

Chapter 1

“Watch her. She’s a handful, and she’s got quite a temper,” the captain said to the guard as he alighted in the middle of the clearing, his patrol and prisoner having preceded him.

“We can handle a mere girl,” the guard said, his confidence a little shaken by the captain’s words, but he hid it well.

Just then, the ‘girl’—Ann—broke loose from her captors’ hold and would have taken to the air, but five of the SkyPatrol arrived at that moment, and the captain’s patrol caught the leads on her shackles when she hesitated. She struggled fiercely, but the newly arrived patrol walked over, having recognized her, and their leader landed a solid blow across her jaw. A thunderclap briefly lit the clearing, more clearly revealing the fury that hung about her features yet, though the double patrol was enough to keep her, for the moment, in check.

“Still sure?” The captain almost smiled. “I’ll leave the Patrol here just in case.”

Ann lay pensively on one of the bunks in the mine as she mulled over the past two years of working for the rebellion. Es had urged her into it, and though she had taken to it eagerly at first, she resented, at times, their reluctance to use her abilities in their full capacity. She had a feeling that Sim was a large part of the reason for that, though he likely hadn’t actually said anything to them.

She was particularly good at stealth, a skill that was enhanced partly by the Ring she carried around her neck in its locket. Es had given it to her when she sent her off at eighteen, and Ann knew that Sim had taken into his protection most of the rest of the items of significance to the king and Ringbearer of which Es had been guardian when she died shortly after. Ann herself had the Rings and swords, though she still hadn’t managed to get Will out of prison.

She felt particularly stupid for getting caught, though it was just a matter of time before she got herself out again. She had been hiking in a new area of the woods, aimlessly following a creek, when a voice muttered something in her mind.

Will? she thought.

Yeah. How are you doin’?

Fine. So how’s life in prison?

Very funny. Busy?

The conversation had continued for almost fifteen minutes, when she had walked into a patrol.

Great time to distract me.

“Well, what do you know? Our patrol won’t be fruitless.”

“Come quietly and you won’t get hurt.” They were a mine patrol, she had realized, looking for workers.

“Quietly? As in don’t talk or don’t fight? I’m bound to do both,” she warned. She had gone out unarmed, and she was angry at herself for the decision. Two of them moved around behind her.

“Both.”

“Do both or don’t do both?” she said.

“Quit stalling.”

Two had moved to shackle her wings and wrists, and in an instant were groaning in the path. The others somehow managed to shackle her, holding the leads taut until their companions recovered enough to walk. They took her back to their camp, then, after making their report, two soldiers and their captain had taken her to the mines.

Ann watched the guards warily as she sat in mines' cafeteria; the percentage of women in the mines was relatively small, and she was expecting trouble. It came in a different form than she expected, however. As the miners were heading back to the bunk room for the night, the SkyPatrol that had stayed when she arrived approached her, and she swore under her breath when they singled her out, forming a circle around her.

"Come with us," the Patrol leader said.

"As though I have a choice?" she replied as one of the Patrol cuffed her wrists in front of her.

They led her into the administrative area of the mines, where the guards and foremen lived. They delivered her to an office, shutting the door behind them as they left. Ann's stomach had tied in a knot; the wings of the person sitting in the chair behind the desk had a distinct reddish-gold cast, a color she had only seen once. She swore again as Saul Morgan stood out of the chair and walked over to her.

"So you're *not* dead," he said. She hadn't seen him since their fight, almost nine months before, and she didn't answer. He wore a patch over his left eye now—her work. A grim smile crept onto her face at that thought.

"So you lost that eye."

He frowned. "You should have been dead."

"I didn't get up for almost three months, if it makes you feel better."

He walked back to the desk once to fill out a paper form, glancing up once when he noticed a glint of silver on one of her hands, and he recognized the ring when he looked up.

"Where did you get that?" he asked suspiciously, turning his eyes back to the form that would transfer her out of the mines.

"Get what?"

"That ring."

She was silent, and when he looked up again, there was a mixture of subdued hate and fury in her eyes again.

"Ah. I wasn't aware the two of you knew each other."

"I don't think anybody was."

"Then you should probably be glad it was dealt with before your uncle found out, because he would have undoubtedly killed him."

"What would *you* know of my uncle?"

"It would probably be better if you heard that from him, hm?" he said, signing the form and taking a set of keys out of the desk. He opened the door to leave. "Come with me."

She didn't move, and a somewhat tired annoyance settled on his face.

"Don't make yourself any more trouble for me than you already are," he said.

When she didn't move again, he drew the dagger from the back of his belt and flicked it to land, point in the crack between two of the paving stones of the floor, in front of her. Her reaction belied the fear that the wound that knife had inflicted had left in her, and she followed him silently after he had retrieved it. There was a wagon waiting outside the mines, and he locked her cuffs to the rings in the back before taking the reins and heading up the narrow road for the prison.

