

The Lost Continent Collection

The Charmed Sphere

The Misted Cliffs

The Dawn Star

The Fire Opal



**www.LUNA-Books.com**

Table of Contents

[The Charmed Sphere](#)  
[by Catherine Asaro](#)

[The Misted Cliffs](#)  
[by Catherine Asaro](#)

[The Dawn Star](#)  
[by Catherine Asaro](#)

[The Fire Opal](#)  
[by Catherine Asaro](#)

The Charmed Sphere  
by Catherine Asaro



**www.LUNA-Books.com**

Contents

[I](#)  
[Jeweled Mages](#)

[1](#)  
[Chime](#)

[2](#)  
[Muller](#)

3  
[Anvil the Forged](#)

4  
[Flight of the Bells](#)

5  
[The Cowled King](#)

6  
[The Hidden Cottage](#)

7  
[Dawnfield Legacy](#)

8  
[The Broken Ring](#)

9  
[Iris](#)

10  
[Pearls of Dawn](#)

II  
[Rebirth](#)

11  
[Sphere of Rainbows](#)

12  
[A Luminous Touch](#)

13  
[The Lost Refuge](#)

14  
[Shadowed Mage](#)

15  
[Hall of Kings](#)

16  
[Night Glimmers](#)

17  
[Dawn of Rainbows](#)

18  
[The Power of a Life](#)

19  
The Imperfect Mage

20  
The Dented Spells

21  
Forest of Dreams

22  
Trespass

23  
The Golden Halo

24  
Charmed Hearts

III  
The Hollow Mage

25  
The Sun's Bower

26  
Drummer

27  
The Dark Dreaming

28  
Decision

29  
Dawn Ride

30  
Magescape

31  
The Covetous Spell

32  
Gathering Winds

33  
The Tallwalk Plateau

34  
Bell Chase

35

The Relentless Waves

36

Vale of the Sun

37

The Chambers

38

Burgeoning Sphere

39

Epilogue

I

Jeweled Mages



1

Chime

Chime hid when the king came to town.

Everyone in Jacob's Vale knew the royal party would arrive today. Fast messengers traveling the country kept citizens apprised of the king's progress through the realm of Aronsdale. Chime had hoped he might skip a hamlet as small as Jacob's Vale, but apparently she wouldn't be so lucky.

A pack of boys raced into town, hair flying, yelling that King Daron was coming. So Chime hid. She ran to her family's orchard and climbed her favorite apple tree. At her age, almost eighteen, she was supposedly too mature for such pastimes, ready instead to settle down and bring a husband into the household. She had no wish to marry, however, and didn't care in the least about her supposed lack of interest in climbing trees. She scrambled up the trunk, dressed in tunic, leggings, and knee-boots, all the hue of yellow apples, her favorite color. She didn't stop until she was deep into the leafy cover of the branches, screened by spring foliage from curious eyes. Royal eyes.

Actually, it wasn't the king who inspired Chime to flee the town and stash herself in a tree. She feared a far more imposing person—Della No-Cozen, one of Daron's top advisors. Della served as the Mage Mistress for Castle Suncroft.

“Pah,” Chime muttered. Although the idea of a castle being a croft for the sun appealed to her sense of whimsy, she had no wish to go there. She knew why Mistress No-Cozen was searching the countryside, visiting towns large and small. Oh, yes, she knew. They were looking for shape-mages, the adepts who used circles, cubes, spheres, and other shapes to create spells. Well, they wouldn’t find any here, not if she had any say in the matter.

Although Chime’s parents realized she carried the shape-mage gifts, neither had ever pressured her to reveal her talents. Besides, if she left Jacob’s Vale and went to Suncroft, her family would have one less person to help in the orchards. Chime loved her family and she loved tending the trees, especially when they blossomed and brought forth fresh, succulent apples.

Thinking of fruit, Chime spotted a particularly juicy apple. She plucked it and settled herself more comfortably in the branches. Then she peered through the leaves at the dusty road beyond the trees, and past it to the hills. In the distance, the first riders of the king’s party had appeared over a ridge outside the town. Taking a bite of her apple, she sat back to watch them arrive.

The stately procession crested the ridge like a wave of people. Chime had to admit they made an impressive sight. Warriors rode great horses with golden bridles. Their pennants snapped in the breeze, dyed the king’s colors, indigo and gold on a white background, showing a castle silhouetted on the disk of the sun. An honor guard rode with them, officers in blue uniforms. As they drew nearer, riding at the edge of the trees and even under some of them, Chime saw the gold insignia of military officers.

Then King Daron appeared. At first Chime mistook him for a royal advisor. He made a spectacular sight, to be sure, tall on his great black charger, his gray hair swept up from his brow. And his chiseled features certainly had a kingly aspect. But he seemed so old. She had seen his image on the hexagonal coins people used to buy the apples, quinces, and pears her family grew. It made her expect a much younger man, one hale and hearty, full of vigor. This man’s advanced age suggested his era of rule might end sooner than she, and most people, expected.

The thought perturbed Chime. King Daron had been a constant all her life, a good sovereign her parents said, steady and certain. He had no son to assume his crown; the prince had died years ago, lost in an orb-carriage accident with his wife and their young child, a boy named Jarid. Rumor claimed their loss had destroyed the king. He had been widowed himself years before, and he had never remarried. Instead he had chosen his nephew, the son of his brother, as his heir.

Chime took another bite of her apple, studying the king’s retinue. Several nobles rode with him, the men in gold trousers and white shirts under brocaded vests; the women in pale tunics and leggings tucked into riding boots.

As the procession drew near, a woman looked up at the tree. Her full cheeks had a ruddy color and gray curls framed her lined face. Chime could see her eyes, gray perhaps, though she was too far away to be sure. What struck Chime most was their intelligence. The woman stared straight at her hiding place as if she saw the truant girl.

Chime held still, praying to escape notice. It seemed to work. The woman rode on with the king’s party, passing below the tree with no more indication she knew someone was watching them. Chime hoped that were true, because she had no doubt who she had just seen—Della No-Cozen, Shape-Mage Mistress of Suncroft.

Chime climbed in a window at the back of her house, sneaking into her mother's workroom. It was here that Bell recorded the sale of fruit from their orchards, writing the numbers on parchments in beautiful inks with designs of vines around the edges. Bell had gone to the village earlier, so this entrance was safer for Chime than going in the front door, where someone might catch sight of her and prod her to go greet the king's party.

She was clambering over the sill onto a rickety wooden chair when a young voice said, "Hey!"

Chime jerked around and lost her balance. As she flailed her arms, she jumped off the chair and landed with a thump on the plank wood floor. Stumbling, she grabbed the wall shelves to keep from falling. Knickknacks rained over her, wooden harvest dolls that clattered all over the floor. She managed to avoid the ignoble fate of sprawling on the floor herself, but she winced at her undignified entrance.

Drummer, the younger of her two brothers, stood in the doorway smirking, his gold curls tousled over his ears and collar, his blue eyes full of delight at embarrassing her. Chime knew people thought she and Drummer resembled each other, both in appearance and behavior, but at this moment she had no doubt about the truth: imps had taken her true brother at birth and put this vexing creature in his place, leaving him to bedevil his poor sister.

Chime drew herself upright and brushed out her tunic. "Well, so why aren't you doing your chores?"

He stopped grinning long enough to glare. "Why aren't you doing yours?"

She spoke with dignity. "I was busy."

Drummer crossed his arms, for all the world resembling a nine-year-old version of their father, though Drummer had far less brawn. "Busy climbing trees?"

"Hah." She thought hard and fast for an excuse, or at least hard, anyway. Fast thinking had never been her forte. At a loss for good response, she fell back on sisterly disdain. "Little do you know."

Curiosity flashed in his gaze. "Know what?"

She brushed a leaf off her sleeve. "Oh, nothing."

"Chime!"

She had to relent, seeing his eyes bright with excitement. "The king's party has arrived."

"Hai!" With no more ado, he spun around and took off. After two steps, though, he skidded to a stop and swung back to her. "Well, come on!"

Chime smiled at his enthusiasm. He had always been that way, full of energy. "You go and see, Drummer. I really do have chores to finish."

"Mother and Father won't mind." His eyes were as round as the moon. "This is special."

"I'll come soon."

"See you there!" He whirled and dashed off. A crash came from somewhere, a chair falling over it sounded like, following by a breathless apology from Drummer, either to a person or the chair. The front

door opened and slammed, and then it was quiet again.

Chime exhaled, relieved he hadn't pressed her to go with him. The news had excited him enough that he ignored her uncharacteristic desire to do her chores. Although she enjoyed working in the orchard, she loathed her duties around the house. Far better to be out in the sun, eating apples.

Pah. If necessary, she would hide in the cellar until the king left town and took Della No-Cozen with him. She went through the house, checking for her parents and her other brother, but she found no one. No doubt everyone had gone to the square to celebrate the king's arrival.

Chime found the chair Drummer had knocked over in the front parlor. She set it back on its feet. Her father's brother, a carpenter, had made it for them. His attention to detail and the beautiful carvings he created put his work in high demand throughout southern Aronsdale. With the income from the orchard, Chime's family was better off than most, so they could afford more of the pieces.

Her uncle would have given them his work for free, but Chime's father refused to let him, paying him with twelve-sided copper coins. For the best pieces he even paid a round copper coin worth twelve of the twelve-siders. Chime loved the shiny coins, which were made at Castle Suncroft. The perfect shapes gave her a sense of completion.

She soon reached the big kitchen in the part of the house built by her great-grandfather. An iron kettle hung over the embers of a fire in the hearth across the room, and the aroma of simmering broth drifted in the air. The dented metal door of the storeroom was closed, keeping in the cold air from the blocks of ice. Chime's father and her older brother had gone out hunting a few days ago, and brought back quail, hares, and a deer.

A rough wooden table that had been in the family for generations stood in the center of the room. Her slate lay there with a stick of white chalk. Chime winced. She was supposed to do sums today. She went over and peered at the slate on the off chance she might find the homework done. It wasn't, of course; her mother's neat writing covered the left half, but the right side where Chime was supposed to answer remained blank. Biting her lip, she picked up a cloth and dropped it over the slate, hiding the sums. She would do them later. Tonight. Really. She would.

Turning, she glimpsed a picture on the mantel of the hearth, a portrait her mother had painted last year. It showed Chime with hair as tousled as Drummer's, more actually, given that she had so much of it. Yellow curls tumbled over her shoulders and arms, and her cheeks were as red as apples. She had thought Drummer's eyes were wide and startled, but in the picture hers looked even more so, as if she had been caught misbehaving.

Chime tried to smooth her hair, which was as unruly today as on the morning her mother had done that portrait. Even as a young child, she had never liked being messy. It hadn't bothered her enough to stop her from climbing trees or chasing her brothers, but more and more often now, she wished she could spend time on her appearance, that she could have coiffed hair and beautiful clothes. She never would; although her family had a comfortable living, the garments she fantasized were too dear in price.

She sighed, disheartened by her impractical dreams. Fancy clothes would be wasted in an orchard. Besides, if she ever did have a life that included beautiful things, it would mean she had to fit that life, which would mean fitting in with the nobility. And never, ever could she adapt to their rarified existence.

Truth be told, she would rather be an orchard keeper. She loved it. Nor would anyone expect more than she had to give. No one would want her to do more with her life than she could achieve. She had a

nightmare of finding herself in the middle of the royal court, unwashed and disheveled, surrounded by the sparkling elite of the land, all in gold-cloth and jewels, all staring at her with derision.

“Stop it,” Chime muttered to herself. It made no difference that the king and his nobles had arrived in town. They would soon be off to another place, looking elsewhere for mages. Yes, soon they would be gone.

Soon she would be safe.



2

Muller

Muller Startower Heptacorn Dawnfield, Prince of Aronsdale, scowled at his valet. “Can’t you fix the rip?”

His valet, Sam Threadman, wasn’t the least fazed. Sam made no secret of the satisfaction he took in dressing the prince. Nor did he take Muller’s grumbling seriously, though Muller constantly bade him to do so. In fact, Sam seemed to enjoy his company. Muller considered him a friend, though he never spoke of it aloud.

At the moment, Muller stood before a gilt-edged mirror in the bedroom of his suite at Castle Suncroft, surveying his appearance with a critical eye. The cream-colored trousers fit his legs without a single crease and tucked neatly into his finely tooled boots. His cream-hued tunic had gold stitching and tailored seams that accented his lean form. Unfortunately, a small rip marred one sleeve at his wrist.

“Your Most Estimable Highness,” Sam told him. “I will see to the problem at once.” With a flourish, he pulled off his sewing kit, which hung from his belt along with various other accouterments designed to make Prince Muller the most elegant man in Aronsdale. Sam prepared a needle with thread of exactly the right color and proceeded to repair the rip. He attacked the crisis with such expertise that when he finished, no sign of the tear remained even on close inspection.

“There.” He beamed at his prince. “That should do.”

“Thank you.” Muller straightened his tunic, turning this way and that in front of the mirror, checking all aspects of his appearance, just as he did each morning before venturing out of his suite. It pleased him that Sam had done such a fine job making him presentable.

Unfortunately, the garments never helped. He enjoyed clothes, but no matter how carefully he dressed, nothing added authority to his demeanor. He had the leggy aspect of a gazelle rather than the muscular brawn he wanted. The straight gold hair that swept to his shoulders glistened in the light. And his face. What a disaster. His eyes were too large, his lashes too long, his features too beautiful. Who took



seriously a man with pretty eyelashes? He was never going to strike fear into his enemies looking like this. Not that he had any wish to fight a war, but he was far more proficient with a sword than anyone believed.

Muller glowered at his reflection. "I am too thin."

Sam drew up to his full height, which although average for a man of the realm, left him looking up at Muller. "Sir, you are known far and wide for your incomparable elegance."

Muller cocked an eyebrow at him. "What a legacy that will be. 'He was the best dressed king we ever had.'"

"You will be remembered for leadership and wisdom," Sam assured him. Then he grinned. "But also for your style, eh?"

"Ah, well, I suppose one could do worse." Muller thought of the King's Advisors, the three elders who served as counsels to his uncle, King Daron. He seriously doubted they expected anyone to remember him for leadership. They seemed more worried that he would bolt before they could put a crown on him.

At times, Muller wasn't so sure he wouldn't do exactly that. He had never wanted the crown; he had expected it would go to his cousin Aron, the only child of King Daron. But Aron had died thirteen years ago, killed with his wife and their son Jarid when their carriage went over a cliff. It had left the grief-stricken Muller with the onerous and unwanted responsibility of becoming heir to the realm.

Muller wished his uncle would remarry and sire another heir. When King Daron had lost his beloved wife several decades ago, he had sworn on her death that he would never take another bride. He seemed determined to stay on that course even after his son died.

Which left Muller to become the most reluctant, albeit best dressed, king in the history of Aronsdale.

A knock came at the door.

Chime lifted her head from the book she was reading. Perhaps whoever had come to visit would go away. She didn't expect her family back from the town square for another few hours.

She wanted to finish her story. It was rare to find a book here in southern Aronsdale, especially a volume with such beautiful calligraphy and pictures inked in gold, silver, and bright colors. Her aunt Maize, one of the few people who encouraged her to read, had brought it back from Croft's Vale, the largest town in Aronsdale. Chime enjoyed the tale, an adventure about a young woman who rescued her beloved from a dragon. The idea of rescuing a handsome fellow appealed to her as long as she didn't have to go out and tackle the task herself.

The knock came again.

"Pah," Chime grumbled. She set the book on the table next to her chair and stood up, stretching her arms. Sunshine slanted through the diamond-shaped windows in the parlor. The air smelled fresh, though a bit dusty, probably because Chime hadn't yet cleaned in here as she was supposed to do today. Motes danced in the rays of sunlight. She smiled at the familiar scene she so loved. Then she went to open the door.

It was a bad decision.

As soon as Chime saw the gray-haired woman outside, she closed the door. Then she froze, horrified at herself. Good graces, she had just shut out one of the most important people in Aronsdale, the Shape-Mage Mistress of Castle Suncroft.

Another knock.

With her face burning, Chime opened the door. Della No-Cozen stood on the front step, her forehead furrowed.

“My greetings,” Chime said meekly.

Della scowled at her. “And mine.” Then she waited.

Chime cleared her throat. “Uh—would you like to come in?”

“Thank you, yes.” Della started forward, then paused, her head tilted.

Mortified, Chime realized she was standing in Della’s way. Moving aside, she invited her guest into the house. She ushered Della into the front parlor and offered her a high-backed chair with finely made blue cushions. Chime had embroidered them herself in gold thread.

“May I get you anything?” she asked. “We have excellent apple cider.”

Della settled herself, obviously relieved to sit. “No, no, please don’t bother.” She motioned to the chair next to her. “Come, child, talk to me.”

Chime sat down, wishing she could hide under the table between their chairs. “It is kind of you to visit, Mistress No-Cozen.”

Della considered her. “So you know me.”

“Everyone knows the great shape-mistress of Suncroft, ma’am.” Chime wished she didn’t, but that was another story. “You honor our home with your regal presence.”

Della gave a very unregal snort. “Hardly.”

Chime flushed. “What brings you to visit, ma’am?”

“I think you know.”

Desperate now, Chime tried to think of an escape, but nothing came to mind. So she said, “I do?”

Della indicated the clock on the mantel across the room, one of the few luxuries in the house. Not many people had such a fancy mechanism. “What do you see?”

Confused, Chime said, “A clock.”

“What is special about it?”

Chime had no idea what the mage mistress was about. Nothing looked unusual about the clock, which had a round face with two hands and numbers engraved into the wood. Right now it read slightly after the fourth hour in the afternoon.

The clock began to chime.

“Ah!” Horrified, Chime tried to forget the clock, but of course that only made her think about it more. Its chimes turned into clangs, as if an imp were whacking away on its bells with a tiny hammer.

Chime swore in a most unladylike manner and jumped up from her chair. She strode out of the room, into the entrance area of the house. The front door stood to her left and stairs to her right went up to the second story. She came up against a round table by the wall and set her palms on its unfinished surface, trying to steady herself. But instead of offering support, the table began to spin.

Chime jerked away from the table. “No! Stop!”

The steadying pressure of Della’s hand settled onto her shoulder. “Breathe. Slowly.”

Chime drew in a ragged breath. “I—I didn’t do that.” She turned to the mage mistress. “I don’t know what happened. Really.”

Della raised her eyebrows. “Don’t you?”

“No, ma’am.”

The mage mistress spoke quietly. “You’ve a gift. I felt it when I rode under the tree where you were hiding today, though I couldn’t see you and had never met you before in my life. The power of your gift brought me to your home.”

Chime stared at her in horror. “Ma’am, no! Surely you cannot feel such.”

“But I can. It is why I am the Shape-Mage Mistress of Suncroft. I recognize mage gifts.” Della’s face gentled. “It is so strong in you, it glows.”

This was even worse than Chime had feared. “No. You are wrong.”

“Why does it frighten you?”

“I’m not frightened. I just know you are wrong.”

“Indeed.” Della put her hand on her hip. “You claim to know more than I? You surely are a powerful mage.”

“I’m not!”

“Then you acknowledge I know more of mage powers?”

Chime hesitated, confused. “Of course.”

“So if I say you are a mage, I must know this.”

“I cannot be a mage.”

Della’s voice gentled. “Why? It is an honor.”

“No!” Chime backed toward the door. Perhaps she could get outside and run to the orchard.

Della frowned at her. “And what is this, young woman? You find mages so offensive, you must close your front door on them and flee at the horrendous thought that you might be one?” She crossed her arms. “It seems Jacob’s Vale teaches the art of giving insults.”

“Mistress No-Cozen, no! I am sorry I closed the door. I was—” She swallowed. Terrified hardly seemed a prudent word right now. “Overawed.”

“Overawed?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And why is that?”

“Why?” Wasn’t it obvious? Della was among the most powerful figures in the realm. “You are a King’s Advisor.”

“I’m aware of that.” Della waited.

Chime squinted at her. “You’ve an imposing presence, ma’am. I fear I shall be incinerated by your disapproval.”

Della gave a startled laugh. “Ah, well, you wouldn’t be the first to think such.” She came closer. “My point is this, Chime Headwind. You say you are overawed, yet it is I who came to see you. Does that mean nothing to you?”

Chime turned toward the door. “Ma’am, I love my home. I’ve no wish to leave.”

“But, Chime, think of it as an adventure!” Della set a hand on her shoulder. “It is hard to find anyone with mage talents at all, let alone with your power. You drew so easily on the shapes of that clock and the table here.” She spoke in a kind but firm voice. “Aronsdale has need of you.”

Chime couldn’t look at her. “If I went to Castle Suncroft, I would be like a bird trapped in a cage.”

“Many would welcome the chance to live there.”

As Chime turned to her, Della dropped her hand. Chime shook her head. “You want to tear me away from everything that matters to me.”

“I won’t force you to come,” Della said. “But think about it, please. Give it a chance.” She rubbed her chin. “I need to do tests. But if I am right, you are the strongest shape-mage I’ve found in your generation.”

“I am sorry,” Chime whispered. “I cannot go with you.”

Della gave her a stern look. "Without mages, Aronsdale becomes weak. We have little else to protect us from Harsdown. We are farmers here."

"Harsdown?" Chime knew almost nothing about the country north of the mountains at their borders.

"They would like to conquer Aronsdale."

"King Daron has an army."

"A small one, yes. It is not enough."

Chime squinted at her. "I don't see what I could do."

"With training, a great deal." Della studied her. "You have hidden your talents, yes?"

"I don't want to be a mage." Chime willed her to accept those words. "I don't want anyone thinking I can use shapes and colors to make spells."

"Why not?"

Why not? Because it would terrify her to have the ruler of Aronsdale expect so much more from her than she was capable of giving. "I'm not even sure what mages do."

"I advise the king," Della said, as if this were a perfectly mundane activity. "I train mages. I teach them to soothe pain and harsh emotions." When she spoke of her work, her voice softened. "We heal. We bring light, not only that of a candle or oil lamp, but also into people's lives." Strength came into her words. "We also help the army. Mages can predict enemy strategies and heal wounds, both physical and of the emotions." Now a shadow seemed to come over her face. "But Aronsdale hasn't enough of us. We don't know why so few are born."

Listening to her, Chime felt inspired to say yes. Then her pragmatic sense of reality reasserted itself; she would be committing herself to far more than she could handle. "I wish I could help. But I cannot."

"Coming with me would have compensations."

"It would?"

"Haven't you wondered why King Daron never remarried?"

"He grieves for his wife."

Sorrow touched Della's voice. "He loved her greatly. But that is only part of it. The king leads our people as monarch. The queen leads as shape-mage. She must be a powerful mage."

Chime stared at her, aghast. "Ma'am! Surely you do not suggest I marry the king." In truth, she knew Della didn't imply such; to entertain such a thought would be a presumption so outrageous, the sky itself would collapse. King Daron would never pick his bride from among the rough country girls of Jacob's Vale. Saying it aloud would make Della see the absurdity of sending such a girl to Suncroft for any reason, including to become a mage.

"King Daron is not looking for a wife," Della said.

Chime nodded sagely. “Of course not, ma’am.”

“Of course not.” Della beamed at her. “You would marry his heir—Prince Muller Dawnfield.”



3

### Anvil the Forged

Hills bordered Aronsdale on all three sides. In the north and west they rose into rocky, foreboding mountains where few people lived, indeed, where few could survive.

The country of Harsdown lay to the northwest, beyond those mountains.

A tall man, gaunt and dark-haired, rode through the mountains of Harsdown. His cloak billowed out behind him like black wings. The Tallwalk peaks towered to the southeast, looming above the bleak landscape, a barrier that separated Harsdown from the fertile hills and meadows of Aronsdale.

The man, Anvil the Forged, rode to the Escar Mountains, home to the castle of Varqelle the Cowled, King of Harsdown. Anvil had heard much of Castle Escar. Made of blue marble, it stood high in the Escars, inaccessible except for one road that wound up the cliffs.

Anvil thought of Aronsdale. The time for my revenge comes, he thought. Soon.



4

### Flight of the Bells

“It is the most absurd suggestion I have ever heard.”

Muller Dawnfield stood with the king’s top advisor, Lord Brant Firestoke. He should have been suspicious when Brant requested they meet here, on the Star Walk that ran along the top of the great wall surrounding Castle Suncroft. Brant’s valet had once confided to Muller’s valet, Sam Threadman, that Lord Firestoke came up here whenever he needed to brood about what he considered the dire future of

Aronsdale when Muller became king.

They stood now looking out at the rolling hills and lush forests, wind blowing their hair. The crenellations in the wall had geometric shapes: circles, diamonds, hexagons, and most of all, stars. None of the figures bothered Muller: only flawed shapes caused him problems. These were all perfect.

Lord Firestoke, however, had given him a new and truly fearsome source of dread.

“I have no desire to marry anyone,” Muller repeated. “Certainly not some country girl.”

Brant pushed his hand through his shoulder-length gray hair, pulling it back from his face, accenting the widow’s peak on his forehead and his deeply set gray eyes. His austere features made Muller feel insubstantial. At least he dressed better than Brant. The advisor’s tunic, leggings, and boots were well made, but they lacked style. Really, Brant ought to find a better tailor.

“The king’s message says this girl is the strongest mage Della has located. It is your duty to marry her.”

Muller crossed his arms, taking care not to crease the sleeves of his tunic. The embroidered designs on its hems consisted of perfect circles and ovals, nary a flaw in any of them. That made them safe. He kept everything around him as perfectly shaped as possible.

“It is bad enough I must someday be king,” Muller scowled at Brant. “I should at least marry a woman of the nobility.”

“This one is the strongest mage,” Brant made a visible effort to be civil. “Della’s letter says Chime is pleasant.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“That is all she said?. ‘Pleasant’?”

“What is wrong with that?”

“Has this girl no personality?”

“I am sure she is a fine young woman.”

“Does she have a brain? Manners? Is she pretty? Is her background gentle? Does she comport herself well?” Muller peered at his tormentor. “How does she dress?”

Brant made an exasperated noise. “In clothes, no doubt.”

Muller could well imagine. She probably ran around the countryside in a rough tunic and leggings with her hair wild and unbound. What an appalling thought. “I will not see her.”

“It may be difficult to avoid,” Brant regarded him steadily. “She and King Daron arrive here tomorrow.”

Chime waited until the darkest hour of the night, when she was certain everyone in the camp had gone to sleep.

Then she ran.

She had been planning her escape for ten days, since she had left Jacob's Vale, riding with the king's party. Her parents had been so flabbergasted by her supposed good fortune that they insisted she go with Della. After ten days of dreading her future, Chime had already had enough. She couldn't go through with this. They had reached the king's lands and would be at Suncroft tomorrow; if she didn't leave now, she wouldn't have another chance.

She had talked very little to anyone during the trip, having no idea what to say to members of a royal party. Della had given her a beautiful riding cape, but Chime still felt a mess with her country ways and clothes.

Her family had accompanied them the first few days, discussing Prince Muller with the king and Della. They seemed delighted and overwhelmed, so happy for Chime that she hadn't the heart to tell them she couldn't face this marriage. After they had returned home, needing to tend to the orchards, Chime missed them terribly. If she stayed at Suncroft, she wouldn't see them again until they came for the wedding.

Each night, Chime had withdrawn to the tent she shared with Della, dined quickly, and gone to sleep. Or pretended to sleep. She feared if she became sociable, Della would ask questions about her mage abilities. Although Chime had managed to avoid giving any more sign of them, she doubted she fooled Della. The time had come to flee.

Chime didn't feel right about taking their gift, so she left the riding cape on her pallet. She snuck out in her yellow tunic and old leggings, with sturdy boots to protect her feet. On this lovely spring night, the Rose Moon was full, shedding a blush of moonlight over the land. She easily crept through the camp, though she had to stop often, lest a sentry see her. She had spent days planning; she knew when and where the guards patrolled and which ones fell asleep.

So it was that Chime Headwind, the recalcitrant betrothed of Muller Dawnfield, skulked away from the royal camp and her unwelcome future.

Muller stalked through the woods by an idyllic lake, glaring at any bird that dared to chirp. He was so angry, he didn't even stop to remove the leaf caught on his boot.

"Outrageous." He paced down to the shore, remembering Brant's talk with him yesterday. "Impossible." How could they condemn him to marriage with some rude country girl?

After a while he began to calm down. He stopped to brush the leaf off his boot, along with some grains of sand. Taking a deep breath, he straightened up and sighed. He ought to arrange a hunting trip and be gone when his uncle's party arrived at the castle this afternoon.

He was wandering through the woods, deep in thought, when a rustling disturbed his concentration. Puzzled, he looked around. Trees and lush foliage surrounded him and sunlight dappled the ground. Roses, skybells, and purple royal-buds grew in profusion, providing a bright cover where an intruder might hide.



Muller wanted solitude. He had told his staff he didn't wish to be disturbed. No one could enter these woods without permission except the royal family. That meant his uncle the king—and he was off gamboling through the countryside, gathering brides for his nephew.

"Who is there?" Muller demanded. "Show yourself!"

Silence.

"These are my woods," he said crossly. "You are trespassing."

More silence.

In his side vision, he glimpsed leaves swaying. He whirled just as a girl bolted from a royal shrub, showering purple buds everywhere. She raced through the woods, away from him, her yellow hair flying out behind her.

"Come back here," Muller bellowed. Then he took off after her.

They thrashed among the trees, Muller tripping on roots, vines, and wild shrubs. The girl moved like a sprite. Although he had longer legs and surely more endurance than one skinny girl, she easily outran him. Of course he had to slow down to avoid stepping anywhere that might muck up his boots.

It outraged him that this wild person had invaded his privacy. With all this tearing about the woods, no doubt she had bugs in her boots. Her coarse garments appalled him. He certainly didn't notice how well they fit her graceful curves. And she had leaves in her hair. Disgraceful. The fact that the glossy tresses glowed, as yellow as the sun, certainly had no effect on him. None. He didn't notice their beauty at all.

As she drew ahead, Muller gave up trying to preserve his appearance and broke loose in his run, eating up distance with his long legs. Branches and bushes lashed at his hair and he dreaded the condition of his trousers. But this had become a matter of pride.

As he closed in on the girl, she glanced over her shoulder and he saw her eyes, as blue as sea stones. Lovely eyes.

No. They were atrocious. Much too large. No doubt she had long eyelashes, too, just like him. It was mortifying for a man, which added to his irritation at her, even though he knew, logically, that her eyelashes had nothing to do with him. He ran harder, gritting his teeth.

There! Muller grabbed for the girl. He caught a length of her hair, but it whipped out of his hands. He lunged again, caught her around the waist—and tripped on a gnarled root.

Muller flew forward into a mass of foliage, sprawling on top the stranger. They landed in a tangle of limbs and weeds, sliding through the bushes and digging a trench in the mud underneath their leafy cover.

"You bog-warted son of a piss frog!" She pummeled him with her fists. "Get off me!"

Muller blinked, stunned motionless by her language. Then he sat up, futilely brushing mud off his tunic. The woman was sitting in a tangle of vines and twigs, with roses in her hair and mud all over her tunic and leggings, a truly appalling mess.

She was beautiful.

Saints almighty. She had an angel's face. A muddy angel's face, but exquisite. And she did indeed have eyelashes as long and curly as his own, though on her they looked far more fetching.

The girl glared at him. "You are a vulgar pig."

She suddenly stopped looking angelic. He crossed his arms. "I am not the one intruding without permission."

Her magnificent eyes flashed. "You are not only a vulgar pig, you are rude as well."

"This is unbelievable." Muller was so astonished by her tart words, he forgot to be angry. "I have never been called such in my entire life."

She didn't deign to answer.

"Who are you, anyway?" he added.

"Uh—Telli Tinner." Now she looked evasive. "I live in, um, Tintown."

Muller smirked. "No such place exists."

"And how would you know that?"

"I know all the towns around here."

She waved her hand as if dismissing his words, not to mention his intellect. "I didn't say it was around here."

"You are trespassing," he said, irate. "These woods belong to my uncle."

"I hope this uncle has better manners than you."

It finally sunk into Muller that she didn't recognize him. He didn't recognize her, either, but really, she ought to realize she was talking to the heir of Aronsdale. He opened his mouth, intending to let her know in no uncertain terms just whom she had offended.

Then he paused. He never interacted with people except as Muller Dawnfield, nephew and heir of the king. He always had to be on his royal best. He had no wish for a crown; he would have preferred the life his father led, a country gentleman who entertained the local gentry.

For this moment, he could be anyone. It gave him an incredible sense of freedom. He could do anything and no one would care. Maybe for just a little while, with this stranger, he wouldn't have to bend under the weight of a role he had never wanted. He hadn't realized how much he craved freedom until he saw it within his grasp.

Besides, if she didn't know his identity, he wouldn't be so mortified by his scruffy condition. He grinned at her. "My uncle has far better manners than you, Goodwoman Telli."

She blinked at him. "What?"

“I said he has better manners.” Belatedly he realized what had confused her. It made him laugh. “Ah. You forgot. You claimed your name was Telli.”

She reddened. “It is. Telli. Telli Tanner.”

“I thought it was Tinner.”

She glared at him, then harrumphed and rose to her feet, brushing rose petals off her skirt. “My name,” she told him with great dignity, “is not your business.”

He stood up next to her, picking twigs out of his hair. “I need to change my clothes.”

“Are you going to a party?”

“Party?” He squinted at her. “No. Just walking.”

“Those are fancy clothes just to walk in.”

Muller silently swore. He would give himself away if he wasn’t careful. “I was supposed to meet my relatives for dinner tonight. But, uh—I don’t get along with my cousin. So I came out here instead.”

“Oh.” She eyed him doubtfully, but she didn’t dispute his story. “Well, and who are you, Goodman—” She let the title hang exactly the same way he had with her. And she called him Goodman instead of Lord, which meant she took him for gentry, not noble or royal. His relief was followed by annoyance. Surely it was obvious he was of royal birth. Then again, most princes didn’t slide around in the mud.

“Goodman Miller,” he said. The name was close enough to Muller that he would respond to it even if he forgot he had given her an alias.

She bowed, more teasing than respectful. “Do you mill grains?”

“My family does.” It was true; the Dawnfield line had many mills tended by families in Croft’s Vale, the village that Castle Suncroft overlooked and protected.

Telli brushed at her tunic, which under all the leaves and dirt looked as if it had once been yellow. Muller reminded himself that he didn’t notice the way it clung to her willowy curves when she slid her hands over the cloth.

“I need to change, too,” she said.

“I have a cottage near here.” He and his friends used it when they went on hunts. Its homey feel might convince her that it belonged to a man of respectable but not extensive means.

She hesitated. “I’ve nothing to change into.”

“My sister has some clothes that might fit you.” In truth, one of his friends had bought the outfits for a girl the fellow liked, but Telli had no way to know that.

Muller offered her his hand, then saw the dirt under his nails and started to drop his arm. At the same time, she reached to take his hand. The ring on her index finger must have broken and bent during their escapade. It slid off her finger and he grabbed it in reflex—catching the imperfect circle.

The moment his hand touched the damaged ring, power sparked within him. Light and heat flared in his palm; with a gasp, he dropped the ring. It hit the muddy foliage and sizzled, sending up wisps of smoke.

“Saints above.” Telli gaped at her ring, which now lay in a charred circle of weeds. “What happened?”

“I’ve no idea,” Muller lied. “Was that a flint?”

She gave him a strange look. “No.”

“Odd.” He bent to pick up the ring, but when he focused on the broken circle, it glowed again. He jerked back, stumbling in the bushes.

Telli laughed, her melodic voice chiming like bells. “You must be the clumsiest man I’ve ever met.”

That annoyed him even more. People called him many things, including athletic, which he liked, and graceful, which he hated, but they had stopped calling him accident prone years ago. He glowered at her. “I thought I was the rudest, crudest man you had ever met.”

She laughed softly, her face aglow. Saints, but she was lovely. Damned if he could make himself care that she had intruded on his privacy when she shone that way, with sunlight on her hair and her face full of mischief.

“I will tell you what,” she decided. “We will say you are the most unique man I have ever met.”

“All right.” He couldn’t help but smile. “I’ve certainly never met anyone like you.”

“Well, then.” She offered her arm. “Now that we have decided we are each one of a kind, let us go to your cottage and make ourselves uniquely presentable.”

Muller grinned. “Yes, indeed. Let us go.”



## The Cowled King

The audience chamber of Varqelle the Cowled, King of Harsdown, had blue marble walls without adornment. No rugs softened the marble floors, and the spare marble ceiling vaulted high overhead.

On a raised dais at the end of the hall, Varqelle sat on his throne. A tall man with long limbs, he wore a blue tunic and leggings, and dark boots. Sapphire studs glinted in his ears. His presence dominated the starkly beautiful hall. No queen sat on the throne next to him; no advisors stood in the hall; no servants

moved anywhere. He remained alone, except for one other person—the man walking toward him down that long hall, his dark riding cape billowing out behind him.

Varqelle nodded with satisfaction. Perhaps this Anvil the Forged could be useful to him. They both wanted the same thing.

Aronsdale.



6

### The Hidden Cottage

Miller fascinated Chime.

She didn't know what to think. Despite his behavior, he seemed gently born, above her station. For a member of the royal court, which she was supposed to join, it wasn't appropriate to go to a man's home by herself. Customs in the country were more sensible; girls made their own decisions about such matters. Chime had even stolen a kiss from a boy she teased into chasing her in the orchard. Perhaps if she stole one from this annoying but handsome fellow, it would make her unacceptable to her groom.

Miller kept trying to clean off his shirt and smooth the wrinkles. She had never seen a man fuss so much with his clothes. He had the grace and beauty of a long-legged animal, an effect heightened by his mane of golden hair. If he cleaned himself up, he would be beautiful. Compared to the strapping, brawny youths in Jacob's Vale, he seemed fragile, but she suspected that impression was deceptive. Lean muscles rippled under his clothes as he walked, a truly enjoyable sight.

"Why are you staring at me that way?" Miller asked.

She flushed. "I, uh, I thought, that is, I wondered how far it was to your cottage."

"Not far." He motioned ahead, ducking his head under a branch. "Do you see?"

She peered where he indicated. Moss-draped trees blocked the way, hiding whatever waited for them. They picked their way through rosebushes and pulled aside loops of vine heavy with gold box-blossoms.

Then they pushed into a small clearing. On its other side stood one of the loveliest cottages Chime had ever seen. It leaned against a hill, and trees shaded it on every side except where a chimney rose from its thatched roof. Carvings graced the window frame with shape-designs: half spheres, cubes within cubes, spiraling tubes. The shapes beckoned to her. She walked forward, vaguely aware she had extended her arms, palms upward to the sky. Well being spread through her, but it wasn't until light glowed within her cupped palms, gold and warm, that she realized what she was doing.

Hai! Dismayed, she dropped her arms and smothered her awareness of the shapes. Her panic sparked; Miller would realize she was a mage and reveal her to the king. She swung around—and saw him several paces behind, cleaning grass off his leggings. She bit her lip, holding back her laugh. He hadn't even noticed what she had done.

Chime went over to him. "Miller?"

He straightened with a start, his face reddening. "Ah, yes." He cleared his throat. "Do you like my house?"

"It's lovely. Can we go in?"

"Yes. Of course. Certainly."

As they crossed the clearing, she noted the good care he took of his home. The gardens were well tended, with rosebushes and skybell shrubs everywhere, their flowers bright in the sunshine.

As they reached the front porch, she glanced at him. "Do you have more than one house?"

He froze in the process of reaching for the knob. "Why do you ask that?"

She wondered at his response. "You said you were a farmer. I just wondered why your house was in the woods instead of on your farm."

"Ah." He nodded. "My family has a house there, too. But this is mine."

Chime dimpled. "A fine house it is."

With a flourish, he opened the door. "Enter, if you dare."

He felt positively wicked. Prince Muller Dawnfield would never behave this way, bringing home a sensual trespasser he found in the royal woods. But Miller No-name could do as he pleased.

As he opened the door, his anticipation plummeted. Golden light filled the house, which could only mean his friends had showed up without letting him know. It wouldn't be the first time. Oddly enough, it didn't make him angry. He felt unaccountably peaceful. Soothed. Strange, that.

As he stepped inside, he realized his mistake; the cottage was empty after all. The light came from sunshine that slanted past open shutters on a window. His sense of well being also faded, though, leaving him feeling inexplicably bereft.

The room looked exactly as it had during his last visit a few months ago. His staff tended to its upkeep when he was gone. Comfortable sofas, chairs, and tables were scattered about, none elegant or expensive, all well-worn. He knew he should replace the circular rugs, which were growing tattered, but they hadn't yet reached the stage where their imperfections hurt him.

He smiled at his guest. "Here it is."

Telli walked inside. "It's lovely." She sounded like she meant it, which made him wonder at her

background, that she thought so much of this tiny cottage. He wished she were a noblewoman, so it wouldn't be such an outrage if he spent time with her. Then again, he could never bring a noblewoman to an isolated cottage with no chaperone.

Not that it mattered, given that he was supposed to marry some blasted girl Della No-Cozen had dug up. He dreaded his unwanted bride. This might be his last chance to enjoy himself before his uncle and the King's Advisors shackled him in marriage.

Telli walked through the cottage studying the tables. The round tables. Just having her in here brightened the room; she seemed to bring light wherever she went. His good mood returned. When she stopped by a window, he closed the door and joined her. Together, they looked out into the woods, toward the lake, though right now the bountiful foliage of spring hid the water. Breezes ruffled the skybells and royal-buds.

"It's pretty," Telli said.

"That it is." Muller opened the window, using that as an excuse to lean closer to her. The glass had almost no imperfections, no bubbles or ripples, which was rare except for the most expensive panes, which only the wealthy could afford. If Telli noticed anything unusual though, she gave no sign. Instead she inhaled deeply and lifted her face to the breezes. Her gold hair stirred around her face, shoulders, and body. "So beautiful."

"Yes." He continued to look at her. "Beautiful."

She glanced at him. "You mentioned clean clothes...?"

"Clothes?" He was having trouble concentrating. Her air of mischief mixed with innocence drew him. The room had become rather hot. Before he realized what he was doing, he brushed his fingertips across her cheek. "I can help you change."

Telli stared at him like a deer hypnotized by a night lamp. "I was right—you are a rogue." She sounded nowhere near as definite in that assessment as before.

He smiled lazily. "But a fine one, eh?"

She gave him an imperious look that somehow worked despite the flower petals in her hair. "You, sir, should learn modesty."

"I would say you should as well," he murmured, "but you look so very fine in that immodest state."

Her face reddened. "If you keep this up, I shall leave."

"Don't do that." He endeavored to sound contrite. "I will behave."

Her lips quirked upward. "I don't believe you."

"Ah, well." He trailed his finger down her jaw. "Good behavior is terribly boring."

She moved his hand away from her face. "Is it now?"

"Very." Sliding his hand behind her neck, he drew her forward. For one glorious moment, she molded to

him, her curves pressed along his strong muscles.

Then she stiffened and put her hands on his shoulders, pushing him away. "Stop that, you scoundrel."

"Come back." He tried to pull her close again.

"Rogue." Telli whacked him on the head.

"Hey!" He jerked back, raising his arm to defend himself. "Are you always so violent to your suitors?"

She quirked one of her perfect eyebrows at him. "So. You are a suitor? And when did you plan to propose, Your Royal Muddiness?"

Muller didn't know whether to be appalled or laugh. "And what would you do if I was royal, hmm? Continue to insult me?"

Telli looked unimpressed. "It wouldn't make a whit of difference. For all you know, I am of royal blood myself."

"Oh, are you now?" Muller knew she wasn't one of his relatives. "And just how would that be?"

She waved at him, a gesture so imperious, it made him want to laugh. He had never seen a woman among his kin do that.

"Telli, listen. Let's have a wonderful afternoon. I have to go back to my duties soon, and when that happens, my life gets dark. But you bring light." He faltered, surprised to hear himself admit so much.

She blinked, pushing a tendril of hair out of her eyes, and the room brightened. Joy rushed through him, a surge of emotion too extreme for this moment, yet he felt it. He had scraped his arm when he fell in the woods, but the twinges of pain from the gash suddenly stopped bothering him. The injury remained, but it no longer hurt. Even his anger about his upcoming nuptials receded. He felt good. And somehow, it all came from Telli.

"Come look," he said. He took her hand and indicated the window. "Do you see the sparkle through the trees?"

She peered where he indicated. "Just barely."

"A river there feeds a lake. It is packed with fish. If you like, we could go fishing."

She smiled. "It is true, I am hungry."

"Well, then!" He took her other hand so they were facing each other with their fingers clasped. "I will make you some fish to eat."

"I would like that." Her voice had an odd quality, tentative, uncertain. In that softer tone, she added, "It is true, we often have duties that darken our lives. Perhaps we can enjoy some light today, before the storm comes."

"Are you sad?" He wondered what made her so wistful. "Tell me what is wrong. Perhaps I can help."



The corner of her mouth lifted with a hint of mischief. Then she stepped forward, putting her arms around his waist—and kissed him.

Muller was so startled, he froze, rather than doing what he really wanted, which was kiss her back. In the past, he had always been the one to initiate amorous procedures with a woman.

Telli wasn't fazed by his reaction. In fact, she was full of misbehavior. She pushed him against the wall as if she were a pirate who had captured him, holding his wrists against the wood panel. It took a moment more to gather his wits. Then he wrested his hands free, wrapped his arms around her waist, and kissed her soundly.

Ah, yes. This felt right.

If only he didn't have to marry. If only Telli was a noblewoman rather than a country girl. Many nobles would prefer her common birth because a lord could more easily have her as a mistress that way. But as much as Muller might have liked such an arrangement with her, he would never ask for one. One didn't compromise a woman's honor. Besides, Telli was more innocent than she pretended. Her kiss also had a desperate edge to it, though why, he had no idea.

After a moment, they paused for air. She regarded him with dreamy eyes the color of a skybell. "You could take over Aronsdale single-handedly," she murmured. "Just by stealing its women from its men."

He smiled, slow and languorous. "You think so?"

"I do." Closing her eyes, she laid her head against his shoulder. With a sigh, he ran his hand down her back. For the first time, he noticed a well-washed pattern along the collar of her tunic, a design of squashed spheres.

Imperfect spheres.

Before he could stop it, mage power surged in Muller. Sparks leapt up from his hands, scorching her tunic.

"Hai!" Telli jumped back so fast, Muller almost lost his balance. He felt her emotions, but with flawed awareness. He didn't know if she realized what had just happened; he could tell only that it bewildered her. His fractured ability to sense her moods receded as she moved away, taking her imperfect circles with her.

Telli spoke in a low voice. "What did you do?"

"Do?" He tried to tease. "I kissed you. Surely it wasn't all that bad."

She craned her neck to look over her shoulder—and stiffened. He knew the back of her tunic must be burned.

A pounding came at the door.

"Ah, hell," Muller muttered. Who could be here?

Telli looked around frantically. "I must hide!"

His annoyance turned to curiosity. "Why?"

She ran toward the kitchen. "Do you have a cellar?"

Another knock.

Muller followed her. "I should answer the door."

"No!" She whirled to him. "You must not!"

He was thoroughly intrigued now. "And why is that, Telli? If your name really is Telli."

"Of course it is!"

"Your Highness!" a deep voice called. "We must speak to you."

Muller swore under his breath.

"Your Highness?" Telli asked. "Why the blazes would someone come to your cottage, pound on the door, and yell. 'Your Highness'?"

"I've no idea." Muller tried to appear sincere. He forgot his discomfort, though, when he saw her terror.

"What is it?" he asked. Had she committed a crime? Suddenly it made sense; she had stolen something from the castle and hidden here in his woods. His men had come to warn him. "I won't reveal you to them."

The clink of keys came from outside. Muller knew if he didn't answer, they would break into his house to make sure he wasn't lying in a pool of blood, attacked by this ferocious vagabond with her gold hair and skybell eyes.

He pushed her toward the archway into the kitchen. "The door to the cellar is in the Prism Closet. Hide there."

"Thank you!" She spun around and ran into the kitchen.

As Muller strode across his living room, the door burst open and slammed against the wall. A formation of soldiers strode inside. As soon as they saw him, they stopped, the hexagon soldiers in the back bumping into the heptagon soldiers in front.

"Why are you bursting into my house?" Muller asked.

"Our apologies, Your Highness." The leader bowed, a burly man with the insignia of a cube-captain on his shoulder. "We had warning an intruder had entered the woods. And no one had seen you for several hours. Your uncle was concerned." He and the other guards were staring at him with undisguised astonishment.

Muller glowered, mortified to be caught in disarray. He had to make a conscious effort to keep from straightening his clothes and hair. "As you see, I am fine. I am relaxing. An anomalous concept, you would think from listening to my advisors, but nevertheless something I need to do now and then. Alone."

“Uh—yes. Yes, of course, Your Highness. We will be on duty outside.” The captain bowed and the guards made a quick retreat, closing the door.

Muller swore. He didn’t want them hulking outside, either. How would he smuggle Telli out without anyone seeing her? He didn’t mind so much if they knew he had a beautiful woman in here, but it obviously bothered Telli, who might be in trouble. He didn’t want to hurt her.

A rustle came from the kitchen. Turning, he saw her in the doorway. She had an odd look, as if she couldn’t decide whether to be furious or shocked.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Your Highness?” She pushed back a straggle of hair. “Your Royal Highness?”

So. She had heard. He lifted his chin. “It is not a crime, you know.”

“Your name isn’t Miller.” She spoke slowly, as if testing each word for the pox. “It is Muller.”

“As in mulled wine, yes. My parents named me after the spirits they make from their vineyards.” He crossed his arms. “You have a problem with this?”

“You lied to me.”

Muller was growing angry. “Whereas of course you have told me the complete truth, Telli who can’t even remember her last name properly from one moment to the next.”

“My name isn’t Telli.”

“I didn’t think so.” He walked over to her, trying to look intimidating. “What is it?”

She didn’t look the least intimidated. Furious was a better description. “My name is Chime. Chime Headwind.”

And then she said, “I’m your bride.”



Tonight King Varqelle dined in the Horizon Chamber, at a crescent-shaped table with guests on either side, nobles from the elite of Harsdown. The floors and lower walls were made from the rare blue marble made here in the Escar Mountains. It shaded from dark into light blues up the walls, the stone cleverly

blended in polished tiles that showed no seam, then into rose marble at the top and across the ceiling, like a sunset. Lamps in gold claws burned on the walls. Varqelle sat in a high-backed chair inlaid with sapphires and upholstered in blue cushions with rose brocade. His gray tunic and leggings clothed him like fog. Sun topazes glittered in his ears.

A tall man with dark eyes and hair occupied the seat of honor to Varqelle's left. Anvil the Forged. He had arrived at Escar with nothing more than his riding clothes and horse, but Varqelle welcomed him, for the realm had no other like this man. It wasn't only that Anvil was a mage of great power; he had also sworn fealty to Harsdown.

Varqelle needed mages. Even in Aronsdale, such adepts were rare. Harsdown had none. He had long sought to annex Aronsdale to his realms, but her people resisted too well. Her army was small but clever. They always seemed to anticipate the moves of Harsdown, no doubt because of mind tricks played by their mages.

Harsdown and Aronsdale had fought no declared war for generations, but their warriors constantly skirmished on the borders. Aronsdale fighters proved remarkably hard to kill. They recovered from injuries faster than normal men and kept going long after Varqelle's men would have given up. No doubt mage trickery was involved, though how, he didn't know.

He intended to find out.

King Daron was clearly irate.

Chime wished she could disappear. The king paced in front of her and Muller, his boots ringing on the parquet floor, his face stern, his gray hair brushed back from his face. Chime could see Muller's resemblance to him, but the king had a severity and sense of authority unlike anyone else she had ever encountered.

They stood in the Receiving Hall with Della and the guards who had brought them here. The room stretched out, long and elegant, more beautiful than anything Chime could have imagined, drenched in sunlight from many tall windows. The walls gleamed with mosaics in lovely tessellated patterns of squares, circles, and stars. She did her best to ignore them, lest they stir the power everyone insisted she possessed, despite her adamant denials.

"Your behavior is appalling." Daron stopped in front of Muller and looked over his muddy nephew. "Though I must say, it is refreshing to see you forget this preoccupation of yours with clothes."

Muller crossed his arms and glowered.

"And you." Daron turned to Chime. "You ought to be ashamed of your behavior."

The only reason Chime felt ashamed was because she had let herself be caught by the very groom she had intended to evade. Even worse, she had kissed the scoundrel. She could hardly say that to the king of Aronsdale, though. So she said only, "I am terribly sorry, Your Majesty."

He snorted, his expression making it clear he had a good guess about how she truly felt. "No one will force you into marriage if you find Muller so repugnant."

Her face flamed. "I never meant—" She stopped when Daron held up his hand.

"Four weeks," he said. "Give this idea of a betrothal that long. If at the end of that time you wish to leave, you may do so. Is that acceptable?"

Chime nodded, her face hot. It was a fair request. "Yes, Your Majesty."

The king motioned to Della No-Cozen, who was standing nearby. The mage mistress came forward and bowed.

Daron indicated Chime. "Please go clean her up."

"Certainly, Your Majesty." Della cocked an eyebrow at her unwilling ward, making Chime want to squirm. Then she led Chime off, mercifully away from the king's displeasure.

Della didn't speak until they were walking down a hall with mosaics on the ceiling, walls, and floors. Then, incredibly, she laughed.

Chime glared at her. "You think it is funny the king despises me?"

"Actually, he quite likes you." Della couldn't stop laughing. "Never, never, have I seen Muller in such a state." She beamed at Chime. "You shall be good for him."

Chime tried not to think of his appealing qualities, that kiss of his and his charmingly roguish smile. "I don't think he shall be good for me."

"What do you fear? Is it truly so terrible to have such responsibilities?"

"I never asked for them."

"Neither did Muller. Nevertheless, you have them."

"It's unfair!" Chime declared. "I don't want to be a mage. I don't want to marry that vain fop."

"That. 'vain fop' is the heir to the throne."

Chime just grunted.

After they walked a bit more, Chime snuck a glance at the jade pendant Della wore around her neck, a pyramid with four sides and a bottom. Despite her apprehension, she couldn't help but be curious about mages. During the ride from Jacob's Vale, Della had said that the five-sided shape represented the highest order she could draw on, with jade-green as her highest color. Chime had no idea what that meant; no one in her village had known much about mages and Chime had diligently avoided the subject. She made spells by instinct; she didn't know how she managed it, which probably explained why they were so erratic.

Yet now, when she saw that pendant, a yearning stirred within her. She didn't understand it, nor did she want to feel it. She just wanted to go home.

But still it stirred.

Lord Brant Firestone walked the tiled corridors of Suncroft with King Daron. They were both of an age and had ridden together when Daron had been crown prince and Brant an ambitious young officer in the King's Army. The decades had matured them both, but neither had lost the honed edge to his personality.

"Muller is right on the verge," Brant said. "If we push any harder, he is going to run." He frowned at his friend. "You must remarry. Sire an heir."

Daron quirked an eyebrow at him. "What makes you think any heir I sire would be better suited for the title than you consider Muller?"

"You would train him from birth, instead of starting when he was fourteen."

Daron's expression darkened. "I trained my son for thirty years. Look what that brought me. Heartbreak and sorrow. I will father no more children."

"His passing was a great sorrow." Brant had considered Prince Aron a fine man, one fit to become king.

"Yes." The tightness in Daron's voice said more than words. Even after so many years, he continued to mourn. "I lost a daughter that night, too. My son's wife, Sky. And my grandson. Jarid."

"They had so much promise."

Sadness shadowed the king's voice. "Even now, it bothers me that we never found Jarid's body. We buried my son and daughter. But how can I finish grieving for Jarid when I don't know how it ended for him?"

"I am sorry," Brant said. It galled him that they had never caught the highwaymen who forced the orb-carriage over a cliff and killed the family. The boy, Jarid, had been only six. Brant suspected he had been a mage. It was rare for the gifts to manifest in a male child, but Jarid's mother had been the greatest mage of her generation, perhaps for centuries. Neither King Daron nor Aronsdale had ever recovered from their deaths.

Brant couldn't imagine Muller leading the country. The young man was too busy polishing his boots and complaining about the bad manners of his friends. Thank the saints for Daron; Aronsdale needed his strong leadership now. Rumors were coming out of Harsdown, unsubstantiated but chilling: King Vargelle was planning the day he would conquer Aronsdale.

Muller's breath caught. "Saints above."

He stood in an arched doorway that opened out from the uppermost level of the Starlight Tower. The Star Walk stretched ahead of him, taking its name from star-shaped crenellations in its walls. It topped the fortified wall that surrounded Castle Suncroft. During battle, archers crouched behind the walls of the walkway and shot through its star openings. The castle healer drew on the ten-sided stars for power when she tended injured archers.

Muller didn't come here often. Although he wielded a sword well, he had less proficiency with a bow

and arrow. But what caught his attention today had nothing to do with arrows or stars. A short distance away, Chime stood gazing at the countryside. The wild hoyden had transformed, draped now in a stunning dress, cream-colored with gold trim. It fit her graceful figure from neckline to hips, and fell more loosely to her feet. A gold belt rested on her hips, its tasseled ends hanging down the front of her skirt, the cord forming a V in front of her pelvis. A gold necklace gleamed against her creamy neck, and a circlet of diamonds sparkled on her head. Her glorious hair poured down her back like a waterfall.

Perhaps marriage wouldn't be so onerous after all.

He walked along the pathway, enjoying the sight as breezes wafted her hair around her shoulders. He would have to ask who designed her dress. The tailoring was superb.

"My greeting," he said, coming up to her.

Chime turned with a start, her face blushed from the wind. When she saw him, her tentative smile transformed into a frown. She turned back to observe the view.

Muller leaned against the wall. "Friendly today."

She didn't deign to look at him. "I have no wish of friendship with you."

"Pity, seeing as we're to be married."

She gave him a haughty look. "I would marry a bog-slug first." Belatedly she added, "Your Highness."

"Chime, let us make a truce, yes?" Now that Della had found a mage powerful enough to be his queen, they weren't going to let him delay his nuptials any longer—assuming the lady agreed, which seemed less likely every minute. For some reason, the idea of her leaving Suncroft flustered him. It made no sense; she was wild, rude, and uncouth. But he didn't want her to go.

"My uncle wants us to marry," he said. "Mistress No-Cozen wants it. Lord Firestoke wants it. Everyone does. We will exhaust ourselves fighting them." He grinned at her. "Besides, you didn't find me so offensive in the cottage."

She gave him a quelling look. "That is because I wanted to enjoy myself before I had to marry Prince Muller Dawnfield. I can't help it if I had the bad fortune to have my forbidden lover turn out to be my groom."

"You are the reluctant mage, eh? And I am the reluctant heir." He spoke wryly. "We make quite a pair."

"I'm not a mage."

"Why not?" He would have given anything to have her purity of gifts.

Chime averted her eyes. "I cannot handle it."

"I didn't take you for a coward."

She rounded on him, eyes flashing. "I fear nothing."

"You fear yourself."

“And you fear your title.”

He had no argument with that. “At least I’m not afraid to admit it.”

For a moment she simply looked at him. Then she said, “You need to help your uncle more. He is tired, that bone-deep weariness that comes when you have worn out your body and your health.”

Panic sparked in Muller. “How dare you speak such of the king.”

“It is true.”

“How would you know this?”

“I’m not sure.” She motioned at the castle around them. “Everything here is shapes, all the mosaics, lamps, walkways, windows—everything. Beautiful, perfect shapes. I feel...I don’t know how to describe it. Too sensitized. On edge with everyone. People’s moods, their pain, their need for light—I can’t escape it here.”

An ache for the beauty of her power filled him. “And you claim you are no mage?”

Her face paled. “I don’t want this.”

“You should.” How could she throw away such a gift?

“As you should accept the truth about your uncle.”

He wanted to deny it. He couldn’t bear the thought. But he had seen Daron age this past season. The weaker his uncle’s health became, the more Muller longed to assure him that Aronsdale would continue. It mattered to Muller, mattered a great deal, for he loved his uncle, who had been his guardian for half his life. This country was Daron’s legacy; the king deserved a strong heir to carry on for him after his death.

Unfortunately he had only Muller.

The ramshackle cabin stood high in the Boxer-Mage Mountains, surrounded by stunted trees. Its thatched roof barely kept out the rain and the walls needed repair. The rocky earth couldn’t support much in the way of crops, but the man who lived there coaxed a garden out of the infertile soil, enough to feed him and his ward.

The man’s name was Unbent. Thirteen years ago, desperate and starving, he had made the worst mistake of his life, going on a midnight raid with Murk, a highwayman who robbed the gentry. They had intended only to stop the orb-carriage and take jewels and coins from its passengers. Unbent had never expected the carriage to go over the cliff and crash into a ravine. He never expected the man and woman inside to die.

Their six-year-old son had survived.

Murk had decreed they must kill the child, lest he reveal what happened. Unbent had fled then, taking the boy with him, determined to protect the orphan. He named the boy Dani and cared for him as best he



could at the cabin. The accident left Dani blind, deaf, and mute. He had no lasting injuries Unbent could see, except for a scar on his neck, but his sight and hearing never returned, and he never spoke again after that night.

So they lived, mired in poverty, hidden from the world, never coming down from the mountain, cut off from humanity.

Unbent knew nothing about his ward's true identity.



8

### The Broken Ring

"I can't do it!" Chime clenched the table, staring at the parchment inked in shimmering colors. "I can't remember what all these shapes and hues mean."

Della sighed. "We will try again."

Chime wanted to lash out in frustration, but she held back. It wasn't Della's fault she had trouble. In the three days Chime had been here, she had learned so little. It was another reason she had dreaded coming to Suncroft; no matter how hard she studied, she would never be quick.

They were sitting at a table in the parlor of Della's cottage at the castle. Sunshine slanted through the windows, casting colored light over well-worn tables and chairs. The windows were lovely, with stained glass in many shapes: diamonds, hexagons, squares, circles, and more. They made graceful patterns around larger round windows with clear panes. Vases of rosy box-blossoms brightened the room even more.

"Start with the colors," Della suggested. "What do they do for mages?"

Chime hesitated. "Color specifies the type of spell."

"Yes. Good. In what way?"

"Like a rainbow." Chime loved her mental image of a rainbow arching over sunlit towers of the castle. Thinking of it helped make this less intimidating. "Red spells create light."

Della nodded her encouragement. "And the others?"

"I don't know," Chime admitted.

"Think of spells as ways to bring light into people's lives." The mage mistress took an orange out of a

bowl on the table. “What do orange spells soothe?”

The word “soothe” clicked for Chime. Relieved to recall something, she said, “Pain. They soothe physical pain. Yellow spells soothe emotional pain, like sorrow.” She wondered if it worked on insecurity. If so, she could certainly use some yellow spells here at Suncroft.

“Very good.” Della smiled. “How about green?”

“After soothing comes healing, yes?”

“Yes, that is a way to think about it.”

“Green heals emotional wounds,” Chime guessed.

Della shook her head. “To soothe pain, all you need to know is how to comfort someone. But before you can heal, you must understand what causes the pain.”

“That isn’t green?”

“Well, it is, in a sense.” Della considered her. “Tell me—how did you know, in the cottage with Muller, that you weren’t in danger from him?”

Chime snorted. “Heaven forbid, he might tackle me in the mud.” She was still irked at him for that.

Della chuckled. “That must have been a sight.” When Chime glared, the mage mistress tried to hide her smile. “But why weren’t you worried? A strange man throws you down, then lures you to his cottage and makes improper advances. You weren’t afraid?”

Chime crossed her arms. “Are you suggesting my behavior was inappropriate?”

“I think your behavior is fine. You haven’t answered my question.”

Ah, well. Why hadn’t she been afraid of Muller? “I knew he wasn’t going to hurt me.”

“But how do you know?”

“I could tell.”

“How?”

“I just knew. I felt it.”

Della spoke quietly. “You made a green spell. Green is the ability to feel the emotions of others.”

“Oh.” Now that Della mentioned it, Chime did remember something about that on the scroll Della had given her to study last night.

“So if green is feeling emotions,” Della prodded, “what about blue?”

“It heals emotions!” Chime knew that had been on the scroll, somewhere.

“Healing, yes,” Della said, patient. “But blue tends to physical injuries. That is why the healer at Suncroft is a sapphire mage. Emotions are much harder to heal.”

It was coming together for Chime. “In the rainbow, you have blue and then indigo. Blue heals injuries and indigo heals emotions.”

“Yes.” Della beamed at her. “A mage can make spells at her color and below. Most can do red and orange. It is more difficult to soothe emotions; it takes a strong mage to do yellow spells. Green mages are rare. Blue is almost unheard of; I know of only the healer at Suncroft. She is even a stronger mage than I.”

“But you are mage mistress.”

Della nodded. “The mage who serves as the King’s Advisor needs ability, yes, but also political savvy.”

It made sense to Chime. “What about indigo mages?”

“They probably don’t exist.”

Chime tried to read her expression. “Probably?”

“I think it must be impossible.” Della paused, her face thoughtful. “How do you cure grief, anguish, misery? Time is the true indigo mage. Only it heals such wounds.”

Chime hesitated, afraid of looking gullible. “I’ve heard it said that the royal line of Aronsdale, the House of Dawnfield, produced indigo mages in ancient times.”

“So the legends say.” Della smiled wryly. “It increases the mystique of the Dawnfields. But no historian has ever found a reliable record of such a mage.”

Self-conscious now, Chime said, “What is my color?”

“I’m not sure, yet. Emerald, I think.”

Chime brightened. “Like you!”

“I am a jade mage. It isn’t as strong as emerald.”

“It isn’t?”

Della laughed. “Don’t look so shocked.”

A wave of unexpected jealousy swept over Chime. “If the castle healer is a sapphire, stronger than us both, doesn’t that mean she must marry Muller?”

Della’s mouth quirked upward. “I suspect her husband, children, and grandchildren wouldn’t take kindly to the idea.”

Relief washed through Chime. “She is elderly?”

“In her seventh decade.”

“Ah.” Chime would never admit it to Muller, but she had found herself unable to stop thinking about him. She touched the parchment in front of her, which was covered with shapes inked in a rainbow of colors. “I don’t have much of a feeling for how the shapes work.”

“Ask yourself this.” Della rolled up the voluminous sleeves of her tunic. “How do mages use shapes?”

“To focus spells.” Chime thought about the coins used throughout Aronsdale, so many different shapes, their value increasing with their number of sides. “The more sides a shape has, the better it concentrates your power.”

“Yes, but only to a point. If you try to use a shape more powerful than your maximum ability, your spell dissipates.”

Chime squinted at her. The few spells she had made had happened by accident rather than design. “I’ve never made a spell on purpose, so I doubt I need worry about it dissipating.”

“It will come.” Della touched her jade pendant. “Three-dimensional forms are stronger than two-dimensional. The more sides a shape has, the more power it can focus. You can use any shape up to the one of your maximum ability. If your highest shape is three-dimensional, you can also use any two-dimensional shape.” She folded her hand around her pendant. “I can use three-dimensional shapes, but only with five sides or less.”

“I could never use one with three dimensions.”

“Certainly you can. At least eighteen sides. Maybe twenty.”

“No! It is impossible.” Chime made the denial out of habit. But then she hesitated. “You think so?”

Della smiled. “I think so.” She tapped a glimmering silver circle on the parchment. “This is the highest two-dimensional shape—a polyhedron with an infinite number of sides.”

Chime squinted at her. “A circle has no sides.”

“But look.” Della showed her the other shapes: square, pentagon, hexagon, each with more sides than the last. “The more sides, the rounder they look. If you had a polygon with two hundred sides, you could hardly tell it apart from a circle.”

Chime traced a circle on the page. She enjoyed the drawings, finding satisfaction in them, especially those with three dimensions: pyramids, boxes, heptahedrons, and so on, the shapes becoming rounder as their sides increased, until they resembled faceted balls. Sudden insight came to her: a sphere had an infinite number of sides. It was the most perfect shape of all.

Concentrating on the sphere drawing, however, made her head hurt. She preferred faceted balls.

Della was watching her closely. “Only the most powerful mage can use a sphere.”

“I like this one.” Chime touched the drawing of a ball with twenty sides. “It feels right.”

Della nodded with approval. “That may be your shape.”

Excitement sparked in Chime. Perhaps she wouldn't fail here after all. "How would I find out?"

"Concentrate on it. See if you can make light."

Chime peered at the drawing. After a moment, she began to feel foolish. "Nothing is happening."

"Imagine light appearing," Della suggested.

She pictured a lamp on the table and focused hard.

Nothing.

"I feel silly," Chime said.

"It is all right," Della said. "Give yourself time."

Despite the kind words, Chime felt the mage mistress's disappointment. Della had hoped Chime would be a quicker study. Chime felt like a fraud. She had no idea how to be what these people wanted. She had felt accepted only that time when Muller came out to greet her on the Star Walk, and that had been because he liked her dress. It annoyed her. If she had to marry him, he could at least like her for herself rather than her clothes. He had been more fun in his cottage, before he knew her identity.

Muller was right about the two of them, the fop who dreaded the crown and the bumpkin who dreaded her mage power. If they were the best Aronsdale had to rely on, their country was in trouble.

Anvil took a tour of Castle Escar. He paced the blue marble halls, appreciating the high ceilings and polished columns, and the mosaics, silver, blue, violet, and white tiles with accents of red and gold. He stopped to view a series of interlocked geometric forms: triangles, quadrilaterals, pentagons, hexagons, heptagons, octagons, and so on, until the progression ended in circles.

Closing his eyes, Anvil pressed his hand against a circle and let it focus his power. He opened his eyes to find himself bathed in blue light. So easy.

Spells were simple to make—and to manipulate. All shapes bent to his will. His will. He had lived thirty-one years and spent most of them, since his eleventh birthday, on his own, searching out knowledge. He had traveled the width and breadth of first Aronsdale and then Harsdown, alone, ignored and silent. He researched every history on mages he could find. This he had learned: with the right incantation, spells turned inside out. Healing became injury and soothing became agony. Mages created light, but they could also burn.

A normal mage of his power would never twist his gifts, for what he did to others, he experienced himself. But Anvil had a difference, an imperfection some might say, though in truth it gave him superiority. He wielded every color except green. He knew nothing of emotions. He felt nothing of what he did to others.

So it was that no restraints existed on his power.

“What do you think of her?” Muller reclined on the sofa in his bedroom, holding a crystal goblet full of red wine, one of his booted legs up on the table and his other stretched across the sofa. The gold upholstery matched his fawn-colored breeches and golden tunic.

Sam Threadman continued arranging Muller’s clothes in the wardrobe, an antique with a mirror bordered by frosted polygons. “She, Your Highness?”

“You know.” Muller waved his goblet. “My bride.”

“She is lovely.” Sam paused. “And stylish.”

“Not yet, much.” Muller swung his boots to the floor and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “But just think what she could become!”

Sam answered dryly. “A mage, I would hope.”

“Well, yes, that, too.” Muller squinted at him. “I am trying to imagine being married.”

Sam turned, the lines around his eyes crinkled with a kindly look. “Do you think of a family, milord?”

“A family?” That threw Muller off guard. Of course someday he would sire an heir. He had never thought about a family, though, beyond his duty to give Aronsdale its next king. He, a father? He didn’t feel ready. He rather liked the idea of Chime as mother to his children, though. She would take no guff from them. He winced. Or from him.

In some ways, though, the idea of a family intrigued him. He was twenty-seven, certainly old enough. Both of his parents had long passed away, his father two decades ago and his mother several years after that. He had no siblings. King Daron was his only kin. The sparse nature of his family left him with a hollow space in his life.

“Yes,” Muller said, surprised. “I am thinking of a family.”

“Speaking of which—King Daron came here earlier.”

Muller took a swallow of wine. “What did he say?”

Sam went back to arranging clothes. “Apparently you were expected at a meeting this morning with His Majesty and Cube-General Fieldson.”

“Damnation!” Muller jumped to his feet, sloshing wine out of his goblet. “I forgot!”

Sam sighed. “I fear King Daron is unhappy with you.”

“He always is.” Muller thunked his goblet on a table. “I had better find out how much trouble I’m in this time.”

“Good luck,” Sam said.

“I’ll need it,” Muller muttered.

Chime ran into Muller just as he blew up Suncroft.

At least it seemed the entire castle could have gone up in that blast. She was running down a hallway, already late for her mage lesson. She had stayed too long in her bedroom, writing a letter to her family. She missed them so much, it ached within her. So she raced around the corner—and ran smack into Muller.

Light flared around them and the stained-glass window in a nearby alcove exploded inward.

“Saints almighty!” Muller grabbed her around the waist, shielding her with his body while broken glass showered the hallway.

“Goodness.” When the tumult stopped, Chime peered around him, staring at the colored shards all over the tiled floor. “How did you do that?”

“I didn’t do anything. Nothing!” He looked panicked. “What makes you think I did that?”

She blinked, aware of his arm around her waist and how good it felt. Embarrassed, she stepped back. His mood came to her vividly, here in a hall tiled with blue and gray polyhedrons in the floor, and with geometric wall mosaics of sky and countryside. Why would he deny the spell that burst the window? She knew without doubt the impetus had come from within him. She didn’t ask herself how she knew; she wasn’t ready to hear the answer.

“It takes a great mage to shatter windows,” she said.

“The wind did it,” he said quickly.

She put her hand on her hip. “The wind, pah.”

“Are you challenging my word?”

He tried to look fierce, but Chime wasn’t fooled. She had trouble reading his face, though; it was difficult to see past the beauty of his features to his expressions. She wondered if it had caused him problems in his youth. In her experience, boys as pretty as Muller took a lot of grief for it from other boys. If that were true, she would have thought he would welcome any power that gave him an advantage. Perhaps she was wrong about his gifts.

“Why do you stare at me like that?” he asked.

“You’re a mage, aren’t you?”

Muller laughed too loudly. “What an innovative idea.”

“A mage.” She had suspected it when he scorched her tunic in the cottage, but now she felt certain. “You’ve never told anyone and no one has figured it out, not even Della.” That baffled her; given Della’s ability to recognize mages, how could she have missed one as obvious as Muller?

“Ridiculous.” He was losing his overly studied calm. “That is the most absurd accusation I have heard.”

“Accusation?” The word hung between them. “Aren’t you the one who called me a coward for evading

my gifts?"

"You could help Aronsdale a great deal." He shook his head. "Doesn't that matter to you? If I could help that way, I surely would."

"Then why do you refuse to acknowledge your gifts?"

"I have no gifts." His voice actually shook.

This made no sense. "You deny you are a mage and no one else seems to realize it. But I see it clearly."

"Don't speak so loud." His panic flared. "You must never repeat what you just said."

"Why?" She crossed her arms. "You keep pestering me to use my mage gifts."

"Pester!" He glared. "I never pester."

"Pah."

"Chime, your gifts shine. You are light." The warmth in his voice faded. "I will tell you a truth, but you must swear never to reveal it to anyone."

That sounded intriguing. "I swear."

Muller lowered his voice. "I am a terrible mage. I can use only imperfect shapes. My spells are like the shapes that focus them. Imperfect. No matter how hard I try to achieve good, I cause damage instead." He spoke darkly. "I can never lead Aronsdale. I would do far more harm than good."

"Muller, no." She couldn't imagine such a thing.

"It is true. I am evil. My spells only destroy."

It puzzled her that he saw himself as in such a manner. He might be a scoundrel, but that didn't make him evil. He seemed oblivious to the purity of his emotions. She touched his arm. "You have much good in you."

He pulled away from her. "Don't be foolish. This isn't something that will go away with a few soft words."

Chime heard little beyond the word foolish. He thought her stupid, just like everyone else. "My apologies." Frost could have formed on her words. "Next time I won't be so foolish as to suggest you might be a better person than you allow yourself to believe."

His long lashes lowered. "You don't understand."

"Of course I don't." She thought of all the things he had said to her on the Star Walk. "I am a coward because I dislike being a mage, but I am foolish for thinking you are wrong to dislike being a mage."

He scowled at her. "Sarcasm doesn't become you, wife."

"I'm not your wife." Nor would she ever be, she decided. "Perhaps you ought to think less about what



becomes people and more about what is inside of them.”

“Very well.” He motioned to a mosaic of yellow rings on the wall that represented the sun. A few tiles were gone, leaving gaps in the circles. “You see those tiles?”

“Yes.” She paused. “They are pretty. But broken.”

“I was in a hurry, not thinking about shapes. I came around the corner and looked straight at the broken rings. My power focused through them before I realized it. When you startled me, I lost control.” He motioned at the shards strewn across the floor. “This is the result.”

She squinted at them. “Maybe you just need to learn how to make spells that work.”

“What makes you think it didn’t work?”

Chime looked up at him. “You wanted to break the window?”

“No. I was thinking about how much I disliked the cold drafts in here.”

“What drafts?” It was completely still and warm.

He tilted his head toward the window. “You don’t think it is odd to feel no breezes right now? The window is gone.”

Chime stared at jagged frame with pieces of broken glass. It was all that remained of the window. She hadn’t noticed the quiet air because she didn’t expect wind inside the castle. But yes, it ought to be gusting in here. Outside, pennants on a nearby tower snapped in the wind.

She went to the window and stretched out her hand. No invisible barrier blocked it, nothing that would keep out wind. As soon as she reached past the frame, breezes rushed across her skin, yet not the slightest gust came inside.

She turned to Muller, impressed. “What did you do?”

“I’m not sure. I didn’t plan the spell; it just happened—and exploded the window.” His face paled. “That was a circle spell. What would happen if I went to higher shapes? Would I heal a person’s arm by cutting it off? Cure unrequited love by making the desired person hideous? I don’t even want to think of the harm I could cause people. My uncle. My friends.” He swallowed. “The family I will someday have.”

Chime wished she had a solution. “Can you learn to do better spells?”

He fisted his hand and banged it on his thigh. “I’ve tried. It doesn’t work. I can only use flawed shapes to make flawed spells.”

“Can Della help?”

“I asked her once if she thought I had mage ability. She said no. She was very apologetic.” Warily he added, “She can’t see it because I am twisted inside. I can’t tell her, because honor would require she tell my uncle. Then what? For the good of Aronsdale, they would have to remove me from the line of succession. Uncle Daron would have no heir. The crown would go to someone other than a Dawnfield.” He rubbed his eyes. “I don’t know. Maybe it should.”

“But you aren’t twisted.” Chime had never been good with words. She spoke as if stepping through broken glass. “I will tell you a secret, as you trusted me with yours.”

“A secret?” Now he looked intrigued.

“I have often felt emotions, but I wanted no one to know. And it is so erratic, how it happens.”

“So you admit it.”

“Only to you.” She indicated the mosaics on the wall. “These focus my mood spells. I can tell this: the good inside you goes deep. You would never deliberately hurt anyone. If your spells twist, it must be because you don’t know what to do with them.” She hesitated. “Probably no one does. I’ve never heard of a mage like you before.” Not that she knew anything about mages.

“That I have no wish to do harm changes nothing.” He shook his head. “The harm still comes.”

“Listen to us. We’re so sure we aren’t good enough to do what everyone says we must.”

His face gentled. “You could almost make me believe otherwise.” He took her hands slowly, giving her a chance to pull away. When she didn’t, he drew her into an embrace. Chime laid her head against his shoulder, letting herself relax into his warmth. He bent his head, his cheek rubbing hers until she turned her head toward his. Then he kissed her. She knew she should stop, given that she intended to leave Suncroft in four weeks. But instead she savored his kiss, unable to remember why she wanted to go home.

“Mistress No-Cozen is gone?” Chime stood at the door of Della’s cottage.

The circle-maid in the doorway had a scarf holding back her hair and she held a dusty mop. “I am sorry. She left this morning.”

“But I had a lesson with her today.” Now that Chime had seen how her ability to feel moods helped her understand Muller, she wanted to learn more. “We have so much work to do.”

The maid smiled shyly. “I am sorry she isn’t here, milady. I will tell her of your dedication.”

Milady? Chime felt her cheeks redden. They treated her as a noblewoman, but she wasn’t one. She needed to learn so much, not only magecraft, but protocols, customs, etiquette. She had to do it exactly right; otherwise, everyone would know Della had brought a fraud to Suncroft. The task seemed impossible.

King Daron had given her four weeks to decide about the marriage, but she had no doubt he was also deciding if he wanted her to marry his nephew. Unless they saw her make a good effort, she might lose Muller. Saints knew, he could be an exasperating man, and often she wanted to pack up and leave. But other times she felt confused and warm when she thought of him, unable to say what she wanted. He drew her, intruded on her thoughts, distracted her.

She finally registered what else the circle-maid had said. Dedication. No one had ever before used that word to describe Chime. In fact, when it came to her studies, they said the opposite. She stood

straighter. "Do you know where I might find Mistress No-Cozen?"

The maid was apologetic. "She be in the Tallwalk Mountains, ma'am."

"Whatever for?" It was a ten-day ride from here.

"She heard rumors of another mage." The girl's face lit up. "Perhaps you will have a classmate, eh?"

"Oh. Maybe so." Dismay swept over Chime. Of course they were searching for another mage to marry the prince. Their present candidate had already run off once and might leave in a few weeks. What if Della came back with a better mage? Two weeks ago Chime would have been grateful to have another woman rescue her from marriage, but much had changed in the ten days since she had met Muller.

She tried to hide her anxiety. "Please let me know as soon as Mistress No-Cozen returns."

"I will, milady."

"Thank you."

Chime left then, miserable despite the bright day. If a better mage showed up, Chime would have to go home—and she wasn't sure she wanted to anymore.

Unbent straightened slowly and wished that his body, once so strong, matched his name. Years of toil had worn him down. He had spent the morning outside, under a leaden sky, cutting firewood for the winter and carrying stones to the cabin, to shore up its crumbling walls.

A rustle drew his attention. Dani had come outside and was standing near the door, staring with unseeing eyes toward the stunted woods beyond the cabin. His tangled locks blew around his face and shoulders. Unbent had washed Dani's hair this morning and shaved his beard. Now he could see the fine line of Dani's face, his regular features, the breadth of his shoulders and length of his legs. This was no rough youth. He had long suspected Dani belonged to the gentry, perhaps even the nobility. It was one reason Unbent had hidden here, high in the Boxer-Mage Mountains, avoiding all contact with people. The penalty for murdering a member of the gentry was life imprisonment; for a member of the nobility it was execution.

Several times Unbent had tried to take Dani down the mountain. But the youth refused to leave this cabin, protesting violently until Unbent gave in. So they remained isolated here, both of them safe, though whether from outer dangers or inner guilt, he never knew.

It grieved Unbent that he had so little to give his ward besides this rocky patch of hell. He had nothing else to his name. His one attempt to gain more had ended in catastrophe. What stupidity had possessed him to believe, even for one night, that highway robbery was the answer to his poverty? He and Dani would pay the price of that crime forever. He owed the boy the best life he could provide.

Over the years Unbent had come to love Dani as a son. He walked over now and stood with him, aware of Dani's greater height and strength. The youth had been exercising; sweat soaked his ragged gray shirt and rough trousers.

He laid his hand on Dani's arm, and the youth turned, his gaze directed above Unbent's head. Reaching

out, Dani brushed Unbent's shoulder. He folded his large hand around Unbent's arm and tugged him toward the east side of the house.

Baffled, Unbent followed. This side looked much like the other, with cracked walls and thatching from the roof sagging down, but with no door or window. Dani pulled him to one corner and knelt on the ground, placing his hand on a stone there.

"I don't understand." Unbent knelt next to him. He talked to his son constantly. Dani never heard and never responded; for over a decade, Unbent had conversed with only himself or the rare visitors that happened by every few years. Dani had stopped speaking the night his parents died, when the boy had been six, if Unbent estimated his age correctly. That would make Dani nineteen now, a man, no longer a child, but unable to live on his own.

Dani set Unbent's hand on the stone. It was perfectly round. A sphere. Lifting it, Unbent realized someone had sculpted the rock, Dani certainly, since it hadn't been here a few days ago. He handed it to the youth, trying to understand. Dani settled cross-legged on the ground and bent his head over the orb.

Light brightened around them.

The radiance shifted through the colors of a rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo. Then white light bathed them, beautiful light that defied the overcast sky. A sense of peace filled Unbent, one he didn't deserve. Did his son know he made light and joy? He didn't understand how Dani wove his spells, but he never doubted them.

Unbent would never forget that night when Murk, the other highwayman, had realized Dani had seen their faces and heard their voices. Murk tried to kill the boy then, intending to make sure Dani never saw, heard, or spoke again. Dani had survived the crash because his mother made a spell of protection. But just as she had only one life, so she could save only one life—that of her son.

Unable to talk with his foster son, Unbent would never fully understand what had driven Dani that night. He could only guess. In desperation, reeling from the loss of his parents, perhaps blaming himself because they died so he could live, Dani had done what should have been impossible. He had grasped his mother's spell and wrenched it, for some inexplicable reason completing what Murk threatened—Dani had taken his own sight, hearing, and voice.

No matter how Unbent tried to heal his son, nothing helped. Dani became a shadow mage, unseen and unknown. He cut himself off from his past life. Unbent had long suspected Dani feared that if he went among people, he would lose control of his power and hurt people as he had hurt himself.

Unbent had no mage gifts of light or healing, none at all, and it took an indigo mage to heal emotions. As far as he knew, no indigos existed, except perhaps Dani himself. He had heard legends of indigo mages in long ago times, but before Dani he had never believed those tales any more than he had believed a Saint of Waterfalls turned diamonds into liquid or a Saint of Buds made flowers open in the morning. This much he knew; he had in his keeping one of the most powerful mages alive.

And he could tell no one.



9

Iris

Chime paced through her suite in the castle. Blue and white sky mosaics tiled the domed ceiling, and the ivory walls had scenes of forests and lakes painted in their upper half. Gilt trim accented the moldings. But right now even the beauty of these peaceful rooms couldn't ease her agitation.

Today Della was bringing another mage to Suncroft.

A knock came at the door. Chime hurried to answer, stopped when she recalled her circle-maid was supposed to do it, and then remembered she had let the maid off for the day. It flustered her to have other people do her chores. Not that she had ever liked doing them herself, but she had never imagined people could make a living doing them for her. By rights, she should be the servant here, instead of the lady.

The knock came again. So Chime opened the door. Muller stood outside, his face creased with worry, his body resplendent in a brocaded blue vest and gold silk shirt, with blue leggings tucked into knee-boots, his gold hair glistening in the sunlight from a nearby window. He looked utterly gorgeous and thoroughly distressed.

Chime tugged him inside and closed the door. "Have you heard anything?"

"Nothing." He grabbed her around the waist and kissed her soundly. Every time he held her this way, she told herself to chastise him for taking liberties, but what she really wanted to do was take her own liberties with him.

After several moments, they parted. Muller smoothed a tendril of hair around her face. "My greetings."

She glared at him. "You are as much a rogue as ever."

He laughed and set her back so he could look over her dress, a gift his valet had brought this morning. It had a snug bodice, an ivory underskirt, and a brocaded overskirt that swept to the floor, all in colors and material that matched his clothes.

"You are a heavenly sight," he said. "I like the way the darker blue trim matches the embroidery on the hems."

Chime smiled. "You sound like a dressmaker."

He grinned. "I would make a great one, eh?" His smile faded. "Except I have to be a king instead and command the army."

Chime suspected he would have thoroughly enjoyed his life if he could have lived on a farm and designed clothes for the nobility. Unfortunately, not much demand existed for farmers with such skills.

“Della hasn’t arrived yet,” she said darkly.

“Run away with me,” he urged. “Before she returns.”

“You want me to run off with you?” She tried to look affronted, though in truth she wanted to flee, too. “You, sir, are incorrigible.”

He put his arms around her waist. “You break my heart. Say yes.”

She set her hands against his shoulders. “What is all this about going away?”

“If I have to marry, I want it to be you.”

Her heart felt as if stuttered. She hadn’t given him an answer about the marriage, yet he freely spoke of his feelings. The boys she had known in Jacob’s Vale were sturdy, stoic types. They rarely mentioned to a girl how they felt, especially not without some reason to believe she returned their feelings. But then, perhaps she wasn’t hiding hers from Muller as well as she thought. He was a mage, even if he didn’t want to admit it any more than she did for herself.

Chime wasn’t ready to say yes to the betrothal, though her heart bade her to do so. She wanted to scold him, to protect her emotions. But when she spoke, hope filtered into her voice. “Just because she is bringing a new mage, that doesn’t mean you will have a new betrothed. Della says few have my ability.” Chime didn’t believe it; she struggled just to understand the word polyhedron, let alone use one for spells. But for the first time in her life, her studies interested her. She liked magecraft. “It would be unlikely this new mage is stronger.”

“I hope so.” Muller kept holding her. “I know you think I’m shallow and fickle, but I’m not. It’s you I want. Not someone else.”

“I never said you were shallow or fickle.”

“You’ve thought it.”

Puzzled, she said, “But I haven’t.”

“You say I should use my gifts. Well, I have. That is what they tell me.”

“Then they’re wrong.”

“Of course they’re wrong,” he said matter-of-factly. “All my spells are wrong. But they always have a seed of truth.”

She hesitated, unsure how to express herself. “What I have thought, Muller, is that you have a great more to you than you let people see, even yourself.”

He shifted his weight. “I’m not suited for this king business. I don’t like governing.”

She couldn't help but smile. "You do seem to spend a lot of time avoiding your uncle."

His grin suddenly blazed. "Would you like to be king? I will abdicate in your favor."

She laughed. "I don't think it works that way. Besides, I wouldn't know how to be a king."

"Neither do I."

"You've trained for years."

"Yes, well, heredity and aptitude aren't the same."

Chime started to protest, but another knock at the door stopped her. She went to open it, aware of Muller standing behind her, an unchaperoned man in her suite. No betrothal had yet taken place.

When she opened the door, she forgot protocol and propriety. Della's circle-maid waited outside, her round cheeks flushed from running. "Milady!" She looked quickly from Chime to Muller, her face turning brighter red. "And Your Highness!"

Muller came forward. "Yes?"

"Mistress No-Cozen is back." The maid stopped to catch her breath. "She brought the new mage."

Muller resolutely took Chime's hand as they entered the Receiving Hall. Sunshine poured through the windows, slanting over Della.

A young woman stood at Della's side.

Chime felt as if bands were constricting around her chest, making it impossible to breathe. The girl looked about eighteen, with cheeks flushed a fetching pink, large brown eyes, and an incredible mane of chestnut curls that fell in waves to her hips. She was taller than Chime and had a much curvier figure, the voluptuous form men always seemed to notice. She glowed with health. Chime suddenly felt like a pale imitation. She glanced at Muller, certain he would have second thoughts about his hastily made oath to her a few moments ago.

Muller, though, didn't look intrigued by this new mage. In fact, he seemed bewildered. He hid it well, but Chime felt his puzzlement.

"Your Highness." Della bowed to Muller.

The new mage glanced from Muller to Chime to Della. When the girl bowed uncertainly, Chime realized that she, too, was new to court protocol. It helped a little with Chime's raging insecurity.

Della had made an extra effort to find a second mage. The mage mistress had apparently spent years recording all rumors, no matter how insubstantial, about mages; this year she had begun following up leads. After she located Chime, it hadn't been so urgent she keep looking—until Chime hesitated.

With dismay, Chime realized that even if she said yes now, the betrothal wasn't automatic. What if the King's Advisors decided she wasn't fit compared to this new mage? Chime wasn't ready to give her

answer yet; agreeing to become queen was too overwhelming. But she didn't want the choice taken away, either. Given her behavior since Della had found her, though, the king and his advisors had reason to question her suitability.

Chime decided then and there that she would become a paragon, with no lock of hair or wisp of thread out of place. She couldn't make her intellect or experience any greater, but if no flaws showed in her appearance or conduct, maybe it would be enough. She would know the truth, that she was a fraud; nothing would change that. But perhaps her lacks wouldn't be so obvious to others—especially to this new mage.

Della brought the girl forward to Muller. "Your Highness, may I present Iris Larkspur of the Tallwalk Mountains. She will be studying with Chime."

"My honor at your presence, Your Highness." Iris's voice lilted with the lyrical accent of the Tallwalks.

Using mosaics on the walls, Chime fumbled to make a mood spell. To her unmitigated astonishment, she discovered that Iris felt no attraction to Muller, either. The other girl considered him too fashionable, too pretty, too everything. She preferred the strapping lads in her hamlet.

Chime blinked. Good graces, how had she known all that? Genuine green spells were welling up within her.

Muller inclined his head to Iris. "It pleases me to meet you, Mage Larkspur."

Iris murmured a response, her face red.

Chime spoke with awkward formality. "Welcome to Suncroft." To Della she said, "And welcome home, ma'am."

Iris managed a self-conscious smile. Then Muller spoke again, welcoming Iris with the verbal grace Chime had always admired in him.

So a new mage came to Suncroft. Chime walked with Muller through the castle. He spoke thoughtfully. "How odd."

"Iris?" Chime asked.

"She isn't what I expected."

"She is a mage. I felt it." Relief flowed through Chime. "But not as strong as me."

"No, I think not." He wouldn't look at her.

"Well. So." Chime suddenly felt magnanimous. "It will be nice to have someone to study with."

"If she can study." Muller rubbed his chin. "Her powers are shrouded. Something is wrong."

"Wrong?" Chime's unease stirred. "How?"



“I don’t know.” He gave her a forced smile. “Perhaps I imagined it.”

“Perhaps.” Chime earnestly hoped so.

Anvil paced with King Varqelle along a walkway atop the high wall of Castle Escar. The mountains dropped away in magnificent peaks to the south and rose ever higher to the north, cliffs in many shades of blue stone. In the slanting sunrays, they looked polished, as if a giant had sculpted them.

“Can you create mood spells to read the Aronsdale generals?” Varqelle asked.

Anvil walked slowly, his hands clasped behind his back as he endeavored to appear deep in thought. He couldn’t reveal his inability to do mood spells; it would cast doubt on his claims to be a mage of great power. He had spent years living by his wits as he wandered Harsdown, never staying long in one place, doing odd jobs, his mind and body strengthened by his labors. He had told no one of his powers until he had come here, to Varqelle. But during all those years he had sought knowledge about magecraft from the histories and folktales of the villages he visited. He knew how to uncover secrets. He could learn what the king wanted to know just by going to Croft’s Vale as a spy.

“Spells dissipate over distance,” Anvil said, which was true. “If I focus through a sphere, I can reach across this castle, but at greater distances the spell becomes tenuous. Across the mountains is much too far.” He paused as if pondering. “I need to go to Aronsdale.”

Varqelle looked surprised. “You would do this?”

“If it pleases, Your Majesty.” Anvil had never hidden his hatred of Aronsdale from Varqelle. He had left his home twenty years ago, as a lad of eleven. Mages were feared and reviled in those remote heights of the Boxer-Mage Mountains. He would never forget. The people of Stonce, the tiny hamlet where he lived, had called him pariah, monster, abomination, and in the end they would have killed him if he hadn’t run away. Given the chance, they or others like them would finish that job—just as they had murdered his parents, sister, and brothers, who had done nothing more than reveal their mage power.

Except he could fight back. Unlike other mages, Anvil could reverse his powers without harm to himself. He felt nothing: no remorse, no regret, no dismay. Perhaps he had never possessed such powers of emotion; or perhaps those years of violence and cruelty in his childhood had scorched it out of his heart. Whatever the reason, he escaped his tormentors by using his spells against them.

The people of Aronsdale would never tolerate a mage who lacked the weakness they called remorse. If his ability to reverse spells without consequences became known, King Daron might order his execution. The sovereign wanted his mages powerless. But Anvil knew another truth: he was better than them all. They refused to acknowledge his superiority, but that would change. They would know better—and honor him as he deserved—after Harsdown conquered Aronsdale.

He spoke quietly. “If I return to Aronsdale, my life as Anvil the Forged could be forfeit without the protection of your army. But I can assume another identity.”

Varqelle gave him an approving look. “A disguise.”

“Yes.” Although Anvil didn’t relish the prospect, his great purpose required setting aside personal preferences. “I will need specifics on what you would like done.”

“Get close to Daron’s generals. Learn their plans.” The king’s eyes glinted. “Make them ill. Strike them with grief, sorrow, pain.”

Anvil absorbed that suggestion. It had a certain appeal. He could certainly do spells to agitate rather than soothe, to hurt rather than heal. Aronsdale had caused him misery; now he would return the favor.

Yes, the idea had appeal.

Iris and Chime sat with Della at a table in the mage mistress’s cottage. Colored sunlight slanted across them and lit the parchment they were studying.

Chime wished she could hide under the table.

“It is a simple spell,” Della said, obviously trying for patience. “Concentrate on the drawing of the ring and use the techniques you studied last night to focus. Then make a spell of light. You can imagine the light, make a rhyme, think of heat, anything that helps.”

Chime felt her face reddening. “I can’t remember the techniques.” She had studied hard, struggling to memorize the list so she would be prepared for her first class with Iris. But she was no better at these studies than any other schoolwork she had ever done.

“Surely you recall some.” Della looked hopeful.

Chime spoke slowly. “Imagine light shining through the shape, yes?”

“Not through the shape, exactly,” Iris said. “You imagine the ring focusing the light.”

Della looked relieved. “Yes, good.”

Chime stiffened. Iris couldn’t have studied last night; the king’s staff had kept her busy moving into a suite adjacent to the one where Chime lived. Chime had heard them while she plodded through her work.

“Now show me,” Della told Iris. “Make a spell.”

Iris caught her lower lip with her teeth and averted her gaze. “All right.” She stared at the ring on the parchment, her forehead furrowed.

Nothing.

Iris lifted her head. “I can’t.”

That puzzled Chime. Quite frankly, she didn’t see why Della wanted them to remember techniques for making spells. Either spells worked or they didn’t. She stared at the drawing and it began to glow.

“Hai!” Iris gaped at Della. “How did you do that?”

“I didn’t.” The mage mistress glanced at Chime. “It was you, yes?”

“Yes.” Chime shifted in her chair, aware that Iris had tensed. She hadn’t meant to embarrass the other girl. As a peace offering she said, “Maybe if you had a real ring to focus your spells, you could make light.”

When Iris stiffened, Chime didn’t understand. Then she realized she had insulted Iris by suggesting she couldn’t make a spell where Chime had succeeded, that Iris needed more concrete help.

Flustered, Chime ran her finger over the ring on the parchment. She hadn’t intended to make a green spell, but it surged within her, revealing Iris’s mood. The other girl reacted to Chime as she had to Muller; Iris thought Chime cold, too exacting in manner and dress. Arrogant. Seen through Iris’s eyes, Chime didn’t much like herself, either.

Chime felt heavy. No matter what she did, she offended people. If she behaved as she had at home, people here considered her common, crude, wild; if she did her best to copy court behavior and dress, they saw her as vain or proud. Chime knew she had faults, certainly more than her share, but surely she couldn’t be as bad as people thought.

While Chime mentally floundered, Iris spoke to Della. “I memorized the images for focusing light through shapes last night. But when I try it, I canna make a spell.” Her accent lilted more when she was upset.

It bewildered Chime that Iris could so easily learn Della’s methods, yet she couldn’t make a spell. Chime could barely remember the methods after studying all night, yet the spells came easily. She had no control, though. No technique. Maybe Iris had the opposite problem; with too much emphasis on technique, she lost some natural quality.

“Maybe you think too hard,” Chime suggested.

Both Della and Iris blinked at her. Then Della cleared her throat. “Well, yes, uh, I’m sure thinking too hard can cause problems.”

“I’m sure,” Iris said under her breath.

Hai! Now they thought she was stupid. Chime decided she would be better off if she kept her mouth shut.

After an awkward moment, Della said, “Maybe we should call it a day, eh? You two come back tomorrow morning.”

Relief swept over Chime. “Yes, ma’am.”

Iris practically jumped up from the table. “Aye.”

After they bade Della good day, Chime and Iris walked back to the castle, across the slopes above the valley that sheltered Croft’s Vale. Chime made another try at being friendly. “How do you like it here?”

Iris twisted a length of her hair. “It is so new.”

“Are you glad to have come?”

“Yes, I think.” Iris looked across the hills and meadows with longing. “It is so much prettier here. I don’t miss the Tallwalks.”

Chime couldn't imagine not being homesick. She never really stopped thinking about her family. She wrote them constantly and they replied often, but it wasn't the same. "Your parents must be sad that you left."

Iris gave her a sharp look. "My foster parents barely tolerated me."

"Oh." Chime heard the pain in her voice. Knowing her clumsiness with words, she suspected she would make matters worse if she pursued the subject. She tried to think of something more cheerful. "You have vigorous hair." It curled beautifully, so long and thick. "And quite the designs on your tunic."

Iris smoothed her hair, seeming unsure how to interpret the remarks. "Thank you."

Watching her, Chime admired the circles embroidered on Iris's sleeve. It reminded her of her crafts work at home, embroidering pillows and tunics, or painting designs on carts. She also enjoyed building the carts.

The shapes on Iris's sleeve sparked a mood spell in Chime; Iris wondered if Chime cared about anything besides hair and clothes. Disheartened, Chime turned away, looking up at the castle. She didn't know how to present herself to these people. Maybe she really was as shallow as they thought. Only Muller seemed to understand. And she could lose him. It startled her to realize how much she had come to look forward to seeing him each day. She hoped she was right about Iris, that the other girl had less magic talent than herself.

After they had walked for a while, Iris tried again. "Do you think we will have a war with Harsdown?"

"I can't really say." Chime had no idea. She had never paid much attention to events outside her village.

"I have heard rumors." Iris's forehead furrowed, a line between her finely etched brows. "Messengers came through town, merchants, minstrels, men looking for work, families seeking new land. They told of Harsdown building up its army." She gestured toward the northwest, where Harsdown lay beyond the mountains. "How can King Varqelle put so many resources into an army while his country starves? I don't know which would frighten me more, that it is true he takes so cruelly from his people or that he has more resources than we realize, enough to conquer us."

Chime felt denser by the moment. It had never occurred to her to consider such matters. "I've no idea."

Iris glanced at her. Although she tried to smile, she came across as sad more than anything else. "You and Muller seem well suited."

Chime didn't think she was being complimented. She spoke stiffly. "I'm sure His Highness agrees."

They continued on in silence.

Chime sat in the twilight, alone, on a bench curving around the window alcove at the top of the Starlight Tower. Tears rolled down her face.

"I'm not stupid," she whispered. "I'm not superficial or small-minded or vain." No matter how many times she said it, she couldn't forget the look on Iris's face, the same one she saw from Lord Firestoke

or King Daron, even sometimes from Della. Only Muller didn't see her that way.

Even after only one day, Chime knew the truth: Iris would make a better queen. In one conversation she had shown Chime more about Harsdown than Chime had bothered to notice in the previous eighteen years of her life.

She leaned against the window, a rectangular pane that stretched from the cushioned bench to the ceiling, with glass circles inscribed within it, one on top the other. The twelve sides of the alcove each had a window panel, and every one glowed with Chime's green mage light, soft and fresh like leaves in the sun. Chime's lips trembled as her tears fell. She spread her palm over a glowing circle and a sense of well-being spread through her. But it wasn't real. No matter how many spells she made, nothing would change the truth. She wasn't good enough to become queen.

"Why do you cry?" Muller spoke from the shadowed entrance. He came and knelt on the bench, flattening the velvet cushions with his weight as he gathered her into his arms. Chime laid her head against his shoulder and put her arms around his waist. His mood came to her, focused by the windows, though they had stopped glowing, leaving her and Muller in the fading light of dusk.

"You are sad, too," she murmured.

He answered with pain. "She is a sapphire mage."

"Who?" Chime knew, but she couldn't bear to say.

"Della thinks Iris is a green mage, not as strong as you." He swallowed. "Della is wrong."

A tear ran down her face. "I will leave Suncroft."

"No!" He pulled her closer. "Not without me."

"It seems I cannot have you."

"Della doesn't know Iris is a sapphire," he said doggedly. "Nor does Iris. She cannot reach her gifts. I felt it the first time we met. She is stopped somehow, I don't know why. She may never find her potential."

"Did you tell Della?"

"I tried. Perhaps not as hard as I should, but I did try." He spoke with difficulty. "Della humors me. She doesn't believe I know anything."

"She is wrong."

He spoke bitterly. "I know how to cause harm."

"When you met Iris, you created a spell to sense her mind. It did no harm."

"No harm?" He made an incredulous sound. "You mean, except for almost destroying the life you and I might have together? Either that, or Iris goes without ever reaching her mage power."

"Almost destroying?" She knew so little about him, so few of his nuances and dreams, but the more she

learned, the more he occupied her thoughts. “We have a chance?”

He answered slowly, as if unsure he should reveal his mind. “If I disappear with you and leave a message behind refusing the crown, what can they do? They must choose a new heir. Iris could marry him.”

“King Daron will search for you.”

“Perhaps. But I think not so hard.” Muller sounded worn out. Older. “Brant Firestoke, Cube-General Fieldson, Della, all of them, they know the truth. I am no king. I never will be.”

“You will be a fine king. And Daron would search for you forever, Muller. He loves you.” As much as Chime longed to run away, it was wrong. “We must accept our duties. I should never have said I would leave Suncroft. If Harsdown attacks Aronsdale, we must do what we can to help our people.” Her voice caught. “Even if our very best is so very little.”

“Ah, Chime.” He pulled her closer, leaning his head against hers. “I feel a darkness coming. And I’ve no idea how to make it stop.”



10

## Pearls of Dawn

Summer passed in a haze of warmth, buzzing shimmer-flies, and blue skies. The farmers in the countryside around Croft’s Vale tended their fields, nurturing corn, wheat, alfalfa, yellow and orange gourds, and other crops that would feed them through the colder seasons. They planted in geometric shapes, triangles here, squares there, circles elsewhere, filling in extra corners with flowers.

Festivals lightened the long summer nights in Croft’s Vale, when country folk streamed into the village from miles around, families walking in together or riding painted carts pulled by oxen. Merchants came to the market from all across Aronsdale and other countries as well, filling the central square with stalls and people. At night, children ran through the cobbled streets waving sparklers. Dogs barked at them with enthusiasm and bounded onto barrels stored by the walls of taverns.

As the languid days cooled into autumn, a peddler rode into the village.

An unusual peddler.

Long and lean, with dark hair, he guided his wagon down one of the busiest streets. He stopped at the Clover Inn, where a wooden sign engraved with a clover swung by a sturdy chain. Bells hanging from the sign jingled in the breeze.

The man rented a room for himself, space for his wagon behind the inn, and a stall for his horse in the Clover Stables. Then he headed to the big common room of the inn, where patrons ate, drank, and gambled with marbles of many colors. After settling at a table and ordering a drink, he questioned the barmaid: Where might he find customers for his goods—goldware, crystal, china, many fine items for the discerning of taste, and coin, too, of course.

She had a ready answer: Castle Suncroft. Croft's Vale was prosperous, and some town folk might have interest in his wares, but the nobility were the ones who would buy large amounts.

So Anvil the Forged, disguised as an itinerant peddler, set up his cover for visiting Suncroft.

The knock came so early in the predawn hours that no hint of day yet lightened the sky. Muller groaned when Sam Threadman shook him awake.

"You've a visitor, Your Highness," his valet said.

"Go away," Muller mumbled. He pushed his pillow over his head. One of its tassels tickled his nose.

Sam pulled away the pillow. "You must come. It is important."

Muller grunted, tempted to order him away. But Sam wouldn't wake him without reason. He dragged himself out of bed and shuffled through his suite in his sleeping robe, his eyes bleared. Sam ushered him to the front parlor.

The instant Muller saw who waited for him, he came awake. "Lord Firestoke."

Brant looked as tired as Muller felt. He wasted no time. "You must come, Your Highness."

"What happened?"

"Your uncle." Brant's words fell like stones. "The king is dying."

As Muller entered into the dimly lit bedroom, a great weight seemed to press on him. He walked to the bed, torn with grief by the sight of the wasted man there, lost in voluminous covers of velvet and silk.

"Uncle Daron?" Moisture gathered in Muller's eyes. "Can you hear me?"

The king slowly turned his head. "Ah... I am glad you came."

"What happened?" Muller asked, bewildered. He knew his uncle tired easily these days, but Daron had seemed all right this morning.

"Too long..." The king's voice trailed off.

Muller looked around, desperate. Skylark, the castle healer, came to him, an older woman in a long flannel night dress and robe, with a braid of white hair hanging over her shoulder to her waist. She spoke in a low voice. "I have tried healing spells on him. From those, I know a vessel carrying blood in his brain

has burst.” Grief etched her face. “The damage was too much. I can ease his pain, but I cannot put back together what nature could never repair on her own. I tried—I—but I can’t—”

Muller laid his hand on her arm. “I understand.”

Tears glimmered in her eyes, what bards called the pearls of dawn, shed for those who passed away in the darkest hours of morning, before dawn gentled the sky with a new day’s hope.

“Nephew...” Daron said. “Come closer.”

Muller sat on the bed, taking care not to jostle his uncle. “I am here.”

Daron watched him with faded eyes. “You will be a fine king. Believe that.”

“Not yet. Please don’t go.” Muller couldn’t imagine life without him. Daron was his only family. He knew his uncle far better than his birth father, who had drowned when Muller was seven.

Daron answered in a papery voice. “I have stayed too long. Must see your lovely aunt, eh?” His smile curved, a shadow of its former strength. “Respect Brant Firestoke. If you argue with him less and listen more, you might find he has better advice than you think.”

Muller’s voice caught. “Yes, sir.”

“Remember...my love is always with you, son.”

Muller’s heart broke on hearing a word he had thought no one would ever use with him again. Son. His voice caught. “And mine is always with you, Father.”

Daron smiled. Then the king of Aronsdale closed his eyes and passed from the world of men to that of spirits.

The slam of fists against wood shook Unbent out of a restless sleep. Barely awake, dressed in old trousers, he staggered out of bed and pulled on a tattered shirt. Then he stumbled into the only other room of the cottage. His foster son was crouched on the splintered floor, half dressed, beating the ground with his fists, his unfocused gaze wild, his face pale under the tangle of his waist length hair and the two day stubble on his chin.

“Dani!” Unbent ran to him. He knelt and laid his hand on Dani’s shoulder. “What is it?”

Dani jerked away, his face contorted. A tear rolled down his face.

“Ai, Dani.” It tormented Unbent to see him in pain. “Let me help.”

But Dani could neither see nor hear his comfort, nor could he ask for what he needed. He rocked back and forth, his shoulders shaking with sobs, though he never made a sound.

Unbent stayed with him through the dark hours before dawn, his hand on Dani’s shoulder, offering comfort in the only way he could to his grieving son, though why Dani mourned, Unbent had no idea.



The people gathered on Mount Sky north of Suncroft, the only point in this region of Aronsdale higher than Castle Suncroft. They flowed around and up its slopes and filled the meadows, valleys, and hills all around, tens, hundreds, thousands of people, come from Croft's Vale and all the farms and towns within five days' travel of the castle. They stood in the pearly darkness before dawn. The wind fluttered their neck scarves and woolen capes, tunics, heavy leggings, and tasseled boots, all dark colors, brown, gray, black, somber violet and cobalt-blue.

The colors of mourning.

At the top of the hill, Muller stood with Chime. Brant and Della were with them, and Cube-General Fieldson, the head of the King's Army and the third King's Advisor. Chime's gray cape billowed around her like fog. The predawn light gave the world an unreal feeling. Five days had passed since King Daron's death, yet still she felt dazed. Muller had barely spoken since his uncle had passed away, silent as he went through the rituals and ceremonies that marked the death of a king, including the day Muller had spent in seclusion, as expected of the heir and future sovereign.

The Bishop of Orbs read the memorial in a clear, resonant voice that rolled throughout the hills, across the throng of citizens, all with their faces turned up toward him. When the Bishop finished, Muller spread the king's ashes on the wind, as Daron had requested in life, returning him to the land he had always loved.

Chime hadn't known Daron well and it saddened her that she would never have the chance now. Muller's grief overflowed into her heart. He mourned not only for his own loss, but for all Aronsdale.

Far down the hill, a peddler stood with a cluster of men from the Clover Inn. He listened to the memorial, his head bowed. People called him Wareman, for his gold and silver wares. Anyone seeing the glint in his eyes assumed it came from tears. Only he knew the truth. Anvil the Forged shed no tears for King Daron.

The glint was triumph.

## II

### Rebirth



Winter had followed King Daron's death, but now spring gentled the land, offering new life to the countryside. Chime stood in the doorway of Della's cottage, savoring the golden morning. The sky arched above, as blue as the glass bowls she used for breakfast each morning. To the west, Croft's Vale and its farmlands basked in the sunshine.

Far down the hill, Iris was picking skybells and yellow box blossoms. She wore the tunic and leggings adopted by most young, unmarried women. Iris preferred earth colors, greens and browns, with accents of blue, whereas Chime preferred yellow, gold, and ivory. It was one of the many things they didn't have in common.

And yet, for all their differences, Chime had come to like Iris during their months together. She had trouble expressing it, though. Iris unsettled her. If the other girl cared what people thought of her, it never showed. She often came late to lessons or arrived in disarray, upsetting the order Chime struggled to create for herself. Chime had gone out of her way to change her behavior so she fit in, and Iris never seemed to try at all, yet Chime always felt as if she were the one who was lacking.

Chime knew she would never have Iris's quick mind, but she did her best to make up for it by applying herself. She didn't regret agreeing to stay at Suncroft and become a mage, though she sorely missed her family. Although she felt no more ready today to be queen than she had a year ago, when she had first come here, at least she stayed on an even keel now.

She was less certain about Muller now, though. He had never spoken of his uncle's death and he had found reason after reason to postpone his coronation. Their wedding would take place when the Bishop of Orbs crowned Muller king. The delays left her off balance, uncertain how much he truly wanted her, for all that he might swear his love.

"Iris!" The sharp call came from nearby. Chime glanced over to see Della standing at the top of the hill, her hands on her ample hips, glaring down at her pupil.

Iris turned with a jerk, the wind wrapping her hair around her body. Then she started up the hill. Seeing her wayward student on the way, Della headed back to the cottage. Chime had long thought Della's home was the wrong place for Iris to study; the hills and woods touched Iris more deeply than Iris herself seemed to realize. But Chime's attempts to say so always ended up muddled and awkward, until she gave up trying to explain what she didn't really understand herself.

"Pah," Della grouched as Chime moved aside to let her enter the cottage.

"Morning, ma'am," Chime said cheerfully.

Della waved her hand as she disappeared inside. Chime started to follow, then decided to wait for Iris, who was almost certainly in a better mood than their teacher. Chime stood in the doorway, nervously fiddling with her hair. She never felt as if she measured up to Iris, but she longed to bridge the gap that kept them from becoming friends.

As Iris reached her, Chime smiled. "You look lively today." Then she winced. She meant to say lovely. It was true, though; the wind had whipped Iris's beautiful hair into a wild, lively mane. She could be a forest goddess. It made Chime feel very boring.

Iris blinked. "Lively?"

“Windblown.” Chime wished she could let her hair free that way. “Your hair is a mess.”

Iris stiffened, and belatedly Chime realized she could have phrased her comment better. Mercifully Iris chose not to take offense. “I don’t mind,” she said.

Chime’s spirits lifted as they went inside. She loved the cottage, with its windows in many shapes, some colored glass, some clear. Tinted sunlight suffused the room, warming the circular tables and the goldwood chairs with their carved backs. Throw rugs adorned the parquet floor, woven from yarn in blue, rose, and goldenrod colors. Blue sphere-blossoms in yellow vases added accents.

Della bustled in from the kitchen and waved at them. “Sit yourselves down, you two. What is all this playing about, eh? We have lessons.”

Chime and Iris moved to the table they often used by the windows. As the girls sat down, Della frowned at Iris. “Well then, don’t you look healthy today.”

Iris’s cheeks reddened. Chime understood perfectly. Saints knew, she had squirmed often enough under Della’s tutelage. And “saints” was right. They did know, for many of them took their essence from colors of the rainbow, which had special meaning for students of magecraft. The saints were actually spirits in ancient Aronsdale legends, including azure saints who glazed the sky blue and rose saints who added the blush to a young woman’s face.

Iris said only, “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Very healthy,” Della grumbled. “What with all the fresh air you get, out who-knows-where instead of studying.”

“Aye, ma’am.” Iris looked ready to escape out to the fresh air again, either that, or hide under the table.

“Aye, ma’am?” Della crossed her arms. “I would rather hear, ‘Aye, Mistress No-Cozen, I will be on time from now on.’”

“A-aye, ma’am,” Iris stuttered. “I mean, I willna be late.”

Chime sympathized with Iris, having often been on the spot with Della herself. She loved Iris’s lilting Tallwalk accent. Chime spoke with a southern burr, which resembled the Suncroft accent. It was one of her few advantages here; she didn’t sound provincial. But she would have given it up in a moment for the lyrical music of Iris’s accent.

With ahumph, Della went off to her office, probably to retrieve their class materials. Chime knew that beneath her prickly exterior, the mage mistress had a gentle heart. Not that Della would ever admit to such a secret.

Chime settled at the table, glad they were to start class. She tried to sound cheerful. “Yes, let us proceed, now that everyone is here.”

“I didna come that late,” Iris grumbled.

Chime could have hit herself upside the head with the heel of her hand. She never seemed to phrase her words well with Iris. She hid her fear with nonchalance, dreading the day when someone would discover Iris was the stronger mage. If only Muller would let them coronate him. After he and Chime married, it

would make no difference how many other comely, powerful mages showed up at Suncroft. But as long as he kept putting off his ascension to the throne, she risked losing him to Iris.

Chime answered self-consciously. "Did I say that?"

"Well then, is'n that what you meant?" Iris asked.

"Perhaps we have a language difficulty."

"Nay, Chime, I donna have a language difficulty."

Chime stiffened, afraid she had sounded dim-witted. "I'm sure you can't help it."

Iris poked her finger into a green box-blossom in the vase on the table. "An' I'm sure you canna help but notice, aye?"

"Language, like appearance, is an art form." Chime thought of Muller's sensuous voice. She would rather listen to him than most anyone, especially Della in a grouchy mood. "Some people have the gift for its graceful expression. Others don't. It isn't their fault."

Iris stared at her. "I swear, I do truly think sometimes you clang."

"Clang?"

"You know the word?"

"Of course." Chime hesitated. "Don't bells clang?"

"Aye, they do certainly."

"But I'm not a bell." That was her mother's name.

Iris sighed. "It is'n important."

Even more defensive now, Chime spoke tartly. "Your speech is so quaint." She regretted the words immediately, but it was too late to take them back.

An image jumped into Iris's mind, one so vivid that Chime caught it without trying, her spell tuned by the many shapes in the room: the other girl imagined Chime with a vase of flowers dumped on her head. Iris's lips curved upward.

Chime knew she should be offended, but the image made her want to laugh. "Why are you smiling like that?" she asked Iris, all innocence. She knew why, but she wanted to see what the other girl would say.

"Smiling?" Iris flushed. "Uh...I was thinking you look radiant this morning."

The easing of Iris's tone so relieved Chime that she barely listened to the words, instead responding to their intent. "Oh, well, in that case. Of course."

Iris spoke in a low voice. Chime wasn't sure, but it sounded like, "And humble."

“What did you say?” Chime asked.

“Bumble.” Iris floundered, obviously embarrassed that Chime had overheard her comments. “Bumble bees.”

“Bees?”

“They are, uh, sunny and bright. Like you.”

“Oh.” Confused, Chime smiled. “Thank you.”

Della returned then with scrolls, rescuing Chime and Iris from their excruciating conversation.

The lesson went well for a while, but then Della asked Chime to make light using a faceted sphere. Uncertain with her technique, Chime made an emotion spell instead. It focused through the powerful shape, revealing Della’s mood. The success so delighted Chime that she spoke before she thought.

“You’re frustrated with Iris,” Chime said. “You worry she will never achieve her potential.” The instant the words came out, Chime could have died. Saints almighty, couldn’t she watch her tongue?

It was too late to undo the damage. Iris rose to her feet. “Well, then, and it be a pity for us all.” Then she whirled around and strode away from the table. She grabbed her boots from the mat by the door and ran outside.

“Hai!” Chime stared at Della in dismay. “I am so very sorry.”

“It isn’t me who needs to hear the apology.” Della shook her head wearily. “I know you mean well. But you must learn to be more careful.”

Chime jumped to her feet. “I will go to her.”

Della also stood up. “Seeing you will only hurt her right now, I think. Let me talk to her first. Give her time to cool off. Then you can talk to her.”

Chime wanted to fix it now, to rush after Iris. But she knew Della was right. With reluctance, she said, “Yes. Of course.”

After Della left, Chime walked dejectedly back to the castle. A man was coming down from Suncroft. He was dressed like a peddler, with russet pants and a green vest over a shirt with billowy sleeves. He carried a large russet sack, one of the special type that had folding shelves inside made from sheepskin. His dark hair and narrow face looked familiar, but she couldn’t say why.

As they approached each other, he nodded, slowing to a stop. Chime spoke stiffly, afraid of saying the wrong thing again. “A fine morn, Goodman.”

“My pleasure, ma’am.” His smile didn’t touch his eyes. “You grace the sunlight with your presence.”

Chime felt terribly awkward with him. She wasn’t sure why; he seemed very nice. But something about him felt...odd. “Thank you,” she said.

He swung his sack off his shoulder and rested it on the ground. “Your betrothed drives a hard bargain,

milady.”

She hadn’t known Muller was bargaining for anything. “What wares do you sell, kind sir?”

His voice took on a peddler’s enthusiasm. “Gold plate like you’ve never seen. Here, let me show you.” He opened his bag.

“I really can’t—”

“Won’t take but a moment.” He pulled out a bundle and unwound the protective cloth. When he finished, he held a sparkling gold bowl inlaid with diamonds arranged in star patterns.

“Oh, it’s lovely.” Chime had never seen such a fine piece, even here at Suncroft where they had so many more beautiful things than she had ever imagined. “May I hold it?”

“Certainly.” He handed her the bowl. “I have table settings, goldware, serving platters.”

She beamed at him. “I will speak to Muller.”

“Ah, ma’am, that would be kind of you. Kind indeed.”

Chime gave him back the bowl. “Have a good day, sir.”

“That I will.” His eyes glinted. “I will indeed.”

It wasn’t until they parted that Chime realized why he made her feel odd. She had formed no mood spells with him. That itself wasn’t unusual; under normal circumstances, she tried to avoid making them so she wouldn’t intrude on the privacy of other people. But she didn’t have enough control to stop it from happening if she found herself unexpectedly confronted with strong shapes. Although the stars on the goblet could have sparked her power, she had felt no hint of the peddler’s mood.

Well, maybe she couldn’t draw on stars. Or perhaps it was their color. She did best with green, though she could use any color of a lower rank. Or maybe her control was improving after all.

Still, the incident tugged at her.

Iris ran through the trees, uncaring of her path. She came out on a bluff above Croft’s Vale. The village filled the valley below, pretty houses with thatched roofs, close enough for her to make out gardens and people, but too far to see the clutter and debris of so many inhabitants living together. Vines bloomed everywhere, spilling down trellises, winding up houses, and brightening flower boxes with rosy orb blossoms, star-flowers, green box-buds. The contrast with the rocky, sparse land of the Tallwalks where she had grown up made her heart ache.

She would miss this place.

Iris knew she wouldn’t be at Suncroft much longer. Chime had only put in words what they all realized: the talent Della had thought she saw in Iris was a ghost, like drifting mist that seemed to take form and shape for a moment, but quickly faded.

She knelt in the grass and bowed her head. A tear ran down her face.

“What is this?” a voice said. “We’ve hardly started the lesson and already you are leaving.”

With a start, Iris looked around. Della stood a few paces away, her hands on her hips and a scowl on her face.

“Hai, Della, admit the truth.” Iris rose wearily. “I donna have it in me to be a mage.”

Della came over to her. “Is that so?”

“Aye, that be so.”

“So now you think you can take my place?”

Iris blinked. “Well, sure as the sun shines, I would never be thinking such a thing.”

“No?”

“No, ma’am.”

Della glowered. “I am the one who decides if you have what it takes to study with me, young woman.”

“But I canna—”

“Pah.” Della motioned around them, taking in the sky and the distant, hazy mountains. “You see all this?”

“Aye, ma’am.”

“What is it?”

“Aronsdale.”

“Aronsdale, Hairs-in-Dale, that isn’t what I meant.”

Iris gazed over the enchanting panorama and breathed in air scented by sweet grass. “It is a place of beauty and serenity.”

“Serenity, pah. Aronsdale is a mess.”

“It is?”

“It will be, after Prince Muller’s coronation.”

“Della!”

“Well, it’s true.”

“You shouldna speak of His Highness so.”

Della spoke tiredly. “Then who will? He doesn’t want the throne.”

Knowing Della loved the prince as her own nephew, Iris understood what it took for her to make such an admission. Nor was it a surprise. Iris had long suspected Muller's reluctance to become king. But Aronsdale needed the royal family. The House of Dawnfield was the symbolic heart of the country; their loss would devastate the people.

"He is the heir," Iris said.

The older woman's voice quieted. "I speak to you privately, Iris, as one of the King's Advisors. We have delayed the coronation because if we push Muller, he may refuse the crown."

"But then who will be king?"

"We don't know. Probably one of his advisors, perhaps Brant Firestoke."

"Canna Chime reassure Muller? She is well an' sure a green mage." Iris spoke with difficulty. "I felt it this afternoon."

"She does have great gifts." Della sighed. "But one must also know how to use them."

Iris longed for Chime's gifts. Techniques were easy; Iris had no trouble learning those. But still she did no spells. Chime struggled to learn techniques, yet she made spells as easily as drinking water. If only they could combine their talents; together they might be the student Della deserved.

"It is only that the studies are new," Iris said. "She will learn."

Della sighed. "You are kind, Iris, especially given how she speaks to you."

Iris hadn't realized how well Della saw the tension between her young charges. The mage mistress seemed to know how to calm her. Della continued to talk, telling her of mages, and Iris' inner turmoil began to settle. When they spoke of King Daron's death, she saw how it had devastated Della, who usually hid her softer emotions.

Finally Della spoke of what would happen after Muller became king. "He needs capable advisors, people with intelligence, compassion and foresight." Her gaze didn't waver. "Someday you could be one of those advisors. You have both the strength of character and the mage power. Don't give up now."

Iris felt as if she were breaking inside. "I canna pretend to gifts I donna have."

"The power is there." Della made a frustrated noise. "I just don't know how to help you find it."

Iris indicated the woods around them. "This is the magic—trees, sky, flowers."

Della considered her. "The harder I push to make you study, the more you want to come out here."

"I donna mean disrespect, ma'am."

"I know, Iris." Della's expression turned thoughtful. "It's as if the studies drive you to seek the outdoors."

