more stench-filled and abhorrent it becomes."

"And then it all rots," she shuddered. "I suppose it *i s* an apt analogy."

"That's not the only thing bloating," he warned. "My father also mentioned something that you might be interested in: the Administrator of Education has now established *four* levels of hierarchy to 'oversee' instruction. To adequately supervise the seventeen villages, they need about sixty more overseers."

"And exactly what are they doing?" Mahrree asked, mystified. "Mr. Hegek seems to be working non-stop, but I never see those piles of papers move on his desk. I still can't figure out what takes up all of his time!" she murmured. "Just let the teachers teach. I still don't get it—why should anyone else besides parents be in charge of the children?"

"You know why. You figured it out earlier this year. Parents feel stupid because their government tells them they are, so they're humbly—and even willingly—allowing someone else to guide their children's teaching. But there's another reason," Perrin hesitated, as if worried the little man in red might

still be in earshot. “This way the Administrators get to pick and choose what the growing generation learns, and anything that’s not supporting the Administrators simply isn’t covered. In one generation, the entire population should be as loyal to the Administrators as they are—*or were*—to their parents’ beliefs. Whatever they say, the people will believe.”

“Let’s hope there are still a few rebellious ‘teenaged’ souls out there. Besides us, I mean.” Mahrree sucked in her breath as a memory from long ago came to her, bearing the mark of coming from her father. “Perrin, did you ever know that King Querul and the three Queruls after him for eighty years kept . .

. *servants?*”

Perrin tensed up next to her. “Yes, I know. The question is, how did *you* know about that? That’s hardly common knowledge, even forty years ago!”

“My father told me,” Mahrree confessed. “He had an older friend over in Winds, another teacher, who helped to settle the servants in their own homes after they were freed. He told my father about it years later, how he had to teach them how to read and write and even shop.”

“Amazing!” he breathed. “I really wished I knew Cephas. How many other secrets of the world did he know about?”

“I think that was the only one,” Mahrree said. “How many more *are* there?”

“Uh,” Perrin hesitated, “that’s probably it,” he said, not sounding completely honest. “Those thirty-three people—they weren’t Querul’s servants, Mahrree. They were *slaves*,” he said bitterly. “They and their children and their children’s children. They knew nothing but what Querul and his descendents told them. They were never paid or educated.”

“They had been with the kings for years,” Mahrree remembered, “and believed everything he told them. He was their only source of knowledge

about anything."

"Querul the First brought them to his mansion and compound during the Great War. He kept them sequestered for their safety, and they never left, for decades," Perrin whispered. "He told them all kinds of terrible things were happening out in the world. Battles, bloodshed, men killed, and their women and children abused in atrocious ways . . . But in the compound they were safe. What they didn't realize was that they were actually trapped. The war ended, but no one told them. Querul and his sons and family had grown so accustomed to those seven people doing all their labor that they simply kept them and told them the world was an awful

place to be. The so-called servants had no idea that everyone else had more freedom than they did," he sighed.

"Querul the Second and the Third simply kept them," he continued. "After all, the seven servants were marrying and making more loyal, terrified servants. The kings told them all kinds of horror stories about the world outside the compound of the mansion, and that if ever they left, they'd be destroyed by the ravaging people of the world. They truly believed the kings had 'chosen' them out of the world to give them such a protected existence. And to earn that honor? All they had to do was work day and night cleaning, building, repairing,

cooking—everything."

Mahrree was nearly breathless. She had never heard so many details. "How do *you* know all of this?"

"My grandfather Pere was the one who liberated them when he was first made High General, about forty years ago."

"Really?" Mahrree felt a surge of pride for her children's ancestor.

"Once he discovered what was going on in the mansion, he wanted to put a peaceful end to it. Eighty-one years they had lived like that. More than three generations of servants had never left the compound, never had contact with anyone else on the outside, and never knew what was really going on the

world. My grandfather told Querul the Fourth that he'd heard some of his 'servants' were actually related to Guarders who had recently been contacted by the outside, and now the servants were waiting for the right moment to massacre his family. Fortunately the Fourth was a gullible, suspicious man and he released all of the servants the next day. His first instinct was to kill them all, but my grandfather had told them that if they were released instead, Querul and his family would be safe from future attacks. My grandfather sent them far away from Idumea where they could get a new start. He appointed some teachers and helpers for them in

Winds—I suppose your father's friend was one of them—and Winds was a very peaceful place. A few years ago I tried to find out what happened to them, but couldn't find any records. Probably changed their names and moved elsewhere."

Mahrree grinned into the dark. "Now I wished I had known Pere Shin! Very clever, telling Querul a lie to right a wrong."

"Hmm, interesting," Perrin said smugly. "Lies are sometimes necessary __"

"Oh, not that again!" She snorted in spite of herself. "My father's friend told him how astonished the servants were to discover they had been fed lies for so

many years, that it never occurred to them to question the source of all their information, because why would the kings ever keep them enslaved? They claimed they loved them. They had no comprehension of freedom. It took them more than a year to adapt to the real world," she recalled.

Perrin scoffed. "My grandfather Pere suspected that the first Queruls even fathered a few of them, based on some noticeable resemblance. They sired their own slaves. Little surprise that none of that information was ever made public. My grandfather told me about it only once, years ago when I was about twelve, with the firm admonition

to never reveal it. He told me only because he thought someday I would be High General, and if so then I should—" he stopped abruptly.

Mahrree bit her lip. He didn't want the position, and they never talked about it. It was as if they had each privately decided that not talking about it would make sure it didn't happen. It certainly wasn't a logical rationale, but it *was* comforting.

Perrin began again, as if he never said the last sentence. "What would the world think of their leader if they knew he purposely enslaved people for his own pleasure? Gives me chills just remembering it," he whispered. "Mahrree, sometimes I wonder if that's

not what's going to happen again. But instead of the servants being restricting in their movement and knowledge, it could someday be the entire world—all of us trapped by our own ignorance."

"Now you've given *me* chills," she said shivering under the blankets. "How will we ever know we're being controlled and trapped?"

He breathed out. "That's the real question, isn't it?"

"That's why we always have to find out the truth!" she pointed out as she snuggled into her husband. The enjoyment of debating her husband increased in relation to her proximity to him. Besides, her nearness frequently

made him lose his concentration. “At least, find the truth as often as possible.”

“Conceded,” he unwillingly agreed, and pulled her tighter to him. “But here’s a follow-up question,” he stated in a debating tone. “Will we recognize the truth when it’s presented to us?”

She groaned. “Ooh, good point. If no one’s allowed to debate, no one will ever know, will they?” she whispered. “There’s always The Writings. We can always refer back to that.”

“But will everyone?” Perrin whispered. “Did my father tell you that the Administrator of Culture is writing a new history text for the schools?”

Mahrree groaned again, but louder.

“Obviously he didn’t. I took a look

at the teacher scripts Idumea sent. For history, the teacher is merely supposed to read the new book to the students. No discussions, no arguments."

"Oh, you can't be serious—"

"The Administrator of Science will have a new book coming out soon, too," he told her reluctantly. "And references from The Writings in those books? I wouldn't bother looking for any. In a generation or two, people might forget all about them. And that's precisely what the Administrators want: the only authority influencing the world will be theirs. No mystical 'Creator' gumming up their plans or confusing their people."

Exasperated, Mahrree growled and

rolled out of his embrace. "People should be able to think and believe whatever they *want* to think and believe! Let us find the truth for ourselves. If the Administrators were completely honest and honorable men, we should be able to teach and believe and discuss and even debate *anything*. But obviously, that's not the case. Dishonest men perceive threats everywhere!" she spat.

Perrin cleared his throat and propped himself up on one arm. "Be *careful*, Mrs. Shin."

"Why?" she gestured pointlessly to the ceiling. "They'll think *I'm* a threat? Someone will start a file on *me?* I thought I was going to bed with my husband, not Major Eyes and Ears and

Voice. Don't you remember what you suggested a few minutes ago? The Administrators are out to control the thoughts of the next generation? They might even enslave the world? You might be considered a bigger threat than me!"

He chuckled. "All right, all right. I won't report me . . . or you. Now we can both sleep better." He leaned over to kiss her.

She didn't notice. "So the Administrator of Culture is writing a new history book . . . do you realize no one's teaching the stories of Terryp anymore? I didn't see any mention of him in the sixty pages of the Full School

description, he was the most important historian of the Middle Age! Who else and what else will they eliminate? Guide Hierum was mentioned only once. I'll be fascinated to read the new and enlightened explanation of how Idumea came to be."

Perrin let out a low whistle. "Ah Mahrree, Mahrree, why do you like to get into such discussions so late at night?"

"Because it's the only time the house is quiet."

He sighed. "Weren't you going to kiss me a few minutes ago?"

"Is that all you can think about right now? Our entire future may be changing, and Perrin, what if we don't notice it?!

What if we someday discover we're . . . *on the wrong side?*"

There. It was out.

He sighed louder. "There's not going to be any kissing, or even any *hope* of arguing, until you get this resolved in your head, is there?"

"We're arguing now!" she declared, a bit put out that he didn't seem worried about whose side they were on.

"No, this is debating—loudly," he said patiently. "I was suggesting the kind of *arguing* that begins with kissing."

Mahrree kissed him quickly on the cheek.

"Well *that* was hardly worth the

effort . . .”

“So what do we do?” she asked earnestly.

“Well, first, I come over here to face you properly—”

“No! I mean, how do we expose the Administrators, preserve the truth, and save the world?!”

Perrin chuckled. “That’s a *little* more than we can expect to accomplish tonight, my darling wife. I have a much better chance at kissing you, but now I’m beginning to doubt my odds of succeeding at that.”

She giggled sadly. “I supposed you’re right. About fixing the world, that is.”

“There’s one thing we *can* do,” he

said. “We can make sure *we’re* not touched by whatever may be coming.”

“Nor our children,” she reminded him.

“Nor our children, I agree. In our house we will discuss and believe whatever we want. We can recognize for ourselves that the sky is dark and threatening with a storm obviously on the way, and explain to our children that the rest of the world has been conditioned to believe it is blue, despite all evidence to the contrary.”

She kissed him quickly on the lips. “Have I told you lately that you are the most perfect man, and that I love and adore you more than words can

express?"

"That kiss is still inadequate for the perfect man. And, if you insist, you can even believe the dinner leftovers can evolve into something as handsome as me, and I'll explain to our children how their mother is a little *odd* at times."

Mahrree giggled. "*I'm* odd? Mr. Let-Me-Put-My-Boots-at-a-Perfect-50-Degree-Angle-to-the-Bed?"

He chuckled. "Just as long as no one *outside* of our house ever finds out what we discuss *inside* the house, we should be all right." He sighed. "It's simply too big a battle to fight, Mahrree. The two of us against the twenty-three Administrators? Definitely not good odds."

Mahrree had heard that excuse before, and she tried to ignore it.

"Hmm. At least the forests are still quiet," she mumbled in resignation. "At least that's one less battle we have to fight."

Perrin slipped his arm under her. "Mm, yes. At least the forests are still quiet. And the soldiers know how much I *love* a quiet forest, especially at night. But they don't know entirely *why*."

She giggled as he pulled her close and finally claimed his kiss.

Barker was waiting when the man

in the black jacket reappeared. He trotted over to the fence and began his slow climb.

"Up, up, up. Well done, well done. Jerky again, but you seemed to enjoy that. Sorry about being late. Didn't realize messengers showed up this hour of night. But it figures—we've had nothing but delay after delay. Alongside, now, alongside. Hope you're ready. Long night ahead of us, boy."

Chapter 22 ~ “Now, how do I go about putting an end to all of this nonsense?”

Mahrree was getting breakfast ready the next morning when she saw the flashes of blue come over her back fence and run towards the kitchen door.

Immediately she knew there'd be no announcement that night at the amphitheater about the new taxation. Something bigger would be occupying the Army of Idumea.

"PERRIN!" she called, and went to open the door for the two soldiers.

"Ma'am! Major Shin here?" said one of the corporals breathlessly. In the alley Mahrree saw a third soldier arrive on horseback with an additional saddled horse ready for her husband.

"I'm right here!" Perrin announced as he hurried through the door, his sword ready at his side. "News?"

"Something moving in the forest, sir!" the soldier told him, and Perrin jogged out the door without a word to

Mahrree.

Jaytsy toddled into the kitchen, her long tunic bed clothes nearly tripping her as she rushed after Perrin, but the door was already closed. Disappointed, and with her wild brown hair in disarray, she said, “Where Fodder go?”

Mahrree waved half-heartedly and unnoticed at the windows as Perrin rode off in a puff of dust. “Had to go to the fort early, Jayts. Something’s come up.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.” Mahrree smiled at her. “I rarely do. Guess it’s only you, me, and Peto for pancakes.”

“Only you and me, Mudder,” Jaytsy said. “Peto sleeping. He can’t eat. He’s

messy wif pancakes."

Mahrree chuckled. "Your brother gets to eat too, Little Lady! Even pancakes."

"No, just keep the pancakes a secret. Give him apples."

"Jaytsy, we don't keep secrets from your brother."

"Why not?" Jaytsy asked, her big Perrin-brown eyes looking up at her, truly wondering.

"Why we don't keep secrets? Because . . . it's not nice."

"Why?"

Mahrree sighed. "That really was an inadequate answer, wasn't it?"

Jaytsy nodded soberly as if she understood what 'inadequate' meant.

“Because people deserve to know. Because even if we don’t like watching Peto eat, with his mouth all open and syrup dribbling down his chin, he gets breakfast too, even if you don’t think he deserves it—”

Mahrree stopped, a variety of ideas flashing in her mind too quickly for her to keep up with them all. “Even though *you* think he doesn’t deserve to know the truth, he *does*,” she said slowly, trying to put all her thoughts in some kind of order as if they were more obedient than her children and the dog. “Every person *needs* to know the truth of everything.”

Jaytsy just blinked at her.

But Mahrree was looking past her.

“And it’s up to us to find out that truth. We can’t expect someone to give it to us, we have to go out to *find* it. Even take risks to find it, if necessary. No . . . no, that’s it exactly! The truth brings great responsibility because it takes great risk to actually find it! Few people dare to take those risks, but there’s no great reward without great struggle. Oh, Jaytsy.” She looked out the wavy window at the large dark smudge that was the forest and mountains.

A plan was forming in her mind.

A most ridiculous, incredible, and brave plan.

And the timing was absolutely perfect.

