

The Hickory Staff

Book One of the Eldarn Sequence

by

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INTRODUCTION

Charleston, South Carolina

Folly Beach Next Winter

The bay waters rolled in gentle swells, almost silent, deep blue colour fading to black. Norman Felson looped a bowline hitch around a small stanchion near the helm of his thirty-six-foot sloop, the *Offshore Maid*, and attached the opposite end to the tiller, fixing the helm to free his hands because a spanker line had come loose aft. He hauled it in, then hustled back to the bridge as soon as he had the errant sheet reset. He was still uncomfortable sailing the sloop on his own, and didn't like to be away from the helm for more than a few seconds. He looked forward to sunrise; he worried less in daylight.

Kay, his wife, was working in their small cabin; he smelled the aroma of fresh coffee mixing with the cool breeze drifting down from the Chesapeake. Save for the distant glow of channel markers and moonlight glimmering in a kaleidoscope of geometric glints flashing from wave to wave, the bay was dark. Felson navigated north and east using his GPS satellite computer, heading towards the Charleston Harbour lighthouse before turning into the Atlantic and setting course for Nags Head. He liked to imagine himself a sailor from a previous age; he'd often try to stay his course using a compass and the stars alone – though he was rarely successful. He silently cursed his Coast Guard navigation instructor for encouraging him to rely so heavily on satellite technology.

He checked again to be sure he had programmed the correct coordinates into his navigation computer before calling to Kay, 'Is the coffee ready?'

'Just about,' she replied, 'I'll be up in a minute.'

Felson took a bite from a blueberry jelly doughnut coated with uncooperative powdered sugar and realised he was actually quite happy to live in this age. Certain the doughnut was the finest invention of the last millennium, he found himself imagining with a shudder what Francis Drake might have eaten for breakfast as he prepared to battle the Spanish Armada in 1588: drytack biscuits infested with weevils. Drawing out a dollop of jelly with his finger, he grimaced; the old captain's fare could never have been as exquisitely simple and delicious as the doughnuts Felson bought, still warm, for \$2.99 a dozen.

Kay appeared from below. She smiled as she handed him a steaming mug bearing an embossed logo from the *Fairfield Gazette*, the paper that had carried his first story more than forty years earlier. Now he was the editor, and proud of it.

'Thank you,' he said, taking a sip. Kay didn't answer; she stared out into the inky darkness as the undulating waves, unbroken by even the smallest of whitecaps, rocked the *Offshore Maid* in a gentle rhythm. Her hair was pulled back with a length of black velvet ribbon; her cardigan was unbuttoned despite the chilly pre-dawn wind.

'Honey?' Felson bent over to recheck their heading on the compass mounted above the helm. 'Kay, are you—?'

He turned to find his wife standing directly behind him and jumped. 'Jesus, you scared me . . . what—?' His words were choked off as Kay took him firmly by the throat. With almost inconceivable strength she began to squeeze the life from him. Felson tried to prise her fingers from his neck. He felt his hand, coated with bloody pus, come away from her wrist, and, for a second, he was concerned for her. Why was she bleeding? But confusion was soon supplanted by terror: Kay was not relaxing her grip.

Panic struck. Norman Felson began to struggle furiously, kicking and writhing in his wife's unfeasibly forceful grasp. He felt his nose begin to bleed as capillaries burst and heard himself gagging phlegm against the collapsed walls of his windpipe. As consciousness closed in, Felson watched his wife draw back her free hand. A tiny fist illuminated only by light from the sloop's galley came forward with lightning speed to slam into his chest – and through the cavity, tearing sinews and shattering bones.

Kay Felson wiped her bloody hand on the folds of her skirt and tossed her husband's body back against the transom like a load of soiled laundry. A thin trickle of blood ran across the deck and out a scupper into the bay as the elderly woman gripped the helm and brought the *Offshore Maid* about.

With a cry of alarm, arms flailing, Steven Taylor broke the surface of the water. The sting in his eyes and briny taste in his throat confirmed his first suspicion. 'The ocean, Christ, I'm in the ocean,' he shouted, then coughed and began treading water. Thankfully, it was not too cold, and by the dim light of dawn he could see land, a beach, about a quarter-mile to the west. His sodden boots and woollen clothing weighed heavily on him, but he was glad to have them. He set his jaw for the difficult swim to shore.

