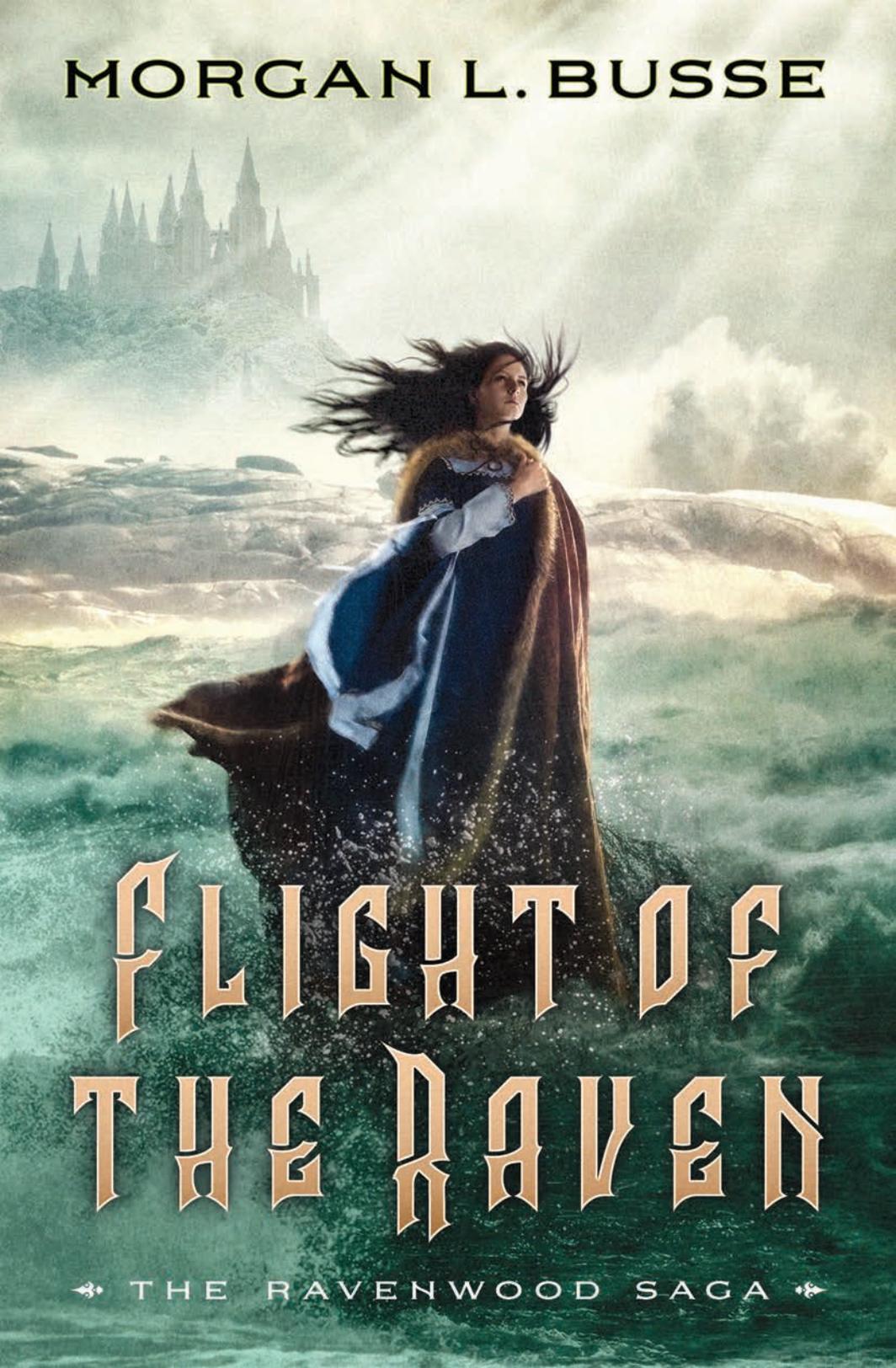


MORGAN L. BUSSE



FLIGHT OF
THE RAVEN

✦ THE RAVENWOOD SAGA ✦

Books by Morgan L. Busse

THE RAVENWOOD SAGA

Mark of the Raven

