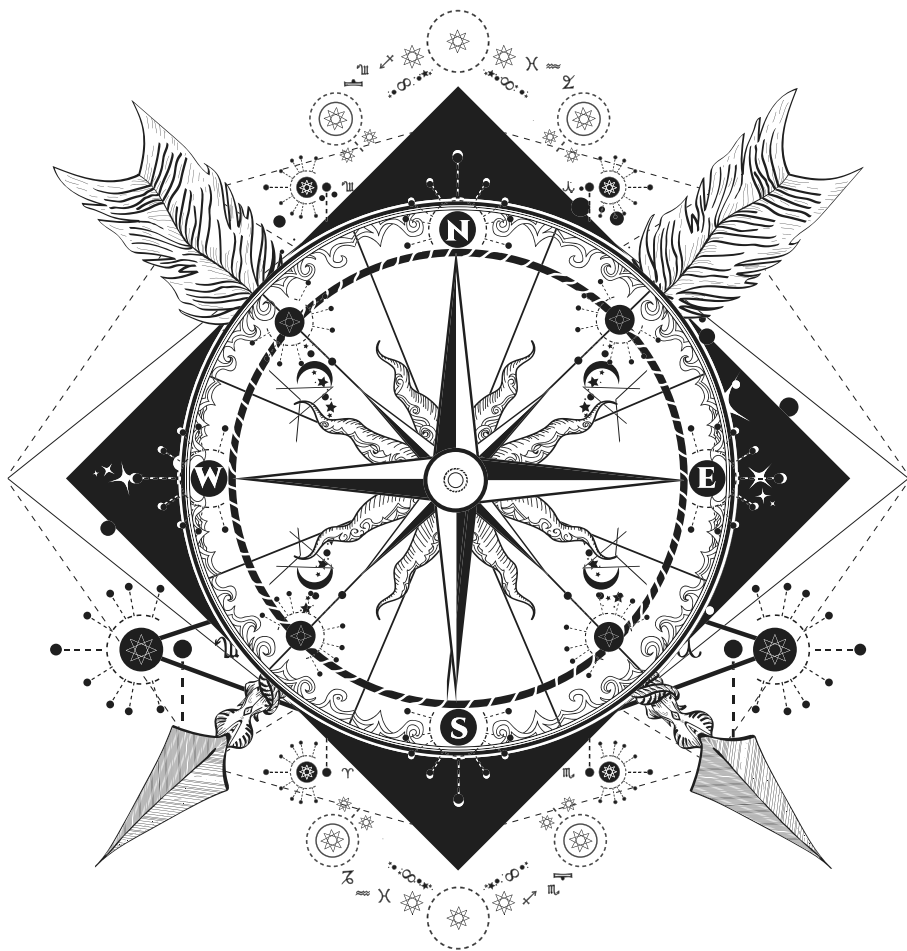


THE ANTLANDS SERIES / BOOK 2

# ANNASLAND



GENEVIEVE MORRISSEY

ANTLANDS.COM

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# CHAPTER ONE

Sometimes I still dreamed I was back in the Valley, kneeling in mud and blood with my friends lying dead all around me. Twenty years ago I killed a lot of Ants—and my better self—in battle there, and I left the battlefield by way of a dark road. I followed that road for many years. It didn't take me home.

On the morning I kissed my weeping mother and rode out of Evergreen for the last time, I stopped as soon as I was out of sight of the forest pickets and cut off my braids with my knife. I was a Man now, on my way to be married to a Daughter of Men, and I wanted to look the part. I wanted to have two names like a Man, too. I wanted to call myself River Wolfson, in honor of my father, Wolf. But my mother told me I was disgracing my father by leaving the forest, so I settled for River Evergreen instead. I never liked the name, and it never felt like mine, but the first two days after I took it were the happiest of my life. I spent them with my new wife, Sarah, and we were young, we were free and whole, and most of all, we were crazy in love with each other.

On my third day as a married man, I went with Sarah's brother Dan, my best friend and business-partner, to where the Allied Armies were assembling in the Valley to make war against the Ants.

The Foresters might have sent me into exile, but they weren't above taking

advantage of the fact that I knew both their language and most of the tongues of Men. Though I wore a sword and knew how to use it, they assigned me to a place in front of a telegraph key at a table positioned so it had a view of the whole battlefield. The generals of Men and Foresters stood to observe the action on a platform above me, and it was my job to relay their shouted orders by telegraph to the captains in the field.

The Ant soldiers marched in from the west, and there was no doubt they'd come to fight. Their weapons were already in their hands. We watched as they warily scouted the ground, their minds working, Ant-fashion, in unison. It was clear they were afraid of the broad river that blocked their escape to the south. They crowded to the farthest edge of the field to get away from it. But they were unsuspecting of the line of uprooted bushes along the top of the rise to the north. The bushes concealed twenty large cannon—crude by today's standards, but plenty deadly—and troops the Men held in reserve, but all the Ants saw was that the army that faced them was reassuringly smaller than their own. Satisfied, they ranged themselves in their usual battle-lines.

Before they could move to engage us, General Cade of the Foresters gave the order for the great guns to be fired.

At the first barrage, the Ants froze, and when we saw them just standing there, witless with surprise, we Allies let out a roar of our own that was almost as loud as the guns. We waited for the cannon to finish its bloody work and watched, amid choking smoke and the screams of the wounded, while the Ants considered their situation.

Their choice must have seemed clear: They faced artillery to the north, a river to the south, and an army in front of them. Before the gunners on the hill had rammed home the shot for a second volley, the Ants turned around in a body and started back the way they'd come.