"It feels that way." Chime had several times tried to tell her the same.



“Do you have a special place here? One that makes you feel even closer to the land?”

Iris hesitated to reveal her secrets. But in her own gruff way, Della had mothered her this past year, easing Iris’s loneliness. When Della had realized how ill-at-ease her charge felt in the castle, she had brought Iris to the cottage, giving her a home. Iris felt she had given back so little, no hint of the gifts Della strove to awaken.

“I have a place where I go to be alone,” Iris offered.

“Will you take me there?”

Softly Iris said, “Aye.”

Trees and ferns enclosed the glade, curving around and overhead, hiding this hollow in the woods. A stream flowed off a stone ledge and fell sparkling into a pool. Shape-vines hung everywhere in colorful loops.

Iris sunk into the grass by the water. “I come here whenever I can.”

Della turned in a circle. “It is lovely.”

Iris’s tension trickled away. “It soothes.”

“Don’t you see what it is?”

“What do you mean?”

Della’s face gentled. “Look at the shape.”

Iris studied the hollow, paying attention to its form today. “I’ll be a frog in a fig. It’s a sphere!”

Della laughed. “In a fig, eh?” She settled herself on the grass next to Iris. “I have been through these woods many times and never did I see this place.”

“It’s always been here.”

“I recognize the waterfall and some trees. But a sphere? It wasn’t like this before. You have changed it.”

“Nay, Della. How could I?”

“Perhaps the plants respond to your mage power.”

Iris didn’t see how such could happen. And yet...each time she visited this hollow, it soothed her more than the last, giving her a peace that eluded her elsewhere. Could she have molded the shape? “It seems impossible.”

Della’s eyes lit up. “Iris!”

“Aye?”

“Make a spell here.”

Iris squinted at her. “That is an odd idea.”

“Maybe an odd idea is what you need.”

“I have no shape to focus my power.”

“But you do.” Della indicated the hollow.

Iris flushed. “Well then, sure, it be a sphere, too much for me.”

“Try.”

“I canna do it.”

Kindly, Della said, “You won’t know unless you try.”

Iris feared to try, lest she fail yet again. But if she never took chances, she might as well live her life in a hole. She breathed deeply, centering herself. Then she concentrated. The waterfall shimmered with rainbows, and blossoms hung from vines, all colors, like mage spells—

Red.

Orange.

Yellow.

Green.

Blue.

Indigo—

With a great surge of power, her mind opened.



He sat in his favorite spot in a corner, on the floor where he couldn't fall. His foster father had stopped urging him to use furniture; after Jarid had grown large and muscular, he asserted himself simply by refusing to move when his guardian tried to put him in a chair. He didn't know his father's true name; he had never understood the signs the older man used to communicate it. Jarid had thought of him as Stone since that long ago night when the man saved his life, protecting Jarid like an unbreakable stone when Murk would have killed him.

Now Jarid imagined spheres, beautiful spheres, glimmering and vibrant in his mind. Over the years they had helped him focus on Stone, until he could sense his father's every mood. Lately Stone worried Jarid would become so immersed in meditations, he would forget to eat.

Jarid sighed without sound. Meditation was his only escape. Since that night his world had ended with the death of his parents, he had neither seen nor heard. On the rare occasions when visitors came, he knew only because their moods differed from Stone's. His father loved him; others found him strange, crippled, disturbing. Mercifully, in these remote mountains few people visited. He and Stone lived alone, cut off from the world, never communicating with it, neither for gossip nor great news. Stone didn't know his son was heir to Aronsdale. He and Jarid were simply two people in the mountains.

A vibration came through the floor, the tread of feet. The aroma of meat tickled Jarid's nose. He had distant memories of eating steaks from gold platters, but over the years he had begun to wonder if his recollections of loving parents and a grandfather who ruled as king were no more than a fantasy he created to fill the void of his life.

Jarid lifted his head, feeling changes in the air. Stone was in front of him, probably kneeling. He waited, and a moment later Stone carefully placed a dinner plate made from chipped stone in his hands. Jarid accepted it to calm Stone, but after his father left, he set the plate down on the floor. Then he sat, savoring the sunlight on his face. On these rare sunny days, Stone opened the frayed curtains and uneven shutters, knowing Jarid enjoyed the warmth.

Eventually the sun moved across the sky, no longer sending its rays through the window. Sorrow at its passing came to Jarid. He rose and did his exercises then, working his legs, arms, torso, any part of his body that he thought needed training. It meant a great deal to him that he could manage this on his own. He worked out constantly, having little else to do but make thatching for the roof or wander outside when the cold, foggy weather cleared.

Eventually he tired and settled into his corner again. After resting, he ate his meal. The meat had gone cold and the gravy congealed, but Jarid didn't mind. Little touched him now. When he had first lost his sight, hearing, and voice, he had cried in silence for days, weeks, forever it seemed, unable even to feel vibrations in his throat that would have come had he been making sounds he couldn't hear. But over the years, he had become numb. He locked away his emotions, protecting himself. Now, full from his meal, he closed his eyes, more out of habit than for any need, and rested his head against the wall, content.

Shapes evolved in his mind.

He loved spheres. Even in that distant time he barely remembered, they had fascinated him. As a child, he had never understood why adults insisted he couldn't feel the moods of other people, or that a fully matured mage would have trouble doing what came so easily to him. They also claimed he couldn't heal, though he had made his kitten better when it had the wasting illness. So he had stopped telling people, except his mother, who believed him. She encouraged him to play shape-games that helped him focus.

Now he had nothing of her but those bittersweet games.

Jarid imagined cubes, rings, pyramids, bars, circles, polyhedrons, faceted orbs, and especially spheres, all in gem colors so lovely his heart ached. They were art to him. He knew, from Stone's mind, that he could light up a room. Jarid never saw the light—indeed, he had seen nothing since the night Murk had shattered his life.

Jarid had hated Stone that night, pounding the man with his small fists. As the years had passed, his hatred had faltered in the face of Stone's unexpected kindness. Jarid knew he soothed his foster father, that he helped heal emotional scars Stone had suffered, mired in the lonely destitution of these rocky hills where crops died and livestock starved. But nothing could ease Stone's crushing guilt.

Jarid knew that guilt.

Stone felt it every time he looked at the youth he had orphaned, every time he struggled to understand his ward's needs. If Stone had once been hard, the years had cracked his granite heart.

Jarid didn't know how he could both hate and love a person, yet he did. It didn't matter that Stone hadn't killed Jarid's parents; he had helped Murk attack the orb-carriage. But since that day, Stone had been a compassionate guardian, at first out of guilt, then later out of love, an emotion he couldn't hide from Jarid. In spite of Jarid's intent to remain cold, he came to return that love. He and Stone barely scratched out a living, but he didn't care; all that mattered had died that long ago night. Stone offered a refuge where he could withdraw from humanity.

Jarid had no idea how he appeared to other people, but he thought he must be hateful and hideous. He had felt that way since his parents died. Stone seemed to find him tolerable, but in the harsh reality of their lives, anything that wasn't actively lethal was tolerable. Jarid knew he should have prevented the crash that killed his parents, but how, he had no idea. He was a mage. He should have helped his parents. His mother had the power to save one life—and she had used it for her son.

She had died so he could live.

Moisture gathered in his eyes. Angry, he wiped it away. Struggling to banish his memories, he filled his mind with images. His thoughts expanded outward. And yet...today something was different. Tension built within him, a sense of straining, of reaching. His mental shapes blurred into a luminous rainbow fog.

Straining.

Reaching.

Seeking.

A tendril curled through the fog. Sweat broke out on Jarid's forehead. What invaded his solitude? He clenched the rough cloth of his trousers. Unaware and unknowing, the invader came closer, closer...

Leave me alone! The cry reverberated in his mind, and he suddenly felt foolish, reacting with such dismay to his own thoughts. For surely this "intruder" was no more than his own fevered imaginings.

But...he did feel it seeking, coming closer, so close. A green sphere vibrant with ferns wavered in his mind, a waterfall of light pouring through its brightness.

Beautiful sphere.

Sphere mage.

Rainbow.

And then he touched her mind.

Muller stood in the circular chamber atop the Mage Tower of Suncroft, across from the Starlight Tower in the southwest corner of the castle. This room was only a few paces across, with one window and walls made from polished silk-stone the color of pale violets. He hadn't come to look out, though. He had come for the shapes.

A thousand years ago a sculptor had carved these walls with a vine of shapes: a dot, a line; flat shapes from triangle to circle; three-dimensional shapes from pyramid to sphere. The engravings curled around the chamber at waist height, with vines of smaller forms rising and descending along the walls. The effect mesmerized Muller—and frustrated him painfully, for he could never focus with them. He had spent his life trying to achieve perfection in himself to counteract his mage flaws, but his every attempt failed.

Yet he never gave up. He kept hoping someday it would be different, that someday he would straighten the twists of his gift. Now he sat in the middle of the chamber and closed his eyes. Gradually his mind relaxed. When he had submerged into a trance, he opened his eyes and gazed at a hemisphere engraved on the wall in front of him. Light, he thought. He imagined the circular shape focusing it as a lens would focus sunlight.

Nothing.

After a while, Muller let his mind relax. He felt odd today, as if he stood on the edge of an abyss. He kept thinking of Iris, and it made him uneasy. Why did he feel as if she pushed him to the rim of that chasm?

The shapes on the curving walls intensified, until he saw them with a surreal clarity. Their power surged around his mind, a tangible force, but one denied to him. He reached for it, straining, and it eluded him.

Muller jumped to his feet, feeling as if he would burst. He heaved open the door and strode across the tower to another door. It opened into a room exactly like the one where he had just been—except imperfect shapes curled around the walls of this chamber, their forms either incomplete or distorted. Historians claimed the ancients had made the first chamber to help mages intensify their power and this one to imprison mages, trapping them with flawed shapes that diverted rather than focused their gifts.

Muller had his doubts. He had always wondered if other mages among his ancestors had also been born with this curse he suffered, an inability to use true shapes. His “talent” had to be in the Dawnfield line; mage traits were hereditary, another reason the queen had to be a powerful mage. This room could have been designed for them.

Again he sat cross-legged on the floor and centered himself. Power rose around him, erratic, dangerous, jagged. Opening his eyes, he focused on a shape, another hemisphere, this one with a chiseled gash in its upper arc. His power surged and he struggled for control, to focus the spells that wavered at the edges of his power.

Iris.

Why did he sense her? He searched with flawed spells, straining to understand. Incredibly, she was reaching with her mage gifts, not toward him, but across Aronsdale. Iris had finally harnessed her power. Dismayed, he fought the urge to lash out with his damaged spells and stop her before anyone realized her ability. He could never deliberately hurt anyone, especially Iris.

He felt the Other.

A power stirred unlike any Muller had known. It was impossibly far away; he should never have sensed it from here. But it was also impossibly huge. Unformed, untrained, and untamed, it filled the mountains like an immense bank of clouds. Iris reached across the valleys and mountains and rivers, beyond the forest and beneath the bowl of the sky, reaching, reaching, reaching—and touched that power.

Muller's world exploded in light.

Chime ran through the castle, her feet pounding on the stone floors. Muller's soundless scream reverberated in her mind, magnified by the uncontrolled burst of power that had torn through him. She took the spiraling stairs of the Mage Tower two at a time, never slowing as she passed landing after landing.

She came out at the top into an open area between two doors. Without hesitation, she heaved open the door on her right.

Muller lay sprawled inside the chamber.

Chime dropped down to kneel by him. He was lying on his side, his hair falling across his face. For one terrifying moment she thought he had died.

"Muller!" She shook his shoulder.

He rolled onto his back, opening his eyes, and she inhaled sharply, with relief. He stared up at the domed ceiling, his face dazed.

"Are you all right?" Chime struggled to form spell of soothing, but the engravings in the room disrupted her focus. Her spells ripped on their jagged edges and fell apart.

"Iris?" Muller asked groggily.

Chime wondered if she should be offended. "I am not Iris."

His eyes focused. "No, you aren't." A smile curved his lips. "But you are truly a welcome sight."

"Hai, Muller! You scared me."

He sat up slowly. "Iris found him."

Chime looked him over for injuries. "Found who?"

“A mage.”

“No! She discovered your secret?”

“Not me. Another mage.”

“But where?”

“I’m not sure.” He took a ragged breath. “We better find her. Everything just changed.”

Muller paced in the Receiving Hall, his boots thudding on its tiled floor. He didn’t see the sun-drenched room with its tessellated mosaics, didn’t see anyone but Iris in the high-backed chair, her hands folded in her lap. He wished he felt even a fraction as calm as she looked.

“Are you certain?” he asked.

“Aye, Your Highness,” Iris said.

“But Jarid is dead!” Muller stopped pacing. “My cousin, may he rest in peace, has been dead for fourteen years.” He feared to believe her. When Daron had died, Muller had lost the last person he could call kin. To hope his cousin lived—no, he didn’t dare.

Della was standing by Iris’s chair, her hand resting on its high back. “His body was never found.”

Muller resumed pacing, unable to stay still, his gait agitated. The floor was tiled in white hexagons, with blue hexagons nested within them, all the shapes too perfect to cause him trouble. “The rescue party thought he was thrown from the carriage when it went over the cliff. He could have fallen in any crevice. The caves and chasms in those mountains are a maze.”

“It does seem impossible he survived,” Della said.

Iris remained unperturbed. “Nevertheless, he did.”

Muller stopped and frowned at her. “If that were true, he would have come home.”

“How? He was a little boy.”

“Not anymore. So where is he?” Muller demanded, probably louder than necessary. He so desperately needed to believe Jarid would have come back had he been able.

“I don’t know,” Iris said.

Her composure flustered him. He ought to quit bellowing; it wasn’t helping. A good leader would encourage his people, win their confidence. But he didn’t know how to be a good leader.

In a quieter voice, he said, “You say he exists, yet you don’t know where.”

“I can find him.” Her face paled, making him suspect she had little desire to repeat her spell.

Muller wished Daron were here to advise him. He missed his uncle so intensely, he hurt inside. Although he could seek counsel from Brant, he had never been comfortable with the elder man, mainly because Brant had so many doubts about Muller's ability to rule. Knowing the saturnine lord was right didn't help Muller's confidence.

He came to a decision. "Very well," he told Iris. "Find him. Bring him here."

"Your Highness—" She hesitated.

Would she refuse? Worry made him stutter. "Yes, yes, speak up."

"Prince Jarid is the heir," she said.

"I know that."

"He can claim the crown."

"I doubt you will find him, but if by some incredible chance you do, he can have the title." The words came out before Muller had time to think them through.

Everyone froze, staring at him. He knew he shouldn't speak of his desire to give up the crown. It weakened his already shaky relations with the royal court, which would remain his court if Iris had made a mistake about this, which seemed likely.

"Your coronation is in ten days," Della said. "That hardly gives us time to look."

"Delay the coronation." It wouldn't be the first time. He had struggled these past months with an internal battle, dreading the crown but knowing he couldn't wed Chime until he accepted his title. If he had thought he was good enough for her, and for Aronsdale he would have set the coronation for tomorrow.

"It's been months," he said. "A few more days won't matter."

"It's been too long." Della pushed back the tendrils of silvery hair that had escaped the roll at her neck and were curling around her face. "Saints, Muller, you know the people are mourning King Daron. We've just come through a hard winter. They need the coronation as a symbol that life will continue. And Aronsdale needs a committed leader."

At the mention of his uncle, Muller felt bereft, missing a part of himself. He knew she was right, but he couldn't answer.

"The bishop canna coronate Lord Muller," Iris said calmly. "Prince Jarid is the heir."

Muller squinted at her. She had never called him "Lord" before. Unlike in the surrounding realms, in Aronsdale only the heir to the crown and his brothers used the title of prince. Muller had come into it only after Jarid died. Except Jarid wasn't dead, or so Iris claimed. How could this tale be true? No matter how long it took or how painful the truth, he had to know.

He took a deep breath. "If my cousin is alive, bring him to me."





13

### The Lost Refuge

Unbent heard the strangers on the mountain before they came into view. Even if they were trying to hide their approach, their party was too large to keep secret. He waited at the edge of the clearing and listened to the clatter of hooves, of horses struggling for purchase on the steep ground. He didn't understand how they had found his cottage. No path led here through the stunted forest.

Maybe they hadn't found him. It could be coincidence they came up here. Perhaps a hunting party had gone astray in their search for game and had no idea anyone lived in this forsaken place. But that hope stretched even his credulity too far; these desolate woods had no game to entice a hunting party.

Unbent strode back to the cottage and opened the creaking door. He heard Dani inside working on thatching for the roof. The youth could do it by touch faster than Unbent had ever managed with sight.

A call came from behind him. "Ho! You there."

Unbent froze. Desperate, he reminded himself this wouldn't be the first time visitors had stumbled upon his cabin. He would do as always, introducing Dani as his son. Most people went out of their way to avoid the foreboding youth who could neither hear nor see. He turned slowly—

And knew he had trouble.

Eight soldiers were leading their horses across the clearing. The quality of their mounts and gear would have warned him this was a royal party even if they hadn't been wearing the king's colors, indigo, gold, and white. Their tunics and leggings, their chain mail and heavy boots, the insignia on their shields—it marked them as officers, seven hepta-lieutenants and a circle-captain. Three others came with them: a tall man with gray hair swept up from his forehead, surely a lord of importance; an older woman with a no-nonsense aura of authority; and a lovely young woman whose golden-brown curls framed her face and fell down her back.

Unbent stood in the doorway, his hands braced against the door frame. Icy wind blew his hair back from his face.

Within moments, people and horses were swirling before his cottage. The circle-captain came to him. "Good morn."

"My greetings." Unbent swallowed. "What brings the king's men here?"

The gray-haired lord walked forward with the older woman. The man stood taller than Unbent, indeed taller than anyone else there. He spoke with an aura of authority. "We come in friendship, Goodman—"

He let the title hang like a question.

“Unbent.” He could barely say his name.

The man nodded to him. “My greetings, Goodman Unbent. I am Brant Firestoke.” Although he gave no title, Unbent could hear the “Lord” that should precede the name.

Firestoke indicated the woman with him. “Della No-Cozen, Shape-Mage Mistress of Suncroft.”

Dizziness swept over Unbent. The mage mistress at the castle stood extraordinarily close to the king. And now that he thought about it, Firestoke sounded like the name of the king’s highest advisor. Somehow he made his voice work. “King Daron honors me to send such notables to my home.” He felt panicked rather than honored.

His guests regarded him oddly. Firestoke said, “King Daron passed away over three months ago.”

Ai! Unbent thought he should quit now and curl up on the floor. “My—my apologies. I meant no offense.”

“None given,” the mage mistress said briskly. “We come to see your companion.”

His companion? Dani, perhaps, though he didn’t see how they could know he had a foster son. Perhaps they were guessing, trying to discover information. He spoke carefully. “I am pleased to help King—” He hesitated, unsure who to name. “King Muller. But I don’t know who you mean by my companion. I have no wife.”

Firestoke’s voice crackled like parchment. “Prince Muller has not yet had his coronation.”

Saints above. Unbent hadn’t believed a person could blunder so often in so short a time. “I am sorry. Terribly sorry.”

The young woman came over and inclined her head with respect, which flustered him even more. No one nodded that way to him. She dressed as a noble woman, in a fine velvety tunic and sky-blue leggings, with a gray riding cape and a billowy hood that covered about half her hair. But she spoke with the cadences of the Tallwalks, a mountainous region here in western Aronsdale.

“My name is Iris,” she said. “May we see your ward?”

Unbent felt as if he were withering inside. How could they know about Dani? They couldn’t take his son. It would kill him. “I’m sorry.” His voice shook. “I don’t know who you mean.”

Firestoke glanced at the captain. The officer nodded in response and then approached Unbent. “We regret intruding on your privacy. However, we must see the youth who lives here.”

Unbent wanted to refuse. “I have no—”

“Goodman Unbent.” The captain spoke firmly. “We must see him.”

Unbent knew then that if he denied them entrance, they would come inside anyway. With courtesy, perhaps, but without hesitation. Feeling bowed under a great weight, he walked into his house. Boots and mail clanked as they followed. He stopped at Dani’s room, but he couldn’t go inside. He couldn’t do it.

A hepta-lieutenant stepped past him and pushed open the door, which had no knob. It swung inward, creaking on rusted hinges. Dani was sitting on the floor across the room, his back to the wall, his head lifted, his unfocused gaze turned in their direction.

"I'm sorry," Unbent whispered to him. Unfamiliar smells filled the cabin: dust and mud, wet wool, leather. Dani would know people had arrived.

The youth lurched to his feet, his fists clenched in front of him, alarm on his chiseled face. Unbent tried to go to him, but two lieutenants grasped his arms, one on each side, firmly holding him back.

Unbent strained in their grip. "Don't hurt him!"

Another lieutenant stepped into Dani's room, but then Iris spoke. "No. Let me go."

The officer glanced at Firestoke. When the lord nodded, the officer stepped back, letting Iris move by him. She walked toward Dani, slowly, her tread muted on the rough planked floor. The soldiers tensed, their hands on the hilts of their sheathed swords. Attuned to mages after so many years with Dani, Unbent felt Mistress No-Cozen's spells swirl in the room. Soothing spells. For his son.

Dani stretched out his arms, his palms outward as if to push back the invaders. Iris stopped a few paces away. She took an audible breath and then continued on, right up to him. The officers followed, ready to protect her.

Iris touched Dani's shoulder.

He swung around, his fist half open. The heel of his hand hit her shoulder and she jumped back, her face suffused with color. Then he jerked up his arms to defend himself. It dismayed Unbent to see his son so close to the edge, fighting his panic. He tried again to go to Dani, but the officers tightened their grip on his arms until it became painful. He had no mail, no armor, nothing but the flimsy, frayed cloth of his shirt.

"Let me go," Unbent said. "He's frightened."

"Give her time," Della murmured.

Iris went back to Dani. She brushed his arm, her touch so careful, her fingers only rustled the faded cloth of his shirt. He turned toward her, his shoulders hunched, his back pressed to the wall and his arms in front of his body. Unbent could only imagine how he must feel, faced with a room full of strangers he could neither see nor hear, people he had no reason to believe wouldn't harm him.

The soldiers had moved into the room and were only a few paces away from Dani and Iris now, except for the two who held Unbent. He fought his growing agitation, knowing it would do Dani no good if he struggled with these two and they knocked him out.

Then Dani reached toward Iris, his gesture curious rather than defensive. He wanted to touch her, it was how he greeted people. Unbent's hope leapt; the boy was going to let her stay. Her serene manner had calmed him. It would be all right, he wouldn't snap after all—

Then one of the lieutenants grasped Dani's arm.

"No!" Unbent cried. "Don't touch him!"

His warning came too late. In the same instant Dani touched Iris's cheek, the lieutenant pulled him away from the girl.

Dani panicked.

The boy whipped around, his fists swinging, his face contorted. Unbent went a little crazy himself then, wrestling with the men who held him back. As he struggled, he saw Dani grappling with three soldiers. They didn't strike out; instead, they tried to calm him. It did no good. Dani was a large man, well developed from work and exercise, and he fought with single-minded intensity. But as well as his physical prowess served him, it wasn't enough. Every time he freed himself from one tormentor, another caught him. No matter how great his strength or speed, he faced too many opponents—and they could see.

It took three soldiers to immobilize Dani. They pressed him against the wall and one of them laid a cloth against his face, covering his nose and mouth.

"Leave him alone!" Unbent shouted. One of his captors raised his fist to strike him, a blow that could break bones, judged by the man's muscled size. Unbent froze, his chest heaving. After watching him with narrowed eyes, the man lowered his fist.

Whatever soaked the cloth worked its evil on Dani. The boy sagged forward and would have fallen if the warriors hadn't held him up. His head dropped to his chest and his lashes lowered over his eyes.

"Why are you doing this?" Unbent cried. "He has hurt no one."

"But others have hurt him." Firestoke's voice came out like ice as he turned to Unbent, his face set in hard lines. "You will pay for what you have done, highwayman. You will pay."

Then they took Dani away, out of the cottage, without even letting Unbent tell his son farewell.

"The peddler troubles me."

Muller paced the tower chamber, stalking past Chime. She stood by the curving wall with its imperfect shapes, trying to forget the uncertainty that had rent their lives. Della and Iris had been gone for ten days. Their absence felt like a swinging blade. So for now, they tried to think of other matters.

"Why don't you like Wareman?" she asked. "He is courteous. And his goods are of high quality."

He stopped in front of her, his angel's face shadowed by the sweep of his hair. "Something in him is missing."

She laid her hands on his shoulders. "People say that about me, too. Sometimes a person doesn't come across well, even when they have good intentions."

Muller slid his arms around her waist. "Anyone who says such about you is utterly blind."

She dimpled. "Or else you are."

"Never." He kissed her, then let her go and indicated the room, with its walls of pale violet stone

adorned by engravings. They reminded her of the strategy game Rocklace she had played with her parents and older brother, where a player earned points by making designs with small polished stones.

“Do you feel the power in this room?” he asked. “Does it make jagged lines in you?”

She shook her head. “I can’t grasp it. I wish I could understand why the spells are so different for you.”

He gave a self-deprecatory laugh. “So do I.”

Chime hesitated. “You are different with me.”

“What do you mean?”

She picked her words with care, trying to avoid the wrong ones. “You let me see your humility. Your vulnerability. To everyone else, you are this beautiful, glittering box with no flaw. But you let no one open the top and see inside.”

“Because if they do, they will discover the truth. My defects. And then?” He averted his gaze. “I truly hope this man Iris found is Jarid. Aronsdale needs a king. Not me.”

It made her ache to see him so convinced he would be less able to govern Aronsdale than someone who had grown up away from the court all these years. “You have spent half your life preparing to wear the crown. You shouldn’t denigrate yourself.”

Muller laughed softly. “I do believe, angel, that you are the only person alive who believes I am capable of denigrating myself.”

Chime wanted to protest, but telling him other people thought he could denigrate himself would hardly be the most helpful statement. “I don’t know about that. But you shouldn’t do it.”

He lifted his hand and lightly brushed her cheek. She felt an echo of power, as if a spell stirred. Suddenly light flashed at Muller’s fingertip and a spark jumped from his hand to her face. She stumbled back, her palm over her cheek, her skin burning.

“No!” He raised his hands, palms out. “Chime, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s all right.” She lowered her hand from her face. “It doesn’t hurt.” And it was true; the burning had faded.

“I despise myself.” He turned on his heel and strode out of the room.

She exhaled as the echoes of his power receded. At times like this, when it gathered within him, she sensed its currents, wild and chaotic. If only he could learn to harness that incredible power. But she knew of no spell that could heal his troubled gift.

Pyramid-Secretary Quill was part of the staff assigned to Chime. Today she and Quill sat at a polished table in Chime’s ivory parlor. Quill was arranging her schedule. In the morning, Chime would study with Della, learning magecraft. At noon, she would lunch with emissaries from the Blacksmith’s Guild who represented metal workers in Aronsdale, discussing how to keep prices for their work accessible to the

majority of the population without undercutting the living of the blacksmiths. In the afternoon, she would see her history tutors, who were teaching her more detail than she had ever imagined wanting to know about the country she would serve as queen. For supper, she would dine with Muller.

Chime dreaded meeting with the guild representatives. Her grasp of economics barely extended to knowing how many coins it took to run an orchard. Discussing the finances of an entire country gave her a stomachache. It didn't help that Mistress Forge, the iron-haired woman who led the Blacksmith's Guild, made Della No-Cozen seem cuddly in comparison. Mercifully, Brant Firestoke would do the negotiating at the meeting. But Chime feared her lack of experience would show, adding to her mortifying reputation of being slow in the mind.

Still, Chime was learning, despite herself. Her mother, Bell, would be proud to see her progress. Bell had tried for years to teach her these type of organizational skills, which Chime would have also needed as an orchard keeper. And Chime had to acknowledge she benefited from learning the history of Aronsdale; as queen, she would need to make wise decisions, not repeat past mistakes. When she wrote her mother, she spoke about her studies as positively as she could manage, but in truth she felt stifled. Knowing she would see Muller tonight, though, made the rest more palatable.

"You won't have many breaks." Quill showed her the schedule. "Perhaps a few minutes after lunch—"

"You might want to wait on that," a brisk voice said.

Chime looked up with a start. Della No-Cozen stood in the doorway of the parlor.

"Della!" Chime jumped to her feet. "When did you get back?" She felt as if she were teetering on a precipice. If Iris hadn't found Jarid Dawnfield, Muller would take the crown and Iris would become his queen.

Della had an odd quality. She seemed...subdued. She glanced at Quill.

The secretary stood up and bowed to Chime. "Shall we finish later, milady?"

"Yes. Of course." Chime nodded to her. "Thank you."

Della waited until Quill left and closed the door. Then she said, simply, "We found Prince Jarid."

Relief flooded over Chime. "That is wonderful!"

The mage mistress wasn't smiling. "Perhaps."

"What is wrong?"

"Chime—" Della paused.

"Tell me."

Della spoke tiredly. "He has lived all this time in the Boxer-Mage Mountains, barely scratching out a living with his guardian. He is like a wild man." Then she said, "And he is deaf, blind, and mute."

Chime stared at her. "Saints above. What happened?"

“We think he was hurt in the carriage accident.”

“Who is his guardian?”

“A man called Unbent.” Della spread her hands out, her palms upward. “He tells us nothing. And Jarid can’t speak.”

Chime’s thoughts whirled. “What does it all mean?”

Della shook her head. “The youth we found is unfit to rule, but Iris swears he is the Dawnfield heir.”

“What do you think?”

“Have you seen the portraits of King Daron as a youth?” When Chime nodded, Della said, “If you clean this man up, he would look almost exactly like Daron in those pictures.”

Chime tried to make sense of it all. “Did you bring him here?”

“Yes. They had to keep him unconscious, though.”

“But why?”

Della grimaced. “He otherwise attacked everyone who came near him.”

“Surely his guardian can calm him down.”

“Brant Firestoke left the man behind, in the custody of several officers from the King’s Army.”

It seemed harsh to separate Jarid from the person who took care of him. Chime could imagine how frightened Jarid must have been to leave the home he had known for years, unable to hear or see what was happening, or speak in protest.

And yet—as much as Brant often angered her, it always seemed to turn out that he had good reason for his actions. She was usually too busy resenting his lectures to admit that to him, but she acknowledged it to herself.

“Did Unbent mistreat Prince Jarid?” she asked.

“We don’t know.” Della rubbed her eyes, her fatigue showing through her usual stoicism. “I didn’t have that impression, but we don’t know enough yet. Brant separated them because he doesn’t want Unbent to influence the person who may rule Aronsdale, even if in name only.”

Chime didn’t see how Jarid could be king. If they crowned him, they would also want him to marry Iris, for in unleashing her gifts, she had revealed her full power. Chime knew Iris felt a debt to the King’s Advisors, who had made it possible for her to leave a life with no future and come to Suncroft. If they pushed for the marriage, she would probably agree. That meant a country girl with no experience would end up as the acting ruler of Aronsdale. Had Iris spent her life preparing for the title, Chime thought she would do well. But only Muller had that training. He couldn’t take the crown unless the King’s Advisors refused to accept Jarid as heir. They had serious doubts about Muller’s suitability, yes, but those might pale compared to Jarid’s difficulties.

A sinking feeling came over Chime. Together, Muller and Iris could do a far better job for Aronsdale than she and Muller. The idea tore at her. If Iris believed Jarid was the rightful heir, though, then even if the King's Advisors decreed otherwise, she might refuse to marry Muller. Her loyalty to the royal family would most likely outweigh her sense of debt to the King's Advisors. But if she refused their wishes, it would set her against them and cause a crisis for Aronsdale.

Chime grimaced as her thoughts circled around and around. "This is a mess."

"Yes." Della regarded her bleakly. "A mess."



14

### Shadowed Mage

Two guards flanked the door of the chamber, large and imposing, in chain mail, the hilts of their sheathed swords gleaming at their sides. The auburn one spoke to Chime, apologetic. "I'm not sure you should enter, milady. Perhaps if you came back with Lord Firestoke—?"

Chime lifted her chin, striving not to let them know how much they flustered her. She was a mage; she outranked them in the royal court. She didn't want to ask Brant, who would almost certainly forbid her to visit this tower room. He was forever constraining their lives.

She gave the guards a haughty stare she hoped would hide how intimidated she felt. "I don't need the permission of Frant Birestoke."

The auburn man cleared his throat, though it sounded like he was trying to cover up a startled laugh. The other guard ducked his head, smiling. A flush spread on her cheeks. No wonder people thought her stupid, the way she garbled her words when she was nervous.

"Milady," the auburn guard began.

She spoke more carefully this time. "Shall I tell the mage mistress you refused me?"

He blanched, the color draining from his ruddy cheeks. "Nay, milady, please, you needn't bring Mistress No-Cozen."

Having been the source of Della's ire on more than one occasion, Chime sympathized with his alarm. "Very well. Please open the door."

He hesitated, then spoke firmly. "If he wakes up, you must call us in immediately."

Relief washed over her. "I will do so, Lieutenant."



He bowed to her. Then he opened the door and let her inside, giving her the chance to satisfy her raging curiosity.

The chamber was a tiled box, with eight walls, a domed ceiling and a tiled floor. On the octagonal table, a rose-glass lamp burned with a low flame, casting more shadows than light. A four-poster bed stood against the far wall. As Chime's eyes adjusted to the dimness, she made out a man asleep on the bed.

Jarid.

She went close enough to see him sleeping on his side, his wrists tied to a bed post. Her breath caught. They dared too much, binding him that way. Every one of them surely recognized this man. He had the same dark hair as the portraits of the young King Daron, the same handsome features and broad shoulders, the Dawnfield long legs. He resembled the late king, yes, but even stronger, taller, more fine of feature.

The resemblance ended there, however. King Daron had epitomized culture and elegance. This man was wild. He wore rags, all gray. A scar ran down his neck from his ear. His hair lay across his back in matted tangles and stubble covered his chin.

Chime didn't envy Iris marrying this stranger. Yet Iris continued to insist he was Jarid. Anyone could see his heredity, but if Iris expressed any doubt at all, no one would hold her to her initial judgment. Too much was at stake to make an error. Chime knew Iris had no wish for the crown; the Tallwalk mage stood by her assertion because she was honest. If Iris said this man was the grandson of the late king, she believed it to be true.

The man stirred, restless, and an odd sensation came to Chime. At first she didn't understand. Then she realized spells were swirling around her, diffuse, hard to define, unfocused. He was a mage. His power suffused the room even as he slept, pouring through her with a strength she had never experienced from Muller, Della, or Iris. He wove a type of mood spell she had never encountered before. It made her recall her youth in Jacob's Vale, the balmy summer nights when she and her friend Merry had snuck off to the barn and stayed up late, making squares of red light when no one else could see. They used to tell stories, especially those of legendary power within the Dawnfield line, whose ancient kings had reputedly wielded incredible mage gifts. But a limit existed. A mage might be strong enough to save a life, but no more, for the mage had only one life to give if the spell somehow turned around.

But those were only stories. It made Chime wonder if she overestimated the power of this stranger; whatever dreams haunted his sleep might create a misleading sense of his abilities, a sense, magnified by the high-level shape of this room. She hoped so, for she dreaded to think what it would mean if a mage of such incredible—and untamed—power were let loose in Aronsdale.

Chime found Muller at the top of the Mage Tower in the chamber with perfect shapes. He stood by the window staring out at Aronsdale. Going to stand behind him, she bowed her head and set her palm against his back.

"Chime." He whispered her name.

"You must do what you believe right." Her eyes felt hot with unshed tears. "Even if it means taking Iris as your bride."

“She deserves better. So do you.” He spoke with difficulty. “Aronsdale deserves better.”

“You misjudge yourself.”

He turned then and pulled her into his arms. She held him close, her cheek against his shoulder.

“I know what I must do.” His words sounded muffled against her hair.

She couldn’t bear to hear any more, but she had to know. “What have you decided?”

He drew back to look into her face. “For so long I feared the day when I would have to wear the crown. Then you came, and I began to believe that maybe, just maybe, I could be a good king. You made me believe. I cannot tell you how much that meant to me. For the first time in my life, I’ve felt as if I were more than everyone’s last choice.” His voice caught. “Now I must do what is right for Aronsdale—regardless of what I want.”

Chime touched the tears on his face. “I know.”

Della paused in the doorway of the room in the Starlight Tower. Unaware of her, Iris sat in a chair by the bed, watching Jarid. The guards had bound the unconscious youth’s wrists to a bed post, but Iris must have freed him. He lay on his back now, sleeping, one hand resting palm down on his stomach.

She wished Iris hadn’t untied him. The girl believed she could have coaxed Jarid to come of his own free will, given more time. Perhaps she could have. But they had bungled their chance to earn his trust up at his cabin in the Boxer-Mage Mountains. The range seemed apt, somehow. The mountains took their name from a hermit who had retreated there centuries ago, embittered when he lost his family. Only the desperate lived in those cruel peaks, outcasts who had little to lose. Such as Jarid? No one knew what he might do when he awoke.

Iris reached out to the stranger asleep on the bed, then pulled back her hand and set it in her lap, as if embarrassed by her wish to touch him. Her impulse didn’t surprise Della. For all his ragged appearance, he was a compelling man. How he and Iris had formed their remarkable bond or what would come of it, Della couldn’t say, but she had no doubt it existed.

She spoke quietly. “Muller has made the announcement.”

Iris turned with a start. Seeing Della, her shoulders hunched. She didn’t ask what Della meant; she seemed to know instinctively. “He stepped aside for Jarid?”

Della nodded, suddenly tired. “Yes.” She crossed the room and sunk down into a chair next to Iris. “It is official. Muller accepts this man as heir to the crown.”

At first Iris said nothing, as if she were absorbing the news. Finally she spoke. “Will he help us with Prince Jarid?”

Prince. Iris had never doubted Jarid deserved that title. In her mind, Della could see Muller’s haunted expression as he told her of his decision. “He plans to leave Suncroft. He thinks it best.”

“But, nay! He canna just walk away.”

“I’m afraid he can.”

“He must realize Jarid canna rule.”

Della understood Muller’s decision; for him to stay at Suncroft after he gave up the crown could be seen as a deliberate provocation of Jarid. Aronsdale couldn’t have two kings. But Jarid needed his cousin’s help, but Muller didn’t believe he could do more good by staying, and no argument Della had tried would convince him otherwise.

“He says the King’s Advisors can help.” Della thought of Brant’s unconcealed disapproval of Muller. “What can they answer? Muller knew they expected to do exactly that with him. He says Brant is better suited to govern.”

Iris regarded her steadily. “Muller is angry.”

“Perhaps. But he believes what he says.” Della glanced at Jarid. She envied his sound sleep. Regardless of how serene he looked now, however, he could be dangerous when he awoke. “You shouldn’t have untied him.”

“What will we do,” Iris demanded. “Take him to his coronation in chains?”

“If we must.”

“This is all wrong.”

“Iris—”

“Yes?”

“I’m afraid there’s more.”

“More what?”

“From the King’s Advisors.”

“What do they say?”

Della spoke carefully. “We are all in agreement.”

Iris regarded her warily. “About what?”

“Only a sphere mage could have reached across the great distance that separated this man from you.”

Iris nodded, her face earnest. “Aye, Della, I think it is true. His talent is incredible.”

“I didn’t mean him.”

Iris frowned. “Well and sure, it couldna been me.”

“No one else.”

“It was him who touched my mind.”

“I was there. You initiated the contact.”

“That canna be. Never have I even lit a room.”

Della gentled her voice. “A room, no. But the trees and meadows, I think yes. The countryside stirs your power. That is why you have had so much trouble making spells. Inside the cottage, you didn’t know how to reach the core within you.”

Iris started to protest, then stopped. Della wondered how long she would avoid the truth. She kept at the girl, gently but without relenting. Finally Della said, simply, “Our greatest shape-mage must marry the king.”

“Aye. Chime.”

“No. Not Chime.”

Comprehension swept across Iris’s face. “Nay, Della. I canna be queen!”

“You must.”

“Nay!”

“I am sorry. I know this is a shock.” Della feared Iris would flee back to the Tallwalk Mountains, leaving Chime to marry Jarid. It would be a disaster. Muller would fight it. So would Chime. If they eloped, what then? Della had been lucky to find Chime and Iris, both unusually strong mages. She doubted she could find a third of child-bearing age. Aronsdale would have no mage queen.

Iris averted her gaze. “He is like a wild, injured creature. He doesn’t even know my name.”

Della laid a hand on her arm. “We need you. Please don’t leave.”

Iris gave her a startled look. “I can refuse?”

“We won’t force you to marry.” If they made Iris take the title and its responsibilities against her will, her anger could bring grief to Aronsdale. “But we need you. Desperately. Please don’t turn away now.”

Sorrow made Iris’s voice bittersweet. “I canna be what you want.”

“Then be yourself.”

“It is not enough.”

Della wished she could show Iris the potential that shone within her, untapped and new. “I believe it is.”

Iris drew in a shaky breath. “When I agreed to come to Suncroft, I gave my word that I would do my best to fulfill what you saw in me. I had so little before. No family, no future, no one who wanted me. You have given me a home, though I give nothing back at all. If this marriage be so important—” Her

voice cracked. "I can try, Della. But I canna promise I willna fail."

"Thank you." Della was breaking inside, seeing how much this hurt Iris. "None of us can make such a promise. We can only do our best."

"Aye." Moisture filled Iris's eyes. "None of us."

"It is a disaster." Brant stood at the window with Della gazing across to the Starlight Tower. He could see into a room there lit by orbs-bud candles. Iris sat next to the bed, her head bent as she kept vigil on their slumbering prisoner.

Della spoke wearily. "This matter of heredity reeks. We are asking children to do jobs people twice their age find crushing."

Brant could feel the weight of their youth. Jarid had just turned twenty and Iris was barely nineteen. For all that Muller frustrated him, Brant would have considered him best suited of these three to take the crown. Muller not only had the training, but of late he had shown a new maturity. With a good set of advisors, he might have managed. Jarid and Iris were ciphers—very confused ciphers.

"She has no idea what to do," Brant said. His fear for Aronsdale flared like mage-light. Nor was it only the country; he had grown fond of Iris, who reminded him of his daughter. Although he had come to respect her judgment these past months, she wasn't ready for so immense a responsibility.

"She is intelligent," Della said.

"That isn't enough." Brant turned to her. "We cannot crown that man tomorrow. What if he goes berserk during the ceremony? Our people are already demoralized. If they think we are giving them a lunatic for a king, saints only know what will happen. Aronsdale is weakened, easy prey. Without strong leadership, we may fall to Harsdown."

Della just looked at him. He knew his sharp words might fool most people, but not her. Jarid evoked so much of Daron, the king Brant had served with loyalty, respect, and the love of a brother. After Daron had passed away, Brant had fortified his emotional barricades, lest grief overwhelm him. Now came this boy, the image of his grandfather, wild and in such need of help, and Brant didn't know how to deal with him. He held up his distrust of Jarid like a shield, but the youth weakened his defenses.

"And if we cancel the coronation yet again?" Della asked. "What message does that send—that Aronsdale is such a mess, we cannot choose a leader?" She shook her head. "We put off crowning Muller too long."

"With good reason. The boy was ready to bolt."

"Well, now he has bolted," Della said flatly. "The situation isn't going to improve. I say this—clean up this man, bring him out tomorrow, put the crown on him and let Iris rule."

That sounded to Brant like a good formula for collapsing the government. "She has no training."

"She has aptitude."

“That isn’t enough.”

“We can guide her.”

He gave her an incredulous look. “And just how do we explain her husband? He may not even make it through the ceremony without losing control.”

“Bring his foster father here. He seems to calm the boy.”

Brant weighed his answer. Almost no one knew he had already brought Unbent to Suncroft—and locked him in a cell. He wanted the highwayman where he could question him personally. But he hadn’t told Della. If she decided to tell Jarid, nothing Brant could do would stop her. Unbent had already caused the boy great harm; the less time Jarid spent with the man who had crushed his life, the better.

He said only, “No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want him influencing our future king.”

Della crossed her arms. “Just how long are your men going to hold him in custody?”

“It is better we separate Jarid from him. The boy needs a fresh start.”

“And if Jarid wants him at the coronation?”

“We delay the ceremony.”

“We can’t. You know that. We have waited too long already.” Della glanced toward the tower room where a frightened young woman sat with a lost young man. “Convincing Muller he wants the crown has become irrelevant. We must work with what we have. Waiting won’t change that.”

Brant knew what she feared. Harsdown grew stronger each day, as did King Varqelle’s drive to conquer other lands. Aronsdale prevailed against them in border skirmishes because of its mages, who healed the wounded, buttressed morale, and predicted strategies based on the emotions of the enemies they fought. But Aronsdale was a fragile realm; if their will faltered, they could fall.

He spoke with reluctance. “Very well.” He gave Della a dour look. “Just pray we all survive the ceremony.”

A touch disturbed Jarid. He woke slowly, his mind hazed. The person stroking his forehead couldn’t be Stone, his father; this hand was too small, with longer fingers and fewer calluses.

A woman.

As he caught her hand, images of octagonal boxes formed in his thoughts. It sometimes happened this way, his mental shapes mimicking his location. That implied he was imprisoned within an octagonal room. The images focused his mind, revealing her mood. She was...in pain?

Startled, he realized he was gripping her wrist too hard. He hadn't meant to hurt her. Chagrined, he released his hold. Although she pulled away, she didn't go far. Her scent came to him: woods, fresh grass, pine soap. This room smelled much cleaner than the cottage where he lived with his foster father. The fragrance of orb-bud candles filled the air. Memories flooded him: the dinner table alight with candles and rose-glass lamps; his father bidding him good night and blowing out candles in his room; his mother holding a candlestick, her wedding ring sparkling, inset with diamonds and amethysts.

What is this place? Jarid had no voice to ask. He felt his companion's magic gifts, but he couldn't tell what she wanted. He wasn't certain she knew herself.

Reaching above his head, he found a bedpost, its wood carved with shape-blossoms, their petals forming boxes and orbs. They felt familiar. Agitated, he struggled into a sitting position on the bed. Stone would never have let these people take him, and not because Jarid could implicate him in crimes. Stone protected him.

But...Stone wasn't here.

Jarid searched with his mind, spinning sphere images to focus. He found no hint of his father's emotions, only those of guards outside this room. The only reason they hadn't come in here was because the woman hadn't let them know he had awoken. Her mind glowed, ruddy flames lighting his isolation. Warm. Inviting.

Go away, he thought, afraid of that warmth.

He knew when she moved because air currents shifted. He wanted to strike out, as he had done with his attackers in the cottage. But her mood warmed him, like sunlight. She soothed.

Jarid gritted his teeth. He didn't want to be soothed. He preferred anger. These people had torn him away from his home and brought him to this place against his will.

A hand touched his forehead and he jerked away, wincing as pain stabbed his muscles, which ached from his fight with the strangers in the cabin. He slid back, away from the woman until he came up against a wall. Then he sat, one leg bent, his elbow resting on his knee, his hand curled in a fist.

The bed shifted, sagging with a new weight. Even as he tensed, someone brushed his arm. In instinct, he raised his fist. The intruder withdrew, which was what he told himself he wanted. No doubt he appeared gruesome to her. That thought bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

Then she returned and laid a tablet on his lap. The smell of wet earth tickled his nose. Baffled, he ran his fingers over the tablet. Its center was clay. He pressed the soft material, noting its cool, grainy texture.

Her long fingers brushed his hand, sending a shiver through him. It had to be from anger; her touch couldn't give him pleasure. He refused to allow it. He would retreat into the fortress of his mind and keep out pain.

She pressed her fingers into the clay, her hand moving against his so he felt her actions. Then she set his hand over the dents she made. It took him a moment to comprehend; many years had passed since he had touched such shapes. Words. Pictures. She was writing to him.

Jarid shifted his weight. Although by the age of six, he had learned some basics of reading, his education had ended then. He recognized only a few of her symbols. The disk shape sharpened his mind, though,

stirring memories. He traced one picture she had made, a circle within a cluster of lines—no, an orb within crossed swords.

His family crest.

No! Jarid hurled the tablet away. He didn't hear it shatter, though surely it broke when it hit. He couldn't bear the truth she brought. But however much he fought it, deep in his mind he had known the moment he smelled the orbs-bud candles.

They had brought him home.



15

## Hall of Kings

Muller opened the door to find Iris in the tower room, staring at Jarid—who was wide-awake and free, standing by the bed. His hair tangled around his shoulders and anger darkened his face. He lifted his head like a wild stag trying to catch an unexpected scent. Muller stepped into the room, concerned for Iris's safety. It disquieted him to know that he and this stranger were almost certainly cousins. Jarid seemed more animal to him than man.

Doubts tormented Muller, as they had since yesterday when he had relinquished the crown. Had he made the right choice? After months of knowing Iris, he believed that with help, she could become an inspired leader. He had grappled with his knowledge of her mage gifts ever since she came to Suncroft, knowing he should pursue the matter with Della but unable to bear losing Chime.

Della had no reason to take his judgment over her own. He could have convinced her by revealing his twisted mage power, but he would have lost everything: what little respect he had earned among his advisors, the safety of everyone's assumption that he hadn't inherited the Dawnfield talents—and Chime. Iris's discovery of Jarid had seemed like a gift, saving him from all that.

But like everything else Muller touched, this gift had twisted. Neither he nor Jarid were fit to rule.

So Muller had made the best decision he could. Aronsdale would be better off with Iris as leader, guided by the King's Advisors. He had done what he believed right, but uncertainty plagued him. He hadn't realized how much it had mattered to him that he would someday lead Aronsdale until he had relinquished that title.

Iris turned to him, her gaze questioning his presence here. He wanted to reassure her that he meant no harm, but Jarid riveted his attention. Muller crossed the chamber, never taking his gaze from his cousin. Jarid remained still, his forehead creased. Muller stopped in front of him and they faced each other, the same height, one light, the other dark. But Jarid wasn't looking at him; his gaze was directed to the left of



Muller's shoulder.

Muller passed his hand in front of Jarid's eyes. His cousin didn't even blink; he just stood, his body tensed. Finally Muller found his voice. "Can you hear me, cousin?"

No reaction.

"Won't you speak?" Muller asked.

Jarid tilted his chin, but made no other response.

Muller glanced at Iris. "It is true, then. He has no sight. He hears nothing."

She nodded, her face pale.

"He has no voice."

"None," she said.

Muller struggled to contain his doubts. He couldn't withdraw his decision to give up the crown; it would throw Aronsdale into another turmoil. They couldn't hide the truth about Jarid much longer; too many people already knew. They had to deal with this carefully, lest it further damage a realm already grieving for its late king.

He could see fear in Jarid's unseeing gaze. Did he fool himself in thinking he also saw recognition? Perhaps. He might never know.

Muller spoke in a numb voice. "May your reign be long and full, my cousin."

Chime's breath caught as she entered the great Shape-Hall. Hundreds of candles glowed in candelabras, and lamps added their luster, filling the room with radiance. Gold and white mosaics gleamed on the high ceiling, and starlight flowed through floor-to-ceiling window panels.

Hundreds of guests mingled tonight, the royal court of Suncroft and gentlefolk of Aronsdale, glistening all. The men wore silk shirts, brocaded vests, and rich leggings, or uniforms with crisp tunics and trousers. The women dressed in lovely gowns that swept the floor, each a single hue; altogether they made a rainbow of color.

A stir came from across the hall. Hoping Muller had arrived, Chime turned toward the commotion. She didn't recognize the noblewoman who entered. Then, incredibly, she realized it was Iris. The other girl wore a luminous yellow gown that clung to her body, and topazes threaded the chestnut hair piled high on her head. Although Iris appeared calm and collected, Chime knew her well enough to recognize the truth; she was stunned, in a daze.

It surprised her to see Iris in yellow. On formal occasions, a mage dressed in the hue of her power. If Iris was a sapphire, as Della believed, she would wear blue. Knowing Iris, Chime suspected that Iris didn't believe she had reached Jarid with her magecraft. In truth, Chime didn't see how the two of them could have managed it even together. Either Iris could call on higher colors than sapphire, or Jarid had done it on his own, which would make him a mage with a power greater than any known in history.

Flanked by Brant and Della, Iris took her place at the head of a reception line to greet their guests. Even after accepting that Iris would assume such duties, Chime felt a pang of loss. She reminded herself that only a year ago she had wanted nothing to do with Suncroft. But since then she had come to accept her duties; now she felt adrift, unsure where she fit. As much as she missed her family, she was involved in life here now. She folded her hand around the pendant she wore, a faceted emerald ball on a gold chain. She could no longer imagine going home to tend the orchards.

“She looks different,” a voice said, rich and light.

Chime turned with a start. Muller was leaning against the column, beautiful in ivory and gold, his hair gleaming, his blue eyes intent on her.

“My greetings,” Chime said.

“You are lovely tonight.”

She smiled. “So are you.” Thoroughly.

He scowled at her, his face radiant even when he was angry. “Chime, that is not a compliment.”

“Would you prefer some mud?” She grinned. “We could go slide around in it.”

He laughed ruefully. “It would certainly give everyone here a good shake up.”

“That it would.” Her smile faded. “It feels so strange the way everything has suddenly changed.”

Muller looked across the hall at Iris in the receiving line. “It is harder than I expected.”

She took his hand. “Come walk outside with me.”

He gave her a look of relief and nodded. They wandered out of the hall, past open double-doors with panes of beveled glass. Beyond them, the gardens waited, graced by what poets called the Azure Moon, full and blue in the sky, with the barest film of clouds veiling its disk. Its luminous rays silvered the sculpted bushes. One sculpture reared like a great dragon, the Saint of Chaos attacking a maze of trimmed bushes. Chime understood the moral of the Chaos story, that without tumult, serenity had no meaning. But the images still unsettled her. She drew closer to Muller, glad for his arm around her shoulders.

They strolled into the woods, where moss-draped trees overhung their way and thorny vines heavy with silvery blossoms curled on the tiled path. It was as if they were escaping the real world into a mystical realm free from the uncertainties of their lives.

Muller squeezed her shoulders. “You are so tense.”

“It isn’t over,” she said in a low voice.

“Iris and Jarid have a difficult route.” His strained tone hinted at his tension, but Chime respected his privacy and made no mood spell.

“It isn’t only Iris and Jarid.” She shivered, though the night was warm. “Sometimes I feel Harsdown

glowering in the dark, crouched across the mountains like a beast waiting to spring.”

His arm tightened around her. “Uncle Daron and I met with King Varqelle a few years ago. We hoped to arrange a treaty that would let our merchants cross his lands. It was hopeless. Varqelle has no interest in compromise. He sees Aronsdale the way a lion sees a deer.”

“Do you think he will invade?”

“I don’t know.” Muller pushed aside a loop of vines hanging in their way. “He knows it would be a grueling war. Harsdown has a larger population than Aronsdale, including more trained warriors, which means he can put together a bigger army. But we are more robust. With our mages, we can do more. It evens up our sides.”

“I don’t really understand why mages give us an advantage. I know they heal and predict, but it is more, yes?” She asked in part to draw his attention away from his disheartened thoughts about tonight’s ceremonies.

“It isn’t one thing in particular,” he said thoughtfully. “By itself, each mage talent wouldn’t be enough to make such a big difference.” As always, he talked naturally to her, treating her as the intellectual equal of his top advisors. If for nothing else, she would have loved him for that. “But taken altogether, the gifts can change the tide of a battle: to heal and save lives; to sense, judge, and interpret moods of your enemy; to build morale; to aid military strategies by reading the emotions of your foe’s officers.”

“But we give life,” Chime said. “Not take it.”

“Yes.” His voice quieted. “Soldiers need the light mages give them: physical, emotional, healing. It eases their anguish.”

“Hai, Muller.” Chime paused at a bench where the path opened up enough to let moonlight bathe the area. “I grieve that war brings so much darkness.”

“I too.” He sat with her on the bench. “Chime—”

“Yes?”

He spoke with difficulty. “I don’t know if I can bear to see you watch another man receive what I had thought would be my legacy to you and our children.” He took an audible breath. “This is so much harder than I expected.”

Chime held his hand. “I understand.” She looked up at the sky, at the perfect disk of the moon. Her spell formed without her thinking about it, telling her of his pensive mood. She let it fade; she needed no spell to tell her about his need to save face.

“Why don’t you go back now to the Hall?” she said. “I can come later.”

He leaned his head against hers. “Thank you.”

Chime closed her eyes, wishing she could ease the hurt inside of him.

He didn’t immediately leave, though. Instead he spoke softly. “Will you visit me later tonight?”

That caught her off guard. In all the months they had known each other, he had never made such a request. He shouldn't, of course, until they were married, but the formal distance they were expected to maintain during the royal betrothal had grown more and more difficult.

Except they no longer had a royal betrothal. Uncertainty swept Chime. Was he asking her to be his lover instead of his wife? He had never actually said he wanted to marry; the King's Advisors had made the decision. Given the choice, surely he preferred a woman of the nobility.

After her silence grew long, Muller said, "I am sorry. That was presumptuous."

"I am on shifting sands," she said. "I do not know where it is safe to stand."

He brushed her cheek. "Stand with me."

"And if you walk away?"

"Why would I do that?"

"You no longer have to marry me."

Muller squinted at her. "I gave up the crown for you. I'm hardly going to walk away."

Her unease trickled away into the azure night. "I am glad." She kept it simple, not wanting to mar this moment by fumbling her words.

He waited. "Well?"

"Well?" She wondered what she had said wrong.

"I am glad you are glad." The hint of exasperation in his voice didn't hide his tension. "I would also appreciate being glad."

Ah. Now she understood. This time she hadn't said enough. She curled her fingers around his. "Nor would I walk away from you."

He smiled, his lashes lowering, relief on his face. Chime had never fathomed why he disliked his eyes. They were gorgeous, especially in the moonlight. Perhaps she shouldn't tell him the effect he had on her; he might use it to entice her into forbidden diversions, such as sneaking into his room tonight.

Muller kissed her, first gently, then with more passion. As she gave herself to the pleasure, leaning into him, his hands roamed her dress, becoming bolder. She had to push them off her breasts.

He moved his lips to her ear. "Come see me tonight."

She answered huskily. "You are a terrible rogue."

"You make me crazy."

Her lips quirked. "You have always been crazy."

"Now you break my heart." He pulled her into another kiss, his most effective mode of persuasion.

Chime began to forget why she couldn't go with him.

"Come on," he coaxed, his lips against hers.

She drew back. "Perhaps Sam Threadman should draw you a cold bath."

"You are maddening."

Chime touched his cheek. "Patience, love."

He frowned at her. "I have the patience of a saint."

"A handsome saint."

"Flattery won't help." His grin quirked. "Much." Then his smile faded. "I really should return to the Shape-Hall. If I am gone too long, it will look strange."

"All right. I will come in a bit."

He brushed her lips with his. "I will see you later."

This time he left his invitation vague; "later" could be in the Shape-Hall or afterward in his suite. She could answer without committing herself.

Taking his hand, she said, "All right."

He stood, his face silvered in the moonlight. Then he left, headed to the castle.

Brooding, Muller stalked through the garden. He shouldn't have asked Chime to come to his suite tonight. She might have a country girl's lack of concern about her sensuality, but here in the royal court, custom allowed him and his betrothed only the briefest touches, no more. That distance from her proved more difficult to keep each day.

He couldn't bear for her to watch him tonight during the ceremony. His loss of status as the Aronsdale heir shouldn't shame him, but it did. It made him want to hold Chime, lie with her, banish his doubts. She affected him at every level, more than the physical, but he didn't know how to express what he felt in any way except by making love to her.

Although in the country, people expected couples to wait until after marriage, they paid less attention to the behavior of a betrothed pair. He knew it well, having grown up on a country estate until his fourteenth year, when he came to Suncroft. Inheritance in rural areas went through the mother's line and her husband usually came to live with her. If confusion existed as to the father's identity, it might cause great pain to the people involved, but it had no effect on the legacy of the children.

Not so for noble or royal families, including his own. They followed customs over a thousand years old, from the era when southern potentates had overrun Aronsdale and established the House of Dawnfield. Southern countries such as Shazire and Jazid had more patriarchal customs, in contrast to the matriarchal ways of rural Aronsdale. So titles in Aronsdale went through the male line. As Jarid's closest male relative, Muller was next in line for the crown until Jarid had a son. No ambiguity would be allowed about

who fathered Muller's heirs.

He knew why Chime worked so hard to refine herself. Her background as a rural commoner raised eyebrows. No one had openly questioned her conduct because she made such an effort to fit into the royal court. Nor did it hurt that with her golden beauty, she fit the part devastatingly well. But he knew she felt awkward with her role, causing an uncertainty on her part that led unperceptive people to assume she lacked intelligence. It angered him. They knew nothing. She had more common sense than the lot of them put together and her kindness was unsurpassed. She was everything special, desirable, and lovely, and well yes, maybe tact wasn't her strong point, but even so, she was an angel.

It had been wrong to invite her into his bed. Now that he would no longer be sovereign, the King's Advisors would have little wish to see him marry one of Aronsdale's most powerful mages. They would prefer she wed someone whose position and personality wouldn't distract her from her work, men similar to the husbands they had found for Della and Skylark, pleasant fellows, farmers, well respected citizens of Croft's Vale. Della was widowed now, but Skylark's husband still worked his land. They wouldn't openly force Chime to marry their choice any more than they had with Della or Skylark, but they could be persuasive.

Muller knew they would also love to find him a wife to compensate for his shortcomings. If his desire for Chime led him to act with dishonor, it would give Brant the perfect opportunity to stop the wedding. He could just hear the craggy lord: Any unwed woman who lies with a man can't be trusted to carry a Dawnfield heir. Muller would have laughed at the absurdity of it, except Brant really would use it to separate them. Given Muller's position in the line of succession, the King's Advisors had more authority to control his marriage than they did with Chime.

Muller pushed his hand through his hair. He had never wanted to marry. Then he had fallen in love with Chime and confused himself. If he wasn't careful, he could lose her even now, after he had given up a kingdom for her.

Chime sat in the moonlit garden, thinking. At home, she had been so unaware of life. Her biggest concern had been how to evade doing her sums. The queens of Aronsdale had always encouraged education for their people, but Chime had never appreciated her fortune. She had known so little about so much. In the market at Croft's Vale, it had stunned her to learn, from merchants who traveled, that most people in Harsdown were illiterate.

She could no longer blithely go about life, assuming days would stretch into years, never too demanding, always happy. And she had been happy, despite thinking she always had some annoyance to deal with. Compared to the concerns of the people here, her life had been simple. No longer could she turn from her duties as a mage, not now that she had begun to understand their importance.

Eventually she returned to the castle. She stood by a column near the door, content to watch the flow of people throughout the Shape-Hall, also called the Hall of Kings. Musicians were playing, a waterfall of bright melodies. People moved in graceful dances, forming and reforming patterns: stars, boxes, polygons, circles. The dais at the far end of the room was a great round disk, empty now. Flecks of gold in its white marble glimmered in the copious candlelight.

Everyone had passed through the reception line. Iris was talking with Brant, her hands folded in front of her dress the way she did when she was nervous. Chime suddenly realized she had forgotten to go through the line. She flushed, hoping Iris had been too occupied with all these changes to notice her

absence, which would look like yet another insult from her fellow mage student.

Muller was standing across the room near the wall, his manner composed as he watched people dance. Chime held back her urge to go to him.

Across the room, a man entered, a disk-captain in a blue dress-uniform with silver trim. When Chime had first arrived at Suncroft, she had thought officers in the King's Army had shape-designations because they were mages. She soon realized her error. "Disk-captain" gave his status in the army. Each rank subdivided into shape-ranks, with triangle as lowest and sphere as highest. All captains outranked all lieutenants, so a sphere-lieutenant had lower rank than a triangle-captain, but he outranked all other types of lieutenant.

As the disk-captain conferred with Brant and Iris, the hairs on Chime's neck prickled. When Brant nodded to the captain, a chill went through Chime, though she had no idea why. The captain bowed to Iris, then to Brant, and then took his leave, striding through an archway behind them.

Brant offered his arm to Iris. They walked together down the hall, stopping here and there to chat with guests, seemingly relaxed. Only Iris's subtly tensed posture gave away her agitation. As she and Brant reached the dais, power stirred within the hall, pure and natural. With a start, Chime realized Iris was focusing her gifts through the dais. At first nothing happened, except that Chime had a sudden thought of forests, hills, and lakes.

A sense of peace spread in Chime. Iris's spell flowed throughout the hall, uneven and uncertain, but with great strength. Even having suspected Iris was the stronger mage, Chime had never realized she wielded such luminous power.

Iris and Brant went to the center of the dais, and Della joined them, along with a retinue of officers in blue and silver uniforms. Tall and stately, the Bishop of Orbs mounted the dais, his white hair swept under his miter, his gait regal. As the keeper of the Scrolls of the Saints, he was the highest spiritual authority in the land. Two pages accompanied him, one carrying a tasseled cushion that held two gold circlets inset with diamonds and amethysts. Iris stared at the sparkling crowns as if they were ghosts.

All conversation stopped. The moment stretched out until Chime thought surely it would snap. Then guests began to turn, gazing down the glittering the hall. Puzzled, Chime looked to see what drew their attention. With stately progress, a retinue of officers from the King's Army was coming down the long hall, escorting a potentate, perhaps a prince from Shazire, Land of Silk and Silver, or Jazid where they grew exquisite teas, or even Taka Mal, a country of bulb towers and lace bridges. The dazzling prince walked in their midst, come to Aronsdale for tonight's ceremony.

Then Chime realized he wasn't a visiting king.

It was Jarid.



## Night Glimmers

Jarid shone in the radiance of the candelabras, resplendent in a gold brocaded vest over a snowy-white shirt that accented his broad shoulders and well-built physique. Ivory-colored breeches clung to his long legs and tucked into gold knee-boots. Instead of a wild mane, now his luxuriant hair grazed his shoulders, neatly trimmed, glossy and night-black. It enhanced the classic lines of his face, his straight nose and high cheekbones. He had violet eyes, large and intense, framed by black lashes. A scar ran down his neck, giving his aristocratic features an edgy quality.

Two sphere-majors flanked him. Although they gave no overt sign they were guiding him, Chime could tell they were helping with a nudge at his elbow or simply their presence at his side. They managed well; had she not known he was blind, she would never have realized it now.

She concentrated on Jarid, focusing through the eighteen-sided ball she wore around her neck...and his mood leapt in her mind. Fear. Enemies surrounded him and he didn't know what they wanted. His anger and confusion sparked, ready to blaze. He controlled himself only with a phenomenal resolve. His inner strength was tangible, an iron will that must have carried him through fourteen years of a nightmare.

Incredibly, no outward sign of his turmoil showed. He continued with his retinue, approaching the dais, his head high. Iris's spell swirled in the hall, diffuse and unpolished, its warmth overflowing. With fledgling, uncertain attempts, she wove a spell to soothe Jarid.

Chime would have rejoiced at Iris's realization of her power if it hadn't hurt so much. How could Chime have ever believed herself the stronger mage? Iris's gifts had an unmatched purity and power. For one brief year, Chime had been the future queen, someone more than the wayward daughter of an orchard keeper. Now that was gone forever. She tried to feel gladdened that Iris was blooming with such grace, but she grieved over what she had lost.

Jarid's retinue ascended the dais and proceeded to its center. They didn't stop until he was standing with his bride, the two of them gazing at each other. Chime suspected she was one of the few people in the hall who realized Jarid wasn't looking directly at Iris.

Iris took his hand. Her gesture appeared charming, but Chime felt Jarid's mood roiling like a storm. He wanted to fight this inexplicable situation, but he held back—for he recognized his ancestral home. Memories jumped in his mind, so vivid that Chime caught them as part of his mood. In that instant, she knew his identity without doubt, for he remembered playing here as a boy, as the heir to the throne. Then anger and fear swamped his memories, threatening to explode.

Iris offered a spell of soothing, like rain misting over flames, calming Jarid. But when she tried a healing spell, it slid off him with no effect. Apparently whatever had hurt Jarid went too deep for even a sapphire mage to heal.

The Bishop of Orbs opened a book written in a gilded script Chime could see glimmering even from so far away. A gold tassel hung down from the tome. Iris and Jarid stood while he spoke ancient words in his resonant voice. When he finished, he asked Iris and Jarid to kneel. A sphere-major reached for Jarid, to guide him—and Chime froze. She felt Jarid's tension; he barely had control of his fear. He would snap if a stranger touched him.



Iris must have also sensed it. She shook her head at the major, and he hesitated, his hand above Jarid's shoulder. The others on the dais had gone still. Jarid tilted his head, the tendons in his neck as taut as cords.

Chime became painfully aware of everyone in the hall watching. She glimpsed Muller across the room, his gaze fixed on the dais as if he were mesmerized. The silence felt tangible. If someone didn't respond soon, the guests would realize something was amiss with Aronsdale's long-lost heir.

A new spell flowed out from Iris, its power untutored but radiant. She offered friendship to Jarid. He paused, his head tilted as if he were listening to a sound no one else could hear. Then he knelt with her, stiff and slow. Both he and Iris bowed their heads, though Chime thought Jarid did it more out of instinct than anything else.

The Bishop of Orbs turned to the boy who held the tasseled cushion. With care, the bishop lifted the larger of the two crowns and set it on Jarid's head. It sparkled, its amethysts and diamonds catching the candlelight. He repeated the procedure with the smaller circlet, placing it on Iris's head.

Jarid's bewilderment swirled through the hall, so tangible, Chime wondered that no one else seemed to feel it. He understood the weight of that crown. An immense grief for his grandfather's death came from him, but he didn't seem surprised.

Then the bishop read the marriage ceremony, his words rolling through the Hall of Kings while Jarid and Iris knelt before him. And finally it was done: Jarid and Iris were wed. Aronsdale once again had a king and queen.

Anvil stood in the gardens and watched the coronation through the open doorway. Jarid Dawnfield fascinated and repelled him. Anvil's spying had revealed much about this new king. They could clean his hair, wash his body, and dress him in brocades, but none of that would make him any less insane.

Far more interesting were the dignitaries and officers at the ceremony. Lord Brant Firestroke made a striking presence, imposing in his silver leggings and blue tunic, his silvered hair swept back, his gaze fiercely protective. Cube-General Fieldson was just as impressive in his dress uniform, a sharply pressed tunic and leggings in the king's colors, indigo and white, with plenty of gold on his shoulders and the cuffs of his tunic. His sword glinted at his side, sheathed but no less deadly for that.

Four other generals were in attendance and many lesser officers. They fascinated Anvil. He had been invited tonight because several nobles among the court had taken a liking to him, including Lady Chime. But he took care not to intrude too much, lest he could draw unwanted attention. Better to be inconspicuous.

He found it easier to blend in than he had expected. Although he had left Aronsdale nearly twenty years ago, it was disturbingly easy to fall back into the accent and customs. Being unobtrusive, fading into the background, he caught a wealth of snippets and rumors. Mood spells would have given him even more advantage, if he could have made them, but he did well enough without. He knew how to sort and store details, having spent a lifetime wandering by himself. He had learned to read situations of all kinds, including those that could mean his life or death.

Here in Suncroft, Anvil had learned a great deal that would interest King Varqelle. Many injuries weakened Aronsdale: a crippled king, a demoralized army with little confidence in their new sovereign,

and a mage queen with neither the experience nor heart to rule. They put on a good show, but it didn't fool him. He understood what hid under their glitter and pomp. Aronsdale was in trouble.

The time was ripe for attack.

Lost in thought, Chime followed a corridor tiled in skybell patterns, carrying a candle in a silver holder. She longed to see how Muller fared, how he was handling Jarid's ascension tonight, but she held back, aware of how it would look if she visited him this late. Nor was she sure where she stood with him. He used many fine words to reassure her, but he also broke propriety by inviting her to his rooms. They both knew he no longer had to marry her. Despite his pretty words, he wouldn't be the first lord to take a common woman as mistress and wed a noblewoman. She had no intention of being part of such an arrangement.

But still. He hadn't suggested she be his mistress, any more than she had suggested what women sometimes did in rural Aronsdale, taking the male version of a mistress. She would never dishonor Muller that way.

Despite her uncertainty, she found herself headed to his suite. She went around the back, along a narrow hall to a recessed doorway, a discreet entrance used by Muller's servants. She disliked that her visit had to be hidden, but she knocked anyway, her heart beating hard. The candle flame wavered in the drafts, making her shadow flicker on the wall. It seemed forever she stood there, praying no one happened by to see her.

Then the door opened, framing Sam Threadman in the entrance. He must have been in bed; he had on sleep trousers under his robe and a white floppy cap with a fuzzy ball at the end of it. Chime expected him to frown or regard her with disdain. Instead he looked relieved. He held a candle much like hers, its light casting a glow on his face and shoulders.

"Lady Chime." He stepped aside. "Please. Come in."

Her face warmed with her blush. She entered a small room painted off-white, fresh and spotless. Three mops leaned against one wall by a pail. Sam murmured apologies as he hurried her across the chamber and into a nondescript hallway the same color. As they followed it to other halls, and yet others, she realized Muller's "suite" was an entire wing of the castle. Within moments they had reached wide corridors graced with mosaics in tessellated patterns of gold, blue, indigo, and white.

"How is Prince Muller feeling?" Chime asked.

Sam wouldn't meet her gaze. "Lord, milady."

She glowered at him. "Prince. He is Jarid's heir."

"Oh." Sam brightened. "Yes, you are right." He gave her a rueful look. "He's as well as can be imagined, under the circumstances."

"I saw him talking to Della at the ceremony." She recalled his stiff posture. "He didn't seem happy."

Sam sighed. "This is difficult for everyone." The lines around his eyes crinkled with a kindly look. "It was gracious of you to understand that he needed—" He paused as if he wasn't sure how to phrase what

Muller had needed during the ceremony.

“To face it on his own,” she said.

“He feels he failed you. And himself.”

“But he hasn’t! Iris will be a good queen.” She didn’t have to add, Better than I. Even if no one said it, everyone knew the truth. She wished it wasn’t so hard to admit.

Sam stopped at an arched doorway bordered by gold and white mosaics. He knocked twice on the varnished wooden door, paused, and knocked again. Then they waited.

When the door opened, Chime expected another servant. But Muller stood there, holding a candle, still in his finery from the ceremony, his golden hair shining in the candlelight.

“Sam? Is something wrong?” He peered at his valet, then past him. When he saw Chime, his face warmed. Earlier tonight he had looked as if he had aged a decade, but now, as he smiled, the years dropped away.

“I am glad you came,” he told her.

She tried to smile, but her lips trembled.

“Will you visit for a while?” he asked.

This time she managed an answer. “For a little.”

His shoulders relaxed. He grinned at Sam and the valet beamed. Sam bowed to Muller, then to Chime, and then bustled off, his slippers whispering on the tiled floors.

Muller beckoned to Chime, and she walked into his room, wondering if he could see how nervous she felt. As he closed the door, she looked around, unable to meet his gaze. Her breath caught. His rooms were like him; ivory and gold, perfect, beautiful. Blue-glass vases with skybells added accents of color. The upholstery on the gilded chairs bore the seal of Aronsdale, an indigo silhouette of the castle superimposed on the sun. The room smelled of fresh flowers and orb-candles.

Finally she turned to the man at her side. He had gone still, like a nervous stag uncertain whether to run or stay. Unexpectedly it reassured her. Had he been smooth, confident, sure of himself, she would have wanted to escape, afraid he entertained women here often, making her only one of many. Instead, he seemed as unsure of himself as she felt.

“Do you like my suite?” he asked.

“It is lovely.”

“Only because you are here.” Then he reddened.

Her face relaxed into a smile. “Thank you.”

Muller ushered her to a circular table with two round-backed chairs. A decanter of red wine sparkled there, with two goblets made from Rosedale crystal. He pulled out her chair, then sat across from her

and poured wine for them. Raising his glass, he said, "To our new king and queen."

Chime lifted her goblet. "Iris and Jarid."

He wasn't smiling. "May they have productive lives."

"Hai, Muller." She set down her glass. "I know you wish them well. You needn't force out the words."

"Wish them well?" He took a gulp of wine. "I would have died if they had made you wed that madman."

She spoke with care. "To marry a king is an honor. I am glad for Iris." Glad that Iris had the honor instead of her.

His lips quirked. "You are becoming a diplomat."

She laughed ruefully. "I'm trying."

He reached across the table for her hand. "I haven't spoken properly. I am making a mood spell right now, and it tells me that what I haven't properly said agitates you. But my spells are fractured. I am unsure whether your disquiet comes from wanting me to speak or fearing that I will." He made a visible effort to fortify himself. "But speak I must."

Chime had no idea what he was about. "To say what?"

He inhaled deeply. "I would ask that you marry me."

His words caught her off guard. "You do?"

He looked like a man falling off a cliff. "I can no longer offer you a crown. But you will have a good life on my country estate."

Relief flooded Chime. She had thought she would have to make an unwelcome decision tonight, either give him up or consent to a liaison she would regret. Instead he made the honorable offer. Not that misbehaving with Muller would be disagreeable; she had begun to think it was high time she misplaced her virginity. His existence was exceedingly distracting. But it meant more than she knew how to say that he wanted to do this right.

His grip on her hand tightened. "You are so quiet."

Chime curled her fingers around his. "I would be honored to be your wife, here at Suncroft, in the country, or anywhere else. You need no crown to woo me." She dimpled at him. "With all these beautiful clothes you wear, who would notice a crown anyway?"

He grinned, his teeth flashing. "You make me a happy man."

She gave a mock frown. "I must say, I don't know how I will feel, knowing the groom is prettier than the bride."

He glared at her. "I am not pretty."

"All right," she said amiably. "You aren't."

Muller laughed with an ease she hadn't heard for days. "You don't have to agree so easily."

"You will always be handsome to me."

"Well, of course."

She smirked at him. "And humble, too."

"That, too." Then his grin faded. "I should like us to wed soon, before Brant and his cronies come up with some new and onerous duty that would preclude us from marrying."

"They want you to stay here and help Jarid and Iris." She took both his hands in hers. "It is the right thing, Muller. Iris has no background, and Jarid is furious and terrified. They need your help."

He pulled away his hands. "You are as bad as Della."

"Just think on it."

For a moment he didn't answer. Then he raked his hand through his hair, tousling the golden locks. Finally he set his hands on the table, clasping them carefully, as if he needed the security of their exact proper placement. With his hair disarrayed around his face, he looked vulnerable instead of exact, though. It made her want him even more.

He spoke in a subdued voice. "When Iris first said she had found Jarid, it seemed a boon from the heavens. Jarid would come, the unflawed king."

"You aren't flawed, no more than the rest of us."

"I cannot hide from the truth." His face paled. "But when they brought him home—he is wild. He could harm our country even more than me. Aronsdale is fortunate to have Iris."

She spoke quietly. "It is no flaw to see only darkness and hear only silence."

"It isn't that." Muller shook his head. "He is like an animal, Chime. It doesn't matter why; the result is the same. No fatally flawed king, or king's cousin, can be allowed to destroy Aronsdale. Our country is more important than either of us. We must protect our realm and our people."

"You aren't fatally flawed, Muller. You've never given yourself a chance."

His sudden tension seemed to snap in the room. "You are saying I should not have abdicated?"

"No. Jarid is the heir. It was right for you to do. And Iris is the queen he needs." She spoke firmly. "But you are a far better man than you let yourself believe."

He still had one hand on top of the other, and the fingers of his upper hand clenched the bottom hand so hard, his knuckles turned white. "Just as long as Jarid never rules."

Chime didn't know what to say. If she convinced Muller he was fit to rule, he would hate himself for giving up the crown; if she convinced him that Jarid was fit, he would despise himself for being less competent than his troubled cousin who had no preparation; if she said nothing, she felt disloyal to Jarid.

A knock came at the door.

Muller jumped like a startled cat. “That can’t be Sam. He was going back to bed.”

As Muller crossed to the door, Chime wondered if she should hide, so his visitor wouldn’t see her here without a chaperone. Only Sam knew she had come. Even if it wasn’t him, though, she didn’t feel like scurrying away. Noblewomen here put up with too many constraints. They needed to live in the country for a while. They would be a lot better off if they just refused to accept all these onerous customs and traditions. So she stayed put.

Muller sought to protect her reputation, though, even if she couldn’t muster alarm about being discovered. He opened the door only partway; as long as she remained at the table, she wasn’t visible to whomever stood outside. She could see the edge of a man’s blue and silver uniform. An unfamiliar voice spoke, low and urgent. Muller conferred with him, then bid him goodnight and closed the door. He came slowly back to Iris, his gaze distant.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Jarid. He and Iris have left the castle.”

“Whatever for?”

His forehead furrowed. “Apparently our new king is agitated. Brant and several guards tried to go with them into the forest, but Iris sent them away.”

Chime stood up. “What if Jarid hurts her?”

Muller met her gaze. “Pray he doesn’t.”



## Dawn of Rainbows

Spheres turned in Jarid’s mind, spinning an endless dance. Never had they come with such clarity. They were even more beautiful than usual, but they gave him vertigo, which had never happened before. He shut them away, trying to clear his mind of everything but the woman.

Breezes cooled his face, a welcome change after his imprisonment in the castle. He would have sung his joy at such freedom, had he owned a voice. The woman had brought him here. Now she guided him through heavy foliage, though to where he had no idea.

His wife. These madmen had crowned him. And given him a queen. He had known the moment his grandfather died, three months ago, but he had never expected anyone to search for him. He felt surrounded now, caught, trapped. Suffocated.

Branches snagged his clothes and he stumbled. He was about to balk when the woman pulled him free of the foliage, into an open place.

Jarid froze.

Spheres jumped in his mind, spinning, spinning, spinning, throwing off sparks of light. He pressed the heels of his palms against his temples, dizzy with the beauty. He recognized this place; the woman had been here when she had reached across Aronsdale to find him.

Mist sprayed his face, hinting of a waterfall. The fresh scent of water and the fragrance of shape-vines tickled his nose. He drew pure air into his lungs.

His wife took his hands. He longed to know her, all of her, but he was lost in his darkness and silence and couldn't find his way. She put his fingers against her mouth, those lips he wanted to kiss until she moaned, though he would never hear her pleasure.

She spoke against his fingers. Jarid. Husband. Her full lips tantalized. The scent of soap and flowers hung about her like perfume.

He mouthed two words. Your name? When puzzlement came from her mind, he tried again. Name?

Iris.

Iris. It made her more real, a woman of colors he felt rather than saw: the ruddy flame of her touch; the gold of her emotions; the sunlight of her intellect; her serenity, like velvety leaves in spring; the open spaces she gave him tonight, as blue as the sky he never saw; and her indigo moods, her sadness when she came to him.

Unable to speak, frustrated in his attempts to fathom the disruptions in his life, he pulled her close, harder than he should, speaking with his body, his confusion mixed with desire until he couldn't separate the two. Anger and love, tenderness and rough edges: they jumbled within him. Alarm sparked in Iris, but he didn't want to stop. Not now. He needed her. He needed. He didn't know what to do with that need, how to satisfy it without hurting her, how to make her want him.

Then her hands moved, stroking his arms. Her spells flowed over him, calming, and he took an uneven breath, struggling for control. It bewildered him that she offered this trust, for he had known her so little these past days, only as an enigma he could neither see nor hear, only feel when she touched him.

Moving stiffly, he knelt on the ground, drawing her with him. The grass felt cool and prickly under them, its smell itching his nose. He had been a child when he lost contact with the world; he had no idea now what to do with a woman. He knew only that he wanted to clench her, press against her, fill her until he sated his driving hunger. He reached out and pulled her to his body, squeezing her in his arms, his muscles straining.

Iris stiffened and pushed against his shoulders. He was frightening her. But it was so hard to let go. He forced himself to ease his grip enough so she could jump to her feet and escape. To his unmitigated surprise, she stayed put. Instead she relaxed her hands on his shoulders and took a deep breath.

Let me, he thought to her. Even if he could have spoken, he knew none of the sweet whispers a woman would wish to hear. They were strangers; this fragile bond they were forging could fall apart if he let his true nature show. He was no king, no one to claim this woman. His guilt went too deep.

Iris moved her hands on his face and chest. He would have groaned if he could have; instead, he grabbed her wrists, his restraint crumbling. Pushing her backward, he unbalanced them both so she tumbled onto her back in the grass. Before she had time to react, he stretched out on top of her, grasping her small waist, the silk and brocade of her dress flimsy under his hands.

When she stiffened, Jarid knew he had pushed too hard, too fast. But no—she was caressing him, sweetly unskilled but with urgency. She wanted him. Him. He would have known if she acquiesced only because she was his wife; just as he felt the moods of others, so now he felt her excitement, her desire all the more arousing because he excited her. Him. No one else.

Jarid kissed her neck as he remembered seeing his father once do with his mother. No doubt he was too rough; surely a man came to his wife more gently. But he had no experience and so few memories. It astonished him that she accepted him despite everything. It made no difference that his world was dark; he saw her with his hands and felt her light-drenched moods. It mattered not that he lived in silence; he spoke with his touch, a language older than any verbal tongue, his callused hands scraping on her soft skin.

Her spell curled around him, released by the power in this place. Earlier tonight, in the castle, she had tried to reach him with a healing spell, but he had been stone. Her spell had skittered off the armored surface of his heart. Here in the forest, in this charmed sphere, he could be more open. After so many long years, he could let go. Her gift poured through him, into him, with tenderness.

Jarid stroked her and she responded with sweet passion. They explored each other, tentative at first, then with more urgency. So they joined together, protected within a sphere of life, misted with water. Her pleasure answered his, and their moods blended as they made love.

Some time later, he lifted his head. He was lying on his side, tangled in Iris's arms, flush with the afterglow of their joining. She slept beside him, her mind tranquil. He should have been content—

But he was breaking inside, the way ice on a creek in the high forest cracked after a long winter. His passion had flared like a catharsis, a great release of emotional energy he couldn't control. He didn't understand what was happening; he knew only that he was shattering. He thought of Iris and the pain grew worse. This pleasure came at too great a price; she weakened his defenses and left him vulnerable. He would have cried out, but he had no words.

Jarid lurched to his feet, pulling on his clothes. The strange forest sphere vibrated with energy, focusing his mind until he thought he would explode with the power coursing through him. A memory came from long ago, from the night his mother had woven her final spell to protect him: the power of a life.

No! He walked off, not even trying to lace his shirt. Dimly, he was aware of Iris coming awake, of confusion replacing her contentment. He stumbled into the pool and slipped, falling to his knees. Angered by his inability to see, he scrambled to his feet, splashing water. Then he strode away, swinging his hands in front of him as if he were fighting the air.

A branch jabbed his palm. Ripping the foliage out of his path, Jarid plunged forward, into the bushes that surrounded this place. He thrashed through the barrier, unheeding that it tore his clothes and gashed his



skin.

Then he was free and running through the woods, his outstretched hands scraping trees as he escaped the unbearable radiance of Iris's mind.

Iris sank down on a boulder by a stream. Jarid wasn't anywhere. She had searched for hours. The tears that had streaked her face were dry now, nothing could ease her heart. She had thought she reached him, but she had failed. Now he was gone, without food or warm clothes, unable even to ask for assistance. She had no choice but to return to Suncroft and request help in finding him. She doubted Jarid would forgive that betrayal of his trust.

Last night she and Jarid had found a haven together. Despite her many lacks, he had reached out to her in his own way. She had been foolish enough to believe she might help him recover from the nightmares that haunted his life. She had even dared to hope their differences wouldn't matter, that he wouldn't care if she came from a poverty-stricken hamlet of the Tallwalk Mountains, fostered by a family that didn't want her, that she had been born the illegitimate daughter to a mother who deserted her at birth. She and Jarid each lived in their own solitude, yet recognizing the loneliness of the other. Together they might begin to heal.

But she had to face the truth. He was a king. No matter that he had spent most of his life in an existence even harsher than hers. No matter that she had given him a few moments of pleasure in the woods. He had been born to his title. He knew she had nothing permanent to offer him.

The sky was lightening; soon dawn would come. Weary, she rose to her feet and trudged toward the castle.

Jarid thought he had slept for several hours. In his perpetual darkness, it could be hard to tell if he nodded off or slept soundly, but he felt a difference in the air from when he had collapsed on the mossy ground. The scent of night-blooming flowers had faded. From force of habit, he opened his useless eyes.

Green.

For a long time he lay, absorbing it. His darkness had turned green. For years he had seen colors only in his mind, and over time those had faded. Yet now, everywhere, he saw green.

Green.

He became aware of details in that living tapestry: a twig, gnarled and brown, poking through the moss; dark soil, rich enough to buy a kingdom, under the ragged carpet of leaves; a red pyramid-blossom opening in the pearly light that heralded the dawn; iridescent dew clinging to leaves.

Jarid slowly rose to his feet. A pressure built in his chest until he thought he would burst. He turned in a circle, unable to believe. If he could have made a sound, any sound, a sob would have caught in his throat. His world remained silent, but he could see it.

He could see.

Forest surrounded him, trees draped in moss, with more shades of green, gray, and brown than he could count. Shape-blossoms added yellow here, violet there, a splash of orange. Tilting back his head, he saw slivers of gray sky between the overhang of high branches. He went to a tree and pressed his palms against its bumpy trunk. Insects scuttled away, a miraculous line of ants that wound along the bark.

Jarid didn't realize he was crying until a drop fell onto his arm. Pushing away from the tree, he wiped his face with the ripped sleeve of his brocaded shirt. He wanted to laugh, cry, shout his astonishment. Emotions welled within him and spilled down his cheeks as tears.

Walking through the woods was a miracle. Magic touched every sight, every leaf, bird, and twig. He had a hard time taking it all in, interpreting it all. He climbed a knoll, making his way through trees until he came out onto an open slope. At the top of the hill, he looked over the countryside. Woods and meadows rolled away everywhere, and in the north the castle stood on a higher peak, draped in shadows, waiting for the rising sun to turn it gold. Memories welled within him; he had often stood here as a child, cherishing this view.

Then he spotted a figure down in a meadow, a woman in a yellow gown hiking toward the castle.

Iris. His wife.

Apprehension and anticipation leapt within him. It had to be her. Iris had long, full hair and so did the woman below, her mane gloriously unbound. He remembered from his childhood that women at balls wore their hair swept up on their heads, but last night Iris had let her curls hang free down her back.

And last night he had run from her, afraid she would melt the ice around his heart. He had no defenses against her. He knew she could hurt him, but now he could think only of seeing her face. This morning, in the pure light of dawn, he fought his fear. He wanted to live again, not just exist.

Jarid started down the hill, tripping on rocks because he had so little experience taking himself anywhere.

Birds chirped, calling the onset of morning.

Grass crackled beneath his feet.

As he gained confidence, he increased his stride, until he was running down the hill.

Wind rustled the long grasses around Iris, enough so that she didn't know anyone had approached until a hand touched her shoulder. With a cry, she spun around.

"Jarid!" Before her fear of rejection could stop her, she threw her arms around him, so relieved to see him safe that she forgot everything else. He enfolded her in his arms and they held each other close. This wasn't like last night, when he had clenched her in desperation; now his mood seemed full of joy.

It wasn't until the light of dawn warmed Iris's arms through her torn sleeves that she came to herself. Pulling back, she looked up at her husband. He stared down at her, his gaze caressing her face.

His gaze.

Iris's breath caught. He was looking at her.

His lips curved upward. Then he mouthed: You are beautiful, wife .



18

The Power of a Life

No one saw Muller.

A great staircase swept down from the upper levels of the castle into the entrance foyer where servants milled around Iris and Jarid. The foyer had the shape of an imperfect hexagon, the wall with the doors to the outside longer than the other five. The curve of the stairs shadowed an interior door, another imperfect hexagon, its shape obvious but elongated. As Muller pushed open that door, his power surged. Desperate for control, he clamped it down.

Muller stopped when he saw the queen and king. Grass stained their fine wedding clothes, which had become ripped and tattered. Iris had a leaf in her hair. But despite it all, the newlyweds glowed. They stood in the dawn's light slanting through the open doors, staring at each other while servants bustled about them, clucking at their disheveled state.

Staring at each other.

Muller felt as if he were drowning. No man could look at a woman that way unless he was really seeing her. None of the servants seemed fazed by their king's newfound sight, but then, none had known he was blind.

In another time and place, Muller would have rejoiced for his cousin. But all he could think now was that he had made a terrible, terrible mistake, one that would end with the fall of Aronsdale.

Jarid looked like a wild animal, his clothes wrinkled and torn, his hair disarrayed. What royal couple spent their wedding night in the woods? Muller stepped out of the shadows. "Jarid, what is this?"

The king turned with a start.

He could hear.

Muller struggled to breathe, to overcome his growing dismay. He walked forward and Jarid watched, his violet-eyed gaze never wavering. The servants melted away, taking their cue from the tension.

"It can't be," Muller said. "You can't see."

Iris answered with a smile, tears on her face. "It is a miracle."

Muller swung around to her. "How could this happen?"

Her smile dimmed. "What do you mean?"

"As long as he couldn't lead Aronsdale, it would have been all right. But this." Muller wrestled with his fear. "Now he can rule, but imperfectly." As if to mock him, his own power sparked, erratic and flawed, stoked by the imperfect foyer, making his anger hurt, adding unwanted vehemence to his voice. "It is wrong. Wrong! It will destroy Aronsdale."

Iris stared at him. "How can you say such a thing?"

Grief spread through Muller. In abdicating, he had made yet another flawed choice, this one possibly fatal for his people. "Fate must be laughing at us," he said bitterly. "No matter what decisions we make, no matter how lofty our intentions, we pay cruelly in the end."

"I donna understand—" Iris broke off when Jarid left her side and strode toward the staircase. He stared at Muller as he came forward, his gaze haunted, his joy gone. Then he started up the wide steps.

Iris caught up with Jarid midway up the stairs. She grasped his arm, pulling him to a halt—and in that heart-stopping instant, he spun around and raised his fist above her. Muller ran to the stairs, intending to sprint after them, but he stopped when he realized Jarid wasn't threatening her. Instead the king stretched out his arm, pointing at Muller.

"My cousin is right." His deep voice rasped with disuse. "Ask Stone."

They descended into the underground levels of the castle, their tread muted on pitted stone steps. Muller's thoughts whirled. Ask Stone. Why would those be Jarid's first words? Now the king refused to acknowledge anyone. He could hear and see, incredibly, but he had withdrawn into himself and spoken no more.

Jarid went first on the stairs with two guards, followed by Iris and Brant, then Muller and more guards. Muller needed no spells to know Iris was furious. Brant had let them believe Jarid's foster father had stayed in the mountains, in custody. Brant had lied. Muller knew he shouldn't be surprised they dealt with Unbent in secret. But Muller was the king's cousin, still heir to the crown. Brant should have told him.

Iris spoke to the lord in a low voice only he should have been able to hear. But the imperfect stairs magnified Muller's power, giving him bits and pieces of a discussion he had no wish to overhear.

"You had no right," Iris told Brant.

"I had every right." His voice was barely audible. "That man kidnapped the Dawnfield heir."

"He took care of Jarid like a son."

"He murdered Jarid's parents."

Iris jerked. "What?"

“You heard me.”

“I thought highwaymen attacked the orb-carriage.”

“That’s right.”

Her shoulders stiffened. “Including Stone?”

“Yes.” Brant motioned toward the officers with Jarid. “Stone matches their description. They were the two guards knocked out during the attack on the carriage.”

“You canna be sure Stone is the same man.”

“He admitted it when my men questioned him.”

“Why didna you tell me he was a prisoner here?” Iris folded her arms and rubbed her palms on them. “You let us believe he intended to follow us to Suncroft.”

“I didn’t want to upset the king.” Brant exhaled. “You’ve had an empathic link with Jarid from the start. I couldn’t risk your knowing, Iris. I’m sorry.”

It tore at Muller that Jarid had thought of his foster father as “Stone.” To a six-year-old boy who had lost his parents, their killers must truly have seemed like stone. That Unbent had cared for Jarid during the next fourteen years didn’t change the immensity of his crime. Muller recalled Jarid as a small boy, laughing as he ran across the meadows outside Suncroft, his hands held out to his cousin. It was hard to reconcile that joyous child with this injured man. Jarid’s face was set with lines of pain he should never have had at his young age.

At the bottom of the stairs, they followed a rough-hewn tunnel lit by torches on the stone walls. The head guardsman took a hexagon-shaped ring of keys off a peg and led them to a cell. The guard unlocked its heavy door and Jarid waited, stiff and distant. Muller felt his anger. How would the king react, seeing for the first time one of the men who had destroyed everything he valued? Unbent may have spent years atoning for his crime, but nothing could give Jarid back what he had lost, neither his parents nor his childhood.

With a grunt, the guardsman heaved open the door. Then he stepped aside, letting two soldiers enter the cell. Metal rang on metal as they drew their swords. Instead of following them, Jarid turned to the people in the hallway, his violet gaze startling in its intensity. The last time Muller had seen his eyes, at the ceremony last night, they had been unfocused.

The king held out his hand to his wife. It was the only time he had acknowledged any of them since that moment on the stairs when he had spoken for the first time in fourteen years. Less than an hour had passed, yet it seemed like ages to Muller.

Surprise flickered on Iris’s face. She took his hand and they entered the cell together. Muller followed with Brant and the guards, going into a room with stone walls even rougher than in the hallway. Clean but bare, it had nothing but a chamber pot in one corner. The cell was in the outer wall of the castle, in the slope behind Suncroft, so it wasn’t all underground. A barred window across the room let in sunlight.

A man was sitting on the cracked ledge cut from the wall. He watched them with weary eyes, his posture that of someone who awaited his execution. A ragged mane of hair the color of granite swept

down his neck, and bushy gray eyebrows arched over his gray eyes. Stone. Except his true name was Unbent.

When Unbent saw Jarid, his face transformed into joy. Jarid was impossible to read as he went to stand before the highwayman, his profile to Muller now. Unbent looked up at his foster son, his expression dimming, his hands clenched on the bench. Muller waited for Jarid to condemn the monster who had helped murder his parents.

And then the king of Aronsdale went down on one knee and bowed his head before the prisoner in his dungeon.

At first Unbent seemed unable to respond. Finally he spoke, but in such a low voice, Muller barely heard. “What is this? You kneel to me? Surely not.” He was talking to himself; he obviously expected no response.

Jarid lifted his head. “Surely yes.”

Unbent froze. “Dani?”

“Dani?” Emotion roughened Jarid’s voice. “Is that what you named me?”

“I—yes, yes, I did.” Unbent started to reach for him, then shook his head. “What miracle is this, son?”

Brant Firestroke spoke harshly. “Do not presume to call His Majesty your. ‘son.’”

Unbent jerked up his head. “HisMajesty?”

Muller froze. Surely Unbent knew Jarid was the Dawnfield heir?

And yet. . .Muller had seen the desolate range where Unbent and Jarid made their home. They had lived in one of the few places so remote that they could have been cut off even from news as big as the death of a king or his heir.

Muller spoke coldly to Unbent. “Yes. His Majesty. That night you murdered the heir to Aronsdale.”

Turning to Muller, Jarid tried to speak, then stopped. Everyone remained silent, waiting while Jarid struggled to do what most people took for granted—talk. He finally answered in a rough voice. “Stone did not kill my parents. Murk was the one who drove us off the road.”

“But I was there.” Unbent rose to his feet, his knees creaking. “I, too, am responsible.”

Jarid raised his hand to touch Unbent’s face, the man who had been his guardian all these years, twice as long as his parents. “Any sin you committed, even that Murk committed, was far less than mine.”

Unbent answered in a low voice. “No.”

Muller felt currents of emotion swirling here, his awareness intensified by the imperfect shape of the cell. But he could barely read the spell. He sensed only that Jarid condemned himself and that it agonized Unbent.

“Stone—” Jarid’s voice caught.

“Stone?” Unbent’s voice caught. “Is that how you thought of me?”

“For strength.” Jarid’s voice turned bleak. “A contrast to Murk.”

“I don’t understand,” Muller said. “Who is Murk?”

Unbent turned to him. “Murk planned the robbery. He was the other highwayman.”

“And you only now reveal this?” The man’s deceptions so angered Muller, he barely kept his voice even. “Better to protect your own, eh?”

Unbent’s gaze never wavered. “Aye.”

“Nay,” Iris murmured to Unbent. “You did it for Jarid. You remained silent all these years to protect him.”

Unbent hesitated. “Jarid?”

“My husband.” Iris inclined her head to the king.

Stone’s weathered face gentled as he turned to his former ward. “You have married this lovely young lady?” When the king nodded, Unbent smiled. “It is good.” He hesitated, his smile fading. “Jarid—this is your name?”

“It is,” Jarid said.

“I am sorry. I never knew.”

Jarid touched his arm. “Do not be sorry.”

Bewildered by Jarid’s obvious love for this man who had ruined so many lives, Muller struggled to contain his emotions. “What does she mean, you remained silent about Murk to protect Jarid?” he asked Unbent. “What lies have you told my cousin?”

“Told?” Pain suffused Unbent’s voice. “I have told him nothing and everything. I spoke to him for fourteen years, Gracious Lord, and he heard nothing. What did I tell him? That the boy punished himself for something not his fault? Yes, I told him. He never heard.”

Jarid spoke in a rasp. “I am no boy.”

“Enough of this, highwayman.” That came from Brant. “Where is this Murk?”

“Gone,” Jarid whispered.

“Gone?” Muller asked. “Where?”

Jarid didn’t answer. Instead he walked to the window and gazed past its bars to the hills. His need for separation surrounded him like a shield, almost tangible.

“I cannot take you to Murk,” Unbent said. “I am sorry.”

Muller clenched his fist. "You will tell us where your partner has hidden."

"I cannot."

Brant's voice came like the wind that scoured the land in winter. "We have been patient with you, highwayman. That is done now. You will talk."

Unbent paled, but he said nothing.

Brant motioned to the soldiers. "Take him to the interrogation room."

"No!" Jarid turned from the window. "You will not."

"Why?" Muller asked. "Why, cousin?"

Jarid's voice had jagged edges. "You know the legend of indigo mages?"

"I have heard them," Muller said.

Brant spoke. "No indigo mage has ever been known."

"My mother," Jarid answered.

"That cannot be," Brant said. "We have no records."

A voice came from behind them. "No. But I recognized the signs in her."

Muller swung around. Della stood in the doorway, her silver hair disarrayed around her face, her cheeks red as if she had run here through the wind. She wasn't breathing hard, though, which made him think she had been standing there for a while, listening.

"It is the legend of the indigos," Della came forward. "A mage's power is limited by the strength of her life. She can soothe, yes, but no more than she could soothe herself. She can heal only those injuries she could recover from herself and feel only emotions she can recognize and endure." Quietly she added, "An indigo mage would have the greatest power of all."

"The power of a life," Jarid said, his gaze hooded.

Iris spoke slowly, watching her husband. "To save a life—but only one, for she has only one life."

"Yes." Della's voice gentled as she spoke to Jarid. "Your mother saved your life in the crash, yes?"

His voice rasped. "She died so I could live."

Iris spoke with dismay. "Nay, Jarid, it is'n your fault."

"You must not punish yourself for their deaths," Della told him.

Muller struggled with his anger. To Unbent, he said, "You should have brought him home. How could you keep him in that hovel?"



“He didn’t know who I was,” Jarid said.

Brant narrowed his gaze at Unbent. “You could have made inquiries. You chose to protect yourself.”

“Yes.” Unbent met his gaze. “I did.”

“Liar.” Pain etched Jarid’s face. “Liar.”

“Son, don’t,” Unbent said. “Let it go.”

“Why?” Jarid’s voice grated as if it could tear his throat. “They should know the truth.”

“What truth?” Muller asked.

“About Murk.” Jarid’s voice rasped. “About me.”

“Dani, stop,” Unbent whispered.

Brant considered the older man. “Whatever you’re hiding, we will discover it.”

“Stop.” Jarid faced them, his body dark against the patch of light from the barred window at his back. He lifted his arms until his hands were at waist level, his palms cupped upward.

Then he began a spell.

Light filled his hands, as if he held a glowing red orb in each. He had a haunted expression, his face stark, lit from below. The rest of the cell darkened around him.

Della moved next to Iris. “A red mage?” she murmured.

Iris swallowed. “I think more. Much more.”

Jarid continued to stare at Brant. The cell was growing hot, as if he held flames rather than light.

The spheres of light changed.

They turned gold—and Muller’s exhaustion receded. As they shifted into yellow, his anguish over the flaws that scarred his life eased. The spheres turned green—and Muller knew, with devastating clarity, the self-loathing that filled Jarid. Why did the king hate himself? The orbs turned sky-blue, then sapphire. The ache of a sword wound Muller had taken many years ago vanished.

The spheres turned indigo.

Tears welled in Muller’s eyes. Incredibly, impossibly, Jarid could heal even grief. Muller struggled not to respond; he had to deal with his doubts himself. But for the first time in his life, he believed hope existed, that he might someday control his mage gifts.

The spheres in Jarid’s hands changed again.

Violet.

“Saints above,” Della whispered.

“The power of a life,” Jarid grated. “The power to give life—or take it away.” He extended his arm toward Brant, his hand filled with violet light. “I took Murk.”

Brant stared at him. “I don’t understand.”

Jarid’s words dropped into the air like stones. “That night when he murdered my parents, I reached out with my mind—and I killed him.”



19

### The Imperfect Mage

Muller stood on a bluff and gazed at Croft’s Vale, but instead of the picturesque cottages, he kept seeing Jarid’s anguished face as he revealed what he had held in silence for so long. In his terror, six years old but with a blazing will to live, the grief-shocked boy had fought back and reversed the greatest spell any mage could make.

Mages brought light. They soothed pain. They healed. Ultimately, the most powerful could save a life. To reverse their spells, to injure others, violated the essence of their lives. No matter how justified their actions, no matter how the circumstances might warrant it, they couldn’t endure using their spells for dark instead of light. Muller knew it well. He had spent his life struggling with his broken gifts.

Jarid’s desperate act of self-defense had shattered him. It had broken the circle of his life. With an unrelenting remorse, the boy had finished what Murk tried to begin, taking his own sight, hearing, and speech.

Muller felt as if his heart were tearing apart. So much grief: so many losses. He remembered the night King Daron had died; Muller mourned as much today as he had then. His uncle would have rejoiced at Jarid’s return. Muller knew he should find comfort in knowing it would have gladdened Daron and perhaps helped to heal Jarid, but he felt only pain. Part of him would always believe his uncle loved him only because Daron had lost his son and grandson. Muller would never know otherwise; death had taken Daron before life could reveal the answers to Muller’s unasked questions.

A rustle came from behind him, the wind playing with leaves on the ground. When it grew louder, he turned. Instead of leaves, Iris waited a few steps away.

Muller bowed. “Good morn, Your Majesty.”

She flushed at the title. “Good morn, Your Highness.” Breezes tossed her hair around her body. She

indicated the rolling slopes and village below. “A lovely view.”

“Like our royal family.” The words were sour fruit in his mouth. “Beautiful on the outside, rotted from within.”

Her voice gentled. “That is’n true, Muller.”

“Isn’t it? You heard Jarid—a shape-mage who can kill.” He could hardly comprehend it. Had it been him instead of Jarid in that carriage, Muller dreaded to think what his mage “gifts” would have done. Destroyed his parents’ bodies? Killed Unbent? Himself?

He feared Jarid because he feared himself.

“Jarid had provocation,” Iris said.

“And if he feels he has provocation again?”

Lines of strain showed on her face. “Saints, Muller, look at what it did to him.” She came forward so he could hear her better. “What if we hadna found him? Would he have spent the rest of his life atoning for being a terrified little boy who defended himself from the monster who murdered his parents and meant to kill him? He’s suffered enough.”

Muller answered in a low voice. “Before we knew anything about him, I had been so certain it would be best if I stepped aside. Then we discovered he was unfit to rule. Even that was all right for Aronsdale—you would do well in his place. And a child might come who had Jared’s spirit. But he began to recover and suddenly we had a king who would rule, but imperfectly.”

“Surely a flawed king is better than none at all.”

His voice cracked. “Even then I didn’t know the worst. He is an abomination. A mage who kills.”

She spoke with that compassion of hers that seemed to have no limit. “We are all flawed, Muller. Just look at me.”

He wondered if she had any idea how vital she appeared to others. “Iris, it may not seem so now, but you will come into your own as a mage, at least a sapphire, maybe an indigo, greater than Della, greater than Chime, perhaps even greater than Jarid’s mother.”

She started to speak, then stopped. He feared she would pursue this matter of kings and mages. What more could he say? In seeing Jarid, he saw himself. But no spell of healing could fix his soul-deep failings.

When she finally spoke, she said only, “In the past, Della said emerald was my limit.”

“She was wrong. I told her so.”

“You believed I had such power and you never told me?”

He pushed back his hair, moving with the grace he had never wanted rather than the warrior’s power he longed to command. “Della didn’t want me interfering. And she thinks I have no mage power.” He tried to shrug, to show her estimation made no matter to him, but he doubted he fooled Iris. “She wouldn’t listen.”

“You should have told me.” Iris could have condemned him. As queen she could have ordered him away, had him shunned, even imprisoned him. Instead she spoke with sympathy. “Except then you and I would have had to wed. And you want Chime.”

He nodded awkwardly. “Yes.”

“If I really am that strong of a mage, surely you knew it would come out.”

“Once Chime and I were married, it wouldn’t have mattered. We couldn’t undo the union.” He looked toward the castle, high on its bluff. “Then you found Jarid.”

“That is why you sent me to get him.”

“In part.” He swept his arm out, indicating the countryside, castle and village. “What I said before is true. Aronsdale needs you. I would only bring sorrow to our people.”

“How can you give up so easily?”

“You think I gave up?” She had no idea. Bending down, he dug up a rock and showed it to her. “What shape is this?”

She hesitated. “An oval.”

“An imperfect shape.”

“Very.”

Muller offered it to her. “Can you use it for spells?”

She took the rock and concentrated on it, her forehead furrowed. Her power eddied around the edges of his mind. Instead of focusing her gift, the broken stone dispersed it like a jagged seashore breaking up waves.

“Nay, Muller.” She gave him the rock. “It ruins the spell.”

“As it would for any normal mage.” Cupping his palm around the rock, he focused.

“Muller?”

He didn’t answer, just continued to concentrate on the rock. His power swelled—and the rock suddenly turned red, glowing like a hot coal. Even knowing what to expect, he grunted and dropped it. When the stone hit the ground, the grass sizzled.

Iris gaped at him. “What did you do?”

“That,” he said harshly, “is my mage power.”

“But you have no—”

“No power?” He didn’t know whether to laugh or weep. “Aye, so Della believes. Why? Because she

can't feel a 'gift' as imperfect as mine. I can only use flawed shapes." He pushed the cooling rock with his boot. "You want me to create light? That was the best I could do. My spells always come out twisted. Wrong." He had to make her see; a realm that kept its freedom only because of its mages couldn't survive such a distortion of power from its highest authority. "But I have the Dawnfield mage strength, green at least, maybe blue. It would destroy Aronsdale to have me at its helm."

Iris's gaze turned luminous with moisture. "Hai, Muller."

He couldn't bear her pity. Looking down the hill, he saw an ethereally beautiful woman in a meadow below. She was walking toward their hill, her white dress drifting on the wind. "My betrothed," he murmured.

"Does Chime know?"

"Yes. She helps me. Soothes me." He rubbed the heel of his hand over his eye, hoping she hadn't seen the glimmer of tears there. "But we cannot deny the truth. She and I are flawed."

"Muller, nay."

He turned to her. "You think she doesn't realize she has far too much trouble understanding spells? She and I will never win acclaim for our gifts of the mind. But we complement each other."

"Acclaim means little." Her voice softened. "A love that makes each of you feel whole is priceless."

"A pretty thought." He tried to hide his pain. "But idealistic."

"Sometimes idealism is all we have." Iris watched Chime climbing the hill. "Jarid and I know so little about our duties. All of us are flawed, Muller, but together, perhaps we can do what would be impossible for one of us alone." She turned to him. "Help us. Let me tell Jarid you will stay. He and I, we need you and Chime."

Muller knew he could never give her what she wanted. He couldn't measure up to the roles heredity and destiny had laid out for him. But neither could he give up, especially when she asked in such plain, earnest words.

"I will talk to Chime." He couldn't say more, lest he give her hopes where he had none.

"Thank you." Sadness showed on her face. But no, her expression hadn't changed; his spell with the rock had done more than he realized, sensitizing him to her moods. She was thinking of Jarid. After they had spoken with Unbent this morning, the king had withdrawn to his tower room, perhaps forever going back to the heartbreaking seclusion he had dared break for one day.

For the sake of Aronsdale, Muller knew he should hope Jarid remained isolated, leaving Iris to rule. But he couldn't help himself; he wished Jarid would return to them. He wanted his cousin back, his kin, his only remaining family. Neither Iris nor Jarid deserved the loneliness the future otherwise held for them.

But he feared for Aronsdale.

Iris felt Muller's grief. His golden hair blew about his beautiful face like the wings of an angel. She

wished their conversation didn't hurt him.

"Look." She pointed down the hill, offering a distraction. Beyond Chime, a man was walking to Suncroft. "It is Wareman."

Muller watched the distant figure. "He unsettles me."

It didn't surprise her. "Why?"

"Something about him seems wrong."

She watched Wareman approach Chime. "I can't read him with green spells."

"You have only begun to learn your shape-gifts."

"It could be that." She spoke slowly, remembering her childhood. "But I have always had a knack for sensing people's moods, even before I knew any magecraft. With Wareman, I get nothing."

"I do." Muller grimaced. "When he is near, I can't breathe enough air."

Iris tensed as the peddler caught up with Chime. He must have called to her, because she turned around. Her posture relaxed when she saw him. They began to converse, their body language formal but not tense. "Chime seems to like him."

"She likes the beautiful things he sells." He sighed. "And Chime sees only light, never darkness."

Iris heard the affection in his words. For all that Chime scolded him and he glowered at her, they had a love few people found together. "You think this man brings darkness into Aronsdale?"

Muller hesitated. "He has a lack. He is missing a part of, well—I don't know how to describe it."

"Aye." Iris did know, but she held back, fearing to sound foolish—for to her, the peddler seemed to lack a part of his soul.

Jarid sat on the floor of the tower room with his back against the wall, as he had always done at home, in Stone's cottage. He pulled his knees to his chest and laid his forehead on them. Now everyone knew: he was an atrocity. He would return with Stone to the mountains and his isolation. As much as Jarid knew he had to go, he hated to leave Iris. But he would destroy her if he let her stay with him.

A knock came on the door.

Although he ignored it, silence no longer protected him. Nor could he shut out the compassion that flowed to him from outside. He shouldn't be able to sense Iris with a heavy door between them, but he did. She was becoming a part of him, one so close to his heart that he feared he would break into a thousand pieces when he left her.

The door opened. Jarid rose to his feet, his back to the wall as if he were facing an attacking army rather than his bride. Iris stood in the archway, guards looming behind her, their hands on the hilts of their swords, ready to defend their queen against their king. His view of the scene distorted at the edges of his

vision; he hadn't yet fully relearned how to see.

Iris turned to the guards. "You may close the door."

"Your Majesty," one began. "You shouldn't risk—"

She lifted her chin. "I shall see my husband in private."

When the man hesitated, Jarid spoke in his gravelly voice. "You heard her."

The guard opened his mouth, then shut it again. With obvious reluctance, he closed the door, leaving Iris alone with Jarid. He knew he should insist she leave, but the words deserted him. He wanted her so very, very much. He put up his hands, palms out, to push her away.

"You donna fool me," she murmured.

"You must go," he said.

"Nay, my husband." Iris crossed the room, her hair swinging around her body. She stopped in front of him.

"You cannot love me," he said.

"You can say I will never be yours, but you canna tell me what I will feel." She spoke with tenderness. "Give us time to learn each other, Jarid. With you, I feel a closeness I've never known before. It is as if we have a place in the world. A home. Perhaps neither of us knows how to love the other, but the seed is there. Let us give it a chance to grow."

She besieged his defenses. His conflicted emotions bewildered him: he wanted her in his arms; he wanted to thrust her away; he longed to hope; he didn't deserve what she offered. He drank in the sight of her hair, so full and curly, gleaming red, gold, and yellow. Her face glowed, her cheeks pink as if she had been running. He remembered their wedding night and his pulse quickened.

He spoke in a rasp. "I cannot promise you a life of the laughter and love you deserve."

"I couldna bear it if you left." She reached out to him with one hand, her arm outstretched.

It was too much. Jarid pulled her into his arms and laid his cheek on the crown of her head. "Iris—" His voice caught.

"Is it truly so horrible, to be with the likes of me?"

"It is a miracle. But you destroy my defenses."

She rested her head on his shoulder. "It is a good thing, to heal."

"It's killing me."

"Nay, Jarid. Living hurts, but that is'n death."

"I must never forget what I am."

“You are Jarid Dawnfield, King of Aronsdale.”

“I am a monstrosity.”

“Nay!” She drew back to look at him, her eyes flashing. “You are a marvel.”

Jarid shook his head. “Muller is right. He is more worthy to be king.”

“He didna say that.”

“He doesn’t want me to wear the crown.”

“He wants it even less himself.”

“He doesn’t mean that.”

“He means it.” She set her palms against his chest. “Muller is also a mage, but his spells go awry. You fear you will kill because you have so much power within you. He fears he will kill because his spells twist out of shape.”

He stared at her. “Muller is amage?”

“Aye. He says I may tell only you.”

Jarid leaned his forehead against hers. “He can learn to control his spells.”

“He thinks not.”

“I cannot accept the crown.”

“You already have it.”

“I will abdicate.”

“Nay.” Her melodious voice flowed over him. “What meaning would light have without darkness? Good is’n the absence of evil, it is our ability to rise above the shadows within. If you had no such goodness, you would have never punished yourself all these years.” She touched his cheek. “That you have both light and shadows donna make you evil, it makes you human.”

“I must go.” He feared to accept this hope she offered. “You must stay.”

Her voice caught. “I would miss you forever if you left me.”

Jarid pulled her close again so he wouldn’t have to look into her face. He couldn’t speak his heart: If I stay with you, I fear I will fall in love. It hurt too much, for to love meant to risk the anguish of loss.

“We all leave this life someday,” she murmured. “We canna let that stop us from giving our hearts. If we do, our lives have no meaning.”

He knew leaving would protect Iris, but when he tried to imagine a life without her, isolated in his



mountain refuge, it was unbearable. Great ice floes were breaking within him, as his defenses cracked and split.

“Let them crack,” Iris murmured.

“I don’t know how to love you.” The words wrenched him.

She spoke softly. “Let us learn together.”

It was a long moment before he spoke. Then he said “I will try. I will stay, my wife.”



20

### The Dented Spells

Chime sat alone, in a hexagonal alcove on a cushioned bench, surrounded by gilded walls and fine paintings. None of the beauty offered comfort. It rent her heart to think of Jarid as a boy, frantic to protect himself, unaware of his immense power. She had felt Unbent’s unconditional love for him and Jarid’s for his foster father. That they had found so great a gift in the midst of such tragedy made her tears fall.

She leaned her head against the wall, remembering how Wareman had spoken this afternoon, so solicitous, offering comfort. She couldn’t tell the peddler why she grieved, but his kindness had eased her sadness. It made her wonder if he were a mage. She had warmed to him these past ten days, since they met.

A crinkling noise drew her attention. Raising her head, she saw Della in the entrance of the alcove. Dark circles showed under the mage mistress’s eyes. “King Jarid wishes to see you.”

Chime sat up straight. “Good graces, why?”

“I don’t know.” Della sounded exhausted.

“I thought he would speak with no one.”

“Iris went to him. I don’t know what she said.” She let out a long breath. “Saints only know what he will do now. But he has asked to talk with you. It is a start.”

Chime had her doubts about that, given her clumsy way with words. She thought of the Saint of Silence, a wind spirit that flowed across the land, sweeping away harsh words on currents of air. If only she had such a spirit to help her now. She would never forget the way Jarid’s power had coursed through Unbent’s cell, glorious and terrifying.

She spoke quietly. "He is an indigo mage."

Della didn't need to ask who she meant. But she said, "I don't think so."

"You must have felt his power." Chime raised her arms high. "It filled the room."

Della didn't answer directly. Instead she said, "In a rainbow, indigo comes between two colors."

Chime lowered her arms. "Blue and violet."

"Yes." Della continued in an odd voice, more subdued than usual. "We name mage powers according to the rainbow."

"You think he is blue?" Surely the mage mistress could see he had greater power.

Della's gaze remained steady. "No."

Suddenly Chime understood. "A violet mage? Nay! It is impossible."

"So we thought." Della gave her a wintry smile. "But impossible or not, it seems to be true."

"He is in such pain."

Della nodded. "We call our gifts light, but every power has its dark aspect. The mage who soothes can also upset. One who heals can also injure."

Chime couldn't bear such a thought. "No mage would willingly commit such evils."

"Mages rarely abuse their gifts. The price is too high." Della folded her arms as if she were cold. "In killing Murk, Jarid crippled himself, physically and emotionally. But he knows so little about his gifts. We've no idea how he will respond to us."

Chime thought of his wedding yesterday. "Last night he left the castle unable to see, hear, or speak. He came back this morning changed. I don't understand it."

"Perhaps you know better than you realize."

"I do?"

Della smiled. "Muller works his wonders with you, eh? Makes you see the world in a new way, hear new music, speak new joys."

Her lips curved upward. "He does, it is true."

"So Iris reaches Jarid."

Chime's mood softened. "By loving him, you mean."

"Well, by trying." Della squinted at her. "With Jarid, I expect it is not easy."

Chime could imagine. “Do you think Iris is indigo?”

“No...but I’m not sure. I had thought sapphire, but that isn’t right.” Della shook her head. “She uses her powers in ways I haven’t yet untangled.”

Chime tried to be happy for Iris. But it disheartened her. She had worked so hard, struggled to learn, to succeed. She might be less articulate than other people, slower, less adept, but incredibly, she had been the best mage. Now she had lost that. She had Muller and she rejoiced in his love. The rest of it shouldn’t matter, but it did. For the first time in her life she had achieved something special and now it was gone.

Della was watching her. “Don’t lose heart, Chime.”

She straightened up. “Shall we attend the king?”

Chime unfolded her legs and stood up next to the bench. “I’m ready, ma’am.” It wasn’t true. But the time had come for her to face Aronsdale’s enigmatic sovereign.

In the hierarchies of Aronsdale, mages ranked above all others except the royal family, the King’s Advisors, and the Mistresses or Masters of the guilds: Blacksmith, Farmer, Husbandry, Crafter, Carpenter, Servers, and Merchant. Aronsdale had only five full mages who were openly acknowledged: Della, the Shape-Mage Mistress; Skylark, the healer for Suncroft, Croft’s Vale, and as many villages as she could reach; Iris, the Mage Queen; Jarid, who was an unknown; and Chime, who had yet to establish a definite place but who ranked even higher than Della by virtue of her emerald, faceted-sphere gifts.

Chime told herself she had every reason to hold her head up within the royal court. But her emotions refused to acknowledge what her intellect knew. She felt as unprepared to face the king today as she had her first day at Suncroft, perhaps even more so, given the differences between Jarid and Daron.

She entered the octagonal tower room with Della. The chamber reminded her of a treasure box capped by the domed ceiling, all tiled in blue and gold star mosaics. Iris and Jarid were standing across the room, close together. Chime could tell they had been embracing. They also looked as if they had been crying, their eyes swollen and red.

Power swirled in the chamber. The mosaics, the orb-lamp on the round table by Jarid, the half sphere formed by the ceiling—it focused their gifts, all of them, four of Aronsdale’s mages. When Della closed the door, completing the octagonal box, the power surged, dizzying Chime. It was too much.

Then serenity flowed over her. She took an uneven breath, regaining her mental balance. That sense of calm came from a mage. She didn’t think Della could make such a powerful spell, and it didn’t have Jarid’s untamed quality. She looked at Iris and the queen met her gaze, her face gentle.

Della bowed to Iris and Jarid. It startled Chime. She had yet to absorb the reality; Iris was no longer her fellow student, the girl who had moved to Della’s cottage because it felt more like a home than the castle.

She was the queen.

Nor was Jarid a stranger isolated in his own private hell any longer. Yet even now that he could see,

hear, and speak, he seemed locked within himself. Chime wondered if he would ever fully heal.

Steadying herself, Chime joined Della and bowed to the king and queen, more deeply than the mage mistress, taking longer, as a commoner would bow to royalty. "My honor at your presence."

"Please," Iris whispered. "Donna do that, Chime." She sounded dazed.

Straightening, Chime found herself looking at Jarid. This close, she reeled from impact of his eyes, so large and clear, a dramatic violet. Although the color wasn't unheard of in the east, where his mother had come from, Chime had never seen such before. She would have thought them unbearably beautiful if they hadn't been so haunted.

Iris spoke to him. "You will be all right?"

The king nodded, his face strained. He touched her cheek, and she curled her hand around his fingers. Then Iris and Della withdrew from the chamber, leaving Chime alone with him.

Jarid leaned over the table, bracing his palms on its surface. With dismay, Chime saw his arms shaking.

"Your Majesty?" she asked. "Are you well?"

It was a moment before he said, "Well enough." His voice came like sand scraping on glass.

She wound the tasseled end of her belt around her hand, uncertain what to say.

Jarid closed his eyes, his head bent. After a moment he opened them again. Finally he straightened up and indicated the chairs at the table. "Sit, please."

Chime sat. Folding her hands on the table, she strove for calm. Serenity. Maybe Iris could manage it, but she found it impossible. She wasn't sure where her gifts ended and Jarid's began; his power swamped everything else. Mage potential filled the room.

He sat across from her, his long legs stretched under the table. Then he leaned back as if to protect himself, his arms folded. His silence unnerved her. In all the protocol she had studied with Pyramid-Secretary Quill, they had never covered a situation like this one. She wanted to wind her hair around her fingers or pull at her belt, but she made herself sit still.

With so much power in the room, Chime formed a spell before she even thought about it. Beneath Jarid's impassive exterior, his moods surged: anger, hope, fear, confusion, wonder, a sense of loss. Too many impressions were flooding his senses. For fourteen years he had lived in the silent dark; now it all came too fast, too bright, too loud. She even caught brief images from his thoughts, sights distorted or wavered. Sounds echoed, became garbled, swelled, then faded.

Chime's fear receded. No wonder he sat there staring at her with such imposing silence. He was trying to find some coherence in that chaos of impressions.

"It is all right," she said. "Take your time." As soon as she spoke, she flushed, realizing she gave insult in suggesting the king needed to take his time.

Jarid, however, took no offense. He breathed out slowly, as if recovering from a long run. When he spoke, his voice had an unfinished quality. "I am unsure of protocols. If I offend, please forgive."

