

## CHAPTER FIVE

“There’s something I don’t understand,” Baylon said as he was filling his flask. “Well, a lot of things actually. But one thing in particular.” He looked over at Jenandra, who waited with Danger on a wooden bridge spanning the small stream. “If your enemies need the map to find this place, and the only way they can get the map is through you, aren’t you leading them straight to it by going after this woman? Shouldn’t you be heading in some completely different direction, to throw them off the scent?”

The Janessi said nothing. During the past week she had grown increasingly withdrawn, spending most of her time staring wordlessly off into the distance. She looked hollow-eyed and worn. Baylon grunted, having not really expected an answer, and climbed back up the bank.

Then, as he was mounting up, she spoke.

“You are right, Baylon. I am taking a great risk. But while I can not allow the map to fall into the hands of the enemy, neither can I allow it to remain in the possession of a complete stranger.”

“You think she might be one of them?”

“No.” Jenandra shook her head. “No, I do not think so. The Sigil gives me only glimpses, but she is not a bad person. Not entirely bad, at least. If she was one of them, I would know.”

“All right, let’s say you manage to get the map from her. What then? Where will you go? From what I’ve gathered, returning to your Sacred Glade is not an option.”

“The Isle of Mists.”

“What’s that?”

“The home of my northern kin.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Why would you have? It is an island in the lake of Silvertarn. The map will be safe there.” She shrugged—a human mannerism that Baylon hadn’t seen her display before, which made him wonder if she had picked it up from him—and added: “At least safer than with me.”

“I see,” Baylon nodded. Then he squinted inquiringly at her. “I suppose you’re not going to tell me anything more about the place that the map leads to?”

Jenandra rubbed her forehead, eyes closed. “Baylon, please. Stop asking me all these questions. This is difficult enough already.”

”What is?”

”Everything!” She thrust her quarterstaff into the ground, sending up a small puff of dust. Her eyes were suddenly ablaze.

Baylon met her gaze, then looked away. This was the first time Jenandra had raised her voice at him. In a way he felt bad about pestering her since clearly she had a lot of things on her mind, but at the same time he couldn’t help but feel that it was unfair of Jenandra get-

ting angry with him for asking what was—from Baylon’s perspective—perfectly valid and motivated questions. They had spent almost two weeks together on the road and Baylon had come to realize that Jenandra’s concession that he had a right to know extended no further than tossing him scraps of information, enough to keep him quiet while he digested them but nothing substantial enough to give him a clearer understanding of what was going on. He was sick of it for sure, but now that he had provoked a reaction from the Janessi he didn’t quite know what to say or how to feel about it.

”You mean well,” Jenandra continued, ”but please, just stop. I need to concentrate and save my strength for...” She trailed off and shook her head. ”I can not talk all the time.”

“*All the time?*” A laugh escaped Baylon. ”You’ve hardly said a word for days!”

“And you never stop talking, Baylon the Bard.” Jenandra shot him a cool glance and went off down the road. Baylon remained there for a bit, Danger stirring restlessly under him as the old stallion saw their companion moving away and wondering why they weren’t going after. When it was clear that Jenandra wasn’t going to turn around and urge him to follow, he cursed silently and let Danger catch up.

They traveled on as late morning became noon, and afternoon slowly ambled towards an ever-earlier evening. They stopped briefly to eat and drink, a tense silence between them, and then continued on their way. Jenandra loped alongside the horse as usual, but Baylon

couldn't help but notice that she didn't appear to have the same spring in her step. Up ahead, beyond the rolling patchwork of field and forest, bad weather was brewing. Storm clouds hung in the northern sky like ugly bruises and shafts of sunlight sifted through, dancing across the gently waving grass in the fields. Thunder rumbled far in the distance like the snoring of some sleeping giant.

If Baylon needed any further proof that Jenandra wasn't quite herself, she looked just as surprised as he felt when five men suddenly stepped out in front of them a dozen yards ahead. They had been hiding behind the ruined ivy-clad walls on opposite sides of the road. On a couple of previous occasions Jenandra had felt the presence of bandits lying in wait, or Zathir had warned her, and they had been able to slip by unnoticed. But not this time. The unshaven men wore hooded cloaks and dirty leathers. Two of them carried short bows, arrows nocked but not drawn, the others swords and axes. One took a step forward and raised his hands, palms outward as if about to address an expectant crowd. As the two travelers stopped, he pulled his hood back revealing a bald pate and a black beard. He looked friendly enough, even though their intentions were beyond any doubt.

