

Chapter I: War and Philosophy

(The City)

"One of my buddies talked to one of the men guarding the Karl Queen on the way back north. Most beautiful woman he had ever seen--went around barefaced the way even the highborn do among the barbarians. Hair like red gold.

"No trouble, friendly, biddable, taken up with her little girl. Until the morning they came clear of the woods. Stood looking out over the plains--Kaerlia is mostly plains, they say, though not where we had been--little girl in her arms. Shook herself, hair so bright it blinded. Where the Karl Queen had been was a roan mare, little girl on her back. Galloped west into the plains, outran the fastest horses. We never saw her again."

Mark fell silent, took a long drink of beer. Fourth time through the fall campaign that day, and his throat needed it. One of the listeners, the big man with scarred hands, refilled his mug; nobody else moved.

"We'd lost the Queen, but castle we found her in was a smoking ruin when we left, garrison our prisoners, so we still weren't doing so badly — not compared to some. Folk here know about Commander Gavin's campaign this spring, him being the Prince's man. Got chased back across the river by a bunch of women with bows, so I heard. Not naming names, but I've heard of other Commanders done worse. Most of my buddies were still alive. Can't say the same for the horseboy auxiliaries, but His Majesty can always hire more. Beer running low, but still beans and bacon. Not too bad — till we got to the river.

"There was the bridge, just like when we came south. Far side of it the fort, flag flying. Couple of officers came across to talk to His Majesty, men he knew, said it had all been pretty peaceful. Expect it was what he wanted to hear, the Karl army being all cavalry and the gods knew where, our horseboys mostly feeding worms since Commander Justin fell into the Valeslord's trap.

"We formed up as three sides of a square, just to be safe--fourth side the river. Wagons across the bridge first, archers after. Last wagon comes off the bridge, bolt of lightening down out of a blue sky. By the time our people could see again, far end of the bridge was floating downstream in bits and pieces, folk in what we thought was our fort giving our archers all their spare arrows, sharp end first. Beans, bacon, what beer was left, on the far side of the river--our land, but not just at the moment. Gold flag had turned to brown with a green circle--banner the barbarian women use when they decide to give their menfolk help killing us."

"The Gilded One called the commanders to council. One of my buddies helped — and when's the last time the Emperor of Etolia got served water to drink? Hear His Majesty tell it, not a lot of choice left. The Valeslord had brought wild men off the western plains over the pass into Kaerlia, used them to smash the horseboys while we were sieging the Karls. Sent them home again across the bridge and

west, looting and burning. Emperor said if he wanted to send a message to the capital — Western Capital, not The City — the bird better carry its own provisions. Ten thousand men, a river in the way, maybe food for a day if everyone shook out his pack and prayed hard. Two days if we slaughtered what horses we had left and ate them. Capital two weeks march if the Karls let us cross at the next ford west, which it isn't likely they would, and every foot of it burned out.

"For all he's the highest highborn in the world, Emperor knows men can't march without food. He asked the Valeslord for terms, got them. Officers, banners, to stay till the ransom was paid. Sent the rest of us home, small groups, enough food to get to somewhere civilized. It took me most of a month, but here I am in The City--hard feet, thin gut, story of how we beat the Karls. Except it came out the wrong way."

When he looked up, most of his audience was gone. He scooped up a few copper pieces, turned to look at his remaining listener. Free by his dress, boxer by his hands, but not the hard condition of the arena--retired.

"Good story. I know you're dry, but if you can manage it one more time I can make it worth your while. More than a few coppers."

Mark looked up at him curiously, waited.

"Highborn I sometimes work for, important man, likes to know things. I told him about you yesterday. He sent a scribe to take it down. Come along, tell him your story--slow enough so he can get the guts of it--we won't be stingy. Enough for another couple of days loafing before you have to report in up north."

The scribe, seated at a table in the back room with his tablets open in front of him, young for the job, looked up. Mark stretched, sat down again, started at the beginning: Ten legions, nine thousand cavalry, five thousand odds and ends, a train of wagons rumbling south across the bridge into the Karl kingdom. The scribe leaned over his tablets, stylus in hand, from time to time signaled Mark to stop while he caught up.

When he was finished, the big man brought in another pitcher, a platter of bread, cheese, black olives. The three ate together for a few minutes before the scribe spoke.

"A good clear account; my employer will be pleased. I think this should be fair payment."

Mark dropped the coins into his purse--three silvers, more than he had made all day--started to rise. The scribe held up his hand.

"A few questions, if you will. There's still a little beer left, and food."

Mark sat down again, waited.

"You said the men from the fort were men the Emperor knew; that's why he sent the supplies over the bridge. How could that be if the Karls were the ones holding the fort?"

Mark thought a moment.

"Dead men walking maybe — doubt anyone checked under their armor to see if they had any holes in them. Or Karls with borrowed faces. They say the Valeslord is a sorcerer, that's why he keeps beating us. Been doing it half of forever; I remember my father's stories. Would think he would be too old to lead armies, wouldn't you?"

"The Valeslord — he isn't the Karl king is he?"

Mark shook his head.

"Ally, from over the mountains. His own people fight as cataphracts, cats, heavy horse archers. He brings them over the pass to help the Karls. Last spring, west of the mountains, the cats fought their own war with the Commander — Artos, the Second Prince's man. The one who put down the Belkhani revolt. Valeslord beat him too."

The legionary gone, Aristos folded up his tablets, put them back into the bag at his left side, adjusted the strap over his shoulder. At the door of the inn, the two men paused; outside was full night. Aristos hesitated; Aethel spoke softly.

"Most noble."

Aristos gave him a warning glance. The boxer paused, continued:

"Nobody is likely to bother me, but some of the streets between here and the palace aren't exactly what you are used to. Better I keep you company. Besides, it's a bit of a maze."

Twenty minutes and nine turns later, Aristos decided that his companion was given to understatement. Also, when they finally reached the Square of Emperors, that going home by the avenues he knew would have taken twice as long.

In the distance they heard the sound of flute music. At the far side of the square, torches. The two men stepped into the shadowed entrance to the Temple of Victory. As the party drew near, Aristos could make out the forms--two guards in front, two behind, four torch bearers, two flute girls. Certainly a safer way of going about the city at night, if a little slower. In the center, half a dozen young highborn, four veiled forms. Highborn ladies, perhaps, but at this hour more likely

not. Two of the men had tunics hemmed with yellow; Aristos recognized one of them. An odd feeling of power, watching from the dark, seeing unseen.

Aristos handed his cloak and tablets to Aethel. The carry bag at his right side held a tunic of heavy silk, edged with gold; he pulled it on. Tablets in their bag over that. Reversed, the cloak showed a familiar dark red; he arranged it to conceal the tablets. Leaving his companion behind, Aristos stepped out into the square. In front of him loomed Konstantin the Great, the marble twice life size, gilded from top to bottom. He stopped, looked up, spoke softly:

"This my promise, Gilded One, nor will I fail. What lands you won us we shall defend. Neither the barbarians will have them nor any in whose veins your royal blood is polluted by blood of the conquered. This I swear, Aristos son of Konstantin son of Alkiron the Gilded One, son of Kerses, gilded, your noble son. Grant me strength."

The square was silent. Aristos stood a moment looking up at the statue, turned, made his way around it. At the far side of the square the familiar mass of the Prince's palace, at its center the formal entrance, lit by torches, guarded. Near the right end a smaller door, unlit. Aristos knocked; the door opened, revealing a single guard.

"Most Noble."

Aristos noted the guard's expression, answered it:

"Yes, she was worth it."

He stepped into the corridor, turned right, passed two doors; a hanging lamp struck gold glints from the hem of his tunic. The third was guarded by two men. One opened it for him.

Before leaving his rooms again he changed into clothing better suited to place and station, the bag of tablets carried by a slave walking behind him. A few minutes brought him to Atarchos' door. He hesitated a moment, but the old man kept late hours. A knock brought the usual grunt.

"Aristos, Most Learned."

"Enter then, best one."

The room was cold. Behind the table, covered with its usual litter, the shutters to the inner courtyard were wide open. The philosopher was sitting bent over a scroll, reading it by lamplight that flickered in the draft.

Aristos crossed the room, closed the shutters, retrieved the crumpled cloak from the corner, handed it wordlessly to Atarchos. The old man looked up.

“I needed them open; daylight is so much better than lamplight.”

“And the last of it vanished an hour and a half ago. The hypocaust is to heat the palace, not the whole city.”

He walked back to the door, took the tablets from the slave, sent him off with a few words, closed the door, walked back to the table.

“I have a report of the Emperor’s campaign.”

“My news is a century older; we’ll have yours first.” Atarchos weighted the scroll he had been reading open with two pieces of carved marble, looked up at the younger man, waited.

“We found a legionary, just back from the campaign. He was dining out on the story; Aethel thinks the inn was giving him bed and board in exchange. I paid him to tell me the whole campaign, got it down on my tablets.”

“How much of what he told you was whatever he thought you wanted to hear?”

“He didn’t know what I wanted. Aethel told him I was a scribe, working for some unnamed highborn.”

“The legionary was blind?”

“I wasn’t dressed like this. No house color, no gold. A plain robe, like a scribe might have; Aethel bought it for me. The guard at the west gate thinks I was out after someone else’s wife.”