Chime took more care this time in her response. “You could never give offense, Your Majesty.”

“No title...” He stopped as if it hurt to speak. Then he said, “Call me Jarid.”

“Yes.” She almost added, Your Majesty, but caught herself in time.

He uncrossed his arms, but he didn’t seem to know where to put them. Finally he sat forward and rested his forearms on the table. “Mistress No-Cozen says you are her other mage student.”

“Yes, I am.”

“I need your help.”

“What can I do, Your—I mean, Jarid.”

“Something in Harsdown.”

“Harsdown?”

“An Other.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.” She had trouble following his fragmented sentences.

He inclined his head, his hair rustling over his collar. It reminded her of Muller, who moved his head in exactly the same way. She saw the resemblance: both men had those high cheekbones, large eyes, and regular features. But where Muller was lithe, Jarid had a well-muscled physique; where Muller was gold, Jarid was dark; where Muller looked like grace and air to her, this man had stronger line to his jaw and a brooding demeanor.

“Harsdown,” he repeated.

“Have you news about King Varqelle?”

“No.” Resting his elbows on the table, he pressed his fingertips against his temples.

“Hai, Sire, I don’t mean to push.” Chime made a spell to soothe his headache, but it skittered around the edges of his mind, deflected by the sheer force of his own power.

“From Harsdown.” He lowered his hands. “Its presence darkens the sun.”

“But the day is bright.” Belatedly it occurred to Chime that contradicting the king was a bad idea.

“Suncroft,” he said.

She grasped at his choppy words. “Harsdown has threatened the castle?”

“Yes. Or no.” He winced, rubbing his temples. “Something here. Nearby.”

Chime glanced uneasily around the room. “With us?”

“No. Not in here.” He stared at the table with a look so distant, she wondered if he had stopped seeing.

Then his spell formed.

It coalesced from the power around them and filled the chamber. Chime knew the truth then; Jarid had no match as a mage. Trapped within his dark, silent world, he must have fostered his gifts without ever knowing what he did, concentrating his power, undistracted by outside influences. He saw himself as darkness, but to Chime he was radiant.

He created a mood spell unlike any she had known. It saturated the room and spread outward, taking her with it like a mighty river carrying a leaf. Farther and farther it reached, throughout Suncroft and beyond. Jarid sat with his head bowed, no longer seeing, not blindness, but an immersion so deep into his trance that he lost touch with the world.

His spell was glorious.

Closing her eyes, Chime gave herself to the river of power. Her thoughts floated with his spell across the countryside, through the hills, into each succulent blade of grass, until she felt the burgeoning, fertile life. She submerged into nodding skybells, rosy box-blossoms, ancient trees draped with moss; she spanned the sky, as wide and as far as forever; she became part of Croft’s Vale, cottages of sod and thatching, some with crumbling brick and mortar. She knew the blacksmith shop, the lumber mill, the inns and taverns, the market with fish carried in from Lake Mirror.

Then she hit a spike.

It disrupted the serenity of the spell the way a knife pierced a royal-bud. A darkness festered in Croft’s Vale. The malevolence came from another mind, a sharp contrast to Jarid. Recoiling, Chime fell out of the spell.

She became aware of the room. Across the table, Jarid raised his head, meeting her gaze. With awe, she realized what he had done, creating a spell beyond any recorded in any of Della’s histories. Green mages could sense moods only if they were near the other person, a few paces away. Jarid had reached across the land.

“That was incredible,” Chime whispered.

He spoke in his rusty voice. “You felt the Other?”

She shuddered. “Yes.”

“It came to Croft’s Vale from Harsdown.”

“How do you know?”

“I cannot...explain. But I know.”

“What would you like me to do?”

“I cannot go into Croft’s Vale.”

Chime could imagine the tumult it would create if the long-lost prince, now king, showed up in the

village. Nor did she think Jarid could handle such a commotion. He struggled to integrate the flood of impressions from his newly awakened senses. And he needed rest. His fatigue weighed on her mood spell like a great weight.

“You would like me to go?” she asked.

“You know the people,” he said. “They accept you.”

Chime had doubts about how much anyone here accepted her, but she let it go. His request puzzled her, though. “Wouldn’t Iris understand what you need better?”

“She says she hasn’t your experience with spells.”

That surprised Chime. Iris had never said such to her. “Would you like me to search out more about the Other?”

“Yes. Bring a hexagon of army officers with you.”

That seemed an overreaction. “I would draw too much notice if I went with guards.” She smiled ruefully. “It would be obvious I’m not in the village to visit the market or a friend.”

He paused, thinking. “Take Brant and Della.”

It was a good idea. Even the most nefarious forces would quail before Lord Firestoke and Mistress Non-Cozen. Unfortunately it wouldn’t work. “They are King’s Advisors. They would draw just as much attention.” She felt a blush spread through her cheeks. “People don’t take me seriously, and I visit Croft’s Vale often. They won’t suspect anything if I turn up at the market.”

He frowned. “You must take someone with you.”

“My maids, of course.” She brightened. “We can buy cloth for new gowns and tunics.”

“You do this often?”

“All the time,” she admitted. “No one will suspect us being there.”

He nodded to her. “I thank you for your help.”

Chime wasn’t sure he should thank her for anything. Without his incredible spell flowing through her, she doubted she would find much in Croft’s Vale. He seemed unaware of the full extent of his power.

Unease trickled over Chime. If Jarid ever chose to use his powers for other than good, nothing could stop him.

The market was a swirl of color, noise, and smells. Chime strolled with Aria and Reed, her circle-maids, two young women from the palace staff. They weren’t mages; their circle rank signified their status, highest among the apprentices, but not yet full-fledged members of the Server’s Guild with three-dimensional ranks.

Her maids chattered to each other, enjoying the market. Each carried a basket over one arm, and they had both let their hair down so it could blow in the wind. Chime longed to free hers as well, but propriety demanded she sweep it up on her head. She had asked Aria to braid gold and silver cords into it, though. If she had to present a restrained appearance, at least she could sparkle in the process.

They passed stalls where red-cheeked men sang out about their produce: oranges and tangerines from the south, apples and quinces from the west, fat carrots and lettuce, beans of every kind, and turban-shaped squash that resembled the exotic headpieces worn by merchants from the countries of Shazire and Taka Mal. Chime saw women in tunics embroidered with the geometric designs popular in western Aronsdale; men in the heavy boots and rough garb of the north; and children in flapping, colorful tunics who ran everywhere. The clang of metal hitting metal rang through the air as a blacksmith showed off his wares.

Aria, a slender girl with white-gold hair, smiled at Chime. "I do so love to come here on a sunny day." The maid indicated Suncroft on its distant hill, its yellow stone glowing in the sunshine. "Truly a home fit for the sun."

"A sun's croft." Although it comforted Chime that the castle had a humble name, she felt out of place in its elegance. She had wanted to accept Della's offer for her mage students to live in her cottage, but had feared that she would have had even more trouble then fitting in with the royal court at Suncroft. Yet Iris had stayed in the cottage until her marriage. Chime wished she had that confidence to ignore what people thought of her.

This morning, though, she enjoyed herself, exclaiming over glimmering bolts of cloth with Aria and Reed. As they sorted through the fabrics, she concentrated on those with patterns, using their shapes to focus her search for moods of the Harsdown presence. Cloth just provided flat shapes, though, limiting her spells. The only three-dimensional form near enough to help was the wooden ball that topped a nearby pole, a shape too powerful for her to use.

Chime hadn't risked wearing her faceted emerald ball. Given its great value, far beyond any other jewelry she had ever owned, she donned it only on formal occasions. It would have drawn attention here, besides which, it would be easy in this crowd for someone to steal it. She felt sure Della would have cautioned her about it, had Chime told her what she intended to do during her trip to market. But she hadn't revealed her plans to Della, knowing the mage mistress would also caution her against going. Chime wanted to do this, both for Jarid, who had asked for her help, and to prove to herself that she could be an asset here.

Eventually she bought two bolts of cloth and moved on through the market. She made a spell each time she passed an object she could use to focus, a pyramid box in a stall, a decorative faceted orb, a star hanging from a beam, but she found nothing unusual, no trace of menace. She only skimmed the moods of people around her; any more would have felt like an intrusion, a misuse of her gifts, making her nauseous.

The market filled a plaza, with buildings on four sides. Chime and her maids wandered among the stalls, stopping here and there until they reached the Clover Inn. Relieved to rest, Chime sank down onto a bench against a wall of the inn, under an awning. Aria and Reed settled next to her, talking companionably with each other.

To their right, the inn's door formed a rectangle, as did the sign hanging from a chain above it. A blue lamp swung by the door, a faceted orb hanging from a beam. Chime felt its shape. Twenty sides. It called to her. She hesitated to use such a powerful form without Della, who could help if her magecraft faltered



or her spell backfired.

Chime sat listening to Aria and Reed until she firmed up her resolve. Then she focused through the faceted orb—and a surge of power hit her like a flood of cold water. With a sharply in-drawn breath, she sat up straight.

“Lady Chime?” Aria turned. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, fine.” It astonished Chime that she sounded so normal; inside she was humming with power. She smiled at her maids. “I’m just going to rest a few moments.”

“Aye, ma’am.” Aria made solicitous noises until Chime leaned back and closed her eyes. Then the maids began to chat again, their voices low.

Chime looked through her lashes at the faceted lamp. Seeing rather than touching it didn’t let her build as much power, but with such a high level shape, her spell still formed with strength. The moods of her maids washed over her like sparkling water, Aria’s amiability and Reed’s curiosity. She reformed the spell to give them privacy. Then she let it hover around her like an invisible cloud. The pleasant day eased her thoughts, though she worried about Muller. He was struggling so hard to adjust to the changes in his life, so different from what he had expected these past fourteen years.

At first Chime thought her thoughts about Muller had stirred her disquiet. Gradually, though, she realized the disturbance came from outside of her mind. If the beautiful day, the voices of her maids, and the breezes were all part of a lovely melody, then what she picked up now were discordant notes. That bitter chord had the same threatening aspect she had sensed in Croft’s Vale this morning. A presence lurked here, one she feared.

Then it noticed her.

Chime couldn’t keep her voice from shaking. “I had to leave. He knew I was there.” She was too agitated to sit, so she stayed on her feet, standing with Brant Firestoke in the Hexagon Room where he did his work. She felt slight and insubstantial compared to his tall, powerful figure.

Brant was half-sitting on the table where he spent many hours working on government documents, one of his legs braced against the ground. Jarid paced by the wall, his hair rustling about his shoulders like a dark curtain. Della and Iris stood at the other end of the table. Brant had also called in Cube-General Fieldson, commander of the army in the king’s absence. Fieldson stood near the wall, intently watching and listening.

“You are sure he knew you were there?” Brant asked.

“I’m sure.” Chime wished Muller were here, but he had gone out hunting for game earlier with a party from the castle.

Jarid stopped pacing and stood by a tall window, facing her, silhouetted against the light. “You said ‘he.’ Not it.”

Chime made herself stop twisting her hands in the hem of her yellow tunic. “Yes, Your Majesty. The mind I touched was human.” She shuddered. “Inhuman, too.”

“How can he be both?” Della asked.

“How?” Fieldson’s voice was as dry as a desert. “Ask any warrior in combat, Mistress No-Cozen.”

“He felt so cold,” Chime said. “Like ice.”

“Do you know his identity?” Fieldson asked.

She shook her head. “I couldn’t tell. But he might recognize me. His spell was stronger than mine.”

In the same instant Della said, “His what?” Iris asked, “He is a mage?”

“Yes. His power was huge. But it had—holes.” She didn’t know how to put into words the lack she had felt. “It was missing something.”

“No green,” Jarid said.

They all turned to him.

“Green?” Fieldson asked. “You mean the mage color?”

“Yes.” Jarid’s voice rasped. “He doesn’t have it.”

The door to the office suddenly banged open. Chime jumped, her pulse ratcheting up, then exhaled when she saw Muller. He wore his heavy leggings, riding boots, and hunting jacket, and he hadn’t even bothered to straighten his windblown appearance, which told her just how fast he must have come when he heard she had returned.

He strode over to her. “Are you all right?” Then he seemed to remember the others. Turning to Jarid, he bowed, his hair swinging forward. “My apology at my precipitous entry, Your Majesty.” He sounded furious rather than apologetic.

Jarid nodded, his gaze hooded.

Chime felt Muller’s emotions roiling. Obviously he had heard about her trip this afternoon, probably from his valet, Sam Threadman, who spent a great deal of time with Chime’s maid Aria. To head him off before he blew up, she said, “Stop fuming, love. I am fine.”

He took hold of her shoulders. “Then why did I hear such terrible rumors?”

Chime didn’t try to hide what had happened. He needed to know about the danger. She outlined her trip to the village, using as neutral terms as possible, but by the time she finished, his face had turned red. He swung around to Jarid, his eyes smoldering. “You had no right to ask her to take such a risk.”

“Take care, Lord Muller,” Brant warned. “You are addressing His Majesty, the King of Aronsdale.”

“He speaks truly,” Jarid said tiredly.

Chime frowned at them all. “It was fine.” It wasn’t fine; she would never feel safe again, but that didn’t change her responsibility. Nor would she stand for them treating her as if she were made of lilac-glass. “I

am perfectly able to carry out such a mission.”

“I don’t want you going to the village again,” Muller said. “Blazes, Chime, what if he comes after you?”

Jarid walked over to them. Chime had an eerie sense, as if he had shut out everyone but her and Muller.

“He is gone,” Jarid said. “He was at the Clover Inn. After Chime found him, he left. He journeys to Harsdown.”

Iris joined them. “Can you locate him now?”

Jarid glanced at his wife, including her in his sphere of concentration, shook his head. “I have lost him.”

“How can you be sure it is him?” she asked.

“Through Chime. She linked to him and I followed his...” Jarid hesitated. “I don’t know the right word. The echo of his mind?”

Chime wasn’t sure what he meant, but if anyone had the power to sense another mage, it was Jarid.

Brant regarded him dubiously. “The echo of his mind?” He glanced at Della No-Cozen. “Perhaps I don’t understand.”

Chime suspected he was offering her a chance to make Jarid’s comment look less strange. Della, however, remained true to her No-Cozen name. She spoke briskly. “I have never heard of a mage echo.”

Inspiration struck Chime. “It is like a harmonic in music. Or the second arch of colors in a double rainbow. Jarid senses an echo of the power from other mages.” She stopped as her sense of sanity caught up with her impetuous comments. She had never spoken up during a council among the King’s Advisors. They would probably laugh now.

No one scorned her outburst, though. In fact, Della said, “With enough power, a mage might do such.”

Fieldson had stayed back, saying little and hearing much, but now he came forward. “Do you fear a threat from Harsdown, Your Majesty?”

Jarid regarded him steadily. “Yes.”

“Why now?” Muller asked.

Jarid spoke roughly. “A government changes hands. A country is vulnerable.”

“Do you believe Harsdown poses an immediate threat,” Fieldson asked. “Or a long-term one?”

“Immediate, I think,” Jarid said. “The Other, this dark mage—he knows we have discovered him.”

“We have no idea who he is,” Iris said.

Chime recalled her sense of familiarity with the mage in the Clover Inn. She had assumed she recognized him because she had touched him before, through Jarid. But could it be more? Sometimes mood spells

helped her recall a mood she had detected before. She tried to make a new spell using the room, but too many irregularities marred its form: windows, moldings along the ceiling, paintings on the walls. They were like a buzz that disrupted her concentration.

Jarid's power suffused the room, but remained latent. Muller had the opposite problem; he was struggling to hold back his power, which could easily surge in this imperfect hexagon. Chime no longer wondered that other mages couldn't feel his gifts; they were somehow at an angle to a normal mage. One had to be able to look around the corner to recognize him. She had from the start, but no one else seemed to see Muller as she did.

It suddenly came to Chime. "Plates!"

Everyone blinked at her with what she called The Look, which people took on when they thought she was making foolish comments.

"Lady Chime?" That came from Fieldson.

Her cheeks were burning, but she couldn't stop this time even if she did fear to make an idiot out of herself. This was too important. "The peddler. Wareman. We purchased some of his serving dishes."

"Wareman?" Della shrugged. "He is harmless."

"I am not so sure," Iris said. "He troubles me."

"Why?" Fieldson asked. He was taking her comments as seriously as he would input from any of the others.

Muller grimaced. "He has dark patches in his mage ability. No green."

"How would you know such a thing?" Brant asked.

Muller froze. Startled, Chime realized that with so many mages at Suncroft and so much tension driving them, he was having trouble guarding his secret. Too many people knew: Chime, Iris, Jarid.

The king answered. "Yes. Dark patches. Holes."

"I felt it, too," Iris said. "A lack of color."

Brant refused to be sidetracked. He considered Muller. "No green. How would you know this?"

"I told him," Chime said, speaking too fast.

Brant glanced at her. "I thought you liked Wareman."

"He has been gracious to me. But it is true, I cannot make green spells with him."

"Wareman is from Aronsdale," Iris said. "I don't believe he could have pretended his accent, gestures, and body language so well if he came from Harsdown."

Muller spoke tightly. "That doesn't mean he didn't betray Aronsdale."

“But why would he?” Chime could see no reason anyone would choose bleak Harsdown over lovely Aronsdale. Not that she had ever seen Harsdown.

Muller’s face gentled. “Would that we all had your innocence.”

She glowered at him. “I am not naïve.”

“You are light,” he murmured. Then realizing they had an audience, he cleared his throat. “So,” he said to everyone. Then he seemed to run out of words.

Brant cocked an eyebrow. “Yes, Your Highness?”

Unlike in the past, today Muller didn’t bristle at him. He said only, “If we face an immediate threat from Harsdown, we must prepare the army.”

“Against what?” Fieldson asked. “We need more to plan for than an undefined threat.”

“An invasion, perhaps.” Jarid pushed his hand through his hair. “I cannot lead an army.”

“Jarid, nay,” Chime said. He stood there, muscled and fit, broad-shouldered, in every way the image of a warrior. “Do not say such a thing.”

“It is true,” Jarid said. “I can fight, but I know nothing of war strategies.” He turned to Muller, his gaze steady. “You must lead in my place.”

Muller started. “Your Majesty, I’m hardly—”

“You are my family,” Jarid said roughly. “Call me by my name.”

Chime wondered if Jarid knew how many protocols he had just broken. Muller was a member of the royal court; as such he was expected to use proper address with the king regardless of their kinship. Muller seemed stunned, but also...relieved. Perhaps Jarid had another reason for ignoring protocol, knowing how Muller wrestled with his change in status. For all that Jarid had spent years without his sight, Chime suspected he saw in other ways, into the heart.

Muller spoke stiffly. “I am gratified by your faith in my ability, Your—Jarid.”

“Faith indeed.” Brant looked as if he had bitten into a sour apple.

“Your Majesty,” Fieldson began.

“I have made my choice. Lord Muller will lead my army.” Jarid looked around at them all. “Do not underestimate my cousin.”

In that moment, Chime decided she liked the king.

Jarid went to the window and beckoned to Muller. He joined the king, his posture so tense, Chime wondered if he intended to refuse the command. But he stood with Jarid, gazing at Suncroft and beyond its walls to the hills of Aronsdale. Seeing them together, both the same height, one gold, the other dark, she felt a tightening in her chest.

They each fought their inner demons.



21

### Forest of Dreams

Sweat dripped off Muller's face as he focused on his opponent, Arkandy Ravensford, a hexahedron-major and superb swordsman. The day's heat pressed down on them. Sunlight glinted off their swords, and those of the other warriors practicing in the Octagon Yard. In battle, Muller would wear leather armor and chain mail, but he eschewed it now, striving to harden himself. Although he and Arkandy wielded blunted swords, Muller's muscles ached from when Arkandy had pierced his defenses and whacked him in the torso.

Finally Arkandy stepped back and raised his sword, the signal to request a rest. Muller paused, acknowledging the break with relief.

Arkandy lowered his sword. "You fought well today."

Muller grinned at his friend. "You gave me a run."

Arkandy laughed. "Have to keep you working." He picked up a cloth in his pile of equipment and wiped sweat off his face. "Will you train with the men later?"

"After midday." Muller hadn't yet adjusted to the decree Jarid had made yesterday, naming him commander of the army. He felt no more qualified for the position than when he had expected to lead them as king, but he had never doubted his ability as a swordsman. During practice, he could forget his lack of confidence.

As he and Arkandy walked across the yard, Muller brooded. Watching the archers train this morning, he had been troubled by their poor aim. Could his mage power have contributed? He didn't want his presence to constrain the fighting ability of his men. A pulled bow formed a four-sided figure with uneven sides. A flawed shape. But it wastoo imperfect to stir his mage power, or so he had believed. Although he didn't think he had made spells that affected their aim, he could never be certain.

"You are quiet today," Arkandy said. He was a burly man about Muller's age, a country gentleman from a farm south of Suncroft. His wide face, brown eyes, and shock of golden-brown curls gave him a stoic appearance.

"What troubles you?" Muller asked.

Arkandy looked startled. "My apology. I've been thinking about Harsdown. But I didn't mean to sound querulous."

“You didn’t.” Belatedly Muller wondered how he had known Arkandy was worried. He hadn’t consciously made a mood spell, but now that he thought about it, he felt his power simmering. He saw no shapes nearby that he might have inadvertently used to focus, however. Although he needed imperfect shapes, they had to be recognizable as geometric forms. The blade of his sword deviated enough from a triangle to cause only a trickle of power. It rarely threw off his ability to fight and it wasn’t enough for a mood spell.

Muller glanced at the Mage Tower of the castle—and saw a tall figure in the window of the top chamber. A chill ran up his spine. Although the man was too far away to see clearly, he knew it was Jarid. An insight came to Muller, so unexpected that he stopped in the middle of a step, his foot raised.

Arkandy halted next to him. “Mull?” The nickname came from when they had been boys together, both sent to foster at the castle. With a grin, he added, “Are you doing a jig?”

“Pah.” Muller set down his foot. “I could out dance you any day.”

With an amiable laugh, Arkandy headed for the castle again. Muller went with him, unable to voice his confusion even to his closest friend. Although Muller felt certain he had made the spell that revealed Arkandy’s concern, he also was convinced Jarid had helped shape it. He doubted his cousin had done it on purpose; Muller had picked up no sense of deliberate interference from Jarid. No, what he felt was far more surprising.

His spell hadn’t twisted.

Muller hesitated to trust that impression. If Jarid had instinctively straightened the spell, it suggested Muller could learn to do the same. He feared to entertain that hope; it would make the disappointment that much harder if he failed. But he remembered Iris’s words: All of us are flawed, Muller, but together, perhaps we can do what would be impossible for one alone.

“Are you all right?” Arkandy asked.

“Fine, yes. Just tired.” Muller wondered, not for the first time, if Arkandy suspected his gifts. He glanced at his friend. “Tell me something.”

“Yes?”

“Do I seem as accident prone now as I used to be?”

“I wouldn’t say accident prone, exactly. You have bad luck.”

“You could call it that,” Muller grumbled.

“But yes, it does seem better, now that you mention it.” Arkandy grinned at Muller. “Chime has a good effect, eh?”

“She does indeed.” Chime didn’t straighten his spells, but she did smooth his jagged edges. He had managed better since he met her.

They split up at the castle and Muller went on to his suite. His body ached, but even so, he felt better than he had in a long time. Perhaps he might conquer his mage gifts after all. He wanted to resist that

hope, but it insisted on staying.

As Muller approached his suite, its gilt doors swung open. Sam Threadman, his valet, stood framed in the entrance, scowling mightily.

“How did you know I was coming?” Muller asked.

With dignity, the offended valet moved aside to let him enter. “I looked out.” He indicated the round window by the door, which showed a stained-glass lark in a field of open royal-buds, those flowers that bloomed only a few days each year. Sam crossed his arms and regarded him with disapproval. “You are late.”

“So I am,” Muller said amiably. “Why were you looking for me?”

Sam shut the door. “The cube-general sent his pyramid-assistent to talk to your pyramid-assistent. Apparently you didn’t tell your assistant you were training. So he sent his octagon-assistent to find someone who knew where you had gone.” He glowered with great effect. “The octagon-assistent found your square-butler who found me.”

Muller squinted at him. “That is a truly impressive chain of people.”

His valet refused to be mollified. “I would ask that Your Most Esteemed Highness let us know where to find you so that we don’t go running around the castle like callow young men in search of a purpose.”

Muller held back his laugh. “No one would ever mistake you as such,” he assured Sam. “Everyone knows you are the reason that the callow young man you serve manages to make his appointments on time when he does.”

Sam finally relented. “Milord, you should not refer to yourself as callow. You have acquitted yourself admirably during these trying times.”

That surprised Muller. “I’m glad someone thinks so.”

“Certainly.” Sam looked him over. “Though I must say, your apparel could use some help.”

This time Muller did laugh, aware of his sweat-soaked shirt and leggings. “So it could.”

While Sam set up a bath, Muller went into the hexagonal room he used as an office and stood at the rolltop desk, studying the scrolls he had taken from the library last night. They described strategies and weapons used in various battles in other countries. Aronsdale hadn’t had a true war for so long, most of their military scrolls were outdated.

When Sam bade him return to his bedroom later, Muller discovered with gratitude that his valet had arranged for a tub of steaming water. Although the pumps at Suncroft made it possible to bring in water from an underground river, it wasn’t easy to heat enough water for an entire bath.

An ivory screen surrounded the tub, a new one painted with colorful birds in exotic trees. Probably a member of Muller’s staff had bought it in Croft’s Vale from a merchant who came to Aronsdale from the south. Muller wished they could build a similar trade with Harsdown and countries to its west, but he doubted King Vargelle would ever let Aronsdale merchants travel freely through his country.



While Muller soaked in his bath, Sam stood on the other side of the screen and caught him up on the latest news. “Apparently the generals want to send me into Harsdown. They wish to discuss strategy with you.”

“They always want to invade Harsdown,” Muller said. “They never do. They know we probably can’t win. Why the urgency today?”

“I can’t say, sir. Their assistants didn’t see fit to tell me.” Now Sam sounded annoyed.

Muller smiled, glad his valet couldn’t see him. Sam had never seemed to comprehend that a valet’s duties didn’t extend to the governance of Aronsdale. Personally Muller thought Sam had more sense than half the royal court.

“Tell me,” Muller said. “What would you do about Harsdown if you thought they posed a threat?”

“What kind of threat?”

“Well, yes, that is the question, isn’t it?” Perhaps that was why Fieldson wanted to see him. “Maybe they have new information.” With reluctance, Muller stood up. “I should go find out what they want.”

“I will see to your clothes.” Sam sounded positively smug. “You will outshine those drab generals.”

“That will impress them,” Muller said dryly. “Here is our commander, the best dressed soldier in Aronsdale.”

Sam sniffed. “Clothes are no matter to take lightly.”

Despite Sam’s protests about sartorial flair, Muller donned only a simple tunic and leggings, light gold, nothing to draw attention. He doubted he would inspire confidence in his officers if they continued to think of him as a fop. He wasn’t certain they were wrong, but he would endeavor to convince them otherwise anyway. In the past, Muller had bridled when his advisors lectured him, especially Brant, who always made him grit his teeth. But he had realized of late that if he spent more time listening, it allowed him to work through matters without becoming defensive.

He left his suite and headed to the Sunstone Hall, a long room Fieldson and Brant used for strategy meetings. He found them both there, seated halfway down the table that extended the length of the hall. Deep in discussion, they didn’t notice Muller until he reached them.

Brant looked up with a start. Then he and Fieldson rose to their feet. “My greetings, Your Highness,” Brant said.

Muller nodded to them both. “My staff said you wished to speak with me.”

Cube-General Fieldson gestured to a chair. “Yes. We have news.”

Muller sat with them. “Where is King Jarid?”

Brant pushed his hand through his silvery hair. “That is the problem. We don’t know. He left the castle a few hours ago, with orders that neither Lord Firestoke nor I was to follow.”

That gave Muller pause. It would be odd for any king to disappear, with Jarid, who knew what might

happen. “Did he say why?”

“Not directly.” Fieldson rubbed his chin. “He did mention Harsdown. I believe he intends to use his mage skills in searching for answers about the presence he and Lady Chime detected in Croft’s Vale yesterday.”

Brant spoke darkly. “Saints forbid he should just tell us what he is doing.”

Muller almost smiled, but he held it back. It amused him to see Brant annoyed at someone else for once. He must have sought out Muller when the king disappeared, and the message became garbled along its convoluted path to him.

“Do you want me to search for him?” Muller asked. It sounded like Jarid had forbidden only Brant and Fieldson to follow. Muller had more leeway in his interactions with the king, given their kinship. Still, he didn’t seem the best choice. “He would probably be more open to Iris.”

Brant scowled. “It seems the young man also avoids his wife today. He told her not to follow him, either.”

“Does she know where he went?” Muller asked.

“She has no idea,” Brant said.

“He has been gone too long.” Fieldson drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. “Given the recent changes in his life, we have concern he is feeling—” He spoke carefully. “Perhaps overwhelmed.”

Muller knew they feared the king was crazy. He didn’t think his cousin had lost his mind, but Jarid remained an enigma. “I will talk with Iris,” he decided. “Then I will look for Jarid.”

Brant raised his eyebrows. Muller immediately felt the familiar surge of insecurity that always came to him when he faced Brant’s disapproval.

Then, incredibly, Brant said, “A good idea.”

The rare compliment gratified Muller. He did wish, though, that Brant didn’t look so surprised.

Iris walked with Muller along a blue gravel path in one of the castle gardens. “Jarid often withdraws. He needs to be alone.” She brushed her hand along the slender trunk of a tree. “He feels inundated with people, sights, sounds. It is too much.”

“What if he decides not to come back?” Muller had felt that way himself more than once, overwhelmed at the thought of ruling when he lacked so many qualities needed by a king. And he had less to deal with than Jarid.

“I’ve worried about that.” Iris stopped by a cluster of royal-buds and cupped her hand around one. “The night we were married, he left me alone in the forest and went off by himself. I searched for hours. But he found me at dawn.” She looked up at Muller. “And he could see.”

Muller’s thoughts gentled. Perhaps in loving Jarid, Iris used her mage powers to heal him. But that would

mean she could heal grief, which only an indigo mage could do. Although he knew she had great strength, he didn't think it was indigo. She wasn't truly a sapphire, either, though. He had no idea how to describe her spells.

"Do you know when he started to hear again?" he asked.

She resumed her walk. "The morning after the coronation."

"You mean that morning we spoke with Unbent?" It was hard to believe only two days had passed since then.

"Yes." She considered him. "Why don't you take Unbent with you? Jarid trusts him."

As much as Muller disliked the idea, he knew it made sense. He also knew why no one else had suggested it; Unbent was the last person Brant and Fieldson wanted near the king. Jarid had ordered them to release his foster father and provide him a suite in the castle, but it was obvious they considered the decision foolhardy.

"I will ask him," he decided.

"My thanks, Muller."

Her use of his name startled him. In the past, he had barely noticed her deferential attitude toward him. Now their roles had reversed. Or no, that wasn't true. They were kin now. He bowed to her anyway, observing the protocols. He had made his decision to give up the crown; now he would accept the consequences.

A box-butler opened the door when Muller's pyramid-secretary knocked. Muller stood back while the butler and secretary arranged matters. Within moments, the butler was escorting them through Unbent's suite, with its scalloped moldings and sunbirch furniture. Circle mosaics worked into the chairs and tables had artful notches here and there, prodding Muller's power. To dampen his response, he focused on unbroken octagons that bordered the doorways.

The butler ushered him onto a balcony that curved out from the castle wall in a half circle. Then he withdrew with Muller's secretary, closing the beveled glass doors, leaving Muller alone—except for one other person. Unbent stood a few paces away, at the curved railing of the balcony, gazing out at the mountains. Muller was almost certain Unbent knew he was there, but the older man gave no sign. So Muller waited, giving him time.

Unbent looked far healthier today than when they had found him in the dungeon. Color had replaced his pallor, he had shaved his beard, and his gray hair had a shine. He stood true to his name, unbent despite his advanced years. His haunted look remained the same, however.

Muller wanted to hate this man. Yet the king loved him, perhaps more than the father he recalled so little of now. It bewildered Muller. He would never forget Jarid's father. Prince Aron had been distant to most people, but never with his kin, including his young cousin. Muller had looked up to him, admiring his strength and steady nature.

Aron had died when Muller was fourteen. It happened so suddenly. It had been that way with everyone

Muller loved: his grandfather a few months ago, his father when Muller had been seven, and his mother when he had been ten. Better to love no one than to weep so often. But Muller couldn't stop loving. He had never been able to wall away his emotions. He doubted his anger at Unbent would ever ease, but it was impossible to hate a man who had been such a devoted father to Jarid.

After awhile, he went to stand with the craggy farmer. "My greeting, Master Unbent."

Unbent didn't seem surprised by his appearance. "My greeting, Your Highness." His accent resembled Iris's, but with a rougher tone, lacking her melodic quality. Although their home provinces weren't far apart, he lived much higher in the mountains, in one of the most remote areas of Aronsdale.

Unbent looked at him. "No one ever gave me a title before."

"The king calls you father." Muller couldn't keep the tightness out of his voice.

"Aye. I don't deserve it."

Muller wanted to say, No, you don't. But only Jarid could decide whom he considered a father.

"King Jarid went into the forest earlier," Muller said. "No one has seen him since."

"He has always done so."

Always? Muller couldn't imagine letting a deaf and blind man wander alone in those desolate mountains where Unbent had lived with his foster son. "And you let him?"

"Yes. He needed to feel he could rely on himself."

"What if something happened to him?"

"He didn't go far." Unbent shook his head. "This power of his, I don't claim to understand it. I only know that Dani needs—" He stopped. "I mean, King Jarid."

It flustered Muller to hear Unbent use a nickname for the king. "Needs what?"

"Places outside. Trees, mountains, life. It renews him. But always, no matter where he went, I felt his power. I knew if he needed help. Then I would go get him."

Muller made himself ask for the help he resented needing from this man who had taken Jarid out of his life for so long. "Will you go with me to look for him?"

Unbent's brow furrowed. "Why? He is fine."

"How do you know?"

"We have a bond. I can feel his power."

Muller had thought only mages were sensitive to other mages. When he was near the king, he felt as if he were bathed in radiance, but they had to be in reasonably close proximity. Right now he felt nothing at all.

"Can you make spells?" Muller asked him.

“Nay. I’m no mage.” Unbent hesitated. “I don’t know how Jarid made that bond with me. But it became stronger over the years, until now I can always tell if he needs help.”

“And you think he is all right?”

“He sleeps.”

Muller wasn’t sure what he expected, but that wasn’t it. “You are sure?”

“Aye. His mind is quiet.”

“Why would he go sleep in a forest?” It seemed truly strange to Muller.

“Maybe he didn’t intend to.” Concern shaded Unbent’s voice. “He is exhausted.”

“I should find him. He may not be safe.”

Unbent hesitated.

“What is it?” Muller asked.

“And you would take me with you?”

“If you will come.”

“A man you must surely distrust.”

Yes, Muller thought. But he forced out the truth. “My cousin trusts you. He is what matters here.”

“What will you do if you find him?”

“Ask him to come back to the castle.”

“And if he says no?”

Muller held back his frustration. He knew Unbent wanted to protect Jarid. That his ward had turned out to be a king may have daunted him, but apparently nothing would stop him from treating Jarid like a son.

“I won’t make him return,” Muller said. “But I must at least try to convince him. I gave my word.”

Unbent nodded, apparently willing to accept that answer. “Very well. I will go with you.”

By the time Muller and Unbent had gone several miles, Muller was worn out. They hiked over hills and through woods scattered across the rolling countryside. Muller had considered himself fit, indeed, in good shape, but he needed all his energy to keep Unbent’s pace. It gave him a new respect for the rigors of the life Unbent had lived.

Finally Muller slowed to a stop and bent over, bracing his hands against his knees as he gulped in air.

When Unbent came back to him, Muller straightened up, still breathing hard. “Why are you in such a hurry?”

Unbent looked confused. “Hurry?”

“Never mind.” Muller stretched one of his aching legs, then the other. “You are sure we’re going to where Jarid sleeps?”

“Can’t you feel him now?”

Muller almost said, No, of course not. But when he concentrated without the distraction of trying to keep up with Unbent, he did sense power around them. It seemed undefined, as if—well, as if it slumbered.

“Yes. I do.” It daunted him to think Jarid claimed a mage potential so great, it encompassed the countryside. “How much farther?”

“Maybe a few miles.”

Muller nodded tiredly and resumed walking, setting a slower pace. They went down a hill, through grasses waving at knee height. Wild flowers bloomed everywhere, sun-orbs and swaying fire-lilies. The terrain remained the same for the next half-hour, low hills with few trees. Eventually they approached another forest, this one more extensive than others they had passed through.

For the first time, Unbent hesitated. “He dreams.”

Muller tilted his head. He felt it, too, an agitation in the slumbering aura of the woods. It didn’t come from the wind or rustling grass. Muller didn’t know which troubled him more, that Jarid had fallen asleep here, alone and undefended, or that his strength was so great, his nightmares inundated the land itself.

They continued on, more slowly now. After passing a few trees that straggled up the slope, they entered the forest. It was older than the woods around Croft’s Vale and extended as far as Muller could see. Moss grew on the trees and shape-vines curled along branches, hanging down in great loops, vivid with rosy box-blossoms. Very little sunlight filtered past the dense canopy. Neither Muller nor Unbent spoke. Muller had an eerie sense that if the quiescent forest were disturbed, it would wake with an intelligence of its own.

Unbent never faltered. He made his way among the ancient woods as if he followed a well trod path. The forest had relatively little undergrowth, but fallen trees blocked their way, some so old that earth partially covered them and moss grew along their crumbling trunks.

The untamed beauty of the forest took Muller’s breath. If he and Chime had time to themselves, he would bring her here. He didn’t miss the irony, that this wilderness was the antithesis of the order they strove to keep in their lives. The forest called to the wildness he had suppressed within himself. His father had drowned when an unexpected thunderstorm hit while he was riding a horse through a narrow canyon. Three years later, Muller had lost his mother in a blizzard. The day the search party had found her frozen body, he had sworn he would never again let the wild control his life, either in spirit or reality.

Unbent stopped at a huge trunk that must have fallen decades ago, perhaps longer. Even lying on its side, it rose higher than Muller stood. Parts of it had caved in and new trees sprouted along its length. When Unbent grasped a handhold and began to climb, the trunk crumbled under his feet. But he kept his purchase. He paused at the top, and for the first time his fatigue showed. His age seemed to press on

him, his gray hair hanging about his weathered face and stubble darkening on his chin. Then he looked over the other side—and his demeanor lightened as if sunlight had broken through the forest.

Muller tackled the fallen mammoth. He almost lost his footing as he scaled the trunk, but he reached Unbent with no serious mishap. Leaning over, he saw Jarid sitting on the other side, sleeping against the trunk in a grassy area sprinkled with white star-flowers. The king's face clenched with whatever specters disturbed his dreams.

“By the spheres,” Unbent murmured. “How can he be so fierce and so beautiful at the same time?”

For an instant Muller hated his cousin. Jarid was everything he longed to be—strong, fierce, powerful, a true warrior—and the king didn't even care. Then Muller pushed down his angry thoughts. Jarid had also lived in hell for fourteen years.

“What should we do?” Muller asked.

“Not surprise him,” Unbent said. “When he is waking, he has less control over his spells.”

“Do you think he might hurt us?”

“He has never harmed me.” Unbent slanted a wary look at Muller. “Several times he set the woods on fire. He helped me put out the flames before it caused serious damage.”

“And when he sleeps? His nightmares could bring to life whatever spirits live in these woods.” Muller immediately wished he could take back the words. Any logical person would scoff at such an idea.

“You think spirits live here?” Mercifully Unbent didn't laugh. “Could be.”

Although Muller hesitated to admit it, he felt as if the forest were aware of him. People would deride at the idea, he knew, though they found nothing odd in shape-mages. He supposed it was because mages were understood, whereas trees didn't have minds, except in myths and legends. Perhaps what he felt came from Jarid rather than the forest.

Unbent let himself down the trunk and jumped to the ground, landing far enough away that he didn't disturb the king. Jarid's head jerked and his hand curled into a fist, but he continued to sleep. When Muller glanced at Unbent, the other man shook his head. So Muller stayed put; Unbent knew better how to deal with Jarid.

Disturbances filled the forest. Vague shapes moved at the edges of his vision—

And a man screamed.



## Trespass

The cry echoed through the forest. A man had shouted Jarid's name. Even more eerie, Muller recognized the voice: Prince Aron, Jarid's father.

Sweat dripped down Muller's neck. He forced himself to remain still, knowing the scream couldn't be real. Unbent showed no sign of having heard. He knelt by Jarid and laid his hand on the king's forearm. When the king jerked, Unbent froze, letting only the light pressure of his hand affect his son.

Jarid suddenly sat forward, his eyes opening fast. Heat rushed around Muller, like a flash fire. He saw no flames, but distortion rippled in the air.

As Jarid's gaze cleared, his rigid posture eased. He drew in an uneven breath. "Saints almighty."

Unbent spoke with a kindness he showed no one else. "It was bad this time?"

Jarid grimaced. "Yes."

Unbent spoke with difficulty. "For so many years I have longed to offer comfort for your nightmares, to let you hear my voice. But now that you can, I don't know what to say."

Jarid touched his arm. "I knew you were there. It always helped."

Muller realized then that he had heard part of Jarid's dream. It troubled him to think that even now, Jarid continued to relive the death of his parents.

Unbent lifted his chin toward Muller, letting Jarid know they weren't alone. Looking up, Jarid climbed to his feet and spoke in his rusty voice. "My greeting, cousin."

Muller had no idea how to bow while crouched on a tree that could crumble beneath him. He half slid, half climbed down until he stood next to Jarid and Unbent. "My greeting, Your Majesty." Then he bowed properly.

Jarid acted neither surprised nor abashed that they had found him asleep. He had seemed desperate yesterday, overcome, but today he was calmer. Now that he had awoken, the sense of foreboding had receded from the forest.

Muller glanced around. The sunlight filtering through the foliage had an aged quality and shadows were gathering. "We should start back. Even if we leave right now, it will be dark by the time we reach Suncroft."

"You wish that I return." Jarid made it a statement rather than a question.

Muller wanted to say, It is your home, but he had no idea if Jarid felt that way anymore. He doubted it would do any good to say Brant and Fieldson wanted him at Suncroft. Nor did he think Unbent would help; if Jarid decided to stay here, Unbent would agree.

"Do you want to come back?" Muller asked.



“I like it here,” Jarid said.

“You are sure?”

“No.” The corners of Jarid’s mouth lifted in a smile, and for a moment Muller saw in him the laughing boy who had run to him, cajoling his older cousin to swing him in the air. Regret for those days ached within Muller.

“I would like to see my wife,” Jarid said.

“She will be worried,” Muller said.

Jarid motioned at the forest around them. “This feels more like home. Suncroft is...alien.”

“Is that why you came here?”

Jarid shook his head. “No. I wanted to search out Harsdown. Suncroft has too many people. They make noise in my mind.”

“But why here?” Muller saw the appeal of the forest, with its untamed beauty, but he wouldn’t have traveled so far to find such a place. Surely others existed closer to Suncroft.

“Iris goes to a hollow like this,” Jarid said. “But I dislike intruding on her sanctuary.” He motioned at the clearing around them. “So I found another.”

Muller peered around. “Another what?”

“You do not see?” Jarid asked.

“Neither do I,” Unbent said. “It is pleasin’ wild, son, but so are other places.”

“The shape,” Jarid murmured.

Muller saw then. The branches arching above them, the depressed ground, the circular clearing—it formed a natural sphere. No wonder he felt such a gathering of power. Jarid was focusing through the forest itself. Its sheer size daunted Muller; it would take an extraordinary mage to harness its power.

“Incredible,” Muller said.

“Impressive, eh?” Unbent beamed like a parent pleased with a child’s cleverness. He didn’t seem to understand the magnitude of what his son achieved. For that matter, neither did Jarid. They had no idea.

Muller regarded Jarid curiously. “Did you discover anything in your search?”

The king nodded. “The dark mage has returned home.”

“To Harsdown?”

“Yes.” Jarid pushed back a strand of hair that had fallen across his face. “We must go to Harsdown.”

“Your army isn’t ready,” Muller said.

“I don’t mean invasion. Just you and I.”

Muller stared at him. “You are the ruler of this land. Until you have a son, I am your heir. We can’t go alone into hostile territory.” He could imagine what Brant would say to such an idea.

“We will go.” Jarid’s gaze remained firm. “Perhaps not this season or this year, but we will go.”

“What makes you sure?” Muller asked.

“If we do not,” Jarid said, “The twisted mage will help King Varqelle conquer Aronsdale.”

Muller froze. Twisted mage? Did Jarid believe he, Muller, would harm Aronsdale? He tried to make a mood spell using the gnarled tree trunks, but they differed too much from a cylinder for him to use.

Suddenly Muller’s spell snapped into focus. Jarid had meant the dark mage when he said twisted, not his cousin. Muller also felt Jarid’s fatigue, the bone-deep exhaustion that a few hours sleep had barely touched. Jarid had no wish to return to the harsh existence of his life in the mountains; he wanted to stay at Suncroft, his ancestral home. But he was far more overwhelmed than he revealed.

The impressions faded; Muller lacked the skill to maintain such a powerful spell for long. But that interlude invigorated him—for during those precious few moments his spell hadn’t twisted.

Jarid peered at him. “Muller? Are you all right?”

“Yes. Fine.” With Unbent listening, Muller couldn’t tell his cousin the miracle that had just taken place. He wasn’t sure himself what had happened, but he knew this much; he had begun to see Jarid in a different light.

Della had known better days.

She, Brant, and Fieldson were in Brant’s Hexagon Room on an upper level of the castle, the three King’s Advisors facing off.

“Angry?” Brant looked ready to explode. ‘Angry’ barely touches it. I cannot believe you let him go with amurderer. Bad enough our king disappears. Now we have neither king nor heir. Perhaps this man Unbent fancies kidnapping both of them.”

Della crossed her arms. “And of course poor, helpless Jarid and Muller, two strapping young men in the peak of health, are no match for an elderly man twice their ages combined.”

Fieldson spoke tightly. “Muller said he was going with you and an octet of soldiers.”

“That you let him go with only this man Unbent,” Brant added, “verges on the criminal.”

Della snorted. “Since when is it criminal to obey the commands of the royal family?” She had great respect for Brant and she knew his severity with Muller came from his affection for the young man, but she wished he would learn to show it in a more positive manner.

"It was bad enough when we only had Muller to deal with," Brant grumbled. "Now we have two of them. By withholding information from us, Della, you undermine our attempts to protect Aronsdale."

"And by refusing to listen to those two young men, you undermine their ability to learn." Della made a frustrated noise. "Muller is so at odds with himself, he barely knows where to begin with you. Stop pushing so hard." She glared at Brant. "Perhaps if you showed a modicum of trust in his judgment, he might develop enough confidence to trust himself."

He met her gaze. "Trust has to be earned. When has he done that? So far his major talent seems to be looking in the mirror."

"Oh, Brant." Della sighed. "So he likes to dress well. It is no crime."

Fieldson answered. "It hardly inspires confidence in his abilities as a military commander." He crossed his arms. "If Muller's behavior today is any example of how he will lead the army, I have grave reservations about the safety of Aronsdale. Quite frankly, I would feel more confident with Iris in charge."

"I donna think so." The lilting voice came from behind them. "I am the one who suggested he take Unbent."

Della swung around. Iris was standing in the arched doorway, tall and elegant in a simple tunic and leggings.

They all bowed to the queen. Brant said, "You honor us with your presence, Your Majesty," though he looked more irate than honored.

Iris's face was drawn. "Have they returned yet?"

"Not yet," Della said.

"I would know if Jarid were hurt." Iris spoke more as if to reassure herself than them. "I had thought, earlier, that he was afraid."

Brant stalked over to her. "Then why the blazes did you send Muller off with Unbent to find him?"

"Jarid's father knows how to find his son."

His fist clenched. "Fosterfather."

"Yes. Foster father." Iris made her words a rebuke. She went to a long window and gazed out over the walls of the castle to the hills beyond, which were shadowed in the gathering dusk. The sun had set half an hour ago.

Fieldson spoke. "Your Majesty, you say you knew he was afraid. Do you know more?"

Iris turned around. "It was vague. I wasn't even sure it was him. It seemed like Jarid, but also a child."

"In some ways he is a child," Della said. "So much in his life stopped after the death of his parents." Personally she thought both royal couples were painfully young, even Muller, who had ten years on the others.

“It is’n that.” Iris’s face took on an inward quality and Della felt the rise of her power, concentrated through Brant’s office, a hexagonal prism, six walls capped by the flat ceiling and floor.

“I sense him,” Iris said. “Like a fog. But I feel a man, not a boy. What I sensed before—it was him, but as a child.”

“That makes no sense,” Brant grumbled. When Della gave him a warning look, he added, “Your Majesty.”

Amusement flickered in Iris’s gaze. She inclined her head to Brant. “Thank you, Your Lordship.”

Della held back her smile. Iris had changed a great deal in the past year.

A knock came at the open door. Turning, Della saw one of the triangle-pages, the ten-year-old son of a southern lord. His face was flushed as if he had been running. “Your Majesty!”

Iris smiled at the boy. “What is it, Randi?”

Excitement filled his face. “The king arrives!”

“About time,” Brant muttered. He bowed to Iris, along with Fieldson. When she nodded, they left the office, Fieldson clapping Randi on the shoulder on their way out.

Iris spoke kindly to the boy. “Go on to the kitchens and see what sweets Cook has. Tell her I sent you.”

Randi grinned. “Yes, ma’am!” Then he took off.

Iris went to Della, only now letting her relief show. “We had better go meet Jarid and Muller.”

“That we should.” With a sigh, Della added, “Before Brant takes them apart.”

Chime stood on the Star Walk in the dusk. Light from torches and lamps shone through the open gate below, spilling down the hill and across the three men hiking to the castle. As soon as she had heard the gates grinding open, she had run up here to see if Muller had returned. The sight of him trudging up the hill flooded her with relief.

Two men strode out of the castle, headed down the hill. Chime needed no spell to tell her one of them was furious; his rigid posture said it all. It had to be Brant; she recognized his walk. The man in a general’s uniform was probably Fieldson. Della and Iris appeared a moment later, moving at a calmer pace.

Everyone met halfway down the hill. Chime wanted to join them, but she hesitated to intrude. Although she and Muller planned to marry, she wasn’t yet a member of the royal family nor was she a King’s Advisor. She was simply a young woman learning to be a mage.

Using the star holes in the walkway, she made a mood spell. Brant’s anger leapt up at her. He was using it to hide his concern for Muller and the tormented sovereign who so resembled the late King Daron. She sighed, thinking what a pair Della and Brant made, always growling and grumbling to hide the affection

they felt for people. It had to be frustrating for them, having so many mages about who could see past their prickly exteriors to their gentle hearts.

After the group below entered the castle, Chime headed downstairs. Perhaps she would send Aria, her circle-maid, to see Muller's valet, Sam. If Sam told Muller that his betrothed had inquired after him, Muller might come to tell her what had happened. She hadn't seen him since he had proposed yesterday and she missed him terribly.

She was walking along a concourse on the ground floor, down an arcade of columns and arches, when a rustle came from behind her. Puzzled, she turned around. The arcade was empty. If someone had been there, they must have ducked behind a column or into an alcove. Or gone outside; doors to the gardens stood open farther down the concourse. She walked around the nearest columns, but saw no one. She was alone. The mosaics on the columns had stirred a spell within her, though, and she could have sworn she sensed someone's mood. It wasn't a mage, but someone cold and stealthy—

The hand clamped over her mouth and nose so fast, she had no chance to react. A sickly smell overwhelmed her and dark spots floated in her vision. She began to pass out.

Instinctively, Chime called on the mage skills Della had taught her. Only dimly aware now of the circle mosaics on the columns, she threw her power into them to make a ragged spell of light and heat. It barely worked. Her attacker didn't shout with alarm and collapse—but his hold did loosen.

Chime tore away and ran. On the verge of falling with each step, she raced down the arcade. She didn't dare pause, in case her attacker was behind her, his pursuit drowned out by the thud of her own feet. She sped out of the arcade, under an archway into a corridor. Desperate, she turned a corner—and slammed into an unyielding surface. A person. Arms grabbed her, holding on when she tried to jump back. She gave a strangled scream and hit his chest with her fists.

"Lady Chime!" The voice penetrated her panic. "What is it? What is wrong?"

She finally focused on the person she had barreled into: Sam Threadman, wearing the gold and russet livery of Muller's staff. Sturdy and firm, the valet stood holding her arms, his face creased with concern.

Chime spun around, whipping out of his hold, and stared down the corridor. It was empty.

"He's gone!" She turned back to Sam.

His face darkened. "Who hurt you?"

"I—I don't know." She tried to push a tendril of hair out of her face, but her hand shook so much, she couldn't even manage that small gesture. She could smell the cloying stench from the cloth her attacker had pressed over her face. She stumbled to the wall and slid down it until she was sitting on the floor.

Sam knelt next to her. "You need the healer."

Chime shook her head, but she couldn't speak. Bile rose in her throat. With great care, she lay down on the floor and closed her eyes. "Don't go," she whispered. "Please. He might come after me."

"I won't leave you, milady," Sam said. "But who might come after you?"

"Didn't see..."

Someone spoke to Sam, words too soft to overhear. Chime opened her eyes to see a rectangle-page, a young girl in the Dawnfield livery, a tunic and leggings, white, gold, and indigo. The page's face paled as she stared at Chime. "Hai, Sam, is she hurt?"

"I think so." He spoke urgently. "Go for Skylark. Tell her Lady Chime needs help. Then let Lord Firestone know an intruder may be in the castle."

"I will be right back." The girl took off, running around the corner, brown hair flying.

Chime's pulse began to slow. Sam continued to kneel at her side, a solid, reassuring presence. She closed her eyes and gave in to the effects of whatever had been on that cloth. For a time she floated, half conscious. Every few moments, she forced her eyes open to make sure Sam remained at her side. Then she drifted again.

"Lady Chime?" A soothing voice washed over her. "Can you hear me?"

"Ahhh..." Chime looked to see Skylark, the Mage-Healer of Suncroft, an older woman with blue eyes and two long white braids that hung over her shoulders.

Skylark was kneeling, holding a blue sphere in one hand. She laid her other palm on Chime's forehead and warmth flowed from her hand. "Does that help, child?"

"Not a child," Chime grumbled.

Skylark smiled at her glare. "I think you will be all right."

Chime slowly pushed herself up and sat against the wall. Sam was hovering behind Skylark, his face filled with worry. Chime wouldn't have expected them to be so concerned for her. She had believed people here viewed her with disdain, especially the servants, who knew her background as a country girl even though they had to treat her as a noble. She was a fraud. Yet Sam, the page, even Skylark, a powerful mage in her own right, genuinely seemed to care what happened to her.

The pound of boots came from the arcade. As Chime looked up, Muller ran around the corner. He skidded to a stop and dropped down next to her, his face flushed. Dirt covered his clothes, mud caked his boots, and his hair was tousled over his collar. She was dimly aware of more people coming around the corner, but she saw only Muller. With shaking arms, she cupped his face. He grabbed her into an embrace and hugged her hard, his cheek pressed against her head. Closing her eyes, she sunk into his arms.

It was several moments before they pulled apart. Then Muller turned to Skylark, who still knelt nearby, though she had scooted back to give them room. "Will she be all right?"

"I believe so. But she must rest." Skylark spoke to Chime. "You were drugged, milady. I think you inhaled a poison called blue-eye. In small doses it knocks you out." Quietly she added, "Larger doses kill."

Muller let out an explosive breath. "Chime, who did this? Tell me the name."

"I don't know." She was beginning to feel steadier now. "Someone came up behind me and put a soaked cloth over my face."

A rusty voice spoke. "He came from Varqelle."

Startled, Chime looked up. Jarid and Unbent stood in the hallway, both as disheveled as Muller, along with Iris, Della, Brant, and Fieldson.

"Do you mean King Varqelle?" Muller asked.

Jarid's voice rumbled. "From Harsdown, yes."

Fieldson spoke to Chime. "We have soldiers searching the castle. Can you tell us where to look for him?"

Chime did her best to speak calmly, describing as much of the incident as she remembered. When she finished, Fieldson sent one of his men to update the searchers.

"He probably escaped through the gardens," Jarid said. "He could be on his way back to Harsdown by now."

"Why do you think he came from Harsdown?" Brant asked.

"I felt it."

"How?"

Jarid seemed at a loss. "I just did."

"He links to them all," Chime said.

"Who links?" Fieldson asked.

She looked up at him. "Jarid."

"Links how?"

Everyone regarded her, expectant. Jarid seemed as puzzled as the others. Having lived all his life with his gifts, perhaps he didn't see how he affected others. She hardly knew how to explain it herself. "You cover all the valleys and dales," she told him. "Everywhere."

Jarid seemed bewildered. He glanced at Iris. "Do you feel this?"

She nodded. "I can tell if you are upset or happy," she said. "I don't even need my own spell."

Jarid touched his wife's cheek, the first time Chime had seen him show tenderness. Iris's face gentled, and for a moment it was as if she and Jarid were alone in the corridor.

Then Jarid spoke to Della. "What say you about this link? Do you feel it?"

"I sense your power," Della said. "But not a link."

He turned his violet-eyed gaze to Skylark. "Healer?"

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty. I don’t feel it.”

Fieldson considered them. “So it is just the three of you. Jarid, Iris, and Chime.”

Jarid glanced at Muller, who met his gaze with an impassive expression. To Fieldson, Jarid said only, “Yes.”

The general rubbed his chin. “I’ve never heard of mages communicating across such large distances before. Strategically it could be valuable.”

Chime rose to her feet, leaning on the wall for support. The effects of the potion were fading, but her nausea surged when she moved. “The intruder—I don’t think he was the Harsdown mage.”

Jarid came over to her and spoke in a low voice. “You used a spell to escape the intruder.” Only Muller was close enough to overhear.

“I made heat,” Chime acknowledged.

“And it burned him.”

“I think so.”

“You gave pain with your gifts,” Jarid said, intent.

Muller stiffened. “She was protecting herself.”

“I mean no censure.” Jarid regarded Chime. “I would be sure only that you do not censure yourself, either.”

“Aye, Your Majesty.” She wondered if the severity of her reaction came in part from causing harm with her spell.

Muller turned to the others and spoke to Fieldson. “We should increase the guard on the castle. We must have no more break-ins.”

His assured tone startled Chime. She had never heard him address the King’s Advisors with such confidence. In the past, he had avoided them and bristled when they cornered him.

“I can also put men on patrol outside,” Fieldson said.

“Yes, that would be good,” Muller said.

Usually Chime couldn’t focus a spell on more than one person, but right now everyone’s unease simmered in her awareness. The mosaics focused her power. They had given her the means to resist her attacker, perhaps saved her life. When she had first come to Suncroft, she hadn’t appreciated their significance, but now she understood. The designs were two-dimensional, which limited the spells they supported, but they were everywhere.

It was no wonder Jarid’s presence filled Suncroft.



Iris found Jarid in the octagonal tower chamber. He was sitting in the dark at the round table, his face silvered by starlight. His presence filled the room, blended with the light of an Azure Moon flowing through the window.

Iris sat with him. "What troubles you?"

His voice was low. "I cannot absorb it all."

She wanted to take his hand, but she feared he would withdraw. "That is why you left the castle today, yes?"

"Yes." His voice deepened. "Varqelle knows."

"Knows what, Jarid?"

"That our leadership is weak."

His intensity unsettled her. "You think Wareman spied for Varqelle?"

"I'm certain of it." He stood and walked to the window. Bathed in moonlight, he seemed more spirit than human. "But why attack Chime?"

"She is a powerful mage. Or she will be, someday."

"So are you, more so. And you are queen."

Iris went to him. "Chime is more vulnerable."

"Yes. But it is more than that. He needs her."

"Why?"

"I wish I knew. Somehow she is the key." His pain sparked, magnified by the patterns on the frame of the window. "We are so vulnerable—you, me, Chime, Muller. Varqelle seeks to demoralize us. To wear us down."

"Ask Brant and Fieldson for help." Iris wanted to reach out to him, but she held back, knowing he couldn't handle so much human interaction this soon, after so many years of isolation. "They have experience. Wisdom."

Jarid rested his forearm on the wall by the window and gazed at the starlit countryside. "That night, after our coronation, you helped me to unlock my prison. But I remain lost. I have sight now, but I cannot see what to do. I listen, but I do not understand what I hear."

"Let your advisors interpret for you."

"I have no trust in them." He glanced at her. "Muller is my cousin. I loved him when I was a small boy. I trust him now, even if he has no trust in himself."

She spoke softly. "And me?"

His voice roughened. "You terrify me." Taking her into his arms, he laid his head against hers. "You make me confront my nightmares. If you were to desert me, I would wither."

Her voice caught. "I won't desert you."

"I cannot see my path." He held her close. "But again and again, my spells turn me toward Harsdown."

"Hai, Jarid." Iris had no answers, for she feared he was right.

Harsdown waited, dark beyond the mountains.



23

### The Golden Halo

Anvil the Forged walked with Varqelle along the top of a fortified wall that wound through the cliffs above Castle Escar. The air was noticeably thinner up here and the sky a dark blue. Cold seared his lungs, exhilarating in a way he never experienced in the humid, overly fertile lands of Aronsdale.

Varqelle, however, looked less than pleased. "I fail to see how that slip of a girl escaped my agent. She has no use to me as a hostage if she runs away so easily."

"Chime Headwind is a mage," Anvil said. "She used a spell against him." It annoyed Anvil. Varqelle had sent one of his best men to catch the girl, a soldier with expertise in infiltrating even the most fortified refuges.

Varqelle tapped his long fingers on the hilt of the sword at his hip. "You assured me those incompetent children can create no worthwhile spells."

Anvil shrugged. "She instinctively defended herself. That is different from using her abilities in a military capacity. However, her spell was apparently rather crude. She was lucky. This time." Varqelle's man continued to hide in the countryside around Suncroft.

The king stopped at a crenellation in the wall. "They bedevil me, these people of Aronsdale." He motioned toward the distant countryside of Harsdown, far below the mountains, spread out like a game board, brown on brown. "My people starve. Aronsdale has more than we do. It troubles me, troubles me greatly."

It troubled Anvil, too, though for different reasons. He had wearied of his travels. At thirty-one, he was no longer a boy hungry for adventure. He desired a permanent home. Riches. Servants. A woman. It

didn't decrease his need to strike at Aronsdale, but it changed the slant of his intentions. Aronsdale had robbed him of his home and family; it would give back to him now, make him rich.

He jerked his chin at the mountains in the opposite direction, toward Aronsdale. "The people beyond those peaks live in wealth while your people starve."

Varqelle snorted. "They may have more than we do, but I would hardly call it wealth."

"They are a boil on the face of the earth," Anvil growled.

Varqelle's laugh put an uncharacteristic smile on his face. "A colorful but perhaps apt description."

Anvil decided to probe for information. "I can see why you have such a history of problems with their kings."

"What history?" Varqelle asked curiously.

Anvil took a guess. "King Daron wronged you."

"Did he now?" Varqelle tilted his head. "How?"

Anvil could see this wouldn't work. Varqelle was too savvy to reveal anything unless he wanted it known. So he switched to a straightforward approach. "Isn't that why you have such difficult relations with Aronsdale?"

"Actually, Daron tried to improve them," Varqelle waved his hand. "He thought I would let his trade caravans go through Harsdown."

"It could be lucrative," Anvil admitted.

"I have no interest in enlarging Dawnfield coffers."

"Even if it enlarges yours?"

"Taking Aronsdale would enlarge them more," Varqelle scrutinized him as a strategist might study a map. "You are looking for a great passion in my wish to conquer them. A drive for vengeance or a burning hatred. What you seek isn't there. Aronsdale is a fertile land, one that would enhance my realms. If they gain strength through trade agreements, it makes it that much harder to overcome them."

"So power drives you."

"It has much to speak for it," Varqelle raised his chin. "I would see myself as king over more than Harsdown and Aronsdale."

That fit more with what Anvil had expected to hear. He intended to make himself so necessary to Varqelle, the king would believe his plans of conquest could never succeed without his mage. Anvil would rise among the elite of Harsdown until he was a power within his own right.

"They call you Varqelle the Cowled now," he said. "Someday it will be Emperor Varqelle."

Varqelle waved his hand. "To rule an empire is neither simple nor easily realized." His voice quieted.

“Sometimes the way seems clear. Take Aronsdale and move on from there. Other times I have questioned the wisdom of this course. Profit exists in trade with Aronsdale. It is far less than I would gain by conquest, but it would be immediate.” He drummed his fingers on the hilt of his sword. “Aronsdale has an army of a thousand men. I have more, but not much. I don’t think I can overcome theirs unless I tax my people enough to hire mercenaries from the outlands. But these soldiers for hire are misfits, unreliable, criminals. And my people would suffer if I require more from them. They survive the taxes now, but they can little afford more.”

Anvil tensed. He had no wish for peaceful resolution. Aronsdale was too full of mage power, too fecund. He felt ill there. He could never forget how his family had died, murdered by the people of Stonce, the hamlet where he had grown up. He wanted them to pay, all of them, every bigot and hate-filled native of that country. He had no doubt they loathed mages, despite the supposed respect accorded them by the royal court. If Varqelle sought peace, Anvil would lose his vengeance.

Varqelle fooled himself, though, if he didn’t think his people already suffered under the current taxes. Anvil had seen it during his travels. He had thought to speak to the king on the subject, if an appropriate opening came up, but now he changed his mind. He had no wish for Varqelle to reconsider his plans to move against Aronsdale.

Besides, peace could never work. Jarid Dawnfield couldn’t even make decisions for himself, let alone his country. “It might not take as much as you think to overcome Aronsdale,” Anvil said. “This long-lost grandson who wears the crown isn’t even sane.”

Amusement flickered in Varqelle’s eyes. “Perhaps he will simply give away his country, eh?”

“One can never tell.” Anvil paused. “Sire, your people need more than any trade agreement can give.”

Varqelle rubbed his chin. “It is a pretty country, Aronsdale.”

“It should be yours. Without conditions.”

“Yes, well, it isn’t.” The king leaned against the wall, his arms crossed. “How does your magecraft compare to that of this plethora of mages they have spawned out there at Suncroft? Four of them, isn’t it?”

“Yes, four.” That hardly constituted a plethora, but Anvil didn’t contradict the king. Other mages might exist in Aronsdale, minor ones, perhaps able to draw on low-level shapes in two dimensions and warm colors, red, orange, more rarely yellow. But mages of real strength were rare. The elderly castle healer at Suncroft and the wife of late King Daron were the only full ones known in their generation; Della No-Cozen and Jarid’s mother were the only ones in the following generation; and Della had found only two in the current generation, despite scouring the country and chasing every rumor she heard.

Had she followed rumors of him?

Anvil shuddered and pushed away the thought. “The Suncroft mages are nothing. The girl Chime is a delectable piece, but she has no brain. The healer is elderly and weak, and the mage mistress is a harriidan. The queen is intelligent but untutored.” Iris Larkspur had a figure too full for his tastes, but he had seen the voluptuous concubines Varqelle preferred. “She is well made, though. You might enjoy her for yourself.”

Although the king smiled, his expression had nothing of pleasure in it. “I have a wife. I sent her away.”

Anvil had heard the rumors of Varqelle's bride. He married a princess from the Misted Peaks, one of the western provinces, to strengthen ties between their realms—and she had fled back home less than a year later, taking his infant heir with her.

Tales abounded as to why the queen of Harsdown left her husband, most rife with rumors of Varqelle's brutal appetites, but one thing was clear: to bring her back, he would have to fight the Misted Peaks, a more powerful realm than Harsdown. Although Anvil believed in taking a firm hand with a woman, he couldn't countenance brutality. However, Varqelle's predilections were the king's business, not his. If Varqelle knew a prize awaited him at Suncroft, it might add an extra enticement to invade.

"You wouldn't marry Iris Larkspur," Anvil said. "Just enjoy her."

"Perhaps." Varqelle sounded bored, but Anvil knew him well enough to realize he was intrigued.

"As for the Suncroft mages," Anvil continued, "You have nothing to fear in terms of their ability to plan or defend against your forces."

"What about the king? I have heard he is a mage."

Irritation surged in Anvil. "The Dawnfields have long claimed male mages in their line. It is a legend, no more."

"You claim such power."

"I am unique."

"Perhaps not."

Anvil loathed acknowledging the possibility, but he couldn't deny it, not as long as other mages lived. "Very well. Let us assume this king is a mage. Unless he is stronger than myself, he couldn't hide his power from me. And I felt nothing significant from him."

"Perhaps he is stronger than you."

"Even if true, the point is moot. The fellow is mad. He can't rule." Anvil had no intention of allowing another mage to have superiority over him. The day Harsdown subjugated Aronsdale, Jarid Dawnfield would die.

Varqelle seemed unimpressed. "Right now the power in Aronsdale doesn't reside with the House of Dawnfield. They aren't the ones we need worry about."

Anvil knew he meant the King's Advisors. "His mentors may have wisdom, but it will do no good if the king ignores them." He laughed harshly. "Saints, Your Majesty, the idiot put Muller Dawnfield in charge of his army. I can't imagine what the prince will do. Dress the men in pretty clothes, perhaps."

Varqelle's gaze glinted. "Perhaps he could lead the knitting circle."

Anvil smiled. But then he said, "Muller Dawnfield does have skill with a sword."

"My concern is the Cube-General. If Prince Muller has sense, he will listen to Fieldson." Varqelle

studied him closely. “You say your power can help bring me Aronsdale. Yet I have doubts about what you can do.”

Anvil held back his anger. Varqelle didn’t threaten or belittle him, which Anvil loathed. Instead the king questioned the extent of his ability. Anvil would have done the same in his position. It didn’t offend him—much.

He placed his hand over a circular depression in the stone wall. Half closing his eyes, he focused, letting his power cycle through the colors, a trick he had learned over the years: red, orange, yellow, blue, indigo.

As Anvil’s spell built, he sighted on the spire atop a jagged tower of Castle Escar to their west. Heat surged through him and he swayed.

Lightning cracked across the clear sky and hit the tower with an explosion of indigo light, shattering the spire. Debris rained over the castle and down the cliffs, echoes of its passage vibrating in the chill air.

Anvil raised an eyebrow at Varqelle.

“An impressive display.” The king’s voice hardened. “Do not damage my holdings again.”

Then never question me again, Anvil thought. He had paid a high price for his gifts; he intended now to reap their benefits. “Think of it as a promise. I could reduce Suncroft to rubble if you so desire.”

Varqelle surveyed the ruined tower. “It must take a great deal out of you to use such power.”

It exhausted Anvil more than he would admit. A tower, a house, an outcropping; he could destroy such as those, but anything more taxed his limits. In his childhood, he had usually fallen asleep after such exertion. Even now, he couldn’t sustain that level of power for more than a few seconds. He had no intention of telling Varqelle, however.

He said only, “I have plenty to spare.”

“So you claim.” The king nodded to him. “Help me gain Aronsdale and you will become its lord.”

“A fitting bargain.” It was no more than Anvil had expected, given their previous discussions. “However, I have one other condition.”

Varqelle frowned. “You have too many conditions.”

“But I have much excess energy.”

The king waved his hand. “Go practice swordplay.”

“This is a different sort of energy.”

“And what might that be?”

“When we take Aronsdale, I want the woman Chime.”

Varqelle gave a hearty laugh. “Ah. That energy.” He clapped Anvil’s shoulder. “Take her as you please.”

He ran from the highwaymen, gasping, pain knifing his side. Someone screamed, his mother, his father...

Muller bolted upright, the velvet bed covers flying. His heart beat too fast and sweat plastered his hair to his head. Saints almighty, that nightmare had felt so real.

After a while his pulse slowed. He slid out of bed and grabbed the robe he had thrown over a chair, pulling it on over his sleep trousers and bare chest, belting it around the waist. He could barely see in the moonlight coming in a tall window. Restless and agitated, he padded out of his suite in bare feet.

With no interior windows in his suite, Muller could see nothing. Was this how Jarid had lived, in blackness? It disturbed Muller. Chime had used her gifts against her would-be kidnapper last night. As an emerald mage, she couldn't heal, which meant she couldn't injure, either, but she could make heat, and heat burned.

In the entrance foyer of his suite, faint light made the stained glass windows glow. Muller crept past a square-butler who had fallen asleep in a chair. He inched open one of the double doors—and made an unwelcome discovery. Two guards stood outside in the light of a torch on the wall, hepta-lieutenants it looked like.

Annoyed, he closed the door, quietly, so he wouldn't alert his dozing butler. After what had happened to Chime last night, it didn't surprise Muller that Brant assigned him bodyguards, too. Brant had probably ordered others to guard Iris and Jarid in the Royal Suite, too. Muller had sent guards to Chime's suite himself. But he loathed losing yet more of his privacy. It all weighed on him: his worry for Chime, his loneliness, the demands of his duties.

He should go back to bed, to rest for the morning when he would resume life, preparing to command the army. But when he thought of going on as usual, something inside of him snapped. Instead of returning to bed, he prowled through his suite, restless, until he reached the quarters for his servants. The rooms were freshly painted and spacious, with quality furnishings. He hadn't consciously planned to come here, but now that he had arrived, he knew what he wanted.

Loud snores came from Sam's bedroom. Sam had always claimed he slept silently, but his magnificent rumbles were vibrating throughout the hall. Muller snuck into a parlor outside Sam's bedroom, his footsteps drowned out by the noise. Floor-to-ceiling panels decorated the room, each about five handspans wide and framed by scalloped moldings. On one, he nudged aside a painting of a cottage surrounded by trees with red, gold, and yellow leaves. The picture hid a cluster of nail holes. Moving stealthily, Muller pressed the holes in a pattern his uncle had taught him twenty years ago, just as Daron's father had taught Daron.

The panel swung inward.

Hah! Muller grinned. It had been so long since he played in these tunnels, he hadn't been certain he would remember how to reach them. He readjusted the painting, then slipped out and closed the secret door behind him.

Chime opened her eyes into darkness. She wasn't sure what had awoken her, but she had a strange

sense, as if the night had taken on a personality. Her songbird trilled, then fell silent in its gold cage, which hung from a hook on the wall by her wardrobe.

Her fear sparked. She wasn't alone. Someone was in her room. She tensed to strike out, but she made no sound, lest she alert the intruder. If she had to fight, she wanted the advantage of surprise. Reaching silently to the nightstand, she closed her hand around a glass vase. It would break well against a person's head.

"Chime?" a man whispered. "Are you awake?"

Saints almighty. A tickling sensation in her throat replaced her fear. "Muller?" She set down the vase and sat up, peering into the dark. A dark silhouette, tall and lithe, stood by her bed. "What are you doing here?"

"Is it all right?" he asked.

"Good graces, no." She whispered her response, so they wouldn't wake up her two maids in the adjoining room. Thank goodness she had closed the door between her room and theirs. Then again, she had also closed the door to the parlor and now it stood open, a lighter rectangle in the shadows of her room.

"How did you get in here?" she asked. "Brant put guards all around the suite."

"Secret passage." He sounded smug. "Only Dawnfields know about it."

"You are very misbehaved, skulking around that way."

"Just a few minutes. Then I will go."

She heard a catch in his voice. "Are you all right?"

"I keep having this damn nightmare." Then he added, "My apology for my language."

Chime had heard far worse in Jacob's Vale. "It is all right." She knew she should tell him to leave, but instead she said, "Stay for a few minutes."

"Thank you." The bed rustled as he sat on its edge.

She traced her finger over a polygon embroidered in the bedspread. A luminous gold circle formed above it and bathed Muller in light, making him look like an angel with his beautiful face, his tousled hair, and his robe clinging to his leanly muscled body.

"Ah, love," Chime murmured, appreciative.

"I've been worrying about you," he said.

"I was sleeping well." Her lips quirked upward. "Until a rogue snuck into my bedroom."

"Rogue!" He tried to glare at her, but his laugh ruined the effect. "You wound me, Chime."

She suddenly felt shy, having him in her bedroom. This was so improper it would give Brant Firestoke a



heart attack. "You should go."

"I wanted to make sure you were here, that no one had run off with you."

She took his hand. Right now it was hard to care about protocols that had never felt natural to her in the first place. In the matrilineal culture where she had grown up, a girl from a landed family usually chose her own husband, who then moved into his wife's family home. Protocol there required the woman not compromise the man's honor by sneaking into his bedroom, but mention was rarely made of the reverse situation.

"You look tired," she said.

"It is my nightmares." He grimaced. "I dream an army from Harsdown marches on Aronsdale, rank after rank of inhuman soldiers, mage creatures created by darkness." He sounded exhausted. "Or else I dream I'm Jarid and my parents are dying."

"I wish I could help." She tugged his hand. "Come sit with me."

Muller scooted over until they were sitting against the headboard, leaning together. "It helps just to be with you."

She laid her head on his shoulder. "I feel safer with you here. After last night—" She shivered, wanting to forget the attack.

"Hai, Chime." He put his arm around her shoulders, his long fingers rubbing the flimsy cloth of her nightgown. "You are so warm and I am so cold. Work your magic on me." He drew aside her hair and bent his head, pressing his lips against her neck.

"You stop that," Chime murmured. Her bird trilled at her voice. "You must leave before someone catches you and sends you to the dungeon."

He moved his lips to her ear. "I would risk any dungeon for you."

Chime ducked her head as his breath tickled her ear. He was rubbing her cheek with his, and when she turned her head, and he found her lips with his. As he kissed her, she slid her arms around his waist.

"Lovely Chime." He made the words a caress. Then he eased the two of them into the bed, under the covers.

Chime knew she should tell him to stop. But he felt so very fine. Just a moment more. Then I will send him away.

His hands moved on her body, tugging her nightgown, shaping her curves. She had admired his lithe beauty for so long now, wanting him, it really was impossible to stop. She rolled him onto his back, pinning him down. Laughing almost inaudibly, he lay still while she rained kisses on his face. Then he rolled her over and kissed her thoroughly, until her thoughts blended into a sensual fog.

Muller touched her with an alluring mix of strength and shyness. By instinct, Chime created pleasure spells, heightening their lovemaking. In the daze of sensuality, she felt the truth: he had kissed very few women, just as she had done no more than tease a few boys in the orchards. They had each chosen to wait, though their differing cultures allowed otherwise for both of them. Knowing they came together new

and fresh, by their own choice, sweetened their passion.

They made love in the earliest morning hours, before dawn touched the sky. Both of them stopped caring whether they achieved the perfection they believed everyone wanted from them. In letting go, in letting themselves be their own flawed selves, they found a love more satisfying than any perfection could have given them.



24

### Charmed Hearts

Winter settled its bleak mantle over the land. Blizzards covered Croft's Vale and heaped drifts around the walls of Suncroft. On some days a dull overcast pressed the countryside; on others the sky turned an icy blue and the air seared with its chill bite.

When they could make it through the snow, Chime and Iris went to the village with Della or Skylark. With their spells, they brought healing. When they could, they traveled to outlying farms. With their warmth and light, they helped hunters survive the harsh weather while finding game for their families or gathering firewood to replenish their stores.

Chime wore a pendant around her neck, an emerald ball with twenty sides, her highest shape. Iris carried a sapphire orb with sixteen facets, too few sides, or so Chime thought. Nor did the color seem right, not exactly. A mage could use any spells below her own level, but her strongest work came from the highest shape and color she could draw on. The queen had yet to define her gifts, making it harder for her to use them. She struggled with spells, but those she did form had great power.

So the mages of Suncroft did their best to ease the long, cold winter for their people.

Sometimes Jarid came with them, against the wishes of his advisors. Other times he stayed at the castle, filling in the multitude of gaps in his education and dealing with his recovered senses. He spent hours each day practicing with a sword, learning a skill he had barely begun to practice as a boy of six. His strength and natural ability impressed Chime, but it was Muller, who had such great skill, she loved to watch, his muscles rippling as he parried with the king.

Sometimes at night, when the castle slept, Jarid's mood spells spread across the land, unfocused but resolute, seeking shapes in the hollows, dales and mountains, always searching, searching, for knowledge of King Varqelle and his dark mage.

Muller drowsed, shifting Chime in his arms. It had been several weeks since he had managed to slip into her room, making their time together now even more of a gift than usual. He sighed, content with his

betrothed asleep in his arms, his thoughts drifting. Her songbird trilled in its cage.

The King's Advisors wanted him and Chime to wait until spring to marry, purportedly because it would be a better time for the people to celebrate, which would, as Brant put it, "heighten morale among the populace."

Heighten morale indeed. Muller knew why they delayed the wedding. Now that he was no longer destined for the crown, they balked at marrying him to one of the most powerful mages alive. As his wife, Chime would have many obligations that distracted her from magecraft. She might even end up assuming some of Iris's more mundane duties when the queen attended her responsibilities as the head mage in Aronsdale. The King's Advisors would want a husband for Chime whose position and title didn't interfere with her work. But they didn't know. She had given him her promise.

Chime stirred in his arms, her head against his thigh, one arm thrown across his legs, her other folded under her head, her cheek resting on her hand. Muller smiled, stroking her hair back from her head.

"Lady Chime!" a woman called. With no warning, the door flew open. Light poured into the bedroom as Aria, Chime's circle-maid, hurried inside carrying a candelabra, followed by Della No-Cozen. Beyond Della, down the hall, Brant waited in Chime's parlor.

"Lady, come!" Aria cried. "We must—oh, dear." She stopped, her mouth open as she stared at Muller, his face and bare chest fully visible in the candlelight.

"Ah, hell," Muller said.

"I am appalled." Brant Firestroke paced in front of the two people seated on the brocaded sofa in Chime's parlor. "Utterly appalled."

Chime was too groggy to comprehend half of what Brant said. It made no difference; she didn't need comprehension to see that he was furious. Muller and her maid had helped her out of bed and thrown her into her nightgown and robe. Now she sat, blinking, her hair tousled all over the place. Della stood leaning against the wall, and Aria hovered in the doorway, looking anxious.

Muller sat stiffly at Chime's side, his robe covering him from shoulder to knees, though Aria and Della must have had quite an eyeful when they found him naked in her bed. He looked as bewildered as she felt. She couldn't imagine a worse disaster in their betrothal.

"Perhaps we should let them go back to their rooms," Della said tiredly. "We can continue this tomorrow."

"Yes." Muller pounced on the idea. "Let us do that."

Brant stopped in front of them. "We have nothing to continue. This betrothal of yours is ended." He glowered at Chime. "We have selected a groom for you, young lady."

"No!" Muller jumped to his feet. Although he was taller than Brant, he had neither the older man's broad-shouldered physique nor aura of power. Even so, he looked ready to take on Brant right then and there. "Chime and I have to marry now."

Brant crossed his arms. "You cannot marry her. She isn't a virgin."

"Oh for heaven sakes," Chime said. "Neither is Muller."

To her unmitigated surprise, Della laughed. When Brant glared, the mage mistress closed her mouth, though her eyes still danced. It wasn't what Chime expected from her no-nonsense mentor.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Brant told Chime.

"Whatever for?" Chime asked. "I'm not the one who barged into my bedroom while I was peacefully asleep."

"I would hardly call the misbehavior we discovered. 'sleeping.'"

"Of course we were sleeping," Chime said sweetly. "We were already done misbehaving."

Muller made a choked sound, and Della's face turned red, though Chime suspected it was because the mage mistress was struggling not to laugh.

"Very amusing, Chime," Brant said. "It changes nothing. You are no longer fit to marry a Dawnfield heir."

Chime stopped smiling. She stood up and faced him, aware of his greater height and presence, and how unsubstantial she probably looked in her robe. It didn't matter. She lifted her chin. "I am. 'fit' to marry whomever I choose."

"You should have considered that before you lay with a man before marriage."

"This is ludicrous," Muller said. "I'm the one betrothed to her."

"Not anymore," Brant said.

Della came forward. "We shouldn't make any hasty decisions tonight. We have other concerns."

"What concerns?" Muller asked.

"Perhaps," Chime said tartly, "they refer to the concerns that prompted them to bring half of Aronsdale into my bedroom in the middle of the night."

"Chime." Della frowned at her.

Brant looked as if he were counting silently to himself. After a moment he spoke in a quieter voice. "Lady Chime, the king believes you are in danger. We thought we were rescuing you." He frowned at Muller. When the younger man raised his eyebrows, Brant turned back to Chime. "Perhaps we were."

"Very funny," Muller said.

"Why does Jarid think I am in danger?" Chime asked.

Brant paused. "I'm not sure."

“Well, so where is he?” Muller asked.

“With Iris,” Della said. “He had a nightmare.”

“Hai,” Chime murmured, glancing at Muller. “Don’t we all.”

Brant spoke to Muller. “You are having nightmares?”

“Nothing unusual.” He went on before Brant could probe further. “Perhaps Jarid overreacted.”

“I don’t think so,” Della said. “He goes into a trance sometimes during his spells. His dream happened then.”

“But I’m fine.” Chime gave Brant a sour look. “Unless you count all this noise and tumult.”

“Why didn’t Jarid come himself?” Muller asked.

“He is still in the trance,” Della said. “Iris fears to wake him.”

Chime squinted at her. “Why?”

It was Muller who answered. “If he is startled as he awakes, he can’t always control his power. He starts fires.”

“Ma’am?” a voice said behind them.

Chime turned to see Aria. “Yes?”

The maid came forward. “I am sorry to disturb you.” She hesitated, glancing at Della and Brant.

“It is all right,” Chime said.

“Your bird, ma’am,” Aria said.

Chime blinked. “My songbird?”

Her face paled. “Perhaps you should come see.”

Brant frowned. “What bird is this?”

“I keep it in my room.” Chime headed for the hall. Over her shoulder, she said, “My betrothed gave it to me.” Brant glowered at her.

Chime entered her bedroom with Aria and Della. When Muller tried to follow them into the forbidden bower, Brant grabbed his arm. Reddening, Muller stayed with him at the doorway.

Chime went to the gold cage hanging near the window—and gave a cry. The bird lay on the bottom of the cage.

“Everyone, out of the room!” Della’s voice cut through Chime’s dismay. “Now!” Before Chime could object, Della was propelling her toward the door. Aria had to run to keep up.

As Della pushed them out into the hall, Brant hauled Muller toward the parlor. “Keep going,” Brant said. “Out of the suite.”

Chime’s pulse leapt, as much from confusion as their sudden exit. They ran into the hall outside, away from her suite.

“What happened?” Chime asked, out of breath.

Now that they had escaped the suite, Brant slowed down enough to answer her. “Your bird was a mine-dove. Miners used them to detect poisonous fumes back before mages figured out how to do it themselves.”

“It didn’t look sick,” Chime said as they walked along the hall. “It looked dead.”

“Yes.” Della’s quiet agreement struck Chime more than would have any exclamation. “Had you and Muller been in the room, you could also have been affected.”

“Saints,” Muller muttered.

“But it didn’t bother us in the parlor,” Chime said.

“The gas was probably released in your bedroom, too little to drift out to where we were,” Della said. “At least not enough to cause us discomfort. The bird was also a lot smaller.”

Brant frowned at Chime. “What about your maids?”

She glanced over her shoulder at Aria and Reed, who were a ways back, following them. “What about them?”

“How well do you know them?”

“They would never hurt me!”

“You wouldn’t be the first noblewoman with such trust,” Brant said dryly. “Nor the first to die for it.”

“I used mood spells when we interviewed them,” Della said. “They are loyal to Lady Chime.”

“Yes.” Chime glared at Brant.

Muller put her arm around Chime’s shoulders. “We must protect her.”

“And precisely how are we supposed to protect any of you,” Della demanded, “if you traipse around in the middle of the night, sneaking away to your betrothed.”

“She is no longer his betrothed,” Brant said.

Muller glared at him. “Like hell.”

“We need to ensure both of you are safe,” Della said.

“If someone can poison us in our own beds,” Chime asked, “how can we ever be safe?”

No one had an answer.

Iris paced the parlor of the royal suite, her hair tumbling down her back, her heavy robe and layered sleeping gown swirling around her legs. Chime stood with Muller, watching the queen and twisting her hands in the sash of her robe. Fieldson, Brant, and Della waited by the twelve-sided table where Iris went over documents during the day. Skylark stood by the door, her lined face drawn with fatigue, her long white hair un-braided.

The queen stopped in front of Skylark. “How can you be sure this bird died of sleeping gas?”

The healer answered with composure, though unease showed on her face. “The gas left its mark on the bird, one strong enough that I felt ill when I focused my spell. It is the same sense I have when I check for gas in the mines.”

Iris nodded, then turned to the maids, Aria and Reed, who sat huddled together on the brocaded sofa. “Neither of you felt anything?”

“No, Your Majesty!” Aria watched her with wide eyes. “Nothing, ma’am. I swear.”

Chime spoke with care, hoping she didn’t insult Iris as she had so often in the past. She didn’t want the queen to hold those past exchanges against her maids. “I will vouch for Aria and Reed.” In her side vision, she saw them watching her anxiously. “I have felt their moods. They are loyal.”

“Very well.” Iris said no more.

Relief swept over Chime, and surprise too, given her strained relations with the queen.

“So we have no suspects?” Iris asked.

“Not yet,” Brant said.

Della looked around at them all. “We never found any leads on whoever tried to kidnap Chime last summer, either.”

Brant frowned. “In both cases, they broke into the castle without our knowing and escaped without being caught.”

Fieldson spoke. “It implies an expertise in covert operations that most people don’t have.”

“Who does?” Della asked.

He glanced at her. “Trained army officers.”

“Could they come from Harsdown?” Iris said.

“Varqelle would certainly have such agents.” Fieldson considered Chime. “But why you both times?”

“Because she’s beautiful,” Muller said. “Because she’s a mage. Because she’s sweet and lovely and vulnerable, and someone wants her, damn it.”

“It could be.” Della cocked her eyebrow at Muller. “But so are many women. Perhaps you are biased. The reason must be more than that.”

“Fine,” Muller said sourly. “When they kidnap her, we can discuss my bias more.”

Brant spoke to Chime. “We will send you to a safe place. Somewhere in the country.”

She knew what he was up to. “I would rather stay here.”

Della spoke gently. “Perhaps it would be best if you and Muller separated for now.”

Muller swore. “No, it would not be best.”

Brant crossed his arms. “You should have thought of that before you went to her room.”

The door to an inner room creaked open. As they all turned, Jarid entered, tall and dark, looming among the gilt-edged furniture. Chime recognized his distant expression; he had just surfaced from one of his trances.

The maids jumped to their feet and everyone bowed, except Iris. She went to her husband, even her tall figure seeming delicate next to his muscular form.

“My greeting,” she said.

Jarid touched her hand, his face gentling. Then he looked around until he saw Chime. “You are all right?”

Chime nodded. “I’m fine, Your Majesty.”

Jarid came to where she stood with Muller. “Apparently someone wishes to take you away.”

Muller stiffened. “He won’t get her.”

“You would protect her?” Jarid asked.

“She is my betrothed,” Muller said, sparing a glare for Brant.

“There is that,” Jarid agreed.

“Your Majesty,” Della began. “If I may speak?”

Jarid glanced at her. “Go ahead.”

“Prince Muller was found this evening with Lady Chime.”

“Found?”

Della cleared his throat. “In her suite.”



Jarid frowned then and turned to Muller. "Is that true?"

"I can explain," Muller said quickly.

"Yes or no," Jarid grated. "Is it true?"

Muller flushed. "Yes."

Jarid scowled at him. "Patience is not one of your virtues, cousin."

"It changes nothing." Muller put his arm around Chime's shoulders. "We still wish to marry."

"As soon as possible," Chime added.

Jarid considered them, his eyes dark in the candlelight. Then he motioned to Chime.

Puzzled and uncertain, she went to him. He ushered her into the chamber he had just left. Shaped like a tiled box, it vibrated even now with echoes of his mage trance.

Jarid left the door open so both he and Chime remained in view of the others. But he spoke in a voice only she could hear. "Iris has told me about Muller's gifts, that he draws on imperfect shapes."

Chime felt as if she were adrift in choppy waters. How she replied could determine her future with Muller. If she steered badly, she could capsize in currents she didn't understand. She couldn't lie, but the less said, the better. So she answered only, "Yes, Your Majesty."

"You reach him. The rest of us cannot."

"Reach him?"

"He seems open with you."

"I think so."

"With others, he believes himself dangerous."

What to say? If she fumbled now, it could affect the dreams she and Muller shared. She wanted to insist he posed no danger, but it wasn't true. Muller had reason for his fears. If she lied to Jarid and that led to harm, she could never live with herself. Besides, Jarid made a mood spell, he would recognize any falsehood she gave him. If she told the truth, it could still cause grief, but at least Jarid would know she acted in the best interests of Aronsdale. It might help.

"Yes." Chime loathed the words she had to say. "Yes, he is dangerous."

"So." His face gave no hint of his thoughts. Lifting his hand, he indicated the doorway.

Miserable, she went with him back to the parlor, aware of everyone watching. She couldn't look at Muller.

Jarid went to Muller and crossed his muscled arms, frowning at his cousin. "It was appalling of you to compromise Lady Chime's honor."

“Your Majesty,” Muller began.

Jarid held up his hand. After Muller closed his mouth, his face reddening, the king turned to Chime. “It was wrong of you to lie with him. It raises questions about your virtue.”

Virtue, indeed. Chime fumed, but she held back her tart response.

Muller had no such reservations. “That is absurd,” he growled. “She is an angel.”

Unexpectedly Jarid smiled, his grin flashing, a startling contrast to his usual more somber moods. “I do not know if angel is the word I would use, cousin. I have seen her ire.”

Mortified, Chime said, “Your Majesty, I do surely regret any—”

Jarid held up his hand. His expression had softened, though. He turned to Brant Firestoke. “Please fetch the Bishop of Orbs.”

Brant blinked. “You want me to wake him?”

“Yes.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“It would seem the only way to get these two married before we have a scandal.”

Chime barely held back her grin. Married? Yes!

Fieldson obviously had other ideas. “Your Majesty, surely a marriage now would be unwise.”

“Well, probably.” Jarid sighed as he regarded Chime and Muller. “You two will be my bane, eh?”

Brant spoke in a quiet voice. “I urge you to reconsider, Your Majesty.”

“You’re always urging,” Muller said hotly. “Why don’t you admit it, Brant? You don’t think I’m good enough for her.”

Brant started to answer, then seemed to think better of it.

Jarid turned to Della. “Two of my advisors urge against this marriage. What say you?”

She spoke with obvious reluctance. “I wish Muller and Chime could marry. They obviously love each other. But it would do more good if Muller wed a princess from Shazire or Taka Mal to bring us allies, and if Chime wed a man who wouldn’t interfere with her work.” Sadness touched her voice. “I am sorry. But I don’t believe the marriage is in the best interest of Aronsdale.”

Chime struggled with her disappointment. She had hoped Della would support them. As an advisor to the king, the mage mistress would speak for Aronsdale first, but Chime still felt betrayed.

Muller spoke bitterly. “Saints forbid it should matter what Chime and I want.”

“Cousin, enough,” Jarid murmured.

Muller’s face reddened as he stared at the man who had taken his crown and now would take away the woman he loved. Chime needed no spell to know Muller’s thoughts; he hated himself, first for abdicating and then for creating a situation that made him lose her as well. Well, it had taken two of them to manage that.

Jarid turned to Iris. “What say you, wife?”

Chime knew then that she and Muller had no chance of turning this around. Jarid placed Iris’s opinion above all others. Remembering the many stupid, tactless things she had said to Iris when they were students, she wanted to curl up and vanish.

Iris regarded Jarid with an odd expression, as if she hurt inside. She said, simply, “Let them marry.”

Chime was certain she had misheard. But everyone else was gaping at Iris as if they too had heard the words. Only Jarid remained unreadable. He held his emotions in check, isolating himself.

The king simply walked over to Brant. They conferred in low voices, their posture stiff, their faces tense. Then Brant bowed angrily. He stalked out of the parlor without a farewell to anyone.

Jarid turned to Chime and Muller. “He goes for the bishop.”

It was the opposite of everything Chime had imagined for her wedding. She had planned a beautiful dress with diamonds; Muller would be resplendent in his best finery. They had intended to marry in the Hall of Kings with the royal court as their guests. Hundreds of candles would shed golden light over the festivities. Everyone would dance and dine all night, and people would talk of the grand event for years to come.

Instead she stood facing Muller, holding his hands, both of them in sleep clothes and bare feet, their hair a mess and dark circles under their eyes. The bishop had just pulled a robe over his sleep trousers and shirt. They had only a few witnesses: the king and queen, the King’s Advisors, and Chime’s maids. Everything she and Muller had planned, all their dreams for the great occasion had come to naught.

It was lovelier than anything she had imagined.

She looked up at Muller while the bishop read the ceremony, and her groom’s eyes filled with an inner light more radiant than a thousand candles. Together, they made a spell of enchantment in the early hours before dawn.

And so they became man and wife.

III

The Hollow Mage



25

### The Sun's Bower

Spring came crisply that year. As meadows brightened with new life, the people of Croft's Vale and Suncroft ventured out to enjoy the warm days.

High on a hill, Iris sat in succulent grasses, surrounded by fire-lilies and white star flowers. Farther down the slope, Chime was running to Muller, her arms full of wild roses. In the three months since their wedding, they had been like sunshine on water. It hurt Iris to see them: they glowed, gold and beautiful, oblivious to the rest of the world. Iris had never doubted her advice to Jarid; Aronsdale needed the joy Chime and Muller shared far more than it needed foreign princesses or overworked mages. But she envied them their happiness, knowing she and Jarid would probably never find what they shared.

Her husband, the king, was standing on the edge of a bluff, gazing out at the vista of green hills. He wore rich garments now instead of rags, but he dressed simply, in dark trousers and a white shirt. She had no idea what he was thinking; even when she picked up his moods with her faltering spells, she had trouble interpreting them.

Still, Iris was coming to know her husband. He would never let go of the guilt that haunted him, but the mild days of spring eased his tormented moods. He had asked his foster father to stay, granting Unbent farmland to the south. The king rarely spoke, but fourteen years of honing his gifts to the exclusion of all else had turned him into a mage unlike any other described in the history texts. Few people knew about the extent of his power; his advisors cautioned discretion and Iris agreed. Too many unknowns remained; they had yet even to fully understand his abilities.

Muller also remained an enigma, his gifts simmering like embers, unpredictable. He and Chime were a haven for each other in a world that demanded more than they had to give. Iris longed to find such a refuge with Jarid, but they had no such fortune. They couldn't even settle into their roles. The queen served as the leading mage for the realm and the king as sovereign, but the more they learned, the more they reversed their duties. Jarid had little desire to govern but he could meditate on spells for hours. The process of governance suited Iris, to her surprise.

Her days felt unreal. For the first seventeen years of her life, she had believed her future held no more than scrabbling out an existence in the stony reaches of the Tallwalk Mountains. Her foster family had made no secret of their expectation that she would achieve nothing of significance. Even now, she had trouble believing she had talents to offer Aronsdale.

On the bluff, Jarid turned toward her, the wind rippling his laced shirt and its billowed sleeves. He had been distant and withdrawn earlier, but now he beckoned. Surprised, she rose and walked to him, breezes molding her silk tunic around her body, the gold top layer fluttering aside to reveal a rich blue layer underneath. Jarid watched, his gaze less fierce than usual. She savored the sight of him. It hurt, too,

longing for closeness with him when they struggled just to know each other.

They sat together on the edge of the bluff. In the distance, Croft's Vale slumbered in the sunlight. Down the hill, Muller and Chime walked together, holding hands.

"They are happy," Jarid said, his voice rough even months after he had regained his ability to speak.

"Yes. They are." She wanted to ask, And you? But she held back. When he had agreed to stay at Suncroft, she had sworn to herself she would never push him. In the months since, she had done her best to keep that vow.

He took her hand. "Iris."

"Yes?"

He rubbed her knuckles. "A lovely day."

"Aye, it is." She wondered at his mood.

Softly he said, "It will never come easy for me."

"It?"

"Speaking."

She flushed. "Can you tell my moods that easily?"

"Not easily. But some." He touched her cheek. "My silences leave a woman lonely, I think."

"Nay, Jarid." Everything had changed when he came to Suncroft. The emptiness she had known all her life had begun to fill. It made her feel vulnerable; if you loved someone, it would hurt that much more to lose him. But it was better, far better, than loneliness.

"Silence donna mean absence," she said.

"It is hard for me to say what is inside."

Iris curled her hand around his. "It is you I want. Not words." She almost added, Words can't love you, but it was too much. They had wed as strangers. It was enough that he seemed content with their union.

He turned her palm up to the sky and cupped his hand under hers, as if they were holding an invisible orb. "Look." A sphere of light appeared in her hand, violet. His mage color.

Her pulse quickened. The power of that simple orb could vanquish any mage in the land. "It's beautiful." Terrifying and beautiful.

"Now yours."

"Mine?" No one yet knew her mage color.

"Watch."

The light changed into a rainbow. Every color swirled within the enchanted sphere.

Wonder spread through Iris. “It cannot be. A mage is one color, not all.”

His voice gentled. “You are like none other. You have part of all of us in you.” He lifted their hands together, offering the orb to the sky and land.

As she watched, marveling, the sphere rose from their hands, translucent in the streaming sunlight. Hills and meadows showed through its glimmering surfaces. It bobbed on the breezes like a giant bubble, rising higher, blown toward the village, its colors swirling. The orb drifted across the land, pulling out against the sky. Farther and farther it floated, stretching out. . .

And then it was done—and a rainbow arched in the blue sky. It was impossible in the clear weather, with nary a raindrop in sight. Yet there it was, a great bow of color over Croft’s Vale.

“A gift to our people,” Jarid murmured. “Light and the healing that comes after a storm.”

Tears gathered in Iris’s eyes. “It is lovely.”

He cupped her cheek, his palm tingling with the power of the sphere. “It truly is.”

He had given her a great weight. Now she understood; she had struggled with her spells because she confined them to one color. But in the woods and meadows, she had let go without realizing the truth. Her abilities flowed then, blue, yet blending a little of all colors.

Together, they sat in the sunlight, watching the colors in the sky, filled with warmth.

Anvil ran. He pounded up the hard path that wound into the mountains above Castle Escar. General Stonehammer ran with him, the beat of his feet keeping time with Anvil’s pace.

They stopped at the top of the path, which surmounted a cliff. Stonehammer bent at the waist and braced his palms against his knees, heaving in deep breaths. Anvil waited, holding back his smile at the general’s lesser physical prowess.

Lifting his head, Anvil looked over the mountains. The castle stood below them, and beyond it to the south and west, the Escar range extended as far as he could see, unusually sharp peaks alternating with knife-thin valleys. To the east, the folds of the Escar range rippled out toward the horizon: beyond them lay fertile Aronsdale.

Stonehammer straightened, breathing more normally now. “You set quite a pace.” He rubbed the back of his neck, under the steel-gray hair he had pulled back from his face into a warrior’s knot. He was an imposing man with a strong chin, a beak of a nose, and green eyes. His old leggings and light sweater hung on his frame, which may have lost some of the musculature of his youth, but which remained strong.

“I enjoy the air up here.” Anvil inhaled with satisfaction. “It braces a man.”

“Indeed.” Stonehammer didn’t sound braced. “Tell me something.”

Anvil turned to him. "Yes?"

"Why do you wish to see Aronsdale conquered? Most men do not seek war against their own home."

He met Stonehammer's gaze. "I am not most men."

The older man scrutinized him. "Your people would call you traitor."

Anvil knew he had to answer with care. Stonehammer had spent a great deal of time with him lately, but Anvil didn't fool himself that the general enjoyed his company. As Varqelle's top officer, Stonehammer was studying the mage who had betrayed his own country, offering his services against Aronsdale. Varqelle meant to lead a campaign; Stonehammer's job was to ensure its success. Anvil had no doubt the general considered him suspect for his change of allegiance.

Bitterness welled in Anvil. "My people' killed my family. They would have killed me if I hadn't escaped."

Stonehammer watched him with an unreadable expression. "King Varqelle tells me that you claim they did this because you were mages."

"They murdered my parents, then my brothers." Anvil's anger strengthened him. He had never hidden the truth. If he ever let his hatred go, he would shrivel into his grief. "They kept my sister and me for—for—" He shook his head, unable to continue.

The general studied him. "In a land where the king must marry a mage, where mages have higher status even than most dignitaries and military officers, you lived in a place where they killed mages?"

"Yes." Anvil made a conscious effort to stop gritting his teeth. "We are supposedly revered, but the truth comes out in wilder reaches of the country. We terrify people." He grimaced, his face flushed. "I lived that terror."

"But you survived."

His voice hardened. "They used my sister. When she died, it was my turn. But one of them had brought a sphere he looted from my parents' room. I focused through it." Anvil didn't flinch as he spoke. "And I killed them."

Stonehammer continued to watch him intently. "I have heard a mage cannot do such deeds."

Anvil wondered if he could ever explain the horror of that day. "I wanted to live."

"And to avenge your family."

"Yes."

The general stretched his arms, cracking the joints. "I regret, Anvil the Forged, that your life has given you such pain." He lowered his arms. "But if the misdeeds of your people have sent you to us, it is to our benefit and their downfall."

"A price must be paid."

"You demand a high one." The general jerked his chin in the direction of Aronsdale. "It is a small

country, but a fine one. Govern it well for King Varqelle.”

Anvil inclined his head. He doubted Stonehammer trusted him any more than before, but the general hadn’t reached his high position by misjudging situations. Whatever he thought of Anvil personally, he would recognize his motivations. The language of vengeance crossed all borders, universal in its reach.

“This woman you want, though.” Stonehammer shook his head. “Why is she worth so much trouble?”

“She is a valuable hostage.”

“Not as much as the royal family.”

Anvil smiled slightly, thinking of hair as yellow as corn and skybell eyes. “You have not seen her.”

“I have heard rumors of her beauty.” Stonehammer snorted. “Also of her stupidity.”

Anvil’s amusement flickered. “Her brain isn’t what interests me.”

“I hear she is a powerful mage.”

“Indeed. As will be our children.”

Stonehammer cocked his head. “I have been unable to place more agents in the castle. My last one left Croft’s Vale months ago. Security there has become too tight for him to stay in that region.”

“Then we will take her when we take Suncroft.” Anvil could wait for his bride. He didn’t like it, but he could be patient.

“Other hostages might be more valuable.”

“No!” Even the suggestion of his losing Chime made Anvil sweat. “It must be her.”

Stonehammer gave him an odd look. “Why?”

“It just must!”

“And if she has already wed this princeling of hers?”

Anvil had to make a conscious effort not to grit his teeth. “They will never waste her on Muller Dawnfield.”

“Then she will marry someone else.”

“And I will remove him.” Anvil became aware he was clenching his fist. He opened his hand.

“So many deaths.” Stonehammer wouldn’t relent. “Where do you stop?”

Anvil understood what the general sought to learn. “I have no desire to kill.” It wasn’t true, but Stonehammer would trust him even less if he realized Anvil had no remorse in taking lives. “But if my talents can help King Varqelle bring Aronsdale under his guidance, I am at his service.”



“Obsession has many forms. It can drive a man to great deeds. But it can also destroy him.”

Anvil felt as if the general had punched him in the stomach. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Perhaps.” Stonehammer’s eyes glinted. “In any case, the rewards in taking Aronsdale are great.”

“So they are,” Anvil said. “So they are.”

Muller circled Jarid in the Octagon Yard, his focus narrowed to his cousin. He lunged and Jarid evaded with unexpected skill. Then Jarid broke through his defenses and jabbed him in the side with his blunted sword.

“Hai!” Muller stumbled back, caught off guard by the parry from his usually less adept cousin.

Jarid looked undeniably pleased with himself. When they had begun working out, six months ago, Muller hadn’t needed to defend himself at all. Although Jarid had natural aptitude and excellent physical fitness, he had little experience with a sword. However, Muller was discovering the hard way how fast Jarid learned. The king worked with single-minded intensity, training many hours a day. He had already surpassed many of the pages and even a few youths close to his own age. Muller knew he needed to pay more attention; his overconfidence could have ended his life if they had been using real blades.

Jarid lowered his sword. “Shall we try hand to hand?”

That gave Muller pause. They had never trained together without weapons. It was a good idea, though. If the army went into combat, Jarid could benefit from experience with hand to hand techniques.

“Yes, let’s do.” Muller motioned to a triangle-page, a boy of eleven. The fellow ran over and took their practice swords. Then Muller fell into a fighting pose, his fists up as he shifted his weight from foot to foot. He reminded himself to hold back so he didn’t injure his cousin.

Jarid lunged.

The moment they grappled, Muller knew he was in trouble. Someone had taught Jarid to fight—and taught him well. He had greater strength and reach than Muller, and far more skill, though Muller had worked out all his life as a boy on his father’s farm, a page here at Suncroft, and as a prince destined to be king.

Jarid evaded every move Muller tried, deflected his momentum, or otherwise stymied his efforts. He blocked Muller’s swings but landed most of his own. Had the king not held back, Muller knew he would be bruised and aching. Hell, he probably would be anyway. He was lucky Jarid hadn’t broken any of his bones.

Then Jarid caught him in a hold that left Muller bent over, staring at the ground. He caught Jarid around the waist, but he couldn’t exert enough force either to throw the king or break his hold. As Jarid drove him across the yard, pain lanced through his side where Jarid had struck him earlier. They staggered over a tiled circle, the royal seal, a silhouette of Suncroft against a yellow sun. The circle was imperfect, cut by the castle...

Like fire on oil, Muller’s power flared. A spell burst out from him, but instead of helping his own injury, it

slammed Jarid.

“Hai!” Jarid stumbled back as Muller let go of him. The king clamped his hand over his side in exactly the same place on his body where Muller ached from the blow from Jarid’s sword.

“Saints, no!” Muller swore loudly. “Your Majesty, Jarid, I didn’t mean—”

His cousin held up his other hand, stopping the words. He heaved in breaths, rapidly at first and then more slowly. Finally he lowered his arm. “I’ve never felt a healing spell turned inside out before.”

Muller wished he could turn into a dust mote and blow away. Although Chime had told him Jarid knew about his warped powers, his cousin had never said anything. It had lulled Muller into believing his secret remained just that, a secret.

“You know about me,” Muller said.

“Almost since the day I came here.”

Muller had no idea what to say. He and Jarid regarded each other, the tiled circle with its imperfect sun between them.

“Do your spells often reverse that way?” Jarid sounded curious rather than critical. “You meant to heal yourself, yes? Instead you injured me.”

“I never meant to hurt you—”

Jarid waved of his hand. “I know.”

“My spells always go awry,” Muller said. “They never work right.” He was grateful he and Jarid had moved far enough away so the other men training in the yard couldn’t overhear.

“Do you make the spells on purpose?”

“Sometimes.”

“You should learn to do it properly.”

Muller would have laughed if this hadn’t all hurt so much. “If only it were that easy.”

“Have you tried?”

He spoke tiredly. “My entire life.”

Sympathy showed on Jarid’s face, the last expression Muller had expected. “Several times, I felt you trying.”

Muller tensed. “You knew when I was making them?”

“I haven’t been sure before today. But yes.”

“You never spoke of it.”

Jarid exhaled. "Speaking...is hard."

Muller wondered if it would ever come easily to his cousin. This was certainly one of their longest conversations. "Do you remember the time Unbent and I found you asleep in the woods?"

"Yes."

"I tried a spell then." He thought back to that day, six months ago. "It didn't work at first, but then it snapped into focus. And it was right. No distortion."

"Good." Jarid didn't seem to realize the full significance of Muller's words.

"Never in my life have my spells worked." Muller wondered if he could even explain that incredible moment. "But twice since you've come, you've straightened them."

Jarid seemed bewildered. "I have?"

"That time, I think," Muller said. "And earlier that day. You were in the Starlight Tower, watching us train. I had made a mood spell, but it didn't work. But you—well, you touched it. Somehow. Then it worked."

"I remember you and Arkandy practicing, but nothing else." Jarid spoke awkwardly. "I felt overwhelmed then. I wanted to reach out to you, my cousin, but I didn't know how. Perhaps it came through to you as help with a spell."

Muller hadn't realized Jarid had wanted to connect with him then. "I am glad you did." It was an understatement, to be sure.

Jarid rubbed his side, a wry smile on his lips. "Would that today I could have made your healing spell work before it hit me."

Muller winced. "Sorry."

"Cousin."

"Yes?"

"If your spells go awry during battle—" Jarid left the sentence unfinished.

Muller had dreaded this question. For all his doubts, it meant a great deal to him that Jarid had given him command of the King's Army. He valued that show of confidence. He didn't want to lose it now.

"I've learned to suppress the spells," Muller said.

"You said you can't control them."

"Once they start. But I can usually hold them down if I'm prepared."

"What do your men think about it?"

Muller stared at him. "I nevertell them."

"No one?"

"Saints no. Just Chime."

Jarid scratched his chin. "Why?"

Why?It seemed obvious to Muller. "Would you speak of killing Murk?"

Jarid's expression darkened. "No. But you have killed no one."

He answered quietly. "Not yet."

"Ah, Muller." He spoke roughly. "You and I have much to face, eh?"

"Aye." He smiled wanly. "Iris believes if we all work together, we can muddle our way through."

Jarid grinned, a rare expression. It lit up his face, calling to mind the joyful boy Muller had known so long ago. "Iris has good sense."

"She does indeed."

"Come, my cousin." Jarid indicated the castle. "Let us go back. Perhaps we can play a game of chess."

Muller blinked, surprised. "I would like that."

As they walked back, Muller thought of how close he and Jarid had been all those years ago. He would never forget the way six-year-old Jarid had looked up to him, seeing past his failings. Muller had mourned the loss of that kinship for many years.

Perhaps he and Jarid could find a way back to each other.

With a groan of relief, Chime lay down under the tree, glad to rest after hiking through the hills. She had spent the morning gathered herbs for Skylark, the castle healer. Aria and Reed had settled a few paces away and were chatting while they sorted the plants Chime had found into different baskets. It amazed Chime how little the staff at Suncroft knew about ordinary plants. She could find those herbs with her eyes closed, practically, but Aria and Reed had exclaimed with gusto over every one she pointed out. They seemed genuinely impressed.

They kept glancing at her now, concerned for some reason. When Chime waved her hand at them, they returned to their conversation, well aware she didn't want anyone hovering over her.

Beyond the maids, one of Chime's bodyguards paced under the widely spaced trees. Her other guard came into view, and the two octahedron-lieutenants nodded to each other, then parted again, continuing their patrol.

"Never alone," Chime grumbled. Everywhere she went, maids and guards went, too. Maybe if she got them interested in each other, they would pay less attention to her. Brant would never let that happen,

though; he had made it clear they must never leave her unattended.

As much as she chafed at having people about all the time, she appreciated their protection, for she dreaded even more the idea that whoever had come after her might try again. Even three months later, the death of her songbird left her chilled. Many people had been in her suite that night. Surely gas drifted from her bedroom into the parlor. That no one felt any effects suggested too little had gone into her bedroom to kill a person. It supported Muller's belief that whoever had done it wanted her alive. They had probably escaped while the King's Advisors were chastising her and Muller for their misbehavior.

Chime couldn't fathom why someone wanted to take her. Jarid and Iris were worth more as hostages, both as royals and as mages. Skylark also wielded more mage power. Della had less power, but she had decades more experience, which made her more valuable than Chime. Nor did Chime have political power. Brant or Fieldson would be more useful to King Varqelle, if he was the one behind the kidnap attempts.

With a sigh, Chime closed her eyes, too sleepy to think. She lay under the rustling tree, warmed by the late summer sun, inhaling the perfume of the white star flowers scattered about. Grass prickled her skin through her yellow leggings and her silk tunic, poking through both the gold layer on top and the emerald layer underneath. It all reminded her of how she had loved to flop down on her back in the meadows of Jacob's Vale. She missed her home so much. She wrote her family regularly, and they answered just as often, but it wasn't enough. She wanted to see them.

She thought often of the little things, the way her mother and father debated whether or not the Saint of Unfurled Leaves existed as a spirit that watched over orchards, as her father believed, or was a myth created long ago by monks who had drunk too much apple wine, as her mother claimed. She wanted to hear her brother, Hunter, singing as he filled buckets of water from the pump behind their house. He had such a beautiful voice. She longed to watch her youngest brother Drummer jumping down the stairs inside their house, seeing how many steps he could skip at once. She even missed the way Hunter and Drummer teased her.

As much as she longed to have her family here, though, she couldn't ask them to move from Jacob's Vale. The Headwind clan had tended those orchards for generations. Guilt tugged at Chime. Her parents needed help in the orchards. They had expected her to marry some strapping young fellow and bring him into the family. Probably she would have done exactly that if Della hadn't shown up. Now here she was, pretending to be a noblewoman and missing them so much, her heart ached.

"Ma'am?"

Chime opened her eyes. Aria was kneeling next to her, her expression concerned.

"Yes?" Chime asked.

"How are you feeling?"

Chime wondered what she was about. "It's a lovely day."

"Aye, it is." Aria hesitated. "Can we get you anything?"

"No, no. I'm fine. But thank you."

Aria motioned toward Reed. "We're here if you need us." The other girl waved to them.

“Thank you.” Chime wished they wouldn’t fuss so. She liked being sleepy. For just a few minutes, she wanted to laze here in the grass, warmed by the sun.

After Aria left, Chime drowsed more. Some time later, she sensed someone else. Half opening her eyes, she looked through her lashes to see Skylark seated next to her, her white braids hanging over her shoulders.

“A fine morning,” Skylark said.

“Hmmm.” Chime thought it would be even finer if they would all leave her alone.

Skylark tried again. “You seem tired today.”

“Hmmm.” Chime closed her eyes.

“Are you sick?” Skylark asked.

“Just tired. Muller has a sore throat, though.”

“I saw him this morning. He was quite irate with the world.”

Chime’s lips curved upward. “He gets that way.”

“I helped his throat. Perhaps I can help yours.”

Chime yawned. “My throat is fine.”

“Shall I try a spell?”

Apparently they were going to pester her until she let them fuss. “Oh, all right.”

Skylark laid her hand on her forehead. “Tell me about your favorite place.”

Chime doubted “Muller’s bed” would be an appropriate response. So she said, “My family’s orchard.”

“Imagine yourself there, relaxing.”

Chime recalled the day King Daron’s party had ridden into Jacob’s Vale while she hid in the apple tree. Later, when she had come to know the king a little, she had discovered she liked him. She wished they could have spent more time together before he passed away.

Skylark sat with her for a while. Eventually she said, “Lady, are you awake?”

“I think so,” Chime mumbled.

“I’m afraid I can do little to help.”

Exasperated, Chime opened her eyes. “Well, I told you nothing was wrong.”

Skylark smiled. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“On how you feel about having a child.”

“Hai!” Chime sat up fast. When her maids looked over, she reddened and waved them away. Then she lowered her voice. “Are you sure?”

“I think so. When was your cycle?”

“I don’t remember. They come whenever they want.”

“No regularity?”

“Not much.”

Skylark chuckled. “It is fitting, yes, for you.”

Chime regarded her warily. “Why do you say that?”

“You are a most impressive woman,” the healer assured her. “You’ve a strong mind.”

“Pah. You mean I’m wild.” When Skylark laughed, Chime relented and smiled. The news pleased her. It would also overjoy her parents to know they would be grandparents.

If only she could visit to tell them the news.

“It wouldn’t be for long.” Chime lay with Muller on the bed, she wearing his tunic and nothing else, he in just his leggings. “Only a few weeks. You will love my family.”

“Brant doesn’t want us to travel,” he said.

Chime glared. “Brant never wants us to do anything, may he suffer the pox.”

Muller spoke wryly. “The worst of it is, he is usually right.”

“Indeed. It is most annoying.” Chime knew Brant’s strictures made sense, but he had also wanted to separate her from Muller. They colored her responses to him. When it came to her child, though, she had to listen to good counsel even if she resented the person giving it. “Maybe Fieldson could send a polygon unit with us. Didn’t you want to train them on that military thing?”

. “Thing?” He smiled. “You mean field exercises?”

“Yes, that.”

“I have been considering it.”

“Well, then.”

“Well, then, what?”

“You and they can go field exercise.”

Muller grinned. “By accompanying your fierce and dangerous self on a visit to your family?”

“You make fun of me.”

“Never, love.”

She made a humph sound. “You know what I mean.”

Muller set his hand on her abdomen. She had told him the news this morning, after Skylark told her. The mage predicted Chime would give birth in eight months.

“I would rather you didn’t come with us,” he said.

“Well, that would be useful,” she said. “Have me visit my parents by not visiting them.”

Although he laughed, he seemed pensive. “Ah, love, if I could, I would protect you from the entire world.”

She gave him a frosty look. “I don’t need to be sheltered.”

“Even if you pulverized me for trying, still I would.”

“I can travel.”

He spoke firmly. “Brant will say no.”

“He can’t stop me!” She paused. “Can he?”

“The king can. And he listens to Brant.”

“You must speak with Brant, then.”

“But, Chime—” When she glared, he held up his hands. “All right. I will discuss it with him.”

She kissed his cheek. “You are an angel.”

Muller sighed. “I make no promises.”

“Just see what he says.”

“If I make Brant think the field exercises are his idea, he may believe they have value.”

Chime took his hand. “You are the commander. You don’t need his approval. Your ideas are worth as much as his.”

His face gentled. “When you say it, I almost believe it.”



“Believe it.” Chime drew him closer, filling her arms with his warmth. She knew Muller would never shirk his responsibilities as commander of the King’s Army. It gave her no satisfaction to know that, however. It only made her fear she would lose the father of her child to war.



26

Drummer

“No.” Brant sat behind the table where he worked, scrolls scattered in front of him. “Absolutely not.”

Muller was sitting across from him, ostensibly relaxed in a chair upholstered in wine-red brocade. “I need to train the men.”

“Fine. Take them out in the field. But Chime stays home.” Brant shook his head. “Muller, be reasonable. This is no trip for your pregnant wife.”

In his heart, Muller agreed. He didn’t want Chime traveling. She had suffered no more kidnap attempts, but that was probably due to increased security. Fieldson’s men had investigated at Suncroft and in the village, and accounted for everyone’s whereabouts on the night the songbird was poisoned. Either someone had contrived a false alibi or, more likely, the scoundrel had fled before they apprehended him.

Even so, he had promised Chime he would try. “She very much wants to see her family.”

Brant raised his eyebrows. “And you agree?”

“Well, uh, no, actually.”

He didn’t look surprised. “Then it is settled.”

“But I would like to meet her family. We never had a wedding for them to attend.” He thought for a moment. “I could go train the men, visit her village, and bring her family back here for a visit.” They couldn’t stay long, with the orchard to look after, but a few weeks should be manageable this time of year.

Brant tilted his head. “It is a good idea.”

“Well, then.” Muller beamed. Then his good mood faded. “Now I must inform my wife.”

To his amazement, Brant laughed. “You are a braver man than I.” “Ah, well.” Muller could face armies, storms, even dragons, if those existed. Facing Chime, however, was another matter.

“Come on,” Muller coaxed. “It is a good idea.”

His wife crossed her arms and walked to the window of their bedroom. She proceeded to stare with absorption at the men training in the Octagon Yard below.

“Chime.” Muller joined her. “The idea was to see your family, yes?”

She didn’t deign to look at him. “The idea was to visit them.”

“Too much danger.”

She gave him a glare that could have incinerated the entire army. “I thought you were going to convince Brant.”

“I tried.”

“You did not.”

Muller touched her cheek, his fingertip lingering in the way he knew she liked. “I did what I thought best.”

“You are an impossible scalawag.”

His lips quirked. “A scalawag in love with you.”

“Pah.” She put her hands on her hips. “Sweet talk will do you no good.”

He drew her into his arms. “Will nothing melt your heart?”

“Nothing.” But she put her arms around his waist and laid her head against his shoulder. “Absolutely nothing.”

“You’re smiling, Chime.”

“I am not.” She spoke against his shoulder.

“Yes, you are.”

“How would you know?”

He grinned. “I just do.”

“Pah.”

Muller pressed his lips against her head. “You are my life. You and our child.”

“And you, for me, you cad.”

Muller held her close, glad she would be safe.

Varqelle the Cowled leaned back in his great chair and swirled the wine in his goblet, a fine piece of Wingham crystal. A fire blazed in the hearth, warming him and his guests, General Stonehammer and Anvil the Forged. Outside, hail whipped through the night and clattered against the beveled windows.

Stonehammer raised his glass. "A fine import, Your Majesty." He was relaxing in a chair by a table with an orb-lamp made from blue glass.

"So it is." Varqelle sipped his wine, watching Anvil. The mage was sprawled in his chair, his legs stretched out, his goblet on the table.

Anvil fascinated Varqelle. He seemed older than his thirty-one years, probably because he brooded constantly. Varqelle could count the times he had seen Anvil smile. The darkly handsome mage attracted the notice of many women, but he ignored them all. Except Chime Headwind. His interest in the girl seemed extreme. If Anvil had suffered such misery for his gifts, why did he want a wife who would bear him mage children? That game of kidnap had intrigued Varqelle, though, even excited him. He regretted his agent hadn't succeeded; Varqelle had looked forward to seeing Anvil's prey. He suspected more than lust drove the mage's thirst for the girl. It would be interesting to see what developed. First however they had a more important matter to attend—the subjugation of Aronsdale.

"Is the wine not to your liking?" he asked Anvil.

The younger man started. "My apologies. I am preoccupied with thoughts of tomorrow."

"So." Varqelle took another swallow of wine. "Are you ready to march, then?"

Anvil sat up straight. "More than ready."

Stonehammer considered him. "You have made many promises, Master Forged. I look forward to seeing them fulfilled."

"As do I." Anvil finally took his drink from the table. "It will realize a goal I have long held."

Stonehammer raised his goblet. "It is time Aronsdale came under Harsdown rule."

"Time indeed." Varqelle stood, and Stonehammer and Anvil rose as well.

The king lifted his goblet. "To tomorrow."

Stonehammer raised his glass, first to Varqelle, then to Anvil. "To tomorrow."

"Yes." Anvil spoke in a shadowed voice. "Tomorrow."

Muller enjoyed traveling cross-country with his men. He took the Hexagon Unit, six groups of six men, each headed by a hexahedron-major. The Pentagon Unit, led by Penta-Colonel Burg, had also gone on maneuvers, heading north while Muller went south. They hiked by day, scouting the land. Speed wasn't important, so they hunted game to augment their food supplies. It felt more like a vacation than a training mission. He gave up his elegant clothes for wool leggings and tunics that kept him warm. Summer was

blending into fall, adding a nip to the air.

