

THANE

TRAVIS
DANIEL
BOW



Mask and Mallet Publishing

Copyright © 2014 by Travis Daniel Bow

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher.

ISBN: 978-0-9914-6570-5

Mask and Mallet Publishing
PO Box 253
Redwood City, CA 94064

To Laura.

PROLOGUE

Verinald had no sword, no knife, no poison, and no noose. He was chained to tent pegs by wrists and ankles, which ruled out breaking his own neck. He had a bowl of soup—tin, not glass—and he had a spoon.

The spoon was his best chance.

But before he could work up the nerve to use it, the tent flap rustled. Verinald relaxed his grip and focused on his soup. He was calm. He was rational. There was no reason to take the spoon from him.

Then a voice spoke. “Let him sit up,” it said.

Verinald was not an easily flustered man. He had trained to maintain his composure since he was old enough to talk. He had kept a straight face while in fear for his own life, while lying to generals and kings, and while watching men die. But as he heard that voice—as two Huctan soldiers loosened and extended the chains on his wrists and raised him to a kneeling position—he trembled with a mixture of grief and rage that was beyond his control.

“It’s good to see you alive, old friend,” the voice said.

Verinald forced himself to raise his gaze, to meet the eyes that belonged to the voice. The trembling would not stop.

“Ricera,” he said.

“I know you want to condemn me for my betrayal,” Ricera said. “I know you’re itching to rail against me, to try to make me grieve for what is lost. Believe me, I grieve already. But I have made my choice, and your judgment is the least of my concerns. So let’s skip the shouting and weeping and get on to the reason you’re still alive.”

Verinald knew the reason he was still alive. His only consolation was that they could torture him until their knives grew dull, and he would not tell them anything. Not because he was strong, but because there was nothing to tell. Everyone else was already dead.

“Certainly,” Verinald found himself saying, with a voice that was saner than he felt. “Don’t let me inconvenience you. I know how busy you are with treachery and faithlessness.”

Ricera sighed. “Or you could replace the shouting and weeping with sarcastic jibes,” he said. Then, to the Huctan soldiers, “Leave us, please.”

The two soldiers obeyed, and Ricera squatted on his hams so that his eyes were level with Verinald’s. He was close, well within reach, and Verinald still had his spoon. This, more than anything, was a measure of Ricera’s contempt for him. Verinald might be Ricera’s peer in subterfuge and espionage, but in combat he was no better than a common soldier. Even if the spoon in Verinald’s hand had been a sword, he would have been no threat to Ricera.

“Stop measuring us against one another,” Ricera said. “You have done nothing else your entire life. Focus, just for this moment, on the task at hand.”

Verinald's hand shook on the spoon, and he could not stop it.

"I have your son," Ricera said.

Just like that. Ricera's abruptness should have shocked Verinald into showing some emotion, into betraying something, but this deception was so practiced—so ingrained—that Verinald actually managed to raise his eyebrows in confusion.

"My son?" he said. "I have no son."

"You have a son, and you know of him," Ricera said. "Your face has suddenly gone smooth. How many times did we learn that lack of emotion can be just as telling as emotion itself? How old were we when they taught us that? Ten?"

"Who's measuring us against one another now?" said Verinald.

"You're right," said Ricera. "The task at hand. *Your* task, if you care for your son."

"I have no son," Verinald said.

"You have a son," Ricera repeated. "I sent for him as soon as Eoriden fell. His Huctan mother gave him up without a fight, when she learned that you were dead."

Verinald's spoon began trembling again.

Ricera smiled. "And you criticize *my* faithlessness."

"The faithlessness of loving a Huctan woman is *not* the faithlessness of handing your nation over to the Huctan army."

"The task at hand," Ricera said. "The point of this meeting is that you, too, will hand people over to the Huctan army."

"I will not."

"Tomorrow," Ricera continued, "I will set you free. I will have my soldiers wound you, if you wish, so that you can invent a story as to how you escaped capture. You will join your friends, if you still have them, and you will gather the remnants of the Duest to

yourself.”

“I will not.”

“You will. I have found many of them, but there are many that I have not found. They have gone deep into hiding. But you were always a leader of men, Verinald. I have confidence in you. Over the years, you will gather them to yourself. You will organize them. You will form a resistance. Just think: for a time, *you* can be the leader of the Duest. I know it is a position you have long coveted.”

“You are mad.”

“You will gather them, lead them, even recruit others who wish to rebel. You will make a safe haven for them, a base of operations, a gathering place. The hill country between Suiton and Shadil will do, I think. I even give you permission, as you see fit, to inflict damage on the Huctans. My only condition is that the damage you inflict does *not* lead to your discovery. You will maintain secrecy and safety at all costs.”

“You don’t have my son,” Verinald said. “You may have known of him, but you don’t have him. This is a bluff.”

“Secrecy and safety,” Ricera said, “but watchfulness. Because when I call for you, you *will* respond. You will deliver the remnants of Botan into my hand. You will betray those you have gathered, and in so doing you will earn the life of your son.”

“My son is dead,” Verinald said.

“Your son is alive,” Ricera said. “He is beginning to speak. He is very intelligent; you can see it in his eyes. In that, he is like his father.”

Verinald could not stop himself. He was too tired, too full of despair and hate and self-loathing. He dropped his head, dropped his spoon, and began to weep.

“Take comfort,” Ricera said. “I may fail. All my plans may crumble around me, and I may never send for you. You may never have to betray those who trust you, as I have. You may even succeed in starting a real resistance. The Huctans may govern poorly. Perhaps, in time, you will throw their shackles off and win independence and freedom for Botan. Maybe your son will hear of your name and come to your throne with open arms.”

Ricera’s hand touched Verinald’s shoulder, and Verinald jerked as if burned. He looked up to find a mirthless smile on Ricera’s face.

“But don’t count on it,” Ricera said. “Don’t count on it.”

CHAPTER 1

In the northern hills of Botan, where the high desert meets the alpine forests, the sun was rising on the last normal day of Timothy's life.

He had been awake for over an hour. He always got up early, as if his diligence might somehow make up for his uselessness as a fletcher's apprentice. By now, with the pink light of dawn filtering through the pine needles and coloring the mist of his breath, he had already gathered water, spread cracked corn for the chickens, collected the eggs, milked the cow, and cooked breakfast. He was on his way to town for arrowheads.

It was a two mile jog. The air was cool under the pines. The needles that carpeted the steep hill to the northwest damped out the sound of his bare feet, leaving only the gurgling of the stream to break the stillness. Even the stream was silent most of the time, making its way smoothly through a narrow, winding channel of overhung grass and dark loam.

Timothy slowed as he neared town. They called it "town", but there were only six buildings, straddling the path and separated

from the stream by a hundred yards of thin alpine grass. The gray wooden structures—the inn, the store, and the homes of the smith, tanner, clothier and carpenter—served as a hub for the canyon people. They came to town when they needed supplies, or news, or social interaction.

Almost no one outside of the canyon knew about town. Occasionally a cowhand would pass through on his way in to Watchton, or a wagoner would bring in supplies, but for the most part, you could count on finding canyon people and only canyon people in town.

And that was what made town worth having. Yes, it was small. Yes, it was probably unnecessary, since Watchton—a *real* town—was only ten or twelve miles up the hill. But it was something that belonged to the canyon people. It was their own.

And to Timothy, it was home. Or, rather, it *had* been home, until a few months ago. Until his father had kicked him out of the smithy. Until his mother had gone to the fletcher and begged him to take Timothy on as an apprentice. Until Timothy had had to bid Robert—the *real* son—goodbye.

No, that was unfair. Only Mother knew which son was her real son, and Father had made the decision. Father could be impartial, because he didn't know which son truly belonged to Mother, and because neither son belonged to him. To him, both boys were adopted. Part of the price of marrying their mother.

No, that was unfair too. Father loved them. Timothy hadn't been sent away because he was unloved or unwanted. He had been sent away because two boys needed trades to survive as men, and because there was not enough work for two smiths, and because Timothy had never shown an ounce of aptitude at the forge.

Or at anything, really.

No. Stop being a baby, he told himself. Don't show Mother even a hint of your pouting. She feels guilty enough already.

But he couldn't help knocking on the door of the smithy and waiting politely for someone to answer it. Robert or Father might miss the gesture—the subtle reminder that they had made him an outsider, that he now *knocked* at the door to the house he had grown up in—but Mother would not miss it. If she answered the door and saw him patiently waiting to come in, she might cry.

But Mother did not answer the door. Robert did. And he did not burst into tears of remorse.

“Your hand broken?” he said. “Or did you forget where the handle is?”

And just like that, Timothy's self-pity evaporated.

“I thought you might be asleep,” he said. “After all, it's not even lunch time yet.”

“You're letting in the cold,” said Robert.

“You're letting out the heat.”

Robert shut the door in Timothy's face. Timothy waited. When Robert didn't open the door again, Timothy reached for the handle and went inside.