Kicking towards the beach, Steven's thoughts were churning. Would his credit cards still work? If not, he'd have to steal a wallet. He needed a flight, quickly. He had no idea where he was, or how far it was to Denver; Steven prayed he would come ashore, find an airport and be in Colorado by late afternoon. They would be expecting him between 5.00 and 5.15. After that, at least the immediate pressure would be off, and Steven would have twelve hours more to get home.

Fifteen minutes later, the sun had risen further in the morning sky and Steven recognised that he was on the east coast – he wasn't certain *which* east coast, but he was hoping against hope that it was the United States. He had no passport to ensure safe passage home from a foreign country. He could claim he had lost it, or that it had been stolen, but he did not have the luxury of time to argue with the clerical staff at an American Consular Office in some foreign city. As Steven approached the beach, his concerns were alleviated somewhat by the sight of a dimly lit sign above a closed concession stand: *Bratwurst*.

He laughed to himself. 'Well, unless they put in an ocean off the east coast of Germany, I'm back home . . . off course by eighteen hundred miles, but home nevertheless.' If this were Florida, Hilton Head or, even better, New Jersey, there would be an airport close by. Judging from the temperature of the water he guessed he was south of the Chesapeake; although chilly, he hadn't succumbed to hypothermia – at this time of year, northern waters would be much too cold: he would have frozen by now.

As he waded ashore, his feet leaving the only imperfections in the trowel-perfect sand, he noticed someone lying on the beach. It was too early for tourists: this was someone who had been there all night. Shaking water from his clothing, he quickly covered the distance to the sleeping form.

'Hey, wake up.' Steven nudged the stranger lightly by the shoulder. He was a young man, probably in his mid-twenties, dressed in a rumpled suit and ruined tie; he smelled of stale beer and vomit. 'C'mon, wake up,' Steven repeated emphatically.

'What? Christ, what time is it?'

'It's 5.15,' Steven said, though he had no real idea – he had traded his watch for a horse in Rona months ago.

'Are you a cop?' the young man asked, still half asleep.

'No. Listen, I have one quick question. Where are we?'

'What? Leave me alone. Jesus!'

‘Tell me where we are.’ Steven was slightly amused: this young professional would soon wake to a painful hangover.

‘Folly Beach, South Carolina. Now shove off, asshole.’ The groggy drunk rolled back onto the sand. As he did, Steven noticed a set of keys lying near a pack of cigarettes, a lighter and nine empty beer bottles.

He waited a minute, counting the man’s steady breaths, before he silently stole the keys and the lighter. Running up the gentle slope to the parking lot, he hesitated a moment and turned to look once more at the sunrise. The light had brightened the waterfront, bringing a sense of hope and renewal. The still form of the sleeping drunk seemed out of place, ink spilled on an impressionist landscape.

Steven did not consider the incongruity long. He was home. Now he had twelve hours to get back. ‘Charleston Airport,’ he said as he hurried towards the lone car parked beside the beach.

BOOK I

The Bank

Estrad, Rona 981 Twinmoons Ago

‘I am aware they were flying Ronan colours, my dear Detria,’ Markon Grayslip, Prince of Rona, told his irritated cousin calmly. ‘I assure you, when they attack my ships, they fly the colours of Praga or Falkan, or some other territory. It’s the ruse they employ to get closer to our ships. Your captains really should know better.’ As soon as the words were out of his mouth he regretted it.

Detria Sommerson’s face reddened with fury. ‘*My* captains? *Your* captains should be out there ridding us of this threat. Your father wanted sovereignty of that unholy pile of rocks he called an island, and I was happy to give it to him. I know you didn’t ask for it, but now it’s yours and you had better police it.’ Beads of sweat lined the dusty edge of her enormous wig and drew rivulets of diluted white powder down her forehead. Markon did not wish to upset her any more.

He tried a different tack. ‘How many soldiers did you lose?’

She calmed slightly and admitted, ‘As luck would have it, we didn’t lose any. My flagship was able to run off those hideous ruffians. However, that’s not the point—’ she made an adjustment to one of the many layers of her dress. ‘The point is that damage was done to one of my ships, and you did not provide an escort to safely see me and my family across the Ravenian Sea.’

