

A SANDERSON CURIOSITY



DRAGONSTEEL PRIME

DRAGONSTEEL PRIME

The 2001 Alternate Version

FICTION BY BRANDON SANDERSON®

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DRAGONSTEEL PRIME

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BRANDON SANDERSON



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INTRODUCTION

IT WAS 1999.

As practice, I'd spent my early unpublished career writing a wide variety of different genres. One far future cyberpunk(ish) dystopian, one comedic fantasy, one epic fantasy in two parts, one hard(ish) science fiction. After all that, I'd settled on my first love, epic fantasy, as the thing I really wanted to do. I'd always suspected this would be the case, but I wanted to experiment first. (Something I recommend all budding authors try.)

Elantris was the first book I wrote with that knowledge: that I was going to make rules-based epic fantasy my focus for the next few years. *Elantris*, though, was conceived and written primarily as a stand-alone. In 1999, with that finished, it was time to do my “big” fantasy. The book that would launch my big series. My *Wheel of Time*, *Lord of the Rings*, or *Dragonriders of Pern*. The work I was confident some day, everyone would know me for.

That never happened.

Dragonsteel, which you're holding now, is a good book—but, like a lot of my work during that era, is erratic at the same time. The various parts of it never quite clicked together. Despite my subversions, it played into a little too many of the fantasy tropes of the '80s and early '90s for my taste. It just didn't quite land.

The best part was the conflict at the Shattered Plains, which I eventually

ripped out and carried over to the Stormlight Archive, an even more ambitious project that I already had brewing in the back of my head. In a similar way, many elements in here would eventually be reused—but the curious thing is, many *other* elements would become Cosmere canon behind the scenes. And (like *Aether of Night*, another book from this era) my modern books would reference them, build upon them, and use them as foundations—despite the book never having been released.

This book, therefore, exists in a strange half-canon state. A lot of the lore is still relevant—indeed, though during the writing of *Elantris* the Cosmere was unformed, by *Dragonsteel* I had a lot of the ideas in mind that would eventually get used in *Mistborn* and become full canon. You could call this the first real Cosmere work.

At the same time, a great number of these elements changed over the years dramatically. You'll see at least one Dawnshard, but in here it won't be called that, and will work differently. You'll see a proto-character who became Shallan, but Lightweaving has undergone many tweaks. You'll see the earliest version of Hoid as a main character, and you'll meet Frost the dragon for the first time. Both aren't quite the same, personality-wise, in the modern Cosmere.

One day I'll return to this story, but Jerick is unlikely to be involved. Instead, the book I will call *Dragonsteel* will be very different—and will focus almost entirely on Hoid and the Shattering. It will lay down the lore as it has become, over the decades since.

However, I'm still proud of this book. Rough though the writing is, nascent though the ideas may be, the ambition is there—and the seeds of what I would become as an author, sprouting alongside the seeds of what would become the modern Cosmere.

Once I hoped this would be the book that made me famous. Today it is but a curiosity.

Fortunately, it is an interesting one. I hope you enjoy your first trip to the planet Yolen.

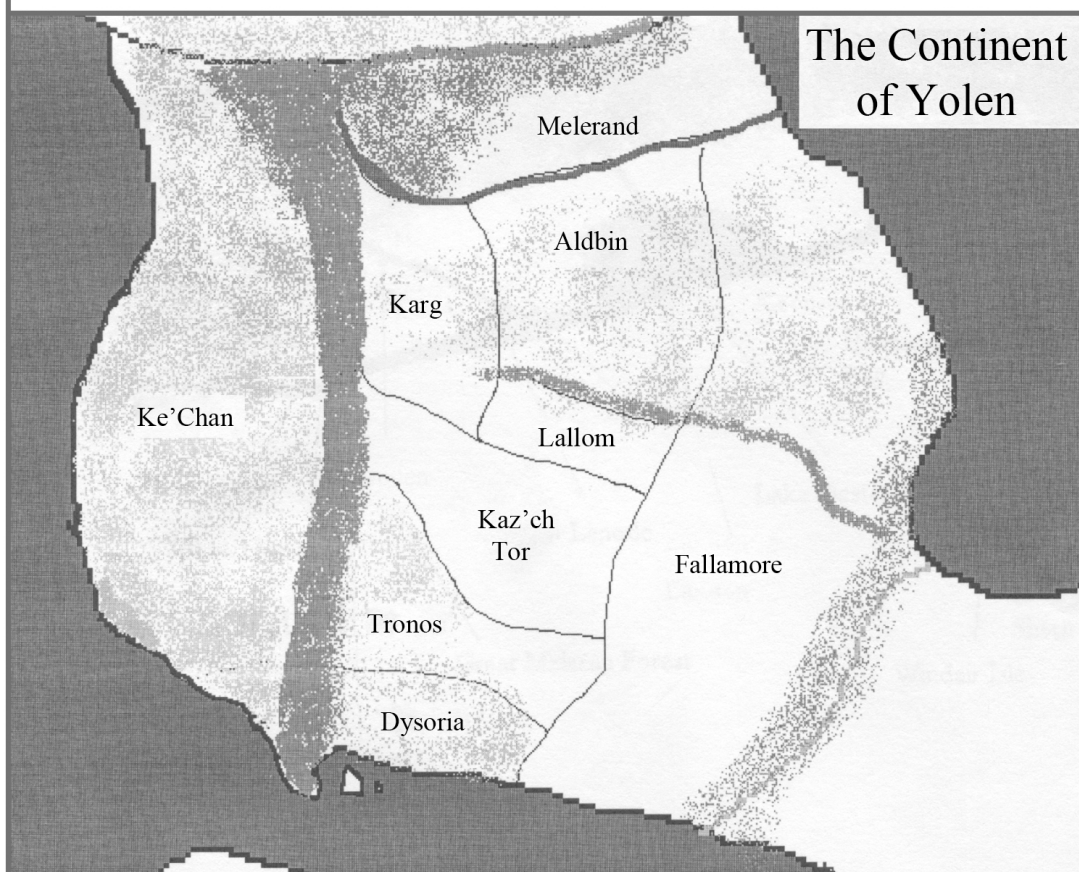
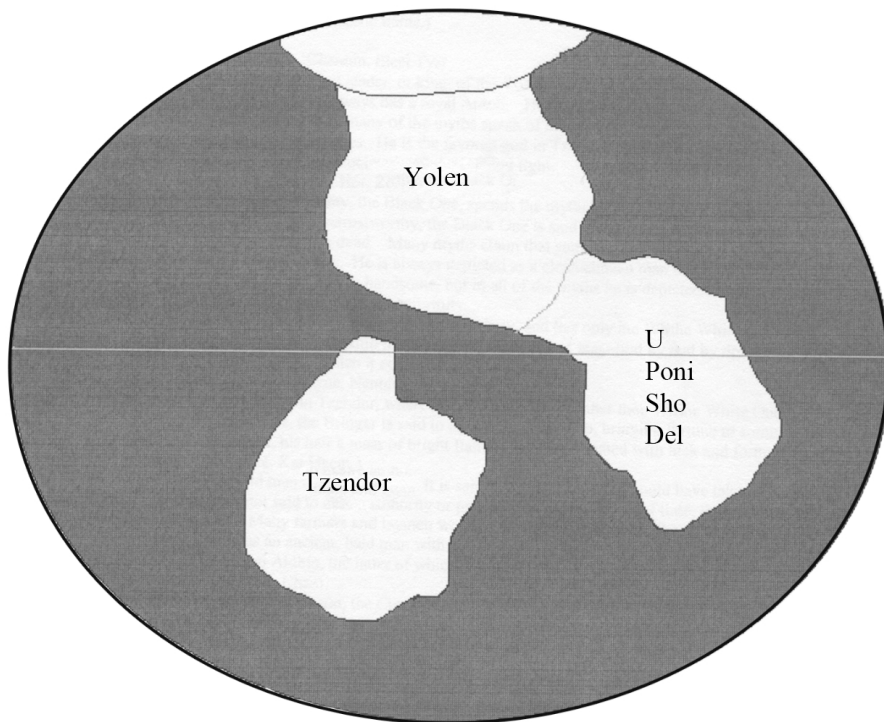
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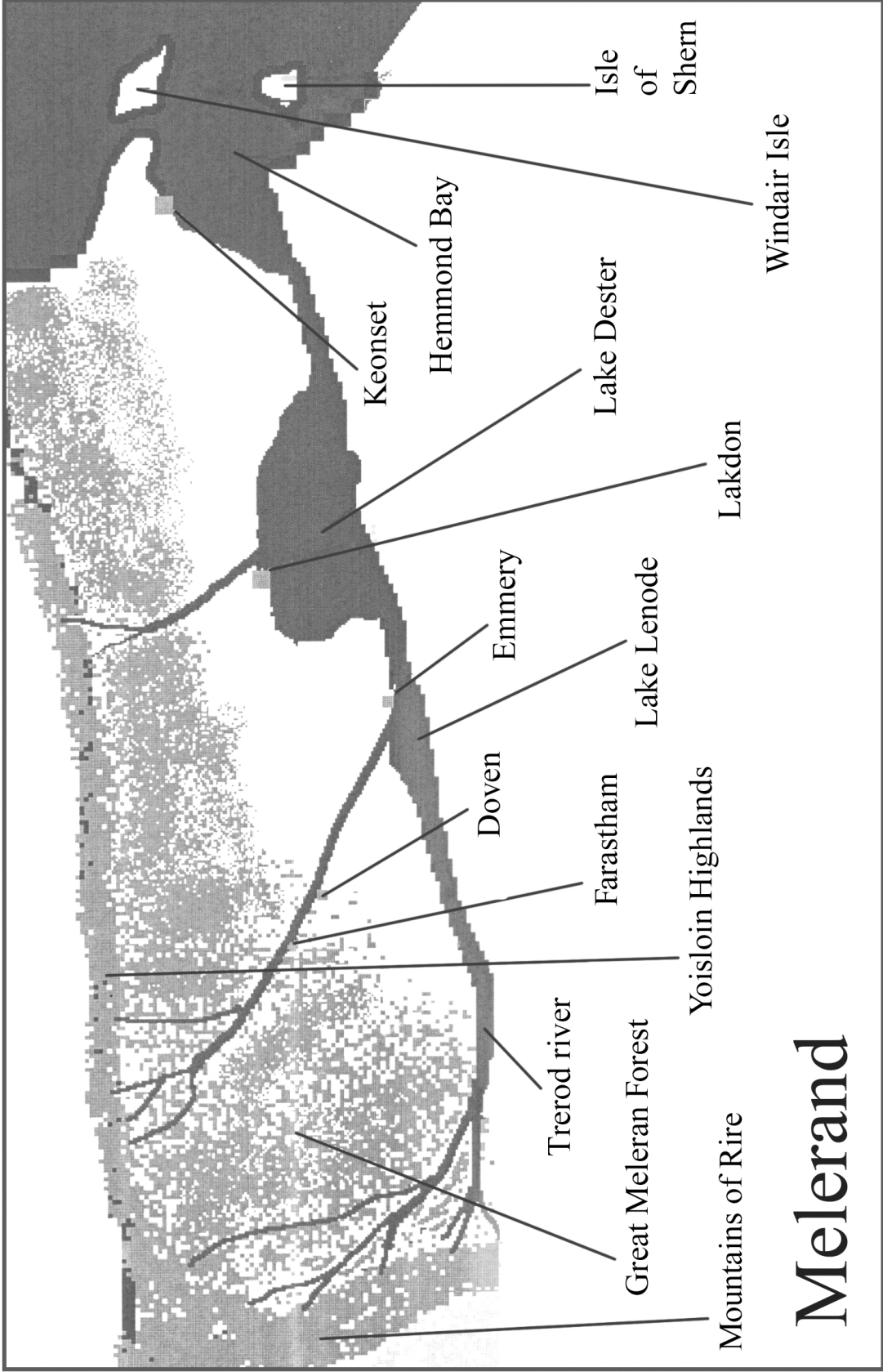
October 2023

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DRAGONSTEEL PRIME HAS A QUARTER CENTURY OF HISTORY, AND IT'S GOING to be very difficult for me to remember and acknowledge all of the people who helped me over the years. I do know I got feedback from a lot of the wonderful people at *Leading Edge*, the magazine I worked on in college. My roommates and friend group at the time helped a lot too. (That includes Annie, who was a partial inspiration for Sarene from *Elantris*; Ryan, who you might know as Drehy from *Bridge Four*; Tom, who is Captain Conrad from *Mistborn*; and Micah—also known as Demoux from *Mistborn*.)

The usual suspects (Dan, and Ben, and Peter, and Kaylynn, and Alan, and Skar, and both Nates) were all probably involved a ton as well. In addition, this was technically my honors thesis during my undergraduate years—and would go on to become the university's most checked-out honors thesis in history (requiring several rebindings). I can't fully remember who helped me in the department, but Sally Taylor almost certainly was influential. Finally, I'd like to thank all the editors who rejected this manuscript, because I wasn't ready to launch the Cosmere, and in hindsight I'm glad I got a few more years to prepare!





Melerand

PROLOGUE

THE WOUND HAD NOT BEEN INSTANTLY FATAL, BUT ADSEN WAS CERTAIN that it was mortal. He could feel his life seeping away with each failing pump of his heart. His stomach burned with a piercing pain, and he couldn't feel his legs. But, for some reason, he couldn't fall unconscious. He simply lay in agony on the Shattered Plains, waiting and hoping that death would come soon.

I have failed you, Calis, he thought, remembering his wife's face. I should not have thought myself a warrior. I should have stayed. I should have . . .

Men groaned in pain around him. The battle was a blur in Adsen's mind. They had lost; they had lost horribly. He didn't remember if any of the humans had escaped or not, but they certainly hadn't held the plateau.

Adsen tried to move his right arm. The limb refused to work, though he could feel a sharp pain coming from within it. He cried out, closing his eyes against the agony. He gasped in pain for a few moments, then reached up with his left hand, wrapping his fingers around the small wooden charm at his neck. His good luck charm, purchased for an incredible sum from a traveling Horwatcher wizard.

Oh, Lords, he thought. Just let me die.

The charm had done him little good. Adsen and the others had tried to hold the small plateau, tried to keep the Sho Del back until the humans could harvest the Dragonsteel well, but they had failed. Images of the battle were fresh in Adsen's mind. Sho Del demons, their faces pale white and their eyes dark black, had sliced through the human lines. The Lord of the

War, leader of the Sho Del forces, had advanced like an incarnation of Xeth the Black, cutting down all before him with a massive Dragonsteel axe. It had all happened so quickly.

A form moved in the corner of Adsen's vision, and for some reason he turned his head. A drip of sweat or blood, he couldn't tell which, slid down his forehead as he looked to the side. The Lord of the War himself stood a short distance away. Had Adsen not been in the process of dying, he would have been terrified.

The creature was as horrifying as the stories said. It was vaguely man-shaped, though it was hard to tell with all the armor. Or was it skin? Adsen had never heard of armor that covered someone's entire body, including the face. If it was metal, it wasn't bronze. It was shiny and silvery. Dragonsteel? Did that much of the valuable metal even exist in the world?

Skin or metal, the creature's body was outlined with harsh corners and sharp spikes. It clinked when it stepped, and it still carried the massive bloodied axe in its hand. The axe was definitely made of Dragonsteel—it was far too large, and sliced through bronze too easily, to be made of anything else.

A human warrior groaned as the Lord of the War passed, but the creature gave the man no heed. It was heading for the Dragonsteel well, a dark black basin in the center of the plateau. Two Sho Del walked at the Lord of the War's side. One of them knelt by the Dragonsteel well, the white, grass-like strands on its head waving in the wind. Then it stood, a small container held in its hands.

I would have liked to see the Dragonsteel, Adsen thought whimsically, the pain in his stomach flaring again, making him cough. It was supposed to be radiant and beautiful in its liquid form. The first person who touched the liquid metal was able to form it with his mind, crafting it into the shape that it would hold for the rest of eternity.

The pain was beginning to fade slightly, and Adsen thought he knew what that meant. He rolled his head back to stare into the sky, and took what he hoped would be his last breath.

What he saw in the air above him was so stunning that it snapped his consciousness back from the brink of death itself. Soaring above him were dozens of majestic black silhouettes. At first, Adsen assumed he was having some sort of delusion. However, the pain of his stomach wound returned suddenly, and he knew that he was wide awake.

The enormous serpentine forms made a broad circle in the air, spiraling

down toward the plateau. Adsen had heard of dragons, and knew that they were linked to the Sho Del somehow, but he had never expected to see one. They were more lithe and graceful than he had assumed—not bulky, despite their large size. As they approached, Adsen could make out their particular features. Their long necks bore heads topped by crowns of silvery horns, and their skin had a leathery look to it. Most of them were dark in color, and the contours of their bodies and wings seemed to be accented by silvery lines.

Dragonsteel, Adsen realized. As its name implied, the metal was said to grow on the bodies of dragons. As he looked closer, Adsen could see that their horns and claws were also silvery in color. The sheer amount of the precious metal growing on the dragons' bodies made the Shattered Plains' wells seem piddling by comparison.

The dragons settled to the ground around him. Each one dropped gracefully, but their sheer bulk made the plateau shake with resounding thuds at the weight. The largest and most magnificent of the beasts landed last. It settled to the ground with one final flap of its wings, sending the cloaks of fallen men flapping in the wind and, for just a moment, blowing away the stench of death.

Adsen somehow knew that this one was their leader. He could feel its age even from a distance. Its skin was a deep black, providing a contrast to the brilliant lines of Dragonsteel that ran like embroidery across its body. The dragons sat on the plateau like silent dark monoliths, their beauty and wonder enough to make Adsen forget his pain.

The Lord of the War still stood beside the Dragonsteel well. The lead dragon stared down at the Lord, its dark eyes unreadable. Somehow, Adsen felt like he could feel the creature's emotions. He was seeing something he shouldn't; something that was not of men. Something between the Lord of the War and this dragon.

Suddenly, Adsen's charm began to vibrate. He blinked in surprise. He had paid good money for the charm, but he hadn't really expected it to do anything. Had the Horwatcher actually been telling the truth?

We are leaving. The words exploded in Adsen's mind, ramming their way in through the pain and surprise. Somehow he knew that the lead dragon, the old one, had spoken. The words seemed to come through Adsen's charm, entering directly into his mind.

Adsen could feel surprise, and anger, from the Lord of the War. *Leaving?* the Lord of the War said, his voice projected through Adsen's charm. *You cannot leave. You are their gods!*

The dragon did not reply immediately. It turned its ponderous black head, looking over the plateau and its bloodied occupants. Its eyes seemed to focus on Adsen.

They are calling it the Eternal War, the old one's voice spoke in Adsen's mind. You fight, and you kill. The humans fight, and they kill. You all die.

We have no choice, the Lord of the War replied bitterly, his helmed head also turning its gaze toward Adsen. They are like maggots, these humans, breeding uncontrolled, corrupting that which they touch.

The dragon turned its eyes back on the Lord of the War. The other beasts stood like pillars, watching the interchange in silence.

We will not sit by and watch you kill one another, the old one said.

So you run? The Lord of the War demanded, his mental voice seething with anger. *You abandon the Sho Del in their time of need?*

We leave them because of their need, the dragon replied. We never asked for their worship, but we have done the best with it that we could. Now they have chosen to listen to you instead of us. Gods are not gods when they are ignored.

The Lord of the War's reply was a wave of disdain. He folded his arms, regarding the dragon. Adsen watched, gripping his charm, barely breathing. He was taking part in something monumental, he could tell that much. The world was changing.

The dragon looked away again. However, this time it didn't scan the battlefield, but instead turned its cavernous dark eyes toward the south. It looked into the distance for a long moment before speaking.

Your brother worries me, the dragon said, its mental voice laced with concern. He is planning something. He is dangerous. He destroyed the world once. He will try again. Who will resist him when you and the humans to the north have killed one another?

The Lord of the War nodded to one of the fallen human bodies. *Tell that to them. If they leave the Shattered Plains, we will leave them alone. Until that day, however, I will fight.*

The dragon continued to stare to the south. *We cannot live in seclusion, he said. That was never the plan.*

And my Father's plans have worked so well in the past? the Lord of the War asked.

The dragon turned back toward the Lord. Then, it stretched its wings, creating a broad shadow over the plateau. In unison, the other dragons opened their own wings, preparing to take off.

Farewell, the old one said. It launched itself into the air, wind from its passing blowing across Adsen's face.

Go, the Lord of the War said bitterly. I will not abandon them. They may have forgotten where they came from, but they are still my children.

Adsen's eyes trailed after the dragon, his charm ceasing its vibration. The dragon's departure somehow reawakened Adsen's pain, reminding him of the wound he had taken. It was as if the dragon's presence had somehow bolstered his life, giving him a few extra breaths. But now, with the creature's majesty departing, the pains and fatigues crashed back down upon Adsen.

He groaned, but he didn't take his eyes off the dragon. He watched the old one until it was just a tiny speck in the sky. And then, somehow freed, Adsen sighed his final breath and closed his eyes.



CHAPTER ONE

THE LUMBERMAN'S SON WAS BORN INTO A WORLD OF MAGIC. PERHAPS others would not have seen it so, but to a young boy full of curiosity and wonder, the forest was a place of enchantment. Jerick saw magic in the growth of the great pines, seeds barely as large as a pebble eventually becoming monoliths with trunks so wide that when he pressed his cheek against the rough bark and stretched his arms to their fullest, his fingertips still didn't touch at the back. He heard magic in the wind, which blew whispers through the branches, dropping cones and needles to the ground like a rattling waterfall. He tasted magic in the fruits of the wilderness, berries both sour and sweet, musty pine scents that tickled the back of his nose. He felt magic in the forest's wildlife, a group in which the lumberman's son included himself. Like the branchrat, the wolf, the rabbit, and the deer, Jerick was a creature of the woods.

His first steps had been taken on a floor of pine needles, his home—a simple hut—constructed from those same trees that surrounded it. The lumberman's son knew other, less fortunate children who lived in Farastham, the village a short distance down the river in a place where the mountain-side tapered and the trees fell away into a broad plain. Here the people lived cramped together, their houses huddled like frightened rodents, or birds too young to leave the nest.

Other lumbermen lived in this village, taking carts or boats each day to their lumbering camps. Jerick could not understand these men. They worked with the forest, yet it did not intoxicate them like it should. He did not

know how they could leave the beautiful woods each day, instead choosing to live in a place so crowded and suffocating.

Jerick had friends in the village, but they didn't see things the same way he did. When he showed Sen and the others a tree older and stronger than the rest, they would shake their heads, not understanding its strength. When Jerick found a large fish swimming in the river's sheltered shallows—its bulbous, unblinking eyes regarding him with an unasked question—the other boys would only try to catch it. When Jerick wondered how the clouds could move in the air when there seemed to be no wind, the others would ask him why he cared.

So, though trips to the village were exciting, Jerick was always glad to return home. Home to his mother, who would be finishing the day's washing. Home to his forest on the mountainside, where he could listen to the pines rustling, fallow owls calling, and twigs cracking, as opposed to the silence caused by men yelling to one another.

He loved to accompany his father into the woods. The lumberman was so tall and broad-chested he seemed almost to be one of the trees. Rin's arms were thick and rough with hair, his tough, axe-callused fingers like ancient roots, his beard like a thick gathering of pine needles that poked and scratched Jerick's skin when the two hugged. His father had deep, understanding brown eyes, and his wide lips were usually parted in a contented smile.

As far as Jerick could tell, his father was the only person alive who understood the forest better than Jerick himself. Rin could tell the strength and quality of a tree's wood simply by rubbing his fingers across the bark. He could see bird nests hiding in branches that Jerick had assumed were only shadows, and he could always find sweetberry bushes to sate a growing boy's appetite.

Most importantly, the forest seemed to accept his father. Jerick soon came to understand that this was because his father respected the woods.

"Look at t'trees around you, my son," his father would instruct as they walked together. "A man can be born, grow, and die in t'time it takes one of them to get so high. They've seen t'likes of us come and go."

Rin was a king's man, and he cut lumber for the king's shipping. Like the other lumbermen, Rin used a shiny bronze axe—the most important possession he owned. Bronze was rare; the only other piece of metal his family owned was his mother's bronze cooking knife. Jerick had heard men in the village speaking of a new, stronger metal that had been discovered recently in the south—something called "mountainsteel." They said its name

came because it was the same color as the mystical metal Dragonsteel, but to Jerick it was all the same. He had never seen either one—bronze was good enough for lumbermen.

As soon as he was able, Jerick followed his father to the lumbering camp, where he watched the burly men work, thinking up questions to ask his father as they traveled home. He wanted to know what made the men's arms so big, why the trees fell the way they did, and what the lumbermen did with all the branches they cut off the trunks. He wanted to know why the king needed so much wood, and how long it took to float it all the way down the Trerod river to the palace. Some of the questions his father could answer, others he could not.

Some things Jerick simply noticed, asking no questions. After felling a tree, his father would dig two holes and drop a pine seed into each one. The other lumbermen did not. It was a simple action, but one that taught Jerick an unspoken lesson. The forest respected Rin because Rin respected it back.

Jerick would have been content to remain in the woods for the rest of his life, living with his parents, becoming a lumberman himself when the day arrived. He probably would have, had the men returning from a lumber run not delivered a strange message to the town one spring day. Jerick heard about it from his father—it was an order from the king himself demanding that all of the lumbermen and their families gather together in the village on the fifteenth of Malen.

A nobleman was coming to visit.

THE NOBLE WAS THE MOST FABULOUS CREATURE JERICK HAD EVER SEEN. His robes were made of cloth, not furs or skins, and they were of a red as deep as the colors of the setting sun. More amazing, his hair was a pale yellow—like the mane of a light-colored horse—rather than deep black like everyone else's. His beard was not bushy and wide like that of Jerick's father—it was straight and stiff, about a handspan long, and only came out of his chin. It was pulled tight and wrapped with thin strings, making it ribbed, like a bale of hay. The beard almost resembled a slice of bread, with the short end glued to the bottom of the man's face, and it made his chin seem like it was a foot long.

His head was covered with a tight cowl that stretched across his forehead then hung loosely against the back of his neck, and his eyes were dissatisfied as he stood atop his chariot—a wonder in itself—and regarded the village. His jaw moved slightly, and his face pulled tight, as if he had suddenly tasted

an extremely rotten bitterroot. Around his neck Jerick could make out a gleaming castemark—the mark of a man's rank in life. It was made of gold, rather than plain wood like those of the lumbermen.

"Bow, lad," his father ordered.

Jerick complied, joining his parents and the rest of the village in bowing before the strange man. "Why do we bow, Father?" he mumbled as he lowered his head.

"Because t'man's of nable blood, boy," Rin explained. "Lumbermen and formers must bow before anyone higher than them, whether it be merchants, nables, or even crafters."

The idea seemed wrong to Jerick, but he said no more. For the moment, he was more interested in viewing the odd, brightly-clothed noble than asking questions.

"I have been sent here by the king himself," the man declared in a high-pitched voice. Jerick frowned—the noble's words sounded odd, as if he couldn't form them properly. They were sharp and separated, not smooth and comfortable like what Jerick was accustomed to hearing.

"What's wrong with his speakin'?" Jerick whispered, furrowing his brow in confusion.

"That's how nables are talkin', boy," Rin explained. "They're not t'same as lumbermen. They think differently, and they have learnin'. Now hush, pay attention." Rin watched the noble with interested eyes. The town had been speculating for weeks at the reason a noble was visiting their insignificant town, but no one but the foreman knew the reason, and he had been ordered to remain silent.

The noble regarded them all for a moment, a frown of displeasure on his face. "I have been ordered to start . . . a school here," he said slowly, as if he regretted every word. "Classes will begin next week. Boys between the ages of thirteen and sixteen may attend."

The crowd of villagers stood stunned. The noble gave no further explanation, however. He stepped down from his chariot, regarding the ground with a look of dissatisfaction. Jerick couldn't understand what he found wrong with the ground. It was, after all, just ordinary mud. The noble stepped lightly through the mud, gesturing for his companion to follow as he approached Miled Foreman.

Jerick frowned to himself. The noble's companion was a man of average height with a balding head. He didn't wear bright clothing like the noble, but his attire was still made of cloth rather than skins. Jerick hadn't even

noticed the second man; he stood in the second chariot, one laden with what Jerick presumed were the noble's possessions. Despite his average appearance, there was something different about the man. Something . . . strange. He regarded the crowd with calm eyes, and as his gaze passed, Jerick felt himself shiver.

"Father, who do you think that man is?" Jerick asked.

"Who?" Rin asked, sounding a bit distracted. The lumberman was still staring at the noble, a look of consternation on his face.

"The second man," Jerick explained. "The one followin' the nable."

Rin turned. "Oh," he said. "I hadn't noticed him. Must be a servant." However, Rin's attention wasn't on the servant. "Son," Rin said after a moment's thought, "come with me." He began to walk forward.

Beside Jerick, his mother frowned. "Rin," she said cautiously.

"I'm just goin' to be askin' if the boy can join, Mardle," Rin explained. "'Tis almost his thirteenth year."

"I don't know about this schoolin', Rin," Mardle said, a frown on her broad face. "'Tis unnatural. Learnin' isn't for lumbermen, 'tis for nables." Jerick's mother was practical in all respects, evaluating everything on its ability to be used. She didn't like things that went against tradition.

"It will be fine, Mardle," Rin assured. He did pause, however, waiting for her decision.

"Fine, then," Mardle finally said.

Rin nodded, then waved Jerick to follow. With trepidation, Jerick realized what was happening. They were going to go speak with the noble. The man was speaking to Miled, the elderly foreman of the lumbering camp.

"I spent an entire year training in Trexandos, the grandest center for learning on the continent," the noble was complaining in an annoyed voice, "and my reward? Forced exile to an insignificant mud pit on the far side of the kingdom. Of course, why am I talking to you? You're one of them. You probably don't even know what an insult it is to be forced to visit a place like this." The man's strangely accented voice sounded less authoritative than it had been before.

"I'm sorry, my lord," Miled said. "We'll do our best to make your stay a good one, my lord."

The noble snorted loudly, not even acknowledging Rin as the lumberman paused a respectful distance away. "Teach lumbermen and farmers?" the noble growled. "What purpose could that serve? You people can't learn. If

I weren't a loyal subject of the king, I'd worry about his sanity." Finally, the noble eyed Rin. "What do you want?" he snapped.

"My son, my lord," Rin said with a bowed head. "He's not quite thirteen. Can he be attendin' your lessons?"

"Bah, I don't care," the noble said with a wave of his hand. "One rat or a dozen, what is the difference? Send him, if you must."

Despite the insults, Rin smiled. Back behind, Jerick's mother watched with dissatisfaction. Jerick, however, just stood in amazement. Rin wanted Jerick to be taught by a noble. The idea was exciting, but frightening at the same time.

"Father," Jerick said as they backed away. "I don't know if I want to be doin' this. That man is strange—I don't think he likes us very much."

"Fa," Rin said with a smile. "All nables are like that."

Jerick turned, looking back at the noble. He was so proud, so lofty. If Jerick learned in the school, would he become the same way? "'Tis more than that, Father," Jerick whispered. "If I learn, things will change, won't they?"

Rin paused. The large man turned toward Jerick, then knelt down so that the two were at eye-level. "You don't have t'be goin' if you don't want to, son," he said. "You're right. Learnin' will change things."

"I don't want things t'change, Father," Jerick said quietly. Suddenly, for some reason, he had the stark fear that he might have to leave his forest.

Rin placed a hand on Jerick's shoulder. "I've taught you many things, and I hope bravery is one of them. Change is a part of everything, Jerick. Even t'forest grows and changes. Courage is nothin' more than bein' able to endure what's different until it becomes familiar."

Jerick smiled at the words, nodding.

"Will you give this schoolin' thing a try, son?" Rin asked.

"All right, Father," Jerick promised.

"THE FIRST THING YOU WILL LEARN HERE IS DISCIPLINE." THE SCHOLAR stood before them, his robes and strange conical cowl ruffling slightly as he settled himself down on a large raised cushion at the front of the room. On his right side sat a thick open book, on his left a long thin reed. The students sat in a single line on the floor in a half-circle before him.

"You will not know my name," the scholar's high-pitched voice continued. "If you refer to me, you will call me Master. You will listen attentively as I speak, then you will repeat what I have told you."

Jerick frowned, trying to make out the man's strange accent. "Do all nables speak like you, my lord?" Jerick asked.

The streak of pain sliced across his shoulder before he even saw Master's thin reed moving toward him. Jerick yelped in surprise, massaging the raw area with his fingers.

"You will address me as 'Master,' boy," Master said. "In addition, you will ask no questions. Questions are for the undisciplined. You will listen and repeat, for that is the only path to understanding. I do not care if you are miscreants and peasants, this classroom *will* be disciplined."

Master turned his contemptuous eyes over the boys, as if daring them to offend him. Finally he nodded, his long, flat beard waving stiffly like a pudge-bird's tail.

"We will begin with history. Our nation, Melerand, was founded in the Third Span. It was then called Melaran, and, in the beginning, was little more than a city and its surrounding farms. During this same time the city of Rodaius was begun in the south. Rodaius would eventually become the most powerful nation in Yolen, though it was all but annihilated by the Ke'Chan invasion at the beginning of the Fourth Span. All that remains of Rodaius now is the island city of Trexandos and its holdings."

"Master?" Jerick asked without thinking. "What does 'annihilated' mean?"

Snap! A second slice of blinding pain ripped across Jerick's shoulder. "No questions!" Master snapped.

"How can we be learnin' if we don't ask questions?" Jerick demanded with frustration.

Snap!

"You will learn if you have the natural capacity to do so. I will deliver what information I see fit, and your mind, if intelligent enough, will deduce the rest. If it is *not* intelligent enough, which appears to be the case, then the information would do you no good anyway. Sit quietly and do not interrupt me."

The class continued, and Jerick could tell he wasn't the only one of the boys bored by Master's teaching. The man's odd accent was hard enough to understand, but the unfamiliar words he used were impossible. However, as soon as one of the boys began to nod off, Master's reed was quick to respond.

Jerick himself slipped only once more during the exhausting session. Accustomed to asking whatever struck him, he had blurted out the question before realizing what he was doing.

"Master, are we goin' to learn readin'?" Jerick asked. As soon as the words

left his mouth, he froze and cringed, waiting for the blood-thirsty reed to whip forth.

This time, however, Master paused, forgetting his reed. The thin-faced man looked threatened for a moment, then he recovered and his reed snapped forward, delivering two blows across Jerick's shoulders—as if the boy were responsible for Master's embarrassing hesitation.

"Reading requires scrolls or books, boy," Master said. "If any of you have scrolls at your homes, you may bring them. I will spend extra time at the end of class teaching those with the proper materials."

The boys looked at each other with dismayed confusion. Most of them had heard of scrolls and reading, but they had no real concept of what either one was. To them, reading was as indecipherable and mysterious as the magic of the Horwatchers.

Master smiled. "Let us continue," he declared.

AFTER THE LESSON, JERICK WANTED TO DO NOTHING MORE THAN RUN around the town screaming—or, even better, to get back to his woods. His legs ached from continual straight-backed sitting, and his body yearned for activity. He was not alone. As soon as Master dismissed them, the children scattered, dashing away from the horrible schoolhouse like rabbits before a fox.

Leaving the school and its severe master behind, Jerick went searching for his father. Many of the other children did the same, skipping through the streets toward the town's tivren, where their fathers would be enjoying a skin of saprye. Oathday, the last day of the week, was one of the few times when men had time to get drunk before nightfall. Jerick didn't go to the tivren—his father would not be found there.

It took a great deal of searching to find Rin. Eventually, Jerick located the axe, but not the lumberman. The precious instrument was leaning up against the side of old widow Barth's house. Jerick approached with trepidation—people said odd things about the widow. Some even claimed that she was a witch, or a Horwatcher, though Rin always scoffed at such things.

"Ho, boy," a voice called from above. "If you'd be holdin' t'ladder, I'll climb down."

Jerick looked up to see his father climbing off the roof onto the ladder. "Father?" he asked uncertainly.

"The widow's roof's been leakin' since that storm a moon ago," his father explained. "I figured, since I had nothin' else to do, I'd see about patchin' it."

"I don't understand somethin', Father," Jerick confessed as the lumberman climbed down and picked up his axe in one hand and the ladder in the other. "Why did t'Nine Lords put some of us as nables and others as lumbermen?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that, boy," the lumberman confessed. "It's always been that way—every man has his place. Lumbermen and formers are at t'bottom, then t'crafters, t'saldiers, t'merchants, and finally t'nables, with t'king at t'top of them. Everyone is where t'Lord's put them, and everyone has someone above him that he's bowin' to."

"But we have so many more above us than everyone else," Jerick complained.

"That we do," the lumberman said simply.

They walked in silence for a moment, Jerick digesting this new view of the universe. His life away from the town had sheltered him—he had heard the other boys speak of crafters or merchants, but the loftiest person he had ever met was Foreman, and he was little more than a lumberman with a nicer hut.

The beauty of the weather soon turned his thoughts to lighter matters, however. It was a perfect spring day; the last of the harsh Melerand winter snow had finally melted away the week before, and a warm breeze was blowing across the treeless village. He was looking forward to the two-hour walk back to their house; today the forest would be filled with life.

"I finally figured it out, Father," Jerick said, looking up at the several clouds meandering across the sky.

"What's that, boy?"

"I figured out why t'clouds can move when there's no wind. I climbed my tree yesterday and was watchin' t'sky all afternoon."

"And what did you decide?" his father asked with a smile.

Jerick's eyes narrowed, staring up at the bright sky. "There *is* wind, Father. There's wind up there that doesn't blow down here. Layers and layers of it, movin' in different directions."

"Fa," the lumberman scoffed lightly. "How could you be knowin' that, boy?"

"I saw it," Jerick informed him frankly.

"Saw the wind?"

Jerick nodded slowly. "Not at first. But I watched for hours and hours and, eventually, I could see it. Like huge rivers in t'sky, Father, each one mixin' and flyin' over t'others. Some movin' quick, others movin' slow."

His father walked unresponsively for a moment. "Fa, boy," he eventually

said, clapping his son on the shoulder. "You have an imagination like t'Lords themselves. Come, let's return this ladder and get movin' home."

Jerick nodded. However, before they had taken another few steps, a startled yell rang through the village. It was a scream of horrible terror, not like the yell young Dal had made when he broke his leg. Fear had caused this exclamation, not pain.

The yell was followed by several others—calls of alarm and outrage, like nothing Jerick had heard men utter. He wasn't certain whether to be afraid or curious.

"What in t' name of t'Lords?" his father demanded. A crowd was gathering at the far end of the street, and Jerick's father began to move quickly, dropping his ladder and axe as he approached and pushing his way through the people. Jerick followed in his father's wake, sneaking to the front of the crowd, eager to see what had caused such a stir in such a determinedly quiet setting.

When he found out what it was, he felt like he had been cheated. "'Tis just a lizard," he said with a betrayed voice.

A small reptilian creature the size of a cat crouched before them. It was bone-white in color, and it was pulled so tightly into a ball that Jerick could make out little of its specific features. Several men were poking at the beast with sticks or rakes, their actions nervous, as if they were certain the pathetic animal would rise up and eat them at any moment.

His father hissed softly beside him, looking at the creature. "Fain," he whispered. "A dragon."

"Fain?" Jerick asked with wonder.

Suddenly, prodded by a particularly strong poke, the creature unrolled itself, and Jerick got his first look at a Fain beast. A creature of darkness—or so the priests said. It had a thin, flat head with black eyes, and, unlike any normal lizard, its mouth was lined with teeth. It hissed loudly at its captors as it unrolled, its long tail raising as if to strike. Its most distinguishing feature, however, was its legs. An extra set of limbs sprouted from its belly, making it look almost like some overlarge insect rather than a lizard.

This is a dragon? Jerick thought with confusion. *But it looks so . . . harmless.*

"Let me through, you boors!" a high-pitched voice commanded. Master stumbled to the front of the crowd, his robes and cowl disheveled from the press. He began to straighten them but his arms fell to his sides in surprise when he saw the Fain creature.

"Impossible! A creature of Fain this far north?" he yelped, pulling back. The crowd, however, had filled in behind him, blocking his retreat. The

people, eager to see the strange beast, were slowly pressing Master forward. He pushed at them ineffectually, terror in his eyes.

"Destroy it!" Master ordered. "Kill that monstrosity before it curses us all!"

"Come, boy," Jerick's father ordered, turning and grabbing Jerick's shoulder in a firm grip. "We'd best be goin' now."

Jerick reluctantly allowed himself to be towed away, his father's massive form easily clearing a path through the crowd.

"They're goin' to kill it," Jerick realized as he reached the perimeter of people. Rin didn't answer, slowly bending down and picking up his axe and ladder.

"Father, they're goin' to kill that poor thing!" Jerick repeated.

"That they will," the lumberman agreed, his face expressionless beneath his wooly beard.

"But . . ." Jerick trailed off as his father set the ladder against Foreman's hut, then moved to walk out of the town. A pathetic wail—this one pained and bestial—came from behind them. Jerick turned, glancing back at the mass of people, their eyes looking eagerly toward the execution. His father had always taught him never to kill for sport.

"Fain beasts aren't t'same as regular animals," Rin explained, his eyes downcast. "They're monsters, boy. Creatures of evil. T'only thing t'do with them is kill them before they breed and plague t'land."

"But . . ."

"Come, boy. Your mother's waitin'."

Jerick allowed himself to be pulled away. However, as he did so, he noticed something. Master's servant stood near the back of the crowd, watching the people. There was a strange look in his eyes. He wasn't afraid. He was . . . angry, if anything.

Suddenly, Jerick's mind felt very cold. A shiver passed through his body. Something wasn't right.

"Come, boy," Rin repeated, and Jerick turned, leaving the strange man behind.

"YOUR SON IS THE MOST DISRUPTIVE OF MY STUDENTS, LUMBERMAN RIN." Master dropped an armload of scrolls onto the table.

"I apologize, my lord," Jerick's father replied, bowing his head submissively.

Jerick couldn't understand what had driven his father to seek out the

scholar. Jerick had continued to attend classes in the month following the incident with the Fain creature, but Rin had never gone to speak to Master. Today, however, the lumberman had come directly to Master's house, insisting that Jerick accompany him. School lessons wouldn't begin for another hour at least, and Jerick had been anticipating the time he would spend with his friends. Now it seemed that he was doomed to spend every moment of the day in Master's presence.

"He refuses to adhere to the basic rules of conduct," Master continued, seating himself authoritatively on the cushion behind his table. His long, stiff beard reached almost to the table's top. "He will never be properly educated, for he refuses to practice self-control."

"I apologize, my lord," Rin repeated with another bow of his head. Jerick could see from his father's expression that he hadn't understood many of the scholar's strange words.

"Yes, he is a dull boy at best," Master declared. "But, I digress into repetition. Tell me, lumberman, why have you interrupted my peace?"

"I was just wonderin', my lord, when you'd be teachin' t'boy t'read."

"Read?" Master scoffed. "Why, do you have any idea how much books and scrolls cost? It was bad enough before the Trexandians developed this new codex form, but now . . ." Master laughed to himself. "Lumberman, I could buy your entire village for the price of just a few of these volumes."

Master punctuated his remark by waving his hand across the room, gesturing towards the various piles of scrolls and books scattered through the room. It seemed to Jerick that if they were truly valuable, Master wouldn't have left them in such disorder.

"T'things are that valuable?" Rin asked with disappointment.

"More than you can imagine, lumberman," Master said airily. He reached over and selected a particularly thick volume. "This one, for instance, cost an entire silver crin."

"That much?" Rin said, his eyes downcast.

Master smiled at Rin's disappointment, resting his elbows on the table and continuing, "Yes. So you see, lumberman, I can't possibly teach your children to read. To do my efforts any justice at all they would have to spend time at home studying every night, and they can't do that without books of their own. My own volumes are far too valuable to lend out. I am as disappointed as yourself—if there were a way to provide the children with proper learning materials I would, of course, embrace it. As things stand, however . . ."

The scholar's voice trailed off as Rin reached down, fiddling with his

belt in his determined, unhurried manner. Then, without hesitation, the lumberman's thick hand reached up and placed something on Master's table with a metallic click. When he removed his hand, a glistening coin lay on the wooden tabletop, sparkling in the light. A silver crin.

Master's arms thumped as they dropped to the table, his face completely stunned. He reached over with a shaking hand, picking up the coin and testing its weight. Finally, composing himself, he looked accusingly at Rin.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded. "The king's lumbermen aren't paid wages, only food and supplies."

"T'boys who take t'lumber down the river are given a copper penning t'buy saprye at t'tivren."

"But it takes a hundred pennings to make a crin, lumberman," Master scoffed.

"I made t'trip once a month for ten years."

"You saved for a decade to get one silver crin?" Master asked incredulously. "Why? You can't buy a new life, lumberman. You are what you are, no matter how many coins you have."

"I know, my lord," Rin agreed. Then he looked down at the book in Master's hands.

"What?" Master demanded.

"My lord, you said if there was a way t'help t'boy learn readin', you would take it."

"You want to buy my book?" Master said with a choked laugh.

"My lord, you said t'book cost a crin. I have a crin."

"You're serious."

"Serious as t' Lords, sir. You said you wanted t'help my boy, and I know that nables such as yourself can't be tellin' lies. There's your crin."

"But . . ." Master trailed off, his long face growing dark. Jerick could read the anger in his eyes—the man had realized that he, master and noble, had been trapped by a simple woodsman.

"It won't do him any good, lumberman," Master insisted.

"My son said you'd teach them after class if they had materials," Rin pointed out.

Master frowned, his long fingers gripping the book with frustrated tension.

"Fine," he said, dropping the codex to the table with a careless gesture. "Waste your money, lumberman. When you see how little it helps the boy, you'll wish you had spent those pennings on alcohol instead."

"Yes, my lord," Rin said with a bow. His hand, however, slid the book

off the table and handed it to Jerick, who had watched the entire exchange with amazement.

“Come, lad,” Rin said, bowing and backing away.

Jerick allowed himself to be led from the room, his eyes transfixed by the silver coin still sitting defiantly on Master’s table. It was the only coin he had ever seen. The scholar did not reach for the money as they left, but regarded it with unusual loathing. Somehow Jerick knew that no matter what the man had said, in the hands of a peasant the book was worth far more than silver could ever purchase.

CHAPTER TWO

“THE WORLD WAS CREATED BY OREON THE WHITE.” MASTER SAT CROSS-legged on his plush pillow, his eyes thin, almost closed, as he spoke. “Once he was finished, he lived upon the land for thousands of years, enjoying his craftsmanship. Eventually, however, he grew discontent. One day he formed a large egg from the mud of a stream. He cushioned this egg with smooth rocks and grass, and when it broke a child was crouched inside. This was the first man, Rodain. Oreon created more men, and the kingdom of Rodaius was born.

“Xeth the Black saw his brother’s creations and scoffed. He saw no point in them. Xeth, however, always found joy in spiting Oreon. So, in order to mock his elder brother, he too created a race of beings, but his creations were flawed. They were of pure white skin and had an extra set of limbs. Because Xeth created them simply as a means of challenging his brother, he gave no love to the monsters, and they were created without souls. These were the Sho Del. From that day forward the Sho Del worked to destroy man, for they have no hearts for love. They are fierce and long to drink the blood of humankind.”

Master’s voice rolled oddly, with rhythmic intonations. Jerick had heard the same story many times from Wat, the priest, but it sounded different coming from Master.

“Where did t’other Fain creatures come from?” Jerick asked.

Master responded immediately, swiping Jerick across the shoulder with his reed. Jerick was almost used to the pain by now. At first he had forced

himself to stop asking questions, but then he had noticed something. Even though Master punished him for the queries, the scholar still answered them. So, Jerick had returned to asking questions. The pain of curiosity was much more uncomfortable than a simple swipe of Master's reed.

"Fain creatures, like the Sho Del, were created by Xeth," Master explained, his voice falling out of its cadence. "Just as the Sho Del were created to be a mockery of mankind, other Fain creatures were made as parodies of regular creatures. That lizard we found the other month, for instance, was probably the Fain equivalent of a dog or a cat."

"Lizard?" Jerick asked. "You mean t'dragon?"

Snap. "That was no dragon," Master said with a snort. "Dragons are mythological beasts which do not exist."

Jerick frowned. "Then, where does Dragonsteel come from?" he asked.

Snap. "Simple-minded men created stories of dragons and other beasts before Fain life was understood, and claimed that Dragonsteel came magically from their bodies. We now know, however, that there is a much simpler explanation. Dragonsteel rises from the earth in liquid form, pooling in wells on the Shattered Plains. It is over these wells that we fight the Sho Del in the Eternal War."

Master opened one eye slightly, watching Jerick, turning his reed between two fingers. When no further questions came forth, Master slipped back into his rhythmic style of speaking, turning back to his story from before.

"As men grew, they formed themselves into nations and kingdoms. Those kingdoms that were blessed and virtuous earned the patronage of certain gods, who guided and aided them. The Bringer of Fire was one of the first to bless Man, giving him that most precious gift by which we cook our food and warm our bodies.

"Though certain kingdoms received the blessings of individual gods, none were foolish enough to ignore building temples and giving offerings to each of the Lords, for we must take care not to earn the wrath of deity. Even Xeth, the Black One, is worshiped by the wise man, for the Lord of death is quick to anger. Only one god is forgotten—the Betrayer.

"Now, the patronages of the gods are as follows. Trexandos, which was once Rodaius, is blessed by Sivin, the Healer. Melerand gives homage to Aldvin the Wise, god of growth and agriculture. Fallamore—"

"You're encroachin' on my territory, I see," an amused voice said from behind them. Jerick turned with surprise. Wat, the priest, was standing in

the doorway. He was a jovial man with a large, oval face and long sideburns. His eyes were wise and his mannerisms kind.

"The Legends are not the sole property of clergy, priest," Master said haughtily. "The Legends are required learning for anyone of decent education. I wish I could teach them in their original tongue, but my students hardly have the capacity to learn Fallin. They have a hard enough time remembering what I teach in Meleran."

Wat nodded slightly, letting the cloth door fall closed behind him as he entered. He wore a simple brown robe, as usual, and his priest's castemark—a simple wood circle with a stone in the center—hung around his neck.

"I heard you had a . . . disturbance here in t'village a few weeks back. I was visitin' another town at t'time."

Master scowled. "Must you replicate that horrendous dialect?" he asked. "I know you, priest. They told me who you were when the king assigned me to this mud pit. You once served in the capital—you must know how to speak properly."

"A wise man knows how to blend with those he serves," Wat said. His voice, however, changed. This last sentence was spoken with the same disjointed accent as Master.

Jerick regarded the holy man with stunned eyes—no one knew where Wat had been born, or who his family was, but Jerick had always assumed he was a peasant, like the rest of them. If Jerick hadn't just heard the priest speak like Master, the possibility that Wat might be of noble blood would have been completely unfathomable to him.

"Why have you come, priest?" Master demanded.

"I simply wanted to hear of your opinion on the Fain creature's appearance."

There was something behind the conversation, Jerick could tell. He couldn't, however, understand what it was.

"Then why interrupt my class?"

"To inform you of my arrival, noble scholar," Wat said. "I'm knowin' that men of t'nable houses grow upset when visitors don't pay proper respect."

Master's eyes grew even more cold as the priest's accent disappeared and he started talking normally again. Wat smiled once, then pushed aside the curtain to leave the building. Master watched the door for a moment, then turned back to the class.

"Today's lesson is finished," he declared.

The children, true to characteristic form, dashed from the room as soon

as they heard Master's dismissal. There were fewer of them now—only five boys had come to this day's lesson.

Jerick sat quietly, not breaking posture as the other boys ran away. The book sat on the ground beside him.

Master watched him, his teeth clenched tightly. Finally he looked down at the book. "All right, boy," he said. "We'll start with the alphabet."

JERICK HAD EXPECTED MASTER TO BE EVEN MORE CRUEL DURING THEIR private lesson than he was with the entire class, but, surprisingly, such was not the case. The scholar set aside his reed during his instruction on the alphabet, and he even broke posture, leaning forward to write on a piece of vellum with a thin stick of charcoal. It was as if the reading lesson was outside of normal teaching, and thereby freed of its strict protocol.

Jerick approached reading with trepidation. Master's lessons on history and Legends had been difficult to understand because of the strange words he used, but the concepts had not been new. Jerick had heard stories of armies, nations, and gods all his life.

Reading was different. He had never really known what it was—the village people, even his parents, spoke of writing and reading with such reverence that he had been a little scared to open the book and peek inside. The pages were filled with tiny little pictures, like what a young child would scribble in the dirt. The pictures were ugly, and without form—barely more than random lines jumbled together.

"This mess is readin'?" he asked with surprise.

"That mess, boy, was penned by one of the finest scribes in Trexandos," Master replied sternly. "It is beautiful."

"Looks like a bunch of broken pine needles to me."

Master snorted, reaching over to pour himself something to drink. His jug, however, was empty. He cursed to himself, mumbling something about his servant.

"Boy, go get me some saprye from the jug in the other room," Master ordered.

Jerick complied. "Where is your servant, Master?" he asked.

"Gone," Master cursed. "He disappeared a few days ago. I should have known better than to hire a Trexandian—they're such loafers."

Jerick nodded, though he didn't really understand, and handed Master his drink.

“Now,” Master said, “pay attention. Your mind probably won’t be able to grasp this.”

As the lesson progressed, Master’s prediction proved wrong. Jerick did understand—at least, he started to. First Master drew a picture of a tree, and asked Jerick what it meant. Then, he drew a large letter, and explained that the letter meant something too—not an object, but a sound. He put several sounds together, and they made the word “tree.”

The concept was amazing to Jerick. That scribbles on a piece of vellum—scribbles that didn’t even look like a picture—could represent a tree was astounding. As the lesson continued, he began to realize why reading was such a magical thing. The man who had written Jerick’s book had died hundreds of years ago, but Jerick could still read his words. The past opened to him. Lumbermen and farmers lived in the present—even the Legends were lessons for today more than they were histories of the past. Being able to experience the words of a man long dead, however, was like stepping into another time.

There, as he first scribbled the word “tree” at Master’s direction, the lumberman’s son knew that his life would never be the same.

THE WALK HOME THAT DAY WAS A RELATIVELY QUICK ONE, WITHOUT much talking. Jerick’s mind was occupied by the day’s lesson, and his father appeared to have concerns of his own. Two hours passed with barely a thought, and soon they arrived at their hut. Light from the hearth inside poured from the windows and illuminated the trees around them. Firebugs swirled around Jerick and Rin, blinking wispily to one another in the moonlit night.

“Come, boy,” Rin said, leading him into the house. “Your mother and I have somethin’ for you.”

Jerick looked up with surprise. “What?”

Rin simply gestured for him to enter. His mother was sitting beside the hearth, stirring a pot of stew. “You’re late,” she noted.

“Not too late, Mardle,” Rin replied with a smile.

His mother nodded, shooting a look down at Jerick’s book. She hadn’t approved of it, of course. It was unnatural for a lumberman’s son to be carrying around a book filled with words.

“Shall we do it now?” she asked, raising the wooden ladle to her lips to taste the soup.

“Good enough as another time,” Rin agreed. Awkwardly he reached into a pouch on his belt and pulled out a thin wooden disk about the size of a child’s palm. “Here, boy,” he said uncomfortably. His father had never been good at giving gifts.

Jerick accepted the disk with curiosity. “A castemark?” he asked with excitement, realizing what it was. “Boys don’t get one of these until they’re thirteen!”

“You’ll turn soon enough, boy,” his father said. “Your birthdate is next week.”

Surprised, Jerick realized he was right. So much had been happening lately that he hadn’t even considered such a thing.

Jerick looked down at the castemark with wonder. Every man and woman in Melerand—perhaps in the world, he didn’t know—wore a castemark. It proclaimed who and what a man was; the king’s law forbade one from removing or altering it. To Jerick the disk was a sign of maturity. Men wore castemarks, boys did not. Each boy in the village anticipated the day he could wear a castemark, to have something that proclaimed he was no longer a child.

“Such a burden t’give one so young,” Rin said with a sigh.

Jerick looked up with confusion. What about a castemark could be a burden? His mother obviously thought the same way, for she ignored Rin’s comment, catching Jerick’s face in her hands.

“My boy, growin’ up. Your father himself cut that from a branch of t’oldest tree in t’forest, then carved it with his own hand. T’men gave it a stain today in town t’protect it from water. ’Tis a very special gift, son.”

Jerick nodded, looking down at the disk. Its front was inlaid with the image of a large, powerful tree—the mark of a lumberman. Whatever anyone else said, this castemark told the world what Jerick was, and what he would always be.

He turned it over, expecting to see a similar picture on the other side. It, however, was blank. “I don’t understand,” he said, looking up at his father.

“I started t’carve it, boy, but somethin’ stopped me. I guess maybe I wasn’t convinced there wasn’t somethin’ else in your future. I don’t know.” Rin blushed, uncertain how to explain himself.

Jerick’s mother frowned—she obviously hadn’t known her husband intended to leave one side blank. But then it wasn’t really blank, Jerick noticed. The natural grain of the wood was a pattern, concentric rings of alternating darkness and light.

With a shrug, he accepted the thin leather rope from his mother and tied the castemark around his neck. Now the world would know what he was.

JERICK KNEW INSTANTLY WHERE HIS FATHER HAD FOUND THE WOOD FOR his castemark. His mother had used the words “oldest tree in t’forest,” and there was only one tree that could fit such a description. It grew a short distance from his hut—about a half-hour’s walk—on a small hill in a forest clearing.

Jerick stood before the massive tree. He had never been able to determine just what kind of tree it was—it had leaves rather than needles, but its bark was flaky and layered like that of a waxpole pine. It seemed to grow out more than up, its thick branches extending almost horizontally, like enormous vines. All of the branches were long and twisted, and they didn’t seem like they should be able to grow out as far as they did without breaking. Yet, each branch was powerful; Jerick had climbed in them many times, and they barely gave way beneath his weight. It was like they were made of metal rather than wood.

The tree was very old. Age seeped from its branches like sap. Its roots felt older than the dirt that surrounded them, and its branches more seasoned than the sky they touched. Jerick was quite certain the tree was the oldest living thing in the world.

He approached the tree slowly. He didn’t remember discovering it, nor did he remember his father showing it to him. He had always known it was there. He ran his hand along its familiar trunk, feeling the vellum-like bark. His father had crafted his castemark from that same wood. The castemark that determined and fixed Jerick’s life, proclaiming who and what he was to the world. This same wood—it felt right.

Reaching up, Jerick kicked off his shoes and pulled himself into the tree’s branches, making his way toward the top. The ascent was not difficult—more like stepping than climbing. The branches were like a wide organic staircase, his unshod feet clinging easily to their bark.

The tips of the upper branches were dark and brittle, the bark charred. Lightning had struck here many times, but, for some reason, the tree had never started on fire. The top of the tree did not come to a point, like the pines or firs he had climbed. Instead, the ancient tree ended in a fat round knob, branches spreading out from it like the palm of a man’s hand. It was

here that his father had excised the small section of wood that had become Jerick's castemark.

The careful axe cuts stood out against the tree's blackened surface. The place where Rin had cut was coated with dark tar, placed by the lumberman to protect the tree's raw insides from insects. The knob was half-gone—his father had taken the wood from the very heart of the tree, yet, like always, had done no more damage than necessary.

Jerick rubbed his hand over the cut, giving thanks to the tree for its gift. Now if he were someday forced to leave the forest behind, at least he would carry a piece of it around his neck, next to his heart.

"THERE ARE THREE REALMS OF EX . . . EXISTENCE. THE SPIRITUAL, AND the cog . . . natib . . ."

"Cognitive," Master corrected. "The second realm is the Cognitive."

"The Spiritual, the Cognitive, and the Physical," Jerick repeated, reading from the first page of his book. "Of these, the Spiritual is . . . dominant, followed by the Cognitive, and finally the Physical. The Spiritual realm is the realm of the di . . . divine, where the Nine Lords reside, and it is this realm that controls all." Finishing the paragraph, Jerick looked up eagerly. "You see, Master, I *have* been practicing."

Master frowned. "A nobleman's son would read twice as quickly after two months of training," he said. "Continue."

Jerick did as instructed. "As is often said, 'Connekte 'e fa donne.'" He paused. "Master, that doesn't make sense."

"Of course not. It is in another language."

"Another language?"

"Yes, 'Connekte 'e fa donne' is a Fallin proverb."

"But I can read it," Jerick said with confusion. "I once heard a trader speakin' a different language, and I couldn't understand it. Why can I read this?"

"Because Fallamore and Melerand use the same Rodain alphabet, as does Trexandos," Master explained, his expression annoyed, as it often was when he found himself forced to explain supposedly simple concepts. "Be glad we do, boy—the Rodain system is logical and phonetic, with few irregularities. The same cannot be said for all alphabets—in Tzendor, for instance, the written language is completely different from the spoken one."

Jerick studied the now-familiar letters on the page. He could usually

sound them properly even if he didn't know what the words meant. Looking at the Fallin words, however, he felt like he almost knew their meaning. "This word, Master, it looks familiar. 'Tis almost like 'connect.'"

Master didn't respond immediately, and Jerick looked up. He was faced with an incredible sight. He thought, just for an instant, he saw a slight smile turning on the corners of Master's lips—could it be pride he saw in the harsh scholar's eyes?

The emotion was gone in an eye blink. "You are correct, boy," Master said in his flat, authoritarian voice. "Fallin and Meleran are related languages, with similar vocabulary. 'Donne' is a word that refers to completion, 'done' in our language, and 'connekte' means connection. The phrase reads 'Connection of the Whole,' meaning something like 'all things are connected.'"

"But what's t'rest of it mean?" he asked. "I can read it, but I still don't know many of t'words."

"That is because you lack the proper lifestyle," Master explained offhandedly. "If you had grown up in the court, you would be familiar with Realmatic theory, and such words as 'Cognitive' and . . ." Master trailed off suddenly, his eyes widening, as if he couldn't believe what he had just said.

Jerick frowned, wondering what about Master's words was so unsettling. Before he could think on it, Master began speaking quickly, as if to cover his mistake.

"Everyone knows that there are three realms of existence, boy. The word 'Spiritual' refers to a better world, one that we, as humans, cannot visit. The Spiritual world is where the Lords live. The Cognitive world is the world of the demon Sho Del, and the Physical world is where we live now—the world is constructed of the four elements, fire, water, air, and earth."

"What's 'Cognitive'?" Jerick asked with a furrowed brow.

"It means 'thought' or 'mind.'"

"What does that have to do with Sho Del? Aren't they Fain?"

"Yes, the Sho Del are Fain—they are the highest level of Fain creature. They resemble men, though they are twisted and horrible to look upon."

"Well, what do they have to do with t'mind? Why is t'Cognitive t'realm of demons?"

Master sighed. "U Poni Sho Del, the central continent, is thought to be the Cognitive realm. The Sho Del are strange—they have the ability to create illusions in men's minds, clouding their understanding. Such is why theorists ascribe them to the level of Cognitive."

"I don't understand," Jerick confessed.

Master sighed. "I do not have time to explain such things to you, boy—they will do you little good. Why would a lumberman need to understand complex Realmatic theories? Just continue."

Jerick nodded, though inside he was frustrated by Master's impatience. Why did a lumberman need such things? Lumbermen had curiosity too. Three months ago Master had claimed the children of lumbermen would never be able to learn in a school, but now one was reading. How much more proof would the man require?

Jerick shook his head and turned back to the book. However, before he continued he noticed something. Master was frowning, his head turned toward the door. There were sounds coming from outside—the sounds of people talking excitedly. "What now?" Master demanded, rising. Jerick followed curiously.

It appeared that there was a stranger in town.

Jerick left the schoolhouse to the sight of villagers standing in the open area before the schoolhouse, murmuring to one another. The stranger stood in the most magnificent chariot Jerick had ever seen. Of course, he had only seen a few in his lifetime. This one, however, shone so brightly it seemed to have been constructed of sunlight itself.

"Is it made of . . . Dragonsteel?" Jerick asked with wonder.

Master snorted beside him. "Dragonsteel is far too precious to be used for making chariots, boy," he chastised. "It's nothing more than wood with some silver plating."

The chariot was drawn by two magnificent white horses. Jerick's family kept no beasts of burden—no lumberman could afford such a luxury—and the few animals that belonged to the town were a pair of unimpressive donkeys and a single ox. In fact, Jerick had rarely seen horses before—their weak backs made them unable to carry riders or pull heavy carts, making them relatively useless.

The rider, however, was much more magnificent than either horses or chariot. Jerick stood awed, his eyes transfixed by the chariot driver. Jerick had never seen so many colors in his life. The man's costume was constructed of a dozen different materials, each one brilliantly colored. The conglomeration was so inherently confrontational, Jerick wondered if the costume had been sewn by a blind woman.

The man wore a long yellow cape and red hose. His overshirt was striped with green, orange, and blue, and on his head was a floppy pink hat that was far too big. He was a tall man, and though he was young, his hair was

stark white, save for a few pepperings of black. As he turned, Jerick was able to see that his face was sharp and hawkish, and it bore a deep smile.

"Oh, Lords," Master groaned. "Not him!"

The stranger seemed to have noticed Master as well—he winked with a sly grin in the scholar's direction. Then he turned to address the townspeople.

"People of the village Farastham," he said in a loud voice, "hear my words, for they are the words of your king." The villagers pressed in, getting as close to the horses as their nerves would allow.

"I have been sent to deliver unto you a decree. Your king, Rodis the First, will be traveling eastward to conduct business with the cattle dealers of Aldvin. He has chosen your town as the meeting place for that event. You have three months to prepare."

TEN MINUTES LATER, AFTER THE CROWD HAD FINALLY CALMED AND dispersed, Jerick and Master still stood on the schoolhouse steps—Jerick fascinated, Master obviously bothered for some reason. Jerick would have left with the crowd, following the men who were ordered to care for the chariot and horses, but Master seemed to be waiting for something.

The brightly-clothed man stepped down from his chariot, and after speaking with Foreman for a short time, walked over toward Master. "Torry!" he exclaimed with a broad smile. "I was warned I might find you here."

"What are you doing here?" Master grumbled. "I would have thought delivering the king's proclamations was beneath you."

The man shrugged. "Rodis was going to send a courier, but I was coming this direction anyway."

"I don't suppose anyone gave you a message to deliver to me?" Master asked.

"Only one," the man replied, holding up a finger. "From the king. He's very interested in your progress."

"Progress?" Master asked indignantly. "But it's only been three months! I knew it—the king must hate me."

"Actually, no," the stranger said, leaning against the side of the schoolhouse. "Quite the opposite, dear Torry. You're very important to the king. Or, at least, his bet."

Master froze. "Bet?" he asked with confusion.

"Why, yes, didn't you know about it?" the man asked innocently. "It's between the king and Kalord Strafen."

"And . . . what does this bet entail?"

The man shrugged. "The king thinks that nobility could be more a function of education than it is of divine right."

"Blasphemy!" Master said with a horrified tone. "You are mistaken!"

The man shook his head at Master's denial. "Kalord Strafen, of course, thinks like you do. Their arguments have become quite famous since you left to study in Trexandos a few years back. However, before it came to blows, the king offered a bet—he wagered that he could open a school in a small village and raise the children there to be as intelligent as noblemen."

There was silence for a moment. "This village?" Master asked with a sick tone.

The stranger nodded with a somewhat malicious smile. "The same, Torry. They sent you because they thought you would be unbiased, having been in Trexandos during the arguments. That's why you were only given a single day at home before the king ordered you out here."

"By the Lords! I cannot be a part of this! It is sacrilegious!"

"If you refuse, the king could have you executed for treason," the man pointed out.

"Oh Lords, why have you cursed me so?"

"Don't take it so hard," the stranger offered, patting Master on the shoulder. "True, if you fail, the king will probably have you punished. If you succeed, however, you'll be rewarded. Of course, the rest of the nobility will probably hate you. . . ."

Master groaned, then threw the colorful man's hand off his shoulder. "You!" he accused. "You're part of this. The king never had such insane ideas before you arrived!"

"Ah, Torell," the man said with a sigh. "How I've missed you. The court hasn't been the same since you left. There's hardly anyone left to make sport with—they all take themselves far less seriously than you do."

Master's face darkened. "Leave me alone," he hissed, stalking down the stairs and heading toward his house.

"Torry, is that the way to treat an old friend?" the stranger called after the scholar with a laugh. "Well, at least you're consistent. I suggest you give thanks to the Lords for your masterfully grouchy disposition—such pure irritability can only be the work of a divine hand."

Master didn't respond. The stranger, still chuckling, eventually turned to Jerick, who had watched the entire display with interest. "Say, boy, is there a place in this village I can get some food?"

"Food?" Jerick asked.

"Yes. The stuff you eat."

Jerick blushed. "I know, sir. There isn't much food to be had. Perhaps you should ask Foreman."

"Ah, yes," the man said lightly, "I forgot—the first rule of despotism is to make certain no one but the aristocracy has enough to eat. Contentment breeds free thought."

Jerick furrowed his brow. The man spoke oddly, like Master, only even more differently. There was a musical lilt to his speech, and he seemed to slur the ends of some words. "There's the tivren, sir," Jerick offered. "You can get something to drink—there's always plenty to drink."

"Ah. Of course—the second rule of despotism: keep the peasants drunk."

"If you say so, sir."

The man laughed, walking over to Jerick. He sauntered very lightly, his step careful, as if he were walking on the top of a very high ledge. "What's that you have in your hands, boy?"

Jerick looked down at his book, then tightened his grip protectively. "A book, sir."

"A peasant with a book? How delightful! Perhaps Torry really is doing his job. Here, let me see." The man held out a hand, and Jerick pulled back hesitantly. The man spoke like a noble, but he didn't seem to have the same air of arrogance as the others Jerick had seen. His arrogance was different, more self-assured but less condemning. Jerick wasn't certain how to react—should he be bowing?

"Peace, boy," the man said with a comforting tone. "I won't run off with it."

Hesitantly, Jerick handed over his precious tome.

The man's wide, open sleeves rustled as he opened the book to the first page. "Bendalious's *Three Realms of Existence*?" the man said incredulously. "This is very deep reading, boy."

Jerick blushed. "I can't read much of it, sir," Jerick admitted. "I only just started learnin'."

The man handed back the book. "A Meleran peasant learning to read . . ." he mused quietly. "That's the strangest thing I've seen since old Jadoro burned off his eyebrows while trying to distill methorone. Perhaps we really will be able to change things in this country."

Jerick accepted the book, his face confused. "Sir?" he asked hesitantly. "Are you a nable?"

"Lords, I hope not."

Jerick felt himself relax. "Then how'd you learn readin'?"

The man smiled, his triangular face intrigued. "There are people in this world who are neither nobles nor peasants, boy."

"Priests?" Jerick asked with confusion.

"No," the man laughed. "Not priests either. Some of us just . . . are. We travel, we enjoy ourselves, and occasionally we visit a court or two to remind ourselves that no matter how hard we try to be a fool, we can always find people that are much better at it than we are—they just have more natural talent."

"I don't understand, sir," Jerick confessed. "What are you?"

"I am a fool, boy," the man said, stepping back with a flourish of his arms. "A jesk, or traveling jester."

Jerick frowned. "What do you do? Do you make something?"

"Of course I do," the man replied. "Can't you tell by the name?"

"Fool?"

"Exactly. Lumbermen make lumber, crafters produce crafts. I, my dear boy, make fools."

"Out of what?"

"Out of whatever is to be found. Let me assure you, there is always plenty of material with which to work."

Jerick smiled. He didn't understand half of what this strange man said, but it didn't seem to matter. When Master said something confusing, he made Jerick feel like an idiot for missing the meaning. This man spoke confusing words as well, but in his eyes was a glint that said "don't worry, it wasn't really that important anyway."

"What is your name, sir?" Jerick asked.

"Cephandrius Maxtori."

"Ce . . . what?"

The man laughed. "Call me Topaz, boy. I prefer it to the other one anyway. Long names are like long betrothals—by the time you finish, you've forgotten why you started."

"What does Topaz mean?" Jerick asked with confusion.

The man pulled off a bright purple glove and held out his hand. "It's a stone, boy."

On his middle finger was a large golden ring with an enormous honey-colored gem at its center. It was unlike anything Jerick had ever seen—translucently pure and beautiful, it seemed to sing in his mind. Before he knew it, he felt himself reaching out to touch it.

Topaz, however, replaced his glove before Jerick had done more than raise his hand, hiding the ring behind a veil of leather. "Ah, I shouldn't wave that thing around. I can't tell you how often she's gotten me into trouble."

"Is it valuable?"

“Only if you pretend it is—and many people do.”

Jerick’s eyes lowered, looking down at the man’s hand. The ring was a slight bump beneath Topaz’s glove.

“Now, about that food . . .”

“I told you, Sir Topaz, there isn’t much to be had.”

“No ‘sir’s. That only reminds me how old I wish I weren’t. As for food, I think Torell might be able to help us there.”

“Master?” Jerick asked. “He didn’t seem to like you much.”

Topaz laughed, hopping lightly off the school’s steps. “That was just an act—the man actually adores me. Come, you look like you could use something to eat as well.”

“MASTER TOPAZ, ARE YOU CERTAIN THIS IS HONEST?”

“Honest?” Topaz asked, hanging from the second story window of Master’s house. “Of course it’s honest—why, didn’t you hear Torell tell me to help myself to his food back there before I met you?”

Jerick remembered nothing of the sort. However, he was too engrossed in Topaz’s display of acrobatics to complain further. Jerick wasn’t certain how the man had managed it, but somehow Topaz had climbed up the side of the house, and was now peeking through the upper window, hanging by his arms from the sill. Finally, Topaz hoisted himself up through the opening. A few seconds later his hawkish head popped out, its floppy hat nearly tumbling free.

“Well, boy?” he asked quietly. “Are you coming?”

“Me?”

“Of course. It wouldn’t be half as fun if it didn’t involve corrupting one of Torell’s students. Come on—I’ll help you up.”

Jerick looked behind him with trepidation. The window faced away from the village, and it was beginning to get dark, but he still felt as if everyone in the city was watching him.

“I couldn’t possibly . . .”

“Sure you could.”

Jerick hesitated. If he disrespected a noble, the Lords would certainly strike him down. Yet . . . his father’s words returned to him. *Courage is nothin’ more than bein’ able to endure what is different.* . . . What if the Lords didn’t strike him down? What would that mean?

Before he knew what he was doing, Jerick had grabbed hold of the side of the building, sticking his feet into grooves between the boards like he had

seen Topaz do. A few moments later he was near the top, where he had the misfortune to look down. He had been up trees before, and was not scared of heights; however, he wasn't paying attention to his handholds. He felt himself start to fall, a yell rising in his throat, when a strong hand grabbed him by the arm and deftly swung him through the window.

"Very good, my little lumberling," Topaz praised.

Shaken, Jerick could do little more than nod his head. What was he doing? If Master found him sneaking into his house, he would certainly refuse to continue teaching him.

Topaz slid smoothly over to the door, and listened quietly. Grabbing hold of his thumping heart and taut nerves, Jerick calmed himself until he too could hear a voice. Master cursing to himself down below.

After a moment's listening, Topaz shook his head. "That man will make my job obsolete," he mumbled. "King Rodis is the best thing that ever happened to this country. Well, let Torry fume. I'm getting hungry."

With that, Topaz crept over to a closet and began searching through trunks. A few moments later he chuckled to himself and tossed a white-wrapped bundle into the center of the floor.

"Midnight snacks," Topaz explained, unwrapping the cloth to reveal a pile of breads, cheeses, and even some dried meats. "Too bad; I was looking forward to sneaking down those stairs in search of a larder."

Jerick must have paled visibly at the thought, for Topaz clapped him on the shoulder. "Get any more white, boy, and you'll be burned for impersonating a Sho Del."

"Topaz . . ." he said, looking down at the food. "This isn't right."

"It's your food, boy. The villagers' efforts paid for it."

"It isn't t'same," Jerick insisted.

"Torell has more than enough. Trust me, he won't miss this little amount."

Jerick shook his head uncertainly.

Topaz sighed. "All right, here." He reached into his cloak and pulled out a couple of copper pennings. "This will more than pay for it." He set the coins on Torell's desk.

"All right," Jerick acceded.

Suddenly there was a thump from below, and Jerick jumped with a slight yelp. Someone was coming up the stairs.

"If Master finds me here . . ." he gasped.

"He won't," Topaz said smoothly, tossing the bundle out the window. "Come on."

Jerick attempted to comply, but his body wouldn't move. He tried to make his fright-struck muscles respond, but to no avail. The thumps were very close now.

Topaz cursed, pushing him toward the window. Then the bright-clothed man rushed across the room toward the door. Jerick knew it was too late. The footsteps were just beyond. He waited to accept his fate. What would his father say?

Topaz reached out to touch the door, and Jerick felt a rush within himself. It was like a chill that moved from the center of his chest to the farthest of his extremities. A feeling of energy, of power. The door groaned quietly, then the wood seemed to swell, pushing against its frame. "Quickly, boy," Topaz urged, sliding across the room to join him at the window.

Jerick could hear Master grumbling as he tried to push the door open. It was stuck in place, however. Regaining control of himself, Jerick rushed to the window and began to climb down.

A few moments later Jerick reached the bottom, and Topaz jumped the last few feet to land lightly beside him. Retrieving the food, they crouched in the shadows of a nearby building, enjoying the release of tension as much as the glory of victory.

Then Jerick noticed something. "Topaz, your hat!" he said with horror. It was gone—he must have left it in the room.

"Peace, boy. I left it on purpose."

Jerick furrowed his brow. "But, why?"

"Because old Torell would have blamed, and perhaps punished, the villagers for the disappearance of his snacks." Then, with a smile, he continued. "And I wouldn't want another to get credit for my genius."

Topaz rewrapped the food, then handed the bundle to Jerick. "Here, see that those who need this get it."

"But you didn't eat any," Jerick protested.

"Suddenly I'm not very hungry. I'd best be going, boy—I have a friend to meet in Aldvin in four days. Don't forget what I've taught you today."

"Taught me?"

Topaz winked. "The surest path to overthrowing oppression is independence, boy. There are fools amongst the nobility just as amongst the peasants—trust me, I've known a lot of fools. You could say I'm an expert. There's no harm in listening to what the fools have to say, just don't think you have to believe them."

Jerick nodded. "Thank you," he said hesitantly.

"You are very welcome. Just promise me one thing."

“What?”

“Promise me you’ll learn. Spite them all, boy—prove the king right. He may be the biggest fool of all, but his heart is right. Study like your life was in danger—for, in a way, the lives of thousands depend on it. You heard what I said to Torell?”

“Yes, Topaz,” Jerick said with a nod.

“It was true; all of it. King Rodis is the most forward-thinking leader I’ve ever known. He’s actually been able to get past his conditioning and see the humanity in even peasants. You are the one who has to prove him right. He will be here in three months to check on you and your classmates, as will Kalord Strafen. Your success will profit an entire nation.”

“All right, Topaz,” Jerick said, retrieving his book from the spot where he had hid it. “I will learn. You’ll see—some day I’ll be able to read this whole book.”

“Read it. Then write one of your own,” Topaz challenged. “Farewell, little lumberling. Perhaps I’ll look in on you—I haven’t had this much fun in a long time.”

CHAPTER THREE

AT FIRST, THE KING'S IMMINENT ARRIVAL HAD LITTLE EFFECT ON THE lumbermen. Summers were short in Melerand, and even though lumbering was still possible on all but the coldest winter days, the warm snowless months were by far the most productive time of the year. Jerick's father rose every day before sunrise, started a fire in the hearth for his wife and child when they awoke, and slipped away to the lumbering camp. He would usually return just before sunset, in time to chop wood for the next day's fire.

Most of Jerick's time was spent trying to decipher the words of his book. He would read outside, sitting in the arms of a tree, so as to not disturb his mother. She said little about it, but he saw the look in her eyes every time he left the house with the book. She knew that the natural life she envisioned for her son, that of an honest lumberman, was drying up and falling away like the brown pine needles she often swept from the house.

It was a triumph to Jerick every time he managed to read a new word. Soon, however, that became too simple for him, and he moved on to entire sentences, paragraphs, and eventually pages. He would memorize new words that were repeated often, then ask Master to define them at their weekly learning sessions.

It was amazing to him how much difference knowing a few simple words could make. Because he knew the vocabulary, he understood more and more of what Master said in the regular classes. The other children didn't even bother to pay attention any more—they had mastered the trick of retaining an erect posture while letting their minds shut down. Master didn't notice;

he took it as natural that none of them could repeat back to him what they had learned at the end of the session.

Not Jerick. He continued to ask questions, each one earning him a swipe with the reed. The pain was minor, however, and it helped keep him awake. His knowledge of the words Master used allowed him to understand the meaning of each lesson, which in turn fueled his desire to read more in his book. Now that he knew so much vocabulary, he couldn't help but use it—the words made so much sense. With one word, Jerick could say the same thing lumbermen would say with an entire phrase. Unfortunately, no one in the town but he and Master knew what the word meant.

About a month after Topaz's visit, Master's servant mysteriously reappeared. Jerick noted the man's return with surprise, but no one else gave him much heed. Master punished him severely for running off, but in the end was relieved to have a servant again, so didn't press for information about where the man had been.

As the three-month deadline neared, the tension in the village rose. It even seeped into the daily lives of the lumbermen. Jerick often heard them theorizing on the king's arrival. They wondered what, if anything, he would have to say about the wood they produced. They wondered if he would come by boat or by chariot, and how many men he would bring with him. They wondered if the king were truly as tall as people said—nine feet in height with a countenance like that of Oreon the White himself.

Jerick had his own speculations. He remembered what Topaz had told Master, that it was important to the king that Master's school succeed. Topaz's insistence that the lives of many men depended on Jerick's studying began to make him restless, and he started to worry that the king was coming to see him personally—to judge how well his studies were proceeding. Unfortunately, he knew the king would be disappointed in him. Master constantly told him that he was learning nowhere as quickly as a noble child.

So, Jerick forced himself into his studies. He continued to read from *The Three Realms*, and as he did so he started reading for content, rather than just for practice. He started writing on his own—rather than just copying—weeks before Master ordered him to do so. All this he did, hoping that it would be enough—though enough for what, he was not certain.

JERICK HAD NEVER SEEN SO MANY PEOPLE IN HIS LIFE. HE AND HIS friends, Sen, Yon, and the others, had climbed a ladder atop the schoolhouse to get a better view of the king's arrival. There were hundreds of people

in the town, crowding its streets, standing so close to one another Jerick couldn't imagine how they kept from stepping on one another's feet. It felt very odd to him—it was not right that there should be more faces in the village he didn't recognize than those he did.

Most of the strangers were farmers from the other two villages Wat looked after. The priest had gained special permission for them to leave the lands they worked, allowing them to break tradition this once for the opportunity to view their king. Along with them came overseers and nobles, richly dressed men and women who had arrived in chariots. After studying the village with disdainful eyes, these had quickly let Master lead them into his large house and out of sight.

Of most interest to Jerick were the cattle traders. They had arrived a few days earlier and had immediately set up a camp right outside of the village. There were even more cattle than people—a fact Jerick found mind-boggling. Looking out from his vantage, Jerick could see them now. The hundreds of beasts stood thick, like a forest of bodies, as they grazed on the short grasses surrounding the village.

The cattlemen didn't appear to do much—they simply sat and watched the cattle, occasionally going in search of strays. Still, their job seemed far more interesting than lumbering. For one thing, some of them actually rode horses. Of course, they couldn't sit astride the horses directly on the back, like a man would ride a donkey—horses weren't strong enough for that. Instead the men rode them sitting in an awkward position, their weight resting above the horse's hindquarters.

"Look! There he is!" Yon, the oldest and largest of the boys, said with excitement from behind. Jerick jumped, assuming that Yon was referring to the king. As he scanned the river, however, he found no signs of a vessel.

"Who?" Jerick asked with confusion.

"The leader of t'cattlemen," Yon said, gesturing to a man who had just walked out of the tivren.

Jerick leaned forward to get a better look. He was anxious to see for himself the strange man the other boys had spoken of. "What's wrong with his skin?" Jerick wondered.

"That's just t'way it is," Yon explained. "'Tis dark, like he stood in t'sun too long."

The cattleman's face was smooth, hairless except for a thin mustache, his skin the color of polished oak, and his body was enormous. He seemed large even when standing with the most burly of lumbermen; his legs and arms were thick with muscle, and he stood with an air of complete confidence.

He wore a long coat that reached all the way to his ankles, but which was open at the front, and two large swords were strapped on either side of his waist.

"I heard Foreman say he was Ke'Chan," Iden whispered, as if afraid that the fearsome man would hear him.

"Ke'Chan?" Yon asked. "Sounds like a gibberish word to me."

"Didn't Master talk about it once?" Sen asked hesitantly.

"The Ke'Chan people used to rule most of the continent," Jerick said absently, still studying the trader. "They once lived to the west, over the mountains, but then the rivers dried up and they were forced to leave. Now they just live anywhere they can."

After a few moments of silence, Jerick looked back at his friends with perplexity. The four boys were standing in a quiet mass, their eyes uncertain.

"What?" Jerick demanded.

"You sounded like Master, Jerick," Yon finally said, looking to one of the other boys for support.

"You spoke just like him," Sen agreed.

"Fa," Jerick scoffed, trying not to blush. Forcing his voice to sound as normal as possible, he continued. "'Tis just somethin' I heard him say."

Sen nodded slowly, but the other boys still looked uncomfortable. Even Yon, who was usually so quick to mock or berate, regarded Jerick with something akin to fear.

Unable to stand their scrutiny, Jerick turned away from them with a barely-veiled scowl. However, his disposition changed as he felt something. Something wrong. A coldness in his mind. Immediately, Jerick scanned the area below him. There his eyes found Master's servant, standing in a doorway.

Jerick paused, looking down at the nondescript man. He had always felt there was something wrong with the servant, but he could never quite decide what.

"Why don't we know his name?" Jerick mumbled. "It's been six months, and no one has ever told me his name."

"The cattleman's name?" Yon asked. "Why would we care?"

"No," Jerick said, staring at the servant. "Master's servant. What is his name?"

"Who cares?" Sen asked. The boys' conversation quickly turned to other topics. Jerick, however, kept staring at the man. *Something is wrong. Something is very wrong.* However, the more he tried to think about it, the

stronger the coldness became. It felt like an incredible weight upon him. He tried to force his way through it, but it was like pushing against a stone wall.

'Tis his eyes, Jerick thought, straining. *Something's wrong with his eyes. They're . . .*

"There!" Sen exclaimed, jumping up and down with excitement. "I see it! The ship! 'Tis a ship!"

Jerick turned, the coldness evaporating as he let himself get distracted. The boys began to yell in excitement. A small cream-colored sail was peeking around the furthest bend of the river, a brilliant red flag flapping from the top of the mast. The king had arrived.

"STAND STRAIGHT, YOU MONGRELS," MASTER HISSED, LOOKING OVER THE line of five boys. "This is your *king*. Every ounce of respect, every bit of discipline you have learned from me you must give to him a hundred times over."

The king's ship stood anchored a short distance from the village. It was an enormous thing with engraved wood and bright red banners. Some sort of special ramp was being set up leading from the ship to the shore; as they waited, Master had organized his students for presentation.

For the first time, it occurred to Jerick that his buckskin lumberman's shirt and thick leather leggings were rather plain. Master himself was wearing a robe Jerick had never seen before, a deep blue one embroidered with thread that appeared to be made of gold itself. Master's scholar-cowl was of the same deep blue, and his castemark was prominent around his neck.

Master paced before them nervously. It seemed odd to Jerick to see the scholar acting so uncomfortable. ". . . my fate determined by a pack of ill-bred peasants . . ." Master mumbled to himself as he paced.

The row of boys stood just outside of the village, at the front of the enormous crowd of people who waited in anticipation of their ruler. Most of their talk had quieted to whispers.

Eventually, a form appeared on the deck, then moved to walk down the long wooden ramp connecting ship and shore. En masse, the people fell to their knees as Wat and Master had instructed, their heads bowed. The only one who did not follow, Jerick noticed, was the strange tan-skinned Ke'Chan trader.

After just a few minutes of kneeling, Jerick's knees began to hurt. The ground wasn't really all that soft, even with the grass, and a rock was jabbing

him in the shin. Master had been very firm in his instructions, however. They must not rise, or even look up, until the king bid them. So, Jerick continued to kneel for an eternity, pretending he was interested in the large spider that had wandered its way into his vision. It moved slowly—the cold would probably kill it soon—and it was nearly out of sight when he heard a voice before him.

“You may rise,” it said.

The king was not ten feet tall. In fact, he wasn’t even six. Jerick looked up eagerly, excited to finally see the amazing, flame-haired being that he had heard described so often. Instead, he found a rather short man with a large belly.

The king wore the thin stiff beard Jerick had come to associate with nobility, and his blond hair was curly and gathered around his neck like a collar. His clothing was like a robe that was constructed of several layers, each one of a slightly different shade of gold or red and each one hanging at a slightly different angle. They all ended in an intricate knot that hung at his waist, the several colored tassels hanging loosely. Flapping against his back was a bright red cape, and on his head was a conical gold hat etched with designs that shone in the light. His face, however, was much less radiant. He had a pleasant smile, true, and kind eyes, but the face as a whole was rather pudgy. Jerick had expected something more . . . divine.

“I thank you for your greeting, my people,” the king said. His voice was firm and commanding—that much, at least, seemed regal. “I am eager to see your town. It is not often that the royal personage has an opportunity to visit these farthest reaches of his kingdom. Tell me, who is the local leader here?”

Jerick’s eyes sought out Foreman, who was looking to either side with nervous eyes. His face was sick—the older man had been dreading this moment since the day Topaz had arrived. He did a good job of leading the village, but he didn’t have the disposition to handle someone as lofty as the king.

“I . . .” Foreman began, his voice turning to a squeak at the end. “I’m the foreman here.” His voice was shaky, and nearly unintelligible.

The king chuckled. “No need to be nervous, lumberman. I simply want someone to show me around this lovely town. It is important for a monarch to see and understand his subjects.”

“I . . .” Foreman was sweating uncontrollably. “I . . .”

Suddenly, a broad hand fell reassuringly on Foreman’s shoulder. Rin, standing directly behind the older man, smiled encouragingly. “Foreman

would be happy to show Your Majesty around t'town. 'Tis a rare pleasure to be havin' Your Majesty visit us."

Miled Foreman looked up at Rin thankfully. Jerick could see even from a distance that his father was at least as nervous as Foreman. However, the large lumberman had never been one to let a friend suffer alone.

"Um, Your Majesty?" Master called out uncertainly. "Will you be inspecting the school during your visit?"

The king turned. "Ah, Torell," he said with a smile. "What disciplined-looking children. Your students I assume?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

A snort came from the king's procession. "Students? Rodents seems more like it." The words originated from a tall man standing just next to the king. He wore the sheet-like clothing of a noble, and his straight blond beard had a reddish tint to it. His face was flat and harsh, his eyes so disdainful they made Master's own arrogance look weak by comparison.

The king raised his eyes as he looked back at the large man. "You will have an opportunity to prove your position shortly, Kalord Strafen," the king said. "Please keep your opinions to yourself until then."

The man bowed his head slightly. "I look forward to it, Your Majesty."

The king looked back at Master. "Arrange your students in the school, scholar," he requested. "I will see them after these good lumbermen show me through the town."

"HE DOESN'T LOOK MUCH LIKE A KING."

Master's head snapped up at Jerick's comment, and he reached reflexively for his reed, forgetting for the moment that he had not brought it with him. After a second of groping, Master swore quietly, then shot Jerick an angry stare. "Be quiet, boy!"

"But Master, 'tis true," Jerick complained, sitting in his place on the schoolhouse floor. The boys had wanted to join the crowds following the king, but Master had insisted they return to the school and 'wait with disciplined patience.' However, judging from Master's increasingly annoyed temper, it seemed to Jerick that 'disciplined patience' was far removed from the scholar's own capacity.

"He doesn't look at all like t'stories," Jerick continued. "His eyes aren't red, he isn't even as tall as my father, and he certainly doesn't look like he could burn down a mountain just by lookin' at it."

"Those stories are foolishness, boy," Master said. He stood at the front of

the room, not sitting in his usual place, and his hands twitched occasionally, as if looking for something to twist, fold, or break. "The king looks like a king because he *is* the king, and therefore he is what a king should look like."

Jerick cocked his head, trying to untwist that last statement. A few moments later, he heard the king's voice approaching from outside.

"It appears to be a neat, organized village, Lumberman Rin," the king complimented.

Master hurriedly gestured for the boys to rise and prepare to bow as the king entered.

"You'd best be thankin' Foreman for that, Your Majesty," Rin responded. "I live up in t'forest, a two-hour walk from town."

"Don't you get along with the others, lumberman?" the king asked with amusement.

"It isn't that, Your Majesty," Rin said, his large frame appearing as he pulled back the cloth entrance to the school to let the king enter. "I just like livin' amongst t'trees."

"A true lumberman at heart," the king chuckled, entering the schoolhouse. King Rodis smiled, looking over the boys and their Master. "Well, Master Torell, it is your turn. Let's see if the gold I used to send you to Trexandos was well-spent."

The king stepped back, gesturing for the hulking red-bearded man to approach. "Boys," the king explained, "this is Kalord Strafen. He's going to ask you a few questions to judge how well you've been learning."

Jerick and the others nodded hesitantly, stepping forward in a line as Master prodded them. Kalord Strafen adjusted his blue cloak and pushed aside a guard as he approached the boys, regarding them with contempt. Jerick frowned—why should this man hate them so much? They had never met before.

The Kalord stopped in front of poor Sen, who stood on the opposite side of the line as Jerick. "You," the Kalord said curtly with a voice that sounded like a dog's bark. "Answer my question, boy. When was the Ke'Chan invasion?"

The beginning of the Fourth Span, Jerick answered to himself.

Sen turned a sickly white color at the demand, then looked at his feet. "I don't know, sir," he mumbled.

The Kalord turned, raising an eyebrow at the king. Then he turned back and moved on to the next boy, Yon.

"All right, boy. What is six multiplied by seven?"

Forty-two, Jerick thought.

“Thirteen?” Yon asked with a weak voice after counting on his fingers.

The Kalord’s eyes narrowed, and he leaned down looking straight into Yon’s eyes. “Thirteen?” he asked with a hard voice. “I asked you to multiply, not add, idiot child.”

Yon wilted beneath the pressure, his arms pulling in and his body seeming to shrink before the Kalord. He tried to speak, but all that came out was a pathetic half-whine. Jerick felt himself growing increasingly angry at this Kalord Strafen. Yon was a showoff and a bully, but even he did not deserve such treatment.

The Kalord snorted, leaving Yon huddled almost to the ground as he moved on to the next boy. “Fine. We shall try something easier. What two nations border Melerand?”

Aldvin and Fallamore.

“I’m not sure, Master,” Fenin replied.

“Who is the patron god of Trexandos?” Strafen asked Tomin, the next boy.

Slonis, the Mother of the World, called Mathona in Trexandos.

“I . . .” Tomin stuttered. “I . . .”

The Kalord paused, waiting for an answer, his harsh eyes focused directly on Tomin. The boy’s voice caught in his throat, and eventually he simply shook his head and looked at his feet.

Leave him alone! Jerick thought angrily. Ask me. Move on. I’m next. Ask me!

“Need we continue this fiasco, Your Majesty?” the Kalord asked, spinning around to face the king. “This questioning obviously accomplishes nothing.”

Jerick’s eyes widened. He couldn’t stop . . . not without giving Jerick a chance.

“Continue, Kalord,” the king ordered. “There is still one boy left. Perhaps he will surprise you.”

“Ba!” the Kalord sputtered, turning his intolerant eyes on Jerick. “All right, boy. What does ‘Toth’ch Malan’ mean?”

Jerick froze, his mouth parting slightly. *Toth’ch Malan?* He’d never heard the words before—they couldn’t be Fallin, and they certainly weren’t Meleran. Ke’Chan, maybe?

“Well, boy?” the Kalord demanded.

“I . . .” Jerick paused. “Is that another language, Master?” he asked.

“Just answer,” the Kalord spat. “Do you know what it means or not?”

Jerick exhaled, his teeth clenching. “No, my lord,” he conceded. “I do not.”

“Ha!” the Kalord said, spinning around. “My point is made, King Rodis. Now surely you must admit that this school was a foolish venture. The

children of peasants cannot learn like those of the nobility—they don't have the mental capacity. This school mocks not only the aristocracy, but the Lords' divine system of governing as well."

"But—" Jerick began to object. Master's hand dug into his shoulder, turning his complaint into a quiet yelp.

"Hush, boy!" Master hissed. "Show respect. Have I taught you nothing?"

No, Jerick thought, *you haven't*.

"Perhaps you are right," the king acceded with a nod of his head. "Though, Kalord, the fault could very well be found in the instruction and not in the students. Perhaps I should have set up the school closer to Lakdon, where I could have kept a closer watch on the process."

"Your Majesty, do not tell me you are still considering this foolish idea?" Kalord Strafen said with a shake of his head. "Why, it is nonsense! Close to the palace or far away, it doesn't matter. You could have put these children in the very same classes as noble children, and they still wouldn't have gained anything from it. These boys know nothing!"

"That isn't true!" Jerick argued before Master could quiet him.

The room fell silent, and all eyes turned toward Jerick. Master groaned quietly behind him.

There was a sudden pain in Jerick's cheek as the Kalord slapped him on the side of the face, spinning him and tumbling him to the ground.

"I see they haven't learned respect either," the Kalord said with disdain.

Jerick shook his head, trying to see through the pain. His father cried out at the blow, but was being restrained by two of the king's soldiers. The Kalord loomed over Jerick, his eyes outraged. Jerick shrunk back, suddenly realizing how innocent Master's punishments had been.

"Halt!" the king's voice sounded sharply in the room. "Kalord, you go too far."

"He insulted my nobility, Your Majesty," Strafen argued, spinning around. "He broke caste!"

"He responded to the situation in which he was placed, Kalord," the king replied, nodding for a soldier to help Jerick stand. "I would hear what he has to say—learning is more than the repetitious memorization of facts. Speak on boy. What have you to say to the Kalord here?"

Jerick shot a look at the angry red-haired noble, feeling the man's rage press against him. He almost backed down. But then he remembered his father. His father who had stepped forward earlier in the day, speaking to the king when Foreman could not. Rin had not backed down.

"I mean to tell him he's wrong, Your Majesty," Jerick declared, his palms

sweating and his knees weak. The side of his face pulsed with a burning pain.

“Wrong about what, child?” King Rodis asked.

“Wrong about these boys, Your Majesty,” Jerick continued. “He says they don’t know anythin’, but that’s not true. He’s just askin’ t’wrong questions.” Jerick gained courage as he spoke, deliberately keeping his eyes off the Kalord, focusing instead on the king’s soft face. “These boys know a lot, Your Majesty. Ask them what time of year sweetberries can be found in the forest. Ask them how to make a snare and catch a rabbit. Ask them the difference between a northern pine and a waxpole pine. Do that, Your Majesty, then ask the same questions to the Kalord, and you’ll find him just as ignorant as he makes us seem.”

The king smiled, nodding his head appreciatively. “The boy seems to have a point, Kalord. Tell me, do you know the difference between a northern pine and a . . . what was it you said? A waxpole pine?”

The Kalord blushed. “Your Majesty, this is—”

“Answer the question, Kalord,” the king said firmly. “I am your king. When I ask a question, you answer.”

The Kalord ground his teeth for a moment before responding. “I cannot.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know the answer, Your Majesty,” Strafen admitted.

“Oh? How about you, boy?” the king asked, pointing to Sen. “Do you know?”

“T’northern has long thin needles, Your Majesty, and they come in clumps. T’waxpole has stumpy needles that run in lines.”

“Yes, Kalord, you might be right,” the king mused, patting his beard thoughtfully. “I was wrong. Maybe instead of sending a scholar to teach these lumbermen I should have invited one of them to come teach us. When asked the right questions we certainly do look . . . what was that the boy said? Ignorant? He certainly has an impressive vocabulary for a peasant.”

Kalord Strafen continued to grind his teeth, an almost imperceptible growl coming from the back of his throat. Without a word, he pushed his way through to the door, ripping down the cloth hanging as he passed through and tossing it to the dirt.

The room waited silently as he left, no one moving except for Rin, who immediately shook loose the soldiers’ hold on him and ran forward to inspect his son’s face.

Finally, the king broke the silence. “Well, boy, I thank you. You may not realize it, but you just helped your king save face in a very difficult situation.”

Jerick blushed, realizing he was still the center of attention. "'Twas nothing, Your Majesty."

"My thanks nonetheless," the king said. "Lumberman Rin, I assume this courageous lad belongs to you?"

"He's my son, Jerick, Your Majesty," Rin declared, a smile on his wide lips as he hugged Jerick to his side with one arm.

"Yes, he seems to have inherited your temerity. Same tree, same grain, as the Fallin people would say. I apologize for the Kalord's treatment of him."

"Good words spoken will be outlastin' t'pain of a bruise, Your Majesty," Rin replied.

"Well said, lumberman Rin. You have a fine child. I have no doubt that someday he will make as exemplary a lumberman as you do."

With that, the king nodded to his guards, and began to leave. He paused by the door, however, and looked back at Master. "By the way, scholar, despite our young friend's lucid point, this day's test was a firm disappointment. I intended to defeat the Kalord's arguments, not just humiliate him personally. You and I will speak tomorrow after I inspect the cattle herd."

Master groaned quietly as the king disappeared. "Oh Lords, why me?" he asked as he sank to the ground.

RIN DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING AS THEY LEFT THE SCHOOLHOUSE. HE SIMPLY placed his hand firmly on Jerick's shoulder, a proud smile on his face, and Jerick knew. They had both done well this day.

They found Mardle speaking with several other women. The stout woman was frowning, as she usually did when she listened to other women gossip, but she had a smile saved for her husband as he approached. She left the other women behind, falling in beside Rin and Jerick as they walked down the darkening street. She gave Jerick's injured face a cursory look, assuring herself that there was no permanent damage, then walked in silence.

"They say t'king was impressed with you," she eventually said.

"T'boy did a good job today," Rin agreed, though they all knew she was speaking of her husband, and not her son.

Mardle put her hand around her husband's waist. "Will we be goin' home then?"

"Not unless we can't find a place to stay for t'night," Rin said slowly. "T'king asked me to go with him t'look at cattle tomorrow, though t'Lords only know why. I'm a lumberman, not a cattleman. I know nothin' about cows."

“You’re a practical man, Rin. T’king sees that. Perhaps he simply wants to be speakin’ with you some more. Come, I’ve arranged for us to stay with t’widow tonight.”

RIN WAS RIGHT—THE KING DIDN’T NEED HIM, AT LEAST NOT TO INSPECT the cattle. However, it soon became obvious that the king himself wasn’t necessary to inspect the cattle—the royal cattle experts did the real work, checking the livestock’s teeth, hooves, and health. King Rodis stood to the side, watching and speaking quietly with Rin and Miled.

The day was colder than the last few had been, and Jerick could see his breath puffing out in the morning light. He watched his father from a short distance away, standing with his mother in an open-walled cattlemen tent. His face ached slightly from Strafen’s blow, but his mother had borrowed some ointment from the widow, and since it appeared as if the bruise would quickly heal, she had let him accompany her.

His mother didn’t seem to care about the cattle. She watched Rin talking with the king, a slight smile on her face.

“Mother,” Jerick asked uncertainly, “I don’t understand.”

“Understand what, child?”

“Why you’re so happy. You’re always talkin’ about what’s natural and what isn’t. A lumberman talkin’ to a king seems pretty unnatural to me.”

“’Tis unnatural,” his mother agreed. “Unless that lumberman is t’foreman. Then it is all right.”

“But we have a foreman,” Jerick protested. “Miled.”

“Miled’s getting on in years, child. T’king’ll have to choose a replacement for him soon. Within five years, I’d guess. Usually he doesn’t bother with it himself, letting Kalord Trevon—who owns t’formers in these lands—do it. But t’lumbermen are t’king’s men. This time maybe he’ll choose t’new leader himself.”

“Father? Foreman?” Jerick asked with wonder. But, thinking about the idea for a moment, he was surprised at how much sense it made. Everyone knew that Rin was the most respected lumberman in the camps. It followed that he would be the next foreman.

Finally, Jerick understood his mother’s smile. As much as he hated the idea of his father moving to the town, he knew it was what was right. Rin would take care of the people. He would see them fed as Miled hadn’t been able to do, and he would take care of people like the widow.

Suddenly, Jerick felt a chill brush against his mind, like someone had

taken an icicle and rubbed it across the surface of his brain. He looked up, grimacing at the pain. Master had just arrived at the camp, his servant with him.

“Son?” Mardle asked with a frown. “Are you all right?”

Jerick shook his head uncertainly. “I . . .” Something was wrong—wrong with the servant. Master and the man were walking toward the king, who had just finished his inspections.

It was as if Jerick’s eyes and his mind were arguing. He could feel the chill distinctly now, and he tried unsuccessfully to make sense of it. His eyes were seeing something, but his mind told him he was seeing something else. It was wrong. Very wrong.

He’s walking toward the king, Jerick realized. The servant’s eyes were focused directly on Rodis.

“Stop!” Jerick yelled suddenly. “Stop him!” Mardle gasped as Jerick suddenly dashed out of the tent, running toward Master’s servant.

The servant didn’t look at him, though Master did. The servant continued to walk, looking completely innocuous. Other people noticed Jerick, however, especially the king’s guard. They looked around themselves in confusion, searching for some sign of danger amongst the placid cattle.

The chill grew stronger, threatening to overcome Jerick’s body. He began to shiver uncontrollably, barely able to walk. The servant continued to stride toward the king.

“He’s . . . he’s . . .” Jerick mumbled, stumbling forward. He tripped, rolling in the frost-covered grass as the coldness struck him, making his limbs wiggle uncontrollably. A moment later his mother arrived, clutching him with a confused cry.

Get out of my head! Jerick thought angrily to the coldness. Frustrated, he forced himself to his knees, his spasming body responding fitfully. Desperate, Jerick reached past his mother’s arms, grabbing a small rock from the grass. Then, with a cry of pain, he threw it directly at the servant. The stone flew true, snapping against the man’s head.

The coldness left. Jerick could see the servant’s eyes. The man’s expression was surprised and confused, his concentration broken. Suddenly, the servant’s form trembled, and Jerick could see what his eyes had been trying to tell him all along. The man was holding a bow, an arrow nocked and pulled tight, pointed at the king.

“Protect the king!” one of the guards yelled. They formed into a wall, shields up and clinking together, obscuring the king from Jerick’s view.

The strange man frowned, dropping his bow to the ground. Except, he wasn't a man. Jerick's eyes opened wide as he realized the servant's face had changed along with his bearing. It looked something like that of a human—two eyes, a firm nose, and delicate features. Except the servant's face was a pale white, the color of bone, and his eyes were pure black. A Sho Del. Fain.

The Sho Del calmly lowered its bow, then reached into his cloak to remove something thin and white. He closed his eyes and his mouth began to move slightly, his thumb rubbing the object. A spear, thrown by one of the approaching guards, slammed into the ground beside the creature. The Sho Del did not move.

Jerick felt what happened next, and he thought he could see it too. A wiggling bubble exploded suddenly from the stranger, a translucent thing that wavered and vibrated. It moved impossibly quick, expanding like a ripple in water, and it hit Jerick before he could even jump back. Only then did he realize what the bubble was. Sound. He was seeing sound.

It crashed like thunder, thunder that had struck incredibly close. It slammed into Jerick's ears, making him gasp in pain. The guards dropped their weapons and put their hands to their ears, groaning in agony. The sound, however, had not been intended just for human ears. Its suddenness startled the massive horde of cattle, causing them to call and run madly.

And Jerick's father and the king were in the middle of it.

Jerick tried to get to his feet, but he was physically drained. His legs wouldn't hold him, and he tumbled back to the hard ground, losing sight of his father and the king in the rush of beasts. The Sho Del dashed away in the confusion, leaving the cattle to kill where the arrow had failed.

"Father!" Jerick screamed, once again trying to rise. His mother stopped him, instead pulling him to the relative safety of the tent. Most of the cattle were running the other way, toward the town, leaving the tent and its occupants alone.

Jerick clawed at the air, looking for signs of his father in the mass. Jerick got to his knees, wobbling dizzily, holding onto a tent pole for support. He could distinguish little from the chaos before him. Occasional flashes of flesh or clothing were visible, signs of the dozens of people trapped in the rush, but he could make little sense of it. "Father!" he called, but his tiny child's voice was drowned out by the thunder of hooves and the screams of both men and animals.

Suddenly, Rin burst from the press of stampeding animals. The lumberman's

massive arms bulged as he ripped King Rodis out of the churning mass behind him, gripping the monarch by the front of his golden robes and pulling him to safety. There was blood on the side of Rin's face.

"Rin!" Jerick's mother called.

The lumberman smiled encouragingly, though he looked exhausted. Rin and the king began stumbling toward the tent, supporting one another, but it was soon obvious that neither was in any condition to walk. Rin's face was a mask of pain, and he stumbled with a halting limp.

"Wait here, son," Jerick's mother said in a concerned, forceful tone as she rushed out onto the grass to her husband.

Jerick nodded, watching nervously as his mother wrapped Rin's arm around her shoulders and helped him shuffle toward the tent. The king stumbled along beside the two, his face dazed.

It happened when the king stumbled. Jerick didn't see what caused the misstep, a dip in the land perhaps. Rin turned as the king went down, and that was when the arrow zipped through the air above Rodis, striking Jerick's mother in the side. She collapsed.

Jerick had never heard his father scream before. The wail Rin let out as Mardle fell was so horrifying that Jerick shrunk back as if before some awful demon. It sounded as if Rin's soul had been ripped forcibly from his body, then cast adrift on the wind as a living shriek of agony.

Jerick couldn't see his mother. Rin stood in the way, huddled next to her body. The king, however, wasn't looking at the fallen woman—he was staring at something else. Jerick followed the king's gaze, his mind growing numb. It was as if he were watching a dream. Not real at all. No, it could not be real.

The Sho Del assassin stood quietly beside the tent, just a few feet away from Jerick. The creature had lowered the hood of its cloak, revealing a white, almost human-like head that stared at Rodis with solemn black eyes. Long ivory wisps covered its scalp, blowing freely in the wind. The creature's face was expressionless as it dropped the bow, drew a thin-bladed sword, then rushed toward the king.

Rodis stared mutely, in his fear forgetting the ceremonial blade at his side. The Sho Del was almost on top of him when Rin tackled it. Human and Fain went down. Jerick could hear his father bellowing madly. A few seconds later several of the king's guards stumbled free of the diminishing stampede, rushing toward Rodis with concerned faces, but they were moving too slowly.

Rin and the Sho Del battled. The lumberman, enraged, knocked the

creature's blade away, then pummeled his opponent with massive fists. Then, somehow, the Sho Del found a thin knife. The soldiers were too far away. The Sho Del raised its hand in desperation, the knife held high . . .

"No!" Jerick screamed. "Father! Get out of the way!"

Though Jerick's eyes saw what happened next, his mind did not.

A few seconds later, Jerick looked away. He looked up, past the ceiling at the blue sky. He saw the puffy clouds and, for the first time, wondered if they were related to the puffs his breath made in cold air. He looked down at the grass, green and sparkling in the morning light. The frost had mostly melted now, except in the shade. He looked to his left, wondering what kind of wood the tent poles were made from. Probably pine, he decided. It was the most plentiful, and the wood seemed to have a red cast to it, though in the shade it was hard to tell. He looked to his right. Someone had dropped a cup from the morning's meal. They shouldn't have done so. Things that were discarded so carelessly had a tendency to break. . . .

KING RODIS FOUND THE LUMBERMAN'S SON MAKING A SMALL HUT OUT OF a pile of sticks. The boy still sat in the grass at the edge of the tent, staring at his construction intently, completely absorbed. The boy did not look up to see the two corpses, now covered with a white piece of canvas, a few dozen feet in front of him.

"This is . . . Rin's boy?" Rodis asked slowly, approaching.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the town foreman answered. "His name is Jerick." The foreman's face was pale, his white hair disheveled. He no longer had a problem talking to Rodis—with the shock of the town's complete destruction, it barely seemed to matter who asked questions.

One of Rodis's soldiers approached from a short distance away, bowing slightly. The man had seen to the disposal of the Sho Del corpse. Apparently, it had been masquerading as Torell's servant. Torell, who had spent years studying in Trexandos, a city just a few day's travel from the Shattered Plains. Rodis should have wondered at him returning with a strange servant.

What would have happened if I hadn't sent Torell away as soon as he arrived back from his training? Rodis wondered. *Would I have died in my sleep, this assassin's blade having cut my throat?* Torell said the servant had gone away for a time—it had probably decided to make its way back to the palace. However, when it had heard that Rodis was going to leave the safety of the capital and travel to the very city where Torell had been stationed . . .

Rodis had been spared. There had been a cost, however. “The father and the mother, both . . .” Rodis asked quietly, looking down at the lumberman’s son.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the foreman replied.

The king sighed, kneeling down beside the boy. His gold robes were already stained with dirt and blood; more dirt wouldn’t matter. “The Lords have been very cruel this day.”

Jerick continued to play with his sticks.

“Boy, can you hear me?”

Jerick looked up, noticing his king with surprise. He yelped, scrambling to his feet so he could bow properly. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty . . . I didn’t see you.”

“It’s all right, lad,” Rodis said, placing a hand on Jerick’s shoulder.

“I . . . ?” Jerick asked, looking around. “Where am I?”

“Never mind that now, lad. Just sit back down for a moment.”

Jerick nodded, seating himself, maintaining the straight-backed posture he had probably learned in school.

Rodis left his hand on the boy’s shoulder, turning slightly. Torell’s failure with the school left him in a difficult position. Strafen grew more and more bold as time passed, and he had many influential friends in the capital. No matter how much Rodis sometimes felt like throwing the overbearing man in prison, he knew that he could never do so. Strafen represented tradition—something even more powerful than the monarchy. If the king wanted to change his society, then he would need to prove the Kalord wrong.

“Kalord Strafen,” Rodis said, an idea forming, “yesterday you made a challenge to me. Are you willing to keep it?”

“Challenge, Your Majesty?” Strafen asked with confusion. He stood behind the king, next to the foreman and cholar Torell. The Kalord had been surveying the day’s destruction, and bodies, with a calculating eye, completely unfazed by what had happened.

“Yes,” the king continued, his voice subdued. “You claimed that even if I took a lumberman’s boy and educated him in the same classes as children of the nobility, he would not learn.”

“I do recall saying something like that, Your Majesty,” the Kalord said hesitantly.

“Well, did you mean it?”

The Kalord’s jaw dropped slightly. “You mean . . . ?”

“Yes, Kalord,” Rodis said. “You were right about the school, but I won’t

concede the battle to you just yet. Your son and mine are about the same age as this boy. Let us put them together with the same tutors, and see who learns the most from their education.”

“A peasant? With *my* son? Your Majesty, I—”

The king’s look challenged the Kalord. “This is your chance, Strafen. You want to prove me wrong, and now I give you leave to make a fool of your monarch. If your boy learns more than this one, I will admit you were correct, and drop the entire matter.”

The Kalord frowned, then leaned closer. “Your Majesty,” he said quietly. “My objections were always to protect the crown, not to mock it. I would not see you throw away our Lords-given nobility. If this boy does not learn, the whole aristocracy will know, and the monarchy will find itself undercut. Do not do this; I beg you.”

The king rubbed his beard for a moment. “All right,” he mused. “We will leave the decision to the one who best knows this boy’s capacity. Scholar Torell, what say you?”

The scholar jumped slightly. “Your Majesty?”

“What do you think?” Rodis asked. “You have taught this lad for six months now. Can he learn? Will I make a fool of myself if I bring him to the palace and try to educate him?”

Torell paled. He glanced at Strafen’s harsh stare. Then he turned to Jerick, whose face was harrowed by the day’s events.

“He . . . he is a peasant, Your Majesty,” Torell finally mumbled. “They have no capacity to understand higher learning.” The scholar looked down at his feet, as if unable to meet his student’s eyes.

“Perfect,” Rodis declared, standing. “Remember those words, Kalord. Let it not be said that when I did this I chose a fluke as my test subject. I will prove to you my words—I will take the lowliest of peasants and raise him to be a prince.”

The Kalord was stunned. Then his expression grew hard. “If you wish, Your Majesty. Let us just hope that when you finish smashing the monarchy to pieces, there will be enough of us left to put it back together. From now on, you and I have no parley.”

The Kalord bowed sharply, then turned and shoved his way passed Torell and the foreman, gesturing for several guards to follow him.

The king watched him go with a hard face, then knelt back down next to Jerick. “Well, boy? How about it? Will you come to the palace with me then?”

Jerick hesitated. “I don’t know, Your Majesty,” he said, looking disorientedly

around him. "I'll have to ask my father and mother. Do you know where I can find them?"

The king hesitated. "I already asked them, boy. They said you should come with me."

"Well, then, if that is what they said, that is what I must do," the boy said. "My father is a very good man, Your Majesty. Have you met him?"

"Yes, lad," Rodis said quietly. "I've met him. He's a fine man—I've never met one better."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FIRST THING THAT AMAZED JERICK WAS THE SIZE OF MELERAND. HE had lived his entire life in the forest, visiting the village on occasion. He knew of other surrounding towns and had heard men speak of Dorven, the city downriver where the king's lumber was collected. Despite Master's lessons on geography, Dorven was an almost mystical place to Jerick—a thing that lived only in the stories of others. The city was three day's travel by cart, a massive distance even for one used to walking two hours into town.

The ship passed Dorven on the first day. The vessel continued on, its passengers taking little notice of the city. The king said that they still had several days to travel before reaching the capital.

Jerick couldn't believe how much there was to see. The bright Melerand hills seemed to continue on forever. The mountains provided a familiar barrier to the north, but to the south he could see no end to the flatness. The rolls of green continued on and on, like the backs of sleeping beasts, until they eventually disappeared on the horizon.

More than any one single event in his life, the trip to Lakdon opened Jerick's mind. It was one thing to hear or read stories of distant places; it was quite different to realize the perspective of his own existence. As they sailed by Dorven without even stopping, one sailor heard Jerick mumbling at the city's size. The man laughed, informing Jerick that Dorven was little more than a village. Greater things were to come.

During the three-day trip, Jerick came to understand just how insignificant his own village had been. He counted dozens upon dozens just like

it lining the Trerod—though these held farmers instead of lumbermen. Still, the size and feel of them were the same. He looked at the map on the wall of the king's cabin, at last connecting its scale with true life. His home had been nothing more than one out of hundreds of nearly identical communities. Beyond that, Melerand itself was a relatively small nation, dwarfed by nations such as Fallamore and Old Ke'Chan.

As they traveled, Jerick struggled silently with this new way of seeing the world. The sailors and nobles seemed unconcerned with the awesome size of their kingdom. They noticed Jerick's amazement, laughing to themselves at his "rustic" nature. Jerick knew they did not understand him. They had never needed to deal with such an overwhelming reconceptualization of the world; they chuckled to themselves, but obviously expected him to adapt once his initial shock wore away. It wasn't that easy. Still, as the hours passed, Jerick did manage to rebuild his mental image of the world, coming to accept what had once been beyond even his dreams.

Another problem, however, wasn't so easy to overcome: that of leaving his home behind. In a way, he was ready for the shock. He had begun preparing for it the first day his father took him to school. The event had prompted a series of changes in his life, weakening his sense of stability, forcing him to adapt. Still, this most overwhelming change was far more difficult to accept.

He kept telling himself he would be able to return some day, to see his mother and father again, though for some reason the king gave him an odd look whenever he spoke about visiting his parents. The knowledge that he could return on some nameless date was not very comforting. The newness of the world around him made him physically sick, something the nobles ascribed to his never having been on a ship before.

Throughout it all, he remembered his father's words on courage, repeating them in his head like a mantra. *Courage is nothing more than being willing to endure what is different until it becomes familiar.* These words, coupled with the formless knowledge that nothing remained for him in the village, helped him to adapt. As the ship continued to progress toward its destination, Jerick did the same, his journey less physical but far more strenuous.

KING RODIS RUBBED AT HIS LONG-BEARDED CHIN, HIS EYES THOUGHTFUL as he turned Jerick's castemark over in his hand. "Perhaps we should get you another one of these, Jerick," he mumbled to himself. "You aren't a

lumberman any longer. Perhaps a free merchant's castemark, or maybe a scholar's castemark, would suit you better."

Jerick's eyes opened wide, and he snatched the castemark away from Rodis before realizing how disrespectful the action was. "Please, no, Your Majesty," he mumbled with embarrassment. "I like this one."

Noticing Jerick's discomfort, the king shrugged, leaning against the ship's side and looking at the passing scenery. "As you wish, lad. Most men would reach eagerly at the chance to receive a new castemark. It is a very rare honor."

Jerick's embarrassment grew. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty," he explained. "My father was carvin' this one."

"Ah," the king said with a nod. Then he turned to Jerick, giving him a look of consternation. "And . . . your father would be unhappy if you gave it away?"

"Yes," Jerick said immediately. "I could never return to face him. He's a lumberman, Your Majesty, and so am I. That will never change."

The king's lips turned down at the comment, an action that confused Jerick. What did the king have against his father? Hadn't Rodis himself spoken highly of Rin? His father, his mother . . .

"Jerick?" the king asked, and Jerick shook his head, realizing he had fallen into a daze.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

The king paused, then looked back at the passing scenery again. "Nothing, lad."

It was a source of amazement to Jerick that the king was willing to talk with him. There were many important officials and nobles on the ship, and all of them seemed eager for an opportunity to spend time with Rodis. As Jerick came to understand how unimportant his village was, he realized his own insignificant place in the kingdom. The king shouldn't have time for a peasant boy such as himself, even if he was the subject of a bet. Yet, Rodis came looking for him several times a day, asking him questions with a thoughtful voice.

"We'll soon arrive, Jerick," the king noted, watching a comparatively large village pass. Like the rest of its kind it was constructed of circular huts with thatched roofs. "That is the last town before Lakdon."

Jerick nodded. Earlier in the day the Trerod had emptied into a lake so large Jerick couldn't see the other side. At first he had assumed this was the ocean Master had spoken of, but the king told him it was just a lake, albeit an enormous one—the largest of its kind on the continent.

"Are you scared, lad?" the king asked, turning his round face toward Jerick.

"Not so much any more, Your Majesty. At first I was, but now I'm more excited. I want to see t'palace."

"Well, I certainly hope my humble dwelling suits you, lad," the king said with a smile. "I expect that you'll find it comfortable."

The king chuckled to himself at that comment, turning to watch the sailors work on the sails. The ship slowly turned to the east, following the shore of the lake.

"Your Majesty?" Jerick began hesitantly.

"What is it, boy?" the king replied with an encouraging smile. He obviously sensed that no matter how casually he acted around Jerick, the boy was far from comfortable in his presence.

"What am I?" Jerick asked. "I mean, you just said that I'm not a lumberman any more. What am I? A . . . a nable?"

The king shook his head. "No, lad, the aristocracy would never accept that. Caste progression has happened before, but never from peasant to noble. I would have enough trouble trying to get them to accept you as a merchant."

"But, you're t'king," Jerick protested. "You can do what you want."

"Not always, I'm afraid. You see, Jerick, the Meleran caste system is said to have come from the Nine Lords themselves. Even kings have no authority over gods."

"But, isn't what you're doin' kind of t'same thing?" Jerick asked. "You're educatin' peasants. Makin' them t'same as nables."

The king smiled slightly. "True, but this way is more subtle."

"Eventually t'nables will have t'admit that they were wrong," Jerick surmised. "If they see peasants as smart as they are, then they'll be forced to agree that dividin' people up by class isn't t'will of t'Nine Lords."

The king nodded, his eyes thoughtful. "You have a quick mind, boy," he noted, speaking almost to himself. "Torell was rather inaccurate in his assessment of your ability. I knew he was a fool, but I didn't make him out to be a liar as well."

"Master was speakin' what he thought was right," Jerick said defensively.

"You don't need to defend him, boy," the king said with a chuckle. "I can only guess how poor of a job Torell is doing in that village. Unfortunately, he was the only choice."

"He taught me a lot, Your Majesty," Jerick replied.

"And betrayed you in the end," Rodis noted.

"Because he thought it was t'right way of things. No disrespect, Your Majesty, but you put him in somethin' of an unfair position."

The king raised his eyebrows at Jerick, not in anger, but in consternation. Then he chuckled. "Well, that I suppose I did. I will concede you this point, lad—I wouldn't want to end up humiliated like our dear Kalord Strafen."

Jerick blinked in surprise, realizing that he had just argued with the king. "I . . . I apologize, Your Majesty," he stuttered, mortified.

"No need, boy. The Meleran monarchy doesn't consider itself completely infallible like the Fallin emperor. I can admit fault, even when defeated by a lumberman . . . or whatever we decide you are."

"If Your Majesty is willin'," Jerick said once he realized that there would be no punishment for his debate. "I think I'll just remain a lumberman for now. A lumberman like my father."

"If you wish, lad," the king agreed. "Though, honestly, I'm not certain which would make more of an uproar: granting a caste improvement to a child or putting a lumberman in with the children of nobility."

The king considered his comment for a moment, then shrugged, turning around to look back out at the shore. The land had risen slightly, turning into a white-rocked cliffside. Almost to himself, the king continued, "Well, I suppose we'll . . . What in the name of Xeth?"

Jerick looked up with surprise, following the king's dumbfounded gaze. A charioteer galloped down the shore toward them, his bright, multi-colored cloak waving like a flag behind him. As Jerick watched, the charioteer jumped up and stood, balancing himself with one leg on each rim wall of his chariot.

"That man is completely insane," the king mumbled, shaking his head.

Even as the words left Rodis's mouth, the chariot's horse approached the edge of the cliff, then turned sharply to keep itself from tumbling into the water. The rider, however, was not so prudent. As the horse turned, the rider sprang from his chariot, his momentum carrying him in a wide arc through the air. He threw his arms out, hovering in the air for a moment with his eyes closed, before plunging in a sharp dive toward the lake water below.

There were several muttered exclamations of surprise from behind as the sailors noticed the man's feat.

The king sighed. "All right," he ordered. "I suppose we should slow down and pick him up."

The sailors complied, angling the boat in the colorful man's direction. A few moments later they threw a ladder over the side, and a sodden face appeared. With surprise, Jerick realized he knew the face.

"Your Majesty!" Topaz exclaimed, rolling over the side of the ship and dropping into a quick bow that sprayed the king with water.

"Cephandrius," the king said tolerantly. "It's been too long."

"Only three months," Topaz protested, ringing the water from his cloak. The cloth squished in complaint.

"Foolish me. I thought appointing you as royal jester would encourage you to stay in the kingdom for more than a few days at a time."

"We all make mistakes," Topaz said with a shrug, running his hand through his dripping white and black hair. "I seem to have lost my hat," he noted, looking over at the king. "I don't suppose you'll loan me yours?"

The king looked up, eyeing his crown. "I think not, Topaz," he replied.

"Oh well," Topaz said with a sigh. Then he looked over at Jerick, who was watching with amazement, surprised that Topaz could treat the king so off-handedly. "I see you've found yourself a lumberman, Rodis. Good choice—I've been meaning to pick up a few myself. They're terribly handy folks to have around—especially if you happen to get attacked by a forest."

The king smiled slightly, looking over at Jerick. "The boy has agreed to help me with my bet."

"Ah," Topaz said, nodding and winking at Jerick. "Well, Jerick is a fine lad. Just make certain to keep your midnight snacks locked safely away."

"You remember me?" Jerick asked with astonishment.

"Topaz remembers everyone and everything, Jerick," the king warned. "He has a memory like the Lords themselves. Once I saw him look at a page from a book for no more than a minute, then close his eyes and read back the entire thing without a single mistake. I lost a bag of gold on that bet."

Topaz chuckled, accepting a towel from one of the sailors. "As I recall, Rodis," the fool noted, "you were so drunk at the time that I could have quoted a verse from 'The Wry Wench of Witherton' and convinced you it came from the *Legends of the Nine Lords*."

The king smiled. "I've noticed you tend to get people nice and drunk before you bet with them, Topaz."

"It's by far the best method, Your Majesty. That way, once they realize how much you've cheated them, they're too tipsy to draw a sword."

"I knew there must be some logic behind it," the king said, shaking his head. Then he looked at Jerick with jovial, but wary, eyes. "Be careful of this one, lad. He has a habit of corrupting people. Even kings."

Topaz wasn't paying any attention to the king, however. "Ho there!" he called at the helmsman. "What are you doing?"

"He's turning the boat, Topaz," the king said. "To take us to Lakdon."

“He can’t do that—we have to go back for my chariot.”

“We what . . . ?” Rodis asked, his patience obviously beginning to wear thin. “Well, why did you jump off the cursed thing then?”

Topaz gave the king a tolerant look. “My dear Rodis,” he said, “you of all people should know by now that I *have* to make a proper entrance.”

The king sighed, but Topaz was insistent. Finally, Rodis nodded to the helmsman. “Take us back,” he ordered.

“WHAT IS GOING ON HERE? WHY HAVE WE TURNED!” STRAFEN BURST ONTO the deck, barely squeezing his large bulk through the small hatch.

The king groaned quietly, turning to deal with the Kalord. Topaz, however, moved more quickly.

“My dear Kalord!” the outrageously dressed man exclaimed. “How propitiously met we are! I bring a message from your wife. She’s doing quite well in Fallamore, and sends her regards. She’s actually grown to be something of a celebrity—I wanted to spend the night and enjoy her services, but she’s become far too expensive. I could barely afford an hour.”

The Kalord’s face turned bright red.

“I know,” Topaz said sorrowfully. “I asked her for a discount on account of my knowing your Kalordship, but she would hear nothing of it.”

It took the Kalord less than a second to cross the ground between himself and the fool, his hand raised to strike.

“Kalord, stop!” the king ordered.

The Kalord pulled to a halt, his hand just a few inches from Topaz’s still-smiling face. Topaz had not flinched.

“He goes too far, Rodis!” the Kalord yelled. “This man has no sense of decency or honor.”

“He is a jesk, Kalord,” the king said with a stern voice. “You violate both tradition and law if you punish him for what he says. The jesks are the voice of the people.”

The Kalord lowered his hand slowly. His face, however, was still bright red. “That ludicrous profession died out a century ago,” he growled. “This man is no jesk. He is just an opportunist!”

“The law remains, Kalord,” the king warned. “Do not give me the opportunity to invalidate our bet by having you disinherited. That is, after all, the lawful punishment for striking a jesk.”

Strafen growled, his blazing eyes focused on Topaz’s smirking face. Jerick shrunk back at the rage he saw in the Kalord’s face, certain that the large

man was about to tear Topaz apart, despite the king's warning. Instead, Strafen growled a simple warning. "There will come a time, fool, when the king cannot protect you." With that, the Kalord spun around and stalked back down into the hold.

Topaz waved cheerfully at the Kalord as he left, then turned back to the king, chuckling mildly to himself.

"That was cruel, Topaz," the king said flatly.

"I'm like that sometimes. Under all this foppery, I'm really just a barbarian at heart."

"I don't understand," Jerick confessed, looking at the two with confusion.

"Kalord Strafen's wife ran off with a Fallin merchant a few years ago, lad," the king explained. "The two of them had been lovers behind his back for some time, and he didn't even find out until they were gone. The escapade is still a favorite topic of conversation at court."

"His burliness is still rather tender on the subject," Topaz explained, smiling cruelly. "Even mention his wife, and he'll disappear for hours and mope. Either that or he'll try to impale you with his fist."

"Which," the king noted, "he came very close to doing this time. He is right, you know, the jesks died out long ago. Few nations honor the old laws anymore. Today's jesters and fools are nothing more than entertainers; few can remember the days when they were anything more. I allow you to speak your mind, Topaz, but it is possible even for you to go too far."

"Perhaps," Topaz admitted. "Strafen, however, is just too perfect to pass up."

The king shook his head. "You shouldn't play with him like that. Some things are better left alone, even with men like the Kalord."

"Come now, Rodis," Topaz countered. "We must have somebody to mock."

"You mock everybody, Cephandrius," the king pointed out.

"You have me there, Your Craftiness," Topaz confessed, looking over as a couple of sailors led his horse and chariot up the plank and onto the deck. A few moments later the ship resumed its course. As it did so, Topaz turned back to the king, his face slightly more somber. "I assume there have been developments since I left?"

The king nodded. "I was hoping you would return in time to look in on the school with me."

"I was . . . detained," Topaz said. "I apologize. I can guess at the outcome, however. You should never have put Torell in charge of the school."

"He was the only choice, and he is a very learned man."

Topaz snorted. "That depends, I suppose, on how you define 'learned.' And the boy?"

The king looked down at Jerick. "The next step," he explained.

Topaz nodded. "We have much to discuss."

The king nodded, bidding farewell to Jerick as the two moved to the king's cabin and shut themselves inside.

Jerick was proud of himself. He waited all the way to a count of ten before he snuck over and put his ear against the door.

"... is the second time I've had to stop Strafen like that," the king was saying. "The bruise has all but vanished now, but the other day, back in the village, Jerick spoke up to the Kalord and earned a slap in the face. That man's temper worries me sometimes. If I hadn't intervened, he probably would have knocked the boy senseless."

"If the reports are true, then his wife was well-deserved in running like she did," Topaz replied. "There is a reason I treat him like I do, Rodis—I've never been able to stomach a man who beats those he claims to love. I didn't know he'd go as far as to hit a child in public—even a peasant. What did Jerick do?"

"Made a Lords-stricken fool of him," the king replied with humor in his voice.

"Good. I'm glad someone was doing my job while I was away. You think Jerick will work then?"

"It seems like he can learn," the king mused. "I've rarely met a boy so observant. The other day, he asked me why the boat floated with so much weight on it. I didn't know, but by the following morning he had figured it out for himself."

"What did he say?" Topaz's voice asked.

"Honestly, Cephandrius, I didn't understand it. Something about the angle of the ship's hull making the water force the entire thing up into the air."

"How would a lumberman's boy figure out something like that?"

"He claimed," the king continued, "that he could *see* the force of the water pushing against the ship. He must have been imagining things—he spent hours leaning over the side of the ship and watching the water pass."

Topaz was silent for a moment. "I see," he finally mumbled. "And the boy's parents? What did they think of your stealing him?"

There was a pause. "I'm ashamed to admit it, Cephandrius," Rodis finally said, his voice bitter. "It happened while I was sitting a few feet away, staring like a fool. I'm no warrior—Melerand hasn't been at war since my

grandfather's days. When fighting breaks out, even a simple brawl, I'm completely useless."

"You mean . . ."

"Yes," Rodis continued. "The boy's parents—"

Jerick pulled away from the door, suddenly noticing that he could see a city approaching in the distance. It would be much more interesting than what the king was talking about. Jerick nodded to himself, walking away from the king's cabin. He shouldn't be eavesdropping anyway. His father always said it was poor manners.

AT LAST JERICK UNDERSTOOD WHAT THE SAILOR HAD MEANT BY CALLING Dorven small. He had assumed that after studying the cities along the Trerod he had a decent understanding of what the kingdom had to offer, but once again he found the legs of understanding cut out from underneath him. Fortunately, they had been cut so often lately that they healed quickly.

"Please tell me this is as big as they get," Jerick said with wide eyes, regarding the town. He had expected a simple extrapolation of what he had seen before—a village made of huts and a few two-story buildings, only bigger. Lakdon was different.

All of the buildings were made of stone, most of them one-story white-washed boxes. Both streets and buildings moved out in a circular pattern from the center of the city, in line with the risings and fallings of the land beneath them. Here the hills of green had been replaced by hills of wood and stone. A stone wall nearly as tall as a man surrounded the entire city, curling over the hills like an enormous snake.

Topaz chuckled. "Ventalle, the capital of Fallamore, is a tad larger, but once you get past a certain point it really isn't all that noticeable." He and the king had spent the next hour or so talking with one another, only exiting the cabin just before they pulled into the docks.

Jerick nodded. The city was strange—it was so large, and the houses were packed so closely together. He had assumed that buildings back in his own village had been cramped, but now he knew they had actually been spread out. There was barely enough room for a man to walk between most of the buildings in Lakdon. "What do they all do?" he asked with confusion. "They can't be farmers or lumbermen—there isn't any space to grow crops, and there certainly aren't any trees to cut down."

"Most of them are quite proficient at doing nothing, little lumberling," Topaz explained, leaning his tall frame against the side of the ship. "Either

that, or very good at making the little they do seem like much more. I wouldn't point that out to them, though. Most people grow rather violent when you comment on their efficiency."

Jerick furrowed his brow in confusion. There were so many people coursing through the streets, in and out of buildings, or just standing with apparent boredom. "Some of them must do something, Topaz. Otherwise the king wouldn't feed them."

"The king doesn't feed everyone, lad," Topaz explained. "He only feeds his lumbermen. Most of these people buy their own food."

"Then where do they get the money?"

Topaz raised his head, scanning across the city. "Sometimes the less you do in life, boy, the more people are willing to pay you for it. Lakdon is one of the oldest cities on the continent—the constant influx of Melerand woods makes it a center for trading and crafts. Such things attract the nobility, for they have to have ways of spending their wealth. Besides, they like to keep their swiny little eyes on one another."

"They're all nables then?" Jerick said with amazement.

"No," Topaz corrected with a smirk. "Just a disappointingly large percentage of them. There are workers as well—aristocrats cannot exist without peons to provide comparison. Those large wooden buildings near the docks, those are the Melerand mills. All the trees your friends chop down end up inside there where a fleet of men cut them into boards."

Jerick nodded, looking over at the docks, noting a batch of logs floating nearby, men nimbly jumping from log to log as they inspected the wood. The king had not emerged from his chambers, and though the sailors were bringing the ship into dock, none of the other people were getting ready to leave. "What are we waiting for?"

"The king," Topaz explained. "He can't emerge until the town is ready to receive him properly."

Jerick nodded. A large mass was gathering on the docks. Most of them were richly dressed, wearing dyed cloth instead of skins. Apparently only the richest segment of the city was required to meet the king. Eventually Rodis appeared on deck and, en masse, the waiting nobles bowed themselves to the ground. One thing apparently was the same for both peasant and noble.

"Finally," Topaz murmured. The king moved to stride down the gangplank, followed by Strafen and a group of guards. The nobles that had come on the trip filed after him, organized according to a prescribed order.

"What do I do?" Jerick asked with confusion.

"You wait," Topaz said, lounging back against the side of the ship, "as do I. We're not important enough to leave yet."

"You may rise!" the king's voice declared from below. The collected nobles came back up to their feet and began talking amongst one another, the ritual finished. Several of them moved to speak with the king—one, however, moved more quickly than the rest. A small girl with long golden hair dashed up to the king and threw herself into his arms. She was younger than Jerick, perhaps eleven or twelve years old, and she wore a fine green dress.

Jerick pressed himself against the side of the ship, his eyes wide as he studied the girl. There was something captivating about her—her hair such a striking radiant color, her skin so white and soft.

"Oh, Lords," Topaz mumbled beside him. "Lumberling, you're too young, and she's too high born, for what you're considering."

Jerick ignored the comment. "Who is she?" he breathed.

"The princess Courteth." Topaz turned sour eyes on Jerick, then shook his head. "And I thought lumbermen were supposed to be practical. What is it about princesses anyway? I've seen any number of peasant girls that are just as pretty."

Jerick shook his head, unable to explain what he was feeling. Finally, he tore his eyes away from the youthful princess and looked back at the line of nobles still walking down from the ship. They had stopped, confined to the plank as people below crowded around the king and blocked their pathway. "Well," he noted to Topaz, "I guess you won't be able to make much of an entrance this time."

When he looked back at Topaz, the man was smiling. "Why do you think I had Rodis go back for the horse?"

CHAPTER FIVE

“YOU MAY RISE!”

Ryalla began to stand, but a hand pushed her back down to her knees.

“No, not you,” the princess said. “As I recall, you were the reason I was late arriving this morning. You will remain kneeling until I tell you to rise.”

Ryalla bowed her head. “Yes, Your Highness.”

The princess nodded, then turned her eyes toward her father. The plump King Rodis was smiling as he looked over the crowd that had come to greet him. Courteth’s green eyes were calculating as she watched the king’s primary officiators approach.

Ryalla lowered her head obediently, but kept her eyes raised just enough to watch Courteth. The princess had great beauty for one so young, not even thirteen years of age. Her perfectly almond-shaped face held a pair of eyes that were almost too large to be natural, and the coat of makeup Ryalla herself had applied to the princess’s face hid all sign of the freckles that were slowly fading as she aged. Even as young as she was, it was apparent that Courteth would grow to be the fairest gem of Melerand. Not like Ryalla, who was the same age but was far too thin, and had short, dark hair. Of course, that was natural. It wouldn’t be right for a slave to be as beautiful as a princess.

Courteth still waited, watching the king smile at his people. Then the princess nodded slightly to herself, adopted a look of wide-eyed joy, then dashed forward, pushing her way between the royal magistrates and jumping into her father’s arms. She arrived just before the councilors began speaking with her father, forcing them to stand uncomfortably and watch Courteth

ask the king about his trip. The move looked spontaneous, but Ryalla could read its meaning. The princess left no doubt that though officials were important, her Royal Highness Princess Courteth was far more so.

Ryalla continued to kneel on the hard cobblestones. Courteth had called Ryalla the reason they had arrived late to the king's arrival, and she had been right—in a way, at least. Years of serving as the princess's handmaid had taught Ryalla never to get dressed until Courteth herself awoke. Ryalla never knew whether the princess was going to dress her in finery or in rags—it all depended on Courteth's mood. And, if Ryalla chose the wrong type of outfit—or even one that did not go well with whatever the princess chose for the day—she would be punished. Finding ways to avoid punishment was a full-time occupation.

So, as usual, Ryalla hadn't dressed this morning, but instead sat patiently in her nightgown beside the princess's bed. Upon rising, Courteth had given Ryalla no clue as to what she should put on. So the handmaid had helped her mistress bathe and dress, then brushed her hair. Finally, when it was almost time to leave, Courteth had sworn at her for being tardy and told her what to wear. As a result, the princess had been forced to wait as Ryalla hurriedly threw on a dress. It wouldn't do for the princess to greet her father the king without the proper attention of a handmaid.

Today, it was finery. Partially because Courteth wanted to look as good as possible before the court, and partially—Ryalla was certain—because she knew her handmaid would invariably dirty the dress by kneeling when the king arrived. The princess herself had turned a wrinkled nose at the dirty cobblestones, then decided not to kneel, instead hiding herself behind the prostrate form of a large nobleman. She had shot Ryalla a look, however, that dared her to do likewise. Courteth was the princess, she could follow or disobey tradition when it suited her. Ryalla was a slave; no castemark of rank hung around her neck. Tradition was law to her.

