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The Enduring Ones

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Bard

The Enduring Ones

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Alec Montecalvo

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Chapter One

The mountain erupted in the clear sky of the late summer morning.

The day had dawned bright and warm, the vast blue expanse, above, void of any cloud or wheeling bird. From the east, out towards the sea, the wind had been blowing, as was it's custom. The air was rich with the scent of salt and water, a scent the Haliots had known for years, uncounted. Since the days of Hal the Mariner, it had greeted them each morning and wished them sweet dreams every night. After all, the sea was as much a part of them as was their own limbs. It was even said children learned how to master the currents well before they could even master speech, and that their veins bore salted blood. A painfully obvious myth, but one that was embraced by the Haliots with great pride, nonetheless.

But it was the sound of thunder that foretold doom. They were not unaccustomed to the occasional monsoon that would sweep in from the sea's distance waters and assault the island mercilessly. They have always weathered such storms, before, and would continue to weather them for however long they called Halsbarrow home. And yet, there was no sign of storm in the sky, as the climbing sun remained alone. It shone brightly upon the city, and as they went to shutter their windows and wait until the oncoming storm passed, they paused.

It was the late morning, though, when the sun turned blood-red. It was nearly noontime when the sun vanished behind a heavy darkness that blanketed the sky. The Haliots assumed this was the storm, finally upon them. That was until the earth started falling from the sky. They were small, at first, and brittle. Their patter on the rooftops was like the patter of small children running down stone hallways. It had become damnably hot. The east-borne wind had become the warm breath of something foul, of something odorous that beat back the scent of the sea. It was

as if a flue had opened from the heart of the earth, and there escaped the burning smell of brimstone. That was when everyone looked towards the mountain.

Not a man, nor a woman, old enough to recall having ever seen the mountain as they saw it, now. Indeed, no one had ever thought it possible. For days uncounted it loomed over Halsbarrow like a watchful guardian, silent and steadfast. After all, it was a revered place, as dear to the Haliots as the city, if not more. It was where Hal the Mariner had made his final resting place, deep within its black caverns to watch over his city for the rest of time. But great stones were tumbling down the western slope, and smoke surged from the mountaintop. It was filling the sky, ceaseless and without concern. The darkness had fully enshrouded the city below and was beginning to roll over the sea, and beneath the smoke the waves began to churn, as if disturbed by the sudden change.

Panic began to strangle the city, the type of panic fueled by ignorance, fueled by not knowing any better. Perhaps Hal the Mariner was growing angry from his mountain-seat, and sought to punish his people? Or maybe it was the ill will of the gods, who reveled in the sight of mortal misfortune and craved entertainment.

The prince of the Haliots could not truly say, but if he knew any better, he cast his lot with the latter. He had heard the great sound of thunder from his own chamber. *How could anyone not hear it?* He wondered. His ears still ached from its suddenness. It had shook the stone walls, rattling the candles and cups scattered across his desk. It was the foul odor that truly raised his concerns. He closed the book he had been reading, a small thing that he enjoyed leafing through, and set it on the table.

His father's library was nothing impressive. It was a small building, shaped like a temple with many pillars, though it had been carefully arranged with shelves of books and scrolls neatly organized. When he stepped into the open lawn of the citadel, he thought, for a moment, he had strayed into night. *Either I have wasted the day away*, he thought, *or I am deceived*. But then he realized it was the latter. The sun still shone to the west, but its light appeared dim and distant. To the east, though, the whole horizon had grown dark by the billowing smoke and ash, and the peak of the mountain was enshrouded entirely. The hot wind was blowing in his face, and strengthened upon its current was a more peculiar sound. Balian's heart sank. *It sounds as if we were besieged*, he thought. But that couldn't be true. There hadn't been an attack for nearly two hundred years.

He ascended the steps to the parapets of the citadel's wall, and ran its length towards gate facing the city. There, the guards of the gatehouse were standing in the open, weapons in hand, fully clad in the panoply of war, but their eyes were fixated on the mountain. Not one of them noticed his coming. But Balian's attention was on the road below, on the road that led up to the tower-flanked gate. Already people were retreating for the closed gates, throwing their bodies against the wood and iron, pounding their fists and crying to be let in. And yet none of the guards heard them, and they would have never heard.

"We must let them in," said Balian, taking the captain by the arm and pointing to the people below. "You must open the gates!"

The captain shook himself from the reverie of the mountain. "I can't," he said, reclaiming his arm. "Only your father can command the gates to be opened. 'Tis the law, my prince."

But my authority counts for nothing, thought Balian. The road was filling, below, and a great multitude of people were pressing themselves against the gate. More were emerging beyond, and what had been a steady stream had now become a torrent. Every side street and alleyway that emptied onto the main artery that ran through the heart of Halsbarrow were emptying with people. But the gates remained shut. The captain of the guard returned his attention to the mountain.

Smoke was still billowing into the sky, inexhaustible and impenetrable. The light of the sun was now completely covered, but beyond the mountain, to the east, the sky remained unmarred and bright, a cruel reminder that it was still afternoon of the late summer day. But under the shadow of the smoke and ash, torches sprung to life in the city to light the way.

Back down the length of the wall Balian ran, back towards the sea. He passed the Great Hall, its gilded rooftop dead, and its banners fluttering in the hot wind. The royal apartments of white stone look dirtied and decayed in the ash-fall, and the rich green of the citadel's lawns were less vibrant, coated with the growing layer of ash. Balian stopped, for a moment, and bent down to collect some in his hand. It was light-colored, and dry, warm like sand baking beneath the afternoon sun. But it was truly everywhere. Behind him he could see the prints he had left, and he could feel it gather and cluster in his hair. He wiped his and on his tunic. *We will be buried under the stuff*, he thought, and he wasn't sure if he feared that fate as much as he feared drowning.

To the far west of the citadel, rising out of a rocky outcrop, his father's tower stood like a spike in the darkness. Smoke swirled around it, but even in the haze there was no smearing of its impressiveness. It was the tallest structure in the city, and the oldest, having been the first

watchtower Hal the Mariner had built when he landed there so many years before. But its stairs were many and winding, well over one hundred in total, and by the time Balian conquered the last step, he was out of breath, with sweat on his brow and his legs aching.

His father was standing in the uppermost chamber of the tower, peering through the great looking glass that had been placed there well before his time. He had it angled towards the sea, and so intent was he in what he was seeing, he failed to notice his son's entrance until Balian spoke.

"What are you doing?" he said. "Are you aware what is happening?"

His father straightened. "I can't see the distant shore," he said. "The old tales have lied to us. My grandfather has lied to us."

"What are you saying?"

His father turned. "It is said on a clear day one can look across the sea to the far-distant shores."

Gods have mercy he truly doesn't know, Balian thought.

"But every time I try, I can't seem to see a damn thing. I have been made a fool by some old wives' tale."

"Do you know what is happening?" Balian repeated. "The mountain...there's...smoke coming from its top. I think it is on fire."

His father seemed entirely uninterested. "Is it? It was said it had happened before, but that was as much of a rumor as this," he rested his hand on the great looking glass.

Balian took a step forward. "You believed more in the legend of the looking glass than you did of the mountain?" He never knew such rumors had existed.

“Would you not?” his father’s voice was soft, almost weak.

“Where is mother?”

“I do not know. Perhaps near the gardens? She loves her gardens. You know that.”

“Father,” said Balian. “Open your eyes. Look out the window! See what threatens your city, see what threatens our home.”

“I am aware,” his father said.

“You are *aware*?” Balian could feel the anger beginning to swell within him. “Father, your people need you. They need us. They’re at the gates, now, waiting to be let in, but the gates need to be opened. We must help, we must give them the protection they need.”

“Must we?” he said, and it was as if his father had not heard him correctly. “Must we? Protection? What protection can we give them?” He turned away, his eyes falling upon the mass expanse of the sea stretching before him. “Must we?” he said, again. His voice was stronger, this time, with a tone of authority Balian was all too familiar with. “By my reckoning they are doomed, whether they are on the wrong side of the walls or the right. We are no more safe than they are unless...unless...” his voice trailed for a moment, and he turned back towards the sea.

“Unless what?” said Balian.

“Unless we can get out to sea,” he said. “Unless we can get to our ships and leave this place before it brings us down with it.”

It dawned on Balian. “The sea? What about the others?”

His father blinked. “What others?”

“The people. Your people. The men, the women, and the children. The *city*. We cannot abandon them. How could we? They need us. They need our help, they need our guidance.”

“*Our* help? *Our* guidance.” His father turned on him, and there was a shrewd glint to his eyes. “Since when were you lord, boy? Have you supplanted your father and claimed his mantle as your own?” He shook his head. “A terrible fate for them all, but one that is inescapable. There is nothing we can do for them. At least we will still have a chance. That is all that matters.”

Balian looked at his father, but instead he saw a man on the verge of madness, a man on the brink of losing his mind. “You can’t be serious,” he said, but his father already had his back towards him. He peered back through the looking glass.

“You would do well to prepare,” he said. “I will not see my heir left behind.”

Balian fled from the top of the tower, descending the steps as fast as he could. Something had to be done, even if his father would not have a hand in it. But he could feel heat creeping up the back of his neck and giving color to his cheeks, and his eyes were burning before he even stepped outside. The air was choked with smoke. Ash was falling, hotter and more thick than before, with falling black stones that were growing larger and heavier. There was no sign of the light of day. Night had fallen, more dark than any ordinary night, nearly impenetrable. Guards were scurrying to and fro along the battlements, bearing torches aloft to light their ways. Servants scurried across the citadel’s yards like rats in pursuit of shelter, or in search of their families. Balian hesitated. His desire called for him to return to the gates, but there was something he needed to do first.

The quiet stillness within his room betrayed the chaos outside. He removed from the trunk at the foot of his bed a thick cloak, wrapping it around his shoulders and pinning it at his breast. To his side he girded a long-bladed dagger. His father told him to prepare, but what exactly was he preparing for? As he tied the lacings off his boots, he had a queer feeling, and

when he stood he took one last look at his chamber, the same chamber that he had called home for his nineteen years of life. He could not help but shake the feeling as if he was never going to see this place again.

He returned to the gates. The captain of the guards was trying to command the attention of his men, but none of them were listening to what he had to say. The multitude of fleeing people had grown, below, and the weight of that mob was pressed fully against the gate.

Balian called out to the captain. "You must open the gates immediately."

"It's as I said, my prince," he said, shouldering his way past his men. "I cannot do so unless commanded by your father."

"Balian's anger lashed out. "You'd see these people die?" *Does no one give a damn?*

The captain pointed to the smoking mountain. "And who is to say that we won't, as well?"

Balian's thoughts returned to his father, but how could he tell the captain that his lord plotted to flee and leave them all? Instead, he pointed a finger to the people below, and how the gates bent under the weight. "Open the damn gates, captain," he said. "That's my command! Or the gods as my witness your soul will bear the weight of their deaths." He held the other's gaze, channeling the hard look he had seen his father give so many times when he wanted his will obeyed. But the captain did not move, at first. For a moment he feared his attempt was fruitless. How stubborn could he be? All he had to do was pen the damn gates and that would be the end of it. There was no use for all this wasted time.

At length, though, the captain obliged. He called to his men, and they all descended the stairs from the wall. The gates had barely opened large enough for a single man to pass through

before the people forced their way through, at first like a leak in a dam, and then as if a floodgate had opened. The yard filled with people. Women were carrying their children, or leading them by the hand even as their faces were streaked with tears and their hands and knees were bloody. Father's herded their families like shepherds. Some called out the names of loved ones, seeking for the faces that matched. Balian moved amongst them, seeing the terror in their wide eyes. Many were weeping, tears streaking down their ash-stained cheeks, their eyes red and raw.

A man seized Balian by the shoulders. "The gods have abandoned us!" His beard was white and there was a rivulet of blood trailing down from his scalp. But his madness was writ plainly in his aged face. "We have invoked their wrath and now they punish us. We are doomed! The end of the world is nigh!"

Another touched Balian on the arm, a younger man with bright eyes clad in fine raiment that had been stained and singed. "Three of the guilds have caught flame," he said. "It's spreading. We couldn't contain it."

As he moved amongst them, Balian was told the full damage of the city just by listening. There was always something. Fires had sprung up here, or this temple had been the first to collapse. But what could he do? What could any of them do? To even enter the city would be nearly impossible: the yard of the citadel continued to fill with people. It was a constant stream with no sign of ending. There was nothing they could do. The city was going to be lost and they had no way of preventing it.

He fled from that place and found his father with his mother. They had gathered at the base of his father's tower, surrounded by his personal guards. Some servants had gathered there too with their families, but only his father seemed undisturbed by the events. But his mother had

aged at least ten years in the span of a day. The raven blackness of her hair seemed to have lost its luster, and the ash covering her face gave his mother an aged appearance, almost like the Weeper, writhing away in the face of death. It was her eyes, though, that terrified him the most. The fear that filled them was evident, thee to plainly see, and one thing became clear to him. She had no answer for this. She, who had been able to answer ever question he could imagine as a child, was just as frightened and confused as anyone else. That was when Balian began feeling the fear seeping into his bones and grip his heart in its cold grasp.

His father, of course, was a bastion of fearlessness. His broad shoulders and thick limbs were hidden by faded red and gold robes. At his waist was a sword, and upon his brow was the gold circlet of his lordship.

“The gates have been overrun,” said one of the guards, and it struck Balian how odd that sounded, as if they were at war and not caught in a disaster.

His father’s look was as hard as stone. “What did you do?”

“The right thing,” said Balian.

“The right thing?” His father crossed the space between him and his son in quick, long strides. Even nearly twenty summers old, Balian still stood a good deal shorter than his father. “You have given them false hope,” he said, his voice low as he stood over his son. “Where can they go, now? How are they made more safe?”

Balian thought for a moment. The citadel sat atop a rocky outcrop that jutted a ways into the sea, splitting the white-capped waves like a ship’s keel. There was only one way out for such a multitude of people, and it so happened to be the way through which they entered. There was the Water Gate, but it was far too small for such a multitude of people to escape from. And then

where could they go? Only the depths of the sea sat beyond it. There truly was no escape. They were just as trapped in the citadel as they were in the city. His father was right, but Balian was not going to admit that.

“It makes no difference,” his father said. “They are damned either way. You should have listened to me, but when have you ever? We still have a chance, though, and I won’t see this opportunity wasted because of such mistakes. How can I rest easy when you’re out thinking you can save everyone. You can’t even save yourself.”

And you will be my savior, father? Balian thought, but he kept his mouth shut. There was no use invoking his father’s wrath.

His father turned to a pair of guards. “Take my son to the ships. Give him to which other brother, I do not care, but make sure he stays there. Tie him to the mast, if you must, or lock him down below. I do not want him off that ship, is that understood?”

Their hands were rough as they seized him. Was he a prisoner being sent to his confinement? “What about mother?” he said. “Let me take her, she’ll be safer there than here.”

“No,” his father’s voice was stern. “She is safest wherever I am. Why would I give her to you? My concerns would be twofold, then.”

And so Balian was led away from his father and mother. He felt as if he was being led to his execution, not to some dark, dank cell. Neither of the guards spoke a word to him, they were his father’s men, after all. There was nothing he could say to them even if he wanted to. And so he allowed himself to be led him away from his father’s tower in silence.

The Water Gate was hardly large enough for a full-sized man, and not even wide enough for two to go abreast. They shuffled through in a line, and on the other side there were stairs

carved into the rock, serpentine down the height of the outcrop. It was a treacherous way, turning this way and that, the stairs made slick by the splash of the sea. The continued ash-fall coated the stairs, as well, and the darkness was growing. Neither of them had been wise enough to bring a torch, and so their passage was slow as they ensured each step was secure.

It was as if he was being led from one death trap to another, though it which one would have been better, he could not say. There was death by the mountain, which seemed inevitable, regardless, but there was the chance of slipping from the steps and breaking his neck upon the rocks below. At least the hellish nightmare would be put to an end, if the latter were to occur. But down they went without incident, towards the twin galleys with red and gold sails waiting at the end of the wharf.

Chapter Two

The ships were twin in appearance: small and sleek with sharp prows meant to cut the waves of the sea like knives. Their sails were crimson red and trimmed with gold. As Balian and his escort approached the ships, he counted thirty oars for each ship, halved to either side.

The captain's were brothers, though their appearances differed more so than the appearances of their ships. One was tall and long-limbed, with as much grace as authority in the way he presented himself as Balian and the guards approached. The other was shorter, broad in the shoulder and thick in the arm. His hair was blonde, though there was no radiance to it, and it was pulled back from his face, which was covered in a light beard of a matching color. His was not as graceful as his brother, but he had a different way of carrying himself about. And it was he who spoke first.

“We cannot wait much longer. The sea is rough and the water is retreating. If we don't leave soon then we will be stranded aground.”

The guards thrust Balian into the captain's hands. “It is as the lord commanded,” one of them spoke. “You wait until he arrives. It is his life that is most dear.”

The blonde-haired captain moved Balian aside as he stepped toward the guards. “If he waits any longer then his life will be wasted like all the others. If it be so dear, go and tell him that time is against us and we must leave *now!*”

“We will do what we can,” said one of the guards. Then he pointed toward Balian. “See that he stays here. Another order by our lord and it should be obeyed at once.”

“Obeyed it shall be,” said the blonde-haired captain. “But he needs to be here now! Go and find him before it's too late.”

But gone were the guards for a long while. It was growing more dark, if such a thing was possible. Still the mountain billowed smoke from its peak, like smoke billowing from the furnace of a smithy's workshop. It stretched far and wide, now, over land and sea. Below them he could feel the waves stirring with an inner turmoil.

When at last they emerged through the postern of the Water Gate, they did so with a great press of people following behind. His father was leading his mother recklessly down the slick stone steps. At their backs, guards were fending off the panicked. Their swords were brandished, some slick with blood as they cried to the people to stay back. But the press was too great for them to repulse it back through the gate. Down the stairwell of the outcrop they were pushed, towards the wharfs and the ships.

The bearded captain gauged the water again before coming to his brother's side, just within earshot of Balian. "We are losing the tide," he said. "We must go now."

His brother pointed to the people rushing down from the postern. "They will overwhelm us. We don't have the means to save so many, let alone the few that we have, already."

"But we must wait for the lord," said the bearded one.