‘Hold on for a moment, please, Aunt Detria—’ She was always called Aunt although she was actually his cousin; now Markon hoped that reminding her of their family connection would soften her somewhat. ‘I offered you an escort, which you turned down last Twinmoon. How many ships did you actually bring?’

‘As a matter of fact, I brought three.’

Markon nearly laughed out loud. ‘Three? Great lords, why? Is it not just you, Ravena and Anis? What could you possibly need with three ships?’

‘Not that it is any of your concern . . . Nephew.’ She may be the family matriarch still, but Markon remained impassive. He did not take orders from her. ‘I needed three ships for my carriage, my horses, my palace escort, and—’ she paused, reddening slightly, then continued, ‘my clothing.’

Fighting to hold back a smile, Prince Markon II of Rona asked, ‘And which ship was damaged, my dearest Aunt?’

Detria gave up the fight, bursting out, ‘My rutting clothing ship, damn your insolence! And I want everything replaced – today.’

Seizing the opportunity to be gracious, Markon agreed, ‘Of course Aunt Detria, please let one of my palace aides know what was lost and I will have the finest tailors in Estrad here this afternoon to re-outfit your entire retinue. And I will also dispatch a force to hunt down these pirates and send word to you when it is accomplished.’ Grinning a little devilishly, he added, ‘It is lovely to see you again, Aunt Detria. You know you were my father’s favourite cousin.’

‘Do *not* try to sweet talk me, Nephew. I’m angry. I’m angry at having to drag myself over here to listen to this reunification proposal of yours. I’m angry at the soggy climate in this lowland swamp you call a nation, and I am very sceptical of this representative government you propose.’ She tried to stare him down, but Markon would not allow this, not in his own audience chamber. She went on, ‘You’re going to have to do a great deal of convincing over the next ten days, Markon, a great deal.’

With that parting salvo, Aunt Detria Sommerson, Ruling Princess of all Praga, turned on her heel and stormed out.

Climbing the grand staircase to his royal apartment, Markon found Danae, his wife, waiting for him on the landing.

‘Well, she sounds upset,’ said Danae, taking his hand.

‘You have no idea,’ he said. ‘I think one of these days she’s going to drop dead carrying on like that.’ A large stained-glass window above the landing illuminated the staircase and lit his wife’s face. She had aged well; he believed her the most beautiful woman in Rona. ‘I need her for this to work, though,’ he said contemplatively. ‘I need all of them, and I have only ten days.’

Markon’s cousins, the rulers of Praga, Falkan and Malakasia, had all travelled to Rona to hear his reunification proposal. The nations were independent of each other, and their political and economic relations had been strained for the past three generations. A brutal war between his grandfather, his great-uncle and his great-aunt had ended in an unstable peace agreement many Twinmoons earlier, but border raids, pirates and inflated tariffs were pushing the Eldarni nations close to conflict once again. Secret alliances had been formed, armies quietly levied and outfitted.

Markon was working desperately to stop the downward spiral into armed conflict; his proposal would bring representative government to the known lands and, hopefully, restore a true peace to Eldarn. The visionary prince was frustrated that his cousins had agreed to be his guests for just ten days; that left a great deal of planning and negotiating to complete in a very short time. Still, he was determined.

He squeezed his wife’s hand and turned to climb the remaining stairs. ‘We begin tonight,’ he said quietly. ‘Prepared or not, we begin tonight.’

From his apartment Markon looked out across the palace grounds. Normally a haven for quiet contemplation, today there were hundreds who had come to witness history, to sell their goods and services, or just to enjoy the fair-like atmosphere of the political summit. Although his royal cousins were housed in various wings of Riverend Palace, their escorts camped on the grounds between the palace and the Estrad River, together with those who had come to sell, to entertain or just to gawp. Markon had offered each a team of squires to act as servants or valets during the summit, but – like Aunt Detria’s naval escort - he had been turned down: his cousins mistrusted him. Looking now across the sea of multi-coloured banners, tents and pedlars’ carts, he knew he was doing the right thing. Markon imagined the great nation of Eldarn reborn, reconstructed into five equal nation-states, where all citizens could enjoy freedom, equity and an opportunity to build a meaningful life. He just had to talk his cousins into the idea. The Ronan prince believed they shared enough fundamental values to bring this vision to life. No one person should rule absolutely. Markon was certain that absolute power had been the damning variable in his great-grandfather’s life: he was killed because he had wielded unchecked power; his scions had been fighting for the shattered vestiges of that power for three generations. It had to stop.

