

# THE RED COUNTRY

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## Chapter I

Had I been capable of speech on my name-day, my parents would never have succeeded in calling me Sellithar. A name like Starflower may be very pretty, and doubtless it is splendid to further a long and noble tradition, but I had little interest in the past and less patience with those who worship it. "Daughter of five royal generations," and "child of an illustrious heritage," and "namesake of the dynasty's founder-mother," bah. I was sure then, and I am surer now, that the first Sellithar would not have given a rotten hethel for such balderdash. Moreover, the palace brats had even less respect for tradition, and I was "Sillycow" from the first day I ran with them, royal nurse, royal fingernails, royal rank and dignity or not.

The one good thing was that it made me fight for respect instead of being tamely ceded it. I was ten years old, with a most reckless disposition from proving my superior mettle in all the scrapes available, before I won the place to which birth should have entitled me, as leader of the palace pack. By the time the boys' muscles overtook mine, I was fifteen, with my hair up and my skirts down, the contest had shifted fields, and I was still ahead. How easy it is to rout callow suitors when you have a sharp tongue and wit to hone it with! By the time they forsook courting I was eighteen, and all of us were growing into our proper roles, I as the crown princess Sellithar, they as the heirs to Resh-lords or soldiers or wine or hethel-oil magnates who would be the pillars of my realm.

That realm's kingpost threatened to endure in spite of me. I might shake off that odious nickname, I might become a haughty young lady or a regal gadabout, but the past I could not shake off. Not the horde of royal retainers, grown gray in their posts if they had not inherited them, nor the heirlooms that crowded us out of the palace, nor the endless ceremony, the precedents that governed my day from sleep to sleep, and, chief bane of this baneful bevy, Zathar, the royal bard.

It was Zathar who droned in my ears his interminable harpers' lore, the Ystanyrx' wearisome legends, the dates and deeds and genealogies of Everran's two dynasties, the history of the law, where I should turn for precedent when my own time to deal out justice came. Worse still, he did not merely drone them at me, he made me drone them back. "No," he would blandly silence my protests, "a harper's prentice would not have to learn all these. But you are not a

harper's prentice. You are a prentice queen." I would have murdered him in the days of my more impetuous youth, had chance not already given me a teacher of a more congenial sort.

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He came on Earth-day in my fourteenth year. It is the high-summer festival, so all Everran was out on the roads with the young trees they would plant to honor the second Sky-lord. My pack should have gone with the palace party, to join their hierarchic succession on the silver-inlaid shovel with which my father would turn the first sod for his sapling terrian. But that year was the opening campaign of my active war against the past, and it began with a signal victory, for in the teeth of heavy and concerted opposition I had coaxed my father into letting me take a shovel and a tree and a household of my own.

We had gone proudly down from the palace, through Saphar to the city gate, over Azilien's bridge, and out into the lazy heat-hazed roll of Saphar Resh. The country was blond with hayed-off grass, dull green with faded leaves above the thick black clusters of grapes ripening on countless vines, grimed with dust from the road where all Saphar laughed and labored, mattock and pick and shovel glancing amid the dust.

We labored too. Hard labor, I found it. I was very glad to relinquish a crowbar to Nerthor, the son of the chamberlain, and stand back with the rest in the shade of an older hellien. It was then that Asta the Resh-lord's daughter dug me in the ribs and mouthed, "Look—an Estarian!"

Our site was under the built-up side of the travelers' campground. He had leant on the well-curb

to watch, a slight, shabby, silent man with keen colorless eyes in a hatchet face, his plain gray tunic and trousers spelling Estar as clearly as they said, "We have seen better days."

The pack were pointing and giggling at a foreigner. Ever ready to prove both impudence and precedence, I called up, "If you have no tree, you can share mine. The worship—and the work!"

He came slowly to the bank and looked down at us. There was a dry twinkle in his eye.

"The honor, princess," he answered gravely, "far exceeds my worth."

"And what is your worth?" I fully intended to be insolent.

He did not show affront. Though he shrugged, his inflection was deadly earnest. "Who knows?" he said.

No more was needed to intrigue me. "Go on there, Nerthor," I said, lordly fashion, and swarmed up the bank.

"Who are you?" I enquired. "Why are you in Everran? And what do you do?"

"My name is Kastir," he answered at length. "I am in Everran because Estar would at present be a little uncomfortable. As to what I do . . . I was once a ruler, of sorts."

