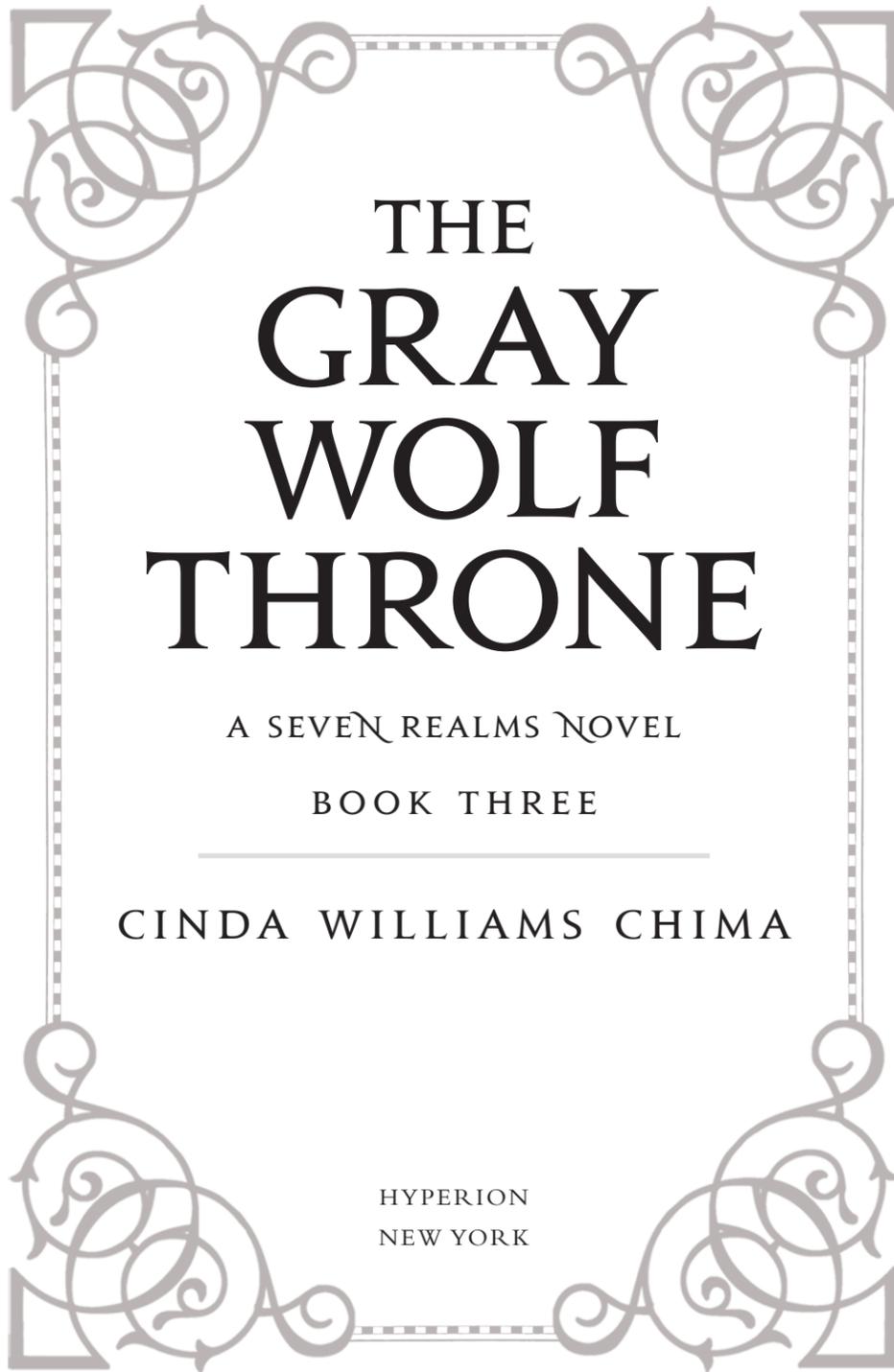




THE
GRAY
WOLF
THRONE





THE
GRAY
WOLF
THRONE

A SEVEN REALMS NOVEL

BOOK THREE

CINDA WILLIAMS CHIMA

HYPERION
NEW YORK

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*For my maternal grandmother,
Dorothy Downey Bryan, a gifted musician and
indifferent housekeeper who had the second sight. Grandma
had a lap that would accommodate several small children,
but she always kept a shotgun in the closet.*



CHAPTER ONE

IN THE BORDERLANDS

Raisa *ana'*Marianna huddled in her usual dark corner at the Purple Heron, picking at her meat pie. She'd learned to stretch a meal and a mug of cider over an entire evening.