Flight of the Raven



FLIGHT OF THE RAVEN

MORGAN L. BUSSE



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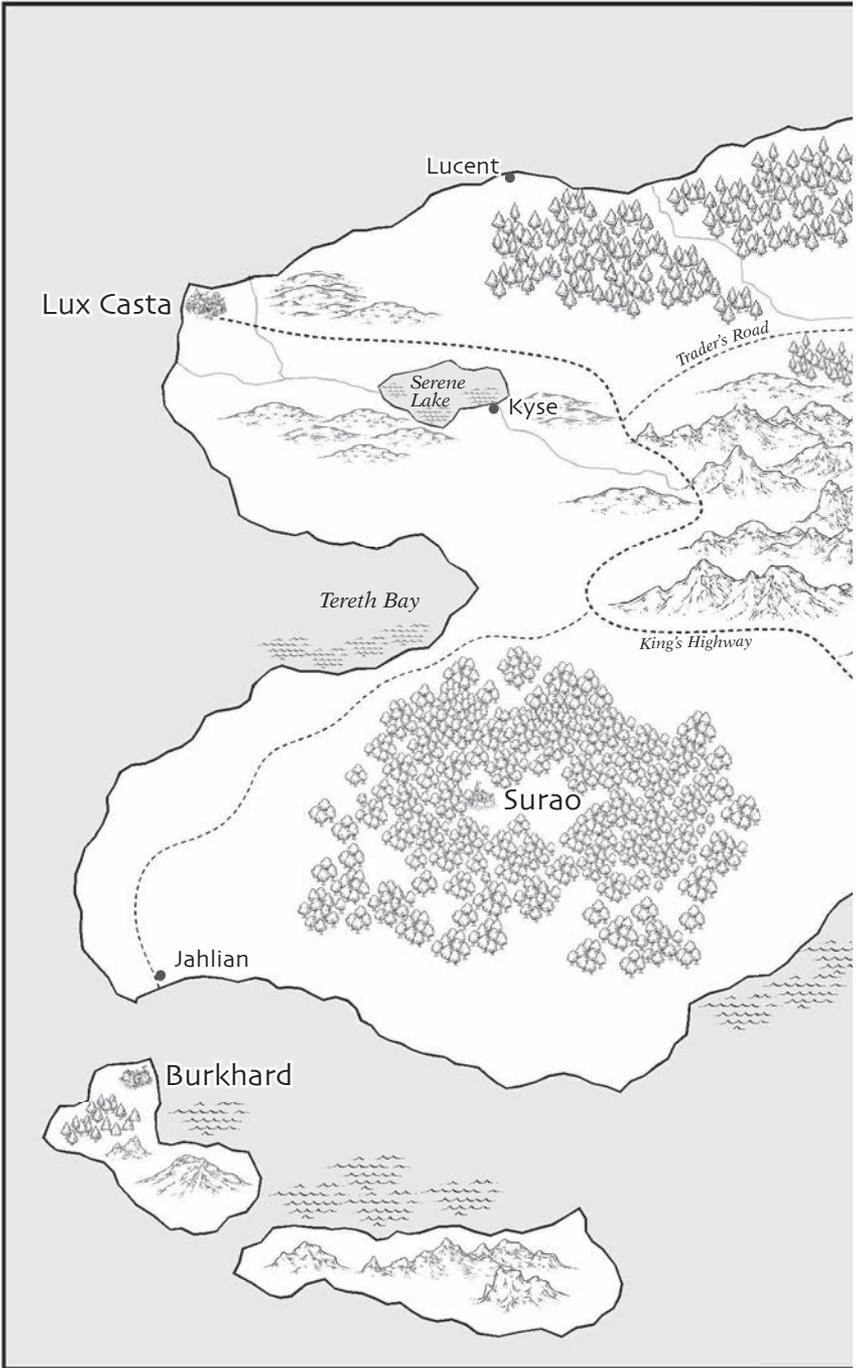
