



Children of Earth and Sky

By Guy Gavriel Kay

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From the small coastal town of Senjan, notorious for its pirates, a young woman sets out to find vengeance for her lost family. That same spring, from the wealthy city-state of Seressa, famous for its canals and lagoon, come two very different people: a young artist traveling to the dangerous east to paint the grand khalif at his request—and possibly to do more—and a fiercely intelligent, angry woman, posing as a doctor's wife, but sent by Seressa as a spy.

The trading ship that carries them is commanded by the accomplished younger son of a merchant family, ambivalent about the life he's been born to live. And farther east a boy trains to become a soldier in the elite infantry of the khalif—to win glory in the war everyone knows is coming.

As these lives entwine, their fates—and those of many others—will hang in the balance, when the khalif sends out his massive army to take the great fortress that is the gateway to the western world...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Children of Earth and Sky*

"...Kay's real genius at unveiling history as a large tapestry of individual ambitions, betrayals, loyalties and simple efforts to negotiate survival in a radically unstable world...compelling, sympathetic characters whose stories gradually weave together in ingenious ways."—*The Chicago Tribune*

"Guy Gavriel Kay has a wonderful talent. He tells stories in an invented world that is so rich in historical echoes that I found myself smiling with pleasure as I heard the echoes, while engrossed in the story. Warmly recommended."—Edward Rutherfurd, bestselling author of *Sarum*

[Kay's] approach, which is to explore our shared humanity through a prism of fantasy and history, is unparalleled... weaves a heartwrenching, exquisitely rendered tale that speaks to every time and place."—*Huffpost Books*

"...Kay is in masterful control of his material, and the prose is elegant. This is writing of the highest order. Very highly recommended."—The Historical Novel Society

"A book of the year ... about ordinary people not so different from you and me, *Children of Earth and Sky* is every inch the equal of the superlative Sarantine Mosiac."—Tor.com

Praise for the novels of Guy Gavriel Kay

"[Read] anything by Guy Gavriel Kay... His strengths are strong characters and fantastic set pieces."--*The New Yorker*

"History and fantasy rarely come together as gracefully or readably as they do in the novels of Guy Gavriel Kay."--*The Washington Post Book World*

"Kay is a genius. I've read him all my life and am always inspired by his work."--#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Brandon Sanderson

"A storyteller on the grandest scale."--*Time Magazine*, Canada

About the Author

Guy Gavriel Kay is the internationally bestselling author of, among others, *The Fionovar Tapestry*, *Tigana*, *The Last Light of the Sun*, *Under Heaven*, and *River of Stars*. He has been awarded the International Goliardos Prize for his work in the literature of the fantastic, and won the World Fantasy Award for *Ysabel* in 2008. In 2014 he was named to the Order of Canada, the country's highest civilian honor. His works have been translated into more than twenty-five languages.

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Chapter I

It was with a sinking heart that the newly arrived ambassador from Seressa grasped that the Emperor Rodolfo, famously eccentric, was serious about an experiment in court protocol.

The emperor liked experiments, everyone knew that.

It seemed the ambassador was to perform a triple obeisance—two separate times!—when finally invited to approach the imperial throne. This was, the very tall official escorting him explained, to be done in the manner of those presented to Grand Khalif Gurçu in Asharias.

It was also, the courtier added thoughtfully, how the great eastern emperors had been approached in long-ago days. Rodolfo was apparently now interested in the effect of such formal deference, observed and noted. And since Rodolfo was heir to those august figures of the past, it did make sense, didn't it?

It did not, at all, was the ambassador's unvoiced opinion. He had no idea what this alleged *effect* was supposed to be.

He smiled politely. He nodded. He adjusted his velvet robe. In the antechamber where they waited he

watched as a second court official—young,
yellow-haired—enthusiastically demonstrated the salutations. His knees hurt with anticipatory pain. His back hurt. He was aware that, carrying evidence
of prosperity about his midriff, he was likely to look foolish each time he prostrated himself, or rose to his feet.

Rodolfo, Jad's Holy Emperor, had sat the throne here for thirty years. You wouldn't ever want to call him foolish—he had many of the world's foremost
artists, philosophers, alchemists at his court (performing *experiments*)—but you needed to consider the man unpredictable and possibly
irresponsible.

This made him dangerous, of course. Orso Faleri, Ambassador of the Republic of Seressa, had had this made clear to him by the Council of Twelve before
he'd left to come here.

He regarded the posting as a terrible hardship.

It was formally an honour, of course. One of the three most distinguished foreign posts a Seressini could be granted by the Twelve. It meant he might
reasonably expect to become a member on his return, if someone withdrew, or died. But Orso Faleri loved his city of canals and bridges and palaces
(especially his own!) with a passion. In addition, there were extremely limited opportunities for acquiring more wealth at Obravic in this role.

He was an emissary—and an observer. It was understood that all other considerations in a man's life were suspended for the year or possibly two that he
was here.

Two years was a distressing thought.

He hadn't been allowed to bring his mistress.

His wife had declined to join him, of course. Faleri could have insisted she do so, but he wasn't nearly so self-abusive. No, he would have to discover, as best one might, what diversions there were in this windy northern city, far from Seressa's canals, where songs of love drifted in the torchlit night and men and women, cloaked against evening's damp, and sometimes masked, went about hidden from inquisitive eyes.

Orso Faleri was willing to simulate an interest in discussing the nature of the soul with the emperor's philosophers, or listen as some alchemist, stroking his singed beard, explained his search for arcane secrets of transmuting metal—but only to a point, surely.

If he performed his tasks, both public and secret, badly it would be noted back home, with consequences. If he did well he might be left here for two years! It was an appalling circumstance for a civilized man with skills in commerce and a magnificent woman left behind.

And now, the Osmanli triple obeisance. To be done twice. Good men, thought Faleri, suffered for the follies of royalty.

At the same time, this post was vitally important, and he knew it. In the world they inhabited, good relations with the emperor in Obravic were critical. Disagreements were acceptable, but open conflict could be ruinous for trade, and trade was what Seressa was about.

For the Seressinis, the idea of peace, with open, unthreatened commerce, was the most important thing in the god's created world. It mattered more (though this would never actually be *said*) than diligent attention to the doctrines of Jad as voiced by the sun god's clerics. Seressa traded, extensively, with the unbelieving Osmanlis in the east—and did so whatever High Patriarchs might say or demand.