It was risky to sit out in the common room of a tavern every night. Lord Bayar's assassins would be searching for her. They'd failed to kill her at Oden's Ford, thanks to Micah Bayar, Lord Bayar's son. But the High Wizard's spies could be anywhere, even here in the border town of Fetters Ford.

Especially here. Bayar would prefer to intercept Raisa before she crossed the border into the Fells. It would be tidier that way, her murder easier to conceal from her mother the queen and her father's people, the Spirit clans.

Still, she couldn't hide out in her room all the time. She needed to be visible to the people she *wanted* to find her. Somehow she had to get home, reconcile with Queen Marianna, and confront those who meant to take the Gray Wolf throne away from her.

The name Rebecca Morley was no longer safe. Too many of her enemies knew it. These days she called herself Brianna Trailwalker, a nod to her clan ancestry. Her story was that she was a young trader returning from her first journey south, held up by the turmoil along the border.

After a month in the limbo of Fetters Ford, she knew the regulars at the Heron—mostly pilots from the ferry service on the river, and the blacksmiths, farriers, and stablers who serviced travelers along the road. Locals were in the minority, though. The town churned with the comings and goings of wartime.

Raisa scanned the room, picking out the strangers. Two Tamric ladies occupied a corner table for the second night in a row. One was young and pretty, the other sturdy and middle-aged, both too well dressed for the Heron. Likely a noble lady and her chaperone fleeing the fighting to the south.

Three lean young men in Ardenine civilian garb played cards at a table by the door. Four had come in, but one of them had left a while ago. Several times, Raisa looked up and caught one or another of them staring at her. Apprehension slithered down her spine. Thieves or assassins? Or just young men showing interest in a girl on her own?

There were no easy answers anymore.

Most of the rest of the patrons were soldiers. Fetters Ford swarmed with them. Some bore the Red Hawk of Arden, some the Heron of Tamron, others carried no signia at all—either sell-swords or deserters from King Markus's army.

Any of them could be hunting Raisa. It had been a month since she'd escaped Gerard Montaigne, the ambitious young prince of Arden. Gerard hoped to claim at least three of the

Seven Realms by overthrowing his brother Geoff, the current Ardenine king, invading his former ally Tamron, and marrying Raisa *ana'*Marianna, the heir to the Gray Wolf throne of the Fells.

Any day, they expected to receive word that the capital of Tamron Court had fallen to Gerard. The prince of Arden had laid siege to it weeks ago.

When Raisa arrived in Fetters Ford, she'd planned to ask the local Tamric authorities to send a courier to the garrison house at the West Wall in the Fells. They in turn could send her message on to her father, Averill Lord Demonai, or to Edon Byrne, Captain of the Queen's Guard—perhaps the only two people in the Fells she could trust.

But when she arrived in the border town, there *was* no authority. The garrison house was empty, the soldiers fled. Some might have gone south to the aid of the beleaguered capital city. Likely, most had melted into the general populace to await the outcome of the war.

Raisa was left with the hope that her best friend, Corporal Amon Byrne, and his Gray Wolves might follow her north and find her here in Fetters Ford. She could travel on, hidden in their midst, as she had in the fall, on her way to the academy at Oden's Ford.

As the future captain of her guard, Amon was magically linked to Raisa, so he should have a rough sense of where she was. But the weeks had dragged on and Amon had not appeared. Surely if he were coming, he'd be here by now.

Her other plan was that she might fall in with a clan trader heading back north. She was a mixed-blood; with her burnt-sugar

skin and thick black hair, she could pass for clan. But that hope had also faded as weeks passed with no traders passing through. With Tamron in turmoil, most travelers preferred to avoid the marshy Fens and sinister Waterwalkers and use the more direct path through Marisa Pines Pass and Delphi.

A shadow fell over Raisa's table. Simon, the innkeeper's son, was hovering again, summoning the courage to ask if he could clear away her plate. Most days, it was an hour of hovering to three words of conversation.

