

PART ONE

Chapter One

He had never come into contact with such darkness and unsteadiness.

The only sense he could cling on to was the feeling of wet mud sliding away beneath his feet and the smell of cooling earth, heavy and pungent, moulded by the plants it supported. The dip in temperature told him that the sun must be setting, though he could not see it; an uncomfortable cloth blindfolded his eyes and there was a hood over that to shutter in his sight. As he was pulled along by the rope that bound his wrists, he had the impression of constantly being close to falling as he was dragged onward with no firm grip on anything. He could have almost been running along ice or sand, the only indicator that pointed to his location was that smell of wet earth that overpowered his nose, as clogging and stifling as the blindfold. He wasn't used to it, this stench of gloomy harmony between the chill temperature and the trees. At home it was warm nearly all of the time even in the thickest of forests, which even during the worst rains never smelt as aggressively heavy as this cloying smell, a smell of decaying vegetation that wrapped everyone and everything in its dank blanket, oppressing this damp place still more.

Why he was here was a mystery to him. The first invasion for over thirty years, his debut as the future leader but he could see no glory and no reason for it. What was the point of subduing this land when there were no riches and more importantly no civilisation made up of cultured or proud people? There were only these savages that had appeared out of the trees and kidnapped him several hours ago. Kidnapped. It was a word of shame. His father would not be pleased and his displeasure was to be avoided at all costs, it rumbled across the valleys of every nation in the world, less benign than the most savage of storms. Briefly those frequent executions, spectacles for the whole court to gloat over flashed into the mind of the Prince, the empty flesh of those who had threatened or displeased or had simply been alive when the Emperor had wished them dead made to crack, split or contort to a background of screams and cheers. His own uncle was among the dead, a blameless victim, his dying face gazing into the Prince's own with a mute sincerity. Sorrow leaked into his mind but he swept it away. Those images were useless to him now, in this moment, as he was caught in the endless action of being partially flung and partially pulled through the mud. He had tried everything to bewilder his captors, letting the rope become tight, then slack, deliberately falling, allowing them to drag him over the earth which was scattered with sharp, cruel rocks until they forced him to his feet and he was made to run once more. Just as well for he would have been flayed alive before long. He had not been trained for this situation. Soldiers from the Eastern Empire were never captured in stealth like this, they fought in open wars which they won.

The Prince ran over his capture in his mind again and again, analysing it, assessing it, attempting to identify a tool that could be used to his advantage, a breach in the chain of events that could become useful when the time came for his bid for freedom. It had been impossibly quick. There hadn't even been an instant for him to grab his sword and defend himself, a memory that stung him like a malicious insect and made him angrier about his weakness and slowness than about the fact he had allowed himself to be captured at all. The first he had known that he was in any kind of danger was when he felt the thin rope around his neck that threatened to cut off his breath, and the weight of someone unknown behind him. For a fleeting second he suspected it was one of his own people – his father was feared, but not liked after all. But he saw Ivor's

eyes widen in horror and realised that it must be the enemy. Before he could do anything he was blindfolded and bound and hurtled forward, hurried and propelled into the enforced run that had dragged on and on until now, whatever notch in time that small but important word conveyed. Strange how moments of great importance often pass so quickly in real time, yet when remembered take up so much detail with every gesture and movement that they seem to last at least ten times as long.

For the first time in his life he had been feeble and as he saw it, stupid, but his captors had dishonoured themselves as well as him by being underhand, slithering, conniving people to match this wet miserable place. What dignity could they have if they would not stand and fight? The principle of sneaking up behind a man and nearly strangling him into submission was as muddy and dirty as this island. Whatever their plan was concerning him it would not be pleasant but that didn't matter. He was not equal to other men, he was above them. Whatever they did he was a giant and they were ants, he would out-think them and overpower them: how could he not when he was first amongst the warriors of his homeland, and his homeland was the mightiest in the world? He had been trained to fight, all those years sweltering under the sun in a sandy arena, taking the blows and the falls and working his way up to be the best, the pride of his father's eyes. These people here were nothing. They evidently knew nothing of fighting which must be the reason that they feared to do so.

As a prince he felt no fear because it was not a luxury he had been brought up to indulge. He has been told that there was no such thing, or that if there was it was always the work of the enemy, designed to spread from man to man like a plague through armies. What was the point of fear when ultimately all paths lead to death, and death was experienced by all people? If all matter of peoples had passed from this life to the next, then so could a prince. But while he believed fervently in the uselessness of fear, he also believed with equal passion in the pointlessness of his own death, here and now. He was young, and he had no doubt as to his superiority in comparison to the hooded figures that had captured him. He had learned to see weakness in other men, to predict their actions in the training ring where the light played with naked metal, each blinking flash tricking the eye, forcing the other senses to compensate, and in the far more deadly circle of power where one lapse in judgement could mean death. He had overcome far greater challenges than this. He knew he was both mentally and physically stronger than the enemy, he knew this for certain.