He conducted war games in the fields, valleys and woods, working the swordsmen and archers, either mounted or on foot. They also practiced hand to hand combat. The unit had brought more equipment than they would take into battle. Muller had them try assorted catapults, most small and easy to transport, others bulkier, harder to carry but more powerful. The men experimented with various types of boots and helmets. They wore chain mail over leather armor dyed in the king's colors, indigo and violet. When they traveled, flag bearers carried pennants that snapped in the breeze; when they rested, the men spent time making arrows, playing cards, and emblazoning their shields with Dawnfield the insignia of Suncroft. At night, they tried out ways of setting up camp, seeing what worked best.

Although the army had never stopped training, the country had lived in relative peace for long enough now that the military had lost its edge. Aronsdale had good relations with the lands to its south and east: Taka Mal, Jazid, Shazire, and tiny Blueshire. They fought skirmishes with Harsdown at their northwest borders, but nothing more. The two countries were evenly matched; Harsdown had a larger army but Aronsdale had mages. Beyond Harsdown, far to the west, the Misted Cliffs loomed, neither hostile nor friendly. The Cliffs seemed to have no interest in Aronsdale, but still, Muller could never be sure the peace would continue. So the King's Army practiced.

It took eleven days to reach Jacob's Vale. The town spread out among low hills in the southwest corner of Aronsdale a short ride from the border with Blueshire. Muller rode Windstrider, his restless black charger. The horse wanted to run and Muller longed to let him go, but he held him in check, keeping pace with his men. So the Hexagon Unit crested the last hill that separated them from the village where Chime had spent most of her life.

The Vale basked in late afternoon sunshine. People were working in the surrounding fields, and a cart pulled by two mules bumped down the hill ahead of the unit. The sleepy, peaceful quality of the scene appealed to Muller. He sent an emissary ahead to let the mayor know they were arriving and would like to camp outside of town. He hoped to purchase food stores and supplies here as well.

"Ho!" a young voice called.

Muller looked to see a boy running along with them. More boys joined him, waving at the soldiers and calling out excited greetings. By the time the unit reached the village, half the town had come out to meet them.

With guidance from the mayor, Muller directed his men to a clearing outside town where they could set up camp. As they swung off their horses, villagers wandered among them, cheerfully greeting soldiers, asking questions, and otherwise nosing in everywhere. Their lack of concern about the war party astonished Muller. Then again, people this far south had probably never experienced military conflict. From what Chime told him, most of them knew little about Harsdown. They might have heard about skirmishes between Aronsdale and Harsdown soldiers, but only as a vague threat in the far north that few took seriously.

A tall man with graying hair and a burly physique approached Muller, making his way through the controlled chaos of the camp. He looked familiar, though Muller felt certain they had never met. The fellow walked with the confidence of someone used to the respect and affection of his neighbors. As Muller straightened up from unpacking a tent, the man stopped in front of him and bowed.

"My greetings, Prince Muller. Welcome to Jacob's Vale." The resonance of his deep voice sounded familiar, too, though Muller couldn't figure out why.

“And mine, Goodsir.” Muller nodded. “You have the advantage of me, I’m afraid. Do we know each other?”

The man paused, as if uncertain of his reception. “Not directly. But we have kin in common.” He cleared his throat. “I am Appleton. You married my daughter.”

Saints above. Muller had counted on having time to gather his wits before meeting his new family. Apparently news traveled fast here. He hoped he didn’t look as nervous as he felt. “It is my pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“My family would be honored if you would dine with us tonight.” Appleton used formal phrases appropriate to the nobility, but it obviously wasn’t natural to him. Judging from the casual way the people here ambled through the camp, Muller doubted they worried much about protocol.

“Thank you for your invitation,” Muller said. “It would be my pleasure to join your family tonight.”

Appleton’s shoulders came down from a tensed position Muller hadn’t realized they had taken until the big man relaxed. The man’s face warmed in a more natural smile. “We look forward to making your acquaintance and hearing news of Chime.”

Muller beamed. “There is much news.” Tonight, he would tell them about the child.

His father-in-law paused. “Please forgive my lack of experience, Your Highness, but I have never invited a member of the royal family to supper before. Will you bring a retinue?”

Muller rarely went anywhere without one, especially now that Brant insisted he have protection at all times. He had no intention of hanging back if he had to go to war, but he had otherwise given Brant his word to accept a bodyguard. And of course he traveled with his aides and other attendants. If he showed up at Chime’s home with a royal company, though, her family would feel obligated to feed them all. He had no wish to cause hardship.

“I have two in my retinue,” he said. “My aide and my bodyguard.” He would take Arkandy and Archer.

Appleton looked taken aback. “Does Chime have bodyguards, too?”

Muller inwardly winced. He had stumbled into a quagmire. He didn’t want to start out with his wife’s family by telling them someone had twice tried to abduct their daughter. Better to ease that gently to them, if at all.

“All members of the royal family have them,” Muller said. It was true, though only since the kidnap attempts. But he needn’t add that last.

“Ah. I see.” Appleton relaxed. “I won’t detain you any longer.” His weathered face creased in a smile. “I did want to make sure you were welcomed. We look forward to your company tonight.”

“Thank you, kind sir.”

After his father-in-law left, Muller turned back to his work. As he set up his tent, Arkandy came over to him.

“Do you know him?” Arkandy asked.

“Not yet.” Muller grinned. “I know his daughter.”

“Hai! That was Chime’s father?”

Muller chuckled. “Do not look so alarmed.”

“You laugh,” Arkandy said darkly. “Many a man has been brought down by overconfidence.”

“I’m not facing Harsdown. Just my wife’s family.”

“I should think the former would be less fearsome.”

Muller gave a rueful laugh. “Perhaps. Her father seems amiable.”

“I hope so.”

Muller slapped him on the back. “Tonight we will see.”

Twilight settled over Jacob’s Vale with the humid warmth of the southern provinces. Muller and Arkandy strolled along the streets together, but Archer insisted on ranging farther out, keeping surveillance. Muller was too nervous to complain. He kept reminding himself he had dined with royalty and nobles. It didn’t help. The prospect of meeting Chime’s family thoroughly intimidated him.

Courage, he thought. He wished Chime were here.

Even if she hadn’t told him where to find her home, he would have known he had reached the right house by the two boys standing on the porch outside. They were younger, male versions of Chime, one fourteen and the other ten, both with tousled yellow curls spilling down their necks, large blue eyes, and angelic faces. Given what he knew of his wife, he suspected those innocent faces disguised a world of mischief.

“Ho!” the younger boy shouted, spotting Muller. The other boy shushed him.

As Muller came up to the door, the older boy bowed. “Good Eve, You Hi-highness.”

“And to you,” Muller said amiably.

“You don’t look like a king,” the younger boy said. “More like a minstrel.”

“Drummer!” The older boy turned red. He spoke quickly to Muller, his words spilling out. “I’m really sorry, Your Lordshipness. He didn’t mean that. Really.”

Muller couldn’t help but smile at this new title. Nor had anyone ever mistaken him for a singer. He rather liked the daydream of wandering across the country singing love ballads. He would compose them all for this boy’s sister.

“I’m actually not a king,” he told them. “But I am the cousin of one. You can call me Muller.”

“Oh.” Drummer’s eyes widened.

The door behind the boys swung open and a girl with yellow hair and blue eyes looked out. She looked too much like Chime to be anyone except her sister, though Muller didn’t remember Chime mentioning one. Perhaps a cousin.

“Hunter, Drummer, why—oh!” She stared at Muller. Then she shook herself and bowed. Warm light poured around her, silhouetting her body, though he could tell she had on a yellow dress, country style, with a flared skirt and fitted bodice. The lovely effect made him think of Chime.

“Please, come in, Your Highness,” she said.

Muller bowed. “You honor me, Mistress Headwind. Are your parents in?”

The woman dimpled just like Chime. “Such flattery.” She moved aside to let him enter. “My husband went to the cellar for some wine.”

Her husband? Mortified, Muller realized his mistake. “My apologies, ma’am. I mistook you for Chime’s sister.”

Her laugh was as melodic as sparkling water. “Hardly an insult, I assure you. I am Bell Headwind.”

“My honor at your acquaintance.” He gave her a formal nod and entered the house with Arkandy and Archer. The two boys came close on their heels, making no secret of their fascination with Muller and his warriors.

Drummer looked up at him, wide-eyed. “Do you know how to use a sword?”

Muller smiled. “Yes, I do.”

His eyes became very round. “Will you teach me?”

“Hush, Drummer,” Bell murmured. She ushered them into the front parlor, her skirts swirling around her legs. In the candlelight, Muller could see lines around her eyes and a trace of grey in her hair, but it did nothing to mute her grace. No wonder his wife had turned out so lovely.

“Ho!” Appleton strode into the room with two bottles. “Here you are!” He greeted them heartily, including Arkandy and Archer in his hospitality.

Bell bustled off to check supper, taking Drummer with her for help. The rest of them settled in chairs around the hearth. It was a comfortable house with unexpected amenities, including a clock on the mantel and a round glass window. Most shapes in the room were either exact or else too far off from pure form to awaken Muller’s gifts. The only problem was the fireplace, almost a rectangular box, close enough to tug his power. Fortunately the logs spilling out of it disrupted its shape enough to keep his spells quiescent. The absence of troublesome shapes relieved him; he would have hated to become “accident-prone” while he endeavored to impress his wife’s family.

As Appleton poured out wine into blue-glass goblets, Hunter flopped down in a chair, a youth on the awkward edge between boyhood and manhood. Muller remembered well that gangly phase of his life, all long arms and legs. In fact, he sometimes felt as if he had never grown out of it. Hunter would clearly fill

out into a more muscular physique, tall and brawny like his father.

They talked stiffly at first, Appleton formal and Muller nervous. Gradually, as they drank their wine, they relaxed. Then Bell returned with Drummer in tow and bade them all come to the polished table, clearly reserved for special occasions, with blue-glass place settings and silverware. It appealed to Muller. Even just a year ago he might have disdained the settings compared to the china, crystal, and gold they used at Suncroft. Now he wondered that he could have been so narrow as to miss the beauty of a home like this. Its harmony made him feel welcome.

Almost as soon as they were seated and the meal set out, Drummer began to fidget. He spoke eagerly to Muller. "When will you show me how to use a sword?"

"We might eat first," Muller suggested. The fragrant aromas distracted him.

Drummer lowered his voice. "You can learn me how to fight the night warriors."

"Night warriors?" Muller asked, curious.

"They prowl the mountains." The boy's voice was full of portent.

Arkandy smiled at him. "What do these night warriors do while they are prowling?"

"March." Drummer leaned toward him, his young face serious. "They march all day and night."

"Where do they march to?" Muller asked.

Drummer blinked solemnly. "They are coming to take over Aronsdale and steal Chime."

Steal Chime? The coincidence startled Muller.

"Oh, Drummer, don't be stupid." Hunter glared at him. "It's bad enough you make up stories, but do they have to have Chime in them?"

"Boys," their mother admonished. "Enough."

"It's not a story," Drummer said.

"Oh, really." Hunter leaned close to him. "And where did you see these terrible warriors who plan to take over the world?"

"Not the world, rockhead." Drummer poked him in the arm. "They just want Aronsdale."

Watching them, Muller felt a stab of loneliness. He wondered if they knew how lucky they were, having each other to fight with. He had longed all his life for a family. He would have given anything for a brother. It made him want his own children all the more. He thought of telling them all about the baby, but this didn't feel like the right time.

Appleton picked up the thread of a conversation from before dinner. "So Chime continues her studies with the mage mistress?"

Muller nodded. "She works with Della in the mornings. She used to spend afternoons in the village,



visiting the elderly or shopping at the market, but now she studies the government.” He thought it best not to mention why she no longer went to the village.

“Chime, studying government?” Hunter smirked. “Aronsdale is in real trouble now.”

Appleton frowned at him. “Do not speak of your sister in that tone.”

“I wasn’t making it up about the night warriors,” Drummer said.

“Boys!” Bell reddened, her gaze flicking to Muller.

“It is fine,” Muller said. “Really.”

Drummer fixed him with a firm gaze. “You will protect Chime from them, won’t you?”

The boy’s insistence disquieted Muller. “Why do you believe she is in danger?”

“Your Highness, please forgive the boy,” Appleton said. “I apologize for his tales.”

“No need to apologize,” Muller said. Drummer plucked a chord within him. He recognized Chime in the boy, certainly, but it went deeper than that resemblance.

“Does Chime do spells now?” Hunter asked.

“Beautiful spells,” Muller said. It wasn’t completely true; Chime was still learning. But she had made plenty of progress. “You should see her light a room.” His voice softened. “Actually she needs no spells to do that. Just herself.”

Bell and Appleton beamed at him. His last statements seemed to have put him in their good graces more than his other pleasantries. He wasn’t sure why, but he was glad they were warming toward him.

“It’s true about the night warriors,” Drummer stated.

“Enough,” Appleton said.

Bell gave Muller a wry look. “I hope this doesn’t put you off from having young ones of your own.”

“Not at all.” Muller wanted to know more about the night warriors, but he also couldn’t let this opening pass. “Actually we—” He was suddenly self-conscious. “That is, I mean—as it happens, the contrary will soon be true.” There. He had said it.

Bell blinked and Appleton squinted at him. Neither seemed to know how to respond, which made Muller suspect he hadn’t “said it” as clearly as he thought.

“The contrary?” Bell gave a hesitant smile. “I’m glad you like the boys.” Both Drummer and Hunter looked bewildered.

“Well, yes, I do.” Muller was growing embarrassed. “What I meant to say, rather clumsily, I’m afraid, is that you will soon have more young ones in the family.” His voice softened. “Chime is with child.”

“A babe?” Bell’s face lit up. “This is wonderful!”

“Ho!” Appleton grabbed the wine and poured out a glass for Muller, then for himself and Bell. “Well done, boy! Well done!” Realizing what he had said, he quickly added, “Your Highness, I mean.”

Muller laughed. “Please call me Muller.”

“A fine name.” Appleton took a hearty swallow of wine. “So! When does the babe come?”

“About eight months,” Muller said.

“Chime is going to have a baby?” Hunter seemed only now to absorb the concept. “That’s strange. She won’t know what to do.”

His mother chuckled. “She will figure it out.”

“Chime can’t have a baby,” Drummer stated.

“Why not?” Muller asked.

“Because she’s my sister.”

“What, our sister can’t be a mother?” Hunter glared at him, though he seemed almost as disconcerted.

“You have to help her!” Drummer told Muller. “The night warriors will hurt her, just like they did her bird.”

Muller’s pulse surged. Her songbird?

“Drummer, you go too far,” his father said. “You will go to your room now.”

“No, wait, please.” Muller turned to the boy. “What do you know about your sister’s bird?”

“They killed it,” Drummer said.

“The night warriors?”

“Yes.”

A chill ran up Muller’s back. “But who are they?”

“They’re bad,” Drummer made a face. “And they’re coming to Aronsdale.”

Appleton gave Muller a look of apology. “I’ve no idea why he is saying this. We’ve seen no one.”

“Neither have we,” Muller said. “My unit has been all over this area.”

“They aren’t there,” Drummer said. “They’re north.”

“Sure.” Hunter snorted. “And you saw them just this morning, right? When you were up north.”

Drummer ignored him. “I dreamed it,” he told Muller.

Bell sighed. "Drummer, honey, you mustn't mix your dreams up with real life." To Muller, she said, "He doesn't usually go on this way."

"No need to apologize." Muller spoke kindly to Drummer. "Have you ever been tested for mage power?"

The boy blinked. "No."

"Mage power?" Hunter peered at his brother as if he might have odd protuberances sticking out of his head. "He doesn't have any. Chime did, even if she pretended she didn't. But not Drummer."

"How can you tell?" Muller asked. As far as he knew, only another mage could detect such powers.

Hunter faltered. "I'm not sure."

Muller glanced to Appleton and Bell. "Children often inherit the traits from their parents."

Appleton laughed uneasily. "I'm no sorcerer."

Bell started to speak, then stopped.

"Please," Muller said. "Go ahead."

She hesitated. "Sometimes it seems...perhaps I can make warmth. Or light. But nothing like Chime. Just a hint here and there."

"Like your sons," he said quietly.

"I'm no sorcerer," Drummer stated, copying his father's inflections perfectly.

Muller spoke with care. "Drummer, can you tell me what these night warriors look like?"

"Shadows."

"Shadows, how?"

"Their hearts are like shadows. They are like Chime, but shadowy instead of light. She is good. They are bad."

Everyone fell silent. Muller had little doubt what Drummer meant. Dark and light, the two sides of a mage's power. Chime embodied the best of those gifts, healing and empathy. If what Drummer described was real, rather than a child's nightmare, it chilled Muller. A year or two ago, he would have scoffed at the idea that a dark mage could bring an army. That was before Chime had touched the presence in Croft's Vale.

"Why do you think they are in the north?" he asked.

"The mountains are big." Drummer squirmed in his chair. "And black."

"How big are the trees?" Muller asked. The northern forests varied a great deal, with towering giants in

the western foothills, smaller trees in the midranges, and stunted vegetation in the highest peaks.

“No trees,” Drummer said.

Appleton looked from his son to Muller, comprehension in his expression. Only one mountain region had no trees: the pass from Harsdown to Aronsdale.

“Surely his dream is coincidence,” Appleton said.

Muller spoke quietly. “When my cousin’s parents died, I knew, though they were far from Suncroft. I dreamed it.”

Bell put her hand to her cheek. “You are a mage?”

Muller took care with his response, acutely aware of Arkandy and Archer listening. “I come from a family of mages. Even those of us without true gifts may experience an echo of power from our kin.”

Appleton leaned forward. “Could Harsdown actually be marching on Aronsdale?”

“Perhaps. We’ve seen nothing in the southwest. The Pentagons came west, too, but in the north.” Unlike him, they had no link to Chime. By touching the mind of the dark mage, she might have inadvertently set up a bond with him, one Drummer caught traces of in his dreams. If so, the boy could be giving him information unknown to anyone else. It might be nothing, just a boy’s dream. But the Tallwalk Pass was several days ride from the border; if Varqelle brought an army through there, it could be days before anyone in Aronsdale knew.

He nodded to Drummer. “I will think on what you have said. Thank you for letting me know.”

Drummer straightened. “Thank you, Your Highness.” He smirked at his brother. “Told you.”

While the brothers glared at each other, conversation among the adults drifted away from Harsdown. Bell and Appleton chatted with Arkandy and Archer, who were clearly enjoying them-selves. Muller sat in silence, preoccupied. If Drummer really had picked up an invasion, the situation was more serious than anyone realized. And Chime might be in danger. He couldn’t make it back to Suncroft, though, before anyone coming over the Tallwalks reached Aronsdale. He ought to rendezvous with the Pentagons, who were about five days’ ride from here. He had no time to waste; an invading army could reach Aronsdale in that time.

And if he was wrong? He would look like an idiot.

He considered the consequences. If they rode north and found nothing, Jarid would question his judgment, maybe relieve him of command. If he didn’t go north and Harsdown had marched against Aronsdale, lives could be lost and villages destroyed, far more serious consequences than his looking stupid.

When viewed that way, the choice was obvious.



27

### The Dark Dreaming

Muller strode through the camp, flanked by Arkandy and Archer. “We must go north as fast as possible. We’ll need enough field rations so we don’t have to hunt. And warm clothes. It’s colder up in the Tallwalks. But leave everything here that isn’t absolutely necessary.”

“I will speak with the other hexahedron-majors,” Arkandy said. “We should be ready to move within the hour.”

Muller nodded, too tense to say more. Clouds had covered the sky and the only light came from torches his men carried. He wished they had a mage, more than just for light, but as a healer, too. However, all their mages were at Suncroft. He didn’t bother to include himself.

He headed toward the edge of the camp—and was startled to see his father-in-law standing near the horses, with Drummer at his side.

Muller went to them, warming inside. “My greetings.”

Appleton and Drummer bowed. Then the father indicated his son. “He would like to tell you something, if he may.”

“Certainly.” Muller smiled, charmed by the boy’s earnest face and mop of wild curls. “It is good to see you, Drummer.”

The boy watched him with a gaze that, if Muller hadn’t known better, would have looked like hero worship. It made Muller ache inside; Jarid had looked at him that way when he had been six and Muller fourteen.

“I wanted to—to tell you.” Drummer stumbled over his words, rushing them. “To wish you luck. I know we all said farewells and all tonight, but I wanted to’ specially wish you well.”

A lump seemed to lodge in Muller’s throat. Somehow he spoke around it. “That means a great deal to me.”

The boy extended his hand. “This is for you.” A cord with a metal ring lay in his palm. “It gives me good luck. It will for you, too.”

“You honor me.” Taking the cord, Muller peered at the flat ring. It was too well formed to stir his magic power. The fitting had probably come off an apple picking machine. He slid the cord over his head, letting the ring hang down his chest. “I will treasure it.”

“You must bring it back,” Drummer said earnestly. “Safe and sound.”

Muller heard what he didn’t say; it wasn’t the charm he wanted to see returned safe and sound, but its wearer. He spoke gently. “I will. I promise.”

“Good.” Relief washed across Drummer’s face. “And you can tell Chime that—well, really, she’s not so bad.”

Muller grinned. “That is high praise from a brother.”

“I miss her a lot,” Drummer admitted. Quickly he added, “But don’t you dare tell her that.”

“Nary a word,” Muller promised.

Drummer gave him a shy smile. “Good night, Your Highness.”

“Good night, Master Drummer.”

Appleton spoke quietly. “Thank you.”

Muller nodded, grateful to have met them. He watched as they headed back to the village. These people, his wife’s kin, barely knew him, yet they welcomed him. During the past years, as he had assumed more responsibility and then met Chime, he had begun to feel more at ease with himself. He even looked forward to his life now. He just prayed it didn’t all end soon in battle.

That night, the Hexagon Unit headed north. They didn’t stop to rest until a few hours before dawn.

It was then that Muller had the first of the dark dreams.

“We must go!” Chime struck wildly at Aria, her mind fogged with sleep.

Her maid deflected the blows. “It will be all right,” she murmured. “You were having a nightmare, that be all.”

“No!” Chime came fully awake, sitting up in bed. “It was a message. Muller tried to reach me.”

“He can’t reach you across all the country, ma’am.”

“I dreamed he is dying. He begs me to come.” Chime clenched her fists in the covers. “I must go to the Tallwalk Mountains.”

“The Tallwalks are north, milady. Lord Muller is south.” Aria spoke calmly, as if it were a perfectly natural for a noblewoman to wake up suddenly and insist on riding off across the countryside in the middle of the night.

Chime slid out of bed, her bare feet hitting the stone floor, her nightgown swirling around her calves. “He went north.”

“Now why would he do such a thing?”

“I don’t know.” Chime couldn’t calm her agitation. “How did you know I was dreaming?”

Aria helped her into her robe. “You were acting muchly strange, Lady Chime. Your voice sounded wrong.”

“My voice?” Chime stopped with one arm in her sleeve. “What do you mean?”

“It didn’t sound like you.” Aria hesitated. “It was deeper. And you spoke a language I didn’t recognize.”

Chime put her arm in the sleeve. “I don’t remember.”

“It was eerie.”

“All the more reason I need to reach Muller.”

Aria regarded her sternly. “You can’t run off into the night by yourself.”

“I have to warn him.”

“About what?”

“He could die.”

“How?”

Chime made a frustrated noise. “I don’t know.”

“I think the dark mage haunts your dreams.”

That gave Chime pause. The nightmares did have an odd sense, one that felt...oily. It reminded her of the presence she had touched in Croft’s Vale. She shivered. It was a desecration of spells to give nightmares instead of comfort. If a mage could invade her dreams, she would fear ever to sleep again.

She regarded Aria uneasily. “To enter someone else’s dreams, especially from so far away, seems impossible.”

“How do you know he is far away?”

“King Jarid says he is in Harsdown.”

Aria handed her the sash for her robe. “It be a bad time, milady. A bad time indeed.”

Chime exhaled. “Aye.”

“You cannot ride off with no plan or protection.”

Chime knew Aria was right, much as she hated to admit it, but she had to do something. “Perhaps Jarid will send a messenger to Muller.”

“To Jacob’s Vale?”

“No. The Tallwalks.”

Aria regarded her dubiously, but she made no further protest. Chime told herself that her fears were misplaced, that she was having wretched dreams because of the changes in her body due to her pregnancy. But she didn’t believe it for a moment.

Despite the cold night, sweat soaked Muller’s shirt and hair. He tossed on his pallet, unable to sleep. Vague dreams always troubled him now. He recalled nothing specific, only a sense of threat that remained after he awoke.

Night warriors, Drummer had said.

For a while he lay on his back listening to the rustles, coughs and rattles of his sleeping men. Finally he clambered out of bed, fully dressed, and pulled on his jacket. Then he paced through the camp, past snoring warriors in bed rolls.

At the perimeter, he nodded to Archer, who was on sentry duty. The lieutenant lifted his hand. Muller continued on—

And jerked as a nightmare hit him, the same undefined sense of menace that plagued his dreams, but coming now while he was awake. With a gasp, he dropped to his knees and bent forward, his arms crossed over his stomach while he vomited behind a tree. Every rock, plant and tree seemed to loom over him, threatening and harsh.

After Muller finished, he simply knelt, gulping in air while tremors shook his body. He had no idea what had spurred the waking nightmare, but the sensation was mercifully fading now.

“Commander?”

Muller raised his head to see Archer approaching. “Is everything all right?” the lieutenant asked.

“Yes.” Muller climbed slowly to his feet. “Fine.”

Archer’s expression clouded. “The feel of mage power be around here. It isn’t right.”

“An eerie night.” Muller stayed noncommittal, afraid Archer felt his power. It would hurt morale if his men thought he had mage gifts that disrupted their ability to fight. He felt certain he could control his spells, but he wouldn’t know how to convince them. With rumors of a dark mage, he could even be in danger if the truth became known.

He spoke awkwardly. “Seems I drank too much this evening, eh?”

Amusement flickered in Archer’s face. “We all do now and then. Have a good evening, Commander.”

Muller lifted his hand in farewell as Archer continued his rounds. Then Muller returned to his pallet and lay down. It was bad enough nightmares haunted his sleep, leaving him worn-out in the mornings. He didn’t know what he would do if they invaded his waking hours as well. How did he fight this formless



threat that stalked his life? At least Chime was safe at Suncroft, untouched by the evil here in the north.

He had to discover who—or what—was coming through the Tallwalk Pass.

Chime stood on the balcony of her suite, bathed in the light of a Jade Moon, the gold and green layers of her nightdress swirling around her body, catching on her ankles. Her hair drifted in the wind. It wrapped her body and pulled toward the rail of the balcony where her hands rested, then blew back from her face. She raised her head to the night sky with its cold stars. The moon had turned the color of jade, perhaps from dust in the air or the filmy clouds, or maybe from the Saint of Halos, a spirit that surrounded the moon with a glowing nimbus.

Chime raised her arm and opened her hand to the sky. An emerald orb lay in her palm, faceted with twenty sides, sparkling. She focused on it, pouring her power into the jewel. A sphere of light formed around her, blended with the moon-light, but a richer green, like leaves that unfurled from an apple tree in the spring, soft grass on the hills, or the water in a mountain lake shaded by ferns. She stood within the radiant sphere, gazing across the land that rolled away from the castle, the velvety slopes and curves of Aronsdale.

Then she reached.

She had neither Iris's colors nor Jarid's strength. She could teach like Della or rely on decades of experience, as did Skylark. But Chime knew now her gift; she could create spells of mood and empathy in a way no one else seemed to touch.

The sphere of light rose into the air, leaving her on the balcony in the endless breezes. It floated above her, luminous, rippling in the air. It was only a mood spell, only encouragement, hope, nothing substantial. It might dissipate before it reached its goal.

But still she would send this charmed sphere.

Go, she thought. Go to them. To the warriors of Aronsdale deep within the hills and woods, uncertain what they face. To the women and men who stand on the borders and look toward the unknown. To my love, wherever he strides the land. Go to them. Give them succor.

"Go," she whispered. "Go to Muller."

The orb drifted over the land, spreading thinner and thinner, until only a faint emerald glimmer remained in the air that blended into the moonlight and the forever reaches of the starry sky.

Jarid opened his eyes, aware of light, nothing more. Even now, months after he had regained his vision, he was still learning to see.

Gradually his mind interpreted the scene. He had fallen asleep in Iris's forest haven, the hollow where they spent their wedding night last spring. He felt gifted by the trust she had shown when she revealed this sanctuary to a man who, though her husband, was a stranger. Perhaps it had started that day she reached across Aronsdale and found him in the mountains.

Jarid stretched and sat up, enjoying the hollow. The waterfall splashed like music. Some leaves on the trees had turned red and gold; others remained green. Summer's warmth was fading into autumn, but he cared little about the cold. He and Unbent had endured far worse in the winters when they ran out of firewood.

His unease came from another source. Foreboding had troubled him for days, invading his sleep and now intruding on his days as well. It exhausted him. He had come here to meditate, probing for the source of his disquiet. He hadn't learned its cause, but at least he had slept well.

Closing his eyes, Jarid wove power through the sphere. His spell made no outward light; it turned inward, within him, like red embers. He went through orange, then yellow. A sense of well-being spread over him.

For green, he deepened his concentration. As he had often done these past months, he sought Harsdown. Della claimed it was impossible to feel emotions over so great a distance. She believed such spells could extend no more than a few paces around the mage who created it. Yet he had always reached much farther with Unbent and now with Iris.

So much else of what Della said made sense, it was odd she would be so wrong on this. Everyone seemed to share her conviction that what he achieved in his trances should be impossible. He had too few referents to interpret their response. Rather than endure their skepticism, he kept the full extent of his powers to himself.

He had no idea if precedents existed for his gifts. None of the tales sung by bards answered his questions. Nor did the history scrolls in the Suncroft library help; he couldn't read well. He had just begun to learn before he lost his sight. Now he had tutors, but the slow process frustrated him. So he searched as he had done these past fourteen years: with spells.

Shapes filled his mind: bars, polyhedrons, circles, and spheres, always glimmering spheres, glistening, spinning, spinning. It puzzled him that other mages used objects or mosaics to focus; he preferred mental images.

His spell flowed across the country and over Suncroft. He sensed its people as a pale wash of moods. Then he found Iris, visiting an outlying town, meeting the citizens who now called her queen. Her presence filled him with emotions he barely understood. It had taken him months to comprehend that he loved his wife; he had no idea how to tell her.

He found Della next, who warmed Suncroft like a banked fire. Chime shed golden light over the castle, as did the girl-child she carried, another mage. Fatigue wore on Chime from her pregnancy and sleepless nights. He made a healing spell and offered it to her. She didn't sense what he was doing and distance weakened his spell, but her mood did brighten.

Jarid lay down in the grass, his hands behind his head as he increased his concentration. He thought of Unbent and his spell reached past Suncroft to the outlying farms. His father was plowing a field, content with hard work under a warm sun. He suffered none of the nightmares that tormented Jarid's nights and apparently Chime's also.

It puzzled Jarid that he and Chime had such troubled dreams. He continued his search, reaching toward Harsdown. The more area he covered, the more diffuse his spell became, until he could barely identify individuals. Far to the north, he thought he touched Muller, but that made no sense. His cousin had gone south to visit Chime's family.

Jarid ranged farther, to the northern Aronsdale border, a fifteen-day ride northwest. His head throbbed with the strain...time to withdraw—

Then he hit the true nightmares.



28

### Decision

“They are coming through the mountains,” Jarid strode down the hall of the castle, so fast that Brant, Fieldson, and Della had trouble keeping pace with his long-legged stride. He had run the entire way here from the forest.

“Both armies are from Harsdown,” Jarid said. “One comes through the Tallwalk Pass and the other is in the Boxer-Mage Mountains.”

“How can you be certain?” Della asked, out of breath. “It is too far.”

Jarid stopped, and the others halted around him like water churning past a boulder in the river. He regarded them all; if one chose leaders according to wisdom and experience, they would rule Aronsdale. Heredity had chosen otherwise, but he had no illusions about his lack of preparation. He needed them. If he wanted their help, he had to convince them of his claims.

“Iris and I reached each other,” he told Della.

“You weren’t as far away,” she said.

“We were a ride of ten days apart. What I sense now is about fifteen days away. Why should I manage one and not the other?”

“Iris is also a mage,” Brant said. “A powerful one.”

“You did it together with her,” Della said. “This time it is only you.”

Jarid shuddered. “He was also there.”

“He?” Fieldson asked.

“The dark mage.” Jarid began walking, more slowly this time. “He comes with King Varqelle’s army.”

“This isn’t much to go on,” Fieldson said.

“Muller is on his way north,” Jarid added.

Brant frowned. “He went south.”

“Nevertheless,” Jarid said. “He now goes north.”

Fieldson shook his head. “We need solid information. Evidence. Proof.”

“Here.” Jarid had brought them to a tall set of doors with circular stained-glass windows on either side. Protocol dictated he should go to his own suite instead of this one and then send for the person he wanted to see, but he was tired of formalities. Had he grown up at Suncroft, perhaps he would have more patience with “proper” procedures, but as far as he could tell, it only made everything take too long. He didn’t have time.

Today Brant didn’t argue; he just rapped on the doors. The circle-maid Aria answered. When she saw them, her mouth opened in an O. Then she remembered herself and bowed. “You honor us with your presence, Your Majesty.”

Jarid didn’t feel like he honored anyone, but he kept that to himself. “I would like to see Lady Chime, if she is here.”

“She is, Sire.” Aria moved aside so they could enter. “We will bring her immediately.”

As Aria ushered them into the gold and ivory parlor, the maid Reed appeared. After a flustered greeting, she bustled off to find Chime. Jarid’s advisors settled into the upholstered chairs, but he felt too restless to sit. He paced by a tall window, through sunlight that pooled on hexagonal patterns in the parquet floor.

Jarid sensed Chime’s power as she entered the parlor. He turned to greet her, then froze, dismayed. She was trying to present a bright appearance, golden in her silk tunic and leggings, her hair shining, but nothing could hide her pallor or the dark circles under her eyes.

“Lady Chime.” He strode over to her. “Are you well?”

“My greetings, Your Majesty.” She bowed. “I had a restless night, that is all.”

“The nightmares.”

Her voice trembled. “It is nothing.”

“Tell me.”

She twisted the long sleeve of her tunic. “I am sorry if I have troubled you.”

“Chime.” Jarid put his hand on her shoulder.

For a moment she seemed ready to insist she was fine. Then her smile crumpled. “I dream Muller is dying.”

“No wonder you are tired.” Jarid led her to one of the small sofas. “I have nightmares, too, but I

remember so little. Only malice.” He sat with her, aware of his advisors around them in high-backed chairs.

Della leaned forward. “But you remember this last vision, yes, Your Majesty?”

“A vision?” Chime’s eyes looked larger than usual compared to her pale, drawn face.

“I had one about Harsdown.” Jarid shifted his weight, restless. “I saw two armies. Varqelle has sent them.”

Chime spoke slowly, her words guarded. “In my dream, I see Muller going north, to the Tallwalk Pass. Baleful spells stalk him. Meanwhile, the Harsdown army sneaks around Aronsdale, going through the Barrens to our north. They plan to attack Suncroft from our eastern border.”

“Ah, saints,” Della said. Fieldson exhaled and Brant shook his head. When Chime gave them questioning looks, Jarid spoke. “In my vision, one army comes over the Tallwalks and the other comes through the Boxer-Mage Mountains even farther north.”

Chime stared at him. “We cannot both be right.”

Jarid grimaced. “We dare not be wrong.”

“Could it be a trick?” she asked.

That gave him pause. He knew he could be mistaking what he saw, but it had never occurred to him it might be a deliberate attempt to mislead him.

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

“My nightmares feel strange.” Chime glanced at Fieldson and Brant, then away.

“You may speak in front of my advisors,” Jarid said.

She reddened. “I’ve no wish to waste anyone’s time.”

Jarid understood that hesitation all too well, having felt it himself on more than a few occasions. He spoke wryly. “If you worry they will find your comments strange, have no fear. I’ve already overcome them with the strangeness of mine.”

Della laughed, then stopped when Brant scowled at her.

Chime answered with care. “Aria said I spoke during one of my dreams. She said I sounded like another person. And that dream—it seemed rotted from within.”

“Malignant.” Jarid spoke without doubt.

Surprise flickered in her gaze. “Yes.”

“I feel that when I awake.”

Chime shuddered. “It is the Harsdown mage.”

Fieldson was watching her closely. "You believe this mage seeks to trick you with dreams?"

"I have wondered." Chime twisted the cuff of her sleeve. "It could just be bad dreams, a wife missing her husband."

"I am not missing your husband," Jarid said, smiling. "At least not that way. But I have the dreams, too."

Brant blinked. "He told another joke. That's two in one night." When Della glared at him, he raised his hands, palms out.

Jarid took no offense. It was true, he hardly knew how to laugh. But since Iris had come into his life, his spirit had lightened.

"We have one unit in the north," Fieldson said. "Two, if Lord Muller took the Hexagons there. They will need support if Harsdown forces come through the mountains." He shook his head. "But sending more of our forces into the north would leave this area undefended."

Brant rubbed his chin. "If it is a trick, it is effective. Make us believe invasion comes from the logical place, our northern border with Harsdown. So we send help. Meanwhile, they attack from another direction."

"What direction?" Jarid asked.

"Suppose they have sent an army through the Barrens that lie to the north." Fieldson thought for a moment. "If they cross the River of Stars and go south around our eastern border, they could enter Aronsdale through the Pyramid Foothills. From there, they could reach Suncroft."

Jarid tensed. "And if we meanwhile sent our forces north?"

"It would take at least fifteen days to reach our northwestern border with Harsdown and that long to return, if we found no threat." Fieldson shook his head. "An army coming through the Barrens could arrive here at Suncroft before we returned."

Fieldson slapped his knee. "We need more information. We must send riders. Our fastest."

"If both of these armies exist." Brant shook his head. "Where would he get enough men for two?"

"Mercenaries," Della said.

"He cannot afford them," Brant said.

Fieldson's voice hardened, revealing the honed edge he rarely showed, the iron that had made him a general above his other contemporaries. "If he thought he could finally take Aronsdale, he would tax his people to starvation and empty his coffers. He could replenish them from Aronsdale if he conquers us."

"Who would he hire?" Jarid asked.

"Rebels from the Outlands beyond the Misted Cliffs," Fieldson said. "Escaped criminals, loners, madmen."

“Not the most motivated or loyal material for an army.” Brant grimaced. “I wouldn’t trust them fighting for Aronsdale.”

Chime watched them, her gaze hollowed by exhaustion. “But Vargelle cannot win. Even if he has one mage now, we have more. Our mages are our advantage, the reason he never tried this before.” She looked around at them. “Aren’t they?”

“Yes.” Della spoke heavily. “But we were so closely matched. This dark mage may be enough to tip the balance.”

Brant raked his hand through his silver mane. “Or maybe Harsdown has sent no armies and we create nightmares for ourselves.” He glanced at Jarid. “My apologies, Your Majesty. But we must consider the possibility.”

As much as Jarid wished it was only bad dream, he knew otherwise. He turned to Aria, who stood with Reed in the entrance arch of the parlor. “You said Lady Chime spoke oddly during her nightmare.”

“Aye, Your Majesty.” Aria came forward, hesitant, and stood behind Chime at the sofa. “With a man’s voice.”

“Chime, like a man?” It was hard for Jarid to imagine such, given her dulcet voice.

“I know it be sounding odd. But her words were all strange and wrong.” Aria looked apologetic. “I didn’t know the language.”

“She repeated the words to me,” Chime said. “I recognized none of them.” She sat as straight as a rod, her hands folded in her lap, but it only made her look more vulnerable.

Jarid wished he could reassure Chime. “How many languages do you know?”

She swallowed. “Just ours.”

“Are you certain?” Brant asked. “Jacob’s Vale isn’t far from our southwestern border. Surely travelers came through there, especially from Blueshire and Shazire. Perhaps you have heard their languages?”

“A little,” Chime said. “The words I spoke sounded nothing like those.”

It frustrated Jarid to know so little about Aronsdale. Had he been raised as expected, he would have traveled widely with his parents, seeing this country and others, learning their ways. Instead, he could barely speak or read his own language, let alone others.

“Can you repeat the words?” Brant asked.

Chime looked up at Aria. “Do you recall?”

She hesitated. “Something like. ‘All-air nell-air.’”

“Allar nellari,” Della murmured.

“Aye, ma’am!” Aria shot her a look of relief.

The words chilled Jarid, though he couldn't have said why. "What is it?"

"Part of an incantation," Della said. "It is ancient. Thousands of years old. Supposedly it helped mages focus through shapes imagined rather than seen or touched."

Jarid frowned. Here it was again, their insistence that one needed real shapes to focus. He couldn't let it go this time, not given what was at stake. "It isn't necessary to see or touch the shapes. That strengthens spells, certainly, but you can make them without it."

A long silence greeted his words. Finally Della said, "Is that how you do it?"

"I had no choice." He paused, uncomfortable. "I couldn't see."

"Hai," Chime said. "Of course."

"Perhaps you are what the ancients sought to create," Della said.

Thinking of the ancient words Chime had spoken, he shuddered. "I need no incantations, either. Especially that one."

Brant was watching him with that intense concentration that unsettled Jarid, as if his advisor could see through any shield or defense he raised.

"Why not that one?" Brant asked.

"The words have malice in them," Jarid said.

Brant glanced at Della. "Was that the full incantation?"

"Not quite," she said. "Allar nellari remalla. It means. 'Sphere inside-out.'"

Chime recovered enough of her spirit to look affronted. "You never taught it to Iris and me."

"It doesn't work," Della said. "It does nothing."

"Then how would Chime know it?" Brant asked.

Della exhaled. "I don't know."

"Those words feel ill." Jarid had to make a conscious effort not to clench his fists. "And why would Chime speak in someone else's voice?"

"Maybe I was hoarse," Chime said.

Concern creased Brant's face. "Have you been ill?"

"Actually, no," she said.

"This connects to those armies Harsdown has sent." Jarid's frustration roiled. "Somehow."

Della considered him. "As our strongest mage, you may pick up what we miss. And you are



uninfluenced by any styles of teaching magecraft. That could let you see in ways we have lost. But it also means you are the most untutored. You could make more mistakes.” She spread her arms out, palms up, then dropped them. “I just don’t know.”

“We can’t base strategy on dreams,” Fieldson said.

“Mages have always helped the army,” Della replied.

“But never with something this uncertain,” Brant said.

“Muller has already made his decision.” Chime wound the belt of her tunic around her hand. “He went north.”

Fieldson studied her face as if he sought to read the essence of her spells there. “You can’t be certain.”

Jarid leaned forward. “He is near the Tallwalk Pass.”

“Why would he do such a thing?” Brant demanded. “Muller never takes the initiative.” When Chime stiffened, he relented slightly. “I apologize, Lady. But what you describe would be out of character for him.”

“In the past, yes,” she admitted. “Nevertheless, it is true.”

“The Hexagons have only thirty-six men and no mages,” Fieldson said. “They couldn’t take on two Harsdown armies. They would be slaughtered.”

Chime’s gaze flicked to Jarid, her face strained. He could imagine what she felt, fearing for Muller, for his life, for the twists of his off-kilter powers. Jarid would always remember Muller as the hero of his boyhood; now he saw depths in his cousin that Muller had only begun to plumb. He didn’t doubt Muller would carry out his duties no matter what the cost. No matter how much Jarid wanted to offer words of comfort to Chime, but nothing would change the truth. Her husband could die if Harsdown attacked.

“The Pentagon Unit is in the north,” Fieldson said. “The Hexagons could rendezvous with them.” He rested his elbow on the arm of his chair, his pose an unconscious study in regal posture.

A pang of grief stabbed Jarid; his birth father had often sat that way. Fieldson was nothing like Prince Aron; the general had a calm nature that contrasted with Aron’s intense style. Jarid remembered his grandfather telling his father to trust Fieldson, that their strengths would complement each other. Jarid hadn’t thought of that in more than fourteen years, but now the memory tumbled back.

Unable to sit any longer, Jarid rose and paced to the window. It calmed him to see the countryside, tranquil now as the sun dipped below the hills and shadows filled the land. Too many memories were coming back, prodded by this place, these people, this life. And his dreams. Could the dreams be a trick meant to draw his army to the wrong place while Varqelle attacked elsewhere? Or had they inadvertently stumbled on his plans? But who was right—him or Chime? The survival of Aronsdale depended on their decision.

Jarid turned from the window and spoke to Brant. “Your recommendation?”

He answered immediately. “Send your fastest riders north to investigate. Have them report back to us.”

Jarid nodded and looked at Fieldson. "Yours?"

"Send the Heptagon and Octagon Units north, with half the infantry and archers."

Brant frowned. "It would leave Suncroft undefended. The infantry would also slow down the polygon units."

"The Nonagons and Quadrons will be here, as well as half our infantry and archers," Fieldson said. "One messenger cannot provide reinforcements to our northern forces."

Jarid spoke to Chime. "What think you?"

"The invaders are coming to Suncroft." She fisted her hand on the arm of her chair. "They are coming through the Barrens. I'm sure of it. We must defend this area."

It troubled Jarid that he and Chime had such different impressions. Perhaps Della was right, that he knew too little about his gifts to interpret his vision. He glanced at the mage mistress. "And your recommendation?"

Della answered quietly. "You must go north yourself. You have the best chance of challenging this dark mage."

Jarid shifted his weight uneasily. "And if he isn't north? If these dreams of mine are a trick?"

"You must use your judgment," she said. "No one else has as much power to see as you."

To see. Had fourteen years of blindness given him another sort of sight? Jarid rubbed the back of his neck, working at the muscle kinks that never seemed to relax anymore. His choices loomed with disaster. He didn't want Suncroft inadequately defended, but neither could he strand Muller with only one or two units to face an invasion.

He had to decide. But what. What?

Jarid looked around at the others. "I will take the Heptagons and a party of mounted archers north. We will rendezvous with our forces there. If we find nothing, we will return as soon as possible."

"And if you encounter Harsdown?" Fieldson demanded. "If Vargelle has hired mercenaries, you won't have enough men, especially if you leave the infantry here. He could have hundreds of men."

Jarid wished he could be more certain of his vision. "I dream they come on fast, flying over the land. They cannot manage such with foot soldiers and carrying supplies for a large company. If we are to meet up with them before they slaughter our people in the north, we must also travel fast." He spoke with foreboding. "If we are too late to help, all the infantry in Aronsdale will do no good."

"And if you are outnumbered?" Fieldson asked.

"I will send a rider for reinforcements."

The general spoke grimly. "Even your fastest rider would take twenty-five days to bring back reinforcements."

Jarid pushed back his hair, tangling it around his shoulders. "We will have to manage with what we have."

He feared that no matter what choice he made, it wouldn't be enough.



29

Dawn Ride

Aria stared at Chime, aghast. "Lady, you cannot."

"I must." Chime hurried through her bedroom, her slippers flapping on the floor.

Supper with Iris, Jarid, and the King's Advisors had taken forever. Iris would rule Aronsdale while Jarid was gone, and they had wanted to discuss a great deal. Iris obviously had doubts: was she needed more as sovereign at Suncroft or as mage queen with the army? While the others debated, Chime had listened, keeping quiet, lest she make a verbal slip and give herself away. But supper finished with no mishap. In the hours since, she had stayed in her suite, waiting for the castle and her guards to sleep.

Waiting to escape.

Once before she had run away. It seemed ages ago now, though it had only been about a year and a half. Then she had been escaping Muller. Now she would go to him.

They wouldn't take her with the Heptagons. Skylark and Jarid were their mages. Pah. Skylark was too elderly for the journey and Jarid had too little training, besides which, he was supposed to lead the Heptagons. They needed a young, active mage. Her. They just didn't appreciate that. So she would take care of matters herself.

"You will be expected to bid the king farewell in the morning," Aria said. "You must appear."

"I told Reed I was sick." Chime rummaged through the wardrobe against the wall, shoving aside silk garments, looking for the sturdy tunics and leggings she had brought from Jacob's Vale. "I asked her to say farewell for me." She gave Aria her most earnest look. "I've had so much trouble with morning sickness, he won't be surprised."

"You haven't had one day of sickness." Aria crossed her arms. "King Jarid is a powerful mage. He will know you have gone off somewhere."

"Yes, if he decides to search me out with a spell. But why would he? He knows how tired I've been." She pulled out her old clothes. "Hah! I knew they were here."

“Lady, you cannot do this.” Aria tried to take the garments away from her. “It is crazy.”

Chime pulled back her clothes. “I’m going. I’ll join the Heptagons after they’ve gone too far to send me back.”

“Why should it be too far?” Aria demanded. “The king can send you here anytime.”

“He won’t.” Chime pulled on her leggings under her nightgown. “Not if they are well out from the castle.”

“And why is that?”

“The army has always taken the strongest mages in the land. It is a duty of the mage queen. Why else choose the most powerful mage in the land to marry the king?”

“That isn’t what I asked. And you are not the queen.”

“Well, I’m close.”

“Queen Iris isn’t going.”

Chime glared at her. “That is another problem. She should go. Pah. Men.” She waved her hand. “If they listened to us more, the world would be much better off.”

Aria chuckled. “Aye.” Then she remembered she was angry. “Stop changing the subject!”

Chime yanked off her nightgown and pulled on her tunic. Twisting her hand around her back, she struggled to button it up. “I have duties, too.”

Aria started to fasten the tunic for her, but then she jumped back. “What am I doing? I won’t help you do this.”

Chime contorted herself until she managed the buttons. “But you are coming with me.”

Her maid’s mouth dropped open. “What? No!”

Chime untwisted herself. “I need you. Please. You’re the only person I can trust.”

Aria glared at her. “You canna trust me, ma’am. I will tell Lord Firestoke of your crazy plan.”

“You would never do that.” Chime went back to the wardrobe and poked around until she found her old boots. “Please come with me.”

“Never. Noblewomen do not dash across the country with only their maid, chasing the king and his army.”

“I won’t be chasing him.” Chime sat on the floor and pulled on one boot. “I’m leaving first. He will be chasing me.”

“He can’t chase someone he doesn’t know is there.” Aria knelt next to her. “He will be furious.”

Chime fastened up her boot. "He'll survive."

"Lady." Aria put her hand on Chime's arm, stopping her movements. "What about the baby?"

"Harsdown is going to attack Suncroft." It was one of Chime's reasons for leaving. If Jarid wouldn't listen to her, she would act on her own counsel. "I don't intend for myself or my child to be here when Vargelle arrives."

"You cannot ride with an army while you are pregnant."

"Why the blazes not?" Chime yanked on her other boot. "It doesn't make me helpless. And read your history. Many pregnant mages have ridden with the army."

"That was hundreds of years ago."

Chime finished strapping her boot. "Harsdown comes here. I will not let them take me and my child. What if they attack in both the north and here?" The thought felt like a dagger in her heart. "Muller could die without my ever seeing him again. I want to be with him."

Her maid spoke in a quieter voice. "Lady Chime, if you leave here with only me, you could be kidnapped by whomever tried before. They almost caught you inside Suncroft. It would be easy to grab you out there."

Pulling up her legs, Chime rested her arms on her knees. She knew Aria was right, but she couldn't sit here in the castle. "I have to go."

"You cannot."

Chime stood up, pulling Aria with her. "Come on."

"Where?"

"To see Jarid."

"Ma'am!" Alarm suffused Aria's face. "It is the middle of the night."

"All the better. He will be too sleepy to protest."

Aria gulped. "If you plan on taking on the king, I would like to be in another country, if you don't mind."

Chime smiled. "You will be fine. Come on."

"Hai," Aria muttered as Chime pulled her out the door. "I must be crazy, too."

Unable to sleep, Jarid sat against the headboard of the bed. Iris stirred, her hair brushing his leg. He shifted her head into his lap, wishing he could sleep, too. Her body was warm, her skin bare. He had never understood how she could feel so much softer than himself and yet be so much stronger inside. She was the cane that kept him standing.

Jarid smiled. She was also the siren that called to him. Her chestnut hair tumbled everywhere on the pillow. During the day, she tended to be reserved, but at night—ah, the night.

Sliding under the covers, Jarid filled his arms with his voluptuous woman. It puzzled him that she considered herself fat. The women of the royal court that she considered beauties were much too skinny.

He caressed her breast. “Are you awake?”

“Hmmm?”

“Was that a yes or a no?”

“A no,” she mumbled.

“Ah.” He tickled her side. “Now are you awake?”

Iris sighed. “Jarid, you must rest for your trip.”

“I’m not sleepy.” He moved his lips to her ear and let his breath do the tickling. “And you are very warm.”

Iris laughed sleepily and slid her arms around him. “You, sir, are terribly misbehaved.”

“You’re my wife.” He rolled her onto her back. “We can misbehave all we want.”

A tap came at the door.

Jarid paused, frowning. Then he turned back to Iris. Her lips felt warm against his, her body ready for him.

Another tap.

Jarid swore under his breath. “I don’t believe it.”

“Let’s pretend we’re asleep,” Iris said.

“I’m the king. It could be a crisis.”

She made a noise of protest low in her throat. “It would behoove our crises to wait until morning.”

He laughed, a rare sound, one that only happened with Iris. “That it would.” Then he dragged himself out of bed and pulled on his indigo robe, belting it at the waist. Silver geometric designs bordered its hems, stirring his power. It filled the room, which had six walls in a hexagon, with a domed ceiling.

Instinctively he imagined the room divided into two parts, the dome and the hexagonal box. A mood spell grew around him, but he held it in check. With Unbent, alone in the cabin, they had desperately needed his gifts; it had been one of their few ways to communicate. Here it became less vital. Nor did he have a connection to the people here. They had no reason to want him sensing their moods. So he respected their privacy. Right now, though, he did catch enough to identify the person beyond the door; Standson, his sphere-butler, always patient. Someone waited with him—

Chime?

Jarid didn't know whether to fume or worry. He liked Chime. She had a great deal of common sense. He enjoyed the bold spirit she hid under a veneer of impeccable conduct. Right now, though, he could have done with less of the bold and more of the impeccable.

He opened the door to find Standson, stoic in sleep clothes and a robe. "Yes?" Jarid asked.

"My apologies, Your Majesty," Standson said. "I am terribly sorry to disturb your rest." He looked terribly sorry to have had his own disturbed. "We have a problem."

Jarid looked past him to where Chime waited with Aria, her circle-maid. "So we do." He glowered at his cousin's wife. "I thought you felt ill, Lady Chime."

She came forward and bowed more deeply to him than protocol dictated. But then, protocol didn't encourage waking the king in the middle of the night, either.

"I apologize, Your Majesty," she said, contrite.

Jarid tried to glare at her. It was difficult because she looked angelic.

"Jarid?" Iris's sleepy voice came from behind him. She joined him at the door and leaned on its frame. "Chime? What are you doing up?"

"I must talk to the king," Chime said, the picture of sincere urgency.

"Well, here I am," Jarid grumbled. "So speak."

Iris gave him an exasperated look. Then she gestured to Chime, inviting her inside. "Come sit with us."

As Chime and Aria entered the suite, Jarid crossed his arms. Standson gave him a look of apology. Aria's face was so red, Jarid wondered her cheeks didn't catch fire. For good measure, he glared at her, too.

Iris set up candles on a table, and they sat around it in wing chairs with gold upholstery emblazoned by the Dawnfield crest. The octagonal table concentrated Jarid's spell. He hadn't intended to read Chime's mood, but it jumped out at him. She meant to ride with his war party in the morning.

"Absolutely not!" he exploded. "Out of the question."

They all blinked at him. Warriors, criminals, rogues, kings—those he could handle. What to do with three women watching him in polite bewilderment was another story altogether. He felt outnumbered.

"Never," Jarid added for good measure, giving Chime the full force of his irate stare. She smiled sweetly, her face aglow in the candlelight.

"Jarid, dear." Iris spoke carefully, as if he were perhaps dangerous. "What are you talking about?"

He frowned at his wife. "She thinks I am going to take her and Aria with me tomorrow."

Iris seemed nonplussed. "With the Heptagons?"

“I absolutely will not,” Jarid told them.

Aria spoke quickly. “Well, I’m glad that’s settled.” She stood up. “We are sorry to have—”

“Aria, sit down.” Chime yanked her back into the chair. The maid sat with a thump, a tendril of hair flying around her face.

Chime folded her hands in her lap. “Your Majesty—”

“Using my title won’t help,” he growled. “I will not take you with me. That is final. You may go now.”

“But I must go with you,” Chime said in her most sensible voice.

“You are worried about Muller,” Iris said.

“Where I come from,” Chime said, “a wife looks after her husband. If he is in danger, she rescues him.”

“What, now you’re a lady warrior?” Jarid tried to ignore the quelling look Iris gave him. At least she had the sense to speak no rebuke. He was the king, even he was only twenty. He was in control here. He couldn’t believe they were discussing this absurd proposition at such an hour of the night. Brant would have apoplexy. Maybe that was why Chime had come now; his advisors were in bed. She knew they would never countenance such an outrageous scheme. Well, neither would he.

“I must do something,” Chime said. “I need to help.”

“The answer is no,” Jarid said. “N. O.”

“What if Iris was in danger?” Chime turned to the queen. “Or if you knew Jarid needed you. You would go to him.”

“Well, yes, I would,” Iris said.

Jarid almost groaned. If Iris decided to insist that she go after all, it would encourage Chime in this madness. He turned his darkest scowl on his wife. “You would stay here at Suncroft.”

Her smile curved. “I would rescue you, my love.”

“You would do no such thing.” The conversation was getting away from Jarid and he didn’t know how to pull it back. Blustering probably wasn’t the answer. He spoke more calmly to Chime. “I understand why you would like to come and I appreciate your offer. But you cannot. The danger is too great. I’m sorry.”

“It is more dangerous to stay here.” Fear shadowed her face. “When Varqelle’s army arrives, what will they do to the pregnant wife of your current heir? Better I go with you.”

The idea that Varqelle would attack his home made Jarid ill. She was right; she would be in danger either way. But Suncroft had walls and warriors. “We are leaving many soldiers here.”

“You will have many in the north, too,” Iris said. “The Heptagons and the two units already there.”



“You can’t be sure Muller has brought the Hexagons,” Jarid said, though he too had sensed their movements.

Chime sat up straighter. “I am certain.”

“Such a journey poses dangers to your child,” Iris told her.

“Less than staying here,” Chime said. “I am not afraid to go.”

Jarid answered sternly. “But I am, for you.”

“You need mages,” she said. “I am a mage.”

“I also,” Iris said. “I should go.”

Saints almighty. Jarid leaned toward her. “I have a mage. Myself. I need you here.”

“You need me with the army more.” Iris rubbed her eyes. “I have worried about this all night. Brant and Della are better suited to govern in your absence than me. I can do far more to help the army than I can do here.”

“And suppose we are attacked?” Jarid demanded, both of her and of Chime. “You could be hurt. Even killed.”

“So could you,” Chime said.

Jarid was about to retort when he saw Iris pale. Damn. He didn’t want her reminded of the danger to himself.

Aria spoke to Chime in a low voice. “Ma’am, His Majesty has made his intent clear. We should leave the king and queen to their sleep now.”

“I am glad one of you has sense.” Jarid rose to his feet. “A good eve to—”

“Jarid, love,” Iris said. “Please wait.”

Ah, hell. He sat down. “Yes?”

“I was chosen as queen for my mage power. I’ve read the histories: even as recently as five generations ago, the queen rode with the army. You will need as many mages as possible when you face the Harsdown mage. By every precedent, I should ride with you.”

Jarid leaned toward his wife and spoke in a firm voice. “You are not going with me.” Sitting up straight, he faced Chime. “Neither are you.”

Chime smiled sweetly. “Will you lock us in our rooms? Tie us to a chair, perhaps?”

“Of course not. I am the king. You will do as I say.” He folded his arms, letting them see his resolve. “You can argue all night. It will do no good. I have made my decision.”

“It is an outrage!” Brant strode with Jarid across the Yard of Circles. All around them, the Heptagon Unit was preparing to ride, men and horses filling the predawn hour with quiet commotion.

“Both of them?” Brant demanded. Remembering himself, he added, “My apology, Sire. But to take Chime and Iris strikes me as unwise.” To put it mildly.

“Don’t tell me,” Jarid muttered. “Tell them.”

“You are the king.”

“Have you ever faced Iris and Chime together, without backup? No reinforcements? No battle plan?”

Brant smiled. “I hardly think talking to our two lovely mages is like going into battle.”

Jarid snorted. “Little do you know.”

“Simply tell them no.”

He slanted a weary look at his advisor. “I tried.”

“You can’t let two slips of women wear you down.”

He knew the real reason Brant was upset, even if the curmudgeon refused to say it. Jarid pulled him to a stop. “They mean a great deal to me, too. I don’t want them in danger. But they are right, we must have strong mages on this trip. Skylark is too old for such travel and Della isn’t much younger. We also need mages at Suncroft, if Harsdown comes. Skylark and Della may lack in endurance, but they have decades of experience in magecraft. They would be more effective here, where they can do their best work without fatigue.”

“If Harsdown comes.”

“Chime is convinced.”

“And you?”

“No. But she has a link to Wareman.” Jarid gazed across the yard to where Iris and Chime stood by their horses, deep in conversation. More to himself, he added, “How do you argue with such a love as that driving Chime? In her position, I would insist on the same.” He wished he knew how to tell Iris what she meant to him.

“Yes, well, they’re just women.”

Turning back to him, Jarid spoke dryly. “Would you like to tell Chime Headwind she is. ‘just’ a woman?”

Brant blanched. “I see your point.” He motioned at Cube-General Fieldson, who was conferring with several officers near the stables. “What does he say?”

“A surprise, actually. He didn’t object.”

“Why not?”

“He felt as they did about Skylark. He also thinks we need two mages with the army, in addition to myself.”

Brant wearily rubbed the small of his back. “I don’t like it.”

Jarid watched his wife, her glorious hair covered by a shawl. “Nor I.”

“I hope you’re wrong about the armies in the north.”

“What I sense is tenuous,” Jarid admitted, more and more uneasy with that truth as the time neared for them to leave.

Brant’s breath came out in puffs of condensation. “The Dawnfield line has such odd mage powers.”

Jarid tensed, thinking of Muller. “What do you mean?”

“Your ability to sense people over so much distance.” He paused. “But perhaps your strength is no surprise, given the way your ancestors married such strong mages.”

Jarid didn’t speak his thought, that the Dawnfield gifts had become too concentrated. No one should hold such power. In his darker moments, when he thought Varqelle might take all that mattered to him—his realms, his regained senses, his home, his wife—darkness moved within him. No mage could ever be free of that temptation, to use such power against others.

Yet Muller seemed to long only for the light. Jarid thought of the Mage Tower. The chamber with flawed shapes unsettled him, but he could see why Muller preferred it. In that place, alone, Muller could practice spells without doing harm. That wing of the castle was ancient, over a thousand years old. In the distant past, had other mages wielded powers such as Muller grappled with now? Although no histories mentioned such gifts, few records survived from ancient times. The traits could lie dormant for many generations, yet still become enhanced as the Dawnfields bred ever stronger mages.

Fieldson came over to them and bowed to Jarid. “We’re about ready to leave.”

“Thank you, Cube-General.” Jarid smiled slightly at Brant. “Take care of Suncroft for me.”

Brant laid his hand on Jarid’s shoulder. “May blessings of the saints go with you.”

Jarid inclined his head. He suspected they would need all the blessings they could find.



## Magescape

Chime sat astride Silvermist, her gray mare. They knew each other well now, she and this horse, and she loved riding her through these hills. They had left Croft's Vale and its farmlands far behind. Every now and then she saw a thatched cottage in the distance, but they otherwise rode through unsettled lands. Scattered trees dotted the hills and meadows, but few wild flowers remained, only snap-lions that grew in wild red and gold profusion in the shade in groves of trees. The early morning light had the aged feel of late summer, when the sun crossed lower in the sky. Tomorrow would be autumn's first day, beginning the long, cold slide into winter.

All around her, the Heptagon Unit and King's Archers rode in lines of warriors, the powerful muscles of their horses rippling, their leather armor and chain mail creaking. Up ahead, Jarid cantered with Fieldson. Iris rode next to Chime on a large mount, a dappled mare. The wind pulled at the raised hood of the queen's riding cape.

"Jarid seems quiet," Chime said. She felt awkward with Iris, unsure what to say, but she tried anyway.

"Aye." Iris sighed. "Talking is 'n his strong suit."

"It has never been mine, either. I seem to do it a lot anyway." Belatedly it occurred to Chime that she had just left herself open for a well-deserved retort.

Iris only smiled, though. "You've a lovely voice."

That startled Chime. "Thank you." She remembered her stupid comments last year about Iris's accent. If only she could take them back. It had been so long, though. She hesitated to speak, lest she remind the queen of a forgotten slight.

They rode for a time, protected against the chill by heavy wool cloaks with hoods. They wore leather armor most of the time, acclimating themselves to it, learning to move and function. Both had daggers sheathed on their belts.

After a while, Iris said, "I had wondered..."

"Yes?" Chime asked.

"About your nightmares. If you donna mind my asking?"

"Go ahead."

"Is anyone else in them besides Muller?"

Chime understood: Iris wondered if the dreams foretold anything for Jarid. "Only Muller. The rest is vague."

"Vague." Iris exhaled, her breath making plumes in the air. "Jarid says this also." Her hair blew across her face and she pulled it off. "I havna had any nightmares that I remember, but I have trouble sleeping. My mind is a pincushion." She reddened. "It is foolishness, I know."

"If it is," Chime said, "then I am foolish, too."

Iris hesitated. "I have had an idea."

"An idea?"

"Aye. Suppose you, Jarid, and I pool our gifts? We might be able to sense more that way."

It was an anomalous thought. Then again, this was an anomalous situation. Apparently even Jarid couldn't reach as far as Harsdown.

"I wouldn't know how," Chime said.

"Nor I," Iris admitted. "I suggested it to Della before we left and she said it couldna be done."

Chime disliked giving up. Besides, supposedly neither violet nor rainbow mages existed, either. "She has never worked with anyone like you or Jarid."

Iris grinned. "She also said that."

"Have you asked Jarid?"

"Aye. He is willing to try."

"What would we try, exactly?"

Iris pondered for a moment. "Maybe if we all make mood spells at the same time, for one another, we can combine them."

"You think that would give us more reach?"

"I hope so." Iris's hood was slipping off her head, and she pulled it back up. "We need to understand this Harsdown mage better."

Chime remembered his wrongness and her dismay when he had recognized her. "If we look for him, it could alert him to our presence."

"It be a problem," Iris said. "But he has the hole. He canna feel moods."

"He can't use green," Chime said. "But he can sense it. He felt my spell." She had no doubt about that.

Iris twisted the reins she held. "An indigo mage can heal emotional injuries. If he reversed his spell, he could cause such injuries. In that sense, he would reach other minds even if he hadna empathy for them."

"You think he is an indigo?" The idea discouraged Chime, but it didn't surprise her.

"I would like it to be untrue." Iris watched her husband riding ahead. "But if these dreams you and Jarid suffer come from spells, their creator must be powerful indeed, able to draw on high level shapes, even spheres."

Chime shuddered. "A gloomy thought."

“Aye.” Iris’s gaze turned bleak. “That it be.”

The three of them gathered together that evening.

Jarid sat against a tree, one leg stretched in front of him, the other bent so he could rest his elbow on his knee. He held a ball of purple marble, one almost too large to fit into his palm. Iris sat on his right and Chime next to her. Chime had her emerald ball with twenty sides, and Iris held a similar diamond orb that sparkled with rainbows. Guards patrolled the area, warriors armed with sword and bow, far enough away so they didn’t intrude, but close enough to reach the mages immediately if needed.

Iris looked at Chime and Jarid. “Ready?”

Jarid squinted at his wife. “What do we do?”

“Make mood spells,” Iris said.

“I’ve never deliberately made one for more than one person,” Chime said. “Though sometimes I pick up more.”

“It is the same for me,” Iris admitted.

“I may have made such spells,” Jarid said. “I’ve never analyzed it.”

An idea came to Chime. “We could imagine links to one another while we make the spell. Some quality to remind us of the other two people in the link.”

Excitement flushed Iris’s cheeks. “Let’s try.”

Holding her ball in both hands, Chime bent her head and closed her eyes. The orb focused her power well, with the right number of sides for her greatest reach but not too many to cause strain. She thought of the forests, hills, and meadows that had awakened Iris’s latent gifts. So, too, did nature rather than human constructs seem to reach Jarid. Chime imagined the queen and king in a forest lush with foliage, leaves fluttering and grass rustling.

As her spell built, she became aware of Iris, an arch of color over the land. Beyond the queen, Jarid loomed, a force at the edge of Chime’s mind. But when Chime reached for them, her spell faltered. She tried to focus and the spell skittered away.

Dismay touched Chime. She couldn’t do this. She would let them down. Taking a deep breath, she made a simpler spell, one as yellow as the sun, this time soothing herself. As her agitation calmed, her previous spell recovered. Chime became the countryside; the queen became sky and sun. They existed in a charmed landscape.

A magescape.

Her sense of Iris deepened. Chime had never known that before coming to Suncroft, Iris had felt as if she belonged nowhere. Emptiness had frozen her life; no one offered her affection. It saddened Chime, whose childhood had been filled with the love of a close-knit family. Instinctively she offered Iris a spell of warmth.

Power swept the magescape, bracing and wild. Jarid. Chime felt him holding back, for fear his spell would disrupt the tenuous balance Iris and Chime had managed. Even with that caution, he came in like a huge wind, or a flood that filled an ocean, or an uncounted number of stars pouring silver light everywhere.

Hai, Chime thought, impressed.

Aye. Iris's answer was sunlight.

North, Jarid thought.

Chime imagined mountains rising against a blue sky. She had never been north, though, so she had no idea how the range should appear.

Here. Iris sharpened the peaks, making them harsh and magnificent, rearing up into a darker sky. The Tallwalks.

They flew through the peaks, heading for a pass that cut sharp lines in the range.

There. That came from Jarid.

Chime's focus dipped into the pass. Yes! She saw it. Jarid had been right; an army was coming through the pass.

They will soon arrive. Jarid's thought resonated. He went farther north, rising in the mountains. The forests dwindled to nothing, leaving bare peaks streaked with snow. The Boxer-Mages, he thought.

Chime suddenly realized Jarid could only guess at the appearance of the mountains he had called home. Although he had never seen them, he had caught images from Unbent's mind. Incredibly, he longed for that harsh, unrelenting beauty. He missed the simplicity of his life there, so different from the complications he lived now.

Again they rushed toward a pass, but when they plunged into this one, they found nothing but snow and barren rock. Chime had been right; no army was coming through that pass.

Her head began to ache. The magescape wavered, but when she tried to refocus, pain stabbed her temples.

Succor washed out from Iris. Let it go.

With an exhale, Chime released her spell. As it faded, the pain in her head receded. She opened her eyes to see Iris watching her. Jarid still seemed in a trance, his eyelashes dark against his cheeks.

"Are you all right?" Iris asked.

"Yes." Her spirits lifted. "That was incredible."

"Aye." Iris glanced at Jarid, who hadn't stirred.

"Both Jarid and I were right," Chime said. "An army comes through the Tallwalks, but not the

Boxer-Mage Pass.”

Jarid opened his eyes and looked straight at her, his pupils so large, his eyes were black with only a ring of violet. “I saw no second army, either.”

“Perhaps he sent only one,” Iris said.

It was then that comprehension came to Chime, making her feel ill. “Varqelle does have two armies, but only one comes through the mountains. The other goes to Suncroft. That way, no matter what we decide, we will be wrong.”

Jarid swore. “It cannot be.”

“He tricked you!” Chime said. “The Harsdown mage knew he couldn’t hide the armies, so he made you think both were here. What if you had brought your entire army north?” Belatedly, Chime realized she had just insulted the king. Hastily she added, “You are a most potent mage, Your Majesty. Of course the trick didn’t work.”

Jarid spoke wryly. “It worked well enough.” He rubbed his eyes. “I did have a sense, at the edges of our spell, of movement in the Barrens.”

“We could try another spell.” Chime tried to ignore the ache in her temples.

“I don’t think tonight,” Jarid said. “We must rest.”

Chime agreed; they would solve nothing if they injured themselves.

But later, in her tent, she couldn’t sleep. She lay on her back listening to the sentries pace outside, their chain mail clinking. What if Muller and his men met the Harsdown army before they could rendezvous with reinforcements? From what she sensed, the Harsdown forces greatly outnumbered Muller’s Hexagons.

It could be a slaughter—and Muller would die.



### The Covetous Spell

The nightmare never ended.

Muller trudged along a bar of land in the swamp he and his men had reached late this morning. Mist hung above the stagnant water, giving the bog an otherworldly quality. Its stench had worsened as the day



passed. But none of it mattered. Compared to the walking nightmare he had lived these past days, the swamp was nothing. The foreboding that had plagued his dreams never left him now, waking or sleeping. He felt lightheaded, unfocused, nauseous.

Arkandy trudged next to him, stabbing his staff into the ground to make sure they didn't step into mud. "Vile place," he muttered.

"Aye." Muller drew himself up straighter and set his chin. He refused to give in to whom—or to what—plagued him with these waking dark dreams.

Up ahead, a murky figure formed out of the mist. It was Archer, waiting.

"Do you recognize the path?" Muller asked. He had taken the short cut through the swamp only because Archer knew this area, having grown up in a nearby village.

"Aye." Archer indicated a branch of the land-bar they were following. "We go through there. It gets slippery, though. We should pass the word on to the others that they should take extra care."

Muller nodded wearily. He sent Arkandy back to warn the men, then plodded on, following Archer's indistinct form.

Gradually Muller became aware of an oddity. Silence. He had stopped hearing the murmurs, coughs, and squelching tread of his men. Puzzled, he stopped and called out to the figure he was following. "Archer?"

The figure dimmed, vaguer, almost gone.

"Archer, stop!" Muller started after him, but his foot slipped on the wet hexagrass, and he barely stopped himself from falling into the water.

No one was in front of him now.

Muller swung around, his fear surging. "Arkandy!"

No answer.

Saints almighty. How had he lost his men? They had been together. He had followed Archer and the men behind him should have followed him. If he had taken a wrong turn, so would have everyone else.

He headed back, peering at the ground. His footprints showed here and there in the mud, but he couldn't find tracks in the slick hexagrass. As he continued, the tracks faded until they vanished completely.

Muller stopped, his heart beating hard. He was lost. He couldn't see more than a few feet in any direction. The swamp was alive and malignant. Alarmed now, he looked around, searching for broken shapes. The hexagrass might do, with its elongated, six-sided blades, but it provided only small, two-dimensional forms. He had disks on his sword belt, but he had chosen the ornamentation carefully, every form perfect. Nor would the hardened metal be easy to bend.

Then he remembered Drummer's gift. The ring hung on a leather cord around his neck. He pulled it out, closing his hand around the talisman. Forgive me, Drummer, he thought. Then he squeezed the ring,

pushing in on its soft metal until it dented, creating a flaw.

His gift sparked.

Power gathered around Muller. With his eyes closed, he strained, using a green spell to search for his men. He didn't know if their moods would lead him to them, but it was better than nothing.

Reaching.

Contact.

No! Muller recoiled. He had no idea what he had found, but it sure as blazes wasn't his men. His twisted spell had thrown him into a darkness so complete, it remained even when he opened his eyes. Frantic now, blind and lost, he struggled to wrench free of the contact. The link held him like a vise, using his own spell to trap him.

The dark dreams touched him.

They descended like ice, a night without stars, the wings of a giant crow. The ring dropped from his suddenly cold hand. The chill pierced his inner self, the place where he drew on his power. Dimly he heard someone scream.

Himself.

Terrified, he grappled with the dark dreams, straining to free his mind, but he couldn't break the spell, his own spell. It should have dissolved when he lost the ring, but whatever had caught him refused to let go. Another mage was adding fuel to this spell. It came from far away, too far, a spell of emotional soothing, but reversed, turned inside out, corrupted, made hideous. Instead of comfort, waves of revulsion surged over Muller.

"Saints, no." The words tore out of him. He dropped to his knees and groped in the mud, unable to see anything in the crushing darkness.

Then his hand closed around the ring. He clenched it so hard, its edges cut his skin. As pain lanced through his palm, the dark spell weakened. He concentrated, trying to regain control. His mind echoed with pain. But he kept on, his teeth clenched, his jaw aching.

The darkness lightened. But rather than the light of day filtering through mist, an emerald sphere surrounded him, glistening, drawn by his spell, his mind, his dented ring from Drummer. Leaning forward, Muller braced his fists on the ground, his head hanging down, surrounded by the beautiful emerald light. He thought of Chime.

"Commander!" The shout came out of the mist.

Muller gulped in a breath and nearly choked on the foul air. "Here!"

They called back and forth until he heard the tramp of boots. Then, suddenly, Arkandy was there, putting a strong hand under his forearm, helping him to his feet. "Good graces, Mull, you're as pale as the fog."

He took a shaky breath. "Where did you all go?"

“I thought you were ahead of me.” He shook his head. “I could have sworn I never lost sight of you. But it was so foggy. When I tried to catch up to you, the man I was following—” He stopped, his face reddening.

Muller was aware of his men gathering around them in the mist. Quietly he said, “The figure dissipated.”

“Yes.” Arkandy cleared his throat. “I know it sounds strange.”

“It happened to me, also.” Muller pushed at his hair, which hung in lank, wet strands around his face. He couldn’t speak of how the Harsdown mage had used his own spell to strike at him, but he needed to warn his men.

“This dark mage attacks with spells.” He lifted his hand and uncurled his fist. The bent ring lay in his palm, which was bleeding where it had cut him. “Any shape can draw his power, even the thought of one. I lost this and I couldn’t see, but still he attacked.”

Arkandy spoke harshly. “What mage would do such?”

“One with too much strength and too few morals.” Muller clapped him on the shoulder. “But nothing we can’t handle, eh?”

Arkandy didn’t smile. But he did say, “Aye.”

Muller glanced at Archer, who had come up behind Arkandy. “How much farther?”

“Not much, Your Highness.” Archer wiped the back of his hand across his forehead, which was beaded with moisture, either from his exertion or the dank fog. “About another half hour.”

“Well, let’s go, then.”

As they set off, trudging in single file along the bar of land, they passed Muller’s warning back along the line, that they shouldn’t even think of perfect shapes. He listened to their voices, muted in the heavy air, and wondered what was happening to Aronsdale, that even their thoughts were no longer safe.

The overcast sky matched Chime’s mood. They had ridden for hours in a drizzle. She had used oil to waterproof her cloak, but the rain eventually soaked through even the heavy, treated cloth.

She thought of Muller, trapped in darkness, fighting for his life. The image disturbed her. Nowhere felt safe. In the two days since she had blended spells with Iris and Jarid, they had managed it twice more, always searching. They hadn’t located Muller’s unit, the Hexagons, but they had no trouble sensing the Harsdown army in the Tallwalk Mountains. Jarid had also located the second army heading through the Barrens. That both he and Chime had been right gratified neither of them.

Chime also sensed the Pentagon Unit, only days away now. Jarid sent scouts ahead to contact them, while the rest of the Heptagons trudged in the rain. The dread that had pressed Chime since before they left Suncroft never left her now, as if her nightmares invaded her waking hours. She touched the sphere that hung around her neck. In some ways, it worked better than the larger ball of green marble she had packed in her saddlebags. Although this smaller orb couldn’t focus as much of her power, its size helped

her fine-tune the spells.

Chime formed a yellow spell, imagining light to push away her melancholy. An answering spell stirred... outside of her.

The spell swept down like a hawk that had spotted prey and plunged straight for her. Someone settled behind Chime on the horse. Her body suddenly felt leaden. Before she could react, the presence behind her reached around her waist, grasping. She tried to push him away, but her limbs had become too heavy. She couldn't move, couldn't cry out, couldn't even open her eyes. He groped her sides, then moved higher and fondled her breasts. Chime tried to shout, but she could neither speak nor hear.

He moved his hands to her legs and slid them under her thighs. Furious and terrified, Chime strained to break their connection. His spell formed a blanket of power, smothering the light. No, not his spell; he had used her spell, turning around the yellow one meant to soothe her agitation. To escape this nightmare she had to regain control of her spell.

A memory came to her, the incantation she had spoken in her sleep: Allar nellari remalla. Sphere-inside-out. Della claimed it didn't work. Perhaps it only worked for a sphere mage. But it was a reversal. Could it work against a sphere mage?

Allar nellari remalla. Chime thought.

The sensation of hands fondling her faded. Then it came back again, redoubled, accompanied by a surge of anger. In desperation, she bit hard on the inside of her cheek. Pain flared, disrupting her focus, and an echo of pain came from the dark mage who invaded her spell.

Allar nellari remalla. Sphere-inside-out.

Her attacker's fury surged—

And he was gone.

Chime gasped, her sight returning, leaving her in painful brightness. She could see the Heptagons again, hear the clank of mail, the snorts of horses, the rustle of leaves on the trees.

"No!" Chime shook from the aftershocks of the twisted spell.

"What is it?" Iris drew her horse closer.

"Iris—no." Chime felt clammy, cold, icy.

Jarid was making his way back among the warriors, headed straight for Chime. The wind whipped his dark hair around his face, uncovering the scar on his neck. Chime sat up straighter on her horse, trying to regain her composure, but she couldn't stop shaking.

Iris drew Chime's horse to a stop. The queen jumped off her mare and handed the reins to one of the men. After Chime slid down to the ground, Iris led her to a tree at one side of trail. The entire unit was stopping, seven sets of seven men, forty-nine total, and fifty archers, plus Jarid and Cube-General Fieldson. It mortified Chime to think she had caused this disruption.

"What is it?" Iris said to her. "What happened?"

“A spell.” Chime choked on the words. “But reversed. Instead of healing, it injured.”

Concern creased Isis’s face “Are you hurt?”

Her anger sparked. “He touched me. I bit him.” It served him right, but nausea surged within her anyway. She had done harm with her spell. No wonder Jarid loathed the incantation. She felt the cold more than before, inside herself as well as without.

“Who is. ‘him’?” Iris asked.

“The dark mage, I think.” Chime shivered and pulled her cloak tighter. “He touched me places. If I hadn’t broken his spell, I think he could have done whatever he wanted.”

Iris’s forehead furrowed. “But no one was there.”

“He was there.” The rough voice came from behind them.

Chime turned with a start. Jarid stood a few paces away, stiff in his posture. Iris glanced at Chime, a question in her gaze. When Chime nodded, Iris beckoned to her husband. Jarid came forward, walking slowly, as if Chime were a wild doe he feared might bolt.

The army stretched out along the trail, the horses stamping and shifting, the men talking to one another. No one disturbed Chime, Iris, and Jarid, though the men glanced their way every now and then. She wondered if they felt the oppressive aura, or if they just thought her flighty, unable to endure the rigors of the ride.

Jarid spoke to Chime in a low voice. “I saw a darkness descend on you.”

She just shook her head. She wasn’t ready to speak of it yet.

Iris was watching her. “Take your time. It will be all right.”

Chime couldn’t fathom her kindness. “Why don’t you hate me?”

“Hate you?” Iris looked bewildered. “Why?”

“I’ve said such awful things.” Chime wound her fingers in the tassels of her shawl, under her cloak. “When you first came, I was so afraid you would take Muller. I didn’t know how to act...” She trailed off, feeling like an idiot.

It was a moment before Iris answered. “It is past now.” Her face gentled. “You’ve a kind heart, even if you donna see it yourself.”

Jarid snorted at Chime. “Never could fathom what you see in that skinny cousin of mine.”

Chime warmed at the thought of Muller. “He does surely shine like the sun, Your Majesty.”

He made an exasperated noise. “If you don’t stop calling me. ‘Your Majesty,’ I shall banish you to—” He paused. “Well, to someplace.”

Chime managed a smile. "Aye, Jarid."

He paused, then spoke with care. "I would like to ask about the attack."

Chime dreaded speaking of it, but their banter had eased her fear. She no longer felt gripped in ice. And he needed to know what happened, even if she wished to forget.

"It is all right," she said.

"Do you know where it came from?" he asked.

She motioned toward the mountains, looming a few days' ride away, dark in the rain. "North."

"What happened?"

"I made a spell to lighten the heaviness."

"Heaviness?"

"It hangs over us," Chime said. "But the Harsdown mage caught my spell and twisted it around."

Jarid stiffened. "Are you saying that by using our mage abilities, we give him a way to attack us?"

"Yes, I think so."

"We must stop him," Iris said.

"How can he do deliberate harm with his spells?" It shook Chime to remember the incantation she had used against him. "I would die before I turned my gifts against people that way."

Jarid's expression darkened. He abruptly turned on his heel and strode away from them.

Chime stared after him, confused. Then, realizing what she had done, she swore. "I am an idiot!" She might as well have stabbed him over Murk's death.

Iris watched her husband walking among his men. "I think he knows you didn't mean him."

Chime started forward. "I should apologize."

Iris caught her arm. "It is best to let him be."

"I am so sorry."

Iris spoke quietly. "Are you all right?"

"I will be." Chime hoped that was true.

Iris shook her head. "This dark mage is obsessed with you. Can you call for help when he attacks?"

"He made it so I couldn't see, hear, or speak."

“How did you stop his spell?”

“I used that incantation, the one I spoke in my sleep.” She ran her tongue over the inside of her mouth. “And I bit my cheek until it bled. It disrupted the spell. His influence comes from a great distance, so it must strain him to extend it so far.”

“That he does it at all is chilling.” Iris watched the king, who was speaking with Fieldson now. “I fear what it would do to Jarid if this mage stole his senses. He has struggled so to adapt. To lose it all, again, would destroy him.”

Chime lifted her chin. “We won’t let it happen.”

As they headed back to the others, Chime brooded. If the dark mage could turn their own spells against them, she dreaded to think what he might do with Muller’s injured gifts.



32

### Gathering Winds

Anvil rode astride Snowhawk, a white charger that glowed in the misty day. General Stonehammer rode with him, his gaze sharp as he scanned the steep trail their company followed down through the Tallwalks.

“Lot of fog,” Anvil commented.

“It makes good cover.” Stonehammer glanced at him. “Though by now they must know we are coming.”

“They have an idea.” Although Anvil tried to hide his fatigue, he suspected Stonehammer knew how much his mage efforts exhausted him. As they neared the Aronsdale forces, though, he didn’t have to extend himself as far, and the strain eased. “Some of their forces are here. Others are at Suncroft.”

Stonehammer’s eyes glinted like splinters of green glass. “They weren’t supposed to know we divided the army.”

Anvil wanted to say it meant nothing, but downplaying the situation would only hurt their still considerable chances of success. With Varqelle leading the greater part of his army to Suncroft, he could take the castle even with a substantial portion of the Aronsdale army there. Anvil could aid this smaller force with his magecraft. They would face a contingent of archers and two Aronsdale units, perhaps three if Muller Dawnfield showed up with the Hexagons. Anvil had misled them, pushing their party too far north. It troubled him that they had ridden north at all, though. Muller shouldn’t have known to come. But come he had.

“They have more mage power than I expected,” Anvil said. He recalled his interaction with Muller in the swamp, when he had spelled the princeling into losing his way. If Dawnfield’s men hadn’t found him, Muller could have died in that bog, ridding Anvil of an irritant that interfered in his intentions toward Lady Chime. Muller had caught him by surprise by fighting back with that bizarre spell of his. Even stranger, a green spell had also protected him. Anvil didn’t understand how a spell of compassion and empathy could be strong. In his experience, empathy weakened a person, leaving him open to attack.

“It isn’t only the king,” he added. “His cousin, it seems, is also a mage.”

Stonehammer cocked an eyebrow at him. “Surely you do not mean Muller Dawnfield.”

“It would seem so.”

The general laughed. “Impossible.”

“Apparently not.”

Stonehammer’s smile faded. “Then unacceptable.”

“Well, yes. But unfortunately true.”

“That gives them advantage.”

“I think not.” Anvil recalled how easily he had turned Muller’s faltering gift against the prince. “He uses shape-magic the way a child with crippled legs moves. He will never run, never walk, only crawl.”

“You make odd predictions.” Stonehammer guided his horse around a hillock covered with hardy stone-hedge, its small blossoms wet in the fog, their violet color so vivid they seemed to glow.

Malice stirred in Anvil for this prince who blocked his approach to Lady Chime. Anvil had earned his high status among the elite of Harsdown; no one had given him any title or advantages due to his heredity. Muller Dawnfield deserved his failings. “He must have an unpleasant life, always fighting his own spells.”

“Hard to believe men would follow such a commander.”

It surprised Anvil, too, especially after the past few days. He had developed respect for Stonehammer during this ride. The general could be hard, yes, demanding, never relenting, but he was also fair. He had none of the weaknesses Anvil had seen in Suncroft, where officers listened too much to their men, undermining their own commands. He had even heard that Cube-General Fieldson had once granted a soldier leave to be with his wife the day she gave birth. Appalling. Stonehammer would never have tolerated such a dereliction of duty.

“I don’t think Dawnfield’s men know he is a mage,” Anvil said.

The general slanted him a glance. “How would you know?”

Anvil shrugged. “People in Croft’s Vale love to gossip about the Suncroft mages. It’s one of their favorite pastimes. I never heard a word about Muller.”

“So.” Stonehammer thought for a while, the planes of his face thrown into a contrast of shadows and light by the slanting rays of the sun. “If he is a faulty mage, perhaps his spells could be manipulated.”



Anvil nodded his agreement. His thoughts precisely.

The line of riders coiled down the trail like a dragon shrouded in fog. They had seven units of forty men each, a total of two hundred and eighty, plus Stonehammer and a mage. Anvil had touched many minds as he haunted the Aronsdale warriors, spreading unrest and sadness. He predicted Harsdown would face the Pentagons, with twenty-five men and a commander; the Heptagons, with forty-nine, their commander, and Chime; about fifty archers; and maybe the Hexagons, with thirty-six and Prince Muller. That made about one hundred and sixty men plus a mage. Although the numbers favored Harsdown, Anvil didn't fool himself that they offered an easy win. Aronsdale had claimed a good army even before Muller stepped up their training. They lacked experience, but so did Harsdown.

That he detected only Chime as a mage suggested Jarid had stayed at Suncroft with his queen. Anvil couldn't be sure, though; he had trouble sensing Iris, who for some reason had no signature color. Even if she was green, like Chime, he would know; although he couldn't create such spells, he could sense when others used them. Jarid remained an enigma. Anvil had believed no mage wielded a power greater than his own, but now he wondered. If the king surpassed him, Jarid might hide within a shield of his greater strength.

Anvil gritted his teeth. He could never tolerate such a mage. If the king and queen had ridden north, he would kill Jarid and capture Iris. If Jarid had left his lovely bride at Suncroft, she would be a fitting prize for Varqelle. Either way, Chime Headwind was here.

It gratified him to know he would be the one to take her.

Muller sat by the campfire on a log, his elbows on his knees, holding his head in his hands. He was aware of his men making camp, fixing dinner and tending horses, but he couldn't move. His headache pounded. Lifting his head, he looked at the twilight sky. Silhouetted against it, towering over the camp, the Tallwalk Mountains raised their harsh peaks to the heavens. I won't let you defeat me, he thought.

"Commander?" Arkandy approached, holding two metal pans.

The aroma of stew wafted over Muller, making his mouth water. He made himself straighten up. "Have a seat."

Arkandy settled down and handed him a plate. "Head still hurt?"

"A bit."

Arkandy stabbed a chunk of meat with his knife. "Blasted spells." He stuck the meat in his mouth and chewed with gusto.

"An understatement," Muller muttered.

"It gets worse, eh?"

Muller poked at his dinner. "Yes."

"I've felt pressure now and then. Like a ghost."

“You have?” Muller had hoped his men wouldn’t be affected. “How bad is it?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.” Arkandy took another bite of stew. “How does he know to target you? What tells him that he has the commander?”

His phrasing relieved Muller. Arkandy could have asked why the mage targeted him, but apparently he assumed it was because Muller led the unit. “Probably he recognizes my mind. If this mage is Wareman, he knew me at Suncroft.”

Archer came over to them, a skein of wine in his hand. “We’ve secured the camp, Commander.”

“Good work.” Muller motioned at the log. “Rest awhile.”

Archer sat on his other side and offered him the wine. “This might help your head.”

“My thanks.” Muller took a long drought. It had helped last night and perhaps it would tonight. Tomorrow they would reach the foothills of the Tallwalk Mountains. Then, saints willing, he would engage the reprobate who was making his life hell.

The Heptagons and the King’s Archers poured down the slope into the camp of the Pentagons. Chime rode in the middle of the unit, accompanied only by two sphere-lieutenants, since Iris had gone up ahead. Mist drifted around the warriors of both units as they mingled and prepared to ride out together.

By the time Chime reached the camp, Jarid and Iris were conferring with Penta-Colonel Burg, commander of the Pentagons. He stood almost as tall as Jarid, a burly man with a blocky face and sandy hair in a thick braid with an iron clasp at his neck. He carried a great deal more weight than most men, all of it muscle.

Restless and unsettled, Chime rode slowly around the edges of the camp. She had only gone a short distance when an odd sensation came over her, as if the mist were burning her skin. She brushed her face and the feeling vanished.

She glanced at the lieutenant closest to her, a gangly fellow a year or two older than herself, riding to her left. “Did you feel anything hot?”

He tilted his head, curiosity in his blue eyes. “Nay, Lady. It be beastly wet and cold this morning.”

“That it is.” The prickle of heat disquieted her. These past two days, since the Harsdown mage had attacked, Chime had taken care to hide her gifts, making no spells. Iris and Jarid had done the same. She felt the dark mage searching, but as long as she suppressed her gifts, his spells slid over her like hot oil. But she couldn’t hide forever. It did the army no good to bring mages who couldn’t make spells.

Chime rode up a ridge shaded with straggling trees. Here in the foothills of the northwest mountains, the soil was rocky and the plants hardier than the lush foliage of southeast Aronsdale. She guided Silvermist to the top of the ridge and pulled the mare to a stop. Then she sat on her horse, looking over the controlled tumult below as the two army contingents combined.

She touched the gold chain around her neck, then slid her hand down to the emerald ball at the end. She

held it in her palm, turning her hand up to the sky. Silvermist stepped restlessly beneath her and she murmured to the horse until it calmed.

Focusing through her sphere, Chime slowly built a mood spell. Emotions washed over her from the soldiers below: tension, conviction, relief at seeing one another, and determination. At the edges of her spell, darkness hovered. She immediately let the spell fade, before the dark mage became aware of her. He already knew she rode through these lands, but she had no intention of giving him any handle to grasp.

The combined forces soon moved out together. Their superb organization and ability to cooperate with such ease spoke well of Fieldson, who had commanded this army for over two decades. It gave Chime new insights into the general. He could have balked when Jarid put Muller in charge, but instead Fieldson had worked tirelessly to prepare the new commander. Remorse tugged at Chime; she had been so busy resenting Fieldson, she had glossed over the many fine qualities that made him a strong leader and inspired such loyalty in his men.

They rode steadily, though their progress was slowed as the land became steeper and uneven. As the sun rose, the fog thinned, until by the late morning she could see the Tallwalks through a haze. Foreboding continued to plague her thoughts.

Scouts ranged ahead, searching for signs of Harsdown. Iris came back to ride with Chime, and Jarid increased their guard from four sphere-lieutenants in the traditional quadrilateral formation to six in a hexagonal formation. The trees thinned out and had a stunted look now. They had left the meadows far behind; only bristly patches of grass grew in cracks in the stone. The horses picked their way with care.

Riding with Iris, Chime spoke in a subdued voice. "We must use our spells to search for Harsdown."

"Aye." The shadows under Iris's eyes were darker today and lines of strain creased her face.

Chime hesitated, leery of appearing a coward. "I fear if I make a spell, the Harsdown mage will find me."

Mercifully Iris didn't disparage her statement. She said only, "I may be able to help. Mood spells are your forte more than mine, so you should search. But I can offer a shield as you work."

That gave Chime hope. A year ago, she probably would have made some foolish comment trying to cover her insecurity, but that no longer seemed important. She said only, "Yes, let's try."

With a deep breath, Chime closed her eyes. It made her more aware of her exhaustion; right now she thought she could fall asleep while sitting in the saddle. But she couldn't let her focus weaken. Grasping the orb on the chain around her neck, she did her best to concentrate. Instead of seeking one person, she imagined her spell as a twenty-sided sphere, emerald. Then she let it grow. Iris shielded it with a rainbow sheen that expanded in a layer of protection, gossamer in appearance yet stronger than any spell Chime could have summoned.

A blurred sense of the warriors came to Chime, their moods blended together. Although they felt far less of the oppressive foreboding that bothered her, many were discouraged, their morale low. She formed a yellow spell of soothing and released it to flow across them. Although no one consciously seemed to realize what happened, their moods lifted.

Meanwhile, her green spell continued to grow. Less than two years ago, she hadn't believed she could

make even one spell properly; now she juggled two of them, green and yellow, shaping and building both. The rainbow film stayed with her, its colors swirling. Not only did Iris protect her spells, she also added support, helping Chime cover more distance. Yet for all that Chime reached across the land, she touched no more minds. Few people lived in these unfertile lands.

Chime's head began to throb. She was overextending herself. She started to release the spell—but then she sensed a distant cluster of minds. A cold determination came from them, like iron manacles. She eased under their notice—and found a mage.

Wareman.

Her heart beating hard, Chime withdrew, hidden by Iris. As her spell dissolved, she became aware of soldiers on horses around her, and the fog that hung about the stunted vegetation in the still air.

She spoke to Iris in a low voice. "Varqelle's forces have passed through the Tallwalk Pass and are descending the mountains. If we keep this pace, we should meet up with them tomorrow afternoon."

Iris tensed. "We must tell Jarid."

"Yes. Immediately. They have many men, a much larger force than ours." Chime looked toward the spare, majestic peaks of the Tallwalk Mountains. "So it comes."

That evening, Jarid doubled the sentries on guard. Chime couldn't sleep. She turned over and over, futilely seeking a comfortable position. Finally she gave up and lay on her back staring at the tent overhead.

A tap came at her tent. "Lady Chime?" Jarid's voice rumbled.

She sat up, startled. A man shouldn't visit her tent at night, but she couldn't forbid the king, particularly not after the way she had insulted him a few days ago. Their interactions had been strained since then.

Chime yanked on her robe, clutching the collar around her neck. Then she raised her voice. "Come in, Your Majesty."

Jarid pushed aside the entrance flap. "I'm sorry to disturb you." Ducking his head, he came inside and fastened up the flap so he and Chime were in view of the sentry on patrol outside. He sat by the opening, giving her plenty of space. He gave her a look of apology. "I would have brought Iris, but she finally fell asleep. And she hasn't slept in so long."

"I understand," Chime said. As mages, they had to rest. They could do little for the army if they were too exhausted to perform their craft.

"I would ask your help," Jarid began.

"Anything I can do?"

He rubbed his eyes, his motions slowed with fatigue. "Are you certain you cannot estimate the size of the Harsdown force? Anything you can tell us might help."

“My spell was stretched too thin to distinguish individual minds.” Chime thought back to this afternoon.  
“Would a comparison to help?”

He smiled dryly. “At this point, any mote of information would be more than we have.”

“You have about eighty men here now, yes?”

He nodded. “Seventy-six, plus you and Iris.”

Chime considered for a moment. “I think Varqelle’s force has more than twice our numbers.”

He tensed. “That many?”

She spoke with reluctance. “Yes, I think at least.”

“Can we take them?”

“Your Majesty, I couldn’t say. I’m no strategist.”

“I would just like your opinion.”

Chime forced out her answer. “No. I don’t think so.”

His gaze darkened. “What about our spells?”

“Iris and I discussed an idea.” She suspected Iris had already told Jarid, but he would want to hear it from Chime, to verify she consented. “We can probably affect Varqelle’s men in a manner similar to how the dark mage discourages us.”

“Hurt their morale.”

“Yes. Or make them feel sick.”

“Won’t these spells hurt you?”

Her hands felt clammy. “Yes, I think so.”

“Chime, you don’t have to do this.”

“Yes. I do.”

His face contorted. “I hate this.”

Softly she said, “I also.”

“I will help you and Iris in your spells.”

“You are king. You must lead the army.”

He snorted. “Fieldson is better fit for that job.”

“Your Majesty, you are a great—”

“No, I’m not.” He spoke tiredly. “I’m a good fighter with my fists and a fast learner with a sword, but I can’t spend most of my life with no experience and expect to command after a few months. Fieldson trained this army. Muller has spent the past fourteen years learning to take command. I hid in the mountains.”

“You mustn’t condemn yourself.”

He shook his head as if banishing the subject. “Were you able to contact Muller at all?”

Chime let it go. “Not yet. I should have sensed him by now.” It had troubled her all day. His moods always came to her with buttery warmth, even when he was grumpy or upset. “I would know if he was near.”

Jarid rubbed the back of his neck, massaging the muscles. “We need the Hexagons.”

“Yes.” Chime didn’t know what else to say.

“I cannot ask this of you or Iris.”

Chime understood what he meant; without the Hexagons, they would need other methods to prevail over Harsdown. Spells. She dreaded using her gifts that way, but if Aronsdale needed it to survive, she would do what she could to help.

“I pray it doesn’t come to that,” she said. “We need to defeat this dark mage. If he falls, his warriors will lose heart.”

“We can hope.” Jarid stood slowly, bending so his head didn’t push the top of the tent. “I will see you in the morning. Sleep well.”

“And you, Your Majesty.”

He departed them, leaving the flap swinging behind him. Chime lay back down and closed her eyes, knowing that somehow, someday, she had to sleep, to build her strength.

Tomorrow they would engage their enemy.

The Tallwalk Cliffs sheered into the sky. A trail switch-backed up them, narrow enough to make the Hexagon Unit ride single file. Muller sat on Windstrider, the reins limp in his hands, his head falling forward, his back bent. He kept going by sheer force of will, drained by lack of sleep and his headaches.

Muller avoided looking down. He didn’t want to know how high they had climbed. Thoughts of Chime supported him; she was sunlight and warmth, safe at Suncroft. He had known he loved her, but he hadn’t realized how much until he became mired in this gruesome trek and feared he would never see her again.

He straightened his back, battling the fatigue that dragged at him. His unit finally reached the top of the cliffs, coming out onto a level area. Gigantic crystal formations jutted up, towering over them—and offering many places for enemies to hide. The crystals drew Muller, all those imperfect six-sided spears.

He spontaneously created a spell, frayed and unsteady. The moods of his men came to him in jagged spikes, nothing clear except their tension, which was obvious anyway. But he sensed only his men; the outcroppings hid no other warriors.

So they crossed the plain, making their way among the eerie formations under an overcast sky. Muller focused his spell forward, toward the Boxer-Mage Mountains. He should stop using his gifts, lest the dark mage find him, but he feared walking into peril even more.

Muller knew when he touched Wareman. The dark mage tried to warp Muller's spell, but it had started out twisted. So when Wareman reversed it, he fixed the twist and the spell worked as it should have in the first place, revealing Wareman's mood to Muller. So it was that Muller learned a hard truth: Wareman had tricked him. The Harsdown army had gone through the Tallwalk Pass, not the Boxer-Mage Mountains. They were halfway down the mountains now, into Aronsdale, well to the east.

Muller swore at this new knowledge. But it didn't end there. Slowly, inexorably, the dark mage focused on him. Sweat ran down Muller's neck and he wanted to rub his palms on the leather that protected his legs. He kept his focus on his nemesis. Pain stabbed his temples, but he held his mental ground, gritting his teeth. He had spent a lifetime learning to subdue his warped spells. Now he turned that knowledge outward to the mage attacking him.

Wareman's rage flared, blazing, firing Muller's head with pain. Muller responded as he did when his spells of warmth backfired; he imagined water cascading over the blaze. It receded, then leapt again, fighting him. Muller envisioned an indigo sphere enclosing the fire, smothering it the way a bell smothered a candle flame. The fury dimmed, faltered—and withdrew.

Muller gulped in a breath, opening his eyes. Saints almighty. He had to go east and find the Pentagons fast.

He just hoped they weren't too late.

"The Harsdown forces are north of us," Chime said. She rode with Fieldson through the foothills of the Tallwalks. "Our scouts should sight them soon."

"And their numbers?" Fieldson asked.

"Almost three hundred, I would guess."

He nodded, rubbing his chin. "Now that we have a better idea of their route, we must think on where we will engage them. Do you detect anything about the territory around their company?"

She thought back to her last mage search. "A little. I can develop a sense of the surrounding land based on how they feel about their travels. It's difficult now from this far away, but I can do more as we get closer."

"Excellent." He looked up the mountains rearing before them, no longer distant. "They're already through the pass, so they will be descending toward us."

"Does that make a difference?"

He turned to her with a grimace. "If we fight them on an ascending slope, they have advantage. Our best scenario would be to split up, sneak around from either side, and ambush them from above."

Chime had her doubts. "I don't think their path takes them through land where that would work. Travelers in valleys or sheltered areas have different moods than those who ride exposed. They are on cliffs or open slopes, I think. We might have no place to hide."

His expression darkened. "If they went east after coming through the pass, instead of straight down the Tallwalks, it would put them in that kind of terrain. It's all cliffs and wide, rocky slopes, no low or protected areas. An ambush wouldn't work there."

"We could wait for them down here." Chime indicated the foothills. "An ambush might work better."

"People live here." Fieldson motioned to the west. A cottage showed in the distance, smoke curling out of its chimney, with a barn and stables beyond it. "If we let Harsdown down this far, they could easily sack the farms and kill the families that tend them."

Chime hated the thought. A chill went through her; if the invaders made it as far as southern Aronsdale, her family could lose their orchards, home, and lives.

"If we can't get around them in the mountains," she said, "what else would work up there?"

"Engage them in a flat region." He pulled his hair back from his widow's peak. "Can you affect their decisions about their route? Nudge them a bit more eastward? We could aim for the Tallwalk Plateau."

Chime held back her shudder. "If I try to influence them, their mage might take notice of me."

He motioned to where Iris rode with Jarid up ahead. "Can they shield your efforts?"

Although normally Chime would never speak in less than positive terms of the king, she had to give Fieldson the truth if they were to survive. "His Majesty doesn't have the training or subtlety to do it. But Queen Iris might."

"Very well. If they agree, let us try that plan."

"General Fieldson—?"

"Yes?"

"The men are tired. I feel their moods. We've come so fast and pushed so hard."

"Yes. I know. It isn't the way to approach battle." He lifted his hand, then let it drop onto his saddle. "But we have no choice."

Fatigue weighed on her as well. "If it makes any difference to know, the Harsdown warriors are also tired. They have come fast, too, I think hoping for the advantage of surprise."

His face gentled. "Aye, Lady, it makes a difference."

As the general went on ahead to speak with Jarid and Iris Chime continued on with the company, the Pentagons, Heptagons, and archers riding onward, lines of horses wreathed in fog.



Iris soon came back to join her. With the queen shielding her mage work, Chime sent bad-mood spells to the Harsdown army. If she thought they were veering eastward, she eased up her spells; if they veered west, she redoubled her efforts. Being an irritant to them made her head hurt, but she kept at it, refusing to quit even as it drained her resources.

Suddenly energy flooded her, light, support. Jarid.

Thank you, she thought.

A sense of welcome came from him.

Chime detected three groups: the Aronsdale company; the Harsdown army descending from the pass; and a group in the west. The third company felt like Aronsdale warriors, possibly the Hexagons, but even now she caught no trace of Muller. Surely if he rode with them, she would know.

A band seemed to constrict her chest, making it hard to breathe. She picked up nothing of Muller. Distance would make it difficult, true, but she touched other minds. Surely she should be even better able to sense her husband, a mage.

Unless someone had injured him. Or worse.

“The groups come from different directions.” Crouched next to Anvil, Stonehammer drew a map in the pebbly dirt. He tapped the arcs he had made for the mountains. “The Hexagons are here.” Then he set several rocks to the east. “Two units here, possibly Pentagon and Heptagon, plus the archers.”

Anvil studied the diagram. “I have felt no mages for the past two days. It makes me suspicious.”

Stonehammer glanced at him. “Perhaps they disguise themselves.”

“Neither Muller nor Chime has the experience to do such. I studied Chime while I was in Croft’s Vale.”

“And Muller Dawnfield?”

Anvil thought of the prince. “No one knew he was a mage. I didn’t until these last few days. I doubt he has tutoring in the use of his gifts.”

Stonehammer rose to his feet, lifting his head, his hard face thoughtful. He and Anvil had paused in an open area while the army rode on down a wide, rocky trail, led by officers under Stonehammer’s command. “Why else wouldn’t you feel the Aronsdale mages?”

Anvil stood up next to him. “Fieldson may have left Lady Chime in a village. With Muller, I’m less certain. He is unlike any other mage I’ve encountered.”

Stonehammer smiled slightly. “It is hard to take the idea seriously, given his reputation.”

“Ah, well.” Anvil spoke with reluctance. “He may have more to him than we realized.”

The general walked with him to their horses. “Could he be hiding Lady Chime somehow?”

“I doubt it.”

They mounted their horses and set off, soon catching up with the army. In this rocky territory, they had to go slow, enough to let the mounted warriors talk among themselves. Arguments sparked and sputtered.

Stonehammer’s gaze darkened. “This irritability seems unnatural.”

“It may be.” Anvil knew all too well how spells could be turned to such purposes, given the way he had haunted the Aronsdale army. He found it hard to imagine their mages would try a similar ploy, though; they were adamant about never using spells for harm, crippled by their ingrained tendency to remorse. Only he had the superiority to rise above such weakness.

They might try, though, if Aronsdale became desperate. It made him suspect Chime; the dim-witted beauty liked mood spells. But that would mean she still rode with Aronsdale and had somehow hidden from him. His anger sparked; she would pay for trying to evade him.

He should have felt it, though, if the pall hanging over the men came from mage-meddling. Although he couldn’t make such spells, he could sense their presence. The puzzle intrigued as much as annoyed him. He had spent his life using his spells for his own survival. Anvil liked having a bigger purpose. He was part of a great undertaking, the making of an empire. This year Varqelle would take Aronsdale; in the future, who knew. Shazire, Jazid, Taka Mal, maybe someday the land of his wife, the Misted Peaks.

Anvil closed his hand around his mage ball, a heavy metal sphere with an indigo sheen that hung by a chain from his leather belt. He sent out a spell, seeking the Aronsdale forces. It didn’t tax him at all now, with the groups so close. He searched for Chime, but again he found no trace of her. When he turned his attention to the Aronsdale warriors, he easily distinguished individual minds. It gratified him to verify they had less than half the number of men that rode with Stonehammer.

Gradually Anvil became aware of another spell. It covered the land like the iridescent sheen of a bubble. He had trouble gaining purchase on it and couldn’t associate it with a color. Odd.

Tiring, he let his spell fade. Although he had continued to ride, he hadn’t been aware of the countryside. Now he saw they had descended below the tree line, into hills with stunted woods and stubby grasses. Stonehammer had drawn ahead and was speaking with a major as their horses picked their way across the uneven terrain, which had many shelves of rock and loose stones.

Anvil nudged the general with a spell, and Stonehammer glanced back. He beckoned to Anvil, then returned to his conference, probably thinking it had been his idea to summon his mage. Hiding his smile, Anvil rode closer until he could overhear the general and major. He already knew the plans they were discussing. However, the major had an alarming suggestion; he wanted to offer the outnumbered Aronsdale forces a chance to surrender in return for their lives.

Anvil gritted his teeth. He loathed the idea. No one in Aronsdale had ever shown him mercy. Why should he do so for them?

Eventually the discussion finished. After the major rode on ahead, Anvil spurred his horse forward and caught up with Stonehammer. When the general glanced at him, Anvil frowned.

“You disapprove of something?” Stonehammer asked.

“Yes. Negotiation.”

“If we can avoid bloodshed, we should.” Stonehammer seemed more at ease now that they knew how much they outnumbered their opponents. “War is a last resort, Anvil. It destroys the lands we seek to annex and builds resentment in the population. We must consider every alternative.”

It was all Anvil could do to keep his voice calm. “As the people of Stonce gave alternatives to my family?”

The general scrutinized him. “I doubt these people were involved in those deaths.”

. “These people’ rule the country.” It didn’t matter that they weren’t the ones who had tortured or murdered his family. They were all part of the same breed.

“Perhaps,” Stonehammer said. “But nevertheless, we will offer them the chance to surrender.”

Anvil knew the general well enough to recognize the finality of his decision. He schooled himself to calm until he had control of his rage. “Very well.” If they didn’t engage the Aronsdale army here, he would find other ways to destroy the figures of power in that country. For now, perhaps it was time to broach a related concern. “The Aronsdale mages may be playing with unusual spells.”

Stonehammer cocked his head. “You have detected this?”

“I detect alack. A sphere of blankness. I suspect one mage shields the other.”

“Muller and his wife?”

“I don’t think it is Dawnfield.”

“Then who?”

“I can’t say.”

“They know about you, then.”

“I suspect so.” As much as Anvil disliked making that admission, it served no useful purpose to deny the possibility when it could affect the outcome of their engagement. “It fits their style. A shielding spell would protect them from my powers without causing me injury.” He flexed his hand as if preparing for work. “But I may be able to mimic the effect. Use it to my own advantage.”

“Good.” Stonehammer spoke thoughtfully. “These mages intrigue me. I hope we take them alive.”

Anvil thought of Chime, gold and green. “I, too.”

“My eldest son has always wished to meet a mage. Perhaps you will bring Lady Chime to visit.”

That startled Anvil; it was the first time the general had indicated any interest in him outside of the military. It suggested Stonehammer had begun to see him as someone worth cultivating, a positive sign.

“It would be my honor,” Anvil said.

The general inclined his head.

A call came back from the front. Stonehammer urged his mount to a faster pace, and Anvil accompanied him up a long ridge that crossed their path. They reined in their horses at the top, looking out. On the other side, the ridge fell steeply away to a plateau; beyond the plateau, the mountains resumed their downward march. Far in the distance, well below the mountains, the gentler hills of Aronsdale hid in fog, visible only in glimpses of green and the fiery colors of autumn in the trees.

On the plateau, the Aronsdale army waited.



33

#### The Tallwalk Plateau

Bile rose in Chime's throat as she stared up at the ridge where the Harsdown army appeared. Wave after wave of mounted warriors crested the long roll of land until they made a jagged line against the cold blue sky. Tendrils of fog curled around the legs of their mounts.

Chime and Iris sat stride their horses, surrounded by a traditional formation that protected mages during battle, seven mounted warriors in a heptagon. Both mages wore leather armor, with long daggers sheathed on their belts. They waited in the southwest corner of the plateau, across from the northern ridge where the Harsdown army loomed. To their left, rocks jutted out of a sheer cliff face, forming a partial, jagged cover. The plateau stretched for as long as a horse could run for several minutes, until it reached its eastern edge, which dropped down into the mountains. A shelf jutted up behind the mages, and beyond it the plateau also plunged down in a cliff.

Even half-hidden over the overhang of rocks, Chime felt exposed. Ideally mages stayed off the battlefield; however, they also had to be close enough for their spells to work. Up here, this was the best they could do.

All across the plateau, Aronsdale warriors had taken polygon formations, the Pentagons in five-sided figures and the Heptagons in seven-sided, according to how they had trained to fight. Archers waited behind them, quivers on their backs, bows ready. The Aronsdale men stood firm, staring at the Harsdown army on the ridge.

Chime shivered despite her heavy cloak and armor. She couldn't sense Wareman, but she had no doubt he waited above. Did he know about Jarid? Although some histories described kings who were mages, little record existed of how they drew on their power during battle, or even if they did at all. Given the way Jarid condemned himself for his act of self-defense against Murk, she feared that if he used his gifts in combat, it would destroy him.

For interminable moments, the two armies considered each other. Just when Chime thought she would snap with tension, a rider separated from the Harsdown forces and came down the rugged slope, his mount stepping across the shelves of rock and through the tough grasses.

Jarid and Fieldson rode out to meet the envoy where the plateau met the slope. Iris watched her husband with a bleak gaze. The queen clenched the diamond orb she wore on a chain around her neck and a spell rose about her, one Chime saw as a translucent shimmer of rainbows. Chime focused through the emerald sphere she wore, extending a mood spell toward the Harsdown envoy. She couldn't tell much, but she sensed no intent to deceive on his part.

After conferring with Jarid and Fieldson, the envoy wheeled his mount around and rode back up to his army. His horse climbed the stony ridge with an assurance that spoke bluntly of its superior training. Harsdown was known for rugged country; Aronsdale had only gentle hills, except here on its border. Fighting in this region gave Harsdown an advantage, but Aronsdale had to stop the invaders before they reached populated areas, which meant confronting them here.

Chime spoke to Iris. "That messenger was nervous."

The queen answered in a leaden voice. "They offer us our lives in return for our surrender."

"Surrender?" Chime wanted to say No! But she knew how few options they had. "Would Jarid consider such?"

Iris watched her husband return with Fieldson to the Aronsdale army. "He refused."

Although Chime was glad, she didn't fool herself that it changed the desperation of their situation. "Harsdown fears a long battle."

"With good reason." Iris turned to Chime, her gaze stark. "We must help."

Chime's pulse surged. They had made their plans; the time had come to put them into action. As the stronger mage, Iris could better endure spells of harm, whereas Chime's talent lay in strengthening moods. So Iris would fight Harsdown while Chime helped Aronsdale.

Holding her faceted sphere, Chime focused, striving to submerge into her concentration until she lost awareness of the soldiers above them. Power rose within her, funneled through the emerald in her hand.

Then the Harsdown army charged.

With many shouts, they thundered down the ridge on horses that seemed to fly across the rocky ground. The Aronsdale cavalry surged forward, maintaining their polygon shapes, their war cries echoing in the mountains. Chime's spell rolled out to the closest polygon formation, a heptagon, filling it like a cup. She poured confidence into the spell, encouraging the fighters, helping to firm their wills, sharpening their sight and hearing. As a green mage, she could neither heal injuries nor improve a person's physical condition, but she could make them feel stronger, and for many, that made all the difference.

When the first Harsdown warriors reached the plateau, their lines met the Aronsdale polygon formations like waves smashing against rocks. Swords clanged, vibrating in Chime's ears as she deepened her magecraft. One by one, she filled the polygons of warriors with her spell. Harsdown made every effort to scatter the polygons, but each time they disrupted one, another formed, the new shapes holding together with uncanny accuracy as Chime strengthened them.

The Aronsdale archers strode past the polygons and fired a volley of arrows, their shots whirring through the air. They stepped back, drawing new arrows from quivers on their backs while the swordsmen in the polygons engaged the Harsdown warriors. Only Aronsdale fought in geometric patterns; the Harsdown men came on in wave after furious wave of humanity and horses.

Every time an Aronsdale warrior affected by her spells took an injury, Chime gasped, feeling a phantom sword slash her side, a blow strike to her leg, a ghost arrow bite into her arm. Each time, she sent a spell to ease the pain. She was dimly aware of Iris bedeviling Harsdown, disrupting their morale even as the queen shielded the Aronsdale combatants from similar spells sent by the dark mage.

To Chime, the battle was a chaos of fighters and horses surging across the plateau, many of the men silent with grim determination, others shouting with fury, some grunting with exertion, a few cries of pain. Men behind the Aronsdale polygons used catapults to rain rocks and small boulders over the advancing Harsdown forces while other Aronsdale soldiers engaged the Harsdown infantry.

A horse reared and threw its rider as an arrow stabbed its flank. The men protecting Iris and Chime moved closer, swords and shields ready. Chime could see Jarid nowhere. If Iris knew how her husband fared, she gave no sign. The queen's gaze had become distant, as if she fought in a place even darker than the bedlam around them.

Gradually Chime made sense out of the battle. She could distinguish the Suncroft insignia burned into the leather armor of Jarid's men. The Harsdown warriors had the cliffs of Escar emblazoned in white and black on their shields and they dyed their armor blue. Slowly but inexorably, Aronsdale was losing both ground and numbers to the blue. She clamped her hand tighter around her sphere and continued her spells.

Pain suddenly erupted in her side, not her own, but from an injury to someone else. She groaned as a pentagon-lieutenant went down, toppling off his horse, a youth who had brought her meals during the ride here and helped set up her tent. She flooded him with a spell of succor—and felt his life seeping away.

"Iris!" Chime's cry rang out.

"Aye." The queen sent a spell to the youth, helping clot the blood that pumped from his wounds, healing torn organs, easing shock. The boy dragged himself off the field and collapsed behind a boulder. His wound incapacitated him, but his life force strengthened. He would live.

In that instant, when Iris dropped her guard, the dark mage attacked. His power hit Chime like ice and she reeled under the blow. Her spells wavered, losing focus.

I protect! Chime called on her power, raising a spell into a blaze around her. She threw heat at the dark mage and his attack faltered. She reeled with the backlash of her own heat spell, a fever burning her cheeks, but she never retreated.

Then she saw him. Protected by warriors, Wareman sat astride a white charger on the ridge. His power slid over her, oily and possessive. Hardening her resolve, she hurled a spell of loathing at him. His power receded—and came back with more force, angry. With deliberate intent, he let her feel him attack Aronsdale. She clenched her teeth as the suffering of the warriors hit her like a blow. She flooded them with spells of support, struggling to maintain her strength in the face of so much violence. Bone-tired but resolute, she continued, wrestling down her dismay. She refused to let the dark mage cow her.

Then she saw Jarid.

Tall on his horse, surrounded on all sides, he fought like a man possessed. For all that he had less ability with a sword than many other warriors, they fell on every side beneath his blade. He fought with spells, yes, not to harm but to know. With split-second speed, he gauged the moves of his opponents, responding to their intent almost before they knew what they planned themselves. Light blazed around him, terrifying, as if he were a celestial avenger descended to earth.

But even the king's incredible power couldn't turn the battle. Relentless and implacable, Harsdown eroded their forces.

Then the dark mage rode down the ridge.

Fear slammed through Chime. She picked up nothing from him, no response to her spells. He plunged deep into the fighting on the plateau, yet no one touched him. A sphere of protection surrounded him, as if he had mimicked Iris's shield, but twisting the spell to his own purposes, causing pain to anyone who penetrated its borders.

Then Chime realized where he was headed. She drew her dagger from her belt and spoke in a low, hard voice. "Keep away from me."

One of her guards turned. "Lady, what is it?"

She jerked her hand at Wareman. "He comes here."

Iris paled. "Then we will stop him."

Chime wasn't so certain. The battle was taking a toll greater than she could have imagined, draining her until she could barely summon her gifts. Iris had more strength, but she was flagging now as well. All the time, Wareman forged toward them. Their guards readied their swords and shields, forming a bulwark, while Chime and Iris backed up their horses. They could only go toward the open plateau on their right; behind them, the plateau plunged down in a cliff, and to their left another cliff rose up into the mountains.

An Aronsdale man broke through to Wareman, brandishing his sword. The dark mage fought him, parrying his blows with cold efficiency until he forced the man back out of his protective sphere. Chime poured her remaining strength into anger spells against Wareman. He made no attempt to counter her; instead he turned on her protectors, hitting them with infirmity and pain. He was so close, she could see a large ball hanging from his belt by a chain, its indigo metal reflecting sunlight. The saints had truly deserted them if this monster was an indigo sphere-mage.

Wareman suddenly surged forward, reaching the guards who shielded Iris and Chime. He engaged them with determination, barely seeming winded, let alone worn out by combat. Chime wouldn't have believed one man could take on seven, but even as that thought came to her, one of the Heptagons went down. Other Harsdown warriors closed in, and soon Wareman was no longer fighting alone.

Chime edged Silvermist onto the battlefield, one hand on the reins and the other clenching her dagger. Swords rang all around her. Somehow she and Iris had become separated. Leaning over her horse, she set off along the edge of the plateau, her heart beating hard.

A Harsdown man swerved toward Chime, his sword raised above her head. Her spells were ragged now, but she had become hyper-sensitized to the battle. His emotional reaction to her was so strong that

for one instant she caught an image of herself in his mind. Her long yellow hair was flying about her body, disarrayed, wild, glowing in the fog. Her eyes were huge and fierce and her cloak billowed out behind her, its hood loose in the wind. She raised her dagger, its blade glittering in the misty sunlight. The warrior froze in midswing, staring at her, his mouth open—and Chime shouted at her horse, spurring it past him.

Someone grabbed at her arm, then lost his hold. She twisted around—and found herself staring into the gray eyes of the dark mage. His horse was running alongside hers, too close, kept from bolting only by a calming spell from Wareman. He grabbed at Chime, catching her around the waist. Shouting the Aronsdale battle cry, she thrust at him with her dagger. She aimed for the crack where his chain mail and armor met his helmet at his neck. He jerked to the side and her knife sliced his skin in a shallow cut.

Then he yanked her off Silvermist. Striking at him with both her fist and her dagger, she almost fell between her mount and his. Their horses kept running as he threw her stomach down onto his mount. Chime rammed her elbow at his crotch and he swore violently, though his armor protected him. The battle wheeled past while she stabbed, kicked, and struck with her fist.

He had lost the mage ball chained to his belt. She grabbed at the heavy chain that now swung free, but then she started to slide off the horse, which had outdistanced Silvermist and was pounding along the edge of the plateau. She lost her grip on the dagger and it fell to the ground, vanishing in the melee around them.

In an instant of clarity, Chime knew she would be crushed beneath the hooves of the horses if she fell. Wareman hauled her back up. He spurred his horse into an even faster pace and fled with his captured mage.



### Bell Chase

Muller led his men up the Slate Incline, holding back his impatience. He forced himself to hold in Windstrider, his horse, so the charger didn't stumble on the sheets of rock that formed the long, shallow slope they were climbing. Arkandy rode at his side, his face drawn with lines that hadn't been there a few days ago.

Shouts beat against Muller's ears, coming from up ahead. He motioned at a ridge that rose to their left, then curved around and crossed their path. "They must be beyond there."

"Damn Tallwalks," Arkandy muttered. He urged his horse faster over the broken ground, surging ahead of Muller.

"Hai, slow down!" Muller called. "We will do them no good if we cripple our horses."



“Hell, Mull.” But Arkandy reined in his mount.

Muller turned to his unit, which was spread out now along the incline. “Ho!” He pointed toward the ridge. “Up there.”

A shout went back among the men. The terrain began to smooth out, letting them increase their pace, more and more, until they were pounding up the long incline. Muller and Arkandy reined in to a halt at the top, their horses stepping restlessly, the Hexagons gathering around them. On the other side, the ridge plunged down in a rocky slope, navigable for a steady horse, but dangerous.

Aronsdale and Harsdown had arrived before them.