“We have to find the truth

ourselves!”

Jaytsy blinked again and shrugged. “So I hide Peto’s pancakes. If he finds them he eats them?”

All day long Mahrree felt like a rebellious child sneaking out of school, but she tried to convince herself there was nothing wrong with what she was going to do. Yes, her plan was daring and risky, but it was also completely legal and didn’t break any rules of the Army, the citizenry, or the village.

So why was her stomach in constant knots, and why did she keep feeling the

need to relieve herself in the washing room every fifteen minutes?

At midday meal she boldly walked up to the fort, her children in the wagon that she pulled, merely to see what was going on. She stopped about a hundred and fifty paces away from the tree line and gazed at the action across the barren strip of land. Extra soldiers patrolled along the forest's edge, but the movement back and forth from the fort to the trees wasn't frantic. While there wasn't a direct threat, something unusual was happening, that was for sure.

She heard a familiar voice. "Mrs. Shin!"

"Zadda!" Jaytsy called back, and Peto began to squirm in his seat to get

out.

Staff Sergeant Gizzada always meant that two little children would be given sweets from a hidden pocket in his uniform. If they noticed the lint stuck to the morsels, they didn't care.

Sergeant Gizzada started patting himself down as he approached Mahrree. Every disappointing pocket in his blue uniform etched a deeper line of apology in the large man's face. He pulled out bits of papers, a long knife, lengths of string, and finally eyed an unusual bulge in his jacket pocket that he didn't retrieve because he couldn't immediately identify it. Worried, he bit his lip.

“I’m so sorry, Small Ones. I wasn’t expecting to see you today, so I’m not prepared. Actually, I’ve been on since late last night.” He looked at Mahrree remorsefully.

“It’s all right, Gizzada.” Mahrree smiled, but her children hooting at the staff sergeant told them it wasn’t acceptable to be without treats for them. “I didn’t bring them up to steal your sweets again. Or your afternoon snacks.”

Gizzada bravely fished out the bulge from his jacket—a shriveled piece of aged jerky—and wrinkled his nose at it.

“A bit tough for the Small Ones,” he said, trying to bend it. “Barker would

appreciate it, though. Where is he?"

Mahrree rolled her eyes. "Probably visiting another small dog to once again further his parentage. Ever since he discovered how to climb over the fence, we can't contain him."

Gizzada smiled. "He followed me to the markets a couple of weeks ago. I think I made him a permanent friend by giving him a sweet roll. Sorry about that."

"Next time, let him follow you to the fort and keep him here!" She looked up towards the forest. "I was just wondering what's going on up here," she said, trying to keep a careful balance between sounding casual, and not sounding as if she *were* trying to sound

casual. “Perrin left without his breakfast.”

Gizzada shook his head sadly. “That *is* a tragedy,” he said in all seriousness. “I’ll see to it that sandwiches are brought up to him.”

Mahrree squinted at the trees. “Exactly *where* is he, Gizzada?”

“Not *in* the trees, Mrs. Shin,” he promised. “Look down towards the west and you’ll see him on the brown mare. Already tired out the bay gelding. Been riding up and down all morning.”

“Why?” Mahrree asked, hoping she sounded relaxed enough that he would tell her.

“Not sure, ma’am.” He shrugged

and patted himself down again when he saw the pouty faces of Jaytsy and Peto looking up at him, still hopeful. "Just a great deal of movement deep into the trees. Not wolves, not bears, just . . . odd. We can't even see up to it, but we're hearing lots of crashing about."

"Maybe some lost livestock?" Mahrree suggested.

Gizzada shook his head. "We thought that at first, too, since the cattle fence isn't completed yet. But cattle, pigs, sheep, or goats would all be crying and calling. We don't hear anything like that."

"So," Mahrree said as nonchalantly as possible. "Guarders then?" She watched the large staff sergeant from the

corner of her eye as she pretended to observe the forest.

Any sign . . . any sign at all . . .

He shrugged helplessly. “But Mrs. Shin,” he lowered his voice and looked around to see no one near, “it’s driving your husband nearly to distraction. He’s just staring into the forest, longingly, as if he sees a . . .” he searched for an appropriate comparison, “a luscious, giant pie just out of reach, and he’s a starving man on his last legs. And the pie is bursting with berries, still steaming from the oven, juices dribbling down the crust—”

Even Mahrree found herself so distracted from her questioning that she

began licking her lips. *If only Gizzada were a few years older*, she thought to herself, as she had dozens of times, or Mother were a few years younger, they could be very happy together.

"—and he can't reach it. It taunts him, beckons him, he smells it, hears it —"

Mahrree stopped licking her lips and wondered exactly how one *hears* a pie. But by the faraway look in Gizzada's mournful black eyes, it was obvious all kinds of foods spoke to him.

"Staff Sergeant?"

"And he's forbidden to touch it," Gizzada's arm began to rise, his chubby brown hand making a grasping motion. "He can do nothing but dream and long

for it, his heart ready to break—"

"Gizzada, have you had midday meal yet?"

"No." He sighed sadly, the longing in his eyes intensifying to true anguish. Mahrree was sure she heard his great belly rumble.

She put a comforting hand on his arm. "As the wife of your major, I have special privileges, or so I claim. And, as the woman with the ear of your commander, I *order* you to the mess hall to make my husband two sandwiches, and take along three for yourself."

Gizzada's mouth turned into the heartfelt smile of a man who had just been rescued from an execution squad.

“Truly, Mrs. Shin, you are an incredible woman,” he said with great feeling. “Major Shin is lucky to have found such a thoughtful, deep, and compassionate woman as you.”

Mahrree suppressed her laugh, and it showed up instead as a sweet smile on her face. “Thank you, Gizzada. And thank you in advance for taking care of my husband.”

He looked down at the children who gave him one last try with their lambs’ eyes. “Next time, Small Ones, I promise I’ll have extra treats, all right?”

He patted their heads gently, tipped his cap at Mahrree, and took off in a lumbering jog back to the fort.

Mahrree sighed and looked again towards the forest to distantly see Perrin kick his heels into his mount and head off again towards the east, yelling something. It wasn't his panicked yell, Mahrree noticed. Only his, I'm-getting-very-frustrated-with-the-situation yell, which meant there wasn't anything dangerous, just maddening.

Truly a massive pie just out of his reach.

"We need to get some berries," Mahrree decided.

"Fodder?" Peto asked, pointing at the fort.

"I'm sorry, sweety. Your father is busy right now. See over there? The

horsey? That's Father. He's not too happy right now. Let's make him a pie for later to cheer him up. On to the market."

It was past dinner time and Perrin still hadn't returned, nor had Shem been by with a message. That was all right.

In fact, it was better this way.

Mahrree rubbed her hands nervously as she stared at the lovely blackberry pie with two small slices and one large slice already cut out and eaten for dessert.

"Fodder!" Peto sang to the back

door, as if his voice would bring Perrin.

"I'm sorry, Peto," Mahrree said as she picked him up. She pointed out the thick glassed window towards the back fence. "No Fodder, I mean, *Father* tonight. He has to work until late."

Peto sighed sadly and wriggled to be put back down. "No Fodder," he moped as he toddled back to the eating room.

"That means something is still going on," Mahrree said to herself, wringing her hands. As much as she wanted something to keep going on, a small cowardly part of her didn't. She had made a deal with herself that morning, and hoped against herself all day. But now as it grew to be evening, she

realized she was going to *have* to—

No, she was *grasping the opportunity* to go through with it. She desperately wanted to, but strangely, she almost as urgently hoped someone or something would stop her.

The evening dragged on at a curiously fast rate as Mahrree bathed her children, dressed them for bed, and told them stories until they dozed off.

Each hour she watched to see if Perrin came home, and each hour that passed upped her heart rate. She was going to have to do it. She had to know, and she'd forever be ashamed of herself if she let this chance pass. There were more secrets in the world than just that

of the thirty-three servants held by the Queruls.

The biggest secrets were held only a couple miles from her house, and those secrets dragged away her husband, threatened her in-laws, and . . . well, she was just tired of it all. Tired of secrets, of unknown variables like her favorite soldier, tired of surprises in the night—it was enough.

There was only one more way her intentions could have been thwarted, but two hours after sundown, the last part of her plan came to the door.

"Mrs. Shin!" Sareen giggled. "I can't tell you how excited I am to tend your children! I realize Corporal Zenos usually watches them—"

“He won’t be by tonight, Sareen,” Mahrree warned her and put a bracing hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

Sareen’s glow dimmed a bit. “That’s all right. Of course that’s why you asked me to come. But you can tell him that you trusted me!”

Mahrree didn’t feel like dousing her passionate fire just then. “I will, Sareen. Should be rather easy tonight. They’re already asleep, so feel free to relax and take a nap on the sofa until I come home from my mother’s.”

“Oh, I won’t sleep on the job, Mrs. Shin! I’ll stay up for as long as it takes ___”

“You know,” Mahrree said with a

small smile, "*Corporal Zenos* naps on our sofa quite frequently. He says that end is the most comfortable for his head. And that over there is his favorite pillow."

Sareen flushed red. "Oh, *oh!*" she eyed the pillow as if it was Shem himself, beckoning her to sit on his lap. "Maybe I *will* take a little nap, if you're out too late, that is."

"I really don't know how long I'll be gone," Mahrree said. "So make yourself comfortable, and later you can give me a report on how comfortable it was, and I'll be sure to tell Shem."

In a small way she felt guilty for feeding Sareen's desperate hope, but she really didn't want her knowing how late

Mahrree might be coming home. Sareen fairly danced over to the sofa, picked up the pillow and gave it such a thorough fluffing Mahrree was surprised it didn't burst open at the top forcing out all the goose down feathers in a white snowstorm.

"This is a *wonderful* pillow!" Sareen giggled as she sniffed it.

Mahrree looked away, unable to watch anymore. She took her cloak from off the hook by the front door and put it on. "Well, Sareen . . . Sareen?"

Her face was buried in the pillow, and Mahrree thought she may have heard a kissing noise come from it. Sareen's head popped up, flushed with

embarrassment.

"I'm not sure how long I'll be gone,"—and Mahrree worried briefly about in what condition the pillow would be when she came back home, "—so keep the doors locked, and if you hear something at the back door, it's likely Barker."

"He's not here?" Sareen appreciated the smelly beast even less than Mahrree.

"Yes, his daytime wanderings have turned into nighttime ones as well."

"Well, with all the *female dogs* in the neighborhood," Sareen giggled.

Mahrree groaned. "Most of the neighbors don't mind his presence. They seem to think his size means he's

actually a guard dog. But that litter of puppies down the road?" She shuddered, and so did Sareen. "Tragic."

"Maybe as they get bigger they won't look so much like drowned rabbits," she offered in a giggle.

"I hope so. We promised to help find homes for half of them. Anyway, just leave Barker outside. He won't mind. And don't open the doors, whatever you do. If it's me or Major Shin, you'll know us by our secret knock."

Sareen nodded soberly. "And if the major returns before you, I'll tell him that your mother is ill."

"Yes, please do," Mahrree smiled.

Her lie would be better coming from Sareen anyway. "Feel free to read anything in the study, and Sareen, thank you again."

She hugged the pillow close to her chest. "No, thank *you!*"

If she were a more honest woman, she would be feeling more guilty about telling Sareen a lie so that she could find out the truth.

"Yes, Perrin—I know," Mahrree muttered in resigned annoyance as she walked as quietly as possible down the darkened road. "Sometimes lies *are*

necessary.”

She glanced up at the tower as she passed it, purposely waving to the guards so that they knew she was a villager and not something worse. She couldn’t tell if they noticed her, but the towers remained dark and bannerless. Even with the activity in the forest, no warning banners had gone up anywhere in the village. Only those with farms adjoining the barren strip of land left before the forest knew anything was happening, and even then it looked more like a full exercise rather than a possible threat.

Mahrree headed east, away from the body of the soldiers that were in the west. Should anyone see her she could

say that she was on her way to her mother's, but she had put up her hood hoping no one would recognize her.

The roads were quiet, as they usually were for this time of night. She didn't feel her stomach knot until she had passed the turn off for going to her mother's. Now she really did feel like a teenager skipping out on school, sure that at any moment she was about to get caught. But she wasn't doing anything wrong, not breaking any rules, and she was even doing Sareen a favor, who was undoubtedly hugging Shem's pillow with a passion no one should be around to witness. Everything was just fine.

So why did she feel so dreadful?

“I need to stop the secrets and find out the truth,” she whispered to herself. “Just to know that at least I tried! I’m the brave wife of the major, after all.”

She cut between two houses without fences and headed north towards the darkness. Passing the last road on the rings that surrounded Edge, she made her way across a farm and slipped between the still-standing dried corn stalks. The cold wind coming down from the mountains rustled the crinkly leaves, making a surprisingly loud and disquieting noise. She picked up her pace to get through the corn field as quickly as possible. Seeing the end of the row, she ran to reach it, stopping

only once she was several paces beyond the stalks. Then she paused and oriented herself.

She was gripped with a sudden panic that nearly dropped her to her knees. To her left, further to the west than she anticipated, was the fort, brightly lit with torches to illuminate the activity. And directly in front of her, across the canal, was the forest. She took several deep breaths, creating little clouds in front of her, and calmed her pounding heart.

Still doing nothing wrong, she reminded herself. Still legal. Still safe. She took a few steps back to conceal herself in the rows of corn stalks and watched the perimeter of the forest.

The soldiers rode so silently she was impressed, but of course, they'd been trained to do that. Even the horses' bridles and saddles were muffled with bits of rabbit fur so as to not rattle or jingle. The soldiers rode in twos, threes, fours, and occasionally as a lone soldier along the border.

She hadn't anticipated seeing so many—the patrols seemed to be tripled, probably because of the action in the forest—and she hadn't considered how to avoid them. She watched for a moment to see a pattern before remembering that Perrin purposely devised irregular distances and times for their movement.

“Very clever, Major Shin,” she whispered. “Not only can Guarders not get in, villagers can’t get near. I’m just going to have to chance it,” she decided, looking up at the sky that was cloudy. “Rather dark tonight—”

She groaned as the clouds quickly passed, revealing two half moons and more than adequate light.

“Thanks,” she muttered. “Thanks a lot. Now if a soldier sees me, he might recognize me and not believe I was a relative from Scrub who got lost trying to find her aunt’s house again.”

But she also knew if she just stood there, she’d likely wet her drawers like Jaytsy did when she was nervous.

