

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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THE LODESTAR OF Ys

Amy Rae Durreson

THE LODESTAR OF YS

Sjurd is convinced that Celyn of Ys is the most irritating man alive. It's a good thing that Celyn is engaged to Sjurd's brother, not him, because Sjurd loathes the brat, and it's quite mutual. When an elopement and the threat of invasion force the two princes together, however, they have no choice but to marry and fake true love to keep their countries safe. Can warrior Sjurd and diplomat Celyn find any common ground?

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

THE LODESTAR OF YS

By Amy Rae Durreson

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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THE LODESTAR OF YS

By Amy Rae Durreson

Photo Description

The photo shows an intense, dark-haired young man, clad all in leather. He is holding a drawn bow and arrow and aiming upwards into the forest.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

His younger brother was supposed to marry the prince of their neighboring country and so form an alliance against the Perth Empire. Good thing too, that it was his brother, since Sjurd couldn't stand the bookish princeling and that feeling was mutual. His brother's fiancé thought him brutish and dumb; at least, he managed to insult him every time they met.

All would be well, if his selfish brother didn't elope with his best friend—a Lord of the realm, and their second cousin. Now Sjurd, the heir apparent, has to honor the marriage promise or risk war, which they couldn't afford. Even worse, he has to actually go on a month-long honeymoon, with a guy whom he can't stand and has nothing in common with—or does he?

Please let those guys make their marriage of convenience work!

No incest, rape or BDSM please! I'd like to see a sarcastic prince who is not meek and doesn't cower before Sjurd.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Anas

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: royalty, arranged marriage, slow burn/UST, enemies to lovers, weddings, warfare

Word count: 46,549

THE LODESTAR OF YS

By Amy Rae Durreson

CHAPTER I

Celyn: Aged 14

The first time Celyn met the oaf was aboard the flying ship *Llinos*, on the eve of their betrothal feast.

Not, of course, that they were supposed to be marrying each other. Celyn was sister's son to King Pryderi of Ys, which meant his main value to the crown was as a minor marriage pawn. He certainly didn't have anywhere near enough status of his own to merit an engagement to the newly selected First Prince of Axholme, who had been named heir elect by the acclaim of his gathered bloodline; was military leader of already legendary status; and was (Celyn was soon to learn) an all round arrogant prat.

No, First Prince Sjurd the Great Oaf got to be engaged to Mathilde, second daughter of the Principality of Challoner, a realm bigger and richer than Celyn's beloved Ys. Challoner, not coincidentally, was possessed of a very large standing army and an unenviable geographical position right between the Axtooth Range and the border of the Perth Empire. Celyn, on the other hand, got to be engaged to the new First Prince's younger brother Ivarr, a development with which he was entirely happy.

Ivarr was in possession of the following virtues, all to be welcomed in a spouse: he was only eighteen months younger than Celyn; he possessed the use of all his limbs; he could hold up his end of a conversation, albeit not as fluently as Celyn himself; and he had a rather pleasant smile. (This latter point would not have appeared as part of Celyn's essential criteria a year ago. It had, however, become more important of late, along with the realization that he was very relieved that his uncle had affianced him to a boy, even if it had been a purely political decision about not producing further heirs, when they might

have to evacuate everyone beyond the Veil of Storms if the Empire did come over the mountains.)

The only problem with Ivarr that Celyn could see so far was that he came with an attachment. The attachment's name was Hrolf, and he wasn't very impressed by Celyn either.

"Do you ever stop talking?" Hrolf demanded, crossing his arms and looking down his rather long nose at Celyn.

"Eloquence," Celyn remarked, trying to ignore the fact that Hrolf, over a year younger than him, *could* look down on him (clearly they grew them big and stupid in Axholme), "is a gift of princes."

"Not any prince I've ever met," said Hrolf.

"And how many princes do you know?" Celyn demanded.

"Sjurd and him," Hrolf said, pointing his thumb at Ivarr, "and he's too busy thinking about things to talk much."

"I'm sure I'll get better with practice," Ivarr said, looking rather worried. "I've only been a prince for a month. Until they chose Sjurd as First Prince, I thought I was going to be a turnip farmer when I grew up."

"Urgh," Celyn said, wrinkling his nose. "Was there nothing better you could grow?"

"I like turnips," Ivarr said, a little more firmly. "They're unfussy, and you can write poems while you're waiting for them to come up."

"Oh," Celyn said in relief. "Well, if you're a poetical turnip farmer, that's perfectly all right."

Ivarr beamed at him, displaying that rather nice smile again. "Do you like poetry?"

"Er," said Celyn. A lie at this point in a lifelong relationship was bound to have unpleasant consequences, but he didn't want a row when they were getting on so splendidly. "Not exactly. Which is to say, not yet, but I'm sure that's just lack of exposure. I mean, I'm bound to find some I like. Eventually."

Ivarr sighed wistfully.

Hrolf snorted and went back to his pet topic. There was a certain grim inevitability to Hrolf's conversation, Celyn had already come to realize, rather like the way a flying ship accelerated towards home when no one was working the rudder. Right now, he was saying, "That's right. Real princes don't waste time with poetry any more than they talk too much. Sjurd says actions speak louder than words, and he should know. He's probably never read a poem in his life. He's a proper prince."

"And I'm not?" demanded Celyn.

Hrolf gave him a look that said clearly not, but he wasn't going to be rude enough to point out the blindingly obvious. "Sjurd's a *fighting* prince."

"I could fight *you*," Celyn offered. Hrolf might be bigger, but Celyn was pretty sure he was meaner.

Hrolf snorted again. "Sjurd fights brigands, and Imperial spies, and misthounds. He wrestled an ogre once, and it almost throttled him." He held out his hands to demonstrate, eyes bright. "But he headbutted it in the balls, then smashed its brainpan on a boulder, and its brains went up his *nose*, and he didn't wash them out for three days, not until he'd killed the whole nest and rescued the children they'd nabbed for their supper. *That's* a real prince."

"Holy Dwynwen protect us," Celyn breathed, covering his own nose with a wince. "That's *vile*. No wonder he doesn't like poems. He probably can't understand any complex ones because he's been hit in the head too many times."

"He is my brother, you know," Ivarr said, a little huffily, and for a moment, trouble threatened.

Then Celyn had the bright idea of offering to show them how the lodestone was rigged to steer the ship, and all notions of proper princely behavior were promptly forgotten.

Llinos was sailing over the foothills on the Axholme side of the ridge, her sails bellying before the wind. Up here, the sun was bright and warm, although the air was cool enough in the shade that both Ivarr and Hrolf shivered a little.

The valleys below were silver with mist, only brown ridges and occasional lines of dark forest rising into sight. Ahead of them, the rough crags of the higher ranges rose in blue-brown folds. The wind was fresh from the northwest, steady but not too strong, and they were making good time across the morning sky. A tour of one of Axholme's lodestone mines was on the agenda for the morning, and then they would be tacking back to the capital at Holmebury for the evening's feasts.

This close to the Axtooth range, where the lodestone was mined, the attraction was so strong that the sailors had only exposed a tiny sliver of the black stone to allow them to counteract the boat's natural tendency towards its home island.

"What happens if we open the lead casing completely?" Ivarr wanted to know.

"Well," Celyn said, gratified that even Hrolf was hanging on his words, and trying to sound knowing, "either the lodestone would rip itself out of the side of the ship, tearing the hull apart, or it would take us with it, and we'd crash into the side of the mountain."

"Brilliant," Hrolf breathed, and Ivarr looked intrigued, his blue eyes widening with excitement.

But Celyn was a son of Ys, and the boats were too precious to relish the thought of one crashing, even if it was a truly spectacular crash. "Better not," he said. "Not after all the fuss they made about writing those marriage contracts."

But there were still gears to investigate, and altitude floats to prod, and the workings of the steerage to be explained at length. And there was good old Captain ap Gwenfor, who had known Celyn since he was a baby and therefore indulged him like one of his own grandchildren, who was delighted to show Celyn's new fiance how to steer a flying ship.

Later, in front of his disapproving elders, Celyn tried to explain how what happened next was simply the final inevitable stage of an unavoidable process. Indeed, he would go on, it could hardly be blamed on him or poor Captain ap Gwenfor. Any Ysian child knew how to keep a boat steady in the sky by the

time they could write their own name. How were they supposed to know that it wasn't some innate ability shared by all boys, even landlocked ones like Ivarr?

At the time, as the ship plunged suddenly towards the ground, he was too busy screaming and hanging onto the side to think of excuses.

It was only a matter of moments before the captain wrestled control back from Ivarr and brought them out of their dive. It was long enough to set everyone on the ship bellowing with panic, though, and send Hrolf staggering to the rail to vomit the moment they were level.

“That’s probably going to land on a very surprised goat in a few minutes’ time,” Celyn said, just to prove his nerves were steady.

Ivarr stared at him in shuddering outrage. “We nearly died, and you’re worried about the goats!”

And then, before Celyn could respond to that, adult retribution appeared. It came in a rather striking form: a lean, dark-haired man in the gray leather favored by the Axholme border guard. His hair was pulled back severely, and his blue eyes were icy with rage, but he was still one of the most handsome men Celyn had ever seen. By the expression on his face, and the uniform, Celyn guessed this was Ivarr’s bodyguard and he wasn’t impressed with his charge.

“What are you moronic little shits doing?” he demanded, and his voice was a surprise too. Even when rough with rage, it had a low musical growl to it that made Celyn’s stomach clench in an interesting way. “I swear it, Hrolf, I will hang you from the prow by your toenails if you fuck this alliance up.”

Well, that was patently unfair, as Hrolf, annoying as he was, hadn’t been involved at all and was, in fact, still heaving over the side. Celyn forgot about how good-looking the man was and said indignantly, “It wasn’t anything to do with Hrolf!”

A low feminine laugh cut in on them, and Celyn looked up to see a woman scramble onto the quarter deck, her skirts scooped out of the way in one hand. He knew her, and liked her, and could almost see why so many of his cousins thought she was the prettiest woman alive: it was in her wide, laughing mouth,

and the way her red hair curled out of the intricate braids that held it off her face, and the forthright way she moved and spoke.

“Was it Ivarr, then?” Princess Mathilde asked. “I didn’t think you knew how to make mischief, sweetheart.”

Ivarr went pink, but set his shoulders and said, “I’m very sorry, Highness.”

“*Ivarr?*” the rude bodyguard said incredulously. “And I thought you were the one person who wouldn’t embarrass me. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Now that was rather too much, even allowing for the shock of a rough flight. Crossly, Celyn protested, “You can’t talk to him like that! He’s a prince!”

Ivarr sighed miserably and confided, “That doesn’t really mean anything. So is he.”

Celyn stared at the man again, his eyes narrowing. Now he looked properly, he could see the resemblance to Ivarr: their dark brown hair waved back from their foreheads in the same way, and their eyes were the same pale blue, although what looked like sea glass on Ivarr was closer to ice in this man. They had the same slightly pointed ears, but there the resemblance ended. Celyn couldn’t ever imagine sweet-tempered Ivarr looking as ferocious and humorless as this oaf.

“Oh,” he said, trying to fill his voice with all the disdain he’d learned in a short lifetime at court. “You must be the brother.”

Sjurd: Aged 21

Sjurd was too tired to deal with this shit.

His back and shoulders ached with the strain of too many battles and too little rest in between. His calf still throbbed from a misthound’s bite a fortnight ago, the raw pain of its teeth followed by the cold numb wrongness of venom pumping into him. His head felt permanently heavy on his shoulders, and his jaw constantly ready to lock shut, and always in the back of his mind, steady

as a heartbeat, was the knowledge that *the Empire is coming, the Empire is coming*.

He wanted nothing more than a warm body to curl around and a day, just one day, to do nothing but sleep. Instead, he was here, playing diplomat to impress not just the Challoners but a shipload of crazy Ysians as well. He wanted his brother married well and safely, and at least Ys was the final nation before the endless western sea, but he didn't understand these people, with their jawbreaking language, their cryptic and epic poetry, and their heedless pacifism.

Thank Thunder he didn't have to marry one of them. He'd known Mathilde for years, since he'd been just a border commander from a minor branch of the royal family and she had been his equivalent on the Challoner side of the border. He hadn't even thought about the throne back then, so it had been a shock when King Snorri announced he was appointing an heir and all his cousins started voting for him.

He and Mathilde would do well together, though. He didn't really see the need to spend a week sailing around the mountains to prove that the two of them were compatible. They were already friends. Wasn't that enough for their respective governments?

Clearly not, for here they were, floating too high above the ground in a flimsy bit of wood and sailcloth he was convinced would drop out of the sky at any moment. And that was without the help of his idiotic little brother, whom he'd always thought was far too meek and mild to try crashing an airship.

Of course, Ivarr being Ivarr, he'd managed to find a new friend, one of the ship's boys by the grease on his face. From a purely brotherly perspective, Sjurd admired Ivarr's talent for making instant friends from every possible background. He'd love to be that at ease with strangers himself. On a diplomatic mission, however, it had its disadvantages.

"He doesn't look like a proper prince," the brat remarked to Hrolf, squinting at Sjurd. "He's a bit scruffy around the edges."

Hrolf (and, seriously, he knew they had to bring Ivarr, since he was one of the ones getting engaged, but what idiot on his father's homestead had decided

to send that muttonhead Hrolf, too?) straightened up, still looking green, and said, “You wouldn’t know a proper prince if one punched you in the nose.”

“Probably because punching people in the nose isn’t princely behavior,” the brat retorted, and then smirked at Hrolf. “Although for you, I’d make an exception.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Hrolf retorted and lunged forward.

Sjurd grabbed him by the collar and stretched out the other hand to stop the brat in his tracks. Holding them apart, he roared, “*Enough!*”

“There’s no need to shout in my ear,” the brat protested.

“Let me go!” Hrolf bellowed, squirming in Sjurd’s hold.

“I *will*,” Sjurd growled, in his best command voice, “knock your heads together hard enough to leave you both unconscious for the rest of the trip.”

That shut Hrolf up, but the brat still had to say, “You people really are barbarians, aren’t you?”

Mathilde stopped laughing long enough to say reproachfully, “I think you started that one, Cel.”

With a sinking heart, Sjurd took another look at the brat. Grease-smear and grubby he might be, but his clothes were fine under the muck, the colors deep and the cuffs stiff with embroidery, golden patterns of complex, intertwining knots. He looked like an urchin, his fair hair sticking up in tufts and his ears too big for his face, but he was pink-cheeked and healthy. It was the eyes that gave him away, the same clear pale green as King Pryderi, passed down the royal line of Ys like their high cheekbones and peculiar sense of humor.

Sjurd looked at his brother, who was hanging his head and trying not to meet anyone’s eyes. “*This* is your fiance?”

“Sjurd,” Mathilde said, laying a hand on his arm. She was still grinning widely, and her eyes were dancing. “This is your future brother, Prince Celyn ap Iorweth of Ys. Celyn, First Prince Sjurd of Axholme.”

“My commiserations, cousin Mathilde,” Prince Brat said, so mildly that it took Sjurd a moment to catch his meaning.

“If he’s going to be my brother, I’m free to hit him, right?” he asked.

“In the nose!” Hrolf contributed enthusiastically, but went quiet again when Sjurd turned his glare that way.

Prince Brat sniffed. “My brothers don’t hit me.”

“It shows,” Sjurd growled, and watched those green eyes go wide.

“Also,” Mathilde said sensibly, “your brothers are six, Cel. Now, leave the poor captain alone, all of you. Get back onto the main deck.”

“Except you,” Sjurd added to Ivarr. “You can go to your cabin and think about how stupid you are.”

“Sorry,” Ivarr said, looking forlorn. Sjurd hardened his heart. In two more years, the boy would be old enough to join a border garrison. If he still had a head full of clouds, he wouldn’t survive his first encounter with a misthound.

“No mine tour, and you’re on dawn watch tomorrow.”

“Sjurd!” Even as a baby, Ivarr had happily slept well into the morning.

“I’m sure this ship has latrines you could scrub as well,” Sjurd added, just to see the indignation on his brother’s face.

Prince Brat chose that moment to share, “I *really* don’t like him.”

“He grows on you,” Mathilde said.

“Like a fungus?”

Her lips twitched, but she simply said, “I hope you have a change of clothes on board, Celyn. If I were you, I’d change before King Pryderi catches you.”

Prince Brat looked down at his grease-smearred finery and actually blanched. Then he bolted. Ivarr took one more look at Sjurd’s face and went after him, the ever-loyal Hrolf on his heels. Sjurd sighed, and turned to offer his apologies to the captain. Really, keeping track of his own family was hard enough. How did anyone expect him to manage a kingdom?

Well, he thought grimly as he followed Mathilde back to the main deck, they probably didn't. King Snorri had a good few decades in him yet, and by the time he passed the Empire would be in spitting distance. His blood kin hadn't chosen him as heir because they thought he'd make a good king. They'd wanted a general.

Mathilde was waiting for him on the main deck. She linked her arm through his with a smile. "He's a good boy, really, young Celyn. He's not had an easy life. His mother was captain of the ship the Empire seized a couple of years back."

"Executed her and the ambassador, didn't they?" Sjurd asked. He remembered the incident, not least because it had finally brought the Ysians into an alliance with the mainland.

"Celyn's like her, from the stories I've heard. True-hearted. He just hasn't learned yet when not to talk."

"You think too well of everyone," Sjurd grumbled, although it was one of the things he liked about her. She saw things clearly enough, but had a gift for forgiving what Sjurd simply found irritating.

She tucked herself more carefully against his side, discreetly taking some of the weight off his bad leg, and he sighed in relief. She might be wearing all her finery today, but she was almost as battle-hardened as he was, and knew exactly how much he was hurting. She was a strong arm in a fight as well, and he'd happily have her at his back in battle. At least their respective kings had been kind enough to match two friends together. He could have been landed with a far less practical princess. He didn't have the time or the patience for a great romance, but they respected each other and would live well together. They would have strong children.

Although, of course, their children would need to be strong to survive when the Empire came. At best, the Empire took royal children as hostages. More often the children were enslaved or simply slaughtered.

"Such a grim face," Mathilde commented.

Sjurd shrugged. "We live in grim times."

She sighed a little. “But we cannot change that by dwelling on it. I refuse to live an unhappy life, no matter what is coming. If we face our fate with honor and courage, we have done enough. I will not let them make me sad as well. So, look.” She waved a hand at the view. “Did you ever see something so lovely?”

The morning sun was catching on the mist below, washing it with gold. The swelling sails above them caught the light as well, their white cloth shining brightly. The sky around them was so clear a blue that Sjurd was surprised they could breathe the air without tasting it, and the wind was cool, crisp and fresh on his cheek.

The mountains were a very long way down.

“Just how high up do you think we are?” he asked Mathilde, trying to keep his voice light.

She wasn’t fooled. “You, afraid of heights? I thought you were supposed to be fearless.”

“Heights are *not* a problem,” he protested. He was fine on even the highest mountain. He just didn’t care for having nothing more than a flimsy bit of wood between him and open air.

Mathilde continued to tease him, and he grumbled at her and watched the sails rather than the valleys, but her company and the bright sun were slowly relieving the tension in his shoulders. He felt a long way from the world, and he wondered if this was what made the Ysians pacifists. It was hard to imagine the dank shadows of a morning ambush when you were fluttering along like a mildly purposeful cloud.

Then the ship lurched suddenly beneath them, and he grabbed Mathilde’s arm a little tighter than he’d meant to and, to his embarrassment, squeaked, “What was that?”

She didn’t call him out on it, bless her kind heart, but just said soothingly, “A contrary wind, perhaps.”

Then it happened again, the ship tipping slightly to the side before it righted itself with a hard jerk. Sjurd locked one arm around the rail and the

other around Mathilde, and looked around for someone who could tell them what in the name of Thunder was going on.

The brat prince was racing up the deck towards them. Sjurd let go of Mathilde to grab him and demand, “What’s happening?”

“Let go of me!” the brat yelled. “The ship’s in trouble and I need to help!”

“You’re not a sailor,” Mathilde said. “Let them do their job.”

“In an emergency, everyone helps!” the brat stated indignantly.

Sjurd cut across him. “What do you mean, in trouble?” His voice came out harsher than he’d intended, and he swallowed hard. Dying in battle, fine. Falling out of the sky to be smeared across the rocks below like jellied prince, no, no, no. The ship jerked again, and he dug his fingers into the brat’s shoulder, fighting back panic.

“There’s no need to leave bruises,” the brat complained, as if he wasn’t the least bit concerned by their imminent and violent deaths. “The ship’s not supposed to do this. She’s only three years old, and the virtue shouldn’t have gone out of her wood yet.”

“Yet?” Sjurd repeated.

“All ships drop in the end,” the brat said philosophically. “Such is life.”

“This has happened before?” Sjurd demanded. “And you people still let us board this thing?”

That, finally, riled the brat. “*Llinos* is not a thing. She’s a lady. And for your information, it takes centuries, and there are plenty of warning signs, and only an idiot would sail on a ship that was close to her final voyage. Now, let me *go*.”

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong with this ship,” Sjurd demanded, as it bucked again. His stomach rose, and he swallowed hard. Men were clearly not supposed to fly.

It was Mathilde who answered that question, though, probably because she was the only one of the three of them still scanning the valley below. Raising her arm, she pointed into the mist below and yelled, “*Hound!*”

Her voice belled out across the creaking tumult on deck, and Sjurd saw every one of his people and hers go tense, even as the Ysians looked confused.

Following her pointing arm, he saw the shadow in the mist: a dark green smoky haze rising out of the silver veil that hung across the forest, the unmistakable sign of a misthound crouched on the ground below, its bony jaws open and its miasma billowing out.

He turned back to the brat, his head clearing now he knew the cause of all this. “Tell the captain to swing away from that and make landing at the next guard tower.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s a misthound,” Mathilde said grimly, already reaching to twist her loose hair up out of her face into something more suited for battle. “They eat magic.”

Sjurd was already striding towards his cabin, whistling his guard close. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the boy head for the quarterdeck again, Mathilde close on his heels. Good. She could explain it to the Ysians while he decided who to pull from the honor guard to deal with this. Let her explain how the misthounds consumed and held every scrap of magic they encountered, and how the Empire trained them to bring it back to their masters to be siphoned into Imperial caches. There was no free magic in the Empire—no ogres, but no healing simples or flying ships, either. All magic belonged to the Emperor, and was allocated out to his favorites as he decreed. Mathilde knew as well as he did that the Empire’s first move against its conquests was to send the misthounds into their territory to consume any hint of magic. They excused it with mealy-mouthed stories about wild beasts and natural migrations, but Sjurd knew the difference between a wild dog and a trained hound as well as anyone.

When their hounds had sucked the soul from a land, their mage cohorts came next, the Emperor’s puppets hanging off the strings of power he fed them. In the wake of their destruction, the legions marched, ready to garrison every town and offer the terrorized people the “mercy” of Imperial law and order.

Every year, he fought more hounds, and still they came slinking over the borders and settling into lonely places to breed more young.

Before long, they were anchoring off the top of a solid stone guard tower, causing much excitement among the resident guards, most of whom came rushing out to gawk at the rare sight of an Ysian ship this far inland. The sailors let down a rope ladder, and Sjurd scrambled down as fast as he dared, calling for the post's commander.

He was not much more than a boy, seventeen at most, but he met Sjurd's greeting with a sharp salute and a steady gaze.

"Misthound," Sjurd said curtly. "League and a half, south-southwest."

The boy's shoulders sagged a little, but he simply said, "I've got five men injured, but we've got horses and weapons, and the other nine are fit to ride."

"What happened?" Mathilde demanded over Sjurd's shoulder, and he saw the moment when the boy looked at her properly and, as most of them did, lost his heart. For the first time, he stuttered, "Er, six hounds in the last week, ma'am. We've sent for reinforcements, but..."

"We'll ride with you," Sjurd said, cutting him off. He trusted Mathilde, but she was still the representative of a foreign government and didn't need to know about the increasing strain on their supply lines.

When he and Mathilde rode out, bows and modified boar spears slung from their saddles, he glanced up at the ship as they rode below its shadow. Ivarr and Hrolf were hanging over the rail, and they both saluted as he rode by, but it was the brat prince who caught his eye. He was watching very solemnly, the sun shining in his pale hair, and he waved awkwardly to Mathilde, a little too late.

He looked afraid, and Sjurd could think of nothing that would comfort him.

CHAPTER II

Sjurd: Aged 23

Three weeks before Sjurd and Mathilde were due to marry, the Empire marched into Challoner. Within three days, troops had secured the capital. On the fourth day, they executed the king, queen and Crown Prince Josselin. Mathilde was already in Axholme for the wedding, along with her younger sisters Aude and Gisele, and Josselin's pregnant wife Rosamund, who had come to be her attendants in the ceremony.

King Snorri had sent a page for them as soon as word reached him, and he stood up as they came into his private study, ushering them to comfortable chairs. It was the most considerate gesture Sjurd had ever seen the cantankerous old bastard make, and he saw Mathilde register it and, for just a moment, falter. Then she lifted her chin, and he could see that she had guessed. She didn't flinch again, but put her arm around shy little Aude and listened gravely.

Rosamund began to weep silently before King Snorri had said three words, one hand over her eyes and the other cupped over the swell of her belly. Gisele put her arms around the older woman and kept listening, her brown eyes wide and unblinking. Aude simply shook her head, again and again.

Mathilde listened to everything Snorri could tell them, and then thanked him. Without another word, she walked out of the room, her steps careful and controlled.

Sjurd went after her, but lost her in the crowds milling through the halls. It was the second day of the month, sacred to Tiw, and so a court day. He and the king should have been in the hall of judgment, hearing petitions from the common people, but the session had been postponed, and now every public corridor and courtyard was milling with disgruntled petitioners, squalling children, badly rolled and stacked legal documents, and, in far too many places, livestock. The crowd that had parted courteously for Mathilde hindered him, with anxious petitioners tugging at his sleeve or stepping into his path to demand his attention.

He shrugged them aside, swallowing his mood to make polite promises and apologies, and eventually won free of the crowd.

Mathilde was in her room in the guest wing. He'd always thought it was one of the nicer rooms, opening onto a quiet corner of the palace garden. It overlooked the red roofs of the lower city and the wide ribbon of the River Ax, bright with barges carrying lodestone and coal down from the mountains. Today, despite the warm sunshine and open windows, it seemed dull and stuffy.

Sjurd stopped in the doorway. He wanted to offer her some comfort, but she had her back to him, and the line of her spine was as straight and sharp as a sword. He dared not touch her. Instead, he cleared his throat and asked gruffly, "What are you doing?"

"Packing," she said, and crossed the room with quick, sharp steps to rifle through her drawers and pull out a thin brown linen shirt and a pair of worsted hose. "Close the door."

He obliged, hoping she might slow down enough to talk to him if they had some privacy. "You can't just ride home, Tilde. They'll kill you the moment you reach the capital."

"I'm not riding for the capital," she said and pulled her dress over her head, throwing it into the corner.

Sjurd yelped, suddenly confronted with far too many pale curves. "Mathilde!"

She smiled then, but it was a sharp-edged and bitter thing compared to what he was used to from her. "They're breasts, Sjurd, not ogres. There's no need to be afraid."

"You shouldn't surprise a man with those things," he grumbled.

"And they thought it was a good idea to marry you to a woman?" she tossed over her shoulder, dragging on her plain clothes. "Don't panic. I'm putting them away. Pass me my gambeson, will you?"

"They'll kill you," he said again, trying to get her to understand what seemed obvious to him.