Raisa guessed Simon was her age, or even a little older, but these days Raisa felt older than her nearly seventeen years—cynical and jaded, wounded in love.

You don't want to get involved with me, she thought glumly. My advice is to run the other way.

Han Alister still haunted her dreams. She would awaken with the taste of his kisses on her lips, the memory of his scorching touch on her skin. But in the daylight it was difficult to believe their brief romance had ever happened. Or that he still thought of her at all.

The last time Raisa had seen Han, Amon Byrne had driven him off with a sword. And then she'd disappeared from the academy without a word—abducted by Micah Bayar. Han wouldn't have fond memories of the girl he knew as Rebecca. Anyway, it was unlikely she'd ever see him again.

By now it was near closing time, another day squandered while events at home rushed ahead without her. Perhaps she'd been disinherited already. Perhaps Micah had escaped Gerard Montaigne and even now was proceeding with plans to marry her sister Mellony.

Someone cleared his throat right next to her. She flinched and looked up. It was Simon.

“My Lady Brianna,” he said for the second time.

Bones, she thought. I have to get better at answering to Brianna.

“The ladies over yonder invite you to join them at their table,” Simon continued. “They say as it can be awkward for a lady, dining alone. I told them you'd already eaten, but . . .” He shrugged, his hands hanging like twin hams at his sides.

Raisa looked over at the two Tamric women. They leaned forward, watching this exchange with eager expressions. Women in Tamron had the reputation of being pampered hothouse flowers, socially ruthless, but physically delicate beings who rode sidesaddle and carried parasols against the southern sun.

Still, it was tempting. It would be a pleasure to converse with someone other than Simon—someone who could carry one half of a conversation. And perhaps they had more up-to-date news about events at Tamron Court.

But, no. It was one thing to fool Simon with a story of being a trader stranded in a border town. Simon wanted to be fooled. It would be another thing entirely to sit down with highborn ladies with a talent for ferreting out secrets.

Raisa smiled at them and shook her head, gesturing at the remains of her dinner. “Tell them thank you, but I'll be retiring to my room before long,” she said.

“I told 'em you'd say that,” Simon said. “They said to tell you they have a prop—a job for you. They want to hire you as an escort across the border.”

“Me?” Raisa blurted. She wasn't exactly the bodyguard type, being slight and small-boned.

She gazed at the ladies, her lower lip caught behind her teeth, considering. There might be safety in numbers, but *they* wouldn't be much protection to Raisa. While their social weapons would be finely honed, they would be no good in a physical fight, and they would slow her down.

On the other hand, no one would expect her to be traveling with two Tamric ladies.

"I'll talk to them," Raisa said. Simon went to turn away, but froze when Raisa put her hand on his arm. "Simon. Do you know who those men are?" she asked, nodding toward the card players without looking at them.

Simon shook his head. He was used to such questions from her, and understood what she wanted to know. "Came in first time tonight, but they're not staying here," he said, scooping up her plate. "They speak Ardenine, but they're spending Fellsian coin." He leaned closer. "They asked some questions about you and the Tamric ladies," he said. "I didn't tell them nothing."

Simon's head jerked up as the tavern door opened and closed. It admitted a rush of damp, chilly night air, a splatter of rain, and a half dozen or so new customers—all strangers. They wore nondescript boiled wool cloaks, but they had a military edge. Raisa shrank back into the shadows, heart flopping like a stranded fish. She strained to catch any stray bit of conversation, hoping to make out what language they spoke.

How long can you keep doing this? she thought. How long could she wait for an escort that might never come? If Gerard gained control of Tamron, how long before he closed the borders completely, bottling Raisa in? Maybe it would be safer to cross the border now, rather than wait for an escort.

But the borderlands swarmed with renegades, thieves, and deserters, and she risked ending up robbed, ravished, and dead at the side of the road.

Stay or go? The question reverberated in her brain like the rain pounding on the tin roof of the tavern.

On impulse, she stood and threaded her way to the Tamric ladies' table.

"I'm Brianna Trailwalker," she said in a gruff, businesslike voice. "I hear you're looking for escort across the border."

The stocky woman nodded. "This is Lady Esmerell," she said, nodding at the younger woman. "And I am Tatina, her governess. Our home has been overrun by the Ardenine Army."

"Why choose me?" Raisa said.