Patriarchs came and went in Rhodias, thundering wrath in their echoing palace or cajoling like courtesans for a holy war and the need to regain lost Sarantium from the Osmanlis and their Asharite faith. That was a Patriarch's task. No one begrudged it. But for Seressa those god-denying Osmanlis offered some of the richest markets on earth.

Faleri knew it well. He was a merchant, son and grandson of merchants. His family's palace on the Great Canal had been built and expanded and sumptuously furnished with the profits of trading east. Grain at the beginning, then jewels, spices, silk, alum,

lapis lazuli. Whatever was needed in the west, or desired. The caressing silks his wife and daughters wore (and his mistress, more appealingly) arrived at the lagoon on galleys and roundships voyaging to and from the ports of the Asharites.

The grand khalif liked trade, too. He had his palaces and gardens to attend to, and an expensive army. He might make war on the emperor's lands and fortresses where the shifting borders lay, and Rodolfo might be forced to spend sums he didn't have in bolstering defences there, but Seressa and its merchant fleet didn't want any part of that conflict: they needed peace more than anything.

Which meant that Signore Orso Faleri was here with missions to accomplish and assessments to make and send home in coded messages, even while filled
with longings and memories that had little to do with politics or gaunt philosophers in a northern city.

His first priority, precisely set forth by the Council of Twelve, had to do with the savage, loathed, *humiliating* pirates in their walled town
of Senjan. It happened to be a matter dear to Faleri's own merchant heart.

It was also desperately delicate. The Senjani were subjects, extremely loyal subjects, of Emperor Rodolfo. They were—the emperor's phrase had been
widely quoted—his *brave heroes of the borderland*. They raided Asharite villages and farms inland and opposed counter-raids, defending Jaddites
where they could. They were, in essence, fierce (unpaid) soldiers of the emperor.

And Seressa wanted them destroyed like poisonous snakes, scorpions, spiders, whatever you chose to call them.

They wanted them wiped out, their walls destroyed, boats burned, the raiders hanged, chopped to pieces, killed one by one or in a battle, burned on a
great pyre seen for miles, or left out for the animals. Seressa didn't care. Dead was enough, chained as galley slaves would do. Would maybe even be
better—you never had enough slaves for the fleet.

It was a vexed issue.

No matter how aggressively Seressa patrolled, how many war galleys they sent out, how carefully they escorted merchant ships, the Senjani raiders found ways to board some of them in the long, narrow Seressini Sea. It was impossible to completely defend against them. They raided in all seasons, all weather. Some said they could *control* the weather, that their women did so with enchantments.

One small town, perhaps two or three hundred fighting men inside its walls at any given time—and oh, the havoc they wreaked in their boats!

Complaints came to Obravic *and* to Seressa, endlessly, from the khalif and his grand vizier. *How*, the Asharites asked in graceful phrases, could they continue to trade with Seressa if their people and goods were subject to savage piracy? What was the worth of Seressini assurances of safety in the sea they proudly named for themselves?

Indeed, some of the letters queried, perhaps Seressa was secretly *pleased* when Osmanli merchants, pious followers of the teachings of Ashar, were seized by the Senjani for ransom, or worse?

It was, the Council of Twelve had impressed upon Faleri, his foremost task this autumn and winter. He was to induce a distractible, erratic emperor to surrender a town of raiders to Seressa's fury.

Rodolfo needed to understand that Senjan didn't *only* raid over the mountains against godless infidels or seize their goods on ships. No! They

rowed or sailed south along their jagged coastline to Seressini-governed towns. They went even farther south, to that upstart marine republic of Dubrava (the Seressinis had issues with them, too).

Those towns and cities were Jaddite, the emperor knew it! In them dwelled devout worshippers of the god. These people and their goods were not to be targets! The Senjani were *pirates*, not heroes. They boarded honest merchant ships making their way to sell and buy in Seressa, queen of all Jad's cities, bringing it wealth. So much wealth.

The vile, dissembling raiders claimed that they only took goods belonging to Asharites, but that was—everyone knew it!—a pose, a pretense, a bad, black joke. Their piety was a mask.

The Seressinis knew all about masks.

Faleri himself had lost three cargoes (silk, pepper, alum) in two years to the Senjani. He wasn't any worshipper of the Asharite stars or the two

Kindath moons! He was as good a Jaddite as the emperor. (Maybe a better one, if one considered Rodolfo's alchemy.) His personal losses might even be,

he suddenly thought, as the young, smooth courtier straightened from his sixth obeisance (six!), the reason he'd been appointed here. Duke Ricci, head

of the Council of Twelve, was easily that subtle. Faleri would be able to speak with passion about the evil the Senjani represented.

"The emperor has received the gifts you brought," the tall official murmured, smiling. "He is much taken with the clock."

Of course he was taken with the clock, Faleri thought. That's why they had chosen it.

The clock had been half a year in the making. It was of ivory and mahogany, inlaid with precious stones. It showed the blue and white moons in their proper phases. It predicted eclipses of the sun. A Jaddite warrior came forth on the hour to smite a bearded Osmanli on the head with a mace.

The device made a steady ticking sound when properly adjusted. Faleri had brought a man with him who knew how to achieve that. He believed this man was also tasked with spying on him. There was always someone spying. There wasn't much you could do about it. Information was the iron key to unlock the world.

Orso Faleri felt as if the moments of his life were passing swiftly, to that ticking sound. His mistress was beautiful, young, imaginative, not celebrated for her patience. There were many back home who openly desired her, including two council members. At least two.

His unhappiness was extreme—and would need to be concealed.

The two great doors swung open. Servants in white and gold appeared, more tall men, standing extremely straight. The court official (he needed to begin remembering names) smiled at Faleri again. Another man appeared at the doors and greeted him. This, he knew, was the chancellor. A name they'd discussed back home. Chancellor Savko nodded his head. Ambassador Faleri nodded his.

They entered a large, long room together. There was a throne on a carpet most of the way towards the far end. There were fires lit, but it was still cold.

