THE MOVING WATER

SYLVIA KELSO
The Moving Water

Sylvia Kelso

Book Two:

The Rihannar Chronicles
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Everran’s Bane
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The Red Country
Dedication

For my parents

Here and *in absentia*
Acknowledgements

With thanks to Lillian Stewart Carl for more than ordinary editing.

The title of this book comes from Robert Payne’s translation of a famous Li Po poem, variously titled “Conversation among the Mountains,” “Green Mountain,” “Question and Answer,” etc. The translation first appeared in Payne’s anthology of Chinese poetry, *The White Pony*, in 1947, and the third line reads, “The peach blossom follows the moving water”: an allusion to TaoYuan Ming’s even more famous prose tale of the peach blossom fountain whose waters led wanderers out of their world and time. I have been unable to get permission from Mr. Payne’s estate to quote the entire poem.
The Empire of Assharral
Chapter I

It is a long road to Eskan Helken here in the wastes of Hethria, and longer still when you do not know you are traveling it. As I did not. The day my journey began, I had never heard of Eskan Helken, and only vaguely of Hethria. All I knew was that, after morning inspection, the Lady Moriana wanted words with me.

Hardly momentous? But no one who served the Lady Moriana answered such a summons without a degree of sweat in the palms and tallying of his own and others’ recent sins. Certainly not the Captain of her Guard. Certainly not the newly promoted Captain of her Guard.

That was in my second’s manner when I said, “Hear defaulter me, Evis. I’m going up there,” and he nodded without meeting my eye. It spoke from the rigid stance of the two sentries I had just posted, as I clanked between them up Ker Morrya’s green marble entry steps. From the schooled face of the steward with moontrees on the back and breast of his black silk surcoat, when I said, “The Lady asked for me,” and he replied, “This way, sir.” It persisted in the fit of my helmet, which was too tight, in the slip of my boots, which were too loose. In the chill of the first long colonnade whose tiles were scalloped moss-green, jade-green, by each archful of morning sun, in the piercing sweetness of a black-beaked eygnor’s song, and the suddenly lovely curve of each water-fern’s drooping frond. Such things grow precious when you may be seeing them for the very last time.

Ker Morrya is a huge pile of a place. The Lady
would add or subtract from it as fancy took her, so some part was always rebuilding, another being torn down, and the intact pieces fitted with no rhyme or reason clear to a soldier’s mind. From the first colonnade we entered a circular gallery with pillars leafed in gold, branching capitals entwined above elegant white marble bas-reliefs: the Lady in profile to the left, to the right. Contemplating a mirror, a serpent, a pomegranate. On the crimson carpet beneath stood a Gjerven swamp-tribe’s gargoyle, six feet of garishly painted red-and-blue wood.

Left turning, we emerged in a garden of pools and pergolas, geometric as a phalanx between hedges ruler-clipped. It was scented by herbs, pungent, unruly, sweetly dangerous. Under the central pergola little black Morryan bees had built a head-sized clot of a nest. Beyond rose a mezzanine hall, a wreathing maze inlaid on its russet-and-mahogany parquet work. From its central pit grew the ferny leaves and gold and scarlet florets of a dwarf delryr tree. A langu, one of the great northern pythons, slept like a round bale of tapestry against the trunk.

Two steps led out and down to a tapestry loggia, its solid wall masked by a myriad tiny bejeweled figures, dancing, reclining, beneath trees in smoky-lavender flower. A staircase turned in and up to a complete guest suite, white plaster walls inset with delicate powder-blue medallions under molded cornices: the Lady burning incense, playing with a dove, tying her girdle, discarding a shoe. The bedroom’s rear wall was torn out, the table of gold and crystal tiring ware and the four-poster’s dove-blue silk hangings open to the bricks and ladders strewn outside.

We crossed the trampled mud, wiped our feet on a
Tasmarn silk rug’s gray-and-crimson damascene, some southern weaver’s masterpiece, dodged the spikes of a helymfet that had gone to sleep on its meal of ants, and entered a vestibule composed in green: malachite floor, jade-inset ceiling, green marble fretwork walls that latticed Ker Morrya’s living drapery. Beyond rose a flight of open, rough-hewn steps.

The steward stopped, lowering his voice. “The Lady is . . . by the fountain, sir.”

He vanished. I looked at the stairs and found my mouth was dry. The Lady received as she built, in kitchen, boudoir, hall or buttery. But it was rarely anyone met her by the fountain, and more rarely that those who went to such an interview came back.

It was chilly in the vestibule. The mountain beyond was already breathing back the sun. I could see facets of black, glassy rock, pockets of moss and fern and palm, glitters of silver water amid the green and black. A vague roar rose from the streets of Zyphryr Coryan, sprawled busy and populous far below. Clearly, through and over it, I heard water, a crystal, fluent tinkle, swift, unfaltering, bubbling out into air and the mountain’s emptiness.