It was late when they reached the prison, and Ann was taken to the top of one of the four towers. The room was partitioned by barred walls into four parts, three of them cells, the fourth the stairs. Only one of them was occupied, and its occupant was asleep. Ann stood silent while the guards unlocked her shackles and opened the cell, then stepped quietly in when they had finished. She hadn't been expecting

the transfer, but it was almost more workable than the mines. Her brother was somewhere in that prison, and she was fairly familiar with it. But for the moment... for the moment she was tired, and she settled onto the bunk to sleep.

When she woke the next morning, it took her a moment to reorient herself. She sat up after rubbing the sleep out of her eyes and looked about herself once to get an idea of what she was in. A fairly standard lock, barred window... The man in the other occupied cell was watching her, and after a moment, she recognized him.

“You got bigger,” she said.

“It’s been fifteen years,” he said, standing and folding his arms on one of the crossbars of the wall between them. “You look like you’ve been through hell and back.”

“Eh, I just haven’t had a proper rest since the last fight I was in,” she shrugged. His brows rose slightly.

“And just what *has* my baby sister been getting into?”

“Watch it, Will,” she said, folding her arms across her chest as she leaned back, frowning. “You have three minutes on me, and I’ll warrant I can still deck you if I have to.”

Saul came up the stairs with two guards.

“So, less than a day together again, and you’re already fighting. Some things never change,” he said. His eyes settled on Ann. “Well, you and I have things to talk about.”

“Not likely,” she said as one of the guards unlocked the cell.

“We’ll see.”

Will settled his head against the bars after they’d left. It should have been him in her position; things just hadn’t worked out such that it could have been.

Saul dismissed the guards after Ann had been chained between two posts on the dead-end side of a T-junction in the prison’s lower levels. After a few moments she realized where they were; the hallway she was facing led to his office, and the dead-end side was for a torturer.

“You and he are what, barely twenty now?” Saul said, settling on a stool by a table with a stack of forms on it. She didn’t answer, and his brow furrowed. “You really do hate me, don’t you?”

“I swore to kill you. I will.”

“You were five,” he said.

“You killed my parents.” A red light was dancing in the irises of her normally white eyes.

“I thought your uncle would have explained this to you by now. Anger is a very tangible emotion for you, isn’t it?” he said, pulling over a blank sheet of paper and making a note to hunt up Sim Michaelson for a talk about his niece. “So you seriously intend to kill me.”

“What, the fight nine months ago wasn’t clue enough?” she said, frowning at his note-taking. “It’s not as though you haven’t added to my reasons.”

“Have I?” he said. “Don’t you realize that I have nothing to ask you? That I know the answers to any question I could possibly pose to you?”

Distrust and doubt had settled into her eyes, and he stood, heading for his office.

“I think I’ll just let you think on that there for a while.”

Ann woke hungry the next morning. Saul Morgan was not what she had expected. After fifteen years of pure hate driven by a blood oath to kill him, though, she could not easily form an objective opinion of him, and after a while she had stopped trying. It was easier just to hate him.

Will was watching her when she sat up, and she settled against the wall to stare back at him.

“You seem rather confused,” he said, himself somewhat amused.

“I’m not bleeding; that’s somewhat unusual for me.”

“Saul does not have the most obvious of motives,” Will shrugged. “Of course, most of my information is third party from his nephews, so maybe those of you who have been freer to access the witnesses still alive know more?”

“No one tells me anything,” Ann frowned. “I was *there* for parts of it, but never anywhere that I actually saw anything. So no. I know nothing. I wasn’t aware it mattered.”

“Doesn’t it? He *knows* who—what—you and I are. I should be dead, or at the very least ignorant and still digging ore in the mines, and I’m not, Ann. Don’t judge him too harshly until you understand what’s gone through his head the past twenty years.”

She held up her left hand to reveal an ugly scar across the palm. “It’s a little too late for that.”

“How so?”

“I swore with blood fifteen years ago to kill him. Oaths like that don’t sit quietly until they’re fulfilled.”

Will frowned. “You’re too damned rash.”

“Am I, now? Perhaps. In light of that, I’m rather tired of being *here*.” She stood and fished a piece of wire out of the hem of her shirt.

“What are you doing?” Will asked warily.

“Getting us out of here. It’s about time we introduced you to the outside world and headed south, no?”

Will was silent while she unlocked the door of her cell, something she was apparently practiced at, but he spoke while she was working on his.

“You’re sure you’re ready for that?” he asked quietly.

“Robay takes Rigobay’n slaves. They’ve increased their military presence here. And large portions of Rigobay are losing what Gobay’n culture they’d managed to hold on to. If we wait too much longer, it will be too late. So whether or not I’m ready for this is immaterial.”

A pair of guards preceding Saul came up the stairs as the lock on Will’s cell clicked open, and Ann turned quickly, landing a fist and then a foot in the first guard’s stomach, knocking all three men back down the stairs. She caught her hesitant brother’s arm and pulled him down the stairs after her, picking their way over the tangle of men at the bottom, and they exited the tower via one of the doors opening onto the top of the wall. Ann pushed Will off the wall to preempt any further hesitations, then jumped off after him, and they flew south, in the general direction of the Silt River and West Village.