‘Danae,’ he called over his shoulder, ‘would you have someone send for Tenner?’

‘Of course, dear,’ she said, gesturing to a pageboy down the hallway. She spoke quietly to the boy, who walked quickly off to find Tenner, the prince’s personal physician, and closest advisor.

Danae came up behind her husband and ran her hands under his arms and across his chest. He was still in good physical shape for a man nearly four hundred and twenty-five Twinmoons old, his chest and arms kept strong with continued riding and exercise. He had put on some weight above his belt, though, and Danae grabbed him playfully.

‘I’m not the man you once married,’ he told her quietly. ‘What do you suppose happened to him?’

‘I’d say he was a bit older, much wiser—’ Markon smiled at that, ‘—and about to bring lasting peace to the known world.’ She wrapped her arms more tightly around him, burying her face in his back.

‘I hope you’re right, my darling,’ he said, sighing a little.

‘I hope you’re right, too, my darling,’ a third voice interrupted: Tenner Wynne, the only man in Rona who would dare to enter the royal apartments without announcing himself. ‘You’ve been wrong so many times. I guess I can’t blame you, though: your losing streak started when you chose the wrong husband.’ Tenner was cousin to Prince Markon, the first-born son of Remond II of Falkan. When his father died, Tenner, a medical student at the time, abdicated the Falkan crown to his sister, Anaria: he believed he would make a below-average politician but a superior doctor.

Now, many Twinmoons later his prophecy was realised as he was responsible for training most of the physicians practicing in Rona.

Tenner’s friendship with Markon had begun when the two were just boys; it had grown stronger over the Twinmoons that he had lived and taught in the Ronan capital. He was a brilliant surgeon and diagnostician, but he was also respected as the prince’s primary advisor.

‘Tenner, I’m convinced your parents had you out of wedlock,’ Markon grinned. ‘And have you, in your decrepitude, forgotten how to knock?’

‘I would remind his Highness that I am younger than him, and that the door was already open.’ Tenner bowed with false obsequiousness. ‘You two really must learn to be more discreet.’

‘Ha! You’re just jealous.’ Markon turned back towards the window. ‘Now, tell me where he is.’

‘If by “he” you mean your son,’ Tenner said, ‘I believe “he” is hunting in the southern forest. He’ll be back sometime later today.’

‘He ought to be here.’ Danae was anxious; she feared yet another argument between her husband and her son. At one hundred and seventy-three Twinmoons, the young man had grown independent, and Markon found many of his son’s decisions disagreeable.

‘Oh, he’ll be here,’ Tenner said. ‘He knows how important this is to you. I believe he wants to make something of an entrance this afternoon – there are, after all, numerous young and attractive women on hand.’

‘Yes,’ Markon mused. ‘I noticed we haven’t seen the Larion contingent yet. Any word from our friends in Gorsk?’

‘Nothing, but I can dispatch a rider north along the Merchants’ Highway to find out why they’re late if you want.’ Tenner didn’t need to say that he was also worried that no one had yet arrived from the northern nation; they had been expected in Rona two days earlier. Detria and the Pragan envoy had been delayed by raiders on the Ravenian Sea; he had no idea what could be delaying the Larion Senate, which was comprised entirely of peaceful scholars who travelled with little or no money. Raiding parties invariably allowed Larion convoys to pass freely, waiting for more lucrative prey.

Markon felt a familiar sense of fatigue: things had not been going according to plan. He was afraid of the news riders might bring back, but he agreed with Tenner: they had to investigate. ‘I suppose you’d better. Will we see you later this evening for dinner?’

‘Of course – would I miss one of the most important evenings in the past six hundred Twinmoons? Peace in our lifetime, and all that?’ Tenner had more confidence in the prince than Markon had in himself. ‘I think it’s probably rare, your Highness, for anyone to be aware that their finest day lies before them.’ Danae smiled, nodding agreement as Tenner continued, ‘We spend so much time looking forward or reflecting back; today we get to focus on today and recognise that this is the most important thing any of us will ever do.’