Mahrree exhaled and started walking directly towards the canal.

Act like you belong there, she thought to herself, and they might believe you do. Behave as if you're trying to get away with something, everyone will suspect you.

She glanced up and down the canal looking for one of the many footbridges that led across it. She found one further to the east and started for it, keeping her hood well over her head. Only once she dared to look up for any nearing soldiers. She saw one that rode past her a few dozen paces away, but his eyes were solely focused on the forest, not the fields behind him.

Mahrree smiled confidently,

stepped quietly across the footbridge even though she could've walked through the canal since it was dry this time of year, and took one last look at the patrols. She had a clear shot for perhaps ten seconds . . .

"Do it!" she told herself, and took off in a dead run across the barren field. The trees loomed larger as she neared them until suddenly she was at the very edge. She took one last look either way, then . . .

. . . stepped in.

"I'm in the forest," she panted and slumped down to the ground.

She stretched to the side and reached her hand out to the front of the

tree she leaned against.

"But not *all* of me. I can still reach the field, therefore I'm not *completely* in the forest, therefore I'm not breaking any rules," she babbled to calm herself. "And besides, Grandfather Pere Shin's law first law is, 'No officer, enlisted man, or citizen of the world . . .' But I'm not an officer, I'm not an enlisted man, and I'm not *actually* a citizen. As a woman I have no vote, therefore I'm not truly a citizen, and I can't be breaking any law," she declared, more as a reminder to herself than anything else. "Right, Grandfather Pere?"

She released a tense giggle and looked around. "Only trees, isn't it? Perrin was right," she whispered. "Now,

how do I go about putting an end to all of this nonsense?"

She never thought she'd get that far. That's when she started to feel cold.

"What in the world do I think I'm doing?" She forced herself to her feet, smoothed down her cloak, and took a few steps tentatively forward, still with the ability to jump out again in a mere two steps. Her hands shook and she found it difficult to swallow.

"Just find someone or something," she muttered, turning to head east away from the majority of the soldiers. "If I'm meant to find something, then I will."

It occurred to her then, as she crept along, that she hadn't once asked the

Creator if this was a good idea. The night of the raid when she ran to her mother's, she was first on her knees pleading for guidance and protection. But not once this entire day had she done that. Maybe it was because she dreaded the answer would've been, "Get Back Home!"

The same gnawing feeling overwhelmed her belly again, and now she knew why.

She shouldn't be there.

She wasn't honest—not with Sareen, who had absolutely no hope in ever getting Shem to fall in love with her.

Not with her husband, who would be livid to know she was there.

Not with her mother, to whom she gave a fake illness for a cover story.

And not with herself, for believing she could find a way to end all of this. Exactly what was she hoping to prove out there? That she was brave? Defiant? Something to be feared? Was it all just pride that propelled her out there and made her think she was something special?

She swallowed hard at her self-doubt and continued slowly along, skirting the leafless trees and shrubby bushes. She wondered what it would be that would finally force her to her senses, out of the forest, and back to her house. In a way she felt like she had

come so far it would be pointless to go back now, with nothing to show for it.

Besides, she'd be all right. She *had* to be. Bad things happened to other people, not her. And there was that old man she remembered yesterday morning, the one who last year asked the Creator to preserve them. Mahrree nodded confidently to herself. If the Creator wouldn't honor the request of a sweet old man, then who would He honor?

Mahrree would be preserved. *Of course* she'd be.

Then again, on the other hand, she realized she could still go back home and no one would ever know what foolishness she committed that night in the name of annoyance, aggravation and

yes, maybe pride. She could just—

No.

No. *She would* succeed where no one else—*no man*—had. She was Mahrree Peto Shin. The daughter of the most intelligent teacher the world never knew, the wife of a commander, the daughter-in-law of the most powerful officer, and therefore, in her own right, quite possibly the most dangerous woman in the world.

What other woman would be doing what she was that night? None. Women could be just as determined, brave, and strong as men. Even more so. She would do what her husband couldn't—

Mahrree sighed as she picked her

way through the underbrush. She hated to admit it, but there were moments during the past season that she considered her husband to be . . .

Well, take that night weeks ago, when he told her that the High General wouldn't let him back into the forest, and that he wouldn't defy the law again. Mahrree *had* started to say she had never known him to be—

She *was* going to say "cowardly," but then he started to say it himself, with such ashamed anger tingeing his voice that she immediately changed it to "cautious." She'd never known him to be *cautious*.

But that wasn't what she meant, and she secretly still suspected him to be

something worse than "cautious." When he first came to Edge he wanted to know the truth; that was the excuse he gave her for going in to the forest that first time with Karna. He wanted to find someone to get answers. He was tired of secrets too.

But not anymore. Every time they talked about the Administrators, she could see it in his eyes: a wall went up, and he scurried to hide behind it. There's twenty-three of them, he'd remind her, and only two of us. She'd never met any of them, and never intended to, but they were *only* older university professors, and slow-witted ones as well. Perrin had one hundred

fifty men under his command, and his father had 15,000 and the army was growing. Those were very good odds, indeed!

But they never used that power. Relf Shin was as intimidated and hesitant as his son. But this was where she was different. She would find that truth, reveal those secrets, and show the world what it meant to be brave.

Courage wasn't killing your enemies; it was looking them in the eyes and proclaiming, "I am here to know you."

Then she would—

"What are you doing so far over here?"

The voice, barely louder than a

whisper, was strong, sharp and—shockingly—*female*. It came from another black cloak right in front of her. Where it appeared from, and from what direction, Mahrree didn't know. It completely took her breath away and all she could do was stare and tremble.

"I told you to go over—Oh. Wait. *Who are you?*"

Mahrree could only lick her lips, because no answer came to her completely blank mind.

The cloaked woman abruptly reached up, grabbed Mahrree's hood, and yanked it down.

"*Oh, no*."

Before Mahrree could think, the

woman grabbed her arm and led her straight north, deeper into the forest. She took about ten clumsy steps before her frightened mind caught up to her.

I'm going into the forest, deeper into the forest . . . Dear Creator, I'm heading into the forest!

Just as suddenly as she pulled her, the woman stopped, shoved Mahrree to the ground behind a large boulder away from the view of the tree line, and pushed back her own hood.

Later Mahrree realized that was her opportunity to run away, but the thought didn't occur her until hours later. All she could do was look up into the woman's face. She had long graying blonde hair pulled into a ponytail and, judging from

her lightly wrinkled pale skin, was at least in her fifties.

"Miss, what in the world do you think you're doing out here?" Her tone was sharp and cutting, like a dagger.

"I . . . I . . . don't really know myself."

At that moment, Mahrree's answer was honest.

"What, you simply thought you'd take a late night stroll along the most dangerous piece of land in the world?"

"I . . . I . . . ," Mahrree stammered stupidly. Then it came to her. "I got lost trying to find my aunt's house."

As soon as the words came out, they sounded dumb.

And they sounded dumb to the middle-aged woman, too. “Try again, Miss.”

It came back to Mahrree, everything. She’d told herself she’d find someone, and now she did! Here she was, dressed like the night, strong, determined, and obviously familiar with the forest—this was it!

“I’m tired of all the secrets! I want to know the truth!” Mahrree declared, getting to her feet to face the woman who was only slightly taller than her. She said it with conviction, with strength, and with a tone that said she wasn’t going to leave until she knew it all.

But that’s not what the older woman

with the ponytail heard.

"No, you don't," she said dismissively. "Go home, dear. Quickly now." She turned and headed deeper into the woods.

Insulted, Mahrree ran up to the woman, grabbed her arm, and spun her around.

"Yes! Yes, I do! I took tremendous risks to come here tonight. I could tell something was going on in the forest, and I've lived here my entire life always being afraid and suspicious, but also knowing that it *never added up!* Something else is going on. I need to know what it is, and you can tell me. So tell me!"

The woman patted her on the arm.

“Lovely speech, my dear. Truly. From the heart, I can tell. But you *really* don’t want to know. You *think* you do, but what you want to hear is something scandalous to share with your little friends, or something secretive that you think will give you power, or something shocking you can expose for a large amount of gold nuggets. But you don’t *really* want to know. No one does, although they think they do. They aren’t ready for it, because the truth can change everything we’re sure we already know.”

“I’m not like that!” Mahrree insisted, furious with the woman’s patronizing manner. “I don’t want gold

or power or anything else—I only want to *know*. Why the raids? What do you want? Why so much fear and terror?"

"*I* don't bring terror," the woman said earnestly. "All *I* do is save lives, but you wouldn't understand that. Maybe someday, when you have enough trust in the Creator."

Mahrree was growing impatient. "I believe in the Creator! I read The Writings! What do you mean, maybe someday?!"

"When you can answer this question, my dear," she patted Mahrree on the shoulder as if she was three years old. "What color is the sky?"

Mahrree automatically looked up to take the easiest test in the world. "Black

with white dots, two half spheres of the moons, and patches of dark gray clouds."

The woman stepped closer and peered at Mahrree.

"Very good," she whispered. "Very good, indeed. I may have been wrong about you."

"You were," Mahrree declared. "Now tell me!"

The older woman gave her a genuine smile. "You're simply not ready, Miss. The truth will change all you know, and you don't want that."

"I do! That's the whole reason I'm here."

"All right," the woman said slowly.

"I can not only *tell* you the truth, but I can *show* it to you. But not here. You'd have to come with me—"

"I'm ready!"

"—and never come back."

Mahrree stopped and blinked. "What do you mean, *never come back*?!"

"There's no going back from the truth, Miss. Once you know it, you have to live it. You can't know the truth and live a lie. It will drive you to despair or insanity. So ultimately, it'd kill you," she said simply. "You can't live here and know it all. Are you ready to make that commitment? Ready to leave it all, for all the answers you've ever wanted?"

Mahrree's mouth went completely dry at the unthinkable offer. *This* was the

real test. Not the color of the sky, but the willingness of her heart.

"Why?" she whispered. "Why does it have to be that way?"

"Nothing costs more than the truth, my dear. It demands everything. And I have a feeling you're not ready to give it all. Look at you—you're quite young still, and probably have so much here you shouldn't leave. Do you have a husband?"

Mahrree nodded, unable to speak, the thought of leaving Perrin tying her tongue.

"A child?"

"Two," Mahrree's voice cracked.

"Two? That's becoming unusual.

How old are your children?"

"Daughter's two, son's one," she whispered, imagining for just the shortest of agonizing moments leaving their sweet little faces.

The woman's face froze in place. "*Two and one?*"

Mahrree nodded, tears filling her eyes. The truth at any cost—

Who did she think she was kidding? The cost was far too high. She'd thought she could find out the truth to help Perrin, to resolve these mysteries, to put an end to all of it—

No. That was just another lie she told herself.

The woman was right. She wanted power, and she was doing this for

herself, to prove something to the world. It was her haughtiness that sent her there, her growing frustration with the Administrators to whom this school teacher thought she should teach a lesson. Deny her more children? Send her only form letters? Change the way children learned about the world? Let the Guarders become so powerful that they take her husband away, again and again? She'd show them she knew a thing or two! She'd expose everything—whatever it was—and disgrace and shame them!

But she couldn't.

When faced with the actuality of doing it, of doing *anything* courageous,

she couldn't do it. Even if she didn't have a husband and children, Mahrree knew she'd never follow this woman one step further into the forest.

She always thought herself to be brave, especially when she stood on the platform in the amphitheater loudly proclaiming her opinions for all the world to hear, but deep down she knew "the world" didn't hear her. Only a few hundred, occasionally a few thousand, in the insignificant village of Edge ever heard her, and even then none of them took her seriously. She knew that, and that was the only reason she dared say anything. Before she was married she frequently walked the edges of the forest, but nothing bad ever happened on

the edges. It wasn't nearly as daring as it appeared.

And neither—Mahrree realized with humbling force as she stood a mere thirty paces in—was she.

The woman stepped closer to her and took her arm. Initially Mahrree was alarmed, but the touch was kind.

"Someday *will* come for you," the woman promised. "There'll be a day when you'll be ready to leave it all behind and embrace the truth. But not for many years still, I suspect. Until then, think of this night never again. Should your mind ever find itself surprised by this memory, tell yourself it was just a vivid dream, for that's all it really is.

You can practice looking at the world in different ways, preparing your mind to realize you know really nothing at all, looking at the sky and realizing it changes minute by second, but until that *someday* comes, nothing will ever quite make sense. That's all right," she said, almost genially.

Mahrree only gaped at her.

"But when that day *does* come," she continued with a sharper edge and firming her grip on Mahrree's arm, "everything will hit you with such finality and power you'll never again be able to forget it or deny it. You'll find the truth and *run to it*. But *not* tonight. Now, you need to get back to that empty field below us, and run home to your

husband and babies before they miss you."

No—

No, she couldn't let it end *like this*, with a lecture in the trees as if she were some thirteen-year-old child with a rebellious streak!

She needed something—some hint or clue or number to plug into Perrin's equation. Just a something more than what she knew this morning, and she wasn't going to let this woman leave without getting it.

One last stupid flash of defiance gripped Mahrree, and the most irrational part of her mind screamed, *Look—you're standing in the forest against all*

laws and logic speaking to a real Guarder! No one's done this before, so DO SOMETHING!

By the time all that audacity reached her mouth, though, it had diminished to a whimper. "But I've come *so far*."

"Not as far as you think, dear. Only about twenty paces." The patronizing tone was back, along with a firm pat on the cheek that felt more like a mild slap.

That did it.

The very last of Mahrree's impudence boiled up and filled her with dangerous courage. "*I have!* You have no idea who I am, or what—"

"Oh, yes *I do!*" the woman interrupted her sharply. "I know you

have a very ill-named dog. It *never* barks. Now, GO HOME, Mrs. Shin!"

Mahrree couldn't even breathe as she watched the woman march hastily away and be swallowed up by the forest, leaving her completely alone in the trees with one horrible thought.

She knew a little bit more, got her one truth, and revealed a secret: she, her children, and even her barkless dog, were known to the Guarders.

Chapter 23 ~ “And whose side are *you* on, anyway, Quiet Man?!”

It was late at night when the man in the black jacket strode through the dark forest, past the steaming vents, around a sulfurous cavern, out of the reach of a

spray of hot water, and over a swell of land that seemed to swell a little more each year. He walked alone and knew exactly where he was going. He picked up his pace once he was past the more hazardous terrain and started to jog eastward, weaving in and out of thickets and through meadows.