She shrugged, pulling her hair back into a tight braid, securing it with a leather cord. “Until Josselin’s baby...” She swallowed. “Until the child is born, I’m the only queen Challoner has. My people need me. Someone has to organize a resistance, and if we can’t force them out now, we never will. You know how this works.”

“I know what they do to resistance leaders, too,” he snapped back, crossing his arms. “Your country needs you alive.”

“Rosamund and the girls will live.” She took another shaky breath. “We have an agreement with Pryderi of Ys to give them asylum. Make sure they get there for me, please.”

“Of course,” he said softly. “I just wish you’d go with them. Or stay here and fight beside me. Don’t take away your people’s last hope.”

“Rosamund and the baby are their hope,” she said wearily. “I’m their sword.”

He stopped arguing after that, and helped her with her armor, as if he were her squire. He sent a page to fetch her sisters to the courtyard, and held her horse while she kissed them goodbye. The day was sliding into afternoon, the sun low and golden on the whitewashed palace walls, and he wondered how the world could look so lovely when it was so full of grieving. Beside him, the horse shifted a little, obviously catching the mood, and he lay a hand on her warm side to soothe her.

“I’ll leave her with the border guard,” Mathilde said softly, coming to stand by her saddle. “I’ll be too conspicuous on horseback, once I cross the border.”

“Taking to the farm roads?”

“And the hill trails. We had plans for this, and there are a few places where people may be rallying. I’ll try to send word once...”

He shook his head at her. “Don’t take any needless risks. Keep moving. Watch for spies. Don’t trust anywhere that’s too quiet.”

“I know,” she said impatiently, and then sighed and slid something off her finger to offer to him. “You should take this back.”

It was the engagement ring he'd given her two years ago, an opalescent black lodestar, polished to a sheen brighter than jet and shimmering with rainbows in the sunlight. He closed his hand against it. "It's yours."

"I can't promise to come back."

"It's still yours."

She kissed his cheek lightly, her eyes bright, and then said quietly, "It's too unique. I'll be passing as a country girl."

He took it then, but fumbled the dagger off his belt to give to her instead. It was a good piece, which had saved his life more than once, and it was completely plain and functional. She fixed it on her belt and then swung into the saddle. Leaning down, she commanded, "Marry someone sweet."

"That was always the plan," he told her.

He got a ghost of her true smile. "I believe that's the most gallant thing I've ever heard you say. Stars bless you, Sjurd."

"Thunder guard you," he said and stepped back.

She went out of the gate in a soft clatter of hooves, and he watched until she vanished between the houses below. Then he climbed up the steps to the top of the gatehouse, young Aude on his heels, and watched the eastern gate of the city until he saw her pass through, the only rider on the road.

"There," he said to Aude, pointing, and she squinted down and nodded resolutely.

They watched as Mathilde rode swiftly away along the causeway that crossed the fens, growing smaller and smaller by the second. She was his closest friend, the only one who understood the demands of being both heir and general, but he hadn't realized how dear she was to him until he watched her ride away.

At last she faded into the mist on the horizon, but even then Aude would not go in. "I'm watching," she said, her voice thin and hard. "I'm watching for my sister."

So Sjurd sat with her as the day faded. The light seemed to hang over the fields, even as the stars began to blaze above them and the lamplighters came out into the streets of the city with their poles and lanterns. By then the night had grown cold, and Aude was shivering beside him. Sjurd put his own cloak around her shoulders and said, although his own heart was breaking, “We should go in.”

“I’m still watching.”

“It’s dark now. We can’t see the road.” She didn’t seem minded to move, so he added, “We can come back in the morning and watch again.”

“But by then she’ll be gone!” Aude snapped. Her voice cracked on the last word, and then, finally, she wept. He put his arm round her awkwardly, and wiped her tears with the corner of his cloak, for the lack of anything better. When she cried herself into exhaustion, he carried her back inside the palace to the arms of her remaining family.

And then, because his night was far from done, he made his way back to the king to join his war council.

Celyn: Aged 16

Celyn was in a cheerful mood as he flew the sky yacht *Eirlys* towards Holmebury for Mathilde’s wedding. He still thought it was a shame she was marrying the oaf, but it was a chance to see her and catch up with Ivarr. Better still, for the first time, he’d been allowed to fly himself here, instead of waiting for one of the dismally slow cargo ships to wallow through the lower sky. *Eirlys* had been a gift from his uncle the king on his last birthday, and he adored every smooth plank of her, not least because she had once been his mother’s.

He swung her low over the river, tilting his sails to ride the strong wind down across the flatlands. The farms in this part of Axholme fascinated him every time he flew over, and he’d never had the chance to draw this close before. He wasn’t used to land that just kept going, one little village after another, with vast sweeps of corn rustling in the wind between them, and only

the ornate bell towers of their temples to distinguish one from the next. Ivarr had told him that this had all been marshland once, squished between the mountains and the sea, but some canny engineer had found a way to drain it all, with spells, pumps, and embankments. Celyn wanted to know how that worked.

“Why?” Hrolf had demanded. “It won’t work on your islands.”

Celyn had shot him a long-suffering stare. Sadly, Ivarr had not managed to lose Hrolf as they grew up and even, to Celyn’s bewilderment, seemed increasingly fond of the fool. “Sometimes,” he had said, speaking very slowly, “people just want to know. Intelligent people, that is.”

Unfortunately, Hrolf had gotten used to him, just as he’d had to get used to Hrolf, and sneering at him no longer provoked much of a response.

Bored of cornfields (they did get a little monotonous after the first league or two), Celyn sought out a thermal and rose up again, turning back towards the river. What entertainments might Ivarr have planned for him this time? They had begun to compete a little over the last few months, trying to outdo each other in finding bizarre or hilarious experiences. Celyn was still feeling pretty smug over the wind-powered mechanical band he’d found on Efydd Island, which only played two tunes, on trumpet, cymbals and panpipes, and only if the wind was blowing precisely from the northwest. Ivarr would be taxed to beat that.

Of course, there was always their mutual favorite entertainment in Holmebury—watching the guard train. Being friends with your fiancée, rather than madly in love, was a brilliant plan, Celyn had decided, at about the same time that he’d worked out that Ivarr was just as fond of beautiful men as he was. And didn’t Holmebury have a lot of them, all dark-haired, pale-eyed, and muscular. Very, very muscular.

Celyn sighed a little in happy remembrance and adjusted his stance behind the wheel slightly. He’d not been all that keen when Ivarr first suggested they watch the training sessions. He’d never really understood the point of organized violence. The odd exchange of punches when someone was drunk or angry was one thing, but if you really couldn’t stand to be around someone,

you could just apply to move to a different island. Fighting for a living seemed rather perverse.

Except the Axholme guard were very keen on training all their men to the highest possible skill level, to the extent that their trainers liked to see every muscle movement, so they could correct any errors quickly. All of which meant, he learned moments after Ivarr finally coaxed him into the training yard, that the Axholme guard trained in nothing more than thigh-length braies. A spectator could almost be blinded by the light reflecting off all those bare chests, broad shoulders, and muscled calves gleaming with sweat.

Ivarr, ever loyal, swore that Hrolf was the most attractive man training. Celyn could, albeit grudgingly, see the appeal (the idiot had grown up very fine in one way, at least). He didn't feel it was quite right to pick favorites, though, not when there was a veritable feast of men laid out before them. Even the oaf was pretty appealing when you saw him like that, utterly focused on the fight, broad shoulders shifting with muscle, and sweat darkening that little trail of hair that led down...

Celyn had to adjust himself again, and he seriously considered setting the boat down on the river's edge so he could enjoy a little private time with his imagination and his right hand. If he kept sailing, though, he should arrive in time for the afternoon weights session. Real sweaty men were definitely better than imaginary ones.

As he coasted down towards the city, though, he immediately saw that something was wrong. The streets were quiet, and there was a long column of men marching out of the city, towards the mountains. There should have been a bustle of preparation for the wedding, but he couldn't see a single banner or strand of bunting. Instead, he could sense the mood even before he landed, a tight, scurrying tension.

He tied up beside the tower of the Ysian embassy and hurried inside to make his presence known to the ambassador. When he got down to the reception room, Ivarr was waiting with the ambassador. That wasn't unusual. He usually kept watch for incoming ships, if Celyn was due to visit, but the expression on his face was new. He looked grim, and he greeted Celyn with a

short nod which made him look more like his brother than the sweet-natured boy Celyn liked.

“The wedding’s off,” he said. “The Empire has invaded Challoner. Mathilde’s gone home.”

“To be with her family?”

Ivarr and the ambassador looked away from him, and after a moment Celyn understood. “Oh.” It didn’t feel real. He’d been told the Imperial threat was imminent for so long that he’d stopped taking it seriously. Suddenly those lines of beautiful soldiers stopped seeming like a special entertainment laid on for his and Ivarr’s benefit. Now Mathilde, warm-hearted Mathilde, had gone riding into danger, and there would be no wedding.

“Should I fly home?” he asked.

“No,” Ivarr said, a little too fast. “Stay.” Then he added, more somberly, “It reassures people, seeing a boat come in from Ys.”

“Then of course I’ll stay,” Celyn said, and looked to the ambassador. “Unless you advise otherwise.”

“Your little yacht flies at courier speed, doesn’t it, Your Highness? You are safe here, for the time being, but it may be that we need a message boat.”

“I am at your service,” Celyn said, and bowed to him.

It was a strange and uncomfortable time. He had put aside any thought of sightseeing or ogling soldiers with only a little twinge of regret, but he had expected there to be something vital and urgent for him to do. Instead, he found that everyone seemed very busy, rushing back and forth and having swift and whispered conversations in corners (they always went quiet as he walked by, turning their heads to watch him go), but nothing actually seemed to be happening. Nobody was willing to tell him what was going on, or even linger for a conversation. He got so sick of polite excuses that it was rather a relief when Sjurd stormed into Ivarr’s sitting room, where Hrolf and Celyn had given into boredom enough to start betting on dice while Ivarr was off in some unspecified council. Sjurd took one look at Celyn and snarled, “Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Then he slammed straight out again.

“Charming,” Celyn commented and rolled the dice again.

“Supposed to be getting married this week,” Hrolf said wisely. “Think of what he could have been fucking.” Most of Hrolf’s conversation these days was about fucking.

Celyn wrinkled his nose. He adored Mathilde, but really? “Urgh. Girl parts.”

“Yeah,” Hrolf sighed and then, spotting Celyn’s facial expression, he added kindly, “Boys are good to fuck, too. Girls are different, not better.”

“You just need a big enough hole, don’t you?” Celyn remarked and rolled again. “Double six. You owe me another penny.”

CHAPTER III

Celyn

No one seemed to know what had happened to Mathilde, or the ambassadors from Ys and Axholme who had been posted to Challoner. There had been constant trade between Axholme and Challoner, and every day representatives of the merchants' families came trailing up the hill to wait outside the palace gate for news.

An Ysian cargo ship had been there too: *Meirionwen*, out of Haearn Island, trading fine cloth and hardy grain for wine. Celyn got used to the sight of old Lord ap Meredydd, the Ysian ambassador, walking up the hill with the merchants' families, often carrying a small child or with one of the younger spouses supporting his elbow. After the third day, Celyn asked him why he didn't just ride or take his coach.

"We are each other's only allies now," ap Meredydd said, smiling at a passing maidservant, who curtsied and smiled back. "A good girl, young Alfdis there. Her mother Jorunn has worked at the embassy for many years. I do like to talk to people here. We are very strange to them, I've learned. If we are embroiled in this same war, it helps the ordinary people to know a little more of us."

Celyn wasn't quite sure he understood, but by now he was desperate for something to do with his days. Sitting in the palace and waiting for news just made him imagine horrible things. "Can I help?"

The ambassador gave him an honest, surprised smile, but said, "Of course, Highness."

After that, he started each day by walking down through the city to the embassy, trailed by a resentful Hrolf, who had been assigned as his guard, much to their mutual indignation. At first, the merchants' families were shy of him, and only ap Meredydd spoke to him directly. But Celyn had always liked to talk, so he chattered away, and by the second day they were beginning to ask him questions: did Ys really float in the sky? How many islands were there? How big was each island? Where did their rivers go? Was he going to

take Prince Ivarr away there when they were married? Did he think Prince Ivarr was handsome? (That one made Hrolf scowl.)

The more he talked to them, the more he worried. The Empire and its threat had always seemed so far away. It had taken his mother from him, and so he had always hated it, but it had always been a monster on the far side of the mountains, a reason never to leave home. Here everyone seemed to see it as an inevitable doom. Until now, he'd imagined Mathilde riding off to be a hero, in some vaguely exciting storybook way. Now he began to fear for her.

Then, very early one morning, before it was quite light, he was roused from his bed by a heavy-eyed page and summoned to the palace walls. King Snorri was already there with Sjurd, and Ivarr and Hrolf came stumbling up behind him. Glancing down into the courtyard, he could see the ambassador dismounting from his horse by the dim torchlight.

The sun was just rising over the mountains to the east, illuminating the top of the ridge like a manuscript limned with gold. The rest of the land was still gray with shadows, only the long lines of the rivers and cuts gleaming faintly. The horizon was hazy, with the morning light blurring what little could be seen, but as Celyn squinted to see what everyone was staring at, he could discern something large moving slowly through the sky.

"Is it a ship?" Sjurd asked him sharply, passing him a spyglass.

Celyn looked through it, but he couldn't pick out much more, just a shadow lumbering out of the dawn. He was a child of Ys, though, and his instincts knew what he was seeing. "Yes, but damaged. I've seen wrecks move like that as they drift back to land."

"Drift?" Sjurd repeated sharply. "Can you tell if anyone's on board?"

"Not unless you have a considerably more powerful spyglass," Celyn snapped. "I can't even tell for certain whether she's *Meirionwen*."

"Let us pray she is," Lord ap Meredydd said gravely behind him. "Remember that *Prydwen* is still in Imperial hands."

"My mother's ship?" Celyn repeated, surprised. Ys had mourned the ship as well as her lost captain and crew, but he had always thought of her as being

as dead and gone as his mother, whose ashes the Empire had returned to Ys. The idea that the Empire might dare fly her made his spine crawl.

“It was our belief at the time,” ap Meredydd said, “that the whole attack was motivated by the Empire’s desire to steal one of our ships.”

He hadn’t known that. He had been too devastated at the time to ask any questions. “How would one ship help them?”

“The Empire is vast, and they are desperate to have a means to subdue rebellions and cross oceans and deserts. With enough flying ships, nothing could stop them from devouring the rest of the world. They thought,” ap Meredydd said with a note of disdain, “that *Prydwen* flew because of some spell or mechanism that they could replicate.”

“Doesn’t she?” Sjurd asked. The shape of the ship was becoming a little more distinct now, and she seemed to be on a course for Holmebury.

“If she was drifting, she’d be running further to the south,” Celyn said. “And, no, the virtue’s in the wood, and *derwen* oaks only grow in Ys.”

“If the Empire has learned that,” Sjurd said harshly, “there’s no power on this earth that will keep it from your doors.”

It made Celyn shake, the shudder rolling down from his shoulders. To his surprise, it was Hrolf who moved to nudge him comfortingly and mutter, “Forgot your cloak, didn’t you?”

Celyn shot him a tight-lipped smile in gratitude for the excuse. He was a little more surprised when Hrolf passed across his own cloak, and he realized that he was actually quite glad that Hrolf and Ivarr were there. As the ship drew closer, he narrowed his eyes, trying to compare her silhouette to his memories of both *Meirionwen*, whom he had seen once as she passed Gwydr Island, and *Prydwen*, who had been a second home to him for years before his mother flew away. She had been a slim, arrogant beauty, built for diplomats and passengers, not cargo.

He was sure for a while before he spoke, but eventually he offered the spyglass back to Sjurd. “That’s *Meirionwen*.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. She’s too wide in the beam for *Prydwen*.”

“Praise Dwynwen,” ap Meredydd breathed. “Even one ship could devastate a city from above, if it had *Prydwen*’s guns. The Empire likes that kind of victory, where it can rain destruction without risking the safety and reputation of its troops.”

“Let us hope that your ship never returns home, then,” Sjurd said harshly. “The Empire does not need a weapon like that.”

The ship steadily struggled closer throughout the morning. Celyn stayed on the walls even as the others disappeared back inside. Below him, he could see people climbing onto the city walls to point and watch for a few moments. Sjurd had left him the spyglass, and by midmorning he could see why she was wallowing so badly in the air. Her sides were stove in badly in two places, the holes patched with sailcloth, and she only carried one topsail, with her foremast snapped off halfway up.

She continued to lose height steadily, but someone was clearly steering her.

“She won’t make it here,” he said aloud.

He hadn’t realized that Sjurd was behind him until he asked sharply, “She’ll crash?”

Celyn shook his head. “I think the captain will be able to set her down in a field.” He offered the spyglass backwards. “I don’t know the land.”

Sjurd looked and drew his breath through his teeth thoughtfully. “She’s about four leagues out, near Rushey. We can get riders out there in not much more than an hour.”

“I’d like to ride with them.”

“Can you keep up?” Sjurd’s tone was so casually contemptuous that Celyn had to bite his lip.

Forcing his voice to stay light, he said, “Better than Lord ap Meredydd. It is an Ysian ship. They might not want to talk to you. One could hardly blame them.” Possibly he hadn’t managed to bite his temper back well enough.

By that evening, he almost regretted his bravado. Ivarr had taught him to ride, but they had never gone at such a bone-jarring speed as that first ride out to meet *Meirionwen*. Nobody in Ys rode. None of the islands were more than a day's ride wide, and there wasn't enough fodder to keep horses. He'd thought he was getting rather good at it, for an Ysian, but Ivarr's gentle lessons had been no preparation for trying to keep pace with Sjurd and his guard.

Then they had arrived in the little village of Rushey, barely more than a farm, a windmill, a temple, and three houses, and he forgot how much his legs hurt, as he plunged into the middle of a flood of panic. The local people had rushed to the rescue of the stricken ship, and the streets, temple and barn were all full of hurt, frightened people. He gained a new appreciation for Sjurd then, as his arrival and a few sharp commands suddenly created some order from the chaos.

There were three hundred refugees here, families as well as sailors and merchants. The Axholme and Ysian ambassadors were among them, both shaken and full of praise for *Meirionwen's* captain, who had taken his ship just far enough out of the capital to hide it in the valleys and gather up not just the staff of the Ysian embassy, but all the Axholme citizens they could cram into their emptied hull. They had almost left it too late to escape. The magic had been draining out of the land as they flew down the pass. They had lost altitude twice, tearing their hull open on the jagged rocks, but they had finally broken over the border and taken to the skies again.

"Is there a resistance?" Sjurd asked, his voice intent.

The Axholme ambassador smiled a little, despite her obvious exhaustion. "Yes, and it's gathering force. They've gotten themselves a new leader. She's top of the Empire's wanted list already."

"Good," Sjurd said, and grinned savagely.

He rode back towards Holmebury not long afterward, but Celyn stayed with the ship and the refugees. It was a sobering realization when it became obvious that none of his people were as familiar with Axholme culture as he was, and he found himself playing diplomat over a thousand petty things.

Meirionwen would not be flying again for a long time, if ever, and he threw himself into the task of organizing a ship from home to come and relieve them. That made him remember that Mathilde's family had been promised asylum, and he sought them out first thing the next morning to offer them the choice of flying back with him now or waiting for a slower, more comfortable ship.

He felt as old as Lord ap Meredydd by the time he finished speaking to Lady Rosamund. He just wanted to go back to his rooms and sleep, but his shoulders were too tense and his brain too busy to just stop and rest.

Ivarr and Hrolf were waiting for him, both looking as jittery as he felt. Celyn threw himself into a chair opposite them and said, "I wish I was in Ys. I wish we were all in Ys."

"I wish the Empire didn't exist," Ivarr said. "Then it wouldn't matter where we were."

"I wish," Hrolf said, his tone musing, "that we could all talk about something else."

"Start a conversation, then, genius," Celyn suggested and laughed when Hrolf simply made an obscene gesture at him. They all sank into an exhausted silence. How did people live with this level of anxiety, Celyn wondered. It made the whole world seem a little numb and distant, and it was so wearying. Did Sjurd feel like this all the time, or had he and all the rest of the border guard just learned to live with it? Celyn wasn't sure which would be worse—always feeling like this, or having fear become just a normal part of life.

Then a page arrived with a note for Ivarr. He read it, his eyes widening, and stood up. "There's been a message from Challoner," he said. "Sjurd wants me in the council."

"Any news of Mathilde?" Celyn asked.

"Not in the note. I'll let you know."

But he didn't come back. After an hour, Celyn got sick of chess and swept the board to the floor, sending the little wide-eyed warriors tumbling across the rug.

“What, just because you were losing?” Hrolf said.

Celyn rolled to his feet and paced to the window. “Because I’m sick of just sitting here.”

“We could go and get drunk,” Hrolf suggested.

Typical. And stupid, too. “I thought you people had laws to stop anyone our age getting into taverns.”

Hrolf grinned. “I know places that will serve us.”

“And they’re open midmorning, these places?”

Hrolf’s face fell. “Huh. Not so much.”

“You’re an idiot,” Celyn snapped.

“You’re annoying,” Hrolf returned cheerfully. “Want to fuck?”

Celyn gaped at him. “Seriously?”

Hrolf shrugged. “Why not?”

It was rather tempting. Celyn had reached a point in his life where he strongly believed he ought to have fucked someone, and he didn’t really care who. Hrolf might be an idiot, but he was an idiot in a very fine body, and Celyn’s cock twitched in interest.

On the other hand, Ivarr would kill him.

In the interests of future marital harmony, Celyn resorted back to a time-honored form of distraction: enraging Hrolf. “Thanks,” he drawled, “but I’ll pass. I don’t know where you’ve been.”

Then he ran before Hrolf, too, suffered a flashback to their not-so-distant youth and tried to clobber him.

He ended up roaming around the palace gardens. Unfortunately, he hadn’t thought to pick up a book before he fled, not that he would have been able to concentrate. Before long he was beginning to wish he’d taken Hrolf up on his offer. He’d been wondering for a while if Hrolf’s arrogance and slightly bowlegged swagger were affectations, or proof that he really was hung like the proverbial horse.

He tried to stop thinking about it, but then his brain filled up with worry. He wandered through the gardens, switching between vague lust and worry about just how many people he'd be able to fit onto little *Eirlys*, if the Empire did just keep marching. The two moods clashed uncomfortably, settling in his belly in a sickly swirl.

After a while, it occurred to him that no one would be able to find him out here, so he headed back into the main palace. All anyone could tell him was that the king and the princes were still locked away in council. Even Lord ap Meredydd was waiting for them to emerge, so Celyn joined him in the library for a while.

He still couldn't settle, though, and ended up wandering back into the garden. The weather had turned, bringing in lowering clouds that turned the whole sky a uniform gray. The light was flat, and he couldn't tell how much time was passing. He ended up on the walls again, looking down on the city and watching the bustle in the streets around the gatehouse.

He sat there for a long time, until his legs cramped and his bladder started to complain. Back inside, in search of a privy and some lunch, he found the halls all seemed deserted. Lord ap Meredydd had vanished from the library, and Hrolf wasn't in his rooms anymore. After some desultory searching, Celyn wandered back outside again. At least the air was fresh, and he could walk out some of his nerves.

On his second circuit of the grounds, he passed close under the windows of the archery range and heard the distinctive thunk of an arrow slashing into a target. It was followed by another and another in relentless succession, with barely a pause between them. The noise made the back of his shoulders tense, not least because he didn't think anyone used the indoor range in the summer.

The door was standing open, so he slipped inside quietly to lean against the worn wood of the back wall, the sandy floor muffling his steps.

He didn't think Sjurd would have noticed him if he'd come in decked in bells and ribbons. He was standing in the middle of the range, with a single target set up at the far end, and he was firing at it, arrow after arrow in a fluid, mindless stream. He wasn't aiming, not that Celyn could see, but he wasn't

missing either, arrows slamming home, clustering in the central ring until each new hit came with a shrill of splinters.

The bow was the one weapon Celyn could use, although he had only ever hunted with it. He couldn't shoot like that, though, and his breath caught in his throat. It should have been impressive, but it wasn't. The room was too quiet, and Sjurd's breath too harsh. The sound of each new shot slashing through the air set Celyn's teeth on edge. He didn't know what he should do. He didn't think Sjurd would hear him if he tried to speak, and he didn't want to leave him here alone, even to get help. He didn't think Sjurd would want to be seen like this, but someone had to be here. In the end, he just stood, trying not to breathe loudly.

At last, Sjurd ran out of arrows. He kept reaching back into his quiver, his hand closing twice on empty air before he let it drop. Celyn thought it might be over, but then Sjurd moved forward in a great rush, his steps long and hurried, and began to tug the arrows out of the target, his grip hasty and clumsy. He refilled his quiver and walked back to his original place. Taking up his stance again, he reached back, not even looking at the arrow he was nocking into place.

That did make Celyn move, darting forward to remove the arrow before Sjurd could draw back the string.

Sjurd grabbed at it, snarling at him wordlessly.

"The shaft is cracked," Celyn said, his voice wavering a bit. Sjurd was taller than him, and far more accomplished at violence, and clearly not in his right mind. He was a superb archer, from everything Celyn had seen and heard, but superb archers knew better than to shoot broken arrows. Moving very slowly, Celyn felt his way through Sjurd's quiver until he found a good arrow. "Here. This one."

Sjurd took it, and then shrugged his quiver off into Celyn's hands. He turned back to the target without another word, and after a moment of confusion, Celyn began to sort through the quiver frantically, throwing aside all the cracked and splintered arrows. Sjurd was already reaching for the next

one before he was half done, so he just started putting the good ones straight into Sjurd's hand.

When he ran out again, Sjurd returned to the target. This time he handed the quiver straight to Celyn and waited, tapping his foot silently. Celyn had no intention of leaving now. In silence, because it would have been wrong to speak, he weeded out the broken arrows and handed the quiver back. Again Sjurd began to shoot, and this time the quiet sound of the arrows flying to their violent end made Celyn want to scream to shatter the awful oppressive quiet of the range.

What had happened? Was the Empire coming? Should they already be running for the coast?

Sjurd's arms began to shake long before he had destroyed all his arrows. He didn't stop shooting, though more of them went astray, clattering into the back wall.

This time, when the last arrow in his quiver plowed into the legs of the target with a screech, he didn't walk forward. Instead, his hands fell to his side, and he dropped his bow. After a moment, he stripped off his gloves and dropped them too, his pale, bared hands curling up into loose fists.

He didn't move, but his eyes fell closed.

Feeling very young, Celyn reached out and touched Sjurd's shoulder, keeping his arm extended and his touch light. He felt like he was touching a wounded animal, and at risk of having his hand bitten off, but he couldn't see anyone, even Sjurd the Oaf, hurting that badly and not offer comfort.

Sjurd went tense, but then swung round sharply to lock his hands in Celyn's shirt and drag him close, their cheeks almost touching. Celyn could feel him shaking and, lost for any better idea, patted him awkwardly on the back. Sjurd shook and dropped his head to Celyn's shoulder, his breath rasping out in long, rough gasps which Celyn didn't realize until hours later were the closest this man would allow himself to sobs. Now Celyn forgot that he disliked the man and put his arms around him, rocking and shushing him, as if he was one of Celyn's little brothers, running to him with a grazed knee.