Political exile, I thought. At fourteen I already knew of Estar's domestic turbulence. Lacking a monarchy, they are ruled by whoever is strong enough to take—and hold—the power, which makes the consequent government more like a dogfight than a dominion of men. I looked again at his dusty feet and once good clothes.

"Come down," I said. "You needn't share the digging, but you can share the tree. Maybe Haz will change your luck."

He chose his words. "Your generosity, princess, is worthy of your rank. Unhappily . . . if I were to accept it, I would be unworthy of the kindness as well as the—possible—luck."

I stared. "What do you mean?"

"You worship Haz," he answered. "If bad luck came on you, would you blame him for it and turn your back?"

"No-o-o," I said. "But—"

"Then it would be as ungrateful of me," he said, "in bad luck, to run bellowing after a god I never troubled before."

I could hardly believe my ears. "You don't believe in the Sky-lords?"

He looked a little pained. "Princess, the word 'believe' is not relevant. Of that which is affirmed by the evidence of my senses, I say, I know. Of things reported or held as opinion, I can only say, this may or may not be true. For myself, I do not know."

I was some time mustering a reply. I had heard of Estar's weird schisms, weirder sects, indeed of barefaced atheism. To hear is one thing. It is another to have reality thrust on you in the broad light of day.

"You don't know?" I broke out at last. I waved around, at the broad breast of Saphar Resh, the festive laborers, Saphar's terraces mounting their knoll to the irregular towers and roofs of the palace and the great stem of Asterne, the rock-pillar that rose above the Helkent ranges' remote red skyline, towering into the hazy summer sky. "But you can see all this! The Sky-

lords made it. How can you not know — not believe in that?"

His eye had followed mine. "Men made the city," he responded. "Just as men planted the trees and bred the vines."

"But who made the men?"

His smile was quick, appreciative, and colder still. "You believe it was the Sky-lords. I can but repeat, I do not know."

"But they did!"

"Have you proof?"

That stopped me dead. As I stared, he went on, "Did you see them? Hear them? Did they tell you so?"

"No, but—but—everybody knows they did!"

His smile was dry. "No, princess. Everybody believes they did."

Quite kindly, he nodded at me. "And whoever told me he had seen them, princess, even your beautiful and generous self, I should still be obliged to answer: You may have seen, but I did not. When I too see, I shall be able to say, 'The Sky-lords exist.' Until then, I can only repeat, they may exist. But for myself, I do not know."

I found myself whispering. "That's . . . blasphemy."

He shook his head sharply. "I do not deny that the Sky-lords may exist. Indeed, I hope they do. I have not the least objection to your believing so. All I claim is the right to form or decline to form an opinion, without fear or prejudice, according as I perceive the truth. Not to blindly swallow other men's beliefs. Either to know, or to say freely, 'I do not know.' "

In that moment the world shifted, as if a new clarity had informed the sun, or a great window opened in a blank and baffling wall.

I took a deep breath. Then I said, “But . . . if you only accept what you see for yourself . . . what about history—other countries—things you’ll never see? You won’t know anything at all!”

He gave me his cold, keen, steely smile. “Agreed, princess. If I accept only the things for which I have evidence, there will be a great deal about which I can have no opinion. On the other hand, I shall have no false opinions. And if I know very little, at least I shall be sure of what I do not know.”

A wind blew in the window, quick, exciting, new. I took another breath. Then I said, “You have nothing to do now?” He nodded. “Could you be a teacher?” He looked startled. “Could you teach me to think like you?”

His surprise faded. That appreciative, measuring look returned. Then he nodded again. “Yes, princess,” he said. “There are not many of whom I could say it. But I think you could learn to think like me.”

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The uproar in the palace was tremendous, and the aftermath dragged on for years, but in the end I had my way. Not least because of my father, who I expected to be the strongest and had feared would be the most difficult opposition of all. It did take a deal of talking. Yet when I really did fear his silence would end in a measured, kindly, but adamant, *No*, he straightened up in the chair in his little presence room and said, “Very well, Sellithar. Let me see this prize.”

I daresay Kastir may have been almost as nervous as I. He entered composedly enough, with his quiet,

even step. And if he did not tender the proper court bow, another relic I heartily detested, in his new clothes he looked neat and well-to-do, if vexingly bare of noble ornament. A lord's factor, perhaps, or a merchant-accountant, though his features would never pass for Evertan bred.

My father surveyed him from behind his judgment face, unreadable even to me. When Kastir folded his hands and remained silent, he said, "Estarian."

Kastir said, "Only by birth."

