

HALLOWED BLOOD  
BENEATH  
*dark*  
WATERS

EXCERPT

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Cover design by JV Arts

*For my children*

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*dark*  
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# 1

## EASTERN OCEAN GHOST MONTH, 1514 ES

THROUGH THE MIST and gloom, the steely cliffs of Hebiwa loomed in the distance, white-crested waves roiling below the steep plunge of stone. The island emerged from the greyness and crashing waves like the craggy back of a great sea serpent, the mantle of vegetation on the island's spine jutting like scales and spikes. The wretched kraken had led the fleet all the way to the other side of the world.

With the wind rumbling in his ears, Torin Maddox held tight to the gunwale as *Tempest Rover* lurched over another violent swell. He grimaced, stomach churning with every pitch and roll, his determination blazing ever stronger. Torin wanted to find and kill the beast and put an end to this months-long chase that was bleeding them dry.

Strands of Torin's ebony hair whipped about his face, long since escaped from the leather thong that had once tied it back. He paid no mind, scanning the choppy waters for that damned kraken, his

bright blue eyes narrowed against the cold ocean spray. It could emerge at any moment; they had to be ready.

Captain Tam Fraser whooped as *Tempest Rover* crested another violent wave. Controlling the steering oar at the stern, Tam navigated the longship over the roiling waters, expertly weaving through rugged stone islets, dodging rocky outcrops and sea stacks with ease. Weather-whipped crewmen lined the clinker-built longship, every one of them ruddy-faced and soaked to their bones, glaring into the fog and spray as eager as Torin to end the gruelling pursuit.

For almost six months, Torin, Tam and the *Tempest Rover* crew had been hunting the tentacled monster as part of a fleet formed by King Erik Stout-Heart of Vastrune. They embarked from the northern isle in the middle of spring, chasing the kraken from the Iss Gulf past the iceberg-strewn waters hemming the glacial Bleak Lands and through the unforgiving Kaldr Sea, skirting the Sirinean Empire's immense coastline with caution.

The seafarers kept the kraken in sight but were wary not to get too close to the merciless Empire for fear of coming head-to-head with their vast naval forces. They had already lost almost a quarter of the fleet along the way, the ships battered into splinters by the kraken's flailing club-ended tentacles or the thrashing bodies and gnashing maws of sea serpents. They couldn't risk losing the rest to the Sirinean Empire's cannons.

Two years ago, the kraken rose from the freezing waters of the northern continent of Jord, marking the beginning of its reign of terror. For months, the kraken wreaked havoc along the coasts of Fjordby, Ravenscar, Nordheim, and Vastrune, and all the little northern isles in between, before settling in the waters near Chillvein, one of Vastrune's many fishing towns. There, the

monster smashed fishing boats and devoured fishermen and their catches. When it ripped down the lighthouse from its perch on Dreadfall Spire, King Erik finally had enough. He sought to slay the beast, sending his entire navy to fight it, but over the months of their attempts, half of Vastrune's navy was destroyed.

Fjordby, Ravenscar, and Nordheim offered what few ships they could afford to spare, their own fleets devastated by the grotesquery. King Erik reached out to the kingdom of Albion, requesting ships to bulk up his forces against the kraken. Of their five-hundred strong navy, Albion provided a poxy fifty ships to help Vastrune, while one of Albion's neighbouring kingdoms, Aeferith, contributed another fifty, a third of the country's naval fleet.

The ships were welcomed, though King Erik was bitter that Albion offered up only the bare minimum. The king was forced to hire ships from independent captains, mercenaries, pirates and merchants alike, anyone brave enough to hunt the vicious kraken. He only hoped they would be enough.

The Sirinean Empire had a powerful fleet equipped with weapons that could destroy the kraken with ease, but King Erik Stout-Heart knew better than to become mixed up with them.

The kraken hunting fleet was made up of all kinds of ships, from whalers with mounted ballistae, single-masted cogs, galleys propelled by fifty oars apiece, and longships filled with battle-hardy warriors like *Tempest Rover*. Commanding the fleet on King Erik's behalf was his eldest son, twenty-five-year-old Prince Dagr, chomping at the bit for the opportunity to prove himself.

There wasn't much that bothered Torin Maddox, but the ocean made him sick to his stomach. He was in Albion when he heard about Vastrune's need for more forces, and the wages King Erik

was willing to pay each warrior. Torin loathed sailing, but the sum that King Erik was offering was too much to turn down. Swallowing his dread, Torin bought passage aboard one of the ships headed to Freystad, the capital of Vastrune.

The seven years he'd spent as a jaeger, an independent monster hunter, and the fifteen years before that as a mercenary in the Middenheim Guard, helped Torin negotiate a tidy sum of ten silver a month, almost the same wages paid to an experienced ship captain like Tam. With pay agreed upon, King Erik assigned Torin a ship to sail on.

*Had to be Tam's fucking longship ... I should've asked for double.* Torin thought angrily, the cold winds pounding his soaking face and hands, his belly growling. The jaeger had no intention of eating any of Tam's shitty provisions until he was dizzy with hunger.

Captain Tam Fraser had signed his contract with the Vastrune king just days before the jaeger's arrival. *Tempest Rover* was hired for five gold every three months with crew wages of thirty bronze per man. *Tempest Rover* was even equipped with a pair of shiny new ballistae to fight the kraken.

"Object portside!" The lookout's voice cut through the howling wind and crashing waves.

Every head turned, ears sharp, crew squinting through the mist and spray. Torin shielded his eyes with his calloused hand. Chewing his bottom lip, he scrutinised every inch of the roiling ocean to his left. At first, he could see nothing but black waves, streaks of white foam, and jagged rocks – then he spotted it.

The clubbed end of a long blue-black tentacle surged from the waters five hundred metres ahead of *Tempest Rover*. It twisted and writhed in the air, reaching, stretching, flexing.

"Hold on, lads! The bastard's rising!" Tam boomed.

With a deafening roar, the ocean swelled and vomited up the grotesquery. The kraken's mantle broke the surface, fat, smooth and impossibly huge, like a floating island risen from the water's depths, sending rings of waves crashing against the fleet. Water hissed as it gushed over decks and rushed through scuppers, swirling in the turbulent wake.

Tam barked orders over the maelstrom, and his crew readily obeyed, rowing against the raging waters towards the monstrous beast. Cogs, galleons, and whalers coursed past them, much faster and more powerful than *Tempest Rover*. With his heart pounding in his throat, Torin watched the ships soar ahead, his grip tightening around his lance.

"Fuck!" Torin hissed as more lashing arms and tentacles shot up from the waters.

Iron chains with barbed hooks exploded from ballistae. Some whistled past the writhing tentacles while other projectiles punctured its flesh. Blue blood spurted from the kraken's wounds, but the grotesquery showed no signs of slowing down. Harpoon lines connected the kraken to the whaling ships, the ropes as tight as garrottes.

Weighted drogues and harpoons would sap the kraken of its strength, while nets and grappling hooks tangled its limbs, keeping it from retreating beneath the waves. If the grotesquery didn't die from its wounds or from exhaustion, the fleet would drag it out the waters and beach it on a nearby coastline to suffocate. The shale and rock-strewn shores of Hebiwa were just as good a place for the monster to die as the black sands of Vastrune or the pebble beaches of Albion.

The kraken's giant yellow eyes blazed through the tempest. It swung its powerful arms and brought them down on nearby

vessels, smashing them to splinters, scattering their injured and dead. Even the two hundred-ton ships were no match for the fierce grotesquery.

