

"It will not sit lightly on my conscience."

Exotic chords drifted through the room as elaborate clockwork plucked strings in a jade box from the Far East. Two men had carried it carefully into the courtyard and wound it gingerly, and then left the device to create music for Berekker's amusement. The box was worth a sum that would be unfathomable to many in the town where Berekker had been raised, but he rarely thought about such things any more.

He closed his eyes and lost himself for a moment in the play of Gahdania's fingers through his hair and the glow of the late dusk in the silvery leaves of the old oak above them. She did not respond for a long moment, and he valued that, because her's was always a carefully considered opinion. He let his head rest on the back of his chair, and opened his eyes to look up at her as she stood behind him. Her face was still, eyes cast slightly downward, in the expression of thought that he knew well.

"And it should not." Her accent was strong, though her Imperial Standard was perfect. She rested her hands on the sides of his face. "Yet I think this would not be the first time that men have lost their lives to your ambitions."

"That is true," Berekker acknowledged. It was a dry summer, and a quick breeze blew brown leaves down on them from the canopy above them. Berekker reached up to take Gahdania's hand. He brought her hand to his face and smelled the faint perfume that took him back to the Isles, and to the sea.

"Come, sit beside me," he said.

She moved with an unhurried grace that Berekker was certain did not belong in this world. She sat beside him on a chair of hardwood slats that had been moulded specifically for her body, and pressed her bare toes against the cool flagstones. He poured two glasses of wine. They kissed their glasses before they drank, as is appropriate in the Isles between the closest of friends.

"I do not think that I have ever initiated violence on this scale," Berekker mused.

The wine was Siltian, from a cask that might well have been the finest in Merendir.

"It is not unprovoked," Gahdania's voice was quiet, but firm. "They are the men of your enemy."

"They are no different from my men," Berekker countered.

"They killed Laraydho because his skin is darker than their own."

"And because he was in my employ." Berekker breathed deeply in his glass, but only from habit. He was paying no attention to the smell or taste of his wine.

Gahdania said nothing. Laraydho had come with her from the Isles. He been a servant in her family's household since she had been a child.

Berekker hesitated, and said, "You know that I must ask Catyan to do this."

"And you know that in Mahagenia it is not the place of a younger sister to interfere with her brother's duties."

Berekker squeezed her hand in both of his. "I care nothing about that, my love." He said, gently, "If something were to happen to him, I fear that you would hate me."

"Perhaps."

"But he is my man. I cannot ask another to do this for me."

"He would not stand for it," she said, pulling her hand free and standing. She walked a few feet away, and pretended to admire the blossom of some exotic plant. Berekker's gardener was an artist, and exhuberant island flora flourished across the estate, in the shade of stately continental trees.

"In war, those that we love must be put in harm's way." She spoke slowly.

"Then you believe that this will lead to war?" Berekker frowned.

"It is inevitable. Do you not think so?"

Berekker went to stand by her, and put an arm around her waist.

"Do you think that this is unjust?" He asked.

"No," Gahdania shivered, even though the evening was warm.

"How do you justify it?" He asked.

"Lighthall means for there to be conflict," she said. "It is better that it begin on your terms."

"Then what is it that upsets you?"

"I fear for you, and for Catyan, and for myself," Gahdania said. "I fear that lives will be lost for nothing."

Berekker drained his glass and went to the decanter.

"Do you think that I have misread the situation?" Berekker asked.

"You are certain where Grainger stands?" Gahdania answered with a question.

He held the decanter out to her, but she declined.

"Grainger would not entertain the idea of turning over dock security to me, regardless of price. He understood my need for retaliation, but warned me not to embarrass him. I think that he has no love of Lighthall, but he still speaks of him as if he is an ally. He will not choose a side unless he is forced to do so, and right now I believe he would choose Lighthall."

"...And yet he helped you?" Gahdania asked, pruning dead leaves from the low branches of the great oak.

Berekker nodded. "He knew an Assessor who would be... receptive... and agreed to mediate the deal. He has a certain interest in seeing retaliation, and if it happens outside the Sea Wall, Lighthall cannot blame him."

"You are keeping something from me," Gahdania said softly, and the words came like a blow.