The sun met me halfway up. I could not help a glance back, and then a halt, for the view would distract you from the Lady Moriana herself. I was on the very shoulder of the Morhyrne, the huge lopsided triangle of mountain visible a day’s sail east of Zyphryr Coryan and three days’ march to the west. Its bare black cone loomed over me. At my feet a vista of the city’s crowded roofs fell in red and white and fallow-gold patchwork to the lands of Assharral, spreading south and west and north to the horizon. On the other side, the city’s huge, peacock-blue-and-green-tinted
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harbor coiled away to the breadth of the eastern sea. I lingered a moment. The air was brisk. The green things near me were tingling with it. It did not seem a fitting day to die.

The stairway ended at a living arch, the blended foliage of two tall trees that drooped sweet-scented speckled brown-and-gold sprays of flower. I knew they were the legendary rivannons, which few Assharrans have ever seen.

Beyond them a semi-circular terrace had been scooped in the mountainside, its diameter the cone’s black native rock, its arc a low parapet of lustrous dark-red porphyry. Inside was a tangle of fragrant shrubs and flowering trees. At its center the sun played black and silver on the fountain of Los Morryan, an endless dance of scintillant bubbles and sweet-tongued sound whose spray showered down over the glittering black rim, fanning moss over pavement where ancient symbols had been blurred by feet and time.

The bower was dappled by shade and water, fragrant, remote as paradise. It was also empty. Of the Lady Moriana I could see no sign.

It would be correct to say I was at a loss. You would not summon the Lady like a serving maid. Nor would you charge bull fashion into the bower of Los Morryan. Nor, as I very much wished, could you summarily retreat.

I tucked my helmet under an arm. The crisp air breathed on my skull. Then, beyond the fountain, I saw a shoe.

A frivolous, high-heeled golden sandal, encasing a high-arched, blue-veined foot. Its owner sat under the broad silver spearhead leaves and golden fluff-lance flowers of the perridel tree beyond the spring. Now I
looked, I could distinguish, through the falling water, a hem of white flowing silk.

I advanced, silently cursing my unsilent boots. The Lady Moriana leant sidelong in the onyx seat, elbow on the parapet, fingers adroop. On the curve of her wrist, motionless as the Lady, rested a great gold-and-purple butterfly.

At first sight of the Lady Moriana you would think, A girl. A girl in girlhood’s crowning flower. The simple white dress, the ebony hair fallen from a center part to a loose coil in the nape of the neck, the pensive downbent profile, slightly parted, unpainted lips, smooth round chin, swannish concave stem of throat, high rounded brow. It would all seem a sculptor’s idealized innocence.

Then you would see the bracelet of nut-sized thillians coruscating on the slender wrist, the huge eclipsed-moon gold signet on the right thumb, the quiet, cruel arch of bridge and nostril from the lids drooped over the slumbrous coal-black eyes, and you would know without instruction that she is neither innocent nor a girl, and that a goaded coffin-snake is less dangerous.

Neither lady nor butterfly paid the slightest heed to me. I stood at uneasy ease, feeling my breath stop. I also knew I had begun to sweat. Fine symptoms for a man who looked unmoved on a Phaxian battle-front.

The fountain tinkled, the shadows stirred. At last, the Lady drew a breath.

“Fly, then,” she murmured. Los Morryan’s music had broken into syllables. “Fly.”

The butterfly opened its wings, beat them once, an imperial trumpet blast, and looped away. The Lady gazed after it, chin on the back of her hand.
“Tell me, Alkir”—that muted music was half somnolent—“was I a butterfly dreaming it was Moriana, or Moriana dreaming she was a butterfly?”

Never was I so thankful for formality. It let me respond with correct and perfect blankness, “Ma’am.”

Her lips curved. The pull of a tightened bow. Her eyelids rose. Black depths I saw, powdered with golden galaxies, and looked carefully an inch above. Her brows were black and fine, her forehead had a glow of youth, just tinted by the sun. Every time I saw the Lady Moriana I had to remind myself that she was ten, twenty times my age.

She turned full face, the edge of my vision caught her eyes’ waking, and I am not ashamed to admit my backbone chilled.

“Never mind, Captain.” Now the music too was lazily mocking me. “You were not meant to understand. It was for something else that I wanted you.”

I came to attention, thinking, You can at least die soldierly. But she reached into a corner of the seat, and the sun blew up in dazzling, transparent fire.

The dazzle passed. A sheet of colorless light flared in her cupped hands. A dewdrop big as a fist, it looked, but retaining its orb shape, its thillian-gem brilliance, in her grasp.

“Ker Morrya’s spyglass,” she said.

I could not help the questioning note as I repeated, “Ma’am?”

“Even the Lady Moriana”—the music kept its drowsy threat—“sometimes needs to help her eyes.”

Finally, I nerved myself. “And, ma’am. . . . What do you see?”