He shouldn't have to be here, he thought bitterly. Something had gone very wrong for him to be taking such a risk again. The stories he had to come up with . . .

There was too much moons' light. That was one of the problems. And the forest was too quiet. Usually it was rumbling and gurgling louder, but the world went in cycles like the seasons,

and it was a bad time for the forest to be napping. A little bit of ground moaning as cover would've been most welcome right now.

That's when he saw him, where he shouldn't be, cowering like a distracted porcupine.

"Ah, no," the man in the black jacket whispered, and crept over to the large rocks where the man in a black cloak was clinging to the shadows and looking in the wrong direction.

"You're not supposed to be here," the man in the black jacket whispered in his ear.

There are many rules of the forest, and the most important is always the one

neglected at the moment. And at that moment, the rule of "Never startle a preoccupied porcupine" shot up to the top of the list.

The porcupine-in-a-cloak nearly jumped out of it in surprise, swung blindly behind him, and smacked the face of the man in the black jacket. Then he took off running directionless, probably spooked because the boulder he'd been hiding behind developed a mouth and a sudden need to communicate its opinion.

But the smack wasn't hard enough to faze the black jacket man.

"No!" he whispered urgently, and was immediately in pursuit. "Go left! Go left!" he hissed, but the man in the cloak

veered right instead.

The second rule of the forest always seems to be, whenever someone's being chased, he'll always run towards the worst possible obstacle.

The porcupine man, for someone who had never been in the forest before, was following the rules perfectly.

"Naturally—the wrong way," the jacketed man grumbled as he sprinted to catch up to him. "What more can go wrong tonight?"

The cloaked porcupine man realized, in his maddened dash, that the trees and shrubs he was dodging abruptly ended. Fortunately he still had enough wits about to recognize he likely

should as well.

He skidded to a stop right before the deep crevice in front of him, but his momentum still swayed his body towards the gap.

The man in the jacket reached him just in time to yank him back, throwing him into the relative safety of a prickly bush.

“That was close! So what do you think you’re do—”

The cloaked porcupine didn’t even thank his rescuer, but was off again in a scrambling dash. The cloth of his covering snagged on the thorny bushes and tripped him up, but he kept running without a plan or a clue.

The jacketed man was right behind

him. “You have no idea where you’re going, do you?” he tried to yell in a hush. “Think about it—this is NOT a great place to run blindly in, now is it?!” and he leaped on top of him, knocking him to the ground in front of several boulders. “Now if you’ll just—”

“No! Get off me!”

“I can’t do that,” the jacketed man told him, pushing a knee into his back and twisting one of his arms behind him. “You’re going to get yourself killed!”

“Only saving you the bother of doing it!” his caught porcupine gasped, trying to free his arm. “That’s all you do out here, isn’t it?”

“Not me, my friend. That’s not what

I do." The man in the jacket—larger and stronger—twisted the cloak around the porcupine to avoid getting smacked again. Then with a grunt he flipped him over onto his back.

The porcupine man, rendered helpless on the dirt, noticed the man's open jacket and the silver buttons concealed on the inside. He glanced down at his captor's trousers, then up at his face dimly lit by the moons.

"Wait a minute," his voice thick with anger, "You . . . YOU! How could you?!" While his arms were bound, his legs weren't. He sharply raised his knee to knock his captor off of him.

"Be quiet!" the man in the black jacket hissed as he tumbled off, but it

was too late.

His hostage had already wriggled free and was on his knees, his hands out ready to strangle him.

"I told you to *stop* him, not *kill* him, Zenos!"

Shem was prepared. He quickly got to his feet, and in a flash Dormin, far less practiced, found his arm twisted and held behind his back again. Then he felt the cold steel of a long knife held against his throat, the flat of the blade pressed on his flesh.

"Dormin, I'm so sorry. It *was* me that killed Sonoforen, but there was no other choice. He was standing in front of the Shins' door, his long knife out, and

his hand on the door handle. I had only seconds to act. I didn't want to do it, I promise you. I've never taken a life before, and that night I took two."

Dormin panted anxiously as Shem Zenos held him immobile. "Are you taking a third tonight, then?"

"I'm praying not to, but then again, the night's only begun."

"Why are you out here?"

"I was about to ask you that," Shem said. "You're supposed to be long gone! This forest is no place for you, last son of King Oren."

"There've been complications." Dormin gasped and swallowed against the cold blade on his throat. "Let me go, will you?"

"Only after you promise you're not going to avenge your brother's death."

Dormin sighed, almost in embarrassment. "I'm not even *armed*, Zenos."

"That's right, he's not!" a woman's voice snapped. She bounded out of a clump of trees, shaking her head in dismay. Her long blonde and gray streaked hair, pulled into a serviceable ponytail, whipped angrily but she moved as silently as the moons. "Dormin, how in the world did you get here?"

"Sorry, Mrs. Yung," he whispered. "I got disoriented."

"Yes, obviously!" she whispered back. "You're almost as aimless as my

husband. We'll have to find him next. Zenos, let go of him already!"

Shem shrugged apologetically, sheathed his knife and released Dormin's arm. Dormin scampered away from him and glowered.

"What you boys get up to in the forests here, I just don't know," Mrs. Yung fumed. "This entire night is going completely wrong!"

"Sorry, Mrs. Yung," Shem said, withering under her glare which didn't even need full light to be fully effective. "We just, uh . . . needed to talk things through."

Dormin folded his arms.

"Well, I hope it's resolved because we have far greater problems right now!

Zenos, the upper northeastern route along the ridge has been compromised. We had to stop at the ravine because of an emergency, but we're ready to move again. But we don't know where the last four are. We split up to confuse them, and confused Dormin instead, I see." All she had to do was put her hands on her hips and face him.

Now it was Dormin's turn to shrug contritely, and Shem's shoulders sagged in additional remorse, even though he hadn't been the cause of any of those problems.

Mrs. Yung was used to that. Rector's wives were supposed to be their husbands' equals in acting as the

Creator's hands to provide heartfelt concern and loving guidance.

But Mrs. Yung had an additional trait which manifested itself in opportune moments. With a determinedly pointed finger, a quick tongue, and a sharp kick to one's conscious, no one could reduce a full-grown man to shamed penitence quicker than Mrs. Yung. When her ire was up, even innocent people who had never met her before felt the need to apologize repeatedly. Her ability to reduce any ego into scrambled egg with simply a well-honed glare was why she was chosen to keep order in the forests. Her husband tagged along at this point, after his work was done, just for the entertainment.

Satisfied that the boys were no longer squabbling, she nodded once in acknowledgement of their apologies. "Now, there's yet another wrinkle tonight, and Shem, you have to fix that one as well."

Shem briefly rolled his eyes. "Oh, what is it now!?"

"A *friend* of yours has found herself on the wrong side of the trees. Now, I suggest you find her lost dog, then—"

"Wait a minute," Shem grabbed Mrs. Yung's arm. "Mahrree?!"

"What's a marr-ee?" Dormin asked.

"A most determined, naïve, and dangerous woman, that's what!" Mrs. Yung declared. "She wanted to know the

truth, or so she claims, and I accidentally grabbed her thinking she was you, Dormin!"

"Where's she now?" Shem asked, alarmed.

"Likely at the edge of the forest, sobbing because I intimidated her for her own good. She and her family need to stay out of here. It's not their time yet. Hifadhi's said that a few times."

Still Zenos looked down in the direction Mrs. Yung had come running from.

She grabbed his jaw and turned his face abruptly to look at her.

"Shem, focus here! First priority is to find and misdirect the last four. Then you can see about *your friend*. And

Shem," her glare turned so severe that only a man as strong as Shem could have withstood it, and even then his knees began to buckle, "since when do *you* call an older married woman by her first name?"

Zenos swallowed. "Didn't want to reveal her identity in front of Dormin. The less he knows, the better."

"Yes, *of course*," Mrs. Yung said slowly, not at all convinced by his explanation as she released his face. But fortunately for the young corporal there were more important matters at hand and no time for a lecture. "I've secured Dormin, so you get out there and do your duty tonight, whatever that means.

Understand?"

"Yes, Mrs. Yung," Zenos said obediently. No one would dare disobey that tone of voice. "*You* just get *him* out of here!"

"That's always been the plan, Shem, but this past week—it's been unlike anything we've ever experienced. How I'm going to explain *any* of this to my brother Hew, I—" She stopped short and pointed to a clearing beyond them.

Four figures in black were jogging quietly towards their general direction, weaving through the underbrush and dodging pine trees.

Without another word, Mrs. Yung jabbed Shem. He nodded, the long knife still in his hands, and headed straight

towards them, noiseless hurtling shrubs in his way. Mrs. Yung grabbed Dormin's arm and pulled him back towards the boulders.

"What's he doing?" Dormin whispered.

"*Saving your life,* Dormin. When I say three, head towards the stand of pines. One . . . *three!*"

Dormin followed her up to the trees several paces away. He slipped into the middle of them, learning earlier that night that complaining about their poking needles wouldn't earn him any sympathy since Mrs. Yung was already quite scratched up herself.

"Hold still and you'll become the

shadows," Mrs. Yung breathed. "That's the best way to see what's happening."

Dormin nodded, but felt a sharp jab from Mrs. Yung. "I said *hold still*. Talk in breaths."

"Sorry," he breathed. He kept his shoulders from shrugging another apology, but his eyes widened with dismay that the gentle, kind woman who had been acting as his mother for more than a year had become as pointed and threatening as the blade she wore concealed under her cloak. With considerable dread, he fretted that maybe that his great grandmother, the originator of the killing squads, was distantly related to Mrs. Yung.

His first night in the trees was

definitely different than what he was used to.

Dormin squinted between the boughs to see where Zenos had jogged off to. A moment later he appeared in the moons' light directly in front of the four men. They stopped in surprise and blinked, as if unsure that the man was really in front of them.

"Who are you?!" one of the men asked, not concerned about keeping his voice low.

Zenos answered them nothing, but stood motionless.

"*Wait a minute*," one of the four said slowly. He took a few steps closer. "Look at his trousers. Hey, I know who

you are! What are you do—”

That’s all he got out.

Shem lunged unexpectedly, thrusting his knife into the man’s heart. His three companions immediately reacted by pulling their jagged daggers, but the man in the black jacket took off running.

Dormin, in the safety of the shadow of the trees, gasped.

Mrs. Yung covered his mouth with her hand. “Hush, Dormin. We’re safe now,” she said in the familiar gentle tone Dormin had known over the past year. “That was the last four we were trying to flush out. The other three will likely survive. We *save* people, Dormin. All we do is to save lives.”

She took her hand off his mouth and

exhaled deeply as if to rid herself of her previously sharp demeanor. When she spoke again, she was once again an ideal rector's wife.

"That one died to save you, and Shem will wrestle with his conscience as mightily as he did the night he killed your brother. But you, and the others, are now safe. My husband, however, isn't. The poor man gets lost when he can't see the mountains. Come on." She tugged on his arm.

Dormin nodded, but took one more glance back at the still body with the long knife protruding out of his heart. Maybe it happened that quickly for Sonoforen, so fast that he didn't even

know what hit him before the ground did. That's the way he'd want to go, Dormin thought—suddenly, like their father. He remembered telling his brother he loved him, and how ridiculously that went over. But the Yungs told him someday he would be grateful he did. And he was.

Dormin nodded once to the body. "I'm sorry, Sonoforen. Good-bye."

Then he dashed through a clearing behind Mrs. Yung and into a stand of scrubby oaks.

As Shem sprinted, he glanced

behind him and saw the three men in close pursuit, but none of them could catch the dark figure that ran with greater speed and agility than a deer. Through trees, through meadows, through a river, and even through a shallow patch of steaming water they chased him, heading west.

If only the Strongest Soldier race could have been run in here at night, Shem thought wistfully.

Sometimes he slowed his gait, only enough for the men behind him to think they could finally catch him, but then he pulled out ahead, tantalizingly out of their reach. He headed down a ravine, stumbled, and struggled to recover his footing.

His pursuers took advantage of his trip and rushed towards him.

Just as the three men were to converge upon him, they were inexplicably stopped by nets and ropes, wrapping around their feet. Shem had stumbled there, too, but knew how to step out again. As the three men fought and flailed, they became more entangled, as if the ropes hidden by leaves and branches tightened with their every move. That's because they did.

Shem, however, stood up, nonchalantly brushed off the black lining of his army jacket, and watched passively as several trees and bushes tightened the binds on the three men.

It was a trap, and one of their best.

As the three men fought against half a dozen camouflaged captors, two more men in green and brown mottled clothing emerged. Those whose skin wasn't naturally hued brown or red had worked mud into their flesh, but it had long since dried and was flaking off. One man went to assist tying up the prisoners and gagging them into silence, while the second one, a hulking figure and already browned by the foresight of nature, made his way over to Shem.

"This should be the last of them," he said appreciatively. "Excellent work! I thought there were four, though."

"There *were*," Shem whispered.

The man in green exhaled in understanding. “The long knife?”

Shem nodded once.

“Where’s it now?”

“Still in his heart,” the corporal said flatly. “If I removed it, it would’ve made a mess.”

“It had to be done. You know that,” his companion said consolingly.

“Never going to own another one again,” Shem whispered in despair. “I’m too deadly with them.”

“You killed a guilty man in order to save fourteen lives tonight,” the man in green and brown assured him. “And these three others will never reveal anything either. The way is safe again,

because of you."

"Why wasn't it before?" Shem snapped bitterly, and began to tremble.

"Bad timing along with a few unexpected complications," his companion explained. "It was the noise that attracted their attention. There were far more than we expected, and they wandered this far east because—Look," he said, growing annoyed with having to justify the situation, "you *know* this is part of why you are here. Your training, your position, your access . . . you also know we wouldn't call on you unless it was a real emergency. True, we need you to keep quiet, but every now and then you still need to—"

"I know, I know," Shem sighed

wretchedly. “Fourteen, you said?”

“Yes, now.”

Shem nodded once, knowing he had to be satisfied with that response. “So where is he?” he asked, looking around at the dark pines and leafless trees. “I need to get him back now that the last are secured.”

The man shrugged and looked behind him. “I’m not sure, but he’ll be completely exhausted. We had no idea we’d be distracting the *entire army*, too, or we would have told you to borrow those three brown cows that never moo. They crash through the underbrush just as effectively, and we could’ve split them up.”