Balian turned towards the outcrop. His father was descending the last flight of steps, pulling his mother along as if she was some plaything at the mercy of his control. Some of the guards were keeping pace around them, but many were falling behind, swinging their swords or brandishing their spears to keep the others as far back as possible. But their pressing was like the pressing of the tide: with each surge they gained ground towards the docks and the ships.

The two captains watched it unfold before them in silence. Then, at length, the taller of the two spoke. “You go at once, Harwin. Take the prince and leave. We’ll catch you, soon enough.”

“Don’t be foolish,” said Harwin, taking his brother by the arm. “I’ve never abandoned you and I won’t do so now.”

“You were always difficult to get rid of,” said his brother, and he managed a smile on his face. “Do not worry about me, little brother. After all, I am the better seafarer.” But when Harwin remained by his brother’s side, the other’s face grew stern, and the authority of his eldest status came to the forefront. It was as if he was speaking to a member of his crew than his own brother. “Do as you are told for once. My mind will be at better ease knowing you were safe.”

Harwin opened his mouth to speak, but the sound of thunder rent the air, again, and a new wave of pumice stones started falling from above. They were larger, and heavier, too. Harwin turned to Balian. “You heard him,” he said, and his voice was thick, and there was frustration in his eyes. “Get on the ship, now, prince. We must be gone before the whole mountain comes crumbling down.”

No sooner had they boarded the ship than Harwin gave the commands. The moorings were cast aside, and the oars dipped into the water. The sails were unfurled, and they caught the hot wind almost immediately. At a furious pace the captain set his oarsmen to work, the sound of chanting emerging from the bank below the deck. Above, it was crowded with the families of the crew, their faces pale with terror and bodies coated from the falling ash. They were huddled together, their heads lowered as members of the crew moved about them, giving and receiving commands. Balian pitied them. He couldn’t be like that, couldn’t be scared, couldn’t stand the

idea of being helpless like sheep at the mercy of the wolves' teeth. He clutched at the rail of the ship's deck, staring back out toward the shoreline that was swiftly putting water between it and them. He wanted to be brave, wanted to stand tall amongst them. Harwin was pacing the length of the deck, directing his crew with curt commands that were obeyed without question. But Balian could not be like that. He stood clutching to the rail, staring out towards the city as *The Sea Queen* sought the open sea. The figures upon the coast were growing smaller, and the faces almost unidentifiable in the darkness. Torches were bobbing wildly. He thought he saw his father ascend the gangway to the ship's deck, but he wasn't sure. It was far too dark to see, and far too many bodies swept in the chaos to tell who was who.

The mountain was just a silhouette hanging over them as they rowed themselves further and further into the water. But then light suddenly appeared in the distance, and everything came to a standstill. Balian was no longer aware of the cowering families at the far end of the deck, or the rhythmic panting of the oarsmen below and how their oars dipped into the water in unison. He couldn't even hear Harwin's orders, if the captain was still giving them, at all. Then Balian realized he had fallen silent, and it was as if the entire world had paused, for a moment, to observe what was happening.

The rim of the great mountain was consumed by fire. Broad sheets of flame had sprung to life, dancing wildly in the hot wind against the billowing smoke. Then, spilling over onto the slope and trickling down ever so slowly, at first, and then gaining more speed, were fiery rivers and streams tumbling down the high place towards the city below.

The captain's voice broke the sight's hold on him. "Row, you whoresons, row! To sea, damn you, before we all burn!"

Back into the water the oars dipped. Balian joined the captain near the helm. Harwin was looking back over his shoulder, then turned away, shaking his head.

“The city won’t last much longer,” he said. “Those flames will devour it.”

Balian looked again. The fires were sweeping with speed down the length of the slope, consuming everything in their path as if it were naught but dry kindling. They were rushing headlong towards the city. “But she’s stood for centuries,” he said.

Harwin nodded. “Aye,” he said, his voice soft as he spoke. “But I don’t think that matters much, now.”

No, he supposed it didn’t. He wished he was wrong, but he knew the captain was right. It was as obvious as seeing that the sky was dark and the sea was rough. How long until nothing remained but dust and ash? How much longer until it was all over, until the world returned to normal, whether with or without them? Perhaps this truly was the end of the world, the divine judgment of the gods punishing the wicked mortals for their sins.

Harwin spoke again. “Helmsman, give us the truest path to the open sea. Do what you can through this cursed smoke.”

The helmsman was a wiry man, with thin, corded arms and a sharp chin and high cheekbones pulled tight on his face. “Aye, cap’n,” he said. “Through worse, I’ve gone. This is naught but a minor nuisance.”

Onward the oars continued slicing into the dark water. Ahead of them was the unknown, or, at least, what seemed to be the unknown. There was no relief from the smoke. It was only growing darker. How the helmsman could see was beyond Balian. Keen eyes he must have, indeed, though all Balian could see was the great expanse of smoke building before his eyes. The

yelling from the city could still be heard, though, growing ever more faint, but still loud enough to raise the flesh on the back of his neck. And then he could see them. How, he didn't know, for their figures were small and distant, barely large enough to see in the darkness and the growing distance. But people were wading into the water. Who they were, he did not know, but he could see them plunging into the water, disappearing beneath the waves and white-caps.

“Is there nothing we can do?” said Balian, though to no one in particular. He hated what he was feeling, hated thinking that he had just stood idly by and did nothing to save them.

It was the helmsman who spoke, as if he had already known without looking. “Aye,” he said. “Better them than us.”

Harwin's look was grim as he nodded in agreement. “If we turn back now, we'll die. We can't turn back. May the Weeper come quickly for those poor souls who are left behind.”

Thunder rolled across the dark sky, and behind heavy clouds there were flashings of yellow lightning. The blasted mountaintop still smoked in all of its ruin, and the western slope was entirely ablaze, the first of the fires just touching the city. The air was rank with the smell of brimstone and other vapors. It hurt to breathe. It was as if Balian was choking with each breath, no matter how shallow it was.

“We need more speed,” said Harwin. “The wind is dead. The sails are not doing us any good.” He strode forward, and over the railing of the forecastle he cried down to the banks of oarsmen below. “Thatch! Aye, you old bastard get them going faster! As fast as they can, damn it, or we'll all be doomed.”

The pounding of a drum sounded, matching the pounding that was in Balian's chest. But the galley gained speed, cutting through the rough waves of the water with her sharp prow. There was nothing he could see ahead of him, but the helmsman was set upon the darkness.

"Once we reach open sea, we'll let the sails breathe more fully," said Harwin.

The helmsman nodded. "Aye, cap'n but there's still much oar-work, yet."

Balian stepped beside Harwin. "I can't see the other ship," he said. "Where is my family?"

But Harwin said nothing. His focus was towards the way before them, and how the darkness stretched without any sign of breaking. Lightning flashed over their heads.

But when Balian looked, he could see naught but the darkness. Onward the oars propelled them. How far from the city they had gone, Balian could not say, but there was no sight of land to be seen. There was only smoke and ash, and the sound of the sea beneath them, and the smell of brimstone in the air.

And then the darkness suddenly dissipated before their eyes. It was as if a heavy veil had been lifted. The sun shone down upon them bright and fierce, full in its golden blaze as it shone upon the calm surface of the blue sea. Balian blinked, and then shaded his eyes with his hand. The wind was still hot as it blew, and there remained the odor of brimstone, faint but distant, now. He filled his lungs with the clean air, exhaled, and then did so again.

The sun was westering in a clear sky. Balian thought it to be well past midday, judging by the length of his shadow. But to the east, there was a dark wall where the coast should have been. Beneath the heavy smoke the turbulent sea churned with white-capped waves. Lightning flashed, forked yellow tongues piercing the darkness.

Balian looked long and hard, his heart sinking in his chest as he did so. "I can't see anything," he said.

Harwin's voice was slow and sad. "It's as if it had been swallowed whole," he said.

Balian closed his eyes. That was impossible. It could not have all just disappeared. And yet when he opened his eyes the same wall of darkness greeted him, rising from the surface of the sea to the tallest reach of the heavens above. His head ached, and when he touched a spot just above his brow, his fingers came away bloody. It was not much. He didn't recall getting hit by one of the falling stones, nor hitting his head on anything. And yet, it had all happened in a panic. As the pounding of his heart began to slow to a normal rhythm, weariness began to burden his limbs. Suddenly it felt as if he hadn't slept for days.

He passed a hand over his face, and when he looked out over the distance of the sea, towards the wall of darkness that still lingered to the east, he straightened. "Those are ships," he said, and for a moment he could feel his heart elevate in his chest.

Harwin looked for a moment, then called to one of the members of his crew. A man no taller than Balian, clean-shaven and dark-eyed, appeared and ascended the steps of the forecastle with speed. The captain took him by the shoulders and pointed to where Balian was pointing. "Davos, your eyes are keener than anyone I know. Can you see ships? You can? Good man. Can you make out the figurehead? What color are her sails?"

Davos was silent for a moment. Surely he could see that far, if Balian could, as well? The ships were but small figures on the eastern horizon, silhouetted by the overhang of smoke and ash. Even he had thought his eyes had deceived him at first. But Davos' confirmation gave him hope, for a moment.

“They’re galleys, no doubt,” said Davos. “One has...a single bank of oars—no, two banks of oars on either side.”

“That’s sixty in total,” said Harwin. “Too large to be Damon’s.”

“Truly,” said Davos. He looked again. He was standing upon the balustrade of the ship’s deck, holding onto the rigging of the mainsail as he leaned out over the water. “The other is smaller, with blue sails, cap’n. It’s got the image of a naked lass clutching flowers to her breast.”

Harwin ran a hand through his hair, and the look on his face told Balian everything that he needed to know. It was a cruel tease of the gods to have him think that, perhaps, it was his mother and father. His heart sank to the pit of his stomach as if it was a heavy stone in the midst of a lake. The strength in his legs gave way, and he seated himself on the deck, with Harwin standing over him.

“Oars up,” said Harwin to Davos. “Perhaps they bring news to us.”

The helmsman came to Harwin was the oars were banked and the sail was lowered. “Blue sails?” he said. “If it ain’t your brother’s ship, then what use have we lingering, especially for *him*?”

“Because we have no other choice,” said Harwin. “So you do well to keep quiet, we don’t need any quarreling.”

Chapter Three

The sound of a horn rang out clear and harsh from the east. Out of the darkness the galleys fully emerged, their oars working with a fury to put as much distance between them and the smoke and ash. The smaller of the two, which was modeled more alike Harwin's, was some ways ahead. The other was laboring in the water with many broken oars, and as it neared it Balian could see that the deck had been heavily damaged.

When the galleys came within shouting distance, Harwin stood upon the rail and cupped a hand to his mouth. "The gods must be jesters to allow cheats and scandals go freely from their judgement!"

A narrow-shouldered man, with black eyes and features that reminded Balian of a rat, came to the end of his own deck and hollered back. "Spare me! If words must be said let us not bray like a pair of asses. We will speak to each other like civilized captains."

"Civilized," said Harwin under his breath as he stepped down onto the deck. Grapnels were thrown from the other ship onto Harwin's, just as grapnels were thrown from the third galley onto the one with blue sails. They pulled each other close, all three of them, until their keels bumped together and came to a rest in the water.

"I find your animosity entirely undeserving," said the captain when Harwin stepped onto his deck. Balian followed closely behind. Although the ship was nearly of the same size as Harwin's, this one enjoyed far finer luxuries, with gilded designs, and sported a larger crew. A silk awning covered the aft-castle and the steering oar, and there sat a high-backed chair, almost like a throne, presiding over the entirety of the deck.

“Do you?” said Harwin. “I trusted your word despite the reputation that preceded you. And yet you still managed to prove me wrong. Just know, now, that Giles and his glib-tongue are known throughout every port from Whitehaven to the South Keys. That is the price you pay for robbing me for the first and last time.”

“That bargain was struck in a fair manner,” said Giles, “and won by me in similar fashion. But if that is what’s at the forefront of your mind, then I should be concerned.” He looked over Harwin’s shoulder, past Balian and the helmsman, toward’s Harwin’s ship. “She is in fair condition, with all things considered.” He said. “Twas a harrowing escape, no? I saw some dashed on the rocks. I believe one or two burst into flame before they could even unmoor themselves from the harbor,” he looked to one of his crewmen to confirm it it was true. “Fortune smiles on you all for not drowning in the chaos. We are all touched by Her graces, aren’t we, though I lost some fine wares in the fires. There were these precious mountain stones ready for the market, and I had a deal all in line to bring them ba—”

Harwin held up a hand. “Your lamentation is understandable but this is not the time,” he said. His eyes went to the fat man who was standing behind Giles’ shoulder. “How many did you save? Surely you have them safely below and can bring them out, now.”

The man’s jowls waggled as he spoke. Balian could see sweat glistening on his brow. “None,” the fat captain said. “They had the harbor restricted from the public. I was barely able to get to my ship, even after showing the guards the seal of my trade. It took a pretty penny to convince them.”

“Likewise,” said Giles when Harwin looked to him. Then he saw the faces that had gathered on the deck of Harwin’s ship, and his eyes softened. “But you managed to do what we could not.”

“There were so many more, though,” said Balian. “Surely more escaped? What about the other ships? Why was the port so heavily guarded?”

“They said it was the lord of the city who commanded it,” said Giles. “As for the other ships I cannot tell you truthfully. There was too much smoke and ash to navigate by. The harbor was as perilous as the city, no doubt.” He then looked to Harwin. “Have you ever seen such a thing, before? A burning mountain that turned the midday sun into night? It was raining *earth*. I could have sworn it so, unless the fumes were getting to my head.”

It was, Balian thought, and I thought the mountain was going to come crashing down upon us.

“If you still hold much animosity toward me,” said Giles, “then let me make it up, for the alleged insult you say I did. You are a smart man, Harwin, a master of the sea who holds even greater mastery over verity. This situation you find yourself in—that we find ourselves in—is not favorable, and will only worsen. Refuge is needed before more losses are suffered. Come to Talwick. That place will give you the aid that we all desperately need.”

Harwin thought for a moment. “No,” he said at length. “There are other places, *kinder* places.”

Talwick. The name meant nothing to Balian. But when Harwin refused, he stepped forward. “Why not?” he said. “Does kindness really matter? We need a place that isn’t burning.

A place that still stands and has food to give, because only the gods know how long we can last adrift at sea.”

“The sea will be far kinder to us than Talwick,” said Harwin.

“Kindness is not what we need,” said Balian, feeling his anger rise. He paused, checking his voice before he began shouting. “The gods have not been kind to us, but why shouldn’t man? Why shouldn’t we trust them to protect us when the gods could not? I’d rather suffer their cruelty than any divine punishment.”

“This one speaks well for himself,” said Giles. “A touch of nobility in him, no? Aye, I can see it, well enough.” Then his voice lowered. “Where is your father? Surely both father and heir were able to escape together.”

Balian ignored him. “What other options do we truly have?” he said to Harwin. “Better to take this chance than let it pass.”

Harwin was silent. His eyes were focused solely on Giles, full with mistrust and hesitation. Balian could see it, and for a moment he feared the captain would disregard everything and stay true to what ever grudge was held between the two of them. “Very well,” he said, his voice thick with dissent. He turned away, back towards his own ship, and with the helmsman in tow returned to his deck. Balian paused for a moment, meeting the look of approval from Giles before following after them.

“Like cattle to the slaughterhouse we will be led,” Balian could hear Harwin say as they stepped back onto the deck of *The Sea Queen*. “I pray the gods show us favor, now,” he said. “It will be a forthwith boon, now.”

Days passed. Each morning Balian watched the sun rise in the east, and each evening he watched it disappear beneath the sea's horizon. The darkness that had emerged in the east was now gone; enough distance was between them and what they had endured so that the only thing that existed was the foul memory of it all that still hung heavily in his mind.

Harwin was harsh to his crew, undoubtedly sour with the changing of the wind which took them towards Talwick. He was unapologetic in his demands of them, but with their families—the wives and children, and the parents who had grown old—he was gentle while firm. They helped where they could. Even Balian was put to task, his more laborious than others. Often times he sat before the oar and toiled until his hands bled, but it was a fine price to pay. It wasn't long until blisters began forming on his raised skin. He couldn't help but think the captain was unhappy with him. After all, he had been the one to make the call to Talwick, and Balian wondered if he had overstepped his bounds. Something needed to happen immediately, though, and Balian was not going to commit the same mistake his father had made only a few days prior.

And yet, as each night passed, and a new morning greeted them, there was no sign of the coast. How many days had it been? Balian couldn't truly say. Four, perhaps, but all he remembered was the smoke and the ash, and the foul scent of brimstone. Sleep was not coming easily for him. Night and day was bleeding into one seamless stream, one painful stream of wakefulness. Not even the soft lull of the sea could soothe his nerves. When Harwin didn't put him to task, his mind drifted to the dark of that day, and the sight of the mountain fuming over them.

It had been by the third day—he thought—when the hunger began to settle amongst them all. There was a small store of food in one of the holds, but it was barely sufficient enough for

the crew, let alone their families. Salted meat, hard bread, and dried fruit was all they had available. Harwin had it rationed, a paltry amount for each mouth, but no one complained. No one dared to. It was all that could be spared for every man, woman, and child to eat. After all, it was because of Harwin they were seeing the dawn of new days. Their gratitude was apparent, enough.

“We were supposed to have another two days to replenish what we needed,” said Harwin. The last of the rations for that morning had been doled out. Balian sat beside him, gnawing at his own piece of hard bread that had no taste to it. “Ill-fortunate we are, indeed.” He looked up at the sky, where the clouds were high and wispy in the blue sky. “No sign of rain, yet. That would be a much needed blessing from the gods. At least we’d have more to drink.”

The Sea Queen was arid under the burning sun. Balian could feel it, plain enough. Thirst was sapping their strength during the day, and hunger fouled their moods. “They’re like wolves,” said Harwin. “And there’s nothing more dangerous than a hungry wolf.” At night, Harwin tried to gift them all a few wineskins from the casks he kept below. That worked well, for the most part. Moods were lightened and life returned to the ship, at least for a brief respite. But when day broke, the process would begin again.

The fifth day dawned bright and clear and warm. For the second straight night they sailed beneath the stars. Giles’ ship led the way some distance ahead. The fat captain and his jowls labored behind *The Sea Queen*, and it seemed that each day the distance between the two widened. Balian watched the sun rise in the east. The sky was blood-red, and the sea was red as if it had been set on fire. It was as if they had strayed back to Halsbarrow and its burning ruin.