The front room of the building was the smithy itself. An array of neatly organized tools hung on one wall to the right. An anvil was fixed to a platform in the center of the small room. The forge—a stone structure with a large leather bellows mounted to one side—was built into the bricked chimney on the back wall. The forge fire was lit, but it hadn't yet been stoked and blown to its full heat.

Robert was on the left side of the room, kneeling before a large wooden shelf. He was cleaning it, removing wooden boxes of

various buckles, links, and latches so that he could scrub behind and beneath and around the stored goods.

It was unnecessary work. From the tiny amount of dirt on Robert's rag, he had probably cleaned the same shelf yesterday. That was a bad sign. It meant that real work, work that paid, was in short supply.

Timothy stood for a moment, remembering the hours spent in this cramped room, sweating through the summers and relishing the heat in the winters. For a moment he had a strong urge to stride through the smithy and into the house, to see if his old bed was still there, to sit down at the table and eat a breakfast cooked by his mother.

But he couldn't dally. The fletcher would expect him to accomplish his business and be back soon. If he showed that he couldn't be sent to town without spending an hour lingering at his old home, he wouldn't be sent to town anymore.

"The fletcher letting you go to the Jubilee?" Robert asked, not turning away from the shelf.

Timothy felt his mood dampen again. It was a small thing—he had never been to the Spring Jubilee, and it wouldn't hurt him to miss it again this year—but it had been twisting at him. Robert was going, this year. Timothy would have liked nothing better than to spend a day with Robert again, to soak up the feeling of peace—without responsibility or self-pity or despair—that came with being around his brother. He would have liked to see Watchton, to really see it and explore it and absorb the joy of hundreds of people celebrating another year of planted crops and birthed livestock. In spite of the Huctan guards, who were always at the gates, he would have liked to go.

“Oh,” Timothy said, as casually as he could. “Yeah. He said I can go after I finish with the garden. It’s going to take a while, though, and I can’t start until tomorrow because we’re going stove-gathering today. So I’ll probably be pretty late.”

“How late?” Robert asked, glancing back from the shelf. His blue eyes looked alarmed.

Timothy shrugged. “Probably early afternoon before I can even leave here,” he said.

“Early afternoon! It’ll all be over by the time you get there.”

Timothy shrugged again. It was getting a little harder to act like he didn’t care.

Robert shrugged too, turning back to the shelf. “I’ll help you,” he said. “With the two of us, we can finish the garden mid-morning. Earlier, if we start before the sun’s up. The moon was pretty bright last night, wasn’t it?”

“No,” Timothy said, suddenly feeling guilty for letting his disappointment show and dragging Robert into his problems. “You’ll miss half the day. No point in both of us missing it.”

Robert waved a dismissive hand.

“Really,” Timothy said, “You don’t have to come help. I’ll get up early. Maybe I’ll be able to leave by lunch time.”

“Stop whining,” Robert said. “I’m coming. What would I do all day without you?”

Something about Robert’s matter-of-fact tone made Timothy’s throat constrict. He found himself rolling his eyes and hastily changing the subject before a sudden flood of emotion could make his voice crack.



On the next day—the day that everything changed—Timothy was awake and moving even before his usual hour. He donned his heavy wool, then slipped outside to do the morning chores. The chickens, still asleep at their roosts, didn't even notice the corn he scattered. They would find it when they woke.

True to his word, Robert came before the sky had begun to turn gray. They got to work immediately. By the time the fletcher woke up, they were halfway finished with spreading manure and compost from the pit behind the garden.

Robert kept working while Timothy went in to prepare breakfast, and refused two offers by the fletcher before finally joining them around the meal of corn grits and eggs. They ate quickly, and in minutes they were back at work.

As the sun poured down on the garden, sweat began to slick Timothy's arms. By the time full morning had set in, the compost and manure was worked into the ground and formed into small hills and ridges. The fletcher came out to supervise the planting, pointing to where he wanted pumpkins, beans, squash, onions, and corn. Then the watering began, bucketful by bucketful. As they did with everything, Timothy and Robert turned it into a contest. Robert won, finishing the corn just before Timothy finished the other plants.

By mid-morning the work was finished. The fletcher nodded grudging approval, and after taking a long drink, Timothy and Robert began jogging northeast along the stream.

When the stream turned due east, they chose to cross and cut through the forest instead of following the wagon road. A thin fallen pine spanned the water, and it bounced beneath their bare feet as they ran across. Scrambling up the bank, they settled into a brisk walk as the hill grew steep.

Timothy was breathing heavily now, his shirt and pants damp with sweat, but he felt more alive than he had in months. A tingling excess of energy and excitement made his feet light. There wasn't breath or reason for talking, but the silence was an easy one. The scents and breezes of the morning seemed alive. It felt like the old days.

They came to a place barred by a kind of rooted, earthy embankment that rose like a cliff for some fifteen feet. With unspoken consent they raced to the top, clinging to roots with fingers and toes. It struck Timothy, halfway up, that it would have been quicker and easier to skirt the cliff. If Fenae had been there, she would have rolled her eyes and made a comment about boys and their obsession with doing things the hard way.

But Timothy didn't think about Fenae, not anymore. Quickly he banished her face and the entire train of thought that had led him to remember her, and concentrated on reaching the top. He beat Robert by a nose, and made sure Robert was aware of it.

With the glory of the morning and the woods and the quiet around them, the urgency of actually reaching the festival was beginning to fade. Timothy tried to hurry anyway, for Robert's sake, but when Robert took out his sling and began throwing rocks as they walked, Timothy joined him gladly. After a few minutes of pointing out targets for each other, the ground began to level out again. Putting the slings away, they jogged to make up for lost time.

They reached Watchton in just under two hours.

Even with the streets hidden by a wall of cut and lashed pine trunks, it was obvious that crowds had already gathered within. There was a noise, a dull roar that had grown louder so gradually as they approached that Timothy hadn't even noticed it. Now, as they

left the cover of the trees, the rumble of hundreds of voices shouting and talking and laughing struck him all at once.

Only one Huctan manned the guard hut, and he was not questioning those that entered. Timothy kept his eyes averted and his hands at his sides, taking slow, even breaths until they had passed the crimson-cloaked soldier. Robert glanced at him, and Timothy gave a nod that he was OK.

Watchton was jam packed. Everywhere faces turned, legs moved, hands gestured, voices spoke, eyes darted. People with something to sell were yelling their hearts out. Woodspeople and farmers were staring and hanging their mouths open. A group of cowhands was laughing and yelling, a few of them making the strange, yipping cries they used to move cattle. Someone was playing a set of pipes.

Together Timothy and Robert joined the gawkers, pointing things out to each other and pressing tentatively through the crowd. They watched a gangly youth juggling three, four, and then five baggy, faded cloth balls. Mouth hanging a little open in concentration, the boy looked slightly upwards as the balls spun between his hands. Timothy would have watched longer, but an up-tilt in the crowd's noise caught his ear. Sliding between the backs of two people and dodging around a woman in a long coat, he strained to see.

A circle had formed as people backed away from the person standing in the center. Pressing forward, Timothy saw that the focus of attention was a grinning, staggering old man.

Holding a finger up, the old man fixed his eyes on someone at the circle's edge.

"What's your name, friend?" he shouted.

The old man tried to touch the stranger, and fell flat when the

stranger dodged. A few in the crowd laughed. Most looked grim.

“Sorry! Sorry!” The old man shouted again, scrambling to his feet and grinning about him. “I am not drunk,” he announced.

There was more laughter, more frowning. The man whirled, clearly loving the attention, and became wilder with his gesticulations. “I am not drunk!” he repeated. “I am not drunk!”

Timothy’s own teeth were gritted, as much at the fact that Botani people were *laughing* as at the man’s intoxication. The sight disgusted him, as it should have disgusted them all. As it *would* have disgusted them all, fifteen years ago, before the Huctans came and made alcohol a protected and legal trade.

It wasn’t the worst of their trades, but it was a poison to Botan. It was the reason that Fenae’s father had...

No. Think of something else. Anything else.

A hush in the crowd started suddenly, spreading like a wave from farther down the street. People pushed each other to make way. Timothy found himself pressed against a counter with Robert.

Someone was shouting for people to move. Timothy recognized the accent, and his jaw clenched harder.

Huctans came into view, two men in gray wool pants and shirts under crimson cloaks. One held a drawn sword in his right hand. The other held a spear and shouted for people to step back.

The drunk, who had stumbled again and gotten himself tangled up in the tongue of a wagon, was the only person still smiling. He reached up a hand toward one of the soldiers for help. Ignoring the hand, the soldiers faced the man coldly.

“Hello,” the drunk said, affecting a dignified face that only made the swimming of his eyes more apparent.