The clock had been placed on a table beside the throne. It was ticking. Faleri heard it when he rose heavily after the second set of obeisances. He managed to stand without help, which was gratifying, but he was perspiring under his heavy clothing, even in a chilly autumn room. It would not be seemly to mop his forehead at this point. His silk shirt under his doublet clung damply to his body. He worked to control his breathing.

If he had to do this every time he was presented for a year—or two!—it would kill him, he thought. He might as well die now.

Rodolfo was looking at the clock. He lifted a vague hand, in what might be construed as a greeting to the newest ambassador to his court. Or it could be a cautionary gesture to keep quiet. No one spoke. Faleri had not been introduced by anyone. He *couldn't* speak. He didn't exist here yet. A good thing, in a way. He needed to regain composure, and his breath.

The clock ticked loudly in a silent room.

Rodolfo, Jad's Holy Emperor, King of Karch, of Esperaña in the west, of the northern reaches of Sauradia, laying (disputed) claim to parts of Ferrieres, some of Trakesia, and diverse other territories and islands, Sword of the High Patriarch in Rhodias, scion of an illustrious (inbred) family, said thoughtfully, "We like this device. It divides eternity."

No one replied, though there were forty or fifty men in the room.

No women, Faleri realized. In Seressa there were always women at times such as this, adornments of life, often sublimely clever. He shifted his legs.

His head was still swimming; the room wobbled and swayed like a child's top. He felt hot, dry-mouthed. They *would* kill him with these obeisances. He would die kneeling in Obravic!

The emperor was taller than expected. Rodolfo had the beaked nose and receding chin of the Kohlberg dynasty. He was pale-skinned, fair-haired. His hands were large, his eyes narrow above that nose, which made it hard to read their expression.

The chancellor finally broke the ticking stillness. "Excellency, I have the honour to present the distinguished emissary from the Republic of Seressa,

arrived to take up his position among us. This is Signore Orso Faleri, who carries ambassador's papers attested by the seal of that republic, and who

wishes the privilege of saluting you." He had *already* saluted, Faleri thought grimly. Six times, head to marble floor. Was he now to crawl

forward and kiss a slippered imperial foot? They did that in Asharias, didn't they? That great, triple-walled city wasn't called Sarantium any more, it

had been conquered. It was where the khalif ruled. They had renamed the City of Cities since the fall, the terrible disaster of the age.

Twenty-five years ago. It was still difficult to grasp that it had happened. They lived in a sad, harsh world, Orso Faleri often thought. There was still money to be made, mind you.

The emperor finally looked at him. He actually turned from the ticking gift-object and regarded the ambassador of a power wealthier than he was, which lent him money, which was less beleaguered, and more sophisticated in almost all ways.

Well, good
, thought Orso Faleri.

Rodolfo said, quietly, “We thank the Republic of Seressa for its gifts, and for sending Signore Faleri to us. Signore, it is our pleasure to see you again and to welcome you to Obravic. We hope to enjoy your presence here.”

And with that he turned back to the clock. He did add, by way of explanation as he looked away, “We are waiting to see the man with the mace come out and strike the infidel.”

He was, thought Faleri, said by many—including their last ambassador—to perhaps be going mad. It was possible. Faleri might spend two years of his life destroying his back and knees, burdening his heart and other parts of his anatomy at the court of a lunatic. There was madness in the imperial bloodline. All that intermarriage. It might have arrived again.

For one thing, Orso Faleri had never met the emperor before.

Our pleasure to see you again . . . ?

Was this a damaged mind, lost to alchemy and philosophies, or was it the empty pleasantries of a ruler not paying attention to what he said? Faleri might consider that an insult. On behalf of Seressa, of course. On the other hand, their gift had elicited approval. That was good, wasn't it?

There came a chiming sound. Everyone regarded the clock.

A warrior of Jad, armoured in silver with a sun disk on his chest and bearing a golden mace, came forth on a curved track from doors on the left side of the apparatus. An Osmanli soldier, clad as one of the elite djanni infantry, bearded, wielding a curved sword, emerged similarly from the right.

They met in the middle, in front of the clock face. Both stopped. The chiming continued. The Jaddite commenced to strike the Asharite upon his head with the mace. He did so three times. That was the hour. The chiming stopped. The warriors withdrew into the body of the clock, left side, right side.

The doors closed, concealing them. There was ticking.

Jad's Holy Emperor laughed aloud.

Later that afternoon, as a cold rain fell, the chancellor of the Holy Jaddite Empire, a man greatly burdened by the demands of his office, closeted himself with two of his advisers in a fire-lit room.

The emperor was, at this moment, on a higher level of the palace—in a tower, in fact—where the latest attempt to alter the state of being of lead was

underway under the auspices of a small, belligerent, untidy person from Ferrieres. There had been rumours of dramatic progress.

In this room the discussion was more prosaic. It concerned the Seressini ambassador. There was a vigorous dispute taking place. Chancellor Savko's tall secretary and the young man named Vitruvius, who held no significant official position but spent most nights in the chancellor's bed, were both of the opinion that the newest envoy from Seressa was a fool.

The chancellor pointed out that the Seressinis had not become the power they were by employing fools in important offices. He differed with their assessment. Indeed, he went further and chastised both—causing the younger one to flush (appealingly)—for being so hasty in formulating any opinion at all.

“Nothing about this,” he said, lifting a necessary cup of warmed, spiced wine, “requires or is assisted by speed.”

He drank slowly, as if to make a point. He set his cup down and looked out the streaked, barred window. Rain and mist. Red-roofed houses barely visible below, towards the grey river. “We have no *need* to form views about him yet,” he said. “He can be observed at leisure.”

“He asked about women,” his secretary said. “Where the most desirable courtesans might be found. It could be a weakness?”

The chancellor made a note. "That is better," he said. "Bring me information, not judgments."

"What did you think of him?" his secretary asked.

"I think he is Seressini," Savko replied. "I think Seressa is always dangerous, always to be watched, and they sent this man to us. Did he say anything else?"

"Little," the secretary said. His name was Hanns. "A remark about pirates, the shared need to deal with them."

"Ah," said the chancellor. He had expected this. He made another note. "That will be about Senjan. He won't wait long before making a submission concerning them."

"What will we say?" his lover asked. Vitruvius was from Karch. He was pale-blond, blue-eyed, broad-shouldered, as many were in the north, and intelligent enough for his tasks. He was utterly loyal to the chancellor, which was critical at any court, and he knew how to kill people.