At last, Sjurd went still. When he drew back, releasing Celyn, his blue eyes were flat. Celyn saw the moment when he came back to himself enough to realize who he was leaning on and the following flush of grief and humiliation. Then his mouth twisted and he said, his voice soft and dangerous, “Get out. *Go.*”

Celyn went, running back through the shadowy gardens until he reached the safety of his own rooms.

An hour later, Lord ap Meredydd came to tell him that the Empire had captured Mathilde in the mountains above the capital.

She had been executed two days ago, beheaded on the steps of her own palace.

CHAPTER IV

Celyn: Aged 23

As he flew *Eirlys* over the brown winter fields, fighting to keep her steady before the strong wind that was sweeping off the sea, Celyn reflected grimly on how much the fens had changed since he first crossed them nine years ago on the way to his betrothal. When he had flown across rooftops before, children had come running out to point in surprise. These days, the few people plodding through the streets, their heads down against the wind, barely bothered to look up as his shadow crossed over them.

Every village had an outcrop of new houses now, many quickly and poorly built. They housed refugees from the mountain villages, who had fled down to the flatlands along the ocean's edge. The Empire had not yet crossed the border, crouching in Challoner, now renamed the Eastern Axtooth Province, like a cat choosing its moment to pounce. Wave after wave of misthounds and "brigands" had come creeping in, however, making travel impossible and life unbearable for many of the mountain folk.

Every man and childless woman of fighting age now spent three months of the year on the border. Those, like Hrolf, who had made the army their life, spent most of their time there. Even Ivarr spent half the year on the border, coming home leaner, harder and sadder every time. Sjurd, of course, rarely returned to Holmebury. Celyn could count on his fingers the number of times he had seen the oaf since Mathilde died, and was quite relieved that it had stayed so low. Anyone else in the world, Celyn thought, the familiar burn of indignation rising in his throat and gut, would have started being nice to someone who had comforted them in their hour of need. Not the oaf, though: no, Sjurd seemed to take pleasure in making Celyn's life a misery whenever they met, to the point that even Hrolf was starting to wonder why.

Thinking about Hrolf and Ivarr didn't help his mood. They were family now, both of them, although Hrolf he counted as the kind of distant cousin you avoided at weddings. They had remained a constant in his life when everyone else had gone: his mother's long-ago death, his father's long decline until he slipped into death as quietly as he had haunted his own life, his little brothers'

adoption by an aunt on another island. Even Lord ap Meredydd had finally retired back to his granddaughter's farm in Ys, and King Pryderi had yet to appoint a replacement, instead relying on Celyn to bear any messages he had for the Axholme court. He seemed to have ended up a diplomat by accident, and he still wasn't sure it suited him. There were times when it was so infuriatingly difficult to bite back the sarcasm he wanted to unleash on every naive idiot (hello, cousin Rhiannon) or stubborn self-righteous prat (Sjurd, always bloody Sjurd) who got in the way of perfectly sensible agreements.

The next gust of wind brought a faceful of rain, and he swore, turning his mind back to steering. By the time he was fighting his way across the rooftops of Holmebury, the rain was lashing down, making it hard to steer above the smoking chimneys. Years ago, when the war began, many people had hoisted flags to hang off their roofs, and the ragged remains still hung in sodden rags from the tops of many buildings, adding a flicker of color to the gray slates and damp thatch.

Hrolf was waiting for him on the top of the embassy tower, huddled into a oilcloth coat, his hair flattened to his scalp with the rain. He caught the painter easily, and helped Celyn pull the rain covers over *Eirlys'* decks with nothing more than a shout of, "Brought the weather with you, I see."

"It's sunny in Ynys Llys," Celyn yelled back over the rattle of the rain against the roof.

It wasn't until they got inside, where some wise soul had left a pile of towels, that he could lower his voice enough to ask, "No Ivarr today?"

Hrolf's shoulders sagged a little. "He didn't feel like coming out."

They exchanged looks, neither of them wanting to put anything more into words.

There were days, more and more every month, when Ivarr wasn't really there. Oh, he performed every duty, with perfect and conscientious grace: smiled when he needed to smile, looked grave when gravity was required, attended councils or drilled with his men. On the bad days, though, there was nothing more. When his duty was done, he simply sat in his rooms with the

blinds down, his eyes vague, and his voice quiet, as he said, over and over, that he was fine, just fine, absolutely fine.

“Well,” Celyn said, trying to make his voice bright, “if he won’t come to us, let us go to him. Is there any point, I wonder, in trying to dry off if I’m going to be drenched again walking to the palace?”

“Scared of a bit of rain?” Hrolf inquired, smirking.

“I see you’ve found a way to keep the water off,” Celyn countered, pinching a corner of Hrolf’s cloak between his fingertips with a grimace. “Tell me, do you wear this to bathe in as well? It could explain a lot about your personal odor.”

“Can’t cope with the smell of a real man?” Hrolf asked, and then lunged for Celyn, lifting his arm to shove his armpit in Celyn’s face. “That’s honest sweat, that is.”

Celyn yelped and ducked, and they tussled all the way down to the front hall, the noise so familiar that the embassy staff just paused to let them pass, hiding smiles behind their hands.

Despite Hrolf’s mockery, they took a less direct route to the palace than usual, walking under the wooden awnings of the market district rather than straight along the high street. Here, in the dry space that still smelt faintly of dried apples and leather, the sound of the rain was a little friendlier, a steady drumming above them like the tramp of marching soldiers (which was a sound Celyn had long associated with Axholme). Very few people were out, and dusk arrived quickly, the afternoon dim and dark long before evening should have come.

“Why are you here this time?” Hrolf asked.

Celyn shrugged, and didn’t answer. What Ivarr knew, Hrolf would know minutes later, of course. Some things he still had to discuss with Ivarr first, though, and the mission he’d been sent on this time was one of those things.

When they reached the palace, the suite laid aside for him was cold and dark. That was another difference from past years. Ivarr had always made sure not just to meet him, but to have his rooms ready. Since he had started

retreating into his own rooms, however, he seemed to have forgotten the kindness he had once shown to others. Hrolf tried to fill in for him, there and in far too many other places, but he didn't have the same instinct for it, and he forgot things.

“Shit,” he said, rubbing warmth into his arms as they stood in Celyn's icy rooms. “I'll find a servant or two.”

“Thanks,” Celyn said, his heart sinking. He'd been looking forward to a change of clothes and a warm bed. Even if someone started a fire now, it would be morning before the room was warmed through.

“Sleep in my rooms tonight, if these still feel like a tomb. I won't be there, and they're over the kitchen.”

“Nice,” Celyn said, and then eyed him sideways. “Where are you sleeping?”

“Er,” Hrolf said hurriedly, blushing. “Let's find Ivarr.”

Ivarr actually smiled when he saw them, rising from his seat to embrace them both. He should have looked good, with all the extra muscles he had earned in the army, and his hair curling softly back from his ears to frame his lean face and solemn eyes. There was something too sad in his face for Celyn, though, as if he were made of cracked glass.

When he sat down on the chair opposite Ivarr, leaning his elbows on his knees, Hrolf sat beside Ivarr, his arm thrown across the back of the chair, and his fingertips just brushing Ivarr's shoulders. He didn't seem to be aware of how he was sitting, until he caught Celyn's look and blushed again, lifting his chin and narrowing his eyes.

Ah. So that was where he'd be sleeping tonight. Celyn had been wondering how long it would take them. He had known from the start that love matches were the exception to the rule, and it was likely that both he and his husband would discreetly take lovers. Within an hour of meeting Ivarr, he had been able to predict exactly who Ivarr's lover would be. It was amazing that it had taken the two of them so many years to realize the astoundingly obvious. Even Hrolf wasn't normally quite so dim.

Of course, the timing was a little unfortunate.

At last, when they had exchanged all the usual gossip and news, Ivarr asked, not sounding as interested as he once had, “So, what brings you to Axholme?”

“Early birthday present,” Celyn suggested wryly.

“I’m not twenty-one for another two months.”

It was Hrolf who understood, his brows suddenly narrowing as he glared at Celyn. Twenty-one was, finally, marriageable age in Axholme.

“There are some concerns in Ys about the strength of the alliance,” Celyn said. “A significant demonstration would be beneficial.”

“Oh,” Ivarr said, understanding finally showing on his face. “Oh.”

“Forget sometimes why you keep turning up to annoy us,” Hrolf muttered. His hand was tight on Ivarr’s shoulder now.

“I’ll always come back to annoy you, Hrolf,” Celyn promised, putting his hand over his heart and pouting.

Hrolf threw a cushion at him.

He caught it and tucked it behind his own head, before saying more seriously, “Not much has to change. I’m pushing the Crown Council to appoint me in Lord ap Meredydd’s place. We’d be here, in that case, with occasional visits to Ys. You’ll hardly notice the difference.”

Ivarr roused himself to shoot Celyn an irritated stare. “There’s no need to patronize me as well.”

“Sorry,” Celyn said and rose to his feet, forcing himself to be a good friend. “You’ll want to talk about it, I’m sure. I won’t pass the message on to your king until tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to go,” Ivarr said, but his shoulders were already drawing up.

Celyn crossed the room to squeeze both their hands, where they were linked against Ivarr's thigh. "Yes, I do. I'll see you in the morning, my friends."

"What makes you think I'm your friend?" Hrolf grumbled, but he squeezed Celyn's hand in return.

He couldn't help feeling a little lonesome as he walked away from Ivarr's rooms. He'd grown used to them, over time, and he was happy that they had each other, he really was. It was just that it left him lonely again. They'd find a way to ensure that Ivarr could still love Hrolf, but he knew that solution would leave him sleeping alone, and who in the world would be willing to look at him when the political lies would claim he was happily married?

He couldn't face going to sleep yet, especially if it was in Hrolf's bed. Instead, he made his way to the library. He had loved the palace library ever since Ivarr first showed it to him. There was nothing like this at home. Building space was so limited that no one was going to put up a building that housed books rather than people. Individual scholars collected according to their interests, and took their students into their homes as apprentices. It was a constant wonder to be able to find histories on one side of a shelf and astronomy on the other side. He could read about anything in here, following his whim from one wall of leather spines and polished shelving to another.

He found a book on the early history of the Empire and curled up into an alcove to read. The rain was pounding down on the windows, but the library was warm and quiet, the enclosed lanterns casting a soft light across the worn tables. He lost himself in the book for a while, but eventually had to put it aside. He could see too much of the roots of their impending doom in the narrative of the rise of the first mage-kings in the furthest east.

It was strange, he thought, gazing around the library vaguely, how many places could feel like home. This was one of the places he valued most in the world, alongside his house on Gwydr and the *derwen* woods above the city of Llys, where the air was sweet with the scent of starflowers. He was Ysian, and proud of it, but Axholme held an ever greater part of his heart. He no longer felt like he quite belonged in his uncle's court, among the crowd of giddy

youths who had never sailed beyond the outer isles, but he would always be an outsider in Axholme. Where in the world did he belong? Would he ever have a place, or a man, who would be a true home for him?

He put the book back on the shelf, because it was making him pensive, and found a volume of wild travelers' tales instead, which purported to describe the lands beyond the Veil of Storms, full of giants and monopods. It amused him, so his mood was brighter by the time his eyelids began to droop.

It was late by then, and the drumming of the rain had stopped, and he was half ready to just curl up in the library and sleep there, cradled by the warm ranks of books. If that story got back to his government, though, it probably wouldn't help his cause, so he dragged himself up and outside, hoping the cold air would wake him up enough to get back to a comfortable bed in one piece. He hoped Hrolf really was with Ivarr, and hadn't forgotten his earlier offer. He might have, grudgingly, acknowledged that they were friends, but that didn't mean he wanted to share a bed with the idiot. Then, to his dismay, he remembered that people here locked their doors more than they did in Ys, and he didn't have Hrolf's key.

The wind was still heaving through the trees, filling the night with eerie sighs and surging motion. He got challenged by guards three times before he had crossed back to the royal wing, which was both good and a reminder that he wasn't at home. Few people in Ys worried that their princes might be assassinated; here in Axholme, the Empire had made numerous attempts at Sjurd, Ivarr and the king. Sjurd, according to Hrolf, who still hero-worshiped him, was only alive because he slept with his sword and had instincts quick enough to strike an assassin down even stark-naked and half-asleep.

At the time, Celyn had made an obscene remark about Sjurd's sword, but the thought of it made him uneasy. The idea of Sjurd, oaf that he was, being slaughtered in his bed like that made his stomach clench. He didn't like the man, and Sjurd clearly hated him, but someone so bold and fierce deserved a better death.

Back outside the palace wing, he decided to climb onto the terrace that ran along the second floor. If he could glance in the windows as he passed Ivarr's

rooms, he should be able to tell if Hrolf was there without seeing any body parts he didn't want to.

There were more guards up here, some of them less obvious than the ones tramping through the grounds below, and he stopped to chat with those he knew, exchanging quick jokes and asking after their families.

The terrace was quieter as he neared Ivarr's rooms, guards on every approach but at just enough distance to give the illusion of privacy. Which, Celyn realized as he got nearer, was probably a very good thing tonight.

It turned out that Ivarr was more of a moaner than a screamer, though he was definitely rising in pitch as Celyn stood there, covering his mouth with his hand to hold in his giggles.

"Oh, yes," Ivarr groaned, his voice slightly muffled in a way that made Celyn envisage him pressed into his pillows. "There, oh, *there*, so fucking good. So big, *oooooh*."

Celyn stuffed the side of his hand into his mouth to stop the laughter. Yes, he would be alone in Hrolf's bed tonight.

It should have been mortifying, but it was all he could do not to break down and roar with laughter. Instead, he stretched his legs into a stride, hoping to get away before they noticed he was there. He'd happily punch anyone who interrupted him at that particular moment, and he wasn't even battle-trained like those two. Even getting confirmation about the rumored size of Hrolf's cock wouldn't be worth the immediately-following encounter with Hrolf's fist.

He'd made it three steps when someone broad-shouldered stepped out in front of him. Celyn's first thought was incredulity: how had an assassin possibly made it past all those guards? Then, belatedly, he went for his dagger.

A hard hand grabbed his wrist, jerking him forward, close enough that he could breathe in the scent of leather, rain and male sweat, and Sjurd growled in his ear, "Don't bother. If I wanted you dead, you'd be bleeding out by now."

"Charming," Celyn drawled. His heart was still pounding, from the shock, of course, not because of the way that Sjurd (urgh, Sjurd) smelled. "Do you welcome all your guests this way?"

“If they’re creeping past my brother’s room in the middle of the night, yes.”

“I wanted to see if they were still awake,” Celyn said irritably, “without walking in on anything I didn’t want to see. I need Hrolf’s key.”

“Why?” Sjurd growled, and Celyn shivered (because he was thinking of the prospect of sleeping in his own cold rooms, naturally).

“Because his rooms are warm, and he clearly won’t be using them, and mine haven’t even been unlocked since I was last here.” Admitting that Ivarr had forgotten he was coming stung, so he lifted his chin and added, “I rather think he’s settled in for the night, don’t you? Rather deeply in, if I’m hearing right.”

Ivarr chose that moment to let out a long, whimpering moan, which was matched by a deep grunt from Hrolf.

Sjurd’s shoulders sagged a little, and he muttered, “Tiw’s piss, Ivarr. One responsibility to meet, that’s all.”

Now that wasn’t fair, and not just because Celyn didn’t like being dismissed as a mere responsibility. He bristled. “It’s not his fault. He’s sick.”

“I know that,” Sjurd snapped impatiently. “Which will mean nothing when the Empire comes. Do you know how they treat that kind of illness across the border?”

“They consider it a punishment from their god,” Celyn said quietly, because he had nightmares about just this. “They bleed the sick on their altars until they recover or die, and then declare the god satisfied.”

Sjurd went still. In a grudging tone, he admitted, “I hadn’t expected you to know.”

“I can read,” Celyn snapped.

“If nothing else of use,” Sjurd muttered. “At least you don’t have an ambassador to turn the insult into a diplomatic incident.”

“Not yet,” Celyn said brightly, and decided not to mention the debates going on at his uncle’s court. “Of course, once they give it to me officially, I’ll bring all my hurt feelings straight to you.”

“You?” Sjurd said, his voice deep with disdain. “The gods do hate us.”

Inside, Hrolf’s grunts started to rise in volume and frequency. Sjurd swore and tightened his grip on Celyn’s wrist, dragging him further along the dark terrace. It wasn’t until he was forced into stumbling to keep up that Celyn realized that some combination of the noise, his nerves and Sjurd’s closeness had done more than send warm shudders through him. He was half-hard.

“Is there a reason you’re trying to dislocate my wrist?” he complained. It wasn’t comfortable trying to keep up with Sjurd’s stride when he was trying to do it bowlegged.

“I’ve stood guard up here before,” Sjurd said. “They’re about to get noisy.”

“They weren’t already?”

“No.”

“Ah, well,” Celyn said. “All joy to them.”

He wasn’t expecting Sjurd to swing him round and slam him into the wall, crowding close to snarl, “What is wrong with you?”

As he was still trying to catch his breath, and the part of his brain that was still working was utterly distracted by the way that Sjurd was pressed against him, all Celyn managed to say, very eloquently, was, “Uh?”

“I watched your ship fly in not four hours ago,” Sjurd told him, voice low and angry, though Celyn couldn’t see what he’d done to annoy the oaf this time. The light was falling through the windows here, and he could see that Sjurd looked furious. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the only thing the dim light showed, and Celyn’s traitorous cock wasn’t going down. Whereas war had left Ivarr looking broken, it had honed Sjurd into a creature of muscle, power and barely controlled violence. “Since then you have suffered nothing but insult. What manner of a man simply takes that?”

Fucking Sjurd would be like kissing a lightning storm—terrifying, exhilarating, and so very worth the risk.

None of which was helping him get rid of his erection, and Sjurd, he reminded himself, liked women and hated him, and probably would kill him if he got a breath closer and got poked in the thigh. To get rid of him, Celyn summoned up his most irritating tone and remarked, “A man who values his friend’s well-being, clearly. Some of us have friends, you see, rather than subordinate officers.”

It didn’t work. Sjurd only got closer, and Celyn’s nobler brain (the one that wasn’t seated in his balls) could only wail *don’t notice, don’t notice*. “And when that friend is your fiance,” Sjurd growled, and Celyn fancied he could feel the lines of every individual muscle pressed against his chest, “and he’s fucking someone else before you’ve even set a date, and will keep fucking him throughout your marriage, you still don’t care? You’ll be lonely for the rest of your life, sleeping in your cold bed while Hrolf makes your husband scream his name.”

“Well, actually,” Celyn said brightly, because he had to get rid of the man before he ignored what a bastard he was and started humping his leg, “I was hoping they might let me join them from time to time. Hrolf’s hung like a horse, you know, and I hear Ivarr could suck the varnish off an arrow shaft. I wouldn’t mind being in the middle of that.”

Sjurd froze, and Celyn couldn’t blame him. He couldn’t quite believe he’d said it either. Then Sjurd shifted slightly, his thigh flexing where Celyn’s cock was pressed against it.

“Ah,” Celyn said, and braced himself for the inevitable punch in the face.

Instead, after another long moment, Sjurd stepped back. When he spoke, his voice was cold and distant. “I’ll ensure that your rooms are ready by the morning, and have someone escort you back to your embassy now. I’m sure they have better lodgings than Hrolf’s used blankets.”

It was late, and Celyn had been annoyed and embarrassed enough for one evening. One look at the set of Sjurd’s shoulders told him he wasn’t being offered a choice, so he bit back his arguments and went meekly enough.

The soldier boy Sjurd ordered to escort him was a good-natured farmer's son from somewhere up towards the marshes on the northern border, rotated back to the capital to heal up after wounds taken on his fifth border tour. He chattered away as they walked through the streets, flirting with such clumsy sincerity that Celyn had to smile at him. Once they had made it inside the warmth of the embassy, which was built on far cozier lines than the palace, and Celyn had sent someone to make the bed in the little guest room in the tower, young Koll said, "I'd best be back to the barracks, then."

"Still on duty?" Celyn inquired, sizing him up. His shoulders were wide enough to carry an ox, and he was thick with the kind of muscle that would run to fat if he ever gave up soldiering, but was very fine indeed right now. He had a plain, pleasant face, topped with short dark hair. His eyes were an ordinary blue, but his mouth was wide and smiling. He was no Sjurd but, on the other hand, he was no Sjurd (and, yes, Celyn knew that didn't make sense, but he was tired and so sick of being alone).

"Done now," Koll said cheerfully. "Only my bed is waiting for me."

Celyn sidled closer. "Well, it seems a shame to send you out in the cold again. I'm sure we could find you a bed somewhere." He ran an inviting hand up Koll's arm, letting it rest on a firmly muscled bicep, and wet his lips. The little warm knot of arousal that had never quite faded, even after he had been embarrassed in front of Sjurd, was growing again. "But you may have to share."

Koll's broad face brightened. "It's nice to share." His hand landed on Celyn's ass, and he hummed approval as he squeezed lightly. Then he leaned close enough to say straight into Celyn's ear, "I could share my cock too."

It wasn't subtle, but Celyn didn't need subtle right now. Gleefully, he dropped his hand to press between Koll's legs, feeling the shape of a very nice erection growing there. "By share, I hope you mean that you're going to shove that beautiful thing into my ass and let me ride you until we both pass out."

Koll's eyes widened and his lips parted, his head falling back as his hips pressed forward.

"Yes. Please."

Celyn pointed upstairs. “Bedroom’s that way. Shall we?”

Some hours later, he was roused from a limp and pleasant slumber by the stealthy sounds of someone slipping out of bed. He opened his eyes just enough to see the moonlight shining on the pale curve of Koll’s ass, and reached out to stroke it lazily. “Going so soon?”

“I should get back to my barracks.”

“Stay for another round,” Celyn offered. His body was aching gloriously, and he felt a little too used to move, but he was sure he could manage to spread his legs enough to get pounded by that nice fat cock again.

“Can’t.” There was genuine regret in Koll’s voice, and his big hand descended to stroke down Celyn’s belly and cup his balls tenderly. “Broken curfew four times already this month, and I’ll get caught again if I don’t go now.”

“Shame,” Celyn commented, snuggling down against his pillows and moving lazily against Koll’s warm hand. “Another time?”

“Whenever we’re both in town,” Koll offered easily. “I like your ass, sailor.” Then he corrected himself hurriedly, “Er, prince, I mean. Highness.”

“Celyn will do.” He sat up and brushed a kiss onto Koll’s cheek. “Go on. I’d hate for you to be punished after such a nice evening.”

After Koll’s steps had faded away, he curled back against his pillows, pulling the blankets up. He felt better than he had in weeks, half the stress of two countries’ worth of political nonsense chased away. Koll’s warmth was still lingering in the bed beside him, and the sheets smelt of musk and sweat. Letting his eyes slide closed, Celyn palmed his cock again. He thought of the hot stretch of Koll moving within him, the strength of broad shoulders beneath his grasping hands, Koll’s hand jerking around his cock, Sjurd shoving him against the wall, his voice sharp with anger.

The last one pushed him over the edge, and he spilled into his hand with a happy sigh.

Then, as the warmth of coming faded, he realized what he'd done. Throwing his arm over his eyes, he tried to persuade himself that it was pure chance, a flicker of memory intruding at an inappropriate moment, no more. He was still arguing with himself when he fell asleep.

CHAPTER V

Sjurd: Aged 30

Sjurd woke up face down on his desk, with some idiot pounding on his door. The hammering noise made him jerk upwards, grabbing at the edge of the desk for balance, and he roared, not quite awake, “Have they crossed the border?”

“No.”

“Then fuck off!” He slumped back over the desk, pillowing his head on his arms again.

“It’s important.” Now he recognized the voice. It had to be Prince Brat, didn’t it?

The realization came with a surge of guilt. He knew how princes ought to treat their guests, even if Ivarr didn’t. Yet he’d still been a complete bastard to the little brat last night. It wasn’t Celyn’s fault that Sjurd looked at him and was carried straight back to the night he learned Mathilde was dead, when he had humiliated himself in front of the boy.

And, of course, there was Ivarr, who terrified him and infuriated him in equal measures. He had seen enough men break on the border to know it was illness and not weakness, but there were times when he just wanted to scream at his brother to appreciate what he had. To see Prince Celyn so easily accept Ivarr’s behavior had infuriated him in ways he couldn’t quite articulate.

“Sjurd, it *is* urgent!”

Sjurd sat up and ran his fingers through his hair. The chain which held Mathilde’s engagement ring had slipped out from under his shirt, and he tucked it away again carefully, squeezing the edges of the little lodestar until it dug into his fingertips and woke him up a little more. His back ached, and his shoulders were uncomfortably cramped. He was too old to sleep in his chair, but walking to his bed never seemed like an efficient use of his time. Maybe he should have put Prince Brat there, rather than sending him back to the embassy.

His cock twitched, reminding him what a terrible idea that would have been. There had been a moment, just one moment, last night, feeling the brat's arousal, when he'd wanted to do nothing but sink to his knees, tear the brat's hose open and suck that straining cock straight down.

Thunder save him, if he was lusting after *Celyn*, he really needed to find someone to fuck, efficient use of his time or not.

He got up with a grimace, rolling his shoulders out and staggering over to open the window to get some fresh air into the room. He'd actually liked having a study when he first arrived in Holmebury, but that had been before he started spending most of his visits to the capital shut inside it. The walls were covered in maps and troop lists that he saw even when he closed his eyes, and the big polished table in the center might be big enough to lay out a battleplan, but it left no space for a couch big enough to sleep on.

"Sjurd!"

Ignoring the brat's existence wasn't actually going to make him go away, was it?

"A moment," Sjurd yelled, and poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher on the sill. It tasted flat, but better than the inside of his mouth, and it woke him up a little more, so he almost felt ready to face Celyn. Almost.

The problem was that, if he hadn't been the same brat who had been irritating him for the last decade and was, never forget, engaged to his brother, Sjurd might have been interested. The army was full of men who rushed to obey his every command with awed eyes. When he couldn't bear to go untouched any longer, though, he turned to a different type of man: smart-mouthed lieutenants who argued back, and whose lips curled with sarcasm even under his kiss. He never took more than a night with any of them, though, and never in Holmebury.

And Celyn was not one of them.

"I'm still here. Do I have to pick the lock to get to you, or should I just set fire to the door? Sjurd, Sjurd, Sjurd! I'm still here. Sjurd! Hello in there, Prince of the Mountain Oafs. I'm not going away. Sjurd!"

On second thought, throttling him would be far more satisfying. What had he been thinking? Sjurd strode across the room and flung the door open. “What?”

Celyn jumped a little, but then moved fast, squeezing around Sjurd to get into the study. Sjurd groaned. He was supposed to be a military strategist. He should know better than to allow any opening in his defenses.

“Close the door,” Celyn said quietly, his voice very serious. “I don’t want anyone overhearing.”

Sjurd bit back the urge to order him out again, his heart sinking. What now? He closed the door and turned to face Celyn. “What is it?”

“Ivarr’s gone.”

“Gone where?” Sjurd asked.

Celyn brandished a piece of paper at him. “According to this, somewhere you’ll never find him.”

The implications of that hit like a landslide, and Sjurd staggered, his knees folding under him. Celyn was at his elbow in a moment, holding him up, his voice frantic as he said, “Not like that! I wouldn’t joke about that! Hrolf’s gone, too!”

That got through his panic, as nothing else would have done. Whatever else you said of Hrolf, he had been loyal to Ivarr since they were old enough to walk, and he had a hearty disdain for suicide. Sjurd managed to stand up again, pulling away from Celyn (why did this brat always have to be here to witness his weakest moments?). “Where?”