"Can a lydwyr jump backward? Or a perraglis learn to sing?"

"Less is possible," Kastir answered, "to beasts than to men."

I did not understand the metaphors. That it was a test I knew, and perhaps a hostile test, and my heart beat hard, but I knew better than to intervene now.

My father looked at Kastir, and Kastir looked back, and I knew this was my father's own test, when he weighed men, their aims, their honor and their veracity, in the balance of meeting eyes.

My father said, "A shophet?"

Kastir shook his head.

"News-master?" Another head-shake. "Guild-lord? Assembly-member? Talk-shaper?" Each succeeding head-shake deepened the incipient frown. "Well?"

"I have assisted," Kastir said, "at most of these enterprises. But for myself. . . ." He looked almost surprised. "For myself, given the chance, I believe I would choose to be a—philosopher. Not a practical man."

I knew my father had drawn truth into his balance, as he always did. He knew it too. He leant back a little and let their eyes unlock. Then he said, “A teacher?”

Kastir looked up quickly and for once some feeling showed. “That would be both a pleasure and an honor. If it were with the princess Sellithar.”

My father weighed that feeling a moment longer, and gave a tiny nod. Then he turned to me.

“Sellithar,” he said, “are you sure about this?”

I managed not to gabble from both nerves and hope. “It’s as I told you, Papa. Zathar can teach me *things*, but that isn’t enough. I need to know how to judge things—how to *question* them.”

“And experience is not . . . will not be—enough?”

“Not just harvest-reports and scout-warnings, Papa! The important things, the ones Zathar never talks about. Who are we all? What are we, in ourselves? Why are we doing whatever-it-is?”

I nearly wrung my hands together and restrained it just in time. Whatever the lure of change, it is fatal to overstate your case before a judgment seat. I caught the tiny glint of awareness in my father’s eye before it turned back to Kastir.

They might have modeled for paintings of their nations, I think now. My father with his tawny hair and the brows they say come down from Harran himself, in his loose palace trousers and almost diaphanous white cotton summer shirt, only the big intaglio signet on his hand to mark a king. And Kastir in the decorous householder’s tunic he had somehow managed to make seem Estarian gray, with his grizzling hair and his reticent, long-lined face.

My father said, "A questioner. A philosopher. A royal tutor. A man who only taught his knowledge, however he came by it, might trust his welcome here. Whatever his birth-land was."

Their eyes locked again and this time I understood clearly the message in my father's stare. And the comprehension in Kastir's look, before he inclined his head in his nearest approach to either thanks or respect, and answered, "Sir, you have my gratitude." Bare enough, but from Kastir it came with the weight of a pledge, signed and sealed.

And my father gave us both his brisk, closing nod and said, "Very well, Sellithar. From now on, halve the time you spend with Zathar."

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So Kastir was installed as the "royal tutor," creating a new post, and a new precedent, of which I was almost as proud as I was pleased with my protégé—if protégé is the word to use of Kastir in relation to a fourteen-year-old girl. But if my father, in his usual manner, denied me the complete escape I had envisaged, not to mention landing me with the task of wringing Kastir a lodging-place from the palace steward and the even trickier fixing of his stipend with the treasurer, Kastir's own cold, clear, incisive mind proved an unending delight to me. A resource, then a shield and a weapon in my struggles against the weight of the palace, its precedents and its past.

Firstly he taught me to sift evidence, to distinguish hearsay and fact, to accept only what could be substantiated, and of the rest to say firmly, "I do not know." He showed me how to respect others' beliefs without blindly accepting them, and to suspend my judgment in matters where there could never be proof.

He gifted me with a deep interest in the natural world, and the mental methods to order both these enquiries and their results. He taught me to argue by the rule of logic, the mind's rapier, and, best of all, to keep clean the windows of the intellect from superstitious and shoddy thought. He never tired of saying, "You can confidently state, 'The sun rose this morning.' You cannot say, 'It *will* rise tomorrow,' or even, 'I believe it will rise tomorrow.' You can only say, 'I hope it will.' Nor can you truthfully state, 'It rose yesterday,' unless you were there to see. Belief is irrelevant, princess. You know, or you do not know."

Taking his post seriously, he did not confine his teaching to the tools of thought. He had held power in Estar. He knew the bones of it throughout the Confederacy, and he anatomized them for me, a far more valuable grounding for a future queen than all Zathar's lists of battles and dynasties. Not that Kastir disdained the past; but in his hands it was important as the well springs of the present, not for the Who and When and How, but for the Because and Why.