The princess was still speaking to her father, the collection of stiff-bearded magistrates watching impatiently. Rodis smiled, nodding to comments spoken too softly for Ryalla to hear. She could, however, guess exactly what Courteth was saying. She would be telling her father who had done what during his absence—making good on promises or threats as suited her. She would couch it all, of course, in an innocent narrative, laying no blame or praise herself. Ryalla knew from experience, however, that most of what Courteth said would have the desired effect. Rodis, for all his political capabilities, had an incredible weakness for his daughter. Those he thought had wronged her would receive swift retribution, and those he knew had

amused or helped her would find themselves rewarded. Ryalla herself had been the subject of both actions—the first much more often than the second.

Ryalla was in the process of guessing what Courteth would say about her handmaid when a startled yelp—followed by a splash—came from the direction of the ship. The crowd turned with alarm to see a large roan chariot horse trotting down the plank, its bulk shaking the wooden platform. It did not slow as it pushed its way past the waiting nobles, toppling a full dozen of them off the plank and into the lake below. In a few seconds the horse reached the docks and stopped, leaving an empty plank behind.

A figure clothed in bright, loose clothing appeared at the top of the gangplank. “Hey!” he called indignantly. “What are you people doing with my horse?”

Nobles sputtered and called from below as sailors hurriedly threw ladders and pieces of wood down to them. Ryalla smiled despite the increasing pain in her knees. Topaz, the king’s jester, was one man who could always bring a smile to her lips. This was in part due to the fact that he was the only person Ryalla knew who seemed completely free from the princess’s power—no matter how much Courteth manipulated or schemed, she had never gotten the better of the clever fool.

Topaz strode down the now empty gangplank, calling pleasantries to the swimming nobles below, asking them if the lake water was warm yet and warning them to beware of freshwater sharks. A boy Ryalla had never seen walked beside him, looking down at the nobles with concerned eyes. He was perhaps thirteen or fourteen years old, tall and somber-looking, with a wide frame for one so young. He had short black hair, and a squareish face. He wore the skins of a northern peasant—some of his dress, such as the boots, still had the fur attached.

Courteth’s face turned sour as she watched the jester approach, but the emotion was quickly covered by one of innocent girlishness.

“Topaz!” she asked sweetly. “Did you bring me any candies?”

“Of course, princess,” the jester said, bowing and reaching into a fold of his cloak.

Courteth popped the proffered candy into her mouth, and then cringed, her face wrinkling as some horrible flavor assaulted her taste buds. She spat the candy out in a very unprincessly gesture, then looked accusingly at Topaz. “That tasted horrible!” she accused.

“Oh, I apologize, princess. I must have given you one of the horse’s saltchews instead. Terribly sorry.”

The king raised his eyes tolerantly, but Courteth shot the jester a loathing

look. Topaz, however, wasn't paying attention to either of them. He was searching the crowd with interested eyes—most of the nobles had trailed away, even the ones who had accompanied the king on his voyage, leaving Ryalla kneeling alone on the cobblestones.

"Why, isn't that your little playmate, princess?" Topaz asked with surprise. "I say, Your Majesty, she certainly is a respectful little girl, isn't she? She's still kneeling after all this time."

The king looked over with surprise. "I suppose so. She is a good servant. Rise and come over here, child."

"You must treat them well to inspire such loyalty," Topaz noted.

"I strive to do so," the king responded.

"It almost makes one want to be a slave."

The king looked up as he recognized the cynicism in Topaz's voice. He sighed. "I've already told you, Cephandrius, I cannot do anything about slavery in Melerand. The nobility would never hear of it. We treat them well—slaves have almost the same rights as peasants."

"Which means no rights at all."

"Slavery is an accepted institution throughout the continent, Topaz."

"And that, of course, means it must be moral."

The king took a deep breath, shaking his head as Ryalla joined them. "Sometimes, Cephandrius, I wonder if I should have had you exiled instead of making you my court jester."

"Perhaps you should have," the jester replied. "It certainly would have made your life easier. Unfortunately, Rodis, you are a good man. It's your main failing as a nobleman."

"Father, who is that peasant boy?" Courteth asked coolly, having finally regained her composure after Topaz's prank.

"This is Jerick," the king said, reaching over to pat the boy on the shoulder. "He is going to live at the palace from now on."

"A new serving boy?"

"No, more of a ward. He's going to be learning from your brother's scholars."

"A peasant?" Courteth asked, wrinkling her nose slightly.

"Jerick is more than a peasant, dear," the king explained. "He is a very important young man. He's going to help your father prove he is right and Kalord Strafen is wrong."

Courteth smiled cordially, but her eyes were frowning as she regarded the boy, obviously trying to decide how he would fit into court politics. Jerick was oblivious to such things; he had spent the entire conversation regarding the princess with wide, dreamy eyes. Ryalla recognized the look—more

and more boys seemed to be giving it to Courteth lately. Another fool caught neatly in the princess's webs.

"Well, Your Majesticness," Topaz said, looking over at the group of officiators who were still waiting to greet the king. "You obviously have a lot to do. Why don't I have Ryalla show us to the palace?"

"All right," the king said as Topaz hopped into his chariot, which several men had brought down the plank and were now attaching to his horse. The jesk reached over and helped Ryalla up next to him.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to provide some entertainment for my homecoming feast tonight?" the king asked.

"Your worthiness," Topaz said indignantly, "have I ever passed up an opportunity to perform?"

"No," the king admitted. "In fact, you usually perform more often than might be desirable."

"All men perform, Rodis. I'm just better at it than most. Are you coming, Jerick?"

The boy looked back at the king, then nodded, climbing up into the chariot behind Ryalla. She shuffled uncomfortably—the vehicle was not one of the large travel chariots, and was not meant for three people.

Topaz reached out a hand to the princess, then pulled it back as she took a step forward. "Sorry, Your Highness. No room."

"No room?" Courteth asked with barely-veiled outrage.

"Afraid so," Topaz said with a shrug. "Besides, I wouldn't want to soil your image by making you ride with three commoners."

With that, the jesk nodded to the king, and flicked his horse into a trot. The boy Jerick, Ryalla noticed, didn't take his eyes off of the princess until they turned a corner and left the docks behind.

Topaz obviously noticed Ryalla's expression.

"Is her royal pamperedness still giving you grief, little one?" he asked as they trotted down the street.

"She is my mistress, Topaz," she said. "She may do as she wishes."

"Rodis is a good king, Ryalla," Topaz replied. "You should go to him."

"He wouldn't believe me," Ryalla said, shaking her head. "The king does whatever Courteth wants him to."

Topaz chuckled. "I think you'd be surprised, little one," he said. "The young princess doesn't have as much control over the world as she thinks she does. In many ways she's more naïve than our lumberling here."

"Well, she does have complete control over my world," Ryalla grumbled. Then, blushing, Ryalla realized what she was saying. Courteth was her

mistress, and, no matter what the princess did, she still saw that Ryalla lived a better life than most of the other slaves—better than most of the peasants and merchants as well. Being slave to royalty was a far better lot than others Ryalla had heard of. “I shouldn’t say such things about her,” Ryalla said weakly. “She is my mistress. It’s just that . . . Topaz, why are you the only one who sees her the same way I do?”

“I’m a fool; I’m trained to recognize other fools.”

“You don’t act much like a fool to me, Topaz,” Ryalla countered. “You dress like one, but you don’t seem very foolish.”

“Ah, innocent one,” Topaz said, chuckling at something she didn’t catch, “as you grow older you’ll realize that I am the greatest fool of them all.”

“Why?”

“Because I still believe society can change, no matter how much the world proves me wrong.”

Ryalla looked back at him, his brilliant striped cloak flapping in the wind along with his peppered white hair. She had always wondered at his hair—Topaz was a young man, barely out of his thirties, but his hair was as white as that of an old man. His bearing marked him as a nobleman, but Topaz claimed no rank beyond that of fool. He had been coming to Rodis’s court as long as Ryalla could remember, but she knew he was not from Melerand. He was from the south—a place Ryalla had never visited but often dreamed about. Perhaps there, in the south, nobles didn’t have blond hair—maybe they had black hair, like Ryalla’s.

As soon as such thoughts occurred to her, she cast them out of her head. They were dangerous thoughts, thoughts that encouraged her to think poorly of Courteth and think herself above her station. Ryalla was a slave. She had been a slave since her birth, and she was fortunate to have as kind a mistress as Lady Courteth.

“She’s so beautiful,” the boy beside Topaz mumbled. He still wore the dazed look, and probably hadn’t heard a word of their conversation.

Ryalla frowned. “Not very impressive, is he?” she whispered, nodding toward Jerick. “Does the king really expect him to learn from the scholars?”

Topaz laughed. “You’ll have to excuse poor Jerick,” he said. “He’s suffering from a malady that strikes all young men at about his same age. He should recover his mind eventually.”

“When?”

“Oh, when he’s about fifty.”

Ryalla laughed at that, and the sound pulled Jerick out of his revelry. Somehow sensing he was the source of her mockery, he blushed. “What? What’s

t'matter?" His indignance, mixed with his rustic accent, only drove Ryalla into another fit of giggling—though she quickly hid it.

The boy turned away, watching the city pass. Soon his face lost its anger and turned instead to curiosity, though Ryalla couldn't imagine what about the city he found interesting. It was normal and dull, not like the cities of the south she had heard described. There, every building was a work of art, and there were sculptures and fountains lining the streets. Lakdon was a dull place with square, unimpressive homes and little ornamentation. These buildings had been built to survive harsh winters and powerful Melerand winds, not to please the eyes.

"Why don't they use lumber?" Jerick asked. "All t'houses are made of stone."

"Stone is more economical—there's a quarry just to the north," Topaz explained.

"But t'lumbermen cut down so many trees," the boy protested. "Why not use that wood?"

"Because the wood demands a high price," Topaz explained. "Trees are much more rare to the south, and places like Ventalle and Trexandos will pay well for them. The south has plenty of stone, however, and it would cost more to ship than it would earn."

"So they get our wood and we build out of stone?" Jerick asked. "That doesn't seem to make much sense."

"It's economically sound," Topaz said with a shrug. "Besides, stone buildings are fashionable in Fallamore right now. And, as everyone and the Nine Lords knows, it's important to be as much like Fallamore as possible. You've undoubtedly noticed the Antolis."

"Antolis?" Jerick asked.

"The beards," Ryalla answered. "Like all the nobles wear."

"The Fallin emperor started wearing one about a century ago," Topaz explained, "and since then they've become a sign of nobility all through Yolen. Even some of the Trexandian scholars have started wearing the inane things."

"Why does anyone in Melerand care what they're doing in Fallamore?" Jerick asked with confusion.

Ryalla sighed. He was rustic indeed. "Because Fallamore is the greatest center for art and poetry on the continent. People there are more cultured than in any other nation."

Jerick raised his eyebrows and Topaz laughed. "You'll have to forgive her," the fool explained. "She has Fallin blood in her."

"You do?" Jerick asked.

"Of course," Ryalla returned, careful to keep her voice submissive. Years of practice had taught her that intonation earned a swifter punishment than meaning. Any noble would beat a slave for mocking him, but many would let the same words pass as long as they were said with an air of subservience. "Can't you tell from my name?"

Jerick looked back at her uncomfortably. "Your name . . . ?"

"Ryalla," Topaz supplied helpfully as the chariot wheeled around a corner. "I suppose you two were never really introduced. She's the princess's handmaid."

Jerick nodded in introduction—an action he should have known never to give a slave. "What's that, over there?" he asked, oblivious to his mistake.

Ryalla turned, following his gesture. A tall, dark building rose up a short distance from the street. Built from Lallin green marble, the structure stood out from the rest of the city. The green, almost black, stone was shiny and well-kept, and gave the square building a mysterious air.

"The temple of Slonis," Ryalla explained. "Haven't you ever seen one? They're all the same."

Jerick shook his head. "We only had one temple in the village, and it was dedicated to all of t'Nine Lords. Slonis has her own?"

"All of the Lords have their own," Ryalla explained.

"Are they all so . . . dark?" Jerick asked.

Ryalla shrugged. "Slonis is the Lord of mystery and childbirth. Her temples convey that."

"Yes," Topaz added. "They're all ridiculously clandestine. Ah, here's the palace."

Jerick turned away from the temple at the comment, looking down the street. He seemed impressed at the palace, though that only showed how little he knew of the world. The Meleran palace was large, true, but it couldn't compare with the paintings Ryalla had seen of the one in Ventalle. Rodis's house was a massive rectangular structure of two stories, with two wings and a central keep. Despite its size, however, it was really nothing more than an improvement of the average Lakdon home, blockish and functional, without domes or spires.

As they approached, Topaz turned the chariot toward the stables. Inside, Ryalla was surprised to see an enormous well-muscled Ke'Chan man waiting for them. He wore the regular Ke'Chan sleeved cloak over a bare chest and long skirt. Only one sword hung at his side, which meant he was either a second son or his father still lived. The sword, however, appeared to be constructed of mountainsteel, not bronze, which marked him as a

successful merchant. Most of the mountainsteel—which most people had just started calling “steel” for short—went to the Eternal War. The Meleran palace guards still had bronze armor and weapons.

“You are late,” the Ke’Chan man declared with a harshly aspirated accent. Ke’Chan people always seemed like they were growling to Ryalla. “I hate heem when people are late.”

“Yes, I know. Add it to the list of grievances, Bat’Chor,” Topaz said hopping out of the chariot.

“Eef you were not my friend, I would keell you,” the Ke’Chan said.

“There’s that brilliant Ke’Chan bargaining savvy coming out again,” Topaz said, walking over to clasp hands with the man. Despite the Ke’Chan’s harsh words, his face was affable, and he didn’t seem to be offended. “How have you been, my friend?”

The Ke’Chan shrugged. “The reevers steell do not flow, and my people are steell een exile. What else ees to be said?”

“Ah, and there’s that encouraging Ke’Chan optimism,” Topaz replied. “It’s been difficult traveling without you, my friend. Everything’s seemed so horribly bright and cheerful.”

The Ke’Chan just shrugged.

“What does Toth’ch Malan mean?” Jerick suddenly asked. “It’s Ke’Chan, isn’t it?”

Bat’Chor looked down at the boy, then back at Topaz. “Who ees the keed?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Topaz said. “Though he could turn out to be rather interesting.”

Bat’Chor nodded at the comment, then gestured toward the door, ignoring Jerick. “We must speak,” he said. “I theenk I found something.”

“Really?” Topaz asked, his face suddenly interested. “Ryalla, take care of Jerick for me, if you would.”

“Yes, sir,” she said immediately. Following orders came quickly to a slave, even when speaking with one she considered her only friend. “What should I do with him?”

“Take him to the queen. Rodis said he mentioned Jerick in the letter he sent warning her of our arrival. She should have a room prepared for him.”

Ryalla nodded obediently, though she wasn’t particularly excited by the prospect of entertaining the rustic boy. Topaz gestured to the Ke’Chan, and the two of them walked toward the front of the stable, speaking quietly to one another.

The fool paused, however, before reaching the door, then turned back

to Ryalla. "Oh, I forgot." He walked over and handed her a small bag. "Candies," he said in response to her questioning gaze. "I must have completely forgotten about them when the princess asked," he added with a knowing wink. "Imagine that."

"HE NEVER ANSWERED MY QUESTION," JERICK NOTED.

Ryalla looked over at the contemplative boy with exasperated eyes, though she quickly hid the emotion when he looked up at her. "Ke'Chan people are like that," she explained softly. "They don't usually pay attention to children outside of their own clan."

"But the words are Ke'Chan, aren't they?" he asked.

Ryalla shrugged. "I guess so."

Jerick's eyes trailed back toward the stable, full of curiosity. "Why did he only have one sword? The other Ke'Chan I saw had two."

"The second sword is ceremonial," Ryalla answered, careful to make her voice sound respectful. He was only a peasant, but even a peasant was her better. Besides, the king seemed to have given this boy special privileges for some reason. "It means that the Ke'Chan is leader of his family."

"Oh," the boy said, following the Ke'Chan man with his eyes as he left. Ryalla could already tell this Jerick was going to be one of those people who were much too attentive for their own good.

"Come," she requested. "Topaz told me to present you before the queen—though maybe we should get you some decent clothes first."

Jerick looked down, and she expected him to ask what was wrong with what he was wearing. Instead, however, he looked up and sighed. "I suppose I should look like everyone else," he agreed.

"Then we'll get you a bath. You stink."

This received a response. "Stink! Just because I don't smell like flowers like all t'nables doesn't mean I stink."

Careful to mask her amusement, Ryalla continued. "I apologize, sir. I only meant to say that you smell like the woods," she said, leading him into the palace through one of the servants' entrances.

"T'woods smell good," he responded sullenly.

"Maybe if you happen to be a bear, sir. However, you are going into the king's court—they will immediately assume you're an uncivilized rustic. You might as well do your best not to reinforce the idea."

"All right," he said uncomfortably, following her down the hallway. His

eyes drifted across the walls as they walked, studying every detail. "Even t'floors are made of stone," he noted.

"Of course. What else would they be?"

"Dirt," Jerick said, looking uncertainly at the floor, as if he expected it not to hold. Then he raised his eyes with alarm. "T'ceiling too?" he asked.

"No, that's made of wood. Though there's another floor between us and the ceiling."

"Still, all that stone," Jerick said with wonder. "And it doesn't come topplin' down?"

"You really are from nowhere, aren't you?" Ryalla mumbled with a shake of her head.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing, good sir."

The boy blushed, falling silent as they continued down the hall. Ryalla didn't quite know what to make of him. He seemed to have a child-like quality about him, though his long-leggedness hinted at the beginnings of his development into manhood, and he did seem quick of mind.

It's his innocence, Ryalla decided. He was from a different world, a world where things were much simpler. He asked questions like a little child, and had an air of honesty about him Ryalla rarely saw in the palace. *I wonder how long it will take for Lakdon to corrupt him.*

The servants were busy preparing for the king's return. They passed the kitchens where cooks were scurrying around firepits and cauldrons, fixing Rodis's favorite dishes, and maids who ran up and down the hallways, afraid that the king would happen to see some nook of the palace that hadn't been cleaned. Some of them turned alarmed eyes on Ryalla when they saw her fine blue dress, but then exhaled in relief when they realized she wasn't a noble.

"Where's your castemark?" Jerick asked suddenly.

Ryalla turned. Now it was her turn to blush. Could the boy possibly be so ignorant that he didn't know about slaves?

"Did you lose it?" Jerick asked.

"I never had one," Ryalla said, turning away from him.

"Everyone has a castemark," Jerick argued.

"Not slaves."

There was a pause. "What's a slave?" he finally asked. He was indeed that ignorant.

Ryalla struggled with the question, first trying to ignore it. When she

looked back at the boy, however, his eyes were demanding, and she knew she had to answer. A slave couldn't refuse to answer a direct question.

"A slave is property, a person owned."

"Like a nable owns his formers?" the boy asked with confusion.

"No, the nobility can't sell the peasants that work for them. A slave is . . . beneath a peasant."

"There's something *beneath* peasants?" the boy asked with surprise, as if the thought had never occurred to him.

"Yes."

The boy cocked his head to one side, and Ryalla looked away with shame. "That means," he continued, "that I'm not the lowest person in the kingdom!"

"Yes, you are correct, sir. *I* am."

There was a pause from behind her, then the boy spoke with sorrow in his voice. "I'm sorry."

"No need," Ryalla said, continuing on. "It doesn't matter. Everyone has their place, and that is where the Nine Lords want us."

"Topaz doesn't seem to think so," the boy noted.

"Topaz has the luxury of being from Trexandos, where there aren't any castes. Unfortunately, Trexandos is very small—only an island, really—and not very important. It's filled with scholars and people who think too much."

He obviously sensed the bitterness creeping into her voice, something she tried to keep out but didn't quite succeed. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I just assumed you were a nable."

"Because of the clothing?"

"That and t'way you talk. You sound like a nable."

"I've lived in the palace all my life."

"But Topaz said you were from Fallamore," Jerick responded.

"I assume so, because of my name," she explained, approaching the servants' quarters. She wasn't certain where the queen would end up putting him, but for now he could get a bath and some clothing here.

"What about your parents?" Jerick asked. The boy simply didn't know when to stop. It was a wonder he had any room left in his mouth to stick his other foot.

"They're dead," Ryalla said, bowing her head and waiting for the apology that was bound to follow. It did not come, however. Ryalla paused, looking back as she realized Jerick was no longer beside her. Instead, he stood

behind her in the hallway, his feet frozen in mid-step, his eyes staring ahead, dull and glassy.

“Jerick?” she asked, suddenly concerned.

His dead eyes focused on her for a moment, then personality and animation returned to his face and he continued walking as if nothing had happened.

“Yes?” Jerick asked as he caught up with her.

“Never mind,” Ryalla said slowly, feeling a chill pass over her. “Let’s get you ready.”

CHAPTER SIX

THE CLOTH FELT ODD ON HIS SKIN, UNNATURALLY LOOSE. JERICK'S NORMAL lumberman's clothing had molded to his body, fitting naturally like a second layer of skin. The cotton clothing he now wore hung too loosely and felt too thin. He wasn't cold, but he felt almost naked. The outfit would never be warm enough to wear in the winter.

Of course, it was a fair bit more colorful than his lumberman's clothing. Instead of leggings he wore a skirt-like article that came down to his knees. The skirt was barely visible, however, because over his chest he wore something the servants called a fendove—a colorful cloth-like draping with clasps at either shoulder. He wore sandals instead of boots, and the fendove was tied at the waist with a loose yellow sash.

The slave girl, Ryalla, looked at him with a critical eye, then nodded. "It will do. It's fine enough to make it clear you aren't a servant, but not so rich as to offend your betters."

Jerick turned at the comment, feeling the wind of his movement ruffle the fendove. "I feel naked," he confessed, feeling his cheeks turn red beneath her scrutiny.

"You should see what they wear in the south," the girl replied with a mischievous smile. "Fendoves came from Fallamore—and there the women wear them as well."

Jerick looked down at the fendove, noting the open sides. "But . . ." he stammered. "You'd be able to see their . . ."

“Only if the wind blows the right way,” Ryalla said, smiling at his discomfort. However, when he looked directly at her, she averted her eyes, bowing her head slightly in subservience—the smile was gone so fast Jerick couldn’t be completely certain he had seen it.

Jerick frowned. She was a strange girl—he had never seen someone so servile and deferential. Whenever she met someone in the hallway, she was the first to step away, and she never met anyone’s eyes directly. However, at the same time, he saw hints of a hidden strength within her. He could sense it in her eyes, but only when he caught them in the corner of his vision. Her words were always quiet and submissive, but there was something behind them that made Jerick think that all of her subordination and meekness was somehow a means of mocking him.

She still waited, staring at the floor. “Let us go, then,” he said uncertainly.

Ryalla nodded at the order, leading him out of the servant’s quarters. Jerick followed uncertainly—it was the first time in his memory he had given someone a command. It felt wrong that she should do what he said simply because he told her to.

Nothing about this girl seemed to make sense. She dressed like a noble. Her fine blue floor-length skirt was embroidered with white flowers, and she wore a lighter blue cloth wrapped around her torso, leaving her arms bare like the other noble women Jerick had seen. Her deep black hair, however, was cut short, only reaching down to her chin. Short hair was a sign of low rank—only noble women could have long hair; peasants either had to cut it short or wear it in a bun.

She was pretty in her own way, though not by far as beautiful as the princess with her glowing hair and large eyes. Maybe if Ryalla didn’t look down so much . . .

Jerick paused mentally, surprised at himself. When had he begun comparing girls with one another? Why did he care? He couldn’t remember ever looking at the girls in the village in such a manner, though the other boys had started speaking of them in hushed tones a few months earlier. He told himself firmly that he was being silly.

It didn’t work. His mind kept drifting back to the princess Courteth, reliving the brief few moments when he had been in her presence. He had never seen anything so captivating in his entire life. He still didn’t know *why* he was captivated by her; he only knew he could have stood there on the docks and admired her for hours, continued on until he died of starvation, never noticing anything but her radiant face. He . . .

Jerick started, realizing Ryalla, walking beside him, was watching his face. Her eyes were unreadable, but her lips were drawn in a thin, tight line—like the face his mother wore when she watched women gossiping. Ryalla averted her eyes as soon as Jerick turned his head, leaving him to wonder why she had been looking at him in such a manner.

Finally, rather than returning to his contemplation of the goddess Courteth, he asked a question that had been bothering him since the docks. “Why didn’t t’queen come to meet her husband?” he asked.

“Melerand royal custom requires the monarch’s wife and heir to greet their king formally in the throne room. That’s why the king’s ministers met him on the docks—they have important items requiring his attention or approval, and they don’t want to wait through the lengthy reunion ceremony.”

“Oh. You know a lot.”

“Only what is necessary to serve well,” she replied, her words spoken like some sort of motto.

“You must serve very well.”

She ignored his comment as she pointed toward a large set of red-painted doors. “The throne room,” she explained. “I’ll go tell the herald who you are.”

“Herald?” Jerick asked uncomfortably as the small, dark-haired girl left him, slipping through a smaller door to the side of the large ones.

The large wooden doors slowly swung open. A man in a gold and red surcoat stood next to the door, standing at attention and staring directly ahead. “Jerick, son of Rin, royal lumberman of the realm,” the man announced in a sharp, monotone voice.

Jerick stood on shaking knees. He had traveled for days in the company of the king, but suddenly finding himself in such a demanding situation was nearly more than his nerves could bear.

“Step forward, child,” a kindly voice requested.

His first thought upon seeing the queen was to wonder how she had produced such a stunningly beautiful daughter. He felt immediate shame for the thought, but it was there nonetheless. The queen was not a beautiful woman. She wasn’t ugly either; she was simply plain. Her nose was a little too large, her face a little too flat, and her frame a little too thin.

The herald cleared his throat, and Jerick realized he had been staring. With a nervous stomach, he stumbled forward and performed the formal bow Master had taught him.

“You may rise,” a voice declared. It was a boy’s voice, not the queen’s. Standing, Jerick looked for the one who had spoken. A boy he hadn’t

noticed stood beside the queen. His clothing was dark blue, almost black, and was cut after a different fashion than Jerick's own. Though he wore a fendove, he wore it much tighter than Jerick wore his own, and beneath it he wore a tight-fitting shirt and dark, cotton leggings that reached to his ankles. It almost looked more like a military uniform than it did royal robes. He was probably about Jerick's own age, but his flat face and seemingly compassionless eyes made him seem much older. From Ryalla's explanation Jerick knew that this must be Yoharn, the king's son. Apparently he ruled the court in his father's absence, not the queen.

Jerick stood quietly, waiting to be addressed. The queen studied him for a moment. She might not have been stunningly beautiful, but she appeared to be a kind woman. She smiled as she looked him over, sitting with a regal manner on her throne. Yoharn was unreadable, but his scrutiny made Jerick even more uncomfortable.

"Welcome to my father's court, Jerick, son of Rin," the crown prince eventually said, his voice flat. He said nothing more.

"Yes. Welcome," the queen eventually offered, her voice kind. "My husband has strong expectations for you. I believe your studies will begin tomorrow—you've already lost much time compared to the other boys."

"I'll do my best, Your Majesty."

"I am certain you will, child," the queen said with a reassuring nod. "Lumbermen are known for their diligence. Ryalla, you are dismissed. My daughter might have need of her handmaid."

"Yes, my lady," the girl said with a bobbing curtsy. Jerick hadn't even noticed her standing to the side of the throne room. She was soon gone, once again disappearing through the small door rather than the large one.

"You, Jerick, have rooms waiting for you. Smethsan, would you direct this boy?"

"Yes, my lady," a man in a simple gray shirt and leggings stepped forward. There was a simple embroidered red shield on his right breast, apparently marking him as one of the king's household attendants.

"Rest from your travels, young Jerick," the queen commanded. "But be ready for the feast tonight—my husband plans to announce you to the aristocracy during the festivities."

Jerick felt himself grow sick again—it wasn't over yet. Resting sounded like a very good idea, but he hesitated before leaving. The servant the queen had spoken to still hadn't moved, and it seemed like the entire room was waiting for something.

"You are dismissed," Yoharn said in a voice far too hard to have come from one so young.

That said, Jerick allowed Smethsan to lead him from the throne room.

"ALL THIS, FOR ME?" JERICK ASKED WITH AMAZEMENT.

"Yes, Master Jerick," Smethsan replied in a stately voice. "It is only three rooms."

Three rooms. For one boy. His parent's home had been a simple one-room hut with a dirt floor, and he had considered it spacious. Some of the large families in the village lived in smaller homes.

Now they expected him to occupy three rooms at the same time. How was it possible? He could only be in one at any one time; why did he need three of them? Walking slowly, he peeked into the other two rooms. One was a bedroom that held an enormous mattress sitting in a fine oak box on the floor. The other was a bathroom with its own iron tub and mirror. The main room held a desk topped with pens like he had seen Master use, and even a stack of paper. All together, the three rooms were probably even larger than Master's house had been back in the village.

"I can't live here," Jerick protested. "It's wasteful."

Smethsan smiled. He was a tall bald man with a proper bearing. It was obvious that he was well-respected in the palace, for the other servants they passed deferred to him. "Spoken like a true lumberman. However, Master Jerick, you will live here. You have no choice. The queen commanded you to do so. You are under the same obligation to follow her words whether they tell you to live in a box or a Kaden."

"Why do you call me Master?" Jerick asked. "I'm not a nable, you know."

"I realize that, Master Jerick. The title 'Master' is given to those of lower birth who have obtained some status in their field. A visiting poet or craftsman, for instance, would be called Master."

"But I'm no crafter," Jerick countered.

"True, but you are in the king's favor. That earns you the title, whether you want it or not. You must accustom yourself to such things, Master Jerick. Accepting your titles of privilege is as important as living according to the Lords' proscribed caste."

The servant stood, waiting as Jerick began to poke through the room. Finally, realizing he was being watched, Jerick looked up. "Um, you may go," he said uncomfortably.

“Yes, Master Jerick,” the tall man said, bowing. However, not five minutes had passed before a knock came at his door.

“Yes?” Jerick asked uncertainly.

A round-faced maid burst through the door, followed by four younger women bearing armloads of cloth. Jerick sighed, expecting them to let him choose his favorite colors. That was not the case. The women marched into his bedroom without a word and began hanging the clothing—all of it—in the closet.

Jerick watched numbly. He had never had more than two sets of clothing his entire life—and lately he had been growing so much that his mother had barely been able to keep him in one. Counting silently, he realized that he now had at least two dozen fendoves, each a different color.

“The rest will be up later, Master,” the head maid said as her disciples trooped out the front door.

“T’rest?” Jerick asked.

“Yes. We had some clothing picked out for you, but it appears that all of it but the fendoves are going to be too small. We’ll bring the gelts and shoes later.” Gelt—he remembered the word. That was the knee-length skirt men wore under their fendove.

“And undercloths?” Jerick asked slowly.

“You’ll find them in the dresser, Master.”

“Ah. Um, thank you.”

“As is pleasing, Master. I’ll send a couple of girls up to help dress you for the feast.”

“Girls?” Jerick yelped in shock. Earlier, when Ryalla had left him with some servants to get dressed, the men had insisted on helping him put on the entire outfit—including the undercloths. “Um, that won’t be necessary. . . .”

“You might want to reconsider, master,” the older woman said, a slight smile on her face. “Begging your pardon, but have you ever put on a formal fendove before?”

Jerick blushed, then shook his head.

The woman chuckled to herself, then, noting Jerick’s discomfort, continued with a comforting voice, “Just put on your undercloth and gelt before they arrive, Master, and they’ll help with the fendove. No need to be embarrassed.”

Jerick exhaled with relief. “Thank you,” he said.

The woman took that as a dismissal, and left.

IN THE END HE WAS GLAD FOR THE HELP. THE MAIDS, WHO WERE CLOSER to women than “girls,” were quick and efficient, snapping clasps and chains together on his fendove in places he never would have considered. The end result, however, was so wondrous Jerick felt his own ordinary features were out of place.

The formal fendove, as it was called, bore little resemblance to the wavy, loose garment he had worn earlier. It was made of thicker material that hung straight down over his chest and back almost like a surcoat, and was crossed in the front by a dozen golden chains that hooked at the side. The clasps on the shoulders were ornate, and they attached a thin cloak to the garment as well as held the two halves together. It was, Jerick realized, surprisingly similar to what he had seen the prince wearing in the throne room, only his fendove had been crossed with dark ribbons instead of chains.

He had two formal fendoves, one white and one dark green. The women had picked the white one for him, and as they left one suggested that he change his gelt for a specific black one. Surprisingly, this gelt was divided like leggings, though the pantlegs only extended to a place slightly above his knees. As soon as the women were safely gone, Jerick stripped off his gelt and put on the one they had suggested. Then, entering the main room of his quarters, he realized that he had absolutely no idea how to find the king’s feast.

His anxiety was unnecessary. After a few moments of worried pacing, just when Jerick was ready to start wandering the palace hallways in the hopes that someone would direct him, a knock came at his door. A young boy, perhaps a few years younger than Jerick, bowed to him as he opened the door.

“I am sent to take you to the feast, master,” the boy said.

“Um, thank you,” Jerick said as the boy led him through the hallways. As they walked, Jerick realized that he was seeing a different part of the palace than when Ryalla had led him to the throne room. The hallways were wider, and bore more ornamentation, such as vases and paintings. Smaller side corridors cut through the main hallway, however, and as he studied them—and the forms he saw scurrying within them—Jerick realized that there weren’t just separate entrances and exits for servants, there were entirely different hallways. The lower castes were kept as separate from the nobles as was functionally possible.

The room holding the feast was enormous. It sat at the direct center of the palace and, with surprise, Jerick realized that the ceiling here was open. The center of the palace was a courtyard, though the building rose up for

two stories on either side, obscuring all but a square section of the blue sky above. Still, he could feel the fresh outside air flowing into the room, and the smoke from torches and firepits was funneled comfortably away.

There must have been hundreds of people in the room. The king's table stood at the front, and dozens of other tables, both long and round, were arranged through the courtyard in front of it. Here nobles mixed with servants, the former either sitting in their places or standing beside acquaintances, chatting before returning to their own seats. The servants wove between them all, setting places and serving drinks. The huge firepits held pots and dishes, keeping them warm until the feast actually began.

Despite the chaos, Jerick's diminutive guide had no trouble showing him to his place. At first, Jerick was afraid the boy was leading him to the main table, but he was relieved when they stopped next to a shorter rectangular table that sat off to the side of the main one. It was still uncomfortably close to the front, but not too important.

Unlike his home, where the entire family had eaten while sitting on the floor, the tables here were raised slightly and lined with cushion-like stools about two hands high. Seating himself, Jerick mimicked the other nobles, who crossed their legs and let them slide forward to keep their knees from bumping the table. Then, uncertain what else to do, he waited for the feast to begin.

The entire situation was, of course, horribly uncomfortable—not the seating arrangement, but the sheer number of strangers. The king had yet to enter, and Jerick realized as he searched the crowd that he didn't recognize a single person in the room. He had always been a solitary boy, and crowds made him uncomfortable. Added to this was the fact that everyone around him was a noble—a caste he hadn't even seen before Master's arrival in the town a year before. None of them paid any attention to him, but he was certain that as soon as they knew who he was—a lumberman—he would become a center of dissatisfied attention.

The situation grew worse as his table began to fill with guests. All of them were boys ranging from a few years younger than him to some many years older. Apparently the sons of nobles, they each wore clothing like his own and seemed very familiar with one another. Each one gave Jerick a questioning look as they arrived, and immediately began whispering to his neighbor. No one spoke to him. He searched nervously through the crowd, looking for anyone he recognized—even one of the servants who had helped him earlier. He had no luck; the boys continued to whisper, and the nobles

continued to talk, the noise of their conversation a roar in Jerick's ears. The entire predicament was so unnerving that Jerick actually let out a startled yelp when a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Easy, lumberling," a voice chuckled.

"Topaz," Jerick said with relief, turning to find the jesk behind him. Topaz had changed clothing, discarding his customary striped outfit for one equally outrageous, if slightly more color-coordinated. He wore an enormous red cape and a red suit trimmed in gold, with strips of light red cloth sewn to the sleeves and legs. On his head was a cap covered with similar streamers.

"Did you miss me?" Topaz asked quietly enough to make their conversation private.

"This place is insane, Topaz," Jerick said with exasperation. "They expect me to live in three rooms all by myself; they gave me so many clothes that I'll never wear them all; I had to let some girls help me dress and—"

"Welcome to the life of the privileged, lumberling," Topaz said, cutting him off. "You've traded your working days for a life of carefree stress and anxiety. Congratulations."

"It wasn't my idea," Jerick defended.

"It usually isn't. Be positive; at least you don't have to worry about being hungry. That's one thing nobility rarely has to deal with."

"Tis a poor trade for my forest."

"I'm sorry, lumberling. Just let me say that in the end, I think you'll probably be glad that you came."

Jerick shook his head uncertainly, looking back at the crowded room. Then he turned back to Topaz anxiously. "Are you going t'be sitting with me?" he asked.

The jester chuckled. "I'm afraid not, lumberling. I've got to pretend to be someone important tonight," he said, nodding to a place set at the king's table. Then, in a quieter, mischievous voice, he continued, "I wouldn't let Rodis sit me up there except I know that it makes the rest of the nobility livid. That, and I can throw food at Kalord Strafen."

"You wouldn't dare," Jerick said with a smile.

"Probably not," Topaz agreed. "I wouldn't want to waste good feasting food. We'll eat well tonight."

Just then, the court herald pounded on a large bell to announce the king's arrival, and the room fell silent. Rodis strode in, wearing his customary gold and red, with Queen Grasse on his arm. Yoharn, as cold-faced and

unemotional as before, followed behind with Courteth on his arm. As soon as he saw the princess, Jerick lost himself again, sighing softly.

"Stop that," Topaz ordered with annoyance, rapping Jerick on the head. "You have to keep your wits about you tonight. The rest of these boys have probably guessed who you are, and unless you watch yourself they'll make such a sound fool of you that you'll never recover."

Jerick rubbed his head, looking back at the jester. "What do I do?" he asked quietly.

"Try not to talk very much. Your accent alone will do enough damage."

"What's wrong with my accent?"

Topaz sighed. "We'll worry about that later. Just remember to keep your opinions to yourself for now. You'll have plenty of opportunities to prove your wits later on, once you understand a little more about court politics."

Jerick nodded. Keeping quiet sounded like good advice.

The king seated himself, and a few other important nobles began to file in, Strafen leading the way. He had no wife to escort, but next to him walked a large blond boy with a dignified face. The boy followed his father to the head table but then, once his father was seated, began walking toward Jerick's table.

"Good luck with that one," Topaz said, rising to leave.

"What do you mean?" Jerick said anxiously.

"There's a Ke'Chan proverb that says 'lions never give birth to gazelles.'"

"What?"

"Just watch yourself with Martis—I need to go," Topaz said. "Remember to keep quiet, and make sure you use the finger cups."

"Finger cups?"

Topaz pointed to a white dish filled with water in front of Jerick's plate. "Wash your fingers off between bites; the servants will keep your cup clean. Despite my unwavering attempts, the people of your homeland have yet to discover the joys of eating utensils."

"Eating utensils?" Jerick asked, still looking at the bowl.

"Something we discovered in Trexandos long ago, and the rest of the world has yet to adopt. For now, use your fingers."

"What else would I use?" Jerick said.

"Never mind," Topaz said. He patted Jerick reassuringly on the shoulder, then walked off toward the head table, cloak and ribbons streaming behind him like a tempestuous red sea.

The large boy Jerick assumed was Strafen's son, Martis, smiled to the other boys of the table as he approached, and several of them called out, inviting him to sit next to them. He stopped in front of Jerick, however, his eyes thinning slightly.

"Who are you?" he said simply.

"Jerick, sir."

"Ah, the peasant. They cleaned you up nicely—I almost couldn't tell. Except for the dung beneath your fingernails."

Jerick looked down immediately, mortified. His fingernails were clean, however, and he looked up with a blush to the other boys' laughing.

"I think I'll sit here," Martis decided, walking around the table to take a seat directly next to Jerick. After he did so, however, he immediately turned on his stool so his back was facing Jerick and began talking to the other boys.

As the nobles finished seating themselves, the king stood, looking over his court with a smile. "I have often said the finest thing about traveling is the feast at the end," he said, eliciting some chuckles from the crowd. "I am happy to announce that despite the disaster you have all probably heard about, the trip was a success. Feeling guilty for the damage his beasts did, the cattle dealer gave me an excellent price per head. In the end, the savings we made should about pay for the village we lost."

The nobles looked at one another, most of them laughing to themselves at the word "disaster." Apparently, they didn't consider the loss of a lumbering town much of a disaster. However, when the king spoke of rebuilding the lost village with the savings on cattle, not a few faces fell. They had been hoping the king's success would mean cheaper meat for them all.

"Now, as the feast begins, I have a few announcements to make."

Jerick's skin grew cold, and his stomach got tight. The king was going to mention him.

"You have probably noticed our distinguished guest, trader Bat'Chor," the king said, gesturing to Topaz's Ke'Chan friend, who was seated at the king's table. "The honorable trader has come offering us Ke'Chan chariots, something the monarchy has been trying to arrange for some time now. Please, show him the utmost of respect."

"Our other guest, whom you have probably noticed, is the young boy Jerick. Please stand, Jerick."

He did so, though his feet almost refused to move.

"Let it be known that for our purposes, Jerick is under the protection of the royal house. His father sacrificed nobly in my defense, and since I cannot

reward him as the law prescribes, I have chosen to bless his heir instead.” The king looked out over the crowd of nobles for a moment. Most of their faces were unreadable; they were obviously ready for the announcement. “You will treat him with respect,” the king said, his voice almost a warning. “Jerick, you may sit.”

Jerick sat, embarrassed and confused at the announcement. Why couldn’t the king reward his father instead of him? Rin certainly deserved it more.

“Treat him with respect . . . ?” Martis said beside him. Jerick turned to find the larger boy’s eyes focused on him. “It sounds almost like His Majesty is challenging us.”

Jerick looked away, refusing to respond as the king sat and the servants began to bring out the food. There was, of course, a ridiculous amount of it. However, after everything that had happened to him in the last few days, Jerick wasn’t really surprised at the proportions. He looked away from his table, his eyes searched for anything to look at other than Martis and the others. He found the princess.

She sat beside her father, the small, dark-haired Ryalla standing obediently behind her chair. Courteth even ate beautifully, taking small pieces from her plate and placing them daintily into her mouth. Each bite was followed by a proper cleaning of the fingers with the finger cup and towel at its side.

A pain seared through his shoulder, and he turned with a cringe to find the Kalord’s son holding his arm in a powerful grip. He was strong, too strong, for his age.

“Eyes off, peasant,” he hissed.

“Eyes off what?” Jerick asked.

“So, you *can* speak,” Martis said, gripping his arm more tightly. He was holding it below the table, where no one could see. “I was beginning to wonder if all you knew was your name. I hear that’s all they teach peasants to say nowadays; it’s really all they need.”

Jerick pulled his hand free, though the maneuver required a lot of painful twisting.

“You just keep your eyes, and your mind, where they belong,” Martis warned. “Some things belong to your betters; I would not have you sully them.”

“My eyes are my own,” Jerick said back, sullenly, not quite able to meet the other boy’s eyes. “I should be able to—”

“Is that a challenge?” the Kalord’s son asked, his voice ominous. Apparently, Martis found challenges in many things.

Rage, embarrassment, and frustration boiled inside of him, and finally Jerick simply looked away.

Martis laughed, and turned to his eating, seizing control of the other boys' conversation as quickly and easily as another man would pick up a stick.

Jerick ate silently. Topaz had warned him, but the warning hadn't done much good. Jerick wanted nothing more than to be done with this feast, to run back to his rooms and hide. He picked at his food, only barely tasting it. He kept his eyes away from the main table, only slipping occasional looks at the princess.

Eventually, the king spoke out. "Topaz, let us have that promised entertainment," he called, gesturing toward the open space before the king's table.

Topaz complied without comment, something Jerick found odd. However, it was soon obvious that the jesk was preparing to perform. His face had grown solemn instead of mocking as he rose from his stool and walked to the center of the room. He produced five colored spheres from inside his cloak and began to juggle them in a simple pattern.

"When the balls fall," he said to the quieting room, "the tale is at its end."

CHAPTER SEVEN

TOPAZ HURLED THE BALLS INTO THE AIR, CATCHING THEM ONE AT A TIME and tossing them back into the air like Jerick had once seen a lumberman do with short fir branches.

“When the world was young,” Topaz began, juggling the spheres a little more quickly, “Oreon the White formed a man from the light of the sky and the soul of the earth. This man was good, different from men of our day. Because of his goodness, Oreon blessed him with immortality, beauty, and magic. From this man came other men, and from them still others, and all followed Oreon, their creator.

“Xeth the Black heard of this and was jealous. He too wanted the following of man, for he was a loathsome and vile beast who had the love of no creature, despite his beauty and power. However, he knew he had not the strength of the great creator Oreon, so he went to the one known as the Mother of the World, Slonis, and begged her help, lying to her, saying he wanted to present Oreon with a gift. Together the two gods created a race, but their power was not equal to that of Oreon, and this race of man was flawed. Its skin was white and did not tan, and it had the wrong number of arms, four instead of two.”

Topaz continued to juggle, throwing the globes in increasingly difficult combinations. At times, when his voice hit the end of a sentence, he would spin, somehow catching each ball and sending it back into the air. His ribbon-covered clothing flowed and wove, each length of cloth writhing like a living beast as he moved.

“Xeth was not pleased with his creation. Though it tried to serve him, his jealousy of Oreon grew and grew. Finally, he decided he must find a way to destroy Oreon’s followers. He took the guise of a normal man and went to live amongst them. Secretly, he went to each of the people, questioning and searching for some sign of dissatisfaction or corruption. He found no success.”

Topaz jumped, never taking his eyes off the balls as he landed on the king’s table. He began to walk along the length of it, placing each foot in an empty space, sometimes missing the food by less than a finger’s width. However, he did not misstep—he walked the entire length without disturbing so much as a napkin.

“Growing more and more frustrated, Xeth questioned the last few of Oreon’s followers. He had interrogated thousands of them, and found no hint of evil. Until he reached the last one. This man had let pride grip his heart. In our day, only one man in thousands is truly great; in that day, beneath Oreon’s just eyes, only one man in thousands was anything but great. However, a small crack becomes great over time, and this man grew increasingly evil as he began to resent the goodness of his fellows.”

Topaz stopped in the middle of the table, and began bouncing the balls off of the high balcony-lined walls of the second floor. Each one went a little higher. However, Jerick noticed that he kept one ball near the center of the formation, never bouncing it off a wall. It was black, with a gold ring around the center.

“Xeth took this man and looked into his soul. The man willingly gave away the secrets of his people, the very secrets of Oreon’s own power. Xeth took this power, and before the White One knew what his opponent had done, Xeth turned the power of creation against the world, completely destroying Oreon’s people.

“Oreon mourned for ten thousand years before creating a new man to replace the old. This one was different from those which had come before. Oreon vowed that these creations would not be replacements for what he had lost; the beauty of what was destroyed would never be seen again. The new men were not immortal, but died after a few short decades. The new men were not all good or all beautiful. And, most importantly, the new men could not use magic, for Oreon had vowed that his own power would never again be used against him.

“One man, however, remained from the old race of man. The one who had helped Xeth, the one with the rotted soul. He whose name should not

be spoken, the man who had caused the death of an entire race. His own race.”

Topaz jumped, flipping off the table in a flurry of red cloth as the juggling balls spun into the air. He landed, spinning once and snatching a single ball out of the air—the black one striped with gold. The other four balls smacked against the stone floor in unison.

“And he lives on, immortal, darker even than Xeth himself, for he is the Betrayer.”

The entire hall was silent as Topaz gathered up his juggling balls and walked quietly back to his seat. It was a powerful telling, such as Jerick had never heard before. There was strength, almost magic, in Topaz’s voice. It entranced Jerick, each word grabbing hold of him and demanding his attention.

Only after Topaz had seated himself did the hall break into life, each person speaking to his neighbor. And Jerick knew what they were saying.

Topaz had told the story wrong.

Jerick had heard the Creation Legend dozens of times, sometimes from priests, sometimes from Master, and sometimes from his own father while sitting beside the hearth in the cozy mountain home. Those stories had said nothing of this earlier race of man that Topaz said Oreon had created. The story Jerick knew spoke only of Oreon creating man, Xeth being jealous and making the Sho Del. However, in the version Jerick knew, Xeth had made the Sho Del on his own. Why had Topaz said Slonis helped him? Everyone knew Slonis the Mother was good and benevolent; she would never do something as evil as create the Sho Del.

Jerick shook his head. He didn’t understand. Why would Topaz tell the wrong story? The king said Topaz had an excellent memory; surely he could memorize the most famous of the Legends.

“He doesn’t know what he is talking about,” Martis said. “He is an idiot, not a fool. I saw a real jester when I traveled to Fallamore—he was really short, like a child, and he told jokes and danced. He never spoke back to the aristocracy; he just did silly things, like tumble around and throw food in the air and let it land on his head.”

“They say he’s a jesk,” another boy said quietly. “They’re different than jesters.”

Martis sniffed disdainfully. “Father says the jesks disappeared a hundred years ago. This Topaz is supposed to entertain us, not lie to us. He doesn’t even know the Legends. Why, did you hear what he did with his horse

earlier today? Twelve men from noble Ka pushed in the lake like they were nothing better than bags of refuse.”

“They say he has the king’s ear,” one boy said.

“He’s corrupting the king,” Martis agreed. “Father says all the strange ideas Rodis has, they come from this foreigner who hides as a jester. He can get away with things that no man should be able to do.”

Jerick looked down at his food. He wanted to talk back to them, to defend his friend, but he was ashamed to face them. What did a lumberman know?

He moodily ripped off a piece of chicken and stuffed it in his mouth. A moment later, the boys started laughing again, and Jerick looked up in confusion. They were all facing him. With horror, he lifted his hand from the finger cup and realized that somehow Martis had switched it for one of the bowls filled with dipping sauce.

Brownish sludge dripped off Jerick’s fingers and the boys laughed again. Slowly, Jerick reached over and dipped his hand in a finger cup, then wiped it on his cloth napkin. He was not angry—he was too amazed. He had just realized something monumental.

He thought of the boy named Yon back in the village. Yon had dominated the children of the small town, and he had constantly made fun of the other children, lording over them and controlling them, making jokes at others’ expense. Just like Martis did with these boys. They were the same.

The king was right. Nobles and peasants were the same. Up until that point, deep in Jerick’s heart, he hadn’t really believed himself equal to a noble. He had spent too much of his life listening to people tell him otherwise. No matter how much he learned, he had still maintained the knowledge that he was inferior. The king’s actions had raised a question in his mind, but not a determination.

The Kalord’s son had just unwittingly changed Jerick’s mind. If Martis could be as petty and domineering as Yon, if he could lower himself to such a level, then Jerick could rise as well. Or, more truly, he didn’t need to rise. There was more nobility in a simple lumberman like his father than in any group of nobles he had seen in Lakdon.

Jerick turned, looking at the boys. “If you don’t believe in what t’king’s doin’, Martis, then you’ll certainly have a chance t’prove him wrong.”

Martis turned with surprise, looking at Jerick’s hard, determined eyes. Snorting, he opened his mouth to speak, but Jerick cut him off.

“And yes, Martis, that is a challenge.”

Martis’s jaw snapped closed, and his eyes grew angry. He didn’t like Jerick taking the attention away from him.

Jerick spoke on, even though his heart was racing and his arms were beginning to quiver with anxiety. "If you're right, Martis, then a peasant isn't as good as a nable, and I must be dumber than you. If t'king is right, then I should be able to learn as well as you. Better, even."

Martis's jaw clenched, then he opened his mouth a few times, as if to speak. "You have your challenge, peasant," Martis finally spat. "By the time I'm finished humiliating you, you'll go crying all the way home to that grimy forest you left behind."

"I'd like nothin' better," Jerick said, then turned his back on Martis, holding his plate in his lap to continue his meal—though his hands were far too unsteady to even consider eating.

As he sat and pondered about what he had thought and done, he caught Topaz's eye. The jester nodded knowingly, smiling congratulations at Jerick.

IT WAS HARD TO SLEEP. WITH DISCOMFORT, JERICK REALIZED HE HAD never slept alone before. During the trip to Lakdon he had slept on a bunk amongst the sailors, and before that he had always been with his parents, or sometimes with friends in the village. Lumbermen houses had only one room, and it was natural to hear the steady breathing of those around you as they slowly settled into sleep.

Now there was nothing. No one snoring, turning, or mumbling in their sleep. Jerick was alone, completely and totally alone. He had no one. They were behind. Gone. His father gone, because of him . . .

He felt suddenly oppressed by the silence, as if it would crush him. He would have lit a candle, but he knew it would do no good. Silence was not a thing of light or darkness, it was independent of both. It would come for him with or without a lamp.

Suddenly, he thought he heard something. If the silence came to destroy him, would it make noise?

"Jerick, are you awake?"

Jerick sat up with surprise. "Topaz?" he asked.

"Over here. The window."

Jerick reached over and lit a candle, then rose and opened the window shutters. Topaz's tall form stood crouched on the sill outside, squatting on the ledge nonchalantly as if he weren't balanced on the edge of a two-story drop.

"Are you having a pleasant night?" the jesk asked conversationally.

Jerick blinked in surprise, still not certain what to make of finding a jester on his windowsill. "Um, not really," he admitted.

"Wonderful. I felt like talking to someone. Can I come in?"

Jerick smiled, stepping back as the fool climbed through the window.

"Why not use t'door?" Jerick wondered.

"I'd rather people didn't see me," Topaz explained, selecting a cushion from a pile in the closet. He tossed it against the wall, then sat and reclined against it. "One nice thing about Melerand—you people definitely make the best cushions on the continent. Maybe one of these days you'll get around to inventing chairs."

"We have chairs," Jerick objected, sitting down on the bed. "We just don't like them. Why do you care if people see you or not?"

"Because, dear lumberling," Topaz began, pulling a few rolls from his pouch. They looked very similar to the ones that had been served at dinner. "I am relatively certain some people will come looking for me tonight, and I'd rather they not find me."

"Why not?"

"Well, considering that Kalord Strafen sent them to teach me a lesson for humiliating him, I doubt our meeting would be a pleasant one. Roll?"

Topaz tossed him a roll, and Jerick caught it and took a bite. "T'Kalord would really do that to you?" he asked.

"He tries it every time," Topaz explained. "The fact that he's never caught me hasn't slowed him down a bit. I swear, I could use that man as a perfect counterexample to Fendarios' theory of conditioning."

Jerick grew cold. "What . . . what would they do to you?"

Topaz shrugged. "Beat me a little bit, steal some money to make it look like a robbery. I would suspect that any thugs hired by the Kalord would share his own complete lack of imagination."

"You should tell t'king."

"The king expects me to take care of myself," the fool responded. "As do I. I get into these situations; I need to be able to handle them. Fooling is a very delicate art, young lumberling."

"So you have to watch for them every night?"

Topaz nodded with a smile. "It makes life interesting."

"And t'king wonders why you visit so infrequently," Jerick mumbled, stuffing the rest of the roll into his mouth.

Topaz chuckled. "My, lumberling, was that sarcasm I just heard?"

Jerick blushed. "Not really. It was true, after all."

"I'll corrupt you yet—just watch. By the way, I managed to find out about your little discussion with Martis. I guess my warning to keep your mouth shut was premature—you can take care of yourself."

"It wasn't anythin'," Jerick said with a blush. "He wasn't expectin' me to talk back to him, and he didn't know what to say when I did."

"Be careful with him," Topaz warned. "Strafen is a fool, but Martis is not. The son already shows much more potential than the father. People actually like Martis, and he doesn't lose his temper as easily. Unfortunately, he's also rather intelligent."

"He is?" Jerick asked, growing disappointed. Perhaps he had spoken too hastily.

"Don't worry, lumberling. I've managed to talk the king into giving you an edge."

"What?" Jerick asked.

"You'll see tomorrow."

"I wouldn't want to cheat," Jerick warned.

Topaz laughed. "Ah, Jerick. So honest and so determined. There *is* no cheating in this game. Strafen, however, agreed to what we're going to do."

"What is it?" Jerick demanded.

"Wait until tomorrow. I think you'll like it, however."

Jerick sighed, reclining against his pillows. "All right. Tell me this, then. Why did you tell t'story wrong tonight?"

"I didn't," Topaz replied.

"Yes you did," Jerick argued. "Everyone knows that story—it's one of t'Legends."

"Everyone knows it as it is *now*, but not as it used to be," Topaz said, raising his finger.

"T'Legends have always been t'same. They're truth."

"Truth . . ." Topaz said, trailing off and looking up at the ceiling. "I don't think truth is so easy to find, little lumberling. The Legends do change, whether people want to believe it or not. Oh, they've been fairly stable since Tynalle wrote his *Legends of the Nine Lords* and codified the Yolish Pantheon, but that didn't happen until the beginning of the Fifth Span, about two hundred years ago. Before that the Legends were more like a plant, growing and shooting off new branches as new nations arose and old peoples were conquered. I think the version I read tonight was written down sometime during the Third Span, almost a thousand years ago, during the days of Gamrion the Godsent."

"You think t'Nine Lords don't exist?" Jerick said with horror.

"I don't know," Topaz admitted. "Most Trexandians don't believe in them, but Trexandians tend to be so literal and factual that they'll disbelieve in their own mother if she doesn't happen to be standing before them. All I

know is that the Legends have changed over time. Some of the Lords, like Lamrin the Bringer of Fire, seem to be recent additions. Others appear to have split off of other deities—for instance, I think Aldvin and Oreon used to be the same person. Others, like the Betrayer and Xeth, seem to go on as far back as I search.”

Jerick sat back, trying to decide how to deal with this new attack on his understanding of the universe. He shouldn’t believe it—it was blasphemous.

“I don’t mean to confuse you, boy,” Topaz said, his voice reassuring. “I just want you to understand that things might not always be what you think they are.”

“Then why did you tell it to t’whole court?” Jerick asked. “Why confuse all of them?”

“Because I’m worried,” Topaz said bluntly.

“Worried about what?”

“Worried that we don’t know what we should. I want the people to think. I want to prepare them. I don’t mean to destroy religion, Jerick. I just want to know the truth—the truth behind the Legends, the thing that gave rise to them all. There are too many similar themes coming from too many different cultures for them to be coincidence. I think there’s a common story, a father truth, behind every one.”

“And is that answer gods or men?” Jerick asked, not quite knowing what either answer would mean.

“I don’t know,” Topaz confessed with a shake of his head. “But don’t misunderstand me, Jerick. Something is out there. Something strong. Whether it be Xeth the Black, the Betrayer, or something we haven’t heard of, it is watching and preparing. I’ve felt it. I’ve teased it out of hints of myths, histories, and stories told by men too old to count their own age. There is power in this world, and I feel anxious—I feel desperate—to know the truth behind these tales we tell one another, for they hold the only clues as to what we may someday have to face.”

Jerick shivered at the comment, feeling the cold autumn breeze come in the still-open window. Topaz sat near the wall, still looking up at the ceiling. Gone from his face was the usual carefree joviality. It was replaced by something much more telling and strong—the look of a man who felt an incredible burden, and was doing the best he knew how to carry it with him. Then, slowly, he masked the responsibility in his eyes, and looked to Jerick with a smile.

“I warned you I was in a mood to talk,” he noted.

Jerick nodded slowly. Even the smile was not enough to lift the feeling of oppression in the room.

“Well, do you mind if I sleep here tonight?” Topaz asked. “I’d rather not wake up hanging outside my window while men hit me with sticks.”

Jerick nodded eagerly, more anxious than ever to have someone else in the room this night. Topaz nodded thankfully, and arranged himself a bed of pillows on the floor. Jerick slept fitfully and woke several times during the night. Each time when he looked over, he could see by the moonlight that Topaz was lying in the exact same position, his eyes open, his dark irises staring up at the ceiling.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“GOOD MORNING, YOUNG MASTER.”

Jerick blinked awake. Morning had come and Topaz was gone—presumably the same way he had come in. The dawn’s light shone through the open shutters, though it hadn’t been bright enough to wake Jerick. The voice had done that.

“Who are you?” Jerick asked with confusion as he sat up.

The man smiled. He was old, his hair white with age and his eyes wrinkled with wisdom. He wore a beard, but not the stiff, ribbed Antoli of a noble. Yet, neither was it bushy and full like that of Jerick’s father. It was long and thin, and it blew slightly in the morning breeze. His eyes were a silvery gray.

“I am your tutor, Young Master,” the aged man explained. He was very tall for one so old, his back straight and unbowed by time.

“Tutor?” Jerick asked uncertainly.

“Yes. Cephandrius promised he would tell you of me. Surely he did not forget—that man has a memory like the rocks themselves.”

Jerick frowned, wrinkling his brow. “He said something about a surprise.”

The old man chuckled. “Well, I fear I am an unimpressive surprise, Young Master. I doubt an elderly tutor is what you were imagining.”

Jerick paused. “Sir, what’s a tutor?”

“I will help you learn, Young Master. I will explain difficult concepts to you and help you understand.”

“Like a teacher,” Jerick surmised.

“Well, yes,” the man said with a nod. He had a quiet voice, yet, at the same time, Jerick found he never had to strain to hear the old man’s words. It was like they had a strength to them beyond their sound. “Like a teacher, except more personal. In a way, I am more like your servant than your instructor. You may ask what you wish, and I will answer as best I know.”

Jerick’s eyes opened wide. “You’ll answer any question I ask?” he said with wonder. “But . . . is this right? I mean, doesn’t it give me an advantage in t’king’s bet?”

“My duty is to make the bet even, not the reverse,” the tutor explained, seating himself on the end of Jerick’s bed. “Prince Yoharn and Strafen’s son Martis have been educated since they were very young. Beyond that, they have grown up in Lakdon, and their proximity to the aristocracy has provided an education of its own. The advantage of my tutelage is to offset the disadvantage of your upbringing.”

Jerick felt himself smile as the kindly old man spoke. He was like Master, in a way. Many of the words he used were unfamiliar, and he spoke them with confidence and understanding. Yet, in other ways, he was as different from Master as a man could get. Where Master had used his knowledge like an axe, chopping at you mercilessly, this man’s tone seemed to invite. *You may not understand all that I say*, his words coaxed, *but soon you will*.

“My first duty, however, has been ordered by the king himself,” the man said. “I am to correct your speech.”

“What’s wrong with my speakin’?” Jerick demanded, knowing that the question was a silly one. His speech set him apart from the nobles. In a way, that was why he wanted it to remain the same—it was one final link to what he used to be.

“Nothing is wrong with it, young Jerick,” the tutor said. “Nothing at all. In fact, in a way, it is more pure than the dialect spoken here in Lakdon.”

“What do you mean?” Jerick asked with confusion.

“Languages change over time, Young Master,” the man explained. “A society’s lower classes tend to be more conservative than its nobility, who are always seeking to distance themselves from their peers, their lessers, and the world in general. Two hundred years ago, the nobility of Melerand spoke just as you do now.”

“Languages change?” Jerick asked, frowning. Last night Topaz had claimed that the Legends themselves had grown different over time, now this man claimed language did the same. Was nothing stable in this world?

"There are few things that do not, Young Master."

"Mountains and rivers stay the same," Jerick argued. At least the land itself was stable.

The tutor raised his eyebrows. "Do they really?" he asked. "Have you never seen a rock roll down a mountain, or a stream wash away a piece of its bank?"

"I suppose," Jerick admitted.

"And what happens after thousands of years, after thousands of rocks have fallen from the mountain and the stream has torn away the side of its own path?"

Jerick frowned, thinking. "You're right," he admitted. "T'mountain would be gone, and t'river would be going a different direction."

"As I said," the old man continued. "Very few things in this world continue on unchanged—even languages and nations."

"Is there nothing that is eternal?" Jerick asked, his voice concerned. Back in his old world, the world of a lumberman, everything had been stable. The world continued, seemingly unchanged, as did the people in it. The more Jerick learned, the more he realized the lumbermen had been greatly, if happily, naïve in their view of the world's stability.

"Some things, perhaps," the old man mused. "Truth, I suppose. Truth and Dragonsteel."

"Dragonsteel?" Jerick asked. He had only heard of the legendary metal in stories. "Is there such thing?"

"Next time you speak with the king, take a good look at his castemark."

Jerick paused. "The king's castemark is . . . Dragonsteel?" he asked.

"Some say so," the scholar said with a shrug. "But such is beside our purpose. Dragonsteel is a thing of the gods. Let us just say that in the realm of mortals, all things change."

Jerick nodded slowly.

The old tutor smiled, patting Jerick's bed as he rose. "It is not a thing to fear, young Jerick," he said. "The world is alive, and living things must change. They must grow and move. If they resist, the world will move them anyway, buffeting them with winds and rain until they are shattered and torn down, becoming material for the growth of some newer entity. Come, dress yourself. We must begin your speech training."

"May I ask one question before we begin?" Jerick asked.

"Of course, Young Master."

"What is your name?"

The tutor smiled, looking down at Jerick. "Frost."

“FIRST, YOUNG MASTER, WE WILL WORK ON THE EASY CHANGES.”

Jerick nodded. After dressing he had found Frost waiting for him in the main room of his quarters. The man had arranged a set of pillows facing one another, and Jerick had chosen one at random to seat himself. It felt odd to be learning in such a relaxed environment. Even during his personal reading sessions with Master, the scholar had always remained aloof from Jerick, seating himself higher than the boy and maintaining a reserved air.

“The easiest thing for you to correct will be your vocabulary,” Frost explained. “To speak like a noble, you must use the words of a noble.”

“I’ve already learned lots of vocabulary,” Jerick said. “I think I sound almost like a nable.”

“That you do—except in certain areas. Nable, for instance, is a word used by peasants. Try ‘noble’ instead.”

“Noble,” Jerick repeated. “It sounds wrong.”

“It is wrong,” Frost agreed. “As I said earlier, rural Meleran is much truer to the original root language than the aristocratic form of the tongue.”

“What happened?” Jerick asked. “Why are the two different?”

“We’re not certain,” Frost admitted—something else Master would never have done. “About two centuries ago, the language began to change. Scholars think it might have had to do with the rise of the Fallin court to the south. As Meleran aristocrats tried to imitate their peers in Fallamore, they began to adopt some of the elements—and sounds—of the Fallin tongue, which wouldn’t have been too difficult, considering how similar the two languages are.

“Anyway, over about a century’s time, some of the vowel sounds in the Meleran language began to shift. Soft ‘a’s became ‘o’s, and hard ‘a’ sounds became hard ‘e’s instead. Tre became Tree, and nable became noble. Of course, that meant that what used to be ‘o’ or ‘e’ sounds had to become something else instead, and that started a series of reactions that shifted the entire language. The language of the aristocracy came first, followed in time by that of the peasants. Now, all that’s left of the original vowel system are some names, such as Trerod and Lakdon, and a few words in the rural dialect.”

Jerick nodded slowly. He had always been frustrated with Master’s lectures because the man had rarely explained the whys behind his teachings. Listening to Frost’s narration, however, made him realize that it just might be possible to give too much explanation instead of not enough. What exactly was a soft “a” sound?

“Anyway,” the old scholar continued. “You might as well learn to say

noble and farmer instead of nable and former. I'm not saying one form of the language is better than another, but the aristocracy thinks so. And, unfortunately, what they think is really all that is important here in the palace."

"Noble," Jerick said again.

"Good," Frost said, nodding. "Now, you'll have to learn to draw out your 'the's.'"

"It takes so much time," Jerick complained. "If you say t'king, everyone knows what you mean."

"They also know you are a peasant," Frost reminded.

Jerick sighed. How long would it be before there was nothing left of the lumberman's son?

"Practice with me," Frost encouraged. "The king. The house. The boy."

"I can already do it," Jerick said. "I learned back in the village by reading my book. The king, the house, the boy, the door, the bird, the three realms of existence are the Spiritual, the Cognitive, and the Physical."

Frost nodded appreciatively. "Impressive," he said. "Why don't you speak that way then?"

Jerick shrugged. Could he explain how the boys in the village had grown uncomfortable around him? Could he explain his powerful, if unreasonable, desire to keep from changing? To keep the people from setting him apart? "I just didn't want to sound like a na . . . a noble."

Frost smiled. "A fine reason if I have ever heard one."

Jerick nodded. "I don't want to disappoint you, Master Frost, but I don't think I have as much to learn as you might have thought."

"Don't be hasty, Master Jerick," the old man said. "Now that vocabulary is out of the way, let us begin on your accent. This, I'm afraid, will probably take several weeks at best. . . ."

REGULAR CLASSES BEGAN AFTER LUNCH. JERICK SPENT THE HOURS UP until the appointed time practicing his dialect. Frost claimed to be impressed with Jerick's improvement, but he could tell from the man's eyes that he still had far to go. Despite Jerick's confident words, he still found himself slipping back into familiar speech patterns when distracted, and even after Frost taught him to listen to his own accent, he had trouble deciding just when his pronunciation and stresses sounded like those of the nobility.

"The best way for you to learn, Young Master," Frost had said at the end

of the lesson, “is to find aristocratic people with whom to have conversations. The longer you spend conversing with those who speak like nobles, the more you will imitate them, both consciously and unconsciously.”

After that, Frost left him, passing Gwellen, one of the castle maids, carrying a plate of bread and steaming soup.

“What’s that?” Jerick asked.

“Lunch,” the maid said, setting the tray on his desk.

“I’m to eat here, in my room?” he asked with surprise.

“Of course. Where else would you eat lunch, Master Jerick?” she asked.

Jerick scratched his head, uncertain how to answer the question. He finally remembered to dismiss the maid, and sat down to his meal, though he didn’t enjoy it much. Not because of the taste, but because he felt uncomfortable eating alone.

A few minutes later, a boy—the same one that had led him to the feast hall—knocked on his door, indicating that he was to lead Jerick to the classroom. Jerick looked down at his half-finished meal, realizing with surprise that he wasn’t hungry enough to finish it. That had never happened before unless he was sick. Rising, he left the tray where it was, telling himself that he would eat the rest later.

He walked behind the smaller boy in silence. The king and Topaz expected great things of him. It was an uncomfortable feeling, knowing that such important people were depending on him. Back in the village, his father and mother had depended on him, but that had been different. They had simply expected him to obey them, to make them proud. Their expectations had been tempered by years of rearing and love.

The king’s expectations were different—they were like weights on Jerick’s shoulders, pressing him toward the ground. Not that he felt bitter—King Rodis had shown him an undeserved amount of kindness. Still, Jerick felt uncomfortable beneath the weight. What right did a king have to expect so much from a simple lumberman?

“I don’t like it, Your Majesty.” A wary voice drifted through the hallway. Jerick turned at the sound, looking as the squat Rodis turned a corner, accompanied by a tall, lean man with a short black beard. He wore leggings and a tight, sleeveless shirt, and he wore a sword at his waist. His face was blunt and flat, like it had been smashed into a wall when he was a child.

The king nodded to Jerick as he walked into the hallway and, belatedly, Jerick remembered to bow, mimicking the action of the small boy beside him.

“Ah, Jerick,” the king said. Then, to Jerick’s young guide, he continued,

"You may go, boy. I'm going to the classroom myself; Jerick may accompany me."

The guide bowed, then scampered away, immediately leaving the main hallway in favor of a smaller servant's corridor.

"I understand your reservations, Doram," the king said, turning back to his companion as he waved Jerick over to walk next to him. "I just don't see what we can do about them."

"Your Majesty," the warrior said, his voice terse. "They tried to kill you once and failed. They will try again."

The king waved his hand dismissively. "The Sho Del have no reason to want me dead. That attack was a diversion, and nothing else. They want to scare us into withdrawing our support from the Eternal War."

"Perhaps we should." Doram said simply.

"Fallamore has been very good to us, Doram," the king said with a shake of his head. "Of all Yolen, only the Fallin share a border with U Poní Sho Del, and they have borne the burden of the Eternal War for centuries. We can spare them wood enough for their bridges and arrows. Be glad they demand nothing more—most of the other kingdoms pay a levy of troops as well as supplies."

Doram sighed, nodding with a resigned gesture. "At least allow my guards to accompany you around the palace, Your Majesty."

Rodis frowned. "I was afraid you were going to suggest that."

"It is a common practice in most kingdoms, Your Majesty."

"I know," Rodis said. "All right, Doram, if you must. Knowing you, even if I ordered you not to, you would find a way to have your men follow me. I might as well take the babysitters I can see as opposed to those I can't."

Doram bowed curtly, then turned down a side-corridor. The king shook his head, then continued down the hallway, Jerick still at his side.

"Your Majesty, who was that?" Jerick asked after a few minutes of walking.

The king turned with raised eyebrows, as if having forgotten that Jerick was with him. "Doram? He's captain of the royal guard."

"He didn't seem very happy," Jerick noted.

The king chuckled. "Doram is rarely what one would call 'happy.' He is a good man, however, and an excellent warrior. He's still a little perturbed that I made him stay behind when I visited your village. He doesn't seem to realize that it's his duty to protect my family as much as it is to protect me."

"He looks very strong."

"Doram fought in the Eternal War for a number of years."

Jerick nodded. He had heard stories of the glorious Eternal War, where the Sho Del were contained and Dragonsteel was won, since he was a child.

At that thought, something occurred to Jerick. “Your Majesty,” he blurted out before thinking whether the question was disrespectful or not, “can I see your castemark?”

“My castemark?” the king asked with surprise. “I don’t see why not.” The king paused in the hallway, grasping the chain at his neck and pulling his castemark from beneath his deep red robes. He unclipped the clasp in the back, then extended his hand for Jerick to see.

Jerick leaned in close, craning his neck and studying the circular castemark in the king’s pudgy hand. It was constructed of thin, silvery wires that formed a circle with an intricate design in the center. It appeared to be constructed of a single piece of metal, one that had been wound and twisted in a complex pattern. It appeared incredibly delicate—in fact, considering how thin the wire was, Jerick was surprised that the king wore it around his neck. The slightest amount of pressure would be enough to completely destroy the elegant piece of art, even hanging from the chain as it did should have bent it out of shape.

“You may touch it, if you wish,” the king said, noting Jerick’s hesitant finger hovering above the castemark.

Jerick pulled his finger back. “I’d bend it,” he said, shaking his head.

“I doubt that,” the king said. He reached up with his other hand and grabbed the castemark on either side. Then, to Jerick’s horror, Rodis proceeded to twist his hands, moving as if to bend the castemark in half.

The delicate circle, however, did not bend. Rodis’s forearms strained, his fingers turning white, but still the castemark remained immobile, completely unbent. Finally, Rodis released the pressure, then held the castemark up and dropped it into Jerick’s surprised palm.

“It’s Dragonsteel, Jerick,” the king explained as Jerick tried to bend the fist-sized castemark himself—first tentatively, then with all the force he could muster. The rigid metal didn’t give even slightly. It was incredible—the wire that made up the castemark was as thin as a man’s hair, yet no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get even one length of it to give. He felt the thin wire digging into his flesh from the pressure, however, and stopped before he cut himself.

“It’s true, then?” Jerick asked, holding the castemark before his eyes and following the complex wire design.

“They say Dragonsteel is completely indestructible,” the king agreed with a nod. “As far as I can tell, the sayings are true. That castemark is

said to have saved my grandfather's life—a soldier tried to stab him in the chest, but hit the castemark instead. The force of the blow drove the castemark into grandfather's skin, leaving a very curious scar on his chest, but the blade didn't even scratch the castemark itself."

"But," Jerick said, transfixed by the silvery metal, "if it can't be bent or destroyed, how did they get it into this shape?"

The king chuckled. "It comes out of the Dragonsteel wells in a liquid form," he explained. "the man who owns it can form it into a permanent shape with his mind. Once that is done, no force save perhaps the Lords can change that shape."

Jerick frowned. "But, what does it have to do with dragons, then?"

The king chuckled again. "So many questions. Frankly, Jerick, I'm not certain why it's named after dragons. The stories say that dragons grow Dragonsteel on their bodies—that their horns and claws are made from it. I think a more likely explanation, however, is because of where it is found. The Shattered Plains are right on the border between Yolen and U Poni Sho Del, the home of Fain creatures."

Jerick nodded, still holding the castemark between his fingers. The metal was brighter than silver, almost white in its luster. Jerick couldn't tear his eyes off of it. He felt himself get lost in the design at its center, following the wire as if it were a twisting road, curving and weaving in and out of itself. The hallway, king, and even his hand seemed to fade away, until only the Dragonsteel remained. Bright, warm, and beautiful.

Then, suddenly—as if something unlocked in his mind—the castemark seemed to explode with light and power. It shone in his face, burning itself into his eyes. It blazed brighter than a dozen suns, emitting an energy that pulsed like a heartbeat.

Crying out, Jerick threw his arms up to shade his eyes, dropping the castemark to the ground.

"Jerick?" the king asked with concern.

Jerick opened his eyes. The castemark had stopped glowing.

"Jerick? What's wrong, lad?"

Jerick blinked, looking up at the king. Could it be that he hadn't seen the Dragonsteel glow? Yet, even as the king reached down to pick up his fallen castemark, Jerick realized that Rodis must not have seen anything. In fact, Jerick's eyes didn't feel like they had seen anything unusual either—they weren't tearing like they did when he accidentally looked into the sun. There was no after-image burned into his sight.

Jerick mumbled an apology to the king, knowing that he couldn't explain

what had happened—but something *had* happened. He had seen something, just not with his eyes. He could feel the tiredness in his mind, like the weakness that came after over-straining a muscle.

“Come, Jerick,” the king said, his face concerned. “The other boys will be waiting for you.”

THE “CLASSROOM” WAS REALLY A BUILDING RATHER THAN A ROOM. IT adjoined the palace on one side, a massive structure with columns running along the outside, though they must have been for decoration rather than utility, for the roof was also supported by four thick, granite walls.

“This building is older than the palace itself,” the king explained as they walked across the short courtyard between the palace and the classroom. “It was built by Rodain craftsmen during the Third Span, during one of the few periods when Rodaius and Melerand were at peace.”

Jerick regarded the structure with awed eyes. Its architecture certainly didn’t match that of the palace or surrounding city. It was more . . . frivolous—but frivolous in a good way. The columns had been carved with wave-like ridges, and even the walls had been decorated with reliefs and sculptures. Words ran across the bottom of the roof—words Jerick could barely make out, for the letters had been formed differently than what he was used to. Most of the words didn’t make any sense, but, Jerick noted with interest, one of them appeared to say “nable.”

“What is it?” Jerick asked as they walked through the building’s broad doors.

“Originally it was the city meeting place,” the king explained. “But, when my great-grandfather moved the capital of Melerand to Lakdon, he turned it into something else.”

Jerick saw immediately what the king implied. Inside, the building’s walls were covered with box-like alcoves containing scrolls. There were thousands of them, all tucked in their specific compartments, labels indicating what they were. On the other side of the large room was an equally large set of shelves containing denkala—a Ke’Chan method of binding that Master had once shown him. The denkala, made of vellum strips that were held together by rings at either corner, stacked much more neatly than the scrolls. On the far side of the room, directly in front of Jerick, he could even make out a shelf containing several hundred books bound in the new Trexandian codex form.

“A library,” Jerick said with awe.

"A humble one," the king said modestly. "Nothing like the Acadius of Trexandos, but far better than anything else in northern Yolen."

The king led him to a far corner of the library where a piece of the room had been sectioned off to make a smaller chamber. Here, Jerick found a group of people waiting for them. Kalord Strafen was there, as was his son. Yoharn, the prince, stood apart from the rest, watching with cold eyes.

Jerick didn't know the other three men. Two of them wore robes that only went down to their knees, but were draped in such a way that the side of the garment hung over their left arms. They stood with dignified airs, bowing only slightly as the king entered. The final man was all but invisible in his deeply cowed cloak and dark blue velvet robe. The cloak's collar was outrageously exaggerated.

"Gentlemen, I appreciate your willingness to adapt," the king said as he entered the chamber. It was a cozy room with a raised seat, not unlike the one Master had sat on, near the front. Several cushions were arranged before it. Candles burned in the corners, but most of the light came through an open window set in the eastern wall. Other than the cushions, the room bore little decoration or furniture.

The oldest of the three men nodded to the king respectfully. "Nonsense, Your Majesty," he said in a stately tone. "The soul of scholarship is the ability to accept new ideas and situations. We can teach three boys just as easily as we could teach one."

"Excellent," the king replied. "I assume you have met Martis and my son? Well, then, this is your final student, Jerick."

The man nodded slightly to Jerick, as did his companion. The man in the blue cloak made no move.

"Jerick, these are to be your instructors. Scholars Vendavious and Teniclese of Trexandos, and Scathe of the Horwatchers."

"Horwatchers?" Jerick asked with both alarm and interest. "We'll be taught to be wizards?"

"You will be taught *by* a wizard, boy," Scathe said, moving for the first time. He reached up, lowering his dark cowl. He was a surprisingly young man, with dark black hair and a long face. He didn't wear a beard—at least, not a beard like any Jerick had ever seen. His face was clean-shaven except for two triangular areas on his lower cheeks. The twin patches of black hair stood out on his face like a pair of mystical symbols drawn directly on the skin.

"Horwatchers are teachers as well as mystics, Jerick," the king explained.

“Scathe will instruct you in astronomy and Realmatic theory, as well as give you demonstrations on the nature of magic.”

“We of the Horwatchers want magic to be . . . more understood,” Scathe said with a thin smile. His face, though uncowed, was crouched in the shadow of his cloak’s enormous, stiff collar.

The two Trexandian scholars were regarding Scathe with undisguised looks of disgust. The sorcerer paid little heed to their contempt, continuing to smile.

“Scholar Vendavious,” the king said, nodding to the older of the Trexandian men, “you have charge of these boys’ education. I leave them in your hands; schedule their classes as you wish. I warn you, however, to give Horwatcher Scathe equal time for instruction.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” the scholar promised.

The king nodded, looking over at Kalord Strafen, who stood with his hand on his son’s shoulder. “Our bet begins here, Kalord,” Rodis said.

Strafen nodded. “Three years from this day, they will take the tests,” he agreed. “Then we will see who has learned the most.”

“Agreed,” Rodis said. He patted Jerick on the shoulder. “Learn well, boy, and may the Lords bless you.”

Jerick nodded solemnly as the king walked over to his son and began to speak quietly. Despite all of the king’s affection and encouragement, he couldn’t help feeling as though he were nothing more than a tool. He was important because he was useful. What would happen to him in four years when, one way or another, his usefulness ended?

CHAPTER NINE

RYALLA WAS VERY GOOD AT HIDING. NOT THAT SHE WOULD EVER INTENTIONALLY hide from Courteth, for such wouldn't be proper. She did, however, sometimes allow her mind to drift, to dream of places that weren't Melerand. Places where she was not a slave, places where no princesses were to be found. At times like this, her mind fluttering through dreams like a handkerchief on the wind, people sometimes found it difficult to locate Ryalla.

She convinced herself that she wasn't really hiding from Courteth. She pretended not to hear the princess's outraged callings, or she told herself that the princess was looking for someone else, not Ryalla. Ryalla rationalized that she hadn't sequestered herself away to make it difficult for others to find her, she just wanted to be out of everyone's way. She had done so since she was a little child, and during all the intervening years, not a single person had ever found her.

This day she had chosen to hide on Courteth's balcony. It wasn't a very good hiding place—but, then again, she told herself she wasn't really hiding. She sat on the stone balcony floor, her arms wrapped around her knees, thinking and dreaming. The princess had strode past the open balcony doors at least a half dozen times and never seen her. *If she really wanted to find me*, Ryalla thought to herself, *she would be able to*.

Today, she wasn't daydreaming about the usual things. She wasn't imagining herself as a noblewoman or a beautiful heiress that the young men

were courting. Instead, she was thinking about what it would be like to be a peasant. A lumberman, like the boy Jerick.

She could imagine it perfectly. They would live in the forest, away from everyone else. Her husband would cut down trees because he enjoyed it, not because anyone ordered him to do so. He would be tall, and have powerful arms like Doram, the king's captain. His hair would be dark and unkempt, wild like the animals around them, but his eyes would be kind, and he would never yell. He would have a long beard—not an Antoli like the noblemen, but a real beard. He would carry an axe with him, and every day she would go with him into the forest and watch him cut down trees.

She would wear her hair long, like a noblewoman, because there would be no one around to see them. She wouldn't wear fancy dresses that she had to worry about getting dirty. She would never have to deal with nobles, or listen to shrill voices calling for her—shrill voices like the one that was definitely *not* calling for Ryalla at that very moment.

She immersed herself in the daydream, feeling the breeze whisper through the trees, hearing the animals shuffle around her, smelling the pine scents. The fantasy was perfect—as desirable as the ones where she imagined herself rescued by some incredibly handsome man with a sword.

But, as usually happened, reality began to worm itself into her perfect world. She began to think of what she and her husband would smell like, living off in the forest away from the city. In Lakdon it was common practice to bathe regularly—the nobility in their own chambers, the less-rich in the public bath houses. She knew this was not true for peasants; she needed only think back to what the boy Jerick smelled like when he arrived to confirm her suspicions.

She also began to wonder what they would eat, and what her husband would do with all the lumber he chopped. If he sold it, then that would necessitate communication with other people. People who would probably call him their servant or peasant. Suddenly, the daydream wasn't quite as fun any more, as she thought of the necessities of life, of how silly it would be for a wife to follow her husband into the forest when there would be work to do back at the house.

"I've only seen a look that disappointed on a woman's face three times," a voice noted. "And every time it was because I was telling her 'no.'"

Ryalla looked up with surprise. "Topaz?" she asked.

He sat a short distance away, squatting on a thin ledge that ran along the outside of the palace, his shoeless toes hanging over the edge. He had

changed from his red performance outfit of the night before, and was now dressed in a loose-fitting concoction of greens and yellows. One of his trademark poofy, oversized hats hung limply to one side of his head.

He smiled. "Of course it's me. Who else would be hanging from a ledge two stories above the ground?"

"I'm just surprised that you found me . . ." Ryalla said, trailing off. She had never been interrupted during one of her daydreaming sessions before.

"Why is that, little one?" Topaz asked, sitting down on the ledge, letting his legs hang freely over the side. A single wrong move would send him tumbling fifty feet to the ground below, but his face was completely unconcerned.

Ryalla frowned weakly. "I . . . was hiding," she admitted with a chagrined face.

"Hiding?" Topaz asked with a raised eyebrow. "On the balcony? You could have at least closed the doors, you know."

"Ryalla!" Courteth's shrill voice called from inside.

"She's a lot more . . . vocal when you two are alone, isn't she?" Topaz noticed.

Ryalla nodded.

"Well, I suppose you have a good reason to hide then."

Courteth's voice sounded from inside again, closer this time.

"You know," Topaz said helpfully, "if you want to get away from her, you could come out here with me."

Ryalla regarded the thin ledge, her stomach growing sick. "Um, no," she said. "I'm sorry."

Topaz chuckled as he hopped up onto his feet. "No need to be sorry, little one. The life of a fool isn't the life for everyone. It requires a careful disregard for everything sensible, and a completely underdeveloped sense of propriety."

She watched as he approached, walking carefully along the ledge as it passed over the balcony doors. "Was there anything you needed?" she asked.

"No," Topaz said, shaking his head. "Just passing through."

"You know," Ryalla said hesitantly. "Regular people use the hallways."

Topaz turned back, then smiled. "Yes, they do." Then he turned a corner and passed out of sight.

"There you are!" Courteth's voice sounded behind her.

Ryalla turned to find the fuming princess standing by the balcony doors,

her red face burning against her blonde hair. Ryalla immediately turned her eyes to the ground. "I was right here all along, my lady."

"You couldn't have been," Courteth argued. "I walked by here half a dozen times."

"I was on the far side, my lady. You wouldn't have seen me."

"Didn't you hear me calling your name?" Courteth demanded.

"I'm sorry, my lady. I wasn't paying attention."

Courteth swore—using words Ryalla didn't know how a princess would learn. "Your dizzy-headedness is unacceptable," she said, pointing for Ryalla to walk back into the room. "A lady's handmaid needs to be ready to serve her at any time. We'll see how well you daydream after kneeling in the corner for an hour, holding a book over your head."

Ryalla sighed, shuffling over toward the corner. The punishment was one of Courteth's favorites lately—the princess had heard of it in a story somewhere.

"Not now, foolish girl," Courteth spat, sitting angrily in the chair before her mirrors. "You must comb my hair first."

"Yes, my lady," Ryalla replied, picking up a brush from the counter and beginning to pull it through the long, golden hair. Hair Ryalla could never have.

As the brushing began, Courteth calmed herself, her face growing from red to a girlish white in a matter of seconds. She was preparing for something—Courteth rarely grew so flustered when she wasn't nervous before some performance or meeting.

"When you are finished," Courteth eventually declared, confirming Ryalla's suspicions, "you shall accompany me to the library."

"The library, my lady?" Ryalla asked carefully. "Isn't that where the king plans to hold the lessons for your brother and the other boys?"

"Exactly. They shall not proceed, however, without me."

The brush went limp in Ryalla's hand. Courteth was as temerarious as she was spoiled, but this . . . "My lady," she began.

"Do not seek to counsel me," Courteth warned, snapping her fingers for the brushing to continue.

"Yes, my lady," Ryalla replied, continuing to brush. As she did, however, unspoken objections ran through her mind. Surely Courteth wouldn't succeed this time—school instruction was only for boys. Courteth was busy enough learning the duties and skills of a properly bred lady; where would she find time to learn the lessons of a boy as well? It just wasn't done.

Except, such things never seemed to bother Courteth. She considered herself above traditions and laws—both would bend before Courteth because the king represented both law and tradition, and he always bent before his daughter. Still, schooling? Would Rodis bend that far?

“You’re done,” Courteth informed her impatiently, nodding for Ryalla to put down the brush. “Let’s go.”

Ryalla followed obediently behind, walking quickly to keep up with the princess. As soon as they reached the main hallway, however, Courteth slowed, her hurried gait becoming more ladylike instead. Ryalla slowed as well, watching her mistress try to imitate the graceful, flowing steps of the court’s older women. Courteth didn’t quite succeed—she was, after all, still a girl barely past her first decade. She was getting better, however.

At such a slow rate, it took them a great deal of time to pass through the main hallway and out into the courtyard behind the palace. The library rose in front of them. In Ryalla’s opinion, the library was a much more appealing building than the rest of the palace. It was tall and powerful, yet at the same time delicate and beautiful. If possible, she knew she would come here often. Unfortunately, the library was forbidden to servants.

Today, however, she could enter, for she accompanied her mistress. Courteth led her through the main doors, giving Ryalla little time to study the carved stone. They continued past the scrolls and stacks of parchment until Courteth stopped before a section of the room that had been separated from the rest by tall, movable wooden walls.

“You will wait here for me,” Courteth said. “Find a book and a corner and kneel until I’m done. Understood?”

“Yes, my lady,” Ryalla replied.

Courteth composed herself again, then drifted into the classroom. Obediently, Ryalla selected a book from the shelf—one that didn’t look too heavy—and knelt on the ground, holding the volume high above her head. She positioned herself in such a way, however, that she could just barely see what was happening in the classroom. After all, Courteth had told her to kneel in the corner, but she hadn’t specified which way Ryalla had to face.

The room was full of people. The king was still there, speaking with Yoharn on one side of the room. Near the front of the small chamber she could see the three scholars who had arrived last month to teach the crown prince. Or, rather, the two scholars and one Horwatcher. Ryalla shivered as her eyes fell on the blue-robed man. His head seemed to crouch like a spider in the center of his enormous collar, his eyes waiting for some foolish insect

to stray too close. He bothered Ryalla. She could feel something about him—some sort of power that made her believe all of the tales the old washwomen said about wizards and Horwatchers.

“Courteth, dear, what is it?” she could barely make out the king’s voice. Ryalla had to strain to hear, but she was glad for the distraction. Her arms were already beginning to complain from the awkward position and the book’s weight.

“I wish to join the classes, Father,” Courteth said, her voice betraying none of the harsh edge it had held just a few moments before when speaking with Ryalla.

Kalord Strafen’s face grew horrified at the statement, but the king just laughed. “Courteth, you know these classes are meant for the boys. You needn’t feel left out—you have your own lessons to attend.”

“Father,” Courteth said demurely, “It’s not that I feel left out, I simply want to learn.”

Ryalla frowned. She hadn’t quite been able to decide what Courteth hoped to gain from this ploy. Perhaps she was simply jealous of the attention the boys, especially Jerick, were receiving.

“You don’t need to learn, dear,” the king said. “These lessons will do you no good.”

“They will do me no good, but they will be beneficial to a peasant?” Courteth responded. She was reserved as she spoke, as usual, but she did place a slight emphasis on the word “peasant.”

The king frowned. “I see,” he said simply.

Finally, one of the Trexandian scholars spoke up. “It is not unheard of, Your Majesty,” the man noted. “Women often receive schooling in Falla-more.” Then, after a slight pause, he added, “if, that is, you can call what goes on in that country ‘schooling.’”

“Father, should I not have an equal chance as this stray boy you’ve taken in?” Courteth asked innocently.

The king rubbed his chin, and Ryalla could see immediately that he was going to give in. There were few things he would refuse a determined Courteth.

“All right,” Rodis said. “You may attend until you grow tired of it, dear.”

Courteth smiled, curtsying slightly, and again Ryalla was confused. If her attempt had been a ploy for attention, why had she actually gone so far as to get herself into the classes? A simple demand and retreat would have served the same purpose, drawing her father’s attention away from Jerick and the others. Now Courteth would actually have to attend the classes.

"If Your Majesty is finished . . . ?" the distinguished elder Trexandian said. He was an older man, perhaps in his early fifties, bald except for two tufts of hair sticking out behind his ears. His Antoli was peppered with black, however, and Ryalla suspected it was fake—glued-on beards were common in the south.

"By all means, scholar Vendavious," the king agreed. "Though I was hoping Cephandrius would arrive. Where is that fool?"

No one answered his question, and so the king simply sighed, wandering toward the back of the room. "If you don't mind, Scholar Vendavious, I'll watch for a few minutes here at the back."

"As Your Majesty wishes," Vendavious said, seating himself on the raised cushion at the front of the room. "Today, I shall teach. Tomorrow Master Teniclese shall instruct you, followed on the next day by the Horwatcher. Boys, and princess Courteth, seat yourselves before me."

They did so, and as the boys moved, Ryalla finally realized why Courteth had wanted to take part in the lessons. As she settled herself on one of the cushions, sitting with her legs bent to her side like a lady rather than cross-legged like the boys, Jerick and Martis watched with dumb eyes. Ryalla could see Courteth smiling to herself beneath the two boys' scrutiny.

Eventually, the two idiot boys moved, Jerick sitting to Courteth's left and Martis to the right. The only time they took their eyes off of Courteth was to regard one another with looks of barely-restrained jealousy.

Ryalla wasn't certain what she was feeling. No boy had ever looked at her that way—she was the great outsider of the palace. The noble boys, of course, thought of her as nothing more than a slave—while her fine clothes and proximity to the princess made the servant boys uncomfortable around her. All she knew was if a boy ever *did* look at her that way, she wouldn't immediately search for another boy to make his rival.

She knew what Courteth was doing, and it disgusted her. More than the princess's manipulations of the guards, magistrates, or even the king, Ryalla found this game Courteth had begun revolting.

Can't they see? Ryalla wondered to herself. Don't they realize what she's doing to them? Why are boys such idiots?

She felt the bottom of the book brush against her hair—her arms had grown slack as she thought. Pushing it back up in a vengeful motion, her eyes fell on the boy Jerick. He, at least, should know better. Lumbermen were supposed to be stout and practical, the type who didn't put up with silly games and useless flirting. Jerick, however, seemed as enraptured with

Courteth as Martis. Perhaps his simple life as a peasant had made him unable to recognize falsehood. Maybe he was naïve. Maybe he was just a boy.

“A classroom is a place of dignity,” the scholar Vendavious was saying. The four students sat on cushions a few feet away from him, looking up at their teacher. “You will call me Master Vendavious, and I will call you Students Jerick, Courteth, Martis, and Yoharn. Those are the only titles we will use while in this room, for they imply our proper relationship—a relationship of mutual respect. I am here to teach, and it is a privilege to do so. You are here to learn, and that is also a privilege. None of us should abuse these privileges.”

Master Vendavious reached over, picking up a long reed that leaned against the wall next to him. “I will use this to punish those of you who disobey the rules of the classroom. The first rule is that of respect—respect for me, and respect for your fellow students. The second rule is that there shall be no questions. The third rule is—”

“Why?”

Ryalla looked up at Jerick’s question. Her mind had begun to drift away from the scholar’s monologue, images of lands far away sparking in her imagination. She had been paying enough attention, however, to realize that Jerick had asked his question just after the scholar said there was a rule against questions.

Sure enough, the scholar’s reed fell, slapping Jerick’s shoulder in a simple move. She could see from the scholar’s face that the move was not out of vengeance—it was simply what he felt must be done.

Strangely enough, after punishing Jerick, the scholar answered the question anyway. “Because, Student Jerick, that is the way classes have been taught for centuries. It is the proper way of things.”

“But,” Jerick countered, “aren’t we here to learn? How can we learn if we don’t ask questions? Aren’t questions important?” The lumberman’s speech was much less accented than it had been just a day before.

The reed fell again, slapping Jerick on the other shoulder. The swipe must have been painful, but Jerick didn’t even flinch as it fell. In fact, he seemed to take the strike for granted, as if it were the natural response to a question.

“Inquiries are important for learning,” the scholar said in response to the illicit question.

“Why punish us for asking them?” Jerick demanded.

The reed snapped against his shoulder. The scholar was frowning now.

"Because questions are not things to be asked rashly; they must be carefully considered to do the most good. Too many people ask when their minds could have discovered the true answer on their own."

"So, questions are good, but only after you've thought about the answer first, and not been able to reach it on your own?" Jerick asked.

The reed swiped Jerick's shoulder. "Correct," Vendavious said. "No man knows everything. It is good for a man to ask a question once he has pondered the possible answers and decided which ones make more sense. Then, the question is a confirmation, not an exercise in laziness."

"In other words," Jerick said, looking up with suddenly understanding eyes, "questions should be an aid to thinking, not a replacement for it?"

Whack. "Yes."

"And," Jerick said, continuing, his voice awed, as if he had just solved something that had been bothering him for a long time, "you punish us to teach how valuable questions are. You want us to think before we ask, only speaking when we judge the answer to be worth the pain asking will cause."

Master Vendavious lowered his reed, his distinguished face unreadable. "Yes," he finally said.

Though she couldn't see him—he was behind one of the walls—Ryalla heard the king laughing. "You aren't supposed to figure that out on the first day, Jerick," Rodis said mirthfully. "The reed is a common teaching tool in Trexandos, and usually it takes the students a couple of years to realize why the masters are beating them. After that, the teacher puts his reed away, knowing his students will think carefully before asking questions. Of course, when *I* was a student, it took us nearly five years to make the connection—and after that, it didn't matter any more. We were nearly through our schooling."

Master Vendavious set aside his reed. "I'm afraid you've ruined it for the other students, Student Jerick," he said with a sigh.

"I am sorry, Master Vendavious," Jerick apologized. He didn't look very sorry, however—his face was bright, and he was smiling.

"No matter. Quickness of mind is a valuable thing. If my teaching devices are that transparent, perhaps it is time to discover new devices."

Courteth gave Jerick a disgustingly wide-eyed look of adoration, and Ryalla had to look away before she got sick. The boy soaked up the look like a puppy devouring his master's scraps. *Think, Jerick!* Ryalla urged silently.

The lumberman shot Martis a look of victory, then settled back on his cushion, looking up at Vendavious with satisfied eyes. Martis's face was turned up in an angry sneer. Ryalla knew, however, it wouldn't be long

until Courteth found a reason to give Martis a taste of favoritism, and then Jerick would be the sullen one. The lumberman didn't know what he was getting himself into—he was letting Courteth lock him in chains, all the while asking if she would like any help.

Jerick didn't realize how good his life as a lumberman had been, Ryalla decided. Even considering the smell, the work, and the difficulties, at that moment she knew she would rather be a lumberman's wife than a slave—or even a noble—in the palace. Everything was fake here. The princess's affection was not real, Jerick's learning was a sham, and even the king was using the boy to win a bet. For some reason, Jerick had foolishly given his life of freedom away to come here, to the palace. A place where no one was free.

Doesn't he see? Ryalla thought bitterly, her arms aching incredibly. Did he think the king cared for him, that Rodis really wanted peasants to be as knowledgeable as the nobility? No aristocrat would want such a thing—it would destroy their way of life. The king had a bet, and sought to win it. If he really wanted to help the peasants, he wouldn't be sitting in a room, watching his pet lumberman talk like a nobleman while hundreds of other servants milled around his castle in squalor, kept separate from their betters, as if their mere presence was revolting. He wouldn't favor one boy with so much when Ryalla knelt on hard stones, her arms quivering from the strain of a useless punishment.

Ryalla sighed, looking down at the ground. *Someday this will change*, she decided. *Someday, I won't have to punish myself simply because of Courteth's whims.* Her upbringing cried out against such thoughts, warning her that they could lead her in dangerous directions.

Ryalla shook her head in despair. Perhaps she needed a little more danger in her life.

INTERLUDE ONE

TOPAZ SWUNG THROUGH THE WINDOW, EXECUTED A PERFECT FLIP IN THE air, and landed with his arms upraised. There were no applause.

“Normal people use the door, Cephandrius,” Frost noted, not looking up from his book. He sat beside the desk in his small quarters, a room stacked with books, scrolls, maps, and paintings.

“Funny, you’re the second person to tell me that today, Frosty,” Topaz said, lowering his arms, disappointed that Frost hadn’t acknowledged his stellar entrance.

“Perhaps you should take that as a hint,” Frost said, turning a page in his book.

“You just can’t make a good dramatic entrance coming in the door,” Topaz said with a sigh.

“True. Of course, you don’t risk breaking your neck if you come in it either.”

“No one understands me,” Topaz complained, leaning against a bookshelf.

“And, unless I’m mistaken,” Frost said, setting down his book, “that is exactly the way you like it.”

Topaz smiled. Then he turned, riffling through the books on the shelf. “Do you have any food in here? Or does your kind not need it?”

Frost sighed. “What is that supposed to mean?” he asked, watching Topaz with slightly amused eyes.

“Nothing,” Topaz said innocently.

"How many times do I have to tell you this, Cephandrius?" Frost replied with a shake of his head. "I am nothing more than a tired old scholar."

"Of course," Topaz said, holding up his hands in an overdone gesture. "I believe you."

"Really. You've watched me for decades now—I grow older, my joints ache, and my eyesight is atrocious. If I were anything more than an old man, would I be so prone to sickness?"

"Of course not," Topaz agreed, knocking over a stack of books in his search.

"Here," Frost said with a slight groan, uncovering a basket filled with bread and cheese.

"Perfect!" Topaz exclaimed, accepting the food.

"One would almost think the king doesn't feed you," Frost noted.

Topaz shrugged, breaking off a hunk of bread. "Strafen tried to poison me again last night. It wouldn't bother me so much if he weren't such an amateur. Good poisons are supposed to be tasteless—the stuff he uses is so acrid that it absolutely ruins the flavor of the food. I can't even choke it down."

"Poor you," Frost said as Topaz cleared some books off the bed and seated himself.

"You met the boy?" the fool asked.

Frost nodded.

"And?"

"And what? He seemed intelligent enough."

"Nothing else?" Topaz asked.

"What else am I supposed to see, Topaz?" Frost asked. "Humans can't use magic. The Horwatchers like to pretend otherwise, but their fakery can only take them so far."

Topaz raised an eyebrow at the comment. "I don't think that prohibition is as strict as it once was, old one," he said.

"Humankind has been forbidden microkinesis for thousands of years, Topaz," Frost argued. "Why would that change now?"

"Why indeed?" Topaz asked.

"Regardless of what you say," Frost said with a shake of his hand, "I'm hesitant to believe it. The fact remains that I've never met a human who could do magic."

Mouth full of bread, Topaz glanced over at a candle on the wall; the wick immediately burst into flames.

Frost snorted. "You don't count. I'd hardly call you human anymore."

“Ouch,” Topaz said, stuffing a piece of cheese into his mouth. “Frosty, that hurt. I am too human.”

“Perhaps,” Frost said without conviction.

“Well, whatever I am, I think this Jerick is one too,” Topaz declared.

“What makes you say that?”

“I’m not certain,” Topaz admitted. “I might be wrong. It’s just . . . the way he looks at the world. Rodis says he was the one who noticed the Sho Del assassin. Jerick saw right through the Sho Del Cognitive thought manipulation, though I doubt he knew what he was doing.”

“I’ve seen humans do such before,” Frost countered. “That doesn’t mean they are microkinetic. Seeing through a Sho Del illusion is a far cry from manipulating an object’s elemental nature on a microscopic level.”

“True. I still think Jerick has potential,” Topaz said. “I’ve got a feeling—there is a power about him. Of course, if I’m wrong, there’s always the girl.”

“Ryalla?” Frost demanded. “What about her?”

“Oh, come now, Frosty,” Topaz said with a snort. “I don’t see why you try to disregard her. Today, while on my way here, I almost tripped over the girl.”

“So?”

“So?” Topaz continued. “She had bent light around herself so skillfully that even *I* almost didn’t notice her. A regular person wouldn’t have seen anything more than a slight ripple in the air.”

Frost’s thin-bearded face grew troubled. “That . . . shouldn’t be possible, Cephandrius.”

“I’m telling you, for some reason the Lords—or whoever rules up there, I’m not sure about that yet—have rescinded their prohibition against humans using magic.”

“But . . .” Frost said, trailing off.

“Frost, she thinks she’s just daydreaming,” Topaz said, his eyes excited. “I’ve talked to her about it before—she doesn’t even know what she’s doing. Think what she could manage if she actually had an understanding of the wave patterns of light?”

Frost paused. “Can you do what she did today?”

Topaz shook his head. “I have trouble separating white light into its base colors; it’s not my area of strength. Could *you* do what she did?”

“I keep telling you, Topaz,” Frost said. “I have no skill in magic—I could no more use microkinesis than the king.”

“Of course.”

Frost scratched at the side of his face thoughtfully. “I’ll have to think about this, Cephandrius.”

“Don’t think too long,” Topaz warned, covering up the basket of bread as he rose to leave. “Something is coming.”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” Topaz admitted. “I’ve spent my entire life trying to figure that out. I don’t know what’s coming, I don’t know what’s behind all of the stories and myths, I don’t know why humans are suddenly showing signs of magical ability . . . I don’t even know what *I* am. I do know it’s vital that we prepare. Keep an eye on this boy for me; I have to go.”

“Already?”

“I’ve got too many responsibilities to play jester up here for more than a few days at a time.”

“Besides,” Frost added with a smile, “you wouldn’t want those scholars from Trexandos to recognize you.”

Topaz snorted, climbing out the window. “They wouldn’t recognize their own father if he were dressed like a jesk—Trexandian scholars focus so much on their books that the real world tends to elude their understanding.”

Frost nodded. “Farewell, my friend.”

“You too. I’m counting on you, Frost. Bat’Chor is coming with me, and you’re the only other person north of Fallamore I trust.”

Frost nodded humbly, and with that the fool was gone, slipping along the outside of the building to the stables where an enormous Ke’Chan waited for him with a pair of horses. They rode away at a full gallop, sensing an urgency that no one else on the continent seemed to understand. With Cephandrius gone, the castle plants seemed to wilt slightly, the air seemed to turn a little colder, and two youths awoke the next morning to find that their best—and perhaps only—friend in the palace had disappeared without a word of farewell.

THE END OF PART ONE



PART TWO

CHAPTER TEN

“EEF YOU TELL EENYONE ABOUT THEES, I WEELL KEELL YOU.”

“Stop whining, Bat’Chor,” Topaz said with a chuckle. “You look perfect. Beautiful, even.”

Bat’Chor turned a displeased eye down at his raiment. Instead of his akerng and chellorbeth, he wore the simple one-piece woolen dress favored by Tzendish women of lower classes.

“Thees ees eendecent,” he said, frowning.

“Hold still,” Topaz ordered, carefully applying makeup to the Ke’Chan man’s face.

Bat’Chor sighed, holding his face still as the jesk worked. Their room was about as nice as could be expected of an inn so close to the slums. The walls were constructed of a dull gray wood that was splattered with stains and gouges. The beds were little more than dirty blankets for mattresses, with more dirty blankets to provide warmth. Of course, Bat’Chor had stayed in places without even such meager offerings, so he supposed he should be thankful to the True God for what he had.

He just wondered what misdeed in a former life had earned him the dubious blessing of a friend like Cephandrius Maxtori.

“Ouch!” he complained as something poked his face.

Topaz snorted. “And everyone says Ke’Chan are supposed to be tough,” he said, his eyes focused as he drew some lines around Bat’Chor’s eyes with a small piece of charcoal. “The glue will mold to your face soon enough.”

"Thees ees a waste," Bat'Chor complained. "No one ees going to believe that I, the great descendant of the Great 'Cheru Tar, am a woman."

"No?" Topaz asked with raised eyes. The jesk leaned back, giving Bat'Chor a view of the small mirror sitting against the wall. Bat'Chor blinked in surprise at the transformation. He, the great descendant of the Great 'Cheru Tar, did indeed look like a woman. His powerful, round Ke'Chan face was now lined and creased, and his olive skin had been lightened by Topaz's makeup. Folds of skin hung from his neck and cheeks, and the area around his eyes was so wrinkled it was impossible to tell that he was a Ke'Chan. The face, coupled with carefully placed padding beneath the dress, made Bat'Chor look like nothing so much as an old, if plump, Tzendish woman.

Bat'Chor regarded himself for a few moments in shocked silence before finally finding his voice. "Thees ees steell unnatural," he grumbled.

Topaz chuckled, turning toward the mirror to begin work on his own face. "One would think you'd be used to wearing dresses, Bat'Chor."

"An akerng ees not a dress," Bat'Chor huffed. "He ees a warrior's clothing."

"Even if it does look an awful lot like a skirt," Topaz agreed, beginning to apply glue to his face.

"He ees not a skirt," Bat'Chor argued. "He simply provides free movement een battle."

"And when's the last time the Ke'Chan people went to war?" Topaz asked pointedly, a smile on his lips.

Bat'Chor sighed—this was one of his friend's favorite topics. The jesk found it incredibly ironic that the Ke'Chan, the greatest warriors the world had ever known, were now a group of merchants and traders.

"Our exile weell not last forever," Bat'Chor said simply. "Someday 'Cheru Tar weell return, and we weell go back to our lands beyond the mountains."

"To live in the desert once again," Topaz noted. "Your people certainly have a twisted concept of paradise, Bat'Chor."

"That ees what we want, nonetheless," he said back.

"Good enough." Topaz applied a few finishing marks to his face, then regarded himself with a critical eye. The jesk, Bat'Chor noted, had used a great deal less makeup on his own face. At the same time, however, his aging looked even more realistic—especially after Topaz flexed his face muscles, wrinkling the skin in what must have been an incredibly uncomfortable, but at the same time effective, maneuver. He looked like an old Tzendish man, husband to Bat'Chor.

“All right,” Topaz said with a nod. “Ready?”

Bat’Chor sighed. “I suppose.”

Topaz stood. “I realize your discomfort, Bat’Chor,” he said, a hint of sympathy creeping into his voice. “If you can think of any reason a Ke’Chan follower of ’Cheru Tar would let himself be seen entering a Tzendish temple, I’m willing to listen. Until then, you’ll have to keep the disguise.”

Bat’Chor nodded, standing as well. Realistically, he understood the need for stealth. Topaz had required Bat’Chor’s trading contacts to get him into Tzendor and, frankly, the Ke’Chan had been happy to come along. Topaz could be infuriating at times—most of the time—but he was also the most interesting man Bat’Chor knew.

But, it was more than that. There was something about the work Topaz was doing, something that told Bat’Chor he wanted to be part of it. He had heard the jesk speculate on what was coming, heard him warn that they needed to prepare—even if they had no idea what that preparation should entail. Topaz searched for the most vital substance in the world: knowledge. Bat’Chor owed it to his people, and the world, to do what he could to help.

Topaz stood at the door, looking back with unreadable eyes. “You could stay behind, Bat’Chor,” he offered.

Bat’Chor paused. It was taboo for a Ke’Chan to enter a temple to a pagan god, hence the disguise. Centuries of tradition screamed at him that what he was about to do was blasphemous. Unfortunately, he knew in his heart—a place deeper than tradition—that whatever it was Topaz planned this day needed to succeed. The fate of the world could depend on it.

“No, my friend,” Bat’Chor decided. “I weell come. Thees weell be dangerous; you weell need protection.”

“I can handle myself,” Topaz huffed.

Bat’Chor raised an eyebrow. “I’ve seen you use a sword, Topaz. I weell come. Let me repeat, however, that eef you ever tell anyone of this, I weell keell you.”

Topaz chuckled, patting Bat’Chor on the back. “Don’t worry. I’d never do something like that. Or, at least, I’d never be clumsy enough to let it get traced back to me. Come on; we’ll miss the pilgrims.”

BAT’CHOR HAD BEEN TO TZENDOR ON MANY OCCASIONS. HISTORICALLY, the southern continent was much poorer than Yolen, but the aristocracy still made for good trading, and the Empire’s coffers never seemed to run dry. There were few Ke’Chan traders who didn’t have at least a few contacts on

the continent. Of course, the strict Tzendish government sometimes made trading difficult, but the Ke'Chan were admittedly a little rigid themselves, and generally the two got along with one another.

A lot had changed in Tzendor since his last visit. Bat'Chor had noted the differences from the first moment he and Topaz arrived at the docks of Hsiton. As they had left the port city behind, traveling across the rocky Tzendish countryside to the Imperial northern sub-capital of Kido, the changes had grown increasingly stark.

The Tzendish people were happy.

There had been a time, not more than a decade ago, when Tzendor's defining attribute had been the oppression of its people. Feudal systems, slaves, and indentured servants were common occurrences in the north. Life in Tzendor, however, had been on a completely different level of severity. There had been only three classes—the few select rich, the clergy, and the impoverished. It had seemed as if there were an unspoken competition between the priests and the aristocracy, both striving to be the most abusive to the lower class.

Bat'Chor had heard, and disbelieved, rumors of the revitalization of Tzendor. But from what he could see, the rumors were true—if not understated. Where he had once been confronted by wide-eyed, starving faces, Bat'Chor now saw only contented—even plump—workers. There were few beggars or poor, and even these seemed to have enough food to keep them satisfied. It was a thing unheard of even in Trexandos.

What's more, farms flourished on the plains of Tzendor—plains that had once been all but barren. It was as if the change of leadership had somehow revitalized the land. Bat'Chor was no farmer, but his experiences in trading had taught him a little bit about irrigation. He couldn't fathom how the people of Tzendor had managed to grow crops in the places they did—irrigation just shouldn't have been possible. Tzendor was not known for its fertility. The northern piece of the continent was mountainous and rocky, the middle an expansive desert, and the south a lifeless tundra. Yet, incredibly, it appeared as if the people were all well-fed.

The city of Kido reflected these changes. Bat'Chor studied it as he trudged along beside Topaz's slighter frame. They had arrived very late the previous night and had moved quickly to secure lodgings. Now, however, he could see what had been shadowed in darkness the night before. The buildings were built after the squat, austere Tzendish style, but they were well-maintained. Bat'Chor could remember trading with some of the merchants of Kido early in his career. The peasants of the time had lived in shacks

built of discarded wood and trash, while the aristocrats—no more than two dozen of them in the entire city—had lived in enormous Kadens. The Kadens remained, but the peasant dwellings had improved dramatically.

“You notice it too?” Topaz asked quietly as they walked down the evenly cobbled street. Peasants milled around them, buying food and speaking with one another in a leisurely manner.

“I have been noting the changes since we arrived. What happened here?” Bat’Chor asked incredulously.

“The new Emperor,” Topaz said, stepping to the side as a man strode past, carrying a large box on his shoulders.

“I’ve heard of heem,” Bat’Chor noted. “Aronack.”

“The same. I’ve been keeping a very careful eye on Tzendor since his coronation a decade ago. He appears to be the best thing that’s ever happened to this people.”

Bat’Chor looked down. Topaz’s voice was reserved for some reason. Beneath the wrinkles and makeup his friend’s face was unreadable. “What?” Bat’Chor asked simply.

“I don’t know,” Topaz confessed.

“You should be happy,” Bat’Chor continued. “Eesn’t thees exactly what you’ve been trying to do een Melerand?”

“In a way,” Topaz said, though Bat’Chor could tell the jesk had doubts. He offered nothing more, and Bat’Chor let the matter drop. Perhaps Topaz was simply jealous—after so many years of working to end suffering in Yolen, it would be difficult to see so much progress in Tzendor in such a small amount of time.

The pilgrimage was gathering near the northern gate of the city. The Tzends were, and always had been, a deeply religious people. Where most people in Yolen, peasant and aristocrat alike, considered their religious obligation fulfilled by the occasional offering burned to the gods, the Tzendish worship services were plentiful and demanding. One such demand was the pilgrimage.

Tzends traveled incredible distances to visit their holy places. It was a thing of the peasant class, mostly. In a way, the pilgrimage had acted as a way of relieving pressure in Tzendor—whenever a peasant’s hardships grew to the point of insanity, he or she could always opt to go on a pilgrimage. Not that life as a pilgrim was any easier—Bat’Chor had heard reports of the long hours pilgrims spent traveling with little food or water. Sometimes, as a sign of devotion, the pilgrims would stop to pray every hour, half-hour, or even every step.

Pilgrimages often met and melded as lines of travelers from different towns came together. Apparently, Topaz intended to join this one just before it reached its destination—a fact that suited Bat'Chor just fine. He didn't much like the idea of traipsing across the desolate Tzendish landscape in search of a pagan temple.

"Weell they not think us strange when we join so late?" Bat'Chor asked as they approached the crowd gathered around the gate.

"This particular bunch is made up of people from both Hongwhar and Gzen-Do," Topaz explained. "They joined together outside the city walls about two hours ago, then split for a short time to let people visit relatives in the city before continuing on to the temple. Those who notice us will just assume we belong to the other half of the pilgrimage."

Bat'Chor raised an eyebrow. "How do you know thees?"

"You don't just look like a rock, Bat'Chor, you sleep like one too. I was up poking around the city before dawn. Come on."

Bat'Chor nodded slowly. He had never been able to prove it, but he was half-convinced that Topaz never slept. The man always seemed to have energy, no matter what time of day, but Bat'Chor had never gone to bed after him nor risen before him, despite all their years together.

"All right, here we go. You should probably play the mute, my friend," Topaz noted as they neared the crowd.

Bat'Chor nodded. He spoke a little Tzendish, like any good merchant, but, like any good Ke'Chan, he had a horrible accent. A Ke'Chan's accent was, in a way, a part of his cultural pride. Topaz had mocked him on many occasions, accusing him of emphasizing his own accent to remain aloof. Bat'Chor bore the mockery in silence—ever since the great drought had destroyed Old Ke'Chan, toppling the Ke'Chan empire, his people had been homeless. A people without a homeland needed to take care not to lose their identity. If that included exaggerating, or even inventing, ways to remain culturally unique, then so be it.

A few seconds later they were amongst the pilgrims, mixing with the crowd of about fifty people all wearing the same drab grays and browns. Bat'Chor would have been inclined to think that the relative prosperity amongst the peasant class would have made them less inclined to pilgrimage, but the size of this crowd seemed to disprove that notion. From what his contacts said, the Tzends had been growing more religious, not less, as the years passed.

A few moments later the crowd began to move, shuffling slowly toward the center of the city. Bat'Chor tried his best to blend in, though he received

more than a few strange looks. His disguise, he noted, would never have worked a decade before—no peasant would have been able to obtain his girth. Tzends tended to be smaller than Yolish people, who were in turn smaller than the Ke'Chan. However, Bat'Chor noted a couple of people who were just as hefty as he was supposed to be. He could only hope that the people looked at him and saw an overly-fat Tzendish woman, not an unnaturally fat Tzendish woman.

It did not take them long to reach their destination. When Topaz had mentioned the Temple of Hsaw, Bat'Chor had sent his mind back to his last visit to Kido a decade before, vaguely recalling a small, open-aired amphitheater near the center of the city. Having done so, he was nowhere near prepared for the enormous structure that rose up before them.

Forgetting himself, he whispered, "Where een the name of 'Cheru Tar deed *that* come from?"

"It's just newly finished," Topaz mumbled, walking beside Bat'Chor with an old man's bent-backed stoop. "That's why there're so many pilgrims. Now, kindly keep your big Ke'Chan tongue quiet until we're alone."

Bat'Chor pulled his jaw closed, though he couldn't take his eyes off the temple. Fortunately, in this respect he did not appear suspicious—the other pilgrims were equally awed. The closer they got to the gargantuan building, the more detail Bat'Chor could make out, and the more amazed he was. It was basically rectangular, following Tzendish architecture, but beside that single trait it was completely different than anything Bat'Chor had ever seen in the southern continent. It was extremely ornate, covered with hanging sculptures, and what looked like enormous colored windows. As they approached, Bat'Chor could see that the windows were really pictures, a thousand fragments of colored glass combined in each one.

Spreading out from the building's sides were long, leg-like protrusions, like thin arches that didn't seem to serve any purpose. The ceiling looked square, but as they slowly entered through the temple's broad gates, Bat'Chor could see that it was actually curved at the top.

And there were no pillars. Bat'Chor stood, stunned, looking around the temple's cavernous insides. It was one, enormous room, unmarred by any form of supporting pillars or walls. It was an architectural impossibility—a building this massive, with such a tall roof, could never stand without dozens of pillars on its inside to keep the entire thing from collapsing.

He shot a dumbfounded look down at Topaz's stooped form.

"Later," the jesk promised, limping forward and motioning for Bat'Chor to follow.

A balding man in a red vest was speaking quietly with one of the Tzendish priests at the head of the large room, directly in front of the altar. The priest nodded, motioning for some men in white robes to approach. Efficiently, the white-robed men began to divide up the crowd of peasants into groups of single men, women, and couples. That done, each group was led separately through several sets of wide doors at the sides of the building, doors that led to long series of small chambers. Each chamber held nothing more than a thin mattress and one blanket.

Topaz quietly shut the door to their chamber. The room was cramped, especially considering Bat'Chor's size—his shoulders nearly touched both sides of the room at the same time, and though it was longer than it was wide, he knew he would never have been able to stretch out all the way.

"I'm glad you decided to wed me, Bat'Chor," Topaz said, pressing his ear up to the door to make certain no one was listening to them—though why they would was beyond Bat'Chor. "If I had been single, I probably wouldn't have been able to get my own room."

Bat'Chor grunted. "Not much of a room."

"True," Topaz admitted. "But it *is* private, which will make our task a lot easier."

"And are you going to tell me what thees 'task' ees?"

"It'll be easier to show you."

Bat'Chor sighed. "And when weell you show me?"

"As soon as they come to fetch us."

Bat'Chor raised his eyes to the heavens in a sign of exasperation. True to his nature as a jesk, Topaz absolutely refused to reveal information until it was dramatic to do so. Knowing he would never get anywhere with that topic, Bat'Chor turned to something else.

"Well?" he asked. "Are you going to tell me how they made thees monstroceety of a beelding?"

"It's called buttressing," Topaz explained, seating himself on the cramped stone floor. "They put the pillars on the outside of the building instead of the inside."

Bat'Chor frowned, seating himself as best he could in his padded, overly fattened disguise. "That doesn't seem to make sense. . . ."

Topaz shook his head. "I don't know how they came up with it, but it's brilliant. A complete revolution in architecture. Those arches you saw on the outside of the building, the ones that looked like legs? They push against the walls and keep the roof from falling in. It must have taken an architectural genius to design this structure—and to finish it in ten years?

That, my friend, is nothing short of miraculous. Frankly I have no idea how they did it. Apparently, the architectural secrets are closely guarded by the priesthood.”

“Ees that why we are here? To deescover those secrets?”

Topaz shook his head. “Delving into the intricacies of Tzendish architecture will have to wait for another day. We have more important things to do.”

“Wheech are?”

Topaz smiled. “Just wait a few more minutes.”

“A FEW MORE MINUTES” TURNED OUT TO BE THREE HOURS. THREE HOURS sitting cramped in the tiny closet of a room. By the time they finally heard the pilgrimage director calling to them in Tzendish, Bat’Chor could barely feel any of the muscles below his waist.

“Come on,” Topaz said, rising spryly, completely unfazed by the cramped conditions.

Bat’Chor stumbled to his feet, feeling his joints crack and his tingling muscles complain. “One day, Topaz,” he grumbled, “I weell keell you for thees.”

“Add it to the list, Bat’Chor,” Topaz said with a smile as he checked over his friend’s makeup, then did the weird twisting action with his face that made him appear to have aged several decades.

The pilgrimage director, apologizing profusely for interrupting their personal prayer time, stood in the thin hallway. Bodies were pouring from the dozens of cubicles lining both sides of the passage—from Bat’Chor’s point of view, most of them looked more sleepy than enthusiastic. However, no one complained as the director led them back to the temple’s main chamber. Apparently they were about to view the relic that they had traveled for days, even months, to see.

Topaz kept his eyes downcast as they shuffled through the arch-ceilinged central chamber. Light poured through the multicolored glass windows, creating rainbow-like patterns on the polished stone floor. *How did they do this?* Bat’Chor wondered again as they walked. The majesty of the building was incredible; even the Rodain, who were said to have been Yolen’s greatest artisans, hadn’t created anything as wonderful as this temple. And in only ten years? True, the Tzends had been the first to discover the way to make mountainsteel from iron, but in all other areas of technology they used to be far behind Yolen.

The director led them quietly through the main chamber, ignoring the several dozen Tzendish supplicants who knelt praying before the altar. They joined with the rest of the pilgrims and waited silently on one side of the chamber until a white-robed priest arrived to lead them.

Bat'Chor frowned slightly as he studied the priest. In his opinion, the Tzendish clergy had always been overdone. This one, however, took extravagance to its utmost extreme. His hat was at least a foot and a half tall, wide and perfectly cylindrical, with a small golden sphere at the top. It had a wide brim that flopped more than hung down almost to his shoulders, with a place cut open in the front for his face. His robes were almost more gold than white, and every finger on his hand bore a thick ring set with a different stone. Apparently the nation's recent prosperity had been very beneficial to the clergy.

The somber-faced priest led them through a small passage at the very back of the room, behind the altar. There was no door, simply an opening, though its frame was encrusted with goldworkings. Inside they left daylight behind, instead relying on the dozens of lanterns that hung on the walls.

Bat'Chor filed through the passage beside Topaz. It was slow going, for there was only enough space in the passage for two men to walk side-by-side. In addition, the low-ceilinged hallway had been constructed with Tzendish build in mind, rather than Bat'Chor's Ke'Chan bulk. He had to walk slumped over to keep the tip of his head from rubbing the ceiling. Fortunately, he didn't look too unordinary—several of the men had to do the same. Even in Tzendor there were those who didn't fit the stereotype of their people.

Eventually they left the cramped passage behind as it opened into a much larger room. Bat'Chor took a deep breath—he had begun to feel like he would suffocate in that narrow, seemingly-endless passage. Topaz pulled him to the side as the rest of their group slowly poured into the room, gasps of awe and quiet praises slipping past their lips.

The room was shaped like a dome, though from the decline of the passage's floor, Bat'Chor would guess they were in a cavern beneath the ground rather than a man-made construction. The ceiling was gilded with gold and brass, and the lantern light made the entire room shine like paradise itself. Directly in the center of the room, enclosed in a glass case, was a long, gleaming sword.

Bat'Chor raised an eyebrow. "What ees he?" he asked quietly.

"The Blade of Gzai," Topaz whispered back. "Owned by one of the first

Emperors of Tzendor—it's actually said to date back to the days before the founding of the Empire, a creation of the gods themselves."

"Before the Empire . . ." Bat'Chor said with disbelief. "Topaz, that was over two thousand years ago."

"So they say," Topaz agreed.

"But that cannot be," Bat'Chor argued. "Look at that blade—he ees not bronze, but regular steel. That means he must be new."

"I think they want to imply that it's Dragonsteel," Topaz noted.

Bat'Chor paused. "Ees he?"

Topaz's eyes thinned slightly. "No," he finally said. "Not the blade, at least. I'd be surprised if it were older than a few years—they probably reformed it when they opened this new temple. It's always nice to give your holy relics an overhaul every few centuries or so. You wouldn't want them to be boring."

"You make light of their holy things," Bat'Chor said with disapproval.

"I make light of everything. Come, I want to get a closer look."

Topaz slowly pushed his way past praying devotees and gawking peasants until he was at the front of the crowd. A long rope divided the circular room directly in half, confining the people to the semi-circle closest to the passage. Bat'Chor struggled his way up next to his friend, moving through the crowd much less dexterously.

"What?" Bat'Chor asked as he arrived, noticing the look of interest on Topaz's face.

"Look at the hilt very closely," Topaz encouraged.

Bat'Chor squinted, looking through the room's splendor to study the sword's hilt. It was covered with a very delicate, spiderweb-like embossing of silver. The design was too far away to make out, but Bat'Chor could tell that it was intricate and detailed.

"All right," he replied. "What about heem?"

"It's Dragonsteel," Topaz said. "Or, at least, part of it is. Not the entire hilt, of course—just the design affixed to it."

"Really?"

Topaz nodded, his eyes curious. "I'd always assumed the sword was a hoax. Perhaps it's older than I thought."

Bat'Chor nodded. "The blade would have long since rusted away, but the Dragonsteel on the heelt would be eternal. That ees their relic—the shiny blade ees just to impress the masses."

Topaz was still regarding the sword, his eyes interested, almost hungry.

"What?" Bat'Chor hissed quietly.

Topaz didn't respond.

"Cephandrius," Bat'Chor asked hesitantly, pulling his friend to the side and away from the crowd. "You're not saying we are here to . . . ?"

"Steal the Sword of Gzai?" Topaz asked with twinkling eyes. "No. It's tempting, but no. What would I do with an enchanted holy sword? You said it yourself; you've seen me fight."

Bat'Chor let out a deep breath of relief. "Then why?" he demanded. "Why are we here?"

Topaz nodded toward the back of the room, by the wall behind the glittering sword. "There," he said.

Bat'Chor looked up, following the jesk's eyes. Against the back wall, almost unnoticed in the room's overpowering gaudiness, was a squat wooden shelf. A bookshelf bearing four thick scrolls—the largest having a circumference of at least a handspan.

"Let younger men with visions of wealth take the sword, Bat'Chor," Topaz said quietly. "We're here for those books."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE WOODEN PRACTICE SWORDS SNAPPED TOGETHER, DRAWING JERICK'S attention away from his reading. He sighed, setting the volume beside himself on the grass as he looked up to the source of the noise. Jerick sat atop a shallow hill just inside the palace gardens. Behind him the heavy stone palace walls rose into the sky; in front of him the ground sloped downward into a flat, carefully-kept meadow. It was here that the boys fought.

Bare-chested in the summer heat, Yoharn and Martis traded blows, their every movement watched by the group of noble girls sitting and chatting quietly a short distance away. The women sat beneath one of the tall pine trees that lined the meadow. Jerick didn't like the trees—they were arranged too formally, too neatly. Trees shouldn't grow in lines, they should grow where the seeds fell.

The swords cracked again as Yoharn struggled to defend himself against Martis's attack. During Jerick's past year in the palace, Strafen's beefy son had grown impossibly fast. Though only fourteen years old, Martis was nearly as tall as a grown man, and what had been mostly flab when Jerick arrived was quickly becoming muscle. The castle people spoke often of how much promise he showed, his widening chest and growing muscles filling into a frame that was powerful and strong, yet not hulkingly beastly like that of his father.

Jerick's body refused to follow Martis's example. Jerick had grown during the past months, but in the wrong ways. None of his limbs seemed to understand the concept of proportion—his legs were too long, and his arms

far too thin. Where Martis was growing to be a man, it seemed that Jerick was growing to be a giraffe.

And the books weren't helping. Starting three months ago, Martis and Yoharn had joined with several of the other noble boys to begin formal weapons training beneath Doram, captain of the king's guard. Jerick, however, had been forbidden.

"There's no need for you to learn to use a sword, Jerick," the king had explained. "The time Martis spends practicing will give you an opportunity to get ahead in your studies."

And so Jerick studied. He studied while others ate, he studied when normal men slept, and he studied while his classmates fought.

"That book probably won't do you much good if you don't look at it," a voice noted.

Jerick looked up with surprise to see Ryalla approaching. As soon as his eyes met hers, however, she turned her own gaze down toward the ground.

"You don't need to do that around me," he said as she walked up the slope.

"Do what?" she asked, her eyes still downcast.

Jerick shook his head, allowing the matter to drop. He still wasn't comfortable with the way the palace servants treated him, but he suffered them. Ryalla, however, was different. A year together had turned her into the closest thing to a friend he had found in the palace. Yet, still she insisted on maintaining her subservient front. At the same time, he sensed something in every subordinate action. Every time she looked away, he caught a glimpse of that latent mockery—only briefly, of course. Ryalla was much too practiced to allow any more to slip through.

She stopped near where he was sitting, waiting expectantly.

Jerick sighed. "You may sit, Ryalla," he said with thinly-veiled intolerance.

She complied, arranging herself on the ground beside him. She was wearing a simple blue skirt made of very thick cloth and a shirt with long, tight sleeves that buttoned all the way up the neck. They were odd choices for the hot, late summer weather, but Ryalla's clothing rarely made sense to Jerick. Sometimes she wore finery nearly as nice as that of the princess, other times he saw her garbed in little more than rags.

She sat beside him, patiently waiting for him to initiate a conversation. Frost insisted that Jerick spend at least a few minutes each day speaking directly with a member of the nobility, claiming that would be the only way Jerick would ever rid himself of his rural accent. Finding nobles willing to spend time on him, however, was a difficult endeavor—especially for a boy who had lived such a solitary life. Fortunately, there was Ryalla.

She spoke just like a member of the aristocracy, but was always obliging. Sometimes too obliging.

Jerick turned away from the practicing youths below. "Today, Ryalla, let's talk about you."

"Me?" the girl asked hesitantly.

"Yes," Jerick said, leaning back on the grass and staring up at the overcast sky. "I've lived here for a year, and I know almost nothing about you."

"There isn't much to know, Master Jerick. I am a slave."

"I know you are a slave, Ryalla," Jerick mumbled. "You point it out at every convenient opportunity."

"I'm sorry, Master Jerick."

Jerick shot a look at the dark-haired girl. The eyes were still downcast.

"Tell me about your parents," Jerick requested. Their conversations had been very hard for him at first. He wasn't accustomed to taking the initiative—he had always been a quiet boy. Frost demanded he do it, however, and Jerick would rather spend time forcing himself to ask questions of Ryalla than a haughty son of some Kalord.

"They died, traitors to the crown," Ryalla said in answer to his question.

"No siblings?"

"One," Ryalla said. "He was given to Kalord Strafen. He works as a stableboy."

Jerick winced—Strafen was said to be hard on servants, and worse on slaves. "At least he was given to a nobleman in the city," Jerick offered. "You probably get to see him often."

Ryalla shrugged. "Only when I'm needed to nurse him after a beating. I suppose 'often' would be the right word."

Jerick studied the small girl, her short-cropped black hair waving slightly in the breeze. A few beads of sweat ran down her face, despite the wind, however—she was probably suffocating in her thick clothing. Jerick shook his head, turning to look back up at the clouds. In many ways Ryalla was more unfathomable than the nobility Jerick had met. At least their motives made sense, even if they were usually selfish and unyielding. Why wear winter clothes in summer? Was it some kind of silent protest?

Her voice was quiet and subservient, as usual, and her face was docile, but that last statement had bordered on cynicism. Perhaps if he pushed a little harder . . .

"You're so pessimistic," he noted, still looking up at the sky, but watching Ryalla's reactions out of the corner of his eye.

"I am sorry, Master Jerick."

"I suppose it's difficult to be anything but pessimistic in your situation," he noted. "Then again, you must deserve it. The Nine Lords put everyone where they belong, slave, lumberman, or noble."

"That is true, Master Jerick."

"You and your brother were meant to be slaves."

"I suppose so, Master Jerick."

"In fact," Jerick mused, "perhaps your parents were guided to their traitorous deaths just so you could be given the caste you deserved."

At that statement, Jerick was just barely able to see the dark, angry look Ryalla shot him.

"What was that?" he asked immediately, sitting up and facing her in a quick movement.

She turned her eyes down. "What, Master Jerick?"

"That look you just gave me," Jerick demanded. "I think I saw true rebellion in it. Not a very slave-like attitude, is it?"

Ryalla paused, silent for a moment. "What is my punishment?" she finally asked.

"Your punishment," Jerick informed her, lying back down, "is to never call me 'Master Jerick' again."

The silence that followed was only broken by a renewed cracking of practice swords from below. Finally, Ryalla spoke. "Why not?" she asked, her voice perplexed.

"Because it makes me uncomfortable," Jerick said frankly. "I'm a lumberman, not the king."

"You sound as if you are proud of that fact," Ryalla said with confusion.

"That is because I am," Jerick said. "My father is a lumberman, and I am a lumberman. Why shouldn't I be proud?"

"You are a strange boy, Jerick," Ryalla said after a moment of thought.

"Why do you say that?"

"Other men scramble for titles and prestige like dogs eating scraps under the king's table. Most never get more than a taste—but you presume to throw away exactly what they long for."

"It suits me."

Ryalla thought on this for a moment longer. If there was one person in the palace who was more reserved than himself, it was Ryalla. She liked to think, and if you paused too long in a conversation, she would get a dreamy look in her eyes, as if her mind were traveling to some distant place.

"Do you believe what you said a minute ago?" she finally asked. "About my parents and caste?"

"I used to," Jerick admitted. "I'm not so certain anymore. I like being a lumberman, but, at the same time, I want being a lumberman to mean more. Does that make sense?"

"Kind of."

"Slaves, however, appear to be a different matter entirely," Jerick said. "I can't imagine the Nine Lords—except maybe Xeth the Black—putting anyone into another man's possession."

"Then why did you say what you did?" Ryalla asked, absently tracing the pattern on the front of one of his books. "Why intentionally make me angry?"

Jerick turned to look at her, an action that immediately caused Ryalla to look down at the ground again. Jerick ground his teeth in displeasure. It seemed he was making little, if any, progress.

Jerick sighed, looking back at the sky. "There was a man back in my village, the foreman, who was exactly what you pretend to be, Ryalla. Every time he saw a member of the nobility, he tripped over his own feet in his eagerness to serve them. He was truly subservient. You try, but you're too rebellious to ever be completely successful."

His words shocked her, he could tell. It was taboo to even hint that a person was acting outside his or her given caste. Finally, however, she spoke. "I am that transparent, then?" she asked.

"Only to me," Jerick said. "The others, they want you to accept your position. They can't see what their minds tell them isn't possible. I'm the opposite—I'd rather think that no one, not even a man born to it, could ever completely accept a life of slavery."

He glanced down, then, looking across the field to see why the fighting had stopped. When he looked back at Ryalla, she was smiling slightly. And she met his eyes.

MARTIS ACCEPTED A CUP OF WATER FROM ONE OF THE SERVANT BOYS, drank deeply, then poured the rest on his face. A short distance away the prince did the same, preparing for their third and final bout. Martis had won the previous two—if Yoharn didn't at least win one, he would look foolish before the court girls. Of course, that would be just fine with Martis.

Shaking out his tiring arms, Martis shot an unconcerned glance toward the girls sitting, as usual, beneath one of the garden's carefully-arranged trees. The garden was tolerable, though much too wild-looking for Martis's tastes. If he lived here, the garden would be different. He would straighten

the walking paths, prune the trees, and replace many of the wild-looking shrubs with easily maintained patches of flowers. Of course, if *he* lived in the palace, the garden would be the least of the changes he would make.

He smiled nonchalantly at several of the girls, who blushed at his attention. Of course, there was only one girl who really mattered. She sat at the head of the group, sitting slightly to the side as if she didn't care what was happening on the field before her. Martis knew otherwise. He could sense her infatuation with him. At times she played Martis off the peasant boy, Jerick, but she couldn't fool the son of a Kalord. No princess would ever stoop to the level of a peasant, no matter how privileged he might be.

Not that it wasn't frustrating to see her pouring affection on the insufferable lumberman, even if Martis knew it was for his benefit.

As he regarded the princess, Martis noticed a form approaching—a form so large it could only belong to one person. His father. Martis frowned; his father rarely came to watch his practices. What could have brought the Kalord to the palace?

Martis bowed as his father approached, waving for the cup-boy to leave them alone and taking a few steps to the side so that their conversation would be obscured from the others by a couple of large trees.

"Father," Martis said formally. Strafen was very firm on proper protocol, even where his family was concerned.

"Martis. How goes your training?" the Kalord's long, oval face was contemplative. He wanted something.

"Well, Father," Martis said. "I did not expect to see you at the palace today."

His father made a dismissive gesture with his thick-fingered hand. "The king called another of his meetings. It was, like the rest, of no importance. A lot of talk and no action."

Martis nodded, waiting for whatever it was his father intended to say to him.

"I saw you looking at the princess, son," Strafen mused, helping himself to a cup of water. His father's large form might have been lean and muscular once, but more of its muscle became flab with each passing year, and he often complained about the summer heat. Not that Strafen was anywhere near as rotund as the king, of course—he was far too tall and broad-chested for that.

"I was, Father," he said slowly.

"She is a desirable prize, son. Beautiful and well-bred. A union between our houses would bring many benefits, both in prestige and finances."

Yes, Martis thought to himself, *not to mention putting me only one step away*

from the throne. Of course, he knew that was not what his father implied. For all his intolerances and passions, the Kalord would never be able to bring himself to take the throne. Strafen saw himself as one who did what was best for the country, and he practically worshiped the king's divine right to rule. In the Kalord's eyes, that made him a patriot. In the eyes of his son, it only made him a coward.

The princess will be mine, Father, Martis thought to himself. *My motives, however, would probably surprise you.*

The Kalord was not through, however. "I spoke to the king after our meeting today, son," Strafen said. "He implied that that *boy* was doing very well in his studies. Better, even, than yourself."

So this is what he wants to talk about. "The lumberman does nothing but study, Father," Martis replied. "He has much more time than I do. I must deal with my training, court functions, and financial studies as well."

"He is only a peasant," Strafen said, staring through the trees toward the lumberman's barely-visible form. "By the Nine Lords' blessing, you can do better than he even if you had no time to study at all. I would not see the king win our bet simply because you refuse to put forth the necessary effort."

Martis snorted. "Your game with the king is nothing to me, Father. I have more important concerns."

He saw his father's fist coming, but his body was weakened from the day's exertions, and he wasn't able to move quickly enough. The blow took him in the chest, tumbling him back over the water barrel. The Kalord's hand quickly fell on Martis's shoulder, pulling him to his feet to stare Strafen directly in the face. His cheeks were red with rage, and his eyes large and wild.

"Do not speak to me so," Strafen growled.

The grip on Martis's shoulder tightened, and he had to clench his teeth to keep from crying out. Finally, he bowed his head. "Yes, Father," he whispered.

The pain in his shoulder did not stop. "My 'game' with the king carries with it the fate of life in Melerand as the Lords intend it. Fail, and you will not only humiliate our Ka, you will validate the king's foolish dreamings. You could destroy the nobility, boy! Do you want that?"

