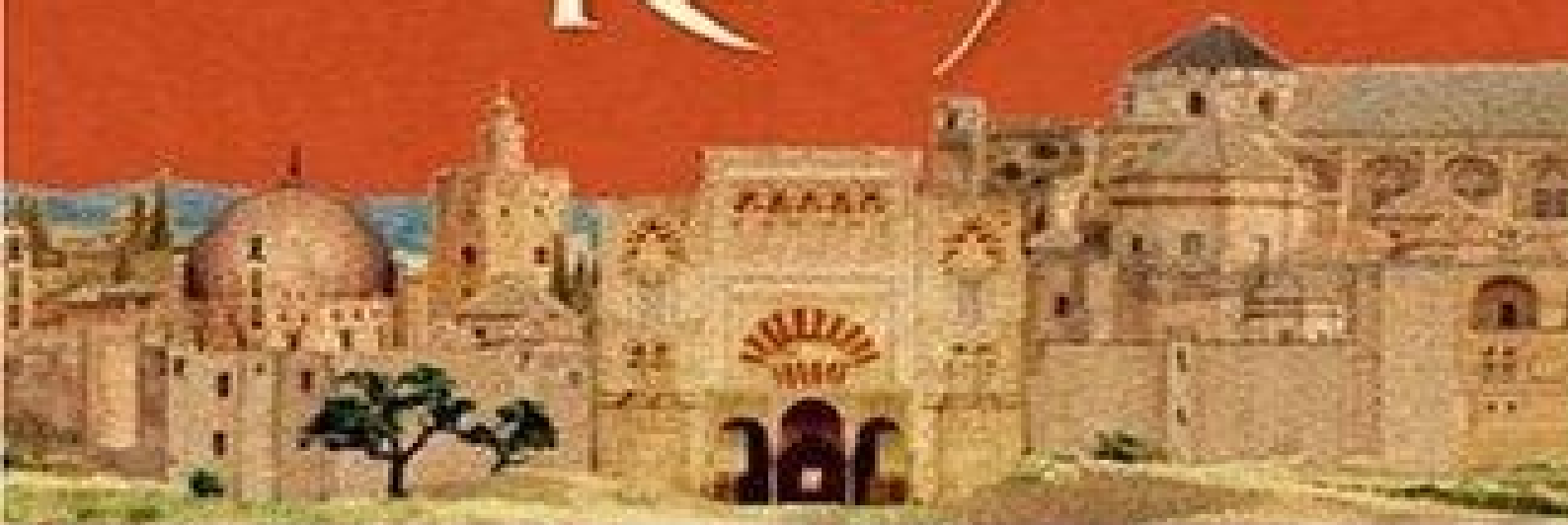


Bestselling author of *The Last Light of the Sun*

GAY GAVRIEL KAY



The LIONS OF AL-RASSAN

"A beautifully wrought, elegantly written adventure." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

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*The evening is deep inside me forever.
Many a blond, northern moonrise,
like a muted reflection, will softly
remind me and remind me again and again.
It will be my bride, my alter ego.
An incentive to find myself. I myself
am the moonrise of the south.*
—Paul Klee, *The Tunisian Diaries*

Prologue

It was just past midday, not long before the third summons to prayer, that Ammar ibn Khairan passed through the Gate of the Bells and entered the palace of Al-Fontina in Silvenes to kill the last of the khalifs of Al-Rassan.

Passing into the Court of Lions he came to the three sets of double doors and paused before those that led to the gardens. There were eunuchs guarding the doors. He knew them by name. They had been dealt with. One of them nodded slightly to him; the other kept his gaze averted. He preferred the second man. They opened the heavy doors and he went through. He heard them swing closed behind him.

In the heat of the day the gardens were deserted. All those still left within the dissolving magnificence of the Al-Fontina would have sought the shade of the innermost rooms. They would be sipping cool sweet wines or using the elaborately long spoons designed by Ziryani to taste sherbets kept frozen in the deep cellars by snow brought down from the mountains. Luxuries from another age meant for very different men and women from those who dwelt here now.

Thinking such thoughts, ibn Khairan walked noiselessly through the Garden of Oranges and, passing through the horseshoe arch, into the Almond Garden and then, beneath another arch, into the Cypress Garden with its one tall, perfect tree reflected in three pools. Each garden was smaller than the one before, each heartbreaking in its loveliness. The Al-Fontina, a poet once had said, had been built to break the heart.

At the end of the long progression he came to the Garden of Desire, smallest and most jewel-like of all. And there, sitting quietly and alone on the broad rim of the fountain, clad in white, was Muzafar, as had been prearranged.

Ibn Khairan bowed in the archway, a habit deeply ingrained. The old, blind man could not see his obeisance. After a moment he moved forward, stepping deliberately on the pathway that led to the fountain.

"Ammar?" Muzafar said, hearing the sound. "They told me you would be here. Is it you? Have you come to lead me away from here? Is it you, Ammar?"

There were many things that could be said. "It is," said ibn Khairan, walking up. He drew his dagger from its sheath. The old man's head lifted suddenly at that, as if he knew the sound. "I have, indeed, come to set you free of this place of ghosts and echoes."

With the words he slid the blade smoothly to the hilt in the old man's heart. Muzafar made no

sound. It had been swift and sure. He could tell the wadjis in their temples, if it ever came to such a thing, that he had made it an easy end.

He laid the body down on the fountain rim, ordering the limbs within the white robe to allow the dead man as much dignity as could be. He cleaned his blade in the fountain, watching the waters swirl briefly red. In the teachings of his people, for hundreds and hundreds of years, going back and away to the deserts of the east where the faith of the Asharites had begun, it was a crime without possibility of assuaging to slay one of the god's anointed khalifs. He looked down at Muzafar, at the round, wrinkled face, sadly irresolute even in death.

He has not been truly anointed, Almalik had said, back in Cartada. All men know this.

There had been four puppet khalifs this year alone, one other here in Silvenes before Muzafar, one in Tudesca, and the poor child in Salos. It was not a situation that could have been allowed to continue. The other three were already dead. Muzafar was only the last.

Only the last. There had been lions once in Al-Rassan, lions upon the dais in this palace that had been built to make men fall to their knees upon marble and alabaster before the dazzling evidence of glory beyond their grasp.

Muzafar had, indeed, never been properly anointed, just as Almalik of Cartada had said. But the thought came to Ammar ibn Khairan as he stood in his twentieth year in the Garden of Desire of the Al-Fontina of Silvenes, cleansing his blade of a man's red blood, that whatever else he did with his life, in the days and nights Ashar and the god saw fit to grant him under the holy circling of their stars, he might ever after be known as the man who slew the last khalif of Al-Rassan.

"You are best with the god among the stars. It will be a time of wolves now," he said to the dead man on the fountain rim before drying and sheathing his blade and walking back through the four perfect, empty gardens to the doors where the bribed eunuchs waited to let him out. On the way he heard one foolish bird singing in the fierce white light of midday, and then he heard the bells begin, summoning all good men to holy prayer.

Part I

One

Always remember that they come from the desert.

Back in the days before Jehane had begun her own practice, in that time when her father could still talk to her, and teach, he had offered those words to her over and over again, speaking of the ruling Asharites among whom they dwelt on sufferance, and labored—as the scattered tribes of the Kindath did everywhere—to create a small space in the world of safety and a measure of repose.

"But we have the desert in our own history, don't we?" she could remember asking once, the question thrown back as a challenge. She had never been an easy pupil, not for him, not for anyone.

"We passed through," Ishak had replied in the beautifully modulated voice. "We sojourned for a time, on our way. We were never truly a people of the dunes. They are. Even here in Al-Rassan, amid gardens and water and trees, the Star-born are never sure of the permanence of such things. They remain in their hearts what they were when they first accepted the teachings of Ashar among the sands. When you are in doubt as to how to understand one of them, remind yourself of this and your way will likely be made clear."

In those days, despite her fractiousness, Jehane's father's words had been as text and holy guide for her. On another occasion, after she had complained for the third time during a tedious morning preparing powders and infusions, Ishak had mildly cautioned that a doctor's life might often be dull, but was not invariably so, and there would be times when she found herself longing for quiet routine.

She was to sharply call to mind both of these teachings before she finally fell asleep at the end of the day that would long afterwards be known in Fezana—with curses, and black candles burned in memory—as The Day of the Moat.

It was a day that would be remembered all her life by Jehane bet Ishak, the physician, for reasons over and above those of her fellow citizens in that proud, notoriously rebellious town: she lost her urine flask in the afternoon, and a part of her heart forever before the moons had set.

The flask, for reasons of family history, was not a trivial matter.

The day had begun at the weekly market by the Cartada Gate. Just past sunrise, Jehane was in the booth by the fountain that had been her father's before her, in time to see the last of the farmers coming in from the countryside with their produce-laden mules. In a white linen robe beneath the physician's green and white awning, she settled in, cross-legged on her cushion, for a morning of seeing patients. Velaz hovered, as ever, behind her in the booth, ready to measure and dispense remedies as she requested them, and to ward off any difficulties a young woman might encounter in a place as tumultuous as the market. Trouble was unlikely, however; Jehane was well-known by now.