For me he traced the rise of Quarred's Tingrith from the eight noble families' obsession with "birth," Holym's elected Consul and permanent Scribe from the cattle-lords' insularity and pre-occupation with fighting their own floods and droughts, Hazghend's tyrants from their endless blood-feuds and brigand temperament, Estar's dogfights from the factions of money-lord and guild-leader and their secret wars for power. Always he saw with merciless clarity. "Men rule as they live, for their own benefit. In all history, look for the motive, princess. And look low, not high."

So he dissected his own career for me, warning me that emotion must not weigh in the mind's balance.

“What happened to me and why is of value, princess. How I felt and if it was justice are irrelevant. Learn what it tells you of Estar, and keep the knowledge for use.”

With the same clarity he exposed flaws in all the Confederate governments, Estar’s turmoil, Holym’s power behind the throne, Quarred’s oligarchy, Hazghend’s unsanctified tyrant, even Everran’s monarchy. “One man ruling by right of succession, yes. Well, if he is efficient.” Kastir never used the word *good*. “If he is not, trouble and oppression. Always incipient trouble over the succession, and if he dies untimely, real peril to be faced.”

When I said in despair, “None of them are any good!” He merely smiled his cold, keen smile. “None of them are perfect, princess. This is the one case where you must fall back on beliefs. Every country believes its government is the best. I prefer to say, ‘Mine is the worst of all possible governments—excepting all the rest.’ ”

And we both understood without words that the debate was more than academic: that, one day, forms of government would be another of my choices, when I sat on Everran’s throne.

Not that I thought much of that, for with a father just hale and heartily fifty, accession seemed many vague tomorrows away. However burdened by Zathar, I had plenty of free time. I played at life with my palace pack, as it is easy to play when you are a royal heir, young, healthy, carefree, and handsome enough for your needs. We might take Kastir with us, but we hawked, we hunted, we danced, we banqueted, we rode on every royal progress, from Maer Selloth in the south to Dun Stiriand at the limits of the north, from

Meldene's gray hethel groves to the red levels of Gebria, and I was lucky, I know now, that in those years Everran's borders were quiet. We traded with the Confederacy, our wine and oil for Holym's cattle and Estar's merchandise, Quarred summered its sheep with us, and we tithed a quarter of the clip before they went home. Hazghend was only a bad reputation in the distant south. Nor did the Lyngthirans descend, as they do so frequently, over the northern border, and everyone knew we were safe from the east. That way the Sathellin carried our wine along Hethria's desert ways to a great nation no one else could name, but no army could have tracked their road back to us. The mighty Gebros frontier wall and Everran's doughty soldiers were waiting if they had. No, we were safe enough in our little kingdom, and we played as only the children of safety can.

All too soon that play reached its end. I was just eighteen when my father, climbing Asterne's hundred and fifty steps to watch them fly the kites on Air's day, fell down with a terrible pain in his chest and died.

I do not mean to say any more. He was my father, I loved him dearly. He was a good king, and he is dead.

Nor shall I deal at length with the mourning, the funeral, the pyre, the solemn procession to lay his ashes with those of Harran's previous heirs in the tomb at Asterne's base. It seems now as if that time is separate; shut away behind the ponderous bronze-studded door that swings to at my back with its grinding thump! Life begins again on its other side.

It begins as I look out over Saphar's roofs, sleek bright red from the first winter rain, over the Resh stripped to tawny dark-stippled earth beneath the

pruned stumps of vines, down to the loop of Azilien shining steely blue beneath the steely gray clouds, and the backs of my mother and two younger brothers receding slowly toward the royal apartments. As I feel the weight of the royal coronet on my brow, the swing of the royal crimson cloak against my skirts, and I think, It is over. The past is past. This is Now, and Now is mine.

I was still the princess Sellithar, for tradition decrees that those already crowned keep the vice-regal title till they come of age, at twenty-one. It did not stop me hatching plans with infernal glee. A clean sweep, I wanted, harpers, door-holders, chamberlains, every crusted bastion of tradition gone. Kastir would help me. With his advice, I resolved, I would strip Everran's monarchy down to the fact. Slough the ritual, the formalities, the rigid, pointless, fossil program for every moment of my day, and become a ruler, not a figurehead so hobbled in robes I could not even walk.

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Needless to say, it was easier to plan than to perform, for every cleansing meant a painful amount of maneuver, adjustment, resettlement of superseded retainers, arguments with irate traditionalists. Or wounded ones, which was worse. I had hardly managed to cancel the royal harper's unquestioned right of entry to his sovereign's private apartments when the Quarred embassy arrived.

