

## PROLOGUE I

**Averalaan, 11th of Wittan, 409 AA**

Water lapped against the curved sides of the ships that lined the docks in the harbour overseen by the Port Authority. This gentle but persistent slap of water against bow wasn't always silent – but at the height of day in the Summer, other noises, louder and more insistent, held sway.

Cursing, some genial, some jovial, and most ill-tempered, issued forth in a dozen different languages from the mouths of sailors as they lowered gangplanks into crowds and maneuvered cargo hoisted by nets or hooks from the hidden, but cavernous, ship's holds. Men in clothing fine enough to distinguish them from these sailors were little better in their choice of words, and these, too, arms free of burden, came streaming down the planks, anxious for solid ground beneath their feet.

The breeze that came from the sea was strong enough to kick flags from their limp positions at the top of masts, and these flags, higher by far than the roofs of the tallest buildings found in the Free Towns, made the port look like an odd, floating city, or perhaps a small Empire, for each ship was rumoured to be its own small nation, and laws on the deck were the Captain's laws. Three ships east, flag flying high, was the full sun against an azure that suggested sky; beside it, in purple and grey, a merchant ship declared its allegiance. The ships themselves differed in size and style, just as manors might; they shared the long, long stretch of dock because there was no other way to deliver their goods to the largest city in the Empire.

Only in port were the men governed by the laws of the Empire of Essalieyan, and the Port Authority had volumes of just such laws for visitors and those new to the city itself to peruse. A reminder, or a warning, they sat behind the harried clerks who looked at manifests, ordered checks of cargos and containers, and made notes for the purposes of the Magisterial guards whose duty it was to protect the interests of the Kings – or more likely their taxes – on this side of the water.

These clerks could be heard speaking in any number of languages, and the words that came most frequently to the lips of tired sailors never crossed theirs. They could be curt, they could be cutting, and they could – with ease – see through a person as if they had ceased to exist at all. But no one who wore the colours of the Port Authority – an austere Teal with a hint of silver – was both crude and employed; they dispensed law in the fiefdom of the Port as if they were nobles. Harried, overworked nobles, in this season.

They could also offer answers to a person who asked when a ship was expected to dock.

It was from one such man that the pale boy with the very unusual hair had received such information, and he had come every day to the port at dawn, finding – somehow – a space in which to stand and observe that did not often put him in the way of busy, or grouchy, men.

Terrick Dumarr was the name of the clerk who had been called to dispense the information. He was, as clerks went, an imposing figure: Six foot, four inches in height, and some very large number of inches around, none of which were fat. He was a far cry from young, but he had weathered age with the spare grace that would not be out of place in the Commanders in the Kings' armies; nor would he have looked out of place had he been standing by the far wall in chain with a sword by his side.

He was not, however, relegated to the far wall, much as he might have wished otherwise. He, like the other men and women, had responsibilities that could somehow be reduced to the sheaf of papers that littered the three desks behind his broad back. But if he was expected to work, he was also expected to eat, and he waited for the sonorous horns to sound out the hour.

He glanced around the large room. Support beams were placed throughout its length, but no walls divided the room, the exception being a single very thin wall, with its obvious windows, that served to separate the employees of the Port Authority from men so impatient or temperamental that they might consider violence at the receipt of news little to their liking.

Instead, small fences, with velvet ropes that had both faded and frayed over time, were erected throughout, an obstacle course for those who had business with the Authority. Some of these, well-dressed and reprehensibly well spoken, would journey, manifests signed and sealed, from the Port Authority to its sister in suffering, the Merchant Authority, where most of the commerce in the Empire was controlled.

But it was not these men, in various poses of irritation, boredom, or exhaustion, that demanded Terrick's attention; it was the boy.

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Three days, Terrick thought, as he caught sight of the boy's hair; the rest of the boy, who was not yet of any notable size, could be lost in the crowd, but his hair, its pale locks rising in a spiral, could not. He was perhaps fourteen, if Terrick judged correctly, perhaps younger, and it was clear that the worn pack he carried – at all times – upon his shoulders contained the whole of his previous life, whatever that had been.

But he was quiet, this one, and when he had chosen to address the first clerk he could see, he had spoken in Rendish. The clerk – Barriston – was

barely up to the task of identifying the language, but had he been unable to distinguish it at all, he would have been employed elsewhere, which would have been a blessing.

Instead, with his small scrap of knowledge a bandage over the gaping wound of his ignorance, he had bid the boy remain, and he had come to the area in which the port authority's employees took a moment of rest.

"Terrick," he'd said, tapping the man smartly on the shoulder, "I have one of your barbarians outside."

Terrick, prevented from strangling Barriston by the necessity of both eating and breathing – the guards frowned on what they considered murder – had merely nodded. In any other circumstance, he would have taken his time, but whoever the visitor was, he'd spoken to Barriston for long enough.

"He's young," Barriston felt the need to add, "and if he were Imperial, I'd give him the lecture on running away to join the merchant ships." Meaning, of course, that it was up to Terrick to deliver that lecture – in the appropriate language.

But when Terrick had emerged from the relative privacy of the back offices to the wide and open crowd that comprised the authority in its busiest season, he had stopped walking, and received, as a reward for this moment of surprise, a back full of Barriston, scurrying head down to his wicket. Terrick had mumbled something which Barriston heard as an apology; the large man didn't bother to correct this. Instead, he looked at the boy, his wide, grey eyes unblinking. Almost self-consciously, he had straightened his back, lifting his shoulders and assuming every single inch of the height so many Imperial citizens found so interesting.

Barriston regained his place behind his own wicket. The boy was then directed to Terrick, who pulled a stool up to one of the wickets that had been closed – for the half hour – for lunch. It had taken the boy five minutes to reach Terrick, and during that time, Terrick had watched in silence, evaluating.

The boy wore an old cloak that trailed a few inches off the ground; it was sturdy, and the colour – if it had ever been dyed – had faded to a serviceable grey. His boots were a shade of brown that suggested both age and dust, but they were whole, although the laces were knotted in places, suggesting wear. He also wore a short sword, which he never touched; it hung on his left side, implying that he was right-handed. He was young for its weight, by Imperial standards – Terrick thought him fourteen, with a margin for error of two years on either side. There was nothing about the boy to suggest affluence, and indeed his weight suggested its opposite – but all of these things paled into insignificance beside the fact of his hair.

It was so pale a platinum as to be white, and it had been pulled from face and neck, greased, and twined around hidden wire. A spiral. It was dusty, yes, as the boy was – but it was unmistakable.

The boy was not injured; he didn't limp; nor did he cringe when people attempted to cut ahead of him in their impatience. But he chose merely to turn sideways and slip out of their way, ignoring their glares or their angry words; he never chose to confront.

And when he stopped, at last, in front of Terrick's wicket, the grey circles under his eyes seemed to occupy half of his face. Terrick nodded at the boy, and the boy grunted back.

"I've come," the boy said in Rendish, "for the Ice Wolf. I was told you would know when it was due in port." He paused, and then added, "or if."

Terrick nodded, and reached for the paper beside his elbow, as if it contained information that he didn't readily have. He leafed through the paper, the Essalieyanese words blurring until they were odd scratches, as they had once been in his youth. "It's due in three days, but those are sailing days; it may be delayed by a day or two."

"Which dock?"

"Seven," he replied.

"Three days."

Terrick nodded. He felt, rather than saw, Barriston's harried glare. He even opened his mouth to begin the lecture one generally offered the young, but his jaw snapped shut before the words escaped. The boy wasn't running. "Three days," he said quietly. He did not ask the boy where he was staying. It didn't matter. He would be back, and Terrick guessed that he would wait by the docks, or as close as was safe, until the Ice Wolf made port, cast rope, and laid down gangplank.

