

THE RED COUNTRY

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Chapter IV

If we still traveled at the limit of my endurance, the next few days were better, for every morning Zam punctiliously outlined the day's march before lapsing into his customary taciturnity. I did not mind. I was studying Hethria, in search of whatever it was about this endless desert with its hot harsh landscape, its paucity of dull vegetation, its shy, strange, ugly animals, that had bound him in such willing servitude.

We seldom saw a Sathel road. He took his own way, by waters I doubt Sathellin had ever seen, bypassing dassyx, but not, I found, ignoring them. When we veered abruptly to a covered irrigation channel where I spent a sweaty strenuous hour bringing stones for him to repair a fall in the roof, he solved three of my puzzles at once by saying, "Pharaone. Farsight. Another art. I use it to check the channels as I go. It saves riding. But it does keep me too busy to talk."

It was the closest he had ever approached to an apology. I answered politely, "My head's not so empty I have to entertain myself with my mouth."

That made him glance up, and he was amused at last. Those gray eyes sparkled like light on a crystalline sea, and I hurriedly suppressed the thought: Four above, I've actually got a laugh out of him.

We crossed sandhill belts, gibber plains, levels strewn with muted gray-green istarel bushes or green with thick spiny torjer grass; we threaded low, abraded ranges, and once or twice we crossed a salt lake whose blinding white reaches taught me the point of a black turban in Hethria. It cuts ground-glare as well as the sky's.

"These are small ones," Zam said in rare response as I silently groaned before another day's grill on searing white. "Kerym Iswyre, where Kemreswash ends, is nearly as big as Assharral. Only one in the last five Hethox generations have seen it fill."

"A fine sort of lake," I retorted pettishly.

He shrugged. "The birds come from all over Rihannar. It's—something to see."

Squinting into that white sterility, I tried to envisage an inland sea shadowed, dotted, rimmed with birds, bedded in desert greenery, smiling with water's opulence to the harsh blue sky.

For a moment the image's image took my breath. Then it was gone. In unwarranted, inexplicable disappointment I said crossly, "I can't imagine how you live out here."

He slanted a look at me. Then he said slowly, "When it happens . . . the wait's worthwhile."

"It doesn't happen anywhere near often enough for me."

“That,” he answered on a note of finality, “is how Hethria is.”

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Having crossed a tiresomely wide gibber plain called Rienzar we did visit a dassyk, to find the horses a new set of shoes, and again I saw that reaction to him, the Sathel closeness exaggerated to a kind of wary dread. The horses were shod by mid-afternoon. Rather than stay the night he made another short march, remarking, “It’s only five miles to Tirien Neth. The southern channel of Kemreswash.”

Tirien Neth delighted me, a sinuous watercourse of pools and patchy grass and white sand brilliant under huge Stiriand helliens, the first sizeable trees since Eskan Helken. Their black-and-white dappled bark and heavy shadow seemed beautifully cool, and the general beauty was scarcely marred by a barrage dam which fed irrigation channels to the dassyk we had just left.

After we pitched camp I wandered upstream, hopeful of more Hethrian gweldryx, whose colors, if not their truly terrible squawks, were a lasting joy to me. I noted an ant-bed eaten out by a spiny-backed he-lymfet, and was heralded by flocks of cerisval that whirled from my path like flying gray-tipped apple buds. Then a clamor like a dozen squeaky doors swung at once jerked my eyes to the trees.

I was under a hellien with a hollow branch, where some cerisval had made a nest. Both parents were there, flapping and screeching in the wildest agitation. I stared, baffled. Then along the branch, a sheet of bark came to life.

It was a langu, one of the big black desert pythons, ten feet long, thick as a man’s forearm. It was climbing

with its slow, inexorable, terrifying snake's glide toward the nest.

One jump had me in the riverbed, scooping stones. Childhood has given me a good throwing arm and I used it to the utmost, sending a volley of pebbles into the tree. But the langu was beyond my range, all I managed was to scare the birds from their pathetic defense. Quite unaware that it was only with my mind, I screamed in grief and fury, *Zam, come here, quick! Quick!*

Of course he did not shout, What is it? Nor did he come pelting to my aid. The Arts are swift as other thought. Though he answered on my next breath he must already have used farsight to perceive the situation and decided his response.