A morning at the Cartada Gate involved prescribing mostly for farmers from beyond the walls but there were also city servants, artisans, women bargaining for staples at the market and, not infrequently, those among the high-born too frugal to pay for a private visit, or too proud to be treated at home by one of the Kindath. Such patients never came in person; they would send a household woman bearing a urine flask for diagnosis, and sometimes a script spelled out by a scribe outlining symptoms and complaints.

Jehane's own urine flask, which had been her father's, was prominently visible on the counter beneath the awning. It was a family signature, an announcement. A magnificent example of the glassblower's art, the flask was etched with images of the two moons the Kindath worshipped and the Higher Stars of divination.

In some ways it was an object too beautiful for everyday use, given the unglamorous function it was meant to serve. The flask had been made by an artisan in Lonza six years ago, commissioned by King Almalik of Cartada after Ishak had guided the midwives—from the far side of the birthing screen—through the difficult but successful delivery of Almalik's third son.

When the time had come for the delivery of a fourth son, an even more difficult birth, but also, ultimately, a successful one, Ishak of Fezana, the celebrated Kindath physician, had been given a different, controversial gift by Cartada's king. A more generous offering in its way, but awareness of that did nothing to touch the core of bitterness Jehane felt to this day, four years after. It was not a bitterness that would pass; she knew that with certainty.

She gave a prescription for sleeplessness and another for stomach troubles. Several people stopped to buy her father's remedy for headache. It was a simple compound, though closely guarded, as all physicians' private mixtures were: cloves, myrrh and aloes. Jehane's mother was kept busy preparing that one all week long in the treatment rooms at the front of their home.

The morning passed. Velaz quietly and steadily filled clay pots and vials at the back of the booth as Jehane issued her directions. A flask of urine clear at the bottom but thin and pale at the top told its tale of chest congestion. Jehane prescribed fennel and told the woman to return the next week with another sample.

Ser Rezzoni of Sorenica, a sardonic man, had taught that the essence of the successful physician's practice lay in inducing patients to return. The dead ones, he'd noted, seldom did. Jehane could remember laughing; she had laughed often in those days, studying in far-off Batiara, before the fourth son of Cartada's king had been born.

Velaz dealt with all payments, most often in small coin, sometimes otherwise. One woman from a hamlet nearby, troubled by a variety of recurring ailments, brought a dozen brown eggs every week.

The market was unusually crowded. Stretching her arms and shoulders as she glanced up briefly from steady work, Jehane noted with satisfaction the respectable line of patients in front of her. In the first months after she'd taken over her father's weekly booth here and the treatment rooms at home the patients had been slow to come; now it seemed she was doing almost as well as Ishak had.

The noise level this morning was really quite extraordinary. There had to be some cause for this bustling excitement but Jehane couldn't think what it might be. It was only when she saw three blond and bearded foreign mercenaries arrogantly shouldering their way through the market that she remembered. The new wing of the castle was being consecrated by the wadjis today, and the young prince of Cartada, Almalik's eldest son, who bore his name, was here to receive selected dignitaries of subjugated Fezana. Even in a town notorious for its rebels, social status mattered; those who had received a coveted invitation to the ceremony had been preening for weeks.

Jehane paid little attention to this sort of thing, or to any other nuances of diplomacy and war most of the time. There was a saying among her people: *Whichever way the wind blows, it will rain upon the Kindath*. That pretty well summed up her feelings.

Since the thunderous, echoing fall of the Khalifate in Silvenes fifteen years ago, allegiances and alignments in Al-Rassan had shifted interminably, often several times a year, as petty-kings rose and fell in the cities with numbing regularity. Nor were affairs any clearer in the north, beyond the no-man's-land, where the Jaddite kings of Valledo and Ruenda and Jalona—the two surviving sons and the brother of Sancho the Fat—schemed and warred against each other. It was a waste of time, Jehane had long ago decided, to try to keep track of what former slave had gained an ascendancy here, or which king had poisoned his brother there.

It was becoming warmer in the marketplace as the sun climbed upwards in a blue sky. Not a great surprise; midsummer in Fezana was always hot. Jehane dabbed at her forehead with a square of muslin and brought her mind back to the business at hand. Medicine was her training and her love, her refuge from chaos, and it was her link to her father, now and as long as she lived.

A leather worker she did not recognize stood shyly at the front of the line. He carried a chipped earthenware beaker to serve as a flask. Placing a grimy coin on the counter beside her he grimaced apologetically as he proffered the beaker. "I'm sorry," he whispered, barely audible amid the tumult. "It is all we have. This is from my son. He is eight years old. He is not well."

Velaz, behind her, unobtrusively picked up the coin; it was considered bad form, Ser Rezzoni had taught, for doctors to actually touch their remuneration. That, he had said waspishly, is what servants are for. He had been her first lover as well as her teacher, during her time living and studying abroad in Batiara. He slept with almost all his women students, and a few of the men it had been rumored. He had a wife and three young daughters who doted upon him. A complex, brilliant, angry man, Ser Rezzoni. Kind enough to her, however, after his fashion, out of respect for Ishak.

Jehane smiled up at the leather worker reassuringly. "It doesn't matter what container you bring a sample in. Don't apologize."

By his coloring he appeared to be a Jaddite from the north, living here because the work for skilled artisans was better in Al-Rassan, most probably a convert. The Asharites didn't demand conversions, but the tax burden on Kindath and Jaddite made for a keen incentive to embrace the desert visions of Ashar the Sage.

She transferred the urine sample from the chipped beaker to her father's gorgeous flask, gift of the grateful king whose namesake heir was here today to celebrate an event that further ensured Cartadan

dominance of proud Fezana. On a bustling market morning Jehane had little time to ponder ironies, but they tended to surface nonetheless; her mind worked that way.

As the sample settled in the flask she saw that the urine of the leather worker's son was distinctly rose-colored. She tilted the flask back and forth in the light; in fact, the color was too close to red for comfort. The child had a fever; what else he had was hard to judge.

"Velaz," she murmured, "dilute the absinthe with a quarter of mint. A drop of the cordial for taste. She heard her servant withdraw into the booth to prepare the prescription.

To the leather worker she said, "He is warm to the touch?"

He nodded anxiously. "And dry. He is very dry, doctor. He has difficulty swallowing food."

Briskly, she said, "That is understandable. Give him the remedy we are preparing. Half when you arrive home, half at sundown. Do you understand that?" The man nodded. It was important to ask; some of them, especially the Jaddites from the countryside in the north, didn't understand the concept of fractions. Velaz would make up two separate vials for them.

"Feed him hot soups only today, a little at a time, and the juice of apples if you can. Make him take these things, even if he does not want to. He may vomit later today. That is not alarming unless there is blood with it. If there is blood, send to my house immediately. Otherwise, continue with the soup and the juice until nightfall. If he is dry and hot he needs these things, you understand?" Again the man nodded, his brow furrowed with concentration. "Before you go, give Velaz directions to your home. I will come in the morning tomorrow to see him."

The man's relief was evident, but then a familiar hesitation appeared. "Doctor, forgive me. We have no money to spare for a private consultation."

Jehane grimaced. Probably not a convert then, sorely burdened by the taxes but refusing to surrender his worship of the sun-god, Jad. Who was she, however, to question religious scruples? Nearly a third of her own earnings went to the Kindath tax, and she would never have called herself religious. Few doctors were. Pride, on the other hand, was another matter. The Kindath were the Wanderers, named for the two moons traversing the night sky among the stars, and as far as Jehane was concerned, they had not travelled so far, through so many centuries, only to surrender their long history here in Al-Rassan. If a Jaddite felt the same about his god, she could understand.

"We will deal with the matter of payment when the time comes. For the moment, the question is whether the child will need to be bled, and I cannot very well do that here in the marketplace."

She heard a ripple of laughter from someone standing by the booth. She ignored that, made her voice more gentle. Kindath physicians were known to be the most expensive in the peninsula. As well we should be, Jehane thought. We are the only ones who *know* anything. It was wrong of her, though, to chide people for concerns about cost. "Never fear." She smiled up at the leather worker. "I will not bleed both you and the boy."

More general laughter this time. Her father had always said that half the task of doctors was to make the patient *believe* in them. A certain kind of laughter helped, Jehane had found. It conveyed a sense of confidence. "Be sure you know both the moons and the Higher Stars of his birth hour. If I am going to draw blood I'll want to work out a time."

"My wife will know," the man whispered. "Thank you. Thank you, doctor."

"Tomorrow," she said crisply.

Velaz reappeared from the back with the medicine, gave it to the man, and took away her flask to empty it into the pail beside the counter. The leather worker paused beside him, nervously giving directions for the morrow.

"Who's next?" Jehane asked, looking up again.

There were a great many of King Almalik's mercenaries in the market now. The blond northern giants from far-off Karch or Waleska and, even more oppressively, Muwardi tribesmen ferried across the straits from the Majriti sands, their faces half-veiled, dark eyes unreadable, except when contempt showed clearly.

Almost certainly this was a deliberate public display by Cartada. There were probably soldiers strolling all through town, under orders to be seen. She belatedly remembered hearing that the prince had arrived two days ago with five hundred men. Far too many soldiers for a ceremonial visit. You could take a small city or launch a major raid across the *tagra*—the no-man's-land—with five hundred good men.