While he recited his creed of confidence again and again, the same pattern with a variation of words, and attempted to maintain mental composure while his legs flew and failed beneath him, he was irritated to hear the muffled sobbing of that fool Ivor, sobs that came in a snatched and irregular manner almost like hiccoughs, as they moved quickly over the uneven terrain. What a coward and an idiot Ivor had proved during this campaign. Ivor should never have given the order to shoot those enemy messengers. Ivor had not consulted him, and the Prince was sure that Ivor's action was the cause of this mess. In fact it was clearly Ivor's fault but no matter. It didn't matter whose fault it was, they were still in the same situation. Ivor, Ivor, Ivor. Ivor's muted cries followed the peaks and troughs in the ground that they were forced to negotiate blindly, like cargo, unable to use any other sense than instinct, clearly the only force prevalent here so far away from any civilised system of rule, order and regulation. And any form of honour. If these people had any principles they would have engaged him and his army in an open field, where it could be honestly proved who had the right to this country by offering up the candid shedding of blood. Now his only battle was his battle to stay upright, to stay running.

Eventually they halted. He was tugged forward at a walking pace, and then his hood and blindfold was removed. Night had indeed fallen, making the Prince estimate that he had been on the move for at least eight hours, since the middle of the morning. They were in a camp. People who looked as if they were covered in moss and paint moved past them towards numerous small fires like the creatures of the wilds they obviously were. Near to these fires were a selection of tents, some large, some small, and these painted people mingled with others who looked marginally more normal and were chatting, drinking, cooking and warming themselves. There was a cheery atmosphere, almost like a party, helped by the gentle buzz of constant conversation, the contented droning of bees in a hive. The Prince glanced behind him and in the fading light noticed walls that looked like trees, covered in foliage, hiding from the forest outside by seeking to become a part of it. He had never seen anything like it. He heard a scuffle next to him and a cry, turned and saw Ivor being dragged off slipping chaotically, his centre of balance dictated by the figure pulling him away. Regretfully realising there was little he could do to prevent this, the Prince distracted himself by trying to impose his authority on the man next to him.

“Where are you taking him?” he demanded of the man, half a head taller than he was, and older, the heavy lines marking his face the sign of one used to a life outdoors. The man frowned slightly and said something back to the Prince, something that sounded similar to the royal captive’s native tongue, yet backwards almost, distorted, nearly familiar and yet completely alien. With shock, he realised that these savages were all speaking in this way, so strange and so similar. He would never be able to make himself understood. All the peoples of the earth spoke his language, the language of Solinam. It just showed how isolated and primitive this lot were.

Another man strolled over, warming his hands on a cup which steamed, the liquid inside sending a deliciously herbal, victual smell into the air, making the Prince light headed – he had not eaten all day. The man with the cup talked to the weather beaten one before turning to the Prince and saying in Solinamian,

“So you’re the ringleader are you?”

“Where are we?” It was as haughty a tone as he could muster.

“Can’t really tell you that Your Royal Highness” said the man in response. He spoke the Prince’s language with a strange accent. “That would be telling wouldn’t it?” He raised his eye brow as he looked the captive up and down, making his prisoner seethe at his insolence. “By the way my name is Mark and this is Graf. Try not to irritate him, he doesn’t like it.”

“Your name is not important to me. Where have you taken the other one who was with me?” An odd choice of words, deliberately simple, but also what else would or could he call Ivor? He was certainly not a friend. To give him the title ‘General’ seemed laughable, and somehow unwise, as if admitting his importance might make the situation worse.

“He will not be harmed. We do not believe in torture and violence.” The comment was obviously meant as a barb, yet was spoken as a simple statement.

“Take me to whoever is in charge here, take me to your Prince.” the captive demanded in response, giving the man an authoritative look that had cowered many back home in his native land, a glare that was strong as a sword and more threatening: it had no power here and fell flat, the lame throw of a spear by a weakling, while the two foreigners laughed at him.

“You are going to the ‘Prince’ so calm down” was the only reply before the man moved away, lumbering like a woodland animal to go and speak to someone else.

There was something odd in the way that the soldier had said 'Prince' that the captive didn't like. It was a mixture of sarcasm and something else. Before he could place what it was, he found himself on the move again, though mercifully more slowly, as he was led to a tent with two giants of men standing outside, who though they seemed in hot debate and very much at ease, were still formidable. At the arrival of the foreigner, one of them pulled out a knife, and still in mid conversation, checked him for weapons, grabbed his wrists, severed the rope which bound them together and almost simultaneously physically hoisted him into the tent. His arrival before the captain of these savages, the leader of the enemy and presumably Prince of the Royal Bloodline was hardly therefore the haughty and noble scene that the captive had envisaged. Rather, he was propelled forward and came to a skidding stop before a woman, as if he were the victim of a shipwreck and had been thrown by the sea on to the shore in disgust.

He was immediately confused. The sight of a woman here was snow in the desert to him. Perhaps she was a slave? Though she didn't look like a slave, or rather her manner was completely unlike one. This woman was neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin, she was unlike the ideas of beauty that he had grown up with. She stood bolt upright, looking at him steadily and piercingly as if she were affronted by his presence, her alert eyes assessing him in a manner he did not like. Even though she was female she was dressed in trousers that clung tightly to her legs, and a plain black woollen shirt. Women that decorated the rooms in the Royal Palace all those endless civilisations away in his homeland were covered in precious stones and metals: the only jewellery this woman wore was an intricately worked ring on the little finger of her right hand, and a plain gold pendant that might have belonged to a man and which hung down, nearly to her stomach. Her single gesture to luxury was the black, fur-lined coat that she was thoughtfully undoing with the slow, deft motions of her long, delicate fingers.