His mental voice was cool as his spoken one. He said, <Let it be. Come back.>

My rage and refusal never attained to thought. I swooped on another stone, and my hand stopped in mid-snatch.

As I struggled in superstitious terror and good honest wrath, he repeated, with a hint of iron, <Let it be.>

I fought. And to my utter outrage found myself, mentally kicking and bawling like a leashed lap-dog, turned about and walking back to the camp.

In that short distance I expended every obscenity in my vocabulary, reached hitherto unscaled heights of invective, poured verbal—or at least mental—boiling oil and scorpions on his head. I arrived ready to stab, stone, strangle or burn him alive, and would have settled for dismemberment, given the opportunity.

I did not get it. He was standing by the saddlebags, his stance curiously rigid, those gray eyes shimmering like molten lead. I was still ten feet away when

he said, “You may as well know now, you can’t. When you’re calmer, I’ll explain. Until then, for both our sakes, you’d best stay where you are.”

And my feet seemed to take root in the ground.

However demeaning a tantrum may be, especially for one taught to vanquish emotion, I defy anyone, in such a position, to be less than beside themselves. It was Chake, of course. The aedryx’ direct Command. Had I known the name, it would have been no better. My self-control was gone beyond recapture. I simply had to wait for the fury to burn itself out.

He lit the fire, proceeding stolidly with routine. It took me till dusk to swallow that; but at last I achieved a cold, hate-filled calm in which I recollected my rank and resolved to stand on it. No shrieks, assaults, shrewish tirades would mar my majestic dignity. I would be as cold as Hazghend’s icebergs, and twice as blighting as ice.

Instantly my limbs were released. Knees trembling, I walked forward and let myself sink down by the flames.

Another of aedryx’ maddening habits is their ability to nip your gambits in the bud. He did not give me the pleasure of refusing food or drink. Nor did he apologize. He said in his calm, impervious voice, “Spiders paralyze flies and hang them up alive. Hornets store living insects for their larvae to eat. Mantis females bite off their lovers’ heads. Ulfann packs pull calves’ intestines out before they’re dead. Morvallon pick out lambs’ eyes on the wing. And kings kill and maim their subjects—so they can win a war.”

My dignity forbade avengement of this last comparison, though I took the point of the parallels all too well.

He went on quietly, "If you had chased it away, it would only have found something else. That's how it lives. Even in Hethria, we have no right to favor one living thing above another because we like them better. They are all part of reality. That-which-is. Some parts may be harder to accept than others, but all are equally real. I thought you made a point of facing facts?"

I had just control enough to turn a shoulder and say in the iciest tone achievable, "Thank you for the lecture. It's your opinion and you're entitled to it. Now may I have the pleasure of not hearing your voice again?"

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So for the next week silence reigned supreme, making Hethria seem noisy in comparison. Never have I sustained such an extended fit of the sulks at such a cost, and it was no comfort that his wretched Scarthe made a charade of the entire thing. Never, even in thought, was I so determined not to thaw. By the week's end I was quite adept at turning my mind off to think nothing for hours at a time, and since he seemed perfectly content, we might have ridden in silence clear to Assharral, had not Hethria taken a hand in the game.

Traveling athwart a belt of low sandhills, we intersected the path of a thunderstorm. It must have passed a good month ago, giving Hethria time to respond in full, and it had been a narrow storm, barely the span of two sandhill crests. So it was without warning that we surmounted the western rise to find ourselves on the brink of a valley that brimmed with flowers.

Every desert blossom must have been there, scarlet, magenta, orange, pink, purple, white, an intense

distilled-sky blue, in every shape from spike to daisy to pea to floweret. They nodded in tight profusion against the intense green of new leafage, the red earth, the leached desert sky, such unexpected profusion that before I could help it, I exclaimed aloud, “Oh, it’s beautiful!”

Zam glanced round quickly, and as quickly smiled. It was the first time I had seen him smile. His face lit up, growing much younger, quite impish, a match at last for those remarkable gray eyes. No doubt I could have found no quicker way back to his good graces than to praise his beloved Hethria. Nor a better way of thawing the frost, however unintentional.

“Yes,” he answered aloud. “Yes, it is.”

