

CHAPTER ONE

“Hey, mate, pass the water will you?”

Tedenbarr nodded and wiped the sweat from his brow before handing the small canteen to Lach who eagerly started to guzzle down its contents. Alarmed, Tedenbarr snatched back the canteen and replaced the stopper while he chided his dejected companion,

“You have to be careful with that, Lach. That's all we have been provided for the entire day.”

“But it's just so hot!”

“What else do you expect? Out here on the open sea there aren't any trees for shade and the Kingdom of the East does have a reputation for being hot. The warmer it becomes, the closer we become.”

“Yeah, I 'spose so,” Lach muttered, refusing to look Tedenbarr in the eye.

Tedenbarr noticed this and sighed. *This journey is taking its toll on all of us. It is so hot that it becomes difficult to concentrate, and the little bit of water we are allotted on a daily basis does not help at all.* Sighing again, Tedenbarr resolved as much as was possible not to appear too worn out, if only to keep Lach focused on their chores. When the pair had first met they could hardly stand to be near each other and Lach had stolen a few of Tedenbarr's things from the cargo hold, leading to a discussion of fists. In time though, Tedenbarr and Lach had resolved their differences and eventually grew to be close friends, Lach becoming to Tedenbarr the younger brother he had never had.

They worked on in silence for a while, but Lach found it hard to keep quiet and started asking all sorts of questions about the Kingdom of the East. For some time Tedenbarr answered him to the best of his abilities, until Lach sensed him reaching the end of his rope and immediately quieted. Less than five minutes later however, the dark haired boy piped up again.

“Teddy?”

“Mm hmm?”

“When do you think we'll get there?”

“When we get there,” Tedenbarr replied, and took two nails out of his mouth, handing them to Lach. “Now concentrate on what we are supposed to be doing.”

The younger boy nodded and started to pound merrily away. His enthusiasm was catching, causing Tedenbarr to chuckle quietly to himself. He passed Lach a few more nails and continued with great industry. The work was arduous in the heat and it came to the middle of the afternoon by the time the two had finished re-securing all the loose planks on the Captain's cabin. The sun felt stronger than ever and Tedenbarr was having trouble focusing, glad he had sent Lach – who had looked ready to faint – below decks to fetch the buckets of pitch.

“Teddy!”

The sound of his pet name caused Tedenbarr to start and jerk his head up just in time to see Lach – who had been weakly staggering over to him – collapse in a heap onto the deck.

“Lach!” he shouted, jumping up and rushing over to the slight figure crumpled in a most distressing fashion amidst the scattered buckets of charcoal black pitch. Uncorking his canteen, Tedenbarr poured its contents into Lach's face. As a gaunt faced slave walked past, Tedenbarr grabbed his sleeve and cried out frantically, “Will, find Dapti and tell him he is needed. Now!”

William saw the stricken look on Tedenbarr's face and with a quick glance at the uninterested guards, immediately hastened in the direction of the sickbay. A few minutes later, minutes that felt like hours to Tedenbarr, he reappeared with the ship's physician in tow. The doctor's normally stony face softened when he saw the handsome young lad lying unconscious in Tedenbarr's arms. But only for a moment. Striding quickly to Lach, Dapti knelt down to check his pulse. A wave of helplessness washed over Tedenbarr, filling him with a deep fear as he watched the doctor's ministrations. A chill passed through him despite the overwhelming heat and he shivered, finally voicing the question that had been tumbling round in his mind.

“What's the matter with him?”

“Your friend 'as a bad case of sun-sickness. 'Is pulse is racing and 'e's burning up.”

Tedenbarr glanced shakily up at the doctor and struggled for control over his voice. “And that means?”

“If we don't get 'im into cold water this instant we'll lose 'im.”