Balian found Harwin staring out toward the open sea from where they came. “Still no sign of my brother,” he said. The horizon was unbroken. All that could be seen was the shimmering sea under the rising sun.

“You don’t think—” began Balian.

“Of course not,” said Harwin. “He’s a good seafarer. He’ll even claim to be better than me, though that’s a lie,” he laughed, though to Balian it seemed more force than genuine. “He knows how to survive,” he continued. “And if he is alive so is your family. That I have no doubt.”

The ship was in a mirthless state. Hardly anyone spoke. Harwin’s commands remained prevalent. The helmsman would include a witty remark here and there, or Davos with his keen eyes would report what he could see. But other than that, an unsettling quiet gripped the “Sea Queen.” The burning mountain still haunted them, just as much as it still haunted Balian.

They brought up the barrels of foodstuffs from the storeroom. They were growing lighter with each passing day. Balian stood near the supply of browning apples, with Harwin standing over him. Not a single person met his eyes as he gave them their share.

A woman with sun-beaten features approached him. She looked at the apple that was given to her, her eyes heavy with disappointment, almost to the point of tears. “Is this all you can spare?” she asked.

Balian could feel Harwin looking at him. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but we don’t have much left.” The barrel was woefully lacking, to begin with. Even if he wanted to give her more, he couldn’t.

“Please,” she said. “It’s not even for me. I have two growing boys. They’re always so hungry.”

Harwin stepped down from where he stood. “I’m sorry, Marian, but it is all we can spare. There are many mouths to feed, and we have very little,” he touched her on the arm and gave it a squeeze. “Take heart, my dear, this ordeal shall be over shortly.”

“When?” she asked him. Weariness made her eyes heavy. “How much longer shall we stray out here?”

“Soon,” said Harwin, “I promise.”

“I hope so,” she said.

Once she was away, Harwin spoke to Balian. “It’s important to remember their names,” he said. “She is Davos’ wife. A sweet woman. She makes the best lentil soup. Kind-hearted and gentle, she is, and I wish we could help her. But there are rules we must adhere to.”

But as the last of them took their rations, Harwin and Balian were approached by three oarsmen. Harwin sealed the last barrel, then straightened himself up before them. “A problem, Thatch?”

Thatch was an old man, the oldest out of them all, or so Balian thought. His hair was white, still streaked with black, and shorn short. His brow was furrowed, though it seemed more like his natural expression more than anything. He had the thin sprout of a mustache on his upper lip and a short beard covering his chin. He crossed his arms, surveying Harwin with eyes blue like ice.

“Aye, there’s a problem,” his voice was gravelly, hoarse as if he had spent his whole life yelling. It was an ugly voice for an ugly man. “Can you tell me why we waste food on them,

when they do nothing but sit and moan of their woes? How come we are given as much as they? We are the ones laboring each hour of the day, unless my reckoning is wrong.”

“I find it wrong,” said Harwin, “you are not the one who labors. You have others laboring for you, but what do you really? But it doesn’t matter. This is not the first time you’ve labored while hungry, and it certainly won’t be the last.”

Thatch spoke over his shoulder. “You see this, lads? Our captain cares about some stowaways more so than his own crew.”

Harwin had half a smile on his face. “Lads,” he said. “Why don’t you give Thatch and I some time to speak privately,” but when they did not move, the attempt at a smile dissipated. “Do so now, lads, before I call for anchor and have the both of you scrapping the keel.”

That was convincing enough for them. When they removed themselves, Harwin lowered his voice. “Do not think your run of luck and good fortune makes you indispensable,” he said. “If you seek to challenge me, you do so on your own. You don’t come to me with reinforcements, understood?”

A moment passed between them. Then another, and yet neither one of them moved. A look of amusement returned to Harwin’s face, but old Thatch’s aged features had the hint of anger to them. But, at length, Thatch retreated, though not before giving one last hard glance to his captain.

“He’s a tough old bastard,” Harwin said to Balian. “And a stubborn one, too.”

“Does he challenge you like that often?” said Balian.

“Like that? No, but he has his own certain ways. Recent circumstances have made him more bold, I think.”

“And yet you’ve kept him on your crew?”

“I have,” said Harwin. “Because despite how much of a pain he can be, he’s damn good at what he does. He knows how to manage the oarsmen when the time calls it.”

Balian wanted to take his word for it, but he could not help but have an ill feeling. He had seen Thatch in passing here and there, but the old man spent most of his time below amongst the oar banks. There was something mistrusting about the man. Balian could sense it almost immediately.

“Should I be wary of him?” he said.

Harwin laughed lightly. “Of course not,” he said. “Intimidating he may be, but he’s harmless, sure enough. He knows his place. He’s been around too long to think anything else.”

And yet, Balian could not help but have a strange feeling. Thatch seemed dangerous. Certainly untrustworthy, but there was something unsettling about him. Balian wanted nothing to do with him, but he found it a cruel joke of the gods to have him confined to such a small place with such a man on board, as well. He made it a note to be cautious of Thatch.

Chapter Four

The shrill call of seagulls heralded land. They were circling overhead. White, inquisitive birds swooping down under the masts of the ships, filling the morning with their chatter and laughter.

Two land masses appeared on the horizon. One seemed no more than a rocky outcrop rising from the depths of the sea. But there was no denying the unmistakable continuity of the shoreline, stretching for to the north and south. Already, Giles had his ship angled towards the south, for the narrow stretch of water between the standing rock and the coast.

Harwin called his crew to action, his commands overcoming the cries of the gulls. *The Sea Queen* angled her prow towards Giles, and they passed through the narrow channel of water, with the coast on their right. To their left the waves broke upon the outcrop that seemed nothing more than one giant stone standing solitary amidst the churning sea. And that was all Balian thought it to be, nothing more than a freestanding carving crafted by the Smith when He shaped the earth in the beginning. But as they passed it, there arose the deep-throated call of a horn. Once it pierced the morning air, and when the last of the echoes died away, a second call rang out, and then a third.

It was then Balian realized a tower rose seamlessly from the rock, almost as if the outcrop itself was once much larger, but had been whittled down by skilled craftsmen. The tower had been hewn with rough edges, and in each direction there sat a lone, dark window halfway up its height. He could see figures atop the parapet peering down at them as the ships passed slowly.

“Such a cursed place,” the helmsman muttered as he maneuvered the ship.

“What is it?” said Balian.

“A warning,” said Harwin, “for anyone who brings trouble to Talwick.” He pointed, there, and dangling from each window were bodies swaying from the ends of rope. It seemed as if carrion had gotten to them and devoured as much flesh as they could get. Ragged clothing clung to skeletal frames. “Hangman’s Height,” said Harwin.

“A devious place, ain’t it?” said the helmsman. “It’s reputation is known far and wide, by both land and sea. A warning for all who come.”

“A warning that has been noted one hundred times over,” said Harwin. Then, he looked to the helmsman, and smiled. “And yet why do I fear that you will do something foolish each and every time we come here?”

The helmsman laughed. “No need for worries, cap’n,” he said. “My fate lies somewhere else, where there’s no nooses to hang from.”

The water opened up again once they passed Hangman’s Height. Along to their right, white beaches followed their passage. Fishermen were wading knee-high into the water, casting their nets as they watched the procession of galleys with cautious eyes. Their clothing seemed rough and home-wove. Their homes could be seen not far from where the water crashed upon the sand: stone and thatch dwellings of simple living tucked against the slopes of gentle hills crowned with tall green grasses. And as they neared the port, more appeared along the beach, until a small town of fisherman and other folk appeared near the water’s edge.

It all reminded Balian of home. He recalled having seen fishermen and their families patrolling the white sands of the coast with their nets and spears, and how the air was pungent with the smell of the sea. This all seemed familiar to him, almost as if they had returned to home well before the mountain’s destruction. Men stood upon rocks and were peering into the water

with spears in hand. Others disappeared under the surface, then reemerged, only to disappear once again. It was nearly identical, and when he told the captain, this, Harwin nodded.

“Tis the work of the sea,” he said. “No matter where you are in this broad world, you will know its sound and remember it’s scent. They are not much different from your own people. We share the same blood, Haliot and Talish. But that bond can be traced to so long ago, I wonder if anyone truly remembers, anymore.”

“And yet you do?” said Balian.

“Aye,” said Harwin, “history has always been a fascination of mine. Where we come from, how it all started...it has a lot to teach us. It would do well to learn from the past. If—”

“Do not get him started, lad,” said the helmsman from his steering oar. “Encourage him enough and he will go on for the entire day, telling you about this lord who goes by this name but what his true name really was. On and on he’ll go with no regard for anything but his own tongue.”

“Perhaps I should have known you felt such a way,” said Harwin, a smile across his face. “I would have told you more.”

Balian laughed. “Then perhaps it was good of us to come here,” he said, “if they are so alike to our own people.”

“Perhaps,” said Harwin slowly. “But I would not anticipate such similitude from His Serenity. He is of a different sort, from what the rumors have told me. More proud, and less kind than most lords, though I have never held audience before him. But one thing is for certain: the descendants of Talos are of the same lineage as the Haliots. We both live and die by the sea.”

When Talwick appeared in the distance, not long after, it was something Balian did not fully expect. It followed closely the contours of the land, hemmed in by stone walls all the way around. Red tiled rooftops caught the noontime sun fully, and the whitewashed buildings shone with such an intensity Balian had to shade his eyes at the sight of them. It then occurred to him that this place was great, almost as great as Halsbarrow. Even from afar he could tell without having stepped foot on a single stone within its walls.

“There must be twenty ships,” he said when he caught sight of all the sails in the port.

“It would not surprise me,” said Harwin. “Talwick has always drawn much attention from across the seas.”

“Then why were you so against coming here?”

Harwin paused for a moment. “I do not like what it’s becoming,” he said. “You can feel the arrogance that is beginning to corrupt it all. Do not say I didn’t warn you, young lord. There are many deceitful things in this world.”

But never before had Balian seen a port with so many ships. There were galleys and cogs of different sizes, some armed with more oars than he could count from such a distance, while some relied solely on great sails of different colors. As *The Sea Queen* entered the harbor, he realized that there were many ships far larger than Harwin’s modest galley, and for a moment he felt alone in a strange place.

Life had returned to the ship when they came to an open wharf. As the ropes were hauled from the deck and secured them in their place, there was a sense of relief. Five wearisome days of toiling at sea had finally come to an end, but before anyone could disembark from the damnable deck to which they had been bound, Harwin stood before their way.

He raised his hands. "At last we have come to land," he said. "After long days of mourning and restlessness, we can finally set our feet again on solid earth. Please, do so if you wish, but I cannot promise you anything just yet. There is much to figure out, still. I have one thing to ask of you all: patience. Give myself the time to discover what can be made available to us, and soon we can get you someplace far more comfortable than my ship."

"Thank you, captain," said a voice, "but you have watched over us long enough. It is about time we do things ourselves, now." Others voiced their agreement, but before anyone could say anything else, Harwin spoke.

"Aye, I understand that," he said. "Truly. I do not wish to rob you all of your independence, but these circumstances force us to stay together."

"Why is that?"

Harwin crossed his arms. "How many of you have seen the lands beyond Halsbarrow? Beyond Hal's Isle, where for years uncounted you were left alone in your own content lives? Who holds lordship here? What is this place we have arrived at?" He paused, but when no one answered, he continued. "When the moment is upon us I will gladly see each and everyone of you put in a place with warm food and a bed, though I can't vouch for its softness." He attempted a smile. "Please, trust me now as you have trust me over these past few days."

When he stepped down, he came to where Balian stood beside the helmsman. "You stay here," he said to the latter. "We need to keep an eye on these people. I fear if we lose them to the streets, then we will lose them for good."

“Why should we keep watch over these people?” said the helmsman. “We have saved them from the fire and smoke. What more can we do for them? Let them go free and make their own decisions.”

“We can’t,” said Balian. “My father refused to help his own people, his own city. He allowed them to perish by smoke and flame all because he was too concerned with himself.” He paused. Even recalling his father’s words incited the anger to boil within his veins, even when it had slept quietly since their escape. “I will not make that mistake. Even if my father is alive and well and is wandering the sea as we speak. These are my people now. I am their lord, and I will see that they are protected until my last breath.”

But the helmsman seemed undaunted by his words. “There is no more Halsbarrow,” he said. “And how can there be a lordship when there is no city? The Haliots are scattered to the winds. We should let them go free. The sooner they realize that the sooner they can survive.”

“If only I could,” said Harwin. “I would grant them that freedom. But we need provisions, and they need food, and drink. Some may need to see healers and apothecaries. But they have no money, and neither do we. Would it truly be a better fate for them to remain penniless in a place they do not know? I cannot abandon them, now,” but then he looked to Balian. “You, on the other hand, have much to learn. I do not know what a lord’s son is taught by his scholars, but there are some things that only experience can teach. You are coming with me.”

“By my count there is twenty we need to provide for,” said Balian as they disembarked from the ship and onto the wharf. Already he could feel a great weight lift from his shoulders, and it seemed as if he could breathe deeply again.

“At least that,” said Harwin. “It won’t be a cheap task.”

“And how are we to accomplish it when we have no coin?” asked Balian, but the captain did not answer. Even when the harbormaster came to collect his payment, Harwin gave to him instead a gold ring from his right hand. A red ruby was set within it, and it gleamed in the sunlight. It was barely enough for the harbormaster, who’s fingers were too thick for him to wear the ring, but he accepted it nonetheless, and Balian and Harwin entered the streets of Talwick.

It truly was a stark reminder of home when Balian stepped onto the avenue of broad smooth stones. Indeed, it was as if they had never left. Each pathway was well paved and straight running, easy to master each turn they took. Harwin could have left his side, right then and there, and Balian would have been able to navigate his way without issue. But Harwin led the way. After all, he knew better than Balian.

There was a vibrancy along the street; a refreshment of new life that Balian could not recall having felt in some time. Splitting the wide boulevard of marble stones was a line of conical trees, tall cypresses that tapered at the end like spearpoints. Set up between the trees, hawkers cried to any who passed, showing wares of fine looking stones, seashells, and other items crafted from the yieldings of the sea. They were laid out on small patchwork carpets and rugs, gleaming in the sun like jewels.

A little ways farther down, the line of trees ended, and there a large space opened up. The stone path skirted around hard-packed dirt. People were shouldering their way about the wooden stalls of the marketplace, purveying hanging fish and other meats, or fabrics claimed to be from far distant lands. There were tools, too, of navigation and other nautical things that Balian had never seen nor heard of before.

“A man has claimed to have sailed across the world,” said Harwin as they passed. “He claims the tool that helped him came from this very place.”

Balian looked at the captain. “You don’t believe it?”

“More goes into navigation than that,” said Harwin. “Fortune is always helpful, and it does well to have a strong, loyal crew. But if the tool truly works, then I missed the opportunity of my life over my own stubborn pride.”

“Will we find someone to help us?”

“Not here,” said Harwin. “The man I’m looking for will never be found in a place like this.”

Down more streets they turned, and still the port had been laid out in such a way it never seemed strange to Balian. It was easy to orient himself amidst the buildings and press of people. They passed inns with open doors, the cacophonous sound of drunken chatter drifting onto the street. Women clad in the scant clothing of their trade loitered outside a brothel that was not far from where a preacher stood upon an altar and offered blessings to passers-by.

When they turned down another street, they found it flanked on both sides by arcades of shops, and the street itself was teeming with an assortment of men and women. They shouldered their way through the mass of purveyors, a warm press of bodies lost in their own minds. Harwin led Balian with aggression, cutting a path for himself if one didn’t happen to open up. They had gone a ways down the street—thickly caught in the press—when they came upon a small shop, a small drinking place not even large enough to be called an inn or tavern. Indeed, people passed by as if it didn’t exist. Its walls had been whitewashed, once, but was in need of another. There was a painted sign over the doorway, but it was too broken and faded to see what it said.

“He’d be here,” said Harwin.

“You know him that well?”

Harwin nodded. “We’ve done business together more time than I can count. It doesn’t stop him from shortchanging me whenever he gets the chance, though. A cheapskate he may be, but he’s ore predictable than anyone I’ve ever met.”

But Balian was skeptical. He half expected the man—whoever he was—to not be there, a cruel jest from the gods for Harwin’s assuredness. Of all places one could have a drink, this seemed the least likely. It was no larger than a shack, perhaps large enough to fit ten people, fifteen if they were willing to press close to each other. There wasn’t even a proper front door; in its place was a large, ripped cloth that fluttered weakly beneath the doorway.

“Who are we looking for?” said Balian.

“A man with a scar over his eye,” said Harwin.

“Is that all?”

“It’s a rather large scar. Unmistakable.”

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness of the room. It was windowless, and the only light there was came from the small candles scattered across the rickety tables. There were five men, all sitting alone with their drinks. They had the unsavory looks of surly men, haggard and gaunt faces, but none of them bore the scar Balian was looking for. *Such a dismal place*, Balian thought. *A poor man’s drinking house.*

“I do not see him,” said the sea captain.

“Nor do I,” said Balian, and he thought they had come to the wrong place. Or perhaps the man they were searching for was not there, and Harwin did not know him as well as he had

thought. But he scanned the room again, until his eyes fell upon a lone figure in the corner.

“What about there?”

There was an older looking man sitting alone at a corner table, so tucked away it was no wonder they had missed him. But he wasn't terribly out of sight, and where the other tables were graced with only a single candle, the man sat with three candles and a single mug on his. In his hand was a small book. He appeared bone thin, almost like a skeleton whose skin had been stretched too tightly over his frame. The candlelight cast dim dancing shadows on his face, but there was no hiding the distinct scar, puckered and pink, just over his right eye.

Harwin paused, looking at the stranger for a moment. The man had not seen them yet. “No, that's not him.” He sounded so sure, but his eyes still lingered over the lone figure. “But is it? No, it can't be.” But he walked towards him, regardless, hesitant at first.

The man glanced up from his book as Harwin drew closer. He regarded the captain with a sharp gaze. A moment passed, and then another, before he gave a toothy grin of dirty and rotting teeth. He stood from his chair.

“What a blessed day this is!” He said, holding out his arms for an embrace. “A dear friend of mine returns, at last. Come hither, Harwin, and give me a hug!”