In the Quarred tradition they were, superficially, excessively polite. They had a "Note" in a huge parchment scroll bearing the seal of the Tingrith's ram horns, but they did not ask me to demean myself by actually reading it. They grouped before my high seat in the audience hall in strict order of precedence, and

the eldest, who had the longest beard and the largest cauliflower of a turban, recited what their government had said.

Under the compliments and tautology, it boiled down to Quarred's concern for a fellow Confederate, intimately linked by bonds of trust and border and trade, now deprived of its noble lord. Here followed an oblique glance at past military alliances and a long eulogy on my father, whose effect I overcame by mentally writing between the other lines. Quarred summered half its sheep in our Raskelf highlands. Wool was Quarred's chief export, Estar paid weight for weight for it in gold. Their income was in jeopardy.

Moreover, civil disturbance in Everran might embroil the Quarred shepherds, refugees would certainly cross the border, punitive expeditions might follow, it could come to open war. I was just eighteen, and worse still, female. It behoved them to secure their pastures, their border and their purses by forestalling trouble and backing the legitimate heir.

"Well enough so far," said Kastir, when we were alone in the royal presence chamber. "But not far enough. What more do you know of Quarred, princess?"

I studied the thick crimson Quarred carpet which matched the rosewood paneling's patina of age. It was made in Harran's day.

"The Confederacy is a balance," I said, "and Everran is its fulcrum. Estar, Hazghend, Quarred, Holym. Whoever has Everran's support can tip the balance. And Quarred has always wanted to rule the Confederacy."

"And so?"

It was just like our old discussions, except that now the examples, and the consequences, would be real. I thought aloud to the ram horns on the big red seal.

“And so the clever way is to arrive before Everran falls apart or any other Confederate takes us over, and offer me ‘protection’ —in effect, annex me. Make Everran a province, and me a puppet queen.”

He smiled his cold, keen smile. “You were right, princess. I could teach you to think like me.”

So the embassy took back a note as flowery and euphemistic as their own, with grateful thanks for Quarred’s offer of support; promises, should need arise, to call on them first; and a query, with many delicate circumlocutions, on whether they wished to forego the Raskelf pastures that year. *If, in your opinion, the flocks are in the slightest danger, we shall be more than willing to agree.*

At which Kastir smiled again and said, “The sweet way to say, if you badger me, I’ll tread on your toes. Deny you your pasture, which is more important than ambitions to lead the Confederacy. Quite right, princess. Aim low.”

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For the rest of winter I was busy traveling over Everran, and shearing away the business of tradition that had made those royal progresses as slow and conspicuous and predictable as the coming of the rains. I meant to be quick, unexpected, and anticipate my messenger’s word. There was pleasure in the achievement. By spring, there was greater pleasure in feeling the Resh-lords settle back into docility, like a team that has just, at the back of the mind,

contemplated rebellion when they first feel a new hand on the reins.

It was in spring that the Lyngthirans struck.

They too had heard the news, Evertan's king dead in his prime, his heir an eighteen-year-old girl. They are nomads who move with the grass and the herds, and now a good season in Stiriand had brought them south to the banks of the Kemreswash, whence it is an easy step, after the floods subside, into Stiriand Resh. They came in force, five or six tribes' worth of horsemen thrown across the river in a night, whisking back with the vineyards and grainfields alight behind them, the gold and silver in their saddlebags and the women tied across their saddle-bows, showing me, for the first time, that I was fettered by more than the past.

"Why not?" I demanded of Kastir, who sat immovable by the fireplace while I ranted about the audience hall. "I don't have to wave a sword to lead an army! I'm the head, not the fist."

"Shall we consider the facts?" he said. "How far can you ride in a day?"

"Forty—fifty miles, if I must!"

"And the second day?"

"The same!"

"And the third?"

We looked at each other. Facts are facts. They cannot be denied for delusion, or desire, or even pride.

"I'll be in the base camp," I said.

He studied the floor-tiles, rose and jade green, Harran's harp superimposed on Evertan's shield and vine.

"Can you use a sword?"

"I can use a bow!"

“And a shield? Could you use one of the big phalanx shields as they should be used, to push a man backward, knock in his teeth, stun him with a hit under the chin, break his kneecap?”

“I shall be in the camp!”

“A postulation, then.” He eyed the rosewood roofbeams. “The Lyngthirans circle to make a rear attack. One of their favorite tactics. If they strike the camp by night, in the *melê*, how will you fare? If you are killed, how will Everran fare?”