Towards noon they stopped on the granite outcrop atop the cliff that made up much of the mountain of Grand West’s northern face.

“Lunch would be good,” Will said.

“The closest food is in West,” Ann said, crouching on the edge of the cliff. “They didn’t follow us.”

“You expected them to? Most of the Firsts assume we’re not important.”

She glanced back at him, unused to hearing the Robay’n terms. “You should have grown up in West,” she said.

“Did you?”

“Not really. Es kept me with her, about halfway between West and Fork. Can you use a blade?”

“Sufficiently.”

“Wait here, then. I’ll be right back.”

She disappeared over the edge of the cliff, and Will walked over to watch her climb down and disappear into a small cave a few hundred feet below.

Ann stood for several moments inside the cave once she was there, looking at the contents of the small wooden box she’d kept there for most of ten years. Most of what was left of her childhood was in that box; after a minute or so she plucked out the ring she was looking for, then put the box in the satchel it had been in and slung it over her shoulder. She picked up the sword that went with the Ring and jumped back out of the cave, flying back up to the cliff where Will was waiting.

“Here,” she said, handing him the sword and the Ring on its silver chain.

“Isn’t there supposed to be another sword?” he asked, hanging the Ring around his neck.

“I left it at home. That’s pretty much the entire reason you’re standing here with me right now.”

“Ah. Home being...”

“A little inconspicuous cave on the Brier’s banks,” she said. “I was sort of trying to hide from the world when I found it.”

“Hide why?”

“Because I was bleeding rather profusely at the time. Can we go now? I haven’t eaten since yesterday, and Sim is likely goin’ to be on my case when we get there. Probably give me hell for showing up without a blade on me, at the least.”

“All right.”

They both jumped off the cliff to take flight, and Ann was chuckling as they turned south again.

What? Will asked.

You wouldn’t have done that fifteen years ago.

Both of us have changed.

She glanced at him, but she didn’t reply.

They arrived in West a few hours later, and Ann led him through the streets to Sim’s house on the edge of town. He was in the smithy out back when they got there, so she walked back through the house to the back porch, though Will felt somewhat obligated to wait in the living room, as he’d never been there before. Ann settled her arms on the crossbeam over the back steps, leaning comfortably out over the open space.

“Sim.”

After a moment he set aside the piece he was working on and came out of the smithy, untying the leather apron he was wearing and tossing it on the workbench as he did.

“Where the hell have ye been?” he asked as he walked across the yard towards the house. She moved her wing and glanced back through the house to where Will was standing in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen. Sim stopped briefly, then continued to the house as Ann turned and went back inside. “Ye didn’t say anything about doing something like this.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” she said. “It just worked out.”

“Ye’ve been gone two days...”

“It started rather stupidly,” she said. “I’m not particularly inclined to go into the details.”

Sim’s eyes had settled briefly on Will, but they shifted back to Ann when he noted she was examining the pantry in more detail than usual.

“He got more of the Marshall than ye did,” he said. “Ye haven’t eaten, I take it.”

“Something like that.”

“Sit, then, before ye catch my house on fire again,” he said, moving to take the pan from her before she could get to the stove.

“Again?” Will said as Ann motioned him to take a seat at the table.

“It was just a little fire,” she said.

“Are ye goin’ to take him up to HQ before ye leave?” Sim asked, slicing potatoes into a skillet.

“I can. They’ll probably want me to do a weapons run before I go, huh?”

“Probably. Cap has been nagging me to drop in on meetings.”

“They could use your help.”

“Maybe. Cap would probably see it as license for him to head back out to sea, though.” He glanced back at Will. “Do ye know who anyone is?”

“I know names and general relations, but I couldn’t say how many I’d recognize by face anymore. The Mackey brothers, since they’ve been in and out of the mines off and on. Some of the younger Morgans. Beyond that?” he shrugged slightly.

“Ye were in the mines, then? How long?” Sim asked, digging through the pantry for an onion and some carrots.

“Till about five years ago. Those of us who were in there for a relatively long period staged a small revolt, and the instigators got shipped up to the prison when the Patrols showed up to suppress it.”

“Implying, then, that ye were among the instigators?” Sim said.

“Something like that.”

Sim sat down to let the potatoes cook for a while. Ann was sitting with her eyes focused on the salt and pepper shakers.

“Ye nearly killed him the last time ye ran into him, no?” he said to her.

“Nearly.”

“Messed up his eye pretty good, at least. *Ye* were nearly dead, if I recall correctly.”

“Probably should have been.”

“Ye aren’t usually this reluctant to talk,” he said.

“The reasons are probably obvious if you know what you’re looking for,” she said. “I haven’t eaten in a while, Sim. I’m not particularly disposed to talking right now.”

“Are ye going to head up there today, yet?”

“Eh, I’ll probably stop by home first and pick up my blade first.”

His brow rose slightly, guessing then how the entire situation had begun. “Ye’re old enough at this point not to be going anywhere without one,” he said.

“I would rather not have to.”

“Why not? Ye can use it well enough.”

“Because it increases the odds that people will end up dead. You have a helluva lot better rein on your temper than I do on mine.”