"No, Father." *Someday you won't be able to do this to me, Father.*

"You will study harder, and you will prove this boy a fool. You are of the noble caste, the Lords demand that you remind the king what that means."

"Yes, Father." *What will you do, Father, when I am bigger than you? What will you do when you punch and I do not fall? What will you do when I fight back? Then we will see who gets the bruises. Then we will see who rules our Ka.*

Strafen released his grip. "Continue your training, son, and do not forget what I have said."

Martis nodded as his father turned to go. "Yes, Father," he whispered to himself. "I will prove this lumberman an idiot, but not for you, for me." Courteth was using Jerick to make him jealous, and Martis realized that it was working. However, he could use her own ploy against her. If Martis defeated the lumberman soundly enough, she would be left without a pawn to use against him.

Except, the boy studied so much. Despite what Martis had implied, he had been studying, and he struggled to keep up with Jerick. Of course, it wasn't because the lumberman was smarter—that could not be. It was because Jerick had so much time, and because the instructors favored him.

Yoharn was calling for him to begin the final bout, and Martis nodded, picking up his sword. As he walked out onto the field, his eyes fell on the reclining lumberman. Jerick was watching them fight, as he usually did. At times, Martis thought he saw envy in the boy's eyes.

With that, a thought occurred to Martis. He raised his sword to engage Yoharn, a smile on his lips. Perhaps he couldn't out-study Jerick. However, maybe the lumberman could be distracted.

"WHAT'S SHE REALLY LIKE?"

Ryalla looked up at the question, regarding Jerick with confusion. "Who?" she asked.

"The princess," Jerick said. Only then did Ryalla notice the look in his eyes—the disgusting, empty-headed look he got whenever he spoke of Courteth. Even after a year's time, the infatuation was still as strong—perhaps even stronger—as it had been when he first arrived.

What was Courteth really like? Ryalla almost smirked at the question, asked as she sweltered, sweating beneath three layers of winter clothing—the latest of Courteth's punishment tactics. But, she could never say such things. Even if she weren't bound by her position as the princess's servant, Jerick would never believe her.

"She's . . . about what you would think," Ryalla said slowly, feeling her true self retreat back beneath a shell of subservience. No matter what Jerick said, no matter how open-minded he seemed to be, Ryalla knew there was no way he would be able to accept the truth about Courteth. Men grew angry when their goddesses were defamed.

"Ah," Jerick said, still looking across the field at the group of girls.

Martis and Yoharn had begun fighting again, this time more vigorously than ever.

Ryalla shook her head, turning back to her contemplation of Jerick's book. She couldn't make out any of the words, of course—reading was not a thing taught to slaves. Still, she tried. Courteth had once spelled out Ryalla's name for her; the princess was fond of proving her intelligence before her slave. Ryalla thought she recognized some of the same characters on the book cover. She couldn't be certain, however.

How lucky he is, Ryalla thought to herself. *And he doesn't even know it.* How often had she longed for an opportunity to learn? She wasn't like most peasants, who didn't know what they were missing. She had heard people describe how books could take a person away, describing to them different places—or even places that had never existed at all. Ryalla dreamt of being able to visit these places, she longed for the freedom of learning and ability. Anything to take her away from where she was now.

She wished she could explain those feelings to Jerick, but something stopped her. She had been a slave too long; she was too practiced at holding her thoughts to herself. The more time she spent with him, the more comfortable she became, but she doubted she would ever get to the point where she could express herself like they were equals. However, he seemed to be working hard to bring her true self out. Perhaps, someday, she would let him see it.

Jerick had changed much in the year since his arrival—and not just physically. The more time he spent around people, the more comfortable he became with crowds. She remembered well how quiet he had been upon first arriving at the palace—not that he still wasn't a little reticent, but he spoke much more now. He was becoming more and more like a noble every day. He had always been one to speak his mind, and now he did it with even more temerity than before. He had grown accustomed to giving orders, and expected them to be followed. And, he was able to catch people in subtle tricks of conversation, like he had used on Ryalla earlier.

Not that he was completely nobilicized. His demand that Ryalla refrain from calling him “Master” proved that. Jerick was something different—something with all the self-respect of a noble, but that cared little for what others thought of him. Except the princess, that was.

In this one area, no matter how progressive and learned he became, Jerick was woefully ignorant. Courteth could play with him more easily than she did with the king, and Jerick loved every minute of it.

The battle below came to a conclusion as Martis rapped Yoharn soundly

on the side of the head with his sword. It wasn't really a fair fight—Martis was not only a year older than the prince, but he was much taller as well. However, the prince bore defeat with the same icy-faced calm with which he accepted everything in life, nodding to his opponent before leaving the field.

Martis, however, remained where he was.

"Hey, lumberman," Martis called. "Are you ready for a little exercise?"

Jerick's head snapped up.

"Can't you hear me?" Martis yelled. "Are your books so interesting that you can't bear to part with them? Come on, I've been fighting for over an hour—I should be an easy win for a fresh opponent."

Jerick paused, then began to stand.

"Jerick . . ." Ryalla said cautioningly.

The lumberman, however, had already made up his mind, and Ryalla sighed, watching him go. Despite everything else, Jerick was still a boy. She had seen the longing in his eyes as he watched the other boys fight—he had that same foolish desire to prove himself that seemed burned into the heart of every boy.

Jerick accepted a practice sword from Martis, holding it awkwardly. The Kalord's son, however, didn't bother giving him any instruction—he simply began to attack. Jerick raised his weapon in a maladroit movement, and was completely thrown off-balance when Martis's sword changed motions mid-swing, sweeping across to slam into his chest.

"Come, lumberman," Martis mocked as Jerick stumbled, gasping for breath. "Surely you can do better than that."

Enraged, Jerick picked up his weapon and began to swing. Martis easily blocked the blow, then slapped him on the back as the lumberman stumbled past. What followed was a display so humiliating, Ryalla had to look away. Her eyes fell on Yoharn, who stood at the side of the field, watching the fight with cold eyes. His lips were expressionless as he wiped the sweat from his brow. Ryalla shivered at the lack of life she saw in the prince's face.

". . . the unrest in Aldvin, Your Majesty," a voice said, approaching from the palace's open passageway behind her. It sounded like Doram, the king's captain.

"The meeting determined nothing, Doram," the king's voice returned. "Though the shift in power bothers me as much as it does you. Aldvin has always been one of the most stable of the Middle Kingdoms. If it can fall so easily . . ."

The king's voice trailed off as he walked out into the sunlight, Doram at his side. "Is that Jerick down below?" he asked with surprise.

"It appears so, Your Majesty," Doram concurred.

The king's mouth closed, and he watched with dissatisfaction as Jerick got beaten to the ground. "It appears a monarch's command means little any more," he mumbled.

"Your Majesty only forbade him from training," Doram reminded. "Not from fighting."

"I assumed he would be smart enough to avoid both."

Doram raised an eyebrow. "Then Your Majesty has forgotten what it is like to be a young man."

The king shook his head, looking sick. "Let's go—I don't have the time, or the patience, to deal with this right now. We'll have to send an envoy to Aldvin, of course. The second one this year. The Lords curse it, when is Cephandrius going to return! I need his input on this."

The king's voice disappeared the same way it had come. As it did, Jerick took one final blow to the stomach, dropping his sword with a cry of agony and stumbling to the ground.

THE PAIN WAS AMAZING. JERICK HAD ASSUMED HE WOULD LOSE, BUT HE had thought he would give a better showing of himself. Jerick had imagined fighting Martis at least a hundred times in his mind; but now, when he finally got the opportunity, he hadn't even given the larger boy cause to sweat.

Martis's blond-haired face gloated above him. "I'm afraid I can't feel too proud of that victory," the Kalord's son, said with a shake of his head. "You didn't even try, lumberman."

Jerick tried to croak a response, but his chest hurt too much to vocalize.

"Perhaps you should practice, boy. Then maybe you'll be a challenge."

Jerick rolled to his knees, his head bowed in pain. What had he been thinking? He had assumed . . . he didn't know what he had assumed. One thing he knew; next time would be different. The Lords could curse those books—when it came down to the test, they did him no good. He could hear Courteth and the other girls laughing behind him. Martis had told him to practice, and somehow he would. He would find a way to get the king's permission, and next time he would win.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“THE ROOM IS GUARDED BY FOUR MEN: TWO AT THE HEAD OF THE PASSAGE and two in the sword chamber itself. The tiles surrounding the sword, and therefore the bookshelf, are pressure sensitive. A weight of more than a couple of pounds will make them sink, triggering a bell-alarm loud enough to bring half the city running. It also drops a bronze door to seal off the room. The door can only be opened by a crank on the outside.”

Topaz sat at one side of their small room, explaining the dangers they were about to face with a calm voice.

“Thees ees a lot of securety for one sword,” Bat’Chor noted.

Topaz shrugged. “There’s enough Dragonsteel in that hilt to buy half of Melerand. Besides, the legends about the Blade of Gzai say the one who bears it is blessed of the Lords never to fail in battle.”

Topaz must have noticed how Bat’Chor’s eyebrows raised at the comment, for the jesk snorted, continuing, “Don’t even think about it, Bat’Chor. Blessings of invincibility are common to relics and items of supposed power; there’s a mummified earlobe down in southern Tzendor that’s supposed to do the same thing.”

“I was not conseedering taking the sword,” Bat’Chor huffed back. “He ees a pagan releec. A follower of ’Cheru Tar would never associate weeth such a thing.”

“Of course not,” Topaz agreed. “Anyway, every half dozen years or so someone makes a serious attempt at stealing the blade, and the temple clergy

have learned that erring on the side of safety is just about impossible where magic swords are concerned.”

“Thees certainly makes our job deefeeecult,” Bat’Chor agreed. His face was beginning to itch beneath its makeup, and he had to work hard to keep his fingers from attacking the offending irritation.

Topaz nodded. “Fortunately, we are going to have a little bit of help.”

“Help?” Bat’Chor asked hesitantly.

Topaz did not answer—he just smiled in his insufferably knowing way, then leaned back against the wall with his eyes closed. Bat’Chor waited less patiently, his fingers twitching with the desire to scratch his face. Beneath the makeup Topaz had applied, Bat’Chor could feel stubble beginning to sprout—the disguise wouldn’t hold for much longer.

Suddenly, Bat’Chor thought he heard something. Outside, one of the other cubicle doors opened. It was late, past midnight Bat’Chor guessed, though he couldn’t be certain. What reason could another pilgrim have for rising?

“Topaz—” Bat’Chor said warningly.

“I heard it,” he said nonchalantly. “We’ve got a few more minutes to wait.”

Bat’Chor sighed, rubbing his back against the wall to sate one itch, at least. The room was stuffy and cramped—Bat’Chor swore he could smell the lingering scent of the last dozen people who had occupied it. Topaz claimed their cubicle was built against the temple’s outside wall, and if that were true Bat’Chor couldn’t understand why the architects hadn’t been decent enough to put a window—even a slit—in the room.

“All right,” Topaz finally said. “Let’s go.”

Bat’Chor nodded, rising and arranging his skirts. Topaz was much more fortunate in his apparel—he wore only a simple brown robe. When the jesk stooped and contorted his body, pretending to be an old man, the thick robe all but enveloped him.

Topaz inched their door open, and Bat’Chor breathed in the relatively sweet air of the hallway outside. It was dark, no torches or lanterns shining, but this hallway did bear a window at the far end, which provided some illumination.

Topaz waved him forward, creeping down the hallway toward the main chamber. Bat’Chor followed silently—Topaz had commented numerous times on how comical it was to see a large Ke’Chan creep. As usual, Bat’Chor had suffered the gibes in silence. He didn’t care how he looked; the mere fact that Topaz brought him along on these escapades spoke for his ability to move silently. Silly-looking or not.

The main chamber was brighter. The windows of colored glass seemed to glow with muted blues and grays, the moon shining behind them. The colors weren't as spectacular as during the day, but they seemed more beautiful to Bat'Chor. There was more harmony to them, more subtlety.

Topaz continued to move forward, slinking down an aisle of pews toward the back of the room. Bat'Chor, knowing he could never fit his bulk between the closely-packed ranks of seats, went around another way. He took his time, moving silently, especially as he approached the tunnel leading to the sword chamber. Topaz had claimed that here there would be guards.

Only there weren't. The gaping black mouth of the tunnel stood empty, its gold inlays twinkling softly in the moonlight. Bat'Chor looked over at Topaz with confusion, but the jesk only waved him to follow, moving away from the passage door. Curious, Bat'Chor followed.

Topaz stopped next to a long tapestry a short distance away. With a dramatic sweep of his hand, Topaz pulled back the tapestry to reveal a small wooden door.

Despite himself, Bat'Chor snorted. Who would hide a secret passage in such an obvious place?

Topaz fiddled with the lock for a moment, opening it with a silent click. A few moments later the two were standing in a short, cramped passage, waiting for their eyes to adjust to the darkness. Topaz had located a shielded lantern on the wall, and, after lighting the wick, he opened the slit just enough to give Bat'Chor a good look at their surroundings.

What Bat'Chor saw surprised him. He had been in secret passages before—he knew what to expect. Spiderwebs, dust, perhaps long forgotten items discarded on the floor. Instead he found brooms, buckets, and several mops. It wasn't a secret passage at all; it was nothing more than a service closet. What was Topaz doing?

Except, the closet extended on into darkness. It was a passage after all, but it was well-maintained. A service hallway of some sort?

"What ees thees?" he whispered.

Topaz simply smiled, motioning him to follow. After a short walk they found themselves in a squat chamber filled with what looked like hanging ropes and counterweights.

"The problem with complex traps like sinking floor tiles and alarms, my friend," Topaz explained quietly as they entered the room, "is that they require an entire roomful of mechanisms to make them work—mechanisms

that often need regular maintenance. The temple's protective devices may be impressively modern, but they're probably not all that practical."

"Impressively modern" seemed like an understatement to Bat'Chor. He had never seen contraptions like the ones that now surrounded him. The counterweights he understood—he had seen those used to aid in the opening and closing of heavy gates. Other items, however, baffled him—such as the odd wheel-like devices that had jagged interlocking teeth.

Topaz walked over to one of these, running his fingers along its edge and shaking his head.

"What ees he?" Bat'Chor asked.

"I don't know," Topaz confessed, looking at the device from several angles.

"Cephandrius, you have leaved for decades studying een Trexandos. They know everything there."

"Apparently not," Topaz whispered. "I've never seen anything like this before, Bat'Chor. I'd wondered how the imperial architects had managed to make their traps work. But, that is a problem for another time. Come, look."

Bat'Chor shuffled over to where the jesk stood. Topaz opened a hatch on the wall, revealing a box containing a lantern. As Topaz removed the lantern, Bat'Chor could see that the back of the box was made of yellow glass. Yellow glass that looked into the chamber containing the Blade of Gzai.

"Why . . ." Bat'Chor began, then he understood. When they had stood in the Blade's chamber, it had seemed to shine with a powerful light—more light than should have been possible from the small torches. He had assumed that the room's metallic walls and ceiling were responsible, but now he saw that such was only part of the illusion. Lanterns built into the walls must have given the room its supernatural glow.

"A trick," Bat'Chor mumbled.

"A trick indeed," Topaz agreed with quiet mockery. "My beliefs are crushed. The Nine Lords must not exist."

"Be quiet," Bat'Chor grumbled. "How deed you know thees place was here?"

"I've been studying the temple for years now, Bat'Chor." Topaz replied. "You have no idea how long it took me to find the entrance to this maintenance hallway."

"Why wait unteel now to take the scroll, then?" Bat'Chor asked.

"Because the time was not right." Topaz turned, looking through the glass window. "Looks like our friends are almost done."

"What?" Bat'Chor asked with surprise, taking a better look through the window. It was small, and the first time he had only been able to see the side of the sword's case. Now, angling his view slightly, he could see that the room was not empty. Four guards in white vests lay unconscious near the room's door, and five men stood up against the ropes separating the safe area and the dangerous floor tiles. The men were clothed in what appeared to be simple peasant's garb, though it was hard to tell through the window's distortion. Each of the five robbers held a long, claw-edged pole in his hand and together they were lifting the glass hood off the sword. Apparently Topaz wasn't the only thief disguised as a pilgrim on this particular trip.

"I wonder how long they had to practice before they got that one right," Topaz wondered as the men carefully balanced the glass on the end of their poles and brought it into the reach of a sixth man standing beside the opposite wall.

"Eempresseeve," Bat'Chor agreed. "You knew they would be here, I assume?"

"Of course," Topaz said with a smirk. "I, the great Cephandrius Maxtori, know all things." Then he shot another look at the room's strange mechanisms. "With a few noted exceptions," he added.

The five men were now reaching their poles forth again to retrieve the blade itself. Bat'Chor shook his head at the ease of the theft. "For the same cost as all these strange devices, the government probably could have hired two dozen men to guard the sword all day and night."

"Ah, Bat'Chor," Topaz chided. "Where's your sense of progress?"

"I am a beesinessman," Bat'Chor replied. "Progress must make money to be worth the price."

"I thought you were a warrior," Topaz noted, fiddling with the side of the lantern box for a moment.

"That too," Bat'Chor added.

Topaz shrugged, watching through the window. The men had the Blade of Gzai out of its case, and were carefully bringing it over to their friend.

"I wonder if they're revolutionaries looking for a symbol of power, or simple thieves seeking the ultimate prize?" Topaz mused.

"Does it matter?"

Topaz shrugged. "Probably not—either way, they *are* stealing."

"And, what exactly do we plan to do tonight?" Bat'Chor pointed out.

"Us?" Topaz asked, reaching his hand into the box. "We'll just be

collecting what we deserve. After this night, the temple will owe us. You should hold your ears.”

With that, the jesk pushed the glass loose from the back of the box, dropping it into the room beyond. It crashed to the floor just beyond the rope barrier and, Bat’Chor noted with alarm, one of the counterweights behind him began to sink. He covered his ears just before a loud noise from directly overhead rang through the temple.

He couldn’t hear the men in the other room cry in surprise, but he saw their mouths open. They dropped the sword in their startlement. A large bronze door crashed shut behind them, sealing the room.

Bat’Chor uncovered his ears timidly, then another peal from the bell rocked the room, causing him to curse and re-cover his ears. “What now?” he demanded.

“We see if they’re as good as they think they are,” Topaz replied, barely audible through the ringing in Bat’Chor’s ears. The jesk seemed completely unfazed by the noise which continued above, though Bat’Chor could barely keep from recoiling in pain every time the sound assaulted his ears.

Bat’Chor peeked back into the blade’s chamber, and in a moment he saw what Topaz was talking about. Slowly, the bronze gate began to rise. The thieves had a man on the outside, prepared to release them in a time of emergency. One of the thieves grabbed the Blade of Gzai, and then the entire bunch shuffled through the half-open doorway. Then the room fell still, the only illumination a lantern that had been dropped by one of the fleeing thieves.

“Keep watch here for a moment,” Topaz said with a leisurely tone. He walked over and pulled on a handle, opening a door in the side of the room, then stepped out onto the safe part of the blade chamber’s floor. After that, he simply strolled across the boobytrapped floor and kneeled down to begin picking the lock on the glass-fronted bookshelf.

After a moment’s wait, Bat’Chor noticed something. With alarm, he realized the door at the front of the room had begun to open again. Someone was coming. Bat’Chor yelped in warning, but Topaz didn’t come dashing back as he should have. Instead the man simply stood up and waved for Bat’Chor to close the small service door.

Not questioning, Bat’Chor responded, pulling the door shut. If one of them were to be discovered, the other needed to remain free to provide rescue. Of course, there was no need for Topaz to get caught—he probably could have made it back through the door in time. Bat’Chor rushed over to

the window to look as his friend was captured. He arrived in time to see three white-vested guards ducking under the partially opened door.

"What took you so long?" a voice asked in perfect Tzendish. Bat'Chor blinked in surprise; Topaz sat pulling on an almost unnoticed lever at the side of the room. He had taken off his brown robe and thrown it in a corner. Underneath he wore the same white-vested uniform of a temple guard.

"What—" one of the men began, but Topaz cut him off.

"Don't just stand there, help me with this cursed thing!" Topaz ordered, pulling down on the lever. "Blasted contraption is stuck."

One of the guards hurried over, helping Topaz pull on the lever. As it locked into place, the bell above fell silent.

Topaz sighed in relief. "I hate that thing," he confessed. "Well, have the thieves been caught?"

"No—" one of the guards began.

"They haven't? What are you doing here? Get to the city gates! You know the drill!"

"But—"

"I'll take care of them," Topaz said, pointing at the guards the thieves had knocked unconscious. "You go. Now!"

Without another word of complaint, the three men dashed from the room, following the jesk's orders. As they left Topaz shot a look at the window where he knew Bat'Chor would be watching, and then raised his eyes in exasperation. Bat'Chor could almost hear Topaz's voice in his head. *They really should hire more intelligent guards.*

Topaz knelt beside the chest again, moving quickly. The lock, however, refused to open.

"De'Herric!" Bat'Chor heard Topaz curse. "Bat'Chor, I have need of your specialized talents."

Bat'Chor pulled open the door and entered the small domed room. Topaz rose, gesturing toward the chest.

"You can't pick heem?" Bat'Chor asked with amusement.

"Their locks are as advanced as their architecture," Topaz muttered. "I was afraid of that."

"Allow me," Bat'Chor said, pushing past Topaz. He bent over, lifting the large box-like chest high into the air. Then he dropped it. The chest shattered, cracking a few floor tiles as it did.

Topaz nodded. "I knew you would be useful." He bent over, pulling a scroll from the rubble. He perused the beginning of it for a moment, then dropped it. The second one proved more to his liking, and he tucked

it under his arm and nodded for them to go. Bat'Chor followed him back through the small side door into the service hallway.

"We'll have to be careful going back," Topaz said, handing the scroll to Bat'Chor and redonning his robe. "We'll be in trouble if anyone sees my face."

"You can hardly expect the same guards to recognize you," Bat'Chor scoffed.

"It's not that, my friend. It's the makeup—or, rather, lack thereof." Topaz gestured to a black and pink stain on the side of his robe, and Bat'Chor realized with surprise that the makeup was gone—rubbed free as the guards entered. They would never have believed an old man to be a member of their force.

"Let's go," Topaz said. "It probably won't be long before they decide to check this passageway."

Bat'Chor nodded, letting the jesk lead the way as they approached the end of the hallway. He was wondering how they were going to slip back to their room now that the entire temple was awake. He needn't have worried. As Topaz cracked open the service door, Bat'Chor could see dozens of forms milling around in the main chapel—and only a few of them wore the white vests. Most were pilgrims, wide-eyed and frightened. A few guards were unsuccessfully trying to herd them back toward their rooms.

"Come on," Topaz said slipping out into the room. Bat'Chor followed, imitating the other pilgrims' looks of terror. Topaz helped from behind, adding to the confusion by calling out random phrases such as, "Assassins? How many have they killed?" or "If we aren't safe here, where are we safe?"

The two allowed a guard to point them back toward their room, meandering in the direction he ordered. Just before they left the main chapel, however, Topaz stopped, frozen in place.

"What?" Bat'Chor asked, nearly running into him.

"I don't know," Topaz said. His face wasn't visible beneath the robe's deep cowl, but Bat'Chor could sense the confusion in his voice.

Suddenly, the jesk turned, looking toward the broad gates at the front of the chapel. A form had just entered, pushing his way past the guards. He was tall—taller than any Tzend Bat'Chor had ever seen—and he wore a tight breastplate that looked like it was constructed of some kind of white leather. On his back he had a long white cloak, and besides a pair of white gloves and a gray pair of leggings, his only other clothing was a simple gold belt. He was handsome and thin-faced, and had the tall

frame of Nyor Tzend. His most distinguishing feature, however, was a deep purple—almost black—birthmark that covered the right side of his face.

Suddenly Topaz groaned beside him—an alarming sound. Bat'Chor had never heard Topaz cry out in pain before. Bat'Chor looked down, supporting his friend's crumpling form. Topaz seemed to be clutching his hand for some reason. The hand that held the large topaz ring that was his namesake. Bat'Chor reached down, as if to pull the glove off Topaz's hand and look for some wound, but he stopped. The ring—the entire hand—was pulsing like a second heart.

"No," Topaz ordered. "Help me to my feet."

The jesk struggled up, allowing Bat'Chor to support his weight. Topaz's body throbbed with a rhythmic beat—it was the strangest and most frightening thing Bat'Chor had ever experienced.

"Topaz?" Bat'Chor asked with concern.

The jesk was staring across the room, his eyes locked with those of the stranger. The white-clothed man had noticed them. He took a step forward, his face hard, his eyes narrowed.

"Move!" Topaz ordered, stumbling toward the hallway to their rooms.

Bat'Chor needed no further prodding. Topaz seemed to have found his equilibrium, and the jesk moved with increasing stability as they hurried down the hall. Topaz had obviously hoped to exit through the doors at the end of the hallway, but a squad of armed guards stood blocking it.

Looking to the side, Topaz pushed open the door to their chamber, stumbling inside and flopping down on the mattress. Bat'Chor pushed the door shut behind them, knowing full well that they were now trapped. With a sigh, he lit the squat candle beside the bed. Hopefully Topaz had a plan.

"Let us pray, my friend, that whoever that was decides not to follow us."

It wasn't much of a plan. "Who was he?" Bat'Chor demanded.

"I don't know," Topaz said, pulling off his glove. "I've never seen him before." The jesk's hand looked normal—if you could call a hand bearing such an enormous, priceless jewel normal.

"He . . ." Bat'Chor began. "He wasn't a normal man, was he?" It had taken him years of accompanying Topaz to accept the fact that there could be things in the world that went beyond normal understanding. He still wasn't convinced, but he was open to the possibility.

"No," Topaz affirmed. "That much, I do know." Then his head snapped up in alarm, and he uttered a quiet curse. "He's coming."

Bat'Chor swore. Then, making a decision, he reached up and began to

rub away his makeup and tear off the folds of leather Topaz had used to imitate skin, revealing his face underneath. A second later he had torn away the dress and padding underneath, finally giving his body a chance to breathe. Then, garbed only in his undercloth, Bat'Chor reached down to the padding that had formed his false stomach and pulled out his sheathed azorban. The long, curved Ke'Chan sword whipped forth easily—he'd felt naked without it.

A pounding came from the door. Bat'Chor pulled it open mid-knock, surprising the white-vested guard outside, whose hand was raised to pound on the door. Bat'Chor caught the man's hand in his large Ke'Chan fist and yanked the startled Tzend into the room, slamming him into the far wall. The guard tumbled to the ground unconscious as Bat'Chor slammed the door closed again. He briefly caught a glimpse of the strange white-clothed man approaching down the hallway.

"We fight, then," Bat'Chor said, feeling his body grow tense with anticipatory energy. He'd begun to fear they would finish the entire theft without any real fighting.

"Not if I can help it," Topaz declared, looking sick at the word "fight." The jesk pushed his way past Bat'Chor, stepping over the fallen guard to lay his hand against the door. The wood swelled against its frame, cracking slightly as it expanded. A second later the handle to their room turned, but the door did not move.

"Topaz, I've seen you do that treck before. He won't keep them out for long."

"I know," Topaz said, climbing atop the mattress and pulling the glove off his other hand. With his eyes closed, he pressed his palms against the stone wall to their room. Bat'Chor lowered his sword slightly as he watched, transfixed by the jesk's movements.

He had seen hints of marvelous acts from Topaz. Nothing blatant or grand, just clues—clues that had eventually led Bat'Chor to accept the possibility that there might be things in the world he did not understand. However, old traditions still ran strong in Bat'Chor's heart. Like most of his kind, Bat'Chor scoffed at the Horwatchers and wizards who preyed off the insecurities of the masses. Magic, he told himself, was a thing of fools and con men.

In that room, however, as men called outside and axes began to break through the door, Bat'Chor finally believed. There were no flashes or smoke, like the Horwatchers always produced. There were no incantations

or prayers to unseen spirit benefactors. There was just Topaz, his hands pressed flat against the wall, his eyes closed tightly, and his breathing regular.

And cracks began to appear at the base of the wall. They crept up across the surface, sticking mostly to the mortar, slipping around the sides of stones, melding and joining like tiny rivers. It was amazing. It was impossible. But it was happening.

Then it stopped, and Topaz groaned, falling backward. Bat'Chor caught him with one hand, still gripping his sword with the other.

"It's no use," Topaz mumbled, sweat streaming down his face. He took a deep, gasping breath. "I have no talent in this area, Bat'Chor. When particles are in a solid state I can barely move them." Then his eyes opened and he uprighted himself, placing his hand on the wall for support. He pounded his other fist against the unyielding stone. "Curse the Lords, Bat'Chor, curse them! I have no power to destroy, even to save my own life."

An axe blade sheered through the door behind them, and Bat'Chor raised his weapon again. It looked like a fight after all.

"No!" Topaz insisted, slapping his palms against the wall again. This time he left his eyes opened, his teeth clenched and gleaming in the candlelight. His eyes unfocused, as if he were looking at something beyond the wall—something Bat'Chor could not see, and never would be able to see.

Then, the wall began to grow. Or, rather, the wall began to sprout. As Bat'Chor watched, molds and fungus seemed to appear out of nothing, growing in the cracks Topaz had already created. Topaz's ring began to pulse with light, shining far brighter than the room's candle. The fungi sprouted larger and larger, coating the entire wall in a blanket of greens, browns, and oranges. Then the stones began to shatter. They popped and groaned as the fungi grew in the cracks, forcing them apart, then grew again in the new cracks they had created.

Finally Topaz lowered his hands, looking exhausted. The wall before him was a mass of weakened stone and mold. "Bat'Chor, could you . . . ?"

Bat'Chor nodded, slamming his bulk against the weakened stone wall. It gave slightly beneath his weight. Bat'Chor growled, then threw his shoulder against the stones again. With an enormous groan of protest, the entire wall crumbled outward, dust, stone, and chips scattering across the dark alley beyond.

Topaz sighed, stumbling to his feet. "Come on," he said, crawling out into the alley.

Bat'Chor resheathed his sword and stepped over the rubble into the dark night beyond. Topaz was trying to rise, wobbling uncertainly. Taking

one look back at the axes still pounding on the room's door, Bat'Chor reached over and unceremoniously picked Topaz up and slung the jesk over his shoulder. Then he rushed into the darkness, leaving the temple—and whatever it was that had wanted to catch them—behind.

THE SHIP ROCKED WITH THE TIMELESS RHYTHM OF THE WAVES, ITS motions reminding Bat'Chor of how much they were at the mercy of the elements. At any time the sea could toss them aside like a scrap of cloth in the wind, whipping them and crushing them, sending them all to gloryless graves on the ocean bottom. It would be a horrifying, icy death.

Bat'Chor did not like sailing.

"There is mold in everything, Bat'Chor," Topaz explained, answering the Ke'Chan's question. The jesk sat at their cabin's desk, scratching idly at a sheet of paper with his long feather pen. "Or, at least, its seeds are everywhere. It hangs in the air we breathe, coats the surfaces we walk on, and lives wherever there is enough water. Where did you think it came from?"

Bat'Chor shrugged, sitting in a comfortable chair on the other side of the cabin. One thing about traveling with Topaz—the jesk spared no expense. Their cabin was lavish, the meals good, and the ship well-piloted. Of course, that was small compensation for nearly getting him killed back in the temple a week before.

"I assumed mold just . . . appeared."

Topaz snorted. "Nothing just appears, Bat'Chor. Everything comes from something—you sound like a Horwatcher, trying to convince the people that maggots are born from rotten meat."

"They aren't?" Bat'Chor asked slowly.

"Of course not," Topaz scoffed, not looking up as he dipped his pen in the inkwell. "Flies lay eggs on the meat, which hatch into maggots and in turn become flies themselves. The problem with people, Bat'Chor, is that they assume because they can't see something it doesn't exist. Mold spores might be small, but they are around us nonetheless. Of course, I would never have been able to use them to break the wall if I hadn't cracked it already."

Bat'Chor took a deep breath, preparing to ask the question he hadn't let himself voice during their travel back to Hsiton to meet the ship. "All right, Topaz. How do you do that? *How* deed you make the spores grow?"

Topaz looked up from his writing. Then he shrugged, and looked down again. "If I knew, I'd tell you."

"You don't know?" Bat'Chor asked incredulously. "You don't even understand what you deed?"

"Of course I understand," Topaz said. "I'm not a Horwatcher, fiddling with things I can't possibly comprehend. I could see the spores, and I knew what I was doing when I lent them the power to grow, but I still don't know *how* I do these things. Or, more accurately, I don't know why I can do them and no one else can. When I can answer that, my friend, I will be a lot closer to knowing what exactly we will have to face in the future."

"And closer to understanding what that person een white was," Bat'Chor added.

Topaz looked up again, then nodded. "Yes, that too. I did some asking before we left Kido. That man was a member of the Emperor's personal guard, sent to inquire why the bells had been set off."

"Emperor Aronack?" Bat'Chor asked with surprise. "Hees personal guard?"

"Apparently Aronack arrived in the town not long after we did," Topaz said, once again scribbling on his paper.

Bat'Chor scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Eenteresting," he said simply.

"Indeed," Topaz agreed.

"What ees that you are writing?" Bat'Chor asked, rising to peer over Topaz's shoulder. The jesk wasn't writing at all—he was drawing. The paper held an exact replica of the strange alarm mechanisms they had seen in the temple, as seen from different angles.

Bat'Chor nodded appreciatively. It was a good rendition, far more detailed than he would have thought possible. Of course, he knew full well that Topaz's memory was impossibly precise.

"You're going to take these with you to Trexandos," Topaz explained, gesturing to the drawings. "Along with the scroll—I don't have time to spend translating it now, and there are others who can do a better job."

"You're not coming to the ceety weeth me?" Bat'Chor asked with surprise.

"No."

"But we're going to dock there."

"I'll have the captain drop me off on the mainland—I don't have time to deal with the pleasantries of Trexandian politics right now."

Bat'Chor shrugged, wandering back over to his chair and trying to ignore the swaying of the deck beneath him. "Where weell you go?"

"Back to Melerand," Topaz explained. "With a few detours. I need to check on some things. I would appreciate it if you would bring the translation to me in Melerand as soon as it's finished."

Bat'Chor shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

Topaz smiled. "It should take them at least six months, Bat'Chor, if not a year. You'll have time to go and attend your father's Rendar."

Bat'Chor nodded his head. He had been away from the dealings of his clan for too long, not to mention his business enterprises. His escapades with Topaz were exciting and important, but unlike the jesk, Bat'Chor had a life beyond gallivanting across the three continents.

"All right," he said. "Assuming the translation ees feenished, I weell meet you een Melerand one year from thees day."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE BRONZE SWORD SWIPED AT JERICK'S HEAD. HE BROUGHT HIS OWN weapon up, barely turning his opponent's blade away. Immediately, Jerick turned his sword to the side, catching the backhand that he knew would follow. He skipped backward, preparing a thrust of his own, only to change his plans as Doram attacked again, his movements incredibly quick. A rapid series of parries followed, ending with the flat side of Doram's blade slapping Jerick on the chest, throwing him off balance until he stumbled back, colliding with the wall, dropping his weapon.

"You're improving," Doram noted, lowering his weapon and relaxing from his battle-ready stance.

Jerick found that hard to believe. They stood in one of the palace's empty ballrooms, a chamber that had been appropriated by Doram to use for weapon training in the winter. The carefully polished wood floor was covered with large, immobile rugs that gave the feet good purchase, and the large open area was perfect for fighting. Of course, it was difficult to keep properly heated, especially with only one stove.

Jerick rubbed his stomach, retrieving his weapon from the floor and walking over to get something to drink. The room was empty save for the two of them, which suited Jerick just fine. He wouldn't want anyone else to see the pathetic show he made for himself during his weekly training with the king's captain.

Doram got himself some water as well, though he didn't look like he needed it. The squat man didn't ever seem to get tired or sweat while they

trained—probably because Jerick was so little of a challenge. Still, even though Jerick knew how poorly he was doing, he couldn't help feeling a bit of pride at Doram's compliment. One thing he had learned about Doram during the last year—the man was perfectly, even bluntly, honest. If he said Jerick was improving, then he was. Even if that improvement was slow.

Jerick looked up as he drank, studying his trainer. Doram was from Aldbin, directly south of Melerand, a land populated mostly by cattlemen and farmers. Doram, however, was no farmer. Though he had the typical shortness of a cattleman, his arms and chest were powerful enough that he could never be mistaken for anything but a warrior. He was short and squat, with thick, well-muscled legs that Jerick had soon discovered were impossible to budge once Doram determined not to move. He kept his hair incredibly short, almost shaven, and he had a wide nose and flat face.

With a start, Jerick realized Doram had noticed his scrutiny and was looking directly back at him. Blushing, Jerick buried his face in his cup of water. Then, trying to cover his lack of tact, he asked the first question that came to his mind.

“Doram, is it true that you fought in the Eternal War?”

The question caught the older man off guard. After a moment, however, he nodded, gulping down the rest of his drink. “I did. Many, many years ago.”

Jerick perked up. He had assumed the tale was just a rumor. “It must have been exciting,” he said.

Doram shrugged. “At times.”

Jerick paused. “Are you a nobleman, then?” he asked with interest. As far as he knew, only the nobility went to the Eternal War.

Doram snorted, shaking his head. “I was a cattleman who hated horses.”

“But . . .”

“Melerand only sends noblemen to the war, boy, but that's not the way it is on the rest of the continent. Peasants can be fodder for the Sho Del just as well as noblemen can. Melerand just restricts itself to nobility because they're more expendable.”

Jerick's eyes opened wide at the comment, and he choked on his water. “What?” he asked incredulously.

“Oh, they'll tell you it's for glory's sake, boy, but that's only half true,” Doram said, putting away his sword with a leisurely motion. “Melerand has more trees than it can cut down, and the demand for lumber in the south is so great that every lumberman is needed. The king can't afford to ship peasants off to be slaughtered on the Shattered Plains, and

the other monarchs realize this. The second and third sons of some Kalord, however . . .”

Jerick paused, considering the comment. It was odd—almost blasphemous—but it was also true. Could it be that the lumbermen of Melerand were actually more important than the nobility?

“Then . . .” Jerick said, realizing something, “you mean *I* could fight in the Eternal War if I wanted to?”

“If you wanted to,” Doram said with a nod of his head. “But you don’t want to. Trust me. You don’t want to.”

“But the glory,” Jerick protested.

“Glory? Thousands of men throwing their lives away in a land far from their home? There is no glory in that.”

“But we need protection from the Sho Del,” Jerick insisted. “The Eternal War is the only thing that keeps them from overrunning the continent.”

Doram shrugged. “I’m not so certain that’s true, boy. From the reports I’ve heard, U Ponì Sho Del is far more beautiful than Yolen. What could they want with our land? No, when it comes down to it, I suspect there is only one thing behind the Eternal War.”

“Dragonsteel,” Jerick finished.

Doram nodded. “If those Dragonsteel wells weren’t there on the Shattered Plain, I think you’d find the Eternal War much less of a priority.”

Jerick considered the comment for a moment. It went against all he had been taught. True, he knew that the Plains held the only source of Dragonsteel on the three continents, but . . . where was the glory in simply fighting for wealth? There had to be more behind it. The Eternal War was the proving ground of men, the place where honor was shown and renown won. It was a place of valor and glory.

“Besides, boy,” Doram noted. “You wouldn’t last half an hour in the Eternal War.”

“But, you just told me I’m improving,” Jerick huffed, sheathing his own sword—a gift for his fifteenth birthday.

“I’m teaching you gentleman’s fencing, boy,” Doram explained with a snort. “It’s completely different from disciplined combat.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you really think you have time to trade strikes and parries for a half hour on the battlefield?” Doram asked. There was no mockery in his tone, only solid factuality. “Think about it Jerick—what good would this form of intricate combat do you when you’re facing five men with body-sized shields,

each one protecting the other? You had better hope that you have four friends with shields as well, and that your men can hit harder than their men.”

Jerick tried hard not to be disillusioned by the comment. Doram hadn’t been in a real war for years now—he couldn’t possibly remember what it was like.

The older warrior continued, however. “No, boy, war is not a thing of finesse or delicacy. You don’t trade blows for five minutes at a time, searching carefully for an opening. You hit hard, and then you keep hitting until your opponent falls down. The techniques you’re learning will work fine if you only have one opponent at a time—or even a scattered group—but the Sho Del fight in formations. In war, you don’t fight an individual, you fight a squadron.”

Doram picked up his weapons and began to walk out of the room. “Trust me, boy. Leave the glory for those foolish enough to want it. I will see you next week.”

Jerick nodded as the man left. The king had finally agreed to let Jerick train with Doram, but only after he had spent hours trying to learn to fight on his own. He still didn’t receive the same amount of training as Martis or Yoharn; they met with Doram three times a week. Still, once a week was better than none, and during the last year Jerick had felt his strength and abilities increase. He had yet to defeat Martis—they sparred on occasion—but that day would come.

Doram stopped at the doorway, standing aside and bowing slightly as a golden-haired figure appeared. Jerick turned with surprise, nearly dropping his weapon in alarm. The princess.

Courteth glided into the room, followed by a less-radiant Ryalla. Jerick knew it must be his foolishness, but he could swear every time Courteth entered a room, it brightened visibly. The shadowed recesses and corners didn’t seem so dark, and the room’s colors appeared to grow more vibrant.

Two years had changed Courteth immensely. Where her beauty had once promised, it now fulfilled. Though barely fifteen, a few months younger than Jerick, Courteth seemed like a woman years older. Perhaps it was her bearing, always calm and dignified, or perhaps it was her body, which had matured much more quickly than other girls her age. Wide hips and a full bosom now gave shape to her well-fed figure, marking the princess as first among women, both in rank and in beauty.

Beside her, as always, was the almost unnoticeable Ryalla. Slight and

rather small, Ryalla's body was struggling to catch up with that of her mistress, and it was obvious that it never would. She would always look underfed, never achieving the healthy level of plumpness that attended all those of true noble comeliness. Her figure had yet to fill out as a woman's should, and her short, chin-length hair, though clean and well-kept, would always prove her lowly station.

"Oh," Courteth said as she wafted in Jerick's direction, "have we missed the training? I had so hoped to see you practicing, Jerick."

Jerick felt himself blush. "I apologize, princess," he replied with a slight bow. "We have finished." *And a good thing, too*, he added in his mind. *Considering my performance.*

The princess's lips turned down slightly with disappointment as she drew close to him. Sometime during the last few months she had started wearing perfume, and the flowery scent crept through the air to tickle Jerick's senses. The fragrance almost seemed to stun, making his vision cloud until only Courteth was visible before him. Following the latest Fallin dress fashions, Courteth wore a single-piece sleeveless violet gown, instead of the customary shirt and skirt. Though it was very loose at the waist, it pulled tightly around the chest, accentuating her figure. Jerick had to fight hard to keep himself from imagining the princess in one of the formless, open-sided fendoves he had heard men describe on women in the south.

"I . . ." Jerick mumbled.

"We will have to come earlier next week," Courteth said at the same time, her voice soft and unassuming. "I assume we will see you at the feast tonight?"

"Feast?" Jerick asked dreamily.

"Yes. The one Father is throwing to welcome the ambassador from Aldbin?"

"Yes," Jerick agreed. "Feast."

"I will see you there," Courteth said with a nod. "Come, Ryalla, we should go prepare."

"Yes, mistress," Ryalla said obediently, shooting Jerick a disappointed look as the two left. Jerick didn't pay her any heed—he knew she was jealous of Courteth, and it didn't bother him. How could another girl *not* be jealous of the princess?

Jerick's eyes lingered on the door for a long moment until he stumbled, his sword sheath refusing to bear the increasing amount of weight he was leaning against it. Recovering himself before he fell to the ground, Jerick looked up sheepishly.

Doram, still standing by the door, didn't say a word. He just snorted to himself and left. Of course, what did he know? As far as Jerick had heard, the forty-something captain had never even been married.

AFTER OVER TWO YEARS IN THE PALACE, JERICK HAD FINALLY MANAGED to find his niche. At first, no one had been certain how to treat him. They knew he was a peasant, but the king obviously held him to be a person of great importance. In a way, this had made the palace servants even more nervous around him than members of the nobility. They knew how to handle aristocrats—they had been around noblemen all their lives. But Jerick, the hybrid peasant-noble, was a confusion to them.

Slowly, however, that had changed. Jerick may have lived his childhood in the solitude of the forest, but he had still known everyone in the village by name. The city of Lakdon was obviously too large for such things, but the palace was like a village itself. It had storerooms and men who worked them, a fleet of cleaners, craftsmen, and maids, and even people like the king's personal groom and foremen to look over the servants. In fact, the longer he lived in the palace, the more similarities he saw between it and his home village. So, he had set out to learn the names of the people around him.

That had surprised the servants. They continued to bow to him and ask for his orders, but they gave him looks of surprise when he called them by name. However, if they were surprised to hear their names, they were astounded when Jerick remembered something about them. People's lives were in the details, and Jerick had always been good at noticing the little things. He remembered who was related to whom, and who liked what. One of the maids was an expert at transforming old brooms into beautiful thatch dolls for the palace children. One of the stablemen had worked with the horses for so long he could recognize each beast by its hoofprint.

It wasn't really all that much, just a detail or two about each person, but it seemed to mean so much to them. Slowly, as the months progressed, Jerick could feel them grow comfortable around him, and as they did, they began to confide in him. That was when he found out the real information he needed to succeed in the palace. The servants seemed to know as much—or more—about the kingdom's politics, both internal and external, as its nobility.

It was from this source that Jerick learned interesting things, such as how many members of noble Meleran Ka had tried to betroth one of their sons to Courteth. Apparently, it was common practice to formalize unions

even while the parties to marry were still in their infancy. Each one had been refused. Jerick also learned why Melerand hadn't been involved in a major war for centuries. The wood and metals it produced were far too valuable—if any one country decided to conquer Melerand, the other kingdoms of Yolen would declare war on it for fear that their own supplies would be cut off. As long as Melerand provided wood and tin for everyone equally, it was allowed to remain neutral and unharmed.

Jerick waved to palace servants he saw as he walked. They still bowed when they saw him, but they did it with a smile, making the gesture more of an affable greeting than a sign of subservience. He didn't see many of them, however, for only those servants who had a valid reason were allowed to use the main hallways.

Jerick would have liked to use the smaller, but much more lively, servants' passages. However, he had learned early on that such would not be accepted—either by the nobility or the servants. His presence in the smaller hallways had caused too much of an uproar, surprising servants and distracting them from their duties. They may have grown comfortable around him, but they still didn't want him violating what they considered their own space.

Still, as he walked he kept an eye on the side passages, and he often saw familiar faces. These smiled at him, waving in recognition. Servants weren't required to bow as long as they were in their own halls.

He smiled as he waved back. It was a sign of—

You know what you need to do.

Jerick paused, taken aback. It was as if his mind had scrambled for a moment, unable to focus on—

Yes, I understand.

He stopped in the hallway, resting his hand against a stone wall and holding his head. His vision was blurred slightly, and he felt dizzy. Something was wrong with his thoughts. Something very—

Once you have the bargaining item, return immediately.

Should I bring the other with me?

No. Leave him to provide information.

Yes.

Jerick sank to the ground, his back sliding against the smooth stone. He rested his head back against the wall, his mind dazed, his stomach growing upset. What was happening? It was as if his thoughts were no longer his own. The words came into it randomly, interjected without explanation into the front of his mind. As if they had been inserted by some other person . . .

Jerick shook his head. Such thoughts were foolish. Master Vendavious said that magic was nothing more than charlatanism, and Jerick had come to trust the old, bald-headed scholar. The man was stern, but he knew what he was talking about. Only the unlearned jumped at some amorphous “magic” as the answer to things they couldn’t explain. Jerick hadn’t been hearing voices—he had simply been studying too much. His mind was overtaxed, nothing more.

RYALLA STOOD PATIENTLY AS COURTETH INSPECTED HERSELF IN THE mirror. A feast was an important event, and it was vital to the princess to look extraordinarily beautiful—a difficult task considering how grand she normally looked.

For tonight’s feast, Courteth had chosen a gown with a long fur-lined cloak, something more traditionally Melerand as opposed to southern fashion. The new dresses from the south were esteemed by so many of the Meleran noblewomen that Courteth would certainly stand out in her more regal-looking red dress. Of course, Courteth had ordered the dress custom-tailored for the event, having it crafted with a dangerously low neckline that had a Fallin flare to it. The princess was well aware of her assets, and sought every opportunity to highlight them.

“All right,” Courteth finally declared, and Ryalla let out a quiet sigh of relief. It had taken four tries for Ryalla to properly apply the princess’s makeup. Ryalla had done the exact same thing each time, but Courteth had found some flaw in every application, and Ryalla had been forced to wash off the makeup and try again. Sometimes Courteth grew insanely picky about the most trivial things.

“As a punishment for your inept painting of my face,” Courteth declared in a cold tone, “you will not accompany me to the feast tonight. Instead, you will stay behind and work on that.” The princess pointed at a large stack of books on the table beside her wide bed.

“But—” Ryalla protested in her most pathetic voice.

Courteth cut her off with a snap of her fingers. “No,” she said firmly, as one would instruct a dog.

Ryalla bowed her head, and Courteth signaled one of her other servants to prepare to leave. She couldn’t, of course, make the short walk to the king’s chambers alone. A princess always had at least one attendant.

“I want it all done by the time I return,” Courteth warned as she left.

Ryalla nodded sullenly, though she could hardly keep herself from

smiling as the princess sauntered out the door. As soon as she was certain Courteth was away, Ryalla allowed herself a broad grin of pleasure.

Over the last year, Ryalla had made an amazing discovery. Courteth considered all peasants to be stupid—especially Ryalla. In contrast, the princess believed herself to be the most intelligent being the Nine Lords had ever saw fit to bring into the world. As such, no peasant could ever manipulate or fool a princess. They could try lying, as a child lied, but they would never be successful—not when faced with an intellect so grand as Courteth's.

That realization had been the beginning of Ryalla's path to escaping punishment. Slowly, she had begun to alter the way she reacted to Courteth's punishments. The more loathsome or difficult Ryalla found a punishment, the more quietly, and even happily, she bore it. On the other hand, she complained incessantly about those punishments that were easy to bear—especially the ones that let her escape from Courteth's presence for a short while.

So, although Courteth undoubtedly thought her handmaid would be fuming at the lost opportunity to attend a feast, Ryalla's heart was singing. She was alone in Courteth's chambers, completely free of the princess's demanding voice and harsh looks, and she would be for most of the night. More importantly, there were the books.

Courteth had gotten herself enrolled in the boys' classes, but they had been more difficult than she had assumed. The teachers expected her to keep up with the lessons, even though she had no real intent to learn—she had only wanted to maintain the attentions of Jerick and Martis. The lessons had soon overwhelmed her, but Courteth had struggled on, determined not to let her pride suffer the blow of admitting she couldn't do the work.

It would have been all right if it weren't for the homework. Apparently, the lessons were mostly listening. However, each day the four students were required to bring in sheets of vellum explaining and commenting on the readings and mathematical problems they had done outside of class. Courteth had neither the discipline nor the desire to do the outside work, let alone write commentaries on it.

By the end of the first year, the scholars had been ready to kick Courteth out of their classes. Only her station as a princess had allowed her to get by for so long while doing so little, but even her rank could only do so much. The teachers considered her continued presence in the classes an affront to their dignity, and if there was one thing that scholars could not stand, it was the belief that they were being mocked.

So it was that on the brink of ruin, Courteth had come up with an idea.

“Ryalla,” she had demanded one day, holding out a sheet of vellum, “finish this for me.”

Ryalla had looked down at the page of indecipherable letters and shook her head. “I’m sorry, my lady,” she had explained. “But I can’t even read, let alone do your work.”

Courteth had fumed at the reply, but had known there was little she could do. No amount of punishment could force Ryalla to read. A little bit of teaching, however, had worked wonders. Courteth had, of course, been a horrible teacher. She had been intolerant as she instructed Ryalla on the mechanics of language, barely explaining concepts and letters. Fortunately, Ryalla had been trying to teach herself to read for some time. In addition, the scholars, assuming that Courteth’s lack of desire to work came from ignorance rather than simple laziness, had given the princess some remedial language books. Ryalla had studied these for hours, secluded in Courteth’s rooms, her activities kept quiet lest they embarrass the princess.

Ryalla had not only been given a chance to read, but had been left alone to do it as well. It was as if all her prayers to the Nine Lords had been answered in one massive blessing. Her first attempts at doing Courteth’s homework had been understandably pathetic, but the scholars had seen these scribblings as Courteth finally making an effort. They had encouraged her, then given her more basic reading texts—which she had promptly thrown at Ryalla and ordered her to learn more quickly, claming the girl’s lack of ability was making her look bad.

So, Ryalla had complied, all the while complaining outrageously at how much she hated studying. Courteth took her hatred as natural—after all, the princess loathed studying, so of course a lesser being, such as a slave, would hate it even more.

One year later, Ryalla knew she was nowhere near as skilled as the boys. She had seen some of Jerick’s work, though she had never told him she was doing the same assignments herself, and noticed with alarm how easily he seemed to understand the complex mathematics and scientific explanations. Of course, she had reminded herself, he had the benefit of actually attending the lectures, while Ryalla only had her books. Courteth provided poor, if any, explanations of what the teachers had discussed during the daily lessons.

But, despite Ryalla’s slowness, she was learning. She must have been making at least some progress, for Courteth stopped punishing her for “making the royal person look bad.” Instead of being in a dangerous mood every time she returned from the lessons, Courteth had instead begun looking smug

and self-satisfied. She had found a way that she could attend her classes, appear smart, flirt with the boys, and never have to turn a page of text.

It was a situation that suited both of them, though Ryalla knew she could never let Courteth know such was the case. If the princess realized how much Ryalla loved to read, then she would somehow find a way to take it away. Only by continuing to complain and drag her feet could Ryalla ensure her good fortune.

The current stack of books was a gift from Master Vendavious. The scholar had told Courteth he thought her ready to move up to a more difficult reading level, and had ordered her to work through them as she was able. Ryalla had watched the pile of books sit on the desk for nearly a week now, her eyes hungry. Courteth, however, had insisted she spend her time doing other, more pressing assignments. The books had waited for a special punishment, one it appeared that Ryalla had finally earned.

Ryalla picked through the stack happily, eager to see what Vendavious had sent. Though she had enjoyed the readings so far, they had been simple and relatively unexciting. Most of them had been journals or invoices—things written with a terse, unimaginative style. She and Jerick had spoken of the upper-level books he was required to read, and it sounded like most of them had to do with philosophy or science. Ryalla was curious to see what Vendavious considered a moderate level of reading difficulty.

One volume in particular caught her eye. It had a bright red cover embossed with red lettering. *Common Tales of the Yolish people*, it proclaimed, *A Collection of Stories from the Rustic Imagination. As gathered by C. Ballacorne.*

Intrigued, Ryalla turned to the first page and began to read. *Considering the literative revolution currently unfolding in Fallamore, the arts reaching a new level of poetic complexity, I have often wondered at the aboriginal sources that provided for our mass creative vein. In an effort to discover these most basic of tenets, it has been my life's work to gather and sort the narratives and stories that permeate the lives of the common man. I have traveled from our homeland across the continent, seeking those tales that appear to have common roots somewhere in our collective past. The following assortment is an amalgamation of those efforts. For the most part, I have included the anecdotes unabridged, attempting to preserve the cultural genuineness of their souls.*

Ryalla furrowed her brow at the paragraph, sorting through it with difficulty. Many of the words were unknown to her, and she could barely follow what they were talking about. Perhaps Vendavious had overestimated her. The foreword continued on for several more pages, and Ryalla quickly

skipped past them, looking instead to the first chapter. If the entire book were equally difficult, then she would have to put it down and choose another.

The Stone Princess, the first chapter read. That much, at least, sounded encouraging. She continued on, reading the first few lines. By the time she finished the first page, she was entranced.

The writing was completely different from that of the introduction. The style was uncomplicated but rhythmic. She could almost imagine some elderly storyteller, his beard long and his clothing worn, spinning the tale to his grandchildren.

It spoke of a princess who had been cursed by an evil spell and taken from the palace when she was a child. Raised by a family of cattlemen, the unfortunate princess didn't learn of her royal lineage until the end of the story, when she was changed to stone by the same sorcerer who had stolen her from the king and queen. She was, however, able to defeat the spell because of the simple kindness she had been taught by living amongst the land's peasantry.

It was a fanciful tale, but it captured Ryalla's imagination and held on with determination. When she reached the end, she was left almost believing that she too was actually the daughter of some wise king, and in the end she would receive the blessings of her life filled with labors. She continued on to the next story, reading with excitement.

Over the next few hours, she finished nearly a fourth of the thick volume. Some of the stories she recognized, such as those dealing with Fentalloni, the Lord of mischief. Most of them, however, were completely new to her, and her eyes dashed across the pages in ecstasy. Finally, she had a vehicle to take her beyond the drab palace walls, something to steal her from her slave's life. Ryalla had found an exercise to match her imagination.

IT WAS GETTING LATE; COURTETH WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY RETURN SOON. Reluctantly, Ryalla put the book of stories down, rubbing her tired eyes. She would have kept reading, but she knew she wouldn't have been able to keep the joy from her face as she did so. Far better to let Courteth arrive and find her loafing—that way the princess would assume she was trying to escape reading, rather than enjoying it.

As she sat back, Ryalla realized that she had forgotten something. She looked over at the half-burned candle, judging the time. If she moved

quickly, she decided, she could be back before Courteth. She jumped up and scurried out the door.

The hallways were silent—everyone who wasn't at the feast would be getting ready for bed. Moving along one of the outer hallways, Ryalla stopped by one of the servant's exits and filled a bucket from the rain barrel. After that, it was a short walk to her destination: Topaz's rooms.

The jesk hadn't been to visit for over a year, and Ryalla was beginning to fear he would never return. The thought made her sick; not only did Topaz tell the best stories, but he also seemed to be the only person she could trust to see the truth behind everyone's acts and false faces. Besides, he usually brought her sweets.

Ryalla pulled open the door to the jesk's chambers, and was confronted by a wall of green and brown. There were plants everywhere. They sprouted from pots on the floor, bins next to the windows, and even from cracks in the walls. Walking into Topaz's rooms was more like taking a stroll through the palace gardens than visiting a man's home. Even now, at the tail end of winter, the plants were vibrant and alive. No matter how cold the rest of the palace got, no matter how much snow fell, the plants in Topaz's room never wilted or dropped their leaves.

The rest of the palace staff stayed away from the rooms, fearing some unholy enchantment caused the plants to continue in greenness while the rest of the country was in winter's grasp. Ryalla didn't know about such things—though she didn't dismiss them, for her imagination considered every possibility. One thing she knew for certain. The plants belonged to Topaz, and someone had to look after them while he was gone.

So at least once a week Ryalla slipped away from her mistress and brought water to the plants. Today she had to rush, for Courteth would return from the feast any moment. Ryalla started with the trees, pouring a bit of water into their large pots. She couldn't spare much—she didn't have time to run back and refill the large bucket. The shrubs were next, running in long wooden boxes next to the walls. She was never certain how to water the small grasses growing from the cracks in the walls and floor, so she just sprinkled a cupped handful on them. Then she moved on to the plants lining the windowsill.

She never got there. Halfway to the window she stopped suddenly, the bucket slipping from her stunned fingers and plunking to the floor, drenching her leg in water. The plants before her, the ones she hadn't watered yet, were growing.

Their stalks were shaking and rising higher into the air, like snakes

searching for something in the sky. Then, as Ryalla watched, bulges appeared at the end of the stalks. The bulges split into multi-colored flowers. Suddenly, the room burst into sound. Ryalla jumped, startled, looking around with wild eyes until she realized the source of the sound. The plants, all of them, were growing so quickly they made noise. The stalks made stretching sounds as they rose into the air, the branches rustled as their weight changed, and leaves crackled as they burst open, spitting out vibrant blooms.

When it stopped a few moments later, Ryalla was surrounded by color. Everywhere she looked there was a different pattern. Thousands of flowers winked at her. The smell enveloped her, a powerful, sweet scent like she had never before experienced. It was the aggregation of all the different species working together—the flowers of trees, shrubs, and small stems all mixing like the sounds of a symphony to create one collective whole.

She wasn't certain how long she stood, wrapped in the overload of sight and smell, before she realized what the flowers must mean. These plants didn't bloom in the spring or summer like regular vegetation, they came to flower at a very specific time: whenever their master was in attendance.

Topaz was somewhere in the palace.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“KALORD GALDWELTH!” JERICK EXCLAIMED, APPROACHING THE PORTLY man with a quick bow. “You appear to have gotten over your cold.”

Galdwelth smiled, looking up as Jerick approached. “Why, yes, I have. Fine of you to notice, lad.”

“The last feast wasn’t the same without you, sir,” Jerick said. “There wasn’t anyone to complain about the wine vintage, so we were forced to drink whatever watered-down barrel the king decided to open.”

Galdwelth guffawed at the comment, his drooping Antoli wiggling as he did so. He patted Jerick on the shoulder, then mumbled “Fine lad,” to his companions as Jerick left.

Jerick finally felt at home during these parties. He was accustomed to the buzz of conversation, and had learned not to be intimidated by the crowds. He convinced himself that the feasts were like a family gathering—just with a very large family.

If the servants of the palace had been slow to accept Jerick, then the nobles had been downright determined not to do so. They were an elite group, loath to admit another into their ranks. So, Jerick hadn’t even tried. He didn’t attempt to pass himself off as a noble; he didn’t expect them to bow back when he introduced himself, nor did he expect those younger than him to pay him deference. The nobles sensed this, and it put them at ease—as long as he didn’t threaten their positions, they were willing to put up with him.

However, after two years, it almost seemed like they had forgotten he wasn't one of them. Where Jerick had wiggled his way into the servants' trust by being friendly and interested, he had done the same to the nobles through simple ambivalence. The more they got used to his presence, the less of a controversy he was.

He also paid them compliments, and he knew they could sense his genuineness. They felt at ease around Jerick because he wasn't political competition, but nor was he someone they felt they needed to command or lead. He was simply Jerick, the happy young lad who had always been in the palace and who would always be in the palace.

Jerick made his way to his customary place, waving to members of the nobility and complimenting them on their choice of clothing. The feast was in the normal place, the palace's large inner courtyard. The light was poorer than usual—a large tarp had been suspended from the balconies several stories up to protect the nobility in case of sudden snowfall, though the increasingly warm weather made snow unlikely.

Still, it was cold enough to make a regular fendove chilly. Jerick himself wore a long-sleeved black cotton shirt underneath his blue fendove, a customary addition during the winter months. Though he was careful to dress according to the latest Fallin fashions, it was a constant source of amusement to him that people in Melerand would pay so much attention to what was worn by those a half-continent away.

At his fifteenth birthday, Jerick had been allowed to move from the children's table to the youths' table a short distance away. It had been a simple, but very important move. Martis had made the same move much earlier, and held this fact over the other boys' heads for some time. The youths' table held boys ranging from fifteen all the way to a few sorry souls in their early twenties—men who either hadn't inherited, hadn't proven themselves financially, or hadn't been able to marry. These solemn-eyed individuals huddled near the end of the rectangular table, trying their best to pretend they weren't sharing space with a group nearly a decade below them.

Jerick took the seat directly across from Martis, nodding as he seated himself. Martis nodded back, his face pleasant and his mouth cocked in a slight smile. As quickly as Martis's body had been growing, his political savvy had outstripped any physical gains.

Jerick wasn't certain when the change had occurred. During most of his first year in the palace, Martis had been simple to understand. The large

boy had been nothing more than a direct, often blunt, bully. Then, however, things had begun to change. Instead of playing practical jokes on Jerick, Martis would subtly dig at the lumberman's sense of dignity. He would hint that Jerick was unmasculine, that he had come to the palace not because of his intelligence, but because he hadn't been able to handle the difficult life of lumbering. He noted Jerick's effeminate traits, likening him to the thin, almost emaciated, scholars who often taught noble children. Scholars who rarely married, and were often whispered to like one another's company more than that of women.

At first, this new form of attack had disturbed Jerick. Bullying he could understand, and even deal with, but the level of subtlety Martis had begun to display was baffling. When he had mentioned it to Frost, the old tutor had simply shook his head and explained that Martis was a child of the court. If Jerick were going to deal with the boy, he would have to learn the art of political intrigue.

So it was that Jerick and Martis sat next to each other at feasts—not because they were friendly, but so each could keep an eye on the other. Instead of frowning when they met, they smiled, and asked after one another's studies. Instead of trading barbs, they tried to best each other's compliments.

It was a new way of thinking to Jerick, and an uncomfortable one. He couldn't help but feel he was being dishonest—his father never saw fit to act nice to someone just to spite them, so why should Jerick? Of course, his father still lived back in the village, completely unaware of such things as political necessity.

As soon as Jerick thought of his father, he felt guilty. He hadn't thought of his parents in a long while, and he feared he was beginning to forget what they were like. In his mind, they were becoming more and more vague. He could barely remember his father's powerful, hairy arms or his mother's frowns of displeasure. More and more his parents were like forces rather than individuals.

In order to keep himself from forgetting, Jerick had begun writing his parents letters every month. The king had promised to see them delivered to Wat, the priest, who could read them to Rin and Mardle. Jerick told them of the wonderful things he saw and learned. He described the people of the court, like the rabbit-faced Vendavious or the cold-eyed prince. Most of all he told them how much he missed them. Missed them so very much . . .

"Jerick?" a voice, that of Retorn, nephew to Kalord Galdwelth, brought

him back to the party. Suddenly the flood of conversations returned, the smell of the freely-distributed wine and still-cooking food overwhelming him. Jerick started, looking around with surprise.

“Jerick, are you all right?” Retorn asked. He was a small boy, dwarfed by Martis sitting beside him, and his hair was patched with brown—as if it couldn’t decide whether it wanted to be blond or brunette. He would have to start dyeing it soon to maintain the proper illusion of nobility.

“I’m fine, Retorn,” Jerick said with a nod.

Retorn exchanged a look with Martis, then turned to the room’s entrance, where the herald was preparing to announce the king’s arrival.

Rodis wore his customary red and gold, the intricate layers of the royal costume making him look like a plush bale of cloth as opposed to a person. His wife, slightly taller than Rodis, looked perfectly regal in silver and blue. Jerick’s eyes didn’t linger on the royal couple, however, for the princess was close behind, arm in arm with her brother. She was, of course, stunning. Cheeks as red as her father’s robes and hair that was so golden it made regular blonde look wan by comparison.

This night, as the princess floated by, Jerick noticed how particularly good her makeup looked—she was wearing just the right amount to give a hint of color without looking gaudy. Jerick was always impressed with Courteth’s ability to apply makeup; too many of the court’s other women painted themselves to the point that their faces resembled the plumage of a stuffed bird from the south. He would have to compliment the princess on her skill.

Courteth smiled his direction—he was certain it was *his* direction, and not Martis’s—as she passed, taking a seat at the head table next to her father and mother.

“The princess looks in good humor tonight,” Martis noted, his eyes as transfixed as Jerick’s.

“She does,” Jerick agreed, not looking away.

“I hear she came to watch you practice today,” Martis continued.

“Yes. Unfortunately, she was too late.”

“Ah. I’m sorry for keeping her then,” Martis said apologetically. “I guess we lost track of time.”

Jerick looked away from the princess, barely catching the hint of a smile on Martis’s lips. Score one hit for the Kalord’s son.

The night’s guest of honor, a tan-skinned man in robes almost as self-important as the king’s, came in after the royal family. He had long

sideburns, as per Aldbin tradition, but, in an apparent attempt to prove his nobility, he had also grown an Antoli. The effect of his sideburns continuing until they melded with the long, straight Antoli beard had an almost comical effect.

"The ambassador from Aldbin," Retorn noted. "Cousin to the new king."

"I don't like him," Martis sniffed as the man made his way to the head table. "They say his family was nothing more than a group of cattlemen before they took the throne. It isn't right for them to claim nobility." Then, looking directly at Jerick, he continued. "Men should not pretend to be what they are not. Don't you agree, Jerick?"

"Completely, Martis," Jerick said, causing the other boy to raise his eyebrows in surprise. "It is wrong to act in opposition to the Lords' divine will. Of course, if the Lords were against the rise of this man's family, one would think They would have done something about it. Perhaps his continued place amongst the continent's nobility is an indication of divine support."

Martis frowned. "Perhaps," he agreed slowly.

As the last guests seated themselves, the cooks began to bring in the food. Most of the scents were sweet, a hint of the light honey glaze that was supposed to be a theme of the night's meal. Jerick smiled to himself, looking toward the head table. Instead of finding the princess, however, his eyes fell on Yoharn, dressed in red and gold like his father. Where Rodis was jovial, Yoharn was flat, his face repelling the room's good will like a rock wall before waves. As the prince's eyes met his, Jerick shivered.

This one person remained the court's biggest enigma in Jerick's mind. What had happened to make the prince so harsh, while his sister was so filled with life? Even after two years of classes with Yoharn, Jerick had never had a conversation with him. The boy stayed aloof, giving credence to the rumors often spoken about him. The servants didn't like the crown prince. They found him even more arrogant than other nobles, and completely unwilling to deal with his lessers. They said he had no heart, that the entire world was beneath him. Jerick was tempted to agree with them; he had never felt anything but coldness from the quiet prince.

Tearing his eyes away from Yoharn, Jerick noticed the king rising to make the introductory toast. Rodis raised his cup high, opening his mouth to speak.

He was interrupted by a strange ripping sound. Jerick joined the rest of the crowd in giving each other curious glances. The ripping continued, and only then did Jerick realized where it was coming from. Above.

He looked up to find a massive split had appeared in the tarp that blocked

the sky. Several of the women cried out as a massive wave of purple appeared from above, oozing through the rip like blood from a fresh cut. The purple blot billowed outward, expanding as it fell toward the ground, revealing fold upon fold of cloth, tassels and streamers expanding in every direction. For only a single, frozen moment, the purple mass fanned out into a wide circle of cloth, filling Jerick's vision and looming above him. And directly in the center of the plummeting mass of cloth and ribbons was a familiar smiling form.

Topaz, outrageous outfit and all, smashed into the ground near the center of the room. Somehow, the jesk managed to detach himself from the cloth—which now appeared to be an enormously long cloak—and rolled free, leaving two tables full of nobility covered in thick, purple fabric. Jerick frowned slightly, judging the distance the jesk had fallen. The outfit hadn't slowed his descent at all—he shouldn't have escaped without injury.

The jesk, however, rolled to his feet with a smile. He was wearing an outfit of red and gold that matched that of King Rodis with exactness. The jesk held his hands high in the air, apparently waiting for applause. None came, however—the aristocrats were all either too shocked or too horrified to respond. Finally, the jesk sighed, stepping forward to take the toasting cup out of the king's still-outstretched hand.

"No one appreciates a good entrance anymore," he lamented, draining the cup of wine with a sigh. Then, noticing the shocked look on the king's face, he continued. "Oh, did I interrupt something?"

YOHARN ALMOST FELT HIMSELF SMILE AT THE JESK'S ANTICS. *WHY DO I like him so much?* Yoharn wondered. *He's so unruly, so flagrant with authority and tradition.*

Perhaps the reason was that, beneath it all, Yoharn wished he could be like Topaz. Free, able to say what he wanted when he wanted. Topaz could say things so easily, he could talk and hold an audience captive, he could defy members of the court while at the same time making them laugh at their own indignation. He was clever, quick-witted, and most importantly, articulate.

Yoharn was different. He had learned early on that when he spoke, people laughed. Not the good laughs that Topaz caused, but shameful laughs. Laughs the crown prince couldn't afford to cause. And so, Yoharn kept his mouth shut. Every time he did open it, his foot was waiting eagerly to jump in.

Yoharn eyed his father, standing at Yoharn's right. The king was ordering

a place be set for Topaz. If there was a person Yoharn respected more than Topaz, it was King Rodis. Yoharn had never been able to understand how his father coped with the pressures and demands of being king—being crown prince was almost more than Yoharn could handle. Yet, Rodis made it all seem easy, solving the kingdom's problems with wisdom and poise. Melerand would surely remember King Rodis as one of its greatest rulers of all time.

Just as it would surely remember Yoharn as one of the worst. He tried—tried his very best—to act like a prince should. Yoharn tried to be dignified, tried to refrain from idle talk, and tried to pretend he knew what he was doing. It was all an act—an act Yoharn was certain everyone in the court saw through. They knew what a fool their crown prince was; it was a wonder they didn't demand someone else be named heir. It was probably only out of reverence to the king that they refrained from doing so.

Yoharn looked over the crowd. He saw the look in people's faces when his eyes fell on them. It was an odd look, and they immediately looked away from him, as if uncomfortable. They were thinking about what a poor king he would make. They were all so kind not to say anything; Yoharn was grateful for such an understanding court. It hurt to know how he would disappoint them.

Eventually, his eyes fell on Jerick, the peasant boy. He sat chatting with members of his table, as diplomatic as a nobleman, nearly as articulate as Topaz. The boy was bright and intelligent—he would make a good king. It was too bad Yoharn couldn't give him the position—he would have done so in an instant if he had thought he could get away with it.

Yoharn had grown to like Jerick during the boy's stay in the palace. During their years of classes together, Yoharn had begun to feel a bond of friendship with the boy. In fact, Jerick could probably be called the only friend Yoharn had ever known. Of course, even the boy saw through Yoharn's facade. Their friendship only existed in the classroom—as soon as the lessons were over, Jerick left. Yoharn could understand the boy not wanting to spend time with the embarrassment of Melerand.

Yoharn sighed, careful to keep his posture straight and his face calm—like he assumed a king should act—as he ate. Topaz was laughing and talking as he ate, making the nobles at the high table feel at ease despite his irregular entrance through the snow-cloth above the courtyard. No, Yoharn would never be like that. He prayed to the Lords every night, offering sacrifices at the temples daily, that he would somehow grow to fill the position that

They had decreed for him, but he was painfully aware of his inadequacy. He was left with the overpowering, omnipresent knowledge that some day, he would have to rule. He feared that day with horror.

FROST HAD DECIDED NOT TO ATTEND THE FEAST. HE FOUND CROWDS unpleasant, especially crowds that customarily looked down at him. It had taken the nobility of Melerand time to accept scholars as their equals—even still only teachers from Trexandos were considered to be worthy of esteem. Frost had never studied in the great city of learning, and so, in the eyes of the nobility, that made him a second-class scholar. Of course, he wouldn't miss out on much that happened—Jerick would probably tell him all about it at their next tutorial session anyway.

Actually, Frost liked feast days. He enjoyed the silence they brought to the palace; because of the energy involved in feeding so many people, the palace chefs often appropriated much of the staff to use as stirrers or servers. As a result, the rest of the building was left unusually still during the party.

This day, Frost had decided to use the time to study a particularly ancient sample of Ke'Chan writing. He delved into the text, losing track of time as hours passed. One could tell a lot about a culture from its language. The Ke'Chan dialect, for instance, was straightforward, with few irregularities. It matched the direct stance the Ke'Chan people took on everything, whether it was war—through which the Ke'Chan people had once conquered most of the continent—or business, through which they were now gaining financial domination of the same area.

"Did you miss me?" a voice asked from right beside him. Frost was so startled he dropped his book to the table with a thunk, jumping back from the sound. Topaz's smiling face sat a short distance away—somehow he had managed to sneak into the room without Frost hearing.

Frost raised his eyes to the sky, then sighed and retook his seat. "Someday, Topaz, that is going to get you into more trouble than you can handle."

"I can handle a lot, Frosty," Topaz said dismissively, pulling a chair away from the wall and seating himself. "I'm actually a little disappointed—I thought I would get more of a reaction from you."

Frost snorted. "Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know," Topaz mused. "A pillar of fire cast my direction, or maybe a wall of lightning."

Frost groaned silently to himself. "How many times do I have to tell you, Topaz. I have absolutely no skill for microkinesis. I am nothing more than an old scholar with bad nerves—a situation you are not helping."

Topaz raised an eyebrow, but said nothing further on the subject. "Aren't you even going to say how good it is to have me back?"

"No. I will, however, ask where you have been. His majesty has been tearing his hair out waiting for you to counsel him on what to do about Aldbin."

Topaz waved a dismissive hand. "Rodis can survive without another fool to guide him; I've been busy corrupting other people. The secret to being someone's trusted advisor is to stay away as often as possible. That way you not only appear more valuable, you don't have as many chances to prove yourself a fool in practice as well as in name."

"Of course," Frost said, turning to regard the jesk. He wore what was obviously intended to be a mockery of the king's robes and he smelled of wine, though he was not drunk. Frost had never known Topaz to be the least bit intoxicated—which was a good thing. Topaz was annoying enough when he was sober.

"You went to the feast, I presume," Frost observed. It was almost time for the festivities to be over.

Topaz smiled. "You should have seen my entrance, Frosty. It was good, even for me."

"I'm certain I'll hear about it tomorrow," Frost said dryly. "So, do you have a reason to be in my rooms, or are you just here to pester me?"

"Both. How's Rodis's little bet going?"

"Jerick?" Frost asked. "Very well. The scholars have taken to him, and he seems to be remarkably adept at learning. Vendavious can't stop praising the boy—Jerick has become something of a disciple to him."

"Vendavious?" Topaz asked, his voice a little surprised. "The scientist? I thought Jerick would take more to history or languages."

Frost shook his head. "The boy is a philosopher at heart, Topaz. He almost seems to know more than Master Vendavious."

Topaz frowned at that.

"What?" Frost asked.

"I was just wondering, Frosty. What is Vendavious teaching the boy about Horwatchers and magic?"

Frost shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, Topaz, but I think you must be wrong about Jerick. The boy has become something of a skeptic—if he ever

had any talent for such things, which I still think is impossible, then it is gone now. Vendavious has made a scientist out of him.”

“De’Herric,” Topaz said, cursing quietly in a language no one but Frost would have recognized. “I thought I could trust you to prevent something like this.”

“Me?” Frost asked incredulously. “Topaz, magic is not a thing of men, and we both know it. What was I supposed to do? Prove that microkinesis works? How?”

“I don’t know,” Topaz admitted, leaning back on his stool. He played with his ring absently as he thought. “This is a problem, Frost. I was hoping . . .”

“What?” Frost asked. “That the boy would instead decide to follow that Horwatcher? Better a disbelieving scientist than a half-wit, pompous charlatan.”

“True,” Topaz admitted. “I’ll have to bring him back, somehow. Open him up to the possibilities of magic again.”

“A difficult task, my friend,” Frost noted. “He has seen the tricks of that Horwatcher, and thinks them fakery. He will assume anything you do is the same.”

Topaz shook his head. “It can’t be something that overt. If the boy has become a philosopher, let him rationalize himself back into believing.”

“How?” Frost demanded.

Topaz smiled to himself. “I’ll be back in a few days.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“STUDENT COURTETH, PLEASE STAND.”

Courteth looked up, surprised at Vendavious’s words. The scholar sat at his usual place, cross-legged on the raised cushion at the front of the room, the hair behind his ears sticking out like tufts of cotton. He smiled as Courteth rose to her feet uncertainly.

“Student Courteth, you are worthy of praise,” the master said. “The essay you wrote on Ballacorne’s *Common Tales* was astounding. I didn’t think you would care for the book, and only included it in your materials because it was of the proper reading level. Did you really read the entire thing in two nights?”

Courteth’s eyes widened slightly—but only for a moment. Her poise took over in an eye-blink, and she smiled demurely while at the same time exuding royal self-satisfaction. “I did, honored Master,” she replied.

“Amazing,” Vendavious said with a nod. “You are beginning to show a very promising grasp of language, young student. Your writing was thoughtful and innovative—if a bit flowery. I see the makings of a great rhetorician in you.”

Courteth curtsied slightly at the compliment, then sat as the old scholar nodded for her to do so.

“Now, for Martis’s essay about Heth’Chor’s *On War*. It was a fine essay, though your comments seemed to ignore Heth’Chor’s arguments regarding peaceful rule. Still, on the whole you appeared to understand his point, and your response proved that you can apply the ideas introduced.”

Vendavious looked down, putting Martis's essay aside and looking at the sheet of parchment underneath.

"Next, we have Yoharn's essay on Flaudin's *Proper Political Procedure*," Vendavious continued. "Your style is blunt, Student Yoharn, but you appear to grasp the concepts introduced. I think perhaps you focus too much on proving you understand Flaudin's words, rather than commenting on his ideas. You should . . ."

Jerick's mind wandered slightly as the scholar continued. Two years of classes with the old Trexandian had taught Jerick that the master often spoke a great deal about essays he didn't like, while only giving a few brief comments about those that impressed him. Apparently, Vendavious had problems with Yoharn's critique, which meant he probably wouldn't get to Jerick's essay for some time.

The prince bore Vendavious's criticism with a straight back and composed features. Of the students, Yoharn had changed the least over the last two years. He was still the same hard-faced boy who had met Jerick in the throne room that first day—though a year and a half of training with Doram had toughened his body somewhat. Despite that fact, however, it was obvious that Yoharn would never be the warrior Martis was—and not just because the prince wasn't as tall or as strong. Doram always complained that Yoharn paused too often in the middle of fights, as if he were uncertain what to do next. Yoharn just hadn't developed his reflexes to the point that his body knew instinctively what to do.

Jerick waited patiently for Master Vendavious to finish, his back straight, his legs folded as Master Torell had taught him. At his side, Courteth fidgeted restlessly, then caught Martis's eye and smiled. Martis smiled back, his posture almost a lounge, a carefully created look of boredom on his face. Jerick ground his teeth with jealousy as the two regarded one another, turning his eyes back toward their master.

The longer he spent in the class, the more Jerick realized he had reason to be thankful to Master Torell, despite the scholar's harsh, uninformative teaching methods. Jerick was the only one in the class who was able to maintain the proper posture while learning, never fidgeting or lounging, and he could tell Master Vendavious was aware of that fact. Jerick knew the proper format for repeating back the Master's words, and he was the only one who had learned—through repeated beatings—to ask his questions carefully.

Still, despite how he had inadvertently trained Jerick, Master Torell was a weak shadow when compared to Vendavious. Where Torell had been

blunt, Vendavious was coaxing. Vendavious never grew angry at his students, and he gave praise as often as criticism. Where Torell had taught to teach, Vendavious taught to have people learn. Beneath Vendavious's tutelage, the students—even Courteth—were becoming scholars themselves.

What's more, Vendavious *looked* like a scholar. The robes didn't drape him, like they did Torell, but instead accented him. He wore the same scholar's cap as Torell, with its long scarf-like back, but he allowed his tufts of white hair to poke out the sides, making him look human at the same time as venerable. He wore no castemark. At first, this had amazed Jerick. Even Aldbish and Fallin people wore castemarks. Vendavious, however, was from Trexandos, like Topaz. Neither one thought highly of the caste system.

Topaz. After the feast a few nights before, the jesk had been nowhere to be found, disappearing as suddenly as he had arrived. The king was, of course, livid. His majesty had been waiting to speak to Topaz for over a year now, and had not been pleased to learn that the royal jester had left without bothering to give an audience to the king.

"And now for your essay, Jerick," Vendavious finally said, turning away from Yoharn.

Jerick looked up, all other thoughts evaporating as he waited anxiously to hear from the old scholar. As time had progressed, Vendavious's opinion of him had become increasingly important to Jerick.

"You critiqued Anxelondous's *Advanced Realmatic Theories*." The scholar paused for a moment, holding up a sheet of paper covered with Jerick's writing. "Your essay was well done," he finally said, setting the paper aside.

Jerick felt pride swell within him. He had never received such a short response to one of his essays before.

"Now," Vendavious said, settling himself on his cushion, "before we finish today's lecture, I wish to present one final idea for your consideration. Student Jerick's choice of reading materials was in fact quite appropriate, for this item has direct application to the Three Realms of Existence."

"But . . . Master Vendavious," Yoharn interrupted—an odd move for the normally quiet prince. "Scathe has been teaching us about Realmatic theories. . . ."

Vendavious's face grew dark. "I care little what that . . . wizard has been teaching you. It is my duty to see to the proper education of my students, and that includes making certain you understand Realmatic theory."

Jerick smiled slightly to himself at Vendavious's determined expression. This wasn't the first time scholar and Horwatcher had come into conflict over which subjects to teach—Master Vendavious still grew red-faced any

time someone mentioned astronomy. The subject was one of Vendavious's favorites, but the king insisted that the students learn it from the Horwatcher.

"Of course, Master," Yoharn responded, his face unreadable. "I apologize for my mistake."

"I am going to assume that the Horwatcher has trained you in the basics, at least," Vendavious continued. "You know of the Spiritual, the Cognitive, and the Physical?"

"Yes, Master," Jerick responded.

"Good. Then I will speak of the Axios," Vendavious said.

Jerick felt his eyebrows raise slightly at the word. The book he had just finished mentioned the term, but had not explained it, leaving him curious. He hadn't been able to find it in any list of terms, either in Meleran or Trexandian.

"The Axios is the base element," Vendavious explained. "It is a new concept, introduced by the scholar Mander about ten years ago, and since that time every philosopher in Trexandos has come up with his own theories on the idea. Mander's thesis was as follows: that every object in the Physical world is constructed of a single, ultimate element. The Axios is the material the Lords used to construct our world, and the material to which it will return when time ends."

"So, essentially," Jerick said, frowning slightly, "all things are the same? Then why do they appear and feel different?"

"Because the pieces of the Axios are so small that they can be combined in a nearly infinite number of ways. So small, in fact, that they cannot be seen."

"How can something be that small?" Martis scoffed.

"I realize it sounds silly, student Martis," Vendavious said.

Jerick frowned deeper—there was something odd about the Master's tone, as if he didn't think very highly of the theory he was teaching. But, then, why would he bring it to their attention?

"Think of it in this manner," Vendavious was saying as he reached over to hand Martis a small twig. "Student Martis, break this twig in half."

Martis did so.

"Now, break it again. And again. And again."

Martis complied, continuing to break the stuck until it was too small for him to crack. "That's as small as it gets, Master," he said.

"Ah, but could you not cut it in half again with a knife, assuming the bronze was sharp enough?" Vendavious asked.

"I suppose," Martis agreed.

"Then, assuming you could see it no matter how small it got and you had the proper tools, how long do you suppose you could continue to break it in half?"

"I don't know," Martis said. "Forever?"

"No," Vendavious corrected. "At least, not according to Mander. He claimed that eventually, you would get to a piece that is so small that it cannot be divided. This is the Axios, the ultimate element."

"But . . ." Martis said, regarding the stick in his hand, "when does it stop being a stick and when does it become this . . . Axios?"

"That is a good question, Student Martis, one of the many problems with this particular theory. There is also much disagreement about what the Axios is. There are those, such as Vodus and Rexdanorinos, who claim the Axios is water. They theorize that all things are made of water. All liquids freeze like water, all living things survive by the water in their veins, and even some rocks have been proven to have water inside of them. Other scholars are trying to prove that the Axios is air, or fire. Some even hypothesize that the Axios is Dragonsteel."

Jerick furrowed his brow—the idea of an Axios went against most Realmatic theory he had learned. Most scholars agreed that all things in the physical world were formed from some combination of the four elements, fire, earth, air, and water.

"Student Jerick, you frown," Vendavious noted.

"What you say is not traditional, Master Vendavious," Jerick responded slowly. "It goes against what Bendalarin said in *Realms by Thought*, not to mention Realmatic orthodoxy over the last three centuries. The theories don't make sense. All liquids don't freeze, for instance. What about oil or liquor?"

"You are right, Student Jerick," Vendavious agreed, a slight smile on his wizened face. "I thought you might have objections to the theory. What I present now is only a hypothesis, and I would not even bring it up except the amount of popularity it has received during the last decade. Your education would be incomplete if you didn't at least know the term."

Jerick frowned again. Could modern scholars hope to contradict such minds as Bendalarin?

"The Axios is the pet theory of President Mander, head of the Trexandian Acadius. I have prepared copies of his *Treatise Axios* for each of you. You are to read it and prepare a response for the next time we meet." Vendavious smiled again. "Though we can probably guess what Student Jerick's response

will be. Read it anyway, Jerick, no matter how much you disagree with its unorthodoxy.”

Jerick nodded, accepting a copy of the Treatise from Vendavious. It was a thick essay; the royal scribe had probably been forced to work for an entire day to prepare four copies of it.

“Until next time, then, students,” Vendavious said, nodding to indicate the session was finished.

YOHARN ROSE FROM HIS PLACE, ALL THE WHILE CURSING HIS INABILITY. Another failure of an essay. Master Vendavious had gone easy on him; Yoharn knew how pathetic the writing was. That, added to his mistake earlier, trying to tell Vendavious that they had already learned about Realmatic theory . . . pure stupidity. Why couldn’t Yoharn learn to keep his mouth closed? How many times did he have to prove himself a fool?

He turned, trying his best to keep his face from revealing the turmoil within. Jerick hadn’t stood yet, but was instead looking over a scroll he had brought with him to the lessons.

Yoharn felt like approaching Jerick to congratulate him on his fine essay. Perhaps then they could go and . . . and do what? What did friends do? Yoharn’s life consisted of three things—his lessons, his studies, and standing in his father’s court trying to learn the secrets of leadership. He was a failure at all three.

Sighing quietly to himself, Yoharn slipped from the room. It was better not to bother Jerick—the boy looked so intent on what he was doing. Besides, he would only think of a way to get out of spending time with Yoharn. Better to not have to deal with such a situation.

JERICK SAT AT A LOW TABLE, SURROUNDED BY SHELVES OF SCROLLS AND books. The library provided a perfect place for quiet study away from the constant motion of the palace proper. Jerick liked its silence, though Master Vendavious claimed the room was too still for proper studying. Apparently the libraries of Trexandos were filled with people, and the buzz of their hundred separate voices reading quietly to themselves was what most scholars associated with a proper studying environment.

Still, Jerick found the calmness of the palace library comforting. In many ways it reminded him of the forest, its stone columns rising like powerful

oaks, the scent of paper and pages faintly reminiscent of the organic smell of leaves and dirt. Perhaps it was this sense of quietude that caused Jerick to read silently, forming the words in his mind and not with his voice—a method Vendavious called irregular and even disturbing.

The man who had written the *Treatise Axios*, Mander, was alarmingly literate. He wrote with a style Jerick had never seen before—a precise, discriminating style that used logical examples like blades to cut away hundreds of years of ingrown scholarly thought. He was revolutionary, his ideas argumentative, and he wrote with such a tone of sarcasm as to make all other writers seem like fools. His logic, however, made him difficult to dismiss.

His claims were not quite what Master Vendavious had explained them to be. Mander did hypothesize that there were pieces of every object that were so small that they couldn't be divided any further, but he didn't imply that they were all of the same substance. Such theories must have come later. The document Jerick had just finished simply claimed the existence of small things called Axi, that, when collected together, formed larger objects. The unspoken point of the essay, however, was to show that earlier Realmatic theory—which claimed the Physical world was made up of the four elements—was simplistic and unfounded.

Jerick didn't like it. He didn't like the idea that all of these men he had been reading for the last two years, men he had learned from and whom he respected, might have been wrong. He didn't like this newcomer's flagrant claims, his arrogance in assuming that only he understood the true nature of the world. Most of all, Jerick didn't like how much sense Mander's words made.

"Welcome to the world of presumed reality, lumberling."

Jerick started at the sound. He had assumed he was alone. His eyes darted around the library, searching for the source of the comment.

"Up here, in the corner," the voice continued.

Jerick followed the sound, and as he watched, a piece of darkness broke away from the shadows near the place where the roof met the wall. Here a small ledge ran around the inside of the building, and from that ledge dropped a black-suited, familiar form.

"So you are back," Jerick said, trying to keep himself from sounding over-eager. "Where have you been?"

"To places you've probably read about, others you probably haven't, and a couple you wouldn't want to," the jesk said with one of his characteristic smiles. His triangular face was topped by a dark black cowl, and his outfit

resembled one of his usual costumes, complete with tassels, a cloak, and even a few feathers. All of it, however, was black.

"That doesn't answer my question," Jerick replied as Topaz approached.

"Yes it does," Topaz corrected, "it just wasn't a very informative answer."

Jerick frowned. "You know what I mean."

Topaz laughed, leaning up against a case of books a short distance away. "You've changed, lumberling," Topaz noted. "I don't remember you being this argumentative before."

Jerick flushed. "I . . ."

"Don't worry," Topaz cut him off. "Education does that to a person. All that reading makes your eyes hurt, and so you turn crotchety. I understand."

Jerick flushed further.

Topaz slid down against the bookcase until he was seated on the floor, shaking his head slightly. "Relax, Jerick. You always were a solemn child, but I don't remember you being this uptight."

Jerick sighed, letting his muscles untense. "It's just this essay," he explained. "It has put me in a poor temper."

Topaz raised an eyebrow. "'Poor temper'?" he repeated. "You've been spending too much time with those scholars, lumberling. Tell me, of whom does your temper think so poorly?"

Jerick held up the first page of the essay.

"Mander, eh?" Topaz noted.

"You've read it?" Jerick asked.

"Of course," Topaz said with a wave of a ribboned arm. "We jesks strive hard to remain well informed. Mander's a bit stuffy, but he certainly knows how to make an argument."

"You could say that," Jerick said slowly. "Though, from my opinion, he's just making the argument to make an argument."

"Nicely, and redundantly, put, dear lumberling," Topaz applauded. "But, so what if he is?"

"He shouldn't be so critical," Jerick argued. "He's making a mockery of the geniuses that developed Realmatic theory."

"I think he was rather respectful of them," Topaz countered. "Considering the fact that they're all wrong."

"You agree with Mander?" Jerick asked incredulously.

"I agree with his theme, lumberling," Topaz explained, holding up a black-gloved finger. "I like the questions he asks because they aren't questions anyone else has been unique enough to think of. Sometimes creativity is nothing more than learning what everyone else expects, and then doing

the utter opposite. It's too bad most of Trexandos completely misunderstood what he was saying."

Jerick paused, considering the jesk's comment.

"I hear you've become Vendavious's favorite student," Topaz noted.

Jerick's face grew dark at the comment. Finally, he replied. "You should be happy. I'm winning the king's bet. That's all that matters, isn't it?"

"Not if it turns you into a skeptical Trexandian," Topaz said conversationally.

"There are worse things a man could aspire to," Jerick said, growing defensive.

"Peace, lad," Topaz said, holding up his hand. "I like Vendavious—he is a good man. However, if the Lords had intended for there to be two of him in the world, you would have been born a short, balding Trexandian with apparent familial links to the rabbit. I know of few better scholars than Vendavious. But, like many of his kind, he tends to be a bit inflexible when it comes to new ideas."

"He gave us this, didn't he?" Jerick challenged, pointing to the *Treatise Axios*.

"He did," Topaz acknowledged. "Of course, he might have done so because I visited Rodis this morning and had him order Vendavious to include it in your education."

"You what?" Jerick asked with surprise.

"Vendavious doesn't like new ideas, Jerick. He's slow to accept change, and even slower to admit the possibility that there might be things in this world that scholars haven't yet managed to explain."

Jerick's eyes grew thin. "You sound like that cursed Horwatcher," he accused.

Topaz laughed, his head thrown back and the sound of his voice ringing through the empty library. "Lumberling, you have no idea how much you just sounded like a Trexandian."

Jerick grew silent as the jesk chuckled to himself. This was a new experience for Jerick—always before he had watched as Topaz put pressure on other people, usually members of the aristocracy. Now, for some reason, the jesk had chosen Jerick as a victim. Why? What had Jerick done to turn Topaz against him?

"I'm not betraying you, lad," Topaz said, obviously reading Jerick's eyes. His voice softened as he continued. "I'm just trying to wake you up. I've been away a long time, perhaps too long, though that couldn't be avoided. I can't afford to have you locking your mind into traditional Trexandian

conformity. Such works just fine for old men who have no other purpose in life than to argue over dead men's philosophies, but I need you to be a little more unbiased."

"I'm trying, Topaz," Jerick said, suddenly feeling ashamed, though he wasn't certain why. "I've just got so much to do, so many people pulling me in different ways. . . ."

"I understand. Trust me, that is one feeling I know. Just realize that not everything there is to know can be found in those books."

"What else is there?" Jerick asked with confusion.

"I don't know," Topaz confessed. "No one does, that's why it isn't written down. Our duty is to figure out what it is."

"I don't understand," Jerick said.

Topaz shook his head, resting it back against the spine of a book. "Neither do I. I really wish I did, but I don't. For some reasons, there appear to be things—and people—in this world that can act against the apparent laws of nature."

"You mean magic?" Jerick asked, his suspicion, and disapproval, returning. "I don't believe in such things."

"You used to."

Jerick paused. Had he? But he had been a simple boy; he hadn't known of science or philosophy. His imagination had led him to believe he could see things in the air and in the water, things that shouldn't have been possible. "I was young then," Jerick said. "Now I know better."

"That's your presumed reality speaking again," Topaz countered.

"What is that phrase you keep using?"

"It's something we all do, Jerick," Topaz explained. "We assume we know how the world works, that we have all the truth, and so we stop looking for other answers. And when we stop, our presumptions become reality—at least to us."

"Presumptions can't become reality, Topaz," Jerick argued. "Truth is truth, and reality is reality. Nothing can change that."

"Nothing?" Topaz asked, raising his eyes to stare at the darkened ceiling. Then, he closed them as he began to speak, his voice taking on his customary storyteller's air. "Once, a long while back, I visited a small village in Jarg. The people there had a strange custom—before they would walk beneath the branches of a willow tree, they would pick up a rock and throw it against the trunk."

Jerick frowned slightly. Topaz's argumentative style seemed familiar to him for some reason. "Why did they do that?" he asked.

"They said it was to appease the gods who reside in the tree's trunk. They told me that if they didn't throw the rock, they would be offending the gods, and that would bring a curse upon them."

"Gods? You mean the Nine Lords?"

"There are places in Yolen where worship of the Nine Lords isn't commonplace, Jerick. Of course, such places tend to be even more remote than your home village, but that is a tangent. Anyway, I stayed in the village for a number of weeks, trying to figure out what made them perform such an odd ritual. Eventually, by speaking with old villagers and some scholars from the nearest city, I pieced together what must have happened.

"A century or so back, there used to be a certain kind of snake that made its nest beside willow trees. When villagers went to gather the mushrooms that grew at the base of the tree, they would always throw a rock to frighten away the snakes, lest they surprise the serpents and get bitten. The snake, however, disappeared from the region over a century before, as had the villagers' custom of gathering mushrooms. The tradition of throwing rock at tree trunks still remained."

"Fascinating story, Topaz," Jerick noted dryly. "Relevant too."

Topaz cracked an eye, looking over at Jerick. "Ah, the second sign of a man with too much education. Sarcasm. Yes, you're progressing nicely. Anyway, I explained my discovery to the villagers. Only, they didn't believe the explanation. To them, the custom was of the gods, and that was the way it had always been. So, determined to force them to see my way, I took one of the adult men from the village and dragged him beneath a willow tree, making certain to keep him from throwing a rock at the trunk."

"And?" Jerick asked curiously.

"And he died," Topaz replied, his voice quiet. "As we passed beneath the tree, his eyes grew wide and frenzied, and I felt his frame shake once. Then, right there in my arms, he just died."

Topaz paused, his eyes finding Jerick's, all lightheartedness gone from his face. "Now you tell me, Jerick. What was reality? That man's belief was so strong that it killed him. Tell me his perception hadn't become his reality. There was nothing special about the trees—I walked under hundreds of them and was never affected. This man, however, died from doing the same thing, and I was left with his blood on my hands."

"I'm sorry," Jerick said softly.

"We all have presumptions, Jerick," Topaz continued, rising to his feet. "And, as little as we might like it, we all force those presumptions to become our reality. The man in that story was no more guilty of it than I was, for

I wasn't willing to see beyond what *I* perceived as being true—I convinced myself that this man's beliefs were foolish, never once considering that they might be real enough to him. Don't let yourself become so entranced with your perceptions that your mind closes to new ones."

"I'll try," Jerick said, looking down at the essay he had been reading.

Topaz reached into his cloak, pulling out a small round object the size of a fist. "Do more than try," he said, tossing the red object at Jerick.

Jerick reached up to snatch the sphere out of the air. It was soft, giving slightly beneath his fingers. It smelled sweet and citrusy, obviously a fruit, but no fruit Jerick had ever seen.

When he looked up, a question on his lips, the jesk had vanished.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JERICK ROLLED THE SMALL FRUIT BACK AND FORTH ACROSS HIS TABLE, using the tips of his fingers to push it from one hand to another. He was in the dining hall, though no feast was being conducted this night. Instead, a more informal gathering was occurring. The high table had been removed and the other seats had been arranged in a kind of amphitheater-like series of rows. These were filled with nobles of all ages, each of whom was watching the stage at the front. Scathe, the Horwatcher, had decided to grace the palace with a performance.

Jerick sat near the back, giving only an occasional glance to the Horwatcher's antics. Most of the feats Scathe performed were old to Jerick now—Scathe often tried to impress the students with his mystical powers, all part of the unspoken battle between Horwatcher and scholars. Jerick didn't join the crowd in uttering exclamations of surprise as Scathe made a vase disappear under a veil of smoke, nor did he laugh when the Horwatcher used thin pieces of wood with pictures on the backs to trick young Domer, second son of an unimportant Kalord.

Instead, Jerick's mind was on the simple piece of fruit rolling back and forth on the table before him. It was no longer bright red; its soft downy skin had changed from scarlet to a dull brown barely an hour after Topaz had given it to him. Curious, and more than a little confused, Jerick had spent the better part of the night—and a whole fleet of candles—searching through library scrolls for a clue as to why the jesk had given him such a strange gift.

The answer lay before him on the table, a scroll Jerick had unrolled and weighed down at the corners with a couple of colored marking stones. The parchment was yellowed with age, the ink faded but legible. Jerick would probably order the palace scribe to copy it before the material was lost forever, something that would have been done earlier if the document had been more important. The information it contained wasn't exactly the most vital in the library—it wasn't an essay on Realmatic theory, commentary on the *Legends of the Nine Lords*, or even a poem from Fallamore. It was a merchant's supply list.

Jerick had run across the scroll by accident—he wasn't even certain why it was in the library. When his eyes had scanned it, however, his assumptions of its unimportance had been discarded as he saw the words "bright red fruit."

Jerick read the passage again in his mind, though he already had it memorized. *I received a shipment of Ballas today, a bright red fruit with a fuzzy skin that is considered a delicacy in Fallamore. Unfortunately, my cart threw an axle before I could get to Ventalle, and the entire shipment spoiled before my eyes.*

Jerick closed the scroll, picking up the thick tome at its side. Once he'd found the name of the fruit, he had been able to look it up in the library's copy of *Ciri's Southern Flora*.

The Balla fruit is known for its powerfully unique taste and its quickness to ripen, Ciri explained. The Balla turns a dull brown within a day of being picked, and after the transformation its flavor becomes bitter and undesirable. Numerous efforts have been made to lengthen the fruit's period of ripeness, from coldness to cutting branches off the trees for transportation. None have been successful in extending the Balla's flavor for more than a few hours. As the Balla can only be grown along the southern shores of Yolen, it has necessarily remained a delicacy enjoyed only by the southern nobility.

The fruit had been red when Topaz gave it to him. Jerick's mind told him that such was not possible—it took months to travel from Fallamore to Melerand; it was inconceivable that Topaz could have made the trip in less than a day. Somehow the jesk had found a way to transport a Balla fruit without it going bad, but how? And what did he expect Jerick to learn from finding the solution?

"You appear contemplative, Master Jerick," a calm voice noted.

Jerick turned with a smile as Frost seated himself on the floor beside him. The old man's almond-shaped face turned to regard the fruit in Jerick's fingers, his eyes inquisitive. "A Balla fruit?" he asked.

Jerick nodded.

Frost reached over to pick up the dull, now-wrinkled fruit. "I haven't seen one of these in ages," he said. "Ever since I visited Trexandos as a young man. How did you come by one so far north?"

"Topaz gave it to me," Jerick said, his voice restrained. His thoughts were too confused to be shared at the moment.

"Ah," Frost said, setting the fruit down next to Ciri's thick volume. "I had wondered where he went."

Jerick looked up suspiciously. "You had something to do with this?" he asked.

Frost chuckled, shaking his head. "You should know by now, Master Jerick, that Topaz never reveals his clever plans before he absolutely has to. He claims it has something to do with his storyteller's sense of dramatics."

Jerick nodded, feeling ashamed. If there was anyone in the palace he could trust, it was Frost. The elderly tutor had been completely honest with him ever since that first day they met. "I'm sorry, Frost," he apologized. "I'm just confused."

"I . . . assume it was red when he gave it to you?" Frost interjected carefully.

Jerick nodded.

"And you know what that means?" Frost continued.

Jerick nodded again. "It means Topaz has found some way to grow Balla fruit within a day's travel of the palace."

"And that is the only possible answer?" Frost asked.

Jerick paused. "I'm not certain any more," he admitted.

"Is that why you're here?" Frost asked, nodding toward the front of the room. The crowd applauded in awe as Scathe, dressed, as usual, in an overdone cloak with a ridiculously large collar, correctly guessed the picture on a thin piece of wood hidden behind a screen.

"I suppose," Jerick said without much conviction. "Topaz told me I need to be more open-minded, so I came to watch Scathe, hoping I'd see something new."

"And?" Frost prodded.

Jerick just shook his head sullenly. As they watched, Scathe threw a cloth over a tall cup, then apparently crushed it beneath his hand. When he lifted the cloth, however, there were no shards of glass to be seen.

"He slipped the cup off the pedestal and into that large pocket on the front of his robes," Jerick explained. "If you look closely you can see the indentation in the cloth."

Frost squinted, leaning forward slightly. "So you can," he admitted.

"When he does woodcut tricks, you can sometimes see him slip one in or out of the pile. When he makes things disappear, they usually fall in that pocket or in another one in the cuff of his sleeve. It's all fake."

"You are a very observant young man," Frost noted, watching Scathe "mysteriously" make the cup appear on the table again. "Perhaps this wasn't the place for you to come to be open-minded."

"You mean I should have found someone who is a better charlatan?" Jerick asked, a slightly bitter tone in his voice.

Frost looked over at Jerick, his silvery-gray eyes concerned. His thin-haired beard twitched slightly as he moved to speak, then obviously couldn't think what to say.

"I don't know what to think any more, Frost," Jerick said, letting the edge melt away from his voice. It was impossible to confront Frost's ingenuous concern with hostility. "At first, I thought all I needed to do was follow my father and be a lumberman. Then the school started, and I was expected to be things my father hadn't been able to become. The king came along, and all of a sudden the fates of thousands of lumbermen rested on my ability to prove myself smarter than a nobleman. Now, after applying myself to nothing but learning, Topaz appears and, instead of being proud of me, he implies I've been learning the wrong way. What more can I do, Frost?"

The old scholar let a hand fall comfortingly on Jerick's shoulder. "You do your best, Master Jerick. Many people claim to do that, but you actually do. I'm certain Cephandrius realizes your effort. But, Topaz likes to push people. It seems his life's quest to force men into being more than they thought they could become. He does the same thing to the king, to me, and to most everyone else he considers a friend. I doubt he even realizes how difficult it is for us. Usually, however, the change is worth the pain, Young Master."

Jerick sighed, nodding slightly to himself.

"Look," Frost encouraged, pointing at the front of the room. "What is he doing now?"

Jerick looked up. The Horwatcher had set up a line of candles, and had revealed one of his mystical charms, a bone he claimed had come from the body of a Sho Del.

"I've seen this one before too," Jerick said, looking down again. "He's going to light the candles. At first it confused me, but Master Vendacious explained it."

"He did?" Frost asked.

Jerick nodded. "There are certain pastes that burn when they come in contact with air—in *Realms of Thought*, Bendalarin says that whenever pure earth meets pure air, fire is the result. Anyway, Scathe must have coated those candle wicks with burn-paste soaked in alcohol. As soon as the alcohol evaporates, they burst into flame. It's clever, but hardly mystical."

As Jerick and Frost watched, the Horwatcher began to chant and wave his charm above the candles. Suddenly, one of the candle wicks burst into flames, causing shouts of surprise from several noblewomen in the audience.

"That was a fairly large explosion for burn-paste," Frost noted.

Jerick didn't respond, he simply sat with his head slumped against one palm, watching the Horwatcher continue his charade.

"And you . . . feel nothing as it happens?" Frost asked uncertainly as another candle wick flared up.

"What should I feel?" Jerick asked temperamentally.

Frost paused. "Nothing," he finally said, rising to his feet and moving slowly away from the table.

He's disappointed too, Jerick thought with annoyed frustration. Isn't my studying enough? He's just like Topaz. What do they want from me?

Another candle smoldered for a moment, then spit out flames. *Frost's right—that doesn't look like burn-paste, at least, not the kind Master Vendavious showed us.*

Jerick slouched at his table, remembering Topaz's words from the day before. Presumed reality, Topaz had called it. Being so certain you were correct that all other theories, and even truths, became fiction. The words made sense, but magic? Topaz couldn't be right about that particular area—the scholars and philosophers knew so much. They couldn't have overlooked such things as mysticism and magic, and the laws of the Four Elements made so much sense.

Yet, even as he watched Scathe light the next to last candle, Jerick thought he felt something. Something coming from the front of the room, a cold feeling he knew he had felt before, but not in years. One he had avoided feeling because of things that had happened . . . things he had done. He shuddered, suddenly feeling alone in the room.

Presumed reality. He thought he could feel something, but . . . Taking a deep breath, Jerick tried to see what it was Topaz wanted him to see. It was as if there were movement at the front of the room—movement he could sense. He squinted, searching out every detail of the Horwatcher's table. He saw nothing, but at the same time knew that there was something occurring

before him—something that he could almost see, but not with his eyes. Something felt more than seen.

“I . . .” he said slowly, to no one in particular. “I see waves.”

Behind him, he heard Frost’s footsteps stop with sudden abruptness.

“Waves,” Jerick continued, “like ripples in a pond, only moving out in all directions. Like bubbles that start small and grow bigger. They pulse from the charm in Scathe’s hand, washing over the candle wicks.”

“And what do they do to the wicks?” Frost asked, his voice raspy, almost awed.

“They . . . they move the wicks,” Jerick said, staring ahead. He was still squinting, but his vision had grown fuzzy, as if his eyes were trying to focus on something very far away.

“Move the wicks?” Frost repeated.

Suddenly, his vision cleared. Or, rather, his mind cleared. He could see in his mind something beyond the room, beyond the motions of the Horwatcher. Only, he knew that his eyes weren’t doing the seeing—it was as if some other sense was feeding information to his mind, its powerful demands taking precedence over the imperfect ability of his eyes.

“No,” Jerick corrected, seeing clearly now. “It’s moving the *pieces* of the wicks. Thousands upon thousands of tiny dots that make up the substance of the wicks. Each dot vibrates slightly in its place, like a bug caught in a web. The waves from the charm, when they are passed over the wicks in the proper manner, make the dots vibrate faster and faster until . . .”

The final candle burst into flame. As it did so, Jerick saw the dots begin to shake wildly and uncontrollably, some of them shooting off into the air. Except, the air wasn’t empty either. It was filled with countless dots of its own, dozens of different kinds of them. Some were pulling in toward the flame, getting sucked into its heat, and others were shooting away from it, like tiny invisible sparks. Many were combining with the dots from the candle, joining together to make tiny patterns.

“He was right,” Frost’s amazed voice whispered behind him. “Cephandrius, you obstinate devil, you were right.”

Suddenly, Jerick’s mind snapped back into place, and his vision cleared, leaving him with a sharp headache. He groaned, putting his hands to his skull. There was a faint memory tickling at his mind—a memory of a time when Jerick had seen those dots before—but he pushed it away.

“What was that I saw, Frost?” Jerick demanded, blinking away the pain. “What happened?”

Frost moved slowly, walking over to seat himself once again beside Jerick.

"You looked at the world a little more precisely than the rest of us can, Master Jerick. You saw into the true nature of the materials that form the objects around us."

"True nature?" Jerick asked. "All I saw were dots, like someone had taken thousands of pins and poked holes in everything."

"Those dots are the infinitely small spheres that make up everything in the Physical world, Young Master," Frost said.

"Axi?" Jerick asked, suddenly making the connection.

"Some have called them such," Frost said with a slight nod.

"Why can we see them while no one else can?" Jerick asked, still holding his head. Fortunately, the pain seemed to be subsiding.

"We can't, Young Master. You can see the Axi, but I cannot."

"You can't?" Jerick asked with confusion.

Frost shook his wizened head. "No, Young Master, I cannot. I only know they are there."

"How?" Jerick demanded.

"People have told me, and I have believed them," Frost said, making the answer sound simple. "I listen well, and I understand better than most, but I haven't the same ability as you appear to possess."

"Topaz," Jerick realized. "He can see them too."

Frost nodded. "He can. Though, he shouldn't be able to—humans are not supposed to be able to do such things."

"Such things?" Jerick asked. "You mean magic?"

"Magic is an awkward term used by the uninformed, Young Master," Frost explained. "Those who are actually familiar with the process call it microkinesis."

Jerick paused, tumbling the word around in his already confused mind. "But, people aren't supposed to be able to do it?" he asked, perplexed.

"No," Frost answered with his customary frankness. "Yet, now I have two witnesses: Topaz and yourself. It appears that for some reason the rules are changing."

"Scathe too," Jerick realized, looking back up at the front of the room. The Horwatcher was making his final bow, and the audience was clapping in appreciation for the performance.

"No, Young Master, I don't think so," Frost corrected. "Scathe's lighting of those candles was as much a trick as his disappearing cup. The item you saw in his hand must be a Sho Del Tamu Kek, the heartbone. Sho Del bones have a power to them, and send out charges of Spiritual energy, rather like a radioactive metal does with Physical energy."

“Radioactive metal?” Jerick asked, wrinkling his brow.

Frost looked down, apparently realizing how foreign the word was to Jerick. “I apologize, Young Master. Think of the Tamu Kek like a pendulum that vibrates in the Spiritual Realm. At regular intervals, it puts out a pulse of energy. If used properly, that energy can affect the Physical world. The Horwatcher no more does microkinesis than a lumberman could cut down a tree with his bare hands. Both require tools to perform their feats. I doubt Scathe even understands why the Tamu Kek can make candles burn—he only knows the proper direction to wave his tool in order to produce a result.”

Frost turned away from the Horwatcher, turning a grandfatherly gaze down on Jerick. “I understand this is very new to you, Young Master.”

Jerick nodded. “I . . . Yes, it is. But, I feel like I’ve been preparing for it for a long time.” Then, his eyes slitted as he understood. “This is why he’s taken such an interest in me, isn’t it?”

“He?”

“Topaz,” Jerick said. “You said he was right about me—he knew, didn’t he? That’s why he’s been coming to Melerand all these years; he wanted to keep an eye on me. He probably doesn’t even care about the bet with the king.”

“I think you overestimate your importance, Master Jerick,” Frost cautioned. “Topaz started coming to Melerand years before he knew about you—years before he even began encouraging the king to challenge the caste system. Something else brought him here.”

“Perhaps at first,” Jerick mumbled. “But it ended with his interest in me. He wants to do something with me—everyone wants something of me. That’s the only reason he pretends to be my friend.”

“I remember the first time Topaz mentioned your ability to me, Master Jerick. He was genuinely surprised when he began to suspect your abilities. I don’t think he knew about them from the start.”

“No. Then he was only concerned about using me as a pawn in his game against Kalord Strafen.”

“Master Jerick,” Frost staid sternly. “I believe that is enough. Cephandrius and the king are doing a good work, and if you happen to be one of the tools in that work, then consider yourself privileged. We are all eventually pawns in the hand of deity—is it such a displeasurable thing to be a tool when you are used for such a noble cause?”

Jerick looked down at the table, feeling his cheeks grow warm with shame. He had never heard the old scholar speak with such hardness in his voice before.

Frost rose. "I suggest you consider just how much you owe Cephandrius and the king, Master Jerick. Think about how much you have gained from being a 'pawn in his game against Kalord Strafen,' and you will realize your debt. Good day."

JERICK SAT FOR A LONG WHILE IN THE HALL AFTER FROST LEFT, HIS ONLY companion the increasingly-shriveled Balla fruit. He thought about his life in the palace, and how different it had been from his life in the woods. He had changed during his two years here. Changed in ways that were not good. When had he begun resenting those who tried to help him?

Pride, his father would have called it. Like old Foreman, who was always so quick to point out solutions to other people's problems, but never wanted to listen to anyone give him a word of advice. Rin had called it the least desirable trait in a man.

A man who's havin' too much pride, lad, is like a tree with too much bark, Rin's voice seemed to sound in his head. *When you strip it away and get to see what's underneath, you find that there's really not much there.*

Rin would be ashamed of him now. The burly lumberman would shake his head, letting his eyes speak for him—as if he couldn't express his sorrow in seeing the child he had raised turn out to be so foolishly arrogant.

Jerick rolled the Balla fruit across the table, feeling it squish beneath his fingers. He couldn't remember his last days in the village. They were like a blur to him. He was certain he must have said goodbye to his parents—he must have, some time. They would never let him leave without a proper farewell. He just couldn't remember it, and that disturbed him. He had written letters to his family, sending them with pleas for the priest Wat to read them, but he had never received a response. Part of him felt like that was natural—that for some reason he shouldn't expect letters in return. However, most of him was disappointed, and a little bit worried.

Had they forgotten him so quickly? Or had they heard stories of his pride? Perhaps they had felt the changes in him through his letters, and had decided that they didn't want to be associated with this creature who had once been their child. A creature so selfish he spurned those who loved him. Why couldn't he remember his father's farewell? If only he had that last profession of love to rely on, he would be all right. Why hadn't his father said goodbye . . . ? *Oh, Father. Where are you . . . ?*

"Jerick?" a soft voice asked.

Jerick started, looking around with a sudden jump. His body felt stiff and

cramped, and the hall's torches had nearly burned down to stubs. How long had he been sitting in the room?

"Are you all right?" Ryalla, her face wide-eyed with concern, knelt beside him, her hand resting gently on his shoulder. Her thin frame was covered only by a flimsy nightgown—hardly proper dress for such a cold evening, but then, Ryalla's clothing choices rarely made any sense.

"What . . . ?" he began.

"When I came in," she explained, "you were just sitting there, staring ahead at nothing. You didn't even blink."

"What time is it?" he asked, feeling disoriented in the dark room. The Balla fruit on the table in front of him was no longer round; it had flattened and slumped, like a wine-skin that was only half full.

"It's late," Ryalla said, leaning back slightly. "The palace went to sleep hours ago. Courteth woke like she does sometimes, and sent me to get her something to drink." Ryalla nodded to an empty spicewine jug at the end of the table.

Jerick stretched his legs, feeling the joints pop and sigh. He must have fallen asleep. With a sigh, he reclined on the dining hall floor, looking up into the darkness, barely able to see the patched cloth ceiling. He didn't feel like he had been asleep—his mind didn't feel muddled, it was alert. Alert, and full of the same questions that had plagued him before.

"RYALLA, YOU KNOW ME BETTER THAN ANYONE IN THE PALACE," JERICK said as he lay back on the floor.

Ryalla paused. She had been about to rise and resume her fetching of the drink, but something in Jerick's voice made her stop. There was need in his voice, a kind of pleading. Not pleading like Courteth did when she wanted something, but a quiet, vulnerable need.

"You might say that," she said cautiously.

He turned his head to look up at her. It had taken Ryalla months to get used to not casting her eyes down when speaking to him, months of forcing herself to stare into his deep brown irises. However, she was proud of her ability to stare him firmly in the eyes—even if he was the only one to whom she could do so.

"Have I changed in the two years I've been here?" he asked.

"Of course you have," Ryalla said, gathering her thoughts. "You've grown taller, for one thing."

"Not my body, Ryalla, *me*. Have I changed?"

"In some ways," she said, leaning against the low table as she knelt beside him. She was dreadfully cold—the nightshirt was barely modest, let alone warming. It was, of course, another one of Courteth's punishments. "You've grown more talkative, and more open. It's almost like you had to grow accustomed to dealing with people, but once you did you seemed to fit in well. Almost everyone likes you—nobles and peasants."

Ryalla paused for a moment, then continued. "In other ways, you're still the same. You still seem to look at things differently than most everyone else, and you notice things no one else would bother to notice." *You also haven't given up your foolish infatuation with Courteth*, Ryalla added silently in her mind.

Jerick turned again to regard the ceiling, his face unreadable. "Am I arrogant, Ryalla?" he asked.

"Arrogant?" Ryalla asked uncertainly.

"Prideful, like a noble."

"Like a noble?" Ryalla repeated. "Definitely not. You don't have the breeding or the practice—I don't think you could ever get as arrogant as one of them, Jerick."

"My arrogance is flawed, then," he said with a cynical half-smirk on his face. She could tell from his eyes, however, that the concept pained him.

"I didn't say you were arrogant, Jerick," Ryalla corrected. "You aren't. You're just . . . self-assured."

"A euphemism."

"A fact," Ryalla corrected. "Jerick, what's wrong with you?"

"I realized today how much I owe the people here in the palace. The king, Topaz, Frost . . ." He turned his head to stare at her, his deep brown eyes gathering up her own. "You too, Ryalla. Have I ever thanked you for all the hours you spent helping me with my speech?"

"You didn't need to," Ryalla said, the words stuttering on her lips. It was the eyes. *Stupid boy!* she thought.

Jerick turned away, and Ryalla finally paused to consider his words. What had he said? That he appreciated her help? Despite his pain, she found herself pleased, and a little surprised, at Jerick's sudden realization. How many times had she cursed him silently for the ease of his education, while she was forced to learn in hiding, feeding off of whatever materials Courteth decided to bring home from her classes? Never once had he noticed how difficult it was for her, or how much he had depended on her to lose his accent.

"I've taken everything for granted, Ryalla," Jerick said, echoing her thoughts. "My learning, my life in the palace, the companionship of Topaz

and the king, Courteth . . . I did what everyone told me, I studied my books and learned my lessons, because of duty and an amorphous feeling of responsibility. Not because I felt grateful."

"But, now you are."

Jerick nodded slowly. "Now, when it's almost over. We take our tests when we reach our sixteenth year. That's not very far away."

"And then?" Ryalla asked.

"I don't know. Hopefully the king won't send me away for being an ungrateful fool."

"I don't think King Rodis would do that," Ryalla noted.

"Probably not. He's much more . . ." Jerick trailed off slowly, noticing Ryalla's strange look.

Cocking her head to the side, Ryalla raised her hand, motioning for silence. "Do you hear footsteps?" she asked.

Jerick paused, a confused look on his face. He didn't appear to be able to hear the sounds, though Ryalla didn't know how he could miss them. They were sounding crisply, coming from one of the side passages and approaching the dining hall. There was another set too, coming from another direction.

Finally, Jerick sat up, surprise gleaming in his eyes. "I hear them," he said. "Just barely though. Who do you suppose it is?"

Ryalla relaxed, feeling foolish. Why was she worried that someone might pass by? Dozens of people lived in the palace. "Probably just palace guards," she said.

Jerick shook his head. "They wear copper-tipped boots. That isn't the right sound."

"A servant, like myself, up on an errand," Ryalla guessed with a shrug.

"Perhaps," he said, his voice a whisper.

JERICK COULDN'T EXPLAIN IT—FOR SOME REASON HE FELT THAT THE ONE approaching wasn't a servant. Perhaps it was the rhythm of the footsteps, which sounded alternately hurried and slow, as if the person were trying to move sneakily. Perhaps it was something else, something to do with what he had experienced earlier in the day. Whatever it was, he felt his voice grow quieter, and his muscles grow tense.

"Let's hide," he decided, moving to grab Ryalla's thin arm and pull her away from the table.

"No," she said, pulling him back. "They won't see us."

"We're right out in the open!" Jerick said incredulously. The footsteps

had almost arrived, and he could hear another set approaching from the other side.

"Sit down, Jerick," Ryalla said reassuringly. "We aren't out in the open, we're hiding. They won't notice us, not if we don't want them to."

Jerick frowned, shooting Ryalla a strange look. The girl was still kneeling on the floor, her chin-length hair curling slightly around her calm face. What could she possibly be thinking?

Then Jerick felt something. A movement around him that his eyes could not see, a kind of shimmering in the dim air. It surrounded him and Ryalla, encapsulating them like some incorporeal bubble. A second later, everything went black. Jerick panicked, but his mind knew what to do somehow. He switched to microkinetic view, and he could see again. All the Axi looked normal, but when he tried looking with his eyes, he found he was still blind. He turned to demand an explanation from Ryalla, but a sound cut him off. Someone had entered the room.

Jerick fell still and remained in microkinetic view. He could make out the Axi of a form in an exaggerated collar standing on the far side of the room. Scathe.

Jerick felt his heart jump—no matter how much he laughed at the Horwatcher's dressing style, it was still intimidating. Jerick had once had a nightmare about meeting Scathe alone in the darkness. The man reeked of mysticism, and that which was mocked easily during the day became that which horrified at night.

Scathe scanned the room with dark eyes, and Jerick was certain he felt his heart stop with fright. The Horwatcher could obviously see, so whatever Ryalla was doing only affected herself and Jerick. However, even though they were only a few short feet from Scathe, the Horwatcher's eyes passed sightlessly over them, not even pausing as they looked directly through Jerick's eyes.

Another man stepped out of a hallway on the other side of the room, but in microkinetic view Jerick couldn't connect his nondescript clothing with any particular face. It could have been any number of people.

The new man looked across the room suspiciously.

"We are alone," Scathe assured him with a wide-lipped smile. He waved a robed arm across the room. "I have used my arts to check for spies."

The stranger remained still. Even if Jerick had been able to see normally, he probably wouldn't have been able to make out the man's features in the dim light. The man didn't say anything as Scathe approached him, smiling self-importantly.

"The token of bargaining is nearly ours," the Horwatcher noted.

The stranger hissed in displeasure. "Not here," he said in a sharply accented voice. "Outside." The unfamiliar form pointed toward the door leading to the palace gardens.

Scathe shrugged unconcernedly, then followed the other man out of the room and into the night. Neither man noticed Jerick and Ryalla watching from just a few feet away. When Jerick switched back to regular vision a few moments later, he could see just fine.

"Amazing," Jerick breathed after the two men left. Then, looking down at Ryalla, he continued. "How did you do that?"

"What?" Ryalla asked, her eyes perfectly innocent.

"They looked right at us and didn't see a thing!" Jerick challenged.

"The table was in the way," Ryalla explained, sounding completely as if the excuse made any kind of sense. "Besides, it's dark, and we're little more than children. Grown people rarely notice children unless they want to."

Jerick frowned. Was she intentionally playing dumb? As she stood, however, he looked into her eyes and understood. *She doesn't know*, he thought to himself, amazed. *She did something to hide us, something I don't understand, and something I definitely wouldn't have believed just a day earlier. And she doesn't know.*

"Lords!" Ryalla said anxiously. "Courteth is going to kill me! Good night, Jerick." With that, the slight girl rushed from the dining hall, hurrying to fulfill her mistress's orders. As she left, the room seemed to grow darker, the shadows reaching out to envelop him.

She can do it too, Jerick realized. *Whatever "it" is, she knows how to do it—even if she doesn't know she knows.* Then a startling revelation hit him—something stunning which at the same time made perfect sense.

"You're the reason he's been coming here all these years, Ryalla," Jerick whispered in the dark dining hall, silhouettes of tables surrounding him like kneeling peasants. "It wasn't me, and it wasn't the king—we're just added bonuses. He's been coming here for you."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MARTIS NODDED FAREWELL TO YOHARN AS THE PRINCE COLLECTED HIS gear and started up the path, climbing out of the palace gardens. The prince bothered him. Martis was never certain what to think of Yoharn—at times, he was convinced the prince was a weakling, unsuited to rule. At others, however—mostly after looking into the prince’s cold, almost lifeless eyes—Martis felt uncomfortable around the boy. As if Yoharn were vastly superior to those around him, and only suffered their existence out of habit.

Martis shook his head. Such speculations were foolishness—imagination of his mind. Collecting his own equipment, Martis took one final gulp from the waterboy’s trough, then waved farewell to the ever-present female onlookers and made his way out of the gardens. His chariot waited where he had left it, the driver still alert and attentive. One thing about his father’s method of governing—the servants never allowed themselves to be caught loafing. They served well—when they weren’t incapacitated from a beating.

Martis didn’t have to speak a word as he climbed into the chariot, throwing his gear to one side. The driver immediately whipped the horses into motion, guiding them across the hard-packed earthen road in the direction of Kalord Strafen’s Kaden.

He had defeated Yoharn in their sparrings, of course. Another battle, however, wasn’t going quite so well. Despite the distraction of sword lessons Martis had introduced, Jerick still continued to best him in the classes. Martis had tried everything, from hiring other scholars to write his papers for him, to baiting Jerick into spending more time practicing with the sword. Over

the last year, Martis had gained ground, but not enough. The time of testing was drawing near, and Martis was beginning to fear that he might not be able to win his father's bet. Such would be disastrous.

The problem couldn't lie with Martis, of course. It was the scholars—they all favored Jerick, even the melodramatically mysterious Horwatcher. It was as if the three teachers were in competition to see who could prove who liked the boy the most, and therefore to see who could best humiliate Martis. He had little doubt who they would choose as the better student when it came time for them to administer the oral tests.

Martis needed something else, a way to take Jerick out of the competition. Assassins wouldn't work, of course. It would be too obvious if Jerick suddenly died, not to mention the fact that it would leave too many questions. People would always wonder who would have won the competition, and they would probably glorify the peasant because of his untimely death.

Martis shook his head as the chariot bumped its way through the city. While Jerick had spent his time studying science and other wastes, Martis had been learning from the great generals and warlords of the past. From them he had learned one thing above all others—in order to truly defeat an enemy, you needed to turn the winds of history and cultural memory against him. Those men the populace thought of as saviors became saviors, no matter how inept or selfish they really might have been. On the other hand, turn a man into a devil, and he would be cursed for centuries.

The question was, how to make Jerick into a devil? The peasants of the city had found out about the bet, and they were coming to regard Jerick with a mixture of faith and wonder. Few were daring enough to postulate what would happen if Jerick actually succeeded, but Martis knew what they were hoping: an overthrow of the caste system that had ruled in Melerand for centuries, an upheaval that would distort what was right. The king was a fool for letting such a possibility even enter the people's minds. On this much, Martis and his father agreed.

The chariot slowed as they approached Kaden Strafen, home to his family. It sat near the outskirts of the city, away from Lakdon's close-packed center. It was a majestic wooden building, completely different from the rest of the structures in the city. Where they were squat, it soared, and where they were dull, it shone. When Martis was king, he would construct such a building to be his palace. It was fitting that the king's house should stand out from the city, rather than blend in with it. If building from wood reduced Melerand's exports, then let the rest of Yolen pay more for what they did receive.

Martis stepped out of the chariot, leaving the servant to deal with his sparring equipment. He pulled off his thick gloves as he entered the house, stepping into a well-decorated hallway complete with hanging tapestries and several painted vases. Martis's grandfather had done the decorating, back when the Kaden had been his. Strafen was far too incompetent to create something so tasteful.

Martis tapped his gloves lightly against the palm of his hand. There were grunting sounds coming from the dining chamber to the left. Martis pushed open the doors, his thick sparring boots clumping against the wooden floor as he strode through. His father stood, plump like an oversized cushion, near the head of the table, a thick wooden dowel in his hand. The cook knelt on the floor before Strafen, the unfortunate man's back a mess of blood and torn flesh. Martis frowned slightly—another stain on the already-damaged wooden floor.

"Too much salt in your soup again, Father?" Martis asked lightly, dropping his gloves to the table as he sat down.

Strafen looked up, his eyes red with fury. Those were the eyes Martis had grown up associating with fatherhood, wide eyes with a frenzied bloodlust to them. Martis didn't look down at the cook again, lest the beating remind him too much of the thick mass of scar tissue that was his own back. At least his father didn't discriminate—he would hit anyone, noble, peasant, woman, or son.

Strafen grunted, giving the cook one final whack with the blood-stained rod before kicking the man back toward the kitchen. Martis wiped a drop of spattered blood off his cheek as Strafen set the cane aside. Then the Kalord sat down at the head of the table, resuming his meal.

"Has it occurred to you to wonder what we are going to do for dinner, Father?" Martis asked off-handedly, rubbing the drop of blood between his thumb and forefinger. "One of the assistant cooks is sick with a fever, and the other is still immobilized from the broken leg you gave him yesterday."

Strafen grunted, using his fingers to stuff a chunk of pork into his mouth. "He can still cook with one leg," he said between bites.

"And if he can't," Martis noted, "you can always just beat him again. Maybe that will make the food taste better."

Strafen shot him a red-eyed look, but after a moment turned back to his meal. "You've finished your foolish games for the evening?"

Martis felt his lips turn down slightly. Strafen loved referring to Martis's sparring and practices as games, a dig at his son's lack of any true battle experience.

"No," Martis said quietly, crossing his fingers in front of him, his elbows resting on the table. "I have a skirmish scheduled for later in the day."

Strafen snorted. "Boys pretending to be men, never knowing what real war is about. Skirmishes don't happen on the fields outside of the town, they happen where armies meet to kill."

Martis sighed, rising from his seat and strolling toward his father's side of the room. Strafen was getting worse as he aged. It was the stress of the contest with the king, Martis was certain. His father had never dealt well with stress—beating the servants to relieve his aggression. Only, that wasn't working as well anymore, and the pressure was increasing as the time for judging approached.

As if reading his son's mind, Strafen spoke between bites. "The judgment is only a few months off."

Martis nodded, studying a painting hanging on the wall beside his father's stool. "True."

"What is your status with the peasant boy?" Strafen demanded.

"I really don't think I'll be able to beat him," Martis said honestly. "The boy is bright, and the teachers favor him."

Martis turned away from the painting. His father had stopped eating, his gravy-covered fingers resting tensely on the table. His face was growing red.

"That is not the right answer, Martis," Strafen warned.

Martis snorted, turning away from his father to look back at the painting. He heard Strafen push the stool back from the table, felt the wood floor tremble with the large man's steps. Martis knew exactly what Strafen was doing—he had been waiting for this day for years.

Martis spun as his father raised the red-streaked cane. Martis ducked low, avoiding the blow, then drove his fist directly into Strafen's ample gut. That stomach had been hard once, though Martis could barely remember such a time. Strafen took a step away, more amazed than pained. As far as Martis knew, no one had ever hit the Kalord back.

Strafen's eyes grew wide, his lips parting slightly in rage. As he stepped forward, his dowl raised for the strike, Martis stepped to the side and pulled a stool away from the table. The stool went up, blocking Strafen's blow. Wood cracked against wood, and his stool shuddered beneath the blow. The Kalord was soft, but his muscles were well-practiced from the constant beatings he dealt to his servants.

Strafen bellowed in rage. "You defy me?" he asked with a booming voice. The stool took him square in the chest even as he was ranting.

Strafen toppled backward, one hand scattering the remnants of his meal

to the ground as he tried to regain his balance. The wooden floor undulated in agony as the Kalord's large bulk slammed down. Martis stepped forward, discarding the stool with an off-handed gesture.

Strafen started to rise. As he regained his feet, however, Martis kicked him in the face, sending him back against the wall. The painting Martis had admired earlier was shaken loose by the impact, toppling to the ground. Martis stepped on its canvas backing as he walked toward his father, blood from the cook's back seeping through to outline his footprint.

Strafen looked up, and for the first time in his life Martis saw horror in his father's eyes.

"I've grown stronger than you, Father," Martis said quietly, advancing on Strafen with slow, almost casual steps. "I have waited and prayed for this day. You've grown soft, and you've grown stupid. You never considered the possibility that someday I might hit back."

Strafen, fright his motivation now, yelled and jumped at Martis. Martis stepped lightly to the side, using a move he had practiced many times while sparring, and placed his hand on Strafen's back as the large man passed, giving him a slight push. The Kalord toppled off-balance again, colliding with the door frame. Martis turned and walked toward his father, leaving another bloodied print on the back of the painting.

"Did you think you could intimidate me forever, Father?" He stood back, waiting as Strafen stumbled to his feet. "Did you not stop to consider that some day you wouldn't be as terrifying as you were when I was a child?"

Strafen growled. "You should respect your father, boy. Have you learned nothing?"

Martis snorted. Then he lunged forward, grabbing his father by the front of his fendove and spinning the larger man around. He slammed the Kalord's face into the oak table, pinning his neck against its edge. Before the man's eyes, glistening red atop the table, was the long wooden cane.

"That is what I learned to respect, Father," Martis rasped, leaning down until his head was beside his father's. "That is what you taught me." Martis reached down, sliding the bronze war-knife out of the top of his boot. He brought the blade up, sliding it across his father's cheek and leaving a trail of blood. "This is love, Father. This is your love for me." He drew other slices on the man's cheek, each one deeper than the one before. Blood pooled on the table top—the blood of a noble mixing with the blood of a servant.

"These marks, Father, *these* are love. I leave them for you, like you left marks of love on my back."

Martis stabbed, feeling the knife puncture through his father's cheek,

holding the large man still as he convulsed in pain, struggling hopelessly against Martis's superior strength. Briefly, he considered pushing the blade deeper, slicing through the back of Strafen's neck, but he decided against it. It would be too suspicious. Instead, he withdrew the knife, leaving Strafen with a large hole in his cheek.

Martis sighed, dropping his father to the ground and cleaning his blade on a napkin. "From now on, I am lord of this house," he informed him. "Next time I feel obliged to chastise you, you will not survive the encounter. Do not force me to go that far—it would look bad for a Kalord to have committed patricide. Especially if someday he will be . . . more than just a Kalord."

"More?" Strafen asked disorientedly, holding his cheek in agony, bloody spittle slipping out onto his lips as he spoke.

"Rodis is weak, Father."

"You would commit treason!" Strafen gasped. His words were muddled from the wounded cheek, barely audible.

Martis shook his head. He had never understood how his father could beat his slaves and servants to near death, showing a complete disregard for life, yet at the same time protect a man as foolish as King Rodis.

"You have said it yourself," Martis said, reaching down to stab a chunk of pork from his father's plate. He raised the tip of the knife to his lips, taking a bite. There was too much lemon. "The king is weak, and he leads this kingdom to disaster. Even if I do beat the peasant boy, Rodis will find a way to throw Melerand into ruin. Someone else needs to take the throne, someone stronger."

"You are too young," Strafen argued. "The nobles will never follow you."

"True. But I will grow, and the time will arrive. Until then, we will try our best to remain a happy, contented family. Servants of the king. Right, Father?"

Strafen, bruised and weakened from the confrontation, could only nod, holding a bloody hand to his cheek.

"Go get that sewn up," Martis said with a scowl, waving for his father to depart. "Then, if you must, take out your anger on the surgeon. In fact, be . . . thorough with your beating. It would be a shame to the Ka if the man lived to tell of the sorrowful state you're in."

THE DAY AFTER HIS CONVERSATION WITH RYALLA, JERICK SEARCHED through the entire palace, trying to locate Topaz. He tried all of the usual spots, looking out windows, checking in corners, and asking servants if

they had seen the jesk. The night's other event, the Horwatcher and his clandestine meeting, was forgotten in Jerick's urgent need to apologize to the jesk. In the end he needn't have worked so hard—eventually Topaz came to him.

"Greetings, lumberling."

Jerick looked up, surprised to hear Topaz's voice. He had given up on his search just after mid-day, instead retiring to his rooms with a plan to give Mander's *Treatise Axios* a more honest read.

At the sound, however, Jerick's eyes immediately went to the window where, sure enough, the jesk squatted. His outfit was blue and yellow, his cowl of the night before replaced by one of his characteristic floppy hats.

"Topaz!" Jerick exclaimed. "I searched all morning for you."

"So I hear," Topaz said with a chuckle, climbing into the room. "Unfortunately I wasn't here."

"I know," Jerick agreed. "I looked—I even checked on the ledges."

Topaz raised an eyebrow. "I'm getting too predictable," he mumbled as he sat back against the window sill. "So, why was my presence so necessary that you were forced to scour the palace for me?"

"I wanted to tell you that you were right," Jerick said, turning back toward his desk with a slightly ashamed look.

"Of course I was." Then Topaz paused. "About what?"

"About me," Jerick explained. "About everything. I wanted to tell you how sorry I was for the way I acted the other day, and thank you for helping me. I was such an idiot."

Topaz leaned back, his shoulders resting against the palace's stone wall. He took off his floppy hat and began to twirl it around his index finger, looking at Jerick with a contemplative eye.

"Do you remember the first conversation we had all those years back, Jerick? When we were in the village?"

Jerick shrugged. "I don't remember much of it," he admitted, slightly confused. "You told me who you were, and I remember being fascinated to hear that there were people who weren't nobles or peasants."

Topaz nodded slightly. "You also asked me what I did for a living."

"And you told me you were a fool," Jerick said, smiling as the memory became more clear in his mind. "You said that like a craftsman produced crafts, you made fools."

"But I never told you why I made fools," Topaz added. Then he looked over at Jerick, his eyes prompting the boy to speak.

"Uh," Jerick said uncertainly. "Why do you make fools, Topaz?"

"Because, lumberling," Topaz said, tossing the cap into the air and catching it again. "Fools learn, but people don't."

Jerick dissected the statement with a contemplative frown.

Topaz continued, looking up in the air as he played with his hat. "When a man is not a fool, he is confident. He is proud of himself. And, most importantly, he is satisfied with himself. When a man becomes a fool, however, he realizes he has things to be ashamed of—things he needs to change. If you think back on your life, lumberling, you'll realize that the times that were the most difficult for you, the times when you realized your stupidity and carelessness, were the times when you decided to grow. That is why I make fools. I would that there were more fools in the world, and fewer men."

Jerick nodded. "I think I understand."

"Good," Topaz said, catching his hat on the top of his head. "Now that we've both agreed that you're a fool, let us forget the episode and move on."

Jerick nodded slowly, feeling uncomfortable about the question he knew he had to ask next. The first part of the conversation, the apology, had been the easy part. "Topaz," he began, "what am I?"

"A lumberman, last I checked," Topaz said, nodding to Jerick's castemark. "You know what I mean."

Topaz nodded, his face growing solemn. "Frankly, I don't know what you are, Jerick," he admitted, folding his arms across his chest and looking Jerick in the eye. "I've been trying to decide exactly what *I* am for a very long time."

"Are we the same, then?" Jerick asked.

"I don't know that, either," Topaz said with a shake of his head.

"But we both can see . . . things. We can do this micro . . ."

"Microkinesis," Topaz finished. "It's Frost's word—he let it slip once, and I've been suspicious about him ever since. I'll admit, Jerick, for the amount of searching I've done, I don't know much. Everything I've read claims that magic is either evil and of the Fain, or forbidden to humans. That's why the scholars scoff at Horwatcher 'magic,' and they would react similarly to our abilities. Frost still refuses to believe about you."

"He came around," Jerick noted.

Topaz gave Jerick a quick, inquisitive look, but continued before the lumberman could explain. "Anyway, something about the world has changed—or, rather, it's in the process of changing."

"That's why you think something is coming," Jerick surmised. "Something dangerous."