#

Nor was he wrong. For each of two days, the boy had come; he was on the docks before the sun touched the horizon, and he lingered until the moon could be seen, bright and clear, in the humidity of the Averalan Summer.

On the third day, seeing him in the crowd, Terrick lifted his head; when the horns lowed the start of lunch, Terrick left his wicket, but instead of retreating to the relative quiet of the desks that lined the back wall, he braved the crowd. Not that the crowd was ever that thick when he chose to risk it; like the sea over which the Port Authority played Baron, it parted when he dove in.

The boy looked up as he approached.

"Come eat with me," he said, surprising them both. "I've food, and there's

not as many of these damn people in the back. I'd be glad of the company."

The boy's eyes narrowed slightly; he had some pride left him. But he was not suspicious, and in the end, he nodded and followed where Terrick led.

Terrick did, in fact, have extra food. A whole loaf, thick smoked meat, a round, soft cheese in the thin cotton cloth that gave it shape, and cherries. He had wine, but offered the boy water instead. He nodded at a chair, which the boy pulled toward the desk.

"Boy," he said, while he tore the loaf in two roughly equal halves, "why are you looking for the Ice Wolf? You're far from home, if you think you belong on its decks." He paused, ripping the two halves in halves, and added, "I'm called Terrick in these parts."

"I'm called Angel," the boy replied.

Not a Rendish name. Not even close. Terrick recognized it as an Imperial word, although he couldn't recall what it meant. "Angel?"

"My mother chose it; my father accepted it. I was born in the Empire," he added. It wasn't a precise description, because the Empire was very, very large. But Terrick understood that it meant the boy was not born in the North, and nodded.

"A wise man doesn't stand between a mother and her son," Terrick replied.

A glimmer of a smile touched the boy's lips. It was there and gone again, and Terrick, with decades of life and observation behind him, knew that the boy's father was dead. And likely the mother as well.

But the boy surprised him. "My father used to say that."

"Wise man," Terrick replied, with a wry smile. His glance strayed to the boy's hair. And away. Years of working at the Port Authority had taught him how to talk, how to listen, and how to ask questions in a variety of tones – but there was no easy way to ask the question that hovered behind his lips. No way of knowing whether or not it would give offense. In the North, it would. But the boy was not born to the snow and the brief, brief Summer.

"Do you speak Weston?"

Angel nodded. His mouth was dusted with bread crumbs, and he chewed slowly and methodically. When he spoke again, he chose to abandon Rendish, and instead adopt the informal and slightly accented Common that came from the West. "I heard what the other man said," he told Terrick softly. "Barbarian."

"Why did you not ask your question in the Imperial tongue?"

Angel shrugged. "I don't know," he said, swallowing. "Someone told me the port authority would have men who could speak my father's tongue, and I wanted to see if it was true." He took a long drink of water, and then said,

"And it was. Are you from the North?"

"I was born there," Terrick replied casually. As if being born in the North was not significant. As if living in a city with more people in its sprawling walls than were contained in some small nations was, as it seemed to be for so many who lived here, a matter of accidental choice, a simple whim.

But the boy looked up at Terrick. "And you live here?" As if he understood the significance. As if he could.

"Your father did," Terrick pointed out.

"You were born in Arrend?" The boy pressed.

Terrick chose to take a long drink of wine; he drained the cup. Filled it again, noting the boy's serious expression, his dark eyes so at odds with his hair and the paleness of his skin. Winter skin, Terrick thought. Terrick's was as ruddy as an Imperial.

"Aye," he said heavily. He considered filling his glass again and managed – barely – to think better of it. Drink on an empty stomach, even at his obvious size, was ill-advised, and he had lost the appetite for food.

The boy, this Angel, had not, but ate slowly.

"Do you know why your father left?"

Angel shrugged, but it was not a casual motion; it was forced. "He didn't like to talk about it," he said at last, after an audible swallow. He lifted his water glass, and took his time drinking, as if to hide behind it.

"He wouldn't," Terrick replied. "No more do I."

"I didn't ask," the boy began.

"No," Terrick said, lifting a hand. "It's why you're still here. But if you've sense enough not to ask, you've got the wits you were born with. Why are you here, boy?"

"For the Ice Wolf."

"Yes, I understand that much. But your father –" He hesitated, and then seeing the hair that the glass couldn't obscure, surrendered. Surrendering with grace was not a skill that Terrick had seen a need for in his youth, and he had mastered it in his later years with difficulty and reluctance. "Your hair, boy," he said, keeping his tone even and quiet. "It marks you. It's a statement."

Angel nodded, but he grimaced.

It took Terrick a moment to understand what it meant, and surprise kept him from comment. "There are men who would kill to be allowed that style," he said instead. "Even if it sets them apart. The inconvenience would not be an issue." He spoke stiffly, and more significantly, in Weston.

"They probably didn't grow up in the Free Towns," Angel replied. But

after a pause, he added, "I didn't wear my hair like this when I was growing up."

"No, you wouldn't. It's not for children."

"That's what he said," the boy replied. "My father," he added, as if his meaning were not plain.

"Did he style his hair that way?" Terrick asked, striving for casual.

"No." The boy looked up as he answered, his eyes the colour that steel would be if it were blue. They saw everything in a moment, those winter eyes; they saw the surprise that Terrick could not keep from his face, if only for a second. "You knew him." It wasn't a question.

"Aye," Terrick replied. "I knew him. And if I had to guess, this fool errand was undertaken on his behalf. He's dead," Terrick added quietly. "Don't look so surprised, boy – if he were alive, you wouldn't be here.

"But he didn't send you to kin. He didn't send you to keep you from starving. If he asked you to make this journey, he wanted –"

"He sent me," Angel said, his soft voice breaking the flow of Terrick's accented Weston, "to speak with Weyrdon."

Smoothing the accent out of his voice, and freeing it, in the process, of any signs of agitation, Terrick said quietly, "Think on it, boy. Think again. Reconsider."

"Why? Do you think he'll try to kill me?"

"There is every possibility that he will do just that."

"Why?"

"Does it matter? The Ice Wolf is his ship, and if you're on it, you're his."

The boy's face, carefully neutral, gave little away – but he didn't seem surprised. Nor did he seem afraid. He was set on this course of action, and while it was admirable – after all, the death of kin was at the foundation of many great men – Terrick found that he was not yet ready to acquiesce.

He should have been, of course. Perhaps the Empire did, in the end, change more than just complexion.

"Take your hair down," Terrick told Angel. "If you're determined to do this, take your hair down."

Angel refused without opening his mouth. Or rather, without speaking; he had continued to eat while Terrick spoke. Only when he had finished did he speak again.

"If you knew my father," he said, with a dignity beyond his years, "You would understand why I can't."

"The man I knew would have cut off his own hand before he let his hair down. You said he did just that. Clearly, time makes its changes." He did not attempt to tell the boy that he might be mistaken, that the boy's father

and the man that he knew might not be the same. Had he believed it – had there been the possibility of belief -- he would have.

"The right to bear a sword," Angel replied, "isn't an obligation to use it; it isn't even an obligation to carry it all the time."

"It depends," Terrick replied, "on your duties and your responsibilities. Boy –"

"He was asked to leave," Angel said.

Silence. Terrick was not a man who was uncomfortable with silence, and he often privately despised those men and women who were – they filled it with useless noise and inane babble simply because they were afraid of what might be noticed if the words ran dry. But some silences were merely a lid over words. This, he now removed.

"I think," he said slowly, "that you do not understand Weyrdon – or any of the clans – if you can say that. It's possible your father chose, for your mother's sake, not to explain too much. But Weyrdon does not ask men to leave. If he feels that there is reason for them to do so, he kills them.