“But once the cattle fence is up, we won’t be able to use those, either. We’ll need to find another strategy,” Shem decided. “He tried to go home early, and that’s what alerted the patrols this morning. Then rumor and fear, being as efficient as they are, blew everything out of proportion. The major’s been on high alert since early morning, completely perplexed.”

“Confusion is good,” the man patted Zenos on the back. “You doubt what you see, so you make up explanations of what it *may* have been, and soon you can’t even remember what you saw to begin with. By the time this night is over, I’ll guess there’ll be about a dozen

different stories, all compelling, all terrifying, and none of them accurate. No one's imagination will ever let them believe that it was—oh, there he is. Ugh, he *is* a mess."

Through the undergrowth came the noisiest creature to ever plod in the forest. He saw Zenos and went straight for him, collapsing in exhaustion at his feet.

"Oh, good dog Barker!" Shem squatted and scratched the massive black dog behind the ears. "Well done, well done. Look at you, covered in burs, twigs, and what's this? Ew, never mind. Sorry about that. Not sure if we'll have time to brush you out before we bring you home." From his back uniform

pocket Shem pulled out a piece of jerky, Barker's favorite.

Barker looked up at Shem, his tired eyes drooping, his drool running, but his tail wagging whip-like and thrashing the long dry grasses behind him. He gulped down his reward.

His two handlers for the night appeared a moment later, winded.

"He always hears your voice, Shem, and heads straight for you. He could sniff you out from anywhere in the forest, couldn't he?" One of the handlers, dressed in a dark brown mottled jacket and trouser, grinned.

The second handler in brown gestured to the three being bound.

“Looks like good hunting tonight, eh?”

The three captives stared at them, stunned by the appearance of two more men as if the trees had just spat them out, along with an abnormally huge dog that could have been spawned by a gurgling black cavern.

One of the captives managed to cough out his gag. “Who are you?!” he demanded. “And whose side are *you* on, anyway, Quiet Man?!” he said to Zenos.

The man in the black jacket stared at him for a moment before saying, “Get them out of here.”

He turned, took the dog by the rope around his neck, and said, “Alongside, Barker. One more problem in the woods tonight. Alongside, alongside.” And he

jogged down through the trees back towards the east in what he hoped was the direction of Mahrree.

Fourteen innocent lives, he reminded himself as they weaved through pines and scrubby oaks.

Fourteen.

In his mind a scale presented itself: the fourteen on one side, and the one man lying dead on the other. The fourteen clearly outweighed the one, but when Shem stepped on to the scale with the fourteen, suddenly it was all out of balance.

It was his duty. It was why he was there. He was guilty only of eliminating the guilty. In the mathematics of it all,

that made him innocent. In a few hours he might believe it. His initial training would take hold of both his heart and mind, and reassure him that this was all right.

But for now the deed was still so raw in his mind.

At least it was dark. As long as it was always dark when he does such things, he might be able to live with the memory of what he didn't see. It was his graphic imagination that haunted him.

Fourteen innocent. Fourteen innocent. Because of him.

Mahrree sat at the edge of the forest curled up under an evergreen bush that was so pungent she knew she'd never forget its scent, no matter how hard she tried. And it would always be tied to her memory of that night. She sobbed silently, shamefully, with the horrible realization.

She was a coward.

Just like everyone else.

Shem did his best quiet jog through the woods trying to discern where she might be. Along the edges, most likely. But he didn't dare get too close. The

soldiers were still patrolling, looking for large dark objects moving strangely through the forest. Crashing through the bushes next to Shem was the world's noisiest spy—the very beast every man in the army had been futilely looking for since dawn. Through the trees he could see the dim movements of soldiers and horses, and watched the uneven pattern of their passing.

Shem slowed his progress and caught Barker by the rope around his neck.

"Halt, Barker," he whispered when he knew a gap in the patrols was beginning. "Down there." He crouched down next to the dog. "That rock in the distance? That's not supposed to be

there. Watch it for a moment . . . see? It's quivering slightly. That's Mahrree. Now Barker, you need to go down to her and take her home, all right?" He slipped the rope off of Barker's neck. "Away from me. Home, home, home," he commanded as he had so many times before, and pushed him in the right direction.

Shem held his breath as Barker first decided to water a pine tree, then started in an unwieldy lope through the trees. The effect was precisely what Shem had hoped for. Barker's awkward jog through the dried leaves sent the 'rock' Shem identified to her feet, terrified that something was coming.

“That ought to cure your curiosity about the forest for a time,” Shem whispered as Mahrree, panic-stricken, backed up quickly out of the woods. She collapsed to her knees and covered her head with her arms just as Barker lumbered out of the forest and flopped on her. Mahrree’s cry of terror was muffled by the thick black fur of her rescuer.

“Sorry about that, Mahrree,” Shem whispered and shook his head sadly, “but you really don’t belong out here. Someday, though. Someday we’ll come for you, too.”

“Get off! Get off, please!” Mahrree cried and flailed as the massive weight overwhelmed her. She kicked and pushed and tried to remember some of the defensive techniques Perrin had taught her, but she was useless.

Panicked, cowardly, and now useless.

It was the licking that completely startled her.

“What?” she gasped, scrambling to stand up. She pushed back her hood and looked at her attacker. “Barker? *Barker!* What—? Where—?”

For once in her life she was grateful to see the ugly beast. She dropped to her

knees and wrapped her arms around the dog, not caring that he was dripping drool on her shoulder as he panted happily to see her.

"I don't believe it! You were in the forest? Was that you, all the time, scaring the soldiers? Oh, Perrin's going to kill you! Not *really*," she assured the dog as she pet him for the first time in many moons. Her hands ran across all kinds of prickly pokey things, and along something else mucky that smelled fouler than nature should. She kept reminding herself she could wash up with lavender soap when she got home, maybe even use up the entire bar.

"It *wasn't* only you, was it?" she whispered, clinging to the animal while

her heart calmed down again. “There are more, aren’t there?” She slumped down realizing, again, that the woman was right about her. “I found the hard truth, Barker, and it’s this: I really *don’t* want to know the truth.” She sighed miserably and stood up. “Come on. Walk the most cowardly, stupid woman in the world home.”

It was well past midnight when Mahrree knocked rhythmically on her front door. She did it two more times to wake up Sareen, who eventually opened the door and yawned a giggle. It was a remarkable thing to witness, and Mahrree hoped she’d never witness it again.

“Sorry, Miss Mahrree. Guess I did fall asleep. Shem was right. Wonderful pillow!”

“Oh, I’m the one who’s sorry, keeping you out so late,” Mahrree said with feigned brightness as she stepped into the house. At least it was dark enough that Sareen couldn’t see Mahrree’s puffy red eyes. “I fell asleep myself at my mother’s, and . . .”

She was just one lie after another. Merely a silly little woman with silly little ideas that amounted to nothing. She felt heavy with her worthlessness.

Barker trotted and headed straight for the kitchen.

Sareen waved her hand under her

nose. “I see, or rather *smell,* that you found Barker.”

“Uh, yes,” Mahrree said slowly, hoping she wouldn’t have to explain how. “You know, it’s so late, maybe you should stay here tonight, Sareen.”

The poor girl giggled again. “My mother will be expecting me to check in tonight, so I best go. Besides, should *Corporal Zenos* come by—”

Mahrree had to do at least one right and honest thing that night, or the weight of her guilt would sink her through the wood floor to the cellar.

“Sareen,” she took her firmly by the arm, “I’m so sorry, but Corporal Zenos just isn’t interested in . . . having a girlfriend. I don’t know that he will for a

very long time."

Sareen's persistently cheery glow dimmed. "I know that, Miss Mahrree," she said with uncharacteristic soberness. Not even a serious giggle accompanied her grave tone. "I know he's only being polite to me, and that if isn't attracted to me yet, he likely never will be."

Mahrree didn't expect any of that. "So you understand that?"

"I'm not stupid, Miss Mahrree. I may not be at the college at Mountseen like Teeria and Hitty, but I do know a thing or two."

Even though she'd been a woman for over thirty years now, Mahrree still didn't understand females. "So Sareen,

why do you keep trying? Keep talking about him?"

"The truth's hard to live with, Miss Mahrree," she said with a sad smile.

Mahrree's throat developed an enormous lump, otherwise she would have said, Don't I know it.

"I'd rather keep the little dream alive." But she shrugged in discouragement as she watched her fingers twist a part of her skirt. "Just in case he . . . changes his mind and surprises me one day."

Mahrree was completely baffled. "But Sareen, I just *told you*, and you admitted that *you know*—"

"He could change his mind!" Sareen insisted, her head snapping back

up to face her former teacher. “Suddenly one morning he could wake up, realize he’s lonely, look around and see me there, that I’ve always been there, waiting and hoping. And then he’ll realize how much he wants me, and . . .”

Her chin trembled until a giggle—hard and determined—forced its way out.

“And then we’ll just see!”

I’m just like her, Mahrree thought dismally. I know the truth is out there, but I’d much rather live with the lies I’ve created for myself. Lies such as, I’m a smart, brave woman willing to do whatever it takes to uncover the secrets and find the truth.

But we *want* to see the blue in the sky—Mahrree had to admit to herself—despite all evidence to the contrary.

The Administrators were winning.

I'm such an idiot. And so is Sareen.

"Sareen, promise me you'll look at other young men, too," Mahrree said. "Just in case Shem never . . . comes to his senses to see what he's missing in you."

Sareen nodded, the cheeriness automatically returning as if she had practiced that happy look a dozen times a day to be sure it appeared authentic. "I will, Miss Mahrree." She turned to head down the front stairs.

“Please be careful, Sareen! Run home!”

Sareen waved that off. “Look at the tower. No fires, no banners—nothing’s wrong. The forest is completely quiet and I’m perfectly safe. Good night!”

“Good night,” Mahrree whispered at the willingly naïve, stupid girl.

Edge was full of them that night.

She slowly shut the door, hung up her cloak, and trudged heavily to the kitchen. Barker lay at the back door, already asleep despite his filth.

“Who is it, Barker? And why? How do they—?”

She sighed, took the grooming brush from out of a drawer, and plopped down

on the floor in the dark kitchen next to the dog.

"You realize I'm asking you because I know you can't answer, right? I'll ask every question in the world as long as I know I won't get an answer." Her words choked her with a renewal of humbling disgrace, and with tears streaming down her face, she started to brush the burrs and twigs out of Barker's thick black fur.

She was completely surprised to hear the back door unlock and someone push on it a moment later.

"Barker! Get away!" Perrin's voice came through the door.

Barker only grunted, and Mahrree took him by his legs and dragged him

away from the door.

Perrin pushed it open and saw her in the dim moons' light. "Mahrree! What are you doing up so late?"

She had honest answer. "The dog just came home and he's a mess. I was trying to clean him up a bit. Didn't feel like sleeping."

Perrin slipped into the house and shut the door behind him. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you'd still be up, worried."

That would be her alibi, she decided as she picked out burs and brushed the fur.

Perrin sat down next to her and ran his hand over the dog to catch the twigs.

“What in the world has he been up to? Last time I saw him was yesterday evening. And what’s with that smell? If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was rolling around in bear droppings.”

“You know about that, huh?” Mahrree asked, hoping her tone sounded light and teasing.

“Stepped in some right outside the forest once,” he confessed in a whisper. “Looks like he had a good time, whatever it was.”

She didn’t respond.

He kissed her on the cheek. “I really am sorry I didn’t send a messenger. I could never find Zenos, and I thought you would figure what was going on. And what was going on was . .

. Well, we still don't know," he sighed in frustration. "Gizzada said he saw you around midday meal and filled you in a bit."

"He did," Mahrree said as cheerfully as she could muster, glad he couldn't see her lying face. "Did he bring you two sandwiches like I ordered him to?"

Perrin chuckled quietly as he continued pulling out burs. "I've never before had a sandwich made with the meats of three different animals, and since he also added goat cheese and lettuce, then put it on oat and barley bread, I felt like I was devouring an entire farm. But somehow he made it

work, quite well. He should sell those in the market. I couldn't even finish the second one and didn't get hungry again until about an hour ago. Is that pie on the work table?"

"Yes," Mahrree said. "Blackberry. Do you want some?"

There was absolutely nothing wrong with the words she spoke, but so much emotion came out with them that it sounded as if she was trying to conceal the fact she had murdered their children.

Perrin heard it.

"Mahrree, are you all right?" He put his arm around her and pulled her close.

"Yes," she lied again, unconvincingly.

“At times like this I remember my father’s only advice about women: when they’re crying but claim they’re fine, they’re the biggest liars in the world.”

“You have no idea!” Mahrree burst out.

“Ah, boy,” he mumbled to himself. “Not getting to bed anytime soon, am I?” He gave her a squeeze. “So tell me, my darling wife—what I have done now?”

“Nothing! It’s not you, it’s me!” she said shortly, and went back to brushing the dog a bit too aggressively.

She wouldn’t cry. Not anymore. She’d already proved she was weak and worthless; crying would only emphasize that.

“Not my fault? Well, good. That simplifies everything. Now, what could it be that has my wife so worked up tonight?” he said easily. “Another man she has hidden in the cellar? Spent all our savings on silk underclothes for Jaytsy? Sold Peto to the Administrators?”

“Perrin, just never mind. I don’t really want to talk about it.”

He paused. “By that do you mean, ‘I really *do* want to talk about it, but I need you to convince me that I do,’ or ‘I really *don’t* want to talk about it’?”

She sighed.

“And . . . no answer,” he said, realizing he had yet another mystery on

his hands. “You think after more than three years of marriage I’d understand you better.”

“That’s because I don’t even understand myself,” she whispered. “I thought I did. I thought I knew exactly what I wanted, but now I realize . . .” She stopped, unable to say the words.

But something else also concerned her. “Perrin, does it ever bother you that people *know* you?”

“Know me?” He sounded puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“That people you don’t even know, know who you are. They see you and the uniform and automatically know, ‘That’s Perrin Shin’.”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged in the

shadows. “I never thought about it. People have always *known* me. When you’re the only grandson of the High General of Idumea, and then the only son of the next High General, you tend to stick out.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” she asked earnestly. “Complete strangers may know a lot about you, and you don’t even know their names? Don’t you feel vulnerable?”

He patted his sword next to his side. “I’ve always been armed, even when I was a boy. Long knife at age seven. But I also never felt any danger. Honestly, it never occurred to me.”