Baylon glanced at Jenandra. The Janessi woman was difficult to read even under normal circumstances. Now, her face was like a stone mask. There was something about the set of her jaw, though, that hinted at... what? Anger? Impatience? The bard turned his attention to the brigands, hoping that Jenandra had the levelheadedness to

let him handle the situation.

“Good afternoon, young sir, young miss,” said the man in the lead with a sloppy bow. “Sorry to interrupt your journey, but this won’t take long. I’m going to have to ask you for any valuables you may have. Jewelry, coins. Don’t worry, we’re not animals. We’ll let you keep your clothes and your food.” He gave Danger a critical look. “You can keep the horse too, he looks like a mean old thing.”

“How generous of you,” said Baylon. “Say, friend, aren’t you awfully well-mannered for a brigand?”

The bearded man shrugged. “This is a nasty business. No reason to make it any more unpleasant than it needs to be for everyone involved. I’ve found that being polite and to-the-point usually works out better than waving my sword around and shouting obscenities. Name’s Eldon, by the way.”

“Eldon, the mannered highwayman,” Baylon grinned.

Eldon returned the smile, not unpleasantly. “It has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it? But enough chitchat. Valuables, if you would be so kind?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Baylon loosened his spear from the saddle.

“Oh, come on,” Eldon sighed. “I thought we were getting along fine here, and now you’re going to do something foolish like that? Such a shame.”

“You seem like a reasonable man,” Baylon said, “and we have no quarrel with you. If you want a friendly piece of advice, walk away now and we’ll forget this ever happened.”

Eldon inspected Baylon more closely, a dangerous glint in his brown eyes. “Aren’t you a cocksure one. In case you hadn’t noticed, young sir, there’s five of us and two of you, and we have bows.”

“I can count.”

“I do not have time for this,” Jenandra interrupted. “I have eight silver coins, that is all. Take them and go.” Baylon knew this to be a lie, as he himself had convinced Jenandra to sew her gold into the hem of her robe, just in case something like this would happen. His own gold was hidden in a small pocket inside his left boot. Baylon said nothing of this of course, he just watched as she loosened the purse from her belt and tossed it to Eldon.

“Baylon”, she said, “oblige them.”

He followed her example, muttering, so Eldon and his ruffians wouldn’t think they were giving up their coin too easily.

“What’s that, then?” the bandit leader said as he pocketed their purses, pointing to the leather case on Baylon’s saddle.

*You just had to, didn’t you?* Baylon thought.

“This? Just a bag full of none-of-your-business.”

Eldon snorted. “If you think that’s going to make me less interested, then you’re even more of a fool than I thought. Tell me, or I’ll have the boys put a couple of arrows in your pretty friend there.”

“All right, it’s a harp. And it’s my life and livelihood. If you know anything about the bards, you know I can’t let you take it.”

“Regrettably, you don’t get to decide what I can or can’t take. Give

it up.”

“Go suck your friends’ filthy cocks.”

Eldon let out a surprised laugh. “A bard, and that’s the best you can come up with?”

“I’m out of practice.”

“Last chance. Hand it over and you’re free to go.”

“Sorry. Can’t do that.”

“Pity.” Eldon shook his head and made a short gesture. “Kill them.”

The bowmen drew their arrows, but before they could loose them, both bowstrings snapped almost at the same instant and the arrows clattered to the ground. They stared at their useless weapons, dumbfounded.

Eldon charged at Baylon with a snarl, brandishing a notched sword. Danger, despite his age a purebred Brennish warhorse, side-stepped the brigand’s attack reflexively and Baylon whacked the man across the back of his bald head with the butt of his spear. With a cry of pain Eldon lurched to his knees, sword clanking out of reach.

The two axe-wielding ruffians went for Jenandra. At first it seemed like she would just stand there and let them mow her down. Then, at the last moment, she burst out in a flurry of movement. Her quarter-staff whirled, striking the first man’s forearm. Bones cracked and he screamed, axe falling out of his limp hand. The scream was cut short as the staff spun around, hitting him in the face. He slumped dead to

the ground, nasal bone driven into his brain. His comrade was almost upon her then, and Jenandra raised her hand. The brigand stumbled backwards, dropping his weapon and clawing at his eyes.

“I can’t see!” he wailed. “Help me Eldon, I can’t see!”