"Not all men serve the clans; not all men are born to them. Some that are not are elevated to their ranks. They're not Northern ranks," he added. "They're simpler, cleaner, and more absolute. Take your Barons," he continued. "They serve the Kings, but they rule their own lands. They cannot secede; secession is called Rebellion here and it is a matter for war."

"He wasn't a Baron," Angel said, and this time, his eyes rounded in surprise – and the red flush, so obvious in the pale-skinned, that spoke of anger colored his cheeks.

"No. It is not an exact analogy. But to leave is to be forsworn. Your life is forfeit, because without the fealty of your sworn oath, your life is meaningless."

"You're here."

"I was not Weyrdon's," Terrick replied.

"You didn't serve the Clans?"

Terrick was silent for a long moment. At his back the horn began to blow; lunch – and this unexpected conversation – was drawing to a close. "No," he said, as he rose. "Lunch is over," he added. "And if we're lucky, the Ice Wolf won't dock before –"

"Before?"

Terrick met the boy's steady gaze, seeing both his evident youth and a hint of the steel that would serve him should he survive to be, in truth, a man. Without preamble, for the horn sounded a second time, and the wicket had to be filled before the end of the third, he said, "I served Garroc."

"That's – that was my father's name."

"Yes," Terrick replied heavily. He rose. "Leave the cups," he said, not looking over his shoulder, "and meet me here when my shift ends."

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Terrick watched the docks. The ships' masts loomed, flags flying, over the surly crowds, and the port authority boasted both large windows and tall ceilings, even through the open doors – and unless there was sudden Summer rain, a distinct possibility in this humidity, they were not closed while the docks were in use. Over the heads of the people pushing past each other in their rush to stand in line – something Terrick was certain he would never understand, no matter how many years he spent in this city – he could see which ships had approached, and which had been given permission to cast ropes and lower planks.

The Ice Wolf was not – yet – among them.

Although he seldom concentrated on future work when so much work was demanded right now, he kept an ear out. The younger members of the Order of Knowledge watched the seaway; the merchant ships owned by the Ten – as well as those owned by Houses less distinguished by history and political power, but not by money – often had a ship's mage, and they made their reports and asked their permissions when they were miles from shore. These reports were often taken to the portmaster or his harried attendants, and he stopped one such young woman to ask about the Ice Wolf.

The Ice Wolf, of course, carried no mage – had there been one foolish enough to set food on its decks, they might preserve the body – but the mages in the port's tower often called out the names of the ships that were approaching. No considerations were to be made for these ships, but the warning was appreciated nonetheless.

He asked the girl to keep an ear out for any mention of the Ice Wolf, and although she was surprised, she nodded and offered a brief half-smile as the portmaster bellowed her name.

But while he listened, he also kept an eye out on the boy. He could see none of the father in the son, except for the colouring of his skin; even Garroc's hair had been a bronze that tinted gold in the Sun's light. Garroc had been large, and Angel, at fourteen, was of medium height; neither too short nor too tall. He was slender, although Terrick's practiced eye could see the definition of muscle in his exposed lower arms and his wrists. He carried only an Essalieyanese short sword. A long sword would have been beyond his reach.

But he did not carry his father's axe. And he did not carry his father's name.

The Imperial notion of beauty was absent, as were the things that

compensated for its lack: he obviously owned neither land nor title. He was not ugly; he could, if it weren't for the utter stillness of his presence and the existence of his hair, have been one of a hundred boys his age. But he had once again taken up position on the docks from which he might watch ships come into port, and he managed, with economy of movement, to avoid the men who might have cursed him for standing in the way. He waited, this boy.

Terrick, better than most, knew both the cost and the value of waiting.

Had he not waited the better part of two decades, trapped by the port authority wicket and old vows that had, as years passed, become increasingly foreign? It was almost done, the waiting. One way or the other, it was almost done.

And what would he do, when it was?

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When the sun began to sink, the boy entered the authority building. The authority building did not face west; the whole of its bank of windows, and its tall, wide doors, were oriented to the east, where the docks, and beyond it, the sea, lay. But the lengthening of shadows and the slow darkening of bold azure were enough of a sign – that and the thinning of the crowds. As people ceased their endless surge from ship to land, the wickets slowly closed, and the clerks began to make headway into the paperwork that any ship docking produced; they would work well into lamplight hours before they stumbled back to their respective homes. At the height of Summer, the working day was long, but it was not the length of the day which had wearied Terrick.

It was the uncertainty caused by a young boy. That boy allowed himself to be ushered toward the doors, but Terrick shouted a quick Weston request, and the guards, sweltering beneath the weight of chain hauberk and its underpadding, let him slip free of their subtle net. He slid between them with easy grace and approached Terrick.

"I'll be an hour or two," Terrick told the boy. "But there's dinner at the end of it, if you've nowhere else to be."

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Angel waited in silence. One or two of the dozen guards the Port Authority employed gave him an odd look, but they held their peace. Terrick's barked order – or request – had carried the weight of the Authority, and as the guards and the rest of the clerks took down the frail, velvet barriers that somehow managed to keep frustrated men and women in narrow, straight lines, Angel leaned against the walls nearest the now closed doors, watching. Lamps were lit, and in the ceiling beams closest to the

back room in which he and Terrick had shared lunch magelights began to glow brightly; unlike simple lamplight, they did not flicker or dim.

The floors here were stone, and at that, a marbled stone that, when mopped and dried, reflected light as if it were glass. In the day, Angel hadn't noticed, because in the day, the floors were anything but clean; too much dirt, too much dust, and far too many people all but hid them from view.

Empty, the authority now seemed like a vast, huge barn, and the distance from door to wicket seemed to grow as he watched people leave. In ones and twos, the younger runners, dressed in the two tone Teal and white that graced all of the men and women – even the guards – made their way to the doors and let themselves out, nodding to Angel, some with obvious curiosity. He nodded in reply, but said nothing; nothing was safest.

Least said, his mother had once told him. He couldn't remember the rest. Found that he didn't want to, here. His mother would have hated this noisy building, with its angry visitors and its tired clerks. She would have hated the language, although her own could be colourful when the need for it arose. And she would, he knew, have feared Terrick, because she had always been uneasy with her husband's kin.

In all of Angel's early life, he had seen evidence of his father's people only three times, and twice, it had ended in a death. It hadn't been his father's death – but it could have been, and his mother knew it.

It was the only time that his mother, when urged to silence by her husband, had actually obeyed. She didn't trust the Rendish.

The third time, there had been no drawn sword. His father had not left the fields upon sighting the visitor, nor had he instructed his wife and child to go – and stay – indoors. He had looked up – he always did, and usually before his wife had even heard the distant movement of horses or men on foot – but he had again bent his back to his work, and he did not leave it until the man was almost upon the house.

That man, pale haired and only slightly shorter than his father, had approached his father in the flats of fields that were not yet sown, and he had waited in silence for his father's acknowledgement. If his mother was the talkative one, if his mother was the hospitable one, his father was rarely rude, and Angel, working by his father's side to dig and turn the earth that would grow vegetables for their own use, had been surprised at how long it took his father to finish.

But he had risen, wiping his hands on the heavy tunic he wore in the planting season, and he had straightened his shoulders. He hadn't said a word.

Neither had the man. But the man's hair, rising above his head in an almost unnatural spiral, marked him clearly as Northern. As clearly as his father's hair sometimes did, it was almost identical. They had exchanged a glance, and then, as if that glance were words, they had walked together toward the copse of trees that served as a wind-break. Angel wanted to follow. He started to, but his mother called him back, and when he obeyed with reluctance, she had caught both his shoulders, one in either hand, and gripped them tightly enough to cause pain.