That was when Mahrree realized

just how courageous—completely and utterly—her husband was, and always had been. He *had* gone into the forest—a few times—and even stayed there to fight men with daggers who tried to kill him. All she faced was a nasty woman with condescending demeanor who tried to hurt her feelings and sense of security.

Oh, how terrifying.

Her insides twisted to remember that she ever thought Perrin to be a coward.

"What's this all about?" he said gently.

She didn't deserve his tenderness, and she sighed before saying, "Perrin, I wrote another letter, after that third one."

"So . . ." he exhaled, "you got

another form letter? A fourth to add to your collection?"

"I did, a while ago actually, but I'm not upset about that. To be honest, Perrin, I'm quite glad now. I don't know what I was thinking, that they would send me a letter back saying, 'Mrs. Shin, you're right! How could we have not recognized the wisdom of your words? You are indeed a brilliant woman, and we're so grateful that you wrote to inform us of our failings!'"

Perrin chuckled, but stopped when he realized she wasn't being facetious.

"For some reason, Perrin—" although she knew the reason, she wasn't about to tell him that, "I suddenly feel

very vulnerable. Being married to you, I realize now that people *know* me. I doubt they know anything else besides the fact that I'm your wife, but complete strangers *know who I am.* I started thinking about the Administrators and realized, I do NOT want any of them to know me! Why would I want that attention?! What would I say if I were to run into one of them face-to-face? My words might be taken the wrong way!"

She was nearly hysterical, gesturing maniacally with the grooming brush.

"My spouting off might actually alarm someone who doesn't realize I'm only a little woman in a little village who means nothing! I could cause trouble! I could bring harm to our

children! To you! What did I want?!”

Perrin nodded slowly as he drew her close to him.

“I’ll always protect you, Mahrree. You don’t have to worry about that. I’ve kept you safe before, and I always will. I understand that you feel vulnerable, but honestly, no one would recognize you in a crowd.”

“Are you absolutely sure?!”

“Just never stand next to me in a crowd, and I’m sure!”

She remained tense, and he held her tighter.

“Tell you what, here’s how to remain in the shadows where you’re safe. Write no more letters to Idumea—”

She nodded rapidly in agreement, and he smiled in relief.

"Don't upset Mr. Hegek, although that's rather difficult since he's as skittish as a mouse that's been sighted by Barker—"

She continued nodding.

"And never anger the commander of the fort."

She sniffed a soft chuckle. "Sounds good," she said, but oddly, it didn't. She sat up out of his embrace and wiped her nose as a memory came back to her. It was about a year ago, on her front steps, and she sat there with one of her former students talking about the world.

"What is it now?" Perrin said

patiently, realizing that she was still lost in thoughts she wouldn't share.

"I was just thinking about Poe," she whispered.

He sighed loudly. "I'm completely lost now."

"We were talking, before I started doing After School Care, about Terryp. I told him about that mysterious fire after the Great War, and how all of Terryp's writings were lost."

"So . . ." he said expectantly.

"He said something extraordinary. It was something along the lines of, people don't like to change what they know, even if they suspect it may be wrong. Even if the truth would be amazing."

“Poe’s a very smart boy. He has great potential, as long as he doesn’t listen to his mother too much.”

“He was right,” Mahrree whispered. “People would rather live in lies.”

“Oh, I’m not so sure about that,” Perrin said, turning back to pull twigs out of Barker’s fur again. “I think people live only what they know. If they know it’s a lie, they look for the truth.”

“Like we’ve looked for the truth about Shem Zenos?” she reminded him glumly. As much as she wanted to, something inside wouldn’t let her suspicions go.

Perrin growled quietly. “There’s no

reason to investigate him further. There's nothing to be found."

"So we like the truth we believe about him?"

"Yes," he conceded reluctantly. "But if something else comes up to cast doubt on him, I'll be the first to look into it. I thought we were done talking about Zenos."

"We are," she assured him. "But think about it *in general*—what if people find a new truth, and . . . it frightens them? What should they do?"

He paused. "I don't know. I've never thought about that."

"Neither had I. Until tonight," she whispered. "You know something else I said to Poe? I told him how they had to

drag Terryp away from the ruins, and that the entire experience nearly killed him."

"That's true," he said leadingly, waiting for what else was to come.

"I told him that Terryp almost died from trying to understand a new truth, something that he thought could benefit everyone, and that people have given up their lives for far less important things than that."

"That's also accurate," Perrin agreed, his tone trying to encourage her to get to the point before morning.

"But I didn't tell him people also shrink away from the truth," she said miserably, "unwilling to make the

sacrifices needed to find it. Terryp was one of the few brave ones who did. The rest of us? Just cowards. I don't mean you, I mean me."

Perrin was silent for a moment.

"Either it's because it's very late, or because I'm very tired—and please know that I truly love you—but Mahrree, I *really* don't understand you tonight."

She leaned against his chest. "I hope you never do."

He wrapped his arms around her. "Can I have that in writing?"

A soldier came out of the fresh

spring area. His jacket, which had been inside out a moment ago revealing a dull dark lining, was now on the correct way. The sword, which he left leaning against a tree in its sheath since running with it wasn't practical, was replaced around his waist. He fastened the last silver button just as he stepped out from the cover of the trees.

Three soldiers on horseback approached, stopped, and smirked at him.

"Feeling better yet, Zenos?" asked a private. "Or do we need to do one more circuit and come back for you? I really hope you didn't ruin the spring."

The two other soldiers sniggered.

"No, no, I'm ready," Shem said

wearily. “And I stayed clear of the spring, I promise. Look, I appreciate you not saying anything to anyone. Kind of embarrassing, you know.”

Another corporal chuckled. “Look at him, men. Breathing heavy, sweating, pale . . . I’ve seen it all before. I told you, Zenos: one should never eat anything presented on a stick. If the sausage is gray and wobbly, you should be asking *why,* not how much it costs. I don’t care how pretty the girl was selling it.”

Zenos took the reins of his horse that had remained tethered to a tree for the past hour and a half.

“You warned me, I’ll admit it,” he

groaned. “And now I’m suffering for it. That should make you happy. And the worst part? She wasn’t even that pretty. When she smiled, her teeth were all black. Probably from eating the sausage.”

The three soldiers laughed as Zenos mounted, grunting in discomfort.

“Ugh. I now know why so many people refuse to eat pork.”

“Poor Zenos,” said another corporal. “I guess this just proves you don’t have the *guts* to be a soldier!”

The three soldiers laughed as Zenos winced.

“Ha-ha. How long have you been waiting to say that?”

“About an hour!”

“If you want to see what kind of *guts* I really have, I can take you to the evidence,” Zenos hinted.

The corporal groaned. “I don’t want to be sick myself, Zenos. The look on your face is evidence enough.”

The three soldiers chuckled.

“At least the forest has fallen quiet again,” said the private. “Master Sergeant Neeks just sent out the word to bring all the extra patrols back in. Even the major’s given up and gone home. Nothing’s been moving for half an hour . . . except for Zenos’s bowels.”

The three soldiers roared in laughter, while Shem shook his head.

The stories he had to live with . . .

In the forest a mass of bodies walked—*quietly*—away.

Chapter 24 ~ “I’d rather fight the current.”

“And how’s our patient this morning?” Brisack chirruped as he came into the grand bedroom.

“You know how much I hate that,”

Mal grumbled.

"Yes, I do. That's why I say it." The doctor smiled as he set down his large bag on the side table and picked up the notes lying next to it. "My assistant who spent the night here said you were up very late again, reading. Now, what did we say about that?"

"If you don't stop that condescending attitude and quit treating me like a child," Mal whispered, "I'll have you removed!"

"You and what army?" Brisack chuckled as he put down his assistant's notes. "While you're incapacitated, the High General reports to *me*. You know, he's actually a rather pleasant man to deal with when you aren't out to

undermine him. We worked together quite well uncovering all the *truth* about those two lieutenants. Been a wonderful couple of weeks, I must say, and I thank you profusely for this opportunity."

"Not one of my best ideas," Mal muttered.

"Oh, I'm making a list of *not your best ideas*," Brisack's manner shifted sharply. "This isn't going on it, though. So," he said in his pleasant way again, "your appetite is returning, your color is better—I suppose I can allow you to resume some of your duties *on a limited basis*."

Mal only grunted.

"Come on, Nicko. You know the

routine. Wrist."

Mal kept his arm firmly on the bed until the doctor stepped over and his snapped his fingers. Reluctantly the Chairman lifted his arm.

Instead of taking the proffered arm, the doctor instead grabbed the elaborate silk covers and threw them back with a flourish.

"Ohh . . . Nicko, just how old are you? Seven? Look at this mess!"

Mal groaned angrily as his stacks of notes—and even a quill with a small ink bottle—were discovered hiding in his massive bed which had doubled as his writing desk. The breeze caused by Brisack's snatching of the blankets sent his piles into disarray, which Mal

frantically tried to straighten again. Drops of black ink stained the creamy colored silk sheets in random patterns, as if the bed were bleeding blotchy words.

"What did I say about exciting your heart?" Brisack snatched up a stack of notes and pages before Mal could reach them. "Rest, not agitation."

"This is restful!" Mal said, grabbing at the rest of the pages. "I'm bored to near insanity here."

"What is this?" Dr. Brisack said, reading one of the parchments he snagged. "Messages? How many have you been sending out anyway?"

"Just a few," Mal confessed,

slumping down, already exhausted from his brief morning workout. “Just to give me something to do. Exceptionally dull being laid up, you know! I’ve been thinking, and—”

“I know what you’ve been thinking, Nicko.” Brisack sat down on a chair next to the bed. “When will you learn? The time’s not right, our methods aren’t yet perfected—”

“No, the right man can do it!” Mal insisted, struggling to an upright position and feebly fighting the half dozen pillows behind him. “I’m sure of it. Sonoforen was all noise and no matter. He mistook obnoxiousness for bravery. But Dormin—*that boy* was thoughtful and clever. He even snuck a visit to his

brother over a year ago, and no one ever saw him except one of my Command School spies. He's our man, Doctor! He has the brains, the motivation, the need —*he* could do it!"

Brisack shook his head slowly. "You've been looking for him, haven't you? I've been intercepting your messages, you know. Two can play at that game. Gadiman's so penitent and scared he'll do anything I order. I think he's still terrified you're going to die and leave me in charge of the world. And then where will our dear Administrator of Loyalty be?"

Chairman Mal stared at his blankets, frustrated.

“But . . . I’ve been letting the messages go,” Brisack admitted. “If only to give you something to do. You’ve been sending very thorough descriptions of Dormin to every chief of enforcement and fort commander.”

Mal slumped back into his pillows which nearly swallowed him. “Yes. So. What of it?”

Brisack picked up his bag and opened it. “And *I’ve* been receiving the responses.”

Mal tried to sit up again. “You?!”

“Remember, *I’m* in control when you’re not,” Brisack said with such an overly happy grin that it committed a sneer.

"And?!"

Brisack rifled through the stack of pages he pulled out. "Actually, I've been watching for a letter from Mrs. Shin. The teacher scripts sent to Edge must have arrived shortly after your glorious failure, but she hasn't sent a fifth letter. Either she's too nervous about what happened at the fort or," the doctor sighed sadly, "you've actually drowned the last swimming cat."

"That was the *whole point*, Brisack," Mal stewed, gazing longingly at the pile of papers Brisack held just out of his reach.

Brisack just shrugged. "Was rather looking forward to her response. Now,

it's all going to become dull again . . ."

Mal growled to draw him out of his blank stare at a distant nothing. "What a b o u t *the messages*? Where's Dormin?!"

Brisack shook himself a little and focused on the stack in his hands, shuffling through it. "Trades is still looking, as is Orchards, no one in Sands or Quake, someone in Pools, but far too old, same in Midplain but far too young . . . ah, but then there's *this*."

He held up a message.

"Winds."

Mal tried vainly to snatch the message from Brisack. "What does it say?!"

"Now, while I do recommend light

exercise, this flailing of yours isn't exactly what I had in mind—"

"Read it!"

Brisack cleared his throat with deliberate slowness. "Young man matching the description, about early to mid-twenties, was seen in Winds during the past year. Nephew of a rector's wife __"

"Yes, yes! Sonoforen said Dormin was talking with a rector!" Mal was practically salivating. "Could be pretending to be a relative!"

"Nephew of a rector and his wife," Brisack intoned, "The young man was working as a field laborer and helping to repair the washed out bridge along the

Winds River. But, as of a few weeks now, all three of them have been missing. They're looking again to appease you, but there's simply no evidence."

Mal's face drooped. "Missing?!"

Brisack nodded as he continued to summarize the message. "No sign of forced entry or mischief at the house. Chief of enforcement initially surmised that the nephew had taken his aunt and uncle to see the work he was doing on the bridge. There was a minor flash flood in the area after a heavy rainstorm, and perhaps they fell in and were washed away. Their bodies would be out to sea by now."

Mal fell back into his pillows

again. “No, no, tell them to keep searching! Maybe they just went on holiday or something!”

Brisack shook his head as he scanned the message. “They had an extensive garden and many chickens. Whenever they went somewhere even only for a day, they asked a neighbor to keep an eye on their property. The neighbors said no one spoke to them. The three of them just vanished.”

“No, no . . . there *must* be something more,” Mal said in a stunning display of desperation.

Brisack sighed. “One of the neighbors did, however, mention that late at night he thought he saw someone

entering the house before they were discovered missing. The neighbor was getting in a cat and wasn't sure of what he'd seen. Then again, there were always people going to the rector's at odd hours of the night, trying to get advice without anyone knowing. But they have no further leads."

"So nothing?" Mal whimpered.

Brisack shook his head as he folded the message. "Just assume Dormin is gone, Nicko. I never met the boy, but from what I've heard about him, he wasn't as throne hungry as his brother. It *is* peculiar, though," he said, unfolding the message again. "Almost reminds me of . . ."

"Reminds you of what?" Mal asked

Brisack when he didn't complete his sentence.

"A few times," Brisack whispered, "people have *vanished.* No chief of enforcement likes to keep records of his failures, but people *have* gone missing before. Occasionally I've been asked to look for clues, or evidence of trauma or blood, but in the cases I investigated we never found anything suspicious. Only a woman, or a man, or a family suddenly . . . gone. Rumor always was that it was Guarders."

Mal scoffed. "Someone loses a nugget of gold, or just a sock goes missing from the line, and a Guarder's always blamed! They've always been

convenient. Of course now with our abandoning them, the next time something goes missing it just might be Guarders!" He smiled smugly, already recovering from his disappointment about Dormin. "Rather looking forward to this new strategy of ours."

