

## Chapter 04

### *The Fifth of Iefimond* *Siracosta*

Standing on the other side of the open doorway was a man who looked to be no older than his mid-twenties. His hair, bleached blond from the sun, was just long enough to be whipped about in the gusts that slipped up from the harbor. Even in the amber lamplight, she could tell he was shorter than her by a few centimeters. Despite his tanned complexion, clearly due to a life spent outdoors, his cheeks were ruddy from the cool night clime. A thin growth of flaxen stubble did a poor job camouflaging acne scars on both cheeks. Dressed in a cream button-down shirt, a blue-and-bronze vest and a pair of navy trousers, he stood upright, with his chest out and his hands behind his back. By the rigidity of his stance, Zoe wondered if he was from the VMF; his casual evening wear led her to consider that he might not be there in an official capacity.

Zoe's eyes dashed around the darkened scenery of the stone path which led away from the porch and saw no one else accompanied the caller. Or, at least, there was no one that she could discern beyond the halo of lambent light. Zoe's grip tightened on the knife against her back. "Can I help you?" she asked as her gaze met the greenish-blue eyes of the visitor.

"Zoe Agilis?" he inquired in a soft voice, to which she silently nodded her head. "Well, I was sent to deliver this to you," the young man said as he took a step forward,

withdrawing his right hand from his back. Zoe shifted her weight for a moment before she noticed the contents of his palm. Without saying anything else, he leaned in and offered an envelope to Zoe, who regarded it cautiously.

“And you are?” Zoe asked as she reached out and set her fingers on the document.

“Bryce! Collin Bryce, is that you?” Dorena called out cheerfully as she trotted over to the entrance. Zoe looked over her shoulder to see her elated neighbor’s face. As Dorena pushed her way past, Zoe stepped away from the door and covertly set the cake knife on the nearby side table.

“Mrs. Seawise?” Bryce was taken aback as the stout woman smothered him in her arms, wrapping him up in an embrace. “I didn’t expect—”

“So, you know each other?” Zoe probed as Dorena eventually released the young man.

“Why, yes. This is Corella’s first mate, Bryce.” Dorena motioned back to the sailor, who bowed slightly. “And this is Zoe Agilis.”

“We’ve met,” Zoe noted dryly. “In fact, I think his purpose in Siracosta was to see me rather than you, by the looks of things.”

“Oh, is that so? Is my dear Corella back?” Dorena asked hopefully.

“Uh, well...”

“Oh, where are my manners? We were in the middle of dinner, or rather, the end,” Dorena interrupted as she took Bryce by the arm and dragged him through the open doorway. “You should have a bite to eat while you’re here. We have plenty extra and a growing boy, or well, man such as yourself has got to certainly be hungry from all the travel.”

“I couldn’t—” Bryce sputtered as he was led into the

kitchen.

“But you will.” Her tone held a motherly insistence that Bryce probably hadn’t heard in years. Immediately, he bowed his head and thanked her for the offer.

Jehn, who remained standing by the table, placed a hand over her mouth to muffle her laughter as she watched Dorena force Bryce into a seat before she dashed into the kitchen to dish up a plateful of food. Dorena was chattering away with the late-arriving guest as Jehn turned back to the entrance where Zoe lingered, the open letter in her hands. With the envelope discarded on a chair on her right, Zoe’s eyes examined the written message.

Once she was done reading, Zoe looked up and met Jehn’s inquiring gaze.

“Is everything okay?” Jehn mouthed silently, to which Zoe only nodded, though her countenance remained serious. She closed the folded sheet of paper and tucked it into a pocket before joining them at the table.

“I take it you’ve met before,” Zoe commented as she remained standing, directing the question to both Bryce and Dorena, the latter of which had just set a heaping plate of food down in front of the former.

As Bryce was about to dig into the meal, Dorena piped up. “Oh, Corella’s brought the lad home with him a few times, back when he was just a crewman of the *Seirina*. He was a young’un the first time I saw him. All skin and bones. I had to fatten the poor boy up, lest he get blown off the deck.” She turned to him and resisted the urge to pinch his cheeks. “Now that you’ve worked your way to first mate, I see that you actually have a little meat on you.”

With a mouth full of food, Bryce only replied with an awkward, close-lipped smile.

After a moment's pause, Dorena was reminded of an earlier inquiry that had gone unanswered. "Ah, before I forget again, where has my boy gone to?"