Ever persistent and determined, the sailors held fast, shooting missiles at the monster, fighting to reel in the ones that missed. The kraken thrashed, dragging ships across the ocean by their lines and flinging them like toys. Noise boomed all around in a chorus of chaos. Ballistae exploded, projectiles hissed through the air, stressed timber cracked, and decking groaned as it splintered. Rigging, chains, and loose gear clanged, rattled, and thrashed wildly in the strong winds, lines screeching. Heavy cargo broke free and slammed against the bulkheads in a frantic rhythm of thudding and pounding and turmoil.

*Boom, boom, boom!*

More chains and harpoons soared from ballistae. The kraken writhed and flailed, striking the waters and sending massive swells at the fleet. The vessels crested the giant waves and bore down on the monster, driving it towards the shores of Hebiwa.

Torin and the *Tempest Rover* crew clung to whatever was in reach – the mast, the gunwales, the benches lining both sides of the ship – bracing against the turbulent swells. An unlucky few were thrown about *Tempest Rover* like dolls, crashing into benches and crewmates alike.

Torin threw out a hand just in time to grab Kylan Gormson as he tumbled passed him, almost flying over the gunwales as *Tempest Rover* listed and threatened to capsize. White-faced and panting for dear life, Kylan nodded his appreciation to Torin, clinging to the nearest bench, trembling.

The coast of Hebiwa wasn't far. If the remaining ships could drive the kraken to the shallow waters near the shore, they might

have a chance to beat it. With the wind hammering down on the longship, the mighty beast loomed above them, its tentacles and arms thrashing, whale lines flaying the air like whips.

“Ready the ballistae! We’re getting closer!” Tam bellowed.

Portside at the bow, Torin was nearest the grotesquery. It continued to destroy the fleet as the ships forced the monster towards Hebiwa. The kraken lashed out wildly, trying to claw its way back to the open sea, its bloodcurdling shrieks tearing through the air.

The jaeger watched in horror as the kraken wound a massive, club-ended arm around Prince Dagr’s longship. The beast lifted it into the air, squeezing tight. The wooden planks of the ship shrieked over the din of the waves and chaos, its lines lashing and tangling into knots. With a bellow like thunder, the kraken crushed the ship in two, sending men and wreckage plunging into the angry waters.

Rubble pounded *Tempest Rover’s* hull. A blanket of corpses and debris covered the surface of the water as far as the crew could see. Guts and limbs floated on the dark, blood-clouded waters, a blanket of gore, bulging eyes and gaping mouths, horror fixed to dead faces. Some of the dead seafarers were impaled on shards of the ships they had been sailing on, others on their own harpoons and lances. The drowned were sinking.

*Fifty metres away—*

“Fucking closer, damn it!” Torin bellowed.

At that moment, Torin didn’t give a shit about beaching the bastard. He was there to kill it and that’s what he intended to do.

*Thirty metres—*

“Fire!” Tam boomed.

Bolts burst from *Tempest Rover's* ballistae, hurtling towards the kraken. Blue blood spurted from the beast as the barbs sunk deep.

“Reload!”

*Fifteen metres—*

*Tempest Rover* came to a roaring halt. The wind was caught in the sail, but the ship didn't move. The steering oar shuddered, and the gunwales shook inexplicably in the darkness. Crewman dashed up and down the deck to investigate, holding lanterns out and shining them on the water as the longship pitched in the waves. A tentacle longer than the hull of a galleon lashed at the steering oar, crunching it with its mighty muscles.

“Get that fucking thing off my ship!” Captain Tam snarled.

The kraken lashed one of its club-ended tentacles around *Tempest Rover's* prow. One swift tug from the monster's great arm sent *Tempest Rover* lurching towards the kraken. Bracing one foot against the bench, Torin tore his dagger from its sheath with his right hand, a hand-hook clasped in his left, a whaling lance strapped to his back. He leered through the rain and spray, waiting for his moment.

*Five metres—*

“Don't be fucking stupid!” Tam bellowed from the stern.

Torin smirked but didn't bother to turn his head and acknowledge him. Tam had a sixth sense when it came to Torin and trouble, but Torin didn't pay any mind to the grizzly old sod.

“No, Torin! Get down!”

The jaeger leapt from the longship, launching himself into the frigid air. With the wind and spray thrashing his skin and loose locks of hair whipping about his head, Torin soared towards the kraken, hook raised high, dagger ready, his startlingly blue eyes glinting with bloodthirst and excitement.

As he collided with the kraken's mantle, the hook and dagger plunged into its thick, slippery hide. Projectiles fired from ships on the opposite side, drawing the kraken's attention away from the jaeger, but for how long?

If the kraken was anything like its cousin, the squid, Torin was only a few metres away from the monster's gills – that was as far as he needed to go. Dangling between his dagger and hand-hook, Torin swung across the mantle, moving towards where he believed the gills might be. He couldn't risk climbing into the mantle cavity from the opening where the kraken's head and legs protruded – he might get trapped. The gills were a safer bet.

The monster shrieked with every puncture, arms flailing, seawater spraying Torin as hard as gravel. Adrenaline thrummed in Torin's veins, silencing the strain of his muscles. With a brutal stroke, Torin carved a deep gash in the grotesquery's thick hide. The kraken shrieked, the noise ear-shattering. It lashed at Torin, but bolts shot from *Tempest Rover's* crossbows stopped the grotesquery from knocking him off. Torin wrenched the gap wider and forced himself inside, wedging his feet between the countless filaments of one gill on the side of the kraken's mantle, gripping the hand-hook tight.

If the kraken was anything like a squid, it would have three hearts located behind its gills. Clutching the hand-hook for dear life, Torin shoved his dagger into his belt sheath before yanking the whaling lance from his back. With a roar, Torin plunged the lance into the kraken's mantle one-handed, hoping his aim found the monster's heart and not an ink sack.

Pain exploded in Torin's ribs as the kraken's tentacle slammed into him. It wound around the jaeger faster than he could react,

wrenching him out of the wound he'd created in the kraken's mantle.

Torin barely had time to curse before the world was spinning, his breath caught in his chest. He flew across the waters, striking the surface with a bone-crushing crash. The jaeger plummeted beneath the waters, swallowed by cold, crushing darkness.

## 2

THE JAEGER GROANED, his throat raw and body aching. It took a few moments for Torin to register the waves sloshing over his legs, and the balmy breeze dancing in his matted hair. How long had he been lying on the beach? The storm had broken, replaced by bright sunlight and warmth. Last he remembered, Torin was launched into the ocean by the kraken, sinking into the dark depths of the unforgiving waves. Now he was lying on a shingle and scree coastline, his clothes filthy and stiff, crusted with salt from the seawater.

As though the very thought summoned it, Torin was hit by the overwhelming stench of rotten fish and brine. Thoroughly roused from unconsciousness now, Torin opened his bleary eyes to find the giant, rotting carcass of the kraken only a few metres from him, the sagging, ragged socket of its big, dead eye staring at him.

Seabirds and crabs were picking at the corpse, gulls squabbling over shreds of the kraken's flesh. A large albatross, mid-feast,

flicked a wary glance at Torin before tearing a rubbery strip from a tentacle. Harpoons, chains, and barbs protruded from the dead monster's mantle. The corpse must've been ashore for a couple of days to be in this state of decomposition, but the weapons indicated that no one had discovered them yet, the projectiles would've been stolen if they had. Torin glanced down, relieved to see his own dagger still in its sheath, strapped to his left thigh.

Groaning and wrinkling his nose at the corpse, Torin forced himself to his feet, his head spinning, muscles stiff and sizzling with every movement. Wiping the dried sea salt from his face on his sleeve, Torin's bright blue gaze travelled over the bodies and wreckage littering the stony coastline.

With a heavy sigh, Torin staggered over to the nearest body. He approached each man strewn across the shore, crouching achingly beside them, shaking their shoulders to confirm whether they were dead or not, holding his fingers beneath their nostrils testing for breath. Torin tried to speak, to urge them to wake, but his throat was too raw to utter more than a few hoarse words.