Though she was simply dressed, next to her he felt as if his own silk embroidered clothes were gaudy, that the attractiveness with which he was familiar meant nothing here. He had taken without question that the purpose of beauty was to convey power, and so beauty equated to wealth. But the priceless gems he wore as badges of his status had become meaningless. Instead he was painfully aware that he was spattered in mud, and was kneeling on the floor like a slave, a fact that not even all the riches of the world could disguise. Plucked out of his own remit he might just as well have been a slave, in spite of his jewels. So his anger increased. The more he looked at the woman, the more she looked back at him with defiance.

She was standing in front of a table, on which a map and multiple sheets of paper were being methodically rolled up by two heavily armed men with expressionless faces. Neither of them looked down at him, kneeling on the floor, but instead gradually sorted the papers more like bureaucrats than warriors. They were dressed in similar drab clothes to the woman who was studying him so intently, dark material flapping with their movements. The Prince rose to his feet, dusting himself down from his ignominious arrival. No one in the tent apart from the woman bothered to look at him. Unused to this attitude of cool indifference he balked. Where was the hatred, where the celebration at his capture, in fact where was there any emotion at all?

"Where is your master?" The Prince demanded, not bothering to conceal his rage. He had been insulted and their rudeness was driving him beyond anger. The woman raised one eye brow, turned to the other two men behind her who had frozen at the outburst, and said something in her own language, which the Prince tried and failed to

understand. All he heard was nonsense, then the laughter of the two men. Laughter again.

“How lucky I am that I understand your language. I might have missed that gem of politeness if I did not.” Whoever this woman was she spoke Solinamian with precise, careful diction, deliberate and slow. She looked him full in the face. “I would not have expected someone so royal to be so rude, particularly not the son of the Emperor of the Eastern Empire, because that is who you are, is that not so? I would normally apologise for the discomfort of your journey, but you have caused all of us a large...er...lot of distress, so I won't. I will not punish you for the rage and anger you have caused by your invasion of our country. Unless you try to escape us you will not be harmed. You will be going on a long journey starting tomorrow at dawn. Before that you will come now and have something to eat with us. Just because we are in a forest doesn't mean we go without comforts. But first, what is your name? I have done much research and I could not find it.”

“Only those of royal blood know my name, to the rest I am a son of the royal house that rules on behalf of the gods. All fear us, and the time will come when you will too.”

The woman translated this, but the sole reaction in the tent was one of mild amusement.

“Don't you have a shorter name?” she asked, then “would it help if I gave you mine first? Yes? Well then, I am known as Octavia, daughter of the present King of this country. Does that make me royal enough by your standards?” She was mocking him. Few ever dared to do this.

“Not really. It seems I did not make a mistake when I mistook you for a servant, soon you will be. You have no idea how great the army we are amassing against you is, and how well trained. You will soon be nothing but dust.”

“How very dramatic of you. We'll see about that.” She folded her arms. “Are you going to be like this all the way through dinner?” the tone was plaintive, the intention again was to make fun of him. She sighed, gestured to the Prince, gargled something in that strange language of theirs and he found himself frogmarched from one tent and taken to another. He was provided with water and soap and similar dark clothes to the ones that everyone else around here was wearing. They smelt odd, sweet and pungent like a herbal remedy yet not unpleasant, soothing in fact. His transformation was overseen by another stern faced brow beaten type, that could have been the same man as the one who had first stood guard over him (Gren, was it? Gorf?) But it could just have easily have been someone else. They all looked the same here; grey faced and ugly, ugly and dull looking, just like their clothing. To do his new garments credit they were a lot warmer than his own were. He was almost grateful for the thick coat he was provided with, similar to the one worn by the woman, (Octgonia? Octravia?) There would even have been room to secrete a sword within its folds, a sword which he no longer had. They had taken it along with his dagger. He felt the bruises and deep cuts on his neck where he had nearly been garrotted, the tactile reminders of his shame, shooting the memory of his capture through his mind yet again. As he was choking he had inadvertently dropped the dagger he had managed to draw. It was a reflex that had cost him his freedom, for had he managed to stab his attacker he had no doubt that he would have escaped.

And now he was in an enemy tent, in enemy clothes, in the middle of a country that he knew his scouts had still not yet properly documented, a place that was practically a swamp, the furthest away from civilization he had ever been, in a tent made of brown sacking. Not even a slave would inhabit these surroundings back at home, and

yet that woman had said she was royal. At least his new coat snugly covered the injuries on his neck, with its high collar. He felt it would somehow add to his shame if the marks of his idiocy were visible to his enemies.

His first priority was working out how he was going to escape. They had unbound his hands, foolish of them, but distinctly advantageous. He reminded himself that he had been under constant pressure as the son of the Emperor so as a result he was the fastest, strongest and cleverest of all his peers. He had to be. Any weakness would be noted and taken advantage of, just as he now planned to take advantage of these so-called guards. He was oddly grateful for all that pressure now. He would calmly watch for his chance, eat with these savages, being careful to eat and drink only what they did, and thoughtfully provided with new, warmer and more surreptitious clothing he would make his break for freedom in a couple of hours. He could move swiftly and soundlessly like a cat. He was the son of a long line of emperors, above all men, worth a thousand of all these creatures and he was quite used to proving it.