Harwin did so, albeit awkwardly.

“It has been quite some time, hasn't it?” said the man. “Come, sit, please. There is much to tell!”

Balian stood over the captain's shoulder as Harwin took a seat. “Indeed, there is,” he said. “You have lost weight, undoubtedly.”

The man smiled. “Some things needed to change, out of necessity.”

“Necessity? I’m not so sure, Brayden. By the looks of it it was more from desperation than necessity.”

Brayden waved a hand. “Oh hush, all is well! How long has it been, though?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe a year? I was here a fortnight ago during the solstice festivals, though I allowed the helmsman to do most of my business. I had no intention setting foot in Talwick, not after what happened last time.”

Brayden laughed. “A wonder how Bayard did not muck up your appointments,” he said. “But he’s a good man, your helmsman. A trustworthy man. Perhaps it was well we did not see each other. I had my own things to take care of.” He then lifted his eyes and met Balian’s. He sat straighter in his seat and smiled. “And who is this? Any friend of Harwin’s is a friend of mine!”

“Aye, a friend he is,” said Harwin. He leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table. “I need your help, Brayden.”

“Of course, my dear friend.”

“I need money,” said Harwin. “Actually, we do, and we have things to sell. You’re the first person we’ve come to and we don’t care to barter. We need minted coins and we need them immediately.”

There was a half-smile on Brayden’s face. “Oh, has someone fallen on hard debts?” His eyes flickered between Harwin and Balian, but the mirth disappeared rather quickly. The smile reshaped into a tight seal of the lips. “I am sorry, my friend, but I am not in business anymore.”

Harwin sat back in his seat. “What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I said.”

Harwin looked at him for a long moment. “Why?”

But Brayden didn't answer. he returned Harwin's long look with one of his own, fingering the small book under his right hand.

"Can you give us a loan?" said Harwin. "We need money, Brayden. Desperately. A generous loan can do us a lot of good. If needs be I'll sail and trade throughout the four seasons to pay it off. You know I am a man of my word. I'll share the sea with pirates if I must. But this is no small request we're asking. You know I wouldn't come to you asking if it was some trifle matter."

"I'm sorry," said Brayden. "But there's nothing I can do."

"Why not?" Harwin's voice was thick with anger. "You'd sit here all day, drinking and reading your damn book, but you won't help us?"

"I can't!" he said. "By the gods, Harwin you are a persistent one, but believe me when I tell you there is *nothing* I can do for you. Must you know? I lost my business, and stay your judge's tongue and high morality, I know how well it dictates your life. But I can admit to you that I was drunk, yes, and made a few bad business deals that have cost me everything, so have some damn pity. I haven't had a drink since. Do you know what that's like? Do you know what it's like to go to sleep at night feeling as if you hadn't ate a damn morsel in days? How can I give you money when I don't even have enough to feed myself?"

"And yet you know nothing of our plight," said Harwin. "What we have endured, what we suffered. We don't know what it's like to go to sleep hungry? You have some gall, Brayden. You're lucky I consider you a friend, though I don't know how much that means, anymore."

"Spare me," said Brayden. He held up the small book. It was no larger than his hand. He opened it for them and leafed through some of the pages, revealing small handwriting. "This I

found on the side of the street,” he said. “This small, unimportant thing discarded in the gutter like rubbish. I’ve been reading it every damn day from sunup to sundown. It keeps my wits sharp.” Then he laughed, a dry laugh that seemed more forced than genuine. “It does not even interest me, but give me another day or two and I’ll be able to retell it word for word, from start to end.” He threw it on the table, knocking over the mug. It was empty. “That is the extent of my fortunes. Now that I have told you mine, tell me your sorry tale. How does the sea-savvy Harwin fall on hard times?”

The captain hesitated for a moment. Silence stretched between him and Brayden as the two were focused as if they were gauging the measure of one another. But then Harwin began telling their tale, of how the mountaintop had been blasted into ruin, and how smoke and ash filled the sky as fires leapt anywhere and everywhere. Up to that very moment Harwin told the tale, and when he was finished, there was a heavy look on Brayden’s face.

He ran a finger down the length of his scar. “I’m sorry, old friend. The gods are truly cruel to inflict such misfortune upon us both. But I have nothing that could help you. I would if I could.”

Harwin pushed back the hair from his face. “I’m sorry, as well. I pray that our fortunes are reversed.”

They exited the drinking house, stepping back into the press of people in the street. Harwin cursed. “Damn him,” he said. “That man never knew the meaning of restraint. This is the very thing I warned him of, and yet what does he do with my advice? He wipes his own ass with it and tosses it away. Stupid bastard. He could never listen.”

“What do we do, now?” said Balian.

Harwin paused for a moment, his hands on his hips as he chewed at his lower lip. At length he spoke. “Something else. We find another buyer. We must, but we won’t get as deserving of a price as we could’ve with Brayden. Even the, Brayden’s price would’ve shortchanged us more than I would’ve liked.”

“Is there someone in mind?”

Harwin shook his head. ‘No, but we’ll find someone.’”

We need to, thought Balian, ignoring the light pangs of oncoming hunger in his stomach.

Chapter Five

“Don’t go disturbing him when he’s in one of those moods,” said the helmsman. “You haven’t seen it yet, but the cap’n has himself a mighty temper when provoked. Almost like a bear, and you wouldn’t provoke a bear, would you?”

Two days had passed since Brayden’s confession, and since then it seemed as if Harwin’s mood soured more and more. He tried to find tasks to keep his crew occupied—and perhaps to keep his temper in check—but when he wasn’t giving commands, he was silent. *And he’s been silent more times than not*, Balian observed, and more times than not he would find Harwin sitting alone, methodically running a hand through his hair. Not even the helmsman could get through to him.

So Balian kept his distance, observing the sea captain where he could, as far away as he could. The first morning Harwin had risen with the sun, and ere the sky was fully illuminated by its light he would disembark from the ship and enter the port without saying a word to anyone. He had been gone until noon, and then he’d return empty-handed, boarding the ship in the same silence as when he had left.

The second morning began the same way, and as Balian watched the captain disappear through the arched entryway of the port, he felt a presence come to stand beside him.

The gravelly voice was unmistakable. “I reckon he’s caught wind of the new gals at lady Beth’s place,” said Thatch. “Pretty little things, I hear, though it seems I have forgotten which street it’s on. Shame on me,” then he turned over his shoulder. “What about you, helmsman? Do you recall where lady Beth keeps her place?”

The helmsman came to stand at Balian's right. "Don't play coy, old man," he said. "You know the place, well enough."

"Aye? And are you some chaste priest who's never tasted such pleasures, before?" said Thatch. His laugh was dry, rattling like bones in a sack. "I reckon you're more familiar with such pleasures than I am." Then he paused for a moment. "Would you blame him if he never came back? He won't, I reckon, if he knew any better. I wouldn't, if this sorry lot was all that waited for me. They're better off dead. It'd be a kinder fate than to live in such misery."

"And your fate is much better?" said Balian.

"I know how to survive," said Thatch. "They don't. *You* don't." He snorted through his nose. "It surprises me to find you still here. Not trailing behind your master, are you, pup?"

"Piss off, won't you," said the helmsman. "Take that reckoning of yours and keep your damn gob shut. You can give us a moment of silence, if you won't do anything else meaningful."

"Open your eyes, you damn fool," said Thatch. "It'd be best for us all if he just stayed where ever it is he's gone. He's lost control. We're better off fending for ourselves."

But when morning wore on into afternoon, and the sun sat at its highest point in the cloudless sky of the late summer, Harwin appeared again. He looked tired as he strode through the entryway of the port, and up the gangway to the ship's deck.

"Have they eaten, yet?" he said.

"No," said Balian, "but we're bringing the store up now. We had the rations measured."

"What's the tally?"

Balian paused for a moment. "We had the rations measured and we've determined we'll run out come this time tomorrow." The words had a poor taste even as he spoke them.

Harwin's laugh was humorless. "Gods help us," he said.

"A cruel joke," said the helmsman, "to call upon the very same gods who cursed us in the first place."

The captain shook his head. "Such is life," he said. "Well, I suppose we should feed them, then. I doubt they'd prefer to starve sooner rather than later. Let us delay the inevitable for another day, shall we?"

The people waited in a heavy silence to receive what they were owed. *Is this what it's like to starve?* Balian wasn't so sure. He was tired, his limbs heavy and his stomach aching for a morsel to eat. *Perhaps Harwin was right*, he thought. *We should not have come here. Talwick has brought us more trouble than assistance.* But Harwin had never boasted of his foretelling, and for that Balian was grateful. The captain was presiding over the others, silent as was his wont, lately, with his arms crossed and brow furrowed. *He searches for a solution but can't find one*, Balian observed. *Gods help us, indeed.*

The rations were doled to everyone, and Balian had eaten his share, though he felt no better than he had before. He found Harwin standing alone atop the aft-castle, lost in his own thought as he stared out to the sea.

When Balian presented the captain his share, Harwin waved his hand dismissively. "Give it to someone who needs it," he said.

"You need it as much as anyone else," said Balian, presenting the food again.

But Harwin refused it a second time. "I'm not hungry," he lied. "I still have my strength about me. Give it to someone who doesn't. Perhaps to Marian and her children. They need it more than I do. I've gone hungry before, and I doubt this will be the last time."

Balian set the food aside even as his stomach gave a low rumble. *If he won't eat it*, he told himself, *neither will I*. "Do we have a plan?"

Harwin's sigh was drawn out before he buried his face in his hands for a moment. Balian thought he would begin weeping, but the captain straightened himself to his full height and returned his attention on the sea. "There's not a single person who can help us," he said. "Not a single merchant or trader who *wants* to help us. This is why I never wanted to come here. This is why coming here causes more trouble than good. Talwick is a place built on coin, and is sustained by it. If you don't have it, then you are as good as being a slave, and not even the gods have a care for what a slave has to say or offer."

It was as if Balian's fear had been confirmed. "You were right," he said. "You warned me of this and I should have listened."

Harwin shook his head. "And never before have I wanted to be more wrong," he said. "But what's done is done. There's no use dwelling on the past and wondering what might have been. It will cause more trouble than good, or so my experience has taught me. A gamble was taken, you tossed the dice and lost. It did not work in the way we hoped, and sometimes that is the price of such a gambit."

"But is it always so costly?" said Balian.

Harwin shrugged his shoulders. "This was the best option for us, though I did not want to admit it. Especially in front of Giles; he is a braggart who suffers from his own excessive pride. And he has robbed me one too many times, so you can understand why I am hesitant to trust my fate in his hands, or the fate of anyone else who don't know any better. But I suppose he knew rather immediately he held our lives in his hands, though it looks like he has now gone and

thrown them to the wind. Ironcombe lies an additional five days to the north. We would have been as good as dead. To the south is Sudwick, and Hardale, too. But never put faith in southrons, they will shake your hand with the right and prepare the dagger with the left, and we had neither the strength nor fortitude to withstand such treachery.”

“Though it seems treachery found us, regardless,” said Balian.

“Aye, it has,” said Harwin. “And that is the nature of Giles, who knows treachery as well as he knows his mother’s name.”

“Well,” said the helmsman, and he pointed. “Speak of the dog and you’d best prepare the stick.”

Standing before the gangway between the ship and the wharf, Giles stood with his legs planted wide and his arms on his waist. He looked far different than before. His hair had been straightened, falling loosely to his shoulders. His face was clean shaven, its gaunt features, with high cheek bones and sharp chin striking Balian peculiar. *He resembles a hound, and he wags his tongue like one, too.* He was clad in fine robes of blue and white, and he had a crooked smile as he stepped onto the gangway and strode forward.

“I apologize for my absence of late,” he said, “but one’s homecoming is often accompanied by many arrangements that need taken care of, especially when they are arrangements long in the making.” He strode to where they had gathered. “The darling lady need my attention, as I’m sure you understand.” He brushed his hand across the railing beside Harwin before resting his elbows and staring out at the sea, as well. “She’s the namesake of my vessel, you know. “Madeline.” A beautiful name, no? A most beautiful name.”

“You have come to tell us your wife’s name?” said the helmsman.

“Such hostility,” said Giles. “What have I done to suffer such cruelty?”

Harwin opened his mouth to speak, but fearing what he had to say, Balian intervened.

“You have come here with a purpose?”

“Without a doubt,” said Giles. “I have come, firstly to see my friends and how they fare? Good, I hope.”

Open your damn eyes, you fool. Was it so difficult to see their pitiful state?

But it was the helmsman who took it upon himself to reveal the truth. “We haven no damn food,” he said. “Nor a place to sleep. You have led us here and promptly abandoned us.”

Giles’ look was that of incredulity. “I saved you all from wandering the seas,” he said. “I led you from the ruin of our home to prosperity and safety. Talwick is the best place you could have gone.”

The helmsman’s voice was thick with derision. “Oh yes,” he said, “you are our great savior. But what food has Talwick given us? We haven’t felt the comfort of a bed since the day the mountain burned. How did you save us, exactly?”

Giles voice had an edge to it. “I could have left you all there to suffer from certain death.”

“You might as well have!” said Balian.

“Death is always certain,” said Harwin, “you’ve only delayed it for us. And yet death is slowly withering us away, nonetheless. You haven’t saved us. You have left us to starve and to suffer all the same. Do not act like you robbed the Weeper, herself.”

“But I did!” said Giles. “Someone, somewhere, would have come across your ship drifting at sea. They would have found you all as burnt corpses under the sun. I brought you here, all of you, to my home, and yet you show me no gratitude. You give me no thanks.”

“Do not take us for fools,” said Harwin, and it was his turn for his voice to raise in anger. “Isn’t starving enough of an insult for you? Tell me, where in this place is your hearth? How many of us have you taken us into your home to feed us and give us nourishment?”

“What are you trying to say?”

Harwin scoffed. “You play the ignorant well, indeed. Do not take us for halfwits and try to persuade us you have done all you can. You have done nothing for us so stop acting as if you had made a great sacrifice.”

“I would never,” said Giles, but you insult *me*. I have been a friend to you all since fate felled the mountain. But if you continue to insult me my friendship will cease. It is because I have been a friend that I came to you today, and yet you all are so readily to see me gone. Perhaps you should show me some kindness, no? I could not have come at the more opportune time.”

“What do you mean?” said Balian.

It was Giles’ turn to laugh. “Ah, so quick to listen when there’s good news to be told!”

When lives are at stake, Balian thought, *yes. I hope we have no missed an opportunity.*

Harwin was sitting a little straighter, and even the helmsman had now taken a keen interest. Giles held each and every one of them with his eyes, a knowing smile on his face. “This is delightful,” he said slowly. “Very delightful, indeed. Perhaps some kindness and gratitude will be shown, now. It would be greatly appreciated after all of these wrongful accusations.”

“Thanks and gratitude will be given to the proper people,” said Harwin.

“If you get straight to the point, that is,” said the helmsman.

Giles fixed him a hard look. “You should consider yourselves fortunate for getting the point across, at all. What’s to stop me from leaving at this moment?”

“Because a friend would not do that,” said Balian.

Giles paused for a moment, then smiled. “You have always been kind to me,” he said. “A proper lord you are, Balian of Halsbarrow.”

Not a lord, Balian thought, that title burned with the city.

Giles drew them in close, and began speaking in a low voice. “Your friend Giles, here, has many connections, connections that run as far back as the time of our grandfather’s grandfathers.”

“And what does that have to do with us?” said the helmsman.

Giles raised a hand toward him. “I was getting to that part. How can I tell you if you interrupt me? It would do you well to remain silent until I have finished my tale, no?” He waited for a response, but when the helmsman remained silent, he continued. “These connections, through their own means, lead to very powerful positions. His Serenity, and his Wise Council, have been made aware of your plight. They are willing to open their doors, and give you sanctuary for you and those who need it.” Then he sat back, smiling as if he was proud of himself.

But Harwin had a look of displeasure. “How much did you tell him?”

Balian looked at him. “Does it matter?”

“I told him all that I could,” said Giles. “There was much to tell, no? Since he is my sovereign lord it is his right to know what goes on beyond his sight.”

“It was bloody foolish of you,” said the helmsman.

“Why’s that? Because His Serenity asked it of me and I, the always dutiful servant, did as was commanded of me by my lord and protector?”

Balian looked at him. “His Serenity?”

“Aye,” said the helmsman, “His Serenity,” and he spat on the deck.

“Sovereign lord of Langmere and her white walls,” said Giles, “and of Talwick, her port, and all other assets belonging to her.” He looked at Harwin, and an edge came to his voice.

“Above all people, His Serenity had every right to know what transpired, no?”

“You’re a bloody fool,” said the helmsman, again.

Giles snapped. “Doing my lord’s bidding makes me a bloody fool?”

“No,” said Harwin, “but making our plight a trifle thing to discuss does.”

“Trifle?” said Giles. “How was I to gain you access without telling the full tale? Now who’s being the fool? I know you’re wiser than that and understand diplomacy better than that.”

“Do not mock me,” said Harwin, and the edge in his voice grew all the more threatening. He made to speak again, but Balian had heard enough.

“For the love of the gods, all of you, enough,” he said. He placed himself between the two captains, and as he spoke he looked from one to the other. “Enough of this feud, however bitter it may be. We have no need for it, not now. If you both wish to continue it later then so be it, but as of now I have no interest in it.”

The helmsman strode forward. “Watch your tongue, boy, when you speak to the cap’n,” he said. “You have no right.”

“I am the prince of the Haliots,” said Balian, “and by my measure we are not completely gone yet. You would do well to remember that as long as there is still a Haliot alive on this good

earth,” he turned his attention back to Harwin. “This is the situation we find ourselves in, but I won’t let your stubborn quarrel be the undoing of all these people, especially after what they endured. We must accept this opportunity...we have no other options.”

“He speaks truly,” said Giles. “I have done this for you all. It will be my honor that’s at stake. My reputation.”

“But why should we care for your reputation?” said the helmsman.

“Because it is the only thing keep death at bay,” said Balian. “What else can we do?”

But no one spoke. An uneasy silence settled between them all. Balian could feel the heat of the helmsman’s eyes on him, and Harwin’s brooding silence beside him. Giles had a look on his face, like a rat caught in a corner preparing for some daring escape. Balian turned to Harwin, and his voice was low.

“What else can we do?”