But she hadn't said a word.

And his father, from a distance, spoke with the stranger for maybe two hours by the fall of sun; he did not invite the man into his home, and he did not introduce him to his wife or his son.

The man, however, had walked toward them both, stopping far enough away that Angel's mother could see he meant no harm.

"You are Garroc's son?" He asked, in Rendish.

With his mother's hands curved like claws across the ridge of either collarbone, Angel had contented himself with a voiceless nod.

The man had said nothing else. Instead, he had nodded once to Angel's father, a brisk nod, and he had retraced his steps, leaving the field and all sight of the farm. His father had waited until the man had vanished from sight, and then, in silence, he had picked up his hoe, motioning for Angel to do the same.

He had not explained the stranger's visit, and Angel knew better than to ask. But it had been hard, then.

He glanced at the magelights. There were magelights in the Free Towns, but only in the Town Hall and the mayor's residence; they were rare, there. Everything was. Here? They seemed to be everywhere; in long poles that, evenly spaced, were spread across the city, street by street, no matter how poor the buildings seemed to be; in similar poles that ran the length of the docks; in the windows of merchant shops in the Common – everywhere. Magic, it seemed, was common, so ordinary that the citizens of Averalan didn't even pause in wonder at the evidence of it.

Was it any wonder that it was in this city that the Ice Wolf docked?

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Terrick was the last to leave the back rooms. This was not always the case, but tonight he worked more slowly, forcing himself to be methodical. He checked manifests against ships, and signatures against signatures, setting aside one bill as suspect. In the quiet of the Port Authority building, he could work without interruption, and in truth, he often looked forward to the end of day, when the streets were dark and the long, long stretch of

building at last fell silent. One or two guards would weather the night hours, but they knew all of the clerks, as well as the runners and the portly man who served as Portmaster in any season that wasn't the rainy one. They would not disturb him unless an emergency arose.

Nor, he thought, grudging it, would the boy. Glancing out of the door, he saw Angel standing quietly beneath the magelights. He was not sitting, and he had not chosen to lean against the wall; he did not fidget, and his expression was carefully schooled.

Can you use that sword, boy?

He shook his head. The wrong weapon, the wrong man. But still, the boy waited. Just as Garroc would have waited, in his position. Aye, Terrick thought heavily. Garroc's son. He signed off on the paperwork, tidying it into a meticulous pile in the center of his desk. Then he rose, removing his key ring, and made his way past the thin wicket wall and into the building itself.

Angel looked up when Terrick entered the room, and Terrick nodded. Together, they approached the front doors by which the two guards were stationed.

"Late night for you, eh, Terrick?" One said.

Terrick shrugged and grimaced. "And an early morning, come tomorrow."

"Trouble?"

"Not worse than usual."

The guard snorted and grinned broadly. "I've seen your definition of 'not worse'."

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Angel did not know the way to Terrick's home, and Terrick had intended to lead him there; at the end of any day in which ships docked continually, only the very young had energy for much else. That Angel was among the very young was not in question, but in a city the size of Averalaan, strangers with no coin to spend often found very little to occupy their time. Or at least very little that the Magisterial Guards did not frown on.

But Angel was clearly used to walking, from somewhere to the port, and from the port to somewhere. He started to walk, as if the path were so familiar it guided his steps, and Terrick, curious, fell in. He did not ask the boy where he went; he was content—and this surprised him—to follow.

Garroc's son followed the harbour's line until it reached the seawall. It was not a short walk, and further, was not in the direction of Terrick's home, and much-desired dinner, but as they climbed the stairs along the seawall, Terrick understood the purpose of this odd pilgrimage.

In the moonlight and the starlight of the humid night, the walls curved out in a demi-circle, and in its centre, a lone statue stood. Or towered. Terrick stopped walking for a moment, to see what Angel would do: Angel continued to walk.

Night, Terrick thought. Night was the time that the people of Averalan chose to approach this statue, this solitary edifice. It was superstition, and at that, a superstition that was entirely Weston at heart, which prevented sensible people from arriving in the daylight hours. Terrick knew this; he had come, himself, during the day. In the day, one could clearly see the towering figure of a man, carved from ancient stone which the salt winds had not managed to weather or destroy. Nor had the seagulls and the other birds which chose his shoulders as perches, unaware of the gravity and the import of his ancient legend.

He joined Angel at the foot of the statue; Angel looked up at the forbidding profile of a man in his prime. "Moorelas," he said, softly.

Angel nodded.

"Why do you come here?"

"Everyone knows his story," Angel replied. It was not the answer Terrick expected, but so little about this boy could be expected. "Everyone knows it. Priests, merchants, guards, children. It doesn't matter where you are, or where you go—you can see children skipping ropes and stone tosses, and you can hear them sing his name. Here. In the Free Towns. In any town in the Empire, I think.

"It's peaceful here, at night. It makes me feel like the world is a smaller place."

Terrick nodded, although in truth, Moorelas' Sanctum, as this statue was inaccurately called, had never quelled the onset of brief and desperate desires for home. "He is known, by a slightly different name, in the North."

"Oh?"

"Morr Aston."

"Do they talk about where he fell?"

"In the City of the Dark League, in the time of gods. He injured the god whose name we do not speak, but in the end, he was betrayed by his companions, and he perished before the god could be killed." Terrick looked up at the hope of the mortal world, if such a thing could truly exist in the time when gods walked the world. "Why do you not visit in the day?" He expected the common lore to answer him: Moorelas' shadow was considered, by many, a harbinger of doom. And, Terrick supposed, it was a safe and tidy harbinger, as it could be so easily avoided.

Angel said, quietly, "I have. But I watch the docks during the days."

Terrick, slightly humbled, and not of a mind to share this, said, gruffly, "Dinner."

#

Home was a set of rooms above one of the smithies in the Common. It suited Terrick in the rainy season; in the humidity of the Summer months it was barely tolerable – but when he had first arrived on these foreign shores, the habits of his youth had not yet been shrugged off, and in the smithy, there was continuous warmth. In his youth, the village Smith would have occupied the building, making rooms available for his sons and their wives – but in Averalaan, while Smithing was an honourable trade, it was one of dozens. And the sons of this particular Smith were not of a mind to make their father's space their home.

It was strange to Terrick.

More so, The Ten, with their disavowal of blood ties. But what could one expect of a City ruled by men who chose wives to bear children for their own fathers? Terrick had chosen his course, and he intended to stay the distance. He had learned.

He glanced at the boy by his side. "Is this the first time you've visited Averalaan?"

Angel nodded. In Rendish, he said, "it's very large."

Terrick chuckled. "Aye, it's that." But he fell silent again; it was seldom that he had company on his trek to the Common from the busy port docks. The Common at night was silent; magelights, well below the heights of the trees for which the Common was famed, were glowing brightly in the humid air. The sky was cloudless, the stars clear. The face of the bright moon was edging to fullness, but it was the dark moon he sought for a moment.

Years, he thought. Years he'd been here, and the moons and the stars were the same. The stalls, boarded over, and patrolled frequently even after sunset, were also the same, and if the men and women who occupied them had weathered those years, so had he. He had not lifted an axe since he had set his own aside. His hands ached a moment, remembering the ghost of her weight.

"Here," he said, more sharply than he had intended.

Angel heard the shortening of the syllable without apparently understanding it; he followed where Terrick led. The door that led to his room was to one side of the Smithy, and the stairs that that door opened into were both narrow and steep, and framed by a wall to either side.

"You live above the Smith?" was the question that drifted up Terrick's back. There was, in his tone, a mild surprise, and given how carefully neutral the boy had forced himself to be thus far, it caused Terrick to smile.