The chancellor tugged at his moustache, a habit. "I don't know yet. It depends on the Osmanlis, somewhat."

“Most things do,” Secretary Hanns said.

He, as it happened, was too clever for his current position. There was a need to consider promoting him to a state office this winter. A useful man should not be allowed to become unhappy.

Savko favoured him with a rare smile. “You are right, of course,” he said. “Pour yourselves wine, both of you. It is a miserable afternoon.” His mood, despite that, was benign. His foot wasn’t hurting, for one thing, and he enjoyed minor mysteries of the sort this new envoy posed. He’d held office for fifteen years, half the emperor’s reign. He knew he was good at what he did.

He’d kept a challenging emperor seated and secure, hadn’t he? Well, largely secure. Money remained a vast, intractable problem, and the Osmanlis had been pushing forward just about every spring the last few years.

He’d be receiving the report on the state of their fortifications soon, since the campaign season had now ended. He wasn’t looking forward to reading it. There was a probability the great fort of Woberg would be under siege again next spring, in which case repairs would be urgent, and expensive.

“I still think this new man is a fool,” Vitruvius said, pouring wine. “Let’s set about finding out, shall we?” the chancellor said mildly.

He would think about the border forts when proper information arrived. A portion of his skill lay in not addressing matters until he had the facts he

needed. He was endlessly aware of what he saw as a defining truth of the world: power almost always decided things.

Looking out the rain-blurred window as a wet evening descended, he gave quick, exact instructions concerning Orso Faleri, who appeared to like women, perhaps especially on cold autumn nights. This matter of a new ambassador he could begin to consider now. He'd done this before, many times.

It wasn't as if seressa was sunny and warm in late autumn. Indeed, if he was being honest he'd have to say his city on its lagoon could be colder than Obravic. Fog and damp that could find your chest and bones, even in a palace on the Great Canal. There weren't enough fireplaces in the world, Orso Faleri was thinking, to entirely ease a wet autumn or winter night back home.

Even so, even so. You felt the cold more when you were away. Men were like that, the world was. An unfamiliar house among strangers, darkness having descended to the sound of rain. Poets wrote about such things.

When he was younger he had done his share of travelling for the family, journeying east on their ships (his father's ships, then), enduring what came to a man at sea or in alien ports where, when bells rang, it was to summon Asharites to infidel prayers.

He had made a point of going once into the desert of Ammuz, an escorted journey inland from the port of Khatib, before sailing home with grain. He had looked up at the innumerable stars from outside a tent at night. He'd been bitten by a spider, he recalled.

If there was any pleasant aspect to growing older, it was that he'd reached a point where others made those journeys for him. He didn't regret tasting the wider world. A man needed, he thought, to know the bitterness of far-away beds and tables, danger and hardship and strangeness away. Spider bites in a desert night.

It made you appreciate what you had at home.

He was appreciating for all he was worth tonight. The afternoon's rain had not eased. He'd thought it might turn to snow, which would at least be delicate, white on the bare branches of trees, but it hadn't yet. It was just wet and cold in Obravic. Windy. The wind was from the north, winter in it. It rattled the windows.

They might have prepared a banquet for him, he thought. His first formal evening as ambassador, documents presented and accepted. They might have welcomed him properly. Of course they'd have been watching and judging him at any such feast, but he'd have been doing the same with those he met. That was what all this was, after all. Power assessing power.

Instead, he was in the ambassadorial residence, below the palace but on the same side of the river, alone except for servants. The clock-winder had remained in the palace. It seemed the emperor wished to have him housed among his men of art and science. That was all right. Faleri didn't trust the clock-winder. He wasn't one of his own men. He had only his manservant, Gaurio, with him. The others came with the house. They lived here, attending to whoever the ambassador was in a given year. Or two—may Jad defend his life and soul from that.

He had, however, enjoyed another passable meal. The cook appeared to know what he was doing. An unexpected blessing. He had drunk very good wine—his

own. He'd brought three barrels of red Candarian with him, would send for more. There had been dreadful reports they mostly served those pale, sour

Karchite wines in Obravic, or beer—and no civilized man could be expected to drink those for an entire year. Or two. (He needed to stop thinking about that.)

He was in a room furnished as a study on the ground level. A sturdy desk, a writing chair, daybed, south-facing terrace with a view of the river, for

use in a better season. A good-sized fireplace, two more heavy chairs either side of it, a large table, storage chests with locks, Seressini paintings

on the walls. One of these, an early Villani, was of the lagoon at sunrise: boats on bright water, the two sanctuaries, their domes gleaming, the lion

pillars, the Arsenale just visible on the right. That painting was going to make him wistful, he thought.

Viero Villani was dead. Earlier this same year. Coughing blood, it had been reported, but not the plague. A good artist, in Faleri's view. Not one of

the greatest, but skilled. He owned two of Villani's works himself. And tonight, looking at a painting (his own palace would have been just to the left

of this scene), he morosely lifted a glass to toast the image and the man.

Not everyone could be a master. You could shape an honourable life somewhere below that level of accomplishment. It felt like an important thought. He

had no one, he realized, with whom to share it.

He missed Annalisa already. She'd have seated him by the fire, poured another cup for both of them, listened sympathetically as he told of those six

obeisances and the weak-chinned emperor clapping his hands like a child when their clock chimed and the warrior smote the Osmanli.

Then she'd have come upstairs to bed and unpinned her splendid hair and warmed him with the miracle

of her youth while the sun god drove his chariot
under the world and defended mankind from all that would assail it in the night.

Faleri drained his wine. Poured another cup. He wondered where she was tonight. If she was alone. He hoped she was alone. He heard a knocking at the
door from out in the rain and dark.

Faleri sent the woman home afterwards. It was difficult, as she had been warm and accommodating in his bed, but this was a game of courts, not desire,
and those here were not to assume they had his measure so soon.

It was too transparent a device, in truth. Almost an insult, insufficient subtlety. Or perhaps just northern clumsiness. He had mentioned women to a
yellow-haired man (and learned his name: Vitruvius) and—oh, see, astonishment!—a girl appears with an escort at his door that very night, scented, in
low-cut green silk, which emerged as she shed a wet, dark, heavy cloak and hood.