“I don’t know,” Celyn said. “He had at least enough cunning not to give an exact location. Dwynwen save you, Sjurd, when did you last sleep properly? Will you sit down, please?”

The concern in his voice was irritating enough to straighten Sjurd’s spine. “Not when I have to ride after the blithering little fool. What does he say?”

Celyn sighed and read from the letter, his voice dripping with frustration. “It’s long. Here.

“I can no longer endure living under a death sentence. There is no hope for our future, and I see no point in marrying for political gain when both our countries will soon be annihilated. You are my friend, but I don’t love you in the way I love Hrolf. If our time is so limited, we must spend it living a quiet life far from the halls of power. Hrolf and I are going somewhere even Sjurd can’t find us, somewhere even the Empire doesn’t want. Please don’t waste time or resources looking for us.”

Sjurd considered that in disgust for a moment before he said, “I need a drink.”

“It’s not even noon,” Celyn pointed out.

“So?”

“Fair enough,” Celyn said, folding up the letter. “There can’t be many places he could have gone.”

“North,” Sjurd said shortly. He hadn’t missed Ivarr’s interest in how the fens had been drained and what they had been like before. “He studied the marshes, and once you’ve lost yourself in there, no one without a local guide can find you. If they’ve been on the road for six hours or so, they’ll cross the border long before we could catch up.”

“I could fly over.”

“You’d have to search every mile. It could take years.”

“We don’t have years,” Celyn said wearily and propped his own hip against Sjurd’s desk with a slight wince. He gave Sjurd a smile that twisted his lips. “I’m afraid I may have precipitated this. I was sent here by the royal council to set a wedding date.”

Sjurd had run out of words. He could think of nothing he could say to that. Silently, he went back to his chair, dropping into it and wishing he could turn back time just enough to still be asleep.

“I can keep little incidents like those yesterday to myself,” Celyn said, turning around to face him over the desk. He leaned on it, lists of equipment

shortages crumpling under his hands. “There is no possible way to conceal this. Having to cancel this wedding will be seen as a huge political insult.”

“Which means what?” Sjurd asked. “Our situation is too desperate for political games.”

Celyn didn’t say anything, but something in the quality of his silence made Sjurd look up. Celyn was looking torn, chewing on his lip as he stared over Sjurd’s head. At last, he said, very slowly,

“There are some concerns in Ynys Llys about the alliance.”

“Concerns?” Sjurd repeated flatly. “We’re the only two nations left on the continent who aren’t part of the Empire. Who else are you people going to ally with? The marsh villages?”

Celyn closed his eyes. “Increasingly, the Empire is seen as a mainland problem.”

“Are you all out of your minds?” Sjurd roared.

“I’m not part of this!” Celyn snapped back. “I spend half my life right here, and Mathilde was my friend too. I know the dangers! I’m spending every moment I have in my own country fighting to make the rest of Ys understand. They could confiscate my ship for revealing what I just told you. Don’t you dare accuse me!”

Sjurd sat back a little, surprised by the vehemence in Celyn’s tone. He’d never quite taken the brat seriously, smart-mouthed pacifist Ysian that he was. If there was a chance of the alliance failing, he might have to change that. He had been counting on Ysian ships to transport soldiers and supplies when the invasion came. Without them, they would fall as fast as Challoner had. “I thought King Pryderi understood the danger.”

“He does,” Celyn said, and went back to silence, his hands clenching into fists. At last he said, “I’m not the ambassador yet, you know. I have no remit, no permission to share our secrets.”

“What you tell me stays with me and my king. No one else will learn it from us.”

Celyn took a quick, sharp breath. “Well, if I’m already marooned... Pryderi’s dying.”

“What?” Sjurd said. He had not expected that. “Who is his heir? His daughter?”

“My cousin Rhiannon,” Celyn said, grimacing. “She’s three years my junior and has never left Ys. Never wanted to.”

“And there’s the problem?” Sjurd surmised.

“I’ve talked myself hoarse, but she doesn’t want to listen. She’s surrounded by handsome boys courting a crown and telling her what she wants to hear. One miserable cousin predicting the end of the world counts for little with her.”

Could something so petty doom a nation, Sjurd wondered. Perhaps Ivarr had been right to run.

The marshes couldn’t contain the whole of Axholme, though. Someone had to fight for his people’s future. Wearily, he said, “We need to talk to King Snorri.”

Celyn nodded and offered him a hand up. “If you’re still planning on that drink afterward, I might just join you.”

It was an odd feeling, camaraderie with the brat, but Sjurd took his hand. “I might just let you.”

That fellow feeling lasted less than an hour, right up until the moment Snorri told them his solution to their problem.

“You want me to do what?” Sjurd shouted, clenching his hand around Mathilde’s ring. “With him?”

“Marry Sjurd?” Celyn was saying, his voice incredulous. “Me? Him? *Marriage?*”

Snorri sat back, regarding them both through narrowed eyes. “We tell the Ysians that Ivarr has been taken ill and has retired back to your father’s homestead. To show how much we value the alliance, we offer a far more high

status match in the form of Sjurd here. You didn't honestly think you could stay single forever, First Prince?"

Sjurd glared at him. "I've changed my mind. I'm going after Ivarr, and I'm going to drag him home by his toenails if I have to."

"I feel so flattered," Celyn said, folding his arms across his chest.

Snorri waved his hand dismissively. "If you like, Sjurd, but I'll just send him home anyway. The alliance clearly needs strengthening, and this is a simple way to do it. You're a soldier of Axholme, man. Put your personal feelings aside, and do your duty."

Sjurd couldn't argue with that, though he could see from Celyn's expression that he wanted to try. He did end his day by getting drunk, however, and he did it alone.

CHAPTER VI

Sjurd

Six months later, Sjurd had still failed to think of a way to get out of the match. It was all very well marrying a friend and expecting nothing more than convenience. Being tied to the most irritating man he had ever met for the rest of his life was not such a pleasant prospect. He couldn't even get away with telling Celyn to live his life out safely in Ys, not now he'd been confirmed as the ambassador to Axholme (which Sjurd half-suspected was a money-saving exercise on the Ysians' part).

He was still in a thunderous mood two mornings before his betrothal feast, as he climbed out onto the top of the guard tower where he had been based for the spring campaign. Summer had come to the mountains now. The dark green of the firs had been joined by the green fuzz of new grass on all the shelves. Flowers now grew in wild banks where the winter rain had soaked into the soil, rising up in swathes of violet and gold.

Summer might be pretty, but it also brought a wave of new attacks. The misthounds were a constant menace, but at least they only bred once a year, and Sjurd had focused the spring campaign on killing their litters. He was just glad that the whelps looked less like dogs than their parents. Their scales were more marked before they grew their adult fur, and they were cold to the touch, flat-eyed and ugly. If he'd had to order his men to slaughter puppies, morale would have been even worse.

Summer meant more men to fight, supposed brigands who spoke with the accents of the jail houses of the east. Men could be intimidated, though, or tricked. He'd even turned a traitor, whom he had sent back to the lowlands under heavy guard, to be kept away from company until he had proved he was no spy. His story had rung true, though, and made Sjurd glad that his brother was lost somewhere in the mist-wreathed north and, for the first time, relieved that Mathilde was safely dead. Their traitor had been a prisoner of the Empire since birth, the child of a royal hostage held by the Empire before it overran her kingdom, abandoned to Imperial mercy once she was of no further value. Her son had been born in prison, and had watched his mother die twelve years

later, executed for instigating a prison riot which almost freed her and did kill ten guards. The only choice he had ever been given was imprisonment or to serve on the front line of the Empire, where death would come a little sooner.

“Why change your loyalties now?” Sjurd had asked him.

The prisoner had turned sad eyes upon him and said, his flat voice suddenly alive with wonder, “I saw the ships fly over. It gave me hope. It made me think, could I fly away? Could I choose more than how to die?”

Sjurd didn't trust him, but he had thought about him ever since that conversation. How many men like that did the Empire hold, men who did not even know there was something beyond cold hard laws? How could men live with so few choices?

It made being ordered into marriage seem petty in comparison. He would just have to endure it. Of course, that would have been easier if he could have used his original plan and blamed impassable roads to get out of his own betrothal feast. Unfortunately, as a gesture of goodwill, the Ysians had sent a ship to collect him. It was floating into view now, its shadow passing across the roof of the forest as it sank down through the air towards the top of his tower.

They didn't even bother to moor, but just tossed a rope ladder over the side. Sjurd saluted the men at watch on the tower, before he gritted his teeth and began to climb. It took counting off each rung in the ladder, as it twisted in the air, and another dose of pride and willpower after he glanced down and saw the forest spinning far below him.

Once on board, it was a little better, but he was still all too aware that he was on a thin bit of wood a very long way above the ground. He bared his teeth in a forced smile as the captain of the ship welcomed him aboard. Then he claimed tiredness and went and lay down in a cabin where he could at least pretend he was on solid ground.

That didn't help much when the wind swung round an hour out of Holmebury and they bounced their way through the last few miles of the voyage. By the time they made landfall, Sjurd was feeling sick. The last thing he wanted was to be ambushed by tailors and fitted for betrothal clothes.

It was always hard coming back to the city after a long stint on the border, and this was worse than usual. The whole city seemed to be bustling, with bunting in the streets and, as the evening set in, parties spilling across the palace lawns. There was a frenetic edge to it, though, with everyone casting occasional glances east and half the partygoers wearing black ribbons on their sleeves for friends or family lost on the border. It reminded him of his previous engagement, which only brought back his airsickness in full force, and he eventually retreated back to his rooms. He locked himself in, shoving a chair beneath the door handle in case any officious idiot had managed to get their hands on a key, and went to sleep.

That strategy won him a good night's sleep, right until the moment the king's valet, who had been assigned to prepare him for the feast, enlisted the help of a few enterprising soldiers and climbed through the window to wake him up (with a feather duster on the end of a pole, because everybody knew Sjurd slept with his sword and woke up grumpy).

He let them dress him up, because that level of enterprise deserved some reward, and made his way gloomily to the reception King Snorri was hosting in honor of him and Celyn.

It wasn't until he got there that he realized he hadn't actually seen any of the Ysian delegation yet, and that might have been an oversight. It meant that he got trapped in conversation with Princess Rhiannon and three of her posturing suitors for the best part of an hour. Rhiannon, to his surprise, wasn't stupid, but she kept glancing around the hall nervously, as if she was expecting fights to break out at any moment. She was a pretty girl, in a willowy, pale-haired way, but he found her constant jitters wearying. It was a relief when Mathilde's sisters appeared out of the crowd, and Rhiannon's sudden smile showed she welcomed them too.

Well, that was a diplomatic triumph Sjurd himself could take credit for. He had continued to write to the girls even after they went to Ys. When, a few months ago, Aude had complained of being bored on the little island where they had set up their new home, he had remembered what Celyn had said about his cousin. If anyone could persuade Rhiannon to take the Imperial

threat seriously, it would be those two, and they would be far less bored in the rush and bustle of a royal palace, even one as cozy as the Ysian court.

He didn't see Celyn himself until they made it up to the high table for the betrothal feast. He was thoroughly irritated to see that Celyn didn't look anywhere near as flustered and bad-tempered as Sjurd felt. He personally hated these affairs, having to think of a thousand slightly different bits of small talk to keep everyone happy. He should have expected that Celyn, who didn't seem to know how to shut up, would be enjoying himself, chattering away happily to one of Sjurd's elderly aunts as he helped her to her place.

He settled her into her seat and then bounced up toward the high table, the smile on his face only fading when he saw Sjurd glaring at him.

"So," Celyn said brightly, "I hear that you used to pull onions out of the garden and try to eat them raw. I hope your breath has improved since."

"I was *three*," Sjurd protested, but Celyn had flitted away cheerfully to greet some southern earls Sjurd hadn't even realized were here. Just how much time had the brat spent in their court? He seemed to know people Sjurd himself had never met.

Dropping into his seat of honor at the high table, he muttered to King Snorri, who was sitting beside him, "Why are we doing all this for a mere betrothal? Won't we have to pay for it all again for the actual wedding?"

"The wedding's not until next year," Snorri reminded him. He already had a full glass of wine, and was eying the doors to the kitchens with the happy anticipation of a lifelong glutton. "We need the political capital now. Smile, Sjurd, or the Ysian chit might think you don't fancy her cousin."

"Perhaps because," Sjurd pointed out, because he'd always felt free to be sarcastic with Snorri, "I don't fancy her cousin."

"With the way she's got her eye on you, better not advertise that."

Sjurd hastily plastered a smile onto his face. He had nothing to prejudice him against Princess Rhiannon, save that she was young and had the air of someone who expected her suitors to dance attendance. At least Celyn was busy enough with his own life not to care about Sjurd's manners.

As they were served with their first course, though, Celyn did lean across to murmur, “Why are you making that face at me? Is it supposed to scare me off?”

“I’m not that lucky,” Sjurd muttered back.

Celyn pressed a hand to his heart. “You say such sweet things.”

Sjurd felt a smile itching at the corner of his mouth, but bit it back. “Sickening, isn’t it?”

He got a sharp-edged grin in return. “Why, are you saying I make you sick? I’m wounded.”

“Celyn!” Princess Rhiannon protested. “That wasn’t what Prince Sjurd meant. You mustn’t be unfair.”

“Oh, I do apologize,” Celyn sighed and patted Sjurd’s hand. “Just a tease, cousin Rhiannon. I know Sjurd adores me. Don’t you, dearest?”

“Excessively,” Sjurd said flatly, and stabbed his fork hard into a innocent slice of roast quail.

“He thinks I have pretty eyes,” Celyn confided in his cousin, not bothering to lower his voice. “You wouldn’t think it to look at him, but he has the soul of a poet.”

Rhiannon looked a little unconvinced, but Snorri was chortling into his wine, so Sjurd narrowed his eyes and said, “Our national verse is the limerick. I have composed several with Celyn in mind. I’m sure he would be honored to recite some for you, Highness.”

“Oh, do, Celyn,” Rhiannon said. “I’m sure you have them memorized.”

Sjurd blinked at that, and had to cough back a laugh of his own when she winked at him. Gravely, he said, “You remember. It begins *There was a young prince from Ys, who didn’t know which way to-*”

“Oh, look,” Celyn said hurriedly. “Minstrels!” Sure enough, a whole troupe was filing in with instruments in hand, ready to inflict some entertainment on the gathered guests.

“Do they sing limericks too?” Rhiannon asked demurely.

The evening went downhill from there, though there were moments when Sjurd quite enjoyed seeing just how far he could push the innuendo before Snorri began to go scarlet (served the old bastard right for setting him up like this) or Rhiannon's sly amusement vanished under hauteur. He'd always known that Celyn was a brat, but he'd forgotten how quick-witted he was, and how swiftly he could turn an insult to his own advantage. Sjurd gave almost as good as he got, however, and gloated silently over how surprised Celyn was to have to scramble for advantage in a battle of wits.

After ten courses which left him genuinely queasy (they didn't eat this richly on the border), Snorri rose to make his speech, announcing and approving the betrothal. Sjurd's mood plummeted rapidly. He supposed there were only so many things that could be said in a betrothal speech, and Snorri had already given one for him nine years ago. It was increasingly apparent, though, that the king had chosen to just recycle the last one by changing the name and gender of Sjurd's fiance. It made him think of Mathilde and how pleasant that feast had been, no barbed compliments but a simple, quiet conversation about the military situation, and a shared moment of embarrassment when everyone applauded them. He still missed her, with a quiet ache in his heart that was made bitter with guilt. She had been his dearest friend, and he had loved her, but not as she deserved. It seemed so cruel that she should have gone to her death without a true lover to mourn her, and it made him feel a little sick every time someone offered him sympathy, as if he was deliberately deceiving them.

Snorri decided to finish his speech with a new flourish, clearly to remind Sjurd why it was a bad idea to antagonize his king. Folding his hands over his belly, Snorri announced, "And now, to seal their engagement, our princes will exchange a kiss."

Sjurd's only comfort was that Celyn looked as horrified as he felt. The brat had been nibbling honeycakes as Snorri's speech went on and on, and he still had crumbs stuck to the side of his mouth and a slight glaze of honey on his lower lip. His cheeks were flushed, from the wine and the heat of the room, and Sjurd did not want to kiss him, not even to discover if he tasted of honey. No, not at all.

“Stand up now, good princes,” Snorri boomed cheerfully. “Take each other’s hands. This is a pledge of loyalty, so look up. Let your eyes meet.”

Sjurd had never kissed anyone who looked quite that murderous, and he could sympathize.

“That’s right,” Snorri continued, quietly enough now that only the two of them could hear.

“Make it look good. Plenty of tongue.”

Regicide had never been so tempting.

Celyn had clearly had enough because he leaned forward before Snorri could say another word, and pressed his lips to Sjurd’s. They did taste of honey, pressing warm and soft against his mouth. Then, with a little breath of relief, Celyn pulled back, leaving Sjurd standing there. He felt a little foolish and, bizarrely, a little disappointed. Somehow, he expected more out of the kiss, which was strange because he hadn’t realized that he had any expectations of Celyn at all.

The crowd was applauding (and a few of the tipsier ones were whistling). Celyn was sitting down again, turning to say something quiet to Rhiannon. Sjurd needed to sit down too, but couldn’t quite pull his thoughts together enough to manage it. Instead, he looked out at the hall, where all the merry faces and bright dresses merged under the flickering torchlight into one bright blur. It was a movement by the door that brought everything back into focus, and he felt the laughter he had carried all evening go cold as a soldier in the livery of the Royal Signalsmen forced his way through the mass of guests and entertainers, his face grim.

Silence fell in his wake, every one of his own people knowing the implication, and the Ysians catching the mood from them.

“Sovereign,” the soldier said, kneeling briefly before the dais. “Word from the border. An incursion, sire. Three hundred brigands in the pass.”

Some of the fear went out of Sjurd’s heart. Three hundred was bad, and would test their strength, but it wasn’t the invasion. Not quite. Not yet. Swinging round, he addressed Rhiannon, hoping she wouldn’t refuse him

before this crowd, “Highness and cousin, my country has need of me. Will your ship carry me, and some further members of my guard, back to the border?”

She didn’t like the idea, but she had little choice if she was not to offer a public insult. Instead, she bowed her head and said coolly, “Dwynwen watch over you, First Prince, and keep you safe from harm. You may instruct the captain of the *Gwennol* to take you wherever you wish.”

He bowed to her. “My country thanks you, Lady. Excuse me, please.”

Celyn was rising to his feet. “I’ll come with you.”

“And do what?” Sjurd snapped, and was surprised by the way Celyn flinched back.

It wasn’t until the ship was skimming north, its cargo decks packed with reinforcements, that he remembered that Celyn had always traded insults just as fluently with Hrolf and Ivarr. It could, after all, have been an offer of friendship.

Sjurd hadn’t thought of the war once while he had been bickering with Celyn.

For a moment, he stood by the rail, feeling the night air eddy around him, and watched the flicker of their sails reflected as they passed over the moonlit drains and ditches below. Then, because this was no time to linger over regrets, he made his way back to his cabin, where he rolled himself into his cloak and tried to get some sleep before the battle began.

Celyn, aged 24

The actual wedding took place a year later, and was a quieter affair. It had been a hard year for both nations. The spring had come late—fouled, Sjurd claimed and Celyn believed, by Imperial weather mages across the border. The summer was still cold, and the crops were slow to grow. It would be a race to finish the harvest before the first frost.

The spring had also brought the death of King Pryderi of Ys, the rot in his lungs hastened by the hard winter. When the spring solstice brought them only further snow, he had simply turned his head to the wall and closed his eyes. Celyn had stood with Rhiannon beside her father's pyre, and watched her grow older and harder as the fire burned. He had been the one to fly her out to the Veil of Storms to scatter her father's ashes into the wind, but after that he had been cut out of her councils. She needed him, she said, to be the voice of Ys in Axholme.

She did not attend his first wedding, although his aunt came and his brothers, whom he had not seen in years. He showed them around the city, even smuggling them into Hrolf's favorite tavern for old times' sake, and they laughed together in their cups, hearty strangers he could be friends with, but not kin, not in his heart.

He married Sjurd for the first time under the open sky, in a field outside the city. They both stood in green corn to their waists, the farmer and his wife watching with anxious pride as the priest of Freyja, Axholme's fertility goddess, lectured them about the need to be generous in love. The wind had risen, making the field sigh and rustle around them so loudly that it almost drowned out the priest's voice. The clouds above were ripped out of the low gray blanket they had formed to go racing across the sky like ships in full sail. Their passing cast waves of light and shadow across the field as they crossed the sun, and Celyn went from shivering to sweating every few moments, aware of how clammy his hands felt in Sjurd's.

There had been a sealed note on his windowsill that morning, which contained a pressed yellow flower and, in a square blocky hand he instantly recognized, the words, *Be kind to one another. Love helps. I & H.*

He had asked one of the palace gardeners to identify the plant and been told, in a disdainful voice, that it was a turnip flower. He had folded it away again safely, to show Sjurd later. It might be better, in the end, to have Ivarr as his brother. He could live with that quite happily, if Ivarr and Hrolf ever returned.

Although if Ivarr thought there was any chance that Celyn might ever love Sjurd, blissful matrimony had obviously rotted his brain. Or possibly it was some kind of concussion brought on by too much vigorous fucking.

Sjurd's hands tightened around his, and Celyn brought his mind back to the present. The priest was finally drawing close to the end of his speech, so Celyn started paying attention again, staring at Sjurd. He wondered if he was supposed look at him differently now they were almost tied together for good. Would Sjurd suddenly start shining with some golden aura of husbandliness? Celyn was skeptical. To his eyes, Sjurd just looked like Sjurd. There was a new scar on his cheek, where a misthound had gotten too close during the spring thaw, and he wasn't wearing any weapons, but those were superficial changes. He was still handsome in a faintly terrifying way; still looked tired, tense and dangerous.

Still looked lonely.

Then the priest was declaring them bound before the gods, and Sjurd was stepping forward to meet him. Celyn had been rehearsed on this bit, so he took his own step forward and kissed Sjurd very chastely, their lips pressing together cautiously.

The crowd went quiet, a sudden gust of wind swinging round them, and Celyn shuddered slightly and breathed out against Sjurd's lips, feeling their hands lock together awkwardly.

Then the priest dumped a handful of damp soil over their heads, followed by a tankard of ale, and he and Sjurd parted, spluttering, as the crowd burst into a noisy roar of delight.

"Barbaric," Celyn muttered, scraping a bit of mud out of his ear. His brothers found it hilarious, holding each other up in the front row of the crowd, as they cried with laughter.

"At least this one we only have to do once," Sjurd snapped.

Celyn sighed. "True." He hadn't been there to see Sjurd's reaction when he found out that a royal marriage wasn't valid in Ys unless a ceremony had been performed on all the islands, but his sources in the palace had reported it back

to him with much hilarity. He wasn't much looking forward to it himself. It would have been all very well with Ivarr, who was interested in new places and could be entertained with sightseeing, but what in the world was he supposed to do with Sjurd for a month and a half of traveling? At least the Empire had eased off its stealthy pressure on the border, distracted, their spies suggested, by a succession of uprisings in their eastern provinces.

They were invited back into the farm's kitchen to wipe the mud off their faces. The farmer's shy young wife brought them a basin and what were clearly her best towels. Celyn thanked her with his best smile, wondering aloud, "What was that about?"

"It's for fertility, highness," she said and then blushed, retreating a step or two.

Celyn winked at her. "Even between men? That's something I don't need in this marriage. It would spoil my figure."

She laughed, and Sjurd said irritably from the other side of the kitchen, "Are you done, brat? We've got miles to go yet."

"Aren't you staying for the feast?" the farmer's wife asked. She had a round face and blue eyes which reminded him of poor Koll, dead in a misthound's nest eleven months ago.

He gentled his voice, to compensate for Sjurd's bad manners, and said, "This is just our first wedding. My cousin is waiting for us in Ys, so we can be married there, too."

"I wish you happy, sirs," she said, and then some palace flunky was at the door to tell them their coach was waiting ("I could ride," Sjurd muttered when he saw the open, beribboned thing, his scowl not improved in the least by the lack of mud).

The trip back to Holmebury took two hours longer than it should have done, mostly because the people of Axholme flocked to the sides of the road to cheer their prince by. Sjurd endured it with a fixed smile, but Celyn started to enjoy it after the first mile or two. It was nice to see people happy for once, and he liked the flowers they were throwing, not least because Sjurd looked far

less intimidating with rose petals in his hair. He waved to them enthusiastically, trying to show that Ysians were perfectly nice people and well worth defending even in a hopeless war.

“Will you sit still,” Sjurd snapped eventually. “You’ll upset the coach.”

“You’re the only person I’ve ever met who dislikes me more on acquaintance,” Celyn remarked, waving extra hard at the next clump of people, not least because the farmer was a very handsome lad.

“You surprise me,” Sjurd muttered.

“Now that,” Celyn said, not without admiration, “was just plain nasty. Be careful, or all these nice people will start to suspect that this marriage is just a cynical political ploy, and then I’ll have to come over there and stick my tongue down your throat to convince them otherwise, which neither of us will enjoy.”

Sjurd looked faintly sick at the idea, but he also stopped making snide comments, so Celyn counted that as a victory. Once they were aboard ship (the royal barge *Gwennol*, also covered in streamers and chains of flowers, much to her sailors’ annoyance), Sjurd disappeared below deck and left Celyn to enjoy his brothers’ company. It was a nice day for sailing, with a fresh merry wind, and Celyn’s heart rose as they soared away from Holmebury. Now he spent most of his time on official duties in Axholme, he found he missed Ys more, with a little ache beneath his heart when the wind blew crisply out of the west, or he caught a glimpse of blossom falling through the air from his study window.

As they neared the coast, where Axholme’s fens slid slowly into low mud flats and sandbanks, treacherous at any tide, the first gulls went squealing overhead, alighting on the yardarms to ride the ship towards the fishing grounds below Ys. He could taste the salt on the wind, and leaned on the rail to squint west, where he could see the gray-brown shadows of the outer isles floating in the sky a league offshore. Big Haearn hung low, its red-roofed village showing along its coast. There would be ladders hanging down towards the fishing ground, and the seaboats would be out, waiting for dusk to return home and let their catch up on the great pulleys that Haearn was famed for.

Higher in the sky, and a little to the north, was Callestr, crowned by a watchtower rising out of its white-flowering *derwen* forest; then Metheglin and Blodyn, where they celebrated the birth of summer by dancing through the woods.

Almost hidden to the south was his own small Gwydr, tucked into the shadow of Enfys, where the village was built on the great arch which joined the two forested peninsulas.

“Can you even fit a ship between them?” Sjurd asked, making Celyn jump. He had been so busy feasting on the sight of home that he hadn’t been paying attention to his surroundings.

“The distance is deceptive,” he explained. “There’s a mile between them at least. Look, there’s the ferry crossing from Callestr to Blodyn!” He pointed at the little white-sailed boat floating across the strait at a leisurely speed.

“Thunder strike me,” Sjurd groaned, and Celyn looked round to see him blanch a little. “I thought that was a bird.”

“She’ll carry forty people as long as they tuck their elbows in,” he said cheerfully. “A few more if they’re willing to rope onto the sides. You should see how she wallows when everyone’s heading for the festival on Blodyn.”

“As long as they’re willing to *what?*” Sjurd said.

