



part ONE

*Dafar*







## CHAPTER 1

**F**roi!’  
In the dark of their chamber, Isaboe awoke. She heard Finnikin stir beside her and she climbed out of their bed, pulling back the curtain that partitioned their sleeping quarters from the rest of their private residence. Despite the thickness of the rug, her feet felt icy as she tiptoed to the hearth. Her hands shook as she lit a taper with the embers of last night’s fire, trying to understand the savage strangeness of her dream. But when she returned to their bed she saw, through the flicker of the flame, what the darkness had hidden. Finnikin lay awake, staring at her with fury. And it made her shiver even more.

‘What is it?’ she asked, as if facing a stranger, not her king. And because she feared the malevolence of Finnikin’s gaze, she gathered Jasmina into her arms and carried their daughter away, settling her to sleep in a moonlit corner of the room. There was a sound behind her, and Finnikin’s shadow was on the wall. Isaboe despaired at the wickedness that had crawled into their lives this night.

‘What?’ she demanded to know, her mood only eased by the



smile of sleepy satisfaction on Jasmina's face.

Finnikin didn't respond and this time she turned to face him, the light of a cruel moon mocking her belief that she had nothing to fear from her king.

'You wake with another man's name on your lips and you ask me what the matter is?' he said.

Froi?

She could hardly remember it now, but she had certainly dreamt that she had heard his name.

'It's the walk,' she said, pressing a kiss against the soft skin of her daughter's cheek. 'Every night now it seems as if I'm in another's sleep, but they reveal nothing.'

Unable to stand his accusing stare, she brushed past him and returned to their bed. 'It's a mind full of strangeness,' she mused. 'There's cunning beyond reckoning there. Snarls. Whispers. And something else. I can't explain it.'

'You've not bled for months, Isaboe,' Finnikin said, his voice blunt. 'Since you began carrying the child. How can you walk the sleep if you don't bleed?'

And then fear left her and anger set in and she matched the grey stoniness in Finnikin's eyes with dark rage.

'Are you calling me a liar?' she asked softly. 'Because I'd be careful of that, my love.'

They heard the sound of horses in the courtyard outside and she suspected it was Trevanion and Perri returning from the mountains where she had sent them to question Rafuel of Sebastabol. Finnikin walked away, without so much as a word. They had all been tense these past weeks after the return of Froi's ring by a Charynite brigand. They had also received news from inside the kingdom of Belegonia about the man who may have planned the slaughter of Isaboe's family, thirteen years past: Gargarin of Abroi. Isaboe had insisted they were to collect



information about the suspect. She knew what her next order would be. Slowly, every man responsible for Lumatere's pain would be gone, and she prayed to the Goddess that it would bring her peace.

When she heard the voices from the entrance of the chamber, Isaboe wrapped her fleece around her body and pulled across the curtain that separated their bed from the rest of the room. Informal meetings with Sir Topher and Trevanion always took place here in their private residence. It was Isaboe's favourite place in the castle, and when she had first seen the vastness of the room she had insisted they include a dining bench and settees to accommodate the closest of their friends when they came to visit. It was beautifully decorated with rich tapestries and ceiling frescoes, and Isaboe was proud of how at ease those nearest to her heart felt in her home. But there was little of that today.

She watched her lady's maid serve hot brew to Trevanion and Perri, who were hovering near the doorway.

'Your shoes, my queen!' Rhiannon reprimanded, turning her attention to Isaboe and staring down at Isaboe's bare feet.

She hadn't noticed. She only noticed Finnikin brooding by the window. Isaboe greeted Trevanion, who embraced her, and she felt the icy wetness of his coat. Taking his hand, she led him closer to the fire where Finnikin's hound pressed himself against Trevanion's leg in recognition.

'Where are your shoes, Isaboe?' he asked with disapproval.

Finnikin's father had one gruff tone for everything and she was finally becoming used to it after all these years.

A bleary-eyed Sir Topher entered with a knock and then they were all huddled before the warmth.