“Ye just have to learn how to channel it elsewhere.”

“If I had something to do *besides* go kill people for them, that might be possible.”

“Odd. I told Cap ye would probably rather do something besides just spying and assassinations.”

“I don’t know how particularly useful the rest of what I can do is to them.”

“Well, with the intimate knowledge of large portions of the continent and of the Robay’n positions, ye could probably be doing strategic planning for them. They do need a kick in the pants in that respect.”

“A formal diplomatic communication prior to declaring war would at least be polite,” Will said.

Sim raised a brow at him.

“Why would we be obligated to give them a warning?”

“I was under the impression that the last war never formally ended.”

Sim rubbed his jaw a moment. “Not formally, but five hundred years is a mite much to consider it a resumption of the same war.”

“The Gobay’n monarchy goes through several hundred year droughts, but it’s always a resumption of the same monarchy,” Will said. Sim’s eyes had settled on him.

“Everything will probably be put on hold till the two of ye get back,” he said. “After that, I would imagine it will be left, to a great extent, up to the two of ye to work out.”

“This thing is over thirty years old, Sim,” Ann said. “Those of you who have been around for most of it better not just take your hands out of the deal.”

“I would imagine those of us who have been in it for at least fifteen years will continue to play our parts,” he said, standing to check on the potatoes. “More than one of us have oaths to see this through.”

After a brief stop to get her sword from the small cave where Ann usually holed up, the twins headed towards Fork Village. It was late, and dark, as Ann let Will through the open woods northwest of the village to the sinkhole where HQ’s main entry was located. He recognized the Mackey brothers’ work in the semi-hidden lever that opened the door.

“Clever,” he said as they headed up the carved tunnel to a large natural cave where several hundred men, mostly younger, were gathered, having already eaten. “I take it this is a fairly well-kept secret?”

“Fairly.”

She led him through the cave system to a smaller room, set up as an office, where an older man sat at a desk.

“Cap.”

He looked up, jumping slightly at her sudden appearance. “Ann. Hello. Who have we here?”

“My brother, Will. Slightly taller than the last time you saw him.”

“Slightly, yes,” Cap agreed, coming around the desk to shake Will’s hand and introduce himself. “Josh Mitchell.”

“Ah,” Will nodded, recognizing the name. “I remember names better than faces at this point.”

“No doubt. It’s good to see you again finally. Maybe we can get something done now.”

“Well...” Ann glanced at Will. “We’ll probably be gone for a while.”

Cap looked between them once. “A while being...”

“A year at the most, I would reckon,” Will said.

“Probably less for you,” Ann said. He shrugged slightly.

“Either way, it’ll probably be less than a year,” Will said. Cap nodded slightly.

“When were you going to leave?”

“That depends on whether you have anything you want me to get done before we go, and what,” Ann said.

“We could use another infusion of blades,” Cap said.

“That’s what I figured. Tomorrow for that, then, and then I guess we’ll leave when that’s done,” she said.

“You two going to stay the night here?” Cap asked.

“May’s well.”

Will realized upon seeing the room that Ann maintained in the cave system that was HQ that her ‘home’ on the river was little more than a place to crash when she wanted to be left alone. He waited in the doorway the next morning while she dug through the desk drawers for a box of matches.

“What do we need matches for?” he asked as she led him out the back entrance of the cave, coming out on the Brier north of Fork.

“The majority of this operation is underground, literally, including the cave where they stashed all the weapons they didn’t want confiscated five hundred years ago,” she said.

She led him down into Fork’s market to get food for the day, since the trip to the cache and back would take most of it. Will was quiet as they walked through the city—which it was, despite its name—and eventually they left, flying westward. He hadn’t been in a city since he was five, and the bustle and nuances were unfamiliar to him.

Ann led him west, skimming the forest along its edge, the plains where much of the continent’s food was grown spreading out to the south. The forest covered the north, for the most part unbroken until it hit the Northern Mountains. The Western Mountains rose suddenly from the forest when they neared the coast. Like the Northern range, they had no foothills. Legend said they were called from the depths of the planet by the dragons, but like so many other details of the continent’s history, the myths surrounding the mountains’ origin were fading from Rigobay’n memory with the continued Robay’n occupation.

“So why am I going with you to do this?” Will asked when they landed at the foot of the cliff of Grand West’s north face around noon, and Ann broke out lunch.

“So I can keep an eye on you,” she said.

“So *you* can keep an eye on *me*?” he said. “What makes you think *I’m* more likely to find trouble than you?”

“Oh, you’re not, probably, but I want you where I can find you when we need to leave.”

“Since when are you the responsible one?”

“I’m not. I just have a vague idea of what’s going on.”

“Only a vague idea?”

“You would think, being raised by Es and spending a large amount of my time with Sim, they would have filled me in on *some* of what happened fifteen, twenty years ago, at least in more detail than what I could find out from hearsay. I don’t know if they were concerned more about hurting me or about my temper’s reaction to whatever they would have had to tell me.”

“Ah. So you have probably about as much of an idea as I do, except that yours is from mostly the other point of view,” Will said.

