

# Talyn – Chapter 3

By Holly Lisle

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The Ram's hour was only half passed, with the new day and Sparrow's first kiss of the sun waiting. But military life is no respecter of hours or beds; I dropped the mask over my eyes with a grumble about the time and a lie to Pada about the dream I'd had to abandon – for in truth I'd not been able to sleep at all – and settled my hands in place on the linking bar. We were doubling on the benches again; this time Pada and I shared. We would be teaming in the View, too; the major had regular teammates working with each other as often as he could to ease some of the stress of our longer shifts. Shielding goes better when you team up with your regular partner, I've found, though it is a more pleasant business if you have a

whole bench to yourself.

I hurt inside and out. But as I soared into the View, my lack of sleep fell away from me, and my worries and guilt tumbled into silence.

For just a moment I let myself rest within the familiar flow of Beyltaak. Then, however, Pada and I pushed our focus away from home and the main unit. We were assigned to provide backup for the Injtaak Shielders, who had most of the taaklords in the Confederacy under their care.

My intelligence to the commander had come to this: The heads of the Confederate Forces believed the Eastils would launch an attack against the Alltaak Hend either before or during the planned conference; they also believed the most likely form of attack, because it would be the most precise and effective, would be magical.

So every Shielder who could be pared away from regular duty without leaving the taaks unprotected would be on watch over Injtaak and those in it – especially those inside the Injtaak Faverhend.

Ontaak, Maattstaak, Beyltaak, Havartaak, Mirtaak and Joontaak – the closest taaks with available units, would all be contributing Shielders.

Pada and I connected with the other units as the first taaklords began entering the Faverhend. We identified ourselves, brushing against the other Shielders long enough to tell them who we were and what unit had sent us. The Shielders gathered into a huddle; those of us on the same hub can talk comfortably to each other at any time, though when we're working we talk little. But only by touching could those of us from different units and on different hubs hear each other.

Civilians have odd ideas about us; one of the most common is that we're mind-readers. We aren't, but I find it easy to

guess which people I meet on the streets of Beyltaak believe this rumor about us, for they squinch up their faces and refuse to look me in the eye, and I can see them thinking very hard about all the things they do not care if I find out, while trying with all their might not to think about the one or two things they wish to hide. And as we part and they believe they have kept their secrets safe, I see triumph on their faces. Those less sure look worried. And those with much to hide cross the streets to avoid me and my kind altogether.

We cannot read minds in the physical world. Not at all, no matter how loudly the guilty might worry, though rumors of some secret unit of Magics that does read minds crops up from time to time even in our ranks. My father laughs about our gullibility every time it pops up again. He says we of all people should know better. Within the View the situation is a little different, but it isn't anything like what the civilians think. If we do not have a tangible connection in the physical world – such as the linking bar and its hub, or holding hands – we can only communicate with each other by brushing our View forms against each other. That method gives us a form of speech and a little more; directed speech comes to us clear enough, but thoughts are opaque even within the View; we cannot read them unless we flow into each other, and then we give up exactly as much as we receive. And even when we merge, we can see what the one we've merged with has seen. We can hear what he has heard, feel what he has felt. But what he thinks about these things but never says aloud – that we can never know.

But most people carry the bits of their day that most please or distress them on their skins like dust from the road, so that if we brush over them, these surface bits cling to us – that a man has found a young woman to replace his wife of many years and feels guilt at his betrayal and worry at possible discovery; that an old woman recognizes the twist of a sickness that will kill her deep within her belly and pretends

she does not know the shadow walking in her footsteps; that a child lies about some small sin and dreads his father's wrath and his mother's disappointment.

They will wear the betrayal, the pain, the lie the way that in the world of the flesh they wear a coat.

And we can touch the coat, and look at it, and know its fabric and the manner of its making.

These things we see on almost everyone, for Life's road is a dusty place, and few travel it without wearing its grit. And it is from our knowledge of these things that we get the reputation for reading minds. The sins of those who feel no guilt or shame are as invisible to us as to any civilian who has never touched the View.

Our first few moments in Injtaak, then, we huddled against each other so that we could talk with those not on our hubs. We quickly divided the taak, the Faverhend, and the people within the Faverhend among the many teams present. And then we settled in to watch.

Nothing was going on. The taak glowed with healthy light, Pada's and my sector flowed and shimmered, our people turned bright with excitement or dull with fury. But, Saint Ethebet preserve me, the whole thing was as exciting as watching a bowl of water.

We watched nothing for a long time, and then Pada told me, "I followed your advice," and the feel of her voice was so dark and sharp when it burst in my head it startled me.

No sound carries within the View. So the voices we 'hear' appear inside our heads, missing loudness and softness and tone. Instead they are bright or dark, bland or colorful, rounded or angled. Getting the mood of the speaker is an acquired skill, and while there are many commonalities, not all speakers come across in the same way, we have to learn

each other's voices individually.

Pada's usual pointless nattering is round and dull and it flows like an unending river. When she is excited, her View-speech is bright – sometimes painfully so. Pada's anger is sharp and hard, her bewilderment is dark.