A battle roiled across the plateau below the ridge where Muller gathered with his men. Swords flashed in the mist. Surrounded by men and bodies, Jarid fought like a wild spirit, a saint of chaos, his body glowing with light. On the far edge of the plateau, Iris was edging her mare around the battle, guarded by Aronsdale warriors.

With a shout, Muller sent Windstrider down the hill. Battle cries rose around him as his men surged to aid their countrymen. They came on hard, hurtling into combat, full of vigor and anger.

So the Hexagon Unit fought their first battle, the first of their lives for most of the men—and so they turned the tide of combat for Aronsdale, from desperation to survival.

Muller found Jarid standing by his horse near the cliff that rose up from the westward edge of the plateau. The king held the reins of his mount, his chest heaving as he gulped in air. Muller jumped down next to him, the two of them surrounded by men tending to horses. Far in the middle of the plateau, Fieldson was directing the clean up of a battle Aronsdale had just barely won, with the aid of the Hexagons. Muller had expected Varqelle’s army to be much larger than what he had found here. It disquieted him to see so few Harsdown warriors. Where were the rest, the infantry, the archers, the rest of the cavalry?

Jarid exhaled. “You are a welcome sight, cousin.”

Muller tried to grin, but it felt forced. “It looked like you might appreciate some help.”

“Aye.” Jarid glanced across the plateau. Following his gaze, Muller saw Iris kneeling by a prone man. When Jarid saw her, safe and well, his brow smoothed.

Even knowing a mage queen might ride with the army, it shook Muller to discover she had fought in battle. He thanked the saints Chime was safe at Suncroft. In using his twisted spells to shield himself from the dark mage, he had cut himself off from her, too. Although he didn’t expect to sense her from this far away, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of loss. He wouldn’t relax until he held her again.

Jarid was scanning the plateau. “Where is Chime?”

Three words. It was only three words.

They stopped Muller’s world.

“Chime?” Muller stared at him. “She is at Suncroft.” He suddenly, urgently needed that assurance.

Jarid turned to him, his posture growing very still. “She came with us.”

“With the army?” Muller froze. “You let my wife, my pregnant wife, ride in an army?”

Jarid offered no excuses. He said, simply, “Yes.”

“Saints almighty, why?”

“For the same reason you and I came.” When Muller began to protest, Jarid held up his hand. “Cousin, listen. Harsdown has sent an even larger force to Suncroft. She knew that better than any of us.” He motioned at the battlefield out on the plateau, littered now with shields, broken swords, arrows, and rocks from the catapults. Iris was treating the injured in a sheltered area near the western cliff.

Jarid’s men had laid out the bodies of those who had lost their lives either for Aronsdale or Harsdown. They chose the northern edge of the plateau, where the Saint of the North would know to find them for their journey to the Northern Lights, the gateway to the ocean that would carry their souls to the land of the spirits.

Jarid spoke quietly. “We needed every bit of help. Had any of us not been here—Chime, Iris, you, myself, any of our soldiers—we probably would have lost this battle.”

Muller couldn’t hear. Wouldn’t hear. “Where is she?” Unable to contain himself, he strode away, knowing his abrupt departure was an insult to the king, but afraid he would offend Jarid far more if he stayed. He couldn’t bear to think of Chime in battle.

He stalked across the plateau, and soldiers stepped rapidly out of his way. They were cleaning up, tending the injured, and mourning the dead. He felt as if he were breaking inside, seeing the men he had trained, ridden with, dined with, and fought with lying broken. Or worse.

Jarid caught up to him and walked at his side, keeping his long-legged pace. At first Muller ignored him. But finally he slowed down. “I don’t see her.” He struggled to keep his voice calm. It didn’t matter how formidable Chime could be when she set her mind to something, he still wanted to sock Jarid for bringing her with the army.

“She was with Iris,” Jarid said.

Muller didn’t trust himself to answer. He could see Iris kneeling by another man, a lieutenant laid out on his back. The queen had her hand around a diamond sphere that hung from a chain around her neck. As Muller came up to them, her patient looked at him with eyes surprisingly free of pain, given the wound in his side, which had soaked the bandage around his torso with blood. The fellow was hardly more than a boy, with a cowlick of hair.

Muller didn’t want to interfere with her work, but he couldn’t hold back his concern. “Have you seen Chime?”

Iris glanced at him. “She was with me a few minutes ago.” She spoke kindly to her patient. “You must go easy for the next few days.”

The youth gave a shaky nod. “I will, Your Majesty.”

She smiled at him, then stood up and spoke to Muller. “Chime and I were separated in the fighting.”

“Do you know what happened?” Muller asked.

“She isn’t here?”

Alarm flared in Muller. “Nowhere!”

Her voice gentled. “You and she have a link. Perhaps with my help, you can reach her.”

Muller was suddenly aware of the injured man listening to them. “How?”

Iris motioned a lieutenant helping her, a man with a healer’s patch on his shoulder. She left her patient in his care and took Muller’s arm, leading him away. Jarid followed but kept his distance.

When they were off by themselves, Iris spoke to Muller in a low voice. “Make a spell with me. Your link to Chime is stronger than mine.”

He was willing to try anything. “I need a shape.”

She showed him her diamond pendant. “Try this.”

He tried to focus through the pendant, but it did no good; the faceted diamond had too much symmetry. Dropping his hand to the hilt of his sword, he focused on the long, stretched shape. It stirred a spell within him, but one too weak to be of any use. Then he remembered Drummer’s ring, lying under his shirt. He pulled out the cord and folded his hand around the bent circle of metal.

Muller formed a green spell, striving to rebuild his link with Chime. Iris’s power washed around him like a river of rainbows, enhancing his efforts. His breath caught; she had such a tremendous gift. His spell spread across the land, searching, searching...

Pain. It stabbed his temples. Instead of Chime, he had found the dark mage, running up against the mage’s mind as if he had hit wall. He tensed for the counter attack. When he felt nothing, he realized Iris had surrounded his spell with a glimmering emerald sphere that hid him from Wareman—

Emerald?

That protective sphere didn’t come from Iris. Green wasn’t her color...

Muller let his spell fade, becoming aware of the army around them. Iris was holding her diamond ball, her gaze clearing. No one had disturbed them, probably because Jarid stood a few steps away, his arms crossed. Several of the king’s men paced nearby, guarding the king.

“I didn’t find her.” Muller wondered about the green sphere, but it had given him no sense of her location, if it did come from her. “Only the dark mage.”

Iris’s gaze darkened. “He took her.”

No. Muller wanted to shout his protest; it took all of his control to answer quietly. “Do you know where?”

“I only caught impressions of his mood.” She looked out toward misty Aronsdale. “I think they are riding to Suncroft, to rendezvous with Varqelle.”

Muller swung around to Jarid, speaking loud enough for the king to hear. “I must go after them.”

Jarid came forward. “How will you find them?”

“I need a scout. Arkandy Ravensford.”

“Take who you need. The rest of us will follow.” Jarid’s face had turned grim. “We must reach Suncroft before Varqelle.”

Muller knew it was impossible. But they had to try.

He couldn’t bear to think of Wareman inflicting his vile person on Chime, such a sweet-natured, dulcet angel.

“You bog-warted slug!” Chime swore with gusto, using language no noblewoman would ever have known, much less spoken. “If you don’t let me go, I will change you into a slime toad.”

“Not likely.” Wareman sounded as if he were gritting his teeth. He spurred his mount, the charger he called Snowhawk, into a pace too fast for them to talk.

With her wrists bound behind her back, Chime had trouble keeping her balance. Wareman sat behind her, his arms around her waist, the reins in his hands. Wind streamed past her face as Snowhawk raced across the valley. She didn’t know whether to shake from fear or punch the cretin who had run off with her. Both would be satisfying, but she had no intention of letting him see her fear and she couldn’t hit him over the head with her arms bound.

At the end of the valley, the ground sloped up into a rocky hill carpeted by wild grass. The plants were greener here than in the mountains, with star-flowers scattered everywhere. As they climbed the hill, Wareman let his horse slow down. Chime hadn’t wanted to risk falling from the horse before, but at this more sedate pace, she immediately began trying to work her wrists free.

“Hold still,” Wareman told her.

“You are unpardonably rude,” she said. “Untie me.”

“Stop twisting around, or I will—” He paused as if he hadn’t thought of a suitable threat.

“Will what?” Chime redoubled her efforts.

He grabbed her upper arms, holding her in place. “I will tie your legs, too.”

“How? The horse is in the way.” She yanked at her bonds. “I guess I’m so terrifying, you must tie me up to protect your helpless self.”

“Blustering saints, woman!”

“What do you want with me?”

“You will be my wife.”

Foolish mage. “I’m already married.”

“Enough,” Wareman growled. “You are married only as long as Prince Muller lives.”

“No! You mustn’t hurt him.”

“It appears I must, if I am to wed you.”

“Coward. I would marry a slug first.”

“Woman, silence!”

“No.” She was too furious to care how he threatened her. “Untie me.”

“If I untie you, will you be quiet?”

That caught her off guard. She had expected more threats. After a startled pause, she said, “All right.” In truth, she was growing too tired to fight anymore. The battle had exhausted her.

Anvil worked at her bonds with one hand while he held the reins in the other. When he loosened the ropes, her arms fell free. She held back her groan of relief as she brought them in front of her body. Burn marks showed on her wrists, but the ropes hadn’t cut her skin. She rubbed her arms, trying to regain the feeling in them.

They crested the top of the long slope and started down its other side, entering a forest of hardy trees, taller than those in the Tallwalks, with bristly leaves. Mist drifted around them.

After a while her captor said, “I am called Anvil the Forged.”

Chime snorted.

“You should show more respect,” Anvil said. “You are riding with an indigo sphere-mage.”

Although Chime knew he had great power, she had nursed a hope she might have overestimated its extent. “Why do you hate everyone in Aronsdale?”

“I don’t hate you.” Then he added, “Though I must say, your manner of speech leaves much to desire.”

“You ride with our enemies and kill our people.”

He answered flatly. “Aronsdale killed my family.”

“Aronsdale?”

“The people of Stonce. I was eleven years old.”

Chime blanched. She couldn't imagine losing her loved ones. "I am sorry about your family."

After a moment he said, "So was I."

She hesitated. "Do you mind if I ask what happened?"

He told her then, his voice low as he related the violence that had culminated in the vicious murder of his family and the brutal use he had endured. By the time he finished, she felt tears on her face.

"I am so terribly sorry," she whispered.

He spoke numbly. "Since then, I have had no green."

It no longer surprised her. What he had experienced could have burned it out of anyone.

After that they rode in silence. Chime needed to absorb what he had told her. Although he pushed Snowhawk hard, the powerful charger easily kept the pace, moving as if it were part of the fog hanging about the trees. Red birds chattered in the branches and blue ones flitted from perch to perch. As the dusk gathered, the coos of echo-doves drifted eerily through the trees.

Chime spoke uneasily. "When do we stop?" She doubted his horse knew the way in daylight, let alone at night.

"Can't stop."

"King Jarid will catch you even if you keep going."

"Jarid." Anvil spoke as if pondering a puzzle. "The Mage King."

Chime tensed. "That's absurd." The less he knew about Jarid's mage abilities, the better.

"Oh, come now. Everyone saw him ablaze. He is a mage, Lady. A powerful one."

She doubted it would do any good to deny it. So she said nothing.

Despite his initial refusal, Anvil did eventually rein Snowhawk to a stop under a cluster of trees. "We will camp here for a few hours." He jumped down from the horse, then reached up to help her. Ignoring his offered hand, Chime slid down and landed with a thump. "And then?"

He tilted his head, considering her with a half smile. "We go to Suncroft."

"You will never take the castle." She thanked the saints he couldn't make a mood spell and know she feared otherwise. "It is impregnable."

"Is it now?" Anvil nudged her toward one of the trees. "We must eat. And rest."

Rest. She would never admit it to him, but she felt so drained, she could hardly move. However desperately she needed sleep, though, she couldn't lower her guard now.

Anvil indicated the ground by the tree. "A seat for the lady." He smirked. "Not what you're used to, eh?"

Chime thought of the orchards she loved. "It will do." She settled in the damp grass around the trunk.

He tended to Snowhawk, but he didn't shed his mail or armor, though it surely had to be uncomfortable. He kept his sword at his side as well. After they ate a supper of dried fruit and beef jerky, he gave her a blanket from his saddle bags. Chime glowered at him, unwilling to admit she was cold. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders, but held back her shivers, determined to hide her vulnerability.

Leaning against the tree, she closed her eyes. Despite her intent to stay awake and escape from Anvil, she dropped into a fitful doze. Every few moments she stirred, then drifted off again. Then Anvil was shaking her awake. It seemed no time passed, yet pearly light filtered through the mist, which had thickened until it turned the world white and formless.

Groggy, Chime peered up at Anvil. He had never tried to touch her during the night, but now he gripped her shoulders and watched her with a frightening intensity.

"Don't look at me like that," he said.

She lifted her chin. "Like what?"

He propelled her toward Snowhawk, which he had already prepared for the ride. "I suggest you don't try my patience." He heaved her up on the horse and swung up behind her.

Chime held back her retort; better to bide her time than to goad him into taking action against her that might make it harder to escape later, if a more auspicious opportunity arose.

They set off through the fog, chewing on hard cakes. She strained to hear in the indistinct morning, but the fog muffled everything. However, she didn't sense Anvil using spells to throw off pursuit. It took green to affect perceptions, but even if he could have managed with another color, he seemed to have exhausted his power yesterday. So had she. Right now, she doubted she could do even a simple red spell.

Anvil held her around the waist as they rode. He remained as taciturn as yesterday, his mail bumpy against her back. Chime soon dozed off, her head hanging down, slowly regaining her strength...

Chime awoke with a start. The fog had lightened with daylight. She also felt lighter. Stronger. Her spells simmered, ready for use. Moving stealthily, she curled her hand around her sphere pendant. If she could reach a mood spell back along the way they had come—

"None of that." Anvil clamped his hand around hers and yanked, breaking the slender chain. It fell away from her neck, hanging down over his fingers.

"Don't." Chime clenched her hand around the sphere, her fist caught within his. "You cannot."

"I can." He pried open her fingers and wrested the sphere away from her. "A powerful shape, lady. Less than my best, but good enough."

She answered through gritted teeth. "Go to hell."

"I think not." He sounded less than amused.

Pah. Chime wished on him curses of the Saint of Foul Water, who made stagnant puddles smell bad. She studied the horse, the reins, even his boots, but saw no shapes she could use. Had the sky been clear she would have tried using the sun, but clouds covered the world.

Anvil focused with her sphere, which she could neither see nor touch now that he had stolen it. Despair settled over her. His power was too strong. She would never escape. The melancholy annoyed Chime. She fought it, knowing Anvil was using reversed yellow spells to weaken her will. His mage strength baffled her. She understood why the gifts showed up in Dawnfield males, given how they bred for the traits. But why would an entire family in a remote mountain village manifest such strength? It was unusual enough to find just one mage. The traits might run in families, but they rarely manifested with power in more than one person, and then only every few generations.

As the fog burned off, Anvil pushed Snowhawk harder. Chime needed no spell to recognize his tension; he had few defenses here. He had fled the battle yesterday, but she doubted King Vargelle would consider it desertion. He needed Anvil at Suncroft. He had probably ordered his mage to avoid capture at all costs.

A bird called through the trees, a waterfall of notes. It reminded her of the songbird that had died from sleep gas. That gave Chime pause. Dignitaries from Jazid, a country far to the southeast of Aronsdale, had presented it to Muller. No birds native to these hills could make such trills. So where had it come from?

The bird warbled, closer now.

Chime stiffened, then tried to relax, lest she give away her interest in the bird. Could someone be trying to let her know they were following? It could be men from the King's Army, come to capture Anvil. Or it could be nothing. The chirps of many birds and insects leavened the day, though she hadn't noticed before. Perhaps she had imagined the other—

There! The trill was closer, a unique call.

"Why do you keep tensing up?" Anvil demanded.

"Why do you think?" She didn't need to put on an act to communicate her loathing; it came naturally.

"You don't like me, eh?" He pulled a length of her hair. "You had better get used to me, gold girl."

"My name is Chime."

"Aye. Chime Headwind." He spoke dryly. "Or was that Headstrong?"

She ignored him.

The trill came again—and this time Chime caught a flash of purple among the trees.

Anvil swore and kicked his horse. "Go!"

Snowhawk took off like a streamer through the fog, his white coat glowing in the pearly light.

"You're done for!" Chime said.



“Quiet!” He urged the horse faster.

Chime suspected then that their pursuers had just notified each other that they had found her and Anvil, using a trill that only they would recognize—which meant they probably came from Suncroft.

“You’re finished,” she said, twisting in his hold.

Anvil grabbed her roughly. “Hold still!”

They were going too fast now for her to answer. Snowhawk broke out of the woods onto a long, lush slope that stretched down to a rolling meadow. Anvil gave the horse full rein and its stride ate up distance. Shouts came from the trees. Craning her head around, Chime saw a rider burst out of the woods, a man on a black charger, his hair streaming behind him, gold in the luminous morning.

“Muller!” The wind grabbed her words and threw them away, but she didn’t care. Saints, she relished seeing him!

Anvil yanked her around. Clenching her fist, she rammed her elbow into his torso. It hit his armor and he grunted with surprise. Turning, she struck him against the side of the head, though it made her shift precariously on Snowhawk. He raised his arm, warding off the blow, his face furious, then shoved her to the front again.

Snowhawk kept running, undaunted by the pursuit. With dismay, Chime realized they were outdistancing Muller. She grabbed the reins, yanking, trying to slow them down. She would rather risk falling than have Anvil escape. The horse stumbled, then regained its stride.

“Are you crazy!” Anvil struck her across the back. “You will kill us both.”

Chime gritted her teeth, but she kept struggling with him, trying to slow down Snowhawk. At the bottom of the slope, the ground became muddy, interfering more with the horse’s pace. Twisting around, she saw Muller gaining on them and another rider farther back. Relief swept over her: Anvil wouldn’t make it. Muller would catch them.

Suddenly Anvil reined in his horse, pulling so hard that Snowhawk reared and trumpeted his protest. Chime held on, clinging to the horse’s neck. He came down with pounding hooves, agitated and ready to bolt. Anvil maneuvered him around to face the way they had come, right in line with Muller’s approach.

Muller rode forward, slowing down. Chime recognized the second rider behind him, Arkandy, his approach wary and careful.

A short distance away, Muller reined Windstrider to a halt. “Are you all right?” he asked Chime.

“Don’t speak,” Anvil told her. He drew his sword, letting it slide close to her leg. She froze, aware of its honed edge. In her side vision, she saw him raise the weapon, the blade glinting.

“Coward,” Chime muttered. “You haven’t the skill to best him.”

“Be quiet,” Anvil said in a voice only she could hear.

Muller’s face hardened. “Don’t hurt her.”

“You want her back, eh?” Anvil snorted. “I can’t imagine why.”

Arkandy walked his horse to Muller and reined in next to the prince. Chime didn’t fool herself that Anvil had no chance against three of them. She had felt the power of his spells.

Muller drew his weapon, a beautifully crafted blade with round gems in the pommel. Arkandy put his hand on the hilt of his sword but went no further.

“Interesting,” Anvil commented. “How do you plan on fighting me while your wife sits here?”

Muller’s jaw worked. “You would hide behind a defenseless woman?”

“Defenseless?” Anvil made an incredulous noise. “That tongue of hers could level the Tallwalk Mountains.”

Muller looked ready to explode, but he held his temper. Chime concentrated on the gems in Muller’s sword. She was too far away to focus her full strength through them, but a spell stirred within her.

Dizzy, she thought, fanning the scrap of power. Then she threw the spell at Anvil. When it hit him, she reeled as well, her head spinning as if she had been twirling in circles.

“Ah—” Anvil swayed behind her, his sword dipping. Then he clenched Chime’s tunic. “So,” he said to Muller. “You do have shape-power.”

“You speak nonsense,” Muller said.

“So it was Lady Chime.” Anvil shifted behind her, his sword poised near her shoulder. Then she realized he was coaxing Snowhawk to back up.

Muller’s forehead creased. He nudged Windstrider forward, following step by step. Arkandy came with him, slowly, everyone careful not to startle anyone else. As Anvil retreated, he lowered his sword until the flat of the blade rested on Chime’s leg.

Muller’s face paled. “You have nothing to gain by injuring my wife.”

“True,” Anvil said. “She has more value as a hostage.”

“What do you want?” Muller asked. They all continued to move across the plain in their odd, cautious procession.

“Free passage away from here,” Anvil told him. “When I reach Suncroft, I will release her.”

A muscle jerked in Muller’s cheek. “We know Varqelle is riding to Suncroft. You will take her to him.”

Anvil didn’t answer. As they continued their strange walk, Chime felt him concentrating on the sphere he had stolen from her. His spell gathered. Alarmed, she focused again on the gems in Muller’s sword, but he was too distant now. She knew then why Anvil backed up; it moved her away from shapes she could use to make spells. She tried to draw on the sphere Anvil had taken from her, but she could do nothing without seeing or touching the orb.

Anvil’s spell continued to grow. The air became hot and indigo light brightened around them. His sword

blade felt heavy against her leg.

Muller's face blurred in the light. "If you hurt her, I will see you die."

"I doubt it," Anvil said. The heat worsened; with in moments, it could be hot enough to ignite grass.

Angry, knowing Anvil intended yet again to dishonor his gifts, Chime concentrated harder on the gems in Muller's sword, straining until her head throbbed. A faint spell awoke within her. Instead of attempting to counter Anvil, who had far more power, she latched on to his spell—and shoved.

The heat suddenly diminished, shifting instead into brighter light, hard on the eyes but far more benign.

Anvil swore. "What the blazes?"

Chime smirked. "Actually, no blazes." She couldn't overcome his power, but she could funnel it into a positive spell.

Then she moved.

Chime jerked hard, twisting in his hold, catching him off guard while he struggled with his faltering spell. The edge of his sword sliced her leg, cutting through the tunic and her skin. Losing her balance, she toppled off the horse. Snowhawk's body went by in a white blur. She hit the ground with a jarring impact, her arms crumpled under her body as she tried to break the shock. Her leg twisted, wrenching the sword gash, and she gasped.

Chime scrambled to her feet, but she seemed to move in molasses, especially her leg. The world slowed down. Anvil jumped off his horse, reaching toward her with one hand while he raised his sword with the other. Muller lunged forward, parrying with him, and their swords rang together.

Stunned, unable to react fast enough, Chime stumbled backward until she hit the trunk of a tree. It jolted her time awareness back to normal. She stared in dismay as Muller and Anvil battled on the meadow, trampling grass, their swords slicing the air. Before today, she had loved to watch Muller practice, admiring his grace, but she saw nothing beautiful in his movements now, knowing he could die if he missed a blow.

Although Snowhawk stepped away from the commotion, he didn't run. Arkandy slid off his mount, grasping its reins. He moved toward Muller's horse, but Windstrider shied away. True to the code of shape-warriors, Arkandy made no attempt to interfere with Muller and Anvil; it would have been dishonorable. Right now, Chime couldn't care less about codes; she wanted her husband to survive. Period. Nothing else mattered.

Muller and Anvil seemed evenly matched, but as they lunged back and forth, their feet dancing in intricate patterns, Chime realized Muller had the advantage of his longer arms. His slender build also hid a physique far more muscled than people realized. Now he used his strength and flexibility to drive Anvil back. Sweat dripped off their faces and ran down their armor and mail, which gave some protection, but interfered with mobility.

Suddenly Anvil lunged, not at Muller, but toward Snowhawk, making a break for freedom. Muller blocked his way—so Anvil whirled and ran for Windstrider instead.

Caught off guard, Muller hesitated for one moment; in that instant, Anvil reached the charger and vaulted

onto its back. Windstrider reared in protest, trying to throw him off, but Anvil held on. He shouted at the horse and hit it hard with his heels. The startled animal bolted then, racing across the meadow.

“No!” Muller slammed his sword back into its sheath and ran after them, his long legs pumping hard, eating up the distance.

“Mull, you can’t catch him!” Arkandy yelled. He shook his head as Muller kept running. He watched for a moment, then looked around the meadow. When he saw Chime flattened against the tree, he came over to her.

“Are you all right?” Arkandy asked, his gentle voice a startling contrast to his implacable appearance.

Chime nodded, though she was shaking for some reason. She couldn’t feel the wound in her leg. “I’m fine.”

Anvil had ridden so far ahead now, he was barely visible in the hills. Muller gave up trying to catch him and headed back, covering ground in his long, loping run. It finally hit Chime that nothing was keeping them apart. She took off, limping as fast as her injured leg allowed. Neither of them slowed much as they drew nearer, so they ran right into each other. Laughing and crying, they embraced, and she hugged him hard, so grateful to have him alive and whole that she couldn’t speak.

For a long time they held each other. With her head against his shoulder, she could see his pulse in the veins of his neck. Gradually, as their hearts slowed, they pulled apart.

“I knew you had come north,” she said. “Everyone thought I was wrong. But I knew.”

He managed to smile. Then he kissed her, his lips eager. Chime melted against him, closing her eyes, aware of nothing but how it felt to touch him again.

Someone cleared his throat.

They turned with self-conscious laughs. Arkandy stood a few paces away, holding the reins of his horse and those of Snowhawk, the charger Anvil had left behind. It was a beautiful animal, with fine breeding and clear eyes.

Arkandy offered Snowhawk’s reins to Muller. “It seems you have a new horse.”

Muller scowled. “Windstrider will never tolerate that dark mage.”

“He is a good rider,” Chime said, wishing otherwise. “And he treats his animal well.” She disliked having to admit Anvil had any good qualities. Windstrider had always been loyal to Muller, and he had a charger’s fiery personality, but unfortunately he also tended to respond to riders who knew how to treat a horse.

Muller let Snowhawk snuffle around him. “She is well cared for,” he admitted. He regarded Chime and Arkandy uneasily. “We must get to Suncroft as soon as possible.”

Chime heard what he left unsaid: they had to arrive before King Varqelle could take the castle.



35

### The Relentless Waves

The Pentagons, Hexagons, and Heptagons poured over the hills above Croft's Vale, interspersed with the King's Archers, rank after rank of warriors. Chime stood with Muller and Jarid at the top of a ridge while men streamed past them and down into the fields. Pages had taken their horses to tend and feed. On a higher hill, across the village, Suncroft reached its spires into the sky.

King Varqelle's army had arrived first.

The Harsdown army surrounded the castle. They had already overrun and looted the village, though they had let its people flee to the hills. With Croft's Vale subdued, they moved on, filling the slopes and meadows, settling in for what would have been a siege had Stonehammer's forces prevailed in the north. Instead the Aronsdale army spilled across the land, ready to challenge them for Suncroft, the crown jewel of the realm.

Muller stared at the massed army. "Saints."

"Hardly." Jarid sounded as if he were gritting his teeth. "Devils, more like."

Just men following their king, Chime thought, weary. She felt only dismay that her premonition about Varqelle bringing a substantial army to Suncroft had been accurate. A pall hung over her, the exhaustion of spending the last eleven days tending to wounded men, helping Iris and Jarid. She couldn't heal, but she could ease the pain of the soldiers, giving comfort. The royals worked alongside the army medics, using magecraft to aid the mundane treatments of splinting broken bones, cleaning wounds, and the like.

Jarid turned as Iris came up to them. He held out his arm to her. "How are our patients?"

She took his arm. "Impatient to heal."

"A good sign."

"Aye."

Fieldson approached them, accompanied by Arkandy and several other men. When Jarid nodded, the general said, "We've fifty-eight men able to fight in the polygons, about thirty archers, and another forty or so with injuries. Maybe twenty of the injured could fight if necessary."

Moisture gathered in Chime's eyes, as it had other times since the battle. Iris had told her of the memorial service they held on the plateau that day, for the warriors who lost their lives, both those of Aronsdale and Harsdown.

Fieldson looked out at the distant army camped around the castle, his gaze bleak. Hundreds, even thousands, of warriors had converged on Suncroft. After a moment, he said, "We have General Stonehammer as a hostage."

Jarid pulled back his blowing hair, catching it into a warrior's knot on his neck, redoing the ragged leather tie. "Perhaps Varqelle will negotiate for him."

"Perhaps."

Iris indicated the distant castle. "The Quadron, Octagon, and Nonagon Units are within Suncroft's walls."

"They should be," Muller said.

"That would give us another one hundred and sixty-four polygon warriors, counting their three commanders," Chime said. "Add to that the six hundred we have in archers and other infantry, and we've almost nine hundred."

Fieldson let out a tired breath. "But the polygons are the key of our offense, the way they work with the mages and coordinate the army. Three of our prime units are diminished." He indicated where Penta-Colonel Burg walked with one of his pentahedron-majors, deep in discussion. "He no longer has a pentagon of pentagons. Right now they are one square and a rectangle of triangles. Either that, or a quadrilateral of four-sided figures. They have trained to cope with such losses, but it isn't how they were optimized to fight. The same is true for the Heptagons and Hexagons. You may not be able to work with them at all. Their formations are imperfect."

His last sentence caught Chime off guard. Nor was it only her. Muller stared at him, his mouth open. "Saints all-blowing-mighty!"

Fieldson blinked at him. "I beg your pardon?"

Muller turned red, the flush bright on his pale skin. "My apologies. I had never thought of a reduced polygon unit in exactly those terms."

Fieldson scowled. "Well, you should have."

Chime could tell Muller didn't mean what Fieldson thought. Of course Muller knew polygons would be less effective in a second battle if the first had eroded their numbers. But he hadn't realized he could work with such polygons—as a mage. He had spent his life suppressing his gifts, in a country that had known no major conflict for generations. Even in the days when they had gone to war, mages had contributed as she and Iris had done in the Tallwalks. He worried his flawed spells might hurt his men's ability to fight. And that could happen. But he might also have abilities that would be invaluable to the army, if he could learn to use them. Had the ancients who created the chamber of flawed shapes in the Mage Tower intended to create a war mage?

Jarid and Iris were watching Muller, comprehension in their gazes. They couldn't reveal him as a mage now; the shock could disrupt morale, particularly if the army feared their commander would make spells that could go awry. They had no time to prepare either Muller or his men. But this gave an entirely new slant on his gifts.

When Fieldson began to look puzzled by the silence, Iris spoke up. "General, do we have a count yet of Varqelle's men?"

He motioned to Arkandy. The hexahedron-major stepped forward and spoke. "My scouts estimate one thousand five hundred, Your Majesty."

Jarid grimaced. "And they are rested. We are not."

"Our men are eager to fight." Arkandy's voice sparked with anger. "This is our home."

"We also know this land," Iris said. "They don't."

"And we have five mages," Chime said. "Three here, two in Suncroft. Varqelle has only one."

Jarid laid his hand on the hilt of his sword. "Pray that will be enough."

Varqelle the Cowled sat in the darkwood throne in his tent, his long legs stretched out, his elbow resting on the arm of the chair, a mug of hot, spiced wine in his hand. He wore his leather armor and sword belt, though he had removed his chain mail. Diamond studs glinted in his ears.

King Varqelle considered the Aronsdale messenger who stood before him, his forehead sheened with sweat. The man was a hexahedron-major, a solid fellow with tangled curls that might be brown when they were clean. He had come without weapon, shield, mail, or armor, wearing only dark trousers, a wrinkled shirt that looked as if he had slept in it, and dusty boots. Varqelle had no doubt the man had ridden with Jarid's army from the Tallwalks; anyone stationed here wouldn't appear so travel weary.

"Arkandy Ravensford." Varqelle let him stand while he sat comfortably, scrutinizing the tired man. "I have never heard the name."

"It is not a common one, Your Majesty." The stiff quality of Ravensford's voice matched his posture.

"Oh, I don't know," Varqelle murmured. "It sounds common to me."

Ravensford's ruddy cheeks flushed, but he made no response. Varqelle noted the man's self-control. This one would conduct himself well in battle. He had lived through the Tallwalk engagement, which suggested he had skill with a sword. The Harsdown warriors who had survived and made it to Suncroft described it as a brutal combat.

Varqelle thought of the men he had lost in that battle and his anger sparked. Yes, warriors died in war, but that changed nothing of his disquiet or sorrow at losing such good men. Some of the fighters had been mercenaries, however, including those who deserted his forces after they lost the engagement. He would attend to them later. About thirty of his men had made it here to Suncroft. He doubted many others would arrive; those who had escaped, had stayed together. Jarid had managed to take no prisoners.

Except one.

"So." Varqelle took a long swallow of wine from his mug. The spices burned his throat. "King Jarid wants to bargain, eh?"

“General Stonehammer is unharmed,” Ravensford said. “He would return to you as he left.”

“So you say.” Although Varqelle maintained an outward nonchalance, Stonehammer’s capture disturbed him. Jarid’s forces had let the other Harsdown warriors escape as they concentrated on catching the one of greatest value. Varqelle depended on the general, a brilliant strategist who knew how to shape and train an army. The king intended to conquer other lands after he took Aronsdale, including the Misted Cliffs west of Harsdown. Especially the Misted Cliffs. He would reclaim his pale, lovely wife and his son. To ensure the success of those conquests, he needed Stonehammer. But Stonehammer would be the first to advise against compromising his chances of success here.

Varqelle sipped his wine while Ravensford stood before him, his boots denting the Shazire carpet. Finally the king lowered his mug. “What does Jarid want in return for my general?”

The major met his gaze. “Anvil the Forged.”

Varqelle didn’t even bother to laugh. “Try again.”

“Stonehammer for Anvil.”

“The mage is of greater value than the general.” It was true. Varqelle had more confidence in Stonehammer; he trusted Stonehammer more, though he trusted no one fully; and he considered the general a friend, as much as he was capable of friendship with anyone. But regardless of all that, Anvil had more value.

“I will guarantee safe passage to the mage queen out of Aronsdale after the war,” Varqelle offered. In truth, whether or not he let Iris Larkspur go would depend on whether or not she pleased him. The bargain meant nothing; after Varqelle defeated Aronsdale, Jarid would be in no position to demand compliance with any agreements.

The major crossed his arms. “That is no reason for King Jarid to return Stonehammer now.”

“True. But it is the only trade you will get.”

Ravensford’s jaw tightened.

“You may tell your young king this.” Varqelle sat back in his chair. “After I have taken Suncroft, I will negotiate the terms of Jarid’s surrender. At that time, we will discuss Stonehammer.”

Ravensford never lost his composure. “His Majesty is willing to bargain with you now for the general. The same may not be true after his army has defeated yours.”

Varqelle set his mug on a table next to his chair and rose to his feet. He stood a head taller than the major. “Understand me. General Stonehammer is a good man. He doesn’t deserve whatever your king plans for him. But the general would no more expect me to compromise this campaign for him than your Cube-General Fieldson would expect such of King Jarid.”

Ravensford’s gaze never wavered. “You won’t take Aronsdale.”

“Oh, I think I will.” He gestured in the direction of the castle, his long fingers lazy in the air. “My agents tell me how many soldiers hide within Suncroft. And I’ve seen what remains of your other units. You have no chance. You will lose.” When Ravensford started to answer, his face flushed, Varqelle turned his



hand palm out toward the man. “You are alone, here, Hexahedron-Major. You came without weapons. I respect that. I will let you leave in the same manner.” His voice deepened. “But do not try my good will. It may not hold.”

Ravensford took a deep breath. Then he bowed, his movements stiff. “At your leave, Your Majesty.”

“You may go.”

So Ravensford went back out into the chill night. Varqelle picked up his wine and sipped it slowly, considering the tent flap that swung from the major’s departure. Varqelle felt tired, though he had hidden it from his visitor. He had no liking for the battle they would fight with Jarid Dawnfield and his army tomorrow. But fight he would, for his desire to expand his territories was greater than his reluctance to kill. One day his name would be remembered in all the history scrolls, the visionary who made Harsdown an empire. Varqelle the Mighty.

Yes, they would remember his name.

On a blustery morning in autumn, when brittle leaves blew across the land and a chill turned the wind sharp, the armies of Aronsdale and Harsdown met in the trampled meadows below Suncroft. They turned the formerly idyllic countryside into a battlefield.

The polygon units within the castle swept out into the combat, a human wave pouring down the hill. The armies surged back and forth, attacking, retreating, surging forward again. Harsdown always pressed toward the castle, climbing its hill and being beaten back, only to force its way forward again.

So it was that under the watery light of a sun veiled by thin clouds, war came to Aronsdale.



36

### Vale of the Sun

For Chime, the day blurred. The Mage Guard of the King’s Army hid her and Iris in the woods on a hill well above the fighting, a walk of ten minutes from the battle. Chime could see the combat, but with several thousand men fighting, she could locate no one in particular. Beyond the battlefields and their roiling armies, Castle Suncroft raised its spires into the sky.

Chime focused through the large faceted ball she had brought with her, imagining golden hues, the color of confidence, until a shimmering haze surrounded her. She sent the spell to the Aronsdale warriors, flowing it across the land. Success, she willed. You shall triumph. You are strong and alive.

She couldn't see Jarid, but she sensed him in her magescape. He flared like lightning. Surely a king should stay back, protected, but he refused, driven to battle with single-minded intensity. Never did she feel him use spells to injure, but that changed nothing. With his sword, he killed again and again, and it exacted a price on his conscience he would never forgive.

She couldn't find Muller in her magescape, but she felt his presence. Several times, when her spells broke on the jagged edges of polygon units, he reached out, trying to help—and her spells surged in power. Then his presence would vanish again, his concentration turned to battle and survival.

It had agonized Chime to see him ride to war this morning. She prayed for his return tonight. When soldiers began carrying wounded men to her, she submerged her fears in work. She bandaged and soothed, easing pain while Iris staunched gashes, set broken bones, and wove her spells. Then she would turn back to the battle, pouring her spells into the polygons as best she could manage.

The combat raged until Chime lost all sense of time. Always when the injured came in, she looked for Muller. Always she asked after him. Her heart sang when someone reported seeing him alive; her mood plunged when no one could say if he lived. Day faded into evening and still the injured came. The battle raged and the polygons fragmented. She and Iris alternated between helping the injured and using their spells in the battle. She worked in a daze, calling on her deepest resources.

Finally, in exhaustion, she fell asleep sitting up, her head falling forward, blood-soaked bandages in her hands.

A trill awoke Chime. She stirred, reassured by the melodies of her songbird. Then she remembered; her bird had died. She heard only the familiar warble of redwing night-canaries so common throughout Aronsdale.

She opened her eyes to see a drowsing camp, warriors sleeping fitfully around her like a bulwark, lit by the ghostly light of an Azure Moon. Iris slept nearby, leaning against a tree, her arms limp at her sides, a blanket across her lap. Warriors paced through the trees, sentries on patrol. Some of the injured moaned in their dreams. In instinct, Chime formed a spell to counter their pain.

Silence had otherwise fallen over the countryside. The armies had apparently withdrawn to recover and recoup. She hadn't realized they would do such; subconsciously she had expected them to keep fighting. The exhaustion of the hundreds of men spread across the hills pressed down on her; both armies were drained. Death had parched their ranks. Many of the soldiers wanted to return home. She felt the same.

Moving stiffly, Chime stood up, her joints aching. A sentry came over, a tall man in battered armor. "How do you feel, milady?" He indicated her leg, which was newly healed from the wound Anvil had given her. "Does it cause you trouble?"

"Nay. It is fine." Hope filled her. "Have you news of my husband? Commander Dawnfield?"

"My apology, ma'am. I don't know."

She tried to hide her disappointment. "No need to apologize, kind sir."

"Would you be liking something to eat?" He indicated a slope that rolled down slightly from where they stood in the direction of the battlefield. "We've stew down by the campfire."

“I would like a little, yes.” She nodded her thanks and limped toward the slope. When he tried to help her, she waved him away, not wanting to appear weak.

The campfire had died to embers. A few men sat around it on logs, and others patrolled the area. Chime intended to stop for food, but she felt too restless to sit. So she walked on past the fire. Sentries watched as she paced, but none stopped her.

Finally she reached the edge of the woods. She stood under a tree and stared across the battlefield below to the hill where Suncroft stood in the distance. Torches burned on its walls and in many windows, turning it gold even in the night. She couldn’t bear to think of that beauty falling into Varqelle’s hands.

A sentry approached. As he drew near, she spoke in a relieved whisper. “Arkandy!”

He grinned, coming to stand with her under the tree. He had taken off his upper armor and wore only a plain shirt. “A good eve, Lady Chime.”

“And to you.” She swallowed. “I can’t find Muller.”

He motioned to the castle. “He and the king retreated with Cube-General Fieldson within its walls.”

Relief poured through her. “It is secure then?”

“Nay, Lady, not at all. It isn’t safe for you to go.”

Chime winced. Arkandy knew her too well. “I had the impression earlier today that the battle had turned in our favor.”

“For a while.” He lifted his hands and let them drop again. “But then it changed. It is this mage, Anvil the Forged. He has such power. He destroys our will.”

She thought of Anvil, trapped in the horrors of his past until he turned the lives of everyone around him into similar misery. “I heard Varqelle refused to trade him for Stonehammer.”

Arkandy’s gaze darkened. “Yes.”

“What is our situation, then?”

He spoke slowly, as if choosing his words with care. “There are many of them and fewer of us. But we are better fighters and we recover faster. We might have a chance if it wasn’t for Anvil.” He stretched, rubbing the small of his back. “Muller says the dark mage has no remorse for abusing his gifts.”

“None.” Chime told him what Anvil had described of his childhood. It was hard even to say the words. “Day after day of that treatment, ending in the death of his family—it burned out his ability to feel.”

“So he wants vengeance.”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t his family leave the village?”

“I’ve wondered, too.” Chime shook her head. “And it is odd they had such powers. I’ve made inquiries. Stonce is a hamlet in the north, very ingrown. Its people marry one another. If Anvil’s family had gifts, surely others would as well. But apparently no one else there does.”

“You were the only mage in Jacob’s Vale.”

Chime thought of what Muller had told her about his visit to her home. “Some people there showed traces of mage talent, including my brothers and my mother.” Now that she knew what to look for, she remembered many other signs as well. “My girlfriend Merry is probably a red mage who can use squares. And Jacob’s Vale isn’t as ingrown as Stonce.”

Arkandy exhaled. “Whatever the truth, Anvil is here now.” He stretched his arms, cracking his knuckles. “Shall I walk you back to camp? Then I must return to my rounds.”

“If it is all right, I would like to remain here.” She glanced at Suncroft, so beautiful in the night.

“We’ve a good number of sentries here, but best that you don’t wander, Lady.”

“I won’t.” She glanced at him. “And Arkandy.”

“Aye?”

“Thank you.”

He blinked. “It is a small thing to let someone stand under a tree.”

Her face gentled. “I meant for your loyalty and friendship to Muller.”

“Ah, well.” He gave a gruff laugh. “The fellow needs me around, eh? He used to be so accident prone, I had to pick him up half the time.”

She wondered what Arkandy would think if he knew the truth about Muller’s accidents. “He is a lucky fellow.”

Arkandy grinned. “Aye, that he is.” With a salute, he sauntered back to his rounds.

Chime stood watching the castle and the countryside for a while. Scattered fires burned on hills to the west and north, where Varqelle’s men had hunkered down for the night. Nothing stirred in the battlefields around Suncroft, an eerie contrast to the ferocity that had swept across them earlier today.

The redwings trilled every now and then, but the other birds in the area seemed to have fled, leaving only the chirping of insects. Even they were subdued by the presence of so many warriors. Rustles came from the men on patrol, and a snore here and there.

Chime walked along the edge of the woods, westward toward Suncroft. She soon reached a point where she would have to leave the shelter of the trees to approach the castle any closer. Even knowing she should go back to sleep and conserve her strength, she stayed, lured by the deceptive tranquility of the golden fortress.

She made a decision. Before she could think about it and lose her nerve, she ran out from the forest and down the slope. Her feet thudded on ground packed down by hundreds of booted feet earlier in the day.

Racing hard, she imagined herself as a nighthawk soaring across the land. The sleeves of her gray tunic billowed with the wind of her passing. She reached the bottom of the hill and sprinted up the slope toward Suncroft, painfully aware that if any Harsdown sentry looked in this direction, he would see her out in the open.

As she neared the castle, it rose up before her, its walls lit by torches and darkened by shadows. The great entrance was closed, as were the side doors by the gate.

“Saints almighty,” a voice whispered. “Lady Chime, here!” A hexa-major stepped out from the shadows, an older man with graying hair.

Chime skidded to a stop next to him, her breath coming in gasps. “Good eve, sir.”

He grabbed her arm and pulled her to one of the small doors, into the protection of its recessed doorway. “What the blazes are you doing? It isn’t safe to come here.”

“Is Prince Muller here?”

The major scowled mightily. “Inside.” He unlocked the door with a ten-sided ring of keys. The massive portal creaked opened into a chamber, also ten-sided in shape, where people could leave boots and gear. Two sentries inside watched them, eyebrows raised, and a third stepped outside, taking the place of the man who was bringing in Chime.

“Why didn’t King Jarid call us back here?” she asked.

“It isn’t safe. Varqelle’s mage has breached the castle.” The hexa-major shook his head. “No one has found him yet, but the king says his spells are everywhere, interfering, damaging.” He led her across the room to a door. “No one has seen him. Perhaps it is his spells.”

Chime nodded. If someone caught sight of Anvil, he could make an “overlook” spell that would encourage them to forget his presence, overlook him so to speak. The more they saw of him, the less an overlook spell would work, but if it was only a glimpse, it could succeed.

But no—an overlook spell worked by changing a person’s mood, so they remembered an emotion incompatible with whatever the mage wished them to forget. That required the one color Anvil couldn’t use.

“He can’t hide that way,” Chime said. “He can’t make green spells.”

The major grunted. “Well, no one can find him.”

As the major opened the door, Chime focused on the vine carved into its border, a scalloped representation of shape-blossoms. Using its rounded depressions, she made an emotion spell and searched for Anvil, whose signature had become all too familiar to her.

“It is true.” She let her spell fade. “He is here.”

“You feel it, too?”

“Like oil on water.”

“So.” The sentry ushered her into the hall. “Your husband will not be pleased you’ve come, milady.”

She gave him one of her quelling looks. “And why is that? I live here.”

The major cleared his throat. “Uh, well, ma’am, he says—” He ground to a stop, his cheeks flushed.

“Yes?” Chime asked, all sweetness.

“That, ah...”

“What does he say, Hexa-Major?”

He straightened his back as if he were preparing to face a regiment of Harsdown warriors. “He says, most gracious lady, that you get yourself into all sorts of trouble and he intends to put a stop to that behavior.”

“Does he now?” Chime gave the alarmed major her most honeyed smile. “We will see about that. Lead on, sir.”

“Ah, yes.” His face red, the major led on.

Muller frowned, intent on the plans of the castle. It had been almost a century since these schematics had been recopied; the scrolls had become curled and yellowed from age, with tears in the edges of the parchment. He, Jarid, Fieldson, and Brant had spread them out on a large table in Jarid’s Octagon Room, holding them open with statuettes at their corners. Now he and the two advisors stood around the table, leaning over the scrolls, searching for signs of hidden passages or rooms that might shield an unwelcome mage.

He wished they had Della’s help; she knew this castle at least as well as he. But she was in charge of the infirmary, helping Skylark tend the wounded—and the dying.

A knock came at the door.

Muller glanced up, puzzled, an odd apprehension tickling his throat. Could some menace await them on the other side of the door?

Cube-General Fieldson straightened, looking at the king. “Shall I answer?”

Jarid continued to study one of the parchments, tracing his finger along lines indicating a corridor. He had an eerie intensity, inwardly focused. Muller suspected his cousin knew far more than the rest of them about finding places he had never seen.

After a while, Muller said, “Jarid?”

“Eh?” The king absently waved his hand at Fieldson. “Go ahead.”

As the general crossed the room, Brant pointed out another set of rooms on a scroll of the second level in the castle. “You see that ring of five-sided chambers? They don’t fit together. Spaces exist between them.”

“Those are broom closets,” Muller said.

Jarid spoke mildly, still intent on the map. “She will pulverize you, Mull.”

Muller blinked. “She?”

Jarid stood up straight, a smile playing about his lips. “Your wife.”

“My wife?”

Brant looked at them, his hand braced against a map. “Lady Chime is safe with the army.”

At that moment Fieldson opened the door.

“Good eve, Cube-General,” a melodious voice said. A golden vision swept into the room, her disheveled hair tumbling over her wool tunic and leggings. She came forward and stopped across the table from Muller. Her lovely smile did nothing to hide the flash of her eyes.

“My greetings, husband,” she said.

Ah, hell. Muller knew the signs. He was in trouble. But he was the lord in their family, a prince of Aronsdale. He refused to be intimidated. Pulling himself up to his full height, he glared at her. “What the blazes are you doing here?”

“I am glad to see you, too,” she said sweetly. “So here you are, warm and comfortable in our home while your wife sleeps in the woods and agonizes over your safety.”

Muller crossed his arms. “You should be out there with the army. You have no idea what we face in here.”

She looked around the Octagon Room, her gaze lingering on the fire in the hearth, the tapestries, the goblets of wine on a nearby octagonal table. Then she gave Muller another of her devastating smiles. “I see your terrible hardship here. My sympathies.”

“Chime.” He made his voice stern. “You must follow the orders of my officers in the field.”

She put her hand on her hip. “Yes, well, you’re so convinced you know what is best for me, you are hoisting yourself on your own metaphorical sword.”

Muller blinked. “What did you say?” Whoever mistakenly thought his wife didn’t have a biting intellect had never faced her in one of these moods.

She made an exasperated noise. “I can help you, my handsome but befuddled husband.”

His face flamed with a blush. He saw Fieldson at the end of the table now, holding his chin, his fingers over his mouth as he tried to hide a smile. Brant and Jarid were watching, too. He gave Chime his most formidable stare. “Wife,” he thundered. “You will obey me.”

“Oh, Mull.” Chime sighed. “I didn’t come to bedevil you. I really can help.”

He could tell she believed it. But that didn't change the necessity that she leave Suncroft as soon as possible. "Your magecraft is a great asset, Chime. But you should be as far away from here as possible. You don't know about the danger."

"You mean Anvil?" she asked.

Saints above. How had she known? It didn't help that Jarid, the always brooding king, was grinning. At least Fieldson had the discretion to hide his smile. Muller glowered at the king. "You find it amusing that my wife risked her life to come here?"

Jarid waved his hand. "You try telling her she can't do what she wants. See how well it works for you."

Muller frowned at Chime. "You must go back."

"It wouldn't be safe to run around in the dark out there," she said, using her most sensible voice.

Muller slapped his hand on the table. "Then why are you here? It wasn't safe to come, either."

"You need my help."

"I need you to stay put when the army tells you to stay put."

Chime fixed him with a formidable stare. "Do you want me to find Anvil for you or not?"

"No! I don't want you anywhere near him."

"I don't have to go near him."

"How did you know he was here?" Muller meant to be firm, but he sounded bewildered instead.

At the sound of his confusion, her posture eased. "Ah, love." She came around the table, not stopping until she stood right next to him. "Do not worry so."

Seeing her soften relieved him so much that he almost reached for her, wanting her warm and lovely body in his arms. He couldn't do it with his audience, of course. But he did lower his voice. "You sense Anvil?"

"I recognize his emotions."

Jarid spoke. "You can feel his moods?"

She turned to the king. "Yes. His inability to use mood spells doesn't mean other mages can't sense him. I think even he can sense green power. He just can't invoke it." She shuddered, folding her arms for warmth. "His mind is...slippery somehow. Wrong."

"And you believe you have located him?" Fieldson came around the table to Jarid so she wouldn't have to turn from the king to speak to him.

"Roughly," Chime said. "He is in this wing of the castle."

"That is more than we knew." Muller wanted to be angry with her, and he would be later, when he



didn't have an audience. But apparently she did have important help to give them. "We weren't even sure he was here."

Her face paled. "Can't you feel him?"

He froze, afraid Fieldson would understand what she meant. Only another mage would "feel" Anvil's presence.

Jarid answered as if she had spoken to him. "Only in a vague sense. More than that, I cannot say."

"But you wield so much more power than the rest of us," Chime said.

The king shrugged. "We each have our strengths. Green isn't mine. I am less attuned to him than you."

Even knowing his cousin had limitations, it startled Muller to hear him speak of such. "Jarid, do you remember the day Unbent and I found you in the forest? You were sleeping in that hollow."

"I remember. Why?"

"Somehow in your trance you gathered power from the forest, focused through that hollow. The woods seemed..." He struggled for the words. "Alive somehow. I heard a cry from your dream as if it were there, in the forest."

Jarid stiffened. "What cry?"

Muller spoke with the gentleness he usually tried to hide. "Your father. My cousin. Prince Aron."

Jarid rested his fists on the table and leaned forward, staring at the plans of Suncroft, though Muller doubted he saw them. He answered in a low voice. "I had a nightmare about my parents' death."

"I'm sorry," Chime murmured.

Jarid looked up at them. "Why do you mention this?"

"I think you have another ability," Muller said. "In your trances or dreams, your spells fill everything. It happens here, too, I think, because Suncroft has so many shapes, in mosaics, tapestries, engravings, windows, the towers, all of it. Your power fills this castle like wine fills a goblet."

Jarid straightened up. "I've no idea what you mean."

Muller spread his arms out from his sides. "I don't know how else to describe it."

"You believe that if I harness this filling spell, I can locate Anvil?"

"How could you miss him?" Muller hoped he wasn't angering Jarid by asking him to recreate a spell borne within a nightmare. "Your mind will reach everywhere within this castle."

Jarid's face took on a shadowed look. "I was asleep when you felt this spell. I have no idea how I made it."

Chime's melodic voice flowed over them. "Perhaps if you went into a trance?"

“I just meditate.” Jarid spoke tightly, obviously discussing part of his life he preferred to keep private. “I’ve never known it to. ‘fill’ anything.”

“You probably don’t realize it,” Muller said.

“Mull, I don’t know.” Jarid rubbed the back of his neck, his motions slowed by fatigue. “I doubt it will help.”

Fieldson motioned at the plans strewn across the tables. “We’ve had no other luck in locating Anvil.”

“Very well.” Jarid exhaled. “I will try.”



37

### The Chambers

Jarid stood in the circular room atop the Mage Tower. The chamber had no furniture, no paintings, no hangings, nothing but a window that looked east. The candle he had set on the sill gave only dim light, making the pale violet stone of the walls appear white.

As a child, Jarid had often snuck up here. The King’s Advisors admonished him, saying he had no business playing in a place reserved for mages. Only his mother understood, recognizing the stirring of his power.

The room fascinated him. A long-ago sculptor had engraved its walls with vines, every blossom a perfect shape: triangles, squares, polygons, circles, polyhedrons, spheres. They curved around the walls in graceful designs. The room drew him even now, when a hostile army waited outside and a deadly mage prowled his home, ready to destroy all he loved, all he had thought he lost forever and then miraculously regained. It would destroy him to lose it again. If he could, he would fill the castle with his mood spell, saturate it, until he flushed out Anvil the Forged.

Jarid sat on the floor, facing the closed door. Gradually his mind relaxed and his power gathered, focused by the engravings, the circular room, the conical turret, the mosaics throughout the castle, the great Shape-Hall, the castle itself.

He became aware of people: Skylark, a blue glow of light, asleep in the Cross Room where she treated the injured; Della snoring in bed, her dreams restless, exhausted from her mage work during the battle; Chime, warmth and fire, vibrant with life, as was the tiny mage daughter she carried; Muller, a blaze of gold light, ragged and unfinished, with a bracing purity.

Jarid could imagine what acerbic comment Brant would have about Muller’s “purity,” given the way his

cousin had wooed Chime. Muller wasn't courting now, though. His mood came through clearly; he was trying to admonish his wife. Jarid took pity on his cousin, who for all his blustering was helpless in the face of Chime's indomitable will, and sent a side spell to sooth their argument.

His main spell continued to expand. He had found many people now, but no trace of Anvil. Could Chime have mistaken his location? He reached beyond Suncroft, across the battlefields and the hills beyond. Such grief, fear, exhaustion. The soldiers wanted to go home, everyone, on both sides. He offered a spell of peace, but it wasn't enough, even with his power. He couldn't counter the years of hostility between Aronsdale and Harsdown with one spell.

A new mood came to him, one full of colors and warmth, deep and wide. Iris. His wife. She slept out there, safe in the woods, protected by his army. During the Tallwalk battle, he had blazed with fear for her life. He would do anything to protect her, even use his gifts in violence. The intensity of his emotions terrified him; what was this fierce, brilliant emotion she evoked?

His temples ached with the strain of his spell. He drew back into the castle and the pain receded. For a while he sat, clearing his mind. When his strength returned, he closed his eyes and filled his mind with images: spheres, rotating, sparkling, spinning. Their beauty saturated his thoughts. Filling. Muller had chosen a good word. So many colors filled the world.

Still he hadn't found Anvil. Chime felt certain she had narrowed the search to this wing, but even in such a limited area, he found nothing of the dark mage.

A green spell shimmered into form around Jarid, sweeping him with emerald mage power like jeweled dust. He stiffened, unfamiliar with this intrusion. But the beauty of the spell drew him, as did the strength that went deep below its glimmering surface.

Chime.

Ah... His mind relaxed and his spell blended with hers, swelling, expanding. She could find Anvil. They swept through Suncroft, through its halls, floors, walls, ceilings, shapes, and colors—

Darkness.

It hit him like ice. As soon as Jarid identified Anvil, he cut his link with Chime, shielding her from the darkness. He hadn't found Anvil before because the dark mage was alack rather than a presence. Chime had neither Jarid's power nor his reach, but she had a green ability unmatched by anyone he knew, including himself, enough to find Anvil even by his absence.

Jarid tried to brighten the cavity of the dark mage, but it stayed black. His spell glided across it like water on oil. So. Now that he had found what they sought, his advisors would expect him to descend the tower and reveal Anvil's location. But they couldn't fight the dark mage; Anvil could too easily destroy them. Jarid had to face this dark mage on his own.

I am here, Anvil. He poured disdain into the words, goading. Come, little mage.

The darkness stirred.

Jarid opened his eyes, aware of how dim the chamber had become, the candle burned to almost nothing. He wove a shield, a gold and sapphire spell made from his abilities to soothe and heal, but directed outward to protect the people of Suncroft against emotions meant to harm. He layered the spell over

their sleep and waking.

Then he waited.

The passage of time meant little to Jarid. He had spent so much of his life without reference to day and night, it no longer affected him. Just as he had meditated when he lived with Unbent, so now he sat in a trance. The candle guttered and flickered.

The gold doorknob moved.

Jarid stayed motionless, his shallow breathing the only sign he was human rather than a statue. The door opened, framing a man in its archway, a tall figure with broad shoulders and long legs, his dark hair combed back from his forehead. His black eyes seemed to absorb what little light remained in the room.

Jarid rose to his feet. "Anvil the Forged."

The man regarded him impassively. "King Jarid."

"Why forged?" Jarid asked his enemy.

"By my life. Beaten into the shape I am now." Anvil stepped into the room and closed the door. "Made strong."

Jarid cupped his hand as if he held a sphere. Light glowed within, blue, then indigo.

In response, Anvil folded his hand around the metal sphere that hung on a heavy chain from his belt. He raised his other arm, his palm out toward Jarid. Indigo sparks jumped from his hand, arcing across the space that separated them. Instead of hitting Jarid, the sparks shimmered around him, lighting his body but unable to touch him through his mage shield. The orb of light in his hand glowed, turning an intense violet.

"A violet mage." Anvil stared at him, hatred in his gaze. "It cannot exist."

"He." Jarid's gaze never wavered. "I am no. 'it.'"

"Tell me," Anvil said curiously. "Why blind and deafen yourself?" Malice honed his words. "Why no voice? Perhaps the power is too much for you, eh?"

"It will do." Jarid refused to respond to Anvil's provocation, but he felt far less serene than the façade he presented. Although he had the greater power, he lacked Anvil's experience and his ruthless nature. The darkness that scarred the mage went deeper than a lack of green. He was cold, like a windswept plateau high in the mountains where no trees survived.

Jarid focused on the sphere of light in his palm and it began to grow.

"You make spells without shapes," Anvil said. Hard edges brooded beneath his casual words.

"My spell is my shape," Jarid said.

"You cannot use your spell to make your spell."

Jarid shrugged. He couldn't explain. He didn't care how it worked; suffice that it did. His sphere grew until it filled the room with violet light.

Anvil stepped back. "I feel nothing."

"The spell does nothing but drain your power."

"Nay." Anvil's jaw jerked. His hand tightened on his metal ball, his knuckles turning white. Indigo light intensified around him. It couldn't force back Jarid's spell but it stopped its advance.

Then Anvil struck.

Pain shot through Jarid's chest as if he had been stabbed. He lurched back, his light dimming. His anger flared as it had the day Aronsdale soldiers wrested him away from his home with Unbent. But this time he faced a far darker foe. He gathered his power into a bolt and jerked back his arm. He barely regained control in time to stop himself from hurtling the spell at his enemy.

Anvil's lip curled. "Smite me, Mage King."

Jarid ignored the taunt. He brought both hands in front of his body, palms upward, cupping them to hold spheres. Blue light intensified within them until it filled the chamber.

"Stop!" Anvil raised his arm, shielding his eyes.

"It is only light," Jarid said mildly. "It heals."

"I scorn your healing." Anvil clapped his hands and the blue light in Jarid's hands turned red. Heat flared as if Jarid held scorching coals, and he jerked from the pain. In the few seconds it took to douse the spell, his palms burned, real burns, no phantom heat. Then the heat vanished, leaving him with sweat running down his neck and a searing agony in his hands.

"You cannot win," Anvil said. "If you refuse to attack, I triumph. If you attack, it destroys you. Either way, you fail." An oily smile creased his face. "Your name is a lie, Jarid Dawnfield. You are night rather than dawn. You realize this."

Even knowing Anvil was baiting him, he recoiled from the truth in those words. Yes, he was night. He had felt that way since his parents died. It made no difference how many people felt otherwise, how many considered his deed justified and his mage light strong. They didn't live with his memories. But for today, he would be light; for Iris, Muller, Chime, for everyone who depended on him, he could, this one day, be his name. Tomorrow, the next day, each day he overcame his crushing, self-inflicted guilt, he became stronger.

"Even so," Jarid said, "I will not kill you." He made a blue spell and coated his hands with it like a balm. The pain receded.

Anvil raised his arms. "Hear me, Mage King!" Outside, a crack rent the night. The window behind Jarid shattered, raining broken glass over him. His spell of healing deflected most of the shards, but a few sliced his clothes, bringing more pain.

"Stop!" Jarid stretched out his arm, his palm facing Anvil. A wall of purple light rolled out from his hand and swept across the dark mage, making him jerk backward.

“Stop my spells, will you?” Anvil laughed. “All of them! You don’t know how to deal with so many at once.”

This time thunder rumbled within the castle, a rolling crash that shook through a nearby wing. Anvil was attacking Suncroft. Jarid’s temper surged. Wind rushed through the shattered window at his back, whipping his hair around his face. Somewhere a woman screamed. Sparks jumped from Anvil to Jarid, searing his skin despite Jarid’s protective spells.

“Go ahead!” Anvil shouted above the noise. “Strike me!” His scorn fueled his spells, making flames jump within the chamber.

“Waterfall,” Jarid said. Sparkling blue light poured down from nowhere, dousing the flames, healing, calming, cooling his temper.

“Look.” Anvil motioned at the window. “See what happens to your home while you play water games.” As he spoke, another crack sounded outside.

Jarid whirled—and saw flames. The Starlight Tower, clearly visible from here, roared with fire. Nothing remained of its turreted roof except a jagged border at the top of the burning walls.

“I will bring it down,” Anvil grated. “All of it, unless you relinquish to me your life and your kingdom.”

Cries came from within the castle, piercing Jarid like a sword. He swung around in time to see Anvil make a light spell, the glowing image of a woman in the palm of his upturned hand—a perfect replica of Iris. She screamed as flames enveloped her body.

“This is what she feels now.” Hatred consumed Anvil’s voice. “Watch her suffer, you madman.”

Jarid’s rage leapt. He felt Iris’s agony—and his capacity for rational thought vanished. Power surged through him, building to an explosive peak.

Anvil kept pushing his spells outward. With a great, thundering crash, part of the wall around them collapsed, destroying the layers of Jarid’s spell that drew on the shape of the chamber. No matter. He needed no concrete shapes. He threw his fury into the orbs of light he held, turning them violet. They spun as he raised his arms above his head. Power rolled through him, building, gathering, cresting. Anvil had no idea; Jarid could destroy any spell the dark mage created, shatter it as easily as Anvil had shattered the window. He could kill this monster with one bolt or make him suffer protracted agony. His power flared, raging, and violet flames roared around his body.

“Jarid, no.” Muller’s shout came from behind Anvil. “Don’t do it!” He stood in the doorway, his body bathed in radiance, his gold hair luminous with reflected light.

The king barely heard him. He drew his spell back as if it were a spear he would drive through Anvil. Power coursed within him, wild, fierce, unstoppable.

And in that moment, just before Jarid killed, Muller lunged into the room. He knocked Anvil to the side and stumbled when a backlash of the dark mage’s power hit him.

“Muller, stay back, you fool!” Jarid shouted. He was losing control of his spell; his cousin could die here as easily as Anvil.

The dark mage grabbed Muller and swung him around, his arm around Muller's neck. "See your cousin!" he called to Jarid. "Watch him die."

"No." Jarid's voice fell into a deceptive calm. Muller stared at him, gasping for breath as he fought Anvil, his eyes taking a manic light. Erratic power flooded Jarid, an incredible power, untrained, untutored, unleashed for the first time with no restraint. Surely such an immense, indigo strength came from Anvil—but this magnificent power had a purity the dark mage would never know.

Then, suddenly, Jarid understood; the room's shape had become imperfect when the wall collapsed. Muller was using it to let his full power loose for the first time in his life. His cousin was an indigo sphere-mage.

Light flared around Muller like wildfire. His power surged, but instead of striking Anvil, it blasted Jarid. The king was already struggling to hold his killing spell; now, with Muller's spell whirling through him, Jarid lost control. Thunder crashed and light flared until he could see nothing, neither his cousin nor his enemy. In that searing moment, he knew Muller had never plumbed a fraction of his power. Stronger than Anvil, surely one of the most powerful mages ever known, Muller came close to breaking Jarid's killing spell—

But even he couldn't stop the fury Jarid unleashed.

With power coursing through him, Jarid stood, his legs planted wide as he raised his arms to the sky. His spell roared through the broken chamber. Muller's spell coursed through him, melded with his own now, bending the forces Jarid and Anvil had thrown at each other. The roof and remaining walls of the room exploded outward in a rain of debris. Wind rushed across Jarid as he stood, his arms to the sky, his body ablaze like a star.

He was dimly aware that Anvil and Muller had fallen to the ground. Muller was kneeling, staring upward in shock. Jarid fought to regain control of his power before the spell destroyed everything. His light filled the chamber, the tower, the castle, and flooded across the countryside, casting harsh shadows in the night.

All around Suncroft, on the field and hills, in woods and vales, warriors were rising to their feet. Jarid saw them clearly, though they were far away. They stood among trees and by campfires, climbed out of bedrolls, and held restless horses. All stared upward at Jarid, who stood atop the broken tower, his arms raised to the sky, mage light brilliant around the radiant pillar of his body.

Jarid thought he could stand there forever, lost in the magnificence and fury. Time lost meaning. A thousand glorious eons passed.

Only gradually did he become aware that a woman had come to him. She stood within the circle that had been the floor of a chamber and was now the top of the tower. Her hip-length hair whipped in the gales, a curling mane, gold, bronze, amber, brown, red, copper. She was fiercely beautiful, like the warrior queens of legend who blazed across the sky on horses of fire.

She spoke, but in the roar of his power, he heard nothing. As she came closer, her lips formed a word: Jarid. He should know that word, but his mind had filled with his spell until he thought he would ignite and be consumed in its fire.

She took another step, closing the space between them—and touched him, laying her palm against his

chest. With horror, he knew his spell would incinerate her.

And yet, incredibly, power flowed around and through her, and she absorbed it unharmed, siphoning the energy that streamed off him with such ferocity.

As his spell eased, he remembered his name. Jarid. He dragged in a breath, brought back from the edge of a catastrophe that could have incinerated everything he loved. This warrior mage was his wife. Iris. She stood with her hand against his chest and he could finally, mercifully, let his spell dissipate into the rushing winds.

By the time Jarid came fully to his senses, dawn had turned the sky red. Iris continued to stand with him, her gaze steady. With a groan, he took her into his arms and buried his head against her hair.

“Saints forgive me,” he rasped. He had almost destroyed it all—Suncroft, Croft’s Vale, everything.

“Such power,” she whispered. “A spell created by three sphere mages, two indigos and one violet. And you held it all within yourself.”

Jarid wasn’t ready to consider the magnitude of what he had done. He drew back and lifted her blowing away of her face. “Anvil told me you were burning alive.”

“I am not so easy to overcome.”

She didn’t fool him. Her mood echoed with the agony she had endured from that spell, which had burned her mind rather than her body. “I am glad you are alive.” It barely touched what he felt.

“And I you.” Her voice caught.

He spoke raggedly. “You are my love. Always.”

Moisture gathered in her eyes. “As you are mine.”

Jarid became aware of other people. Lifting his head, he saw Muller standing a few paces away, his face pale, his arms hanging at his side, his hair ruffled in the wind. Brant stood behind him with Della and Fieldson. Arkandy waited with Sam Threadman, Muller’s valet. Beyond them, across the razed tower, stood the other chamber, the one with imperfect shapes—except it no longer existed. It too had exploded.

Muller followed Jarid’s gaze to the blasted chamber. Then he turned back to Jarid. “It magnified my spell.”

“Yourwhat?” Della asked. The others stared at Muller in bewildered astonishment.

Jarid spoke quietly. “You saved my life, cousin.”

“Nay.” Muller flushed. “I almost destroyed you.”

Jarid shook his head. “You deflected Anvil’s spell, so it exploded the room instead of killing anyone.”

Muller swallowed. “Quite some luck.”



Luck. He wondered if Muller had any idea what he had accomplished. Anvil would have pulled Jarid's spell inside out, turning it to evil, just as he had done to Chime when he attacked her while she rode with the army, or to Muller when Anvil tricked him into losing his way in the bog. Only this time, the dark mage would have been dealing with a power unlike any other unleashed. If Muller hadn't shunted off Anvil's attack, turning it against the tower, Jarid could have destroyed Suncroft and saints only knew how much of the countryside.

Jarid looked around at them all. "Anvil?"

Iris indicated the ground. "He is gone." Ashes in the shape of a man lay there. Despite the wind lashing the tower, nothing disturbed the remains.

Jarid knelt next to the ashes, but a spell stopped him from touching them. He looked up at Muller. "How?" His voice sounded eerily calm.

"I was trying to protect you." Muller swallowed. "It seems I protected Anvil instead, even in death."

"Nay." Jarid rose to his feet. "You turned his spell back on itself. He tried to make me strike down Suncroft in flames. Instead, he incinerated him." Softly he added, "His hatred finally burned him alive."

Iris spoke to Muller. "Your protection only keeps his ashes here. He died from his own spell."

Muller just shook his head. Jarid didn't know how to make his cousin believe in himself, but this much was clear: Muller needed to master his gifts instead of hiding from their terrible, beautiful power.

Then Jarid realized who was missing.

"Where is Chime?" he asked.

"Just behind—" Iris stopped when she turned and saw no Chime. "She was running to the stairs with me."

Muller's agitation flared. Without a word, he strode to what remained of the landing at the top of the stairs and took off down the steps spiraling into the tower. Jarid followed, a weight descending on his heart. In all that had happened, he hadn't been consciously aware of a lack, but now he felt it clearly. Emptiness existed where Chime's warmth had touched them.

Tonight's cataclysm may have stolen a treasure more precious than any castle—the life of their emerald mage.



## Burgeoning Sphere

Chime walked through the night, thunder crashing above her, though no clouds darkened the sky. A great, jagged branch of lightning hit the Starlight Tower, exploding the top with a crash. Debris rained down the castle, chunks of rock rebounding off the walls.

She kept walking.

Wind plastered her tunic to her body, wrapping the green and gold silk around her. She walked down the slope from Suncroft on its northern side, putting the castle between her and the woods where she and Iris had been with the King's Army. To her left, the campfires of the Harsdown army flickered on slopes and ridges.

She continued on.

At the bottom of the hill, Chime crossed a field where the fighting hadn't yet reached. Grass brushed her calves and knees, wet with dew, soaking her leggings. She came to the next slope and started hiking up Mount Sky, the highest point in this region of Aronsdale.

Thunder rumbled, followed by an explosion behind her. She stopped and turned to the castle. The top of the Mage Tower had collapsed, leaving Jarid standing in the open, his arms raised to the sky, his body radiant with violet light. His spell roared through Chime and lit the countryside for miles around. Everywhere in the hills, warriors were rising to their feet, their heads turned up to the Mage Tower.

"Be strong, my cousin," she murmured. Then she resumed her climb up the hill.

Chime had felt the power rising in Anvil tonight the instant Jarid had found him, guided by her spell. The king had tried to shield her, but nothing could break the link that had formed between Chime and the dark mage.

When she reached the top of Mount Sky, she turned toward Suncroft, toward the pillar of light that was Jarid. The moon on the horizon had turned a jeweled green, though she had never heard of an Emerald Moon. Then she realized that a sphere of glimmering emerald light surrounded her, coloring the world.

Chime felt Anvil die.

His spirit rose into the sky as his body turned to ash. But he refused to relinquish his hold on this world. She had known he would never give up. The time had come for her to face him. He came toward her, and she stood firm within the glistening light of her enchanted sphere, the wind swirling her hair around her body.

Suddenly Anvil's spirit rushed through the air above her. He was all around, encompassing her spell, closing his sphere of emptiness around her light.

Chime pulled off the gold chain around her neck and clasped her fingers around the emerald orb. It glowed within her hand, casting light as rich as new leaves in spring.

You cannot stay, she thought to Anvil. Your spirit must pass on from this, the land of the living.

Come to me, he answered. Come to me.

He filled her mind, drawing the essence of her spirit to him. More than any other mage, any human alive, she had what he lacked, the green of empathy, of compassion, of moods felt and understood. It was the color of new life, of burgeoning fields and deep lakes. He filled himself with her spells like a man dying of thirst suddenly given a lake of clear, fresh water. He drowned himself in the empathy that life had burnt out of him, that he no longer had—because he had felt emotions too much.

“No,” Chime whispered.

“Become me.” Anvil’s ghostly voice drifted on the wind. “And I will become you.”

She tried to pull away, but she couldn’t break their link. He would fill her with himself and she would become the dark mage, giving him a body to strike at Aronsdale, not only possessing her but also her unborn child, and through her, Muller, perhaps even Jarid. He would triumph now, when they thought him defeated, and he would do it by using her.

You cannot, Chime thought. I am too strong.

You are only a tender green mage, he answered. Unlike any other, but no match for me.

Strength comes in many ways, Anvil the Forged.

And I have them all. His spirit saturated her mind.

Fear sparked within Chime, but she didn’t flinch. She accepted now that she had more within her than she had been willing to admit for so many years. Mage. Green mage. No longer would she deny her gifts, letting her doubts weaken her power.

Suddenly she remembered the incantation. Sphere-inside-out. She had used it to free herself from Anvil before. She would do it again.

No. His thought rumbled within her.

Yes. Chime prepared to speak the words.

Then she paused. The first time she had used the spell, it had left her nauseated, weakened with a darkness that she had abhorred.

But it had worked.

Perhaps she had to suffer its darkness to achieve the greater good.

No, Anvil thought. Do not.

Chime felt his mood. He projected fear. But she didn’t believe it. He wanted her to think he was afraid that she would use the incantation. But why did she know it? She had dreamed the words while he tormented her nights.

Desperation tugged at her. Sphere-inside-out. Allar nellari remalla. Was he maneuvering her into speaking those words? He reversed spells: the incantation reversed spells. It had seemed to work for her before, but doubt assailed her. Had it been a trick? The incantation might be her only hope of escaping his spirit or it might bind her to him forever.

She didn't have the mage power to overcome him. But if she didn't stop him, he would take all that mattered to her, to the people she loved, to Aronsdale.

She made her decision.

Chime lifted her arm into the air, her hand fisted around her emerald pendant, its gold chain hanging down her arm. The wind whipped down at her sleeve, leaving her arm pale and bare in the night. Lifting her chin, she spoke the incantation—backward:

Allamer irallen ralla.

Reversed, the ancient words poured into the world with clarity and light. Brilliant. Anvil's spirit cried out in horrified fury. He had never expected her to reverse a spell of reversal. His spirit whirled in the wind—and fled from her mind like a bird arrowing into the heavens.

Chime followed.

He plummeted through the clouds of death as if he had been struck by an arrow. Chime caught his spirit in her mage hands, cupping them around the fading essence that had been Anvil the Forged. Within that spirit, she found his life—the truth of his life. Mourning for the child he had once been, she drifted down to an endless ocean that filled her magescape from horizon to horizon.

Colors swirled: the red of an apple, streaming gold sunlight, the yellowing green of a leaf at summer's end, the sparkle of emerald, a forever sky, the indigo ink of a pen, the violet of night. They blended into a haze. She floated within them like a cork on the sea, drifting father from shore. A burial craft bobbed next to her, the ashes within it lifting on the wind and wafting into an endless clouded sky.

Chime drifted into the wind, spreading out, as free as light and air. Lovely music tugged her mind. It receded and she began to fade. Then it began again, pulling her back, back, back...

"...back, please." The voice, the music, became words. "Please come back to me."

She couldn't bear the grief that drenched that beautiful voice. With a silent farewell to the floating pyre, she let the voice pull her back...

Chime opened her eyes. Muller was kneeling next to her, his face drawn. "Please come back." Tears slid down his face. "Chime, I cannot be without you. Come back."

The sun had risen. She was lying on her side at the top of Mount Sky, her cheek against grass drenched with dew. The light of the rising sun slanted across her face.

She answered in a whisper. "Don't weep, my love."

"Gracious Saints." Muller pulled her into his arms, leaning over her, his body shaking. He kept saying her name over and over, rocking back and forth.

Sitting up, holding him close, Chime laid her head on his shoulder. The funeral pyre had been Anvil's spirit, shepherded to its final rest, gone forever from their world, freeing them from his rage, his

cruelty—and his agony.

“I thought you were gone,’ Muller whispered.

Pulling back, she touched his beloved face. “I cannot leave, dear Muller.” A tear ran down her cheek. “Then who would scold you for worrying too much about your clothes?”

He laughed unsteadily. “We mustn’t let that happen.”

She cupped her palms around his face. “I am so glad to see you.”

Muller kissed her. “Why did you come out here?”

“Anvil—”

“No!” He grasped her shoulders. “What did he—”

Chime laid her fingers on his lips, stopping his words. “I came here to meet him. We had to finish our business, he and I. He wouldn’t leave this world until we did. I caught his spirit and sent it home.”

He searched her face. “Are you hurt?”

“Nay, love.” She touched his temple and traced the line of his cheek. “He was kin to you and Jarid.”

He stared at her. “Impossible.”

A voice rumbled behind them. “That cannot be.”

Startled, Chime looked up. Jarid, Iris, Arkandy, Sam Threadman, and several military officers were gathered around on the grass. It was Jarid who had spoken.

Chime and Muller rose to their feet. Although they let go of each other then, Chime felt as if his arms were still around her.

“It is true,” she told the king.

Jarid’s voice darkened. “It cannot be.”

“It would explain his power,” Iris said.

Muller shook his head. “But we have no kin in Stonce.”

“I don’t know how you are related.” Chime recalled Anvil’s mind as it drifted into oblivion. “He genuinely believed what he told us about his family, how they died.”

Muller spoke quietly. “You speak as if you no longer do.”

“I saw it all. His life. It was nothing like what he describes. His friends, family, the villagers, they all treated him well. His mind, it—it buckled.” She struggled to express what she had felt in his dying, as he escaped the insanity that had tortured his life. “He was a mutant.”

“He was born without green ability?” Della asked.

“No. The opposite.” Chime spoke in a subdued voice. “He had too much. He lived in a constant mood spell. It all poured into him.” Her voice caught. “He was just a little boy. Every pain, agony, torment anyone suffered, he suffered, too. It was a nightmare that never ended. He didn’t understand. Neither did his parents; they only saw him become more and more withdrawn.” She folded her arms around herself, feeling cold. “He burned out the green within himself so he could bear to live. Then he never had to feel again. Nothing. But it drove him insane. He ran away when he was eleven, convinced he had lost his family. They probably never knew what happened.”

“Saints almighty.” Muller’s face paled.

Iris came forward. “It took compassion for you to guide his spirit on its last journey. Not many would have done such.”

“I wouldn’t call it compassion. I wanted to make sure he left.” After a pause, she added, “But even the darkest soul deserves to rest from a life that devastated.” She grieved for the child Anvil had been, a mage of unimaginable sensitivity destroyed by his own gifts.

“I have no compassion for this man,” Muller said. “He would have destroyed my country, killed my king and cousin, and stolen my wife and unborn child.”

Jarid’s voice rumbled. “He gravitated toward Chime.”

“Of course he did,” Muller said. “She’s an angel.”

Chime smiled, tears in her eyes. “Not that you’re biased.”

Iris spoke gently. “Anvil knew you could help him.”

“I don’t know that anyone could have helped him,” she said. “Perhaps I am sorry for him. But I cannot regret his passing. He would never have rested, no matter how much he destroyed. His inner demons drove him too hard.”

The clank of mail came from behind them. As Jarid and the others turned, Archer and a hexahedron-major approached them, climbing the hill. They stopped and bowed to Jarid.

“What is the situation?” Jarid asked.

Archer answered. “King Varqelle wishes to meet with you, Your Majesty.”

Jarid tensed. “Did he say why?”

“His emissaries chose their words carefully.” Archer gave a grim smile. “But I think he wishes to surrender.”

“After what happened this morning,” Fieldson said, “I would be surprised if he felt otherwise.”

“Very well.” Jarid spoke quietly. “Tell King Varqelle I will meet with him.”

Chime stood in an alcove of the Starlight Wing in the castle, looking out the window there, up at the nearby Starlight Tower. The top chamber had ceased to exist last night, blasted into rubble. Fortunately they could rebuild it. The tower had sound construction and the rest of it remained firm, including the portion of the Star Walk that led to its upper level.

The Mage Tower had fared less well; the collapse of the upper level had also weakened the lower levels. Chime could see across Suncroft to its remains, jagged and black in the daylight. But rebuild they would, including the two rooms at the top, both the chamber of perfect shapes and the chamber of flawed shapes.

In the fields below the castle, the Harsdown army was preparing for their journey home, guarded now by the Aronsdale army. Everyone had a subdued quality. She felt it herself, though she was among the victors in this unwanted war. It would take a long time for their countries to heal from the powers unleashed here.

A rustle sounded behind her. Turning, she saw Jarid in the arched entrance to the alcove.

“Your Majesty.” Chime bowed.

“Jarid,” he reminded her. “We are kin. You must learn to treat me as such.”

She wondered if either of them would ever feel comfortable with court protocols. “I thank you. But I also wish to show respect for your title.”

“And yours.” He came forward.

“Mine?” She couldn’t imagine answering to Princess Chime. She grinned. “Tree Climber, perhaps?”

He laughed gruffly. “Perhaps.”

She wasn’t sure how to interpret his mood. “Will you speak with King Varqelle soon?”

“I just finished.”

“Already?”

“At his wish, yes.” Jarid indicated the Harsdown warriors outside. “He didn’t want me to attack his army as I did Anvil.”

“But you didn’t attack Anvil.”

Jarid shrugged. “He thinks I did.”

“And you let him believe it.”

“Yes.”

“So he surrendered.”

“I would have, too, in his place.” His gaze seemed to turn inward. “Nor am I sure I wouldn’t have done

exactly what he feared. I have too little control.”

“You have more than you know.”

Jarid shook his head. He stared out at the hills beyond the castle, his silence her only answer.

After a moment, Chime said, “Did you want to see me?”

He glanced at her. “I came to talk about Muller.”

It didn’t surprise her. The news had traveled like wildfire this morning; Muller Dawnfield is a mage. Astonishment rippled through the castle, tangible to Chime. Muller would spend the rest of his life learning to deal with that truth.

“I thought he was with you,” she said.

“He was. He went to the stables, to see his horse.”

“Then Windstrider is all right?”

“Yes. Fine. Anvil left him with Varqelle’s men.” He sounded odd, as if he were taking great care with his words.

“Is he still at the stables?” Chime asked.

“No.” It seemed Jarid would say no more. But then he added, “Now Muller speaks with Brant, Della, and Fieldson.”

“Your advisors.” She wondered why.

“Yes. Also his, for the next few months.”

“His?” She stared at him, dismayed, able to think of only one reason the King’s Advisors would suddenly answer to Muller. “No! You must not leave! We need—”

“Chime, wait.” His face lit with a smile, his teeth bright against his sun-roughened skin. Suddenly he looked his age, barely a youth of twenty. “I am going nowhere.”

“But why...?”

His smile faded. “Varqelle attacked my realms. He lost. I won.”

“Yes.” Her voice hardened. “I am glad he lost.”

“I also.”

She searched his face, trying to understand. “He will leave with his army, yes? He will bother us no more?”

His voice had a shadowed sound. “You see the world in so much purer terms than the rest of us.”



She flushed. "I don't understand."

"Varqelle tried to conquer Aronsdale and kill me. I cannot let him go."

It was a truth that nothing would change. "Will you execute him?"

"Brant and Fieldson wish so. Muller says no." Jarid rubbed his eyes, then dropped his arm. "I can imprison him. I could send him to a holding in the north, in the Barrens. With guards. He could never leave."

"It seems the compassionate choice."

"Or the foolish one." He sounded tired. "As long as Varqelle lives, he may escape and rise against me again."

"Hai, Jarid." Chime didn't envy him the decision. "What will happen to Harsdown?"

When he didn't answer, she wondered what she had said wrong. It seemed she would forever stumble over her words and offend people. She resisted the urge to make a mood spell using the wall mosaics; she wouldn't intrude on her king and kin that way.

Then, unexpectedly, he said, "That is why I speak with you now and why Muller is with my advisors."

She didn't see what he was trying to say. "I know nothing of Harsdown."

His mood was quiet today. "I would like you and Muller to be my representatives there. To rule Harsdown."

She stared at him. Lead a country that size? "No! Muller maybe, but I could never do such a thing."

He smiled. "You sound like your husband. And like him, you do sorely underestimate yourself."

She didn't know where to put the immensity of what he asked. It would make ruling Aronsdale seem easy, and she had never believed herself up to that responsibility. To take on a country with so many problems would be an insurmountable challenge. "I cannot."

His voice cooled. "And yet I, after fourteen years in isolation, with no preparation, am to lead Aronsdale?"

Her face heated. "I am sorry. I don't mean to shirk my duties. But I am not you. I cannot do this." The obstacles were too great.

"You misjudge yourself. You can surmount much greater obstacles than you believe."

Chime regarded him warily. "Are you putting mood spells on me?"

"I need no spell," he said dryly. "Your face tells me your thoughts."

She put one hand on her hip. "Then it must be yelling that I cannot be queen of Harsdown."

Jarid motioned to the window, indicating the armies. "Fieldson is taking a contingent of the King's Army

to Harsdown. He will govern there during the transition. Muller has said that if you agree, the two of you can join Fieldson after preparing here with Brant and Della.”

She slid her hand over her abdomen, which had yet to begin swelling. “My child isn’t due for seven months.”

“The transition would take at least a year.” His violet eyes were vivid in the sunlight. “I need people I trust in Harsdown. And its people need to learn better uses of their land. Schooling in agriculture and animal husbandry could go a long way toward ending their poverty. Varqelle hasn’t given them that.” He regarded her steadily. “I think you and Muller could. You both have the background and a love of the land.”

It was true she had always wanted to run the orchards. Muller came from an estate that took its prosperity from farming. But loving such a life and being able to guide a country were two very different prospects.

“Would Brant and Della come with us?” she asked.

“I’m afraid I need them here. But Fieldson will be there. Skylark has also offered to go, since Iris can be healer at Suncroft.”

“Iris is sapphire?” Chime’s mood lightened. “It is hard to understand her talent. I don’t know what it means to be a rainbow mage.”

He hesitated, thoughtful. Then he said, “When you make a spell, it uses one color, yes?”

“Always.”

“She uses more.” He ran his finger along the mosaics that bordered the window, tracing out a design that were mostly blue, but with accents of other colors. “Her spells are like this. They depend mainly on one hue but include some of all. When she makes a healing spell, she soothes a little, feels her patient’s mood, gives a bit light. Her healing may have less power because of that, but she adds nuances we cannot achieve.”

“It sounds lovely.”

His face softened. “Aye. She is.”

She smiled at his besotted expression. “We all have much to learn about our gifts.”

“So Muller says.” The king shook his head. “He believes he is cursed.”

“Jarid, he is wrong. I have looked through many histories, trying to understand.”

Curiosity flashed in his gaze. “You have an idea?”

She hesitated, afraid to sound foolish. But she had to learn to express herself better, with more confidence. “I might. I believe some ancient mages used that room in the Mage Tower to concentrate their power.”

“Many of us did. But Muller never could focus through that room.”

“I didn’t mean the one you used. The other.”

“With the flawed shapes?” When she nodded, he said, “I hadn’t realized our histories recorded mages using that one.”

“Often they just say. ‘the chamber.’ We’ve assumed it meant the one with perfect shapes.” She paused. “But I’ve found mentions of a view from the window that make it sound like the chamber of flawed shapes.”

He considered her words. “You think that room existed because other Dawnfields had powers such as Muller?”

“Yes.” She paused, seeking to speak well instead of stumbling. “I think long ago, your ancestors tried to breed Dawnfield mages who didn’t need actual physical shapes to focus their power. Instead they ended up with mages who used imperfect shapes. Like Muller. War mages. Perhaps that is why Anvil had an imperfect green power.”

Jarid stiffened. “No comparison exists between Muller and Anvil.”

Her voice softened. “Muller is light. Anvil is dark. I meant Anvil’s gifts were skewed. Perhaps those traits our ancestors explored can show up many generations later, changed by the passage of centuries, even millennia.” She had seen another truth in Anvil’s spirit. “Do you recall the incantation I dreamed?”

“Allar—” He stopped. “I dislike the words.”

“I also.”

. ‘Sphere-inside-out.’”

“Anvil used it to reverse spells. Perhaps it spoke to him because he was a throwback to those ancient mages.”

Jarid grimaced. “He should have left it in oblivion.”

“Aye,” she murmured. “Muller’s spells are different. They often do achieve good, but in strange ways.”

A smile eased the severity of the king’s face. “That cousin of mine is incapable of cruelty.”

It gratified her that he understood. “His spells go awry because he can’t control them. No one knows how to teach him.”

“He has learned some. He was so accident prone when I was little. Now he has less trouble.”

“Jarid—”

“Yes?”

She spoke quietly. “You make spells without shapes.”

“I always use shapes.”

“But you imagine them. They don’t have to be real.”

“Real shapes strengthen my spells.”

“Yes. But if your ancestors did try to breed mages who didn’t need real shapes, you are what they hoped for.”

He gazed out at the countryside, becoming distant. “I had little to do all those years except meditate.”

Chime couldn’t imagine the loneliness. She wanted to hate Unbent, but he had given Jarid unconditional love, making those years bearable. Without that, Jarid probably wouldn’t have survived.

“You refined your gift,” she said. “Purified it until you could tap into your power.”

He turned back to her, his gaze intent. “I need a magic now that only you can provide. Say yes. Say you will go to Harsdown.”

She twisted the cloth belt of her tunic. “I must talk to Muller.”

“All right. Do that.” He grinned. “Then say yes.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “You are incorrigible.”

Mischief lit his eyes. “Perhaps I am.”

She hesitated. “I heard you sent emissaries to Stonce.”

“To find Anvil’s family, if they live.”

“I will weep for them.”

His jaw stiffened. “But not for him.”

Chime lifted her palm outward as if to splay it on his chest, but she held it a finger-span away from touching him, though no spell stopped her. She was too aware of the invisible shield he used to isolate himself.

Softly she said, “You must first learn to forgive yourself.”

True to his name, Vargelle the Cowled wore a dark robe this night, its hood pulled up to shade his deep-set eyes. He stood at the barred window of his room and let gusts of wind ripple over his face. They had imprisoned him in an upper room of the Starlight Wing, one well appointed with heavy gold drapes and gilded furniture upholstered in wine-red brocade. Chandeliers glittered above, and urns painted with geometric patterns held sprays of ferns. An echo-dove harp with gold strings stood in one corner.

It was still a cell.

The door rattled behind him. He turned to see its ornate gold knob turn. The door opened, leaving a tall, dark-haired man with a scar on his neck framed in its archway.

Jarid. The mad king.

He walked into the room, the gusts from the window molding his violet shirt to his muscular torso. Six guards came with him, a hexagon. He stopped a few paces from Varqelle and they stood taking each other's measure, both of them the same height, their gazes level.

Varqelle pushed back his hood, letting the wind pull at the gray-streaked hair he had tied in a warrior's knot on his neck. He felt darkness closing around him. Soon he would die. But he would go to his execution with his pride intact.

His gaze remained firm. "My greetings, Your Majesty."

"And to you, Your Majesty," Jarid rumbled.

Varqelle had no desire to exchange pleasantries with his captor. "Then it is time for the execution?"

For a long moment Jarid watched him. Finally he spoke in a dusky voice. "My men will take you to a holding in the Barrens. You will spend your life as a prisoner there."

He knew then that Jarid Dawnfield truly was mad. But he said only, "You are generous."

"Perhaps," Jarid said. "If you give me cause to reconsider, you will die."

"I shall give you no such reason," Varqelle lied. Jarid seemed painfully young.

The king inclined his head. "Good eve, Your Majesty."

"And to you, Your Majesty."

After Jarid took his leave, Varqelle went to the window and resumed studying the countryside around Aronsdale. For the first time since yesterday morning, when Jarid had brought down the castle towers with the sheer force of his mage power, he felt hope.

Varqelle had wrestled with escape plans, but none had offered any realistic chance of success. Now Jarid had changed all that. The boy was compassionate, yes. He was also a fool. Compassion weakened a person. Varqelle would never have let his enemy live. He had no doubt he would be imprisoned and well guarded, with no means of escape, especially in the desolate reaches of the northern Barrens.

But nothing was impossible, not as long as he lived.

He put his hand on the bars of his prison. Someday, somehow, even if it took decades, he would regain Harsdown, if not for himself, then for his son.

The morning of the memorial service dawned cold and gray. Chime and Muller stood at the peak of Mount Sky with Jarid, Iris, the King's Advisors, Chime's maids, Aria and Reed, and Muller's valet, Sam. King Varqelle stood in the midst of eight guards, his face somber.

They had waited ten days for the emissaries to return from Stonce. Anvil's parents came with them, an elderly couple. They did have a relation to the Dawnfield line, though they hadn't known; the names on their family tree suggested Anvil's great-grandfather had been the brother of Jarid's great-grandmother. The man had dallied with a girl in Stonce and a child came of that union. The mother knew too little about the father to find him, but they had recorded him in their family scroll, Seaborn Knoll, a name rare enough in landlocked Aronsdale to have been Jarid's forbearer. Mage gifts could remain latent for decades, even centuries, before they manifested again.

Anvil's parents had searched for years, praying they would find him or that he would return. Mercifully none of their other children had suffered as Anvil. Several showed signs of mage ability, but no full-fledged gifts.

Muller had unlocked the spell binding the ashes, and now Anvil's father held the urn that housed them. They wept for his loss, but Chime also felt their closure; finally, after twenty years, they knew what had happened and could properly mourn their son.

When the service ended, Chime had a sense of release. They had survived this war. The recovery wouldn't be easy. She couldn't imagine governing Harsdown, but Jarid's confidence buoyed her. Even more startling, his advisors agreed with him that she and Muller should go to Harsdown.

So much had changed in her life. Yet she regretted none of it. The morning had come.



39

## Epilogue

Chime sat at an octagonal table on the veranda of her home, going over the newly inked scrolls with Quill, her Pyramid-Secretary. She practiced the words of her speech. "Creating Guilds here, as we have in Aronsdale, will help establish more reasonable wages for everyone."

"They surely need some standard," Quill said. "They pay almost as much in taxes as they earn."

"Aye. They must be lowered." They couldn't keep taxing the people at this rate, but the treasury was empty, drained by the war. "All these changes will take time."

"I do think so." Quill continued working on the parchment, inking the words Chime had given her. This evening, Chime would go over the speech, preparing for her meeting tomorrow with leaders from the surrounding towns.

She gazed past the porch columns to the gardens and beyond those to the orchards. Two sphere-lieutenants patrolled the gardens; another stood at the other end of the veranda, tall and strong in

his uniform. She was becoming used to them. Before going to Suncroft, she had never realized how much privacy a sovereign relinquished.

Had someone asked the carefree girl dashing through the orchard a few years ago if she could imagine herself leading a country, Chime would have laughed and run on her way. She missed those days; they warmed her memories like sun on a field of wheat. She had enjoyed her childhood—but now she wanted purpose to her life. She wouldn't give up this life. Even more astonishing, she was finding resources within herself to achieve goals she had once believed far beyond her abilities.

A door creaked behind her. She turned to see Muller walk out onto the veranda, carrying Melody, their daughter. The baby was fast asleep, snug in a white gown and knitted white socks with blue ribbons. Muller settled on the wicker swing and beckoned to his wife.

Glancing up, Quill saw Muller. She smiled at Chime. "It will take me a while to copy your report."

"Thank you, Quill." Chime went to Muller, settling next to him on the swing. As it rocked back and forth, he handed her the sleeping baby, who was barely five months old. Melody stirred in her arms, her eyes closed, her face turning toward her mother. She rubbed her lips against Chime's tunic, searching out her breast.

"Little beauty," Chime cooed as she opened her tunic and began to nurse. She drew her scarf around over her arms, veiling the suckling baby.

"Her mother is a beauty, too," Muller murmured. "But you look pensive today."

"We so rarely get to rest." She cradled Melody. "Times like these are precious."

He touched the baby's head with that tenderness he showed only her and their child. "Yes."

For a while they sat, enjoying the moment. They had moved their household to Harsdown three months ago, two months after the birth of their daughter, a girl with wisps of gold hair. Neither Chime nor Muller had wished to live in the stark halls of Castle Escar; instead, they had come here, to a southern estate with farmlands and orchards.

Aided by advisors and assistants, they spent their days learning Harsdown. It caught Chime by surprise when Varqelle's staff began to help them. She had expected resentment, even hatred. And some reacted that way. But Varqelle had been a hard master, unforgiving and unrelenting in his ruthless drive, a king who followed the ways of his predecessors, driving the country further into poverty. Some of his staff welcomed the change.

They were establishing a program to help farmers improve crop yields. Muller was training and recruiting a new army, one led by Aronsdale officers. Chime would establish Guilds and schools. So much had to be done.

But for these few moments, they could relax.

Muller pulled out the cord with the dented ring from under his vest. "We must visit your family so I can return this to Drummer."

"Knowing it saved your life has meant so much to him." Chime thought fondly of her brothers and grinned. "Apparently he hasn't let Hunter hear the end of it."

“You don’t think it bothers them to know I am a mage?”

“Not at all.”

“Perhaps someday I will become used to it.” He paused. “I started a fire in the hearth today.”

Chime recognized his hesitation. “Was that what you intended?”

He reddened. “Actually, no. I wanted light. But at least this time I didn’t damage anything.”

“I’m glad.”

“So was Skylark. Relieved, anyway.” His lashes lowered halfway as he regarded her. “You look lovely, sitting there.”

“So do you.” She did truly enjoy the sight of him, dapper in gold and russet silk, his long legs clad in fine leggings, his white silk shirt covered by a brocaded gold vest. Sam Threadman had come with them, as dedicated as ever to fussing over Muller. Her husband had changed a great deal, but he was still the best dressed man she knew.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked.

“Like what?”

“As if I am a delectable morsel you plan to eat.”

Chime laughed softly. “Ah, Muller, you do truly fill my days full of charmed light.”

His face gentled. “And you heal my shapes, love.”

So they sat together. The future they faced wouldn’t be easy, setting a course for a restive, impoverished country. But whatever labors lay ahead, their intertwined lives and love would make it worthwhile.

The Misted Cliffs  
by Catherine Asaro



[www.LUNA-Books.com](http://www.LUNA-Books.com)

Contents

[1](#)  
[Citadel of Rumors](#)

[2](#)  
[Cobalt the Dark](#)



3  
[Castle of Clouds](#)

4  
[Storm Tower](#)

5  
[The Jaguar Groom](#)

6  
[The Skybell Bride](#)

7  
[The Starlight Engagement](#)

8  
[Borderland Glade](#)

9  
[The Airlight Room](#)

10  
[The General](#)

11  
[Fists](#)

12  
[The Tiled Pool](#)

13  
[Chamberlights](#)

14  
[The Sphere Tower](#)

15  
[The Living Sea](#)

16  
[The Citadel Within](#)

17  
[Blueshire](#)

18  
[Flame Caller](#)

19  
[The Azure Fields](#)

[20](#)

[The Mortal Spell](#)

[21](#)

[The House of Zerod](#)

[22](#)

[The King's Brother](#)



1

Citadel of Rumors

They called him the Midnight Prince.

Cobalt the Dark, the only son of Varqelle Escar, stood on a ridge and looked out across the Barrens. In the distance, the blurred towers of a half-hidden fortress made black silhouettes against the darkening sky. The Citadel of Rumors. It guarded a bleak, northern landscape.

This sunset would finish far more than one day. An era would soon end. For the last eighteen years, the people of Aronsdale, Harsdown, and the Misted Cliffs had lived without hostilities among their three countries. Tonight, the Midnight Prince would destroy that peace.

For eighteen years, his father had been a prisoner in these desolate Barrens. For eighteen years, Varqelle, the king of Harsdown, had lived in the Citadel of Rumors against his will, captured by the Aronsdale king, guarded by Aronsdale cavalry and troops, locked here in isolation while an imposter sat on his throne in Harsdown.

Now that would end.

Cobalt mounted his horse, a powerful charger. He had left Admiral, his travel horse, back in camp. This one stamped and snorted, straining to run. His advisers had cautioned him to wait for morning, but Cobalt had waited and planned for years. He would delay no longer. He drew his sword and stretched his arm straight up with the blade pointing at the sky. Behind him, six hundred warriors would be leaning forward in their saddles, ready to charge. His men would thunder out of the crimson sunset like avenging angels.

He intended to free his father—no matter what the price.

Melody Headwind Dawnfield went by the name Mel, and woe to anyone who called her Princess Melody. She sat astride Tangle, a horse from the royal stables, and rode through the orchards on her family's estate in Harsdown. The practice sword at her hip had interlocking polygons engraved on its hilt. Her yellow hair caught leaves, and she knew she ought to tie it back. She would have preferred to cut it off, but she had promised her father to reconsider.

Mel sighed. Her father was an admirable king, a great army commander and swordsman, but he cared about fashion too much. She preferred to tramp about the orchards and hike in the woods. Her behavior would be considered scandalous for a woman of the royal court in Aronsdale, the country of her father's birth, but here on their farm in Harsdown it was only odd. Her father often grumbled about her lack of decorum, but Mel knew he enjoyed her free spirit. Although she had no desire to conform, she also wished to do well in her role as heir to the throne. Someday she would have to follow the dictates of protocol more closely, but for now she had the liberty to be herself, and she relished that freedom.

She reined Tangle to a stop under an apple tree rich with green and gold autumn leaves. She loved this fertile country far more than the stark mountains to the north or the humid southern climes. The horse snuffled and shook its head, then settled down to nibble at straggles of grass. Mel sat in the saddle and braided her hair. The last rays of the sun slanted through the trees, and many shapes showed in the patches of light and shadow on the leaf-strewn ground, a triangle here, a circle there. One caught her notice in particular, an almost perfect square. It glowed with light, so bright she had to squint. Oddly enough, it had a red tinge—

The leaves within the square caught fire.

"Hai!" Mel swung off Tangle and stamped on the flames. The horse stopped grazing, but otherwise didn't seem concerned. This wasn't the first time he had witnessed her mishaps. Fortunately, only a few leaves caught fire, and she easily put out the small blaze. Tangle went back to grazing.

Mel winced. "Sorry about that." At least a horse didn't chastise her for losing control of the spell. It was more than she could say for Skylark, the elderly mage mistress who was training Mel.

She knelt by the ashes. Apparently she had exerted more control than she realized, for the fire had burned in an exact square. She focused on the square and thought of the color hierarchy of spells, from lowest to highest level: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo—like the rainbow created when light shone through a prism. She imagined the next color after red—and the square glowed orange, adding its luminance to the fading light of a gorgeous autumn day. Refocusing on yet another spell, Mel imagined the orchards in a season when their trees were thick with green leaves and green foliage carpeted the hills. The light within the square turned green—and suddenly Mel knew how much Tangle enjoyed the succulent grass.

"Hey!" Mel grinned at the horse. He lifted his head to look at her, then returned to his meal. She sat back on her haunches. Amazing. Would Skylark believe Mel had felt the mood of a horse? Green spells worked mainly on human beings, revealing their emotions. They might conceivably work on an animal, but usually only an experienced mage could achieve that level of nuance. Mel had come into her abilities relatively late in life, only within the past few years, and she had a great deal to learn.

"What do you say?" she asked Tangle. "Shall I try a blue spell?" Mel doubted she could go as high as blue, the color of healing. She struggled when Skylark worked with her on such spells and had yet to create one. Mel's mother, Chime, was a green mage, one color below blue, and Mel suspected green would be her highest color as well. Her father, King Muller, was an indigo, but he could use only flawed shapes. They damaged his spells, with unpredictable results. For that reason, he rarely called on his

power, lest his spell go awry and hurt someone.

She attempted the blue spell, with no result. Well, she was only eighteen. Perhaps she needed more time for her mage talents to finish developing. Skylark had her own theory about why Mel couldn't do blue spells. The mage mistress claimed it was because Mel preferred "hefting swords and dashing about on horses" to the more serene pursuits of healing and meditation. The theory aggravated Mel. A swordswoman needed the ability to heal just as much as did a scholar or mystic, and she deeply regretted that she couldn't manage the blue spells.

In ancient times, mage queens had ridden with the army. Sometimes a wildness stirred in Mel, deep in the night, and the fire of those ancient queens burned within her. In her dreams, she thundered across the land on a charger with her sword held high. Her people had fought no war for eighteen years and had no reason to think they might soon, but she was the only child of the king and queen of Harsdown, and regardless of what she did with her mage heritage, the day would come when she inherited the title of mage queen.

Mel had been born only months after the war with Varqelle Escar had ended and he lost his throne. Her parents became the king and queen of Harsdown. Mel had known a life of warmth and serenity, and she loved it here. Sometimes she chafed at the weight of her duties, but she also savored the challenge of her future as heir to the Jaguar Throne of Harsdown. Such a startling name, though; jaguars weren't native to the settled lands but had been brought here by sea merchants long ago. The great black cats stalked the warmer regions of southern Harsdown, rare and deadly, far too cruel a beast to symbolize her family. When she became queen, perhaps she would call it the Sun Throne.

Her mood dimmed. She would become a queen only after her parents died, a thought she never wanted to entertain. They were the suns in her life. For all that they often exasperated her, they were also the two most loving people she had ever known.

She couldn't imagine her life without them.

No scouts had detected Cobalt's company as they crossed the desolate northern lands. They had come east from the Misted Cliffs and ventured through remote passes in the Escar Mountains. Then they traversed the icy northern tundra and headed into the Barrens. They started out each morning before dawn. During part of the day, they rested themselves and the horses, both those mounts they rode for travel and the chargers they used in combat or when chasing bandits in the Misted Cliffs. Each evening they headed out again and rode in the fading light, hidden, covert, silent.

Cobalt's spies had determined that no "mages" defended the Citadel of Rumors. It didn't surprise him. He had thought long on the subject and listened to the scholars in his grandfather's royal court. He had weighed their debates about the validity of mage powers and come to the conclusion shared by many of his people. Mages were tricksters.

The country of Aronsdale—deceptive, treacherous Aronsdale—claimed only six mages of any significant power: King Jarid and Queen Iris; their cousins, Muller and Chime, the false king and queen of Harsdown; and two elderly mage mistresses. Such claims added mystique to tales of their royal House, but none of them fooled Cobalt. Perhaps they might manage a few minor spells, but he suspected they were adept at herbs and chants rather than magic. Even if they had genuine powers, it didn't matter. He was resolved to see his father given justice, and he would overcome a thousand witches if necessary.

His army gave the Citadel of Rumors no warning. They came hard and fast out of the dusk, six hundred shadows. The men at the fortress responded with admirable speed, given the surprise, but not soon enough to stop Cobalt's men from wheeling in their battering ram. Arrows rained on the invaders from the walls above, volley after volley, and then flaming oil, but it was too little and too late. Cobalt's archers returned the volleys even as his other men assaulted the massive gate. They brought it crashing down as dusk spread its cloak across the Barrens.

Cobalt's cavalry thundered into the stronghold, hundreds of mounted warriors, and also his lightmen, the riders who carried torches. As they engaged the Aronsdale forces, his troops strode behind them, their war cries ringing off the walls. They broke through to the central building and smashed open its great doors, toppling the stone dragons that had guarded the entrance for centuries. The statues shattered on the flagstones.

Cobalt's cavalry rode straight into the hall beyond. Pillars filled it, hundreds of them. Each pair of columns rose up over ten feet, then joined in a circular horseshoe arch. The circle shape supposedly focused the power of a mage, if one believed the tales. Glistening mosaics covered the arches, and red crystal spheres hung from their apexes on gold chains. Row after row of arches filled the hall, a forest of columns. Very few of the Aronsdale defenders remained and most seemed to have reached this hall. They faced the invaders, swords in hand, desperate in their final stand.

The battle raged among the pillars, and the exquisite arches toppled. One of the larger columns that held up the ceiling also fell, and a portion of the ceiling collapsed to the floor.

When several of the defenders retreated toward the far side of the hall, Cobalt's pulse leapt, for he knew they would kill his father rather than let Varqelle escape. He went after them, but a giant warrior on a black horse blocked his way. Fired with battle rage, Cobalt swung his blade through the air in a wide arc. Their swords clanged, and the force of the blow shook through his arm. Although the man had good training and fought well, Cobalt had more than just training. He had spent years leading his men while they tracked, fought, and captured the bandits and killers that made their living in the mountains and borderlands of the Misted Cliffs.

His opponent delayed just a second—and Cobalt's sword found its target. His challenger jerked from the thrust through his chest, his mouth opening as if he couldn't believe it had happened. Cobalt yanked back his sword, and the blade smashed a column covered with gilded mosaics. Broken tiles flew into the air and added their debris to the wreckage on the ground. Dust swirled. The Aronsdale man toppled from his horse and collapsed on the floor, then lay crumpled amidst the shattered tiles.

Breathing hard, his heart pounding, Cobalt looked around. No Aronsdale man remained standing. Cobalt mourned the death and destruction they had wrought here, but the courage of his opponents and the beauty of this citadel had hidden a crime too heinous to allow.

Now that would change.

Cobalt rode deeper into the hall, accompanied by eight of his men. His charger stepped over debris and bodies. He passed under a large arch and into a wide corridor. His spies had mapped the citadel, and he had memorized its layout as he had memorized every fact they gleaned about this place. He had a good guess where he would find the man he sought, for he had read everything ever written about his father and questioned anyone he could find who had known Varqelle. His father was a renowned sovereign, infamous after his failed invasion of Aronsdale. Although Cobalt had never met him, he knew more about Varqelle Escar than most anyone else alive.

It took only moments to reach the Hall of Arcs. King Jarid, the Aronsdale sovereign, gave audiences here when he was at the citadel. Now Jarid was many days' ride to the south, at Castle Suncroft, the hereditary estate of his family. The hall should have been empty.

Cobalt rode through the great entrance. The Hall of Arcs stretched before him, its walls, ceiling, and floor built from rare violet marble and engraved with interlocking circles. At the far end, six steps led up to a dais, which supported a cushioned bench where Jarid would sit with his queen or advisers during an audience. No one sat there now—but Varqelle stood in front of it, his head lifted, his eyes dark, his shoulders broad. Black hair swept back from his forehead and fell to his shoulders. The years had added streaks of gray.

Although Cobalt had seen portraits of his parents at the Diamond Palace where his grandfather lived, he had never met his father. But he had no doubt whom he faced. He rode down the hall, aware of silence behind him. His men waited outside. They knew this meeting was only for the father and the son.

As Cobalt neared the dais, he saw Varqelle more clearly, the gaunt face with a strong chin and nose, the dark eyes and brows, the high cheekbones of his royal heritage. Lines creased his face. He wore a dark gray tunic and leggings tucked into black boots, and a gray cape. A warrior's sword with a massive hilt hung from his leather belt. Cobalt knew then that he and his men weren't the only ones who had killed today; Varqelle's captors would never have willingly allowed the deposed king such a weapon. If they had tried to kill Varqelle, as Cobalt feared, then they had died instead.

Varqelle watched him with a dark, unreadable gaze. Sweat broke out on Cobalt's forehead. Would his father recognize him? Varqelle had no way to know who had attacked; neither Cobalt nor his spies had managed to send a warning. Varqelle had never known his son. Dancer, his queen, had deserted him only months after Cobalt's birth and fled with her child back to the Misted Cliffs. Cobalt had been fifteen by the time Varqelle had built up his army enough for an invasion, but his father still hadn't had sufficient force to take on the Misted Cliffs. Dancer believed Varqelle had attacked Aronsdale because he perceived it as the weakest country among the settled lands, that when his army was strong enough, he would march on her country. Someday Varqelle would have come for his heir. Instead he had lost his throne and his freedom—until now.

Tonight the son came for the father.

Cobalt reined in before the dais, then dismounted and dropped the reins. He knew this horse enough to trust that it wouldn't desert him within these walls.

Then he walked to his father.

Varqelle watched him with no emotion on his ascetic face. His hand rested on the hilt of his sword. Cobalt kept his arms at his sides as he climbed the dais. At the top, he was four steps away from Varqelle. He stood a head taller even than his father, who had a height greater than most men. It was hard for Cobalt to imagine his pale, delicate mother as queen to this man. The years had weathered Varqelle and added to his aura of power. He would crush those he deemed weaker than himself.

Varqelle said, "Well done, my son."

Cobalt's breath stopped. The silence of the citadel seemed to roar in his ears. His father knew him.

Cobalt had anticipated this moment for decades. He knew Varqelle's notorious reputation, knew his mother's fear of her husband, knew his grandfather's distrust. But Varqelle was the only father Cobalt

would ever have, and in the parched emotional fields of his life, his need to know this man had become a compelling force in his life.

Cobalt went down on one knee, folding his immense frame before his sire. Then he said the phrase he had practiced in his mind a thousand times, since he had been old enough to long for a father.

“I pledge to you my loyalty,” Cobalt said.

“I accept.” The king’s voice rumbled. “Rise, Cobalt.”

He stood, and a crystalline power seemed to fill him, as if the cold northern air seared his lungs and heart clean of emotional debris he had accumulated over the decades. He felt strong.

“I have many men,” Cobalt said. “We will take you to the Misted Cliffs. King Stonebreaker offers sanctuary.”

Varqelle’s gaze darkened. “Why? He has no love for me.”

Cobalt spoke with suppressed bitterness. “Grandfather has no love for anyone.” It had taken him years to convince the king of the Misted Cliffs that Varqelle would be of more use to him free than in prison. “He also has no male heir—except me. If you regain your crown, then someday I will inherit the thrones of both the Misted Cliffs and Harsdown. What matters to Grandfather is that the power of his house will double.”

Varqelle’s eyes glinted. “As will mine.”

“Yes.”

The king paused. “And your mother?”

Unease stirred in Cobalt, the one hesitation that had plagued him through his years of planning. He knew the rumors, that his mother had fled her husband’s brutality. Dancer had never told him what happened, despite his many questions. But neither had she tried to stop him from following his drive to know his father.

“She is well,” Cobalt said. “I would see that she remains that way.”

“I also.” Varqelle’s gaze never wavered. “The Jaguar Throne awaits us.”

As much as Cobalt wanted his heritage, he had his doubts. He didn’t believe the Misted Cliffs could defeat Harsdown and Aronsdale combined, and he had no desire to embark on a war that would lay waste to three countries. Would they repeat the mistakes of history? Two centuries ago, Jazid and Taka Mal had attacked the Misted Cliffs and nearly destroyed all three countries. They had severed the Misted Cliffs in two, but they couldn’t hold their subjugated lands. Harsdown absorbed some of the conquered territory and the rest became a new country, Shazire. It had taken many generations for their realms to recover. It could happen again, this time with the Misted Cliffs attacking two other realms. Cobalt had no wish to precipitate such a ruin.

Yet no matter what his wishes, he couldn’t have rescued his father without his grandfather’s help. So he

had made a devil's bargain. Nor was he certain who to name as the devil—his grandfather...or himself. A dark spirit drove him, restless and wild, full of anger, quenched only when he was riding hard with his men, sword in hand. He wanted to avoid war—but if it happened, he would gladly go into battle with Vargelle.

Vargelle spoke in a shadowed voice. "I accept the offer of my wife's father for sanctuary in the Misted Cliffs. But never forget, my son, that the Jaguar Throne is your heritage. We will reclaim your legacy—no matter what it takes."



2

## Cobalt the Dark

Night had fallen by the time Mel finished tending her horse and returned to the house. Her parents could have chosen to live in Castle Escar, the fortress of the Jaguar King high in the northern mountains, but they preferred the sunnier climes and milder countryside here in the lowlands. Their sprawling farmhouse had many wings, all built from sunbask wood, so warm and golden it almost seemed to glow.

Mel went in a side entrance, into the boot chamber. She smiled, thinking of how her mother, Chime, found "boot chamber" so amusing. Born a commoner, Chime had lived on a farm until she was Mel's age. She often told her daughter stories of how they all tramped straight into the kitchen after working in the orchards.

That had been before the mage mistress of Castle Suncroft had come searching for mages—and found Chime. Mel had heard the story so many times, she knew it by heart. The princes of the Dawnfield line were expected to wed the most powerful mages they could find among the eligible women of Aronsdale. So a reluctant Chime had agreed to marry Prince Muller, cousin to the king, and after a rocky betrothal, they had come to love each other. Then Vargelle had invaded Aronsdale. Mel shuddered. Had he succeeded eighteen years ago, he would have executed her father, possibly her pregnant mother as well. Mel would never have been born. It disquieted her to know Vargelle still lived, imprisoned far to the north.

While Mel cleaned her gear from her training with the army earlier that day, she mulled over the fate that had put her father on the throne. Vargelle had commanded a more powerful military than Aronsdale, but Aronsdale had mages. Legends told of armies backed by a mage queen, and those tales strummed a chord within her. In both a literal and figurative sense, mages gave light. Red spells brought warmth, orange eased pain, yellow soothed emotions, green read emotions, blue healed injuries, and indigo healed emotions. A mage had a maximum color she could use, and she could do spells with that or any lower color. Red and orange mages were most common, though they numbered only in the twenties. Yellows were rarer. The only known greens were Chime and the mage mistress at Castle Suncroft. Skylark, the mistress here, was the only pure blue. Iris, the Aronsdale queen, was a rainbow, with blue as her strongest hue. Muller, Mel's father, was the only living indigo, and legend claimed King Jarid was a



purple mage. Together, they had all helped defeat Varqelle.

“Lucky for them I wasn’t involved,” Mel muttered as she put away her practice sword. Fighting was easier. It frustrated her that she could do so little with her magecraft. She wondered if she would ever figure out her maximum color or shape. Geometric shapes determined the strength of a spell. The more sides to the shape, the more power it gave. A triangle offered less than a square, which was less than a pentagon, and so on. A circle was essentially a polygon with an infinite number of sides, which made it the most powerful two-dimensional shape. The sphere was the highest form of all, a three-dimensional polyhedron with an infinite number of sides. A mage could draw on any shape up to her maximum. Most used only two-dimensional shapes, and that was all Mel had ever managed.

She sighed. Skylark kept insisting Mel would master at least some three-dimensional shapes. Mel admired Skylark. Really, she did. But the mage mistress exasperated her no end, always pushing, pushing, pushing her to make spells Mel couldn’t manage.

Mel admired her mother, too, an accomplished green mage who used three-dimensional shapes with up to twenty sides. But Mel feared she would disappoint her. At age nineteen, barely a year older than Mel was now, her mother had ridden with the Aronsdale army. A green mage could neither heal nor add health, but she could make someone feel stronger. She could pour confidence into soldiers, firm their wills, raise morale—and during battle that often made all the difference. She could also judge the moods of their enemies, if she could get close enough without being caught, which helped her to predict their strategies, often with considerable accuracy.

When it came to magic, Mel felt more kinship with her father, though he was an indigo, for he also struggled with his spells. Indigos did more than soothe; they could actually give someone a stronger will, a happier outlook, an easing of grief. Legends of such mages were a thousand years old, from a misty age with few historical records. In modern times, no one had believed they existed—until Muller. Usually only women showed the traits of an adept, but after so many centuries of marrying powerful mages, the Dawnfield men had them, too. However, Muller’s power responded only to flawed shapes, and it made his spells crooked and erratic, as likely to injure as to heal. In the war, his abilities had been invaluable, but now he rarely used them.

With a grimace, Mel braced her hand against the wall and tried to tug off her boot. Her flaws weren’t only in her spells. People tended to ascribe larger-than-life traits to the royal family and wear blinders when it came to their faults, but her parents never missed anything. They always noticed her misbehavior, including her less-than-royal apparel and her penchant for sneaking out late at night to explore the orchards. Mel’s mouth quirked upward. Her mother might seem a paragon of queenly elegance now, but Mel’s grandmother delighted in telling tales about how wild Chime had been in her youth, running about the farm and causing mischief.

As Mel worked on her boot, she told herself she wasn’t bothered by her struggles to make spells. Just as her skill with a sword improved with practice, so would her magecraft. Both pursuits satisfied needs within her, one physical, the other mental. When she trained with the army, she felt strong, not only in her body, but also in her character; when she learned mage skills, it strengthened her mind. But it was discouraging that her talent was taking so long to mature.

The blasted boot wouldn’t come off, either. Mel yanked—and her foot popped free. She lost her balance and stumbled. She could have fallen, but with so much flexibility, she easily twisted around and caught a hook on the wall. She grinned. All that daily exercise came in handy.

“You look smug,” a good-natured voice said.

Mel spun around to see her father, the king of Harsdown, leaning casually against the door frame with his arms crossed. Gray streaked his yellow hair. At forty-six, Muller Dawnfield projected maturity and experience, and the faint lines around his eyes added to that impression. It contrasted with the portraits Mel had seen from his youth, when he had been so beautiful that people had called him pretty. They never said it to his face, though, given his expertise with a sword.

Mel had never understood why it embarrassed him that he had a lithe physique and wielded a sword with grace. She wished she had his art. She didn't care about looking tough; she never would with her slender build. She just wanted to fight well. Part of that came from her drive to feel she could protect herself and her people, and part from the satisfaction it gave her to excel at military disciplines. Chime encouraged her interest, determined Mel would grow up strong. Her instructors praised her skill and said she had a natural talent with the sword. Perhaps it was her Dawnfield blood or the indomitable spirit she inherited from Chime that made her feel such kinship to the warrior queens in her ancestry.

However, Mel still lacked her father's style with a sword. Ironically, the same could be said about their clothes. He was dressed impeccably today in a gold tunic over a white shirt and darker gold leggings tucked into knee-boots. Embroidery edged his shirtsleeves, and topazes and opals studded his finely tooled belt. He was without doubt the best dressed warrior in Harsdown.

"Hello, Father," she said.

"Where have you been?" Muller said. "We expected you at supper."

"I was doing field exercises with Lieutenant Windcrier."

Muller didn't look convinced. "He and the others were back over an hour ago."

"I also went riding in the orchards," she admitted.

"What about your studies?" He endeavored to put on a stern expression. "Your tutors say math is the only thing you aren't behind in."

Mel held back her smile. No matter how hard he tried, he could never manage to be mad at her. "I like math."

"Yes, well, you have other subjects, you know." Bewilderment tinged his voice. "And why do you dress that way? You're a lovely woman, Mel, but you act as though you think you're a boy."

She walked over to him, her gait uneven with one boot on and one boot off. Going up on tiptoe, she kissed his cheek. "I'm sorry I missed dinner, Papa."

His attempt to look strict melted. "Ah, Mel." Then he remembered himself and frowned. "You need to behave," he added.

"The orchards were beautiful today." Mel stepped back and braced one hand on the wall while she pulled off her other boot. "I lost track of the hours."

Muller sighed. "I don't know what to do with you."

She gave him her most angelic smile. "How about letting me do whatever I want?"

“For flaming sakes,” he growled. “You’re just like your mother was at your age. She always smiled at me like that and I couldn’t think straight. And she never listened to me back then.” He squinted at her. “I’m not sure she does now, either. She is just better at making me think she does.”

Mel laughed softly. “What a difficult life you have, Papa.”

His answering laugh was kind. “You minx.” Quietly he added, “I would hope for you no greater difficulties in life than a father who grouses about your clothes.”

She set her boots on the tiled floor. “You seem pensive tonight.”

“I feel odd. I don’t know why.”

“Make a mood spell.”

He blinked. “For who?”

“Yourself.” Mel went to the wall opposite the door and took her shoes off the shelf. “It might surprise you.” She often tried such spells. Sometimes they gave her unexpected insights into her own thoughts.

“I already know how I feel,” he said. “Besides, my mood spells aren’t reliable.”

Although his tone was casual, Mel knew what it cost him to make that admission. She turned around, a shoe in each hand. “They are just different, Papa. So powerful! You’re the only indigo alive.”

His face gentled. “A powerful mess. But thank you.”

“What does Mother say about your mood?”

“She thinks I worry too much.”

Mel walked over to him in her socks. “You do.”

“Is that so?” He cocked an eyebrow. “When did you become an expert on the royal moods?”

“Everything will be fine,” she assured him. “You will see.”

He offered her his arm as they walked out into the hallway. “I hope so.”

Mel didn’t see any reason to worry. Her parents had been successful with Harsdown. King Jarid had been clever to put two farmers in charge of this country, where farming was the most common way of life. Chime had spent her youth learning to run her family’s orchard; Muller’s family made their living from their lands and supported the farms of their tenants. Both Aronsdale and Harsdown exported crops and the wares of their craftspeople and imported many of the other goods they needed to live.