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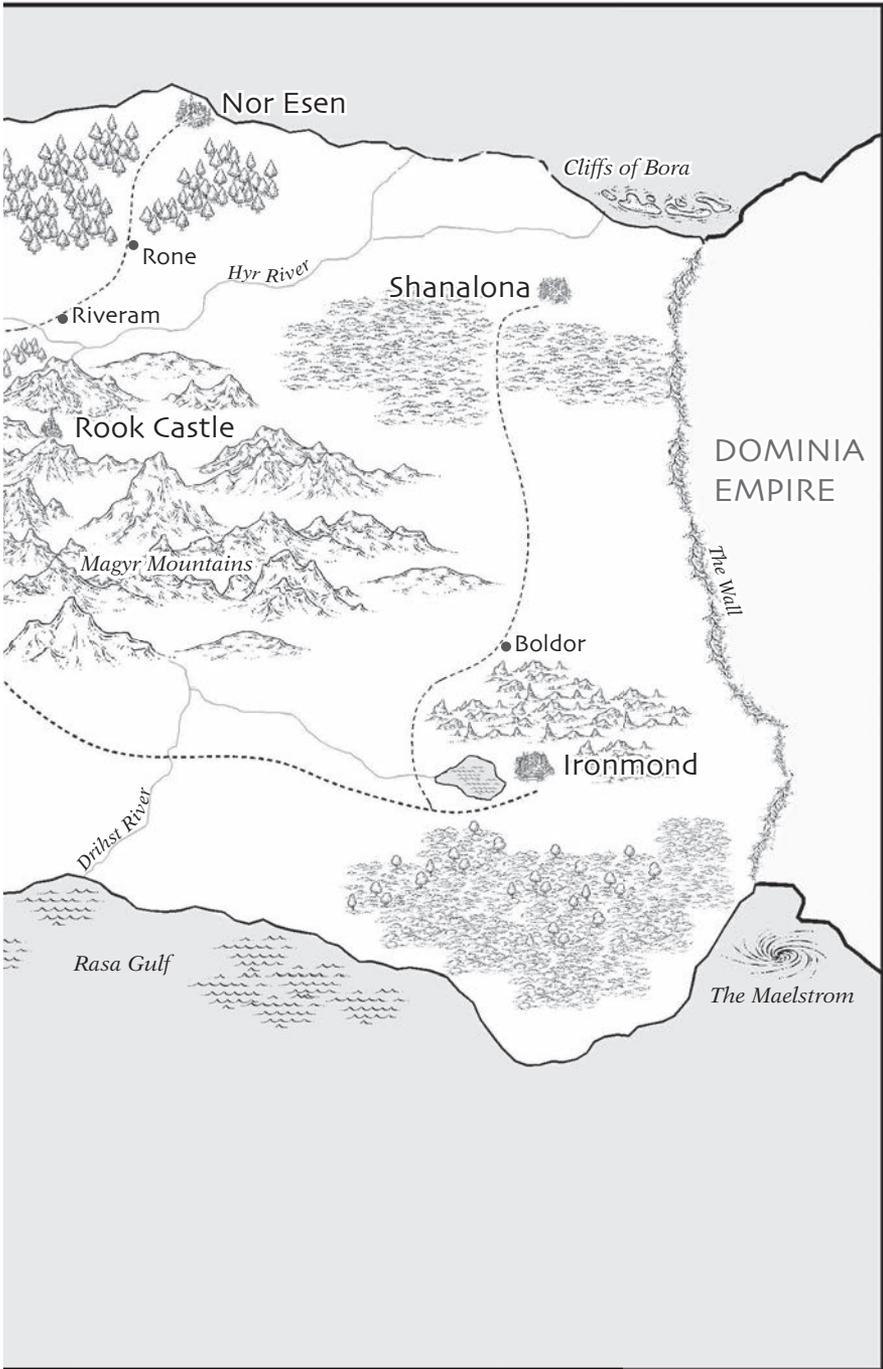
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To Kaitlyn.
May you always follow the Light.