'Sit,' Isaboe ordered everyone and they made themselves comfortable before the fire.



'Rafuel of Sebastabol has become somewhat difficult to get alone these past weeks,' Trevanion said. 'Impossible, actually.'

'Since Phaedra of Alonso . . .' Isaboe said.

Trevanion nodded.

'How are they all?' she asked quietly. It had been three weeks since the death of Lucian's wife.

'Grieving. I left Beatriss and Vestie with them.'

'*Yata* sent a letter,' Isaboe said. 'Tesadora is taking it hard, I hear,' she added, looking at Perri. He nodded, but said nothing more. Isaboe had never known him to speak of Tesadora. Whatever it was that they shared was a private matter.

'Tesadora and her girls insist on going down to the valley again,' Trevanion said.

Isaboe shook her head. 'I want Tesadora here keeping me company until I deem it safe for her to return to her work with those Charynite valley dwellers.'

She noticed the flicker of annoyance on Perri's face and stared at him questioningly.

'Tesadora claims they are suffering greatly,' Trevanion said.

'The Monts?' Isaboe asked.

'The valley dwellers.'

'Why so much concern for the valley dwellers?' she asked, exasperated. 'They're not our problem.'

'Well, they may just be,' Trevanion continued. 'The province of Alonso has stopped sending grain carts. The valley dwellers are sharing meagre rations and it's beginning to show. Tesadora says that in their weakened state and in this cold, they're more at risk of illness. The older ones are beginning to die far too quickly.'

'Why would the Provincaro of Alonso leave them to starve?' she asked angrily.

'Grief,' Sir Topher said. 'He believes his daughter's death would have been avoided if she wasn't in the valley. He blames



the valley and he blames us. Perhaps if we write to offer our –'

'I don't grieve for Charynites,' Isaboe said, her voice cold. 'I don't recall receiving a letter from the Provincaro of Alonso when my family were slaughtered, nor was there a note of sympathy when my uncle Saro of the Monts was killed. I owe the Provincaro nothing. He, on the other hand, owes Lumatere for relieving him of the problem of a crowded province. Write to him, Sir Topher, and demand that he feed his people. I will not have them dropping like flies on my land!'

Rhiannon returned with Isaboe's slippers and another shawl, and they all waited until she stopped her fussing.

'You're quiet, Finnikin,' Sir Topher said after Rhiannon had left the room.

'I agree with Isaboe,' he said, his voice flat. 'Regardless of whose problem they are, the valley dwellers are Charynites, and Alonso has no right to stop the grain carts. Explain to the Provincaro that every death in the valley will be recorded, and one day when a benevolent king sits on the Charynite throne, Alonso will be held accountable.'

It was the wavering in Finnikin's voice that marked the difference between them both. Isaboe knew that. He was the better person. He wrote the letters of outrage to the King of Yutlind Nord about the injustices in Yutlind Sud. He wrote the letters to every leader of the land challenging the Sorellian laws of slavery. He was the only person she had ever known to use the word Skuldenorian. As if those in the land of Skuldenore were one people. But Isaboe could not think of being one with their enemies. Not with the memory of what had been done to her family. Finnikin's father was close at hand. Hers was dead and she had prayed these past years for the grace of forgiveness, but the Goddess refused to send it.

'We're not here to speak of the valley dwellers,' Isaboe said.



‘What else have we discovered about Gargarin of Abroi?’

Trevanion indicated for Perri to speak first.

‘I’ve interrogated every Charynite prisoner we have,’ Perri said, leaning forward in his seat. The blaze of the hearth illuminated the scar that ran across his brow. ‘Those who have heard of Gargarin of Abroi all speak the same thoughts. He was the King’s favourite advisor in the palace eighteen years ago. The Charynites in our prison say that the King favoured Gargarin of Abroi’s opinion over all others. It was well known in the capital that if young Gargarin of Abroi had a plan, the King would follow it.’

‘And what does the Charynite in possession of Froi’s ring have to say?’ Finnikin asked.