When we reached the flowers he slid from the gray and walked by Vestar’s shoulder, pointing a plant out with a boot-toe, touching the higher ones with light, careful fingers that made it a caress. I knew the morrethans, but there were scores of strangers as well. Heshnor, with woolly silver leaves and white daisy-like flowers; kerrothar, palm-wide blooms in pastel blue or pink or pristine white; fimbrethal, lilies like purple stars with hairy edges and golden hearts. Fimbravos lilies, gangly white multiple florets frail as spiders of snow; mallavos, delicate red long-petalled orchids. Legumes flowering scarlet, sunset orange, pink and lavender and hyacinth, and ilienlythe—“in a good year cattle come right out into Hethria after it”—with fleshy pointed green leaves and globes of heavy, spiky cerise flower. Shaggy yellow axvystar daisies, lydsith, flamboyantly bizarre claws of blossom, tawny yellow and black or maroon and emerald. And the blue flowers whose intense cobalt and azure shades eclipsed the very morrethans, whose thick crowds turned the valley

floor to a rainbow cloud-mass, patched with lakes of sky.

<Azians,> he said. <The same as they call the gem. Blue fire.>

Something very near affection was in his eyes, as it was in the way he touched the blooms, or his careful path amid the clumps, a more careful, more loving attention than any gardener's. It was earth's gift that moved him, not its mastery.

I was so enchanted by this abrupt, capricious display of Hethria's bounty that we were atop the farther slope before I realized the silence had not broken. I was, unawares, thinking my questions, and it was in mindspeech that he was answering me.

On the thought he glanced up. <It's better, don't you think?>

I looked back onto the flowers, and in that moment I first felt the spell of Hethria. They were beautiful in themselves, more beautiful because they were unplanned, untended, more beautiful again because they were so rare, so uncharacteristic, such a contrast to their environment, as in a kinder land they could never be. And I understood what he meant. The silence too was an integral part of this landscape. Like the landscape, it did not deserve to be marred, by human presence or human voice.

I nodded. He vaulted back on the gray, and in perfect accord we looked once more into the flower valley, before we rode away.

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After that we rarely spoke aloud, though we were no longer uncommunicative. A few nights later, he said over the sinking fire, <We've made good time. The day

after tomorrow we should reach Kemrestan. The border province of Assharral.>

How far then? I thought.

<To Zyphryr Coryan, the capital, would be a fortnight's fast riding. But the court's on progress. We'll meet them in Etalveth, one of the border towns.> His glance grew a shade tentative. <Did you want to see Assharral?>

No. I recalled, with a start, that I had not left Everran for a sightseer's jaunter. *It's Beryx I came to see.*

It was dark when we rode into Etalveth, but daylight proved it quite disappointingly normal, a knot of twisted streets, whitewashed flat-roofed houses, keerphear trees' grateful shade on glary white dust, lazy dogs, garrison people and off-duty soldiers, so familiar I might have been in Gebria. We slept in the caravanse-rai. When Zam went off to the horses, remarking, "We can go to the fort for morning audience," I took a quick walk abroad, adjusting to the oddness of being among people, buildings, cultivation, domestic animals, and that constriction which comes from clipping the sky's edge. When I returned, Zam had disappeared.

Pest on him, I fretted in the tiny mud-brick colonnade room. Why must I come before Beryx trailing an aedr? How long will he be gone? He could have left a message, at the least.

Then it occurred to me that I would not arrive trailing Zam. He too was an aedr; he and Beryx would be long acquainted. It was Zam who would be trailing me.

I gave my habit a futile dust, my hair an equally vain brush-up, saddled Vestar and set off for the fort, half a mile out of town.

The gate guards' surcoats were the very green of Everran's livery, but their badge was a cluster of vivid vermilion dagger-petalled flowers. There was also a startling variety of breeds, red, yellow, white, black or bronze-skinned, though all perfectly polite. When I said, "I'm here to see the emperor," the officer nodded at once, told me where to leave the mare, and added, "They'll be in the mess hall, ma'am."

They? I wondered, following a stream of local people, mostly shepherds by the smell.

The mess hall was also mud brick, relatively cool inside its thick walls, impregnated by the smell of all communal eating places, and just as scruffy. Nor had it been dressed up. No throne, no hangings, no costly furniture, not a flower. The tables had just been pushed back to the walls and the benches set in rows to face a line of chairs on the low dais. In the gloom of the un-drawn shutters it looked shabby, dilapidated, so I thought in sudden anxiety, Was it really a myth? Does this emperor, legendary or otherwise, have any power at all?