But by then we'd erected an obstacle in that direction, too. In the Ants' path, a team of Men that included Dan had raised a fence of heavy wire. The Ants had no way of knowing the fence was connected to a human-powered electrical generator, but they were distrustful of it. When they saw it, they stopped their headlong rush and waited while one or two of them reached

tentatively to touch it. Exactly as Dan and I had hoped (we hadn't had time—or the means—to really test it), the fence-wire emitted showers of sparks and a sharp crackle, killing one Ant, I think, and terrifying them all. Just then, a second volley of balls and exploding shells landed in their midst, and the Ants, who were usually silent creatures, cried out with one voice in despair.

Mad with fear and thwarted by the fence, they rushed toward the river, then stopped—Ants can't swim—turned again, and made a feint at the Allied ranks instead. In response, the human soldiers stood as ordered, unmoving, and the Ants, seeking an easier way, wheeled north again, toward the rise. The cannon answered their charge with more fire and death. The Ants spun west—but on that side, of course, was the fence.

With mounting panic, the Ant-soldiers whirled like leaves in the eddy of a brook, slashing ineffectually with their weapons. Seeing them, I almost laughed out loud. Everything was going exactly to plan.

Then, just as the generals on their platform called down to me to order the cannonade to cease and the Allied soldiers to advance, the collective Ant-brain apparently issued an order of its own. Of the obstacles they faced, armed men was the one with which the Ants were most familiar. Turning one last time, they hurled themselves with unimaginable ferocity on our armies, and from that moment, all their efforts to attain victory or escape were focused in that direction.

I looked on helplessly as General Cade, standing forward of his line, was among the first to be struck down. Even before he fell, one of my best forest-friends, Swan of Evergreen, was fighting his way up from the rear, frantic to reach his general's side. Swan went down too. I jumped to my feet, my hand on my sword.

Someone on the platform above barked at me to sit down; that I had a job to do; and I obeyed. Whether the command came in Forester or another language, I could never remember afterward, but I'd never willingly taken an order from anybody since.

The only help I could give was to signal repeatedly to the field-captains to stop the Men who carried hand-cannons from using them. Small arms were

a recent re-invention of an ancient weapon, and too primitive to be effective, but the noise and spurts of flame they produced seemed to be frightening the Ant-soldiers into concentrating their greatest fury on the Forest Army, where they faced only the familiar sword, bow, and lance.

I signaled—but the Battle in the Valley had degenerated by now into a melee of individual combats, and the gunfire continued. I watched the carnage with mounting anguish. Unless the Ants could somehow be persuaded to turn in another direction, the Forest Army would be annihilated.

The plan of battle called for the Ants to be confined in the Valley until they had been exterminated down to the last soldier, but it was evident to me by now that no more Ants could be killed with bolts of electricity or persuaded to drown themselves in the river. Since the two armies were now fully engaged, further cannon-fire or more volleys of hand-thrown exploding missiles (my own invention) would be as likely to kill friends as enemies. The Ants would have to be dealt with one-by-one by individual soldiers—and the soldiers of the Forest, exhausted and demoralized by the slaughter among them, were at the forefront of the battle. I watched in torment as one friend after another fell.

Finally I turned to the generals and begged them to allow me to telegraph to have the fence at the Ants' rear lowered. It might relieve the pressure on the Forester's line, I said.

The generals could see the appalling slaughter for themselves, but lowering the fence would give the Ants a means of escape. After a discussion that seemed endless, they reluctantly gave permission. I sent the signal, then watched with a spyglass as Men rushed to carry out the order.

The fence was down, but the Ants didn't immediately notice that the way to their rear was now clear. Their entire attention remained focused on forcing a breakthrough in the opposite direction. Frustrated, I signaled again and again to the Forest Army, the only ones whose discipline still held, to do something—anything—to turn the Ants around, but the forest soldiers were too hard-pressed to do more than stand as they were and keep fighting.

A commotion behind the Ant Army caught my eye. Brandishing the sword

Foresters had once given to his stepfather, Dan was leading a handful of Men in a charge at the Ants' rear.

The Men were few, but they were valiant. When they couldn't get the Ants' attention by shouting, they attacked the rearmost soldiers of their line. With my heart in my mouth, I watched as, more irritated than injured, twenty or so Ants turned to face my friend. Dan fought courageously—all the Men did—until finally the Ants looked past them and recognized there was a clear path out of the killing-grounds.

Since Ants are telepathic, the realization they could escape traveled almost instantly from the few Ants' brains to the many.

It would be inaccurate for me to say the Ant Army then *began to retreat*. In an instant, they *were retreating*, leaving the field of battle as fast as they could. Seeing this, the generals above me began arming themselves to rally their troops for pursuit. They released me from my duties, and, able to draw my own sword at last, I ran behind the fleeing enemy. I struck them with impunity. Their whole attention was on getting away. They didn't bother to fight back. By the time I reached Dan, my hands, my clothes—my soul—were sodden with the blood of those I had slaughtered.

Dan was alive, but just barely, with many wounds and shattered legs. As I knelt beside him and did what I could to help, I begged him aloud to please, please just live. One or two of the other Men showed signs of life, and I bandaged their wounds, too. I couldn't look at the torn remains of the rest.