As he spoke, the bald doctor was already gathering Lach up into his arms. Signaling to his assistant who had just arrived on the scene with supplies, Dapti swiftly carried Lach to the ship's small emergency room and shut the door firmly after them. Behind them Tedenbarr hung his head and just stood, stock still, until William put his hand on his shoulder and reminded him of his work. With a heavy sigh he set to re-tarring the captain's cabin, starting by cleaning up the mess which Lach had inadver-

tently caused when he had fainted and dropped the full buckets of sticky pitch. No easy task, as Tedenbarr soon found out.

For the rest of the afternoon he progressed further and further into a state of abject misery, not to mention the stagnant heat which made the situation worse as the pitch became more and more glue-like. A strong sense of hopelessness beset the distressed young man, and he quickly started to succumb to the terrible storm that was building inside of him. It certainly did not help that Tedenbarr had expended the last of his water over Lach and now had none left for himself. His mouth was dry, and his head pounded fearfully. Not until early evening was someone was free to help Tedenbarr, by which time his back ached under the strain of constant bending. A shadow blocked out the glow of the setting sun, and Tedenbarr looked up, treating the approaching slave to a glare most baleful. The young woman, whose hair fell just to her collarbones, was not put off by Tedenbarr's cold attitude.

"I've come to 'elp," she started, but was cut off by Tedenbarr.

"At last," he retorted bitterly. "And just as I am finishing up here. Wonderful."

"You know it's not like that, Teddy. This was the first time anyone was able to get away and 'elp you," Jehri said and picked up Lach's mop from where Tedenbarr had placed it against the cabin. "Course, I could just not 'elp you," she continued and began swabbing a rather sticky patch on the deck.

"Why are you then?"

An expression of disbelief crossed Jehri's face. "I thought us friends, Tedenbarr! This *is* what friends do for each other."

"Leaving me out here all by myself for hours while Lach might be dying? That isn't friendship!"

"In case it's escaped your notice, mate, we're all slaves 'ere. Not like any one of us is exactly free to go off and 'elp someone else unless it's a life or death situation. Sometimes not even then."

"But Will, Dapti—" Tedenbarr began, only to be cut off by mouthful of dirty mop.

"You just 'appened to catch them at the right moment. An' Dapti's got a bit of a soft spot for Lach, if you didn't notice before. Reminds 'im of 'is son."

Tedenbarr glowered at Jehri as he become more bothered by her insistent words, but she kept on speaking.

"Besides, it's not as if the soldiers care what 'appens to us unless it means their boots won't be shined or their bellies filled. But the rest of us care. It's just that our 'ands are tied."

Tedenbarr scoffed at Jehri's words. "Lach and I roam the ship mostly

as we please, Jehri. We may be slaves, but we are not captives. Not the way you and the others make it out to be.”

“An' do you know 'ow many of us can swim?” Jehri retorted. “A mere 'andful. We fall overboard, it's a death sentence. You an' Lach, you've got it loads better than a lot of the rest of us.”

“Why, because I care for the animals and Lach's got a face that would make the most capricious deity smile upon him?”

“You're not as replaceable as the rest of us are,” Jehri said and sighed softly, tired of Tedenbarr's contrary attitude, before brandishing the handle of her mop in Tedenbarr's face once more. “But that doesn't give you the right to skulk about the deck an' snap at a friend who comes to 'elp you out.”

Tedenbarr squared his shoulders in response and turned away from Jehri to slap some more pitch onto the wall of the cabin.

“What?!” he yelped out in surprise when Jehri grabbed a handful of his sticky tunic and jerked him around to face her.

“By the goddess, Teddy!” she yelled in frustration and shook Tedenbarr, “Stop thinkin' only you matter when we've all got a rough lot of it!”

The impact of Jehri's words stung Tedenbarr as surely as if his companion had struck him across the face. To his utter surprise he realised that the young girl leaning on the mop was right. Not that that was easy to admit – to himself or Jehri. She fixed Tedenbarr with a steady stare until he hung his head in shame. Taking a deep breath and then another, Tedenbarr shakily spoke.