My natural nervousness became a pang of dread. The shepherds had not sat politely on the benches but were squatted in groups, eating, dicing, gossiping, drinking wine from skins which shot a stream straight into your mouth. Where was the court, the lords, the chamberlain, the scribes and council, the herald and trumpeters?

Then a door opened onto the dais and a solitary woman came briskly in.

She was middle-aged, though slender and upright, with an unlined oval face and black hair so sleek and shining it needed no adornment but its simple knot in the nape of her neck, and the contrast with her

white dress of eastern silk. The only other sign of wealth or rank was her bracelet, a chain of pea-sized thillians. And, when I looked closer, a gold signet, the badge of a monarch, on her right thumb.

The shepherds scrambled to their feet. Stunned, I realized this was the ruler of Assharral. Not an emperor, an empress.

Over the shepherds' heads her eyes met mine. Black eyes, blacker than a moonless midnight, shot with weaving golden motes of fire. I knew that motion. She was an aedr too.

I was still gaping when she came swiftly from the dais, the shepherds parting for a smile age had made no less bewitching, and a voice like running water: "You wouldn't mind waiting a moment, would you? Someone here has come so far it would be unjust to make her wait at all." That smile would have made perfect justice of twice the iniquity.

Next moment I had been turned about, while that fluent music continued, "Come through here, I see no cause to bellow your affairs around all Kemrestan," whisked down a passage to what was clearly the commandant's living room, a jug of scarlet flowers on the table among the remains of breakfast, and she was saying, "What have they done with the wine? Yes, Etalveth is a fleapit. I wish we had time to show you the rest of Assharral. Thangar and Tasmar are—"

I never heard what they were. A quick step and a clear, decisive voice with the ring of a trumpet and an undernote of irrepressible laughter preceded their owner through the door.

"Moriana, are you aware that half Kemrestan's spitting crusts and mutton-fat all over Ansor's mess hall, and if we don't move soon he'll be fit to—"

I knew him at once. The black hair was grizzled now, the face deeply trenched, and his right arm lay in a sling I did not remember remembering from the dream, but the eyes were the same, black-lashed almonds almost violently full of life and laughter and the aedric motion, glancing like sentient emeralds from the nobly boned face. The scar was there too, a purple blotch across his cheek. A livid purple, grown more livid as I looked. He was turning white.

You expect to be affected by a legend. You do not look to see it affected by you. It was he who broke the silence, in the merest whisper.

“Sellithar.”

All at sea, I went on the defensive by instinct, trying to sound pacific rather than belligerent.

“I hope you’ll excuse me. I didn’t choose the name. It’s tradition. . . .”

And then it struck me like a thunderbolt. To him the first Sellithar had not been tradition. She had been his living, lived-with, abandoned queen.

My eyes fled to Moriana. Hers were laughing, almost wickedly. She must have spoken too, in mind-speech, but much as I was thinking, for Beryx started and said, “No. Yes. I mean, of course. No, only at first—oh, dear. . . .”

His confusion was endearing. An intuition that it was his basic quality off-balanced me further. Endearing is not the term you expect to use in summing up an aedric emperor.

“I mean,” he went on, with a disarming smile, “that you have the name, and some resemblance, but you’re quite different.” And from mirth and confusion came one of those rapier darts that were also characteristic. “As Zam’s probably learnt by now.”

Then he instantly cancelled my embarrassment with soldier-swift directions that produced wine and sat us down with the cups at our elbows, delicate buff pottery painted with the dagger-petalled flowers. Following my eye, Moriana said, "Lythians. Thangrian work." Beryx was saying briskly, "I doubt we need waste time on talk-talk. We all know why we're here." He raised his brows, handing the initiative to me.

I took the challenge and plunged. "You know what's happening in Everran?"

The last thing I expected was to disconcert him twice. He nodded, looked down, and scrubbed a hand through his hair. Then he said, "Yes. I . . . am sorry, but I may know better than you."

A premonitory thrill made my voice sharp. "What do you mean?"

"After Zam told me, I used Pharaone." Now the look was apologetic. "Since you left . . . I'm sorry I must say this. It's a hard thing to have someone disappoint you, and no easier to give the news."