"Traders are known to be skilled with weapons, even the females," Esmerell said. "And we would feel more comfortable with another woman." She shivered delicately. "There are many men on the road who would take advantage of two gently raised ladies."

I don't know, Raisa thought. Tatina looks like she could knock some heads together.

"Did you mean to cross via the Fens or the Fells?" Raisa asked.

"We'll go whatever way you choose," Esmerell said, her lip trembling. "We just want to get away and take refuge in the temple at Fellsmarch until the Ardenine brigands are driven from our lands."

Don't hold your breath, Raisa thought.

Esmerell groped in her skirts, pulled out a fat purse, and clunked it onto the table. "We can pay you," she said. "We have money."

“Put that away before somebody sees it,” Raisa hissed. The purse disappeared.

Raisa gazed down at them, debating. She couldn’t wait forever for someone to come fetch her. Maybe it was time to take a chance.

“Please,” Tatina said, putting her hand on Raisa’s arm. “Sit down. Maybe, if you get to know us, you will—”

“No.” Raisa shook her head. She didn’t want to be remembered sitting with the ladies in the tavern if anyone came asking questions. “We had better be early to bed if we’re going to make an early start tomorrow.”

“Then you’ll do it?” Esmerell said, clapping her hands with delight.

“Hush,” Raisa said, glancing around, but nobody seemed to be paying attention. “Be at the stables at daybreak, packed and ready to ride all day.”

Raisa left the two ladies and returned to her table, hoping she’d made the right decision. Hoping this would get her home sooner rather than later. Her mind churned with plans. She would ask Simon to pack up bread, cheese, and sausage to carry with them. Once in the Fens, she could make contact with the Waterwalkers, and they might . . .

“You look like you could use cheering up, young miss,” a rough male voice said in Ardenine. A bulky stranger dropped heavily into the chair opposite Raisa. It was one of the newly arrived patrons, his face shadowed within his hood. He hadn’t even bothered to remove his cloak, though it dripped puddles on the floor.

“You, there!” he called to Simon. “Bring the lady another of

whatever she’s having and a jacket of ale for me. And step lively, now! It’s almost closing time.”

Raisa’s temper flared. One of the hazards of dining alone in a tavern was being seen as fair game by any male who wandered in. Well, she would disabuse him of that notion right away.

“Perhaps you were under the mistaken impression that I wanted company,” Raisa said icily. “I prefer to dine alone. I’ll thank you not to intrude on me again.”

“Don’t be like that,” the stranger complained, loudly enough to be heard across the taproom. “It’s not fitting for a girl like you to be sitting all by herself.”

The soldier leaned forward, and his voice changed, became low and soft, though he still spoke Ardenine like a native. “Are you sure you can’t spare a moment for a soldier long on the road?”

He tugged back his hood, and Raisa looked into the weathered gray eyes of Edon Byrne, Captain of the Queen’s Guard of the Fells. Eyes uncannily similar to his son Amon’s.

It was all Raisa could do to keep her jaw from dropping open. Questions crowded into her mind, threatening to pour out. How had he found her? What was he doing here? Who knew he could speak Ardenine so fluently? Was Amon with him?

“Well,” she managed. “Well, then.” She cleared her throat to speak, but just then Simon brought their drinks, slamming Byrne’s ale onto the table so hard that it sloshed. Byrne waited until Simon slumped away before he spoke again.

“Fetters Ford is no longer safe,” he murmured, still in Ardenine. “We’ve come to take you home.” Byrne looked beyond her, scanning the room. He smelled of sweat and leather, and his

face was stubbled from days on the road. Though he slouched back in his chair, Raisa noticed that he'd raked his cloak back to expose the hilt of his sword.

"Let's talk," Raisa said, hope blossoming in her heart. "Meet me in the stables behind the inn in ten minutes."

She rose abruptly. "If you won't leave, I will. Go and bother someone else." She turned toward the stairs. The Ardenine ladies fluttered and clucked sympathetically, likely thinking Raisa should have accepted their offer to join them.

"Miss! You forgot your cider," Byrne called after her, drawing some catcalls and snickering.

Raisa strode past the stairs and through the kitchen, where Simon was kneading bread for the overnight rising. "My lady?" he said, looking up at her.

"I need some fresh air," Raisa said. Simon stared after her as she walked out the back door and into the rain. Shivering, she drew Fiona Bayar's wrap more closely around her shoulders. It had come with the horse she'd stolen from the High Wizard's daughter—one of the few things of Fiona's that fit.