“Tie on,” Celyn said. Surely it was obvious? “The crew rig some extra nets along the side, and people tuck themselves in. As long as you balance the sides properly, it’s safe enough. Uncomfortable, of course, but it’s cheap. I know some lads who’ve seen the whole of Ys like that, before they settled onto an island, working a little here and—”

Sjurd had been spluttering for a while, and here he finally regained the power of speech enough to say, “You people are insane!”

“Technically,” Celyn said, raising his voice as Sjurd backed away. “You’ve just married into the nation, which makes you one of us, too.”

But Sjurd had disappeared inside, and didn’t even re-emerge when they began to trace their way between the inner isles, past flowering cliffs and waterfalls that tumbled into the great reservoir channels which hung below the

larger isles. White-painted houses were scattered along the cliffs, and people came out to watch them go by, waving in delight. Passing under the shadow of Caerwyn, they were surprised by a sudden rain of flower petals from small boats above, which caught in the curve of the sails and blew against the cabin doors in bright heaps.

Celyn was touched by it. He hadn't thought many of his people knew who he was. Yet they were celebrating his wedding. It made him all the more certain that the more reactionary factions at court were wrong. Ys and its people were quite capable of reaching out to Axholme. At least Rhiannon's tone had softened since she took the throne.

They made landfall in Ynys Llys late in the afternoon. Rhiannon and the court were waiting for them on the quay, and there were more flowers and bunting, bright against the white-arched buildings of the capital. The city seemed very small after a few months in the broad tangle of streets that was Holmebury. It felt good to be able to look up, though, and see the mountain rising over the roofs, its slopes green and white with *derwen* forests.

Every bell in the city was ringing by the time the sailors ran the gangplank out, and there was more music and a crowd to welcome them on the quay. Rhiannon was there to take his hands as he stepped back onto home ground, her hair blowing loose in the wind and the crown heavy on her brow. She kissed his cheek in greeting, and then turned to offer Sjurd her hands.

"Ys welcomes you, First Prince," she said, pitching her voice to carry as the fiddles went quiet. "Long may our countries hold each other as dearly as you hold my cousin in your heart."

A little more dearly than that, Celyn thought dryly, but then they were all on the move, proceeded by pipers with droning *pibgorns* announcing their arrival. They were welcomed with roars of cheering from the crowd, probably more to drown out the pipes than for any other reason.

"We walk from here?" Sjurd asked, looking around with more uncertainty than Celyn had ever seen on him.

"Only as far as the palace," Celyn said. "Not really the right sort of country for a coach and horses."

They'd just made it to the bottom of the Great Stair, which wound back and forth through the city. Sjurd cast a look at the ribbon of steps in front of him and then remarked, "I can see that."

There were more crowds lining the Stair, and leaning out of windows above. Celyn had never seen so many people in the streets of Llys, and he was a little surprised the island wasn't sinking. He said as much to Sjurd, who demanded, "They can do that?"

"Oh, yes," Celyn lied blithely. "Terrible the court cases we have when someone puts on too much weight, and giving birth to twins is positively antisocial. Sometimes all that's keeping our feet out of the sea is sending a few unlovable aunts off to visit friends on another isle. I had one great-aunt who was constantly traveling for that very reason. She got stranded on board ship one winter, waiting for—"

"Celyn."

He took the hint and shut up, and tried to ignore that sudden little quiver that had gone up his spine at his name being growled in quite that tone. He really did need to take another lover sometime soon, although how he was supposed to find someone this month, he did not know. It was going to be a trial, for so many reasons.

Once they finally made it to the palace, the ceremony was much simpler than the one on Axholme and involved no mud whatsoever. They simply knelt before the dais while old Mother Heddwen, the priestess of Dwynwen who had blessed his birth and married his parents, quavered a blessing on them, her wrinkled hands trembling where she rested them upon their heads. He had to kiss Sjurd again, but it was as swift and chaste as the last one.

Then, of course, there was a feast, the proper Ysian kind where it was unlucky to stop the wine and mead moving, and someone always ended up climbing on the table to sing epics laced with dubious innuendo. By halfway through, Sjurd had stopped looking horrified and just wore a look of weary resignation, which Celyn found a little more offensive than outright disgust. He'd never made that face at any Axholme feasts, had he? It was about time

Sjurd experienced how strange it was to be confronted with someone else's customs.

Rhiannon leaned over and said quietly, "I think Uncle Rhodri is about to start the trouser song..."

"Already?" Celyn protested in dismay. On second thought, there were some traditions that no stranger needed to witness.

She shrugged with a faint wince. "He started drinking at noon. If I were you, I'd slip away now when everyone's distracted. If you wait much longer, you'll have an escort to the door."

"Do you know where they've put us?" Celyn asked quickly.

"Higher Dawn, I'm afraid."

"Fine by me," he said. "We need to be in the air early." From the back of the room, there was a sudden roar of cheering, and a distinctive wild-haired figure started trying to climb onto the table, propped up from below by several of his rowdier cousins. He turned to Sjurd hurriedly. "Time to leave."

The halls of the palace were quieter, empty and echoing as they walked away from the hall. Sjurd didn't say anything, his footfalls soft as they crossed in and out of the moonlight spilling in through the high windows. To fill the silence, Celyn said, "Poor Uncle Rhodri is always taken badly by the drink. He's a judge when he's sober, you know, and well respected. He just cannot resist a glass of mead and a chance to pull his trousers down."

"I'm wondering what I've married into," Sjurd muttered.

"Oh, please," Celyn said with a snort. "Every family has one."

"Usually we keep them out of royal occasions."

"How poor-spirited," Celyn said, a little snippily. He was already getting tired of this attitude. They were doing their countries a service, after all. They didn't have to be utterly miserable about it.

He could hear the faint noise of parties all over the city. He wished he could be at one of those, instead of walking down these cold halls with this distant man. He shook himself slightly, trying to throw off the mood, and led

Sjurd up through the palace without saying anything else. As they climbed, the sounds of revelry faded away, and Celyn could hear the gulls sleeping outside the windows instead, cooing softly in their sleep.

Their room was at the top of Dawn Tower, facing back towards Axholme, though there were too many islands between here and there to glimpse the mainland. This high, the room caught the wind, even with the thick glassed windows, and someone had been considerate enough of Sjurd's lowland upbringing to light a fire and set a lamp by the bed. It made the room too warm for Celyn's taste, but he just went to the bed and pulled back the sheets.

"We have to share?" Sjurd asked. There was something a little rough in his voice, and when Celyn glanced at him, he was standing very still.

"We are expected to consummate the marriage on every island as well," he pointed out sharply. "Do you ever listen to any non-military briefings?"

Sjurd's throat worked silently for a moment. "You and me?"

"No, the other three people in our marriage." Celyn sighed, closing his eyes for a moment, and then forced himself to be nice. "Don't look like that. It's for appearances. Here in Llys, nobody will care if you sleep on the floor instead, although the bed is far more comfortable. Out in the islands, we might have to rumple the sheets a little before we leave. I'm certainly not going to molest you in your sleep."

Sjurd's eyes narrowed. "I'd like to see you try."

Celyn decided to ignore that. "So, as long as you don't snore, we're fine. And now, I'm tired, and I'd like to sleep. You can stand there all night if you like, but I'm getting into this bed."

He turned his back on Sjurd, but couldn't quite ignore the weight of his presence in the room. Kicking his shoes off was a good distraction, but his fingers went clumsy on his shirt buttons. He wasn't going to sleep wearing this much heavy embroidery, but he was suddenly very conscious that he was a diplomat and occasional scholar, not a soldier. He'd seen Sjurd's chest, and he was just a halfweight of pale and scrawny in comparison.

He reminded himself that he didn't care what Sjurd thought of him and shrugged his shirt off. Climbing into the bed without looking round, he grabbed an armful of pillows and curled up, pushing the blankets down to his waist so he wouldn't overheat.

He was almost asleep before Sjurd blew the lamp out, casting them into darkness. The bed creaked behind him, and he suddenly came awake, aware of the warm bulk of Sjurd just behind him, not touching him but irrevocably there.

Neither of them spoke, but it was a long time before he heard Sjurd's breath slow. Only then could he manage to relax into sleep.

CHAPTER VII

Celyn

He woke up warm, the sun shining into his eyes with the full golden glory of a summer dawn. Ordinarily, he would have looked straight out at the view, one of the best on the island, and started his day with wonder. Today, however, something far more pressing and novel had captured his attention.

Or perhaps, more accurately, had captured him. There was a solid arm over his waist, and a hand curled loosely against his chest. Sjurd's leg was draped laxly over his hip, pushing him down against the bed, and he could feel damp snuffling breaths against the sensitive nape of his neck. He'd never quite believed that Sjurd *could* relax, even in his sleep, but right now he was wrapped bonelessly around Celyn's back, warm, limp, and just a little too sweaty for comfort. In fact, Celyn thought, a faint twinge of panicky disbelief curling in his stomach, you could even say he was (Dwynwen save them) snuggling.

It was rather sweet.

That thought, more than anything else, made him move. Getting tender over someone whose attitude to him varied from grudging tolerance to outright dislike was stupid. That way lay misery, and the world was depressing enough as it was.

He untangled himself very carefully, trying to shift Sjurd's weight without waking him, and eventually slid inelegantly out of the side of the bed. Someone had left them a basin of water, with floating mint leaves to keep it fresh, and he went over to splash the sleep from his eyes. His packs were here, too, so he pulled out a thin long-sleeved shirt that would offer some protection from the sun and wind.

He could smell bread baking, the scent drifting up from the courtyard below, where the ovens bulged out of the walls. It drew him to the window, one sleeve still unlaced, and he rested his hip against the sill to breathe in the morning breeze. The sky was hazy but showed so blue through the low mist that he knew it would be clear later, and the vague shapes of the surrounding

isles floating above them were slowly revealing their small beauties as the sun climbed in the sky.

It was one of those moments between moments, when the whole world seemed to be still and at peace around him. He listened to the quiet rise and fall of Sjurd's breathing and felt his own shoulders relax, as the weight of months in Axholme, always glancing east, slid softly away.

He was home at last, and it gave him the luxury of knowing what the day would hold. There would be breakfast waiting in the refectory soon, warm bread and freshly churned butter, sweetened with honey and the final jars of last year's bramble jelly. Out in the city, the pulleymen would be lowering buckets into the sea to draw up saltwater to clean the traces of yesterday's celebrations from the streets and steps, saving any chance-caught fish to fry for their own lunch.

But time kept turning, even when you were happy, and soon the sounds of the morning grew louder: shutters slamming back from the windows below; a kitchen boy running out to empty the slops, whistling as bright and heedless as a lark; the voices of the chambermaids greeting each other in the corridor, young and sweet and giggling; Sjurd mumbling sleepily and then sitting up, the bed creaking.

Celyn closed his eyes.

He listened to Sjurd wash and dress with a certain vague detachment. He was tempted to make some snide comment about cuddling, but in the end he said nothing, even when Sjurd came to stand at his shoulder.

He did open his eyes at Sjurd's sudden intake of breath. Sjurd was leaning forward now, one hand braced on the sill and his eyes wide. He looked very young, his face slack with amazement.

Celyn tried to imagine how it would feel to see the Falls of Rhaeadr and dawn over the inner isles for the first time. The mist had cleared enough that he could see between the near isles to the peaks of Antherth and Ochain beyond, floating serenely in the quiet light of morning. To the west, Rhaeadr towered above them, high in the sky and dark with woods. Its river flowed out of the forested headland to spill over the edge of the isle, descending in sweeps of

gleaming water to crash into the great lake on Ynys Llys far below, filling the air between the isles with shining spray and rainbows dancing in the mist.

“The water...” Sjurd started, but then stopped, shaking his head.

“Fresh,” Celyn told him. “The reservoir here supplies both islands. We call the great falls, that leave the coasts like that, the tears of Dwynwen.”

“Why would she cry for that?” Sjurd’s temper seemed to have vanished somewhere, washed away by the view, perhaps.

“Fresh water is precious,” Celyn said quietly. “The smaller falls we can redirect into pipes and cisterns. The big ones just tear through any channels during the winter storms. To see something so precious lost to the salt seas is worth a tear or two, I think.”

Sjurd shook his head again. “How far are we from Holmebury?”

“As the ship flies? Thirty leagues, no more.”

“Half the world, more like,” Sjurd said.

Celyn thought about what the Empire would do, if it ever made it to the islands. Even a sea-going ship might get close enough for the legions to overwhelm one of the low isles, and then they’d ravage their way from island to island, reaping the forests and dooming every soul and lovely thing that lived in Ys. Harshly, he said, “I wish it was that far.”

Sjurd went still. After a moment, he stepped back from the window and said, his voice tired again, “Where do we go today?”

“I’m certain that I sent you our itinerary,” Celyn snapped, his good mood fraying. “Did you even look at it?”

Sjurd snorted. “Lots of islands, none of which I can pronounce. Time-wasting heap of diplomatic crap.”

“It might be crap, in your view,” Celyn said sweetly. “If you want to know where we’re going, however, read it. I’m for breakfast. You need to be at the quay by the third bell of morning. I’m sure someone will give you directions.”

He started to stalk out, but Sjurd caught his arm, spinning him around. For a moment, they just glared at each other, and Celyn found himself wondering

where the man who curled close in his sleep was hidden within this all too familiar oaf. Then Sjurd said, his tone grudging, "I'll read your itinerary over breakfast. For now, brief me as we walk. Please."

"Up to Rhaeadr," Celyn said, heading out of the door and trusting Sjurd to keep up. "It's a longer flight than you'd think, since we have to circle the isle to avoid getting wrecked in the water stream. The wedding there is in the temple in Kingport, up above the falls. We'll leave there early tomorrow, and fly on to Gwylan for the next ceremony. The palace here, and your embassy, have copies of the itinerary and pigeons ready to pass on any message from Holmebury to the local message stations."

"And you organized this?" Sjurd asked.

"We all serve our people," Celyn snapped. "Yes, I planned this."

They were halfway down the hall before Sjurd said grudgingly, "Thank you."

Celyn sniffed and pretended he was still offended, because the oaf needed to learn, but that did mollify him a bit.

Their quiet truce lasted right until the moment Celyn climbed aboard *Eirlys*. He'd missed his pretty girl over the last few weeks, while he had been forced onto official transport, and she had been sitting lonesome at the end of the long piers that jutted out of the lower harbor of Ynys Llys, below the dock where the tall ships lingered. He patted the side of the little yacht fondly, and glanced back to see what was taking Sjurd so long.

His new husband was still standing on the pier, his hand locked around the nearest bollard. He was regarding *Eirlys* with absolute loathing.

"You physically can't walk to Rhaeadr," Celyn called. "The sooner you get on board, the sooner we can get there and be done with this for another day."

Sjurd still didn't move.

"What is your problem?" Celyn demanded, swinging back onto the dock to grab Sjurd's pack and toss it onboard.

"What is *that*?" Sjurd replied, pointing his free hand at the boat.

Celyn stiffened. Nobody got to talk about his pretty girl like that. “*She* is called *Eirlys*, and she’ll be carrying us the length of Ys. If you ever step on board, that is.”

“I was told we’d be traveling by ship.”

“She is a ship,” Celyn protested. “She’s just little.”

“That,” Sjurd growled, “is not a ship. That’s a coracle.”

Celyn drew in an indignant breath, patting poor *Eirlys* on the wheel again. “She certainly is not. If nothing else, coracles can’t fly.” Then, because he was beginning to guess why Sjurd had hidden below decks on the voyage in, he added, “Do you really want to do this with an escort of bored and randy sailors?”

Sjurd frowned, and his fingers loosened a little on the bollard. “I’d like to survive the experience.”

“This lady’s a century old and hasn’t floundered yet. I’ve flown her through open skies, which is much more dangerous than hopping between the islands.”

“She’s an *antique*?”

“We build our ships to last,” Celyn said impatiently. “We don’t chop *derwen* wood, so every boat is made of windfall and trees too old to flower. It takes decades to save up for a tall ship. Even a little yacht like this takes years.”

“Where’s the crew?”

“Right here,” Celyn said, which made Sjurd freeze again. Carefully, he added, “I’m as good a sailor as you are a soldier.”

Sjurd snorted at that, arrogant even when scared. Celyn hadn’t come across many people who were afraid to fly, but he’d have put money on it that most of them weren’t quite so hostile about it. Abandoning kindness, which never seemed to work on Sjurd anyway, he added insouciantly, “Of course, if you’re too cowardly, I can always drug you and carry you in the cargo net.”

“Cowardly?” Sjurd repeated and came on board in two strides. *Eirlys* shook under the force of his landing, and he froze, going pale again.

Celyn grinned at him, just to be annoying, and pointed to the back of the cockpit. “Sit there and keep out of my way. If you feel the need to be sick, lean over the side and check for low-flying boats before you heave. Casting off now.”

And they were away, and he could ignore Sjurd to focus on tilting the sails and riding the wind out to catch the breeze back in over the city, where the warm air lifted their sails and they began to climb towards the higher skies.

The wedding on Rhaeadr was a quieter affair than the first two. Only the local mayor and his family attended, and the party afterward was set in the town square, watching the town band play and nibbling on flat cakes and little spiced meat pies. A great *derwen* tree stood in the center of the square, and little girls danced in circles around it as part of the entertainments, their red capes and full skirts belling out as they hopped and turned. As dusk settled over the island, the band began to play the old tune of *Gwenllian’s Lament*, and everyone stilled to listen. As the sad music floated across the square, the starflowers blossoming on the *derwen* tree began to open, scenting the air and glowing with a soft, milky light, as bright as the moon.

It made Celyn crave a little romance, and a shoulder to lean against, but all he had was Sjurd sitting unsmiling beside him.

Their accommodation that night was in the mayor’s guest room, in an old-fashioned box bed with painted wooden sides. Even this high, the night was warm, so Celyn pulled the panels back before climbing in. It was tighter than the one from the night before, and he could feel Sjurd’s shoulder brushing his even before they went to sleep.

In the morning, Sjurd was pressed against his back again, his face tucked into the curve of Celyn’s shoulder. In the enclosed space, it was definitely too warm and stuffy for this, so Celyn did his best to squirm out despite the high sides of the bed and the dead weight of a very muscular soldier draped all along his side (and now he’d thought that, getting out was all the more

important, because thinking about naked soldiers and their muscles whilst in bed with Sjurd was not a wise idea).

He was less successful than he'd been the previous day, and Sjurd roused enough to growl, "Stop wriggling, lieutenant."

And, before Celyn had time to consider the implications of that, he found himself flat on his back and enveloped by Sjurd, that strong body settling on top of his, knees pushing his thighs apart until Sjurd could slump down onto him, his arm curling around the top of Celyn's head, and his own head on Celyn's shoulder.

Celyn couldn't breathe properly and didn't care. His thoughts fell apart, shattered by the sudden pounding of his heart and the rush of blood to his cock. There was something so good about the weight of a man pressing him down, and he didn't care right now how much of a git Sjurd was, because he felt so very wonderful.

Then Sjurd shifted again, pushing himself up on his arms, and blinked down at Celyn, his eyes hazy with sleep. Celyn saw the moment when recognition dawned, and couldn't help himself. In the most cheerful tone he could summon, he said, "Good morning, Sjurd." And then he smiled.

Sjurd's eyes went blank. Then he groaned and rolled off Celyn to crash down on the other side of the bed, dragging the blankets back over his head. Celyn hurriedly made his escape, staggering down the landing to the washroom they had been given, where he locked himself in and hurriedly jerked himself off, thinking of everything he could that wasn't Sjurd: blond hair and dimples, and eyes that were brown, not the steel-bright blue of a winter sky; shoulders that were lean and slim, not broad and strong; slender thighs, ones that didn't flex with hard muscle against one's swelling cock.

He came with his hand over his eyes, cursing himself even as it surged through him. Such a bad, bad idea, this. How was he supposed to survive over a month of it?

By the end of the afternoon, however, he disliked Sjurd as much as he had when he was fifteen. At breakfast with the mayor, they were offered a tour of the sacred caves behind the waterfall. Celyn accepted, of course, because this

was exactly the kind of opportunity that a marriage tour had to offer. He noticed Sjurd scowl, but discounted it (when didn't Sjurd scowl?).

But Sjurd's mood stayed surly all through the afternoon, even when they emerged out of the shrine to look down on the city on Ynys Llys far below, through the streaming water of the Falls of Rhaeadr. The mayor and his friends were beginning to look hurt and offended, so Celyn had to work twice as hard to be charming. By the time they finally boarded the *Eirlys*, his head was pounding.

Sjurd squashed himself into the corner of the cockpit, looking even grumpier than before. "Nice to know they value our time."

"Far more than you value theirs," Celyn snapped. "Did someone forget to teach you your manners?"

Sjurd glared at him. "Manners never won any wars."

"Lack of them lost a few," Celyn retorted, and then made an effort to pull his temper in. "If you can't be civil, don't speak to me at all. If you're lucky, I won't fly loops on the way downwind."

That shut Sjurd up, but didn't do anything to improve his mood. He scowled through the ceremony on Gwylan, growling his responses and bestowing a stiff, perfunctory kiss on Celyn. He spent the feast nursing a single cup of ale and glaring over the heads of the crowd, thoroughly disconcerting the locals. He only joined the conversation when somebody mentioned the Empire, and managed to give the poor mayor's daughter, who was trying to show off her political acumen, a description of the front that was so clinically terrifying that the poor girl pushed her plate aside and stopped eating.

By the time they retired, Celyn was sick enough of the man's rudeness that he simply turned his back and pretended Sjurd didn't exist.

He wasn't entirely surprised to wake up the next morning with Sjurd pressed against his back, but was still cross enough to roll straight out of bed and go down to a solitary breakfast (because trying to stab his new husband

through the throat with the butter knife would not have convinced anyone that the match was secure).

The situation didn't improve. The people of Ys flocked out to make them merry, in isle after isle, and Sjurd met them with disdain, shrugging aside effusive greetings and trudging around local sights that had been lovingly decorated for their visit. The staff in the courier stations, on the other hand, saw his best manners, as he strode straight there once they had made landfall on each island, charming every one of them into agreeing that they would come running for him at once, surely, Highness, if a message should come from Axholme (which was more consideration than Celyn had ever got from such a notoriously surly profession). Which all meant, of course, that it wasn't some natural deficiency to blame for Sjurd's behavior. He was just plain rude.

Celyn made excuses to the locals, playing up the emotional cost of war and what Axholme was sacrificing to keep Ys safe. He knew that much of what he said was true, even if he was polishing it for the benefit of their hosts, which kept him quiet about Sjurd's behavior for longer than he might have been otherwise.

Then they landed on the pretty headland at Briallen, where the sides of cliffs were bright with primroses and the rocky base of the island vivid with green moss. They were met by the mayor and Dwynwen's priestess, and their six merry red-haired daughters, the tallest just old enough to stare at Sjurd and giggle, while the youngest still needed to clench a fist in her older sister's skirts to keep her balance as she toddled. They were all in white for the wedding, with flowers in their hair. It was a pretty sight, and Celyn, who often stayed here if he was flying into the capital from the south, hurried forward to greet them. He accepted a kiss of congratulations from the girls' mother, and then held out his arms to little Eilir, the second youngest, who was a favorite of his.

She launched herself up with a cry of, "You were supposed to marry me!"

Celyn laughed and spun her around. "You're still my prettiest girl. Too pretty for me, but look what a handsome husband they gave me instead."

She wrinkled her nose at Sjurd and reached up to straighten her wreath with a little sniff. “He looks mean.”

“He’s a brave soldier,” Celyn told her, lowering his voice and widening his eyes. “He fights monsters, and keeps all the little girls in Axholme safe from ogres.”

Eilir gave him a skeptical glance, her mouth pursed. “Can he get rid of spiders?”

“I don’t know,” Celyn admitted, laughing. “Shall we ask him? Sjurd, want to meet my favorite girl?”

“I don’t like children,” Sjurd said and walked away.

Eilir’s eyes went round, and she looked up at Celyn uncertainly. Behind them, the rest of the family were quiet.

“Excuse me,” Celyn said to them, passing Eilir back to her father, and took off after Sjurd.

He had only gone as far as the cliff edge, scowling down over the bright summer sea and the Isle of Sirig spreading out below them, nets hanging from the ends of her fields to skim the waves. He looked as out of place here as Celyn would have felt on a battlefield. Who in the world got angry at a sunny day and was rude to a small child, especially when so much rested on their reputation?

“What is wrong with you?” Celyn said to his back, frustration making his voice sharper and louder than usual. “If you’ve gone battle sick like Ivarr did, I needed to know that before we planned a wedding.”

“I’m not battle sick.” Sjurd turned to face him. “It just makes me angry. All this wasted time and nonsense, when the border is crumbling further every fucking day.”

“Which is why we’re here,” Celyn snapped. “You know more than anyone why your people need this alliance. I don’t understand why you’re so determined to destroy it.”

“*Nothing* I’m doing here is helping my people! My people are dying, while I play at being a diplomat!”

Celyn stared at him. Either Sjurd was stupid (which he was reasonably sure was not the case) or he really didn’t know about the treaty (which was irritating, given how much work he, old Lord ap Meredydd and King Snorri had poured into it). “Sjurd, don’t you know what’s going to happen to your people if the border fails?”

CHAPTER VIII

Sjurd

It was the worst thing the brat could have asked, and for a moment Sjurd couldn't even see the flower-strewn headlands. All he could imagine was the farms of Axholme broken and burned, slain farmers bleeding into the soil that had sustained them, as their children were led into slavery.

He was beginning to hate Ys, with a twisting bitterness that he knew the country didn't deserve. It was just so fucking peaceful and pretty, all these forests, innocent dances, and warm welcomes. Didn't they realize that the world was ending less than seventy leagues away? Didn't they know they were doomed? Every ancient temple or quirky bit of scenery they had to tour around made him feel queasy. And then Celyn had turned around to him with that bright smile, his arms full of a giggling red-haired child, and he had thought, *Mathilde's daughters would have looked like that.*

The contrast had stabbed deeper than a misthound's bite.

Celyn was close to him now, his hand warm on Sjurd's arm, and Sjurd despaired, because he hadn't even seen the brat move. How was he supposed to keep fighting when even his instincts were failing him?

"Sjurd," Celyn said, and there was something very careful and gentle in his voice, something he resented fiercely coming from Prince Brat. "Every island in Ys is preparing for refugees. We'll take your people in."

He blinked at Celyn, the bloody vision fading so he could see the sun shining down on the *derwen* trees again. Celyn's eyes were wide and serious, as green as old glass, and he was still talking, changing the world a little bit so that it wasn't quite made of despair any more. "We're a smaller nation, of course, but we started sowing *derwen* oaks on new rock the year the Empire killed my mother, and those new islands are almost clearing the water now. Another decade, and they'll be high enough in the air to carry houses and people. If we put people on all our ships as well, we can relocate maybe seventy per cent of your people. I know it's not quite good enough..."

“It’s good,” Sjurd said, his voice going dry and rough in his throat. He covered Celyn’s hand where it lay on his arm, squeezing it convulsively. “It’s very good.” It hurt to think of his people floating away to become Ysians, but it was better than death or slavery.

“I didn’t realize King Snorri hadn’t told you,” Celyn said, squeezing his hand back. “The treaty isn’t quite signed yet, but it’s just a matter of small details.”

“He handed me the border,” Sjurd said. He wanted to sit down and think about this, preferably with Celyn within shouting distance, but he was aware of the Ysian family waiting for them, the littlest girls beginning to look tired and whiny. “Everything else I got briefing notes on. I, ah, may not have read them all.”