Character List

HOUSE RAVENWOOD

House of Dreamers

Grand Lady Ragna

Caiaphas (consort)

Amara

Opheliana

HOUSE MARIS

House of Waters

Grand Lord Damien

Grand Lady Selene Ravenwood

Grand Lord Remfrey (deceased)

Serawyn (deceased)

Quinn (deceased)

HOUSE FRIERE

House of Fire and Earth

Grand Lord Ivulf

Raoul

HOUSE VIVEK

House of Wisdom

Grand Lord Rune (brother) (deceased)

Grand Lady Runa (sister) (deceased)

Renlar

HOUSE RAFEL

House of Healing

Grand Lord Haruk

Ayaka

HOUSE LUCERAS

House of Light

Grand Lord Warin

Leo

Tyrn

Elric

Adalyn

HOUSE MEREK

House of Courage

Grand Lady Bryren

Reiden (consort)

Grand Lord Malrin (deceased)



Dark.

So dark.

Selene shivered and pulled her cloak and hood closer around her shoulders. Her clothes were still damp from crossing the Hyr River, and the cold wind did not help. The trees that lined Trader's Road appeared like bony fingers reaching up toward the darkening sky. Twilight slipped across the road, blending the forest edge with the dirt path. Up above, streaks of red split the sky, as if some large animal had torn open the heavens.

Brittle leaves crunched beneath her boots as she followed the guards, Sten and Karl. Karl was a few inches taller than Sten, and younger by at least ten years. His hair curled along the edge of his cloak, and his hand hovered near the hilt of his sword. Sten was round and muscular, with greying hair and a neck as thick as a man's hand. He pointed at something, and Karl answered in a low, gruff voice.

Cohen, the monk, walked quietly beside her, his presence warm and friendly. He was as tall as he was skinny, with straw-colored hair that stuck out around his face. And behind her . . .

Her stomach lurched and her fingers curled around the edge of her cloak. Lord Damien followed a couple of feet behind, his steps firm. No, not lord. Not to her anymore.

Damien. Her husband.

Selene kept her eyes ahead, but every part of her could sense him. The moment the monk had finished the rites and the flame had jumped between their hands, she *knew* him. Most of it she had already discovered during her dreamwalks, but having that knowledge imparted into her innermost mind and soul, rather than seeing it as memories, were two completely different things. And just as much as she now knew him, he knew her as well. He knew who she really was. He knew what she could do.

He knew her gift.

She could still see the shock on his face the moment her dream-walking gift was revealed to him. Yet he was still able to turn away and maintain enough mental capacity to raise the river barrier in time to save them.

Selene lifted her hand and brushed her cheek. That power. To raise water. It was amazing. And terrifying. And if he hadn't chosen to bond with her minutes before . . .

Her hand slid down and rested on her throat. She would have drowned alongside those men.

Instead, Damien had chosen to save her. In a permanent way.

A wave of dizziness hit her, darkening her vision for a moment. Mere days ago she was heir to House Ravenwood's secret and training to be a dreamkiller, only now to be crossing a whole new country on her way to a new home and new life.

A dead branch caught her foot, and Selene stumbled forward. A hand caught her by the forearm while something gripped her cloak and pulled her back.

"Are you all right?" Cohen asked beside her.

"Careful there," Damien said behind her.

“I’m fine. I didn’t see the branch.” She didn’t want to explain how her thoughts and emotions were a jumbled mess, making it hard to concentrate. That, and she was tired. So very tired.

Damien kept his hand on her back—a light touch, but every part of her was focused on that spot between her shoulder blades, right where his hand was.

Right where her mark was.