Some of the bodies were so mangled or sprawled in such unnatural positions that Torin didn't need to check to know they were dead.

Of the twenty men that Torin found on the small stretch of coastline, seven were alive, in varying degrees of wellness. Only three of the survivors were able to walk unassisted.

"Find a village and get help." Torin rasped to the least injured men. "Have them ready a healer."

The three nodded and grunted their agreement before stumbling along the base of the cliff in search of an incline that led to the top. The group had washed up on a narrow coastline at the foot of a sheer cliff. Were the storm still raging, Torin knew

the waves would be beating down on this rock-strewn coastline and all of them would have drowned. If Torin was a religious man, he would say it was a blessing from any one of the countless deities that the weather was fair, giving the eight of them a chance to live – but he wasn't.

At last, the trio of bloodied, broken survivors disappeared up a narrow slant between some rocky outcrops. They staggered up the steep incline cautiously, gripping clumps of spiky marram grass to steady themselves until they managed to safely reach the top.

Thankfully it didn't take them long to find help. What seemed to be an entire village appeared atop the cliff upon their return. Curious faces stared down at the scene of rubble and corpses. Shabbily dressed boys as young as ten to ancient old men, straggly and leathery, as wrinkled and gnarled as the bark of a tree trunk, scrambled down the cliffside towards Torin and the other survivors, calling to them in Hebiwan.

Despite being half-Hebiwan himself, Torin couldn't speak more than a handful of phrases in the language – stutteringly at that. Torin's mother-tongue was Sirinese, the common tongue and trade language of the world of Bodan. The only other language Torin was fluent in was Nord, the dialect of the northern countries, due to growing up on the isle of Rim with the Middenheim Guard from the age of ten. Nord wouldn't help the jaeger in Hebiwa.

An image of his beloved Celia's heart-shaped face materialised suddenly in Torin's mind, her waist-length brown hair cascading around her lovely countenance in dark tousled waves. Her luscious full-lipped mouth curved in a wide, radiant grin, sparkling just as brightly as her honey brown eyes. Celia could speak

Hebiwan. Celia could speak a list of languages as long as Torin's arm. Celia, who had been born in the Velvet Pearl brothel and never left it, who hadn't stepped foot outside of the wayside town of Wildemaw, could speak more languages than Torin could count, yet *he* was the one traipsing across the world while Celia – intelligent, sweet, beautiful Celia! – was trapped in that damn brothel, the world nothing but a story recounted to her by patrons, travellers, and Torin.

With the kraken dead, Torin could finally return to his darling Celia. It had been too long since he'd lain in her arms. He was excited to return to her with a bag full of silver from King Erik. Maybe with finances secured, he could convince Celia to finally marry him and begin a new life far away from Wildemaw ...

"You're okay?" A villager asked in broken Sirinese.

"Mhmm, yes," Torin rasped, nodding.

The villager motioned the jaeger to follow him.

It was too dangerous to carry the injured and dead up the narrow, slanting path along the sheer face of the cliff. Instead, the villagers worked diligently crafting two stretchers out of wooden planks and rope while others worked on a pair of pulley systems near the edge of the clifftop. It took hours for them to gather the required items and build it all, but, at last, the first stretcher was lowered to the bottom of the cliff. An injured crewman was strapped to it with ropes across his waist and legs before being carefully towed up to the top.

It was harrowing to watch the slow ascent of the stretcher. With painstaking care not to rock it as they hauled it up, the villagers managed to safely retrieve the injured man, carefully untying him and whisking him out of sight from those below.

With all the injured safely at the top of the cliff, their wounds being tended to by a team of fishermen's wives, the dead were now being gathered. For hours, the villagers trawled the shore in search of bodies, gathering them at the foot of the cliff path. Torin winced and hissed through his teeth, pain radiating through him while he carried corpses to the bottom of the path, refusing to let his wounds hold him back from helping.

“Torin! You absolute bastard! Up here!”

The voice was unmistakable: soft and smooth but possessing the mildly nasal tone and relaxed speech rate of a typical Boodjar accent, Tam was calling to him. Torin peered upwards, cupping his hand around his eyes to block out the glaring sun. Despite them being so high up, Torin's remarkably keen eyesight allowed him to discern the figures with ease. Sure enough, there was Captain Tam Fraser waving down at him. The jaeger was relieved to hear a familiar voice – even if it was Tam's.

Torin's eyes moved to the huge man and his retinue of armoured guards appearing on horseback behind Tam. The Hebiwan warrior was broad and impossibly tall, his steely gaze fixed on the shore as he brought his silver horse to a stop beside Tam.

Hayate Nakaya, Lord of Riften.

Still and daunting, the lord's broad, towering form was clad in rich ebony robes, a wide silver belt around his waist, his ink black boots gleaming in the sunlight, and a long, thin sword sheathed on either side of him. His sleek white hair was drawn back in a low ponytail, but the lengths whipped behind him on the wind, glimmering silver strands dancing in the bright light. Despite his age, Lord Riften bore himself with the unshakable poise of one who had never tasted defeat.

Even from this distance, Torin could tell he was as fearsome and menacing as his reputation described. Torin had never met Hayate Nakaya, but he had heard much about him over the handful of times he'd visited Hebiwa in his life. The great city of Riften was located in the northernmost point of Hebiwa, far away from the capital in the south-western corner of the serpentine isle.

Rumours of Hayate Nakaya were whispered across the country. Torin had heard much about the Lord of Riften, the bastard son of the Hebiwan God of War, the favoured weapon of the Hebiwan emperor, Chikara ... Seeing Lord Riften with his own eyes, Torin wasn't so sure that the tales were as baseless as he had previously believed.

If the sight of Lord Riften didn't send ripples of unease skittering through him, Torin would've laughed at the sight of Tam, no small man in his own right, dwarfed by the Hebiwan lord. Realisation struck and Torin's stomach turned as he comprehended just how big that meant Lord Riften was.

Tam and Lord Riften's differences didn't stop at their height. In contrast to Lord Riften's stoic, elegant, and wealthy appearance, Tam, beaming down at Torin, was wearing his aged, dark brown leather jerkin atop a creased off-white shirt along with worn black trousers and unpolished boots. Tam looked as though he, too, had been dragged out of the sea just hours ago. Locks of Tam's dirty-blond hair blustered about his sun-scorched face, half-bound back with a leather thong, and his wiry, grey-streaked beard was unkempt and untamed.

Ever the ragged ship captain, Tam obviously didn't think to dress in finer clothing considering his present company, but that was Tam in a nutshell. Tam didn't pay any mind to other's opinions on his appearance or actions. The old mercenary owed

fealty to no man but his crew, and thus lived to his heart's content, lordless and wild and free, changing himself for no one. That confident insouciance might've seemed like an admirable trait, but Torin knew first hand that Tam was just a stubborn old bastard who did things his way or not at all.

Lord Riften said something to Tam, who nodded in return before making his way down the rocky path towards Torin. Whooping and laughing, Tam skidded down the cliffside and strode over to Torin.

"Found you, ya daft bastard! We thought you'd killed yourself!" Tam exclaimed, his crooked smile bright and beaming. "Who in their right mind jumps off a ship onto a fucking *kraken*?"

"Nice to see you, too." Torin winced as Tam clapped him cheerfully on the shoulder.

"Bet you're not gonna do that again in a hurry."

"Was hardly the worst thing I've ever done." Torin grumbled through gritted teeth.

"Hardly the stupidest thing either." Tam sneered. "Come on, you should meet Lord Riften. Luckily for you, we've already smoothed everything over with the big fella and proved we're not an invading army from the west, so he's welcomed us here as guests. Be on your best behaviour, yeah?"