‘Every word that comes out of his mouth seems a lie, so he’s not the most reliable of sources, but he certainly knows who Gargarin of Abroi is.’

Trevanion and Perri exchanged looks. ‘According to the Charynite, the ring was given to him by a lad to bargain for Gargarin of Abroi’s life. And the province leaders paid three hundred pieces of gold as ransom to have Gargarin of Abroi returned to them when he was held hostage by these men called the street lords.’

There was an uneasy silence in the room.

‘Are we suspecting that Froi has joined the enemy?’ Isaboe asked, trying to keep her voice even.

‘We’re suspecting anyone can be an enemy to Lumatere,’ Trevanion said. ‘If it was Froi who bargained with the ring, then he was begging for the life of a man who could easily have been the mastermind behind events in this palace thirteen years ago.’

‘Easily have been?’ Isaboe asked. ‘If we’re going to hunt a man down, we need to be more certain than that.’

‘Gargarin of Abroi dazzled the King with his ideas,’ Sir



Topher said. 'Perhaps he has a way about him.'

'Froi is the least likely to be dazzled by another,' she said. 'Even when he had a choice between life and death, he refused to be influenced by powerful men. His choices are about survival.'

She heard a sound come from Finnikin and dared to glance at him.

'How is it that you came to speak about such things with him?' her husband asked.

She shrugged. 'We were exchanging stories of horror from our childhood. I told him about my time as a slave in Sorel and he shared with me some of his more . . . sordid moments on the streets of the Sarnak capital.'

Again she felt Finnikin's cold stare. How could a man who stared so coldly possess a smile that made her mood change in an instant? But that smile was far away now.

'I'll say this again because it's the life of a man we are playing with,' Isaboe said. 'Gargarin of Abroi worked for the King of Charyn eighteen years ago and then disappeared. But he did not work for the King thirteen years ago when Lumatere was attacked. How can we be sure he was involved?'

'We intercepted a letter he sent to the Belegonians, Your Majesty,' Sir Topher said. 'Gargarin of Abroi wants to talk to them about Charyn's unborn King. He has ambition.'

'Is that a crime? Most people in this court have ambition,' she said.

'He mentioned Lumatere.' Sir Topher removed the letter from his pocket and began to read. '*The Lumaterans need not know of our alliance. We'll talk later about what to do with them. Leave it to me, for I have a plan for Lumatere that will eliminate them as a threat.*'

Eliminate Lumatere? Isaboe shuddered. 'Then we must set a trap,' she said.

Trevanion nodded. 'Already done, my queen. We sent a letter



in response to his, asking him to meet with us on the Charyn–Osteria border.’

‘And you don’t think Gargarin of Abroi knows the look of an authentic Belegonian seal on a letter?’ she asked.

Trevanion and Sir Topher exchanged a look.

‘Our spy in the Belegonian palace managed to stamp the letter with a Belegonian seal,’ Sir Topher said, and she knew him well enough to understand he was hiding something. She looked from her First Man to Trevanion.

‘Who’s your spy?’ she demanded. ‘Lord August? On his last visit? Does Abian know?’

There was silence and she almost choked at the realisation.

‘Celie?’ She stared at them in horror. ‘August will kill you.’

Sir Topher sighed. ‘Celie came to us. She’s bored. She says she’s too plain to dazzle the Belegonian court, but that they all confide in her. She says her insipid looks are the perfect weapon. Her words, not ours.’

Isaboe rubbed her face, knowing that soon she would be dealing with Celie’s parents, Lady Abian and Lord August.

‘What about Rafuel of Sebastabol?’

‘According to Lucian, the Charynite has made contact between us impossible,’ Perri said.

‘I don’t like the fact that he’s out of our sight,’ Finnikin said. ‘He’s still a prisoner and the agreement was that he would be spying in the valley for us.’

Isaboe agreed. ‘I want Lucian to send down the lads again. I want Rafuel’s every movement noted.’

‘If you send down the Mont lads, Tesadora will insist on returning to the valley for good,’ Perri said.