The stable was warm and dry and smelled of sweet hay and horses. Ghost poked his head out of his stall, snorting and blowing bits of oats at her. She stroked his nose. Two stalls down, she recognized Ransom, Byrne's large bay gelding, a mountain pony cross.

The stable doors creaked open and Byrne entered, followed by a handful of bluejackets. Though they could hardly be called bluejackets, since they wore a mixture of nondescript cold weather clothing in browns and greens.

Raisa scanned them quickly, but to her disappointment,

Amon wasn't there, nor any of the other Gray Wolves. These soldiers were more seasoned than Amon's cadets, their still-young faces inscribed by sun and wind.

Byrne carefully latched the stable doors and set one of his company to keep watch. The others went immediately to work, leading out their horses and saddling them up.

"You mean to leave tonight?" Raisa asked, nodding toward the others.

"The sooner the better," Byrne said. He stood gazing down at her, chewing his lower lip, examining her for damage. "It is a relief to find you still alive."

As if he wouldn't have known if she'd been killed. As if he wouldn't have sensed the blow to the all-important Gray Wolf line.

"What's happened?" Raisa said. "How did you know I was here? Where is Amon? Why is Fetters Ford no longer safe?"

Byrne took a step back, retreating from the onslaught of questions. He nodded toward the tack room. "Let's talk in there."

Raisa remembered the Ardenine ladies. "Oh—there's one thing. Those two ladies I was talking to in the taproom—I agreed to travel on with them tomorrow. Could you send someone to let them know my plans have changed?" It was cowardly, she knew, but she was too weary to deal with Lady Esmerell's disappointment.

"Corliss." Byrne motioned to one of his men and sent him back to the inn to give Esmerell and Tatina the bad news.

Unlatching Ghost's stall door, Raisa led the stallion into the tack room and cross tied him, then fetched his saddle and bridle from the rack against the wall.

Byrne followed her in and closed the door. He watched Raisa work for a moment. “Isn’t that the flatland stallion Fiona Bayar was riding last time she was home?”

Raisa nodded. Fiona went through horses like her brother Micah went through lovers. “I borrowed him.” Dragging over a step stool, she climbed up so she could fling her horse blanket across Ghost’s broad back.

“I’d like to hear that story,” Byrne said.

“You were about to tell *me* the story of how you came to be here, Captain Byrne.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Byrne inclined his head, giving in. “Your father intercepted a message that suggests Lord Bayar knows where you are and has dispatched assassins to murder you.”

“Oh,” Raisa said, looking up from her work. “Right. I know about that. He sent four of them to Oden’s Ford.”

Byrne raised an eyebrow, which so reminded Raisa of Amon that her heart stuttered. “And?” he said dryly.

“I killed one, and Micah Bayar killed the other three,” Raisa said.

“Micah?” Byrne said sharply. “Why would he—”

“He’d rather marry me than bury me, apparently,” Raisa said. “He kidnapped me from school and was hauling me back home for a wedding when we were overrun by Gerard Montaigne’s army on its way into Tamron. That was just north of Oden’s Ford. If Micah survived, I think he’d assume I’d go back to school rather than on to the Fells. So it’s unlikely Lord Bayar knows where I am now.”

“This was a recent message,” Byrne said, frowning. “I’m not sure it refers to the earlier attempt.”

It’s unfortunate, Raisa thought, shivering, when so many people are trying to kill you that you can’t sort them out.

Byrne lifted Ghost’s saddle and positioned it atop the tall horse. “If you would like to go fetch your belongings, I’ll finish him up.”

Raisa was familiar enough with Byrne avoidance tactics to know when she was being played. “*Corporal* Byrne taught me to take care of my own horse,” she said, ducking underneath to buckle the cinch strap. “Who else knows that you were coming after me?”

Byrne thought a moment. “Your father,” he said. “And Amon.” He bit down on the last word as if he regretted saying it.

Raisa stood on tiptoes so she could look over Ghost’s back. “Did Amon contact you? Is that how you knew to come here?”

Byrne cleared his throat. “When you disappeared from Oden’s Ford, Corporal Byrne thought perhaps you had gone home, willingly or not. He guessed you might take the western route, since you’d come that way last fall. He sent a bird suggesting I try to intercept you here in order to avoid a possible ambush at West Gate.” Raisa could tell he had been shining up this story for some time.