The chill became ice. "What has Kastir done?"

As he hesitated, Moriana said in that lovely voice's nearest approach to asperity, "Oh, stop quaking about her feelings and get on with it! She'd sooner know. I would."

He did not snap at her. I had the impression they were so closely linked, so fundamentally happy, that they could revile each other with the blithest impunity. He said equably, "Enough, vixen," and turned back to me.

"I'm afraid he twisted your orders. He did wait till it was fairly clear there'd be no word from you." Moriana snorted. "Then he opened channels with Estar." The pity in his eyes described my face. "And then he

told Everran they could not fight Quarred and Estar and Hazghend too. Since you had forbidden him to do it by war, Everran's only choice was to admit Estar's migrants, accept them peaceably, and so keep out the rest. In gratitude, Estar appointed him governor."

I can still see the signet on his left hand as it lay on the table, a long-knuckled hand with burn scars and ancient shield calluses and the huge finghend, his sole imperial token, square-cut, graven with a vine whose leaves were fire. Yet all my will was bent to the one grim determination, that they should not see me cry.

"There was really," he went on gently, "little else he could do."

I had to break out, though I tried to subdue the tone. "No doubt you think I should have stayed? Should never have given him the order? Or you think, like all the rest, that there's no good in an unmarried queen?"

He laughed outright. "Don't ravage *me*, spitfire! I'm already fireproof."

Mollified by the tone, I said, "I beg your pardon. But what else could *I* have done?"

He nodded. After a moment he went on.

"The migrants have been crossing north over Breve Tirien for the last month. A drop in the bucket to Estar, to Everran a flood. There is one thing, it will deter the others. Half the Estarian army has squatted on the border, and they could enlist migrants to form suicide squads before they let Quarred or Hazghend or anyone else take what they've 'won'. Everran—" Despite my extremity, his eyes reminded me that it had also been his kingdom, that Zam said it was still very dear to him "—is for all purposes a piece of Estar." He paused. "We both know there was room. And there's

been little trouble. Far less than I expected. Everran simply seems to have . . . accepted things.”

I saw Everran lost in a gray swarming flood, our customs and dialects swept away, my lords and soldiers’ dazed submission, their spirit broken before battle. Because of me. Because I had betrayed their trust, because I had run away. . . . I do not know what I would have done then had the door not opened and Zam walked in.

Dimly I registered that both Beryx and Moriana had jumped up, with a flurry of embrace and exclamation, a note of joy, more than joy, in Beryx’s, “Zam! How was it?” and something recorded that this was more than relief at a diversion or a tactful pretext to let me recover myself. That Zam was not just an acquaintance, he was more like a son.

When the fuss subsided we all sat round the table. It could have been a family breakfast rather than a council between an emperor, an empress, a queen and a virtual king. Beryx opened it with an enquiring look at me.

By then I had had time to think. “How big is Assharral?” I asked.

His brows shot up, but he answered readily. “There are ten provinces, all but one bigger than Everran. Eight would be more thickly populated.”

It gave me pause, when he did not answer my next thought as Zam would have, so I had to go on aloud. “Could you get an army across Hethria?”

Moriana’s black eyes flashed fierce approval. But Zam and Beryx looked so guarded it was like no response at all.

After a moment Beryx said, “Is that what you want?”

I was past manners, let alone diplomacy. “Everran is my kingdom. I want it back!”

Beryx scrubbed at his hair. He sounded unhappy. “Have you thought what it will cost?”

When I did not answer, he spelt it out for us both.

“It will split the Confederacy. They’ll unite against Assharral, or take sides and turn on each other. Whoever wins, Everran will become an Assharran dependent. The balance of power will be destroyed. Assharral will be permanently involved. There will never be a Confederacy again. And whatever the rest do, Estar will certainly fight.”

Now his eyes held open pain. “You know what that means. Dead Assharran and Everran soldiers, yes, but for Everran itself? Ravaging, pillaging, wanton destruction. A people divided. Guerrilla warfare. Reprisals. Decimated population, the land ruined. You know that, whoever wins a war, the battlefields lose. If we did win, you wouldn’t get back Everran. It would be a—a ruin.”

