



Donnel's Promise

By Anna Mackenzie

Chapter 1 – The throne of Havre

Above the harbour a sprawl of buildings reached like a lapping tide for the pale stone towers that crowned the hill. The colour of the walls, the orange roof tiles, the proud pinnacles of the castle: it all looked exactly as it should. And yet, it was not quite the city Risha had been expecting.

At her side Timon leant forward on the ship's rail, bringing his head level with her own. 'They'll be waiting at the dock. There's bound to be formality.'

The western arm of the harbour, sliding past on their port side, felt like a door poised to swing closed behind them. 'I wish Donnel was here.'

He gave an impatient shake of his head. 'Better you stand in your own right than in Donnel's shadow. As Donnel's shadow.' He studied her, doubtless seeing the sleeplessness of her nights written across her pale skin. 'It's what your mother would have wanted.'

Risha's fingers curled around the rail, the sea's lift and surge vibrating up through the smooth wood.

Sunlight scattered across the water like spinning coins. The crossing had been calm, unlike her previous passage, but still she would be glad to leave the ship. Even in easy water her stomach felt unsettled — though perhaps that was for less obvious reasons. Heir to the House of Havre she may be, but she was a stranger to it, as to her mother's memory. 'Which will change once you're there,' Cantrel, her father's seneschal, had assured her.

She glanced at Timon, impeccably dressed, his dark hair somehow unruffled by the wind, his face a courtier's mask. Above the blue of his eyes his eyebrow hooked into a question. 'Ready, my lady?'

His eyes still startled her, as they had the first time she'd seen him, a prisoner in Caledon. 'Would it make a difference if I said no?'

He grinned quickly, losing years, fleetingly becoming the young man who had aided her escape from Fretha's bossing and taught her to ride on LeMarc's steep mountain trails. 'You should find Lyse and get her to do something with your hair.'

Risha raised a defensive hand, capturing the auburn strands the wind had tugged from her braid. 'Wouldn't it be better if they see me as I really am?'

Timon took her elbow and steered her along the deck. 'Better they see you as you choose to be. The first impression you make is important.'

She grimaced. 'You sound like Fretha.'

His grin flashed again as he bundled her into the cabin. Lyse set aside the embroidery that had occupied her for most of the crossing.

'I'll fetch you once we've docked,' Timon said.

Risha's lips pressed into a stubborn line as Lyse's quick fingers loosed her braid and began smoothing her hair. 'I feel like a prize heifer being readied for market.'

'I don't know how you manage to get it so knotted. It's as though you intend it. And you've stained your dress.'

'It's only salt.'

Ropes thudded on the deck, shouts and the rattle of a chain disrupting Lyse's fussing. Risha leant close to the porthole

but they were on the wrong side of the ship; she could see only a scattering of dwellings stitched by fields and orchards to the hills across the harbour. The vessel bumped and bellied sideways, a clatter and thump announcing that the gangway had been lowered. Lyse completed her grooming with a swipe at the frosting of salt on Risha's skirt.

Risha felt skittish as a new-broken horse.

Timon opened the door, Gorth at his shoulder. 'Much better,' he approved, extending an arm.

She didn't move. 'Are there many people?'

'A handful of councillors and a dozen guardsmen to ensure an appropriately respectful space is maintained around them,' Timon answered. 'They've a covered litter for you.'

'Why? Do they think I can't walk?'

'I suspect it's their preference that you remain out of sight.'

Gorth's grizzled face cocked into a smile. 'Aye, and good luck to them if they think they'll keep the girl who single-handedly defeated Goltoy's navy out of the action.'

'It was hardly single-handed.'

'No? You should listen to the songs they sing in the taverns.'

She had no intention of doing so. Westlaw's siege of LeMarc's citadel was written in blood, Havre's as well as LeMarc's, which hardly seemed a cause for singing. 'We'd best not keep them waiting.'

'On the contrary.' Timon flashed his courtier's smile. 'It's your prerogative to keep them waiting. Whether they like it or not.'