“You have been drinking,” the Huctan with the sword said. He

sounded angry, and Timothy found himself wondering what the Huctans would do. They had made alcohol legal, but they frowned on public intoxication, realizing how it served as a reminder to the Botani people that they were an occupied country ruled by their oldest enemies. In a crowd this size, with so many Botani already hiding clenched fists as they watched the spectacle, the Huctans would be worrying about a riot.

The drunk grinned. "I am not drunk!" he shouted, looking around for those who had laughed at him before. No one was laughing now.

The soldier with a sword said something in Huctan to the one with the spear, who turned to face the crowd.

"This man is disturbing the peace and showing disrespect to a Huctan officer," he announced. "He will be punished accordingly."

The soldier with the sword yanked the old man forward so hard that he fell flat on the ground in the center of the circle. Timothy could only see him in glimpses now, between the shoulders of the crowd, but he saw the soldier's face tighten as he delivered a vicious kick, and he heard the drunk grunt in pain.

The spearman had upended his weapon. Grasping it with both hands near the blade, he lifted the length of the shaft above his head. Then he swung the handle like an axe, hard. The drunk screamed.

People in the crowd gasped. Some nodded in approval, as if the Huctans were somehow doing the right thing, as if the Huctans had not been the very ones to put the liquor in the man's hand in the first place. Timothy felt sick, and his clenched fist trembled.

The soldier raised the spear haft again, and a gap in the crowd allowed Timothy to catch a glimpse of the old man on the ground,

turned halfway over and holding his hands up pitifully. The spear handle fell, and Timothy heard a terrible snap that had to be one of the drunken man's wrists.

The crowd, which had already been quiet, grew suddenly silent. Timothy ducked and craned his head, looking for an opening, and caught another glimpse of the old man, lying still, eyes rolled back, body shutting down because of the pain.

The Huctan with the spear struck one final time. The sound of brittle ribs cracking was loud in the unnatural silence.

Timothy was breathing hard out of his nose, now. The Huctans were turning to leave. The crowds were moving, dispersing. Robert was tugging at him.

"Come on," Robert said. When Timothy didn't move, Robert tugged harder, and Timothy allowed himself to be pulled and pushed away from the soldiers and into the open space between two houses.

Robert had pressed him against the wall. Timothy realized that Robert's face was so close that their noses almost touched. "You OK?" Robert was saying. "You alright? Timothy, look at me."

Timothy looked into his friend's blue eyes. In spite of himself, he saw Fenaë, saw his own weakness, saw red. With an effort, he shook his head and focused on Robert. His eyes. His blue eyes.

"I'm fine," he said.

Robert looked at him for another minute.

"I'm fine," Timothy repeated.

"Ok," Robert said, "Let's go."

Together, more slowly, they began making their way toward the center of the town, where the festivities would soon begin.

Robert made a valiant effort to distract Timothy from his

brooding, and after a while it began to work. With cheerfulness and energy that was only a little bit strained, they ran back and forth between the contests, trying to see them all. There was an archery shoot, followed by dancing on one side of the square and wrestling on the other. Shepherds had a race to see who could shear a sheep the fastest. Cowhands took turns roping calves. Burly men competed in the caber toss, balancing a ten-foot log upright in their hands, running forward, and flinging the heavy beam as far as they could.

Timothy entered the slinging contest, and although he was better than most of the woodspeople and farmers and *much* better than any of the townspeople, he was far behind the shepherds and cowhands. For them, slinging was a way to protect flocks and herds from the coyotes that roamed the sage. For them, failures with the sling meant dead lambs and maimed calves.

A shepherd won. His prize was a turkey leg and an ear of roast corn. Seeing the food reminded Timothy that, with no money, he would not be eating until they returned home late that night.

A crier shouted something over the crowd, and Robert beckoned to Timothy excitedly. Timothy followed him across town to the field that had been prepared for horse races.

They were early, but the races were what Robert had anticipated the whole day. He was enamored with horses in a way that Timothy would never understand. This was yet another reason why Robert deserved to become a smith, and Timothy did not. Half of a smith's business was making and fitting shoes to the feet of horses. A smith that did not know about horses was like a shepherd that did not know how to shear wool.

They sat for a while on a rail fence in the shade, watching the

people swarming and gathering as the racers prepared their mounts. Timothy saw a group of youths from the canyon approaching, and carefully hid his disappointment when Robert stood up and waved them over.

He could feel it happening as his peers came closer, almost like the onset of a disease. With Robert, alone, Timothy could quip and joke and talk as easily as he breathed. Around anyone else—especially around others his age—he was suddenly slow-witted and awkward. His throat tightened. His eyes slid downward. He was reminded, with every second that Robert chatted and laughed easily while Timothy scratched his neck and blushed, that Robert didn't need him nearly as much as he needed Robert.

He hated it.

There were four boys and two girls. One of the boys was unfamiliar, but the rest of the group had lived in the canyon as long as Timothy could remember.

“Come to see how someone stays *on* a horse, Indriana?” Robert shouted. One of the girls laughed and rolled her eyes, and Timothy remembered that she had brought her father's horse to the smithy once when she was younger. A snake had spooked the animal, and she had been thrown. Father had had to bind her ankle.

Trust Robert to remember that, and to be able to make a girl laugh about it.

The group was close now. Chuon, Indriana's older brother, pointed to Robert and looked at his comrades.

“Here's the one I was telling you about,” he said, loudly enough for Robert to hear. “The reason half of these horses are going to lose shoes before they reach the finish line.”

Robert stepped forward, laughing, and clapped Chuon on the

shoulder as if they were old friends. In fact, Timothy knew, Robert and Chuon despised one another. The fact that Chuon and Indriana's parents had chosen to keep blatantly Botani names for their children, even after the Invasion, spoke for some of the stubborn pride that made their family hard to deal with.

It also made Timothy jealous, that *some* people's parents did not constantly remind their children to bow and scrape to the Huctans at every opportunity.

Thomas, Anne, and their little brother James were farmers from up-canyon. They had always been easier going. Anne, the closest in age to Timothy and Robert, was nowhere near as pretty as Indriana, but she had always struck Timothy as more intelligent. She was also quieter, giving the appearance of shyness, though she seemed to be able to talk easily enough when the time came for it. Timothy couldn't say as much for himself.

Hugs and handshakes were being exchanged—hugs between Robert and the girls, handshakes between the boys. Anne turned away from Robert to meet Timothy. He held his hands out for a hug without thinking, saw what looked like hesitation in her eyes, and tried to turn the gesture into a yawn and stretch. At the same moment, Anne opened her own arms for a hug, but stopped when she realized that he was stretching. Timothy's mortification must have been obvious, then, because Anne laughed and held out a hand. Timothy shook it.

Chuon and Indriana, of course, ignored Timothy completely. The fourth boy—the one Timothy didn't know—had already been engaged in conversation by Robert. Robert was laughing at something he'd said, holding out a hand towards Timothy.

"This is my brother Timothy," he said.

“I’m Peter,” said the boy, holding out a hand to shake.

“I’m Timothy, Robert’s brother,” Timothy said automatically. It was a standard reply, and usually a safe one, when introducing himself to others their age. But of course Robert had already introduced him, and Timothy had just repeated exactly what Robert had said.

Was there any faster way to make it clear how much of an idiot he was?

He probably should have laughed at himself, made some excuse about being distracted, but instead Timothy finished the handshake and then looked past the new boy, towards the horse track, scratching the back of his neck as if he were unaware of the other boy’s presence. It was another automatic reaction. Better to look casual, disinterested and even rude than to writhe and wriggle and make his inability to make conversation obvious.

Luckily Robert had enough conversation for both of them. Gradually everyone turned away from Timothy as Robert talked about the race and told Peter stories about the others. Timothy affected a vacant expression, as if he were only half interested, as if he could have been part of the conversation if he’d felt like it.

Sometimes he hated himself.

After the races, almost all of which Robert had predicted correctly, the two of them split off from the others to explore the town. For almost two hours they wandered, looking at merchandise they could not buy, watching performers they could not tip, and killing time. They were able to avoid the Huctans walking the town, for the most part, and Timothy made an enormous effort to stave off the fury that came over him at the sight of their red cloaks.

The fact that there were too many soldiers for a town like Watchton did not occur to him until it was far too late.

It was getting toward dark when they decided to leave town. Although the festivities were still in full swing, both boys had seen as much as they cared to. It was a long walk back home, and they had been up early, with nothing to eat since breakfast. They were hungry, and tired. The constant presence of so many people, which had been exhilarating at first, was beginning to drain them.

The outskirts of the town were nearly deserted. Only one officer guarded the gate. Timothy, now getting better at keeping his back from stiffening and fists from clenching, fixed his eyes on the forest and walked forward steadily. Soon they would be out of this town, away from the Huctans, and free in the openness of the woods. Soon he could breathe.

Ignoring the soldier became suddenly impossible when the Huctan raised his crossbow and leveled it at Robert's chest. Timothy froze, and another soldier stepped out of the shadows with a crossbow pointed at Timothy.