Without a second thought Jenandra raised her quarterstaff and jabbed it into the man’s chest, right above the heart. He let out a gasp and dropped to his knees. Slowly he toppled over, face down on the dirt-covered paving stones, and was still.

The bowmen had brought out their daggers to join the fray, but as they saw their commander and two friends fall within mere moments, they lost heart and turned to flee. Jenandra didn’t go after them. Instead, she stared intently at their backs as they ran. Passing the stone walls behind which they had lain in wait, there was a grinding, rumbling noise. In a cloud of age-old dust the walls collapsed onto the road, burying the two men. A booted foot twitched briefly under the rubble, then all was still.

All this happened while a dazed Eldon was getting to his feet and retrieving his sword. The highwayman stared at Jenandra and Baylon, cold fear shining from his eyes.

“What are you?” he wheezed. “Demons!”

Then he turned and ran into the field at the side of the road.

“Ride him down,” Jenandra said. “Do it!”

“Are you out of your mind? He’s fleeing!”

“Give me that!” The Janessi woman yanked the spear from Bay-



lon's hand. She leaned back, then tossed it with a strength that seemed impossible for someone her size. The spear flew in a graceful arc across the field, burying itself between Eldon's shoulders. The man fell into the long grass and lay still.

"You... you killed them." Baylon was shaken. "You killed them all!"

"They had the same fate in mind for us."

"You don't understand, do you? They were just bandits! Poor, desperate folk. A show of strength would have been enough, and they would have left us alone. But you... you wiped them out. Just like that."

"I have no time for vengeful brigands coming after us." At once, her words were oddly slurred. "Besides, I thought you did not want them to take your huh... huh..."

"My what?"

"*Harrrrp*," Jenandra intonated. She swayed.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine," she said. Then her eyes rolled backwards and she dropped to the ground.

"Jenandra!" Baylon cried and leapt from the saddle. Kneeling at her side, he lifted her head up from the dirt. "Jen, what's happening? Are you hurt?"

The Janessi's golden eyes flicked open. "Do not call me that," she mumbled drunkenly. Then she slipped from consciousness and didn't

stir again despite Baylon's attempts to wake her.

The storm was almost upon them now. Baylon lifted Jenandra up, surprised at how light she felt, and hoisted her onto Danger as the wind grew stronger, bringing with it the first scattered raindrops.

The ancient murals were falling apart, masonry peeking out underneath the crumbling plaster, but in the fire's flickering light it almost seemed as if they had come to life. Unknown heroes in archaic armor battled creatures of myth and legend. Lithe women danced among the trees while shadowy figures—gods, perhaps—watched. A verdant valley with a city at its center, and beyond it a mountain with a plume of smoke rising ominously from its jagged peak.

Baylon didn't know what this place was, or had been—maybe a rich man's villa, or a temple. At least the luxuriant decorations implied as much. What mattered to him was that three of its walls and a large part of the roof were still reasonably intact and able to shield them from the elements. Just as the rain went from a drizzle to a pour, he had found the ruin almost completely hidden from sight in a large hazel thicket. The sooty ring of stones on the mosaic floor indicated that they weren't the first to seek shelter there, but it mattered little. By the looks of it, it was years ago.

A cold gust of wind came howling through the broken wall and Baylon pulled his cloak closer around his shoulders. Just inside the

opening, Danger snorted and tossed his mane as the spray of rain-drops hit him.

Baylon never failed to be amazed at how quickly autumn came in the north. Back home—the bard grunted as he realized he still thought of old foggy Brenland as home—the march of seasons was slow and deliberate, the temperature dropping gradually over weeks and months. Here, it was balmy summer one day, and the next a storm would come and chase the fair weather away, leaving chilly days and turning leaves in its wake. He looked over at Jenandra, hoping she wasn't cold.

Covered in furs and blankets the Janessi lay bedded down close to a wall, the fire between her and the windy opening. Beads of sweat glistened on her brow. She had been running a fever for some hours now and her breathing was labored. Baylon had no idea what might be wrong with her. If it weren't for the fact that none of the attackers had gotten close enough to even give her a scratch, he would have suspected a poison-tipped blade. As it stood, all he could do was keep her as comfortable as possible and hope that she would eventually recover.