The Allied Armies, reinvigorated by the Ants' retreat, chased after them, determined to cut down as many as they could before the enemy scattered too far or found cover. In their wake, the Men's medics and the forest infirmarians swarmed onto the field to carry the injured away to field hospitals. I saw Roar of Evergreen bend over General Cade, then turn sadly away, but Swan, at least, wasn't dead after all. As Roar lifted him onto a litter, Swan was holding to his chest the gory stump of what had been his right arm, from which white bone protruded.

I was unhurt but afire with rage, and as the Ants rushed toward the hills, I swore in the names of the dead that I wouldn't go home again until the last

remaining Ant on the continent was dead, too. To kill them might take months, or even years, but it seemed like a debt I had to pay. I could only hope—and I did hope—my darling Sarah would wait that long for me.

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For the next twenty years, the memory of the Battle in the Valley was like all the other scars I brought home from the war—an ugly thing nobody talked about.

Meanwhile, D&R Enterprises, the company I owned with my friend Dan, flourished. After I came home from the army, we moved quickly from telegraphy into radio, and since a legless man in a wheelchair couldn't get around too easily, I did the necessary traveling throughout the continent to put up broadcast towers. Dan stayed at our workshop in Fortress City, supplying everyone who would pay with radio receivers and reliable power, and combing Ancient Texts to find more useful things we could reinvent.

We usually had more business than we could handle, so when we were approached about a partnership by the biggest shipping company on the continent, Dan and I told them we weren't interested. Neither of us knew anything about ships or shipbuilding, and we weren't inclined to learn. But the shippers persisted, and eventually I saw interesting possibilities in the project. I'd always had an urge to go exploring. Throw in a chance for me to explore, I told the shippers, and we have a deal.

Naturally the shippers didn't want to explore. They just wanted us to help them build a coaster that could make the trading circuit of the continent in less time with more cargo. The compromise we finally worked out was that Dan and I would oversee the construction of a vessel built to our specifications but paid for by the shippers, and in return for a chance for me to take her on a couple of exploratory cruises before we surrendered her, Dan and I would design, manufacture, and fit her with a workable engine and a new means of navigation. *Muriel* was the first steel-hulled ship produced since ancient times, and I won't deny I was as proud of her as though I'd built her with my own hands.



I didn't, naturally. I didn't know anything about naval architecture. Experienced shipwrights drew her plan, and her hull was constructed by steelworkers, some of whom wondered aloud in my hearing whether something as heavy as the *Muriel* would actually float. When the steelworkers were finished, dockyard joiners furnished her interior, grumbling the whole time that the ship's steel knees and engine compartment got in their way. In point of fact the *Muriel* was nothing more than an outsized wooden boat encased in a metal shell. Only her engine was novel, and the engine was Dan's design, not mine.

But I oversaw the whole project, and I provided the impetus, through a million complications and delays, to see it to completion. Looking around her, I was completely satisfied with my work.

*Muriel* had passed her sea-trials, and I was going to take her out on a real voyage as soon as she'd been provisioned. Only first, the shippers insisted, she had to be fitted with a few cannon for protection.

I was not a great lover of guns—which probably sounded ironic coming from somebody who'd used them as much as I had. I could respect a bow, or a knife, which required skill and a certain degree of courage (or at least nerve) to use, but any fool could shoot a gun, and nobody liked to shoot guns more than fools did. There was no resisting the shippers in the matter though—I knew, because I'd tried—and I was watching from the shore as a cannon was lowered through the *Muriel's* main hatch when a voice beside me exclaimed, "Oh, I see! Those slides are mounted to the deck, I suppose, to absorb and direct the cannon's recoil."

I didn't bother to turn. Since the day we'd laid her keel, everything we did on the *Muriel* attracted a gaping crowd. "Right, right," I agreed distractedly. "It's safer than the old blocks and about twice as fast to load."

Then I stopped as it dawned on me the voice and accent were familiar. I looked and heard myself say, "Teacher... Teacher."

Except that his hair was now white, Deer hadn't changed much. He smiled broadly and put out both hands to me.

I didn't take them. "What're you doing here?" I blurted instead.

“I came to see you,” Deer said, his smile fading as he lowered his hands. “And her.” He gestured toward the *Muriel*. “She’s beautiful. You must be very proud.”

My mouth was hanging open. I shut it. “Yes.”

Deer hesitated. “Perhaps this isn’t a good time,” he suggested. “Later, maybe? Let me be perfectly straightforward, River; I want a favor of you. You may refuse me, but I hope you can find time to hear me out. You’re very busy, of course.”

I’d begun to collect my wits by now. “No. I mean—yes, I’m busy, but we can talk. I don’t need to watch this. I don’t even want to, now that I think of it.” We stood for a moment in awkward silence before I thought to add, “Come aboard, why don’t you? I’ll show you around the ship.”

Deer’s smile broadened again.

At his feet lay a doeskin travel-bag no different from the one I carried out of the forest when I left it twenty years ago. “Let me get that, sir,” I said. “Come this way.”

The “sir” was inadvertent, and I winced to hear myself say it. The last thing I wanted was for Deer to think nothing had changed from back in the old days. I was a Man now, and a pretty successful one, too. “How is it you’re here?” I asked him, trying to sound polite, but distant. “Have you Foresters changed the rule about the master never leaving his forest?”

If Deer noticed the deliberate chill in my voice, he didn’t let on.

“I’m no longer forest master. I retired last year. I only recently heard about your ship. Is shipbuilding a new enterprise for your company?”

*Everybody* asked that. “No. The ship belongs to somebody else. D&R’s business is mostly radio.”

“Ah, radio!” Deer said, brightening. “I enjoy your radio. I like the musical programs.”