But it was a pained smile, an echo of the smile he might have offered his younger self; he certainly would not have cared to offer that younger man anything as sensible as advice.

Thinking this, he made his way into the kitchen. The windows that fronted the Common were open, and the moon's full light, silvering everything it touched. In this half-darkness, he made his way to the lamp.

"I live in the dark," he told Angel.

"You don't have a magelight?"

"Gods, no. They're expensive."

"They seem to be all over the place."

"Aye, they seem to," Terrick said, struggling to light the lamp's oil. "But it's just light, and the lamp does me fine. There's a seat by the table you can take if you've a mind to sit; you've been standing all day. It won't take a minute to get food, but it's not fancy; I don't cook much in this weather, and I don't get many visitors," he added.

The boy surprised him. "Do any of the ones you do get try to kill you?"

He ceased his fumbling with the lamp, although he did not turn back to the boy. In the darkness there was a quiet that light – any light – seemed to break. He schooled his expression – such a Weston phrase, that, and it now came naturally to him – even though the boy couldn't see it. Then he forced his hands to continue their work.

"That's an odd question to ask of a man who works as a clerk for the Portmaster," he said at last, choosing the words with care, but delivering them as if they were unimportant.

"It's not to a clerk that I ask it," Angel replied gravely.

"And did your father have visitors who were fool enough to try to kill him?" And did one of them succeed, boy, is that why you're here? The lamp flared to life, flickering as he opened the valve to allow more oil to burn. He lifted it and turned to catch the boy's wary expression. His own, he knew, gave nothing away.

"Twice," he replied. "My father sent us into the house; my mother closed the shutters."

"But he came back."

Angel nodded.

"Did you see them?"

"Not alive."

"And dead?"

"When my father was digging a grave."

"Did you notice anything unusual about them?"

"They were marked," he said. "Tattoos, I think."

"Their hair?"

Angel nodded. "Like my father's, I think. But not the same." He paused and then said bluntly, "why did they try to kill him?"

Terrick snorted. "I don't know."

"But you're not surprised."

"No. I would have expected Weyrdon –" he lifted a hand. "Do you understand how far away from home your father was?"

"He was at home," Angel replied.

"Aye, perhaps he was. But he left Weyrdon, and none of us – not one – understood his purpose."

"Maybe he loved my mother enough to stay." A hint of steel in those words. A hint of defiance.

Terrick could have explained to the boy why everything he had just said was wrong, and he opened his mouth to do just that, shutting it on the edge of the words. Did it matter, in the end? They were dead, Garroc and this wife, and all they had left behind stood before Terrick in a lamplit room.

Terrick shook his head. "I forget myself," he said. "We both have to eat; we can talk when there's food ready."

#

"There was a third visitor," Angel said, when food was on the table between them, and bread broken. It was warm and humid in the confines of the small room, and the lamp cast shadows that reminded Terrick of large and open fires in a much colder clime, beneath the early night sky.

Terrick ate. He said nothing, waiting for the boy to offer more, but when it became clear that the boy wouldn't shoulder the conversation himself, Terrick at last set aside the caution and isolation of almost a decade. That he did it quietly, and with a minimum of fuss, did not lessen the fact.

"Tell me," he said quietly, "about this third visitor."

Angel shrugged. "My father didn't send us away," he said at last. "I don't think he was surprised to see the man, but I don't think he was happy, either. He didn't invite him into the house, he didn't offer to feed him – and my mother didn't either. They always did that," he added softly. "They fed everyone who stumbled across the field. If they didn't crush anything while they were doing it." He stopped eating for a moment, his eyes vacantly staring at the contained fire on the table. After a moment, his gaze became focused, and he pulled it away, glancing at Terrick.

"He was of Weyrdon, I think."

"You're not certain."

After a moment, the boy said, "He was of Weyrdon."

Terrick nodded. "Your father spoke with him?"

"And he walked away," Angel replied, tearing bread into smaller chunks almost absently.

"He said nothing to you?"

"He asked if I were Garroc's son."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing. He nodded, and he left."

"How long ago was that?" Terrick was sifting through manifests and shipping schedules, the paper in his mind almost as readily accessible as the actual paper in his hands would have been. "Three years?"

The boy was surprised enough that he let it show. But he was careful enough to hold his words for a moment, and when he did speak, surprise had given way to the beginnings of suspicion.

Garroc, Terrick thought heavily, he is your son.

"It was three years ago. Why do you ask?"

"Meaning, how do I know?" Terrick smiled grimly. "One of the men left the Ice Wolf."

"They all leave the ship."

"He left and did not return. I did not see him return to the port until the Ice Wolf had sailed North and back again, carrying a different cargo. He was not," Terrick added, "a man that could easily be missed in a crowd."

"Not by you, you mean."

"Not," Terrick said heavily, "by anyone. He is not a young man, and it was never his intent to remain in the Empire; it would have been beneath his dignity to absorb or reflect Imperial customs."

"My mother said Arrend is part of the Empire."

"And your father?"

"He ... didn't agree."

"In this, trust your father. We make no war upon the Empire or its subjects," Terrick added, "but we pay no tribute to foreign kings. Make of that what you will." He paused and then added, "I mean no insult by this, Angel, but if you go to the Ice Wolf, you keep your mother's opinion to yourself."

If Angel had, in his caution and his reticence, proved himself to be Garroc's son, he proved himself to be more, or different, now. He nodded, his expression thoughtful, the passing insult ignored. Terrick himself, at the boy's age, would have been angry at the implication that he was fool enough to insult Weyrdon, or ignorant enough; Garroc would have been enraged. But the boy? Neither.

"Did you recognize him, when he left the ship?"

Terrick nodded.

"And you thought he might try to kill my father?"

"In truth, boy, while I thought of your father, I thought it highly unlikely that he would be able to find him. As I said, it's not his way to bend to foreign customs, and he was unlikely to find much help."

"He did find him."

"Yes, and it surprises me."

"And it doesn't, as well?"

Keen-eyed boy. Garroc's son. But for the first time, Terrick found himself wondering about the mother. Some of the mother – besides just the name – was in the boy, and if it wasn't the harsh cold of the North, if it wasn't the steel and the ice, it was as strong in its own way.

Were you happy, Garroc? Terrick thought, for the first time. As if it might have meaning.

"And it doesn't, as well. Where did you live?"

"In Evanston." He waited a moment, watching Terrick's face for some sign of recognition. When it failed to appear, he grimaced – and looked, for a moment, young. "Evanston is one of the Free Towns."

"The Free Towns? To the West of the Empire?"

"Between the Empire and the Western Kingdoms, yes."

"A good distance to travel." Again, he began to sift documents contained only by memory, this time leaving the familiar manifests and Port Authority papers for her maps. The maps with which he was familiar were only accurate along the coasts – which, given they were Port Authority maps, was to be expected – but the scale and distances for the much less detailed land-locked country were good; they would not account for roads or difficult terrain, but they would give him a rough estimate of distance.

"He made his way there directly," Terrick said. "And if possible, he travelled by horse or carriage for some part of the journey; he made good time both there and back. He was not known as a horseman of any quality," he added.

Angel nodded absently. "So you think he knew where to find my father."

"It looks that way."

"But the others found him, too."

"They did not leave that ship," Terrick replied heavily. "They may have left other ships from the North, but they did not stop by the port authority. We have some custom with the Northerners; it is why I was employed." In truth, his preference would have been to stand as a guard in the busy building, although the guards saw little battle. Even tired and angry people were aware in some corner of their minds that they depended on the goodwill of the Imperial Port Authority for their living.

"But not why you chose to take the job?"