So.

"What advice?" I asked her.

"To bed Dosil without requiring better gifts first."

Oh, Saints. After holding onto her virginity forever, Pada had experienced sex for the first time because of something I had said. And her thoughts were still sharp and dark. My heart sank.

"What went wrong?"

"It was boring, and it was messy, and it hurt. And he is already talking about the next time, as if there is going to be a next time."

"The first time hurts," I told her. "But the second time usually doesn't. And ... why did what I told you convince you to bed him?" My conscience was going to nag me about this. I could already feel it starting up.

"You said there was no difference between a whore and a woman who wanted gifts before she would bed a man."

Well, I did not see a difference, but clearly I should not have made this assertion to Pada. Dosil might be thanking me, but Pada was not. Still, having told the truth, I could not deny it with a lie. "It all looks the same to me."

"It sounded the same to me, too," Pada told me. "When you said it, anyway." This is the first time I could prove that she had listened to a thing I said. Maybe when I wanted to get

her attention on any issue, I needed to tell her she was acting like a whore. That ought to make our friendship, such as it was, even more interesting. Pada might wear Ethebet's braid, but she still thinks like one of Saint Minda's.

" I am sorry, truly, that you did not enjoy yourself," I said, and I meant it. Because now I was going to hear about how this was my fault for as long as Pada and I worked together.

But for the moment, at least, Pada was not inclined to lay blame. She was taking a different tack. "I cannot understand how you could enjoy such a ... such a beastly thing. I know you do; you are not just pretending. When you talk about it, your words are bright and colorful and they dance inside my head. While I felt like an animal," she added.

" You're supposed to feel like an animal; poggging is an animal thing," I told her. "To get the fun out of it, you simply have to learn to be an animal that you like."

I got no words from her for that – just a dark cloud of bewilderment.

Below and around us, the taaklords were up and moving, heading for the Faverhend. They faded and brightened, connecting and reconnecting as they greeted each other and moved forward. Beyond the Faverhend, Injtaak lay quiet, placid, soothing beyond words. I could afford the time to give Pada an example.

" Take me," I told her. "I don't want everything always the same. Poggging can be sweet and gentle, and once in a while that is well enough, but I want to know that my partner is there with me. I want to be sure I am all he can think about. Sweet and gentle does little to make that happen. So I see myself as a mountain cat, all teeth and strong muscles and sharp claws. And I do not worry myself with thinking too much. Thinking gets in the way; feeling doesn't. And telling them you bite does much to separate the men from the boys."

" I was thinking," Pada admitted. "I was wishing that Dosil would finish and get off me," Pada said. "He had the stupidest expression on his face, and he just went on, and on, and on."

" You take what you want," I told her, "or you'll not get it. Next time, flip him on his back, jump on top of him, ride him like a good horse. Take him at your pace – canter, gallop, and jump."

" Me lead him?" Pada was scandalized; her reply was bright orange, sharp as hedgehog quills.

I should have been ashamed of myself for using her upbringing against her; she'd come from a family who had never lived under Ethebet's Law. Both her mother and her father were civilians, as was her only sibling, an older sister. Pada had been raised to think that the woman waited for the man, that virginity was a sacred state and sex was a duty to be endured and got through and not mentioned. Saint Minda was known to have said, "Be quiet, be still, do your duty but hold chastity in your heart."

Which would tell me only that Minda had either never gotten herself bedded or had done a piss-poor job of it if she had.

But Minda was hugely popular with civilians. Pada's father had likely never seen Pada's mother naked; Pada's mother had likely never pugged Pada's father outside their marriage bed, and equally likely had never enjoyed herself while she was in it. With her body rigid, her thoughts pure, and her mouth pressed tight so that she might be a good, silent chaste wife. Which had to be a real romp for Pada's father, too, come to think of it.

And every time Pada went home, her parents reminded her of where she came from, and because she was a dutiful daughter, she had held to their ways even when she had the freedom to find and follow her own.

Ethebet's Law frees the men and women who live under it from the burden of virginity at marriage. It permits us to select and abandon partners, even those who do not live under the same law, with complete freedom, though we and we alone must bear full responsibility for any children who are our issue. Nevertheless, we can skip marriage entirely if we so choose, even if we bear – or father – children. If we marry we may divorce, and – man and woman – we hold our assets as our own instead of jointly.

These freedoms can be good or bad – children suffer without both parents, and most Ethebettans settle down and marry when they start a family. Most families stay together. After all, Jostfar expects honor and moderation from all of us, and though he has given us endless freedoms, he expects us to use them wisely and in good faith.

However, the freedom to do otherwise is always there.

While they are with us, our partners live under Ethebet's Law. And that situation leads more than a few of us to find our mates and partners from within the service; not everyone finds Ethebet's freedoms of choice a comfortable fit.

The resistance comes from shopkeepers and other business people, who follow Saint Minda for her economic blessing and who have miscalled perpetual virginity, prudery, and fanatical fastidiousness “chastity,” and have labeled these flaws virtues.