Nobody in Evergreen would have listened to a radio in my day, that’s for sure.

I didn’t say anything more until we were aboard the *Muriel*. When I announced, “Here she is!” I couldn’t keep the pride from my voice.

“Fascinating!” Deer looked around. “This oak is from Northland, I believe.”

On a crowded ship with about three hundred new things to look at, trust a Forester to notice the wood first.

“Right,” I said. “Old growth.” As if Deer wouldn’t have figured that out already. “So—what’s this favor you want?”

“Can we wait a moment before we get to that? I’d like to know first how you are. Are you well? You look well.”

I laughed, embarrassed. “Sorry. Businessmen have trouble with the social niceties. Let me think...” I tried to remember how things were done in Evergreen. “I should offer you something to eat and drink, I guess. What would you like?”

Deer said he only wanted water, which I supplied, and as he drank, I answered his question.

“Yeah, I’m well. Busy, as I said. How about you? What’re you doing now you’re not forest master anymore? Have you gone back to teaching?”

It was Deer’s turn to look proud. “I have. We have quite a large school in Evergreen. How are your children, River?”

I love my children very much, but for various reasons, I didn’t want to talk to Deer about them. I squinted toward the horizon. “They’re good,” I said vaguely. “My daughter, Laura, just got married, and my son, little Bobby, works for D&R now, in Fortress City. More water?”

I could feel Deer studying me, but I wouldn’t look.

“How’s everybody in Evergreen?” I added quickly, “I heard you got married.”

This was old news, but successful as a distraction. “Yes, Bellflower and I married during the war—about ten years after we should have, according to Leaf.” Deer smiled. “My wife sends her love.”

“Thanks,” I said sincerely. I’d always liked Bellflower. “Give her mine, too. Care to see the rest of the ship?”

“I’d like nothing better!” Deer exclaimed.

I led the way, explaining the functions of the various parts of the *Muriel* as we passed them, and when the conversation looked like it was veering toward subjects I didn’t care to discuss, I sidetracked Deer by asking about old friends in Evergreen.

The few who'd survived the war seemed to be doing all right.

"For Swan's sake, we built stairs in place of the ladders in the library," Deer told me. "They seem to have caught on. We have many stairs in the forest now. And electric lights, of course."

"I heard that. What's your power source?"

"Water turbines. They've rather spoiled the look of the waterfall, I'm afraid, though the light is welcome—especially in the schoolhouse."

"You have a schoolhouse now?"

"Oh, yes. We outgrew the library some years ago."

Deer explained, and it turned out the Evergreen school really was big, just as he'd said. In an agreement with neighboring villages of Men, the Foresters were educating Men's children as well as their own. Apparently, the Men's children were permitted to come right into Evergreen. I was dumbfounded by this news.

"We made an agreement with the Men," Deer told me. "We offered our school to their children in return for their own assurances that they would otherwise respect our borders. Our game and timber are a constant temptation to them. So far, at least, they've kept the bargain."

I shook my head like I doubted this, but what I was really thinking was that Deer had been incredibly clever. He'd arranged things so Men's own children—with their Forester school, and their little Forester friends, and their Forester teachers who no doubt indoctrinated them thoroughly with Forest Principles—would be his adorable little allies in keeping their fathers' greedy hands off Evergreen. Deer had taken what had happened to Broadleaf Forest as a lesson.

I stifled a laugh. "Feel like going down to see the engine? All Dan's design, by the way."

"I'd like it very much!" Deer said happily.

Once we were in the engine room, he was puzzled by the *Muriel's* lack of an obvious means to charge her batteries.

"This is the battery array, is it not?" He peered closer. "And those, I think, are the turbines. But what turns the turbines? Is it the sails?"

“No. The *Muriel's* masts are for emergency use only. At her bulk, I'm told she'd need at least one more mast and a lot more canvas to be a good sailer. Guess again.”

“Is it the motion of the ship against the water?”

I admitted regretfully it wasn't. “That would be great, and we tried that first, but we couldn't make it work. No, the turbines are turned by steam.”

Deer's face fell a little. He was too polite to say so, but I knew he thought steam power was a terrible idea.

We modern Men knew from the writings of our ancestors there was a great “steam age” in ancient times. But that steam age could never be repeated—or at least, not on our continent. Our continent couldn't support trees enough for wood to heat thousands and thousands of boilers. Whether it might be rich in coal or in whatever “oil” it was the Ancients also used for fuel, we didn't know, but we did know the extraction and processing of either of those would likely require technology beyond our capabilities.

But as Dan Farmer figured out while he was still not much more than a boy, batteries weren't difficult to make, though they were difficult to make well, or small, and turbines to charge them could be turned by any swift-flowing watercourse or stiff breeze. Thanks mainly to D&R, wind- and watermills had become features of every continental landscape.

“No need for us to cut down a single tree, Teacher,” I assured Deer. “The ship's liquid-fueled.” I slapped my hand against a tall, upright iron apparatus he hadn't asked about yet. “This is where the heat comes from to make steam.”

Deer had never heard of liquid fuel before, except maybe the little lamps Foresters used in my childhood with a wick to melt greasy lumps of goose-fat to liquid oil.

“This is Dan's best invention ever. Or best re-invention, anyway. We mostly just re-implement ancient technologies. The *Muriel's* fuel is fermented from plants, and then distilled like spirits.” I grinned. “You remember how good Men are at distilling spirits, right?”

Deer agreed wryly that distillation was a branch of chemistry at which Men excelled.

“We burn spirits for fuel. It’s handy that we don’t have to make these particular spirits taste at all good. Anything flammable will do.”