One of the men he recognised from before came to fetch him, bringing along a host of others for security. They surrounded him, pressing tightly against him to restrict the movements of his arms as he walked with them from one tent to another, pushing from all sides as they marched so that he could conceivably have lifted his feet from the floor and allowed himself to be carried along. The man who seemed to be the head of the troop reintroduced himself as Mark, (though his was the only name that the Prince had remembered) and talked to him through this mobile wall of men as he strode along by the side of this curious arrangement, trying to make conversation with the Prince, to coax him into anything other than monosyllabic replies. It was faintly incongruous and beneath the Prince's contempt. This other man spoke to him as if these guards were not here and as if they were equals, the way that he kept pace with them by loping along was too familiar, it made the captive's nostrils flare and his skin prickle with the strength of his disdain. They did not realise that if he chose he could overpower the whole group of them. But he did not choose. Not yet.

As he entered the tent for dinner the conversation ceased like a refrain of music ending, the familiar intonations without any recognition of words within phrases clunking to a disharmonious stop. In front of him were three tables around which sat men and women like a gaggle of foreboding black birds, fluttering with constant movement, their shadows stretched and brought to life by the row of candles lighting the tent, which created pools of darkness eating in into the figures, making them seem extensions of it, strange creatures, half human and half unknown. To his surprise he was led to a seat next to the royal woman, and made to sit on a rickety chair of canvas and wood that moved beneath him in a dishearteningly unsteady manner as he sat down. He was going to have difficulty keeping what little dignity he still had. The woman glanced at him, her brows joined in preoccupation as she spoke to the man who had brought him through to her tent. Her face changed from anxiety to pity as she looked at the captive.

"So you have not tried to escape? I'm not surprised, I wouldn't either. Not until I had eaten of course." With the calm attentiveness of a nursemaid she pronounced "You must be tired. You must of course eat as much as you like and drink some wine." As she poured the deep pink liquid into a dun, grey, metallic cup it caught the light from a nearby candle sending molten patterns up her throat. "Your good health," she toasted him seriously, taking a sip from the goblet. Her eyes met his and she handed him the drink with the solemnity of a priestess fulfilling the duties of a rite, then suddenly smiled with an intensity that made the Prince blink in surprise. She had known then, that he would be suspicious of being poisoned. "I wonder what you must

think of us," she added, then, "no, in fact I think I would rather not know. You must be hungry. Eat."

Several plates of food were placed before them, which he noted with relief were intended for communal use. He truly would not be poisoned then. Strange, when it was such an easy way to get rid of an enemy and a common weapon for cowards who did not like to fight. His mind worked like the quick movements of a hunting hawk, mentally assessing every single threat and advantage in the room with subtle glances, on edge, ready to seize his moment. He had no doubt that they would try to kill him, or torture him, or use him in some way, so he had to leave as soon as possible.

Probably best to wait until the dead of night now though, when most of them would be asleep. They were strange people, unfamiliar and sinister, and he did not trust them. Not that he trusted any of his own people either, not completely in any case. Time had taught him that everyone had their own needs, their own ideals and their own strictly private loyalties, no matter how much they may deny them, and it was impossible to determine exactly what each person truly represented until a crisis arose. By then it was usually too late.

He must leave, but he must attempt to fool them first, to fool them into believing that he had no such intention. It would make his task so much easier. He turned to the woman.

"Most Noble Princess, why did your King send a woman to challenge his enemy rather than his son? I am told that he has a son...." He sounded clumsy, idiotic even.

"You will find in this country, we respect women every bit as much as we respect men." she responded briskly, then "Octavia, my name is Octavia" she said slowly, as if unsure whether he would be able to pronounce it, adding "and I am not a Princess." "I am sure that you are most capable," he responded, trying to recoup lost ground (if he had ever gained any ground in the first place) "but you must concede that war is better suited to men."

"That depends on the sort of war you choose to fight." Her eyes challenged him.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you tell me, what sort of war are we fighting....Prince? Why are you here in the first place?"

"To claim what is rightfully ours."

"I see. I think that we will have to put a stop to that idea."

"Just because you have managed to trick me into capture doesn't mean that the army will stop this invasion. I have countless generals trained -"

"Who says we just have you?" The wind was taken out of his sails and she leaned forward so her face was close to his. Her eyes were wide open, hard and eager, the same look he had seen on the faces of the powerful punishing the rebellious.

"We've captured all of your leaders. As we sit here now they are being dispatched to safe, secret places all over the country." She wagged her finger at him, "You won't get them back you know. And what will your army be without its leaders?" She let that sink in before adding, "You're not, as a nation, very good at delegating power are you? You don't like letting the servants, the commoners have a go. Your mistake. Because now your army is useless. The soldiers won't know what to do, and they won't dare do anything for fear of being executed for mutiny, or acting without orders or whatever it is that you chose to name the crime of initiative. Foolish really. Our system you see is different, we judge people on merit alone."