“Take up what I offer you,” said Giles.

Balian nodded in agreement. “There is no other option.”

“Indeed,” said Harwin after another moment of silence. He looked to Giles. “Well done, you have bound our hands against our will. Onward, then! Lead us to the slaughterhouse like the powerless beasts that we are.”

Chapter Six

Giles returned to them at noontime the next day. The last of the rations, as Balian had predicted, were spent by then. But the prospect of the betterment of their fortunes had incited a new flame in the wearied survivors, and Balian would have been lying if he said he didn't feel it, as well. They made short work in their preparations. There were few things left, remaining, that amounted to anything of value. When Giles came for them, he found them all ready.

"I do not like this," said old Thatch. He stood beside Harwin and the helmsman, with Balian just within earshot. "Langmere is no place for our sorts. We should remain here, or leave as soon as we get the chance."

"Why?" said Balian.

"Every man knows the reputation of the lord of Langmere," said Thatch. "I reckon he fancies himself the smartest man the world has seen, and I would not doubt the rumors. His cunning is well-known."

Balian looked to Harwin for confirmation, and the expression he found on the captain's face was all he needed. *Are we being led into another trap?* he thought. *How many more traps must we stumble in before the gods decide it is enough? I grow tired having to be on my guard.*

They departed the port when the sun had reached its highest mark. The passage between Talwick and Langmere was an old track of road, packed hard by the years of constant usage. Turreted walls flanked it's length on either side, following it's entire length. It ran straight like an arrow, and at some points it was wide enough for five horsemen to ride abreast, or so Giles told them. But they made good speed for a wearied band. Under the full summer sun, though, they had been reinvigorated, and as they marched to better fortunes the weariness in their legs and the

hunger in their stomachs were forgotten. There was even laughter amongst them, actual genuine laughter prompted by Giles. Despite the man's shortcomings, he was an entertainer that kept the moods light and happy. His stories were wild and unbelievable, but just real enough for the children to believe and for the others to admire at the youthful innocence. Balian was glad to have him, there, even though he was fully aware of Harwin's reservations towards him.

It was two hours past noon when they came upon the entrance of Langmere. The gate was a monumental and ornate thing, spanning across the entire width of the road. Two rows of white marble pillars, intricately carved with floral images and beasts of the wild, halved the way into two lanes. There were more images carved within the pediment above. To Balian they appeared to be godly kings, embattled in conflicts from faraway times, painted in vibrant colors. He could feel their immortal eyes glaring down upon them, weighing the worth of his approach before their post.

But then he realized it wasn't their eyes weighing his approach. Across the path, standing shoulder to shoulder before the entranceway, armored men watched them coldly from behind tall helms. Their mail shirts were brightly burnished beneath surcoats of deep blue, and their white cloaks, though stained and dirty, were trimmed in a matching hue. They bore long spears of broad blades, and slung on their backs were round shields embossed with steel.

"It appears they have changed the guard, already," said Giles as they approached. "I was hoping for an easy passing with you lot."

One of them was bearded, and judging by his bearing he was the leader of the contingent. He stepped forward, and demanded documentation to be presented. Only Giles moved, producing a scroll bound by a blue cord. He spoke to the man with respect, answering the

questions without issue. He gave his name, both family and the name from which he was descended, and what business he had ahead. His answers seemed suitable for the guard, until he turned his eyes towards Balian and the others.

“Documentation,” he said to them, “or no admittance.”

Giles sought for the right words to say. “Well, my friend, if you simply read what I have given you, you will see that, well, I can vouchsafe their... admittance.”

But the guard was immovable. “If they cannot give proper documentation then I cannot allow them to enter. By law of the city and its lord.”

“It is by that lord’s will that we have come,” said Balian.

“Truly,” said Giles, “though what harm could come from reading what I have given you? You will see it is from His Serenity’s own hand, if you know it well enough.”

The guard did not know it well enough, but the seal at the end was enough of a confirmation. But even then it seemed as if the guard was skeptical of its authenticity. It would have been a damn good forgery if it was not real, and if that was the case then that would have made Giles a damned good liar. The rest of the contingent had closed in behind their captain, their hands on their weapons as they awaited for his command.

The captain handed the document back to Giles. “You are granted admittance, but you must adhere to every law on pain of whichever punishment is deemed fit, even if death, the most severe of them all, is decided. I trust you know the way.”

“That I do,” said Giles.

“Very well,” said the captain. “Welcome to Langmere, and may His Serenity be gracious to you all.”

It was cool under the shadows of the pillars as they passed beneath the gateway. There were images there, too, of bulls and lions and other fierce animals captured in the heat of a hunt. There was also a fountain and a channel of running water that split the path into two lanes. To its right they strode, putting the guards behind them, though Balian could feel at least one pair of eyes still watching them as they traversed the long, shaded corridor.

The light of the sun felt warm and comforting as they stepped out from beneath the gateway. Under a full blue sky, the white buildings of Langmere shone with the captured radiance of the afternoon. They followed the winding street that seemed to cut through the heart of the city, a weary group of dirty people, staying close to Giles, who strode proudly as their guide. They passed many-storied homes where people watched them pass from their windows. Here and there a child or two would dart across their pathway, appearing from one doorway and disappearing through another. But everywhere they went, the group of Haliots drew inquisitive looks.

They must have been mistaken for beggars. A woman clutched at her child to keep him away. She regarded Balian with dark, mistrusting eyes. He figured they must have looked like a sorry, pitiful lot. Indeed, they looked like a walking dead, or those on the brink of death, at least.

Deeper into the city they went, flanked on both sides by shining white homes and painted doorways and red rooftops. It felt as if they had been pulled into a current and were being swept away from the monumental gateway through which they entered, and away from *The Sea Queen*. Like children shuffling after their mother they followed Giles without question. Not even Harwin, or the helmsman, had anything to say, nor did a word pass between any one of their group once they had entered the city.

The street came to a large open space. It reminded Balian of Talwick, and the market of wooden stalls that had all kinds of wares. But this was different. There were no wooden stalls. In the open areas, people were lounging beside flowing fountains. There preached a man in flowing robes, a laurel upon his brow, his sermons calling upon the gods for a bountiful harvest. Elsewhere there were rows of shops with painted doorways and large windows advertising their wares. There suddenly came the onslaught aroma of cooked meats, and the hunger that Balian had forgotten came upon him with a fury.

But Giles seemed to sense his intentions. “Foodstuff for the common folk,” he said. “Unworthy to satiate your hunger, my friend. Trust in Giles, as you have before, and trust in the charity of His Serenity. It’s most generous, and certainly most worthy of you.” He then lifted an arm, and pointed ahead of them. The road had straightened as it cut between white manses with low stone walls and wrought-iron gates, and it ran undisturbed until it came upon the foot of a rocky hill, an outcrop jutting upward from the depths of the city. “And you shall see the city in all of its splendor.”

From the marketplace they followed the path, between the stone manses and their gates, towards the outcrop crowned with its shimmering buildings in the afternoon sun, and its white walls. When they reached its foot, there rose a flight of many wide steps hewn into the hillside. At each landing there were flanking pillars where, even in the light of day, flames danced from atop their perches. Balian counted each step as they ascended, until at last they came upon the last one, well over one hundred. It gave way to a smooth landing of slate. Carved blackly in its surface was the sigil of the city; a blue-eyed swan. Balian looked at it closely. It was familiar to him, as if he had seen it before. He had seen it before, he was sure of it, but he could not recall

exactly when or where. But there was a knowing look, however, from that black swan with its one blue eye as it watched the passageway to the gate like a sentinel.

That entrance to the citadel was as monumental as the entrance to the city. The guards here were clad in similar panoply, but the way they carried themselves was different. It was as if they were lords, themselves. Their cloaks were grey and wrapped around their persons, clasped at the throat by brooches wrought in the shape of the black swan. Their helms shone brightly, and their spears stood tall by their sides. In the gentle breeze, beneath the spearheads, there fluttered three black feathers bound together.

Here, though, the guards recognized Giles by sight. One of them pounded on the heavy wooden gate with the butt-end of the spear, and the gate swung open ever so slightly, leaving only a sliver of space for them to pass through. They did so in a single column, Giles been the first to enter, with the helmsman taking up the rear.

Beyond the gate, the space was open, with green lawns that were well kept. Paved stones were set within the soft turf, with several passages meandering off to different buildings. Balian recognized several temples tucked away in their own corners of the surrounding wall of the citadel. He recognized one for the Weeper, and the Smith, and the All-Father with his flame dancing eternally before the temple's entrance. *I shall make offerings, when I have the chance*, he thought as he was led away. *For our fortunes, and those who were less fortunate.*

They found themselves before the doors of a great hall. Carved into the heavy oak were the figures of kingly men in scenes of some unknown event, like the figures from above the city's gateway. The guard who was leading them struck the door once, and there was the sound of groaning hinges and the jangle of chains as the doors swung inward.

The interior, like all things was white. White pillars with blue veins held aloft a marble cavernous roof, decorated with the images of constellations. Golden beams of the westering sun streamed through the high windows, but it was the stone, ageless faces that glowered down from high perches that had caught Balian's attention. How many eyes judged them? Between the rows of deathless faces he passed under, towards the far end of the hall. There was a long table before a raised platform, and upon that platform sat a single chair of intricately carved wood. It was high-backed, and cushioned, and sitting upon it was an old man.

It seemed as if he had not noticed their coming until they were nearly before the dais. He looked up from his chair, a shrewd-looking face with dark eyes and long, wispy white hair. Laid across his knees was a walking stick of white wood with a golden handle.

"Honored guests," he said in a slow manner. But his voice was strong, stronger than Balian had expected. "Your tale has been told to us in full, and our hearts weep for the losses. On behalf of our city and our people, we welcome your coming, though it be under dark circumstances."

Harwin gave a stiff bow, and the others followed suit. He must have been near seventy, judging by the looks of him, but he had a far older aura about him. Despite his aged appearance, it was his eyes that struck Balian so prominently. They were keen and sharp, and even then Balian could see the depths of knowledge they contained.

But it was one of the men who sat at the table below that spoke. He was far younger, with black hair cropped short, and broad shoulders, but long in the limbs. "We could not sit idly by as our distant kinsmen suffered." He then surveyed the group. "Surely this is not all?" He said.

“Do not be unkind,” said the old lord as he rose from his chair. He descended the steps, the tapping of the walking stick echoing through the hall. “Excuse my son, there is still much for him to learn, though he is near a grown man, already.” He hobbled to Balian, and when he was nearly toe to toe with him, the old lord straightened his back and drew himself to his full height. He was taller than expected.

“My lord,” Balian began, recalling the lessons of courtesy taught to him when he was younger. “On behalf of Halsbarrow, and her people who have—”

“You have your father’s bearing,” said the old lord. “It’s plain enough to see. Your father was always a man of proud bearing, even when his father was lord before him. I remember him even then, when he was no older than you are now.” He folded his hands over the top of his walking stick. “I never expected the day to come where I would hold an audience with his son.”

“Such a day may never have come,” said Balian, “if not for your generosity. Thank you, my lord.”

A smile twitched at the old lord’s lips. “Well spoken,” he said. He turned to where his son still stood. “Have their lodgings been accommodated?”

“They have, lord father, and we can accommodate any other requests easily enough. However, we did not anticipate such numbers, though we had expected more. A few we can lodge here, in the citadel. The honor should go to lord Balian, and the sea-captain Harwin whom Giles has mentioned. But there are fine establishments in the city, close to the citadel, with warm food and soft beds. There they will find comfort, there.”

“Your kindness is a blessing from the gods,” said Balian. “What thanks can we give that would be sufficient for your generosity?”

The old lord smiled softly. “Sleep, rest, and eat when the time calls for it. Be happy again, and know that the worst of times are now behind you.”

It almost seemed too good to be true. “Is that all?” he asked.

“If only it were that easy,” said the old lord. “Your people may enjoy our gifts, now, if they wish, but there are things required of you, lord Balian. We would have you sit with us, for a bit, and recount the tale that led you here.”

“Pardon me, my lord,” said Balian, “but was the tale not already told to you by Giles?”

“In full,” said Giles, forgetting his place. “Not a detail was spared. Was it not to your liking, my lord?”

“Everyone’s perspective is different,” said the old lord. “And Balian’s is one I would be most interested in hearing.”

It was not long until Balian was left alone with the old lord and his council. He was keenly aware of how cold it was in the great hall, but he suppressed any shiver that tried to creep up the length of his spine.

A seat was placed for him at the council’s table, and a platter of fresh fruit and a ewer of clear water was bought and placed on the table before him. He was given the curtesy of eating first, and when he had filled his stomach and quenched his thirst, the tale began. Balian told them everything that he could remember. From time to time the lord’s son would interject with a question, but His Serenity sat quietly, his hands interlocked together atop his walking stick as his eyes were intent on Balian.

When the tale was finished, the old lord sat there quietly for some time. He had closed his eyes, and as the silence lengthened, Balian feared he had fallen asleep. But then the eyes snapped open, and the old lord let out a long sigh. “A sorrowful tale,” he said. “A hellish nightmare conjured by demons and devils. No man should suffer such things, and yet so many have suffered all at once.”

“Indeed, lord father,” said the dark haired man. “To lose such a city is a loss the whole world will feel keenly.”

“Well said,” the old lord rubbed his brow for a moment. “My lord Balian,” he said. “Without Halsbarrow, Langmere would be nothing. Talwick would be nothing. My line is descended from Talos, kinsmen of Hal, and while the years have seen our families distanced, there is no denying that there still lies the bond of kinship between you and I.”

“Distanced is a kind way to put it,” said the lord’s son. “Quarreled would be more accurate, however.”

“Truly?” said Balian. “I have known the tale of Talos and the Great Split between him and my own ancestor. Brothers they had been, unless I am mistaken.”

“You are correct,” said the old lord. “I can neither condemn or defend Talos’ hunger for glory. To the west he came in the name of conquest with one of the greatest fleets the world was ever seen. But he did not have the support of his brother, who’s ire he drew the moment the armament set sail.”

“Who set fire to the fleet with his own,” said the lord’s son, and there was a noticeable edge to his voice. “And levied a great tribute from his brother for his insolence. Only recently has the Talish people been made free from that debt.”

Now this was a tale Balian had never heard before. He fingered the rim of the cup as he listened. The Great Split was hardly ever spoken of, anymore. Even as a child, his tutors refrained from delving too much into the subject.

“A great shame,” said the old lord. “For much could have been accomplished if only both sides had settled their differences and joined together once again. That was a union your father and I sought to consummate. We were nearly crippled by the tribute, but your father saw an end to it.”

“Though he was a hundred years and more too late,” said the lord’s son. “And what of your father? I have noticed you mentioned very little of him. Did he not escape the hellfire, too?”

Balian paused for a moment. “Only the gods know, as of this moment,” he said. The image of his father fighting his way down to the wharf came back to mind, and of how the second ship had not yet unmoored itself even as *The Sea Queen* made for the sea. “Last I saw he was still alive, but that was many days ago, now.”

“The gods can be cruel,” said the old lord. “Such mysteries torture the soul, no doubt. But they do enjoy our misery, those wicked gods. They’d take any opportunity to hurt us. I had another son, once, a brave man with the mind of a scholar and the heart of an adventurer. But neither knowledge nor strength could save him from pestilence and the foul breath of the Weeper. There is nothing more painful on this earth than when a father must bury his son.”

“My brother was a noble man,” said the lord’s son. “But brothers uncounted were lost in Halsbarrow, many young, many old, and many between. How many ships escaped? Did the sea swallow the city or was the city consumed by flame? Was there any hope by land, or was the sea the only salvation?”

But the old lord raised a hand before Balian could speak. "Peace, my son," he said. "Balian's tale was long and tiresome. Can you not see it? We have kept him here long enough, when all he has wished for is a bed to sleep in, once again." The old lord rose, and everyone else followed suit. "Please, escort our honored guests to the room that was prepared for him." He hobbled to Balian, and draped a frail arm around his shoulders. "Take heart, young lord. Your trials are over, as is your suffering. Sleep deeply and long. The morrow is a new day."

The housing that had been prepared for him was a grand, old place tucked quietly away, facing southward from the citadel. It was perched upon the steep edge of the hillside, and suspended over the plunge were many balconies from which the layout of the city could be admired. But Balian's attention had gone immediately to the great bed. It called to the weariness set within his bones and muscles, and he could begin to feel the strength drain from his body. He managed to throw his weight onto the feathered mattress, and a darkness descended him almost immediately.

Chapter Seven

The soft patter of the early morning rain woke him.

Through the south facing windows he could see that it was still the early hour of the morning. The stone of the sill had been turned dark and damp, but a cool breeze wafted through the open windows with the fresh scent of the summer storm filling the room. He had nearly forgotten where he was, but when it dawned on him, he closed his eyes again, and breathed deeply the taste of the rain that lingered in the air.

Sleep had not come easily for him, though. Still he felt weary. His dreams had been dark and smoky, rank with the scent of brimstone. The patter of the rain had entered his dreams, but it had materialized in the form of the pumice stones that fell from dark skies. He had woken with a start, finding himself short of breath as he lay on his back atop the feathered mattress.

But when the swelling pressure beneath his breast refused to go away, he placed his feet on the cold stone. How long would it be until he could sleep again, undisturbed by nightmares and hellish memories? To not be able to sleep on a ship's deck was one thing, but this was different. He pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes. How long until the flames die away and the smoke is gone? When would he be able to breathe the fresh air fully, again?

He stood. The chamber was larger than the one from home. The breeze stirred the curtains to the balcony. He donned a loose tunic, took a pear from the platter of fruit that had been placed by his bedside the night before, strode to the balcony.

The air was cool, and the rain was cooler. It kissed him softly as he bit into the pear, feeling the juice run down the length of his chin. He swore then and there that he would never eat bread, again, or salted meat. No longer would he have to. He finished the fruit there beneath the

falling of the rain before retreating back into the chamber and pouring himself a cup of clear water.

The sky was brighter when he had dressed himself, but still it was landed with the heaviness of a summer's rain, the first storm he had witnessed since the mountain. The hour was still early, and he figured everyone else were still asleep. He exited the room as silently as he could, moving like a shadow down the stone corridor and into the damp open air of the summer morning.