During Varqelle’s reign, the people of Harsdown had suffered under heavy taxes and a lack of education. Many families had teetered on the edge of poverty. Muller and Chime had instituted wide-ranging programs designed to teach people improved methods of agriculture and animal husbandry, and they had restructured the taxes to be less of a burden. They also started guilds to train teachers and encouraged villages to set up schools. Mel thought it appalling that Varqelle had wrung so much from his

country to support his war efforts while so many of his people struggled. Even now, some considered him the rightful sovereign, but in her eyes he had forfeited any right to his title when he put personal ambition before the welfare of his country.

Over the years, Mel had seen the standard of living and education rise among her people. Orchards thrived, crops grew thick in the fields, shops were booming, and merchants came often now to Harsdown.

She couldn't imagine it would ever change.

Cobalt's men rode as hard as they dared with only moonlight to guide their progress. It would have been safer to wait until morning, but Cobalt didn't want to risk that extra time. He had lost men in the battle, men whose deaths he grieved. His force was now more vulnerable to attack. It would take many days to reach the Misted Cliffs, and the sooner they were away from the Citadel of Rumors, the better.

Varqelle sat easily on the stallion they had brought for him. His confidence in the saddle suggested he had kept physically fit during his confinement in the Barrens. Cobalt had feared to find him broken in a cell. But then, if Jarid Dawnfield had been a brutal man, he wouldn't have let the deposed king live.

Dawnfield was a fool.

At the age of thirty-three, Cobalt was four years younger than Jarid, but he saw far more clearly than the Aronsdale king. Cobalt would never have allowed his enemy to live after vanquishing his army. Tonight was witness to the folly of that choice. But Cobalt was grateful to the Aronsdale king for his ill-advised compassion.

Cobalt had been fifteen when Jarid imprisoned Varqelle, and on that day, Cobalt had begun to make plans to free the sire he had never met. He had also wrestled with the knowledge that another person had taken his heritage, a supposedly masculine girl. He abhorred Melody Dawnfield, not for anything she had ever done—for he had never met her, nor had he any desire to do so—but because she would inherit the throne her family had stolen from his father.

Over the years, his spies had gathered information on the Citadel of Rumors. Aronsdale guarded the keep well, but Cobalt had persevered until he knew its vulnerabilities. He had also worked on his grandfather, Stonebreaker Chamberlight, king of the Misted Cliffs, convincing him to support the mission. As much as Cobalt had loathed asking his grandfather for help, his need to free his father had overcome even his burning resentment of Stonebreaker. When his grandfather had finally given him a force of men, Cobalt had trained them with care, taking time to know them, to assure himself of their prowess as warriors and their loyalty to his cause.

Cobalt had learned to command by pitting his small army against the mercenaries and criminals who roamed the badlands between the Misted Cliffs and Harsdown. These days, people called that territory the borderlands, for it had finally become safe to travel after Cobalt cleaned it up. His men rode with him tonight, brimming with the success of their mission.

Rock formations jutted all around like broken pieces of mammoth pottery. The land stuttered in natural furrows and ridges, and they had to slow their pace, enough to make conversation possible. Cobalt took his spectacles out of a protected sack in his travel bags and put them on so he could see the dark landscape better.

Varqelle smiled slightly. "Glasses?"

Cobalt flushed. It was hardly an imposing or convenient trait for a general. Fortunately, he needed them only for far distances or in the dark. He was a mediocre archer without them, but he didn't need them for sword fighting.

"I almost never use them," he said.

"Like your mother." Varqelle paused, then spoke with a nonchalance that sounded forced. "How is she?"

"Well." Cobalt vividly remembered her words before he had left on this mission; she made him swear that if he came back with Varqelle, he would protect her from her husband. He knew almost nothing about why his mother had left his father, and it greatly disturbed him that she feared Varqelle.

"Has she spoken to you about me?" Varqelle asked.

"Very little." Cobalt felt constrained in talking about her. To him, his father was a stranger, albeit one he very much wanted to know. But Varqelle had the right to ask. Dancer was his queen, though he hadn't seen her for more than three decades.

"She deserted me, you know," Varqelle said.

Cobalt shifted in his saddle. "I know."

His expression hardened. "In Harsdown, the penalty for such desertion used to be execution."

Cobalt stiffened. "You will not harm my mother."

Varqelle made a visible effort to relax. "I have no wish to harm her. But understand, son, I was angry for years. It is hard to forget."

Cobalt hesitated. "It has been a long time. Perhaps now you and she can find some common ground."

"Perhaps." Varqelle didn't sound optimistic. "Does Muller Dawnfield still rule in Harsdown?"

"Aye." It relieved Cobalt to change the subject. "He sits on your stolen throne."

"Castle Escar is the worse for it."

"He and Queen Chime don't live in the castle." Cobalt knew of the mountain retreat only through Dancer's descriptions. She said it reminded her of the Misted Cliffs. It sounded stark and remote, a fortress high in the mountains, away from the fertile plains and gentle countryside. Such a place could appeal to him.

"Where do they live?" his father asked.

"On a farm."

Varqelle laughed. "How dignified."

“It is a rich estate,” Cobalt said. “Its output would increase your coffers if you were king again. As you should be.”

His father gave him an appraising look, the planes of his face thrown into relief by the moonlight. “I am pleased you would have me back on the Jaguar Throne. But what army will put me there? I find it hard to believe that after eighteen years of letting me rot in the Barrens, the Harsdown army will come thundering to my side to overthrow that silly fop who thinks he is their king.”

“Muller Dawnfield is surprisingly well liked,” Cobalt admitted. “I don’t see why. He seems weak. He is reputed to have talent as a military commander and strategist, but that may be Aronsdale propaganda.” Judging from what Cobalt had heard, Dawnfield spent most of his time worrying about trees and clothes. The man’s life had spoiled him with too many emotional riches. Strength came from learning to overcome the hells a person lived. Cobalt knew. His life had made him strong. Rage often filled him, too, and a hunger to ride and fight. Perhaps now that he had freed his father, his spirit would calm.

Varqelle spoke dryly. “The Dawnfields did manage to keep me locked up for all those years.”

It felt like a rebuke, though Cobalt heard no censure in his father’s voice. “I should have come sooner.”

“You came when you could. And you did well.” For the first time, Varqelle smiled with ease. “It pleases me. You are a fine son, a man to make his father proud.”

A fine son. The unexpected compliment left Cobalt at a loss for words. He never heard such from his grandfather. Stonebreaker made no secret of his scorn.

Regardless of what his grandfather thought, though, he wanted Cobalt to inherit the Jaguar Throne. It would increase the influence of Stonebreaker’s line. He had declared Cobalt crown prince to the Sapphire Throne of the Misted Cliffs. His daughter, Dancer, should have inherited the title; in lands where royals had only one child, women often held a throne. But Stonebreaker refused to consider her. He wasn’t the first king to modify the expectation of “one heir” to “one son.” But his queen had died, and he had never re-married. That left only Cobalt to inherit. No matter how worthless Stonebreaker considered him, the fact remained: if Varqelle regained the Jaguar Throne, they could unite Harsdown and the Misted Cliffs and greatly increase their family’s power.

The Chamberlight king, however, had no love for Varqelle. He claimed his son-in-law had sorely abused Dancer until she fled home to her loving father. Cobalt knew better. His grandfather disliked Varqelle because, for a short time, the Harsdown king had replaced him as the primary force in Dancer’s life. Cobalt doubted his grandfather cared if Varqelle had taken a rough hand with his wife; Cobalt had felt the force of Stonebreaker’s blows plenty in his childhood. So had Dancer. She and Cobalt had lived in fear. But she never told him why. In fleeing Varqelle, she had gone home to a monster, and however much Cobalt might love his mother, a part of him could never forgive her for the price her decision had exacted.

The day had come in his youth when Cobalt had fought back against his grandfather. It had enraged Stonebreaker, and he had beaten Cobalt harder. But Cobalt had continued to grow, and to train with a sword and in hand-to-hand combat. When he reached his full height and weight, he towered over all other men. He had become so large that even a man as physically powerful as Stonebreaker no longer dared hit him. Cobalt had sworn to his grandfather that if the king ever touched Dancer or him again, Cobalt would retaliate. Even now, Cobalt continued to train, obsessively, with single-minded determination, as if sheer physical power could overcome the nightmares of his youth. He hated himself

for the violent fury that simmered within him, ready to flare, for he believed it made him no better than the man who had taught him that rage.

Stonebreaker had backed away from his worst violence, but his verbal attacks had never stopped. Cobalt suspected his grandfather supported this expedition in part because he hoped Varqelle would help him control his grandson. Or maybe Stonebreaker felt the years pressing on him. He had no other kin, and Cobalt's grandmother had died years ago from a fall in the cliffs. In his darker moments, Cobalt wondered if Stonebreaker had lost control during a rage and killed her. Cobalt hated him—but the king of the Misted Cliffs was the closest he had ever known to a father.

The one light in Cobalt's life was his mother. From her, he learned that love could exist within a family. Fragile and easily broken, it suffered always, yet somehow it survived. If not for Dancer, he might have become so hard that nothing human remained within him. Only she could have convinced him to call off this mission. She never asked that of him, and he could only guess at what it cost her. But she understood; he had to face his father if he was ever to appease the doubts that haunted his life.

Cobalt needed to know this man, Varqelle Escar, or he would never know himself. He had to come to terms with what it meant to be Cobalt Escar; otherwise, he feared one day he would snap from the brutal loneliness he called life and kill either himself or his grandfather.



3

### Castle of Clouds

The messengers from Aronsdale arrived late in the day. They had ridden hard, and dust covered their horses and clothes. Mel saw them pound into the yard behind the farmhouse, in front of the stables. As they surrendered their exhausted mounts to stable hands, members of the house staff ran out to them.

Her parents met with the visitors in her father's study, and Mel waited in the antechamber outside. She had changed into blue silk leggings and tunic, more formal attire, for she had recognized the white and indigo livery of the riders. They came from Castle Suncroft, the home of her cousin, King Jarid.

After an hour, her father opened the door. His expression disquieted her; it was as if an avalanche were thundering out of the mountains and he saw no way to stop it from burying them.

"You can come in," he said.

Uneasy, Mel went with him into the study. Shelves with books and scrolls lined the walls, as did star charts and maps of Harsdown. The two riders were rising from high-backed chairs near the desk, with its clutter of scrolls and ink bottles. They bowed to her parents and to her, and then left the room. Muller closed the door behind them. It all happened with an eerie quiet that chilled Mel.

Her mother stood by an arched window across the study, her yellow hair loose, flowing down her back to her waist. Chime's vibrancy was muted today, and Mel had never seen her face so drawn. Sphere-General Samuel Fieldson stood with her. He was a burly man, strongly built, with graying hair the color of granite. He had been a Cube-General during the war against Harsdown and had helped lead Aronsdale to its narrow victory. Now he served as her father's chief military adviser.

Skylark, the mage mistress, was standing by the hearth. The decades had lined her face, but her blue eyes remained alert. Her braid hung over her shoulder, thick and full, completely white. Along with Fieldson and Chime, she served in the inner circle of the King's Advisers.

A portrait of the royal family hung above the fireplace. It had been painted when Mel was six. Curls tumbled around her shoulders and her blue eyes matched those of her parents. Right now, neither of her parents had anything resembling the serene smiles in that portrait.

"What happened?" Mel asked.

Muller walked over to the desk. He gazed down at a scroll held open by a paperweight sculpted in the shape of an ice-dragon. Chime pressed her palm against the window as she watched them.

"Father?" Mel asked.

He turned and spoke quietly. "Cobalt Escar led a company of men against the Citadel of Rumors. They wiped out most of the defenders and freed Varqelle Escar. King Stonebreaker has granted Varqelle asylum."

Varqelle free and the men at the Citadel dead? It couldn't be. Mel had heard tales about Prince Cobalt from travelers. Some called the Chamberlight heir a brute, others named him a demon, but none disputed his cruelty.

"What does it mean for Harsdown?" Mel asked.

Her father pushed his hand through his hair. "Varqelle will demand I return his throne."

Mel stared at him. "He cannot!"

General Fieldson spoke. "Then he will come for it himself. His son has a well-trained force and a reputation as a formidable military leader. Stonebreaker must have supplied the men for the strike against the Citadel of Rumors, which means he is willing to take an aggressor's stance now. I doubt they will stop with the citadel."

"You mean we will fight the Misted Cliffs?" Mel asked.

"I don't know," her father said. "We have lived in peace with them for centuries. They took no side in our war with Harsdown eighteen years ago. But Cobalt is King Stonebreaker's grandson and will be the heir of two kingdoms if Varqelle regains his throne. And he has had many years to convince his grandfather to ally with his father."

Mel absorbed his words. If King Stonebreaker supplied Varqelle with an army, they would ride against Harsdown. Her father would go to war. Maybe die.

"No." More loudly, she said, "No! It must not happen."



Chime came to the desk and laid her hands on it as if drawing strength from the place where she signed documents as the queen of Harsdown. "If he invades, we have no choice but to fight."

"We must prepare," Fieldson said.

"Can we survive against the Misted Cliffs?" Mel asked. "Their army is large."

Her father answered grimly. "It is more than strong enough to defeat ours. We will also have Aronsdale support, but even if Jarid and I combine our armies, we aren't evenly matched with the Misted Cliffs. If my men start deserting back to Varqelle, their former commander, we will be in trouble."

"Harsdown has been under your rule for eighteen years," Fieldson said. "Your army is loyal."

Skylark spoke. "And we have mages."

"No!" Muller's voice exploded. "I will not see my wife and daughter ride to war. Nor you, Skylark. Gods, you're a great-grandmother. You should be knitting on your rocking chair."

Skylark smiled dryly. "I would die of boredom."

Chime came around the desk to him. "I must go. The mage queens have always ridden with the army." Her melodic voice had an underlying steel. She was far more than the lovely vision in that portrait above the hearth. The painter had seen her as a golden-haired angel, but this strong-willed woman had a power beyond what he had captured in the picture.

Mel went over to them. "I will also go with the army." Although she had never faced anyone in genuine combat, she had always known, in the back of her mind, that her day-to-day training was preparation to kill. Until this moment, it hadn't seemed real. But she could never remain here in safety while her parents risked themselves.

Her father looked as if he were dying inside. "Were you my son, I could no more refuse you than I could myself."

"Son or daughter," Mel said. "It makes no difference."

"But it does to me," her father said.

Fieldson spoke. "Muller, your wife has gone into battle before. Her help was invaluable. And your daughter is as well trained as any of the junior officers her age."

Muller regarded him with a chill gaze that Mel hoped he never turned on her. "What man encourages another to send his wife and daughter to their deaths?"

"I would have none of you go into combat," Fieldson said. "Not Mel, not Chime, not you. But what would you have us do? You lead the army and we cannot win against the Misted Cliffs without other mages. Even with them, we might lose."

Muller scowled at him. Then he swung around to Skylark. "What say you, Mage Mistress?"

"If you go to war," she said, "someone has to stay here and govern Harsdown." She nodded to Chime.

“The queen.”

“Yes.” Muller nodded. “You are right.”

“And it is true I am elderly,” Skylark said. “I would slow down the army.”

Muller gave Fieldson a pointed look. “It appears my mage mistress does not agree with you.”

“I agree about Mel,” Skylark said. “She should go. She has the ability and the training.”

“I will not send my heir to die,” Muller said flatly.

Fieldson shook his head. “If only Jarid had executed Varqelle.”

“Do not criticize my cousin and our king,” Muller said. But he sounded tired. They all had to be having the same thought.

“It might have made no difference,” Chime said. “Had Jarid executed Varqelle, Prince Cobalt probably would have raised an army anyway, to avenge his father’s death and regain his throne.”

“But why would Stonebreaker want a war?” Mel asked. “Surely he must see there would be no real winners.”

“They will consider it a victory if Varqelle regains his throne,” Chime said grimly. “No matter what they destroy.”

“Jarid sent an envoy to the Misted Cliffs,” Muller said. “Perhaps the situation can be resolved without combat.” He looked around at them. “But we must prepare the army. Just in case.”

The Castle of Clouds stood atop a massive cliff, part of a wall of cliffs that stretched to the north and south for many leagues. They towered over the lowlands and marked the western border of Harsdown with the larger country of the Misted Cliffs. Almost no one lived in that desolate region. The castle was inaccessible except to those few who knew the convoluted path to its apex. It took its name from the clouds that swirled around its parapets and walls.

Centuries ago, a Chamberlight king had built the castle for his wife. It consisted of towers—only towers—surrounded by a high wall. The white stone blended with the clouds. Spires topped the domes, and pennants snapped in the wind, each with a filled-in blue circle on a white background. The circle was drawn to resemble a sphere, the symbol of the House of Chamberlight. Flying buttresses braced the walls, and bridges arched among the towers. Two statues of ice-dragons guarded the path to the main gate. The keep had a courtyard and stables, but little else within its wall. No other construct existed like it in any of the settled lands, not in Shazire to the south, Jazid or Taka Mal to the east, Aronsdale and Harsdown in the central lands, or here in the western lands of the Misted Cliffs, which stretched from Harsdown to the western coast, where the Blue Ocean rolled to the horizon.

Above the castle, the River of Diamonds flowed through the mountains and fell in a long waterfall into the Lake of Ice. The land around the lake supported the only cultivated fields in this region. With its remote location, the castle had to sustain itself. It served as a sentry on the border, but nothing more; the royal court presided over by King Stonebreaker was in the Diamond Palace in the heavily populated

lowlands west of the cliffs.

Dancer Chamberlight Escar lived year round in the Castle of Clouds. Cobalt knew she had chosen this retreat as a refuge from the court. He also loved the fortress. In his childhood, his grandfather had only let them spend part of the year here, away from him. Cobalt had treasured those times of freedom from violence and acrimony. Then he could almost put aside his bewildered anger. He had never understood why his mother had left Varqelle for the nightmare of Stonebreaker's violence, and she had always refused to discuss the subject. She claimed she was protecting Cobalt, and he never doubted she meant it. Why go to Stonebreaker, then? True, his grandfather would never have allowed her another retreat; he would have sent his army for her if she had fled to anyone else. But he had arranged her marriage. He wouldn't have ripped her away from her husband if she had chosen to stay.

Dancer would say only that he was better off here. Was his father such a monster? Varqelle's blood flowed in Cobalt's veins. Cobalt had freed him because it was a son's duty to his sire and king, but his wish to know his father often pressed on him more than those more traditional reasons.

Cobalt and his mother had agreed he would bring Varqelle to the castle first, instead of to the Diamond Palace. Dancer wanted to face her estranged husband in the safety of her retreat. It would be difficult enough for her to see him without also having to deal with Stonebreaker.

So Cobalt took his father to the clouds. Before dawn, they headed up a trail into the cliffs. As they went higher, fog curled around them, wet against his cheeks. Wind tugged his dark hair in its warrior's queue. His father constantly scanned the austere landscape, and Cobalt didn't doubt he was memorizing the route. Varqelle had never been here before; after Dancer left her husband, Stonebreaker had forbidden Varqelle to see her.

They reached the castle in the afternoon. Its wall stood four stories high and surrounded a wonderwork of towers. Sentries on top of the wall had watched their approach, and as Cobalt and his men arrived, the massive gate creaked open.

Varqelle tilted his head back to view the towers clustered at different heights. "Pretty."

"Yes," Cobalt said. The beauty of the castle soothed him despite its stark location, or perhaps because of it. He breathed deeply. This high up, the crystalline air was seared dry of moisture.

His father fell silent as they rode through the gate. They entered the narrow courtyard that curved around the base of the towers. The gatekeeper leaned out of his window in the small tower that flanked the gate and called down to the gatekeepers. Soldiers on horses patrolled the courtyard, and stable hands in the blue and silver livery of the House of Chamberlight hurried to attend the arriving company. Cobalt and Varqelle rode side by side through the commotion.

A slender man with wispy gray hair approached them, astride a dappled horse. He wore Chamberlight livery, and a large silver medallion with sapphires hung around his neck. Tenson Gray directed the castle staff and had served here for decades.

Matthew Quietland, a taller man in homespun clothes, rode at Gray's side on a chestnut horse. Matthew had been a stable hand with Dancer's household for as long as Cobalt could remember and oversaw the stables here. An odd sensation warmed Cobalt. Very few people evoked it from him. He wasn't sure what it meant, but he did know it pleased him to see the taller man. Matthew had offered an oasis of kindness when Cobalt had been a small boy running around these towers with smudges of dirt on his face.

Cobalt raised his hand in greeting to the two men.

“Hoy, there!” Gray made his way through the commotion of arriving warriors and running servants. “It is good to see you, Your Highness.” His gaze flickered to Varqelle.

Cobalt turned to Varqelle. “Father, may I present Tenson Gray, our steward.” Then he said, “Goodsir Gray, my father, Varqelle, King of Harsdown.” He wanted to introduce Matthew as well, but protocol in the Misted Cliffs allowed introductions only for a servant of Gray’s higher rank. Cobalt had little patience with customs that dismissed a man like Matthew, but he didn’t want to risk offending his father, either.

Gray bowed from the waist. “I am honored, Your Majesty.”

Varqelle inclined his head. “My greetings, Goodsir.”

Matthew slid off his horse and bowed deeply. He could have spoken to Varqelle, but custom neither required nor encouraged it. Varqelle hardly even looked at him as he dismounted and handed him the reins, which were dyed the Chamberlight blue.

Cobalt swung off Admiral. As Matthew took the reins, Cobalt gave him what he hoped was a friendly expression. It felt stiff and unpracticed on his face, but he didn’t want Matthew to think he shared Varqelle’s dismissive attitude. Matthew’s face gentled into a familiar smile. He nodded to Cobalt, then led their mounts around the towers toward the stables.

Varqelle craned back his head to look up at the walls. “An odd choice, that, a castle of only towers.”

“But pleasing,” Cobalt said.

Varqelle quirked a smile at him. “I rather like it.”

Startled, Cobalt returned the smile. It stretched the muscles of his face in odd ways. Then he escorted Varqelle to a large tower on their right. Cliff-terns wheeled around its dome and broke the silence with their eerie cries. Cobalt felt his heartbeat in the veins of his neck, and sweat soaked his collar. He suddenly wanted to run and run until he exhausted himself. Unable to escape in such a manner, he instead escorted his father inside.

The base of the tower joined with two others to form a large hall three stories in height. Heavy beams held up its ceiling and clusters of gourds hung from the rafters. An arcade of white-washed columns painted with blue borders circled the hall and curved at their tops in scalloped arches that supported the balcony. The colonnade looked different today, though Cobalt couldn’t place why.

Then it hit him; the architecture echoed the arches that he and his men had destroyed at the Citadel of Rumors. He felt heavy, remembering the deaths. But he had done what needed doing and his regrets wouldn’t change that. What use was his remorse? It implied the hope of redemption, and he knew the truth, that his soul was parched of goodness. A man who had killed so many times—and who secretly entertained thoughts of murdering his own grandfather and king—was beyond salvation.

A figure appeared on the balcony.

She came forward and stood with her hands on the railing. Hair the color of a raven’s wing, just barely streaked with gray, framed her alabaster face and fell over her shoulder in a braid to her waist. She had a

slender, graceful build. Faint lines creased the corners of her large, dark eyes. Her delicate cheekbones and small nose gave her an ethereal aspect, one heightened by the white silk of her tunic and trousers. Cobalt had seen portraits done in her youth; she had been lovely at age sixteen, when she had borne her first and only child. The years had added maturity, elegance, and an indefinable quality that made it hard to look away from her face. Now, at forty-nine, his mother's beauty was devastating.

Her attention was riveted on the man at Cobalt's side, the husband she hadn't seen in more than three decades. Varqelle met her gaze, his expression guarded and unreadable. A sphere of glass seemed to enclose them and leave Cobalt outside.

Dancer broke the tableau first. She walked along the balcony to a spiral staircase and descended to the main hall. Cobalt was acutely aware of how slight she was compared to him and Varqelle, especially when they stood here in leather and metal armor and chain mail, with swords at their sides. How had Stonebreaker justified beating this frail woman? Cobalt didn't want to think what that said about Varqelle, that Dancer had chosen to live with Stonebreaker instead of with him.

She stopped before them with no welcome in her eyes and looked up at Varqelle. "My greetings, Husband."

Varqelle looked down at her. "Wife."

Cobalt waited. He wasn't certain what he had expected—perhaps explosions or some great revelation. Maybe secretly, in a deep place where he didn't want to admit the truth, he had hoped they might be glad to see one another.

None of that happened.

Dancer looked toward the entrance behind him and Varqelle. Cobalt could hear his men out in the courtyard; they were making more noise than usual. Probably they were excited to be home. He didn't turn around to look; this moment was too important to let anything distract him. He had told his men that under no circumstances was anyone to disturb him and his parents, not even if the castle were falling off the cliff or the sun out of the sky.

Dancer shifted her gaze to him. "Your men must be tired and hungry." Her tone was courteous. Impeccable. She was also so distant, she could have been encased in ice.

"We've had a long ride," Cobalt said. The rumble of his voice, deeper than that of other men, sounded threatening next to her soft tones. He wanted to reassure her, but he didn't know how.

"I will see that Goodsir Gray takes care of it," Dancer said.

"Thank you." Cobalt had never felt this stilted with his mother.

She spoke to Varqelle. "Perhaps you and Cobalt will join me in the Cloud Room? We could have—have tea. Wine." She caught her lower lip with her teeth.

Varqelle didn't look any more comfortable than his wife or son. Cobalt knew too little about him to judge, but he almost thought that behind his father's dark gaze and composed expression, he was...relieved? There had been no recriminations. Perhaps this might go all right after all—

"Ho!" a voice outside called.

Cobalt almost jumped. What the blazes? Surely his officers wouldn't come in now. As he started to turn, Dancer looked past him, her forehead creased—

The color drained from her face.

Puzzled, Cobalt shifted his focus to the entrance—and froze. No. It couldn't be. Not now.

Stonebreaker Chamberlight, king of the Misted Cliffs, stood framed in the archway.



4

## Storm Tower

Mel whipped up her sword to parry a blow from Bricklayer. They were practicing on a field behind the stables, as they had done most of their lives, ever since the two of them had been old enough to lift the wooden play swords Brick's father had made.

Their relative abilities had varied over the years. They had been fairly evenly matched as small children, but they had only been playing with toys then. As they matured, they began practicing with blunted metal swords. In adolescence, Mel had grown faster than Brick, and she had almost always bested him. Then he had shot up like a cornstalk, tall and gangly. His voice deepened next, and his body beefed up with muscle. For a while during that frustrating time, Mel had lost every bout, unable to match his reach or strength. Gradually she learned to take advantage of the speed her smaller size and lithe build afforded her. Now they were evenly matched again, relying on skill and experience when they challenged each other.

However, today their bouts had changed. No longer was it just exercise, a game, a friendly competition. Their lives could soon depend on how well they trained. Brick would ride with the army if Varqelle invaded Harsdown. And Mel's parents had decided; if it came to war, Chime would rule Harsdown while Muller defended the country. Mel would serve as a mage and a junior officer for the army. She saw no other path she could take in good conscience.

After a few minutes, Brick sent her sword spinning. Mel glared at him and heaved in a breath, her hand clenched on the strap of her wooden shield, sweat soaking her tunic.

Brick raised his sword. "Ho!" He sounded tired and smug.

"Ho, yourself." But Mel smiled. "Well done."

"You, too." His crooked grin revealed strong, white teeth. He was a bulky youth, her lifelong friend, neither handsome nor plain, with brown hair that flopped over his ears. A friend who might soon

die—and she could do nothing to stop this march of events toward war.

He rubbed his arm across his sweating face. “Long bout.”

“Aye.” Mel retrieved her sword from where it had landed on the packed dirt. “I guess I’m distracted.”

He laughed amiably. “By my great swordsmanship, eh?”

“Hah.”

They headed back to the house and parted with a promise to meet tomorrow. Mel tried not to imagine Brick in battle. She knew he would be a good soldier, but somehow that made it worse. He shouldn’t have to risk his life because Cobalt Escar and his outlaws had murdered Aronsdale warriors to free a prisoner who should have died eighteen years ago.

Inside, Mel walked down the hallway, lost in thought. The sunbask paneling on the walls and the paintings of the summer countryside usually soothed her, but today nothing helped.

Her bedroom was large, all constructed in sunbask, from the parquet floor to the walls, ceiling, and rafters. Rugs woven in blue and gold yarn warmed the floors. The four-poster bed stood across the room by one of the windows. Her favorite blue quilt lay fluffed on it, worn and freshly laundered. Shelves with her books took up one wall and her desk sat in the corner. It annoyed Mel that her parents expected her to study so much. She already had an education beyond what most people attained. Although her studies interested her, she felt she had done enough. By law, a person reached the age of majority at sixteen. At eighteen, she was more than old enough to decide her path in life.

As far as anyone knew, Mel was the strongest mage among the girls of her generation; as such, she was betrothed to Aron, her cousin, the crown prince of Aronsdale. About one year her junior, he had the Dawnfield good looks, dark hair, and dark eyes. He was supposed to marry the strongest mage in Aronsdale, not Harsdown, but no one quibbled over the detail. Although Harsdown was technically now a territory of Aronsdale, the two countries and their sovereigns operated on almost equal footing, and Harsdown had the larger area. Mel saw Aron once or twice a year and they wrote each other often. She could envision herself coming to care for him. But now, with the threat of war looming over them, her thoughts turned from romance to fear. As a newly commissioned officer, seventeen-year-old Aron would ride with the Aronsdale army.

Her betrothed could die.

A cry came from her bed. Startled out of her gloom, Mel squinted at the quilt. It looked normal. She went over and investigated, but found nothing on or under the covers. Crouching down, she peered under the bed.

Two yellow eyes blinked at her.

“Well, who are you?” Mel gently pulled out a small ball of fur, a powder-gray kitten. It resembled the stable cat, who had recently had a litter of babies fathered by a tomcat that prowled the farm.

The kitten mewed piteously.

“Are you lonely?” Cradling the small animal, Mel sat cross-legged on her bed. As she petted the kitten, the designs on her bedcovers caught her attention, all those chains of blue octagons on a lighter blue

background. Mel loved the quilt. At age nine, she had figured out how to calculate the interior angles of each octagon and also its exterior angles. She liked geometry. Always she was coming up with relations to describe shapes. She often later discovered that her proofs had already been worked out in her books, but sometimes she came up with new ones. Someday when she knew enough, she planned to write her own book about geometry. It all connected to her magecraft. But it was hard to imagine turning her studies to the service of war.

The mathematics of death.

Mel bent her head, disheartened. As she brushed her hand over the kitten's front leg, it mewled in protest.

"What's the matter?" Mel murmured. She examined the leg and realized it was hurt, either sprained or broken. Dismayed, she looked around her room. The window nearest to the bed was open. The kitten could have climbed up a bush outside and tumbled inside the room. Its leg had probably already been injured. She doubted that short fall would harm an otherwise healthy kitten, but it could have made its leg worse.

"We'll get you help." Mel started to stand, but the kitten cried again. She settled back on the quilt, taking care not to jostle its leg. As soon as she calmed the animal enough to move, she would find someone who could set its leg. As she petted the kitten, the octagons on the quilt shimmered and their blue grew more intense. She filled with blue light. Beautiful blue light.

"That is a lovely animal," a woman said.

Mel surfaced from her reverie. Her mother was standing in the doorway, a slender woman in a glistening tunic and trousers sewn from layers of emerald and gold silk. Her luxuriant golden hair curled around her face, shoulders, and arms. It amazed Mel when people said she looked like her mother. Mel knew they were being kind, that she resembled a boy more than a girl. She would never have Chime's beauty.

"Didn't I close that door?" Mel asked. She tended to forget, which could be embarrassing given that she had just changed her clothes.

"You did. But no one answered when I knocked." Chime hesitated. "I felt your spell. I feared you were hurt."

Mel stared at her blankly. "What spell?"

"Your blue one. The healing."

Blue?"I don't know what you mean."

"May I come in?"

"Yes. Of course."

Chime came over and sat on the bed. "You aren't hurt?"

"I'm fine." Mel touched the kitten's front leg. "She hurt her leg."

Her mother examined the kitten. "She seems fine."



“What?” Mel gently probed the leg, but she found no trace of an injury. This time when the kitten mewled, she sounded annoyed rather than in pain.

“Do you think I healed her?” Mel asked, bewildered.

Chime beamed at her. “It seems so.”

Elation surged in Mel. “But why now? Blue spells never worked for me before.”

“Never?”

“Sometimes maybe I would get a hint of something.” Mel shrugged. “But no real spell.”

“Did you do anything differently this time?”

“I didn’t try. I just—well, sort of meditated.” For Mel, it was a rare state. Usually she was too busy with her life to slow down and be contemplative.

“Perhaps you were pushing too hard before.” Chime scratched behind the kitten’s ear, evoking a contented purr. “You’re also still maturing into your abilities.”

“Maturing, pah,” Mel grumbled. “When you were my age, you had already reached your full potential.”

Chime spoke quietly. “That’s true. And I’ve never made a blue spell in my life.”

A tickling caught in Mel’s throat, anticipation and nerves. “I will talk to Skylark. See what she says.”

“I have been so proud of your talents.” Chime’s smile dimmed. “But of late I find myself wishing you had no magecraft at all.”

Mel’s hand stilled on the kitten. “Would it matter? If Varqelle takes the Jaguar Throne, I doubt he will show us the same compassion Cousin Jarid gave him. At least if I go with the army, I’m doing something to protect us.”

Chime took her hand. “We will manage. Somehow.”

Mel squeezed her mother’s fingers. Better to fight than to wait for retribution from a king bent on vengeance. Rumors ran wild now. They claimed Varqelle’s monstrous son, Cobalt, the Midnight Prince, would lead Varqelle’s army. Varqelle had never made it a secret that he considered Mel’s family “weak, pretty pretenders.” It made her skin crawl. Women weren’t always killed by an invading army, but she would rather die in combat than have them touch her or her mother.

She saw that same fear reflected in Chime’s eyes. The kitten rubbed Mel’s hand, purring, fine now. She wished the wounds among their three countries could be as easily healed.

The Gales Chamber in the Castle of the Clouds took up half the third level in the Storm Tower. Its floor, curving walls, and domed ceiling were white marble. So were the thrones for the king and queen that stood on a hemispherical dais on the outer edge of the room. White cushions softened the marble seats

and diamonds inlaid the high backs. Stonebreaker Chamberlight, king of the Misted Cliffs, sat in one throne. He wore the traditional garments of his station, blue trousers and knee-boots, and a snowy white tunic with a blue sphere on the chest. The Chamberlight sphere. Scholars claimed it symbolized the perfection of Chamberlight rule. A sapphire medallion hung around his neck on a gold chain. He was leaning slightly to the side, one elbow on the arm of his chair, his posture a study in regal carriage.

It didn't fool Cobalt. It never had.

He should have known Stonebreaker wouldn't respect Dancer's wish to face Varqelle in private. Saints forbid you might show sympathy, Cobalt thought, wishing he could pierce the king with his anger. Dancer should have sat in the queen's throne; as her mother's heir, she had the right. But she came nowhere near Stonebreaker. She stood by the door on the opposite side of the chamber, ready to escape.

Cobalt waited below the dais while Varqelle paced back and forth up by Stonebreaker. "Some of the soldiers in the Harsdown army would probably come over to us," Varqelle was saying. "I had good men."

"We cannot count on this," Stonebreaker answered. "It has been eighteen years. Many of them will no longer be in the army. Others may have genuinely changed allegiance to Dawnfield."

Varqelle considered him from the other side of the empty throne. "My men are loyal."

"It has been a long time." Stonebreaker tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Muller Dawnfield is reputed to be a good commander. He also has Sphere-General Fieldson."

Varqelle didn't argue. Cobalt approved of his restraint. Stonebreaker detested people who challenged him, and neither he nor Varqelle had any liking for the other. However, Varqelle had no military force, nor was he likely to get one by angering Stonebreaker. If they did raise an army, Cobalt knew his father expected him to act as his general. Why else free Varqelle? Why, indeed. Cobalt wanted answers to questions that had driven him all his life. He was part Chamberlight and part Escar, and he needed to know what that meant. If finding answers meant he would sweep down from the Misted Cliffs at the head of an avenging army, so be it.

"Dancer." Stonebreaker beckoned to his daughter. "Come."

Cobalt gritted his teeth at his grandfather's condescending tone. He turned toward his mother, ready to intervene, but she shook her head slightly at him. She walked forward and her silks drifted around her body. Varqelle watched her with an intensity that burned. When Dancer came onto the dais, Stonebreaker glanced at Varqelle. Cobalt knew then why the king had come here; he wanted Varqelle to see that nothing had changed. Dancer belonged to the Misted Cliffs, not Harsdown. Cobalt wondered why his grandfather had ever agreed to any marriage, given how much he resented anyone taking Dancer's attention. If it was because he wanted an heir and couldn't get another one himself, no sign of that showed in his attitude toward Cobalt.

By tradition, royals had one child. In ages past, the custom had been slightly different: they had one legitimate offspring. With infant mortality rates so high, a king made sure he had plenty of progeny available. If something happened to his heir, he legitimized his favorite "spare." Historians placed the origins of the custom in a distant past when resources were few and a sovereign concentrated them on his heir. The supposed experts of those ancient times also claimed the blood of the king and queen was somehow purer if it wasn't "diluted" among more than one child. Cobalt thought his ancestors must have been daft to believe such a theory. More likely, they used it as an excuse to dally with their mistresses.

In this modern age of physicians and advanced herbal lore, children were far more likely to reach adulthood, and society was less tolerant of an adulterous monarch. Some royals had more than one legitimate child, such as King Jarid in Aronsdale. Cobalt would have liked siblings, a younger brother or sister he could love. But he always pushed away the thought. He would never wish his miserable childhood on anyone else.

Dancer mounted the dais and stood before Stonebreaker. "Yes, Father?"

He sat relaxed, his manner deceptively casual. "You have been quiet during this discussion."

"I have nothing to add."

"Really?" He indicated Varqelle, who had gone completely still, like a statue. "Have you no opinion as to whether or not your husband should reclaim his throne?"

Her face showed no expression. "My opinion is that you and my husband are better able to judge matters of war."

Varqelle spoke. "You have nothing to say?" More to himself than her, he added, "You never did."

Cobalt almost retorted that of course a woman of half a century would be more articulate than a sixteen-year-old child bride. But he held back. He knew Dancer; she would answer for herself or not at all. She often kept her silence for the same reason Cobalt kept his: Stonebreaker. Denied the chance to use his fists, the Chamberlight king turned his words into blows. They had long ago learned that fighting his verbal sallies only invited more. And despite Cobalt's warning, even now Stonebreaker sometimes became violent. Better never to speak. However, Cobalt remained on guard, ready to intervene if necessary.

"She has always prattled." Stonebreaker motioned idly at Cobalt. "At least he never talks. It is one of his few redeeming qualities."

Dancer flushed and Cobalt stiffened.

Varqelle looked from Stonebreaker to his wife, his gaze narrowed. Assessing. He spoke to Dancer. "If I regain my throne, will you join me in Harsdown?"

Cobalt felt suddenly shoved off balance. He hadn't expected that question. But he had hoped. Saints, he had hoped. Would they try again, incredibly, after all these years?

Dancer glanced at her father. His steel-gray eyebrows drew together. It was a simple expression, but Cobalt knew what it meant. In his youth, it had preceded the king's rages, when he used his fists. Now it warned of other retaliation, such as his coming here when Dancer had requested otherwise.

She turned to Varqelle. "I have my life here."

His voice tightened. "Thirty-four years ago you swore a vow to me, Dancer ChamberlightEscar. Hardly more than a year later you broke it. You have a chance now to make amends. I would think well before you refuse."

Why must you all threaten her? Cobalt thought. Just tell her you want her back.

Stonebreaker rose to his feet. “She has given her answer.” He grasped his daughter’s arm, his large hand clenching it so hard that Cobalt could almost see bruises form. Even as Dancer flinched and tried to pull away, Stonebreaker reached for her other arm.

Cobalt went up the dais, his step firm. He stood closer to Stonebreaker than custom allowed, deliberately intimidating with his height. Cobalt was one of the few people alive who could look down at Stonebreaker.

“I can escort Mother to her suite.” Cobalt almost said the queen, but he stopped, knowing Stonebreaker would hear it as a taunt, a reminder that she “belonged” to Varqelle.

For an instant, Cobalt feared his grandfather wouldn’t release her. Then Stonebreaker dropped Dancer’s arm and turned to Varqelle, dismissing his daughter and grandson.

“You and I can continue this over wine,” the Chamberlight king told his son-in-law.

Varqelle was watching them all closely. It was a moment before he said, “Yes. Certainly.” He didn’t look pleased.

Cobalt offered his arm to his mother. She set her palm on his forearm in the traditional gesture of a queen escorted by a male relative. Her hand shook, but his body hid it from the two kings. Cobalt and Dancer descended the dais and crossed the chamber, going past the guards, neither of them looking to either side. When they came outside onto the landing of the staircase, Cobalt closed the door, leaving the others in the room, and he and his mother out here in relative safety.

“Saints.” Dancer leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.

“I should have guessed Stonebreaker would come,” Cobalt said, angry with himself. “I should have taken Varqelle straight to the Diamond Palace instead of letting them come here to bother you.”

She opened her eyes. “Don’t castigate yourself. It isn’t your fault that neither of them are easy men.”

He grimaced. “To say Grandfather isn’t easy is an understatement of magnificent proportions.”

“I would have wished a different life for you.” Moisture gathered in her eyes. “I can bring to you the Chamberlight Throne, the most powerful in these lands, but I cannot give you something as simple as the unfettered love of your family.”

“Mother, don’t cry.” Cobalt spoke awkwardly. “You gave me yours. That is what matters.”

She wiped her cheek and tried to smile. “When will you find yourself a wife? It is well past time. You need a lovely young sweetheart.”

He couldn’t imagine one that would want him. In fact, he could hardly imagine women at all. He had gone to courtesans in the past, but he found little comfort in it. He rarely interacted with anyone. In his youth, Stonebreaker had isolated him from other children, and Cobalt didn’t know how to form friendships. He had grown up with no one to talk to except Dancer, Matthew, a few other servants, and the bodyguards who protected him from assassination. If only they could have protected him from the king. Although those days of violence had mostly ended, Cobalt sometimes thought words did more harm than blows. He had little to give to a wife, even if one would have agreed to endure his presence for

the rest of her life, which he found unlikely.

“I would inflict myself on no woman,” he said.

“Why do you talk like that?” She spoke firmly. “You are a fine man, strong and loyal. You should not lose confidence in your heart or your goodness.”

“Goodness?” Only a mother would have such a deluded view of a man like him. “I killed many men to bring Father here. That is hardly goodness.”

“You didn’t imprison him. Nor are you responsible for his decision to invade Aronsdale.” Her hand gripped the stone wall. “His sins are not yours. The same is true of my father, no matter how hard he tries to make you believe otherwise.”

Cobalt couldn’t talk about Stonebreaker. His emotions there were shards of glass that cut. “Why did you leave my father?”

She went rigid. “Please don’t.”

“You never answer me. Why?”

“I did what I believed best for you. This will always be my answer.” She pushed a tendril of hair off her face. “My life with your father is private.”

“You brought me here.” Tohell. “I deserve to know why.”

“Because it was better here than there.”

“Varqelle is no monster.”

“Let it go, Cobalt.”

“I cannot.”

“I did my best.” She took a shaky breath. “Someday you will be king, possibly of two countries. It is small recompense for this life, but it was the best I could do.”

Cobalt didn’t want to argue. It hurt too much. He gestured toward the stairs. “Shall we go down? I believe the chamber musicians have a concert planned for this evening.”

Dancer hesitated, searching his face. “All right.” She stepped past, her silks rustling, and headed down the stairs.

Cobalt followed, brooding. Varqelle and Stonebreaker would plot and discuss, until finally they laid the plans for a war that would demolish all three countries, a war where Cobalt would go out and prove to Dancer beyond any doubt that he was, truly, the irredeemable monster the world believed.

The envoy from Aronsdale arrived at the Diamond Palace in the morning of a cool summer day. The fog had burned off and no longer shrouded the lowlands. Fertile countryside started at the base of the

mountains on the eastern border of the Misted Cliffs and stretched out to the west in rolling hills of green. The palace sparkled on a hillside, hard and brilliant, its spires translucent, its gilded bulb towers reminiscent of Taka Mal, a country of scalloped architecture and bridges, or of Shazire, land of silk and silver.

Lord Brant Firestoke led the emissaries. He had lived all his life in Aronsdale, more than seven decades, and had served as an adviser for the last two kings. His shoulder-length gray hair swept back from his face, accenting the widow's peak on his forehead. He had deeply set gray eyes. His austere presence had made many a young man feel callow, but beneath Firestoke's sober exterior was a man known for his integrity, humor, and loyalty to the House of Dawnfield.

He rode with an honor guard from the Aronsdale army, thirty men on horseback in ceremonial armor. They wore the colors of Dawnfield, indigo and white. At the border between Harsdown and the Misted Cliffs, a company of fifty Chamberlight men met them, and escorted them through the cliffs to the lowlands beyond.

Now the travelers clattered into a courtyard of the palace, eighty mounted men armed with swords. Although no one had forced the Aronsdale warriors to disarm, the men in the Chamberlight company were at least as heavily armed and they easily outnumbered Firestoke's men.

So the representatives of Aronsdale arrived to negotiate with the Chamberlight king.

Stonebreaker met with the emissaries in the Hall of Sapphires. It was a larger affair than the Gales Chamber in the Castle of Clouds. Diamonds and sapphires encrusted the gilded chairs on the dais and left no doubt as to the wealth of the Chamberlight king, who sat on one of the two thrones. He reigned over a country rich in resources, including the farmlands where most of his people lived and the prosperous mines in the eastern cliffs. His country exported far more goods than it imported, and it was the only settled land with a seacoast and thriving merchant trade. Even after losing a third of its territory two centuries ago, the Misted Cliffs remained the strongest and wealthiest of the settled lands.

Today Stonebreaker gave the second throne on the dais to Varqelle. Cobalt had no doubt about the message his grandfather intended for the envoy: the House of Chamberlight considered Varqelle Escar a full sovereign. It also sent a private, colder message to Dancer. By rights, she should have sat in the second throne—and Stonebreaker knew she would have done so here in the Diamond Palace rather than lose face before the royal court. But he forestalled her. He would of course say he assumed she wouldn't sit with him after she had declined at the Castle of the Clouds. Maybe that was even true. But Cobalt suspected this was retaliation. Dancer had avoided Stonebreaker when he had wanted to make a point with Varqelle, so now he shamed her in front of the royal court and the Aronsdale emissaries.

Cobalt stayed in the columns to the right of the dais, near the wall, inconspicuous. One could learn much by fading into the background. Dancer stood by another column. She had draped herself in blue silks, and she wore a long silk scarf over her head. A veil covered her face. Although she had told him she could see through the veil, it hid her face from everyone except those who looked too closely for courtesy. She wore it often at the Diamond Palace, and it let her watch while she remained hidden.

Lord Firestoke came to the dais and went down on one knee to King Stonebreaker. After a pause that stretched out longer than necessary, Stonebreaker said, "You may stand."

Firestoke rose to his feet. He was lean and fit, with the well-developed shoulders and arms that implied

he had wielded a sword often in his youth and continued to practice now. He had an aspect of intelligence, though Cobalt couldn't define exactly why. The best he could say was that the lines of Firestoke's face looked as if they had been set by a man who thought a great deal and acted on his principles.

"The Misted Cliffs bids you greeting," Stonebreaker said, giving a traditional response that indicated welcome tempered by wariness.

Firestoke inclined his head. "King Jarid sends his greetings and salutations."

Stonebreaker raised an eyebrow. "But not himself."

"He wished to come," Firestoke replied. "However, his advisers didn't consider it safe for him to travel."

Cobalt thought it an acceptable answer, neutral without being coy. Everyone in this room knew why Jarid hadn't come. Even with a promise of safe passage, which the Aronsdale king didn't have, he would have been ill-advised to enter a country whose crown prince had just perpetrated an act of war against him.

Stonebreaker, however, narrowed his gaze. "How convenient."

Cobalt gritted his teeth. What did his grandfather expect, that Dawnfield would be stupid enough to come here himself? Fortunately, Firestoke didn't respond to the dig. He and Stonebreaker continued the formalities and expected protocols, always with subtle jabs from the Chamberlight king.

As a child, Cobalt hadn't wanted to believe his grandfather acted with malice. Every time Stonebreaker had given him some crumb of approval, his hope had surged. Perhaps the king would finally accept him, praise him, even love him. He knew better now. Stonebreaker lacked a crucial trait: He couldn't interpret emotions, neither his own nor those of others. That alone didn't make him cruel. But he also had no moral sense in how he treated people. Combined with his inability to judge the impact of his words or actions, it left him unable to comprehend the harm he caused. He simply didn't care. He was intelligent, however. He knew that to rule successfully, he had to deal fairly with his advisers, officers, and royal court. But he gained some perverse satisfaction in setting people against one another, perhaps because it drew attention away from his own flaws.

Cobalt doubted anything could prevent this war that couldn't be won. His father and grandfather wanted it too much. What unsettled him even more was that a darkness within him welcomed the specter of battle.

"The answer is clear," Varqelle told Brant Firestoke. "A pretender sits on my throne. If your king does what is right and removes his cousin, we will avoid hostilities."

Firestoke met his gaze. "Harsdown attacked Aronsdale without provocation, Lord Varqelle."

Lord. Not king. Cobalt could almost feel his father bristle, though Varqelle showed no outward reaction. They were seated around an oak table in Stonebreaker's Sapphire Chamber, a circular room deep within the castle. It had a recessed floor and maps of all the countries on the walls. Cobalt had met here with his men to plan his expedition against the Citadel of Rumors, and it was here where they would

design strategy against Harsdown. This war was madness and they all knew it; Stonebreaker might have a bigger army, but not by much, and the Dawnfields had their cursed mages. Such an offense, that they sent women into battle; even worse, it worked. Cobalt didn't believe those women were sorceresses, but they did possess an uncanny ability to predict strategies of the opposing army.

"You lost the war," Firestoke told Varqelle. "Why, then, should we relinquish the throne?"

Varqelle answered in a shadowed voice. "You will not win another war. The Jaguar Throne has been held by the House of Escar for over a thousand years."

"No longer," Firestoke said.

"For now," Varqelle said. He and Cobalt had both worn black to this meeting: boots, heavy trousers, tunic, and shirt, all black. It was the color of the jaguar. Cobalt had never seen his father in any other color, except for the studs in his ears, the blue diamonds. They came from the colors of Escar, black with blue accents. Cobalt blue. It was the origin of his name. The colors would fly again in Harsdown when the House of Escar regained the throne—if they didn't obliterate Harsdown, Aronsdale, and the Misted Cliffs in the process.

Stonebreaker sat back in his chair. "We are three old men arguing about a war that we are too old to fight." He waved at Cobalt. "There is your general. The Midnight Prince, a man without a conscience. The lord who never speaks." He leaned toward Cobalt. "What say you, Grandson? Shall we descend on Harsdown and destroy all the gains they have made in the past eighteen years?"

Varqelle stiffened and his jaw clenched. Cobalt shook his head almost imperceptibly at his father, hoping he understood the caution to restrain himself. Stonebreaker was perfectly aware he had insulted his son-in-law. Parrying his verbal sallies would only escalate the exchange. One of Stonebreaker's greatest "gifts" was the ability to manipulate other people into tearing each other apart while he sat back and listened.

Cobalt had never heard his grandfather admit he was wrong about anything. When Stonebreaker erred or hurt someone, he turned around and accused them. He was an expert at it. He could stir up anger until everyone believed that the person wronged had committed the offense. Cobalt had reached the point where he never responded to his grandfather unless it was absolutely necessary. His silence was his protection.

Now, however, he had to answer or lose face. He had set these events into motion and he would gladly fight for the Jaguar Throne, but he didn't want to wipe out Harsdown in the process. His father's people shouldn't have to die so they could become his people again. Unfortunately, Cobalt saw no alternative that would return the throne to the House of Escar.

Cobalt spoke quietly. "I have no wish to destroy anything."

"You refuse to lead your father's army?" Stonebreaker asked.

Cobalt gritted his teeth. Grandfather knew damn well that wasn't what he had said. He could tell Varqelle was growing angry.

"My father is a brilliant leader," Cobalt said. "I will support him however he sees fit."

"Will you?" Stonebreaker glanced at Varqelle, then at Firestoke. "It seems my grandson will ride on



Harsdown.”

Cobalt knew what Stonebreaker was doing. The king didn’t want blame as the one who declared war, but neither did he want the House of Chamberlight to lose its claim on the Jaguar Throne. Varqelle couldn’t retake the throne without an army, but if Stonebreaker supplied those forces, it would end centuries of wary peace between Aronsdale and the Misted Cliffs. The Chamberlight king wanted Aronsdale to believe other people agitated for this war. Not him.

Varqelle spoke to Firestoke. “You have our response for King Jarid. Return the throne or we will take it by force.”

“You failed the last time you sought to break Aronsdale.” Anger edged Firestoke’s words. “Will you try again and destroy three countries?” He jerked his head toward Cobalt. “Aronsdale has already seen what violence your general is capable of.”

Cobalt clenched his fist under the table, on his knee. He had set himself up for this, for it had been the only way to enlist his grandfather’s support. Stonebreaker would get the power he wanted and his grandson would have the notoriety. Cobalt’s large size and forbidding nature didn’t help; just by themselves, they darkened his reputation. He would regain the throne if he could, but damned if he would let Stonebreaker make him look like a monster.

“I do not wish to see three countries ruined,” Cobalt said.

Firestoke met his gaze. “Yet you threaten us—surrender or fight. We will not submit to these demands. This will be true no matter how many threats you make.”

“We have given you our terms,” Varqelle told Firestoke. “Take them to your king. We will await his response.”

“I already know his response,” Firestoke said. “He will never surrender Harsdown. That is why he sent me here.”

“Then it is decided.” Varqelle’s voice rumbled. “And you are fools.”

Firestoke rose to his feet. “We will defeat you again, Lord Varqelle.”

Cobalt’s father stood as well. “You would do well to remember that the man you address will soon be your king.”

Firestoke faced him across the table. “You will never rule in Aronsdale. Not as long as I live.”

“I wager that will not be long,” Varqelle said.

“You threaten my life?” Firestoke asked, his tone hard.

A muscle jerked in Varqelle’s cheek. “You are here only on our tolerance.”

Stonebreaker was watching the confrontation with an avid interest that sickened Cobalt. The Chamberlight king glanced at Varqelle, who met his gaze. Then Varqelle beckoned the guards posted at the door. “If you would escort Lord Firestoke to a place of custody.”

Damnation! Cobalt knew exactly what such “custody” meant. They would kill the envoy as a message to King Jarid. The situation was spinning out of control. Even if the Houses of Chamberlight and Dawnfield had already declared hostilities, murdering such an honored emissary would inflame an already volatile situation.

Cobalt stood up. “No.”

Everyone turned to him.

“You would proceed in another manner?” Varqelle asked.

“Yes.” How? Cobalt thought fast. He had to get Firestoke safely out of the country, but in a way his father wouldn’t see as a betrayal.

The answer came to him with sudden, blinding clarity. By freeing his father and setting up this situation, he had forced the House of Dawnfield into a corner. They knew what Stonebreaker’s armies could do to them. They would be desperate. It gave him the perfect chance to take what they would never otherwise give. He suddenly knew how he could attain his goal—Harsdown—without destruction.

Both triumph and foreboding filled Cobalt. “I have a proposal for your king,” he told Firestoke. “I would have his answer without delay.” They had to let the envoy return to Aronsdale if Cobalt wanted him to carry the proposal.

Firestoke went very still. “Yes?”

Cobalt regarded him with an unwavering gaze. “I propose that I marry Muller Dawnfield’s daughter, the current heir to the Jaguar Throne.”



5

### The Jaguar Groom

In the silence that followed Cobalt’s words, he thought he could hear his own pulse. His insane proposal made perfect sense. If he married Melody Dawnfield, she became Melody Dawnfield Escar. Their child would inherit the Jaguar Throne. It would return the title to the House of Escar without shedding one drop of blood.

Varqelle stared at Cobalt as if his son had grown a second head. For once Stonebreaker seemed at a loss for a comeback.

Brant Firestoke narrowed his gaze at Cobalt. Then he said, “I will carry your proposal to King Jarid.”

Stonebreaker slowly rose to his feet. “So you have come around after all,” he told Cobalt.

After all? Cobalt could have socked him. Stonebreaker wanted it to sound as if he had suggested the marriage and his grandson had resisted until now.

Cobalt crossed his arms. “I hope you won’t continue your attempts to talk me out of this, Grandfather. My decision is made.”

A muscle twitched in Stonebreaker’s cheek. He didn’t like his own duplicitous methods turned against him. Well, he could live with it. Either that, or he could start a verbal war right here and weaken their position.

Stonebreaker turned to Firestoke. “My men will escort you to the border. We await King Jarid’s response.”

Relief washed over Cobalt, though he schooled his face to keep it hidden. He had no wish to marry a Dawnfield, especially not a woman who reputedly looked like a man, but it would achieve their ends. The proposal probably wouldn’t satisfy his father; it would put his grandson on the throne, not him. But Varqelle surely saw the advantage of protecting Harsdown—his country, his people, and his home. Although the idea wasn’t perfect, it just might work.

If Dawnfield agreed.

The creak of stable doors awoke Mel. She lifted her head from her pillow and peered into the darkness. Predawn light sifted through the window nearest her bed. The stamp of hooves and the snort of horses came from outside.

Mel got up and went to the window. A short distance behind the house, men were dismounting from horses. They wore the livery of King Jarid at Castle Suncroft. Her father was out there as well, a robe over his sleep shirt and trousers as he spoke in a hushed voice with the visitors.

She laid her hand against the diamond shapes engraved in the window frame. Closing her eyes, she imagined green leaves and lush grass. A spell grew within her, and she probed her father’s mood. The diamond was a weak shape, just two dimensions with only four sides, so her spell picked up only a vague sense. Something dismayed him—

Her?

Mel opened her eyes. She could think of nothing she could have done to trouble her father, at least beyond the normal state of affairs. She went to her bed and moved the sleeping kitten off her robe. As she pulled on the velvet dressing gown, she left her room and padded barefoot down the hall.

It was cool outside. Mel walked through the gardens behind the house and approached the stables, where her father was talking to the messengers, and stable hands were seeing to their horses. In the flurry of all that activity, no one noticed Mel.

“It is worse than her riding with my cavalry,” her father told one visitor, a craggy man with a sunburned face. Muller was clenching a scroll with the seal of Castle Suncroft.

“King Jarid won’t force her to accept the decision,” the man said. “It is her choice.”

“What choice?” Mel asked behind them.

Muller spun around. When Mel saw his look of pain, she realized what had happened and a chill went through her. “It has begun, then? Vargelle has invaded?”

“How much did you hear?” Muller asked.

She pushed her hand through her tangled hair. “That you believe a choice I have to make could be worse than riding with your army.”

He spoke with difficulty. “Mel—”

“Tell me.” She felt as if she were about to fall.

“Stonebreaker has a proposal that will avoid this war.”

Such news should have overjoyed him. Why did he look as if he were attending a funeral? “What is it?”

He didn’t answer. When the moment stretched out too long, Mel said, “Father? What do they propose?”

He spoke in a dull voice. “That you and Prince Cobalt wed.”

Mel waited for him to laugh. It was a horrendous joke, one she would never have imagined from him.

He didn’t smile.

Finally she found her voice. “This is a terrible jest.”

He looked as if he had aged ten years. “It is no jest.”

“No.” She couldn’t accept that.

“It is the perfect solution.” Bitterness edged Muller’s voice. “Brilliant. The Misted Cliffs win. Chamberlight wins. Escar wins. Everyone wins.” Grimly he added, “Except us.”

“No! Father, no.”

“Gods forgive me, Mel, but I could never see you marry that man no matter how much it would mean for our people.”

Mel folded her arms and shivered in the chill autumn morning. “Cobalt the Dark is crazy.”

“They are all crazy,” Muller said, “if they think I would give you to such a monster.”

“I am betrothed to Aron.”

Her father lifted the scroll he held. “This includes a letter signed by both King Jarid and his son Aron. It releases you from your betrothal if you decide to accept the Chamberlight proposal.”

Her mind whirled. “And if I don’t agree?”

“The Misted Cliffs will invade.” His fist gripped the scroll. “They swear they will not stop until the House of Dawnfield is destroyed in both Aronsdale and Harsdown.”

Mel felt ill. “They could succeed.”

“It is a devil’s offer!” her father said.

“What devil?” a sleepy voice asked.

Mel spun around just as her mother ambled up to them, dressed in her robe and silk pajamas, her hair tousled. The queen smiled drowsily. “You are all up early.” As she looked from Mel to Muller, her smile faded. “What happened?”

Muller told her, briefly, without comment. He needed none. His pale face said it all.

“This is ludicrous.” Chime stared at him. “They believe we would sacrifice our daughter so they can steal the throne they lost through their own belligerence?”

The world seemed to tilt around Mel. “If I tell them no, many of our people could lose their lives, lands, and homes.”

Her father lifted his chin. “We can defeat any army the Misted Cliffs sends against us.”

“Can we?” Mel felt as if a band were tightening around her torso, cutting off her breath. “They are so strong.”

“We will find a way,” Muller said. His hollow expression belied the confidence he was trying to project.

“At what cost?” Mel whispered.

“Ah, saints.” Chime held out her arms, and Mel went to her mother. Chime held her, and Mel hugged her hard, unable to stop shaking.

“What can I do?” Mel said.

Her father clasped her shoulder, but his hand shook. No matter what he or her mother said, what reassurance could they give? Mel couldn’t say yes, but she didn’t dare say no. Her mother murmured her name over and over. Chime’s voice caught, and Mel felt the wetness of her mother’s tears against her hair and cheek.

Every instinct urged Mel to run from this proposal. She wanted to go to Aron, her betrothed. If only they were already married. Although they weren’t in love, she had always been fond of him. Her feelings surely could have grown into more, given time. She couldn’t bear to think of losing him for a prince of night and terror. But if she said no, how many of her people would die beneath his sword and the ferocity of Escar vengeance?

Mel’s voice cracked. “I have no choice.”

Her parents both held her, the three of them forming a grief-stricken knot in the yard. The messengers and stable hands waited in silence, no one intruding. Tears slid down Mel's face. She had known a good life here with a loving family and friends. Now that would end. In the rest of Harsdown, the sun was rising, but for her family, it was sunset.

Cobalt gazed into his wedge-shaped bedroom. Here in the narrow end, the entrance curved in an elegant horseshoe arch. Curtains hung along the wall to his left, and oil lamps lined the other wall, though none were lit. The only light trickled from a single lamp on the wall outside. His bed stood across the room at the wide end of the wedge, its covers bunched up or thrown on the floor. Every night he went to sleep in a perfectly made bed and every morning he awoke with it torn to pieces. He tossed and turned throughout the night. And he was too big. His bed had to be tailor-made for his body; otherwise, his feet hung off the end.

"Goodbye," he said. It felt odd to speak; he rarely did it even around people. But today it seemed appropriate. This was an ending to the first half of his life. It called for something dramatic. A spoken word seemed to fit that requirement, though he supposed most people would find his conclusion amusing. Or perhaps not. Cobalt Escar and amusing weren't concepts found in the same thought for most people.

"Brooding on your soon-to-be-lost freedom?" a familiar voice asked.

Cobalt turned around. Matthew stood behind him in the circular chamber in the center of his suite, here at the top of the tower where he lived in the Castle of Clouds. He smiled. It even felt natural. Matthew was one of the few people who actually seemed to like him. "My greetings of the morning."

Matthew bowed. "Is it all right that I'm here?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Thank you." Matthew was wearing rough trousers and a homespun shirt. Cobalt knew he had finer clothes; after so many years with the Escar household, Matthew had a high status among the staff and was in charge of the stables. But he seemed to prefer simple garments and a simple life.

"It is good to see you," Cobalt said. "But unusual, eh?" Matthew was usually working in the stables at this early hour.

"It is hard to believe you will soon leave for Harsdown."

Cobalt crossed his arms. "I would prefer not to believe it. But it seems I must do this. I'm the idiot who suggested it."

Matthew's mouth curved upward. "Perhaps your bride will be comely and sweet."

"Or she might have two heads."

The older man laughed, a mellow sound. "Ah, well, I hope not." His voice quieted. "It was a good idea."

Cobalt was just glad he wouldn't lead his men into defeat. He had no doubt he could act as Varqelle's general, and he wanted the chance to prove himself to his father. He had thought this driving need to seek challenges would calm after he freed Varqelle; instead it had grown stronger. But they couldn't have won

this damn war. His unplanned plan to conquer Harsdown without combat had worked out perfectly—except for one thing. He had to get married.

He squinted at Matthew. “Rumor says Melody Dawnfield looks like a man.”

Matthew chuckled. “Perhaps she is a pretty man.”

Cobalt scowled at him. “Very funny.”

“You need a wife,” Matthew admonished. “It shouldn’t have taken such extremes to make you propose.”

“I don’t want a wife. Especially not this one. She is also said to be a sorceress. Saints, Matthew, what if she turns me into some vile creature?” Cobalt knew the “mage” powers probably didn’t exist, but he had no doubt his bride could find some way to bedevil him with arcane rituals.

Matthew wiggled his fingers. “Poof. You are a roach.”

Cobalt glowered at him. “Did you come here this morning to torment me?”

“Actually, no.” Matthew cleared his throat. “I request that you take me on your journey to Harsdown.”

Cobalt had intended to ask, but he hadn’t been certain Matthew would come. Stonebreaker wanted Matthew to take extra care of the stables in preparation for the bride. “Are you sure you can leave your work here?”

“Yes, certainly.” Matthew hesitated. “Your Highness...”

Cobalt groaned. “Whenever you say, ‘Your Highness,’ I know I am in trouble.”

“No trouble. Not for you, anyway.”

“Surely you aren’t in trouble.” That would be a first.

“Not now.” Matthew spoke awkwardly. “I was one of the people who helped your mother leave Harsdown all those years ago. Back then, I worked in the stables of your father’s castle.”

Ah. Cobalt had long suspected as much, though his mother had never told anyone, not even him. No guarantees existed that Vargelle wouldn’t someday return, and she had always acted to protect those servants who had risked their lives and his wrath by helping her leave Harsdown.

“Has my father said anything to you?” he asked Matthew.

“I don’t think he remembers me. But I fear he will.” Matthew grimaced. “The more I avoid his presence, the better.”

“I will arrange it.” Cobalt put his hand on the older man’s shoulder. “I will let no one bring harm to you.”

“My thanks.” Matthew started to say more but then stopped.

“Yes?” Cobalt asked.

“Forgive my presumption,” Matthew began.

Cobalt snorted. “Since when has my forgiveness or lack thereof stopped you from presuming?”

“It is just—I couldn’t help but notice you have somewhat confused responses to your sire.”

Cobalt glowered. “I am never confused.” It wasn’t true and they both knew it. He had nothing to say because Matthew was right. Cobalt’s reaction toward Varqelle had always been too convoluted for him to untangle, and he felt no more able to talk about it now than he had any of the other times Matthew had tried to draw him out over the years. He might need a lifetime to figure out his emotions in this, but at least now he had the chance.

He hoped he hadn’t made a mistake in this attempt at a truce with the House of Dawnfield. A part of him wanted to fight. He had pledged his fealty to Varqelle, and he would keep that word. He finally had his father, after thirty-three years, and he didn’t want to lose him.

If this marriage didn’t work, they would still go to war.

Mel and Shimmerlake had been friends for as long as Mel could remember. They had played together as toddlers, run through the orchards as children, snuck out at night to swim in the lake, commiserated on the embarrassing names their parents had inflicted on them, and shared their secrets. Now Shim was helping her prepare to leave home, and Mel feared she would never see her friend again.

Shim arranged Mel’s silk dress. It fell in blue drapes around her body, layered and soft, with gold under-panels that glimmered. By tradition, a royal bride wore the color of her mage power. In making the cat spell, Mel had shown she could access the power of a blue. They didn’t know what sub-level yet; different shades of blue corresponded to variations of power.

“You look gorgeous,” Shim stated.

Mel grimaced. “I look like an idiot.”

They were in Mel’s bedroom. The sunbask walls glowed in the sunshine that poured through the windows. Light and air; that had been her life until now. Mel couldn’t believe it would end, with marriage to someone named “The Dark” and “Midnight” no less. She hoped he didn’t look as monstrous as his reputation claimed.

Shim turned her toward the mirror on one wall. “Look.”

Mel did so. A stranger stared back at her. Shim had brushed Mel’s hair into a yellow fall of curls that spilled over her shoulders and arms to her waist. Her friend had even twined blue flowers into it, skybells, which grew only in the lowlands. A pendant hung around Mel’s neck, a twenty-sided sapphire in a gold claw. Mel didn’t know yet the number of sides she could draw on as a mage, but her mother could use a faceted ball with up to twenty sides, so Skylark considered it a good guess for Mel, also. Mel thought it was overly optimistic, but she didn’t have the heart to tell her mentor.

Mel bit her lip. After today, she would have no one to help her learn magecraft. Cobalt Escar had made it clear no one could accompany her to his home. What reasonable prince refused his bride even one



lady-in-waiting or companion? Mel had intended to ask Shim and one or more of the house-maids to come with her, and one of the red or orange mages who studied with Skylark. But Cobalt the Dank and Dismal forbade it. She hoped his carriage broke an axle on the way here and fell over a ridge.

"I look silly." She frowned at her reflection. "That isn't me."

"No, it isn't." Shim put her hands on her ample hips. "But most brides don't stomp to their wedding in riding boots, wool leggings, and an old tunic."

"I ought to," Mel muttered. "Maybe it would scare him away."

A clatter came from beyond her window. Mel went to peer out. At least thirty riders in dark livery were headed to the stables behind the house. They were leading more horses, probably spares so they could travel faster without overworking their mounts.

"Ho!" Mel said. "He's here!"

"Are you sure?" Shim joined her. "Black livery? How unsuitable. It doesn't match your gown."

"Oh, Shim. Who the hell cares if it matches my gown?"

"He should have worn sky blue."

"That livery has blue lining," Mel offered.

"Cobalt blue," Shim said darkly.

"I don't see any carriage," Mel said. Her groom had sent word he would arrive in one. Perhaps this wasn't him after all.

The riders gathered in front of the stables, their horses stepping and snorting, stirring up dirt. Stable hands were running out to meet them.

A carriage rolled into view.

It was black, all of it, with the Escar jaguar emblazoned on its side, visible only by the narrow blue border that set it off from the rest of the black surface. Black horses pulled the carriage. The reins, bridles, and uniform of the driver were black. Even the carriage wheels were black.

"If that is supposed to scare me," Mel said, "it doesn't." Never mind that her voice shook.

Shim laid a hand on Mel's shoulder. "You'll be fine."

"He's in there, Shim. I'm sure of it."

"Do you think he is as grotesque as they say?"

Mel frowned at her. "As who says?"

"Everyone."

“Everyone who?”

“If you are asking, do I know anyone who has actually seen him, the answer is no. But, Mel, rumors like that don’t start out of nothing.”

“Thanks, Shim,” she muttered. The longer the carriage sat there, the more her pulse sped up.

A Dawnfield groom came over and reached up to the carriage door. Before he touched it, though, the door swung outward, creaking on its hinges. A large, muscular man with a shaggy mane of gray hair jumped out. He wore gray riding clothes of a fine cut, though without the elegance that Mel was used to seeing on her father. Then again, probably no other man alive had Muller Dawnfield’s style.

“He’s big,” Shim said.

Mel studied him. It was true, he was taller than most men, with a bulkier physique, but he wasn’t as huge as she had heard. Although he wasn’t handsome, he had regular features and a pleasant mien. In fact, if she hadn’t known better, she would have described his expression as kind.

“He isn’t monstrous,” Mel said, relieved.

“He doesn’t look so bad.” Shim smiled at her. “If that’s him, then perhaps you will be all right.”

“Wait.” Mel caught a flicker of motion behind the man. “Someone else is still in the carriage.”

“Can you see him?” Shim asked.

“Not yet. He’s coming—”

The second man stepped out into the yard.

“Saints almighty,” Shim whispered. “You’re dead, Mel.”



## The Skybell Bride

He was the tallest man Mel had ever seen. He towered over everyone in the yard. His broad shoulders, heavily muscled frame, and long legs made her think of a powerful charger. His hair fell to his shoulders, thick and black. His dark clothes had no adornment save one: his cape bore the jaguar crest of Escar, which only a king or prince of that House could wear. His face would have been handsome if it had held even a hint of compassion, kindness, anything to make him seem like a man rather than stone. But no trace of humanity eased those hard features. Nothing. Combined with his monstrous size, it made him

look inhuman.

Her groom had arrived.

Cobalt longed for the nightmare to end.

He hadn't wanted to leave his horses with stable hands in hostile territory. He had no wish to be on this land of his enemy. Everyone looked as if they believed he would curse them with demonic spells. He just wanted this over with, so he could load his unwelcome wife into his carriage and return to the Castle of Clouds, where she could live in another tower and he would never have to deal with her.

Her home bewildered him. It was beautiful, built from an astonishing golden wood that almost seemed to glow, but it was a farmhouse. He supposed a royal family didn't have to live in a castle. This was foolish, though. If someone attacked, this place had no wall, battlements, moat, chasms, cliffs, or other means to protect it. Just trees. Many trees. He had ridden past row after row of pear and apple trees. Yes, Muller Dawnfield had a regiment of the army here, but even so. Cobalt would have chosen to live in Castle Escar in the Blue Peaks of the Escar Mountains.

They held the wedding in a large parlor. Arched windows let in copious sunlight, and rugs warmed the parquet floor. Cobalt stood with Matthew on one side of the hearth, Cobalt in black, Matthew in gray. One of Stonebreaker's top officers, General Cragland, stood on Cobalt's other side, crisp in his military white and blue surcoat, trousers, and blue boots. Protocol required his presence, but he also served as an unspoken reminder to the Dawnfields of the alternative to this marriage.

Muller and Chime stood on the other side of the hearth with Sphere-General Fieldson. The royal couple left Cobalt feeling as dark and as dour as his name. The king was resplendent in gold trousers, a white and gold vest, and a snowy shirt with gold embroidery. His queen shimmered in green and gold silk, with her yellow hair swept up on her head and threaded with emeralds. They looked utterly beautiful and utterly exhausted. Dark rings showed under their eyes. Neither smiled. Cobalt didn't blame them. He wouldn't have wanted to marry his daughter off to someone like him, either.

Ten rows of high-backed chairs filled the room, with an aisle in the center. People occupied all the chairs, and more guests sat on banquettes in the back or against the side walls. Cobalt recognized no one but Lord Brant Firestoke, who represented King Jarid. Firestoke had brought the documents for the treaty established by this marriage. Earlier today Muller, Chime, and Cobalt had signed all of them except those that Cobalt and his bride would complete after this ceremony.

By mutual agreement, on Stonebreaker's advice, neither Jarid nor Varqelle had attended. Too many hostilities lay between them from the war. Given that each would have liked to kill the other, their presence here seemed a less than spectacular idea.

Dancer had planned to come, but Stonebreaker convinced her it would be unwise to travel into hostile territory, where she would be a target for abduction or assassination. All the royals were, though Stonebreaker hadn't mentioned the risk with his grandson. Obviously, Cobalt had to go to his own wedding. As a sign of good faith, Stonebreaker had suggested Cobalt go to fetch his bride rather than demanding she come to him. That his grandfather advised it had almost made Cobalt stay home, but he had to admit the idea had merit. He didn't want his antipathy toward his grandfather to prod him into bad decisions. So he went.

Stonebreaker, however, did stay home. If it wasn't safe for Jarid Dawnfield to travel to the Misted Cliffs, it obviously wasn't safe for the king of the Misted Cliffs to enter Dawnfield territory. But it meant no member of Cobalt's family attended his wedding. He didn't want to believe his grandfather had set it up that way, but he had known Stonebreaker too long to be naive. Cobalt refused to let anyone see how much it hurt. Nothing bothered him. He was stone that no one could break.

Now he waited for his bride to appear. She was taking a lot of time. Why? She needed only come in here and repeat the blasted vows, and then they could be done. He doubted she had any desire to prolong this business, either.

People shifted in their seats. Conversation trickled among them, but no one spoke loudly. The Bishop of Orbs stood a few paces away, by a display case with figurines and vases. He was going over the scroll he would read for the ceremony. His long robes, white with indigo embroidery, were patterned with designs of spheres. In a back corner of the room, four musicians were warming up, a man with a harp, a woman with a violin, another woman with a star-harp, and a man with percussive instruments.

A stir came from the doorway at the back, and a young woman entered. Cobalt stiffened. Was this his bride? Relief washed over him. She didn't look like a man, after all. She was above average height and had a sturdy build. Her brown hair gleamed with auburn highlights. She wore a simple dress, attractive without being showy, blue and yellow, with a snug bodice and a skirt that swirled around her legs. She was no great beauty, but tolerable enough. He could have done a lot worse.

She barely glanced at him when she entered. He couldn't tell if she wasn't interested or if she was avoiding his gaze. Instead of coming down the aisle, she hurried to the musicians and conferred with them. They all stilled their instruments and nodded.

Cobalt waited, wondering if and when the girl would acknowledge him. She didn't; she left the room and closed the double doors behind her.

Sweat ran down Cobalt's neck and soaked into his collar. It was humid here in the lowlands and hotter than the cliffs of his home, hotter even than the lowlands of his country. He glanced at Muller, and the king inclined his head. Cobalt returned the nod. Maybe that girl hadn't been the bride. She didn't look much like either Muller or Chime, who both had yellow hair and blue eyes. It was hard to know, though. Children didn't always have the same color hair or eyes as their parents.

The quartet started to play. The sparkling song reminded him of the River of Diamonds above the Castle of Clouds. That water was cold and icy, though, whereas this dulcet melody had warmth. On another day, he might have enjoyed the music.

A housemaid opened both doors at the back, and everyone turned to look. The girl with auburn hair came in again, and this time she did walk down the aisle. She was holding a bouquet of blue flowers. Cobalt flushed, then stood straighter and watched her. She wouldn't meet his gaze. She didn't come over to him, either. Instead she went to stand by the king and queen. They nodded to her, but neither showed what looked like parental attention. Cobalt was confused. She had come down the aisle, but she wasn't acting like a bride. Not that he knew how one normally acted.

A stir came from the back of the room. Cobalt looked—

And froze.

Another girl stood framed in the doorway. He couldn't absorb her presence. The colors! He lived in a

colorless world. The castle, clouds, cliffs all were white. His mother tended to pale colors or white. The Diamond Palace was white. Chamberlight livery was white and blue like ice and shadows. Pale, blanched. He spent most of his time around soldiers, who never wore much color. His own life was dark. Black.

The girl in the doorway overwhelmed him. Her dress was dyed such a vivid blue, he could barely take it in. Gold shimmered in the drapes of the gown. It clung to her, outlining her body. She had incredible curves, full and buxom, with a small waist and a height that suggested long legs.

Then he realized one of her gold drapes wasn't a drape. It was her hair. It flowed over her shoulders, arms, and torso to her waist. Blue flowers adorned it, and she held a bouquet with more of them. As his mind adjusted to her colors, he finally took in her face. An angel's face. No one could be so pretty. The curve of her cheek, the small nose, those large eyes as blue as the flowers in her hair—no, it wasn't possible. He couldn't absorb it all. This creature couldn't be his bride.

Matthew spoke in a voice only Cobalt could overhear. "I would say she doesn't look like a man."

Cobalt couldn't answer. He couldn't move. He thought perhaps he might die right now, because surely if he touched that impossible creature it would kill him. Nothing as dark as the Midnight Prince could survive such light.

She walked down the aisle, and she wouldn't look at him, either. He finally recovered enough to glance at Muller and Chime. It told him all he needed to know about this apparition approaching him. Only parents would look so anguished at the wedding of their daughter to Cobalt Escar.

The girl came to the hearth and stood next to him. She didn't raise her head, she just stared at the empty fireplace. Cobalt gazed at her shimmering hair and thought he would never be able to feel it. Saints only knew how he might damage it. He had a tendency to break fragile things, not through any wish of his own, but because he had too much strength and too little sense of how to use it sparingly. He didn't want her to break, and she might if he touched her.

The bishop came over and bowed to Muller and Chime. Then he turned to the bride and groom. Melody glanced quickly at the older man and nodded, though still she avoided Cobalt's gaze. His anger stirred, but he pushed it away. None of this was her fault.

The bishop unrolled his scroll and the musicians stopped playing. Then the bishop read the ceremony. He kept it short and simple, which relieved Cobalt. When the older man finished, he turned to Cobalt. "Do you have a token to give your bride?"

Cobalt stared at him blankly. "Token?"

"A ring?" he asked. "Bracelet? Heirloom?"

"No," Cobalt said. No one had told him he was supposed to give her something.

The bishop flushed. But he continued with the ceremony, his voice awkward. "Cobalt Chamberlight Escar, do you declare for this woman, as her husband?"

"Yes," Cobalt said. At least he knew that part.

"Melody Headwind Dawnfield," the bishop said. "Do you declare for this man, as his wife?"

She spoke softly. “Yes.”

“It is done.” Although the bishop kept an appropriately dignified demeanor, his posture relaxed slightly. He rolled up his scroll. “You may kiss her now.”

Kiss her? In front of everyone? He never touched anyone in front of other people. He looked at Melody’s bowed head. He couldn’t kiss her here, in enemy territory. Saints above, her parents were watching.

With no warning, she looked up at him with her vivid blue eyes. So much color! He couldn’t move. Fighting a battle or climbing a mountain was easier than this.

After a moment, Melody looked away. Cobalt released the breath he had been holding.

The bishop cleared his throat. “Well.” He spoke awkwardly. “You are now wife and husband.”

Then it was done. Cobalt was consort of the heir to the Jaguar Throne. It should have been his father’s throne, not that of the yellow-haired man who was now his father-in-law, but this would have to do. Only time would reveal if his ill-conceived marriage could stop a war.



7

## The Starlight Engagement

Mel sat on a banquette in the hearth room. When everyone else had filed into the dining room for the buffet, she had stolen away to her bedroom seeking the comfort of Fog. Now she sat here with the kitten curled in her lap while her guests ate and carried on stilted conversations in another part of the house. She wondered what her large husband was doing. He really was as big as the tales claimed. She hoped the rumors of his cruelty weren’t as accurate.

She laid her hand on circles carved into the wooden arms of the banquette. When she concentrated, gold light glistened around her. The sparkles cloaked her body with one of the best golden spells she had ever managed, and Fog began to purr loudly. The spell didn’t help her, though. Maybe it was the color; orange spells soothed pain and yellow soothed emotions. Gold was somewhere between the two. Mel strained to shift the hue. She felt as if she were trying to train with an improperly balanced sword or sew with a needle that was too thick. Gradually, though, the spell brightened into yellow, as if sunshine had come inside the house even here, where it couldn’t reach from the window. The spell was like velvet brushing across scar tissue; she knew it was there, offering comfort, but it couldn’t smooth away the rough edges of her mood.

A sigh escaped Mel. A yellow spell couldn’t heal, it could only warm her mood. Right now she wasn’t

even certain what she felt aside from confusion. She let the spell fade until no color remained in the air.

Footsteps sounded by the door, and Mel looked up as Brant Firestoke entered the room, elegant in his white silk shirt and gray velvet finery. His silver hair gleamed.

“A good evening to you, Lord Firestoke,” she said.

“And to you, Your Highness.” He bowed. “May I sit with you?”

“Yes, please.” She patted the cushioned bench. Fog growled and started to stand up, a prelude to jumping to the floor. He paused when Mel scratched his ears, then settled back into her lap with a wary look at Brant. Apparently the lord met with the kitten’s grudging approval.

Brant sat next to her. “I wish this day could have been a time of joy for you.”

“Perhaps it will all work out.” She doubted it, but she didn’t want to say that. She tried not to think of Aron, her former betrothed.

“Perhaps.” He didn’t look as if he believed it, either.

“Can you tell me more about Prince Cobalt or his family?” she asked. “You’re the only one of us who has met them all.”

He grimaced. “They damn near executed me.”

“Saints, Brant, why?”

“I didn’t say what they wanted to hear.”

“Then why this wedding?”

“Prince Cobalt suggested it as they were about to toss me in their dungeon.”

It made a twisted sort of sense. “Do you think they planned it that way to ensure you would carry his proposal?”

“I suppose.” He hesitated. “My impressions are probably nothing more than an old man’s uncertainties.”

“You’ve a mind as keen as a knife, Brant.”

Amusement flickered in his eyes. “Your father didn’t think so at your age.”

She had heard tales about her father’s lack of enthusiasm in his youth for his role as a Dawnfield heir. It made her smile. “I’d like to hear what you think.”

“What I think is that Cobalt came up with this marriage idea to stop them from killing me.” Brant rubbed his chin. “He had a rather odd exchange with his grandfather.”

“Odd, how?”

“Stonebreaker spoke as if Cobalt had already rejected the idea of marriage. Cobalt acted as if

Stonebreaker was the one who rejected it.” He shook his head. “I don’t think either of them had considered it prior to that moment.”

Mel knew little about Stonebreaker; he was the only leader in the settled lands she hadn’t met. He would interact only with the Dawnfield men and apparently let no men speak with his daughter. “Why would they pretend otherwise?”

Brant shrugged. “Perhaps because it is a good idea and both wanted credit.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I will tell you more, but only in confidence.”

“You have it.” He knew her word was good.

Brant spoke slowly, seeming to think through his words. “Stonebreaker is off kilter somehow. I don’t trust him. And he is intensely jealous of his grandson.”

“Cobalt is...” She searched for a word without negative connotations. “An impressive man.”

“He’s dangerous, Mel. So are his grandfather and father. Especially his father. Varqelle wants the throne.” Brant laid his hand on her forearm. “Your marriage is all that holds him in check.”

“You think he will try to separate me and Cobalt?”

His gaze never wavered. “Or have you killed.”

Her hand tensed on Fog, and the kitten mewed in protest. “Brant, don’t say that.”

“I’m sorry. But it’s true. You must be careful.”

Mel loosened her hold, and Fog jumped down, then ran under the banquette. She looked back up at Brant. “I will remember what you’ve told me.”

They left the farmhouse at sunset. Cobalt’s new in-laws asked him to stay the night, and he knew they wanted more time to say goodbye to their daughter, but he couldn’t bear to wait, even if it meant traveling in the dark. He was exposed here. Unprotected. It wasn’t just that he was in hostile territory. Had that been the only reason, he would have stayed one last night. But his emotions were at risk. The warmth in this house came from more than lowland humidity. The people created it. He had no context to understand his bride’s family, and it left him anxious to escape. How these gentle people could bring him harm, he had no idea, but he had to leave.

His bride hugged her parents on the veranda of the house. They were all crying. Cobalt waited by the open door of the carriage, so uncomfortable that he wondered if something was wrong with him. The thirty men in his honor guard surrounded his carriage, all of them on horseback, including Matthew. Cobalt had already gone over strategies with General Cragland and his men for protecting the carriage during the trip back to the Misted Cliffs. He had nothing to do now but watch his bride weep with her parents.



Mel finally came over, carrying a wicker basket on her arm. She looked up at him, her face wet with tears, and he wanted to crawl under the carriage and hide from those vivid eyes. She was too alive for him; he was dead inside, though he hadn't realized it until now. She stepped up into the carriage, then turned and waved to her parents, also to the girl who had stood up for her in the wedding and was on the porch now with Chime and Muller.

When his bride had gone into the carriage, Cobalt started to follow. He paused with one leg up, though, the hairs on his neck prickling. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Muller Dawnfield standing behind him.

Cobalt stepped back down from the carriage. "Yes?"

Muller spoke in a quiet voice. "Treat her well. Or you will answer to me."

Cobalt almost didn't respond, as with threats from his grandfather. But no, he should answer. Muller had reason to speak in such a manner. So he said, "Yes."

"Good." Muller's face was creased with lines of strain. "Be well, Your Highness."

Be well? People never said such to him, especially not anyone with good reason to hate him. He didn't know how to answer, so he just nodded. Then he swung up into the carriage. Within moments they were on their way.

Melody—no, they called her Mel—sat across from him in the seat that faced backward. She held the basket in her lap. He stretched out his legs and his feet hit her bench, but he managed to avoid tearing the silk drapes of her gown. So bright, that blue and gold. Belatedly, he wondered if he should have given her time to put on travel clothes. He had worn his to the wedding, but women seemed to change their clothes a great deal. He was glad that she hadn't though; it felt good to see her in that dress.

Her face was turning pink. "Are you going to stare at me for the entire trip?"

Cobalt jerked. She had spoken; he should answer.

"No," he said.

"Oh." Her blush deepened.

They sat for a time as the carriage rumbled along. The ride was reasonably smooth compared to some journeys Cobalt had taken. This was a popular thoroughfare and well tended. The driver had lit his lanterns, but shadows were filling the carriage as the evening deepened.

"Would you like me to make some light?" Mel asked.

Cobalt tapped the lamp in its claw on the wall. "I can light this. But it is smoky. I tend to leave it out."

A silence followed his words. Then she said, "That was incredible."

Cobalt blinked. "The lamp?"

"No. You. That was three sentences. I haven't heard you say that much before."

He felt a flush spread in his face. His anger stirred, but then it subsided, just as it had during the wedding.

Usually when the anger came, it stayed. But not with her. She obviously wasn't mocking him. She sounded relieved. Sweet, even. Had he been that closed since meeting her?

"Do you want me to light the lamp?" he asked.

"No. This is fine."

"Are you cold?"

"No. I'm fine. Really."

Cobalt scratched his ear. He didn't know what to do with this wife he had acquired. His body knew, though; he recalled well how her dress had fit her curves. "Come sit here."

Her voice wavered. "Next to you?"

He slid over and laid his hand on the seat. "You will fit."

She clutched her basket and stared at him with eyes large in her face. Her dress rustled as she stood. She had to stoop to keep from banging the top of the carriage. Cobalt knew that problem; he had it in most places. She was small and probably rarely had to bend her head, but this ceiling was low.

She almost fell on top of him as the carriage lurched. Cobalt caught her arm and helped her sit down. When she inhaled sharply, he let go, afraid he might bruise her the way Stonebreaker so often bruised Dancer.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Y-yes."

Only moonlight came through the window, but even in that dim glow her hair glimmered. He picked up a length and pressed it against his cheek. "So odd."

She sat like a statue. "Odd?"

"Your hair is like silk." He carefully arranged the lock back over her arm. "Even softer."

"Have you never felt long hair before?"

"My own." It only went to his collar, though, and was much coarser than hers. He thought of the courtesans he had known. "A few other women. Not like you."

"Oh."

He touched the basket on her lap. "Is that food?"

"Saints, no. It's Fog."

He squinted at the basket. "It doesn't look foggy."

To his unmitigated surprise, she laughed. "Fog is my kitten."

Cobalt barely heard her answer. Her laugh riveted him. It sparkled. It was music. And he had caused it. That had never happened to him. It was astonishing.

After a moment, he recovered enough to respond. "Your kitten is quiet."

"He's sleeping."

"Ah."

Mel said nothing else, and Cobalt had exhausted his supply of conversation ideas. She sat by his side, her back erect, her hands gripping the handle of her basket.

Eventually, her head nodded forward and she slumped. At first he thought she was hurt. When he bent toward her, he realized she had fallen asleep. Moving with care, so he didn't wake her, he put his arm around her shoulders and settled her against him. It was pleasant. He wished they could have spent their wedding night at the Castle of Clouds. They needed their own place; he couldn't have stayed their first night together in her childhood home. Unfortunately, they had only this carriage and he hardly intended to do anything here. He hadn't expected he would want her so much. This could have been a dismal wedding night, but oddly enough, he felt content.

He was growing drowsy. He took Mel's basket with its misty kitten and set it on the floor. Wedging himself into the corner where the seat met the side of the carriage, he slid his leg behind his slumbering wife, his knee bent since the carriage wasn't wide enough for him to stretch out. He braced the boot of his other leg against the floor and shifted Mel so she was sleeping against him, between his legs, her head on his chest.

Then he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

A jostle awoke Mel. Her neck ached from sleeping in an odd position and it took her a moment to orient to her surroundings. Cobalt was reclining against one side of the carriage, asleep, with her lying against his chest. One of his boots was braced on the floor; the other leg was behind her. He had his arms around her, muscular arms, strong and solid, as a bride might desire from her groom. In his sleep he held her more naturally than when he had touched her hair earlier, with that exaggerated care. His strength made her tingle as if she were afraid, but it wasn't unpleasant. If she hadn't been so groggy, she might have jerked back from him, but she was only half awake, and he seemed less imposing when he was asleep.

His vest rubbed her cheek. She had thought earlier today that it was unadorned, but now she felt embroidery. The thread was dark, hard to see on the black. She traced the designs on his chest, circles and hexagons in interlocked chains. Running her finger around them, she envisioned fields of grass. The shapes began to glow a rich green. As the mood spell intensified, she focused on Cobalt, but she couldn't reach him. She felt as if she were straining to draw more power than a two-dimensional form could give. Perhaps she needed more experience or a higher order shape. She questioned how much either of those would help, though. His emotions were distant, out of reach. Mental armor protected them.

Mel let the spell fade. She lay in his arms, acutely self-conscious, and wondered about him. Such a strange man. Would she spend the rest of her life in conversations of one or two words, perhaps a few sentences now and then? His coldness toward her family at the wedding troubled her. He had shown

almost no reaction to any of them, not even when her mother entreated him to stay one last evening rather than venture into the darkness.

However, Mel felt no hostility from him, either. He might hide it behind the impenetrable armor that defended his mind, but if that were true, he could be hiding gentler feelings, too.

The carriage jolted and Mel's elbow hit the paneling behind them. As Cobalt stirred, the carriage lurched to one side. She would have fallen to the floor if he hadn't tightened his arms around her. Outside, someone shouted.

"What?" Cobalt set her upright, then sat up and rapped on a trap door in the roof. He didn't even have to stand to touch the top of the carriage.

"Matthew!" he called.

The trap door opened and starlight filtered into the coach. A man peered down at them, the gray-haired fellow who had first come out of the carriage when Cobalt's party arrived at her parents' farm, and who had stood up with Cobalt at the wedding. No trace of gentleness showed in his expression now.

"There are at least thirty of them," Matthew said.

Cobalt swore. "My sword."

Matthew withdrew from sight.

"Thirty?" Mel asked. "Are they attacking?"

Matthew reappeared and lowered a sword belt to Cobalt. As the prince buckled it around his hips, the carriage lurched to an abrupt stop. Mel's foot hit the basket and a distressed mewl came from within.

Cobalt turned to her. "Stay here. My men and I will be protecting the carriage."

"Do you know what is happening?" Mel asked.

He didn't answer. Instead, he opened the door and jumped out into the night. Beyond him, a melee of men on horseback surged in the starlight. The clang of metal hitting metal rang out. Mel heard him call out orders to his officers, and then he slammed the carriage door.

Fog wailed, and Mel leaned down to the basket. "Shush. Don't draw attention." She comforted the frightened kitten, then closed the basket and hid it under the protection of the seat.

Outside, a man cried out, but it cut off abruptly. Mel felt the blood drain from her face. She knew where Cobalt's men had packed her belongings on the carriage, in the back. She stood on the seat and pushed open the trap door. Although small, the opening was large enough. Grabbing its edges, she hoisted herself up. Her gown caught and then tore as she clambered out onto the top of the carriage.

For a moment, she clung to the smoothed wood. They were in a narrow valley with woods on either side. She couldn't see clearly, but the stars gave enough light to show men fighting on both sides of the carriage, here and farther out. Cobalt had brought thirty, but there were at least twice that number now. She crawled to where her bags and packages were lashed to bars on the back of the carriage. She knew where she had put everything, but nothing seemed to be where she remembered. She fumbled through

the packages, searching, searching—it had to be here—there! She undid her sword from its wrappings and fastened the belt around her hips. A metal stud on the leather ripped her wedding dress more.

Mel edged back to the trap door and lowered herself into the carriage. Fog was crying and scratching inside his carrier. Crouching by the basket, she cracked it open enough to pet the terrified kitten. “Shhh,” she whispered. “Please, Fog.” It did no good; the kitten kept crying.

The door suddenly jerked open, leaving a large figure silhouetted against the starlit sky. He wore rough clothes under crude leather armor, and he held a long sword. Lunging inside, he grabbed her arm.

“No!” Mel tried to pull away.

He yanked her out of the carriage. Mel fell to the ground and her legs tangled in the cursed wedding dress. Several men in Chamberlight armor lay sprawled on the ground, unmoving. She scrambled to her feet, unmindful of the tearing silk.

“Stop!” she shouted.

“No Escar will sit on the throne again.” He shoved her back against the wheel. “Neither your husband nor your child.”

Mel grabbed the hilt of her sheathed sword. She was aware of others fighting near the carriage, but no one was close enough to help.

“You should never have married him,” the man said. His blade glinted in the starlight as he swung at her.

Mel whipped out her blade and parried his blow. Their swords rang, adding to the clangs and grunts of the fighting around them.

“What the hell!” He stepped back. “You’re armed.”

“You don’t want to fight a Dawnfield heir.” Her anger was flaring like a stoked flame. This was no practice match with blunted swords, but a combat for her life.

He didn’t answer, he just came at her again, with more force this time. Mel countered the blow, her swing fast and sharp. She had to rely on speed, because she sure as hell didn’t have the strength to match him. She had no time to be afraid; she reacted with single-minded concentration, her senses heightened and focused. He was stronger but less well-trained, probably a farmer rather than a soldier. When he drove her against the carriage, she ducked and came at him from the side, catching him with a wound along his arm. She had never deliberately drawn blood before, but rather than shock, she felt a fierce triumph.

When he caught her blade with his, she staggered from his force; when she evaded him, he couldn’t keep up with her speed. They went back and forth past the wheels of the carriage. As Mel tired, she slowed down and desperation intruded on the fire of her will. She knew, without doubt, that if she lagged now, she would die. Her opponent was breathing heavily, also slowing, but he retained his strength. She barely managed to parry his next thrust, and when his blade hit her sword, she stumbled into the wheel.

No! Anger surged in Mel and added strength to her arms. Clutching the hilt of her sword with both hands, she thrust upward. He blocked her strike, but her blade caught his sword and knocked it out of his hand, smashing it into the door of the carriage.

For one instant, the man stood with his mouth open, staring at her. Suddenly he arched. His face crumpled and his grunt ended in an odd gurgle. As his legs folded, he collapsed, but he didn't hit the ground; he hung about two handsprings in the air. A huge figure stood behind him. Cobalt. He had run his sword through the man's chest and was holding him up. Then he yanked his sword out of the body, and the man sprawled in front of Mel, very, very dead.

"Saints almighty," she whispered, her heart pounding.

Cobalt lunged over the body and grabbed her arm. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She couldn't pull away; his grip was so tight it hurt her arm.

"What are you doing with a sword?" he demanded.

She stared at him. "Defending myself."

"He could have killed you!" His arm was shaking, not from fear, but from whatever blood lust had gripped him in battle and still had him in its thrall. "I told you to stay in the carriage."

"Damn it, I didn't have a choice!"

"You will not use that language with me!" He dropped her arm and jerked his own up high, the fist drawn back, his elbow lifted.

Mel knew a blow from that height, from a man this strong, would break her bones. She was still holding her sword, but she couldn't strike her own husband. She tried to back up—and hit the carriage wheel.

Cobalt groaned and grabbed his raised arm with his other hand, his palm smacking against his wrist. He lowered both arms and crossed them over his torso. "I won't hit you. I swear, Mel. I won't."

Someone was approaching them, more a shadow than a person. As he neared, he resolved into Matthew. "I think that's the last of them."

Cobalt turned to him. "You will go with my wife in the carriage. I will ride Admiral."

Matthew looked at Cobalt holding his arm. "Cobalt, listen—"

"No." He spoke in a low voice. "Do you remember how you used to hide me in the stables?"

"Those days are gone," Matthew said, his gaze intense. "Gone."

Cobalt didn't seem to hear him. He motioned at Mel. "I task you now with her protection—" His voice cracked. "Just don't tell me where you hide her."

Matthew grasped him by the shoulders, something Mel could never have imagined anyone doing to the Midnight Prince. "Have you ever struck a woman? Or a child? Ever?"

"No," Cobalt whispered.

"Nor will you."

Cobalt pushed off his hands. "I am him, Matthew. I am his blood, his grandson, his spawn. Ride in the carriage with her." Then he strode away, toward a cluster of men who were tending another man on the ground.

Mel was starting to tremble. She sagged against the carriage door, above the body crumpled at her feet, the hilt of her sword clutched in one hand, her arms folded across her stomach. Bile rose in her throat.

Matthew came over to her. "I'm sorry."

She raised her head. "Who are you?"

"His stable hand."

She wanted to laugh, then cry. This man was obviously far more than a stable hand to Cobalt.

"Can I help?" Matthew asked.

She doubted anyone could help now. "He frightens me."

"Aye. He does everyone."

"Doesn't he feel it?"

"Too much," he murmured. "He feels far too much. If he didn't, his wounds wouldn't be so deep."

Mel was clenching her sword so hard, she couldn't release the hilt. As she pulled herself up straight, Matthew slid his hand under her elbow in support.

"No." Mel pulled away. "Don't touch me." She climbed into the carriage and sat down on the bench where she and Cobalt had slept. Her legs shook, but she couldn't let a reaction set in; she had to keep going until she reached a place of safety where she could release her frayed control. Except she had no place of safety anywhere.

Matthew followed her in and swung the door closed. He sat on the bench across from her. With dogged resolve, she picked up a layer of her dress and cleaned the blood off her sword. Then she sheathed the blade at her hip.

Fog began crying, frantic and disconsolate. Mel pulled the basket out from under the seat. Before she even finished opening it, the kitten scrambled out and burrowed into her lap. She tried to pet him, but her arm had no strength and she could only rest her hand on the trembling animal. Matthew watched them with a strange look, as if the sight filled him with grief.

Mel didn't know how long they stayed at the site of the battle. It could have been moments or hours. Voices called outside and several times men cried out in pain. She tried to build a blue spell of healing, but she couldn't summon the strength for anything at all.

"I've never seen a woman fight with a sword," Matthew finally said.

"They should learn," Mel answered dully.

“Your Highness—”

“I do not feel high, Matthew. Please do not call me that tonight.”

“I’m sorry.” The starlight coming in the window turned his gray eyes black.

“They killed any attackers who survived, didn’t they?” she asked.

His voice sounded carefully neutral. “I don’t think any survived the fight.”

Mel didn’t dispute him. She didn’t believe him, either, but regardless of the truth, she doubted any were left alive. It was one more part of this terrible night.

The carriage lurched and rolled forward. Their journey to the Misted Cliffs had resumed.



8

## Borderland Glade

Cobalt rode in a trance. They had rested the horses and then continued through the night. Now the sky was lightening. In the distance, the Misted Cliffs rose up from the borderlands in a barrier that blocked the world. A blurred barrier. He could have put on his glasses, but he didn’t want people to see him wearing them. Even hazy, though, those magnificent cliffs looked as if they could be a great wall erected for the saints themselves.

In truth, Cobalt found it hard to believe saints existed. They were spirits from the ancient legends, and they took their essence from colors of the rainbow, which supposedly corresponded to the “spells” of a mage. Azure saints glazed the sky, dawn saints added their blush to the sunrise, verdant saints breathed new crops into life, and on and on with the foolish tales. What of blood and the fire of rage? Those existed only in hells never touched by any spirit of life. And in him.

Last night, only one of their attackers had broken through the defenses Cobalt had set up around the carriage. Only one. But that was all it had taken. Had Mel not known how to defend herself, she would be dead now. Her blood would be on his head.

The carriage rolled ahead of him, carrying his bride. If any saints did exist, they had surely cursed this young woman. He found it hard to believe that the slender, fragile beauty he had married had turned into the swordswoman of last night, but her fire wouldn’t protect her from his darkness. She would spend the rest of her life with a monster who could shatter her as easily as a china dish falling onto a stone floor.

As easily as Stonebreaker had shattered his queen.



No.No. His grandmother had died from a fall. Everyone told him so. He couldn't believe otherwise.

The carriage rolled to a stop ahead of him. As Cobalt approached, the door opened and Matthew jumped out. The older man rubbed his eyes, then shielded them with his hand as he looked around at the empty, flat countryside. The sun had just risen behind them. Ahead, the wall of cliffs stretched from north to south as far as they could see.

Mel stepped out of the carriage. Her wedding dress, that vibrant creation of silk, hung in torn layers with dried blood crusted on the hems. Cobalt's stomach tightened. Beauty had finally come into his life, and he had left it ripped and trampled.

He reined Admiral to a stop and dismounted. Matthew gently pried the reins from Cobalt's hand.

"I'll take care of him," Matthew said.

Cobalt nodded stiffly, aware of Mel watching. Without the excuse of tending his horse, he had no reason to avoid her. At least Matthew hadn't given him any warning looks to suggest his bride would run away from him.

Cobalt went to her. Dark circles showed under her eyes, but she spoke in an even, melodic voice. "Good morning."

"How are you?" he asked.

"Fine." She smiled ruefully. "Your Matthew is a saint. Fog ran all over him in the carriage, but Matthew never complained."

"Ah." Her smile mesmerized him. "Matthew is kind."

"Yes. He is." She hesitated. "If we have time, I would like to clean up."

"Yes. Of course." She seemed even more delicate close up. After last night, though, he knew better. Anyone who wielded a sword so well would have toned muscles and more strength than some youths. She unsettled him, because she very definitely curved like a woman. How would those curves feel under his hands? He wanted to find out. He had the right; she was his wife. After last night, though, she would probably shrink from his touch.

An alarming thought came to him. Perhaps she would pull her sword when he came to her. He wasn't certain if the idea appalled or aroused him. She was certainly a woman like no other. Then again, he knew almost no others.

"Your Highness?" she asked.

Cobalt realized he had just been standing here, staring at her. He mentally shook himself. "I will have someone accompany you while you perform your ablutions."

"No!"

"No?"

"My, uh, ablutions are private." Then she said, "If you had let me bring a maid, she could have

accompanied me.”

“A maid?” He vaguely recalled mention of such, but of course he had said no. Stonebreaker allowed no women at the Castle of Clouds except Dancer, and now Mel. Cobalt’s mother had plenty of ladies-in-waiting and female servants at the Diamond Palace, but Grandfather had left no doubt; if she insisted on living away from him, she could damn well do without the comforts associated with her station. He had obviously expected his daughter to come home rather than look after herself.

Dancer had stayed at the Castle of Clouds.

“We have a staff at the castle,” Cobalt said. Male servants helped Dancer when appropriate, but that left a great deal for the queen to do herself.

Spots of red appeared on Mel’s cheeks. “No one here can help.”

He suddenly realized what she wanted. To bathe. His pulse jumped. “I will go with you.”

Her blush deepened. She nodded awkwardly, and he thought she wanted to protest. She didn’t, though. Who else could go with her? Certainly not one of his men. He would punch any of them who tried to watch her bathe.

While she retrieved some clothes from one of her valises, he set men to guard the carriage and to check the surrounding area, including a ridge about a hundred paces away. A river wound across the otherwise dry land, providing a place where his men could water their horses. It disappeared into the ridge. Not much thrived in these borderlands, but trees grew along the banks of the river and a small forest covered the hill.

As soon as Cobalt and his men established that the area was safe, Mel headed for the trees. Cobalt followed and caught up as she entered the woods. He could have reached her sooner, with his stride so much longer than hers, but she seemed more comfortable without him looming about. He also liked being behind her, watching the sway of her hips while she walked.

Mel neither looked at him nor spoke as they went through the forest. Birds fluttered among the leaves and added splashes of color to the morning.

“Your cat would like this,” he said. “Lots of birds to eat.”

Mel looked up with a start. Then she laughed, that same lovely sound she had made yesterday. “I imagine he would, when he’s old enough. He’s just had mush in the carriage.”

Her laugh so surprised him that he stopped. She kept going a few steps, then halted and came back to him. “What is wrong?”

“Nothing.” He felt foolish. She didn’t know he wasn’t used to hearing people laugh. “Come. We shouldn’t tarry too long.”

“All right.” She scratched her chin, but started off again.

No path wound through the trees, so they made their way by pushing aside scrubby bushes with pink flowers and thorns. Cobalt doubted anyone came here much. They were far out in the dry lands between Harsdown and the Misted Cliffs. Not many people lived in this region, which had few resources. This

was the only river he had seen all morning.

They climbed the ridge and discovered a hollow between it and a second ridge. The river fell in a waterfall over a ledge and filled a small pool overhung with trees.

Cobalt looked around. "This looks like a good place. You should have privacy here."

"Yes." She stood a few paces away, her face red.

After several moments of standing there, Cobalt said, "Didn't you want to bathe?"

"Yes." She pressed the knuckles of one hand against her cheek. "Are you going to stay?"

"Someone must." He walked over to her. "We are married. It is all right."

"I know." She didn't move.

Cobalt offered her his hand. She started to take it, then looked down and froze. He followed her gaze.

Dried blood crusted his fingernails.

"Hell," Cobalt muttered, quickly dropping his hand. He wasn't doing this well.

Her exhalation was almost inaudible. She sank to the ground and lowered her head, holding the clothes she had brought in her lap. Cobalt knelt next to her, at a loss for what to do. He wanted to say, I'm sorry. But he couldn't. Never apologize. Never admit vulnerability. Never acknowledge a mistake. Show no weakness. Except that was his grandfather in his mind, not him; he couldn't let it be him. But he couldn't say the words. He had killed men last night, ten, maybe eleven. He had done what had to be done, and even in that he had almost failed. Mel could have died. Filled with adrenaline and battle fury, he had raised his fist. On her wedding night. He wouldn't have struck her, but that moment was seared into his mind. And he couldn't even say I'm sorry. No wonder people thought he was a monster.

Cobalt sat down and put his arms around her, with his legs on either side of her body. She sat rigid in his embrace. Then her shoulders began to shake. He drew her closer and she slumped against him, her cheek on his chest.

And she cried.

Her sobs were quiet. He could barely hear them, but he felt her crying. He kept her in his arms, awkwardly smoothing her hair, his head bent over hers. He didn't know what else to do.

Her shaking gradually slowed. A bit later it stopped. She sat in his arms, leaning against him, her head bowed, her eyes closed, her gold lashes long on her tear-stained cheeks. Cobalt wondered how a woman could look so much like an angel and yet fight like a warrior. He realized he was rocking her back and forth. Confused, he slowed down and then stopped moving.

Mel lifted her head to look at him. He still had his head bowed over hers, and her face was only a finger span away from his. She regarded him with large, moist eyes, but she didn't flinch or recoil. He did then what he had wanted to do since the Bishop of Orbs first offered him the opportunity. He kissed his wife.

She could have jerked away. He wouldn't have blamed her after everything that had happened. Instead

she sighed and relaxed against him. Her lips were warm. She tasted of light and strength, tart and sweet. He rubbed his hand down her back, over her hair. His tongue rasped across her lips until finally she relented and parted them so he could kiss her more deeply, with his tongue. That she had no idea how to return such a kiss only made him want her more.

Mel eventually pulled her head away, not much, just enough to see his face.

“Sweet Mel,” Cobalt murmured.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice trembled. “I didn’t mean to fall apart.”

“Don’t.” Sorry. Unbidden, a memory came to him: He was a boy cowering on the cold stone floor in the Diamond Palace while the king disciplined him with fists and a leather belt. He had crouched there, too small and skinny to fight back, shaking and crying, saying he was sorry over and over again, though he hadn’t known what he had done wrong—other than just existing and being so much less than a king deserved for his heir.

“You never have to apologize to me,” he said.

She traced a circle embroidered on his vest. The sunlight played tricks on his sight and made the circle glow green. Then he saw it reflected on her fingers and realized the green light was real.

Cobalt jerked and pushed away her hand. “What are you doing?”

Her eyes were luminous with tears. “What hells have you lived?” she murmured, “that you need such heavy armor to protect your emotions?”

“What did you do to me?” Thoroughly alarmed, Cobalt rubbed his hand over his vest. It had stopped glowing.

“It was a mood spell.”

“You cursed my mood?” He had expected something more dire. His mood was usually bad anyway.

“Well, no. I can’t curse anyone.” She leaned her head back on his chest. “I can make light or warmth. A little. I can sense someone’s mood, vaguely, though my interpretation isn’t always accurate. Sometimes I can soothe a person or help heal a minor injury.”

Cobalt found it hard to credit, but it was clear she believed her words. And he had seen the green light. “I heard you are a mage.” It made him feel both uneasy and foolish to say the words.

“Not a very practiced one, I’m afraid.”

“It is hard to believe the tales of Aronsdale sorceresses.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’m afraid to ask what you’ve heard.”

He didn’t want to relate tales of harridans inflicting blights on unsuspecting travelers. He didn’t believe them anyway, even less after meeting Mel and her mother. He had always told himself that this business of magecraft was no more than a sham, but a part of him wondered if it could be possible. Behind all the lurid tales, he had also heard that mages were healers. He couldn’t admit any of that, however. All this

talking made him feel exposed. Either she was a mage or she wasn't. Time would reveal the truth.

After his silence went on for a while, Mel sighed and closed her eyes. Cobalt liked sitting here, holding her, surrounding her with his legs. He brushed his hand over her shoulder and pulled down the edge of her dress. "Do you still want to bathe?"

"I—I think so." She didn't move, though.

He bared her shoulder. "I can help."

"Ah. Oh." She swallowed.

He brushed the tangles of her hair off her face. "If you wish me to leave, I will."

She did look up at him then. She touched him tentatively on the cheek. "Will you swim with me?"

"Yes." Oh, yes.

She smiled then, one of the few times she had done so specifically for him. The expression trembled and vanished as fast as it had come, but while it lasted, it was wonderful. Astonishing that a simple flash of teeth could be so arresting.

He slowly pulled down the top of her gown. She averted her eyes, but she didn't pull away. The skin of her shoulders was pale and soft. And unmarked. She had no scars from fights or a leather strap. He touched her arm where it met her shoulder, wondering at her perfect skin. Then he pulled the silk more and uncovered her breasts. Beautiful breasts, large and erect. No, she definitely did not look like a man. He filled his hand with one of them and she drew in a sharp breath.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked.

Mel shook her head, her eyes averted. He stroked her, first one breast, then the other. He was on the verge of laying her on the ground when she eased out of his arms. Before he could pull her back, she stood up. The dress fell down past her waist and draped around her hips, leaving her upper body bare. She reminded him of the ancient statues he had seen of the goddesses his ancestors had worshiped, except that instead of marble, she was golden and warm. Alive.

"Saints almighty," Cobalt muttered. He wanted to look and look at her body, and then pull her down under his own.

Mel froze like a deer mesmerized by a lamp—except he was the one who riveted her in place. He rose to his feet, towering over her, and reached for his wife, hungry, no longer thinking clearly. Mel shied away. She wouldn't meet his gaze, but she tugged down the gown and let it fall to the ground. He wanted to look at her more, but she splayed her hand to cover the triangle of hair between her thighs. Then she crossed to the pool and eased into it. It was deep enough for her to submerge up to her shoulders, leaving her body no more than a blur under the water.

He almost groaned. Why couldn't she just lie down with him? In truth, he knew the answer. She was nervous. His impatience would scare her away. He didn't know how to approach her, though. The only talk he ever heard about women was the crude jokes among his men, and that hardly seemed useful now.

Well, she had asked him to swim, which he wouldn't do in his clothes. Cobalt took off his cape and

dropped it next to her silks. He unbuttoned and removed his vest and then his shirt. The sun was warm on the bare skin of his torso. Mel watched, her eyes large. He had never been self-conscious about his body before, but now he wondered if she found him desirable.

He pulled off his boots while he was standing up, which was no small feat of balance. Then he unfastened his trousers and removed them as well, along with his undergarments. Her eyes widened and she swam backward, staring at him. He hoped his arousal didn't frighten her. He couldn't do anything about it without her help. Actually, he could, but he didn't want to. From the way she watched him, he wasn't sure if she would swim closer when he came into the water or scramble out and run away.

Cobalt eased into the pool, and she backed all the way to the other side. He walked out to the middle, where the water came most of the way up his chest.

"It's warm," he said.

"F-freezing." Either her voice was shaking or her teeth were chattering, he wasn't certain which.

"Here." He held out his hand and his arm floated on the water. "I can help."

She pushed off the edge of the pool and drifted toward him. He caught her easily, sliding his arm around her waist. Her body felt soft and hard at the same time, her skin like velvet and her muscles firm under that provocative layer of softness. Her breasts pressed against his chest. He didn't know how much longer he could hold back from taking her, hard and fast. He didn't want to damage her and she was so small, but it was becoming difficult to control himself.

He pulled Mel against him and bent his head next to hers. As he bit at her neck, his breath quickened.

She set her palms against his shoulders. "Wait."

"Don't say no," he murmured.

"I—I'm afraid."

He teased her earlobe with his teeth. "Put your legs around my waist."

She wrapped her long legs around him and he groaned. He knew he should take the time to figure out what she needed, because he had never done this with a woman who had no experience and he didn't want to ruin her first time. If it was her first time. In all of the negotiations, it had never occurred to him to ask, though it should have. He would worry about that later; right now he didn't want to think.

The top of her head brushed his chin. "Tell me what to do," she whispered, as if afraid to say it louder.

Love me. He held her with his left arm and slid his right hand down to hold her behind. It fit neatly into his palm. When she moved in his arms, rubbing against him, he lost his final shreds of control. His hips jerked as his seed spurted against her stomach in the water, and his mind blanked with pleasure and relief. He stopped thinking altogether.

Coherency returned slowly. His breath stirred her hair.

"Cobalt," she gasped. "I can't breathe."

Bloody hell. He loosened his hold and she gulped in air.

“Better?” he asked.

“Much better.” She inhaled deeply. “Did something just happen?”

He gave an uneven laugh. “Oh, yes.”

“Ah.”

He nuzzled her hair. “Are you broken?”

“Broken?” She sounded perplexed. “Well, no.”

His pulse surged. He hadn’t hurt her. He hadn’t caused harm. He hadn’t violated her or ruined the trust she had offered when she asked him to “swim” with her. It relieved him so much that it took a moment to remember he hadn’t done anything else for her, either.

“Ach,” Cobalt muttered. He was a coarse rogue if ever there was one, thinking only of his own pleasure.

“Ach?” Mel smiled. “Does that have a translation?”

With her hair damp and tousled, and her blue eyes wide, she was so appealing that he wanted to stay here forever. When they left this hollow, they would have to face reality, the deaths of the men last night, Stonebreaker and Vargelle, and all the harsh uncertainties that went with his life. But right now he had just Mel, his astonishing, unexpected wife, and he could forget the rest for a while.

Something odd was happening to his face, as if his features were arranging themselves into new expressions. Gentle ones. He kept one arm around her waist and lifted his other to touch her cheek. “Ach means we need more time.”

“We do?”

“Yes.” Still holding her, with her legs around his waist, he walked to the edge of the pool where they had left their clothes. He lifted her up and sat her on the rocky shelf. Water cascaded off her body and sparkled in the sunlight. As Cobalt climbed out next to her, she crossed her arms over her breasts, hiding herself.

“Don’t,” he murmured. He spread his clothes on the rocks and nudged her down until she lay on top of them, on her back. She stared up at him, still nervous, but she seemed curious, too. Encouraged, he tugged on her arms until she let him pull them down. Then he lay on his side next to her, his head propped up on one hand, and just looked. Her face turned red. So pretty. Even her blushes were pretty. Drops of water beaded on her nipples and ran down her breasts.

He lowered his head and took her nipple into his mouth. Mel exhaled, stroking his hair while he suckled. When he slid his hand between her thighs, he found another surprise; she was ready for him. He hadn’t expected that. Here he was, finished, and she was waiting. He rolled against her, half lying on her body, and moved up so he could put his lips against her ear. “I need more time.”

“Time?” She sounded confused.

“Umm...” Cobalt wished they could stay here all day.

When Mel moved her pelvis against his hand, he stroked her, using his fingers to help satisfy a need in her he didn't think she even understood. He also found the answer to his question about her experience; she was a virgin. It didn't surprise him. She had been betrothed to the crown prince of Aronsdale. The women of that country might be freer in many ways, but when it came to ensuring the royal line remained true, Aronsdale princes would be just as obsessive as any others. He was probably the only heir in centuries, in any of the settled lands, who had forgotten to verify that his bride was untouched. Well, hell. It was an intrusive question. He was glad he hadn't asked.

He took his time with her, enjoying the process of exciting her almost as much as he had for himself. The uncertain motions of her hips became more urgent, more demanding. She rocked against his hand, her eyes closed, breathing fast. Suddenly she stiffened and cried out. She stayed that way for several seconds, her hips pushed up off the ground, against his hand. Then her entire body went limp. It was more erotic than any deliberate seduction any courtesan had ever tried on him.

“Ah...” Her voice trailed off. She had her arms around him, though he didn't remember when she had put them there. She stroked his back the way she had petted her kitten earlier. It made him want to laugh, which was a response rare enough that he didn't know what to do with it.

He slid his hand over her breasts and kissed her ear. “Better?”

“Much...better.” She sounded embarrassed. But happy. “I didn't know it could be that way.”

“I could tell.”

“Does that bother you, that I don't know anything?”

Bother him? She was an angel. A miracle.

“No,” he said. Cobalt raised his head to look at her. Her face was flushed, this time from exertion, and her hair was even more mussed than before. So sensual. Here he was, ready again, and now she was finished. They would have to learn to time themselves better. Such sweet lessons those would be. Maybe this marriage idea hadn't been such a bad one after all.

She touched his lips. “You say so little. What are you thinking?”

That I want to stay right here, forever, with you.

“We should go back,” he said. If they were gone too long, his men would look for them, which could be embarrassing.

“All right.” She sat up slowly and gave him an apologetic look. “I got your clothes wet.”

He smiled and it didn't even crack his face. “They'll be fine.”

Mel stared at him with the oddest expression.

“Really.” He felt his shirt. It was damp, but it would dry quickly. She was still staring, though. He spoke uncomfortably. “What?”



She touched his lips. "You have an incredible smile. It lights up your whole face. You should use it more often."

I rarely have reason. Perhaps that would change. He knew he was deluding himself, that when they reached his home, he would have to deal with the same miserable life he had owned before he married her. Maybe with her it could be just a little different, enough that he might smile every now and then.

"But, Mel." He stood up, drawing her with him. "It would ruin my reputation."

She gave a startled laugh. She seemed less... wary? Less something. It was a good thing.

Mel gathered up her fresh clothes, a blue tunic with gold trim and blue leggings, and began to dress. His clothes were damp where they had soaked up water from her body, but it didn't bother him as he put them on. It made him think of the drops rolling down her breasts, pooling in her navel, dampening her hair. It didn't help that her tunic and leggings clung to her, an inescapable reminder of the body underneath. This wasn't going to be easy. She made it difficult to concentrate. Such pleasant distraction, though.

"What do you think when you stare like that?" Mel asked.

Stare indeed. "I'm wondering how long it will take us to reach the Cloud." The ride up to the castle was a long one.

She smiled uncertainly, as if she thought he was making fun of her. Then she headed back into the woods. Cobalt didn't know why his answer bothered her, or even if it really did, but she said nothing when he caught up with her. A few paces ahead of them, a man was leaning against a tree, sharpening a dagger.

"Matthew." Cobalt walked over to him. "What are you doing here?"

Matthew glanced up. "Keeping watch."

Like a bodyguard. Cobalt had spent most of his life with such protection. He didn't know who they were supposed to have protected him from, given that the only person who ever hurt him had been the king, whom none of his bodyguards would have dared to defy. Only Matthew had sheltered him during those days. Today, Matthew undoubtedly had posted himself for a far milder reason: to keep the other men from looking in on the newlyweds. Matthew seemed pleased, though why, Cobalt didn't know. This stop had delayed them over an hour. He had no objections, but then, he had reasons no one else shared.

As they all walked together, Cobalt thought of Mel and felt that strangeness happen to his face again, the gentling. She didn't see, fortunately; she was looking up ahead, through the trees. His fear that he would hurt her was abating. Perhaps it would be safe for him to ride with her after all. He wanted to hold her in his arms for the rest of the day.

The forest soon thinned out enough to show the open land up ahead. His honor guard waited out there and throughout the woods, pacing and probably impatient to get moving. His good mood faded. They had fewer men than before. They couldn't carry the bodies, so they had buried the six who had died last night. The task of telling their families would be his.

"Your men seem restless," Mel said.

“Yes.” Cobalt was walking with Mel to one side and Matthew to the other. The sun filtered through the trees. “Would you like to ride with me on Admiral?”

She smiled. “I would like that.”

For some reason, Matthew scowled at him.

Cobalt let Mel pull ahead until he and Matthew were a good ten paces behind her. Then he spoke in a low voice. “What?”

“This is hardly a time for her to ride a horse,” Matthew said.

“Why not? I’m sure she knows how.”

“I was thinking of her comfort.”

“Admiral is a good horse.”

The older man made an exasperated noise. “And you are a dense dolt.” Then he added, “Your Highness.”

“Explain,” Cobalt said. He certainly was dense, because he had no idea what Matthew was getting at.

“She is a, uh, young bride.” Matthew’s face reddened. “The two of you go off together. You come back, both with wet hair and she has on different clothes. It would not be a stretch to imagine that for an inexperienced young woman, well, that is—riding a horse right now might be painful.”

“Oh.” Cobalt felt like an idiot. He thought of her question: Did something just happen? If he had managed better control and initiated her in the proper manner, Matthew might have reason for his concerns. As it was, the point was moot. He could hardly tell Matthew that, though. So he said only, “She will be all right.”

The older man scowled. “You are impossible,” he muttered. He strode away before Cobalt could respond.

When Cobalt reached the carriage, his men were mounted and ready to go. Matthew stood holding Admiral’s reins, with Mel at his side. Rather than saddling the horse, he had strapped a blanket across Admiral’s back. Cobalt took the reins, avoiding Matthew’s gaze. As soon as he mounted, he reached down for Mel’s hand. He pulled her up easily and she straddled Admiral in front of him.

Cobalt put his arms around her, and for a moment, he just sat with his head bent over hers. Her hair smelled damp, a trace of the soapy fragrance from yesterday lingering. He was aware of everyone watching them. He wondered what his men thought, if they envied him, if they considered him insensitive, like Matthew, or if they even cared. He pressed his lips against Mel’s head and snapped the reins. Admiral started off at an easy pace across the land.

So they left their fragile refuge. Their interlude had ended.