“Really?” she said. “How did he know I survived? We left a bloody mess behind at Oden’s Ford.” She buckled Ghost’s bridle while the stallion lipped at the bit, trying to spit it out.

“He . . . ah . . . had a feeling,” Byrne said. Raisa snorted. He was no better a liar than Amon.

“If he thought I was here, then why didn’t he come here himself?” Raisa tugged at the cinch strap, unconvinced that it was as tight as it could be.

“He thought I could get here sooner,” Byrne said, shifting his weight.

“Why? Where is he now?” Raisa demanded.

Byrne looked away. “I don’t know where he is right now,” he said.

“Well, where was he when he messaged you?” she persisted. “We had no birds at Oden’s Ford that would carry a message to Fellsmarch.”

“He was in Tamron Court, Your Highness,” Byrne said, like an oyster finally yielding up the meat within.

“Tamron Court!” Raisa straightened, swiveling around. “What was he doing there?”

“Looking for you,” Byrne said. “He’d received word that you’d been entangled in a skirmish between Montaigne’s army and a scouting party from Tamron. He thought you might’ve taken sanctuary in the capital. So he and his triple went there to find you.”

Raisa stared at Byrne, her stomach clenching as certainty set in. “He’s still there, isn’t he?” she whispered. “And Gerard Montaigne has the city surrounded.”

“That’s why it’s important that we move quickly, while the Prince of Arden believes that you are in Tamron Court,” Byrne said.

“What?” Raisa whispered. “Why would he think . . . ?”

“It’s a long story.” Byrne rubbed his chin as if debating whether he could avoid telling it. “Montaigne has threatened to level the capital if they don’t surrender. Whether he can really do that or not is anyone’s guess, but King Markus seems convinced that he can, so he leaked word that you were inside the

city, hoping the prince of Arden won’t destroy the city with you inside. Now Montaigne is demanding that King Markus hand you over or he will put everyone in the city to the sword. So Markus sent a message to Queen Marianna, asking her to send an army to rescue you.”

“Isn’t he afraid I’ll surface somewhere and prove him a liar?” Raisa asked.

“Corporal Byrne told him you were killed during the skirmish with Montaigne’s forces.” Byrne grimaced. “In fact, Corporal Byrne was the one who suggested this scheme to Markus after Montaigne laid siege to the city.”

“But why would he do that?” Raisa asked, lost.

“Corporal Byrne guessed you hadn’t yet crossed the border. He’d rather that those hunting you believe you’re in Tamron Court, and not here in the borderlands. So he and his triple have made themselves visible in the city so that any spies working for Montaigne or Lord Bayar see that members of the Queen’s Guard are still there and assume that you are also.”

“No,” Raisa whispered, pacing back and forth. “Oh, no. When Montaigne finds out he’s been tricked, he’ll be furious. There’s no telling what he’ll do.” She stopped and looked up at Byrne. “What about the queen? Will she send help?”

“Given the situation at home right now, we cannot send an army into Tamron,” Byrne said flatly. “It would destabilize a fragile situation. War may break out at home at any moment, depending on what happens with the succession.”

“But . . . if my mother believes that I’m trapped in Tamron Court,” Raisa whispered, “wouldn’t she send an army anyway?” In truth, Raisa wasn’t sure of the answer to that question.

“I told her not to risk it, that you were not there,” Byrne said, his gray eyes steady on hers.

“But—but—but—that means that Amon—and all the Gray Wolves—will *die* there,” Raisa cried. “In horrible ways.”

“There is that possibility,” Byrne said quietly.

“Possibility? *Possibility?*” She stood in front of Byrne, hands fisted. “Amon is your son! How could you do that? How *could* you?”

“Amon made this decision for the good of the line, as is his duty,” Byrne said. “I won’t second-guess him.”

Raisa went up on her toes, leaning toward Byrne, her fury ringing in her ears and freeing her tongue. “Did he even have a *choice?*” she demanded. “He told me what you did to him—that magical linkage you forced on him.”

Byrne frowned, rubbing the corner of his eye with his thumb. “Really? He said that?”

Raisa didn’t slow down. “Does he even *have* free will anymore, or is he compelled to sacrifice himself to save the bloody line?”