“I – I'm sorry, Jehri. You're right. I'm deathly worried about Lach, but that doesn't give me an excuse to act like a skimshiv towards you or anyone else.”

Jehri arched an eyebrow before turning away from Tedenbarr and smoothing out a couple of rough spots that Tedenbarr had missed. “I forgive you. Now let's finish this job, yeah?”

Tedenbarr let slip a small smile at the sight of Jehri's sunny face. It still scared him how she could switch so easily from being very angry with him to displaying a quite exuberant manner. Though Tedenbarr felt much better for making peace with Jehri – having come to feel rather close to her since the time she had offered him an extra portion of food his fourth night aboard the ship – he nevertheless found it impossible to keep from fretting over Lach, and it was with not a little difficulty that he temporarily stowed away his conflicting emotions to focus on completing the task set before him.

That night when Tedenbarr and Jehri retreated to the slave section of the galley, Tedenbarr regaled Jehri with the myths of Agon to keep his mind off Lach at least for a little while. Still, as Tedenbarr recited the

great deeds of the legendary hero, a few lines of poetry presented themselves to his mind.

*All day long I moped
Then a wise lass gave me hope
Friend, when will you heal?*

The next day passed uneventfully. Once night fell however, a fierce storm arose from the north, driving sailors and slaves alike from their beds to prevent the ship from sinking. All through the night the men battled, lashing sails tightly to masts, pumping out briny seawater, and lightening the ship by throwing overboard all unnecessary items. Those above decks had the worst time of it, and only the ropes tied around their waists kept them from being swept out to sea. Still, the lines were thin and accidents happened, prompting those who had ridden out such storms before to knot their ropes doubly with extra lengths of the fraying material. If not for the danger the rain would have been a welcome change, for with it came the cool weather of the north seas. Relentlessly the rain pelted down, drenching Tedenbarr as he strove to keep his footing on the slippery deck.

“Hey! Tedenbarr, I need your help securing these cannons,” William shouted.

“One moment!” Tedenbarr shouted back into the rain. He wiped the water out of his eyes, straining to see which cannon William was at. Walking unsteadily on the wildly rocking ship, Tedenbarr ended up falling not a few times; once being swept off his feet by a huge wave, saved only by the cord tied fast around his waist. Finally he arrived next to William and started rapidly tying the cannons in place. As Tedenbarr looped the ropes through the iron rings embedded in the deck for such a purpose, he could not help but marvel at the sheer power of the storm.

“Keep your mind here, Tedenbarr, or you'll soon be swept over the side.”

“I understand, but Will, this storm is awe inspiring.” Tedenbarr paused and leant against the wet iron for a moment, not at all noticing the stinging rain that the wind whipped fiercely at him. “I am reminded of home on nights such as these.”

“Only you, Tedenbarr. Too much of that Agon epic rattling around in your head.”

Tedenbarr grinned sheepishly and resumed working, his poet's mind also toiling away.

A storm at sea is

*In a single word? Fearsome
Not all share such thoughts*

Laboring so close to the violent sea, great waves often rose over the side of the ship and crashed down onto the deck, much of it splashing into Tedenbarr and William's faces, which in turn made their eyes sting and vision blurry. For at least the hundredth time, Tedenbarr found himself wiping his rather lengthy shaggy hair out of his eyes.

"I never let my hair grow so long on Have Lath. Do you know a man who will lend me a pair of blades?"

"Of course, but I could cut it for you if you'd like."

"Would you? That would be fantastic. I've been in need of a bit of a trim for quite some time."

"Yeah, you really have. Alright, there. That's the last of the cannons. The storm looks to be lifting as well."

Surprised, Tedenbarr looked up. Although it was raining steadily, the wind had lessened, as also had the height of the waves. The air temperature had started to rise, though clouds still hung dark and heavy in the sky, with no signs of clearing in the near future.