Nerthor had inherited his father’s post of chamberlain. He came softly in with a fresh jug of wine to set on the heirloom table. When he had gone down the walkway, I looked out over Saphar to the azure and lime of sky and burgeoning vines, and said, trying to restrain anger, which clouds perception, trying to accept facts, “Very well. I stay in Saphar. Karyx can take command in Stiriland.”

The son of my father’s general had grown up with me, a lithe, dark, raw-boned young man still low in the army hierarchy, but a brisk, clever, fiery cavalry officer. Too fiery for his own good. He threw troops after the Lyngthirans across Kemreswash, was led into a plains ambush, horses and riders lying flat in the grass in a fold of ground, and had his forces massacred to the final man.

He came to report the loss in person. After he left the audience hall, Kastir shook his head at me.

I stared. Then I said, “Six hundred prime cavalry lost. A tragedy. A grievous blow to our army. A dangerous precedent for the Lyngthirans. He knows what he’s done.” I saw Karyx’s face, sallow, haggard, grief and shame bitten deep as if he had aged ten years

overnight. "And if there were need to rub it in, it would be his father's business, not mine."

Kastir shook his head again. Striving to flatten hackles he had lifted for the first time, I insisted, "He's a good officer. Too good to cashier for one mistake he won't repeat."

"Princess," said Kastir very gravely, "have I not shown you, there are mistakes no ruler, for his own sake, can afford to forgive?"

I waited a moment, since one should no more speak in anger than think in it. Then I said, "Thank you for your advice, Kastir."

He bit his lip. At last he replied, "Princess, I hear."

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The few remaining palace back-biters relished what they chose to see as Kastir's first reverse in his impudently assumed role of chancellor. Karyx returned north as Resh-commander, we increased the border garrisons, and for the rest of summer Stiriand was torn by a bitter little war. Hit-and-run raids, avoiding the garrisons to kill unarmed folk, damage the land, and cause losses among troops who could only chase the enemy fruitlessly back over the march, and then disengage. I did manage a garrison tour, which, if it left the troops unheartened, allowed me to see the situation firsthand. On the last night we lay in the keep of Dun Stiriand, the surly red border fort nearest the pass where Kemreswash heads; it was there the informer came to me.

My first impulse was to hang him on the battlements forthwith. Justice prevailed. Do you beat the thrower, or the stone?

When he had gone, I sent Nerthor and my escort-captain out, and Kastir came in with his smooth, stealthy tread.

I said, "You knew about this."

He inclined his head.

I was just cool enough to add, "Let me hear the reasons, then."

He raised his brows. "Surely, princess, the report is reason enough? Your southern Resh-lord has plotted a revolt. Tirs has never been noted for its fidelity. On past evidence such behavior was to be expected in a situation like this. An informer has given you time to act. I know you are unaccustomed to such methods. Estar is different. I used my experience, so that if events ran true to precedent you would not be taken unawares."

It was good reasoning. The facts supported him. There was no point in clinging to the outmoded ethics of a past which had scorned such tools. I said, "You were right. Tell them to saddle up."

Six evenings later I rode up to Maer Selloth, the Tirien citadel. No king had crossed Everran in less than a fortnight since Harran's day, as Oxys the Resh-lord and I both knew, and the surprise was all I had planned. Standing face to face with him before the high seat which he had ceremonially vacated when I was announced, I told him what else I knew. I was angry, and this time saw value in revealing it.

When we were upstairs in our hastily prepared apartments, Kastir said with his wry, cold smile, "You fight with all your weapons, princess. With weakness itself."

Startled, I said, "What do you mean?"

He answered, "Look in the mirror there."

I had ridden in a plain gray habit with my hair plaited and twisted up under a soldier's leather forage cap. The day's ride had brought it down, to frame my face in a lion's mane of tangled gold, a face still crimson with sunburn and wrath, so eyes that were normally just blue sparked fiercely as sapphires amid the golden knots and fiery skin and general overlay of dust.

I cried in dismay, "I look like a Lyngthiran catamount!" But Kastir answered without a smile, real feeling in his voice.

"On the contrary, princess. You look magnificent."

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That settled the other Resh-lords along with Tirs, and for the rest of summer Everran was internally quiet. Only the raids went on. And presently Kastir's informers began to produce disquieting news of unrest, deepest in Stiriland but present everywhere, of murmurs against this costly, ineffectual little war. End it, people were saying. Stop killing our sons for nothing. Make the country safe, as it used to be.