The boys stood still, not breathing, eyes flickering. Timothy was so surprised that, for a moment, it felt as if his mind had stopped functioning. Then he thought of running, immediately realized that the Huctans were too close, and had to struggle to keep his sudden panic at bay. Then he wondered what was happening, wondered whether something he or Robert had mumbled about the Huctans had been overheard, wondered if he was about to be beaten or killed for a crime he was not even aware of.

Then the second soldier, who had been coming steadily closer, was near enough that Timothy could see the individual blades of the

arrowhead on his crossbow quarrel. Suddenly all Timothy could think about was the fact that a simple twitch of the finger could drive that quarrel through him like a gaff through a lake fish.

“Is there something...” Robert began.

“Be quiet,” the first soldier—an officer—said. “Move off of the road.” He gestured to the left with his crossbow, and Timothy found himself obeying, sidestepping in the direction the Huctan had indicated.

“Sit down, backs against the wall,” the officer said. Timothy hesitated, glancing again at Robert, looking for an avenue of escape.

“Sit. Down,” the officer repeated, stepping quickly forward and pointing the steel-tipped quarrel at Timothy’s face. With the sharp metal arrowhead almost scratching his eyeball, Timothy sat.

The door to the wall they were sitting against opened beside them, and four more soldiers hurried out. Before Timothy could think about getting up, the soldiers were upon them, manhandling them into the building by wrists and throats.

“Help!” Timothy yelled, coming to his senses in time to kick the door frame as he was being shoved through. A fist caught him hard, in the cheek, and dizzying pain cut off his shouts as the door closed behind them.

Panic took over, then, and Timothy found himself jerking violently in the darkness, kicking and thrashing until a heavy blow to the stomach knocked the wind from him.

He doubled over and fell. Opening his mouth, he tried to gasp. Air wouldn’t come.

Someone kicked his hip. He was still trying to breathe. Feet appeared in front of his face, then knees. Someone grabbed his hands and forced them behind his back. Timothy kicked, trying to

tell them he couldn't *breathe*, but then his chest loosened and he stopped struggling to suck in heaving breaths of sweet, dusty air.

His gasping was cut short as a gag was stuffed into his mouth. Robert, somewhere behind him, cursed. Rough hands yanked Timothy to a sitting position and shoved him against the building's inner wall. The soldiers stepped back, and Timothy's eyes gradually adjusted to the lamplight.

A slender figure was standing near a low table, his back to Timothy and the other boys. There were almost a dozen of them, Timothy realized, tied and stacked against the wall like bundles of firewood. Some were unconscious. He looked for Robert and found him far to the left. Their eyes met, and Timothy's panic lessened by one degree.

Taking a breath, he turned back to the desk where the slender man was standing. The other soldiers seemed to be looking to the man at the desk, and Timothy decided that he was in charge.

The slender man turned and spoke. His voice was calm, pleasant, perfectly enunciated. The Huctan accent was so subtle that Timothy didn't even hear it, at first.

"Hello," the man said. "My name is T'shira."

The voice sounded young. Almost Timothy's age.

Robert said something that was unintelligible through his gag, but the lack of humility in his tone was unmistakable. T'shira stepped forward and kicked Robert hard in the stomach.

Robert doubled over, heaving against the gag, and Timothy found himself half-standing, trying to shout, levelling his head to drive it into the young Huctan's side. T'shira whirled, and his boot struck Timothy's shoulder, smashing him to the ground. Timothy lay where T'shira had knocked him, eyelids squeezed tight against

the pain blossoming in his shoulder. His wrists were bleeding against the ropes behind his back.

“Do not speak,” T’shira said. His voice was still calm, pleasant, crisp.

The door opened and two soldiers entered, supporting someone between them. The boy was young, only thirteen or fourteen, and he did not struggle. He glanced around with a look of terror on his face as they tied him, and there was something funny about the way his eyes shone in the lamplight. Timothy caught the sight of blood on the back of the boy’s head just before he recognized Anne’s little brother, James.

The next few hours passed at a slow crawl. The door continued to open and close periodically, sometimes loudly with struggling and muffled shouts, other times quietly as a limp or submissive figure was escorted into the increasingly crowded room. T’shira paced, sat, watched the captives, and then got up to pace again. Timothy tried working at the ropes at his wrists, received several kicks that left him gasping and whimpering in the dirt, and then remained still.

He tried to sleep, but could not. His shoulder throbbed where T’shira had kicked him. His wrists ached and stung where the cords pinched them together. He was hungry, he was thirsty, and he was afraid. He could not figure out why they were here or what was to be done with them, and the uncertainty welled up to a panic that he had to suppress periodically.

The room grew hot, stinking of sweat and fear and blood. No one bothered to look when the door opened yet again, but this time it remained open. The night air, already a little cooler, passed over bodies drenched in discomfort. Heads began to lift.

T’shira had joined another soldier in the doorway, and after a

brief conversation in low tones, he gestured to someone outside. Soldiers began to enter, taking up the stiffened bodies of the tied boys, striking those that cried out until they held their silence. Quickly the room emptied.

Timothy's turn came, and he bit back a whimper as a soldier took him by the rope on his wrists and lifted him to his feet, steering him out the door at a painful, stumbling walk.

Horses stood on the road in the night, some with trussed boys already slung across their backs. Timothy was taken to an empty horse, his foot forced into the stirrup. A jab to his ribs encouraged him to step up, and a shove laid him across the saddle blankets.

He felt a cord cinch around his ankles.

"Don't fall off," a Huctan voice advised. Then someone had mounted the horse in front of Timothy, and they were moving.

Every step drove the breath from Timothy's lungs, but after a brutal elbow silenced his first whimper, he did not cry out.

He could not tell how long they rode, or how far they traveled, or even what direction they went. His body slowly bruised against the saddle's edge and the horse's back. His bare feet grew ever colder, and his hands alternately tingled and grew numb behind him. It seemed like dawn should have come a long time ago. He did not sleep, but exhaustion sometimes blurred the pain and the passing of time. He heard someone ask to pee and receive a hard blow in reply. When his own urge became unbearable, he wet himself against the haunches of the horse and was grateful for the warmth.

When the movement stopped and Timothy tried to lift his head, dizziness spun his senses and he almost vomited. Torches and lanterns were lit, and when the spinning stopped, Timothy could see dusty white tents fluttering in the now-cold breeze.

Breath was frosting from the horses, their riders, and their burdens. Someone whimpered. Timothy's rider dismounted, unlashd his feet, and pulled him from the horse. Timothy cried out softly and almost fell as his numb feet struck the ground. Someone grabbed the back of his neck hard, steered him for several steps, and shoved him. Then he did fall, only just managing to twist so that his shoulder struck the ground before his face.

Someone knelt behind him, cutting the bloody ropes away from his wrists. Tightened muscles suddenly released, and Timothy felt a few seconds of relief before the soldier woke the bundles sleeping on the ground and yanked at the chains that bound them.

Seeing the manacles meant for him, Timothy tried to run. He stumbled on his uncooperative feet, rose, and fell again as something heavy struck him in the back. Two more soldiers rushed to help, and he was dragged back to the chains, writhing and shouting. The back of a gloved hand struck him hard across the face, and hot blood poured from his nose. He screamed and freed one of his own hands, swinging back at the figures holding him. Another backhand left his ears ringing and vision blurred.

In a moment, the cold manacles were closed around him, and he was bound between two other boys, wrist to wrist, ankle to ankle.

He wanted to cry, but didn't. Instead he lay still for several minutes, teeth gritted, and tried to get control over his breathing.

Presently someone beside him spoke.

"You OK?"

Timothy didn't answer for a moment. Looking up, he could just make out the shaggy hair of the boy next to him.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm OK."

The boy waited a moment, obviously wanting to ask something,

but trying to respect Timothy's shock. Finally he spoke again.

"What village did they get you in?" the boy asked. "Where are we now?"

Timothy felt something trickle down his ear, realized he was still bleeding, and pulled his hand up towards his face. The chain, attached to the other boy's wrist, caught for a moment, but then the boy raised his own wrist so that Timothy could reach his face.

"Watchton," Timothy heard himself say. "I don't know where we are now."

"Watchton," the boy repeated, half to himself. "Still moving us northeast."

Timothy got his nose pinched shut and felt blood start to trickle down his throat. He tried to swallow, but his throat was so dry that he was unable to do so.

"Us?" he said. "Still? What is this? Where are we?"

"Shh," the boy said. Timothy realized that most of the torches were gone, moved farther toward the tents, and that a quiet had fallen over the mass of boys on the ground. The clouds were covering the moon, and it was hard to see much farther than his own hand.

"Where are we?" Timothy asked again, in a whisper. This time the boy answered.

"I don't know," he said. "There are about a hundred and fifty of us, all boys, all older than twelve or thirteen. They've been marching us along the edge of the desert, kidnapping as they go. The popular theories are that they're going to kill us, make us into death-slaves, or force us to fight in their army."