Her name was Veith, she said. Yes, it was a bad night. Yes, wine would be much appreciated. She had a low, appealing voice.

He'd given her the wine in his bedchamber (best to get into the habit of not letting girls into the ground-floor room where there would be papers). He
had taken his pleasure with her, and it was pleasurable. She simulated desire and gratification with practised, amusing skill. No northern
clumsiness here. They'd spoken a little, afterwards, about autumn weather and importing silks, then he'd summoned Gaurio to take her back down to the
front door where her escort would be—one dared assume—waiting under cover from the rain. She'd looked slightly disconcerted at being asked to dress and
leave so expeditiously. That was all right.

He told Gaurio to be generous, though she'd have been paid by the court. She'd earned his coin, he judged, if not theirs.

He went to bed.

In the middle of the night Orso Faleri woke suddenly, even urgently, with a thought out of nowhere, or, more properly, out of the depths of a dream-memory.

He'd been standing with his father by the lagoon near the Arsenale. The slap of water against the stones. A great imperial ship was docked, a royal visit from Obravic. A herald presenting the republic's dignitaries to the previous emperor, including the well-regarded, prosperous merchant family of Faleri.

The previous emperor's oldest son, Rodolfo, was with *his* father. Walking behind him, hands clasped behind his back, looking about with curiosity. Faleri had been a boy, Prince Rodolfo a young man.

But they had seen each other that day. Almost forty years ago.

It is our pleasure to see you again

.

Faleri felt chilled, and not from the cold.

He adjusted his nightcap over his ears. It would be a grave mistake, he decided, wide awake in a black night, to decide that this emperor, however distracted he might appear, was any sort of fool. He would write that, encoded, in his first dispatch, he thought.

He hoped they'd make that sort of mistake judging him. It might be possible to behave in such a way as to encourage it. That could even be amusing.

The rain had stopped. It was quiet outside now. He wished he'd kept the girl, she'd have been warm. And the court might have drawn some conclusions about him. Not entirely false ones, he conceded, but it would be useful if they considered him only sensuous and incompetent.

He lay in bed and thought about the pirates of Senjan, the raiders behind their reefs and walls. His first task here. He was to induce this emperor—who had actually remembered him, glimpsed once as a boy—to allow Seressa to destroy them in the name of goodwill and trade.

He'd been authorized to offer money outright, not just loans. The emperor needed money. The Osmanlis would almost certainly be coming back against him in the spring.

Chapter II

She hadn't intended to bring the dog when she went out on a moonless night to begin the next stage of her life.

Problem was, Tico jumped in the boat while she was pushing it off the strand and refused to leave when she hissed a command at him. She knew that if she pushed him into the shallow water he'd start barking in protest, and she couldn't allow that.

So her dog was with her as she began rowing out into the black bay. It could have been comical, except it wasn't because she was here to kill people, and for all her hard, cold reputation in Senjan, she had never done that.

It was time, Danica thought.

The Senjani named themselves heroes, warriors of the god defending a dangerous border. If she was going to make herself accepted as a raider among them, not just a someday mother of fighters (and daughter of one, and granddaughter), she needed to begin. And she had her vengeance to pursue. Not against Seressa, but this could be a start.

No one knew she was out tonight in her family's small boat. She'd been careful. She was unmarried, lived alone now in their house (everyone in her family was dead, since last summer). She could come and go silently at night, and all the young people in Senjan knew how to get through the town walls if they needed to, on the landward side, or down to the stony beach and the boats.

The raid leaders might punish her after tonight, the emperor's small garrison almost certainly would want to, but she was prepared for that. She just needed to succeed. Recklessness and pride, courage and faith in Jad, and prowess, that was how the Senjani understood themselves. They could punish her and

still honour her—if she did what she was out here to do. If she was right about tonight.

Nor did she find it distressing that the men she intended to kill were fellow worshippers of Jad, not god-denying Osmanlis—like the ones who had destroyed her own village years ago.

Danica had no trouble summoning hatred for arrogant Seressa across the narrow sea. For one thing, that republic traded greedily with the infidels, betraying the god in pursuit of gold.

For another, Seressa had been blockading Senjan, keeping all the boats pinned in the harbour or on the strand, and the town was hungry now. The Seressinis controlled Hrak Island, which was so near you could swim to it, and they'd forbidden the islanders, on pain of hanging, from dealing with Senjan. (There was some smuggling, but not enough, not nearly so.) They were bent on starving the Senjani, or destroying them if they came out. There was no mystery to it.

A good-sized overland party of twenty raiders had gone east through the pass into Asharite lands a week ago, but end of winter was not a time to find much in the way of food there, and there were terrible risks.

It was too early to know if the Osmanlis were advancing towards the imperial fortresses again this year, but they probably would be. Here in the west, the heroes of Senjan could try to capture animals or take villagers for ransom. They could fight the savage hadjuks in fair numbers if they met them, but not if those numbers were greatly increased, and not if the hadjuks had cavalry with them from the east.

Everything carried risks for ordinary people these days. The powers in their courts didn't appear to spend much time thinking about the heroes of Senjan—or any of the men and women on the borderlands.

The triple border, they called it: Osmanli Empire, Holy Jaddite Empire, Republic of Seressa. Ambitions collided here. These lands were where good people suffered and died for their families and faith.

The loyal heroes of Senjan were useful to their emperor. When there was war with Asharias they'd receive letters of praise on expensive paper from Obravic,
and every so often half a dozen more soldiers to be garrisoned in the tall round tower inland from their walls, augmenting the handful usually here. But
when the demands of trade, or finance, or conflicts among the Jaddite nations, or the need to end such conflicts, or whatever other factors in the lofty
world of courts caused treaties to be made—well, then the raiders of Senjan, the heroes, became expendable. A problem, a threat to harmony if the Osmanli
court or aggrieved Seressini ambassadors registered complaints.

*These bloodthirsty savages have violated our sworn peace with the Osmanlis, the terms of a treaty.
They have seized shipped goods, raided villages,
sold people into slavery . . .*

So Seressa had notoriously written.

An emperor, reading that, needed to be more honourable, more aware, Danica thought, rowing under stars. Didn't he understand what they needed from him?