“If you’re trying to suggest that we’re going to argue about it, you could just say so,” she said, flicking the stem of her apple over the edge of the cliff. “For being aware of the mental contact, you’ve been damned distant.”

“And you haven’t been?” he said. “I may have been in the mines, but I did have a semblance of a life there, even if some of the details were dictated to me.”

“Well, for all my wandering over eighty percent of Rigobay, I was pretty damned sheltered,” she said.

“You’re in a bad mood today.”

“What, you wouldn’t be, upon realizing that you’ve spent most of fifteen years in the dark when

you're generally considered integral to the operation?"

"I always got the impression that at least I was being kept out of public scrutiny to avoid becoming a target. I would imagine they tried to do the same with you, without making you aware of it to the point you worked too much against it."

"We should get started if we're going to get done today," she said, tired of working through her apparent exclusion in her mind. After the remnants of their lunch had been packed up, she jumped off the cliff to glide down to the foot of the mountain, and Will followed after a few moments.

Ann was righting a pair of mine carts on some obviously neglected tracks when Will landed beside her, and he helped with the second, as he was familiar with the task.

"There are mines here?" he said.

"Were, once," Ann said. "Mostly coal, from what I understood. Robay wasn't interested enough in importing it that they shut most of the coal mines here down so that we couldn't maintain a large enough steel industry to rebuild our army."

"And we're here because..."

"The majority of the weaponry from five hundred years ago was stashed here. Most of it has decayed, but some of the blades were of high enough quality that they've survived and just need new wraps on the handles."

She hooked the two carts together and started pushing them into the mines; after a moment Will took the opposite side to help.

"Get in," she said after the carts were moving steadily.

"But—"

"It's mostly downhill from here. We have to push them back up. No point in walking both ways if we don't have to."

"All right."

Will climbed in the rear cart, and Ann jumped into the front one as they entered the mines.

"It's dark the entire way?" he asked as the entrance faded out of sight.

"Pretty much. Hence the matches. I can somewhat see, though."

"Somewhat?"

"Sim told me once that I was born blind, that Gabriel did something to my eyes to fix them. It apparently had other effects, as well."

"Like the mind reading?"

"Nah, I got the impression I was born with that."

"Ah. Been putting it to good use recently?"

"Eh, I generally avoid getting into people's heads unless I absolutely have to, other than for occasionally scanning surface thoughts. Means I generally avoid direct eye contact, but it's easier than getting stuck in there and risking a forced severance of contact."

"Why?"

"Because the one time that happened, I was on my back for most of a week afterwards."

"That didn't explain, really."

"It burns. Like a knife that you can't pull out. Messes with regular sight pretty severely, as well." She peered into the inky darkness ahead, frowning for a moment at a shape that had darted through her line of sight before disappearing. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Not really. Why?"

"Good." She settled down a little further in the cart, not sure what she had seen, but not wanting

to really know what it was, either.

“How far in is this stash of weapons?”

“Ten minutes, maybe.”

“How stable are these mines?”

“The route we’re going? Fairly.”

Will was quiet for the rest of the ride, keeping his eyes closed so as not to strain them in the darkness. He was wondering just what his sister was getting him into; he had spent ten years working in ore mines, working and scheming with David Morgan and the Mackey brothers for much of that time, with occasional stints elsewhere that had served to teach him at least to read, write, and do basic arithmetic. David had spent a good deal of time elsewhere, and had taught him to fight when they had the opportunity. Then had come his stay in the prison. He had expected to die there, but Saul apparently had no intention of letting that happen. David had been hanged within the previous year, but Will had seen how the events had built up, and he knew that the decision had not been Saul’s. The older man had spent a lot of time talking to Will in the later hours of the night, sometimes sober, sometimes not. Liquor was generally not good to Saul, and Will had learned quickly that on the nights he was drinking, it was better just to let Saul ramble, and to save questions for the nights he showed up sober. He’d come back with a patch over one eye after being gone over a month, a few months before David had been hanged—the fight Ann had mentioned. Will had gotten the impression the last few months he’d spent in the prison that Saul had found comfort somewhere beyond drinking recently, as he was sober more often and he didn’t stop by to talk as often.

But this... rebellion. Ann avoided calling it such directly, but Saul had mentioned it more than once. Were they really expecting to throw out the First–Robay’n–Army with the few hundred men apparently involved? And were they going to expect *him* to take over when they returned from Gobay? Would they even accept that, or would he need to prove himself to them first—and could he?

Ann began applying the brake after about ten minutes had passed, jarring him out of his train of thought.

“So now what?” he asked when they’d stopped.

“Sit tight a minute, and I’ll find the lights,” she said. She climbed out of the cart, and Will could hear her wander off into the darkness. After another minute or so, she struck a match, lighting a kerosene lamp that was resting in an alcove.

“Is it really safe to do that in a coal mine?” he said.

“This room is fairly well ventilated,” she replied, bringing the light over to a large pile of weaponry in the center of the room, and Will picked out a speck of light on the ceiling—which was almost two hundred feet above them. Ann noticed where he’d moved his eyes to. “It’s disguised as a well. Help look through these, huh?”