"That's part of my fear," Topaz agreed. "The rest comes from books."

Stories and legends, tales that hint at what used to be. You remember that story I told at the king's feast?"

"Right after we arrived in the palace?" Jerick asked with a nod. "It was the creation Legend, only told in a different way from the formal story. I've searched through the books in the library, and I haven't been able to find it told the way you did."

"You won't," Topaz said with a shake of his head. "Libraries are actually a new development—there isn't a collection of books on the continent, except maybe the one in Trexandos, that goes back further than a few hundred years."

"You think the clues are that old?" Jerick asked incredulously.

"Older. Old as the first myths our ancestors used to tell, the first stories they knew."

"How are you ever going to find that sort of information?" Jerick asked, shaking his head.

"I have my sources," Topaz said cryptically. "For now, your job is to learn. Not just study, learn. Don't worry so much about the king's bet—it's important, but there are much more vital things to come."

Jerick nodded slowly as Topaz stood, walking over to get a peek at what Jerick was reading. He smiled. "Old Mander makes for crusty reading, but underneath it he's rather brilliant, and he's got some good ideas. Leave your mind open."

As Jerick began to thank the jesk, he heard a noise out his window, the sound of people yelling in surprise. He frowned, an action Topaz mimicked.

"What's that?" Jerick asked.

"Probably nothing," Topaz said, sliding back over to the window. "It doesn't take much to excite you Northerners. Someone probably found a rat in their pantry."

The jesk, however, froze when he reached the window, his eyes widening slightly, then pulling tight into suspicious slits. Jerick rushed over to join Topaz. He definitely wanted to see whatever it was that could surprise the unflappable jesk.

There are some images that are forever unforgettable. Scenes that etch themselves into the back wall of the mind, and are constantly dredged back into the consciousness for additional review. These scenes shape lives. This was such an image.

The man's armor shone in the noonday sun, silver and bright, like a fragment of light itself. Not an inch of skin or leather was visible beneath the glittering metal—the armor had been molded to fit every part of his

body, from steel-gloved hands to wicked-looking helmet. The suit of armor made the man appear huge, riding atop a gargantuan horse and carrying a long standard in his right hand. The standard flag matched his horse's livery, white trimmed with gold. For a moment, Jerick was certain that this visitor was none other than Oreon the White, King of the Nine Lords.

Topaz hissed quietly behind him. "Where in the name of the Lords did they find that much steel?" he asked. "And . . . how? No one can forge metal that precisely!"

Jerick shook his head in wonder. The palace guards wore armor constructed of leather straps and a single, bronze breastplate. Only officers were worthy of bronze shields, and Jerick had only seen one sword cast from iron in his entire life. Equally impressive was the man's horse—Jerick had never seen a beast so massive in his entire life. Only, it couldn't be a horse—horses were too weak to carry men on their backs.

"Could the armor be painted somehow?" Jerick asked.

"It's real," Topaz said with a shake of his head.

"Then, is it . . . Dragonsteel?"

"No, thank the Lords; it's just regular mountainsteel," Topaz said, his eyes unfocused slightly, as if he were staring at nothing. "But even still, it's amazing!"

Suddenly, Jerick realized what Topaz was doing. He was doing *it*. Looking at the structure of the man's armor, not its image. Jerick turned back to the steel-clad warrior, trying to remember what he had done the day before when looking at the Horwatcher.

It took him some time, and several tries, but fortunately the warrior wasn't moving very quickly. Eventually Jerick succeeded. He began to feel detached from his vision as a second source of information took over his mind. He could see the tiny Axi vibrating in place, thousands upon thousands of them making up not only the man's armor, but his horse and the city around him as well. Even though there must have been millions of Axi before him, Jerick could somehow sense every one, though most were just an indistinct mass unless he focused his attention on them. It was a very disorienting feeling, as if he were looking at something very close up with one eye, but from very far away with the other.

He felt Topaz's hand rest on his shoulder. "Good," the jesk approved.

"How can you tell it's steel, and not just painted bronze?" Jerick asked.

"You see the dark gray dots, the ones that vibrate very slowly? That's iron."

Jerick studied the Axi. He knew they weren't colors, not really, but each different type had its own feeling. His mind associated the feelings

with colors, for some reason, perhaps because it was trying to connect this new source of information with its more familiar sense of sight. Much of the warrior's armor was constructed of Axi that his mind translated as dark gray.

"Iron?" Jerick asked uncertainly. "I thought we were looking at Axi."

"We are," Topaz explained.

"But aren't all Axi the same material? The Axios?"

"No," Topaz said, shaking his head. The movement was very strange to Jerick, as the jesk's features were now blended together, melded out of thousands of multi-colored Axi. "The theory of an ultimate element is a tangent that the Trexandian scholars have, unfortunately, stumbled into. There is no single all-prevalent element, nor is the world made up of simply air, earth, fire, and water, like the Horwatchers, and many scholars, still try to teach. The world is far more complex than people think, lumberling. I've been able to count over thirty different elements, though some of them are much more rare than others."

"Then the theory of the Axi is wrong," Jerick surmised.

"No, the theory as Mander proposed it is still valid," Topaz corrected. "He just hypothesized of a small, indivisible unit from which everything in the Physical world is built. That's exactly what you're sensing—a speck of material so small that a regular eye could never see it. Essentially, the smallest thing that can ever exist. There just happens to be about three dozen different types of them. In fact, there are probably more—some Axi are so rare I've only seen them once in my entire life."

Jerick nodded, looking back at the strange warrior. The man had arrived at the palace courtyard, and was sitting motionless atop the back of his steed, apparently waiting for a welcome of some sort.

"What about the horse?" Jerick asked. "Or, is it even a horse?"

"It's long been postulated that if horses could be bred for strength, a strain would eventually develop that could carry a rider. It appears that theory was correct." Topaz watched the strange warrior for a moment. "Come on," he eventually said, turning away from the window. "We probably don't want to miss this."

"HOW COULD YOU TELL IT WASN'T DRAGONSTEEL?" JERICK ASKED AS THEY rushed through the palace halls, heading for the front gates. His head hurt slightly now that he was looking at the world normally again.

“Dragonsteel isn’t like the other elements,” Topaz explained, walking quickly. “For one thing, it doesn’t vibrate like the others.”

Jerick frowned. “Shouldn’t it be very, very cold then?”

Topaz turned to him as they walked, a smile creeping across his lips. “You catch on quickly, lumberling,” he said. “Yes, in fact, it should be impossibly cold. I’ve never seen any of the other elements stop moving completely. Even ice vibrates a little bit. Yet, Dragonsteel always feels warm, like something living. It also gives off strong pulses in the Spiritual Realm.”

“Like a Tamu Kek?” Jerick said.

Topaz looked down again, this time surprised. “Yes,” he eventually replied. “Like a Tamu Kek—in fact, if you look microkinetically at Sho Del bones, you’ll see Dragonsteel Axi mixed in with the calcium and carbon. It isn’t the bone that pulses, it’s the Dragonsteel in the bones.”

Jerick froze in the hallway, stunned. “The Sho Del have Dragonsteel in their bones?” he asked with stupefaction.

“Yes,” Topaz said, reaching back to grab Jerick and pull him back into motion, his voice twinged with slight annoyance. “It’s very complicated.”

Jerick fell silent as they moved, eventually arriving at the front of the palace. They rounded a corner just as the king appeared from another direction. Rodis nodded and Topaz waved off-handedly as Jerick stopped and bowed. The jesk raised his eyes to the heavens, yanking Jerick back into motion again. They moved into place just inside the doorway to the palace, amidst a crowd of gawking nobles, as the king entered the courtyard, Doram and several guards standing protectively at his side.

Rodis stepped forward; then, in a loud voice, he proclaimed, “Tzarn bet fel garn!”

Topaz chuckled to himself. “I’ll bet our friend wasn’t expecting that,” he mumbled.

“What?” Jerick asked with confusion.

“Rodis speaks Tzend.”

“Tzend?” Jerick asked with amazement, looking back at the courtyard. The warrior was replying, his words as indecipherable as the king’s.

“Yes, the warrior’s from Tzendor. Didn’t you see the word on his standard?”

Jerick looked up, frowning at the criss-crossed picture painted in gold on the warrior’s flag. It didn’t look like a word—there weren’t separate letters Jerick could make out, it was all just a mass of jumbled lines crossing one another at strange angles.

"I don't see a word," he complained. "Just a weird picture."

"Tzendor has a logographic writing system, not an alphabetic one like ours," Topaz mumbled, trying to listen to the king's conversation. "Their words *are* pictures."

Jerick thought for a moment. "But, there would have to be a picture for every word!" he surmised. "How would anyone learn them all?"

"It's very difficult," Topaz said. "Look, Jerick, I'm usually very supportive of random questions, but right now I'm trying to listen. Could we save the discussion of Tzend philology for another time?"

Jerick blushed. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Topaz nodded, leaning forward to pay attention to the conversation. Jerick tried to remain silent and listen as well, but eventually he couldn't take it any more. He wanted to know what was going on.

"What are they saying?" he asked.

Topaz sighed. Then he simply shook his head. "They're talking about—"

Topaz fell silent as the warrior suddenly leaned to the side, lifting one leg and sliding off of his horse to land on the ground with a pronounced clink. Reaching up a pair of huge arms, he pulled off his helm, revealing a square, tan face underneath.

"I have come from the Eternal War!" he proclaimed, addressing the assembled nobles, speaking in a heavily accented voice. "I have traveled the continent, pursuing a Sho Del assassin I believe intends to murder your king. The man who kills this Sho Del will have a thousand gold Kvors from Emperor Aronack himself, as well as prove himself a true nobleman warrior of the united continent!"

The crowd stood in silence, stunned by the news. Then, en masse, they began talking excitedly to one another. Several of the younger noblemen even yelled for servants to prepare their horses for a hunt.

"Great," Topaz muttered in the chaos beside Jerick. "So much for my quiet vacation amongst the calm, rational people of the North."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE PALACE THRONE ROOM WAS COLD. NOT THE WIND-BLOWN WINTER cold Jerick had grown up with, but a different kind of cold. It was stagnantly cold, as if the chill air were trapped in the room, pressed and confined by the four hard stone walls. There was also a dank mustiness to the chamber—it was like Jerick imagined the inside of a cave would feel.

Even after years in the palace—years of favored closeness to the king and his family—visiting the throne room made Jerick uncomfortable. There was a formality to the experience. The room's stately columns, its walls lined with lifeless portraits of people long dead, reminded him that there was more to Rodis and Grasse than a jovial fat man and his matronly wife. This couple Jerick had come to love almost as a second set of parents were monarchs of the kingdom, people with a responsibility and nobility that would always set them apart from him.

Rodis sat squished between the throne's two stone armrests, his head barely reaching halfway up its tall, engraved back. The throne was draped with furs, but Rodis used none of them for warmth. Though only a small fire burned in the great round hearth at the center of the room, Rodis didn't appear cold. The man never seemed to get chilly—Jerick had seen the overweight monarch sweating even on a cool day. It was often remarked that the throne room was kept cold out of preference, not necessity.

Rodis's round face was serious as he spoke quietly with the Tzend warrior, who called himself Sir Hsor. In the days since his arrival, Hsor had chosen not to wear his steel armor, a fact that disappointed those townspeople who

had missed the display earlier. However, Jerick didn't blame the man—the armor didn't look very comfortable, and it couldn't be practical for everyday use. Jerick didn't know how the Tzend even managed to walk in it.

Not that the outfit Hsor was wearing now wasn't impressive. The clothing seemed more like an adaptation from one of the old stories than a true style of dress. It resembled leather armor, in a way. It had a chest piece that fit over a tighter jerkin that had sleeves all the way down to the wrists. Except, the leather didn't look like any Jerick had seen before. It was white. In fact, the entire outfit was white, from the gloves to an enormous, wide-shouldered cloak. And, more amazingly, somehow it remained white, looking pristine each day despite the dirt and grime found even in the relatively clean palace.

The two men continued to talk as Jerick waited. The room's only other occupant was Yoharn, standing beside his father's throne in a dark blue fendove and shirt. It was strange, but Yoharn almost seemed to blend with the throne room, his flat, expressionless face reminiscent of the quietly watching stones.

"Ah, Jerick!" the king said, finally waving for Jerick to approach. "How have you been these last few days? I trust the excitement isn't disturbing your studies?"

"No, Your Majesty," Jerick said, bowing formally as he approached the throne. "It's actually quite nice—many people are gone on hunts during the day, leaving me to study in peace." *Though I would give anything to be with them*, he added in silence.

Rodis chuckled. "Ever the scholar, aren't you?"

Jerick bowed again, more in order to hide his frown of displeasure than out of any feelings of humility.

When he looked up, Hsor was watching him. The warrior's blond, nearly white, hair looked odd against his tanned skin. However, most odd were his eyes. They were a very light brown—so light, in fact, that they almost looked yellow. On his arm he had a dark purple birthmark that ran from his elbow all the way down to his hand.

"Jerick, Sir Hsor here is looking for people who would recognize a Sho Del."

Jerick frowned slightly. Why had they called him? "For what purpose, Your Majesty?"

Rodis sighed, shaking his pudgy head as he rubbed his forehead. "You have no idea what it's been like these last few days, Jerick. These hunts have become nothing but a chaotic game of suspicion. No one really knows what a Sho Del is; they can only base their guesses on stories and sermons.

"The different noblemen's hunting parties have each claimed to have

caught the assassin at least a dozen times. I've had everything imaginable dragged past my throne—hairless cats, old women, cows born with only three legs, and even a priest from one of the lumbering camps. Sir Hsor has tried to explain what we're looking for, but it hasn't done much good."

"The people are ignorant," Hsor said, speaking with his odd, disconcerting accent. He formed every word with precision, but he spoke the syllables in a disjointed cadence, as if each one were a separate word. He also seemed to speak from the back of his throat, making each sound as if he were gagging at the same time. "They do not even know the face of their enemy."

"This isn't the South, Lord Hsor," Rodis said in defense of his people. "Most of these people hadn't even seen a Fain creature before a couple of years ago. They are searching for demons, and demons take very differing forms depending on the mind of the man hunting them."

Hsor nodded curtly. "So, boy, you have seen a Sho Del?"

Jerick paused, wrinkling his brow. "No, sir. I haven't ever seen one. What do they look like?"

Hsor frowned, looking at the king. Rodis gave him an odd "I warned you" look, then simply shook his head.

"Are you certain, Jerick?" the king asked.

"Positive, Your Majesty. When would I have seen a Sho Del?"

"Back in the village, perhaps. Do you remember when I visited?"

Jerick's lips parted slightly as he thought back to that day. He could remember distinctly the image of Rodis's barge rounding the curve in the river, its bright red flags flapping as young Sen pointed excitedly. He also remembered his confrontation with Kalord Strafen. After that, however, was a blur. What had happened . . . ?

"Never mind, boy," the king interrupted quickly, bringing Jerick's remembrances to a halt.

Jerick looked up with surprise. "Your Majesty?" he asked.

"I must have been mistaken, Jerick," the king said kindly. "You may go."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Jerick said with a confused bow. What had that all been about?

He backed away, then turned to leave as the king and Hsor began to speak quietly once again.

JERICK HADN'T NEEDED THE KING TO TELL HIM HOW CHAOTIC THE PALACE was. Every noble house in the city had decided to form his own band of hunters, made up of lesser nobles, warriors, and the occasional merchant

wealthy enough to buy himself into prestigious company. They told one another it was for the glory, rather than the reward, but there wasn't a man in the country, noble or peasant, who could ignore the offer of a thousand Tzend golds. Though prosperous, Melerand was far from the wealthiest nation on the continent, and such a large sum would be a welcome addition to even the richest of noble houses.

And, despite what Jerick had said to the king, the hunts and excitement had been a large bother to his studies. Hsor's announcement had turned the palace into a scene of confusion. Even as he left the throne room, Jerick was forced to step aside as a group of men with bronze breastplates and spears pushed their way past him. The men, wearing the green and dark blue of House Lock, strode through the palace hallway, dragging what appeared to be a frightened boy with extremely white skin. An albino, Jerick guessed, though he had only read about such things.

Jerick bowed as the men passed—they were, after all, nobles—but he scowled at the same time. Judging from their well-polished breastplates and unwrinkled “hunting” clothes, Jerick guessed these men had never seen a day of battle beyond formalized sword training.

It seemed that every party of hunters, whether they had made a catch or not, found a way to spend at least half of their time roaming the palace—showing off their outfits and armor, making boasts and threats when other hunting crews were in sight. Like everything they did, the nobles had turned the hunt into a social event, another way to prove their superiority over the opposing Ka.

Of course, what bothered Jerick most about the hunts was his inability to join one. Beyond the ever-present necessity of his studying, it was obvious that this was a noble-only activity. The only way to get on one of the hunting crews was to buy your way in. A few days ago, a group of enterprising servants had been caught searching for the assassin on their own, scouring one of the poorer sections of town. They had been incarcerated by House Fin, on the charge of breaking caste. King Rodis still hadn't managed to free them—when it came to caste breaking, any nobleman was allowed by law to give whatever punishment he saw fit.

So, life for Jerick had continued as normal. He memorized the Legends, he worked mathematical problems, and he attended classes—classes that were held despite one noted exception. Martis.

For some reason, Strafen had bequeathed leadership of Ka Strafe to his son. Perhaps it had something to do with the mysterious illness the Kalord purportedly had caught. Strafen had rarely left his Kaden during the last

week, and witnesses said that his entire face was wrapped up in some sort of bandage. As a result, Martis ran the Ka as if he were its lord. The young nobleman left the city every day, beating out the forests to the north in a systematic effort to find the Sho Del. Never before had Jerick envied his rival so much.

Jerick saw the way the women looked at the hunters when they returned each day. The noblewomen didn't see the hunting parties' continued failure, they only saw the men dressed like heroes from the South, risking their lives in defense of the king. In a country where the most exciting event in decades' time had been the time the wife of Kalord Deng had given birth to twins, the man who actually managed to capture or kill the assassin would become an instant legend.

Jerick's thoughts, and dreams, were interrupted by the sound of a ruckus coming from the other side of the hallway, near the front gates. Wondering what they had caught this time, Jerick made his way in the direction of the noise. As he grew closer, the yelling got more and more violent, and Jerick found himself walking more quickly. Had someone finally captured the assassin?

"I'm tellin' you, t'king will have your head if you aren't soon lettin' me go!" a loud voice bellowed as Jerick rounded the corner. He stopped abruptly—the captive was definitely not Sho Del. He wasn't even being held by one of the hunting teams, but instead was struggling against the palace door guards.

He was a scruffy man with a scraggly beard about a handspan long. He wore dirty, faded robes that had been torn and resewn in numerous places, and his hands were covered with grime. As Jerick approached, he could smell the powerful odor of a body that hadn't been washed in a very long time.

Jerick frowned. "What is this, Captain Rolen?" he asked, nodding to the ranking guard, a short lean man with jet black hair.

"Nothing, Master," the guard responded as one of his men wrestled the miscreant to the ground. "He tried to walk through the doors, as if he were a noble. We told him to go back to the servant's entrance if he had business there, but he refused and tried to push his way through."

"T'king will be floggin' you all!" the man groaned, his face pressed against the stone floor.

Jerick raised an eyebrow, looking back at Rolen. "Mad?"

"It certainly looks that way, Master," the captain said with a nod of his head.

"Please," the man said, looking up at Jerick, "you appear to be a noble of good breeding. Go be tellin' t'king I've returned. He'll . . ." the man trailed off, his eyes growing wide as he stared at Jerick's face. "You!" he finally gasped.

"Are we acquainted?" Jerick asked uncertainly.

"I . . . I . . ." the man stuttered.

Then Jerick made the connection. He had seen this man's face before, though it had been several years.

"Master Torell?" Jerick asked incredulously.

The man groaned, nodding.

"Captain Rolan, have your man release him. I will take responsibility."

"Yes, Master Jerick," the guard said, nodding to his soldier.

Torell gave his captor a push as he was released, grumbling to himself as he rose, brushing off his dirty robes. From what Jerick could tell, the motion did little good. The robes had been beyond hope long before this encounter.

"Torell?" Jerick asked, shaking his head. "What happened to you?"

"What do you mean, boy?" Torell said stand-offishly—an action that earned him a quick rap on the back of the head from Rolan.

"You shall address him as 'Master,' knave," the guard said.

"Peace, Captain," Jerick said, raising his hand. "He is of noble blood."

Rolan raised an eyebrow skeptically.

"He's been away for a long time," Jerick said. "Trust me."

"All right, Master Jerick," the guard said, scratching his short black beard.

Master Torell snorted at the man, and Jerick grabbed the scholar's arm, pulling him into the palace before he could get himself into any more trouble. As soon as they rounded a corner, however, Jerick spun the man around.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Were you taken by thieves?"

"I'm still not understandin' you, boy," Torell said with an intolerant tone. "Nothin' happened to me."

"But your robes . . ." Jerick said.

Torell looked down. "They're a bit aged," he admitted, "but I wasn't havin' access to a fine tailor. Still, I think they held up well enough."

Only then did Jerick understand. The scholar had been away from noble society for several years. His robes were grimy, but they were still probably finer than those of the lumbermen. His beard was formed into a rough approximation of an Antoli—or, at least, the best that could be managed without proper grooming facilities or stiff creams. Torell probably didn't

realize how bad he looked, smelled, and sounded. In his own eyes, he was still the model of a perfect nobleman.

What Jerick did next was a source of shame to him for at least thirty seconds. He laughed. Very hard, and very loudly.

“What?” Torell demanded. “What’s t’matter?”

Hearing the arrogant scholar speak with the same accent Jerick had worked for years to lose only made the boy burst into another round of laughter.

“YOU CERTAINLY APPEAR TO HAVE TAKEN TO LIFE IN T’PALACE, BOY,” Torell noted.

“I’ve been fortunate here, Master,” Jerick said, smiling slightly. He stood, leaning with his back against a wooden dresser in one of the small preparation rooms near Rodis’s throne room.

Despite the accent—which, upon reflection, didn’t seem half as strong as that of a real peasant, even though hearing it here in the palace made it seem stronger—Torell had changed very little. He still complained about everything, and he still had the same look of constant disapproval in his eyes. Yet, for some reason, his attitude didn’t bother Jerick as it once had. Jerick felt more like he was speaking to an old, ill-tempered uncle than a man he had once considered an enemy. Perhaps Torell’s personality reminded him of home, or, more likely, his words no longer held the bite they once had. Since coming to the palace, Jerick had experienced arrogance that made Torell’s own pride seem childlike and innocent.

A servant entered, bearing—at Jerick’s request—a new set of scholar’s robes for Torell. The noble had wanted to go present himself before the king immediately, but Jerick had prevailed upon him to clean up at least a little bit. The more he spoke to Torell, the more Jerick was realizing that the scholar was far from a master of politics. The thought amazed him—back in the village, everyone had been impressed with Torell’s poise and refinement. Little did they know that the man they were revering was probably something of a buffoon back in the court.

Of course, Jerick noted to himself, the mere fact that he ended up in Farastham teaching the children of a bunch of lumbermen should have been enough to give us a clue. The other court members, the ones with true political cleverness, would never have allowed themselves to be maneuvered into such an embarrassing appointment.

"Thank you," Torell mumbled as he took the clothing from the servant girl. Jerick looked up with surprise, his eyes widening slightly. Perhaps Torell had changed a little after all—in the years they studied together, Jerick had never once heard the scholar thank a peasant for their efforts.

The girl curtsayed and backed away as the scholar moved behind a screen to change.

"Is he really a noble, Master Jerick?" she asked with a curious look.

Jerick nodded. "Unbelievable as it might sound, Markey," he replied.

The young girl turned wide, disbelieving eyes toward Torell's changing screen. "Leri sure did get him good, didn't he Master Jerick?"

Jerick chuckled. Leri was the trickster of the Lords and master of fate. "He did indeed. Did you find a scholar's cowl for him?"

The girl raised a hand to her lips in chagrin. "I'll go fetch one now, Master Jerick," she promised.

Jerick nodded as she scampered from the room. A few moments later Torell reappeared, looking slightly more distinguished in the violet robes. His beard, however, was still a mess.

"What happened to your fake Antoli?" Jerick asked.

"Cheap thing started fallin' apart t'year after you left. I had to . . ." Torell looked up suddenly, blushing. "What business is it of yours?" he demanded grumpily.

Jerick smiled. "None, of course, Master. I'd recommend you shave, however, and let me fetch you a new fake one."

Torell turned a critical eye toward the room's mirror. "Perhaps," he admitted. Jerick made the proper commands, and soon a servant arrived with a razor to do the job.

As the shaving was completed, Jerick noticed something very interesting. Torell was not as old as he had once assumed. Without the beard, and stripped of his imposing air, Jerick was amazed to find himself facing a man no older than thirty years old. As a child learning at the man's feet, he had assumed Torell to be at least sixty or seventy—making him older than even Foreman.

"Altene E fa corlatene," Jerick mumbled, quoting the proverb to himself. *A small change in perspective can mean a large change in meaning.*

"What was that, boy?" Torell asked as the servant glued his Antoli into place.

"Altene E fa corlatene," Jerick repeated, a bit louder.

"Oh," Torell said, looking a bit uncomfortable.

He doesn't speak Fallin! Jerick realized with surprise. *Or, at least, he doesn't*

know more beyond the standard proverbs. This encounter was growing increasingly interesting.

The door opened behind him. Markey had finally returned. Sure enough, a cowl flopped down on the dresser Jerick was leaning against.

"Thanks, Markey," Jerick said, watching with a smile as Torell snapped at the barber.

"No problem," a determinedly unMarkey-esque voice replied. In fact, the voice sounded just like . . .

"Topaz," Jerick mumbled with chagrin, turning to regard the jesk.

Topaz didn't reply. He was too busy watching—and listening to—Torell.

"Be careful, you knave!" the scholar was exclaiming. "Don't be pullin' on my skin. I'm t'king's own personal scholar, you know."

Jerick turned back to Topaz. A large, evil smile was growing on the jesk's lips. "Oh, Lords . . ." Jerick mumbled.

"Torell, my old friend!" Topaz exclaimed, walking forward with wide arms. "It's been so long. The palace just hasn't been the same without you—I've often noted that I didn't wish you weren't not here."

Torell turned apprehensively as Topaz approached—even he was politically-minded enough to realize that a smiling jesk was not a good thing.

"Topaz," he muttered. "Certainly t'most dreadful part of my return."

"Oh, come now, Torry," Topaz said affably, grabbing the scholar by the shoulder. "Let us put past grievances away. This is a time for celebration!"

"Well . . ." Torell mumbled.

The jesk's smile deepened. "Come, let's present you to the court."

"PATROL FINISHED, SIR, WITH NOTHING TO REPORT."

Martis looked up as the young soldier entered his pavilion. Hork was his name, the fourth son of Kalord Herein. He was an unpleasant-looking boy with bad acne and a plump figure, but he was very good at taking orders.

"Good. Inform squad seven that it's their turn for patrol, then take your men and join squad four at the city gates for reassignment."

Hork saluted, thrusting his hand out palm-forward, then disappeared from the tent. Martis looked back at the map on his table, repositioning the small marker that represented Hork's squad. Then he smiled.

The hunt for the Sho Del assassin was an opportunity from the Lords themselves. By defeating this single foe, Martis could win the prestige of the entire court—prestige that would be very important when it came time for him to seize the crown for himself. One thing that Heth'Chor's writings had

taught him was that people wanted to follow heroes. When their leaders weren't particularly heroic, the masses still tended to glorify them, often inventing feats of bravery attributed to their monarch. It was as if the populace couldn't stand the idea of being in servitude to a normal man, so they tried to wipe away their inferiority by bolstering the majesty of their rulers.

No one would have to bolster Martis's reputation. He would be the one who slew the demon, the one who proved himself a mighty warrior. Yes, this was an opportunity that could not be missed.

That was why he had immediately taken control of his Ka hunting party, then augmented it with the boys from his weekly war skirmishes. The boys were already used to following his orders, and they were excited to be involved in something as grand as the hunt. But Martis didn't let them spend their time in boasting or playing. Wars were won through careful planning and organization.

"Sir," a voice said from the front of the tent.

Martis turned. "Yes, Jorn?"

Jorn was the first son of Kalord Trent, and Martis's second, a position that continued Ka Ren's three-century tradition of being both allies and lackeys to Ka Strafe.

"Sir, the runner has returned. Apparently, the disturbance at the palace gates was not a hunting party at all, but some beggar trying to get into the palace."

Martis nodded, feeling relief flood his body. For a moment, he had been certain it was all over. "Good," he said. He wasn't sure why he had been worried—it couldn't have been a hunting party. His men watched all of the city gates; no party could have entered successfully without Martis hearing of it.

"Has the picture been circulated?" Martis asked.

"Yes, sir. I have the book, if you want it."

Martis nodded, accepting the volume from his second. It was a thick tome, inscribed with Fallin lettering that read *Spinode's Fain Life*. As far as he knew, it was the only book in the city that contained a sketch of a Sho Del demon. He wanted his men to be prepared and informed. It was vital that they know when to strike, for they would only be able to act once.

"Wait outside," Martis ordered. The boy saluted, leaving Martis alone with the sound of his tent walls blowing in the cold spring breeze. The weather, pleasant just a few days ago, had turned cold and snowy just the night before. The change served Martis well—it made the other hunting parties more lethargic.

He fingered the spine of the book as he slowly paced the room. He would only have one chance, and he would make certain it went well.

He had known from the start that he had little likelihood of finding the Sho Del. There were too many teams, too much chaos, for anything to be certain. His organization and manpower left him with an advantage, certainly, but not enough of one to be completely assured of victory. When that became obvious, Martis had made a decision. His team would not hunt the Sho Del. It would hunt other teams.

His men watched, patrolling and spying, keeping several eyes on every other hunting party. Whenever one of them made a capture, Martis knew long before the king did. When one of them finally managed to find the Sho Del, Martis's team would be ready to act.

Martis set aside the book, letting the thick volume thump down on top of his tactical map. There was only one unpredictable element in his plan, and she was growing increasingly frustrating as time moved on. The more Martis proved himself, the more in control of his life he became, the more Courteth teased. Every time he looked at her, she would look away, a glimmer in her eyes as she pretended to fawn over her lumberman pet. Hero or not, the nobility would never accept Martis's rule unless he had some connection to the throne. He needed Courteth. He *deserved* Courteth. She was the ultimate prize, the most valuable possession in the kingdom, and she belonged to him and none other. He had to make certain she understood that.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“HERE,” COURTETH ORDERED, POINTING. THE PACKBOY OBEDIENTLY dropped the volumes—three scrolls and one book—onto the dresser. Another gift from the insufferable rabbit of a scholar, Vendavious. He handed them to her after class sometimes, as if expecting her to lug them all the way back to her chambers. The Lords only knew where he found so many writings—during the time Courteth had been attending classes he must have loaned her at least two dozen different books and twice as many scrolls.

The servant boy stood next to her table, staring ahead dumbly. Courteth waved her hand, shooing him away, and finally he took the hint, bowing and backing out the door. Courteth didn’t watch him go—she was too busy looking for Ryalla.

The girl was hiding from her again. Courteth wasn’t certain what infuriated her most—the fact that the slave girl continued to defy her by hiding, that she lied about the action, or that no matter how hard she tried, Courteth couldn’t ever seem to find the girl’s hiding place. It put their relationship on improper terms, forcing Courteth to wait upon Ryalla’s whims.

With a sigh, Courteth began systematically searching the chambers, trying to do so without letting frustration appear on her face. At first, she simply drifted from chamber to chamber, looking as if she were doing so only by happenstance. Then she began to grow more angry, and started pulling back curtains and looking in closets, her motions decreasingly

subtle. Finally, giving up as she always did, Courteth began yelling for Ryalla. The yells became screams.

After a few moments, Ryalla still hadn't appeared. Courteth paused, letting her calls fall silent. The slave girl usually didn't wait so long to make an appearance. Perhaps this time she truly wasn't in the chambers. But where else . . . ?

Grinding her teeth, Courteth strode out onto the balcony. At first, she saw nothing. Then, however, she spotted a speck of darkness—black hair, moving through the snow-covered gardens below. For some reason the girl seemed to have acquired an affection for the gardens, though Courteth couldn't understand why—even though the long Melerand winter was nearing its end, a storm the night before had covered the ground with patches of snow, and the streams and ponds were topped by ice. There was nothing of beauty in the gardens, no cultivated flowers to scent the walkways. It was dead.

Courteth tapped her foot for a moment in frustration. Finally, she stuck her head out of her chambers, calling for a servant. A few moments later, the same dull-eyed boy appeared.

"Bring those," she said, pointing at the books. Then she stalked out of the room, heading directly for the gardens.

ONE OF THE STORIES IN BALLACORNE'S *COMMON TALES* WAS ABOUT A kingdom made completely from ice. It was one of the few Ryalla had heard before reading the book, a favorite amongst the old maids of the palace. It spoke of a nation far to the north, beyond the great mountains, in a land where nothing existed but snow. There, in a palace chipped completely from ice, lived a princess made of ice herself. Here, standing amongst the gardens in winter, Ryalla could almost imagine what such a kingdom would look like.

There would be trees, aspens, like the ones lining the pathway, only they wouldn't just be covered with icicles, they would be made of them. Everything would be translucent and perfect, reflecting the sun and slicing it into thousands of tiny sparkles. The scent would be of a new snow, clean and refreshing, but with a hidden bite that kept the mind sharp. The world would be crisp and beautiful, a land of pristine whiteness.

But, in the story, the ice princess wasn't content with her perfect world. She fell in love with the sun, watching it pass overhead each day, beckoning

to her and calling out professions of affection. She followed it, beginning a trek that took her far to the west, to the place where the sun hides every night. The closer she got, however, the smaller she became, melting in the increasingly powerful heat until one day, she finally arrived. By then she was only an inch tall, and when she approached to finally embrace her love, she melted away completely, dying a few short inches from her goal.

It was a depressing story, one Ballacorne's commentary said was meant to teach against the dangers of following hopeless dreams. It made Ryalla wonder about her own life. What of a small slave girl who was made of nothing but hopeless dreams? Would she melt away before the sun when she realized how foolish her fantasies were?

She continued down the stone pathway, careful not to lose her footing on the ice. Just when it had appeared that spring had decided to move in and stay, winter had reappeared, raging and mad at its forced withdrawal. Just two days ago the weather had been warm enough to melt away even the most resilient patches of snow. The night before, however, it had started to rain. The rain had become sleet late into the evening, and when the palace had awoken, the entire city had been covered with a thin sheet of ice and snow.

Now, walking in the gardens, Ryalla found little to remind her of the warm days before. The ponds and streams that ran through the garden had all iced over again, and the buds on the trees had been frozen mid-growth. A chilly breeze whipped at her long leather coat, blowing against her cheeks, and she paused, looking over one of the garden's larger ponds. Its frozen top resembled a large, overturned mirror.

Despite the cold, Ryalla preferred the gardens to the palace. At first, she had come in curiosity. She remembered the incident between the Horwatcher and the strange figure a few nights ago. There had been something wrong about their meeting—that much was obvious. Stories of clandestine sects and secret pacts fresh in her mind, Ryalla had come to the garden seeking a clue about the meeting. She had found nothing suspicious. Instead, she had found peace.

There was a calmness to the quiet gardens and a beauty only Ryalla seemed to see. Lately, the palace had been a chaotic jumble of hunters and soldiers, filled with men boasting of the deeds they would accomplish—if, that was, they ever managed to put down their mugs of warmed saprye and go looking for their quarry. Of course, if they did that, they would have to brave the cold—hunting was only fashionable as long as it wasn't

inconveniently chilly. They probably assumed the Sho Del thought the same way about assassination.

The sharp crack of a footstep on ice sounded behind her, and Ryalla spun. Courteth, wearing a white, fur-lined overcoat, stood on the path behind her. Her face was as cold as the ice covering the trees and pathway. Dory, one of the packboys, quietly set a small stack of scrolls and books on a nearby bench, and Ryalla cringed. Courteth was in a bad mood.

“Go,” COURTETH ORDERED, TURNING BACK TO THE SERVANT. THE BOY bowed quickly, taking off down the path. He slipped on the ice as he moved, nearly toppling to the ground, and Courteth shook her head disdainfully. Then she turned back to Ryalla.

The short-haired girl stood on the path next to a large, frozen pond, her head down. She knew that she had done wrong—Courteth had ordered the girl to remain in the princess’s chambers until her return. The slave had been growing more and more rebellious lately. She took longer to cast down her eyes in Courteth’s presence and she seemed to hesitate when obeying orders. Perhaps Courteth had been too lax—she had been preoccupied by the Sho Del assassin and maintaining a proper image before the hunting parties.

Ryalla was looking at the stack of books, a grimace on her face. *Yes*, Courteth thought, *you see them, don’t you? I know you hate them. Perhaps you should have considered that I would return with books before you ran off.*

“You are to read them,” Courteth ordered. “Vendavious wants to know what I think of them by one week from today.”

“All four?” Ryalla asked with a small groan. “By next week?”

“No,” Courteth corrected. “You have four days. I want to finish them early, to look good for Vendavious.”

“Four days?” Ryalla asked hopelessly.

Courteth smiled at the displeasure in the slave’s voice, then she paused, frowning. The girl’s voice seemed . . . forced. As if she were exaggerating her displeasure. Maybe she was becoming accustomed to reading; perhaps the punishment was growing too soft. Courteth had learned that unless she varied her methods, they lost effectiveness.

What’s more, the girl’s voice was far too complaintive—even if she were exaggerating. It was almost as if Ryalla were talking back, trying to talk her mistress out of punishing her. She was definitely getting insubordinate. It was time to reassert control.

Composing herself, certain to make sure none of her displeasure showed on her face, Courteth seated herself carefully beside the stack of books on the cold wooden bench.

"Take off your coat," she ordered.

RYALLA LOOKED UP FROM HER EXCITED CONTEMPLATION OF THE STACK of books, her eyes surprised. "What, my lady?" she asked slowly.

"Take off the coat," Courteth ordered again, her voice firm. She had seated herself on the icy bench that stood before the frozen pond.

Moving slowly, Ryalla complied, pulling the warm leather coat over her head and dropping it to the ground, ice-covered grass crunching mutely beneath the weight.

"Now your shoes and gloves," Courteth continued.

Ryalla complied, feeling a dread as cold as the winter breeze well within her. Was the princess going to make her stand like this, without a jacket, in the cold? It was a punishment more severe than most. The cold pressed against her from all sides, cutting through her woolen dress like an animal clawing for her heart. How long would she have to wait?

"Now," Courteth continued, her voice soft but crisp. "Remove the dress."

"My lady!" Ryalla exclaimed with shock.

Courteth's face grew even more hard at the complaint. Ryalla could see the princess's teeth clenched tightly with displeasure. "Do it!" she snapped.

Ryalla's teeth were chattering as she forced numbing fingers to comply, undoing the buttons of her dress then, with a breath against the cold, she pulled the garment over her head and dropped it to the ground beside her coat. Her thin shift billowed around her as the wind blew across her flesh. *Lords . . . she thought in pain, it's so cold . . .*

"Now," Courteth said, her blue eyes watching Ryalla without a sliver of mercy. "Step into the pond."

Ryalla's voice froze as her eyes widened in horror. The ice-covered pond sat placidly, swirls of snow blowing across its surface. Certainly she didn't intend . . .

"Did you hear me, slave?" Courteth asked quietly. "I told you to step into the pond."

Years of training fought within Ryalla, trying to quell the rebellion that was beginning to burn in her heart. This was too much. Courteth's punishments went too far, this time. Ryalla turned back to her mistress, her eyes blazing.

However, as soon as she met the princess's eyes, she felt the fire fall dead within her. Courteth's face was firm and demanding, her eyes expectant, and Ryalla felt her body moving despite herself. She had been a slave too long, her feelings of independence too new for her to disobey. Over a decade of conditioning told her that she was doing the right thing as she stepped onto the pond, feeling the thin ice crack open beneath her foot. She was a slave—Courteth had a Lords-given right to do whatever she wanted to Ryalla.

The cold water attacked her bare foot like a thousand tiny insects, biting her flesh again and again. Yet, she kept moving, despite a small piece of her heart that screamed for her to stop. Her other foot broke through the ice with equal ease, and she continued to walk forward, sinking further into the glacial water with each step. Her muscles began to grow stiff as she moved, her body shaking in a futile effort to restore warmth to her flesh.

The icy water washed over her hips and up her torso, enveloping her arms and chest. Finally, when Ryalla was standing in the water up to her neck, Courteth ordered her to stop.

Ryalla turned silently, her head shaking so violently she found it hard to focus on Courteth as the princess stood and began to walk leisurely along the pond's bank. Ryalla had never felt such pain in her life, every inch of her skin was screaming in agony, begging for respite.

"I don't know what has inspired you to rebellion lately, Ryalla," Courteth said softly as she paced. "I don't know why you seek opportunities to disobey me. I have always been so kind to you, letting you live at my feet. Do you know the beatings the other slaves of the city receive? Don't you realize how lucky you are?"

Please, beat me. Anything but this, Ryalla pleaded, trying to push the words through her lips. Her numb features refused to move, however. Her mouth quivered, too numb to make noise. Courteth didn't speak for a short while, continuing to pace as the agony built, and Ryalla's small frame struggled to cope with the cold. Then, something happened. She stopped shivering. Not knowing what that meant, only knowing it was wrong, Ryalla felt herself grow horrified.

"The Lords have given me responsibility for you," Courteth mused, not looking down at Ryalla. "I have a duty to see that you know your proper position. Do you know the hell that awaits those who forget their divinely granted caste? I am doing you a favor, Ryalla. You may be uncomfortable now, but in the future you will remember this day, and realize that I saved your soul."

Ryalla began to struggle, trying to move out of the pond. Orders or not, slave or not, she wouldn't let herself freeze in the name of caste obligation.

Her legs, however, refused to move. With terror, she realized that they had stopped hurting—they had stopped feeling at all, a situation shared by her arms. They felt like dead weights attached to her shoulders. Slowly, a tingling feeling was moving up her torso, and her movements were growing increasingly sluggish.

Oh, Lords! Ryalla thought, feeling her vision begin to darken. *Someone! Anyone! Please . . .*

“You will thank me when this is over, Ryalla,” Courteth said. She paused. “Ryalla . . . ?”

Ryalla’s vision blacked, and she felt water fill her mouth as her head tipped backward and she began to sink.

Then, a sound. Ice shattering. Ryalla’s vision returned for a moment just before she sank beneath the surface of the pond, and she saw a dark shadow dashing down the garden path.

Then, all the world was darkness. A darkness of warm ice and floating nothingness.

A powerful force grabbed the front of her shift, ripping her out of the pond. She barely felt it pull her free of the ice, bringing her out of its warm embrace, out into the cutting wind. She tried to yell, but only water left her mouth.

Something was shaking her, calling her name. She opened her eyes lazily. The world seemed blurred, like a dream, but one thing was distinct. A face. A very worried face.

“Topaz?” she whispered with confusion.

He was still yelling, but she couldn’t hear him. Her world was growing dark again. The only thing she could hear was her heart, and it pulsed softly, growing more and more faint, as if it were going to sleep. Before her, only Topaz was still visible, though even his concerned features were beginning to fade away.

Topaz reached up, tearing the glove off of his left hand. Ryalla’s final thought as she drifted away was how odd it was to see his bare hand. In all the years she had known the jesk, she had never once seen him without gloves.

Topaz reached out, the large ring on his finger gleaming as he touched her face, cupping her chin in his hand.

Warmth exploded through her body. Starting at her cheek, it moved like a wave of pure heat across her face and down her spine. It beat back the cold like light suddenly flooding a darkened room, leaving her body not only warm, but completely revitalized. The numbness left her mind, and her vision grew crisp and alert. Ryalla gasped in surprise and pleasure. Her body had never felt so alive, so energetic, and so powerful. She exulted in the

feeling for a brief moment before Topaz removed his hand, leaving her warm, alert, and confused.

She shook her head, trying to restore her memory of the last few minutes. She sat on the cold bank beside the pond, whose calm icy surface bore the broken scar of her entrance. She was wrapped in a large black cloak that matched Topaz's clothing, enveloped from neck to feet in its embrace. With sudden horror, Ryalla stared at the hole in the pond's ice. Had she really gone in there? Had she really . . . ?

She looked up with alarm. Topaz stood before her, looking little like the jesk she knew. His features hadn't changed, but his bearing was completely different. Instead of the sarcastic, dramatic jester she was accustomed to, he now stood tall and powerful, like an exaggerated statue carved from hard, black stone. The wind blew ineffectually across him as he stood, all black except for one exposed hand bearing the large topaz ring.

Courteth shrank in front of his vengeful stare, stumbling back until her legs ran into the bench. Topaz took a step forward. There was a crash from beside him as he walked, and ice sprayed across the air. Ryalla followed the sound with surprise, watching as the tree that had been cold and lifeless a moment before burst into life, leaves sprouting from frozen buds and greenness spreading across its branches. Other trees and plants followed, writhing and twisting as they grew, moving in rhythm with Topaz's steps, breaking free from their icy prisons. Ryalla had never seen anything so foreboding or ominous as the ice covered plants blooming as Topaz stalked the terrified princess.

"Demon!" the princess accused, her voice frightened.

Topaz continued to move. Pots exploded around him as shrubs grew too large for their confines. Icicles crashed to the stone path, cast free from blooming branches.

"Stop," Courteth whispered, more a plea than an order.

Topaz raised his hand, pointing with the bejeweled finger. "You are everything I have worked to exterminate in this world, princess," Topaz said. "You are hate, you are selfishness, and you are pain. Someday it will all come back to you, for pain begets pain." Topaz stopped, his finger only inches away from Courteth's face. "Pain deserves pain, Courteth," he whispered.

Courteth stood for a terrified moment, her eyes focused on Topaz's finger, plants writhing behind her, vines whipping over her shoulders and roots twisting around her legs. Then Topaz lowered his hand slowly, and Courteth, sensing her opportunity, scampered away down the path, slipping on the ice as she went.

Topaz turned back toward Ryalla, his eyes dark. Then, a moment later, the emotion was masked by a laugh. "I've been waiting to do that for a long, long time," he said with a mischievous smile. "She'll probably be terrified of plants for the rest of her life. I heartily suggest you give her shrubberies for her birthdate from now on."

Ryalla felt herself exhale in relief, her muscles untensing. For a moment there she had thought Topaz would . . . she wasn't certain what she'd thought he would do. Something horrible.

The jesk walked forward, pausing to lay his hand against the trunk of a fully-bloomed tree. "Rest," he said quietly, "the cold is not over yet." As she watched, the tree and other plants shrank upon themselves, leaves drying and falling to the ground and green disappearing until the garden had returned to its former, hibernative state.

Topaz reached down, retrieving his black leather glove from the ground and pulling it back on his hand, hiding the ring once again. Then he walked forward, scooping her up in his arms. "Come on, little one. I think old Ulcha the nurse should have a look at you."

"But, I feel fine," Ryalla complained, confused at why such should be the case. "Better, actually. I feel wonderful."

"I know," Topaz said with a slight nod of his head.

"Topaz, wait!" Ryalla said suddenly.

"What?" he asked, halting mid-step.

"The books," Ryalla said, pointing back at the bench. "Courteth brought them as part of my punishment."

Topaz raised an eyebrow. "I don't think Courteth is going to be punishing you any more, little one," he said. "You don't need to do what she says."

"But they're *books*, Topaz," Ryalla said incredulously. "You have no idea how much effort it took to convince Courteth I hated reading them. I was finally learning how to make her give me punishments I liked."

"Like swimming in frozen garden ponds?" Topaz noted as he walked over, allowing her to reach down and grab the books.

"It's not a perfect art," Ryalla admitted with a smile.

COURTETH RAN TO HER ROOMS, TAKING NO THOUGHT FOR HOW SHE MUST look to the people she passed. The events in the garden were like a horrible nightmare. She had always known there was something wrong with the jesk, but never had she assumed that he might be so evil.

As she scurried through the halls, however, she realized how foolish she must appear. Despite the tension in her breast, she forced herself to slow and adopt a more regal pace.

It must have been a trick of some kind, she told herself. *Topaz is no Hor-watcher, in command of the elements. He is a trickster, a lover of pranks.* She knew the jesk had always favored her slave for some reason. Perhaps he saw Ryalla as a convenient tool for making a mockery of Courteth.

That's what it was, Courteth realized as she approached her rooms. *He does it all to make me look foolish. He must have been waiting for an opportunity, a chance to perform like he always does.*

Half convinced, Courteth pulled open the doors to her room and rushed to the balcony overlooking the garden. Her eyes sought out the place where her confrontation with Ryalla had occurred. The trees looked just like all the others, barren and lifeless. She had been tricked.

She didn't know how he'd pulled it off, but he had obviously made a fool out of her—and in front of her slave, too. No longer frightened, Courteth sat herself in a nearby chair, fuming at the way she had been taken advantage of. There was only one way to regain her fallen pride—revenge.

A sudden knock came at the door, and Courteth looked up with surprise. Could it be Ryalla, returning to apologize?

"Come in," she said with perplexment.

The door swung open, revealing Martis's broad frame. He wore a tight, almost militaristic, fendove and shirt bearing the maroon and black of Ka Strafe. He bowed shallowly as he entered.

"Princess," he said in his thick, powerful voice.

Courteth stood, masking her confusion and blessing the years of practice that allowed her to compose herself even in times of extreme emotion.

"Martis," she said, instilling her voice with the flowery lightness that was expected of a noblewoman. "What a surprise."

"You are alone?" he asked with a bit of surprise in his voice as he looked across the room.

"My handmaid is fetching something for me," Courteth explained. He turned back to her, then continued walking into the room. Courteth watched him with curiosity. Most young noblemen, on finding her alone, would have left for propriety's sake. Martis apparently had no intentions of doing so.

Martis passed her, walking slowly. One thing was certain about Martis as opposed to Jerick, the former was definitely more masculine. Martis had the

broad shoulders and powerful arms of a man five years his senior, and the straightforward attitude as well.

"I have come to tell you of my hunt for the Sho Del," Martis finally told her, pausing by the balcony doors, staring out over the gardens and city beyond. "The assassin will soon be mine."

"I await such an event with anticipation," Courteth replied, still uncertain as to his point.

He turned to regard her. "That will make me a hero, dear Courteth. There will be no one in the country more revered than myself." He began to walk forward, passing by her again. "It will also mean that I have saved the life of your father. An action that can't help but leave you . . . grateful."

So it was another ploy for her hand. Courteth smiled—Martis was an easily read boy, and his goals were very consistent. He was so simple-minded.

"You haven't captured the Sho Del yet, Martis," Courteth reminded him, feeling herself get a grasp on the conversation. As long as she knew what Martis wanted, she could control where the dialogue went.

"But I will, Princess," he said, looking her in the eye. "Trust me, I will. I always get what I want."

"Then I, along with the rest of the nation, shall applaud your heroism," Courteth said.

Martis paused for a moment, reaching down to play with a jewelry box on her vanity, lifting the lid and letting it fall closed several times. "You know," he said, turning back to her, "many members of nobility are engaged at younger ages than ourselves."

Courteth kept her face expressionless—he certainly was feeling daring this day. "Fathers make arrangements when it suits them," she replied.

"Sometimes fathers can't be trusted," Martis said, moving closer. "Sometimes they need prodding."

"A girl cannot prod if she cannot decide, Martis," Courteth said flightily, moving away from him to walk toward the balcony. "I have too many options left to make a firm decision."

"The lumberman?" Martis growled. "Really, Courteth, don't try and play with me. I know you have no intention of marrying a peasant."

Courteth turned, leaning against the railing. He spoke harshly, but his face was calm, and he was very self-assured. Years of practice allowed Courteth to keep her own face serene, even though on the inside she was still seething. She had to find a way to get revenge on Topaz. But

how? The jesk was untouchable. Then, a thought occurred to her. She couldn't get revenge on the fool directly, but she could act against one of his pawns.

MARTIS WATCHED COURTETH QUIETLY AS SHE THOUGHT. THEN SHE turned to him, a slight smile on her lips. "I don't know," Courteth said airily, responding to Martis's comment about Jerick. "He might be a peasant, but my father is quite fond of him, and he is quite handsome—not to mention clever."

Martis snorted. Courteth tried to be sly and manipulative, but it was obvious she would never be a master of politics. Everything she did was far too transparent. In her childhood, her age had masked her intentions. As she grew, she was losing that edge. "The lumberman is pampered and favored, Courteth," Martis said. "That is not the same thing as being clever."

"Perhaps," Courteth said, turning her head to look out over the city.

"How long will you play this game, woman?" Martis said with a sigh, walking onto the balcony next to her. "How long will you avoid the inevitable?"

"I could never make a decision," Courteth said with a girlish shake of her head. "Not so long as both contestants are so equally matched." She paused, looking over and catching Martis's eye. "Of course, if one of the contestants were to fall . . . If one of them were so humiliated that it became obvious I could never choose him, then I would only have one option left, wouldn't I?"

Martis raised an eyebrow. There had been true vengefulness in her voice. *What has she suddenly got against Jerick?* Courteth was smiling as she leaned against the balcony—she thought herself extraordinarily clever for some reason, as if she were pushing Martis into doing something he didn't want to do.

Martis shook his head. He didn't care about the flighty ways of women. The princess wanted to play games, but she didn't realize that such could trap her just as easily as her opponents.

If you won't give me a promise, Courteth, Martis thought to himself as he bowed to leave, *then I will just have to leave you without options. You will be mine—and, as an added gift, I'll even humiliate your lumberman for you. That much, at least, will be a pleasure.*

CHAPTER TWENTY

BAT'CHOR APPROVED OF LAKDON. IT WAS A CALM, WELL-ORGANIZED CITY, unlike the chaotic metropolises of the south. The buildings of Lakdon ran in straight lines, and each one was a simple, utilitarian box. Very practical. The palace itself was a massive rectangular structure that would be highly defensible in the case of a war—not that Melerand ever had to worry about invading armies. It had made itself far too valuable a supplier to worry about invasion.

Another thing Bat'Chor liked about Melerand was the people's lack of prejudice. In the south the Ke'Chan were excluded from society. People, especially in Fallamore, were jealous of Ke'Chan merchants' financial success. In addition, the nations to the south retained a cultural memory of the time when the Ke'Chan had ruled most of Yolen. In those days, before the Ke'Chan homeland across the Atad mountains grew dry and unlivable, the Ke'Chan had ruled an empire that ran from the southern ocean up to the borders of Melerand.

Only this one country, Melerand, had never been conquered, either by the Ke'Chan or their precursors the Rodain. It was a constant source of amazement to Bat'Chor that this humble people were the only ones on the continent who had never been taken in battle. He wasn't certain what element of strength, luck, or divine blessing had granted them such a boon.

Bat'Chor reined his chariot in, approaching the Lakdon city gates. The only thing he didn't like about Melerand was the temperature. He could see his breath puffing out in front of him, even though the calendars said

that spring should have arrived months ago. Patches of snow squatted in the shadows of the city wall, and a chill wind whipped at his chellorbeth, flipping the back of the long coat up in the air.

With a shake of his head at the insane Melerand weather, Bat'Chor whipped his horse back into motion, guiding his chariot down the short hill toward the city gate. The sooner he reached the palace, the sooner he could find himself a fire and get warm.

Something was different about the city. He didn't notice it at first; he was too busy anticipating that warm fire. However, as his chariot moved down the main street, he sensed it. The townspeople were apprehensive for some reason, and they had frightened looks on their faces. Most of them appeared as if they were moving about in unconscious groups.

He felt his horse shuffle nervously in front of the chariot, something she did when she sensed danger. "He'cho, Kabreth," he said reassuringly. The horse quieted beneath his ministrations, but Bat'Chor himself wasn't so easily pacified. He let his eyes move across the city, searching the faces for information.

They were worried about something, that much was certain. His presence wasn't helping things, either. They regarded him with looks of distrust and even hate—but not the racist looks of hate he was accustomed to from the south. It was a more fearful hate, like the look one would give a Fain creature. As if he were something that wasn't understood, and therefore wasn't to be trusted.

Groups of armed men marched through the city, each group bearing its own colors. Bat'Chor recognized the crests of several influential Meleran families. What was going on? He had heard nothing of a succession war or rioting in Melerand, yet these people looked like they were being forced to live under some sort of martial law.

Bat'Chor whipped Kabreth into a canter, moving more quickly as several groups of bronze-armored men began to regard him with speculative looks—looks a guardsman gave a criminal when determining if he was worth the trouble of arresting. Just to be certain, Bat'Chor flipped back the side of his chellorbeth, letting the sun fall on his broad-bladed azorban.

He attained the palace without incident, though one group of men in green and yellow followed him for the better part of the trip. They fell back as he drove his chariot into the palace stables and handed the reins to one of the stableboys.

"By 'Cheru Tar, Topaz," he mumbled as he entered the relative safety of the palace. "You'd better be here."

FOR SOME REASON, THE POND DIDN'T SEEM FOREBODING TO RYALLA. EVEN though she had nearly died in its waters—a strange notion, considering the water was barely deep enough to reach over her head—she found she wasn't bothered by its presence. She had assumed that seeing its calm surface would make her uncomfortable, at the least. However, she had discovered with surprise that even sitting a few feet away from the pond didn't bother her.

She sat on the very same bench from which Courteth had ordered her near-demise. In her hands she idly played with a crisp leaf, possibly one of the ones that had grown and died by Topaz's mystical command. The air had warmed slightly over the last few days, and the wind was just chilly now, as opposed to bitter. At first, Ryalla had stayed away from the gardens, afraid of the memories and feelings the sight of the pond would cause. Today she had finally come to confront her fears, only to find nothing there to confront.

As she sat and pondered, crinkling the leaf in her bare fingers, she finally hit on the answer. She wasn't afraid of the pond because it wasn't the thing that had almost killed her. There was only one person she could blame for the attempted execution. It wasn't the princess. It was Ryalla herself.

Ryalla was the one who had stepped into the icy water, thrusting her naked flesh into the frozen depths. She was to blame for obeying the whims of a foolish mistress; she was at fault for giving in when she knew better. Courteth may have been the one to make the orders, but Ryalla had been the one to execute them.

Part of her still couldn't believe Courteth had tried to kill her. Death probably hadn't been the princess's goal. Still, it had nearly been the result, intended or not. Either Courteth was even more cruel than Ryalla assumed, or the princess was simply more careless. Besides, even if Courteth hadn't realized how dangerous her commands had been, Ryalla doubted that the princess would have grieved overly-much if Topaz hadn't arrived to pull Ryalla free of the ice.

The princess was a monster of a person. Ryalla had always known that, but her discipline had never allowed her to admit it. What's more, Ryalla was a fool for following her. A fool who deserved to drown in a garden pool, assuming she wasn't intelligent, or courageous, enough to know when to disobey.

The more Ryalla thought about it, the more she realized her slavery to Courteth had been willful as much as forced. All of Courteth's punishments, the kneeling, the book holding, the wearing of unseasonal clothing, had only worked because Ryalla allowed them to. Courteth had never really

punished Ryalla, she had only commanded her servant to punish herself. And, like an idiot, Ryalla had complied. She had made herself a slave.

Her relationship with Courteth had changed now. The princess didn't seem as disturbed by events as Topaz assumed she would be, but she had stopped giving Ryalla punishments on a whim. Maybe she realized that Ryalla would no longer punish herself, or maybe she was afraid of retribution from the jesk. Either way, both princess and slave continued to pretend their roles were unchanged, when both knew that nothing would ever be the same again.

Ryalla left Courteth's rooms when she wanted and returned when she wanted. She continued to do the princess's homework, but Courteth no longer commanded—she simply left the books for Ryalla to read, or wrote instructions for essays she was to write. It was probable that Courteth was beginning to suspect that her slave actually enjoyed reading, but knew that she had no other option but to keep giving Ryalla the books. Courteth couldn't do the work on her own—the reading level and expectations had progressed far beyond her abilities. Besides, if it became known that all of her work had been done by her slave, Courteth would be shamed before the court—not to mention the potential for retribution. It was against the law to teach a slave how to read.

So, Ryalla continued to ingest the volumes Vendavious gave to Courteth, her understanding, and imagination, growing with each new work. It pained her each time she had to return a book or scroll, knowing that she would probably never be able to read it again. Though some of them were from Vendavious's own personal collection, most were from the library—a place Ryalla would never be able to go, despite her newfound independence. In the eyes of the court, she was still a slave, even if she had stopped regarding herself that way.

So, she devoured each book, sometimes reading it two or three times, writing her favorite passages on Courteth's parchment and memorizing as much as she could. A time would come when the books would be cut off—a time not far away, for Jerick's sixteenth birthday, and the end of the learning sessions, would arrive in just a few weeks. Ryalla wasn't certain what she would do when that happened.

Ryalla shook her head, trying to dispel the foreboding thoughts from her mind. Instead, Ryalla turned her thoughts to a problem that had been bothering her for the last few days. The problem was a person, an incredibly complex one. Topaz.

He had done something that day, something that had brought her back

from the very edge of life. She still could feel the effects of his touch in her body, her muscles felt renewed and stronger, her head clearer, and her body more energetic than it ever had before. There were other changes as well.

The day after the event she had awoken in Ulcha's room, the old Ke'Chan nurse that took care of palace servants when they got sick. Ryalla had slept restfully, and managed to convince Ulcha that she was unharmed by the previous day's events, receiving permission to return to her duties. As she had dressed, however, Ryalla had noticed something odd. She no longer had moles or freckles on her body.

Arms, legs, torso—it was all the same. Her skin was completely unblemished, unnaturally so. What's more, the small dot of a birthmark on her left thigh was gone, as was the scar she'd had on her right arm ever since cutting herself as a child. Even her teeth had suddenly become full and straight. Her body had been completely renewed.

Then there was the inexplicable occurrence with the garden plants. Topaz hadn't spoken of what he did, but there was a twinkle in his eye when he looked at her now, as if he were daring her to figure out what he had done and how he had done it. Ryalla knew there was only one answer. Magic.

It wasn't all that difficult for her to accept—all of the old palace maids spoke of magic as if it were an everyday occurrence. They made charms from bits of garlic and bone, burned rosefallow on particularly cold evenings, and warned Ryalla never to speak the name of Xeth the Black during a new moon. Ryalla had grown up accepting magic as a part of life, but she had always considered it a subtle thing. More a way to influence the Lords or lesser gods and spirits into granting you favorable luck than anything else. What Topaz had done was anything but subtle.

If it were a singular occurrence, perhaps Ryalla would have been able to pass it off as one of Topaz's tricks. After all, she could find nothing different about the trees of the garden. However, there was the time a month earlier when the plants in Topaz's room had grown so suddenly, and that, added to her incredible healing, was enough to be convincing. Besides, there had been the look in Topaz's eyes. The desperation when he pulled off his glove, the passionate anger with which he confronted Courteth. The events of that day had been no planned ruse—Topaz had been acting spontaneously, of that much Ryalla felt certain.

It still left her with a question, however. How had Topaz done what he did? Remembering his dark, powerful form standing protectively above her, she was almost tempted to think him one of the Lords themselves.

The sound of footsteps on the stone pathway caused her to turn. She was still half-afraid she would find Courteth stalking her; instead she saw only Jerick's ingenuously boyish face.

The boy paused. "I haven't seen you for a few days," he said uncomfortably, standing on the path. "I was wondering how your recovery was coming."

Ryalla smiled, nodding for him to have a seat on the bench beside her. "There was little to recover from, Jerick," she explained, letting the leaf blow out of her fingers. It tumbled in the air for a moment before dropping to the pond's cool, now iceless, surface.

"That's not what I heard," Jerick said, settling down on the bench. "Courteth told me all about it."

"She did?" Ryalla asked curiously.

Jerick nodded. "She said you just slipped in. One moment the two of you were walking together in the gardens, the next thing she knew you were struggling for breath beneath the ice. It must have been horrible for her, watching you drown but being unable to pull you free without falling in herself."

Ryalla smiled to herself, shaking her head. *Maybe one day you'll realize what she is, Jerick, and I'll be able to tell you the truth.*

Jerick continued. "If Topaz hadn't heard you screaming . . ."

"Screaming?" Ryalla asked, looking up with curiosity.

"Yes," Jerick said with a nod. "We could hear you all the way to the palace."

Ryalla sat back contemplatively, confused. When had she screamed? The entire event was hazy, but she did remember that her face was so cold she hadn't even been able to speak.

Jerick turned away, sitting quietly. Ryalla watched him curiously as he sat absorbed in his own thoughts, tossing small pebbles into the pond. His jacket was crafted like that of a nobleman, bearing the red and gold crest of the king's house. Not the crest of ownership, like slaves and servants wore, but the actual House crest—that which proclaimed a member of Rodis's family. If she recalled correctly, it had been an early birthday present from the king. At his side he wore a scabbard holding a medium-sized bronze sword—like many of the men in the palace, he had begun wearing a weapon ever since the Tzend warrior's arrival.

"Jerick," she said, letting her mind drift back to the problem that had been plaguing her before he arrived, "have you ever noticed anything . . . odd about Topaz?"

Jerick's head cocked to the side, surprised at the question. "Odd? If Topaz

is anything, Ryalla, he's odd. I don't believe there's a person in the palace who would argue with that statement."

Ryalla felt herself blush slightly. "I mean, more than just his dress or his mannerisms. Something about the things he can do."

"You mean like magic?" Jerick asked, smiling slightly.

Ryalla bit her lip. She knew what Jerick thought of Horwatchers and their abilities—he had once given her an extended lecture on not believing in Scathe's charlatanism. *He's going to think me a fool*, she realized. *If only he had seen what I saw . . .*

"I don't know," Ryalla said, bowing her head and feeling foolish.

"I've told him he should be more careful," Jerick said musingly. "The people of Melerand are very superstitious—he's going to find himself beheaded by a mob of housewives if he keeps throwing his powers around like they were an everyday event."

Ryalla's head snapped up with shocked eyes. Jerick sat leisurely on the bench, his hands resting behind his head. He turned his eyes toward her with a smile.

"I thought you didn't believe in magic," she said with a stunned voice.

"I've had cause to rethink my position lately," he replied, looking back at the pond. "It's very hard to argue with one's eyes. Not impossible, as proven by the many of us who manage to do it, but difficult."

"You know what he does?" Ryalla asked.

Jerick nodded.

"And you believe it's . . . magic?"

"He calls it microkinesis," Jerick explained. "Says it's more a science than a mysticism. Something measurable, like mathematics or astronomy."

Jerick fell silent then, and she could see from his eyes that he was following contemplations of his own. The two of them sat on the bench for nearly an hour, watching Jerick's pebbles make tiny splashes in the pond that had nearly become Ryalla's tomb. Eventually, he bid her farewell, walking down the path that led to the library to continue his studies. Ryalla continued to sit, wondering at the world and, more acutely, the people she knew—or, at least, had thought she knew.

"WHAT IS SHE TO YOU, FROST?" TOPAZ ASKED.

Frost turned away from the window, looking back with an inquisitive eye. "Who?"

Topaz climbed to his feet, abandoning his seat next to the wall to join

Frost by the window. He nodded out toward the garden, where a small, dark-haired form was barely visible through the cover of barren trees. "The slave girl," he said. "Why do you pay so much attention to her?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Frost noted.

Topaz shrugged. "I cultivate potential where I see it. I've seen the looks you give her, however, the way you watch over her. One would almost think you a relative of some sort."

Frost snorted, turning his eyes back toward Ryalla. "There is no mystery surrounding her origins, or mine, Cephandrius," he pointed out. "Our families are not related."

"Then why? Why do you look after her so? I'll bet she doesn't even know how much you do."

"I haven't done that much, really," Frost defended.

Topaz raised an eyebrow. "You were the one who made certain she became the property of the king, as opposed to some other Ka."

"A move that appears to have been rather foolish, considering the princess's temperament," Frost countered.

"But you couldn't have known that at the time."

"No," Frost admitted. He looked out across the gardens, studying Ryalla as she stared across a glass-surfaced pond. A pond that had nearly killed her, and where had Frost been? All these years of watching, all these years of trying to guide and protect her without appearing to do so, and when danger had finally come to a head, he had been oblivious, sitting with his nose in a book on ancient Rodain grammar, a few feet from this very window.

If only he had looked out and seen, if only he had taken his duty a little more seriously. He hadn't realized the danger until he heard Ryalla's shout for help—a shout that had obviously not come from her mouth, but her mind. Waves projected into the air. Sonic microkinesis, something Ryalla should definitely *not* have been able to do. Topaz had been right again.

He looked over at the jesk, who was studying him with a slight smile on his face. He knew—or, at least, he suspected. Topaz could read faces like Frost read books; it was insufferably difficult to keep a secret from the man. Yet, despite his annoying habits, there was no human on the planet Frost respected more than Cephandrius Maxtori. It went beyond the jesk's rescue of Ryalla a few days before, an action by which the jesk had unwittingly gained Frost's eternal gratitude. Topaz was the only person—man or god—Frost knew who was working to prepare for what was coming. Everyone else either didn't suspect, or tried to ignore, the dangers of the future.

He does so much with so little. . . . Frost thought with admiration. At times, the old scholar was almost tempted to break his vow and tell the insufferable jester all he knew.

"I am little more than an old man who tries to help those he can, Topaz," Frost said, meeting the jesk's eyes. It wasn't a lie—Frost never lied. "Let me assure you, whatever you suspect, it is wrong." *It's much, much greater than you assume.*

Topaz smiled. "Of course, Frosty," he said, his eyes suspicious.

Let him suspect, Frost thought with an inward sigh. *He doesn't trust anything else I say anyway.*

Suddenly, a cacophonous pounding came from the door. Seconds later, an enormous, impatient form burst into the room.

"Thees town has gone crazy!" the bulky Ke'Chan pronounced.

"Bat'Chor," Topaz said, turning away from the window. "You're late."

"I had oblegations," the Ke'Chan merchant declared, dropping a bulky leather bag to the floor.

"Obligations that held you six months past our appointment?" Topaz said critically.

"My father died," Bat'Chor replied, seating himself on one of Frost's stools. Frost watched with anxiety as he did so—the delicate wooden legs had not been designed with the gargantuan Ke'Chan body shape in mind.

Topaz paused, seating himself on another stool. "I'm sorry," he said, his tone subdued.

Bat'Chor waved a hand dismissively. "We knew he was coming. Hees mind went to the True God years ago; he ees well that hees body followed."

"How does this change our plans?" Topaz asked.

Bat'Chor shrugged. "I have two years. After the mourning ees feeneeshed, then we weell see."

Topaz nodded curtly to himself. "Well, I should have expected this. Ke'Chan are never on time."

Frost snorted. "Don't let him chastise you, Bat'Chor," he said, handing the merchant a cup of steaming tea. "He didn't get here himself until a few weeks ago. He was annoyed to find you weren't waiting for him, but I don't see that he had any right. He was just as late himself."

Bat'Chor accepted the tea, then looked over at Topaz with raised eyebrows. "Really," he said with a flat tone.

Topaz shot Frost an accusatory look. "I had my sources keeping watch on the castle," he said defensively. "If you'd arrived, I would have come. Eventually."

Bat'Chor snorted, showing what he thought of Topaz's punctuality, then

set his tea aside as he reached for the saddlebags. "Here," he declared, pulling out a scroll wrapped with a leather strip.

Topaz accepted the scroll eagerly, then pulled his stool over to Frost's desk and unrolled the paper, weighing its corners down with colored marking stones.

"He ees a book of heestory," Bat'Chor said, rising to pour himself another cup of tea. On the way back to his stool, he closed the window's shutters, mumbling something about "crazy Northerners."

Topaz nodded, his eyes skimming over the scroll's contents.

"What is it?" Frost asked curiously, moving over to get a peek at the scroll.

"A translation of a book we borrowed from the temple of Hsaw in Kido," Topaz said.

Frost raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know that the Tzendish clergy were that free with their books."

Topaz smiled evilly. "They aren't," he said. Then he looked up and winked. "Getting this scroll was the best fun we've had in a decade, eh Bat'Chor?"

"Undeniably," the Ke'Chan said in a rather unenthusiastic voice.

"You should have seen Bat'Chor. He looked lovely."

Frost looked over at the large Ke'Chan, who was eyeing Topaz with a look that very clearly said "I am going to keell you."

As the two traded looks, Frost inched closer, scanning the scroll's contents. Most of it seemed standard—if antiquated—historical documentation. One section, however, stood out.

"The Altar of Dol," he mumbled, reading the top of a paragraph whose bottom was cut off by the still-rolled section of the scroll.

Topaz looked up, his eyes sharp. "What did you say?"

Frost pointed at the page. "It's right here, Topaz. There appears to be a section telling the legend of the Altar of Dol."

"Never heard of it," Topaz said, unrolling the scroll.

"Then you should probably read about it," Frost hinted.

"That section ees very eenteresting," Bat'Chor mumbled, leaning back on his stool. Frost cringed as the wooden legs groaned beneath the strain. "I read heem on my way here. There was a part even the Trexandian scholars couldn't translate."

Topaz read quickly, his brow furrowing in confusion as he digested the information. "This story must date back before the founding of Rodaius," he guessed. "Look, it mentions 'a time when men knew not the art of copper and bronze.'"

"An altar was built in the city of Rothanden," Frost said quietly, making

certain to stay close to the narrative contained on the scroll, lest he reveal too much and wander into what was forbidden, “by a people who were destroyed thousands of years ago. An altar to five gods. It was a beautiful creation, especially for the time, carved and engraved by their best stonemasons. However, it was a pagan altar, and the king—one of the few pious men to rule in Rothanden—ordered it torn down. The altar was shattered and destroyed, but, as part of its decoration, the names of the five gods had been cast from Dragonsteel and placed at its head.”

“Making them eternal,” Bat’Chor mumbled. “Wheech means, theoretically, they should steell excest today. Assuming anyone wanted to know the names of those gods badly enough to search them out.”

“That would be a waste,” Topaz said, eyes widening. “Considering the fact that they’re written right here.”

Bat’Chor rose, shuffling over to crouch over Topaz’s shoulder. Written below the text of the story was a group of five words written in a strange language.

Bat’Chor snorted. “Yes, but we can’t read them—that was the part I mentioned earlier. The scholars of Trexandos said that they’d never seen that language before. They wrote those five words exactly as they were found on the oreegeenal scroll.”

Topaz ran his finger over the scroll, his eyes demanding, as if pure determination would let him decipher the unknown language.

“You’re right, Bat’Chor,” he finally admitted. “We can’t read these names.” Then he looked up. “But Frost can. Can’t you?”

Frost felt his body grow cold, and his hand slipped free from its place at the back of Topaz’s stool. The jesk’s eyes were unyielding as they held Frost’s own, and the old scholar felt himself backing away from his friend, fear in his heart. During their years as acquaintances, Topaz had supposed, assumed, and cajoled. He had never, however, outright demanded.

I cannot! Frost thought to himself with horror. Yet, Topaz had worked so hard, and so long, making so little progress. The facts he needed were lost in time, contained in the doings of men before they thought to write down their histories. Even this clue was so small, such a little piece of the many-layered puzzle of time, as to be nearly useless.

I’ll tell him I can’t read it. Yet, at the same time as he made that determination, Frost remembered Ryalla. Topaz had saved her life, had protected her when Frost could not. How could he deny this man anything? “Yes,” he heard himself whisper, “I can read them.”

Topaz’s face grew triumphant, and a broad, knowing smile moved over

his face. Then it faded as he realized he hadn't yet asked the more important question.

"Will you?" he asked quietly.

Frost bowed his head. It wouldn't be a true betrayal of his promise—only a marginal one. He would simply be reading information on a page, not volunteering it. He was a scholar of languages. Even if he hadn't known what he did—if he weren't what he was—there was a chance that he would be able to read those letters.

Yet, despite the rationalization, a piece of him knew that a simple man, historical linguist or not, would never have been able to learn this particular language. It had been too short-lived, and too infrequently used, for time to remember it.

For Ryalla, he thought to himself.

"Yes, Cephandrius, I will," he said, stepping forward. He lit a candle beside the scroll, illuminating the room against dusk's advance. Then he placed his index finger next to the first Rothanden word.

"This reads Selonis."

Topaz's eyes widened. *Yes, you recognize that one, don't you?* Frost thought to himself. The legend of Selonis had survived until modern times, eventually finding itself a place in the formal Yolish Pantheon as Slonis, the Mother of the World.

"This second one reads Ethain," Frost continued. Topaz and Bat'Chor looked at one another with confusion. No, they didn't recognize this name, nor would they know the others. "The third reads Doruse, and the fourth Rafete."

"And the fifth?" Topaz demanded.

"There is no fifth. Rafete was written as two separate words in Rothanden."

"But, the narrative said there were five names on the altar," Topaz said with confusion.

"There were," Frost replied. "The fifth one was not contained in the legends, for people feared to speak his name."

"The Betrayer?"

Frost shook his head. "That is a separate legend entirely."

"Xeth the Black, then," Topaz guessed.

"Perhaps," Frost said with a nod. "Or, at least, the two share similar traits. I would not be surprised if the Xeth tradition was created from stories about this one. Though, in the beginning, his name was not Xeth."

"You know it, don't you?" Topaz accused.

Frost nodded.

"And are you going to tell us?"

Frost paused, then shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said, turning his eyes down. "I cannot."

Topaz slammed his fist into the table in frustration. "By the Lords, Frost! Are you working with us or against us? Why can't you do something as simple as tell us a name?"

"I'm sorry, Topaz," Frost said, true regret in his voice. "I'm forbidden."

"By whom?"

By the Father, Frost thought. *If he knew the name of this one . . .* Frost thought. It wouldn't be such a big deal except for the creature's fondness of calling himself by his true name. Frost wanted to tell him—it was one word, but it would reveal so much. . . .

"I cannot tell you," Frost heard himself say.

Topaz pounded his fist against the table again, knocking the marking stones loose. The scroll re-rolled against itself weakly.

"All right, Bat'Chor," Topaz eventually said, determination in his eyes. "We'll find the name of the fifth god on our own."

Bat'Chor grunted in agreement. "Een all honesty, Topaz, ees thees worth the effort? Ees the name of a long forgotten god that eemportant?"

Topaz paused, looking into Frost's ashamed eyes.

"Normally I'd say no," Topaz said. "But . . ." he looked into Frost's eyes, delving deep. "He thinks the name is important, Bat'Chor. And it's the only hint we have. Those five names are out there somewhere, written in Dragonsteel. We're going to find the one that isn't on this scroll. Then, perhaps, Frost will be willing to translate it for us."

"That I can do," Frost replied quietly.

"But, Cephandrius," Bat'Chor said apprehensively, still leaning on the table beside Topaz, "those names could be anywhere. They could be lost een the ocean, for all we know."

"They could," Topaz admitted. "But I doubt it. Here, look at this."

The jesk unrolled the scroll again, pointing at one of the Rothandish words, the one that said "Doruse." "Do you recognize this pattern?"

The large Ke'Chan squinted, looking at the word, then shook his head.

"Do you remember the Blade of Gzai, back in the temple? These letters were contained in its Dragonsteel hilt."

"You mean . . .?"

Topaz nodded. "What the Tzends now call the Blade of Gzai was once a piece of this altar. Dragonsteel is too valuable to just disappear, Bat'Chor.

Many monarchs never see a piece of it larger than a man's finger, and whatever they do get hold of, they hang on to. The man who forged the original Blade of Gzai probably didn't know that his Dragonsteel spelled out the name of an ancient god, he just knew that it was a symbol of wealth and power, so he attached it to the hilt of his sword."

Bat'Chor nodded slowly. "So, we go looking for large pieces of Dragonsteel, and see if they spell words."

Topaz nodded. "Though, if they're all like the piece in the Blade of Gzai, then the letters will be decorated with trappings and designs."

"Then how weell we know when we find the name of the feeftth god?" Bat'Chor asked. "We have no pattern to compare heem to."

Topaz looked back at Frost, a bit of the accusation gone from his eyes. "Will you write down the Rothanden alphabet for us?" he asked.

Frost paused.

"It really isn't all that different from reading these words," Topaz pointed out.

Frost sighed. "All right," he agreed.

"Fine," Topaz said, standing and rolling up the scroll. "Bat'Chor, I still have a few things to tie up here in Melerand. The scholars will test Jerick and Martis in just a few weeks—we'll leave after the judging."

Bat'Chor nodded, following Topaz as the jesk walked out of Frost's room. Cephandrius gave the old scholar one last look before he left, one of disappointment, then pulled the door closed.

Frost groaned quietly to himself, moving through the now-dark room. How had this happened? He had chosen Melerand because it was the most stable, and least politically active kingdom on Yolen. He was supposed to be able to live his life here as a peaceful, quiet scholar. Free from questions and probings. Why had he let himself get involved with Topaz?

With a sigh, Frost sat himself on a stool. Too late, he heard the legs give a final sigh of a crack, and felt himself topple to the ground.

He had to work hard not to think about the collapse's symbolism.

"WHAT?" MARTIS DEMANDED, THROWING OPEN THE FLAP OF HIS TENT outside the city. Night was quickly approaching, and he had been interrupted in the middle of a late dinner by a young messenger boy. The written message had simply said, "Come to the tent immediately."

Martis's anger evaporated as he looked into the tent, and his arm fell limp.

Jorn stood proudly beside Martis's map table. Beside him, tied with at least a mile's worth of rope and gagged soundly, sat a white-skinned form. It had features like those of a man, but although its eyes resembled a human's, they were black where they should have been white. Instead of hair, the top of its head was covered with thick strands of something that looked like long, thin leaves or small pieces of rope. It regarded him with eyes filled with pure hatred.

Martis smiled. "The men you took it from?" he asked.

"Dead," Jorn said. "Killed by men sworn to you. We left the bodies covered with symbols like the book said the Sho Del sometimes draw on their victims."

"Perfect," Martis praised, walking into the tent and studying his captive. It appeared to be male, though with demons one probably couldn't tell so easily. It had a tall frame, like a man, though its muscles weren't large like he would expect from a warrior.

"Shall we take it to the king now?" Jorn asked eagerly.

Martis shook his head, his smile deepening. "No. I have a better plan."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MASTER TORELL'S PRESENTATION TO THE COURT HAD BEEN AS DISASTROUS as Jerick anticipated. King Rodis, ever sympathetic, had managed not to snicker—though Jerick had been able to tell it took every ounce of his regal self-control to manage the feat. The other nobles in the throne room, however, had not shown as much restraint. By the end of the day, every aristocrat in Lakdon—and Jerick suspected most of those in the neighboring towns—knew the fool Torell had made of himself.

"I'm ruined," Master mumbled sorrowfully. Fearing for the man's sanity after not seeing him for a week, Jerick had come to Torell's room in search of his old teacher.

"It can't be that bad, Master," Jerick consoled. He sat on the floor beside Master's bed mattress, sitting as he once had in the school, his legs folded, his posture straight-backed.

"It is," the older man groaned. "I was ruined t'day King Rodis sent me to that cursed town. Did you know that my Ka has renounced me? They did it just one day after I left, three years ago, and never sent me word. They didn't want to be associated with a man who taught peasants."

"At least the king gave you a place here, in the palace."

"To do what? Waste away? Teach t'palace servants how to read?" Master held his head in his hands, staring down at the floor. He wore the blond Antoli Jerick had found him, and had bleached his hair to match, following aristocratic tradition.

"You have what every scholar desires, Master," Jerick countered. "You

have the support of a wealthy Ka, close proximity to a library, and time to study. What more could you ask?"

Master simply groaned again. "Don't you see?" he asked. "I only went to Trexandos because I thought having a scholar in the family would increase t'prestige of my Ka. I don't even like to study. I *hate* books!"

"You could always join the priesthood," Jerick suggested. "The temple of Lamrin is looking for new inductees."

Master sighed his reply. Then, suddenly, he yelped in surprise as his Antoli popped off his face and flew out the window.

Jerick blinked in surprise. What . . . ?

A hand appeared from the side of the window, holding the Antoli between thumb and forefinger as if it were an object of disgust. Topaz's face came next, bearing a look of sadness. "I think it's dead," he confessed.

Master simply slumped back on his bed, and Jerick rose from his place, stalking over to snatch the Antoli out of the irreverent jesk's fingers. There was a small, almost invisible string looped around it—Jerick didn't want to know how Topaz had managed to get it in place.

"Can't you leave a man alone when it's obvious he's having a bad day?" Jerick asked.

"Bad day?" Topaz asked. "Bad life is more accurate."

Jerick sighed, handing the Antoli back to master. The man accepted it with a limp hand. "Topaz, sometimes you're very childish."

"I have to do something to atone for the times I'm forced to be solemn," the jesk replied, completely serious. "Come on, the king's going to make an announcement you should hear."

"Just a moment," Jerick said, placing his hand on the despondent Master's shoulder. There was another reason he had come to visit the scholar.

"Master?" he asked, prodding the man softly.

"What is it, boy?" Torell replied with a deep sigh.

"I know this probably isn't the best time, but I have to know. I doubt you even paid attention to this sort of thing but . . . well, when you left the village, Master, how were my parents?"

Master looked up, a confused look on his face. "Your parents?" he asked dumbfoundedly.

"Yes," Jerick continued. "Were they in good health? Did they ever . . . speak of me?"

"Boy, your parents are—"

Everything seemed to fuzz, and Jerick's mind grew dull. Then, suddenly, Topaz was there, his hand clasped tightly on Jerick's shoulder.

“Jerick?” he asked. “Lumberling? Are you all right?”

Jerick shook his head, dazed. What had happened? “I guess so. . . .” he mumbled.

“We’re going to have to do something about that some day,” Topaz said quietly.

“About what?” Jerick asked with confusion.

“Never mind. Come on,” Topaz said, grabbing his hand and walking toward the window. “We’ll miss the announcement.”

Jerick resisted. “Topaz, I am *not* going to climb on ledges behind you.”

Topaz turned back, looking into Jerick’s unyielding eyes. “It really is faster,” he said with a sigh.

Jerick didn’t budge.

“All right,” Topaz said, raising his eyes to the heavens in resignation. “We’ll take the hallways.”

“WHAT IF IT DOESN’T WORK?” JORN WHISPERED, LOOKING OUT OF THE stable’s shadowed recesses through the broad gates. Beyond lay the palace courtyard, where the king would stand to make his announcement.

“It will work,” Martis said with more confidence than he felt. What if it didn’t work? It had to. He couldn’t see how the Lords could help giving him success now, after how hard he had worked, how well he had planned.

“It will work,” Martis repeated, more to himself than to Jorn.

“WHAT KIND OF ANNOUNCEMENT WILL IT BE?” ONE OF THE GIRLS ASKED, walking through the halls of the palace.

Courteth shrugged. “How should I know?”

“He’s your father,” another girl, Marnanne, said.

“That doesn’t make me privy to secrets of state. You’ll just have to wait,” Courteth said lightly. However, at the same time she put a teasing edge into her voice—as if to imply that she really did know, but didn’t feel like telling.

Ryalla trailed behind, wearing one of her finest dresses—a dress she herself had chosen, rather than Courteth. The three noble girls paid her little heed, as usual. However, unlike before, Courteth didn’t order her away as soon as they reached their places at the front of the courtyard, just in front of the steps from which the king would make his announcement. When Courteth looked back, as if to give such an order, Ryalla stared her directly in the eyes, and the princess’s lips fell silent.

"I'll just assume that there's no way you'll tell me what the king's planning," Jerick guessed as they walked down the hallway.

Topaz eyes twinkled mischievously. "That schooling really has made you smarter."

"That assumption, however," Jerick continued, "won't stop me from trying to guess."

"If you feel you must," Topaz said with a shrug.

"Does it have something to do with the Sho Del?"

"Perhaps," Topaz said with a slight smile. "That is, assuming there really is a Sho Del assassin."

Jerick looked over with surprise. "You don't think there is one?"

Topaz shrugged. "It's been three weeks, and not a single credible witness has seen this supposed assassin. I'll admit I'm a bit skeptical."

"What about that hunting party that was slaughtered a couple of weeks back?" Jerick pointed out.

"I'm not convinced that was a Sho Del."

"But the marks—"

"Were drawn sloppily," Topaz cut in. "Either our assassin was a very poor penman, or human fingers drew those letters."

"But why?"

"To make us think there's an assassin out there when there really isn't," Topaz surmised. "To get the entire court riled up."

"That doesn't make any sense at all, Topaz," Jerick challenged.

"I know," Topaz agreed. "And that's the part that worries me most. One thing is growing more and more certain, however. There's no assassin—there never was."

THE SHO DEL ASSASSIN STRUGGLED AGAINST ITS BONDS, CRYING OUT WEAKLY.

"Shut that thing up," Martis hissed. Jorn placed a boot directly in the beast's stomach, and its complaints fell silent.

The beast had grown weak over the two week time it had been in Martis's possession. The delay worried Martis, but it was necessary. The deaths of the hunting party had led to a sudden increase in the king's guards, and Martis had been forced to wait for them to grow lax again. Besides, if he had moved too quickly, there would have been a chance that people would have connected the deaths of the hunters with Martis's sudden success.

Martis looked away from the Sho Del, turning his eyes back at the gathering crowd of nobles. Courteth stood at their front, looking devilishly

tempting, as usual. She thought she was so clever, able to manipulate Martis and pull him around like an animal on a string. Well, they would see who did the manipulating after this day was finished.

JERICK CRIED OUT, FEELING HIS KNEES QUIVER AS THE COLDNESS SUDDENLY struck his mind. He dropped to the stone hallway floor, contorting as a glacier forced its way through his head.

We are ready, a voice said, like a spider crawling across the outside of his brain. *The distraction is set.*

It goes according to plan?

Better. We didn't actually have to do anything—someone else is in the process of creating a distraction for us.

Good. You have permission to proceed.

Then, the voices were gone, and Jerick's world reoriented itself. He breathed deeply for a moment as his vision cleared.

"Jerick!" Topaz's concerned voice floated into his mind.

"I'm all right," Jerick said, lifting his head. The dizziness was gone almost as quickly as it had come, as was the disorientation.

"What in the name of the Lords was that?" Topaz demanded.

"Voices," Jerick said with confusion. "Voices in my head. You didn't hear them?"

Topaz cursed, not answering as he helped Jerick to his feet.

"It happened once before," Jerick said, recalling an incident months ago. "I dismissed it as the effects of a tired mind. But it wasn't, was it? It was microkinesis."

"Afraid not, lumberling," Topaz said with a shake of his head. "Microkinesis only affects the Physical world. Mind-speaking is Cognitive magic."

"Cognitive magic?"

"Sho Del magic," Topaz clarified.

Jerick looked up with surprise. "Does this mean you're wrong?"

"Maybe," Topaz admitted. "Though I have trouble believing any Sho Del would be careless enough to broadcast so widely that a bystander could hear."

"Then who?" Jerick asked with confusion.

"Humans could do it," Topaz said, grinding his teeth. "Assuming they had some very powerful Tamu Keks."

Jerick frowned. "Why could I hear it when no one else could?"

"It has to do with Cognitive natures," Topaz said, waving his hand as if that explained everything. "Trust me, it's complicated. What did they say?"

“Something about a distraction,” Jerick said, shrugging.

Topaz stood for a moment, lost in thought, one hand absently twiddling the ring hidden beneath the gray glove on his other. “I don’t like this,” he said. “Come on, I want to keep a very close eye on the king.”

YOHARN WALKED ABSENTLY THROUGH THE PALACE HALLWAYS. RECENT days had been difficult for him—he had spent so many hours worrying about his father’s safety. Sir Hsor, the knight from the Eternal War, had convinced Yoharn to spend a lot of time in his room under guard—he said that Yoharn should be protected doubly, in case the king were killed. The concept terrified Yoharn. Not only would he have to deal with the pain of losing his father—but then Yoharn would be left to rule the kingdom. He wasn’t ready—he probably never would be.

Yoharn hurried toward his rooms. Sir Hsor insisted that he remain protected, even though the king was about to call an end to the hunts. The next few weeks would prove whether or not the assassin had left the country; they would be dangerous, Sir Hsor warned. It was essential that Yoharn remain protected.

The palace halls were nearly empty, even the servant’s hallways. They were all gathering to hear the king’s announcement. Yoharn was glad for the excuse not to join them—it would just be another crowd before which he would have to perform. Have to pretend to be something no one believed he was. Much better to stay in his rooms.

He walked in, nodding to the guards at the doorway. He sighed in relief, entering the one place that he felt comfortable. He began to undress, intending to get out of his stiff formal fendove. But, he paused. Something was wrong.

“THE KING IS HERE,” JORN SAID.

Martis looked up. He had been watching Jerick and the fool—dressed in one of his customary outrageous outfits—walk out of a doorway on the far side of the palace. They had made their way through the crowd, the jester dexterously elbowing them a place right at the front.

“Good,” Martis declared. “Make certain our boys fall into place, forming a line to stop anyone but myself from saving the king.”

“Already done, sir,” Jorn said, nodding to the crowd. A group of boys and men, Martis’s strongest supporters, were forming an unobtrusive line at the front of the crowd. When the fun began, they would jump back in fear,

pushing the collected nobles away from the king. Martis didn't want anyone random suddenly proving heroic.

"The king's guards?" he asked.

"Drugged," Jorn replied. "We had Fel take them cups of spicewine to calm their nerves before the big announcement."

Martis snorted. Only in Melerand, where there was never any excitement, would a group of trained warriors fall for such a ploy. Everything was perfect. Only one question remained. Would the Sho Del cooperate?

MARTIS HADN'T ARRIVED YET. RYALLA THOUGHT THAT WAS STRANGE—the young noble was very anal about making appearances at social occasions. Wherever the aristocracy gathered, Martis was certain to be found making alliances or bolstering connections.

Yet, this time he didn't look as if he were going to make an appearance. She could already see the king's form shuffling in the palace hallway as servants looked over his formal robes. He would make his announcement in just a few moments. Another oddity was Yoharn—where was the crown prince? He usually accompanied his father for such announcements.

Jerick and Topaz had arrived, however. She tried to catch Jerick's eye, to encourage him to come over next to her, but there was something odd about his face. He stood at the front of the crowd, his back to the palace as he looked at the people around him. However, at the same time his eyes appeared unfocused, as if he were in a dazed trance of some kind.

Ryalla fell silent. Topaz looked the same way. Could something have happened to them?

JERICK SCANNED THE CROWD, HIS MIND DIGESTING THE MILLIONS OF separate Axi that formed the living beings before him. "Someday you're going to have to do more than just look, Topaz," he noted. "I assume there's more to microkinesis."

Topaz stood beside him, his own eyes unfocused as he examined the crowd. "A lot more," he said. "But looking is enough for right now. If you start experimenting, you're liable to accidentally topple the entire palace down on top of us. Trust me—I've done it. Support walls can be very sensitive things."

Jerick smiled. "I don't see any signs of Tamu Keks or Dragonsteel."

"I concur," Topaz said, letting his vision return to normal. "Wherever they are, they aren't in this crowd."

"Now what?" Jerick asked, turning back toward the palace. As he did so, he noticed Courteth, radiant as always, standing just a few bodies away. Martis wasn't at her side, a place he usually claimed for his own during such meetings. In fact, Jerick didn't see Martis anywhere in the crowd.

"I'm not sure," Topaz admitted. "You stay here. I'm going to go find a place inside the palace doorway—that way there will be one of us on either side of the king."

"All right," Jerick said, still staring at Courteth. She was so beautiful.

Topaz sighed. "And try to stay focused, even if you do have a severe case of puberty."

"HE'S TAKING YOUR PLACE!" JORN SPAT, WATCHING JERICK MOVE THROUGH the crowd to stand next to Courteth.

Martis shot a look at the insufferable lumberman, containing his anger. "No matter. The time is upon us—untie the captive."

SHE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN JERICK WOULDN'T NOTICE HER. NOT WITH Courteth around. Ryalla sighed—she might have liberated herself from Courteth's control, but she hadn't freed Jerick. He was still just as wrapped up in the princess as ever.

The stupid boy stumbled through the crowd until he fell into place right next to Courteth, standing at her left. He smiled dumbly, making some inane comment that Ryalla could barely hear. Courteth twittered her reply, encouraging him with wide eyes and pursed lips.

Only then did Ryalla notice that Topaz had disappeared. He hadn't even stayed around for the king's announcement. Where could he have gone?

Her speculation was cut short as King Rodis stepped out onto the platform at the top of the stairs, holding out his thick arms for silence. The crowd complied.

As the courtyard became silent, the collected nobility looking up at Rodis with expectant eyes, the king lowered his hands and began to speak. "Most of you have been involved in the last month's excitement. I wish to grant you all royal appreciation for your concern over my well-being. It has been very difficult knowing that an assassin lurked somewhere nearby, wanting my head. Your vigilance has been a source of support during these nervous times.

"I also wish to thank Sir Hsor for his aid." The king paused, nodding to

the warrior who stood aloofly at the back of the crowd. Hsor nodded back, his face flat.

"However, I think it is time for our fear to end," Rodis continued. "We have heard nothing from the assassin in weeks—I can only assume that your show of might, my good people, has scared him away. Therefore, I officially call an end to the—"

The king was interrupted as the screaming began.

MARTIS PULLED THE SHO DEL CLOSE. IT STRUGGLED IN HIS GRIP, TRYING to free itself, but it was far too weak.

"You came to kill our king, didn't you?"

The Sho Del said nothing, staring him in the face with angry eyes. However, Martis could tell that it understood. Heth'Chor was right—well-trained assassins always spoke the language of their enemies.

Martis held his hand out. Jorn placed the Sho Del's own sword in it. The weapon's edge had been carefully dulled. The assassin looked at the sword apprehensively, not knowing how useless it now was. He thought Martis was going to kill him.

"Take it," Martis said, placing the sword in the assassin's hand.

The Sho Del looked down, its black eyes incredulous.

"Kill him," Martis hissed. "I hate him too—as much as you do, if not more."

The assassin looked back up, disbelief on its face. Martis smiled, then handed the creature to Jorn. "Let him go in sixty seconds," he ordered.

Then Martis took off, dashing into the palace. He couldn't run out of the stables and stop the Sho Del—that would appear too suspicious.

Martis ran, the feeling of tension in his body exhilarating his every muscle. Everything hinged on the Sho Del. In a few moments he would see whether the assassin would try and complete its mission or whether it would turn back and try to escape.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of screaming from the courtyard. He froze in horror. Jorn had released the Sho Del early.

JERICK'S HEAD SNAPPED UP AS THE SCREAMS BEGAN, AND HIS HAND reached immediately for his sword. The sounds were coming from his left, in the direction of the stables. He craned to see what was causing the ruckus when suddenly, like they were moved by the hand of a god, the crowd

pulled back, shoving Jerick away from the area of the steps. As they did so, he briefly caught a glimpse of what was causing the people to shout in fear.

Jerick felt himself freeze. The black eyes. The bone-white skin. The thick hair. A similar image flashed into his mind, a monster like this one, holding a bow and looking across a field trampled by the movement of a hundred stampeding animals.

Jerick shook his head, pulling himself into the present. The Sho Del wore a tight-fitting pair of green leggings and shirt, its bone-white arms sticking out of short sleeves. It held a gleaming bronze sword in its hand, and it was running toward the king.

Jerick realized he had to do something. He felt a sudden, irrational anger burn within him—anger at the white-skinned creature. A sudden image flashed into his mind—an image of his father fighting a similar white-skinned Sho Del.

Jerick screamed in denial, shoving aside the surprised boy in front of him and dashing out in front of the crowd. He had to save the king. Just like Rin had done years before. Suddenly he remembered. He remembered his father, fighting. Rin had killed a Sho Del, and won the respect of the king. Rin had won that battle, hadn't he? Jerick's mind was still fuzzy. He remembered his father attacking one of the creatures, but he didn't remember the outcome of the fight. His father had to have won . . .

Jerick shook his head, clearing it of thoughts. He had to make his father proud. Jerick raced toward the Sho Del, shoving his way past onlookers and pulling his sword free of its sheath. He caught up to the demon in the middle of the palace steps. The Sho Del was ready for the challenge.

Their swords clanged together as Jerick put Doram's teachings to use for the first time in his life. As the assassin parried his first blow, Jerick immediately brought his weapon down to block his opponent's attack. Surprisingly, the block succeeded. Though his mind was a little stunned that his training actually worked, his body knew what to do next, blocking another backhand from the assassin, then following with a thrust of his own.

What he hadn't counted on, however, were the steps. As he battled, the Sho Del pushed him slightly to the side, causing him to stumble. He slipped, off balance as the assassin's blade whipped forward.

But the blade was blocked by a sword that seemed to appear out of nowhere. Topaz. The jesk's face was determined as he swung his weapon at the Sho Del's head. However, just before the blade connected, something seemed to spasm in Topaz's arms, and the sword moved upward slightly, missing the Sho Del completely.

Topaz swore, trying another attack. This one also looked as if it would hit, but the sword once again fell awry. It was as if the jesk were battling his own body, trying to force his arms to do something they absolutely refused to do. Before he could try a third attack, the Sho Del kicked Topaz in the stomach, sending him tumbling down the stairs.

MARTIS STOOD BESIDE A WINDOW, LOOKING OUT AT THE COURTYARD AND cursing quietly to himself. The Sho Del wasn't holding the dulled steel blade Martis had given it—instead, it fought with a familiar bronze weapon. Jorn's sword. Somehow the creature had overpowered him and taken the weapon. The action had allowed it to advance on the king before Martis got into position.

Martis turned and continued to dash down the hallway. Perhaps he could still arrive in time. Fortunately, an unlikely source was buying him some time—the lumberman. Somehow Jerick had pushed free of the crowd and was fighting the Sho Del. He probably wouldn't last very long. Even as Martis passed another window, he saw the boy tumble back down the steps.

People were yelling from the crowd, and several warriors were trying to make their way through to lend aid. Fortunately, the mass of confused bodies thwarted them. Martis still had a chance. Rodis was watching the action before him with stunned eyes. His guards, including the stalwart Doram, were trying to get to the Sho Del, but they were stumbling around with dizzied expressions—the results of Martis's poisoning. Most of them had fallen as they stumbled down the stairs.

The lumberman yelled, jumping to his feet again and stopping the Sho Del just before it reached the king. Martis cursed—he was still a few seconds away from the king's doorway. He might arrive in time, but how to stop Jerick? The boy actually looked as if he might be able to defeat the assassin.

Martis's mind raced, searching for some solution. Perhaps he could use this opportunity to his advantage. If Martis defeated the assassin, it would be a great achievement. If he defeated the assassin after Jerick had failed . . . such a victory would leave his enemy humiliated and his peers in awe.

And Martis knew just how to do it.

YELLING AGAIN, JERICK JUMPED TO HIS FEET, FEELING RAGE COURSE through his limbs. Even as Topaz tumbled down the stairs, Jerick leapt at the Sho Del, knocking its weapon aside and preparing to deliver the killing blow.

"Kill it, Jerick!" a voice yelled, almost unheard. It came from the direction of the king. It was Martis's voice. "Kill it for your father! Remember, it was one of these monsters that slaughtered your parents!"

Jerick froze, his blade a few inches from the Sho Del's neck. His mind and body went numb, and the weapon slipped from his fingers to clatter against the stone steps. His mind fuzzed.

Everything disappeared. The palace, the king, Martis—they were all gone. Jerick stood alone, standing on a green field. A field from his memory. A field filled with cattle.

His father burst from the crowd of animals, pulling the king behind him. Jerick had seen this scene before. He stood transfixed, watching the images from his memory. His mother fell. His father fought. And then, suddenly, everything was different. He watched his father and the Sho Del collapse, fighting one another, but their images changed. They were made of Axi, millions upon millions of Axi.

The Sho Del raised its weapon.

I can't look, Jerick thought with horror. I will not watch what happens next! I must not . . . Father, get out of the way!

Jerick's body slammed into the stone steps, shoved out of the way by the Sho Del. He blinked, trying to clear the fuzz out of his mind. The palace and its occupants returned. The assassin ran up the steps toward the king.

What have I done? Jerick screamed at himself. Why did I pause?

The Sho Del was nearly to the king. Now, however, it had one final opponent to defeat. Martis battled alone at the top of the steps, spinning and blocking dramatically as he traded blows with the Sho Del. He fought as Jerick had wanted to, with delicacy and control. The warriors who finally reached the steps paused as Martis pushed the Sho Del away from the king, easily turning aside its attacks. The entire crowd, Melerand's most influential and important people, watched as Martis fought with glory and valor. In the end, Strafen's son ducked a final swing from the Sho Del, then delivered a powerful, spinning blow of his own, separating the would-be assassin's head from its body. The blood that flowed was milky white.

The Sho Del toppled to the ground. Martis stood in triumphant glory, his blade raised high, the king approaching from behind to clap him on the back. A few seconds later a golden-haired angel threw herself into Martis's arms.

That should have been me! Jerick cried to himself. That should have been me. . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JERICK HUDDLED JUST INSIDE THE STABLE DOORWAY, ONE HAND GRASPING the doorway's wooden frame. He felt the cool darkness on his face, knowing that no one outside could see him lurking within. Just as no one had seen the Sho Del. It must have been hiding in this exact place—this was where they had found the body of the boy it had killed.

There was a pit in Jerick's stomach. His mother was dead. He remembered the pain of her face, his father's bellow of rage. He remembered some of that day, though a lot was still fuzzy. Somehow, he knew that his mother had died, and that Rin had defeated a Sho Del warrior.

At least my father survived, Jerick told himself. The loss of his mother was a horrible one, but he knew Rin had to still be alive. Even if Jerick couldn't remember those last few moments, he knew his father was alive. His father hadn't failed to protect the king.

But Jerick had.

For the second time in one day, the Meleran nobility stood around the king's chosen place of announcement. For the second time they mumbled amongst themselves, speculating at what would follow. This time, however, most of them knew exactly what the announcement would be.

Jerick shrank back as King Rodis appeared. He sought the darkness, the stink of horses and hay, the dankness of a building cleaned too infrequently, left to mold. To rot. To die.

Martis stood next to the king. So did Courteth. Standing atop the steps where white blood had been spilt not two hours before.

"The blessed day has finally come," Rodis declared. "I have reached an agreement with Martis Strafen, acting leader of his Ka. Let it be known that he and my daughter, Courteth, are formally betrothed to be married."

The words hurt, even though Jerick was expecting them. Just two hours earlier he had stood next to Courteth, receiving her smiles. Two hours earlier he had been given his chance, a chance from the Lords themselves, and he had failed. He still didn't know what had happened to him—he remembered Martis yelling something, something that had cast Jerick's mind back to the past. In that second he had paused, and that pause had left him open.

Jerick turned, reaching into the darkness beside him to retrieve a leather traveling bag. The bag was thick, pregnant with everything he owned, or, at least, that which he thought worth owning. He slung the bag over his shoulder and walked farther into the musty stables.

Nearly three years in the palace had taught him that a peasant could think as well as a noble. Unfortunately, when it came down to the real test, that didn't matter. In the end, it had been the fighting that won the princess's hand. Jerick would prove himself. He would prove himself in the way that mattered.

"Jerick, what do you think you are doing?" a voice demanded.

Jerick spun, the bag slapping him in the side as he turned toward the sound. "Ryalla," he said simply, picking out the girl's dark-haired form in the shadowy room.

"Well?" she demanded. When had she learned to demand?

"I'm going," he said simply, turning again.

"Going?" she asked incredulously. "Going where?"

He didn't answer.

"Jerick, she's gone. You can't have her now, she belongs to another. Accept that and move on—running away won't help."

"I'm not running away," Jerick lied. He knew he couldn't face the court, not after what had happened. He had heard them talking, heard them muttering at what they had seen. They said he had dropped his weapon in fear, that he had let the assassin run past him, offering it no resistance. They called him a coward, some called him a traitor. All claimed it was expected, however. They had known he wasn't capable of action all along. They had known him for what he was, they said; they had realized he was just a lumberman. Nothing could be expected of lumbermen.

He was shamed before the court. More importantly, he was shamed before his own eyes. He hadn't measured up to his father. He still didn't

remember much about that day years ago, when Rin had fought with the Sho Del, but he remembered enough. His father had saved the king. Jerick had failed.

"If you're not running," Ryalla said, folding her arms, "what is the travel bag for?"

"I'm going to go to a place where I can show that I'm as strong as Martis, and as capable of bravery," he explained, opening up one of the stable doors. Inside sat Gray, his favorite of the palace horses.

"A place where you can . . . ?" Ryalla trailed off as she tried to figure out the comment.

"The Eternal War," a new voice explained. "Lumberling, I know I've called you a fool before, but there's no need to go about proving me right."

Jerick looked up. Topaz sat astride Gray, his weight on the beast's hind-quarters as to not injure its back. The jesk leaned forward, his elbow resting on the horse's side.

Jerick closed the stable door. He would take his second favorite horse.

"The Eternal War?" Ryalla asked with amazement. "Jerick, you'll be slaughtered!"

Jerick paused, looking back at her small form silhouetted against the bright doorway. She didn't believe in him either.

"Jerick, you're a scholar," Ryalla pled. "That's far better than being a warrior. No one expects you to defeat trained assassins in combat. Your mind is your asset, not your sword."

Jerick grunted, pulling open the door to Gallant's stable. Behind him he heard Topaz drop lightly to the floor.

"That isn't a very useful argument to try against a teenage boy, little one," the jesk observed.

"Jerick, you're smarter than this," Ryalla continued, her voice pleading, yet at the same time firm. When had she learned to be firm?

Jerick took Gallant's chariot-harness off the wall and began to prepare the horse for departure.

"Why, Jerick?" Ryalla asked. "What do you hope to gain?"

He pulled the harness tight, then led the horse from its stall. "A formal betrothal in Melerand lasts two years," he mumbled. "I have that long to prove myself."

Ryalla raised a hand to her lips. "Oh, Lords. You still . . . ?"

Several footsteps came from outside, and soon a large, hulking form joined Topaz outside Gallant's stable. "I brought heem," the Ke'Chan said.

Jerick looked up. Frost stood next to Ryalla, a look of disappointment on his face. "So, everyone's here," Jerick noted, strapping Gallant to one of the palace chariots. "All determined to make me complacent with my fate."

"Jerick," Frost said softly. "The Eternal War isn't what you think. You won't find glory there—at least, not the type you think."

"I have to try, Frost," Jerick said stubbornly. "It's the only thing I can think to do right now."

"Wait a few days," the elderly scholar urged. "Think about this."

"I might lose my nerve," Jerick said with a shake of his head. He threw the bag into the back of the chariot.

"Then, I suppose we will see you if you return," Frost said solemnly.

Jerick nodded, stepping up into the chariot. Gripping the reins, he moved the horse forward, rolling past the group of people. "Tell the king I'll return his chariot and horse in two years," he said. Then, without turning to look back at his friends lest they sway him from his purpose, Jerick whipped Gallant into a gallop and sped out of the stables.

RYALLA WATCHED HIM GO, TRYING TO FIGHT THE TEARS. HE WAS THE only one, the only one in the palace she had been able to talk to. After all those years of being alone, she had finally found someone willing to accept her, and now he left without even looking back. He left because of *her*. Courteth.

"De'Herric!" Behind her, Topaz cursed quite vocally.

"Cephandrius," Bat'Chor said sternly. "There ees a lady een the room."

Topaz didn't stop his string of curses. "I search all this time, Bat'Chor, and I finally discover another human who can do microkinesis, and he runs off like a Lords-cursed idiot!"

"You are certain?" Bat'Chor asked. "He ees like you?"

"Yes."

"No," Frost corrected, watching Jerick ride away with discerning eyes. "He's not like you, Topaz. You have the power of life—this one has the power of destruction. He worries me."

Topaz frowned at the observation. "How do you—"

Ryalla interrupted him, spinning to face the three. "Isn't anyone going to follow him?" she demanded.

"And do what?" Topaz asked, hands on his hips. "Let him spout more idiocy about wars and glory?"

"He doesn't realize," Frost whispered, reiterating his previous statement.

"If he even makes it to Fallamore, he is soon going to be a very disillusioned young man."

Topaz snorted, waving his hand dismissively. "He could use a little more disillusionment, if you ask me. It'll be healthy for him."

"Won't you go after him, try to help him?" Ryalla asked quietly.

Topaz sighed, shaking his head. "Don't be so afraid, little one. King Rodis won't let Jerick go far—he'll send men to bring him back. If he doesn't, Jerick will either run out of food or regain his wits. Let the boy blow off a little steam. He'll probably be back within a few weeks."

Ryalla wasn't so certain. Something felt wrong—somehow, she felt as if she weren't going to see Jerick for a long, long time.

"I'm worried about him, Topaz," she whispered, choking slightly. She wasn't doing a very good job of holding back those tears. "Please, go after him."

Topaz paused, then shook his head. "The boy has a right to choose his own path. I've tried to force him into one for his own good, but my patience for that is at an end. Let him see where his recklessness takes him. Besides, I'm a little pressed for time right now. There are a dozen important things I should be doing, and I would be doing them, if I didn't have a dozen *more* important things ahead of them. Bat'Chor and I will leave for Jarg within the hour."

Ryalla squared her jaw, pushing back the tears. "Then I'll go," she determined.

"No!" Frost said suddenly, stepping forward. "Ryalla, you can't."

"Someone has to," she said.

Frost paused. "Then I'll do it," he said. "I'll go after him. I'll . . . try and turn him back. If that proves impossible, perhaps I can help keep him safe."

"Thank you," Ryalla said passionately, embracing the old scholar. "Thank you."

THE THREE MEN READIED THEIR CHARIOTS, BAT'CHOR AND TOPAZ WITH well-practiced hands, Frost less adroitly. Ryalla was gone, off to fetch some traveling food from the larder.

"You will return to Melerand frequently, I assume," Frost said, looking at Topaz.

"Perhaps," the jesk said slowly. "Now that my idiot lumberling has run off, the whole point of being here—the bet with Strafen—has kind of had its feet chopped off."

"But there is still the girl," Frost pointed out. "She has abilities. Not ones like Jerick, but powerful ones nonetheless."

"True," Topaz agreed.

"Watch over her for me, Topaz," Frost pled. "I won't be able to return, not the way you do. Please, watch over her."

Topaz face softened, and he nodded. "I will, Frost. I always have."

The old scholar nodded as Topaz finished his preparations. Bat'Chor already waited in front of the stables, sitting in his large Ke'Chan chariot.

"Some day I'll figure out what you are, old man," Topaz said, hopping into his own chariot. "Then maybe you'll answer a few of my questions."

Frost smiled wanly. "Figure out what I am, Topaz, and I will happily answer your questions. Unfortunately, if you know that much, I suspect that you will have the answers already."

"The Lords let it be so."

Frost nodded. He paused for a second, debating his next words within himself. "Topaz, I know it doesn't seem rational, but that name is important. If you find it . . . well, it will tell you something very important."

Topaz smiled, reaching up to place his hand on Frost's shoulder. "Thank you, my friend. You take this oath seriously."

"You have no idea who I made it to," Frost whispered. "The Lords and . . . others bless you, Cephandrius."

"They'd better," the jesk said with a snort. "We'll be in some serious trouble if everything depends on me alone. Farewell."

Frost nodded as Topaz rolled out of the stable and, nodding for Bat'Chor to follow, left the palace courtyard.

Frost watched them go, then turned to pack the final stack of clothing into his travel bags. *This isn't the way it was supposed to happen . . .* he thought. Of course, when did things ever happen the way they were supposed to?

INTERLUDE TWO

LORD HSOR, SPEAR KNIGHT OF THE HOLY IMPERIAL GUARD, CLOSED THE door to his rooms in the Melerand palace. He walked immediately to his balcony and closed the shutters, locking the room in darkness. Next he knelt on the floor in the center of the room and began to pray.

A few minutes later, Eleel Tyi, the White One, God above all gods, appeared before him.

Hsor bowed himself to the ground.

“Rise, my child,” the god spoke, his voice a deep boom that shook Hsor’s very soul. Eleel Tyi’s radiance filled the room, glowing so brightly that everything—bed, walls, and door—seemed to become white by association.

Hsor looked up, adoration in his eyes. “My Lord,” he whispered.

“Tell me, child. Is the king dead?”

“No, my Lord,” Hsor replied. “The one known as Martis slew the assassin.”

“And what of . . . the others?”

“They took the prince, My God,” Hsor explained. It was obvious to him that the god knew his answers before he spoke them, but still He allowed Hsor to talk. Mysterious were the ways of deity. “They took the prince while everyone was distracted by the assassin. No one in the palace has realized Prince Yoharn is gone yet. The boy went to his rooms early in the day at my directions. It shouldn’t be long before it becomes known that he is missing.”

The great white-haired god nodded as he floated in the air above Hsor. “It is good,” he declared.

“What do you want of me, O Lord?” Hsor asked.

“Remain as you are. Become the king’s confidant. He will trust you, now that your words about the Sho Del have proven true. We shall wait and see if the Horwatchers betray us. If they do, you shall slay them.”

“I understand, my God,” Hsor intoned.

Then, like the sun setting to leave the land lonely and dark, the great being disappeared. Hsor lay on the floor, gasping from the incredible power that had held him during the conversation. Eventually, however, he rose, confident and proud.

Few men ever had the privilege of communing directly with a god.

THE END OF PART TWO



PART THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

JERICK'S CHARIOT WAS STOLEN ON HIS FOURTH DAY OUT OF LAKDON. HE had been riding, wondering how long it would take him to reach Fallamore, when suddenly he found himself surrounded by fur-clad men riding haunch-back. Jerick lost control of the horse when one of the bandits tried to jump from horseback to chariot. The vehicle swerved too close to a tree—or, more accurately, one of the tree's low-hanging branches. The horse and chariot continued down the hard packed road. Jerick did not.

Only then, sitting on the unyielding ground, watching the distant thieves take possession of his chariot, did Jerick begin to realize that his quest for glory might not begin very gloriously.

Fortunately, the bandits—assuming he'd stored everything of value in the chariot's compartments—didn't double back to search him. Unfortunately, they assumed correctly. Jerick had no money and nothing of value—not that he'd brought all that much with him to begin with.

As the next few days passed, Jerick admitted to himself that he hadn't been thinking very clearly when he departed Lakdon. At the time, he had maintained some unfounded notion that as he traveled, the farms and villages he passed would give him what supplies he needed.

All his life, food had been there when he wanted it. The lumbermen had been supplied by the king, and, of course, there had always been enough to eat in the palace. Now, alone and resourceless, Jerick finally came to understand how scarce a commodity food was. In a way, food was the ultimate barrier that separated the castes.

The people had nothing to give him. Whatever food they had, they ate themselves, and they certainly weren't willing to share it with a wandering boy—whether he wore a cloak bearing the king's crest or not.

The poverty grew worse as he crossed the Trerod river, passing from King Rodis's land into Aldbin. Here, signs of the recent change in governments were prevalent. Books on politics had told Jerick that a sudden political upheaval, whether by coup or conquest, usually meant difficult times for the peasants. Now he could see firsthand the misery behind Flaudin's comment. "Difficult times" translated into a state of perpetual starvation.

No matter how hungry Jerick grew during the days after the robbery, he could still find people who looked worse. Farmers with barely the strength to lift a hoe, children who cried perpetually, unable to understand why the pain in their bellies wouldn't subside. Worst of all were the hollow looks in the peasants' eyes, looks that told Jerick these people had come to accept their state as the natural way of the world. It was natural that they should own nothing. It was natural that they worked endlessly, monotonously, like beasts. It was natural that their children should perish from want of the very thing they struggled every day to produce.

Jerick wanted to scream at the hard-eyed foremen he passed, wanted to warn them they were pushing the workers too far, that their greed would bring about an economic disaster. Farms didn't produce if their workers all starved to death. Unfortunately, Jerick knew his complaints would fall on deaf ears. The new Aldbish monarchy was too eager to prove itself, too focused on stabilizing its control, to bother with logic.

The people watched Jerick as he hobbled down the road. The peasants did so with eyes as flat and dead as the dry ground before them. The overseers, however, regarded him with keen interest. To them, Jerick was nothing more than another set of strong hands to be worked and starved. Only his clothing and bearing, which marked him as a nobleman's courier—no one important himself, for such would never be foolish enough to travel alone—kept Jerick safe. He hurried by, no matter how much his stomach begged him to stop and ask for food. One stray look at his castemark would bring the end of his freedom. He wore the thin disk hidden beneath three layers of clothing, but if anyone asked, he would be forced to either show it to them or refuse—both actions would brand him as a caste-breaker. Free game for whoever was quick enough to be the first to enslave him.

He attempted to use the skills his father had taught him, occasionally recognizing an edible plant, and less frequently managing to trap a small animal. He did so awkwardly; it had been years since he had been in a

position to forage. In addition, the land in Aldbin was very different from what he was accustomed to.

There were few trees, found only along river beds, and the ground seemed to grow more flat the farther south he went. Even around Lakdon there had been trees, if not the deep forests of his childhood. Here there was nothing; emptiness poorly masked by grass. He felt odd looking across those plains. He felt unprotected. Nothing broke the horizon, no mountains, no trees, not even hills. It was as if the Lords, when making the world, had grown bored by the time they reached Aldbin.

Jerick's birthdate came and passed a week after he left the palace. It was to have been a glorious day, the day he finally proved the king's position to the rest of Yolen, the day Jerick was to have defeated Martis, showing that the time he had spent studying instead of training made him the better man. Jerick tried to keep such thoughts out of his mind—he had chosen his path, and he was determined to see it through. Dreams of what could have been would only serve to distract him.

EXHAUSTED AND HUNGRY, JERICK STUMBLED INTO THE VILLAGE JUST after nightfall. It was a small town, with no wall or fortifications, just a simple earthen road with clay brick buildings running along either side. If he hadn't been so concerned with his stomach, he might have paused to remark on the fact that a town he now considered "small" was still several times larger than his home village.

He slowly made his way down the darkened street, heading toward the only building that still showed signs of life. He didn't need to see the picture sign hanging out front to know this would be the town's tavern. He had no money for a room, but the nights were still chilly, and he could at least warm himself for a short while before seeking a place to sleep somewhere in the darkness.

He blinked against the tavern's ruddy light as he pushed aside the door-cloth and stepped inside. The firepit sat at the center of the room like a great brooding doorway straight to the underworld, its scarlet coals giving harsh illumination to the room. The tavern was sparsely occupied, as had been the case with nearly every town he had visited.

Travel through Aldbin was tempting, for it provided the most direct route to both Melerand and the northern half of Fallamore. However, another thing Jerick's books had taught him was that civil unrest bred thieves like summer bred mice, and his own experience proved that comment true. In

addition, if he could trust the hushed comments he had overheard, then the new monarchy was even less reputable than thieves, seizing cargoes or possessions and offering only slight compensation.

The serving girl, a slight thing with her hair in commoner's braids, approached, but Jerick waved her aside with an authoritarian air, sitting down as if to contemplate for a moment before ordering. The girl cast her eyes down immediately, noting the crest on his cloak, and rushed away. He had quickly discovered that the more he acted like a nobleman, the more people treated him like one—whether or not he had the castemark as proof.

Jerick chose a place near the fireplace, settling himself on the wooden floor and staring deeply into the inferno of coals. The room smelled of saprye and unwashed bodies—both scents with which Jerick had been forced to grow accustomed. After living so long in the palace, with its baths and scented soaps, he could hardly believe the harsh dirtiness of the outside world. Had he once lived like this? He couldn't reconcile the dirty faces, scraggly hair, and powerful stench with what his life in Farastham must have been like. He knew, logically, that people in his village had rarely bathed, kept their hair groomed, or done any of the other things he was now used to. Still, he couldn't imagine that he had ever been so dirty.

The sound of a voice clearing caught his attention, and he looked up toward the front of the room. A man in a bright blue fendove and green leggings stood next to the innkeeper, looking out at the room's dozen patrons.

"The good innkeep has asked that I liven the somewhat somber mood of the room with a tale," the man announced in a voice that had the lyrical warble of one who was trying very hard to impress others with his knowledge and culture.

"Therefore," the man continued, "I, the traber Pioza, will favor you with a recounting of the Legends, book sixteen: Oreon ou Deshelle."

Traber, a traveling storyteller. Topaz had spoken of them with contempt, claiming they were a poor substitution for a jesk. However, as far as Jerick knew, Topaz was the last remaining jesk. Apparently, kings and emperors had grown weary of dealing with the jesks, who had considered themselves equal to any monarch. The trabers had taken the jesks' place in palace courts. Trained in Fallamore, the trabers were much less influential than the jesks—though if this man were a good example, they had egos to match their ancient counterparts.

"Deshelle was born the most beautiful of mortal women," the traber began, speaking in a loud, overdone voice. "She was so desirable, in fact, that no being—mortal, god, or even force of nature—could help falling

in love with her. When she would travel, Rin, the god of summer, would follow her, bringing the life and warmth of the season with him. The sun shone perpetually where Deshelle was to be found, hanging lethargically in the sky, enchanted by her beauty and unwilling to bury itself in the sea as it should. Even the cold-hearted Xeth, black god and keeper of the dead, could not help being touched by Deshelle's spell."

Jerick sighed, grinding his teeth slightly at the telling. The traber belted out each word with a voice that could probably be heard back in Melerand. He likely thought himself dramatic, but the effect was simply clamorous.

"When Oreon the White saw how Deshelle proved such a distraction, preventing the gods from doing their work," the traber continued to bark, "he grew concerned. 'It is not right that summer should move about with randomness, that the sun should pause in its course. All things need work in order, nature, god, and man.' So, he came down to Deshelle, appearing to her as an old seer. He hailed her as she passed him on the road one morning, saying, 'Fair maiden, Deshelle, most beautiful of all women. What would you trade for your beauty?'"

In a way, Jerick felt sorry for the traber. Looking around the room, Jerick could tell that the tavern patrons were not in a mood to be entertained—at least, not in a mood to be entertained by one so annoying. When Jerick had entered, the smattering of traders and travelers sat apart and aloof, each one concentrating only on his mug of saprye. Now their faces were turning dark. The innkeeper, realizing his mistake, was attempting to quiet the traber, but the man continued his tale uninterrupted. Jerick had to admire his diligence, at least.

"I will trade nothing for my beauty,' the fair Deshelle replied. 'For I know that it is the greatest in the land, and even gods envy me.'

"But,' replied Oreon, 'does not beauty fade with time? Would it not be better to have riches or a keen mind, or perhaps eternal life? Any one of these things I will trade you for your beauty.'

"I will have nothing,' the girl declared. 'My beauty will never fade. Look how the sun holds high in the air, desiring me with its rays. Feel the summer air around me, and feel the envy of lady winter, kept forever at bay when I am near.'

"I fear that you grow prideful above your station, fair maid,' the disguised Oreon warned. 'Forget not that no matter how beautiful you may be, you are still a mortal woman. Do not seek the realm of the gods. They have granted you a gift; you should not allow it to make you haughty.'

"The girl yawned and waved dismissively toward the beggar. 'Begone,

you. Wretched as you are, you cannot possibly understand what it is to be desired. Leave me be, for my beauty demands the presence of gods, not mortals.’”

The situation was growing worse. As Jerick watched, several of the traders made eye contact, reaching for their mugs. Jerick was certain the poor traber would momentarily find himself doused with saprye—finally the source of some true entertainment.

He had to do something. But what? Simple pleas to stop obviously wouldn’t work—the innkeeper had tried such. Jerick searched for a way to prevent the man’s impending embarrassment. In the end, the only thing that popped into his head was to do what Topaz would have done.

“That isn’t the way it goes,” Jerick noted sharply, speaking as the traber paused for a breath.

All eyes turned on Jerick, and the traber stuttered, losing his rhythm. The innkeeper’s requests he could ignore, but a question to his authority was another thing entirely.

“I beg your pardon?” the man asked indignantly.

“The Legend,” Jerick said, trying to maintain an aloof air. “You’re saying it wrong. I don’t know what text you used for that translation, but it’s hardly lyrical. The Legends are poetic masterpieces—couldn’t you have at least tried to put them into verse?”

“I’d like to see you do better,” the traber snorted, folding his arms.

And so, Jerick was left with no recourse but to do just that. He spoke with a clear voice.

*“So Oreon, the creator of light,
Was turned aside by a mortal girl
Her pride extreme
His rage incurred
He unveiled his self, Oreon the White,
And changed Deshelle into a lucent pearl.*

*She dropped to the sea, and fell with a gleam
To rest in the ocean, in the south by the shore
Summer cried out
The sun, it wept
They search to this day, over mount and stream
They will not forget their love of before.”*

Jerick continued on, falling into a cadence as he spoke. He told of the sun's rage—represented by the god Tyserne, the Bringer of Fire—at his father Oreon. Jerick told of how summer, or the lesser god Rin, had searched the ocean for Deshelle. Finally he spoke of the Legend's moral, explaining the dangers in assuming one was as wise, or as powerful, as the gods—a veiled warning against caste breaking. As a final end to the tale, he explained that Rin and Tyserne still search the southern oceans for Deshelle, which explains why winter never comes to the southern lands, and why the sun shines longer on their shores.

The stanzas came more and more naturally as he continued. Though the words in his head were Fallin—the original tongue of the Legends—he spoke them in Meleran, using Enphoden's most recent translation. Though Enphoden was hardly a brilliant poet, his was the only Meleran translation that maintained the original rhythm and rhyming of the Legends, which Jerick liked.

The traber's knees failed him halfway through Jerick's telling, and he sank down to the floor beside his table. The sullen merchants put down their mugs, watching Jerick with transfixed eyes, the tension melting from their forms.

Jerick knew he didn't have the skills of a storyteller—he tried to vary his voice as Topaz did, sometimes letting the words slide from his lips, other times snapping them forth. However, he knew that he would never be able to do the story justice, so mostly he just let the poetry do the work, telling it simply, as he had been taught by Torell and then by Vendavious.

By the time he finished, the entire room was watching him, smiles twitching at the ends of their lips, their pains and stresses momentarily forgotten. They sat quietly for a moment after the telling, then burst into noise, whistling and clapping. Even the traber at the front joined in, though his applause was grudging.

Jerick held up his hand humbly, shaking his head to refuse an encore. He was no storyteller, and he had no desire to be one. He seriously considered changing his mind, however, when the innkeeper approached a few moments later with a steaming plate of mutton.

"Tis a good thing you did, Master," the innkeeper, a lanky balding man who looked like he could have used a few plates of food himself, said with a bow. He set the plate on the table beside Jerick. "My lord, when you didn't order anything I realized that my food was probably beneath your gentle tastes. However, please accept this. 'Tis t'least I can do."

Jerick eyed the plate hungrily. "I will consider it, innkeeper," he said, purposefully looking away from the food.

The innkeeper bowed, backing away. Jerick waited an excruciating few minutes before he reached over, grabbing a dripping chunk of meat between his fingers and popping it into his mouth, then sighed in pleasure as the taste washed over him. He hadn't even considered telling Legends as a means of earning his way to Fallamore—he had been trained to believe the simple recitation of Legends was beneath a true scholar. The Legends in their pure, poetic form were reserved for the nobility. Most people heard only vulgar recitations, as told by the trabers. Though Jerick hadn't realized what he was doing at the time, he had given the inn's patrons a rare gift this night.

As he ate, trying to maintain some air of dignity while he stuffed mutton between his lips, Jerick realized that customs and taboos meant little in the face of starvation. He would tell the Legends to anyone who wanted to hear, if it would earn him steady meals.

Except, he knew that wouldn't work. If news got out that a traveling scholar was misusing the Legends, he would certainly be arrested for caste-breaking—even in Aldbin. Or, perhaps, especially in Aldbin; new monarchs tended to be very strict about the caste system. Perhaps he could pretend to be a traber, telling versions of the Legends without the poetic verse. Except, if he did that he would have to abandon his guise as a courier, the only thing that allowed him to travel without his castemark in prominent view. If he claimed to be a traber, innkeepers would inevitably demand to see his castemark as proof.

As he pondered the question, however, a shadow fell on his table. He looked up with concern to see a very large, long-bearded man standing over him. It was one of the merchants who had been sitting on the other side of the room—the one who had nearly thrown his mug of saprye at the traber.

Jerick had to resist the urge to jump to his feet and bolt away. Surely the man had found him out.

The merchant, however, bowed slightly and seated himself. "My lord," he said with a nod. His tone was not deferential, but it was not antagonistic either. Technically, even a very wealthy merchant had to bow before the poorest of noblemen.

"Yes?" Jerick asked uncertainly.

"My lord, I assume you are a scribe of some sort?" the man asked in a gruff tone, waving the serving girl to bring him another drink.

"I have recently finished my training under the scholar Vendavious of Trexandos," Jerick said carefully.

The man nodded. "Then you can write?" the merchant confirmed.

Jerick frowned. "Of course I can write," he replied.

The man held up a thick-fingered hand. "No offense intended, good master," he said. Then, continuing with care, he spoke again. "How much . . . compensation would you require for your services?"

Jerick blinked—the man couldn't write. Then Jerick shook his head at his own stupidity. Of course the man wasn't literate. Vendavious had spoken on this. The hiring of tutors to train children was still a relatively new idea outside of Trexandos. Most people, merchants, nobles, or kings, couldn't read—they simply hired scribes to write and read for them.

The merchant was watching him expectantly. "Well," Jerick said musingly. He had no idea what to charge. "I am not really in need of any extra funds at the moment. If it is a simple job, then I will accept a silver crin."

His eyes went to the merchant's face at the proclamation. Would the man laugh? Had he asked too much?

"Ah, my lord is too kind," the man said with a deep smile on his face. "All I need is for my lord to scribe a letter for me."

"All right," Jerick said, cleaning his fingers in his dipping bowl. "You have parchment and a quill?"

The man looked up with surprise.

"Mine is packed away in my chariot, fool," Jerick said, thinking quickly. "You expect me to go out into the cold and dig it out just so I can write a silly letter?"

The man's face grew ashamed. "Of course not, my lord," he said quickly. "One of my associates has some. I will go beg it off of him."

Jerick nodded curtly. Inside, he felt a little sick at the way he was acting. He'd hated nobles who projected the very bearing he now imitated, but he had little choice. If he deviated from what was expected, he could very well leave the inn this night a slave to the same merchant who was now obeying him.

"Here, my lord," the man said, waddling across the floor to give him a sheet of parchment, quill, and ink.

"You may begin," Jerick said, dipping the tip of the quill into the ink.

The hefty merchant scratched at his beard uncomfortably. Then, in a low voice, he began. "Address it to 'My dearest love bunny,'" he said.

Jerick looked up with droll eyes, the words "you're kidding" on his lips. He stopped before speaking, however. The man's face bore no laughter, only seriousness. Sighing to himself, Jerick began to write.

"Your lips are as delicious as saprye," the man continued. "Your ears are

like flowers. Your breasts like two hills for me to run across. Your eyes are like two . . . uh . . . two more breasts.”

Jerick successfully repressed a groan.

“I will return soon. Until then, entertain your husband, so he will think nothing is awry.”

Jerick looked up and the merchant blushed.

“Is that all?” Jerick asked dryly.

“Sign it ‘your powerful ox,’” the man requested.

Jerick did so, then handed the man back his paper. He no longer felt guilty at his arrogance; he was simply disgusted. That emotion evaporated, however, as the merchant placed a silver coin on the table and then backed away, rolling the paper and tucking it into his shirt pocket. He would hire a messenger—probably one who couldn’t read—to deliver it.

Jerick picked up the coin, staring at its sheen with wide eyes. He had never owned so much money—in fact, he had never owned any money.

“I suppose I should congratulate you, Young Master,” a tired voice said from behind him.

Jerick jumped, spinning at the familiar voice. It couldn’t be . . . “Frost?” he asked with confusion.

The man seated at the table behind him pulled back the cowl of his cloak, revealing the old, thin-bearded face of Jerick’s tutor.

“You followed me,” Jerick accused.

“Did you really think no one would, Young Master?” Frost pointed out.

Jerick paused. “No,” he admitted. He had actually feared that Rodis would send guards to collect him. “But, why didn’t you tell me?”

Frost regarded the coin still pinched between Jerick’s fingers. “I had been hoping, Young Master, that you would grow wearied and hungered enough from your travels to return home. I am not here to help you, Jerick; I am here to try and make you see reason.”

Jerick turned away, accepting a mug of saprye—something he could now afford—from the serving girl as she moved through the room. “I *have* seen reason, Frost,” he replied bitterly. “In fact, I see more clearly now than I ever did in the palace. I was deluding myself, thinking I would be accepted because I was able to memorize more than Martis. There is only one way to win glory in this world.”

He heard the floorboards creak behind him as Frost rose, walking over to take a seat next to Jerick. He didn’t respond immediately to his student’s comment.

“There are many people in this world,” the old man finally said, his eyes

reflecting the firepit's red glow. "Some give glory to those who win wars, others glorify those who seem the most beautiful or the most intelligent. What none of them realize is that glory is not a thing to be given of men."

He fell silent, leaving Jerick confused.

Eventually, Frost spoke again. "One thing is certain, Young Master. You are perseverant. I thought you would turn back when your chariot was stolen."

"You saw that?" Jerick demanded incredulously.

Frost nodded, still looking into the coals.

"Why didn't you do something?" Jerick asked.

"Do what, Young Master?" Frost asked pointedly. "I cannot stop thieves on horseback, and you survived the attack with few bruises. Remember, I want you to give up this foolish quest. I thought it quite appropriate that you should be confronted with the real world so soon after leaving the palace."

Jerick turned away angrily. All his life he had been a piece in other men's games. Well, no more. Now he was leading his own life.

"You were close, Young Master," Frost continued. "I could see that. A few more days sleeping on cold dirt, a few more days with nothing to eat but berries and roots, and you would have turned back."

Jerick ground his teeth, trying to deny the comment to himself. Yet, he knew that Frost was probably right. He wouldn't have been able to stand much more, not when he knew the comfortable life that waited for him back in the palace. A life without Courteth, a life watching Martis be heralded by the town's people, but a life without hunger.

But something had changed. Jerick raised the coin in the air before him once again. "This changes everything, doesn't it, Frost?" he said, more to himself than to the tutor. "I pass so many merchants and nobles, most of whom cannot read, let alone write. All of them are days away from a major city where they could find and hire a scribe. It took my father ten years to save up the same amount of money that I earned in barely a few minutes of writing."

"There is an elite group in this world beyond the rich, Young Master," Frost agreed. "There are those who know, and those who do not. Melerand is an aberration—it is the only nation on Yolen that has a literate king. Scribes are very valuable assets."

Jerick smiled, waving over the innkeeper. "Innkeeper, I would like a room," he declared.

The man bobbed excitedly, obviously thinking that his food had impressed Jerick into staying.

“You may stay with me if you wish, Frost,” he invited, standing to follow the innkeeper.

The old scholar sighed. However, he did rise to follow. As they walked toward the back of the room, Jerick paused by the merchants’ table and, speaking loud enough that other tables could hear, he said, “My man has just told me that we will need to travel farther than expected, and I would like to avoid a detour to pick up extra funds. If any of you have literary needs, I shall be in my room contemplating the writings of Flovellus for another couple of hours. Ask the innkeeper to direct you to my room.”

Then, shooting Frost a thin-lipped smile, Jerick turned away from the common room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE ROOM MADE TOPAZ REMEMBER EXACTLY WHY HE AVOIDED INNS IN northern Yolen. They all seemed to have been designed by the same simple-minded architect. Musty, crowded, and unimaginative. There were, of course, no chairs—everyone sat on the floor, pressed up against one another before the low tables favored in the area. It was loud—a trait common to every restaurant outside of Trexandos. Both table and floor were stained with the remnants of numerous spilled drinks, spills that had been cleaned up with only a half-hearted swipe of a dirty rag that had probably once been the owner's loincloth.

The light was dim—a prerequisite for any dirty, overpriced inn. A firepit stood at the center of the structure, its scarlet coals roasting the carcass of a whole pig on the spit above. The stench of the overcooked meat permeated the room, and only careful training allowed Topaz to keep from retching at the smell.

They had taken their path to the west, crossing out of Melerand and into the kingdom of Jarg. Topaz had ridden through Aldbin on his way north a few months back, and did not want to repeat the experience. This way might be longer, but at least in Jarg there was food to be had at the inns, even if it was horribly overpriced.

If, that was, one could call the inn's offerings "food." Shaking his head, Topaz turned away from the pig, only to see Bat'Chor practically drooling beside him. "You can't possibly be anticipating a slice of that thing, Bat'Chor," Topaz complained to his friend's wide-eyed look.

Bat'Chor blinked, looking over at Topaz with a snort of indifference. "He ees a warrior's meal," the Ke'Chan declared.

Topaz shook his head, catching himself before he leaned his elbows against the tabletop. True, he was wearing his traveling clothes, but he liked to think that even they were above certain indecencies. The serving girl was approaching—a young woman so top-heavy that if she ever tripped and fell over, she'd probably never be able to climb to her feet. Assuming, of course, she didn't fall on her chest and bounce right back up.

"I weell have the peeg," Bat'Chor announced. "Very much of heem."

The serving girl nodded, turning to Topaz.

"Do you have any vegetables?" he asked hopefully.

The girl gave him a dumb look. "Vegetables?"

"They usually grow in the ground," Topaz said, mumbling half to himself. "Often green . . ." he sighed. "Just bring me some bread," he said.

The girl shrugged, turning to pick her way through the jumble of bodies, legs, and pinching fingers.

"Do you meess heem?" Bat'Chor asked.

"Miss what, Bat'Chor?" Topaz asked, leaning back. At least they were next to a wall. Not that the wall would be any cleaner than the tables, of course, but he could delude himself into thinking so, as long as he didn't look back.

"Eating meat," the Ke'Chan said, accepting a mug of saprye from another serving girl.

Topaz shrugged. "Honestly, Bat'Chor, it's been so long that I can't remember what it tastes like."

Bat'Chor shook his head as he took a long gulp from the mug. "The True God has been very unkind to you, my friend," he said.

Topaz didn't respond at first, instead taking a sip from his own mug. The frothy drink tasted much too strongly of the sap from which it was made. He would be glad indeed when he could return to civilization, where one could order true Lallin wine with any meal.

His words to Bat'Chor had been true—he didn't really mind not being able to eat meat. In fact, he tried to think about such things as little as possible. The last time he had even entertained the notion of sampling some Trexandian Kilios ribs—once one of his favorite dishes—he had become physically ill.

He turned to Bat'Chor, intent on finally responding to the Ke'Chan's comment. As he turned, however, he was confronted by the sight of

his friend's thin Ke'Chan eyes silted in rage, his mouth forming a slight snarl.

"What . . . ?" Topaz asked, following Bat'Chor's gaze. At the table next to their own, on Topaz's side of the room, sat a group of what appeared to be Jargish traders. Their cloaks were thick and torn in numerous places, their beards unkempt and soaked with saprye froth. They were laughing to themselves as one of their members noticed Topaz's scrutiny.

"Looks you'in got t'kak long well trained, theres," he called in the nearly unintelligible Meleran dialect of Jarg. "Even eats at t'table."

Bat'Chor growled beside him. Kak was short for Kakchaa, a Fallin word for sneeze that was also used as a derogatory term for a Ke'Chan. Apparently, it was thought that the Ke'Chan language somewhat resembled the sound of a man sneezing.

Topaz looked back at Bat'Chor, who was reaching under the table to slip his thick-soled Ke'Chan sandal off his foot.