‘Trust me; I’ve thought of little else.’ Markon clamped a hand on his friend’s shoulder and squeezed it firmly. ‘I’m glad you’ll be there with Danae and me. Would you send word when our son returns?’

‘Of course,’ Tenner said as he turned and left the couple alone in their chambers.

The heir to the Ronan throne tethered his horse to a low-hanging tree branch and carefully untied a longbow from his saddle. Danmark Grayslip was tall and powerfully built. He pulled his shoulder-length hair into a ponytail, tied it quickly with a thin leather strap and tucked it down beneath his collar, then surveyed the forest, searching for any signs of game: fresh tracks, broken branches or disturbed leaves. Danmark guessed there would be rabbits, a gansel or maybe even a wild pig near the deep eddy that marked the Estrad River’s final turn as it wound its way to the sea.

Stepping carefully towards the edge of a steep slope that ran to the riverbank, he was able to see much of the great bend in the river. A small group of wild hogs were gathered at the base of the slope, rooting for mushrooms in the mud under a misshapen maple tree. Danmark thought of fresh pork for the reunification feast as he slithered along the ridge on his stomach. He needed to get clear of several small trees to have an open shot down the hill. At this range he thought he could kill two, if they didn’t panic and run off right away.

Excited that he had found an easy target so early in the day, the young prince imagined his triumphant ride through Estrad with a boar or two lashed to his saddle. Hundreds of guests, visitors and merchants, had journeyed to the city to hear his father’s vision for peace. He would ride slowly, stately, to give them all the opportunity to witness his return from the hunt. Danmark had his choice of Ronan women; they were all vying for his hand, and not just for his inheritance – the olive-skinned, dark-eyed young man was considered very handsome. Following his impromptu parade, he would select a companion for the evening from the many lovely foreigners visiting Riverend Palace, he thought smugly. Imagining the evening’s entertainment aroused him, and the future Prince of Rona had to fight a desire to rush the job.

Danmark froze: one of the hogs had stopped digging and turned to look at him. He watched as the small boar began climbing the slope. Smiling at his luck, he was already rehearsing the story of how he killed the ferocious animal with just his hunting knife. He peered down the hill again; there it was, still staring at him and still climbing. He nocked an arrow and moved onto his knees, into firing position, as the pig came slowly but deliberately towards him. Then something strange happened. The hog stopped its relentless climb, gave the young prince a vacuous look, then collapsed as if rendered completely senseless: a child’s stuffed toy discarded in the woods.

Danmark watched it for a moment, shrugged bemusedly, and prepared to fire downhill at one of the larger pigs still digging for truffles.

The ache began as a distant burning sensation in his left wrist. At first the prince ignored it, preparing to fire his bow, but before he could release the first shaft, pain lanced along his forearm. As Danmark dropped his longbow the arrow glanced harmlessly off a nearby tree and fell into the river. Tearing off his left glove, the young man discovered an open wound forming rapidly on the back of his wrist. It was an ugly sore, dripping with strangely coloured pus and dark blood.

‘What in all the Eastlands—’ He had no time to complete his thought. He was going blind, the forest colours fading from green and gold through blurry grey to black. Covering his eyes, Danmark gave a surprised cry and struggled to regain his feet.

As he stood, he realised he could see nothing and his hearing was fading as well. ‘What sort of demon virus is this?’ he screamed, but he could barely hear his own cries. He wiped his palms over and over his eyes, as if to massage sight back in.

Now in total darkness, Danmark tried to make his way back to his horse, hoping that the beast might find its own way back to the stables at Riverend Palace, or at least into the village. His head swam, his equilibrium disturbed by the rapid hearing loss. Crying out once again as he

lost his footing, he fell backwards down the slope, hitting rocks and trees as he rolled. Danmark was overcome by fear; he tried screaming for help, but could not tell if he made any sound.

His heart raced: he was dying. He could feel it; the burning, the blindness and the deafness had come on too quickly for this to be anything other than death.