Thinking about how Jenandra had coldly dispatched the brigands, Baylon felt sick. They had posed no real threat despite the numbers being in their favor. The archers had held their weapons like children wielding toy bows, and all five men had looked weak and malnourished. If he had been able to see this, why was it that Jenandra—a far

more skilled fighter than himself—hadn't? It occurred to Baylon that he knew very little about the Janessi woman, and he had never thought her to be this ruthless. Yes, he had seen her make short work of the Crescent assassin. But that was different. It had been a life and death situation, a struggle with a vastly more dangerous opponent. This... this was more akin to cold-blooded slaughter.

*And she used magic.*

The bowstrings snapping, the man suddenly losing his eyesight, the crumbling walls—maybe even the mighty spear throw—nothing else could explain it. It was strange, it struck him, how undramatic it all had seemed. It wasn't until you thought about it that you realized what Jenandra had done was impossible.

There was a bustle of movement in the hazels outside and Baylon started, grasping a burning stick from the fire to fend off the potential intruder. Then he saw the flutter of white feathers and let out a sigh of relief.

“Zathir,” he said, returning the stick to the flames.

Baylon watched as the owl landed, ruffling its feathers and sending droplets flying. It strutted awkwardly over the floor to where Jenandra lay, and with a flap of its great wings leapt onto Baylon's saddlebags and sat there watching her.

“I don't know what's wrong with her,” the bard said. “Do you?”

Zathir swiveled his head and winked at him dispassionately.

“Seven lords of hell, I'm talking to an owl,” Baylon groaned and

got up to fetch the wineskin. Sitting back down, he huddled closer to the fire and took a long draft.

Growing up, Baylon had a good friend named Wilfert who was the son of the town blacksmith. Baylon's father, the lord of Colbury, wasn't enthusiastic about his progeny larking about with commoners, but being preoccupied with his lordly affairs and the upbringing of Baylon's older brothers who had land and titles to look forward to, he never went out of his way to put a stop to Baylon's and Wilfert's friendship. The bard suspected that his father allowed it so that Baylon, by spending time in the smithy, would get interested in a more useful and manly trade as opposed to the singing and playing he showed an affinity for.

But in the year Baylon turned fourteen, Wilfert was taken ill. He had looked pale and complained about a headache the previous day, and when Baylon came to visit him the next morning he was greeted by the boy's distraught parents. They had not been able to rouse Wilfert, they explained, and he was burning with fever. A wisewoman was summoned, but her suggested remedies did nothing.

Baylon pleaded incessantly with his father to let the noble family's Medicus have a look at Wilfert, and the lord eventually gave his permission—to put an end to Baylon's nagging if nothing else. But there was nothing that the old doctor could do either. Leeches didn't help, nor did any of the tinctures and tonics that he poured into the unconscious boy. Wilfert remained unmoving and unwakeable.

The last time Baylon saw his friend, the boy looked more dead than alive. His face was pasty and sallow and despite the windows being wide open the room was rank with a disturbing stink of sickness. Shortly after that the lord forbade Baylon to visit again. Rumors of the plague was spreading in town and even if they might turn out to be just that, the nobleman wasn't taking any chances with his family. A few days later news reached them that the boy was dead, but no one else fell ill.

Baylon grieved for a long time, until one day his father said:

“That is quite enough, Baylon. Rabble die every day and it is beneath our kind to mourn them.”

That was the last time he talked to his father. The following morning Baylon packed his backs, saddled Danger, and with a letter of recommendation from his tutor left for Holston to become a bard. And, perhaps, to find a world that wasn't as cruel and heartless as the one he had grown up in.

*And if it's indeed out there, Baylon thought with a yawn, I have yet to find it.*

His head buzzing from the wine, Baylon soon fell asleep.

The morning came with no change in the weather. The storm showed no signs of abating, nor did Jenandra's comatose, febrile state. Zathir had gone sometime during the night, for which Baylon was mildly thankful. He would have been ill at ease approaching the Janessi with the big owl sitting right next to her. The bard wiped her

forehead with a damp rag, then lifted her head up to dribble water into her mouth from his flask. She swallowed, and Baylon repeated the process until he felt she had drunk enough. Her skin was burning to the touch. He rose to fill the flask from the water skin, only to realize it was almost empty. Baylon grunted. He had hoped he wouldn't have to venture outside, unwilling to leave Jenandra, but now it looked like he had no choice. There was a stream not far from where the brigands had attacked them, and he supposed he could get there and back again in half an hour. While he was at it, he might as well recover the spear and staff that they had left behind.

