

The Rose Sea: Chapter 1

By Holly Lisle

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First Captain Sir Bren Morkaarin, Hereditary Guardian of Timlake, yawned enormously, leaned back against his saddle and pulled his cloak over his legs. The deck was hard, but better than mud, which was something he'd slept in often enough on campaign; summer nights in the clear dry air of the central provinces were just cool enough to make sleep comfortable. The barge rocked, water chuckling against its bows. All three moons were up, silver coins in the sky – stately Falcon Father, Wolf Mother near Him and The Child moving below, in their long slow eternal dance. The river was high as a result – no worry of sandbars for a while. The towing cable curved away to the bank, black against the star-shot, moonlit water. The low-slung, pillar-legged shape of the twofork leaned into its harness with ponderous deliberation. The towing-beast was a formless lump in the darkness until it threw up its head and showed the Y-shaped horn on its nose; it trumpeted a complaint through thick, blubbery lips.

Bren stretched and shifted position on the hard deck; it was the twenty-first hour, an hour past sundown in summertime. Nobody was awake save the watchstander at the tiller, leaning silently on the long pole. *Easy night for him*, Bren thought, and grinned. Behind his barge came ten more, equally quiet, dark save for the great glass-globe lanterns that hung from the sternposts above the steering oar. Ten barges of men and women, pikes and halberds and muskets, barreled gunpowder and barreled salt pork and hardtack, tents and bandages and boot-grease and the boxed Shrine of the Three that moved with the standards. The whole of the XIXth Imperial Regiment of Foot was on the move from garrison duty in the foothills of the

North Shield Mountains to the seaport of Derkin in the far south, on the shores of the Shoban Yentrör, the Imperial Sea.

Well, not quite the whole of it, he thought sourly. Lord Colonel Feliz Gonstad, Overlord of Maldard and commander-in-chief of the XIXth, was not along for the trip. He'd gone ahead in a well-sprung carriage, with his hangers-on and aides, leaving Bren to do the work.

Nothing new in that.

Lights were coming up ahead, as the canal curved southward through the great riverine plain of the Olmya. Villagers with lanterns, moving like fireflies amid the apricot trees of an orchard, getting in the early harvest and not stopping for sundown. For a few minutes the strong sweet smell of fruit filled the air, and then they were through into an endless rustling of barley, stretching white beneath the moons and table-flat to the horizon. Nearly ready for the reapers.

Nothing but corpses to be harvested where we're going, he thought, his head nodding back against the saddle he was using as a pillow.

A woman came screaming at him out of darkness and dank heat, running toward him. Running toward him with a sword in her hand, plastered with mud and sweat and blood, looking over her shoulder down a pathway through jungle deep and rank and alien. Closer and he could see details, that she was young and dark and probably pretty when she wasn't gasping with effort and terrified. She had Tykissian markings like his on her face, the tattoos on each cheek and between the brows, despite her southron looks. His heart knew her, and his heart leapt in recognition – she shouted for him to beware – and he roared an answer.

His shout woke him.

Waking, the knowledge faded, slipped through the fingers of

his mind as he reached for it. So did the warning she shouted: only the desperate urgency in her voice remained.

“Not asleep, sor?” Sergeant Ddrad asked quietly.

“Dreaming,” Bren said shortly, wrapping his cloak about him.

After a moment: “Dreaming about women.”

The noncom grinned and sketched a half-salute. “Good luck then, sor,” he said, before moving back to his own bedroll.

Bren Morkaarin’s eyes stayed open, long after his sergeant went from quiet repose to deep, resounding snores. He did not believe that all dreams were omens. Most were the mind scratching itself, or the result of a bit of bad sausage or too much wine the night before.

He wasn’t sure about this one. The stink of hot jungle air hung in his nose even waking. And the girl...

He touched his markings, finger and thumb to the cheeks and both together between his brows, sending a wordless prayer to the Three Above.

Sleep, he told himself. The work of the day won’t wait on your dreams.