Suddenly everything stopped. As Danmark stared into the endless midnight, brightly coloured shapes and forms drifted through his mind, playfully moving about inside his head. For a moment his loss of sight and sound was forgotten; he was distracted by the hauntingly beautiful rainbow of colours. He found he could make them sing or play music; he could hear it resonating behind his eyes. Giggling, he reached out to touch them with his good hand, and discovered that when he commanded, they obeyed. The Ronan prince joyfully organised shapes and shades into a series of moving pictures, a magical parade through his blindness. They called to him, and he answered, in a language he never knew he could understand, but which he could now speak fluently.

On the slope above, Danmark's horse stood idly by as the prince waved one hand back and forth through the air above his head. With one leg resting lazily in the gently flowing waters of the Estrad River, the young man grunted, cried out and laughed in a succession of unintelligible noises, but he made no move to rise from where he had fallen.

'Marek, take a long look at Anis will you?' Helmat Barstag elbowed his cousin in the ribs. 'Lords, but she is put together nicely.' The future prince of Falkan stared unabashedly at Anis Ferlasa's breasts, displayed prominently thanks to the laced and embroidered bodice she had chosen for the evening's state dinner. He reached for his wine goblet.

'She's your cousin,' Marek Whitward commented dryly. 'It's indecent.'

'Distant cousin, my friend, and tell me you wouldn't love a chance at her if you could get one.' Helmat eyed Marek suspiciously. 'You do get involved with women from time to time, don't you?'

'Of course I do, Helmat. It's just that I try to limit my relationships with women who aren't relatives . . . however distant.' The young prince of Malakasia lowered his voice when he saw his father scowling at him from across the table. He added, in a whisper, 'I do admit she is beautiful.'

'Beautiful? She's more than beautiful.' Helmat's voice rose. 'She makes me want to forget myself and take her right here on the table.'

'I'm certain your mother would appreciate that,' Marek remarked sarcastically, looking pointedly at Princess Anaria, seated at the head of their table. He liked his cousin; he felt disconcerted and somewhat guilty at how pleased he was Helmat would one day rule Falkan now that Harkan, Helmat's older brother, had been lost at sea seven Twinmoons earlier. Harkan had been distant, serious, and brooding, the very antithesis of the witty and fun-loving Helmat. Marek had dreaded the Twinmoons he and Harkan would have worked together as Eldarni heads of state.

Now that Helmat was the prince-in-waiting to Falkan, Marek looked forward to their collaborations: he would have an ally in the Eastlands when he took his family's ancestral throne in Malakasia.

But Harkan's tragic accident, in a storm off the Falkan coast, had broken Princess Anaria's heart. Now she wore only black, in public mourning for her elder son. In the wake of his brother's death, Helmat was not sure he would be ready to take control when his mother died: his life and education so far had been preparing him to play a secondary role in governing Falkan. Marek was pleased to see his cousin finally warming to the notion that he would eventually oversee the most powerful economy in Eldarn.

The beautiful Anis Ferlasa, the object of Helmat's desire, was seated with Ravena, her mother, and her grandmother, Detria Sommerson, Princess of Praga. Calculating the difference in

their ages, Marek guessed Anis was now about one hundred and fifty Twinmoons. The Malakasian prince flushed as he recalled the girl he had known and teased mercilessly as a child: tall, gangly, with pale skin, pin-straight hair and high cheekbones. Stealing a glance at her over Helmat's shoulder, Marek marvelled at how lovely she had grown in the seventy Twinmoons since he had last seen her. He felt his temperature rise, and dabbed at his brow with a brocaded napkin before loosening his collar.

Helmat, not as subtle as his Malakasian cousin, had turned in his chair to gain an unobstructed view of Anis across the grand dining hall.

Noticing their stares, Anis smiled devilishly at the two princes and mouthed the words *meet me later*.

'Did you see that?' Helmat blurted, too loudly. He immediately sat up, ramrod-straight, as Princess Anaria cast him a cold look, her slate-grey eyes staring him down knowingly from the far end of the banquet table. Whispering excitedly, Helmat nudged his cousin. 'Did you see that, Marek? I tell you, my friend, we are set for tonight.' Nearly bursting with anticipation, Helmat quickly downed a third goblet of wine to brace himself for the long dinner ahead.