“Read me the story. Then tell me how much of it you believe. Tomorrow, when the light’s better, I’ll copy from the wax to parchment.”

The knock on the door was Aristos’ slave, with two others, carrying a brazier filled with coals. They brought it in carefully, put it in the one corner that wasn’t too near a scroll rack, went out. The two men warmed their hands over it.

When Aristos had finished reading him the account, Atarchos thought a moment before putting the first question.

“Which parts don’t you believe?”

“You mean the magic? The story about the Queen sounds like something out of the myths. But the legionary claimed to have talked to someone who saw it.”

“Did he?”

Aristos opened the tablets again.

“Here it is. You’re right. He said he talked to someone who said he had talked to someone who saw it. You think it was just a story?”

“If nobody listened to him, he might go hungry. How old was the little girl?”

“I don’t know. Yes I do. Gavin said the Karl Queen was brought to bed a few weeks before he invaded. He was afraid the Valeslord might have stayed the winter for it and still be on his side of the mountains. That was his excuse for going so slow and careful he ran out of supplies before he did anything. It’s bad enough Father has a commander who talks like a peasant and can’t be bothered to wipe his boots before reporting to his lord. We could at least have a peasant who won.”

“That makes the daughter maybe six months old when she and her mother escaped?”

Aristos nodded.

“I don’t know much about magic, but I know little girls. I’ll believe in a woman turning into a horse before I believe in a baby riding a galloping horse bareback.”

“Then there were the stories about the Karls’ rivers. One of them rose in flood, washed away half a legion. Then it went dry—one reason the army left. The legionary thought it was magic.”

“More likely the Karls found someone who could build a dam--and break one. That still leaves one.”

“The men from the fort—men the Emperor knew, after the Karls took it and all our people should have been dead?”

Atarchos nodded, waited, watching the younger man.

“That’s the easiest of all—easier without magic than with. ‘It is unnecessary to multiply hypotheses,’ as the Logician says. One covers all—not only the men, but how the fort got taken. Treachery. Open the gate at night, let the enemy in—no damage to the fort to warn us. And I know why. And who.”

Aristos paused. It felt like old days, solving a puzzle his tutor set him. Now they were both older, he was setting his own puzzles.

“My uncle. Iskander knows the Emperor won’t choose him—he’s half barbarian on his mother’s side. Not when Father’s doubly royal—and older too. This was his chance.”

“How does he gain by the Karls defeating the Empire he wants to rule?”

"Iskander has four legions in the Western Province, and I'll give odds they're all loyal to him. None of them were lost in the invasion—any more than Father's—the Emperor wanted to prove he could do it himself when his sons couldn't. After the surrender, ten legions gone, the Emperor is left with two--nothing else nearer than Belkhan. Next news we hear We have to do something."

"Not tonight--everyone important is asleep. Besides, it's my turn. I found your warrior ladies. Here."

He tapped the scroll spread out on the table.

"The Historian went looking, three hundred years ago. Do you remember what he found?"

Aristos nodded: "Nothing. He looked everywhere they ought to be and everyone said they were somewhere else. That's the bit of "Concerning the Strange" where he says he cannot prove a negative, but on all the evidence they are a good story but a bad fact."

"You always had a good memory. The Historian was wrong.

"For two hundred years, everyone thought the question was settled--no women warriors outside songs and stories and maybe a few girls pretending to be boys to run away from someone they didn't want to marry. Do you remember who Xanthos was?"

Aristos shook his head.

"No reason you should--he didn't write much worth reading. He was one of Astogeiton's school, exiled from Thénai over a killing. Came here. He tried to start his own school, but the New City was never much for philosophy, so he decided on geography and history instead. Talked to traders, travelers, mercenaries out of the western kingdoms, back before Konstantin conquered most of them. Collected stories. At the end, he got interested enough to go himself, came back alive too.

"The Historian was looking east and north of the Free Cities, where all the stories he knew said the spear maids were to be found. Xanthos was looking west of here. He found them."

He leaned over the scroll, read aloud:

"In Norgaland and Kaerlia and lands about are found the spear maidens of legend. Their fellowship is said to number three hundred or a little less, sworn to loyalty to the company and each to her sister, as they call their closest comrade. Their weapons are lance, bow, and sword. Not all are maids; their laws permit them lovers. Sons are raised by the father or else exposed, as we do with daughters."

Aristos broke the silence.

"The Historian may have been right."

Atarchos looked curiously at him, waited.

"Xanthos says there were three hundred of them a hundred years ago. Gavin says there are two thousand now--and he should know. Maybe three hundred years ago, when the Historian was writing, there weren't any. Not even the Historian could find them before they were there to be found."

II: Concerning Jobs

"You sent word you needed to speak with me."

Aristos looked around the room--as always, perfect--turned back to his father.

"Yes, Sir. It's about the Emperor, and my Uncle, and what happened in the war."

The Prince's expression became less concerned, more puzzled.

"You want to know what's happening?"

"No Sir. I think I know what's happening--how The Gilded was defeated by the barbarians and what happens next. I heard it all from someone who was there. And we have to do something about it, before Iskander kills His Majesty and claims the throne."

"You think you have new information about the fall campaign, and my brother's plans?"

Aristos nodded.

"Then I am not the one you should be talking to. "

This time it was Aristos who looked puzzled.

"Sir? You're the head of the household, and the faction, and"

"I am the head of the household. That doesn't mean I cook the banquets--I have slaves to do that. It doesn't mean I command our legions--I have Gavin to do that. Cooking and commanding are not my job. Neither is politics, or intrigue, or military intelligence. I have people to do those things too. Be in your room half an hour before the noon meal; I'll send someone to you. You can tell him what you think is happening, and why, and what we should be doing."

"Sir." Aristos turned to go, hesitated, turned back. Hesitated again.

"Sir. What is your job?"

The Prince thought a moment.

"Part of it is being the things you said, and royal, and doing my best to act as highborn and people expect us to. The other part"

He leaned over, carefully picked up the goblet sitting on the low table by his chair, cupping it in both hands, and held it out to his son.

The bowl was chrysoprase, deep green, almost eggshell thin, the foot gold, shaped like a bird's talons. The gold bands around rim and stem were ornamented with a precise pattern in tiny granules.

"It's exquisite, father--the finest in your collection. And perfect. It might have been made last month."

"It was made last month. In a workshop by the old forum."

Aristos took another long look at the cup, carefully replaced it on the table, looked back up at his father.

"Someone in The City--not Thénai or one of the other free cities but here--made that?"

The Prince nodded.

"I discovered him two years ago doing what everyone else was--cups and plates of carved stone in the modern fashion. But technically perfect--precise, balanced, granulation so fine you could barely see it, like dust. What he needed were models, so I invited him to look through my collection, commissioned copies of my favorite pieces, showed them to people. Pretty soon he had more work than he could do, found apprentices, hired more workmen, even moved out of the falling down building he had been using as a workshop into something someone I suggested found for him."

"This," he nodded at the cup, "was made by his best apprentice. Two years ago, nobody in the world was making things like that, not in the free cities or anywhere else--nobody had for three hundred years and more. Ten years from now"

"You asked me what my job was. I'm a gardener."

"Yes, Sir. I see. Thank you."

Aristos gave his father the full obeisance--as if in court--rose, left the room.

Chapter III

"The very noble Timokrates seeks grace and courtesy of audience with the most noble Aristos."

The herald--a slave boy of thirteen--looked nervous; Aristos gave him an encouraging smile. Not the visitor he was expecting, and by the shadows outside the window it must be near noon. With luck, the visit would be a short one.

"The very noble Timokrates is welcome; let him be admitted."

The guard at the door drew back. Timokrates came through with a graceful flutter of floor length sleeves. There was a brief pause before Aristos spoke:

"A social visit, or hiding from an outraged husband?"

"I never outrage husbands. Husbands who would be outraged don't find out.

"Speaking of which, I hear you have abandoned philosophy for livelier pursuits. Would you like a few quick pointers?"

"Another day. Are those this month's fashion?"

Timos gave his sleeves a satisfied glance:

"Next month's. If you want to help, I'll send my tailor; they would look even better with gold edging. A suitable entry for you into the fashionable world."

"I think not. The Philosopher says ..."

"The Philosopher is three hundred years dead and a pretty dull stick by all accounts. Philosophy is all very well for boys under a tutor's eye but we have better things to do with our time now."

"Drinking parties and chasing other men's wives? It's not as if ... how many concubines do you have now?"

"Slavegirls are recreation, not sport. Tell me what you have been up to and your big brother will tell you how to do it better next time. What rank was she?"

Aristos shook his head.

"When I feel the need for expert advice.. . Just at the moment, I am expecting another visitor, so if ..."

Aristos stopped. His half brother was wearing an expression he knew. He hesitated a moment, but it was the only answer that made sense.

"Father sent you?"

Timos responded with a graceful bow:

"Political agent for the Faction--a nicer title than 'spy' and covers more--at your service."

"How do you find the time? I thought ..."

"I spent all my time starting new fashions and chasing neglected wives? Everyone else thinks so too. I intend to keep it that way as long as I can."

"You might consider how useful neglected wives — highborn wives — can be. Husbands talk to them, they talk to me. I talk to them, they talk to their friends. A source of secrets, a channel for spreading gossip. Rumors, the right rumors, can be very useful. Now tell me what you were going to tell Father about Iskander and the barbarians, and Grandfather's recent troubles."