Danger was drinking from the puddle of water that had gathered on the floor by the opening. As Baylon lifted up the saddle, the horse huffed and snapped at him.

“Stop it. I don't want to go out in this damn weather either, but you don't see me biting people, do you?”

Baylon led the warhorse out through the thicket and mounted up. The wind tore at his cloak and the rain soaked through his sleeves and trouser legs in moments. Face scrunched up and muttering curses, he made his way back to the road.

The bodies lay where they had fallen and a murder of crows were feasting on them in the downpour. The birds took flight in a flurry of black and gray as Baylon approached, then settled down among the branches of a nearby birch, their agitated caws echoing across the fields. The bard hopped off to retrieve Jenandra's quarterstaff from

the road, then went out in the grass to where the spear had felled the bandit leader.

The spear was still there, its tip brown with clotted blood, but the man was gone. Troubled by this discovery, Baylon looked around. No one was in sight. The grass had been flattened by the wind and the deluge, erasing all tracks, and it was impossible to tell what had happened. If someone had come to retrieve the body, why had they left their other friends lying in the mud? It was possible, Baylon surmised, that Eldon had actually survived the spear throw and had been able to get up and flee once the bard and the Janessi were gone. Or maybe he had crawled away only to succumb to his injuries somewhere in the vicinity. Perhaps he was still there, slowly dying from his wound in a ditch somewhere. Baylon shuddered.

*Poor man. Why couldn't you just take the silver and go?*

But there was little Baylon could do. He already had Jenandra to look after, and he could not spend Gods knew how long to search for a man who, if not already dead, likely did not want his help. With a sigh Baylon picked the spear up and wiped its blade clean on the grass. Then he returned to Danger to go and fetch water.

At sunrise, three days after their encounter with the bandits, Jenandra regained consciousness. Baylon had fallen asleep against the wall the previous night. Restless and brooding he had been sitting there star-



ing at the Janessi, who still showed no signs of recovery, until sleep finally overtook him in the wee hours of the morning. His dreams were uneasy and filled with sickness and death. When he awoke to her speaking his name, it felt like he had closed his eyes just moments earlier.

“Baylon.”

The bard squinted at her sleepily, then his eyes widened. “You’re awake!” he gasped and scrambled to his feet. Baylon winced as his back complained loudly about having been crooked up against a cold wall all night. “How are you feeling?”

“Thirsty,” she said. Baylon handed her his flask and she emptied it. He smiled wanly, reminded of that day in Crast weeks ago. “And very hungry,” she added.

“Hold on a moment.” Baylon put some kindling on the embers from last night, blew on them vigorously, and before long he had a brisk fire going. He heated up the last of the soup—the last of their food, for that matter—and poured some in a bowl, removing the bits of pork and turnip so it would not be too overwhelming for a starving stomach.

“Careful now,” he warned as Jenandra raised the bowl to her lips. “You haven’t eaten for days. Too much too quickly and it’ll all come back up again.”

She nodded and took a small sip of the steaming broth. “Where are we?” she asked, examining the murals.

“We’re in an old ruin a ways from the road. I had to get you to shelter.”

“Why?” She seemed confused and disoriented.

“You collapsed, Jenandra. And you’ve been unconscious for three days.”

“I have?” the Janessi frowned. “What happened?”

Baylon looked at her searchingly. “You don’t remember.”

“I remember you annoying me with questions,” she said slowly, “and storm clouds on the horizon. Then I have no further recollections until I woke up here.”

“We were waylaid by brigands.”

“We were? What happened to them?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Jenandra regarded him, clearly aware that there was more to this than he let on, but she did not press the matter further. “What happens now?” she asked.

Baylon sighed. “Best thing would be for you to rest and regain your strength. But the last of our provisions are in that pot, so staying here for longer than tomorrow will only make you weaker still. Sadly I’m not much of a hunter, otherwise I’d go out and bring back some food.”

“That is all right. I will be ready to leave soon.”

“I hope so.” Baylon helped himself to some soup and they ate in silence for a bit. Then he said: “*Do not call me that.*” Jenandra gave

him a confused look. “You said so, just before you lost consciousness.”

“What did you call me?”

“Jen.”

“Among my people, nicknames are only used by family and close friends.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

Jenandra smiled weakly. “Do not be. You may call me Jen.”