Torin grunted in reply.

"Lord Riften looks scary, but he's a good man. Don't cross him, and don't fuck around while you're here. He's not the type you want to be enemies with."

"I'll bear that in mind."

"Atta boy, Torin." Tam continued brightly. "It took us three days to find you. Dunno how long you've been washed up here for, but at least you're not dead. Try to keep it that way, yeah?"

“Are there many others dead or missing?”

“Too many,” Tam’s chipper tone faltered. “Far too fucking many.”

The pair made their way up the treacherous path, gripping onto spiky tufts of marram grass protruding from ridges to keep their footing. Torin silently blundered along behind Tam, the Boodjaran’s statement hitting him like a ton of bricks. Had any of *Tempest Rover*’s crewmen fallen in the fray? Torin had seen many of the fleet ships destroyed by the kraken’s flailing arms, most of them strangers, but the men on *Tempest Rover* – so many faces from his childhood ... Were any of them dead?

Torin shook his head, rolled his chapped lips together, and focussed on moving one aching foot in front of the other. He would find out soon enough, good news or bad.

The clifftop was teeming with activity. Villagers worked diligently alongside the force of newly arrived warriors. Lord Riften’s men were dressed in identical ebony robes with long thin blades sheathed at their hips.

Tam pointed out Lord Riften’s sons, Takeru and Yuta Nakaya. Both young men were tall and strong, lean in comparison to their father’s burly build, but equally as elegant and handsome as him. Takeru’s long, silky black hair was pulled back in a ponytail while Yuta’s hair was short and dishevelled. Where Takeru was encouraging all around him, helping the injured from the stretchers, a bright light in such a dark situation, Yuta was quiet and visibly worried, his lips drawn in tight line as he helped carry the dead to the wagon.

Women who weren’t tending to the injured were clutching their children, standing with the elderly eyeing the commotion from afar. A crowd of warriors and village men carefully lower another

stretcher to the group below, ready to load with dead. At the top, the injured were being helped into a wagon pulled by a pair of fine chestnut-brown draughthorse mares, while the dead were respectfully loaded into another.

“We should be helping.” Torin shot Tam a pointed glance.

“First Lord Riften.” Tam nodded at the giant foreboding form not far from them.

The Hebiwan lord was just as intimidating up-close as he was from a distance. Lord Riften surveyed the jaeger grimly, deep lines set in his brow, around the severe line of his mouth, and at the corners of his cold smoke grey eyes. There were only a few stubborn black strands streaking his sleek white hair. The warrior was easily in his sixties, perhaps even older, but his size and the bulk of his muscles visible even beneath his sumptuous flowing robes proved that he was a force to be reckoned with.

It was laughable that Lord Riften was surrounded by a retainer, the battle-hardened warriors so much smaller physically than the lord they were there to protect. Just by the sight of Lord Riften, Torin reckoned the old lord could wipe out the entire group of warriors on his own with ease. But what did Torin expect from the alleged bastard of a war god?

“You’re the missing jaeger, Torin Maddox?”

Lord Riften’s deep voice was low and surprisingly smooth considering his intimidating appearance. Torin had expected Lord Riften’s voice to be gruff and gravelly, not silky and dulcet.

“Yes, my Lord.” Torin gave the lord a short bow.

“I hear you cast the killing blow.”

“I can’t be sure. I lost consciousness when it flung me into the waters after I struck it.”

Tam snorted.

“He’s being humble. He sliced the thing open and stabbed it dead, we all saw it.” Tam smirked.

Lord Riften nodded sharply.

“Get on the wagon with the other survivors, Maddox. They’ll bring you to the infirmary at Mournhold Castle. My healers will tend to your wounds.”

With that, Lord Riften tugged on the rein and nudged his heel into his horse’s flank. The great silver horse trotted through the crowd before breaking into a gallop the moment the way was clear, Lord Riften’s retainer following close behind.

“Atta boy, Torin. That didn’t hurt now, did it?” Tam grinned.

Torin wrinkled his nose, turned on his heel, and joined Yuta Nakaya moving the dead from the stretchers onto the wagon.

\*

“WELCOME TO RIFTEN.”

The wagon rumbled up the path that wound along the side of Windcrest Peak. It had taken hours to haul the dead up from the bottom of the cliff, the process hastened by the help of the warriors. The moment the last body had been retrieved, Torin finally allowed himself to be ushered onto a wagon. Tam slid in beside him, much to Torin’s frustration. His relief to hear a familiar voice on the beach had worn off long ago.

Despite Lord Riften’s instruction, Torin had refused to leave with the injured, choosing to stay and help recover the dead before the tide came in. But for a few cuts, bruises, and aching muscles, Torin was fine, his body healing swiftly with every passing moment. Somehow the jaeger had managed to come out remarkably unscathed for the most part, evading broken bones

unlike his comrades. He didn't need to be rushed to the infirmary like the others.

The journey to Mournhold Castle, Lord Riften's abode, was long but uneventful. Riften was two hours travel from where Torin and the others had washed up. All the villagers who had helped them up the cliffside were the inhabitants of a small fishing community nearby, the only community within an hour's walk of where Torin and the others had appeared.

Winding around the final bend, the city of Riften loomed ahead of them on the top of the Peak, the city's anterior surrounded by a thick stone wall. Backed against the cliff edge, there was no need for the city to possess a rear wall. After a brief stop at the front entrance, the entourage of warriors and dead were given entry into the city. A litany of booms sounded from the great wooden doors before they slowly creaked open.

Torin admired the charming vernacular buildings neatly situated around Riften in tidy rows, ribbons of smoke creeping through the reeds of thatched rooves. Curious faces peered at the parade of warriors and the wagons of dead from half-opened sliding doors. Some townspeople even stepped out onto their verandas to stare shamelessly at the procession.

Riften's buildings and districts were meticulously organised by rank and occupation; every domain in Hebiwa followed the same structured design. The city's merchants and artisans were situated in specially designated areas, while the religious and entertainment districts were located on the outskirts of the city. Warriors and guards lived in the town surrounding the castle, with the higher ranked officers living closest to the castle in much smaller but equally elegant estates.

The troupe stopped and started at a complex system of gates and courtyards, passing through a number of wooden palisades, baileys, and stone walls with ports to shoot arrows from. They crossed a moat before reaching the castle gatehouse. Torin was impressed by how massively protected Mournhold Castle was. It was practically impregnable! Weaving through the numerous walls and palisades would surely confuse an invading force. Torin wondered if the complex design was to protect the precious meteorite said to be beneath the castle.

Lord Riften's expansive estate was rumoured to sit upon the largest deposit of meteoric iron in the known world. It was said that a meteor struck the world millennia ago, burying into the earth. As the landscape changed over time and people began mining for ore, the meteor became accessible.

Allegedly, when crafted into a sword, the meteoric iron was fearsomely strong. Rumour said that a faction of shamans mined and smithed the meteoric iron using sacred tools. With their tools, chants and rituals, the shamans were said to imbue the meteoric weapons with a special element harnessed from the mountain of Windcrest Peak itself, giving the weapons the ability to absorb mana from the user's foe and strengthen the user instead. The name of the element was a secret, as were the names of the shamans and their order.

A famously difficult man, Lord Riften refused to sell the iron despite how rich it could make him, a vow all rulers of Riften were obligated to make and maintain. Lord Riften was the only man in Bodan to own a blade imbued with the element. The blade had been passed down through generations, said to be inherited originally from the God of War, the first owner of the sword – and, allegedly, Lord Riften's father.

“You really believe all that?” Torin frowned, dubious of the fantastic tale Tam was regaling him.

“Sure, why not?” Tam winked.