Her gaze moved past me, out over Zyphryr Coryan,
over Assharral, into blue’s infinity. Her voice was flute song, just audible.

“Something is coming. Coming here.”

I was relieved to unearth tangibles, and tangibles within my sphere. “An enemy, ma’am?”

Her lips curved. To this day I cannot decide if that smile held hate or love, hope or dread, eagerness or enmity.

“All things in the Dream,” replied that low, absent melody, “seem as you see them. Rose, thorn. Treasure, serpent. One, the other. Both.”

I hoped she was not listening to my thought. Respectfully, I did not say, Are you babbling? but, “If the Lady has need of me. . . .”

“Oh, yes.” She was still gazing westward. Her words fell cool and crystal clear. “You are going to meet it, Alkir. Bring it to me.”

I tried not to swallow. “Yes, ma’am. Er. . . .”

She turned her head. Her mouth spoke what I knew her eyes would hold. Knowing, languid mockery.

“Hethria,” she said. “You’ve never heard of it.”

“Er—yes, ma’am.” You dare, sometimes, to contradict even the Lady Moriana. But very, very respectfully. “It’s a desert. Beyond Kemrestan. I served garrison duty out there once.”

“How very”—silken menace—“convenient.”

Looking over her head at the glittering black rock of the Morhynne’s shell, I felt the toes curl in my boots.

“It is coming,” she sank back, letting the dew-globe slide down into her lap, “from Hethria. To . . . let me see . . . Etalveth. You know the town . . . no doubt.”

“Ma’am.” My mouth was dry.

“A fleapit,” added that drowsy lilt. “Full of bored dogs, lazy soldiers. And Sathellin.”
The picture assembled in my mind, white dust between white mud flat-roofed shanties, searing sun, sanctuaries of shade jammed with donkeys, dicing soldiers, beggars, peddlers, and the black-turbaned, blue-gowned figures of the Sathellin, the desert sailors whose caravans wind in from oceans only they can chart, laden with the craziest blend of rubbish and treasure-trove. Ochre-daubed amulets, tall pointed jars of wine from an unknown vineyard, maerian gems and goat-skin sandals, dried serpent skins and the priceless tapestries hung in her own loggia. . . .

The image faded. Los Morryan twinkled, the perridel’s golden bloom and silver leaf were dancing, while the Lady looked past me with that odd smile in her coal-black eyes.

“You will go to Etalveth, Alkir. Take . . . two pentarchies of the Guard. And collect this gift.”

“Ma’am.” I saluted. My heart bounced ridiculously halfway up my throat. After my forebodings, this lunatic order was a gallows reprieve. And then the omission occurred to me.

The Lady smiled. Now the laughter was cruel, alert, and aimed at me alone.

“Yes. How very remiss of us. You are looking for a man, Alkir. A man with a scarred face.” She drew her fingers down the flawless porcelain of her right cheek. “With a crippled arm.” She moved her right arm on the parapet. “And. . . . Oh, yes. He has green eyes.”

* * * * *

Los Morryan did fulfill part of its reputation. It seemed a mere minute or two we spoke there, in the first quarter of a fine Dry-season day. Yet I descended
into late afternoon, to find the Guard in turmoil, Evis unsure if he was a second or a new-made commander, and Callissa occupying my work-room amid a swarm of upset children and a flood of half-stemmed tears.

“Yes,” I told Evis, untangling a wife from my breast-plate and a son from each leg. “But not for long. Yes, dear, I’m alive. No, son, nobody’s eaten me. I just have to go away for a while.”

Callissa substituted frightened query for frightened relief. We grew up on two of Frimmor’s little neighboring farms. She was never fully reconciled to my quitting it for the army, even after I married her and necessity rather than ambition kept me aiming for captaincy of the Guard. Without influence, it takes a good deal more than simple addition would predict to feed four mouths. She had never said a word against soldiering, the Lady, Zyphyr Coryan. Only I knew that if I ever asked, “Do you miss Frimmor?” we would be striking camp in a week.

“Nothing to worry about,” I told her, smiling to calm those clear brown eyes. She has clear skin too, and a cloud of fine brown hair, and fine bones that looked elfin before Zem and Zam arrived. “I’ll tell you at home. Just let me grind Evis’ nose a little flatter first.”

Before we talked I also had to bed down the twins, supply a condensed saga of the latest Phaxian war, and warn them that my trip was “in security.” I doubted the Lady’s whim was for open talk, and that was enough to lock their mouths. Then I disarmed and bathed and Callissa silently kept an eye on the maid serving roast beef and vegetables. Servants were still not customary to her.

She did not exclaim on the Lady’s vagaries, speculate on the stranger’s aims or provenance. There
was no “Etalveth’s such a long way” or “When will you be back?” or “Why must it be you?” or even “Is it safe?” There never had been, even when I marched to Phaxia. Only at the end, not raising her eyes, she said quietly, “I suppose it had to come sometime.”