I opened the front panel and invited Deer to inspect the whole system at close range.

Deer studied the burner closely. “What plants do you use?”

“That’s the best part,” I said. “We use waste. We distill stuff nobody needs into spirits nobody wants to drink. Then we store the spirits in those tanks back there, and to make the turbines go, we feed the spirits into the burner. The burner boils water to make steam, and the steam turns the turbines. The turbines charge the batteries, the batteries power the *Muriel’s* propeller, and the propeller pushes us through the water. Brilliant, right?”

Deer agreed that it was brilliant and added a few flattering adjectives of his own. “Will you be able to make long voyages?”

“Pretty long, because we can refuel along the way. We carry all the equipment we need to distill spirits right here on the ship.”

After looking some more at the engine, we continued our tour. By now I’d forgotten my earlier misgivings, and we talked with a freedom that was almost like old times.

Deer wanted to know if I was going to be captain of the *Muriel*.

I laughed at the suggestion. “Me? No. I don’t know anything about captaining a ship.”

“But you will be sailing on her?”

“Oh, definitely. But just as Supercargo.” By now we were standing at my cabin door. I waved him in. “I think you’ll be impressed. The actual space is small, but it’s got everything I need.”

Smiling, Deer entered.

I saw him look twice at my bed, and all the self-consciousness I’d felt earlier came back. It was unmistakably a forest bed, with hand-loomed linen sheets and a cover of squirrel-fur.

“Fisher’s,” I explained uncomfortably. “He left his room at the library to me when he died. He gave the rest of the library to the city, but he left that one room to me.” Before Deer could answer this, I added, “The fact that I have

it here doesn't mean I want to be back in Evergreen or anything. My mother wove the sheets, that's all."

"She was a fine weaver," Deer said gravely.

He sat where I pointed, and I took the chair opposite and put his bag on the floor between us. Neither of us spoke for a moment.

"How is Sarah?" Deer asked suddenly.

Sarah was at the top of the list of things I didn't want to talk about.

There was a greasy machine part lying on my desk. I picked it up and held it out for Deer's inspection. "It's a bearing," I explained. "See? But it's broken."

Deer just looked at me, and I laid the part aside again.

After a minute, I said, "Sarah's fine, I guess. I haven't seen her for a while."

"You parted?" Deer asked quietly.

"Yeah, we parted. About a year ago."

"I'm sorry."

"Not Sarah's fault," I said quickly. "Mine. First the war kept me away, and then afterward I was gone a lot on business. She got tired of it."

"I see."

"She got tired of being alone, and—we grew apart. That's all. It happens."

"I knew after the Battle in the Valley you continued to pursue the Ants." Deer folded his hands together. "Roar told me he thought you went because you felt partly responsible for the fact that our casualties were so great. Is that true?"

A change of subject was in order. "How is Roar? We haven't talked about him yet."

"Roar's fine. Was he correct? Is that why you went away instead of home to Sarah?"

I took a deep breath. "Look: I *was* responsible for a lot of those casualties because I waited too long to ask for the damn fence to be let down. But it was a long time ago, the Ants are all gone now, and my marriage to Sarah is finished. Let's not waste time discussing the past, all right?"

Deer wouldn't let it go. "After the Valley, were you in many more battles? Were your casualties heavy?"

The question annoyed me.

“You’re thinking of another kind of war,” I said coldly. “The kind you fought. We took some casualties, sure—but mostly, we killed them, not the other way around.”

“Ants?”

“Yeah, Ants. Who do you think? Cold, starving Ants, a lot of them.”

“Tell me.”

“Tell you what?” I leaned back in my chair, avoiding Deer’s eyes. “What don’t you already know? You went to war.”

“As you said, I went to a different war. Tell me about your war.”

Deer had always been obstinate. I remembered that now. And nosy.

“War?” I repeated, sneering. “After the Valley, the only war on the continent was between nations of Men.” Somewhere in the last few minutes—I had no idea when—we’d both switched to speaking Forester. I was surprised at how easily it came back to me. I hadn’t spoken it for years. “Where I was, there wasn’t war, there was slaughter. We found Ants in little groups of twenty or thirty and some of them weren’t even armed. By the second year, a lot of them weren’t armed, in fact, and some of them didn’t even have clothes. They were cold and starving and scared to death, and we didn’t kill them in battle, we executed them.”

I realized suddenly I was shouting and struggled to lower my voice. “One group I remember had a young one with them, a female. I don’t know what she was even doing there. She was no soldier. I guess the others just hadn’t wanted to leave her to starve in the Antlands. Not only did that group not fight us, they didn’t even try to run away. They just looked at us. They looked at us, and then they shut their eyes, put their arms around each other, and then one of them put her hands over the young one’s face. I’ll never forget that. They wanted to spare her from seeing death coming. She knew what we were going to do, though. They all knew.”

“You killed them?”

“I helped. I didn’t want to, but shit, yes, I killed them. That was my job.”

Once I started talking, I couldn’t stop. I told him more things; unspeakable



things. Terrible things the Ants did, terrible things my men and I did to the Ants. It was ugly stuff, and I'd never told a soul about most of it before. I thought I'd forgotten it, in fact, but as I spoke every incident came back to my mind as clearly as though I were right there, watching it happen. I talked until I was sick of the sound of my own voice, and if Deer answered any of it, I didn't hear him.

Finally, I said, "When the Ants were all dead, I went back to Fortress City. I'd hardly been home for two years. I was ashamed to face civilized people. I wasn't human inside anymore. I was an animal. My men and I—!"