"I doubt that" he scoffed. "Why are you here then? Is it not because you are the daughter of the King?"

“It is because I am clever.” She snapped, adding “Don’t talk to me of...” she paused, searching for the word, clumsy in a language that was not her own, “you exist, you function on hereditary... merit. Your country runs on it. It’s just ridiculous that you don’t have a name, a proper name. It implies that you don’t have any other function than as...well as a Prince.”

“I don’t” he replied simply.

“But that is ridiculous!” she repeated. “What then do people call you? Your friends, your lovers...”

“My Lord, Your Highness, My Lord Prince...” he tailed off, watching her laugh so heartily she almost choked on her food. She laughed all the more as her companion could not see the irony that she saw behind this absurd situation, that automatically elevated a mere person to the level of a quasi god.

She finally managed to control herself, and responded, “Here everyone has a name. Though I am the daughter of the current King I do not presume in my right to be a princess, or to succeed him. You will find that our system is very different to yours. So pick a name, you’ll need one. Have you really never had one? Not in your whole life?”

He thought for several moments, back to a time he could scarcely remember where memory was a series of colours more than defined images as the years had passed and eroded them slowly and surely, a childhood of brightness, where the breeze would stream through archways that looked out on to the sea, soothing his skin while he played with wooden toys on cool marble floors. “My mother used to call me Gereik.” “What?”

“Ge-ray-eek. It is from an old language from before the reach of memory. It is probably sentimental.”

“Why? Because it is from ‘before the reach of memory?’” Her tone was full of mirth and sarcasm as if she were goading him. He repaid her with her own humour.

“It is the sort of thing women like isn’t it?”

About to launch into a tirade fuelled by righteous anger, Octavia observed her captive, and couldn’t decide whether he was serious or not. Her natural, more generous instincts conquered her desire to quash all the elements in her companion that she found objectionable, that is to say, nearly all of him. She was used to being decisive, to entering into a debate followed by agreement of some sort, and the unassailable fact that this foreigner was never going to meet her on any common ground unsettled her, and made her ruder than she was by nature.

She gave up. She turned her back on the Prince and directed her whole attentions to the man on the other side of her, a friend of her brother’s called Graf. Soon they were deep in conversation, she relaxed over the familiar topics and the things that she knew, and took silent pleasure in ignoring her new acquaintance, who moodily started straight ahead, as if by ignoring everything around him he could distance himself from proceedings, and go back to that point in time about three moments before his capture. He would urge the horse on, rather than stopping for a closer look at the markings carved into some rock next to a small cave, rock that looked similar to the ones used by the priests back at home as the foundation for their crazed ceremonies. Only Priests of the Sacred Order knew its real name. As he halted and considered it seemed to him that the markings were significant, left over from an ancient, powerful and long forgotten tribe, a method of communicating importance. Could this cave before him lead to supplies of those sacred stones that were valued so much? An irresistible urge to find out gripped him. Greater than the desire to discover the rock was his desire to learn its secrets, to find out what drove those hated religious zealots

that had such a hold on the Empire. He could use this information against them, perhaps he could overthrow them? His thoughts span. He stayed there too long. His weakness had given the savages the opportunity to capture him.

And now he was sitting, bored and frustrated, at what passed for a dinner here. He swiftly found that he and the man sitting to the other side of him did not share a common language, nevertheless what was lacking in verbosity was made up for in gusto, on the savage's side at least. The Prince gathered that the man's name was Ralph through a series of hand gestures and repetitions of the relevant syllables. He was as over familiar as the rest of his kind, more forward with his smiles than a courtesan seeking to seduce a client for extra money. It was all so distasteful.

The Prince sat isolated in a cloud of superiority, smouldering for revenge and profoundly disliking all those around the table with him. The taciturn man sitting next to the Octavia woman was nodding when she spoke, again and again, mesmerically almost, too obedient. He looked like a reliable yet stupid guard dog. And the girl the other side of him had a face weathered by wind, hardened by it. She looked like a nut, wrinkled before her time and hardy. He could almost feel her practical nature like a barrage hitting him from over there, as if she could not allow herself to be beautiful. He admired beautiful women, but only if they were clever and they interested him, for he liked to be fascinated. He found that no matter how divinely formed a woman was she would lose his interest after a time if she did not possess the intellect to intrigue him. If she had no brains she was like a flower that once plucked started to die, to shrivel to a brown stump like an old crone, until it was nothing more than a grotesque pile of dead leaves, lifeless and monotonous. He was not often tempted but when he was he moved on quickly and ruthlessly. He had banished his heart long ago in favour of his head; it was more reliable. The consequences of being blinded by sentiment could be fatal in the court of the Eastern Empire.

In a way he envied these people because they were blissful. They had no idea about the Sacred Order, or that rock which drove them to such extraordinary lengths, or the ruthless and suspicious Emperor, who while pretending to obey the Order, in fact used them to subdue his people. That stone and its sinister presence had sat on his mind for as long as he could remember. It preyed on everyone's mind. Even the Emperor was influenced by it, in his attempts *not* to be influenced. It both undermined and underpinned the society he knew, for while it fuelled the Order it denied all other people. At long as the Order had power no one was safe. At least this squalid country had one good side: he could temporarily forget about the priests and their sacred stones, and pretend there was no such thing. He could concentrate on simple pleasures instead.

