

Angharad idly carved initials in the table with her boot knife. Not her own initials, not the initials of anyone she could think of at the moment. No sense leaving a trail. The sturdy trestle table bore similar scratches, nicks, dents, burns, and stains of varying ages. It had been built well over a century ago and had numerous ales spilled on it and secrets told over it, and it would last in this small windowless room until a spark from the fireplace reached it unattended, probably at least a generation down the pike.

"Remember Johnny One-Nose?" she asked. "And the socks and the traps in the bunkhouse!"

Dee laughed out loud. "His face! His face just crumpled when all he managed to catch was his own right foot. Damn but he was good comic relief!"

Angharad rose to answer a rap at the door and accepted a laden tray from a kitchen girl. The girl barely murmured her courtesies and kept her gaze carefully on the floor; she served this particular back room with the admonition not to notice who occupied it. Angharad set the tray on the edge of the table and re-locked the heavy oaken door. She tossed a loaf of bread to her best friend. She began tearing chunks from her own steaming loaf and dipping them in the butter-pot.

"And well we deserved him. Meg's Braids, Dee, how did we manage to survive being recruits?"

"Blind luck? Overeagerness?" The firelight softened her face and shone on her blonde hair, twisted at the nape of her neck. Then she smiled, and that smile crinkled the corners of her dark blue eyes as she rolled them toward Angharad. It was an old joke between them, and they said together, "Stupidity."

The two friends sprawled on benches in this very private room, with feet up toward the fire and tankards half full. With one part of her mind, Angharad noticed that her boots could use a visit to the cobbler. With another, she waited for Dee to get around to her point. It never paid to rush; she devoted the greatest part of her attention to supper. Any tavern could serve a decent stew, but this place managed tender beef, huge chunks of perfectly-done potato, steaming fresh bread and, wonder of wonders, greenhouse fresh vegetables.

Deirdre speared a piece of carrot thoughtfully with her boot-knife.

"I miss Jimmy," Dee whispered. Angharad only nodded gently. Dee's adored older brother had had the personality of a freshening summer storm, sudden, intense, cleansing. He had died half a year previously in a freak hunting accident, leaving Deirdre alone with the family's burden. "He was so alive, Angha, so ...

How can there be a world without Jimmy?" Her tears fell hotly against her cheeks. Angharad rose and passed behind the table, sat astride the other bench so she could take her friend onto her lap like a child. "He's here, Dee. I'm not being trite - everything he did, everyone he touched, every memory we have of that damned lopsided grin of his - all those are here. We all miss him." She rocked, and her friend's weight fell heavily against her shoulder, rocking as well.

"I wish," Deirdre choked, "I wish I had been there. I wish I had taken the days off to go camping and hunting with him. He took few enough breaks as it was, I wish I could have had that time with him. I had to push for that promotion, I had to deserve it twice over -"

The weight of Deirdre's loneliness wrenched sobs out of her. Angharad rocked her, smoothing her hair back behind her ears. She murmured to her friend. "I wish I could help. I wish I could really and truly reach inside you and take up some of the burden, Dee. You have a bitch of a road to walk, girl. But I know you can do it. I'll support you and love you, and no one will be more proud of you than I will. Just cry for now, girl. We'll get very, very drunk tonight and drink to Jimmy and to Johnny One-Nose, and to Sarge until they're all here with us and we can't see straight and no one dares to carry us back to our bunks."

"I had to sign on for another short tour instead of going with Jimmy when he asked. Maybe I could have seen the storm coming, found a better shelter than that forester did..."

"It was an accident, Dee. A freak accident. We rode out there ourselves - that cave looked perfectly safe. There was nothing anyone could have done better. It wasn't the forester's fault, it wasn't anybody's fault."

Deirdre whispered, "I wish it were my fault."

She nodded and reached for her tankard. Angharad let her sit up by herself and refilled the pitcher from the tap as she returned to her own bench. She leaned against the backrest watching the younger woman pull herself together. She leaned forward and tossed another log on the fire, listening to it crackle.

After a time, Deirdre spoke, her voice husky and spent. "I almost cashed it in, Angha."

"You can't do that, Dee."

"I know. I rode up to the cliffs at sundown. Picturesque as hell. Mother Ocean sparkling down there, the sky a hundred different shades. Falling would be almost, almost flying." She sipped. "Then I figured you'd be so mad you'd have the High Priest resurrect me just so you could beat the stuffing out of me."

"Damned straight."