Brisack didn't even comment about Mal trying to share credit for their new plan.

"What is it?" Mal asked.

"Where do they go, Nicko?" the doctor whispered. "The people that vanish? They can't all be washed out to sea. Winds, Waves, Flax—they're all along the rivers. You think someone would notice their bodies."

Mal shrugged that off. "People fall

into all kinds of things. There was that young man and his girlfriend that fell into one of the larger hot pools last year and died. People have accidents, or maybe committed a crime and have run away to another village to not be caught, or maybe a former lover abducts them . . . so many possibilities. And I'm sure a few people actually do fall into the rivers."

"What if they don't, Nicko?" Brisack said quietly. "What if there really is someone taking them?"

"For what purpose?" Mal scoffed. "Who would want *extra* people? Who else is there?"

Brisack leaned forward, bracing

himself on his knees. “Nicko, just consider—what if there is someone else out there? What if our men aren’t the only ones in the forests?”

“I’d say *you* need some bed rest, Dr. Brisack!” Mal sneered.

Brisack earnestness remained. “But what if, Nicko? We’re never sure of how many we have anyway. We can’t risk keeping written records, and communications have always been poor __”

“It’s impossible, Doctor! Even if we had someone that’s gone rogue up there, why would they? Impossible!”

“I’m sorry to confess,” Brisack whispered, “that the older I get, the less I think things are impossible.”

Dormin, the last son of King Oren, stopped, no longer unable to walk. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. He could only stare.

Rector and Mrs. Yung chuckled. They'd been anticipating this moment, and they weren't disappointed. Then again, they never were.

They stood behind the young man, just waiting.

At the same moment on that clear,

cool Harvest afternoon, Mahrree looked up from her chore of hanging the laundry out to dry. She felt an unexpected urge to look at the mountains—*really* look at the mountains.

A mistake of nature. Land should be flat. Everyone knew that.

But why?

She turned her back to the jagged peaks topped with early snow, the boulder field at the base of them that stretched from the east to the west with rock as big as barns, and ignored the mile wide forest that led up to those boulders. So many borders, so many barriers.

But they all refused to be ignored.

She put another cleaned, wet

changing cloth on the line and pinned it in place.

The mountains called silently to her.

She flung a pair of long hose over the rope.

The boulders beckoned to her.

She took her husband's undershirt and draped it next to her son's sleeping gown.

The forest invited her to turn and notice it again.

She sighed, then pivoted to face north to take in the fiercest enemy of the Army of Idumea. No one ever looks at the mountains, she knew. They merely glanced at them, but never stopped to see

the details, to notice the grooves where pine trees grew straight and tall until they reached some invisible border high on the mountain where no more trees grew.

It was the first time Mahrree ever noticed that.

She also noticed the sunshine glinting on what must have been a trickle of water coming down one side, following the contours of the rock. She saw shrubs that didn't grow down where she lived, and grasses turning brown in the growing cold, and patches of yellow that may have been late-season flowers, and . . .

In his office Perrin, too, suddenly felt the need to look up at the peaks that loomed so high his windows couldn't fully contain them. He stood up from his desk and walked over to the window for a better look. He always watched the forest, but rarely the mountains behind them. But today he did, and his chest unexpectedly burned.

He saw colors he never noticed before, shades of gray, brown, green, white—all of them distinct and separate and more detailed than he ever imagined.

Until that day he never really

noticed that the mountains weren't all just one color. They were as varied and mottled as . . .

As . . .

A good comparison didn't come to mind. There really wasn't anything to compare them to. The mountains were their own thing.

And they would be ignored no longer.

At Edge's Inn, Hycymum paused to look out of the kitchen door that abutted the alley, and noticed for the first time the white snow-capped peaks. Snow

must come early up there at the top. She never realized before how the snow resembled whipped cream. It almost looked tasty. She turned to go back into the Inn, but found herself stopping to stare again at the mountains.

Why had she never before seen the cream?

Down in Idumea, High General Shin, accompanying his wife to the carriage, glanced to see why she stopped. Joriana looked towards the faint, hazy blue in the distance where her son and his family lived, and she sighed.

Relf looked north and thought about his grandchildren. Then . . .

"I never noticed that before," he murmured.

"Noticed what?" his wife asked.

He shook his head in amazement. "You can see the mountains from here! That distant pale purple—"

"The jagged line on the horizon—yes, I see it! Those *are* the mountains!" Joriana exclaimed in wonder.

Together they stared in silence at the north. It was so obvious now.

"So why did we never see them before?" Relf whispered, almost reverently, almost nervously.

In the large orange and red stone Administration building, Chairman Mal, back on the job, shouted at two disappointing Administrators until he turned red in the face.

In the hallway Dr. Brisack stood ready with a bottle of heart tonic, because he heard Nicko's frantic squeals of, "How can the last son of the king just vanish?! Look harder! I need Dormin!"

Dr. Brisack was also feeling some disappointment. The letter skimmers hadn't seen anything come in from Mrs. Shin, and each one of them was watching for her distinctive handwriting in order

to whisk her letter immediately to the Administrator's desk. Brisack was beginning to suspect nothing would be coming, and that filled him with growing disillusionment. He thought there was a little bit *more* to her.

Down the hall, still cloistered in his office, Gadiman pored over pages, writing and writing and hoping no one would knock on his door.

No one ever did.

Back up in Edge, Shem Zenos, taking his midday meal break at the fort, looked down into his mug and turned it

slowly. He glanced up at the sand clock above the door and smiled at the time. He nodded at nothing, stood up, and walked outside.

He glanced at the mountains, saw immediately what he was looking for, then he headed back to his bunk for a nap.

And down from the fort, Mahrree continued to stare at the mountains.

“What do you see?” came the panicked voice from over the fence.

Mahrree, startled, looked to her left to see a pair of anxious eyes peering

over the wooden fence, mousy brown hair above them shaking slightly.

"Nothing, Mrs. Hersh. I was just noticing the mountains."

"Why?" the woman in her late thirties exclaimed, standing a little taller now that there was no immediate danger about to come over the fence.

Mahrree blinked at that. "Why not? Look at them—I mean, *really* look at them. Fascinating! The crevices, the colors, the foliage—I never before noticed. So mysterious! So intrigue—"

That's when she saw the look of astonishment on Mrs. Hersh's peaked face. Mahrree glanced down to make sure she hadn't suddenly transformed into a rabid wolf. Her neighbor seemed

to think she had.

"*Why are saying such things?*" she hissed.

"Why not?"

"The mountains are . . . are . . . *deformed!* They're not *natural!*" Mrs. Hersh gestured madly at the objects she dared not look at. "Land should be flat! I'm just glad my house faces away from that," she spat with a grimace. "I keep telling my husband we need to leave, but he says, 'Just ignore them.' How long can we ignore them?! They're hideous! Everyone knows that!"

Mahrree took an earnest step forward. "Who first told us they were deformed and hideous? I've never been

able to find out! Don't you ever wonder —I mean *really wonder*—that if everything we claim is true really isn't simply someone else's opinion? And we've repeated it so often that we all accept it's true? But what if it's *not*?"

Mrs. Hersh's eyes bulged, and she looked uncomfortably at Mahrree's hand. Mahrree hadn't realized that she had been gesturing with Perrin's underpants. She tossed them behind her into the basket.

That made Mrs. Hersh only slightly more at ease.

"Who cares?" she said as threw her hands in the air. "Mountains are dangerous! Stay away! That's even what your husband says, so why fight it?"

Mahrree took a few more steps to the fence.

Mrs. Hersh took a defensive step away.

"Why fight it? Because what if everything we believe is *wrong*?"

Mahrree saw her poor neighbor's eyes glaze over. She knew better than to get into a debate with Mrs. Shin. That was something else everybody 'knew.' If Mahrree didn't break people down by logic, she did so out of sheer persistence. Mrs. Hersh realized too late she'd been dragged into the discussion, and the dread in her eyes demonstrated a frantic desire to escape.

But there was also something else

there: a sudden loyalty to her society that demanded no one step out of bounds.

"Then we're wrong *together*," Mrs. Hersh decided. "Being united is important," she said as if realizing she actually believed that. "What everyone thinks *together* is *correct*," she reasoned out loud, "and so if you follow the crowd, you'll never be wrong."

Mahrree's shoulders fell. How can you open someone's eyes who holds them firmly shut, yet claims she sees just fine?

"It's like the river," Mrs. Hersh went on, emboldened by Mahrree's discouraged silence. "Everything flows downstream. Simply . . . go with that flow. It's just easier that way."

Mahrree saw her way back in. “Fish don’t flow downstream.”

“Yes they do.”

“No, they don’t.”

Mrs. Hersh put her hands on her hips. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“Because then there’d be no more fish up here in Edge!” Mahrree pointed out. “I’ve seen them when I’ve taken my students to see the river, and when I’ve dragged my fishing husband home again. Many fish swim in the same spot, fighting the current. A few species even swim upstream, against everything pushing them to the southern ocean.”

Mrs. Hersh pondered for a moment. “That doesn’t make any sense. Why

wouldn't they just go with the flow of the river?"

"Because," Mahrree tried not to sigh at her neighbor's inanity, "maybe they don't like where the *river is going*! Salty water at the end of it likely kills them."

Mrs. Hersh squinted. "How would they know about the salty water? Besides, so what? At least they had an easy time getting to it. They're going die eventually, so might as well go easily instead of fighting the current."

And right then Mahrree realized, to her horror, that the Administrators had won.

People didn't need to think for themselves, they only needed to think

what *everyone else* thought. They didn't need to worry about the color of the sky, because *everyone* agreed it was only blue. They didn't need to worry if they were drifting to an irreversible tragedy, as long as they were doing it together, *united*.

Because as long as everyone else was doing it, you should too. Hold hands and jump off the crevice together, never questioning why.

"I'd rather fight the current," Mahrree said quietly.

Mrs. Hersh shrugged her shoulders. "You're a lovely neighbor, Mrs. Shin, always willing to lend an egg, but I truly don't understand you."

The debate was over.

Mrs. Hersh glanced at the mountains, shuddered so dramatically she should have been performing in the amphitheater, and marched back to her house.

There was only one thing left for Mahrree to do.

She turned to face the peaks fully. She could see things in any way she wanted to. And to her, the mountains seemed the way they had in her dreams of a large house with weathered gray wood and window boxes filled with herbs.

They were majestic. Powerful. Awe-inspiring.

Beautiful.

And then, for a brief moment, she thought that she could see *almost* everything in them and beyond. She'd always regarded them as a barrier of some sort, made of tall dead things like the stockade fence that surrounded the fort.

But the mountains were *alive*.

Even at this distance she could see trees sway as a wind blew past. The yellow specks weren't flowers, but leaves being blown off of high spindly trees, like tiny flakes. Surely there was even more alive up there. Where did the bears, mountain lions, and wolves that visited the forest, and sometimes the

villages, come from?

What *else* might be there, alive?

She'd asked Perrin about the other side of the mountains over a year ago, but even then she'd never actually *looked* at them. Now she couldn't seem to pull her eyes away from them. She wished she had her husband's spy glass to peer up into the crevices of the rocky terrain. Surely there would be something peering back at her!

Mahrree's chest tightened with possibilities. What if . . . what if there was even *more* than she ever dreamed about?

Her chest tightened even more, but now with dread.

Dreams could be very frightful

things. Did she *really* want to know? Deeply, desperately? Or was it all just a silly romantic notion? True, she went into the forest, but she was so frightened of it she nearly wet her drawers like a two-year-old. Would she really have gone with that woman if circumstances were different?

Maybe it was because the woman had an air about her that told Mahrree she wouldn't be leaving Edge that Mahrree felt courageous enough to proclaim she would. It's so easy to be brave when everyone knows you can't prove it.

And that woman's words . . .

Despite Mahrree trying to forget

what happened that night, her words still bounced in her head.

"All I do is save lives."

So was it the women that preserved and hid other women, while the men killed? What if Mahrree had run into a man instead of a woman that night?

She also finally recalled the words of that gray old man: "May the Creator always bless and preserve this family."

Mahrree cringed. How arrogant she had been, assuming that nothing would happen to her because of an old man's wish. Of course she could have been killed! What had she been thinking that night?! She knew, always, that she was merely a loud coward.

But her husband? Perrin truly was a

brave man. And so was his father.

She tried to stop looking at the mountains and boulders and forest where she learned the truth that she was nothing more than a steam vent, pouring out so much heat and stench, yet accomplishing nothing. But still the north continued to captivate her. For some odd reason right then, it was all just so appealing.

And it was all far too confusing. There was simply too much she didn't know, and that nagged at her. She hated knowing she didn't know.

She was missing something, very important.

Dormin struggled to move, but instead he crumpled to his knees. He wasn't the first one to do so at that spot. He continued to stare, his mouth slowly dropping open, and his eyes filling with tears.

The Yungs winked at each other.

Dormin tried lamely to gesture, but his arms couldn't even obey him. He just gaped.

Eventually words stumbled out of his stunned mouth as he stared at the scene in front of him.

"Oh . . . my . . . I . . . just . . . didn't . . ."

The Yungs laughed.

Mahrree felt, for the briefest of moments, a thrust of heat and energy and amazement. It came out of nowhere, filled her completely, and then, just as swiftly as the feeling came, it slipped away.

She hadn't imagined it; it had been real—so painfully, acutely real. It stopped her in her back garden, as if an invisible hand had slipped into her and yanked her soul. She still felt it, even though it was now only a fast memory.

And the loss of that moment—of that wonder, that fear, that knowledge

that so quickly rushed into, and then out again—panged her heart. Something extraordinary was, at that moment, happening somewhere in those mountains.

And she was missing it.

She *had* to miss it.

She could never leave her husband or her children. They were a family. Without her family, she was merely a fraction of what she should be.

There would come a time for her, the woman had told her. That notion both fascinated and terrified her. When that time would be, she had no idea. For now it was just easier to push aside the worrying yet captivating thought. So until *that time* . . .

Until then, there was nothing more she could do.

Except . . . the laundry.

She sighed loudly, turned back to the basket on the ground, and forced her arms to go through the motions of hanging her daughter's dress on the line. Tears of frustration leaked from her eyes, and embarrassed, she brushed them away.

There was nothing more to see, or to know, or to imagine.