"Of all people, it turned out to be Timos."

"Timokrates? Your father's son by ..." Atarchos paused a moment.

"By Gwenhyr. She was always a favorite and Timos was the first son, so even though she's only a concubine he was brought up in the family. By all appearances he's been living a gay life for years--parties, affairs, fashionable clothes. But it was all a cover for intrigue. He has a whole network of people--someone, at least a slave, in practically every Great House in the City."

Atarchos glanced at the door, lowered his voice.

"Including this one?"

"I hadn't thought about that, but considering Timos, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Worth remembering. What did he think of your account of the campaign, your guesses about your uncle?"

"As far as I could tell, Timos thinks I'm wrong about Iskander's plans but hopes I'm right. He thinks if Iskander tries to grab the throne it will swing the legions to our side. He has four legions. The rest of the Empire has more than a hundred, mostly loyal to the Emperor. If Iskander kills the Emperor, they go with Father."

"Does he think you are right about what happened--that the defeat and surrender were Iskander's work?"

"I don't think he cares. What matters to him is whether people in The City would believe it. I think he is planning to find the legionary I got the story from and suggest that he keep telling it, with a few changes to make it clear that it was

treason by Iskander that let the barbarians win. If it looks like the story works, he can find more people to spread it around.”

“I asked him about Belkhan, too. Aethel thinks that when the news of the Imperial defeat in Kaerlia gets to the Belkhani, we’ll have another revolt to deal with.”

“What does your brother think?”

“He is in favor of that too. He says that all it takes to put down a Belkhani revolt is a legion and a sack of gold.”

Atarchos looked curiously at him, waited.

“The legion is to guard the sack of gold. The sack of gold is to bribe whichever clan has the longest running feud against the leading clan to betray the revolt. Then you take captive as many of the revolting clan as you want, march them back to The City, sell them, and get back your sack of gold. Timos says the price of slaves is getting too high, so it is time for another revolt.”

“I don’t suppose your friend Aethel was there for the conversation?”

Aristos shook his head.

“No. Why?”

“You know Aethel was born in Belkhan? Timos’ story is how he ended up in the arena. If Aethel had been there, you might have lost a brother.”

There was a long and thoughtful silence before Aristos spoke:

“I knew he was from Belkhan, of course, and that he had been a boxer. But I never thought about how he got from Belkhan to the City, or into the arena.”

“He was taken prisoner during one of the Belkhani risings when he was a boy; he never told me the details but he must have been pretty young to actually fight, so I assume it was something like what Timos described. Since he was big and strong and quick he got bought by a trainer instead of sold to the mines or for a servant or made into a eunuch. He trained for the arena, made enough money to buy his freedom, enough more to support himself, retired when he decided he was slowing down. I gather he was never one of the top favorites, but a solid, reliable fighter.”

“That fits, but he never told me his history. I suppose I should have guessed it. I don’t--we don’t--pay enough attention to people outside the City.”

“If there is going to be another revolt we need to know more about Belkhan. Timos isn’t interested; as far as I can tell, he thinks everything important is inside

the walls. What matters to him is not whether Iskander is a traitor but only whether he can make people in the City believe he is."

Atarchos shook his head.

"That works for a while. It might work long enough to get your father crowned Emperor in the Temple. But if what happens elsewhere ends up with the rest of the Empire under your uncle's control and an army besieging the city, having been crowned in the Temple won't be worth much."

"Yes. If Timos is not interested in the rest of the world, someone else in the family should be. How do I find out more about Belkhan? If Aethel left as a boy"

"He probably knows people who came more recently; there are a lot of Belkhani in The City, free or slave. What sorts of things do you want to learn? Slaves in The City are not likely to know which clan is going to ally with which next time around, or which ones will support the revolt and which willing to help put it down."

Aristos thought a moment:

"I'm not a politician. I'm not a soldier. I'm a scholar; that's what you made me. How can a scholar help father and the Empire? What can I do to help keep Belkhan from revolting again—whatever Timos says, putting down a revolt is going to tie up legions we may need to help the Emperor against Iskander. If they do revolt, how can I make it easier for us to deal with it. Philosophy isn't useless; Timos is wrong about that. But"

"Philosophy is not all that scholars do."

From the expression on his face, Atarchos had an answer in mind. It was up to Aristos to find it.

It took him most of three days. Returning to the palace from the barracks he stopped only briefly in his rooms to change. Atarchos was as usual at his desk; this time at least the shutters were closed.

"You remember Antinous?"

The philosopher looked up from the scroll he was reading.

"The southerner. The one who was so helpful on the early history of Tibur, before the Etolian alliance."

"That one. We knew him because of his historical interests, but I remembered that he was an officer in the twenty-third, one of the legions that put down the Belkhani revolt three years ago. I invited him to come talk, then he invited me

over to the legion's officers mess. I got them talking about the revolt. It took a while, but once they stopped paying attention to what color the border of my tunic was they were friendly and very helpful. And I think I have the answer to your question. I know what I can do, at least for a start."

Atarchos said nothing.

"There were a dozen officers who had been in the revolt. Not one of them spoke Belkhani. I asked about translators. Their translators were all Belkhani who spoke Tengu, either from clans supporting us or Belkhani from The City like Aethel. One of the officers almost died finding out which side his translator was really on.

"One of the things scholars do is languages; one of the things I am going to do is to learn Belkhani. If I can, I am going to produce a word book and a grammar so that next time at least some of the officers will be able to tell whether their translators are really translating."

"How are you going to learn Belkhani?"

"I thought Aethel could help, find me someone willing to come to the palace, maybe live here, and teach me. You said--when you were talking about your year with the barbarians north of the Kozani--that the best way to learn a language was to speak it all the time. I can't do that, but if I had someone in the palace ...
."

"You don't need Aethel. Gwen."

"Timos' mother?"

"No. The short slave with yellow hair; I think she mostly works in the kitchen. She's young, Belkhani, and speaks Tengu well enough. A few months ago when I was sick she was the one bringing me meals, and I talked with her a good deal. Pleasant child, brighter than you might expect. Have her transferred to your service or just assigned to you a few hours a day for language."

"Is she good looking? People might think--not fair to the girl."

"Not fair to have people think she is sharing your bed? Not honest, unless she is, but I cannot see it doing her any harm. High born's concubine ranks well above kitchen slave."

Aristos shook his head.

"It doesn't feel right. I'll have to make it clear to her, at least, that isn't what I want her for. I'm not Timos. I don't want to be Timos. Besides, you said she was young."

Atarchos smiled. "Not that young."

Chapter IV

"The Most Noble sent for me?"

The girl was small, light haired, obviously nervous.

"Yes. I am told that you are from Belkhan."

She nodded, a puzzled expression on her face.

"I wish to learn Belkhani. I will tell Martus that you will be spending several hours a day speaking it with me. That is all I will require of you. I ... "

She gave him a shy smile.

"I understand. At what times will the Most Noble require me?"

Aristos thought a moment.

"I have never learned a foreign speech, save only Tiburi, and that from books. Let us try for an hour after the morning meal and another hour before the evening meal. I will tell Martus, and he can send you. We will see how well that works."

"Yes, most noble." The girl hesitated.

"If the Most Noble would tell me more about what he intends, perhaps before I come I could think about how best to assist the Most Noble in learning the Hero's speech."

"Most of the time we seem to be either ruling Belkhani or fighting them. Both might go better if more of us knew their tongue, instead of depending on translators who may have their own reasons for what they say. I wish to understand the common speech of the people and to speak it well enough so that I will be understood. I do not need to be able to talk with your poets and philosophers, only with soldiers and merchants and the heads of clans.

"You called Belkhani the hero's speech. Is that its name in your own tongue?"

She nodded.

"We call Belkhan, the inner lands, the hero's land. It is ringed by high mountains, you know, and common men could not have climbed them. Also, in ancient days giants dwelt in the inner lands; you can still their works. My own clan's stronghold is a ring of stone as big around as the City; it has a lake and grazing fields within its circle. It was not built by human hands. The men who took the inner lands from them must have been heroes indeed."

She stopped, bent her head, hand to forehead, backed out of the room.

* * *

“I have not seen you for some days. How is your word book doing?”

Aristos finished coming through the door, sat down on the other side of the table from Atarchos.

“Slowly. And learning the language goes more slowly still. I have more than two hundred words on the tablet so far but barely a hundred in my head. And I think Gwen has to keep herself from laughing at the way I put them together.”

“The girl is working out?”

“Yes. My thanks for suggesting her. For a woman, a barbarian and a slave she is surprisingly bright. And very nice.”

“Would you expect being enslaved to make someone less intelligent?”

“I suppose not, but still”

“The Philosopher was a slave for over a year, before one of his students ransomed him.”

“That was different.”

Atarchos said nothing, but the expression on his face was sufficient.

“The Philosopher was a slave because he was captured fighting for his city, as was his duty.”

“And Gwen is a slave because her clan head made the double mistake of fighting the Empire and trusting his allies. I cannot see that either reason is related to intelligence. If anything, surely the adult is more likely to be at fault than the child.”

“The Philosopher was neither a woman nor a barbarian.”

“Yet there have been women esteemed for their wisdom. And your grandfather’s attempts to demonstrate that he is wiser than the barbarians upon the battle field have not met with great success. In any case, you have to deal not with women, barbarians, and slaves but with one woman who happens to be a slave and a barbarian.”

