

CHAPTER 1

ETHAN'S DOUBTS

ETHAN BEDWYR, eldest son of the Eorl of Bedwydrin, stood tall on the balcony of the great house in Dun Varna, watching as the two-masted, black-sailed ship lazily glided into the harbor. The proud man wore a frown even before the expected standard, crossed open palms above a bloodshot eye, came into view. Only ships of the king or the barbarians to the northeast would sail openly upon the dark and cold waters of the Dorsal Sea, so named for the eerie black fins of the flesh-eating whales that roamed the waters in ravenous packs, and barbarians did not sail alone.

A second standard—a strong arm, bent at the elbow and holding a miner's pick—soon appeared.

“Visitors?” came a question from behind.

Recognizing the voice as his father's, Ethan did not turn. “Flying the duke of Montfort's pennant,” he answered, and his disdain was obvious.

Gahris Bedwyr moved to the balcony beside his son and Ethan winced when he looked upon the man, who appeared proud and strong, as Ethan distantly remembered him. With the light of the rising sun in his face, Gahris's cinnamon eyes shone brightly, and the stiff ocean breeze blew his thick shock of silvery white hair back from his ruddy, creased face, a face that had weathered under the sun during countless hours in small fishing craft out on the dangerous Dorsal. Gahris was as tall as Ethan, and that was taller than most men on Isle Bedwydrin, who in turn were taller than most other men of the kingdom. His shoulders remained broader than his belly, and his arms were corded from a youth spent in tireless work.

But as the black-sailed ship drifted closer to the docks, the coarse shouts of the brutish cyclopan crew urging the islanders into subservient action, Gahris's eyes betrayed his apparent stature.

Ethan turned his gaze back to the harbor, having no desire to look upon his broken father.

“It is the duke's cousin, I believe,” Gahris remarked. “I had heard that

he was touring the northern isles on holiday. Ah well, we must see to his pleasures.” Gahris turned as if to leave, then stopped, seeing that stubborn Ethan had not loosed his grip on the balcony rail.

“Will you fight in the arena for the pleasure of our guest?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Only if the duke’s cousin is my opponent,” Ethan replied in all seriousness, “and the fight is to the death.”

“You must learn to accept what is,” Gahris Bedwyr chided.

Ethan turned an angry gaze on him, a look that might have been Gahris’s own a quarter of a century before, before independent Eriador had fallen under the iron rule of King Greensparrow of Avon. It took the elder Bedwyr a long moment to compose himself, to remind himself of all that he and his people stood to lose. Things were not so bad for the folk of Bedwydrin, or for those on any of the isles. Greensparrow was mostly concerned with those lands in Avon proper, south of the mountains called the Iron Cross, and though Morkney, the duke of Montfort, had exacted rigid control over the folk of the Eriadoran mainland, he left the islanders fairly alone—as long as he received his tithes and his emissaries were granted proper treatment whenever they happened onto one of the isles.

“Our life is not so bad,” Gahris remarked, trying to soothe the burning fires in his dangerously proud son. The eorl would not be shocked if later that day he learned that Ethan had attacked the duke’s cousin in broad daylight, before a hundred witnesses and a score of Praetorian Guards!

“Not if one aspires to subservience,” Ethan growled back, his ire unrelenting.

“You’re a great-grand,” Gahris muttered under his breath, meaning that Ethan was one of those throwbacks to the days of fierce independence, when Bedwydrin had fought against any who would call themselves rulers. The island’s history was filled with tales of war—against raiding barbarians, cyclopan hordes, self-proclaimed Eriadoran kings who would have, by force, united the land, and even against the mighty Gascon fleet, when that vast southern kingdom had attempted to conquer all of the lands in the frigid northern waters. Avon had fallen to the Gascons, but the hardened warriors of Eriador had made life so miserable for the invaders that they had built a wall to seal off the northern province, proclaiming the land too wild to be tamed. It was Bedwydrin’s boast during those valorous times that no Gascon soldier had stepped upon the island and lived.

But that was ancient history now, seven generations removed, and Gahris Bedwyr had been forced to yield to the winds of change.

"I am Bedwydrin," Ethan muttered back, as if that claim should explain everything.

"Always the angry rebel!" the frustrated Gahris snapped at him. "Damn the consequences of your actions! Your pride has not the foresight—"

"My pride marks me as Bedwydrin," Ethan interrupted, his cinnamon eyes, the trademark of the Bedwyr clan, flashing dangerously in the morning sunlight.

The set of those eyes forestalled the eorl's retort. "At least your brother will properly entertain our guests," Gahris said calmly, and walked away.