Pada's parents are Mindans, and they will not be happy that their younger daughter will no longer be able to marry on Saint Minda's Street under her porphyry arch.

I should have regretted shocking Pada. But I did not.

” You lead,” I told her. “And while you're about it, keep away from the bed. Walls, floors, tables, chairs, the grass outside ...”

Her orange grew brighter, her sharp spikiness more pronounced. She stood out in the muted terrain of the View at that moment like a fire in a dark room. Others around us were beginning to notice her; their attention was beginning to drift.

Which meant I had just become an obstacle to our mission.

Then in the physical world the bells began to ring; within the View ringing bells are like tiny sparkling stars, silent but beautiful, their energy bursting in white light and then shivering away to darkness. With the bells announcing the coming of day, the Alltaak Hend would start for real.

Pada noticed the attention she was getting, and to her credit she got herself under control. She is not worthless; she's truly a good Shielder. Hard to tolerate, difficult to like many times, but she knows her work and she does not put anything before her duty.

We dropped our discussion and put ourselves into our work.

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His men were in place. Gair had walked the circuit around the Faverhend, unobtrusively checking to be sure that the side doors all the way around were closed and guarded, and that for this special meeting only the vast front doors stood open. The taaklords, male and female, headed through the doors as the sun rose over the horizon and the bells throughout the taak rang in the Sparrow, the Tonks first station of the sun and first hour of the day.

As the bells stopped ringing, every Tonk in sight turned – more or less as one – to face the sun, and murmured, “Haabudaf aveerzak.”

Gair turned with them and repeated the phrase, which was a greeting to the new day and which meant “Blessing upon us all” or “We bless ourselves,” depending upon how one chose to

translate it. That simple prayer completed, the Tonks turned back to their business. But Gair paused, momentarily unnerved. He was uncomfortable with public displays of piety, and unsettled by the uniformity displayed in that fleeting instant. In the Republic, temples to a hundred different gods jostled shoulder to shoulder in the bigger towns and cities, and at all hours of the day and night, men and boys gathered in the public places to argue the merits of their gods and their religions, sometimes with words and sometimes with fists. They'd brought their gods with them from all corners of the world, and the Republic had proven a fertile breeding ground for their followers.

That wasn't the way of things in Tonk lands. The Tonks were a uniform people with a single history; they were born into different clans, but all those clans had worked together and traded together across Tandinapolis for thousands of years. The Tonks still held all of southern Tandinapolis, but perhaps two or three thousand years earlier, a handful of clans had packed up their ponies and their shaddas and trekked across the frozen wastelands of southern Tandinapolis, across the island chain that traversed the Copper Sea, and up the peninsula into Hyre. Those clans had settled heavily across western Hyre and lightly in eastern Hyre, from whence the Republic, which came later, had suffered mightily getting rid of them. The Tonks shared a handful of closely-related dialects of a single language, a single history, and five flavors of their single religion, Jostfarianism.

It wasn't even much of a religion. Their god was a distant, grandfatherly one who didn't have a great deal to say about obedience or disobedience, and whose whole role, as far as Gair could see, seemed to be to let the Tonks know that, as long as they were Tonks and didn't hurt each other, they were all right with him. Jostafarians embraced five saints – apocryphal figures whose actions embodied the things Tonks considered virtuous as well as the things they thought were

vices. Their saints weren't saintly at all; they had flaws. And the flavors of the Jostfarianism centered on convenience, rather than differences of opinion or philosophy. Each patron saint had followers, but the followers chose their saint when they chose their career. No one seemed to get excited about which of the saints was the best – except perhaps the Mindans, whom Gair could almost understand – no one seemed to care which saint anyone else followed, and the Tonks didn't show any interest in introducing Jostfar, their god, to anyone who wasn't Tonk. It was all very polite and all very dull.

And, from Gair's point of view as someone who could end up administrating a taak and civilizing the people after the war, it was also terrifying. Because the whole Tonk culture seemed to present a shell smooth and hard as the surface of an egg, with no crannies that could be penetrated, with no way to win the people over to a new and better way of life.

They were Tonk. Everyone who was not Tonk could never be Tonk, and that was fine with them. That was the basis of their society, their culture, and their philosophy.

And it was going to have to change.

He took a deep breath and walked up to the front doors of the Faverhend. He realized that every taak in the Confederacy – every little independent city-state in western Hyre – had a building like this one, where the men and women of the taak gathered to speak their minds and vote. He knew that this was, by Tonk standards, a small Faverhend, because Injtaak was a middle-sized taak, and in theory, the building had to be large enough to accommodate all voting citizens of the taak at the same time. In the case of Injtaak, it had to hold about three thousand standing people at once.

This mission had been put together in haste when the first mention of peace talks and the possibility of a meeting of all the taaklords arose. Gair and his men, already attached to a

unit stationed up in the mountains, and in place to be used for any opportunity, had been in the right place at the right time for this.