“What are we looking for?” he asked as he moved to stand beside her at the pile.

“Stuff that’s not corroded.”

Almost an hour had passed before they had sorted out enough blades that Ann was satisfied with. Both carts were roughly full, and Will was not thrilled at the thought of pushing them, uphill, all the way out.

“So what do you mean by *sufficiently* proficient with a blade?” Ann asked, leaning back against the first cart when they’d finished loading them.

“I won’t hurt myself,” he said. “It’s not as though I’ve had the opportunity for a lot of practical application.”

“Care to show me?” she asked.

She was in a bad mood yet, and he was uncertain whether to accept.

“I’d like to know if you’re going to get yourself killed in a week if I don’t watch your back,” she said.

“Fine.”

For most of the next half hour, she kept him on his toes in the dim light of the kerosene lamp, seeing just how much he did—and didn’t—know. Finally she picked up the lamp and took it back to its alcove and blew it out.

“Ann—”

“Two shakes. I have a couple candles.”

She affixed the candles to one of the carts, lighting only one of them after she had.

“Well?” he asked when they had started pushing the carts out.

“You’ll live, maybe, but not up against a Patrol. And it won’t take the Patrol too long to realize who you are, I think, once you’re out in the world. So maybe talk to Sim when you get back and see if he’ll work with you some.”

“Why?”

“So you have a chance at living through a Patrol. Not much point in going down to train if you’re just going to be dead a week after you get back.”

“No, I mean, why Sim?”

She raised one brow slightly. “You’re kidding, right?”

“About what?”

“Sim is probably the *best* blade on Avera. When SkyPatrol killed his wife, he killed all of them except their current captain and Saul Morgan. Over the span of about two weeks.”

“Wait—Sim was married?”

“Yes? Are you really *that* out of the loop? He married Mary Matthias when he was eighteen, and she was killed about two years later. So that was about ten years ago now. They had a little boy, named him Ben, after Grandad. He disappeared when Mary was killed, and Sim hasn’t been able to track down what the Patrol did with him.”

“He’s not dead?”

“He doesn’t seem to think so. It’s a possibility, but at this point, no one really knows, or if they do, they haven’t been talking.”

“Huh. Any other random family floating around out there that I should know about?”

“Not that I know of. You know that Cap has kids, right?”

“Vaguely. They were quite a bit older than us, if I recall correctly.”

“You know the Mackeys, the Morgans... hm.” She frowned briefly at the form that darted across the passageway just out of her line of sight again. “You don’t believe in ghosts?”

“I already said that.”

“Enh. I’m starting to wonder.”

“Why?”

“I see some damned strange things every time I’m down here.”

“So how do we get all this back to where we came from?”

“They should have sent someone up from West with a wagon.”

“Then why do you have to come get them?”

“Because I don’t get lost down here,” she said. She sighed slightly. “It’s better than a run into

their Central Command, anyway.”

“Their what?”

“They maintain a fort outside Kingston they call Central Command for their operations on Rigobay. Getting in and out of there can mean killing four or five people.”

“You don’t seem like you would have much trouble with that.”

“I don’t. That’s the problem. I can and will kill, without too much of a second thought. I’m not sure when exactly I got to that point, but I’m not really sure how happy I am about being there.”

“You seemed to approve of Sim’s killing the Patrol...”

“That’s different. The Patrol’s a lot of wanton murderers. They’re charged, at this point, with suppressing revolts on Rigobay. They use that as license to take what they want. The guards at the Central Command are just putting in their time. Robay requires military service of all their adult males. They don’t ask to come here. The Patrols volunteer.”

“For someone so vehement about them—”

“When you’ve been in an operation like the one I have been in for a while, you understand just how true it is that you can’t hold the grunts accountable for their leaders’ decisions. You can’t hold the entirety of Rigobay responsible for what we do; most of them don’t know we exist yet.”

“For being the irrational one, you seem to have a more rational perspective on that than I do.”

“I prefer to hold individuals responsible for their own actions.”

“Even when they had no choice?”

“He had a choice.”

“Did he? *He* had a wife and kids once, Ann.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You aren’t exactly being fair to him. You don’t even know what happened fifteen years ago—”

“This has nothing to do with Mom and Dad,” she said shortly. “Despite whatever I may have sworn.”

“No?”

“No.”

“What, then?”

“I don’t think you particularly need to know that, really.”

“That fight?”

“No.”

“Then what—”

“This discussion is ending now,” she growled.

“But—”

“You don’t have to live long enough to get to Gobay,” she snapped. They came back out of the mines at the foot of Grand West’s cliff, on the shore of the lake that fed the Silt River. Sim was sitting on a wagon beside the tracks, and his brow rose at the altercation that had come out of the mines.

“And what are ye two arguin’ about now?” he said, dropping off the wagon to help unload the carts.

“I’m not exactly sure,” Will said. Sim shifted his eyes to Ann, but she was fuming yet, so he let her be about it.