When she had finished her meal, the Janessi lay back and closed her eyes. Baylon was immediately worried, but checking on her he discovered that the fever was gone and her breathing was deep but otherwise normal. She was just sleeping. Jenandra awoke some hours later, insistent on getting up and going out “for some fresh air”. She refused Baylon’s help, which didn’t surprise him. Having lain helpless like a newborn for days, the proud woman didn’t need the added humiliation of Baylon leading her out to pass water. Her gait was unsteady and she leaned on her staff like an elderly woman as she exited the ruin, but she was notably less enfeebled than the bard had feared. Perhaps she would soon be strong enough to continue their journey, after all.

As they bedded down to sleep on opposite sides of the room that night, Baylon turned to Jenandra.

“If I ask you a question, can you promise me to answer truthfully?”

“That depends on the question, but I can try.”

“Jenandra, are you ill?”

She smiled at his concern and shook her head. “Not in the normal sense of the word.”

“Is that a yes or a no?” When he saw her hesitate, he added: “Truthfully, Jenandra.”

“I am weary,” she said with a sigh. “Drained, even. Sorrows and hardships have taken their toll on me and lately I have felt... not quite myself.” Seeing he was about to say something, she raised her hand. “Please, Baylon. No more questions. Trust me when I say that I will be all right and you need not worry about me.”

“Only last night you looked anything but all right.”

“I feel much better now. How far is it to go?”

Baylon glowered at the Janessi. “Just a few days,” he muttered, “if the weather holds up. Which is by no means a given this time of year.”

She nodded, satisfied with him dropping the subject, and laid down to sleep.

The next morning arrived gray and overcast but a little warmer than the past days. The storm had moved on, as had the sporadic rains that trailed behind it like chickens after a hen, and while summer was now on the retreat it seemed it was not ready to relinquish its hold just yet. As Baylon and Jenandra gathered up their equipment and prepared to leave the ruin with its mosaics and murals the sun peeked out briefly, only to return to its hiding place behind the ashen clouds

when they were ready to go.

Jenandra was already out of breath, sweat glistening on her face from just putting the fire out and shouldering her backpack. She swayed a little and Baylon grasped her arm. The Janessi recoiled from his touch. When she saw the bard staring at her, she said: “Forgive me. It is not common among my people, as it is among yours, to touch each other.”

“Really?” Baylon said lightly, hoping that she wouldn’t notice how hurt he felt from her reaction. “So Janessi children grow out of flower pots?”

“I will not discuss such things with you.” Her tone was frosty and, Baylon thought, slightly embarrassed. For some reason this amused him to no end.

”Shame,” he grinned. Then he added, more seriously: ”But you’re going to have to get used to the touching, because there is no way I’m letting you go on foot in your current state. You will ride with me on Danger, at least until you get your strength back.”

”I will do no such thing.”

”Really? Then what *will* you do, Jenandra?” Baylon made a gesture towards the road. ”Run for a mile and then lie unconscious for another three days? Seems like a waste when we could cover a lot of distance in that time if you just swallow your pride and get on the damn horse with me.” He mounted up and held out his hand.

”Baylon...”

”No discussions, Jen. If you want to get to Arynbridge before Midwinter, just get up.”

She just stubbornly stared off in the distance. It was funny, Baylon thought, how someone so determined and self-assured could behave so childishly in the face of something as simple as an unfamiliar experience. Funny or not, Baylon was losing his patience.

”Look. I lifted you like a child when I brought you to the ruin. I held your head up to give you water and broth for days. Stop treating me like I’m a leper.”

Finally she looked up. Without a word Jenandra took his hand and clambered gracelessly up into the saddle behind him, tense as a coiled spring.

”You’re going to have to put your arms around me,” said Baylon, ”or you’ll fall off. Do you want to fall off? My uncle broke his neck getting thrown from the saddle.”

She did what he asked, albeit hesitantly.

”That’s it. That’s not so bad is it?” He grunted. ”I’m sorry, it probably is, if this is all new to you. But you’ll get used to it.”

Baylon bumped his heels in Danger’s sides and Jenandra tightened her grip on him as the big horse started moving. Leaving the hazel-covered ruin behind, the Janessi mumbled something into his shoulder.

”What was that?” He glanced at her.

”You smell, Baylon the Bard,” she repeated.

“So do you, Jen,” he chuckled. “Welcome to life on the roads.”

Turning his eyes back to the road, Baylon’s smile waned quickly. For underneath the odor of sweat and unwashed clothes he could faintly feel that death-stink on her, just like in Wilfert’s room all those years ago.