According to Lorak, Magics had sacrificed most of its Sender units' fighting capabilities for the better part of the next month in order to create diversionary cover for Gair and his men as they made their last push for Injtaak. Conventionals waited just behind the border at a dozen spots, prepared to move at the first word of success. Everything hinged on Gair's mission.

And he and his men had position, and the requisite skills to do the job, and they had access.

They could end this war, after three hundred years of struggle. They could destroy the fat old men who from positions of comfort ordered strong young men into places of danger and death. They could put an end to the barbaric excesses of the Tonks and bring them true civilization and turn Hyre into one strong, rich, peaceful nation.

But he worried that they were underarmed for what they had to do. The Faverhend looked like it held a thousand people, and though the vast space and the forest-like pillars made it difficult to count accurately, Gair thought that number was not too far off.

The bells stopped ringing, but the taaklords lingered outside the Faverhend, talking. Talking. Godsall, were they not going to get inside and close the last of the doors?

Gair was ready to give the signal. But he had it on the best authority that all the delegates would be present before Hend actually started, and that when they were all present, the doors would close.

He knew his men would hold. They would hold until the end of the world if they did not get their signal. But this was the

Republic's great opportunity, and a handful of old windbags on the steps of the Faverhend were interfering with it.

He wished each and every one of them a quick death, and prayed that he would be the one who would deliver it to them.

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"Ready to bump?" I asked Pada. Our task, and the task of all the Shielders assigned to temporary duty in Injtaak, was to wander among the spirit-forms of not just the thousand or so participants of the Alltaak Hend, but also the six thousand citizens of Injtaak – men, women, and children – the unknown number of camp followers, hangers on, support personnel, traveling troops, and people just passing through, brushing against them and hoping to find, in the dust of worries and guilt that they carried at the surface, a sign that they were enemies – Eastil troops, or spies and saboteurs from one of the Republic's allies, or mercenaries hired to cause trouble. We were looking for single pebbles in a big, fast-moving stream and we knew it.

If we found them, we would signal what we found, and pray that Conventionals in Injtaak could use our information, or if not them, then the Shielders and Senders assigned to arms.

"Pick a direction," Pada told me. "I'll start from the opposite corner of our quad and we'll meet in the middle."

Movement within the View takes almost no time; if you know where you want to be, you are there. Its ease can make physical travel an unbearable burden; those of us who have ridden the heavens can find the back of a horse's best pace suddenly a plodding one.

We chose our starting points and reached them in the same thought; I moved at an easy pace, making a point of brushing against every human I passed. I caught irritation, boredom, amusement, frustration, fear ... that stopped me, and then I

realized that a wife faced off against her angry husband with her children tucked behind her skirts and a frying pan clenched in her hand. Bad. But outside of my mission. I prayed she would get through her ordeal, and moved on. Boredom, boredom, more boredom, an intent to lie about a mistress to another mistress and a wife. That one was a taaklord. Right. Back to boredom.

And then something unexpected. I touched silence.

The person I touched – male? female? – carried none of the detritus of life on his or her surface. I felt like I had been running through a muddy field and had just fallen into a pure, cold spring.

Who was this person?

A mystic? A saint undiscovered?

I tried to dig deeper, to push myself into the smooth, cool surface of this stranger. I felt something almost like a bubble surround me, but the stranger I wanted to read remained as much a mystery as before. This was a person beyond my ken, beyond my experience.

And then, to my shock and embarrassment, this person turned his attention on me.

"I'm male," he said. "I'm a Feegash diplomat – one of those here to negotiate this necessary peace between your people, who do not want peace, and the Eastils, who also do not want peace, though the world around you wants you to make peace because your fighting affects those beyond your borders." He touched me, lightly but with focused intent, and in that touch I felt the spark of connection. A tiny, palpable sting. "And you are ... gods ... you are remarkable. But this is neither a time nor a place for talk. You have a duty, as do I. I do hope that some day we shall meet again."

And his attention turned away from me, and I found myself back in the mud and the dirt, the cool spring having moved on and left me far behind.

But that little buzz of connection between us continued to vibrate for a moment. The Feegash had been ... lovely.

I moved back to my duties, feeling small and grimy and chastened, and I covered myself in the boredom of the comfortable and annoyed, in the nervousness of the pettily dishonest.

The odd thrill of the Feegash diplomat's touch still echoed inside me, distracting – a faint reverberation that seemed to call me away from my hunt. I pushed it away. Forced myself to focus.

Nothing. I could find nothing, but I knew my chances of finding something were poor. I wished, as I had before on occasion, that some way existed to control the lay of the land within the View – to map it and everyone in it so that we could search the Faverhend and the surrounding streets in some sort of order.

We could only check those whose attention focused on the Faverhend; those taaklords whose attention wandered all the way back home, to crops or livestock problems or ships late back from foreign ports, or to lovers waiting far away, disappeared from our view entirely, only to pop back in when something caught their attention. Here then gone then back then gone then here ... They made my search nearly impossible and I found myself hating them for their lack of focus.