He recalled seeing, although only in a passing moment, an altar under the open sky. It stood neglected in a quiet corner, within sight of the housing that had been provided for them. Extinguished were tapered candles, and bread crumbs, empty cups, and the withered remains of white asphodel littered the altar's surface. There, standing above it, was the carven likenesses of an old woman, hunched in the back, swathed in the tattered remains of a stirring black cloak. She was tearing at her hair, and in the faded features of her aged face it seemed to Balian that she was in the throes of grief. Mad, wild grief. He felt pity for her, in all of her misery.

He touched the stiff leaves of the asphodel. He had only seen the flower a few times, and wondered where in this great city one would find it growing freely and wild. *They are death's flower, and the Weeper adorns her hair with them.* Again he looked at the mournful face of the old crone and saw the pain that scarred her face was the same he felt within him. Even as he thought of his mother, of the women and children and men, and even his father, the only thing he felt was a dull absence within his person. No pain, no searing white flame that burned his heart. Sadness, surely, but it felt insufficient. He should have felt more, and yet he could not weep for

what was lost. He felt ashamed under the sight of the Weeper. Her tears mocked the absence of his own, she who wept for all mankind. And yet he could not even weep for his own family.

But there he lingered in the quiet of that removed corner of the citadel, beneath her eternal tears. The hour of the morning grew late, but still the sky was sullen, slate-grey, and weeping lightly the cold drops from a northern storm that had swept down to warmer air. It was there, as he knelt amongst the weeds before the altar and the old crone, that he heard footsteps approach.

“It is a sight not pleasant to see, the way they show her agony.”

The old lord’s son had a thin smile on his face as Balian turned to meet him. “Have you imagined her anyway else?”

He laughed. “No. She is, indeed, plagued by a duty most foul.” He then looked at the image with thoughtful eyes. “She, above all others, deserves the pity of the world, I think. Has anyone lost as much as she has? Do the gods truly feel pain?” His voice drifted into silence as he stared at the anguish of the Weeper. But then his eyes returned to Balian, and he struck out a hand. “Full introductions were not conducted, yesterday,” he said. “And for that I apologize. But I am sure you are fully aware who my father is, as I am fully aware of who yours is...or was. To many I am the heir apparent of Langmere and Talwick, ever since my brother died from the pestilence. But to you, you may simply call me Asher.”

Balian took his hand. He could tell Asher was older than him, but not by much. “You know my name, well enough.” he said.

“Indeed,” said Asher. “We all do, now. Giles’ tale was enough to capture our attention, but it lacked a certain...life to it. One could not feel the fear in his words as we heard it in yours. It was a fine performance, on your part. A fine performance, indeed.”

“A performance?” said Balian, and suddenly he felt odd. “It was no performance.”

Asher raised a hand. “Of course not. Do not think I belittle your ordeal. In fact I admire it. No such things happen in places such as this. There is not even a single mountain nearby, though I never thought a mountain could do as what you have described.”

“Nor did we,” said Balian. “Perhaps if we had we would have avoided great losses.”

“Perhaps,” said Asher. “But you have endured much, and that is a testament to bravery.”

Bravery? Balian looked at him cautiously. There was no bravery in it. If anything, Balian would have described it cowardice, cowardice for when they abandoned the city and left so many behind to die. When was there ever bravery in running away?

“Twas an interesting tale, wasn’t it?” said Asher.

“What tale?”

“Yours was, undoubtedly,” said Asher, “but my father informed you of many things, as well. It is true, though. All of it. Talos’ exile, the founding of Talwick and Langmere. The divide between Haliot and Talish was more sudden than he made it seem. Perhaps it could have been avoidable, but then again pride can cause much damage.” He paused, and then he chuckled.

“What do you think that makes us, then? Cousins, of some sort? It all has been lost somewhere down the centuries. After all, it has been three hundred years and more.”

Cousins, the thought of it sat weird with Balian.

Asher looked at him keenly. “You do not say much,” he said.

And you say too much, Balian thought.

But Asher continued. “But I suppose it makes no difference. Talish, Haliot, we are all of the same blood, if one goes back far enough. I suppose,” and he paused for a moment. “I suppose then my loss is the same as yours. After all, you are my cousin in some manner, as was your father to mine. You did not speak much of him, even after when you were asked. Could you tell me more? I would like to know more about my distant relatives.”

“Your father,” said Balian, “mentioned there was once another son. What happened to your older brother?”

Asher’s face tightened. “He died from the pestilence,” he said. “As did many others.”

“A shame,” said Balian. “Your father made him seem to be a good man.”

“Alester was weak. Aye, my father makes him seem strong and noble, but my father failed to see the true side. Alester was a coward. His admiration of the world came from his fear of it. He knew all there was to know, if it could be found in a book. But that was the full extent of his knowledge. There was never a chance of him venturing beyond.”

“His death has struck your father rather difficultly,” said Balian.

Asher peered up at the old crone. “My father grows old and his heart weak,” he said. “It began when my mother died. Twas the same pestilence. She was one of the first. So when Alester soon followed, you can imagine how difficult that was on him.”

But not you? “It seems no one can escape the gods’ cruelty,” he said.

“Indeed, no one can,” said Asher. “My father has described life as suffering. A very dismal notion, that our purpose on this earth is to suffer at the hands of the gods until it is time to die.”

Isn't it? thought Balian. "You disagree, though?"

Asher's nod was enthusiastic. "Whole-heartedly! Life is not meant to suffer. On the contrary, life is full of opportunity. Seize it when the time is right, and even the lowliest of men can rise to the highest of ranks."

Says one who was born into the highest of ranks. The lowliest man will be cast from the ladder well before he reaches the last rung. "You have seized many opportunities, then?" said Balian.

"A few," said Asher, "though not enough. More will come, though, of that I am certain." He paused again, and his eyes lingered on the crone as if he had taken a particular interest in her. Then, he clapped his hands together. "Must we stand under her tears all morning? Come, kinsman, when was the last time you've tried your hand at the butts? The longbow has always been a pleasure of mine."

Balian followed him to an open space beside a workshop. There a burly man with thick arms and an even thicker beard was focused on the shaping of a long stave. Asher greeted him kindly, strode to a rack against the far wall, and removed from it two unstrung bows, and bushels of arrows.

"You have loosed before, I assume?" he said.

Balian took the bow in hand. It was light, and the wood was smooth beneath his hand. In truth he had not bent a bow in some time. The art, indeed, was a pleasure, but it had never been something he had taken a particular liking to. But he knew it, well enough. He strung it with ease, and tested the weight of its draw.

“Ah, so you have,” said Asher, and he smiled as he slung the bow on his shoulder and gathered the bushels of arrows in his hands. “Come, then, and let’s see how good your mark is.”

Balian was led to the butts, earthen mounds raised nearly the height of the man, and there, run through by a stave into the ground, were figurines of a men crafted out of straw and wicker. Asher counted ten paces from the target before planting the arrow tips into the earth.

“Will this be far enough?” he said.

“It shall.”

“Very good,” Asher unslung the bow from his shoulder. “It is guest right to allow you the first arrow.”

And so, Balian stepped to the mark. He nocked the arrow, and it was as if the lessons he had been taught returned to him. His draw was smooth, and no sooner had the fletchings of the arrow tickle his cheek than he let it fly with a sharp *twang*.

“A fine shot,” said Asher. The arrow was quivering in the breast of the target. “A fine shot, indeed. Better than I expected, I must admit, though I must say I will have to do better.” He stepped to the line and, with a draw far smoother than Balian’s, and a quicker release, sent his arrow quivering in the space between where the eyes would have been.

“A victory for the Talish, I think,” he said. “Though I have no doubt your mark would have been a fatal strike.”

“Indeed,” said Balian as he removed another arrow and nocked it to the bowstring. He gauged his target, drew and loosed in one smooth motion, and pierced the figure through the throat and into the wooden stave that held it upright. He smiled. “But a Haliot can be just as good as a marksmen.”

“Truly,” said Asher. “After all, it was the Haliots who taught the Talish the importance of the bow. The histories recall the night when flaming arrows set the sea on fire burned the fleet. This was when Talwick was but a newborn place with wooden walls and no real keep. But let me prove to you how the Talish have surpassed the skills of the Haliots all this time later.”

And so, they had their competition throughout the hours of the afternoon. Arrow after arrow they traded, some hitting their marks better than others. There was no denying Asher’s skill with the longbow. He handled it with confidence, and his release was far more quicker than Balian’s. But Balian shot well for someone who had not picked up the weapon in some time. Indeed, he shot far better than even he expected. His arrows flew just as true, and struck with as much force and precision as Asher’s.

They shot until their arms ached and their fingers were raw. Balian wiped the sweat from his brow, his last arrow still shivering just below Asher’s in the right shoulder. They had both already spent their quivers thrice, but none of them moved to retrieve the arrows just yet.

Asher stretched his back. “A fine bout,” he said. “A Talish takes pride in his bow, but I can see a Haliot still retains the skill of his ancestors. You shot well,” he offered his hand, “though I do believe I had the better fortune, this time around.”

“Perhaps,” said Balian. He clasped Asher’s arm. It was better to give him the victory, considering he wanted the competition, in the first place. “But give me some time. I think I’ll have you beat once I have bent it a few more times.”

“Tis good to pick it up, again, isn’t it?”

Balian nodded. *It truly is*, he thought, and he wondered why it had fallen out of his routine. “Perhaps I will make it more of a habit, again.”

“I have always enjoyed a good competition,” said Asher, “though no one has been able to beat me in some time. Perhaps you are the one to do it,” then he laughed, as if he idea amused him. “Fortune will have to favor you mightily, if that were to happen.”

Perhaps. They returned the bows to the bowyer, who still seemed to be focusing on the same stave from before. Asher thanked him, and led Balian away.

“Challenge me whenever you wish,” he said as they walked. “If you do not mind disappointment.”

“Disappointment is necessary,” said Balian, “or at least that is what I have been taught.”

“Truly? Sounds maddening, if you ask me.”

“I believe it,” said Balian.

“Why?”

“Because triumph is built on the ruins of disappointment. You cannot have one without the other.”

“An interesting concept,” said Asher, but he seemed wholly unconvinced. “Most interesting, indeed. But I hope you will not disappoint myself, or my father tonight.”

“And why would I?”

“Because,” said Asher, “We will have a feast in your honor, and the honor of your people. The Haliots deserve such...triumph, if you will, after what you all have endured.”

“A feast?” the thought of it did not sit well with him.

“Yes, and as our honored guests we expect your attendance,” Asher clapped him on the shoulder. “Come, you have proven to me that a Haliot makes an adequate bowman, now prove to me they can drink, as well.”

Chapter Eight

“He’s a strange one. Inquisitive, at best, but invasive at worst.”

Harwin looked up from the book he was reading. Balian found him facing the south lands from his own balcony beneath the shelter of the awning. The light morning rain had continued into the early hours of the afternoon.

“I saw, briefly,” said Harwin. “The two of you spoke for some time, didn’t you.”

Balian sat himself across from the captain. “Too long of a time,” he said. “He’s a strange one, Asher is. He asks too many questions.”

“What did he ask?”

Balian paused. *Nothing specific*, he recalled, and then it seemed strange to him.

“Nothing,” he said, “but I could feel him searching for answers.” And then he recounted the whole of the interaction between him and Asher, even the archery competition held between them. When the tale was finished, Harwin closed his book and thought for a long moment.

Then, at length, he spoke. “Inquisitive, indeed,” he said. “I suspect you have frustrated him, though, if what you tell me is true. You did not tell him nearly enough to satisfy him, so it seems.” He sighed, passing a hand across his face. “I feared this would happen,” he said in a low voice. “It’s one thing to have our misfortune whispered by every wharf rat and alley whore in Talwick, but something else entirely when it has captured lords’ attention.”

“There is to be a feast for us,” said Balian. “Tonight. We are expected to attend.”

“Of course we are,” said Harwin. “And it would be wrong of us to refuse. If you recall I said Giles has tied our hands...I stand by my statement.”

When day waned and night grew, they prepared for the feast. Balian had been given new clothes to wear. He had been give the colors of the city in a close-fitting vest of silk with matching hose. The supple leather boots proved to be a bit too large for him, but they fit better than he had expected. He was fixing the half cloak around his shoulders when there was a rapping at his door.

“Well it appears the hour is upon us,” said Harwin once the door was opened. He was clad in fine garments, as well, and he looked fitting in them. The helmsman, however, stood a little ways behind, and he looked far less comfortable than the captain. “You look well, like a true lord.”

“And you as well,” said Balian, but he looked to the helmsman and gave a mocking smile. “You, on the other hand...”

The helmsman pulled at his collar. “It’s all too small. I can barely breathe. It’s as if they’ve done it on purpose.”

“Nonsense,” said Harwin. “Must I keep an eye on you, tonight? I don’t need you stirring trouble.”

“I could say the same for you,” said the helmsman. “Keep your concerns for Thatch, not I. I may not take too kindly to these highborn folk but I ain’t no halfwit. I know how to pick my spots, when the time is appropriate.”

“Good,” said Harwin, “but do not expect tonight to be appropriate for such...antics.”

They arrived to the doors of the great hall, and there they were met by a manservant, who announced he would lead the way. Through the doors they passed, and between the tall standing pillars and carven faces above. Onward they went, the sound of their boot-heels unusually loud

in the silence of the hall. Passed the council's table they went, and the old lord's chair, until they came upon a small doorway tucked away in the far wall. Through it they entered a narrow corridor almost entirely dark. They walked some ways, still having not spoken a single word, until they stopped. In his blindness he heard the sound of groaning hinges, and another door swung open, and through it his sense were assaulted

It was a great, vaulted dining hall. Torches lined the walls in iron sconces in their own separate alcoves. Set in a pit on the floor a great fire roared, its red flames flickering like serpent's tongues. But it was the pungent smell of roasted meats, and vegetables, and the scent of flowing wine that drew them out of the corridor. Great slabs of smooth stone had been fashioned in the shapes of tables, and more people than Balian could count were seated around them on cushioned benches. He recognized his own people, and for the first time he could see them truly happy, their faces flushed from laughter and wine. He saw Giles, too, who sat below the lord's high table with a dark-haired beauty, her blue and white dress matching the fine doublet he was wearing. They smiled as Balian followed the manservant, with Harwin and the helmsman following, in turn.

But the faces he did not recognize outnumbered the ones he did. There were many of them, stern faces that seemed less happy to see his arrival. What it was, he could not say, but it was not long until he began to feel like a showpiece being displayed before an audience. Or perhaps an apparition for all too see, and they were still trying to believe what they saw. Heat crept up the back of his neck, and suddenly he felt the strong urge to hide, but the manservant continued leading them into the midst of the staring eyes.

At the end of the dining hall there stood His Serenity, leaning on his walking stick, and beside him sat Asher. He was clad in princely robes, and he above all others was focused the most intently on Balian. His gaze was searching, just as searching as it was earlier, and he could feel its edge as sharply as he had before, even with the distance between him and the high table. Balian wondered if a madness had descended upon him, for when the old lord's eyes passed over him, it felt as if the hall had gone cold. But the hearth-fire was still roaring, its warmth flush on the faces of every in the feasting hall. It seemed only Balian could not feel it.

His Serenity rapped his stick upon the table, and the hall fell into silence. "Honored guests," he said, and his words were slow and measured. "Tonight serves as both celebration, and remembrance. For the cruelty of the gods, and their mercy," and it seemed as if he met each and every pair of eyes in the dining hall. "To our Haliot kinsmen, who suffered terrors uncounted," and he raised a cup. "From the people of Talos, to you, we open our doors, and welcome you to our hearth and home. We cannot imagine your loss, but let us imagine a world of reconciliation between Talish and Haliot." The pounding of cups on the tables signified an agreement, and they all drank, all save for Balian and the others, who stood there and watched as the old lord finished his cup.

"Come, sit here as the honored guests," he said when it was done. "The wine is red and fruitful, and the food plentiful. Sit and fill your stomach until it cannot be filled anymore."

"Sit here beside me," said Asher, rising to his feet and indicating to the empty chair to his left. Balian could not refuse. There he sat, with Asher beside him, then the old lord, and Harwin and the helmsman to His Serenity's other side. The rest of the lord's council filled the seats at

either ends of the tables. He was barely settled when food was brought to him, piled meats and steaming vegetables, and his cup was filled to the brim with a deep red wine.

“Our kitchens have labored all day for such delicacies,” said Asher. “But it is customary for one to wash before the meal.” A servant appeared over his shoulder, bearing in his hands a bowl of water with floating rose petals. Asher laughed. “I hope the sea has not robbed you of decencies.”

When his hands were cleansed, Asher gave him an approving nod. The hunger that he had managed to suppress all that time suddenly assaulted him in full force. He cleared his plate far faster than he had anticipated, and faster than he wanted. Asher was laughing, again, by his side.

“You are our honored guest,” he said, “and have the right to eat as much as you wish. But before you do so I must know if I should warn the kitchens. It seems their labor will not be over, quite yet. Then again, our larder is well stocked and should accommodate you well.”

Truly, Balian thought as a second plate was brought to him. He stabbed his fork into the meat and bit into it.

Asher sat forward in his seat. “I bested you with the longbow, and I reckon I could beat you with the cup.”

Balian swallowed the morsel that remained in his mouth. “The drink has never been kind to me,” he said.

“Nor to me, but it’s trying to best it that makes it fun! Now raise your drink, kinsman, and let us begin!”

They drained their cups easily enough, but when they set them down Asher's laugh seemed loud in Balian's ear. "How foolish of us," he knocked the cup over and called to a servant. "Ale! That's what we will use, not this... woman's drink."

The ale was thicker than the wine, and harder to drink in excess, but it was certainly stronger. The second round he conceded to Asher, but the third and fourth he bested him by the briefest of moments. And that was how it went for some time, exchanging victorious rounds, pausing only for a moment or two to exchange a few words. But Asher was pushing a fast pace, hardly giving Balian time to collect himself before drowning himself in ale.

"Mercy, please," said Balian, slamming his cup onto the table. He had lost count how many that was. It was nine or ten, but the cup wasn't even fully finished yet as he suppressed a belch that had risen to his throat.

"So soon?" said Asher. "We have barely begun."

"Barely begun?" Balian's head was abuzz. He tried to speak some more, but words were struggling to get past his lips. He closed his eyes, but in the dark it felt as if he was spinning, first this way, and then that way.

"Have the Haliots lost their ability to drink?" said Asher.