‘Last I knew, Tesadora was not in charge of this kingdom,’ she said coolly. ‘I’ll say it again. I want her to pay me a visit. Can you ensure she receives that request, Perri?’



He nodded. 'I'll send Moss.'

'Hunt Gargarin of Abroi down,' she said to Trevanion. 'I don't want him alive. And I don't want him in Lumatere. What needs to be done.'

She spoke a few moments more with Sir Topher about their upcoming market day and then turned to find Finnikin packing.

'What are you doing?' she asked. 'Where are you going?'

He refused to speak and continued to place items in his pack.

'What is wrong with you?' she cried.

She grabbed the cloak from his belongings and threw it back into the chest.

He stood her aside and retrieved the cloak and placed it back in his pack before pulling on calfskin trousers, which she knew he only used for travel.

'I'm going with my father and Perri.'

'No!'

He laced up his boots, continuing to dress as if she hadn't spoken.

'You're not going to Charyn, Finnikin.'

'I don't follow a wife's orders,' he said.

'I'm not speaking to you as your wife,' she shouted. 'I'm speaking to you as your queen, and my order is that you are not going to Charyn.'

In her corner, Jasmina awoke and began to cry.

'Ah, so that's what is meant by the "Queen's Consort",' Finnikin said with bitterness. 'A page who answers to her demands.'

She grabbed his arm, but he shook it free.

'Is that what this is about?' she asked. 'Being my consort?'

He ignored her.

'Answer me!'

'You spoke another man's name in my bed!'



She stared at him, stunned. He had shouted at her this way once before when she had been disguised as the novice Evanjalin. It was almost four years past when he discovered the truth about Balthazar and had accused her of sedition.

‘I go to Charyn with my father and Perri,’ he said, his voice hard. ‘Because I speak the language in a way they don’t and if we are fortunate enough to cross the path of our wayward lad, I’ll bring him home to you safe and sound. Perhaps you can murmur his name to him while he shares your bed.’

She slapped his face with a cry of outrage and he pulled her close to him, his arms shaking.

‘You’ve never spoken to me of your time in Sorel as a child,’ he said, and she saw tears in his eyes. ‘You’ve always said it was too painful. That apart from Balthazar’s death and what you witnessed in Sarnak, it was your worst memory. Yet you told him. You trusted another man with your pain.’

He shook his head, anguished and full of fury. ‘I’ve told you everything. Every fear I have. How can we be equals in this union if you can’t trust me?’

‘Not telling you about Sorel has nothing to do with trust, Finnikin!’ she said.

He walked out the door before she could speak another word.

Soon after, she saw his fleece on their bed and knew he would freeze without it. Let him, she thought. Let him. But she grabbed the fleece and walked outside, flinging it over the balcony down to where Finnikin was already mounting his horse in the courtyard alongside his father and Perri. It caught him in the face and her only satisfaction was that the weight of it almost toppled him from his horse.

‘And don’t expect any sympathy if you catch your death out there,’ she shouted. ‘You didn’t even pack an undershirt.’

‘I expect nothing from you,’ he shouted back.



She was determined he would not get the last word and shouted a whole lot more until she had no idea what she was saying.

Inside, she walked to Jasmina's bed, thinking of her dream again. Not of the savageness and not of the confusion, but of the part that she remembered most of all. That it wasn't Tesadora and Vestie who had walked the sleep with her, as they had each month before her pregnancy when it was Isaboe's time to bleed. It was a different spirit now, one that almost shared her heart-beat. She stared down at her daughter, but knew it hadn't been Jasmina. She felt a kick in her belly and almost buckled, imagining the truth.

Had she walked the sleep of some savage beast with her unborn child?