"How long do you think until the rain ceases?" Tedenbarr asked. "Because as much as I like it, I'd prefer not to lose my footing over and over again."

William shrugged. "I'm not sure, another few hours perhaps? I'm surprised at you though. You hail from Have Lath do you not?"

"Well, yes."

"I'm given to understand that it rains quite a lot there."

Tedenbarr chuckled and ran his hands through his hair before answering. "Aye, but not quite as heavy as all this. Most often the weather is misty and cool. When a true storm blows in, we baton everything down, lock ourselves indoors, and stay inside until the storm has passed by. I only know two people besides myself who would dare to go outside on such a night. The man who raised me, Myrc – but that was when he was younger and the cold didn't pain him so – and my fiancée of sorts, Keira. She loves to sit out on her aunt's terrace and observe the sky as it fractures into a thousand pieces."

As Tedenbarr said this, he sighed dreamily and began gazing off into space. William regarded the young man quizzically for a few moments then asked him what he meant by "fiancée of sorts." When he received no answer, William tapped his head.

"Um, yes, sorry? What did you say again?"

"Your woman. You really carry a deep affection for her don't you?"

"Deep affection might be a rather small way of putting it." Tedenbarr's

eyelids fluttered shut as the ache of missing Keira bubbled up to sit with all the weight of the ship's anchor upon his heart. Making no attempt to hide his amusement at the young man's evident love sickness, William repeated his initial question, and Tedenbarr stopped trying to futilely wring out his shirt long enough to ponder his answer.

"Well," he started, returning to twisting the water from his tunic but this time more slowly, a frown creeping across his face. "You see, we had just become engaged – only Myrc knowing since Keira is not a slave as I am but a free woman – and we were about to share the good news with our closest friends when the *Sailing Prison* stopped by in need of a new animal handler since as I'm sure you know, the last one had recently succumbed to disease."

Tedenbarr stopped squeezing the distressed material and examined his clothes. "This isn't working, is it?"

William grinned and shook his head.

"In any event, when asked who best takes care of the animals among the slaves on Have Lath, the village guards dragged me forward and here I am. I have no idea whether or not Keira told of our engagement but all I desire," Tedenbarr said, peering up at the sky, "is to safely survive this journey so that I may be with her again."

"You are *quite* full of romantic notions, Tedenbarr," William remarked.

"On Have Lath I *did* have a bit of a reputation as a poet. I love the old stories, so excuse me if – what's happening over there?"

"Seems that everyone is gathering over at that end of the ship."

"Then what are we waiting for? I wager I reach the other side before you!"

"Are you out of your mind? Have you forgotten that it's still raining pretty heavily and the deck's bound to be—"

A crash and yells drowned out the last of William's words, who winced as Tedenbarr fell hard onto the deck taking another person with him.

"Ouch! That had to hurt."

William hurried over to the fallen persons, taking care not to fall himself. Upon reaching them he had to force himself not to laugh. He struggled to regain his composure and asked,

"Tedenbarr, Patch, are you both alright?"

The youth shook his head to clear it and replied laughingly, "I am, I'm just not sure about Patch."

"Don't worry ye self, young'un," Patch said. "I jist wish I 'ad ye youth."

Slowly Tedenbarr stood up and assisted Patch in the same. Red faced, he apologised profusely to Patch until the old man cut him off mid-sentence.

“Look, lad, I 'ready told ye it's alright. In fact ye reminded me of a time when I were younger an' I barreled straight into a gruff soldier more'n twenney times me size. That took the wind out of 'im an' 'e keeled right o'er. Well I thought I were done for, so I made off quick as possible 'fore 'e recovered. I were a right 'ero 'mong the other fella's me age in those days I can tell ye.”

When he paused to catch his breath, William intervened and managed to get them all going in the direction they were originally headed.

“What did you stop him for?” Tedenbarr whispered, “I enjoy his stories.”