They needed soldiers here. The current governor of Fezana was a puppet of Almalik's, supported by a standing army. The mercenary troops were here ostensibly to guard against incursions from the Jaddite kingdoms, or brigands troubling the countryside. In reality their presence was the only thing that kept the city from rising in revolt again. And now, of course, with a new-built wing in the castle there would be more of them.

Fezana had been a free city from the fall of the Khalifate until seven years ago. Freedom was a memory, anger a reality now; they had been taken in Cartada's second wave of expansion. The siege had lasted half a year, then someone had opened the Salos Gate to the army outside one night as winter was coming, with its enforced end to the siege. They never learned who the traitor was. Jehane remembered hiding with her mother in the innermost room of their home in the Kindath Quarter, hearing screams and the shouts of battle and the crackle of fire. Her father had been on the other side of the walls, hired by the Cartadans a year before to serve as physician to Almalik's army; such was a doctor's life. Ironies again.

Human corpses, crawling with flies, had hung from the walls above this gate and the other five for weeks after the taking of the city, the smell hovering over fruit and vegetable stalls like a pestilence.

Fezana became part of the rapidly growing kingdom of Cartada. So, already, had Lonza, and Aljais even Silvenes itself, with the sad, plundered ruins of the Al-Fontina. So, later, did Seria and Ardeno. Now even proud Ragosa on the shores of Lake Serrana was under threat, as were Elvira and Tudesca to the south and southwest. In the fragmented Al-Rassan of the petty-kings, Almalik of Cartada was named the Lion by the poets of his court.

Of all the conquered cities, it was Fezana that rebelled most violently: three times in seven years. Each time Almalik's mercenaries had come back, the blond ones and the veiled ones, and each time flies and carrion birds had feasted on corpses spread-eagled on the city walls.

But there were other ironies, keener ones, of late. The fierce Lion of Cartada was being forced to acknowledge the presence of beasts equally dangerous. The Jaddites of the north might be fewer in number and torn amongst themselves, but they were not blind to opportunity. For two years now Fezana had been paying tribute money to King Ramiro of Valledo. Almalik had been unable to refuse not if he wanted to avoid the risk of war with the strongest of the Jaddite kings while policing the cities of his fractious realm, dealing with the outlaw bands that roamed the southern hills, and with King Badir of Ragosa wealthy enough to hire his own mercenaries.

Ramiro of Valledo might rule a rough society of herdsmen and primitive villagers, but it was also a society organized for war, and the Horsemen of Jad were not to be trifled with. Only the might of the khalifs of Al-Rassan, supreme in Silvenes for three hundred years, had sufficed to conquer most of the peninsula and confine the Jaddites to the north—and that confining had demanded raid after raid through the high plateaus of the no-man's-land, and not every raid had been successful.

If the three Jaddite kings ever stopped warring amongst each other, brother against uncle against brother, Jehane thought, Cartada's conquering Lion—along with all the lesser kings of Al-Rassan—might be muzzled and gelded soon enough.

Which would not necessarily be a good thing at all.

One more irony, bitterness in the taste of it. It seemed she had to hope for the survival of the man she hated as no other. All winds might bring rain for the Kindath, but here among the Asharites of Al-Rassan they had acceptance and a place. After centuries of wandering the earth like their moons through heaven, that meant a great deal. Taxed heavily, bound by restrictive laws, they could nonetheless live freely, seek their fortunes, worship as they wished, both the god and his sisters. And some among the Kindath had risen high indeed among the courts of the petty-kings.

No Kindath were high in the counsels of the Children of Jad in this peninsula. Hardly any of them were left in the north. History—and they had a long history—had taught the Kindath that they might be tolerated and even welcomed among the Jaddites when times were prosperous and peaceful, but when the skies darkened, when the rain winds came, the Kindath became Wanderers again. They were exiled, or forcibly converted, or they died in the lands where the sun-god held sway.

Tribute—the *parias*—was collected by a party of northern horsemen twice a year. Fezana was expensively engaged in paying the price of being too near to the tagra lands.

The poets were calling the three hundred years of the Khalifate a Golden Age now. Jehane had heard the songs and the spoken verses. In those vanished days, however people might have chafed at the absolute power or the extravagant splendor of the court at Silvenes, with the wadjis in their temples bemoaning decadence and sacrilege, in the raiding season the ancient roads to the north had witnessed the passage of the massed armies of Al-Rassan, and then their return with plunder and slaves.

No unified army went north into the no-man's-land now, and if the steppes of those empty places saw soldiers in numbers any time soon it was more likely to be the Horsemen of Jad the sun-god. Jehane could almost convince herself that even those last, impotent khalifs of her childhood had been symbols of a golden time.

She shook her head and turned from watching the mercenaries. A quarry laborer was next in line; she read his occupation in the chalk-white dust coating his clothing and hands. She also read, unexpectedly, gout in his pinched features and the awkward tilt of his stance, even before she glanced at the thick, milky sample of urine he held out to her. It was odd for a laborer to have gout; in the quarries the usual problems were with throat and lungs. With real curiosity she looked from the flask back up at the man.

As it happened, the quarryman was a patient Jehane never did treat. So, too, in fact, was the leather worker's child.

A sizable purse dropped onto the counter before her.

"Do forgive this intrusion, doctor," a voice said. "May I be permitted to impose upon your time?" The light tones and court diction were incongruous in the marketplace. Jehane looked up. This was, she realized, the man who had laughed before.

The rising sun was behind him, so her first image was haloed against the light and imprecise: a smooth-shaven face in the current court fashion, brown hair. She couldn't see his eyes clearly. He smelled of perfume and he wore a sword. Which meant he was from Cartada. Swords were forbidden to the citizens of Fezana, even within their own walls.

On the other hand, she was a free woman going about her lawful affairs in her own place of business, and because of Almalik's gifts to her father she had no need to snatch at a purse, even a large purse—as this one manifestly was.

Irritated, she breached protocol sufficiently to pick it up and flip it back to him. "If your need is for a physician's assistance you are not intruding. That is why I am here. But there are, as you will have noted, people ahead of you. When you have, in due course, arrived at the front of this line I shall be pleased to assist, if I can." Had she been less vexed she might have been amused at how formal her own language had become. She still couldn't see him clearly. The quarryman had sidled nervously to one side.

"I greatly fear I have not the time for either alternative," the Cartadan murmured. "I will have to take you from your patients here, which is why I offer a purse for compensation."

"Take me?" Jehane snapped. She rose to her feet. Irritation had given way to anger. Several of the Muwardis, she realized, were now strolling over towards her stall. She was aware of Velaz directly behind her. She would have to be careful; he would challenge anyone for her.

The courtier smiled placatingly and quickly held up a gloved hand. "Escort you, I ought rather to have said. I entreat forgiveness. I had almost forgotten I was in Fezana, where such niceties matter greatly." He seemed amused more than anything else, which angered her further.

She could see him clearly now that she was standing. His eyes were blue, like her own—as unusual in the Asharites as it was among the Kindath. The hair was thick, curling in the heat. He was *very* expensively dressed, rings on several of his gloved fingers and a single pearl earring which was certainly worth more than the collective worldly goods of everyone in the line in front of her. More gems studded his belt and sword hilt; some were even sewn into the leather of the slippers on his feet. A dandy, Jehane thought, a mincing court dandy from Cartada.

The sword was a real one though, not a symbol, and his eyes, now that she was looking into them, were unsettlingly direct.

Jehane had been raised, by her mother and father both, to show deference where it was due and earned, and not otherwise.

"Such 'niceties,' as you prefer to call simple courtesy, ought to matter in Cartada as much as they do here," she said levelly. She pushed a strand of hair back from her eyes with the back of her hand. "I am here in the market until the midday bells have rung. If you have genuine need of a private consultation I will refer to my afternoon appointments and see when I am available."

He shook his head politely. Two of the veiled soldiers had come up to them. "As I believe I did mention, we have not time for that." There still seemed to be something amusing him. "I should perhaps say that I am not here for an affliction of my own, much as it might gratify any man to be subject to your care." There was a ripple of laughter.

Jehane was not amused. This sort of thing she knew how to deal with, and was about to, but the Cartadan went on without pausing: "I have just come from the house of a patient of yours. Husari ibn Musa is ill. He begs you to come to him this morning, before the consecration ceremony begins at the castle, that he might not be forced to miss being presented to the prince."

"Oh," Jehane said.

Ibn Musa had kidney stones, recurring ones. He had been her father's patient and one of the very first to accept her as Ishak's successor. He was wealthy, soft as the silk in which he traded, and he enjoyed rich foods far too much for his own good. He was also kind, surprisingly unpretentious, intelligent, and his early patronage had meant a great deal to her practice. Jehane liked him, and worried about him.

It was certain, given his wealth, that the silk merchant would have been on the list of citizens honored with an invitation to meet the prince of Cartada. Some things were becoming clear. Not all.

"Why did he send you? I know most of his people."

"But he didn't send me," the man demurred, with easy grace. "I offered to come. He warned me of your weekly market routine. Would you have left this booth at the behest of a servant? Even one you knew?"

Jehane had to shake her head. "Only for a birth or an accident."