The food was good, without the elaborate spices that he was used to at home, uncomplicated, somehow comforting, though his appreciation of it was no doubt coloured by his overpowering hunger. The wine was warm, sweet, and above all strong, nothing like the wine that he was used to, but after only a small amount of it he found he felt much more benign than he had before. He started to eye the back of the woman Octavia more speculatively. He found her odd but he did not intrinsically dislike her and there were many questions that he wanted to ask, even if her answers would be in that filthy, plain version of his language that she spoke. He had rarely been obliged to listen to speech that was so direct, simple, and ugly before, for his own tongue was one of decoration, metaphor and innuendo. After lightly placing his hand on her arm she swung her head round to face him with a look of accusation rather than welcome. Such a look that he might have given one of his peers who had dare presume too much.

“How did you know I was the Prince?” he asked. Octavia softened and smiled, visibly trying to make an effort to seem more of a gracious host than a fierce jailor. More food was being brought to the table. As he was mellowing from the effects of a full stomach and a gentle alcoholically induced outlook, so she was struggling to contain a rude agitation that she could feel threatening to break to the surface at any time.

“Apart from the fact it was always you giving orders, you had the brightest clothing, the best looking jewels, the nicest armour...it was simple really.”

She turned her body fully to face him and once again give him her full attention, direct to the point of being rude to his ears that were only used to deference and platitudes. At least alcohol had made her speech more fluent. “As you can hopefully tell, Gereik, I have studied your language, and naturally where study of speech comes, so follows desire to learn of the culture from which it stems. I was taught by someone who had spent his youth and middle age in your country, and then, finding himself in danger of being put to death, fled from the Eastern Empire to here. He is rather unique in that respect though, for I gather few are able to escape after your father takes a disliking to them.”

The Prince nodded “He would not allow anyone to disobey his rule, to disobey is to debase, and as he rules on behalf of the forces that are greater than our own, to debase his rule is to debase them.” There was a gleam of something in her eyes, was it dislike, hate? She continued,

“Well...as you say...anyway, this fugitive came here, and as one of the few to have done so, certainly recently, he taught us your language. I took lessons from him years after he first came here, when he was an old man. My father thought that I was mad, but I was curious. Sad to say I only had two years of tuition before my tutor died, the rest I had to learn from what he had written down and keep my studies going by talking to those who had also learnt Solinamian. My teacher kept great catalogues of his language, I mean, he made them himself, he wrote a dictionary of your language, he was always making efforts to preserve it for us, as if he thought one day we might need it. No one really understood why. But I was grateful. I like learning unusual things, but it is hard to practice when there are few people to practice with. My accent no doubt is terrible.”

The Prince skimmed over the attempted reach for a compliment: he had none to give so instead remarked,

“I am as surprised as your father at your wish to learn a language it was unlikely you would ever need. But fortune smiles on both of us with your mastery of it. Commonly only those countries who tremble under our rule speak our language.” She stiffened as he said this, and too late he realised the double meaning behind his words but continued regardless. “I did not mean to sound the discordant note of discourtesy but you must see that sooner or later our forces will overwhelm yours. We are the mightiest nation that has yet lived and inside our very souls are inscribed messages of war. When you are defeated your skills in both languages will be invaluable, so it *is* indeed fortunate for you that you can master speech in our tongue.

“Or unfortunate for you that you have not bothered to master mine,” she retorted, adding, “Tell me, have you ever read any ancient history from the Old World? Oh but of course, you don’t believe in it do you?” Her tone was soft but full of a sharp scorn that even the Prince with his inexperience of women could not fail to see. “Huge and powerful nations have been annihilated by countries less than half their size before now. It is more important to have intelligence than might, you see.”

With that pointed comment she turned away from him and started having another animated discussion, with the man and another woman, punctuated by frequent

laughter. In no mood for talking to his companions through the previously unencountered medium of sign language, the Prince sat in silence, deep in his own thoughts, but then couldn't help listening to the Princess and the men beside her, and found, almost to his horror, that he thought he *could* make out odd words, half words that he understood. It must be an aural trick for after all, he thought, I'm sure if I concentrated on birdsong for long enough it would be possible to find some understanding of it.

At that moment, several more men entered the tent, and two more women, dressed in the same dark, fine wool as the others. At the sight of him they cheered, smiles and hand shakes were exchanged, a man that the Prince recognised as leader of the band that had captured him was brought in, and clearly congratulated. Now clean faced, the captain was beaming with pride, a glass of wine was pushed into his hand, and the Princess rose to give him a cordial kiss on the cheek. The captain raised his glass and looked straight at the Prince, saying something addressed to the whole company. They all stood up, raised their glasses, looked at him also and drank. Baffled, Gereik turned and stared up at Octavia, who had also risen beside him and asked what was going on. With a hard, small smile she replied, "We are all toasting you, who as the potential destroyer of the Western Islands, has proved to be their salvation."

"How exactly?" he asked, sardonically.

She turned her beaming face to him once again, and shrugged. "There is no harm in telling you: tomorrow you are going to The Capital, and when you are safe there, we will treat you as a bargaining tool to get your father to call off this invasion and send his troops home."