Balian took a breath. "No," he said. His words felt heavy, and even to his own ears they sounded slow in their utterance. "Pardon, please, but the sea will do that to a man." He made to leave, but Asher placed his hand on Balian's arm.

"If you leave you lose again," he said. "Do the Haliots give up so easily?"

But Balian did not take the bait. He removed his hand from Asher's touch and descended from the high table. Harwin and the helmsman had already removed themselves and were sitting

amongst their crew. They were laughing, fully ensnared by the effects of drink. At least they were enjoying themselves, and in good company, no less. It felt as if he was moving through sand, but when he came to them Harwin pulled him down onto a seat beside him.

There was a wide grin on his face. “Welcome, and not a moment too soon!” Then he paused, and he observed Balian keenly. “You do not look so well.”

Balian took a breath. “You should feel what I feel,” he said. He then proceeded to tell him of the drinking competition that Asher had been insistent on, and the change from wine to ale.

“He is a confident one,” said Harwin.

“An arrogant one would be more correct,” said Balian.

“Aye,” said Harwin, and he laughed, clapping Balian on the shoulder. “Ale is a man’s drink, through and through. I remember when I first tasted it. I hated it, but you become accustomed to it, so much so you might actually enjoy it. There is a place in Talwick that serves the finest ale you’ll ever have. It’s the greatest asset of that damned place. But would you prefer wine?” He offered the cup in his hand. “Tis not the greatest, but it certainly isn’t the worst.”

Balian dismissed it with a wave of his hand. He feared if he were to have another drink he might drown. Harwin only laughed, again, and dropped his arm around Balian’s shoulders. “Then enjoy while you can,” he said.

The table at which they sat at was for story telling, or so it seemed. They exchanged all kinds of tales, stories that made the listeners cry tears of laughter, bawdy tales fueled by the wine. Some recalled more serious events, of battles with pirates on distant seas, and others of cheating death once or twice. All who listened were held captivated until it was told fully. But as the tales were told no one dared to speak of the burning mountain or the darkness on the sea.

And then a graybeard spoke. He told them all of having witnessed a woman of the sea, but where her legs should have been she had the scaly tale of a large fish. He swore under all the gods that his own eyes had seen this.

“She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen,” he said. “Why would I lie about such a thing?”

And then Asher’s voice spoke above all the others that were protesting. He had come down from the high table quietly and had made his place amongst the audience. Now he was shouldering his way through the gathered crowd, and squeezed himself a spot at the table.

“Do not play us for children, graybeard,” he said. “It is known such things have never existed. Those are old sailor’s tales, and they bore us.”

“Bore you?” The old man sat back for a moment, and met Asher’s eyes. “There are many tales to be told,” he said. “And you will not be bored.”

“But there is a particular tale we all want to hear, I think,” said Asher, and he looked to the faces that had gathered around them. Balian looked up, as well, and noticed that many of them were not Haliots. Talish, they were, high-born folk clad in fine garments with their drinks in their hands. Some had children clinging to their knees, or were in each other’s arms. But they were all focused on Asher, who was now looking to Balian, and Harwin.

“What tale is that?” said Harwin.

“The great escape,” said Asher.

Balian sat straighter. Even in his ale addled mind he understood what Asher was getting at. “I have already said as much as was asked,” he said. “Why must it be told again?”

Asher turned to him. “Yes, and it was a good tale, like I told you. But can we allow these people be robbed of such a story? The great escape of the Haliots,” he smiled. “*That* is a story worth hearing, and certainly worth telling.”

Balian placed his hands on the table. “No,” he said. “Now is neither the time nor place.” His head was throbbing, now, and he could feel anger starting to creep up the length of his back.

“Why not?” said Asher. “Everyone who hasn’t heard the tale would like to. Now seems to be the best time.”

“No.”

The smile on Asher’s face slowly disappeared. He leaned forward, his lips twitching slightly as his grey eyes probed Balian. “You are a secretive lot, you Haliots,” he said, and the corners of his mouth flickered for a moment. “Keep these secrets long enough, and people might think you all to be false.”

Balian made to rise, but Harwin’s hand on his shoulder sat him back in his seat. Asher raised his hands in defense, though. “You mistake me though, kinsman. I am certainly not calling you a liar, but I cannot speak for what others might think.”

“Bugger what others think,” said the helmsman.

“If I recall, I was speaking to lord Balian,” said Asher, and he cast a dark glance towards the helmsman.

“He has as much a right to speak as I,” said Balian. The heat was creeping up his neck. He leaned forward, and repeated the helmsman’s words. “Bugger what everyone thinks. This is no one else’s burden.”

“Others will think tha—”

“With all due respect,” said Harwin, his voice level and calm. “People can think what they wish. It does not matter to us. We will not tell them what happened, and that is that.”

“And what if someone was to tell them in your stead?” said Asher.

“They would have no right,” said Balian, and then a thought occurred to him. “You would have no right. They did not live it. They did not suffer under it’s shadow of fear, not knowing whether life or death awaited them beyond the darkness. They would have no right because it is not their story to tell. You have no right to tell our tale.”

A crooked smile darted across Asher’s face. *Does he think this is a game?* Balian thought. All he wanted to do was close his eyes, to surround himself in darkness and silence for a moment’s respite. He blinked, and as swiftly as that crooked smile had appeared, it was gone. In it’s place was a black expression.

“You have some gall, after all, kinsman, to come to my home and command *me*. Perhaps if you weren’t blood we would have turned you away. Then again, our blood has been thinned so much I truly wonder whether we really are kin.”

Balian had gone nineteen summers without knowing other kin than the family that raised him. What loss would it be if they were not truly kin? His eyes were fixated on Asher’s. *Would it* “You have a lot to say,” he said.

“And you have very little,” said Asher. “What small bearing you have, kinsman. I have half a mind to think you all a fraud. But your tale truly was convincing, so much so that I find it hard to think it was false.”

His hands closed into fists, then slowly opened. Asher’s eyes flickered to the action. “Ah, see here, my people, I believe he wishes to strike me. Anger often is the reaction of the guilty.”

He shook his head. “What happened to you, kinsman? I remember the reputation of the Haliots being some of the finest seafarers to master the waters. Such pride, and honor. I would have expected more from a descendant of Hal the Mariner.”

Balian opened his mouth to speak, but closed it promptly. What could he say? What could he do? Insult him? He would make more enemies than friends if he took that route, and in the presence of so many they clearly outnumbered him and his people. Balian observed the faces that were waiting for a response, before falling on Asher’s. Had he made an enemy already? What had he done to do so? “Mutes and liars,” said Asher in a low voice. “That is the reputation of the Haliots.”

“And what would they think of the Talish?” the old lord appeared amidst them, leaning on his walking stick, his eyes like daggers piercing his son. “Great insulters, and poor hosts, no doubt. What trouble are you causing, embarrassing me thusly?” But when Asher opened his mouth to speak, the old lord raised a hand. “I do not want to hear any excuses. Your brother would have shown better courtesy.”

Asher crossed his arms. “My brother is dead, lord father. Have you forgotten?”

“No, I have not,” said the old lord, and his hands tightened atop his walking stick. “I will never forget. A great loss that was for our people. Too great. I hoped his model would have encouraged you.”

“Spare me,” said Asher. He rose to his feet, and those who had gathered behind him gave him some space. “Alester is dead and I am what’s left. The sooner you realize that the sooner we move on.”

The old lord did not respond. Asher waited, but when he realized there would be no response from his father, he finished the cup that was in his hand and threw it at the old man's feet and sent it skidding across the stones.

My father would have my hide if I did that to him, Balian thought. But the old lord remained still and silent, but whatever it was that he could have said he was saying it with his eyes. They were harsh and shrewd, and they held Asher in place as silence hung over the dining hall.

At length, Asher cursed. "I have had enough," he said. "I try to show them kindness, and yet they repay it with disrespect and thanklessness," he looked towards Balian, and then Harwin, in turn. "I thought the Haliots knew better, but in Langmere we do not take thanklessness kindly. In Langmere we treat our hosts with honor and respect. Have the people of Halsbarrow become so base?"

He never saw his father's walking stick until it struck him across the face. Someone needed to do it, and while Balian hoped for someone to do it, he neither expected it to actually happen, nor did he expect it to be from Asher's own father. But Asher doubled over, clutching at his face. Blood dripped between his fingers and onto the stone, and a curse was wrenched from his lips. But his father stood there without emotion, leaning on the walking stick as he waited for his son to regain his feet.

"I have had enough of you," the old lord said. "Be gone from here, your night is done."

But Asher did not move. His hand fell to his side. The cut was just above his right eye, bleed profusely down the length of his face and staining his tunic. His fists were clenched at his

side, and his breath was heavy, and through the blood Balian could see the anger and embarrassment in his eyes.

“I will not ask you again,” said the old lord. He raised his walking stick as if he were to strike again. Asher flinched. “And if you dare challenge my authority, again, you best be prepared for the consequences. Do not return until you have gained wisdom as well as your wits.”

“Caution, father,” said Asher. “If you let your guard down they will beguile you with their deceit. I have half a mind to think they have played us for fools.”

“Perhaps if you think with your full mind you will discover who the true fool is,” said the old lord. “Now begone before I have you dragged from this place.”

Chapter Nine

Balian tried to forget what had transpired. The day after the feast he refused to leave his room. It wasn't because he was trying to hide from Asher—it seemed nearly impossible to begin with, so why would it suddenly change—but more for him to savor a moment alone away from the old lord, away from Asher, and even away from Harwin and the helmsman. He wasted the day away alone in his chambers, sitting by the balcony, reading the leather tomes that had been furnished in the room, or small books bound in leather of some scholars' philosophies or far-distant battles.

He ventured beyond the privacy of his chambers on the second day. It had been a clear and cool morning, and Balian was already up from his bed ere the sun had peeked over the horizon. He watched as the last of night's darkness gave way to the morning's pale light. Back to the altar of the Weeper he went, and offered another prayer to all of the souls she had collected. Then he went to the yard Asher had taken him the day before, where the thick-armed bowyer was already working on another stave, shaping it to his will. Balian asked him for a bow, but all the response he received was a grunt and a curt nod in consent. He proceeded, until just about noon, to loose shaft after shaft of white-fletched arrows into the effigy thirty strides ahead of him.

He half-expected Asher to come upon him, then, but as he bent his bow time and time again, he was alone, save for the bowyer in his workplace. The sun burned white overhead, and the coolness of the dawn had given way to a sudden warmth. No breeze blew in from the sea. Sweat trickled down the length of his face as Balian nocked his last arrow, drew the string to his ear, and let it fly toward its target.

“Now that was a fine mark. Perhaps the finest you’ve had today. I’ve been watching you lose arrow after arrow, and yet didn’t understand exactly *why* you were doing it.”

Balian lowered his bow. “I would not expect a merchant captain to know much about a bow,” he said.

Harwin laughed. “I suppose you’re right,” he said. “I was always a terrible archer. Not even my brother could master it, and Damon could match anyone at any thing, or so it seemed.”

They retrieved the arrows from where they protruded. “I think about them often,” Balian told him. “My father and mother. And your brother, too, I suppose. I think what could have happened to them, but I don’t like what comes into my head more times than not.”

“As do I,” said Harwin. “It’s a queer feeling. He was my eldest brother, and yet it always seemed like I had to take care of him more times than he did. I wonder what I could have done, instead of just leaving him like I did.”

“I do not think he wanted us to linger behind.”

“Indeed,” said Harwin, and his voice trailed into silence. He was staring off into the distance, and it was as if Balian was not even there, with him. But then he came to, and he flashed a forced smile. “Come,” he said. “The others wait for us. My ship awaits me!”

Balian paused. “Are we leaving?” His heart skipped a beat. *It seems we have overstayed our welcome*, he thought, though he would be lying if he said he was not eager to leave the place.

“Not yet, but soon,” said Harwin. “We were lucky ones, that is for sure. *The Sea Queen* is a good ship, fast and agile, which is why I think she did not sustain any damage. But we cannot go out to sea with our supplies as low as they are, or we’ll just find ourselves back in the exact same situation.”

At the gates of the citadel they found the helmsman waiting for them, along with old Thatch and a few others. When Balian and Harwin approached, Thatch crossed his arms and spat. “The pup is coming with us, is he? Can’t leave the master’s side, I reckon.”

We have not even left yet, Balian thought, *and he has already proven himself to be an ass*. But he kept his mouth quiet. He was learning more and more, as each day passed, that Thatch really only liked to hear himself talk, and if you did not give in to his childish goading he would oftentimes shut up and remain silent. But to have no one give in to the trap was a great demand, and more times than not it seemed as if the helmsman was the one who fell victim to it time and time again.

“Perhaps we can find a bit of leather for you to clamp your mouth on,” he said. “Perhaps that way you’ll keep quiet and let the smart men speak.”

“Smart men?” Thatch laughed, looking at the faces around him. “What smart men do you speak of, pray tell? Cap’n here is the smartest out of the bunch, and I reckon I’m a close second. Unless you think you are, in which case you’d be sorely mistaken.”

The helmsman ignored the barb. The gates opened, and the lot of them passed through towards the city. “What have you planned?” he asked Harwin. “Last I recall we still have no money.”

“And that is where His Generosity has been kind and generous,” said Harwin. He produced from a pouch at his belt a rolled parchment bearing the seal of the old lord. “This shall see all of our necessities met.”

Back through the city they marched. The wide streets, with their flat stones and bristled trees pointed like spear tips, were thronged with the lively clamor of the growing afternoon. They

were no mere wharf rats and mariners of Talwick. No, these were respectable people, clad in fine garments. They even carried themselves differently, here. Theirs was a sort of...titled aura, as if everyone thought themselves as people of importance, even if they actually weren't.

Back through the monumental gateway of the city they passed. They followed the stretch of flanking walls on the road towards Talwick. It was past noon, with their shadows growing long to the east, when they entered through the unimpressive gateway of the port. Balian felt better, here, amongst the hardened folk, even as they passed brothels with whores hanging from the windows. Here was a place he could stay; at least the people were true to who they really were and didn't prance around in some guise. But that wasn't his life. His life wasn't meant to be that simple, to be that easy.

They found *The Sea Queen* exactly how they had left it. Indeed, it seemed completely untouched. Harwin greeted the harbormaster, and spoke a few words with him as the others ascended the gangway onto the ship's deck. There, they went below into the holds, and surveyed the empty barrels, though some still contained rotting food that served as meals for the rats. What was left they dumped into the water before returning topside.

To Thatch he gave the rolled parchment with the old lord's seal. "Seek out only what we agreed upon," he said. "Have it brought here and loaded on the ship. I want to be ready to depart by the end of the week."

"Aye, and what might you be doing," said Thatch. He handed the parchment to one of the others.

"I know a place with particularly good wine, and I'll be damned if I don't pay it a visit, again," he said. "I trust you will have everything under control."

The place Harwin spoke of was an old place. They entered through its heavy door, which was intricately carved for a tavern's entrance. But Balian could *smell* the age that mingled with the hearth smoke and the smell of flowing wine.

The common room was spacious, with trestle tables throughout a rush-covered floor. It was thronged with all sorts of people. Standing near the hearth was a quartet of musicians with lyres and flutes, orchestrating light-hearted tunes to which the flames twisted a feverish dance. Elsewhere were seafarers and wharf rats, men with hard faces fixated on their own conversations.

No one took notice of their arrival; no one really seemed to care for the three newcomers who were standing in the doorway. A server stole a glance in their direction, but she did nothing more. Balian was grateful for that. At least no one was watching their every move, here.

They found a place to sit: a round table, with four chairs, tucked away in an unassuming corner as far from the hearth and the music as they could possibly get. Harwin boasted of a dark ale, one of the finest drinks he had ever tasted. He called for three to be brought to the table, one for each of them, and when the drinks were brought, he took his and raised it.

"To His Serenity," he said. "Whose coin has made it possible for us to enjoy such a fine beverage, and in such pleasant company."

Balian set his cup down. "Must we praise him? Please, let's praise something else. Anything else."

The helmsman nodded in agreement. "There are too many old bastards for my liking, though how you managed to keep old Thatch occupied is beyond me."

“To what, then should we toast?” Harwin said. All of their cups had been lowered, now.

Balian shrugged his shoulders. “Nothing,” he said, then he smiled. “Let’s just drink the damn stuff.”

The first sip for Balian was the best he had ever tasted. he had been skeptical of Harwin’s praise; after all, it was just ale. But this was far better than the ale from the feast. The moment the drink touched his lips he could see that it was, indeed, praiseworthy. The flavor danced on his tongue and set within his limbs a new energy. An quenchable thirst, like that which he had felt at sea, came upon him with a fury. He tilted his head back, and nearly drained his cup as fast as Harwin.

They drank the second round more slowly. The helmsman and Harwin began speaking of a certain voyage, reminiscing of a far distant land whose name Balian had never heard before. But Balian listened as a world was painted before him, a combined effort by both the captain and the helmsman.

By the time the third drink had come around, the coin purse that had been given to Harwin by the old lord had grown lighter. Balian could feel the ale getting to his head. It was a pleasant feeling, though, far more pleasant than what he had held at the feast in Asher’s company.

The late hours of the afternoon had given way to night. A cool night air, which swept in with every opening of the tavern’s door, told him as much. The time they had spent at that table, though, had been made swift by the potency of the drink. The tavern was beginning to tilt before his eyes, and his head was aching from the cacophony of voices that seemed to be growing louder with each passing moment. The helmsman was still going on about something ridiculous

as Harwin was sitting quietly. His eyes were intent somewhere else, just behind Balian's shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked the captain. The helmsman stopped speaking, as well.

Harwin's voice was low as he spoke. "'Tis nothing. I'm just listening."

"Aye, but not to what I have to say," said the helmsman. His words were slurred.

But Harwin did not respond, instead still focused on whatever it was that had caught his attention so intently. Balian looked over his shoulder, following the direction of the captain's eyes to a table that was within reaching distance from where Balian was seated. Weather-beaten faces were huddled over their drinks, thick-armed men with dirtied faces and heavy hand. Their voices were loud, though at first Balian could not make out a word they were saying. He only knew that someone was speaking, and the others were interjecting with questions here and there. But then there was an unmistakably rough voice that rose over the others.

"Listen to me, y'hear? I han't ever been put to the bench as much as now. They have us working day and night, I swear."