“We should be close to Riveram. Then we can all rest for the night.” He removed his hand, but Selene could still feel the imprint of it. Would she ever get used to him? She was not a woman who touched people or liked to be touched herself. The only person she ever truly let past her physical barrier was Ophie—

Her heart clenched and she missed a step, but no one seemed to notice this time. She held a fist to her chest to ease the pain inside as she pictured her youngest sister. Her sweet smile. Her dark curly hair. The way her eyes communicated what she was thinking in a way she could not say with her mouth.

Would she ever see her little sister again?

“Ophie,” she whispered as moisture collected along her lower eyelids. She blinked before the tears could collect and roll down her cheeks. She would not waste this opportunity that fortune, chance, or perhaps even the Light himself had given her. She would not leave her sisters behind—even Amara. She had an opportunity now to find a way to free them from the Ravenwood legacy.

“I wish we had our horses,” Karl grumbled up ahead, so quietly that Selene barely heard his words.

“Stop your bellyaching. Would you rather have a horse or your life?” Sten replied, just as quietly.

“Do you really believe she did this to rescue us? Or was it to find a way to the Northern Shores and then finish her job?”

“Do you not understand what Lord Damien did back there?”

Karl grunted out what sounded like a no.

“By marrying her, Lord Damien ensured that Lady Selene can never take his life.”

Selene sucked in a breath. He did? How much did she not understand about the marriage rites?

Sten continued. “Cohen bound them together. She can never harm him in that way. She cannot kill him.”

She frowned. Was that why Damien proposed a marriage alliance? To save himself? It also explained why her Ravenwood ancestors took consorts from lesser houses: not only to protect their secrets, but to make sure the men who knew those secrets could not turn around and kill them. It seemed that in return they could never kill their husbands either.

The guards did not seem to realize she could hear their conversation, something for which she was thankful, as they had provided her with information. But what they didn't seem to understand was that she had no plans to fulfill her mission. In fact, if Damien was truly the threat from the north her mother feared, then all the better if he lived.

But it did make her wonder. What was the true reason Damien chose to bond with her? To save her . . . or to save himself?

Just when it seemed it would be too dark to go on, a faint light appeared in the distance up ahead on the road.

“Riveram. Finally,” Sten said, his voice sounding fatigued.

“Looks like it,” Karl replied.

“Thank the Light,” Cohen said beside Selene.

Selene didn't say a word. Instead, she focused on twinkling light. Every part of her body was past exhaustion, and the only thing making her move was the thought that if she didn't, someone would have to carry her. And that wasn't going to happen.

The light ahead brightened as night fell. A sliver of a moon

hung in the sky, partially obscured by the trees. Selene focused on the light and the road before her, unwilling to trip on another branch or rock. More lights appeared as log homes took shape in the distance.

“Do they have an inn?” Cohen glanced at the men behind him.

“I don’t think so,” Taegis replied. “Riveram is small compared to most of the villages along Trader’s Road. We’ll see if someone is willing to give us a room for the night, or perhaps there is a barn we can sleep in.”

A barn? Selene sighed. Well, at least it was out in the open. Much more preferable than the cramped tunnel where they had spent the last day and a half.

“Oh.” Cohen sounded crestfallen. “What about food?”

“I’m sure we will find a meal. The people of Riveram are generous.”

Her stomach rumbled loudly in response. Selene placed a hand along her middle and bit her lip. Did they hear that? A chuckle behind her, sounding vaguely like Damien, answered her question.

Sten looked back at the same time. “Sounds like I’m not the only one who’s hungry.”

Selene gave him a small smile, one he probably could barely see in the dark. At least he wasn’t as suspicious as Karl.

Twenty minutes later, they reached the edge of Riveram. Taegis was right. The village was small. As far as she could tell, there were only a handful of wood homes with thatched roofs. Yellow light from candles shown through small, square windows, providing the only light in the village. Around the homes, slender logs were stacked and tied together with twine and propped up by posts, creating fences around gardens or pens for livestock. A hint of smoke filled the air, and a subtle hum of voices emerged from the cabins.