The Cartadan smiled, showing white teeth against the tanned, smooth features. "Ibn Musa is, Asha and the holy stars be thanked, not presently with child. Nor has any untoward accident befallen him. His condition is the one for which I understand you have treated him before. He swears no one else in Fezana knows how to alleviate his sufferings. And today, of course, is an ... exceptional day. Will you not deviate from your custom this one time and permit me the honor of escorting you to him?"

Had he offered the purse again she would have refused. Had he not looked calm and very serious as he awaited her reply, she would have refused. Had it been anyone other than Husari ibn Musa entreating her presence ...

Looking back, afterwards, Jehane was acutely aware that the smallest of gestures in that moment could have changed everything. She might so easily have told the smooth, polished Cartadan that she attend upon ibn Musa later that day. If so—the thought was inescapable—she would have had a very different life.

Better or worse? No man or woman could answer that. The winds blew, bringing rain, yes, but sometimes also sweeping away the low, obscuring clouds to allow the flourishes of sunrise or sunset seen from a high place, or those bright, hard, clear nights when the blue moon and the white seemed to ride like queens across a sky strewn with stars in glittering array.

Jehane instructed Velaz to close and lock the booth and follow her. She told all those left in the line to give their names to Velaz, that she would see them free of charge in her treatment rooms or at the next week's market. Then she took her urine flask and let the stranger take her off to ibn Musa's house.

The stranger.

The stranger was Ammar ibn Khairan of Aljais. The poet, the diplomat, the soldier. The man who had killed the last khalif of Al-Rassan. She learned his name when they arrived at her patient's house. It was the first great shock of that day. Not the last. She could never decide if she would have gone with him, had she known.

A different life, if she hadn't gone. Less wind, less rain. Perhaps none of the visions offered those who stand in the high, windy places of the world.

Ibn Musa's steward had briskly admitted her and then greeted her escort unctuously by name, almost scraping the floor with his forehead in obeisance, strewing phrases of gratitude like rose petals. The Cartadan had managed to interpose a quiet apology for not introducing himself, and then sketched a court bow of his own to her. It was not customary to bow to Kindath infidels. In fact, according to the wadjis, it was forbidden to Asharites, subject to a public lashing.

The bejewelled man bowing to her was not likely to be lashed any time soon. Jehane knew who he was as soon as she heard the name. Depending upon one's views, Ammar ibn Khairan was one of the most celebrated men or one of the most notorious in the peninsula.

It was said, and sung, that when scarcely come to manhood he had single-handedly scaled the wall of the Al-Fontina in Silvenes, slain a dozen guards within, fought through to the Cypress Garden to kill the khalif, then battled his way out again, alone, dead bodies strewn about him. For this service, the grateful, newly proclaimed king in Cartada had rewarded ibn Khairan with immediate wealth and increasing power through the years, including, of late, the formal role of guardian and advisor to the prince.

A status which brought a different sort of power. Too much so, some had been whispering. Almalik of Cartada was an impulsive, subtle, jealous man and was not said, in truth, to be particularly fond of his eldest son. Nor was the prince reputed to dote upon his father. It made for a volatile situation. The rumors surrounding the dissolute, flamboyant Ammar ibn Khairan—and there were always rumors surrounding him—had been of a somewhat altered sort in the past year.

Though none of them came remotely close to explaining why this man should have personally offered to summon a physician for a Fezanan silk merchant, just so the merchant could be enabled to attend a courtly reception. As to that, Jehane had only the thinly veiled hint of amusement in ibn Khairan's face to offer a clue—and it wasn't much of a clue.

In any event, she stopped thinking about such things, including the unsettling presence of the man beside her, when she entered the bedchamber and saw her longtime patient. One glance was enough.

Husari ibn Musa was lying in bed, propped on many pillows. A slave was energetically beating a fan in the air, trying to cool the room and its suffering occupant. Ibn Musa could not have been called a courageous man. He was white-faced, there were tears on his cheeks, he was whimpering with pain and the anticipation of worse to come.

Her father had taught her that it was not only the brave or the resolute who were deserving of a doctor's sympathy. Suffering came and was real, however one's constitution and nature responded to it. A glance at her afflicted patient served to focus Jehane abruptly and ease her own agitation.

Moving briskly to the bedside, Jehane adopted her most decisive tones. "Husari ibn Musa, you are not going anywhere today. You know these symptoms by now as well as I do. What were you thinking? That you would bound from bed, straddle a mule and ride off to a reception?"

The portly man on the bed groaned piteously at the very thought of such exertion and reached for her hand. They had known each other a long time; she allowed him to do that. "But Jehane, I *must* go. This is the event of the year in Fezana. How can I not be present? What can I do?"

"You can send your most fulsome regrets and advise that your physician has ordered you to remain in bed. If you wish, for some perverse reason, to offer details, you may have your steward say that you are about to pass a stone this afternoon or this evening in extreme pain, controlled only by such medications as leave you unable to stand upright or speak coherently. If, anticipating such a condition, you still wish to attend a Cartadan function I can only assume your mind has already been disjointed by your suffering. If you wish to be the first person to collapse and die in the new wing of the castle you will have to do so against my instructions."

She used this tone with him much of the time. With many of her patients, in truth. In a female physician men, even powerful ones, often seemed to want to hear their mothers giving orders. Ishak had induced obedience to his treatments by the gravity of his manner and the weight of his sonorous, beautiful voice. Jehane—a woman, and still young—had had to evolve her own methods.

Ibn Musa turned a despairing face towards the Cartadan courtier. "You see?" he said plaintively. "What can I do with such a doctor?"

Ammar ibn Khairan seemed amused again. Jehane found that irritation was helping her deal with the earlier feeling of being overwhelmed by his identity. She still had no idea what the man found so diverting about all of this, unless this was simply the habitual pose and manner of a cynical courtier. Perhaps he was bored by the usual court routine; the god's sisters knew, *she* would have been.

"You could consult another physician, I suppose," ibn Khairan said, thoughtfully stroking his chin. "But my guess, based on all-too-brief experience, is that this exquisite young woman knows exactly what she is doing." He favored her with another of the brilliant smiles. "You will have to tell me where you were trained, when we have greater leisure."

Jehane didn't like being treated as a woman when she was functioning as a doctor. "Little to tell," she said briefly. "Abroad at the university of Sorenica in Batiara, with Ser Rezzoni, for two years. Then with my father here."

"Your father?" he asked politely.

"Ishak ben Yonannon," Jehane said, and was deeply pleased to see this elicit a reaction he could not mask. From a courtier in the service of Almalik of Cartada there would almost have to be a response to Ishak's name. It was no secret, the story of what had happened.

"Ah," said Ammar ibn Khairan quietly, arching his eyebrows. He regarded her for a moment. "I see the resemblance now. You have your father's eyes and mouth. I ought to have made the association before. You will have been even better trained here than in Sorenica."

"I am pleased that I seem to meet your standards," Jehane said drily. He grinned again, unfazed, rather too clearly enjoying her attempted sallies. Behind him, Jehane saw the steward's mouth gape at her impertinence. They were awed by the Cartadan, of course. Jehane supposed she should be, as well. In truth, she was, more than a little. No one needed to *know* that, however.

"The lord ibn Khairan has been most generous with his time on my behalf," Husari murmured faintly from the bed. "He came this morning, by appointment, to examine some silks for purchase and found me ... as you see. When he learned I feared not being able to attend the reception this afternoon he insisted that my presence was important"—there was pride in the voice, audible through the pain—"and he offered to try to lure my stubborn physician to my side."

"And now she is here, and would stubbornly request that all those in this room save the slave and your steward be so kind as to leave us." Jehane turned to the Cartadan. "I'm sure one of ibn Musa's factors can assist you in the matter of silk."

"Doubtless," the man said calmly. "I take it, then, that you are of the view that your patient ought not to attend upon the prince this afternoon?"

"He could die there," Jehane said bluntly. It was unlikely, but certainly possible, and sometimes people needed to be shocked into accepting a physician's orders.

The Cartadan was not shocked. If anything, he seemed once more to be in the grip of his private source of diversion. Jehane heard a sound from beyond the door. Velaz had arrived, with her medications.

Ammar ibn Khairan heard it too. "You have work to do. I will take my leave, as requested. Failing an ailment that would allow me to spend the day in your care I am afraid I must attend this consecration in the castle." He turned to the man in the bed. "You need not send a messenger, ibn Musa. I will convey your regrets myself with a report of your condition. No offense will be taken, trust me. No one, least of all Prince Almalik, would want you to die passing a stone in the new courtyard." He bowed to ibn Musa and then a second time to Jehane—to the steward's visible displeasure—and withdrew.

There was a little silence. Amid the chatter of marketplace or temple, Jehane unexpectedly remembered, it was reported that the high-born women of Cartada—and some of the men, the whispers went—had been known to seriously injure each other in quarrels over the companionship of Ammar ibn Khairan. Two people had died, or was it three?

Jehane bit her lip. She shook her head as if to clear it, astonished at herself. This was the sheerest, most idle sort of gossip to be calling to mind, the kind of talk to which she had never paid attention in her life. A moment later Velaz hurried in and she set to work, gratefully, at her trade. Softening pain, prolonging life, offering a hope of ease where little might otherwise lie.