“And intelligent and sweet tempered and very patient with a fool of a free man trying to learn her language. It is true. I thank you for advising me to make use of her. It is a hard lesson I am learning, but at least I have a pleasant tutor.

“But I came not to thank you but to ask for your help. Here are some sentences in the Belkhani tongue, the words spelled out as best I can with our letters. Under each I have written what Gwen says it means. Over each I have written the meaning of the single words as best I understand them. I hoped you could make more sense of why they mean what they mean than I can.”

[Aristos goes with an army under Gavin to put down a renewed Belkhani revolt, Gwyn accompanying him, arranged by Timos. Timos plans to get Aristos killed. Plan fails because conspirators try to get Gwyn to cooperate, she tells Aristos, the two of them escape, get back to the city. Probably all before anything substantial happens of the military conflict.

When word comes of the Emperor's decision and death, Timos decides not to believe it, to claim Iskander killed him and faked word of his decision. Timos persuades one of the merchant witnesses to lie, has the other one killed. Tells his father his version. At some point perhaps tries to kill his father in order to claim the throne himself. He may argue that Iskander's mother wasn't Imperial either. Aristos may use the same argument to justify marrying Gwen, after changing his view of racial purity and barbarians.]

[Lots more stuff here that isn't written]

Eat at morn,

None knows what evening brings;

Luck is ill to lose

Book II?

[May not end up in the final version]

[Deals with the attempt to restart the Belkhani revolt by some of the Belkhani who surrendered during the campaign, plus Elaina, Kara, Asbjorn...]

Chapter III:

(Western Provinces--Two Days North of Borderflood)

"Is it you that is in charge of the beautiful lady?"

Hedin looked up. The questioner was one of the younger of the Belkhani troopers; several more were watching. Elaina and Kara were at the end of the little meadow, putting saddles back on their mounts after the brief noon break. A problem he should have expected. Forty troopers. Two ladies, one small, very good looking and, by all reports, lethal. First step--stall for time to think.

"What do you mean by "in charge of?"

"We... . I know that among the Karls even highclan women go barefaced; she does not hold herself like a slave or peasant. You are the only man of her people with her. Are you her kin, or one chosen by her kin to speak for her on the journey? We wish leave to speak to her."

Kara, of course, had noticed; she and Elaina were both watching. Since neither had ever been in Belkhan, they were unlikely to know any of the language. Which left it to him.

"I am not exactly kin to Elaina, but close enough; what would you have me say to her for you?"

The smile lit up the young soldier's face.

"Tell her I am in love with her."

Two of the others came forward immediately.

"And that we are too."

Hedin was still trying to figure out a response when Elaina came over, Kara behind her.

"What are they asking?"

"They want me to tell you that they are in love with you."

"All of them?"

"Three so far, but I wouldn't be surprised. If I tell them you are married, or pledged ... Belkhani take such things seriously, and with luck"

Elaina shook her head.

"Translate for me."

"Are you sure? I know these people; you don't. Their customs are not the same as ours."

"They are people and our companions in this venture. Translate for me."

"As you will."

Elaina thought a moment.

"Say this to them. I do not desire a lover or husband, but would take them all as comrades, brothers upon the journey, that their swords may guard my back and my sword theirs."

He hesitated briefly, but, seeing no alternative, translated; he noticed Kara watching him.

There was a brief silence; the young Belkhani broke it.

"The sword she carries is very plain. Is it in truth not ornament but a weapon of war? Does she expect to kill enemies with it?"

"You were at the battle, where the left of our line was Ladies of the Order, Lady Elaina's sisters. Were their bows weapons of war? Did they kill enemies?"

The young Belkhani looked puzzled; one of the older troopers broke into the conversation.

"The Karl ladies fight in battle in truth. I was with Ivor this spring. For the first weeks of the campaign they ran us ragged, shooting, running, shooting."

He went back to saddling his horse; in a minute the other did the same. They rode north towards Belkhan, the young trooper with a thoughtful expression on his face.

[They go to negotiate with the noble holding the key Belkhani fortress, the one that Artos took a few years earlier. It isn't the one they think, who is close kin to one of them—he has been replaced, probably killed, by someone else loyal to the Empire. They are taken prisoner, the two ladies not taken seriously, escape.]

Book III??

[Western Provinces: The second prince, Kiron, the Emperor]

Chapter XXX

(Western Province. Town at foot of low pass (need to name it))

Kiron nodded to the sentries by the Prince's door; they drew back to let him through. Iskander was seated not on the carved chair that he usually used as a throne but on one of three arranged around a small table, Artos on his right.

"You sent for me, father?"

The Prince nodded, gestured Kiron to the empty seat.

"Read this."

He handed Kiron the scroll he had been reading, waited while he read it.

"His Majesty wants all three of us to come?"

Iskander nodded:

"To consult with him concerning the defense of the western provinces against Kaerlia and its allies."

Kiron looked puzzled.

"Are they invading? I thought Harald let most of his army go after His Majesty surrendered."

The prince looked at Artos, Artos answered:

"We know he sent the nomads home over the low pass and by our front door—with Marko's blessings. Not surprising considering the amount of damage they had been doing on his side of the mountains. Carrying lots of loot and driving close to four thousand of His Majesty's horses. We bought more than a thousand back from them.

"So far as the Karls, as best I can tell their army went back to the provinces as usual; they only owe their King a month's service and he was stretching that already. I don't know where Harald himself went, but if there had been two thousand of his cataphracts running around this end of the Empire for the last year I think we would have heard about it. Besides, it's late in the year for campaigning. Whatever the Emperor wants us for, I don't think it's that."

"What then?" Kiron still sounded puzzled.

His father waited a moment before answering.

"To see if we'll come."

"So he can lock you up again?"

"Maybe. That's why it tells him something more than how I feel about riding in the rain—which I'm betting keeps on for the rest of the week. It's a test. Am I loyal enough to obey his command, even though it might mean another spell of house arrest somewhere? Or am I close enough to rebellion to refuse an Imperial command and start moving legions into the pass?"

"Isn't that risky for him? Until he can rebuild his army, we have more men than he does; and ..." He glanced at Artos.

"With four legions and the Commander I expect we could force the low pass, deal with anything my father has outside the golden wall, prevent him from reforming the legions that got dissolved when he surrendered to Harald. I have my doubts that we could take the Western capital without more help." He paused, looked at Artos; the Commander nodded agreement. [\[change wording if this is a year+ after the surrender.\]](#)

"Suppose we take it a step further. I siege the western capital, ally with the Karls and Harald, with their help somehow capture it, kill or imprison my father, declare myself Emperor. What happens then? We have four legions and some allies. My brother has two legions—and a lot of relatives among the Imperial highborn. The rest of the empire has something over a hundred. Do you think my usurping the throne would incline them to our side?"

Kiron looked at his father, then at Artos.

"It sounds hopeless."

The Commander shook his head.

"His Highness exaggerates. Those hundred legions are a long way from here and quite a lot of them are needed where they are. It isn't as if you can simply pick them up and move them like pieces on a game board. And you have to not only move them, you have to feed them. The only route for an army is by sea to the Old Capital, then west by river and land. The trade route from the Middle Sea north over the mountains isn't anything you would want to try with an army even if the Maril weren't in the way. If we have allies, perhaps promise the Belkhani independence in exchange for support, make terms with the client kingdoms, use the sort of tactics Harald used against us, we might be able to hold them back, maintain control over the west, everything Konstantin took from the Four Kingdoms."

The Prince watched his son, waited. In a moment Kiron spoke.

"Which means that at the very best we split the Empire, the way Theodoros did two hundred years ago. And at the worst we get a lot of people killed and our heads cut off. I don't think I like that plan, Father."

"Neither do I. I am sending the messenger back with a message to his Majesty that you and I are on our way. Unfortunately, Artos left this morning to inspect the training grounds northwest of here. I'm sending a messenger after him, but since I don't know exactly where he is going"

"You greatly regret that the messenger may not be able to find me. It's dark already; if I left town this morning I had best be on my way." The Commander rose, pulled his cloak around him, gave the Prince a final formal salute and left the room.

"So we obey the command. If the Emperor wants, he can lock us up. What good does it do ... "

"To have Artos free? Remember, he's not only my commander, he's also my first cousin on my mother's side. If you were the Emperor, which do you find more frightening: A revolt by your son, who wants to keep the Empire together and rule it, or a revolt led by the best general in the Empire, who has as good a claim as anyone to the throne of Norgaland?"

"My father, my brother, and I are quarreling over who ends up Emperor of Etolia. If the Emperor takes me and my heir out of the game and throws away all the western support he bought when he married my mother, sired me and made me governor of the province, he risks a revolt to tear the west out of the Empire. To reestablish the Kingdoms. He spent a fair part of his life trying to conquer the last of the four; I don't think he'll risk losing the three that his grandfather won.

"That's the gamble. By coming myself but leaving Artos behind, I demonstrate my obedience while preserving a threat, giving him a reason not to hold us. I also show that I can match him move for move. Father isn't playing for his own power, however much it may look that way; what he cares about is the future of the Empire.