The wagons passed through a final set of giant heavy wooden gates studded with iron. Hauled open by a team of warriors, the gates laboured open just wide enough to allow them through, revealing Mournhold Castle. Constructed of wood and stone and covered in white plaster to defend against fire, the fortress loomed ahead of them, as refined and intimidating as its owner.

The lavish, sprawling residence was made up of a variety of structures connected by numerous breezeways and corridors in a U-shape around a stunning formal garden and a huge, glistening pond. The largest of the buildings (second only to the castle tower) was the main hall from which the other halls and annexes branched off. These buildings included various reception rooms, Lord Riften’s offices where all official and administrative business was held, the living quarters of the domain lord’s family, as well as the kitchen, a prayer room, the library, the armoury, the garrison, and noble guest quarters.

The most eye-catching building in the compound was the castle tower, the elegant, elaborately decorated multi-tiered keep with curved, tiled rooves. Positioned at the back of the complex, it loomed over the rest of the compound and the town below. It was a symbol of Riften’s power, functioning as command post during times of war, and in its basement was a prison.

Not connected to the castle were the lavatories, bathhouses, infirmary, two storehouses, stables, a barn and pen where goats bleated noisily, a henhouse, and a vast vegetable garden. A few enchanting pavilions peeked out from the luscious foliage of cherry blossom, ginkgo and palmate maple trees, embraced by

flowering shrubs and charming flowers. Some were positioned in a shady spot gazing over the pond, magical-looking wooden garden rooms where one could snatch a moments peace.

Despite his protests, Torin was taken to the infirmary for an examination. Torin was stripped entirely but for a short swath of fabric to wrap around his waist before the healers whisked about him, revealing his immense, tattooed form in its entirety. The healers were unperturbed by the bodysuit of tattoos, instead they marvelled in Hebiwan and broken Sirinese at his minimal injuries considering all that had transpired.

After the examination, the healers called servants to bring in basins filled with boiling water, and soap. The healers had the servants scrub Torin from head to toe and wash his hair, his scalp crusted with sand and salty flakes of dried seawater. Deemed satisfactorily clean, the healers smeared medical salves over Torin's injuries and dressed the more severe wounds in clean, fresh white bandages.

Torin was given clean clothes and straw slippers to wear: a thin black jacket that knotted shut at his side which he tucked into a pair of loose grey trousers that were tied closed with a small, elegant bow. Over the jacket, Torin pulled on a black robe that was loose and stopped midway down his thigh.

Feeling refreshed already, Torin quietly followed a servant along a neat stone path across the immaculately manicured courtyard and up the stairs to the main hall of the castle complex. Tables and benches had been brought in and lined the centre of the room in tidy rows, where the survivors of the kraken hunt were sitting. Many were dressed in their regular clothes, but a lot were wearing Hebiwan garments identical to Torin's.

Torin thanked the servant in Hebiwan, (one of the few phrases he could remember), before striding through the hall. Torin paused in front of the main table and politely bowed to Lord Riften and the others sitting with him, his family.

Lady Riften was sitting on Lord Riften's right side. She caught Torin's eye: she wasn't Hebiwan. Maybe she was from Albion, Aeferith, Vastrune, Boodjar, or the Sirinean Empire, but she was certainly not from Hebiwa. Lady Riften gave him a small, polite smile. Torin bowed politely before striding through the hall in the direction of *Tempest Rover's* crew.

Reunited, Torin inspected every face and greeted every man, relieved to discover that none had been lost, though many of them were sporting blackeyes, bruises, cuts, and a few broken limbs. They shifted along the bench to give Torin a place to sit, far down the table from Tam.

"It honours me to welcome you all to Riften." Lord Riften's eyes moved slowly over the faces of the survivors. "Krakens once thrived in the Eastern Sea. They tormented Hebiwa, killed our fisherman, sea merchants, and sailors ... They disrupted our sea trade, destroyed our ships, and consumed so much sea life that many of the fishing villages of Hebiwa were left starving. Even the bigger cities inland felt the pangs of hunger! The situation became so dire that the Emperor of Hebiwa ordered all thirteen Domain Lords to gather their fleets and slaughter each and every one of the grotesqueries.

"Our loss was overwhelming. Every family in Hebiwa bears the scars of those battles. Yet, we prevailed. It has been many years since I last saw a kraken, and I'm relieved it's a dead one. Your sacrifice, like that of our relatives and ancestors, is recognised. We

know the hardship that comes with taking a kraken head-on, and we thank you for slaying it.

“I know that many of you – including myself – are concerned about Prince Dagr. I have sent a missive to Emperor Chikara requesting he send his finest doctors to Riften to examine the prince. For now, Prince Dagr is receiving the best care that Riften can offer, as all of your wounded are. I spoke to Prince Dagr just an hour ago, and, although his wounds are severe, I am pleased to share that he is in fine spirits.

“Not only will your injured receive the best care that we can provide, but every one of your fallen comrades will receive a funeral worthy of their sacrifice at my expense to show Hebiwa’s gratitude. Upon your return to Vastrune, I intend to sail alongside your fleet to reunite Prince Dagr with his father, King Erik Stout-Heart, and inform the king of your bravery myself.

“Until then, please rest, eat, drink, and enjoy my home.”

# 3

A DAZZLING COLUMN of sunlight blazed through the gap where the sliding door had been left ajar. Unfortunately for Torin, the stream of light smacked him directly in the face, stirring him from his slumber. The jaeger buried his head beneath his pillow and tried to ignore it, but he couldn't get back to sleep no matter how hard he tried.

Groaning, Torin sat up, rubbing his bleary eyes with his fists. His muscles and joints were stiff and sore, and a dull ache was radiating in the back of his head. His movements were slow, his limbs heavy, as though they were being dragged down by invisible weights.

The futon was comfortable, but Torin had slept better knocked out on the beach beside the kraken's corpse. All through the night, Torin dreamt he was floating through an endless blackness, drifting and sinking. Just as he started to enjoy the sensation, the blackness rushed into his mouth and nostrils, suffocating him.

Over and over, he jolted awake in a cold sweat, clutching his throat, desperately gulping down air.

Torin shook the dream from his mind and yawned deeply. Gradually, he wakened, recovering his senses. He peered at the other men sprawled across the futons surrounding his own. Each man was snoring away, sleeping off various stages of drunkenness, their bellies blissfully full.

Lord RIFTEN had gone all out for the feast. There were platters heaped with delectable meats, roasted, dried, fried and stewed, dishes of shellfish, raw, dried, and cooked fish, and mountains of steaming white, brown, and purple rice. There were tureens of vegetables – bamboo shoots, red beans, yams, cucumbers, burdock, onions, aubergines, radishes, and more – that were steamed, raw, boiled, or pickled and seasoned with salt, broth, vinegar, oil or various herbs, even sweetened with honey or rice jelly. Guests were served steaming cups of green tea, flagons of ale and beer, and a variety of rice wines of varying strengths and flavours. One was smooth and sweet, another was robust and earthy, a third was tart and somewhat bitter, as well as a slew of others infused with various fruits. Torin was inclined towards the sweet rice wine infused with peaches.

Lord RIFTEN had arranged lodging for the survivors when they washed up on RIFTEN's doorstep three days beforehand. The highest ranks of the fleet were allocated guest rooms in his castle. Soft-rush mats as thick as Torin's thumb was long were set on the hard wooden floors with plush futons, pillows, and blankets neatly arranged atop each mat.

Crewmen were divided between the spare bunks in the garrison and rooms at inns in RIFTEN city proper. Torin wasn't sure why he had been assigned a futon in the castle, but he had a hunch that it

had something to do with his antics that took down the kraken. The castle guests were provided straw slippers to wear inside the castle, and new clean clothes while their own were being washed and mended by his staff.

