

THE TENTH PROVINCE OF JARYAR

THE CALL TO THE COUNCIL

1st April 619 AL

It was an ordinary morning, until the strange woman came.

Meriden was standing among the rigs with one of the Lithermayg farmers, trying to forget that Sametta was marrying another man, and discussing this year's crops. "Our lady insists we need the beans, so very wholesome, and pretty in flower. And after all, I've been arguing with her for ten years or so -" he shrugged concedingly - "and she's often right." Garren grinned, and they both looked around.

The humped rigs of greening earth lay between them and the village road and its cottages – *that roof still not fixed*. Beyond, cattle hungrily grazed after the winter fast, and up the sloping pasture they could see the distant hall, and the church off to the left.

And the sky was pale blue - patched with blowing clouds, for the day was breezy - and an occasional lark soared and fell, soared and fell – like its own music, their lady would say. She had odd fancies.

A pleasant dull scene. Meriden didn't love it, but it was home.

But then there were shrill shouts. On the road, an unfamiliar old woman leant swaying on a stick. Three children were dancing backwards before her, laughing and calling, "Get away! Plague! Plague!" A stone, or a clod of mud, soared and fell, unmusically, and struck the woman's shoulder.

"Leave her, you brats!" Meriden strode towards them, putting all his lady's authority into his voice. "Shame on you! Shame!" The children scattered. He jumped the ditch, and hurried

back along the road to the woman, praying *Not plague*. She took a slow step forwards, staring at the ground.

Meriden saw stained brown travelling clothes, a cheap newish satchel, and a figure that swayed. An elderly wandering pauper. His lady would want him to be charitable, within reason.

Then she looked up, and he found someone he didn't expect. Surely she was younger than him - perhaps twenty-five. A thin brown face, with no rash and few marks of weather; ungreayed hair. Her breath was shallow, and her eyes dark-rimmed, but as they met his, he saw pride and anger. He saw her superiority over this place, and certainly over him.

“Greetings, madam,” he said.

“Good – good morrow, sir. Is this being the road to Vach-roysh?”

A foreign voice. His puzzlement grew. “Vach-roysh? Yes, but it's several days – many days away on foot.” She was rocking on her staff. *Exhausted – she's going to weep*. He dared to stretch out a hand. “Madam, you need to rest.”

“No. I must - I have a message -” But she gasped, and was falling forward, and he had to catch her.

He called Garren, and they carried her to an empty barn, roomier and fresher than those children's homes would be. She was starved-light, and her skin hot. “Go and tell the mistress. She'll want to help. But she shouldn't come herself – there may be fever.” Garren hurried away, and Meriden found a blanket, and water.

The woman lay on the straw, eyes wide, shoulders shivering. She revived a little to drink. Kneeling beside her, he noticed that her teeth were sound.

What is such a woman doing, deep in the Haymonese countryside, without servants?

“You're safe here, madam. Please rest. I am Meriden, steward of this estate. What is your name?”

She swallowed, staring upwards. A pigeon sat on a beam above them, jerking its head and fluffing feathers. “Upali. Upali of - it doesn’t matter.”

“Where have you journeyed from? D’you have friends or kindred near here, to help you?”

“Kin.” A grunt. “Curse them, all of them.”

Meriden blinked. She turned her head (with pain, he thought) and stared at his pale-skinned but otherwise very ordinary face. Her eyes were dark.

“I can see your soul,” she said. “You have a sad soul.”

You are a strange woman, Upali. This is going to disrupt my whole day.

“I need a priest, or someone who can write.” She stopped to cough, and her body rattled. “There are words. Words for the great ones at Vach-roysh.”

“I can write for you,” he said soothingly, and drew out parchment and pen, to prove it. But she wasn’t looking at him; she was staring at the pigeon.

Then, softly, “I saw their deaths, Abbos and Rosior. I saw it, and I spoke it, and they died. And now - I have seen. Write,” and she was commanding a servant.

Meriden was a servant, and so he wrote. Her voice was slow and thin, and sometimes she stopped to cough, but every word was deliberate.

“To the hall with six flames

Call the great of the nine

For an heir to the King;

They will seek for a sign.

From the north see a wife,

From the south see a son;

And the second will rule

When the counting is done.

*There is hate, there is death,
I feel fear, I see blood,
But one has stooped low,
Raised a bloom from the mud.
Bowing down to be raised
For the Dream, and God's law.
But the sheep, they all wait
For mild peace or grim war."*

The voice stopped. As he was writing the last of this nonsense, he heard the door open behind him, and the light was blocked by shadow.

His lady pushed gently past him, knelt, and took the woman's hand. She spared Meriden a glance, and he tried to say *She's very ill, and perhaps mad*, without words. Aloud, "Her name is Upali."

"Madam, I am Talinti of Lithermayg. I'm sorry to find you sick, but I've sent for a physician. Can you eat?"

Upali stared at the other woman, perhaps a decade older and glowing with health. If she saw Talinti's soul also she didn't mention it. She lifted a weary finger and gestured to his parchment. "The words. They must go to Vach-roysh. They must -" Her breath wheezed.

"My lady," whispered Meriden, "I think we may need a priest."

His mistress nodded sadly. Then she too looked over at his writing. For a moment, he wished he'd hidden it away. But that would have been a betrayal of duty, and now in any case it was too late.

He was fairly sure that those words would be trouble.

From "The Great History of Jaryar in the Seventh Century"

All of Jaryar mourned for Prince Abbos and his son, but King Osgar's grief was the most bitter. From that time his health began to fail, and by the next spring it was clear that he was fading towards death. Then there was great consternation in the land and in the capital, for he had neither child nor grandchild, nor sibling nor nephew nor niece. His nearest kin were the grandchildren of his cousin once removed Igalla, who had married the Prince of Marod in the year 571.

Of these grandchildren, one was Nerranya, Queen of Marod; and the other Haras, whose father had returned to his native land, and who was now Duke of the Province of Vard. There were some who said Jaryar could never endure to be ruled by a foreign queen; but there were those in other provinces who did not love Vard, and did not wish to give its duke the crown. And all agreed that warfare within the kingdom was to be avoided beyond everything, looking to and fearing the example of the seven-year War of the Throne in Ricossa, in which it is said ten thousand died.

And at last it was proposed to gather the great of Jaryar, both of the nobility and of the church, to a Council, and there present to them the claims of the two Competitors, the Queen and the Duke, who would send delegates to speak for them. And the selected people would hear all the arguments fairly presented, and weigh matters before God, without malice or strife, greed or selfish ambition, and would elect one or the other to be King Osgar's heir.

This was agreed, and then arose the further question, Where should this great Council be held? For the rulers of Makkera city feared the incoming of so many, especially barbarians (as they said) from the north and from the islands; while others argued that Makkera would be a

hostile city to the Marodi Queen, where she would not receive a fair hearing. The solution came unexpectedly from the King's vassals in Haymon in the west.

And so messengers rode and sailed out in the winter of 618 to all the nine provinces of Jaryar, calling lords and ladies, bishops and abbots, to attend in April 619 in Vach-roysh, to hear what the Queen and the Duke had to say, and then, by God's guidance, to choose between them.