I had to stop to get my breath. "The truth is, my men and I were no better than the Ants."

"You were soldiers," Deer said quietly.

I waved the remark away. "We were *killers*. And when I got back, my little girl, Laura, didn't know who I was. She kept asking Sarah, 'Mama, who's that Man?'"

Deer started to say something, but I wouldn't listen. Suddenly, I wanted to tell him the worst and have it over with. "I won't lie to you," I said. "That really hurt. I tried to laugh it off, but it hurt. But then instead of staying home and making it up to her and Sarah, I ran away. I started traveling. It was business, sure—but somebody else could have done it. I wanted to go. I couldn't be home for more than a month or two before I wanted to leave again. Despite Sarah. Despite Laura. She was so beautiful and sweet, like her mother... But I was gone when she was little, so we could never be as close as we should have been. But I could have been close to my son, at least. I could have stayed and been close to little Bobby. Instead I kept going away. It's a wonder when my children saw me they even knew who I was. They didn't know who I was, in fact. They still don't know. And that's best. That's the way I want it."

Deer didn't say anything, but I knew what he was thinking. Any child born in a forest is loved and nurtured by all, and no one who has children ever travels to get away from them. I'd had two young ones, and I hadn't valued them. Deer was thinking Evergreen was lucky to be rid of me. I waited for him to tell me so. I would have welcomed it if he had.

But instead, when he finally spoke, it was just to ask me calmly, “Your children are both living?”

As if I hadn’t been clear on the point. I kicked his bag aside—viciously.

“Yes,” I snapped. “I told you before—they’re fine. That’s all Sarah’s doing, by the way; not mine—in case you weren’t listening.”

“I was listening. Then whether the situation is as bad as you believe it is or not, since your children are alive there is still a chance for you to become closer, isn’t there? Assuming you want to be closer.”

“Of course I want to be closer! I’m just a bad father, not a monster. They don’t want to be closer to me.”

“Have you asked them?”

My patience was gone. “Look, this conversation is over, all right? What my children want—or I want—isn’t your business. Let’s move on to the ‘favor’ that brought you here in the first place and get this over with.” Not that I was in any mood for granting Deer “favors.”

“I didn’t realize it before this moment,” said Deer, “but the two matters may actually be linked. Your relationship with your children and their mother isn’t complete and immutable. As long as you live, it will be an ongoing project. Meanwhile, there is some unfinished business in their lives that I suspect must trouble Sarah, at least. If you were to help her with that, it might be a means of bridging the gap between you.”

I was suspicious, but he had my attention.

“What ‘bridge?’” I asked warily. “What ‘business?’ Did anybody ever call you a schemer before, Deer?”

“Yes. Your mother. In this case, I’m talking about the fates of John and Muriel Seaborn.”



## CHAPTER TWO

I leaned back in my chair, and all the breath left my body in one long sigh.

“Oh, gods... John.” I rubbed my face. “And Muriel.”

Muriel was my mother-in-law. Without needing one minute’s discussion to make up our minds about it, Dan and Sarah and I had named our ship for her.

She was a sweet lady. A little insecure, like my own mother, and inclined to be nervously fluttery, but unlike my own mother, always watching out for everybody else’s happiness and comfort. If anybody was going to remember what you liked to eat, or which chair was your favorite, or that you’d mentioned you wanted some new thing, it was going to be Muriel. She’d see to it you got whatever it was you wanted, too, even if it meant she had to give up something of her own.

John Seaborn had come to live in the Farmer house as Dan’s tutor after Dan’s father was killed in the Penultimate Ant War, and though he was a cranky old fellow generally and never minded giving anybody else the rough side of his tongue, he was always tender with Muriel, whom he adored. He was a demanding but loving stepfather to her children, too. He valued them because they were hers.

On the day the Ants broke out of the Antlands and began advancing on

the Valley, where we Men and Foresters hoped to annihilate them, John and Muriel made a run for the coast.

The reason they went was never quite clear to the rest of us. In one way it made sense: The coast was farther from the battlefield than the Farmer home was. But in another way, the decision was incomprehensible. John and Muriel weren't particularly afraid of the Ants, for one thing; and for another, they left Sarah, her sister Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's three children behind in Fortress City.

After the Battle in the Valley, we all assumed John and Muriel would come back home. I gave letters for them to people who were headed coast-ward, breaking the bad news about Dan's legs and the good news that they were going to be grandparents again (twice over, because both Sarah and Elizabeth were pregnant), and we looked for them every day.

Over a period of about a year, we received twenty or so letters back. They'd gotten our messages—Muriel was half out of her mind with worry about Dan—but they wrote that they couldn't come home yet. Soon, soon, they said. Keep the home fires burning; we'll all be together again very soon. They sent their love, and in Muriel's case, lots of loving advice: Keep warm; eat well; wear clean socks.

And then—nothing. For twenty years.

The wound was still raw for me; I could only imagine what it was for Sarah and Dan and Elizabeth.

"I don't know what you could possibly tell me to say to Sarah that would help," I said slowly. "Honestly, I think it might be better not to bring the subject up at all. You have no idea how hard it's been."

"No one can truly know another's pain," Deer agreed. "But what if you could tell Sarah where her mother and stepfather went and why they didn't return? Wouldn't she want to know that? It's possible Muriel might still be alive. She was younger than I."

"If Muriel were alive, she'd be with us," I said firmly. "Nothing could have kept her away."