Timothy had the sudden feeling that the boy had explained all this before.

“How long have you been...” he asked.

“Two weeks,” the boy replied. “Almost since the beginning.”

Timothy was quiet for a moment, trying to stave off his exhaustion long enough to collect his thoughts. The jingling of chains and the whimpering of boys grew steadily quieter. The air grew steadily colder.

“I’m Garret,” the boy said.

“Timothy,” said Timothy.

He wondered where Robert was, how far away he was chained, whether he had fought as they manacled him. He hoped Robert had not had to wet himself, as he had. The stink was already wrinkling his nose, and the wet was cold on his legs.

“How many soldiers?” he whispered. Garret did not answer. Timothy nudged the boy with his elbow. “Hey. Hey.”

“What?” Garret whispered.

“How many soldiers are there?” Timothy asked.

“I dunno. Fifty maybe.”

“And you said there are a hundred and fifty of us?”

“About,” said Garret.

Timothy lay back again on the hard ground, looking at the stars. After a moment, Garret spoke.

“Look over there,” he said.

“Where?”

“There.” Garret was pointing with their chained hands. Timothy sat up, grimacing, and then saw what Garret was pointing at. About fifty feet away, something stood in a pool of light cast by a lamp that had been left burning.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Two people that tried to escape. Got out of their chains

somehow. They tied them there this morning.”

Timothy leaned forward, blinking to clear his eyes, and suddenly realized what he was seeing. Two naked figures hung limp, strung up by wrists and ankles below a wooden beam like the carcasses of two animals. Timothy shuddered as he made out the silhouette of the boys’ heads, lolled back at an unnatural angle and hanging limp. He wondered how long it had taken for the weight of their heads to become too much for their necks to hold anymore.

A sudden thought crossed his mind, and he turned sharply to Garret.

“Are they...” he whispered.

“No, they’re alive.” Garret said. The way he said it made it sound like an unfortunate truth. Garret rolled over, turning his back to Timothy. Slowly Timothy laid his head back on the grass and stared up at the stars.

For a long time he could not sleep. He was cold, and the boys huddling close on either side only helped a little. He was also afraid. His fear shamed him, his shame angered him, and when that wore off he was afraid again.

But something was happening, deep in his gut. Something was... *opening*. The trembling was slowly being replaced with something harder. Something hotter. As if his life, before this, was wax. As if the molten iron was ready, and was beginning to be poured.

When Timothy finally fell asleep, his knuckles were white on the chains, and blood trickled from his palms.

CHAPTER 2

SELENA

Selena was physically shaking.

She had done this sort of thing before, but it had always been a game. Her mentor had always been watching. Her opponents had never been real Huctan soldiers who might actually kill her.

She asked herself, for the hundredth time, why she was going through with this. She had only met the boy once. Why was he her responsibility?

Because she had opened her big mouth, that was why. She had had pity on him, seen potential in him, and had promised to help him. And now that things had gone bad, she could not bring herself to let him die.

Hesitating at the bottom of the stairs, Selena tried to calm herself. Pressing her forehead against the cool stone, she took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Then she pursed her lips, opened the door, and walked out into the open moonlight.

The storm last night had drenched the courtyard, and now a slow

drizzle was speckling the silver surfaces of the puddles. The rain was a warm one, this late in the spring, and she was glad to have it. With luck, it would rain harder.

As Selena crossed the courtyard, she tried to find the balance between skulking and parading. She had an excuse to be out this late, but the guards that knew about her and Ibara—which, hopefully, was all of them—would enjoy stopping her. Even that she couldn't afford. Not tonight, when timing was crucial, when a few moments could ruin everything.

She was practically running. Deliberately Selena slowed her steps. Staying mostly in the shadows, but not hugging them, she kept her back erect and walked quietly. When she came to the guardhouse door she took a deep breath, stilled her trembling, and knocked.

A chair scraped inside. That was good. Ibara was here.

Then a voice said something Selena couldn't quite catch, and was answered with laughter.

Selena froze, and the shaking started again.

Ibara was not supposed to have company. He knew she was bringing him dinner tonight. She had been painfully obvious about her intentions. Why, then, was he not alone?

Run, Selena's instinct said. You don't owe the boy anything.

But didn't she, now? Hadn't this been *her* plan? Wasn't this plan the reason T'shira had readied a gallows?

Please, Selena said silently, mouthing the word and closing her eyes briefly as she waited for the door.

The latch turned. Selena opened her eyes, and Ibara stood before her. His Huctan cloak was missing—she saw it hanging on the wall inside—and his bare chain mail was bulging around the meat of his shoulders. Selena, who had placed her feet close together and

lowered her head demurely, looked up at him from the tops of her eyes and affected a smile that she hoped was both inviting and afraid. The afraid part was easy.

“What do you want?” Ibara said.

Selena did not wince, and it was one of the most difficult things she had done. This was the worst possible beginning to what she had hoped would be the easy part of tonight’s mission. She *had* to get into this guardhouse.

She had counted on Ibara inviting her in. That was the obvious part of her plan. But he was not inviting her in. He was not alone—she could see his companion watching from the table—and he was not in a good mood. Did her entire mission, and the lives of those boys, depend on the temper of one idiot soldier?

“I brought dinner,” Selena said in Huctan, being careful to struggle with the vowels and retain the heavy Botani accent Ibara seemed to like. She put a slight tremble in her voice, as if hurt by Ibara’s tone, and looked down at his feet as she spoke.

“Give it to me,” Ibara said, taking the dish from Selena’s outstretched hands and lifting the corner of the cloth to inspect the contents. Selena glanced up, and saw the corner of Ibara’s mouth twitch upward as he tried to frown at the dinner dish.

This was a *joke* to him. Selena found it difficult to keep her shoulders from slumping with sudden relief. She could use this.

“Was there something else?” Ibara asked, pressing his lips together and glowering. Selena maintained the confusion on her face and increased the hurt in her eyes. She even managed to make her lip tremble a little.

“No,” she said. “I...”

Whirling suddenly, she turned and began to leave. She had only

gone three steps when Ibara laughed out loud.

“Selena!” he called, and Selena winced at the noise. The idiot was going to wake everyone in Northelm.

She glanced back, over her shoulder, but kept walking. She forced herself to hurry, taking quick little steps as if she actually intended on leaving. It was difficult—so much depended on his inviting her in—but Selena had learned long ago that you had to be confident. You had to commit, act, and trust your judgment.

“Wait,” Ibara said, now in a loud whisper. He ran after her suddenly, and Selena let him catch her. She gave a tiny cry as he seized her arm.

“Please,” Ibara said, affecting earnestness. “Come in. I was only joking.”

Selena hesitated. Ibara tugged at her arm, and she resisted the urge to smile. This was good. Now she had a grievance. It might be a small one, and Huctan soldiers might not care about the grievances of Botani scullery maids, but it was better than nothing.

As Ibara ushered her into the guardhouse, he dropped the apologetic look and wiggled his eyebrows at his friend. The quick, appraising glance at Selena was obvious and insulting, but of course Selena pretended not to notice.

“Good evening,” said Ibara’s friend, standing and giving Selena a small nod. “I am Lieutenant Byon.”

Selena did not miss the apologetic flick of Lieutenant Byon’s eyes toward Ibara, as if he were embarrassed by his companion’s behavior. Nor did she miss the emphasis of his rank, which was higher than Ibara’s. The sharpness in Lieutenant Byon’s eyes was obvious. He was significantly more intelligent than Ibara, Selena thought. His presence was going to make her job a lot harder.

“Of course, of course,” said Ibara. “My friend, Byon! He is joining us tonight. I hope you do not find him too ugly?” Ibara laughed again, sweeping a heavy chair across the room with one thick hand and scooting it up to the table.

Selena did not change her expression, only continued appraising Byon, but she could see that this was enough. The lieutenant took her appraisal to mean that she was fascinated by his suave manner and high rank, and he preened under her gaze.

Selena took the seat Ibara offered her, keeping her head slightly lowered and her arms submissively at her sides. She had never known a Huctan who minded an overly humble Botaña.

“I brought beef, and gravy,” she said, timidly reaching out to withdraw the cloth from the dinner dish on the table. She nearly jumped as Ibara made a sudden movement, but she managed to hold still as the man grabbed her wrist and held it, his fingers easily encompassing the bone of her wrist.

“Time for that later,” he said, and then sniggered, as if somewhat surprised by his own boldness.

Selena looked at Ibara, who was only partially joking, and then at the lieutenant, whose gaze held no mirth at all. Suddenly she realized, deep and cold in her gut, exactly how much danger she was in.

She had been in this guard hut twice before, and both times she had escaped without giving Ibara anything but hints and promises. She had pegged him as stupid, yet having some measure of honor, and so far she had found him easy to manipulate. But now he was drunk, and the burning look in his friend’s eyes was both shrewder and more sordid than Ibara’s had ever been.