## CHAPTER 2



**F***roi?*

*'Yes?'*

*'Are you awake?'*

*'I am now.'*

*'I can't sleep.'*

*'What are you thinking?'*

*'About sad things, really. What if I never get to meet our little king, Froi?'*

*'Don't say that. Don't think it!'*

*'He'll never know that the time I felt most brave was when I knew he was in my belly.'*

*'You were brave long before that, Quintana. Sleep.'*

*'Quintana?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'Are you awake?'*

*'I am now.'*

*'I can't sleep,' he said.*

*'What are you thinking?'*



*'That time . . . that time you let go of my hand in the Citavita,' he said, 'when you thought I would hurt you and the babe, where would you have gone?'*

*'Wherever our little king guided me.'*

*'He speaks to you?'*

*'No. But he used to speak to my sister, the Reginita. He liked the sound of her voice. He's very clever in that way. I think he's gods' blessed like Arjuro.'*

*'And where did our little king suggest you all journey without me?'*

*'You'll not believe it.'*

*'But I will.'*

*'Promise you won't think me a fool.'*

*'With all my heart.'*

*'Then you'll have to come closer, Froi. We can't have the Avanosh lot hearing.'*

*Quintana? I can't hear you. Speak louder. You've got to speak louder. I can't hear you. Quintana!*

*'Froi!'*

*Don't wake up.*

*'Froi!'*

*Fight it. Don't let her go again.*

*'Froi, wake up!'*

The times he loved most were when his eyes were closed. So he could imagine he was still in his quarters in Paladozza on that long night when they talked and talked and lay naked against each other. They were like a cocoon, she said. She had seen one in the gardens of their compound and had sat and watched it for hours. So there they lay with her rounded belly between them, protecting their little king, studying each other's face as if trying to work out which part of them would belong to the babe.

With eyes closed shut, Froi could also imagine Gargarin and Lirah down the hall in De Lancey's home and he could go back to that room time and time again and change everything that happened. Take back every word he spoke.

But sleep was already gone and with its loss came truth and a flatness to his spirit that rendered him motionless. Barely opening his eyes, he could see Arjuro crouched beside him, a cup of brew in the Priestling's hands that was sure to turn Froi's stomach.

'She whispered it to me, Arjuro,' he said, his voice hoarse, and Arjuro lifted the cup to Froi's lips. 'I could almost hear her. I could almost hear the words telling me where she'd hide.'

'Drink,' Arjuro ordered gently. 'She's just about told you every night, Froi. For weeks now. You beg her in your sleep over and over again. Let it rest or you'll drive us both mad.'

Arjuro lit another of the oil lamps, and then two more, and placed them in the crooks of the wall. It was the only light Froi had seen these past weeks and he wondered what it did to a spirit to not feel sun on the skin or the wind on one's face.

Although he shared the cavern with Arjuro, passages linked it to every other cavern in the underground godshouse of Trist. The rest of Charyn had been led to believe that the Priests were hiding somewhere in the caves outside Sebastabol, but instead they lived beneath the city itself. It was a labyrinth so extensive it had three main entrances: one through a grate in the ceiling that led to a hospital for travellers, and two through cellars of Sebastabolians who had an allegiance to the Priests. It was outside one of those homes where Froi's bloody body was left.

'You have a habit of turning up on our doorstep, Dafar of Abroi,' Simeon the Head Priest had told him the first time Froi woke. 'Creating havoc in the kingdom beyond understanding.'

They were unable to tell him who his saviour was. 'You were



left and he was gone without a word,' they said.

Froi dragged himself out of his bedroll and walked to the basin, dampening a cloth and wiping it over his face. Each morning had been a measure of how quickly he was healing and his only relief today was that there was less pain than the day before.

'I'm ready,' he said to Arjuro.

'You said you were ready the day you woke up with eight barbs wedged in your body,' Arjuro muttered, mixing a paste that he coated on Froi's wounds each morning. It produced a stench that made them both want to retch, but Arjuro insisted the scars would fade and Froi would heal quicker. The faster Froi healed, the closer he came to finding her.

'Arm up,' Arjuro ordered.

Froi held up his arm as Arjuro smeared the paste onto the deepest of the wounds on Froi's side. 'It's the one that brought you closest to death,' Arjuro said most days, and Froi would hear the break in the Priestling's voice each time.