"But something *did* keep her. Something unanticipated. That's the favor I

came to ask of you, River. To find out what happened to John and Muriel.”

My eyes narrowed. “What happened to them? You know more than you’re saying, don’t you?”

Deer took a breath to answer, then stopped himself. “No one else on this ship understands our language?” he asked instead.

“Of course not.” I sat up impatiently. “Who’d bother to learn it? What do you know?”

“I *don’t* know where John and Muriel went,” Deer said hastily. “At least, not precisely. You will have guessed for yourself they were not really bound for Coast-town when they left Fortress.”

Actually, I hadn’t.

But I didn’t like to admit it, so I said, “Well, sure. So where were they going, then? And what happened to them when they got there? If they did get there, I mean. Wherever it was.”

“Let me start from the beginning. You knew John Seaborn was not Anna’s father?”

Anna.

Anna of Evergreen was my first love. She married Heron, my best forest friend. Put that way, the story sounded like someone’s life-blighting tragedy—but it wasn’t. Anna may have been my first love, but I was long over her and head over ears for Sarah by the time Anna and Heron married. I danced at their wedding quite happily, in fact, the night before I left the forest for the last time.

Though she’d been raised in Evergreen, Anna was a Daughter of Men. Specifically, she was the daughter of John Seaborn. Or so I’d thought.

“He *called* her his daughter.”

“She was the daughter of Margaret, his first wife,” Deer said. “Her real father was an Ant.”

My knees went cold.

“Oh, gods,” I breathed. “An—!”

Everything became perfectly clear. “Of course she was. How didn’t I see that? It was right in front of my face.”

It was Anna—not scholars like Deer or John Seaborn or (at one time) me—who discovered that Ants were telepathic. Anna knew it because she was a telepath herself. She led us to other human telepaths, and the Allied Armies had the upper hand at the Battle in the Valley because Anna and the other telepaths together had plumbed our enemies' minds, taught us their secrets, and showed us how to fight them and win.

"Those other telepaths—them, too?"

"Yes. They were all half-Ants."

"How did—"

"You can guess how," Deer interrupted, with a grimace. "Apparently, Ants sometimes returned for young ones begotten in that way. The Ants who destroyed Anna's village were there to retrieve her. In Anna's case, her injuries obliged them to leave her for us to find, but we think this admixture of human blood in the Ant line accounts for the subtle differences between individuals among them."

Ants were originally all descended from one small group of clones—"clone" being a word, a concept, we learned from the Ancient Texts. Our long-distant ancestors had cloned Ants to be workers, lost control over them, and ended up being nearly exterminated by their own creation.

I had to stop and think about all this for a moment. It was news, and yet in a way I felt like I'd known it all along.

"Where do John and Muriel come into this?" I asked finally.

"By the time of the battle, we had nearly sixty captive Ants, as you'll remember. They and the seven half-Ants we also had working for us were under Anna's command. We used all of them to draw the Ant Army into the valley. Anna and the others took a path just out of the Ant soldiers' reach, and mentally directed them to follow."

"I heard that." I shook my head. "I still can't believe it worked."

"Anna and the others told the Ants they were leading them to a place where they could live out their days in peace and plenty. The message was true—and indeed it *had* to be true to convince the Ant soldiers. Telepaths, of course, cannot deceive each other. There was such a land as Anna described, and the

Ants were going to it. But only her Ants. And John and Muriel were going with them.”

I started, and then my face began to burn. “No.”

“It was by their own choice,” Deer said, watching me closely. “They wanted to help.”

“No.”

“River, they never intended to *stay* with the Ants.”

Even in my rage, I recognized Deer was speaking gently. He must have understood how painful it was for me to hear that while I was killing Ants—and part of myself—John and Muriel were choosing Ants above their own children and saving them.

“It was only going to be for a short while. They had become fond of Anna’s captive Ants, and anyway, John felt he owed it to Anna for having thrown off her mother. He abandoned Margaret for giving birth to another Man’s child, as he believed Anna to be, and that was how she happened to be living in a frontier village when the Ants raided it.”

While I was still mentally resisting this information, Deer added, “Posthumous went to stay. He told me frankly he expected to die on that island. But John and Muriel—and Anna and Heron, too—were going to get the Ants established, and then they were going to come back.”

“Wait—!” I gasped. “Posthumous went? To an island? Where?”

Posthumous had been the forest master of Evergreen before Deer. The day after Anna and Heron married, he retired and left Evergreen to join his daughter in Beechlands Forest.

He left Evergreen, but never reached Beechlands. I remembered that now. Another loss among so many in the Final Ant War.

“What island?” I repeated grimly.

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t give me that, Forester,” I said tightly. “What island? Where?”

“I don’t know,” repeated Deer. “It was an island John knew of, a few days’ sail, he said, from the island of his birth. He said it would meet all their needs, but he would tell no one exactly where it was, save the young Man who was

captain of the ship that was to carry them all there. That Man, you see, was brother to one of the half-Ants and could be trusted to keep the secret.”

“But Sarah couldn’t. Or Dan. Or me.”

“Nor I,” Deer pointed out. This argument, at least, seemed valid. “John reasoned it would be easier for us if we didn’t know. No one could press us for information we didn’t have. Only a few people were permitted even to know Anna and her party were not lost in the war, as most assumed. Even Bellflower didn’t know it until a few days ago. John made me swear not to tell.”

It was just like John to decide what was best for other people, of course.

“When they didn’t return, I made inquiries.”

People I loved had been wiped from the face of the earth, and Deer had made “inquiries.” At that moment, I almost hated him.