That sleek-as-polished-stone Feegash diplomat, though – he was always right there. He did not waver, did not drift.

I tried not to be enchanted by him; he was, after all, the enemy in many ways. He wanted for us something we did not want for ourselves, and wanted to force it past us because of the

opinions of the world outside our borders. How could I not hate him?

But I did not.

Brushing my way through the crowd, my attention only half on what I was doing, I tripped over my target. Or at least I found one of them. He crouched between two steep roofs at the back of the Faverhend. He was one of several men who had traveled to Injtaak over the mountains from the Eastil Republic; he ached from a night spent someplace cold and hard, and was nervous about the wooden shakes of the roof on which he hid because he was deeply afraid of ... fire.

Fire. When the doors of the Faverhend closed and locked with the taaklords inside it. Fire was their plan?

I pulled back from him so that we were not touching and screamed my discovery, shaking myself loose from the View for just an instant with my vehemence. "Here!" I was screaming, and I was for a moment back on the padded bench with Pada's shoulder blades digging into my back and my hands locked around the linking bar like claws. "Here!" I shouted, and dove back into the View. "One of them is here!"

I passed on what I knew – location, intention, armament – to the first Injtaaker to brush against me. And the Injtaaker dropped out of the View immediately and passed on what I had found.

Brilliant red flashes in another quadrant, as another of our hunters found another of their agents within the View.

But the doors to the Faverhend closed, because while things in the View happen instantly, translating them to the physical realm takes time. Distance has to be covered, communications made.

The physical world is never so simple and logical as the world

of the View.

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Gair watched the doors close, and heard the crossbars inside drop into place. Quickly and loudly, he whistled a tune into the chill morning air: The Madman's Reel, which was an uncommon bit of music, and one unlikely to be mistaken for anything else. As he whistled, he pulled a miniature crossbow from beneath his cloak, and with gloved hands slid a bolt into the groove, cocked and aimed and fired in one smooth motion, and dropped one of the two door guards with a bolt into the chest. Gair reloaded, fired again, and his second shot hit the other guard, the one running toward him, in the face. The second guard, too, fell to the ground, twitching.

Gair turned away for an instant, wincing. He did not let himself think about the guards' deaths right then, because he had a mission; he had to carry out his mission. Three hundred years of war and horror and senseless death on both sides of the border would end if he could succeed.

But, oh, God, he hated killing. Hated knowing that every life he ended came bound to a family, a past, a future cut short. That most of those who died were men like him; decent people in hard circumstances. The soldiers in the Republic Conventional forces never knew their enemy; they had not spent years learning their language, studying their philosophy, discovering their achievements and memorizing their history. They could believe the tales of Tonks eating babies and sacrificing virgins on lusty altars.

But Gair knew better; he knew that the enemy could in many ways have been him, and that the Tonks had done much that was good and even some things that were magnificent.

And though they no doubt had villains among them, he could not fool himself into believing those two guards had been villains. He would carry their deaths with him for the rest of

his life, however long it might be. And the next horror – which he prayed would be the last horror – would be even worse.

Gair then pulled the first of three vials of Greton fire he carried from their straw padding and hard casing, and threw it with all his might against the huge twin front doors of the Faverhend. Greton fire required no spark to ignite; neither did it need tinder to keep it burning. The vial hit the doors and shattered, and the liquid sprayed out, erupting into flames as the ingredients within the two chambers of the glass mixed for the first time with each other and touched air.

Only the Gretons knew how to make Greton fire – what they put in the vials or how they got it in there without disaster remained a mystery to the rest of the world. His people maintained friendly trade with the Gretons as much because of their production of weapons as for any shared philosophy.

The door exploded in flames. Gair heard running and shouts from the other side of the Faverhend; he also thought he heard the shout of one of his men. At the same time, he saw flames begin licking their way around the corner from the side door nearest him to his right. So some of his people were succeeding, even if one was in trouble. He ran to his left, clutching the crossbow in one hand, loading it as he ran, determined to save his men if he could, and to guarantee the success of the mission if he could.

He ran left; that door was not ablaze. Which meant that Wellam hadn't been able to set his fire, which meant, most likely, that he had fallen into the hands of the enemy. Gair threw his second vial against that door, and heard the 'whump' as the Greton fire ignited. It burned hot and spread fast; evidently some of the taaklords had run to that door and pulled the bar out of the brackets, but by the time they got the door open it burned like a Franican's hell. The taaklords opened the door, and the fire sucked inward, and Gair heard screams.

Gods.

Three hundred years of war coming to an end, he told himself. No more friends dead in battle, no more families torn apart by sons or daughters lost in the front lines. A few had to die so that many could live. And this time those who died were those who kept the war going, and not those they sent to fight it. Still ... gods! The sounds, the smells, the sights ...

The streets were filling; people shouting and running, throwing together bucket lines from public wells to the flames with a speed that could only come from long practice. But these were people who lived in wooden houses; fires would be something they knew far too well.

Water would spread Greton fire, not put it out – but they wouldn't know what they were dealing with until it was too late.