Never play the seduction game, Haberd had told her, unless

you're prepared to lose.

Suppressing a swallow, Selena continued, as if her heart were not thrashing in her chest, as if she were not a status-less Botani maid in the power of two smoldering Huctan soldiers.

"And I also found good wine," she said, raising one eyebrow and giving the small smile she had practiced. The smile was designed for Ibara—shy and submissive with a generous touch of mischief—but she hoped it was a good one for the lieutenant as well.

Neither man responded. Selena used her free hand to withdraw the wine from within her cloak. Focusing her full attention on the bottle—trying to feel enough lust for the drink to draw the two soldiers' attention along with her own—she slid it onto the table. As she released it, she allowed her fingers to accidentally catch on the glass, causing the sanguine liquid within to slosh.

Ibara looked at the wine, but did not remove his hand from Selena's arm.

"As you may have noticed," he said, hooding his eyelids and clearly thinking himself very funny, "I have already had a few drinks, myself."

It would have been very easy, at this point, if Ibara had been alone. Selena would have met his eyes out of the tops of her own and asked if the wine was too much for him, if he couldn't handle a little more. There would have been shyness in her voice, but also a bit of a challenge, and Ibara, as surely as water flows downhill, would have swept the bottle from the table, popped the cork, and drunk deep.

But Ibara was not alone, and Lieutenant Byon was intelligent enough to grow suspicious at such obvious coaxing. Selena now had to say or do something that was both subtle enough to slip under

Byon's guard and obvious enough for Ibara not to miss it completely.

It was difficult.

Selena settled for a demure shrug, and reached for the bottle herself. "Good," she said, again with the smile that she hoped she was not overusing. "More for me."

She lifted the bottle with her free hand, and Ibara instinctively released her wrist so that she could work at the cork. She struggled with it, deliberately. After a moment, Ibara snatched the bottle from her hand, seized the cork in his teeth, and pulled it free with a small pop. Selena noted that his lips had touched the neck of the bottle and knew that she had to hurry.

Taking the wine from Ibara, Selena lifted it to her mouth. Carefully clamping her teeth onto the bottle neck and pursing her lips as close to the glass as she dared, she tilted her head back and took a long drink. Her lips and tongue quivered with the effort of not touching the glass, but she managed to take three swallows before lowering the bottle and giving a breathy sigh of satisfaction. It *was* good wine.

She slid the bottle to the center of the table, not so close to Byon as to be offering it to him, but not so far that he couldn't easily reach it. Then she closed her eyelids as if enjoying the ecstasy of the liquor.

Outwardly she was calm, but inside, down in her toes, she was shaking again. She needed the lieutenant to drink, now, but he was not moving. She could feel his eyes on her even with her own eyes closed. She prepared to praise the wine, to tell them whose special case it had come from, to do *anything* to get the lieutenant to drink.

But Ibara beat her to it.

Snatching up the bottle again, Ibara closed his lips well around the glass and took several long, gulping swallows before slamming the bottle down on the table. Selena noted with dismay that he had left a sheen of saliva on the bottle neck, and that there was a slight set of distaste to Lieutenant Byon's face.

But Ibara's exclamation couldn't have been more perfect.

"Now that," he said, "is *wine*."

Still the lieutenant did not reach for the wine. Still he looked at Selena, eyes burning, only as interested in the wine as it had relationship to her. Selena willed herself to meet the lieutenant's eyes coolly. She twisted her mouth, smiling and pursing her lips in the same motion, and raised her eyebrows a fraction of an inch.

It was a subtle challenge, and it was a gamble. Selena hadn't had time to study the lieutenant, had no idea whether he had the same competitive, not-to-be-bested streak that ran so strongly in Ibara. She had no idea whether a challenge was the right temptation for him. She was flying by instinct.

But tonight she was lucky.

The lieutenant hesitated, then took the bottle from the table. He glanced back at Selena as he lifted the wine, raising his own eyebrows in reply.

Well, why should she be surprised? He and Ibara were both men, weren't they?

Selena sighed inwardly as the lieutenant touched his bottom lip to the glass.

Then Ibara stumbled, and the lieutenant paused.

Too soon, Selena thought, but she kept her face smooth. She forced herself to stop staring at the lieutenant's lips and looked with a sudden grin at Ibara, as if his stumble was simply the effect of too

much alcohol. Drink, she willed the lieutenant, even as she covered her mouth and pretended to giggle at Ibara.

But the lieutenant was not drinking. His bottom lip was still touching the bottle, which was good, but Selena wasn't sure that Ibara had left enough oil on the glass to make one lip enough.

Ibara had stumbled again and was on his knees now, feeling for the floor as if looking for a good place to lie down. Lieutenant Byon was looking at Ibara with an expression of amusement that was fast becoming alarm. Selena saw the lieutenant's eyelids droop momentarily as whatever had seeped into his lower lip began to take effect, and then the confusion and alarm on his face turned to sudden realization. His eyes met Selena's.

He knew.

It happened in an instant. The lieutenant stood suddenly, dropped the bottle, and lunged for her.

Selena dropped her shy pose like a mask and sprang up, dancing backward as her chair fell over behind her. The lieutenant followed her, much more quickly than she had expected, and caught her cloak in one fist.

Desperate, knowing exactly how helpless she would be if the larger and stronger man got a good grip on her, Selena twisted. Throwing her arms back and her body forward, she left the cloak in the lieutenant's hands and vaulted over the table.

The lieutenant paused to draw his sword, and she saw him stumble on unsteady feet. Good. At least some of the liquid had gotten into his system.

Selena looked for something to defend herself with, snatched up a chair, and only just deflected the lieutenant's first swing as he came around the table. The steel broke two slats from between the

chair legs, and the magnitude of being attacked with a real sword that would really kill her hit Selena like a blow to the stomach. She felt panic trying to rise and struggled against it, trying to remain calm and remember her training as she fled around the table again.

The lieutenant swung a second time. In this small space, there wasn't much Selena could do to dodge him, and only the clumsiness of his hand saved her from a torn shoulder. Desperately, she swung the chair, and though it bounced uselessly off of the lieutenant's armor, it was enough to upset his already weakening balance. He fell, and dropped his sword.

As the lieutenant rolled over, Selena saw a swimming movement of his eyes and knew that the drug was now taking hold. He sat up part way, reached for his sword, and then slumped down again. Rolling onto his side and panting, he looked up at Selena with vicious hate.

Then he opened his mouth to shout.

Selena rushed forward and landed a brutal kick in the Huctan's stomach. As his wind left him, she dropped on his shoulders, picked up her fallen cloak, and shoved the cloth into his gasping mouth.

The lieutenant struggled, but only with the weakening muscles of his neck and a useless flopping of his arms. Selena pressed down hard, clamping cloth over both mouth and nose. The soldier's struggling slowed.

Then, as his body's desire for air momentarily overcame the working of the drug, the lieutenant's resistance grew frantic. Selena held fast, clenching her teeth and shutting her eyes and throwing her full weight on the man's face as he bucked and pushed at her body with arms that had lost their strength.

In a moment the struggling slowed again, and then it stopped.

Selena continued to hold the cloak, breathing heavily through her nose, shaking through her entire body. At last, with a swift, frightened effort, she withdrew her hands and lunged to her feet, dropping the cloth like something unclean.

Straightening, trembling, she saw the blood she had wrung from the Huctan's nose as she pressed his face. She gagged. Swallowing, feeling weak, she took several quick breaths and then several deep ones.

Then, clenching her teeth and swallowing, she nodded to herself once. Putting out the light, she went to the door.

Pausing in the darkness to thumb a tear from her eye, Selena quietly crept into the barracks where the boys were.

CHAPTER 3

Timothy was beaten, and half naked, and still trembled a little when he stood up, but he felt strong. A change had come over him. He wasn't the barefooted woodsboy of a few months ago.

Pushing his body up to a sitting position, he prodded at the bruises. There was no good reason to prod at them—it wasn't as if they would have healed in the last five minutes—but he had never been able to leave his wounds alone. Besides, the pain reminded him of what he had done. For once in his life he was nursing wounds of honor instead of shame and selfloathing.

Soon it would be over. If the girl was to be trusted, they would escape within the week. If she was not to be trusted, Timothy would find a way on his own, and this time they wouldn't be taken alive.

Timothy stood up and went to the door of his cell, and for probably the tenth time that day he felt at the lock and the bars and the crack where the hinges were. After a moment he stood on his toes and put his face to the barred window, trying to get a look at the cell just across the hall from his.

It was infuriating, being so close to Robert and yet so

impenetrably separated. Timothy thought of calling out to Robert again, but decided against it. All his previous attempts had brought nothing but laughter from the boys down the hallway and threats from the guard at the barracks entrance.

Timothy closed his eyes and saw Robert as he had been this morning, limp and ghastly, dangling between four soldiers as he was carried down the hallway. His head, streaked with blood, had been lolled back. His mouth had been open.