“What on earth do you mean?” In peace or war, our kind mislike cold prophecies. “This is just an errand. Inside Assharral. I’ll be back before the boys need more new shoes.”

She turned the silver on her plate. A Captain of the Guard needs silver tableware, naturally, and naturally it bore the moontree crest. So did most things in our large old house above the main barrack square. Cups, hangings, chairs, fan-light, the round moon with its crowning tree looked back at you everywhere.

“Oh, you’ll be back.” With anyone else, I would have called that note defeat. “Only . . . things won’t be the same.”

“Tell me,” I said, taking her hand, with gentleness. “Nothing.” She turned her hand to clasp mine briefly before removing hers. “Just stupidity.”

* * * *

If it is shorter than the way to Eskan Helken, the road to Etalveth is journey enough. Four of Assharral’s ten provinces it crosses, from the coastal farms of Morrya to Thangar’s ranges with their timber forests and tingling air, then the long grain lands of Climbros, and Darrior’s mines and cattle-camps; before the ever-more-arid shepherd lands of Kemrestan change from half-desert to wilderness, and a fringe of garrison towns marks the edge of no-man’s-land, the prelude to Hethria.
We were a fortnight on the way, despite post-horses and the silver moontree on our black surcoats that gave us precedence over everything but chance. A fortnight is ample time to think. Yet I had reached no conclusions when I informed Etalveth’s flustered garrison commander that I was on “an informal inspection of the western defenses,” and he quartered us in his half-empty fort.

The western garrisons are little more than the Lady’s whim, or the army’s nursery. When Assharral looks for trouble, it is northward, from Phaxia. My ten guardsmen livened the brothels and enriched the gambling sharps, I spent half my days in military trivia and the rest at the caravanserai, the huge colonnaded courtyard with its crumbling brick walls and monstrous old keerphar trees and babble of a dozen different dialects, where the Sathellin camp in Etalveth, when they come at all.

Only in the last two generations have they come. No one then knew why. There were many rumors, all baseless. Wild stories of a realm beyond Hethria, a cluster of realms called the Confederacy, wilder stories of a witch dwelling in Hethria, who dammed a great river to make the desert flower and bade the Sathellin carry wares from one to the other end of the world. There were curious tales of wizards, and another sea. Everyone knows there is only Gevber, which borders Assharral and Phaxia, and keeps the islanders of Eakring Ithyrix trading instead of invading us. I heard a good many yarns in that week I haunted the caravanserai, from grooms, sweepers, peddlers, merchants. All Assharrans. No caravan was in.

I wrote to Callissa and sent the boys toy Hethrian spears, blunted to prevent massacre. I extricated two
guardsmen from the civil jail and a third from an imputed paternity suit. The caravan master took to nodding, then to offering mint-tea. He had once visited Zyphyr Coryan and felt himself the Lady’s intimate.

On the eighth morning my humoring of his humors paid off. A sweeper met us setting out to inspect a nearby signal tower and said, touching his brow, that the master thought I might be interested. Some Sathellin were due.

“Nomads,” I told the blank-faced fort commandant. “Homeless. Masterless. Have you never thought, what a perfect communication line for a spy?”

His jaw dropped. He never paused to wonder what you would spy on in Kemrestan, or what value it would be at such a transit’s end. We rode out past Etalveth’s wattled sand-levees, to where the works of man sink into insignificance, and confronted the pebbly curve of sky that is the threshold of Hethria.

The caravan was approaching from slightly north of west. At first it was only a snailing dust smear, like an infantry column in extended march. Then it became a slowly swelling red cloud. Then blurs patched the fog. Then heads stuck out at long intervals, black-turbaned heads. Then the bobbing ears of horses, donkeys, mules appeared, interminable squadrons roped in sixes and sevens to each other’s pack-saddles, with a Sathel riding at each troop’s head. They ride side-saddle, controlling their mounts with a stick tapped on quarters or neck. “Barbarians,” said the commandant, comfortably superior. “Never heard of a bit.”

Most rode donkeys, but here and there was a horse of another breed to the heavy, shaggy clumpers laden with water-skins, fodder and firewood, along with human goods and provender. And these horses, in the
days before Zem and Zam made horses a forbidden luxury, I would not have disdained myself. Most were black: fine-boned, blaze-faced, with a proud bearing and a look of tempered stamina. But at the very rear of the caravan another kind caught my eye.

It was more like a war-horse, tall, well-boned, though so finely proportioned it did not seem heavy, with splendid shoulders and rein and a fine if placid carriage of the head. It was gray. A silver dapple-gray, like a piece of moonlight come to life.

The rider, swathed to the eyes in blue robe and black turban, resembled all three accompanying Sathellin, except that he had no stick to control his beast. I watched him as they rode by. Then, thinking it would make a pretext for scout-work, I said, “I wonder if there’s a price on that horse.”