“Now I’ll know to brief you in person,” Celyn said, sounding amused and a little superior. It should have annoyed Sjurd, but he realized, with a touch of chagrin, that he was getting used to the brat. Let him be smug about this. It was a miracle, and Sjurd wasn’t going to bite it to see if it was hollow. “So, now you know, you should also consider the practicalities. Most people in Ys have never met anyone from Axholme. As far as they know, all your people are just like you.”

“So I should mend my manners,” Sjurd said, wincing. Why hadn’t someone explained this before?

“I’m afraid so,” Celyn said, his smile going sharp. “I know politeness doesn’t come naturally...”

“Fuck you,” Sjurd said amicably.

Celyn went a little pink and snickered. “Actually, on that subject...”

“Tiw save me.”

“I’m not saying that my people wouldn’t understand the meaning of a diplomatic marriage, but we need to win them over on a more emotional level. If you could bring yourself to fake it, just a little, it wouldn’t hurt anyone’s reputation.”

Sjurd raised an eyebrow. “Your people are more likely to accept mine if they think the two of us are all lilies and lilacs?”

“My people are romantics,” Celyn said, in a far gloomier tone than that statement deserved. “It will make the bond between our kingdoms more real to them.”

“Fine,” Sjurd said, sighing. “Let’s go, then.” Then, even as he was about to stride away, he reconsidered and tightened his grip on Celyn’s hand, towing him along as well. It probably wasn’t the most romantic of gestures, especially when Celyn started complaining that Sjurd was about to dislocate his arm, but it was a start. He even went so far as to kneel down in front of Celyn’s small friend (and how fitting was it that the brat liked brats? He should make sure to comment on like preferring like later, when there were no eavesdroppers) and saying, “Where are these spiders you want me to slay, Lady?”

“In the roof,” she said, and held out her hands. “And they’re this big!”

Behind her, one of her older sisters rolled her eyes and pinched her fingers together to suggest a much smaller pest. Sjurd ignored them to say, “Fearsome beasts. Perhaps, if you show me their lair later, I could scare a few away.”

She pondered that, rocking back on her heels and chewing the ends of her hair. “What’s your name?”

“Sjurd.”

“I’m Eilir, and I’m four, and I *suppose* you could fight my spiders, if you really want to. But no killing. That’s bad.”

“No killing,” Sjurd agreed, and let her continue to dictate terms all the way into the village.

This wedding made him burn with resentment a little less than the previous ones, although Celyn’s self-satisfied expression began to wear on his nerves as the ceremony went on. Revenge, however, was easy. *Fake it*, Celyn had said.

So this time, Sjurd didn’t just press a dry kiss against his new husband’s lips. This time, he made the kiss long and slow, wrapping his arms around Celyn to pull him close. He felt Celyn’s whole body stiffen in protest. He continued the kiss right until the tension began to slide out of Celyn’s body.

Then he pinched Celyn on the ass, making him jump and yelp.

“Overexcited,” Sjurd said in apology to the gathered villagers and basked in Celyn’s glare throughout that day’s wedding feast.

That night, staying in the mayor’s house, he was indeed summoned to deal with spiders in the girls’ room. Eilir watched fiercely as he disposed of three impressively hairy and scuttling specimens out of the window, her little feet swinging where she sat on the side of the bed. When he was done, she nodded firmly and said, “Thank you. Now go to bed!” It was said so sternly, and with such a note of adult exasperation, that Sjurd had to bite back a chuckle. He wondered how often she heard that from her elders.

He was still smiling when he got back to their room, a warm little space tucked away under the eaves. Celyn was still awake, sitting up in bed and reading by lantern light, papers scattered around him. He had clearly run his hands through his hair at some point, because there was a tuft standing up from the crown of his head, and he was wearing little square reading glasses. For a second, Sjurd felt like he was looking at one of those optical puzzles, the type where one look showed an old woman and the next a lady of fashion: one way, here was a lie, the brat prince he had been forced to marry getting on with his own life; the other way, it was oddly domestic, his husband waiting up for him at the end of a long day. In the lamplight, Celyn’s light hair could have been white, and for a moment Sjurd considered being eighty, two cantankerous old men who had learned to live around each other.

Then he dismissed the idea. Neither of them would see old age. He wouldn’t evacuate with his people, not when they still needed men on the border, and the evacuation would only slow the descent on Ys, not prevent it entirely. Quietly, he stripped off his shirt and shoes, while Celyn moved his papers aside to make space for him. It was a strange thing, sharing such intimate space with no sexual expectations. He couldn’t think of a time when he’d had someone to talk to in bed, not since he was a boy on his father’s mountain homestead, tumbled in with all the other children for warmth. Even when he brought some clever-tongued soldier to his bed, it was just for fucking, and none ever stayed to sleep, let alone make conversation. And, of course, for the last few months he had been too tired even for that.

He'd had a vague dream once, an idea that one day he would have someone to sleep beside and a shoulder to rest his head on. He'd given up on it, and yet here was Celyn instead, and he couldn't quite make sense of the world any more.

"Eilir likes you," Celyn said, leaning down to stack his papers beside the bed. His back was long and pale, and Sjurd bit back an urge to run his finger down the hollow of his spine, just to check if that unblemished skin could possibly be real. Oh, he was tired. He hadn't slept like this in months, so freely and greedily. People had so many poetic names for Ys, but they should really call it the Land of Good Sleep.

"Sjurd?" Celyn sounded amused (not fond, not possibly fond).

He recalled himself. "She's sweet."

"She is," Celyn agreed (and, oh, the fondness was for little Eilir, of course). "I'm sorry."

"For what?" He propped himself up on one hand to keep his head from the pillow.

"If you wanted children."

Sjurd thought about it, keeping his eyes from drifting shut. "I might have done. In another time, you know. This world... I wouldn't bring a child into it."

"That's sad," Celyn said softly.

"You disagree?"

Celyn was quiet for a while. Then he said, very softly, "No."

"So, then," Sjurd said firmly, and let his eyes fall closed. He felt Celyn lean over to blow out the light and then settle back against the mattress. Sjurd mumbled at him, something that was meant to be thanks or goodnight, but didn't quite work.

As he sank into sleep, he rolled a little, trying to get comfortable. He was cold, toes curling and nipples pebbling. Ysian nights were just too chilly. Crossly, he sought out warmth, curling up against Celyn. An arm over his

waist, his toes inveigled between Celyn's calves, and he was fine. Everything was fine. He could sleep.

He woke up warm, comfortable and hard, his cock pressing between Celyn's ass cheeks.

It felt good, even through two sets of clothing, and he groaned in appreciation. He hadn't woken up like this in a long time, and his whole body was coming alive with it, his nipples tight, his skin prickling and his lips tingling. He tightened his arms around Celyn, breathing in the morning tang of a sleeping man, and thought lazily, *I want to fuck now.*

Celyn stirred, his body moving against Sjurd's in a way which only heated him more. Then he froze before he snickered and said, "Good morning, soldier."

Sjurd still wanted to fuck, just maybe someone or something other than Celyn. Too lust-warmed to argue, he just said, "Good morning, Celyn. Get out of bed."

"Why?" Celyn grumbled.

Sjurd couldn't stop himself from rolling his hips, even though he knew he was right at the limit of honorable behavior. "Unless you're offering to help, that is."

"Er," Celyn said, sounding a little breathless and startled. "No." He squirmed out of bed, which was an extra and unnecessary provocation, and the moment he was gone Sjurd rolled onto his back, pushing down the blankets with a sigh of anticipation. Then he realized Celyn was still staring at him, standing beside the bed with his lips parted and his cheeks pink.

"What?" Sjurd growled at him.

"Nothing."

"Then go away!"

Celyn went, and Sjurd settled back against the warm muddle of pillows and blankets to finally push his braies down and get his hand around his cock. He

was in no rush, but set out to savor it, stroking himself slowly, losing himself in the moment—the spill of morning sunshine that crept through the shutters, the warm bed, and the heat that gathered under his skin and in his balls. Images from the last few days skittered through his mind, their edges blurring as his pleasure built: waterfalls tumbling from the sky, starflowers opening at dusk, Celyn’s indignant face when the mud hit his head, the bright skirts of dancers swirling across the square, Celyn laughing, the stars over Ys, so bright and close, Celyn.

He came in a slow hot rush, dropping back against the pillows as his head swam. He could have stayed there forever, but he made himself get up and wash, opening the door a crack to let Celyn know he could come back in. He couldn’t help whistling to himself as he dried his hair, his whole body still feeling relaxed.

Celyn, for once, kept his mouth shut as he came back in, although he did smirk quite a lot when he saw the state of the bed. Sjurd, feeling gracious, ignored him.

His good mood lasted through the morning, sitting by the village green watching the children dance patterns around a maypole and clapping them even when they got their ribbons tangled. The front seemed a little further away this morning, rather than a constant storm cloud on the horizon, and it was easier to talk to the locals when he could tell himself it was duty as well as pleasure. He was still cheerful as they made their way back to the landing, much to Celyn’s amusement.

“If a few minutes with your hand makes this much difference to your mood,” he commented, “you should definitely have sex more often. We could put out a call for volunteers who want to do their duty for their country.”

Sjurd snorted. “I don’t need to evoke duty to get a man into my bed.”

Celyn blinked at him for a moment, his mouth half-open. Then he visibly rallied to say, “Well, it took an arranged marriage to get me there, and I haven’t seen anyone else sharing our pillows, so forgive me for being mistaken.”

“I wouldn’t want you to scare them off,” Sjurd retorted.

“A hit,” Celyn laughed, clutching his chest. “Is setting sail going to destroy your mood entirely, or is this new personality of yours going to last? I mean, if you want a little private time behind a hedge before I cast off, I’m sure...”

“Shut up, Celyn,” Sjurd said.

He still didn’t like flying, all that empty air below an inch of planking, but he distracted himself by saying to Celyn, as they rode the wind down towards the next island, which sat just above the waves, “I shouldn’t be the only one.”

“What’s that?”

“I shouldn’t be the only one of my people to come here,” Sjurd elaborated. “Is there an evacuation plan, do you know, for who goes where?”

“I don’t think anyone’s started thinking about it yet.”

“It should be by county. Link our counties to your islands, and send soldiers from those counties here on leave, if they want. With their families, of course, so they can build a connection before the evacuation.”

Celyn twisted round, his face bright with interest. “That’s a *good* idea.”

“No need to sound so surprised,” Sjurd grumbled. “If I can sleep properly here, it should help my men too. Make them more efficient at the front.”

“Efficient,” Celyn repeated, grimacing.

“Efficient, rested soldiers are less likely to be dead soldiers.”

“I’m glad you’re here, then,” Celyn said and then, having clearly surprised himself, turned around to concentrate on his steering, the back of his neck flushed.

The air tasted different on the new isle, salty and damp. The sun was warmer here, too, though the islands above and to the west cast long shadows as the day faded. It was strange to see the islands from below, the moss, pipes and cisterns that covered their bases dim and shadowed. He found himself looking up all the time, scanning for new details as the sun moved round.

“Wait,” Celyn told him, leading him down the side of a bowl in the rock which housed the temple. They were married there, for the ninth time, and then escorted up into a bare meadow where striped tents had been set up along

the east fence to serve the gathered villagers with sweet tea and currant cakes. They were granted seats in the center of the meadow, and from there they watched the sunset. As the sun sank towards the horizon, it began to light the underside of the islands, washing them with gold so that every curl of moss and gleaming brass pipe glowed.

Their hosts that night were a local merchant and his husband, an artist who had wandered here on the ropes twenty years ago and never left. They had a little guest cottage in the *derwen* grove at the back of their property, so close to the coast that they could hear the sea sighing under the island. Starflower petals were floating past the windows as their hosts bid them goodnight, and Sjurd sat on the sill for a while, just watching. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been free just to sit and breathe in the night.

"We should close the shutters before the moths get in," Celyn said.

"If we must," Sjurd said and took a last look at the glowing petals tumbling on the wind, and the long road of moonlight shining across the sea. Then he pulled the wooden shutters closed and turned to face Celyn.

He was standing by the bed, looking entertained. "Look what our hosts left us." And he held up a little lidded jar. "Smells like almond oil. Nice."

Did he even know what it was for, Sjurd wondered, suddenly and frantically. He had no idea if Celyn was a virgin or not, or if all his banter was just for show. Had he ever had a man slide into him, pressing him open with slow strength until he writhed and whimpered?

And then, to his dismay, he was imagining it.

"Like this," he'd say, pressed close against Celyn's bare back. They'd be naked, with Celyn curled into his lap. Sjurd would stroke Celyn's cock, feeling it spring to full hardness under his touch.

"Well, I know how to do that," Celyn would say, because he was still a brat, even when naked and breathless.

"But have you ever done this?" Sjurd would murmur, nibbling the curve of his ear. Then he would pour oil into his palm and reach for Celyn again, breathing in the little noises Celyn made at the new sensation. He'd be hot in

Sjurd's hand, hard and straining, and then Sjurd would say, "That's not the only place it feels good," and, "Spread your legs." And soon he'd have Celyn impaled on his fingers, incredulous and sobbing out his name.

"Better make sure we leave a bit of that smeared on the sheets, or they'll never believe it," Celyn commented, shattering Sjurd's fantasy. "Seems a shame to waste it, though. Looks like the good stuff. Want to toss a coin for it?"

"Uh," Sjurd said. His mouth was dry and his cock was rising. So Celyn wasn't a complete innocent. Could he be the opposite? And, of course, that thought tumbled him straight back into fantasy, this time of Celyn's breath harsh in his ear, and slim hands holding his wrists down as Celyn fucked into him hard and fast.

"Sjurd? You sleeping tonight or not?"

"I... er..." He was actually stuttering, which was embarrassing. Driving his nails into his thigh to snap his brain back to where it should be, he managed to say, "I'll sit up a little longer. Don't wait for me."

Then he fled to the little sitting room that filled the other half of the cottage, where he rammed his back against the wall, shoved his wrist in his mouth and stroked himself to completion fast, thinking of Celyn's sly pink mouth and the curve of his ass.

Then, his legs still shaking, he staggered to the nearest overstuffed chair and sank down to clutch his hands in his hair.

This was not good.

CHAPTER IX

Celyn

As they flew onward, Sjurd's behavior became increasingly odd. There were entire days where he was civil to Celyn, which would then be interrupted by a sudden return of the old scowling Sjurd. Then there were their wedding kisses. There were no more cold presses of lips. Instead, Sjurd made an extravagant show of each one, and then ended it with pinching his ass, biting Celyn's lip or ruffling his hair on end. It was infuriating, but every time Celyn's heart beat a little faster in anticipation.

Sjurd was also, finally, taking an interest in the places they stopped, talking to the locals with a serious focus that Celyn couldn't summon. He was good at making people smile, but they asked Sjurd for advice, which was just bizarre to Celyn's mind. What did Sjurd know about island life?

More and more by the day, it seemed. He startled the words right out of Celyn on Caerwyn, when he listened to a frustrated farmer spill out the troubles he was having with wandering cattle and recalled something they had seen on Sirig which might help solve the problem. He was good at names, too, and surprisingly gentle with the inevitable flock of starry-eyed girls and youths who trailed after a handsome mainlander on every island.

He still went to the courier stations first, of course, but all the news out of the east suggested that the Empire was still entangled in subduing rebellions. Celyn couldn't help feeling sorry for those distant lands fighting for their freedom, but he was also relieved that they were distracting the Empire from Axholme and Ys.

The route Celyn had planned for them took them in a spiral outward from Ynys Llys. As they began to visit the outer isles, the flight times between the islands got longer. He hadn't really thought ahead to anticipate it, but now they were in the air for hour after hour, they had to talk to one another, about all the subjects you strayed onto when you had nothing to do but talk—the weather, places they'd been, their childhoods and families, even daft, bottom-of-the-sixth-pint conversations about the existence of the gods and the nature of reality (Sjurd was a determined conservative on every topic, so Celyn opted

for the most eccentric perspective he could come up with, just to see Sjurð's blood rise). He actually had a sense of humor, which was a surprise. It was as dry and sardonic as Ivarr's but with an extra edge that Celyn appreciated. He'd never been good with sweet people, Ivarr (possibly) excepted.

What all this meant, he slowly came to realize, was that he actually liked the oaf.

It was an uncomfortable revelation. He'd spent a third of his life cheerfully despising Sjurð, and now he felt like it was an intrinsic part of his own identity. It really wasn't fair of the man to actually be a likable human being.

Then, of course, there was the cuddling. He was still waking up every morning wrapped up in Sjurð's arms. After the third time Sjurð had kicked him out of bed, Celyn had pointed out, perhaps a little acidly, that he got morning wood too, and it would be far more fair to establish a schedule. Sjurð had gone so scarlet that Celyn had actually wondered whether he should call for help, but now they took turns to stay in bed. Celyn had to admit, if only to himself, that he had occasionally gone no further than the other side of the door. It wasn't his fault he was condemned to share a bed with such a powerfully attractive man, especially one with a cock the size of the one that was often pressing against his hip when he woke, and it really wasn't fair to expect him not to notice. Anyway, the cuddling was rather sweet. It was hard to dislike someone who wanted to snuggle you in their sleep.

Ivarr would be laughing at his frustration, and he supposed, if you considered the alternatives, there really wasn't much wrong with actually liking the very attractive man you happened to be married to. Even if he was Sjurð.

On the flight between Caerwyn and Gorchudd, Sjurð had asked to learn how to fly. He still clearly hated his time on board ship, swallowing hard before he stood up in the cockpit every time, but he seemed determined to learn. It was rather (oh, Dwynwen save him) admirable.

It was also surprisingly difficult. The wheel did not seem to answer to Sjurð's hand as cleanly as it did when Celyn steered. Even when Celyn stood behind him and covered his hands to steer for him, *Eirlys* was slow to respond.

It was on windswept Awel, where their sleep was disturbed by the wailing of the gale around the corners of the watchtower they were staying in, that Celyn worked it out. He had woken first, for once, and turned around in Sjurd's arms to look at him. Sjurd had sighed in his sleep at the movement and gathered Celyn close, his arms locking tight. With their chests pressed together, and Sjurd's chest hair tickling his nipples up to sensitive peaks, Celyn could feel the cold press of the amulet Sjurd always wore against his heart.

He worked it free, because it was far too cold and spiky for comfort, and looked at it properly for the first time. It was a ring, bearing a star-shaped and faceted stone that gleamed with a rainbow sheen that was somewhere between iron and opal.

"What is this?" he asked, when Sjurd finally opened his eyes.

Sjurd hitched a leg over Celyn's hip and pressed his face forward to nibble his shoulder. "Lodestar. You're warm."

"I'm not your bedwarming lieutenant," Celyn reminded him, because he'd learned Sjurd took a while to wake up and remember where he was. A shame, really, because that move had left his cock pressed right against Celyn's and he would quite happily start rubbing their hips together if he was confident Sjurd knew his name. "What's a lodestar?"

Sjurd pulled back enough to scowl at him. "Find them in mines. Like lodestone, but stronger. Pressed between the veins. Like quartz. I *know* who you are."

"Of course you do," Celyn said soothingly, patting his shoulder. He was starting to find Sjurd's morning fog appealing, which was probably a sign that he had spent far too much time in the man's bed.

"Mathilde's ring," Sjurd said, a little forlornly. "She wouldn't take it. Thought it would betray her."

"Oh," Celyn said, his heart catching a little. He still missed her too. Impulsively, he dropped a kiss on Sjurd's cheek.

Sjurd just blinked at him, bleary-eyed and startled. Then he let out a low, triumphant, “Hah,” and wrapped himself around Celyn again. It wasn’t possible that he had more than four limbs, Celyn knew, but he felt entirely entangled in the man, every nerve in his body thrilling in anticipation.

Then he felt the slow rise and fall of Sjurd’s breath against his throat and realized that the stupid oaf had fallen asleep again.

“One of these days,” Celyn told him sternly, “you’ll catch up on all that lost sleep of yours, and things will change.”

Waiting for Sjurd to wake up gave him time to think, though, and he squirmed under the rudder before they set off that morning, adjusting the casing of the lodestone carefully.

“What are you doing?” Sjurd asked from somewhere behind him.

“Trying something,” Celyn said and wriggled out ass first. “I think your lodestar is interfering with the steering. Try now.”

Sjurd narrowed his eyes. “That better not be some very strange innuendo.”

“It’s not,” Celyn protested. “Seriously, try flying my girl now.”

Sjurd shot him a skeptical look, but cast off carefully. The wind caught at the *Eirlys’* tilted sails, lifting them, and Celyn felt the difference at once. She was eager for the wind now, and they went racing out over the ruffled waves. He saw the moment when Sjurd felt the difference, his shoulders setting into place and his breath catching.

“There’s my girl,” Celyn crowed, scrambling to stand behind him. “Feel the difference?”

“How does that work?” Sjurd asked.

“You know she’s made of wood that grew on Gwydr? In a completely calm sky, with no lodestone to counteract the call of home, she’d drift steadily back towards Gwydr.”

“There’s a lot of islands between here and there.”

“Which is why we need the lodestone to manage the steering. Your lodestar was interfering, which is why you had trouble steering. I shifted the

lead casing on the *Eirlys'* lodestone to compensate. We'll have to adjust it again as we move closer to the coast."

"How do you know how much adjustment to make?"

"Equations," Celyn said with a shudder. He'd never been much of a mathematician, but some things you had to learn if you wanted to live. He knew the theory well enough to teach it to Sjurd, though he didn't expect it to sink in. Most first-time sailors went by the feel of the boat and only returned to the math the first time they hit trouble.

It took a week of watching Sjurd's steering improve at an uncanny rate before he noticed the absent look in his husband's eyes every time he adjusted his course. Suspicious, Celyn demanded, "Are you doing the equations in your head?"

"They're not that complex," Sjurd said absently, shifting their course so they caught the next thermal and went soaring.

Celyn, who still had to work them out on paper every morning before he set sail, narrowed his eyes and kept quiet. Why was this man being wasted fighting monsters and indoctrinated Imperial legionnaires? It wasn't right.

The next day took them out towards the westernmost isles. It was a long sail, and they had to stop overnight on the craggy uninhabited little isle of Gwymon. There was a bothy there, a little one-roomed wooden hut on the machair with only a rag to fill its doorway and two single narrow bunks with heather-stuffed mattresses. The islet only had a single copse of *derwen* trees, just enough to keep it above the waves, which meant it was low enough that Celyn could cast a fishing line off the side. They had fresh fish for dinner, and then Celyn made Sjurd stay outside and wait for the dusk.

The western sky from here was full of color: green, purple, and moon-silver streaking across the darkness of the night.

"What is that?" Sjurd breathed.

"The Veil of Storms," Celyn explained. "Built on prayers and held in place by lodestone, that. It's all that protects us from the bad storms and keeps the islands from floating out into the unknown."

“Could that happen?”

“It might yet,” Celyn said, the thought sobering him. “If all else fails, we’ll drop the Veil and escape the Empire that way.”

“So easy.”

“Not all the islands have enough fresh water to support their population. Very few can withstand bad storms. If we drift apart...” He swallowed. “Not easy, not at all.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We’ll take your people too, if the day comes. Fill up all our ships and rafts, and take our chances with the storms.”

There seemed no question of taking separate beds that night, narrow as they were. It was too natural by now to just crawl in with Sjurd, laying his head on Sjurd’s chest to be lulled to sleep by the sound of wind, waves, and the steady beat of Sjurd’s heart. He couldn’t imagine what it would be like to sleep alone again, when he returned to the embassy and Sjurd rode grimly towards the front.

Out here in the further isles, the rest of the world seemed very far away. By the time they reached Luaith, it felt like they would be traveling forever, moving from island to island until the world faded into a final sunset. Looking down from the torn-off beach on the island’s northern shore, they watched the priests of Dwynwen slowly drawing rocks from the seabed to the surface of the water, preparing them for a new plantation of *derwen* seeds, another new island to offer hope to the people of Axholme.

But from there, their route swung back towards the mainland, the islands closer together as they left the Veil behind: Blodyn, Metheglin, Callestr, Haearn, where Sjurd forgot to tweak his ear after he kissed him, lingering instead with his hands on Celyn’s cheeks, and all Celyn could do was sigh into it softly.

And, finally, they were coasting into Gwydr, dear rocky Gwydr with its half-timbered houses and brass bells hanging off every eave. Celyn didn’t take them to the town pier, but straight home, tying up at the little red-painted

landing at the bottom of his garden. There were rabbits on the lawn again, plump and brown, but they scattered as he pulled Sjurd up the back path, their white tails flashing. The house stood among gnarled old *derwen* trees, built a little bit crooked, with its black-timbered top story hanging over the bottom and its chimneys and turret poking out of the roof and side gable awkwardly. The shutters were flung back from the windows, and lace curtains were fluttering in the breeze. Foxgloves and lupins grew against the wall, stretching out of beds full of bright sweet williams and fool's bane. The apple tree was already heavy with fruit, now summer was slowly beginning to fade, and he was pleased to see such a good crop after the hard spring they'd had.

"No one to welcome us?" Sjurd said, sounding a little disappointed. He'd started trying to guess what kind of hosts would greet them on each island.

"No," Celyn said happily. He pushed the back door open, and gestured Sjurd in with a faint flourish.

The kitchen was cool after the bright sun outside, with its worn stone floor absorbing the heat from the air. Someone from the village had been in to prepare the house, and they'd left bread and cloth-wrapped cheese on the big wooden table, along with a big pitcher of freshly-drawn water and a round bottle of cider.

"Do you want lunch before the ceremony this time?" Celyn asked, dropping his bag with a sigh of relief and padding across the kitchen to get a couple of cups out of the top cupboard. "The water's good for drinking, if you're thirsty. I've got a proper covered well in the front garden."

Sjurd was still standing in the doorway, looking a little uncertain. "This is your home?"

"Yes," Celyn said and, remembering the formalities, he added, a little belatedly, "Enter in, friend, and be welcome to my hearth."

Sjurd took another step inside, looking around. "It's not a palace."

Stung, Celyn scowled at him. "No, it's not."

"That wasn't a complaint."

“It sounded like one,” Celyn snapped and poured himself some water. Sjurd’s hand on his shoulder surprised him and, annoyingly, steadied him.

“I didn’t grow up in a palace, either. Why were you out here?”

“My father brought us here after my mother died,” Celyn said, shrugging. “We used to spend our quiet seasons here before that, but he couldn’t bear to be in court at all without her. When he died, my aunt took the twins away to Briallen Isle to bring up with her girls, but I was of age, so I stayed here.”

“Have you other family here?”

“No,” Celyn said, and pulled away to hunt out the bread board. “Just friends.”

“How old were you when your father died?”

“Sixteen.”

Sjurd was quiet for a while, just watching him, and Celyn busied himself with the bread, keeping his back to his husband. People looked at him strangely sometimes when they heard that, especially if they knew how rarely his father had noticed that he still had sons. He had brought the twins up himself the last few years, with help from half the old women in the village, and it had been both a weight from his shoulders and a terrible shock when Aunt Edwy had swooped down and taken them away. He hadn’t quite known what to do with himself, besides start visiting Axholme more often.

“Give me that,” Sjurd said gruffly at last. “I don’t trust you with a knife.”

“It’s a bread knife. I’ve been feeding myself successfully for many years, you know,” Celyn complained, and they were back to themselves again.

They ate their lunch in the garden, perched on the wobbly old applewood bench with their elbows knocking. They washed their food down with potently alcoholic cider, and Celyn laughed to see Sjurd’s eyes widen at the kick.