"He's, well..." From his shifting about in the chair, it was clear that Bryce was uncomfortable. It occurred to Zoe that he hadn't intended on visiting with her.

"Go ahead. You can tell her," she said to Bryce, who looked to her for reassurance.

After drawing a long breath, he turned to face the older woman. "He sent me back with Captain Kepsain and the *Cahimierha*. He's still out on the Great Sea. You see, it's a bit of a long story, and..."

"Take your time and start from the beginning," Zoe suggested as she retook her place to his left.

Bryce leaned back with a groan before settling into his seat. He took a drink from his glass, the chill feeling particularly comforting after his lengthy trek, and began to recount the events of the past few months to the trio.

"It was... uh, some time ago when this all started. Probably two years out when the contracts were signed and the construction of the boats began. As it was, Captain Seawise, along with Captains Kepsain and Wellsmitz, was commissioned by the Evisrans to command one of the three special ships built specially for an expedition to map the Great Sea. Ships were named the *Aergaeu*, *Hbitierai* and *Cahimierha*. Not sure what any of those names mean, though. Doesn't matter, I guess. I'll say, they're the biggest ships I've ever seen, with sturdier, reinforced hulls meant to withstand the harsher waters of the Great Sea. And even with a full contingent of men, they're laid out with enough space for crew's quarters and storage for provisions to last for anywhere from seven to eight months, barring any issues.

"Well, as it turned out, we were late to set off out of Port

Hadley last year, waiting for the Evisrans to finally show up, oddly enough. They put all the money up and contracted the whole thing and then they don't show up on time." Bryce let out a short laugh before continuing. "They did eventually arrive, well over a dozen days late, a couple days into Gnosimond. From what I heard, they were delayed getting through Chancel, but I didn't catch much more than that. The captains put a stop to them discussing with the crew why they were late."

Without a word, Zoe looked to Jehn, who nodded lightly. Bryce only paused to take another long swig from his glass before resuming.

"Once we was at sea, any fears the crew had about the durability of the vessels seemed to be calmed. By the fourth day heading eastward, we ran into a brutal squall that hammered the ships for days on end and forced us a bit off course. We eventually got back on track, though it wasn't without a bit of cross words and negotiation between the captains and the cartographers. Apparently, two of the Evisrans—one, a fellow by the name of Grathi, who was a bit of a seasoned mapmaker, and the other, Jakara, who was an expert in astronavigation—didn't quite agree with the route that the captains wanted to take. Finally, they relented when Corella advised them that sailing with the oceanic currents would be in their best interest, at least until they had a good idea where we was headed. I don't think they agreed so much as they let the matter drop to keep from delaying the voyage any further.

"Even though everyone who had signed on knew what to expect, that they'd be on the sea for months before returning home, I think the fact that there was no sign of land since our departure really did some of them in. By the second month, a rumbling of dissention began to seep into the crews. That I know of, on two separate occasions, men had to be tossed into the brig to sober up. I overheard that one night, Captain

Kepsain gave his crew a blistering tirade to remind them that they had willingly signed on knowing there was going to be little in the way of familiar ports of call. I think the hearty payday waiting for them upon our return probably kept the worst of the grumbling at bay.

“By the time we were nearing the end of Sehbienimond, the captains decided to speak again with the Evisrans, this time in Wellsmitz’s quarters on the *Hbitierai*. Because I was tending to the day-to-days of the *Aergaeu* while the captain was off-ship, I wasn’t privy to the meeting’s particulars. As far as Captain Seawise let me know, we were to change course on a directly east bearing. He didn’t say so much, but I got the impression that the Evisrans feared the snaking course we were on would take too long and we would be forced to head back to Verenigen before discovering anything. Captain certainly didn’t seem too thrilled with it, but he got their position.”

As they both understood Corella’s mindset, both Dorena and Zoe smiled at the comment.

“About ten days later, at the beginning of Eiithimond, we got our first sight of land since our departure. The men were so atingle, you would’ve thought the sands were made of gold and three dozen whores were waving to them from the shore. It was another three days before one of the longboats was sent ashore. Apparently, because they didn’t know what to expect, the captains wanted to be extra cautious. They could see a village just a kilometer or two away from the beaches, but couldn’t tell whether the natives were a danger or not. Eventually, Kepsain sent a boat in with one of the Evisrans, a tall fellow by the name of Thabies, at the head, letting him take the lead. It seems he was chomping at the bit to get on land and find something, anything. In talking with some of the crew of the *Cahimierha*, they said he was a real chirper, chattering on nonstop about going in land, like he couldn’t be bothered to be patient.”