The commandant laughed. “With Sathellin,” he said, “there’s a price on a sister’s virginity. Just so long as it’s high.”

I went down to the caravanserai at dusk. A pretty time, in any camp. The fires gild the dust, there is a comfortable smell of cooking and off-saddled beasts, the babble of a long day relived in talk, a romance in the mundanities of picketing. The caravan-master was delighted to sip mint-tea and school me in the scandalous habits of Sathellin, while through his door arch I watched horses, donkeys, mules being watered, and the blue-robed figures that passed with their swift, gliding walk. But nobody brought a gray horse to drink.

Presently I disengaged to take a stroll. Some
Sathellin were already haggling. In this or that room tallow lamps caught a vehement mouth, a waving finger, an eager, skeptical, impassive, wary curve of cheek, the gleam of metal or sheen of fabric, the glitter of other, more precious stuff. One buyer was sampling wine. It ran redder than heart’s blood in the glow of the lamp. But nowhere, loose or picketed, could I catch a glimpse of a gray horse.

Having patrolled the entire court, I was forced to clumsier tactics. As the next Sathel passed I halted him and said, “When your caravan came in, there was someone riding a gray horse. Do you know where he is?”

Though he was a mere blur in the dusk, I sensed a withdrawal, a stiffening. “Why was you wanting to know?”

“I rather,” I said, “liked the look of the horse. I should like to see it again.”

“Ah,” he said at last. He stopped another passerby. I caught only a quick run of words, ending in one intelligible phrase. “Thorgan Fenglos.” The Moon-faced King.

Sometimes there is vantage in surprise. “Thorgan Fenglos,” I repeated. “Is that the man? Or the horse?”

One Sathel twitched. The other let out a snort. Both seemed to withdraw. Then the second said under his breath, “Ah, well.” He jerked a thumb. “Down the end there. Last keerphar.”

I had walked past. Walking back, I found a door had been masked by the tree’s wide, gnarled trunk. I ducked under the prop that upheld one huge low limb, stumbled on a hump of root, and looked up into a rectangle of deeper darkness from which came a faint silver gleam, and the sound of someone humming, as
you do at a pleasant task.

It was a man’s voice, clear, low, with a lurking gaiety. Under it ran a brisk rhythmic brushing noise. As I came up the humming broke off. The voice said, “Stand over, then.” Hooves clopped on stone, and a faint tingle coursed my neck. Whatever the context, it is impossible to mistake the tone of a military command.

I hesitated in the keerphar shadow, oddly ill-at-ease, wishing for light. The humming ceased. The voice said with that good-humored authority, “If you don’t fancy Assharran water, madam, that’s all I can do for you.” A shape came swiftly from the doorway, straightening and checking so we stood face to face.

He was tall, taller than I, and even in Assharral I am no dwarf. I could see only the shape of robe and turban, but two things struck me at once. His right shoulder was somehow mis-held, and he showed no surprise.

“Yes?” he said. The lurking gaiety persisted. “Were you looking for me?”

“If you own a gray horse,” I answered, “yes.”

“Fengsaeva?” A low chuckle. “Oh, she owns me.”

My wits must have been quickened by something in the air: the Sathel strangeness, the freakish search. Or some infection from him. I am not usually witty. Nor, usually, am I recklessly cordial. “Then perhaps,” I said, “she would permit you to eat with me?”

The amusement had deepened. “Why not eat here? Then you can inspect us both at once.”

I should have been startled. Later, I was, and not merely by the idea of dining with a horse. At the time I replied as if it were commonplace, “A pleasure. But I fear I’m not an owl.”

With another half-chuckle he turned on his heel.
“Move up, madam.” His shape vanished. There was a flash, a flare, I was still wondering how he could be so quick with flint and tinder when the door filled with lamplight, and he called, “Come in.”

The mare’s quarters nearly filled the door. His voice said, “She won’t kick.”

Nettled, I stepped by. A tiny traveling kettle sat on a clay brazier. Saddlecloth and saddlebags had been tossed out on the floor, a vague heap of belongings lay beyond. As any soldier would, I looked for his weapons. And could not find a knife, let alone a sword.

“I don’t carry one.” He was stooped over a saddlebag, the amusement open now. He tweaked out a cup. Left-handed, I noted as my wits rallied. The mare blew gently on my elbow, distracting, reviving me.

“A self-invited guest,” I said, “should add something to the board. And at his host’s behest.”

“Very good.” He turned around. I had the most curious idea it was not the offer he meant. “Then in honor of Assharral, we might pass up mint-tea for once. You’ll favor me, Captain, if you relieve that old rogue Langis of a measure of wine.” The laughter flickered. “Tell him Thorgan Fenglos asked for it.”

I retreated, in ostensible good order. The wine-seller, in a way that had my complete sympathy, gave me the measure without a word, a demand for payment, a glance at my face. At the time it seemed quite reasonable.

“This,” said my host, “should come after eating. Let’s begin.”