"No." Terrick found that even the pretense of eating was beyond him, and rose, turning away from both light and visitor so that he might look out into the summer streets. At night, they were their own landscape, as different from day as North from South. He took a breath of humid, hot air, and expelled it from his lungs with a keen distaste. It was sharper in him than it had been in years, and the homesickness that had characterized his beginnings here was also strong. Both could be laid at the feet of this boy, if he were of a mind to assign blame.

But he was practical; blame served nothing, now. "They did not pass through the Authority and I cannot therefore track their journey. They could have been months tracking him down; they could have been years. Garroc came for the Kings' Challenge," he continued. "As an entrant, he was not invisible."

"Wait – are you saying my father was in the Kings Challenge?"

At that, Terrick turned, a half smile on his lips. "Had he taken the challenge some five years earlier, I believe he would have won. It is often a Northerner who wins the wreath," he added, "But if he did not win – and he did not – he was noted, and in the end, he chose to accept employment in House Kalakar." So much effort, to say the words.

"He served The Kalakar," Angel said, ignoring that effort without apparent awareness.

Stiffly, holding onto his anger with as much care as he had ever held anything, Terrick said, "no."

"He did," Angel answered quietly.

"No. He was employed –"

"He was a House Guard," the boy replied, his face shading, in the lamplight, to a definite red. Protecting, Terrick saw, his father's memory. Defending his dignity and his honour.

Unaware that in so doing, he was destroying Terrick's ability to do the same. "He could not take another master," Terrick all but shouted "He served Weyrdon!"

The boy fell silent, and Terrick thought the matter resolved. But the boy was, in his fashion, still Garroc's son. "You can serve The Kalakar and serve The Kings at the same time. They rule," he added, "but they don't demand the deaths of those who choose to pledge allegiance to the Houses who also serve."

"You do not understand the clans. You do not understand Weyrdon."

"No," Angel replied, the heat slow to leave his cheeks. "But neither do you."

#

The silence that followed the boy's flat statement was as cold a silence as any that Terrick remembered from his youth. And in his youth, as in the occasional Winter that crept in beneath the cover of the cold rainy seasons in the Empire, cold could kill. It was not, however, the only thing, and Terrick laid his palms flat against the surface of a crumb-dusted table cloth to indicate that he had not – yet – reached for a weapon.

The courtesy – if such a thing was indeed within the purview of the Southern sense of polite behaviour – was lost on the boy; he had made his comment as an observation, no more; he had no reason to understand how much of an attack it was.

Had he been, in truth, Rendish, he might well be dead, the courtesy owed guests one had offered the hospitality of the hearth notwithstanding. But he would not have offered anyone but Garroc's son this opening – and the child was Garroc's son. If the boy did not understand his birthright, if he did not understand his father's senseless betrayal of their entire life, it was not, in the end, his fault.

"Be careful what you say, boy."

Angel, eating slowly and methodically – as he had done at a lunch that now seemed in the distant past – swallowed. "It wasn't meant as an insult," he said carefully. "But you don't. You don't understand my father's role. You don't understand why he left, or for what reason."

"And you do?"

Angel said nothing. But it was a nothing that held no fear, no timidity. He was not bold, this boy; he did not try to stake out space by size or temper; he did not care, in fact, to cut out a space that he might stand in and call his own. This, at least, Terrick had seen clearly when he had watched the boy on the docks and in the Port Authority. But if he did not seek his safety in this most obvious of gambits, he did not relinquish whatever it was that made him Garroc's son.

Terrick waited.

After a long pause, the wait was rewarded.

"No," Angel said quietly. "I don't. I understand what he believed," he added, and for just a moment, the boy's loss was fresh, and his eyes, wide, were shadowed by it: death, and mourning that had not yet run its course. "But Terrick, he was asked to leave."

"By who?"

"Who else could ask?" The boy now placed his hands, palm down, upon the tabletop, just as Terrick had done, but without the obvious anger to make of that gesture a statement. "He loved my mother," Angel said quietly,

as if he now picked up the threads of an entirely different discussion; as if the discussion he was continuing could have the same import as the one he had – at least for now -- abandoned. "And he understood the farm. He worked with the Mayor, even if he didn't like him much. He taught some of us."

"Taught?"

"How to use a sword," Angel said. "How to kill a man." He looked away, his profile caught and heightened by the lamp's light. "It saved us, in the end, but it didn't save him."

"They came back to kill him," Terrick said heavily.

"They? Oh, the Northerners." As if he weren't one. "No. Not them. There are many things, my father used to say, that will kill a man. Most of those don't even know that they're killing us. The cold," he added softly. "Water. Fire. Time. Other things."

"He said that, did he?"

"All the time," Angel said, his voice uninflected. "But when he taught us to use the sword? He said, in the end, that you fight the things that can be fought. You fight those things as if they were everything – anything – in the world that could kill you, or that had harmed you, or your family."

Terrick nodded. "That, at least, I can believe. I can almost hear him."

"He also said that stupidity and anger aren't the same," the boy added, with a wince. "He had a lot to say about stupidity. Most of it ours."

"Why did he teach you?"

"He thought we should know. My mother – many of our mothers – didn't approve, but... he thought it was something we should know." He stopped for another moment. "When the rains come late," he said at last, "the Free Towns have problems with raiders. They cause merchants problems as well, on the routes through the Towns; if it's bad enough, the Kingdoms or the Empire will send men, quietly."

"And the rains came late."

"For three years," Angel replied. "He taught us. We learned. He wasn't the only one to die."

"And your mother?"

"My mother, as well. And Emily, and David –" He paused. Shook his head. "They were children. From another farm."

"And so you came here."

"Yes."

"To meet the Ice Wolf."

"Yes."

"What do you hope to learn, Angel?"

"Why."

"Why?"

"Why my father was asked to leave. Why he chose to live in the Empire. What he wanted, from Weyrdon, and what Weyrdon wanted from him."

"And then?"

Angel shrugged. "I don't know. It depends on his answer." He added, quietly, "my father wanted this."

Terrick nodded. This, at least, did not surprise him. "And you?"

"Me?"

"What do you want?"

Silence again, a different silence. Terrick bowed his head. The boy had come this far to fulfil a duty that he, as a son, could not turn away from. But that duty consumed all thought; it was the only future he could see. Beyond that? He had not considered.

"Will you tell me, in the end, what Weyrdon says if you survive?" He kept all hope and all desire from the words; only the fact that he had asked this at all exposed them. But to a man from Arrend, it would have exposed everything. And perhaps, in some fashion, blood ran true, no matter where the child had been raised. The boy met his gaze, and held it, searching for something. What, at his age, and with his life, he might search for, Terrick could not be certain.

Nor could he be certain what, in the end, was found – but something was.

"If I survive," Angel nodded bleakly. "I give you my word, Terrick. If I survive, I will tell you what I know." He paused and tore a piece of bread into something that could comfortably fit in his mouth. "The bread here is so hard," he added, speaking as if to himself. Sounding, for a moment, much younger than he looked.

Then he drew breath. "I will tell you what I know, and I hope it makes more sense to you than it does – than it ever did -- to me."

#

And after that, silence for a long stretch of time. Terrick let the oil burn; it was costly, but as he seldom entertained guests of any significance, he could afford the hospitality. There was never any question about Angel's significance. Boy or no, he was the son of the man that Terrick had served for much of his adult life. He watched the boy eat in silence, and found the silence difficult.

But words presented a different difficulty. Were the boy Garroc, they might have spoken, or they might have passed the night in companionable silence; were he Garroc, they might have argued, raising voices as if they

were blunt weapons, and words as if they were edged. Garroc and Terrick had seldom come to blows – but not never.