At the mention of Thabies' name, Zoe's brow rose.

"By the seventh, Thabies and a delegation from the *Cahimierha* met with the local villagers. Come to find out, the place was named Haallmeca. Don't know if that was the name of the township or the island as a whole. Could be both for all I know. Still, it was one of a dozen islands in the area, no more than day-or-so's travel apart. We come to find out later than even the furthest isle away was barely a day's trip, probably more so in the locals' smaller ships.

"Later that day, just about nightfall, the longboat returned with good news. Apparently, the nearby village was fairly civilized by Verenigen standards. The only real issue was that they didn't speak Common. But, Thabies apparently understood what they were saying. Said it was a version of the old tongue. And since he was an expert in pre-Byraelian... well, everything, it didn't take much for him to translate what was being said.

"It wasn't long before we were permitted to encamp in a clearing a few kilometers to the south, setting up a fairly large site for a contingent of crew to be stationed. They rotated the men who would be posted there on a regular basis; I think it was to keep morale up since we'd been on the sea for so long. The captains and the Evisrans felt it was smart to use Haallmeca as a base of operations; that we'd send out one of the three ships to the nearby islands to scout the area. At the time, I wasn't sure if it was just so the Evisrans could fill out their maps or whether it was to determine if there was anything of value elsewhere. From what I heard, since I was put in charge of the camp and never got the chance to join in on the scouting sorties, many of the islands were populated, though not in the same numbers found on Haallmeca."

"How many natives do you estimate were there?" Zoe inquired as Bryce stopped long enough to finish his drink.

The plate before him was nearly polished off and he declined Dorena's offer for seconds.

"Six, maybe seven hundred," he said with a shrug. "Could be a thousand for all I know. I never saw more than a few dozen in and around the campsite. The Evisrans who went into the main village said that most of the population lived up in the back hills, so getting a good gauge of the populace wouldn't be easy. Reports from the scouts sent out was that, except for Sillphi to the east and Thoa to the south, most of the islands barely had a hundred citizens."

"I assume at some point in this narrative that you'll be getting to the issue that brought you here," Zoe stated, growing impatient with the meandering backstory.

"Uh, yeah," he sputtered briefly. "Well, it seems that by the time Eithimond was coming to an end, the Evisrans had come across some *details*, as it were. Between the scouting trips throughout the island chain and Thabies discussions with the Haallmeca's elected officials, we came to learn about another island a few days to the east, goes by the name of Valkenistri. Of course, the Evisrans wanted to go out and map it like they did the others, but from what I heard, the locals were none too keen about it."

"How so?"

"Well, from what the captain told me, the village leaders and their elders were quite upset at even the mention of the isle. Word is that the Evisrans learned about it from some documents they uncovered on one of the other islands. I didn't catch the details, but supposedly, there was a settlement on the isle of Dllinn that was left barren. Like they all disappeared, be it that they fled or were taken. In the papers they found in the town's common house, there was reference to this black island, the Valkenistri. Talked of strange things, almost men but not, coming from that island and arriving in the night."



Jehn shuddered at the implication.

“Of course, this was something Corella only told to me. He and the other captains thought it best not to let it get out. Didn’t want the men to know. In retrospect, I’m sure he wished he had at least warned them.

“Eventually, it was decided that the *Cahimierba* and the *Hbitierai* would both head out to explore the new location, while we were left to maintain our base of operations. It would be about twenty days before they returned. The stories we heard from the two crews were, well, hard to believe at the time. To be honest, they still are. After talking with both Kepsain and Wellsmitz, their first mates, Hullough and Weil, and the Evisrans, I got a pretty fair idea of what happened.

“It seems that when they arrived on the fifth, they found the Valkenistri to be this bleak stretch of scorched rock, barren of any vegetation or wildlife. The land mass was bigger than all the other islands combined. Grathi said it probably was ninety to a hundred square kilometers in area. Except for a stretch of blackened sand along the southern shore, much of the coast was inaccessible. Couple of the crewmen commented that there were odd rock formations along much of the coastline; like geometric-shaped columns of stone bordering the seas. Kepsain spoke of a volcanic peak at the center of the isle which he was certain was responsible for the state of the land. It wasn’t active, but he thought that the last time it had blown, the lava flow had ravaged most of the earth.”