“Twenty-two hundred forty-six silver Crowns, drawn on Bemmah and Daughters of Derkin,” the Imperial agent said, handing over the elaborately sealed parchment.

Karah Grenlaarin snatched the rolled document from him and looked at it closely. The stamp on the seal read “Shemro IV, of the Strekkhylfa line, Emperor by Grace of the Three” with the signature of the fisc’s agent beneath it. *Good as a bag of silver coins, she thought. Better, since it’s easier to carry and harder to steal.*

“Done,” she said.

Godsall, but that was a lot of money. She'd gotten better than seven Crowns per horse for the whole herd – and back home on the ranch in Farbluffs County, one Crown was a good price for a saddle-broken four-year-old. Cash money especially. Prices had gone completely crazy with the war coming on.

Best go before the fisc comes to his senses she told herself. *Get out of this office and out of this city.*

Great-Uncle Jaiwan, the busybody, would get his report on conditions down here in Derkin, for what it was worth... and Ma and Pa would get the banker's draft. The Grenlaarins could finally get that dam built on Sungren Creek and refinish the roof – and pay off the back taxes besides.

“Father, Mother and Child witness it,” she said, spitting on her hand and holding it out in the traditional deal-sealing gesture of the horse trade.

She grinned when she saw the clerk swallow – Derkin bankers were a citified bunch. *Fit to be geldings*, she thought. *Not much else.*

The clerk slapped palms with her, then surreptitiously wiped his hand on the hem of his frippish overtunic. Karah pressed her lips together to keep from laughing out loud, tucked the document into an inside pocket of her jacket and clattered out the door.

Konzin wasn't waiting where he said he'd be. Karah frowned. That wasn't like him at all. She unhitched her horse, swung into her saddle and looked over the heads of the crowd for him. She thought she saw him and his horse partly hidden down a side alley, but there was no sense yelling – or chasing after him, either. A military unit of some sort was thundering toward her down the narrow street, drums and pipes making a terrible racket, and everyone around her clambered up onto the

raised walks and against the walls to get out of the way.

Karah urged Glorylad onto the walk, then watched with interest as ten hitch of big platter-hoofed draught horses lugged a cannon down the cobblestone streets. The gun was a breech-loader – a fancy new bit of craftwork her uncle had told her about. The big gun rumbled between the high, whitewashed walls on its way to the docks. The huge northern horses dripped sweat and tossed their heads as they bent to the traces, and the nail-studded wheels of the field carriage clattered counterpoint to the drums.

Karah squinted into the glare. Behind the cannon, pikemen marched five abreast, heads straight forward and chins jutting; sweat ran off their noses and flushed faces and matted their hair to their heads. They looked almost as uncomfortable as the horses.

Krevaulti yokels from up around Dire, she judged. She counted rows and guessed the length of the line; her estimate put their numbers at five-hundred strong. All in steel back-and-breastplates, helmets slung to their belts beside their swords, heavy packs on their backs.

Phew! Uncle would find that bit of gossip fascinating. He was always talking about what grand warriors the bloody mad Krevaulti mountaineers were. *Warriors and tinkers*, she thought.

In between revolts.

Not everybody in the New Empire of Tykis liked playing second flute to the Tykissians, her own people. The Krevaulti were about the only ones who tried to do anything serious about it, though.

The soldiers' long pikes swayed to the rip-thrip-rip of the drums and the whine of sackpipes. Sergeants with half-pikes marched at their sides, snapping orders to them and the

bystanders alike. The troops went by with a swing and the crash of hobnails, and then they were gone and the crowds closed in behind them.

Karah caught the flash of red out of the corner of her eye, and looked across the street. That was Konzin; Karah was almost certain. The man's back was to her and he was still dickering with one of the runty little Derkinoi over some piece of local tripe.

But he wore a red hat. She knew no one else who would taunt the gods in such outlandish garb. Karah cupped her hands to her mouth and bellowed over the noise of the crowds, "Heya! Konzin! I'm ready t'get outta here!"