Up ahead, the Misted Cliffs loomed in the sky.



## The Airlight Room

Mel thought Admiral must surely descend from the mounts ridden by the ancient wind saints of Aronsdale. He was magnificent. Like his rider. Cobalt sat easily with his arms around Mel. Her face warmed when she thought of her husband. She doubted she would forget those moments when he had undressed this morning. Such long legs, broad shoulders, narrow hips, all those planes of muscle, hard and lean. She blushed. Did he know what a fine figure he cut? He didn't seem to care. Perhaps her reaction was only that of an untutored woman seeing a man that way for the first time, but she didn't think so. She couldn't imagine that he had any match.

Although he was a strange man, he wasn't unkind. She had seen that this morning. He had more to him than the darkness of his reputation. She recalled Matthew's words: He feels far too much. If he didn't, his wounds wouldn't be so deep. What was it like to be the son of a warlord who had lost his throne? Whatever stories Cobalt may have heard, it hadn't stopped him from seeking recompense for Varqelle. But not vengeance. If that had been his intent, he would never have offered this marriage and the treaty they had all signed.

Mel wanted to understand him. The survival of three countries could depend on how well she judged his intentions and those of his father. Hell, her own survival probably depended on it. How Stonebreaker came into all this, she didn't know, but Brant Firestoke's warnings remained in her thoughts.

She closed her hand around the twenty-sided sphere that hung around her neck. If only she could draw on such a high-level shape, she might pick up more from the moods of her husband and the other people around her. She focused on the sphere, imagining emeralds and jade, sparkling green stones, tens, hundreds, thousands. But no spell formed. Frustrated, she tried harder, increasing her concentration.

Pain jabbed her temples.

"Ah!" She let go of the pendant with a jerk.

"Are you all right?" Cobalt asked.

Mel took a calming breath. Remembering how uneasy he had been about mages, she said only, "I'm fine. Just a little tired."

They continued on in silence.

The Misted Cliffs hadn't seemed far away this morning, but it took all day to reach them. They rose up, taller and taller, until they dominated the sky, a great wall that sheered out of the lowlands as if the world had split in two here, half of it dropped down and the other half standing like a barrier fit for the saints or

the stars.

As they rode, the sun crossed the sky, never directly above them even at its highest point. They rested the horses and then continued on. Their party reached the base of the cliffs in late afternoon, as the sun sunk out of view and shadows stretched across the borderlands. They stopped to transfer Mel's belongings from the carriage to the spare horses, which included the mounts of the six men who had died. Cobalt directed his men with confidence. He didn't need to demand or bark; they responded to his taciturn self-assurance with a respect that had obviously been earned over time. The warriors were silent as they worked with the animals. Every now and then a man would bend his head in the traditional gesture of honor for a fallen soldier.

As Cobalt rode up to the carriage, Matthew came forward with Fog's basket. He handed it up to Mel and she smiled.

"My thanks for looking after him," she said. "Did he behave himself?"

Matthew pretended to grimace, but it didn't hide his good mood. "Ran me ragged, he did, scampering all around the carriage. Ate my soup and drank my water." His expression softened. "He's been a busy young fellow. I think he needs a good rest."

She lifted the top of the basket. Fog blinked at her, half asleep. "Good kitty," she crooned, petting his fur with long strokes. He butted his head against her arm.

"You should do that with me," Cobalt said behind her.

She smiled as she scratched behind Fog's ears. "Are you a sweet, cuddly kitten, Husband?"

His answering snort sounded like a laugh.

After she gave Fog some mush from leftover grain and meat, she closed up his basket, and Matthew fastened it to the travel packs on one of the horses. The carriage driver started up again, heading south along the cliffs. Four of the honor guard went with him and the others remained with Cobalt.

Mel watched the carriage recede. "Where is he going?"

"To a southern pass." Cobalt guided Admiral toward the cliffs at a slow walk. "They will go on to the Diamond Palace."

"Aren't we going there?"

"No."

"But—then where?"

"My home."

"Your home isn't the Diamond Palace?"

"No."

Mel tried again. "We're going into the cliffs?"

“Yes.”

“Will you tell me where?” she growled. “Or must I extract the answer as if I were pulling a broken tooth from your mouth?”

“Ach, I hope not.” He sounded alarmed. “I had my back teeth removed when I was young. It was exceedingly painful. I should never like to repeat the experience.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” She was impressed, though. That was four full sentences.

“We are going to the Castle of Clouds,” he said. “It is closer than the palace. I am concerned about the attack. The sooner we reach safety, the better.”

Mel shuddered at the memory. “Yes.”

“My mother and I usually live there,” he added.

“Your mother.” Panic touched Mel.

“She might appreciate another woman to talk to.”

“Might?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Don’t other women live at the castle?”

“No.”

“None?” She didn’t want to believe that.

“None.”

“Surely servants.”

“No.”

“Don’t the men have wives?”

“Some do.”

“But they don’t live with their husbands?”

“My grandfather has never allowed it.”

This sounded strange. “But why?”

“I don’t know.” His voice had lost its vibrancy.

She had a feeling he did know, but didn’t want to say. “Your mother must be lonely.”

His silence stretched out. Then he said, “Yes.”

Why would his grandfather deny her companionship? It sounded bleak. “Are your friends there?”

“I have no friends.”

Mel couldn’t tell if he really meant it. She had thought he was having fun with her this morning when he said they were going to “the Cloud,” but now she realized he had meant the castle. Surely, though, he couldn’t be serious about having no friends.

“Are you teasing me?” she asked.

“No.”

If he truly believed he had no friends, he led an even more parched life than she had thought. “There is Matthew.”

“My stable hand?”

“Does he really work in your stable?”

“Since before I was born.”

“He acts like your friend.” She thought of the disparity in their ages. “Or a mentor.”

“He is my stable hand.”

Mel gave up. She had friendships with many of the young people who worked in the stables at her home, and she had done chores there herself, at her parent’s insistence. But the Misted Cliffs had a more stratified society. Suggesting to the crown prince that his only friend was his stable hand might be an insult. Or perhaps he thought he had no friends because he didn’t recognize friendship.

They rode through a natural archway in the cliffs and up a path that wound back into the great wall. In some places, the trail was a crevice open to the sky; in others, it became a tunnel, jagged and uneven. Their honor guard ranged ahead and behind them.

After a while, Cobalt said, “You are quiet.”

“I was wondering.”

“About what?”

“You.”

“What about me?”

She decided to have another go at solving her puzzle of a husband. “Do you have other members of your staff like Matthew?”

“Other stable hands?”

“Men you talk to as you do with him. As if his companionship pleases you.” She recalled how Matthew had stood up with him during the wedding. “As if you trust him.”

His voice hardened. “I trust no one.”

Surely he had someone in his life. “Were there...women?”

“Women?”

“Um, concubines.”

“No.”

“Oh.” She didn’t believe him. He had seemed too experienced at the pool this morning. “Then who?”

“Who what?”

“Who taught you so well?”

“You ask many questions.” Now he sounded embarrassed.

“Were you married?” He was thirty-three, after all.

“No.”

“A mistress?”

“No!” He made a frustrated noise. “I have known several courtesans. Now stop asking me these questions.”

“You mean prostitutes?”

“I do not wish to have this conversation.”

Mel let it go. His answers bewildered her. Surely he hadn’t spent his life with no companionship except soldiers, prostitutes, and servants he wasn’t allowed to acknowledge as friends.

They rode quietly after that, with only the clatter of hooves to break the silence. The shadows deepened and several riders lit torches. Their mounts went slowly, both for safety and to conserve strength. Sometimes they walked the horses. Mel was sore and stiff, but she had always liked to ride and she enjoyed this solemn procession despite the strangeness of going at night. One time Fog woke up and cried. She fed him and played with him until he let her coax him back into his big basket. Then they set off again, and Mel rode with Cobalt. Every now and then, a night bird cawed or a small animal scuttled into the shadows, but even those intermittent noises seemed muted.

She drowsed for a while, held by Cobalt. When she awoke, they were climbing a steep portion of the trail. Late-night constellations shone in the sky. She could see the borderlands to the east, over a natural wall of rock. They had gone high into the cliffs and the rest of the world had become distant and removed. Wind gusted through the open chasm beyond the trail. With a sigh, she stretched her arms.

“You’re awake,” Cobalt said.

“Hmm.” She wasn’t sure. “Aren’t you tired?” He had slept only a few hours last night and none tonight, as far as she could tell.

“I am fine.” He moved her hair aside and brought his lips to her ear. “Look.”

Mel almost said, At what.

Then she saw.

They were coming out at the top of a cliff. Dawn had tinted the sky red in the east. A castle rose before them in a wonderland of towers. Their onion tops evoked the palaces of the southern countries rather than the turrets of Aronsdale. Bridges arched among them and their spires were silhouetted against the paling sky.

“Ah, saints,” she said. “It’s lovely.”

He blew against the sensitive ridges of her ear. “Yes.”

A wall about four stories high circled the keep. Sentries walked along its crenellated top, disappearing behind merlons carved in elongated onion shapes and then reappearing again. They must have already seen the party, for a large gate was opening in the wall. The honor guard escorted them past the wall, twenty men with Cobalt and Mel in their midst. Inside, pages were running across an odd courtyard, a wide strip of ground that curved around the bases of three towers. Other towers rose behind them and to the sides.

“I’ve never seen a castle like this,” Mel said.

He kissed her ear, which was distracting, especially with his body pressed against hers. She felt warm in places he wasn’t even touching.

“This is my home,” he said.

“Then what is the Diamond Palace?”

“A place in the western lowlands. Grandfather lives there.” He dismounted with unexpected agility, given how long they had been riding, and gave the reins to a groom. Then he reached up for Mel. She hesitated to trust him, but she knew she had no good reason to believe he would drop her, and she was tired enough to accept help.

Mel maneuvered her leg over Admiral so she was sitting sideways. Then she slid into Cobalt’s arms, putting hers around his neck. As he eased her to the ground, her palms slid down his chest. He wrapped her in his cloak, enveloping her in wool that warded off the predawn chill. Then he held her close, his head bent over hers as Mel hugged him around his waist. It was hard to believe this man was her husband. He was a stranger, yet not a stranger. His embrace could have menaced; the top of her head only came to the middle of his chest and she felt the immense power in his arms—he could break a person’s spine with this hold.

Mel didn’t feel threatened, though. She leaned into him. “Tired...”



“Don’t go to sleep,” he murmured.

With a sigh, she straightened and drew her head back, out of his cloak. The sun hadn’t risen, but it was light enough to see. People filled the courtyard and stable boys were leading away the horses.

As she and Cobalt stepped apart, a commotion came from a horseshoe arch in a tower to their left. The people coming out of it seemed to be headed this way, but she couldn’t see much with so many others in the way. Mel felt too worn down to meet anyone new. She had no moorings and little sense of what they expected of her here. She had to depend on Cobalt, whom she had known only two days.

The newcomers drew nearer, and the courtyard cleared around them. Ten men in blue and silver livery surrounded a man with thick hair. Mel’s breath caught. The center man’s resemblance to Cobalt was unmistakable. They were both tall, though this man didn’t have Cobalt’s extraordinary height. He did have the same mane of dark hair, his streaked with gray. His face had that same aristocratic cast, the dark eyes, strong nose and chin, and high cheekbones. Both men had a hardness to them, as if they had been annealed in the same forge until nothing soft remained.

Mel stayed back while Cobalt greeted the newcomer. Her husband gave him a deference he had shown no one else.

The man inclined his head and spoke in a rumbling voice. “I am glad to see you returned safely, my son.”

My son. This, then, was the notorious Varqelle.

“I almost didn’t return,” Cobalt said.

His father’s gaze was like a hawk’s. “What happened?”

As Cobalt recounted the ambush, Mel lost the contentment she had managed to gain during their ride here. She hadn’t realized how severe their situation had been two nights ago. Cobalt estimated the number of their attackers at forty. He and his men had killed eighteen and the rest had fled. Mel remembered how Cobalt had reached out to her yesterday morning, with blood on his hand. Nausea rose within her.

“They were men of Harsdown?” Varqelle asked.

“Probably not,” Cobalt said. “They dressed like farmers, but I think they were borderlands outlaws.”

“Mercenaries,” Varqelle said.

“Yes.”

“Hired by whom?”

Mel recalled the man who had yanked her out of the carriage. He had attacked because she had married Cobalt, not because she was a Dawnfield. “Someone who doesn’t like the House of Escar,” she said behind Cobalt.

Everyone turned to her. When no one spoke, Mel flushed.

“Who are you?” Varqelle said.

Cobalt spoke. "Father, may I present my wife, Melody Dawnfield Escar."

"Yourwife?" Varqelle stared at her. "This does not look like a man, Cobalt."

A man? Mel flushed. What the blazes did that mean?

"She fights like a man," Cobalt said.

"But doesn't look like one," Varqelle murmured.

Mel's face flamed, not only because they spoke as if she wasn't there, but also from the way Varqelle watched her, as if she were prey.

Falling back on the safety of protocol, she bowed as a royal woman in Aronsdale would to a member of another royal family, with one arm at her side and the other holding the cloth of her tunic. Customs varied among the realms, but the ways of the Misted Cliffs were closer to those of Aronsdale than to those of the eastern lands of Jazid and Taka Mal. "I am honored by your presence, Your Majesty." She gave Varqelle the title for a king, though her own father sat on the Jaguar Throne.

Varqelle glanced at his son. "She speaks well."

Cobalt squinted at him. "She speaks a lot."

"Women do that," Varqelle said.

Mel wished they would speak to her instead of about her. With Cobalt, she doubted the slight was deliberate, but Varqelle was another story. Nor could she forget: This was the man who had almost brought Aronsdale to its knees eighteen years ago. Had he succeeded, he would have killed her uncle Jarid and her father as well, possibly her mother, too, or taken Chime as a prize. Mel could think of nothing positive to say to him, so she said nothing.

Thinking of her cousins made Mel remember Aron, and her heart seemed to lurch. She had put him out of her mind, knowing she must, but now memories flooded back. He was full of life and mischief, with his brown hair sticking up over one ear. They had known most of their lives that they would marry. He had written her poetry. Now all of that was gone. Instead, she had lain with the son of the man who had tried to kill Aron's father. Even worse, she had enjoyed it. Guilt washed over her and she wanted to sink into the flagstones.

Mel looked away, past the guards, horses, and grooms to the open area beyond the entrance in the great wall. Men were cranking the gate closed, turning huge wheels wound with ropes as thick as her arm. The massive portal rumbled into place and cut off her view of freedom.

From a distance, the bridge looked like frozen lace carved in ice. It arched between two towers. When she and Cobalt reached the span, Mel realized it was white marble flecked with silver. Its walls came up to mid-torso on her. Holes shaped like heptagons were carved into them, and her mage power stirred.

The wind pulled at her braid and tossed Cobalt's hair around his head and collar. By the time they reached the top of the span, midway between the towers, Mel was chilled through her tunic. The

courtyard was five stories below. A cloud had drifted under the bridge and obscured the view. She thought of Fog. Matthew had promised to see the kitten safely put in Cobalt's suite, fed, and closed in so he wouldn't run away. She hoped Fog was all right. Mel had so little else left of home.

At the end of the bridge, Cobalt opened a door and they entered a chamber tiled in circles and squares. This entire castle was full of shapes. Everywhere. The Misted Cliffs had no mages, but they favored tessellated mosaics similar to those in Aronsdale, interlocked geometric shapes that mesmerized. It had oversensitized Mel's mage talents until a low-level mood spell surrounded her. Dark emotions saturated this tower.

"Who lives here?" Mel asked.

"On this level, no one." Cobalt wouldn't look at her. "My grandfather lives on the top floor when he visits."

"Oh." The mood she felt didn't speak well of Stonebreaker. She wondered if the emotions came from Cobalt.

They followed halls tiled in blue and white mosaics, crossed another bridge in the clouds, and entered another tower. Her spell stirred again; the moods here were warm, especially toward Cobalt. He took her to a large room hung with translucent drapes that shimmered in the breezes coming through many open windows. He disappeared through a door behind the drapes, and Mel waited, feeling vulnerable. Alone. This tower might be better for Cobalt, but she sensed no welcome for herself.

He pulled aside the drapes. "Come."

Mel followed him through another horseshoe arch. In the study beyond, a slight woman with black hair was sitting at a desk. Silks draped her body in pale yellow layers, and gold-rimmed spectacles lay on the table next to her. She had exquisite skin, almost translucent, but her dark eyes seemed too large for her face. Gray streaked her hair and fine lines showed around her eyes. Her features were delicate, including a rosy mouth, straight nose, and the high curve of her cheeks.

Cobalt drew Mel over to the woman. "Mother, may I present my wife, Melody Dawnfield Escar." He turned to Mel. "My mother, Her Majesty, Dancer Chamberlight Escar."

Mel bowed deeply to the queen. Compared to Dancer, she felt clumsy and crude.

The queen spoke softly. "So you are Melody."

Mel straightened up. She saw no welcome in her mother-in-law's gaze. She wanted to create a better mood spell, but she had no shape to touch and she feared to relax her concentration. Everything in this fortress seemed saturated with warnings, unspoken and unwritten, like shadows that would swallow her and leave no trace that she had existed.

She said only, "A good morn, Your Majesty."

"Have the staff treated you well?" Dancer asked.

"Yes, ma'am." Mel hadn't actually met any of them yet. At home, they would have gathered in the front parlor to greet a new member of the household, but here everyone seemed to take their cue from Cobalt, and she had a feeling he had no clue how to introduce his new wife to the staff. Since she had nothing to

add about them, she said, "It is beautiful here."

"Yes," Dancer murmured. "Let us hope it stays that way." She took her son's hand and touched the end of his finger. He still had a trace of blood under the nails. Dancer tried to scrape it off one finger, then gave up and set his hand back by his side. He didn't pull away, but neither did he explain.

Dancer put on her spectacles and studied Mel. "Bring no bloodshed into my home."

"Mother." Cobalt frowned at her. "The only thing my wife has brought into our home is herself." Then he added, "And her cat."

"An animal?" Dancer took off her glasses. "I hope it does not get underfoot. I can't guarantee one of the men won't step on it and break its neck."

Mel blanched. No wonder Cobalt was so strange, with this charming family of his.

"For saints' sake," Cobalt said. "No one is going to step on her cat." He put his hand on Mel's shoulder. "Perhaps we should see to your things in my suite."

His servants were taking care of her belongings, but right now Mel would have agreed to anything to escape the queen. She bowed to Dancer. "My pleasure at your company, Your Majesty."

"Is it?" Dancer asked.

Mel flushed. She had no answer to that, either.

They left as they had come, through the rippling drapes that veiled the room.

Mel sat on the cushioned bench of a window seat in the Airlight Room of Cobalt's suite. She held Fog in her lap and petted the kitten while she gazed out the window in dispirited silence. Cobalt lived at the top of the East Tower, which afforded a spectacular view of the borderlands far below the cliffs. The land stretched out for many leagues until, at the distant horizon, it blended into the Tallwalk Mountains.

The room was an expanse of white stone with no furniture. Breezes wafted through the open windows and rustled the gauzy drapes. Cobalt had fewer of the curtain-walls than Mel had seen in other rooms, but these were enough to give the room an airy feel, as if she were among clouds even inside the castle.

A scrape came from behind the hangings and a blurred figure appeared across the room behind the hanging cloths. Then Cobalt pushed aside a drape. He was dressed in black, as always, and he cut a stark contrast against the white marble and diaphanous curtains.

He came to stand by her at the window. With his hands behind his back, he looked out at the borderlands. "Would you like to eat supper up here tonight?"

From what Mel had overheard among the staff, the family ate on the ground floor of the Storm Tower where Stonebreaker stayed during his visits. Right now, it was only Cobalt, his parents, and her. "Won't we be expected downstairs?"

"Not tonight," he said.

She thought of her reception here. “Maybe never.”

He shifted his gaze to her. “Why do you say that?”

“Your family doesn’t like me.”

He leaned against the wall and folded his arms, watching her now instead of the view. “They don’t much like me, either.”

Mel couldn’t imagine what sort of life he had, that he could speak that way with such casual disregard. “Your mother does. She doesn’t think I’m good enough for you.”

“Ah, well.” He shrugged. “My mother thinks you married me only to stop me from attacking your country, that you have no love for this place, and that you wish you were home instead of here. She thinks I should have married a woman who loves me.”

“Oh.” Mel reddened. She could hardly deny any of it.

“That is why she distrusts you,” Cobalt said.

“She’s afraid I’m going to hurt her, too.”

His forehead furrowed. “Why do you say such a thing?”

“All the shapes.” She traced the pentagons carved into the stone frame of the window. “They’re everywhere. It sensitizes my mind to spells.”

His face seemed to shutter. “Mage spells.”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps you should unpack,” he said.

“Cobalt, don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Shut me out.”

He just looked at her. She wasn’t certain he even knew what she meant.

She bent her head over Fog. Here in his home, Cobalt had receded from her. She touched a pentagon and concentrated on a green spell. It was a weak one, fed only by a five-sided, two-dimensional shape, and it told her very little, only that Cobalt was guarding his emotions from her. Especially from her.

She didn’t see how she would bear to live in this ice castle for the rest of her life.

Cobalt didn’t know what to do.

Mel sat by the window petting her absurd cat, which was small enough to fit in his palm. Although it batted at her hand, she didn't play with it today. The sunlight made her hair shine and brought a glow to her cheeks—but not to her eyes. They were full of tears.

He had done this to her and he had no idea how to fix it. His father wanted her gone. His mother objected to her. None of the staff trusted her. He thought Matthew liked her, but the stable master lived in the clock tower by the stables and didn't often come into the castle. If everyone here followed Stonebreaker's dictates, then the only person who would even speak to Mel, aside from her husband, was Dancer, and his mother had made her opinion on that excruciatingly clear. Mel had good reason to bend her head over her cat and cry.

She was sitting sideways on the seat, her back pressed against the window frame, with the window on her right. She had stretched her legs across the short bench, and her feet hit the opposite side. It wasn't a large seat; she took up most of it. When he sat on the edge next to her knees, it left no room at all. His leg pressed her thigh, penning her against the window. Her hand jerked and the cat mewled in protest. Cobalt hadn't meant to corner her, but he couldn't make himself less large. He scratched Fog's ears the way he had seen her do. Perhaps if he could make her cat like him, she might like him, too.

"Mel, listen," he said.

She managed a misty smile. "Are you going to talk?"

"Yes." He gave Fog one last scratch, then laid his hand on his thigh. "Tonight I must meet with Varqelle and discuss the treaty I signed with your father."

"What will your father say, do you think?"

"That he hates it," Cobalt admitted.

"Oh."

"You should stay in my suite," he said. "Don't go anywhere without me for these first days, until people know you better."

"Do you think someone will hurt me?"

"I don't know." Cobalt wished he had better things to tell her. He lifted his hand, intending to touch her cheek, but he stopped when she flinched. He felt as if someone had socked him in the stomach. Did she think he would hit her? If he could have taken back that moment when he had raised his fist after the battle, he would have done so a hundred times. But nothing could change it. He couldn't even swear it would never happen again. He had never struck a woman or a child, but he had brawled with many a man. Outside a tavern one night, years ago, a thief had tried to rob him. Cobalt had sought only to defend himself. He hadn't intended to kill the man.

They had buried the thief the next morning.

He looked at his nails. He had cleaned away the blood, but he could never clean the stain from his soul.

Mel touched his fingertip. "Does it bother you?"

He knew she meant the killing. “Yes.”

Her voice trembled. “I—I couldn’t tell if it did.”

Don’t fear me. He wanted to say it, but he couldn’t form the words. They would be false. She had good reason to fear him.

“I am not a good man, Mel. I never will be.” He met her gaze. “But I can vow this—I will always protect you.”

“Goodness and gentleness aren’t the same.” Tears gathered in her eyes. “They have much in common, but you can have one without the other. A man’s life may harden him. It may make him harsh. But that doesn’t mean he is evil.”

He couldn’t face her words. They skirted dangerous territory. He touched a tear as it ran down her face. “Don’t cry, Mel.”

“Don’t you ever cry?” she asked. “Does anything soft remain behind all that armor?”

“It was never there.”

“Cobalt—” Another tear rolled down her cheek.

He was breaking inside. “Does my home sadden you so much?”

“I don’t cry for your home.”

“Then for what?”

“You,” she whispered.

He wanted to run from her. “Don’t.”

She squeezed his hand. “Go talk with your father. I will be here when you’re done.”

His heart stuttered. His empty suite was empty no longer. But he feared she wouldn’t stay.



surprised Cobalt that Varqelle chose the South. The compass towers at the corners of the castle were the largest of its eleven, except for the Storm Tower in the center where Grandfather sometimes lived.

Cobalt strode through dusky corridors in the Sphere Tower. He held a long metal tube capped at each end. Torches on the walls sputtered and cast oversize, misshapen shadows of his body against the stone walls.

At the end of the hall, he pushed open a door. Wind blasted him. He crossed the bridge between the Sphere and South Tower with no light except from the stars and a crescent moon. Inside the South Tower, he followed the hallway that circled its girth until he reached the stairs. Those took him to his father's suite, which occupied the top level. The ceiling was open to the onion dome and its graceful curves arched over Cobalt's head. In the past, this room had been partitioned by gauzy drapes, but Varqelle had had them removed. It was all open space now, airy and full of light during the day.

Varqelle's study was to Cobalt's left, with a desk and wingchair. The canopied bed stood on a dais far across the room. A table with several chairs occupied the center of the tower. Cobalt and Mel weren't the only ones who had dined alone; platters from Varqelle's dinner remained on the table. Now the king sat at a darkwood table by a window, relaxed in an armchair, gazing at the night. A crystal flask of red wine and two goblets waited on the table.

Cobalt crossed the room. When he was several paces from Varqelle, he paused. "Father?"

Varqelle glanced up at him. "Ah!" He motioned to a chair across the table. "Come. Sit. Have some wine."

Cobalt settled in the wingchair and stretched out his legs under the table. They reached all the way to the other side. He set his tube on the table between them, then filled the goblets with wine and offered one to his father.

Varqelle accepted the drink. "Did you settle her in?"

Cobalt knew he meant Mel. "Yes."

His father sipped his wine. "Enjoy her now, while you can."

Cobalt took his goblet. "While I can?"

Varqelle's face seemed shadowed. "Before she betrays you."

Why did Dancer leave you? Cobalt hardly knew Varqelle, but he could already see how much he and his father had in common. Varqelle didn't seem a monster. Hardened, Mel might say. Perhaps she would say worse; Varqelle had tried to conquer her people. But Cobalt didn't see why Dancer had fled. How did she think this man could have been worse than Stonebreaker? He couldn't ask outright, but perhaps he could probe.

"Mel would not take my child from me," Cobalt said.

"I didn't believe your mother would, either."

"Did you ever think of having another?"



“Another child?” Varqelle seemed startled. “Of course not.”

Cobalt spoke with care. “One might acknowledge a child born in less than auspicious circumstances.”

His father took another swallow of wine. “If you mean, did I take comfort elsewhere, I certainly didn’t spend all those years alone. But even if I had other children, which I don’t to my knowledge, I couldn’t recognize them. You are my heir, son. I would have it no other way.”

His words warmed Cobalt. “Nor I.”

“I am pleased.”

“I would have my child know you, too.”

Varqelle inclined his head. “I would like that.”

“Or my children,” Cobalt added.

His father blinked. “You can have only one.”

“King Jarid is royal. He has several.” Cobalt had thought it odd, too, but now he wondered. “The stars did not clatter out of the sky.”

Varqelle snorted. “Mad King Jarid.”

Although Cobalt had heard rumors about the eccentricities of the Aronsdale king, he also knew many considered Jarid a good ruler, if somewhat taciturn. Cobalt didn’t know him, but he found it hard to credit the stories of Jarid being a mage.

His father leaned forward. “If your wife takes your child home to her father, we will fetch him back. Whatever it takes.”

Whatever it takes. As he had done to free Varqelle from the Citadel of Rumors. “Did you ever consider coming here to reclaim me, after Mother left?”

Varqelle regarded him steadily. “Every day of my life.”

Cobalt wished his father had succeeded. But he had no way to know if his life would have been better with Varqelle. “I would have welcomed the chance to know you sooner.”

“I also.” Varqelle spoke quietly. “I tried to send men here secretly, to take you back. But your grandfather guarded you too well.”

Cobalt stiffened. “You would have had them kidnap me?”

“Does that horrify you so much?”

Cobalt didn’t know what to think. To be ripped away from Dancer—he would never have wanted that, as a child. But to escape Stonebreaker would have been a gift. “Just me? Or Mother and me?”

“I tried both. And just you.” Varqelle exhaled. “Neither worked.” He set down his goblet. “So I tried

another method.”

“Conquest.” The word had a dark appeal.

“I had intended to take Aronsdale first,” Varqelle said. “I thought I had the best chance of defeating their military. Then Shazire. By that time, I might have had an army strong enough to face the Misted Cliffs.” His gaze took on a fierce intensity that called to the restless energy within Cobalt. “Eventually I would have had all the settled lands.”

A heady thought, that, sweeping across the land at the head of a force that would conquer the world. “A powerful vision.”

Varqelle sat back. “Yes, well, it failed.”

“Not completely.” Cobalt thought of the tube before them on the table. It contained his copy of the treaty. He knew he should take it out. He and his father had much to discuss. But this matter of heirs was unfinished.

“I have thought lately on how a father might be to his son,” Cobalt said. He had no one to base his approach on except Stonebreaker, and he would die rather than use the Chamberlight king as a model. He intended to discuss it with Matthew, when he found a good time, but the subject seemed appropriate now.

“You must be strong with him,” Varqelle said.

“So Grandfather says.”

“Your grandfather raised you, didn’t he?”

“With Mother, yes.”

“I would never have chosen it that way.” Varqelle paused. “But he seems to have done well.”

Cobalt felt ill. “He had a heavy hand.”

“It didn’t defeat you.” His father nodded with respect. “You have become a fine man. I am pleased.”

Cobalt felt cold, then flushed. The father approved of the son. He hadn’t expected this, hadn’t even imagined it could be possible. He had spent decades laboring under the weight of his grandfather’s censure, until it became a way of life, a necessity to deal with but never escape. Although he had hoped his father might be different, it had been too far outside his experiences to imagine Varqelle might look on him with high regard. Cobalt would do anything, descend from the cliffs and spread his father’s rule across every settled land, from the western coast through the Misted Cliffs, Harsdown and Aronsdale, through Blueshire, Jazid, Taka Mal, and Shazire, anything at all, to keep that approval.

He had no idea how to express any of that. So instead he said, “I descend from a strong line.”

“The House of Escar goes back a millennium. It has known greatness.” Varqelle leaned forward. “It will again.”

Cobalt’s pulse quickened. “Yes.”

His father's eyes glinted. "Together, you and I can make it happen."

"We are already." But the more Cobalt thought of their peace treaty, the less satisfied he felt. It had been necessary, yes; what point in ruling a broken land? He wanted Harsdown whole. But it didn't appease the hunger within him, the drive to push outward, sword in hand, his men at his back, challenges ahead of him.

Varqelle touched the tube as if probing a disappointment. "The treaty?"

"Yes." Cobalt opened it and pulled out a scroll. A red string tied the parchment. He undid the string and unrolled the scroll in front of his father. "The agreement stipulates that neither the Misted Cliffs nor the House of Escar will raise an army against Harsdown or Aronsdale. Nor will the House of Dawnfield attack Escar or Chamberlight. The marriage will put my heir on the Jaguar Throne."

"Your son."

Cobalt cleared his throat. "Actually, it says. 'heir.'"

Varqelle scowled. "That is why these mage countries are so perverse. Their women do too much."

Cobalt had no problem with that stipulation of the treaty. Had he been able, he would have made his mother heir to the Sapphire Throne of the Misted Cliffs. He thought of Mel, who had rescued herself during the assault on the carriage. He had ultimately killed her attacker, but if she hadn't defended herself, she wouldn't have survived.

"The Dawnfields breed strong children," Cobalt said.

"They certainly don't look strong." Varqelle scanned the parchment. "This all seems in order."

"It is a good agreement," Cobalt said. "We maintain peace and your House inherits the thrones of both Harsdown and the Misted Cliffs."

"So it does." Varqelle looked up at him. In a shadowed voice, he said, "Why stop at Harsdown and the Misted Cliffs?"

Cobalt's pulse surged. Why stop?

He had prepared an army. Catching bandits and mercenaries who preyed on farmers wasn't enough. After the engagement at the Citadel of Rumors, he had grieved for the deaths. But they had achieved a worthy goal—the rescue of the true Harsdown king. For the first time in his life, Cobalt had operated to a greater purpose. He had freed his father to reestablish the House of Escar, and he had thought that would be enough, but it hadn't eased the edgy hunger that drove him every day, always challenging, always striving, always pushing.

Cobalt said only, "The treaty is signed."

"So it is." Varqelle's gaze never wavered. "You have the makings of a great general, Cobalt. Would you let a marriage weaken you?"

Cobalt didn't realize his fist had clenched on the table until his nails bit into his palm. It wasn't from the

rage that too often took control of him, though. He had subconsciously been gripping the hilt of a sword, prepared to do battle, not with Varqelle, but with...he didn't know.

"We gave our word," Cobalt said.

Varqelle rolled up the treaty and tied it with the string. "You and I are of a kind." He regarded Cobalt steadily. "Remember that."

Cobalt felt the truth in those words. The restive spirit he had hoped would calm after he rescued Varqelle had instead intensified—and found an answering spirit within his father. Cobalt felt hungry and fierce, filled with a fire that nothing seemed to quench. For the first time, in his father, he had met someone who sparked an answering fire.

He returned the scroll to its tube. "I will remember."

Mel was walking through the round chamber at the center of Cobalt's suite, holding Fog, when she heard a tap. It sounded like it was in the hallway stretching from this chamber to the corridor that circled the outer wall of the tower. Almost instinctively, she thought of the straight hall as the radius of a circle and the hall that ran around the tower as its perimeter. As soon as she envisioned the circle, gold light filled the chamber all around her. It wasn't only the lights from the lamps in the wall sconces; this illumination came from a well deep within her. The spell happened without her even trying to make one. Fog nuzzled her arm and purred loudly.

In the past month, her mage abilities had come to life more than in all her previous eighteen years. She wasn't sure why, but perhaps it related to the fact that she had matured late physically, too.

The tap came again.

Mel's spell slipped away and the gold radiance faded until only torchlight remained. She went down the hallway to the outer wall of the suite. The main entrance was a horseshoe arch eight feet tall, bordered by marble columns tiled halfway up with blue and white mosaics in sphere designs. She remembered Cobalt's warning about not leaving this suite tonight. Fog wriggled, seeking freedom from her hold, and gave an annoyed mewl. Mel was so tense, she hardly noticed when he dug his claws into her sleeve.

"Who is it?" she asked.

A man answered. "Matthew, Your Highness."

Relief trickled over her. Matthew she liked. Still cautious, though, she only opened the door a crack. "Yes?"

Matthew stood outside, his arms full of scrolls. He bowed to her. "I am sorry to disturb you, Your Highness. Her Majesty finished with these and Prince Cobalt wished to read them."

Mel hesitated. She didn't know which would cause more offense, if she refused to let Matthew complete a task Dancer had given him or if she let him enter Cobalt's suite when she was here alone. She couldn't ask him to bring a female servant. She had seen no women on the staff here. It was bizarre. The men even did the cooking and cleaning. Mel could believe Dancer might have sent Matthew to vex her new daughter-in-law, but she found it hard to believe Matthew would offer to bring in the scrolls if he

shouldn't be here. She didn't know him well, so she could be wrong, but he struck her as the type who would have let her know if this could get her into trouble.

Mel moved aside. "Come in."

"Thank you." Matthew entered and Mel closed the door, then followed him down the hallway. Fog struggled in her arms, and she let him jump down. When Matthew reached the center chamber, he turned to her with a kindly expression on his weathered face. Fog ran around him once, batted at his foot, and then tore off into another room.

Mel smiled. "I think he likes you."

Matthew laughed good-naturedly. "He has good taste."

"Do you know where to put the scrolls?" Each room in the suite was a wedge in the circular tower, six in all, with entrances on their narrow ends that opened into this chamber.

He indicated an entrance to his right. "The library."

Mel went to the horseshoe arch. She had yet to explore many of the rooms here. A single lamp illuminated the library, gilding the shelves of varnished darkwood that lined the walls from floor to ceiling. Scrolls and books filled them, with gilt titles on the spines of the tomes and gold ribbons tying the parchments. To her left, a desk was pushed into the corner where the curving outer wall met the straight wall. Windows in the curving section let in starlight. A large globe on a stand was set in the right corner, with its continents painted in gold, the seas in blue and green, and the lettering in black. Globes were rare in Harsdown, but she expected they were more common here, in the only country with a coast where visiting ships brought news of other lands. A telescope stood next to the window. At least Mel thought it was a telescope. She had never seen one before.

"It is a nice room," she said.

Matthew sighed. "One could wish he spent more time here."

"Does he read much?"

"He likes history." Matthew entered and set the scrolls on the desk. "It is an interest he and Dancer share."

Mel thought of her icy mother-in-law. "She was reading when I met her."

"She has much interest in the history of her people, especially the women." He spoke in a confidential tone. "I think she would like to write her own treatise. She feels the histories of the Misted Cliffs ignore the contributions of women."

That didn't surprise Mel, given what she had seen so far. "It seems like a good idea. Does Cobalt read about women, too?"

Matthew chuckled. "Ah, no, I don't think so. He reads about wars. All the battles and strategies."

"Military history."

“It fascinates him.”

She could well imagine. “Well, I will let him know you brought his scrolls.”

He bowed. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

After Matthew left, Mel wandered back to the library and looked at the materials he had brought. Fog dashed out of a hiding place under a nearby table and jumped up on a chair, and from there to the desk. He batted curiously at the scrolls, and Mel nudged him away, lest he harm the parchments. They were inked in beautiful calligraphy with colorful borders, apparently modern copies of works several centuries old. It took her a while to decipher the antiquated language, but she could tell they were histories of campaigns from the days when Shazire had been part of the Misted Cliffs instead of a separate country. Eventually she retied the scrolls. Her husband, it seemed, had many facets she had yet to learn.

Fog stalked around the desk, looking for something else to bedevil, since she had denied him the scrolls. He swiped at a paperweight shaped like a blue cube, and it skittered off the desk, then clattered to the floor. He jumped down and pounced on it with all the ferocity a kitten could muster.

“Oh, Fog, honestly.” Mel bent down and rescued the paperweight. “You’re going to get us into trouble if you reduce my new husband’s library to shambles.”

Fog seemed unconcerned. He ran off to explore one of the bookshelves, which had just enough space for him to crawl under the bottom shelf.

The cube fit easily into Mel’s palm, and she gazed at it thoughtfully. She didn’t know if her failure with her pendant had come about because she didn’t have the strength to use such a high-level form or because she lacked experience. Skylark wouldn’t have given her the pendant if she didn’t believe Mel could use the shape. Perhaps she needed to build her strength with spells much as she built her muscles when she practiced with a sword. A six-sided cube might offer a good test of her developing skills.

Mel took a deep breath to settle herself. She concentrated on the cube, imagining strawberries, and roses with their red petals drifting on the wind. Her temples throbbed, but the pain wasn’t unbearable—and red light glowed around her hand. Excited, she carried the cube to the windowsill, where an unlit candle stood. Outside, the night shed cold starlight across the ghostly towers of the castle.

“Everything is chilly here,” Mel murmured. She held her hand with the cube above the candle, and her spell expanded until its red glow enveloped the wick. She focused harder, intensifying the spell. Unlike when she used circles or other two-dimensional shapes, she didn’t have to strain with this cube to find the power she wanted.

The wick burst into flame.

“Ha!” Mel grinned. Bringing the fire had felt almost effortless with the strength of a cube behind her spell, and she had controlled it much better than her last fire spell, the mistake in the orchard back home.

The red light soon dimmed, but the candle stayed lit. She returned to the desk and set down the cube. Although she was tired, and her head ached, she also felt invigorated, full of unused power. After a hesitation, she folded her hand around her pendant. This time she imagined oranges, sweet and succulent. Pain sparked in her temples and she struggled to keep her focus—

Suddenly orange light flared all around her. She hadn’t realized her sword arm was sore until the ache

receded now. The library was warm with orange radiance.

“Incredible,” Mel murmured.

The pain in her head spiked and her spell slipped, then crumpled. As the light winked out, Mel groaned and let go of the pendant. Standing before the desk, she pressed her fingertips into her temples and rubbed hard.

A plaintive mewl came from the floor, followed by a body rubbing her ankles. Mel looked down as she lowered her arms. Recognizing the kitten’s tone, she couldn’t help but smile. “I just fed you, you foggy scamp.”

Fog jumped up to the desk and sat there, posed with his feet together and his tail curled around his body, as regal as a statue. Laughing, Mel scooped him up in her arms. “You’re beautiful,” she crooned, rubbing her cheek against his fur. “My head hurts like the blazes, though.”

Fog settled into her arms and purred.

“Time for sleep, eh?” Tomorrow she would practice again, both her mage skills and with her sword. After the attack on the carriage, she couldn’t risk letting down her guard.

What unsettled her most about the fight, though, were those few moments when she had felt exhilarated rather than terrified.

Cobalt’s suite was quiet when he returned. Unlike his father’s tower, this one had solid interior walls. A lamp glowed in the center chamber and its light trickled into his bedroom, but the other rooms were dark. Standing within the horseshoe arch, he couldn’t tell if Mel was in his bed or not. If she made a mound, it was too small to see from here.

He thought about his father’s words. Did she weaken him? Had he lost sight of greater goals because of her? No, he was the one who had suggested this marriage. She couldn’t have ensnared his heart and weakened his resolve before he even met her.

Cobalt walked to his bed. As he neared, he saw a low ridge on one side. It didn’t look big enough to be a person. He sat next to the ridge and lifted the blue quilt. Mel was underneath, on her side, her cheek against the pillow, her eyes closed. Fog was curled in the crook of her arm.

He scratched Fog behind the ears. “Cat,” he admonished. “You may not replace me here.”

Fog mewed drowsily.

Cobalt slid his palm under its body and lifted it carefully out of the bed. It blinked sleepy eyes at him. The animal felt fragile and soft, and he didn’t want to hurt it. He brought it closer to his face so he could see it better.

“You are small,” he said.

The kitten butted its nose against his wrist.

Cobalt smiled. “Yes, well, in this bedroom, she is mine.” He looked around for someplace to put it, but he saw only the floor. The stone would be too cold and hard. He opened the drawer of the nightstand and pulled out the shaving things he had put there, except for the towel he used to wipe his face. His razor and soap wouldn’t mind a cold floor. He set them by the bed, then put the kitten in the drawer on top of the towel. It looked up at him and mewed.

“I know she is warmer,” Cobalt said. “But I need to be warm, too.”

The kitten sat for a moment considering him. Then it yawned, wide and large, showing him its small fangs. It turned around a few times on the towel and settled down, curled into a ball. Then it closed its eyes and appeared to go to sleep. Cobalt didn’t know enough about cats to guess if it really was sleeping or just ignoring him, but it seemed content.

He turned back to Mel. She hadn’t stirred at all. He undressed and left his clothes in a heap on top of the razor and soap. Then he went around to the other side of the bed and slid in behind her. She was wearing a filmy nightdress. He moved his hands over the cloth, tugging here and there, but he couldn’t see how to get it off.

“What...?” Mel stirred, warm and drowsy, and turned onto her back.

Cobalt fumbled with the ties at the neck of her gown. He couldn’t undo them, but the ribbon broke in his hand and her gown opened. He slid his hand over her breast. Propped up on one elbow, with one hand braced on a pillow and his other stroking her nipples, he gazed at her face. Angel face. He lowered his head and kissed her.

Mel went very still. Her lips were warm, inviting him, but she didn’t respond the way she had at the pool. He lifted his head, puzzled. Her eyes seemed too large and she had no smile for him tonight.

Don’t be afraid of me. He wanted her to desire him. Was this what his father meant by a woman weakening him, this need that made him feel as vulnerable as the cat in the drawer? Unlike Fog, he couldn’t just turn around a few times and go to sleep.

After several moments of him looking at her and her looking at him, Cobalt realized she wasn’t going to scream or beat him off. He tugged at her nightgown. “Can you make it go away?” he asked. “It tears when I try.”

Mel hesitated. Then she wriggled out of the gown, her body moving sensuously against him until he wanted to groan. He didn’t, though. He made no sound at all. When she had the gown partway over her head, he pulled it off and tossed it over the side of the bed. She lay beneath him, gazing up with luminous eyes. Eager for her, he lowered himself on her lovely body.

Mel awoke in darkness. Someone was fumbling with her nightgown. She opened her eyes, groggy and confused. Cobalt had pinned her on her back and was looming over her. His hands moved on her body, grasping and large. He pressed his lips against hers while he mauled her breast. He was too heavy—she couldn’t breathe—he was going to crush her.

Cobalt lifted his head and his hand stilled on her breast. Mel stared at him, her heart beating hard. She could breathe now, though. After a moment, as her pulse calmed, she exhaled. She remembered the first time they had lain together. His power could be as erotic as it was overwhelming, but he was different



now, darker, less patient. Or perhaps he had been that way before and she hadn't noticed.

Cobalt tugged at her gown. "Can you make it go away? It tears when I try."

Did she want to refuse him? He was her husband, and a fine figure of a man—if she could just stop being afraid of him. She did want him, she realized. She struggled out of her gown, which tangled with her limbs. Before she finished, he pulled it away and threw it somewhere. Then he stretched out on top of her, his weight pressing her into the mattress. She had to turn her cheek against his shoulder to breathe. It was too much. He was huge, his head above hers, his biceps hard against her, his hands grasping her breasts until she felt suffocated.

"Mel." He whispered her name. "Sweet angel."

"Can you lift up?" She slid her arms around him in a tentative embrace. "You're heavy."

He pushed up on his elbows, easing his weight off her. Then he grinned, his teeth a flash of white in the darkness, and leaned down his head to rub his nose against hers.

Mel gave him a shaky smile. "What is that?"

"Like Fog. He did it when I put him in the drawer."

"The drawer?"

"Hmm." Cobalt caressed her breast. Then he kissed her again. He pressed his hips against her, spreading her legs apart while he pushed her lips open with his tongue.

Slow down! Mel struggled under him, but it only seemed to make him more insistent. His hands kneaded her too hard, enough to leave bruises.

Mel pulled away her head. "Stop!"

Cobalt froze. "Stop?"

"You're hurting me."

Even in the dark, the alarm on his face showed. "Tell me what hurts. I will stop."

"It's just—your hands. And I—It's hard to breathe."

He slid off and lay against her side. His hand slowed on her breast, stroking only, no longer kneading.

"Better?" he asked.

She blushed. "Yes."

"You are small," he said, more to himself than to her. "Like Fog. I will have to be more careful."

"Don't put me in a drawer," she said, managing a laugh.

His face softened into his most incredible expression, that smile he so rarely showed. "You wouldn't fit

in the nightstand, Mel. You aren't that small."

She touched his lips. "You are beautiful to look at and to touch, my husband, but too much of anything, even such a desirable man, can be overwhelming."

His grin flashed. "So I am desirable."

"Hmm..." She kissed him tentatively, and he responded with that fierce intensity of his, but more controlled this time, enough that she didn't feel overwhelmed. Knowing she provoked this response from such a powerful man aroused her in a way that sweet words or suave expertise could never have done. His strength, his urgency, his muscles hard against her body: it was unlike anything she had imagined. He touched her everywhere. Although he would never be a gentle lover, his hands weren't as rough as before. Her breasts ached, but without his weight pressing her so hard, she no longer felt as if she were suffocating. She ran her palms over his back and buttocks, and her breath quickened.

"You're beautiful," she whispered.

For a moment his hands stopped. Then he groaned and rolled on top of her, holding himself up on his elbows so she could breathe. He pushed his hips between her thighs and she tensed when he tried to enter. She was too tight, too small, he was pushing too hard, she couldn't take him—

Mel cried out as her barrier gave and Cobalt thrust inside, hard and deep.

"Mel?" He paused, breathing heavily.

She didn't want him to stop, not now. "It's—all right."

He moved with great thrusts, all that power and ardor concentrated on her. His hands gripped her waist. Sensations flooded her and she responded with a passion she hadn't known she possessed. The pleasure he had given her at the pool was nothing compared to this. She arched against him, and the world broke into pieces.

Mel didn't know how long they built together, their rhythm increasing. Then Cobalt thrust so hard, he shoved her deep into his mattress. Contractions of pleasure rippled inside of her and swept away her thoughts.

Gradually Cobalt slowed to a stop and sank onto her. It was hard to breathe again, but that no longer seemed to matter. She could have floated away on the clouds, sated and content.

After a while, he pushed up on his elbows and looked down at her with intense dark eyes. "You are mine."

She touched his mouth. "Your queen. Someday."

His gaze seemed to burn. "I will make you an empress."

A thorn pricked her contentment. "The Houses of Escar and Chamberlight have a treaty with the House of Dawnfield."

"Yes," Cobalt said.

A chill went through her. “Then why call me empress?”

“I gave my word I wouldn’t invade Harsdown or Aronsdale.” Then he said, “I never promised I wouldn’t conquer Jazid, Shazire, or Taka Mal.”



11

Fists

Mel ran across the bridge between the East and North towers. The clank of metal and the thump of swords on wooden shields came from below. She stopped at the high point of the arch and leaned over the rail, breathing hard. Cobalt and Varqelle were working with the Chamberlight warriors in one of the few straight portions of the courtyard. A wooden fence marked off the practice area, along with a row of risers for anyone who wanted to watch. A few grooms sat there and some of the castle staff. The physician had set up a station near the risers where he could treat injuries. The swordsmen worked with blunted metal weapons, in pairs, parrying back and forth or trying various moves. Farther down the yard, the archers were training. Their arrows thwacked into the targets with unsettling precision. In Harsdown, she would have practiced with them, but here none of the soldiers would even look at her, let alone train with her.

Cobalt’s words from last night echoed in her memory. I never promised I wouldn’t conquer Jazid, Shazire, or Taka Mal. Nothing Mel had said or asked since then would convince him to reveal his plans. Would he and his father attack countries that had lived in peace for many generations? Yes, Jazid and Taka Mal had once attacked the Misted Cliffs without provocation. And yes, Shazire and the western edges of Harsdown had once been part of the Misted Cliffs. But that had been over two centuries ago.

Mel had to face the truth. With a Chamberlight army and Cobalt as his general, Varqelle could conquer Shazire, which had a relatively small military. If he added the Shazire army to his, they might take Jazid and Taka Mal, as well. Blueshire would fall without a blow; that tiny realm didn’t even have a real army, only a glorified honor guard. Varqelle would hold every country surrounding Aronsdale and Harsdown. What good would a treaty do then?

Taking hold of the pendant around her neck, she tried to call forth a green spell. She imagined the orchards at home during the height of their foliage, with acre after acre of leafy green trees. Her head didn’t hurt at first, but as she strained for green, a higher-order spell, the ache rekindled in her temples. Still nothing. She had to stop—

Wait! A shimmering bubble of green light spread out from her body, covering a greater area than any spell she had created before. She turned her focus toward the practice yard below. She knew she was too far away to feel much, but she tried anyway. Her spell thinned as it grew, like a soap bubble blown from a child’s ring toy. Incredibly, moods came to her then, diffuse and hard to differentiate—except for one. She recognized Cobalt’s intensity, fierce and sharp even when he was only practicing. She also felt

his determination.

He wanted more.

Morewhat? When Mel tried to probe further, her headache flared. With a groan, she lost the spell and sagged against the railing, weak and dizzy.

Gradually her head cleared. She inhaled deeply and stood up straight. She had to warn her parents and King Jarid. But what message should she send? She knew nothing definite, only Cobalt's vow, made in the aftermath of a passion that had nearly incinerated them both. She wanted to think he hadn't meant it, but she had seen that ferocity in his eyes when he called her an empress. It would know no appeasement except by the sword.

If she couldn't send a message, she would take it herself. But she was trapped here. Cobalt hadn't even let her bring Tangle.

Mel took off again. She ran through the horseshoe arch at the end of the bridge and entered the fourth floor of the North Tower. Drapes rippled in wind that gusted through the open windows. She raced across the room and down the spiral stairs, her soft boots thudding on stone, her tunic fluttering. At the bottom, she shoved open a door into streaming sunlight. The courtyard twisted among the towers, and the clang of swords echoed off the walls.

It took Mel only moments to reach the stables. She hefted open the door of the center building. The air inside was quiet, and sunlight filtered through cracks in the planked walls. Dust motes drifted in the shafts of light. She walked to a stall with its upper half-door open. The horse inside stood in a bar of sunlight from a high window. His black coat glistened over the lines of his incredible muscles. He wasn't as fast as a charger, but he was the largest horse Mel had ever seen. The most powerful. Magnificent. Like his rider.

"A good morn to you, Admiral," she said.

"Take care," a man warned. "He tolerates very few people."

Mel turned with a start. Matthew was standing a few steps away. "Good morning. I was looking for you."

He bowed deeply. "I am at your service."

Relief washed over her at his welcome. He didn't walk away or ignore her. Impulsively she said, "Matthew, have I caused offense here? No one else will speak with me."

He didn't look surprised. "It isn't you, Your Highness. King Stonebreaker has forbidden the men here to speak with women of the royal family."

"Whatever for?"

"Your protection."

She put her fists on her hips. "Surely I am not in danger of their saying, perhaps, 'Greetings of the morning.'"

“They must obey their king.”

“But there are no other women here. Who does he expect Dancer to speak with?”

He answered with care. “Her Highness is always welcome at the Diamond Palace. She has many ladies-in-waiting there.”

The more Mel learned of the Chamberlight king, the less she wanted to meet him. If he had intended to force Dancer’s return to the palace, though, it hadn’t worked.

“You talk to me,” she said.

“I am attached to the House of Escar.”

“Won’t King Stonebreaker still disapprove?”

Matthew rubbed his ear. “His Majesty has not forbidden me to speak with Her Highness or with you.”

Mel suspected that had more to do with Stonebreaker being unaware of Dancer’s interpretation of his decree than his intent. “I am glad.”

“May I help you with something here?” he asked.

“I was hoping to find a horse I could ride.”

His weathered face crinkled with his smile. “I have some gentle mares you might like.”

Gentle mares, indeed. He was misguided if he thought all females were gentle, and that went for humans as well as horses. “I prefer an animal with spirit.”

“Spirit?”

“Perhaps one of the horses used by the soldiers.”

“You cannot take such a risk.” Matthew blanched. “If you come to harm, Prince Cobalt will haul me over hot coals.”

“What harm?” Mel tilted her head toward Admiral. “I could ride him.”

“Saints above! Your husband would kill me.”

Mel could imagine. She relented and said, “We brought a gray up from the lowlands, the one with blue and white cords braided into his bridle.” Softly she added, “The man who rode him fought well. His memory will be honored.”

Matthew inclined his head with respect. “He did, indeed.”

“Does the gray belong to his family?”

“Nay, lady. To the House of Chamberlight. He is one of the mounts provided by the king for the men quartered here.”

“May I ride him?”

“He is a warrior’s mount, Your Highness.”

“Good.” She waited.

“Saints,” Matthew muttered. He raked his hand through his hair. “You are sure you won’t take a mare?”

“Very sure.”

“Well. So.” He shook his head as if he were seeing the downfall of the civilized world. “Come with me.”

As Mel followed him out of the stable, she heard him mutter under his breath. It sounded like, “Aye, Cobalt has his hands full.” She held back her smile.

They found the gray in another stable. Mel offered him bits of a small apple from the kitchens and the horse pushed his nose into her hand. While he chewed, she looked him over. He had a healthy coat. She found no scars from poorly treated saddle sores. His legs were strong with no swelling, and his hooves had no cuts or pebbles. His excellent condition, and that of his stall, told her a great deal about Matthew, all of it good.

“What is his name?” she asked.

Matthew had watched intently while she examined the gray. “Karl called him Smoke.”

“Karl?”

“His last rider.”

Mel nodded, subdued. Karl lay in a grave in the borderlands. She laid her hand against the horse’s neck. “May I ride him?”

She expected Matthew to urge her again about the gentle mare. Instead he said, “Aye, I think so.” He showed her Smoke’s gear and watched while she saddled the horse and prepared for their ride. Then she pulled over a stool and swung up on his back. Smoke stepped restlessly and whinnied.

“Good beauty,” Mel murmured, patting his neck. She guided him out of the stable.

Matthew walked with them. “You’ve a good touch.”

Mel inclined her head in thanks. “Where can I ride here?” From what she had seen on the journey up, the area was mostly gorges and cliffs.

“The trails are out there.” Matthew indicated several gates in the wall behind the stables. They were smaller than the main entrance, but looked just as thick.

Mel walked Smoke toward the wall, past the stables, getting a feel for how he moved, the way he lifted his head, how he reacted to her touch. Matthew released heavy bars on one gate and cranked it open. As Mel rode past, she raised her hand and he smiled at her.

She came out into a flat area. The mountains rose beyond, gray and mottled with stubby bushes. Streamers of cloud banded the sky. Cliff-terns wheeled above the castle, and their eerie cries echoed across the peaks. Birds with iridescent green chests darted from cracks in the wall. The air had a pure quality with none of the dust or pollen common in the lowlands. It invigorated her.

Several trails led from the clearing into the mountains. Mel chose the largest. Smoke seemed to know the way, and she slowed down as they climbed higher. The trail wound around boulders and switch-backed up cliffs with spectacular views of plunging gorges. The River of Diamonds poured over a high ledge brilliant with green ferns and fell a long way into a series of pools Mel could barely make out from so high. For the first time since she had left her home, she began to relax.

She spent the morning exploring the region around the castle and getting acquainted with Smoke. He was solid beneath her, spirited but responsive to a firm hand. She headed back around noon, tired but gratified. Smoke was a good horse. They would do well together.

A stable hand opened the gate for her and scowled as she rode past. Mel had an impression he would have liked to leave her outside. Except for Matthew, none of the staff seemed to like her much.

As she entered the courtyard, Matthew came striding over. Mel reined in Smoke and dismounted. "What is wrong?" she asked.

"Where have you been?" His face was pale.

"Riding. You knew that."

"You've been gone for hours! Cobalt is angry."

Mel frowned. "He doesn't control my time."

Matthew reached for the reins. "Better you discuss that with him."

Mel gently pulled away the reins and walked Smoke toward his stable. "I can tend my own mount."

He went with her. "I'm sure you can." Dryly he added, "But so can I. And I'm afraid only you can tend to His Highness."

Well, perhaps he had a point. With reluctance, she handed Matthew the reins.

Mel wasn't certain where to find Cobalt. She heard no one in the training yard now. She climbed the North Tower to its fourth floor. The open room was the same as when she had crossed it earlier this morning, empty, just gossamer drapes, no people. She wouldn't have been surprised to see a cloud drift in the window.

She returned to the East Tower and found Cobalt's suite empty except for Fog, who was visiting the library. Mel scooped up the kitten and cuddled him until he squirmed out of her grasp and jumped to the floor. She laughed as he chased a wooden ball he had found somewhere. It was as big as his head.

"What have you there?" she asked.

"It's a billiard ball," a dry voice said behind her.

Mel spun around. Cobalt was standing in the entrance of the library, leaning against the door frame with his arms crossed. He obviously intended to present a stern demeanor, but it had a very different effect on her. The way he folded his arms made his biceps bulge and reminded her of the previous night. Her face heated and her body tingled.

“My greetings,” she murmured.

He scowled at her. “Where have you been?”

“Riding.”

“Smoke is no animal for a woman.”

“Why not?”

He seemed at a loss for words. It made her wonder if no one ever disagreed with him. She had a feeling he had assumed she would quake.

“What do you mean. ‘why not’?” Cobalt finally growled.

She walked over to him and set her palm against his chest, above his crossed arms. “He is a good horse. I like him. He likes me. It pleases me to ride him.”

“Matthew says you ride well.” Now he looked flustered. Or aroused. Maybe both.

“Of course I ride well.” Mel could feel the muscles of his chest through his shirt. She moved her hand in a circle and murmured, “Very well.”

“Saints, woman.” Cobalt pulled her against him. With one arm around her waist, he bent his head and tried to kiss her. He was too tall to manage with them standing, so he lifted her up with her feet dangling. Her tunic bunched up in his hands.

Mel laughed as she slipped. “Cobalt, stop!”

He made a frustrated noise and set her down on her feet. “Wife, you play with dangerous weapons.”

“Are you?” she asked, intrigued.

His face actually reddened. “Maybe my father is right.”

“About what?”

“You distract me.” He glowered. “Weaken my resolve.”

“Your resolve to do what?” Her voice cooled. “Will you be the weapon he uses to subjugate all the settled lands?”

“Do not speak ill of him.”

“I speak ill of no one. It was a question.”



He folded his arms again. "You ask many questions. You do many things. I don't recall giving permission for any of it."

"I don't recall asking for permission."

Cobalt sighed and lowered his arms. "No, I don't imagine you would." He put his hand under her chin and tilted her face up to him. "Would you ride at my side, like the warrior queens of your past?"

"Why a warrior?" Mel pulled her head away. "We have peace now. I would have it stay that way."

"Why?"

"It is better than killing."

He leaned toward her. "Battles are triumph. Not killing."

"Unless you lose them."

"Until a man dies, his battles are never lost." The name Varqelle remained unspoken between them.

Mel felt as if walls were closing on her. "He demands too much of you."

His gaze darkened. "He demands nothing. I freely give."

She laid her hand against his chest, this time to hold him off rather than draw him near. "Honor the spirit of the treaty you proposed."

"I do." He folded his hand around her fingers. "You like that horse?"

"Smoke?" The change of subject caught her off guard. "Yes, I do."

He pulled her hard against his body, still gripping her hands in one fist, his other arm tight around her waist. "Then ride at my side, wife. Not against me."

"Do not ask me that." Mel didn't know how to deal with this force of nature she had married. He watched her with his sensuous dark gaze, compelling and indomitable, and she knew she could no more stop him than she could halt the ferocity of a blizzard or the thunder in the sky.

Cobalt paused outside his mother's suite. The drape before him rustled as air gusted in the windows. He pushed it aside and went to knock on the door within the elegant horseshoe arch.

"Come," Dancer called.

He laid his palm against the door and bent his head. Perhaps he should leave. Come another time.

The door opened, and he lifted his head. Dancer stood there in her silk tunic and trousers, wearing her spectacles. "Cobalt?" She smiled. "What are you doing?"

"I came to talk with you."

She moved aside so he could enter her study. "You seem troubled. Is it your bride?"

"No." He walked into the familiar room, but today it all looked different. He turned to Dancer as she closed the door. "He is not a monster."

"Who?"

"My father."

She stiffened. "I will not speak of Varqelle."

Cobalt paced away, toward her desk. Her history scrolls lay open, weighted down by small statues of ice-dragons. "You deserted your husband and denied me my father." He swung around to her. "You let Stonebreaker raise me." His anger threatened to flare, but he kept control. "Why? You've always told me it was for my protection. Against what? I have met this supposed devil and he is no demon."

"I told you the truth." She took off her spectacles. "I have also told you that I will say no more."

"Did he hurt you?" Cobalt knew he skirted the edges of decent questions. He was neither deaf nor dense. He had heard the rumors of his father's appetites in the bedroom. He had no wish to know what cruelty might have gone into his conception. But if that was why his mother had fled his father, how could she look him in the eye and claim it had been to protect him? She had given them both a lifetime of hell.

Dancer spoke stiffly. "This is not a conversation I will have with my son."

"You betrayed us both."

She came over to him. "I did not."

"Prove it!" His fists clenched at his sides. "How could you subject us both to that monster you call a father?"

Her voice snapped with anger. "You will not speak of the king in that way."

"Why? He deserves it." He was breaking the unwritten rule they always kept. Never acknowledge the truth about Stonebreaker. But everything had changed with Mel and his father here, and his world was shifting in ways he didn't yet understand. Today he couldn't keep the long-suppressed rage out of his voice. "The day will come when no man or woman dares to raise a hand against me."

"Ah, Cobalt." She seemed full of grief. So sorry. But she would never say the word. Never admit that vulnerability.

"Tell me why you left him!" Cobalt demanded.

"I have said all I have to say."

His fury threatened to incinerate him and leave only cinders. He had to go before he lost control. He walked away, to the door, but when he went to turn the knob, his hand was still clenched. He stood and stared at his fist. He was so full of the rage, he felt as if he would burst if he even moved.

Dancer spoke behind him. “Don’t leave like this.”

Cobalt slowly relaxed his hand. Then he opened the door. He walked into that airy room of gauze and beauty and nightmares, the room where he had so often sought refuge. He would run to Dancer, and she would hide him, but in the end Stonebreaker always found them. Cobalt walked past the doorway of the closet where his grandfather had locked him as punishment for fleeing a king’s rage. He had spent hours there in the dark, terrified no one would ever let him out. The door was closed now, the closet used to store ladders and paint.

He strode across the room, whipping aside the drapes. It wasn’t until he was descending the spiral stairs of the tower that he stopped. He sagged against the wall and a sound escaped his throat, a half gasp, half sob. He slammed his fists against the stone. His rage welled up and exploded out of him. He hit the wall again, again and again, gouging his skin on the rough bricks, expending his fury until his hands were bloody and battered, his skin torn to shreds. He wasn’t his grandfather. He could never break the stone. His bones would shatter first. If the king of the Misted Cliffs had been here now, Cobalt would have turned his fists against him and brought on his own execution for attacking, even killing the reigning sovereign.

Finally his rage wore itself out. He sank down on a step and put his head in his bleeding hands. He grieved for what he would never have, for the friends he had never known, for the normal life he had glimpsed, however briefly, with his bride’s family. He had taken Mel and run from that place, unable to face the love that they all shared without apology or subterfuge.

Cobalt made his decision. Together he and Varqelle would create a world where no one could ever again harm him or anyone he loved. He would do this—no matter what price they had to pay.



12

### The Tiled Pool

Mel went to the highest room of the Zephyr, a small tower west of the central Storm Tower. Its top floor had no furniture, no partitions, nothing but hanging gauze and windows open to the night. She sat on the floor with her back against the wall, drew up her knees, rested her elbows on them, and put her head in her hands, the heels of her palms braced against her forehead. Moonlight flowed through the windows and silvered the room. It was so quiet here at the Castle of Clouds. She could hear only the keening of wind outside the tower.

They had been such fools. Of course Cobalt wouldn’t break the treaty he had signed with Harsdown and Aronsdale. When they combined forces, those two countries had the strongest army in the settled lands, one controlled by the House of Dawnfield. Cobalt would keep his promise not to attack—for as long as he honored the treaty, so too did it bind the House of Dawnfield. They had vowed they wouldn’t fight the House of Chamberlight. Her marriage was a sham, a brilliant ploy to neutralize the only military

force that had a chance of defeating the Chamberlight army.

Mel lifted her head. She had to warn her father. But how? She realized now that if she took Smoke and fled, as she had originally intended, it would negate the treaty. Another Escar woman would have deserted her husband. She doubted any army could stand against a force led by an enraged Cobalt. And he would come for her. She had seen the possessive fire in his eyes this afternoon.

Her body had betrayed her. Mel wanted his touch even now, as she dreaded his plans. This was no untried youth writing pretty sonnets. She hated herself for setting Aron aside in her thoughts, but Cobalt stoked a fire within her that could consume her heart, even her soul.

She had to take action. But she had no recourse here, no allies, nothing. Cobalt had called her a mage queen. Although he didn't believe his own words, they had truth. She had done little beyond inconsequential spells, but she descended from warrior mages. She had always assumed she would learn her skills over the years and use them for the good of the realms she and Aron would rule, he as king of Aronsdale and she as queen of Harsdown. She had imagined her days spent in scholarly pursuits, especially mathematics. No longer did she have those choices. She had to learn her abilities now and in ways she had never expected. Ways of violence.

Mel focused on the chamber around her, a squat cylinder, three dimensions instead of two, small for the top floor of a tower but huge compared to shapes she had used in the past. Power surged within her, erratic and unfocused. She couldn't focus any spell. It might be the imperfect shape; the open windows and drapes marred its form. Probably had more to do with her lack of skill.

Concentrate. What did she want? Green spells were within her ability. They revealed moods, and a skilled adept might send as well as receive them. She needed to relay her warning to her mother or father, to communicate her fear of what Varqelle and Cobalt intended. She had neither the power nor the gift for such a spell, and if she pushed too hard she could burn out what talent she did possess, but she could think of no other way.

Mel tried to imagine the fields and orchards of home, but those memories had dimmed. So she envisioned emeralds, cold and hard, brilliant. It was the highest level of green.

Power surged within her.

A door scraped open. Mel opened her eyes into a green haze. The mist filled the Zephyr Chamber. A woman was crossing the room in the shimmering light. Dancer. Her silks fluttered around her body and took an emerald tinge, as if she were a jewel herself. Mel felt her mood clearly; Dancer had seen the light from the windows and had come to investigate. Shock emanated off her. Until this moment, she hadn't truly believed mages existed.

The queen stopped before Mel. Her mouth moved, but Mel heard nothing.

"Again?" Mel asked—and froze. Her words resonated with a volume and fullness nothing like her normal voice.

"Witch." Dancer had fear in her eyes and her mood. "You will destroy us all."

"I am no witch." Mel's words rolled through the room in defiance of her denial.

"You have turned my son against me." Dancer lifted her chin and clenched one fist at her side, but her

voice shook. "Will you drive him to his death in battle to satisfy your thirst for more lands than are your due?"

"I would have him stay home," Mel said. "Raise a family, come to the hearth at night, work in the orchards." She spoke with pain. "Can you see him living such a life? The thirst for conquest comes from him, Dancer, not me, and your husband feeds it because he knows of no other way to exist."

"No!" She stepped toward Mel, then stopped when light flared around them. "Cobalt is not like his father!"

Mel heard the anguish in her cry. She wished she could help Dancer, but she could barely help herself. "Whether he pays for his father's sins or becomes his father's image, neither will change his nature. He was born a conqueror."

"He must not," Dancer said.

Mel rose to her feet. The mood spell was pouring into her and she felt as if she would go up like a torch with more power than she could control. Her voice echoed. "Varqelle gives Cobalt the paternal regard he has craved his entire life, and neither you nor I can stop your son from hurtling toward his destiny."

"You know nothing," Dancer said. "You would see him die, false Harsdown queen."

Mel could have called Dancer the false queen, but she knew better. Dancer was every bit her heredity. "The throne will return to the House of Escar with the birth of my child."

"That is too late." Bitterness edged Dancer's voice. "Varqelle wants it for himself. Do you believe he will be satisfied to see Cobalt as your consort? I think not."

"We have a treaty." Mel spoke as much to convince herself as Dancer. The resonance faded from her voice.

Dancer's voice quieted. "What will that treaty mean when your lands are surrounded by the empire my son has conquered for his father?" She spoke with the sound of tears she was too proud to shed. "No more will we see peace in our lands."

Then Dancer turned and walked away, leaving Mel alone with her fading spell and her fears.

Cobalt's suite was empty when Mel returned. She felt worn out, numb from straining for a spell out of her reach. She hadn't even thought she could use a shape with a level as high as a cylinder. Apparently so; nothing would have happened if it had been beyond her ability. She desperately wished for Skylark, the mage mistress, but she had no one to help her here. She had to find her own way.

She went to the library. Usually it eased her mind, with its tomes, scrolls, and the globe of the world on its stand, but today it all seemed so frail. Historically, conquerors in these settled lands had killed scholars and burned libraries. It was easier to control a people if their intellectuals didn't agitate against the new regime. Scholarship was such a fragile part of human endeavor. Now when it was too late to continue as before, she realized the gift her parents had given her with such a good education.

A rattle came from one shelf and a purple billiard ball rolled out from under it. Fog ran out after the ball,

slipping and sliding on the parquet floor.

“Ah, Foggy,” Mel murmured. “He doesn’t want you to play with those.” She picked up the ball—

Light flared around Mel. Pain seared her hand and she dropped the ball with a cry.

Her vision cleared slowly. Her hand throbbed, and a burn covered the palm where she had touched the ball.

“What the—?” She looked around. Fog had run under the desk and was crouched in the shadows watching her with large gold eyes. The ball had rolled against the doorstep. It was no longer purple; the paint had been scorched, leaving it black.

Mel crouched down and tapped the ball. An echo of power vibrated through her fingers. It wasn’t the ball. It was her. She hadn’t properly concluded her spell in the Zephyr Tower, so her power had discharged when she touched the ball.

Chills went up Mel’s back. A sphere was the highest mage form. This was a solid ball rather than a hollow sphere, but that made no difference. The shape was the same. King Jarid in Aronsdale was the only mage who could use a sphere in its pure form. Mel’s father was also a sphere mage, but his spells never worked with ideal forms, and they came out flawed when he used flawed shapes. Given the power of a sphere, Muller could do great damage with such a spell; as a result he almost never used his abilities.

Mel found it hard to believe she had called forth power from such a shape. It couldn’t be true. She was a Dawnfield, yes, but neither she nor Skylark had expected such a degree of ability.

“What is this?” a voice asked.

Mel looked up. Cobalt was standing by the bookshelf. She rose to her feet, holding the blackened ball. “How long have you been there?”

“Long enough to see you nearly burn down my library.”

His voice was so tightly controlled, she wondered it didn’t snap. His knuckles were a mess, torn and ragged, crusted with blood.

“Saints, Cobalt, what happened?”

“Nothing.”

“But your hands—”

“It is nothing.” Cobalt came over and took the ball out of her grip. He grasped her palm and turned it from side to side. “This is a bad burn.”

As dizzy as she felt from the overuse of her abilities, Mel knew she wasn’t yet done. She took the ball from him and cupped it in her burned hand, then put his hands over it and covered them all with her uninjured palm.

“What are you doing?” he asked sharply.

Mel concentrated, only half believing she could manage with a sphere. Outside, the blue sky vibrated until it entered her mind and filled her body.

The ball glowed with blue light.

Cobalt yanked away his hand. “What are you doing?”

Mel was too drained to answer. The ball continued to glow in her palm. She took Cobalt’s hands and once again folded them around the ball, covering them with her own. His fingers tightened into claws but this time he held on, his face creased with strain.

The spell drained her. It trickled away like sand running through her fingers, and the glow around the ball faded. Her legs buckled and she collapsed like a rag doll.

Cobalt caught her as she fell. He knelt down, easing her to the floor. Then he held her against him, her head on his chest. “What did you do?” His voice held an echo of Dancer’s fear.

“Too tired...” She lifted their hands—and saw only smooth, unmarked skin on both his and her own. No injury remained for either of them.

“It isn’t possible,” Cobalt whispered.

“Apparently it...is.”

Then she passed out.

It was dark when Mel awoke. She was lying in Cobalt’s bed with the covers pulled all the way up to her eyes. He had taken off her tunic and leggings, leaving only her camisole and lace trunks. Fog was curled on her pillow, apparently having forgiven her for the dramatics in the library.

Mel rolled onto her back. She felt as if a horse had stamped on her head. She needed a glass of water, but she wasn’t certain she could stand up. The pain in her temples surged when she looked around the room, which was empty except for herself. Had she been at home, someone would have tended her, a maid or her mother. Here she was on her own.

Mel sat up and groaned. She pressed the heels of her hands against her throbbing temples. When the worst of her dizziness passed, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed, out from under the rumpled covers. Fog mewed as she jostled the pillow. She tried to stand, then sat down heavily as her head swam.

“You can do it,” she muttered. She took a breath to steady herself and then slowly stood up. Her vision blurred and her mind reeled. She very much wanted to sit down. But she steeled herself and stayed on her feet. The cold air raised goose bumps on her bare skin.

When her head cleared a bit, Mel left the bedroom. The circular chamber in the center of the suite was empty, too. Although most of the castle was colorless, as white as the clouds, the colors here glowed richly in the golden light shed by the lamps. Six horseshoe arches opened into the chamber from the six wedge-rooms that made up Cobalt’s suite. Stained glass filled the curved portion of the arches, each with a luminous design of blue, white, and gold spheres. She walked around the chamber and peered into the

bathing room, study, parlor, library, and Airlight room. No Cobalt.

For a while, Mel leaned against the marble column of the entrance to the bathing room. When she felt steadier, she went inside and eased into the shallow end of the pool. The water came to just above her breasts. Its warmth soothed her, enough that she slid down and dunked her head. She traced the mosaics on the bottom of the pool, green, blue, and silver designs of polygons, circles, crosses, stars, all in chains and curving patterns.

Blue light filled the pool.

Saints! Mel broke the surface and gulped in air. Her headache had vanished. Then a spark of pain returned. She had to be careful with this strange loop of power; if she made spells that helped her heal from straining her talents, she could end up straining her talents again.

She floated across the pool to a slanting section and lay on her back, half out of the water. Her underclothes clung to her body, wet and almost transparent.

After a while, Mel had an odd sense, as if hairs on her body were standing up. She opened her eyes. Cobalt was leaning against a nearby column with his arms crossed, his clothes dark against the pale blue, green, and silver mosaics. He was staring at her with a hunger so raw, her pulse stuttered.

Mel pushed up on her elbows. Her skin felt sensitized and her body tingled. No man had ever looked at her that way before; it both aroused and alarmed her. She wanted to hide herself, but she wanted even more for him to come to her and expend that powerful hunger. Letting her head fall back, she arched her back and stretched her legs.

“Saints, woman,” Cobalt said. He stalked over to her, his boots striking the tiles. At the pool, he knelt in the shallow water, fully dressed, with his knees between her thighs. He rubbed her breast through the lace. Then he clenched a handful of the cloth and jerked. The camisole ripped off her body. He threw the wet rag onto the floor and then tore the lace trunks away from her hips. She was breathing harder now, either from lust or fear. Or both.

Cobalt lowered himself on top of her. He didn’t remove his clothes, not even his boots, he just opened his trousers. Nor did he tease or seduce—he just entered her hard and fast. She was ready for him, even more than she had realized. Lying here thinking about him had been enough. She was sore from last night, and she gasped at his thrust, but when she groaned, it wasn’t from pain. She lifted her hips, answering his urgency with her own. His onslaught drove her. She needed more. Even the scrape of his trousers on her thighs aroused her. He thrust harder, his head above hers, and she cried out. Cobalt went rigid and his muscles corded against her body as if they were made of iron rather than human sinew.

The spasms inside Mel seemed as if they would last forever. She stopped thinking altogether and let the sensations sweep her along. Gripping Cobalt’s biceps, she pressed her body into him.

Gradually Mel became aware again, as her tremors subsided. Cobalt lay on top of her, his breaths coming more slowly now. He moved inside her again for a few moments, as if he didn’t want to stop even after he had finished. Then he sighed and settled his weight on her body. They lay still, and his hair tickled her ear.

A few minutes passed. Then Cobalt said, “I seem to be wet.”

Mel smiled drowsily. “I guess so.”



He lifted his head and looked down at their bodies half in the water. "I was a bit impatient."

"A bit."

"Are you hurt?"

"Ah, no," Mel murmured.

His gaze darkened with pleasure. "You are a sorceress. So angelic in appearance, but a she-devil in my bed."

Her lips curved upward. "We are hardly anywhere near as comfortable as in a bed." The tiles were hard and wet, though she hadn't noticed until now.

He rose onto his knees. Water dripped off his shirt, but he paid no attention, he just sat back and gazed at her. Mel let him look. She was too sated to move.

"Do you put tantalize spells on me?" he asked.

"Do I what?"

He pushed back his damp hair. "Spells to make me want you."

"Of course not." Her voice turned husky. "You must be putting spells on me. I am a proper woman of a venerable line. Yet you make me into someone wild and uncontrolled."

His lips twitched upward. "I like you that way."

"Umm." Her fatigue was returning. Too many spells and too much love. She sat up, but she could only slump forward.

Cobalt pulled her against his chest. His muscles ridged through his wet shirt. "My mind tells me to ward off your magecraft. My instincts want me to embrace you."

She sighed drowsily. "Ward off? Silly Cobalt."

"I am never silly," he stated.

She smiled as her eyes closed. "I can't do anything but make warmth and comfort with my spells."

"Very warm." His voice deepened. "You should go to bed. Rest."

Rest, indeed. "That means you can't come with me."

"I need to make sure you are all right." Cobalt stood up and lifted her, one arm under her knees and the other around her back. He settled her head against his shoulder and carried her out of the room, dripping water the whole way. Even with her eyes closed, she knew he was going to his bedroom. Mel suspected he wasn't going to stay out of bed, either. She doubted either of them would sleep much the rest of the night.

He dried her off with an extra blanket set out on the end of the bed, taking his time as he rubbed it over her body, especially her breasts and thighs. When he finished, he laid her on his bed, then undressed and threw his soaked clothes on the ground. As he stretched out next to her, he spoke in a low voice, dark and ominous and full of a sensual promise. "I will lay the world at your feet."

Mel didn't answer. She let herself think of nothing and feel only his hands on her body and his lips on her breasts. She didn't want to know his dreams, for if he tempted her long enough with his warlord's spell, he might seduce her into anything, even loving him—and if she fell that far and that hard, she could someday find herself riding into battle with him against the people of all the settled lands, even her own.



13

### Chamberlights

Mel found the main library in the Sphere Tower. It took up the entire base of the structure. Books and scrolls filled the shelves there. Stained-glass windows glowed with sunlight high on the walls, patterned in circles, hexagons, and diamonds. Colored light slanted over the mellow wood tables. An elderly soldier was cleaning the globe on a stand across the room, a larger sphere than the one in Cobalt's library. Mel felt odd when she concentrated on it. Light-headed. Strained. No spells stirred. It made her uneasy. What if her spells never came back? She couldn't let herself believe that might happen. After having achieved so much, she couldn't bear to have it all vanish. It would be worse than losing her sight.

The soldier scowled as she entered the library. Then he went back to work, pointedly ignoring her. He seemed to be the only librarian. She hesitated, then took a deep breath and walked over. She stopped before him, uncertain how to proceed. He rubbed his cloth on the bronze stand that held the globe, his concentration on his work, but she felt certain he knew she was there.

Mel spoke awkwardly. "Greetings of the morning, Good sir."

He kept polishing the same section of metal.

She tried again. "You have a beautiful library. I don't want to disrupt your procedures. Please let me know if I can do anything for you, or if you have any preferences for how I treat the materials here."

His polishing slowed, but he didn't look at her. After another moment, Mel bit her lip. But just as she was about to turn, he looked up at her and spoke gruffly. "If it be pleasing you, Your Highness, I'd ask you be gentle with the books. That is all."

Mel smiled at him, her relief warming her expression. "I will indeed, kind sir."

At her smile, his cheeks turned red. He even seemed on the verge of smiling himself. Mel wasn't certain why people reacted that way when she smiled, but she was glad to see his unfriendly demeanor soften.

After taking her leave of the librarian, she browsed the library—and found a treasure. An entire set of shelves was devoted to geometry. She eagerly gathered up an armful of books and scrolls and carried them to a table. Soon she was engrossed in proofs about the diagonals in polygons.

“You are doing mathematics,” a woman said.

Mel looked up with a start. Dancer was standing only a few paces away. She held two large scrolls, one with a title penned on the outside: *Historical Perspectives on Agriculture in the Western Cliffs*.

“Oh, yes,” Mel said. She motioned at her books. “These are wonderful. I’ve never seen most of them.”

Dancer seemed perplexed. “You like to read?”

“Very much.”

“Ah.” The queen lost some of her cool reserve. “That is good. Always good.” She inclined her head. “I will leave you to your studies.” Then she went away with her scrolls.

Mel watched her leave, bemused. She hadn’t expected Dancer to value education, though now that she thought about it, she wasn’t sure why not. Perhaps she and Dancer had a great deal to unlearn about each other.

Varqelle stood with Cobalt on a balcony of the South Tower. They gazed out to the east, toward Harsdown. Without his glasses, Cobalt couldn’t see the borderlands well, but the night was too dark to make out much even with them. He could distinguish the constellations if he squinted. That gave him a headache, though. It was why he liked his telescope; it turned the night sky into a sparkling wonderland he had no trouble seeing. He couldn’t view many stars at once with such a powerful lens, but he liked it anyway.

His father was discussing matters with far less appeal than star patterns. “The messenger from the Diamond Palace arrived this morning,” Varqelle continued. “Stonebreaker will be here tomorrow.”

Cobalt suppressed his hatred. He had to hold it in check, because they needed Stonebreaker. Only the Chamberlight king could provide them with an army. When his grandfather had tried to make him responsible for invading Harsdown, Cobalt had challenged him. And won. Cobalt wouldn’t have hesitated to ride against Harsdown if he had thought they could succeed. Both his father and Stonebreaker wanted the Jaguar Throne at any cost, but Cobalt had no desire to destroy his goal in the process of achieving it. He preferred his solution. Although neither he nor his father would ever sit on the Jaguar Throne, he had brought it back to their House without bringing ruin to their country or people. And now they had other options, for neither Harsdown nor Aronsdale could move against the Misted Cliffs. Tomorrow he would face Grandfather again, and this time he would give Stonebreaker what he wanted: conquest. But it would be on Cobalt’s terms.

“You are quiet,” Varqelle said. “Do you not wish to see your grandfather?”

Cobalt gritted his teeth, then realized what he was doing and stopped. “I never wish to see him.”

“You do not like him,” Varqelle said.

“No.”

“Why?”

Silence.

“He kept me apart from you and your mother,” Varqelle said. “I have no great love for him, either.”

“He is—” Cobalt could think of no tactful way to voice his true opinions of the king, so he said only, “Harsh.”

“A man needs to take a firm hand even with his family,” Varqelle said. “Strength gives rise to strength.”

The thought made Cobalt ill. He would sooner throw himself off a cliff than harm his child. He wanted his son or daughter to have the security neither he nor Dancer had known. He wished for his family what Mel had with hers.

“Is that what you would have me do with my son?” Cobalt asked coldly. “Beat the ‘strength’ into him?”

“Of course not. I do not approve of beating children.” Varqelle paused. “But neither would I have you spare the switch. A child who never knows discipline becomes weak in character.”

Cobalt’s fist clenched on the balcony rail. “And you would take this ‘firm’ hand with your wife?”

Varqelle scrutinized him. “This Dawnfield woman preys on your mind.”

“She does not prey.” If anything, he was the predator. Yet she had bewitched him with her spells. He thought of her constantly. Nothing would free his mind from her.

“You must control her,” Varqelle said.

Anger sparked in Cobalt. “Is that what you did with Mother?”

“Apparently not enough.”

This was a side of his father he didn’t want to see. “Or too much.”

Varqelle frowned. “It is not your affair.”

“I would have you tell me.”

“Why?”

“It would explain her fear of you.”

His father answered with scorn. “She fears strength.”

Cobalt crossed his arms, so tight with submerged rage that his words grated. “Perhaps she fears being punched in the stomach, the back, the arms, and the legs until she can’t bloody damnwalk.”

Varqelle stared at him. “What lies has she told you about me?”

“Nothing.” Cobalt wished he could blur his memories as easily as his vision blurred. “That was what I watched Stonebreaker do to her.”

“I cannot believe such.”

Cobalt gripped the railing. “That you can’t believe it doesn’t change its truth.” He had no stone wall to hit and he didn’t want to lose control in front of Varqelle, but his father was treading on dangerous ground.

“I would never countenance such behavior,” Varqelle said. “That is the truth.” He suddenly went still. “Saints, Cobalt, did he hit you?”

“No longer. I am stronger than him.” Cobalt was clenching the railing so hard, his knuckles hurt. “Now.”

His father swore. “It was unforgivable for Dancer to bring you here. That my son should have endured such is a crime she can never undo.”

Cobalt gave him an incredulous look. “What about her? She endured the same.”

“She deserted her husband. That has consequences.”

“She deserves to be loved.”

Bitterness edged Varqelle’s voice. “She is incapable of it.”

“She loves me.”

“Then why did she bring you here?”

Why, indeed? That question had tormented Cobalt his entire life. He knew he should let it go. This bond he and his father were forming could all too easily break. Their connection was unlike anything he had known and he would do almost anything to protect it. But Varqelle and Dancer had molded his life. He had to understand. His need drove him when prudence cautioned he remain silent.

“Why does Mother fear you?” Cobalt said.

“She poisons your mind against me.”

“She says nothing of you.”

Some tension eased from Varqelle’s stance. “As is right.”

“Maybe you didn’t beat her like Stonebreaker, but you hurt her.” Cobalt couldn’t stop. “And you did other things. At night.”

Varqelle’s voice turned chill. “I will not discuss this with my son.”

Why? You are what I have to emulate. Cobalt had thirsted his entire life for his grandfather’s approval, but he had never wanted to become like Stonebreaker. With Varqelle, he lost his moorings. He and his

father were so alike. He saw much to admire in Varqelle but also much that angered him. No easy answers were here.

Moonlight silvered the planes of Varqelle's face. "Know this, Cobalt. Power burns within you. If Stonebreaker was cruel, if he tried to break your spirit, he succeeded only in forging you into a greater man. History will record your campaigns, my son. You will be remembered as the greatest general ever known."

Cobalt stared at him. With Varqelle he could go from anger to stunned disbelief in a matter of moments. No one had ever spoken of him with such pride. That Varqelle would do so swept away Cobalt's simmering rage and filled him with a longing he could barely define. He knew only that he never wanted to lose his father's esteem.

"I will be remembered as your son," Cobalt said.

Varqelle inclined his head, accepting the offered respect. But then his gaze darkened. "Do not let a woman ruin what you can become. Allow her to weaken your will and she will destroy you."

Destroy? No. Perhaps Varqelle would call his driving need for Mel a weakness, but she made Cobalt feel invincible. Nothing could stop him. Knowing his father saw so much within him changed everything. They would join forces, he and Varqelle. It might be an alliance made in hell, but it would have no equal.

The king of the Misted Cliffs arrived late in the day, as shadows stretched across the land. He brought several hundred soldiers and they poured into the courtyard. Grooms, stable boys, and the castle staff ran to accommodate them.

Mel stood on a balcony in the Storm Tower and watched the commotion. Cobalt already had over fifty men here. With the cavalry Stonebreaker was bringing, their numbers swelled to more than four hundred. Everywhere she looked, warriors dismounted, called, strode, and gathered. They would lodge in towers, in tents set up in the courtyard, and in the open areas outside the wall. Stonebreaker actually had thousands of men, and rumors floating about the castle said the rest of them were assembling at the base of the cliffs, down in the borderlands. The Chamberlight king hadn't brought a retinue. He had come with his damn army.

He expects to fight. The thought haunted Mel. No one would mount an operation this large just to meet his grandson's bride. Stonebreaker might say he intended to show honor, but Mel didn't believe it. This was either an unsubtle threat or the prelude to an invasion. Or both.

Leather creaked behind Mel. She turned to see Varqelle silhouetted in the archway. She bowed to him. "Good evening, Your Majesty."

A chuckle came from the silhouette. "I'm hardly majestic, even at the top of a tower."

"Matthew?" Mel winced. "My apologies. I thought you were Varqelle." Now that she looked more closely, the difference was obvious. Matthew had a similar height, but kinder features and a huskier build. His hair was completely gray.

He came onto the balcony. "I'm sorry to disturb you. But I must prepare for King Stonebreaker's arrival."

“I will go. I should be downstairs anyway.” She would have preferred to stay away, but she couldn’t hide from Stonebreaker forever. Sooner or later she had to face him.

The Storm Tower contained many rooms, including the suite at the top where Stonebreaker stayed. Clerks worked in the mid level on the day-to-day business of the castle. Other floors had halls where Cobalt or Stonebreaker could meet with the staff that ran the castle. The chef and his staff had a huge kitchen below the ground level.

Mel descended to the bottom floor and stood in the shadows of an archway that opened onto the courtyard. In the hubbub outside, no one acknowledged her. The few people who glanced her way quickly averted their gazes. Their behavior didn’t surprise her. She didn’t even know the names of the soldiers quartered here. They kept apart, never speaking to her, especially as rumors of her magecraft spread. People made discreet snapping gestures with their hands when she walked by, signs to protect themselves against whatever evils they imagined within her. At home, her family and friends would have rejoiced to see her power growing, but here people avoided her as if she carried a plague.

She spotted Vargelle outside talking to several officers. Neither Cobalt nor Stonebreaker was anywhere in view. She had never met the Chamberlight king, but she had seen portraits here of him. Cobalt might have already escorted him to a place of welcome. Given his antipathy toward his grandfather, though, she questioned if Cobalt would even come down to the courtyard. His sense of duty was strong, however, and she thought his enmity for the king masked his desire for Stonebreaker’s good opinion.

“He has many men,” a woman said.

Mel almost jumped. Looking across the archway, she saw Dancer standing in the shadows. Mel had expected her mother-in-law to denounce her as a witch after what happened in the tower, but Dancer had remained silent these past few days, watching, judging, appraising. Although Mel wasn’t certain what to make of it, she could see that Dancer genuinely loved Cobalt. The mother was evaluating her son’s wife.

Mel spoke carefully. “I’ve heard over five thousand more of his men are gathering down in the borderlands.”

“These are for show,” Dancer said. “An exhibition of Chamberlight strength. For you.” Dryly she added, “My father has never been a subtle man.”

A dark figure formed in the shadows behind the queen—and resolved into Cobalt. He came up beside his mother. “It is time to greet him.” His words had a hollow sound.

“Where is he?” Mel asked.

“With the last wave of men,” Cobalt said. “The sentries spotted him.”

Mel couldn’t read him now. He was like a shuttered window. He and Dancer stood side by side as if they gained strength from each other against a threat.

“Why would he come last?” Mel asked.

Dancer folded her arms as if she were cold. “For a better entrance.”

Cobalt laid his palm on his mother's arm, an unmistakable offer of protection. "Come. We will meet him at the gate."

"Very well." She caught her lower lip with her teeth.

Cobalt turned his stark gaze on Mel. "You can wait here. If you wish."

Mel felt as if cool fingers walked across her shoulders. Of course she should greet the king. But watching them, she wanted to retreat to Cobalt's suite until Stonebreaker left. No matter how she felt, though, it would be wrong to hide.

"I will go with you," she said.

Dancer gave her an odd look. If Mel hadn't known better, she would have thought it was approval. Cobalt inclined his head to Mel, and she caught the flicker of fear in his gaze. Never before had she seen that emotion from him, and she had questioned whether he was capable of it. Even now, he masked it well. But she had come to read him better these past few days. He feared his grandfather.

Dancer arranged the silk folds of her tunic as if they were armor. Then she stepped out into the slanting rays of the late afternoon. One of the arrivals, a warrior in Chamberlight armor and chain mail, glanced at her. He did a double take, then knelt before her and bowed his head.

"Please rise," she said. Behind her, Cobalt was stepping out of the tower.

As the man stood, Cobalt joined his mother. The soldier blanched and went down on one knee again, with a sharper drop of his head. Nor was he the only one. Several others had seen them as well. All of Stonebreaker's men who could see Dancer and Cobalt knelt. Their expression of fealty spread like a wave across the narrow strip of courtyard that curved around the base of the Storm Tower. Everywhere, they knelt in honor of the Chamberlight heirs.

Cobalt spoke, a short phrase Mel didn't catch, and the men closest to him rose to their feet. The rest followed suit, and the wave spread in reverse now as the men stood. Cobalt turned and extended his hand to Mel. Taking a deep breath, she went to stand with him and Dancer. The soldiers watched with no welcome in their gazes. A bead of sweat ran down her temple. Had she not been with Dancer and Cobalt, she wasn't certain she would have made it through this crowd without incident.

They walked across the odd, curving courtyard toward the main gate. Men on horses continued to ride through it, and others walked inside, leading chargers or pack animals loaded with feed. The men followed a custom she had never seen back home, bowing to Dancer and Cobalt from horseback. Dancer inclined her head, but Cobalt showed no trace of a response. His face was like carved stone.

A formation of six horses around a seventh appeared. Mel's breath caught. The Chamberlight king sat astride the central mount, his head raised high. Stonebreaker. Cobalt resembled him even more than he did Varqelle. They both had the same broad-shouldered, long-legged build, the same pride in their carriage, the same powerful physique. But Cobalt was more. He had even more height, greater musculature, stronger features. He and Stonebreaker were two powerhouses, but the heir surpassed the sovereign.

Next to Cobalt, Stonebreaker would always seem second, even though in authority and status he was first. Mel recalled Brant Firestoke's comment, that Stonebreaker was jealous of his grandson. Although she could see why, she would have expected the king to be proud rather than resentful. What better



indication of his ascendancy than to see it reflected in such an exceptional heir? The more she learned about the Chamberlight dynasty, the more uncomfortable they made her.

Stonebreaker and his personal honor guard entered the courtyard at a regal pace. The king wore the leather and metal armor and chain mail, with a massive sword at his hip. The wind blew back his silvered hair, and he held a helmet under one arm.

Mel spoke in a low voice. "He is impressive."

Neither Cobalt nor Dancer answered.

Mel wasn't certain of protocols. Although her parents tended to avoid ceremony, the royal court in Aronsdale was formal. She knew the expected behavior there, but she was less certain here. She had read what she could find about the Misted Cliffs and the Chamberlight dynasty after she accepted Cobalt's proposal. Most of it applied specifically to the court at the Diamond Palace; she recalled nothing about greeting the king in a lovely but strange citadel on top of a cliff. It was probably best to follow Cobalt and Dancer, or deal as she would in the Diamond Palace. If she felt uncertain, she could fall back on the customs at Castle Suncroft. Different countries had different ways, but Aronsdale, Harsdown, and the Misted Cliffs weren't that dissimilar.

The king reined in his horse and surveyed the yard. When he settled his gaze on Dancer and Cobalt, they each bowed to him. Mel followed suit, copying their motions. Stonebreaker inclined his head much in the way they had done with the riders who bowed to them. High up on his stallion, with his armor and helmet glittering, he seemed the epitome of majestic splendor.

As the king dismounted, Cobalt walked over to him. Mel hung back with Dancer. The two men greeted each other and stood together, surrounded by the bustle and flow of soldiers, guards, and servants like columns of rock in a turbulent river. Dressed in black, Cobalt seemed shadowed compared to Stonebreaker. Mel wondered if he deliberately played down his own qualities in his grandfather's presence. If Stonebreaker did envy him, such an approach would be a way to appease the king's displeasure.

Stonebreaker and Cobalt seemed respectful of each other. It took her a moment to pinpoint what was missing; neither man showed any sign he was glad to see the other. In her family, they would have been hugging, talking, laughing. She had seen the reserve in how Cobalt and his mother interacted, but this coldness went beyond that.

Mel touched the pendant around her neck. She concentrated on a spell. Her power did respond today, but it stirred only weakly. She couldn't control the green light that formed around her hand. Dancer glanced at her sharply, and Mel lowered her arm, letting the spell go. She didn't want the Chamberlight king to think she was trying to curse him or some such nonsense. Nor was she certain she wanted to know more; her brief spell had been enough to reveal the darkness Cobalt felt toward his grandfather.

Stonebreaker and Cobalt came toward them, but the men in the Chamberlight honor guard stayed back. The king looked Mel over without a smile, then turned away as if she were of no consequence. He stopped in front of Dancer and nodded. "You look well today, my dear."

Dancer returned his nod with formal, icy perfection. "Thank you, Father."

Cobalt drew Mel forward. "Grandfather, may I present my wife, Melody Dawnfield Escar."

Mel bowed to the king with one hand holding the silk layers of her tunic, the greeting of an heir to a sovereign of higher rank among her people, and among Cobalt's as well, from what she had read. When she straightened, Stonebreaker was looking the other way, at the men setting up tents in the courtyard. He spoke to Cobalt. "We won't be able to lodge everyone here."

A muscle twitched in Cobalt's cheek, and for a moment Mel thought he would speak in anger. She tried to catch his eye, to tell him the slight didn't matter, but he wouldn't look at her.

"You have brought many men," Cobalt said. The rebuke too many remained implicit.

"If you are unable to deal with them," Stonebreaker said, "I can take care of the matter."

Cobalt stiffened. "I regret that your advisers were unable to plan ahead of time."

Mel stared at him. He had practically suggested the king's advisers were incompetent.

"Ah, well," Stonebreaker said, as if making allowances for his grandson's ineptitude. "I am sure you did your best."

Cobalt's fist clenched at his side.

Dancer spoke quickly. "We have a feast planned tonight, Father, to honor you."

"I imagine so." The king finally turned to Mel. "Perhaps you will fetch everyone drink to slake our thirst. We have traveled a long way."

Mel had no idea how to respond, especially after his bizarre exchange with Cobalt. She wasn't a servant. Even if that had been the case, what did he expect, that she would provide wine for the hundreds of men arriving here?

Cobalt spoke. "We have refreshment inside." He sounded as if he were gritting his teeth.

"That will have to do." Stonebreaker offered his arm to Dancer. "Come, Daughter. I should like to catch up on news."

Dancer answered stiffly. "Of course." She set her palm on his arm and they started for the Storm Tower.

Mel looked up at Cobalt, at a loss for how to respond to all this. His gaze had darkened. He presented his arm and she set her palm on it the way Dancer had done with Stonebreaker. They followed the king and his daughter, and Mel was aware of Stonebreaker's guards coming behind them. She vowed she would learn their names, rank, even their favorite food, anything to make them people rather than more unnamed soldiers.

Inside the Storm Tower, a large hall took up the entire bottom floor. Youths from the kitchen staff were setting platters of food on a large table in the center. Ice sculptures graced the table, one carved to resemble the Diamond Palace and the other like the Castle of Clouds. Servers were escorting guests into the hall, highly ranked officers from among the men Stonebreaker had brought and in the company already quartered here.

Varqelle entered through another archway, accompanied by Cobalt's honor guard. They escorted him through the bustle of soldiers and servers, and everyone they passed stepped aside, bowing to the Escar

king.

When they reached Stonebreaker, Varqelle inclined his head to the Chamberlight king, one sovereign to another. “You honor us with your visit, Your Majesty.” The rigid set of his shoulders belied the courtesy of his greeting.

Stonebreaker returned the nod. “You look well. I hope my home agrees with you.”

The Escar king answered with stiff formality. “It does you honor.” The courteous words didn’t hide his discomfort with the man who had kept him from his wife for thirty-three years.

Varqelle glanced at Cobalt and his face relaxed into a smile. “My greetings, son.”

Cobalt bowed deeply, showing a son’s respect for his father. He could have bowed that way to his grandfather, too, had he so chosen. Varqelle clapped him on the shoulder, and incredibly, Cobalt smiled. Mel realized it was the first time anyone had greeted her husband with good wishes today. Stonebreaker’s men had knelt to him, yes, but out of duty, not because they were happy to see him. It was no wonder Cobalt had taken to his father; Varqelle might be evil in her eyes, but he was the only one here aside from Dancer who treated Cobalt like a human being.

When Varqelle turned to Mel, his expression hardened. She met his gaze, knowing hers held just as much distrust. He would use Cobalt to gain his ends, and Cobalt would do whatever his father wanted, because Varqelle gave him the acceptance that the rest of the world had denied him his entire life. Stonebreaker was a fool if he had let envy poison his relationship with his grandson. He might covet Cobalt’s power, but in trying to destroy his grandson’s spirit, he would only turn that power against himself and his reign.

The royal party went to a dais at one end of the hall where a smaller table stood, long and narrow. Stonebreaker led the way, flanked by two men in his honor guard. Varqelle and Dancer came next, followed by Mel and Cobalt. It was the first time Mel had seen Cobalt’s parents walking side by side. Neither looked at the other. Varqelle didn’t offer his arm for Dancer’s hand and Dancer made no attempt to take his elbow.

High-backed chairs stood along one side of the table, each a work of art, made from darkwood and set with blue and white silk cushions. The central chair was a white marble throne inlaid with sapphires and diamonds. The table was also darkwood. A circular mosaic inlaid its center, displaying the insignia of the House of Chamberlight, a blue sphere on a white background.

Stonebreaker went to stand in front of the throne. He nodded to his family, and they took their places in front of the chairs that flanked him, Dancer and Varqelle to his left, Mel and Cobalt on the right. The six officers in Stonebreaker’s honor guard went to chairs at the ends of the table, three to the left and three to the right.

They all faced the hall. Below them, about fifty guests stood at the larger table. Stonebreaker lifted his chin and surveyed his men. Then he raised his hand. Immediately, kitchen servers filed up to the dais with platters for the high table and a frozen sculpture of the mythical ice-dragon said to live in the highest reaches of the Misted Cliffs. They set out crystal goblets shaped like orchids and flasks of red wine imported from the lowlands. Mel would have preferred apple juice, but they had none. Although a few of the trees grew up here, they were scraggly and bore little fruit. She had no desire to eat, knowing this feast honored the commander who had gathered one of the largest armies ever seen in the settled lands—and poised it on the border of her country, Harsdown.

The royal family remained standing while the table was set. After the servers withdrew, Stonebreaker settled into his throne. At Cobalt's nudge on her elbow, Mel joined the Chamberlight family in taking their seats. Stonebreaker's honor guards sat next. Only then did the rest of their guests settle into their chairs at the big table. Mel was relieved they all knew what they were doing, because she had no idea. Had she been expected to assign seating, she wouldn't have known who to put where or when to do it. No one had told her about this meal despite her inquiring in the kitchens both yesterday and earlier today about preparations for the king's arrival. The castle had a staff of over twenty, plus the stable hands and soldiers, yet she felt completely isolated.

Her introduction to Stonebreaker only made it worse, and she had little doubt it was intentional on his part. Cobalt's protective attitude toward his mother and his strange verbal battle with his grandfather caused her to wonder how much he, too, was a victim of Stonebreaker's control. Mel couldn't imagine how she would survive up here. Saints, she missed her family.

No emotion showed on Cobalt's face, but something flickered in his eyes when he looked at her, an apology maybe. Or perhaps she only wished to see it. She didn't try a mood spell. Hers always created light and that would draw unwanted attention, possibly even endanger her life if Stonebreaker's men feared she would harm the Chamberlight king.

Supper was excruciating. With eleven of them sitting along one side of the table it was difficult to talk to one another. Stonebreaker asked Dancer for news about the castle and listened with patience while she spoke. His officers said nothing. Had Mel been at home and her family invited her father's officers to dinner, they all would have been talking and laughing around the table. Now she didn't even know if she could talk to anyone. She had lost track of all the decrees Stonebreaker had for the behavior of his family.

The officer to Mel's left was a tall man with hair the color of bronze and a colonel's ebony ring on his finger. He dined with gusto, but he never broke protocol by eating with his hands or spilling food. The same couldn't be said of the soldiers at the table below. Mel was glad she wasn't the one who would clean up after the feast. Though perhaps she shouldn't be so certain, given the way Stonebreaker had treated her this afternoon. Pah. She shouldn't let him bother her this way.

Mel spoke cordially to the colonel. "Is the food to your liking, sir?"

The man froze. Then he slowly set down his knife and looked at her. "Yes, Your Highness. It is excellent."

"I am glad you are enjoying it, Colonel..." She let his title hang as a question. She didn't expect an answer; when she had tried this technique with Cobalt's men, they only bowed and went about their work, refusing to talk to her.

This fellow, however, smiled amiably. "Leo Tumbler, ma'am."

Leo Tumbler. Finally! She had a name for someone. She smiled and said, "My pleasure at your acquaintance, Leo Tumbler." She heard Stonebreaker speak to Cobalt, the first time it had happened during the meal, but she didn't catch the words.

Tumbler flushed when she smiled. Then he beamed at her. "The honor is mine, ma'am."

A hand touched Mel's arm. "Your roast grows cold," Cobalt said.

Startled, she turned to him, and he shook his head slightly, warning her to silence. Her anger sparked. Beyond him, she saw Stonebreaker cutting his venison. Although the king didn't seem to be paying attention, she had no doubt he was listening. She gritted her teeth. You want Cobalt and me to argue, don't you. Stonebreaker knew how isolated she and Dancer were here; he had set it up that way. Of course she wanted to talk to someone. So Stonebreaker manipulated Cobalt into stopping her. It could leave her and her new husband ripe for a spat.

Mel gave Cobalt her sweetest smile, the one her friends at home had always said made her look angelic. "Why, thank you, love. It is kind of you to notice."

Cobalt gaped at her. Suddenly his grin flashed—and lit up his entire face. It vanished immediately, but the sight was enough to warm Mel through ten dinners. Stonebreaker stabbed his fork into his meat, too hard, and the shaft bent.

Mel couldn't imagine raising a child in this family. If Stonebreaker was always like this, he would make the child doubt her worth. Or his. Varqelle would teach a boy his unforgiving view of life and probably despise a girl. She had no idea how Dancer would respond. If only she could raise her child with her parents. The likelihood Cobalt would ever agree to such, though, was about as great as that of the Misted Cliffs toppling into the borderlands. The shame of it was, Cobalt could probably be a good father if he had the chance to find that side of himself. But in this place, she didn't see how that would ever happen.

With the Chamberlight army gathering, they had room only for thoughts of war.



14

### The Sphere Tower

Cobalt disappeared with Varqelle and Stonebreaker after dinner. Left on her own, with no one who wished to talk to her, Mel wandered through the castle. She stood on a bridge between two towers and gazed at the night sky. She thought of the telescope in Cobalt's library. Perhaps sometime he would come out here with her and look at the stars. It was hard to imagine him taking the time for such a dreamy pastime, though.

Eventually she returned to Cobalt's suite. He was in the parlor, practicing at the billiards table. She had never heard of the game before coming here; it was an import brought by a merchant ship from the west. Legends claimed that in the past, the Misted Cliffs had boasted a thriving sea trade. These days, only a few merchants came from across the Blue Ocean, and only a few Chamberlight vessels traveled the world. Ships that ventured out often disappeared or somehow became lost and ended up back on the shores of the Misted Cliffs.

Mel stood in the doorway. Cobalt was using a polished stick to make balls hit each other and roll into pockets on the edges of the table.

"I'm sorry about the purple ball I burnt," she said.

He jerked the stick and missed the shot. But as he looked up at her, his face relaxed. He set his stick on the table and came over. Then he put his arms around her waist. "Thank you."

She blinked. "For ruining your game?"

He laughed, that full, rumbling sound he so rarely let out. "No. For tonight. Dinner."

"Oh." She had no idea what she had done. "Conversation seemed a bit strained." To put it mildly.

"It usually is with my family." Cobalt led her to a small sofa against one wall and drew her to sit with him on its gold and crimson cushions.

Mel took his hands. "I would love for you to visit mine."

His grip tensed on her fingers. "What?"

"Come stay with my family."

"I cannot."

"But why?" She lifted his hands and pressed her cheek against his knuckles. "I would like them to know you."

"Your family hates me."

"No." She wasn't actually certain he was so far from the truth, but they needed more of a chance to know him. "You were there less than one day."

He put his arm around her shoulders. "I have much to do here. I cannot traipse around the countryside."

"This is a cold, cruel place. It is bad for us."

He shuttered his expression. "It is the best home I have ever known."

Mel wanted to weep for him, if this was the best he had known. "Life can be full of laughter and light. Let me show you another way."

His gaze darkened. "You would sap my strength."

"Oh, bah." She thumped her palm against his chest. "Your strength is just fine. You should quit worrying about it."

He bent his head over hers and brushed his lips over her hair. "My father thinks you weaken me with such talk."

"Saints forbid I should weaken you by suggesting you have a right to a happy, contented life."

“Happy and contented by whose standards?”

“Anyone’s.”

“No. Yours.” Cobalt shook his head. “Perhaps my father is right. But I cannot see the world as he does.”

It wasn’t exactly a declaration that he would visit, but it wasn’t an outright refusal, either. “Does that mean you will consider my invitation?”

He paused. “Perhaps.”

“I miss my family.”

“You’ve been here less than a month.”

It had felt like years. “Come visit. You will like them.” Inspiration came to her. “Bring Dancer.”

Silence.

“Cobalt?”

He drew back and regarded her with his forehead furrowed. “You would like my mother to visit your family?”

“Yes.”

“It would be odd.”

“Why? Families do it all the time.”

“Not us.”

“It could make her happy.”

“She is happy here.”

“She has no friends.” It was heartbreaking if they considered this happiness. “No companions aside from you.”

He spoke awkwardly. “She doesn’t even have me.”

“What happened?”

“I got angry at her.”

“You didn’t seem angry with each other this afternoon.”

“That was a truce, because of Grandfather’s arrival. Unspoken, but we both knew. We face him together.” A muscle twitched in his cheek. “But I got angry with her because of him.”

“What happened?”

“She let him bring me up.”

This sounded like an anger several decades in the making. “Surely she had a reason.”

“She will not tell it.”

Mel touched his cheek. “Go to her. Make it better.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Invite her to Harsdown.”

He made an exasperated noise. “What makes you think she wants to go?”

It was a good question. Mel didn’t have a good answer, because she suspected Dancer would rather walk in a swamp than visit her daughter-in-law’s family. “She would go if you asked.” Another idea came to her. “Bring Matthew.” Dancer seemed to like him, too.

Cobalt regarded her doubtfully. “I don’t know.”

“Just for a visit.” Even if Cobalt didn’t like it enough to stay, at least she would have tried. “Think on this, too. Suppose your mother and my family get along? If anything ever happened to you, Dancer would have people she could stay with, people who would treat her well.” Guessing at truths he only alluded to but never spoke, she added, “People who would protect her from anyone who would cause her pain.”

He sighed. “You fight a fierce and difficult battle with your words.”

I fight it for us—and for the settled lands. Maybe nothing could ever calm his tormented spirit, but the demons that drove him would never stop as long as he stayed here, influenced by Varqelle and Stonebreaker. He had never known any alternative. She could show him one. He might not want it, but she had to try. He deserved a chance to find his own peace.

Mel had learned enough of her husband to realize he would say no more for a while, until he thought on the matter. She wondered, though, if anything could ever be enough to satisfy his hunger for validation from his family, or if he would bring the world to its knees in his drive to make his grandfather acknowledge him as a man of worth.

Cobalt walked with Matthew to the West Tower. “The men seem less suspicious of Mel now.”

“She conducts herself well,” Matthew said.

“I wish they appreciated it more.”

Matthew hesitated. “Well, Your Highness...”

Cobalt recognized his tone. Wary now, he said, “Yes?”



“You must not get angry.”

Cobalt scowled at him. “About what?”

“Some of them believe she has enchanted you.”

“She has,” Cobalt said dryly.

“They thought so more at first. They are less certain now. She is kind to everyone, even though they never speak to her.” Matthew chuckled. “And when she smiles that way, like an angel, it melts the hardest heart.” His smile shifted into a frown for Cobalt. “But she is obviously lonely. You must find companions for your wife. Female companions.”

Even if Stonebreaker would have allowed it, Cobalt couldn’t imagine more women at the keep. “They would talk all the time.”

“So?”

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“Of course not. Their voices are music.”

Cobalt snorted. “Hardly.” In truth, he liked to listen to Mel. But he had no idea what it would be like with more women here. He hadn’t been around enough to have an opinion on the subject. As long as Dancer refused to live at the Diamond Palace, Stonebreaker wasn’t likely to allow her companions. Cobalt could have brought them anyway, as he had done with Mel. But right now he didn’t want to challenge his grandfather, lest Stonebreaker change his mind about giving him command of the Chamberlight army. In planning campaigns with Varqelle, Cobalt found a satisfaction in his work that his life had never given him before. He was made for this—and his father understood.

He knew now that nothing would appease the fire that drove him. Except conquest.

Dancer didn’t smile when she opened the door. She simply stood aside so Cobalt could enter her study. He went to her desk, uncertain of himself. Today she was reading a tome about the tiny country of Blueshire and taking notes with a quill on a parchment. He steeled himself and turned to face her.

Dancer remained by the open doorway. “It is late. Have your say and be done.”

“Mother.” He took a deep breath. “I would not be at odds with you.”

Some of her ice seemed to thaw. “Yet we are.”

“It troubles me.”

“I also.” She came over to him. “I wish I could undo the nightmares you endured in your youth. I cannot. But you are the one light in my life. I do not wish to be at odds with you.”

“I worry for you, staying here.”

She shuddered, though the room was warm. "I will not return to the Diamond Palace."

"Perhaps a place of sun and laughter would be better."

"I know of no such place."

Neither do I. But he had glimpsed it when he went to fetch his bride. It had hurt to be at that house among the apple trees, and he didn't know why. When he thought of Dancer there, though, he felt a deep relief.

"I am sending Mel to her family for a while," he said.

"I think it is for the best. She disrupts our lives." Dancer sounded uncertain, though. Cobalt had noticed that his mother was having trouble disliking his wife, hard as Dancer might try to be hostile.

"She has invited you to go with her," Cobalt said.

"What?" Dancer stared at him. "No!"

"Why not?" It was the same question Mel had asked him.

"It is a trick. They would never accept me there. I am the wife of the man who invaded their country and the mother of the man who took their daughter."

"Nevertheless, Mel has invited you." He rubbed his chin. "My wife is rather formidable. If she insists they accept you, I believe they will do so."

"Your wife is a witch."

"Well yes, that, too."

She blinked. "It doesn't bother you?"

"It terrifies me." But he smiled.

Dancer studied him. "You are odd tonight."

"How?"

"I don't know. Calmer." She thought for a moment. "You seem happy lately."

"I don't know." He wasn't sure how "happy" differed from his normal state. He did know, however, that with Mel he felt strong. Happy? Perhaps.

"I cannot imagine going back to Harsdown," Dancer said.

"I would like you to."

"Why? Do you not want me here?"

“I worry for your safety when I am not here.”

She didn't look surprised, but her shoulders tensed. “Where are you going?”

He couldn't tell her about his counsels with her husband and father. Nothing was certain. He spoke carefully. “I may ride with Grandfather's army. I haven't decided yet.” Then he added, “I would have for you a place where you may have other women as friends. Where you may walk among flowering trees. Hear laughter. See happy children. Have a pet.”

She seemed bewildered. “A pet?”

“If you want.” Stonebreaker had never allowed Cobalt the hound he had longed for as a boy, and eventually Cobalt had stopped thinking about it. Now he shared his suite with a scrap of gray fur that chased spiders but ran away from anything larger and alive. Oddly enough, it wasn't unpleasant.

“I don't want a pet,” Dancer said.

“You might enjoy traveling.”

She didn't look convinced. “It's been so long since I've been outside of the Misted Cliffs. Decades.”

“Think of it as adventure,” Cobalt suggested.

“I don't like adventure.”

“As fun.”

“It doesn't sound like fun.”

Exasperated, he said, “At least consider it, Mother.”

She twisted her hand in her pale tunic. “Very well. I will think on it.”

Well, it was a start. He hoped she would go. It would be good for her. And perhaps she could deal with Mel better than he could—for he had no idea how he was going to tell his wife that she was going home without him.

Mel stood in the highest chamber of the Sphere Tower, under its dome, which curved in a hollow globe, except where it opened to cap the chamber. She imagined the globe completed. She couldn't hold it the way she would hold a ball, but she knew her mother could make spells without touching the shape, if she was close enough to it. Mel concentrated now on doing the same.

Power surged within her, erratic but more settled than the last time she had tried a spell this large, that night Dancer had found her in the Zephyr Tower. Mel still didn't know what Varqelle intended, but she wanted her parents warned that the House of Chamberlight was gathering its army.

Green light filled the dome above her, and she raised her hands. She couldn't have touched the light even if she could have reached that high, but it helped her focus. She thought of home, of her father writing at his desk in his calligraphic script, of her mother preparing to meet with the Glassblowers' Guild. She

thought of Shim, of Bricklayer, of her other friends, of Skylark and her tutors. Memories filled her like wine in a goblet. She could almost feel her home.

Her parents were both mages, Muller the stronger of the two but Chime the more adept. Mel focused on her mother, an emerald mage who responded strongly to green spells, and on her father, an indigo sphere mage. She sent her mood to them, her concern about the Chamberlight army amassing at the base of the cliffs. She reached across the borderlands, hills, glades, rivers, and woods and poured her fear into her spell.

Mel had no idea if she contacted either of them. She opened her eyes into a haze of green light that filled the chamber and spilled out the windows into the night. Her arms felt too heavy to hold up, and she let them drop back to her sides. She had never tried a spell this strong nor pushed it so hard. Nausea roiled over her. Her vision blurred and needles seemed to bore into her temples.

With a cry, she collapsed to the floor.

Someone was shaking her. She pushed at his hand, but she couldn't dislodge the iron grip. She tried to roll away and he pulled her back. He continued to shake her. Hard. It hurt. Her spine knocked against the stone floor.

Mel opened her eyes. King Stonebreaker was kneeling at her side, his hands clenched on her shoulders as he strove to wake her up. When she looked at him, he finally stopped knocking her back and forth. She would have bruises where he had banged her against the floor.

"Are you awake?" he demanded.

"Yes." Groggy and confused, Mel slowly sat up. Didn't he realize he could hurt a person that way?

"Why are you sleeping here?" Stonebreaker's scorn was almost palpable. "Is your husband's suite that distasteful to you?"

"No..." Mel wasn't certain herself what had happened. She couldn't have been unconscious long; the Hunter constellation still showed in the sky, through one window. Her dazed thoughts wandered. Legend claimed that if a captain sailed his ship west, the Hunter would take him to other lands. But in the distant past, an immensely powerful mage had spelled this small continent so that ships had trouble leaving or finding it. As the ages passed, it became more and more difficult. Someday all other lands would be lost to her people. Mel found the tales hard to believe, but she had no better explanation for why fewer ships came every generation.

"Are you mute?" Stonebreaker asked. "Why were you lying on the floor? You looked dead."

Mel struggled to gather her thoughts. "I grew dizzy and fainted." She didn't know why she had passed out, but she thought it had something to do with pushing her abilities too hard. By collapsing, her body had forced her to stop.

"Are you ill?" Stonebreaker asked.

"No... just overwhelmed." She rubbed her eyes. "How did you know I was here?"

"I saw the green light in the windows." He sat back with one leg bent and his forearm resting on his knee. "But I see no way you could make such a light."

"I was practicing a spell." She couldn't pretend nothing had happened. If the people here believed she was trying to hide her skills, it would only make them distrust her more.

"A spell." His voice hardened. "Then it is true what they say. You are a witch."

"No. Just a mage." She rubbed her temples. Her head had never hurt this much. "I only do warmth and comfort spells."

"Warmth and comfort, eh?" Stonebreaker cocked his head. "And what sort of enchantment would those involve? Perhaps an incantation to ward off my grandson."

Mel had no intention of giving him that satisfaction. "It was a mood spell. I sought to divine if he loved me." She smiled angelically at Stonebreaker. "He is such a magnificent man, Your Majesty. You must be so proud of him."

The king scowled. "You drank too much wine tonight." He let his gaze travel over her body in a way that made her face burn. Then he wet his lips. "You are a lovely young woman. Cobalt must seem too old to you."

She wanted to slap him. "He's perfect."

He leaned forward. "So you are up here in the night making spells to discover if he has passion for you."

That wasn't exactly what she had said. "Love."

"I would think you would find a better answer if you spent the night in his suite rather than up here."

Well, yes. The verbal sparring was tiring Mel. Her temples ached and her mind felt fuzzy. If she kept pushing her abilities, she could burn them out. Too much, and she could injure or even kill herself.

"Well," she said. "I should go join him."

"You should stay here, witch woman." Stonebreaker grasped her arm. "He will never notice your absence." His fingers dug into her skin hard enough to bruise.

"Your Majesty." Mel tried to pull away. It hurt where he gripped her.

Stonebreaker yanked her toward him so their faces were only a handspan apart. "I told you to stay here." He clenched both of her upper arms until his grip felt like a vise. Then he looked down the front of her tunic. "Why would you waste yourself on him?"

"Stop!" Mel tried to pry her arms free. "It hurts."

"I am your king." He shook her hard. "You will not put others before me."

"S-stop!" Mel managed to pull one arm away.

Stonebreaker slapped her across the face. Mel gasped as her head snapped to the side. She couldn't

believe this. And what decent man looked at his grandson's wife as if he were undressing her?

"Stop lying," he said. "Tell me what deviltry you were up to in here." He lifted her up and then knocked her back down on the floor, on her back. "I will have an answer!"

"D-don't." Her cheek throbbed where he had hit her and her head spun. She rolled away from him, but instead of letting her go, he raised his fist—in a motion identical to the way Cobalt had threatened her that night their carriage was attacked. Cobalt had held back the blow, but she had no doubt Stonebreaker fully intended to beat her.

"Youbastard." A dark figure yanked Stonebreaker away from Mel. "Let her go!"

The king jumped to his feet and spun around. Cobalt stood in the moonlight flowing through the windows, his face contorted almost beyond recognition by fury.

"Don't touch her." Cobalt ground out the words.

"You will not speak to me in this manner." The king's voice was low and angry.

Mel struggled to her feet and stepped toward Cobalt. Her head ached and she swayed, barely able to stand. Her thoughts whirled.

Stonebreaker put out his hand to catch her, and Mel stumbled away from him in the same instant Cobalt grabbed for her. She was already falling when he caught her. He pulled her to his side, away from Stonebreaker, the muscles in his arm tensed against her waist. Still sensitized by her mood spell from before, she felt Cobalt's rage like grit against her skin. A fisted anger throbbed within Stonebreaker, clenched and ugly.

"Touch her again," Cobalt said, "and I will tear you apart."

Mel stared at him. He had just threatened the king with bodily harm, even death. Stonebreaker could have him tried for treason and executed.

His grandfather regarded him with no trace of remorse. "Do not threaten me, boy."

"Leave my wife alone."

"You should ask your wife why she lies here on the floor at night, alone and seductively dressed."

Cobalt answered in a voice so tight, Mel thought he would snap. "Good night, Grandfather."

"Leave me," Stonebreaker said, his eyes glinting. "Sleep well. If you can." He made it into a curse.

Cobalt kept his arm around Mel as he turned away. His tendons ridged like steel cords against her torso. He reached across his body with his other hand and held it out to her. When she took it, he gripped her fingers, helping support her, but she thought also to calm himself. She could only imagine the effort of will it took for him to walk away. That he managed it told her more about his self-control than anything he could have said. It probably also saved him from being thrown into the dungeon for attempted regicide.

They left Stonebreaker in the tower. She had no doubt he intended to search for a source of the green

light. She and Cobalt descended the spiral stairs, holding on to each other.

Mel started to tremble about halfway down the tower. Once her tremors started, they wouldn't stop. She pulled away from Cobalt and sat down heavily on the step. Crossing her arms over her stomach, she leaned forward with her head bent. Shudders racked her body.

"He had no right," Cobalt said, his voice dark and low.

Mel looked up. He stood several steps below her, breathing as if he had been running. His fists were clenched at his sides.

"Cobalt—"

"No." Anger suffused his face. "No!"