“What do you people do to your scrumpy?” he complained.

“Oh, we press the apples under the full moon,” Celyn said airily. “Then we dance naked around the vats every night for a month, praying to Dwynwen to bless...”

“Shut up, Celyn,” Sjurd said, turning his head to kiss him quiet. His lips were warm, and his mouth tasted of cider, nut bread and the faint tang of salty cheese. Celyn fell into it as easily as dreaming, letting his eyes drift closed and his lips press and cling. The sun was warm on his cheek, and the air smelled like apples, and he never wanted to break this kiss.

Then Sjurd drew back, leaving Celyn blinking and confused. What had that been for? There was no one to see them, and they weren't in the middle of a wedding. There was no reason for it, unless Sjurd had wanted to do it, which was the strangest and yet most rational thing in the world.

Draining his cup, Sjurd then set it aside and offered his hand to Celyn. “Shall we go and get married? Again.”

But this time it felt different, and not just because Sjurd kept hold of his hand all the way to the temple. Celyn stole little glances at him as they walked, trying to puzzle it out. He still looked like Sjurd the Oaf, although the shadows under his eyes had faded and there was a new energy in his step. He still grumbled and sighed and cast aspersions on Celyn's wit and strength. It was just...

He just didn't seem that much of an oaf any more, and not just because Celyn could still taste the sweet ghost of his kiss.

As they walked along the winding main street of the village, people came hurrying out of the houses to join them, shouting greetings and congratulations: Nest and Myfanwy, the weaver's girls; old Taryn, her wrinkled face bright and smiling; Math the Dairy with his plump wife Carys; handsome dark-eyed Teilo, who had been Celyn's first kiss, behind the schoolhouse on a blustery spring day, now carrying his baby daughter against his shoulder. The wind was dancing through the bells on the eaves, making them sing, and soon the chapel bells joined in, pealing out over the steep roofs and the rustling boughs of the *derwen* oaks and apple trees.

They made their vows in the cozy little oak-paneled chapel where Celyn had learned his first prayers, and for the first time Celyn felt more than duty in the words. As the priest spoke of honesty and kindness, protection and compassion, he found himself caught by Sjurd's eyes, the cool steady blue of

them. For the first time, he wanted this; wanted this courageous, bad-tempered, infuriating man who had kissed him so sweetly in his own quiet garden.

Then he realized that Sjurd's hands weren't quite steady in his, and his voice was a little rough on his promises. His eyes were locked on Celyn's, and his lips were parted slightly, as if yearning for another kiss.

The priest finally said, "And now you are wed, and may seal it with a kiss."

Celyn was moving forward before he thought about it. He wrapped his arms around Sjurd's neck and fell forward into his kiss. Sjurd met him just as eagerly, his lips parting under Celyn's as he slid his tongue into that warm mouth. It was as sweet as the last kiss, but there was a hunger to it now that made him dig his fingers into Sjurd's arms as Sjurd pulled him close.

It was the noise of whoops and cheers that made him pull back, and he wet his lips and tried to catch his breath, still gazing at Sjurd's flushed face.

Celyn wanted to kiss him again. He was leaning in for it when someone thwacked him around the back of the head with a prayer cushion.

"Save it for your wedding bed," Teilo advised him cheerfully as everyone laughed. "No place for such things in the chapel."

"Oh, because you've never pressed your devotions to the queen of love a little too hard in here," Celyn retorted to general hilarity. It had been a priest's daughter who finally caught Teilo, after all, and there were plenty of rumors about just where she'd converted him to the cause of matrimony.

Slipping his arm around Sjurd's waist, he made an effort to pay attention to their surroundings, even when Sjurd cupped a hand around the back of his neck to keep him close. There would be another feast or entertainment, of course, just like on every previous island. Although, given this lot tended to forget he was a prince, they could be in for anything. If someone came at him with a wig and petticoat, he was running for it and leaving Sjurd to their tender mercies. "What have you planned for us, then?"

"There's a fair," little Myfanwy piped up. "And a huge feast."

“And you’re not invited,” Teilo added, to applause.

“What’s that?” Celyn asked, startled.

“We’re having it without you,” one of the girls said. “We thought you’d probably had enough feasts by now.”

“There’s food on your table, and your bed’s made up,” Teilo elaborated. “Take your husband home, boy, and we’ll see you in the morning.”

“Late morning,” someone piped up from the back of the crowd, provoking a ripple of laughter.

A month ago, he’d have cursed them. Now he just beamed at them, and said, “I could kiss you all.”

“You could not,” Sjurd growled, twitching beside him, which prompted another wave of laughter and jostling that carried them out of the temple. The crowds were moving down towards the river meadow, and Celyn could already hear the distinctive wheeze of the steam organ and the crack of hard balls against the Aunt Sally shy. He hadn’t been to a proper fair in years, but he didn’t care. Instead, he waved them all away and took off up the high street at a run, Sjurd’s hand caught in his, laughing at the whoops and whistles that earned him.

Then they were round the first corner, and he was suddenly in Sjurd’s arms, being kissed so brightly and fiercely that he lost himself in it.

When that kiss ended, he couldn’t manage to pull back more than a breath, though he did manage to say, “I think we’ve lost our minds.”

“I blame the scrumpy,” Sjurd agreed gravely and closed the gap between them again.

They were interrupted by the scattering sound of footsteps as children went racing past, giggling their way towards the fair.

“It wouldn’t take us long to walk home,” Celyn muttered against Sjurd’s rough cheek. “It’s just up there.”

“At the top of the hill,” Sjurd grumbled. He was tracing circles on Celyn’s hip, through his thin shirt, and it was distracting Celyn, making his thoughts scatter and fracture.

“If we start walking,” he suggested, “we’ll get there eventually.”

They did, though they stopped three more times. It really wasn’t fair, Celyn thought, tipping his head back to allow Sjurd access to his throat. Not fair at all. He wasn’t quite sure what was so unfair, but something definitely was. Or wasn’t. Perhaps it was Sjurd’s mouth.

“Ssh,” Sjurd mumbled. “You’re not making sense.”

“That’s your fault too,” Celyn told him. He reached behind himself blindly and managed to push open the garden gate. “Come in. To the garden, I mean, and the house. Not that you couldn’t come in other places, but that’s a discussion for ins... *Sjurd!*”

The world was suddenly the wrong way up, as he was tossed over Sjurd’s shoulder with a broad hand slammed onto his ass to hold him in place. He got a faceful of lavender as Sjurd strode up the garden path, and managed to splutter, “If you carry me over that threshold, I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” Sjurd inquired, his hand shifting on Celyn’s ass so that his fingers were teasing his crack through his hose.

“Bite?” Celyn suggested feebly, eyeing the delicious curve of Sjurd’s ass from very close up. It wouldn’t take much of a wriggle to get his teeth grazing that.

“Promises,” Sjurd growled, but swung him back onto his feet, kicking the door open and propelling them both inside. The moment the door slammed shut behind them, Sjurd was on him, pressing him hard against the wall, his mouth hot and hungry as his hips rocked sharply against Celyn’s. They were both hard, and the hot press of cock against cock made Celyn groan.

“Oaf,” he managed.

“Brat,” Sjurd retorted fondly and slipped his hands under Celyn’s shirt, pushing it up as he stroked Celyn’s taut belly. “Take this off.”

“I would,” Celyn said and wriggled against him. “You’re in the way.”

Sjurd hummed and leaned in to kiss him again, his hands slipping down to tease their way under Celyn’s waistband. He sounded smug, which wasn’t to be endured even when Celyn’s brain was slowly melting into syrup. Pulling himself up, he hitched his leg a little tighter around Sjurd’s hips, very aware of how uncomfortably tight his braies were.

Breaking the kiss to nibble the lobe of Sjurd’s ear, he breathed, “If you won’t let me take my clothes off, how are you going to manage to fuck me senseless?”

Sjurd went completely still. “Is that a challenge?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Celyn agreed. “I challenge you to be naked before I am. Shall we say the winner gets to...”

Sjurd had leaned back and was peeling off his shirt, so slowly it could only be deliberate. And, yes, Celyn had seen his bare chest many times now, but not from such close quarters and not when he was already quivering with anticipation. His mouth went dry, and he entirely forgot what he was saying.

Sjurd let the white shirt fall from his hand and leaned forward again, so close that Celyn could almost taste him (and he wanted to run his tongue down from Sjurd’s throat, delving through the dark hair that curled over his solid chest to tease around his nipple. And then he’d work his way down, following that dark trail of hair that led below Sjurd’s belt to...).

“Top?” Sjurd asked, his voice deep and soft.

“What?” Celyn said.

“The winner,” Sjurd reminded him, his left hand slipping back under Celyn’s shirt, “tops.”

“Done,” Celyn said breathlessly and choked out a groan as Sjurd tweaked his left nipple gently, sending little shivers of pleasure rushing down to his cock. “That’s nice. Do it again.”

“Happily,” Sjurd murmured and obliged, making Celyn sway forward, reaching out for Sjurd’s hips to pull him closer. He found bare skin, and froze

in delight. Then he slid his hands round to get them on the warm bare muscle of Sjurð's very fine ass. He'd managed to get his breeches and braies undone with his free hand, and they were sliding down his legs as Celyn explored, trying to get his hands round to the front, even as Sjurð pressed close against him, shuddering as his cock rubbed against Celyn's bared belly.

Sjurð bit his ear, and Celyn was so lost that it shocked him into a long shudder, his hands clenching on Sjurð's ass. Sjurð groaned and then said, right into his ear, "You've lost."

Celyn was fine with that, but he made a last stab at dignity and breathed, "Boots."

Sjurð swore and bent down, and Celyn, despite the wrench of pulling away, patted him on the ass and ran for the stairs. Sjurð roared after him indignantly, but he had the advantage of surprise and being on his home ground, and so made it all the way to his bedroom, three floors up in the turret, before Sjurð caught up and tackled him to the bed.

"What are you doing, brat?" he snarled.

"Getting us into bed," Celyn informed him with a sniff. "Only barbarians fuck on the floor."

"What makes you think we were going to get as far as the floor?" Sjurð asked, and then his mouth was on Celyn's again, hard, hot and demanding. Celyn pushed himself up to meet it, winding his hands in Sjurð's hair. His clothes felt like an unbearable restriction, especially now he could feel Sjurð's bare warmth through them and touch every point on his broad solid body. He lost himself in Sjurð, pressing himself against every muscle, smoothing his hands across Sjurð's ass and down his thighs, reaching forward to where he could feel Sjurð's beautiful cock pressed against him.

Then Sjurð reared back, snarling down at him.

Celyn surged up after him, but Sjurð pushed him down hard with one hand, his eyes narrowing as he held him against the pillows.

"What?" Celyn complained, and it came out breathless and needy. The man was magnificent.

“You’re still not naked,” Sjurd growled.

“Well, you keep distracting me,” Celyn said reasonably, looking up in delight. Sjurd’s body was the very best kind of distraction, all defined muscles and strength, his cock as long and broad as the rest of him, dark with blood as it jutted forward. As Celyn watched, wetting his lips, it bobbed a little, the head growing slicker.

Then suddenly Sjurd was on him, pulling off his clothes with clumsy haste. Celyn did his best to hinder him, getting his hands on Sjurd instead, laughing as Sjurd swore at him and then stilling as Celyn wrapped his hand around that lovely hot length and began to stroke him, feeling every quiver that sent through Sjurd.

“If,” Sjurd gasped, his cheeks flushing, “you want any of that yourself, you have to... holy *Thunder*, Celyn, your hands.”

“Have to what?” Celyn inquired, reaching down to tug his half-done breeches out of the way and set his own cock free. The sight of Sjurd coming apart in his hand was making him harder than he’d ever been in his life.

“Naked.” Sjurd’s chest was heaving a little now, his cock thrusting hard and fast against Celyn’s palm.

Not yet, Celyn thought, and pulled his hand away, spreading his arms out. “Make me naked, then.” He actually thought Sjurd might hit him, or bite him (and there was an idea that made him twitch a little himself). Then Sjurd’s hands were knotted in his shirt, dragging it up.

“That still has to do one more wedding,” Celyn said, as his breeches were tugged right off.

“I don’t fucking care,” Sjurd snapped, as one of his hands closed around Celyn’s cock and the other dragged Celyn’s hand back to where it had been. They went tumbling across the bed then, pressing kisses onto any bit of skin they could reach as they rutted into each other’s hands. It was giddy and wonderful, and Celyn felt the excitement rising through him like sparkling wine, prickling across his skin with a promise of ecstasy.

Managing to lunge up close to Sjurd's ear, he breathed, "In me, please. Fuck me, Sjurd, fuck me, please!"

Sjurd went still against him. Then he turned Celyn fast, shoving him face down on the bed as he snarled, "If the oil's downstairs..."

"There's some in the drawer." Celyn thrust his ass up in invitation, and gasped when Sjurd bit it lightly. He heard the rattle of the drawer, and then Sjurd's oiled finger was easing clumsily into his ass, stretching him with a desperate haste. Celyn rocked up onto it, demanding, "More!"

He got a second finger for that, and a first press on his inner nub which made him twitch and whimper. When Sjurd pulled his fingers out, Celyn shivered in anticipation. The first broad press of Sjurd's cock made him gasp as his hole stretched around it, quivering on that magical edge between pleasure and pain. Then the next push brought Sjurd deeper, and Celyn's whole body was trembling now, craving more, more, more.

"This shuts you up?" Sjurd gasped, his voice rough.

Then he thrust again, and Celyn made his next gasp a loud moan instead, just to show the oaf that just because he felt perfect, it didn't mean... it didn't mean that Celyn wasn't going to cry out for real when the next push hit his most sensitive spot, that was what.

"There," Sjurd murmured, a hint of wonder in his voice. His hands covered Celyn's on the sheets and then he pulled back just enough to thrust in hard, landing on that same spot again. Then, he began to fuck Celyn, hard and fast, and Celyn lost control of not the situation but himself, yelling out his pleasure as his hands clutched at the sheets and his whole body lit up in pleasure every time Sjurd swore in his ear and slammed forward again.

Sjurd came with a roar, his whole body going still and stiff behind his final thrust, and that carried Celyn over the edge as if he'd fallen into a storm, swept away into the lightning so fast his vision went white.

CHAPTER X

Sjurd

Later, lying sated with Celyn's head upon his chest, Sjurd finally took notice of his surroundings. The room, low-beamed and cozy, was as warm and shabby as the rest of the house. He would never have imagined the brat prince living in a place like this. It felt like a country farmhouse, with only the big glass windows and long skylights above the bed hinting at wealth.

It reminded him of home. Not Holmebury, but his father's homestead of High Aldeby, where he had run wild as a boy, barely aware that a distant grandfather linked him to the throne. He hadn't heard of the Empire then; had only gone into soldiering after watching the local regiment come in to help drive out a rabid ogre that had settled in their grazing land. Fascinated by the shine of armor and clash of swords, he had gone into his service on the front looking for excitement.

"You've gone sad again," Celyn remarked, propping himself up enough to study Sjurd. He looked softer than usual, his hair hanging loose and tousled to his shoulders and his lips flushed. He smiled at Sjurd, without the faintest hint of mockery, which warmed him in a way that should have been a little worrying, but wasn't.

"Do you ever wish the world was as simple as you used to think it was, when you were a child?"

Celyn considered it, his eyes distant and his fingers playing with Sjurd's chest hair. At last he said, as if they actually had the whole conversation and he was just drawing an obvious conclusion, "At least as an adult, you can enjoy the complications with other people. Preferably in bed."

Sjurd's laughter burst out of him, loud and bright and easy, startling him. It hadn't even been that funny, but he suddenly felt free enough to laugh, and it just bubbled out of him. Still chuckling, he reached up enough to snag his arm around Celyn's neck and pull him down. Celyn came happily, meeting his smiling kisses with soft, amused lips and teasing hands. Soon, Sjurd's breath

was coming fast, and his cock was twitching back to fullness, rubbing against the crease of Celyn's thigh.

"Somebody's eager," Celyn murmured, his voice rough and warm. Strange to think he'd have this to come home to, and a little bit hard to believe. Ys still felt like a dream, lovely, restful and utterly untrue. Some moment soon he'd wake to find himself bleeding out in some misthound's den, the frost still clinging to the bare thorns and winter biting down on the border. This was too sweet a moment to be real.

"Sad again," Celyn murmured and then chuckled, rich and a little wicked. "I think I can cheer you up."

"Oh?" Sjurd said, deliberately putting his mood aside. "And how do you plan to do that?"

Celyn beamed at him and then licked his lips slowly. Before Sjurd could work his way through the implications of that, Celyn was sliding down the bed, pushing Sjurd's knees apart to settle between them. His mouth closed warmly over Sjurd's cock, and Sjurd forgot all about dreams to lose himself in sensation.

Later still, they crept downstairs to fill up plates from the piles of cakes, pastries and fancies on the kitchen table, taking them back to bed to share in between honey-flavored kisses.

"I hate sleeping on crumbs," Celyn complained.

"Well, then," Sjurd said, reasonably enough, he thought, "don't sleep."

Eventually, though, they both subsided into a pleasant languor, Celyn nestled into the crook of his arm, still making vague and sleepy innuendos. Sjurd tugged him a little closer, pressing a kiss against his hair, and then looked up.

Through the skylight above them he could see the stars scattered across the great dark depth of the night. As he watched, fallen starflowers went floating over the window, lighter than air and glowing with their own faint trace of moonlight, their blooms open like cupped palms reaching up, lilies of the night sky.

“It’s the season for it,” Celyn said softly. “They fall to the sea eventually. It’s lucky, if one lands on your ship.”

“The Empire,” Sjurd said, a little reluctantly.

“Will suck all the magic from the land,” Celyn said quietly. “And there will be no more starflowers, and likely no more Ys. If they fell the *derwen* forest to build ships, there will be no trees to keep us floating in the sky, or even above the water.”

Sjurd took his hand, squeezing it lightly. There was little to say to that, except, “We’ll stand in their way, for as long as we can.”

“Don’t die for it,” Celyn said, his voice carefully casual. “When the moment comes, don’t make a last stand. Come back here, and fly away with us.”

“My people...”

“Most will be here, in that case. They’ll need someone to speak for them in Ys.”

“I can’t run away.”

“Run *to*,” Celyn said, suddenly fierce. “Run here.” Then, with a visible effort, he relaxed his shoulders and curled close again. “We could be farmers.”

“I don’t know how to farm.”

“I have books on that. We could plant enough vegetables in the garden to feed us, and probably a handful of refugees. We could easily take in a family. Have a goat. Grow our beards long. Learn to chew grass and talk of the weather.”

“Ridiculous boy,” Sjurd said, but let Celyn continue to spin his fantasy as the pale starflowers floated overhead, and he sank slowly towards sleep.

There was no rush to leave Gwydr, so they lingered the next morning. Celyn, to Sjurd’s amusement, knew how to scramble eggs and fry a few sausages, so they ate a hearty breakfast, with the morning sun spilling through the kitchen window and the air sweet with the scent of apples. The lawn

outside was dusted with fallen starflowers, and when they finally cast off, there was one sitting on *Eirlys'* prow.

They weren't expected on Enfys until just before dusk, so they had set out late, and the afternoon sun was already sinking below the islands, turning the sea below them gold. Pale fallen flowers floated on the quiet water, and Celyn had to coax the sails to pick up every scrap of wind. As they approached Enfys, the wind picked up a little, but it was still barely enough to keep them moving.

Enfys Isle was actually two islands, connected by a narrow, shallow strip of rock. The main isles were heavily wooded, and the village stood on the connecting arch, narrow brightly painted houses pressing up against each other in a cheerful jumble. Sjurd sailed them in, ignoring Celyn's cheerful comment of, "And to think, a month ago you nearly threw up walking down the pier. I'll have you flying loops next."

"Strange how much of an optimist you are," Sjurd threw back and brought them in neatly. The usual crowd of dignitaries was waiting for them on the quay, in their peaked hats and smart clothes. This felt like his life now, and it was unsettling to think that it would end tomorrow and he would be back on the border by the end of the week. What would it have been like to live in another age, he wondered, where his biggest concern would have been tax-collecting and potato blights?

For a start, he'd not have been heir at all. The kin would have chosen someone from one of the more important branches of the family. He was only First Prince because he could hold his own in a fight. There would have been no chance of marrying for advantage and wandering around Ys in a time of peace. He would have been a country farmer, just like in Celyn's silly fantasy.

"Sjurd," Celyn said now, his voice tight. He jerked his head towards the group on the quay.

None of them were smiling, Sjurd realized suddenly. Instead they were conferring among themselves, looking unhappy. Then one of them was jostled forward, and he came slowly along the pier to meet them, doffing his scarlet hat.

“First Prince Sjurd,” he said and held forward a rolled scroll. “There is a message for you, from your king.”

The edges of the paper were black, and Sjurd felt the peaceful dream that was Ys shatter around him. Taking the scroll, he snapped the seal and began to read, the world getting a little colder and harder with every word. When he was done, he turned to Celyn. “How long to fly back to Holmebury? Or the border?”

“In this wind?” Celyn said, and all the laughter had gone from his face and voice. “We’ll be lucky to make safe anchorage on the coast before dark.”

“Then fly in the dark,” Sjurd snapped.

“It’s not safe.”

“I don’t care,” Sjurd said, the letter crumpling a little as his fists clenched.

Celyn glared at him. “I care. Maybe you can sail the seas in the dark, but by night you don’t know what else is flying. A bat or an owl in the rudder or ropes and at best we won’t be sailing on for days. As for landing, you need enough light to see exactly where the rocks, trees and rooftops are. If we kill ourselves on the flight, the war is lost.”

Sjurd snarled, trying to untangle impossible demands. Suddenly, for the first time in weeks, he wanted to hit something, the harder the better.

“Sjurd,” Celyn said. “How bad?”

“They’re coming,” Sjurd said, and saw Celyn go white even in the softening light. “They’re coming by *boat*. They just flew down the pass.”

“*Prydwen*,” Celyn breathed, looking even sicker.

“The first guard tower,” Sjurd said, stabbing his words at Celyn, because it had been his people who let the Empire take possession of such a thing, “thought they were Ysian. They were ready to welcome them, until the cannons started. I need to be there!”

“We can go at dawn,” Celyn said. “Ride the morning sea wind inland. If we can get even a slight breeze at our backs, we can make it to the border by

the end of the day. *Eirlys* is no great ship, but she doesn't need much to make her run at speed."

"And what are we supposed to do until then?" Sjurd demanded, taking a few quick pacing steps back down the pier. "Sit and watch the sunset?"

"Well," Celyn drawled, voice sharp with annoyance. "We could always get married. That is why we're here, after all."

"Married?" Sjurd repeated.

"Yes. We've done it thirty times already. You might recall, if you think very hard."

There was a political urgency to sealing the link between their lands now, so Sjurd said, "Fine. Let's do this."

He strode towards the village, Celyn keeping pace with him, and the locals falling in behind in a flurry. Celyn let him stalk for a few moments and then said softly, "You're frightening these people."

"They ought to be scared," Sjurd responded. He'd let himself get caught up in the Ysian attitude to the war, as if it was happening to someone else, far away, and now he was regretting it.

"Diplomacy," Celyn said, stretching out each syllable. "Remember that."

"Don't. Give. A. Fuck," Sjurd enunciated, just as clearly.

It wasn't like their previous weddings, not even the first awkward few. The words spoken over their heads were the same, but the quiet rustling unease of the witnesses was new. Sjurd couldn't concentrate on the hopeful words, not when his mind was steadily filling with troop numbers and strategies, and his stomach was turning icy with fear.

He growled out his responses at the right moments, and then went back to thinking about what route the ship would be taking out of the mountains. Could they set nets or fire the sails to slow it? He'd have to ask Celyn.

Celyn, whose gaze hadn't left his, even as the dusk dimmed the room around them; Celyn, who was making his own responses in a cool voice, his hands steady on Sjurd's. When they knelt for the blessing, it felt bitter, as if it

were an ending, not a beginning: their final marriage, and likely their last days alive.

When Celyn kissed him, there was no mischief in it, and it was warm. Sjurd closed his eyes, trying hard to lock hope away, lest it weaken him. Celyn kissed him again, this time chastely on the cheek and moved away. Sjurd just stood, hearing the quiet murmur of conversation, and the movement of people around him, chairs scraping back and children beginning to run and giggle. He didn't open his eyes.

"I've made our excuses," Celyn said, his voice still very gentle, and Sjurd tried to be angry at that. Celyn was supposed to snap and argue, not treat him as if he were broken. "I didn't think you'd want to go to the feast. We have the storm cottage for the night, and one of the aldermen just retired from the sky. He's bringing across his tabletop maps, which are bigger than the ones I keep in the *Eirlys*."

Sjurd opened his eyes. The little temple was almost empty now, with just a few grave elders standing by the door. He took Celyn's offered hand, and went to thank them.

The night was still, the last heat of summer clinging to the hollows of the path as they climbed up to the storm cottage. The air felt heavy, and Celyn looked up and whispered, "Hold the storm, Great Dwywnwen."

"I thought you were an atheist," Sjurd commented to hide the clench of his gut. He couldn't be stuck here while his country burned.

"Nobody's an atheist in a storm," Celyn said absently, still frowning at the sky. "If we get a breeze before morning, to break the heat, we'll be safe."

Inside, the cottage was stuffy. Sjurd went to fling the shutters open and light the lamps, as Celyn spread the maps out across the big table. They both stripped off their shirts, and Sjurd bent down to get rid of his boots. When he stood up, Celyn was staring at him across the table, his eyes unreadable in the dim light. There was a mark on his collarbone, a little smudge that Sjurd realized with a sudden thrill wasn't dirt, but the print of his own mouth.

Without thinking, he was moving across the room and dragging Celyn in, kissing him hard and desperately, his tongue sweeping into Celyn's mouth. Celyn rose into it, his arms tight around Sjurd's neck, shuddering as he kissed Sjurd back with the same fierce determination.

They stumbled to the bed, kicking off the rest of their clothes in a shambling rush, tripping because neither of them would pull back from the kiss. Celyn's hand on his cock was a beautiful shock, warm and firm and sweaty as Sjurd thrust against him. When Celyn tugged them both down on the bed, he went willingly, following their kiss to sink down against the now familiar lines of Celyn's body.

Somewhere in that moment, the kiss shifted from desperate to tender, and their hands slowed, roaming over each other's bodies in slow wonder. Their long kiss fractured into quick, soft nuzzles, lips against lips, and then Celyn shifted away to kiss his jaw, his throat, and every old scar that marked Sjurd's skin. The soft press of his mouth made Sjurd shiver, and he groaned, twisting around Celyn to return the favor, touching his mouth to shoulder, collarbone, the line of Celyn's spine, in a slow wordless wrestle to see which of them could reach most skin.

Sweat-washed in the warm air, they slid against each other, hands slipping. He savored every gasp he won from Celyn, whether it was from a kiss to the dimple at the base of his spine or the moment he ran his knuckle gently along the long curve of Celyn's cock and then cupped the fat head gently against his hand, bending down to brush kisses against its pink and swollen tip.

Someone had left them oil by the bed again, for which he spared a vague moment of gratitude, because nothing could have induced him to leave this bed, and now he just had to reach out. He let his fingers linger as he teased Celyn's hole, tracing circles as Celyn began to writhe and groan, his voice going gruff as his cock strained against Sjurd's other hand.

"Sjurd!" Celyn protested. "Please!"