I forget what we ate, though I have the clearest vision of the mud-walled room, the mingled smell of horse and burning tallow and traveler’s distance from
his gear, the mare’s big black liquid eyes and shimmering face poised over us, the lamplight that made everything mysterious, indistinct. We ate in silence. Then he filled the cups, left-handed, as he had done everything else, poured a drop on the floor, drank, and let out a long breath.

“From Stiriand,” he said. “Gesarre valley, I should think.”

“You know where this wine is made?” I could not help myself.

He nodded. For once the underlying laughter was quite gone. “Yes,” he said softly. “I know.”

I was still deploying words when he supplanted them.

“It comes from Everran. A kingdom west of Hethria. The mare’s not for sale, she belongs to a friend. But then, you didn’t really want to buy her, did you? And I’m Thorgan Fenglos because of this.”

He had loosed a fold of turban to eat. Now he pulled it all off in a tangle and lifted his face to the lamp, revealing the huge scar that darkened his right cheek. It also, for the first time, showed me his eyes. They were narrow, almond-shaped, alive as sun on running water. Deep, vivid green.

“How did I get it?” He raised his brows at my dumbstruck face. “The same way I got that.” He slapped his right arm, still swathed in the robe, and the swing told me it was limp. Paralyzed.

“Hotheadedness.” His eye-corners crinkled. “Military hotheadedness. But then, you knew I was a soldier when you heard me speak.”

Whatever my face said made him grin. “A friend of mine once did the same to me. ‘Too full of How and Why to choose a First. I’ll tell then, and save all our
tongues.’ So now you’ve found what you were looking for, why were you looking for it?”

I must have swallowed nothing at least five times. He had turned to the mare. When I did not answer, he went on easily, “The only reason I came to Assharral is . . . to see the sea.”

“The. . . .” I croaked.

“The sea. They always said there was another east of Hethria. I didn’t want to spoil it by looking. I wanted to see with eyes.”

Some basic inconsistency in this eluded me. I still felt as if the entire Morhyrne had hit me in the wind.

He went on, not quite gravely, “You’ll grow used to it. Getting answers before you speak, I mean. And now, why were you looking for me?”

Finally I managed to assemble something resembling wits. “I have” — orders was too tactless — “an invitation from the Lady Moriana. She wishes you to . . . visit her.”

Those eyes danced, making me perfectly sure he knew just how I had paraphrased.

“I shall be delighted,” he said gravely, “to visit the Lady Moriana. Whoever she is. So long as she lives near the sea.”

* * * * *

With that same alarming clairvoyance he forestalled awkwardness by saying, “You can leave me here overnight. I won’t decamp. But I hope you don’t need to travel post-haste, because I can’t leave the mare. She’s unbroken, you see.” I did not see at all, and could find no way of saying so. “So we’ll meet,” he finished crisply, “at the town gate tomorrow morning.” And
finding I had answered, “Sir,” without the slightest hesitation, I knew that if he had been a soldier, it was in the highest rank.

I was glad we did not travel post, because in those weeks’ escort duty I rediscovered Assharral. The Kemrestani herds of long-tailed sheep and flamboyant black and white goats, I learnt through his eyes the splendor of their vivid splashes on the dun and tawny wilderness. The Darrian watermen drawing with a yoke of tall red bow-horned oxen backing to and from the well, I had never noticed their ingenuity. Nor had I appreciated the iron-miners who pump water by some kind of screw and use their spill to reshape the countryside. The Climbrian dancers, fifteen-year-old living candelabra in cloth of gold, ruby and emerald tinsel, with headdresses high as themselves, I had never plumbed the beauty in their swaying mime of Assharral’s legends, Langu the snake that ate the Ocean, Fengela the Moon-mother who stopped a flood in the River of Heaven with a net of her branching hair. The make of a Climbrian stump-jumping plough, the ram-headed Kemrestani cups, the style of a Thangar axeman’s cut, the blue-spotted Darrian cattle-dogs, he showed me it all. At first I was uneasy. But I soon understood, with the perception beyond reason, that this was not the scrutiny of a spy. It was more like that insatiable innocent curiosity of a boy on holiday.

Finally he caught my sidelong look as he watched a pair of herd-boys wrestle a fractious calf, and grinned. “I’ve been so long in Hethria. Everything’s new.”

I revolved openings on that topic. Then, as by Los Morryan, an image formed in my mind. A wide, barren, hard, hot, red and golden country, beautiful in its savage way, scattered with staging point farms and
nomad savages. And thrusting from its heart a cluster of rock domes, bubbles of rusty vermilion against a harsh blue sky.

“Eskan Helken. Someone else does live there, but she’s not a witch. Aedr is the proper name. Just as it is for me.”

I concentrated hurriedly between my horse’s ears.