One hundred and thirty-nine citizens of Fezana assembled in the newest wing of the castle that afternoon. Throughout Al-Rassan, not long after, what ensued became known as the Day of the Moat. This was the way of it.

The newly finished part of Fezana's castle was of a most unusual and particular design. A large dormitory for quartering the new Muwardi troops led to an equally large refectory for feeding them and an adjacent temple for prayers. The notorious Ammar ibn Khairan, who accompanied the guests through these rooms, was much too polite to make specific mention of the reason for further military presence in Fezana, but none of the assembled dignitaries of the town could possibly escape the significance of such extensive facilities.

Ibn Khairan, offering undeniably witty and impeccably courteous commentary, was also too discreet to draw anyone's attention, particularly during a celebration, to the ongoing indications of unrest and subversion in the city. A certain number of those passing through the castle, however, exchanged wary, sidelong glances with each other. What they were seeing, clearly, was meant to be intimidating.

In fact, it was a little more than that.

The odd nature of the new wing's design became even more apparent when they passed—a magnificently dressed herd of prosperous men—through the refectory to the near end of a long corridor. The narrow tunnel, ibn Khairan explained, designed for defensive purposes, led to the courtyard where the wadjis were to perform the consecration and where Prince Almalik, heir to Cartada's ambitious kingdom, was waiting to receive them.

The aristocracy and most successful merchants of Fezana were individually escorted by Muwardi soldiers down that dark corridor. Approaching the end of it each, in turn, could discern a blazing of sunlight. Each of them paused there, squinting, almost sightless on the threshold of light, while a herald announced their proffered names with satisfying resonance.

As they passed, blinking, into the blinding light and stepped forward to offer homage to the hazily perceived, white-robed figure seated on a cushion in the midst of the courtyard, each of the guests was sweepingly beheaded by one of two Muwardi tribesmen standing on either side of the tunnel's arch.

The Muwardis, not really strangers to this sort of thing, enjoyed their labors perhaps more than they ought to have done. There were, of course, no wadjis waiting in the courtyard; the castle wing was receiving a different sort of consecration.

One by one, through the course of a scorching hot, cloudless summer's afternoon, the elite of Fezanan society made their way along that dark, cool tunnel, and then, dazzled by the return to sunlight, followed the herald's ringing proclamation of their names into the white courtyard where they were slain. The Muwardis had been carefully chosen. No mistakes were made. No one cried out.

The toppling bodies were swiftly seized by other veiled tribesmen and dragged to the far end of the courtyard where a round tower overlooked the new moat created by diverting the nearby Tavares River. The bodies of the dead men were thrown into the water from a low window in the tower. The severed heads were tossed carelessly onto a bloody pile not far from where the prince of Cartada sat, ostensibly waiting to receive the most prominent citizens of the most difficult of the cities he was on day to rule, if he lived long enough.

As it happened, the prince, whose relations with his father were indeed not entirely cordial, had not been informed about this central, long-planned aspect of the afternoon's agenda. King Almalik of Cartada had more than one purpose to what he was doing that day. The prince had, in fact, asked where the wadjis were. No one had been able to answer him. After the first man appeared and was slain, his severed head landing some distance from his toppling body, the prince offered no further questions.

Part of the way through the afternoon's nearly silent, murderous progression under the blazing sun, around the time the carrion birds began to appear in numbers, circling above the water, it was noted by some of the soldiers in the increasingly bloody courtyard that the prince seemed to have developed an odd, disfiguring twitch above his left eye. For the Muwardis, this was a contemptible sign of weakness. He did stay on his cushion though, they noted. And he never moved, or spoke, through the entirety of what was done. He watched one hundred and thirty-nine men die doing formal obeisance to him.

He never lost that nervous tic. During times of stress or elation it would return, an infallible signal to those who knew him well that he was experiencing intense emotion, no matter how he might try to hide the fact. It was also an inescapable reminder—because all of Al-Rassan was soon to learn this story—of a blood-soaked summer afternoon in Fezana.

The peninsula had seen its share of violent deeds, from the time of the Asharite conquest and before, but this was something special, something to be remembered. The Day of the Moat. One of the legacies of Almalik I, the Lion of Cartada. Part of his son's inheritance.

The slaughter did not end until some time after the fifth bells had called the pious again to their prayers. By then the number of birds over the river and moat had made it evident that something untoward was taking place. A few curious children had gone outside the walls and circled around to the north to see what was bringing so many birds. They carried word back into the city. There were headless bodies in the water. Not long after that the screaming began in the houses and the streets of Fezana.

Such distracting sounds did not penetrate the castle walls of course, and the birds could not be seen from within the handsome, arcaded refectory. After the last of the assembled guests had made his way from there along the tunnel, Ammar ibn Khairan, the man who had killed the last khalif of Al-Rassan, went alone down that corridor to the courtyard. The sun was over to the west by then, the light toward which he walked through a long, cool darkness was gentle, welcoming, almost worthy of a poem.

Two

After somehow coping with the disastrous incident at the very beginning of their ride south, Alvar had been finding the journey the most exhilarating time of his life. This did not come as a surprise; he had nourished dreams of this for years, and reality doesn't invariably shatter a young man's dreams. Not immediately, at any rate.

Had he been of a slightly less rational nature, he might even have given fuller rein to the fantasy he briefly entertained as they broke camp after the dawn invocation on their fifth morning south of the River Duric: that he had died and arrived, by the grace of Jad, at the Paradise of Warriors, and would be allowed to ride behind Rodrigo Belmonte, the Captain, through the plains and steppes of summer forever.

The river was far behind them, and the walls of Carcasia. They had passed the wooden stockade forts of Baeza and Lobar, small, fledgling outposts in emptiness. The company rode now through the wild, high, bare sweep of the no-man's-land, dust rising behind and the sun beating down upon them—fifty of Jad's own horsemen, journeying to the fabled cities of the Asharites at the king of Valledo's command.

And young Alvar de Pellino was one of those fifty, chosen, after scarcely a year among the riders at Esteren, to accompany the great Rodrigo—the Captain himself—on a tribute mission to Al-Rassan. There were miracles in the world, truly, bestowed without explanation, unless his mother's prayers or her pilgrimage to holy Vasca's Isle had been answered by the god behind the sun.

Since that was at least a possibility, each morning now at dawn Alvar faced east for the invocation and offered thanks to Jad with a full heart, vowing anew upon the iron of the sword his father had given him to be worthy of the god's trust. And, of course, the Captain's.

There were so many young riders in the army of King Ramiro. Horsemen from all over Valledo, some with splendid armor and magnificent horses, some with lineage going back to the Old Ones who had ruled the whole peninsula and named it Esperana, who first learned the truths of the sun-god and built the straight roads. And almost every one of those men would have fasted a week, would have forsworn women and wine, would have seriously contemplated murder for the chance to be trained by the Captain, to be under the cool, grey-eyed scrutiny of Rodrigo Belmonte for three whole weeks. To be, if only for this one mission, numbered among his company.

A man could dream, you see. Three weeks might be only a beginning, with more to follow, the world opening up like a peeled and quartered orange. A young horseman could lie down at night on his saddle blanket and look up at the bright stars worshipped by the followers of Ashar. He could imagine himself cutting a shining swath through the ranks of the infidels to save the Captain himself from danger and death, being saluted and marked by Rodrigo in the midst of roaring battle, and then after, victorious, drinking unmixed wine at the Captain's side, being honored and made welcome among his company.

A young man could dream, could he not?

The problem, for Alvar, was that such immensely satisfying images had been giving way, in the almost-silence of night, or the long rhythms of a day's hard riding under the god's sun, to the vivid, excruciating memory of what had happened the morning they set out from Esteren. To a recollection of the moment, in particular, when young Alvar de Pellino—heart's pride and joy of his parents and three sisters—had chosen the wrong place entirely to unbutton his trousers and relieve himself before the company mounted up to ride.

It ought to have been a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

They had assembled at dawn in a newly built sidecourt of the palace at Esteren. Alvar, almost giddy with excitement and the simultaneous effort not to reveal it, had been attempting to remain as inconspicuous as possible. He was not a shy or diffident young man by nature, but even now, at the very moment of departure, a part of him feared, with lurid apprehension, that if someone noticed him—Lain Nunez, for example, the Captain's lean old companion-at-arms—they might declare Alvar's presence an obvious error of some kind, and he'd be left behind. He would, of course, have no choice but to kill himself if such a thing happened.

With fifty men and their horses and the laden pack mules in the enclosed space of the courtyard it was easy enough to keep a low profile. It was cool in the yard; something that might have deceived a stranger to the peninsula, a mercenary from Ferrieres or Waleska, say. It would be very hot later, Alvar knew. It was always hot in summer. There was a great deal of noise and men were bustling back and forth carrying planks of wood, tools, wheeling barrows of brick: King Ramiro was expanding his palace.

Alvar checked his saddle and saddlebags for the twentieth time and carefully avoided meeting anyone's eye. He tried to look older than his years, to convey the impression that he was, if anything, trifle bored by a mission as routine as this one. He was intelligent enough to doubt he was fooling anyone.