“It’s been a long time since I was in Riveram, but likely not

much has changed,” Taegis said as he came forward. Damien joined Selene on the left. “If it’s the same as it was before, then the place to ask for hospitality is the house on the right. I can’t remember the man’s name, but he acts as the village’s leader.”

Taegis approached the door while the rest of the party stood ten feet away, just outside the light from the house. Taegis knocked. Seconds later, an older man answered. He was bald on top, save for a few strands of hair pulled over his head, and a scruffy beard covered the lower half of his face. His clothes were faded and patched but in good repair. In his hand, he held a knife.

He glanced at Taegis, then squinted into the darkness at the rest of them. “Travelers? We haven’t had any travelers to Riveram in weeks. What brings you folks here and at this time of night?”

“We’re returning to Nor Esen from Rook Castle,” Taegis said, his own hand hovering near the sword at his side.

“Rook Castle? You mean from Ravenwood lands?”

“Yes. In my company is Grand Lord Maris himself. We seek shelter and food—”

“Grand Lord Maris?” The man’s eyes widened as he looked past Taegis and toward the group ahead.

Damien stepped forward. “Yes. My companions and I have been traveling without rest and seek shelter and food from your village. You will be compensated for your generosity.”

“My lord.” The knife clattered to the floor as the old man knelt down in the doorway. “My apologies at such a welcome. There’s been talk of highwaymen along Trader’s Road.”

Damien bent over and placed a hand on the man’s shoulder. “No apologies necessary.”

“I’m afraid we do not have many luxuries here,” the older man continued, still staring at the ground. “We are a simple people. But what we have is yours.”

“Thank you,” Damien replied. “Food and a place to sleep are

all we ask. And perhaps if there is a stable where we can obtain horses for our travels back to Nor Esen. I'm afraid we were unable to bring ours back from Rook Castle."

The man looked up, puzzled, but he did not ask. "We can provide what you require."

Damien took a step back. "Please rise. And if I may, what is your name?"

The man slowly stood, awe across his face. "Tarren, sir. Jorgen Tarren."

"Jorgen Tarren, House Maris thanks you."

Jorgen smiled. "Please wait inside my home while I find a place for you and your companions to stay the night. I do not have enough for a hot meal, but I do have cold ham, bread, and ale. Please help yourselves." Jorgen stepped back and motioned for them to enter.

Taegis entered first, followed by Sten, while Damien waited by the door. Selene glanced at Jorgen, amazed at the exchange between him and Damien. Mother would have never treated a commoner in such a way. She would have issued firm demands and expected them to be fulfilled.

But Damien had treated the man as an equal.

Taegis checked the cabin, then came back to the door and ushered the rest inside. As Selene crossed the threshold, Jorgen glanced at her with one eyebrow raised. "I did not realize you had a woman in your group. Will your . . . uh, companion need any special accommodations?"

Damien glanced at Selene.

Dart'an! She should have kept her hood up. A lone woman traveling with a band of men was not considered proper, no matter the party. How would Damien explain her presence?

Damien waved toward Selene. "Jorgen Tarren, let me present to you my new wife, Lady Selene."

So he was going to go with the truth. She both respected him for that and at the same time wasn't ready for the world to know. She had hardly had time to accept that reality herself.

Jorgen's eyes grew bigger. "My-my lady," he stuttered. "I-I didn't know. . . ."

"It was very recent," Selene said, hoping to put the man at ease. If nothing else, she could still speak like a lady.

"Then I shall be sure to place you both together."

Selene opened her mouth to answer, then stalled, her own eyes growing wide. *Both . . . together?*

Before she could say anything, Jorgen bowed to Damien and left. Selene stared at the doorway, a cold sweat breaking out over her body.

Cohen stepped inside and closed the door behind him. There was hardly any room within the cabin. A small hearth stood across from her with a cheery fire burning brightly. A sleeping mat lay on the dirt floor, with a chest at one end. To her right was a narrow table with a candle on top and two chairs. And in the back by the larder, a pot, a pan, and a few cooking utensils hung from the ceiling. Overall, it reminded her of the small home of Petur, the gardener at Rook Castle.