"The only way I can win is to convince him that choosing me is a better gamble, in the long run, than choosing my brother. With his support most of the legions will back me. I offer my brother what he has now, a free hand in the Old Capital as the Emperor's representative, and I think he will take it. No fighting, no heads cut off, and we get the Empire."

"If you are wrong? If His Majesty locks us up, or executes you and locks me up, or executes us both?"

"If that happens, I think Artos claims in his own name, or possibly mine if I'm still alive, or yours, or your little brother's, and His Majesty gets to refight his Grandfather's campaign—this time against a first rate Imperial Commander with legions, Cataphracts, Karls, and Artos still has one bird for Haraldhold. The Emperor lost this fall against Harald and one kingdom; what are his chances next spring against Harald, Artos, and all four? The Empire might get the West back in the long run, or it might not; my brother may be named after Konstantin the Great, but commanding armies in the field is not his talent."

"Which is why His Majesty is not going to lock us up. What I think he is going to do, once that matter is settled, is to bargain with us."

"Over what?"

"Over the terms on which he is willing to support me for the succession, I hope. Have Giorgio pack for both of you for the trip; until we get to the Capital we travel light. Antonio can take care of packing what you will need at court; if in doubt consult with your mother."

"It is a pity the Commander left before His Majesty's command arrived, but these things happen."

Chapter XXX

A few hours short of the Capital the Prince's party stopped to make camp by a stream just off the road. The escort, two decades of auxiliary cavalry, unpacked the pack horses, set up a tent for Kiron and his father. The next morning the two Highborn bathed in the cold water of the stream, dried themselves, changed into silk tunics edged with gold, while the troopers scrubbed horses and gear.

They reached the main gate two hours past noon. Giorgios played herald for the party:

“His Royal Highness Iskander son of Alkiron the Gilded One, son of Kerses, son of Konstantin; The Most Noble Kiron son of Iskander son of Alkiron the Gilded One, son of Kerses, come to hold council with His Imperial Majesty Alkiron, The Gilded One, Son of Kerses, Son of Konstantin, son of Alkiron.”

The great gate swung wide; the party entered. Kiron spoke softly to his father:

"Last time I came through here I made a lot less noise."

"The more noise the better just now. My brother's people here will let him know that we entered in state, by invitation, on the best of terms with His Majesty. That should worry him a little."

After a brief wait in the paved courtyard just inside the gate they were met by an official in imperial livery and conducted to the central keep. A groom took charge of their horses, a legionary conducted their escort to barracks. Kiron and Iskander were shown to apartments in the keep. Half an hour later a second official brought them to the Imperial throne room.

The first thing Kiron noticed was how warm it was; there were half a dozen braziers burning, two either side of the throne, the others in the corners of the room. Alkiron's robe was edged with fur, the cloak spread over him of dark blue wool thickly embroidered in gold. He nodded to his son and grandson but did not rise.

Iskander came forward, went to his knees; the Emperor nodded, gestured for him to get up.

"We are here at your command, Gilded One."

"Two of you, at least. This is your boy?"

"My son and heir, Gilded One."

Iskander gestured Kiron forward; Kiron knelt, held position.

"Lift your head, boy. I want to look at you."

Kiron looked up. The face was older than he remembered, sharper boned.

"Do you think you could rule the Empire, boy?"

"Not yet, Majesty. Perhaps some day, if the gods require it of me."

"Think your father could?"

"I believe so, Majesty."

"Because he is your father?"

"Because the province he rules prospers."

"Didn't do very well against the barbarians this spring, did he?"

"No, Majesty."

Alkiron waited a moment. Kiron stayed silent.

"At least the boy can hold his tongue; a useful skill. Could my other son, your uncle Konstantin, rule the empire?"

"I do not know, Majesty. I have never been to the Eastern Capital, cannot judge of what he has done there."

"If I choose Konstantin for my heir, will you obey him?"

"I will, Majesty."

"Will your father?"

Kiron hesitated a moment.

"I cannot speak for my father. He has not told me otherwise."

"Fairly spoken. It's a hard floor; get up. Xylos, fetch chairs for the prince and his son.

The servant brought chairs; another brought a flask of wine, goblets, a bowl of apples and grapes. Iskander tasted a grape, turned to the Emperor.

"You grew them here?"

The Emperor nodded.

"Konstantin's work. He sent me a man from the Capital, four years back. The vines are against a south facing wall, inside a frame of beams. When it gets cold, he puts up walls, if it is too cold a brazier inside. He wants me to let him build a bigger warmhouse, with a glass wall."

"It would take a lot of glass. I have never heard of anyone growing sweet grapes this far north. They are good."

"If I hadn't lost the Karl Queen, I would have fed some of them to her. I thought If the Karls would come in, even as clients, it would save all of us a lot of trouble. They could keep their King. But they won't."

"Was that the offer you made the King's cousin, to get him to come in with us?"

The Emperor nodded. "I offered to recognize him as King of Kaerlia under Imperial hegemony, with a legion or two to deal with anyone who objected. He said yes, but I was never sure; he might have thought he could use my gold and men to seize the throne and then change his mind about the terms of our bargain. If he did ... he wasn't the only Karl my people were talking to."

"And now?"

"And now we have to start over again. I thought the old king's death would finally give me the chance I needed. If the fates had been a little kinder"

The Emperor reached down, took a grape, ate it slowly.

"After it was all over I did my best to figure out what happened, why we lost the campaign. Justin had scouts most of the way across the plains, and leatherbacks can outrun cats, so he expected to have news if anything showed up. That's why, when it looked as though he could trap the Karl cavalry, he took the chance. And ended up fighting two armies instead of one."

"What went wrong? I know he got beaten, but nothing more."

"The nomads went wrong, the wild men Harald brought over from his side of the mountains. You should know; you hire them as scouts. They shoot from horseback but they don't armor like the cats and they move a lot faster."

"I talked to one of our scouts from the last group of prisoners we ransomed free. He spotted the cats, all right—half the Host, or so he thought, coming from the direction of the pass, from the west. He headed east to warn our people—and ran into half a dozen of the damn nomads. They'd outrun the cats, got past the leatherbacks, made sure word never got back to Justin that the cats were coming."

"If he hadn't had the nomads, Harald might still have had enough men to beat Justin, but he would never have had the chance. Justin would have kept his cavalry back by the camp at the valley mouth, with two legions to help, maybe sent to me for more."

Iskander nodded, took another grape, filled in the rest.

"And without the nomads, Harald couldn't have burned out the border territory. Getting the army back after he took the bridge would have been hard but with luck you could have done it, instead of ... " He fell silent.

"Instead of surrendering my whole damn army, as your boy very politely didn't point out that I had to do when I fought Harald. Yes. Your job, next time, will be to deal with the plains nomads. Not after they show up, but before."

You are planning another campaign?" Iskander sounded alarmed.

"Not this year. Not next. Rebuilding a legion takes time. It will be years before I have back what Harald wrecked this fall, not to mention dealing with the rest of the Empire, matters elsewhere that I've been neglecting. But when we do move against the Karls again, I want to at least know what the wild men are doing. Better yet, I want a fair number of them on my side. You've been dealing with them off and on for years, probably still have a few working for you, the ones who set things up three years back when I needed to hire some of them to deal with things down south."

Iskander nodded.

"Yes. One of my officers is half plains nomad and speaks their language; I have regular dealings with one of their tribes, occasional dealings with another. If you want me to, I will do what I can to build links to more tribes, find out how to keep track of what all of them are doing. It won't be easy. Do you know what the Valesfolk, Harald's people, call the nomads?"

The Emperor shook his head. Kiron answered.

"Westkin. Harald has a nomad foster son; I think one of his relatives has a wife from Fox clan."

The Emperor thought a moment before replying.

"That might make it harder. But don't the nomads fight with each other, like most barbarians — like the Kingdoms before we conquered them? You should be able to find out which tribes Harald is friendly with, which tribes hate those tribes, Even if we can't get the nomads on our side, things will be easier if they are fighting each other instead of us."

"Yes." Iskander hesitated a moment before he continued.

"It would make it easier. But the nomads are not the real problem, Majesty. We had Raven clan scouting for us last spring. Harald still beat us. You ... We have been trying to conquer the Karls for thirty years and every time we lost. The nomads were his trick for your campaign, but he has had other tricks. Thirty years of them."

"And has not run out yet. I know; that's what I told my people a year ago, when they wanted to keep sieging the Karl capital. The barbarians lost three of the four kingdoms

because we had the good luck to have Konstantin the Great wearing the gold. They've held on to the fourth because, by our bad luck, the best general in the world is a Northvales farmer. I don't know if he can read and I am quite sure he doesn't grow grapes up on his mountain, but he is better at commanding armies than anyone we have. Better than Talinn was. Better than your Artos is. Artos would have been useful to help with the plans, but I can't say I'm surprised you didn't bring him."

Iskander started to say something in an apologetic tone; his father gestured him to silence.

"Don't bother; it doesn't matter. We have years. I just wanted to get things worked out now, so I could spend myself on other things."

"If we could kill Harald today I would plan on another invasion in three years, but we can't; he's a long way from here on his own mountain and his people are loyal to him. But if we are patient, time will kill him for us. Fifty-five, maybe older, and he's lived a hard life. Another ten years, twenty at worst. With luck dead, and if he is still alive in no shape to fight battles.