When Count Gonzalez de Rada walked unannounced into the courtyard, dressed in crimson and black—even at dawn among horses—Alvar felt his feverish anxiety rise to an even higher level. He

had never seen the constable of Valledo before, except at a distance. A brief silence fell over Rodrigo's company, and when their bustle of preparation resumed it had a subtly altered quality. Alvar experienced the stirrings of inescapable curiosity and sternly tried to suppress them.

He saw the Captain and Lain Nunez observe the count's arrival and exchange a glance. Rodrigo stepped a little aside from the others to await the man who'd replaced him as constable when King Ramiro was crowned. The count's attendants stopped at a word and Gonzalez de Rada approached alone. He was smiling broadly. The Captain, Alvar saw, was not. Behind Rodrigo, Lain Nunez abruptly turned his head and spat deliberately into the dirt of the yard.

At this point, Alvar decided that it would be ill-mannered to observe them further, even out of the corner of his eye—as he noticed the others doing while they pretended to busy themselves with their horses or gear. A Horseman of Jad, he told himself firmly, had no business concerning himself with the words and affairs of the great. Alvar virtuously turned his back upon the forthcoming encounter and walked to a corner of the yard to attend to his own pressing business in private, on the far side of the hay wagon.

Why Count Gonzalez de Rada and Ser Rodrigo Belmonte should have elected to stroll together, a moment later, to the shade of that same wagon would forever after remain one of the enduring mysteries of the world Jad had created, as far as Alvar de Pellino was concerned.

The two men were known throughout the three Jaddite kingdoms of Esperana to have no love for one another. Even the youngest soldiers, new to the king's army, managed to hear *some* of the court stories. The tale of how Rodrigo Belmonte had demanded at the coronation of King Ramiro that the new king swear an oath of noncomplicity in the death of his brother before Ser Rodrigo would offer his own oath of allegiance was one that every one of them knew. It was a part of the legend of the Captain.

It might even be true, Alvar had cynically murmured to some drinking companions one night in a soldier's tavern. He was already becoming known for remarks like that. It was a good thing he knew how to fight. His father had warned him, more than once back on the farm, that a quick tongue could be more of a hindrance than it was an asset in the army of Valledo.

Clever remarks by young soldiers notwithstanding, what *was* true was that although Rodrigo Belmonte did swear his oath of fealty and King Ramiro accepted him as his man, it was Gonzalez de Rada who was named by the new king as his constable—the office Rodrigo had held for the late King Raimundo. It was, therefore, Count Gonzalez who was formally responsible, among other things, for overseeing the selection and promotion of young men throughout Valledo to posts in the king's army.

Not that many of the younger horsemen had been observed to deviate greatly from the collective view that if you wanted to be properly trained you did whatever you could to ride with the Captain. And if you wanted to be numbered among the elite soldiers of the peninsula, of the world, you offered money, land, your sisters, your own young body if need be, as a bribe to whomever could get you into Rodrigo's band.

Not that anyone *could* get you in, for any of those offerings. The Captain made his own choices, often unexpected ones, with gap-toothed old Lain Nunez his only counsellor. Lain was manifestly uninterested in the alleged pleasures of boys, and the Captain ... well, the very thought was near to sacrilege, besides which, Miranda Belmonte d'Alveda was the most beautiful woman in the world. So all the young men in Esteren agreed, though almost none of them had ever seen her.

On the morning he stood peeing against a wagon wheel in a sidecourt of Esteren's palace and overheard certain things he ought not to have heard, Alvar de Pellino was one of those who had never

met the Captain's wife. He hadn't met anyone, really. He was less than a year in from a farm in the northwest. ~~He still couldn't believe they were going to let him ride with them this morning.~~

He heard footsteps and voices approaching from the far side of the wagon; that was not of great concern. Some men might have to be alone to empty their bladder or bowels; they didn't last long in an army. But then, on that very thought, Alvar's groin muscles clenched in a spasm so hard they cut off the splashing flow of his water. He gasped, recognizing the Captain's wry tones, and then realized that the second man's voice—the one that sounded like slow honey being poured—belonged to Count Gonzalez.

With a decision to be swiftly made, Alvar de Pellino made what turned out to be the wrong one. Panic-stricken, irrationally preoccupied with remaining unnoticed, Alvar almost injured himself holding in the last of his water and kept silent. He hoped, fervently, that the two men were only here to exchange parting pleasantries.

"I could arrange to have your sons killed and your ranch burned," Gonzalez de Rada said, pleasantly enough, "if you make any trouble about this."

Alvar decided that it was by far the wisest course not to breathe for a time.

"Try it," the Captain said briskly. "The boys could use some practice against assault, however incompetent. But before you leave, do explain how I would be the one making trouble and not your part of a brother."

"If a de Rada chooses to go raiding in Al-Rassan, what business is it of yours, Belmonte?"

"Ah. Well. If such is the case, why bother asking me to close my eyes and pretend not to see him?"

"I am merely trying to save you an embarrassing—"

"Don't assume *everyone* else is a fool, de Rada. I'm collecting tribute from Fezana for the king. The only legitimacy to such a claim is that Ramiro has formally guaranteed the security of the city and its countryside. Not only from brigands, or his brother in Ruenda, or the other petty-kings in Al-Rassan, but from buffoons in his own country. If your brother wants to play at raiding games for the fun of it, he'd best not do it on my watch. If I see him anywhere in the country around Fezana, I'll deal with him in the name of the king. You'll be doing him a kindness if you make that clear." There was nothing wry or ironic, no hint of anything but iron in the voice now.

There was a silence. Alvar could hear Lain Nunez barking instructions over by the horses. He sounded angry. He often did. It became necessary, despite all his best efforts, to breathe. Alvar did so as quietly as he could.

"Doesn't it cause you some *concern*," Gonzalez de Rada said in a deceptively grave, an almost gentle tone, "to be riding off into infidel lands after speaking so rashly to the constable of Valledo, leaving your poor wife alone on a ranch with children and ranch hands?"

"In a word," said the Captain, "no. For one thing, you value your own life too much to make a real enemy of me. I will not be subtle about this: if any man I can trace to your authority is found within half a day's ride of my ranch I will know how to proceed and I will. I hope you understand me. I am speaking about killing you. For another thing, I may have my own thoughts about our king's ascension but I believe him to be a fair man. What, think you, will Ramiro do when a messenger reports to him the precise words of this conversation?"

Gonzalez de Rada sounded amused. "You would actually try your word against mine with the king?"

"Think, man," the Captain said impatiently. Alvar knew that tone already. "He doesn't *have* to believe me. But once word of your threat does reach him—and in public, I promise you—what can the king do should any harm befall my family?"

There was a silence again. When de Rada next spoke the amusement was gone. "You would really tell him about this? Unwise. You might force my hand, Belmonte."

"As you have now forced mine. Consider an alternative, I beg of you. Act the part of an older, wiser brother. Tell that bullying man-child Garcia that his games cannot be allowed to compromise the king's laws and diplomacy. Is that really too much authority to ask of the constable of Valledo?"

Another silence, a longer one this time. Then, carefully, "I will do what I can to keep him from crossing your path."

"And I will do what I can to make him regret it if he does. If he fails to respect his older brother's words." Rodrigo's voice betrayed neither triumph nor concession.

"You will not report this to the king now?"

"I will have to think on that. Fortunately I do have a witness should I have need." With no more warning than that he raised his voice. "Alvar, finish doing what you have to, in the god's name, you've been at it long enough to flood the yard. Come let me present you to the constable."

Alvar, feeling his heart suddenly lodged considerably higher than it was wont to be found, discovered that he had gone dry as the desert sands. He fumbled to button his trousers and stepped gingerly out from behind the wagon. Crimson with embarrassment and apprehension, he discovered that Count Gonzalez's features were no less flushed—though what he read in the deep-set brown eyes was rage.

Rodrigo's voice was bland, as if he was oblivious to the feelings of either of them. "My lord count, please accept the salute of one of my company for this ride, Pellino de Damon's son. Alvar, make a bow to the constable."

Confused, horribly shaken, Alvar followed instructions. Gonzalez de Rada nodded curtly at his salute. The count's expression was bleak as winter in the north when the winds came down. He said, "I believe I know of your father. He held a fort in the southwest for King Sancho, did he not?"

"Marana Guard, yes, my lord. I am honored you are so good as to call him to mind." Alvar was surprised his voice was working well enough to manage this. He kept his gaze lowered.

"And where is your father now?"

An innocuous question, a polite one, but Alvar, after what he'd heard from the far side of the wagon, seemed to catch a feathery hint of danger. He had no choice, though. This was the constable of Valledo.

"He was allowed to retire from the army, my lord, after suffering an injury in an Asharite raid. We have a farm now, in the north."

Gonzalez de Rada was silent a long moment. At length he cleared his throat and said, "He was, if memory serves, a man famous for his discretion, your father."

"And for loyal service to his leaders," the Captain interjected briskly, before Alvar could say anything to that. "Alvar, best mount up before Lain blisters you raw for delaying us."

Gratefully, Alvar hastily bowed to both men and hurried off to the other side of the yard where horses and soldiers awaited, in a simpler world by far than the one into which he'd stumbled by the wagon.