"I..." He started, and then said nothing. Behind all of this was Paya Gandro, the man who had taught Berekker ledgers, who had given Berekker his start, who had shared his charts and his crews and his contacts with Berekker. And now Paya Gandro needed Berekker's help to accomplish something unspeakable.

Gahdania looked at him and waited, and he felt a tightness in his throat. He stayed quiet too long, and when he reached out to touch her arm, she was rigid.

He whispered, "There is nobody who knows my thoughts like you do."

That was all he could say. He could not deny that his secret existed any more than he could tell her what it was. She left without a word, without even looking at him, and Berekker

sank into his chair and stared up at the sky, deciding in that moment that he would have no part in Paya Gandro's traitorous machinations. Berekker's enterprises were doing well. He held no enmity toward the Empire. Paya Gandro had asked too much. He would excuse himself from Paya Gandro's plots, and then explain it all to Gahdania, but he had other matters that required his attention first.

"Janieu!" Berekker yelled, and one of the doors to the courtyard opened. Berekker's attendant was a somewhat sour-faced man, beginning to hunch with age, and meticulous in dress and bearing. He awaited instructions silently in the doorway.

"Bring Catyan and Reven," Berekker said.

Janieu bowed slightly as he closed the door. Berekker refilled his glass and wondered what Gahdania said about him to her brother. A short while later there was a knock at the door.

"Enter," Berekker called.

Janieu opened the door, and Catyan strode into the room, followed by a skinny, wild-haired, sailor who wrung his hands as he walked.

Catyan's face was studiously impassive, which meant that he was furious. Berekker remembered that his man had surely not been amused earlier that day, when Berekker had asked him, loudly, to buy one of everything in the market, and then abandoned him.

"Your trinkets are in the gatehouse," Catyan said, in a tone that made the disheveled sailor look nervously back and forth between them. Berekker briefly considered explaining why it was important for the hawkers in the market to love him better than Lighthall, or how he had embarrassed his rival by showing up with no escort.

Instead Berekker ignored him and asked, "Who are your five best men?"

"Rydes, Faurad, Gahrans..." Catyan stopped, pursed his lips, and asked "Best for what purpose?"

"Stealth and close fighting."

"...Haneel and Kouragh."

"A ship will arrive this evening, bearing oils and silk from Silt. The cargo represents the better part of a month's profit to Lighthall. It will be stopped outside the Sea Wall for the night. Reven," Berekker gestured at the sailor, who stepped forward and bowed, "will show you to a cave in the cliffs west of the city, where I keep a rowboat. Board Lighthall's ship, kill whatever crew remains to protect the cargo, and burn the ship."

Catyan received the instruction without reaction or comment. Berekker waited, but Catyan merely continued to stand at attention.

"I do wish that you didn't consider questions to be a sign of weakness..." Berekker mused aloud.

"And I assume that you will tell me everything that you know," Catyan said flatly. Reven looked nervously again from one man to the other. Berekker nearly smiled. Catyan would not have responded with such impudence five years ago.

"That's fair." Berekker conceded. "Would you like tea? I'd offer you wine, but I expect you'll want all of your wits tonight."

"Thank you, no," Catyan said.

Reven cleared his throat and said hesitantly, "I wouldn't mind some wine, sir. I figure I don't need much in the way of wits."

Berekker poured Reven a glass, and the sailor took it in a gulp. Reven knew every crevice of the coastline, but had lost his taste for danger after he had nearly been hanged. Berekker had been happy to offer the former smuggler legitimate employment.

Unsure whether to address Berekker or Catyan, Reven addressed his own sandals. "When you head out to the ship, row as close to the Sea Wall as you can. The water's choppy, but plenty deep, and the Assessor's men can't see you, even if they patrol the wall. You shouldn't have to worry about Grainger's men, or Lighthall's, but be off as soon as there's flames lit, because they'll be visible from the Whale and Wharf, and Lighthall and Grainger'll both have plenty of men there."

"Do not let any of Lighthall's men survive," Berekker instructed. "Everybody will suspect

that I have ordered this, but if you are recognized as Islanders, I will not be able to deny it. If all goes well, none of Grainger's men or the Assessors become involved, but if they do, make sure that none of them are harmed."

With his instructions complete, Catyan turned to leave.

"Catyan!" Berekker said, stopping him.

"Sir?"

"Be careful."

"Yes, sir."