"I know that sounds like a long time. I'm older than he is and not in the best of shape either; you are not blind and don't have to pretend to be. But I don't have to be alive to win. I only have to have an heir who is. An heir patient enough to wait. That's what I called you here to talk about."

(Part of a chapter somewhere in the Kiron/Iskander/Emperor thread)

"How much do you know about the eastern edge of the Empire?"

Kiron thought a moment before he answered:

"You mean our border with the Turani, Majesty?"

The Emperor nodded.

"We had a war with them before I was born. I know we have legions on the frontier. What else should I know?"

The Emperor got up, walked slowly over to the mosaic map on the left wall, limping a little, pointed with his stick.

"The Free Cities — Thenai and the rest. You know the history. They spread colonies east and west before they started spending most of their men and money fighting each other. We're descended from the western ones--stayed clear of the wars, mostly, allied with some of our barbarian neighbors, grew, and now there are three legions stationed as guests, making sure the Cities don't start fighting each other again. Not that it's likely they ever will.

"The eastern colonies didn't do so well. Their barbarian neighbors were the Turani. Busy expanding east and south, happy enough to trade with civilized cities, but not an enemy you would want to take on with five hundred or a thousand half trained citizen soldiers. The cities are still there. So are the Turani."

The Emperor stopped, waited. Kiron turned back from the map.

"Independent city states under Imperial hegemony, like the Free cities, aren't they?"

"Twenty years ago they were. But I've been busy since then at this end of the Empire. The Turani have been busy at the other end.

"It started with little things — complaints about the Empire in the forum, agora talk about trading opportunities east. I wasn't in the forum or the agora listening, and I didn't pay enough attention to my people who were. New factions. A tyrant friendly to us overthrown in one city, one we had never heard of set up in another. Turani money behind it, good trading opportunities for people in their factions. I got reports. I get a lot of reports. Some were from people who said everything was fine, just a little froth on the surface. I expect some of them believed it, some thought we weren't paying enough and decided to sell their services in the other direction.

"If last summer's campaign had gone as planned, I would have shifted legions east when it was done, showed up at Skala with an army and a fleet, suggested that they get themselves a new tyrant and offered a few names. Skala's the biggest of the cities and the most in the Turani's pockets--if they folded the others would mostly go along. The Turani wouldn't be happy, but they have to move their troops by land, supply them by land. We have the inner sea. With the west taken care of we could handle an eastern war if we had to. My guess is we wouldn't have needed to--the Turani don't like losing wars any more than we do."

Kiron hesitated before putting the obvious question.

"And now, Majesty? Are you going to do it anyway?"

The Emperor shook his head, lifted his stick, pointed at the map.

"North of the Free Cities, what do you see?"

"Mountains."

"There are people in them. Half barbarian--they speak Tengu, but it's closer to the language of the old poets than to ours. Fierce, like most barbarians, and mostly to each other. The joke south of them was that they would be worth worrying about when one of their kings managed to keep the throne for ten years running."

Kiron stood silent, waiting.

"One finally did--fifteen years, and no enemies left at home alive that anyone knows about. He's started looking past his borders, conquering some of his neighbors and allying with others. He's building an army--a very good army for a barbarian, by all accounts. Not quite legions, but mostly infantry trained to fight in formation, slingers, more discipline than you might expect. Now he's looking south--and east."

"Does that mean we need to shift more legions into the Free Cities to protect them."

The Emperor shook his head.

"We aren't the ones who are going to have to shift troops. The King of the Kozani — Antios — doesn't want to conquer the Free Cities, he wants to lead them. He wants their help driving the Turani out of the coastal cities, the old eastern colonies--his army, their armies such as they are, and him as the leader. Civilization driving back the barbarians. He's half a barbarian himself, but that isn't how he sees it. We're going to back him with gold, influence in the free

cities. We'll get them to vote him some impressive sounding title. No direct Imperial involvement, but the fleet will be there keeping an eye on things."

"Can he do it?"

"He can if the Turani don't get wind of his plans too soon and send an army to stop him. If they do, the worst that happens is that they beat him, and probably get cut up doing it. He's no longer a threat to the Free Cities, the Turani are a bit weaker than they were, and we don't lose anything but a little gold. With luck he beats them — they aren't likely to send that big an army this far west, and I'm not sure they could supply one if they did. The eastern cities are out of the hands of the Turani and it hasn't cost us a single legion."

The Emperor fell silent, watching his grandson. There was a long silence; Kiron broke it.

"Doesn't that leave Antios as Hegemon of the Free Cities and everything east? A buffer between us and the Turani might be useful--but we're losing as much territory to him as they are. More."

"In the short run. But Antios is the first competent Kozani king in generations; they aren't likely to manage two running. He will end up assassinated by his brother or his cousin or his oldest son, or, if he is very lucky, die of old age, and the whole thing will fall apart. The Kozani will be back in their mountains fighting each other, the Turani will have lost their toehold on the coast of the inner sea, and the Cities will go back to looking to us to protect them from barbarians and each other. In my job — maybe yours some day — you have to take the long view. That's one of the reasons we always win against the barbarians. It just sometimes takes longer than we would like."

[This is a setup for the third book in the series, of which I have written less than one chapter.]

Chapter XXX

When Kiron entered, past the silent guards, the Emperor's eyes were closed, his body slumped back in the padded throne, his face the face of an old man. Or a corpse. For a moment Kiron stopped breathing.

One hand moved, the eyes opened. It took Kiron a moment to wipe the shock off his face. The wrinkled mouth twitched into a cold grin.

“Not dead yet boy, but too damned close. That's why I had you summoned. I want you to talk sense into your father before it's too late.”

Kiron said nothing, waited.

“Your father must talk to you, boy. Do you know what we've been arguing about, these past three days?”

He nodded.

“You want father's promise that when he is Emperor he will finish your war, win it. He thinks the war has cost us too much already, wants to make a final peace with Kaerlia and the Vales, leave us free to pay attention to the other frontiers, free up the gold and legions to deal with them.”

“What do you think?”

“Your Majesty told me, last visit, about the Turani problem and how you were dealing with it. If we hadn't been tied down here all this time, we could have dealt with them ourselves, not gambled on tricking a barbarian king into doing it for us. The longer we keep fighting Harald and losing, the more problems like that we will have; Father thinks it's the news of last year's defeats that set off the new rising in Belkhan.

“And if we win here, then we have to worry about holding down Kaerlia and the Vales. Father says that after Konstantin conquered the other three kingdoms, he and his heir spent decades dealing with revolts.”

“And I haven't thought of all that? Too deaf to hear your father's arguments, too dumb to work it out for myself? Too stubborn to admit I've lost my war? Is that it?”

Kiron remained prudently silent.

“I am stubborn; stubborn can pay. If your enemies know you won't give up, sometimes they will.

“But it isn't just stubborn. I've been fighting this war since before you were born, and it's no secret how it's gone. Why didn't I take your father's answer ten or twenty years ago, leave Harald on his mountain raising sheep and hunting wild goats instead of legions? Maybe I've gone stupid in my old age, but why didn't I try for peace after the first time

we lost, or the second? Think, boy. Kaerlia isn't all that big, we aren't going to make the Empire rich on what we can loot from the Vales. Why did beating them matter to me — and why doesn't your father see it?"

There was a long silence before Kiron spoke.

"I don't know, Majesty. Tell me."

"You do know; you just aren't putting what you know together. That's one of the things you still have to learn.

"You said it yourself. West of Belkhan there were four kingdoms--Norgaland, Skandia, Straland and Kaerlia. Four kingdoms that had been fighting each other, allying against each other, breaking alliances when a king got tired of being married to some other king's sister--they only had one wife each--for as long as anyone could remember.

"The first was easy--Konstantin allied with Straland, which wanted revenge against Norgaland for knifing it in the back and stealing some border territory a year or so earlier. It was only when he took Norholt, which everyone knew couldn't be done, and turned it into the Western Capital, that the remaining kingdoms realized what was happening. By then it was too late.

"He ended up adding Straland and Norgaland to the Empire. Skandia, after a few problems, decided that it was safer to be our friends; we recruit heavy cavalry there still when we can't get it out of Belkhan.

"That left Kaerlia. Konstantin was dead by then, and Kerses, between risings in Norgaland and the Turani incursion, let it be. That was a mistake. Every time we put down a rising, the leaders fled south to their kin beyond the border. People, and maybe gold, came north too. As long as Kaerlia was outside the empire and not under imperial hegemony, we had a problem. I decided to settle it."

"And now, Majesty?"

"Better in some ways, worse in others. Marrying your grandmother helped; the people west of here weren't so eager to break out of the Empire once it looked as though one of theirs might some day sit on the throne. And I won the first round, when the Karl king came north trying to break Norgaland out. But we've had a lot of defeats since then and defeats are hard to hide. It's easier to persuade people not to fight you if they think they are going to lose. Every time Harald beat us, more of them started to wonder if they could do it too.

"Your father doesn't see it. His mother's grandfather was the last king of Norgaland; with Iskander emperor, things might stay quiet for a while, even if we don't deal with Kaerlia. But in the long term, we're safer if we do. It's Harald who has been stopping us, and once he is too old to lead armies, better yet dead, We have a better army than they do; once we have a better commander as well, we can do it. Your father can do it. If he will.

“If he won’t, I have another son, and I don’t think he will refuse my terms.”

“You want Father to agree to keep fighting Kaerlia until we win, in exchange for your naming him as heir?”