Late in the morning of that same day, Ser Rodrigo Belmonte had dropped back from his position near the front of the column and signalled Alvar with a motion of his head to join him.

His heart pounding with the apprehension of disaster, Alvar followed his Captain to a position off one flank of the party. They were passing through the Vargas Hills, some of the most beautiful count

in Valledo.

"Lain was born in a village beyond that western range," the Captain began conversationally. "Or so he says. I tell him it's a lie. That he was hatched from an egg in a swamp, as bald at birth as he is today."

Alvar was too nervous to laugh. He managed a feeble grin. It was the first time he'd ever been alone with Ser Rodrigo. The slandered Lain Nunez was up ahead, rasping orders again. They would be taking their midday break soon.

The Captain went on, in the same mild voice, "I heard of a man in Al-Rassan years ago who was afraid to leave the khalif's banquet table to take a piss. He held it in so long he ruptured himself and died before dessert was served."

"I can believe it," Alvar said fervently.

"What ought you to have done back there?" the Captain asked. His tone had changed, but only slightly.

Alvar had been thinking about nothing else since they had left the walls of Esteren behind. In a small voice, he said, "I should have cleared my throat, or coughed."

Rodrigo Belmonte nodded. "Whistled, sung, spat on a wheel. Anything to let us know you were there. Why didn't you?"

There was no good, clever answer so he offered the truth: "I was afraid. I still couldn't believe you were bringing me on this ride. I didn't want to be noticed."

The Captain nodded again. He gazed past Alvar at the rolling hills and the dense pine forest to the west. Then the clear grey eyes shifted and Alvar found himself pinned by a vivid gaze. "All right. First lesson. I do not choose men for my company, even for a short journey, by mistake. If you were named to be with us it was for a reason. I have little patience with that kind of thing in a fighting man. Understood?"

Alvar jerked his head up and down. He took a breath and let it out. Before he could speak, the Captain went on. "Second lesson. Tell me, why do you think I called you out from behind the wagon? I made an enemy for you—the second most powerful man in Valledo. That wasn't a generous thing for me to do. Why did I do it?"

Alvar looked away from the Captain and rode for a time thinking hard. He didn't know it, but his face bore an expression that used to induce apprehension in his family. His thoughts sometimes took him to unexpected, dangerous places. This, as it happened, was such a time. He glanced over at Ser Rodrigo and then away again, uncharacteristically cautious.

"*Say it!*" the Captain snapped.

Alvar suddenly wished he were back on the farm, planting grain with his father and the farm hands waiting for one of his sisters to walk out with beer and cheese and bread, and gossip from the house. He swallowed. He might be back there, soon enough. But it had never been said that Pellino de Damon's son was a coward or, for that matter, overly shy with his thoughts.

"You weren't thinking about me," he said as firmly as he could manage. There was no point saying this if he sounded like a quavering child. "You pulled me out to be a body between Count Gonzalez and your family. I may be nothing in myself, but my father was known, and the constable now realizes that I'm a witness to what happened this morning. I'm protection for your wife and sons."

He closed his eyes. When he opened them it was to see Rodrigo Belmonte grinning at him. Miraculously, the Captain didn't seem angry. "As I said, there was a reason you were chosen to be tested on this ride. I don't mind a clever man, Alvar. Within limits, mind you. You may even be right

I may have been entirely selfish. When it comes to threats against my family, I can be. I did make a possible enemy for you. I even put your life at some risk. Not a very honorable thing for a leader to do to one of his company, is it?"

This was another test, and Alvar was aware of it. His father had told him, more than once, that he would do better if he thought a little less and spoke a great deal less. But this was Ser Rodrigo Belmonte himself, the Captain, asking questions that *demand*ed thought. He could dodge it, Alvar supposed. Perhaps he was expected to. But here they were, riding towards Al-Rassan through the pine-clad hills of Vargas, which he had never seen, and he was in this company for a reason. The Captain had just said so. They weren't going to send him back. Alvar's customary nature seemed to be returning to him with every passing moment.

Alvar de Pellino said, "Was it an honorable thing to do? Not really, if you want my true thought, my lord. In war a captain can do anything with his men, of course, but in a private feud I don't know if it's right."

For a moment he thought he had gone too far. Then Ser Rodrigo smiled again; there was real amusement in the grey eyes. The Captain stroked his moustache with a gloved hand. "I imagine you caused your father some distress with your frankness, lad."

Alvar grinned back. "He did caution me at times, my lord. Yes."

"Cautioned?"

Alvar nodded. "Well, in fairness, I don't know what more he—"

Alvar was not a small man, and there had been nothing easy about life on a northern farm, and even less that was conducive to softness during a year of service with the king's army in Esteren. He was strong and quick, and a good rider. Nonetheless, the fist he never saw coming hit the side of his head like a hammer and sent him flying from his horse into the grass as if he'd been a child.

Alvar struggled quickly to a sitting position, spitting blood. One hand went feebly to his jaw, which felt as if it might be broken. It had happened: his father's warning had just come true. His imbecilic habit of speaking whatever he thought had just cost him the opportunity any young soldier would die for. Rodrigo Belmonte had opened a door for him, and Alvar, swaggering through like the fool he was, had just fallen on his face. Or on his elbow and backside, actually.

Holding a hand to his face, Alvar looked up at his Captain. A short distance away the company had come to a halt and was regarding the two of them.

"I've had to do that to my sons, too, once or twice," Rodrigo said. He was, improbably, still looking amused. "I'll doubtless have to do it for a few years yet. Third lesson now, Alvar de Pellino. Sometimes it is wrong to hide as you did by the wagon. Sometimes it is equally wrong to push your ideas forward before they are complete. Take a little longer to be so sure of yourself. You'll have some time to think about this while we ride. And while you are doing so, you might consider whether an unauthorized raid in Al-Rassan by a band of Garcia de Rada's cronies playing outlaw might take this affair out of the realm of a private feud and into something else. I am an officer of the king of Valledo, and while you are in this company, so are you. The constable attempted to suborn me from my duty to the king with a threat. Is that a private matter, my young philosopher?"

"By the god's balls, Rodrigo!" came an unmistakable voice, approaching from the head of the column, "What did Pellino's brat do to deserve that?"

Ser Rodrigo turned to look at Lain Nunez trotting his horse over toward them. "Called me selfish and unfair to my men. Guilty of exploiting them in my private affairs."

"That all?" Lain spat into the grass. "His father said a lot worse to me in our day."

"Really?" The Captain seemed surprised. "De Rada just said he was famous for his discretion."

"Horsepiss," said Lain Nunez succinctly. "Why would you believe anything a de Rada said? Pellino de Damon had an opinion about anything and everything under the god's sun. Drove me near crazy, he did. I had to put up with it until I wangled him a promotion to commanding a fort by the no-man's-land. I was never as happy in my life as when I saw his backside on a horse going away from me."

Alvar goggled up at both of them; his jaw would have dropped if it hadn't hurt so much. He was too stunned to even get up from the grass. For most of his life his quiet, patient father had been gently chiding him against the evils of being too outspoken.

"You," Ser Rodrigo was saying, grinning at the veteran soldier beside him, "are as full of horsepiss as any de Rada I've ever met."

"That, I'll tell you, is a deadly insult," Lain Nunez rasped, the seamed and wizened face assuming an expression of fierce outrage.

Rodrigo laughed aloud. "You loved this man's father like a brother. You've been telling me that for years. You picked his son yourself for this ride. Do you want to deny it?"

"I will deny anything I have to," his lieutenant said sturdily. "But if Pellino's boy has already driven you to a blow I might have made a terrible mistake." They both looked down at Alvar, shaking their heads slowly.

"It may well be that you have," said the Captain at length. He didn't look particularly concerned. "We'll know soon enough. Get up, lad," he added. "Stick something cold on the side of your face or you'll have trouble offering opinions about anything for a while."

Lain Nunez had already turned to ride back. Now the Captain did the same. Alvar stood up.

"Captain," he called, with difficulty.

Ser Rodrigo looked back over his shoulder. The grey eyes regarded him with curiosity now. Alvar knew he was pushing things again. So be it. It seemed his father had been that way too, amazingly. He was going to need some time to deal with that. And it seemed that it wasn't his mother's pilgrimage to Vasca's Isle that had put him in this company, after all.

"Um, circumstances prevented me from finishing my last thought. I just wanted also to say that I would be proud to die defending your wife and sons."

The Captain's mouth quirked. He was amused again. "You are rather more likely to die defending yourself *from* them, actually. Come on, Alvar, I meant it about putting something on your jaw. If you don't keep the swelling down you'll frighten the women in Fezana and ruin your chances. In the meantime, remember to do some thinking before next you speak."

"But I *have* been thinking—"

The Captain raised a hand in warning. Alvar was abruptly silent. Rodrigo cantered back to the company and a moment later Alvar led his own horse by the reins over to where they had halted for the midday meal. Oddly enough, despite the pain in his jaw, which a cloth soaked in water did only a little to ease, he didn't feel badly at all.

And he *had* been thinking, already. He couldn't help it. He'd decided that the Captain was right about Garcia de Rada's raid taking the matter out of the area of a private feud and into the king's affairs. Alvar prided himself that he had always been willing to accept when someone else made a shrewd point in discussion.