Konzin's head jerked up and around, and his eyes narrowed. "A moment, missa!" He turned back to the Derkinoi. Karah waited, watching him above the bustling crowds in the street. She'd never known Konzin to be much of a shopper – she wondered what a seedy backstreet vendor had to offer that would interest him.

The chief herdsman on the Grenlaarin ranch finished his dicker, swung into his saddle, and trotted down the street toward Karah's inn without so much as looking back at her. Karah had to fight her way through the crowds and hurry her mount over the damned cobbled road to catch up with him. She sighed. Konzin had carried a burr under his skin the whole trip – this was the first time Karah had done the trading instead of him. He wasn't happy.

She knew it. But there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

At least he'd have to admit she got a good price.

She caught up with him. "I got seven Crowns a head for the herd."

He raised his eyebrows, then shrugged. "War prices," he said,

then looked straight ahead and kept riding.

Just be that way, then, Karah thought. *It's not like I don't know they're war prices – and not like I don't know you could have done the same thing.* She tried not to let him make her angry. He'd been in charge of trading the horses for the Grenlaarin ranch for a long time. She knew she had to understand it was hard for him to let go.

She and Konzin rode in silence. Karah forced herself not to rubberneck as they moved through Derkin's narrow back-streets, breasting the crowds like water at a river-crossing. Derkin was big, full of twisting streets and alleys, nearly all paved. A person could ride all day and barely cross from the north gate to the south, and many of the buildings were four and even five stories high, all stone or brick-built.

They crossed the narrow wood bridge over an evil-smelling canal, passed one of the Temples of the Three – small, since most of the locals were still heathen – and turned off into the walled courtyard that fronted Karah's inn.

Karah said, "Well, then. Have everyone here first light."

She touched cheeks and brow – a gesture of both courtesy and dismissal. Family dignity demanded that she stay under a roof in town. Konzin would be camping with the other herders out on the outskirts. "See you tomorrow."

"Missa," he said. He touched a finger to his brow and smiled – the first smile she'd seen on his face all day. Then he wheeled his horse around and cantered out of the courtyard.

For all that she liked Konzin, Karah was glad to see him go.

He'd been damned prickly the whole trip, and kept giving her funny looks. If he'd said she was too young to be put in charge one time, he'd said it a hundred.

She'd shown him, though.

She swung down from the saddle and stood gratefully in the shade of the arcade that ran around three sides of the little square. There was a fountain in the center, running into a stone horse trough and shaded by a jacaranda. She scooped her broad-brimmed leather hat full of water and dumped it over her head. Then she rested her hand for just an instant on Glorylad's breast, checking to be sure he wasn't overheated before she let him drink. Not that she'd run him hard, but Tykis' southernmost province was hotter than either of them were used to.

He was fine. She checked his hooves, then sat on the edge of the fountain and watched him drink. The ostler peered out of the stables, and she waved him over. "Brush 'im good," she told the man. "Rub him down. Don't feed him till you're done, and when you do, it's to be beanmash and oats!" The man listened and nodded but didn't speak. He was one of those piebald thralls from across the sea. Karah had never been easy trusting a horse to a thrall. They were fairly common along the coast, so there was no avoiding them – still, she had little faith in work done by those who weren't freemen.

She studied Glorylad's gait as the thrall led him off; he walked easy and straight. No limps, no fumbles. She smiled. He was the better of the two horses she'd ridden this trip, though Windrush was a solid mount, too. With a sigh, she turned, and went inside looking for food.

Thick adobe made the common-room of the inn almost cool, even in midafternoon. The room was nearly empty. In Karah's brief experience, it would stay that way until near-dark, when the locals left off work to gather and drink and carouse until the early hours of the morning. Karah tossed her gear down onto one of the adobe benches, adjusted the tattered rug that covered it, and settled at a table near the wall.

"What's going?" she shouted.

