

CHAPTER 1

Lord Rendail sat motionless in the saddle, eyes fixed on the distant watchtowers silhouetted in the growing dusk. They reminded him of the fingers of a great hand, held up in warning to any who approached. He had not moved for more than an hour, and every so often his horse stamped restlessly, snorting in protest. His face betrayed neither impatience nor discomfort. He paid no heed to the coming dark, nor to the fine drizzle glistening on his skin, the rivulets of water running into his eyes.

The drizzle turned to heavy rain, but he made no attempt to seek shelter despite the fact that his cloak was stowed in his pack. He remained perfectly still, waiting, long dark hair plastered to his body as weed clings to the surface of a rock; the earth turning to mud under the horse's hooves.

When it came, the acknowledgement was brief and cold – less, even, than a word. But it was a sanction nonetheless, the equivalent, in thought, of a curt nod. Rendail responded by starting down the slope into the valley, moving without haste, keeping his mount to a steady trot.

It took a little under two hours to reach the gate, which had been opened to allow him passage into the fortress. He dismounted and walked through, the horse following him into a rough, cobbled yard. The gate swung closed. A groom, deliberately avoiding his eye, took the reins and led his mount away, leaving him standing alone on the steep path that led up to the inner wall. The rain had stopped, but water still cascaded down the path, turning it into a narrow torrent that spilled over the tops of his boots. Not that it mattered, as he was already soaked to the skin.

He followed the path to a stairway cut into the inner wall, running up some six feet to a gap wide enough to allow the passage of a man. On the other side, the path descended, continuing past a large number of dwellings both of wood and stone. It came to an end in front of a set of wide steps leading up to the entrance of the stone building that lay at the heart of the fortress. The doors stood open, and again he felt the wordless inner voice give its terse consent. He walked up the steps, and went inside.

The only source of light in the vast entrance hall came from two small torches on the wall above a great arched fireplace. They cast no more than a dim glow into the centre of the room, leaving the rest in almost total darkness. Rendail moved forward until he was standing in the light and waited, the water running off him and forming a large puddle around his feet. There was a scuffling somewhere in the shadows, off to his right, and he heard a suppressed giggle. He followed the sound with his eyes, but could see nothing in the gloom.

After another minute or so, the hidden observer's curiosity got the better of the desire for concealment and another rustle was followed by the sudden appearance of a boy, perhaps nine or ten years old, staring from beneath a tangle of black curls, a hand over his mouth in an attempt to stop himself from laughing.

The youngster mastered himself and, looking the guest up and down, declared loudly, "You're wet!"

Rendail allowed himself the faintest flicker of a smile, but said nothing.

“My father says you're dangerous,” the boy went on. “But you don't look dangerous to me,” and he continued to stare, full of curiosity, but despite his pronouncement stayed well out of reach.

Finally, Rendail spoke. “Tell me,” he said quietly, “what does someone who is dangerous look like?”

The boy's eyes narrowed as he pondered the question. “I suppose you're right,” he said. “My father says I shouldn't judge things by their appearance. But you do look very wet.”

“What else does your father say, I wonder?” Rendail muttered, half to himself. Then, to the boy, “And did your father send you here simply to see what I look like? Or did he send you to greet me, in his place?”

The boy flushed a little and lowered his eyes.

“Ah.” Rendail nodded, and again showed the faint hint of a smile. “Then I suggest that at this moment you are in more danger from your father than from me.”

As he spoke, the atmosphere in the room grew tense, and at the sound of approaching footsteps the boy paled slightly. He scurried across to Rendail, who placed a protective arm about his shoulder, and together they awaited the arrival of the owner of the footsteps.

The newcomer strode into the room, stopping a few feet from them, and fixed the boy with a withering look. The child began to tremble, and Rendail squeezed his shoulder for reassurance.

“Come here, Devren,” commanded the other, and Devren reluctantly obeyed, although Rendail noted a slight softening of the father's expression as the boy slipped under the waiting arm. He felt the attention shift back to him but said nothing, letting his eyes drift over his host in an unhurried appraisal. His first thought was that physically there was little difference between them. The man before him matched him in height and build. It was not always so, he reflected, his mind framing the picture of a young boy, a child no more than four years old, clutching fearfully to his mothers skirts, black eyes flashing hatred. The fear was buried now. Not so the hate.

He pulled a veil across the memories and continued his perusal of the man in front of him. To a casual eye they might have been brothers. Both had hair as black as their eyes. However, whereas his fell completely straight, almost to his waist, held back from his face by a small, carved wooden slide, the other's formed a mass of long unruly curls, most of which were trapped in place by a silver clasp.

At last Rendail broke the silence. “Your son,” he inclined his head towards Devren, who pressed himself against his father, holding his breath, “has been a most delightful host. Please don't be angry with him. He has entertained me well while I waited for you.” The boy exhaled, and shot him a grateful little smile. Rendail bowed in the boy's direction and continued, deliberately adopting the mode of speech reserved for formal exchanges among high ranking Family members. “Thank you, Devren, son of Arghel, for your welcome. I am honoured to be admitted to your father's house.”

It was clear from his expression that the opening step in the ritual dance of courtesies was not lost on Arghel. He said nothing, however. Instead, he nodded to his son, who took a nervous pace forward and returned the bow, adding the correct response, “The honour is mine,” then, after a pause and a glance backwards, “and my father's.”

Arghel stroked the boy's head gently and whispered, "Go to your mother now, and wait with her until I come."

He waited until Devren's footsteps faded along the corridor before addressing his visitor for the first time, his tone distant, his voice even.

"You must realise, Lord Rendail, that you are not welcome here. May I remind you that you are a long way from your own house, and that your usual bullying tactics will be quite ineffective here. The reason must be pressing indeed, to force you from your stronghold – you have not dared to cross your border for more than two hundred years."

Rendail lowered his eyes. "Lord Rendail?" he murmured to himself. Then, looking up, he said aloud, "You still refuse to call me 'Father', then?"

When Arghel didn't respond, he sighed and went on, "As you rightly say, the reason is pressing, and as you have been watching my approach for some time, you also know that I have come alone. It should be quite clear to you by now that I would harm neither you nor your family. There is a threat, certainly, and a grave one, but it is not from me. Now," he gestured towards his sodden clothing, "I would prefer to be dry, and perhaps rested, before we discuss the matter fully. That is, if you are prepared to extend your hospitality as far as a fire and somewhere to sleep."

Arghel hesitated, then sent out a silent command, and a moment later a young man appeared at the doorway. The youth was one of the many short lived people who had their homes within the walls of the fortress, one without the 'gift', as it was known. Seeing the guest was another mind reader he gave Arghel a nervous glance. Arghel gave him a reassuring smile, and turned back to Rendail.

"I forbid you to use your gift in my house. You will communicate by speech, and speech alone. Neither will you influence anyone using thought. If you cannot submit to these conditions, leave now."

Rendail raised his shoulders in a slight shrug. "As you say, it is your house. I give my word that unless directly threatened, I will influence no one, except through speech. This meeting is difficult enough as it is – for both of us. I have no more desire than you to make things any worse. Are you satisfied?"

Arghel's eyes narrowed, but he gave a curt nod. "Until morning, then," he said, and turning on his heel swept out, leaving the youth to lead Rendail away down the corridor.