He started to back away; the building burned hard and fast, and none of the doors stood open. None of the taaklords or the Feegash had stepped free. A thousand lives would be the final price of peace – but now real peace could come at last. Gair moved in front of Lorak's hiding place and gave the signal for Lorak to send his message to the waiting Republic. A simple hand gesture; a clenched fist raised high and pulled down to chest height.

And then he saw Lorak, with his hands bound behind him and a spear at his back, being marched away from the blaze, right past Gair. He did not look up – did not in any way signal that he recognized Gair.

But a tall man with pale eyes and a lean, hawk-featured face was suddenly standing beside Gair, and he laid a hand on Gair's shoulder.

" And this one," he said, and Gair couldn't move. Couldn't speak, couldn't run, couldn't fight. Something about the man's

touch froze him, held him pinned to the ground while soldiers walked up to him and bound his hands and hobbled his ankles.

" No," he wanted to say. "Not me."

But his tongue was as frozen as his muscles. The man looked into his eyes and said, "This one is the officer in charge. Keep him separate from the rest of them." The Tonk's hand was still on Gair's shoulder. The two of them stood staring at each other, and Gair felt ... something ... moving inside of him. And the man said, "The roofs of that house ... and ... that one," pointing to the places where Arrige and Bokkam hid. "There are only seven of them. Keep the others alive if you can."

The building burned. The taaklords and the Feegash diplomats would die – were perhaps dead already, since Gair no longer heard the screams. But no message would go to the troops massed on the borders at the key points. No word that Gair and his men had succeeded, and that the way was clear for them to move.

The Tonk broke eye contact and moved his hand, and Gair felt life flowing back into his limbs and his tongue. But he no longer had anyplace to go or anything to say. He felt the spear at his back, and heard the rough Tonk voice say, "Move, then, you shitbag."

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I had never before seen my father at work. Nor, in truth, could I say that I had seen him now; what he did was not a thing that eyes could follow. However, I recalled again those rumors of mind-readers in our midst, rumors of that secret unit. And in that moment I could not see any practical difference between what my father had somehow done and what he said – and all of us had mostly believed – could not be done.

Because he stood both within the View – linked briefly to our hub and us by nothing but the force of his mind – and without,

and from his position, merged with the enemy leader and dragged out of him the hiding places of the other Eastil bastards and at the same time, told the Conventionals with him how to find them.

Four of the enemy died during capture, but we took the leader and two others. We would get good information from them. Then they would wait in cells for their ransom – the exchange of some of our prisoners for some of theirs. The Confederates long ago worked out rules for the treatment of prisoners of war and for prisoner exchanges, and over time got whichever scum-licking king who held the throne at the time and his degenerate rabble who ran the Eastil Republic to respect them; the heathen horde eventually came to see that getting their people back in one piece and untortured was worth treating our people well.

My unit and I stayed briefly to check for any who had not escaped the Faverhend through the tunnels. The Eastils hadn't succeeded in destroying the standing leadership of the Confederacy, but they had succeeded brilliantly in infuriating the taaklords. This stunt alone would probably be worth another thousand years of war. Out of the thousand-plus taaklords, seconds, scribes, and Feegash diplomats and their attendants who had been in the Faverhend, fourteen were dead – most of them Feegash, who had not known of the presence of the tunnels, of course – the other the three scribes who had tried to drag the Feegash away from the doors and down to safety, and who had given their lives for their altruism. Had the Eastils known us better, they would not have tried fire. And we could have lost most of our taaklords in a single stroke.

Yet had we lost every single taaklord and every second, the Tonks and the Confederacy would have gone on; we would have kept fighting. This attack only proved again that the Eastils did not understand who we are. We are not sheep that follow a shepherd. We have no king who tells us what to do. We stand together, a hundred packs of wolves in Western Hyre alone,

uncounted clans spread across the whole of the world – where each pack accepts the temporary leadership of one of its number. If those who lead fall, others always step forward, ready to take their places.

We are Tonk. We know who we are, and who we are does not change, and it will not change. We cannot be conquered in our hearts, so we cannot be conquered in our lands. And this is something that fool king of the Eastils will never comprehend until the day we march into Fairpoint, which is his capitol city, and take his throne away from him.

I dropped out of the View when the word passed that our shift was done, and pulled off my mask and stretched. My body ached from tension, but my mind was at rest. We'd beaten the Eastils – beaten them well this time.

The major was waiting for us as we shook off the lingering tendrils of the View. "Bonus pay for all of you," he said. "Pick it up as you go out the door. You did good work today – you saved a lot of lives."

Not all of them, of course. It is ever painful to admit that we cannot save all of them.

He'd not been jesting about the bonus. The paymaster by the door gave me my regular pay in coin, and as my bonus, a stack of horse cash thick as my thumb. I checked the amount and signed on my line, then waited for Pada by the door; when she got through the line, I held up my wad of horse cash – tan paper printed with brown ink flecked with gold, that pictured a galloping horse on the front and the House of Aklintaak on the back. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

She grinned. "We can at least go look."