One of the inn's workers ambled in, scratching her bare stomach. "Roast a' mutton, sliced, wit' greens," she said, speaking Tykissian with a thick Derkinoi accent; Derkin Province had only been added to the New Empire a century or so ago. "Or yestidday's roast a' pork, minced inna pie. Wit' t'same greens."

"Today's wit' – I mean, with – wine and water," Karah said, flipping a tenth-Crown bronze coin. The local coffee smelled wonderful but they brewed it thick as stew and strong enough to melt a spoon. "Keep the change," she added expansively.

That speeded up the service considerably. Karah cut the too-sweet lowland wine with half water; more wine and less water was the rule down here in the coastal plains, unless you wanted a case of belly-fever or the runs and an expensive trip to the priest-healer. The mutton arrived, greasy and heavy with garlic and buried under tomatoes and onions.

Southron food would give me eternal heartburn, she thought, mopping the plate with a heel of loaf. With enough wine, even it wasn't unbearable, and now that everything was wrapped up – all but the boring journey home, anyway – she felt entitled. But she'd be glad to get back to real Tykissian cooking.

Twenty-two hundred Crowns, she told herself again, pouring another slug of wine-and-water into her earthenware mug. The few others in the common room were a mixed crew. Small dark locals, mostly.

She wished she were tall and blonde like the classic Tykissians, instead of short and ruddy. A bit less enthusiasm on her ancestors' parts, she thought, and a damnsight more selectivity, and she would have been as lithe and fair and thin as she deserved. She slugged back a large draught of the wine and scowled at no one in particular. The migrations were five hundred years past, so there was nobody to complain to.

Two of the Derkinoi scowled back. Probably resentful of the

upcoming war on their kinsmen in Tarin Tseld south over the Imperial Sea. Probably they'd rather be ruled from An Tiram than from Olmya.

Piss on them, then, she thought. Heretic-lovers.

Over in one corner, two enormously tall black men with glossy shaven heads and sweeping white robes played some foreign card game; Karah finally guessed them to be Shborin traders, who were notoriously standoffish. She glowered at them, as well.

The man at the next table was Tykissian. He had thinning red hair and freckles across his snub nose – she guessed him to be midding thirty. He dressed in citified clothes, but from the look of his hands, he'd done real work in his life. He was reading a little leather-bound book, peering down his nose at it through small spectacles and eating forkfuls of meat pie at the same time.

She noticed the man was wearing a ring with the totem-head of the Running Wolves. "Evening, lodge-brother," she said.

"Ah?" He looked over at her, and then past her, his expression puzzled. Karah flushed – she had been embarrassingly mistaken for a native several times since arriving in Derkin. But he focused on her again, and she saw his eyes flick from her ring to the three blue dots tattooed on her face.

He touched thumb and forefinger to his own cheek marks and both together between his brows. "Good evening to you, lodge-sister; the Three be with you." He started to turn back to his book, but Karah, lighthearted from the success of her hard-driven bargain, and a bit giddy from the wine, suddenly didn't want to eat her meal alone.

"So, lodge-brother, what do they call you... and what brings you to this hot, stinking *mourye*-hole of a city?" she asked the man.

He closed his book with a faint air of regret, leaving one finger between the pages to hold his place. "I am Amourgin Thurdhad, a law-speaker of Olmya. I am here on... business."

He had a capital-city accent, slightly pendantic to her ears; the profession explained the book, at least.

Karah felt bold and successful at that moment. If she could outbargain the Imperial fisc, surely she could hold her own in conversation with a scholar from the capital.

"Yah – business." She winked and raised her glass to him. "Then here's to business. Karah Grenlaarin."

The law-speaker smiled politely, and raised his glass just off the table in recognition of her gesture, but he didn't drink. *So maybe, she thought, his business hasn't been as successful as mine.*

Well, Pa was always on at her to talk about something besides horses and County gossip. If it wasn't business, maybe it could be books.