Villages or farms on a violent border divided by faith didn't become peaceful because of pen strokes in courts far away.

If you lived on stony land or by a stony strand you still needed to feed yourself and your children. Heroes and warriors shouldn't be named *savages* so easily.

If the emperor didn't pay them to defend his land (their land!), or send soldiers to do it, or allow them to find goods and food for themselves, asking
nothing of him, what did he want them to do? Die?

If Senjani seafarers boarded trading galleys and roundships, it was only for goods belonging to heretics. Jaddite merchants with goods in the holds were
protected. Or, well, they were supposed to be. They usually were. No one was going to deny that extremes of need and anger might cause some raiders to be a
little careless in sorting which merchant various properties belonged to on a taken ship.

Why do they ignore us in Obravic?

she asked suddenly, in her mind.

You want honourable behaviour from courts? A foolish wish
, her grandfather said.

I know
, she replied, in thought, which was how she spoke with him. He'd been dead almost a year. The plague of last summer.

It had taken her mother, too, which is why Danica was alone now. There were about seven or eight hundred people in Senjan most of the time (more took refuge if there was trouble inland). Almost two hundred had died here in two successive summers.

There were no assurances in life, even if you prayed, honoured Jad, lived as decently as you could. Even if you had already suffered what someone might fairly have said was enough. But how did you measure what was enough? Who decided?

Her mother didn't talk to her in her mind. She was gone. So were her father and older brother, ten years ago in a burning village. They didn't talk to her.

Her grandfather was in her head at all times. They spoke to one another, clearly, silently. Had done so from the moment, just about, that he'd died.

What just happened?
he'd said. Exactly that, abruptly, in her mind, as Danica walked away from the pyre where he and her mother had burned with half a dozen other plague victims.

She had screamed. Wheeled around in a mad, terrified circle, she remembered. Those beside her had thought it was grief.

How are you here?

she'd cried out, silently. Her eyes had been wide open, staring, seeing nothing.

Danica! I don't know! You died!

I know I did.

It was impossible, appalling. And became unimaginably comforting. She'd kept it secret, from that day to this night. There were those, and not just clerics, who would burn her if this became known.

It defined her life now, as much as the deaths of her father and brother had—and the memory of their small, sweet little one, Neven, the younger brother taken by the hadjuks in that night raid years ago. The raid that had brought three of them fleeing to Senjan: her grandfather, her mother, herself at ten years old.

So she talked in her thoughts with a man who was dead. She was as good with a bow as anyone in Senjan, better than anyone she knew with knives. Her grandfather had taught her both while he was alive, from when she was only a girl. There were no boys any more in the family to teach. They had both learned to handle boats here. It was what you did in Senjan. She had learned to kill with a thrown knife and a held one, to loose arrows from a boat, judging the movements of the sea. She was extremely good at that. It was why she had a chance to do what she was here to do tonight.

She wasn't, Danica knew, an especially *conventional* young woman. She swung her quiver around and checked the arrows: habit, routine. She'd brought a lot of them, odds were very much against a strike with each one, out here on the water. Her bow was dry. She'd been careful. A wet bowstring was next to useless. She wasn't sure how far she'd have to aim—if this even happened. If the Seressinis were indeed coming. It wasn't as if they'd made her a promise.

It was a mild night, one of the first of a cold spring. Little wind. She couldn't have done this in a rough sea. She dropped her cloak from her shoulders.

She looked up at the stars. When she was young, back in their village, sleeping outdoors behind the house on hot summer nights, she used to fall asleep

trying to count them. Numbers went on and on, apparently. So did stars. She could almost understand how Asharites might worship them. Except it meant denying Jad, and how could anyone do that?

Tico was motionless at the prow, facing out to sea as if he were a figurehead. She wasn't able to put into words how much she loved her dog. There was no one to say it to, anyhow.

Wind now, a little
: her grandfather, in her mind.

I know
, she replied quickly, although in truth she'd only become aware of it in the moment he told her. He was acute that way, sharper than she was when it came to certain things. He used her senses now—sight, smell, touch, sound, even taste. She didn't understand how. Neither did he.

She heard him laugh softly in her head, at the too-swift reply. He'd been a fighter, a hard, harsh man to the world. Not with his daughter and granddaughter, though. His name had also been Neven, her little brother named for him. She called him "zadek," their family's own name for "grandfather," going back a long way, her mother had told her.

She knew he was worried, didn't approve of what she was doing. He'd been blunt about it. She had given him her reasons. They hadn't satisfied. She cared about that, but she also didn't. He was with her, but he didn't control her life. He couldn't do anything to stop her from doing what she chose. She also had the ability to close him off in her mind, shut down their exchanges and his ability to sense anything. She could do that any time she wanted. He hated it when she did.

She didn't like it either, in truth, though there were times (when she was with men, for example) when it was useful and extremely necessary. She was alone without him, though. There was Tico. But still.

I did know it was changing

, she protested.

The freshening wind was north and east, could become a bura, in fact, which would make the sea dangerous, and almost impossible for a bow. These were her waters, however, her home now, since her first home had burned.

You weren't supposed to be angry with the god, it was presumption, heresy. Jad's face on the domes and walls of sanctuaries showed his love for his children, the clerics said. Holy books taught his infinite compassion and courage, battling darkness every night for them. But there had been no compassion from the god, or the hadjuks, in her village that night. She dreamed of fires.

And the proud and glorious Republic of Seressa, self-proclaimed Queen of the Sea, traded with those Osmanlis, by water routes and overland. And because of that trade, that greed, Seressa was starving the heroes of Senjan now, because the infidels were complaining.

The Seressinis hanged raiders when they captured them, or just killed them on board ships and threw the bodies into the sea without Jad's rites. They worshipped golden coins in Seressa more than the golden god, that was what people said.

The wind eased. Not about to be a bura, she thought. She stopped rowing. She was far enough out for now. Her grandfather was silent, leaving her to concentrate on watching in the dark.

The only thing he'd ever offered as an explanation for this impossible link they shared was that there were traditions in their family—her mother's family, his—of wisewomen and second sight.

Anything like this?
she'd asked.

No
, he'd replied. *Nothing I ever heard.*

She'd never experienced anything that suggested a wisewoman's sight in herself, any access to the half-world, anything at all besides a defining anger,
skill with a bow and knives, and the best eyesight in Senjan.