“We really should get going before we land ourselves in trouble. I know from seeing it before that you could have stood there all day listening to him speak of his youth,” William whispered back.

With a sigh Tedenbarr gave in, hoping that he would be able to hear more stories at a later date. Despite knowing that in most of Patch's tales the facts of them were slightly – or greatly – coloured, Tedenbarr still loved to listen to them, wishing he could be as brave or do deeds as daring as the young Patch in the stories. Still, for all the old man's penchant for telling tales he was always rather demure when asked how he had obtained the stiff black eyepatch that peeped out from underneath the brightly coloured headscarf that he habitually wore. Given how closely Patch guarded that particular story, Tedenbarr was sure that it was the most interesting tale of them all and made a mental note to ask about to discover whether any others aboard the ship knew any details.

Turning his mind to other things, Tedenbarr mentally assessed all the slaves around him. The storm had been large enough to require the assistance of almost all of the ship's inhabitants, and Tedenbarr had noticed Jehri dashing about the deck battening down sails. With Lach still unconscious in the sickbay, Tedenbarr had spent a good deal of time with her, the two of them making the best of the oppressive heat as they worked together, sharing jokes and trading stories to lend a little interest to the laborious drudgery.

“Will,” Tedenbarr called after wandering aimlessly about the deck where the soldiers were busy attempting to collect a head count, “have you seen Jehri? I swear I saw her before I came to aid you.”

“I've not seen her, Tedenbarr,” William replied, an unreadable look in his eyes.

“She went below decks then? I ought to find her. I have a few things that I want to go over for tomorrow.”

“Tedenbarr,” William called as the young man started off. “I am afraid you'll not find her below.” The suggestion behind William's words halted Tedenbarr in his tracks, his mind unable to properly process what the

older man implied.

“That is not possible.” He turned to catch William's solemn gaze. “I'm sure she is around here somewhere. If not, we shall see each other at sup-pertime tomorrow.”

“Tedenbarr,” William began, unable to finish as he could not find the words and settled instead for placing his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

“She cannot be—” Tedenbarr said, voice cracking as he brushed William's hand away. “She's not!” he yelled. “She—”

Tedenbarr broke. William grabbed at him as his legs collapsed beneath him and hugged Tedenbarr to his chest, tears mixing freely with the rain streaking down his face.

“Tisn't only Jehri,” William whispered, holding fast to Tedenbarr who stayed limp in his embrace. “I myself was unable to find Davies, who was as much a brother to me as if we had shared the same mother.”

William let out a deep sigh, the pain of losing his best friend threatening to overwhelm him even as he attempted to comfort the young man desperately trying not to sob his eyes out onto William's already soaked tunic.

“When Myrna is angry, she takes from us those who we hold dear.”

Tedenbarr lifted his head at that and stepped away from William, the new-found huskiness of his voice unable to cover the tone of anger that Tedenbarr substituted for his pain. “I have lived my whole life on Have Lath around fiercely bad weather. One violent storm does not this the work of a goddess of legend make.”

“Tch. Tell that to the others who lost friends when the lines wore through. People, me, I have to have some way to rationalise my grief.”

“I see,” Tedenbarr said. He squared his shoulders and visibly tamped down the emotions that roiled just beneath the surface. “We should be getting under cover.”

William watched Tedenbarr walk off head bowed, the spring missing from his step. For him to lose one of his closest friends after the scare he had had with Lach only a few days prior – William wished he could do more for Tedenbarr, but his own concerns dragged him away from Tedenbarr's problems.

Meanwhile, Tedenbarr walked on languidly. A strange numbness had overtaken him, chilling him to the bone. He felt paralysed, only still moving by sheer willpower, and even that was seeping slowly out of him. He entered the musty living quarters of the slaves in a sort of stupor, not even noticing when a no nonsense guard grabbed him, hauled him roughly down the dim corridor, and dumped him unceremoniously in his tiny room. For a long while Tedenbarr lay where he had fallen.