"We'll know by the crowd when we're a block away, if it's true."

I was right and I was wrong. We knew it was true when we were still two blocks from the horse market, because clusters and knots of citizens were hurrying there with pockets jangling. The Aklintaak traders had come to town, bringing with them the finest horses from the Aklintaak fjords, and from the Tonk breeders in far-off Tandinapolis. When they came to town, they frequently stopped by the post moneychanger and traded their horse cash for gold, since gold is a bit easier to spend locally unless you're in the service. Taakfolk are used to taking strange currency from us. Horse cash is good as gold, though. It's backed by Tonk horses, and those, frankly, are better than gold.

We were tired from a long shift, dark had fallen long ago and bed would be the only sensible destination, and even so, the horses called to us. I've heard all the jokes about how a horse is as good as a man to a Tonk girl; but if you remove the innuendo from that statement, it is not far from true. Even Tonks born in taaks instead of among the nomadic clans learn to ride when we learn to walk, and spend as many hours in the saddle as we can arrange from then on. Horsemasters are on an equal social standing with those of us in Magics, and just a step below the taaklords. A good horse breeder can afford to be picky when deciding whether to include the local taaklord on his dinner invitation list.

Pada and I wore our uniforms, having not taken even the little time we would have needed to go to the barracks to change. So the crowd opened up for us, and we found ourselves hanging off the paddock fence like children, watching as the handlers trotted the new arrivals past us to the stables.

They would not be for sale until the morrow, after they'd been fed and rested and groomed, but if we saw a horse we liked, we could put a marker and a sealed bid on it.

I wanted many of them. I could not in truth say that I needed a new saddle horse, but having one would give me a second that

I could alternate. I saw a fine dappled gray gelding that I fancied – he had a smooth gait and a good solid back, he carried his head up and danced a bit as he trotted. Beautiful.

And then there was the bay. Ah, Saints. She came from the Tand steppes, I would bet my life on it. Not a spot of white on her. Her coat gleamed like dark rubies beneath the torches, with the black of her muzzle, mane, tail, and legs sheened like good silk. She had the light bones, the quickness, the fire, the delicate stature of a pureblood Tand, and I'd bet her pedigree was twice as long as mine. Those Tand horses always look like they will blow away in the first hard wind, but there is no horse tougher. And rarely one faster. If I wanted to drop half a year's pay in a day, I might have her. But if I had her and didn't breed her, I'd be criminally remiss, and I couldn't afford to start breeding horses and still work with my jewelry.

She would no doubt go to a taaklord. No doubt. And he would rejoice in her, or be a fool.

But in my heart, I lusted after her, and promised myself that some day I would love to have a horse that fine.

Pada, too, watched her with yearning. "By Jostfar's blessing, I'd even bed Dosil again if he bought her for me," she said, and then looked at me sidelong and winced. "That is tawdry, isn't it?"

"You're getting better." I shook my head. "But for that horse, I might even bed Dosil, though he sounded like a dreadful lay."

Pada, bless her, got the joke of that and laughed. We shared a companionable moment watching a parade of good horses – palominos and duns and the oddly blocky spotted horses of the Velobrinan north, whose thin necks and heavy heads always bother me. The Velobrinans breed for the coat, and they end up with some hellish conformation because of it. But we have a

few in Beyltaak who like to play with the breed, doing crosses with good Tonk horses to see if they can get animals that have the Tonk soundness and the pretty spots. Those Velos were probably a special order.

" Going to put a bid on anything?" Pada asked.

" Maybe that first gray I saw," I told her. "I'm tired of using the unit's horses as backup for mine when we do long trips."

Pada nodded. "He had good legs. Nice flex in the pastern, good solid rump, hocks and fetlocks well put-together."

Pada can be interesting when she's talking about an interesting subject. "How about you?" I asked her.

" I'll put a bid on that bay mare," she said. "Might as well give everyone something to laugh about when they unseal it. But I already have two saddle horses, so I won't be doing a serious bid."

I swung down from the paddock and turned, and almost ran into a man dressed all in gray, in flowing silk breeches and a smocked velvet doublet studded with gray pearls.

A Feegash of some sort, though not a diplomat ... and in Beyltaak. And he had been standing there watching Pada and me. I hated him on sight, wished him gone, and could not find anywhere within me the momentary peace I'd held when speaking to that Feegash in the View. But that man had been a Feegash in someone else's taak. This one was polluting mine. He looked me up and down, and with his face expressionless and his voice neutral, said, "Pleasant even to you, soldier," and moved away from me.

" A dagger through the ribs would be a sweet solution to that problem, wouldn't it?" Pada muttered.

Sometimes I know why I like her.

We went into the stables and I looked over the gray. Felt his joints, checked his teeth, looked at his legs and hooves. He was all over sound, as sweet up close as he'd looked from a distance, and he was five years old, from a breed known for horses that lived into their mid-twenties and sometimes crept up on thirty. He was a big, solid lad, his withers chin-height to me – and I'm a tall woman. I prefer a big horse, to keep my stirrups up and my boots out of the weeds. Conventionals and Magics ride where there are no roads.