Service and servility were only conflated in the confusing and complicated cultural greyness of the South, and nowhere more so than in Averalaan.

But against this boy? Terrick could not raise voice; could not even imagine raising hand. They had fought no wars together, survived no conflicts, tested no loyalties; nor had they felt the keen and biting edge of an oath's many constrictions, circling different sides of it, seeking the advantage of terrain. Seeking, perhaps, the truth that lay at the heart of all great oaths; that gave them the power to bind a life, year after year, to the Port Authority.

Terrick found himself mulling over words as if they were the sodden leaves that blanketed the Common at the start of the rainy season. They were thin and flat and limp, and they had no resonant power, not yet; power, with words, was something both given and taken – and how could one do either, when one did not have the measure, in the end, of the man?

Or of the boy.

Angel's hair, so pale it was almost white, rose above his face and his porcelain forehead like a crown. Like, in truth, a crown that fit poorly and might topple at even the slightest of turbulence. Garroc had done this, he thought. Garroc had taught the boy how to plait his hair, how to wire it, how to mimic adulthood.

But – and this from the vantage of years – was that not what they all did? Was it not how they all learned? By mimicking adults and adult behaviour until the mimicry and the fact could no longer be easily separated?

No, it wasn't his age that made Terrick uncomfortable, for he had been such a boy, and seen many more such boys when boyhood had passed – thankfully – beyond his grasp. Not to one of those boys would be offer this embarrassing and tongue-tied silence. And why?

Because those boys were not foreigners.

This one was.

Angel could speak Rendish, and could even speak it well; he could openly declare his allegiance by styling his hair in that particular design. He could wear a weapon as if it were not a hoe, not a farmer's tool. But all of this was superficial; what the boy was, beneath these things, was hidden. Terrick – and Garroc before him – had never trusted the superficial to tell them what they needed to know; they read a man's intent by more than the colour or style of his hair or the clan-marks, more common, that he wore across his skin.

But the boy's caution, while commendable, gave little away; were it not

for the quiet comment he had made about, of all things, bread, he might have lied about his age, either raising or lowering the number. He stood on the threshold, this one, or perhaps on the fence; one way or the other, he would have to jump off.

And he would do that, tomorrow, regardless of whether or not he understood the decision.

"Angel," Terrick said quietly, when the boy had stopped eating for long enough that he might indeed be finished.

Angel met Terrick's gaze and held it, an acknowledgement that younger children often failed to offer. In the face of that steady gaze, Terrick momentarily lost the words, for there was, in the lines of the boy's chin and cheekbones, something of Garroc – the Garroc that Terrick had met in the snow and cold of a distant youth.

Angel surprised him. "You've met the Weyrdon, haven't you?"

"Yes." He paused and then added, "It's Southern, to call him the Weyrdon. He is Weyrdon. There is no other."

"His son?"

Terrick shook his head. "While he lives, he is Weyrdon. When he dies, perhaps his son, after him. Perhaps his brother, or a cousin."

"But – the hair –" He lifted a hand self-consciously to touch his hair, as if he expected it to topple. As if, Terrick thought, he was aware that he wore the hair the way another might wear a hat – it was external, not yet of him, if it ever would be.

"It marks you as Weyrdon, yes."

"But not the Weyrdon."

"Angel – a man does not exist apart from those who serve him. He is Weyrdon, but those who serve him are also Weyrdon. Those who serve will never be confused with the man who leads – but they will be seen as an extension of that man, more valuable in all ways than even the sword he wields, although the sword might be older. Weyrdon is judged by the strength of those men, and judged, as well, by the strength of their oaths." He let the words settle around the boy, wondering if he understood.

Angel thought about this for a while. "In the Empire, the ruler of the House takes the name. So the Kalakar is the Kalakar, and all those who take the House Name are AKalakar."

"It is not of the South you must think," Terrick said, frowning.

Angel's lips creased in a smile that was startling, if brief. It was unfettered, for a moment, by oaths or worry; it made him look young – or rather, appear as the ideal of youth. There was no caution at all in the expression. "My father –" he began. The smile dimmed, fading into

something that was greyer and darker. It was, Terrick thought, very like the smile that Garroc had offered him so many years ago. "My father would have said that."

"Then I will stand in his stead," Terrick replied gravely. "I cannot take his place, nor would I be fool enough to try. The South, once you reach the Ice Wolf, is not your concern."

But Angel, reaching for a slender rind of cheese, said, "but it is. And it was my father's as well."

"Aye," Terrick replied. "Do not look to me for explanations; I little understood his choice, then – and I understand it no better now." But now, boy, he thought, I fear its weight and its consequences.

"Then tell me about the – I mean, about Weyrdon. You met him."

Terrick nodded.

"Did you meet him before or after you met my father?"

And allowed himself a half-smile. He could not see where the boy's conversation would lead, but he was willing to follow it to its natural conclusion. Garroc's son, indeed. "Many years after," Terrick replied.

Angel chewed thoughtfully on the rind, and Terrick almost rose to get more food. But the boy chose to speak as Terrick placed his hands on the table to push himself out of his chair, and the boy's voice pulled him back down again, as if it were gravity.

"You said you served Garroc."

"Yes."

"And my father served Weyrdon."

"Yes."

"Did you give him the oath that he gave the – that he gave Weyrdon?"

Silence. The pause of drawn breath and gathered words. All of these words, Terrick rejected. "No," he said quietly. Just that.

"So you were friends?"

"We were."

"But he wasn't your lord?"

Terrick lifted both hands to his face and pressed his fingers against his closed lids. "He was," he replied at last, as he lowered his hands.

"I don't understand."

"No. You don't."

"But I need to."

"Yes."

"Can you explain it to me before the Ice Wolf reaches port?"

"No." He lifted a hand as Angel's mouth parted. "I can try," he said heavily. "But I fear it will make little sense to you."

"Little is better than none."

"That would be your mother speaking."

Angel's face showed a hint of surprise; it was a subtle shift of brow, a slight widening of eye. "It was something she used to say." His voice was quiet, almost gentle. "How did you know?"

"Because Garroc would never have said it. We hold the opposite to be true: A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. It is like the ice above water that looks solid, but is too thin to support a man's weight; you break the surface and the water takes you. Better never to trust that ice in warmer weather." He frowned. "You will excuse me if I attempt to salvage my reputation."

"Pardon?"

"I am your host, and I have invited you into my home for a meal. You are still hungry. I have therefore failed, and unless I wish to brave the fury of my ancestor's hearth spirits, I must make amends." He glared at the boy, and added, "I am getting more food."

He was rewarded by a flush that, in the dim light, would have been hidden by a darker complexion. But he was also rewarded by a rueful smile.

#

Terrick took his time gathering both food and wine. The lamplight wasn't necessary to the work, and he worked slowly and methodically, as was his wont. He was at home, here, in a way that he could not have foreseen in his youth.

"Garroc was older than you are now when we first met," Terrick said quietly, feeling the boy's attention at his back. "He was not yet at his full height, but he was strong and quick – quick to think, quick to speak, but still cautious in action. We had, in our village, some problem with raiders from further North, and we had seen fighting, and death.

"We did not like each other much when we were introduced; he came from a village some few miles through the snow, and I thought him proud and reckless. I distrusted him; he intended to fight in my village, and not, in the end, in his own. A way to minimize losses," he added. "His own. As he – and the men who came with him – were outsiders, it was a commonly held opinion – but we were desperate enough to accept aid. And he, although I did not appreciate it at the time, was desperate enough to offer." His hands had ceased their motions – what had he been doing? Cutting. He returned to the task, seeing snow and ice and the red spill of frozen blood that spoke of battle.