The Emperor nodded. “To publicly commit to it. Yes. And I want you to persuade him. Not just to keep the West safe, though that’s a good enough reason. But because your Father will make a better Emperor than his brother but he won’t get it without my support, and he won’t get my support if he won’t meet my terms. For the Empire.”

There was a long silence, the Emperor watching Kiron. At last the younger man spoke:

“With Your Majesty’s leave, I would like to ask one question.”

The response was a nod. He hesitated a moment, then spoke:

“Suppose that twenty years ago you knew what you know now. Or suppose you were my father, and Emperor, with my father’s support in the West, but that Harald and the Lady Commander were young again, young enough to lead armies for another thirty years. What would you do?”

The Emperor gave him a puzzled look.

“Been listening to the legionaries, the ones who call him the Valeslord and blame his beating us on sorcery? I saw Harald a year ago. If he could make himself young again, he would have.”

“No, Majesty. I don’t believe in sorcery.”

“If Harald was young, and I was Iskander and emperor, I would do my best to make peace. With the Turani lively on our eastern border, we can’t afford another twenty years of defeats. But Harald isn’t young, gods be thanked.”

“Harald isn’t young. With Your Majesty’s leave, I think there is a story I have to tell you.”

The Emperor rose slowly, forcing himself out of the chair with his arms, turned, gestured to someone by the door. One of the guards came in.

“Fetch something for him to sit on; this is going to take a while.”

When the guard came back, carrying a stool, the Emperor gestured to Kiron to take it.

“Sit down, boy. Tell me your story.”

Kiron sat, thought a moment, balancing the paired risks. Too little and the Emperor would not be convinced. Too much

“Last year, when Commander Artos fought Harald and lost. I was with the army.”

The Emperor nodded.

“I know. Your father went with the legions for a while when he was your age; so did I when I was. The throne rests on them, more than anything else; the man who sits on it needs to know the legions and they need to know him. Nothing I could offer would persuade Artos to betray Iskander — too much shared blood. And I don’t mean just kinship. Nothing my brother could offer persuaded Talinn to betray me. It’s a risk — gold edging on your tunic won’t stop an arrow — but it’s one worth taking.”

“Father’s view as well. He told me I was going for my education.

“We had some supply problems at the beginning, but the Commander was dealing with them. He got the army across the river at the edge of Northvales territory, forced the mouth of the valley it comes out of. We were half way up it when he got a message that Harald wanted to talk to him.

“Harald had crossed the river the other way, made it all the way to the fortified oasis that guards the road north, taken it. When our cavalry got there expecting to find it ours, he gave them the choice of dying of thirst or surrendering; they surrendered. He had one of the officers with him to prove the story was true.

“With no cavalry, no supply lines, and an army in the field against us, there was no way we could take the oasis back and no way to supply the army or get home without it.”

Kiron fell silent a moment. The Emperor said nothing.

“He offered us terms. The Commander and most of the officers to stay as hostages until the ransom was paid, the rest of the army to go home. Artos would have taken them, but I thought I had a better idea.

“I told Harald who I was, offered myself as a hostage instead.”

The Emperor’s eyes opened.

“You thought your father needed Artos more than he needed you?”

“Artos and the officers. But that wasn’t why I did it. We had been fighting Harald for thirty years; this looked like a chance to find out what we were fighting and maybe why we were losing. Father had sent me with the army for my education.”

The Emperor nodded.

“Your father’s son. Might make an emperor yet. What I thought the first time I heard about it. Is that the whole story?”

Kiron shook his head:

“No. That’s just to explain why I spent a month at Haraldhold as a hostage; I didn’t know if you knew. The story is what I learned there.

“The cats that brought me there didn’t treat me as a prisoner or as someone important either, more the way legionaries treat each other. One of them was one of Harald’s sons; when we gusted at a farmhouse on the way, he slept in the hayloft along with the rest of us. I don’t think there are any highborn in the Vales.

“When we got to Haraldholt, it wasn’t a castle or a palace, just a big farmhouse with lots of kids running around. Harald’s wife met us, welcomed us, offered me bread and salt, sent us all off to the bathhouse to get clean. All the time I was there, they treated me as if I was a friend of one of their sons who happened to be visiting for a while.

“One evening I came into the main room and it was empty except for a lady sitting at the long table by herself. Older than me, tall, strong face, clothes filthy from traveling. I knew a good deal of their language by then, it’s not that different from Alteng and I was used to hearing that from servants and common folk in our province. I didn’t know where she fit into things, but the valesfolk are pretty casual; none of the women veil, as far as I ever saw, and they mix freely. So I started a conversation, the way I would talk to a free lady at home, if I had a chance and didn’t think she would be offended. We’re not as touchy about that sort of thing in our province as I’m told highborn are out east, in the City.

“It turned out she spoke Tengu, spoke it well. Much better than I spoke her language. She said she had come over the pass from Kaerlia. I asked about Gavin’s campaign, what had happened. I suppose I should have guessed she was a lady of the Order, but I’m not used to women as soldiers; I took it for granted that what she was telling me was second or third hand. She went off to the bath house, I went off to bed.

“Next morning at breakfast Harald was there and she was sitting next to him. He introduced her to me as his daughter. He said that she was back from chasing Gavin home across the river.

“Later I talked with another lady of the Order, a friend of Harald’s son Njal. I asked about Caralla — that’s the daughter’s name. She acted surprised, as if she couldn’t believe I didn’t know who she was. She said that Caralla is a famous captain, the daughter of Harald and the Lady Commander.

“Later I had a chance to talk more with Lady Caralla, and with other people who knew her.”

The emperor looked up, said nothing. Kiron hesitated, continued.

“I’m pretty sure she was the one who commanded the Order forces, maybe the Karls as well, in the spring campaign on that side of the mountains, the one who beat Gavin, my uncle’s commander. I don’t know if she is as good as Harald or her mother but they must have trained her, and it sounds as though she has won one campaign already. Also ... I

talked with her. It's hard to say just why, but she reminded me, more than anything, of Artos."

Kiron fell silent; in a moment the Emperor spoke.

"You are saying that Harald has a successor."

Kiron nodded. "Two. One is his daughter. The other is his grandson. The boy was only fifteen, but everyone treated him as someone they had to take seriously. I heard stories about him and his grandfather. I think Harald intends Asbjorn as his heir, and I think, in another five or ten years, he will be as dangerous as Harald was at that age. He might get killed, of course; his uncle told me that the fur on the boy's bed is from a bear he killed himself, and he goes up cliffs that I wouldn't try even with ropes. No lack of confidence. But he's frighteningly competent. Caralla reminds me of Artos; Asbjorn reminds me of Harald."

* * *

The next morning, Kiron suggested to his father that they go to the parade ground outside the keep to watch the new men, recruited to fill the holes from the previous year's campaign, drilling. Two cacades were at the north side of the field, marching back and forth, changing formation under orders. Most of the rest of the field was empty; the two men ended up near the center. They could hear the shouted orders, an occasional bugle call.

"Safe enough. What did the Emperor have to say to you?"

Kiron looked around again before speaking.

"He wanted me to persuade you to agree to his plan, commit to continue the war. He wants you to be his heir, he wants his heir to win the war after he's dead, and he wanted me to know he was stubborn enough to back the First Prince if you wouldn't do it."

"He might be. Besides, his health is getting worse, and he can't change his mind if he's dead. That's part of what he is counting on, that I'll agree to his terms for fear that one morning the servants will find him dead in his bed, with the succession still open and fair odds of a civil war."

"That's what he said to me. It's what I said to him that I want to tell you about."

His father nodded. "Yes. Tell me."

"I told him about how I ended up a hostage in Haraldholt. It turned out he already knew; he must have had someone with our army who made it back, maybe more than one. But he didn't know what I saw at Haraldholt. I've told you some of it, but I didn't really put it all together until yesterday, standing in that great room sweating — he had the braziers out as usual, though it had been a pretty warm day — and trying to figure out why I thought he was wrong, what I could say that would persuade him.

“I told him how I had met the Lady Caralla and what I thought about her, that she had won the spring campaign on the other side of the mountains. And what she was like, that the person she most reminded me of was Artos; I hadn’t thought about putting it that way until just then, but it felt right. That it was clear she had been trained by Harald and the Lady Commander to take over the war when they got too old, and had already started that spring.

“I had a bit of a scare at one point, when I mentioned having talked with her more. Something I said caught the Emperor’s attention, and I was afraid he knew the rest of it, how I went with her and some of Harald’s people to get you out of the Summer Palace. Or at least suspected something. But he didn’t say anything.”

“Either he doesn’t know or he chooses not to; he may have just picked it up from your face or voice that you were hiding something. He isn’t looking for an excuse to cut my head off. He’s looking for a way to end our dispute, to make me heir without giving up on his plans to win the war. What else?”

“I told him about Asbjorn. I couldn’t tell him about how he saved my life here, the night I came in looking for the Commander, killed two armed men with his dagger and his wits. But I told him the truth about what he was like, as best I could, and who he reminded me of.”

“And the Emperor?”

“Thanked me for the story, sent me out. I don’t know if I changed anything or not. But it was all I could think of to do.”

* * *

The Emperor looked down the length of the hall, lit by candles on the table, torches on the walls. The feast tables made three sides of a square; they reminded him of something. Eyes closed, will fighting down the pain, he remembered. Three sides the legions, the fourth the river, the bridge, the fortification guarding it. That too had been an end.