"No shoes," Topaz ordered sternly.

"But he has offended the honor of the great descendant of the great 'Cheru Tar!" Bat'Chor argued.

"He is an idiot, and not worth your time," Topaz argued back. "Or your shoe. Leave the sandal on your foot, Bat'Chor."

The Ke'Chan grumbled a bit, but he took his fingers off of the sandal and turned back to his mug. Topaz shook his head. He was often surprised at Bat'Chor's relative open-mindedness, but at heart the man was still a Ke'Chan.

A few seconds later the food arrived. Topaz regarded his plate with a decided lack of excitement. The cook had managed to scrounge up some sickly-looking onions, which he had proceeded to smother with at least an entire mug's worth of butter. Beside the onions he had still placed a moderate chunk of dead pig, as if unable to fathom someone actually wanting a meal without a large hunk of something dead attached to it. Trying not to look, Topaz stabbed the ham and slid it onto Bat'Chor's plate. The merchant grunted in appreciation.

"Don't mention it," Topaz mumbled, breaking off a hunk of bread and dipping it in the buttered onions.

He only half heard the comment from the next table—the punchline of a joke about a Ke'Chan trader and three Fallin prostitutes. Topaz had heard it before—he didn't think it was particularly funny. Apparently, neither did Bat'Chor.

The sandal whizzed past Topaz's face, knocking the bread out of his hand and smashing into the Jargish trader's face. Topaz sighed to himself, leaning back and feeling the table shake as Bat'Chor leapt to his feet and hurled himself at the group of traders with a mighty yell.

"Bat'Chor," he sighed to himself, "for a surprisingly intelligent Ke'Chan, sometimes you're also surprisingly dense."

WALKING WITH A LEISURELY STRIDE, TOPAZ WOVE HIS WAY OUT OF THE tavern as it exploded into a massive brawl. He would have preferred to slip out a window, but Northerners seemed to have something against windows—there was only one in the entire room, and it was on the opposite wall. Several men took swings at him as he hopped over fallen tables, stepped around wrestling bodies, and ducked impromptu projectiles. He dodged the attacks quietly, not swinging back. Such wouldn't have done him any good—he would only miss anyway. Just as his body would no longer allow him the luxury of eating meat, it also prevented him from doing harm to another man. No matter how hard he tried, his attacks always missed.

Eventually he reached the exit and stepped into the faint evening light. Gehng was like most Jargish mining towns: squat, dirty, and absolutely lacking in anything reminiscent of creativity. The buildings were made of a uniform, shabby-looking wood that gave the town an impermanent look. Like the entire town could be shut down and abandoned without a second glance.

The Jargish people maintained few illusions or hopes about their land—such would have required too much imagination. Historically, their copper mines couldn't compete with the rich tin and gold deposits of Melerand, especially now that more and more armies were turning to iron for their weapons. With land too rocky for cattle, too dry for forestry, and only mediocreatly blessed with minerals, Jarg was the poorest nation of Yolen, and would probably remain that way.

Topaz leaned against the side of the tavern, feeling the boards shake beneath his back as the ruckus continued inside. He took a sip from the mug of bitter saprye he'd rescued, and watched with marginal interest as bodies were occasionally tossed out the door. The Gehng city guards would be slow in responding, of course. Jargs tended to be even more lax about brawling than Ke'Chans—it was one of the country's main national pastimes.

As he stood and thought, watching the bodies pile up in front of him, Topaz forced himself to confront his bad mood. He didn't like being

surly—in fact, he was notorious for mocking those with bad dispositions. Of course, most people didn't have to watch ten years worth of effort flutter away, destroyed by the fickle whims of a teenage boy.

He was severely displeased with the turn of events in Melerand. Topaz had worked for over a decade gaining Rodis's trust and then encouraging the monarch to act on his natural feelings of justice. For the first time in his life, Topaz had found a monarch willing to challenge the caste system. A peasant had actually been trained in the learning of Trexandos, and he had turned out more intelligent than even Topaz had expected. Then, a bare week before Jerick's success would have made a mockery of castes and class oppression, the boy ran off.

What's more, in Jerick's disappearance Topaz had lost one of his few clues about his own nature. He had been learning a lot from the boy—for instance, Jerick could eat meat. He could also fight. Not very well, granted, but he could swing a sword and his muscles wouldn't rebel. The boy was obviously different than Topaz—but, at the same time, he could see micro-kinetically, which made them similar. Topaz could only guess that the boy's talents would turn out to be different than his own—but what those talents were was still a mystery. Jerick had left too soon.

Beside him the door opened again, but this time a form walked out, instead of getting thrown. Topaz turned to see Bat'Chor, his long akerng coat dripping with saprye, his round face looking extremely pleased.

"You got your sandal back?" Topaz asked dryly.

Bat'Chor pointed to his re-shod foot, smiling.

Topaz shook his head with a sigh. A thrown shoe was the Ke'Chan way of initiating a fight, a symbol that the owner had been irrevocably offended. Topaz had once seen a room full of Ke'Chan get into a brawl—the air had been so full of shoes one might have thought a cobbler had been caught in a tornado.

BAT'CHOR FOLLOWED HIS FRIEND THROUGH THE SMALL TOWN, LEAVING the tavern behind just before the watch arrived. Bat'Chor felt invigorated—there were few things as refreshing as a good, harmless fight. He knew Topaz didn't approve, but Bat'Chor didn't care. The jesk was a remarkably insightful man, but in some areas—primarily fighting—he was amazingly closed-minded. Of course, that probably had something to do with his condition.

Topaz had never said anything on the subject, but Bat'Chor had eyes.

He had seen Topaz try to attack an opponent—the jesk was incredibly fluid and dexterous right up to the point where his weapon was about to connect. Then he would miss. For some reason Topaz was physically unable to defend himself. Bat'Chor didn't try to understand it—he just realized that when their endeavors came to fighting, Topaz would be of little help.

Topaz led them away from the scene of the brawl, heading toward the town's other inn. The sun set early here next to the mountains, falling behind their veil and dropping the land into an early dusk. Still, there was enough light for Bat'Chor to see some of the city.

Bat'Chor liked Jarg. Its people weren't known for being Yolen's brightest, but they had an ingenuous simplicity about them that Bat'Chor preferred over the conniving scheming of people from the south. Jargish buildings had the same straightforward utilitarian style found in Melerand, even if they were a bit less sturdy.

Bat'Chor also saw remnants of his people's history in Jarg. Jarg—then a province of the Ke'Chan empire—had been founded by emperor Kath'Che the Fourth. Tired of dependence on Melerand for minerals, Kath'Che had set up mines in the Rire mountains and stocked them with Yolish slaves. The empire fell before the mines became productive, and the descendants of those slaves had eventually founded modern Jarg—left alone mostly because no one else wanted their land.

Signs of the Ke'Chan empire were prevalent in Jarg. Fallen temples to the True God, blockish formations of stone architecture, even the occasional inscription in old Ke'Chan. When he saw such things, Bat'Chor was able to remember that his people had not always been wanderers, scattered among the people of Yolen. Ke'Chan had been a mighty empire once, and the stories promised that one day his people would gather again.

A particularly fierce wind came upon them suddenly, whipping Bat'Chor's akerng. There was one thing he hated about Jarg, however. The cold. The Jargish highlands felt chilly to him even in the summer. The wind blew against his bare chest, blowing up under his chellorbeth and gnawing against his legs. He shivered despite himself. If the cold continued, he feared he would have to abandon his traditional clothing—at least marginally—by wearing leggings hidden under his chellorbeth and tying his akerng closed with a belt.

Topaz looked back at him as they walked up the short wooden steps into the inn, obviously noticing his friend's chilled look. “Bat'Chor, I absolutely refuse to feel sorry for you,” the jesk noted. “Not so long as you insist on walking around bare-chested.”

“He ees a warrior’s way,” Bat’Chor mumbled, his words weakened by the sound of his teeth chattering slightly.

Topaz snorted. “Watch your skirt. I’d rather not have the wind show us anything we don’t want to see.”

Bat’Chor forestalled his usual comment of “he ees not a skirt;” he was too focused on the cold. Perhaps he shouldn’t have let that trader douse him in saprye—it had seemed the preferable option at the time, considering another trader had been about to clobber him with a table leg. Still, the sudden wind was making him wonder if he wouldn’t have rather had a bruise.

“Keep moving, jesk,” he ordered, nodding toward the inviting firelight of the inn’s interior.

The jesk smiled slightly, then led the way into the inn. Like most Jargish buildings it was only one story, and the door opened right into the dining area. People sat scattered around the floor, eating at low tables. It wasn’t as full as the last tavern had been, however.

Topaz paused as the owner approached, smiling. “What’in t’preference, theres?”

“Were’in tired from t’trevels, there,” Topaz responded, perfectly mimicking the native dialect—something he often did when he was traveling. He claimed it made people more comfortable. Perhaps the jesk was finally getting over the distemperament that had been afflicting him the last few days. “We’in just long wantin’ a room.”

The innkeeper nodded. Bat’Chor, however, growled his dissent. “Food,” he noted, nodding toward the people.

“Not a chance, my friend,” Topaz mumbled back. “This is the last inn in town—I’m not going to give you an opportunity to destroy this one as well.”

“But, I threw my plate at one of my enemies,” Bat’Chor complained. He was even hungrier than before—a good fight always gave him an appetite.

Topaz sighed, turning back to follow the innkeeper toward their room. They wove through the crowd of people and arrived at the back of the building, where a short hallway led to three doors. As usual, none of them had locks—Topaz claimed the Jargish people were too dense to consider stealing as an option.

The innkeeper opened the door, gesturing to the room. “That’in t’big best room,” he announced.

“Long good,” Topaz replied with a smile. “We’in also wantin’ food. There’in bringin’ us t’long best, right?”

"'Tis right," the man said, bowing slightly as he turned back to his room full of diners.

Topaz nodded back to Bat'Chor. "Are you satisfied?"

"I weell have to taste the food first."

"I AM SATEESFIED," BAT'CHOR DECLARED, LEANING BACK. THE MEAL HAD been surprisingly good, as were their accommodations. The innkeeper had brought his dinner in on a low table, and their room even contained a short desk and stool. Topaz sat at this now, completely focused as he scribbled on a piece of parchment by candle light.

"I could tell that from the belch, Bat'Chor," Topaz mumbled, pausing to dip his quill. There was a slight smile on his lips, however, as he looked down at the page.

"You are een a better mood," Bat'Chor observed.

"I've come to accept what I cannot change and what I can, Bat'Chor."

"The boy's deesappearance no longer bothers you?"

"Oh, it does," Topaz corrected. "But, there's nothing I can do for him right now. I considered turning back several times, but we just don't have the time anymore. My pet projects will have to wait, for now. We have a greater work to do."

Bat'Chor paused. "And what ees that?"

Topaz paused, looking up. "What is what, Bat'Chor?"

"What ees our greater purpose?" Bat'Chor asked, pushing away from the low table and leaning against the wooden wall. It groaned a complaint. "Topaz, I have traveled weeth you on and off for years, but most of what I have learned I have had to guess. When are you going to tell me what we are doing?"

Topaz set down the pen, looking up with curious eyes. Finally, after studying Bat'Chor for a long moment, he spoke. "You tell me, Bat'Chor. What have we been doing all this time?"

"Collecting stories," Bat'Chor replied. "Finding old books, talking to grandfathers. I know what we do, I do not know why."

Topaz paused, then he reached over and picked up his pen again. "Here, read this," he requested, pointing at the page.

Bat'Chor rose, shuffling over to the table. "What ees he?"

"You'll recognize it, I promise," Topaz said.

Bat'Chor leaned down over the low table. What he found written on the paper surprised him. "The prophecy of 'Cheru Tar!" he exclaimed. It was

perhaps the most famous section of the Book of Ke'Chan, his people's most holy of writings. He didn't know Topaz had read it—the Book was supposed to be forbidden to outsiders. Of course, he should have suspected—there seemed to be few books in the world Topaz hadn't read.

Not certain whether to be angered or just shocked, Bat'Chor stared at the page for an extended moment. Only then did he realize that the script, penned in Topaz's handwriting, was written perfectly in Old Ke'Chan, and the ink was still wet. "You speak old Ke'Chan?" he demanded.

"A little," Topaz confessed. "I hope you'll forgive my trespass," the jesk said solemnly.

"When deed you read heem?" Bat'Chor demanded, still unsure whether he would forgive the trespass or not.

"In your father's tent," Topaz explained. "He gave it to me."

"Never!" Bat'Chor gasped. "You lie!" His hands twitched, one nearly reaching out to crumple the obscene paper and the other moving involuntarily toward his sandal. However, he held himself back. Topaz deserved a chance to explain.

Topaz paused. "Well, perhaps 'gave' is the wrong term, Bat'Chor," the jesk confessed. "He understood how important it was for me to read the Book of Ke'Chan, but he couldn't bring himself to give it to me. So he just put the book on the floor and left the room. He gave the choice and the condemnation to me."

"And you read heem?" Bat'Chor said slowly.

"Well, not really. I didn't need to read it, I just needed to look at the pages and memorize them. The reading came later. When your father came back ten minutes later, the book was back on the floor. We never spoke of it again."

Bat'Chor sat back, resting on the room's other stool. He had known about Topaz's memory but . . . the entire Book of Ke'Chan, in ten minutes? Bat'Chor had been forced to memorize a scroll's worth of text to pass his warrior's rites as a young man, and that had taken him a year to manage. The entire Book was fifteen scrolls long.

More amazing than Topaz's accomplishment was Bat'Chor's father. How had his father, the great BatKal, aided in such a blasphemous project?

"I . . ." Bat'Chor mumbled, dumbfounded. Sneaking into other people's heathen temples was one thing, but it was quite different to learn that Topaz had done the same to the Ke'Chan.

"Your father was a great man, Bat'Chor."

"He was." On that much they could agree.

"He did what was necessary, as far as his conscience would let him," Topaz continued. "If the True God wants to punish someone, he'll take me."

"He . . . He won't," Bat'Chor finally decided. "What you deed . . . what my father deed . . . was correct."

Topaz nodded slowly, studying Bat'Chor's face. "I'm glad you think that."

Bat'Chor wasn't completely convinced of his own words, and he knew Topaz could sense that, but they both let his willingness to say them stand.

"But," Bat'Chor continued, moving on, "why have you wreetten them?"

"Sometimes it helps me think if I can see things before me, rather than just in my mind," Topaz explained. "Here, let us get back to what I was showing you. What is the meaning behind the prophecy of 'Cheru Tar?"

"That 'Cheru Tar weell return," Bat'Chor said, feeling a little uneasy about speaking of such holy subjects. Topaz had obviously read them already, however, so he knew holding back would be foolish. "That he weell come to reunite our people again, as he deed long ago."

"Ah, but it won't exactly be 'Cheru Tar, will it?" Topaz corrected, holding up a finger.

Bat'Chor shuffled in his seat uncomfortably.

"The first time 'Cheru Tar came he united the clans," Topaz began, "then he led them to conquer the eastern half of the continent. Except the legends say, and the Book of Ke'Chan agrees, that it wasn't really 'Cheru Tar that provided the force of unification—it was the True God. He came down and became 'Cheru Tar."

"No," Bat'Chor corrected. "The True God deed not *become* 'Cheru Tar, 'Cheru Tar was given the guise of the True God. The True God dwelled een heem, but 'Cheru Tar was steell an eendeeveedual."

"Right," Topaz said. "And the next time, the so-called return of 'Cheru Tar, will be the same. The True God will choose someone from amongst the Ke'Chan people, and he will use that man to unite them. Not a literal return of 'Cheru Tar, simply another acting in his same role."

"Yes," Bat'Chor said with a solemn nod. Topaz was speaking of things that had never, to Bat'Chor's knowledge, been discussed with a non-Ke'Chan. Some outsiders knew of the prophecies of 'Cheru Tar's return, but not of the Doctrine of the Guise of the True God.

"This second 'Cheru Tar," Topaz was continuing, reading the paper before him. "He will 'Come from amongst the common of the world, be least suspected but most worthy, lowest of men but highest in divinity. He will descend into death, but conquer, and return with blessings for his people."

Bat'Chor nodded. The quote was directly from the Book.

“Now, look at this,” Topaz said, pulling out a second sheet of paper. “Do you recognize this?”

Bat’Chor accepted the sheet. “Thees ees from the Yolish Legends,” Bat’Chor said. “One of the more famous ones.”

“Right,” Topaz said, his eyes gleaming with excitement. “It’s the Legend of Gantalla, called GathBa in your language. Gantalla was the half-mortal son of Oreon the White. He was born to this earth, where he lived as a common man until he was forced to travel to the underworld to bring the life-giving Uris plant to his people. Now this one.”

Bat’Chor accepted the next sheet. “I do not recognize thees.”

“It’s an ancient Rodain prophesy,” Topaz explained. “It speaks of a man named Phaodes who will be born of the gods, slay the god of death, and bring immortality to the inhabitants of Yolen. Next.”

Once again, Topaz handed him another sheet.

“This one’s Meleran, dating back to the days when they worshiped a god named Aldwin, or Old One—the modern god Aldvin. It tells the tale of a young peasant boy found by the king’s daughter and raised in the palace. The princess names him Corl, and gives him the blessings of a royal life. Eventually, her kindness was rewarded as the boy turns out to be the son of Aldwin. He slays a beast sent by Xeth which was terrorizing the country and plunders its lair, bringing peace and wealth to the people.”

Topaz already had another page ready for him. “Agaron,” the jesk explained.

Bat’Chor nodded—everyone knew the legend of Agaron, greatest emperor of Rodaius. He had been a peasant, the son of a table-maker, who had risen to the throne. He was said to have battled the Black One for the right to the most beautiful woman in the world.

Bat’Chor set the paper aside, looking up to find a stack of paper as thick as a man’s finger held in Topaz’s hands. “They’re all the same story, Bat’Chor,” the jesk explained. “Half of them prophecies, half of them legends, but all following the same basic pattern. A child is born of the gods, he is lost and lives as a peasant until he exhibits enormous powers. He defeats death, and eventually comes to lead his people to great prosperity and unity. No matter who they are, no matter what language they speak, everyone wants to tell the same story. Every culture I visit has almost exactly the same legend or prophecy. The Ke’Chan have the return of’Cheru Tar. The Meleran have their Corl, and everyone tells stories of Agaron. The official Legends of the Yolish religion speak of both Galtalla and the goddess Mathona, who is supposed to come and unify the Yolish continent for good.”

"The same story . . ." Bat'Chor mumbled. "But what good ees a story?" He thought for a moment, considering Topaz. What would the jesk want with all of these prophecies? Then, his head snapped up.

"You mean to use these, don't you?"

Topaz smiled. "Someone has to unify our continent, Bat'Chor," he explained. "The Meleran squabble with the Aldbish, the Fallin hate the Trex-andians, and the Ke'Chan pretty much fight with whoever's convenient at the time. If we are going to survive what is coming—whatever it is—then we will have to be one people. These prophecies are going to do that."

Bat'Chor looked down at the sheet of parchment in his hand. In all their time together, he had never heard Topaz speak in favor of superstition or religion. "You don't believe them, do you?" Bat'Chor guessed.

Topaz paused. "No," he admitted. "They're all the same story, but they aren't connected. I've tried to link them together, to trace their roots, but it appears that these hero stories are simply a part of human nature. I don't think there's any truth to them. But, the people *do* believe them, and that's what matters. I will find them a hero, and I will make him fulfill these prophecies—these stories everyone's been telling themselves from the beginning of time. The idea of this universal hero is so powerfully ingrained into them that they won't be able to resist following him."

Bat'Chor looked up with dark eyes. He wasn't certain what to think of such a plan. "You do a dangerous thing, Topaz," he warned. "You should not play weeth people's faith."

"Faith is a good thing, Bat'Chor," Topaz said quietly. "But I have felt something in this world, something I don't understand. Something evil. I have another stack of papers, one not so big, that speak of it, tales of a monster that betrays humankind and sacrifices them to destruction. Those stories I do believe."

"Why believe one and not the other?" Bat'Chor demanded. "Why are you so queeck to accept the eveel and not the good?"

"Because, my friend, the stories about the evil one are different." The jesk reached over, pulling out a blank sheet of paper, then began scribbling. Bat'Chor leaned forward to watch.

"The story of the hero appears in every culture and every people with no apparent link between incarnations," Topaz explained, making a short list on the paper. "They speak of something inherent in humankind, an acknowledgment of our progression through life. People who have been completely secluded, left with no stories from the past, will eventually create legends and prophecies involving the hero. Take Jarg, for instance. They were completely

isolated by your Ke'Chan government, left without religion—which was forbidden of the slaves. Today they have a dozen different legends that follow the heroic pattern.

“Now, the evil one, this force I speak of, it’s different.” Topaz continued by writing some words on the page, then linking them with lines. “For one, there aren’t as many stories about it, and the legends I have found are much more specific, even if they do differ slightly. However, each of those differences can be traced.

“The stories about this force, whether it be Xeth the Black or the one you Ke'Chan call 'Chathis Hor, are like steps. You can follow how the story changed as time progressed. It seeped into different cultures as groups broke away and nations diverged.”

Topaz paused in his writing. He had started with a group of twenty names, representing stories, then had drawn a line coming from each one, pointing down toward the bottom of the paper. Whenever two lines met, Topaz wrote names—some Bat'Chor recognized, though most he did not. Topaz continued drawing, forming a picture something like a tree or a bolt of lightning. What began as a dozen different names merged slowly until there were only three left. All three pointed back at one missing name, the story at the base of the tree.

“The tales form an arrow, Bat'Chor,” Topaz continued, his eyes glittering with excitement. “There’s some original story—unlike the hero legend, which is too varied and far too universal to have come from one myth. In fact, I’ve often wondered how many of the hero stories were created simply because people knew the story of this evil one, and were uncomfortable knowing that the old legends provided for no way to defeat him.

“Regardless, the story of Xeth—or whatever his name is—is real, and I can only assume he is real as well. Somewhere in time a story, legend, or event arose that was so powerful its legacy has continued for thousands of years. Whatever it was that inspired this story is the thing we are fighting.”

Bat'Chor scratched his head. “The feefth god,” he mumbled.

Topaz nodded. “The fifth god. He’s our enemy, Bat'Chor. That’s what I’ve been doing all this time. I became a jesk because it was a way to collect stories, and as I collected I was able to divide them into these two groups. The hero that man hopes will come, and the evil that he knows exists. The evil is coming—I don’t know how I know, but I do. We’ll have to make a hero by the time it gets here.”

Bat'Chor looked at Topaz’s stack of papers, watching the flickering candle as it burned slowly. “The boy,” he finally realized. “Jereck.”

"He was my best prospect," Topaz admitted.

"He came from a peasant family, he had powers you could attribute to godhood . . ." He paused, looking up. "The Ke'Chan would never follow him. He is not Ke'Chan."

"The Book of Ke'Chan doesn't say anything about the second 'Cheru Tar being a Ke'Chan," Topaz noted. "I looked."

"But . . ."

"They would follow," Topaz interrupted, "if their leader, head of the clans, told them to."

Bat'Chor drew in a sharp breath. "He would never do such a thing."

"Perhaps," Topaz said with a slight shrug. "I would like to think that he gives my suggestions more than passing thought. For now, let's worry about our enemy. Jerick is a moot point anyway—as much as I like the boy, I can't help him. Hopefully, Rodis will bring him back. If not . . . well, he's decided to make his own path now."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

FROM THEIR VANTAGE ATOP THE HILL, JERICK AND FROST COULD SEE THE strange landscape. Just ahead, the land of southern Fallamore, normally fertile and green in the year-round warmth, suddenly turned brown and dark. The hills dribbled into an enormous flat plateau, the grasses failing at its edges, the land growing sterile and lifeless. Here, extending for miles in either direction, the infamous Shattered Plains spread out before them.

The schisms began small, apparently no more than natural cracks in the sun-dried earth. At the edges of the Shattered Plains the largest cracks were barely wider than a man's finger. They interlaced, joined, and diverged, running like tiny dried-out rivers. As they moved farther out onto the flat, lifeless steppes, however, the cracks grew larger. They expanded, slowly changing from cracks to chasms, until finally the land itself seemed to fall away, breaking into thousands of column-like plateaus. Most were still close to one another, some even within jumping distance, but the rifts between them were sheer and incredibly deep.

Jerick stood awed beside Frost, looking out at the disjointed plateaus. "How . . . ?" he asked in wonder.

"Dragonsteel, Young Master," Frost explained. "This is where it comes from. It seeps up from the ground, gathering in pools at the tops of those plateaus. Long ago this place was a flat plain, but thousands of years of erosion have eaten away at the ground. Dragonsteel, however, is indestructible. Over time, it seeped into the ground around the places where it pools, strengthening the earth. As a result, the ground there doesn't wear

away. The final product is what you see before you, a system of plateaus and thin, but very deep, gorges.”

The young boy’s eyes were filled with wonder as he looked down. Frost smiled slightly; as much as he disapproved of the logic behind Jerick’s travels, he knew the experience had done the boy immeasurable good. Over the last three months of traveling Jerick had experienced the wondrous variety of the land, seeing what life was like on the continent of Yolen. Now if the boy could only manage to keep himself from getting slaughtered in the Eternal War.

Frost sighed, looking out over the Shattered Plains. The sight was familiar to him; though, admittedly, there weren’t many sights in the world that hadn’t long since become familiar to him. The land was a dear old friend to Frost, no matter what face it chose to put on. Looking at the Shattered Plains, however, he felt a special affection well up in his heart. Not for the Plains themselves; to him those only represented Dragonsteel and death. They did, however, remind him of a place nearby, a place he had once called home.

“Is that the place?” Jerick asked, nodding toward the edge of the Shattered Plains. A short distance away, built at the base of a hill, was a semipermanent collection of tents and wooden structures. Thousands of people milled about, light twinkling as it reflected off of their various weapons and armor.

“Yes,” Frost admitted flatly.

JERICK BARELY KEPT HIMSELF FROM DASHING TOWARD THE TENTS IN AN exuberant run. After three months of laborious travel, they were finally here. The Shattered Plains. He contained his excitement as they began to walk toward the army. It was vital that he make a good impression.

Except for that first week, his trek across Yolen had gone remarkably, if uneventfully, well. Under Frost’s council he had kept a low profile, offering his services only in smaller towns, where suspicious nobles or jealous rivals would be less likely to demand his castemark as proof of his station.

Wherever he had gone, there had always been quick demand for a scribe. Frost claimed that it was because the nations of Yolen were only beginning to understand the true benefits of literacy, and in wake of the explosion of interest there weren’t enough trained scribes to do the work. In many areas, Jerick’s position as a scribe had earned him more respect and admiration than if he had been a powerful Kalord, rather than a simple courtier. He had soon been able to afford an ox and cart, and after that they could

move more quickly. Traveling in such a manner was less dignified than using a chariot, but it was also cheaper and less likely to mark him as a target for bandits. He had sold both animal and vehicle at the last stop before arriving.

The land had changed a great deal as they moved south. They had taken a direct route through the mountains that divided Fallamore in half, leaving Aldbin behind as soon as possible. After climbing up through the Fallin mountains—which, in Jerick’s opinion, were more hills than true mountains—they had dropped into the lush area known as the Rothanden Valley. Here the land was fed by the two branches of the Flueese River, creating a long strip of land that many scholars called the most fertile area on the continent.

And, as the two travelers had dropped out of the mountains, Jerick had seen why. The land to the north consisted of flat plains covered sparsely with short grasses and shrubs. In the valley, however, everything was green. Great twisting trees Jerick didn’t recognize dotted the land, and life seemed to coat every surface, whether it be dirt or rock.

And the heat was like nothing Jerick had ever experienced. Even at the height of summer in Melerand it hadn’t been half as hot as it was in Fallamore. His body soon grew sticky from the humidity, and his brow was constantly streaming with sweat. It seemed as if the entire land were an enormous bathhouse filled with steaming water.

He was surprised anything could live in such an environment. Frost, however, had only laughed when he made the comment, claiming that the southern heat was actually rather mild when compared to places like the Ke’Chan desert. Jerick’s only response had been to decide that he would definitely never visit Old Ke’Chan.

Frost walked lethargically beside him. For some reason the old scholar continued to travel with him, even though he hadn’t been able to persuade Jerick to return to Melerand. But, despite the constant naggings, Jerick had been glad for the company. Frost’s presence had not only given him someone to talk with, but the scholar was also a fount of useful knowledge. He knew the customs, languages, and mannerisms of even the smallest ethnic groups, not to mention their histories.

Jerick’s footsteps grew quicker as he approached the camp. It was enormous, more like a city than an army. The camp seemed to be divided into sections, different groupings marked by different colors. Men of all body shapes stood about, some lounging, others practicing, others working. Jerick looked at them in wonder, noting their armor. It was bright and silver. Steel,

not bronze. This was a real army, unlike the ornamental guards of King Rodis's court.

Jerick paused at the edge of the conglomeration of tents and buildings, his brow furrowing as he looked from side to side. Which way was he to go? A quick look at Frost told him that in this case, the old scholar knew no more than himself. So, shrugging, he approached an armored man leaning against his spear. A sentry of some sort.

"Um, excuse me . . . ?" Jerick began.

"New conscripts report at the big white tent," the man mumbled in Fallin, pointing lazily.

Jerick nodded, motioning for Frost to follow. It was time for the real adventure to begin.

GENERAL DEMETRIS STOOD OVER HIS TABLE MAP, A SCOWL ON HIS FACE. The map had been carved into the top of the massive table—so large it took up half of his conference room—then painted to give accents to the separate plateaus. The rough circles were connected by strings of various colors, the common pathways used to move from plateau to plateau. Through the use of mobile bridges every plateau could be reached by at least one route, though sometimes a company had to take an extremely round-about path to reach its goal. If only he could make fortresses on the Plains themselves . . .

But, no, he had tried that. Demetris hadn't believed the stories when he'd first arrived at the Eternal War a year earlier, and had proceeded to experiment with permanent settlements. He had lost several forts before learning the truth. Plants could not grow on the Shattered Plains, and the Sho Del demons were impossibly quick. He hadn't been able to keep his fortresses supplied, let alone get them reinforcements in an attack. Demetris shook his head—it all came back to the bridges.

Most of the generals used the same basic bridge design. A couple used wider constructions that allowed more men to move from plateau to plateau at the same time, but most favored the thinner bridges for mobility's sake. Demetris now used the smaller variety, as did Ki Tzern. Yet, somehow the Tzendish general still managed to hold his place as the most profitable leader in the war, forcing Demetris to be an unacceptable second.

Demetris pounded his fist against the hard wooden table. Over the last year Demetris had taken Ske Company from the least successful position all the way up to second place. Yet, for all the glory and wealth he had earned, he still couldn't defeat Ki Tzern. The man continued to stay a little bit ahead

of Demetris, reaching wells a little more quickly, retrieving just a little more Dragonsteel, killing just a few more Sho Del.

It had to stop. Demetris was poised to lead his Ka to the imperial throne. The succession was only a few years away, but Demetris would never gain the prestige necessary as long as Ki Tzern continued to make a fool of him. He—

“My lord?” a voice asked from the front of the tent.

Demetris turned angrily, almost toppling off the wooden box he used to raise his height a couple of feet. It was Flavinne, the captain in charge of conscriptions.

“What?” Demetris demanded. The man should have known better than to bother him.

“I apologize, sir,” Flavinne said, saluting. “But there is a matter that demands your attention.”

“What?” Demetris demanded dismissively. “The men want more prostitutes? Tell them to win more battles, and I’ll see about it.”

“Um, no, sir,” the man stuttered. “It’s about a new volunteer. He claims to be trained as a nobleman.”

“What does his castemark say?” Demetris asked.

“It says he’s a lumberman from Melerand, sir.”

Demetris snorted. Flavinne was wasting his time again. “Peasants, especially runaways, go to the bridge crews,” he spat. “You know that.”

“But he claims he was raised in the palace, sir,” Flavinne continued to argue. “And he speaks perfect Fallin.”

“Yes, well, so do you, but that doesn’t appear to make you any smarter. Put him in the bridge crews, and be gone!”

“Um, yes, sir,” the man said as Demetris turned back to his map. The man wasn’t through, though. “Just one more thing,” he added.

Demetris felt his face turning red. He opened his mouth, about to order this annoying captain to place himself in the bridge crews as well, but Flavinne spoke more quickly.

“There’s a scribe traveling with him, sir.”

Demetris paused. “A scribe?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. His castemark is valid.”

Demetris scratched his Antoli. “Send the scribe to me,” he said. “I’ve been needing someone to write correspondences with my contacts back in the capital.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said, saluting again.

Demetris watched him go, shaking his head. Yes, the first order he would

have this scribe write would be one sending Captain Flavinne to the bridge crews. It was just his sort of incompetence that was letting Ki Tzern stay ahead of them.

“YOU, FOLLOW HIM. YOU, COME WITH ME.”

Jerick looked up with surprise at the soldier’s blunt voice. He was pointing for Jerick to follow another man, one who didn’t look very warrior-like. He was overweight and had a rather slovenly appearance, his blue uniform stained in numerous places. Jerick turned back to the soldier who had spoken. The man was grabbing Frost by the arm and pointing for him to follow.

“Wait,” Jerick objected. “My man is to—”

Jerick fell silent with a sharp groan as a sudden pain jabbed him in the stomach.

“When an officer gives you an order,” the overweight soldier said, removing his fist from Jerick’s midsection, “you obey.”

Jerick croaked his response, feeling his legs wobble slightly under the pain. He looked up, blinking through tears to catch one last glimpse of Frost as the scholar vanished inside a large brick building. The old tutor’s head was shaking slightly with resignation.

“Move,” the soldier said, pushing Jerick down an earthen path running through the camp. Jerick stumbled to respond, too shocked to do much else.

None of the soldiers gave the pair much heed as Jerick followed his companion’s proddings. They only made one stop, beside a short, open-sided tent. After speaking with the soldier inside, his guide returned, shoving a diminutive sheathed sword and leather jerkin into Jerick’s hands.

“Here,” the soldier said. “Put these on.”

Jerick obeyed, pulling the leather vest over his head and strapping the weapon around his waist. As they walked, he pulled the short sword free of its sheath. It was bronze, and the blade looked as if it hadn’t even been sharpened. In addition, it was so stumpy and slight-looking that Jerick doubted it would do him any good in battle.

He looked back at his guide with a frown. “This is it?” he demanded.

The guard simply nodded.

“But, when do I get one of those?” he asked, nodding to the steel long sword at the man’s side.

“You don’t.”

“But—”

The soldier interrupted Jerick, pushing past him and waving toward a

tent that appeared to be their destination. "Hey, Gaz," he bellowed. "New recruit."

Beside the tent an enormous form turned, and Jerick felt his breath catch in his throat. He was Ke'Chan. Or, at least, he had the thin eyes and dark skin of a Ke'Chan, though he was wearing a blue uniform instead of the traditional skirt and coat. Jerick had never seen a Ke'Chan wearing regular clothing before.

"That spindly thing?" the Ke'Chan, Gaz, roared back. His voice held no trace of the Ke'Chan accent. "He'll barely stop an arrow!"

Jerick's guide chuckled, reaching back and pushing Jerick toward the Ke'Chan. Jerick stumbled, barely catching himself. Further conversation, however, was interrupted by the sound of hoofbeats and a loud blaring horn.

Gaz cursed as Jerick's guide dashed away, running back toward the front of the camp. Men began to scatter through the camp, large groups of them either dashing or, in the case of the armored soldiers, jogging in rank. Soon a group of scruffy-looking men in leather vests like Jerick's own had gathered around Gaz.

"Move, move, move!" Gaz yelled as the men split into several groups. "You!" the enormous Ke'Chan bellowed, pointing at Jerick. "Follow that group; you're a member of Bridge Four. Go!"

Jerick jumped, scrambling in the direction Gaz ordered. His mind was confused at the noise and rush of bodies, and he barely kept up with the others as they approached a large wooden bridge sitting on the ground a short distance from the tent. Its construction was simple, with no wheels or other means of movement.

One man, an older man with a face so scarred his beard came out in patches, stood to the side as the group of about twenty men surrounded the bridge. "You," the older man said, pointing at Jerick. "You new?"

"Yes, sir," Jerick said, disoriented.

"To the back with you then," the man ordered, pointing at the back of the wooden bridge.

In a daze, Jerick did as commanded, falling into place between two other soldiers. "What now?" he mumbled, almost to himself.

"We lift," the man beside him explained, reaching down with the others. Jerick followed, digging his fingers under the edge of the bridge and heaving in rhythm with the old warrior's command. The ponderous bridge rose slowly into the air, incredibly heavy, and then settled into place on the men's shoulders. There were grooves to make the carrying easier, but it was still extremely uncomfortable.

"Let's go, lads!" the older man at the front ordered, and the men began to move, following the sound of their leader's voice. From the back, Jerick could see little of what was happening. They seemed to be joining other crews carrying bridges of their own, and he did catch a glimpse of the large Ke'Chan warrior trotting along beside them.

They moved out onto the Shattered Plains themselves, leaving behind the scrub grass and striking out onto the dry, dusty plateau Jerick had seen from above. The air beneath the bridge was stuffy, smelling of dirt and sweat, and he found it difficult to keep rhythm with the walking men around him. It grew even more difficult as an order from Gaz drove the crew into a trot.

Jerick struggled to keep going, still uncertain of what was happening.

"First day?" a voice asked beside him, speaking in Meleran.

Jerick looked up, an action that didn't do him much good. The shoulder mounts by which he carried the bridge prevented him from turning his head toward the sound.

"Yes," Jerick said between laborious breaths.

"Poor lad," the voice said. It bore the distinctive accent of a man from Aldbin.

"Where are we going?" Jerick asked the voice.

"T'one of t'wells," the man explained. "A scout must have spotted one preparin' t'put out Dragonsteel."

Jerick didn't say anything for a long moment, his breathing too difficult to allow speech. Finally he managed to get out one more question. "And the bridge?"

"T'cross t'chasms, of course," his unseen companion explained.

Jerick fell silent, trying not to concentrate on his complaining feet or the wooden boards digging into his shoulders. Fortunately, the leather vest seemed to have extra padding on the shoulders, which helped somewhat.

Just a few moments later, he sensed a change in the ground below. The sound of feet clunking against wood sounded in his ears.

"Near t'edges there are permanent bridges," the voice explained, answering Jerick's unasked question. "At least, where t'cursed demons haven't burned them."

Jerick nodded to himself beneath the canopy of wood, sweat dripping from his nose in the humidity. They quickly crossed the permanent bridge, passing onto what must have been a separate plateau, though Jerick could see nothing but the brown earth below. Hopefully, they would reach their destination quickly. He didn't know how much longer he could hold on.

He hoped in vain.

Over the next half hour they crossed four more bridges, following Gaz's bellowed orders. By the time the call came for them to halt, Jerick could no longer feel his arms, and he could barely stand. The order to lower the bridge came like a blessed sound from the Nine Lords themselves. Jerick moved with the rest of the group, first lifting the bridge with numb fingers, then backing away and setting it down on the hard earth.

Gloriously fresh air enveloped Jerick. However, he was given little respite. "Now push!" Gaz ordered.

The men around Jerick moved to the back of the bridge and together they began to push the large contraption forward. Several men moved to the sides, holding ropes attached to the far end of the bridge. As they moved, Jerick noticed for the first time the enormous gap in the ground ahead of them. The earth simply stopped, dropping abruptly. Across the twenty-foot chasm was another plateau, and the men slowly pushed the bridge over the gap—the men with ropes pulling the end up to keep the entire thing from falling into the chasm. Carefully, they guided the edge of the bridge, settling its far end on the other side of the chasm. Other bridge crews did the same to Jerick's right and left.

The men around him collapsed as the work was finished, and Jerick gladly copied them. As he sank to the ground, a thundering sound was heard and a line of horse-drawn chariots, which must have been following them the entire way, galloped across the bridge. The charioteers were followed by a squad of several hundred armored soldiers carrying swords, bows, or spears.

Jerick watched them go with wonder. Was he to have nothing to do with the combat? There had to be some mistake—he wasn't going to spend the next two years as a simple packman. Of course, at the moment he probably couldn't have lifted a sword if he wanted to, so he was happy to let the warriors pass. He could correct the mistake later, after his body recovered.

"All right," Gaz ordered as the last warriors crossed. "Move!"

The men around him groaned, climbing to their feet. "Come on, lad," a familiar voice came from beside him. Jerick's unseen companion was a lanky, long-faced man with thin hair that was wet with sweat.

"What?" Jerick complained, climbing to his feet. "Time to turn back already?"

"Turn back?" the man laughed. "No, lad. We're probably not even halfway there, though t'Lords only know which plateau we're headin' for."

"What!" Jerick exclaimed as the group of bridgemen clamored across their bridge. He allowed himself to be pushed forward, only marginally noticing the depth of the drop below. The sides of the Plains were smooth, almost

like polished marble, and the chasm continued on seemingly forever, its bottom lost in darkness.

On the other side the men pulled the bridge back. Then, to Jerick's horror, they moved to lift the contraption once again. Beyond, the soldiers and charioteers waited with varying levels of patience as Jerick's companions hoisted the bridge onto their shoulders.

"T'first time is always the worst, lad," the Aldbish man's kind voice came from beside him. "Keep movin', and you'll do all right."

"Move!" Gaz's unyielding voice spat again, and the nightmare began anew.

They repeated the same exercise a dozen times, spanning chasms that all looked the same to Jerick. It was as if they weren't making any progress; the only thing that varied was the size of the plateaus. Sometimes they only carried the bridge for a few moments before putting it down again. Those times, the group of warriors would be crowded on a plateau barely large enough to hold them all. Other times the plateau extended far to either side, the cracks that marked its edges barely visible in the distance.

Each time the call came to put down the bridge, Jerick prayed with all his might that it would be the last, but each time the call came to move again. At every incident, Jerick was certain he wouldn't be able to move when the command came, but each time he managed to pull himself forward, though sometimes it took a kick from Gaz to get him going. As the time progressed, the group of soldiers began to grow increasingly apprehensive, and Gaz's orders became more urgent.

Finally, a new order came. It was a simple one, but one Jerick didn't understand.

"Be ready!" Gaz ordered.

Ready for what? Jerick's befuddled mind wondered.

"Lords," the Aldbish man's voice came from beside him, "please let us have gotten here first."

"Go!" Gaz's voice yelled sharply. The forms around him burst into a trot, moving with an energy Jerick wouldn't have thought possible after such an extended hike. He tripped, almost losing his footing, and he reacted so sharply he knocked his head against the back of the bridge.

Through the shock, the sweat, and the daze, Jerick heard the screams begin. The bridge shook suddenly, as if it had run into a wall. However, it didn't stop moving, it only rocked slightly. The screams continued, coming from all around. Jerick felt horror in his chest, and his arms began to shake. It was then that his foot slammed against something soft. He looked down

to barely catch sight of a body in a leather vest like his own, its eyes staring blankly into the air, a white-fletched arrow in its chest.

Then Jerick screamed. He wanted to back away, to run from whatever doom he was approaching, but the bodies around him prevented him from scrambling away. The bridge continued to tow him along.

“Drop!” a voice ordered from in front. The men moved quickly, lifting the bridge in a single fluid motion and stepping away from underneath. The bridge dropped to the ground, and Jerick was thrown into a world of terror.

Arrows whizzed around them, snapping into the wooden bridges and slicing through bodies, tumbling them screaming to the ground. More frightening, however, were the monsters. Great slathering beasts with wide, bat-like wings and multi-toothed mouths hung around them. Drool and bile poured from their bulbous white bodies, and they screamed with terrible, inhuman voices that shook the air.

“They aren’t real, lad!” the man beside him warned. “They’re Sho Del illusions! Push!”

The voice jogged Jerick into motion, and he ducked down to throw his weight against the bridge. Arrows continued to fall. As Jerick pushed, the friendly Aldbish man beside him took a shaft in the chest, then another in the neck as he fell. Blood spurted from the neck wound, washing over Jerick as the man twitched, his body spasming on the ground. A second later the bridge locked into place, and Jerick barely dodged out of the way as a dozen chariots roared across the chasm, trampling the corpse of the unnamed man who had spoken so kindly to him.

JERICK SAT ON THE HARD EARTH AS THE BATTLE PROGRESSED, HIS MIND numb. He barely even noticed the corpses around him—fully a third of the bridge crew was dead. As soon as the bridge was in place, however, the arrows stopped falling, and the bridgemen were ignored.

Apparently, the Sho Del had obtained the plateau first, and had been ready for the humans’ approach. He could see them, their white-skinned forms battling with the blue-suited soldiers. Most of the fighting was hand-to-hand now, and the human line was slowly pushing toward the center of the plateau. Only the humans used chariots, and these rode randomly through the battle, striking where they could. The horrific illusions that had surrounded the bridge crew earlier hovered in the air above the warriors, seeking to distract them. Even as Jerick watched, one of the beasts drove

a charioteer off the side of the cliff, toppling him and his horse into the chasm beyond.

It lasted about an hour, neither side making much headway as far as Jerick could tell. However, eventually the Sho Del retreated, and the bridge crews around him let out a weak yell of joy. The warriors did something near the center of the plateau that Jerick couldn't make out, then rode, or marched, back across the bridges.

Only then did Jerick's over-taxed mind realize that he would be expected to cart the bridge back to camp, this time with two-thirds the number of men as before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING PRINCE YOHARN'S DISAPPEARANCE, THE PALACE rose to a height of chaos that made even the search for the Sho Del assassin seem calm. A city that had already been searched a dozen times over was forced to endure continued examination as the groups who had once sought an assassin now turned to hunting kidnappers. No one was above suspicion.

King Rodis was hardest hit by the disappearance. He blamed himself in a dozen different ways, claiming he had been too easily distracted, that he hadn't been careful enough with the kingdom's security, that he had become too lax. Where he had barely tolerated the wild searches for the Sho Del assassin, he now became the great motivation behind the reckless hunting that was ostensibly to find his son. He offered wealth, titles, and land to anyone who found Yoharn.

In the midst of the confusion, one surprising source of stability arose. Queen Grasse, Rodis's matronly wife, began to shoulder the burden of her husband's political duties, seeing that the country continued to function. She did so quietly, without presumption or domination. Her tact and political skill, however, soon led the more lucid members of the court to wonder if some of the king's historical decisions had been influenced by his queen.

After four months of searching, the fervor began to die down. Rodis turned from anger to melancholy, realizing that the prince was not going to be found within the borders of his kingdom. In the end, all he could do was wait and see if demands were made. Life in the palace slowly returned

to a semblance of normalcy—though there was still a sense of fragility in the air. As if one wrong move would cause the tense peace to shatter, throwing everything back into confusion and chaos.

THE THING THAT STRUCK RYALLA MOST ABOUT RECENT EVENTS WAS HOW quickly Jerick had been forgotten. Had the prince not been taken, things might have been different. However, as they stood, there had been little opportunity to worry about a runaway peasant boy—no matter how much his countrymen had been relying on him.

One beneficial side effect of the prince's disappearance—if, indeed, one was willing to think of it in such a manner—was the way it took away from Martis's success. Ryalla could see displeasure in the large man's eyes every time Yoharn was mentioned. Martis had achieved a major triumph; he had saved the life of the king and won the hand of the princess. Yet, his ability to gloat was crushed by the general feeling of anxiety.

Ryalla watched him now as she stood behind Courteth in the palace courtyard. The scholars, Vendavious and Teniclese, had finally announced their departure for Trexandos. The classes had ceased months before, just after Jerick's departure, but King Rodis had forbidden anyone—especially foreigners—to leave the country. The restriction had only just been lifted, and the Trexandians were eager to return home. Their pay had come to an end, as had their usefulness.

Martis bowed one last time to his masters, making a great show of the event. Now that Jerick was gone and Martis had proven himself, by default, their best student, the beefy noble was more than willing to claim the two men as his honored mentors. Ryalla watched the proceedings with a churning in her stomach. The end of the classes had marked an end to Ryalla's reading, Vendavious's final departure made such a state harshly permanent. The scholar had reclaimed all of his loaned books from Courteth's chambers, and Ryalla had been left without a single scrap of literature to fill her time. It was the most bitter loss, save perhaps for Jerick's running away, that Ryalla had ever experienced.

"Honored Masters," Martis was saying, "my fiancée and I will sorely miss your tutelage. It was in your classes, I think, that we first fell in love."

Courteth stood quietly at Martis's side. She had changed over the last few months—the most startling alteration being her tendency toward silence, at least when Martis was around. The Kalord's son had made it quite clear that the proper attitude of a nobleman's wife was to be seen and

admired, but definitely not heard. It was common knowledge that King Rodis had given Courteth far too much freedom. The princess still ranted and screamed as usual when she was with only her servants, but even those outbursts were becoming more subdued.

"I am pleased to have been of service, Student Martis," Vendavious replied. He turned to Courteth. "Courteth, do you mind if I borrow your slave for a moment to help me arrange things in my chariot for departure?"

"Of course not," Courteth said with a reserved tone, nodding for Ryalla to follow the rabbit-like scholar into the stables. Ryalla did so with curiosity—why had the scholar asked for her, a thin-framed girl, when he could have easily gotten help from one of the stableboys?

Vendavious's chariot waited inside the stables, packed with chests and bags that would be transferred to a ship once he reached the docks. The scholar bent down, riffling through one of the trunks, and came up with a thick brown volume that Ryalla instantly recognized. Ballacorne's *Common Tales*.

"I want you to give this to your mistress, child, since she liked it so much," Vendavious said, handing Ryalla the volume. "Tell her I have never known a more promising essayist and poet. Tell her that her words sometimes brought tears to the eyes of a very old, and supposedly very crotchety, man."

"Yes, Master Vendavious," Ryalla said, accepting the book eagerly. Perhaps she wouldn't have to abandon reading entirely—if, that was, Courteth left the book in a place where Ryalla could occasionally sneak it away.

"Oh," Vendavious added as Ryalla turned to go. "Also tell dear Courteth that I am neither as stupid nor as inattentive as I look."

Ryalla froze, looking back to the old scholar, his tufts of white hair sticking out beside eyes that glimmered with a slight smile.

"You know?" Ryalla whispered.

"From the beginning, child. One does not teach for decades without learning to recognize handwriting. Besides, I doubt that the princess has the intellectual capacity to connect ideas even half as well as you did in those essays."

Ryalla stood with wide eyes, holding the book in stunned hands. "But, why didn't you say anything?"

"What?" Vendavious asked. "And accuse the princess of teaching her slave to read? Castebreaking is a very serious crime, my dear. Even with a king as progressive as Rodis, the implications of such an accusation would have been dreadful. One learns when dealing with foreign courts, my dear, that there are some things you just have to ignore. Even if Rodis had believed me, I doubt his daughter would have received any retribution. If there is

one thing at which Courteth excels, it is manipulating her father. No, the blame would have gone somewhere else.”

Ryalla grew chilled. “Me,” she realized.

“Probably,” Vendavious said, turning to re-close his trunk. “It was much better not to make a fuss. In the end, this method was better for all of us, wasn’t it?”

Ryalla looked down at the book in her fingers, feeling its familiar leather cover. She actually owed a great deal to the princess—because of Courteth’s laziness, Ryalla had received an opportunity usually reserved for the grandest of the nobility. “I guess it was.” Then she looked up at the old scholar. “This . . . is for me, then?” she asked.

Vendavious nodded. “It should belong to the person who wrote so stunningly about its contents.”

“But slaves are forbidden to own property,” Ryalla objected.

Vendavious approached, softly laying a hand on her shoulder. “You’ll just have to keep it hidden then, won’t you?”

Ryalla smiled.

“My dear girl,” Vendavious said, “my only regret is that I was such a poor teacher.”

“No, Master,” Ryalla objected. “You were wonderful. Jerick spoke often of your teaching.”

“Ah, but for you I could do nothing more than pass on words and hope somehow they reached you,” Vendavious said with a shake of his head. “If only I had been able to teach you directly. But even then I would have been inadequate. I am a scientist, not a poet. You already have a far better command of language than I.” Vendavious paused. “I can, however, recognize greatness. Poetry is not what the Fallins think—it is more than simply matching rhymes or forcing your words into a rhythm. Poetry is passion.”

“I . . .” Ryalla mumbled, uncertain what to say. “Thank you, Master.”

Vendavious shook his head. “No, you must understand, child. I am not a scholar; I am a teacher. The two are not necessarily the same thing. To a teacher it is the most blessed of privileges to interact with a student of truly genius potential. These last few years, I had the amazing fortune to teach two such individuals. And, interestingly enough, neither was of noble blood.”

Vendavious turned back to his chariot. “Run along now, child,” he said. “Hide that book where no one will take it from you, and hurry quickly back here so I can send you to your mistress as if nothing happened.”

“Yes, Master,” Ryalla said, walking toward the door to the palace proper.

She paused, however, noting an odd look in Vendavious's eyes. As she waited by the door, she could see an inner conflict rumbling within the old man. Finally, he made a decision, and waved her back. She obeyed, and he leaned down, looking toward the courtyard nervously.

When he spoke, his voice was hushed. "Child, for political reasons we are not allowed to aid—or even encourage—the breaking of caste," he whispered. "Trexandos is small and lacks a military. We only remain safe because we are a threat to no one, and because our scholars are so valuable to the various governments. If it got out that we encouraged dissension, we would be quickly, and mercilessly, crushed." He paused, shooting another furtive look at the palace. "Remember this, however, Ryalla. In Trexandos there are no castes. There are no slaves, and no nobles. No man, monarch or not, may remove a former slave from our borders once he or she arrives. A mind of your caliber would be . . . very well received."

Ryalla looked into the old man's eyes, nodding slowly. There was sorrow therein—sorrow that he couldn't do more. There was also encouragement. Then, he nodded for her to go, and she turned to rush into the palace, holding the precious volume close to her chest.

VENDAIVIOUS'S GIFT WAS A SMALL CONSOLATION IN THE FACE OF THE greater chance for education she had lost. Over the next few weeks, Ryalla seriously considered running away for the first time in her life. The thoughts scared her, but at the same time intrigued her. A few years ago she wouldn't have even been able to contemplate such radical ideas.

But, she held back. The first and most important reason was the king's attitude. Rodis had barely agreed to let the scholars return to their homeland; what chance did a rogue slave have? Jerick had been lucky to escape when he did. If she were truly going to run, she needed to wait at least until things calmed down. Another, more personal, reason lay with Courteth. As much as she resented the princess, Ryalla had grown up with the girl. In a way, Courteth was like her sister—even more of a sibling to her than her brother, whose service in Strafen's Kaden rarely allowed them to see one another. Ryalla wanted to see Courteth's wedding, at least, before leaving.

Besides, life in the palace had become—for Ryalla at least—a lot easier since Courteth's engagement. The princess spent a great deal of time with Martis, and even when she was in the palace, there was the quiet understanding that Courteth no longer had complete control over her slave. She yelled occasionally, but she never punished. Both of them knew that

if Courteth had ordered Ryalla to do something she didn't want to do, the slave would refuse. Apparently, Courteth didn't want to face that confrontation, so she simply left Ryalla alone.

Ryalla often found herself gazing out the window at the columned library building. Jerick had been given free entrance to the place; why didn't she have the same privilege? Were they so different? Her mind hungered for further works to read. She tried for weeks to come up with a way to get more books.

When she found the solution, it came in a very unlikely form. She had seen him before—he had apparently gained housing in the palace itself, more out of pity than need. His Ka refused to have anything to do with him, and as a nobleman he was above labor. Jerick had spoken often of the strange man named Torell, a scholar who, from what Ryalla could tell, had become the fool of the Meleran court. Part of the reason behind the mockery was the slight rural accent he had picked up while teaching all those years in Jerick's home town. The accent was slowly disappearing—his vocabulary was becoming more in line with court standard—but he still had a habit of dropping the last half of his “the”s and “to”s.

Ryalla waited patiently for her opportunity. It came three weeks after Vendavious's departure. Torell was sitting in the small garden behind the palace, a place that had become almost deserted now that Martis and Yoharn no longer used it for sparring practice. The man sat melancholily on a short bench—in the background Ryalla could hear the gurgling of the stream that had nearly claimed her life.

Ryalla took a deep breath, gathering her determination. She had never approached a nobleman she didn't know. Then, she walked up to Torell, and spoke directly to him—a forbidden act, unless she was addressed first. “I can help you, my lord,” she declared.

The man looked up, surprised, then angered. Ryalla's eyes tried to dart away and look down at the ground, but she held them steady.

“You're t'princess's slave girl,” Torell said. “Go away—leave me be.”

“I can help you,” Ryalla repeated, trying to remember the words she had prepared. Her mind was blank.

“Bah!” Torell cursed. “You are an insolent one, aren't you? If you were in one of *my* classes I'd see you learned some decent respect for nobles.”

There was an odd longing in his voice as he said the word “classes,” an emotion Ryalla must have misunderstood. From everything Jerick said, this Torell absolutely loathed teaching—especially the children of peasants.

“My lord, I . . .” Ryalla trailed off, feeling her resolve break. *What am I doing?*

"Leave me be," the man spat, turning away from her as if to rise.

"But Master Torell," Ryalla begged. "Please, hear me."

The words made him stop, turning back to her. Then he sighed, waving for her to speak. "What is it?" he asked.

"I was the one who trained Jerick to speak like a nobleman," Ryalla explained. It was only half-true—Jerick had learned mostly from Frost, but Ryalla had been the one with whom he practiced. "I coached him. You heard him before he left—there was no trace of his village accent."

"And what does this have t'do with me?" Torell asked intolerantly.

"Master Torell," Ryalla said quietly. "You need to do the same thing. You probably don't want to hear it from a slave, but you know you won't get any respect from the court until you can lose that accent." Then, her declaration made, Ryalla cringed, preparing herself to be chastised for speaking so boldly to a noble.

No retribution came. Instead, Torell sat silently, pulling at the hairs of his long fake Antoli. "What do you propose, girl?" he finally asked.

Ryalla blinked in surprise. What exactly was she proposing? At first, she had simply intended to ask him to get books for her from the library. But he was a scholar who had spent years teaching peasants. Surely a slave wouldn't be that much of a change.

"I want you to teach me," Ryalla said. "I will show you how to speak like a nobleman again, and you will give me an education."

"Teaching slaves is forbidden," Torell said. His voice was a grumble, but it didn't seem completely unyielding.

"I know," Ryalla said quickly. "But I've already learned so much—Master Vendavious was teaching me. Or, at least, in a way."

"Vendavious?" Torell asked, his head rising. "You were taught by Vendavious?"

"Yes," Ryalla said. "For over a year before he left."

Torell smiled slightly. "It was good t'see t'old man again," he mumbled. "If only for a short while. He taught me back at t'Acadius. I . . ." then he stopped, as if realizing for the first time that he was babbling to a slave. "Well, you are fortunate, girl," Torell finally declared. "I appear t'have a little bit of spare time; I could, perhaps, see my way t'taking a new student. You'll have t'be disciplined, of course."

"Yes, Master Torell," Ryalla said immediately.

"And," Torell added in a subdued tone. "I will humor you on t'matter of . . . t'accent coaching. Only for t'express purpose of your education, of course. Perhaps pretending to teach me will help your own language skills."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BAT'CHOR EYED THE BOAT UNCOMFORTABLY. "HE EES SMALL."

Topaz snorted, walking over the plank and onto the deck. "It isn't like we're traveling all the way to Tzendor, Bat'Chor," the jesk noted. "Trexandos is close enough that you could swim there."

"Kaz azeel ha'hellor," Bat'Chor mumbled, looking at the tiny boat. Its sail was nearly as large as its hull, and even the slight waves at the dock seemed nearly strong enough to capsize it.

"I may be a 'foolish and careless nonbeliever,'" Topaz replied to Bat'Chor's muttered comment, "but at least I'm not superstitious. Come on, get in the boat."

Trying not to look down, Bat'Chor inched his way across the plank and stepped into the boat. As he had feared, it rocked uncertainly beneath his weight. He sat as quickly as possible, muttering a quiet prayer to the True God. Unfortunately, he knew that the True God would be slow to listen—they both knew that Bat'Chor should have enough sense to stay out of boats.

"What would your great ancestor say if he saw you now?" Topaz asked disdainfully as he stowed their gear underneath one of the seats.

"He would call me an eediot," Bat'Chor replied. "And tell me I deserved my fate. There ees a reason why the Great 'Cheru Tar never conquered Trexandos."

Topaz just shook his head, untying the moorings and releasing the boat. "Wait!" Bat'Chor said with alarm. "What about the sailors?"

Topaz began to fool with the riggings. “Why pay sailors when I can do just fine on my own?”

Bat’Chor felt himself grow pale. “By ’Cheru Tar! I’m getting off.”

“Sit still, Bat’Chor,” Topaz said tolerantly. “I know what I’m doing.”

Topaz pushed off, leaving Bat’Chor with no choice. However, Bat’Chor felt himself calm as the boat drifted into the sea. Topaz worked the ropes and boom with a familiarity that bespoke mastery. Soon they were on their way, guided by a faint set of peaks on the horizon—a chain of small, uninhabited islands that eventually led to Trexandos.

The sea was calm, a sure blessing from the True God, but such also meant that there wasn’t much wind. The trip to Trexandos usually took several hours, and it appeared that this journey might take even longer. Bat’Chor felt his anxiety melt away as they moved—there was something settling about the sight of a flat ocean, extending in all directions like an enormous crystalline field. So innocent, but so deadly. Everyone knew Ke’Chan sank like rocks.

Eventually, Bat’Chor’s thoughts turned from contemplations of a voiceless death in the deep to more realistic matters.

“Cephandrius,” he asked after they had been sailing for some time, “why do you take me weeth you on these treeps?”

The question caught Topaz off guard, bringing him out of his contemplations.

“What was that, Bat’Chor?” the jesk asked from his place near the back of the boat.

Bat’Chor turned. “Why bring me? What ees the thing you expect me to do? You say you want the protection of my sword, but we both know that there ees no one more capable of protecting heemself than you.”

Topaz was silent for a moment, pulling slightly on the riggings held loosely in his fingers. “If all I wanted was a person to hit my enemies, Bat’Chor, I could hire someone with more experience—and less of a tendency to talk back—than yourself.”

“Why, then?” Bat’Chor demanded.

Topaz shrugged. “Companionship.”

“Someone to witness your clever schemes, you mean,” Bat’Chor returned.

Topaz smirked—they both knew the jibe held as much truth as falsehood. “Bat’Chor, I need someone who is more than just a sword. I need to make certain there is someone else who knows what I know, who understands the need to prepare, even if we don’t exactly know what we’re preparing for. It may sound like a cliché, but there needs to be two of us just in case something happens to me.”

"But I don't understand, Topaz," Bat'Chor confessed. "I don't know what ees going on."

Topaz shook his head. "Neither do I. I thought I'd made that clear. You know about the stories; you know about the dark god, and you know about the hero. Honestly, that is all I've been able to figure out. For all my mystery and melodrama, that's all there is to it."

Bat'Chor paused, considering for a moment. Topaz was right; he did understand. He didn't have the vision, however—he didn't sense why these things were important. But he knew Topaz did, and that was enough.

"Then why me?" Bat'Chor finally asked. "You said yourself you could have found a more experienced soldier—you probably could have found a better assestant as well. You remember that treep we took before, the one to the temple in Tzendor? What deed I do? Nothing. You let me heet a guard and break a chest, but in the end you deed everything eemportant."

"You learned, Bat'Chor," Topaz replied, letting go of the riggings as the wind finally fell completely still, leaving them to drift. They had oars, but Topaz didn't appear to be in any hurry to get them out.

"What deed I learn? How to steel from the Tzends?"

"No," Topaz corrected. "You learned to open your mind. Very few people in this world can do that—they are convinced that society is stagnant. Nothing can change to them, whether it be castes, people, or simply the way the world is perceived. I needed a partner who could watch me shatter a wall with microkinesis and accept what he saw. More importantly, I needed a friend who could step into the temple of a pagan god, no matter what his cultural taboos."

Bat'Chor frowned. "You needed someone who could deny hees own relegion?"

Topaz caught Bat'Chor's eyes, then slowly shook his head. "No, Bat'Chor," he said, his voice quiet but intense. "Your faith is perhaps your most important asset. You don't know what all these years of studying legends and myths has done to me. I . . . don't think I can believe anymore. I have seen through so much of what people teach as religion that I've lost my capacity to believe in the Lords, or 'Cheru Tar, or anything. That scares me. I need your strength, your faith, because I don't have one of my own."

Bat'Chor didn't respond. He had never seen such . . . weakness before in Topaz. The jesk was usually so incorrigibly confident, and not infrequently arrogant.

Topaz looked up, his eyes falling on the limp sail. He slowly pulled the glove off his left hand, then raised it into the air, palm forward. Even in

the brightness of day, Bat'Chor thought he could see the enormous ring begin to pulse. Then the sail flapped slightly and puffed out, though Bat'Chor could feel no wind. The boat began to move—not quickly, but it did move.

"Gasses are much easier than solids," Topaz mumbled, almost to himself. "I wonder why that is. Is it because the Axi are moving so quickly already, making them easy to divert, or do they actually weigh less when they're a gas?"

The words made little sense to Bat'Chor. After a few minutes of being propelled by Topaz, the wind returned on its own, allowing the jesk to replace his glove. They both sat quietly for the remainder of the trip. Eventually, the tall spindly peak that was Trexandos rose before them. Bat'Chor could make out the spires and arches, all part of one massive city that was carved from the white rock of the peak itself. From a distance, the city looked more like one enormous castle than a collection of individual buildings, all of them rising up the slope until they met at the triangular Acadius, home of the library, at the top.

They settled into the dock, and Bat'Chor's earlier fears returned as he was forced to stand in the wobbling boat and step onto the wooden plank. Soon, however, he was free, and he turned to look expectantly at Topaz.

The jesk did not follow. He pulled out Bat'Chor's pack and stood, but did not step out of the boat.

"You're not coming," Bat'Chor realized.

Topaz smiled. "The fisherman who rented me this boat will be mighty unhappy if I don't have it back by the end of the day like I promised."

"What do you expect me to do?" Bat'Chor demanded.

Topaz shook his head. "You know what I know now, Bat'Chor. No more fetching papers or running errands. We have to find the name of that fifth god, and you can guess where it might be just as easily as I can."

"We go alone, then?"

Topaz nodded. "We have two continents to cover, my friend. We have to split up."

"Where should I start?"

"That depends," Topaz said with a shrug. "Which continent do you want?"

Bat'Chor paused for a moment then, with a sigh, he continued. "I weell take Tzendor," he said with an unenthusiastic tone.

"It will mean another boat ride," Topaz warned.

"Yes, but there are many Ke'Chan een Tzendor. I could move more easily than you."

Topaz nodded. "All right. Then I'll take Yolen. We need to find the other pieces of that altar—look for Dragonsteel patterns that match the letters on the list Frost gave us. There's a copy in your pack."

Bat'Chor nodded. "I weell start een Gvorn Du. I have heard many things about a necklace made of Dragonsteel kept there. Then perhaps to the capital, Sipan. If there ees Dragonsteel to be found, he weell probably be near Emperor Aronack."

Topaz nodded. "I have a few things I need to do—some people I need to be—for a little bit. Then . . ." he smiled faintly, "I think I'll go see what the Horwatchers have locked away in that fortress of theirs in Lallom. I've been trying to find a good excuse to sneak in there for years."

"I do not envy them," Bat'Chor said with a smile.

"Well you should," Topaz replied. "It isn't just anyone who merits a visit from the great Cephandrius Maxtori." Then, with a more serious tone, he continued. "The Acadius will provide you with supplies and a boat, my friend. May the True God give you success."

Bat'Chor smiled. "He weell care for us both."

Topaz smiled, handing Bat'Chor the pack. Then, after clasping the Ke'Chan's shoulder in farewell, the jesk untied the mooring rope and turned to head back to sea. Bat'Chor stood for a long while, watching the boat disappear. Somehow, he knew he was going to wish for the days when his only purpose had been to hit things with a sword.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

DEATH. IT SURROUNDED HIM, REACHED FOR HIM, AND TOOK HIS FRIENDS. He could hear himself screaming as the arrows fell, killing the defenseless men around him. Their blood fell like rain, pooling and streaming until it poured off the sides of the massive plateau, disappearing into the chasm like scarlet waterfalls.

But the deaths were only the beginning. Horrors much more vibrant than simple corpses surrounded him. Nightmarish monsters that tore men to pieces, devouring them with greedy lust. At times, the dead rose up, staring with sightless eyes. Other times, men seemed to explode, sending out waves of bone and gore. Gaz screamed that they were only Sho Del mind tricks, but Jerick knew otherwise. They were real. It was all real. The death, the blood, and the Sho Del.

They rose up in front of him, their bone-white skin shining in the sunlight. He could see them clearly now, and his eyes ran across their sharp features, features that could almost have belonged to a man. A nose that was too pointed, a face that was too triangular, and eyes dark as a cavern far beneath the earth. As the demons approached, however, Jerick could see that he was wrong. The eyes weren't completely black—near the center, where a human iris would have been, was a ring of pure white. Eyes that would have better suited a reptile, rather than something bipedal.

The Sho Del fell on him, hacking at him with bright steel swords. Jerick yelled in terror, turning to the left, looking for help. He could see Frost there, being torn to pieces by four large serpentine monsters. Jerick shook his

head in horror, turning to the other side. Ryalla stood screaming, struggling as a Sho Del tossed her into the chasm. The sharp blades cut into Jerick's skin, attacking him over and over again. He caught sight of Topaz, his head being cut from its body by a Sho Del sword.

"You killed him," a voice said. Jerick looked up. Standing between two Sho Del, their swords bright with Jerick's blood, stood his father. The lumberman shook his head in disappointment. "You killed us all. You killed me."

"No!" Jerick denied.

Rin continued to shake his head, a look of disappointment on his face even as a Sho Del blade cut into his chest.

JERICK AWOKE. A MAN STOOD OVER HIM, SHAKING HIM LIGHTLY. THE weak light of dawn poured through the tent flap, and forms were rising around him, shaking their lethargic bodies.

"Keeg?" Jerick asked, blinking.

The man, really no more than a boy, smiled weakly. He claimed to be seventeen, but his face made him look as if he were years younger.

"Time t'be geffin', there," the boy said with his characteristic Jargish accent.

Jerick smiled briefly at the sound—he still hadn't quite gotten used to the dialect, even if most of the words were Meleran. The language had been twisted horribly by the Jargish. The syntax was odd, and there was so much inflection to the words that they were often hard to understand.

"I'm geffing," Jerick mumbled, using the Jargish word for "move." He pulled himself out of bed—a simple blanket set on the hard ground—stretching his muscles. He had slept poorly. Of course, he hadn't slept very well since he had entered the Rothanden valley. Nights in Fallamore were almost as hot and damp as the days, and Jerick found it almost impossible to sleep in such conditions. Since arriving at the war, however, things had gone a little better; pure exhaustion often overcame discomfort. Now if he could just find a way to get rid of the nightmares.

Except he knew that wouldn't be possible. Jerick slowly pulled on his clothing—a smelly shirt and trousers he knew he would never have even thought about wearing just a few months before, followed by his leather vest and short sword. The nightmares were only an extension of the horrors he faced every day. The death, fear, and suffering haunted him while he was awake—it only made sense that they would continue through the night.

Falling into line with the rest of the bridgemen, Jerick shuffled out of

the tent into the morning light. Bridge crews were too expendable, and too numerous, to deserve a permanent structure. Outside, Gaz waited, prepared to punish those who didn't move quickly enough.

The large man was not Ke'Chan, Jerick had discovered, though he was related to them. Gaz was from a land called Kaz'ch Tor, a remnant of the old Ke'Chan empire where some Ke'Chan warriors had settled down and intermarried with the Yolish people. The Kaz'ch considered themselves separate from the homeless Ke'Chan nation, a fact which, from what Jerick had been able to gather, suited the Ke'Chan just fine. The large merchants considered their cousins impure, both racially and doctrinally.

Jerick noticed Gaz's fist just before it hit the side of his head. Pain washed through his body like a sudden spark, and Jerick wavered slightly. He probably would have tumbled to the ground if Keeg hadn't steadied him.

"You thinking again, fick?" Gaz grumbled, using Fallin slang for peasant. The large Kaz'ch stuck his face directly against Jerick's. "You're paid to work, not think."

Jerick nodded humbly as his vision cleared. For some reason, out of all the hundreds of bridgemen, Gaz had singled out Jerick for punishment. It didn't seem rational that he would spend effort on one man when he was over so many, but Gaz nonetheless found time to keep an eye on Jerick. The large Kaz'ch claimed he didn't trust Jerick—didn't like the look in his eyes.

During his first few days in the war, Jerick had tried to stand up to the man, an attitude that had led to numerous beatings. Even worse, Gaz had insisted Jerick stand at the front of the bridge crew, rather than rotating with every skirmish. Jerick had learned quickly that where Gaz was concerned, one kept one's opinions to oneself.

The bridgemen fell into line, a few late-risers earning whacks from Gaz. The Kaz'ch was like nothing Jerick had ever experienced before. He wasn't a bully—or, at least, not like any bully Jerick had known. Bullies used their size to gain dominance over others. Gaz already had dominance over the bridgemen—total and complete dominance.

The man made it clear that his punishments were for the good of the army, for any man who wasn't willing to follow orders could cause the entire group to fail. The longer Jerick spent in the war, the more difficult it became for him to decide if Gaz was correct or not. On one side, he saw a powerful warrior picking on men who couldn't stand up to him. On the other side, he had seen entire bridge crews slaughtered by the Sho Del because they lacked coordination.

"Teams one, two, and three," Gaz barked, speaking from memory, like

he always did. Few soldiers, even the officers, were able to read written orders. "You are on latrine duty. Four, five, and six, you will work on bridges. Seven and eight will go gathering."

Gaz didn't ask if there were any questions. He simply stood expectantly as each crew leader led his men to the appropriate activity.

"All right, boys," Tenne, their team leader, announced. "You heard him. Let's go."

Bridge Four began to move, following Tenne to the bridgeyards. Jerick shuffled along in line, Keeg to his side. The boy had arrived only a few days before, and he still had the energy of a newcomer. It wouldn't last long.

For the most part, the camp was quiet—bridge crews rose earlier than anyone else. There were a few men visible outside of the large troop cabins that housed the warriors, men who were either on patrol or rising early. As they neared the bridgeyards, Keeg's eyes fell longingly on a pair of soldiers sparring with wooden swords and shields in the morning light.

"You thought they'd teach us that, didn't you?" Jerick asked quietly. Talking was allowed, as long as they didn't make a nuisance of themselves.

Startled, Keeg looked over at Jerick, then nodded guiltily. "Aye," he admitted. "I've long wantin' t'learn t'sword."

Jerick smiled knowingly. "I thought that too, before I came."

"Not for us," Keeg said with disappointment.

"No," Jerick agreed. It had taken Jerick weeks to abandon his dreams of obtaining quick glory on the battlefield. Even still, as they walked past the fighting men, he felt a stab of jealousy. That should have been him.

Except, now he knew the truth. Peasants could never be more than bridgemen, and bridgemen would never be trained to fight. The Eternal War wasn't like the battles he had read of in books, where thousands upon thousands of men had met to determine the fate of nations. The Eternal War was more delicate, an extended campaign that involved hundreds of small skirmishes but few extended battles. Most of the plateaus were small, fitting only a few hundred soldiers at a time. Therefore, those soldiers needed to be very highly-trained and very well-equipped.

Bridgemen, however, never crossed onto the battlefield—the soldiers protected the bridges from their side. Bridgemen didn't need to be well-trained or well-equipped, there just needed to be a lot of them, which there were. Training them was futile; not only did they rarely need the skills, their casualty rate was so high that teaching them would be about as wasteful as throwing money into the chasms. The only sort of training they received was

running—every day, whether they went on a run or not, they were forced to jog around the camp perimeter three times carrying a bridge.

And this was the situation in which Jerick found himself. He had considered running away, but where would he go? Pretend to be a scholar or a scribe? Surely someone would eventually discover his ruse. Even assuming he was able to find one of the fine-worked gold or silver scholar's castemarks, scribes were a very closed group. Eventually they would ask who trained him, and discover proof that he had never been to Trexandos.

He could return to Melerand, but that would not only require him to face Martis and Courteth, he would also have to admit how wrong he had been. He couldn't bring himself to do such a thing—not in front of the princess.

So, he struggled on, hoping for the same thing every bridgeman wanted, the one dream that kept them going in the face of such horrors. Any bridgeman who lasted a year would be made leader of his own crew, a rank that not only earned him more pay, but allowed him the privilege of always walking at the middle of the bridge—the most protected spot. Survive another year as crew leader, and he would be moved from the bridge crews entirely and made a runner or a watchman.

It wasn't much to hope for, especially for a boy who had once lived in the palace of a king. For most peasants, however, it was an absolute dream. Runners and watchmen were allowed to bring their families to the camp, and the pay they earned was a fortune when compared to a farmer's wages—or, rather, lack thereof.

"Jerick, you take the second squad and Gent, you take the third." Tenne's voice brought him out of his contemplations. They had arrived at the bridgeyards.

"Right," Jerick said with a nod, gesturing for Keeg and six other men to follow him. After just a couple of months in the field, Jerick was already one of the most experienced members of the bridge crew. He felt little pride at the distinction—it only meant he had lived longer than the others.

Ske company, named after the third letter of the Fallin alphabet, was reputed to be the unluckiest company in General Demetris's camp, and Jerick's bridge crew the least lucky in the company. It had certainly lived up to its reputation. During Jerick's time in the war, the crew had been decimated on four separate occasions. Rarely a battle went by that they didn't lose at least two or three men to Sho Del arrows. In fact, the only man Jerick remembered from his first day was Tenne, the crew leader.

"All right, men," Jerick said, nodding to the scattering of planks. "You know what to do."

The men nodded, moving with dull eyes to begin working. Dragonsteel battles occurred infrequently, only about one a day. During their off time, however, the bridgemen were never allowed to relax. They were used to keeping the camp running, doing menial labor such as cleaning, constructing buildings, and building replacement bridges. Whenever possible, the Sho Del knocked their opponents' bridges into the chasms—at times, it seemed to Jerick almost as if they lost more bridges than they did bridgemen.

Jerick knelt down beside Keeg, pounding nails into the wood. The camp engineers kept careful watch on the bridgemen, setting them to work at tasks that required little skill or training. The bridge work didn't go as quickly as it could have had all the participants known exactly what they were doing, but it all came back to the training factor. Why teach a man to build bridges when he would likely be dead tomorrow?

"Thinkin' there'in last til a year?" Keeg asked, pounding nails with a smirk that was almost contented.

Jerick shrugged. "Either that or I'll be killed," he mumbled. Then he paused—that wasn't what the boy needed to hear. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I'll last, Keeg. Of course I will."

Keeg smiled. "I'in too, there. I'in wantin' t'be long best warrior in camp."

Jerick felt himself smile back, but as he did so the memories surfaced. Memories of men dying, one after another. Why did he bother to learn their names? No one lived; the Sho Del killed them all.

With that thought in his mind, he heard the distinctive blare of the warning horn blast through the camp. Two short blasts, followed by a long one: the signal for Ske company. All three companies in the camp took turns going on runs, placing only one company on the Shattered Plains at any one time. Occasionally Dragonsteel would be discovered on two plateaus at nearly the same time, requiring two companies to move out.

"Come on!" Jerick called to his sub-crew as he saw Tenne's brown and gray-haired form motioning for them to gather. The nightmares from his sleep were pale competitors for what was about to occur.

"DOWN!" GAZ ORDERED.

Eight thunks could be heard as the bridge crews dropped their loads. Jerick jumped to the side, grabbing one of the steadying ropes as other bridgemen began to push. He leaned back with all his weight, adding his strength to

the other steadiers as they struggled to keep the far end of the bridge from sinking too low and toppling the entire construction into the chasm. Jerick had seen such a thing happen before, though never to his crew.

The edge of the bridge plunked into place, and the bridgemen quickly dodged out of the way. A few seconds later the warriors were across, forming a protective wall around the small rock basin at the center of the plateau. Jerick sat down with a sigh, looking around at the rest of the crew. Most of them had looks of exhausted relief on their faces—this time the humans had arrived at the plateau first. There had been no hail of arrows to meet them, no slaughter of bridgemen. Their part in the battle had been completed without casualty.

Keeg groaned next to him, sweat pouring down his face. Jerick smiled to himself, remembering his first week as a bridgeman. Even the Fallin Emperor wouldn't have been able to pay him enough to go back and do it over again. Though he had never really grown used to carrying the horrible weight of the bridge, over the months his muscles had grown strong and his body firm. He was still tired after a Dragonsteel run, but not so exhausted he couldn't move.

Oddly, after just a moment of sitting, Jerick heard a sound from Keeg that wasn't a groan of exhaustion. It sounded more like . . . awe.

"Jerick, be lookin' at that, there," the boy said, his fatigue forgotten, replaced by excitement.

Jerick followed the boy's gesture, looking high in the sky. There, flying just below the clouds, was a dark winged silhouette.

"By the Lords!" Jerick mumbled, rising to his feet to stare into the sky. "What is it?"

"So the rumors are true," a third voice mumbled. Jerick turned to the side, his eyes falling on Tenne, Bridge Four's grizzled leader. Tenne was old for a warrior, perhaps in his late thirties, and he had skin almost as tan as his brown hair. He was missing several teeth, and his face was littered with scars. He was a harsh man, but not unkind.

"Rumors, Tenne?" Jerick asked.

"About him," Tenne said, nodding toward the form high in the sky. "Drephrast, king of the dragons and lord of the Sho Del. The stories say he used to watch over the Shattered Plains, but stopped appearing decades ago. It appears that he's returned."

"A dragon?" Jerick asked, turning back to watch the form. Vendavious had said that there was no such thing as dragons. But, it appeared that the scholar could be wrong. The form circled above them for a moment, too

far away to appear as more than a shadow, then disappeared, rising into the clouds. When Jerick looked down, the entire army—bridgemen and soldiers, had stopped their movements to stare up at the sky.

“Why did he return now?”

“You’re asking me?” Tenne said, laughing gruffly to himself. “I’m just a soldier, Jerick.”

The men stood for a moment watching, then, realizing they were about to have a battle, continued with a hurried gait. Fortunately, the Sho Del had yet to arrive, and the humans were able to take and surround the well unopposed. Now it would be the Sho Del who had to take up the offense.

“It’s a bad sign,” Tenne mumbled.

Jerick shrugged, taking a seat on the plateau. “I don’t know. It looks like the battle today will be an easy one.”

“True,” Tenne agreed, sitting beside Jerick. “We might even get a bonus.”

Jerick nodded. “Probably,” he agreed. Every time a company made a successful run, it meant a copper flep—the Fallin equivalent of a Meleran penning—for every bridgeman.

Tenne studied the soldiers, handing Jerick a waterskin. “Look there, Jerick,” he said, nodding to the side.

Jerick followed the older man’s gaze, barely making out a small group of warriors on the plateau next to their own. They weren’t Sho Del—their armor was human, and they bore the blue standard of Demetris’s Camp. Squinting, Jerick could make out a tall form standing at the front of the group.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“The general, I’d guess,” Tenne replied.

“Demetris?” Jerick asked with surprise. Then, looking more closely, he realized he had made a mistake. The figure at the front wasn’t a tall man, it was a short man standing on several boxes. “So it is,” he agreed.

“Wonder what he’s up to,” Tenne mumbled, accepting the waterskin back and squirting himself a mouthful.

“Watching us, I’d guess,” Jerick said. “That plateau is far enough away that he’ll be safe from the battle.”

“Probably,” Tenne agreed.

Jerick snorted quietly to himself. “It almost makes me wish we hadn’t had such an easy time of it,” he mumbled, studying the diminutive form. “Perhaps if the general actually saw what his bridge crews go through, he’d find a better way to protect us.”

Tenne grunted in disagreement. “I doubt it,” he grumbled. “He sees the

numbers, Jerick. He knows what we go through. The only thing that man cares about is the Dragonsteel we bring in.”

“What about the Sho Del?” Jerick objected.

“That’s all they care about too,” Tenne said. “They could get through if they wanted. The camps are too disjointed to repel a determined offense. The Sho Del don’t want our land, they just want the Dragonsteel. They may be demons, but they share one trait with the rest of us. Greed.”

Jerick rubbed his chin, feeling the whiskers there. He couldn’t even remember when he had started growing a proper beard—back in the palace he hadn’t been able to grow anything but fuzz. Tenne’s words had an uncomfortable truth to them. One of the reasons he had convinced himself to stay in the war was because he believed it was necessary, that he could protect his father and the rest of Yolen by keeping the Sho Del out. However, Tenne was right—the Sho Del could probably break through the camps if they wanted to.

“I don’t know, Tenne,” Jerick mused, turning his head from Demetris to the Ske company warriors on the plateau just beyond the bridges. They were fidgeting uncomfortably, waiting in anticipation of the Sho Del’s arrival. Perhaps the demons wouldn’t arrive. Such an event was unlikely; in all Jerick’s months at the war, never once had he seen a well harvested without a battle.

Unconsciously, Jerick’s eyes sought out the well itself, even though he knew he wouldn’t be able to see it through the warriors. He had seen plenty of them, however—there was one at the center of every plateau. Turning, he caught sight of the one on his own plateau. It looked somewhat like a tub, a large round cup that rose a few feet out of the ground. The one on his plateau was brown, just like the rest of the ground, but he knew the one the warriors were protecting would be dark black, an indication that liquid Dragonsteel would soon seep up into its basin.

Other than the raised wells, the plateaus were all perfectly flat, and generally the same height. Their surfaces were slick and dry, unadorned save for the occasional white boulder. There were a few of the boulders on every plateau, their white providing quite a contrast to the dun earth beneath. They reminded Jerick of Melerand; there had been similar strains of rock near his home.

“You don’t belong here, Jerick,” Tenne said quietly beside him.

Jerick turned with a confused look. “What was that, Tenne?”

“You, Jerick,” the older man said, his eyes staring out across the plateau. “You don’t belong in this war—or, at least, you shouldn’t be a bridgeman.”

"Why not?" Jerick asked slowly.

Tenne shook his head. "You're too poised, too confident. You aren't a peasant, no matter what that castemark says. The other men, they look up to you, even though you're nothing more than a lad."

"I've been here for a while," Jerick defended.

"True," Tenne agreed. "But I've seen men much older last much longer without earning the respect you have. The men don't look at you and see a boy, they look at you and see a leader."

"I'm just a lumberman."

"I've never met a lumberman who could speak Fallin before," Tenne noted.

"How many lumbermen have you met?" Jerick asked pointedly.

Tenne smirked. "You see? You say clever things like that, Jerick. You think like a noble. You're a waste, dying here with the rest of us."

Jerick didn't respond for a moment. "Why did you come to the war, Tenne?"

The older man looked surprised at this comment. Then, he just shrugged. "Greed," he finally said.

"I find that hard to believe," Jerick replied.

Tenne sighed, leaning back. "My son did something very foolish, Jerick; got himself made a slave. A farmer can't earn enough to buy a man's freedom, so I came here."

Jerick nodded, opening his mouth to respond, but Tenne cut him off.

"Here they come," the grizzled man noted.

Jerick looked up. Sure enough, the Sho Del had arrived. He could see their bone-white faces approaching on the plateau beyond the one the warriors held, and soon arrows began to fall on both sides. As the demons reached the edge, they began to jump, sailing over the twenty-five foot gorge to land on the contested plateau. They needed neither bridges nor bridgemen.

All the warriors had to do was hold out until the Dragonsteel appeared, then they could collect the prize and retreat across the bridges. The Sho Del rarely gave chase, for they knew that once the Dragonsteel was in human hands, it was very difficult to retrieve—Sho Del legs could jump far, but they could not keep up with a galloping chariot. Couriers waited on every plateau leading back to the camp, ready to accept a thrown vial of Dragonsteel should the Sho Del decide to try and follow.

Jerick and the other bridgemen watched the battle with strangely uninvolved eyes. It was odd, seeing men fight and die just a few feet away

but knowing that he himself was in no danger. Jerick couldn't feel quite as detached as the rest of the bridgemen, with their tired eyes and uncaring faces. The horrors of what he had experienced over the last few months were too strong, too vibrant, to forget simply because this time he wasn't personally in danger. Watching the soldiers fight, the Sho Del throwing horrible visions at them, made Jerick shiver with dread. *I will never last two years like this*, he realized.

"By the Lords, have a look at that," Tenne mumbled from beside him.

"What?" Jerick asked, glad of any distraction that took his mind off of the battle.

"Look over there," Tenne said, pointing at General Demetris's plateau. A powerful-looking figure in white and gold was approaching Demetris, followed by a file of tan-clothed warriors.

"It's General Ki Tzern," Tenne said with awe.

"Really?" Jerick asked with interest, looking closely at the form. Tzern rode a magnificent horse like Sir Hsor had back in Melerand—one of the amazing Tzend beasts that was capable of carrying a man on its back. It towered over even the chariot horses used in Demetris's army. Ki Tzern was a tall man, though Jerick had always heard that Tzends were a short people.

The general dropped off his horse and approached Demetris with a firm stance. Jerick had heard of Tzern; the Tzend was said to be the most successful general in all of the Eternal War.

"Ah, Jerick," Tenne said wistfully. "How many times have you wished you'd gone to that man's camp for recruitment instead of here? They say his companies almost never have casualties, even bridgemen."

Jerick snorted. "I wouldn't believe it, Tenne. Like you Fallins say—your tea never tastes as good as your friend's."

"Ah, but wouldn't it be nice if the stories were true?" he asked. "The most successful camp, and the one with the fewest deaths? They say his warriors are immune to the Sho Del illusions. They even say he has men on his side who can make illusions of their own."

"I doubt the Emperor would stand for the use of demonic magic, even if it did bring him Dragonsteel," Jerick contested.

"Probably true," Tenne agreed. "What do you suppose he's doing over there?"

Jerick shrugged. "I don't know. Having tea with Demetris?"

Tenne snorted. "I hope so. Maybe if Demetris associates with Tzern enough, some of the Tzend's humanity will rub off on him. The hardest

thing about this war, Jerick, is knowing your leaders are nearly as monstrous as the devils we're fighting."

"Hush, Tenne," Jerick said, looking around for Gaz. If the Kaz'ch heard such talk, it would mean serious retribution.

"I'll say what I want to," Tenne grumbled sullenly, though he did lower his voice.

The sound of galloping drew Jerick's attention back to the battle in front of them. One charioteer was riding madly for the bridges, the rest of the company retreating more slowly behind. In the charioteer's hand was a steel container, and inside of that Jerick knew there would be a small glass vial. Dragonsteel, which would remain in liquid form until some fortunate buyer touched it and gave it shape with his mind, determining the form the metal would hold for eternity.

"Let's move!" Gaz bellowed, ordering the bridgemen into place for the trek home.

DEMETRIS STOOD WATCHING THE BATTLE'S END, A SLIGHT SMILE ON HIS lips. Earlier, when he had seen the dragon, he had been angry. Others had told him that the cursed creature had returned, but Demetris hadn't believed them. Dragons were supposed to be superstitious tales. But now he had seen it himself—he would look foolish for punishing the men who had claimed to have seen it before.

But, fortunately, Ki Tzern had arrived. Not that Demetris liked the Tzend, quite the opposite. Tzern's arrival, however, had given Demetris a chance to show how well his armies were doing. His army had won this battle—they had even managed to do it with minor losses. Demetris knew the victory would bring envy to the Ki Tzern's heart.

"Well fought," Ki Tzern said with mock-humility.

Oh, you can't fool me, Tzern, Demetris thought to himself with glee. *I know how you're really feeling. I know the resentment, the jealousy, the hate. I have felt them all too often.*

The thing Demetris hated most about Ki Tzern was his height. Normally, a single box allowed Demetris to stand even with other men, and a second box allowed him to tower over them. Tzern, however, was tall enough that two boxes only gave Demetris a few inches advantage. What's more, the Tzend had a stature so militaristically sharp that Demetris felt short no matter how high he stood. It was frustrating, and he knew that Tzern enjoyed his discomfort.

"They did passably well," Demetris said, watching the men retreat across the bridges.

"Your bridge crews are remarkably efficient," Tzern said, his Tzendish accent making each word sound staccato.

Demetris scanned the crews, searching for the flaw Tzern must have noticed. The comment was obviously meant sarcastically, but how? Tzern's own crews couldn't possibly move faster than Demetris's. When it came to peasants, a carefully cultivated sense of terror was always the best motivation.

Tzern turned away from the battle. "I came to inform you, Demetris, of a new bridge mechanism I have designed."

A new bridge? Demetris scoffed. *Impossible. I know what you're doing, Tzern. You seek to trap me, to make me think you have a technology I do not. It will not work.*

Tzern continued. "I have noticed the casualties amongst your bridge crews. I think this new design will cut down on your losses."

Ah, so that's it, Demetris realized. He's come to plead for me to stop making him look bad. He knows that my aggressive tactics will soon overcome, and then I will take his precious place as first general.

"I don't think that will be necessary, Tzern," Demetris said with a smile.

Ki Tzern's brow wrinkled with confusion.

Yes, you weren't expecting me to see through your scheme, were you?

"At least let me send you the plans, Demetris," Tzern said.

Demetris frowned. A clever comment—Tzern was always lording over the other generals, seeking to gain prestige by implying he could read. Demetris knew better. The man carried around books, as if he were some sort of scholar, but no general had time for such foolishness. It was a trick, one Demetris had never been able to prove.

"Not necessary, Tzern," Demetris said, hopping off of his boxes and wandering toward his chariot.

"All right, Demetris," Tzern said, his voice sounding displeased.

The Tzend's pet warriors, a squadron of men dressed in tan uniforms, parted as Demetris waved them out of his way. Demetris climbed into his chariot.

"I should let you know, Tzern," he said, turning to regard the team of warriors, "I've let the emperor know about your devil-warriors. I doubt he will be pleased."

Tzern's face grew dark. "I don't know what you're talking about, Demetris."

Demetris snorted, shooting a look at the warriors in tan. "I've heard about these men, Tzend. I know that you're teaching them demon Sho Del magic."

"In Tzendor we teach our men to focus their minds, Demetris," Tzern said stiffly. "There is nothing magical about it. A man who controls his thoughts cannot be fooled by Sho Del illusions. That doesn't make him a demon."

"Claim what you want, Tzern," Demetris said lightly, nodding for his honor guard to mount. "We'll just see what the emperor has to say."

At this, Tzern just shook his head, smiling slightly. "You know your Fallin Emperor has no jurisdiction over Tzend troops, Demetris. I doubt he would say anything even if we were using magic—he needs the Holy Tzend Armies far too much to risk offending us."

Demetris shook his head slightly. *He seems so confident. Could he have bribed one of the Emperor's advisors? But which one?*

Mulling over this new information, Demetris signaled his men and rode away, leaving the Tzend and his devil-warriors behind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

GROW!

The stubborn plants remained still. There wasn't even enough of a breeze to rustle the leaves, so she couldn't delude herself into thinking that maybe they had responded a little bit. Of course, Ryalla hadn't really expected them to do what she commanded. Topaz was capable of such power, and maybe even Jerick, but they were special.

Ryalla turned away from the tree, walking in the cool autumn daylight. One side benefit of her mistress's engagement was that it gave Ryalla an excuse to visit Strafen's Kaden, and therefore her brother. Martis and Courteth sometimes exchanged messages—a novelty enhanced by the fact that both of them could read. The natural carrier for said messages was Ryalla.

She approached the Kaden with a happy step. Her lessons with Master Torell were going very well—she didn't know how competent the man really was, but underneath his grouchiness he actually seemed to enjoy teaching. After just three months of practice he had managed to lose the last hints of his commoner's accent—something Ryalla had to admit probably would have happened with or without her help. Still, the older man had appreciated her tutelage. More excitingly, he continued Ryalla's lessons, even though his own were finished.

It was amazing how much difference a live teacher made. Before, she had relied on Courteth and—more often—Jerick's commentary on the classes. Torell's instruction was so much more useful. He taught her tricks for memorizing huge blocks of text, he told her of great debates he had

heard while studying in Trexandos, and he watched her handwriting and offered suggestions.

Through all of this, of course, he complained that she was absolutely hopeless and that he was wasting his time. Such didn't bother Ryalla—no one ever complimented a slave; they only gave varying levels of rebuke. Ryalla had learned very early in life to distinguish between true insults and veiled compliments. In this light, most of Torell's gruffly mumbled complaints were actually positive.

Besides, she could tell he was impressed with her. Years of suffering Courteth's punishments had taught Ryalla how to sit perfectly still and straight-backed. Her natural inclination as a slave made her slow to ask questions, instead encouraging her to find her own answers. The things she couldn't figure out on her own she wrote down in formal essay questioning form and gave to Torell, a method that pleased him.

Today's lesson would come late in the day, and Ryalla knew she had to hurry if she were going to have time to visit her brother. Torell had given her something titled the *Treatise Axios*, and told her to have it read by tomorrow. If she hadn't at least started it by the time of the evening's lesson—always held in Torell's carefully-locked quarters—then Master would be disappointed in her.

Strafen's Kaden was different than most of the buildings in Lakdon. It didn't follow the same blockish stone construction, but instead was crafted of wood. Ryalla had always thought it looked out of place. She hurried to the side of the building, going in the servants' entrance, and quickly made her way through the hallways.

Strafen's Kaden was a subdued place. The servants moved about quietly with downcast eyes, rarely speaking. The atmosphere always chilled Ryalla, making her eager to complete her task and return to the palace's more cheerful halls. She moved quickly, searching for Martis.

Usually she found him in the receiving room, a chamber structured something like a throne room. However, when she peeked into the room, she found it empty. So instead she headed toward the study. If Martis wasn't there, then she would ask one of the servants if they knew—an option she avoided whenever possible. If the air of Strafen's palace was uncomfortable, then speaking with the hollow-eyed servants was downright painful.

Fortunately, it appeared as if she were in luck. Through the open study door she could see a large form standing near the front of the room. She entered the room quietly, intending to stand humbly at the back, near

the doorway, until Martis noticed her. Then, however, she froze. She had been mistaken—the form before her wasn't Martis at all, but his father.

A shiver passed over Ryalla, and she immediately pressed herself up against the back wall, willing the Kalord not to see her. Kalord Strafen had always frightened her, and over the last few months the feeling had only gotten worse.

The Kalord rarely went out, but remained in his Kaden like an unseen specter. The entire city spoke of him in hushed tones, whispering to one another of the changes that had overcome the large man. He had lost a frightening amount of weight, which was probably the reason Ryalla had mistaken him for Martis. Now, standing closer, she could see the hollow folds of skin hanging from the man's face and the way his fendove draped him like an oversized robe.

He was even thinner than Martis, and the power was gone from his face, replaced by a sad, sickly look. There were dark circles under his eyes, and the bottoms of his eyelids drooped, revealing the reddened skin underneath. Most notable was the bright crimson scar on his right cheek. It was shaped something like a star, and the rumors of how he had earned it were many—everything from a battle with a Sho Del assassin to a mistake falling down the stairs.

If he sees me, he'll hit me, Ryalla thought, her arms shaking. *Don't let him see me*. One thing about the Kalord hadn't changed—he was still as cruel, if not more so, to his servants and slaves as he had been before. As he turned his eyes across the room, however, they passed right over Ryalla, not even pausing on the place where she stood. Such was, of course, what Ryalla expected. People never saw servants unless they wanted to. Slowly she inched out of the room and back into the hallway, where she stood breathing deeply for a moment, recovering from her ordeal.

Eventually she began moving again, deciding to check one final place before resorting to inquiries. Martis's chambers were on the second floor. He had purportedly moved into his father's rooms after announcing the engagement, and it was expected that Strafen would officially grant his son the Ka title as soon as the marriage took place.

There was a servant standing attentively outside Martis's door—she was in luck. She nodded for the man to knock, then entered at Martis's command.

"A message from the princess, my lord," Ryalla said softly, her eyes downcast.

"Put it on the table," Martis said curtly. Ryalla looked up. The Kalord's

son stood near the room's large windows, a look of consternation of his face. In his hands he held a rolled sheet of parchment bearing a bright purple seal that had not been broken. Looking down again, Ryalla quickly moved to do as commanded, then scuttled out of the room.

STRAFEN'S STABLES WERE MASSIVE THINGS, NEARLY AS BIG AS THOSE OF the palace. Up until recently the Kalord had been very fond of chariot races, and was said to own the finest collection of horses and chariots in northern Yolen. His teams raced regularly in the Lakdon games, and won more often than not.

Such a vast number of horses required an almost equally large number of attendants—especially considering Strafen's tendency to render his own servants useless through beating. When he wasn't incapacitated, Ryalla's brother, Hert, was one of Strafen's best chariot drivers.

Today wasn't a race day, however, so Hert would likely be found in the stables themselves, grooming the horses or oiling the chariots. Ryalla walked into the dark box-like structure quickly—it would, out of necessity, be a short visit. As she entered, however, she noticed something strange—the stables seemed deserted. The dark building smelled strongly of hay and manure, and horses could be heard shuffling in their separate stalls. But there was no sign of human life anywhere.

Ryalla tried to yelp as the hands grabbed her, but one of them had been expertly placed over her mouth. The dim stables spun before her as the powerful arms easily pulled her small frame with them. She barely caught sight of a huddled circle of dark forms as her captor pulled her into one of the stables and threw her to the ground. Fright began to shake her body—what was going on?

"Wait," a familiar voice said quietly. "It's my sister."

Ryalla blinked, looking up at the circle of shadowed forms near the back of the stall. One of them detached itself from the gloom, his face half-revealed in the light. A harsh, square face with a short beard. Her brother.

"Wait here," he whispered back to the others. "This won't take long." With that, Hert pulled her to her feet roughly and led her back out of the stall.

It would have been harder to find two siblings more different. Hert's large frame towered over Ryalla, and their features were hardly similar. Where Ryalla had a thin, angular face to match her small frame, Hert had barely any neck and a strong body that lent itself well to controlling the reins of a racing chariot.

“Hert,” Ryalla said as they entered the main stables. “What was that?”

“Nothing,” her brother replied. “You shouldn’t come looking for me. This place is dangerous.”

“But I wanted to see you,” Ryalla protested weakly.

Hert snorted. He made no secret of the fact that he had little regard for their kinship. They had been apart since Ryalla was old enough to remember, and before the last few months they had rarely seen each other—except for the times when Ryalla was allowed to nurse him back to health following a beating.

Ryalla looked over Hert’s shoulder, back at the dark, apparently-empty stall that held the meeting of dark forms. “Hert, what . . . ?”

“I told you. Nothing.”

“But . . .”

“Ryalla, don’t get yourself into trouble,” Hert warned.

She sighed. “All right. Here, I brought you something. Some fruit.” She pulled a couple of withered apples from her pouch, holding them out.

Hert eyed the fruit—something rarely allowed to slaves. Torell had given them to her, claiming that they gave him mouth-sores, though really he had been rewarding her for a particularly good essay. Eventually, Hert accepted the gifts.

“You should go,” he said, turning back to the stall. Ryalla barely caught a glimpse of the ominous forms inside before Hert closed the door.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE BONES GLOWED SOFTLY IN THE TORCHLIGHT. THEY LAY IN HEAPS, blanketing one another, some held together limply by the remnants of decayed sinews and muscle, others scattered and disjointed. The torches seemed to shine mutely here, in the dark home of the dead—almost as if the light itself were afraid to look too closely at the corpses. Eyeholes remained black, their secrets held in the whispering winds that could be heard from far above.

The first time Jerick had been forced to come here, to the dark valleys between the plateaus, he had been terrified. The valleys were more like caves, dank and poorly lit—cracks that led deep into the earth. The walls were perfectly smooth, worn away by thousands of years of rainfall, and in some places they were so close together that Jerick could touch both sides at the same time.

The torchlight didn't seem to help very much. In fact, it added to the gloom. The weak light was just strong enough to give detail to the closest bones, to reveal laughing skulls and shattered bones without banishing the darkness. Beyond the torches' reach, the silhouettes of piled bones were visible, lining the makeshift pathway.

The bridgemen walked in a line, their feet squishing in the ever-present mud. It was always wet in the caverns. Every third man carried a torch. Jerick shuffled along with them, looking around with uninterested eyes. He had been terrified his first time, but now the piled corpses didn't bother

him at all. He had seen much, much worse. He had met men for the first time in the morning and held their dying bodies in his arms by noon, watching life gush crimson from their wounds, their ragged voices begging for him to do something. Even the camp was not safe. Disease was common; he had seen entire squads wiped out by it. In fact, he had been sick a dozen times himself.

Tenne called for them to stop, and the bridgemen slowly fanned out. The crack had widened here, and the path ended. Slowly, with tired arms, the men began to sift through the bodies, searching for weapons and armor that were still usable.

Jerick made his way to one of the cliff walls, kneeling beside a corpse. The skull was cracked badly, most of the bones were—a drop of several hundred feet had that effect on bodies. Jerick pushed the bones aside, feeling the man's clothing come apart in his hands. He had been human, Jerick guessed—not from the bones themselves, for the two races had surprisingly similar skeletons, but from the armor. It had been bronze. The fall, time, and damp humidity had not been kind. His sword appeared to have some salvageable metal left in it, so Jerick pulled it from the mud, shoved it in his sack, and moved on.

The salvaging was a relatively new idea in the Eternal War. As the demand for metals grew, new ways had to be found to get materials, no matter how gruesome the methods. Actually, most bridgemen looked forward to scavenging duty. While they were down at the bottom of the pits, they couldn't be summoned to go on Dragonsteel runs. It said something about a man's life when he felt lucky on the days he was allowed to pick through the half-rotting corpses of his fallen comrades.

Jerick's next victim was part of a group. A half-dozen corpses lay piled together, bones sticking in strange directions as if they were part of some odd carnival act. There was still a little flesh on them, and a rotting chunk of wood nearby told Jerick who these men had been. A bridge crew. Jerick moved on—the metal used in bridgemen short swords was of poor quality. What hadn't rusted away wouldn't be worth smelting down for reforging anyway.

As Jerick turned, his eyes fell on a set of bones slightly paler than those around it, the remnants of its foreign armor hanging limply. Jerick approached slowly. Sho Del corpses were extremely rare, though Jerick didn't know why. From watching up above, it appeared that just as many Sho Del were thrown into the chasms as men. Perhaps the demons came searching for

their fallen dead, though Jerick's mind rebelled at the thought. He couldn't associate such an apparently noble act with the monsters he had watched kill his companions for the last four months.

The skull was alarmingly similar to that of a man. The creature's bones were fractured, but not to the extent of the human skeletons around it. And Jerick was drawn to them. There was a power to the skeleton, and he felt his skin grow cold despite the heat. He wanted to reach out. He did reach out. To touch the bones, to feel the power.

Jerick snapped his hand back, jumping up so quickly he kicked a nearby skull, sending it skipping across the mud floor to smack into the far wall. Several heads looked up at the sound, then turned back to their work. Skitishness was common during scavenging hunts.

Jerick forced himself to reach out and retrieve the Sho Del's rusting steel blade. After that, he turned away from the bones, ignoring their demands. He would not give in. Magic was evil; it was of the Sho Del. He would not be associated with them. It was because of the Sho Del that he had lost Courteth. It was the Sho Del that had slaughtered his friends. It was the Sho Del that had killed his . . .

The dark cavern flashed suddenly as pain exploded in Jerick's head.

"Loafing again, fuck?" Gaz demanded, his voice echoing though the twisting cracks.

Jerick looked up with surprise. His torch lay sputtering next to the wall, and the other bridgemen had moved forward in the darkness, expanding the path as they went. What had happened? How long had Jerick just been standing there? Another blow from Gaz nearly dropped him to the ground. Jerick scrambled forward, moving to catch up to the rest of the group.

"Never mind, fuck," Gaz mumbled. "I've come to bring you all back up—Rai company just got called on a run, which means we have to be ready. Tell the rest of them to get moving."

JERICK STRUGGLED BACK INTO CAMP, DROPPING HIS BAG OF RUSTED SWORDS into the pile. Gaz had made him carry two other men's findings as punishment for laziness, and the trek up from the bottom of the Plains was a long one—they had to hike far enough out to reach a place where there was no Dragonsteel in the earth and erosion had formed the land into an incline. Jerick still wasn't accustomed to the Fallin heat, and only the thought of the food awaiting them back at their tents kept him from collapsing. As it was, the sudden release of his burden made him light-headed, and

he would have fallen to the ground had Tenne not steadied him. None of the other bridgemen even looked at him. They didn't want to be a part of his punishment—to them, Jerick's extra burden had only meant less for them to carry.

Gaz laughed loudly, nudging one of his friends and pointing as he noticed Jerick wobbling. Jerick shook his head, clearing his vision, then began to stumble after the other bridgemen as they made their way back to their tents.

"He didn't think you'd be able to do it," Tenne noted quietly, walking beside him.

Jerick looked up. "What?"

"Gaz," the older man replied, whistling slightly as he spoke the word—a result of his missing teeth. "Didn't you notice how forced his laugh was?"

"I was too busy keeping myself from falling over to notice much," Jerick confessed.

"You could probably take him, you know," the older man confided.

Jerick looked up in surprise. "Me?" he asked incredulously. "Gaz would mash me worse than those ficks at the bottom of the gorges. He's twice my size!"

"Lords, Jerick," Tenne said with a snort. "Have you looked at yourself lately? You're taller than Gaz, and you might not be as wide, but you're certainly stronger."

Jerick just shook his head, dismissing the argument, and Tenne let the matter drop. As they arrived at the tents, however, Jerick let himself ponder the question. Could he beat Gaz in a fight? Perhaps. The thing was, he didn't want to try.

He stood back, waiting as the others rushed greedily forward, accepting bowls of the white mushy substance considered fit food for the bridgemen. Jerick turned away from the scene, looking out across the camp. The longer he stayed, the more he realized the Eternal War was not what he had envisioned. At first he had only been forced to admit that his own duties would not be as glorious as he had dreamed, but he had retained his view of the war as a whole. Bridgemen were grunts, he told himself, but the rest of the warriors were noble.

He had been wrong again.

At first, he had been too enthralled with his own miseries to notice it. Now, however, the truth was becoming increasingly stark. The camp was not stocked with heroes, or even career soldiers. It was filled with bullies and miscreants.

True, they wore uniforms, some of them even kept clean. However, fights were common, and the officers were slow to stop them. Theft was so commonplace that most men had simply given up on saving their earnings, and immediately spent them on whores or saprye. Even as Jerick scanned the semi-permanent city, he saw some soldiers taunting a group of working bridgemen. The bridgemen, mostly peasants, rarely fought back—and when they did they were quickly overwhelmed by the superiorly-trained soldiers.

That was why he couldn't let his anger drive him to attack Gaz. He didn't want to be part of it—the entire camp, its ideals and its activities, sickened him. Every time he thought of punching the Kaz'ch sergeant, his mind's eye remembered the fighting that went on constantly around him, and his anger evaporated.

A sudden wail of dismay caused him to turn in alarm. Keeg, his youthful face dismayed, stumbled from his tent, tears openly running down his face. Several of the bridgemen looked up, but they immediately turned back to their meals.

"Its'in gone!" Keeg groaned, sliding to the ground.

"What's gone, Keeg?" Jerick asked, approaching.

The boy simply groaned in sorrow.

Jerick closed his eyes, shaking his head in frustration. "Keeg, I told you to send your earnings some place safe."

"Couriors'in costin' long too much," Keeg replied mutedly. "They'in want half t'earnings!"

"It's expensive," Jerick agreed. "But now you have nothing. You should have at least carried it with you."

"Its'in not fair," Keeg groaned. "T'Lords, they'in hate me, sureingly."

"They don't hate you, Keeg," Jerick said with a sigh. "They just . . ."

Jerick trailed off, looking up. Then he looked back at Keeg. The young man's eyes were closed, and he was shaking his head in denial. He heard it too—a scout's horse approaching from the Plateaus. The horn sounded a moment later.

"LORDS, IT'S GOING TO BE A BAD ONE!"

The voice belonged to Gevvane, a man who had been moved into their crew a month earlier after his own group was slaughtered.

"What do you see?" Tenne asked from his place at the middle of the bridge. Only those in front had any sort of view of what was approaching.

"The Sho Del!" Gevvane screamed back, horror in his voice. "They've already set in, surrounding the well. Lords, they're raising their bows!"

"Run!" Gaz's voice shouted to the bridge crews.

Jerick felt the men around him break into a jog. He was situated near the middle of the bridge this time, on the same side as Tenne. He felt himself grow sick as they moved, hearing men begin to scream from the bridge crews on either side of him. These kind of approaches only happened one time in ten, but when they did, it was a slaughter.

"Now is our chance, Tenne!" Jerick screamed against the terror rising in his chest.

He could feel the older man's hesitance in front of him.

Gevvane yelled in pain at the front, and the bridge rocked.

"Tenne!" Jerick pled.

"All right, men!" Tenne yelled, his voice ragged. "Do as the boy told you!"

Spurred by what they were facing, the bridgemen acted. They paused for a moment on the field, turning to the right. The motion brought Jerick's edge of the bridge closest to the plateau. He turned his head to look, then wished he hadn't. Two dozen Sho Del archers stood in ranks beyond the chasm, their expressionless white faces taking aim at floundering bridges, dropping bodies to the ground in heaps. Several archers were watching Jerick's group, pulling back their bows and finding Jerick in their sights.

The edge of the bridge dropped, tipping on its side. The motion was awkward—they hadn't had an opportunity to practice—and they nearly dropped the bridge in the process. However, it worked. Arrows smacked against the wood frame like angry hornets, trying to break through to the soft flesh beyond.

"All right, let's move!" Jerick ordered. The men began to shuffle forward as best they could. Holding the bridge at such an angle was difficult, and he had to lean over to move, but the structure provided a wall between them and the Sho Del. Tenne walked at the far end, watching carefully as they moved forward to keep them from falling into the chasm.

"Now!" Tenne said. Together, the bridgemen dropped the structure and took their familiar places, some pushing it across the chasm, others holding the far end up with the support ropes. A few seconds later, they were done.

Men collapsed around him as the warriors rushed across the bridge. Jerick remained standing, searching through the faces of his companions. "How many did we lose?"

The men looked around at one another. Several bore wounds from arrows that had passed too close, and one man was groaning with a shaft

in his arm, but no one was missing. Even Gevvane sat near the back of the group. The fallen man had stumbled after the rest of the crew, joining them when the bridge was in place. There was a bloodied bandage around his leg, but other than that he was fine.

"We didn't lose any," Tenne said with amazement, looking over the group. Bodies of bridgemen lay slumped across the plateau, but none of them were from Jerick's crew.

Jerick smiled in satisfaction—then Gaz's punch took him in the face, spinning him around with enough force that he lost his footing and tumbled to the hard, iron-like plateau surface.

"What in the name of Keth's bloody fist was that!" the sergeant bellowed.

Blood poured from Jerick's nose and the world shook around him. He tried to speak, choking on the blood pouring down the back of his throat.

"Wait, Gaz!" Tenne intervened. Jerick could vaguely see the older man's form moving to stop Gaz. He could also see the rest of the bridgemen backing away, turning their faces from Jerick. The very ones he had saved refused to stand beside him.

"I know who's responsible for this," the Kaz'ch mumbled as he pushed Tenne out of his way, reaching down to grab Jerick by the front of his leather vest. Jerick flailed, trying to get back on his feet as he felt the large Kaz'ch drag him across the ground. Toward the chasm.

"He'in saved us, there!" Keeg's voice objected in the background. Two of them, at least, would try to help him. Two out of twenty.

Jerick coughed, trying to reorient himself. His feet couldn't find purchase. "Gaz," he said, choking. "Gaz, it worked. No one in our crew died!"

They reached the edge of the chasm, and Jerick pulled at the large man's arm. He tensed his body. When the Kaz'ch tried to throw him over, Jerick would shift his weight and drive his fist in the back of the man's head. He would not let him . . .

Gaz didn't toss him over the side. Instead, he pulled Jerick up and turned him to face the battle on the other plateau. "Look, boy," he ordered.

Jerick looked, feeling blood drip from his chin. The men had attacked their enemies on two sides in an attempt to push the Sho Del back from the well. The maneuver hadn't worked. The Sho Del had turned, flanking both groups of warriors and pushing them back toward the edges of the plateau. Only then did Jerick notice a third group of men, their ranks decimated, completely surrounded by white-faced warriors. It was the crew that had crossed Jerick's bridge. The human attack hadn't been meant to come at the

Sho Del from two different sides, it had been intended to be one coordinated strike.

"There's a reason the bridge crews move like they do, boy," Gaz growled, dropping him next to the chasm's edge. "They have to arrive at the chasm in unison. When the other crews saw what you were doing, they paused, and were slaughtered, and the warriors all arrived on the plateau at different times. You may have saved a half dozen bridgemen, but you've lost us the battle."

Jerick slumped down, watching the Sho Del cut through their warriors, as many men as possible moving to retreat back across the bridges. "I . . ." Jerick trailed off, but Gaz had left.

AS A RESULT OF THEIR DECISION TO LISTEN TO JERICK, TENNE'S CREW WAS given latrine duty for the next month. News of what had happened moved quickly through the camp, and the team became a constant butt of jokes, pranks, and abuses. The crew, of course, blamed Jerick for the treatment.

Until that month, Jerick had never in his life wished he were dead. Whenever there was a grisly chore to be done, it was given to Jerick. Whenever a foot could be placed to bring him to the ground, it was done. He was dragged from his tent on four separate occasions and beaten by warriors who had lost friends in the failed Dragonsteel run, and none of the bridge crew voiced a word of objection—or even came looking for him. Each time, he somehow found a way to crawl back to his tent, and each morning afterward he had received no sympathy from the others—just an increase in his workload.

Young, idealistic Keeg lost the lively glimmer in his eye as he watched Jerick being beaten down. Finally, it seemed to register to the young man that his dreams had been wrong, that he would never have any part in the war besides cleaning refuse and carrying bridges. The boy stopped laughing, and pulled away from Jerick, never meeting his eyes.

Even Tenne deserted him. The bridgeleader stopped confiding in Jerick, and he shook his head with sadness and turned away every time Jerick tried to talk to him.

But, slowly, things returned to normal. The months passed and the crew changed as men either died or were moved to other crews. When it was over, Jerick was more than willing to return to his life as a normal bridgeman. He shuffled along with the rest of them, forcing himself to keep his eyes on

the ground, and to do as he was told. He stopped sending his money back to his village, instead joining the rest of the men at the tavern.

As he did so, he found the work more bearable. When the men were satisfied that he wasn't going to cause any more trouble, they let him back into their group. They stopped calling him Jerick, simply referring to him as "Hook," a name he had earned from the strange slant at the end of his nose. It had never been set properly after Gaz broke it.

The most frustrating part of the entire experience, however, was the quiet knowledge in Jerick's heart that his plan could have worked. It had only failed because his had been the only crew to protect itself—if all of them had used their bridges as shields, moving at the same slow speed, then they all would have arrived at the same time. And they all would have survived. But, there was nothing he could do. Instead, he simply tried to tell himself he was a regular bridgeman. When further plans and ideas for protecting his crew tickled at his mind, as they invariably did, he paid them no heed.

"HAVE A SEAT, HOOK."

Jerick nodded, slumping to the ground as he listened to men fighting on the other side of the plateau. The man who had spoken was Ham, a short, burly runaway slave from Aldbin. He had been in the crew for less than a month, and hadn't been part of the ordeal following Jerick's failure. He simply considered Jerick a fellow Northerner, and a fine drinking buddy.

"It's lookin' t'be an easy day," Jerick noted. During the last few months he had intentionally begun reverting back to his lumberman's dialect when he spoke Meleran. It put people such as Ham at ease.

Ham nodded. Ske Company had arrived at the battle before the Sho Del and dug into place. More importantly, however, the plateau in question stood a fair distance from the plateaus around it, and the only plateaus close enough to use bridges were on the human side. A small group of Sho Del had gathered on a plateau in the distance—Jerick could barely see their forms—but it didn't look as if they were going to attack. The distance was too far even for a Sho Del to jump, and the only other option open to the demons—a method by which they dropped long poles across the chasm and climbed across one at a time—wouldn't work when the humans were so well-prepared. Amazingly, it looked like the humans would escape with their Dragonsteel without a fight.

"Look there," Ham noted, gesturing to the left. In the distance Jerick

could see a group of warriors who weren't having quite as easy a time winning their Dragonsteel. Once in a while, when they were near the borders of their camp's territory, they could see warriors from another camp fighting.

"Ki Tzern," Jerick noted, nodding to a group of tan-clothed men waiting on a nearby plateau, separated from the battle by a wide chasm. Ki Tzern's special troops.

Ham spat. "Devil warriors," he mumbled. The tan-suited warriors were growing increasingly infamous.

Jerick nodded, mumbling a condemnation of Sho Del magic. Tzern's regular soldiers seemed to be having a hard time of the battle, and they were slowly being pushed back from the well. Then, however, the group of tan-suited men burst into motion. They ran toward the gap between their plateaus, jumping and sailing across the thirty-foot chasm to land behind the surprised Sho Del line. The strange warriors moved in, slicing through the Sho Del ranks. They ran straight through the forms of monstrous Sho Del illusions—something that Jerick had never seen even the bravest man do. Sho Del horrors affected one's mind, somehow able to terrify you even though you knew they couldn't be real.

"By t'Lords," Ham whispered beside him. "Did you see that?"

Jerick nodded.

"Devil warriors for certain," Ham mumbled. "They jumped just like t'Sho Del. No regular man should be able t'do such a thing. That's why Tzern's been winnin' so many battles; he's given his soul up t'devils."

"Cursed magics," Jerick agreed quietly.

Presumed reality. The phrase formed in his mind even as he spoke, Topaz's words surfacing from the back of his memory. Jerick paused. He hadn't thought of the jesk, or home, for a long time now. He hadn't thought of much of anything for a long time.

That's your presumed reality speaking, lumberling. Jerick smiled slightly, remembering the playful lilt that always seemed present in Topaz's voice. Slowly, he turned his eyes around and looked at the faces of the bridgemen. Most of them sat with dull eyes, staring at nothing, their bodies and minds fatigued. Not a few were sleeping, as they did whenever they had the opportunity. Some bridgemen rarely spoke, and only then to order another mug of saprye.

You're becoming one of them, Jerick, his mind warned. *No, you have become one of them.*

But that's what I want, isn't it? he argued back silently. *They don't have pain like I do. They don't think of the death, the misery. They don't dream. They're numb. That's how I want to be. That's the only way to survive as a bridgeman.*

Presumed reality, his mind repeated.

It isn't presumed, it is reality! Jerick thought.

Presumed reality.

I tried! Jerick said, holding his head, feeling himself begin to tremble. *I tried, and look what happened!*

Try again.

Jerick shook his head. He couldn't. Not after how much work it had taken for him to regain the other men's trust. He couldn't go through that again, he couldn't. His eyes sought out Keeg, who sat, his flat eyes staring thoughtlessly into the sky. Tenne sat slumped next to the bridge. They would probably be dead before another few months passed. Jerick would probably be dead before another few months passed. He didn't care, he *couldn't* care.

Suddenly there was a sound. Metal against metal. Jerick looked up with alarm to see a battle had somehow begun on the plateau beyond their bridges. Enormous beasts Jerick had never seen before were jumping through the air, traveling the vast distance between the Sho Del and human plateaus. They were large and reptilian, with four small legs in the front and two enormous ones at the back, legs powerful enough to jump even the fifty-foot chasm. Each beast bore a Sho Del on its back.

"Lords!" Ham whispered to the side of him. "Illusions?"

Jerick shook his head. "Probably not. They're steeds of some sort."

"Dragons!" another man hissed.

Jerick frowned, comparing the beast's size with the shadow he had seen in the sky months ago. Then he shook his head—they were too small.

"No," he said to himself. "Not dragons, but similar."

"There's hundreds of them!"

Jerick nodded in amazement. Where had they all come from? The Sho Del had never used them before—at least, not in the half-year he had been at the Eternal War. Their sudden arrival had surprised the human troops, who were responding poorly to the attack. The Sho Del had obviously decided to make a major offensive. Human warriors scrambled into ranks, trying to fight the strange horse-sized monsters with Sho Del on their backs.

Then the screaming began. Not from the plateau, but from around him. Jerick spun with shock. A group of six Sho Del warriors, armed with swords, had appeared from behind. They were attacking the bridge crews.

Men scattered, some trying to hide behind the white boulders that were

the plateau's only cover. The small group of Sho Del attacked mercilessly, slaughtering man after man. Another group of them appeared, jumping across a chasm to Jerick's right, falling on his own crew. The men began to scatter in all directions, completely forgetting the swords they had never been trained to use. Some simply fell to the ground whimpering as the Sho Del murdered them.

One Sho Del, white-faced and wearing a steel breastplate, turned to take an off-handed swing at Jerick. Jerick ducked, feeling the blade whoosh over his head. Then, moving with reflexes he had almost forgotten he had, Jerick rose, putting himself directly in front of the Sho Del. The demon's face turned with shock—he had expected Jerick to duck away, not confront him. However, the look of shock was nothing compared to the surprise in its eyes when Jerick's fist pounded into its face. The Sho Del stumbled and Jerick tore the sword from its hand, turning the weapon on its master and jamming it into the monster's side.

White blood gushed down the blade and over Jerick's hand, and the Sho Del fell backward, an astonished expression still on its face. The last thing it had expected was for a bridgeman to fight back. Jerick stared at what he had done, nearly as surprised as the Sho Del. Then he looked up at his companions, still being slaughtered.

"Organize, you fools!" Jerick yelled, pulling a whimpering Ham to his feet, and pointing to the man's short sword. The former slave pulled the weapon from its sheath, holding it in uncertain, trembling hands. The Sho Del warriors had already massacred half of the bridge crews, and were working on the rest. Keeg stood off to the side, huddled next to the bridge, his short sword held like a long dagger in his hand. He looked to Jerick with frightened eyes just before a Sho Del noticed him and, batting the short sword away with an off-handed movement, ran the boy through.

Jerick screamed in denial, dashing forward to attack the Sho Del from behind. The demon turned just in time to block his blow, and then moved to respond with an attack of its own. Jerick backed away, allowing Doram's training to guide his movements as he searched desperately for help. Where were the warriors?

Then he saw. Two of the eight bridge crews had escaped across to the other side of the chasm, and they were moving to pull their bridges across to their side. From there they would be able to push the bridges across to a third plateau, providing an escape route for the warriors. The other bridges had been taken by the Sho Del, and even as Jerick watched they were toppled one by one into the chasm.

“No!” Jerick screamed, realizing his men were about to be abandoned. With the bridges gone, they would be left alone with the Sho Del.

One form turned at his scream. A large, tan-skinned form. Gaz. He watched Jerick fight for just a moment, then he trotted across the last bridge just before it was pulled away, leaving Jerick and another two dozen bridgemen to their fates.

Ham screamed behind him, and Jerick turned briefly to see the squat man get pushed over the side of the plateau, tumbling into the chasm. Jerick turned back just in time to see his opponent launch a furious attack. Jerick parried maladroitly, his muscles out of practice. One blow turned his wrist at an awkward angle and he yelped, dropping the blade in agony.

The Sho Del smiled—a strangely human gesture to see on the face of a demon—then stepped forward to finish him.

Just then Jerick heard an odd thump beside him, and a wave of tan attacked the Sho Del. Jerick looked up in amazement. The tall form was followed by a dozen others, warriors that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, each bearing a thin steel sword. Ki Tzern’s special troops.

The tan-clothed men fought meticulously, somehow managing to engage the scattered Sho Del one-on-one while at the same time maintaining a controlled formation. They were good, better swordsmen than Jerick had ever seen, and their attack quickly pushed the Sho Del back. Just a few seconds later, the Sho Del decided that a couple of bridgemen weren’t worth the effort of fighting Tzern’s elite, and they retreated across the chasm. One Sho Del, not wearing armor, suddenly yelled something in an odd, accented language, holding aloft a small object. A Dragonsteel container. Soon the Sho Del were gone, riding their strange jumping beasts, leaving the plateau empty save for scattered human bodies and white boulders.

Jerick’s legs betrayed him, and he slumped to the ground. Around him the bridgemen bled. Not a single one was still standing, though a few from other crews were moving feebly. Of Jerick’s own crew only corpses remained.

The dozen tan-clothed warriors gathered in a small group, surveying the results of their attempted rescue. Then, talking quietly amongst themselves, they moved toward the chasm to the right, jumping across with their unnatural skill to join their own camp which had finished its battle in the distance.

A pair of warriors waited, watching the retreating Sho Del as the rest of the warriors jumped plateaus. Satisfied that their enemy wouldn’t return,

one of the warriors nodded to the other. Then, pausing, he turned to look at Jerick with sad eyes. He was a tall Tzendish man with dark black hair and straight features. "I'm sorry," was all he said. Then he turned back to the other. "Let us go."

"Yes, Lord Tzern," the other man agreed.

The two of them backed up a little bit, then ran forward and jumped, sailing into the air and crossing to the other plateau, leaving Jerick alone.

JERICK SAT WAITING, STRANGELY LUCID, AS THE HOURS PASSED. HE HAD searched through the bodies, finding a dozen men alive, though none from his crew. He had dressed their wounds as well as possible, and they lay in a pitiful heap moaning and complaining that they had been forgotten. Jerick doubted that was true. There were dead warriors on the plateau; their weaponry was too valuable to let sit. Perhaps if it had just been the bridgemen, no one would have returned. The steel, however, was a different story.

As Jerick waited, the sun slowly toppling from its noonday perch, he thought. He thought of the look on the Sho Del's face when he had fought back, and the actions of the other bridgemen. He saw their faces over and over again, their desperation and their fear. He saw Keeg get killed a dozen times. He saw Ham drop into the abyss. He remembered that first, friendly bridgeman he had seen die—Jerick had never known his name—then get trampled by his own crew.

It was presumed reality, and Jerick was caught in the middle of it. *Eight bridge crews with twenty men each, a hundred and sixty men, and we couldn't defeat a dozen Sho Del. No matter how poorly trained, no matter how pathetic our weapons, we should have been able to stand against twelve opponents.*

The bridgemen hadn't fought back because they had assumed they couldn't. They mentally separated themselves from the warriors, believing all they were capable of was carrying bridges and cleaning latrines. Just like peasants worked because they assumed they weren't worthy of anything better. It was a lesson Jerick had learned long ago. Why then did he keep falling into the same traps?

Two bridge crews, one without their bridge, arrived just before dusk to search the bodies. They reacted with alarm when Jerick stood, and then surprise when they realized he wasn't a Sho Del. They hadn't seen Tzern and his men arrive, and had given up the abandoned bridgemen for dead. Jerick waited as they pushed their bridge across, then appropriated their

litters—brought for carrying back the bodies of officers—to carry the wounded instead. He spoke commandingly, like a noble, and they followed him without argument. One person, however, was not so quick to obey.

“Gaz,” Jerick said flatly. The large Kaz’ch had come to supervise. The sergeant walked across the bridge, joining Jerick on the other side as he surveyed the damage.

“You’re the only one?” he demanded.

Jerick nodded.

Gaz ground his teeth for a moment. “I’ll send you a new crew in the morning,” he said.

Jerick blinked in surprise. “New crew?” he asked hesitantly.

“You’re bridgeleader now.”

“Me?”

“I don’t have much choice,” Gaz mumbled, kicking at a body. Tenne’s body. The leader had been one of the first to die. “Everyone else is too young. They don’t know what to do.”

“But, I haven’t been here a year yet,” Jerick objected. “Barely half a year.”

Gaz looked him straight in the eye. “If anyone asks, you’ve been here eighteen months. Understand?”

Jerick nodded slowly. He did. Looking into Gaz’s thin Kaz’ch eyes, he understood much more than he was probably supposed to. It was all a lie. They told the bridge crews they would be made real warriors in two years, but no one lasted that long. It was a false hope intended to keep them going. Going until they died.

“I assume you learned your lesson from that little stunt a few months back,” Gaz said warningly.

Jerick nodded. He had indeed. The problem with the bridgemen was as much a part of their thoughts as their methods. If he wanted to help them, he had to change both.

“Yes, Gaz, I’ve learned much since then,” he replied. He bent down, retrieving the long Sho Del sword he had taken, and buckled it to his waist. Then he turned to help carry one of the litters of wounded men.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THEY WERE AN UNSIGHTLY GROUP. THEIR BEARDS WERE UNKEMPT AND often filthy, their clothing even more ragged and stained, and their expressions dull. They moved slowly, with little energy—except, of course, when there was food to be had. Their muscles were large, but their eyes were fatigued. They were slovenly, degraded, and unassertive. In short, they were bridgemen.

Only a couple of them appeared to be new recruits. Gaz was belligerent and demeaning, but he knew better than to construct a crew completely from the untried. Such would buckle the first time an arrow flew their way. No, most of these men had been gathered from other crews. They had been hauling bridges for months; they had been taught their place and they knew what they were. Jerick had to change that knowledge.

Presumed reality, he thought to himself as the group slowly gathered before him, shuffling toward the tent—they knew what a crew transfer meant. They would have less than an hour to stow what few belongings they had before the day's work began.

"Did I say you men could move?" Jerick asked pointedly as the group moved past him.

En masse, the bridgemen paused, turning dull eyes his direction. He had spoken commandingly, like a nobleman—a tone of voice they didn't expect from a bridgeman, even the leader of the crew.

"I am your bridgeleader," Jerick announced, standing straight-backed as

he looked across the group. "My name is Jerick, though many just call me Hook, because of this little ornament on my face."

A couple of men smiled at the comment.

"Welcome to the Fourth Bridge," Jerick announced. "We are going to be the best crew this war has ever seen."

The bridgemen regarded one another for a moment then, as if by common consensus, they turned back toward the tent, leaving Jerick standing awkwardly alone, his carefully-prepared speech dying on his lips.

JERICK LAID ASIDE HIS ADZ, LOOKING AT THE SMOOTH BOARD BEFORE HIM. It had been part of a mighty trek, starting back in Melerand, near one of the lumbering camps—perhaps even Jerick's own village. It had been felled by the hands of some unknown lumberman, then floated down the Trerod to be stripped and cut into boards in Lakdon. After that, an extended voyage via ship down the eastern coast of Yolen had followed, ending at a Fallin dock. The still-rough wood was then brought to the Shattered Plains, where bridgemen would sand it and pound it together, forming bridges. Bridges that would ultimately find themselves plummeting into one of the chasms to crack and rot below, part of one massive, eternal grave.

Hands grabbed the board, pulling it away from Jerick and fitting it into place on the side of the nearly-finished bridge. The bridgemen worked rotely, with laboriously slow movements. Jerick watched as they tried to fit his board into its notches, pushing against the unyielding wood.

"No," Jerick, shaking his head. "It goes the other way around. The small notches should be on the outside."

The men continued to push, ignoring Jerick's words. They only flipped the board around when one of the bridge engineers came over and yelled at them, pointing out the proper way.

Jerick sighed, leaning back against a stack of boards. He had been trying for three days now to instill some sort of independence in the minds of his crew, and so far he had been woefully unsuccessful. The men were so accustomed to their old ways that new suggestions didn't even register with them. New recruits were no better—most of them were not like Keeg had been. Used to a peasant's life, the newcomers simply melded with the aggregate of dullness, falling into line and doing as the others did.

If anything, all Jerick's efforts had done was ostracize him from the rest of the men. They didn't look at him as one of them. He wasn't sure what they thought of him, but they didn't accept him. They most certainly didn't

accept his authority. To them, a bridgeleader was just a bridgeman who had survived longer than the rest.

He had tried everything. He had urged them with inspirational talks, he had tried explaining to them logically why following him would help them survive, he had proven that he understood their way of life, that he had been a peasant himself. Nothing worked. They would not see what they did not accept.

Such thoughts were his companion until the alarm sounded a few hours later.

JERICK RUSHED FORWARD WITH HIS MEN, FORCING HIMSELF TO HOLD back, lest he outpace them. During these last few days one thing had become certain to him—the life of a bridgeman was fatiguing, but by no means debilitating. They received enough food. True, it was flavorless, but it was food. They worked hard, but only a short period of that work—the actual carrying of the bridges—was taxing. The bridgemen’s lethargy was as much a function of their mindset as their conditions.

“All right, form up,” Jerick commanded as they reached their bridge. Gaz stood at the center of the crews, directing them with powerful—and not a little pudgy—arms.

The bridge crew followed Jerick’s instructions, falling into place along the sides of the bridge with surprising nimbleness. Dragonsteel runs were the time when they were accustomed to taking orders from their bridgeleader, and in this they worked as routinely as ever, the same habits that had caused them to ignore him before now causing them to obey.

Though this would be the first run the new crew had gone on together, they each found their places along the edges of the bridge without discussion. Bridge placement—meaning who would go in the front—was very important to bridgemen, and they had drawn lots to determine it the first hour they were together.

They left a hole on the right side near the back, the bridgeleader’s place, the most protected slot on the bridge. Jerick paused, then shook his head, walking to the front of the bridge.

“Move it, Dente,” Jerick said, motioning for the bridgeman in the front center slot—the most dangerous place—to move out of the way.

“But . . .” the man said with confused eyes.

“I said move,” Jerick said authoritatively. “Do you have a problem with that?”

Dente looked back at the bridgemen, perplexed, then shrugged, walking to the back of the bridge and taking the place saved for Jerick.

"Every time this crew goes on a run," Jerick announced, "I get the privilege of being in the front. It is my right, and my duty, as your leader. Understood?"

All his efforts of the last few days, all his objections and explainings, hadn't earned him such a look of utter dumbfoundment. Before he had confused them. Now they thought he was insane.

"Lift!" Jerick ordered, leaning down and reaching behind him to grab the edge of the bridge. The men followed, hoisting the construction onto their shoulders.

IT WASN'T AS BAD AS IT COULD HAVE BEEN, BUT IT WASN'T PROMISING either. Jerick had stood at the front of the bridge many times during his career in the war, and he knew it wasn't a good sign when the Sho Del were already on the plateau. They appeared to have just arrived, and their archers were rushing across the plateau to fall into position.

"Run!" Gaz ordered, letting himself fall behind like he always did when it looked like it was going to be a difficult attack.

The bridge crews broke into a trot just as the first arrows began to fly. Jerick felt terror begin to shake his frame. He could have stayed in the back, been protected. Why had he come forward? It didn't do him any good; the men would never follow him. What was he doing?

However, even as the fear and the questioning began, Jerick beat it back. He would not allow his mind to become placid. They could force him to be a bridgeman, but they couldn't stop him from thinking like a nobleman. Better yet, like a lumberman. Like his father. He would rather face death with pride than live without purpose.

"Let's move, men!" he bellowed, breaking into a jog, feeling the enormous bridge move behind him, as if he were towing it all on his own. "For our families!"

Arrows bore down on them, but Jerick kept running. He didn't flinch as a shaft took the man next to him in the chest, and he continued to yell as he saw a Sho Del take him in its sights. The arrow was loosed, and Jerick felt more than saw it zip through the air. He knew it would fly truly.

This is the reality I choose, Jerick decided, screaming wordlessly, running at the arrow as if he were the weapon and it the target.

The world lost its focus. Then, suddenly, it snapped back into place—back

into place in a way that Jerick only vaguely remembered from his former life. The world became a jumbled of tiny quivering spheres, a dozen different colors predominating. The arrow hovered in the air, moving slowly toward his breast. Its shaft no longer wood, but a mixture of Axi. Most black, some blue, a couple of red. Its tip was the cold dun gray of iron. The Axi hummed in his mind, trembling and jerking in place, as if held together by an unseen force.

Go, Jerick felt himself urge.

The Axi resisted at first, but then suddenly burst apart, each one soaring in a different direction. Hundreds of them, thousands of them, each one tearing free of its neighbors. The majority immediately combined with Axi from the air around them.

Then, the world was back. Gaz was yelling for them to drop the bridges, and Jerick complied—more out of habit than conscious desire. He jumped back and grabbed a steadying rope, and the bridge slid into place. Then, his job finished, he sat stupefied, trying to determine what had just happened.

JERICK SAT BESIDE THE EVENING FIRE. THE SUN HAD LONG SINCE SET, leaving darkness and a cloudy sky, but his thoughts continued to burn brightly.

Part of him was incredibly disturbed by what had just happened. He had only barely discovered microkinesis, still uncertain of whether to accept it as good or evil, when the events at the palace forced him to leave. The part of him that had grown up listening to the Legends, the part trained by the superstitions of the villagers, told him that he didn't want such power. Magic was of the Sho Del, the monsters he was fighting. Even Horwatchers could only use it if they had access to Sho Del bones.

Yet, another part of him—strangely, the part trained by Vendavious—was curious about the Axi and what he had done. *Experiment*, it urged. *Find out what you can do. Use it.*

Jerick couldn't decide between the two halves. He was frightened by both options, and more than a little bitter about the fact that he should have to make such a decision when normal men were left to much simpler lives.

"Sir?" a quiet voice asked.

Jerick looked up from the small fire—used only to warm food and give light, for even in the winter the nights were hot enough without fires to help. Beside him in the quiet darkness stood Dente. He was a tall, thin

Fallin man with hair almost blond enough one would have thought him a nobleman. Of course, more people had lighter hair down here in the south.

"Yes, Dente?" Jerick asked.

The man stood uncomfortably for a moment, then took a seat on the ground next to the fire. A few other men sat on the other side of the pit, staring into the flames with uninterested looks.

"Sir, I want to thank you," Dente mumbled. "I . . . you took my place, sir. I would have died today."

"Nonsense," Jerick chided. "I didn't die, did I?"

Dente twitched nervously, holding a small leather cap in his hands. "I don't know, sir. Old Kerl, he was next to you. He said the Lords themselves protected us today. Why, we only lost one man, and the other crews lost at least four or five each. Old Kerl, he says he saw Oreon himself standing over you protecting us."

Jerick sat quietly for a moment. "Why would he do that, Dente?"

"Because you're special, sir," Dente mumbled. "We all know it. You don't belong here. The Lords protected you, that's certain as the heat. Kerl saw an arrow disappear, vanish right before it hit you. He swears he did."

Dente fell silent then, resting back against the ground. A group of men were returning from the tavern; Jerick could smell the saprye on the wind. They shuffled quietly—not drunk, of course. Bridgemen didn't earn enough to get themselves properly intoxicated. Some of them sat next to the fire.

They're so sad, Jerick thought with a shake of his head. *No hope in their eyes at all. After today, which should have been a victory to them, they still have no hope. No matter how much they drink, no matter how much they numb their thoughts, they know that a victory only means they'll live to see another day of nothingness. If only there were a way to cheer them up a little.*

"Now, we all know that Fentalloni is the most cunning of the Nine Lords," Jerick heard himself say as he looked into the fire. "Fentalloni—we call him Leri in Melerand—is Oreon's son, and before he was even born he was known to slip out of his mother's womb at night and commit mischief. As he grew, he only got more cunning, though he never reached a height of more than a few dozen feet tall—making him something of a dwarf amongst the gods."

Jerick spoke the words in his best imitation of Topaz's storyteller's voice. He spoke as much for himself as for the men, a means of pushing away their overwhelming despair and trying to remember the lighthearted ways of his friend the jesk.