"This has always happened," I said indignantly to Kastir. "It's nothing to do with me being a girl! We were only safe this last ten years because good seasons in Lyngthira kept them away. How can people not remember that?"

Kastir smiled coldly and replied, "The people's memory is short. It reaches to yesterday, but not the day before."

I thought a while. Then I said, "If I'm ridden with harpers, they may as well be some use."

So, summoning Zathar, I bade him send out his pestilent lore-keepers to sing the history of Everran in Everran's ears, and teach them that today, not

yesterday, was the norm. It seemed to do some good. At least, it contained discontent until the arrival of the Holym embassy.

Holmyx are less polished than Quarreders. Their ten “delegates” in farmers’ shirts and harpoon spurs and high-heeled riding boots did not recite the contents of their “Note.” They simply handed it to me, announced, “We’ll take the answer,” and trooped off to the guest-quarters to wait.

“So?”

Kastir steeped his chin on his fingers above the delicate inlaid imlann-wood table that the first Sellithar had placed in the queen’s hall. The same blond wood shone in the walls. A flock of gweldryx flew apple-green and lavender among the mosaic floor’s smoky lavender terrian blooms. I looked at the “Note” and back to him.

“Would I like financial help with my defense? Can Holym’s troops assist me directly? Support for a fellow Confederate . . . solidarity. . . . What they mean is, let us put you under an obligation, better still, in debt. And if we can get troops into Everran under pretext of alliance, you’ll have a hard time getting them out. Maybe so hard that we can manage a coup.”

He nodded. “A sweet bait, princess. But you can see the hook.”

So my note to Holym’s Scribe—I knew the real ruler of Cattleland—thanked him graciously for the offer of assistance, emphasized how sensible I was of his kindness, and politely assured him that Everran was still able to fend for itself.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was no time for planting trees that Earth-day, so I had deputized my mother and brothers. The

boys were still too young to help me much, Sazan twelve, Haskar ten. In fact I hardly knew them, for they were outside my age group, boys, raised in a separate nursery, I had always had other pre-occupations. Yet when Kastir brought his newest information, I could not credit it.

“Sazan? Haskar? It’s ridiculous! They couldn’t take the throne if they did get rid of me!”

He watched me with his cold, colorless eyes.

“They will grow.”

“But. . . .”

I stopped. He nodded. “They are boys. There are many highborn folk in Everran who,” he put it delicately, “wonder if a queen can rule alone. Who would be prepared to wait for a king.”

It was nothing I did not know. It was nothing we had not discussed. I snorted and made the usual riposte. “And who would be Regent meanwhile? A Resh-lord? They’d sooner cut each other’s throats!”

“Princess,” he spoke in reproof, “have you forgotten Holym? A wise ruler works from behind the throne.”

“Very well, they install a puppet. But who?”

He looked down. Then he said, “Queen mothers are notoriously reluctant to renounce power. Even the power of a figurehead.”

I actually put a hand to my head. Everran, I thought in panic. Where has it gone? Eighteen months ago this was the strongest, safest nation in the Confederacy. Now it’s a quag, the people restive, the Resh-lords shaky, the neighbors threatful, and the royal family ready to turn on its sovereign. If they succeed? At best abdication, at worst assassination or civil war. If they fail. . . .

“No!” I cried. “I don’t believe it! Not Mama!”

Kastir did not bother with placebos like, “There, there,” or, “Never mind” or, “Oh, princess, please don’t cry.” He merely waited till I blew my nose and put away the handkerchief. Then he slid a hand into the breast of his green retainer’s gown and spread the letters in a fan across the tabletop.

When I finished reading, the little presence chamber had darkened, its crimson carpet and ruby rosewood dulled to the shade of old, dried blood. I stared a long time at the pile. There was no need for back reference. I knew the ringleader’s hand, I knew the names. I could build on the scaffolding they revealed, the plot so plausible, so inexorably probable. It was only the leader’s identity I could not accept.

In mind’s-eye I saw my mother, a hethel-lord’s daughter from Meldene, tawny gold hair and gray eyes and the slim western build. They say Harran was from Meldene himself. I saw us going down to pour the wine and launch the terrian flower-boats on Water’s day, laughing together over family jokes, the confidences, the advice, then back and back to childhood, the embraces, the care and comforting, the love I had known behind me as surely as I could stand on Asterne and find rock under my feet. It was bitter, this betrayal, more bitter than her treason to Everran. That she could turn against me. That all these years she had secretly put my brothers first. That it had all been a sham, a counterfeit.