"Consolidated Analects of Mero Rimsin?" she read from the spine of his book. He studied her with increased interest – this time his expression showed both surprise and respect. The book was printed in Tarinese, the classical tongue of the Old Empire. Few could read the old tongue anymore.

"Relevant to a case," he replied, with a smile that was slightly shy. "You've read Rimsin?"

"Some of the poetry." She winced a bit, remembering; the poetry was bad enough. Three spare her the legal philosophy. Actually the tutor had to whale Rimsin into her with a willow-switch, she recalled. She picked up pitcher and plate and joined the law-speaker on his bench. "I can't drink this pitcher alone with a lodge brother here," she said.

Bren Morkaarín drew his sword and whirled it in a complicated figure-eight as he marched, before thrusting it straight up in salute.

“Eyes... *right!* ” he snapped. Drums and trumpets relayed the order.

Behind him eight hundred booted feet struck the earth together as the XIXth gave a wordless shout of hail to the high officers on the reviewing stand. Pikemen and halbediers in breastplate and tassets and helmet, musketeers in floppy hats and broad bandoliers with dangling wooden charge-tubes clicking as they marched, each screw-topped cylinder holding one shot worth of powder.

“Regiment –” The underofficers and noncoms echoed it to their units.

“Company –”

“Platoon –”

“Left... *face.*”

Snap-*stamp* as every soldier took a half-stride and turned ninety degrees to the left, marching on without breaking stride. What had been a column was now a broad line, eight files deep.

“Pikepoints... *down.*”

There was another deep shout as the sixteen-foot shafts swung down and bristled forward; first rank held low, next four at staggered heights, last three high but slanted forward. Out on the flanks of the formation the halbediers brought the broad chopping blades of their six-foot weapons forward as well, the bright morning sun glinting on the honed edges, the dagger points, and the curved spikes on the reverse sides.

“Sound *prepare to receive cavalry.*”

A complex ruffle of drums and scream of brass. Two more steps and the XIXth halted, marching in place. A war-shout as they stopped. The first rank of pikes squatted in unison, bracing the butts of their weapons in the earth and holding them slanting out. The second rank knelt behind them, and the rest stood, presenting a bristling row of points that any horse would turn from.

The musketeers halted as well, bringing their weapons to their lips and blowing sharply on their slowmatches. The first rank let the rests drop to the ground and levelled their muskets, the heavy barrels resting in the U-shaped fork at the top of each rest.

“Fire!” S-shaped serpentines snapped the burning end of the slowmatches down into the priming pans.

A long *baaaammmm* sound punched at Bren’s ears and face; billowing off-white smoke hid the front of the formation, smelling of brimstone.

“Countermarch! Reload in nine times. March!”

The musketeers who’d fired turned smartly and each paced back to the rear of their file to reload; the one behind stepped forward into first place, planted their rest, levelled their musket.

“Fire!”

Bren watched critically as the eight-trooper files of musketeers took turns to fire and retire, step forward and fire once more. *Smooth*, he thought. Of course, these were veterans, and he’d had the training of them for six years now – most of his military career, stuck off in the wilds doing garrison and patrol work. Plus enough action to see what they were made of; the North Shield foothills were imperfectly

pacified.

“To attention! Prepare for review!”

Weapons came upright, and troops braced. Sweat runneled their faces; down here on the coastal plain near Derkin it was *hot*. Particularly compared to the northern hill country they'd been stationed in for so long. Uncomfortable, and hellish if you were wearing armor and padding.

Lord Colonel Gonstad came up, in his showy horseman's three-quarter armor inlaid with silver and electrum, a light-cavalry cloak of leopardskin half-off one shoulder. Bren sneered behind an impassive, square-jawed face. His own simple coat of buffel leather studded with thousands of steel nailheads was a good deal more practical for an infantry officer.

The officer beside Gonstad probably thought so too. His own plain breastplate and open-faced helmet were as plain as Bren's. He held a command baton in one gloved hand, and the wrinkled planes of his face were covered with the elaborate tatoos of a man from Old Tykis, north of the Shield range.