I think my mouth fell open. I know I gawked like an imbecile as the cumulative sense sank in. He met my eyes, unhappy but unflinching, while I progressed from realization to belief to reaction to words.

“You don’t want to help me.”

He scrubbed again at his hair. “Sellithar, I want to help, I would help you, please believe me, for your own sake and for Everran’s, if only—if only I could.”

The rage came then, burning my ears, reddening my sight. “If you could! Do you have an empire, or don’t you? Do you care for Everran, or not?”

“Of course I care,” he said wretchedly. “But it’s a question of how—”

“Oh, I see! So long as you have Assharral, it doesn’t matter who else is dispossessed. And all because I believed a stupid dream and ran away, trusting to get help from *you!*”

Still he did not fire up, just looked miserable. The approval had left Moriana’s eyes, there was a cold glint in Zam’s. I rounded on them. “And don’t say I can’t speak to an emperor like that! It’s his fault this happened! I’d never have left Everran if it weren’t for him!”

“Sellithar!” When Beryx did rouse he was commanding enough for any emperor. He also seemed much younger, a glimpse of an earlier, more hot-blooded king. “Do you really think I’d tinker so viciously with reality? Whatever caused your dream, it wasn’t sent by me.”

“Ohhh!”

I had leapt up, the chair went over with a crash, with a second crash my winecup fragmented on the floor. Through a teary haze of wrath I saw their faces: Moriana grave, Beryx stern, Zam impassive as ever; six eyes with the same aedric quality. “If you’re aedryx, then give me Kastir any day. At least with him it was straight deceit!”

Beryx’s eyes dilated. Very softly, he said, “Sellithar, will you—just for a moment—look here?”

And when I looked his eyes flowed, darkening to laurel or bayleaf green shot with the white slashes of sun on leaves, absorbing my attention, swallowing me.

With neither rage, wonder nor resistance I felt myself grow calm. As the backwash of emotion faded his face reappeared, and he said quickly, “Forgive me, but I had to do that. Now listen. You’ve sat in judg-

ment. You know there are two sides to every case. Will you at least hear ours?"

I took breath. Then I said stonily. "Well?"

Incredibly, he grinned. "No," he said. "Not in the least like Sellithar."

Then he sobered. "I know this is the most damning of all defenses, but we tried to act for the best. You were at Eskan Helken before we had any inkling of this, and if you had gone back then it would have done no good. We didn't want to make your decision. We wanted to see you, face to face, to tell you what had happened and hear your side and let you make your choice. We hoped that . . . you would see our side too."

"And if I had?"

"Then we . . . we would have been most happy to . . . I mean we still are—or at least we would be—"

"Men!" said Moriana. "What he means, apart from trying to save your pride, is that you needn't be dispossessed. You could come to Assharral. Not as a court ornament. We need a new governor in Tasmarr, for a start." She smiled at me. "And it's not charity."

My momentary softening steeled. "Thank you," I said. "But I am the ruler of Everran. It belongs to me."

Beryx was frowning as at a physical pain. "Try to understand," he said earnestly. "What happened in Everran is beyond reversal. The cost of trying would be bloodshed and misery far beyond its worth."

"You mean I should simply give up? Go quietly away, let Everran become an Estarian anthill and Kastir play at governors and everybody think"—rage made my head swim—"that I didn't look for help? I just deserted them?"

"No, I never meant—"

“You not only won’t help me fight, you don’t want me to fight at all!”

His doubt and unhappiness vanished. He spoke with a more-than-imperial authority.

“There are ways and ways of fighting, Sellithar, and if the hardest is against yourself, the most foolish is against Math. Which means, so far as it can be defined, reality. That-which-is. And when you fight reality you can’t help but lose. Reality now is that Estar has taken Everran. I’m not a velandyr by any means, I feel as you do. It was my kingdom once. But I do have enough Velandryxe—enough wisdom—to recognize reality when I see it, and accept what I must.”

Moriana cast her eyes up. “You may as well go quietly,” she put in, “once he starts to talk about Math.”

I hardly heeded her. Though the rage threatened to drown me, my voice, amazingly, was almost cool.

“It’s very easy to say that, when you’re sitting safely in Assharral, with Hethria to fend off any risk to you. It’s not so easy for me. I’ve lost my kingdom. I’m afraid pious resignation’s not quite within my reach.”