He opened his eyes, pushed away the memory of defeat. This time would be a victory — of a sort. His last.

The table on the left held the commander of the first legion, some of his staff, the first tier of the legion officers, commanders of two other legions--mostly paper now, and raw recruits drilling. A few other officers. The table on the right, court officials, the master of offices, the cornicular with his assistants and a handful of their assistants, the head of the financial office with his. Farther down were guests: representatives of the client kingdoms, two merchants from The City, doubtless there to report back to the First Prince on the Emperor’s dealings. One or two real merchants as well, two guildmasters. The governor of the province was seated at one end of the Emperor’s table, the Second Prince, as governor of the western province, at the other, his son beside him, just to the

Emperor's right. On his left, more plainly dressed than the other guests, his taster and physician.

He spoke, without turning, to the master of the hall standing behind him: "Start it."

Trumpets blew to signal the beginning of ceremony; the hall fell silent. The herald's voice rang out:

"His Imperial Majesty Alkiron, The Gilded One, Son of Serses, Son of Konstantin, son of Alkiron, bids you welcome. Silence for His Majesty."

The Emperor forced himself to his feet, spoke into the silent hall.

"I have commanded you to attend me that you may hear my choice of heir. I name Iskander, my son, to follow me upon the Imperial throne."

Before there was time for a response from the company — there was not much time left — he turned his head, nodded to the commander of the First Legion. Marcus rose.

"I pray Your Majesty's leave to swear to your successor."

"Granted."

He came forward, bowed to the emperor, passed him to stand before the Second Prince:

"I, Marcus, Commander in the armies of the Empire, Servant of the Emperor Alkiron, here swear in the sight of the gods and all in this place assembled my service and support to Iskander, son of Alkiron, Gilded, son of Serses, son of Konstantin, saving only my service to Alkiron, the Gilded one."

"And I, Iskander, son of Alkiron, the gilded one, son of Serses, son of Konstantin, in the sight of gods and men swear justly to rule over lands and people, fairly repaying their service who serve me, when the time comes. Until then"—he turned to face his father—"I swear again my service to Alkiron, gilded, son of Serses, son of Konstantin, son of Alkiron."

One by one the Emperor watched them come, the senior officers of the legions, the officials in whose hands the daily business of the empire, justice and money, lay, to swear to his son. The hall was growing dark, the candle flames shadowed. He held himself straight, watching the hall, the witnesses that filled it. The body was servant, not master. When it was all done, the last oath sworn, his duty fulfilled, he turned to his grandson beside him.

"Comes your turn, boy, don't disappoint me."

The eyes closed, the grim face relaxed, the body went limp. The Emperor fell forward into his grandson's arms. Kiron caught him, felt the final shudder.

[From here on fragmentary, outlines, scenes that may not be used]

Chapter XXX

“You keep up well for a low lander.”

Asbjorn

Arrival in the inner lands

Party with Asbjorn caught in avalanche--possibly set off deliberately. Asbjorn alone runs towards the cliff, gets under overhang, survives. Digs out one party member. [Madoc ap Morvran? Madyn, Rhys, Gwion] . Gwion insists on proper ceremony for the dead--otherwise they will not rest, will haunt.

Continue over the top and down towards the village where Madoc's father is headman (and chief of the subclan). Meet someone from the village, who at first mistakes Madoc for his father and is very frightened. When identity clears up, becomes clear that something is going on .

Come into the village. Madoc's stepmother Gwenllion and a large man identified as her brother Rhys seem to be in charge. Madoc introduces Asbjorn, starts to mention imperial defeat. Stepmother shuts him up, acts hostile towards Asbjorn, idea of revolt, tells Madoc he will sleep in the guesthouse tonight in honor of his return, puts Asbjorn in charge of the young men, who lodge in the Men's House. (unmarried adult, perhaps 8 of them).[Sort of woman who knows what she believes must be true--and nobody better contradict her]. Guesthouse near edge of precipice down (west?), gentler slope east out of village down. (maybe description as they approach the village?)

On way to Men's House, Asbjorn sees skis, poles leaning against the wall. Asks what they are. One of the young men explains. Asbjorn puzzled, tries putting skis on. One of the young men wants him to take off his pack to make it easier, another wants the foreigner to look stupid and says not to. Asbjorn ties on skis with help, stands up, falls over. Young men mixture of laughing at him and sympathetic, some suggestion that the latter is repressed because stepmother won't like it.

Young man explains that it requires slow, smooth steps. Asbjorn pushes himself upright with a pole. Told he needs two. Takes the other.

Three gliding steps took him to the edge of the slope out of the village, the fourth over it.

Search party sent by Rhys after him, return to report that they lost his track on the dragon's spine, long ridge of bare rock. He was heading down, so sent two men on each side of the ridge heading downhill looking for tracks. Rhys came back to report.

Madoc wakes in the guesthouse--Asbjorn there, strung bow in his hand. Warns Madoc that someone likely to come to kill him (been evesdropping). Madoc in bed, dagger in hand. Asbjorn in dark corner.

Rhys comes in, cudgel in hand. When he sees that Madoc is awake, tells him he is going to send him to join his father--advances with cudgel. Asbjorn puts three arrows in his back. Turns, advances on Asbjorn. Madoc attacks from behind, pulls chin up, stabs dagger into throat.

Asbjorn proposes dumping body over precipice, getting out while the getting is good. Madoc says no.

Next Chapter

Start with Gwen's point of view, lying in bed alone. Door opens, in the moonlight figure, white face and hair, furs.

This was not an enemy to fight with daggers, but she has other weapons. Stands up.

"Greetings, wife."

"Welcome, husband, and glad I am a last time to see you. My sole regret at having you killed was that I had no chance to tell you what a fool you were."

"To trust you and your brother?"

"As much a fool dead as alive--Rhys is no more kin to me than you. And no less. Gods willing I had made his son your heir--but giving life is not what they intended me for. At least I have sent your Madoc to join you, and wish you joy in his company."

(Continues. Becomes clear that her grudge was his role in the previous revolt, which got some of her kin killed, plus his thinking of her as a pretty plaything).

(Earlier written fragments and outline from here on--may not all get used))

[Incident with Kara, Elaina, and Belkhani en route to Belkhan, involving someone claiming land to force a duel he expects to win. Elaina volunteers. Inspired by a bit of Egilsaga]

She stepped forward, struck straight down at Kuro's head. He blocked and lunged forward, cutting at where her leg had been. Shadowed by his raised shield she stepped past his left side, spun, struck.

Sudden silence. The dead man's brother stared at body, blood, head. Looked back up at Elaina, watching them, sword still raised. Said something to her. One of the other two spoke in response.

"What did he say?"

"He his brother vengeance will have."

"Challenge was his. Is vengeance owed?"

The Balkhani turned back to Haril, said something. A brief exchange,

"You have right. But he vengeance will have." The younger man walked over to the body, picked up his brother's shield, fitted it on his arm, reached down for the sword. Elaina glanced at Kara, spoke.

"Bad luck to kill twice in one kindred. Young, too."

Haril stood up, dropped the sword, looked with surprise at the arrow through his arm. Kara nocked another.

"My sister apologizes for her carelessness. When it heals I am Elaina ni Leonor. My home Eston valley in Kaerlia. If I am dead, mother and sister inherit my quarrels."

[Scene with Elaina, who has tried unsuccessfully to persuade James to support the Belkhani revolt]

"With Belkhan out of the Empire ..."

Leonora looked at her daughter, responded calmly.

"With Belkhan out of the Empire, the next war would be easier. I know that, James knows it."

"He won't do anything to help. Even one cacade ..."

"Don't be too hard on the boy. He's your father's son."

Elaina stood frozen.

"One of the times they were at feud--most times were, truth to tell. She was a cold bitch. Worse--a fool. Never did forgive him for giving up the claim to the Vales that his father and grandfather had poured blood to hold. What she thought he was going to fight the Empire with, later, I never knew. Ballads, maybe. All things considered, it's pure luck the boy turned out as well as he did."

"He treated you badly enough."

"Politics. Besides, most young men are fools."

It was a faint smile, but Elaina had a lifetime of practice.

"Yours wasn't."

"Wasn't. Isn't. Henry wasn't either. Marrying her wasn't his idea. Made the best he could of it."

A long silence before Leonora spoke again.

"James isn't doing nothing. He is releasing a hundred and fifty Belkhani cavalry with their horses and armor, all the ones who survived the battle and are willing to change sides, supplying them and sending them north. If they can't start a rising, another hundred of our people won't do it."

"There isn't anything ..."

"I am letting you and Kara go with them, a token of support from the Order. Hedin is going for the vales. We should speak to Anne; there may be someone she can send as well. Best not to bother James again."

[A scene with Asbjorn and some Belkhani climbing over the mountain ring that separates the inner lands of Belkhan from the outer]

An hour later, Gwion called for a rest; the company assembled about him. He noticed Asbjorn.

“Still with us? You keep up well for a lowlander.”

Asbjorn looked south, where the high plateau fell in giant steps to the plain, turned, looked up at the high peaks.

“Lovely mountains the Hero’s Land has — but there are other mountains in the world. I was born higher than this.”

Gold is the falsest of friends.