“When are ye plannin’ on leavin’?” he asked her.

“Assuming there’s no one he particularly wants to look up, probably tomorrow, if we spend the night in South,” she said.

“Ye’re lookin’ at about two days’ flight,” Sim said, pausing to look over one of the blades.

“What?” Ann said.

“I recognize this,” he said.

“What, the style?”

“No, the blade. Jade Michaelson’s gift to her younger brother at his wedding shortly before the last war,” he said. “I’ve got three of the planning sketches for this.”

“If you want it, *you* have to get one to replace it later,” she said.

“Eh, it’s worth that. It was supposed to have been buried with him.” He set it in the wagon under the seat. “That can be fixed fairly easily.”

“Wouldn’t the sketches be almost five hundred years old?” Will said.

“Michaelsons aren’t particularly known for throwing out anything they write down,” Sim said. “I’ve read most of it, at this point.”

“Going back how far?”

“Forty thousand years, give or take. Some spans of time are fairly sparse.”

“Forty *thousand*? How much space does that take up?”

“Eh, the basement, part of the attic. There are fairly long spans of very dull history where no one bothered to write much down, so it works.”

Ann tipped the empty mine carts on their sides again so they wouldn’t fill with water when it rained. She stood for several moments with her eyes out over the lake after the men had fallen silent. After it became apparent that she wasn’t going to make the deciding move, Sim walked over to her.

“Do ye want to come with me and leave tomorrow?” he asked her, quietly enough that Will couldn’t hear.

“I’ve never had a choice in this,” she replied, keeping her voice similarly low.

“I’ve never understood why ye resent it.”

“I suppose at this point I shouldn’t. It’s not as though there’s anything else for me to do with my life.”

“No?”

“No.” She turned and took a pair of steps to take flight, heading southeast. Sim sighed heavily, then walked back to the wagon.

“Ye should probably catch up if ye intend to go with her,” he said to Will.

“Has she always been this bitter?”

“No. And she’s been stubborn about explainin’ it, so I don’t know what changed to make her thus. Remind her to be careful for me, huh?” he said as he climbed back up on the wagon. “We need ye both to come back alive.”

Ann was quiet until they got to the city of South Village.

“Keep your head down,” she said as they walked into the city.

“So all our cities are called villages?” he said to her.

“Yep.”

“So what do we call the villages?”

“Villages... what does it matter?”

“It’s sort of like... well... it gives one the impression that they don’t *want* to be any bigger than a village. So just dropping the village part of the name...”

“You’re going to find out fairly quickly that no one here likes to change,” she said. “If Cap

weren't in charge, I would have been turned away the first day."

"Despite who all you're related to?"

"Not everyone will begrudge a woman what she's capable of doing, Will. I somewhat doubt Sim and the others would be different if they hadn't known Es."

"Why?"

"Because Es was a better blade than her brother." She stopped outside a small restaurant, looking somewhat hesitantly at the menu.

"What?" Will asked, more quietly.

"I don't have a particularly lot of money," she said. "Granted, it just has to last tonight, but I would like to sleep in a bed while I can. So I don't know what we're going to be able to eat yet."

After looking at the menu a moment longer, she continued on, and Will moved to follow her.

"Then how have you been living the past couple years?"

"Sim feeds me if I show up. Half the time I hunt and sell the hides. Es didn't have a lot of cash when she died, just a lot of friends who would support her."

"And you don't?"

"I'm not willing to ask for it," she said. "Except Sim, but I practically live there sometimes, anyway, so it's not quite the same."

"Ann?" someone up the street called, and she turned her head to look at the middle-aged woman who was approaching them. "It is you! How are you, dear?"

"Eh, I've been worse," Ann said as she reached them. "Edith, my brother Will. Will, Edith Mackey."

He furrowed his brow briefly as he shook her hand. "Mac and Mitch's aunt," he said after a moment, remembering the name. She smiled.

"When they'll acknowledge me. I'm a tad eccentric for the lads," she said. "Or used to be, at least. I *have* mellowed enough to no longer dye my wings blue."

"Blue was a good shade for you," Ann said.

"Have you eaten yet?" Edith said. "I just ran out for some rolls to go with the roast, and it'll be cold soon."

"Ah, well, no, but..."

"I'd offer to put you up," she said, "but I've a dear friend who stopped in with a wrenched back yesterday, and I haven't the room for the both of you at the moment."

"I—"

"I know you're broke, hon," Edith said, smiling. "Save the excuses and come for dinner, hm? I haven't seen you in over a year."

"All right," Ann conceded.

"She's such a pushover when it comes to food," Edith said to Will, smiling broadly.

"I noticed."

"You need to do yourself a favor and make one of these 'dear friends' permanent sometime, Edy," Ann said.

"Oh, I think I would with this one, but I don't want to rock the family boat too much."

"What, you think we wouldn't like him?"

"I'd bet my entire set of dyes on it," Edith replied. "But he won't be down for supper, so I'm not going to make things difficult for you."

"Entire set of dyes?" Will said, confused.

“She weaves,” Ann said. “And she’s almost as good a healer as Sim is.”