Bren bowed and saluted with his blade. “Lord Colonel.” More deeply: “Count Mustermaster General Feughylfa.”

The older officer nodded. “Good drill, First Captain.”

Checking on soldiers' ability to march in step, maneuver to the word of command and use their weapons with skill was a primary reason for parading before the mustermaster.

Feughylfa looked critically at the ranks. The XIXth's equipment was worn but sound, weapons clean, armor carefully browned to a shade close to the dark-green uniform coats. Stepping closer he checked the sharpness of edges, ran a finger into the barrel of a musket, made sure each musketeer had bullet-mould and spare coils of slowmatch. A priest beside him checked the spells on the engraved copper amulet each

trooper wore on the left wrist – the most expensive piece of equipment, and about as vital as the weapons. It cost to maintain the combination of anti-fever, contraceptive and anti-curse enchantments, but without them you could lose half an army to dysentery in a month, not to mention pregnancy, the whorepox and an enemy's antiexplosive spells damping your powder.

Besides which, of course, it was impossible to take the amulet off – and a priest could track it down if the soldier deserted.

“All rifled muskets?” the old man asked.

“Yes sir; rifled, with the new pointed hollowbase bullets.”

The mustermaster nodded again. “Well, the XIXth're in better shape than some of the handless cows who've shown up from backcountry garrisons,” he said. “But the rolls carry you at six hundred muskets, three hundred pikes, one hundred halbediers, fifteen mounted scouts and couriers, and fifty skirmishers, with ancilliarities in proportion. You're two hundred down.”

Bren swallowed and looked straight ahead. That was the *other* reason for parading before the mustermaster; it showed whether the colonel of the regiment was carrying nonexistent troops on the rolls and pocketing their pay. Which was exactly what Gonstad had been doing, of course. Skirmishers and scouts commanded double pay, which was why the XIXth had none at all. “We've had casualties, sir,” Bren said doggedly. “Bandits attacked several convoys to the silver mines near Dire.”

Feughylfa snorted. “Well, get your recruits in order, then,” he said.

“Recruits?” Bren asked.

The wrinkled hawk-face turned towards him, pale eyes

narrowing. "You're authorized to offer a twenty-crown bonus for volunteers and conscript the eligible if that doesn't work," he snapped. "*That* went out to regimental commands with the general summons to the war-levy. What, didn't you get it?"

"N-" Bren began. *General summons war-levy?* he thought dazedly. That only happened in a *real* war.

"First Captain!" Gonstad broke in. "I'm shocked at your dereliction of duty!"

Bren swallowed again, feeling the blood of rage darken his cheeks. He had the true Tykissian coloring – ash-pale hair and fair skin. He knew the mustermaster would see him flush, and regretted that he could not hide his feelings better.

"My apologies, Lord Colonel," he said woodenly. *After this war I will sell out and move to the colonies,* he thought.

"Well, you can press recruits from around here," Gonstad said.

Bren saw glimmers of pink before his eyes; that was part of his heritage too, the rage that took him beyond himself. He breathed deeply, feeling his armor squeeze at him. Derkinoi Province was conquered land, recently conquered at that – only a century ago. Most of the natives were non-Tykissian, and of the Empire's subject races only Krevaulti were allowed to serve in arms rather than pay double tax. If he'd been told to make up the numbers back in the central provinces he could have gotten any number of sturdy, freeborn peasants; volunteers, even. How was he supposed to find a hundred Children of Falcon and Wolf *here*?

"See to it, Colonel Gonstad," Feughylfa said dryly. "See to it *personally*, because I hold you personally responsible. Dismissed."

Feughylfa was not blind, then – he saw whose armor bore gold inlay. A little of Bren's rage turned to sour amusement as

Gonstad paled. Enough remained to put a harsh edge in his voice as he turned on his heel and shouted orders.

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