"One day, when the earth was still rather new, Fentalloni was passing

through the woods when he heard familiar voices in the distance. He crept forward, sneaking through the bushes until he found a small clearing. Inside, he could see Venteere the Wise—we call him Aldvin in the north—and Sivonn, the Healer, standing together. Before them on the ground was a creature unlike any Fentalloni had ever seen before. It had a head like a horse, but wings like a bird, and a tail that was a hundred different-colored strands of hair. The two gods were arguing back and forth.

“It is certainly an animal of a practical nature,’ Venteere claimed, pointing at the strange creature. ‘Why, look at its strong back and powerful legs. It was meant to carry burdens and do work.’

“Sivonn shook his head. ‘No, brother, I must disagree. Look at the beautiful colors of its wings, and the graceful style of its tail. This is a creature of beauty. It is meant to be kept as a pet, to be admired and to be painted by artists. It would be a travesty to reduce it to simple labor.’

“The two gods continued their discussion for some time, neither one willing to give credit to the other’s words. As everyone knows, Venteere is a practical god, and all things must be put to good use in his eyes. Sivonn, however, is an artist, and seeks decoration in all that he does. The argument grew quite fierce until finally, Fentalloni stepped out from his hiding place and confronted his siblings.

“Brothers, brothers,’ he chastised. ‘You should listen to yourselves. You sound like simple-minded mortals, unable to make a decision.’

“But we cannot agree,’ Venteere explained. ‘He will not listen to my words.’

“Nor he mine,’ Sivonn complained.

“Brothers, what you need is a mediator,’ Fentalloni declared. ‘Someone to listen to your two sides and make a decision for you.’

“Why, that is an excellent idea,’ Venteere said. ‘Would you do such a thing for us, brother?’

“Well,’ Fentalloni said thoughtfully, ‘I have heard much of what you’ve been saying. Perhaps I could spare the time to give judgment on this most odd of beasts. Where did it come from?’

“Our father just now created it,’ Sivonn explained. ‘It is the only one of its kind, and we were trying to decide what its use should be.’

“Fentalloni sat back and listened while the two brothers continued to explain their case. However, he soon grew bored of their arguments. ‘This is no good,’ he declared. ‘Your words are of little use, and look, the light is getting dim. I can barely see the creature any more. How can I give judgment?’

“‘Here,’ Sivonn said, ‘let me make you a fire.’ And he did so.

“‘Ah, very nice,’ Fentalloni said with a smile. ‘However, it is still difficult to judge with the creature sitting down on the ground as it is. Do you expect me, a god, to stoop down to examine it?’

“‘Of course not,’ Venteere exclaimed. ‘Here, let me build you a table on which to place the beast.’ And he did so.

“Fentalloni examined the strange creature before him, shaking his head. ‘I still cannot decide,’ he said.

“‘What can we do?’ Sivonn complained. ‘Can we never resolve this question?’

“‘I know,’ the cunning Fentalloni suddenly said. ‘What I need are some examples. Brothers, why don’t you each go gather several beasts from the forest. Venteere, you bring the most functional animals you can think of, and Sivonn, you bring the most beautiful and colorful. Then I will compare this new creature with the two groups and see which one it belongs in.’

“‘Ah, now I see why you are known as the most cunning of the gods,’ Venteere said.

“‘Yes,’ Sivonn agreed. ‘We will go quickly and gather as you have said.’

“And they did. They rushed forth, carefully selecting those animals they thought would best make their case. Then, they met together at the small clearing. However, when they arrived they found it empty. The table was still there, however, and on it was a neat pile of bones. Beside the charred bones was a note.

“‘Dear brothers,’ it said. ‘I don’t know whether it would have been better for work or for beauty. I only know one thing: it certainly tasted good. Thank you for the fire to cook with and the nice table on which to eat.’”

Jerick spoke the final line with a smile. It was one of his favorite stories, and he had asked Topaz to repeat it on several occasions. He had expected a few chuckles at the ending. He was surprised to no end when he got a roar.

Jerick looked around with surprise. While he had been focusing on the story, men had been gathering around the fire. He had seen a few forms moving in the darkness, but he hadn’t realized the extent of the gathering. Every man in his crew stood circling the flames, and they all laughed heartily together at the final lines.

Jerick looked through the crowd of faces, the twenty men standing, smiling, firelight glittering in their eyes. Eyes that seemed alive for the first time since he had become bridgeleader. All they had needed was a little bit of laughter.

And, also for the first time since he had become bridgeleader, he seemed to have their attention. They all watched him eagerly, obviously hoping he would tell them another story.

Instead, he asked them a question. "Men, why are you here?"

There was a silent pause. "For the pay?" one finally answered.

"Because I was told I had to come," another mumbled.

"Where else would I go?" a third—Dente—added.

"Wrong," Jerick said simply. "That may be how you ended up here, but that's not why you are here."

"Then why?" Dente asked quietly.

"Look out there," Jerick said, nodding toward the dark Shattered Plains. "Beyond those plateaus, beyond the chasms and the wells, is an enemy. Now, some say that the armies are only here for the Dragonsteel, that the generals only care about money. I don't know about that. All I know is that this is the only place where Yolen connects to Fain lands. We have to keep them away, lest they slaughter our families."

"They say the Sho Del don't want our families," a voice in the darkness muttered. "That they only want the Dragonsteel too."

"They're wrong," Jerick said flatly, his voice growing quiet. "Trust me, they're wrong. I've . . . seen Sho Del murder families. One tried to kill my king." Something was itching at the back of his mind, something he didn't want to acknowledge. Fortunately, another comment drew him back to the conversation.

"But," Dente said, "we're only bridgemen."

"Only bridgemen . . ." Jerick said, turning to look at his crew. "Let me tell you another story, men. You're probably familiar with this one—it's about King Agaron of Rodaius."

Several heads bobbed at this. Agaron was a famous character throughout the legends of all Yolen. However, it was not of his many glorious adventures that Jerick wished to speak. It was of his beginnings.

"According to the legends," Jerick began quoting from memory, "Agaron was not born a king. In fact, he was not born a noble at all. His father was a simple craftsman, and his family was very poor. Had things gone differently, Agaron would have probably been a table-maker like his father.

"Now, in those days there was a regent on the throne of Rodaius. The true king had died while very young, and his chief general had decided to take the throne. However, it is said that Oreon the White appeared to him in a dream, commanding him not to claim the crown for himself. 'I will choose the next ruler of Rodaius,' Oreon informed him. The general, being

a pious man, only declared himself regent, informing the people that some day a new glorious king would take his place.

“When Agaron was still yet a boy, his father was commissioned by the regent to create a new banquet table for the palace. It was a massive job and, unfortunately, Agaron’s father came down with the fevers before he could finish it. Determined that the regent would get his table, Agaron went to work on his own. He carved the table with designs so intricate that it would leave no doubt that this was a king’s table. He made the legs into the shape of the Nine Lords, each one representing one of the gods, with a tenth leg bearing a crown to represent the monarch of Rodaius.

“The regent was amazed at the marvelous table. He had the boy’s father brought to the palace to reward him, but the man humbly admitted that it was not he who had done the carving, but his son. The regent immediately sent for the son, and when Agaron arrived, it was said that heavenly voices could be heard in the air above the palace, praising the new king of Rodaius. The regent immediately recognized his replacement, for Oreon had shown him the boy’s face in a vision. Agaron was set on the throne, and that night feasted at the very table he had carved.”

Jerick paused. He didn’t go on with the story, though he knew the men were thinking of it in their minds. They were remembering the many tales of valor associated with Agaron, how he united nearly the entire continent, how he slew monsters, battled armies, and even braved the depths of Xeth’s underworld, battling the Lord of Death himself. All this done by the son of a craftsman.

“Before Agaron was a great king,” Jerick said to the crowd of bridgemen, “he was a great table-maker. If he had not worked so hard on his carvings, the regent would have never called him to the palace.

“You say you are only bridgemen, but what is a bridgeman’s job? Could the army function without us? Could it cross the chasms? Could it even reach the Dragonsteel? You have all seen runs where the warriors weren’t necessary—sometimes the Sho Del don’t even arrive. But have you ever seen a run where the bridgemen weren’t necessary?”

He looked across the faces, faces that were growing less dull with every word he spoke. They were beginning to see something in themselves, a little bit of Agaron.

Jerick spoke vigorously. “We are the first ones into any battle. We wear the least armor, and we carry the smallest weapons. In my mind, that takes more courage than is required of any nobleman in a chariot. Dente, please do something for me.”

Dente nodded, and Jerick explained what he wanted him to do. The man ran off and returned shortly with a dirt stained bundle. The cloth-wrapped object had been buried shallowly beneath Jerick's bedroll.

Jerick pulled off the cloth, revealing the silver-sheathed Sho Del sword. Jerick pulled the blade free from its sheath. The sword sparkled in the firelight, its silvery steel inscribed with the alien writing of the Sho Del. It was long and straight, but only edged on one side, and the pommel was tipped by a carved reptilian head.

"I slew the Sho Del that this belonged to," Jerick said quietly. "I killed him with his own sword. Me, a bridgeman. This is his blood you see staining the sleeves of my shirt.

"We have been chosen to be bridgemen. So be it. But, men, we get to decide what it means to be a bridgeman. You all know boys who came into the war looking for glory—perhaps you were one. Well, who is to say there is no glory in being a bridgeman?"

He rammed the sword back in its sheath, it snapped into place with a click. "I say again what I told you on that first day, men. Let's not just be bridgemen, let's be the best cursed bridgemen those demons have ever seen."

He had hoped for nods of agreement. He got shouts.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

WINTER CAME EARLY TO MELERAND THAT YEAR, AN EVENT THAT WAS considered by many to be a natural result of the king's sorrow regarding the loss of his son. The monarch was often equated with the soul of a nation. The weather turned bitter and cold, though Sir Hsor, the Tzend warrior, claimed Yolish winters were nothing compared to those he knew back in Tzendor.

Sir Hsor had opted to stay in Melerand even after the Sho Del had been captured. He claimed he felt some responsibility for the prince's disappearance—after all, it was the confusion caused by his hunt that provided a distraction for the kidnappers. As the months progressed and the rest of Yolen grew bored of searching for the missing prince, Hsor took it upon himself to lead the investigation. He claimed it was his area of specialty—hunting kidnappers really wasn't all that different from hunting assassins.

Ryalla passed the months dedicated to her studies. As her reading skills progressed, she moved through every book Torell gave her with delight. She was most intrigued by the newer material, that which came from Fallamore. The words of the Fallin poets were mostly ballads and stories, things that held her imagination and gave life to her dreams. Eventually, she even requested that Torell teach her Fallin—a request he declined, claiming his own specialty was history and geography, and that he had little time to waste on languages. Ryalla understood what he was implying—he didn't speak Fallin himself.

So, she began to teach herself. It was slow going, and she knew it would

be a long time before she could read even the most simple of Fallin texts. It would have been much easier had she had something to tell her what different words meant. All she had was Torell's spotty knowledge of the language and some scrolls from the library that existed in both their Fallin and Meleran translations. Fortunately, the languages were very similar, and the alphabets were identical.

She would never forget the day when she finally decided to try her hand at composing her own ballad. She did so huddled in some blankets in the back of Courteth's room, listening to the chilled night winds trying to break through the shutters. She penned it in Meleran—she could barely write simple sentences in Fallin, let alone poetry. When she was finished, she stared at the page for a long while, a contented smile on her face.

RYALLA CREPT AS SILENTLY AS POSSIBLE, FOLLOWING THE CLOAKED FIGURE. The streets of Lakdon were lined with ice and piles of snow, and those people who were out so early in the morning went about their business as quickly as possible, eager to get out of the cold and back indoors.

The man wore a brown cloak that was drawn close, shadowing his face, the steam of his breath puffing out the front of the hood. He moved nondescriptly down the street, his back bent like a servant, stepping carefully to avoid patches of ice. Few people gave him any heed. Ryalla, however, followed the man with intent. She stayed close behind him, careful not to let herself be seen as the man approached the palace, slipping into the courtyard. He stopped just outside the stables. That was when Ryalla struck.

"Did you bring me any sweets?" she asked.

The form jumped with surprise, nearly losing its footing on the slick cobblestones. It spun, ducking low into a defensive stance. As it did so, the wind blew back its cowl, revealing a familiar hawkish face and a patch of white hair speckled with black.

"Ryalla?" Topaz asked with surprise. "Lords, girl! Didn't you know it's against the law to sneak up on a jesk?"

"It is?"

"Well, no," Topaz admitted, standing up straight. "But I certainly intend to have that changed one of these days."

TOPAZ POURED THE STEAMING LIQUID INTO HER CUP, THEN MOVED TO DO the same for his own. Ryalla raised it to her lips, carefully sipping the hot

tea. It wasn't bitter, like most Fallin teas she had tasted, but sweet and a little citrus-like. "It's good," she approved, holding the cup between her hands to warm her fingers.

"The Fallins drink it cold," Topaz explained, seating himself on the floor across from her. Beside him, oblivious to the winter cold outside, a hanging fern bloomed with bright orange blossoms. "Personally, I've never been able to stand cold tea. Call it a personal prejudice."

Ryalla nodded, raising the cup to her lips and sipping again.

"Oh, by the way," Topaz said, reaching into his pack. "Here." He reached out, handing her a small bag. Curious, Ryalla pulled at the strings and peeked inside.

"My lady's sweets," Topaz explained.

Ryalla blushed. "You didn't really have to bring me any," she said. "I was just joking."

"I've learned never to take a woman's 'jokes' lightly," Topaz mumbled, sipping his own tea.

"Really," Ryalla protested. "Sweets aren't quite as . . . important to me as they once were."

"Try these," Topaz said simply.

Ryalla shrugged, reaching in and pulling out one of the sweets. It was different than what Topaz usually brought her—it was soft, as opposed to hard, and it was a dark, almost black color. Ryalla popped one into her mouth, and immediately her eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Lords," Ryalla mumbled, savoring the powerful flavor. It melted away in her mouth, not requiring the extended sucking of regular sweets. It had a creamy, succulent flavor that was completely new to her. "What is this called?"

"Chocolate," Topaz said. "It comes from a bean the Tzends have started cultivating."

"The Tzends are geniuses," Ryalla determined, pulling out another sweet and eating it.

"I assume it was the plants that gave me away," Topaz said, looking around his room at the mass of greenery.

Ryalla nodded. "I knew you were in town as soon as I came to water them this morning."

"But, how did you locate me?" the jesk asked.

"It was easy," Ryalla said. "You were so furtive, so secretive. Everyone else in town learned months ago that it's dangerous to go about with your face covered like that."

Topaz frowned. "Am I missing something?"

"You don't know?" Ryalla asked with shock.

"I've spent the last ten months traveling," Topaz explained. "I've barely stopped to think, let alone pay attention to what's happening all the way up here in Melerand."

"The prince was kidnapped," Ryalla said quickly. "He was taken the day Martis killed the Sho Del."

Topaz regarded her for a moment in stupefaction, the steaming cup of tea sitting forgotten in his hands. "Yoharn?" he finally said.

Ryalla nodded.

"Kidnapped?"

Ryalla nodded.

"What an utterly stupid thing to do," Topaz mumbled, taking a drink of his tea. "What would someone want with the prince of Melerand?"

"We don't know," Ryalla explained. "The king has spent the last ten months searching for him, practically tearing the city to pieces. No one has any idea what could have happened—we only assume he was kidnapped. Some say he might be . . . dead."

"Ten months," Topaz said shaking his head. "That doesn't bode well."

"But, Sir Hsor thinks he's still alive. Or, at least, he's still searching—though the king might have given up."

"I doubt he's given up," Topaz said with a shake of his head. "Rodis is . . . prone to melancholy sometimes. I thought he got over that when he left his teens."

"No one knows what to think," Ryalla continued, looking down at her cup. "The palace has been in chaos since it happened. Everyone has their theories about where Yoharn is. But, now that you're here . . ."

Ryalla looked up slightly, meeting Topaz's eyes. Slowly, the jesk shook his head. "I'm sorry, but this isn't really a visit, more of a stop-over. I only intended to pick up a few things and be on my way."

"But, the prince, Topaz," Ryalla protested. "You could find him; I know you could."

"Perhaps," Topaz admitted, regret in his eyes. "But as much as I like the boy, I no more have time to spare looking for him than I do for baby-sitting Jerick. I can't let myself be diverted for one person, even a prince."

Ryalla felt her heart fall. Ever since she'd noticed the plants blooming, she'd assumed Topaz was in Melerand to fix everything.

"De'Herric," Topaz cursed softly, using the strange word she'd heard from him before.

"What does that mean, anyway?" she asked.

Topaz paused, looking down. "De'Herric?" he asked. "I don't know. I heard Frost use it once—it was the only time I heard an expletive pass his lips, so I know it must be really bad."

He set his cup aside, looking up to the ceiling. A few moments later he spoke. "There's just too much going on for me to handle. I can't do anything about Yoharn, little one. I wish I could. I can't even leave someone to help—we're extended too thin already. Bat'Chor's in Tzendor, Frost is following that cursed lumberling . . . everyone I could trust with this is busy. There isn't anyone else."

Ryalla paused. A thought had just occurred to her—a thought that she would have considered dangerous a few years before, but one that now demanded her attention. Perhaps it was her studies, perhaps it was the pride she was learning to take in herself. Whatever it was, it led her to mouth her next words. "What about me?"

Topaz looked up with curiosity. "What was that?"

"What about me?" Ryalla repeated. "I'm still here. Maybe I could help—if you tell me what to do."

Topaz mused for a moment, then he reached over and picked up his cup, sipping at its contents once again. "I never even thought of that," he admitted. "How old are you now, little one?"

"Almost sixteen," Ryalla informed him, looking down again. She knew she didn't look it—her body continued to refuse to grow. "Or, at least, that's what I think. I'm not exactly certain when my birthdate was."

Topaz nodded. "You think you can find the prince?"

"Well," Ryalla said, blushing, "no. Not really."

"Funny. I do."

Ryalla looked up at the jesk. He sat with a slight smile on his face, sipping his tea and looking odd in the muted brown colors that were so different from what he normally wore.

"You can do it," Topaz continued. "That is, assuming you stop deluding yourself and face your abilities."

Ryalla frowned. "My abilities?"

Topaz set aside his cup again, placing it next to a patch of grass that was growing right out of the stone floor. "Little one, I don't have time to be delicate with you, like I was with Jerick. I don't have the resources right now to think up some clever way to make you accept what you can do. So, I'll just have to be blunt. You can do things other people can't."

"Magic?" Ryalla asked quietly.

"Some people call it that," Topaz agreed. "Uninformed people—which means just about everyone. I like Frost's word—microkinesis."

Ryalla shook her head. "Topaz, you must be wrong."

Topaz groaned, thumping his head back against the trunk of a potted tree. "Lords, not you too? Why is everyone so determined to disbelieve?"

"Oh, I believe," Ryalla put in quickly. "Topaz, I've seen you do wondrous things. The plants bloom in winter. You healed scars I've had ever since I was a child. I just don't believe . . ."

"That you can do it too," Topaz finished. "You believe in magic; you just don't believe in yourself."

"I'm flattered you think so highly of me," Ryalla continued, unable to meet the jesk's eyes. "But you don't understand. I'm nobody. I'm just—"

"Little one," Topaz interrupted. "That 'I'm just a slave' routine is getting a little bit old, don't you think? It has made a good crutch in the past, but you're old enough to throw it aside."

Ryalla blushed. "I say it because there's truth to it. Even you can't change truth."

"That's debatable," Topaz noted, a smile in his voice. "But in this case I don't have to. Before this afternoon I would have sworn in the name of the Betrayer that there wasn't a person on this continent who could sneak up on me. I've seen you disappear in plain sight—half the time I'm in Melerand I'm convinced you're hiding in the corner watching me."

Ryalla blushed again. "That's because people ignore slaves. I'm there; they just don't pay attention to me."

Topaz snorted. "Surely you don't really believe that."

Ryalla shrugged. She didn't know what she believed. She told herself that people didn't see her because they ignored slaves, but there had been times when she knew there was no way she should have been able to escape detection. "Even if it's as you say," she said, "hiding isn't the same as what you do. I tried commanding the plants to grow once, and nothing happened."

"Ryalla, do you really think the Nine Lords would have showed such a decided lack of creativity as to make us all the same? Even a blind Jarg knows everyone has different talents. Here, watch."

Topaz pulled off his glove, revealing his hand and the large tan gemstone underneath. He held his hand out, palm forward, concentrating on something Ryalla couldn't see. She *felt* it however, felt the power surging from Topaz even before she saw the ring begin to pulse. A moment later the air above Topaz's hand began to shimmer. Topaz ground his teeth, his

face adopting a look of utter concentration. Beads of sweat even began to form on his scalp.

"There, on the wall," the jesk mumbled, nodding to the side of the room. There, beside a patch of blooming lilies, she could see a bright rainbow shining on the white stones.

The rainbow vanished, and Topaz exhaled deeply. Ryalla looked back at him, surprised at the exhaustion suddenly etched into his face.

"That's the best I can do," he said between breaths. "I can scatter light into its separate colors. Holding it for even a moment, however, is taxing. Now, ask me how much energy it would take for me to bend light around myself, making it appear as if I weren't here? Lords, Ryalla, I couldn't even make this ring disappear. Jerick once told me you made him and yourself vanish at the same time."

Ryalla looked down at her cup, uncertain how to respond.

"Little one," Topaz said in a more subdued tone. "Why do you have so much trouble believing in yourself? If a man like Martis can win the hand of a princess and the heart of a kingdom, why can't an intelligent young girl use a little magic? I think you'll find that the world is slightly more fair than people claim."

Uncertainty, shame, and curiosity all fought within her. The cup in her hand was cold before she finally responded. Curiosity won. "What is it I do, Topaz?" she asked.

The jesk smiled. "You play with light, little one."

"But what is light?"

Topaz chuckled. "Now you sound like a Trexandian. Honestly, I don't know what light is. I think it's made of small pieces of something, but I can barely see them—and then only if I concentrate very hard."

"Axi?" Ryalla asked.

Topaz looked surprised. "You've read the *Treatise Axiom*?" he asked with surprise.

Ryalla nodded.

"What did you think?" he asked with curiosity.

"I don't know," Ryalla said, draining the last of her tea. It really did taste better cold—though she would never admit so to Topaz. "For the most part I liked the way it flowed, but the word choices seemed bulky in sections."

"Um, I meant what did you think of the ideas, not the writing," he clarified.

"Oh," Ryalla said. "I thought it made sense."

"Well, I don't think light is the same as Axi," Topaz said. "It's . . . different. I don't know what to make of it, since I can't really see it."

"But you can see Axi?" Ryalla asked with confusion.

"It's complicated," Topaz said, "but, in essence, yes. And I think if you work at it, you'll realize you can see light in the same way. You can certainly manipulate it."

"I'll . . . try," Ryalla said.

"Good. But don't wait too long. Yoharn's safety is one thing, but there's a bigger problem caused by his disappearance."

"The state of the kingdom?"

"In a way," Topaz said, standing. "Assuming Yoharn is still missing approximately fourteen months from now, we are going to have a real problem."

"Martis," Ryalla realized.

Topaz nodded. "Courteth's marriage and the prince's vanishing makes a certain member of Ka Strafen the next heir to the throne. If you think these last few months were chaotic, imagine Martis as king."

Ryalla shivered. "Lords," she whispered.

"Lords is right," Topaz said, gathering a few items she couldn't see out of one of the chests at the back of the room. "And, since you've been so nice as to volunteer, it's now your responsibility to see that such a thing doesn't happen."

"But I don't know where to start," Ryalla protested.

Topaz threw his pack over his shoulder. "I'd start with the most suspicious characters. Who would benefit from the prince's disappearance?"

"Martis?" Ryalla offered.

Topaz nodded. "If I wanted to become king of Melerand—though the Lords only know why someone would want a responsibility like that—removing the heir and marrying his sister would be a decent way to go about it. Anyone else you think might have done it?"

"I don't know," Ryalla mumbled. "The Horwatchers?"

Topaz raised an eyebrow. "Why would they bother with such a thing?"

"I'm not sure," Ryalla said. The impression had been with her since she'd heard of the prince's disappearance, however. "They're just so . . . suspicious. In Fallin ballads it's always the conniving sorcerers that cause all the problems."

"That's hardly valid reasoning, little one," Topaz said, closing his pack. "I'd keep an eye on Martis first, if I were you. In my experience, a throne is always more powerful a motivator than some inchoate desire to do evil."

"All right." Ryalla stood, watching Topaz prepare with sad eyes. "You're leaving so soon?" she asked.

"Like I said," the jesk explained, replacing his brown cloak, "just passing through. Hopefully Rodis will never even know I was here." Then he paused, looking her in the eyes. "I was, however, going to visit you, little one. I wanted to warn you that I might not be back for a while."

"How long?" Ryalla asked softly.

"I don't know. Years, probably. Some of the things I'm getting involved in are going to take a lot of time, and it won't be easy to slip away. I'll . . . try to stop by."

"You'd better," Ryalla said, fighting tears. With Jerick gone, the kindly old Frost after him, and even Courteth getting married, Topaz was about the last one she had left. "Someone has to bring me some more of that chocolate."

Topaz chuckled. "Water my plants while I'm gone, will you, little one?" he requested.

"I always do."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“ALL RIGHT, MEN,” JERICK SAID, SCANNING THE PILES OF BONES. “YOU know what to do.”

The members of the Fourth Bridge fanned out, scavenging as they had done dozens of times before. Today, however, there was a difference. They spoke to one another as they moved, joking and talking about their lives before the war. As they worked, they tossed rags and fragments of wood onto a fire they had built in the middle of the passage. A little illumination helped to push back the gloom of the grisly chore and provided warmth. Jerick would have never thought it possible to be cold here in the south, but these cracks were so far down that they were actually sometimes frigid.

“Kep, it’s your job to keep us entertained,” Jerick reminded, putting his hand on the shoulder of a young boy from Lallom. The Lallin was the youngest member of their crew—save, perhaps, for Jerick himself, though he knew the others assumed he was much older than he really was. Kep was a short, scrawny thing who had a difficult time fitting into the life of a bridgeman. He had to wear tall braces on his shoulders to carry bridges, and even then he wasn’t much help. In one area, however, he was invaluable.

The boy pulled out a small flute he had constructed from a couple reeds and began to play. Even in Rodis’s palace, Jerick had never heard a musician who was so skilled. Kep’s music was haunting and beautiful, and it conveyed

all the passion of a storyteller. It seemed at times like an entire room full of pipers was playing, not just one boy. At other times, a single, solitary melody was all he gave. Whatever the style, every moment was engaging.

Today Kep chose a lively tune, and the music joined with the light, both pushing away gloom. Jerick walked over to the others, falling into place and pushing through bones and bodies in search of weapons. His heart, however, was not as joyful as those of his men.

The Fourth Bridge had been together for over a month now, and the group was beginning to feel an incredible sense of camaraderie. However, during that month he had lost three members to Sho Del arrows. Such a low percentage would have been considered fabulous by any normal bridge crew, but Jerick's men would not be any normal bridge crew. Losing one man was too many—he had to find a better way.

After the second death, following their fourth run, Jerick had realized his selfishness. He had been forced to confront his own strange abilities, realizing that no matter how distasteful microkinesis was, he couldn't justify ignoring it when men were dying. From that moment on, he had gone into battles looking at the world microkinetically. Unfortunately, he had never been able to reproduce the extraordinary events of before, when he had destroyed the arrow. Other Axi refused to obey him, no matter how much he challenged them. It was almost as if a piece of him were holding back. He wasn't certain what he had done that once, but he was beginning to feel that he would never be able to do it again.

Not that microkinesis wasn't proving useful. "Don't touch that one, Gathban," Jerick warned.

Gathban, a squat, overweight Kaz'ch, looked up with surprise. He had been reaching to move a still-rotting corpse out of the way, trying to get to a glimmer of metal underneath.

Jerick looked at the body, his vision shifting to see beyond its flesh and into its base construction. He could sense small—but still intricate—constructions of Axi crawling across the corpse's skin. He had seen the same things on the body of a man dying of the dark fever.

Not questioning, Gathban moved away from the body. Jerick quickly scanned the rest of the crack, but the other bodies had been dead long enough for their flesh to have rotted away, and he saw no signs of disease. Jerick followed Gathban, placing himself next to the larger man as they continued to search.

"Tell me about Kaz'ch, Rock," he requested, using the man's nickname—a

tag he had earned half as a joke regarding his size, and half as a comment about his sheer toughness.

Gathban looked up for a moment, then shrugged a large shoulder. Jerick had never seen a Kaz'ch that wasn't a little bit fat—like their Ke'Chan cousins, they were a large people, though they tended to be shorter. They carried their weight well, however; the bulk was spread around their entire bodies, instead of concentrated in the belly like it had been in King Rodis. Jerick knew from experience that beneath the flab was a set of muscles that could rival even the mightiest of soldiers.

"Honestly, sir, Kaz'ch is a pretty ordinary place. Our people used to be chariot warriors like the Ke'Chan but, well, they say we got too big for the horses to pull. Now most of us just farm or raise sheep."

"And you're related to the Ke'Chan?" Jerick asked, picking up a long-bladed sword that still looked usable.

Gathban smiled. "Partially, but they don't like us much, sir. We've got as much Fallin and Rodain blood in our veins as we do Ke'Chan. I barely even know a handful of words in Ke'Chan—I was raised speaking Fallin, and that's what I know."

Jerick nodded. "Still they—"

"Sir!" a voice called from the other side of the cavern. "I found one."

"Good," Jerick called back. "Excuse me, Gathban."

"Of course, sir."

Jerick hurried over to where a small group of bridgemen stood around a particular corpse. It had long since lost its flesh, but the bones were draped with tattered remnants of clothing that had obviously not been human. The Sho Del wore armor made of hundreds of tiny steel rings, a method of construction that still baffled Yolish smiths, though he had heard the Tzends could duplicate it. The small rings rusted easily, leaving the metal unusable. The bones, however, were a different matter.

"Dente, you have that sack?" Jerick asked.

"Yes, sir," the tall man replied, holding out a sack bearing a stalk of grain, which marked it as food supplies.

"Good, you know what to do."

"Yes, sir," Dent replied, reaching to put the skeleton in the sack. The first bone his hand fell on, however was a long, thin one that came to a point at both tips.

"Wait," Jerick said, feeling a coldness about him. Though he was not looking microkinetically, he could sense the pulses of energy coming from the

bone. The Tamu Kek. “I’ve warned you about that bone, Dente. Leave it behind, but take the rest.”

“Yes, sir,” Dente said with a shrug.

AS SOON AS THEY REACHED THE TOP OF THE CLIFFSIDE, DENTE TOOK ON the slump-backed, customary posture of a bridgeman, then broke off from the rest of the group and slowly began to shuffle away. The sack of Sho Del bones rested plumply on his back. They had found several more Sho Del bodies during the hunt, and had harvested their skeletons as well.

Jerick watched the lanky Fallin wander away. His biggest fear was that someone would see Dente’s motions, and assume they were trying to take some of the scavengings for themselves. No cry arose, however, as the members of the Fourth Bridge made their way over to the collection station to unload their burdens. Though the semi-theft was starkly obvious to Jerick—Dente just wandered past the collection station, carrying a large and suspicious-looking sack—none of the regular soldiers even gave him a passing glance. It appeared that the assumptions about bridgemen could work for them as well as against them; since it was presumed that bridgemen were too dense to do much on their own, everyone just assumed Dente had orders to do what he was doing.

Jerick was so caught up in watching Dente that he completely missed what was happening on the other side of the collection station. When he heard the cry, however, he immediately realized his mistake. Young Kep had been pushed out of line by one of the weighing guards, and the boy lay huddled on the ground, cowering before the larger man.

“You call that a load?” the man demanded.

Jerick cursed quietly. They had given Kep an equal distribution of the gatherings, but no matter how much they brought back, it seemed that the weighing guards always found one bridgeman to pick on. Usually, it was one of the smaller ones.

Jerick dropped his own load, preparing to rush over and help. He slowed, however, as he realized someone else had beat him to it. Gathban stepped out of the line, tossing his bag of metal to the ground with a sharp crash. He stepped in front of Kep, planting his powerful legs on the ground and folding his arms. Another man, Kurt, joined him, followed by two more until the single guard found himself faced by four unyielding bridgemen. Jerick approached with a quiet step.

The guard’s face was shocked, as if he were seeing bridgemen for the

first time—realizing that compared to these men, their muscles powerful from their daily labors, their eyes hard and enduring, he was outmatched.

“Is there a problem here, soldier?” Jerick asked, joining the line of four men, folding his arms to imitate their stance. He made certain that the action raised the side of his shirt, revealing the glimmering Sho Del sword he had taken to wearing. He’d decided that they could try to take it from him if they wanted, but he would not be quelled. So far, no one had made any objections.

“Um, no,” the man mumbled.

“Good,” Jerick said. “Back into line, men.”

The men nodded, one of them turning to help Kep to his feet. Jerick laid a hand on Gathban’s arm as he passed. “Good job, Rock,” Jerick mumbled.

The large man smiled. “We’re the Fourth Bridge, sir. All of us.” With that comment, he picked up his sack and moved into line.

GATHBAN STIRRED THE SOUP, ADDING SPICES FROM SEVERAL POUCHES that rested on the ground beside the fire, and humming to himself a tune that Jerick didn’t recognize. It was amazing what the Kaz’ch could do with a few simple ingredients. It was probably a result of the slop he had been forced to eat for the last eight months, but Jerick thought Gathban’s soups tasted better than anything he had ever had in the king’s palace.

Men sat around the fire talking, a usual occurrence now in the Fourth Bridge. Jerick had long since run out of stories to tell them, but it didn’t matter. Sometimes he retold their favorites or even made up new ones, but mostly the men liked to just sit around and talk. For some reason, they didn’t seem as tired as they had before.

To augment their nightly sessions, Jerick had taken to spending half of his pay—two coppers now, because of his rank—on ingredients for Gathban’s soups. It wasn’t much, but it seemed to do a lot for filling the men’s stomachs.

“Where’d you learn to cook, Rock?” Jerick asked as one of the men accepted a bowl full of soup from the Kaz’ch.

“My Hami taught me,” Gathban replied, seating himself next to Jerick.

“Hami?” Jerick asked.

“My grandmother, sir. She was the best cook this side of the Atads. Could turn rocks and twigs into a feast not even a king could refuse. She said a boy who couldn’t cook wouldn’t be able to appreciate his wife.”

“Sounds like quite the woman,” Jerick noted.

"She was, sir," Gathban said with a sigh, eating his own soup. "And she was right too."

"Right?"

"Rock got a woman waiting him, sir," Kurt said in broken Fallin—the accepted language of the fireside chats.

"And I hear she's as big as he is, too," another man, Vessin, snickered.

"Bigger," Gathban huffed. "Not like these scrawny things you Fallins chase."

The men laughed at the Kaz'ch's indignation. "How long do you have now, Rock?" Dente asked, helping himself to some soup.

"I'm almost halfway there."

Jerick raised an eyebrow.

"Rock's Tez . . . Tech . . ." Dente stumbled on the foreign word.

"Tez'ch Del," Gathban corrected. "It's something like a Kalord over here."

"Anyway," Dente continued, "his chief won't let him marry unless he can come up with three hundred coppers."

"That seems a little extreme," Jerick noted.

"It's complicated, sir," Gathban said. "I don't much understand it myself. Roshel—that's my girl—she belongs to a separate Tez'ch Del. I can only marry within my area, and so my Tez'ch Del has to buy her before the wedding can take place. He said if I came to the war and sent him the money, he'd do it."

"You see," Vessin said, scratching his short beard. "It's much easier here. The women may be scrawny, but we don't have to work so hard for them."

"No, Vessin," Kurt put in. "Instead of paying nobles, you just give money directly to girls."

Vessin blushed as the men laughed.

"I'll bet Hook has a girl," Dente said, flopping down on the ground beside the fire. "How about it, sir? You probably have some gorgeous thing waiting for you."

"She won't be waiting long after she hears about that nose," Vessin quipped.

Jerick smiled, setting aside his bowl aside. "I have a woman," he admitted as the laughter died down. "Though I wouldn't say she's waiting for me. In fact, she's engaged to someone else."

"That's why you came to the war?" Dente asked.

"That's part of it," Jerick said.

"Who was she?" Kurt asked, his Meleran accent showing through. He

didn't speak much of his past, though Jerick guessed he was a runaway servant of some sort.

"The daughter of the king," Jerick said off-handedly.

There were several whoops of surprise at this. "Hook certainly knows how to set his sights high," Vessin chuckled.

"Were you a nobleman?" Kep asked, his voice reserved.

"I was a lumberman," Jerick said. "I've told you that before. However, I was raised in the palace."

"A servant?" Vessin guessed.

"No," Jerick corrected. "I was part of a bet. The king and one of the Kalords had a competition—they wanted to see if a peasant boy could be trained to learn as well as the son of a nobleman."

"That was *you*?" Kurt asked with surprise, sitting up so quickly he dropped his bowl.

"Unfortunately," Jerick admitted.

"How did it turn out?" Vessin asked, his thin face intrigued.

"Well," Jerick said, leaning back to look up into the clear night sky. The stars looked different here in Fallamore; they were slightly off. "Let's just say I got too accustomed to life in the palace. I started to think I was an aristocrat; I even assumed the princess would choose me over a member of the nobility. In the end, she didn't, and I ended up here."

"You didn't win, then?" Kep asked with disappointment.

"Oh, I won," Jerick said. "We never finished the bet, but my essays danced circles around those of the nobleman's son."

The night grew silent. Jerick looked up to find the bridgemen looking at him with solemn eyes.

"You can . . . read then, sir?" Gathban asked.

"Of course I . . ." Jerick paused. There was surprise in the men's eyes, surprise he recognized. He had felt the same emotion the day he had realized that Martis was no better than the bully back in his home village. To these men, reading was a sign of nobility. They had been taught it was the divine right of the upper class. "Yes," he said, "I can read. The king was right—peasants can learn to read. In fact, they can turn out just as learned as any nobleman."

It was a heavy load for them to bear, and Jerick could see the uncertainty in their eyes. One comment, even from a man they respected so much, was hardly enough to battle an entire lifetime of contrary teaching.

Jerick smiled. "I'll teach any of you who want to learn."

THEY DIDN'T GET AN OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE USE OF THE SHO DEL BONES for another two weeks. They went on a number of runs, but each one proved to be easy and relatively safe, with no Sho Del shooting at them. The strain of luck only served to enhance the Fourth Bridge's growing reputation. It was whispered throughout the camp that the crew that had once been the least lucky had been taken under the protection of Oreon the White himself.

Eventually, however, the day came.

"I see them, sir," Gathban said. "They're waiting for us."

"Well, our luck couldn't have lasted forever," Jerick said, taking a deep breath.

Gathban nodded. Ever since Jerick had named him as his second—a rank that wasn't officially endorsed by the camp, but was considered law to the Fourth Bridge—the Kaz'ch had decided to take the place next to Jerick at the front of the bridge. It was his privilege as second, he claimed.

"Run!" Gaz yelled from behind. The Sho Del were lining up to fire.

"If this doesn't work," Jerick said under his breath, "carry my body back to camp when Gaz is finished with me."

Gathban snorted. "You think we'd let him touch you?"

"All right, men!" Jerick yelled. "Let's give this a try!"

Jerick let go of the bridge. Ducking to a running squat, he slowed slightly and let the bridge pass over him. There, tied to the bottom of the wooden structure, were four large rectangular shields, each one wrapped in cloth. He pulled them loose, then dashed back to the front of the bridge, handing one to Gathban and two others. They brought the shields up just as the arrows began to fly.

Jerick held up the large, cloth-covered shield. Shafts began to snap against its surface, but it held. "Let's move!" Jerick cried. The men behind, rearranging slightly to compensate for the four missing bridgemen, broke into a dash. Jerick and his shield-bearers ran at the front, blocking the arrows.

"There, sir!" Gathban yelled, nodding toward the quickly approaching plateau. One of the Sho Del archers, angry at Jerick's ploy, was jumping across the chasm in front of them.

Jerick cursed—he hadn't considered this. Yelling loudly, he dashed forward and rammed his shield into the surprised Sho Del. Then, without pausing, he dropped the bulky rectangle and whipped out his sword. The archer had barely recovered from the first blow when Jerick's sword took him in the stomach.

White blood pulsed forth, and Jerick brought his foot up, kicking the Sho Del off the end of his blade, toppling the creature into the chasm, its dying black eyes utterly shocked. Jerick immediately rolled, dropping the weapon to recover his shield—and none too quickly. Three arrows cracked against its front just after he brought it up.

“Drop the bridge and move into place!” Jerick yelled.

The men complied, moving with practiced efficiency. Jerick jumped onto the bridge itself, holding his shield to protect the men pushing behind. He walked backward as the bridge slid across the chasm, careful not to let his weight topple it into the black gulf.

Jerick jumped off as the bridge fell into place. Men galloped across the structure, engaging the retreating archers beyond. Looking around quickly, Jerick offered a silent prayer to the Nine Lords. Had they been quick enough? His tension faded as his eyes found the other bridge crews. Several of them were just placing their bridges. The members of the Fourth hadn’t just kept up, they had moved even faster than their companions.

Jerick turned to confront what he knew would come next. Sure enough, Gaz could be seen trotting across the white-rocked plateau, his face dark.

“Where in the name of the Lords did you get those!” he demanded. “You’ve been stealing!”

Jerick reached out his hand as the Kaz’ch approached, pulling the cloth off the front of his shield, revealing the wall of white beneath.

Gaz stopped, looking at the collection of bones. It had taken most of the leather from the men’s vests to strap them all together, but the three-layer construction of bones had been worth the effort.

Gaz growled. “I’m not certain if I should beat you for insubordination or pure morbidity,” he said with a curse.

“They’re Sho Del bones, Gaz,” Jerick said, setting the shield aside. “They’re much lighter than human bones, but they’re stronger as well. I once heard someone tell me that there was Dragonsteel in them. Last I looked, there is no rule forbidding us from using Sho Del bones.”

“You must have used camp time—time when you’re paid to be working—to gather them,” Gaz challenged.

“You could make that assumption,” Jerick said with a shrug. “However, if you check with the overseers, you’ll probably find that our crew has produced more metal while scavenging than any other. That makes a poor case for us being loafers.”

Gaz paused again, less certain. “I don’t have to answer to anyone,” he finally decided. “I could have you hung just for looking at me wrong.”

"That would be a bad idea," Jerick said, holding out his hand. Gathban brought him another shield, and Jerick held it out toward the Kaz'ch sergeant.

"What's that?" Gaz demanded.

"Your shield, Gaz," Jerick said. "We made five. My crew will carry them to and from the battlefield, all you have to do is come get it when you want a little extra protection. And," Jerick said, nodding to the battlefield, which was littered with the bodies of dead and dying bridgemen, "I think only a fool would reject it. I've seen some arrows come pretty close to you Gaz, no matter how far back you try to hide. Sooner or later those Sho Del are going to realize you're the one who gives the orders, then you'll suddenly become their prime target."

Gaz scratched his beard. The Kaz'ch had always disliked Jerick, but the first lesson a man learned in the Eternal War was that of self-preservation. All prejudices were cast aside when it came to survival. "All right," Gaz finally decided.

"Not so quickly, Gaz," Jerick said, handing the shield back to Gathban. "I'll give you the shield, but you're going to have to give me something in exchange."

The Kaz'ch's eyes grew suspicious. "What?" he demanded.

"Men," Jerick said. "I want more men. The other bridge crews are constantly getting new recruits, but I haven't gotten anyone new in months."

"You never lose any men," Gaz protested. "The last time one died was a month ago, and I sent you a replacement."

"Nonetheless, I want a few more. It's only fair."

"It only takes twenty men to carry a bridge," Gaz said. "What would you do with them?"

"That is my business. I am, after all, the bridgeleader."

Gaz ground his teeth, his face growing indignant.

"Look, Gaz," Jerick said, stepping forward, and looking down at the man's eyes. He only remarked briefly on the fact that eight months ago, when he had arrived at the war, he had been forced to look up to meet Gaz's eyes. "If you'll apply your brain to it, you'll realize more men for me is a good thing for you. Don't tell me you haven't received reports telling you that our crew is becoming more productive than any other in the camp. We scavenge better, we build better bridges, and we even clean latrines faster. I'll bet our success has brought you praise."

Gaz looked up. He suddenly looked very tiny—had Jerick ever considered this man large and frightening?

"If I have more men, we'll work even better. No one will realize I have a few extra bodies—in fact, it will just look normal, because we'll be receiving replacements just like the other crews. You'll be praised, I get what I want, and we both are safe from Sho Del arrows."

Gaz took a step backward. "I'll think about it," he mumbled.

"You'll do it," Jerick replied.

Gaz paused. Jerick could see the battle going on in his mind—this was the crucial moment. Either Gaz would get enraged at Jerick's questioning of his authority, and Jerick would probably end up disappearing from the camp one night in an unexplained "accident," or the Kaz'ch would take the offer and say nothing to his superiors. It was pride versus self-preservation.

"All right," the man finally agreed, grinding his teeth. As much as he wanted to see Jerick punished, the prospect of being shielded during battle was more enticing. "But just be glad I didn't beat you seriously for today's stunt." With that rather pathetic attempt at saving face, the Kaz'ch retreated to begin yelling at another crew.

Jerick turned to find Gathban's smiling face, and beyond him a group of quiet, and respectful, bridgemen. Not a single one had been injured in the approach. Kep walked up to him slowly, holding out the discarded Sho Del sword. Jerick accepted the blade, and slid it back into his sheath.

"We're Bridge Four," he said simply, and the men let out a cheer.

JERICK SAT CONTEMPLATIVELY AS HE WATCHED THE BATTLE PROCEED, thinking about his easy victory over Gaz and the success of his shields. He had found a way to get his men to a defended plateau safely, but he was still worried.

"You look troubled, sir," Gathban noted, sitting next to him.

"It isn't enough, Rock," Jerick confided. The Fourth Bridge lounged around them, congratulating themselves on their victory.

"What do you mean, sir? I'm just a simple man, but it looks like we won to me."

Jerick shook his head. "What if a couple more Sho Del decided to attack us like that archer did?" he asked. "They'll realize that this change in bridgeman techniques is dangerous, and they'll try to squash it quickly. Next time we might find ourselves facing an entire squad of warriors."

Gathban shrugged. "I don't see what we can do about it, sir."

Suddenly, Jerick's eyes fell on the short sword at Gathban's waist. "Rock, have you ever even drawn that thing?"

The Kaz'ch looked down. "This?" he asked, pulling the diminutive blade out of its sheath. In his massive hand it looked even smaller. "It never seemed to be of much use to me."

"I think we underestimate the usefulness of those swords, Rock," Jerick mused. "If we knew how to use them . . . That's what we need to do! We need to train ourselves to fight."

"But when?" Gathban returned. "At night?"

Jerick shook his head too slowly. "No, that time is too important. The men need a chance to relax." Then, he looked around him, realization striking. "We do it now, Rock."

"Now?"

"Now, in the middle of runs. We just sit here, watching the battle. We should be preparing, training ourselves. These runs take hours." Jerick smiled to himself. "That's the answer, Rock. It's the time we need."

The Kaz'ch nodded slightly, agreement in his eyes. "Today?" he asked.

"No," Jerick decided. "Let the men celebrate first. We'll start next time; I know some basic fencing techniques, and the men are already in shape. If we can teach them to hold together in a fight, and not scatter, we'll probably have all the edge we need . . ."

Jerick trailed off. Something was wrong—very wrong. He stood suddenly, his body tense and alert. It was coming from the center of the fighting plateau. Something very powerful, like he had never felt before.

"Sir?" Gathban asked with concern.

Jerick scanned the conflict. The Sho Del had pulled back momentarily, regrouping before they tried one last time to take the well from Ske company. There were the usual horrors and floating monsters, which gave off a slight pulsing chill, but Jerick was used to that. This was something much more powerful.

"There," he said out loud without realizing it, pointing at the back of the Sho Del group. A new arrival had joined their ranks.

Jerick could distinguish little from such a distance. It wore armor—full body armor like the Tzend warrior that had come to the palace back in Melerand—but it wasn't silver like steel, it was a dull grayish black. On its head was a wicked helmet that pointed down in a "V" shape, with twin, knife-like protrusions at the top, like spiked ears.

"It's the Lord of War," Gathban breathed, rising beside him. "I've never seen him before."

Jerick nodded slowly. He had heard stories, but never seen the creature for himself. The Lord of the War, they called it, leader of the Sho Del forces.

It was supposed to be a wicked monster, a horror even the illusions couldn't match. Looking at his armor, Jerick could believe the stories true.

In a moment of curiosity, he distorted his vision, looking microkinetically. The creature's armor was nothing more than painted steel—not Dragonsteel. Jerick couldn't be certain the creature itself wasn't an illusion—he had tried looking at illusions microkinetically, but they looked the same as anything else, collected groups of Axi. The illusions were detailed enough to fool even his abilities.

Jerick switched back to regular vision as the Sho Del attacked again. The strange warrior rode at their front, astride one of the reptilian jumping beasts that had become increasingly common over the last few months. The Lord of the War slammed into the human ranks, laying about him with an enormous weapon that was some cross between a sword and an axe—a construction that was short in length but at least four handspans thick and covered with wicked barbs and spikes. Jerick didn't need microkinesis to know the blade was forged of Dragonsteel—its edge sheered through men's armor like an oar through water, splitting soldiers completely in half with nearly every swing. Within a few minutes, the battle was over, the men retreating across their bridges.

As they left, the monster reined its beast in and paused, looking at his fleeing opponents. His face seemed to pause on Jerick, staring at him, though no eyes were visible beneath the dark helm.

"Come on," Jerick said distractedly, his eyes still focused on the Lord of the War. "Stow those shields. Let's get moving."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BAT'CHOR KNEW LITTLE OF AGRICULTURE, BUT HE HAD ENOUGH BUSINESS sense to recognize prosperity when he saw it. Lush green crops, peasants who laughed while they worked, and cities that welcomed foreigners—even Ke'Chan. All of this in the middle of what had once been a barren land where scrub and tumbleweed had been much more common than crops. Tzendor had changed dramatically even in the two years since he and Topaz had infiltrated the temple.

Bat'Chor shook his head, guiding his chariot through the city gates. Had he not been on such an important mission, he might have even considered relocating his clan from Fallamore to Tzendor. Such prosperous times boded well for merchants—he knew of at least a dozen clans that had left for Tzendor in the last decade.

Another change he had noticed was the horses. Ever since 'Cheru Tar had introduced the chariot to Yolen over a thousand years before, the vehicle had been the chosen means of transportation. A chariot could move much more quickly than an ox-drawn cart or a mule; unfortunately, the metals necessary to construct a chariot—not to mention the horses to draw one—were beyond the means of most people.

As he had been traveling, bumping along a newly-constructed Tzend highway, a man on horseback had galloped past him—not just any man, however. A Ke'Chan. Bat'Chor had been so dumbfounded that he had nearly lost control of his chariot. Ke'Chan did not ride horses. It wasn't a matter of cultural taboo, but one of necessity. Horses, unlike mules, could

only carry weight on the hind portion of their back, right above the legs—a position that made for very uncomfortable riding. In addition, Bat'Chor hadn't ever seen a horse that was strong enough to bear the weight of an enormous Ke'Chan frame. Riding was for lean, wiry cattlemen. Ke'Chan used chariots.

Except, it appeared as if that were changing. Bat'Chor had heard that recent advances in horse breeding had produced an animal capable of carrying a rider on its back, but never had he imagined the magnificent beasts he saw in Tzendor. Here, in the city of Gvorn Du, he counted more horses bearing the strange leather constructions—apparently known as “saddles”—on their backs than he did pulling chariots.

Gvorn Du was a large city and, like most modern Tzend cities, was constructed mostly of stone and thatchings. It was an odd combination, stone walls with wooden tops. Bat'Chor was accustomed to either the clay-brick buildings of Fallamore or the completely wooden shacks of northern Yolen. The combination seemed to work all right for the Tzends, however—their homes didn't have to bear the weight of snow, like those in Melerand, but they also didn't have to deal with the powerful humidity of Fallamore, which tended to warp and even rot woods.

Bat'Chor made several inquiries as he traveled the streets, and he didn't even have to glare very hard to get answers. Eventually, he arrived at a prosperous-looking building with a shingled roof and meticulously white-washed stone walls. He tied up his horse, then pulled open the door and strode in. The Ke'Chan family inside, who had been in the process of eating, looked up with surprise. Bat'Chor had never seen any of them before in his life.

“I am Bat'Chor,” he informed them.

There was a brief pause, then the Chanwife—a squat, short woman, at least for a Ke'Chan—jumped from her seat enthusiastically. “Cousin!” she declared as the rest of the family rose, greeting him with hand-clasps and pats on the shoulders. In a moment the Chanwife, Tokal, had set him a place at the table and he was eating and conversing with the family.

Few outsiders understood the nature of Ke'Chan familial ties. From his experiences traveling and dealing with Yolish merchants, Bat'Chor knew that they would have been amazed at what he had just done—in Yolen, one didn't just stride into the home of a distant relative you had never met and expect to be fed.

Tokal was his Got'Chuf, a female seventh cousin. Bat'Chor had never met her, but he knew her name—all Ke'Chan were required to know their

family decandancies eight generations removed, and one was still considered a close relative until the twelfth generation. Tokal could have been his mother's sister's daughter, and not his mother's father's father's mother's father's mother's father's brother's daughter's son's son's daughter's daughter's daughter's daughter. It made perfect sense—Bat'Chor had never understood why outsiders couldn't comprehend such things.

"You have come like everyone else, I assume," Bethra, Tokal's husband, was saying. "More and more Ke'Chan are moving to Tzendor these days."

"It certainly has changed, Rukath," Bat'Chor responded, using the title for one's Got'Chuf's husband.

"It has indeed," Bethra continued. "A decade back, our clan could barely make its way dealing in Tzend stone. Now we've become wealthy by trading clocks." No mention was made of Bat'Chor's dead father, for the two year mourning period had not ended. It was taboo to speak of the deceased in that time.

"Clocks?" Bat'Chor asked, forming the unfamiliar Tzend word in his mouth.

"Cousin Bat'Chor, haven't you seen one?" Tokal said, pulling her chair away from the table and scuttling into a side room. Bat'Chor shifted in his seat uncomfortably—when had the Tzends started using chairs at the table? Last he had known, they ate on the floor like everyone else. It was much more economical—the only thing chairs did was make you have to build taller tables.

Tokal returned with a box-like contraption that was about two hand-spans wide. On the front was a circle, divided something like a sundial, with two arms pointing in different directions.

Tokal handed him the box. "It tells time, Bat'Chor," she said.

Bat'Chor frowned. He couldn't read Tzend, but the symbols around the circle were familiar enough for him to recognize them as numbers.

"But, why use a box when you have the sun?" Bat'Chor asked.

"Because this is more precise, cousin," Tokal explained. "It can tell the exact minute of the day."

Bat'Chor snorted. "Why would you need to know that?"

Tokal shook her head. "I don't really understand either," she confessed. "They are extremely popular, however, and the nobility all think they need one. And, of course, if the nobility needs one then the rich merchants all need one as well—if just to prove that they're as good as any aristocrat."

Bat'Chor shook his head, turning the box in his hands. Fads were common amongst the nobility—he suspected that in another few years

the novelty of these “clocks” would wear away and everyone would go back to telling time the way the True God intended. Until then, however, he couldn’t blame his cousins for making a profit on them.

“We’ll need a distributor in Yolen soon, Kath’kor,” Bethra said, using the word for a male seventh cousin of one’s wife. “Whatever brought you to Tzendor, I assure you this will be a much better deal.”

Bat’Chor paused. Even in the face of his quest, such an offer was tempting.

“I must decline, Rukath,” Bat’Chor said with a sigh. “I am committed to my current trade endeavor.”

“And may we ask what that is?” Tokal inquired.

Bat’Chor paused. “Dragonsteel,” he finally replied.

TRAVELING THESE LAST SIX MONTHS HAD BEEN A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE for Bat’Chor. Soon after arriving in Tzendor, he had realized that he couldn’t just go from place to place like he used to do. He bore a much greater weight now; he had to take responsibility for things that he had always just left to Topaz. He had to listen as he traveled, teasing out information from the people he met and using what he learned to guide his course.

He knew, however, that he could not do it the way Topaz did. Bat’Chor was no actor, able to construct for himself a dozen different personas as the situation demanded. Besides, even if he had been capable of such, it would never work for a Ke’Chan. His people’s histories and family relationships were too complex to be invented. Had he tried to pretend to be someone he was not, every Ke’Chan in the area would quickly have seen through the deception.

So it was that Bat’Chor, acting as no one but himself, came to stand in the receiving hall of the Ki family mansion. It was an impressive building—more so than even the rest of Tzend. Its construction followed that of the temple he and Topaz had visited, with broad archways and vaulted ceilings. Its walls were draped with artwork—most of which were Fallin, though some appeared to be Tzend.

Bat’Chor was not a connoisseur of art, but the Tzend paintings impressed him. The southern continent was not known for its artistic ability, but apparently this trait—like so many others—was changing under the reign of Emperor Aronack. The paintings incorporated some new element that Bat’Chor couldn’t quite figure out—somehow, the painter made it seem as if things in the background of the painting were actually farther away than those at the front. It was an impressive technique, and Bat’Chor felt himself

wanting to reach out and feel the canvas to prove to himself that the images were really just paint.

"Tradesman Bat'Chor," a feminine voice addressed.

Bat'Chor turned from the painting to regard a middle-aged woman approaching from the far end of the hallway. She had the tall, thin frame of a Nyor Tzend—few people from Yolen understood the diversity of the Tzends as a racial group. Since Tzendor as a continent was also a single country, most Yolish assumed that it was also one people. Such was a gross simplification—Bat'Chor knew of at least a half-dozen distinct racial groups in Tzendor, and he had spent relatively little time on the continent.

The Nyor Tzends originated on the northwestern tip of the continent, where the only truly suitable farmland could be found. They were a tall people, and though their skin was a shade darker than that of most Yolish, she was not half as dark as a Ke'Chan. Still, despite their tendency to be thin, many people postulated that the Ke'Chan and the Nyor were related somehow. They were the tallest and most aggressive people on their separate continents.

Bat'Chor nodded his head as the woman approached—the Ke'Chan bowed to no one, no matter how lofty their rank. "My husband will see you now, tradesman," the woman said. "Though I must warn you—he is not in a very . . . inviting mood."

"I understand," Bat'Chor replied in horribly accented Tzendish. From what he had been told, Lord Ki Avel was rarely in, as his wife put it, an "inviting" mood. The man was known to be of an irritable temper, probably because his brother—his younger brother—was one of the nation's most accomplished generals. It was widely assumed that when the younger brother returned from his campaigns in the Eternal War, Emperor Aronack would appoint him head of his house—displacing his sibling.

Lady Ki led Bat'Chor through the twisting halls of the mansion to a well-lit room near the back of the building. Inside he saw a man who would have been distinguished had his face not been marred by a scowl. Ki Avel was short for a Nyor Tzend, which, knowing Tzend politics, probably inspired relentless gossipings about his parentage. He had been dictating something to a scribe, but as Bat'Chor approached he waved the man away and turned his frown on this newcomer.

"What do you want?" the man demanded. "To see the necklace, I assume. I wish you people would understand that it is not for sale. Go ask some of your squinty-eyed brethren; they'll tell you what I told them. Your answer is no. You may not see it, you may not weigh it, and you certainly may not buy it."

Bat'Chor paused, taken aback by the sudden hostility in Ki Avel's words. "But, you do not know what I am offering for heem," Bat'Chor protested.

"It doesn't matter what you're offering," the man said, throwing his hands into the air. "I'm tired of you people coming to our country and buying up all the goods. You Ke'Chan flock to prosperity like ants on a corpse, always searching for some way to take a chunk of flesh for yourselves. Well, not here. You may go."

Topaz would have talked his way through. He would have either made friends with the man—turning hostility to affability in a matter of minutes—or he would have shamed Avel so soundly that all denials were forgotten.

Bat'Chor was not Topaz.

His sandal thumped lightly against Avel's chest. The Tzend caught it before it dropped to the floor, looking down at the shoe with confused eyes. Bat'Chor's fist took him in the forehead just as he was looking up.

Bat'Chor hopped back, raising his fists to prepare for the fight. Avel, however, dropped like a dead mule at the first blow. Bat'Chor frowned, looking down at the unconscious man—he intentionally hadn't hit Avel very hard, trying to compensate for the unfairness of the fight. Apparently, he hadn't compensated enough.

Then Bat'Chor remembered the wife. He looked up in alarm, expecting her to have gone yelling for the guards. Lady Ki, however, still stood in the doorway—a slight smile on her lips. Apparently Bat'Chor wasn't the only one who had been insulted by this man.

Bat'Chor looked down again, slipping his sandal back on his foot. "Hees brother ees a mighty warrior?" he asked in disbelief.

The woman nodded.

Bat'Chor just shook his head. "Weell you show me the necklace?" he requested.

The woman hesitated.

"I do not weesh to take heem, only to look at heem."

"It would serve him right if you *did* take it," the woman decided, brushing past Bat'Chor and pulling open the door at the back of the room. Inside Bat'Chor could see a pedestal holding the necklace. Topaz would have snorted in disdain at the lack of proper security.

Bat'Chor nodded to his unlikely accomplice and walked into the room. The necklace was bulky and ornate, constructed of a set of fist-sized circular discs. It was silvery but, as Bat'Chor looked closer, he noticed lines of tarnish hidden within its folds and etchings.

He snorted. "He eesn't even Dragonsteel," he laughed.

“It isn’t?” the woman asked with an amazed voice.

Bat’Chor shook his head, picking up the necklace. He reached down and pulled out his belt knife, then scraped the side of a disc. The blade left a mark. The silver was, of course, valuable, but not by far as priceless as Dragonsteel.

“He never lets me touch it,” the woman confessed. Then she smiled slightly. “But, perhaps now that I know the secret . . .”

Bat’Chor replaced the necklace, then nodded to Lady Ki, leaving her to contemplate her newfound power.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“LOOK HOW THEY STAND, MEN,” JERICK SAID, GESTURING TO THE PLATEAU in front of them. The human warriors had arranged themselves in a sturdy line, each man prepared to guard the sides of the men around him.

“The important thing is not to break,” Jerick explained as the Sho Del made their attack. “If the line breaks, then the enemy can surround you and attack you from behind.”

The bridgemen nodded to themselves, watching the warriors fight. During the last few months, training during runs had been a success for more than one reason. Not only did it give the men something to do while they waited, but they were also able to see firsthand how their ranks were supposed to be formed. Though Jerick had a little knowledge of swordplay, he knew next to nothing about actual warfare. He learned as the other men learned, by watching.

“See how each man’s shield partially protects his neighbor’s body,” Gathban noted.

“I doubt there’s a shield large enough to protect you, Rock,” Vessin said, slapping the Kaz’ch on the back.

Jerick chuckled, turning away from the battle. “All right, let’s form our ranks and practice. Remember your postures.”

The bridgemen did as he commanded, falling into two ranks of nine men each, and proceeded to stage a mock battle. Jerick and Gathban stood aside, giving suggestions when they could.

Jerick had requested, and been refused, enough wood to make practice

swords. The officers suffered Bridge Four's training, probably because they couldn't think of any reason to forbid it. Jerick could feel their resentment, however. Trained bridgemen challenged their elitism, breaking down the barriers between what made a man a noble and what made a man a peasant.

The more he thought about it, the more he wondered just why the officers—especially General Demetris—were so wasteful with bridgeman lives. Shields were a simple enough thing to produce, not really requiring that much wood or expenditure. However, such things were called too good for bridgemen. The more he thought about it, the more Jerick realized the entire situation—the bridgeman casualties—was less an issue of money, and more an issue of class. The regular warriors, mostly noblemen, often lost their lives while fighting for Dragonsteel. It would be wrong in their eyes for the peasants to escape unharmed when nobles died. So, the bridgemen were forbidden shields.

There was more to it than that, Jerick was certain. If the statistics he heard were true, then General Demetris was able to put more men on a plateau more quickly than any other general. Most of that success came because of the way he pushed his bridge crews. Giving them shields would just add another element of complexity to his resource management and burden of training. In the end, the simple question was: why protect the bridgemen when there were always plenty more to replace them? Demetris's willingness to sacrifice men was always compensated by the Fallin emperor sending him more replacements.

Still, Jerick thought poorly of Demetris because of his attitude. Rin's cardinal teaching had been that of not wasting life, and Jerick could not respect a man who so blatantly wasted his men. Jerick did, however, keep such rebellious thoughts to himself. General Demetris was the bridgemen's ultimate superior—it would hurt their morale, and sense of purpose, if they knew of Jerick's disapproval.

"Good," Jerick noted as Kep jabbed his weapon between his opponents' shields. The young boy was disadvantaged in many ways, but his size did make him a more difficult target to hit. He almost completely vanished when protected by the shield of his companion, and he moved incredibly quickly.

Kep smiled, an action that immediately earned him a rap on the head from his opponent's "weapon"—a piece of bone approximately the same length as a short sword. Jerick had been right about the weapons—they weren't as useless as they appeared. Though the short swords weren't as

majestic as longer swords, they worked very well in a tight formation. They were much easier to thrust and swing than a longer blade.

“Stay focused, Kep,” Jerick warned, continuing to watch the battle. The men were getting good. Several months of training had made their reflexes quick, and their already strong muscles had provided a good basis for transforming them from servants to warriors. Now when the members of Bridge Four walked through the camp, they wore their swords as if they knew how to use them. Each man also bore a small shield constructed of Sho Del bones.

Eventually, Jerick called for a break, and the men went to get drinks and rest. There would be no more practicing this day—it appeared as if the Dragonsteel battle was almost finished, and it wouldn’t do for his men to be exhausted from training when it came time to carry their bridge back to camp.

“HO, DENTE,” JERICK CALLED AS THEY APPROACHED THE CAMP. “ALL IS well?”

The tall Fallin smiled, nodding. He sat at the fire with four other men, stirring a pot of soup. The twenty with Jerick dropped their bridge in its place and began preparing for dinner.

“It was a quiet day, sir,” Dente explained, handing Jerick a bowl as he approached.

“That’s what it’s supposed to be,” Jerick replied with a smile.

Gaz had actually given him the extra bridgemen he requested—an action that had come as a bit of a shock to Jerick. The excess of five men had given Jerick an opportunity to instigate a plan he had been working on: giving the men a day off. Bridgemen worked all days of the week, and the constant drudgery took its toll. With twenty-five men in his crew instead of twenty, Jerick had been able to put them into a rotation, giving each man one day off in every five.

It was a small blessing, but it had made an enormous change in the bridgemen. Not only did their morale improve, but their bodies grew stronger as well. In addition, the ability to leave five men behind at the tent every day had completely eliminated theft. The camp’s soldiers left Bridge Four alone, for there was much easier prey to be found. As a result, the men had actually been able to save their earnings.

“Look, sir,” Dente requested, pointing back at the tent. The normally white side of the structure was covered with black letters.

"You did that?" Jerick asked, impressed.

"I practiced all day," Dente explained.

"It's good," Jerick said appreciatively. Lacking anything else to write on, he had told the men to use the sides of the tent. The charcoal washed away freely enough. "We'll have you reading Realmatic theory by the end of the month."

"Rel . . . what?" Dente asked, blushing beneath the praise. Then, pausing, he continued in a quieter voice. "Thank you, sir," he said. "You don't know what this all has meant to me."

Jerick placed a hand on the man's shoulder. Dente's body was tougher now, lean where it once had been tall and somewhat scrawny. His long, rectangular face bore hope in it—something he had never expected to see from Dente. "I understand," Jerick said simply.

"I've been a wanderer since my family died in that plague," Dente continued softly. He rarely spoke of his past. "It's good to have a purpose again."

With that, the tall, willowy man turned to walk over to the side of the tent, reading the words penned by his own hand with a look of amazement in his eyes.

Jerick smiled to himself, tasting the soup. It was, of course, horrible—Dente couldn't cook to save his life. Jerick ate it anyway, as did the other men—though he did notice Gathban discreetly adding a few spices to the mix.

Jerick watched them, standing a little off to the side. He felt like Dente, in a way. He was amazed at what Bridge Four had become, unable to believe the transformation. The men were singing a rousing song Vessin had taught them. They were happy, and they were alive. Somehow, as he watched them, he knew he couldn't take much credit for their success. Just as the words Dente wrote on the tent had first been crafted by creative thinkers long ago, the souls of these men had been given life by a power far beyond Jerick's own understanding. He had only given them a little bit of a push.

The song was about a boy named Pluke who, through encountering several mishaps and adventures, ended up the king of a nonexistent country. It was a silly song, involving several misadventures in places like brothels, but the theme was encouraging. Pluke won in the end, proving himself not to be the fool everyone had thought him to be. As the second verse began, Vessin called out with a loud voice, changing the name from Pluke to Hook. The men laughed, continuing the verses with this new alteration, and Jerick couldn't help but chuckle to himself.

"In all my days, I've never seen such love for a leader," a voice noted.

Jerick turned slightly as Gathban moved in the twilight darkness to stand next to him.

"I still don't really understand why, Gathban," Jerick said softly under the sound of the music. "I'm amazed every day. How did it happen?"

"I don't know, sir," Gathban admitted. "For me, it started on that day you took Dente's place at the front of the bridge. In my six months in the war, I'd had leaders yell at me, cajole me, and even beat me. However, never once had I ever seen one actually try to lead me. After that . . . well, let's just say my loyalty was certain the day you forced us to march back to the Plains in the middle of the night to search for Uthkar."

"We found him dead," Jerick said with a twinge of sorrow. Uthkar was the last soldier he had lost.

"Yes, but you didn't know we would," Gathban continued. "I saw him fall myself, but even I couldn't be certain he was dead, considering how fast we retreated. That night, as we searched the Plateaus for that one man, despite what old Gaz had told us to do, I knew that you would do the same for any of us. The same for me. You knew we had to retreat when we did, lest the warriors be unable to cross the chasms and escape. But you didn't for one moment give up on poor Uthkar. Sir, I'd follow a leader like that anywhere."

Jerick nodded slowly. "Thank you, Gathban," he said quietly.

"No problem, sir."

The song ended with a round of cheers to Jerick's health and a toast—something which consisted of slapping their bowls of soup together as if they were mugs of saprye. Jerick nodded appreciatively, and the topic changed, turning to stories from the men's homelands.

The talk had a strange effect on Jerick. He thought of Melerand with increasing frequency lately. Perhaps it was the camaraderie of the men, perhaps it was because of the time of year—his birthdate was quickly approaching. He had been at the Shattered Plains nearly a year now. He wondered about the king, Courteth, and even Yoharn. He missed them—they had become his second family. He felt guilty at his treatment of Topaz and the others—they hadn't deserved his anger. He had searched the camp for Frost, but the man had disappeared, and Jerick was frightened for the old scholar's welfare.

Most of all, however, he found himself wondering how Ryalla was doing. It was odd to him that he should worry about her—if anything, he should be thinking about Courteth. Ostensibly, all of his effort in the war was an attempt at winning the princess's hand. The more time he spent here, however, the more he realized he had never really known Courteth. Her

personality had been a thing of vapors to him—unimportant next to her beauty. Memories of her face faded, and he was left trying to remember any truly enjoyable times he had spent with her. To his surprise, there were none.

Ryalla, however, he could remember well. True, most of the recollections involved her implying he was a fool for one reason or another, but at least they were there. Jerick remembered with fondness the first time she had chastised him—the sentiment had been building for some time, and it had been no surprise to him when she released it. Ryalla, however, had been completely shocked that she would let such thoughts pass her lips. He wondered how she was faring up in Melerand, if Topaz often came to visit, and if they often spoke of how stupid their once friend had been for running off to die on the Shattered Plains.

Jerick continued his reminiscences for a short time, but then, almost unconsciously, his eyes noticed something. Kep was looking off into the darkness, a curious look on his face. Jerick followed the boy's gaze, picking out a group of dark forms in the twilight. At first, his hand went to his sword, assuming the silhouettes belonged to soldiers come to make sport of the bridgemen. Then, however, he realized the postures were much too stooped-over to be those of warriors. They were bridgemen.

Jerick met Kep's eyes, then looked out into the darkness. The forms stayed a good distance away, listening to the singing. Jerick felt as if he could sense their longing, their jealousy, despite his inability to see their faces.

The music fell silent as the men noticed Jerick staring off into the night. They looked from him to the dark forms, questions on their faces. *What should we do?* they asked.

"Come closer," Jerick suddenly called out.

The forms jumped, and looked as if they were going to scurry away.

"Leave if you want," Jerick said. "But if you do that, we'll be forced to eat all this soup ourselves."

Slowly, uncertainly, the forms approached the firelight, not quite entering the circle. They stood for a moment and then, as if in concordance, Jerick's men burst out into another joyful song, waving for their associates to join them in the light. Kep began gathering bowls and filling them with the remains of the soup, then handing them to the newcomers.

Jerick smiled, nodding in satisfaction to himself. It appeared as if he were going to have to start spending more of his money on supplies. He turned, about to go find the privy, and was confronted by the sight of a rough form in the darkness.

"Your time has come, fick," Gaz's voice growled.

"What do you want, sergeant?" Jerick asked stiffly.

"It isn't me," Gaz said. "It's the general. He's heard about your little group, and the disruption it's making."

A stab of fear pierced Jerick's body. "Is that so?" he asked, keeping his voice steady.

"He's going to watch you tomorrow. He's coming on the next run, to see for himself."

"I assume you're not going to want us to bring your shield then?" Jerick asked, letting his voice grow sarcastic and folding his arms across his chest.

Gaz spat. "Don't try and drag me down with you, fick. I was never part of this—I only suffered you. I knew the general would come down on you sooner or later."

Jerick sighed. Gaz had been more than willing to use the shield when he thought there would be no repercussions. "Thank you for the message, sergeant," he said dismissively. "I will put it to good use."

And he did. Or at least, he put it to use—mostly in the form of worrying the entire night what would come in the days to follow.

"BY THE LORDS, WHAT'S *HE* DOING HERE?" GATHBAN ASKED UNDER HIS breath. General Demetris's chariot—complete with several boxes in the back to improve his height—was joining up with the group of soldiers as they marched across the Plains.

"He sometimes comes to watch runs," Jerick said off-handedly. It was a hot day, without a cloud in the sky. One nice thing about carrying the bridge was that it allowed the men to march in the shade. Unfortunately, its canopy-like nature also seemed to increase the humidity. Jerick shook his head—winter had come and passed, and it hadn't seemed to make a bit of difference in the temperature of this crazy land.

"I know," Gathban said. "But he always makes me nervous. Simple men like myself don't like dealing with nobility."

"We don't have to deal with him, Rock," Jerick reminded. "We only have to do our job. Who knows, maybe he'll like the idea of our shields, and provide them for all of his bridgemen."

"True," Gathban said dryly. "And maybe the soldiers will stop using bridges and start flying over the chasms."

Gathban fell silent as they marched across the sweltering plateaus, making their way to the one that had chosen to spit out Dragonsteel. The

other men had noticed the general as well; Jerick could hear them muttering to one another. Despite Jerick's own attempts at remaining positive about the camp officers, Demetris was not well-liked by Bridge Four. Jerick had conditioned them to be independent and questioning, and the general's poor leadership did not bear well beneath such scrutiny.

Demetris could be heard, riding back and forth amongst the various marching groups, barking orders at the men—most of which were completely inane. He told one bridge crew its men were too tall, and that they should try to squat down as they marched, and he ordered a group of soldiers to march with their weapons drawn, just in case the Sho Del attacked them en route—something Jerick had never seen, or even heard of, happening.

"Keth-cursed fool," Gathban muttered.

"Careful, Rock," Jerick warned under his breath.

"Sorry, sir," Gathban replied, containing his annoyance.

They arrived at the plateau before the Sho Del. As the bridgemen moved to place their bridges, however, Demetris ordered them to stop and pull back as far away from the plateau as possible. The bridgemen complied with their characteristic lack of enthusiasm, and Jerick's crew gave him looks of confusion. They waited as the Sho Del appeared on another plateau then warily made their way onto the contested plateau.

"All right, you may approach now," Demetris said with a wave of his hand.

He wants to see how the shields work, Jerick realized with sickness in his stomach. *He will waste the lives of countless bridgemen just to see how well my crew fares.*

"It's a test," Gathban said with a quiet curse beside him. "He's going to . . ."

"Let's just do our best," Jerick said, cutting off the larger man. "All right, Bridge Four," Jerick said as Gaz stepped forward to order the bridgemen forward. "Let's show him what we can do!"

"Run!" Gaz ordered, and eight bridge crews dashed forward.

Jerick ran at the front, Gathban at his side, blocking arrows. No Sho Del jumped across to attack them—in fact, few of them even loosed arrows at Jerick's crew. Bridge Four moved with absolute efficiency, placing their bridge and jumping out of the way before the other bridge crews had even begun to push their bridges forward. A second later, it was all over.

"Injuries?" Jerick called to his men.

"I've got a rock in my shoe," Vessin called back with a smirk in his voice. "It hurts so much, it must be as big as one of these cursed granite boulders."

"No injuries," Gathban answered, counting faces. "As usual, sir."

“Good,” Jerick said, looking back at Demetris. “Let him think about *that*.”

The conflict was a short one. It seemed as if the Sho Del were only making a perfunctory effort at getting the Dragonsteel. There were fewer of them than normal, and none of them rode the large battle-beasts that had become standard over the last several months.

Jerick had his men practice during the fight, as usual, but he could tell their hearts were not in the fighting. They were distracted, and they kept looking back at Demetris.

For his own part, the general appeared to be watching the battle with little interest. He chatted with a couple of adjuncts he had brought, standing atop his boxes like a speaker giving an oration. Jerick looked into the man’s face, and knew that no matter what they did, it wouldn’t be enough to impress him. If Demetris decided he didn’t want Jerick’s crew carrying shields, he would order them not to.

“Good job, men,” Jerick said quietly, putting an end to their practicing. “Take some rest; this battle will be over soon.”

They looked back at him, lowering their weapons. There was determination in their eyes. At that moment, Jerick realized they knew. They realized why Demetris was there, and they also understood what Jerick understood. *Steal our shields, force us not to practice, increase our workload, and we will continue on*, their eyes said. *We are Bridge Four, and we are stronger than he is.*

After that moment, Jerick wasn’t worried any more.

“Good job, men,” he repeated with a nod.

When he looked back to Demetris, something had changed. The General had ordered his chariot to pull up next to the east side of the plateau, and he was looking out across the Plains. Jerick followed his gaze. There, on the plateau just next to their own, the well had turned a dark black. It would soon give forth Dragonsteel.

He saw Demetris’s mouth open to order them across, but then he stopped. He had seen something else—men approaching in the distance.

“That plateau’s not in our district,” Gathban said from next to him. “It belongs to Ki Tzern.”

Sure enough, a tall warrior in white and gold could be seen riding at the head of the approaching force.

Vessin, just behind Jerick, snorted quietly. “Look at the general,” he said. “He looks like he’s eaten a rotten Balla fruit.”

“He thought to get that Dragonsteel before Tzern arrived,” Gathban agreed.

Jerick looked back at their own battle. The Sho Del had completely retreated, leaving the men to stand defensively around the well. As soon as the Dragonsteel came out, they would be heading back to the camp.

"There," Vessin said, pointing. Jerick followed his gesture. A small group of Sho Del were approaching the plateau beside them. It appeared that Tzern's troops were going to have an easy time as well.

"Will you look at that," Gathban breathed in surprise.

Jerick looked back at Tzern's troops, immediately noticing what the Kaz'ch had seen. There, moving along with the men, were several massive wooden constructions. They rolled on huge wheels, and they had a large flat surface at the front, like a raised palm. There were oxen drawing them.

"What are they?" Vessin asked with confusion.

"Bridges," Jerick realized quietly. Still out of arrow range, the oxen were unhooked from the wooden contraptions. Several groups of men climbed down from the structures and, at Tzern's unheard order, began pushing them forward. Several Sho Del arrived on the plateau in time to loose arrows, but the bridges were so massive that the men behind them were completely protected. When they reached the chasms, a man on top pulled a crank, and the entire front of the mechanism dropped forward, bridging the chasm. A second piece fell backward, providing a ramp for the oncoming warriors—Tzern at their head—to gallop up and over the chasm.

"By the Lords," Gathban breathed.

"Suddenly our shields don't look quite so clever," Vessin noted.

Jerick waited quietly for a moment. Gaz was calling from behind—their own Dragonsteel run was over. "Let's go," he ordered.

Bridge Four waited a laboriously long time for the soldiers to finish collecting discarded weapons and march back, then gathered up their bridge. They were just beginning to march away when they heard the yells from behind. Jerick turned, along with most everyone else, worried that they were under attack. It wasn't them, however.

Jerick turned just in time to see the last of Tzern's large bridge machines topple into the chasm. Hundreds, even thousands, of Sho Del had appeared as if out of nowhere. It couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes since they had first seen Ki Tzern gallop onto the plateau, but suddenly he was surrounded on all sides.

"Down," Jerick said, not certain why. The men moved, dropping their bridge. Jerick stepped forward, watching the battle on the next plateau.

Sho Del were everywhere. There were dozens of the jumping beasts approaching on all sides—apparently the Sho Del had used these to push

the bridge machines into the chasm. Tzern's men were hopelessly out-matched.

"Where are the special soldiers?" Jerick asked quietly. "The ones in tan?"

"There," Gathban said, pointing to a plateau barely visible in the distance. A second battle could barely be seen in the distance. "They must have come from a different direction—a flanking force."

"But the Sho Del engaged them first," Jerick realized. "It's a trap. They're trying to get to General Tzern."

"And they're going to," Gathban said quietly. Tzern's men were falling quickly, Sho Del pounding them mercilessly. The demons must have withheld most of their troops for this one battle—that was why Demetris's team had won so easily.

Only then did Jerick's mind register the chuckling. It had been going on for some time, but he had been so focused on the battle that he hadn't noticed it. He turned, seeing General Demetris standing in his chariot a short distance away.

"Oh, what a wonderful surprise this is," the general proclaimed. "It couldn't have turned out better if I'd planned it myself." Then, turning to his forces, he bellowed. "Keep moving, men! We want to be back in time for supper, don't we?"

The bridge crews and soldiers began to walk again, traipsing back toward the home camp.

Jerick paused, looking back to his men. They hadn't moved; most of their eyes were focused on the slaughter happening just a short distance away. Then, one at a time, their faces focused on Jerick. He could see the anger in their eyes.

"Those men need an escape route," Jerick said quietly.

Bridge Four nodded.

"Let's move!" Jerick yelled, grabbing his shield and pulling out his Sho Del sword.

His men raised the bridge quickly, and followed him at a dead run, bellowing calls of Fourth Bridge at the top of their voices.

The Sho Del noticed their movement, as did Demetris behind them.

"By the Lords!" he heard Demetris scream. "What are they doing?"

Then, a moment later, he continued. "You, bridgemen, stop! Stop now!"

Jerick didn't look back.

"Archers, stop them!" Demetris called. Then, however, he must have realized his own danger. "No!" his shrill voice suddenly declared. "Everyone, back to camp! Hurry up, you fools, before they bring the demons upon us!"

Arrows flew so thick they seemed like a mass of buzzing gnats. Before, Jerick's crew had only been one of eight. Now all of the Sho Del attention was focused on them. The shields, however, held. He heard a grunt of pain from beside him, and looked briefly to see Went falling with an arrow in his calf. Jerick continued on, blocking arrows as best he could.

"Drop!" he ordered as soon as they approached the chasm. A flock of Sho Del, their bows discarded, jumped into the air, soaring across the twenty-foot chasm to land in front of the bridge.

"Team one, swords out!" Jerick yelled. "Team two, get that bridge across the chasm!"

The men worked quickly, forming into a rank around Jerick, and he gave a quick prayer that months of practice would somehow pay off now that real battle had come.

"Forward!" Jerick yelled, swiping his sword at the first Sho Del. Nine men pushed forward with him, moving in a perfect rank, their short swords looking pitifully inadequate when faced by Sho Del with much larger weapons. As the battle began, however, Jerick realized the short swords were as efficient as he had assumed—his men could swing faster and with more control. Jerick's team also had precedent on their side—the Sho Del didn't expect bridgemen to fight back.

The little squad of bridgemen pressed forward, striking as Jerick had taught them. The first Sho Del fell easily beneath Jerick's strike, and the other three wore faces of confusion, hastily raising their blades as they realized they were actually going to have to fight. One lost his footing, toppling off the ledge and into the chasm. While the other two watched him plummet, Jerick's team attacked them.

"Done!" Gathban called from behind just as Jerick heard the bridge thump into place. He looked across at the platform. A dozen Sho Del were approaching quickly, their intentions obvious.

"Team one, across the bridge. Hold that ground until Tzern arrives. Team two, hold the other side. The Sho Del will try and push the bridge into the chasm."

And then it was true war. His team fanned out on the ground before the bridge, the chasm at their back, Jerick on the far left. Blades flashed on every side, beating at Jerick's inexperienced men. He watched Kurt fall before his eyes, a Sho Del blade taking him in the neck. The Meleran bridgeman fell with a gurgle. Jerick's men, however, did not break. They stayed firm, filling in Kurt's place and fighting with determination.

Jerick scanned the battle, searching for the man they sought to help. Tzern's massive war-horse had fallen, and he fought on the ground with his men a short distance away. They were moving toward the bridge, but their movement was painfully slow. Tzern's eyes met his own. *Hold a little longer*, they pled.

"Fourth Bridge!" Jerick yelled, renewing his attack. His weapon was white with Sho Del blood, and splattered with not a few flecks of red, signs of his own wounds or those of his men.

"Fourth Bridge!" the men yelled around him.

Then, the bridge shuddered. Jerick spun around, stepping back to let another man hold his place. Team two was getting overwhelmed. Three of its nine members had fallen, and the others had retreated onto the bridge itself. One of the large jumping beasts was snapping at them, a Sho Del with a long spear atop its back. Gathban had found a Sho Del longblade somewhere, and was laying about himself in large sweeping blows, taking down two warriors as Jerick watched.

However, just then another Sho Del approached from behind. Jerick called out to Gathban in horror, his voice sharp, but he was too late. The Sho Del's sword rose, then fell . . . dropping from its dead fingers. Kep, short and almost unnoticed at Gathban's side, pulled his short sword out of the Sho Del's stomach. He noticed Jerick and smiled, then turned back to the fighting.

The jumping beast was still a problem. It snapped at team two, driving them farther back onto the bridge. Any more, and it would easily be able to push the bridge into the chasm.

"Hold the front, Dente!" Jerick ordered, preparing himself to run and help. Just then, an enormous, bulbous monstrosity appeared over the bridge. It was round, with arms hanging from dozens of pore-like holes in its body. It roared with an incredible sound, and Jerick could feel the bridgemen cringe around him.

"It's not real!" Jerick said. "It's an illusion. Focus on your fighting."

With that, Jerick jumped, leaving behind the plateau. He closed his eyes and screamed as he passed through the horrific illusion to land on the bridge itself. He jumped again, crossing diagonally to land beside the war beast on the rear plateau.

The Sho Del on the monster's back swung at him with his spear, but Jerick ducked, and felt it whoosh overhead. Jerick struck at the side of the beast, distracting it from his men on the bridge, then immediately

regretted doing so. The monster turned, smashing its thick, plated head into Jerick's chest and knocking him backward. His sword flew from his fingers, skidding across the plateau to click against a large, white boulder.

The monster reared up, two legs in the air, four on the ground. There were broad-fingered claws, not hooves, at the end of its feet. The Sho Del raised his spear, and plunged it toward Jerick as the beast dropped back to six legs.

Jerick shifted visions, replacing the world with one made of Axi. *This had better work*, he thought as the spear plunged toward his chest. He commanded the spear to split, as he once had the arrow, months ago. Nothing happened.

Go! Jerick ordered, without result. *Split!* his mind wailed ineffectually. Then, just before the spear hit him, he felt something else. It was like a force, a force that surrounded him, similar to the force that held all of the Axi together into objects. He couldn't see it, not even microkinetically, but he could feel that it wanted to leave him. It wanted to escape into the ground. A lesser force was also pulling it toward the Sho Del warrior—or rather, Jerick realized, the Sho Del's armor.

Go there! Jerick thought, indicating the armor. Not knowing quite how he did so, Jerick released the force.

There was an explosive clap and a flash of light so bright that Jerick screamed in pain. Then there was a thump beside him. He shook his head, trying to clear the bright streak from his eyes. From the edges of his vision, Jerick could make out the form of the Sho Del warrior, dead on the ground. Its breastplate was charred and black, and the smell of burnt flesh was heavy in the air.

Jerick didn't give himself much time to glory in his continued existence. The Sho Del's war beast, frightened by the sound, had dashed away in a random direction—in fact, all of the beasts on the field were jumping about wildly, their riders losing control. In this confusion, Ki Tzern finally broke through.

"Fall back!" Jerick yelled, barely able to hear his own voice for the ringing in his ears. His men must have been little better, but they moved quickly, anticipating his orders. They retreated across the bridge as General Tzern and a ragged group of about fifty soldiers finally crossed the bridge.

"Pull the bridge back and up!" Jerick ordered, realizing that the battle was far from finished. The Sho Del were regrouping, ready to chase them across the second plateau.

The bridge went up on men's shoulders, then wobbled for a moment—there were only twelve men left to carry it. It stabilized, however.

"Move!" Jerick ordered, grabbing his sword and one of the arrow shields. The men pulled back, and Jerick followed, pausing only briefly to scoop up Went, who still had the arrow sticking out of his calf, and throw the man over his shoulder. Jerick turned hesitant eyes back on the bodies of his men that had fallen in the assault, then shook his head, knowing he had to leave them. None were moving; they might all be dead. They might be alive.

We'll be back! Jerick thought.

"Move!" he yelled again, backing up as the bridge crew dashed toward the other side of the plateau. Jerick blocked what arrows he could, as did Tzern's men. The warriors, however, were tired, and only a couple of them had bows to return fire. Sho Del began to pour across the chasm, jumping in groups of a dozen or more.

Then they stopped.

Jerick paused near the back of the plateau, listening as the men dropped the bridge and pushed it into place. The Sho Del could slaughter them, he knew. There were more of the demons than he had assumed; they covered the plateau behind. But for some reason they stood quietly, waiting for something.

The wall of white faces parted, and a figure in dark gray armor stepped from the midst of them. The Lord of the War. It stooped, looking down at the warrior Jerick had felled, rubbing at the blackened breastplate with a gauntleted hand. Then it rose, its wicked helmed head locking on Jerick's face. Jerick felt one emotion from the creature, as obvious as if it had been told to him. The Lord of the War was confused.

Then, the creature raised its hand and pointed at Jerick, signaling for his warriors to attack. The Sho Del rushed forward, jumping across the chasm to run toward the frail human force.

"Lords!" Dente whispered beside Jerick, his voice horrified. "We'll be—"

A massive shadow fell over the plateau. Sho Del and human alike froze, their eyes looking up toward the sky. Jerick's breath caught in his chest as an enormous form dove toward them. At the last moment it unfurled its great wings, blocking out the sun. It thumped to the plateau between the humans and the Sho Del.

Jerick regarded the creature in awe. He had heard stories and tales, read histories and legends, studied essays and superstitions, but no words of men could possibly have described the marvelous creature that stood before him. It had broad, bat-like wings and a serpentine neck. Four massive legs grew from its body, and it sat lithely, almost like a cat, as it regarded the humans.

Most magnificent, however, were its colors. It was a pure, deep black,

and its skin was crossed with silver lines. The metallic sheen outlined the creature's body, running along the edges of the wings and across its chest. The lines of silver ran up the sides of the dragon's neck, outlining its jaw and its reptilian head, then melded in the middle of its forehead, forming into a knife-like silver horn that jutted at an angle back from its skull.

And, standing close to the creature like he was, he could feel something from the silvery metal. Power.

"Dragonsteel," Jerick whispered. That was how the metal had gotten its name. It wasn't because the wells were so close to Fain lands, it was because dragons grew it on their bodies.

Drephrast, god of the Sho Del, continued to watch the humans for a long moment. Then, it turned its unreadable eyes back on the Sho Del, who, en masse, lay prostrate on the ground before it. Jerick heard a faint buzzing in the back of his mind, like someone yelling a great distance away.

Enough, Ethain, a powerful and aged voice said in Jerick's mind. *They have earned their escape.*

The Lord of the War regarded Jerick for a moment. Then he spun, marching back through the prostrate Sho Del. The dragon turned its eyes on Jerick, eyes that Jerick thought he should recognize for some reason. Then Drephrast launched himself into the air again, leaving stunned humans and penitent Sho Del behind him. A few moments later, the Fain creatures rose and turned their backs on the humans, retreating toward their own land.

"NEVER IN MY CAREER HAVE I SEEN SUCH BRAVERY," KI TZERN DECLARED, looking over Jerick's tattered group. They still stood on the battlefield, their men searching for survivors on the now-deserted plateaus. They moved quietly, speaking in hushed tones about the creature they had just seen. Tzern, however, wasn't concerned with dragons—he was focused on the men who had saved his life.

"And you are bridgemen?" Tzern continued. He spoke with a sharp accent that Jerick assumed was Tzendish, separating every syllable as if it were its own word.

"Yes, sir," Jerick said. His men stood a little taller at the response.

"Bridgemen from Demetris's army?"

"Yes, sir," Jerick replied again, this time with less vigor.

"There are not a hundred men in this war who could have stood as firmly as your group did, soldier," Tzern said, his voice impressed. "Nor, I am sorry to say, are there many who would risk their lives in such a manner."

"It was our duty, sir," Jerick said. "You would have done the same for us."

Tzern smiled slightly, catching Jerick's eye. Until that moment, Jerick had been certain the man didn't recognize him.

Gathban arrived just then, and Jerick turned to him. The Kaz'ch shook his head—none of their fallen men were alive. Jerick sighed. It had been a slim hope anyway.

"I seem to be in need of a bridge crew to return me to my camp," Tzern said speculatively, his sharp, squareish face contemplative.

"Yes, sir," Jerick said uncertainly.

"Once you get me there," Tzern speculated, "it would hardly seem efficient to send you all the way back to Demetris's camp. It would probably be best if you stayed in my army."

A sudden conflict warred in Jerick's stomach. Demetris was a fool, true, but he was, after all, Jerick's general.

"I am a general too, soldier," Tzern said carefully, noticing Jerick's indecision. "In fact, I have won more Dragonsteel than Demetris, which means I technically outrank him. If I want you in my camp, there is nothing he can do to make you come back to his."

Jerick smiled slightly. "I understand, sir. I have men back in General Demetris's camp. I would not leave them behind."

Topaz frowned in confusion. "Why were men left behind? Are they sick?"

"No, sir," Jerick said. "It is their day off."

"I wasn't aware Demetris gave his men days off," Tzern commented.

"He doesn't."

The Tzend smiled slightly, nodding. "They shall be sent for."

"Then, my lord," Jerick said with a nod, "it would be the honor of the Fourth Bridge to serve you."

"You will not be bridgemen in my army, soldier," Tzern said. "I think you've all earned a promotion."

Jerick smiled, looking back at his men. The thirteen survivors regarded one another with uncertain looks.

"Speak," Tzern ordered.

"Well, sir," Dente said. "Bridging is what we know, and we're proud of the job we do. I'm not certain we want to change."

Tzern nodded slowly. "All right, then, bridgemen you shall be. I trust none of you will object if I *pay* you as soldiers, however."

The men nodded to one another. No, there was not a problem there. Jerick smiled with pride, looking over his bridgemen. Then, however, a hand fell on his shoulder.

"You, however, will not remain a bridgeman," Tzern said in a subdued voice.

"Sir?" Jerick asked.

"I've seen a lot of bridgemen in my time, son," Tzern said. "And I know what kind of soldiers Demetris breeds. A crew is only as good as its leader, and this is a fine crew indeed. I have plans for you."

Jerick opened his mouth to respond. However, at that moment a group of tan-suited warriors appeared, dashing across the plateau. They saluted Tzern as they arrived, out of breath.

"My lord, we . . ." the foremost of them began.

"I understand, Sharn," Ki Tzern said, raising his hand. "Let's just get back to camp."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

CATHIS HATED RECRUITING. HE OFTEN DREAMT OF WHAT IT WOULD BE like to be one of the elder Horwatchers, the Drath. They had been in the Ekrobila so long that they no longer had to recruit to win prestige—they just let the younger Horwatchers beneath them do all the work. And, of course, since they gained prestige anytime a Horwatcher they had recruited found a recruit of his own, the Drath continued to grow more powerful despite their lack of effort.

It was an enviable life. One that was, unfortunately, far distant for Cathis. He had been in the Ekrobila for over twenty years now, but he still had a long time to go before achieving Drath status. Assuming he recruited hard, he could probably make it in another decade. It all depended on how many people he could get to join the Horwatchers, and how powerful they were.

That was why he forced himself to go on these recruiting trips so far away from civilization. He didn't like northern Yolen; he never had. He had been born and raised in Dysoria, then moved to the Ekrobila in Lallom just after his fourteenth birthdate. He liked his weather warm and predictable. Jarg, at least, had half of that equation right—it was predictable. Cathis had never visited the Lords-forsaken country when it hadn't been cold, wet, and miserable.

Unfortunately, northern Yolen was more ripe for recruiting than the south. Lallom and Fallamore were saturated with Horwatchers, each one drooling for an opportunity to find some talented newcomer. The north,

however, was different. Few of the senior Horwatchers—revents, like Cathis—were willing to endure the long trips and cold weather required to visit the north. Here recruiting was more profitable, if less comfortable.

Recent advances by the Trexandian scholars—whose tutors and scribes were taking the court positions once reserved for Horwatchers—had alarmed the Drath, and they had put more of an emphasis on recruiting. Every nobleman's son who came to study with the Horwatchers was one fewer potential scholar and one more aristocratic house with ties to the Ekrobila. Even the Jargish nobility were valuable; though the poorest of noblemen, the Jargs were historical allies of the Ekrobila. Their superstitious natures made them more inclined to align themselves with the Horwatchers, as opposed to the Trexandians.

Even now a likely candidate sat before them, listening to Cathis's partner—Endelo—explain about the path of the Hor. The room they had chosen for the testing was squat and drab, but the building was more sturdy than most in Jarg. Cathis could hear the winds blowing outside, rocking loose boards and threatening to knock down the entire town. Such had happened not infrequently in Jarg.

Endelo and the candidate, a Jargish nobleman's son, sat on the floor on either side of a thin table. The room's only other furniture was a short desk on which a single lamp burned, its light barely reaching to the edges of the room. Such limited illumination was intentional; it gave the room a proper Horwatcher's atmosphere.

Endelo continued the test, moving through actions that were long familiar to Cathis. Endelo performed them with precision—he was one of the first men Cathis had recruited some ten years back. The younger Horwatcher had just barely achieved senior status, allowing him to recruit, and Cathis had agreed to bring him along on the trip. The partnership would mean sharing the prestige a little bit, but intelligent companionship was scarce north of Fallamore, so the price was worth it. Besides, Cathis wouldn't lose that much—since Endelo was one of his recruits, Cathis received prestige any time the young man made a catch. Therefore, anyone they recruited on the trip would benefit Cathis doubly.

"All right," Endelo was saying. "Now for the final test. I want you to hold this bone in your hand and tell me what you feel."

The potential recruit—a stocky boy with eyes thin enough that he might have had some Ke'Chan blood somewhere in his parentage—accepted the bone. It was a precious item, the most powerful Tamu Kek Cathis owned. All of the other tests—waving a rod of amber over the recruit's head, telling

fortunes with a stack of coins, and feeling for bumps on the back of his hand—were secondary to this one all-important decider. Could he feel the Tamu Kek's power?

"I . . ." the boy said slowly, rubbing his finger along the bone's smooth surface. "I sense power. Yes, it feels strong, like the roaring of a river."

The two Horwatchers shared a look. The boy was lying. The power of a Tamu Kek was warm and calm, like a soft humming, not intense. If the boy had really felt the power, he would have described a quiet throbbing or pulsing, like waves on a calm day or a slowly beating heart.

"That will be all," Cathis declared, waving for the boy to back away from the testing desk.

"When we leave?" the boy demanded as he stood. He spoke Fallin with only passing ability, but Cathis refused to hold the tests in any other language, even though he spoke Meleran.

"Do not be so quick to presume, nobleling," Cathis declared, turning hard eyes on the boy. This one would have to be humbled if he were going to be of any use. "We must consult before we decide if you are worthy or not. Wait outside with the others. We will call you."

The boy's mouth dropped open to complain, but he fell silent before Cathis's glare. Few men, noble or peasant, could long maintain their composure when confronted by a practiced Horwatcher. The Ekrobila taught one how to use posture, clothing, and expression to achieve the desired ominous effect. As usual, it worked, and the boy simply nodded as he backed out of the room.

Endelo sighed, brushing a hand through his shoulder-length blond hair. "Our choices are limited this time, Cathis," he said, standing.

Cathis nodded slowly. It sounded odd to hear Endelo calling him by name; they were, however, of the same rank now, and such was proper.

"That last one at least lies well," the younger Horwatcher noted as he poured them both a mug of warmed spicewine.

"Yes, but he obviously has little talent," Cathis replied with a disappointed tone.

"He is better than nothing."

Cathis shrugged in agreement. Most recruiting trips, to the north or the south, ended in such a manner. They would find two or three teens of noble blood who were willing to join the Horwatchers, but none of them would have any true power. They would be taken to the Ekrobila anyway, and Cathis would earn marginal prestige for their recruitment, but they would never be allowed to achieve senior status. They would therefore never

go recruiting on their own, denying Cathis the second and third generations of new recruits that were necessary for advancement in the Ekrobila.

"We'll let them wait for an hour or so," Cathis decided. "Then we'll take the ones who seemed most willing—the first two and that last one."

Endelo nodded his agreement. The three boys would never become full Horwatchers, but they would go through the training before returning to their families in Jarg. They would maintain their status as Horwatcher initiates for the rest of their lives, and when it came time to hire tutors for their children they would choose Horwatcher over Trexandian. That was, in the end, the real reason behind recruitment. Still, Cathis couldn't help dreaming about finding the one perfect recruit—the boy whose ability would lead Cathis to the coveted title of Drath.

"My lords?" a voice asked from the doorway.

"I told you we had to deliberate first," Cathis said angrily, turning. The voice didn't belong to the boy from before, however—the one who had spoken didn't even look noble. He wore the thick one-piece brown leather outfit of a Jargish mineman, and his face was covered with dust. His hair was of a dirty brown color, and his features were of an indeterminable age. At first, Cathis thought he might be an older man, but his face was devoid of wrinkles.

"What is it?" Cathis asked intolerantly.

"I'in, um . . ." the man stuttered, holding a flat mineman's cap in his gloved hands.

"Well?" Cathis demanded.

"I'in was just geffin' t'see t'Horwatchers, theres," the man confessed.

Cathis raised his eyes to the heavens in exasperation. He had come to recruit, not bless fields or tell fortunes. "You've seen us. Now go."

The man, or boy, shrank back before the words. "I'in sorry, theres," he apologized, moving to leave. "It's just that my father, he'in always says Horwatchin's a long best lie. I'in think it isn't right t'be speakin' so, an I'in tells him. But he'in just keep long speakin' about it. So I'in come t'see."

Cathis frowned—he could barely understand the Jargish accent. Endelo, however, was more versed—at least, so it appeared, for he called to the man as he moved to leave. "Wait, boy," Endelo ordered.

The unnamed Jargish peasant paused. "Yes, my lord?" he asked.

Endelo held out the Tamu Kek, flipping it between the fingers of one hand in a complex pattern. Cathis never used the flipping-patterns; his fingers weren't dexterous enough, and he usually dropped the Tamu Kek before completing even a single rotation.

"Tell your father you saw this," Endelo said in a dramatic voice. He produced a candle from one of his deep, wide-collared sleeves and set it on the table in a fluid motion. Of all Cathis's recruits, Endelo was the most successful—he had the heart of a true showman, an invaluable talent to a Horwatcher.

Endelo stopped flipping the Tamu Kek, instead catching it firmly in his fist. Then he began to wave it over the candle, chanting and mumbling. He used one of the standard mantras, but the personality he lent it gave it an entirely new feeling—he almost seemed to moan as he spoke. Cathis nodded appreciatively; Endelo wasn't the strongest Horwatcher in the Ekrobila, but his sheer ability to perform would help him go far.

On the sixth pass the candle smoked and burst into flame. Lighting a candle in six passes was very good—the most powerful Horwatcher Cathis knew could only do it in three, and Cathis himself had done it in four only once in his life. Perhaps he had underestimated Endelo's power—of course, maintaining the proper form was equally important to power. Occasionally a determined initiate with seemingly little power would train himself in the patterns so well that he actually managed to light a candle in under twenty passes, the requirement for becoming a senior Horwatcher.

The candle only stayed lit for a few seconds before a gust of wind from the still-open door extinguished it, but the sight was enough to impress the mineman. He fell to his knees before the table in a show of superstitious reverence, as if worshiping the two Horwatchers. Cathis smiled—there were some things he liked about the northern kingdoms.

"Well done," he complimented in Fallin.

Endelo smiled. "I figured that if we can't find any good recruits, we might as well instill a proper sense of reverence within the locals. Maybe they'll be impressed enough that next time more people will come to the testing."

"Good idea," Cathis agreed. Then, taking his eyes off his partner, he noticed something. "Endelo, stop him!" he snapped, but it was too late.

The peasant had risen from his posture of subservience and, with a trembling hand, had reached out to touch the Tamu Kek, which Endelo had foolishly set on the table when he was finished. He should have known better. The peasant picked it up, holding the long thin piece of bone up in front of his face, gazing at it with wondering eyes.

"Put that down!" Cathis snapped in Meleran, moving to take the bone away. The boy, realizing what he had done, quickly reached out to put the Tamu Kek back where he had found it.

As he did so, the bone passed over the candle. The wick burst into flame.

Cathis froze, his eyes wide. Endelo's expression was similar, his hand a bare inch away from the now burning candle. Horrified, the peasant scrambled to his feet and dashed toward the door.

"Wait!" Cathis yelled, finally finding his voice.

The boy froze.

"Come back here," Cathis ordered, pointing at the spot on the ground before the table. As the boy slunk forward, Cathis and Endelo shared a look. What they thought had happened *couldn't* have happened. No one could light a candle in one pass, especially not an untrained peasant from the most uncivilized knee-pit of a country on the continent.

"Do that again," Cathis ordered.

"Do'in what?" the boy asked.

"Light the candle," Cathis hissed.

The boy paused and then, with a hesitant hand, picked up the Tamu Kek. *It had to be a fluke*, Cathis told himself. *It had to be—*

The candle lit again. One pass.

Cathis looked at his partner—Endelo's face was so amazed it looked as if he might pass out at any moment. Cathis himself wasn't doing much better.

"Wait outside," he mumbled to the peasant boy. "Do not speak to anyone, and do not go anywhere. If you do either, the Lords will strike you dead."

The boy's face grew pale, but he responded, rushing from the room to stand in the cold evening winds.

"That's . . . that's impossible," Endelo breathed. "Even Shivex never lit a candle in a single pass. It's . . ."

It's my path to Drathhood, Cathis realized, his eyes widening. If he brought in a new recruit that powerful, he might even be able to obtain the final Horwatcher rank within the year. He would be one of the youngest Draths ever.

"What do we do?" Endelo asked, his calm breaking before such an unexpected event.

"We take him with us," Cathis said, forcing his hands to stop shaking. *A Drath!*

"But he's a peasant," Endelo objected, his eyes horrified.

"No one need know that but you and me, Endelo," Cathis snapped. "We will fashion him a Horwatcher's castemark before we return, and teach him to speak enough Fallin to mask his peasant's dialect."

"But . . ."

"Think of the opportunity we have, Endelo," Cathis said, leaning down to look in the younger Horwatcher's eyes. Endelo might have the edge in showmanship, but Cathis's talent was persuasion. He knew people, and

could see through their guises and tricks while at the same time cleverly fabricating misdirections of his own. He could get this peasant into the Ekrobila, and he would win the greatest award of prestige ever. He just couldn't let Endelo ruin it.

"He lit the candle in one pass, Endelo," Cathis continued. "Think of the prestige we'll win—think of the power he will bring the Horwatchers. This is exactly the tool we need to finally overthrow those cursed scholars! A Horwatcher greater than any who has ever lived!"

The persuasion, especially the mention of prestige, was a tempting one, and Endelo's eyes began to lose their fear. He brushed a hand through his hair nervously as he contemplated the falsehood. "They'll all assume him to be uncivilized," the younger man rationalized to himself. "He is, after all, from Jarg. Besides, you're right. His power won't do anyone any good digging in mines."

Cathis nodded. "And we will be initiated into the Circle Drath before the year is out."

CATHIS WAVED THE BOY BACK INTO THE ROOM. HE HAD GIVEN ENDELO ten minutes to compose himself and to discuss their plan. With the younger Horwatcher convinced, there was only one random factor in the scheme. The boy himself.

"What is your name, boy?" Cathis asked as the peasant seated himself.

"Jerick, sir," the boy said.

Cathis nodded—it was a common Meleran name. "Well, Jerick, we have made a decision based on what we saw earlier. Not everyone can do what you did."

"Light'in t'candle?" the boy asked.

Cathis nodded. "Of course, you didn't do it as skillfully as a Horwatcher, but you showed potential. That is why you are coming with us to the Ekrobila, home of the Horwatchers."

The peasant blinked in surprise. "Will I'in be back in time t'go minin' tomorrow?" he asked.

"You will never come back," Cathis said, leaning down to place his hands on the table.

The boy's eyes grew wide, his thin hawkish features afraid. "But, I'in can't be leavin'," he protested. "I'in havin' a master, theres."

"The Lords are your master," Cathis said firmly. "They want you to come with us. You do want to follow the Lords' will, don't you Jerick?"

"I'in . . . I'in think so," the boy admitted, cowering before Cathis.

"Good. Then we leave immediately."

"Will you'in be tellin' my master?"

"We will deal with everything, Jerick," Cathis said smoothly, laying a hand on the frightened boy's shoulder. It was important that the peasant learned to respect him above all others—if the most powerful Horwatcher in the Ekrobila paid deference to Cathis, the others would have no choice but to do the same. "Don't worry. You are a very special boy; the Lords have chosen you for a singular work. You are going to be a Horwatcher, like us."

"Like you?" the boy asked with wonder.

"Yes, but only if you do exactly what I say," Cathis warned.

The boy nodded eagerly. Cathis smiled, hardly able to contain his excitement. Opportunities like this only happened once in a generation.

THE HORWATCHER TURNED TO REGARD HIS COMPANION, THE EXCITEMENT in their eyes barely contained. They could hardly believe their fortune—the Lords had smiled on them this day. Trust a Horwatcher to know how to prosper from any and every circumstance.

As the two men congratulated themselves, however, neither one noticed the tiny smile forming on the edges of their new recruit's mouth. Neither did they pause to ask him why he still wore the large workman's glove on his left hand—a glove thick and bulky enough to hide the large ring that sat securely on the peasant's middle finger.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

AS SOON AS JERICK STEPPED INTO KI TZERN'S CAMP HE REALIZED ALL HIS assumptions about armies in the Eternal War had been wrong. He had based them on the single, faulty example of Demetris's camp. Walking through the Tzend camp's structured ranks, Jerick was able to see what a true army was supposed to look like.

The buildings were all sturdy, permanent structures, as opposed to shacks and tents, with a wooden palisade around the perimeter to serve as both a means of defense and a reminder of place. The guards who stood at the gate's doors wore uniforms that were without wrinkle or stain. There even appeared to be a temple to the Lords near the center of the camp.

A messenger had been sent ahead to warn of Tzern's arrival, and a group of healers rushed out to collect the wounded as soon as the camp came into view. The unwounded soldiers saluted one last time to Tzern as they entered the camp; then their officers dismissed them, and they went their different ways. Jerick's bridgemen, uncertain what else to do, simply followed Tzern's white and gold form as he walked through the gate.

As they passed into the camp, the sense that this army was a place of order impressed itself upon Jerick. The buildings stood in neat rows, men practiced in formal ranks and sparred in neatly roped-off squares. It was also a place of camaraderie. Men were seen talking in groups—not wandering packs, like in Demetris's army, but friendly gatherings. Most importantly, Jerick realized that, for most of the men he saw who were not in uniform, he couldn't tell if they were bridgemen, footmen, or officers.

They paused after walking just a brief distance, waiting as Tzern met with a group of rushed, worried attendants.

"It's paradise," Kep whispered beside him, scanning the camp.

Gathban chuckled. "Perhaps not paradise, but definitely an improvement."

As Jerick's men were taking in their new surroundings, Ki Tzern turned from his adjuncts and waved them over. "Men of the Fourth Bridge," he said, "I welcome you to my camp. I'm going to assign you to the north division, but for now consider yourselves on leave. After today's ordeal—not to mention the time you spent with Demetris—you've earned it."

The men regarded Tzern with confusion for a moment. "Leave?" Gathban finally said.

Tzern smiled slightly. "Yes, leave. You're on vacation. You'll still get paid, but for the next two weeks you won't be required to go on any runs. Farrle here will lead you to your quarters."

A soldier to the side nodded, waving for the crew to follow. They stood for a moment, stunned at the idea of an extended break. Before leaving, they paused, turning collective eyes on Jerick.

"Go ahead, men," Jerick said, a quiet knot of sorrow twisting in his chest. He knew that would be the last order he ever gave to Fourth Bridge. "You will be well-cared for here."

Dente cleared his throat. "It was a pleasure, sir."

Jerick nodded, uncertain how to respond. "I . . ."

"It's all right, sir. You don't belong in a bridge crew," Gathban said in a subdued voice.

"A man belongs where he finds friends, Rock," Jerick said, resting his arm on the enormous man's shoulder. "I would rather be a bridgemen with the lot of you than a noble in any king's palace. Take good care of them, Rock."

Fourth Bridge stepped back and saluted in one silent motion. Their actions weren't as fluid or as sharp as those of the soldiers from Tzern's camp. However, there was no less respect in their eyes. Jerick watched them go, following with his eyes until they disappeared.

"I fear you've made me a liar, young Jerick," Tzern said beside him.

"My lord?"

"I once claimed that no good thing could ever come from Demetris's training."

"It almost didn't, sir," Jerick responded quietly. "The battle we fought today was little more than sparring when compared to what we had to go through to make Bridge Four what it is."

Tzern nodded, understanding, as he turned to his waiting adjuncts. "The

east division is to go on immediate leave for the next two weeks. After that, begin to rebuild it with new recruits and transfers. Don't send it on any difficult runs for at least three weeks."

"Yes, my lord," a tall man in a white and gold uniform answered.

"Leave . . ." Jerick said again, shaking his head. In Demetris's camp there had been no such thing—at least, not for bridgemen.

"Yes," Tzern said, beginning to walk again as his adjuncts dispersed, "you aren't the only one to notice a little free time improves morale, young Jerick."

"Sir!" a voice said. A man, shorter than any Jerick had ever seen before, was scurrying down the camp's main path. He looked like a child, but he had the face of an adult. His legs were short and stumpy, and he wore a simple white outfit.

The tiny man puffed as he approached, moving quickly. "Sir, the bridges?" He spoke with an accent that was sharp and irregular, almost unintelligible. Compared to this man, Tzern spoke Fallin almost as if he had lived in Yolen all his life.

Tzern shook his head. "We lost all four, Sung," he replied.

"By the Lords!" the little man wailed in despair. "It is a miracle!"

"You mean disaster, Sung," Tzern corrected.

"Yes, a disaster," the little man cried. "What will we do?"

"I'm certain you can make us some more, Sung," Tzern reminded.

"Not unless we get more wood," the little man said, walking in circles, anxiety coating his face. "What with the disturbance up north, our supplies are plentiful."

"The supplies are depleted, not plentiful, Sung," Tzern corrected, informing him of the proper Fallin word.

"Yes, that too!" the little man groaned.

"I don't suppose you've had word from Dellanios?"

"No, sir. Not in months."

Tzern cursed quietly. "Where is that man? He always disappears when we need him most. Well, just get to work on some new plans, Sung," Tzern requested. "We need a mechanism to lock the wheels, otherwise the Sho Del will just push them into the chasm every time."

"Yes, sir. A locking mechanism! Of course, that would be completely frivolous! I shall get to work on it immediately."

With that, the tiny man hurried away. Tzern just shook his head, waving for Jerick to follow him.

Jerick nodded, walking down the path beside the general. Eventually they arrived at a rectangular, one-story building. Inside was a table with a large

map of the Shattered Plains on its top, a smaller table with colored stones on it, and several chairs—not stools, but actual chairs. Tzern took one of these, and gestured for Jerick to take another.

“Now, young Jerick,” Tzern said contemplatively. “You are going to answer some questions for me. First of all, I want to know why the son of a nobleman is pretending to be a common bridgeman.”

Jerick looked up with surprise, objection in his voice. “My lord, I—”

Tzern held up a hand, cutting Jerick off with a gesture and a commanding look. “Understand,” Tzern warned, not dangerously, just firmly, “one thing I expect from all who serve under me is the truth. No amount of bravery or ability to lead will help you in this camp if I cannot trust you.”

“I understand, sir,” Jerick said frankly. “But I am not a noble.”

“A bastard son, then?” Tzern asked. “Raised by a guilty father, then expelled when you became an embarrassment?”

“No, sir,” Jerick said, pulling out his castemark. “I am a lumberman, though I was trained in the palace of King Rodis of Melerand.”

“I find that difficult to believe, young Jerick, castemark or no,” Tzern said, his voice contemplative. “My homeland may be Tzendor, but I know enough about Yolish politics to be aware of caste segregation.”

“What this youth says is true, my lord,” a new, familiar voice said from the area of the doorway.

Jerick’s head snapped around. “Frost!” he exclaimed enthusiastically.

The old scholar bowed slightly. “Young Master,” Frost simply returned.

“*This* is the one you’ve been following, Frost?” Tzern asked with a musing smile. “Interesting.”

“No doubt, my lord,” Frost said, entering the short-ceilinged room. “I am very curious to know where you found him.”

“Actually, he found me,” Tzern replied. “But that is a story for another time. A lumberman raised in the king’s palace. You must be a special young man.”

Jerick shrugged. “That is where life took me, my lord.”

Tzern didn’t answer immediately, instead sitting with a contemplative look on his face. “All right, then, Jerick,” he finally said. “Now that is resolved, perhaps you can answer a more perplexing question for me. How, in the middle of a cloudless day, did a bolt of lightning strike down that Shen Da rider just before it killed you?”

Jerick felt himself grow cold. “I don’t know, my lord,” he answered truthfully.

“I listened to your men as we marched back to the camp,” Tzern continued. “They say the White One himself attends and protects you.”

"The priests say he watches over all of us," Jerick responded.

"Isn't it curious, then," Tzern continued, "that lightning is not the tool of Oreon, but of his brother Keth the Black?"

Tzern's eyes caught Jerick's and held them for a long moment, as if searching for something. Finally, the tall Tzend turned away. "Regardless, one thing is obvious. You are no average lumberman. I saw you jump through the center of that Sho Del illusion."

"Sir?" Jerick asked, perplexed. "It was only an illusion; it wasn't really there."

"Ah," Tzern replied, "but even knowing that, most men cannot force themselves to do such a thing."

"It has to do with the nature of Sho Del illusions, Young Master," Frost explained, noting Jerick's continued confusion. "The Sho Del do not send images themselves, they just project an imprint into your head—a general set of instructions. Your own mind translates those instructions, creating the things you see. Each person who sees a Sho Del illusion is really creating the image in their own mind, assembling it from the things they have seen before. That's why the illusions seem so real. A person can know logically that he is seeing an illusion, but since his own mind is creating it, filling in every necessary detail, it can still feel completely tangible to him."

"Men often die from Sho Del illusions," Tzern added. "Most soldiers, jumping as you did, would have convinced themselves that instead of passing through the illusion, they had run into it. They would have fallen to the ground, as if knocked unconscious."

"I don't know how to respond, sir," Jerick confessed. "I knew it was an illusion and that I couldn't let it distract me."

"A good enough answer," Tzern decided. "All right, Jerick, one final question. I always let men choose how they will serve. You may return to your bridgemen as their leader, and no one will think less of you if you do. You may be trained as an officer, and perhaps some day command a division—or even camp—of your own. Or, you may try something else."

"Something else, sir?" Jerick asked carefully.

Tzern nodded toward the door, and Jerick turned, looking through the open portal. Just beyond, in one of the roped practice squares, two men were fighting. They wore no uniforms, though one was wearing a green vest and the other a blue one. Instead of practice swords they were holding real weapons. A small crowd of men had gathered around the sparring area, watching quietly.

The match was almost a surreal experience. He couldn't be certain, not quite, but it seemed as if their motions were a little too quick, a little too fluid,

to be a real battle. It wasn't the blunt, forceful fighting of battlefield soldiers, or even the sparring of a fencing match. It was like a thing rehearsed, with each motion placed in precision.

As Jerick watched, the blue warrior spun, leaping into the air and placing his foot against one of the guard ropes. Though the rope should never have been able to hold such weight, the man pushed off of it into a flip, twirling in the air over his opponent. The green-vested man, however, had begun spinning himself, sticking out his foot as he rotated in an attempt to trip the man who had yet to land. Blue dropped to the ground, then immediately hopped, barely clearing Green's attack, while at the same time bringing his own sword down.

Metal rang against metal as Green, still spinning from his attempted trip, thrust his sword back, blocking his opponent's weapon without even looking to know where it was. Still spinning, his foot having yet to complete its trip-rotation, Green thrust his second foot into the air and caught Blue on the side of the head, pulling him to the ground.

Green was on his feet first, his sword plunging at Blue, who was still on his back. Blue paused, watching the sword plunge at his heart. He seemed as if he were going to do nothing. Then the world stopped. Jerick felt drawn into the battle, as if everything about him—the building, the watching soldiers, the sky, and the earth—were focused on this one event. The green-vested warrior hung in the air, his blade just inches from Blue's chest. Blue lay on the ground, his arm pulled back as if in a punch. Nothing moved—nothing could move. Then Blue's hand suddenly snapped forward with an audible crack, smashing into his opponent's blade at an incredible speed. The second warrior's steel blade shattered in two.

Blue was on his feet a second later, swinging his sword at the now-disarmed Green. For a moment it appeared as if he would behead his opponent. The weapon, however, stopped just before Green's neck.

"They are called the Tzai," Ki Tzern said from behind. "My elite soldiers. Your third option, young Jerick."

"I WORRIED THAT SOMETHING MIGHT HAVE HAPPENED TO YOU, FROST," Jerick confessed, standing in his new room. He wished he had something to pack in the chest at the foot of the bed. His few possessions—a writing quill, some paper, a few coins, and some clothing—had apparently been confiscated by Demetris, who had branded Jerick a rebel and an

insubordinate. Tzern's officers had barely managed to release the five men left behind from the detention cells.

"I arranged to have myself transferred to another camp as soon as I could," Frost said, standing on the other side of Jerick's new quarters. It was a modest chamber, but a large improvement over the cramped tent of Demetris's camp. It felt good to once again have a room to himself.

Jerick smiled. "You always did see things more quickly than I, Frost," Jerick said, looking at the empty chest, then shutting it with a shake of his head. "I'm surprised you didn't head back to Melerand as soon as you realized how hopeless I was."

Frost smiled slightly. "I realized *that* before we left, Young Master," he said. "I checked in on you from time to time—even considered approaching you and suggesting we return home. Each time, however, I sensed that you were not ready, and so I left."

Jerick sat down on the room's small mattress, leaning back against the wall. He searched for the words to describe all he had seen and done over the last year, the death, the loss of friends, the nightmares, the pride of seeing his men fight. "Oh, Frost," he said with a sigh, "I'm glad I came here but . . . what in the name of the Lords was I thinking?"

"You weren't thinking much, as I recall, Young Master," Frost said, seating himself on the floor. "You felt as if you had been rejected, that your life had collapsed."

"It's been so long."

"Only a year, Young Master," Frost noted. "I suspect the world has changed little in such time. You, however, are a completely different matter. Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

Jerick shook his head. "Mirrors are a luxury Demetris's army did not have."

"Here," Frost said, standing and retreating to the room next to Jerick's—the scholar's own quarters. He returned a moment later with a medium-sized mirror.

Jerick was stunned by what he saw. When he looked into the mirror, his own face didn't look back—his father's did. Firm and experienced, the face before him wore a dark curly beard. The body that accompanied it wasn't as wide or burly as his father's, but it was much taller, and powerfully well-muscled in its own right. It also had a litheness that Rin had never possessed. Jerick raised a hand to his face, feeling the beard with hesitant fingers. He'd never actually seen his reflection while wearing it.

"By the Lords . . ." Jerick whispered. Who had stolen away the boy he knew and left this man in his place?

"You realize, Young Master, that there is another option left to you, one beyond the three Lord Tzern offered."

Jerick looked away from the mirror. "Returning to Melerand," he inferred.

Frost nodded, placing the mirror beside the wall.

Jerick thought for a moment. Then he shook his head. "I don't know," he finally admitted. "I'm not certain I can do it. Not yet. I'll have to think about it."

"You still think you can win enough glory to earn the princess?" Frost asked.

Jerick shook his head. "It's not Courteth. It's just . . . I'm not ready yet. Not ready to face them."

"And?" Frost asked, sensing there was more.

"And . . ." Jerick said, his eyes darting involuntarily toward the practice squares.

"Ah," Frost said with understanding. "The Tzai."

"What are they, Frost?" Jerick asked, somehow knowing that Frost would be able to answer. "How do those men do such amazing things?"

"Are you certain you want me to answer that, Young Master?" Frost replied pointedly. "My explanation may go against some of the things you have read."

"I don't care," Jerick said. "I stopped ignoring truth after my first few months as a bridgeman."

"Well, then, Young Master," Frost began. "Your answer lies within an understanding of the Three Realms."

"That much, at least, is true?" Jerick asked.

"Oh, yes. There really are Three Realms of Existence—Spiritual, Cognitive, and Physical—though they are not what men think them to be. Your scholars tell you the Spiritual realm is that of the gods, the Cognitive realm that of the Sho Del, and the Physical realm that of man. The truth is that most things exist in all three realms.

"Everything you see around you, animals, rocks, and plants, has a Physical nature. You know that, you can touch it with your Physical nature. However, all things also have a Cognitive side and a Spiritual side as well. The Spiritual is its soul, its ideal nature. The Cognitive is the thing that mediates between an object's Physical side and its Spiritual side."

"The mind," Jerick surmised.

"You could call it the mind," Frost admitted, "though that doesn't necessarily always hold true. A rock, for instance, has a Cognitive nature—a weak one, but it has one nonetheless. The Cognitive is what determines an object's placing in the world—in effect, it remembers where the object is in relation to the rest of the universe. When the Sho Del use their minds to speak with one another, they are speaking Cognitive to Cognitive. When they send illusions to your warriors, they are doing the same thing."

"Then the Sho Del *are* creatures of the Cognitive," Jerick noted.

"Not exactly," Frost corrected, holding a finger into the air. "The Sho Del tend to have powerful Cognitive sides, true, but they exist primarily in the Physical realm, just like humans. Men can have powerful Cognitive sides as well, though humans vary wildly from person to person. Some have more Cognitive power than even the greatest of Sho Del, others have so little they are only slightly better than a rock."

"I've met a few of those," Jerick mumbled.

Frost smiled. "You, Young Master, appear to have a strong Cognitive side."

"How can you tell?"

"Because microkinesis is Cognitive magic. When you look at the world microkinetically, what you are really doing is looking through the eyes of your Cognitive self. Almost like you have slipped into the Cognitive realm for a moment, and are peeking out at the Physical world."

"And when I use microkinesis to . . . change things?" Jerick asked quietly.

Frost paused. "I wasn't aware you had gotten that far," he admitted. "The essence of microkinesis is changing things—using Cognitive energy to make alterations in the Physical world."

"And what these Tzai warriors do?" Jerick asked. "Is it the same thing?"

"No," Frost corrected. "The Tzai go the other way. They use their Cognitive energy to affect the Spiritual realm—though they do it quite innocently."

"Innocently?" Jerick asked.

"General Tzern is a brilliant man," Frost explained. "But, like most brilliant men, he doesn't accept the idea of magic or mysticism. When his men meditate and practice, they are focusing their Cognitive power, but they simply see it as a training technique. When a Tzai shatters his opponent's sword with his bare hand, what he is really doing is gathering his Cognitive energy and using it to break the sword's Spiritual aspect. Any alterations made to an object's Spiritual side have immediate, and often violent, repercussions in the Physical world."

"Tzern's warriors don't see that side, however. They think their hand shatters the steel, when it really has little to do with the process."

Jerick nodded slowly. What Frost was saying was different from what he had been taught. It was like a clearer vision of what the Trexandian scholars were trying to piece together. He only paused briefly to wonder how Frost knew so much. He trusted the words—somehow he innately understood that Frost was speaking the truth. Topaz was right—the old scholar was something much more than one first assumed.

Frost rose, brushing off his simple gray robes. "You should sleep now, Young Master. If what Lord Tzern said is true, then your day has been a difficult one. We will speak again in the morning."

THAT NIGHT, SLEEPING WAS MORE DIFFICULT A PROPOSITION THAN HE'D expected. He tried to turn in early, but to no avail. Six months ago he would have given nearly anything for a few extra hours of sleep. Now he found himself completely unable to use the time given to him.

Instead, his mind raced. He thought about his time in the Eternal War, his men, and his suffering. He wondered if he could turn down an opportunity to run when he had the chance, knowing that another year here—even in Tzern's camp—meant more death, more pain, and more blood. He wondered if Ryalla remembered him.

Just after sunset, a knock came at his door.

"Come," he said.

The door opened slightly, and General Tzern appeared. Jerick quickly moved to stand and salute, but Tzern waved him to be still.

"I saw your candle burning," he said with his staccato accent, "and thought I'd drop by."

"I have much to think about," Jerick admitted.

"I understand." Then Tzern paused, searching Jerick's eyes in his ineffable way. "You see them, don't you, young Jerick?" Tzern asked quietly.

"See what, sir?"

"The nightmares and the visions," Tzern continued. "The deaths of men you knew, the horrors of battle. You see them when you sleep."

"Every time I close my eyes, sir," Jerick admitted.

"Then know this. The Sho Del's illusions aren't the only visions Tzai are trained to overcome."

Jerick thought for a moment. "Thank you, sir," he said quietly.

“Good night then, young Jerick.”

“Sir,” Jerick said as Tzern moved to close the door.

“Yes?”

“I’ve made my decision.”

Tzern’s eyes searched his own, then he nodded. He had seen the answer therein.

“Come to my office in the morning and we will begin your training.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

RYALLA WATCHED CURIOUSLY AS THE THRONE ROOM'S BROAD DOORS swung open, spitting out the courier who had entered just moments before. Once the man was out, a pair of Doram's guards in Meleran red quickly shut the doors, locking out the palace servants' curious eyes.

"Enough of this," a voice said from behind. The servants, mostly palace maids, looked up sheepishly. They had been watching covertly from the corner where the servants' passages and the palace main hallway met.

Smethsan, the tall palace chamberlain, regarded them with unyielding eyes. "The content of that message is no business of ours. Go about your work."

"But they say it might be a ransom note," one of the younger maids said eagerly.

"If it is, then we will hear about it soon enough," Smethsan said. "Now move."

Sullenly, the group of maids scattered, leaving behind only Ryalla. Smethsan eyed her with dissatisfaction, but didn't say anything as he turned and left. As the princess's personal slave, Ryalla wasn't under Smethsan's control—a fact that had never sat very well with the chamberlain.

Ryalla turned back to the still-closed doors. *I have to get in there*, she realized. So far, her search for the prince had been less than productive. She had kept an eye on Martis as Topaz suggested, but the man had done little that was suspicious. He appeared to a bit hasty in his wedding preparations—the ceremony wasn't for another year, but Martis already had many

of the festivities planned. Other than that his actions had been completely unexceptional. He had visited several farms under his Ka control, he had occasionally gone to the chariot races, and he had taken care of the fiscal matters of his house.

Her only consolation was that no one else seemed to be doing any better at finding the prince. Investigations by guard, nobleman, and king had all turned up nothing. Though Sir Hsor still maintained that the prince might be alive, the rest of Melerand had given up on the boy. A year was a long time, especially without any sort of ransom demand. It was widely assumed that Yoharn had simply gotten too close to the cliffs outside of Lakdon and fallen into the lake itself. If that were the case, then his body was probably feeding the sharks somewhere in the eastern ocean.

And now this. A letter mysteriously attached to the palace gates by a dagger, left sometime in the night. The most important of the king's advisors—Martis, Sir Hsor, and the Horwatcher Scathe, had been gathered for a clandestine meeting. Ryalla needed to hear what they were saying.

But how to get in? The situation was different from what she was accustomed to. Over the last few months she had grown quite proficient at placing herself in locations where eavesdropping would be beneficial. Sometimes she used her ability to “hide,” though most of the time it wasn't necessary. Getting past two guards and a closed door, however, was a different matter entirely.

After Topaz's departure, she had finally forced herself to admit that the way she “hid” was not natural. She had known such was the case for several years now, but hadn't wanted to face the fact that what she was doing was a form of magic. Except, the way Topaz had spoken of it didn't make it sound mysterious at all—he talked more like the Realmatic theorists and scientists whose books Ryalla had occasionally read. Magic wasn't supposed to be something measured or explained; it was supposed to be cryptic and dark. Like the Horwatchers.

But, if anyone's the expert, it is Topaz, Ryalla told herself. So in control, so always ready with an answer—in Ryalla's mind Topaz was the ultimate authority on everything. Even his “I don't know”s were spoken with an air of knowledgeable mastery, as if to imply “and if I don't know, there probably isn't an answer.”

He had mentioned that if Ryalla tried, she could see light. But, didn't everyone see light? She could see it now, shining in the window on the far side of the hallway. Topaz had to be talking about something different. Over the last few months Ryalla had tried to put his words into practice, spending

long hours staring at patches of light, trying to get them to split into colors as Topaz had done, trying to recapture the feeling—the sense—she had felt that day when the jesk visited. So far, her results had been less than impressive. She thought she had made a patch of light fuzz once, but the moment had been over quickly.

Slowly, Ryalla let her mind drift, telling herself that she was hiding. This time, however, she tried to focus on exactly what it was she was doing when she “hid.”

It was a familiar feeling, one of detachment. She allowed the world to swirl around her, continuing as normal, but without touching her. She let her mind relax and dream, thinking of the words from her books and the desires of her heart. Then, she opened her eyes, trying to maintain those feelings.

Usually her “hiding” had been one of two things—either an offshoot of her dreams or a reaction to danger, a method of protecting herself when she was afraid of being seen. Recently she had been trying to do something different. She wanted to be more in control, to make her ability more of a purpose than a side effect. The world seemed a little fuzzy through her eyes, like a dream. She worked harder, trying to see exactly what it was Topaz had said she could do. She was close—she knew she was. It was as if she were surrounded by a powerful force, but it was just beyond her grasp. If she reached just a little bit farther . . .

And then it happened. Like a sudden blow to the head, everything around her became crisp. Everywhere she looked there were radiant lines of color and brightness. It was like a million tiny strings shooting in every imaginable direction. The entire whole was breathtaking—it was a magnificent tapestry, but a tapestry woven in all directions, rather than just up and down.

In some places, where the light was greater, the thin beams were brighter and stronger. In others, there seemed to be no beams at all—or, rather, these places seemed to suck in the beams as opposed to reflecting them. All of the beams, strong or weak, grew more and more dim the farther they went. Part of the reason, Ryalla noticed, was because the beams had a tendency to spread out—to grow wider the longer they went in a single direction. Some even split into separate lines of light, each carrying away a fraction of the original intensity.

Wherever a beam hit something solid, it bounced away—and since a single inch of space held thousands upon thousands of beams, Ryalla was able to see the texture of the world around her. She knew where walls began

only because of where the threads of light stopped moving and turned a different direction.

It was amazing. Everything around her was color—the entire hallway was etched out of light itself. In the distance she could see bodies moving, and the uncountable beams of light bounced and reflected off the moving forms. Torches were enormous explosions of light, shooting off millions of shifting lines.

She had never seen anything so beautiful in her life. Except, somehow she knew she wasn't "seeing" the light beams, at least not with her eyes. It was more of a sense, a feeling that her mind interpreted as sight, rather than actual seeing. She could close her eyes and nothing seemed to change.

This is how people see, Ryalla realized. *These tiny lines of light hit their eyes, and the eyes absorb some of the energy. We never really see objects at all; we only see the light they reflect.*

Ryalla wasn't certain how long she sat staring around her, but eventually she realized that there was a greater purpose she was ignoring. The conference. Gasping in alarm, Ryalla stood, still bathed in the lines of light. She had to get through those doors. Carefully, she made her way down the servants' hallway until she was standing just to the side of the intersection with the main hallway. Just beyond her, the illuminated forms of Doram's guards could be seen outlined in the light beams.

As she moved, she noticed something about herself. The light didn't bounce off her like it did the rest of the world. Instead the beams bent when they approached her, distorting slightly as they wrapped around her body to continue on in the direction they had originally been going. Curious, Ryalla tried to stop the behavior, pulling the lines toward her instead of pushing them away. Instantaneously, the beams snapped from bent to straight, and they began to hit her body like they did everything else. To the rest of the world she would now be visible.

That, however, wasn't going to get her into the throne room. She pushed with her mind, and though the beams resisted her, they eventually complied, bending as they had before. No beams touched Ryalla; not a one was reflected back to reveal her position to observers.

The doors, however, still presented a problem. Even if she couldn't be seen, the guards would hardly ignore a pair of doors opening mysteriously on their own and then shutting again.

Topaz was able to split the light into colors, Ryalla reminded herself. *Perhaps I can do something similar.*

Carefully, she studied the impression the doors gave by reflecting the

light beams. Certain objects seemed to absorb different colors of beams, only reflecting other colors. In her mind, Ryalla ordered the light beams to pull back slightly from the doors, but to maintain the same shape and colors as before. She moved the image of the doors a couple of feet closer to the guards. Then she crept forward as quietly as possible, her heart thumping as she slipped directly between the two men.

Then, muttering a prayer to the Nine Lords, she pulled on the door handle and cracked it open. One of the guards turned at the sound, but relaxed when he saw the image of the still-closed doors. Ryalla held her breath, hoping the man wouldn't notice that the door appeared much closer to him than it had been a few moments before. His glowing head turned back to the front, however, leaving Ryalla to inch the door open just enough to slide her small frame through, then quietly pull it closed.

She could still feel her hold on the door's image, though it was much weaker now that there was a solid object between her and it. Slowly, working as best she could with the unfamiliar streams of light, Ryalla pulled the image back to overlap the door and then released it. No cry of alarm came from the other side of the doors. She had done it—she was in.

"I am loath to point this out, Your Majesty," Martis's voice said from behind her. "But what if the note is just a scheme concocted by men who don't really have the prince? It is not too much to presume that a random group of bandits, seeing that no ransom note has been sent, finally decided to capitalize on your loss and try and bluff their way into getting a reward."

Ryalla turned. The light image before her was that of Rodis's tall-backed stone throne and several men seated on stools around him. Uncertainly, she tried to switch her view back to normal—she knew she could remain unseen and look at the world in the regular way, for she had never until this day actually seen the light threads. With a snap her eyes complied.

The room looked a little bit fuzzy—something she was used to. Every time she had used her abilities without knowing it, the world had fuzzed slightly. Only now did she realize why.

I shouldn't be able to see. The light beams are bending around me, so none of them are hitting my eyes. Everything should be black. Somehow her mind was taking the information she sensed through her ability and translating it into the more familiar method of sight she was accustomed to.

"Young Martis's observation is possible, Your Majesty," Sir Hsor noted, speaking in his separated Tzend accent. "It would explain why the kidnappers have waited so long to send a ransom note."

"They could have just been waiting for the fervor to die down," Scathe objected. He sat on the king's far left, his purple cloak bearing the distinctive Horwatcher collar. "It is my feeling that the note is authentic."

Ryalla stepped forward, sticking to the outside of the chamber despite her knowledge that none of them could see her. It would have been too creepy for her to walk directly through the center of the group—besides, they could have heard her breathing.

She made her way around the periphery of the room until she was standing beside Rodis's fur-covered throne. The note in question was resting on the king's knee but was covered with his hand so Ryalla couldn't read it.

"I think we should assume its authenticity as well," Hsor agreed.

Ryalla's eyes fell on the man—he had always impressed her. Tall and mighty, Hsor was the kind of powerful but refined man that existed in so many of the Fallin ballads she loved. Ryalla knew she wasn't the only girl in the palace who had somehow found a way to put herself near the barracks when Hsor did his daily training with the city guards. Even now, firm-faced and determined, he exuded a sense of control and poise.

"We should play along, Your Majesty," Hsor continued. "But do so only to provide your guards and myself an opportunity to capture the authors of this letter. True kidnappers or simple rogues, they deserve to come to justice."

"That might be dangerous, my lord," Scathe warned. "I have consulted the stars, and they warn that now is not the time for foolish bravado. Is fifty thousand gold really that much to give for the safe return of your son?"

Martis snorted. "Perhaps not too much to give monetarily, but what would be the ramifications of such an action, Your Majesty?" he asked. "Can you afford to look weak before the rest of Yolen? If you pay these miscreants, then how long will it be before every villain on the continent decides that the means to easy riches can be found through the throne of Melerand?"

Rodis, looking very tired, rubbed his forehead with a sigh—his left hand still resting on the letter. The hefty king had gained even more weight over the last year, and he now had to sit on a raised platform, for his bulk could never squeeze between the armrests of the throne. "It is a difficult decision the Lords have given me," Rodis mumbled. The humor and jolliness that had been so much of his character before were also gone, replaced by a dull fatigue. "I must think on this."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the three men said. Slowly they rose, bowing and making their way out of the room. One man, however, remained behind.

"Your Majesty?" Martis asked. "Might I have a moment?"

"Of course, Martis," Rodis said, settling back in his seat. "What is it?"

"Your Majesty," Martis began, his voice laden with something Ryalla instantly recognized as false concern. "I am worried about the kingdom."

"In what way?" the king asked.

"Yoharn's disappearance is a grave loss to us all. He was my friend, and would have become my brother. There are things, however, we are forced to consider now that he may not return."

"Such as what, Martis?" the king asked tiredly.

"The nation is without an heir, Your Majesty," Martis noted.

"I know," Rodis agreed. "But there is little I can do about that. What would you have me do? Take a young girl as my wife and try to repopulate the royal family?"

"No, Your Majesty, of course not. I do, however, have another suggestion. This was the last thing on my mind when I sought your daughter's hand, but since recent events have taken the path that they have . . ."

The king nodded. "You have been a trustworthy advisor, Martis," he said. "Your father and I never got along, but you seem to have inherited all of his loyalty with none of his propensity toward argument. I look forward to having you as a son."

"I know I shall never replace the one that is gone, Your Majesty," Martis said, bowing his head humbly. "But the kingdom is in need. That is why I make a suggestion. Perhaps we should forego tradition in this case and advance the date of the wedding."