“Just almost, hon?” Edith said.

“After that first fight I had with the Patrol, I’m somewhat biased,” Ann shrugged.

“And you’re worried about *me* getting myself killed?” Will said to her. Edith smiled.

“It’s good to see you two still get along.”

“If by ‘get along’ you mean I still want to thrash him, yes,” Ann said.

Edith ran a plate upstairs to her guest while Ann and Will were eating.

“Are you going to stop in more often?” she asked them as they were leaving. Ann glanced at Will.

“We’ll be... busy for maybe the next year. After that, yeah, we can try. On an individual basis, maybe,” she said, frowning briefly at Will. “So that we can have a decent woman-to-woman chat without him prying too deeply into areas of my life I would prefer he stay out of.”

Edith smiled. “Of course. Be careful, if Sim hasn’t already harassed you half to death about it. I am looking forward to this getting over with.”

“Several of us are,” Ann said.

Will was unused to the amenities offered by an establishment such as the inn they stayed in that night offered, and it wasn’t long before Ann was laughing out loud at his curiosity.

“Maybe it’s better we’re doing this now than after you got used to living comfortably again,” she said.

“Well, it’s giving me things to look forward to coming back to again,” he said. “I think I’ll be thrilled enough to get a place with a bed.”

“Have you put any thought to how you’re going to finance all of it?”

“Er... no. What did Dad do?”

“From what I understood, he was a math teacher.”

Will’s brows furrowed. “Really?”

“Yeah. Sim is, as you’ve probably noticed, a metal smith. Cap has a merchantman. The Mackey brothers’ father—Edith’s brother—has a store in Fork.”

“So it’s either find legitimate work or tax everyone so I have time to do this full time.”

“Something like that. Probably the latter, since there’s a lot that needs to be done that no one can really get done without someone just saying it needs to be and hiring the people to do it.”

“Like what?”

“East’s docks need some serious work. The road between here and Gulf needs to be, in several areas, completely rebuilt. Stuff like that. A formal constabulary would help a great deal, since at the moment it’s basically just the Robay’n army and informal vigilantes, which means a lot of people who didn’t do anything get hurt, and some people get off.”

Will sighed slightly. “Would you like to trade jobs?”

“No.” She rolled over to put her back to him. “Just go to sleep, huh?”

They stopped the next night on the Last Isle, a tiny speck of land that barely broke the ocean’s surface halfway between Gobay and Rigobay. Will wasn’t wholly sure how Ann had found it in the wide expanse of water they’d flown over the entire day, but he was glad for it when they’d landed on it. Ann had a fire going shortly from the driftwood available on the beach, then broke out half of what remained of their food. Will sat across the fire from her as they ate; she’d been reluctant to talk, vocally or

mentally, the entire day.

“Is there anything to eat on Gobay?” he asked.

“I would imagine so,” she shrugged. “The four previous pairs were there since the people left.”

“True.” He slowly chewed the apple he was eating, not wholly sure when he would be eating again after breakfast the next day. “How do we know that we’re really supposed to be doing this?”

“What, taking up these roles?” Ann said. He nodded slightly. “I wouldn’t have really suspected it beyond general speculation if Es hadn’t given me the Ring two years ago. The generation above us has always looked upon it as a foregone conclusion. I... well, I didn’t suspect it until Es gave me the Ring. And once I’d laid a hand on the locket, I couldn’t have denied it.”

“How so?”

“There are days it’s like a noose around my throat. I know what it’ll do to me.”

He sighed heavily.

“Knowing I can pound your face in is somewhat consoling,” she said.

“Do you know just how much you’ve changed since I last saw you?”

“That was inevitable.”

“Was it? You used to be so vibrant. So fascinated just by living. It’s like you’ve lost your innocence.”

She raised one brow. “And what do you mean by ‘innocence’?”

“About life. About everything.”

“So?”

“How?”

“Haven’t we already been through this?”

“That would just piss you off. There has to be something else.”

She shifted her eyes to the fire. “It really isn’t any of your business.”

“No?”

“He’s dead now. At this point it doesn’t matter.”

“Who’s dead?”

“I told you, it’s none of your business.” There was an angry edge in her voice now, so he just let it drop. The implication was clear enough, even if she wouldn’t give him a name.

Ann landed at the mouth of a large river on the northern coast of Gobay the next evening, and Will dropped beside her.

“So... how are we supposed to find anything here?” he said.

“Heh... if I knew that, I wouldn’t have landed on the coast,” she said. “Maybe they’ll find us.”

“So no supper,” he said.

“Not tonight.” She crouched for a moment, elbows on her knees, looking up the river to the point where it entered the forest. “This is the Tokmier.”

“Why did we never come back here?” he asked, glancing back over the ocean they had crossed.

“The dragons are still here,” Ann said, standing to collect enough driftwood for a fire. “I suppose to avoid a war with them.”

“So now we just wait?”

“Pretty much.” She settled by the fire after she’d gotten it started. “Sleep, at least. If no one’s come to find us by noon tomorrow, I’ll see what I can do about food.”