The paste and Arjuro's fingers were cold on his skin and Froi flinched more than once, although he tried hard not to. It was Arjuro who had to be convinced of his strength. Arjuro, Froi had come to understand, was respected by the compound of Trist, and Froi could see the Priests and their families were desperate to keep him. He was the last of the Oracle's Priestlings and he still held a fascination for them all.

'Are you ready for the *collegiati*?' Arjuro asked. 'You're the most exciting thing that's happened to them for quite some time.'

'You mean my injuries are,' Froi said.

'Yes, I suppose they will miss your wounds when you leave,' Arjuro chuckled.

Each morning, a group of young men and women, a little older than Froi, came to visit their quarters. Although not last-borns, some were in hiding because they were believed to be



gods' blessed. Others were the children of the Priests and Priestesses who had hidden their families all those years ago when the Oracle's godshouse was attacked. That a school for the brightest minds in Charyn existed in the bowels of a province didn't surprise Froi. In the nook of any given cave in this kingdom were a people refusing to give up.

'The way they grovel to you makes me sick to my stomach,' Froi said as he watched Arjuro arrange his tools of healing. Froi thought of them more as tools of torture. When he had first awoken from his injuries, one of the *collegiati* had told Froi how excited all in the compound had been when Arjuro returned to them.

'He was considered the greatest young surgeon in Charyn before the attack on the Oracle's godshouse,' the girl, Marte, had explained to Froi. 'My mother was one of his teachers in Paladozza and said that even as a boy he showed brilliance.'

Marte and her fellow *collegiati* were hungry for any type of learning and they hovered around the entrance of Arjuro's chamber all day long, just for a chance to spend more time with the Priestling.

Arjuro found them as annoying as he found most people and would tell them exactly where he would prefer they go. But they returned each day while he treated Froi's wounds, which they analysed and discussed, poking at Froi as if he was nothing but a slab of mutton. Froi would see their eyes blaze with excitement each time they saw his scars.

Whoever had taken him to these caves had tried to yank out the arrows, but once the shafts were pulled, they had come unstuck from their stems and Froi was left with eight arrowheads lodged inside his body.

'Cat gut goes a long way, blessed Arjuro,' Marte said that morning when they all shuffled in. 'The stitching is perfect.'



'But how did you remove the barbs, Brother Arjuro?' a *collegiato* asked in awe.

'An arrow spoon,' Arjuro said, showing them the instrument. There was much oohing and aahing.

'The spoon is inserted into the wound and latches onto the arrowhead,' Arjuro said, looking at Froi. 'You might want to close your ears for this next bit, Froi.' Arjuro turned back to the others. 'Next moment, the barb is ripped out and look what we have?' Arjuro said. 'Beautiful.'

This was what produced joy for Arjuro. Inflicting pain.

'It's a work of art, Brother Arjuro,' an annoyingly fawning *collegiata* said. 'You're a genius.'

'Yes, I'm going to have to agree,' Arjuro said, pleased with himself. 'See how clean this one is,' he said, pointing to Froi's shoulderblade. 'But I think it could have been a tighter stitch. I only wish I had a chance to do it again. If I could get myself some bronzed wire, rather than using sheep bone, I think I could have done a neater job of this sewing.'

He caught Froi's eye, a smile crossing his lips. Froi knew he was enjoying himself.

Someone ran a finger alongside the dent at the back of Froi's head and Arjuro slapped the hand away. Froi had received an arrow to the head and they had been forced to crop his hair. Although not completely bare, it felt strange under his fingers. But what was even stranger was the *collegiati's* reaction to it. Not a day went by without a hand attempting to feel its way across the cleft at the back of Froi's skull.

'Are you going to tell me what's there?' he demanded of Arjuro.

'A hard head,' Arjuro responded and Froi saw the warning look he sent to the others. 'It's a good thing you have no brains and the arrowhead pierced nothing but empty space.'



It was the same joke each time and Froi rolled his eyes when the others laughed at it again.