“Hmmm,” Byrne said, still damnably calm. “Well, I would say he has some free will or he’d not have told you about the bond between queens and captains,” he said.

“What about the Gray Wolves?” Raisa said. “Did *they* have a choice?” She thought of her friends among Amon’s cadets: Hallie, whose two-year-old daughter waited for her in Fells-march. Talia, who would have left her beloved Pearlie behind in Oden’s Ford. And poor Mick, who had offered Raisa his clan-made saddlebag as consolation for losing Amon Byrne.

Tamron Court is standing in for me, she thought. It was arrogant, she knew—the notion that the invasion of Tamron was all

about her. Gerard Montaigne wanted Tamron’s wealth, a bigger army, and a throne to sit upon. She was just the filling in the nougat—a chance to claim the Fells as well.

“We have to go after them,” Raisa said. “There has to be a way to get them out of there. What if—if I showed myself and drew Montaigne off. Or if I offered to negotiate. Or maybe there’s a way to slip between their lines, and . . .”

Raisa didn’t really believe any of these things would work as she spoke them. And Byrne knew it, because he just looked at her impassively until she trailed off.

“We don’t even know if he’s still in the city, or if he’s still alive, Your Highness,” Byrne said softly.

“He’s still alive,” Raisa said. “The linkage goes both ways. I would know if he were dead.”

“The city may have fallen by now,” Byrne continued. “How do you think he would feel if you went to the capital and were captured by Montaigne, and all of his efforts were wasted?”

Unable to contain herself, Raisa kicked the door of the tack room, hard enough to splinter it. Ghost tossed his head, yanking at his tether. Furious tears burned in her eyes, then spilled down her cheeks as she turned back to Byrne.

“Amon Byrne is better than you, better than me; too valuable to throw away, and you know it,” she said, her voice trembling. “He is—and always has been—my very best friend.”

“Then trust him,” Byrne said. “If anyone can get out of the city, he will.”

Raisa rubbed away her tears with the heels of her hands. “Captain Byrne, if anything happens to Amon, I will never, ever forgive you.”

Byrne took hold of her shoulders, gripping them hard, the light from the lanterns gilding his face. “What you can do for Amon now is survive,” he said, his voice husky and strange. “Don’t let them win, Your Highness.”

Raisa strode back across the stable yard toward the inn, her mind churning with worry about Amon and the Gray Wolves, still trying to devise some kind of rescue plan.

It was after closing time, and with any luck, the taproom would have cleared. She’d pack her few belongings and they’d be on their way.

When she looked ahead, she saw Esmerell and Tatina hustling toward her through the rain, lifting their skirts above the mucky ground.

Great, she thought, rolling her eyes. Just what I need.

Then two of the card players Raisa had noticed earlier burst out the back door, charging after the ladies at a dead run.

Raisa’s mind grappled with what she was seeing, and came to a quick conclusion. The men *were* thieves after all, and likely had seen the purse the wealthy Ardenine ladies have been waving around.

“Look out behind you!” Raisa yelled, sprinting forward, yanking her dagger free.

The women didn’t look back, but increased their speed, running faster than Raisa would have expected. The card players were yelling something as they ran. Something Raisa couldn’t make out. She heard the stable door bang open, then shouts and pounding feet behind her.

“Get behind me!” she shouted as the ladies closed the distance between them. But then something slammed into her, throwing

her sideways to the ground. She rolled to her feet in time to see the Ardenine ladies go down under the card players.

Edon Byrne seized Raisa’s shoulders in a viselike grip and held her fast.

It took a moment for Raisa to gather breath enough to speak.

“What are you doing?” she spluttered, struggling to free herself. She was soaked through, muddy and shivering, her teeth chattering.

Slowly, the guards disentangled themselves and stood. The ladies lay flat on their backs, unmoving, blood and rain soaking their fancy dresses.

Run through by the card players.

“Good work,” Edon Byrne said gruffly, nodding at them. “But next time don’t let them get so close to the princess heir.”

The card players yanked their blades free, wiping them on the ladies’ voluminous skirts. One of them knelt and efficiently searched the women. He came up with three knives and a small framed picture. He scanned the picture, then mutely extended it toward Raisa.

It was a portrait of Raisa, done for her name day.

Byrne kicked something away from the two bodies, stooped and picked it up with two fingers.

It was a dagger, delicate and feminine and deadly sharp.