Moriana choked a giggle, but I noted with a start that Zam was frowning, frowning thunderously. The wrath you feel at an insult to someone very dear.

“Oh, dear.” Beryx’s dismay was almost comical. “I know it’s hard to accept. I know I sound a hypocrite. I know I might as well spit in the wind as say, ‘I’d give in.’ I know you don’t believe that either.” Tiredly, he smiled at me. “You feel we’ve betrayed you, and from your view, we have.”

The smile faded. “But . . . try to see, Sellithar. When you choose a course of action, you try to base it on the facts. So do I. Only facts aren’t enough. How

you see them is governed by—beliefs, principles. I believe in Math. And Math says, Respect That-which-is. Which means, never try to tamper with it unless you must. What happened in Everran is now reality. There's no sign that Estar will play the tyrant. If I meddle, I'll cause ruin and destruction in Everran, I'll waste untold lives in the Confederacy. And I'll betray Assharral, by involving them in a pointless, irrelevant war, at whose end we'll all be worse off. I cannot do it. That is my judgment; in Math and as an emperor. Do you see?"

"You won't help me," I said flatly.

"I'll help you if you let me." He held out his hand as if to make it a physical fact. "I can help you come to terms with it, to make a new life, in any way I can, in any way you like."

"Except to get Everran back."

"Oh, Sellithar." It sounded almost tragic. "I can't."

The breath caught in my throat. "I'd have done better to go straight back from Eskan Helken and take on the Confederacy myself!"

Zam looked across me and said quietly, "I did think it would have been better to tell her then."

My throat dried so completely it was some time before I could speak.

"You knew?"

His eye was hard as a fist. "I used Pharaone too."

"And you never told me, you brought me all this way for nothing, you let me go on thinking they'd help, and all the time you—oh, you—you—"

Beryx cut in like a flash. "Zam wanted to tell you, I said, No. To go back would have been pointless, and we hoped you'd—"

“And you *discussed* me! Talking over my head as if I was a filly you might buy, making my choices for me, giving *my kingdom* away! By the Four, if you weren’t aedryx I’d murder the lot of you, even if I’m a woman I’d, I’d—” and then, to my eternal chagrin, I dissolved willy-nilly into tears.

* * * * *

When I finally resurfaced, Moriana and I were alone. She did not bother with soothing coos and embraces. She gave me a cup and ordered, “Drink this.”

I choked on the wine. My own Everran wine. She sat down with an elbow on the table, studying my face.

“Yes,” she said. “He is infuriating. The most infuriating man alive. Or that may be Zam, in your case.” I was too far gone to erupt. “But you’ll never move him, not if you cut both your throats, once he decides something is against Math. And I have reason to be grateful for that, because if he wasn’t such a soft-hearted imbecile I’d have destroyed Assharral and killed myself into the bargain. Or been killed by the people I wronged.”

She gave me a flashing smile. “The last thing that you want to hear is ancient history. And it is unjust that you’ve lost Everran, and we sit here preaching surrender with our every border intact. Unhappily, it’s also reality. I loathe having to echo Beryx, but there’s no refuting that.”

Her hard common sense revived me. I put by the cup, unearthed a grubby post-Hethrian handkerchief and blew my nose. “Now,” she said crisply, “we’ll think what to do next.”

It was there with the vividness, the clarity and instantaneity of a lightning flash. I said, “I know what to do next.”

She looked enquiring. I heard Zam say other aedryx only used Scarthe when they chose, wondered if he was eavesdropping now, challenged him to do his worst, and stood up.

“Thank you for your patience,” I said. “I wish I could stay longer. I should have liked to see more of Assharral—and of you.” For a moment I envied her bitterly, not for her dominions, but for what she had made with Beryx: the integral gaiety born of happiness, of two people safe behind humanity’s strongest shield. “Please tell Beryx I beg his pardon for troubling him. And tell Zam he’s the vilest, most priggish, most hateful, hypocritical, tyrannical, selfish monster ever born, and I never want to see his face again as long as I live.”

“Oh, oh!” she cried, and giggled most disconcertingly. “What are you going to do?”

“I am going back to Everran” I said. “With the Sathellin. I shall marry Kastir, since there’s no other help for it, and I shall get Everran back, whether I’m queen or not.”

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