After making his bed, Torin pulled on his trousers and slipped the straw slippers on his feet. Noiselessly, Torin slid the bedroom door shut behind himself. To avoid disturbing the other men, he finished dressing in the corridor. A maid spotted Torin as he was tying his thin black jacket shut, her eyes as wide as coins as she caught sight of his naked torso where vibrant monsters roared in silence among vivid stationary battles.

Their eyes caught. Torin's cheeks flushed pink, and the maid's turned scarlet. Before the jaeger could open his mouth, the maid swallowed hard, turned on her heel and scurried away.

In most countries, tattoos belonged to ruffians, outlaws and bandits (and elves, but they were said to have been driven to extinction centuries ago). If someone in Boodjar, the Sirinean Empire, or Albion, for example, caught sight of Torin's tattoos, they crossed the street or dashed away from him as quickly as they could. Some stared at him shamelessly or even avoided looking at him entirely, trembling with fear. Others would spit at his feet, repulsed by the images engraved into his flesh.

Tattoos were popular in the northern kingdoms of Jord, some countries in the southern continent of Bora, and a handful of nomadic tribes in the Sirinean Empire. Hebiwa was one of the few countries in the eastern continent of Tairiku that accepted tattoos – revered them. Here, most men possessed a few tattoos. Indeed, nobles and warriors, especially those of high rank, were *expected* to get tattooed. Those of the highest rank, like Emperor Chikara and the thirteen domain lords of Hebiwa, were tattooed

from their ankles and wrists to their necks. Only their hands, feet, faces, groins, and a fist-wide river of space from their throats down their torsos were naked of ink. Many Hebiwan men were entirely tattooed this way by the time they were sixty.

A smile played on Torin's lips. The maid must've been taken aback by the strong, tight, muscles of his abdomen and the vast, bulging plains of his pectoral muscles. Pleased with himself, his ego stroked, the jaeger held his head high and smirked to himself as he strolled down the corridor, following the delicious smell of breakfast. Mischievously, Torin considered talking to the maid next time he saw her.

The balmy morning sunlight poured in through the latticed windows and the partially open sliding doors that lined the rooms, corridors, and breezeways on the way to main hall. It was early judging by the gentle sound of slumber radiating throughout the castle. The dining hall was empty but for a few maids wiping down tables or sweeping and mopping the floors.

Finding a bench with a clear view of the doorway and a wall at his back, Torin seated himself. Within a few moments, a maid descended upon him carrying a tray laden with food. There was a bowl heaped with steamed rice, a dish of pungent, sticky, savoury soybeans, a plate of grilled fish, the skin perfectly crispy while the flesh was tender and flaky, a few dishes of pickled vegetables, rolled omelette, and a bowl of dark, salty broth.

Torin thanked the maid in broken Hebiwan as she set the dishes before him, but her lips remained pursed. Did he say the right words? He smiled instead to show his gratitude, but she was looking at the plates, not his face.

The jaeger enjoyed his meal in peace, wolfing down everything to the very last grain of rice and droplet of broth, his belly fit to

burst. Torin wasn't going to leave even a crumb of delicious food to waste knowing that it wouldn't be long before he would have to set off back to Vastrune on *Tempest Rover* and suffer the rancid products that Tam passed as food. Torin had practically starved himself while they hunted the kraken, loathe to eat the foul hardtack, cheese so dry that it seemed to absorb all the spit from Torin's mouth like ash, and the beef rations that were so salty, the crewman were gasping for drink afterwards. Torin didn't know how Tam and the crew could stand to eat the awful foodstuffs, but at least the beer was good.

Others, both Hebiwan warriors and crewmen from King Erik's hunting fleet, gradually entered the dining hall. They nodded silent greetings to one another as they found places to sit. Torin watched the clutch of maids dash in and out of the dining hall, serving the guests and cleaning up dirty plates with impressive speed.

When Lord Riften's son Takeru came to dine, Torin noticed that he was served a different meal to everyone else. He received grilled fish, rolled omelette, pickled vegetables, and a bowl of rice porridge seasoned with onions, broth, ginger and salt.

Torin watched Takeru for a while. For the most part, Takeru ate slowly, his gaze flittering around the room. Torin chuckled when Takeru grimaced at a plate of sticky soybeans on the tray a maid was carrying as she walked past him.

Ever polite and warm, Takeru was attentive to everyone who entered the hall. Each person respectfully bade him a good morning or, in the case of the bleary half-asleep breakfasters, nodded or bowed in greeting to him. Takeru beamed at everyone in turn, even the maids. A handful of men seated themselves with

him, and soon the table buzzed with conversation, laughter rippling through the group.

From the impression Torin had of him thus far, Takeru was bright and friendly. He always seemed ready to joke, and possessed a warm, unashamedly loud, contagious laugh. Torin wondered if it was difficult for Takeru to maintain such a sunny persona, especially so early in the morning. Briefly, he considered approaching Takeru but decided against it. Torin didn't think that Takeru would've minded the additional disturbance, however, unlike the approachable Takeru, Torin wasn't ready to speak to anyone just yet.

Torin set his eating utensils on his plate and rose to his feet, offering Takeru Nakaya a final nod that was returned with a chipper smile and cheerful wave. With that, Torin left the hall.

Pausing at the foot of the steps leading from the main hall to the courtyard, Torin stretched, groaning softly. Rubbing his bloated stomach, Torin regretted his gluttony, but he knew he would miss the feeling of fullness and the blissful flavour of delicious, perfectly cooked food when he faced his first meal at sea on *Tempest Rover*.

It was a beautiful, balmy morning. The storm from days ago had broken, replaced by clear blue skies and bright, though admittedly tepid, sunshine. The chill of winter whispered through Riften, but it would be a few weeks yet until the air would turn crisp and the season would cool entirely.

The fleet hoped to set sail long before then lest they would be forced to overwinter in the eastern land. Until then, there was nothing for Torin to do but wait – wait for an assessment of the fleet and have the damage repaired – wait for more bodies to

washup on shore and help bring them up to land for their funerals – wait for Prince Dagr to heal up, well enough to sail.

It could be two weeks, or even two months of waiting ... Torin hoped beyond hope that it would be sooner rather than later. Riften was beautiful, but being stuck here for the winter was not an option he relished in the slightest.

A small hum rumbled in Torin's throat as he considered what to do now. It had been a long time since he had nothing to do. Mournhold Castle was expansive, but it would become suffocatingly crowded once all the other guests woke up. Torin couldn't stomach the idea of being squashed between those walls with all those other people, crawling over each other like insects in a nest – it was bad enough on the ship. Torin resolved to stay out of the castle during the busier periods, preserving his sanity for the looming voyage back to Vastrune.

If Torin learned a few more phrases in Hebiwan, he could speak with the locals to see if there were any grotesqueries harassing a farm or fishing village that they wanted taken care of. Torin reasoned that he may as well be useful while he waited for Lord Riften and all the ship captains to figure out a plan between them. Torin was no politician, shipwright or carpenter – hauling bodies up a cliff and slaying beasts or supernatural entities were the only things he could do.

Torin decided he would investigate whether there was any grotesquery trouble in Riften at dinner. Perhaps he could even request a translator to speak to the locals. Thankfully, Tam and the crew of *Tempest Rover* had kept Torin's belongings safe while he was washed up on the coastline. The moment Torin had been reunited with his trunk, he had made sure all his belongings and weapons were accounted for, meaning he was more than capable

of hunting monsters while he was in Hebiwa. With his mind made up, Torin opted to spend the morning exploring Lord Riften's castle compound.

Mournhold Castle was as elegant and magnificent as it was immense. The pond in the courtyard was connected to a long, slender stream that curled over the contours and slopes of Windcrest Peak from a crystalline lake a few kilometres from the castle. The pond was suspiciously circular insinuating that it was possibly manmade.

*Or meteor made ...* Torin thought.