Riverend's grand dining hall was festooned with fine linen, colourful silk banners and hundreds of freshly cut flowers. A bellamir quintet provided music from an alcove, and dozens of torches brightened the scene with dancing firelight. Warm night air mixed with the faint aroma of woodsmoke to give the chamber a feeling of home, despite the fact that nearly two hundred people filled the long tables: the royal families and honoured kinsmen and courtiers.

Servants hustled to deliver wine and ale around the room; the diners were still awaiting the opening course as Prince Markon II and Princess Danae had not yet joined their guests for the evening's ceremony. Many of the revellers were beginning to get restless in the stifling heat: the fashionable layers of ornately stitched clothing were causing great discomfort. Several of the elder cousins began grumbling their discontent.

Marek took a long draught from his tankard. 'I've heard a rumour that young Danmark hasn't returned from a hunting trip. His father's furious.'

Helmat tore his gaze away from Anis's ample bodice and looked around: the Larion representatives had not arrived either. 'Things don't seem to be going very smoothly for Markon,' he whispered. 'Danmark's missing and no one from Gorsk has bothered to show up.'

'I'm not surprised about the Larion brothers,' Helmat answered. 'They can only lose in this proposal. They've been entirely autonomous for thousands of Twinmoons. Now Markon plans to include them in a decision-making body made up of members from across the known world. Their convenient self-appeasement programme is about to get shattered.'

'I thought they were peaceful,' Marek said, surprised.

'They are. There's no question about that.' Helmat reached for a loaf of bread, but another withering glare from Anaria made him think twice. 'But their tendency to be self-righteous will only hurt them when they have to deal with all of us. They won't be able to just sit back, secure in their belief that they know everything, and make decisions for themselves alone any more. They're being thrown into a much larger pot.'

'Why wouldn't they show up for this, though?' the young Malakasian asked.

'That gets me, too,' his cousin answered. 'They aren't powerful enough to ignore Markon if we all decide to adopt his plan. They have no army, no weapons—'

'They have magic, though,' Marek interrupted.

'They do, but you're right, they're peace-loving. They'd be overrun before they finished arguing about whether or not to use it.' Helmat sighed, looking hungrily towards the palace kitchens. 'I'll be rutting drunk if they don't hurry this dinner along, and poor Cousin Anis will find only a shell of my former self at her disposal later this evening.' Helmat nudged his cousin playfully. 'You know, if we—'

Helmat was interrupted as the music modulated from a stately dance in a minor key to a sweeping fanfare. Prince Markon II and Princess Danae of Rona entered the grand dining hall to

join their guests. Markon looked calm but determined; his wife was a vision of elegance, striking in a flowing ivory gown brocaded in silver. Before taking his seat, Markon waved the crowd silent. He asked their forgiveness for his tardy arrival, and encouraged them all to enjoy dinner.

Helmat and Marek ate and drank with abandon: fresh venison, pork tenderloin, roasted gansel and enormous beefsteaks streamed in unending supply from the palace kitchens. Finally, when Marek was convinced he could eat nothing more, the tables were cleared and trays of elaborate decorated pastries were presented. Marek's parents, Prince Draven and Princess Mernam, tucked into the delicacies, but he could not manage another morsel.

'Lords, but I am stuffed to bursting,' Marek commented to no one in particular.

'Try one of the pink ones, dear.' His mother wiped puffy cream from the corner of her mouth. 'They're quite light.'

'Maybe later,' he answered, loosening the belt around his tunic.

'I'm having a brief meeting with Prince Markon in his audience chamber,' his father said from across the table. 'I'd like you to join us.'

'Of course,' Marek said, trying to hide his disappointment at missing his evening rendezvous with Anis.

Helmat looked askance. 'You can't seriously tell me you're going to miss Anis for a meeting with Markon about *politics*,' he said through a mouthful of cream-filled pastry.

'Sorry, Helmat, duty calls – but I'll expect full disclosure in the morning.'

'Outstanding,' his cousin replied, all of a sudden re-energised. 'I'll meet you for breakfast.'

The thought of yet more food made Marek wince. He was about to comment on the impending tryst when Markon rose to address his guests.