He caught the words against his own mouth and took mercy on his husband, pressing one finger to work him open and tease against that inner nub that made Celyn whimper so happily, his eyes falling closed as he arched into

the touch. Sjurd watched him, feeling a warmth grow in his chest to match the fire in his gut. Celyn was made golden by the soft lamplight, all his sharp edges vanished into bliss, and his mouth soft and slack. He liked it spitting insults, Sjurd thought, sliding a second finger in, but he loved it like this.

He kissed Celyn, then, because it was too tempting not to, and murmured, “Ready?”

Celyn’s eyes flew open, and he shifted his hips, pulling his legs up and bunching the blankets beneath them. Sjurd pressed into him, feeling Celyn’s body ease open around him. They both sighed, and then Celyn’s hands were on the back of his thighs, pulling him further in. Sjurd rocked forward, bracing his hands on the bed, and Celyn sighed again, a sound too soft and breathy to be a moan. Sjurd thrust again, slow and deep, his own breath breaking out of him at the soft rub of Celyn’s channel pressing around him. He was close enough to lean forward now and kiss Celyn. Even though it meant he couldn’t move as much, he stayed in the kiss, rocking his hips in short, shallow thrusts. Celyn rose up to meet him, and they moved together in a slow and gathering heat that made Sjurd’s head spin and his heart stumble.

Remember this, he told himself, the world beginning to blur around him as his balls tightened. *Remember this, when the hounds come roaring down; when the legions march towards you; remember, when you lie dying. Remember.*

And his climax went rolling over him, even as Celyn cried out beneath him, gasping his name in slow amazement.

Afterward, he rested against Celyn’s shoulder, enjoying the clasp of Celyn’s arms still holding him tight. Thoughts and feelings were skittering through his brain like fallen leaves in a wind, fast and elusive, and he couldn’t make sense of it all—what he feared and what he felt. At last, out of the muddle of it all, he said, “The first time I saw you, I wanted to kick you off the side of the ship.”

Celyn chuckled against his forehead. “The feeling was entirely mutual.”

“Things change,” Sjurd managed, knowing he was getting this all wrong.

Celyn was quiet for a moment. Then, with a hint of amusement in his voice, he said, “Yes, they do.” And he kissed Sjurd again, just as gently and tenderly as before.

When they finally left their bed to look at the charts, though, things were less peaceable. Celyn’s knowledge of the winds was useful in predicting *Prydwen’s* path, and Sjurd could mark in the guard towers and encampments in her path. If she made it past the first few, she’d carry her cannons right over the big encampment at Dunthorpe, where two thousand soldiers were waiting under canvas to be rotated up into the mountains.

“Why now?” he asked the maps. He’d thought they were in the middle of a reprieve, and cursed himself for complacency.

“Because of the rebellions, I assume,” Celyn said, leaning over the map. “They may need an easy victory to shore up morale and undermine the resistance. *Prydwen*, if she’s still got her cannons, could burn her way across Axholme, all the way to Ys, without the loss of one Imperial life. If I understand the Imperial way of thinking, that would be worth the risk to them.”

“They’re invading us for the sake of their reputation?” Sjurd said flatly, anger twisting bitterly in his gut.

Celyn looked up at him, his lips twisting in a humorless smile. “So we have to show them that it’s not an easy task. If I’m right, doing it without taking casualties is as vital to them as the conquest itself.”

“So where do we try to stop them?” Sjurd asked, and Celyn went back to the maps, murmuring about *Prydwen’s* speed and sails as they tried to work out if they could reach her before she burned past Dunthorpe Camp.

It was when Sjurd began to talk about destroying her before then that Celyn’s expression got stormy.

“How do you imagine we could capture her?” Sjurd snapped.

“It’s possible,” Celyn argued, and then showed a smile which was a little too sharp. “Do you know who my ancestors were, before they united Ys?”

“I dread to think.”

“They were pirates,” Celyn said.

Sjurd laughed incredulously, and then yelped when Celyn smacked him on the bare ass.

“I’ll have you know that I am one of the only people left in the world who knows anything about sky ship warfare. I also know that the cannons on *Prydwen* were loose-mounted, so they could move a little in a storm rather than ripping the decking up. Which means they can be unscrewed. Get a small boarding party, and you could certainly capture the helm and tip the cannons, and have a good chance of bringing her to land as well.”

“Celyn,” Sjurd said quietly, because there were dreams in his husband’s eyes. “They’re going to be using her to transport troops. *Eirlys* can’t carry enough men to fight off that many. I’m sorry.”

“You can’t know that,” Celyn argued. “Not until we’re there. If we can get a few men from the nearest tower...”

“Tipping the cannons is a good idea,” Sjurd said, cutting him off. “But only in case the fire doesn’t take.”

“We saved wood for three hundred years to build her,” Celyn said, his voice cracking. “She was my mother’s ship.”

“Celyn,” Sjurd said again, hopelessly.

And then, suddenly, the maps stirred a little on the table, their corners lifting. Celyn reached out to flatten them and then looked back up at Sjurd, his eyes wide. “The breeze,” he said. “We will be able to sail.”

“At first light,” Sjurd said, leaning forward to feel it curling in the window. It was only then, as his movement made it swing forward, that he realized he was still wearing Mathilde’s ring.

The wind held steady through the night, and they ran before it as the sun rose over the mainland. They took it in turns to steer, heading straight east with the sails full. They didn’t speak much, both of them more concerned with what was to come.

Late in the afternoon, as they approached the camp at Dunthorpe, Celyn asked, “Should we stop?”

“They’ll know by now.”

Celyn nodded but went to rifle through one of the low lockers, emerging with an armful of colored cloth.

“What are you doing?” Sjurd asked.

“Flying our colors off the stern so no bright spark tries to shoot us down.”

Sjurd hadn’t thought of that, but he grunted approval. “They’ll be even more alert at Yawby Tower.”

But, long before they reached the tower, they saw that Yawby was burning, the smoke spearing up into the darkening sky.

CHAPTER XI

Celyn

They eventually found *Prydwen* anchored awkwardly above the forest, just southwest of the ruins of Yawby tower. Her sails were still unfurled, and she was straining towards Ys on the end of her ropes.

“Amateurs,” Celyn muttered bitterly.

Sjurd shot him a quelling look, and Celyn went quiet. The tender lover of the last two nights had vanished into the grim soldier, and he couldn't tell what Sjurd was thinking, or how badly the loss of the tower and its guard had wounded him. There was no going home from here, not until the battle was done, but he wanted more than anything to be back in his bed on Gwydr, watching Sjurd smile as the starflowers floated overhead.

“How long would it take two men to loosen the cannons?” Sjurd asked quietly. “Or get to a place where they could set a fire?”

“Cannons, depends how many guards they have on deck. Could be done quick and quiet, but once we tip the ship, there'll be no fighting our way off. Firing her? If they've left the powder chute unlocked, a moment, but again, we won't have time to lay a fuse and get clear like we could have done with ten men.”

Sjurd looked up at the boat again. His hand was over the place where Mathilde's ring was tucked into his shirt. Celyn watched him, and weighed up his life. He was a son of Ys, above all else, and Ys was not ready for the Empire to come flying in. To stop it, he would sacrifice *Prydwen*, if he needed to, and his own life was a brief and paltry thing beside a ship that had needed the dedication of ten generations to build, let alone the thirty peaceful isles that floated over the western sea.

“I can put us alongside the stern,” he said, resolving himself. “We'd have to climb the side, but that's to our advantage. Best they don't know we're there.”

“You are under no obligation...”

“Shut up, Sjurd,” Celyn said absently. The dusk was settling hard around them, and he weighed up the advantages of waiting for night against the extra risk and difficulty of approaching a ship from below in the dark.

“Celyn.”

“We’ll need the grappling ropes now,” Celyn said. “They’re in the aft cupboard, if you could tie one to the rail.”

“I could take her in. You don’t—”

Celyn laughed at that. “You’ve been flying less than a month, lover, and this is difficult. *Eirlys* isn’t a rowing boat. Besides, I’m far too young to be a widower.”

“Surely, also too young to die.”

“No one’s too young to die,” Celyn said, feeling the fear change into something as strong as steel in his heart.

Sjurd looked at him quietly for a moment. Then he reached out and brushed his thumb lightly along Celyn’s cheek, before saying, “Take us up.”

From that moment on, there was no time to think of anything except their mission. Celyn eased *Eirlys* in towards *Prydwen*’s hull. He pointed to the grappling rope fixed to the rail and waited tensely, focused on the wheel as Sjurd threw the rope up and it caught on *Prydwen*’s bow with a clang. Sjurd went tense, scanning the side of the ship, as Celyn pulled them in closer with the help of the rope, lashing *Eirlys*’ prow to a mooring hook just below the curve of the hull.

They waited tensely to see if anyone had noticed their arrival, but the ship above stayed quiet. That was the trouble with only having one stolen ship to fly, Celyn thought dryly. It just didn’t occur to you that other people could fly, too.

At last, Sjurd nodded, looking a little green, and Celyn smiled at him in reassurance, because he couldn’t imagine doing this if you were nervous of heights. Carefully, he grasped the rope and went swarming up the side of the ship at a steady pace, hand over hand as neatly as he could. This much any

sailor could do. Damage to the hull rarely happened when you were safely docked, and repairs had to be done, even in a storm.

He glanced down to check on Sjurd and saw him following, his lips set and his face turned upward. Celyn kept climbing, listening for any shout from above. Just under the edge of the deck, he stopped for a moment, bracing his feet against the hull to keep himself steady. Someone was passing at a slow, steady pace. Celyn breathed softly and hoped they wouldn't be discovered now.

But the steps kept going. Celyn counted to fifty and then glanced down at Sjurd, who nodded. As quickly and lightly as he could, Celyn swung himself up the last length and over the rail, landing lightly and dashing for the shelter of a couple of solid crates. Sjurd climbed up just behind him, a little more slowly, but he moved fast once he was over the rail, already reaching for his bow. Crouched in the shadows beside Celyn, he nocked an arrow to his bow and waited.

Celyn looked the other way down the deck, ready to count just how many guards they needed to overcome (*to kill*, a little cold part of his brain reminded him, and he recoiled a little). What he saw puzzled him at first. There seemed to be men sleeping half-naked on the deck, huddled around the masts and along the rails. Then he registered the chains around their ankles, fastened to solid metal staples in the deck, and breathed in sharply. He had known the Empire kept slaves, but he had never thought to meet any here.

“Sjurd,” he breathed. “The sailors are chained in place. If we fire the ship...”

Sjurd was quiet for a moment, still posed and ready to shoot. Then, very softly, he murmured back, “Their lives are hell. They...”

“Don't!” Celyn hissed.

The sound was just loud enough to make the nearest of the slaves stir. He sat up, blinking in their direction, and Celyn froze. Then, his voice dry but perfectly distinct, he said, reaching out with his scarred arms, “Dwynwen's grace, I see an Ysian face. Am I dead at last, then, and my soul home in the west?”

“No, cousin,” Celyn whispered, staring at him. He looked old, too old to be sailing, but Celyn had no idea how slavery might age a man. “Merely over Axholme.”

“Then she is pulling towards home,” the slave murmured, lowering his head. “They don’t tell the deck slaves where they’re steering. Oh, my country.”

“I am Aderyn’s son,” Celyn told him. The only Ysians who had not come home from the Empire were his mother’s crew.

“Has it been so long?” the slave murmured, shaking his head a little. “I am Dyfri, Highness.”

His mother’s secretary. Celyn remembered him, just a solemn young man who had always slipped Celyn and the twins sweets or pennies when he visited Gwydr. “I remember you, sir.”

“Can you tell us how many guards there are?” Sjurd asked, with a note of irritation. Fair enough, Celyn supposed. This wasn’t the best time for social chitchat.

“Ten,” Dyfri said. “They are lax in their duties.”

Sjurd’s bow suddenly sang out, and both Celyn and Dyfri turned in time to see a guard by the rail stagger, lifting his hands to his throat as the force of the shot toppled him over the edge.

“Nine above deck,” Dyfri corrected with a faint smile. “But there are almost four hundred below. Are there more of you?”

“We two came to tip the cannons,” Celyn said, and left the rest unsaid.

“You’ll want to block the hatches, then,” Dyfri told them, and gestured towards the crates. “Those are full of disassembled siege machines. If you can shift them, they will weight the hatches down and win you time.”

Sjurd’s bow sang again.

“Eight,” Dyfri breathed, his eyes glinting. “Highness, we all vowed to serve Ys. Do what you must, even if it means destroying the ship. We are ready to die.”

Two more arrows, in swift succession, and Sjurd said, “Start on the hatches.”

There were boat hooks under the rail, so Celyn ran to grab them. Wedging them across the tops of the hatches, he then turned to the heavy crates. The other slaves were stirring by now, and the last few guards came at a run to investigate the disturbance. Sjurd’s arrows sang into the night, and then he was beside Celyn, bracing his shoulder against the first crate. As it grated and moved across the deck, it suddenly came into the reach of the chained slaves nearest the aft hatch and there were more hands at work.

Celyn left it to them and dashed for the second one. Already someone below decks was hammering at the hatch, the long boat hook juddering under the blows. Then Sjurd was with him, and more hands as they moved it.

“Well, that gives us until they find an axe,” Celyn said, a little breathless. “Dyfri, is anyone posted at the helm?”

“No. They won’t leave any of us within reach, and they’re too stupid to watch it themselves.”

“All to our advantage,” Celyn said, and started for the port side, unhooking the wrench he’d brought from Ys from his belt. He worked the first screw free, aware of Sjurd watching. After a moment, he stepped away and started on the next cannon along.

When the whole port side were loose, Celyn dropped his wrench and went racing up the deck to the helm, leaping up the steps. There wasn’t time to pull the anchor up, so he punched the chain’s release. It went rattling away, and he felt the moment when it slipped free of the hull. The ship suddenly surged forward against the wind, set towards Ys. Celyn grabbed the wheel and steadied himself, roaring, “All hands, brace to heave down to port!”

He got a chorus of hesitant ayes and turned the wheel hard. The ballast below shifted on its rollers, and the ship began to tilt steadily to the side. He heard the cannons roll forward and crash through the rail, but lost count and had to wait until someone below sang out, “All clear!”

“Loosen the starboard cannon!” he bellowed, dragging the wheel round to right the boat. For a moment, he thought she wouldn’t respond, but then the ballast began to move and she swung back up, the stars blurring above him. She wasn’t answering the helm properly, and he tried to pull her round, to ride the wind cleanly.

She moved sluggishly, but he didn’t have time to query it, because Sjurd was calling up to him, “We’re ready!”

“Brace to heave down to starboard!”

This time he got more replies, and she turned more easily, though it was harder to bring her back. For a moment he thought she would just keep turning and they would all go crashing down to earth with her.

Sjurd was at his shoulder now, saying urgently, “How do we fire her?”

Celyn ignored him. An idea was blossoming in his mind, but it wouldn’t work if she wasn’t sailing true. Perhaps these idiots had set the lodestone wrong.

“Take the helm,” he snapped at Sjurd, ignoring the increasing sound of hammering to drop to his knees and crawl under the helm.

“Celyn! We have to set the fire!”

“Actually,” Celyn said, grinning to himself as he peered into the dim steerage compartment. “I thought I’d take her for a bit of a flight.”

“*Celyn!*”

“Ask me where.” He’d found the lodestone compartment by touch, and began to work it open.

Sjurd sighed heavily. “Where?”

“Dunthorpe Camp,” Celyn said. “Thought I might put her down on the parade ground. You’ve got a few soldiers there, haven’t you?”

“A mere two thousand,” Sjurd said, but there was something in his voice that was suddenly brighter than despair. “Can you do it in the time?”

“If I can fix her steering, maybe. Depends how sharp their axes are.” He finally got the compartment open, and reached in.

Sjurd laughed, a little wildly, and said, “It’s a new way to go. Yes. *Yes.*”

The compartment was empty. He groped at it hopelessly, as the stone could have rolled into a corner, but it wasn’t there. The lodestone was missing. It was probably decorating some Imperial general’s desk as a paperweight, he thought bitterly. They wouldn’t need it to steer on the far side of the mountains, where the Axtooth range cut off the pull of Ys. Its lack doomed them now.

He crawled out, and looked up at Sjurd. “There’s a chute to the gunpowder store at the bottom of these steps.”

Sjurd blinked down at him. “But...”

“Her lodestone’s gone.”

“Can’t you use the one out of *Eirlys*?”

“Not for a ship this size,” Celyn said. “Even if one of us could get to *Eirlys* and back before they break through, I need one more powerful. No, I can’t steer her, and if she keeps drifting...”

“She’ll go straight to Ys,” Sjurd finished. “Which island built her?”

Celyn swallowed hard. “Gwydr.” For a moment, it was all he could see—the Empire making its first landfall at the Gwydr landing, slaughtering its way through Math, old Telyn and little Myfanwy to burn the temple and take their axes to the forests. He’d burn *Prydwen* out of the sky first, and found himself wondering bleakly if even ashes would float back to Ys. Perhaps some part of him would come home in the end.

“There must be some way to steer her,” Sjurd said, looking implacable again. “It must be possible.”

“Not unless you’re carrying a great chunk of lodestone in your pocket,” Celyn snapped.

Sjurd’s hand went to his chest. Then, without another word, he pulled out Mathilde’s ring with its gleaming lodestar, far stronger than any stone. He

broke the chain apart, and offered it to Celyn. His hand was trembling, and his eyes were bleak. How long had he worn that thing as a chastisement around his neck?

“It wasn’t your fault,” Celyn said, covering Sjurd’s palm with his own, feeling the edges of the lodestar digging into his skin. “She did what we’re doing now, for her country.”

“Just use the fucking lodestar,” Sjurd snapped. A sudden splintering noise from below made them both startle.

Celyn dived back under the wheel, twisting the lodestar into the empty compartment and sliding the cover round. As soon as he got his hands back on the wheel, he could feel the difference. *Prydwen* answered to his hand now, almost as smoothly as the little *Eirlys*, but with a sense of barely leashed power no yacht could ever muster. Turning her back towards due east, he said, “Are they through?”

“That was the bottom of one of the crates,” Sjurd said, but his bow was in his hand again. He took his stance at the top of the steps, clearly ready to take on anyone who came charging at them.

“Sailors!” Celyn hollered. “Tighten the main sail.” He then added, more quietly, to Sjurd, “They’re far more defenseless than I am. You should protect them first.”

Sjurd snorted. “Perhaps, but you’re *mine*.”

They were heeling before the wind now, faster than any ship he’d ever sailed, but it wasn’t just the speed that made him smile. “Oh, well, if it’s like *that*, I won’t argue.”

Sjurd muttered something at that, but Celyn chose not to hear. He just clung to the wheel, coaxing the ship to follow his slightest whim, and watched the dark ground rush by below them, their shadow stark by moonlight.

He had no idea how much time passed before he glimpsed the pale mass of the camp ahead of them. The sound of splintering had stopped, and Sjurd was getting steadily tenser behind him, but Celyn needed all his attention for the wheel. It would be so easy to let her overfly their target, so he started calling

the orders to tip her sails, making her begin to coast towards the ground. At this speed, they'd crash, so he had the crew start to slacken the sails, all the time scanning the ground for any tall trees or towers which might rip the hull out from under them.

Then there was a slow, ripping crash from behind and Sjurd drew his bow, saying softly, "They just cut their way up through the deck." His bowstring thrummed, one, twice, again and again. They were rapidly approaching the mass of the camp, and Celyn dared not look around, too focused on keeping them just above the tents. He wasn't going to find the parade square, and he winced as he heard swords squeal against a slave's chain behind him.

There were men running between the tents below, torches flickering and arrows arching up. He saw the first gleam of mud from the fields below and tipped the wheel again.

Prydwen ripped tents from the ground as she furrowed down, hitting the fields hard enough to knock Celyn from his feet and send Sjurd staggering, an arrow falling from his grip. Mud sprayed up around them, and the ship kept skidding on, digging deeper into the marshy ground until she juddered to a final halt.

Sjurd grabbed his bow again, taking aim at one of the few Imperial soldiers still standing. As Celyn picked himself up, he watched his husband begin to shoot again, as smoothly as if nothing had happened, the only difference the way he was shouting, "Men of Axholme, to arms! To arms against the Empire!"

"The slaves," Celyn gasped. All the breath had been knocked out of him.

"Spare the slaves!" Sjurd added to his roared orders. "Arm against the Empire, but spare the slaves!"

And as Celyn sat behind him, watching in awe, the army of Axholme came raging to their rescue.

Sjurd

By dawn, it was long over, and Sjurd was reduced to sitting on the camp commander's cot, his arms around Celyn and his heart still beating a little too fast.

"They came," he said in wonder to the back of Celyn's neck. "They came, and we... *we won.*"

"We did," Celyn said, very fondly. They'd had this conversation a few times already tonight, Sjurd unable to believe it had really happened. It was as if everything he thought he knew about the world had been rewritten, and suddenly there was hope.

They'd come out of it lightly, both scratched and bruised, and Sjurd with a bad slash on the arm where he'd had to fight off the Imperial charge before the bulk of the army arrived. They were alive, though, when he had resigned himself to death. *Prydwen* herself was badly damaged, but Celyn declared she could be mended, and would be, if his people had their way. *Eirlys*, by some strange fluke of luck, had come through almost unscratched, still floating benignly on her tether, a little above the tilting wreck of the bigger ship.

Mathilde's ring still sat within *Prydwen's* steerage. It felt strange not to wear it, as if it had been so much heavier than its actual weight.

"We *won*," he said again, and Celyn let out an exasperated laugh, and turned to kiss him. His mouth was soft, tired, and tasted of camp tea, sweet and minty. Sjurd closed his eyes and returned it with a new rush of shock. Neither of them were widowers, and there might even be time now to take Celyn to bed again and find out whether they kept burning so hot together. He rather thought they would, not least because his whole body was already flushing from a mere kiss.

They were interrupted by the sound of someone pointedly clearing their throat, and broke apart to find King Snorri standing in the tent's doorway, chuckling at them.

"I see you boys dealt with things before I could get here," he said, and gave Sjurd a pointed look.

Sjurd hurriedly untangled himself from Celyn and found his king a seat, watching with a little awe as Snorri folded his bulk into the flimsy camp chair.

“I’m sorry you missed the fun,” Celyn said, and Sjurd flicked him on the ear as he sat back down, because Snorri had clearly ridden through the night to get here, and he was not a man known for his love of action.

“It appears to have been quite a spectacle,” Snorri remarked, folding his hands over his belly. His eyes twinkled viciously. “I foresee a very interesting conversation with the Imperial ambassador later today. I thought I might thank him.”

“For what?” Sjurd demanded.

“Restoring a cultural treasure of Ys to the right side of the mountains, and returning all those poor stranded sailors home. Such a gracious gesture.”

“You’re a mean old bastard,” Sjurd said, not without admiration.

“Why don’t I get to talk to my monarch like that?” Celyn grumbled.

“Because Rhiannon’s scarier than you,” Sjurd told him gravely. “What now?”

“Depends on the negotiations,” Snorri said, and Sjurd suddenly realized he hadn’t seen that sort of glee on his king’s face in years. “The Empire hates defeat and can’t afford to risk further humiliation, not with its internal problems. If I can twist this to allow it to save face, the legions may be willing to pretend we don’t exist for a while... Indeed, if this goes well, you boys could just have won us another ten years.”

Sjurd just stared at him. He’d been counting his life in days and weeks for so long that years seemed like nonsense. Celyn squeezed his hand gently and said, “Give us a decade, and Ys will have ten new islands in the air before we have to drop the Veil.”

Even Snorri seemed stunned by that. Then he rallied himself and said, “Of course, I want you boys out of the way. Can’t have the Empire complaining that my heir attacked their personnel.”

“They started it,” Sjurd grumbled.

“Well, luckily enough, you were still on your honeymoon.” Snorri’s eyes half-closed and a slow smile spread across his face. “I think I’ll tell them it was brigands.”

“Don’t get creative,” Sjurd warned. “And no one’s going to believe we’re still honeymooning after a month.”

“Nonsense,” Snorri said. “If I remember the dates correctly, your last marriage was less than two days ago. Honeymoons come *after* the weddings.” His eyes narrowed. “In fact, I don’t even want to hear your names for the next three weeks.”

“Done,” Celyn said swiftly, his arm going around Sjurd’s waist. “We’ll be on Gwydr, once I’ve taken the time to brief my queen. With your permission, we’ll send a salvage team to lift *Prydwen* from your fields, sir. I’d like to take a few of the original crew home with us as well, if any are fit to travel.”

“Certainly,” Snorri said, and heaved himself to his feet, the chair creaking. He shook his head, looking entertained. “Of all the people to make a love match...”

“He grows on you over time,” Celyn said lightly, turning to send a bright smile at Sjurd. “Rather like a fungus.”

“I didn’t just mean him,” Snorri pointed out.

“Me?” Celyn protested, clapping a hand to his heart. “I’m lovable. Everybody loves me.”

“They’d better not,” Sjurd growled. Celyn was his now, and he planned to keep him to himself.

“And to think of all the paperwork I would have avoided if I’d just arranged the match between you two to start with,” Snorri muttered, and left them to it, disappearing off into the bright, cool morning. A few moments later, they heard him berating someone outside.

“I am glad,” Celyn said, squeezing his hand, “that it was you in the end.”

“You just like the sex,” Sjurd grumbled. The idea of Celyn married to someone who didn’t want to fuck him was just preposterous.

“Oh, I do,” Celyn agreed, “but that’s not all I like.” He swallowed a little, turning to face Sjurd. “Not all I might love.”

Sjurd’s heart was in his throat. Closing his eyes, he mumbled, “I’m bad at declarations.”

“Say, I’m glad, too.”

“I’m very glad,” Sjurd whispered and leaned forward to brush a kiss across Celyn’s mouth, as gently as he could. Celyn sighed into it, and Sjurd tried to pour into it all the things he couldn’t quite manage in words yet.

It wasn’t until Celyn’s hands slipped under his shirt that he realized how heated the kiss had become. When a wolf whistle from outside interrupted them, he sat back with a groan. “I hate tents.”

“I want my own bed,” Celyn agreed, and then stood up, rolling his shoulders out wearily. “Let’s go home.”

Sjurd thought of Gwydr Island and smiled. It wasn’t his home yet, but he could imagine it. When the day came that the Empire forced them back to the water, he thought he would choose to live, to escape to Ys, and Celyn, and a wild hope of freedom. He said as much to Celyn, stumbling over his words until he finished, “If I survive, I’ll do everything I can to make it back to you.”

“And, if you get lost on the way,” Celyn said cheerfully, offering Sjurd his hand to stand, “I’ll just come looking for you. Now, let’s get *Eirlys* flightworthy. We could be on the wind in an hour, love.”

So Sjurd took his hand, and they walked out together, into the fresh hope of a new morning.

THE END

Author Bio

Amy Rae Durreson is a writer and romantic, who writes m/m romances. She likes to go wandering across the local hills with a camera, hunting for settings for her stories. She's got a degree in early English literature, which she blames for her somewhat medieval approach to spelling, and at various times has been fluent in Latin, Old English, Ancient Greek, and Old Icelandic, though please don't ask her to speak any of them now.

Amy started her first novel nineteen years ago (it featured a warrior princess, magic swords, elves and an evil maths teacher) and has been scribbling away ever since. Despite these long years of experience, she has yet to master the arcane art of the semicolon. She has had a novella out with Dreamspinner Press and has been included in two of their recent anthologies.

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