From the rumours swirling around Riften, it didn't seem unreasonable to assume that the pond might've been caused by a meteor impact. Maybe *the* meteor impact that gave Riften its precious iron.

The pond was large but hardly a fraction of the size of most Hebiwan castle ponds that usually worked as part of the castle's defence system. Lord Riften's pond might be of use in an invasion, but for the most part it served as a beautiful, eye-catching addition to the luscious, well-manicured landscape.

There was a large building overlooking the pond, connected to the castle complex by one of many corridors. Two of the sliding doors were open, presumably to allow in a breeze, and Torin noticed rows upon rows of bookcases inside the room. Curiosity got the better of him. Torin continued around the pond until he found a stone pathway leading up to the room.

Upon entering the library, Torin was surprised to meet with a huge, life-size portrait of Lord Riften, his wife, Serena Nesse, and their five children, three sons and two daughters. Torin had only met two of the sons so far. Both daughters were married and living with their husbands in different cities. Torin hadn't met the

third son yet. The painting hung in a shining, black lacquer frame, gazing down on the rows of books neatly arranged down the centre of the room, illuminated by the light pouring in from the windows on either side of the room.

Torin ambled down the centre of the room, glancing at the thousands of spines in every colour imaginable, arranged neatly on the sturdy wooden bookcases. He found himself drawn to the portrait. He paused before it, taking in the harmonious colours, the trueness of the subjects' expressions, the exquisite, seamless brushstrokes, and all the tiny details that made the giant painting so life-like. Torin glanced over the multitude of other, much smaller, but no less beautiful, paintings hanging in identical black lacquer frames surrounding the giant picture. Each and every one of them were family portraits.

In the biggest painting, Lord Riffen and his family were painted dressed in comfortable everyday robes rather than the multitude of layers of elaborate, ornate noble garb, the epitome of love and domestic bliss. Situated in the centre of the painting, Lord Riffen was proudly standing partially behind his wife, holding her hand. Serena was sitting in front of him on a comfortable but unassuming chair. Their children were arranged around them, their personalities shining from the canvas.

Torin was surprised to see the softness captured in Hayate's face, the gentle upward tilt at the corners of his mouth as he smiled contently, clasping the fair hand of his beloved wife, his coal black eyes sparkling with happiness and pride. It was hard to believe this relaxed family man was the same person as the steely, severe warlord Torin had dined with the night before.

In the painting, Lord Riffen's clothes were casual and loose, not the usual stiff layers of nobleman robes that Torin had seen him

in so far. The edge of the vibrant tattoos on the lord's pectoral muscles were visible beneath the deep V-neckline of his robe, the tattoos separated by a river of bare skin down his middle, no wider than his fist.

The painting was old, at least twenty-five years old judging by the age of those depicted. Lord and Lady Riften had hardly more than a handful of white hairs in the painting – now both their tresses were mostly white.

Standing mirrored to his father, Lord and Lady Riften's eldest child, a son, was standing slightly behind Lady Riften, stoic and stern, his hand resting on his mother's shoulder. He was maybe sixteen years old if Torin had to take a guess. Torin tilted his head, knitting his brow as he contemplated the boy's expression. Was that the weight of being the eldest son weighing visibly on his shoulders? Or was this the expression of a son determined to be like his serious domain lord father?

There was a whisper of Takeru in the stoic teen's face, but the severe young man did not really look like a youthful Takeru at all. Torin had thought that Takeru was Lord and Lady Riften's oldest child, but there was a discrepancy between his current age and the age of the painting, if Torin had guessed correctly.

Lord Riften and Lady Serena's eldest daughter looked to be only a couple of years younger than the oldest boy. Sweet and beaming, her silky black hair hung in a long glossy curtain over her shoulders, decorated with pretty flowers and combs.

Lord and Lady Riften's second daughter was sitting on the floor at her parents' feet, her skirts spread about her neatly. Both girls were wearing the soft pink robes of spring, identical wide, elaborately embroidered silk belts of complementing colours tied at their waists. She, too, had pretty ornaments in her hair. Unlike

her older sister who had high, sharp cheekbones, the younger girl's face possessed the plumpness and roundness of childhood, suggesting that she was only ten at most.

Torin smirked when he noticed that the youngest child, a boy of two, was holding a flower ornament in his chubby little fist, plonked on the floor next to his sister, his cheeks rosy as he grinned. She had one arm around him and was laughing, presumably at the comical victory splashed across the little boy's face for stealing the hair decoration.

Finally, the second-youngest boy, six years old at most, was grinning (presenting a gap where his lower central incisors should be) in front of his eldest brother, leaning over the arm of his mother's chair, kicking his legs in the air. Was this little boy's mischief the cause of the eldest son's sombre expression?

There was no doubt in Torin's mind that this cheeky looking boy was Takeru. That meant that the youngest child was Yuta, who Torin had met but not yet spoken with for more than their introduction – and it also meant that Takeru wasn't the eldest son. Torin gazed at the stern looking boy standing at Lady Riften's side and briefly wondered where he was.

Torin's bright blue gaze moved over each face in turn. They were a beautiful family. The proud parents, the reliable eldest son, the happy, pretty daughters, the mischievous youngest sons.

Jealousy tightened Torin's chest. What he would give to have a painting like this of his own family! But what family? His mother's face had blurred with time, the only memory still vivid was the day she died. As for his father, all Torin knew about him was that he wasn't Hebiwan – Torin didn't even know his name. Then there was Captain Tam Fraser, the man who had loved his mother for as long as Torin could remember. As a child, Torin had once

seen Tam as a father, but that changed when his mother died. Now, Tam was nothing to him.

Torin swallowed the knot forming in his throat. His gaze travelled back to Lady Riften, her face transforming in Torin's mind to that of Celia's. Losing himself to fantasy, Torin imagined Lord Riften's image transforming into his own reflection, the children taking on more of Celia and Torin's features ... The jaeger would never have a painting with his parents, but maybe one day he could have a picture like this with Celia and their future children.

"Nishiki was so stern that day." A soft voice giggled.

Despite her gentle tone, Lady Riften's voice startled Torin, tearing him from his musings, the fantasy of his and Celia's imaginary family vanishing. Torin was surprised to realise that Lady Riften was speaking Sirinese with a perfect Albionic accent. He turned to find her curled up on a chair beside the window, just a few paces away from him. A book was resting open on her lap as Lady Riften gazed at her family portrait, memory alight and shining in her eyes.

"As he got older, he became more quiet – more serious. He had a wicked sense of humour, though." Lady Riften mused. "Nishiki idolised Hayate ... He heard the whispers and the gossip about Hayate's parentage, and it affected him until he was just as grim and grumpy as his father."

Lady Riften laughed softly. Torin's lips curved into a polite smile that didn't quite reach his eyes as he patiently listened to Lady Riften as she drifted through her memories.

"Nishiki was deeply conflicted by the people's disloyalty – they sought his father's aid in times of war but mocked him in times

of peace. Hayate accepted this as the price of duty, but Nishiki saw it as a betrayal he would one day inherit.

“That wasn’t his only struggle. Nishiki wanted to be worthy of receiving his father’s title one day, to be strong and weather every storm like Hayate did. It didn’t matter how many times we assured him that he would be successful when the time came, Nishiki wrapped himself tighter in Hayate’s shadow. Nishiki was so busy trying to be like his father, he didn’t realise that he was already so loved and cherished as himself.”

A weight settled in Torin’s chest. Lady Riften’s voice was warm, but grief lined every word, twisting through the silence like smoke. Torin hadn’t met Nishiki Nakaya yet. And now he realised why.

“How old was he?” Torin asked gently.

“Thirty-six,” Lady Riften replied, quietly. “It’s been five years.”