Tears clouded my vision. But emotion cannot be permitted to cloud the mind.

Kastir had waited silently. Now he said, “Princess, the present is bitter, but it is the future that matters most.”

I looked up. He numbered on his fingers.

“Banishment to Lyngthira would be barbarity. Hethria is an unknown quantity, too little known to risk as a source of danger in your rear. Exile to any nation in the Confederacy would play into the conspirators’ hands. They would become a focus for disaffection, a seed-ground for rebellion and invasion. And not a chance that any Confederate would miss.”

It was like a bucket of cold water over the head. I said, “I could have it out with them.”

He shrugged. “How much is repentance worth? Next time they may be more careful. Too careful, perhaps.”

Silence filled the little blood-colored room. At last he spoke again. “Princess, there is only one remedy for high treason. It is a mistake not even you can afford to forgive.”

I moved my foot on the crimson carpet. Then I said, “Send the guard captain to me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was as terrible as you would expect. Of course they denied it, swore the letters were forgeries, accused Kastir of plotting to eliminate them and then use me to rule Everran, wept, begged me to believe them, invoked the bonds of blood and family. I cannot bear to write the rest. The Four know, I would have given Everran to be convinced they were innocent. But the letters were there. Facts are facts.

The other conspirators had to be arrested too, and there was no hope of keeping it secret after that, all Saphar was in uproar, all Everran for what I know. I had no heart to think beyond my own folk’s part in it. But when they were all under guard, the night before the executions, Zathar came to visit me.

He did not request formal permission; just slipped into the presence chamber on Nerthor's heels when Kastir had gone and the chamberlain comes to see his sovereign to bed. It had Nerthor's connivance, I suspect, but before I could speak he had vanished and Zathar had me round the knees in the ancient mercy ritual.

It was more dignified to stand still. At last he raised his lined, fallen old man's face, all blubbered with tears that had soaked even his beard, and I could not help it, seeing him in such a state. I helped him up, said, "Please, Zathar, don't upset yourself so," sat him down, poured him wine, and braced myself for the inevitable.

First he maundered on about my "faith to the blood," my "generosity and magnanimity." But then he lifted his bloodshot eyes and said with an intensity I could not discount, "Princess, I well know you scorn our trade and all its lore and you'll not heed more than the words' length. But believe me, believe me, if you do this t'will be the greatest sorrow of your life."

Patiently, I said, "Go on."

"They're your blood kin," he said, "guilty or innocent. Let be this — this will stain your hands beyond all washing, let be the folk'll never trust you again, they'll be ever asking, 'If she could do that to kinfolk, what may she do to us?' Let be all that, there's Everran to think on. You're the queen. Oh, princess, I know you've no time for the lore-songs, but t'is in them, over and over. Them that do evil in the high seats, it returns on their kingdoms, not on them. T'is Everran, princess, that you think to ward, and that you'll bring to ruin. I can tell you, you remember —"

"Not now."

I knew he would cite examples for hours, examples I knew as well as he. I wanted time to think. For at his words something had leapt within me, crying: *He's right, that's the truth!* Some response deeper than the mind, deeper than the very will, against which facts, reason, political expediency were mere words, arguments that one touch of concrete reality can upset.

I could feel his eyes. When I sighed and began to marshal the prosecution points, he interrupted, tumbling over his words. "Not a pardon princess not even exile not any judgment at all!"

"What then?" I stared.

He leant forward, and actually took hold of my wrist. He was barely whispering.

"Let them escape, princess. Tonight. I can do it. Just say the word, you'll never know so much as how. . ."

"But. . ."

His eyes burnt into me. "Princess, whatever the proof, I know t'is wrong. I know! Let them go. No matter where, they'll not trouble you, they'll lie quiet as mice and just wait until—"

"Until what?"

His eyes fell. From a hardened back-biter, I might have expected some euphemism for, Until you get rid of Kastir. But Zathar had never sunk to nursing a grudge. He did mumble something, changed it to, "Till this comes clear." Then he fixed his gaze, dog-like, back on mine.

There was no rational cause for it. It could not be justified by any argument in reason. It was sheer stupidity, emotion, clouding the wits, overbearing the mind, irresistible.

I took his fingers from my wrist and blinked and said to the table, "Get them out, Zathar. I don't care how, I don't care where. Don't dare try thanking me. And if you ever breathe a word of this, I'll have you burnt alive."

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