On deck it felt as if the city was holding its breath, the only sound the harsh shriek of gulls fighting above the fish sheds and swooping to seize scraps. Risha gulped the thick salt air, heavy now with the taint of the town, and stared at the crowded wharves.

Gorth's strong hand closed on her elbow. 'I'll see you properly settled before I head north.'

She glanced sideways. 'We'll do it as we planned. I'll be fine.' Did her voice waver? She cleared her throat. 'You might tell Olli that Sulba's goal is achieved as well as giving him my thanks. I'd not be here without his help — without both their help.'

His eyes searched her face. She lifted her chin, and his mouth twitched. 'Donnel's daughter,' he said, his fingers giving her arm a quick, reassuring squeeze before he stepped away.

Before her doubts could betray her Risha crossed to the gangway where she paused, as Timon had advised. The man in blue and gold, he'd said. Her eyes found Athan, convenor of Havre's Council for the past eight years. Beyond him, behind the guardsmen, a larger crowd had gathered: people who had known her mother, had cradled her in their hearts, mourned her loss. Something caught in Risha's throat. There was a flutter in her mind, a snatch of song, a salt wind, the flicker of a sail.

Pulling the knowledge of her parentage around her like a cloak, she walked down the gangway and stepped, for only the second time in her life, onto the soil of Havre.

The castle was a series of towers linked by wide corridors and twisting stairs, the whole boxed within a high and heavy stone wall, more definitive than defensive. Below it the town jostled down the hill, walls leaning on walls, streets twisting into alleys. Perhaps it was the density, the cheek-by-jowl liveliness of the town, that Athan had sought to protect her from. More likely Timon was right, and the man had wanted to keep her away from the eyes of the populace. He'd looked uncomfortable when a woman had darted forward to press a posy into her hands, and had failed to mask his irritation when the marketplace crowd had cheered her, and her mother.

'Your rooms are larger than at home but they'll get less sun,' Lyse announced, having finished her inspection of the suite

to which they had been shown. ‘But why haven’t they given you your mother’s old rooms, or your grandmother’s?’

Fretha had expressed concerns about the proper protocols being observed. With Lyse on hand, the woman needn’t have worried. ‘It doesn’t matter, Lyse. I don’t intend sitting around in my room.’

‘That’s beside the point. Also, why were their wives not there to greet you?’

‘Perhaps they didn’t want to overwhelm me. The townsfolk seemed happy to see us.’

Lyse’s eyes narrowed. ‘And that’s another thing: that fat councillor tried to make the guardsmen hush them up, but why shouldn’t they cheer you?’

‘Peace, Lyse.’ There had been something objectionable about Councillor Thatton. Perhaps it was that he’d held her hand within his sweating palms a moment too long, or the way his tongue had flicked across his fleshy lower lip as he’d studied her.

Risha walked to the tall windows, the carved scrollwork around their mullioned panes as ornate as those of the scholars’ halls at Elion. Her foster-father Pelon, as well as her mother, had lived in Havre’s castle. His thin scholar’s face rose up in her mind. Had he imagined these towers from the cold obscurity of the northern mountains; perhaps longed for the mellow southern sun and this shimmering harbour? Or had he remembered only Cattrra, as Risha could not?

Abruptly she turned. ‘Is there water, Lyse? We should get ready for the reception.’

The girl was not done with her complaints. ‘As for trying to hide you away in that litter: I’m glad you stood up to him.’ Emptying a pitcher into a basin and squeezing out a cloth, she produced a fair imitation of Risha’s voice. ‘“Forgive me, Convenor Athan, but with my feet so newly planted on Havre’s soil, I’m loath to have them leave it.” He looked as if he was sucking his own tongue!’

Risha smiled. ‘I thought my second argument stronger.’

Lyse waved her cloth graciously. ‘“What better way to arrive at my mother’s home than surrounded by—” what was it?’

‘My ministers of state.’

‘“Than surrounded by my ministers of state”. You put paid to his plans.’