“I’m sorry.” Torin returned his gaze to the portrait, his bright blue eyes locking onto Nishiki Nakaya’s light brown ones.

Yes, there was determination in those eyes, Torin could see it. The way Nishiki’s jaw was set, his brow furrowed, lips pursed tight – the boy was tightly-wound, ready to spring into battle and prove himself a man, a warrior. Torin remembered when he was that age, a stubborn pup eager to bite ... That grit was highly favoured in the Middenheim Guard, they rewarded the trait, encouraged it in all the apprentices. They fanned the fire in all the boys, moulding them into tools – weapons.

“Nishiki died fighting ... I always knew that would be his fate. Even as a baby, he struggled. He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, yet nothing ever came easy for him. He never slept; didn’t speak more than a handful of words by the time he was four. But as he grew, he made up for it – so intelligent, so

stubborn!” A laugh as gentle as a breeze fell from her lips. “While other boys kicked a ball through RIFTEN’S streets, Nishiki had his nose buried in books. The only thing that could tear him away was chess or swordplay.”

“Did he have a family of his own?”

“A wife and a daughter,” Lady RIFTEN nodded. “They live here, and I console myself every day that if the gods had to take my son, at least they left me with his wife and daughter.”

Torin watched Lady RIFTEN rise from her chair, setting her book down on the seat. She crossed the room and pointed up to one of the portraits.

“There, Nishiki, Emi, and Chiyo.” Lady RIFTEN smiled. “Nishiki gifted this to me for Parent’s Day. He had it painted when Chiyo celebrated her fifth birthday.”

Silence settled over the pair as they gazed at the wall of paintings, so many faces gazing back at them. There wasn’t a single speck of dust on any of the frames. A pang struck Torin when he realised that the family picture of Nishiki, Emi, and Chiyo was the last picture of Chiyo with her father.

“It’s lovely that you have all these memories captured on canvas.” Torin said, delicately.

Lady RIFTEN studied him for a moment, her gaze warm but searching. Then she smiled, settling back into her chair.

“And what of your own family? You carry Hebiwan features – your eyes, your jawline. Was one of your parents from here?”

Torin’s brows shot up, surprised by the Lady’s bluntness, but he understood her interest and why she would ask – like her own children, he was half-Hebiwan. He possessed some common Hebiwan traits, epicanthal eyes, a slim, straight nose and broad nostrils, strong square jawline, and ebony hair. Another trait he

inherited from his mother was his typical Albionic accent, though it had a Boodjar twang when he got angry – Tam’s addition to Torin’s upbringing.

“My mother was Hebiwan, but she was born and raised in Albion.”

Lady Riften’s eyes sparkled.

“That was my home, too, before Hayate and I were married. You must get your beautiful blue eyes from your father, then? Was he from Albion, too?”

“I guess I must’ve.” Torin shrugged. “My mum’s eyes were so dark, they were almost black. Honestly, I really don’t know where my father was from.”

“Ah,” Lady Riften nodded. Steering the conversation away from awkwardness, she asked, “What brought your mother’s family to Albion?”

Lady Riften’s question summoned a memory of Torin’s mother to his mind. Curled up together beneath the tent on *Tempest Rover*, wrapped in blankets, the sea sloughing gently beyond the canvas walls, Torin’s mother had shared the tale with him by the orange glow of lantern light to lull eight-year-old Torin off to sleep as they travelled to Albion for the first time.

“Hebiwa was three years into the Seven-Year Famine when my maternal grandparents conceived my mother. Her father was determined that their baby would not be born into the famine and managed to get a job aboard a merchant ship. He stowed his pregnant wife aboard the ship and smuggled her all the way to Albion to get her to safety. After five months at sea, they disembarked in Albion. Within a month of arriving, they found a shack to live in and had my mother.”

“That sounds like a story from the pages of a novel!” Lady Riften marvelled, touching the book splayed on her lap. “Did your grandparents ever return to Hebiwa?”

Torin shrugged again.

“My grandfather didn’t return, I know that much. He died from a sickness just over a year after they arrived in Albion. They gave my mother an Albionic name instead of a Hebiwan one, too, so I’m not sure they ever intended to return.”

Torin had never met his mother’s parents. He realised in that moment, speaking with Lady Riften, that he hadn’t asked enough questions, hadn’t taken enough of an interest in his family history outside of the tales his mother chose to share with him at bedtime. He was sure his maternal grandmother never returned to Hebiwa. His mother hadn’t stepped foot in Hebiwa until she, Tam and Torin stayed there for six months when Torin was eight years old. They had lived in a charming rural village called Camelia Hill, located on the opposite side of the country to Riften.

“Sometimes home isn’t the country you’re born in.” Serena said, tenderly. “I lived in Albion until I was one-and-twenty, but it wasn’t until I came to Hebiwa that I felt at home. I hope your grandmother found her home in Albion – and I hope your mother did, too.”

A noncommittal noise rolled in Torin’s throat. From what he had heard from his mother and Tam while he was growing up, his mother’s family were poverty-stricken and struggled incessantly, even after his grandmother was remarried.

His mother had told him that her life brightened the day she, Torin and Tam began their life together – *as a family*. Torin cringed at the knowledge he’d ever referred to Tam as family. They had never planted any roots. Throughout Torin’s childhood, they

moved constantly, never settling for too long in any singular location, but his mother said that it was far better than living in the slums of a city, struggling to make ends meet and depending on the pity of a rich man to put food in their rumbling bellies.

“My mother used to say that home can be a place, but it can also be a person. She said that it didn’t matter where she lived, she was home as long as she, Tam and I were together—” Torin stopped abruptly, his cheeks flushing with embarrassment at his intimate confession.

Lady Riften beamed, her gaze softening.

“Your mother is an intelligent woman.”

“Yes, she was.”

“And Tam Fraser is a good man. I thought he was your father from how desperately he searched for you. He spent every waking moment combing the beaches for you, sleeping only when he collapsed from exhaustion. I was relieved for his sake as well as yours when you washed up on shore. I thought he would die of worry if he didn’t see you again. It was wonderful to see him happy during the feast last night.”

Torin cocked a brow at Lady Riften.

“Tam is ... *something*.”

Torin found Lady Riften’s words hard to believe. The Tam he knew would never be so frantically concerned for him. Why would he be? Torin and Tam had been estranged for more than twenty years until they were inadvertently reunited in Vastrune’s capital, Freystad, just six months ago. What had changed? Torin went missing at sea for two days, so Tam decided it was the ideal time to play concerned stepfather?

“How often do you see your daughters?” Torin wanted to steer the conversation away from himself.

Lady Riften chattered away about her daughters (both were married to sons of lords in neighbouring provinces) and her grandchildren, to Torin's relief. Admittedly, Torin only half-listened to her, hung up on her farfetched revelation that Tam had been searching desperately for him.

Torin would've happily spent the rest of his life estranged from the Boodjaran ship captain, and he had thought that Tam felt the same way about him, after all, Tam *had* abandoned him at the Middenheim Guard fort when Torin was ten. No letters. No visits. Not a single damn word in over twenty years! Now Torin was expected to believe that Tam had spent days combing the beaches for him, that he'd nearly collapsed from exhaustion searching? Ha! Torin doubted that Tam had lost a single night of sleep over Torin in his life.

Assumedly, Lady Riften was making things up to make Torin feel good after the depressing nature of their conversation. However, she did not seem like someone who would lie, let alone lie stupidly about something so easy for Torin to verify or refute. Tam, too, was not the type to lie nor make a show over nothing. If he didn't care whether Torin lived or died, he would not pretend otherwise. Tam was brusque and bluntly honest. He hated liars almost as much as he hated the Sirinean Empire. But that only made Torin more confused and infuriated. Why was Tam worried about Torin after all these years?