A second voice, a bit kinder in sound, spoke up. "Now that isn't true," the man said. "You aren't working now."

"Aye, which is much of a surprise even for me," said the first man. "But they have us producing a ship a day."

"That doesn't seem like much," spoke the third member of the table.

"Yeah, and what do you know?" You han't ever built a ship before. One a day be an easy task, aye, but I reckon we've been going at thirty days, now. That'd be a task you'd never accomplish."

“And you’ve built all those ships yourself?” said the third member, a tall, long-limbed and lanky man with a wisp of hair on his upper lip.

But the second member whistled in surprise. He had a shock of red hair that fell all over the place near his shoulders. “Thirty days, you say? By the Smith’s Hammer, that’s a whole fleet.”

“It is, and that lord’s son has been keeping a close eye on the progress the entire time. He hardly gives us a moment’s rest.”

“Didn’t the lord’s son die some years ago?” said the ginger-haired man.

“Gods have mercy, you are a stupid one,” said the rough voice. “Not that one. Aye, he died. But there’s a second son. The one with the dark hair and the even darker look. Aye, han’t ever seen one with as much shrewdness as he does. Especially for how young he is. But here he comes to us, every day, and if we are not meeting his standards he threatens to cut our pay. We’re already getting paid little to begin with.”

Balian wanted to listen for more, but Harwin was on his feet, producing the last payment and leaving the coins on the table. He then made his way to the other table, and settled himself amongst the men there.

“And what is he up to?” the helmsman said, but Balian only shrugged his shoulders.

Harwin was doing most of the talking, by the looks of it. The others were simply listening, wary of the newcomer, or so their body language told Balian. But Harwin was not there for long. After a short time he smiled to the men, rose from the table, and departed the tavern.

“Gods, cap’n, did your ma die?” said the helmsman. They found Harwin waiting for them in the cool night.

Harwin looked at him with confusion on his face. “What?”

“Sorry, cap’n, but you were up and out of there before Balian and I could blink. Almost as if you heard something evil.”

“No need to worry yourselves,” said Harwin. “We won’t talk about it, now.” He looked up at the night sky, regarding its darkness. There were no stars to be seen, and there was the faint scent of a midnight storm on the way. “I want to return to my ship. Hopefully Thatch did everything that was asked of him, and did it correctly.”

Torches had been lit to guide the streets in the darkness. It was quiet, with only a few persons traversing at that late hour. Balian tried to make out the time of the night, but his mind was too fogged, and there was not a moon to be seen. It was utterly dark, but Harwin led them at a quick pace. Down the cobbled street they went, putting distance between them and the tavern as they made back towards the port and the ship. Balian was following closely behind with the helmsman trailing a ways behind him, in turn.

But when Harwin turned to urge him faster, he stopped. There were people sharing the road with them some ways behind, dark silhouettes against the light of the tavern’s torches and flickering windows. Balian looked back at them, and it struck him how...ghoulish they appeared. But whether the dark phantoms had seen them or not, he did not know. They were walking towards them, though it was more like stumbling, and soon their conversation drifted across the space. Judging by the slurred words, Balian figured them to be drunk.

Harwin tried to speak in a low voice to the helmsman. “Come on, I should have known three would have been too much for you. Even Balian can handle his drink far better than you

can.” But it was as if his words had caught the attention of the others, for they had suddenly fallen silent, though they still approached.

The drunkenness in their step, however, had disappeared. Instead it was replaced with a cocky swagger, a type of youthful swagger as they closed the distance between them and the helmsman. Balian could hear Harwin curse beside him, and his heart began beating a little faster in his chest as he followed the captain to retrieve the helmsman, who had paused and was hunched over as if he was catching his breath.

“Bugger Balian,” he said between pants. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “He’s a good lad, that one, but he can’t outdrink me. That’s foolishness, cap’n.”

But before Harwin could speak, another voice drifted along the length of the road. It was oddly soft, without a hint of drink in it, at all. “Hello, lads. A beautiful night! The smell of the sea is always sobering, or so my father used to tell me. But he was drunk more times than not when I was a young one, so you can imagine my doubt.”

The sea captain had a hand on the helmsman, steadying him in his drunkenness as Balian stood on the opposite side. He counted five of them, all tall and broad shoulder, though the one who carried himself as the leader was of a same height with Balian. *His voice is familiar*, he realized, but the features of his face was hidden half by the shadows and the other half by the hood he was wearing.

“I hope the night was enjoyable for you all,” said the stranger.

“It was,” said Harwin. “But forgive us. Who are you? It’s hard to see your faces in the dark.”

The man laughed. “Of course. Your eyes would be sharp indeed if you could see us in such poor lighting. Sharp like a hawk’s. We know you though, and we see you well enough. All three of you. Your coming to the city certainly did not go unnoticed.”

Balian could not help but shake the queer feeling that was rising within him. He was aware that the others had fanned out to either side, encircling them slowly in the dark like wolves around wounded prey.

The man pointed to the helmsman, who was swaying between Balian and Harwin. “He does to look so well. Too much to drink? I imagine so. It’s rather easy in the Red Cock,” he then laughed again, and in the dark Balian could see he was shaking his head as he did so. “I always hated that name. “The Red Cock.” It’s too easy to mock. Oh, but that ale is too good to not drink., isn’t it? Better than what those highborn folk drink in the city.”

Balian could not keep quiet any longer. “Aye, the ale was good, but surely that’s not why you’re here.”

The man laughed again. “Ah, at least he speaks! He who says very little. Gods, no! Actually, we come to you for an entirely different reason. Amens need to be made the other night. Great insults were committed between the Haliots and the Talish.”

A face flashed before his mind, an arrogant face that matched the cockiness of the voice that had been speaking. But no sooner had the realization dawn on Balian when something struck him on the side of the head. His ears were ringing as he felt the cobblestones caught his fall. They were cold and damp, unforgivingly hard as he tried to orient himself in the darkness.

But the blows came from unseen attackers. They rained mercilessly upon his exposed body. A blow to the gut drove the wind from his lungs as he tried to choke out Harwin’s name.

Where had they gone? Why didn't they do something? But from under the shelter off his arms he could not see anything. He couldn't even see the silhouettes of his attackers. But that face flashed before his mind's eye, again, a face with a lopsided smile and a glint of shameless arrogance in his eyes.

How long the beating last, though, Balian could not say. It felt like an eternity of punishment, but the blows finally did come to a stop. Every part of his body. Tears burned his cheeks as he struggled for breath. Pain shot up the length of his back, and his right hand felt numb, save for the sharp ache in his wrist. He could feel them standing over him, and he imagined he made quite the pathetic sight. He waited for a moment before trying to get to his knees, but a foot was pressed firmly between his shoulders, and it forced him back down into the cold wet of the cobblestones.

"That was much needed," said the voice after a moment of laughter. *I know it, now,* thought Balian. *And I won't forget it.* "It's a shame that it had to end, but I made a promise: 'Don't kill them,' were my orders. Though I don't see the reason why I can't." And then, in the dark, Balian could feel hot breath at his ear. The voice was like the hissing of a snake. "You are worthless. A far better fate it would have been if only you had burned with the rest of your people. Maybe then my forebears would have been avenged."

Balian could feel the cold cobblestones on his face, but the heat of that fateful day began to creep up the back of his neck. He could smell the brimstone, again, but before he could say anything a rough hand seized him by the hair and lifted his face. A sharp edge was pressed against the soft skin of his throat.

“I would be doing a great service,” said the voice. “For myself, for my forebears, and for every Talish man, woman, and child who suffered from the Haliot tyranny. Why should I spare your miserable? There is no place in this world for you, anymore. You and your will perish, and no one would care for the loss. The reign of the Haliots is over. The sea is no longer yours. It never should have been yours. It shall now suffer Talish mastery, and it will soon forget the Haliot people.”

But then another voice spoke. “You had given your word,” said the man, and immediately a face flashed in the darkness behind Balian’s closed eyes, a face with rotten teeth and a thick puckered pink scar above his eye. “And your word means something, no? The bargain was struck fairly: they will not be killed. You gave me your promise.”

“The bargain is still agreed upon. If it’s the money you’re concerned about you need not worry. You’ll get your pay.”

Balian tried to speak. He was the prince of the Haliots, but no words could force themselves from his lips. The man who held him was laughing, as if he had read Balian’s mind and knew his intentions. “Don’t speak,” he said. “There is nothing you could say that would help you.” And then there was a burst of pain in the back of Balian’s head, and the last thing he heard was the man’s laughter as darkness descended over his eyes.

Chapter Ten

It would have been a god-sent boon had Balian dreamt of nothing. But in the darkness he saw many images. Therefore the faces of the dead, ashen grey and perpetually bound in their moments of agony. He saw the burning mountain with its slopes scarred by fiery fissures. Then, he saw the shadows of his attackers, and how their fists struck him relentlessly. All the while, the words were like a haunting whisper echoing in the caverns of his mind: *You are worthless. You are worthless.*

No, he yelled back, but his voice was weak in the darkness. He was the prince of the Haliots, descendant of Hal the Mariner. His blood mastered the sea and were mastered by none. But the only response he received in the darkness was laughter, cackling like a madman.

How long he was consumed by the darkness, he could not say. But he woke from the darkness under a stone roof, with a soft bed beneath him. He had no recollection how he got there. All he remembered was his descent into darkness from the beating, and the faces that had appeared to him, and the voice that had haunted him.

But he found Harwin seated at his bedside, reading a small leather-bound book through one eye. The rest of his face was bruised, beaten badly enough so that his other eye was swollen shut, and his lip was split. He held the book in one hand; his right arm was bound in a sling.

When Balian stirred, the book closed. "Welcome back," said Harwin, and Balian could tell there was a heaviness in his words. "You've been asleep all throughout the day. I didn't know how much longer it would be."

Balian looked towards the window. "What hour is it?"

"You are lucky. It could have been worse. Much worse."

Balian straightened himself up on the bed. His chest and side were aching. “Truly?” His voice was soft. It was as if a war drum was pounding frantically within his skull.

“Yes,” said Harwin. “And I’ll leave it at that, for now. How do you feel?”

“No better than how I must look.” He tried to manage a smile, but it failed to reach his lips. “How are you?”

Harwin looked down at his arm. “It isn’t broken, or so the physicians say, but it hurts all the same. But I’m well enough.”

“And the helmsman?”

Harwin’s face tightened. His eyes were heavy, and though they seemed as if they were looking right at Balian, they saw through him, lost somewhere far off. He said nothing for some time, before blinking and speaking slowly. “Get dressed. There’s something you must see.”

The helmsman’s throat had been slit ear to ear.

His Serenity offered to have it entombed as an honored friend of the city. “We’ll have a monument erected, and hold a feast in his memory.”

But harwin was shaking his head before the old lord had even finished speaking. “That would not be what he had wanted,” he said. “There is not a patch of land on this green earth he would wish to rot in.”

“What would you do, then?” said the old lord.

Harwin paused for a moment. “Give him to the sea,” he said at length. “He was always more fond of it than anything else.”

The old lord raised an eyebrow. “To the sea? That seems like as cruel a fate as burning him. When my time has come I would like to be placed on a hill beneath the sun.”

But they still bore the helmsman’s body down to the water, a quiet procession of the crew, and Harwin, and Balian, and any others who wished to witness the helmsman’s last journey. Through Langmere they proceeded, drawing the interested looks from each person they passed, but in Talwick, once it became clear what was happening, people showed little care.

They understand it, Balian observed. His brow was glistening with sweat, and his head was aching, but he promised himself he would see this thing done, a last token of friendship. To *The Sea Queen* they went, and once all were aboard, Harwin commanded the oars to be let into the water, and he himself steered the ship clear from the port and out to the open sea. With the coast still in sight, they said their last words, and the helmsman’s body, wrapped fully in spare sailcloth and weighed down with iron fetters, was dropped into the darkness of the ocean’s depths.

A thought crept into Balian’s head as the body disappeared from sight. “What was his name?”

“His name?” said Harwin.

“All this time I simply knew him as ‘helmsman,’” said Balian. “Surely he had a more... proper... name.”

Harwin gave a light chuckle. “Aye, he did, but he never liked it. He preferred ‘helmsman’ over the name that had been given to him.”

“What was it?”

“Bayard,” said Harwin, and it seemed as if even he was disgusted by the way it sounded.

“It was his father's name, too, apparently. And he always told me he hated his father.”

Bayard. Balian thought on it for a moment. *It's unfitting.*

Silence had settled on the ship as they returned to port. It was past noon, and a darkness was growing above the horizon of the sea, an ill-omen for an oncoming storm. When they had returned, Balian and Harwin sat in the quiet of the latter's chamber. The captain was deep in thought, a cup of wine in his hand as Balian stared off into the east, over the stretch of the city and where they had just come from.

“His Serenity has promised us every resource he has available to catch the man who did this,” said Harwin, at length. He took a sip from the wine. “But I cannot imagine who did the deed. I can hear the voices, but I cannot match them with faces.” Then he drained his cup. “Cowards,” he muttered to himself before slamming the cup onto the table beside him. It knocked over, spilling small droplets of what was left of the red wine. “Give me a face and I would hunt that man to the ends of the earth.”

“Was it not obvious?” said Balian, and he laughed. “I remember that voice, well enough. It belongs to the person who insulted us greatly at the feast.”

Harwin's look was that of someone who understood what was being said, but didn't want to believe it. “How can you be so sure?”

His voice has haunted my dreams. “Because I am. I knew his voice even without having to see his face.”

“You're making a bold claim,” said Harwin, “based on speculation.”

But Balian looked I'm dead in the eye. “I am sure of this.”

Harwin ran his hand through his hair, his one good eye regarding Balian closely. “I believe you,” he said. “I have no reason not to. But you cannot go and accuse the son of the lord who has taken us in of having done this.”

“Are we to do nothing, then?” said Balian.

Harwin shrugged his shoulders. “I do not rightfully know, to be honest. You will be called a liar if you were to accuse him.”

“I am not a liar.”

“And I know that. I am not calling you one. But others will. It is your word against his, and unfortunately you are in the wrong position.”

“And yet you were so eager for vengeance, this morning,” said Balian.

“And do not think I’m any less eager, now,” said Harwin, and there was anger in his voice. “I want vengeance on his death more than anyone. More than you. He was my friend, and yet I could not help him,” then he paused, and drew a breath. “But we cannot go after the old lord’s son, not now, not even on some later day.”

“Why not?”

Harwin rose to his feet. “Do not be a fool, Balian. What are we but a tattered remnant of a once proud and stubborn people punished by the gods? A prince you are, and a noble one at that, and with morality the likes of which the Haliots have not seen in many years, but have needed since the time of your grandfather’s grandfather. But what can we do, us, a broken group of no more than two score men, women, and children, who just three days ago were starving and staring the Weeper in her shriveled face? I would see my friend avenged, but this is what the world is like, has always been like. Stay hidden too long and she forgets you, and loses any care

for you, if she had any to begin with. This is the cruelty of life, the cruelty of things not always being what you hoped for. Tell me what we can do and I will see it done immediately.”

He would have told him, the answer was as hidden from him as it was from Harwin. 108“Then that’s it?” said Balian, and he gave little care for the apparent anger in his own voice. He refused to believe that the world was as cruel as that, but even as his silent protests tried to convince him so, there was still a voice in his head that told him Harwin was speaking the truth. After all, what did he know? The world had been some far off place beyond the sea, beyond the walls of Halsbarrow. And yet the defiance still remained. “We’d just leave it at that?”

Harwin’s nod was slow, as if he was forcing himself to grasp the reality of it all. His hand kept opening and closing into a tight fist, and Balian understood that the realization sat no better with the captain than it did with him.

At nightfall a small feast was held in the helmsman’s honor. There was very little joy in it, a mirthless event held in an uncomfortable silence. Balian sat at the high table, between the old lord and Harwin, but Asher was no where to be seen. His Serenity apologized for his son’s absence, but he too wondered where he could have been.

Everything was hurting, though, and Balian wondered if he could have handled having Asher there beside him—because it always seemed as if Asher wanted to stay close to him. To draw a deep breath meant to send shooting pain up the length of his back and around his sides, and his appetite had disappeared rather quickly. As the hour grew later, and a heavy weariness descended upon him, his thoughts turned towards his bed, and how much he was craving to be left alone in the darkness of his chamber.

As Balian took a shallow sip of wine from his cup, the old lord turned toward him. “We will utilize every resource available to catch the men who did this.”

“As I would expect,” said Harwin. He had been seated on the other side of the old lord, but his eyes were focused on the people below. “It is your responsibility, as lord of the city.”

“A man dies every day,” the old lord said, and his eyes were fixed on the captain with a hard look. “Do not think that this...misfortune, is unique to you and you alone. I want this man, or men, as you claim, to be caught as much as you both do.” Balian did not believe him, but the old lord continued speaking. “Do not underestimate my abilities in these matters. My connections are vast, and I have eyes wherever I wish.”

The old lord did not speak much, after that. Indeed, it appeared to Balian as if he did not want to be there, that he had suddenly grown tired and bored. There was a heaviness in his eyes as he surveyed the tables that stretched before them, and he was fingering the rim of his cup absent-mindedly. But Balian was not ready to bring the old lord back to the present. Let him drift wherever he wants. At least his attention was off Balian.

But it was Harwin who spoke. “My lord, where is your son? I would have expected him to pay his respects.”

The old lord stopped fidgeting with his cup and took a swig from it. “My son is a man of many ventures. It is a duty he has taken up since his brother’s death. Unfortunately it has taken him elsewhere, tonight, but he sends his deepest condolences for your loss. I hope his absence does not offend, but he was insistent on the matter.. His heart mourns for the loss, and he will see that a proper offering is made to the Weeper for the helmsman’s soul.”

“And what has called is attention elsewhere?” said Harwin.

“Matters of the state,” said the old lord, and his voice had an edge to it, almost as if it was defensive. “And matters of the state are not for your ears, or the ears of anyone beyond the wise council.” His eyes lingered on the captain, as if to see the point had come across clearly. But at length they softened, and he raised his cup with a light smile on his lips. “Asher is determined to see justice. He has always wanted to be the heavy hand that deals it. He will find the helmsman’s killers, and see that they get what they deserve.”

I am sure he will, thought Balian, though there was not a doubt in his mind that was a cruel lie.