The king thought for a moment, his Antoli drooping limply from the end of his ample chin. "A good suggestion, Martis. What did you have in mind?"

"I could be ready in four months, Your Majesty."

Rodis nodded. "All right, then. I shall make the announcement this afternoon."

Martis smiled, backing away from the throne. As he did, Rodis finally moved his hand, allowing Ryalla to read the letter. It was written in simple, straightforward lettering. *Fifty thousand will return the prince.*

What struck Ryalla, however, was the letter itself. At the top and bottom of the parchment were the broken remnants of a seal—the wax was dyed a bright violet color that Ryalla had seen somewhere before.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

THE EKROBILA SAT ALONE, ATOP ONE OF THE HILLS—OPTIMISTICALLY named Mt. Ekro—of southern Lallom. It was ominous, dark, and impressive. Or, at least, it would have been ominous, dark, and impressive to an eight-year-old boy. To Topaz, it just looked silly.

The path leading up to the black fortress was lined with poles bearing skulls at their tops, and Topaz had to keep himself from snickering at the overdone attempt at appearing threatening. In all his years he had never seen a Horwatcher do anything the least bit dangerous—the skulls had probably been raided from a nearby cemetery.

“Behold the Ekrobila!” Cathis said dramatically, sweeping his arm out before him.

“It’s . . . amazing,” Topaz breathed with wide-eyed wonder. “I can’t believe I’m actually here.”

Cathis nodded, whipping their oxen back into motion to begin the ascent. Topaz shook his head—he had spoken the words in perfect Fal-lin, a language he had pretended to learn during the three months they had spent traveling. Cathis took it for granted that Topaz had learned so quickly, attributing the student’s linguistic ability to the teacher’s skill. Topaz should never have been able to progress as quickly as he did, of course—no Jargish peasant, no matter how talented, could have accomplished such a feat. But he supposed he couldn’t blame Cathis for not knowing better. The man was, after all, an idiot.

The oxen plodded their way up the side of the hill, passing the lines of vacant-eyed sentries. There was one thing he had to admit about the Horwatchers—they were very careful about who they let enter their fortress. Topaz had tried to sneak into the Ekrobila three times during his lifetime, and had never made it past the outer wall. The sentries all carried Sho Del Tamu Keks, and were trained to use them to sense the approach of living beings. No matter how stealthily he walked, no matter how clever his plan, Topaz couldn't hide from Cognitive magic. The Horwatchers might not know what they did when they used the Tamu Keks, but they were surpassingly adept at it nonetheless.

The Ekrobila itself was constructed of Fallin blackrock from quarries in the northern mountains. Its walls—which were, admittedly, higher than any Topaz had seen, nearly as tall as two men—were lined with twisted sculptures Topaz assumed were supposed to be frightening. Beyond the wall was the keep, a two-story box of a building without window or door beyond the gate at the front.

"You are a very lucky boy, Jerick," Cathis informed him as they passed through the outer gate. "Few people ever get to see the inside of this most sacred of buildings. Monarchs, armies, and thieves have all tried to enter the Ekrobila, and all have failed. No force on the three continents is powerful enough or sly enough to get past the Horwatchers."

And with that, Cathis led him into the building.

TOPAZ HAD ASSUMED THERE WAS NOTHING DANGEROUS IN THE EKROBILA. He was wrong. These men were all dangerous—dangerous to his sanity. If one more person asked him to light a candle, he was going to scream. He would scream very loudly and very suddenly, and the sound would reverberate through the entire complex.

Fortunately, it appeared as if the Draths were finally satisfied with his ability. At first they had made objections, claiming he was too old—despite all of his skill in disguise and impersonation, there was only so much Topaz could do to mask his age. However, as soon as he lit a candle, all talk of age disappeared without a complaint. Rules and traditions could be ignored in the face of opportunity.

The Draths spoke together now, standing in a loose circle, occasionally turning worried eyes back at Topaz and Cathis. Cathis had quickly and neatly excluded the other Horwatcher, Endelo, from the meeting. Topaz

doubted the younger man had realized that Cathis intended to take complete credit for discovering “Jerick.”

Topaz remained where he had been told to stand, careful to keep his eyes down—he couldn’t afford to start being belligerent until they actually swore him in as a Horwatcher. After that, not even a Drath could kick him out again—it would take a vote from the entire elder council. As far as Topaz knew, no Horwatcher had ever had his title removed.

Cathis, however, did little to hide his self-satisfaction. He stood beside Jerick, humming softly to himself as he watched the discomforted Draths. A person who could light a candle in one pass was an incredibly valuable find, and would probably give him enough “prestige”—something the Horwatchers kept track of with a system of points and levels—to advance to Drath status.

Topaz didn’t, of course, really use the Tamu Keks to light the candles—microkinesis was far more efficient. Though he had relatively little talent for speeding up or slowing down Axi, lighting a candle or two was well within his abilities. He made certain not to light the candles on the first try every time—he wanted to appear powerful, but not unbelievably so.

Eventually the Draths finished their deliberation and turned back to regard Topaz. Their senior member, a wizened man with so many wrinkles on his face he resembled a wadded up piece of paper, stepped forward.

“Revent Cathis, you certainly have returned with a valuable addition to the Ekrobila,” the man declared in a voice as cracked as his face. “He will no doubt be a mighty Horwatcher, and bring praise to us all.”

“Thank you, Great One,” Cathis said humbly.

“And that is why,” the Drath continued, “we have decided that this Jerick is too valuable to be trained by one who is not himself a Drath.”

Cathis nearly dropped to the floor in shock. “Great One?” he practically yelped.

“I will take this boy as my own student,” the Drath said. “You may leave full of the knowledge that you have served the Ekrobila worthily.”

“But . . .” Cathis practically wept.

Topaz barely covered a snicker—apparently Cathis wasn’t the only one skilled at taking prestige for himself. If Topaz became the student of the head Drath, then all the “prestige” from his progression—including all the residual points earned for any Horwatchers Topaz some day recruited—would go to this man. Cathis would be left with virtually no benefit from having found Topaz.

"This is a special incident," the Drath explained, "requiring special handling."

"You can't!" Cathis finally sputtered.

"Be careful, Cathis," the Drath warned. "If you ever wish to join the ranks of the Drath you are going to need *our* approval. I strongly warn you not to do anything that would incur our . . . disfavor."

Cathis grew white, his entire frame trembling. Topaz almost felt sorry for him. Finally the Horwatcher bowed, backing from the room. A second later a scream of despair could be heard from the hallway—followed closely by a second one coming from what sounded like Endelo. Cathis might have been intending to hoard the prestige, but he was definitely willing to share the grief.

"Now, Jerick," the Drath continued as another man shut the door behind Cathis, "we can continue. I am known as Ethusileth, and I will be your master until such time as you prove yourself fit for senior status. If you have no objections, we will proceed with the initiation."

Topaz nodded solemnly, inwardly very curious. He had heard many things about the secret Horwatcher initiation rites. In the end, however, he was sorely disappointed. The ceremony didn't involve dancing naked before an altar, sucking the blood from a still-living animal, or any of the other things Topaz had heard attributed to the Horwatcher initiation. Instead, all he did was repeat after Ethusileth as he read from an old scroll, promising never to reveal the things he saw in the Ekrobila to outsiders.

When it was finished, Ethusileth nodded and re-rolled the scroll. "Tellenis," he said. "Take this boy to one of the meditation chambers so he can ponder fully the nature of what he has become. Initiate, your training will begin tomorrow."

IN A STUNNING FEAT OF PATIENCE TOPAZ WAITED IN HIS MEDITATION chamber for a full half hour before sneaking out to look around the Ekrobila. He threw on the robe they had given him and slipped through the door, hoping no one would come to check on him. Of course, if they did he could just claim he had gone looking for the privy and gotten lost.

The dark, cramped hallways of the massive stone structure were poorly lit and unadorned—as if the passages had been designed by a masochistic claustrophobe. It all looked so similar that he made certain to keep careful track of his progression, counting intersections and trying to move vaguely in the same direction.

He passed Horwatchers as he traveled, most of them bearing the ridiculously massive collars that marked them as a senior member. Topaz was careful to step to the side as they approached, turning his eyes down as he assumed would be expected of a peon such as himself. No one gave him a second look.

It soon became obvious that exploring the Ekrobila would do him little good. The maze of a building was so twisted and confusing that it would take months to become familiar. Facing another identical intersection, Topaz shook his head and chose a random way to go.

There were rooms coming off of many of the hallways, but each one was either locked shut or filled with robed bodies engaged in one esoteric practice or another. The entire experience was frustrating—he could sense Dragonsteel somewhere in the complex, but getting to it was another matter entirely.

Eventually, he decided that if he were going to find anything of value it would be hidden behind one of the locked doors. He debated for a moment which one to try but eventually decided that it didn't really matter. They all looked the same. Randomly, he chose a door and reached for the lock—he could snap the mechanism microkinetically without too much trouble. He paused, however.

The Horwatchers used Cognitive magic—or, rather, they used a very inefficient form of Cognitive magic that depended on the Dragonsteel locked within Sho Del bones. He wasn't certain if their sentries would be able to sense the use of microkinesis; sometimes the two forms of magic reacted with one another. So, instead, he pulled out a thin bag of lockpicks. They were primitive when compared to microkinesis, but they had served him well.

YOHARN HEARD THE SCRATCHINGS AT THE DOOR AND PULLED BACK INTO a fetal ball, preparing himself for the assault of light that would follow. In the time he had been here—had it been days? Weeks? Years?—he had lived in darkness. He didn't even know where “here” was. He had awoken once to see his captors, long ago when he had been taken from the palace, but they had been dressed nondescriptly. They had quickly knocked him back into unconsciousness, and since that time the only thing he had seen of them were shadowed forms outlined in the hallway's blinding light.

The door shook softly. Why weren't they coming in? Yoharn pulled himself against the side of the wall. He would have prayed, but such seemed

futile any more. The Lords didn't care about him, otherwise they would never have left him in the lightless perdition that was now his home.

Please, just let me die, he pled in his mind. *Let it end. I can't live without time, without contact, without light.* . . .

TOPAZ PAUSED. THERE WERE VOICES COMING FROM THE SIDE OF THE hallway. Cursing, he removed his pick and quickly stowed the set of tools underneath his robes. He'd been close.

He turned and began to walk down the gloomy hallway in the direction of the voices, keeping his eyes on the floor.

"Ethusileth wants us to move him," one voice said quietly.

"Isn't that dangerous?" the second muttered back.

"The one who wants him is growing restless," the first voice explained. "The Great One fears that he will send spies to try and retrieve the boy, rather than pay what is demanded."

Topaz stepped to the side, waiting with a bowed head as the two men passed in the narrow hallway. They ignored him, continuing their conversation.

"Where will we take him?" the second Horwatcher asked.

"Back to the place where we found him," the first explained. "No one will expect such a move."

Then they were gone, rounding a corner and leaving Topaz alone once again in the hallway. He turned, looking down the passageway—he couldn't even remember which door he had been trying to open. It probably didn't matter, anyway. He reached for his picks, but then paused. Perhaps it was the experience of nearly being caught, but he slowly moved his hand away, leaving the picks where they were. Perhaps opening one of the doors wasn't such a good idea—he could just as easily walk in on a sleeping Drath as find something important.

With a sigh, Topaz shook his head. He didn't like his options, but fate rarely paid much attention to his objections. He didn't want to spend the time necessary to move through the ranks of the Horwatchers, but that appeared to be the safest way to gain access to their secret chambers. Perhaps a little more searching would give him some more ideas.

After about two hours of wandering, however, he finally gave up. There was no way he was going to succeed in the Ekrobila unless he spent a great deal of time studying it. He stood hesitantly in the hallway for a moment; then decided to make his way back to the meditation chamber. He would

have to spend a good bit of time weighing his options, and the room he'd been given seemed as good a place as any.

As he passed through a hallway, however, something caught his attention. It was a door, slightly cracked open. So far, every passage he had encountered had either been sitting wide open or locked tight. Curious, he approached and peeked through the crack.

And saw what appeared to be a half dozen naked men dancing around a stone altar. Topaz blinked in surprise. Apparently some of the stories were true after all. He checked again, amazed—he hadn't really expected the rumors about Horwatcher practices to have any foundation in truth. He'd thought they were weird, but this . . . ?

His eyes, however, did not lie. He was confronted by the strange, and somewhat nauseating, sight of seven middle-aged men hopping around the strange white altar, completely unencumbered by clothing. He recognized several of them from his meeting with the Draths earlier.

As Topaz turned to leave he noticed something else. He frowned, staring at the altar itself. It was probably a trick of the light, but it appeared as if a glowing nimbus were appearing over the stone block. As he watched the nimbus resolved itself into the form of a glowing young woman—a completely naked, and rather buxom, woman.

Topaz suddenly felt an incredible wave of power—as if a mighty wind had suddenly exploded from the room, but hit only him. He stumbled away from the door, his eyes unfocused, his mind cloudy. He felt his back slap against the opposing wall, and stood, his fingers groping against the cold stone wall as he struggled to regain control.

Whatever he had just seen involved microkinesis—microkinesis on a level he had never before experienced. The torrent made his own most powerful releases of energy seem like pathetic dribbles.

Unable to think in the face of such power, Topaz stumbled away, leaning against the wall for support. A second later, however, the power vanished from his mind. He stood, breathing deeply as if he had just performed some feat requiring every ounce of his endurance. What had just happened? Holding a hand against his throbbing head, he tried to orient himself. Now, more than ever, he needed to spend some time in quiet thought.

He was not to escape so easily, however.

"Cellin," a voice seemed to whisper in his ear.

Topaz looked up, eyes searching wildly through the empty hallway. He hadn't heard that name in a long, long time.

"Cellin," the voice repeated, more loudly this time.

Then it happened. A power appeared before him, so incredibly strong that he was thrown to the ground, cracking his head against the stones. When his vision cleared he saw a white-robed form standing in the air above him. It shone so brightly that everything—stones, wood, and metal—seemed to be made of a glowing white essence. The being was in the form of a man with a long white beard and a blazing mane of hair. It hurt Topaz's eyes to look at him. Energy pulsed from the being, slamming into Topaz like waves pounding against a cliffside.

"Cellin," the man said, his voice booming through the hallway, "I have been watching you."

Topaz gasped, trying to force his body to breathe. His limbs spasmed wildly in the middle of an uncontrollable seizure induced by the power. He squirmed on the floor, unable to even keep his eyes on the figure before him as he twitched.

"What happens to a man when he has no faith, Cellin?" the being asked. "What part of himself must he sacrifice? Does a man with no beliefs give up his soul?"

Topaz couldn't answer—he could barely listen.

"You have no purpose, Cellin," the voice said disapprovingly. "You have lost that very thing which gives you life."

Topaz threw his arm against the ground, grasping for any sort of purchase to hold himself steady as he tried to bring his body under control. The being seemed closer now, standing just a few inches above him, its vast, overpowering eyes looking down at him.

"Worship me, Cellin," the form demanded.

Topaz groaned, pushing himself back up against the wall and barely managing to obtain a seated position. His mouth refused to obey him. "What . . . ?" he managed to croak. ". . . the Horwatchers?"

The being snorted in disdain. "No, I am not here for the Horwatchers. My sister likes to play with them, but I have no use for fools." The being paused, then stared directly into Topaz's eyes. "I am here for you," he informed him. "Give me your devotion, give me your life. Come to me, as you belong."

"Who . . . ?" Topaz said between gasps, tears streaming down his face from the pain of looking upon such luminescence.

"You know who I am, Cellin. I am the God before all Gods. I am he who is called Oreon and Cephus. I am the True God of the Ke'Chan. I am the White One, and I created all. Even you. Worship me."

As the being spoke, another wave of power assaulted Topaz, pushing him back into convulsions. *So much power!* His mind strained to accept it.

That which he had felt just moments ago now seemed miniscule. It was as if the entire world, every vibration of every Axi, were suddenly thrust upon him in one mighty attack.

Worship me! it demanded. How could he resist? The world around him screamed praises to it. All he had known, all that he was, strained, ready to snap—ready to crush his own will and join it with the mighty river of power before him.

Then he felt his world shift, and his microkinetic senses took over. He opened his eyes, though such wasn't necessary, and gasped despite his pain at what he saw.

A void, total and complete, hung in the air before him. It was not power, it was blackness. It did not exude strength, it sucked life in. He had never seen darkness before when looking with the power of microkinesis—everything had Axi, even a dark night sky. Everything was made of Axi. But not this. This thing that claimed to be Oreon, King of the Gods, Creator of all, was himself nothing.

"No," Topaz croaked. It wasn't a scream of denial—he didn't have the strength for such. However, despite its weakness, it bore behind it the full force of what was left of his will.

"So be it," the being said quietly.

And then all was still. The waves of power vanished, as did the light, and Topaz was left lying on the floor, as if dead, his eyes staring dully, his limbs too weak to move, a thin line of spittle dripping from his mouth. As his overtaxed mind slowly fell unconscious, one final thought occurred to him.

I need to stay, he knew. No matter how long it takes, no matter that I have to ignore the rest of the world, I need to stay here until I figure out what that was.

CHAPTER FORTY

IT BEGAN WITH MEDITATION. JERICK RECEIVED HIS FIRST LESSON FROM Tzern himself, a lesson given in the general's office on the day that Jerick would realize only later had been his seventeenth birthdate. The lesson was unlike any in Jerick's life. His father had taught by example, with only occasional explanation. Torell and Vendavious had taught through books, and Topaz through laughter. Tzern was different. He didn't order or instruct, and he couldn't really show. Meditation—or Gvel Mou, as Tzern called it—had to be experienced to be understood.

Jerick learned a great deal on that day—perhaps more in one session than he ever had in his life. Tzern's calmness, his ability to perceive with sharpness, struck Jerick. The Tzend exuded control, and somehow Jerick absorbed some of that feeling. During the three-hour session Jerick learned to breathe—something he'd never thought a person needed to be taught. He learned to clear his mind—no easy task—and he began to feel what Tzern called the concept of “tensed relaxation.” The paradoxical term was an apt one; during the months that followed Jerick came to understand that when meditating, it was possible for his senses to be completely alert, his muscles prepared for instantaneous motion, but at the same time be completely at rest.

After that first lesson, Tzern assigned him a mentor from amongst the Tzai—a Tzend by the name of Sharn. Tzern met with him frequently to instruct and train, but it was Sharn who guided Jerick on a daily basis, and, when the time came, who sparred with him.

It felt odd to Jerick, not going on Dragonsteel runs any more. He hadn't realized that by agreeing to become a Tzai, he had committed himself to a training process that often took years to complete. Before him, the next youngest Tzai had already been in training for over a year, and he had only started going on runs again a short while ago.

Once again, Jerick's life became one of learning and study, though this time no books or writing were involved. Most Tzai were allowed to begin joining Dragonsteel runs again after fourteen months of training, and then only under close supervision. Tzai warriors were too valuable to be allowed to get themselves into danger before they were fully trained.

THE BOX WAS CONSTRUCTED OF A DEEP BROWN WOOD—PROBABLY MAHOGANY, though Jerick couldn't be certain. It was odd how little he really knew about wood, considering his background. The problem was, the lumbermen's forests lacked diversity—that was part of what made them so valuable. They were filled with a dozen different varieties of pine, some patches of cedar, and several less-useful woods such as aspen. There were, however, very few hardwoods.

The box's wood was different than those Jerick knew—for one thing, it didn't have much of a scent. Jerick had lived his childhood associating different trees with different scents—it seemed odd to him that the box should smell more like the stain that had been used to preserve it than it did of any natural wood scent. The grain was also less pronounced than in the woods Jerick knew. It was faint, almost indistinguishable, making the box appear as if it were one solid color, rather than the complex weave of layers that should make up a wood.

Still, it was beautiful. Jerick had never seen wood its color before, a brown so dark it was nearly black. Like stone, rather than wood. It was incredibly smooth, smoother than any pine board could ever become, no matter how much it was sanded. It was also very hard; the tip of Jerick's fingernail had left no mark.

Jerick was at a loss as to what could be contained in such a small box. It wasn't a chest to put clothing in, or even one of the chests he had seen men use to store food. It was only about two hand-spans across the top and about a hand-span high. It could have been a woman's jewelry box, but why would Tzern have given him such a thing?

Jerick sat on the floor of the Tzai practice hall, sitting comfortably in the Gvel Mou position. The box rested on the floor in front of him, such

an insignificant object to be the source of so much contemplation. The hall was empty for now—the other Tzai had gone on a run, leaving Jerick alone.

This second step in the meditation process—called Gvel Tzou, the act of studying a single object—had come much easier to Jerick than the first step. It had taken him the better part of two months to reach the point where he could wholly and truly clear his mind of all thought, resting simply and unemotionally, his senses alert but relaxed. Once he had mastered that technique, Tzern had allowed him to move on.

People always remarked on how perceptive Jerick was. He wasn't certain about that, but he did know that he had always enjoyed studying the world around him. So, when Tzern had explained the second step in Gvel Mou, Jerick had felt an instant understanding.

"Study the object," Tzern had explained. "Know it, know everything about it. Feel it with your eyes, learn its secrets. Come to know each of its separate pieces; then put them together as a whole."

Jerick had been doing that since his childhood. True, it was different now that he understood the first step of Gvel Mou, the preparing of one's mind through emptiness. He could focus even more sharply, studying the one object so intently that no distraction—whether physical or mental—could draw him away from it. However, it was only an extension of his natural inclinations. More intense, but still the same.

Tzern, sensing his student's progress, had moved Jerick on to the next step after just a week. Gvel Too, the third step in meditation, was the act of pondering a single concept with the same discrimination and focus that had been used to study objects. Jerick had assumed that this step would also be easy for him. He had spent countless hours as a student considering different ideas and their implications. In a way, he had been right—Gvel Too had been easy for him, but he had been unprepared for its effectiveness.

Before, when he had read and thought, he had considered himself intuitive. He had readily grasped the concepts presented to him, and had assumed he was able to discern their meanings. If there was one thing Gvel Too did for him, it was to convince him of how little he knew.

Tzern had started him with the concept of beauty. "Consider it as you did the candle, the box, and the plant," Tzern had explained. "Take apart its pieces and discover what they each mean. Feel the whole, and experience it until it becomes as familiar to you as the fingers on your hand and as close to you as the skin on your chest."

Jerick had done as he was told. After clearing his mind, he had begun to

consider the different philosophies and perceptions that made up the concept of “beauty.” He had deliberated on the various things people considered beautiful, wondering why they were distinctive, and tried to make connections between them. Then he had begun to question why some people could consider an object beautiful while others did not. Was beauty not universal then? Was something beautiful if only one person considered it so, or was true beauty to be contained in the opinion of the masses?

When he had finally fallen out of his meditation of beauty, it was twilight outside. The session had been long—he had begun early in the morning. Jerick rose, planning to prepare for bed, but had been shocked to find people bustling around the camp with an air of busyness. People were usually growing lethargic and preparing to sleep at such a time. Only then had he realized it was growing lighter, not darker. He had not only meditated through the day, but through the night as well.

It was that session, and dozens more like it, that had finally convinced Jerick of how truly ignorant he was. Within the formless calm of Gvel Too, he was able to follow strains of thought far beyond what he had done as a student, when his mind had jumped from topic to topic. Now he could spend hours on a single idea and still not understand it. He could, however, see the nearly endless potential for thought, and know that he still had a very, very long way to go before he understood.

Of course, he still spent time on Gvel Mou and Gvel Tzou—true meditation required the continued practice of all three. The dark brown box was one of his favorite exercises, partially because of the mystery it contained—Jerick still did not know what, if anything, was inside. However, more of his fascination with the box came because of the challenge it presented.

“When you can release the contents of this box,” Tzern had explained upon giving it to him, “you are ready to begin Dragonsteel runs again. You can, however, only touch the box with one finger.”

The box had three clasps on it, one on each side except for the hinged back. The lid was fastened down with the clasps. However, each clasp was attached to an odd sort of coiled metal that snapped it closed again whenever Jerick lifted it. With a single finger, he could only open one clasp at a time. Over the last month he had tried hundreds of different finger positions, attempting to find a way to pull open multiple clasps at once. One time he had almost managed to lift two of them at the same time, but never had he even come close to three. It seemed a physical impossibility.

Jerick could, perhaps, have used microkinesis to open it—but that would have felt like cheating to him. Tzern didn’t know about his abilities,

and Jerick wanted to perform the task the general had intended. He already felt guilty enough for having looked at it microkinetically, which allowed him to see through the wood and sense the contents. Such hadn't done him much good, however—he still wasn't very adept at sensing objects when there was a physical barrier in the way. As far as he had been able to tell, the object in the box filled it almost completely, and its Axi resembled those of glass.

So, for a few hours each day, he pondered the box, knowing that the secret Tzern intended him to find could come with quiet Gvel Tzou, otherwise it would not have been included in his training.

He was still studying the box when the other Tzai returned from their run. Jerick noticed their arrival—Tzern had very strictly explained that Gvel Mou did not lead one to ignore one's surroundings, for such could be very dangerous to a warrior. Instead, it was the complete focus of one's attention without letting distraction occupy the mind. He could be aware of those around him—needed to be aware of those around him—without letting them draw him out of his contemplation.

This day, however, he did let the Tzai's arrival draw him out—not because of their distraction, but because he knew he was finished with his meditations for a time. The hour for dinner had almost arrived, and he had promised to let Frost begin teaching him Dek, a strange game involving a board and multi-colored stones, after they ate.

Jerick blinked slightly, rising from his seated position as he felt meditation disappear for the day. His body felt invigorated and alert—his muscles were never stiff after Gvel Mou, and he never felt as if he needed to stretch.

Sharn noticed him rising and smiled in acknowledgement. He was older than Jerick, perhaps in his early twenties, and had the thin body of a Tzend. His hair was sandy blond and his face was open, his eyes always friendly. Over the last three months, Jerick had developed a deep fondness for the Tzend. Jerick had never had brothers or sisters, but under Sharn's tutelage and guidance he felt as if he had begun to understand what it would have been like to have an older sibling.

"Still stuck on the box, I see," Sharn noted as he pulled off the thin tan and white leather jerkin that was the Tzai's only armor.

Jerick nodded, looking back at the box. "I don't know that I'll ever open it."

Sharn chuckled. "You'll figure it out eventually, tep," he said, using the Tzend word for a younger sibling. "Lord Tzern gives it to you at the beginning, but he doesn't really expect you to do anything with it until you've been training for the better part of a year. Give it time."

Jerick nodded. Sharn continued to dress, placing his Tzai uniform on a peg then redressing in a fendove and leggings. Several of the other Tzai called to him as he finished, suggesting they head into town for the evening. Lord Tzai's camp didn't have brothels or taverns like Demetris's, but it was carefully placed to be within walking distance of a medium-sized village where, assuming they didn't act shamefully, the men were allowed to find leisure.

Sharn called back to them, saying he'd be along in a moment. Jerick had realized soon after his admission into the Tzai that Tzern had chosen the best of their already elite group to train him. Sharn was the leader of the Tzai, a man respected throughout Tzern's army. He was one of those affable, witty people who seemed to be able to do anything they wished without much trouble, but of whom you couldn't force yourself to be envious. He was just too likable to hate.

"Why don't you come with us, tep?" Sharn suggested, leaning back against the wall and folding his arms. "I know Lord Tzern likes to talk about focus, but I've often found that a little diversion is necessary in a man's life. It keeps him healthy."

Jerick smiled slightly. It would be nice—he might start to feel like he was back in Bridge Four again. Not that he didn't appreciate the Tzai; they had immediately accepted him as one of their own, and had made true efforts to include him. It was just that he missed the simple feeling of brotherhood in Bridge Four; the feeling of not just being accepted, but of being needed. He visited his old friends on occasion, but it wasn't quite the same. They had their lives, and he had his, and Jerick missed the unity they had once felt.

"No, Sharn," Jerick said with a sigh, looking back at the box. "The harder I work, the sooner I can move on. Besides, I promised a friend I'd meet him after dinner."

"All right," Sharn said, clapping him on the shoulder. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

Jerick nodded his farewell. Every morning Sharn trained him with the sword. Jerick was almost beginning to feel as if he could stand against his mentor, at least until the older man used his Tzai skills. Every time Jerick got close to beating him, Sharn would change. Gvel Dar, it was called, the final stage of meditation—that of maintaining the Gvel while fighting.

Sharn's eyes would grow more focused, his movements more quick. He would jump higher than he should be able to, spin to his feet when he should have fallen to the ground. His sword would parry Jerick's blows, as if out of nowhere, and he would dodge blows that should never have missed. Sharn

never attacked when he was in such a state, for such a contest would have been laughably unfair.

All Sharn would have had to do was perform a single Tzai blow—a strike like the one Jerick had seen on that first day, the attack where all of one’s energy and focus combined into a single, powerful blow—and Jerick would be beaten. Jerick had seen it dozens of times since his arrival. The focus in the warrior’s eyes, the tensing of the muscles, then the moment of absolute stillness. Frost called it a Cognitive ripple, an effect of the enormous Cognitive power about to be released. To everyone watching the battle, time would seem frozen for a brief moment just before the Tzai struck.

No, if Sharn had gone on the offensive, Jerick would have fallen quickly indeed. Fortunately, the older man only used his Tzai skills to dodge, an exercise to help Jerick progress as a swordsman, to present a foe that would be challenging. Jerick had only managed to land a blow twice when fighting a warrior maintaining the Gvel Dar. According to Sharn, such was quite an accomplishment.

It didn’t feel like one. Jerick sighed, turning to sit before the box again. There were a few minutes before dinner began, and he never liked to arrive at the beginning of the rush. Every man in Tzern’s camp, whether bridge-man or Tzai, stood in the same meal lines. If Jerick was going to wait, he might as well spend it here, in the quiet of the Tzai hall.

The box stared up at him, but his mind was not on it for the moment. He was thinking of the Tzai, and how different their mannerisms were from those of other warriors. When the men had returned a moment earlier, no mention was made of Sho Del killed. There had been no bragging about fighting prowess or counting of opponents slain by the number of notches in the sword hilt—both things Jerick had noticed in the regular warriors of both camps. The Tzai didn’t do such things.

Not only did Tzern forbid them to brag of their kills, but the warriors didn’t like to speak of the deaths they had caused. Jerick wasn’t certain, but he sensed that they, like himself, had at one point been bothered by the nightmares. These men had killed many, many times—their Tzai skills made them unparalleled warriors. Where a regular soldier would perhaps kill one or two opponents in the course of a Dragonsteel skirmish, a Tzai would often slice through a dozen or more, slaughtering with the cold efficiency of a quiet, focused mind.

Fortunately, they had the Gvel Mou. Of all the things Tzern had told him, this had been the most true. Since Jerick had become a Tzai, the nightmares

had trailed away, vanishing like the dreams they were. His sleep now was quiet and restful, and whenever his mind began to dredge up images of dying men, screaming friends, and demonic Sho Del, it would immediately quiet itself with the blissful thoughtlessness of Gvel Mou.

Just as it did at that moment. As soon as such dark images began to grow oppressive, Jerick found his mind clearing. He breathed in a deep breath of peaceful, calm air, and the horrors and shadows of his visions were gone, leaving him still and in control.

Still, in control, and facing the box. Jerick contemplated it carefully, noting its smooth, glossy finish. Perhaps he had been thinking about it the wrong way. What if the clasps were a distraction, like the visions that constantly tried to overwhelm his mind? What if there were another way into the box, one not so obvious?

One finger. Jerick raised his hand, looking at his index finger. Then he looked back at the box, his vision slipping naturally into microkinetic view as it sometimes did while he was meditating. The tiny Axi danced before him—most prevalent was the black one that could be found most purely in the charred remnants of a fire, and the blues and the whites that made up water. Jerick raised his finger, all of his attention focused on it. He could feel his energy, his Tzai, coursing through his body, converging and welling within the muscles of his arm.

His finger froze in the air for a moment—a moment that seemed impossibly long to Jerick—then it struck, snapping forward. It smacked into the side of the box before he realized what he was doing. There was a large crack, and Jerick's meditative mindset shattered. He shook his head in confusion. Then he looked down. His finger had punctured the back of the box, somehow breaking a perfectly finger-sized hole in the center of the hardwood panel. The box itself hadn't moved, not even scooting an inch forward from the impact.

Immediately, Jerick felt a wave of weakness strike his entire body. It didn't just affect his arm—the muscles in his feet suddenly seemed just as fatigued as his arm. He recovered quickly, but for a few seconds he was so feeble that he nearly passed out. A few seconds later it was over.

Amazed, Jerick pulled his finger out of the box. It was difficult—the hole was so exactly sized to his finger that he had to yank soundly to pull it free. Afterward, dark red sand began to pour out of the hole, piling on the ground beside the box.

"By the names of the Lords!" an amazed voice whispered behind him.

Jerick turned suddenly to see Sharn and two other Tzai standing in the doorway, apparently having returned to retrieve some forgotten object. Their task was forgotten, however, as they noticed Jerick's accomplishment.

"Go get the general," Sharn said to one of the other men in a quick voice.

TZERN TURNED THE BOX OVER IN HIS HANDS, INSPECTING THE HOLE AT the back. Red sand, like granulized blood, poured out as he looked over the dark wood. Finally, he set the box back on the Tzai Hall's floor, then turned to regard Jerick, who sat straight-backed a short distance away.

"You, young Jerick, are a constant source of surprises," Tzern said simply.

"I'm . . . sorry, sir," Jerick said uncertainly.

"It's all right," Tzern said calmly. "I did, after all, tell you to open it with one finger. My daughter is going to be absolutely livid when she finds out what I did to her jewelry box, however."

Sharn smiled beside Jerick. Tzern's daughter, Sharn's fiancée, had been visiting Tzendor since Jerick arrived. She was reputed to have a very fiery temperament—quite the opposite of her father.

Jerick frowned. "I wasn't supposed to open it that way, then?" he asked with confusion. He had assumed he'd discovered the solution of the test.

"Lords, no," Tzern said with a slight smile. "The box exercise is supposed to be futile, a method of developing patience. You are ready to go on Dragonsteel runs when Sharn and I agree you're ready. All three of us open it together, one finger each, as a sign of your advancement."

"The sand, then?" Jerick asked.

"A way of making it seem as if there really is something in the box," Tzern explained. "Some of the more ingenious students balance the box on their finger and shake it up and down to try to determine what is inside. I had to start filling it with sand or rocks to maintain the illusion that there was some secret to be gained by opening it."

Tzern shook his head slowly, opening the lid and looking inside. A moment later he pulled out a round piece of wood the size of Jerick's finger. It fit precisely into the hole in the back.

"Perhaps it can be patched," Tzern mumbled. Then, with his ineffably calm eyes, he looked up at Sharn. "We will have to begin teaching him the Gvel Dar if he is going to start going on Dragonsteel runs."

"Sir!" Sharn said with surprise.

"I made a promise, Sharn," Tzern said.

Jerick paused. Part of him was excited, but part of him knew what he had to do. "Sir," he said. "I will not hold you to such a comment. If you don't think I am ready . . ."

"You have just proven yourself ready, Jerick," Tzern said, rising. "You have amazed me since that first day."

"But sir," Jerick objected. "It took me so long to master the first step of meditation."

Tzern smiled slightly. "It takes most students at least six months to do what you did in seven weeks, Jerick," Tzern said. "You have a natural aptitude for the Gvel. What say you, Sharn?"

"He is still inexperienced, sir," Sharn said thoughtfully.

"Then take him on night runs at first," Tzern said.

"Night runs can be very dangerous, sir," Sharn said.

"Yes, but not chaotic," Tzern explained. "At night it is only the Tzai; the other soldiers won't be depending on him for safety. If the Sho Del contest you, turn back."

Sharn thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, sir."

"The boy is ready," Tzern said. "There is no reason to hold him back." With that, the general left, leaving the two Tzai sitting quietly.

Finally, Sharn put his hand on Jerick's shoulder, rising to his feet. "Good job, tep," he said appreciatively with a wink.

FROST SAT IN TZERN'S ROOM, STUDYING THE DEK BOARD BY CANDLELIGHT. A young Tzai had arrived in the middle of their game, pulling the general away with something urgent—something involving Jerick, Frost had guessed from the way Tzern looked at him. In his many years of life, Frost had learned to read people very, very well. He could sense nothing dangerous had happened—no one had accidentally gotten their head chopped off or some similar disaster—so he simply let Tzern go. He would hear the news from Jerick later on.

The distraction was, shamefully, a welcome one. It gave Frost an opportunity to study the board, and wonder just how it was possible that he was losing. He hadn't lost a game of Dek in decades, but somehow Tzern managed to best him two times out of three. The general truly was an amazing strategist.

Frost!

Frost paused, looking up with surprise. The mind-thought had come very awkwardly, like it was initiated by someone very young and untrained. Why would they let one of the youths call him?

Yes, child. I hear, listen, and consider. He gave the ritual answer before he realized what was wrong. The one mind-thinking to him had used the name Frost, not his true name. That meant . . .

Hah! The mind-thought said, and Frost realized he recognized the quirky, ironic twinge to the voice. *I knew it, I knew it, I knew it! You can hear me! Explain this one away, old man—if, indeed, you are a man.*

Topaz, Frost mind-thought tolerantly. I should have guessed. Have the Lords done us all a favor, then, and finally sent you to the other side?

Why, Frost! Topaz's mind thought with mock pain. *I can't believe it. Such bitterness doesn't suit you.*

Frost took a deep breath, forcing his frustration to melt away. It had been a long time since someone—even Topaz—had surprised him so soundly. That was, however, no reason to be uncivil.

I apologize, he thought.

Topaz laughed, a bubbling sound through the mind-thoughts. *Oh, come now, Frosty, Topaz replied. You should know me better than that. I find sarcasm endearing. It means someone cares enough about you to pretend that they don't.*

How are you doing this, Cephandrius? Frost asked. *Have you spontaneously developed Cognitive to Cognitive powers as well?*

Hardly. I'm in the center of that ant-hill of a building the Horwatchers call home. You should see the number of Tamu Keks they have here—must have depopulated an entire Sho Del clan to get so many. Wave this bunch of ivory around the wrong way and every candle-stick shop in a hundred-mile radius would go up in flames.

Frost shook his head. He had always found the idea of a Tamu Kek in the hands of a human a little bit morbid.

Now, what's your excuse, Frosty, Topaz demanded. How does an ordinary old tutor like yourself understand Sho Del mind-thinking?

You said it yourself, Topaz. You must have enough Tamu Keks there to mind-think with a dead ox.

Frost heard Topaz's snort of disdain from several hundred miles away. *And that answer you gave me when I first spoke to you?*

You caught me in the middle of a daydream, Frost replied. A weak excuse.

A pretty weak excuse, Frost, Topaz said. How's the kid doing?

I thought you didn't care about him, Frost noted.

Frost! Just because I'm heartless, manipulative, and cruel doesn't mean I don't care.

Of course, Frost thought with a shake of his head. He is actually doing much better than one would think. He's training with a group known as the Tzai warriors.

Tzai! Topaz thought with true shock. *How in the name of the Lords did he manage that?*

You know of the Tzai?

I have my sources, Topaz responded with characteristic mystery. *Well, maybe that old Tzend—what's his name, Tzeppy? Tzenzup? Tzoba?*

Tzern.

Right. Maybe he'll be able to keep the kid alive. What about . . . other things?

The boy's powers? Frost asked. *Most of the time I think he refuses to use them.*

Why does he keep doing that? Topaz mind-muttered with a curse. *That boy seems determined to keep himself from using his talents. Every time he makes a little progress, he turns around and intentionally tries to forget everything he's learned.*

I don't know, Frost confessed. *Maybe he's just frightened.*

Maybe, Topaz thought, sounding unconvinced. *There's something more there, Frost. There's something holding him back. Some part of his mind is rejecting his abilities.*

Anyway, Frost continued, *I had almost concluded that he would never be able to do anything more than just see the Axi. For many, that is the extent of their powers, you know.*

No, I don't, Topaz noted. *For many what? Humans aren't supposed to be able to use microkinesis, and I know Sho Del can't. Who are the ones you keep referring to?*

Frost paused. *I can't tell you.*

Great. Remind me to find a new mysterious old-man confidant. My current one is growing increasingly frustrating.

Anyway, Frost said, hurrying on. *I assumed that was all the boy could do, but then something happened.*

What?

A spontaneous bridge of negative sub-Axi between two conductors.

Topaz was quiet for a moment. *Um, of course,* he mind-mumbled.

A bolt of lightning, Topaz, Frost said. *It appears as if the boy has some ability in manipulating nuclear bonds.*

That's what I was thinking, Topaz said, a little too quickly.

Frost smiled. Topaz knew about Axi, he had guessed about photons and waves, but he still had no clue about sub-Axic particles. To him, an Axi was completely indivisible. He'd probably figure it out some day.

De'Herrie! Topaz swore. *Someone's coming. I'm still young here—I'm not supposed to be using the Tamu Keks yet. I'd better find a corner and start chanting or something.*

Farewell, Cephandrius.

Farewell, whatever you are, came the quipped reply as Topaz's presence faded from his mind.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

PASSING INTO THE NYOR REGION OF TZENDOR WAS LIKE ENTERING A completely different world. The stunted pinions and junipers that barely sucked a living out of Tzendor's dry earth gave way as the land rose, forming the bare series of hills that the Tzends simply called the Barrows. Beyond the Barrows the land fell off steeply, dropping into the Nyor flatlands—a wide, circular chunk of land that jutted into the ocean like a plateau. The area was so scattered with streams and lakes that it almost looked like a series of small islands.

Here the mighty Nyor palms were the dominant plant. Like their smaller cousins, which could be found along southern Yolen, the Nyor palms had straight trunks topped with a platform of broad leaves. The Tzendor version grew so huge, however, that a single leaf from the top could grow to be twice the length of a man. The wood was too stringy to be used for lumber, but the artisans of Tzendor created frayed-looking sculptures from it. Palm sculpting was an art that completely baffled Bat'Chor.

He stood now, looking at one such piece. It bore little resemblance to the mighty trunk from which it had come—though it was vaguely cylindrical, the bark had been stripped away and the soft pulp underneath shredded and pulled apart. The result looked something like a blooming flower, though its sides were twisted and hanging with hair-like strands of pulp. Bat'Chor could understand painting, and he highly approved of metalworking and stonecrafting—both arts the Ke'Chan were known for. This, however, resembled nothing so much as a useless scrap.

Bat'Chor stood in a wide open-ended hallway—most buildings in Nyor had few doors. Though rain was frequent, Nyor was even hotter than Falla-more, and breezes were welcome. The hallway had a curved ceiling and the walls were lined with small alcoves, each one bearing one or more pieces of artwork. The hallway was packed with people, most of them staring into one alcove or another.

In a way, the building confused Bat'Chor even more than the sculptures it contained. The structure seemed to serve no purpose—it wasn't anyone's home and it didn't sell anything. It was kind of like a storehouse for art, but anyone was allowed to come in and look at it—even peasants, and they didn't even have to pay. It was one of many buildings of its type scattered through Tzendor. The Tzend Emperor, Aronack, called them “museums.”

Bat'Chor shook his head in wonder. More than anything else he had seen, the “museum” idea convinced him that this Aronack was a little bit on the odd side. Bat'Chor agreed with Topaz's thoughts that peasants should be treated much better than they were, but everyone knew art was something that only the rich could appreciate. If one wasn't raised around such works of culture, then one didn't know what to make of them. Displaying artwork in such a public manner seemed pointless.

Still, it made Bat'Chor's job easier. Many of the museums were concentrated in the Nyor region, near the capital of Sipan, and Bat'Chor had spent the last six months traveling through the region visiting every museum that was reputed to contain a work of Dragonsteel. So far he hadn't had much luck. No matter what Aronack said about bringing art to the masses, Dragonsteel was too valuable to be shown indiscriminately. The few bits of Dragonsteel Bat'Chor had found were far too small to contain any sort of writing.

This museum was his last hope. If he didn't find anything here, then he would either have to travel all the way across to the eastern side of the continent and search the museums there or find a new method altogether. This museum, called the Tzu Ka, was located just outside Sipan. It was said to be the largest museum in all of Tzendor, and it was certainly the most popular. Three times a day the inner doors were opened and visitors were allowed to go in and look at the more valuable pieces in the collection—works crafted from gold, silver and, hopefully, Dragonsteel.

Bat'Chor waited impatiently for the time to arrive. The museum bore several of those infernal “clocks” that were appearing all over Tzendor, and the guards were amazingly stubborn about not opening the doors early. It appeared that, in Tzendor at least, “noon” no longer referred to the period

when the sun was high in the sky, but instead to a precise moment indicated by two little arrows pointing straight up. Bat'Chor found the entire idea silly, but the Tzends held to it like a religion.

Eventually the all-powerful arrows proclaimed that it was time for the doors to open, and the guards lethargically undid the locks. The large wooden doors swung inward, allowing a flood of people to pour through. Bat'Chor allowed himself to be carried along, grumbling softly to himself. He didn't like crowds—when too many people pushed against him, his first instinct was to start pounding on heads until a space cleared. He wouldn't do such a thing, of course, but some Ke'Chan didn't have his restraint. Usually, people were careful to give any Ke'Chan in their midst a wide berth. Unfortunately, the Nyor Tzends seemed to have forgotten this little custom.

The inner chamber was a large, box-shaped room. The upper half of each wall was constructed of glass, and beyond were raised platforms holding various works of historical or artistic import. Bat'Chor pushed through toward the back wall, ignoring such items as gold necklaces and earrings, trying to catch a glimpse of the thing he had come to see—Emperor Kvon's Dragonsteel shield.

Unfortunately, the rest of the crowd had come for the same reason, and no matter how much Bat'Chor shoved he couldn't make his way forward. The Nyor Tzends' height also prevented him from looking over their heads—Bat'Chor had only a few inches on most of them. He pushed, he elbowed, he even growled, but nothing worked. Finally, he was forced to just wait as the crowd—a mixture of noblemen and peasants, both trying to ignore the presence of the other class—slowly moved past the back window.

An hour later he finally reached the glass. Just then, however, the guards at the doors announced that the time was up, and everyone had to leave. Bat'Chor cursed, looking up at the clock on the wall. Sure enough, the stupid little arrows had moved an entire hour's time. The people obediently streamed out of the room.

Bat'Chor turned back to the glass, ignoring them all. If the guards wanted him out, they would have to throw him out.

"Sir?" one of the guards called. "The next visiting period is at four. You can come back then."

"I am not going unteel I have seen heem," Bat'Chor declared flatly, turning and folding his arms.

The guards gave each other exasperated looks, and Bat'Chor slipped his sandal free, preparing for the battle. The men, however, did not attack.

“You have five minutes, sir,” the guard said tolerantly.

Bat’Chor blinked in surprise. “Um, all right,” he mumbled, turning back to the glass wall, then frowned. The supposed Dragonsteel shield bore the unmistakably amber metallic glint of bronze.

Bat’Chor snorted. “He eesn’t Dragonsteel at all!” he declared.

“The entire thing isn’t made of Dragonsteel,” the guard behind him said with a chuckle. “Lords, man, there probably isn’t that much Dragonsteel in the entire country. Look at the center.”

Bat’Chor squinted, blushing as he studied the circular shield’s center. Sure enough, if he looked close enough he could make out a few lines of silver at the middle. They were worked into the bronze—or, rather, the bronze had been forged around them. Bat’Chor felt his heart thump in excitement—that probably meant that the piece of Dragonsteel had existed before the shield was constructed.

As he looked he saw more and more lines of silver. The thin piece of Dragonsteel was about the size of his palm, and looked something like a long wire that had been bent and looped to form a pattern. Or a name.

Mouthing praise to the True God, Bat’Chor reached into his pack and pulled free the sheet of paper Topaz had sent with him. He pressed it up against the glass and began to compare the alphabet with the Dragonsteel.

“Sir,” the guard began again.

“You weell please be quiet!” Bat’Chor snapped, “or I weell be forced to keell you.”

The letters were flowery and interlaced, making them difficult to distinguish. However, after a few moments of pondering Bat’Chor was able to make out four letters. An “e,” a “th,” an “ai,” and an “n.” Ethain. Bat’Chor frowned, lowering his sheet of paper. Ethain was one of the names Frost had told them—it wasn’t the name of the fifth god.

Disappointed, he turned. Behind him he saw a line of a dozen dark-faced guards, their weapons—which appeared to be half-spear half-axe—held at the ready.

“Sir,” the lead guard said. “We’re going to have to ask you to come with us.”

“I was just going,” Bat’Chor said, stepping forward.

A dozen spears fell to point directly at his chest. Bat’Chor raised his hands, backing up. Even a great descendent of the great ’Cheru Tar knew better than to fight a dozen armed men.

He regarded the spears with a frown. “I deedn’t really mean I would keell heem,” Bat’Chor explained. “I am Ke’Chan. That ees just what we say.”

“Sir, we have been ordered by the emperor himself to bring you to the palace,” the guard said. Only then did Bat’Chor realize that these men wore the white and gold of Aronack’s personal guard, not the tan and brown of the regular museum guards.

“What?” Bat’Chor asked with confusion.

“You match the description of a man who assaulted Lord Ki in his home a few months back,” the guard explained, nodding for several of his men to surround Bat’Chor. “You are to appear before Emperor Aronack himself for judgment.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

THE COALS WERE KEPT SO HOT THAT EVEN STANDING AT THE FAR SIDE of the temple was uncomfortable. Blazing red and white, the coals quickly devoured the carcass of the small bird and the two apples. Humbly, Ryalla knelt and quoted the commoner's version of the supplication prayer, as recorded in the *Legends of the Nine Lords*. The words were familiar—everyone, including slaves, was taught them from childhood.

In her mind, however, Ryalla spoke the real words; not the vulgar, verseless version, but the nobleman's version. Torell had been loath to give her a copy of the untranslated, pure Legends, but eventually he had capitulated. After all the other teaching he had done, this final step wasn't much worse. Ryalla was probably the only one in the temple, besides the priests themselves, who had actually read the Legends.

The temple to Merith, the Queen Warlord, was an open-sided thin structure with tall columns. The top was a dome, and it was marked by the smoke of countless sacrifices. The center of the temple, taking up the majority of its space, held the round firepit. The circular walkway around the pit held numerous places for peasants to kneel in prayer, and a couple of raised daises held the similar—if more plush—places for the nobility. Though the lower half of the temple was well-populated with humble parishioners, the nobleman's section was all but empty. Most aristocrats only made an appearance at one of the temples during feasts or festivals, sending servants to order their sacrifices the rest of the time.

Please watch over him, Queen Merith, Ryalla pled, adding her own words

to the end of the formal prayer. *He is only a boy, and a foolish one, but there are those of us who would like to see him return safely.*

She watched until the dove and apples had stopped smoking. She, of course, hadn't paid for the dove herself—every year the king gave a stipend to each of the temples to pay for the sacrifices of those unable to do so on their own. The apples couldn't even be called hers—they were another gift from Master Torell. All she had were her feelings, and so she added those to her prayers, hoping they would be enough.

Stupid boy, Ryalla thought to herself. *You're probably dead already.* Still, she hoped. Sometimes, in her dreams, she thought she could see him. An older, worn Jerick, his face hard, the naïveté of his youth replaced with strength and understanding. There was something wrong with his nose—it bent down oddly near the middle. She could feel his hurt, so much pain and sorrow that she woke frightened. The dreams must have been nightmares, for no human could possibly live with so much agony and remain sane.

Still, she burned sacrifices for him. It was no accident that she offered the sacrifices to Merith, even though the goddess of war had one of the smallest and least attended temples in Lakdon. If anyone knew how to take care of a lost warrior, it was the Queen Warlord.

Ryalla stood, making her way out of the temple. The cool spring breeze was welcome on her face. Outside, she met with one of the cowed priests and handed him a small scroll—an order to burn a sacrifice in Torell's name. The scholar had complained to no end about Jerick's insolence, but as soon as he heard Ryalla was coming to offer a sacrifice today, the grumpy scholar had penned the order for one of his own. It was a touching move—Torell barely had enough money to survive. If the king hadn't given him quarters in the palace, then he probably would have been forced to leave Melerand in shame and look for employment as a scribe.

Spring had brought new energy to the streets of Lakdon. The city finally seemed to have recovered from the prince's disappearance over a year ago, and the people were returning to the open, amiable ways that had always been a trait of the Meleran. The news that Martis and Courteth were moving up their wedding date had been well-received—the country needed a celebration to revive its spirit. Now, with the wedding only days away, there was a feeling of excitement in Lakdon that Ryalla hadn't seen in ages.

Unfortunately, the princess's marriage wasn't quite as exciting a prospect to Ryalla. She wasn't certain why she hadn't realized it before, but the marriage would mean relocation to Strafen's Kaden—both for Courteth and

her servants, most especially her handmaid. Perhaps it was because of her increasing autonomy, but Ryalla hadn't truly understood this fact until the packmen arrived a few days before to begin moving Courteth's belongings. And, no matter how independently-minded she was, in the eyes of the rest of the city Ryalla was nothing more than another possession.

Ryalla tried to tell herself that she didn't care. The palace servants had never really accepted her anyway. What did a change of scenery matter? She would still be the same person. In fact, she should be glad for the move—it would place her closer to both her brother and the man she suspected was behind Yoharn's disappearance.

Yet, at the same time, she couldn't help remembering the hollow eyes and nervous air of the servants in Strafen's Kaden. Even thinking of them made her feel sick; what would it be like to live amongst them? Worse, what would it be like if she became one of them? She wanted to believe that such a thing wasn't possible, that she could never become so lifeless. She worried, however, what might happen to her if she were ever cornered by Kalord Strafen and was unable to hide quickly enough.

It didn't help her mood any that her afternoon's destination was the very place she was trying to avoid. Unfortunately, she had little choice. The king had decided to pay the fifty thousand gold ransom, and had spent the last few weeks waiting for further word from the kidnappers. If Ryalla didn't move quickly, she would lose her opportunity to link Martis to the crime.

Seeing the seal on the ransom note, and coupling it with Martis's attitude, had been enough to convince Ryalla that Strafen's son was the culprit. The bright violet wax was distinctive, and Ryalla could remember seeing the same type of letter—if not the ransom note itself—held in Martis's hands. If she could find that signet wax, then perhaps she could use it to prove that Martis was behind the kidnapping.

Unfortunately, her efforts so far had been futile. Using her ability to remain hidden, she had searched all through Strafen's house, looking through trunks, opening closets, and rifling through every stack of paper she could find. She was growing desperate.

Topaz should be doing this, not me, she thought to herself as she approached Strafen's house. She willed herself to vanish, bending the light around her body—an action that was becoming increasingly simple the more she did it. She entered through the nobleman's entrance, walking right past the guards.

He would have figured out how to expose Martis in a matter of days. I've been trying for months now, and still haven't really made any progress. I know Martis did it, but Topaz told me as much on the first day.

Even assuming she found the wax, she still wasn't certain how she would convince the king that Martis was the kidnapper. Topaz could have just walked in and told the king, accusing an important member of the court of high treason as nonchalantly as other men spoke of the weather. Such an option wasn't open to Ryalla—slaves, no matter how much proof they had obtained, were not allowed to speak ill of a nobleman. She could no more accuse Martis of being a kidnapper than she could own possessions or leave the boundaries of the city without permission.

Of course, such worries were pointless without the wax. First she would find her evidence, and then she would decide how to implicate Martis. Perhaps Torell would be able to help her; such an action would certainly improve his standing in the court.

Not really certain where she was going, Ryalla drifted through the Kaden looking for inspiration. She had already searched everywhere she could think of. As she wandered, however, she heard voices and, curious, she moved toward them. They weren't the voices of servants—at least, not servants in this house. They were too firm, and lacked the necessary anxiety.

"Frankly, it all sounds moot to me," one of the voices said. "He's already agreed to pay the ransom."

"That he has," another voice—this one Ryalla recognized as Martis's—said. "But what I want to know is how he plans to gather that much money."

Ryalla crept closer. The sounds were coming from Martis's study, and as she approached she could see that the door was cracked slightly.

"What do you mean?" the first voice asked. Peeking in, Ryalla saw Martis sitting before a group of five noblemen, immediately distinguishable as such by the Antolis they wore. Martis had only recently begun wearing an Antoli himself, and it was amazing how old the stiff beard made him look. Ryalla had always thought Antolis looked a little silly—Martis's stuck off his chin like a slice of bread on its end, wiggling as he spoke—but at the same time she associated them with authority and power.

She recognized most of the nobles in the room. The one who had spoken was Kalord Guth, third in preeminence following only the king and Strafen. He was a nondescript balding man, neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin. His only distinguishing feature was his complete lack of eyebrows.

"Ludor," Martis said, nodding to a second nobleman. "Tell them what you told me." Kalord Ludor was a thin man, and one she hadn't often seen. He was said to run one of Melerand's best trading companies, and was usually traveling in some distant part of the world.

"Melerand might be doing fine in your estimation, gentlemen," Ludor

said in a smooth voice, “but you only deal with your farmers and the food they produce. The king’s wealth comes from lumber and from the mines in the north. Those mines, however, mostly produce tin—once the most valuable metal on the continent, next, of course, to Dragonsteel. With the popularity of bronze waning in recent years, tin has become nearly as useless as Jargish farmland.”

“In short,” Martis concluded, “the king has lost half of his income. Rodis is too weak-willed to raise taxes, and so he has made do with only the proceeds from his lumber. And lumber production has been down since the prince’s disappearance—the city has been so troubled that the mills no longer operate efficiently. I doubt Rodis has ten thousand gold in his coffers, let alone fifty.”

The group of noblemen eyed one another with looks of surprise.

“But,” Martis continued, leaning back against his desk, powerful arms folded across his chest, “let us assume that the king somehow raises the money. Perhaps he had found a way to get a loan from abroad, or perhaps he has some hidden stash that we don’t know about. What then?”

“Then the prince comes back,” a man—Ryalla thought his name was Rullen—said.

“Does he?” Martis mused. “Tell me, my lords, do you not find this entire situation . . . suspicious?”

“What are you implying, Martis?” Guth said bluntly.

“The prince disappeared during the Sho Del assassin’s attack,” Martis replied. “A distraction so perfect, one might think it had been orchestrated. Then we hear nothing for a year, as if the ransom note had to travel an incredible distance before arriving here. Really, men, who do you think these kidnappers are? Who else would have cause to steal a human child? Melerand is at war with no kingdom or sect—at least, not one on *this* continent.”

“You think it was the Sho Del,” Guth assumed.

“I think it’s possible,” Martis said with a shrug. “And, you all know what the demons do with human children.”

The men nodded to one another, not speaking out loud. They didn’t need to—they all knew, as Ryalla knew, what Martis was implying. Everyone had heard many stories about the Sho Del stealing babies and replacing them with changelings. Ryalla, of course, didn’t give the idea credit—she didn’t believe the stories. Besides, they all spoke of babies. Despite Martis’s willingness to refer to Yoharn as a “child,” the prince was only a year younger than Martis.

"My dear lords," Martis said quietly, "can we really allow someone to take the throne when there's even a hint of a doubt that he might not be . . . one of us?"

It was a dirty ploy, but an effective one. Ryalla could see the seeds of doubt appear in the eyes of the other noblemen. Even if Yoharn did return, and even if somehow he managed to take the throne, these men would always wonder if they could trust him.

Someday, Martis, Ryalla decided, you are going to catch yourself in your own sneakiness.

But, why wait for someday? Ryalla smiled as a plan formed in her mind. She would let Martis himself give her the evidence she needed. Scanning the room, Ryalla located a sheet of ordinary parchment sitting on Martis's desk. Then, careful to maintain her own invisibility, she switched views so that she could see the individual beams of light. Once again, the world exploded into a realm of color and luminescence. She took the image of the sheet of parchment, as outlined by the light, and then made an addition of her own—a bright violet seal, broken at the top and bottom.

It was something she had never tried before. In the past she had only duplicated images, but she had thought more and more about the potential for her ability. Technically, she should be able to create an image of anything she imagined. This was probably the wrong time to be testing her abilities, but now was when she had the opportunity and, more importantly, the determination.

Taking the image in her mind, she waited for a point when Martis was looking toward the back of the room, over the heads of the men he was addressing. Then, she flashed the image of the parchment in the air just behind the heads of the noblemen, letting it hang there only a brief instant before making it vanish.

Martis cut off in mid sentence, his eyes growing wide with shock.

"Lord Martis?" Guth asked uncertainly, turning to look for whatever it was Martis had seen.

Martis shook his head, continuing his previous thought. "Um, as I was saying, I—"

Ryalla flashed the image again, making certain only Martis could see it. Martis nearly jumped to his feet in shock. Now the entire room was concerned, men searching around themselves in confusion. Martis shook his head again, looking down at the ground as he did so. Ryalla threw the image in front of him again, this time making it appear to rest on the floor.

“My lords,” Martis said in a strained tone, “I think perhaps we should continue this meeting another time. Suddenly I’m not feeling well.”

The men agreed quickly, having noticed the sudden change in Martis’s temperament. Ryalla slipped into the room as Guth opened the door all the way, then she waited as they all left.

As soon as he thought he was alone, Martis rushed over to the room’s firepit and pulled loose a stone on the side—one that Ryalla would never have thought to try removing. She approached eagerly, waiting for him to pull out the incriminating signet wax.

Instead, Martis only pulled out a sheet of paper—a sheet with a broken violet seal. He sighed with relief when he saw it, shaking his head and mumbling something about the stress of the wedding.

Ryalla approached with a frown, looking over the kneeling man’s shoulder to read the words of the letter. *You are placed in a very envious position by the prince’s disappearance, the note read. If you wish things to remain as they are, you will pay us sixty thousand gold. Do so, and the prince will never be seen again.*

Ryalla stepped back with dumbfoundment as Martis put the letter back in its hiding place and replaced the stone. She had been wrong—Topaz had been wrong. Martis wasn’t the kidnapper. He was definitely involved, either through act or contemplation, but the letter seemed to imply he hadn’t been the original instigator. In fact, Ryalla suspected that he hadn’t even paid the demanded price—that would explain why the ransom note had taken so long to come to the king. The kidnappers had been waiting to see if Martis would pay them or not, and had probably sent the note to the king as a means of putting pressure on Martis.

But, if not Martis, then who?

THE WEDDING WAS AS GREAT A CEREMONY AS WOULD BE EXPECTED FOR the daughter of a king. As if trying to forget the sorrows involving his other child, King Rodis made a grand holiday of the event, proclaiming a day free from work for the entire kingdom.

The ceremony itself was performed in the temple of Slonis, the Mother, whose duties included the blessing of newlyweds and the gift of fertility. It was like most temples of its kind—or, at least, that was what Ryalla had been told. She had always been fascinated by the structure and its clandestine nature—supposedly a representation of the secrets of the wedding night and of childbirth. It was made completely of green Lallin marble, a

rock so dark that it almost appeared black. There was only one entrance in the flat, rectangular structure, and the windows were little more than slits.

Ryalla herself stood at the back of the crowd that had gathered around the wide, rectangular temple. She watched—or rather listened to—the proceedings with only passing interest. She was so far away that she could barely hear the callers, who stood on boxes throughout the crowd, repeating in loud voices the events that were happening in the temple.

It was a minor source of discomfort to her that she had no part in the ceremony herself—as one final act of spite, Courteth hadn't allowed Ryalla to join the honor procession of servant women. Every other unmarried girl in the palace had been given a bright green dress and allowed to throw rose petals before the couple as they walked to the temple. Only Ryalla was excluded. It was a slight, but only Ryalla noticed it—to everyone else, it was expected that a slave would be excluded from such an activity.

However, Ryalla gave the spiteful move only marginal thought. Her mind was occupied solely with a single problem—that of the prince. Topaz had been wrong—it wasn't Martis. That option removed, she was leaning toward her first suspects, the ones she had assumed were behind it from the beginning. The Horwatchers.

The problem was, she had no idea how to prove it. She knew her feelings were silly—she had no more basis for her suspicions than what she had read in the ballads. Still, she didn't have any other suspects, and she couldn't ignore the impressions her heart was giving her.

She had thought of a little evidence, though it was weak. Torell had mentioned that the Horwatchers were having financial troubles, now that they had to compete with Trexandian scholars and Fallin poets for noble patronage. She also had a feeling that the sneaky wizards would be apt to offer Yoharn to several different sides, trying to get as much from the prince as possible.

Her most important basis was, however, a memory. The night, years ago, when she had found Jerick sitting vacant-eyed in the middle of the feast hall. Scathe had met with some shadowed figure. She had been tired at the time—it had, after all, been in the middle of the night. In addition, she had nearly frozen in the lake a few days later. What recollections of the event she did remember she had long ago dismissed as irrelevant—Horwatchers, after all, were supposed to do things that were mysterious and unexplained.

She now realized, however, that she might have been witness to one of the early stages in the plot to steal the prince. Unfortunately, all she had for proof was her word—she couldn't even use Jerick as a witness, now that

he was gone. She also didn't know who Scathe had met in the darkness. It wasn't much of a lead.

Ryalla shook her head—she needed proof as much for herself as for evidence. She had been wrong once before, and she wasn't confident enough to trust her feelings. Essentially, she was back to where she started—she had a suspect, but little else.

A roar came from around her, and Ryalla looked up. Streamers and shreds of colored cloth were being tossed into the air in all directions. The wedding had been performed—there was little time left. Martis might not have taken the prince, but he still could not be trusted. He was now only one step away from the throne. It would only be a matter of time before he decided to stop waiting for King Rodis to vacate the position.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

ALL WAS STILL ON THE SHATTERED PLAINS AT NIGHT. NO CRICKET creaked—even assuming such an insect had somehow managed to cross the numerous chasms, it wouldn't have been able to survive on the plateaus' lifeless surfaces. Eons of soaking in Dragonsteel had made the plateaus impervious to floral growths of any kind. The ground was so hard no root could pierce its surface, let alone glean nutrients from its core. Even molds and lichens shunned the Plains—the infrequency of shadows and the omnipresent heat was just too uninviting.

As a bridgeman, Jerick had rarely been given cause to come onto the Plains after dark. It was eerie, watching the quiet plateaus in the darkness. It was so still. Empty, save for the boulders.

“Our only company the rocks,” Sharn whispered beside Jerick, echoing the younger Tzai's thoughts. “They always remind me of home for some reason. There were rocks like these near my house in Zvel Tni.”

Jerick looked over at Sharn, barely making out the Tzend's form in the darkness. Then he turned back to look out at the plateaus. “I had always wondered what happened when Dragonsteel wells came to fruit at night,” he mumbled.

“Wonder no more, tep,” Sharn said, his Fallin so flawless Jerick would have sworn he was speaking to a native. “The night belongs to the Tzai.”

Jerick nodded, though he doubted Sharn could see the movement. Each night four Tzai warriors, two sets of two, were sent to the Plains to watch for Dragonsteel. Back in Demetris's camp, Jerick had assumed that either

Dragonsteel didn't come at night—an illogical assumption—or that it simply couldn't be harvested. The only way to tell if a well was about to put out Dragonsteel was by the colors it turned—colors indistinguishable at night.

No one had told him that wells released a brief flash of light when Dragonsteel appeared in them. Frost said the brief glow was caused by the Dragonsteel itself, a reaction to its new environment. Regardless, the burst of light—easily visible to enhanced Tzai senses—provided a way to locate Dragonsteel after sunset.

Jerick scanned the plateaus, looking one direction while Sharn looked the other. His mind was clear and focused with Gvel Dar, the art of meditating while actively moving. Jerick still had not mastered it, of course—even Sharn claimed to need practice at Gvel Dar—but he was growing increasingly adept at the art.

The two Tzai sat atop a plateau that rose far above the others, providing a perfect place for watching. Jerick had assumed all of the plateaus were the same height—those he had seen as a bridgeman in Demetris's army had made it appear so. Apparently, Tzern's section of the Plains was more diverse. The vast majority of the plateaus were still at the same basic level, but a few of them jutted into the sky like pillars on an open plain, the tops of hills whose sides had all worn away. Rope ladders, hung through a massive effort by the Tzai, ran down the sides of these few unique plateaus, the only means by which the top could be reached.

Jerick's eyes ran smoothly over the Shattered Plains, looking for a sign of light. It was vital they spot the glow of Dragonsteel as soon as it appeared, for they were not the only ones who watched the Plains at night. Out there somewhere, their pale forms hidden by the darkness, were the Sho Del.

Battles at night, if they could be called such, were very different from those during the day. In the day, Dragonsteel wells grew dark hours before they actually put forth any fruit. A division of warriors had enough forewarning to march to a well and secure it, waiting until the Dragonsteel finally appeared. Such a method created skirmishes and strategic battles, forcing a group of soldiers to either hold their ground until the prize arrived, or try to take the same ground from their opponents.

The Dragonsteel glow, however, appeared just as the liquid metal touched the air. As soon as a Tzai saw light, he could be assured that Dragonsteel waited for him. There was no need to hold ground or fight through a line of defense. All that success required at night was speed. The first ones to reach the well were the ones who got the prize. Usually, the Sho Del weren't even

involved. If a well too close to the human side bore fruit, they wouldn't even try for it—just as Jerick and Sharn would ignore any lights too far off in the distance. The wells in the middle, however, required constant surveillance.

"I wonder if Demetris realizes how much Dragonsteel he's missing at night," Jerick mumbled.

"Probably not," Sharn replied quietly. "And even if he did, there would be no way for him to do anything about it. I don't care how many men he's willing to slaughter, there's no way Demetris would be able to reach wells before the Sho Del. His men would have to move much too slowly in the darkness."

Jerick nodded, falling silent. Since his arrival in Tzern's company, he had come to understand a lot more of the politics that went on in the Eternal War. General Tzern was quite open about such things—he condemned them all liberally. Such condemnations, however, didn't stop him from consistently earning the coveted spot as most successful general. In fact, he earned it by a wide margin—Tzern brought in nearly twice as much Dragonsteel as Demetris, his closest competitor. Part of it was due to his organization, part of it was due to his ability to lead, and part of it was through clever tricks such as sending his Tzai to collect Dragonsteel at night.

Jerick turned his mind back to the Dragonsteel search. The plateau was still dark and silent—though, for some reason, a faint buzzing had begun to sound in the back of Jerick's ears. It happened sometimes when he was on the Plains—Jerick assumed it was some sort of feedback from the hundreds of Dragonsteel wells. The others couldn't hear the buzzing. The noise—which was really more of a feeling than a sound—was very similar to what he felt when he was too close to a Sho Del Tamu Kek.

"There," Sharn said suddenly.

Jerick spun, searching through the darkness. Sure enough, he could make out the tell-tale glow of newly arrived Dragonsteel.

"It's closer to their side," Jerick noted, judging the distance.

Sharn paused. "True, but not so close that we don't have a chance. Come on."

The decision made, the two Tzai leapt to their feet and began the race.

IT HAD TAKEN SEVERAL MONTHS BEFORE TZERN'S PROMISE TO LET JERICK go on Dragonsteel runs was fulfilled—no matter how quickly Jerick learned, it would have been impossible for him to follow another Tzai across the

Plains without the proper skills. From that day, however, Jerick had been taught the Gvel Dar, the art of extending one's meditation from quiet contemplation to focused movement. Once he had mastered simple acts such as walking, Sharn had begun training him to fight while in the Gvel Dar.

At first, he had done worse than before. Jerick had been forced to expend so much effort keeping his mind clear and focused that he hadn't been able to watch his fighting. After two weeks of fruitless training, however, something had changed. It had occurred almost instantaneously, like his body and mind had finally discovered how to reconcile meditation with reflex. After that he had been able to give even Sharn a decent challenge. The older man still won four bouts out of five, but at least now he didn't hold himself back.

Such remembrances were far removed from Jerick's mind as he loped across the dark Shattered Plains behind his mentor. As he moved, his consciousness was focused simply on the task at hand, his emotions and memories held in firm check. The two men moved as quickly as possible considering the dark night—one false step would send them plummeting into a chasm. The cloudy sky and thin crescent moon made it almost impossible to see where one plateau stopped and another began.

Sharn slowed in front of him. The older Tzai had been running the Plains for long enough that he had developed a feel for the sizes of the different plateaus. He could sense generally when a chasm was approaching.

"Here we are, tep," Sharn said, stopping at the edge of the plateau. "Be careful—it's darker out here than usual tonight."

Jerick peered forward, trying to separate the darkness of the chasm from the darkness of the plateau. Eventually, he managed to distinguish a vaster, enveloping darkness a few feet ahead of them.

"Got it?" Sharn asked.

"Yes."

"I'll go first." Sharn backed up. Then, with a light step, he dashed forward. Just before he reached the chasm, the Tzai sprang. In execution, nothing appeared extraordinary about the jump. Yet, it carried Sharn's dark form higher than it should have, projecting him across the twenty-foot chasm. A muted thump came from the other side, and Jerick knew that Sharn had landed perfectly, like always.

Then it was Jerick's turn. He backed up as he had been shown, then let his feet carry him forward in a quick run. He focused his mind on nothing but the jump, seeing the chasm before him, feeling his legs pump, gathering his Tzai. When the jump came, he pushed off with his mind as well as his feet.

He hung freely in the air for a moment, as if he weren't really jumping but hovering in a dark room with wind blowing at him, then his feet touched the ground and he pushed against it with his mind as he landed. That was one of the first lessons he had been taught—unless he prepared his mind for the landing he risked damage to his legs.

“Good,” Sharn said simply, turning to dash off again.

Jerick followed. He suspected that Sharn intentionally took his time on these runs—Jerick had only been accompanying him for a few weeks now, and was still considered little more than a toddler when compared to the rest of the Tzai. Even when the moon was full, Sharn stopped beside chasms, having them take the jumps one at a time. Had he not been calmly within the Gvel Dar, Jerick probably would have chafed at the restraints.

The jump training had begun with two lines drawn in the dirt—a simulated chasm. From that they had moved on to an actual chasm, one near the camp and strung with netting. When Jerick had been able to leap that a hundred times in a row without error, he had been allowed to move on to real chasms.

Now the process had become almost rote to Jerick. As they chased the Dragonsteel light—its location held only in memory, for the glow wasn't visible now that they had descended to the basic level of the plateaus—they crossed a dozen different chasms. At each one Sharn paused, gauging the distance and waiting for Jerick to do the same.

Eventually, Sharn stopped, this time looking around with wide, scanning looks. “We’re close,” he said.

“What plateau were we heading for?” Jerick asked.

“I thought it looked like it was somewhere in the early seventies,” Sharn said.

“Where are we now?” Jerick asked.

“Seventy-three.”

Part of the Tzai training included memorizing a map of Tzern's section of the Plains. The general had numbered each plateau and noted how often each one put out Dragonsteel. So far he hadn't been able to find any patterns, but his method of mapping was useful for direction finding.

“There,” Sharn said.

Jerick squinted in the darkness, trying to distinguish which direction Sharn was pointing toward. Finally, he noticed a plateau a short distance away. There was a muted, almost indistinguishable glow coming from its center.

Without a sound, Sharn moved to jump onto the next plateau. From this point on they wouldn't speak, just in case there were Sho Del nearby. They approached the plateau cautiously. The glow meant that the Dragonsteel was still there, but Sho Del could arrive at any time. Jerick frowned as they made the final jump. Something felt wrong to him—they had taken far too long getting to the plateau. Perhaps two full Tzai could have made it in enough time to beat the Sho Del, but Jerick never should have been able to. Not this close to the Sho Del side of the Plains.

Sharn sensed it too. He paused after jumping, not moving forward even after Jerick had joined him on the plateau. He stood in a half-crouch beside Jerick, like an animal sniffing the wind for danger.

The Sho Del attacked a second later.

Sharn cursed, his Tzai-enhanced reflexes whipping forth his blade even as he heard footsteps approaching. Jerick spun, as if to jump back across the chasm behind him, but he heard footsteps from that direction as well. His heart began to thud quickly—it was his first confrontation with the Sho Del in the six months since he had moved to Tzern's camp. Every night before this one had passed without incident.

Jerick pulled free his weapon, calming himself and forcing his mind into the Gvel Dar. He backed up slowly, moving until he could feel Sharn close behind him. Jerick's heartbeat slowed as he reasserted control, his body becoming perfectly relaxed for the conflict ahead.

The Sho Del surrounded them. There had to have been at least a half-dozen of them, three in front and three behind. He could hear their footsteps on the hard stone, see their forms moving in the poor light. Sharn breathed carefully behind him. Then he attacked.

Jerick did likewise, throwing himself at his three shadowed opponents. There was something wrong—he should have been able to see their pale white faces in the darkness. The forms moved out of his way as he attacked, and he brought his weapon up in what he hoped would be an effective parry. Something hard and metallic cracked against his blade, and Jerick spun, ducking as he moved. Two more weapons whooshed in the air above him.

Jerick backed away calmly. He could hear fighting from his left, metal on metal and grunts of pain, but there was no way for him to know how Sharn was doing. He only knew that his own opponents were near because of their muffled footsteps. He raised his weapon again, blocking as best he could in the dim light.

Then, fortunately, a break came in the clouds, and the thin moon appeared.

It wasn't much, but it was enough for Jerick to make out the enemies before him, their bodies draped in dark clothing, their faces voids of blackness. With the cold of the Gvel Dar surrounding him, Jerick leapt forward.

Two of the Sho Del dodged to the sides, but one decided to attack. Jerick's foot took him in the face even as he was raising his blade. In one fluid motion, Jerick continued the spin from his kick, bringing up his blade and decapitating the Sho Del. He continued spinning as the body thudded to the ground behind him, blocking attacks from the two remaining opponents.

He advanced even as they attacked him, trying to get past his defense. When an opening apparently came, they took it, swiping at his chest. By the time their swords arrived, however, Jerick was gone, jumping into the air. He twisted as he arced over the Sho Del, dropping one with an elbow to the head as he landed and whipping his sword at the other.

The Sho Del blocked Jerick's strike and returned with one of his own. Sho Del were mighty warriors—as a bridgeman Jerick had often seen them stand against two or even three human opponents—but they were no match for a Tzai. To Jerick the Sho Del's movements seemed unnaturally lethargic and dull, as if the creature were trying to fight while submerged in water. However, he knew that the truth was opposite—that the Sho Del moved as quickly, or even faster, than a normal human. It was Jerick's own motions, motions within the perfect clarity of meditation, that were enhanced.

Jerick felled the Sho Del easily with a quick strike to the breast, dropping the creature with an efficiency that would have horrified him a few years earlier. However, the beast had one final trick with which to end its life. Even as Jerick's sword arced at its unprotected chest, the Sho Del lowered its weapon. Jerick didn't notice what the creature was doing until it was too late. Realizing its own life was forfeit, the Sho Del had decided to take one final blow at its opponent. Its kick dropped Jerick to the firm plateau floor even as a froth of white blood spurted from its chest.

The Sho Del collapsed beside him, spasming briefly. Jerick rolled onto his back, sitting as he reached over to pick up his fallen sword. As he moved his eyes fell on a dark-faced form behind him, its blade raised high. The opponent he had felled earlier had decided not to remain unconscious.

Jerick reached soundlessly for his weapon, trying desperately to bring it up in time. However, the Sho Del's own blade had been descending even as he turned. Even movements through water could be deadly. To a regular warrior, it would have all been over before the mind had time to realize its own death. To Jerick, his senses alert and crisp, the moment dragged on forever. The world seemed to freeze just before the weapon pierced his chest.

Then he realized the world had frozen, both he and the Sho Del rendered motionless. A streak of light, like a tiny bolt of perfectly straight lightning, snapped across the Sho Del's body—the light trail of Sharn's sword. The Tzai blow, moving so quickly even Jerick couldn't follow it, had sliced completely through the Sho Del's body. A splinter of a second later Jerick heard the cracking sound that always accompanied a Tzai blow.

There were two thumps as the Sho Del's arms, separated at the elbows, dropped to the ground, followed by its torso and finally the legs. Sharn rose, sliding his sword into its sheath—there was no need to wipe the blade, for a Tzai blow passed through a body without wetting itself with blood. Jerick, however, was another story—his tan Tzai uniform was covered with Sho Del blood. He accepted Sharn's hand and pulled himself to his feet.

"My thanks," he said with a nod, looking down at the dead Sho Del.

Sharn smiled lightly. "The general would never forgive me if I killed off his favorite student." Then the older man knelt, touching the Sho Del's black face. His fingers came up with their tips darkened. "They're wearing some sort of paint," Sharn noted.

"It's about time they thought of that," Jerick replied. "Their faces usually glow like firebugs in the moonlight."

"They wanted to ambush us," Sharn guessed, rising from the body.

"Just like they tried to surround General Tzern six months ago," Jerick agreed. "They're trying to kill off the Tzai."

Sharn nodded, walking toward the center of the plateau. Jerick followed.

"It makes sense," Sharn said a moment later. "The Tzai are relatively new to the Eternal War, started by the general about four years back. The Sho Del must realize how dangerous we are. If the other camps were to start training Tzai of their own, it could be disastrous for the Sho Del side of the battle."

"The other camps wouldn't even need to train full Tzai," Jerick said as they reached the well. "They would just need to train their men to see through the Sho Del illusions. That alone could be enough to turn the odds permanently in our favor."

Sharn nodded to himself, looking down at their prize. There wasn't much of it, a single drop no bigger than a sweetberry, but it was over drops such as these that hundreds of men died. The Dragonsteel glowed brightly in the darkness, illuminating the basin-like well. The glow was more muted than the flash it had given off when it first emerged, but it was still relatively bright compared to the dark night.

There were no holes or pores in the stone of the well, the Dragonsteel just

seeped through the bottom, appearing from whatever source it had beneath the earth. It was silvery white, and it had beaded into a small sphere like mercury.

Sharn pulled out a small iron vial and an instrument that looked something like a tiny shovel. Then he reached down, pushing the drop into the vial. The Dragonsteel ran like a liquid, but it had incredible cohesion, sticking together in a single mass as Sharn shoved it into the vial.

Jerick watched, feeling the power of the Dragonsteel. The feeling was even stronger within the Gvel Dar, as if his microkinetic senses were enhanced with his regular ones. The Dragonsteel almost seemed to sing to him, giving off the buzzing sound that he could hear only in the back of his head. Along with it came the feeling of coldness at the front of Jerick's mind.

As Sharn replaced the cap of the vial, the world grew dark again. Jerick blinked, letting his eyes adjust to the night. The clouds were back, cutting off the moon, and the Plains had been returned to blackness. He could still feel the Dragonsteel buzzing in Sharn's hand.

Then, suddenly, a thought occurred to him. Jerick blinked, shifting his vision. The world exploded with light, everything around him shifting to the colors and vibration of Axi. Yet, just as it wasn't quite right to ascribe "colors" to the Axi, it was equally inappropriate to call what he saw "light." Because he didn't use his eyes to see the Axic world, sensing them didn't depend on lightness or darkness.

I am a complete idiot, Jerick thought with amazement. *Why didn't I think of this earlier?*

"Jerick?" Sharn asked uncertainly. "Are you all right?"

"Perfect," Jerick said, the edges of his lips lifting in a smile as he looked around the Plains. The world was no longer shadows of black and gray—he could make out chasms and plateaus with ease. "Come on," he said, dashing away from the well. He didn't even break stride as he jumped across the chasm.

FROST ROLLED THE SMALL STONE BETWEEN TWO OF HIS FINGERS, HIS EYES focused on the Dek board. Though Frost had done well at the beginning of the game, Tzern was slowly chopping away at his territory. It wouldn't be long before the general took the lead. Frost didn't really mind losing again—it had been decades since he had been able to take so much enjoyment from Dek. Worthy competitors were difficult to find.

Eventually Frost placed his stone—a defender. Ever since Tzern had started catching up, Frost had been trying desperately to retain hold of his territory.

Tzern rubbed his clean-shaven chin for a moment, studying the board. Eventually he chose a red stone—an attacker—and placed it on the board. The move put two of Frost's stones in jeopardy—any stone touched by two attackers was considered dead. Tzern removed the two stones and placed them in his pile of winnings.

"Have things grown any better since we last spoke, my lord?" Frost asked, placing his piece—another defender.

Tzern didn't take his eyes off the board as he responded. "No," was the simple reply. Frost waited quietly as Tzern placed a piece and captured another one of Frost's. Eventually, the general continued. "It is looking bad for the entire war, Frost. Dragonsteel winnings have dropped off at an alarming rate, and we are losing more men than we can raise."

Frost placed another defender.

"If only I knew where they were getting so many men," Tzern said with a shake of his head.

"The Sho Del?" Frost clarified.

Tzern nodded, his stone face expressionless. "Somehow they've managed to triple the number of warriors they send on each run. It started with those Lords-cursed jumping beasts, then moved on to regular soldiers as well. At first I thought it was just my camp, that for some reason the demons had drawn reinforcements from other sections of the Plains to focus on me. That notion proved arrogant, however. The other camps have experienced a similar increase. Apparently the Sho Del have committed themselves to taking the Plains once and for all. The only thing I can't figure out is why now? If they had so many men in reserve before, why wait hundreds of years to bring them to the front lines?"

Tzern placed a piece—an attacker, though it didn't manage to capture any of Frost's stones. Perhaps the game was looking up.

"We're losing the war, Frost," Tzern confided quietly, his sharp accent making the whisper sound odd. "For the first time since it began centuries ago, it appears as if the Eternal War might find an end. Then the demons will have free access to the continent."

Tzern fell silent then, and the Dek game progressed. Eventually, Tzern took control of the entire southern half of the board—a bad sign for Frost. Still, he could perhaps hold out until the end of the game and win by a few pieces.

As the end neared, however, Tzern chose to speak again. "The boy is progressing at an impressive rate," he noted in a contemplative voice.

Frost paused, then placed a defender. "Jerick always has been a quick learner, my lord."

"I've seen 'quick learners' before, Frost," Tzern said in an even tone. "Jerick is in a completely different category. He is mastering the Tzai skills with incredible aptitude . . . one would almost even think his progression unnatural."

"Unnatural?" Frost asked slowly as Tzern placed another piece. An archer. Frost regarded the piece, trying to determine if there was any significance to the move. Traditionally, Dek was much more than a simple game. Merchants and political emissaries often masked their negotiations with a game of Dek, the pieces used representing certain nuances of conversation. The archer was a neutral piece. Tzern wasn't making an accusation, just posing a question.

"Part of it is undoubtedly due to his experiences," Tzern said speculatively. "The other Tzai are mostly nobleman. Jerick, however, lived for a year as a bridgeman. His will is already hard, and he is accustomed to controlling pain. From what you've told me, he was also a good student, so he is accustomed to learning difficult concepts. Still, it seems there is more to young Jerick than rationalization can explain.

"Sharn says that recently the boy has begun moving so dexterously on the night runs that other Tzai have trouble keeping up with him. Ever since that run two weeks ago, when the Sho Del ambushed them, Jerick has suddenly become as adept as any other Tzai. He leaps chasms instinctively, even on the darkest nights, and three times now he has been able to sense a Sho Del ambush before arriving on the plateau. Once he even managed to sneak up on the ambushers and surprise them from behind."

"Sneak up?" Frost asked with surprise. "On Sho Del?" Sho Del were said to have better hearing and sight than humans. The assumption wasn't true, but it might as well have been—Sho Del had more powerful, and better trained, Cognitive natures. Many of them were able to sense the presence of humans nearby.

Slowly, Frost reached out and placed a gray stone—a reserve unit. Reserves were uncertain pieces, and changed to match whatever pieces were closest to them. *I don't understand either*, the move said.

"Sharn says that sometimes he feels like he is the trainee, and Jerick the master," Tzern continued. He placed a reserve stone as well. He wasn't

certain. However, he had put his stone next to three attackers, which made the reserve change to an attacker as well. The message was clear—he was worried. Jerick's unnatural skill made the general suspicious.

Frost didn't blame him—Tzern was a good man, but he was also a dedicated officer. No matter how amiable or honest Jerick appeared, Tzern would not allow his personal feelings to cloud his judgment. If the general thought Jerick to be a Sho Del agent, he would move without hesitation.

Frost placed his piece—an attacker. The move was a daring one; it took one of Tzern's pieces, but it left Frost's line of attackers undefended. If Tzern took one, he would be able to take the others.

I trust Jerick completely, the move said. I will vouch for him.

Tzern paused, picking up a stone and holding it for a moment. Red—an attacker. He could place it and easily take both the attacker Frost had just put down as well as the stone beside it. Then, slowly, Tzern set the attacker aside.

"I don't think this game needs go any further tonight, Scribe Frost," Tzern said.

"I agree, my lord," Frost said with a nod.

As they moved, cleaning away the pieces, a knock came at Tzern's door.

"Come in," the general ordered as he separated the different colors from one another.

"My lord," Jerick's familiar voice said as the boy entered the room, saluting crisply.

"Jerick?" Tzern said with well-covered surprise. "Back so early?"

"I'm sorry, my lord," Jerick explained. "But we had to come back. We ran out of room to carry Dragonsteel."

"Ran out of room?" Tzern said, this time with surprise that was less well-covered.

Jerick smiled, setting a small metal vial on the table. The boy had gotten much better at covering his emotions since he had become a Tzai, but Frost could still detect a hint of excitement in his face.

Slowly, Tzern reached out to check the contents of the vial. Apparently it was full, for he looked up at Jerick with raised eyebrows. "Jerick, this is . . . amazing. Some generals don't raise this much Dragonsteel in a month's worth of fighting."

The boy beamed at the compliment—he couldn't sense the hesitation in Tzern's voice.

"I assume you avoided the Sho Del?"

"Yes, sir. We didn't see a single one—we beat them to the wells."

"Dellanios would be proud," Tzern mumbled. "Well, Jerick, you should get some rest. You have done more than enough tonight."

Jerick blinked in surprise. "But, sir . . ."

"I mean it, Jerick," Tzern said. "Even a Tzai's body can only last so long without sleep, and you have been going on night runs far too often lately. Bad habits breed bad soldiers. I've been intending to take you off night runs for several days now."

"Take me off . . . ?" Jerick began. Then, understanding, he smiled with enthusiasm. "You are moving me to day runs?" The move would mark Jerick's ascent to full Tzai status.

"I don't see why not," Tzern said. "From all accounts, you move and fight as well as any Tzai—better, even. That skill could do a lot for protecting our men on the battlefields. Now, go to sleep, soldier."

"Wait a moment, Jerick," Frost said, hurrying to put away the other Dek pieces. "I will walk with you."

Tzern moved, dexterously helping Frost clean up the last few stones. "I will remember this game, Frost," the general said.

"It was an . . . interesting one, my lord."

"You play very well. Better than any man I've seen—save, perhaps, for Dellanios. I would introduce you, but the cursed man comes and goes so randomly that you can never tell when he will be here."

"Sir?" Jerick asked, curiosity in his voice. "Who exactly is this Dellanios?"

"One of my advisors," Tzern explained, placing the lids on the Dek boxes. "Though honestly I don't know why I suffer him. He is always trying to convince me to pull my men out of the Eternal War and make peace with the Sho Del."

"End the Eternal War?" Jerick asked incredulously.

Tzern nodded. "'You only win about half the battles anyway,' he tells me. 'Why not just give half the wells to the Sho Del and keep half for yourself? That way everyone has Dragonsteel and no one has to be sent home in several inconveniently messy pieces.' As if the demon Sho Del were capable of such an honest agreement."

Frost caught Jerick's eyes from across the room. They were both thinking the same thing.

"What does this Dellanios look like, my lord?" Frost asked carefully.

Tzern frowned. "He's tall with a firm, angular face. He has the strangest hair—white with streaks of black, even though he's a young man."

“He likes to dress in bright colors and he always wears gloves, doesn’t he?” Jerick asked flatly.

“Yes,” Tzern said. “You know him?”

Jerick just shook his head, smiling slightly to himself. “Lords,” the boy mumbled, “he gets around, doesn’t he?”

“He certainly does, Young Master,” Frost agreed. Then, noticing Tzern’s look, he continued. “Next time we play I shall have to tell you a few things about our friend Dellanios, my lord,” Frost offered.

“I look forward to it, Frost,” Tzern said with a nod. “Good night, then.”

“Good night, my lord,” Frost said as Jerick saluted, then the two left.

As soon as they were outside of the general’s building, however, Jerick smiled at Frost energetically, Topaz forgotten for the moment. “Finally,” he said. “A full Tzai.”

“It takes most men years to accomplish what you have in six months, Young Master,” Frost said with a nod. “You have done well.”

“I can’t believe it,” Jerick said. “I have to go back to my room and write my father immediately.”

“Didn’t you just send him a letter?” Frost asked slowly. The boy’s—or, rather, man’s—continued delusion was one of Frost’s major concerns. Frost worried that Jerick’s selective amnesia regarding the death of his father might be an indicator of much deeper psychological problems.

He had tried to explain the truth to Jerick on a dozen different occasions, but every time Frost mentioned Jerick’s father, the boy grew vacant-eyed. When he woke, he couldn’t even remember the conversation. Frost was worried his attempts at helping Jerick were doing more harm than good—there was a very serious problem crouching in the back of the boy’s mind.

“Yes, I sent him one yesterday,” Jerick said. “This, however, merits another letter. Did you see the general’s surprise when I handed him a full vial of Dragonsteel? I don’t think I’ve ever seen that much emotion from him.”

“It was indeed an interesting sight,” Frost agreed. “Tell me, how did you do it? An entire vial in one night?”

“I can sense Dragonsteel, Frost,” Jerick explained in a hushed, but excited, voice. “I’ve always been able to—there’s a power to it, a resonance that I can see microkinetically. Before, I could only sense it when I was very close. But when I’m in the Gvel Dar it’s much more powerful. At first I didn’t realize what it was—I was so new to Gvel Dar that I didn’t understand that I could actually pinpoint where Dragonsteel was going to appear.”

Frost nodded quietly to himself, wondering why he hadn’t made the

connection himself. Tzern's Cognitive enhancement exercises would have increased Jerick's microkinetic senses. Of course he would be more receptive to Dragonsteel's Spiritual radiation. He could probably tell which wells would give out Dragonsteel hours before they actually came to fruit.

"Young Master," Frost said cautiously as they approached the building that housed their quarters, "perhaps it would be wise to show a little more restraint."

"Restraint?" Jerick asked with surprise. "Why?"

Frost paused, considering how to raise his objection. "Sometimes men grow jealous of those who advance too quickly," Frost eventually said, deciding to keep Tzern's reservations quiet for the moment.

"The Tzai aren't like that, Frost," Jerick said without concern. "They don't let foolish emotions like envy get hold of them."

"Even still, Young Master," Frost continued. "It would be best not to look unnatural. We aren't even certain why you can do microkinesis—it could be dangerous if news of your abilities became too widely known."

"People expect the Tzai to do unnatural things," Jerick objected. But then, noticing Frost's concern, Jerick held up a hand to forestall further argument. "Peace, Frost," he requested. "If you are worried, then that is enough for me. I will try to show some . . . restraint."

Frost nodded slowly. "Good night then, Young Master."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

IT WAS BY FAR THE NICEST PRISON BAT'CHOR HAD EVER BEEN IN. NOT that he had been in many prisons, of course—he'd been incarcerated a few times for brawling, but what true-blooded Ke'Chan hadn't? Still, judging by his limited experience, he could tell that this particular prison was far more luxurious than most.

For one thing, it was in the palace itself. Aronack's home was a massive stone building that followed the same architectural design as the temple Bat'Chor and Topaz had visited. It had wide, spindly buttressings, broad archways, and several spire-like towers. It was an impressive structure; Bat'Chor had never seen anything so grand except maybe the Trexandian Acadius.

His "cell" was on the second floor, and had a nice view of the city. It was well-furnished with soft Fallin rugs and several plush benches. There was even a painting on the wall—a portrait of some unnamed Tzend wearing a gold military uniform. The windows had no bars on them, but there was no ledge, and the ground was far too distant to risk a jump. The door was kept barred on the opposite side. He was fed regularly and his chamber pot emptied, but other than that he had received no contact in the three months of his incarceration.

Ke'Chan did not deal well with captivity. They were wanderers in spirit, and some of them still held to the nomadic ways of their past—though, of course, they now traveled in style, their slaves carrying massive pavilions with them wherever they went. A Ke'Chan's heart was accustomed to

freedom. Being locked within a single room, no matter how nice, was almost more than Bat'Chor could bear.

He had tried to escape several times, but there were never less than a dozen guards present whenever the door was opened. Each attempt had only earned him bruises and an occasional concussion. At the end of the first month, he had gone into a frenzy, tearing apart the room and bashing one of the benches repeatedly into the door. The wooden portal still bore marks and scars from his outburst.

Most frustrating about the entire experience was how little sense it made. Why were they treating him so? On the first day the guards had told him he was being arrested for assaulting a nobleman. That in itself was a little baffling—though the Ke'Chan weren't exempt from the law, they were usually suffered when it came to brawling. It was understood that a Ke'Chan would never attack unless he was insulted; the people, nobleman and peasant alike, generally thought that if a man was foolish enough to insult a Ke'Chan, he deserved what he got. Bat'Chor's people rarely killed—they preferred fists to swords—and as long as they didn't do much damage, they were ignored.

However, Bat'Chor had to admit, he had stretched the limits of tolerance with his recent attack. He hadn't been partners with Ki Avel, or even negotiated a business deal with the man. Bat'Chor had attacked Ki in his own home, and hadn't given the Tzend much opportunity to defend himself. Even still, if Bat'Chor were to be reprimanded he should have been thrown in a dungeon or—more likely in the case of a Ke'Chan—ordered to pay a fine. Why had they brought him to the palace and just left him alone? Where was this Emperor Aronack?

Questions like these drove Bat'Chor to the point of near-insanity. By the middle of the second month it had become clear that unless he found something else to occupy his mind, he would probably end up completely mad. That very same day he had heard something outside the window: the faint sound of troops marching. Anything involving warriors was of immediate interest to a Ke'Chan, and Bat'Chor had found himself rising from frustrated contemplations to stare out the window at the line of soldiers marching past.

They were disciplined and orderly, moving in a perfect formation. Their tan and white uniforms had been covered with bright steel breastplates and helmets, and, squinting, Bat'Chor could also see many of them wearing the strange Tzend armor that was made of thousands of tiny steel rings.

Bat'Chor watched them pass, counting their numbers and admiring their organization. Over the next few weeks, other groups had arrived

as well—archers, pikemen, and swordsmen. Even a contingent of the extraordinary mounted warriors who wore suits constructed totally of steel. Bat'Chor had watched them all with fascination, noting how they arranged themselves into camps just outside of the city. Tzendor was gathering an army.

And, from the looks of the ships that were floating in the docks, it would be an invasion army. Bat'Chor could only draw one conclusion—Emperor Aronack intended to invade U Poni Sho Del. The Tzend hatred of the Sho Del was famous—Tzendish religion taught that the Sho Del were the adversaries of all that was good, and that only through Sho Del extinction could true harmony be found in the world. Aronack was known to be a deeply religious man—he had built more temples and religious centers in his short reign than any other emperor. It appeared as if he had finally decided to destroy Tzendor's hereditary foes.

And, judging from the army, he just might succeed. Counting the number of ships, the cooking fires he saw at night, and the ranks he had seen marching, Bat'Chor guessed that the Tzends had over a hundred thousand men sitting outside the capital. Such an enormous collection of soldiers hadn't been seen on the three continents since the Ke'Chan invasion nearly a thousand years before.

It was a wondrous undertaking, and Bat'Chor found the time passing more quickly as he called up maps of U Poni Sho Del in his mind, guessing how the invasion would proceed. Little was known about the middle continent—its borders had been mapped by a joint effort between the Tzend and Fallin emperors a hundred years before, but that had been accomplished by ships, and so the center of the continent remained a mystery. Aronack would probably land somewhere near the Shattered Plains, putting his Yolish allies at his back to keep his supply lines open.

The thoughts had been enough to keep Bat'Chor from thinking about his incarceration, and the last month passed much more smoothly than the previous two. Still, even as he sat and stared at a new squadron of archers, Bat'Chor knew that the army wouldn't be able to satisfy him for much longer. Fewer and fewer troops were arriving each day, and it appeared as if the time for launch were growing near. Once the warriors left, he would be back where he started.

A shuffling came from the door and Bat'Chor turned, seating himself on the bench. He had taken to watching quietly whenever the servants brought his food, sitting immobilely and staring at them with cold eyes. Such seemed to make them even more nervous than they had been when they expected him to attack.

This time, however, no cowering servant entered. Instead, a tall Nyor officer in a gold upon white uniform strode in. He had a round face topped with a head full of dark black stubble. In his hands he carried a pair of white gloves.

"All right, kak," the man said firmly. "Where is it?"

Bat'Chor frowned, rising and folding his arms. "Where ees what?" he asked with true confusion.

"Do not play stupid with me, kak," the man warned, waving for the guards to enter and stand around him. "What did you do with the necklace?"

"The necklace?" Bat'Chor asked with befuddlement. "I deened't take heem."

The man stood, quietly tapping his gloves against his hand. Bat'Chor could see true hatred in this man's eyes—not just the passing racism or disgust that was normal for those dealing with a Ke'Chan, but true and complete loathing. Bat'Chor could sense that had something not been holding the solider back, he would have drawn his sword and killed his prisoner right there.

"You disgust me," the man whispered, confirming Bat'Chor's impressions. "We found her, you know. We haven't told the public what you did to her yet, but when we do I doubt even the palace walls will be enough to protect you."

Bat'Chor looked from soldier to soldier in confusion. What was the man talking about? "You found her?" he asked. "Found who?"

"Ki's wife, kak," the soldier spat. "At first we thought you were holding her for a ransom, but then we found the body . . . and what you'd done to her before you killed her. If the emperor hadn't ordered us to keep you until he returned, I would have had you hung months ago."

Bat'Chor felt himself grow sick. "Ki's wife?" he asked. The quiet woman who had shown him the necklace?

"So, kak," the officer said quietly, stepping up to stand just inches before him. The man's entire air urged Bat'Chor to attack him. Bat'Chor knew that if he did, orders or no orders, the officer would have him killed in a second. "Only one question remains. What did you do with the necklace? Did you give it to the stableboy? Were the two of you working together? Or did you kill him as well?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," Bat'Chor growled.

The man stood for a moment, rage in his eyes, as he looked at Bat'Chor. His hands pulled into fists, crushing his white gloves, as if he were barely restraining himself from reaching out to strangle Bat'Chor. Finally, he spun.

“Fine,” he announced. “Lord Aronack will order you tortured when he returns; then we shall have our answers.”

The men filed out of the room, and the door swung closed. The bar fell into place with a thud. Bat’Chor fell back onto his bench with an equally resounding thump.

Ki Avel’s wife, he thought to himself, *dead? And the necklace gone?* Suddenly, he saw clearly what must have happened. He saw himself leaving the house, disappointed. He saw the wife, sensing a chance for independence, grabbing the necklace and fleeing from the room. He saw her ordering the stableboy to drive her away in Ki’s own chariot. Most importantly, he saw her being too careless with the necklace, showing it to the stableboy, presenting an opportunity too good for him to resist . . .

And when Avel woke up, all he knew was that he had been assaulted by a Ke’Chan, and his necklace and wife were both gone. It looked bad. Very bad. This was no simple matter of a nobleman’s wounded pride.

“’Chathis Hor!” Bat’Chor swore quietly to himself.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

“I WILL NOT LET YOU BE KING.”

Ryalla froze at the sound, pulling back against the side of the hallway. She bent the light around herself reflexively—four months of living in Strafen’s Kaden had taught her to stay alert.

She crept forward, her back against the wall—not that anyone could see her. She just liked the feel of the powerful stone; it gave her strength. The voice sounded like it belonged to Strafen himself, and any form of support was welcome when dealing with the former Kalord, whether you happened to be invisible or not.

Ryalla peeked around the corner. The cross-hallway was the one that led in front of Martis’s study—a room newly emblazoned with the crest of Ka Strafen to note the change in leadership. People had even begun calling Martis “Kalord Strafen,” now referring to his father—whose birth name was long forgotten—as the “old Kalord.”

Martis stood just outside the room, his hand resting on the side of the door, as if he were on his way out of the room and about to close the door behind him. He had frozen in the doorway, however. His eyes scanned the hallway in confusion.

“I will not let that happen, Martis,” the voice spoke again, coming from a darkened corner on the other side of the hallway. The old Kalord, looking increasingly wan and wraithlike since the marriage, stepped out of the shadows. The darkness seemed to stick to his skin as he walked into the light, as if loath to release its captive.

“What are you saying, old fool?” Martis said, pulling the door to his study closed. “Go back to your rooms and play with your servants—I have no time to deal with you.”

Martis turned, as if to leave.

“I used to think I was evil, Martis,” the old Kalord whispered.

Martis hesitated.

“I knew what I did was foul,” the old Kalord continued, his face so full of creases it looked like the skin was about to melt and drop free from the bones. “I hated myself for my temper. When I hit, when I saw the pain in their eyes, I knew there would be no forgiveness for me. I tried to make up for it in my loyalty to the king. I thought perhaps if I couldn’t be a good person then I would at least be a good Kalord.”

Martis turned slightly to regard his father. “You failed,” he said.

The old Kalord simply continued on as if he hadn’t heard Martis’s comment, walking forward in the shadowed hallway. “You are something different, Martis,” the old man rasped. “You aren’t bad. You are evil. I hit because I couldn’t control myself—when the anger was in my blood I had no control. I’ve seen you, Martis. You enjoy giving pain. I see the delight in your eyes, the twisted sense of accomplishment.”

The old Kalord stopped. He stood directly behind Martis now and, for a moment, Ryalla was able to see a little bit of the old Strafen in him—the powerful man that had disappeared in the two years since Jerick’s departure. Though faded and aging, the old Kalord was still taller than Martis, and his bulk seemed to return for a second, his strength and power filling the hallway.

“I will not let you take the throne, Martis. By the Lords themselves, I will stop you. This one last duty I will perform for Melerand. I cannot control my anger, but I will control the thing it has created.”

Martis stared into the eyes of his father for a moment, then snorted and stalked away. Ryalla waited for them both to leave, afraid to release her invisibility until they were gone. Finally, once her pulse had returned to normal, she allowed her cloak of light to drop and continued on her way.

Over the last four months she had spent as little time as possible in the Kaden. She slept here—at least, most of the time—but little else. Strangely, the servants in Rodis’s palace had finally started to warm to her, now that she was gone. Before she had been the odd one, the servant who didn’t fit in. All was forgotten, however, once she had been forced to move to Strafen’s Kaden—a place that, in the eyes of Lakdon’s servants, was only slightly removed from Xeth’s underworld. Ironically, now that Ryalla was gone they finally accepted her as one of their own.

As a result, she had little trouble finding food or an occasional place to sleep. The servants listened with morbid eagerness as she described what went on in Strafen's Kaden, their eyes wide with horror at the atrocities the servants were forced to suffer.

"Ryalla?"

The voice shocked Ryalla out of her contemplations, bringing her back to the hallway. She looked up with alarm, then relaxed when she saw who had spoken.

"Yes, my lady?" Ryalla said, turning to regard Courteth.

Perhaps the most horrible thing about Martis's house was what it had done to the princess. Courteth stood in her nightgown, bare feet resting on the stone floor. Her blonde hair hung limply around her face and there were large dark half-moons beneath her eyes. As Ryalla curtsied obediently, the princess turned her head, revealing the large purple and blue welt that covered most of the left side of her face. Ryalla's stomach turned at the horrid sight, and she had to turn her eyes away.

"Have you seen him, Ryalla?" Courteth asked in a frail voice, staring at her with nearly-dead eyes.

"Yes, my lady," Ryalla replied. "He was coming out of his study—he looked like he was going to the stables."

"Ah, good," Courteth mumbled, turning in that direction. Her eyes stared sightlessly down the hallway. "Perhaps I should see if there's anything he needs."

"My lady," Ryalla said hesitantly. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"Not if he needs me," Courteth mumbled. "He gets so mad if he needs me and I'm not there."

Ryalla shivered as she listened to Courteth's quiet voice. The princess hadn't yelled at her in two months and, strangely, Ryalla kind of missed the harsh words. Anything would be better than being forced to see Courteth in this condition.

"Where are you going, Ryalla?" Courteth asked, a flicker of life appearing in her eyes as she turned back to the slave.

"I have some things to do, my lady."

"Of course," Courteth said with a nod. "You aren't around much any more, Ryalla," she said. "You're so busy; I never see you."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," Ryalla said, frowning slightly. Was Courteth implying something?

"I . . . would like it if you would stay with me once in a while, Ryalla,"

Courteth said softly. "The servants here frighten me. I would like to see you—to talk to you."

Ryalla felt a stab of guilt as she looked into Courteth's dying eyes. Despite the punishment, pain, and screaming, this woman was the only sister Ryalla had ever known. Strangely, the more independent Ryalla grew, the more dependent Courteth had become. Now that the princess stood with bruises all over her body, genuine need in her eyes, could Ryalla really abandon her?

"I will come and see you tonight, my lady," Ryalla promised. "We can talk about times before."

"When Jerick was here," Courteth mumbled, smiling slightly. "Do you remember him, Ryalla?"

"Of course, my lady."

"He was only a peasant, you know," Courteth continued, rambling with disoriented eyes. "But he was so smart, and so proud. He would have made a very good nobleman. I almost believed he was one, half of the time. Do you think he's all right?"

Ryalla gritted her teeth, trying to push back her own fears. It had been over a year and a half, and there was no word from Jerick. Barely a day went by that Ryalla didn't worry what had happened to him. "I'm sure he's all right, my lady," Ryalla soothed. "Jerick is a very determined young man."

"Yes," Courteth agreed. "Very determined, and handsome too, in his own way. If only . . ."

"We can talk tonight, my lady," Ryalla promised. "Right now you should go back to bed."

Courteth nodded, her eyes glazed. Then, however, for a brief moment they became intense. She reached out and grabbed Ryalla's hand. "No, Ryalla, don't come to me," she said in a hushed tone. "Go and leave this place. I give you permission—go as far from this horrible building as you can. Get away!"

Then, dropping her hand, Courteth turned and began to hobble back in the direction of her rooms, leaving Ryalla alone.

SPENDING SO MUCH TIME AWAY FROM STRAFEN'S HOUSE HAD PROVEN easy—if monotonous. Left with no other option, Ryalla had decided the only way to continue her investigation was to start watching Scathe as much as possible. It was, of course, impossible to follow him all the time.

She could only hope that if he did something suspicious, he would choose to do it at a time Ryalla happened to be watching.

She had remained committed to this line of investigation, no matter how boring it became. Most of the time Scathe did amazingly little with his time. He spent an incredible percentage of it standing in the throne room looking impressive. He attended those gatherings of the court to which he was invited—he was, after all, of noble blood—and occasionally went to the chariot races. About once a week or so he was called upon by a member of the aristocracy to perform an augury—none of the court members maintained Horwatchers of their own, though Ryalla had heard that in the south most major noble Ka kept one.

The surveillance gave her plenty of time to read, and she did so with eagerness. She had long since completed all of the ballads and stories in the library, and had moved on to history and, for lack of anything better, science. Torell warned her that she was approaching the last of the scrolls—Melerand's library was hardly comprehensive.

Over the four months of waiting, however, Ryalla began to grow more and more uncertain. Scathe did nothing that could have reasonably linked him to the prince's disappearance, and Ryalla was quickly running out of time. Rodis had revealed the royal cache of Dragonsteel, two vials of the precious metal that had been earned over the last two centuries by sending supplies, and the occasional nobleman's son, to the Eternal War. The two vials were valuable indeed, as the Dragonsteel inside them hadn't yet been touched by human hands. Together with a small addition of gold coins, they were enough to pay the ransom.

Further notes had come from the kidnappers, and the latest one finally set a date for the exchange. Ryalla only had a few weeks left to find Yoharn. One side of her mind kept trying to tell her that she didn't need to worry, that the king would pay the ransom and all would be well. The other side, however, knew such wouldn't be the case. She didn't know what the Horwatchers were planning, but she worried that they would somehow take the money without returning the prince. If they suspected that Yoharn knew who had kidnapped him, they would never be able to let him out of their grasp alive—if it became known that the Horwatchers had been behind such an atrocity, their reputation in Yolen would be destroyed forever.

Unfortunately, Scathe absolutely refused to do anything sneaky. Ryalla was losing hope—the time for the exchange had been set for two months in the future, almost exactly two years from the day the prince had disappeared.

Her only clue came about a week after her chilling encounter with

Courteth. She had been following Scathe for several hours, and was about ready to abandon her surveillance for the time being. Master Torell intended to begin teaching her the rudiments of the Trexandian language that night, and she was eager to start. Her Fallin had improved over the months, but she couldn't speak it, only read. The prospect of learning to speak in another language was exciting.

Scathe spent most of the evening sitting in his room comparing star charts with the night sky outside his window and making notes on a small ledger. Ryalla watched him with half-interest, reading a book on Fain life by Mander, the man who had written the *Treatise Axiros*. The book was better than most of the scientific volumes in the library. It wasn't that Ryalla found science boring—it was actually rather interesting. Her problem with it was the philosophers themselves—many of them wrote with such a decidedly dry style that it was laborious to read.

"What?" Scathe suddenly asked.

Ryalla looked up in alarm. How had someone else entered the room without her noticing? She soon saw, however, that Scathe was still alone. He sat on his stool, a thin white Tamu Kek clutched in his hand. His eyes stared sightlessly forward, but his lips were moving softly, as if he were speaking to someone.

Ryalla stood, watching his lips with interest, hoping that he might say something intelligible. She could only make out a few of his mumbled words, however.

"... this soon ... dangerous to ... in the city ... until the time ... where ..."

Eventually, the Horwatcher seemed to fall out of his trance, and shook his head, setting the Tamu Kek aside. Then, however, he looked around, his eyes suspicious. He turned to a chest beside the wall and pulled out a small bag filled with some sort of powder.

"I know you are here!" he said suddenly with an authoritative voice.

Ryalla jumped despite herself. Surely he couldn't possibly ...

"Be gone, you spirit of the underworld," Scathe commanded, tossing a pinch of the powder into the flame of his lamp. It burned quickly, filling the room with a foul stench.

Ryalla resisted the urge to sneeze, instead frowning. Was he talking to her?

The Horwatcher began to chant, and Ryalla simply shook her head. The powder was so foul smelling it would be as effective at removing the living as the dead. Eventually, it appeared as if she weren't going to learn anything more from Scathe that night, so she quietly crept out of the window.

Scathe's room was on the ground floor, and so it was only a short hop to the ground below.

Shivering, Ryalla left the palace behind, striking out instead into the dark city. She walked until she arrived at another window and, after peeking inside for a moment, climbed in.

"Ryalla?" a concerned voice asked.

"I'm here, my lady," Ryalla said quietly, as she entered the room. Courteth's skeletal frame sat on a stool beside the bed, staring into her mirror. The room, tastefully decorated with rugs and brocades, was stuffy, kept uncomfortably hot by the fire burning in the stove on the far side. Courteth's eyes seemed to brighten slightly as she saw Ryalla enter.

"I almost thought you weren't going to come," Courteth said, her voice nearly as weak as a whisper. "He'll be coming to bed soon."

"I would never forget you, my lady," Ryalla promised, walking over to stand by her mistress.

"You've been so good to me . . ."

"I am your handmaid, my lady," Ryalla said, seating herself on a stool beside Courteth. "And your friend."

"I was so cruel to you. I . . ." Courteth stopped, her dazed eyes turning back to regard her mirror. Whatever she had begun to say was forgotten a moment later.

Ryalla picked up a brush and pulled it delicately through Courteth's long wan hair. Despite Ryalla's best ministrations, the hair refused to reclaim its once golden sheen. It was limp, and seemed a gray dun. As Ryalla worked, she tried not to notice the bruises on Courteth's back.

"Am I still beautiful, Ryalla?" Courteth suddenly asked.

"Of course, my lady."

Courteth was silent for a moment. "Tell me about your day," she finally requested.

And so Ryalla did. She invented most of it—a day spent watching Scathe would hardly make for interesting conversation. She continued on until they heard Martis thumping down the hall, and Courteth shooed Ryalla away, insisting, as she always did, that Ryalla leave before the new Kalord arrived.

Ryalla obediently climbed out the window. She stood in the darkness, watching the room for a long time after Courteth closed the window and untied the drapings. Ryalla couldn't see what went on inside, but unfortunately in this one instance her clever mind was far too imaginative.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

JERICK STOOD ON THE PLATEAU, WATCHING THE BATTLE WITH KEEN EYES. He didn't notice the Plains' sweltering heat—he had trained himself to ignore it. Nor did he pay attention to the hard earth underneath or the cries of pain from the men a short distance away. His attention was focused on the battle as a whole. Unfortunately, his observations only told him that the battle was not going well.

Jerick stood with ten other Tzai, waiting for a signal from Tzern to join the battle. The general himself stood back from the conflict, waiting near the bridgemen with a small honor guard. The focused attempt on Tzern's life eight months ago had forced the general to stop entering confrontations in person, though he still went on over half of the runs. Jerick could tell that Tzern wished he could take a more active role in the fighting, but, like always, the general had accepted the inevitable with calm understanding. If he were to join the battles himself, he would present a prize too tempting for the Sho Del, thereby endangering his men.

Not that Tzern's self-imposed exile seemed to be doing any good. Endless waves of Sho Del threw themselves against the defending humans, and even more waited on the plateaus beyond. Tzern's men fought valiantly, striving to hold the well long enough for the Dragonsteel to appear, but they were horrendously outnumbered and were tiring quickly.

Jerick silently watched the men fight and die, knowing full well what a loss this day would mean. During the last two months Dragonsteel runs had grown increasingly difficult. The Sho Del were innumerable, and they

somehow managed to place so many men in every battle that standing against them was proving more and more futile. Tzern's camp hadn't won a Dragonsteel run in over a month, and none of the other camps were faring any better.

Today would be their last attempt. Tzern had gathered three-fourths of his army and waited for Dragonsteel to be spotted on one of the larger plateaus. If he couldn't win this battle, he intended to pull back into a purely defensive formation. He was losing too many men, he claimed, to justify continued Dragonsteel runs. Fail this day, and the army would pull back to its fortress and wait for the Sho Del assault which might or might not come.

Such an outcome was looking increasingly likely. Tzern's troops were disciplined and skilled, but the Sho Del—their flow from one plateau to another not restricted by bridges—were able to put a much larger group of men on any given plateau. Even now, with the bulk of Tzern's army forming a single powerful wall of men, the Sho Del were far more numerous.

Tzern's army employed no chariots. At first Jerick had been surprised by this, but Tzern had explained his reasoning. The chariot was becoming outdated, the Tzend general claimed. It was too solitary, too individual, to fit into formation warfare. Charioteers, with one man driving and the other firing arrows, were maneuverable but easily surrounded by a well-trained formation of men.

Instead of chariots, Tzern relied on the flexibility of his formations. His men carried large shields and when they formed together they produced an almost impenetrable wall of bronze and steel. Those in back carried spears, those in front swords. The formation could quickly split into two smaller groups to surround a foe, which Jerick had seen happen numerous times to Shen Da riders.

Yet, no matter how disciplined the formation, it couldn't stand forever against an incessant foe. No matter how many Sho Del the warriors slaughtered, there were always two more to take the place of any one that fell.

Jerick frowned as he watched the battle. There was something wrong—something more than just the incredible numbers they were facing. Then, he realized what it was.

"Where are the illusions?" he asked out loud.

"What?" one of the other Tzai, Fu Kal, asked.

"The illusionary beasts," Jerick continued. "The monsters. There aren't any today."

The Tzai around him looked out at the battle, searching, as Jerick did, for any sign of the horrible monsters the Sho Del wizards created. There were none.

"I guess they figured they didn't need them," Fu Kal replied.

"I don't see any illusions," another Tzai—Moud—said. "But look over there." Moud gestured with a tan-gloved hand. There, in the distance, a familiar form soared through the air.

"Drephrast," Jerick mumbled. The King Dragon's appearance made the battle seem even more foreboding. During Jerick's first year in the war, sightings of the mighty beast had been common, but recently it appeared as if Drephrast had retreated from the Shattered Plains once again. Jerick felt a chill as he watched the dragon soar across the contested plateau to land a moderate distance from the fighting. For now, the beast appeared content to simply watch.

Jerick forced himself to ignore the beast and focus back on the fighting. It was a good thing he did, for a moment later a group of Shen Da riders jumped across the chasm and smashed against the human's eastern flank. One of the huge beasts could have been dealt with, but twelve of them together played havoc with the human lines. Men were tossed in all directions, their line breaking. If the Sho Del got through they would be able to assault the unprotected backs of the human ranks, and the battle would soon be over.

"Let's move," Jerick ordered. Starting about two weeks ago, Tzern had split the Tzai into two separate squads—an unusual event, but not an irrational one. Two squads would give more flexibility. Jerick had been surprised when Tzern put him in a different squad than Sharn. However, that surprise had been nothing compared to the one he had felt when Tzern announced that Jerick would be leading the second Tzai squad.

The Tzai moved at Jerick's command, dashing toward the battlefield. They did what he said, though Jerick knew it was more out of respect for Tzern than anything else. Frost had been right about one thing—the Tzai, no matter how disciplined or meditative, were still men. They resented Jerick's quick rise to power. Fortunately, they were too well-trained to ignore him as the bridgemen had done. At the same time, however, Jerick realized that they would also be much more difficult to win over.

"Get in quickly and neutralize those Shen Da," Jerick ordered as they approached. "Don't let yourselves get engaged by the regular troops. One man per beast, and I'll take the last two."

There was no sign of confirmation from the Tzai, but Jerick knew they had heard him. They arrived at the chasm and, en masse, jumped into the air, pulling out weapons as they leapt. A group of Sho Del warriors noticed their approach and turned to confront them, but the Tzai dodged in different

directions, some to either side, others jumping again to soar over the Sho Del heads. The confused Sho Del turned awkwardly, trying to decide in which direction their opponents were heading. By the time they realized they weren't the subjects of the Tzai attack, they had been left far behind.

The human warriors let out a muted cheer as Jerick and his men approached. The Shen Da raiders turned their beasts just in time to meet Jerick's team. Jerick heard the sound of fighting surround him and, as one of the riders took aim with its long-shafted spear, Jerick jumped. He landed on top of the beast's head, placing one foot on the beast's serpentine brow, and pushed himself off again.

The Sho Del pulled back in surprise as Jerick sailed through the air—missing the spear head by only a few inches—in a powerful kick. His foot took the rider in the face, toppling him from the back of the Shen Da. Jerick landed on the beast itself. The confused Shen Da reared back, crushing its rider beneath one of its six feet, as Jerick whipped out his blade and sliced through the soft flesh on the back of the creature's head.

Jerick jumped to the ground as the Shen Da spasmed, flopping to the rigid plateau surface in its death agonies. Even as it fell, Jerick was running toward a second beast. This creature bellowed at him as he approached—a strange, half-hiss, half-scream of a sound. It bore several spears in its side, though its tough skin had prevented any of the human defenders from doing much more than inconsequential damage.

Jerick swiped his sword at the creature's face, but it ducked instead of rearing as he had expected. Too late, Jerick noticed the creature's thick tail swinging in his direction. He took a deep breath, focusing his Tzai energy on strengthening his body. The blow tossed him easily to the ground, but nothing broke, and Jerick rolled quickly to his feet. Perhaps later a bruise would form, but for now the pain was washed away by the Gvel Dar.

Jerick dodged a bite as he searched for his sword. The blade—the same Sho Del weapon he had taken all those months ago—had fallen a good distance away. Instead of dodging in its direction, Jerick lunged toward the Shen Da itself, ripping one of the human spears from its side. Dodging a strike from the Shen Da's rider, Jerick spun, driving the thin spear at the creature's face, which was approaching for another bite.

The spear drove straight into the surprised creature's mouth, piercing the back of its throat and stabbing through the back of its head. It ripped the spear's haft out of Jerick's hands as it reared back, bellowing in rage and agony. A motion from Jerick's side barely gave him time to duck as a sword passed over his head. The beast's rider had jumped down from its dying

mount and, having discarded the now-useless spear, was attacking with its blade.

Jerick moved to dodge in the direction of his own sword, but the Sho Del jumped to block his path. It stepped warily, hiding behind the enormous square shield that was intended for a mounted warrior. The Sho Del was fast—not as fast as Jerick, but faster than most Sho Del he had encountered. Jerick barely had time to jump back as another sword strike nearly decapitated him. The Sho Del struck again, but this time, instead of jumping back, Jerick leapt forward, his arm pulled back in a fist.

It was a gamble. He gathered his Tzai as he attacked, the Sho Del's blade getting closer and closer to his neck. Time froze, Jerick hanging in the air just in front of his opponent, his feet a few inches off the ground, his arm raised, the Sho Del sword touching the skin at the side of his head. Then, with a crack, his fist shot forward more quickly than even he could follow.

The Sho Del's sword shook as its body jerked backward. Jerick felt a searing pain on the side of his neck, but the blade didn't continue its cut, flying out of the Sho Del's fingers as if it had been thrown. Jerick's own hand had broken a hole directly through the center of the Sho Del's shield, then had moved forward to pierce the creature's chest. White blood poured around his fist as the Sho Del fell backward, its body pulling off of Jerick's hand with a sucking sound. As it fell, Jerick realized for the first time that the creature appeared to have feminine features. For some reason he had never associated genders with the Sho Del, lumping them all into one mass of demonic "things."

Jerick shook his head, feeling the weakness from the Tzai blow strike his body. He was used to it now, however, and knew it was temporary. He pulled the shield off his arm then raised his hand to touch the side of his neck. The cut wasn't deep. He turned to locate the rest of his team. Many of them were still fighting—several more Shen Da had appeared to engage them. Jerick moved to help his men, then stopped. An awesome power washed over him. He knew what it was before turning. The Lord of the War.

The creature sat astride its Shen Da, cleaving at the human ranks with its axe weapon. Jerick hadn't seen the Lord since he had joined Tzern's camp—like Drephrast, it had retreated from the battle. But, unlike Drephrast, it had decided to take an active part in this last decisive assault.

The Lord of the War sensed him as well, turning from the soldier it had just decapitated to look at Jerick. There was no challenge, no battle yell; the two warriors simply advanced on one another. As if, by mutual consent, they knew they were destined to fight.

Jerick picked up his fallen sword as he ran forward, dashing with a low gait. The Lord not only had the advantage of being mounted, but its weapon was also Dragonsteel. Jerick wasn't certain what that meant—he had never seen enough Dragonsteel in one place to form even a small dagger. At the very least it meant that not even a Tzai blow would be able to shatter the Lord's blade.

The Lord swung his weapon as soon as Jerick was in range. It made a slight sound as it sliced through the air—a sound like a crashing waterfall heard from a very long ways away. If it had been constructed of steel or bronze, the weapon would have been far too awkward to be functional. Its barbs and spikes would have made it bulky and overweight. Dragonsteel was impossibly light, however, and would hold its form even if it were only a hair's-width thin.

Jerick ducked, striking not at the Lord, but at his mount. Jerick's blade dug into the beast's leg, but it didn't rear, as he had hoped. Instead it brought its head down and slammed it into Jerick's side. Jerick stumbled away from the beast, turning even as he saw the Lord striking again. Reflexes brought his weapon up to parry the attack, though logic should have warned him what would happen next.

The Dragonsteel weapon sliced cleanly through his sword, lopping off two-thirds of the blade. Jerick tossed the broken weapon aside, ducking to the side to avoid the Lord's backhand. Arrows fired by a careless archer—Jerick didn't have time to see whether it was human or Sho Del—tore through the air just behind him, forcing him to stay close to the monstrous warrior.

Jerick's mind worked quickly within the coolness of the Gvel Dar, preparing to dodge another attack. He had no weapon, and he was still too weak from his previous fight to perform another full Tzai blow. Still, he had to do something. So he ducked, gathered what Tzai he could, and used it to jump straight into the air beside the Lord of the War.

A fraction of a second later the world froze. Jerick hung in mid-jump about eye level with the Lord of the War, his mind confused. Where had the Cognitive ripple come from? Why was time freezing? Jerick hadn't made a Tzai blow—had another of the Tzai warriors come to help him?

There was a crack in the air, and the Lord's Dragonsteel weapon ripped through the space where Jerick had been standing a second earlier, moving so quickly that it appeared to jump directly from the beginning of the swing to the end. The attack, meant to kill Jerick, instead sliced through an arrow flying below him. The Lord of the War could perform Tzai blows.

Jerick didn't have time to ponder the implications of the blow. As time

resumed Jerick continued to soar in the air, completing his jump. His foot whipped out, kicking the Lord in the face. It wasn't a Tzai blow, not completely. It was delivered, however, with all the force and control of Gvel Dar enhanced muscles. Jerick felt the iron crumple beneath his foot.

Jerick dropped to the ground, hearing the Lord bellow in pain. Jerick dodged backward, falling into a defensive crouch as he turned his eyes back on his opponent. The kick had twisted the helmet in such a way that the Lord could no longer see. A gauntleted hand came up, ripping off the dented helm, revealing the face underneath.

Even in the middle of the affray, men screaming and dying around him, Jerick's jaw dropped in amazement. The Lord of the War wasn't Sho Del. He was human.

The Lord felt the side of his face, turning dark eyes on Jerick. He had stark blond hair and delicate, masculine features. The Lord advanced his mount on the surprised Jerick, but then paused. His eyes darted across the battlefield, falling on the warriors around him. There was anxiety in his eyes, and he raised his shield, as if to obscure his face.

He doesn't want them to know what he is, Jerick realized. That he's human. But, does he want to hide that from us . . . or from the Sho Del with whom he fights?

The Lord's eyes fell on Jerick; there was a debate held within them. Finally, he made a decision. *Another time*, his look said. The Lord reared his mount and retreated toward the back of the Sho Del lines.

Jerick stood stunned for a moment before remembering his men. He turned, seeking out the rest of the Tzai. The ground a short distance away was littered with the reptilian bodies of Shen Da, and the Tzai were gathering at the center of the carnage. All ten were walking, though one appeared to be leaning on two companions. Jerick swore softly—they couldn't afford to lose even a single Tzai.

"Back," Jerick said simply, leading the way toward the plateau they had left behind. He would think about the Lord later.

Then Jerick froze, looking in front of him with amazement. The plateau they had left, the one they had been using to watch the battle, was now covered with Sho Del. Jerick spun, looking around them. Every plateau he could see was infested with white faces. There were thousands upon thousands of them, most waiting silently.

Jerick heard hissings of surprise and alarm from around him as the Tzai stopped. The Sho Del were everywhere. With horror, Jerick realized they had even begun to attack Tzern's plateau—he could barely make out the general's standard amongst the sea of armor and white.

"To the general!" Jerick ordered, picking up the sword of a fallen soldier. "We have to get to him. Quickly, and by whatever means necessary."

The Tzai nodded, dashing toward Tzern's standard and breaking into smaller groups of two and three as Sho Del moved to stop them. In the back of his mind, Jerick knew the move was futile. There were too many Sho Del. Tzern's entire army was only five thousand men strong, and there had to be over fifty thousand warriors surrounding them. An impossibly large number, one Jerick's mind could hardly comprehend.

Tzern's plateau was a great distance away but, surprisingly, Jerick almost made it. He jumped, he dodged, and occasionally he fought his way across the battlefield. The Sho Del, however, were determined to corner him. They had learned how to fight Tzai—they focused all of their efforts on inflicting a single wound to his leg. Eventually, despite his speed and agility, one of them hit, slicing into the back of his calf with a lucky strike.

Jerick didn't scream in pain—there was no pain. He did, however, drop to the ground. He immediately found his feet again, blocking a half-dozen attacks as he rose. Unfortunately, his leg could barely hold his weight. He couldn't jump or run—he could barely stand.

Sho Del weapons assaulted him from every side. Jerick blocked with every ounce of his trained skill, keeping the most lethal blows from hitting. He couldn't stop everything, however, and soon he was covered with a dozen cuts of varying severity. He stumbled, and a blow took him on the side of the head.

Gvel Dar shattered around him, and his world exploded with pain. His sword dropped from stunned fingers as his mind finally acknowledged the agonies his body had been feeling. He barely saw a Sho Del raising its weapon to kill him. The world fuzzed, and Jerick felt himself slipping toward unconsciousness. He tumbled to the hard earth, trying to dodge as his world faded completely to black.

Then, through the pain, Jerick heard the sounds of fighting around him. He gritted his teeth, using the pain itself as a point of focus. He would not let himself fall unconscious—not now. Tzern needed him. Slowly, Jerick reasserted control of his body and, a few seconds later, forced his mind back into the Gvel Dar's meditative state.

Immediately, all pain disappeared. Jerick's eyes snapped open and he found himself staring up into the air, a concerned face hovering over him.

"He's alive!" Kep said with excitement.

Jerick reached up, leaning on the young boy's shoulder as he rose to his feet. Bridge Four stood around him in a protective circle, their old bridgeman

leather discarded for a set of silvery steel breastplates and shortswords. The tall, long-faced Dente turned as Jerick rose, saluting. Most of the men were there, standing defensively around Jerick. The battle had pulled back from them for a moment, the Sho Del searching for easier targets.

"Dente," Jerick said with relief. "I have never been so glad to see anyone in my life."

Dente smiled. "You don't look so good, sir," he confessed.

"I'll live," Jerick said dismissively, scanning the familiar faces. Then, for the first time, he noticed something else—someone was missing from the ranks of Bridge Four.

"Gathban!" he said with concern.

"Don't worry, sir," Dente assured. "He went back to Kaz'ch Tor. He made his three hundred coppers, and went to collect his bride."

"Of course," Jerick said. Bridge Four stood at the ready, looking at him expectantly. With a churn of disappointment, Jerick saw the hope in their eyes. Even though they just rescued him, they expected him to be the one who saved Tzern's company. Everything would be all right now that they had found Hook—he would find a way to turn the battle. He always had in the past.

Jerick looked beyond the bridgemen, scanning the battle. He could only make out a few scattered pockets of human resistance. It was not good. Even as he watched, Tzern's standard fell, its flag getting trampled beneath the endless waves of Sho Del.

"What now, sir?" Dente asked, his voice concerned. The Sho Del had once again taken an interest in the small group of bridgemen. A large group of at least a hundred of them was gathering for an assault.

"I . . ." Jerick began, hope fading from his voice. *There's nothing I can do!* he wanted to warn. Microkinesis refused to help him, no matter how much he pled. The Gvel Dar was powerful, but only on an individual level. It could not stop an army.

Then he noticed something. A fallen Tzai, Telledos, a blond man from Dysoria. He lay on his back, dead eyes staring into the sky, his hands clutching a wound in his stomach. Except, there was no blood. There was no blood anywhere on his body, most especially not next to the long gash in his torso.

Jerick frowned. No blood. Then he looked back at the battle. No illusory monsters either. His former confusion returned—why not use the illusions now, when everything depended on this one battle? It didn't make sense. Unless . . . the Sho Del illusory power was focused on something else.

Perhaps it was the sudden realization, or maybe it was just his innate penchant for noticing details, but at that moment Jerick realized something else was wrong with the battlefield—not with the men fighting on it, but with the Plains themselves. Something was wrong, and had been wrong, since he had first arrived.

The boulders. Bright white rocks, just like those near Jerick's home village.

His mind searched back, remembering comments—comments that hadn't seemed important at the time, but now made absolute sense. Gathban, referring to the rocks on the Shattered Plains as "blood-colored"—just like boulders would be back in the red-rock deserts of Kaz'ch Tor. Vessin complained of a rock in his shoe the size of the Plains' granite boulders. Sharn, speaking in the quiet darkness of the Plains at night, commenting on how the rocks reminded him of his home back in Tzendor.

Most importantly, Jerick remembered Frost explaining the nature of Sho Del illusions. *They don't really create images, they just project an imprint into your mind—a set of general instructions explaining what they want you to see. Your own mind makes the illusions; that's why they seem so real. Your own mind makes the illusions—makes them from what you know.*

The group of Sho Del smashed into Bridge Four, easily crushing the tiny line of defenders. Jerick screamed in denial, grabbing his sword from off the ground and spinning. One of the white boulders, sitting on the hard earth like a sun-bleached skull, lay directly behind him. Hearing men scream in pain—men Jerick himself had trained—Jerick raised his weapon high and gathered his Tzai for one final strike.

Time froze, men and blood held in the air, then Jerick's weapon struck, its point driving into the center of the large white stone. There was a yell—an inhuman yell. The boulder vanished, revealing a Sho Del in dark red robes. The creature writhed on the end of Jerick's sword, screaming in pain. Then, it fell still. As it did, the Sho Del warriors attacking Jerick's men vanished.

Jerick looked up, and the surprise of what he saw, combined with the weakness caused by a Tzai blow, nearly made him drop his sword in surprise. Every Sho Del, living or dead, in a twenty-foot circle had disappeared, leaving dead humans alone on the quiet ground. The members of Bridge Four sat up in amazement, their wounds suddenly gone. In the back of his mind, Jerick noticed that his own wounds had also been healed—or, rather, the force that had been convincing his body that it was hurt had been removed.

"They're illusions!" Jerick yelled in amazement. "They're all illusions. Bridge Four, to me! We have to get to the other rocks on the plateau!"

Addled but determined, Bridge Four formed into a rank as Jerick dashed

forward. When the next group of Sho Del saw them, the members of Bridge Four quickly engaged them, giving Jerick time to reach the stone. He hacked at it with his sword, and was completely dumbfounded when it struck against the stone instead of passing through it.

Are some of them actually real? He wondered for a moment. Then he realized what must be happening. Raising his blade, he focused himself and made a Tzai blow—something not even his own mind, no matter how deluded, could stop. The blade passed through the stone, and a Sho Del head rolled out and bounced across the plateau. Fully three thousand Sho Del warriors disappeared.

Bridge Four let out an excited whoop from behind him. A third of the plateau was now empty, and a few human stragglers were left standing in the middle of their fallen companions, looking around themselves with amazed eyes. Two of these were Tzai.

“Bindel!” Jerick yelled. “Move to the southern side of the plateau and use a Tzai blow on the first boulder you see there. Tidor, you do the same for the eastern side. Move!”

“Yes, sir!” both Tzai yelled, dashing to follow Jerick’s orders. The few dozen remaining human soldiers were quickly gathering to join with his bridgemen.

“To the general!” Jerick yelled, leading the men to the north, in the direction he had seen Tzern’s standard before it fell. There were still thousands of Sho Del between them, but Jerick’s men—their wounds healed and their spirits raised—crashed into the illusionary warriors, fighting desperately. Jerick fought with the cool precision of the Gvel Dar, which didn’t care whether its enemies were flesh or illusion—it cut down both without care.

Despite their enthusiasm, however, they were moving too slowly. The masses of Sho Del felt real enough, and they provided an effective block. Jerick fell back desperately. He had to do something. Reaching down, he picked up a small piece of metal—a round pommel stone that had fallen from some hapless warrior’s sword. Then he cast his eyes back in the direction of Tzern’s plateau, searching for signs of a white boulder. As soon as he saw one he jumped, Tzai energy carrying him high into the air. He gathered his Tzai again and threw the small steel ball.

There was a crack in the air as his muscles, driven by the Gvel Dar, snapped the ball forth. It flew truly, screaming forward to pass through the stone’s image and crack against something hard underneath. The image fuzzed, revealing a red-robed Sho Del clutching his arm in pain. A section of Sho Del disappeared as the creature’s concentration broke.

There, in the center of the vanished Sho Del, stood a very confused General Tzern, surrounded by the tattered remnants of his honor guard and two tan-uniformed Tzai. Jerick landed on the ground behind his rank of men, and immediately collapsed in fatigue, the Tzai blow having sapped the last of his strength.

He remained conscious enough, however, to notice when another large group of Sho Del disappeared as either Bindel or Tidor completed his mission. After that, the enemy Sho Del vanished in droves—as did the rocks, revealing a group of red-robed Sho Del who began to dash away from the battle in fear. Strangely, about two dozen of the Sho Del warriors didn't disappear, but instead retreated with their wizards. Two dozen, out of fifty thousand.

Jerick groaned and stared up into the sky in exhaustion, listening as the human soldiers cried out in victory, though their voices were muted. Most of them were staring out at the thousands of dead human soldiers that lay scattered across the plateau—each one having died without taking a single wound.

JERICK KNELT ON THE PLATEAU'S FIRM SURFACE, LOOKING DOWN AT THE Sho Del warrior's face. The second one he had killed, the Shen Da rider, had apparently been real and not an illusion, for the bodies of both her and her beast had remained when the battle was through.

She was beautiful, in a way. Her delicate, angular features could have been human—except for the eyes, black save for a ring of white where the pupils should have been. The large hole in the center of her chest, delivered directly between her breasts, matched the size of Jerick's fist.

There was a footstep behind him, and Jerick rose, saluting when he saw General Tzern. Both had stayed back with most of the other men to search for survivors amongst the dead, waiting for Sharn and Tidor to return with new bridge crews—or, more aptly, new bridges—to help them off the plateaus.

"All this time . . ." Tzern said, shaking his head as he surveyed the plateau. The bodies thereon appeared to be sleeping, rather than the remnants of a great battle.

"I wonder how long they've been using illusions instead of real warriors," Jerick said, stepping over to stand next to the general.

"A goodly long time, I would guess," Tzern replied. "I always wondered

what happened to the bodies of fallen Sho Del. Everyone just assumed they came back for their brothers.”

Jerick nodded. “They must have worked very hard to maintain the illusion.”

Tzern nodded. “They would have had to leave their magicians on the plateaus all day to make certain their rock hiding places didn’t vanish or change—there are those of us who would have noticed if the boulders shifted position from one day to another.”

“And the illusions of monsters and nightmares,” Jerick added. “They were all just diversions. The magicians knew that some of us would learn to see through their creations, so they gave us obvious horrors to look at. They made the horrors weak, without much power, so as soon as we learned to see through them we assumed we were impervious to their mind tricks.”

“Never realizing the true illusion, the one that was defeating us, was hidden in more ways than one,” Tzern finished with a nod. “I also wouldn’t be surprised if there were ‘rocks’ like these near our camps as well. Someone had to maintain the illusions in the minds of wounded soldiers, convincing them that they were injured. I wonder how many men we lost to fevers and infections that were purely the creation of Sho Del demons.”

Jerick nodded, thinking back to the frequent diseases that had plagued Demetris’s camp.

“And we would still be suffering from their illusions if they hadn’t gotten sloppy,” Tzern concluded. “They tried to handle too much, to create too many warriors at once. While I was fighting I wondered why so many of the Sho Del were just standing there, as if waiting for something. Only a few hundred of them would be active at a time—if all of them had attacked at once, we would never have been able to stand.”

“There are obviously limits to their abilities,” Jerick agreed. “Otherwise they would have never slipped and stopped projecting illusionary blood on the fallen humans. They must have grown desperate to try what they did today.”

Tzern frowned. “What do you mean?”

“This was a huge gamble, sir,” Jerick explained. “They probably knew that they couldn’t maintain so many illusions at once, which is why they haven’t done it before. One slip could have forever put an end to their secret—and one did. They will never be able to use their illusions so freely again.”

Tzern thought for a moment. “Greed,” he finally determined.

“My lord?” Jerick asked.

"They did it for greed," Tzern explained. "They wanted the Dragonsteel so badly that they weren't happy with the amount we were winning from them. So, they risked everything on the chance to keep it all for themselves."