That last was the other thing that made tonight possible. It was black on the water, only stars above, neither moon in the sky—which was why she was here
now. She'd been fairly certain that if the Seressinis did do this they would come on a moonless night. They were vicious and arrogant, but never fools.

Two war galleys, carrying three hundred and fifty oarsmen and mercenary fighters, with new bronze cannons from Seressa's Arsenale, had been blocking the
bay, both ends of Hrak Island, since winter's end, but they hadn't been able to do anything *but* that.

The galleys were too big to come closer in. These were shallow, rocky, reef-protected seas, and Senjan's walls and their own cannons could handle any shore
party sent on foot from a landing farther south. Besides which, putting mercenaries ashore on lands formally ruled by the emperor could be seen as a
declaration of war. Seressa and Obravic danced a dance, always, but there were too many other dangers in the world to start a war carelessly.

The republic had tried to blockade Senjan before, but never with two war galleys. This was a huge investment of money and men and time, and neither ship's
captain could be happy sitting in open water with chilled, bored, restless fighters, achieving nothing for his own career.

The blockade was working, however. It was doing real harm, though it was hard for those on the galleys to know that yet.

In the past, the Senjani had always found ways of getting offshore, but this was different, with two deadly ships controlling the lanes to north and south
of the island that led to sea.

It seemed the Council of Twelve had decided the raiders had finally become too much of a nuisance to be endured. There had been mockery: songs and poetry.
Seressa was not accustomed to being a source of amusement. They claimed this sea, they named it after

themselves. And, more importantly, they guaranteed the safety of all ships coming up to dock by their canals for their merchants and markets. The heroes of Senjan, raiding to feed themselves, and for the greater glory of Jad, were a problem.

Danica offered a thought to her grandfather.

Yes, a thorn in the lion's paw
, he agreed.

The Seressinis called themselves lions. A lion was on their flag and their red document seals. There were apparently lions on columns in the square before their palace, on either side of the slave market.

Danica preferred to call them wild dogs, devious and dangerous. She thought she could kill some of them tonight, if they sent a skiff into the bay, intending to set fire to the Senjani boats drawn up on the strand below the walls.

He wasn't going to say he *loved* her or anything like that. That wasn't the way the world went on Hrak Island. But Danica Gradek did drift into his dreams, and had done so for a while now. On the island and in Senjan there were women who interpreted dreams for a fee. Mirko didn't need them for these.

She was unsettling, Danica. Different from any of the girls on Hrak, or in the town when he made his way across to trade fish or wine.

You had to trade very cautiously these days. Seressa had forbidden anyone to deal with the pirates this spring. There were war galleys. You'd be flogged or branded if caught, could even be hanged, depending on who did the catching and how much your family could afford in bribes. Seressa almost certainly had spies in Senjan, too, so you needed to be careful that way, as well. Seressa had spies everywhere, was the general view.

Danica was younger than him but always acted as if she were older. She could laugh, but not always when you'd said something you thought was amusing. She

was too cold, the other men said, you'd freeze your balls making love to her. They talked about her, though.

She handled a bow better than any of them. Better than anyone Mirko knew, anyhow. It was unnatural in a woman, *wrong*, ought to have been displeasing, but for Mirko it wasn't. He didn't know why. Her father, it was said, had been a famous fighter in his day. A man of reputation. He'd died in a hadjuk village raid, somewhere on the other side of the mountains.

Danica was tall. Her mother had been, too. She had yellow hair and extremely light blue eyes. There was northern blood in the family. Her grandfather had had eyes like that. He'd been a scary figure when he came to Senjan, scarred and fierce, thick moustaches, a border hero of the old style, men said.

She'd kissed him once, Danica. Just a few days ago, in fact. He'd been ashore south of the town walls with two casks of wine before dawn, thin blue moon setting. She and three others he knew had been waiting on the strand to buy from him. They'd used torches to signal from the beach.

It happened he had learned something not long before and—on an impulse—he'd asked her to walk a little away from the others. There had been jokes, of course. Mirko didn't mind, and she hadn't looked as if she did. It was hard to read her and he wouldn't claim to be good at understanding women, anyhow.

He told her that three days earlier he'd been part of a group supplying the war galley in the northern channel. He'd overheard talk about sending a boat to fire the Senjani ones drawn up on the strand. Bored men on ships, especially mercenaries, could grow careless. He said if it were him doing it, he'd do it on a no-moons night. *Of course*, she said.

He thought if she was the one he told she could reap the benefit of reporting the tidings to the raid captains and she'd be happy with him for that.

Danica Gradek kissed really well, it turned out. Fiercely, even hungrily. She wasn't quite as tall as he was. He wasn't sure, remembering the moment, if it had been passion, or triumph, or the anger everyone said was in her, but he'd wanted more. Of the kiss, of

her.

“Good lad,” she said, stepping back.

Lad?

That he didn’t like. “You’ll warn the captains?” “Of course,” she said.

It never occurred to him she might be lying.

She was protecting the boy, she’d explained to her zadek. Mirko wasn’t a boy, but she thought of him that way. She thought of most of the men her age that way. A few were different—she could admire skill and bravery—but those often turned out to be the ones who most fiercely rejected the idea of a woman as a raider. They hated that she was better with her bow than them, but she wasn’t, ever, going to hide what she could do. She’d made that decision a long time ago.

The heroes of Senjan, devoted equally to Jad and independence, also had a reputation for violence. That last, in the eyes of the world, included their women. There were horrified, wide-eyed stories told of Senjani women streaming down from hills or woods to a triumphant battlefield at day’s end—wild, like wolves—to lick and drink the blood from the wounds of slain foes, or even those not yet dead! Tearing or hacking limbs off and letting blood drip down gaping throats. Senjani women believed, the tale went, that if they drank blood their unborn sons would be stronger warriors.

Foolish beyond words. But useful. It was a good thing to have people afraid of you if you lived in a dangerous part of the world.

But Senjan didn’t think it good for a woman, not long out of girlhood, to believe—let alone seek to prove—she could equal a man, a *real* fighter. That, they didn’t like much, the heroes.

At least she wasn’t strong with a sword. There was someone who had spied on her throwing daggers at targets outside the walls and, well, according to him

she did that extremely well. She ran fast, could handle a boat, knew how to move silently, and . . .