“And he knew this, how?” Zoe asked.

“Kepsain’s a native Moa’rehnzan. Says that stories of the last great eruption from the Molten Eye on the Horn of Rehnza were something he grew up with as a child. Told me that he’s seen the dormant volcano from the surrounding waters as he was sailing around the Horn long before he was a captain.

“Well, they ended setting up a beachhead near to the shore

and started sending out groups to explore. Both Grathi and Thabies were pretty intent on charting out the entire island before they headed back. Late on the tenth, one of scouting parties found a cave near the base of the volcano. And you would think that finding a cave wouldn't such a big thing, but the Evisrans really wanted to see what was in there. So, they waited until the next morning before dispatching a group, including Grathi into the cave.

“Later that day, the survey team returned, all in a state. Grathi was all worked up and had to be calmed down before he spoke to the crew and captains. Evidently, they got a couple hundred meters in when they found man-made structures, including an archway that separated the opening cavern from a corridor that led further in.

“At that point, Wellsmitz wanted nothing to do with the cave, complaining about the stories they had heard about from the isle of Dllinn. He just wanted to get back on the boats and return. Everyone thought he probably meant to Haallmeca, though Corella figured he really meant to Verenigen. Thabies, who I never took for a pushy kind of fella, pretty much blackmailed him, telling him that he would forfeit his share if he left before they was done there. Of course that didn't go over well.

“It wasn't until the thirteenth that Kepsain and Wellsmitz eventually gave in to Thabies' and Grathi's request and sent in another scouting party with Grathi. Thabies wanted to know what was underneath the volcano and he was willing to prolong the entire expedition to find out. At one point, it was said that he considered sending for the *Cahimierha* as he was certain this was the *big find* he was looking for.

“By midday on the second day, couriers were being sent back with stacks of charcoal rubbings and drawings. They found all manner of murals and carven runes lining the walls as

they kept heading further in. I hear it was slow going and they only got a few kilometers further along each day before heading back to the surface.”

Bryce paused to catch his breath for a moment. Dorena refilled his glass, of which he took a quick gulp before he recommenced.

“On the sixteenth, well, this is where the details get kinda sketchy. I’m not sure that anyone has a full idea of what completely happened. What we heard from the survivors was a bit jumbled, though I imagine that, in the state they was in when they got back to the ship, they could be excused a bit of confusion. But at some point, they ended up in this big chamber, with a domed roof, probably a good ten kilometers along the path from the entrance. When they got there, they heard footsteps from off in the distance. One of the crew decided to check it out. A few minutes later, he comes back *screaming*, running to the others, telling them to flee.

“Of course, a couple bailed right away. They’re superstitious and already being down there has made them all sorts of jumpy. Well, the others, they didn’t wait too long, ‘cause a whole pack of these creatures come scrambling out of the darkness to swarm them. Grathi, who caught sight of them as he fled, said they were these scrawny human-like things, with skin like pitch and glowing orange eyes that flickered in the dark. Mouths filled with needles and a serpent-like tongue that wagged as they howled. As best as he could describe, their screams was like echoes in a well. Said it was the kind of thing that would stay with him forever.

“Well, Grathi and two other crewmen managed to flee. Or rather, they got away from those things. They said that they were hounded for a few kilometers. Of the three, Grathi was the only one not a bleeding wreck when he got back to the ship. After they got some of the details from the other two, they

had to medicate and lock them up in the brig to keep them from getting to the rest of the crew. I never saw them, but I heard that neither man was in any condition to do more than sleep and soil themselves, even up to the point before we left to return.

“Needless to say, they pulled up camp and headed back for Haallmeca right away. No one wanted to stay on the island after what had happened. You would have thought with what they heard that they would have hauled anchor and all three ships would have been on their way, but Thabies refused to budge. He was damned and determined that we were gonna go down into those tunnels, going on about how it was a monumental discovery. Wellsmitz, being the ass that he is, suggested that Thabies and his men could stay behind if it suited them. Thabies pulled out the contract and made it clear that they would forfeit *everything* if they refused to remain.