"And you think that will work?"

"Don't you? I have no doubt that he wouldn't want his only son to die. Your lack of brothers and sisters could be your salvation in a sense, as his family line is so important to him." Again her words had an edge to them, as if she was struggling to contain laughter, but there was undoubtedly smugness underpinning everything she said. No one likes self-satisfaction in others, thought the Prince, and then comforted himself with the thought that he would soon be free. Even if he was not sure of the exact way back to his camp he would just have to rely on what his senses told him. It would not be too difficult. In order for them to have run here there must be some sort of path, perhaps even a road. And he had seen horses in this camp, they could not simply crawl along the undergrowth. He would overpower his guards with the minimum amount of noise and using the dark clothes they had considerably provided for him, stick to the shadows before finding his way out. There would be some slip, some mistake, some gap that he could use, particularly as these people seemed so relaxed. He would wait for an opportunity which would certainly come. In the mean time he would make use of the heat coming from the braziers in the room like a warm mist, which made him feel so cocooned and comfortable. He must hold on to this memory for the soggy journey that he would have to undertake until he found sanctuary once more. But the necessity for alertness was streaming from him, slipping as a blanket might gradually fall off the lap of a sleeping old woman, blissful, peaceful....warm....The Prince realised that he had been drugged as the figures around him became muted, soft like a half remembered dream. His last thought was bewilderment. How had they done it, when they had all eaten and drunk the same as him? Yet he didn't mind. He just wanted to get some sleep.

There was no loud crash as the captive slipped into unconsciousness, he simply slid down to the table in front of him until his head and shoulders were resting on it, like a puppet laid to rest by its owner. Ralph spoke to Octavia over the top of the insentient

man, safe in the knowledge that he would not need to resort to sign language again for the rest of the evening and more cheerful than a first time father looking at his newborn baby.

“He’s gone. Told you it was powerful stuff. Even works if the subject has eaten.” His very own project was flourishing and had evidently impressed onlookers with its efficiency.

“You’re not wrong. Very elegant. How long did it take to have an effect?”

“Just over half an hour. I thought he was going to be built like a hero of myth and legend judging by all the reports of him as a seasoned warrior, though he’s actually relatively slight.” He eyed his subject speculatively, “He’s well built though despite that, obviously at the peak of fitness...even so, he’ll be out for longer than I anticipated.”

“Get him into bed then. And make sure he is guarded. We don’t want to take any chances.” She watched as the sleeping man was carried from the tent, arms flopping. There was something unpleasant about it, as if they were taking a stunned animal away to die. Octavia did not like underhand dealings, but what choice did they have? She would never underestimate her captive, and she could not risk his escape.

No one else present seemed especially concerned. They had fallen into small groups, the way that is common after a communal dinner, and stood or sat chatting with the contented drone of the cheerful and well fed, showing no signs of going anywhere in particular. She decided to hurry proceedings along a bit, so banged on the table for their attention. “I just want to see those who are coming with me tomorrow, the rest of you can go if you like.” They took the hint, slowly, meandering to the door like a mellow herd of cattle. Ralph returned announcing that their guest was sleeping like a baby.

Octavia motioned for the group left to come and pull up some seats next to her. The flood of nervousness that she had started to feel now turned into a deluge as the planned event came closer like a malevolent spirit springing from the darkness. She did not feel competent, the captive was right; it should have been her brother who was here and not her. Her heart was pounding to the point where she felt sick. She breathed in and held her breath before she spoke as if this would calm her down.

“Right. You all know that we’re leaving tomorrow and heading as quickly as possible to Couburn Hills, where we are going to get fresh horses and put the Prince in a light, fast moving cart. It just seems the easiest way of transporting him. Then we go on as quickly as possible for the Ridge, probably via the Farlowe Valley, depending on whether we are followed or not. After we get up the Ridge we won’t have to worry about our speed as much, thankfully, and we can head to The Capital. Simple, and hopefully effective. Oh by the way, how on earth did you knock out our guest Ralph? And how long will he be unconscious for?”

He smiled, in his element, an eager teacher lecturing to a class. “I soaked the top of his cloak and shirt in a tranquilliser concoction of my own, paying particular attention to the collars because I knew that he would probably have some sort of recent cut there after his near-strangulation, and because as his skin heated up the garment, the potion would evaporate and he would breathe in the fumes. So double strength security if you like.”

“You are unbelievably deadly” commented Octavia. “How long is our new acquisition going to be unconscious for?”

“At least twelve hours judging by the state of him when he was carried out.”

“How much did you put on his clothes?”

“A lot” he responded seriously, “I felt relaxed just sitting next to him.”

“I didn’t.” she replied with feeling. “Can I remind you that he is a cold and merciless killer? Who knows how many he has massacred and tortured in the name of making his country powerful?”

“Yeah...well...we all have our faults.” Ralph commented flippantly.

“You really have been affected by that tranquilliser,” snorted Graf.

“No, no.” Mark waved his hand expressively “he’s in love.”

“I can’t deny it” Ralph smiled and blushed slightly, then leaned forward to scratch the back of his neck self-consciously.

“Who is it?” Alice leaned forward conspiratorially.