Timothy's knuckles went white on the bars at the memory. The rational part of his mind said that it was good, that it was according to plan, that the girl had relayed his message and Robert had been brave enough to see it through. The rest of his mind, and his hands on the bars, said that it was terrible, that Robert might be dead or crippled in that cell, and that it was Timothy's fault.

Both were true. It was good, and it was terrible.

Timothy left the window and returned to the floor of his cell. The stones were hard, and he hissed as he laid his battered skin against them, but he forced his body to be still. After a minute he closed his eyes and tried to get some sleep.

He woke suddenly with the impression that he had heard something. His eyes snapped open in the darkness, but he could see no more with them open than he could with them closed.

He listened, and the noise came again: a metallic scratch from the direction of the door. Quietly Timothy rose to a crouch and crept forward, holding one hand in front of his face to keep from running into a wall. He opened his eyes wide, trying to catch any light he could, but the darkness was heavy.

There was a snap that made him jump. The door moved—he

couldn't see it move, but he felt the draft when it opened—and Timothy scuttled backward.

“Timothy.” The word was spoken in a whisper, a tiny breath of air just strong enough to form each syllable.

For a moment Timothy didn't answer. Finally he whispered back.

“What?”

“Shh... come on.”

It was the girl.

Suddenly Timothy was no longer cold and stiff. He grinned in the darkness. The feeling of strength came back, and an energy that bordered on giddiness shuddered down his rib cage. He felt warm, and alive, and almost free.

The girl had kept her word. His cell door was open. They were escaping.

“I can't see,” he said.

“Shh!” the girl repeated. “This way. Slow... it's lighter out here.”

Timothy rose. His finger met the door, then a warm hand, and then he was in the hallway.

“Follow me,” the girl said, and Timothy followed the shadow of the girl on the balls of his bare feet. They reached Robert's cell almost immediately.

“I already opened it,” the girl said, pressing the door and widening the shadow around its edges. Timothy slipped inside and peered into the darkness.

“Robert?” he whispered.

“Hey.”

A weight lifted from Timothy's shoulders at the sound of his brother's voice. Robert was alive, and if his voice was hoarse, so had Timothy's been. Timothy recognized the lighter spot in the

blackness and knelt beside it.

“Hey,” he whispered. “How’s it going?”

Robert sniffed a laugh. Timothy grinned again in the darkness, then wrinkled his nose. The smell of vomit was in the air, and the sharp scent of it brought back the memory of his own beating. Coming to consciousness of such pain, all at once, had left him dizzy and heaving as well. All things considered, it was surprising that Robert was still awake. This was good.

Then the girl said something terrible.

“He can’t walk,” she said.

The soaring, dizzy excitement in Timothy’s veins stopped dead and shattered, like an arrow against a rock. Part of him wondered if he had heard correctly, while the muscles in his gut knotted in the terrible certainty that he had.

“What?” he said, a bit too loudly.

“Shh!” the girl said again, and Timothy felt a hot flare of anger. He knelt by Robert, certain that he had done the unthinkable, that his friend was a cripple because of him.

“Can you move at all?” he whispered, feeling for Robert’s legs.

“I might be able to, now,” Robert said. There was a shuffling noise, and Timothy felt Robert’s leg move a small distance. Then there was a catching of breath and a very low moan, and the leg relaxed.

Robert’s pain was palpable, but Timothy felt sudden relief. Robert could move. He wasn’t crippled. It was just the pain, and hadn’t Timothy himself felt that? In a few days, Robert would be fine. The girl would come back. They would try this all again.

But why had she come and unlocked him, tonight, if Robert couldn’t walk?

“See?” the girl said. “We have to leave him.”

Timothy turned again to face the girl’s voice, and a sudden cold rage spread inside him. The girl was trying to manipulate him. She had opened his cell door and gotten him excited about escaping, and now she was showing him Robert, lying here unable to move. She would probably say that this was their chance, that she was sorry, that they had no choice.

She had to have known that Robert had been beaten today. She had to have known that he would need a couple days to recover. Yet she had deliberately chosen tonight.

She had never wanted to bring Robert in the first place.

“I told you,” Timothy said, “I am *not leaving without him*. That’s the reason he’s here in the first place. Take me back to my cell. We’ll try again in a couple days.”

“We don’t *have* a couple days,” the girl said, and there was something almost frantic in her voice. “This is it. Tonight. T’shira put up the gallows this afternoon. He’s going to make an example of you both in the morning.”

All three of them, squatting there in the darkness and the silence, were still and quiet for several long seconds.

She could be lying. Timothy knew that. It would be a terrible thing to do, just to get someone to leave his brother to die. Almost unthinkable terrible. But he didn’t know the girl. She could be that kind of person.

But Timothy also knew that she was their only chance of really escaping. Without her, his best plan was making a run for it during a courtyard drill, and even he knew how that plan was likely to end.

Finally Timothy spoke.

“I’ll carry him,” he said.

“Too dangerous,” the girl replied, dismissively, as if she had already considered and discarded this option.

“I’ll *carry* him,” Timothy repeated, turning away from her and feeling for Robert’s body.

“We’ll all get caught,” the girl said. “I’m sorry... you don’t know how sorry I am, but we have to leave him.”

“Go for it,” Robert whispered, batting Timothy’s hand away.

“I’ll carry you,” Timothy repeated again.

“Hey!” Robert grabbed Timothy’s arm and pulled him close. “It’s not worth it. They’ll just get both of us. At least give me the satisfaction that you got away.”

Timothy sniffed a laugh.

“I’m serious,” Robert said, in a tone that Timothy hadn’t heard from him before. “I’m not going. If you try to carry me, I’ll yell and wake everyone up. I swear I will.”

Timothy felt the sudden urge to hit something, or to cry. This was not the way he had imagined things. They were supposed to either die together, defiant and proud and strong, or to escape together and look back at the Huctans laughing. He wasn’t ready for this possibility, that he would escape and Robert would die. He wasn’t ready for Robert to threaten him. He wasn’t ready for that deadly serious tone in Robert’s voice.

Something came back to him, a memory, as vivid as if it had been yesterday.

“Stop whining,” he said. “You’re coming. What would I do all day without you?”

Robert’s hand continued to grip Timothy’s arm for a moment longer. Then it slackened, and Timothy heard Robert sigh. He closed his eyes in relief.

Robert remembered, and he understood.

“I’m going to carry him,” Timothy said, his voice stronger.

“We can’t…” the girl began.

“He’s going to carry me,” Robert repeated. Timothy was already groping for Robert’s other arm and turning.

“It’s fine if you can’t help us anymore,” Timothy said. “Thanks for unlocking the doors. We’ll find our own way out.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” the girl said, and he could hear something between rage and crying in her voice. It suddenly occurred to him that she was as scared and desperate as he was. Possibly more so. He had nothing to lose, but she was risking everything.

Robert heard it too.

“Thank you for helping us,” he said, quietly and sincerely. Timothy nodded agreement in the darkness.

The girl sniffed, and then spoke in a very low whisper.

“You’re welcome,” she said.

There was a moment of silence. Then Robert began trying to pull himself up onto Timothy’s shoulders. His attempts were pitiful, as if he could barely lift the weight of his own hands, and Timothy looked for the girl.

“Help him?” he asked. The girl hesitated, then knelt, and Robert was bravely quiet as they pushed and pulled him up to Timothy’s shoulders. Timothy could feel the welted pattern of Robert’s chest on his back.

He stood, with the girl’s help, and felt Robert’s weight. Robert wrapped his arms around Timothy’s neck, but they were almost limp. His body began slipping, and Timothy’s own legs trembled.

“Hold on,” Timothy whispered, and then jumped Robert higher up on his shoulders. Robert’s teeth clacked together, and a low

whine escaped his lips, right by Timothy's ear.

"Sorry," Timothy said.

Robert swallowed, audibly, and then tapped Timothy's arm with a weak hand.

"Giddy up," he whispered.

Timothy grinned in the darkness. They were going to get out of here. They were going to get out together.

The journey down the long hallway of the barracks was excruciating. It took about ten steps to wear down the energy and excitement that had made Robert's weight seem tolerable, and Timothy was soon gripping Robert's legs with trembling arms and trying not to admit to himself that he already needed to rest.

More agonizing than Robert's weight, though, was the thought of the boys. There were scores of cells on either side, each filled with several sleeping Botaños on cots, each separated from the hall by nothing but an iron grating and the darkness. Timothy had spent his nights in such a cell for weeks before his punishment, and he knew well how exposed he was.

He also knew how many of the boys had already turned, and how many would love to gain a fingernail of favor by raising the alarm and preventing an escape.

Robert slipped, gradually, and carrying him grew even more difficult. Timothy desperately needed to bounce Robert's body higher up on his back, but he wasn't sure that Robert could keep quiet if he did.