"He's sired by Braakwa's Ranger," the stablehand said, and I added an extra fifty horse cash to the price I could expect to pay for him. Well, I always could pick the good ones. "You looking, or bidding? Stablemaster will show you the papers if you're bidding."

"Bidding," I said. The gray wasn't the Tand mare, but he was superb.

I went to the stablemaster and looked over the horse's papers. Nice lines on both sides, but that Braakwa's Ranger sired him – that promised only good things. When I said, "I'll bid," the stablemaster took out his bid sheet and wrote my name and contact information on it. Then he gave me a numbered envelope. I got a low number, which was good; it meant if my bid was high bid, but matched another bid, I would probably win by virtue of being first to bid that amount. On the bid sheet, I wrote the bloodline name and tag number of the horse I wanted, and my bid – and I went a little high because I decided I really wanted that horse.

I closed the envelope and wrote my horse's tag number on the outside of it, the stablemaster sealed it with wax and I stamped the seal with my Shielder ring, and he dropped my envelope into the bid barrel.

And there he was again. The gray-clad Feegash.

"I want to put my bid on the horse in stall eight," he said,

speaking too loudly.

The stablemaster looked at him with distaste. "This is a closed market, sir," he said.

"I just saw you take her bid," the Feegash told him, pointing to me.

The stablemaster was patient, if cool. "I did not say this market was closed. I said it is a closed market. You're not Tonk, and you're not of this taak. Therefore, if you hope to buy a horse, you will have to go to the public market, which will be held a week Cladmusday in the public arena."

"Will the horse in stall eight be available then?"

The stablemaster didn't even have to look at his roster, though I ventured a peek out of the corner of my eye to see which horse he wanted. The bay Tand mare stood in eight, described by the gray lump of a Feegash as nothing more than 'the horse.' "No," the stablemaster said. "She's proscribed."

Which meant that her breeder had marked her for sale and ownership only to other Tonks. The best of our horses we keep to ourselves.

But the Feegash didn't know what a proscribed horse was, and the stablemaster explained it to him. He got an odd look on his face then; he stood very still, lost in thought. And then, without another word, he turned and walked away.

The stablemaster and I exchanged glances, and he said, "Foreigners."

I laughed.

Pada, true to her word, put her bid on the bay, and we headed back to our barracks. We would have to forego the Star's Rest; we would have to forego much of anything save a quick meal of the jerky and travelers' bread that we kept in our lockers for

such days as these.

" I do not suppose the major will put us back on regular hours yet," Pada said as we walked back to the post.

So she was back. Pada, stater of the obvious.

I was in too good a mood to be annoyed. "I imagine you're right," I told her.

We passed the Feegash just a little way from the stables. He had his hand on the arm of one of the richest importers in Beyltaak, and the two of them were staring into each other's eyes like lovers about to fall into bed, only from their expressions, I would guess they weren't going to make it to a bed, or even to a horizontal surface.

I elbowed Pada, and glanced over at the two of them, and she followed the direction of my gaze and shook her head. "Well, importers. What do you expect?" she said, and shrugged. "I heard DuSyttar was haatuuf. Never saw him with anyone – man or woman – before this, though."

Jostfar's Word permits all adult relationships equally. Saint Ethebet herself mentioned women loving women not as sisters and men loving men not as brothers in one of her Examples, and if my ever-tedious, fanatically Ethebettan colleague Vanim had been with me, he could have quoted her word for word. A handful of warriors in Magics take lovers of the same sex at one time or another, and a few do so exclusively, though it is something most of us have no interest in.

" I'd think he'd have better taste than some foreigner, though – even if he is an importer." I told her. "Doesn't truly fit what I've heard of him, either. And all I've ever heard of Dusyttar is that he's a stingy bastard who likes his gold better than life itself."

And then the two of them, not speaking, turned and walked back

to the stables, and I frowned.

" Which might have been wrong. Guess who thinks he just figured out a way to get himself a proscribed mare," I said.

" You don't think DuSyttar will really buy the horse, do you? Good Saint Minda, the Feegash could have a house on Short Street and silk curtains at every window for the price that horse will go for!" Her fists balled tight and she said, "And that Feegash bastard could own the house. He will be able to do nothing but ride the mare – that horse and her issue will belong to DuSyttar no matter how often the Feegash beds him."

A thought occurred to me and I laughed. "Perhaps DuSyttar hasn't told the Feegash that a Tonk cannot even give a proscribed horse as a gift to one of the moriiad." I laughed suddenly. "Or maybe DuSyttar has done the numbers and decided that buying a good horse and getting Feegash ass for free until the Feegash finds out the truth of the bargain is an equation he can get behind. So to speak."

Pada rolled her eyes and said, "By Jostfar, but you can be crude sometimes."

I laughed, and we put the couple out of our minds.

Check out the TALYN extras

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