Jerick didn't answer immediately. Tzern's comment held merit—it must have been a tempting proposition for the Sho Del. However, it was Jerick's feeling that there was something else to the battle. It seemed too much like a last effort, a desperate attempt to protect themselves, to have been fueled by greed. But why risk so much simply for Dragonsteel?

"You have distinguished yourself again, young Jerick," Tzern said, turning to regard him with even eyes.

"Sir, it wasn't me," Jerick protested. "Anyone could have put the pieces together if they had seen what I saw."

Tzern shook his head. "No one else noticed the pieces, Jerick," he said. "You have saved my life, and the lives of my men, twice now. More importantly, I think you may have permanently broken the Sho Del's power on the Shattered Plains."

Jerick blushed slightly before Tzern's praise. One thing he had learned about the Tzend general was that the man never spoke frivolously. Tzern was sometimes hard, but he was always honest, and he truly cared for his men.

"I was suspicious of you, I must confess," the general said slowly, staring out across the plateaus.

Jerick blinked in surprise, completely stunned. "Suspicious, sir? Why?"

"It is the human way to be suspicious of those who appear too successful, Jerick," Tzern said. "I had half-convinced myself that you were a Sho Del somehow disguised and planted in my camp."

Jerick felt his mouth open in stupefaction.

"I apologize for this," Tzern said. "No spy, no matter how much he wanted to earn my trust, would have revealed what you discovered today." He turned to face Jerick, looking him right in the eyes. "I must accept the facts, no matter how improbable. You are what you appear to be."

The bridge crews arrived, and Tzern left him, standing contemplative next to the body of the Sho Del he had killed.

I am what I appear to be? He wondered. *But what exactly is it I appear to be?*

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

“INITIATE JERICK,” ETHUSILETH DECLARED, “YOU HAVE BEEN JUDGED BY this council and determined worthy to advance to senior status. You are now to be addressed by the title of Revent.”

Topaz smiled to himself, noting the look in Ethusileth’s eyes. Even as the old Horwatcher spoke the words, he looked as if he himself couldn’t believe what was happening. The average time it took an initiate to make revent status was a decade, though some had been known to do it in five years. Topaz had done it in nine months.

Granted, he had a few advantages over the average initiate. Beyond microkinesis he had age and maturity, as well as experience dealing with people. Topaz had wiggled his way into so many organizations and courts that sometimes he almost felt guilty. In the end, the Horwatchers had been forced to advance him simply because they couldn’t think of any more excuses not to.

He had memorized all of their chants and teachings within his first week of training; he could use their charms and Tamu Keks with more efficiency than even the best Drath. He had only been forced to wait nine months because of a comment made by a Drath a thousand years dead—the rules stated that no person should be allowed to be a revent until they had passed their twentieth birthdate. Topaz had claimed to be nineteen from the beginning, and the induction ceremony had required him to invent a birthdate for himself. He had chosen a random date for his supposed birth,

not realizing at the time how important that very date would eventually become.

But, now it had arrived. He stood in the same chamber as he had on that first day, again presenting himself before the group of Draths. For Topaz, it had been an excruciatingly long nine months. He had only been able to sneak out of the Ekrobila occasionally, and then he couldn't remain away for longer than a few days.

Fortunately, he had more freedom than the average Horwatcher student. The Master of Initiates had quickly learned that Topaz would not put up with silly things such as washing floors or menial chores. It was a constant source of amazement to the jesk that organizations like the Horwatchers, not to mention any craftsman who took an apprentice, could claim they were "improving character" and "teaching obedience" when they were obviously just making up excuses to get free labor.

The teachers amongst the Horwatchers had taken an immediate dislike to Topaz—probably because he had memorized their codex of chants in five minutes, a task that normally took years. They had begun sending him to the Master of Initiates with some frequency, claiming he needed to learn discipline.

His first task had been to clean an enormous firepit as wide as two men were tall; the only tool he had been given was a small brush the size of his thumb. He had tossed the brush aside disdainfully, then used microkinesis to separate the ashes from the stones. He'd called up a slight breeze to blow them into piles. When the Master of Initiates had returned to check on the student a half-hour later, he had found Topaz dozing at the far end of the room, the firepit bleached nearly white, and seven piles of ashes sitting by the doorway. As an added bonus, Topaz had separated the ashes by color, and arranged them in ascending order of darkness from gray to black.

The Master of Initiates, a fat-faced Drath named Vorndor, now stood at the back of the collected Draths, watching Topaz with nervous eyes. He had come down with a case of the shakes, growing increasingly paranoid as the months progressed. Every time he gave Topaz a task, no matter how impossible it seemed, he had returned to find it completed. One day, Topaz had off-handedly offered to heal Vorndor's nervous tic. That had been too much for the man. The Drath had ordered the teachers never to send "Jerick" to him again, then locked himself in his chambers. Since that time Vorndor had begun regarding every other Horwatcher—especially Topaz—with paranoid hostility.

“As you know,” Ethusileth was saying, his voice drawing Topaz back to the revent initiation announcement, “this appointment will not be made official until ratified by the Goddess herself. We will hold a special ceremony this night, and ask for her blessing. Until that time, you should spend the day in meditation.”

“Yes, Great One,” Topaz said with an overdone, flowery bow. “And might I say, your wise face is looking particularly wizened this evening.”

Ethusileth frowned slightly. “Um, thank you, Jerick.”

Topaz smiled—he was pretty certain that Ethusileth was catching on to him. Over the months Topaz had begun to shed his façade of being an ignorant Jarg, instead adopting the personality of a cultured and learned man—but a cultured and learned man with absolutely no tact or common sense. In essence, he became what every nobleman assumed a backwater Jarg would be like if they were forced to imitate those of true genteel society. He made embarrassing comments by the dozen, pointed out things that never should have been said, and his compliments were always less than flattering. It was, of course, incredibly fun.

The Draths filed away. As they passed, Topaz shifted to microkinetic vision. He gathered some Axi from the air, pushing them into the shape of a finger, which he used to tap Vorndor on the shoulder just before he left. The wide-eyed man spun in alarm, and saw only Topaz, standing on the other side of the room. Topaz waved affably, and Vorndor paled, his right eye twitching uncontrollably.

“You really should have someone do something about that twitch, Master Vorndor,” Topaz noted.

The man rushed from the room.

Topaz chuckled to himself—maybe in the future Vorndor would think twice about making his students clean out the Ekrobila stables with their tongues. The jesk left through the chamber’s opposite door, intending to head in the direction of his meditation chamber.

His path was blocked by a familiar short-bearded Horwatcher with blond hair. He wore the stiff-collared robe of a senior revent.

“Hello, Cathis,” Topaz said affably. “You’re looking wonderfully dull this evening.”

“I know you are lying,” the man hissed, his eyes dark.

“Oh? You mean you aren’t feeling very dull?”

Cathis’s eyes slitted in anger. “You should be more careful around me.”

“Yes, I know,” Topaz replied lazily, leaning against the door frame. “You found me. I owe you an eternal debt of gratitude.”

Cathis shook his head. "You are no Jarg," he said quietly. "I've watched you. You've fooled us all."

"Ah, Cathis," Topaz replied. "I always knew you were slightly less stupid than the rest of them. And, might I say, your voice is sounding melodically petulant and spiteful today. You must have worked on that for some time."

"I don't know what you are," Cathis said, "but I'm going to find out."

Topaz shook his head. "Good luck," he said with complete frankness. Then he pushed his way past the man and strode down the hallway.

It appeared as if he were finally going to be able to get some answers. In his nine months in the Ekrobila, the powerful white-clothed form had not returned to him. Topaz had literally spent months pondering on what he had seen, and he could only come to one conclusion. Either he was wrong about everything he had been studying and learning since he began his quest, or he had just met the fifth god. The evil one, whose name he still did not know. If that were true, and he thought that it was, then he was in trouble.

He had been bedridden for two weeks after his encounter with the being. He hadn't suffered any true physical damage, but his body had been so utterly drained that he had been able to do little but sleep. The Horwatchers whispered together that he was subject to the fits, a sure sign of being favored by the Lords. Topaz hadn't known what to think. He had told Bat'Chor that he didn't have faith, that he couldn't believe, and in part that was still true. He didn't know what he believed, but after experiencing the awesome power of the being that claimed to be Oreon, Topaz was willing to admit the possibility of deity. Whether that meant that the Nine Lords actually existed, he didn't know.

After two weeks of recovery, Topaz had returned to normal, completely without scar—at least physically. He was left wondering, however, how he was going to fight against something so powerful that its very presence sent his body into convulsions. Now, more than ever, he knew he needed answers—and he needed them quickly.

Unfortunately, he had been forced to wait nine months to ask them. But no more. Tonight, for the first time, he would be able to meet directly with the Goddess the Horwatchers called Selonis. He had felt her presence several times during his stay in the Ekrobila—she was nowhere near as powerful as the other being, but she was obviously of the same make. As a recently advanced revent, Topaz would be allowed to ask her three questions. Topaz didn't particularly look forward to dancing naked

in front of a pagan altar, but he was willing to try about anything to get his answers. Besides, he was pretty certain he would look a fair bit better in the buff than the Draths did.

TOPAZ WOKE FROM HIS NAP WITH A YAWN. HE USUALLY USED HIS MEDITATION time to sleep, and any Horwatcher who claimed that they didn't do the same was trying to hoard prestige. Lazily he checked his internal clock—which was always right—and knew he had about a half hour until the moon rose. Plenty of time to get to the ceremony chamber. He threw on a clean initiate's robe—it would be the last time he wore one. After this day, he would be given one of the incredibly tacky—but strangely desirable—Horwatcher robes.

He made his way through the now-familiar passages of the Ekrobila, speaking with no one. He was forbidden to talk until the ceremony was finished. It was all delightfully clandestine, and of course utterly pointless, but no more so than the initiation rites of other groups. Topaz just took it all in stride—if this night went well, then he would ironically have gained more information from the Horwatchers than all his years studying in Trexandos.

The Draths waited for him in the chamber. It was just as he remembered it from his covert peeking on that first day, containing a bright white altar about as long as a man was tall and a ring of torches on its walls. He waited silently with the others, a little bit nervous for some reason, until he heard a muffled noise from behind.

Two revents entered, bearing a bound and gagged form between them. It was a young girl, wearing nothing but a thin shift, her eyes red from crying.

Topaz felt himself grow sick. *Oh, Lords.* . . . He turned to the wrinkled Ethusileth, feeling anger rise in his breast. "Who is that?" he demanded with a harsh whisper.

"Hush!" Ethusileth said sternly. "You may not speak until the ceremony is over."

"No," Topaz said, his voice staccato and firm. "*Who is that?*"

Ethusileth sighed. "Your virgin," he whispered back. "Now be quiet—all will be revealed."

"My . . ." Topaz trailed off. Only then did he notice a raised platform behind the altar, a platform he wouldn't have been able to see when peeking through the door on the opposite side. A platform just long enough for a pair of bodies to lie upon.

He turned to Ethusileth again. “When?” he demanded. “Before or after I ask the questions?”

Ethusileth shot him an enraged look.

“When?” Topaz repeated.

“It is the act that summons the goddess,” Ethusileth explained in an intolerant tone.

Topaz groaned inwardly, looking back at the frightened young girl. She couldn’t be older than fourteen, a short, dark-haired girl. *She looks like Ryalla*, he thought suddenly. He was so close to finding the answers . . .

Topaz sought desperately for a way, any way, around what the Draths expected of him. He had worked too long to let it all slip by so easily. However, even as he thought, the Draths towed their poor captive past him and moved to begin tying her across the platform. He didn’t have much time left.

With a sigh, Topaz shook his head. *Well, I just wasted nine months.*

Topaz moved suddenly, spinning away from Ethusileth. As he moved, he ordered the oxygen Axi in the room to pull back from the torches. It was almost more than he could manage, but he only had to hold it for a brief second before the flames choked and died. The room was suddenly blanketed in darkness, except for Topaz, whose microkinetic vision allowed him to sense what was around him without the use of his eyes.

He spun through a world full of vibrating Axi, snatching the girl’s form out of the hands of the surprised revents and dashing out the door. There were yelps and calls of alarm from behind him as he wove through the Ekrobila’s passageways, towing the girl behind him. As he ran, he used microkinesis to loosen the knot tying the girl’s hands together. It came undone as they paused at an intersection and Topaz reached back to pull the gag off as well.

“Be quiet and stay behind me,” he warned in Fallin.

The girl nodded in confusion. He could sense her weakness—he could only guess what kind of conditions she had been forced to live in. If the Horwatchers treated their initiates so poorly, what would they do with their captives? His microkinetic eye could see something overlaying the girl’s Axi—a sort of white shadow. The shadow seemed to glow softly, though light meant nothing in the microkinetic realm. Frost had once told him the shadows were reflections of the Spiritual Realm, an image of a creature’s ideal nature.

Topaz removed his glove, then reached up and touched her on the side of the face, willing her strength to return. In an instant, the dull exhaustion

left her eyes, and they began to glitter with energy instead. The Axi in her body seemed to jump with ecstasy, many of them rearranging until they matched the Spiritual shadow. Topaz held some of them back—healing children was difficult. If he wasn't careful, he would accidentally cause the girl's body to grow and age.

The girl gasped in delight, her strength returning. The wounds where the rope had bit into her skin disappeared instantly.

She raised her hands with wonder, staring at the now-healed wrists. "Sivonn," she whispered, looking up at Topaz with wide eyes, "the Healer."

"If I were one of the Nine Lords, my dear," Topaz said back, turning to peek around the corner, "I wouldn't have to sneak my way out of this building. Come on."

They moved quickly, Topaz in the lead, ducking into rooms or down side passages whenever Topaz heard someone approaching. As the minutes passed such intrusions became more and more frequent—even in a maze like the Ekrobila, it was impossible to remain hidden forever.

"I knew it!"

Topaz spun toward the voice, pushing the girl behind him. A form stepped from the shadows of an intersection a short distance away.

"Cathis," Topaz said flatly. "My, how unspeakably revolting you look this evening."

"I knew you wouldn't be able to do it, Jerick," Cathis said, stepping forward. Topaz cursed silently—the revent was caring a sword. He knew, unfortunately, that most Horwatchers had been the sons of noblemen before recruitment—nearly all had received at least marginal training with weapons.

"What'in t'meaning, theres?" Topaz said innocently in Jargish Meleran, backing away from the Horwatcher as he sought for an escape route. Unfortunately, the only thing behind them was a storage chamber. If they went in there they would be cornered for certain.

"Don't try that on me, Jerick," the man warned, taking a step forward. "It was all too easy, just too easy. You're obviously some sort of demon from the Cognitive realm. I knew you wouldn't be able to face the Goddess—you aren't pure enough."

"Not pure enough to rape someone?" Topaz asked incredulously. "And I thought I was good at irony."

"Ha. You can't—"

Cathis cut off with a muffled gulp of a sound. Topaz frowned in confusion, a look he shared with Cathis. Then, the revent slumped forward, toppling

to the ground. There was a bloody stain in the middle of his back. Topaz grew cold as he watched a couple of forms move quietly around the corner, their white skin reflecting the torchlight. One, holding a bloody sword in one hand, bent down to make certain Cathis was dead. The other stepped forward quietly, noticing Topaz and the girl.

Sho Del? Topaz thought with complete shock. *Here? What in the name of the Nine Lords?*

Suddenly a scream, piercing in the face of the Sho Del's silence, echoed through the passageways. It was impossible to tell what direction it came from—the Ekrobila's hallways reflected and distorted sound. The scream was followed by the sound of metal on metal, and the shouts of men. Topaz turned back to the advancing Sho Del. They had paused, but then turned back to Topaz, stepping forward again, their pale faces a stark contrast to the dark eyes, their white ribbon-like hair framing their faces.

He felt the girl shudder beside him and heard her begin to say a mumbled prayer to the Nine Lords. Topaz backed away from the advancing warriors, pushing the girl into the room behind them and quickly moving to shut the door. He barely had time to make the door swell within its frame—the only thing his power of growth could do to wood that was already dead—before the handle turned.

He scanned the room. It was empty save for a few bales of cloth and some sacks of flour. The girl huddled in the corner as the door began to thump in its frame. The door slowly began to slide open as the Sho Del rammed their shoulders against it.

Think! Topaz commanded himself, searching for something in the room he could use. The flour was no good—he couldn't command seeds to grow if they had been crushed. He could probably start a fire with the cloth, but what good would that do? Mold wouldn't help him this time; the walls were too thick—as wide as a man was tall in some places.

Topaz froze. Why were the walls of the Ekrobila so thick? Surely the upper floor didn't need that much support. Cursing himself for a fool, Topaz switched to microkinetic vision, scanning the walls around him. Sure enough, he sensed a passageway extending out from the back of the room. *Idiot! Of course the Horwatchers would have secret passages in their castle. They're so cursed melodramatic sometimes it's painful.*

He ran over to the wall, looking through the Axi in search of a mechanism to trip the doorway. Since microkinesis didn't rely on the eyes, it was possible to “see” through solid matter in the same way it was possible to “see”

in the dark, but in the case of stone the sense grew cloudy after a few feet. Eventually, however, he found a stone in the wall that appeared to be attached to some sort of pulley. He pushed it forward and the wall swung back on some unseen hinge.

"Come on," Topaz urged, waving the girl through the opening.

She obeyed quietly, moving into the passage as the room's door resounded with another hit. It was almost open. Topaz stepped through into the passage and pulled the secret door closed.

"Come on," Topaz said, leading the way through the passage.

"I can't see," the girl whispered with a frightened voice.

Topaz paused, realizing that he was still looking microkinetically. "Hold my hand," he ordered, reaching back to take her thin hand. He led them through the darkness and up what appeared to be a ramp. Occasionally, the walls around them thinned, and Topaz could hear the sounds of fighting on the other side.

He still couldn't understand what the Sho Del were doing in the middle of Lallom. They would have had to travel all the way through Fallamore to reach the country—had Topaz been so out of touch the last few months that he'd missed word of an invasion? Cursing the Horwatchers for their foolish secretiveness, Topaz followed the incline of the passage until they reached a dead end. The path turned into a set of steps and, reaching up, Topaz was able to find a clasp and push the trap door open.

The girl gasped behind him and Topaz shifted views to see bright moonlight shining down through the opening. He stuck his head up, then climbed out onto the roof of the Ekrobila. The shadowed stones were guarded by horrific sculptures that looked much more ominous in the moonlight than they had during the day. The girl climbed out after him, pulling close to his side with fright. If Topaz's infallible memory was right, there was a stairwell on the far end of the roof that led down to the courtyard.

They moved quickly over to the stairwell's column, listening to the muffled screams and fighting from below. Topaz pulled open the door, surprising the Sho Del who had been reaching for the latch himself. The two stared at each other for a moment, then Topaz cursed, slamming the door closed. The Sho Del caught it before it closed entirely, however, pushing it back open.

Topaz pulled the girl after him, running to the back of the Ekrobila and along the plank that joined the keep to the outer wall. Even as they reached the wall, however, Topaz noticed Sho Del appearing from the stairwells at either side of the structure. Several of them were carrying bows.

The girl began praying again beside him, but Topaz shook her out of the mantra. “We’re going to jump,” he warned, looking down at the ground twenty feet below.

“I trust you, Lord Sivonn,” the girl responded and, without warning, stepped off the side of the wall.

Topaz cursed as she slipped from his grasp, plummeting toward the hard earth. He reached out desperately, feeling the power swell within him. He searched with his mind, scanning the ground below until he located the proper Spiritual shadow. He released the power within him, the power he didn’t understand. *Grow!*

A bush sprouted suddenly from the ground, throwing out branches and leaves even as the girl fell. By the time she hit, it was as high as a man’s waist. Topaz shot one look back at the Sho Del, and jumped himself.

He and the girl had been running for about a half hour when a massive explosion sounded behind them.

AMAZED, TOPAZ WALKED THROUGH THE SMOKING RUBBLE THAT HAD once been the Ekrobila. What he saw before him shouldn’t have been possible. He had expected carnage and bodies, perhaps even some flames, for there were things in the Ekrobila that would have burned. Instead, he had found only rubble—a black scar on the hilltop where the large stone building had once stood.

In places it looked as if the stone itself had burned—the blocks that remained were oddly distorted, as if they had been melted. Most of the bodies were nothing but burned skeletons, and the miasma of death hung strongly in the air.

What could have done this? He knew the answer, however. He had felt its power. This was what would happen to all of Yolen when the fifth god came in force. Could the Sho Del be allied with him?

Topaz slowly picked through the rubble, searching for survivors. He wasn’t certain why he did so—after what he had been confronted with at his initiation, he knew that every man who had made the rank of Revent deserved what had happened to him. Topaz still found it hard to believe—he had come to know many senior Horwatchers during his time in the Ekrobila, and many of them had seemed to be decent people. Some of them he had even liked. How had men like that lived with themselves after the initiation? How had they continued to live with themselves, knowing what happened each time their Goddess was summoned?

He turned, shaking his head. There was one last thing he wanted to do before he left. He opened his microkinetic vision, not focusing on specifics but extending the sense on a wide spread. Slowly, he became aware of something pulsing a short distance away. He walked over and pushed aside some rubble, digging carefully. Eventually, he pulled free an object covered in soot. It was thin and spindly, about two handspans wide and one tall, like a spiderweb that had somehow been frozen and hardened. He rubbed it with the sleeve of his Horwatcher's robe, revealing the silvery glint underneath. Dragonsteel. So the Horwatchers *had* been holding a piece of the altar. He flipped the piece of metal in his hands, reading the foreign letters that made up the spiderweb.

Selonis, he read. *Makes sense, I suppose.* It wasn't the name of the fifth god, but one of the four Frost had told them. So Topaz really had wasted his time—even if the Sho Del hadn't destroyed the Ekrobila, the Horwatcher Dragonsteel wouldn't have revealed anything new.

If only I'd been able to ask the questions, he thought with disappointment. Still, at the same time, he had a feeling that he didn't want to have anything to do with a deity that was summoned in such a sickening manner.

Topaz tucked the Dragonsteel in his robes. Such a large piece was probably valuable enough to buy a kingdom—assuming, of course, he wanted one. Still, though fiscal matters were of little interest to him, such a powerful item of bargaining could not be ignored.

He turned to leave. Then, however, he heard an incredible sound—moaning. Turning toward the sound, Topaz rushed to the far side of the fallen Ekrobila. He pushed some rubble out of the way, revealing the pudgy face of Vorndor, Master of Initiates. Even as Topaz watched, the light of life faded from the Horwatcher's eyes.

Hurriedly, Topaz ripped off his glove, grabbing Vorndor by the neck. The man gasped suddenly, a deep rasping breath that filled his entire lungs—like a yell, except it pulled in air instead of pushed it out. His back arched rigidly. His arm, which had been nothing more than a blackened stump, regrew in less than a second.

Then, slowly, a dazed look in his eyes, Vorndor sat up, every scratch and mark gone from his body, though his robes were still burned and scarred.

Topaz sat back, replacing his glove.

"You!" Vorndor said, noticing Topaz. "You . . . healed me."

"You're lucky," Topaz said. "Another moment and you would have been dead—and that's a barrier even *I* cannot cross."

The Drath looked at him questioningly, but Topaz said nothing further

on the subject. Instead, he asked a question of his own. "Why did you survive, Vorndor?" Topaz demanded. "Why didn't you die in whatever destroyed the rest of them?"

"They . . . they wanted to question me," Vorndor mumbled, shaking his head.

Topaz frowned. "So there *was* a point behind the attack. What did they want to know? What did you idiot Horwatchers do to so anger the Sho Del?"

Vorndor was staring at his hand and feeling his abdomen, as if amazed that his wounds were actually gone. "I don't know," he confessed. Suddenly, tears began to roll quietly down his cheeks. "I don't know. They . . . they wanted to know where the boy was."

"The boy?" Topaz asked, his voice sharp. "What boy?"

"The prince," Vorndor babbled. "The prince of Melerand. We took him for the money. We . . ."

"Yoharn?" Topaz asked incredulously. "Yoharn was here in the Ekrobila?"

"Yes, but we moved him. Took him back to his homeland. The king is going to pay us soon. . . ."

Topaz cursed, looking to the north. A wide set of tracks—chariot wheels and hoof prints—led to the north. "You told the Sho Del this?"

"They hurt me," Vorndor mumbled, staring off into space. "They hurt me so badly. But now all the pain is gone. Gone . . ."

Topaz stood. What did the Sho Del want with Yoharn? Regardless, they were heading for Melerand now, and they had a one day lead on him.

Topaz left the still-sobbing Vorndor behind, rushing toward his own chariot. Then he paused, noticing something for the first time. One of the burned corpses in front of him was not human—though its face was charred, it was possible to see patches of white skin and a single black eye. Apparently the Horwatchers had been able to take a few with them to the next world. Topaz frowned, trying to decide what about the Sho Del corpse bothered him.

Then he finally realized. Before, when he had searched for Dragonsteel, he hadn't felt anything from this corpse. He quickly switched to microkinetic vision to confirm his suspicion. Sure enough, he felt nothing. No pulsings, no power at all. There was no Dragonsteel in this creature's bones.

It isn't a Sho Del! Topaz thought with amazement. It looked like one, but on the inside it was different. It was something else, not human and not Sho Del.

Oh, Lords, Topaz thought with a quiet groan. *Why so many questions and so few answers?* If it wasn't a Sho Del, what was it?

Such questions, however, were irrelevant in the face of what the creature had done—or, more importantly, what it might do. Topaz looked to the north, debating what path he should take. He had several avenues of travel open to him, some much more quick than others. Eventually, he unhitched his horse from its chariot and hopped on the beast's back.

The beast didn't rear or react with fear—all animals trusted him. Horses weren't meant to be ridden like donkeys or oxen—their backs couldn't support the weight. Unless, of course, that weight was Topaz. He removed his glove and pressed his hand against the horse's neck, filling the creature's body with energy and strength. Then, grabbing the reins, he kicked the horse into a gallop.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

“TONIGHT, DRAGONSTEEL WILL APPEAR IN THE PLACES I HAVE MARKED,” Jerick said, pointing at his table map.

Tzokar, one of the new Tzai, nodded, memorizing the plateaus Jerick had indicated. “Yes, Lord Jerick,” the man said, bowing and backing from the room.

Jerick frowned slightly. “That still sounds odd to me, Frost,” he confessed.

“The second and third commanders of an army hold the rank of sub-general, Young Master,” Frost said from the side of the room. “In the minds of the men, that makes you a lord.”

Jerick nodded. He had heard the explanation before, but it still sounded odd to him. He looked down, noting on his ledger which plateaus he had indicated. He was in charge of a third of Tzern’s section of the Plains, and the general wanted him to keep close track of which plateaus gave out the most Dragonsteel.

“You can really sense them from this far away?” Frost asked.

Jerick nodded. “It has taken practice,” he admitted. “But I’m getting better. I’ve been here so long I’ve started to feel a closeness to the plateaus—as if the Shattered Plains were part of my skin. Maybe it’s all the Dragonsteel.”

“Perhaps,” Frost agreed. “Will you have time for a game of Dek tonight?”

Jerick smirked, finishing his ledgers. “What? You aren’t tired of defeating me yet?”

“You aren’t that bad, Young Master,” Frost objected. “Lately you’ve started

to provide something of a challenge. Another year, and you might be ready to go against Lord Tzern himself.”

Jerick shook his head, setting down the ledger and walking over to pour himself a cup of chilled wine—one of the perks of being a sub-general. “I’m not that eager to be humiliated, Frost, thank you.”

The old scholar smiled, accepting a cup of wine. Jerick frowned slightly, looking into the man’s eyes. “What is it?”

“Young Master . . .” Frost began. “Do you realize what time of year it is?”

Jerick thought for a moment. Seasons were so similar in Fallamore that it was easy to lose track of time. “Sometime in the middle of winter.”

“The end of winter,” Frost corrected. “Your . . . birthdate will be approaching soon.”

Jerick leaned against the wall, sipping his wine as he counted the days. It had been two months since his discovery of the Sho Del illusion tactics, ten months since he had joined Tzern’s army, nineteen months since he had arrived at the Shattered Plains, which made it a full twenty-two months since he had left Melerand. His eighteenth birthdate would be in about two months.

“I guess it is,” he said, drinking the rest of his wine. The cool liquid was an absolute relief in the southern heat.

“And that means . . .” Frost implied.

“Courteth will be getting married soon,” Jerick finished, setting aside his cup, a suddenly sour taste in his mouth.

“You won’t be returning, then,” Frost guessed.

Jerick shook his head. “I have too much responsibility here.” The acknowledgement hurt. For the first time, he realized that he had done exactly what he set out to do. He had won honor and glory in the Eternal War; he had earned the respect and loyalty of an entire army. Yet, for some reason, he didn’t feel like returning to show off his accomplishments. He couldn’t use the praise and honor of these men to win Courteth’s hand—that would cheapen their esteem somehow.

Glory wasn’t what he had thought it was. It didn’t come from slaughtering the most Sho Del, or even rescuing a general from danger. It came from being worthy of the respect his men gave him.

“I’ll send them a gift,” Jerick decided. “A . . . book.” In the last few months Tzern had opened his personal library to Jerick, who had begun to pursue his former studies. He had found that he gained much more joy from reading and learning now that there was no pressure to defeat Martis. In

addition, his understanding of Axi and Realmatic theory added a great deal to his learning. He had even begun to pen an essay of his own, explaining his theory on the unseen forces that held Axi together.

He looked up from his contemplations. "I'm sorry, Frost," he confessed. "You were still waiting for me to return, weren't you?"

"No, Young Master," Frost said with a shake of his head. "I think you have made the proper decision."

"You can go if you wish, Frost," Jerick offered. "I shouldn't hold you here—Melerand is your home."

"Melerand was my home," Frost corrected. "But I have had many homes over the years. I'm getting old, and the cold makes my joints ache. I think perhaps I should retire to someplace warm."

Jerick smiled, laying a hand on Frost's shoulder. "Thank you, my friend," he said. "We'll return sometime, perhaps in another half a year, long after Courteth and Martis have been married. Lord Tzern has a ship on the eastern coast, and we could probably make the entire trip in less than two months. I would like to see Ryalla and the king again."

"Good," Frost said. "I have some things in the palace that I would like to collect."

The decision had an air of finality about it. Jerick had found his place in life—here, in the war. If he ever returned to Melerand, it would be to visit, not to go home.

"My lord?" a voice asked from the doorway.

"Yes, Kep?" Jerick asked, turning.

"General Tzern has asked to see you."

"All right," Jerick said. Frost rose to follow as Jerick walked out of his quarters—now a building that was all his own—and proceeded down the pathway in the waning light. A group of armed men, led by Dente, fell into step around him.

Things had changed much over the last few months. Dragonsteel runs were quite different now. For one thing, Jerick could tell ahead of time where the Dragonsteel would come up. No one questioned his ability; they assumed it had to do with his being a Tzai. In addition, the Sho Del defeat had allowed them to construct permanent bridges and watchstations across most of the Shattered Plains. Apparently, it had been the hidden Sho Del magicians who had been setting the permanent bridges on fire.

The result was a severe decrease in the necessity of bridgemen. Most places had permanent constructions, and Tzern's new ox-drawn bridges worked

for the rest. As a result, Bridge Four had found themselves unnecessary. They had, however, eagerly accepted their new assignment as sub-general Jerick's honor guard.

Human armies now had a permanent hold on about two-thirds of the Plains. The Fallin government had placed all of the other camps under Tzern's command, so instead of separate competing armies they were all one organization. Tzern had, of course, allowed Jerick and his bridgemen to accompany him when he took control of Demetris's camp and set about cleaning it up—physically and metaphorically.

Tzern's own camp had changed as well. Now that the real threat of the Sho Del was gone, the camp had become less of a fortress and more of a city. Tzern had allowed certain businesses access to the camp, and made orders to construct a second, larger palisade around the first. The result was a central, still martially organized city with a larger civilian one on the outside. Jerick could see the beginnings of houses and shops being set up, and the change had fostered a sudden boom in marriages amongst the troops.

"Lord Jerick," the guards at Tzern's door said, saluting as Jerick arrived. Leaving Bridge Four behind, he and Frost quickly walked up the wooden steps and into the general's command room.

Tzern stood to the side, speaking with Sharn and a short, red-haired woman that Jerick didn't recognize. When she turned, putting her face into the light, he couldn't mistake the squarish, determined features he saw. She had to be Tzern's daughter.

"Ah, Jerick," Tzern said as he arrived. "And Scholar Frost, welcome. I wish you to meet my daughter, Tulin."

"Ah," Tulin said with a staccato Tzend accent. "You're the one who broke my jewelry box."

Jerick blushed—he had heard stories about Tulin. "I'm very sorry, my lady," he apologized.

Sharn laughed. "No need to cringe, Jerick. She rarely throws things at strangers."

Tulin huffed in complaint, punching her fiancé lightly in the shoulder. Tzern watched them with amusement in his eyes, then turned to Jerick.

"My daughter, true to her rather impetuous nature, has decided not to wait for the wedding as planned. Sharn has graciously consented to her demands, and they will be returning to Tzendor to make arrangements."

"Congratulations," Jerick said, walking over to clap Sharn on the shoulder.

"Thank you," Sharn said.

"As I will want to see the wedding of my only child," Tzern continued. "I will follow them in four months." The general paused, and Jerick looked toward him expectantly. "I doubt I will return," Tzern continued.

Jerick froze. "My lord?" he asked with surprise.

Tzern reached over, pouring himself a cup of chilled wine. "You know of Emperor Aronack?" he asked.

"I have heard impressive things about him, my lord," Jerick replied.

"They are all true," Tzern said. "There is no one I respect more than the emperor; you should see the good he has done for Tzendor. His imperial majesty was the one who sent me here in the first place—he told me the Eternal War was out of control, and that I was to subdue the Sho Del threat." Tzern paused, sipping his wine. "I know my emperor well, Jerick," he finally continued. "The Sho Del are subdued. If there is no change in the next six months, then when I arrive in Tzendor for the wedding he will have another assignment waiting for me."

Jerick leaned back against the wall. What would the war be like without Tzern's firmness to rely on?

"Jerick," Tzern continued. "Since I will be gone, and Sharn will be staying in Tzendor to join the emperor's guard, that leaves you in charge."

"Me?" Jerick asked with surprise.

"You are third commander," Tzern said. "Such implies you will be in command when the first two leave."

"Sir . . . I don't know what to say," Jerick confessed. "The entire camp?"

"Not just the camp, Jerick," Tzern prodded. "The war. The leader of this camp is the supreme commander of the entire Eternal War."

"Sir!" Jerick objected. "Surely there's someone more qualified."

"There was, but they were killed in that final battle," Tzern said truthfully. "But that isn't the point. The Eternal War is, essentially, a political endeavor. Only a person with the proper rank will be allowed to lead. Unfortunately, the other generals are like Demetris—though none so bad as he. They are not warriors; they are courtiers."

"But I'm just a lumberman," Jerick reminded him.

Tzern held up a hand. "Not from this moment on, you aren't. I couldn't place any of my squad captains in charge; the Fallin court knows each of their ranks, none of which is high enough. You, however, are an enigma. No one knows who you are or where you came from—in this case, your obscurity is your ally. They assume you came with me from Tzendor, like Sharn. Everyone in the court heard how you saved the war; they will accept you. Besides," he added, "you are the most qualified man I know."

"I appreciate the honor, my lord," Jerick said. "But I can't help thinking I'm not ready."

"You aren't," Tzern said. "That's why I'm giving you four months' warning."

"ARE THEY ALL REAL, MY LORD?" VESSIN ASKED, SCANNING THE APPROACHING group of Sho Del.

Jerick wrapped his mind in the Gvel Dar, focusing all of his energy on building a mental shield around himself. He forced external thoughts and proddings to turn aside, then slowly opened his eyes. He was impressed—fully half of the approaching warriors were not illusionary.

The Sho Del were reluctant to give up completely on their ruse. Over the last few months they had tried several variations on the illusion idea, mostly ways of keeping their magicians safe during the battle. Even if the humans knew their opponents were illusionary, they would still be slaughtered unless the magicians—called Kame Ken Den Tu by Frost—could be destroyed.

At first the Kame Ken Den Tu had tried to disguise themselves as other objects, such as corpses or riderless Shen Da, but these guises had quickly been recognized. They had briefly tried to disguise themselves as nothing at all, trying to be invisible, but for some reason this didn't work very well. The human mind wasn't willing to accept information telling it that an object it could see did not exist—even the regular warriors had been able to sense where the magicians were when they tried that trick. Their latest, and most effective, trick had been to alter the men's perceptions of where the plateaus ended. Jerick had lost an entire squad of men to such a ruse—he had watched them run out on apparently solid ground, only to see them vanish as they plummeted into the chasm. The humans had quickly learned not to stray too close to plateau edges.

Now it appeared that the Sho Del were disguising their wizards as regular warriors. It was a clever idea, but still inadequate. Jerick could sense which of the warriors was creating the illusions—their manipulations of the Cognitive realm gave them away.

"Well, at least they're persistent," Jerick mumbled, reaching to his belt and pulling out several small steel discs. Following his success with the broken pommel stone before, Jerick had fashioned the discs, following the design of a wooden toy the lumbermen had made. He raised one of the discs and, gathering his Tzai, whipped it in the direction of the approaching Sho Del. The small disc, about half the size of a man's palm, hurled through

the air, propelled by the force of Jerick's Cognitive power. It hit the Sho Del magician's chest, slicing through his armor and digging deeply into his flesh.

The Kame Ken Den Tu collapsed, taking his illusions into the next world with him. The remaining Sho Del warriors paused and then, picking up the corpse of their fallen comrade, quietly retreated.

"I don't understand why they keep trying," Dente confessed. The members of Bridge Four waited protectively around Jerick and the regular warriors stood in formation a short distance away, watching over the well which would soon put forth Dragonsteel.

"I don't either, Dente," Jerick said with a shake of his head. The Sho Del refused to give up, even though humankind held nearly all of the Shattered Plains.

He watched the Sho Del trail off, crossing the few remaining plateaus back to their side of the Plains. Jerick had never been so close to U Poni Sho Del, the southern continent, before. Just beyond the barren plateaus he could see a thick forest unlike any on Yolen. Jerick was accustomed to pines, which tended to grow relatively far apart from one another. U Poni Sho Del's forest was more like a wall of foliage; one mass of solid shrubbery as opposed to a line of trees.

And, of course, the plants were all bone white. Fain animals he had seen before, but it had never really occurred to him that the plants would be Fain as well.

He felt the warriors around him relax as the Sho Del disappeared into their white forest—though, realistically, they must have known that there was little chance of a battle. Tzern, working at Jerick's suggestion, had scattered the remaining Tzai warriors across the Plains, giving two or three to each camp. It took a good measure of concentration and focus, but most of the time they were able to locate the Sho Del magician and either kill him or tell the warriors where to find him.

The Eternal War was over. It was a difficult idea to accept—the war had been a part of Yolen for centuries. Every boy, even peasants, dreamed of glorious battles fighting the Sho Del, and every village told and retold the stories of its heroes and legends. Now it was finished; the Sho Del were broken.

Not that troops would ever leave the Shattered Plains. There was still the Dragonsteel, as well as the necessity of patrolling the border. In addition, many noble Ka depended on the war as a venue to dispose of second and third sons. In name, the war would continue. Patrols would still be

sent, Dragonsteel runs still made, and there would probably even be the occasional skirmish with the Sho Del. But the danger was gone.

Jerick had spent a lot of time over the last few weeks thinking about the future of the Eternal War—mostly because it now appeared that he would be leading it. The concept was still enough to stun his mind. However, as the days passed, he learned more and more about the administrative duties of running a war. He learned to procure supplies for his men, to maintain order, and to delegate duties.

At first, he had been worried more about the strategic side of the appointment. He had less than two year's battle experience, which was hardly enough preparation to run an entire war. Tzern had quieted his fears, reminding him that it was becoming increasingly obvious that the fighting was over. And, even if the Eternal War did somehow return to the way it had been, Jerick was ready. The war was unusual in that it was made up of tiny skirmishes, as opposed to massive battles. Jerick understood the skirmishes—he excelled at them.

Still, despite the fact that the war was all but over, Jerick felt an enormous responsibility in being chosen to lead the armies. The battles might not be fierce, but he was still accountable for the lives of thousands of men.

He felt a chilled pulsing behind him—the Dragonsteel had nearly arrived. He turned, and the warriors parted before him as he stepped forward to gather the luminous metal.

THE CHARIOT RIDE BACK TO CAMP WAS A SHORT ONE—PERMANENT bridges made a big difference. Jerick rode ahead of the rest of the men, leaving them in the charge of a division captain. He wanted to get back before it grew too dark to inspect a new shipment of steel swords. As his driver pulled into camp, however, he noticed something odd—a blue and green chariot sitting outside Tzern's command building. Curious, Jerick climbed out of his own chariot. Vessin and Dente—who had come behind him in a separate vehicle—followed quickly.

Jerick climbed the steps to Tzern's office. Blue and green were the Fallin imperial colors. Usually such a chariot indicated a messenger from the court itself. Sure enough, Jerick passed a blue-liveried courier on his way into the building. The man bowed to Jerick, then climbed in his chariot and whipped the horses into motion.

Jerick entered Tzern's office. The large room, its walls covered with maps

and charts, was empty save for the general himself. He was holding a yellow sheet of parchment in his fingers, eyeing its contents with consternation. Though Tzern's face was characteristically difficult to read, Jerick immediately sensed that something was wrong.

Tzern did not look up as Jerick entered. "There has been an attack," the general said quietly, his voice confused. "In Lallom. An army of five hundred Sho Del assaulted and razed the Horwatcher's Ekrobila, completely destroying it."

"Lallom?" Jerick asked with surprise. "How in the name of Xeth did they get that far north?"

"I have no idea," Tzern said, shaking his head as he lowered the parchment and set it on the table beside a stack of books. "It appears we have been too presumptive—the Sho Del are not beaten. Our main function as an army was to keep them out of Yolen, but somehow they've gotten by us."

Jerick walked over, picking up the letter and reading its contents. "Five hundred . . ." he repeated. "As far as we know, those five hundred warriors could have all been the construction of one Kame Ken Den Tu."

Tzern paused. "Perhaps. However, accounts say that the entire building was destroyed, and several reports said they saw an army marching through the northern mountains—an army that left tracks. They might actually be real. Of course, I doubt it matters much to the men who were slain—illusion or not, they're still dead."

Jerick cursed quietly. The Sho Del had realized they wouldn't be able to win the Eternal War, so instead they had gone to a place where there were no Tzai to oppose them.

"We have to send men after them," Jerick decided. "The Tzai are the only ones trained to stop the illusions. If we don't act now, the war might flare up again, on the continent this time."

"I agree," Tzern said. "I feel responsible for this. Unfortunately, there are . . . complications."

Jerick looked up, frowning. Tzern reached over and selected another sheet off of his desk. This one was crisp and white, and was covered with the strange picture-like words of the Tzendish language. "As fortune would have it, this came today as well. It is from Emperor Aronack himself. It appears that I was right when I assumed he would re-assign me, though I was wrong about how long it would take."

Tzern paused, looking into Jerick's eyes. "This is an official order to withdraw to Tzendor within the week. Lord Aronack wants me to return as soon as possible . . . and he wants me to bring my troops as well."

“All of them?” Jerick asked incredulously.

Tzern shook his head. “Only the Tzends—which means about half the camp. But he especially asked that I bring the Tzai warriors.”

Jerick frowned. “But sir, without the Tzai . . .”

“I know, Jerick,” Tzern said quietly. “It worries me as well. However, I think there may be a more important task ahead of us. I have heard reports from associates in Tzendor. The emperor is preparing for something big, a massive confrontation. An . . . invasion.”

“U Poni Sho Del,” Jerick breathed. Aronack intended to take the war into the Sho Del homeland.

Tzern nodded. “We have a chance to rid the world of the Sho Del finally and completely. That is why he needs the Tzai, and that is why he needs me. Lord Aronack indicated in his letter that I am to take command of Tzendor’s imperial armies.”

The tall man reached out, placing a hand on Jerick’s shoulder. “I would have you there with me, Jerick. One of the first things you learn as a military commander is that you must be careful whom you trust. Any man, even your closest advisor, could be in the enemy’s employ. A man you know will not betray you is a valuable commodity, and if that man happens to also be an excellent leader, then you know you have been blessed by the Lords themselves.”

“But what about the Eternal War?” Jerick asked.

“Jerick, if this invasion is a success, we won’t ever have to worry about the Sho Del demons again. Lord Aronack’s plans take precedence over the greed of the Fallin nobility. Come with me, and leave them to squabble over their Dragonsteel.”

Slowly, Jerick felt himself begin to nod. “It would be my honor to follow you, my lord,” he said.

Tzern smiled deeply—a rare sight. “Good. Then let us make preparations to depart. Fully half of my camp is Tzendish; if we are going to leave in one week’s time, then we are going to have to move quickly.”

“But, sir,” Jerick said, taking a deep breath. “I cannot go just yet.”

Tzern paused, turning back to Jerick with a question on his face.

“Sir, I have to go north after those rogue Sho Del. Whether it’s an army or a single illusionist, the Sho Del are desperate and angry. If I don’t go after them, then they could slaughter thousands before they’re stopped.”

Tzern was silent for a moment, then he nodded. “You are an honorable man, Jerick,” he said. “I have rarely seen such nobility in the most lofty of kings. You may go if you wish.”

"Thank you, sir," Jerick said with relief.

Tzern shook his head. "I seem to remember another time when you came to the aid of someone in dire need, despite your commander's wishes. I cannot be grateful for what you did while at the same time forbidding you to do so again. Take the second division with you—they are mostly Yolish, and I was planning to send them after the Sho Del anyway. If those demons happen to be real, then you are going to need more than a crew of bridgemen—no matter how courageous—to defeat them."

"Yes, my lord," Jerick said gratefully.

"Just hurry," Tzern urged. "And come to me in the Tzend capital of Sipan as soon as you are finished."

JERICK RUSHED DOWN THE STEPS OF TZERN'S OFFICE, WAVING FOR VESSIN and Dente to approach. "Vessin, you gather Bridge Four and tell them to prepare for immediate departure. Dente, do the same for the second division. We're leaving for northern Yolen in two hours."

Both men saluted, dashing off in separate directions to fulfill his orders. Jerick hurried to his own quarters to prepare. The warriors, used to the unpredictable nature of Dragonsteel runs, could easily be ready in such a short time. The supplies would be more difficult to arrange, but since the Eternal War was a joint effort between all of the nations of Yolen, he could probably demand food from the various cities he passed—especially if he brought with him the letter bearing the Fallin Emperor's seal.

"Young Master?" Frost asked with confusion as Jerick rushed in and began to throw clothing into a trunk.

"We're leaving, Frost," Jerick explained. "A group of Sho Del attacked and destroyed the Horwatchers. They're moving north into Aldbin, and we have to stop them."

"What?" Frost said with a shocked tone. "That is impossible."

"Then the Fallin government, and the Horwatchers, are gravely mistaken," Jerick said, continuing his packing. He snapped the clasps closed on the trunk, standing. "You can stay if you wish."

Frost shook his head. "I shall begin packing." Then he paused, smiling. "It appears that our trip to the north has begun unexpectedly early."

"I suppose so," Jerick said with a smirk. "I have to go see about supplies. I'll be back soon."

With that, he rushed back out of the building. He stopped, however, on

the steps. Tzern was waiting outside, standing beside a massive black horse that Jerick had never seen.

"This was to be my farewell present to you, Jerick," Tzern said, laying his hand on the horse's neck. "His name is Shakan. He is a Tzend war horse, bred to be intelligent and powerful. Your Yolish horses are too weak to bear an armored man on their back, but Shakan will do so and still run faster than any chariot."

"He's amazing," Jerick said with awe. "But I don't need such an animal."

"You do now," Tzern said, nodding for a pair of soldiers to set down a large wooden box. Inside Jerick could see a suit of bright silver armor packed in straw. On the right side of the breastplate was etched a familiar Tzendish symbol. The character that represented Tzern's own name.

"You cannot fake nobility and be a commander in the Imperial Army, Jerick," Tzern said. "You will need to be affiliated with one of the noble families. House Ki bears an honorable heritage, and we would be proud to have you bear our name."

"My lord, I . . ." Jerick said, trailing off.

"The armor will take some getting used to," Tzern confessed. "I am still not comfortable wearing it. However, it is undeniably impressive. Ride into any town wearing this and no Kalord will be able to deny your right of passage."

"Sir," Jerick protested, "I can't take your armor."

"You can and will," Tzern corrected. "We are nearly the same height and build, so it should fit. I will have adjustments made when you arrive in Tzendor. In the meantime, I will send Gven with you," Tzern said, pointing to the Tzend soldier who was his primary attendant. "He knows how to put the armor on, and will instruct you how to move in it, as well as teach you the knee commands for riding a war horse."

"My lord," Jerick said, falling to one knee. "This is far more than I deserve."

"I will decide that, Jerick," Tzern said. "I am, after all, the commander of the Imperial Tzend Army. I want my men to be properly equipped, especially those who are from my house. Now, stand up and get moving. If you are going to leave in less than two hours, then you will need to arrange supplies."

Jerick stood, clasping Ki Tzern's arm. Then he rushed off to make the necessary arrangements.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

“EMPLAE CUSO DELUMI, CARMAE CUSO ROLANS, KUBLANAE—”

“Kublenae,” Torell corrected.

“Kublenae,” Ryalla continued, reading from the text. Master Torell insisted that the way to learn Trexandian was to memorize verb conjugations. After two months of drilling, Ryalla was beginning to regret her interest in the subject.

She finished the list, and Torell nodded to himself. The scholar sat atop his dais, Ryalla studying at his feet in the proper position of respect. His reed sat off to the side of the dais, though he had never once used it on Ryalla. The scholar’s room was small for a noble—not even as big as Jerick’s had been—but about this one item she had never heard him complain. He knew the king had been merciful in giving him the rooms—a man whose Ka rejected him was little better than a peasant in the eyes of many.

“You progress nicely,” Torell told her, sitting with his back as stiff as his Antoli. “Not as quickly as I did, of course, but I had the benefit of learning Trexandian while actually in the city itself. Had I not learned quickly, I would never have been able to survive. I believe it is time to move on to the next set of verbs.”

Ryalla sighed. How many sets were there? Still, despite her growing resentment of the Trexandian’s incredible vocabulary base, she was grateful for the distraction. She was almost ready to give up on her quest to find the prince. In her year of searching for the boy—had it really been that long?—she had done little more than discover what Scathe liked for breakfast.

She had thought long about the words she had heard the Horwatcher mumble that once when he was in the trance. One of the books—actually, it had been Mander’s *On Fain Life and the Sho Del*—postulated that some Sho Del could communicate directly from mind to mind. Mander claimed the Horwatchers could imitate this technique by using Tamu Keks, which accounted for many of their more amazing feats of divination and prediction, such as “seeing” through walls or predicting bad weather.

There was a time when Ryalla might have ignored such an explanation—not because of disbelief, but because, like most, she would have been afraid to postulate on anything involving Sho Del magic. However, now she was willing to consider the possibility. Scathe had definitely been talking to someone, and Ryalla suspected it had been the Horwatchers who were holding the prince.

The only conclusion she had been able to come to was that the prince was somewhere in the city. Not only did Scathe’s “conversation” seem to imply that, but it made sense. The ransom would be paid in less than a week; Yoharn had to be somewhere close. That is, assuming the Horwatchers actually intended to give him back.

“Student Ryalla,” Torell said disapprovingly. “Your mind is wandering again.”

Ryalla blushed, looking back up at the scholar. “I’m sorry, Master,” she replied.

Torell sighed. “They often say that a poetic spirit and an imaginative mind go together, student Ryalla, but that is no excuse not to pay attention during your lessons.”

“Yes, Master,” Ryalla agreed.

However, as the lesson progressed, her mind refused to leave the topic of the Horwatchers alone. As if making one final, desperate attempt at putting fractured pieces together, it searched through all she had learned, trying to find some connection that would lead her to the prince.

Where would the Horwatchers keep the boy? Scathe had made no contact with other Horwatchers—at least, not physically. It made sense that they would stay hidden; the arrival of a contingent of Horwatchers just before the prince’s return might look suspicious. She had hoped that Scathe would be foolish enough to meet with them, but in this case he had proven wiser than she assumed.

“Master?” she finally asked, unable to come to any conclusions on her own. “I would like to ask a question.”

Torell looked up from the parchment he had been using to record a new

list of verb conjugations. Finally, he sighed, setting the pen down. "You are never going to learn this language if you don't pay attention," he noted.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled.

"Ask your question," he said, waving a hand.

"What do you know of the Horwatchers?"

"As little as possible," Master said. "They are a despicable crowd, relying on tricks and mysticism. Though they claim to be teachers, their main goal is to keep the people ignorant."

"They come from Lallom, right?" Ryalla asked. From her seat she could just barely see out the room's tall window. The city spread out from the palace—the prince could be anywhere out there.

"Correct," Master said. "At least, that is where they make their home. Lallom itself is a sparsely populated kingdom, with more sheep in it than people. From what I understand, most of the Horwatchers are actually from Fallamore."

From Fallamore, Ryalla repeated in her mind. Something about that statement struck her. It had to do with the Horwatchers—their style of dress, their mysticism, their entire attitude. Then, with a start, she realized what it was. "That means they have probably heard the ballads," she mumbled to herself.

"That, student Ryalla, is an understatement," Torell said. "Those cursed things are sung repeatedly at nearly every Fallin gathering. One can't think for all the foppish storytelling that goes on in Fallamore."

"That's where they get it!" Ryalla said, blinking in surprise.

Torell watched her uncomfortably for a moment. "Where they get what?" he demanded.

"Their look," Ryalla explained. "Those collars, their overdone robes—those are things directly out of the Fallin ballads. The Horwatchers act the way they do because they're trying to fit a part. They want to be like the magical sorcerers described in the ballads."

Torell snorted. "It certainly would explain their melodrama," he agreed. "I've always thought those collars looked ridiculous."

Ryalla smiled to herself. It made sense—at least, to her it did. She was so familiar with the ballads she didn't know why she hadn't seen it before. Many of them were strikingly similar, as if there were a written set of rules that had to be followed. The Horwatchers were trying very hard to emulate the powerful wizards often included in the ballads. But, how did that help the prince?

Except . . . if the Horwatchers dressed like the sorcerers in the ballads, they would try to follow the sorcerers' actions as well. If this were a ballad, if

the sorcerers had been the one to capture the prince, where would they hide him? Somewhere mystical.

“Master, which of the Lords do the Horwatchers claim as patron?”

However, even as she asked the question, her eyes fell on the dark-green temple to Slonis. It rose above the buildings around it, its blackish marble walls a refuge for seclusion and secrecy.

“I don’t think they have a formal patron,” Torell said. “Though, from what I understand, they are somewhat partial to—”

“Slonis,” Ryalla finished.

Torell frowned. “Yes.”

YOHARN SAT AT THE FAR SIDE OF THE ROOM. RYALLA STOOD FOR A FULL minute, staring at him with dumbfounded eyes. She couldn’t believe how easy it had been—the temple to Slonis was filled with chambers and passages, but most of these had been occupied by priests or worshipers of some sort. She had easily found the way to the underground chambers—the entrance was “hidden” behind a large naked statue of the goddess near the back of the temple. She stood in the short underground hallway. It was lined with doors, each of which had a small opening at the top that one could look through. The third one had, to her amazement, revealed a gagged, bound, and blindfolded Yoharn.

He was not alone, however. There were three men with him, all dressed in simple robes. Their attitudes, however, as well as the Tamu Keks on the table, revealed them as Horwatchers. The men sat speaking softly together, their hushed voices nervous.

Ryalla looked over Yoharn’s form with pity and sorrow. The prince had not fared well over the last two years. Never very large in the first place, he had grown scrawny and pale during the time of his captivity. He sat with his head hung low, his chin resting against his chest. If not for the occasional twitch, Ryalla would have thought him dead.

If she could distract the Horwatchers somehow, perhaps she would be able to sneak in and free him. She needed something that would surprise them, and perhaps . . . Ryalla paused her thinking for a moment, looking down at the three Horwatchers. One of them had turned his head slightly, a frown on his face. In his hand was clutched the distinctive shape of a Tamu Kek. He rose slowly from his stool, his eyes eventually focusing on the door. On Ryalla.

Her breath caught in her throat, and her arms went stiff with fear. The

Horwatcher was looking right at her. His eyes didn't quite focus on her, but somehow he knew she was there. He took a hesitant step forward, waving for the other two to join him.

Shock gave way to alarm, and Ryalla jumped down from the stool she had been using to peek through the door's small window. She broke into a dash and didn't stop until she had left the temple's green hallways behind.

They can see me! she thought with alarmed surprise. *Or they can sense me, at least.* No illusionary distraction would work on these men—such would only make them more suspicious. She needed another way. But how? The king might believe her, but then again he might not. Scathe was one of his trusted advisors—the king would not be quick to accept a denunciation of the Horwatchers, especially from a slave. Besides, in recent weeks Scathe had started spending a great deal of time around the king, perhaps to keep watch for traps. It would be difficult for her to speak with King Rodis without warning Scathe.

Suddenly, Ryalla realized where she needed to go. Someone who would help her, and who would have no trouble dealing with a couple of Horwatchers.

SIR HSOR DID NOT ADMIT HER IMMEDIATELY. HE WAS BUSY SPEAKING with Doram about the upcoming exchange, and how to best protect the king. Ryalla was forced to wait outside his chambers, debating whether or not to use her powers to slip by the watchful guards outside. Two hours, and a great deal of anxiety later, Doram finally left the room. The old Aldbish warrior nodded to her in greeting, then marched off, his guards in tow.

Hsor barely looked up from his table when she entered. He was studying a map filed with lines and circles—troop arrangements, she assumed.

"Yes?" he asked simply after she had curtseyed with appropriate humility. He was said to be a nobleman of some high ranking back in Tzendor.

"My lord," she began, uncertain what to say. Finally, she decided to just say it. "My lord, I know where the prince is!"

Hsor raised an eyebrow, but did not look up from his maps. "What is it? Did you see a stranger visit your neighbors? An owl landed on someone's rooftop? Tell Doram and he will have some of his men check on it."

"No," Ryalla said. "I actually saw him, my lord. It's the Horwatchers. They—"

Hsor looked up suddenly, fixing his powerful yellowish eyes on her. "What?" he asked.

"The Horwatchers have him, my lord," Ryalla repeated.

Hsor rose, placing his firm hands down on top of the table. Standing at least six and a half feet tall, he was like a Ke'Chan, only a little thinner and much more handsome. "Show me," he ordered.

HSOR PUSHED ASIDE THE COMPLAINING PRIEST, THEN CONTINUED STRIDING down the temple hallway. Before they left he had strapped on a piece of his armor—the shiny steel breastplate—and a large sword. Few people got in his way as he walked through the temple's dark passages. Ryalla pointed out the way to the basement, and Hsor led the way, taking the steps quickly.

"The third door," Ryalla informed him anxiously. What if the Horwatchers had been frightened off by her presence earlier? What if they were no longer there? Would Hsor call her a liar?

Her fears vanished as Hsor pulled open the door with a determined hand. Ryalla peeked around the Tzend's massive body, catching a glimpse of the three Horwatchers rising with alarmed faces.

"You!" one of the Horwatchers said with horror. He reached for his Tamu Kek. Hsor's blade slammed into the table top, sinking an inch into the wood and causing the table's contents to bounce into the air. Bowls, Tamu Keks, and flagons fell back to the table, some rolling off the sides and falling to the floor with a series of cracks. The Horwatcher withdrew his hand reflexively, backing away from the table.

Hsor pulled his blade free, advancing on the three men with a slow step. "It is not wise to betray Tzendor, my friends," Hsor said quietly.

"We . . . We . . ." the lead Horwatcher babbled, searching for words. "We always intended to give him to you. We just wanted to see if we could get some money from the king first."

"That was not the deal, my friends," Hsor said, shaking his head. "Your greed has ruined years' worth of planning."

"You can have him," the Horwatcher yelled, falling to his knees.

Hsor's sword took the Horwatcher in the neck, neatly separating his head from his body.

"We don't need the prince anymore," Hsor said as the Horwatcher's body flopped to the ground. "We have made other arrangements."

Ryalla watched with stupefaction, feeling her body grow numb with fright. Blood sprayed across the green stone floor, running thick and dark. What Sir Hsor was saying meant . . .

With a yelp of shock, Ryalla bent light, delivering herself into the soft haven of invisibility.

Hsor's hand reached out and snatched her, invisible or not. He held her in a powerful grip, setting his sword aside as he regarded the other two Horwatchers. The men looked down at their dead companion with fright, knowing they were cornered in the back of the room.

"Surely there is some agreement we can come to," one of them said.

"I am afraid not," Hsor replied flatly. "I am not a cruel man, but Eleel Tyi the White, God of all, has spoken to me about you. Betrayal is a sin he cannot forgive, for memories of His brother's traitorous acts are still fresh in His eternal mind. Your death will be quick, though His judgment will last an eternity."

"But—" the other Horwatcher began. Then stopped suddenly, grabbing his chest.

Ryalla felt it. A surge of power, like a pulse of warmth, from Hsor. Both Horwatchers toppled to the ground groaning and kicking, then fell silent.

Then Hsor turned to regard Ryalla, who was struggling ineffectually in his grip. The man's eyes focused directly on her, even though she should have been invisible. "So you're the one who has been running around the palace unseen," Hsor mused. "You might as well stop wasting your strength. Invisibility will not let you slip away."

Ryalla stopped her struggling, instead letting herself hang weakly in his grip. Reluctantly she allowed her invisibility to drop.

"Lord Eleel will be very interested in you," Hsor said.

"What did you do to them?" Ryalla asked weakly.

Hsor turned his eyes back on the dead bodies. "A man's body will not continue to function if you separate his heart from the veins surrounding it," he explained.

"I . . ." Ryalla said, the horror of what she had just seen dulling her mind. Hsor behind the kidnapping? Three Horwatchers murdered? "What will you do with the prince?" she asked.

"It will be best if he remains 'kidnapped' for a few more weeks," Hsor decided. "But that is of no concern to you. I thank you for leading me to him. These vermin deserved to receive Lord Eleel's judgment."

A noise came from behind, and Hsor turned. Ryalla craned her neck to see a group of priests gathering back in the hallway, staring into the cell with horror. Hsor reached to his belt and pulled out a pouch that clinked with the sound of coins.

"It appears that those who rented this room will no longer need it," he informed them, tossing the bag to one of the priests. "I shall require it—and another just like it."

INTERLUDE THREE

DU LEN STRODE PAST THE SENTRIES OF THE COUNCIL HALL, IGNORING their hostile stances. Their manes rose slightly as she entered, showing their disapproval. The elders were in council; it was a breach of courtesy for Du Len to interrupt them. The sentries did not move to stop her, however. Du Len might not be a full adult, but she was still a Kame Ken Den Tu, and therefore allowed access to the council chambers.

The sentries weren't the only disapproving eyes and bristling manes Du Len had to ignore as she made her way through the building. She let none of them sway her, however, as she walked directly toward the inner chamber, her steel-heeled boots clumping against the hard white She Ka Vo wood floor.

The elders looked up as she walked through the final doorway, her still-gauntleted palms cracking as they pushed the doors aside.

"What is this?" she demanded simply, folding her arms as she stopped in front of the group of elders. "Why have you ordered me away from the Ana Ku Mae Ven Kor?"

The foremost of the elders, Fa Len Ko Mar, an aged Sho Del whose face was creased with lines and whose mane hung limp, rose when he saw her. The other twelve Sho Del followed.

"We recalled everyone, Du Len," the old Sho Del said. "Not just yourself. The war is lost, for now. We need to rethink our strategy."

"You are giving up?" Du Len asked flatly.

"We have little choice. The Doni Kar saw through our illusions. It was

bound to happen eventually; in fact, I am surprised the ruse lasted as long as it did.”

Du Len felt her mane bristling in dissatisfaction. “You say that with far too much complacency, Father,” Du Len spat.

Fa Len raised an eyebrow. “What would you have us do, daughter? Throw away endless lives without any hope of winning? What good would it do us to win a few drops of Ana Ku Mae when we lose a bucket worth in the process?”

“And so we just wither away?” Du Len returned bitterly. “We let the cursed Doni Kar glut themselves on that which we need?”

“For now,” was the simple reply.

“Where is the general?” she demanded. The Lord of the War had disappeared following the final battle.

The Sho Del elders regarded one another. She could read their looks and limp manes. They didn’t know.

“There is nothing we can do but pull back,” her father said.

Du Len’s mane grew even more stiff at the pronouncement. Her father, however, seated himself, nodding for the other elders to do likewise. Assuming she was dismissed, Du Len turned angrily to leave. Fa Len Ko Mar, however, was not finished.

“It is fortuitous that you would arrive at this moment, daughter,” the older Sho Del said. “The council had been discussing you.”

Du Len froze, her mane falling limp with apprehension. Slowly she turned; the entire council’s eyes were on her. She felt like backing away in fright—how easily they could turn a conversation on her just by hinting at this one subject.

Sensing her feelings—her father was a powerful Kame Ken Den Tu as well—Fa Len continued. “Yes, I know it brings you grief, my youngest child, but it must be discussed. The time is quickly approaching when you will be too old to be made an adult. You should take the Ana Ku Mae now, while there is still some to be found. You are a powerful Kame Ken Den Tu, and a fine warrior—you would easily pass the judgment.”

“And then spend the next twenty years of my life bedridden with child-bearing,” Du Len returned.

“It is your duty.”

“Let another have it,” Du Len said, feeling her earlier resolve return. “There are plenty vying for the opportunity.”

“You would live your life as a Sha La Men Ves? An eternal child, never knowing parenthood?”

Du Len felt herself grow cold. Sha La Men Ves. The mere mention of the word made her skin crawl and her mane feel like curling up upon itself. No Sho Del wished such a thing, but more and more were forced to accept it as Ana Ku Mae became increasingly rare.

“At least offer prayers and seek answers,” her father suggested.

“The Dra Sho U Fel no longer answer, Father,” Du Len returned. “They have abandoned us.”

Fa Len’s aged mane bristled at the comment. “Speak not so, daughter!” he warned sharply. “They may not answer, but they still listen. If you do not wish their help, then pray to our fathers instead. Either way, I suggest you make your decision quickly. Your days—our days—of fighting are at an end. We need to discover a new way.”

Du Len stared her father in the eyes for a moment, then spun and stalked from the room.

You may have given up, Father, she thought to herself. But I will never stop fighting. Even if I have to slaughter every last Doni Kar with my own hands.

THE END OF PART THREE



CHAPTER FIFTY

JERICK TURNED THE DARK, BLACK ROCK BETWEEN HIS FINGERS. FLAKES of char broke free, floating to the scorched ground below. The rock itself looked like some he had seen before in Fallamore—melted and twisted, like it had at one point been liquid. Jerick had read of the volcanic islands that could be found in the sea of Trexandos, but he had never heard of such a thing happening on Yolen itself.

He dropped the rock, wiping his blackened fingers on the side of his tan Tzai uniform. The ground was littered with the stones—his men had found shards of it a hundred yards away. Jerick stood at the center of the blast, upon a hill that had once held the Horwatcher Ekrobila. Now all that remained of the structure were bodies and a few twisted lines of rock that might once have been walls.

It looked like a vision from a nightmare. Jerick immediately cast the thought from his mind. Recently, his dreams had been turning dark again, despite the protection of the Gvel Dar. He couldn't let himself think of them.

"What could have done this?" Jerick turned, looking at Frost.

The scholar simply shook his head. "Only a few things in the world could have achieved such destruction, Young Master."

"Such as?"

Frost shrugged. "Deity," he replied. "Or perhaps a very powerful micro-kinetic."

Jerick ground his teeth for a moment. He didn't like either option.

"Lord Jerick!" a voice called. "Over here!"

Jerick followed the voice, stepping over melted rocks. Even though the fires must have stopped burning days ago, the scent of smoke was still strong in the air. On the other side of the wreckage he found Kep. The boy was standing over a half-burned, decomposing corpse. Jerick stooped down, studying the form. It was not human.

"Good job, Kep," Jerick said. Then he looked up at Frost with a raised eyebrow. "Well, at least some of them are more than illusions. Of course, the chariot tracks insinuated that much."

Frost nodded, a frown on his face. The wind blew at his thin, wispy beard as he studied the body. There was confusion in his eyes.

"What?" Jerick asked, rising.

"Nothing, Young Master."

"I know better than that, Frost," Jerick returned, nodding for Kep to continue searching for survivors—just in case.

"This isn't like the Sho Del," Frost explained. "They wouldn't have just massacred the Horwatchers for no reason."

"They didn't seem to have any reservations about sending assassins after King Rodis," Jerick noted.

"That is different, Young Master," Frost explained. "That only required a single person, not an army. The Sho Del can't afford to commit this many troops. There's too much of a chance they'll be surrounded and too little promise of a reward. Besides, they don't have the power to destroy a building like this. Sho Del magic is Cognitive, and can have little direct effect on the Physical realm."

"If I were a more curious man," Jerick said, passing Frost and walking back toward the bulk of his army, which waited below with the horses and chariots, "I would ask how you know so much about the Sho Del."

Frost did not respond. Below, Jerick nodded for his sub-commanders to prepare for departure. There was still light left in the day, and the ruins could tell them no more. As they prepared, one of the scouts—a tiny man who had been a cattleman, and was capable of riding a horse bareback—galloped up. He slid off his mount and approached Jerick with a salute.

"A chariot is approaching, sir," the man explained. "It bears your standard."

Jerick smiled. Bridge Four had revealed a present to him the day they left Tzern's camp—his own standard. It was, of course, a tree, similar to the one his father had carved on his castemark. "Dente," he said with a nod.

A few moments later, the lanky Fallin man's chariot thundered into their midst. He climbed down, saluting as he gestured to the overweight man

he had brought with him. "I found him in the town, sir," Dente explained. "He claims to know the cause of the Ekrobila's destruction."

Jerick nodded, looking up at the man. He wore nondescript gray robes, cut after the fashion of the priest class, but he appeared to have no castemark. His jowled face was utterly calm, and he stared back at Jerick with serene eyes.

"Step down," Jerick ordered.

The man complied, climbing out of the chariot.

"You know something of this?" Jerick said, nodding to the remains on the hill a short distance away.

"I am the Seer of Sivonn," the man explained, as if he hadn't heard Jerick's question. "He came to me, and nearly took away my life, but then returned it. He asked only that I serve him."

Jerick frowned. Sivonn the Healer? One of the Nine Lords?

"We knew him not for what he was," the man continued, "for we were selfish and sightless. He brought his wrath down upon the others for their wickedness, but me he reserved for a special purpose."

"You claim the Healer did this?" Jerick asked incredulously. "Sivonn is Lord of healing and the arts."

"Sometimes in order to heal, one must first cleanse a wound," the large man responded. "Sivonn sent demons to wipe away our wickedness."

"How many were there?" Jerick asked.

"All that were necessary."

Jerick nodded to Dente, and they stepped a short distance away. Vessin and Tellore, captain of the warriors Jerick had brought, joined them.

"Not much help, is he?" Tellore grunted. He was a simple, no-nonsense career soldier with an eye for tactics and a firm sense of discipline.

"I apologize, my lord," Dente said. "He was the only thing I could find. I don't know if it's his doing or not, but the entire village is buzzing with rumors of Sivonn's involvement. They claim the Healer rescued a village girl just before she was to be sacrificed."

"Sacrificed?" Jerick asked.

"Probably an exaggeration, Young Master," Frost clarified. "The Hor-watchers engage in some revolting practices, but I have never heard valid proof linking them to murder. They often appropriate young women for . . . certain purposes, but they always return them alive."

"Lord Jerick?" a voice, Kep's, asked from a short distance away. Jerick nodded for the boy to join the conference.

"What is it, Kep?"

"I know that man, my lord," Kep explained. "He's a Horwatcher."

"How do you know?"

"My home village is only a half day's ride from here," the boy explained. "He came once and demanded that we give him three unmarried women, and our lord made us comply."

"The Sho Del have probably done the continent a favor this time," Tellore grumbled. "Too bad they missed one."

"He's different now, sir," Kep explained, looking back at the priest-like Horwatcher. "He was always angry before, and very loud. He's changed."

"Well, whatever happened to him, it took his wits as well," Vessin declared. "I've heard more coherent ramblings from a drunk Jarg."

"Agreed," Tellore said.

Behind them, the former Horwatcher had begun to speak, as if preaching to the men around him. "Beware," he warned. "The Lords have grown weary of our wicked ways. They have sent the Healer to cleanse this continent. He will not stop until all have been purified. Time is growing short."

Jerick turned back to his officers. "Put him back where you found him, Dente," he ordered, "then catch up with us. The madman is right about one thing—we don't have much time. The Sho Del have as much as a week's lead on us."

THEY PUSHED THE HORSES HARD, RIDING UP THROUGH THE LALLIN highlands after the Sho Del. Jerick had appropriated every chariot in Tzern's camp, as well as a few from other camps, to outfit his warriors. The group was seven hundred strong, and rode two men per chariot. The emperor of Fallamore had given them three hundred of his finest horses to use as alternates, allowing them to move faster than they would have otherwise been able.

Even with the alternates, the rigorous pace was hard on the animals. Barely a day went by that they didn't lose at least one. Jerick knew from his studies that such was to be expected—'Cheru Tar reportedly sacrificed two thousand mounts during the first year of his assault on Rodaius. Still, Jerick couldn't help seeing the dead horses with an eye of chagrin—each one meant a loss of both life and time.

As they rode into the highlands—Jerick still couldn't force himself to call the stunted hills "mountains"—the weather grew increasingly cold. To the rest of the world, winter had only just passed, and Jerick welcomed the cool temperatures like an old friend. While his men shivered and complained,

he only smiled. He had forgotten how wonderful it was not to be covered with damp sweat.

The welcome return to the north was, unfortunately, spoiled in his mind by several factors. He worried about the Sho Del, of course, but he also worried about his increasing lack of control over his dreams. The nightmares came almost every night now, and no amount of meditation seemed to help. Every single one of them had to do with his parents—especially his father—in some way.

Jerick tried to ignore the nightmares, pushing forward with his quest. Unfortunately, no matter how fast his men moved, the enemy always managed to remain ahead. The Sho Del wisely steered away from any large cities, coming out of Lallom and passing into Aldbin. Hopefully, here the chase would find its end. Emperor Flend of Fallamore claimed to have sent a message to the new king of Aldbin, warning him of the Sho Del. Most of Aldbin was still under a form of martial law, and the throne maintained a large standing army. If the king had moved quickly enough, he should have been able to block the Sho Del at his border. With luck, they would be able to crush their enemies between two armies.

“THIS DOESN’T LOOK GOOD, SIR,” DENTE NOTED.

Jerick frowned, sitting atop Shakan as he looked down at the plain before them. He wore the breastplate emblazoned with Tzern’s symbol, but not the rest of the armor. He still wasn’t proficient enough at wearing the suit to comfortably ride while encased in it.

This plain, where the land finally dropped from hills and barrows to flat scrub, marked the border of Aldbin. Apparently, the Aldbish king had indeed moved quickly enough, for spread out before them was a long line of troops.

“Five thousand,” Tellore mumbled, scanning the line. “Maybe as many as seven, with reserves. Most of them foot soldiers, with a couple hundred archers. About a dozen chariots.”

“Maybe they already caught the Sho Del,” Kep suggested.

“Maybe,” Jerick said without conviction. It didn’t look like the scene of a battle—even if the bodies had been removed, the ground should have been torn in wide, random sweeps by the Sho Del charioteers. He could see where the Sho Del vehicles had passed, but the tracks did not speak of a battle. The chariots had crossed the plain riding in a wide straight line, passing through the very spot the Aldbish warriors now held. Jerick’s scouts

told him they were now only a day behind the Sho Del, and the fresh tracks confirmed the projection.

“Bridge Four is with me,” Jerick decided. “Tellore, keep the men ready. I’m going down to find out what’s going on.”

Bridge Four’s ten chariots fanned out around him as he galloped down the shallow slope toward the army. Soon, a standard-bearing chariot detached itself from the Aldbish army and rode toward them. It pulled up about a hundred yards in front of their main force, and waited as Jerick approached.

“That’s far enough!” the herald called as soon as Jerick was within shouting distance.

Jerick reined in, and Bridge Four moved protectively in front of him. “We come in peace,” Jerick called back. “Emperor Flend sent word of our approach.”

“We know who you are,” the man shouted back. “His Majesty, King Wornt of Aldbin, is not eager to allow imperial troops within his border. He knows all too well the greedy hands of Fallamore.”

“Apparently his majesty doesn’t feel the same way about demon armies,” Jerick called back.

“Who the Aldbish grant passage to is none of your concern,” the herald announced. There was anger in his voice. “Know only that you are forbidden. Come any closer, and we will consider it an attack. Good day.”

Jerick cursed as the herald wheeled his chariot around and headed back toward his line.

“How could they have let the Sho Del through?” Vessin asked incredulously.

“The Aldbish will do anything for the right price,” Jerick said, turning his mount to gallop back up to his men. Tellore waited with a frown—he obviously knew from Jerick’s expression what had happened. Jerick turned, eyeing the army.

“Those aren’t good odds, sir,” Tellore said, “even if we do have chariots. Look how they’ve graded the ground underneath their army to make it difficult to drive over.”

“We can’t afford the losses we’d take, even if we could win,” Jerick decided. “We’ll go around—northern Fallamore reaches all the way up the coast. We’ll find the trail again in Melerand.”

“Are you sure that’s where they’re going?” Tellore asked pointedly. “Aldbin could be a ruse altogether—they could be planning to turn around and head south again as soon as we’re gone.”

Jerick shook his head. “Perhaps, but I don’t think so. The kingdoms of

the south are alert now, and every one of them but Trexandos has a decent army. Melerand, however, hasn't had to fight a war in centuries."

"Why attack Melerand, though?"

"Why attack the Horwatchers?" Jerick returned. "But, in this case, they have a much better reason. Wood."

Tellore nodded. Melerand lumber was the basis for the human efforts in the Eternal War—without it, there would be no bridges to cross the chasms. If the Sho Del could cause enough havoc in Melerand, they could stop the flow of lumber long enough to regain their footing on the Shattered Plains. It was a brilliant, if desperate, move.

"Let's go," Jerick said, leading his men to the east. Whatever gains they had made during the last few weeks of riding would be lost in the detour.

ONE BENEFIT OF THE DETOUR WAS THAT IT ALLOWED THEM TO MAKE USE of the Fallin imperial highway system. Northern Fallamore had once been a collection of unassociated tribes and small kingdoms. In the early days of the empire, several centuries before, the Fallin emperors had moved north, conquering all the way up to the Melerand border. Ostensibly the move had been to defend against barbarian threats from the north, but many theorists claimed it had been intended to limit access to the Shattered Plains, and therefore its Dragonsteel. If Aldbin, Jarg, or Lallom wanted access to the eastern ocean, they had to come through Fallamore first.

Since that time, however, Fallamore had been content to commit its troops to the Eternal War, leaving its days of conquering behind. Few in northern Fallamore even remembered that they had once been independent, and they tilled the ground with calmness, providing much of the food that supplied the Eternal War.

Jerick spent the next several weeks riding with apprehension. Despite his words, he worried that the Sho Del would turn unexpectedly. When they were about three weeks away from Lakdon, Jerick decided to order his men to cross the border into Aldbin. The Aldbish army had been on foot—it was a subtle irony that the nation with the most horses was also too poor to afford chariots for its troops. Jerick gambled that the Aldbish king had placed the majority of his men in the south, and that he wouldn't be able to do anything about the violation of his borders.

They easily found the Sho Del trail about a three-day ride into Aldbin. The discovery relieved a great deal of tension in Jerick's heart, and they immediately turned north again. They had lost about a week on the Sho

Del, but there was a chance they could make it up again. Hopefully, King Rodis had gotten Emperor Flend's message warning him of the Sho Del. Even Melerand's relatively small army could probably hold out against five hundred soldiers, especially with enough forewarning to make preparations.

The chariots continued northward with renewed purpose. The problem came exactly three days after they found the trail again.

"I'D SAY ABOUT TEN CHARIOTS WENT THAT WAY, LORD JERICK," THE SCOUT said, kneeling on the ground. In the waning light Jerick could just barely see where the chariot tracks split, the vast bulk of them turning to the northeast, toward Lakdon. A much smaller group of them, however, had turned northwest for some reason.

"Ten chariots aren't worth worrying about, sir," Tellore said. "The capital is our main concern."

Jerick barely heard him, his eyes locked, staring to the west. He seemed pulled in that direction, his mind rejecting the warrior's advice despite its logic. He quite nearly kicked his horse into motion, following the smaller trail at a gallop. He pulled himself back, however, shaking his head. What was he doing?

"We camp here tonight," he decided.

Tellore nodded, calling back to his sub-captains. A series of clankings and hoofbeats ensued, the sounds of the men making preparations for camp. They hadn't brought tents—they had to conserve weight—but they did need to make certain their camp was arranged defensively, just in case.

Throughout the preparations, Jerick found his eyes constantly drawn westward. He knew one thing, at least, that could be found in that direction.

Fool! He told himself. *The Sho Del have no reason to go after your home village. A bunch of lumbermen mean nothing to them.*

The fear remained, however, as he ate his simple dinner and threw out his bedroll. He didn't even notice that he had arranged it in such a way that his eyes would be looking northwest when he climbed in. Sleep came slowly that night, and when it did the nightmares were fast on its heels.

His dream was vivid and crisp, even more so than reality. He stood on an open plain, the odd sound of thunder cracking around him. It was cold, and there was frost on the ground. King Rodis stood a short distance away, wearing his bright red and gold formal robes.

Rin was there too. Jerick's heart surged as he saw his father, powerful and

humble as Jerick remembered him. Rin was walking with the king, helping Rodis walk, as if the large man were wounded. Rin was wounded too—Jerick could see blood on the side of his face. He vaguely remembered these events. Rin would fight and save the king.

Slowly Jerick turned, his eyes pulled to the side against his will. There he saw the Sho Del. It was dashing across the plain, its thick white hair streaming out an armlength behind it. In its hand was a wicked length of steel.

Jerick screamed as Rin threw himself in between the assassin and Rodis. Sho Del and man fought, one with skill, the other with determination. For a moment it looked as if Rin might win, but then something happened, more quickly than Jerick could follow. The lumberman yelled in pain, a gash in his chest so large that it was instantly fatal.

Rin fell backward, his face pale, his life spraying red from his chest, his eyes dull . . .

Jerick awoke with a cry, throwing off his bedroll. The vision was crisp in his mind. If he didn't go now, if he didn't ride to stop the Sho Del, they would kill his father. Somehow he knew, more powerfully than he had ever known anything in his life, that a Sho Del would kill his father. He had to stop it . . . *had to*.

FROST AWOKE WITH A START AT THE SCREAM. AT FIRST, HE ASSUMED they were being attacked—an opinion shared by not a few of the soldiers. Many of them were already standing, weapons held uncertainly in their hands. There were no Sho Del, however. Only Jerick. The boy was saddling his massive war-horse, his face illuminated only by moonlight.

Dente was standing at Jerick's side. "My lord!" the tall man asked with alarm.

"I'm going after the Sho Del who split off," Jerick snapped.

Frost frowned, throwing off his bedroll. Something was wrong with Jerick's voice. It sounded shaky and uncontrolled. As Frost approached, he caught sight of Jerick's eyes in the moonlight. They were wide, like a man facing some awesome terror. Frost felt a sudden wave of cold—he had seen the same look in the eyes of madmen.

"My lord, but who will lead?"

"Tellore is more than competent," Jerick said. "He is in charge now. I have to do this—I *must* follow them."

"We will go with you," Dente said.

"No," Jerick snapped. "Bridge Four will stay with the army. I am Tzai—I can defeat ten Sho Del by myself."

"But—"

"Those are my orders, Dente," Jerick said tersely, throwing himself into the saddle. "Follow them."

Dente stood with an open mouth as Jerick kicked his horse into a gallop, heading after the tracks. No chariot, however light, would ever be able to keep up with him.

Frost watched the boy go, dread in his heart. *He's going after his parents*, he thought with dismay. *By the Father, we should have realized this would happen!*

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

RYALLA HAD HEARD STORIES ABOUT THE TEMPLES OF SLONIS. IT WAS SAID that if one needed a place to hide, or a place for . . . intimacy, one went to the priests of Slonis. The temples had a strict policy of non-disclosure. Innkeepers could be bribed, but not Slonin priests. And, since the temple was also a popular place for worship, one always had a perfect, and provable, alibi. Many an illicit affair was maintained through “pious” visits to the temple.

She had never guessed, however, the extent to which the priests would go. They brought her food and saw to her needs, but would not let her leave the confines of her cell. Of course, she had heard them arguing outside about the danger in what they were doing. They suspected who Yoharn was, and had only let him remain captive because of the Horwatchers, who apparently had a special bond with Slonis worship. Somehow, Sir Hsor must have managed to persuade them to continue on after the deaths of the Horwatchers, for the captives were not turned over to the king.

She still couldn’t believe how stupid she had been. She now realized that the shadowed form that had met with Scathe all those years ago must have been Hsor. The meeting had happened on the day before the Tzend warrior had formally arrived at the palace, but he must have come the night before to meet with his contact. That, of course, didn’t explain how he had gotten into the palace—but, as Ryalla had seen, he had at least a little skill with microkinesis.

She didn’t see him again during the weeks she spent trapped in the

temple. The days passed slowly, but she spent them trying to think of ways to escape. She tried making herself invisible when the priests came with her meals, but Hsor must have warned them, for they didn't open the door to look for her, only slid the food through a small gap near the floor.

Eventually, she gave up and instead began to spend the time practicing her manipulation of light. She taught herself to make increasingly detailed illusions, starting with just colors and shapes, like boxes, and getting more and more intricate. The process was frustratingly slow—creating an image from pure imagination was much different than copying one, and she made many mistakes. In the weeks of her incarceration, however, she managed to make several small steps forward, until she could project simple images—such as tables or flat walls—without trouble.

RYALLA AWOKE AS SHE HEARD THE DOOR CLICK. SHE FELT RESTED, WHICH meant it was probably somewhere in the early morning, a fact confirmed by the slight amount of illumination coming from the cracks around the thin window at the very top of her wall. The priests had bricked up the window before putting her in the room, obviously worried that she would use it to call for help. She looked up, her mind cloudy from sleep. By her count, she had been in the cell for seven weeks, and not once had anyone opened the door.

The lock clicked again, and then the door began to swing open. Quickly, Ryalla pushed light away from her, planning to rush out as soon as the door opened wide enough. The figure she saw peeking through the doorway, however, so shocked her mind that she immediately let herself slip back into visibility.

"Master Torell?" she asked incredulously.

The scholar stood nervously beside the door, looking furtively back in the direction of the steps.

"Quickly, foolish girl!" he said, waving her forward. "Before anyone notices I'm gone."

Ryalla leapt off her bench, then threw herself at Torell and embraced him with an ecstatic sob, trying to prove to herself that she wasn't dreaming.

Torell stood awkwardly as she hugged him. "How did you find me?" she asked.

"The day you disappeared you spoke so strangely of this place," the scholar explained, prying her arms loose. "I knew it was where you must have gone. Teaching myself to pick locks was the difficult part. Now move."

"We have to get the prince first," Ryalla said, pointing to the cell at the other end of the hall.

"The prince?" Torell asked with surprise. He followed Ryalla's gestures, looking into the room. She hopped up, peeking to make certain he was still there. Sure enough, Yoharn sat disconsolately in the corner. His bonds and blindfold had been removed—apparently the priests were confident enough in the nondescriptness of their cells to let him see his surroundings.

"That's the prince?" Torell asked with shock.

"He's changed," Ryalla said, "but that's him."

"I didn't even notice," Torell mumbled, pulling out a pair of lockpicks with shaky hands. His fingers moved with such a decided lack of dexterity, it was a wonder he had ever managed to get Ryalla's door open.

"Hurry," she urged, watching the steps with anxiety.

Torell grumbled his response, his fingers shaking even more after her urgings.

It was then that Ryalla heard footsteps on the stairs. "Master, stop and stay perfectly still," she said. "Don't move, no matter what you see."

"What?" Torell asked with fright.

"I can't explain," Ryalla said. "Please, just do as I say."

Glad that she had thought to close her cell door, Ryalla bent light around herself and Torell. Hopefully, the priests would come and go, Hsor's warnings that they might not see her in her cell turning against him. Unfortunately, the form that appeared in the doorway was not that of a priest. It was tall, with a Tzendish face, and wore a bright silvery breastplate. Hsor.

Ryalla prayed with all her might, hoping that he wouldn't notice her. The large Tzend paused at the bottom of the steps, looking around, then he began to walk forward slowly. Ryalla pressed herself against the wall, breathing as quietly as she could. Perhaps Hsor couldn't see through her illusions. He had been able to grab her before, but that could have just been because he had seen where she was when she disappeared.

The ping of metal hitting stone rang through the hallway. Ryalla turned with alarm to see that Torell had nervously dropped one of his lockpicks. There was so much sweat on the scholar's face that his Antoli was coming unglued at one side, revealing his chin underneath.

Hsor's reaction was immediate. He lunged toward the sound, grabbing Torell by the shoulder. Ryalla ducked away, but Hsor did not follow. Instead, he shook Master Torell for a moment, holding the scholar pressed against the side of the hallway.

"What interesting timing," the Tzend said. "Of all the days you could

have picked to try escaping . . . reveal yourself, girl, or I shall have to kill him.”

Reluctantly, Ryalla did as commanded, standing sullenly in the hallway. As soon as she let the light hit her, Hsor lunged, dropping Torell and moving more quickly than she would have thought possible. She yelped, trying to duck away and turn invisible again, but his hand found her arm and yanked her back toward him. A second later he turned back to the scholar, holding Ryalla tightly in one hand. She felt the warm surge of power within Hsor, and knew immediately what was going to happen. Torell had seen too much.

“No!” Ryalla screamed, tears welling in her eyes.

Hsor did not reply.

She began to struggle in his grip, but she knew that it would only take a second for Hsor to end Torell’s life. If only she could do something. Hsor obviously could hurt people with his magic, but what could light do?

Ryalla’s vision changed, and the world turned bright with thousands of shifting lines. Desperation in her heart, and not really knowing what she was doing, Ryalla commanded them all to focus, to realign themselves.

The room turned completely black, even to her vision. Every tiny beam suddenly changed direction, every fragment of light from the torches, every bit of illumination from the tiny windows at the top of the walls, it all focused on Ryalla’s hand. From there it shot forth in a single, compact line—a beam directed squarely at Hsor’s chest.

The change lasted only for a moment, and immediately Ryalla felt drained. She slumped to the ground in exhaustion, blinking as the world swam around her. Her vision was clear enough, however, for her to see the look of shock on Hsor’s face. He stood with his hand raised in Torell’s direction, a small black hole—no bigger than Ryalla’s little finger—burned in the center of his breastplate. A thin dribble of molten steel ran down the front of the metal, growing cool and dull even as Ryalla watched.

Hsor slumped against the wall, then tumbled to the ground, his eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

What have I done? Ryalla thought with horror.

“By the Lords!” Torell said with wonder. “By Xeth, Aldvin, and Oreon himself!”

“Open the door,” Ryalla said, rolling to her knees.

Torell nodded, bending down to scoop up his pick. Ryalla shook her head. Something was wrong. She could hear movements up above—had someone noticed them?

Her eyes fell on the dead Tzend again. *Oh, Lords*, she thought with sickness, pulling away from the corpse. *I killed him.*

Then she heard the screams. They were coming from above and, oddly enough, from what seemed like outside. The pungent scent of smoke suddenly reached her nose.

There was a click, and Torell sighed in relief. He pulled the door open, and Ryalla rushed inside.

Yoharn scooted away from them with frightened eyes, as if trying to push himself into the dark corner.

"My prince," Torell said, kneeling.

"Yoharn?" Ryalla asked, taking a step forward.

The prince whimpered, turning his head to the wall and closing his eyes.

The screaming from outside was growing louder. Ryalla frowned, looking at Torell. The scholar shrugged. Then she heard it, something screamed so distinctly that it even made its way down into the temple's dungeon-like basement. The words "Sho Del."

TOPAZ WOKE TO A REBELLIOUS BODY. THERE WAS A SHARP, PULSING PAIN in his head, and his limbs refused to move. He groaned, then was frightened by the weakness he heard in his own voice. His eyes blinked open, revealing the blue morning sky above. He felt more than saw the powerful force standing a short distance away. The fifth god, the one who called himself Oron the White.

Topaz could barely remember the events of the last two months. He'd pushed his horse hard, quickly overtaking the Sho Del army, then—convinced that they really were heading for Melerand—he had passed them by, intent on warning Rodis. He had arrived in Melerand at least two weeks ahead of the Sho Del. He had been crossing one final hill before riding down into the city of Lakdon and then . . .

He tried to sit up, but the movement was unsuccessful so he settled instead for pushing himself up on his side, resting his head against the cool earth and staring down at the city below. It was as he feared—the Sho Del, or whatever they were, had arrived. He had spent the last two weeks in a state of delirium. The fifth god had not wanted a messenger to ruin his plans.

The god watched the battle below, his face turned away from Topaz. Somehow the Sho Del chariots had gotten through Lakdon's wall, and the warriors—now on foot—were engaged with the Meleran guard, fighting in

small skirmishes throughout the city. Just in the distance Topaz could see the tip of a massive sail—the creatures had come by sea as well. He could see from his vantage point that white bodies far outnumbered the human ones—the charioteers had only been a small fraction of the army, sent on a detour to destroy the Horwatchers.

“Why?” Topaz croaked.

The White One turned at the sound, his face curious. As his eyes fell on Topaz the enormous power of his essence once again assaulted the jesk, and Topaz lost control of his body, spasming on the frost-covered grass.

The god did not answer his question, instead turning back to the battle. It was not going well for the humans. Rodis’s warriors fought haphazardly, as if they hadn’t been able to respond quickly enough. Whatever messengers had come from the south must have been intercepted.

But it doesn’t make sense! Topaz thought. He could feel the god’s power—why use these mock Sho Del to attack Melerand? Why not do it himself?

And then Topaz understood—or, rather, he thought he understood. “You never even cared about the prince,” he realized, rolling over onto his back and staring at the clouds overhead. “It was all a ploy to frame the Sho Del. What were you going to do? Have Yoharn’s body turn up on the Shattered Plains somewhere?”

The god did not respond. He did, however, flick an almost unconscious look back at Topaz, which was all the validation the jesk needed. *He wants to frighten the kingdoms of Yolen*, he realized. *For some reason he wants us to attack the Sho Del.*

And, hearing the sounds of battle float weakly from the city below, Topaz knew that the plan would succeed. The Yolish nations would never be able to ignore such a direct assault on one of their own. They would blame Fallamore, whose duty it was to protect Yolen from the Sho Del, and the empire would have no choice but to mount an invasion. Tzendor would probably be quick to help—their hatred of the Sho Del was well known. In a single move, the fifth god had pitched all of the known world into a single massive war.

Lords help us.

JERICK RODE WITH HIS FACE PRESSED UP AGAINST THE HORSE’S NECK, feeling the beast’s powerful muscles work as it galloped beneath him. The weeks passed fitfully, and he was never able to tell dreaming nightmares

from waking ones. Part of him was horrified at what he had done, leaving his men behind, but the greater part of him didn't care. All that mattered was his father.

He saw Rin die a hundred times over, each time slain by the Sho Del. He saw others fall as well, most notably his mother. The mad visions spurred him to near insanity, and he drove his horse as hard as possible, galloping it to the point of near exhaustion, only walking it when the logical side of his brain was able to reassert brief control.

Suddenly nothing else mattered. He had to get to his father; he had to stop the Sho Del from killing Rin. Jerick was strong now; he was a warrior. He could do it. If only he could get there in time.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

THEY EMERGED FROM THE TEMPLE BASEMENT INTO A CROWD OF FRIGHTENED townspeople, most of them of the lower classes. Apparently, they had come to the temple seeking refuge from something—Ryalla couldn't believe that it was actually the Sho Del. However, even as she told herself such, the temple doors broke inward and several armored forms stepped into the hallway. They had the white skin and black eyes of Fain creatures.

"Demons!" Torell said, his face terrified.

Ryalla looked at the monsters with shocked eyes. She could barely hold herself upright—the fatigue of whatever she had done to Hsor was still upon her. Yoharn only whimpered, pulling against the scholar's grip as if to crawl back into the dungeon and hide himself. Gritting her teeth, Ryalla bent light around herself, Torell, and the frightened prince. The act, one that had been nothing to her earlier, was incredibly difficult, and she felt it quickly sapping away what strength she had left.

"Come on," she mumbled as the Sho Del began to mercilessly attack the frightened mass of peasants, swords flashing red.

"But—" Torell complained as the screaming began. The people pushed away from the Sho Del in a mad rush, many of them weeping as they dashed down into the dungeon Ryalla had just left—a place where they would find themselves cornered.

"The Lords will protect us," Ryalla said, unable to explain why they wouldn't be seen. The mass of people was thinning quickly, providing a path to the exit. She stumbled forward, but Torell didn't follow.

“Everything is black!” he said with fright. “I can’t see—I’m blind!”

Ryalla cursed. Of course he couldn’t see—she was stopping the light from hitting his eyes. She rushed back and grabbed his hand. “I’ll lead you,” she said, then picked her way through the confused room toward the door. They made it to the exit unharmed, but the outside appeared little better. Bodies lay scattered, dying in the street, and groups of warriors—some human, some Sho Del—were dashing in every direction. Not a few buildings were on fire.

“Master Torell,” Ryalla said, releasing her hold on the light as she felt the last of her strength ebb, “we have to get the prince out of the city. He’s the heir to the throne—whatever else happens, he must be protected.”

Torell gasped in wonder as his sight returned, and Ryalla felt her legs give out. She tumbled to the green marble temple steps with a sigh.

Torell looked down at her with confusion. “Stand up,” he pled, grabbing her arm in one hand, still holding the uncooperative prince in the other.

“No. I can’t,” Ryalla said, barely able to speak. “Take Yoharn, Master. He’s what’s important. I’ll be all right—they won’t pay any attention to a slave girl.”

Torell looked from her back at the prince, his eyes torn. The motion finally shook the rest of his Antoli free, dropping the fake beard to the steps next to Ryalla. It was amazing how young he looked without it. “By the Lords,” the scholar mumbled. He couldn’t carry her and deal with Yoharn at the same time.

“Go, Torell,” she asked.

Finally, he let go of her arm and, with an assertiveness she hadn’t realized he had, slapped the prince across the face. The prince’s eyes opened wide at the pain, and his jaw dropped.

“Move!” Torell said, pushing the boy in front of him. The scholar shot one final look at Ryalla before dashing off in the direction of the east gate, Yoharn in tow.

Ryalla managed to drag herself into the dark shadows at the side of the temple, then watched with sickened eyes as the Sho Del left the building, their grisly work done. As the battle continued, her strength slowly returned, and finally she was able to pull herself to her feet and stumble away. Uncertain where to go, she simply headed in the direction of Strafen’s house—the nearest place she could think of.

MARTIS SAT AT HIS DESK, GOING OVER LEDGERS AND PAYMENTS. HE HAD nearly managed to straighten House Strafen’s mercantile endeavors back in order—his father was as bad at managing money as he was at decorating.

Martis smiled to himself as he made the final notation. Things were going well. Even if the prince did return, it would leave the king bankrupt. The majority of the nobility was on Martis's side. Taking the throne would be almost laughably easy.

At that moment, the door to his room burst open. Martis looked up with anger, an emotion that turned to surprise when he saw what was before him. Five Sho Del warriors stood on the other side of the room, steel swords in their hands.

Martis didn't even think. He jumped to his feet, grabbing his sheathed weapon, which lay against the wall. His sword came out just in time to impale the first Sho Del who attacked him.

The other four creatures reacted with surprise as they saw him fight. Martis knew he was good—though he had spent no time in real battle, his sparrings had made him quick and keen. He smiled to himself. He didn't know where these assassins had come from, but he was more than happy to engage them. His body grew thrilled at the prospect of battle, and he yelled as he swung at one of the other soldiers.

The Sho Del casually, almost easily, turned Martis's sword aside and stabbed him in the chest.

Martis looked down with shock. His blood flowed freely, dribbling down his chest. He stumbled backward, the sword dropping from his fingers.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way . . . he thought with amazement. *I . . . I lost.*

THE KADEN WAS ONLY A SHORT DISTANCE AWAY, BUT THE TRIP SEEMED to take an eternity through the chaotic, smoking streets of Lakdon. When Ryalla finally arrived, she was half surprised to find the building still standing. It was one of the only wooden constructions in the city, and she had expected to find it burning. As she watched, the front doors of the Kaden swung open and a group of Sho Del appeared from within. Hurriedly, she pulled back into the cool shadows, knowing that if she tried to bend light she would collapse again from fatigue.

The Sho Del marched down the steps, moving purposefully. These ones wore different clothing from those she had seen before—their armor seemed of a higher quality, and their uniforms were not stained with blood. At their rear stood several Sho Del holding what appeared to be a pair of limp bodies in their hands.

A second group of Sho Del appeared from a side street, then bowed before

their superiors. One form did not bow, but remained straight-backed, his human face harsh. The old Kalord Strafen, Martis's father.

A captive? Ryalla wondered. They did not appear to be guarding him, however, as he easily pushed his way to the front of the group.

"You may take the girl," he said in a sharp voice, "but the boy remains."

The lead Sho Del snorted, nodding to the warriors behind him. One of them tossed its burden to the earth before Strafen, and the body rolled, revealing Martis's face. The younger man's eyes stared lifelessly into the air, and there was a massive red wound in his chest.

Kalord Strafen let out a wail of pure despair, dropping to his knees before Martis's corpse. He picked it up, holding it close to his chest. "No!" he screamed. "You weren't supposed to kill him!"

"Our bargain was to make certain he didn't take the throne," the Sho Del responded in broken, accented Meleran. "Be happy, human. We have nearly taken the palace. You will be king by noon today."

"But that isn't what I wanted!" Strafen gasped, his eyes horrified.

The Sho Del ignored him, pointing for his warriors to load the second body into a nearby chariot. Ryalla could tell unmistakably from the form's long golden hair just who this captive was. Courteth was sobbing weakly, but she barely struggled as the Sho Del towed her into the chariot and whipped the horses into motion.

Kalord Strafen sat, rocking, his son's body held tightly in his arms as the rest of the Sho Del turned and walked in the direction of the palace.

The palace, Ryalla thought. He said they hadn't taken it yet! Perhaps there's hope. Maybe I can hide the king from them.

Groaning, she pushed herself away from the wall and began to stumble after the Sho Del. Kalord Strafen didn't even look up as she passed.

THE HUMANS WERE GETTING SLAUGHTERED. EVEN FROM A DISTANCE, Topaz could see that their resistance was quickly breaking down. The only fighting he saw now was happening around the palace itself. Fortunately, the building had been built in an age long past, when Melerand was not so unfamiliar with war. It had a short wall of its own, and the warriors were able to use it to their advantage, holding the Sho Del at bay. Unfortunately, the palace was at the center of the city, and the Sho Del had it completely surrounded.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Topaz saw movement. He struggled to turn his head, looking out at the hill-strewn plains to the west of the

city. There, in the distance, he could see a group of forms approaching. Chariots—hundreds of them. As they grew closer, Topaz could make out two standards flapping above the lead chariot. One was the blue and green of the Fallin Empire, the other an unfamiliar red symbol that looked like a tree.

Soldiers from the Eternal War! he realized. Emperor Flend had sent help—or, more likely, Topaz's old friend Ki Tzern had done so. Topaz smiled. Perhaps this fight wasn't over yet.

A soft chuckle came from the glowing form beside him. Frowning, Topaz looked up at the deity. He was staring at the Fallin charioteers. Topaz looked back at the plain. *What . . . ?*

Then, suddenly, three groups of Sho Del appeared out of nowhere, surrounding the chariots. The Fallin warriors wheeled back, surprised, their archers unprepared. The Sho Del attacked quickly, falling on the startled charioteers. There was no room for the vehicles to maneuver, let alone escape. They were forced to abandon the chariots and engage the far larger Sho Del force on foot.

Topaz watched the massacre with pain, annoyed most at his own helplessness. It was agonizing to watch such carnage and be unable to even stand.

"What would you do?" a deep voice asked.

Topaz turned his eyes back to his captor. The god had turned, focusing its gaze on him.

"I see the desire in your eyes," the fifth god continued. "You want to be among them, but what would you do? You couldn't fight, Cellin—you can't even swing a sword. I know how it is for you." The god hovered a bit closer, looking down at Topaz with pity.

"The power inside you," he continued, "it controls your actions, doesn't it? It won't let you do harm. Such power was never meant to be held in a frail human body—you are a poor conduit. It overwhelms you, holds you back."

The god hovered even closer, putting its glowing visage right up next to Topaz's face. "Give it to me," the being whispered. "Free yourself from its chains. You were a fine swordsman once. You could help those below."

"Give . . . the power to you?" Topaz asked weakly. "That's what you want?"

"It is meant to be, Cellin," the god explained.

"Well, I guess I can't do that, then," Topaz mumbled with a slight smile. "If there's one thing I loathe, it's doing what's expected of me."

The wave of torture that followed the remark was enough to make Topaz forget the battle, the deaths, and even himself, as he was absorbed completely by the pain.

RYALLA ARRIVED AT THE PALACE JUST IN TIME TO SEE THE SHO DEL PUSH over the chest-high defensive wall and overwhelm Doram's guards. She had recovered somewhat during the walk and, gritting her teeth, she forced herself to risk bending light. She rushed through the affray, barely dodging swords and bodies as she dashed toward the palace doors. She got in just before a few retreating guards barred the portal shut. Deep thuds followed as the Sho Del proceeded to batter at the door.

Ryalla dashed through the familiar hallways, letting herself become visible again to conserve strength. Soldiers paid her little heed as they rushed from one position to the next, their bronze armor clanking. Ryalla searched through the building, trying to find the king. Eventually, she located him near the back of the palace, standing with Doram and a dozen nervous guards.

"As soon as they break through, Your Majesty, we move," the squat soldier explained. "The bulk of their men will come in the front, and it will take them time to search through the hallways. We go out the back, through the garden, and over the wall. If we can reach the lake, we might be able to escape on one of the fishing boats."

The king nodded quietly, his eyes haunted.

PAIN WAS MORE THAN A FEELING. PAIN WAS A SCENT, TEARING THROUGH his nostrils to claw at his brain. Pain was a sound, a rushing torrent in his ears. Pain was a taste so bitter even his tongue writhed in torment. The outside world was gone to him; the only thing he could sense was the oppression of the fifth god's will. It pressed against him, like a massive dark hand, squeezing his soul smaller and smaller.

He fought back, but did so out of rote, rather than desperation. He knew he was lost. The god's will was far too powerful for him—it would crush that which was Topaz, leaving behind a dead shell of a body. Topaz was ready to die—not willing, but ready. At least he had passed on what he knew before he went.

Then, as the god crushed him, he began to sense something. Rather, a

hint of something. Something deep within him. A glimmer of warm light. He hadn't known it was there—might never have known it was there if he wasn't so close to death. Reaching down mentally, he touched it, and was stunned by the power he sensed therein. It was a strength, like that he used to heal, but multiplied a thousandfold. It was the source of what he did, that which gave him the ability to use microkinesis. Only now did he realize that all he had done up to this point was a trickle compared to its potential.

This is what he wants, Topaz realized. And that means, in one way at least, I am more powerful than he. I have something he does not.

Around him, he sensed the awful void that was the fifth god. The lack of energy, lack of soul. When Topaz looked at a person microkinetically, he could see their Spiritual nature. That was how he healed—he caused their Physical bodies to come in alignment with their Spiritual bodies. In essence, healing and growth were both simply attempts by the body to come closer to what it knew was its perfect form.

The fifth god seemed to have no Spiritual side. No, that wasn't right. It had a strong Spiritual nature—that was part of the power Topaz felt from it. Except, that spirit was a void—there was no growth, no essence of creation within it. No Spiritual shadow, like he saw around others.

Taking his new strength, Topaz reached up into the void and touched it, pouring a tiny splinter of creation power into it. The reaction was violent.

The world exploded back around Topaz, and he was suddenly aware of his body again. The fifth god screamed in agony, a bellow that was so loud it could undoubtedly be heard on the field below. Then, with a sudden crash, the god disappeared, leaving Topaz disoriented and weak on the top of the hill.

Dizzy, Topaz stumbled to his feet. The warriors from the Eternal War were nothing more than a pile of corpses now—there was nothing he could do for them. There still appeared to be some resistance in the palace, however. He turned to move toward the city, but paused, noticing something—something watching him from a short distance away. A massive white form, its sleek body lined with Dragonsteel.

What is that doing here? Topaz thought with confusion.

The beast sat motionlessly, its deep black eyes ignoring Topaz, instead focusing on the keep. A silent observer.

Topaz shook his head, feeling his strength begin to return. He didn't have time to watch dragons. Shaking his head, he started to lurch, walk, and eventually run down the hillside toward the town.

THE SHO DEL DID NOT DO AS DORAM PLANNED. THEY SEEMED TO KNOW exactly where to find the king. There was no searching, no confusion. Barely a few seconds after the front door was shattered, the white-skinned soldiers were appearing from all sides. The Aldbish warrior cursed, yelling for the king to run. It was too late, however. Sho Del surrounded them.

Suddenly a white form appeared in the air above the king. It was vaguely shaped like a man, with arms and legs but no distinct features.

"I am Oreon the White!" the being said. "And I claim this man for my own."

Then, the king vanished. The soldiers, both human and Sho Del, looked at each other with confusion. What bothered them most was how much the god's voice had sounded like that of a young woman.

"THEY CAN'T SEE YOU, YOUR MAJESTY," RYALLA WHISPERED.

Rodis looked around with confused, sightless eyes.

"Come on," Ryalla said, grabbing his hand and pulling him with her. There was an opening in the bodies just large enough for them to squeeze through. The room's occupants stood dumbfounded by her illusion. It hadn't been very good, she knew, but it was the best she could manage with her still-weakened abilities.

Rodis followed her limply, looking around him with confusion. "Why is everything black? Where are we?"

"Be very quiet, Your Majesty," Ryalla whispered back. "This is a pathway to safety, but we must sneak through."

Rodis followed obediently, stumbling as they reached the steps and dropped into the garden. Before her lay the double line of trees, between which Martis and Yoharn had once practiced their swordplay.

Ryalla couldn't go much farther. Even now she felt her fingers growing numb, her mind fuzzing from the effort it took to hide herself and Rodis. Fortunately, the bulk of the Sho Del were behind them. If they could just make it to the far wall—it was another fifty yards in front of them.

Suddenly, something sucked Ryalla's strength from her, drawing away the last of her ability like lungs drawing the air out of a sack. She cried out at the sudden attack, confused.

You should not have imitated me, a voice said in her mind.

Light unbent, leaving Rodis and herself exposed in the center of the gardens. A cry came from behind as the Sho Del saw them.

“Run!” Ryalla commanded, dashing toward the wall. The king followed, waddling at a slower pace.

SHO DEL ATTACKED TOPAZ, BUT HE EASILY DODGED. HIS STRENGTH HAD returned tenfold, and he felt as if he could run for days without even growing tired. Topaz whirled and jumped, moving out of the way of Sho Del blades. He dashed past a pair of startled sentries, entering the palace. The bodies of Meleran soldiers lay scattered through the hallways, their bronze armor dented and torn beneath their enemy’s superior weapons.

I have to find the king, Topaz told himself. Then he realized the way—Rodis’s castemark was made of Dragonsteel. He opened his mind, searching microkinetically for such a source of power. Once he found one, he sprinted in its direction. Rodis was somewhere near the back of the palace.

When Topaz arrived, however, there was no sign of Rodis. He peeked around a corner to see Doram and several guards sitting unarmed, their hands bound behind their backs, surrounded by Sho Del. Topaz frowned—he sensed Dragonsteel nearby. Taking a breath, he rounded the corner and dashed through the hallway. Sho Del cried out as he ran right through the middle of them. At the back of the room Topaz could see a line of Sho Del archers raising their bows, pointing at something just outside the palace. Topaz threw his body at them, pushing his way between two archers, then he froze on the steps.

A short distance away Rodis’s bulbous body lay in a heap on the ground, three arrows in his back. A weeping, frightened Ryalla stood at the king’s side, pulling ineffectually at the corpse’s hand. She looked up and met Topaz’s eyes. Around him a half-dozen archers raised their bows a second time. He heard a sword pull free from its sheath behind him. The archers targeted Ryalla.

“No!” Topaz cried, turning to one of the archers, pulling his hand into a fist to throw a punch that could never connect. Then he froze. That wasn’t the way—not for him. Instead he turned to the soft green garden, his eyes falling on Ryalla again even as six arrows twanged free of their bows. The power he had only just discovered welled within him, a great tempest of strength. He raised his hand.

Grow! he commanded.

AN INVISIBLE WAVE OF LIFE WASHED OVER THE CASTLE. SOLDIERS WHO had fallen, both human and Sho Del, felt their wounds suddenly heal. Bodies

that were dead remained so, but any with even a spark of life left in them were completely revitalized. Men left for dead sat up, finding their armor mangled and torn, but their bodies intact. About two dozen of these rescued men—fourteen of them bearing the symbol of a tree on their armor—could be found on the fields behind the palace, amongst a scattered group of five hundred bodies.

Where the fighting continued, a man impaled on a Sho Del sword felt his life return suddenly, his vitality lifted, his pain extinguished. He looked down at the sword still sticking from his chest, then up into the eyes of his confused opponent. A second later the wave had passed, and he began to die again.

In the garden, where the energy had been focused, hundreds of trees sprang from the ground, growing from tiny seeds to enormous pines in the blink of an eye. Seeds that had lain dormant for years, seeds that would never have grown on their own, suddenly burst to life.

The trees appeared like a tidal wave of wood, growing so closely together that they pushed one another out of the ground as they shot up, tossing several full-sized trunks high into the air. Branches snapped and pressed together, shattering even as they grew, for there was no place for them to go. Those watching could hear the wood groan and pop, a sound similar to an enormous rockslide. The resulting wall of trees had grown so closely together that they would never survive—there wouldn't be enough light or nutrients to support them.

Six arrows thunked into the trees.

RYALLA STOOD WITH AMAZEMENT, REGARDING THE FOREST THAT HAD appeared just inches in front of her. Rodis's body was gone, enveloped and digested by the trees. She backed away slowly. The line of trunks continued in both directions, completely separating her from the Sho Del.

Topaz. She had caught one brief glimpse of him before the trees appeared. Weak and shaken, Ryalla turned and climbed over the short garden wall, then escaped into the burning city.

“NO! I WANT THIS ONE ALIVE.”

Topaz could barely turn at the sound—he had weakened himself incredibly with the expenditure of energy. Apparently having the power inside him wasn't the same thing as being able to handle its use. *Maybe I overdid it a little*, he admitted, looking back at the wall of wood.

A hand grabbed his face, turning it to the side. Kalord Strafen, looking emaciated and harried, stood at his side. “Finally,” the larger man mumbled. “I believe I once warned you that a time would come when Rodis could no longer protect you.”

And, for once in his life, Topaz was too exhausted to spit back a witty retort.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

JERICK KNELT IN THE BURNED WRECKAGE OF WHAT HAD ONCE BEEN THE lumbering village of Farastham. The scents of smoke and blood hovered in the cold spring air. Around him lay the scattered corpses of people who had once been familiar to him. The old widow Barth lay inside her still-smoking hut. Miled Foreman lay half submerged in the stream. Some of the bodies were still warm—Jerick must have arrived within hours of the Sho Del.

They were gone by the time he arrived, however. Their chariot tracks led to the south, away from the village. The bitter taste of failure mixed with that of smoke in his mouth. He had come too late. All his riding for nothing. They were dead.

Suddenly, hope returned. He had not saved them, but perhaps his father . . . maybe he hadn't been in the town during the massacre.

He turned, intending to leap atop Shakan and head into the forest, but stopped. He could hear a sound—someone weeping. He paused, then followed the sound. He rounded the burnt husk of the white-washed building that had been his school to find a huddled form on the ground. A man, holding the dead body of a child. A man Jerick recognized.

"Wat?" he said, searching through memories from his childhood.

The priest looked up, deep sorrow showing in his eyes. "You," the man whispered.

"Wat . . ." Jerick mumbled. "I'm sorry. I didn't come soon enough. I could have stopped it. I could have . . ."

Jerick paused. Why was Wat still alive? Had he been visiting another

town when the attack came? As Jerick opened his mouth to ask the question, he felt something—an enormous power—appear suddenly behind him. He spun, hand on his sword, to find a glowing being standing in the air. It exuded such power, such magnificence, that it could only be one person. Jerick's mouth opened in awe, and he fell to one knee. He was in the presence of Oreon the White.

The bearded glowing form hovered in the air, turning until it was facing Wat. The priest looked up at it and, laying the small girl's corpse to the side, stood. "Leave me be," the priest hissed bitterly.

The god in white smiled, but did not respond. Instead it surveyed the remains of the village. Finally, he shook his head. "I can't believe you let this happen, brother," Oreon declared.

There was rage in Wat's eyes. "Why couldn't you just leave me alone?" he demanded. "I was doing you no harm."

Oreon clicked his tongue—an oddly human gesture for deity. Jerick frowned, not understanding the exchange that was happening between priest and god.

"I just can't believe you stood there, watching as they were slaughtered, Doruse," Oreon continued. "I assume they did it slowly, before your eyes, as I ordered? One at a time? Dying even as they prayed for deliverance? And you didn't even raise a proverbial finger to help them. You hold to your vow—very admirable of you."

Wat, or whatever his name was, had begun shaking as Oreon continued. "You are a monster," he hissed.

"As are you, brother," Oreon countered. "Our sin was the same. Have you looked in on our creations lately? They were doing well until a short while ago—they nearly took the entire Shattered Plains. Of course, this is the one who stopped them." Oreon nodded to Jerick as he spoke. There was no sarcasm or lightness in the god's voice—he was completely serious.

Jerick frowned, backing away and summoning the Gvel Dar. He had obviously been mistaken—this creature could not be the god he had worshiped since he was a child. He raised his blade, falling into a battle stance and feeling the cool focus of meditation clear his mind.

"He has become quite a warrior," Oreon—or whoever he was—noted. "An impressive feat for a simple lumberman. You have no idea how surprised I was when I learned he had come from your village, Doruse. Tell me. Did you use your powers to make him as he is?"

"I hold to my vow, brother," Wat growled. "My purpose here was to watch over the source of power."

“Ah,” Oreon said, folding his arms across his luminescent chest. “So that is where he came from. But, you hold to your vow? Then, if I were to destroy this one, you would do nothing to stop me?”

Wat’s eyes grew wide. “No!” he hissed. “Not this one. He’s special—he’s come so far.”

“A pity, I agree,” Oreon said, completely serious as he waved his hand in Jerick’s direction.

Suddenly, Jerick felt his chest constrict. The air was forcibly torn from his lungs, crawling out of his nose and mouth like a living thing. He gasped for breath, and something filled his lungs that was not air. Confused, he dropped his sword, stumbling against the charred side of the building. He breathed rapidly, but even though he knew he was drawing gas into his lungs, his body could draw no life from it. It was as if something were missing from the air, something very important.

“This is what we were commanded to do, Doruse,” Oreon said in the background. “The Father wants you to watch all you love die when you could do so much good. Don’t you ever wonder how he could force you to make such an obviously ridiculous vow? One would almost call the move malicious. Watch the boy squirm. Of course, you’ve been watching those you love die for millennia now, haven’t you, Doruse?”

Spots appeared in Jerick’s vision, spots that grew larger and larger as he stumbled to his feet and threw himself at the one he had assumed was Oreon, attempting an unarmed attack. He passed right through the white-robed figure, toppling to the ground again. The darkness enveloped him.

And then the air turned sweet again. He breathed deeply, groaning in pleasure at the experience. A few moments later he became aware of the world around him again—aware of someone crying.

Wat stood, his arm raised in Jerick’s direction, a look of horror on his face. “No . . .” he whispered. “What have I . . . ?” He screamed, holding his head and dropping to his knees.

“There,” Oreon said with satisfaction. “Don’t you wish you had done that a thousand years ago?”

With one final wail, the being Jerick had known as Wat vanished. Oreon turned to Jerick and, nodding affably, disappeared as well.

RYALLA PUSHED HER WAY THROUGH THE CROWD OF PEOPLE. THE SHO DEL were gone, disappearing as quickly as they had come, leaving the town confused and half-populated. No one knew how the creatures had gotten

into the city—the guards had closed the gates in time, but someone had slain them from the inside and opened the gates again. Ryalla suspected she knew who the traitor had been.

Strafen stood at the front of the crowd, wearing royal red robes and the king's castemark—his men had spent hours chopping through trees searching for it. Once he had the castemark, Strafen had ordered the people together to witness his coronation. They had come, dazed and searching for any sort of leadership.

The event happened on the cliffs a short distance from the city—the traditional place for coronations. The cliff overlooked Lake Dester, which in Melerand legends was the place where Aldvin the Wise had been born. Strafen made the ceremony simple and short, saying only a few words about “rebuilding after this disaster,” then waving a priest over to coronate him.

Ryalla watched with a sick feeling. Her powers had not returned since their loss earlier in the day, and she didn't know if they ever would. After escaping from the palace, she had easily found safety—the Sho Del were satisfied with their initial slaughter, and when they left the palace to board their ships, they hadn't touched a single person. It was almost as if the massacre had been a calculated event, something meant to fill a quota.

Most of Lakdon didn't know what to think. Half of the people were still hiding in their homes, the rest were here, watching their new king with stupefied eyes. Ryalla had searched through them for Torell and the prince, but so far had found nothing. She didn't even know if the two had survived.

Strafen regarded the crowd with haunted eyes. He was a shell of the man he had been two years ago—and even that man hadn't had much regality about him. For some reason, Ryalla believed his words from before, that he hadn't intended to become king. That didn't, however, make his betrayal any less heinous.

“My first act as your monarch is one of retribution,” Strafen said loudly.

Ryalla looked up with a frown.

“We have found the man who let the demons into our city. He has been coming here for years, acting as their spy. Many of you know of the odd happenings that seem to attend his presence—the twistings and writhings of plants and his impossible stunts.”

Ryalla felt herself grow cold. *Oh, Lords, no . . .*

A pair of Strafen's guards brought forward a bound form. Topaz still wore his traveling clothes, the muted browns far less flamboyant than his usual choices. His eyes, however, still glittered with the personality that was all his own.

“Why, thank you for the introduction, Your Majesty,” Topaz mocked. “You do know how I like to make a good entrance.”

Strafen ignored the jesk’s words. “If you need proof of his magics, go and look at the unnatural trees growing in my garden. I have judged this creature, and found it to be Sho Del, and not human. A changeling. He is also a traitor; he betrayed us to the Sho Del and murdered the guards at our gate. The priests of this city agree with my decision. His punishment is immediate execution.”

“The sooner the better,” Topaz put in. “These ropes chafe.”

Strafen pointed for a soldier to approach, a large headsman’s axe in his hands.

TOPAZ DIDN’T STRUGGLE AS THEY GRABBED HIM AND PULLED HIM BACK to the edge of the cliff, pushing him to his knees and slamming his head against a large wooden block. Even if his powers had the capacity to destroy, he doubted he had the strength to kill a bug in his current situation.

He saw Ryalla in the audience as the guards slapped him down. He was happy to see she had survived—at least he had kept his promise to Frost. He had hoped, however, that she wouldn’t come to the coronation. It would be better if she didn’t have to see the inevitable. *I’m sorry, little one.*

His eyes fell on Strafen. The new king fit poorly into his robes, watching with a firm jaw as his orders were carried out. *What a waste of skin*, Topaz thought. *The god who created him must have had a hangover at the time.*

“Wait,” Strafen suddenly commanded.

Topaz frowned. Surely Kalord Strafen couldn’t be getting weak nerves now.

Strafen walked forward and bowed down, placing his head even with Topaz’s. The Kalord reached up, and though the ropes prevented Topaz from seeing what the Kalord was doing, he felt it. The ring. Strafen pulled it off Topaz’s hand with a merciless grip. Instantly, his body felt cold, and for the first time he began to feel fear.

“Take it,” Topaz hissed. “Buy yourself a new soul.”

Strafen snorted. “When I look back at this day, jesk,” the Kalord growled softly, “yours is the only murder I know I will not regret.” Then, standing, he continued in a loud voice. “Proceed.”

Topaz heard the men shuffling behind him, heard the headsman approaching. However, even as he awaited the inevitable drop of the axe, Topaz’s eyes noticed something. The bright Dragonsteel castemark hanging on Strafen’s neck. With Topaz’s head turned to the side as it was, he

noticed something about it—something he hadn't even thought of before. From this angle the pattern in the Dragonsteel almost seemed to form . . . words.

Topaz blinked in utter surprise. As soon as he noticed it, the letters popped out in his mind, spelling out a name in the language Frost had taught him. The name of the fifth god. It had been hanging around Rodis's neck all this time.

Topaz slowly read the letters to himself, then cursed in shock when he read what they said, finally understanding why Frost thought the name so important.

Aronack! By the Lords, I have to tell Bat'Ch—

The axe fell with a thunk.

RYALLA SCREAMED AS TOPAZ'S HEAD TUMBLED FREE, HIS NECK SPRAYING blood. One of the guards kicked the body off the side of the cliff, then picked up the head and presented it to Strafen. The Kalord regarded the jesk's surprised face for a moment, then tossed it over the side of the cliff as well.

Ryalla collapsed in a heap. She had been expecting Topaz to do something, to escape somehow. He was Topaz—he could get out of anything. But she knew it had been no trick. She could have sensed a bending of light—even if the jesk had been capable of such a thing. He was gone. They were left to face whatever was coming without Topaz.

BAT'CHOR WAS ESCORTED BY AN ENTIRE SQUADRON OF STEEL-ARMORED soldiers. They clanked through the hallway, keeping suspicious eyes turned his direction. He followed without complaint, glad to finally be free of that cursed room. He didn't know if he was going to his acquittal or his execution, but anything was better than forced inaction.

The guards marched him through hallways each more magnificent than the one before. Enormous chandeliers, each bearing a hundred or more candles, ran the entire length of the final hallway, and the walls were covered with dozens of mirrors, each one held in a gold frame. The floor was crafted completely from marble, and the large door at which they presented him was gilded with precious metals.

The door opened, and a guard pushed him in. The room beyond was lined

with beautiful tapestries and a massive chandelier crafted from sparkling crystal. The man who stood beneath it was tall and had dark black hair. His features were delicate and handsome, his militaristic uniform sharp. Emperor Aronack.

"Welcome, Bat'Chor," the man said, waving for him to enter. "I apologize for the delay in my arrival—I had to see to things on the other side of the continent."

Bat'Chor frowned. "What do you want?" he asked bluntly. Emperor or not, Bat'Chor deserved to be grumpy after being locked up for so long.

"Ah, just like a Ke'Chan," the emperor responded. "So quick to the point."

"I deed not keell the girl," Bat'Chor said.

"Oh, I know you didn't," Aronack said. "We caught the stableboy months ago. Unfortunately, I needed a reason to detain you until I returned, and the murder charges were a very good excuse."

"What?" Bat'Chor asked with rage. A couple of guards at the side of the room reached for their weapons warily, but Aronack waved them back.

"I hope you'll forgive me," Aronack said. "But it was vital that we meet. Once you hear what I have to say, you will understand."

"Conteenue," Bat'Chor said.

Aronack smiled, taking a few steps closer to him. "You saw the army gathering outside your window, I assume?" he asked.

"Yes," Bat'Chor replied slowly.

"You guessed what it was for?"

"An eenvasion," Bat'Chor said. "Of U Poni Sho Del."

"An invasion is correct," Aronack said with a raised finger. "But not of the Sho Del."

"But then . . ." Bat'Chor said. "Yolen?"

Aronack nodded. "Your people have been wanderers long enough, Bat'Chor—it is time for the Ke'Chan to take back what was once theirs. I know that your father is dead; you are now the senior descendant of 'Cheru Tar. If you draw his sword, the clans will unite behind you. The time has come for 'Cheru Tar to return. Tzendor is willing to help you."

"Why?" Bat'Chor asked suspiciously. There was a Ke'Chan proverb—think twice about accepting free money, but never accept free troops.

"Because the Ke'Chan and the Tzends, we are the same," Aronack explained, his eyes intense. "We believe in a single god, the True God, as you call him. The Yolish still hold to their foolish pantheon of voiceless Lords, and the paganism is their folly. Bring a people under one ruler, and

one god, and they progress. This is my goal, Bat'Chor. I would see Yolen conquered for its own good."

Bat'Chor shook his head. "Things are not that seemple."

"They were that simple for your great ancestor, 'Cheru Tar," Aronack pointed out. "Did he not ride upon Yolen, conquering as he saw fit? It is the Ke'Chan's place to rule Yolen, and you can be the force that unifies them all. What would 'Cheru Tar tell you to do?"

"He would tell me not to believe you. Your arguments are weak. One does not help another conquer seemply because of seemeelar releegious beliefs."

Aronack rubbed his chin for a moment. "Fine, Bat'Chor," he said, nodding. "I want to take Yolen for myself. In exchange for the loyalty of the Ke'Chan, I give your people Old Ke'Chan."

Bat'Chor snorted. This emperor wasn't as intelligent as the stories made him out to be. "Old Ke'Chan ees already ours," Bat'Chor said. "You cannot bargain with an item that does not belong to you."

"Ah," Aronack corrected, raising a finger. His eyes were crafty—the eyes of an accomplished businessman. "You have Old Ke'Chan, but it is a desert. Your people were forced to leave it centuries ago because it cannot support life." Aronack leaned closer. "I can change that. I offer you not Old Ke'Chan as it is, but as it was."

Bat'Chor paused. "What do you mean?"

"You've seen this country, Bat'Chor," Aronack explained. "I know of your travels across it. You have seen the new Tzend technologies. Tzendor used to be nearly as barren as Ke'Chan, but I have changed it to match the fertility of Fallamore. You are a businessman, Bat'Chor. I offer you a deal—a mercantile exchange. My knowledge of irrigation for your warriors."

Bat'Chor opened his mouth to refuse, but the words would not come out. Slowly, he closed his mouth. Old Ke'Chan, restored. His people would once again have a home. It was the greatest hope of every living Ke'Chan, and as soon as his father's mourning period ended, Bat'Chor would be their leader. He was the one who was supposed to watch for their interests, make their hopes into realities.

"The waters would flow in Ke'Chan again," Aronack whispered. "The prophesies would be fulfilled, and your people could return to their homeland."

Bat'Chor closed his eyes. He wanted to refuse, but he couldn't. He couldn't accept either. All his life, decisions had been easy for him—he was not one who wavered from one viewpoint to another. He simply chose and

moved forward. This time, however, he could not be so hasty. He had to at least consider the proposal.

Topaz, forgive me, he thought. But I have to at least think about it.

JERICK RAN HIS FINGERS ALONG THE SIDE OF THE ROTTING WOODEN doorway. The small building was covered with fungus and vines, and its insides were littered from the pillagings of forest creatures. It had been abandoned for years. Five years.

"They're dead," he whispered, realizing for the first time what his parents' abandoned house meant. "Not just my mother, my father too."

"Yes, Young Master, they are," a quiet voice replied. Jerick spun. Standing in the shade of the trees was Frost.

"The things I've been seeing and dreaming . . . they weren't visions, Frost," he mumbled. "They were memories. Memories of the Sho Del killing my father. All these years . . ."

Frost stepped lightly, leaves and needles cracking beneath his feet. "Yes, Jerick. They were killed by a Sho Del assassin the day you were taken to the palace by King Rodis."

Jerick groaned, sliding to his knees. "My men, Frost. What happened at the battle? Is Lakdon safe?"

"I'm sorry, Young Master," Frost whispered.

"All of them?" Jerick cried. "Bridge Four?"

Frost nodded.

"The . . . king?"

Another nod. "As well as Martis and, presumably, Yoharn. Kalord Strafen sits on the throne now. Courteth was taken by the Sho Del."

A low wail came from Jerick's throat, and he thumped his head against the wooden door frame. "It was because of me," he realized. "I did it, Frost. I abandoned them. They needed me, and I came here instead. Here to try to save a man who died long ago."

"You couldn't help yourself, Young Master," Frost said. "We should have made you face this years ago."

"Couldn't help myself?" Jerick demanded angrily. "Is that an excuse?"

Frost paused. "No, Young Master, it is not."

"I should have been there," Jerick said. "I might have been able to save them—and even if I couldn't have done anything, it was my duty as their commander to fight with them."

"You have done what is done, Young Master," Frost said softly. "You must learn to live with the consequences."

Jerick's breaths came as gasps, his eyes squeezed shut against the guilt. Rodis, Dente, Kep, Yoharn . . . his father. Dead.

And only then, in the throes of pain, did Jerick finally let himself face the memory of his father's death. He hadn't been able to see it before—his mind had known it was too painful to acknowledge. Now, however, he wanted pain. He deserved pain. The recollection came not as understanding, but as punishment.

"Oh, Lords," Jerick whispered.

"Young Master?"

"Do you know the first time I saw microkinetically?" Jerick asked, staring into space with dead eyes.

"Yes, Young Master," Frost said. "I was there—you were watching the Horwatcher Scathe light candles."

"No," Jerick said. "There was a time once before."

JERICK SAW IT ONE LAST TIME. HIS FATHER AND RODIS EMERGED FROM the stampede. His mother cried out, rushing to help them. She fell from an arrow. Jerick's father screamed. The Sho Del attacked the king. Rin stopped it.

Jerick saw now what his mind had refused to remember. His father and the Sho Del fought, the lumberman struggling to keep the demon occupied just long enough for the king's guards to arrive. The Sho Del had a sword, but Rin had the strength of a lumberman. The two grappled, Rin slowly pushing the Sho Del to the ground. The creature's thin sword slipped from its fingers, and it let out a cry of pain as Rin clutched its wrist in a powerful hand.

Then, even as Rin appeared to be winning, the Sho Del slipped a hand free and slid a knife out of its boot. It raised the weapon at Rin, plunging it at the lumberman's chest. It was a short-bladed weapon, and the swing was wide—it wouldn't have done much damage to the lumberman, but Jerick hadn't known that at the time. He simply saw steel heading for his father's chest.

The boy Jerick had screamed, and then something had happened. The world had changed around him, changing into a strange place of vibrating spheres—millions upon millions of them, far too small to see, but somehow he could sense each one. Frightened by the strangeness of it, Jerick had

looked about himself wildly. He could see forms made from the dots, and one such form was that of his father. The blade was nearly touching the lumberman's flesh.

No! The boy Jerick wailed. *Get out of the way!*

And the tiny Axi obeyed, splitting to move out of the way of the knife. His father's body had obediently divided in half, sliced open as if by an enormous blade. Jerick's vision returned to normal just in time to see his father's corpse tumble backward, cut nearly into two pieces. The Sho Del looked down at its small blade for a moment, its eyes amazed, before Rodis's guards fell upon the creature and hacked it to pieces.

The Sho Del hadn't killed his father. Jerick had.

"I KILLED HIM, FROST," JERICK MUMBLED. "I KILLED MY FATHER. I DIDN'T know what I was doing—I didn't understand microkinesis. Oh Lords. . ."

And, with a bowed head, the lumberman's son finally admitted to himself what he had done.

EPILOGUE

JERICK PACKED THE LAST OF THE FOOD INTO SHAKAN'S SADDLEBAGS, THEN pulled the clasp tight. On the other side he belted his sword. He had discarded his tan Tzai uniform, instead scrounging something from the town. A simple pair of leggings and a shirt—both black. Pure black. People deserved a warning as to what kind of person he was.

"Where are you going?" Frost demanded from beside him. The man had brought no horse or chariot, but somehow he had managed to cross the distance from Lakdon to Farastham in barely a few hours.

Jerick didn't answer, instead swinging up into Shakan's saddle.

"To Tzendor?" Frost asked.

Jerick shook his head. "I'm not worthy of that anymore, Frost," he said. "I have betrayed my command—I am not fit to lead men."

"Then where?" the old scholar asked.

"If Yoharn and the king are dead," Jerick said, turning Shakan to look east, "then Courteth is the heir to the throne. I failed her father; the least I can do is see his child rightfully crowned in his place."

"But the Sho Del took her," Frost objected.

"Then I'll have to find her," Jerick said simply. "It's odd—now that I've finally realized I have no interest in her, I am forced to go looking for her. I owe Rodis that much. Farewell, Frost. From now on, I travel alone."

Jerick turned Shakan and galloped in the direction of Lakdon. Before he went after Courteth, he had a very large grievance to settle with King Strafen.

FAR TO THE EAST, THE LAPPING WAVES OF A QUIET LAKE WASHED ONTO A beach. The waves were calm, but they spoke of things to come. They were the crashing surf in microcosm, a tiny warning of what ships would encounter if they followed the waters to their cousin, the ocean.

Scraps of wood and garbage, discarded from the numerous cities lining the lake, lay strewn across the serene beach. Sitting contemplatively on its sands sat a man, absently poking his driftwood fire with a stick. The man did not seem rushed or hurried. But, like the lake waves, his eyes spoke of the future—violent times that were to come.

The man sat for a long time, burning away the end of his stick. As he sat, a hairy, round object washed almost unnoticed onto the wet sand. The man poked at it, turning it on its side to reveal a bloated human face—a face with white hair speckled with black.

“Funny,” the man mumbled to himself. “I always thought it would be my head that grew a new body.”

THE END OF BOOK ONE

RELIGION OF THE WORLD

THE YOLISH PANTHEON

The Nine Lords (written in a non-language specific form, followed by their Meleran name, their Rodain name, their Fallin name, their Ke'Chan name, and where applicable, their Tzend name.)

THE WHITE ONE

Oreon, Cephus, Oren, 'Chennin, Eleel Tyi

The 'White One' is the traditional leader, or king, of the Yolish Pantheon. He is depicted as a man in white, often clean shaven, though in Fallish art he always has a royal Antoli. He is said to be pure and just, unable to deceive, but wrathful in his rage. He is unmarried, though many of the myths speak of his search for a proper consort. The White One is a popular deity, with many temples and shrines. He is the favored god in Tzendor—and in recent years, many Tzends are claiming him as the only true god. He is associated with justice and light.

THE BLACK ONE

Xeth, Axios, Keth, 'Chathis Hor, Zorteth

The White One's traditional enemy, the Black One, spends the mythologies trying to overthrow his brother's rule. Rebellious, but not necessarily untrustworthy, the Black One is said to be a warrior of unprecedented strength. He rules the underworld and the shades of the dead. Many myths claim that some day he will destroy the world. The Black One is the god of

death, war, and pestilence. He is always depicted as a clean-shaven man in dark, tight-fitting clothing, and he usually has broad black wings. He is handsome, but in all of the myths he is depicted as having one single flaw in his features—a scar, a lazy eye, or some other deformity.

Despite its dark nature, the Black One is still a popular deity, and lies only behind the White One and the Wise in shrines and temples. Most people who worship him, however, do so out of fear—hoping that by donating time and money to his temples, he will pass over them when it comes time to destroy.

THE BRINGER OF FIRE

Lamrin, Shabas, Tyserne, Nenbheo, Chonwhen

The Bringer is most popular in Tzendor, where his shrines nearly number those of the White One. A personification of the destructive power of nature, the Bringer is said to destroy and build up, bringing fortune to some and despair to others. He is usually depicted in red, his hair a mass of bright flames. He is associated with luck and fortune, as well as with nature.

THE WISE

Aldvin, Patorn, Venteere, Kar Heem

The Wise is the only old man in the pantheon. It is said in the myths that he could have taken the rule from the White One at any time, but he is not said to desire authority or power. A personification of time, the world, and the earth, the Wise is a very popular deity. Many farmers and laymen worship him, feeling that he is the most base and understanding of the gods. He is depicted as an ancient, bald man with pale white skin—a leftover from Rodain and Sho Del rule. He is highly favored in MElerand and Aldbin, the latter of which was named for him. He is associated with crafts and agriculture.

THE CUNNING

Leri, Wick, Fentoloni, Chaz

The trickster figure of the pantheon, the Cunning is always creating mischief. Often regarded as relatively unimportant, most myths involving the Cunning are told for their comic effect. He has few worshippers, though he is often invoked in conversation. Phrases such as ‘Blame Leri’ or ‘Look towards the Wick’ are popular in the face of sudden, but non-catastrophic, mishap.

THE HEALER

Sivin, Kodsendios, Sivonn, Mak'Chot

The Healer is the god of arts and of medicine. A sly god, the Healer is often said to get the better of his brothers and sisters, even the Cunning. He is associated with wisdom, learning, and healing. Other myths tell of his artistic natures. So, ironically, he is popular both in Trexandos, where science is favored, and in Fallamore, where the arts are champion.

THE MOTHER OF THE WORLD

Slonis, Mathona, Sellonns, Ysmora, Svo-lin

The Mother is usually depicted as a beautiful woman. Often painted nude with large breasts as a sign of her caregiving nature, the Mother is worshipped throughout Yolen and Tzendor. She is associated with childbirth, mystery, and secrets. She is often favored by those who believe in magic or superstition. She is extremely popular in Lallom, and the Horwatchers claim her as their patron.

THE QUEEN WARLORD

Merith, Helos, Mevornaline, Rothdam Korbeth, Hzanda

The Queen is the goddess of strength and power. She is often depicted in armor, riding atop a white stallion. Many of the myths present the Black One as being hopelessly in love with her, but she will never have him. A personification of military might, the Queen is favored by warriors and soldiers. She is the only of the Lords ever fully accepted by the Ke'Chan other than the White One.

THE BETRAYER

Stenfate, Ios, Stenfate, Hostor (though no Ke'Chan will speak his name), Ro

The Betrayer is unique amongst the pantheon. The horror of the Betrayer has permeated every society and every people in Yolen, Tzendor, or U Poni Sho Del. Unlike the Black One, the Betrayer has no shrines or temples. No man invokes his name, and few will even speak of him. While it is an insult to say 'The Black One take you!' is unconscionable to say 'the Betrayer take you!' Children are horrified of him, but only slightly more so than adults. Few men can hear the name *Betrayer* and not feel the hair on their arms rising in superstitious fear.

KE'CHAN

The Ke'Chan worship only one god, the True God. During the years of the Ke'Chan empire, the imperial bureaucracy allowed the Yolish people to continue worshipping their traditional gods—in fact, the empire even went so far as to give the Yolish pantheon Ke'Chan names. However, the Ke'Chan still consider the Yolish heathens, and have a cultural taboo against entering temples dedicated to any of the Nine Lords.

TZENDOR

The Tzend pantheon is slightly smaller than the Yolish one, though it includes many figures that are almost identical. They accept the White One, the Black One, the Bringer, the Mother, the Queen Warlord, and the Betrayer. In recent years, however, the new emperor has headed an almost monotheistic government, which pays much favor to the White One, and worship of the others has fallen sharply. The exception is the Bringer of Fire, whose cults remain strong despite efforts from official government priests.



Nazrilof

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