"We are often called a harsh people, for a harsh climate. There is truth in

it; those raids were not the first time I had witnessed death, nor would they be the last. We do not – as the Southerners do – dream of peace. But we dream of strength, for there is safety in strength, if safety can be found at all.

"Leading men is not a simple task. Giving orders may appear simple to those who have never given them," he added, reaching for a plate, "but when you see the cost of those orders in the corpses of the men – and women – who followed them faithfully, you begin to understand the price paid by those who undertake the burden of leadership.

"It is not easy to be a good leader. It is very easy to be a bad one. Most of us, in the end, would become bad leaders," he added as he turned, carrying the plate back to the table. Angel was watching the fire, but listening to the words as he did. It was a small fire, and the words were Rendish, although throughout the meal they had wandered casually between their two tongues.

"Why?"

"Because it is impossible to be perfect, in this life. And when we make mistakes – and our mistakes are measured in the lives of those who are forced, by circumstance, to trust us – many of us will hide from the cost of our power, without surrendering that power itself." He frowned at Angel's expression. "In order to lead effectively, when we know men will die no matter what we do, we protect ourselves from pain by refusing to care or countenance death. We lay blame anywhere else. We hide from the truth of ourselves.

"Eventually, it is power that we are left with – but power unleashed from its moorings. We no longer remember why we took power in the first place, and the reasons we come up with to justify continuing to hold that power? They are all bad."

"My father never wanted power," Angel said quietly.

"No. But when we met, he had taken it anyway. I did not trust him, not then. But I learned," he added softly. "A few deaths, his men and our own, and I learned. He was younger then, and he burned, his eyes like dark fire. Things that angered or enraged me, he could accept as simple fact, as if it were snow or ice floe. He did not let his temper rule him – not when lives depended on it. And lives did," Terrick added.

"We are not afraid of tears, in the North. Grief does not unman us. The women are harsh," he added, "and often hide grief behind faces no warmer than stone. But we – we know how to grieve. He grieved for our dead as if they were his own, and he would not leave our bodies behind. The men, many older, followed him. I followed him. When we at last found the raiders, and destroyed them, Garroc and his men were no longer outsiders, they were ours. And we, in turn, were theirs. That was his gift, boy.

"I was by his side. He wielded an axe, then; they called him Stormfury, and –" Terrick laughed out loud at the memory, "he was embarrassed by it. Not even frost-bite could redden his skin the way embarrassment did, and the old women loved to tease him."

"But why?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was their way of showing him that he had become – in so short a time – like a son. He would rather, he told me, face the raiders. He did not want our admiration, and he did not want our mute obedience. But he had at least the first, and if we were not mute, we listened more often than not, and it was his lead that we followed.

"And when he left the village, I asked his leave to accompany him to his home, or what was left of it, and he granted it." He paused, and then added, "I served Garroc, in the North. And when Garroc met Weyrdon, and I saw Garroc take Weyrdon's measure, I understood what would happen next." He wanted to stand.

He did not.

"Weyrdon was a man," he said quietly. "Older than either of us, but younger than I am now, he was unlike Garroc; in Weyrdon, with his honey eyes, it was said that Cartan walked the earth again – and in its fashion, Angel, it was true. I had seen Garroc, among the villagers, and I had left my home to follow him – but Garroc was to Weyrdon what the lamp is to the high sun.

"Garroc did not understand why men were willing to serve him. His humility was part of the reason they did, but he was not falsely modest, and as likely to issue a challenge at a perceived slight as any other man. He had had no desire to found a clan of his own, although he could have.

"But he understood, when he met Weyrdon, some part of what we saw in him."

"But you said Weyrdon wasn't like my father."

"He wasn't. What your father struggled to do, Weyrdon did as if it were simply a matter of breathing; he led. He walked among the dead, and he grieved for them, but their deaths – in our eyes – were ennobled by his grief and his gratitude. He came to the women to help wash the corpses of the fallen and clean them before they were placed on the funeral pyres.

"He could make himself heard – and felt – across the tented camps of a large army. His men did not worship him, but they revered him. He was like the warriors of legend," Terrick added. "And born to us in a time of need."

"There were wars?"

Terrick was silent.

"Terrick?"

But Terrick did not answer the question. Instead he said, watching the lamp fire and wishing that it were larger and louder, with a voice of crackling wood and tinder, "Garroc came to me after our campaign at the borders of Arrend. Five great clans were united behind Weyrdon's shield, and the eldest sons of many smaller clans bore spears in his vanguard.

"He told me he intended to offer his axe to Weyrdon. I knew," Terrick continued. "I knew, but I had avoided the knowledge for as long as I could. He was my lord," Terrick added, "in the Southern use of the word. I was his liege.

"He asked me to serve Weyrdon; he felt that Weyrdon would also honour my service. I refused."

"But why?"

"Garroc was the only man that I wished to serve."

"You thought that Weyrdon was worthy of his service."

"Yes. He was worthy of the service of any."

"But not yours." It wasn't a question. And it was. So many years, Terrick thought, since he had heard those words. So many years since he had refused to answer them. He might have refused now, without shame and without demur on the part of his guest.

Garroc's son.

"Perhaps," Terrick said quietly, "I felt I was not worthy to serve him."

Angel tilted his head to one side. He opened his mouth to speak – or possibly eat – but food did not enter that mouth, and words did not leave it. Which was good; he was exercising some caution. Not even a guest called his host a liar with impunity.

Terrick rose, muttering about lamp for the oil. It was feeble, but he wanted to be free of the confines of the table. The boy would not press him for an answer, and he did not wish to surrender it. But the answer lay there in the silence, and the spaces between the words he had been willing to share.

Weyrdon was revered.

Garroc? No. Respected, yes, and followed. What he achieved, he achieved with struggle and work, and the dream of the achievement was always brighter, and more perfect, than the achievement itself.

Quick to anger, slow to awe, slower still to love. But the shadows he cast were the length of a man, no more and no less. He knew doubt and he knew despair, and he mastered them both with effort.

Terrick understood that man.

"So ... he left you."

"No." Terrick shook himself with an effort that Garroc would also have understood. He returned to his chair, with oil. "I went with him. I was Garroc's man, and this was understood – and Weyrdon was secure enough in his power that it was not seen as insult to Weyrdon."

Angel was silent for a long moment. "And when he left Weyrdon?"

The silence was thicker and heavier now.

"You left with him."

"I could. I was not of Weyrdon." Terrick's breath was sharp. "Boy," he added, thickly, "I would have followed him into exile and I would have died at his side or his back."

"He would never have asked that of you."

Terrick's laugh was bitter and deep. "He asked it a hundred times."

Angel watched Terrick's face as his laughter faded; the bitterness remained. Terrick could mask his expression, but chose, at that moment, not to do so. He waited instead, wondering what the boy would say. Or if, in the end, he would say anything at all.

His eyes were the colour of winter sky in the lamplight when he at last shook his head. It was a slight motion, a contained one; he would speak, then.

"From what you've said, my father's departure from Weyrdon's side was a disgrace."

Silent, Terrick nodded.

"If he asked you to fight at his back, he meant you to face death – and facing it, risk dying. He would have asked that of you," the boy continued, after a pause, "because when he taught us to use these swords, he asked it of us, and we were younger and weaker. We didn't understand, then. We understood it later.

"But he would never have asked us to live in disgrace," Angel continued. "Possibly the children, or the old women, but I don't think so." Angel picked up a wedge of thick cheese.

"He would never have asked it of you."

Terrick said nothing for a long moment. And then, rough-voiced, he said, "boy, do you ever stop eating?"

Angel, half the wedge now in his mouth, laughed, and Terrick rose. "Sleep here," he said. "I'll wake you in the morning; I have to be down at the port by sunrise."

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