'Good evening one and all,' he started. 'I am so very pleased you were able to join us here at Riverend, to discuss a proposal of monumental importance to all our people of Eldarn.' He paused, looking around the room, then continued, 'It is wonderful to have you all as our guests: I trust the accommodations and food are to your satisfaction.' At that, a smattering of applause ran through the room, like so many children in hard-soled shoes. 'Danae and I are excited to have our family, the descendants of King Remond Grayslip, here on hand to witness this summit, this recognition of critical common values that will guide us into a new era of peace.'

Markon paused again for effect.

Looking across the Pragan table at her daughter Ravena, Princess Detria frowned. She doubted her Ronan cousin was blessed with the leadership necessary to see his vision realised. Ravena shrugged and turned her gaze back to Markon.

'I have been—' Markon stopped his speech and looked down at the floor in consternation, as if trying to recall a line from a poem memorised too long ago. 'I have been—' Again the prince paused and, flushed from the heat in the dining hall, absentmindedly wiped his brow. 'I have been able to work with—'

Tenner stood and approached the prince nervously. Princess Danae took her husband's hand in a show of support. Reaching Markon's side, Tenner handed his friend a goblet of wine. Markon reached for it, managed a partial smile and raised his head to continue. His face was pale and damp with beads of sweat. He blinked several times in rapid succession as if to clear his vision, and took a long sip from Tenner's wine goblet before clearing his throat.

Marek wasn't sure if he heard Princess Danae scream first, or if he saw Prince Markon collapse to the stone floor. The room erupted with the concerned cries of family and friends. Scores of people rose to aid the fallen prince and Marek's view was blocked until he jostled into position near the head table. He watched as Markon, looking horribly lifeless, was carried from the grand dining hall to his royal apartment, attended by his wife and physician.

Marek's father stood up purposefully. 'Come,' Prince Draven commanded his son, 'let's see if we can help.' He was already moving towards the exit; Marek looked over at Helmat before rising to follow.

Later that evening, Helmat lay beneath Anis. Her exquisite body glistened with perspiration as she breathed heavily down into his face. Her warm breath smelled of stale wine, but Helmat found it the perfect aphrodisiac.

‘Lords, my dear cousin, but we must do that again, immediately,’ he told her, already beginning to feel his body respond to his desire. They had taken each other furiously, without care or compassion, both fighting a selfish battle for physical pleasure.

‘Oh yes, my dear cousin . . .’ She leaned into him, her breasts brushing against the sides of his face. ‘But first I need a drink.’

Helmat watched as Anis rose and walked to the armoire against the far wall of his suite. She poured two goblets of dark red wine, drank one nearly dry, refilled it and drank again.

Helmat smiled. ‘That’s my girl. You know that’s from my family vineyard.’

‘It’s good,’ she answered, ‘much better than the horse-piss we ferment in Praga.’

Helmat stared at her in the flickering candlelight, excited at the thought of taking her all over again. ‘You have perhaps the most perfectly formed backside of any woman walking the known lands,’ he said softly. ‘Do you know that? It’s perfect. And trust me, I know; I’ve examined plenty of backsides in my time.’

Anis said nothing, but turned and slowly approached Helmat’s bed. In one hand she carried the wine bottle. ‘Oh, that’s better,’ Helmat said, laughing, ‘bring the whole bottle. It cuts down on all those unnecessary trips back and forth. We don’t want the sheets getting cold, do we?’

Anis didn’t return his smile. It was only then that Helmat noticed the small wound forming on her hand.

‘Rutting whores! What *is* that?’ he asked, sitting up and reaching for the bedside candle. ‘Come here and let me see – it looks like it might be infected.’ Suddenly concerned, he sobered somewhat and repeated, ‘Come here. Let me look at that for you.’

Moving with unexpected speed, Anis shattered the bottle against the headboard and drove a broken shard of thick Ronan glass deep into Helmat’s neck. Blood spurted from the wound as her cousin choked out a guttural plea for mercy. His eyes bulging in terror, Helmat reached for her. In his last moments he ran his fingers over those perfect breasts he had been lusting after all evening. Wine mixed with blood: a sanguine vintage that soaked the bedding as Anis Ferlasa of Praga, naked and spattered in red, stared for a moment at the twitching corpse of her fallen cousin and lover before collapsing to the floor herself.