“Yes, we did dam a river and run the water south into Hethria. It was a femaere’s own job.” In old Assharran it means an evil spirit. Catching my look, he grinned. “First to get her interested, then to build the thing. I was never my own engineer before. It’s a cursed sight easier to say, ‘Build me such-and-such,’ than to go out and do it yourself. That’s what kept me so long in Hethria. But it was worth it. If only to open the road for the ‘Sathellin.’”

My mouth opened too. Two generations they’ve been coming. . . . It danced in my head. Yet the lamp had revealed a man of seeming early middle age, forty, no more, deep-lined face, gray in coal-black hair.

“Don’t worry.” I could hear the smile. “Aedryx live longer than ordinary people, that’s all.”

I should have followed that up. A mysterious, powerful—wizard—led like a pony into the heart of Assharral? It would sound Alarm to the merest ranker, let be Captain of the Guard. But I never even paused to wonder why, instead, I thought about the Sathellin.

“No, they don’t come to spy,” he said. “Or to drain gold from Assharral. They do take some things. Seeds, new animals. Your silk. But that’s not why the road was built.”

This time, I had to ask. “For what, then?”

He was gazing ahead, though not at the wide lands of Kemrestan. “Roads,” he said softly, “are for carrying
ideas.”
What sort of ideas? I wondered warily.
“Oh,” he said, “nothing dangerous.”
This has to stop, I thought furiously. I can’t call my thoughts my own!
“Forgive me,” he said. “It’s so simple, and saves so much time. And living with—Fengthira—I’ve grown used to it. It’s just Scarthe, you know, reading your verbal thoughts. But if it worries you,” contritely, “I won’t do it again.”
After two or three swallows I managed to ask, “Scarthe?”
He watched a red kite plane across the road. You are, I told myself, Captain of the Lady’s Guard. You should be equal to this.
“We call them rienglis,” I said. “Morglis is the other sort, with sharper wings.”
Not at all startled, he glanced round, giving me a rare look full in his eyes, which were bright with interest, and oddly pleased. And seemed again to have a life of their own, a motion as if the very irises were awake.
“Morglis? That’s Black-nose, to me. A southern cape.” Then he nodded at my sword-belt. “Do your smiths use tempered or laminated steel?” And next moment we were deep in military technicalities.
More than technicalities. Presently I found myself saying, “Of course, the Guard’s mostly a parade unit. But you have to pass up the real stuff, when you’re a married man—”
I broke off, more shaken than by anything he had done. Even to myself I had never admitted how I saw the Guard, or what had put me there. But he only
nodded, with sympathy, understanding, and a strange touch of envy in his voice as he said, “Everything has its price.”

* * * * *

That made me wariest of all the surprises he handed me, and those began with our first bivouac. It was a post-house, whence the usual swarm of ostlers rushed at sight of the livery, to be taken aback on finding a desert Sathel in our midst. And more than taken aback when he said as he slid to earth, “Thanks, I’ll see to the mare myself.”

I opened my mouth. Shut it. Bade my senior file-leader, “Carry on, Zyr,” and followed the mare and her rider and the inn’s protesting rank and file stableward.

“Water,” he told them. “A loose box. Hay. Handful of oats. That’s all.” He bedded her down. Then he beckoned the head groom and said sternly, “For your own sakes, see nobody fools with her.”

The mare was gazing placidly over the stall door, looking sweet-tempered as an apple and mild as any clumper that ever hauled a cart. His eyes flickered at me. “You’re as bad as the rest. I’ll give you all a demonstration. You, Captain. Walk up to her.”

At ten paces her ears went back. At five, she showed the whites of her eyes and jerked her head. Not fear, but the challenge of the man-eater, proclaiming readiness to savage you.

“Whoa,” I said, trying to sound soothing. “What’s the matter? You know me.”

She bared her teeth. I took another pace. She did not snort or squeal or rear, she hit the door with her full weight and a wicked scything snatch of the jaw that
plucked my surcoat sleeve before I shot out of range.

“You see?” her rider asked the thunderstruck yard.

“So don’t go meddling.”

“Wreve-lan’x,” he said as we walked off. “Beast mastery. Another art. She’s never been broken in the proper sense. But it’s hard to make people believe she’s only safe when I’m around.”

“Safe!” I exclaimed, and he chuckled. “At least that hatchet-faced red lad of yours won’t go trying to play horse-tamer behind my back.”

My guardsmen were too well trained to think much, but that episode began to change their view of him from lofty disdain to rank distrust. Isolation is part of command. We were not battle-knit, even old enough rankmates to overstep rank, so I could neither share their speculations nor air my own; and I was naggingly aware my thoughts might be shared elsewhere, unbeknownst. But you need not know men to gauge their mood.

Theirs grew bad enough to distract me from the riddle in our midst, and was not bettered by the evening in Darrior when his saddlebag fell open halfway across the yard. He said, “Oh, drat!” and kept walking, while cups, spare girth, bootlaces, kettle and knife and salt-box whirled up in his wake and popped back into the bag like autumn leaves on a backward wind.