“What good did you expect that to do?” I sneered—not bothering to keep my tone respectful. “What kind of ‘inquiries’ could you even make without telling anybody what you were inquiring about?”

“I knew the name of the ship. With that much I was able to discover quite quickly that it had not been seen in any port since a year or so after the Battle in the Valley. I knew by the letters I received from Posthumous that the party arrived safely on John’s island, and that the ship made at least two successful trips back before—”

Deer looked away suddenly. His lower lip shook.

“Before the ship was lost,” I finished for him.

Deer nodded miserably. “We must suppose it was. River, I am tortured by the thought they might think we abandoned them!”

I softened. Posthumous had been like a father to Deer after his own father was killed by Ants, and Heron was Deer’s only nephew. Deer and John somehow managed to be friends, and everyone loved Muriel, of course.

And Anna had probably been more to Deer than all the others put together. Though she always called him “uncle,” I think to Deer, Anna was the daughter he’d never had.

“I’m sorry.” I meant it. “The captain of the ship... he hadn’t told anyone else where the island was?”



“His crew, I suppose, must have known. But they were lost with him.”

I thought about this.

After a long moment, I said, “Seems like you could find the place, though.”

“I thought so, too. I hired ships to look for it, in fact.”

“You hired ships?”

“Well, I’m not a sailor myself.” Deer shrugged apologetically. “I felt the relinquishment of Broadleaf provided good cover for the undertaking.”

I saw his point.

A few years after my mother died, the citizens of Broadleaf Forest, pressed on every side by nations of Men, voted to sell their land and disperse themselves among the other forests. The decision marked the end of an age. Broadleaf was the original Forester homeland and had existed for almost a thousand years. At the time all I could think was that my mother would have died a second death if she’d known how many of her friends elected to go to Evergreen, where Deer—whom she hated—was still Master.

Deer explained, “I suggested to my councils it might be prudent, if worse came to worst for Evergreen, to have a place prepared for us to go. When they agreed, I sent pickets to hire ships to explore for one. I knew the island we were looking for was near John’s former home, so I directed the search be made in that area—though without saying why.”

“But you didn’t find it?”

“No. There are many islands, and the Men who sailed the ships were willing to risk themselves only so far and no more. But your ship is powered, and capable, you said, of long voyages. You may succeed where I failed.”

I mentally poked at the fire of my earlier rage at Deer and John—no use even trying to be angry with Muriel—and was surprised to find it was dead out. What was done was done, and a few Ants one way or the other didn’t really matter. We already knew there were plenty of Ants left elsewhere in the world by the fact that no humans from other continents ever came to ours.

Deer was right. I might succeed where he’d failed. Using the *Muriel*, I might find Muriel—and John and Anna and Heron, too. At any rate, trying to find them seemed like a better use for my time than anything else I was currently doing.

“What were you planning to tell the captains of your rental ships if they had found that island?” I asked, beginning to smile. “Were you going to flat-out lie about the Ants, or just hide them under rocks? You’d better tell me, because if this works, I’ll have a captain and crew I need to deal with, too.”

Deer’s face lit up. “You’ll go?”

“Sure, I’ll go. Why not?”

Deer was spry for his age. Before I had time to blink, he’d jumped up, grabbed both my hands, and embraced me where I sat, cheek to cheek in the manner of the Foresters, who are still my people, forever my people, even though I chose to throw in my lot with the Men. How could I ever have forgotten—or doubted—my people?

Almost despite myself, I clung on. If Posthumous had been a second father to Deer, Deer had been one to me, and I was suddenly ashamed of the long silence between us. Deer had written to me a few times after I left Evergreen, and I’d never answered.

“I’ll find Anna and Heron for you, Teacher. I’ll find them and the others, and I’ll bring them home. I owe it to you for hearing the worst about me without flinching.”

I laughed outright then and stood up, drawing Deer up with me. “And now I know the worst about you, too, Teacher. You, the famous Deer of Evergreen, are an unrepentant liar.” When Deer protested that he wasn’t unrepentant, I corrected myself. “You’re right. According to Forest Principles, you’re actually a violator of oaths, which is worse. As I recall, you and all the other important Men and Foresters took a sacred oath to wipe out all Ants, and now it turns out you knew damn well the whole time you weren’t going to keep it.”

“I question the sanctity of oaths in any case,” Deer said, looking wounded, “and I took that particular one under conditions of some duress.”

“I know why you took it. You took it because Men and Foresters don’t trust each other without a lot of swearing and promises and oaths. Well, whatever. All I can say is it’s made me a new man to know you lie just like the rest of us when it suits you.”

I put my arm around Deer’s shoulders as familiarly as if we’d been equals.

“Come on, I’m starving. Let’s go get something to eat.”

Deer pulled back, eyeing me warily. “You were serious when you said you’d attempt to find John Seaborn’s island, weren’t you? You didn’t mean that facetiously?”

“I was serious. I was dead serious. But I’m also hungry, so come on.”

“I can’t begin to express my gratitude, River.”

“Fine, fine.” I nudged him along. “Let’s eat.”

That’s what I said.

But deep down, I knew I should be the one thanking Deer. I’d failed Sarah; I’d failed Laura and little Bobby; I’d failed a lot of people. But in my business undertakings, I’d always had success. If I could succeed in this bit of business—if I could find John’s island and maybe bring Muriel home—it might go a long way toward making up for my deficiencies as a husband and father.

And if I found Ants on that island and let them live, it might in some way make up for the skinny little knock-kneed female I’d slaughtered, too.