"The man was kind enough to offer us food from his own larder," Taegis said as he headed toward the back.

Selene stepped aside and stood by the fire as Damien, Taegis, and Sten gathered around the larder and pulled items from the cupboard. Cohen came and stood beside her. Taegis placed a platter topped with ham on the table. Sten followed with a loaf of brown bread and knife. Damien found a wooden pitcher and two tankards.

At the sight of food, Selene heard her stomach growl again, and a dizzy spell washed over her. She had never eaten cold ham, but at the moment, she felt like she could eat anything.

Taegis began to slice the meat while Sten broke off pieces of bread. Damien took a step back and closed his eyes. His lips moved but no words came from his mouth. Karl moved forward and poured pale liquid from the pitcher into the two waiting tankards.

Selene watched Damien from the corner of her eye. What was he doing? A moment later, his eyes opened, and he held out his hand as Karl handed him a tankard.

Instead of taking a drink, he looked over at Selene and held the tankard out to her. "You first."

She took the wooden cup and held it up to her lips, her eyes never leaving his. The scent of sweet yeastiness filled her nose, and she took a drink. The ale was tepid and tangy, warming her as it flowed down her throat. She took another drink as she realized how thirsty she was. After draining half of the mug, she handed it back. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Damien took the tankard and finished it off with one long gulp.

"Here," Sten said as he handed her a chunk of bread.

Selene tore off a piece and hardly chewed before she swallowed and broke off another piece. Bread had never tasted so wonderful. Sten handed her a thick slice of ham. The salty and smoky-flavored pork brought a groan to her lips. After living off of hard biscuits and dried meat the last two days, this simple fare was a feast.

The men began to chat and laugh as they enjoyed food and drink. Selene listened as she finished off her own meal. The dim light, pleasant company, and full belly brought fatigue crashing down on her. What she wouldn't give for her bed back home in Rook Castle.

Her spirits dimmed and she looked around. She wasn't home anymore. She could never go home. This was her life now. Her eye caught Damien's just as the door opened and Jorgen walked in.

“One of the families here in Riveram has a loft that two of you can share. Another family has offered their stable. Lord Maris, I would like to offer you and your wife my own home for the night.”

“And where will you sleep?” Damien asked.

“In my stable. It’s clean and dry, but small.”

Selene almost expected Damien to protest. It seemed to be his nature to serve everyone else. Instead, he bowed his head. “Thank you, Jorgen.”

The older man made his way through the crowded cabin and opened the chest next to his sleeping mat. He pulled out a faded quilt and cloak, then stood. “Here,” he said, extending the blanket to Damien. “It’s not much, but it should cover the both of you.”

Selene’s heart leapt into her throat. She wasn’t completely ignorant of all that a marriage entailed, but her parents did not share a bedchamber—not to mention a bed. And it was her understanding that was the usual way for every Great House. Was House Maris different? Did Damien expect her to sleep beside him?

Her stomach clenched even harder at the thought, and her hastily eaten dinner threatened to come back up.

“The rest of you may come with me, and I will show you where you will be staying for the night.” Jorgen bowed to Damien. “Grand Lord Maris, good night.” He glanced at Selene and continued his bow. “My lady.”

Selene tried to nod but found herself frozen in place.

Taegis came up to Damien’s side as the other men exited the cabin. “I will be sleeping outside Jorgen’s cabin,” he said quietly. “We might be in our own lands now, but I will feel better once we reach Northwind Castle. Especially with this talk of highwaymen.”

“Thank you, Taegis. I would join you, but I think it would be an offense to Jorgen’s hospitality and generosity.”

“I agree. Good night, Lord Damien.”

“Good night, Taegis.”

Taegis turned and caught sight of Selene. He bowed his head.

“Good night, my lady.”

“Good night.” Her voice cracked halfway through her words. She swallowed, but her mouth was dry.

Taegis left, closing the wooden door behind him. Silence descended upon the cabin, only broken by the soft crackle of the fire.