“My apologies,” he said, when we sat, as usual, over supper in one of the inn’s better rooms. “I’ve really upset them now.”

I felt it the most masterly understatement I had been privileged to hear. I did not say so. With surprise, I found I had accepted speech was unnecessary.

He nodded, at the agreement or the realization or
both. “I forget you’re not used to aedryx. And I’ve used Axynbrarve so much it’s easier than hands. Especially,” a somewhat rueful look, “for me.”

I looked at his arm, and asked instead, “Axynbrarve?”

“Another art.” His eyes shot a green flash. The beer jar slid to my elbow, and he chuckled at my recoil. “Easy, after you’ve spent whole days knocking over trees. Oh, yes. You can do almost anything with it, if you’re strong enough. And I usually am.”

With his turban down in coils about his neck and the scar hidden by warm human laughter in those extraordinary eyes, he looked like a disheveled, impudent boy, and I succumbed to the spell behind the powers.

“Trees and beer jars,” I said. “Just make an exception for me.”

“Sir.” He parodied a salute, and for the first time we shared a laugh.

But when we rode into Bhassan he did not laugh at all.

* * * * *

It was a normal high day. The magistrates had already sacrificed in the temple, which was palatial for a province, granite portico, high-relief frieze, gilt columns, solid gold image inside. A pleasant smell of burnt meat and incense wafted over the colorful crowd, there was a medley of sacrifice vendors in the forecourt, a babble of greeting and chaffering and noise from the doves and cocks and lambs on sale, and for once he questioned me outright. “What’s all this?” he said.
“High day.” I was surprised. “They’re offering sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice?” For once the tables were turned. I had startled him.

“Animals. Or incense, if you’re rich enough. In thanks, or a petition.” It was on the tip of my tongue to add, How on earth do you worship in Hethria? His eyes silenced me.

“You mean . . . you kill things? For the Four?”

“The Four?” Surprise was back with me. “We worship the Lady. I don’t understand what you mean.”

“The Lady? What Lady?”

“The Lady Moriana,” I said patiently. “What other could there be?”

He turned full round. Though he rarely met your glance, from him it did not seem shiftiness. But now his eyes were wide open, and I pulled mine away, for those irises were no longer green but pure black, and his horror was solid as a blow.

“You worship your ruler? She lets you treat her like a—a—Sky-lord? Another human being?”

More insulted than shocked I said indignantly, “She is our Lady. And you may be long-lived, but she is immortal. Why should we not worship her?”

He let out his breath. Very low, utterly appalled, he said, “Imsar . . . Math.”

“Do you”—I was still in arms—“behave differently?”

He tore his eyes from the beasts.

“Sacrifice? To the . . . the Four?” He sought for words. “We fly kites for Air. Light fires for Fire. Plant trees for Earth. Give wine and flowers to Water.” His eyes returned to the animals, as to some indelible obscenity. “But those are Sky-lords. Not a—a—”
“No wonder,” I snapped, “you made a desert of Hethria.”

Shock nearly made him laugh. “Oh, I’m the Four’s only follower in Hethria. Fengthira just believes in Math. The Good. I can’t explain, it’s too complicated. But she doesn’t give it anything at all.”

He jerked his eyes free and clicked to the mare. We had changed horses and were a mile outside Bhassan before he spoke again.

“Your Lady. You call her undying?”

Still stiff, I retorted, “I am the tenth Captain of her Guard. And she is still a girl.”

He caught his breath. Shot a glance at my surcoat. “Moontree,” he muttered. For a second his eyes went vacant. Then he said bleakly, “I see.”

“See what?” I snapped.

“This—immortality. Does it touch others too?”

I recalled my predecessor’s fifty-year reign, my minute-long day beside Los Morryan. “You might share some of it, if you were close to her often enough.”

“I see,” he repeated, with another sort of glance, and I said furiously, “I don’t want to live forever. I have a family to feed!”

“Of course,” he agreed mildly. Provoked, I charged on.

“She’s a good ruler! Assharral is safe, wealthy, orderly, strong. What more could you ask?”

“And nobody,” he retorted softly, “sings.”

“Nonsense!” I was thoroughly enraged now. “I’m not afraid of her! Nobody is!”

He gave me one brief inexpressive look and words died on my lips.

“Very well,” I said, half a mile later. “So people . . .
disappear. They are rebels. Troublemakers.” He did not reply. “It’s a small price to pay!” He still did not answer. “What ruler is different?” I found myself near shouting, and hastily dropped my voice. “What if she does have moods? Play cat-and-mouse? Get rid of—of—bad elements? If you think that’s cruel, you should go to Phaxia!”

He glanced round then. His eyes were still and sad and gave an odd impression of grief not only suffered but relived.

“You needn’t defend her, Captain.” He sounded almost tired. “I understand. I probably understand far better than you.”
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