“It took a couple days, but they eventually negotiated that they would finish mapping the island, including the underground tunnels, in exchange for the expedition coming to an end. Thabies seemed more than happy to agree. He never would tell us exactly why, but I think he read something of interest in the rubbings Grathi brought back. Something he didn’t want anyone else to know.

“It was near the end of Ninimond before they came to an accord. After a lengthy discussion between the captains and the Evisran delegation, it was decided that Kepsain and the *Cabimierha* would return to Verenigen. To the surprise of no one, Wellsmitz was quick to offer the services of his own ship for the return trip, but his constant grumbling about wanting to be done with the voyage left the rest of us wary about the possibility that he might not come back at all. The Evisrans wasn’t too thrilled about the delay, but what with the need to restock on supplies, they had little choice. It was also Kepsain’s and Corella’s hopes that when back on the mainland, they could

hire mercenaries to provide some protection for the return trip to the Valkenistri.”

“And that’s where I come in,” Zoe commented.

“Well, to some degree, I guess,” Bryce turned to her. “Corella did ask me to come back with the *Cabimierha* to deliver that letter to you. I never opened it, but I gathered it was something he wanted to share with you about this expedition. I spoke with him before we set off, and he made it clear that I was to find you before we departed. He guessed that I might find you in Siracosta and if not, his mother might know where you were off to.”

“You said that you didn’t leave until the end of Ninimond—”

“We weren’t on the seas until the second of Thecimond,” Bryce clarified.

“Still, that leaves you just over forty days since your departure. How did you get back so soon?”

“Oh, it was because the ship’s navigators and Grathi had taken such detailed notes of their voyage eastward. Our return trip avoided the original serpentine path that had taken so much of their time, causing the trek to only take twenty-eight days instead of the nearly three months that the original course required. Of course, there were some rougher moments because we weren’t sailing with the currents, but the ship was sturdy enough to manage. We arrived back in Port Hadley only fifteen days ago. Since then, I was aiding Kepsain and Hullough in securing some manpower before I headed out.” His story told, Bryce let out a long sigh; his shoulders sagged with relief.

“What’s in the letter?” Dorena asked as she turned to Zoe, who stood up and removed the folded slip of paper from her pocket and handed it to the older woman. Dorena held the sheet in her hands as she perused it, nodding to herself as she set it down on the table. “Poor boy must have swallowed a

whole lot of his pride to just write this.”

Letting her curiosity get the better of her, Jehn reached over and snatched up the missive. With the wrinkled dispatch open before her, she began to read the brusquely-written script.

*Dearest Zoe,*

*You know I am not one to ask for assistance. I am not given to plead for aid unless it is truly warranted. But, I must ask for your support in this matter. My first mate, one Mr. Collin Bryce, will apprise you of the details. To write it all out would produce a tome rather than the communiqué I wish you to have.*

*As I know you would want from me, I must formally request your services as a mercenary. I assure you that you will be well-paid out of my cut of the expedition's proceeds. I am certain Kepsain is employing whatever gun-for-hires he can scrounge up from the docks of Port Hadley, men who are certainly more skilled with a bottle than a sword. I fear that without proper experienced fighters, our return to the underground tunnels will end in failure and the Evisrans, namely one Hollistier Thabies, will refuse to let us conclude this voyage without finishing this final task.*

*I tire of these islands and wish to return. So, please consider my offer. If you decide that you are not interested, please let Bryce know so he can plan accordingly.*

*Corella*

Jehn set the document down with a frown. The name Hollistier Thabies hung in her mind, though she couldn't recall from where she had heard it previously. *Pretty sure I've never met this Thabies. Maybe someone I know is familiar with him. I had to have overheard it somewhere.*

Bryce looked to Zoe as the room became silent. There was a long pause before he cleared his throat and spoke up. “So, what

say you? Will you be joining us?"

Zoe's demeanor gave no hint to what was on her mind.

"Oh, Zoe, you can't be thinking about doing this," Dorena said, the pitch of her voice rising as she stood up. "My boy should know better than to ask you. You've given up that life."

"He wouldn't have known that when he wrote this," Zoe responded. "When last I spoke with him, I was still employed. In the middle of a contract, in fact." Zoe kicked back the chair, the wooden legs scraping across the tile floor, as she came to her feet. After taking a deep breath, she placed a hand on Bryce's shoulder and spoke, "I'll do it."

"But it's so sudden. Shouldn't you at least think about it?" Dorena implored. "Bryce can wait until the morning for your response, can't you?"