All that was days in the past. A swollen but not a broken jaw had assisted Alvar in the difficult task of keeping his rapidly evolving thoughts to himself.

The twice-yearly collection of the *parias* from Fezana had become something close to routine now ~~more an exercise in diplomacy than a military one~~. It was more important for King Ramiro to dispatch a leader of Ser Rodrigo's stature than to send an army. They knew Ramiro *could* send an army. The tribute would not be refused, though it might be slow in coming and there was a kind of dance that had to be performed before they could ride back with gold from Al-Rassan. This much Alvar learned during the shifts he rode ahead of the party with Ludus or Martin, the most experienced of the outriders.

They taught him other things, too. This might be a routine expedition, but the Captain was never tolerant of carelessness, and most particularly not so in the no-man's-land, or in Al-Rassan itself. They were not riding south to give battle, but they had an image, a message to convey: that no one would ever want to do battle with the Horsemen of Valledo, and most particularly not with those commanded by Rodrigo Belmonte.

Lodus taught him how to anticipate from the movements of birds the presence of a stream or pond in the windswept plateau. Martin showed him how to read weather patterns in the clouds—the clues were very different here in the south from those Alvar had known in the far north by the sea. And it was the Captain himself who advised him to shorten his stirrups. It was the first time Ser Rodrigo had spoken directly to Alvar since flattening him with that blow on the first morning.

"You'll be awkward for a few days," he said, "but not for longer than that. All my men learn to ride like this into battle. Everyone here knows how. There may come a time in a fight when you need to stand up in the saddle, or leap from your horse. You'll find it easier with the stirrups high. It may save your life."

They had been in the no-man's-land by then, approaching the two small forts King Ramiro had built when he began claiming the *parias* from Fezana. The garrisons in the forts had been desperately glad to see them, even if they stayed only a single night in each, to leave letters and gossip and supplies.

It had to be a lonely, anxious life down here in Lobar and Baeza, Alvar had realized. The balance in the peninsula might have begun to shift with the fall of the Khalifate in Al-Rassan, but that was an evolving process, not an accomplished reality, and there had been more than a slight element of provocation in the Valledans placing garrisons, however small, in the *tagre* lands.

These were a handful of soldiers in a vast emptiness, perilously near to the swords and arrows of the Asharites.

King Ramiro had tried at the beginning, two years ago, to encourage settlement around the forts. He couldn't force people to make their way down there, but he'd offered a ten-year tax exemption—given the costs of a steadily expanding army, not a trivial thing—and the usual promise of military support. It hadn't been enough. Not yet. Only fifteen or twenty families, clearly leaving hopeless situations in the north, had been brave or rash or desperate enough to try making lives for themselves here on the threshold of Al-Rassan.

Things might be changing year by year, but the memory of the Khalifate's armies thundering north through these high plains was a raw one yet. And everyone with a head above the ground knew the king was too fiercely engaged by his brother and uncle in Ruenda and Jalona to be reckless in support of two speculative garrisons in the *tagra* and the families who huddled around them.

The balance might be shifting, but it was still a balance, and one could ignore that only at peril. Thinking, as they continued south, about the narrowed eyes and apprehensive faces of the men and women he'd seen in the fields beside the two forts, Alvar had decided there were worse things for a farmer to contend with than thin soil and early frosts in the north by the Ruenda border. Even the fields themselves down here had seemed pathetic and frail, small scratchings in the wide space of the

otherwise empty land.

The Captain hadn't seemed to see it that way, though. Ser Rodrigo had made a point of dismounting to speak to each of the farmers they saw. Alvar had been close enough to overhear him once: the talk was of crop rotation and the pattern of rainfall here in the tagra lands.

"We aren't the real warriors of Valledo," he'd said to his company upon mounting up again after such conversation. "These people are. It will be a mistake for any man who rides with me to forget that."

His expression had been unusually grim as he spoke, as if daring any of them to disagree. Alvar hadn't been inclined to say anything at all. Thinking, he'd rubbed his bruised jaw through the beginnings of a sand-colored beard and kept silent.

The flat, high landscape of the plateau did not change, and there were no border markings of any kind, but late the following afternoon old Lain Nunez said aloud to no one in particular, "We're in Al Rassan now."

Three days later, nearing sundown, the outriders caught a glimpse of the Tavares River and, not long after, Alvar saw for the first time the towers and walls of Fezana, tucked into a northward bend of the river, honey-colored in the westering light.

It was Ludus who first noticed the strange thing. An astonishing number of carrion birds seemed to be circling and swooping above the river by the northern wall of the city. Alvar had never seen anything like it. There had to be thousands of them.

"That's what happens on a battlefield," Martin said quietly. "When the battle's over, I mean."

Lain Nunez, squinting to see more clearly, turned after a moment to look at the Captain, a question in his eyes. Ser Rodrigo had not dismounted, and so none of them had. He stared at Fezana in the distance for a long time.

"There are dead men in the water," he said finally. "We'll camp here tonight. I don't want to go closer, or enter the city, until we know what's happened."

"Do you want me to take two or three men and try to find out?" Martin asked.

The Captain shook his head. "I don't think we'll have to. We'll light a good fire tonight. Double the guards, Lain, but I want them to know we're here."

Some time later, after the evening meal and after the sunset prayer for the god's safe night journey, they gathered around the fire while Martin played his guitar and Ludus and Barano sang under the brilliant stars.

It was just after the white moon had risen in the east, almost full, that three people rode into their camp, with no attempt at concealment.

They dismounted from their mules and were led into the glow of the firelight by the posted guards, and, as the music and the singing stopped, Rodrigo Belmonte and his company learned what had happened in Fezana that day.

Three

From within Husari ibn Musa's chamber late in the afternoon they heard the screaming in the streets. A slave was sent to inquire. Ashen-faced, he brought back word.

They did not believe him. Only when a friend of ibn Musa, another merchant, less successful—which appeared to have saved his life—sent a servant running with the same tidings did the reality become inescapable. Every man who had gone to the castle that morning was dead. Headless bodies

were floating in the moat and down the river, carrion for the circling birds. Only thus, the very efficient king of Cartada appeared to have decided, could the threat of a rising in Fezana be utterly dispelled. In one afternoon virtually all of the most powerful figures left in the city had been eliminated.

Jehane's patient, the luxury-loving silk merchant who was, however improbably, to have been among the corpses in the moat, lay on his bed with a hand over his eyes, trembling and spent in the aftermath of passing a kidney stone. Struggling, not very successfully, to deal with her own churning emotions, Jehane looked at him closely. Her refuge, as ever, was in her profession. Quietly, grateful for the control she seemed to have over her voice, she instructed Velaz to mix a further soporific. Ibn Musa surprised her, though.

"No more, Jehane, please." He lowered the hand and opened his eyes. His voice was weak but quite clear. "I need to be able to think carefully. They may be coming for me. You had best leave this house."

Jehane hadn't thought of that. He was right, of course. There was no particular reason why Almalik's murderous desert mercenaries would allow an accident of ill-health to deprive them of Husari's head. And as for the doctor—the Kindath doctor—who had so inconveniently kept him from the palace ...

She shrugged. *Whichever way the wind blows, it will rain upon the Kindath.* Her gaze met Husari's. There was something terrible in his face, still growing, a horror taking shape and a name. Jehane wondered how she must look herself, weary and bedraggled after most of a day in this warm, close room, and now dealing with what they had learned. With slaughter.

"It doesn't matter whether I stay or go," she said, surprised again at how calmly she said this. "Ibn Khairan knows who I am, remember? He brought me here."

Oddly, a part of her still wanted to deny that it was Ammar ibn Khairan who had arranged and achieved this wholesale massacre of innocent men. She couldn't have said why that had any importance to her: he was a killer, the whole of Al-Rassan knew he was. Did it matter that a killer was sophisticated and amusing? That he had known who her father was, and had spoken well of him?

Behind her, Velaz offered the small, discreet cough that meant he had something urgent to say. Usually in disagreement with a view she had expressed. Without looking back at him, Jehane said, "I know. You think we should leave."

In his subdued tones, her grey-haired servant—her father's before her—murmured, "I believe the most honorable ibn Musa offers wise counsel, doctor. The Muwardis may learn who you are from ibn Khairan, but there is no great reason for them to pursue you. If they come for the lord ibn Musa, though, and find us here, you are a provocation to them. My lord ibn Musa will tell you the same thing, I am sure of it. They are desert tribesmen, my lady. They are not ... civilized."

And now Jehane did wheel around, aware that she was channelling fear and anger onto her truest friend in the world, aware that this was not the first time. "So you would have me abandon a patient?" she snapped. "Is that what I should do? How very civilized of us."

"I am recovering, Jehane."

She turned back to Husari. He had pushed himself up to a sitting position. "You did all a physician could be asked to do. You saved my life, though not in the way we expected." Amazingly, he managed a wry smile. It did not reach his eyes.

His voice was firmer now, sharper than she could ever remember. She wondered if some disordered state had descended upon the merchant in the wake of overwhelming horror: if this altered manner was his way of reacting. Her father would have been able to tell her.

Her father, she thought, would not tell her anything again.

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