‘Can I put on my trousers now?’ he asked. Never one to be bashful about his naked self, it felt different when the *collegiati* scrutinised every part of his body. The topic of foreskin was the most difficult to endure.

‘He grew up in Sarnak. It’s what they do to their male young. A snip and then it’s gone,’ Arjuro explained.

The men had flinched. The women were intrigued.

Arjuro ushered them all out.

‘Brother Arjuro, what of warts?’ one of the lads asked at the entrance of the cave. Nothing gods’ blessed about that one. Some were quite delusional when it came to the degree of their talents.

Arjuro stared at the young man.

‘I don’t heal warts. If you want to learn how to heal warts, go to the soothsayer and she’ll feed you with an old wives’ tale or two.’

When they were all gone, Froi pulled on his trousers.

‘They’re all half in love with you,’ he said. ‘Men and women.’

‘Yes, it’s a pity you didn’t inherit our looks,’ Arjuro said. ‘You too could be as popular.’

Froi hid a smile.

‘Gargarin was even more sought after,’ Arjuro explained, sketching today’s image of Froi’s gut wound into his journal. ‘It’s because he ignored the world and, in turn, the world believed he was playing games.’

‘Were you jealous of him?’

‘Gargarin?’ Arjuro looked up, surprised by the question. ‘Never. I told you. I was jealous of anyone who took him from me.’

‘He could be happy with Lirah in Paladozza,’ Froi said softly.

Arjuro sighed. ‘I can’t see my brother staying put while all this is happening.’



Froi imagined that ‘all this’ was the question of Quintana’s whereabouts. He watched Arjuro carefully. ‘You know I’m ready.’

‘I’ll tell you when you’re ready. Sit.’ Arjuro pressed hard on the puckered skin across Froi’s gut.

‘Does that hurt?’

Froi pressed two fingers against Arjuro’s shoulder with the same force.

‘Does that?’ he snapped in return.

‘Oh, so we’re bad-tempered this morning, as well. Always good to see the Abroi spirit living on in our sprog.’

This time Froi couldn’t resist a smile, but then he grabbed Arjuro’s hand and pressed it against the back of his skull.

‘What’s there, Arjuro? What are you hiding from me?’

Arjuro pulled his hand away with a grimace.

‘Nothing we don’t already know, Froi. It was just hidden for so long. You were born with a mop of hair. Did you know that? It’s probably been there your whole life and no one ever saw it.’

‘But what is it?’

‘It’s the same style of lettering as Quintana’s,’ Arjuro said finally. ‘We didn’t realise all this time that both of you were scorched by the gods or whoever it was.’

‘If not the gods, who else?’ Froi asked.

Arjuro shook his head. ‘I don’t know. I wish I did. I wish I knew what it meant.’

He placed a blue woollen cap over Froi’s head, almost covering his eyes and ears.

‘Make sure no one outside these caves see it. Charynites are used to the sign belonging to lastborn women,’ Arjuro said. ‘I don’t know what would happen if they knew the very last male born was walking amongst us.’

Arjuro put his journal away under his cot. Froi saw a note



poking out from one of the pages. He watched for signs of news all the time, and during the past day, Arjuro had received new correspondence.

‘What’s in the letter?’ he asked.

Arjuro didn’t respond.

‘Tell me,’ Froi begged.

Arjuro sat on the cot and thought for a minute. ‘We’ve received word back from the Turlans. Quintana never reached them, Froi. She’s not in the Lascow Mountains either. We’ve sent out word to the Provincari. She may have gone back to Jidia.’

‘Orlanda made it clear she would not protect her,’ Froi said, referring to the Provincara of Jidia.

‘Regardless, if Orlanda’s hand is forced, she will protect the future King.’

‘What of De Lancey? Quintana went searching for Lirah that time in the Citavita. Maybe she returned to Paladozza.’

‘I’ve written to De Lancey. Let’s hope he responds with the news we want to hear.’

‘Arjuro –’

‘It’s all I know. Don’t ask me again!’

# Quintana of Charyn

Melina Marchetta



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