" 'tis true." Bryce nodded in agreement.

"I've had all the time I need to consider my answer. I read the letter when Bryce arrived and got to contemplate my response as he told us about what had happened," Zoe noted. "I can't, in good conscience, ignore his plea. If things were to go bad, he might have to return with the expedition deemed a failure. Or worse, a financial disaster due to a breach of contract. I'm sure he's sunk lot of his own personal funds into this, with the hope of an eventual payday. If I have the skills to help him in any way, I don't see any reason to refuse." Left unsaid was clear concern that whatever was within the island might cause harm to her lifelong friend. With her experiences from Marhalli Isle and Trone Stenan, she was earnestly worried about what else might lie beneath the volcanic-coated surface.

"Well," Dorena began with a hitch in her voice. "As his mother, I'm grateful that you're agreeing to it. But as your neighbor and your dearly-departed mother's best friend, I feel guilty for even wanting you to go." Tears began to gather in Dorena's eyes.

Zoe crossed over to where the older woman stood and embraced her. "It'll be fine. Don't you worry. I've been through worse."

Dorena opened her mouth, as if to protest, but upon seeing the look in Zoe's eyes, she let it go. Zoe's mind was made up and no amount of coercion would change it. She brushed the tears from her cheeks as she tried to compose herself.

It was only when she heard a yawn leak from Bryce's lips that her attention was drawn from Zoe.

"Sorry," Bryce apologized as he slipped away from the table, a hand covering his mouth. "Between the travel, the meal and the drink, I think I'm a bit at my end."

"It's late. I think we've stayed long enough. I can make up a bed for you for the night," Dorena offered, motioning for him to follow as she headed for the entryway.

"It would be appreciated. I need to be returning to Port Hadley first thing in the morning." After a polite bow to Zoe and Jehn, Bryce was quick to follow Dorena as she made her way to the front door. Zoe joined them, holding the door ajar as the pair departed.

Before he was halfway down the path, Bryce called back to Zoe. "We'll be waiting for you at the harbor in Port Hadley."

"I shouldn't be any more than a few days," Zoe replied before closing the door. She turned about to find Jehn leaning against a chair in the living room, her hip pressed against the padded armrest. Zoe was surprised by neither Jehn's silent approach nor the smug look on her face.

Having been largely quiet during Bryce's visit, Jehn was the first to speak up now that they were alone. "I'd say I'm stunned at your decision, but I think you wanted something interesting to happen all along. It doesn't seem like retirement is all you thought it would be."



Zoe snorted as a thin smile crossed her face.

“So... uh,” Jehn stammered, looking for the right words. “I think I’ll be coming along, as well.”

Zoe raised a single brow. “Oh, really? Do you have enough clothes and gear to last a couple months on the sea?”

“I think I can make do.” Anything of value to Jehn was already in her pack, set beside the staff still leaning by the doorway,

“And school? You know you’ll probably miss almost the entire next semester? Isn’t that going to be a problem?”

Jehn groaned. It was a scenario she didn’t want to mull over at that moment in time. She didn’t exactly want to give up on her schooling. It had been important to both Marcel and O’mas, and she often wondered if that was why she considered it crucial. The problem, she found, was that the tedium of everyday life in Chancel was wearing on her, causing her mind to wander when she should be focusing on schoolwork. The routine schedule of classes and social interactions with her fellow students was proving to be a chore she felt she had to suffer through. Only when she found herself lost in the back alleys of the city late at night did she begin to feel the kind of enthusiasm for which she longed.

“Or, you could just worry about it when you get back,” Zoe suggested when Jehn failed to reply right away. “Maybe you can toss a letter in the post that you’ll be away for months due to some ‘family business’ or whatever excuse you can come up with.”

“So, you’re not going to make a fuss?” Jehn gave Zoe a wary look, to which Zoe smiled.

“You’re an adult. You can make you own decisions. If you want to head off into very real and tangible danger, who am I tell you otherwise?”

A PRISON OF FLESH

“Especially since—”

“I’m going there myself?”

“Yes.” After a pause, Jehn continued. “And that’s just it? No other reason?”

“Well,” Zoe started as she walked off to clean up the dishes. “I figure if I have you nearby, I’ll know what kind of trouble you’re getting into. If I’m off to sea, I won’t be able to stick my nose in when you do eventually get into a real dilemma in Chancel.”