Ethan looked back to the harbor—the ship was in now, with burly, one-eyed cyclopians rushing about to tie her up, pushing aside any islanders who happened in their way, and even a few who took pains not to. These brutes did not wear the silver-and-black uniforms of the Praetorian Guards but were the house guard escorts kept by every noble. Even Gahris had a score of them, gifts from the duke of Montfort.

With a disgusted shake of his head, Ethan shifted his gaze to the training yard below and to the left of the balcony, where he knew that he would find Luthien, his only sibling, fifteen years his junior. Luthien was always there, practicing his swordplay and his archery. Training, always training. He was his father's pride and joy, that one, and even Ethan had to admit that if there was a finer fighter in all the lands, he had never seen him.

He spotted his brother immediately by the reddish tint of his long and wavy hair, just a shade darker than Ethan's blond locks. Even from this distance, Luthien cut an impressive figure. He stood two inches above six feet, with a broad chest and muscled arms, his skin golden brown, a testament for his love of the outdoors on this isle, which saw more rain than sun.

Ethan scowled as he watched Luthien easily dispatch his latest sparring partner, then pivot immediately and with a single thrust, twist, and leg-sweep maneuver take down the opponent who rushed in at his back, trying to take him by surprise.

Those warriors watching in the training yard gave a cheer of approval, and Luthien politely stood and bowed.

Yes, Ethan knew, Luthien would properly entertain their "guests," and the thought brought bile into the proud man's throat. He didn't really blame Luthien, though; his brother was young and ignorant. In Luthien's twenty years, he had never known true freedom, had never known Gahris before the rise of the Wizard-King Greensparrow.

Gahris walked out into the training yard, then, and motioned for

Luthien to join him. Smiling and nodding, the eorl pointed to the docks. Luthien responded with a wide smile and ran off, toweling his corded muscles as he went: always ready to please.

“My pity to you, dear brother,” Ethan whispered. The sentiment was an honest one, for Ethan knew well that Luthien would one day have to face up to the truth of their land and the cowardice of their father.

A shout from the dock stole Ethan’s attention, and he looked that way just in time to see a cyclopien smash an islander fisherman to the wharf. Two other cyclopiens joined their comrade, and the three punched and kicked the man repeatedly, until he finally managed to scramble away. Laughing, the three went back to their duties tying up the cursed craft.

Ethan had seen enough. He spun away from the balcony and nearly crashed into two of his father’s own one-eyed soldiers as they walked past.

“Heir of Bedwyr,” one of the cyclopiens greeted through smiling, pointy yellow teeth.

Ethan did not miss the condescension in the brute’s tone. He was the heir of Bedwyr, true enough, but the title rang hollow to the cyclopiens, who ultimately served only the king of Avon and his wizard dukes. These guards, these “gifts” from the duke of Montfort, were no more than spies, Ethan knew as everybody knew. Not a soul on Bedwyr mentioned that little fact openly though.

“Do your appointed rounds normally take you to the private quarters of the ruling family?” Ethan snapped.

“We have only come to inform the nobles that the cousin of the duke of Montfort has arrived,” the other guard replied.

Ethan stared at the ugly creature for a long while. Cyclopiens were not quite as tall as most men, but were much thicker, with even the smallest of the burly race weighing nearly two hundred pounds and the heavier brutes often passing three hundred. Their foreheads, slipping out of a tight patch of stringy hair, were typically sloped down to the bushy brow of the single, always bloodshot, eye. Their noses were flat and wide, their lips almost non-existent, offering a perpetual view of those animal-like yellow teeth. And no cyclopien had ever been accused of possessing a chin.

“Gahris knows of the arrival,” Ethan replied, his voice grim, almost threatening. The two cyclopiens looked at each other and smirked, but their smiles disappeared when they looked back at the fiery Ethan, whose hand had gone to the hilt of his sword. Two young boys, human servants of the noble family, had come into the hall and were watching the encounter with more than a passing interest.

“Strange to wear a sword in one’s own private quarters,” one of the cyclopiens remarked.

“Always a wise precaution when smelly one-eyes are about,” Ethan answered loudly, taking strength in the appearance of the two human witnesses. He more than matched the ensuing scowls of the guards.

“And not another word from your mouth,” Ethan commanded. “Your breath does so offend me.”

The scowls increased, but Ethan had called their bluff. He was the son of the eorl, after all, an eorl the cyclopians had to at least maintain the pretense of serving. The two soldiers turned about and stomped off.

Ethan glanced at the boys, who were running off, but undeniably smiling. They were the youth of Bedwydrin, the eldest son thought. The youth of a proud race. Ethan took some solace and some hope in their obvious approval of the way he had stood down the ugly cyclopians. Perhaps the future would be a better time.

But despite the fleeting hope, Ethan knew that he had given his father yet another reason to berate him.