“Look, I hate to drag your attention back to the matter at hand,” Octavia was gnawing at her finger nails, with the look at an anxious dog worrying at a bone, “but we might have a problem on our hands. Ralph said that his little concoction will knock out our guest for twelve hours. We’ll need to be on the move by then. Really, we need to move in the next six hours in case any of his men try to track us here.” Octavia bit anxiously at the nail of her forefinger as if to announce her point. “How are we going to get him on a horse? And more than that, how are we going to ensure that he stays on when we get up to speed? I find it difficult enough some times...”

“That’s because you hate riding,” pointed out Alice, “if you’d let me give you some lessons when we get back to The Capital...”

“It will be too late then. And anyway, I’m not ever going to like travelling. Oh shit,” she groaned “I don’t want to think about it.”

“Are you sure that you want to go? You don’t have to.”

“I know you mean well Mark, but really I do. If anything happens I do have to be there. I don’t want to let down the King. If the Prince escapes, or dies, or kills any of us, my father will blame me, but if he does that and I am not there he will never forgive me.”

“Come on, he’s not that bad.”

“Over serious matters like this, yes he is. He has to be, he is an elected King, the responsibility of the country has been given to him by the people. So how are we going to move the captive?”

“Don’t panic, it should be easy enough. He’ll be very pliable.”

“Yes all right Mr Chemist, that’s exactly what I’m worried about. If we put him on the back of a cantering horse he’ll just jog off it.”

“Not if he is secured on he won’t,” pointed out Mark thoughtfully, “or otherwise, he could be tied up and tied to one of us.

“I could do it.” Graf spoke up, “I can stay on a horse no matter what. And I won’t put up with any shit from the foreigner either. Any small indication that he is going to try and tip us off the horse, I’m damaging him. Probably permanently.”

“I’m really glad I’m on your side Graf.” Alice giggled for there was something bizarre in violent intent coming from such an impassive source.

“That’s settled then. He can go with Graf.” Octavia looked relieved. “Any sign of difficulty and we’ll stop and have a rethink. He’ll be gagged and under that hood anyway.”

“I’ll put more magic potion in the hood then. That should ensure that he doesn’t wake up at all and start causing problems. If he breathes it in directly from the cloth then the concoction acts much quicker.” Ralph had the calm and satisfied air of one who knows he has completed a job well done.

“What a headache this all is,” Octavia exclaimed. She felt exhausted already and they hadn’t even started their gruelling race back to The Capital, back to her father. “I’ll be

so relieved when this is all over and I can go back to listening to weird, random and frighteningly high brow lectures as usual.”

“Don’t you find it dull?” asked Alice. “I could only ever interest myself in the practical, even when I was studying.”

“You get the occasional lecture that is savagely uninteresting, but mostly I enjoy listening to new theories and discoveries – I think progress is the most important thing to us if we are ever to enjoy the comforts, and more critically, the civilisation of the Old World. It is that thought that gets me through the worst and most painful moments.” After several glasses of wine she did not sound pious to her own ears.

“I prefer the great outdoors myself. There is nothing as enjoyable as racing through the countryside on the back of a horse, feeling the wind through your hair.” Alice looked mischievous. “I can’t wait for tomorrow – its going to be so exciting!”

“Lucky you,” replied Octavia heavily, “it’s going to be hell for me. You’ll have to give me tips on how not to die as we go along.”

“Of course!” Alice shouted to Ralph in mock centurion tones as he rose to leave, then “Wait! Where do you think you’re going? I haven’t heard about the new girlfriend yet!”

“Oh.” He sat down reluctantly and looked at Octavia. “Well you know her quite well actually.”

“Really?” Octavia rifled through her list of friends in an attempt to sort out possible candidates.

“Helena Sefallan.”

Octavia couldn’t contain her laughter, “Oh you poor thing.”

“Helena the Heartbreaker.” Alice was wide eyed in sympathy. “Though she has been nicknamed a lot worse than that. I count myself one of her friends but I have to admit that there is no one who is blind to her faults.”

“The nature of friendship, surely?” interjected Mark.

“Even she knows that she is bad!” Alice replied defensively “Poor Ralph, she will have forgotten you and taken up with someone else by the time you get back to The Capital.”

“She’s not *that* bad.” Octavia felt she should defend the name of her closest friend rather more, but Helena frequently admitted that she got bored of men easily, which was unfortunate for them as she cast a spell on the opposite sex that meant they quickly became besotted with her.

“It will be different with me.” Ralph confidently predicted. “I entertain her. And she finds me interesting, she has said so. And the nature of our love is beyond the qualities that normal people consider to make up a relationship.”

“Qualities like fidelity you mean?” remarked Graf as he stood up.

Ralph coloured, whether through anger or shame it was difficult to tell, the emotion clamped his mouth shut into a stubborn line, raised his chin in a sharp movement that shut off all other conversation on the subject.

“Right” Octavia stood up also. She could not afford tensions with this group. Part of the reason she had chosen them was because she had thought that they would work well together as a unit. Her voice rang with stress and anxiety, taught as her locked vocal chords.

“We’ve only got five hours until we need to go, so I suggest we go and get some sleep, as we’ll be getting precious little for the next three days at least. We should be on the move by dawn, as we need to put as much of a gap as we can between *us* and *them*.”