Perhaps it would have been wiser not to antagonise him. Athan would not have remained nominal ruler of the duchy all these years if he were not a force to be reckoned with. But if it had been a mistake, it was not an irreversible one. Risha rolled her shoulders to unlock their tension. ‘Come, let’s see if we can find our way through this warren. And if we can’t, we’ll see what we find anyway.’

The reception proved a gathering of eighty people in a hall large enough to accommodate twice the number, or more. Risha secured a smile as Athan bore down on her.

‘Lady Arishara. I trust you are rested and find your rooms to your liking?’

Fretha might have judged his tone more patronising than deferential.

‘Thank you, yes.’ She glanced around but could see no sign of Timon. ‘Though I wonder why I wasn’t allocated my mother’s rooms.’

‘The wing has not been used since the untimely demise of your grandparents.’ He said it as if it ranked on a par with a poor growing season or the loss of a promising colt. ‘Might I introduce Councillors Willart and Vormer?’ One short and withy-thin, the other with a mouth like a blade. ‘Councillor Feron you know.’

Risha smiled at the little merchant. ‘Indeed. Councillor Feron was of great assistance to LeMarc following Westlaw’s siege. You are looking well, Councillor, though I find it hard to believe an entire year has passed since you left us.’

‘We had hoped to see you sooner,’ Athan cut in, his voice low but pitched to carry.

She matched it in tone. ‘And I had hoped to visit sooner. But, as you are aware, the siege left LeMarc in considerable

difficulty, and with my father unable to return from Fratton till late last summer the delay seemed for the best, Councillor Athan.’ She watched his neck mottle at her mis-title. ‘Or is it Convenor? You must forgive me if I do not immediately grasp all Havre’s customs.’

Vormer smiled thinly. ‘Inevitably there will be a great deal to learn. I put myself at your disposal.’

Thatton, one of the councillors she’d met at the harbour, elbowed forward. ‘As do we all!’ Grasping her hand tightly he bowed, his belly bulging before him. ‘Good lady, I am yours to command!’

Rescuing her fingers, Risha replied with a bland smile. ‘I don’t doubt I shall learn much from all my councillors.’

‘Of course, but—’

‘Come now! Whatever can you mean by monopolising our lovely daughter so? The poor girl must be overwhelmed! Gentlemen, please.’

Risha eyed the newcomer, a burly woman dressed in too many frills and flounces for her advancing age, who was yet able to clear a space with her voice alone.

‘Allow me to introduce myself: I am Verony, wife of Councillor Ortun, and the heart of our little castle community, even if I must declare it myself. Do I not mother you all?’ Her smile at the assembled councillors caused each to draw back a pace.

She tucked Risha’s hand into the crook of her arm. ‘Now, my dear, come along and I shall introduce you to people far more interesting than these dry old sticks.’ They advanced on a small cluster, the crowd rippling apart around them, eddies swirling in behind. ‘Convenor Athan’s wife, Ciaran, Councillor Vormer’s Lenora. Thatton’s wife is indisposed,’ she leant close, ‘as she most commonly is, poor girl, and none of us blame her, considering.’ Her voice regained its impressive volume. ‘Councillor Willart’s wife Shallie and daughters Tullie and Neril, Councillor . . .’

They swept around the room, heads turning as they progressed. Through the press of bodies Risha glimpsed Timon, but they had moved on before she could attract his attention. Risha pulled away from her keeper with a smile. ‘You have quite bamboozled me with names, Mistress Verony; I shall not remember a single one.’

The woman returned her smile. ‘Oh, I’m sure you shall. Your mother had an excellent memory for names.’

Lenora peered over Verony’s shoulder. ‘You do look a little like her.’ Under her intent scrutiny Risha stifled an urge to open her mouth and display her teeth. ‘Though the resemblance is perhaps not as strong as it might have been.’

Ciaran intervened, her fingers cool on Risha’s hand. ‘You are most lovely, my dear, as was your mother. Tell me, how is Donnel?’

The topic carried them down the hall. As she turned to acknowledge yet another introduction Risha’s attention lodged on a portrait that hung above a raised dais. A man with hair that swept from his temples like the half-raised wings of a cockerel gazed towards her across the years but, despite his regal bearing, it was the petite woman at his side who dominated the painting. Her eyes were the bright cerulean blue of a summer sky above the mountains, her auburn hair — Risha’s hair — falling in sculpted waves to her waist.