"So we go ahead with it. I go ahead with it. I do what Jimmy and you and everybody would want me to do, but I don't do it for you. It took a couple of months, Angha, but I'm ready. I'm doing it because I want to do it, because it's the right thing and I want to do the right thing. I'm not doing it for you, Angha, but I'm not doing it for me. Am I making sense?"

"Enough."

"Good. I'm doing it for everybody. Both of us, all of us. I'm doing it for that kid with the green eyes in the street yesterday."

"What kid?"

"I dunno. Never saw her before, might not see her again. Gotta do it for her, though. Feels right."

"And so?"

"So I need the Dreamweed."

Silence hung with the smoke. Angharad tried to blink the muzziness out of her system. She suddenly understood better her friend's fears, and knew how to combat them. "It's a story, Dee. There's no Dreamweed. It's like a nursery tale for budding young patriots."

Deirdre's blue eyes turned to Angharad. "True, Angha."

"It's a story made up a hundred years ago, girl. No such thing around any more. You don't have to do that to yourself - "

Dee interrupted. "It's true. Jimmy showed me. He did it, too. Told me where to go for it, how to get it."

Angharad swore. Dreamweed. The power to direct your dreams. Once the purview of priests only, it had become the nation's narcotic a century ago, when the few still-sober knights of the Duke's Guard burned it by the field and barnful.

"What was it like?"

"He never told me that. He got sort of a sad look in his eyes."

"I wondered why they kept that part of the ceremony if the stuff was all burned away. Thought it was just one of those tradition things that got its own momentum, like the Consort's Guard when there's no Consort."

Deirdre snorted. "At least we cut that to six oldsters headed for retirement." She took another long draught. "No, Angha, the 'weed is real, and I need it for the ceremony on Midsummer's."

Angharad's eyes swept over her friend's face. "There's more."

"What do you mean, there's more."

"You haven't told me everything."

"What do you mean I haven't told you everything?"

"I mean, Commander, that you get a nervous tic in your cheek when you're trying to keep something from me, and it's ticcing."

"So that's how you always know."

"Yep. And that's how I beat you at cards. Now tell me the rest."

Deirdre took a deep breath. "You have to take Calum."

Angharad stared, wishing fervently that the mussiness would return. "What the bloody axe do you mean, I have to take Calum?!"

"Angharad, until this thing in the mountains settles down, Calum is the closest thing I have to family. He has to go get it, like I did for Jimmy."

Angharad sat straighter. "That's a frightening - wait, when did you go get it for Jimmy?"

"When I made that envoy to Elegic right before the coronation."

"That was supposed to be a cover for you meeting the dashing and eligible Prince Whatshisname before he met Jimmy and could make a play for your hand!"

"Jean-Jacques. Right. And *that* was a cover for getting the Dreamweed."

"And you didn't take me!"

"Serves you right for cheating at cards."

"Wasn't cheating, I was taking advantage of natural... You're distracting me!"

Dee, I'm the Captain of the Duke's Guard and there's border trouble not two hundred kilometers from here. I'm not leaving my post to go gallivanting into the hinterlands to find a nonexistent poisonous plant with a kid who can barely shave who thinks he's the reincarnation of Saint Dandrea!"

Deirdre stood to toss another log on the fire and stack the trenchers. "Angha, I don't know anyone else who can possibly help him to get it together to be ready for knighthood."

"Knighthood!"

"It's got to happen!"

"What he's ready for is a nice long rest at the Happy Meadows Home for Extra Special Friends of the Gods!"

"Angha, he's not incompetent, he's just crazy - "

They stared at one another for a moment, caught between laughter and tears.

Angharad considered. "I could refuse."

Deirdre looked apologetic. "I could order you."

"Kiss my axe."

"Kiss my ring."

Angharad's face relaxed into a grin. She stood before her friend, almost a head taller than Deirdre, as dark as the other was fair. With her left hand, she reached down and took Deirdre's right, lifted it to where a signet ring showing two small birds and a sword caught the firelight and gleamed.

"Angha, I didn't mean..."

"I know you didn't." Angharad studied Deirdre's hand, calloused, strong, but still petite, the ring held on by a pad of yarn to make it fit her middle finger. She bent her head and gently kissed the signet. "I'll go. I'll always go where you need." The moment passed. "It will take me two weeks to get everything ready. We leave on the Kalends." She rattled Deirdre's hair. "I will never get used to you being able to give me orders. Let's avoid it whenever possible, shall we?"

They laughed and turned for the door, for fresh night air. Angharad escorted Deirdre to the Royal Chambers, saluted her with "Blessings on your dreams, Your Grace."

"Good night, Captain."