Six times they froze at noises in the darkness-shrouded cells around them. Each time, after waiting, the girl finally continued, and Timothy, breathing once more, followed. The tension was hot and slick.

Either the light grew steadily better or Timothy's eyes grew more adjusted to the darkness, because when they arrived at the door, Timothy could distinguish the wood from the stone.

The girl put a hand on Timothy's arm and put her lips inches from his ear.

"Quiet," she whispered, so softly that Timothy could not even feel her breath.

He nodded.

The girl crept to the door, lifted the handle, and opened it.

Moonlight cascaded into the blackness. The guardhouse room was filled with the silver light, which poured through the window and overflowed into the hallway.

The girl seemed surprised at the light, and she spun her arm, hurrying Timothy inside and using her body to keep the nearest cell in shadow. Timothy was through the door in three steps.

But it was too late.

"Hey," someone said. The voice was loud and profane in the silence.

Timothy swiveled, already inside the guardhouse, and saw one of the boys with his face to the grate of his cell. He was sleepy, and confused, and squinting in the moonlight, but as the situation dawned on him, his eyes grew wider.

"Take me with you!" the boy whispered, loud enough to wake the dead.

The girl jerked, holding up a hand for silence. She floated to the cell and leaned close to the boy, who was several years younger than Timothy or Robert. She whispered something Timothy could not quite make out.

"Take me *with* you!" the boy repeated, just as loudly. This time

someone heard him.

“Berrin, shut up,” an older voice said, and even though it only took a second for the girl to dance back through the guardroom door, that second was enough for Timothy to recognize the voice. And for the owner of the voice to see someone escaping.

“Hey,” Chuon said aloud. Then, as the girl closed the door, Chuon repeated in a full-throated, all-out shout. “Hey!”

The door snicked shut. They were alone in the guardroom, with only one more door separating them from the open night air.

But Timothy wasn't looking at the outside door, or at the light-filled window. He was looking at the larger of two forms on the floor. It had stirred at the shout in the hallway. It was a soldier.

The Huctan sniffed, and shook his head, but did not open his eyes.

The girl had already bent to pick up one of the swords. As more people in the barracks woke and shouts from within came muffled through the heavy door, she stood over the man on the floor.

“What are you doing?” Robert hissed, as the girl put the tip of the sword to the Huctan's throat. She jerked her head, and glared at Robert, and in the stark lighting her face looked wild. The calm she had had, when she visited Timothy's cell two days ago, was gone. Her hand was trembling.

Timothy looked at the form of the second Huctan on the floor, the one who had not moved a muscle since they came in, and realized the reason for the girl's crazed look. The second Huctan was in no danger of waking up. Ever.

“Don't,” Robert said. “Let's just go.”

It would be smart to kill the Huctan, Timothy knew. The yelling in the barracks was getting louder. Soon the boys that had turned

were going to organize, to find a way to yell together and increase their volume, and the Huctan was going to wake up.

Besides, he deserved it. For all that the Huctans had done, this one deserved whatever came to him.

“Do it,” Timothy said.

“Let’s just go,” Robert repeated.

The girl hesitated a moment longer, and then seemed to come to a decision. She snatched the sword away from the Huctan’s throat and marched to the inner door they had just come through. Throwing it open, so that the confused yelling thundered into the room and light spilled into the barracks, she knelt and took hold of the soldier’s ankles.

He was stirring again, turning his head as if trying to wake up. The girl gave a mighty pull at his ankles, and he slid several feet across the floor. Still he did not wake. She pulled again, twice more, and the Huctan slid through the door and into the barracks. Timothy could hear Chuon yelling at the top of his lungs for the soldier to wake up.

Chuon was the one who deserved a sword.

The dragging and shouting was beginning to bring the Huctan to full consciousness. His eyes fluttered, and his left hand moved.

The girl paused to fling something skittering down the hallway—the keys, Timothy realized—and then leapt back through the door. Slamming it shut, she threw the bolt and leaned against it, panting.

That was smart. Someone was going to figure out a way to get those keys. There was going to be a riot.

The girl ran across the room to the outer door and opened it a crack. Timothy could hear, soft and muffled in the night air, the same noise that was coming through the barracks door. It was

muted, but clearly audible.

Then a Huctan voice split the night air, calling down to the guardhouse door. The language was Huctan, but apparently the girl understood it. Drawing herself up and cocking her head strangely, she shouted back.

Robert jerked on Timothy's back at the sound of her voice. It was loud, and deep, and if Timothy hadn't seen her mouth moving with the syllables, he would never have guessed that the bellowing, masculine, Huctan shout had come from the lips of a young Botani girl.

"What did you say?" Timothy hissed, but the girl shook her head and darted back across the room. Snatching the two crimson cloaks from their hooks on the wall, she threw one over Robert and Timothy and wrapped the other around herself.

"I told him I was handling it, but I had to take the Lieutenant across to the infirmary," she said.

"What?"

"Stick to the shadows on the right side, and follow me. Run!"

Timothy ran.

It had been raining in the courtyard, and the air still had a wet smell to it. The moon was almost full, shining through a break in the clouds. The night air was warm and still, as if the clouds were wrapping the night in a blanket.

Timothy caught this in a glance as he left the guardhouse. Then he lowered his head and saw nothing but the girl's feet. Desperation gave him strength as the Huctan above yelled again from the outer ramparts. He crossed the courtyard at an awkward gallop, expecting any moment to hear the twang of a crossbow.

But he did not feel a quarrel in his back, and they made it safely

across the open courtyard. They entered a small side-door to the main fort, and a short flight of stairs robbed him of his wind.

The girl glided ahead of them, now vanishing from sight in the darkness, now reappearing as they rounded a corner. Timothy hiked Robert farther up on his back again, and this time Robert let out a small cry. As Timothy began panting audibly, Robert started making small, whimpering noises between breaths.

They came to another flight of stairs, and Timothy had to close his eyes and hold his breath to gain the last few steps. His eyes would not focus. He staggered as he reached the top of the stairs and had to release one of Robert's legs to catch himself against the wall. Robert slipped, and the change in his weight pulled Timothy down. Timothy sank to his knees, and Robert slid from his back.

The girl crouched beside them, peering about and throwing nervous glances at them both. Timothy was in the midst of a heaving gasp when she turned sharply and threw up a warning hand.

Timothy tried to hold his breath and could not. He breathed slowly, trembling for more air, and listened.

There was shouting, outside, barely audible through the thick stone walls of the keep. The girl listened, as if she could understand the Huctan, and then looked despairingly at the boys slumped on the floor.

"They're sounding the alarm," she said. "We have to go."

Timothy shook his head that he could not, but got to his knees anyway. The girl knelt and grabbed Robert under the arms, straining to lift him high enough to wrap his flopping arms around Timothy's neck. When Timothy couldn't get up from his knees, she got under his arm and pushed until he was standing.

Timothy took several quick breaths, gritted his teeth, and hiked Robert up once more. Robert let out another whimper.

“Maybe thirty yards through the hallway, then a ladder, and we’ll be on the battlements,” the girl said.

“A ladder?” Timothy gasped.

“Shh... yes. Come on!”

Timothy went, as if in a dream, sure at each step that he was going to collapse. He followed the unfocused shadow of the girl through the dark stone passageway. Through the haze of his pounding pulse, he could hear shouting and the peals of the alarm bell, but the sounds seemed irrelevant. The important thing was the next step, the next step, and then the ladder.

The girl opened the door to a small room. Moonlight shone through a hole in the ceiling. The open sky was only ten feet up.

But opening the door let the full volume of the alarm bell directly into the hallway, and as she shut it again behind them, Timothy heard shouts in the hallway they had come from.

“The ladder comes out next to a short wall,” the girl said. “When you get up, get into the shadow as quick as you can. I’ll come behind and try to help with Robert.”

Timothy had not paused to listen, was already putting foot and hand to the ladder rungs and setting his teeth to climb. His resolution and momentum carried him upward for three rungs, and for a moment he thought he would make it.

Then, on the fourth rung, his knee buckled. His right hand slipped, and he nearly fell to the floor.

“Push!” the girl hissed, and Timothy felt her underneath him. Robert’s weight lessened as she threw her shoulder into helping them, and Timothy set his jaw and pulled again. Slowly he rose, air

escaping his lips in a hiss. His thigh trembled with the effort. With a heave and a jerk, Timothy got his foot on the next rung and planted, gasping.

“Again!” the girl said, and Timothy strained, baring his teeth and shaking. He pulled as hard as he could, rose four inches, and could rise no farther.

Voices sounded close, in the hallway, and the girl scampered down the ladder to lock the door. Timothy dropped the four inches he had risen and barely stopped himself from falling further.

The girl reached the lock and threw it just before someone tried the door handle, rattled it, and then began shouting something in Huctan. There was a pounding at the door, and the hinges shook.

They were going to get through. They were going to get through, and Timothy could not lift himself one more rung.

“Let me go,” Robert whispered.