She turned toward the image, the gaggle around her breaking open.

‘My dear—’

She shrugged Verony’s hand from her arm and pushed toward the painting. A stab of cold bit through her soft leather slipper. She glanced down. The floor, the steps of the dais, were awash in red. Risha stumbled. A firm hand gripped her arm. She stared into eyes she didn’t know.

Vormer was at her other side. ‘Are you quite well, Lady Arishara?’ His eyes were flat pools of grey. She looked down. Red stained his shoes, wicked up his legs. Risha stared at his hand on her arm. Blood from his fingers soaked her sleeve.

‘My fault,’ a bluff voice announced. ‘I trod on the poor girl’s foot. It will be quite bruised I’m afraid. Let me help you to a seat.’ Ignoring Vormer’s objections, the giant at her side swung her up in his arms and deposited her in a chair. The room had gone silent. Risha stared around — she seemed higher than she had been. Across the heads of the crowd she

saw Athan, his face bright with anger as he waded toward her.

‘Better?’ The man’s bearded face was close to her own.

Risha glanced at the floor. The pale stone slabs were clean. She cleared her throat. ‘Yes. Thank you.’ She met his eyes. They were brown, flecked with green, and there was a depth of kindness in them — and something else. ‘It wasn’t your fault. I tripped, I think—’

‘No.’ His tone was definitive. ‘I caused you to stumble.’ He knelt to test her ankle, his hands surprisingly gentle. ‘There’ll be bruising. Best you just sit here a moment.’

There was more beneath his words than she could grasp. Everyone was staring. She looked down. Beneath her hands, the arms of the chair were ornately carved, the tapestry seat tasselled in gold. Understanding swept through her. ‘This is—’ ‘Aye, and now it’s yours. Don’t let them tell you different.’ He was Donnel’s age, perhaps a little older, his hair and beard more grey than black.

‘Talben, what is going on?’ Athan stood on the first step of the dais, his cheeks and neck an unhealthy shade of red.

‘I crushed her wee toes,’ the giant said, gently setting Risha’s perfectly undamaged foot back onto the floor. Did she imagine his wink? ‘She needed to take her weight off it.’ He rose to his feet and stepped from the dais. Even a step lower than Athan, he towered over the man.

‘Why are you even here? I don’t recall issuing an invitation.’

Talben’s smile spread slowly across his face. ‘Did you not? And there I was thinking the courier must have got lost.’

‘I’m sure my foot will be fine, thank you—’ she hesitated over the name — ‘Talben. I’m most grateful for your assistance.’ The vision of blood pulsed in her head. ‘And really, I don’t think it was entirely your fault. I stepped sideways rather suddenly — it’s the voyage, I think. Every now and then it’s as if the sea still rolls beneath me.’

‘Perhaps you would prefer to retire to your rooms,’ Athan snapped.

‘I will be perfectly all right if I rest here a moment. Please do carry on.’

Ciaran was suddenly in front of her. ‘My lady, you look most at home in your grandmother’s chair. And she would have been delighted to see you there.’

‘May I atone for my clumsiness by fetching something for you?’ Talben asked loudly. ‘Refreshments or—’

‘You’ve made your point, I think, Ben.’ Ciaran’s words were quiet, her glance towards the big man quelling. He subsided without looking in the least chastised.

‘Are you a member of the Council, sir?’

Talben laughed. ‘Little chance of that. I avoid the city generally. I knew your grandfather. And your mother,’ he added, sorrow darkening his eyes. ‘She’d have been proud to see the lovely young woman you’ve become.’

Something hollow uncurled within Risha’s belly.

‘Ben is defender of Havre’s northern marches,’ Ciaran said. ‘And my brother.’

... to read more, visit www.annamackenzieauthor.com

Donnel’s Promise © Anna Mackenzie 2014

<http://www.annamackenzieauthor.com/#!donnels-promise/ctnt>