Some reckless, very brave man, the general view became, needed to marry the ice-cold, pale-eyed Gradek girl and get a baby into her. End this folly of a woman raiding. She might be the daughter of Vuk Gradek, who'd had renown in his day, inland, but she was a *daughter* of a hero, not a son.

One of his sons had died with him; the other, a child, had been taken by the hadjuks in the raid on Antunic, their village. He was likely a eunuch by now in Asharias or some provincial city, or being trained for the djannis—their elite, Jaddite-born infantry. He might even one day come back attacking them.

It happened. One of the old, hard sorrows of the border.

The girl did want to join the raids, it was no secret. She spoke of vengeance for her family and village. Had been talking that way for years.

She'd openly asked the captains. Wanted to go through the pass into Osmanli lands on a raid for sheep and goats, or men and women to ransom or sell. Or she'd ask to go in the boats chasing merchant ships in the Seressini Sea—which they might actually be able to start doing again if this accursed blockade would only lift.

Danica knew the talk about her. Of course she did. She'd even let Kukar Miho watch her practising, thinking himself cleverly unseen behind (rustling) bushes, as she threw knives at olives on a tree near the watchtower.

This past winter the clerics had begun speaking to her about marrying, offering to negotiate with families on her behalf since she had no parent or brother to do so. Some of her mother's friends had made the same offer.

She was still mourning, she'd said, eyes lowered, as if shy. It hadn't been a year yet, she'd said.

Her mourning year would end in summer. They'd chant a service for her mother and grandfather in the sanctuary, along with so many others, then she'd need to think of another excuse. Or pick a man.

She was perfectly happy to sleep with one when a certain mood overtook her. She'd discovered some time ago that cups of wine and lovemaking could ease her on occasion. She closed off her grandfather in her mind on those nights, relieved she was able to do so. They never discussed it.

But being with a man by the strand or in a barn outside the walls (only one time in her own house—it had felt wrong in the morning and she'd never done it again) was as much as she wanted right now. If she married, her life would change. *End*, she was half inclined to say, though she knew that was excessive. A life ended when you died.

In any case, she'd told her grandfather the truth: she was protecting Mirko of Hrak by not reporting his information to the captains or the military. If the Senjani set a full ambush on the beach for a night attack, the Seressinis would realize someone had given their plan away. They were clever enough to do that, Jad knew, and vicious enough to torture a story out of the islanders. They might or might not arrive at Mirko, but why risk it? One guard out in a boat—that could be routine.

If she'd revealed Mirko's story she'd have been asked who told her, and it would have been impossible (and wrong) to not tell the captains. She wanted to join the raiders, not anger them. And the Seressini spy inside the walls (of course there was a spy, there was always a spy) would almost certainly learn whatever she said, see the preparations. They'd likely cancel the attack, if it was happening. If Mirko was right.

No, doing this alone was the prudent approach, she'd told her grandfather, choosing the word a little mischievously. Unsurprisingly, he had sworn at her.

He had been legendary for his tongue in his day. She was developing a little of that reputation, but it was different for a woman.

Everything in the world was. Danica wondered sometimes why the god had made it so.

She really did have good eyesight. She saw a flame appear and vanish to her right, north, on the headland that framed that side of the bay. She caught her breath.

Jad sear his soul! What pustulent, slack-bowelled fucking traitor is that?
her grandfather snarled.

She saw it again, quickly there and gone, moving right to left. A light on the headland could only be there to guide a boat. And to do that in these deadly waters you needed to know the bay and its rocks and shallows.

Tico had seen it too. He growled in his throat. She silenced him. It was a long bowshot to that headland at night. Too long from a boat. Danica began rowing again, heading that way, north, against the light breeze, but looking west as she went.

Quietly, girl! I am.

Nothing to be seen yet. The Seressinis would have a long way to go past the island from where the galley blocked the channel. But that light on the headland was signalling a path through rocks and reefs. Swinging right now, then left, held briefly in the middle, then hidden, most likely by a cloak. It meant someone was coming, and that he could see them.

She gauged the distance, shipped her oars, took her bow, nocked an arrow.

Too far, Danica.

It isn't, zadek. And if he's up there they are on their way.

He was silent in her thoughts. Then said, *He's holding the lantern in his right hand, guiding them left and right. You can tell where his body is by how—*

I know, zadek. Shh. Please.

She waited on the wind, the small boat moving as the breeze moved the sea.

She was still watching two ways: that headland light, and where the channel opened, by the dark bulk of the island.

She heard them before she saw anything.

They were rowing, not silently. They were not expecting anyone out here and they were coming towards her.

Splash of oars in water, Tico stiffening again. Danica hushed him, stared into the night, and then it was there, clearing the dark bulk of the island, one small light. Seressinis on the water, come to burn boats on the strand. She was awake, this was not a dream of fire coming.

There was anger in her, no fear. She was the hunter tonight. They didn't know that. They thought they were.

I don't need to kill him
, she said in her mind.

He needs to die.

Later. If we take him alive we can ask questions.

In truth, it might have been hard for her, killing that one on the headland: whoever he was, he was going to be someone she knew. She had decided it was

time to learn how to kill, but she hadn't thought it might be a face she knew right at the start.

I ought to have realized they'd need someone to guide them in. Might have been with them in the boat
, her grandfather said.

Might still be someone with them. They tend to be cautious.

She couldn't resist. *Like me?*

He swore. She smiled. And suddenly felt calm. She was in the midst of events now, not anticipating they might happen. Time had run, after almost ten years
it had carried her to this moment, this boat on black water with her bow.

She could see the shape of the approaching craft, dark on darkness. They had one light, would mean to douse it when they came nearer to shore. She heard a
voice, trying to be quiet, but carrying, if anyone was in the bay to hear.

"Over other way, he's saying. Rocks just there." Speaking Seressini. She was glad of that.

Jad guide your arm and eye
, her grandfather said. His voice in her mind was very cold.

Danica stood up, balanced herself. She had trained for this, so many times. The wind was easy, and the sea. She fitted an arrow to the string, drew the
bowstring back. She could see them in the boat now. It looked like six men. Maybe seven.

She loosed her first arrow. Was nocking the second as that one flew.

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