Except a strange little thought that floated like a tiny puff of cotton through her mind, so quietly that she nearly missed it, but she caught it at the last moment.

It said, *Where—exactly—is your family?*

“I can’t help it, that story always puts me in the mood for berry pie.”

The two thirteen-year-olds stared at the old woman as she looked thoughtfully into the sky. Pulling weeds in the pumpkin patch had been forgotten hours ago.

“Aren’t either of you hungry?” she asked the teens. “I’m starving. And look—the raspberries are ripe. Surely someone’s mother somewhere has a raspberry pie?” she hinted.

The girl scoffed. “Muggah, you can’t be serious—”

Her cousin Vid jumped in. “Oh Hycy, yes she is. Look at her eyes. Pie eyes.”

Muggah smiled slightly. “Can’t go on without pie. I’m so frail, so needing of sustenance . . .”

“But,” Hycy exclaimed, “You didn’t tell us if Shem—”

“Forget Shem,” Vid cut her off. “She didn’t get to the part when they went to—”

“Ohh,” Muggah sighed loudly and put a hand dramatically to her forehead. “Need pie. No more words until pie. Memories . . . fading . . . only restored

by . . . pie."

"Oh, for crying out loud!" Hycy rolled her eyes. Vid nodded in disgusted agreement at the old woman sitting in the garden with them. "We'll find you pie, all right?" Hycy said.

Muggah winked at them. "Pie for words, then. And don't worry—the story will still be waiting for you," she promised as the teenagers stood up and brushed off their clothes.

"And a glass of milk would be nice to go along with it," she announced as they trudged off. "And a napkin. I'm not a filthy Guarder just sitting out here in the dirt, you know."

She grinned as they groaned loudly.

Then she looked up at the warm sun

and laughed.

Here's a sneak peek from the working draft of Book Three: *The Mansions of Idumea*

Lieutenant Colonel Perrin Shin looked at the report in front of him dated the 36th Day of Planting, 335.

He groaned.

"Well?" Major Karna asked with a sly smile.

"Chief Curglaff is an idiot. Still."

He cleared his throat and read in the nasally tone of the chief of enforcement.

"'The continued thieving problems in Edge are not a result of teenage mischief but may indicate a Guarder presence, therefore all thefts and concerns should continue to be under the jurisdiction of the fort.'"

He tossed the document on the desk. "We established that years ago! It's just another decree that his men aren't going to do anything more than sit on the corners and attempt to direct traffic this season. Didn't he promise he was going to retire this year?"

Karna grinned. "At the end of Weeding Season. Can you deal with him for that much longer?"

Shin scoffed. “I’ve been dealing with that hard-nosed goat for fifteen years now. Where’s my medal for that?” He patted his chest filled with patches and insignias.

Karna laughed, and there was a knock at the Command Office door.

“Come in,” Shin called.

The door opened and Master Sergeant Zenos leaned in. “Oh, sir, I can see this is a bad time.”

“I wanted to see you anyway, Zenos.” Shin waved him in.

Zenos walked into the office and closed the door behind him. “I’ve seen that look on your face before. It says, ‘Curglaff’s an idiot and when is he

retiring?’”

“Very good, Zenos,” Karna chuckled, “but even I could have read that expression.”

Shem sat down on a chair next to Karna. “So he’s still refusing to direct enforcement patrols in the village?”

“Naturally,” Perrin spat. “All the thieving this season is Guarder related, supposedly.”

“Where’s his evidence?” Karna asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

Perrin rolled his eyes. “Since when has he ever needed evidence?”

Zenos sighed. “I’ve been through this with him before. The fourth time we arrested Poe Hili for thieving, he

admitted he had buyers for the goods, but he'd never met any of them. And no one was more prolific than Poe."

"Since he was released I haven't seen him around. Where is he anyway?" Karna wondered.

"Not around here, that's all I know!" Shem sighed in relief.

Perrin shrugged. "Been what, two years now? The couple of times I've had the unpleasant pleasure of running into his parents, they didn't mention him. I don't think they even know what happened to their sweet yet misunderstood lamb."

"Lamb in wolf's clothing," Karna breathed. "All of those boys. Your son

excepted, of course, sir," the major added quickly.

Perrin chuckled. "Thank you, Karna. Although Peto's so small and wiry he'd be an excellent thief. Just doesn't have any muscle on him to carry anything."

"But if he did," Shem said, "he'd be stuck in your wife's class with all the other 'special cases' she gets to teach."

Perrin's eyes twinkled. "And that's probably the main reason he's remained such a good boy—he doesn't want his mother as his teacher!"

The three men chuckled.

"At least Mahrree's in a position to see if any of those boys are looking at Jaytsy," Karna said off-handedly,

picking up a page from the desk, until Zenos exploded.

"Why should they be?" Shem nearly shouted. "She's only fourteen!"

Karna flinched at the master sergeant's volume, dropped the page, and held up his hands in surrender. "Sorry, sorry . . . it's just that she doesn't *look* fourteen. I keep forgetting her age."

The lieutenant colonel winked at him. "So do I, Brillen. And she's *almost* fifteen. Doesn't help that she's taller than her mother. And . . . and more, uh," he gestured lamely with his hands, finally balling them into protective fists.

"Yes . . . all *that*." He sighed, not

quite sure how to describe his very mature-looking daughter who he still thought of as only four years old.

"Better *not* be looking at her," Uncle Shem mumbled, his shoulder twitching.

Perrin stifled a smile and picked up the report from Chief Curglaff again. That quickly sobered his mood.

"In a way, Brillen and Shem, I almost miss outsmarting the Guarders. Chasing down and chaining up Edge's sons is far less rewarding and far more disturbing. Home grown criminals. I don't like it, and I'll never get used to it."

"Agreed," Karna whispered while Shem nodded.

“So,” Shin said breaking the quiet moment, “have the new duty rosters ready, Zenos?”

“Right there, on the corner of your desk. I put it there before Curglaff visited.”

Shin nodded and picked up the pages he hadn’t noticed before. He smiled faintly. “You already put the soldiers on patrols again in the village, hadn’t you?”

“It’s Planting Season again, after all. Weather’s warming up, so our lizard-like thieves will be coming out of their slumber.” Zenos’s normally sweet expression turned crusty. “I knew Curglaff wouldn’t take on the

responsibility, and with this past Raining Season being so long, we've got 250 soldiers itching to get out and do something."

"Very good, Shem," Perrin said handing back the duty roster. "Just continue like that for the next two and a half seasons, until it gets cold again and the boys go back into hiding."

"Yes, sir." Zenos smiled and stood up. "Anything else, sir?"

"No, thank you, Master Sergeant." Perrin got up as well. "I'm going to make my sweep of the village. Some of those new shop keepers with the Idumean goods wanted to have a word with me about 'security' issues." He rolled his eyes.

“Curglaff referred them to you?” Karna guessed.

Perrin grumbled back. “You have the fort, Major,” he said as he put on his cap. “Headed to the stables, Zenos? I’ll accompany you.”

Out in the forward command office, the lieutenant colonel nodded at the older, gnarled sergeant major.

“Grandpy, I’m heading out for the afternoon.”

Grandpy Neeks saluted and grinned his weather-beaten smile. At fifty-three, only ten years older than Perrin, he looked more like the last survivor of the Great War 135 years ago.

“Lemme guess,” he drawled

slowly, “them lovely shops in the center are getting their fine wools coming in. Worried about them being pinched.”

Perrin chuckled. “It’s Planting Season, Grandpy. The wools are going *out*, the silks and linens are coming *in*. More valuable. More anxiety causing.”

“A shame,” Neeks said slowly shaking his head, “that a man like you is reduced to having to know what kinds of cloth are in fashion.”

Perrin and Shem laughed.

“I know about the fashions only because I have a teenage daughter that’s been growing non-stop for the past two years.”

Neeks winked knowingly at the men as they trotted down the stairs.

“That’s probably why he never married,” Shem said quietly as they walked through the reception area, returning the salutes of younger soldiers. “Doesn’t want a wife pestering him about fashion. A shame,” he drawled like the sergeant major.

“So is that why you’re still not married, Shem? A strapping not-so-young man of now thirty-four? Men will start calling you Grandpy soon, too.”

Shem elbowed his commander. “I look nothing like a Grandpy! And neither do you, I might add.”

“I thank you for that,” Perrin nodded formally, “And by the way, you now finally look like you’re twenty-one.

I thought I saw a whisker on your chin the other day."

Automatically Shem's hand went up to his chin to find it.

Perrin burst out laughing.

Shem shook his head and chuckled. "Not funny, *sir*," he sneered.

"Mahrree's still on the lookout for you. Though I have to remind you again, single women your age are getting scarce."

"We've been through this before," Shem sighed as they walked out of the compound toward the stables. "When I'm ready, I'll find the right woman. Or she'll find me, and then I'll know I'm ready. We've just never crossed paths yet."

“That’s because you don’t walk on any paths except when you’re on duty, Shem! You need to go out and find some new paths.”

Shem looked around to make sure they were out of earshot of any nearby soldiers. “So, what, you’re saying you’re tiring of my company, Perrin? You’re ready to find a new little best buddy?”

“Look,” Perrin said with a smile, “what you do with your life is your life.” He put a hand on his master sergeant’s shoulder as they made their way to the stables. “But you know Mahrree. ‘Nag him a little, Perrin!’” he said in a high-pitched voice. “‘Tell him how

wonderful marriage is!' Just doing my duty to my wife, Shem. Get married. Have a *wonderful* life. There. It's done."

"Good man, Perrin. I'll tell Mahrree you did your duty, and I'll take your words to heart," Shem said gravely.

"You must be the biggest liar in the army, Zenos!" Perrin chuckled as they neared the stables, but then each man assumed a more formal demeanor.

They nodded to each other, took their respective horses readied for them, exchanged complicated facials expression that said, *Mahrree's expecting you for dinner*, and *I hope it's steak,* then headed out in different directions.

Shem set off for the forest's edge to monitor the training of the newest set of ten recruits, while Perrin rode a brown mare towards Edge to show the village that the Eyes, Ears, and Voice of the Administrators was *there* for them.

Comforting the citizenry, was what his father called it, with an appropriate grimace. Another idea pushed forward by the Administrator over Culture which the High General of Idumea had to support. Let the villagers *see* their commanders, every day if possible. *Assure* the citizens that the leaders of their forts are working hand in hand with their magistrates and chiefs of enforcement to quell the thievery

problem that had been plaguing the world for over ten years. People feel *better* when they see their leaders out and working for them.

Perrin smirked to himself. It was stupid, but it seemed to work.

He accomplished very little on his daily outings except to make Edge feel better about things, although things never changed.

If only Perrin were allowed to publicly argue this, he could demonstrate how inane all of that "perceptive thinking" really was.

So it was likely a good thing debating had died in Edge a long time ago, or the army wouldn't be so appreciated now.

Edgers loved the commander and his soldiers. They waved to Perrin every day, beckoned him over to share a few words, and begged him to visit their shops and homes to promise them that nothing would be stolen.

He'd tell them to lock their doors, shut their windows, and, if they really didn't want anything valuable to be taken, simply don't possess anything thieves find valuable. It worked for him and his family. No one ever tried to take their books and old maps, but then again, who would dare burgle the lieutenant colonel's home? He had swords and long knives, and the rumor was they were hidden all over his house and his

family knew how to use them.

He knew of the rumor, because he had Shem spread it for him.

But in another way, Perrin sighed as he thought of it, so much had changed in the sixteen years since he first came to Edge that he couldn't see how anything would be better again.

His horse plodded along. He still wasn't too fond of this animal, but the stabling sergeant told him she was the strongest and fastest animal they had lately. Together they reached the last ring of houses bordering the farms, and he nodded to the workers out there.

When he first came to Edge it was children with their parents out working in the fields, but now there were no

children left during the day. Full School had been in place for over a decade now, and children were forced into gray blocked buildings for seven hours a day. How Mahrree put up with it, Perrin would never know.

He cringed whenever he thought of his daughter and son trapped in the buildings that looked a great deal like the incarceration building, forced there to learn whatever trivial drivel the Administrators thought needful for them to memorize that year so that they could regurgitate it on tests twice during the school year.

Torturous. Insane.

Mahrree would say he was being

overly dramatic, equating Full School with torture.

His daughter would roll her eyes at him, as she was so skilled in doing, and his son would tell him something new he and his friends got away with while the teacher was preoccupied in trying to control a few other of the thirty students crammed into the same classroom.

Then his wife would invariably shake her head to top that story by telling the family of yet another attempt by one of her 'special cases' to light another student on fire, and she'd spend the next ten minutes going on about how if she was allowed to actually teach something *interesting* to the teens, they might stop trying to burn down the block building.

And then he'd look at her lovingly and say, "And you think *I'm* being overly dramatic?"

Full School was progressive and that progressiveness was ruining Edge, among many other things, Perrin considered bleakly as he turned his mount towards the village green.

But his children weren't being ruined. He and Mahrree made sure of that. She started them on the "What color is the sky?" debate when they were just six and five.

"Debate" wasn't exactly the right term.

"Fight" would be more like it.

And the two of them hadn't stopped

“debating” ever since . . .

Acknowledgements . . .

This will read identical to Book One, because the first two books in the series *were* combined until my dear friends who read the entire thing begged me to split this massive blob.

First, thank *you* for reading this, and for being charitable with the niggling errors that I fear still remain, hiding like crabgrass despite my continuous weeding. (Mahrree and I both have gardening issues.)

My thanks next to my daughters: Tess (who's read the entire series—several versions of it—and realized we needed someone named Sonoforen), Alex, and Madison Pearce, who each gave me responses that ranged from, "I loved this part!" to "I hated this part!" (Can't beat children for honesty; it's against the law.)

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the first book realized I wasn't spending hours each day writing something vampy, and that Perrin Shin born a remarkable resemblance to him in both face and spirit—just shrugged when the house looked like nine tornados touched down, because he knew writing this made me oh so happy.

About the author . . .

Trish Strebel Mercer has been teaching writing, or editing graduate papers, or revising web content, or changing diapers since the early 1990's. She earned a BA in English from Brigham Young University and an MA in Composition Theory and Rhetoric from Utah State University. She and her husband David have nine children and have raised them in Utah, Idaho, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina. Currently they live in the rural west and

dream of the day they will be old enough to be campground managers in Yellowstone National Park.

(One of my friends suggested I use this photo,
because there's "mystery on my face."
But I think it's pollen.)