With no warning, he slammed his fist into the wall. He jerked back his arm and hit the bricks again—and again and again, with a force that could have shattered Stonebreaker had he expended it against his grandfather instead of an unyielding wall. Any harder and he could break his own hands. The bricks were old and ragged, and half of one cracked from his blows, then disintegrated the next time he hit it. The uneven blocks ripped his skin until blood smeared his knuckles. Jagged bits of mortar and stone crumbled to the steps and dust swirled in the air. Mel pressed back against the stairs, afraid to make a sound. She didn't believe he would turn his fists against her, but she had never seen him lose control before. He pounded the wall as if he wanted to destroy the castle itself.

Gradually his rage abated and his blows slowed. Finally he pressed his palms against the bloodied stone and rested his forehead on the wall, his chest heaving from exertion.

"Cobalt?" Mel whispered.

He made a choked sound. Then he pushed away from the wall and turned to her. "I won't hurt you. I swear." Blood dripped off his torn knuckles and splattered on the cracked step by her foot.

"Your hands," she said, shaking.

"It doesn't matter." He knelt next to her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She lifted his hand and blood trickled across her fingers. Even now, when she was stunned from his rage, from Stonebreaker's behavior, and from her struggle with her magecraft earlier tonight, she still automatically folded her other hand around her sapphire pendant and tried to form a blue spell of healing. A terrible pain lanced through her head and she gasped, dropping the pendant. No hint of a spell formed. Nausea swept over her, then dismay. Was it possible she had burned out her mage abilities? This aftermath was much worse than the last time. She couldn't heal even herself right now, let alone Cobalt.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I can't help."

He searched her face as if trying to find an answer. "You were alone up there."

"Cobalt, I swear, I wasn't doing anything wrong."

He put his bloodied fingers against her lips. "I know. But why were you alone?"

Mel couldn't tell him why. But she could tell him another truth. "I feel so out of place here. I needed some time for myself, to practice my craft. When people see me doing spells, they think I am some sort of demon. Cobalt, I'm not evil—"

"You are a gift," he said, his gaze never leaving her face. "I don't understand your spells. And yes, they disquiet me. But I know you intend only good, not evil." He sat on the step next to her. "I never wanted you to witness any of that. Not Grandfather. And not—not me."

"He has hurt you." Mel had no doubt about it. Saints only knew what Stonebreaker had done to Cobalt and Dancer.

"It is over," Cobalt said.

Mel knew it wasn't, not if he bloodied himself this way. "You need to escape this place."

His gaze darkened. "I will kill him if he hurts you again."

She knew Cobalt was capable of it. What then? Would his people execute him for murdering the king? She doubted it. He would be king then. It would be a nightmare. Would they revolt? They all feared him and he had control of the army. No matter what happened, he would hate himself. It would poison everything he did. He had it within him to become a great leader, but she didn't think it would happen if he didn't get away from here and heal. She couldn't bear to see his promise destroyed in the flames of his rage.

"Don't talk that way," she said.

"I have decided," he said. "My mother will go to your family with you."

Relief flooded Mel, so sudden and welcome that it made her light-headed. "It is a wonderful idea. You will like my family, too."

He didn't answer.

"Cobalt?" Her unease stirred. He had said with you. Not with us. "You are coming, aren't you?"

"I will escort you with the army."

Mel froze. "You are bringing them into Harsdown?"

"An honor guard wasn't enough to protect you the last time. Now it will be both you and my mother."

"You cannot bring an army to my family's home!"

He wouldn't meet her gaze. "We won't stay there."

"Cobalt, look at me."

He turned to her. "I will escort you home. Then I will take the army to Shazire."

"No! Don't do this."



With unexpected gentleness, he smoothed her hair back from her face. "I will give you the world, Mel."

Her voice caught. "I don't want the world."

He spoke quietly. "But I do."

She didn't know how to make this nightmare stop. "You could be happy with my family."

He smiled with sadness. "I might wish that were true. But it is not."

She grasped his forearms. "Shazire has never done you harm."

"It is part of the Misted Cliffs!"

"That was over two hundred years ago."

"Then we have been apart too long."

Her pulse stuttered. "The western edge of Harsdown was also part of the Misted Cliffs."

He cupped her face in his hands. "I won't go back on my word to you. We will not attack Harsdown."

"Then why?" She grasped his wrists and moved his palms away from her face. "Whymust you take back Shazire?"

"Why must a lion stalk its prey? Why must lightning stab the earth during a storm?" Cobalt pulled away his arms. "I am not a man to tend orchards. I never will be." He regarded her steadily. "And neither are you such a woman."

"No," she whispered.

"A fire burns in you."

"You are wrong."

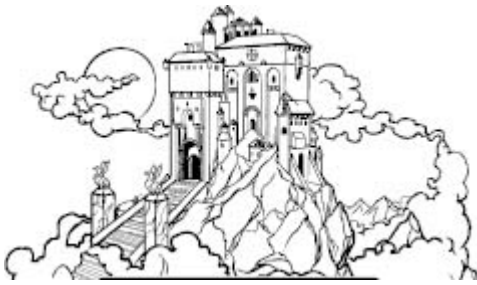
"Someday an empire will kneel to you."

"I don't want people to kneel to me." All she wanted was a happy life with him and their child. Most of all, she feared he would seduce her with his dark promises of glory and power.

His gaze burned. "I will become invincible. No one will ever hurt you, my mother, or any child you bear me."

She knew then that Stonebreaker truly had been a fool. The small boy he had so easily terrorized had grown into an indomitable man, one haunted by the demons of his childhood.

Now the rest of humanity would pay the price.



15

## The Living Sea

In the end, Dancer agreed to come. Mel suspected it had nothing to do with meeting her son's in-laws. She feared remaining at the keep without Cobalt—for Stonebreaker was to stay there. Varqelle insisted the Chamberlight king not risk his life with the army, and though Stonebreaker protested, in the end he reluctantly agreed to abide by his son-in-law's wishes. Mel didn't believe his reluctance for one moment. The king of the Misted Cliffs wanted as little blame as possible for this campaign he was supporting. He desired the result, that his grandson would restore the size and wealth of his realms, but not the responsibility.

Today Mel wore a gray tunic and leggings, with soft boots. She left the castle by a small door behind the stables and crossed the yard outside where she often rode Smoke. To the west, cliffs towered over the castle; to the east, the rugged land crumpled in folds and ridges, then dropped down to the borderlands. She walked slowly, lost in thought, her pendant heavy around her neck. Several stable boys were training horses in the yard. Most of them paid her no heed, but Jumper waved. She smiled and waved back at the towheaded child. He often helped her tend Smoke. Sometimes he forgot he wasn't supposed to talk to her and told her jokes about his favorites among the horses.

Mel wandered a trail that climbed into the mountains. Eventually she reached a ledge near the top of the waterfall created by the River of Diamonds. Water thundered over the rocks and down, down, down to the Lake of Ice far below. She sat cross-legged on the ledge and folded her hand around her pendant. Then she imagined red roses, flushed cheeks, bright red ribbons on a festival pole, red, crimson, scarlet, the simplest mage color.

Nothing.

She envisioned rubies sparkling on red velvet.

Nothing.

She thought of cherries and apples, rosy and round, and red leaves on the trees in autumn.

Nothing.

Moisture filled her eyes. It had been this way ever since that night she had collapsed after trying to warn her parents about the Chamberlight invasion. No spells. She couldn't manage even the simplest, a little warmth, a little light. That night in the Sphere Tower, had she incinerated the essence that infused her as a mage? She closed her eyes and squeezed back the tears. Although she had always valued her magecraft, she had never before realized how much she based her sense of herself on her ability to perform spells. She had never heard of a mage losing her power this way, nor did she have any idea how to heal herself.

She didn't even know if it was possible. Without her abilities, she felt shorn and reduced.

"It's a lovely view, Your Highness," a voice said.

Mel opened her eyes. Colonel Leo Tumbler stood about five paces away, where the end of the ledge met the path coming up from the castle. His yellow hair curled on his forehead and his demeanor was friendly. Ever since she had spoken to him at the dinner on the afternoon of Stonebreaker's arrival, he had been courteous to her. He seemed unfazed by the rumors of her purportedly evil magics. Mel knew Cobalt had asked him to watch over her, but she didn't understand why her taciturn husband trusted him. Leo Tumbler was among Stonebreaker's top officers. Cobalt would reveal nothing of his reasons or even admit Tumbler was guarding her.

"Greetings of the morning," she said.

"May I join you?" Tumbler asked.

Mel indicated the ledge. "I've no chair to offer, but you are welcome to sit here if you would like." Dryly she added, "Though I thought bodyguards were supposed to stand."

Tumbler smiled slightly. "Ah, well." He didn't deny being her bodyguard.

He came closer, to within about three paces, but he did remain standing, his gaze flicking around the area. Mel rose to her feet so he wouldn't loom over her. "Leo, I was wondering if you would mind my asking you a question."

He regarded her curiously. "Yes, Your Highness?"

"Have you ridden with the Chamberlight army for long?"

"For years."

"Always with Stonebreaker?"

His face became guarded. "Always with the House of Chamberlight."

His evasive answer only made her more curious. "Cobalt is a Chamberlight by blood."

"So he is."

"Did you ever know Cobalt before?"

His expression was carefully neutral. "Ever since we were boys together at the Diamond Palace."

Interesting. Apparently they had a long history. "He must be glad to see you."

"I am always glad to see my prince."

So. This was beginning to make sense. "It must be useful for Cobalt to have someone he knows well in Stonebreaker's army." Like a spy.

He almost smiled that time. "It is an honor to serve the royal House."

Based on what she had seen of the Chamberlight king, she doubted he would have brought Tumbler here if he had realized Cobalt trusted the colonel. Her respect for Tumbler's courage increased even more. King Stonebreaker imprisoned suspected spies and executed those convicted of the crime.

"Are you impatient to ride to Harsdown?" Mel asked. "It's been so many weeks since you all arrived." The staff at the castle had been sending stores down to the main body of the military force gathered at the base of the cliffs, and they were organizing which servants would go as support for the army.

"It would be foolish to leave before we are ready," Tumbler said. Then he released a long breath. "But, aye, Your Highness, I grow restless."

Mel couldn't say the same. She had tried every argument she knew to change Cobalt's mind, with no success. Soon his forces would move inexorably into Harsdown—and beyond.

The Chamberlight army headed out on a morning late in the winter when all moisture had frozen out of the air and the sky arched overhead in an icy blue dome. Mel rode Smoke. An honor guard of six officers surrounded her, including Leo Tumbler. She wore a sturdy tunic and leggings, all light blue, with leather armor. Her sword hung on its sheath on her belt.

Mel avoided Cobalt. She couldn't bear to ride with him. She couldn't talk to him. She couldn't look at him. Dancer rode a dappled mare alongside her son up ahead, separated from Mel by about fifty riders in the column of mounted warriors. The cavalry and troops were happy to be moving out. Their spirits were high. Mel's could go no lower.

The army consisted of six thousand men, about one thousand more than the combined forces of Aronsdale and Harsdown, three times the size of the Shazire army. Two thousand were cavalry and the rest marched as troops. They brought food and other supplies, and many horses, including pack-horses and chargers for battle, and carts drawn by plow horses. The army flowed from the base of the Misted Cliffs across the borderlands, a great ocean of people rolling inexorably toward Harsdown.

Mel's honor guard formed a hexagon around her. Had she still been able to act as a mage, she could have filled the hexagon with spells to encourage and support the soldiers, just as her ancestors had done before her. She died a bit more each time she thought of her lost abilities. This army would go into battle without mages—and because of that, more men would die. Maybe Cobalt. She didn't want to fear for his survival, but nothing could stop the pain that came when she realized his life could end. She was falling in love with her warlord husband and no amount of self-reproach could stop it from happening.

Magnificent in his armor and plumed helmet, Varqelle rode at the head of the great column, flanked by six standard-bearers. Three sat on white stallions and carried the banner of the House of Chamberlight, the blue sphere on a white background. The reins of their horses were strips of blue leather braided together, and silver tassels hung from the bridles. The other three rode black stallions and carried Escar banners with the black jaguar on a dark blue field. Cobalt and Dancer rode behind Varqelle, surrounded by another honor guard. In his dark armor and chain mail, Cobalt made an imposing figure next to his mother, who wore a riding tunic and leggings with no armor to shield her slight form.

Whatever Cobalt claimed, everyone could see the hostile message this sent, that the Chamberlight army entered Harsdown with that country's deposed king and queen. Mel knew her father might have spies in the Misted Cliffs, but Stonebreaker was obsessive about secrecy. A good chance existed that Muller

hadn't known this army was preparing to ride on Harsdown. When her father learned of the march, he would mobilize his forces. Was this an act of war? If the Chamberlight army attacked, Aronsdale would come to the defense of Harsdown, but by the time they arrived, thousands of people could have died.

Mel didn't trust Varqelle to honor the treaty established by her marriage to his son. She wasn't even certain about Cobalt anymore. He hungered for a campaign of conquest, and it wasn't only his desire for his father's approval. It was him. Whatever drove Varqelle burned even hotter within Cobalt.

He gave his word. Whenever Mel began to brood, she reminded herself of Cobalt's promise to honor the treaty. She had to believe him; otherwise, she was riding against her own family.

The cavalry crossed the borderlands throughout the morning. Mel had brought Fog in a large basket strapped to her saddlebags. He liked to ride that way, lulled to sleep by the rocking motion. Horse-drawn carts rolled past, heaped with provisions: dried meat and fruits, grains, piles of gourds, feed for the horses, barrels of water and ale, and mounds of other foodstuffs. Women from the Diamond Palace guided the carts, cooks who would prepare the food and other servants who would tend to the needs of the army.

A cluster of young warriors rode by and glanced at Mel, their dark eyes curious. She had already realized the people of the Misted Cliffs considered her yellow hair exotic. The youths looked back at her after they had passed, and one smiled shyly. Colonel Tumbler scowled at him, and the boy flushed and quickly rode on, soon swallowed up in the surging mass of humanity.

After several hours, they stopped to rest the horses and let the foot soldiers catch up. Mel fed the kitten and played with him until the army set off again. At this pace, it would take more than a day to reach the woods where she had lain with Cobalt for the first time. She didn't want to remember, but she couldn't stop herself. Even now she wanted him, and she despised herself for that weakness.

As the hours passed, clouds gradually spread across the sky. By afternoon, the day had darkened. A fog bank appeared in the south, and a few drops of rain pelted Mel's face. The soldiers continued to ride, and the fog swelled on the horizon, stretching from east to west, dark and dense.

Then Mel realized it wasn't fog.

It was another army.

Mel spurred Smoke forward. Her guards came with her, Leo Tumbler at her side. They passed armored men with swords at their hips or strapped across their backs. A few wore their helmets, angular affairs that covered most of the face, with slits for eyes, but most had lashed the helmets to their gear. Their mounts raised clouds of dust.

Mel slowed as she neared Cobalt. Her guards fell back, leaving her room to join her husband. Dancer was riding on his other side. She turned a cool gaze to Mel, but said nothing. Nor did she make any attempt to ride with Varqelle. She seemed to prefer even Mel's company to that of her estranged husband.

Cobalt glanced at Mel. "Do you recognize them?"

She knew he meant the other army. "They're too far away." They both had a good guess about who it was, though. "You gave your word not to attack my people."

He spoke tightly. "As did they, for my people."

Her pulse beat hard. "What will you do?"

He answered in a careful voice. "I will not violate the treaty first."

First. If he believed her father's army was attacking his, she had no doubt he would respond in kind. She had never been sure she believed in the saints of nature and color revered by her people, but now she silently petitioned every one she could think of to keep everyone calm, both Cobalt's men and those who rode from the south to meet them.

The two forces drew nearer throughout the afternoon, and the "fog" resolved into columns of warriors. After several hours, the armies reached a long, narrow valley that stretched from east to west, separating the two forces. There they halted. Men poured in throughout the evening, thousands of riders, archers, foot soldiers, grooms, and support. Cobalt's people gathered on the northern crest of the valley and the other army gathered on its southern crest. They filled the land as far as Mel could see in either direction.

Mel recognized the banners carried by the standard-bearers for the other army—the violet and white pennant of the House of Dawnfield. Her family. Then her breath caught. Her father was with them, seated on his white charger, tall and imposing. Gone was the well-dressed country gentleman; this man wore armor with a burnished breastplate and plumed helmet. His shield gleamed even in the overcast day. He had become a war leader, a stranger to her.

Somehow Mel managed to speak calmly, though her heartbeat felt as if it had doubled. "I would speak with him."

"Yes." Cobalt didn't have to ask who. He prodded Admiral forward and they rode to where Varqelle sat on his mount, flanked by the Escar and Chamberlight standard-bearers. His gaze was hard and his attention fixed on his counterpart across the valley, the man who had taken his throne.

Cobalt drew alongside Varqelle. Mel stayed on the other side of her husband, keeping him between her and his father. Varqelle didn't look at them; he continued to watch the other army.

"They are many," he said.

"About six thousand, I would estimate." Cobalt studied the Dawnfield forces as they continued to amass along the ridge across the valley. Neither army was setting up tents or looking after the many needs of a force that size as it settled in for the night. Foot soldiers stood at attention and cavalymen gathered in geometric formations, ready to fight.

"They must have had warning," Cobalt said.

Varqelle scowled. "How? No one left the keep. In the borderlands, you can see for leagues. We watched. No one came to or left the army."

"Even so," Cobalt said. "Someone told them."

Mel's pulse hammered. Had her warning succeeded? If so, it had been worth burning out her mage talent.

"Well, it seems we must negotiate," Varqelle muttered.

Cobalt cocked an eyebrow at him. “As was always the plan.”

When Varqelle didn’t answer, a chill went up Mel’s back. She hated to think what might have happened if her father hadn’t been prepared to meet this force. Cobalt had sworn to her that he would honor the treaty, but his father had not. The Chamberlight army followed Cobalt, for he was the crown prince of the Misted Cliffs, but they knew he acted as general for his sire, who had once ruled this land. She wasn’t certain they—or Cobalt—would have refused Varqelle if he had ordered them to fight against Harsdown.

Cobalt laid his hand on Mel’s arm. “Will you talk with your father?”

She nodded, aware of Varqelle’s hard gaze. “Do I have your word that you ask only for safe passage through Harsdown? No combat?”

“Yes.”

Mel looked from him to his father. Two men with predator’s eyes. “Both of your words?”

Varqelle’s mouth twisted. She knew he thought she had gone too far. It didn’t matter. She wouldn’t negotiate for them without his guarantee.

Varqelle glanced at Cobalt, and his son met his gaze. After a moment, Varqelle said, “You have my word.” He looked as if he had eaten a sour fruit.

Mel exhaled, but she strove to hide her relief. The less Varqelle could read from her, the better. She urged Smoke into a trot, and he made his way down the slope of the valley. He seemed to flow beneath her, strong and sure, though his hooves tore up the wild grasses. He gathered speed as the slope leveled out. When they reached the creek at the bottom, he jumped it without hesitation, his leap so fluid she barely felt a change in his pace. Within moments, they were climbing the southern slope.

Mel slowed as she neared her father. As she approached, he came forward with Sphere-General Fieldson and Hexahedron-Lieutenant Jason Windcrier. Officers in the Dawnfield army had ranks based on the geometric hierarchy of spells. They weren’t mages, but the custom originated in the mages who had ridden with the military in past eras. The shapes subdivided each rank, with triangle as lowest and sphere as highest. A square-lieutenant held a higher rank than a triangle-lieutenant; however, he still had a lower rank than a triangle-captain because all captains outranked all lieutenants. No one ranked above a sphere-general. Fieldson was the only one in either Harsdown or Aronsdale, and was another reason Muller had a strong military.

Seeing her father, Mel wanted to jump off Smoke and run to him. But she held back, determined to retain her dignity. As they came up alongside each other, he pulled off his helmet and held it under his arm. She saw the moisture in his eyes. Neither of them would cry, not here with so many people watching, but it was all she could do to hold back her tears, for both her joy in seeing him and her grief in the circumstances.

His voice caught. “Greetings, Daughter.”

“It is good to see you, Papa.” She heard the tremor in her words.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes. Fine.” She scowled. “My husband is sending me home. For my safety.”

A startled smile flashed on his face and he seemed to drop ten years. “You are coming home?”

“Aye, Papa.” Mel took a deep breath. “My husband, Cobalt of the House of Chamberlight, does ask if you honor the treaty our countries have signed.”

“If I honor it?” His voice hardened. “He is the one who brought an army.”

“He gave me his word. He wishes only safe passage through Harsdown.”

“For what purpose?”

“They go to Shazire.”

Muller spoke grimly. “Why?”

“Ah, gods, Father,” she said, miserable. “Why do you think? My husband is his father’s son.”

Muller gazed out at the Chamberlight army blanketing the countryside. “We cannot stand by while he invades Shazire.”

“If you fight them, you void the treaty. It goes both ways. When the House of Chamberlight swore never to attack the House of Dawnfield, we swore never to attack them.”

He made an incredulous noise. “They expect us to let them through so they can subjugate another country?”

“It is part of the Misted Cliffs.”

His face paled. “So was part of Harsdown.”

“Cobalt swears they will leave here in peace. But if you try to stop them, they will call it a violation of the treaty and attack Harsdown.” Her hands clenched the reins. “Varqelle seeks the Jaguar Throne. He will not hesitate to kill for it.” She left unspoken what they both knew—that the man he wanted to kill was her father.

Muller was shaking his head. “The treaty was meant to give peace among our countries.”

“And it does.” Mel felt heavy. Tired. “But it said nothing of Blueshire, Shazire, Jazid, or Taka Mal.”

Muller looked ill. He faced a horrendous choice: sacrifice the well-being of his own country, possibly his throne and his life, to defend other lands; or keep his people safe and stand by while Cobalt brought those other lands to their knees.

Muller blew out a gust of air. “I must think.”

“I understand.” Mel hesitated. “I would ask one thing of you.”

“Yes?”



“The Escar queen rides with us. She is my companion.” That was probably pushing their relationship too far, but it would have to do. “She has no wish to see her estranged husband wage war and she desires no part in his campaign. I would ask that you accept her into our home as you accept me.”

Muller stared at her. “Hell and damnation, Mel.”

“She has nowhere else to go.” Then Mel added, “And Father—as long as she is with us, in our territory, it is an added incentive for her son’s good faith. He wishes her safe.”

Muller studied her face. “As he does with you?”

Mel knew what he was asking; were she and Cobalt estranged or did they live as husband and wife.

Mel had to tell him the truth. “As with me.”

“You accept this man?”

“The good in him.”

Her father snorted. “I have yet to see it.”

Mel doubted he would have the chance. The world would know Cobalt by his campaigns. No one would see the man she knew, the Cobalt who dreamed of stars and gazed through a telescope, who had taught her to hit wooden balls with a stick, and who was so awkward and yet so gentle with her kitten. The world would know only Cobalt the Dark. Or perhaps Cobalt the Great, if his campaigns succeeded; victors invariably rewrote history in their own favor.

“It exists,” she said quietly. “His mother has had some difficult years. I would like her to know life can be better than what she has seen.”

“You are kind,” he said. “Also terribly naive.”

“Will you take her?”

He sighed. “All right, Mel. We will take her.”

Her shoulders relaxed. “Thank you.”

“For the other,” he said. “Tell your husband I will have an answer for him in the morning.”

“I will.”

“Mel—”

“Yes?”

He raised his head to look out at the Chamberlight forces. Then he turned back to her. “If we had not been prepared, what would have happened with this army?”

She told him the truth. “Were it just Cobalt, I think nothing. But he and his father are of different minds.”

“His father.” His fingers gripped his helmet. “He almost destroyed my homeland eighteen years ago.”

“But not this time.”

“We had warning.” His expression softened. “From a mage.”

She averted her gaze. “A mage no longer.” The words cut like a blade.

“Spells that powerful can injure.”

She looked up at him. “They can destroy.”

“Injuries heal.”

Her voice broke. “How?”

“I don’t know.” He spoke gently. “I pray they will.”

“It may never happen.”

He inclined his head with respect. Sadness showed in his eyes. “If it turns out that way, your sacrifice will be honored by an entire country.”

“Papa—” He couldn’t stop the pain of losing her abilities, but his words helped ease her sadness. A tear ran down her face. “Thank you.”

He touched her cheek. “Be well.”

She folded her hand around his arm. “You also.”

He set his palm over her hand. They separated then, he returning to his army and she to hers.

In the morning, Sphere-General Fieldson delivered Muller’s reply to Cobalt: The Dawnfield forces would give them passage to the southern border of Harsdown. Mel grieved for what she knew that decision had cost her father.

As the army prepared to ride, Cobalt took Mel to a secluded copse of sunbask trees. She wanted to say so much, to argue, cajole, plead, insist he change his mind. But it was useless. She had already tried every approach she knew.

He enfolded her in his arms and held her under the swaying branches, her cheek against his chest.

“Don’t be a hero,” she whispered.

Cobalt drew back and put his hand under her chin, tilting her head up so he could see her face. “Why do you say that?”

She laid her palm against his chest. “I want you to come home to me. Alive.”

He searched her face. “Why? You have every reason to hate me.”

“I don’t hate you.”

“No?”

Softly, with pain, she said, “No, saints forgive me.”

He released a long breath. Then he lowered his head and kissed her. Mel leaned into him, her arms around his waist, and she wanted him even now. When he raised his head, his eyes had a luminous quality, sadness and light.

They spent too long among the trees, and Leo Tumbler came to fetch them. After they returned to camp, Cobalt and Dancer said their farewells. Dancer didn’t cry, but tears glistened in her eyes. Cobalt looked as if he felt the same. Yet they didn’t embrace. Mel had never seen any member of his family unrestrained enough to show affection.

Then Mel and Dancer rode across the valley, accompanied by Mel’s honor guard. As they approached her father’s army, he rode forward with a hexagon of his cavalymen, who exchanged places with the Chamberlight men. Leo Tumbler and his men bowed to Dancer and Mel from horseback, and Leo raised his hand in farewell. Dancer nodded, regal on her silver horse. Although the queen held her head high, Mel saw her white-knuckled grip on the reins.

Muller bowed to Dancer. “Welcome, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Her face was pale and she swallowed as she looked around at the slopes crowded with the Dawnfield army.

Muller put more warmth into his voice. “My daughter has spoken for you. You are welcome in our home.”

She gave Mel an odd look, as if she would decipher what lay beneath her daughter-in-law’s innocent exterior. Mel hoped Dancer didn’t always feel this constrained among her people, that in time they might build some trust.

Within an hour, the Dawnfield and Chamberlight armies were moving out, headed south. They left hills and meadows trampled in their wake, and Muller’s forces escorted their unwelcome visitors around settled areas. They crossed Harsdown with the two largest military forces in the settled lands, a sea of men and horses that stretched as far as Mel could see.

In the evening, Mel’s father separated a contingent of his most trusted officers from the main body of his forces. He sent them west—with Mel and Dancer. They left the sea of warriors and rode for the Dawnfield orchards.

Mel brooded. She abhorred being sent home while so many others went to risk their lives—including her husband.



16

### The Citadel Within

Chime was waiting on the veranda in back of the farmhouse, dressed in a tunic and trousers, green silk with shimmering gold layers. Jason Windcrier stood with her, dusty and tousled. He had ridden ahead to warn the household that Mel and Dancer were coming. Brant Firestroke was at Chime's side, tall and imposing in gray, with his silver hair swept back from his forehead.

Dancer and Mel rode with their guards around the house to the stables. Grooms ran out to meet them. Chime came down from the porch with her tunic fluttering in the breeze, flanked by Jason and Brant. Her face was drawn but she walked with poise despite her obvious fatigue.

Mel dismounted from Smoke and let a stable girl take the reins. A sandy-haired youth offered his hand to Dancer and she accepted his help with a regal nod. When she was safely on the ground, she turned to face Chime. Her gaze had the same shuttered quality Mel had seen so many times in Cobalt. At first, Mel had thought it meant Cobalt felt no emotions. She had soon come to realize he was guarding them because he was afraid of being hurt. So, too, would Dancer guard herself as she met the woman who had taken her title as the queen of Harsdown.

Seeing her mother, Mel felt as if she were coming out of a thunderstorm that had drenched her in darkness. She wanted to run and hug Chime, but she held back in front of Dancer, she wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was the painful reserve Cobalt's family had with one another. But Chime had a familiar gentle expression, the special one for her daughter. Mel could restrain herself no longer. She went into her mother's arms and Chime held her close, her head against Mel's head.

"Welcome home," Chime murmured. "I am so very, very glad to see you."

"Me, too." Her answer was muffled against her mother's hair. Everything was catching up to Mel, the long ride, her months at the Castle of Clouds, a time of wonder and misery, the magic of learning to know Cobalt, her dread of his plans, her pleasure in his touch and the sight of him, and her fear of Stonebreaker. She squeezed her eyes closed and held her mother.

After a few minutes, they drew apart. Self-conscious, Mel turned to Dancer. The queen had stayed back, but she didn't seem offended.

Mel spoke. "May I present my mother, Chime Headwind Dawnfield." To her mother, she said, "Dancer Chamberlight Escar." She deliberately avoided titles. Who would she call queen? No matter what she said, it would offend someone. So she said nothing.

Dancer and Chime nodded to each other, two women of influence, both of them forged by difficult lives, Dancer's heavy with the demands of heredity and pain, and Chime's with her responsibilities as a mage

as well as a queen.

“I hope you will dine with us,” Chime said.

“I appreciate your hospitality,” Dancer said.

So polite. Mel doubted either of them wanted to spend the evening together. What would they talk about? I wonder when we’ll know if they’ve crushed Shazire. The armies wouldn’t reach the border for many days.

“Would you like to freshen up?” Chime asked. “I’ve a girl who can help you.”

Dancer put her palm against her cheek as if she wasn’t certain what to do. It was such a simple thing Chime offered, a chance to recuperate with help from someone—except for Dancer it was a luxury, one deliberately denied, given only when she left her refuge and went to a place she hated, the Diamond Palace.

“I thank you,” Dancer said with brittle formality.

Chime lifted her hand in a gesture of invitation, and Dancer joined her as they walked to the house. Jason and the other officers went into the stables to check their horses.

Brant fell into step with Mel, following the two queens. “How are you?”

“One moment I feel like mourning,” Mel said. “The next I miss him terribly.”

He didn’t have to ask who. “Do you grieve for Shazire? Or him?”

A good question. “Both. For Shazire’s losses. And for what Cobalt could have been if his life had been less harsh.”

“Is he such a monster, then?”

“No. He’s not.” How to describe him? It would be like trying to explain lightning or thunder. “He could be a great leader.”

Brant studied her face. “And his father?”

Mel thought for a moment. “Varqelle is not the horrendous man I expected, but neither is he good. He has neither Cobalt’s compassion nor his kindness. For all his power, Varqelle lacks wisdom about people. He considers gentler emotions a weakness.” She struggled to express what she had trouble defining for herself. “Somehow that makes him weaker than Cobalt, not stronger. He and Stonebreaker criticize Cobalt, yet Cobalt is more than either of them. I think they know, even if they don’t understand. Varqelle admires Cobalt and Stonebreaker fears him.”

“It is not Cobalt who will rule in Shazire and Blueshire if his army conquers them.”

If. If Cobalt didn’t die in the process. Mel shuddered. “Do you think my father will break the treaty to defend Shazire and Blueshire?”

“I have no doubt he has asked himself that question every hour since he made his decision.” He

continued without hesitation. “He will keep his word. He has always done what he believed right and stood by his decisions.”

“He never had to make one this terrible.”

“No,” Brant said softly. “He never did.”

Mel sighed, saddened by everything. “You remind me of Matthew.”

“Who is that?”

“A good friend.” He was her only one at the castle, though at least the staff no longer seemed to resent her.

Brant inclined his head. “I am honored.”

She slanted him a look. “He’s in charge of the stables.”

He didn’t even blink at the comparison. “From what I saw of your horse, it is well cared for.”

“Yes. It is.” Brant was so very different from Cobalt’s family. She couldn’t imagine Stonebreaker or Varqelle accepting such a comparison. “I wish we could stay here.”

He watched Dancer and Chime ahead of them. “You may end up living in Shazire.”

It was a sobering thought. Mel had no idea how this would end. Dancer and Cobalt had survived and remained free after Varqelle failed to conquer Aronsdale, but only because they no longer lived in Harsdown. Otherwise, Jarid would probably have sent them into exile. If Cobalt lost this campaign against Shazire, Mel doubted that Prince Zerod, the emir of that country, would let him live. Cobalt had sent her and Dancer here to ensure that if he failed, his wife and mother would be safe, not only from Zerod, but from Stonebreaker, as well.

Mel would have rather risked her life in the upcoming war than have come here to safety. If she could no longer act as a mage, she could do little to help the army. But she couldn’t bear to stay here while Cobalt courted death.

They took supper together, Mel and Chime, Dancer, Brant, Jason, and the other five officers from the honor guard. Dancer said little and avoided looking at Chime.

When Brant and the officers became involved in a discussion of vintage wines Muller imported from Taka Mal, Mel’s interest wandered. She picked up the bronzewood ring that had held the cloth she used to clean her hands. It glistened in the candlelight. The wood seemed to glow with rosy light. In fact, it was glowing—

With a start, Mel dropped the ring. It clinked on the table and the glow faded.

“Mel,” her mother admonished.

She glanced up. Only Chime had noticed; everyone else was talking or paying attention to their food.

Mel's pulse raced. A spell! It was a small one, yes, but real. She hadn't lost all her abilities. Elation surged within her, followed by an absurd urge to cry.

Mel wasn't embarrassed that her mother had seen her fumble the spell. She wanted to jump up and yell. Barring that, she beamed at Chime, evoking a perplexed look from her mother. Mel said nothing. If she explained about the injury, Chime would want to know how it happened. The answer would reveal to Dancer that Mel had warned Harsdown about the invasion. If she didn't answer, it might look odd. She could tell her mother later—though it might be a long time before she had the chance.

After dinner, they relaxed around the table and drank wine mulled with spices and apples. Brant spoke to Dancer. "Do you have any hobbies, Your Majesty?"

Mel approved of the title he used. Technically, Dancer was a Highness, as a Chamberlight princess. Given the circumstances, though, Mel was glad he had chosen to forget she was no longer a queen.

Dancer seemed bewildered. "Hobbies?"

"I play chess," Brant said.

"I know the game."

"Perhaps we might try a game later," he offered.

Dancer regarded him warily. "Perhaps."

Chime smiled. "I enjoy working in the orchards, when I have a chance."

"We have men who tend the crops," Dancer said. It could have sounded like a slight, as if she looked down on Chime for doing such work, but Dancer spoke with no disdain. She seemed more baffled than anything else.

"Her Majesty is an expert in the history of the Misted Cliffs," Mel said.

"History?" Chime's interest perked up. "I've always enjoyed the subject. A lot is there to be learned."

For the first time since they had arrived, Dancer smiled. "It intrigues me how much our lives have changed over the centuries. The past was a simpler time." She sounded wistful. "Or perhaps it only seems that way now, when our lives have too many complications to bear."

A silence fell around the table. Mel didn't think Dancer realized what she had said. With her life, the former queen had no reason to think people might live without complications that seemed unbearable.

Chime spoke gently. "You are welcome to visit our library. Our scrolls and books are at your disposal."

"Thank you." Dancer had a strange expression, as if she expected that any moment someone would yank the rug out from under her chair.

Later that night, after everyone had retired, Mel walked down the hallway carrying a candle. Its mellow light reflected off the sunbask walls, but the house was otherwise dark, the lamps on its walls doused. She carried her basket over one arm with Fog sleeping inside.

“You’re getting heavy,” she murmured. “Not such a baby anymore.” She hoped Fog would sleep well for the next few hours. If she left him outside her mother’s door and the kitten woke up alone, he would be frightened inside his basket. Mel had decided to slip it inside her mother’s room and crack open the lid. That way, Fog could climb out, but he wouldn’t end up wandering and lost in a house he probably didn’t remember. Knowing Fog, he would jump on the bed and sleep under the covers next to Chime.

Mel had come to a decision as soon as she had realized her magecraft was returning. No matter how much anyone else might disagree with her—especially her husband or father—he couldn’t shirk the responsibilities conferred by her power.

Up ahead, the door of the library opened. Dancer stepped into the hallway, holding open the door with her back, a lamp in one hand and her attention absorbed by a gilt-edged book in her other hand. She looked vulnerable with her velvet robe over a pale nightdress and her unbound hair hanging down to her waist. Startled, Mel stopped. At that instant, the queen glanced up and froze, as if she expected attack.

“My greetings of the evening,” Mel said. She could make out the title of the book, a historical treatise on agriculture.

Dancer hesitated. “I hope I didn’t disturb you.”

“Not at all.”

The queen nodded stiffly. “Well. Good evening.”

Mel returned the nod, feeling self-conscious. “Did you enjoy the library?”

“Very much. It is a splendid collection.” Although impeccably courteous, her tone had a finality that left little doubt she had no wish to converse. She walked past Mel, in the direction of her room. “Good night.”

“Good night.” Mel watched Dancer, helpless to do anything, though she didn’t know what she thought she needed to do.

The queen paused and turned back. “Thank you.”

Mel wasn’t certain why Dancer was thanking her. Whatever the reason, she was glad her mother-in-law’s attitude had softened. “You are welcome.”

Dancer inclined her head. Then she continued on her way. When she turned the corner, Mel resumed her errand. She felt somehow lighter, as if sunlight had slanted through a window, though it was night.

A half-moon lit the yard behind the house. Mel lifted a wood panel at the back of the stable, taking care to make as little noise as possible. When the wood creaked, the crickets went silent. She hadn’t even noticed them until they stopped their racket. That was why the Castle of Clouds had seemed unnaturally silent; it had few of the night sounds she knew from these fertile valleys. No crickets.

After a moment, they started up again, like a host of miniature saws cutting wood in the night. Mel ducked into the stable. She padded across a dirt floor strewn with fragrant straw, and the smell of hay tickled her nose. A horse snorted in one of the stalls.



In her youth, Mel had worked in these stables. Her mother had decreed she wouldn't grow up "spoiled." Prior to her betrothal to Muller, Chime had lived as a commoner. Mages had always been rare, and a royal heir in Aronsdale was expected to marry the most powerful female mage who would accept his suit, which meant Dawnfield men often wed the daughters of farmers, merchants, or shopkeepers. Some said it was the reason their line remained so robust. Mel didn't see why that mattered, but she knew enough about livestock to realize inbreeding could have a harmful effect on offspring.

In any case, Chime had worked on her family's farm in her youth and she was determined her daughter would do the same. So Mel had mucked out stalls and fertilized crops along with all the stable boys and stable girls. Now others were tasked with those onerous chores, but Mel had never lost her love of the horses.

She went to Smoke's stall and leaned across the open half-door. He pushed his nose against her hand, searching for the apple she often brought him. She offered him a succulent fruit she had taken from the kitchen. While Smoke crunched it, she rested her hand on a carved ball that decorated the half-door.

Blue light glowed around the ball.

Saints! Mel moved her hand and the light faded. Elated, she grasped the ball again and focused, using extra care. Blue light flickered. Had she wanted to make a brief spell, she could have managed. Tears welled in her eyes. "Well, Smoke. That is my second spell tonight. It seems I am still a mage after all."

He nuzzled her hand, searching for sweets, unconcerned about the momentous event. Mel laughed and scratched his neck. "Sorry. No more."

It didn't take long to prepare him for their ride. The supplies she had hidden earlier this evening were in the back of the stable where she had left them. She changed into the armor she had taken from the storeroom and strapped on her sword belt. The familiar weight of the blade reassured her. When she fastened the travel bags across Smoke's flanks, he stepped with restless energy. Like her, he wanted to be off and moving.

The front doors of the stable creaked more loudly than her private entrance. Mel held her breath as she walked Smoke into the yard. No calls came from the house, and no lights glowed on. Even the reading lamp in Dancer's bedroom was dark. Mel knew by heart the schedule for the sentries who protected the house; she had only a few moments before they would come by here. She mounted and guided Smoke past the house in a wide circle to minimize the chance of waking anyone. When she reached the orchards, she urged him down a row of trees, slow enough for safety but fast enough to get them away as quickly as possible.

She couldn't stay here, coddled and safe. She had no wish to fight Shazire, and she couldn't stop Cobalt, but if she could use her mage powers to ease the ruin brought on by battle, she was honor-bound to try.

As soon as she and Smoke reached the dirt road, Mel gave the horse his head and he broke into a gallop. She finally began to breathe more naturally. He was a good horse, fast and strong. Mel would be long gone by the time her mother found her letter in the morning.

Cobalt paced the ridge above the fields where his men had camped for the night. Neither he nor Muller Dawnfield wanted his forces below those of the other army, so they both ended up camping on separate regions of the grassy plains. This was rich land, so different from the rocky cliffs of his home. He felt saturated. It was like eating too much sweet food; it seemed a good thing, but afterward you felt queasy. Too much, and your body became sluggish and heavy. A part of him wanted to return home, and the other wanted to gorge on this lush countryside.

The sky had just barely begun to lighten, and dawn was more than an hour off. A few fires burned as cooks prepared the morning meal. Fragrant traces of smoke drifted around him, a richer smell than produced by the hard woods of his home.

Cobalt climbed to the top of the ridge and looked back across the hills they had crossed yesterday. He had thought eleven thousand people would strip the land bare, but the scattered woods were still standing. A creek meandered at the foot of the ridge, its path muddied and shifted. In the predawn light, he could see little of the damage done by the army, just the natural beauty of the land. No one stirred in the hills, though yesterday they had swarmed with people, horses, livestock, and carts.

Almost no one. A rider was crossing a distant bluff. Cobalt squinted. His vision wasn't usually bad enough to make his spectacles necessary, but this early-morning light bothered him. He took his glasses from a pouch inside his shirt and put them on. The rider resolved into a man in armor, which meant he could be from either the Dawnfield or Chamberlight forces. The fellow had probably traveled a good distance, since the armies had passed no settlements in this region. Given the time, well before sunrise, he must have left at a very early hour, indeed.

By the time the rider reached the base of the ridge, Cobalt had deduced that he came from Muller's army. His helmet resembled the head of a bobcat found only in these southern hills. Cobalt's men had the Chamberlight sphere emblazoned on their breastplates, whereas this man had a blank one fashioned from leather. The Chamberlight men used more metal in their armor, which offered better protection but less agility. This fellow's chain mail also had a less solid look. Nor was he large. He was probably a fast fighter without much strength.

Cobalt was standing under an outcropping that jutted up from the ridge. It was a deliberate choice; in the open, he would be silhouetted against the paling sky, giving away his position. The rider climbed the ridge more to the east, where a mounted sentry from the Chamberlight army intercepted him. Cobalt watched as the riders conferred. Then they headed over the ridge and down the other side. He expected them to veer eastward, toward the Dawnfield army, but instead they went through the Chamberlight camp. In fact, they were headed toward his own tent. Puzzled, Cobalt jogged down the ridge.

The sentry and the Dawnfield man arrived at Cobalt's tent first. Cobalt slowed to a walk, watching them. The two riders dismounted, and the sentry spoke with Matthew, whom Cobalt had left on guard. The Dawnfield man waited back a few paces. His chin showed under the bottom of his helmet, well formed but too delicate for a grown man. He was a boy. Probably he had wanted to join Muller's army and they had turned him away because of his youth. Although Cobalt approved of determination, he didn't see why the sentry had brought the boy here. A few of Muller's men had deserted their army and asked to join Varqelle's forces; they had served him eighteen years ago, and they returned now to swear their loyalty. Although it was a smaller number than his father had hoped for, it had gratified Varqelle. They were older men, however. This boy probably hadn't been alive during the last war. Cobalt frowned. He had doubts about a soldier who changed sides so easily.

"I will inform you when he returns," Matthew was saying in his deepest voice.

Cobalt smiled. Matthew had often used that voice during Cobalt's youth, when the young prince had misbehaved. It could rumble with just as much authority as the highest general in the land.

The sentry seemed unduly agitated. "It wouldn't be wise to wait, sir."

"You have no choice," Matthew said.

Cobalt walked up to them. "What is the problem?"

They all turned with a start. The sentry took a step backward as he saluted, his hand snapping to his shoulder in the Chamberlight tradition. "Sir!" He was staring at Cobalt oddly.

Cobalt suddenly realized he was wearing his spectacles. Embarrassed, he took them off and put them in his pocket. "You have a message for me?"

The sentry indicated the boy. "You've a visitor." He swallowed and took another step back.

Cobalt wondered at the sentry's behavior. He knew he unsettled people, but this seemed extreme. The fellow had never acted with such trepidation before. Cobalt frowned at the Dawnfield youth. "Remove your helmet. Let me get a look at you."

The boy inclined his head in an oddly regal gesture. He pulled off his helmet—and masses of gold hair spilled free.

Bloody hell. Cobalt swore in several languages. Decked out in armor and mail, his wife regarded him with an unwavering gaze, her chin lifted. Then she gave him that devastating and deceptively angelic smile of hers.

"Good morning," she said.

Cobalt glowered at her. "Not anymore." He jerked his hand toward his tent. "In there."

Mel nodded to the sentry who had escorted her. "Thank you, sir." She walked forward and gave Matthew a courteous nod. "It is good to see you." Then she entered the tent. Cobalt didn't miss that she neglected to nod to him. Well, hell. How was he supposed to greet her? Now he had to worry about sending her home, and saints knew, he dreaded that conversation.

He yanked aside the flap and stalked inside. Mel was standing across the tent by the brazier holding her helmet under her arm. Her hair tumbled about her body in golden waves, and the hilt of her sword glinted in the ruddy light. Her House took its name from ancient tales of a warrior goddess who came down from the stars in the dawn sky. Right now, Mel could have been an incarnation of that goddess. She took his breath away. She would also drive him to drink. He had no idea how to deal with this wife of his, who carried the blood of warrior queens in her veins.

"You must return to your mother," he stated.

"I must stay here," Mel answered calmly.

Cobalt crossed his arms. "I do not see your mother riding with your father's army."

She scowled at him. "That is because someone has to rule Harsdown while my father makes sure your

marauders do not pillage our lands.”

“We do not maraud,” he growled.

Mel walked over to him. Her head came up to his chest and she was probably less than half his weight. She was also thoroughly intimidating.

“I will not leave,” she said.

“Why not?” Cobalt lowered his arms. “You wish to fight Shazire?”

“Saints, no. I wish I could stop you. But I cannot.” She turned her palm up as if showing him what she had to offer. “As a mage, I am sworn to do no harm. If you must do this, I must do what I can to ease the harm.”

“You would fight against me?”

“You are my husband. I would not go against you.” In a low voice, she added, “Though I feel I am betraying my own people because of it.”

“I would not have you betray anyone,” Cobalt said. “The solution is for you to go home.”

“I cannot.”

“You are one person,” Cobalt said, bewildered. “What could you possibly do?”

“I am a mage. I can help an army.” She spoke as if she were forcing out the words. “I also know Shazire. My parents felt I should learn about the neighbors of the country I will rule. Shazire has little chance against this mammoth army you bring against them. Nor do they have strong allies. Aronsdale is probably the only country they could have relied on for help, and we are bound by our treaty with you to withhold such support.”

The tendons in Cobalt’s neck tightened. “Are you saying you will use your mage abilities to help them defeat us?”

“No.” She made no effort to hide her regret. “I could never achieve such a miracle. You have three times the men, resources, and armaments they can bring to muster. I cannot change that with a few spells. But I know the House of Zerod. They have great pride. They will never surrender. Even now, they will be scrambling to prepare, sending envoys to other countries asking for help, even to the borderlands to hire mercenaries. But it will be too little too late.”

The clicks, buzzes, rustles, and hums of the night receded until Cobalt heard only Mel. “Then what are you suggesting?”

She spoke quietly. “I can help you win your campaign with as little loss of life and destruction as possible.”

Cobalt was certain he had heard wrong. “You will help me conquer Shazire?” With her at his side, he truly would be invincible.

Her voice turned cold. “I have no wish to help you conquer anyone.” She laid her hand on the hilt of her

sword and the ball at its tip glowed blue. "I have come to minimize the harm."

Cobalt was beginning to see. "You can heal, yes? You will help my physicians."

"That is part of it. I can also bolster confidence and health among your men. My mood spells can gauge the morale of armies you fight, even their plans if I can get close enough to them. I can save lives when men fall." She was clenching her the hilt of her sword. "I will help you win your campaign as fast and as cleanly as possible, my husband, because it is the only way I can see—the only realistic way—to minimize the harm you will do."

It was what he had wanted, to have her support, but it sobered him that it came because she saw him as a destroyer and was desperate to help those she expected him to hurt.

"Mel, listen." He drew her to sit with him on his pallet. She remained cross-legged, stiff and distant though they were only handspans apart. He had tried to make her see before, but he found it hard to speak so much. He would try again, and yet again, until she would know his visions as he knew them.

"I have no wish to harm," he said. "I too hope for as few deaths as possible. Shazire is a beautiful country and I would keep it that way. But it is our country. The House of Escar will rule. Someday we will take Jazid and Taka Mal. When I am king of the Misted Cliffs, it will unite the Escar Empire. Then you will inherit the Jaguar Throne. Mel! It could be the greatest empire ever known among these settled lands, one that will endure for ages." He took her hands. "This is my dream. I would bring our peoples together."

"It is a powerful dream. But is it real?" She tensed her fingers around his. "You conquer. How does that make you different from a tyrant?"

"I am no tyrant."

"Why not?"

"A tyrant oppresses. Destroys. Kills."

"You will kill and destroy to defeat Shazire."

Why could she not see? "People die in battle."

"How is it not oppressing people when you force them to deny their leaders and accept you?" she demanded. "How is it not destructive to trample their lands, to kill their sons and fathers and brothers, all so you can take the throne?"

"Jazid and Taka Mal did exactly that when they tore apart the Misted Cliffs." He flexed his fingers, easing her viselike grip. "I do not claim it will be easy or gentle. That does not mean it isn't a vision worth the price of its realization."

"It is a brutal price." She opened his hands and showed him his palms. "Soon you will cover these in blood. Will you do the same to anyone who defies you? Where is the line between an 'acceptable' price and tyranny?" In a quieter voice, she said, "And if you succeed? Where does that leave Aronsdale? Surrounded on every side by your empire."

He hesitated. "I might hope, through you and our child, that someday Aronsdale would join us. Perhaps

the tie could be strengthened through a marriage.”

“I don’t think that could ever happen.”

Cobalt didn’t know how to make her see. In the light from the brazier, her face had a gilded quality, as if she had stepped out of a legend like an antique goddess. He wanted to lay an empire at her feet, but she wouldn’t accept it. He put his arm around her waist and drew her against his body, his legs on either side of her.

“Mel—”

“No!” She set her palms against his chest. “You cannot seduce me into this.”

“Be my empress.”

“Why would I wish this?”

It seemed obvious to him. He was offering her immense power. He wanted to give her so much and she didn’t want it. What did a husband give his wife, then? He had little to offer, but this was something he could do and do well. So he tried again. “If you fear for the future, then sit at my side and do what you think is right for the peoples of the lands that become ours.”

“Cobalt...”

He waited, but she said no more. At least she wasn’t refusing. “You say that a lot. Just my name. It sounds very fine, but I think when you say it, you have other purposes in mind than to enchant me with the sound.” He trailed his fingers across her mouth. “Do you truly think I am evil?”

Her lips parted. “No.”

Ah, saints. What could he do when her mouth invited him that way? He bent his head and kissed her, making her lips part even more for his tongue. At first she stiffened, and he thought she would shove him away. She kept her hands up, exerting pressure to hold him at bay, but she kissed him back with a hunger that fed his own.

“Mel.” He reached for the fastenings of her armor.

She pushed back from him. “Stop it.”

“Why?”

“You seduce me.”

“Good.”

“It is not good.”

“I am your husband.”

“Cobalt.”

Exasperated, he said, "There it is, my name again."

She hesitated. "You asked if I thought you were evil."

"You have already changed your mind?"

"Listen," she said. "You simmer like a fire. Soon you will flare like a blaze."

"Why does this upset you?"

"What will history remember you for?" She splayed her fingers on his rough shirt. "You have so much goodness within you. But the capacity for evil is there, too. You live on the edge between your own darkness and light. What will drive you across these lands? Will you become a tyrant?"

Cobalt knew he had problems with his rage. "Anger alone does not make a tyrant."

"What if a person angers you? A village? A country? What will you do when there is no one to stop you?" She shook her head. "You say a price must be paid to achieve your visions. Who decides what price? When does it stop?"

He couldn't fight her with words. But this differed from his verbal battles with his grandfather. He needed to answer Mel fairly, and that made it much harder.

"If ever I go too far," he said, "pull me back."

She paled. "You have no idea the task you put to me."

"I can think of no one better for it."

"Do not ask me to be the conscience of a conqueror."

"I cannot stop being what I am, Mel. If you would call me a conqueror, then so be it." He lowered her onto the pallet and lay next to her, half at her side and half on top of her body, propped up on one elbow so he could look at her. "Be my wife. My adviser. My queen. The mother of my heir."

"Stop." She set her palm against his cheek. "When you do this, when you touch me, I can't think straight."

Cobalt caught her hands and brought them down to the pallet, one on either side of her head. He pinned her there. "I do not wish to think right now."

"I will not do this with you. Not now." But her voice had that husky quality it took on when they lay together.

He kissed her forehead, nose, lips. "Your body and your voice say otherwise."

"It does not matter."

He might take over the world, but it seemed he could not conquer his wife. "Do you truly see such evil in me?"

“No!” Her eyes were doing what he dreaded, filling with tears. “I see the man who can best the most accomplished swordsman among his men one moment and hold a purring kitten the next. I’ve seen your kindness to your mother, your men, your staff. I’ve known the Cobalt who can be gentle to a scared bride one day and bring alive her passion the next. I’ve seen the way your face lights up when you laugh, those rare, rare times you laugh.” A tear leaked out of the corner of her eye and ran down her temple. “I’ve seen the good in you.”

He had no name for the sensations welling within him. He released one of her hands and touched her tear. “Why do you cry?”

“Because I cannot leave you.”

His heart felt strange. Breakable. “Why?”

“I can’t—”

His voice caught. “Why, Mel?”

A tear escaped her other eye. “Because I am falling in love with you.”

The armor around his heart cracked then, and she stormed the citadel he had built to protect his emotions.

“Do not cry,” he whispered.

“Cobalt—”

He put his finger over her lips. “If I could live ten centuries, still my life would be meaningless without what you have just said.”

“I don’t want you to live ten centuries.” Her voice caught. “Just one lifetime. With me. Without all this conquest and ambition.”

“I cannot be other than what I am.” He kissed her, more softly now. “I do not know if I am capable of loving a woman. But when I am with you—” He wrestled with the words. “I know I am the most powerful man alive, that I could live forever, that I would make the stars fall to the ground at your feet. And I know that if I ever lose you, I will die a thousand times over.”

She touched his lips. “I cannot leave you.”

“And this makes you weep?”

“Ah, Cobalt.” She pulled her other hand out of his grip and put her arms around him. “Just love me.”

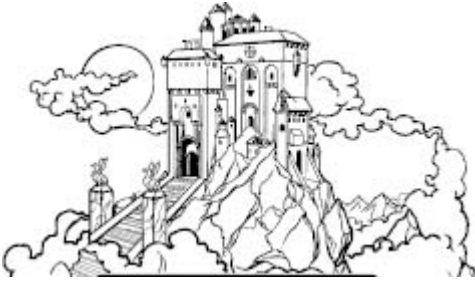
He touched her sword and smiled. “You are armed, my lady. I fear I take my life into my hands.”

She laughed then, and her blue eyes filled with tears.

In the hour of dawn, he made love to his wife. He died in the circle of her embrace and came alive again, and his life would never be the same, for he had let this woman topple his defenses and in doing so he had given her the power to hurt him. Why that terrible deed created such joy within him, he would never



understand.



17

## Blueshire

On the thirty-second day of their march, in early spring, the two armies reached the southern border of Harsdown, which it shared with the tiny country of Blueshire. The Dawnfield army stopped, massed on the border, while the Chamberlight forces crossed into Blueshire. Mel sat with her father high on a ridge and watched the elite of the Chamberlight cavalry riding below. Muller was holding the reins in a grip tight enough that his horse picked up his tension and stepped agitatedly beneath him.

“I wish you would reconsider,” Muller said, again.

“Would you?” Mel asked. “In my place?”

He let out a tired breath. “No. I wouldn’t.”

“Will you stay here?” Mel asked. The border between Blueshire and Harsdown wasn’t a long one, extending only along the southeastern edge of Harsdown. Shazire curved around Blueshire and bordered the southwestern edge of Harsdown.

Muller answered grimly. “As long as your husband’s army is marching, we will stay here to protect Harsdown.” He watched her as if his heart were breaking. “Be careful, Mel. Come back to your mother and me. Live to make us grandparents.”

Her smile trembled. “Even if the father of my child is conqueror of the world?”

“Even so.” His voice caught. “Be well, Daughter.”

“And you.” She wanted to hug him, but she felt constrained with all the warriors riding by them. Although none looked up at the ridge, they all knew she was here with the king of Harsdown, the man who had taken Varqelle’s throne.

Blueshire was so small, the Chamberlight army could have crossed it in one or two days. It took only two hours to reach Oldcastle, the city that served as the seat of the government. While the Chamberlight forces spread out in the hills surrounding Oldcastle, Varqelle entered the town with two hundred cavalry, including Mel and Cobalt. People watched from houses and shop windows, but whenever Mel looked up at them, they pulled their shutters closed against her gaze. No one ventured into the streets.

The Blueshire army waited in the town square—all fifty of them, twenty men on horses and thirty on foot. Baker Lightstone, their king, sat astride a white horse at the head of his tiny cavalry. He was more of a mayor than a king, but he had the royal title and a lineage that went back two centuries. Blueshire had also been part of the Misted Cliffs and had broken off into a separate country at the same time as Shazire. Lightstone was an elderly man, neither tall nor husky, and Mel knew he walked with a limp because one of his legs was slightly shorter than the other. She had always liked him. He and his daughter were chess experts, and his wife played the harp beautifully. Mel had spent enjoyable evenings at his country estate. She hated coming here this way, with an occupying force.

Lightstone waited with his wife on her gray mare to his right and his daughter on her chestnut to his left. Varqelle walked his dark stallion up to the Blueshire king, flanked by Cobalt and Colonel Tumbler. The rest of the Chamberlight column filed around the plaza and encircled the Blueshire army. Mel stayed with the cavalry, but close enough that she could hear Varqelle.

“You are Baker Lightstone of Blueshire?” Varqelle asked.

Lightstone lifted his chin. “I am.”

Varqelle spoke without fanfare. “Your House no longer holds sway here.”

Lightstone answered tightly. “You come for Chamberlight?”

A muscle twitched in Varqelle’s cheek. Mel doubted he appreciated that his victories would be possible only because the man who had kept him from his family for so long now gave him an army. In the end, it didn’t matter. Varqelle would take the throne here. She doubted he had much interest in Blueshire; it just happened to be a splinter on the way to Shazire.

“I come as the House of Escar,” Varqelle said.

Lightstone glanced around the plaza at the two hundred men who had confined his “army.” Then he looked out at the hills that rose beyond Oldcastle and the mass of humanity that blanketed them, six thousand strong.

Lightstone’s shoulders slumped. He turned to Varqelle. “Will you accept our surrender?”

Relief poured over Mel. If Lightstone had chosen to fight the invasion, it would have been a slaughter. But he was a man of proud heritage. Had it been only his life in question, she had no doubt he would have defied Varqelle no matter how futile the attempt. But his fifty men were loyal and would follow whatever decision he made. It didn’t surprise her that he chose the one most likely to preserve their lives.

Varqelle said, “I accept your surrender.”

Cobalt walked with his father through the dusk. The lurid sunset had faded into a crimson line on the horizon. Tents and fires dotted the hills outside of Oldcastle, but an open strip of land here offered a buffer zone between the city and the army.

“I left a company of our men to guard Oldcastle,” Cobalt said. “Plus the fifty men in the Blueshire military.”

Varqelle frowned at him. "You left the opposing army in charge of their own city? Whatever for?"

His father's challenge was oddly refreshing. Stonebreaker would have made an oblique insult to Cobalt's intelligence, then gone behind his back and undermined his authority with the men until they doubted his decision. Varqelle did none of that; he just came out with his objections and expected Cobalt to support his decisions or change them. He did it constantly, until all the talking made Cobalt's head hurt, but dealing with him was easy after Stonebreaker. Varqelle listened when he spoke and actually made effort seem worthwhile.

"The Blueshire soldiers aren't going to fight us," Cobalt said. "They swore allegiance to you today. They aren't really an army, anyway; they're more of a police force. The people here trust them. We are more likely to hold Blueshire if we don't trample their people the way we are trampling their hills."

Varqelle snorted. "We would hold Blueshire with our thumbs tied behind our backs."

"Well, yes. But this way, its people will resent us less." Cobalt cocked his head. "I found out a lot, talking to the soldiers. Many families here have histories from when Blueshire was part of the Misted Cliffs. Although the people like being independent, they also seem to miss the security and affluence they had when they were part of such a powerful country."

"You worry too much about how they feel." Varqelle waved his hand toward the outskirts of the city. "Why do you need so many soldiers to guard this little town?"

Cobalt indicated the Chamberlight warriors encamped all across the hills. "The guards will keep the rest of our warriors from getting out of hand."

Varqelle lifted his finger in front of Cobalt as if he were teaching a schoolboy. "Our men need a release and the town has good taverns. Women, too."

"All the more reason to make sure our forces behave."

"I fail to see why."

Cobalt scowled at him. "Because we are civilized people. Not a horde of plundering barbarians."

"Tomorrow we march on Shazire. The men will have little chance to release all this pent-up energy before then."

"What pent-up energy? They have been marching for twenty days. They need sleep."

Varqelle crossed his arms. "And I suppose you would have me let King Lightstone and his family go into exile?"

"Yes."

"Cobalt, you sorely bedevil me."

"Why?" Cobalt knew, but he intended to stick with his recommendation anyway.

"You even have to ask?" Varqelle lowered his arms. "Jarid Dawnfield was a fool to let me live. Mind you, I am glad to be alive and gratified I have such a magnificent son who would free me from that

hellhole.” He glowered at Cobalt. “Would you have King Lightstone someday go free and come after you?”

Cobalt couldn’t help but smile. “With his fifty men?”

“It is not amusing.”

“Where would Lightstone get this army to attack me?”

“Jazid. Taka Mal.”

“How would that be any different from our situation now?” Their intention to engage Jazid and Taka Mal would be the same regardless of whether Lightstone asked those countries for help.

“It changes their stance from defense to offense.”

Cobalt shrugged. “Either way, they have the same armies.”

“There is also Aronsdale.”

“We have the treaty with them.”

Varqelle snorted. “Do not assume they will honor this treaty just because you married one of their women. If the House of Dawnfield joins with Taka Mal and Jazid, we will be hard pressed to overcome them.”

“I have studied the history of these lands.” It had always fascinated Cobalt. “Jazid and Taka Mal have never allied with Aronsdale. They have trade relations, yes, but they are otherwise cool in their dealings. The cultures are too different. My marriage to Mel will make them even more suspicious of the House of Dawnfield. An alliance is possible, but unlikely. Jazid and Taka Mal have much stronger ties with Shazire, yet our scouts report nothing about their forces moving to defend that country.”

“They haven’t had time,” Varqelle said.

“This is true,” Cobalt admitted. Yet Muller Dawnfield had known, and with time enough to gather both Harsdown and Aronsdale forces. He suspected Mel had had something to do with that, though she would never admit it. He couldn’t fault her for defending her family and her country. Although he would never tell his father, it had relieved him to find Harsdown so well defended. Treaty or no, he wasn’t naive enough to believe Varqelle would overlook an opportunity to reclaim the Jaguar Throne.

“Jazid won’t ignore us,” Varqelle said. “Neither will Taka Mal.”

“Eventually we will have to deal with them.” Cobalt spoke thoughtfully. “How we conduct this campaign matters. It will affect how other countries respond to us. Send Lightstone and his family into exile. Show humane treatment. Not barbarism.”

“Perhaps,” Varqelle grumbled. “I still don’t like it.”

They were walking along the edge of camp, near a campfire, and its light delineated the planes of Varqelle’s face. For Cobalt, it was like looking into a mirror thirty years down the line. He found it hard to believe his father was sixty-three; Varqelle was as fit as men half his age and had almost no gray in his

hair.

“Eighteen years in the Barrens,” Cobalt mused. “It is a long time.”

Varqelle grimaced. “I don’t know which was worse, the imprisonment or the boredom.”

“They treated you ill?” It hadn’t seemed that way, but Varqelle hadn’t talked about it much.

“Not really. I just had nothing to do.” Varqelle looked around the camp with the same edgy need to move that Cobalt often saw in Admiral, his horse—and in himself.

“We are much alike,” Cobalt said.

Varqelle didn’t respond, and Cobalt thought his father must deem him presumptuous for such a comment. Just as Cobalt was about to withdraw the statement, Varqelle said, “Very little in my life has mattered enough to me that I would die for it. Only two things.” He gazed at the campfires scattered over the hills like blossoms of flame in the night. “One is the Jaguar Throne.”

“It will return to the House of Escar,” Cobalt said. “In one generation.”

“But not in mine.”

Cobalt had no good answer. He could do a great deal for his father, and would gladly, but he couldn’t put him on the throne. He had done his best and it felt like a failure. If he couldn’t give his father Harsdown, he would bring him an empire.

“What is the second thing?” Cobalt asked.

Varqelle spoke quietly. “My son.”

Cobalt felt again that disquieting sensation that had come over him when Mel spoke of love. It was terrifying and magnificent at the same time. “I am honored.”

Varqelle stopped and laid his hand on Cobalt’s shoulder. “A man, a king, and a father could not ask for a better son.”

Cobalt tried to answer, but the words failed him. He tried again and his voice came out low and intense. “I, too, for you.”

Varqelle smiled, an unusual expression on his ascetic face. “Well.” He lowered his hand. “Now we must see to your having an heir, eh?”

Cobalt thought of Mel and felt warm. “Yes.”

As they began walking again, his father spoke musingly. “I would never have imagined my grandchild would be half Dawnfield.”

“It is a good line.”

Varqelle snorted. “Pretty, anyway.”

Cobalt supposed it would be asking too much for his wife and his father to deal well with each other. But he wondered about Dancer. "You and Mother have not done so poorly, living at the keep together."

"By avoiding each other."

"Father—"

"Cobalt, no." Varqelle shook his head. "She robbed me of all those years with you. And for what? Were you better off with her father? I think not."

Cobalt was beginning to accept that he might never learn Dancer's reasons. But he knew his mother. If she said she had acted on his behalf, she believed it. He either had to let go of his anger or turn away from her. He could never repudiate her, nor had he ever doubted she loved him, so he would have to find a way to live with never knowing the rest.

"Wives can be confusing," Cobalt said.

"Yours is rather disobedient," Varqelle said sourly.

Cobalt laughed. "That she is."

"You think it is funny?"

"I think it is maddening."

"You should deal with her more firmly."

Cobalt winced. "I would rather face an oncoming horde from Taka Mal, Jazid, and Shazire combined."

Varqelle waved his hand. "Take a switch to her."

Cobalt's good mood vanished. "No."

"She will get more unruly."

This was an aspect of his father he didn't want to see. "I am no Stonebreaker." He rubbed his knuckles, recalling the bloodstains they left in the towers of his home. "Nor a breaker of women and children."

"I do not countenance brutality." Varqelle shook his head with a firm, unyielding motion. "But Cobalt, you must make your wife behave. Break her as you would an unruly horse."

"I never break a horse." Cobalt thought of Admiral. "Destroy the spirit and you lose what you love."

"Such women are incapable of love." Varqelle's voice hardened. "Judge by their actions, not their false words."

Cobalt wished he could soften his father's view. "Have you no sympathy for Mother?"

"Why would I have sympathy for a woman who hated me from the day we wed?"

"Sometimes a woman needs time."

“An eternity wouldn’t have melted her.” Varqelle’s voice lost some of its edge. “The only woman who ever gave me any warmth was a girl I got from Jazid.”

So his father had kept a concubine. It didn’t surprise Cobalt. Stonebreaker had several, and Varqelle didn’t seem the type of man to spend all those years alone. “Did you bring her to Escar after Mother left?”

“Before. She consoled me for your mother’s cold heart.”

Cobalt’s sympathy vanished. He scowled at his father. “Perhaps your mistress was the reason your wife lacked warmth.”

“You want a miracle reunion. It will never happen.” Varqelle’s answer held no anger, only sadness. “You must stop hoping.”

“The three most important people in my life all hate one another. I cannot help but hope it will change.”

“Then see to your wife. She is the one you can most affect.” Varqelle’s eyes glinted. “You spend a great deal of time with her at night. Make it mean something.”

“Mean something?” Cobalt asked, perplexed. It meant a great deal, all of it very private.

“No reason exists why punishing her should not give you pleasure.”

Cobalt felt as if Varqelle had punched him deep in the stomach. His rage stirred, and it took a great effort not to raise his fist. “I do not wish to have this conversation.”

“Ah, Cobalt, I do not mean to offend you.” Varqelle paused. “Just think on what I have said. Do not let her pretty words blind you.”

Everything Mel did blinded him. She remained in his thoughts always. She terrified him, yet he would do anything, anything at all to hear her tell him that she loved him. Was this weakness? Should he rethink the way he dealt with her? The thought of her coming to harm was unbearable.

“Was there never any love between you and Mother?” he asked.

Regret showed on Varqelle’s face. “I’m sorry I cannot give you the answer you want.”

Sorry. Just like that, his father said, I’m sorry. Never in a millennium would Stonebreaker have apologized for anything.

Varqelle smiled. “It is true, though, that the one time she sought me of her own volition was the night you were conceived.”

Cobalt’s face flamed. “I don’t believe I should hear this.”

“Ah, well, perhaps not.” Varqelle chuckled. “You were born as you lived, impatient and demanding to conquer the world. You couldn’t even wait the full nine months.”

“I was born early?” Dancer had never told him.

“About a month.”

“Was I sickly?”

“Not at all. You were always big and robust.”

“Perhaps Mother mistimed the dates.”

“I don’t think so. She slipped and fell. That was why she went into labor early. But she and you were both fine.”

“Well, I am glad to be born.” It was one of the few times in his life when Cobalt genuinely felt he could mean those words.

Varqelle clapped him on the shoulder. “Indeed.”

They continued on together, father and son, discussing plans for their future.

King Lightstone and his family left in the early morning. Mel rode out to meet them with a scroll in her hand. Lightstone, his wife, and their daughter, Sky, were mounted and ready to ride, accompanied by an honor guard of twenty Chamberlight and twenty Lightstone men. Varqelle sat on his horse a distance away with a company of his men, observing, and Cobalt was speaking with Lightstone.

Mel rode through the honor guard, aware of everyone watching her. She reined to a stop alongside Sky. The Blueshire princess regarded her with red-rimmed eyes.

“I am sorry,” Mel said. She and Sky had known each other all their lives, not well, but with friendship.

Sky indicated Cobalt. “Are you the one who convinced him to let us live?”

Mel told the truth. “It was his decision. But I spoke in support of it.”

Sky nodded and they sat awkwardly. There seemed no more to say. Whatever friendship they might once have shared had no place here.

“Be well,” Mel finally said.

“I would wish the same for you.” Sky glanced at Cobalt, then at Mel. “If such is possible.”

Mel had no answer for that. After she and Sky bid each other an awkward farewell, Mel rode to where Cobalt conferred with Sky’s parents. They all fell silent as Mel bowed to King Lightstone. Then Cobalt backed up his horse, giving her privacy with the king and queen.

“Your Majesty,” Mel offered him the scroll. “This is a letter on your behalf to my cousin, King Jarid in Aronsdale.”

Lightstone accepted the scroll and inclined his head in a formal gesture of thanks. “Perhaps someday we will meet again.” His voice cooled. “Though you are no longer Dawnfield.”



What could she say? She had married the Escar prince whose army had overrun Blueshire. Nothing would change that.

Cobalt's men would ensure the Blueshire party reached the Harsdown forces at the border. From there, her father would have them escorted to Aronsdale. Mel had no doubt her parents would offer to take them in, but given her marriage to Cobalt, she doubted the Lightstone king would accept.

The queen spoke quietly. "Goodbye, Mel. I hope you fare well."

Mel nodded to her. "You also."

They left then. An hour later, the Chamberlight army was on the move as well, headed for Shazire.



18

### Flame Caller

Mel had always thought Shazire beautiful. She had loved to visit as a child. Never in any of her imaginings would she have expected to ride through its lovely countryside as part of an invasion. The army flooded the hills and meadows and churned the wildflowers into pulp. They forded rivers and left behind swamps. Six thousand strong, they marched southward.

Scouts who had ranged ahead of the main force for days came back and reported to Cobalt; the Shazire army was amassing in the Azure Fields north of Alzire, the capital city. Estimates put their numbers at roughly two thousand, with four hundred spearmen from Jazid.

Mel rode with her hexagon guard. They surrounded her but kept enough distance to give her privacy. The Chamberlight cavalry proceeded in columns, and pages led additional mounts. Carts rolled forward, carrying men, women, and supplies. The foot soldiers traveled more slowly but had to rest less often than the horsemen. Several officers from the Castle of Clouds rode past Mel and one raised his hand in greeting. She nodded to them, gratified that their attitude toward her was beginning to thaw.

Toward midday, Colonel Tumbler pulled his horse alongside hers. He bowed and smiled with reserve, his two crooked front teeth giving him a boyish look.

"My greetings," Mel said.

"I wondered if you required anything," he said. "Food or water? You are so stoic, never complaining."

"Thank you." They were practically the first kind words anyone had said to her during this march. Although the people here still didn't speak to her much, she suspected it was more now because she was

Cobalt's wife than because of any decree from Stonebreaker. "I appreciate your concern. But I'm fine."

"Let me know if you need anything."

Mel smiled. "I will."

At her smile, Tumbler blushed. He nodded formally, then let his horse fall back into formation, as was appropriate. But he stayed close enough that she could easily call on him if she had any request.

His gesture touched Mel. Nor was his the only one. It was just a nod here, a wave there, but they no longer seemed hostile. It lifted her spirits, which were otherwise dark.

The antiqued sunlight of late afternoon was slanting across the land when Mel saw Cobalt riding back along the lines. He sat tall on Admiral, long-legged and broad-shouldered, his armor glinting. He held his helmet under his arm, and the wind tossed back his hair from his strong-featured face. His aura of power caught Mel and left her breathless. She had no doubt that this man, Cobalt the Dark, the Midnight Prince, would someday be known as Cobalt the Great—if he didn't burn himself out in the flame of his ambition.

He rode over to her. "Did you forget to eat?"

Mel blinked. "No. Why do you ask?"

"Because," he said smugly, "you were looking as if you wanted to devour me."

She glowered at him. "You have an avid imagination."

He grinned and continued to ride at her side, looking around, conducting an informal inspection of his cavalry, at ease on his mount. Men saluted as they passed and Cobalt nodded in acknowledgment.

"Have you had any message from the emir?" Mel asked. She knew it was a futile hope. Prince Zerod, who ruled Shazire, would never surrender, not if he faced an army ten times the size of his own. One of the greatest tensions among the people of Shazire was that they had a culture steeped in the traditions of the Misted Cliffs, but their rulers now came from the eastern lands, Jazid and Taka Mal, creating a clash of cultures that had never sat easily on the populace.

"A letter arrived this morning," Cobalt said.

Her pulse leaped. Was she wrong? Perhaps Zerod would surrender. "What does he say?"

"It was very wordy, formal, and polite," Cobalt said dryly. "Stripped of all that, it said. 'Get the hell out of my country.'"

Ah, well. It had been a foolish hope.

He glanced at her. "You are wearing armor and a sword."

"So are you."

He crossed his arms, his reins tight in one hand. "I would not have you fight tomorrow, when we engage Zerod's army."

Her voice cooled. "I have absolutely no desire to kill people."

"Nor I."

"Don't you?"

"No. Of course not." He unfolded his arms and motioned at the land around them. "I desire this. And more."

She shook her head. "What will you do, Cobalt, when there are no more lands to conquer?"

"I will keep these lands." He indicated his father, who was riding ahead of them. "For him."

Mel knew she could never win where Varqelle was concerned. Cobalt's bond with him was forged in a furnace of shared goals and personality, and annealed by Varqelle's longing for a son and Cobalt's need for a father. Nothing she could say would stop Varqelle from despising her, and if she spoke against him, it would only estrange her from Cobalt.

"Why does your face cloud so?" Cobalt asked.

"I wish your father and I got along better."

"So do I."

"Do you think it will ever change?"

He thought for a while. "I do not think he likes women."

There's an understatement. "He loathes me."

"He believes women should be submissive. Especially pretty ones." His lips quirked upward. "You are never the former and always the latter."

She tilted her head. "You've changed."

"I have?"

"You smile sometimes. And you use full sentences."

He spoke with mock solemnity. "I must be more careful about that."

"Cobalt."

He laughed. "There it is. My name again."

She grunted at him.

"Mel, listen to me."

"Yes?"

His smile faded. “You must promise you will stay away from the fighting tomorrow.”

“I do not wish to fight.” She had no desire to see battle. But she couldn’t give him her word when she didn’t know yet what she would be able to do as a mage. She just didn’t know.

“You must promise,” Cobalt told her.

She said nothing.

“Wake up,” Cobalt said.

Mel groaned. “It can’t be dawn yet.”

“It isn’t.” He kissed her ear. “You need to dress.”

She turned on her back and opened her eyes. He was propped up on his elbow, looking down at her. One of his shirts dangled from his raised hand.

“I do?” she asked, groggy.

“You do.” He pulled her up until she was sitting. Then he tugged his shirt over her head and down around her knees. She regarded him with bleary eyes. No light yet showed around the cracks between the entrance flap and the front of the tent.

“It must be almost an hour before dawn,” she mumbled.

“I know. I have to go.” Cobalt drew her to her feet.

Mel swayed. “Too sleepy.”

“Here.” He led her over to where they had hammered a post into the ground to hold up his tent. “Sit here.”

Mel yawned. “I need one of those metal balls your men use in the catapults.”

“The catapults?” He put her back to the pole and pushed her down so she was sitting against it. “Why?”

“Cobalt, what are you doing?” Mel tried to get up.

He hugged her as if he were embracing her, but he was also pulling her arms behind the pole. Before she could react, he had wrapped a rope around her wrists.

“What—stop!” Mel tried to yank her arms free, but he held her pinned in his arms and quickly bound her wrists together.

“No!” Mel struggled against him. “Let me go!”

He did finally let go, though he stayed kneeling in front of her. He spoke firmly. “I would die before I would let you near a battle. You must stay here.”

She jerked on the ropes that kept her arms behind her back. “You bastard.”

“I assure you my birth was quite legitimate.”

Mel swore at him with the choicest words she had picked up from her father’s officers during training.

Cobalt winced. “Your language is extraordinary.”

“What if Shazire warriors break through here?” she demanded. It was unlikely; they were far from the Azure Fields. But it wasn’t impossible. “What then?”

He rose to his feet. “Matthew will be here to see that you are protected and give you meals.”

She couldn’t believe he was going to leave her half naked and bound to a pole. “You have to untie me.”

“No.” He picked up his clothes from where he had laid them out the night before. “I do not.”

Mel wrestled with her bonds. When she couldn’t loosen the ropes, she tried to pull the pole out of the ground. That didn’t work, either. While she struggled, Cobalt dressed, donned his armor, strapped on his sword, and picked up his shield and helmet. He lifted the tent flap, and his body made a dark silhouette against a sky just barely lightened by dawn.

“I will see you when I return from the Azure Fields,” he said.

Mel turned her head and refused to acknowledge him. It was several moments before she heard him leave. The flap crinkled as it fell back in place.

“Are you all right?” a man asked.

Mel jerked and nearly choked. A man with broad shoulders and long legs stood in the entrance, dark against the paling sky. It wasn’t Cobalt—she couldn’t defend herself—

“Matthew!” She sagged against the pole. “You scared me.”

He came over and crouched next to her. “I am sorry.”

“Will you untie me?”

“You know I cannot do that.”

She scowled at him. “You are perfectly capable of doing it.”

“I won’t disobey Prince Cobalt’s orders.” At least he had the decency to look uncomfortable.

She twisted her hands behind her back, trying to work them free. All she succeeded in doing was scraping her wrists. “I can’t believe he did this.”

“I’ve never seen him treat a woman in such a manner,” he admitted. “But then, I’ve never seen him so intense about anyone, either.”

“You mean tying them up? You’re right. He’s intensely crazy.”

“He’s in love.”

“He has a damn fool way of showing it.”

“What would you have him do?” Matthew asked. “Let you go into combat?” “Yes.”

“That is crazy.”

“He goes, and I have to agonize over his safety.”

“That is different.”

“Like hell it is.”

“You know,” Matthew said, “you not only fight like a man, you swear like one, too.”

“Yes, well, Cobalt doesn’t tie his men to poles.” She wrenched at her bonds. “He listens too much to his father.”

Matthew’s voice quieted. “I would take care how you speak to him of his father.”

“I know.” Mel leaned her head back against the pole. It was too irregular in its cut to provide a good shape for a spell. “I need to calm down.”

“This would be good.”

She sent him an annoyed look. However, a plan was coming to her. She lifted her head and put on a wistful expression. “I guess I’m afraid.”

His gaze softened. “I won’t leave your side.”

“I wish Fog were here.”

“He would be comforting.”

“My people have a custom—well, it’s rather silly. But it does offer comfort.”

He squinted at her. “What custom?”

“When we are afraid, we hold a favorite object and sing.”

Matthew blanched. “You want to sing?”

Mel glared at him. “I don’t have that bad of a voice.” Then she remembered she was being conciliatory. “But I wouldn’t sing this early in the morning. It would be calming, though, to have something to hold.”

He looked uncertain. “What sort of thing?”

“Have you ever seen Cobalt’s billiard balls?”

“Indeed.” He smiled dryly. “In his youth, I often had to take them away when his mother wanted him to study.”

“I should like one of those to hold.”

“We have none here.”

“Oh.” She let her disappointment show.

“I might find you some seeds.”

“They would trickle through my fingers.”

He thought for a moment. “The balls for the catapults are the right size.”

She gave him her most angelic smile. “Would it be all right if I had one to hold?”

He seemed to melt in front of her. “Aye, I could manage that.” He stood up. “It won’t take long.”

“Thank you,” Mel murmured.

After he left, she let her chin sag forward to her chest. She intended to stay awake until he returned. Her head felt so heavy, though. Her eyes closed...

“Princess Melody?” Someone’s knees popped. “Wake up.”

Mel cracked open her eyes to find Matthew crouched beside her. Princess Melody, indeed. He showed her a metal ball, blue-gray with an iridescent sheen. Then he reached back and slid the ball into her hands. “There you be.”

She smiled beatifically. “You are a lovely man.”

He blushed. “Are you hungry?”

“Not now. I’d like to sleep some more.”

“I’ll be right outside, then.” He stood up. “Call for me if you need anything.”

“I will.”

As soon as Matthew left, Mel concentrated on the ball. She didn’t try any high-level colors. Her abilities had only begun to heal, and with such a powerful shape, she wasn’t certain she could control blue and green spells. So she thought of red. She had too little precision to risk a spell with the ropes; she might hurt her wrists. Instead, she chose a point across the tent. It was still a risk, but if she didn’t try, people could die who didn’t have to, all because Cobalt had tied her to a pole. She concentrated on the cloth. Focus...

The point glowed red. She built the spell—a spell of heat—

Flames erupted out of the point.

“Matthew!” Mel shouted. “Fire!”

He swept aside the flap and strode into the tent, which was already burning. He knelt behind her, and the ropes snapped as he cut them with his knife. As soon as her arms fell free, he jumped up and hauled her to her feet. An entire side of the tent was in flames.

Matthew pushed her toward the entrance. “Run!”

She grabbed his arm. “Not without you.”

“This is Cobalt’s tent! I have to—”

“No you don’t!” She dragged him forward.

They broke into a run as flames caught the peaked roof. Just as they burst out of the tent into an overcast day, a man heaved a bucket of water on the fire. A line of people was forming, made up of the men and women who tended camp while the soldiers were in combat. It stretched to a creek about a hundred paces away. Mel and Matthew joined them and helped pass buckets up the line. Cobalt’s shirt flapped around Mel’s knees and she had to roll up the sleeves to her elbows. She moved forward each time the first person in line ran back to the creek with an empty bucket. The people all worked together with a practiced efficiency that told Mel a great deal about how well Cobalt trained his army, not only the warriors, but everyone.

The fire was out in a matter of minutes. Mel stood with Matthew in front of the remains, breathing in gulps, her hair straggling around her and ashes on her arms. The flames had burned one side of the tent and about half the roof. She blanched when she saw the scorched pole where she had been tied. What if Matthew had left his post for some reason? No, she wouldn’t dwell on what-ifs. That hadn’t happened—and now she was free.

“Saints,” Matthew muttered. “That could have been you.” He turned to her. “How did it start?”

“It was across from where I was sitting,” she said. “It was hard to see.” Which was true.

Matthew grimaced. “I think maybe no more poles, eh?”

Mel exhaled with relief. “Yes. No more.”

They spent the next hour cleaning up the remains and setting up a new tent. Her belongings were intact, though they smelled of smoke. She pulled leggings and a sturdy tunic on over Cobalt’s shirt and put on boots. She fashioned a sling for her metal ball out of a scarf and hung it from her belt. Although she had found her armor and sword where Cobalt had hidden them under a pile of rugs, she ignored them. Matthew was keeping an eye on her. The entire time, she worried about Cobalt. His men would have engaged Zerod’s army by now.

When they finished with the tent, Mel went to see Smoke. Matthew followed at a discreet distance, but close enough to stop her if she tried to get on her horse. Smoke didn’t need anything; one of the grooms had already seen to his care. But she spent time pampering him. When Smoke was blocking her torso from Matthew’s view, she folded her hand around the ball in her sling and gazed over Smoke’s back at a distant cart heaped with blankets and folded tents. Then she concentrated. Yellow. Her favorite silk tunic. Her mother’s hair. Wild suncups.



Yellow light glowed around the cart.

“What is that?” someone asked.

Mel intensified the light. A new voice called, “Look!”

Matthew glanced at the cart, then frowned and walked toward it. While that occupied his attention, Mel grabbed her saddle from the nearby gear, threw it onto Smoke, cinched it, and scrambled up on the horse. Leaning over his neck, she urged him toward her tent. As soon as they reached it, she jumped off, snapped up the bottom edge—and yanked out the sword she had just happened to leave at the edge of the tent.

“Hey!” Matthew shouted.

Damn. She didn’t have time to get her armor. She grabbed her sword belt and swung back on Smoke. Then she took off, one hand gripping the belt. Matthew would follow, but he had to get his horse. Smoke was fast. Very fast. And she was a good rider. Better than good. He wouldn’t catch her, nor would anyone he called on for help.

Smoke galloped through the camp, urged on by Mel. Her hair streamed behind her. A cook looked up from his pot, and a blacksmith paused in repairing a sword. A camp follower walked out of an officer’s tent and stood watching her. Smoke headed south, his long stride eating up the distance.

They soon left the camp behind.



19

## The Azure Fields

Mel heard the battle before she saw it. It came to her first as a distant rumble. She had followed the route taken by the army, through demolished meadows, until she saw a line of low hills. Her sword hung at her side, but she had told Cobalt the truth; she didn’t want to use it. Unless they had no choice, mages kept out of sight during battle. Usually one or more polygon formations of warriors protected them, but she had no one at all.

As she galloped onward, hills rose out of the countryside and the rumble swelled until it separated into individual sounds, a cacophony of yells and cries, the twang of arrows, the pounding of hooves, the groan of catapults, the clang of metal on metal, and a hundred other sounds she couldn’t identify. It swelled into a roar.

By the time she reached the first line of hills, sweat was dripping down her neck. She kept to the

quilt-work of forest that patched the land, though at times she had to ride in the open to reach the next woods. She guided Smoke away from the soldiers who were serving as pickets, the men who kept watch. With such a large area to monitor, they were stationed at wide intervals, under cover, and she managed to avoid them. In the last hills, she rode into a clump of trees. The woods ended at the crest of a ridge where she stopped. A slope rolled down in front of her. She looked out into the plain beyond—

It was bedlam.

Thousands of men surged across the Azure Fields, on foot and on horseback. In some places, scattered soldiers fought, parrying with swords; in others, their numbers were so thick it was hard to make out individuals. It was a collection of battles. One would flare, then die down as men retreated and regrouped. A line of Shazire archers stepped forward and fired a volley of arrows into the advancing Chamberlight troops. Then they stepped back and their cavalry thundered past, cutting and striking Chamberlight foot soldiers from above. To the west, other warriors all fought on foot. A man lost his sword and scrambled out of the fighting; two others fought hand to hand; another swung his blade against the neck of his opponent—

Mel groaned and leaned over Smoke, afraid she would retch. She had never seen a man beheaded before and she prayed she never would again.

It was a while before she could swallow the bile in her throat and heave in a shaky breath. Then she raised her head and searched the fields below, looking for Varqelle. The battle was too large to find one person. She had overheard some of the war councils Cobalt held with his top officers; they considered Varqelle too valuable to risk and wanted him to stay out of the combat. She also knew how much Varqelle loathed the idea. He was a warrior king, not a statesman.

She continued scanning the field—and froze. Cobalt was at the top of a knoll, on foot, surrounded by his men. His sword cut through the air, silver and crimson. And in that moment, she understood without a shred of doubt why he felt driven to keep her as far from combat as possible, for she died a million deaths every moment she saw him with his life in danger.

Mel tried to steel herself. She had to put aside her emotions and do what she had come to do, for as long as she could manage, until someone stopped or killed her. She slid her hand around the ball in the sling that hung from her belt.

Mage power built within her like the embers of a fire stoked into life. Blue sky stretched overhead, and seemed to fill her, luminous and full. Blue light glowed around her body. The battles blurred in her vision, hazed with the radiance. When her head began to throb, she eased her concentration; when the pain receded, she focused again. She didn't force the spell. If she pushed too hard with such powerful colors and shapes, she wasn't certain she would survive.

"Mel?" The voice seemed far away. "What are you doing?"

She slowly turned her head. Matthew was sitting on his horse a short distance away, his body limned in blue light. He held his reins tightly.

"Don't interfere." Her words echoed.

"You are a sorceress." His face had paled. "You started that fire in the tent and made the gold light at camp."

“I am a mage,” Mel said. “You knew that.”

“I thought it was a glorified title for a woman who healed with herbs.”

“I know little about herbs.”

“What are you going to do?” Matthew asked.

“Shazire will fall.” A shudder went through her. “Will this battle rage for days until all who fight for Zerod are dead? Until the exquisite capital of Alzire is razed to the ground? Until this land and its people are beyond repair?”

“You think you can stop it?”

“No—” Her voice cracked with the pain of knowing how little she could do. “But I can soften it. I will do everything I can to sway Shazire to surrender. I will help Cobalt win with as little bloodshed as possible, strengthen his men in mind and body, in morale and prowess, and I pray, in their capacity for mercy. I will do this, Matthew. Do not try to stop me.”

He looked down at the battle. In profile, his features were even stronger, the straight nose, high cheekbones, and firm chin. It was the profile of a king.

“Cobalt tasked me with guarding you.” He turned back to her. “I will remain here and do so for as long as you work.”

Mel released the breath she had been holding. “Thank you.”

“Wait here,” he added. “I will return soon.”

Mel blinked. She wasn’t certain why he was leaving when he had just sworn to stay, but she trusted him. “All right.”

After Matthew rode back into the woods, Mel refocused on her spell. Blue light inundated her mind. Although she watched the battle, her concentration turned inward.

A short time later, branches crackled behind her. She looked back to see Matthew riding with two sentries. They stared at Mel. One began to speak, then stopped, his face ashen. The other leaned forward as if he would kick his mount into a gallop. The horse neighed and shook its head. But then the sentry straightened again and drew in an audible breath. Matthew had chosen well; both men stayed.

As the three guards took up formation around her, Mel said, “Can you make a triangle? The shape will strengthen my spells.”

They nodded tensely and moved into place, each a vertex of the shape. A triangle was a low-level shape and gave little power, but that also meant she could easily fill it with a spell. A blue spell. Physical strength. She poured it into the three guards. She added green swirling along the diagonals of the triangle. A mood spell. She sent them confidence.

When her triangle spells were complete, Mel returned her focus to the battle. Had the Dawnfield army been below, they would have fought in polygon formations, creating shapes for their mages. If the enemy formed such shapes, it worked against them, for Mel could just as easily pour dismay and weakness into

her spells. Such tricks came at a high price, however, for they also affected her; when she gave others strength or confidence, her own increased, and if she demoralized or impaired them, so she also affected herself. It was why mages sought light rather than darkness.

Historically, armies without mages had never fought in polygon formations, especially against a military force backed by the Dawnfields, the only House with good access to mages and the knowledge to train them. To form a polygon on the battlefield was to invite a mage to fill it with a spell. Neither the Chamberlight nor Shazire forces presented Mel with formations she could use. No matter. Every one of Cobalt's men, from the youngest to the most experienced, had one thing in common on the breastplate of his armor.

The Chamberlight sphere.

The Misted Cliffs was the country farthest from Aronsdale. Its people either didn't believe mages existed or else didn't understand how spells worked. When they thought of mages, they associated them with tales of witches and arcane signs rather than geometrical shapes. That was especially true with spheres. The ability to use such a shape, particularly a flawed representation of one, was almost unheard of even in Aronsdale. But Mel was a sphere mage—the child of another sphere mage who could use only flawed shapes.

The design on the breastplates wasn't a circle; the raised curve evoked a shape in three dimensions rather than two. Nor was it a true sphere; it couldn't be on armor. But the intent was obvious. It clearly represented the highest shape.

Mel reached out with her power.

Her spell diffused across the battle with no moorings. She affected no one. She could create it using the catapult ball, but she had no way to direct the spell. Envisioning the breastplates of Chamberlight warriors had no effect. Pain sparked in her temples, and it took a conscious effort to stop herself from pushing too hard.

The spell caught.

It felt like the mental equivalent of silk snagging on a sharp edge. Her spell hooked the breastplate of a warrior, then ripped and began to slip. She strengthened her focus and the spell held. She filled the round depression on the inside of the breastplate with blue power.

Mel reached again, searching—and caught another sphere. Then another. As she poured her power into the Chamberlight spheres, her spell built and spread. The more spheres she filled, the easier it became to find others. She sent Cobalt's men health, confidence, acuity, renewal. She gave them strength and prayed they used it wisely. Subdue without massacring. Shazire couldn't win, but in the fiery rage of battle, it was easy to forget, to destroy. To slaughter.

When Mel could offer succor to a fallen warrior, she gave it freely for Chamberlight and Shazire alike. She couldn't stop them from dying or mend fatal wounds, she could only speed healing that would happen anyway. She tried to help the dying, and she wept when she failed.

Show mercy.

The day passed, and the combat wore on beneath an overcast sky heavy with dark clouds. Mel either sat on Smoke or stood by the horse, all the time maintaining her spells, green and blue, as she watched

the armies fight. She felt it all, the blows, wounds, deaths, and grim emotions. She could hardly see for the light that surrounded her and the tears in her eyes. Her strength drained away until she floated in a sea of exhaustion.

And she watched Cobalt.

Mel had known men feared her husband's prowess as a warrior. She had watched him train at the castle. She had even seen him kill, the night they were attacked in the carriage. But she had never seen him fight, truly fight.

He terrified her.

Cobalt cut a swath through his challengers. No one could stand against that huge sword or a warrior of such uncommon height and strength. Sometime during the day, he regained his mount, not Admiral but a black charger with great speed. The Shazire warriors fought with bravery and would face almost anyone, but Mel saw men run in panic when the Midnight Prince bore down on them.

As the day darkened, a ripple went through her awareness of the battle. She turned her head, her body heavy with the spells that saturated the air. A rider was galloping across the field, his sword high. He looked as if he had been fighting hard and long, his armor dented and his shield cracked. With her awareness so sensitized, she could even tell that the hilt of his sword was fashioned into a true Chamberlight sphere, one of the few on the battlefield. It grabbed her spell like a great claw.

Varqelle.

Do not slaughter. Mel pleaded with her spell, but even with a true sphere enhancing it, she couldn't reach him. His battle fury was too intense. He was Cobalt, but with a cruel edge, one honed first through the loss of his family and then his years of captivity. Of all the officers in the battlefield, only Varqelle and Cobalt had led engagements beyond this one, and only Varqelle had previously led an army to war. His presence rallied the men. He was the king who would make this land his, and he could no more stay out of the battle than could Cobalt.

Mel's power flagged. She had held her spells for too long. Varqelle's charge had started their collapse but her own exhaustion sent them spiraling down. She slumped against Smoke and bent her head. As the blue and green light faded around her, Smoke whinnied and blew out air.

"Mel?" Matthew laid his hand on her arm.

She straightened up and gazed dully at him. No other of Cobalt's men would dare touch her or call her by her first name. Did he even realize he took for granted privileges allowed no one else? Dancer had brought him to the Castle of Clouds thirty-four years ago and he had been a part of her life and Cobalt's since then.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She answered in a low voice. "Who is your father?"

"What?"

"Your father."

He lowered his hand from her arm. “A blacksmith. Why?”

“At Castle Escar?”

“Yes. I was born there.”

“And your mother?”

Puzzlement creased his forehead. “A seamstress.”

“For who?” But she already knew.

“Varqelle’s father.”

“You are sixty-four.” Her voice was almost a whisper.

“Mel, what is this about?”

“You are the eldest.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you see it?”

“See what?”

She pointed to where Varqelle was leading a charge on the Azure Field. The horses built up speed as they approached the enemy line, led by the king. The conqueror. “It should have been you on the throne.”

He gripped her arm. “What strange spell do you weave now?”

“It is no spell.” She pulled away her arm. “Is your mother still alive? Your father?”

His posture had become rigid. “They both died years ago.”

No one remained who could reveal the truth. “The blood is in you, Matthew. You are an Escar.” Varqelle’s half brother, if she was right, born on the side of the sheets that left him with nothing, even though he was the firstborn son.

Emotions sped across his face: fury, dismay, shock. But not surprise. “You go too far.”

Too far? She thought no one had gone far enough for him. “You deserve so much more in life.”

“I am happy with my life, Mel.”

“I know.” Whatever drove Varqelle and Cobalt wasn’t in Matthew. She wished it were otherwise for Cobalt, but even having been raised by Matthew rather than by Varqelle, Cobalt reflected his father more.

She could see them in the fields below, Varqelle and Cobalt, together now, on horseback, no longer

fighting. The battle had begun to wane. It could have been so much worse; it hadn't spread beyond the Azure Fields, and Mel thought that less than five hundred men had died on either side. From the remnants of her mood spell, she felt Zerod's will fading. If he surrendered now, Cobalt would accept it. And if Cobalt accepted it, so would Varqelle. It would end. Today would see no massacre.

Then catastrophe hit.



20

### The Mortal Spell

For Cobalt, it was an apex in his life. He sat on his charger at his father's side, his blood fired, his head high, his body powerful, and he knew they had been destined for this. He had never fought so well as today. His men had isolated the Shazire forces into controllable pockets of resistance. Prince Zerod had to surrender; his army was no longer a coherent force. The Jaguar King would triumph. Even better, they would manage as Mel had asked, with a minimum of bloodshed and death.

The fighting had stopped around the hillock where Cobalt and Varqelle were now. They rode up it together, each looking out for the other while their men stayed on guard below. From this vantage, they could survey the remains of the battles.

A flurry of motion erupted to Cobalt's left. His men were fighting again—a mammoth of a warrior had engaged them. Tall and immensely broad-shouldered, the man wore Shazire armor and rode a mount as large as Cobalt's horse. He wielded a massive sword. He cut his way through the defenders with ease, and his horse lunged up the hillock. He was the largest man Cobalt had seen this day, possibly the most formidable he had ever faced.

As the Shazire man bore down on him, Cobalt lifted his shield. They were on a slope, a difficult place for the horses, but he was above and the other man below, which could give him an advantage. Then the giant was upon him, and their blades rang together. The man's mouth pulled back in a snarl under his helmet. Cobalt blocked his next thrust, but the blow vibrated along the sword through his arm to his shoulder. Such power!

For the first time, Cobalt faced someone of his own strength. He shouted a war cry as his blade sliced through the air. The other man deflected the blow, and the impact nearly unseated Cobalt. Filled with battle lust, he saw only the giant before him. Their horses slipped as they fought and churned the ground with their hooves as they struggled for purchase.

The Shazire man turned.

For one instant, the man left himself open, his left side only partially covered by his shield. Cobalt went for the vulnerable spot and slashed him across the ribs. It wasn't a fatal wound, but it would slow him.

But even as Cobalt struck, the Shazire man was lunging to the right—

At Varqelle.

With sudden, chilling clarity, Cobalt knew his mistake. He had never been the target. This warrior didn't want the general, he wanted the king. By leaving himself open, the man had distracted Cobalt for that one second he needed to go after Varqelle. His and the king's blades clanged as they came together. Caught unaware for that single instant, Varqelle countered a moment too late and didn't recover fast enough to stop the second blow from his attacker.

The Shazire warrior buried his sword in Varqelle's chest.

Everything around Cobalt stopped: the battle, the shouting, the setting sun, all of it. He saw only his father's shocked eyes through his helmet.

An agonized cry tore out of Cobalt's throat. Time snapped back and the Shazire warrior yanked his blade out of Varqelle's chest. Cobalt's vision turned red. His fury exploded as he bore down on the Shazire man, who in attacking Varqelle had left himself open to Cobalt. He had been a suicide lunge, for he must have known even he couldn't take on both Cobalt and Varqelle. The giant tried to counter Cobalt's thrust, but he had no chance. Cobalt drove his blade into the man's torso with so much force, it went through his body and lifted him off his mount. He swung his sword with the Shazire warrior still on it and literally threw the giant. The man fell through the air, ripped and bloodied, and hit the ground hard.

More Chamberlight men were moving in to defend the hillock. Cobalt jumped down from his charger and dropped to his knees near the fallen giant. The man was dead, his body broken. Cobalt scrambled to Varqelle, who lay on his back staring at the darkening sky.

"Don't die." He grabbed his father's hands. "You mustn't die!"

"Cobalt—?" Varqelle's eyes clouded.

"I'm here."

"You must...keep fighting."

Cobalt looked up as men gathered around them. "Get him to the physicians. Now!"

Several men knelt around the king, and another was guiding a cart up to them. Most of the fighting had moved elsewhere or stopped, but it made no difference whether a thousand warriors or only one had attacked the hillock. It had taken only one thrust to topple the king.

Cobalt had seen mortal wounds before—and he recognized his father's. He had no name for the pain within him. Grief, shock, rage: none were enough. He clenched his father's hand as the men lifted him into the cart. "I will avenge you."

Then they took Varqelle away.

Cobalt grabbed the reins of his horse from the man who had caught them. He swung back on the charger and spoke to the cavalry officers around him.

"Kill them." Cobalt ground out the words. "Every last Shazire man on this cursed field." Grimly he



added, “And when we’re done here, we will burn Alzire to the ground.”

“No.” Mel cried out as Varqelle fell from his horse.

Cobalt’s fury swept through her like fire. She couldn’t stop watching, though she wanted to hide her eyes. When he killed the giant who had struck down his father, a brutal echo of the blow vibrated through her fading spell. She groaned and felt as if a part of her had died as well.

It ended in seconds, and Cobalt jumped down from his horse. He knelt by his father, leaning over Varqelle’s body.

“He’s alive!” Matthew said.

Mel wasn’t certain. Although the vitality she had sensed in Varqelle was gone, she couldn’t tell much else with so many fragments of her spells swirling and fading. But nothing could mute Cobalt’s fury. His rage immobilized her. He mounted his horse again and his resolve shattered the night.

There would be no mercy.

“Saints, no.” Mel wanted to shout her protest. The overcast day was nearly dark now, but nothing would stop Cobalt. He would drive his men to fight by torchlight if he had to, but drive them he would, for Shazire had ripped away the father he had waited a lifetime to know, the man who had made him believe he mattered.

Matthew grabbed her arm. “We have to leave.”

“No!” She pulled away from him.

His voice snapped with authority. “You must go. This is going to get a lot worse. If anything happens to you, it will kill him.” He reached for her again—and Mel drew her sword.

She held the blade up between them. “I mean it, Matthew. I will not leave.”

“What are you going to do?” he demanded. “Go down there and stop them? It’s going to be a bloodbath, Mel. You’ve done what you can. You must leave.”

She gripped the hilt of her sword with both hands and held it upright before her body. The blade glinted in the fading daylight. She had worn out her high-level spells; she had to go to a lower level or she would kill herself and achieve nothing.

What was lowest? Red. Simplest? Light.

She pulled the ball out of her sling and clenched her sword again, this time with the ball pressed between her palm and the hilt. A red spell was so simple. Simple—and useless. How would light stop the carnage?

Mel made the spell anyway. Driven by the sphere, the power swept through her like fire. Red light ran up the blade, deepening until the metal seemed to burn. Matthew took a fast step backward and the horses of the sentries shied away.

Mel gripped the ball and focused. The light flared in brightness. She concentrated harder—and it leaped into the sky. Across the Azure Fields, heads turned toward her and the fighters paused. It was only light, nothing more, and it could do nothing to stop anyone, but it stretched in a column up to the darkening sky.

She had no armor. She could barely do more than maintain the spell. She was defenseless. If she went down on that field, it could be her death.

Mel took a ragged breath. She left Smoke with one of the sentries and started walking down the hill. She held the sword high in front of her body, the blade pointing up, and a pillar of red light stretched from it up to the sky. It surrounded her in a brilliant red glow and cast shadows from every rock, every tree, every person around her.

None of her three guards spoke. Incredibly, neither did they leave. Matthew walked beside her, far enough away that the light didn't envelop him. The two sentries rode behind them, bringing Smoke and Matthew's horse.

Mel continued down the hill.

By the time she reached the field, the fighting at the base of the slope had stopped. Men from both armies were watching her, standing with swords at their sides or bows in hand. The cavalymen sat on their horses. She saw them through the light, as if she burned without heat. The lull spread as more warriors turned to look. Mel kept going, terrified, walking through the middle of the battle with no protection other than red light.

Far across the field, a hillock jutted upward like the clawed hand of a stone giant. Vargelle had fallen there. Mel walked toward the knoll, and crossing that distance seemed to take forever. By the time she reached the mound, no one was moving on the Azure Fields. No one approached her. Matthew and the sentries stopped at the bottom of the hill, leaving her to go on alone. She never paused. She never looked around. She just climbed. And concentrated. As she ascended, her spell grew until it encompassed the entire hill. The blaze from her sword reached into the darkening sky as if it would pierce the clouds.

Finally she reached the top. She raised the blade above her head, holding it in one hand with her arm extended at its full length over her head. The radiant sword blazed across the land and Mel stood there, bathed in its fiery light.

Someone moved at the base of the hill. A tall man. He climbed up to her and stopped at her side. Of all the people on the fields, only he stepped close to the light.

Cobalt.

"No more," Mel said. She meant the words only for him, but her spell amplified them and they resonated across the Azure Fields. Her hair tumbled around her body, and tears streamed down her face.

"No more killing!" She shouted the words and her grief fed the spell. Her voice rolled like thunder across the fields, the armies, the thousands of warriors.

Cobalt regarded her with an expression unlike anything she had ever seen from him before, a satisfaction so intense, it burned as fiercely as her light. He spoke in a voice only she could hear.

“You are a goddess.”

“Let them surrender.” This time she kept her voice low enough that only he would hear.

He turned to the field. “Zerod!” Caught in her spell, his shout thundered and echoed many times before it died away.

Mel stood with her sword high, blazing. She felt as if she were on fire, though the light generated no heat. She had pushed herself too far, even with this simplest of spells. She had to rest. But she couldn’t, not yet.

Cobalt stood at her side, his feet planted wide, his body bathed in the light. Everyone else throughout the Azure Fields remained where they were, staring at them.

Movement came from the east. A group of warriors was riding across the fields. As they drew nearer, Mel recognized them as a Shazire honor guard.

Zerod rode in their center.

The Shazire ruler sat astride a magnificent stallion with a tasseled bridle and ornate saddle. He was a stocky man of middle age, with black hair and eyes, a hooked nose, and heavy eyebrows streaked with gray. He had married the daughter and only child of the previous ruler, and in Shazire that meant he would always have the title of prince, though he ruled here.

Zerod and his men halted at the bottom of the knoll. The ruddy light cast his face into sharp relief. Mel swung her sword down, the weapon streaming radiance, and drove the blade deep into the ground. The light flared as if it would consume her and Cobalt. She could see the two of them reflected in the metal shields of Zerod’s men, their images distorted, blurred and red. Cobalt towered behind her, fierce in the darkness, and she blazed, her hair wild around her body.

“Surrender,” she told Zerod. She was pleading with him, but it came out with the same resonance as before. “Surrender or they will massacre your army and raze Alzire to the ground.”

Without taking his gaze off her, Zerod dismounted from his stallion. His honor guard followed suit. He walked up the hill and his men came with him, resplendent in their bronzed armor. When Zerod was several paces from Cobalt, he stopped.

Then the prince of Shazire went down on one knee.

Zerod bent his head and set one arm across his raised knee. His men knelt, as well, in a semicircle around him. Zerod removed his belt with its sheathed sword and laid it on the ground, and his guards did the same with their weapons.

Cobalt spoke. “Rise.”

They all stood, quiet, somber. Zerod spoke in his Shazire dialect, which clipped consonants and drew out vowels, giving his voice a richness unlike the colder speech of the north. “The House of Zerod surrenders to the House of Escar.”

Cobalt spoke in a shadowed voice. “Escar accepts.”

The relief that hit Mel was so intense, it hurt. They would see no slaughter, no carnage, no sacking of the capital, neither tonight nor tomorrow. She let the light fade then, until the red glow covered only her body. She wanted to collapse, but she didn't dare, not now. She could do nothing less than stand next to her husband. Cobalt the Dark.

If Varqelle died, Cobalt would rule Shazire, Blueshire, and soon the Misted Cliffs as well, given his grandfather's advanced age. He would reign over the largest empire ever united in all the settled lands.

Cobalt rode Admiral without a saddle, and Mel sat in front of him. Admiral might not have as much speed as the charger Cobalt had taken into battle, but with his great strength, he easily carried his two riders. Mel sagged against Cobalt's chest, limp in his arms. Her red light had vanished, and they crossed the Azure Fields in darkness, Matthew riding on one side and Leo Tumbler on the other. People with torches moved on the fields, tending the injured or lifting them into carts so they could be taken to the physician's station. Some were picking up weapons or catching horses that had lost their riders. Others were trudging off the battlefield.

The torchlight seemed paltry to Cobalt after Mel's light. He would never, if he lived a century, forget that moment when she stood on the hill with her sword thrust in defiance at the sky, her body radiant in a column of flame. Except it had been light, not fire, no matter how dramatic it appeared. He had stood within it and felt only the barest hint of heat. Nothing would have stopped anyone from killing her. And Mel had known. She had walked into the middle of combat with no more than red light as her defense. His witch of a wife had pulled off a monumental bluff. He would never gamble with her at cards, but he would admire her bravery from now until forever.

None of that changed what had precipitated it all, however, neither his raging grief nor her desperate attempt to pull him back to sanity before he laid waste to Shazire.

His father.

His men led him to the medical station where they were bringing the wounded, between two rows of hills in a grove of trees. Admiral walked with care past the men on pallets. Those who could raise their arms saluted Cobalt. He nodded in return, subdued in their presence.

Mel braced her hands against his arms.

"What is it?" Cobalt asked.

She answered in a low voice. "I can help...later."

He thought of the scorched billiard ball, her burned hand, his ragged knuckles. She had healed them both. He found it hard to understand why he had ever feared her abilities as a mage. She was a miracle.

A question came to him, one that had the power to shake his world. "Can you heal my father?"

Silence.

"Mel?"

"I—I don't know." Softly she added, "I can help injuries heal, but I cannot mend what would not mend

on its own.”

“Please.” It was a word he rarely used.

“Cobalt—”

“I know you and he do not like one another.” Although he meant to be calm, his voice shook. “But he is my father.”

“I swear, Cobalt, I would do no less for him than anyone else.”

“Will you not try, then?”

“But if I fail?”

He bent his head over hers. “We all must fail sometimes.”

“I just—”

“Please,” he whispered.

Her voice broke. “I will try.”

Cobalt pressed his lips against the back of her head, more grateful than he knew how to say. He had seen how badly the Shazire man gored his father. He wanted to shout at Varqelle for refusing to stay out of the battle. His father, like his wife, had his own mind and nothing would dissuade him from his decisions. Now Varqelle lay here, in this place of moans and pain, dying.

Ahead, a tent stood hunched between two trees. As Admiral approached, an army physician stepped out of the entrance. Cobalt dismounted and put up his arms for Mel, though usually she frowned at him and got off his horse without help. It told him how tired she was tonight that she slid into his arms without protest and let him lower her to the ground.

Matthew came over and extended his hand for the reins. Grateful, Cobalt handed them to him. Friend. Mel had called Matthew his friend. He put his hand on Matthew’s shoulder and the horseman nodded, sympathy in his eyes.

Cobalt and Mel headed to the tent. She swayed, and her slow pace warned she wouldn’t be on her feet much longer. But when he offered his arm, she shook her head and continued on her own.

The physician moved aside so they could enter. Although Cobalt bent his head, it still scraped the rough cloth of the entrance. Braziers shaped like jaguars were set in corners of the tent, and their coals shed ruddy light. Varqelle lay on a pallet between two of them, just as he had once slept in a bed with posts carved in totems of the great animal. Jaguar. His namesake. In the ancient language spoken in Harsdown a thousand years ago, “escar” meant the great mythical cat that prowled the high mountains.

Cobalt knelt next to his father. Varqelle regarded him with black eyes so very much like those that Cobalt saw when he looked into a mirror. The bandages wrapped around Varqelle’s chest were soaked with blood.

“Father.” The one word felt as if it ripped Cobalt.

“Remember me,” Varqelle whispered.

Cobalt put his hand on his father’s arm. “You will be here to remind me.”

Varqelle exhaled, his breath strained, but he didn’t answer.

Mel went to the other side of the pallet and sat cross-legged by the king. With her tangled hair falling over her body and her haunted eyes, she resembled images Cobalt had seen of the saint of souls that shepherded the spirits of the deceased across the ocean of death.

Varqelle turned his head to his daughter-in-law. “They have told me what you did at the battle.”

“She can help to heal you,” Cobalt said.

Mel looked as if she tried to smile but her lips wouldn’t hold the curve. She took a catapult ball out of a sling on her belt and cradled it in her hands.

“Why...help me?” Varqelle asked her.

“You are my husband’s father.” Her voice caught. “He loves you.”

A strange expression came over Varqelle’s face. He rolled his head back to Cobalt. “Is it true?”

Cobalt set his hand over his father’s. “It is true.”

Varqelle squeezed his hand and closed his eyes. “I...am fortunate.”

Mel bent over the ball. A blue glow appeared around her hands and deepened as it surrounded her body. Then it enveloped Varqelle. This was nothing like the harmless red light she had created on the battlefield. Cobalt felt power swelling around her. It saturated the tent.

Mel looked across to him, her eyes filled with moisture. Then, ever so slightly, she shook her head.

No. Cobalt wanted to shout the word.

She bent her head again and the glow intensified. A tear dropped onto her ball.

“Father?” Cobalt asked.

Varqelle’s grip eased on Cobalt’s fingers. “The wound is mortal, son. But...the pain goes...”

Cobalt could barely speak. The words felt thick in his throat, full of the tears he couldn’t shed. “You will ride with me again.”

Varqelle looked at Mel. “I know of no other woman who would ride all night...to stand by her husband in battle. With a sword of fire.” He struggled with the words. “It was honorable.”

“Aye.” Cobalt could say no more. His eyes felt strange.

Varqelle squeezed Cobalt’s fingers. “Remember that...I love you.” Then his hand went limp, and the

blue glow faded from his body.

For the last time, Varqelle Escar's eyes closed.

The wave of grief that had been roiling in Cobalt surged up and swept over him in an unbearable flood. He made no sound. He wanted to shout to the skies until the clouds froze and shattered, but he couldn't move.

"Father," he rasped.

Mel was sitting with the ball in her lap. In a nightmare of slow motion, her body crumpled and she fell to the side. Cobalt jumped to his feet, but he couldn't reach her before she sprawled next to his father's body. In that killing moment he knew the truth. She had drained herself to stop him from crushing Shazire. She had nothing left to give—and he had insisted she help the man who had attacked her people eighteen years ago and would have killed her family. He truly was the monster of his reputation.

"Mel." Her name caught in his throat.

Cobalt lifted her body. He put his palm against her cheek and found it ice cold. He shook her arm but she didn't stir. Her head rolled against his chest. He bent his head to hers and felt no breath from her mouth against his cheek. He found no pulse in her wrist or neck. He knelt with her limp body in his arms, and he knew then that nothing would ever matter again, that this night, at this moment, the world had ended—for he had lost them both, his father and his wife.

The Midnight Prince threw back his head and shouted. The cry was huge and agonized, and it wrenched out of him. The anguish rose from his throat and cracked open the night as his heart tore apart with grief.



21

### The House of Zerod

Cobalt saw no one. He was dimly aware of leaving the tent and striding into the night, but he paid no heed to where he went. No one tried to stop him. He had no idea how he looked, but warriors who had fought on the Azure Fields without flinching backed out of his way now. He went blindly through the trees while inside he died a thousand times. He made no sound; he was screaming in silence.

They had come into his life, Mel and his father, and changed him, made him alive, made him believe he could love, that he was worth loving. Now they were gone and he knew the truth: Stonebreaker had always been right, he was nothing, worthless. He could topple a hundred countries and it would never be enough to prove his grandfather wrong. Perhaps he could have survived the death of his father, though he would have grieved forever, but without Mel he had nothing.

Sometime later he came to his senses enough to comprehend that he was crouched by a creek. Darkness surrounded him, and he could barely see the water running past his feet. He rubbed the heel of his hand over his cheek and it came away wet. Mel. Melody. She was a melody of light and love and laughter. He had extinguished that light.

“Forgive me,” he rasped.

The ruddy light of a torch cut through the darkness. Then Matthew spoke. “Cobalt?”

“I sent her home to her mother.” Cobalt choked out the words. “She came back. I told her to stay out of the battle. She said no. Saints, Matthew, I tied her to a damn pole and still she came back. Now I’ve killed her.”

Matthew knelt next to him. “You shouldn’t blame yourself.”

“Yes. I should.” The words cut like broken glass. “I don’t know how to be anything else but what I am. And that ended her life.”

“I gave her the catapult ball,” Matthew said. “Blame me if you must blame someone.”

“No. I would have asked her to heal him no matter what. I didn’t know spells could kill. I didn’t know. She feared I would hate her if she didn’t try.” Blinded by grief, he had wanted his miraculous sorceress to save his father, and because of that he had lost them both.

“Come.” Matthew spoke kindly, though he sounded as if he were breaking. “Come back to camp with me.”

“I must—must make arrangements.” Cobalt stood up with him. “Arrangements.”

“We will take care of them.”

Cobalt walked at Matthew’s side, unable to think, unable to feel, encased in numbness. It wouldn’t last; soon he would break open and have to face this anguish. His great dream was all he had left, but it had turned to ashes.

Eventually they came to the medical station. It felt unreal, a nightmare. Surely he would wake. But the nightmare continued. He found himself back at the tent. Inside, two bodies covered in shrouds were laid out between the jaguar braziers.

The physician was kneeling next to Varqelle with his head bowed. He looked up as Cobalt came in, and immediately rose to his feet. An unbearable sympathy showed in his eyes. Cobalt couldn’t speak to him. He had no more words. He had given what few he had to Matthew and only silence remained. This physician had saved lives today, not killed the people he loved. Cobalt the Great. Cobalt the Fool.

Matthew and the doctor spoke in low voices. Cobalt couldn’t hear, couldn’t listen. Then they left, giving him privacy. He knelt next to Mel’s body and pulled back the gauzy white cloth that covered her face.

His entire life, he had been outside the warmth. He had seen other children in loving, complete families, but he had known that could never happen to him. As a boy, he had once stood outside the window of a cottage that belonged to a groom from the palace stables. Cobalt had watched hungrily while the family inside laughed and talked. The father had hugged his wife and son with unrestrained affection. Cobalt had



run home that night, too torn apart even to cry. He had no father, only Stonebreaker. Had it not been for Dancer, he would have broken into a thousand pieces, inside his heart, where no one could see. All during his childhood he had wanted that scene in the cottage. As an adult, he had secretly dreamed of a loving wife, but he had never had any idea how to catch that elusive dream, and eventually he had stopped hoping.

Then somehow it had happened, not the way he had imagined, but with the same intensity that he lived the rest of his life. Varqelle would never have been like that gentle, affectionate groom, but he had approved of his son, admired him. Loved him. And Mel. Saints, Mel. She had been more than he could have dreamed, beyond his hopes. She had filled the holes in his life, those empty places he had lived with for so long, he hadn't even realized they were there—until she took them away.

And he had killed her.

"I'm sorry." The words choked out of him. "I am so very, very sorry." He closed his eyes and tears ran down his face.

A finger touched his cheek. "Don't cry, love."

Cobalt froze. He opened his eyes—and found his wife looking at him.

"Mel?" he whispered.

"I tried to help him." Her voice was so low he could barely hear. "I tried. I couldn't do it." Circles of exhaustion darkened her eyes. But they were alert. Alive.

The world quaked under Cobalt. Time seemed to stop. He drew her into his arms and cradled her against his chest. He said her name over and over and thought he would sit here forever, for he feared if he moved, this delusion would dissolve and he would be left with only his grief and her lifeless body.

Then she put her arms around his neck and leaned her head against his, holding him. "It will be all right," she murmured.

Cobalt cried then, tears running down his face as he rocked her back and forth, her body so fragile in his arms.

"Don't die." His voice shook. "Don't leave me, Mel."

"I won't."

"I thought—we all thought—you didn't breathe, you had no pulse—" He couldn't finish.

"I went into a mage trance. To heal...like that night in the Sphere Tower."

"Sphere Tower?" He couldn't take in her words.

"That night King Stonebreaker found me...on the floor..."

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "For everything."

"Don't worry, love." She held on to him and didn't try to talk anymore.

Cobalt didn't know how long he sat with her. Someone spoke to him and someone else tried to ease Mel out of his arms, but he refused to let her go.

Gradually he became more aware. The doctor was kneeling next to him. As Cobalt's gaze focused, the man said, "Shall I tend your wife, Your Majesty?"

Majesty? It was the wrong title. He shifted Mel so that she was curled against him, her cheek pressed against his chest, his legs extended on either side of her. He bent his head over hers and his hair fell forward, mingling with hers, black on corn silk. She stirred but didn't open her eyes.

"She's alive," Cobalt said.

"Did you bring her back?" The physician sounded subdued. Awed, even.

"No." The last thing Cobalt wanted was for people to think he could do such deeds. "Not me. She was under a mage spell."

"Ah." He sounded bewildered.

Cobalt lifted his head. "My father?" Even now, he hoped.

The doctor shook his head. "He is gone."

"You are sure?"

"Yes. It is not like with your wife. He shows all the signs of his passing." He let out a quiet breath. "I am terribly sorry."

Cobalt's voice caught. "We must see to his funeral pyre."

"I will begin the arrangements immediately."

"Not immediately." Cobalt held Mel against him. "I need to sit here. With them. For a while."

"I understand."

"Can you bring ale for my wife?" He didn't know what mages needed to help them recover, but ale often made him feel better.

The doctor smiled kindly and rose to his feet. "I will fetch some."

Cobalt nodded, grateful, and held Mel. When he was alone, he sat in the dimly lit tent and mourned for his father while he thanked every saint he had heard of for his miraculous wife.

They spread Varqelle's ashes across the hills north of the Azure Fields, in green countryside that had escaped the weight of the armies. Skybells nodded in the wild grasses, and patchy shadows scuttled across the land from clouds. The ashes drifted on the wind and across a hill below the ridge where Cobalt stood with Mel and Matthew. Cobalt had thought he might place them in an urn and carry it with

him, but this was better, giving his father the freedom of the land he had made his own before he died, though he lived only moments to know his victory.

“Rest well,” Cobalt murmured.

He wanted to stay there forever, high on a ridge under the clouds. But it wasn't possible. Much remained to do. He had taken this country and now he had to prove to Mel that he could be a good leader instead of a tyrant.

Cobalt turned to her. “How are you?”

“Well,” she said softly.

She didn't look well. Her face was gaunt and she had confined her hair in a braid that fell to her waist. Her tunic and leggings were black to honor his father, an honor she freely gave, though Cobalt would never have asked for it after all that had happened. He didn't deserve this wife of his, but for some incredible reason he had a second chance with her.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. Her knuckles felt cold when he pressed his lips against them. Since last night, when he had thought she had died, he kept wanting to touch her, to assure himself she really was alive.

“Ride with me,” he said.

“All right.” She squeezed his hand. Then she let go and walked slowly back to where Admiral stood among the trees.

Matthew spoke at Cobalt's side. “She is strong.”

Cobalt glanced at him. Matthew sounded strange today. Perhaps it was grief for Varqelle, but it confused Cobalt, for Matthew had avoided the king and knew him little.

“What troubles you?” Cobalt asked.

“I'm just getting old.” Matthew rubbed his eyes. “More aware of my own mortality.”

Cobalt laid a hand on his shoulder. “You must not think that way. You're a fine, strong man. You will outlive me.”

Matthew set his palm over Cobalt's hand. “I hope not.”

Cobalt lowered his hand and smiled. “We should catch up with my wife before she rides away on Admiral. I will return to camp to find she has taken over my army.”

Matthew tried to return his smile, but it didn't reach the sadness in his eyes. “She just might.”

“Well.” Cobalt stood awkwardly, feeling as if he should say more, but he didn't know what.

They crossed the meadow to the trees. Mel had somehow already mounted, though Admiral stood taller than most horses and usually tolerated no one except Cobalt to touch him when he was without a rider. Cobalt saw the tree stump Mel must have used, so he used it, too, to boost himself up behind her.

Matthew swung onto his chestnut horse. Then they rode through the trees, following a trail that wound down a mild slope on the other side of the ridge.

Cobalt's mounted honor guard was waiting at the base of the hill, where they had kept people from interrupting the memorial. They maneuvered their horses into a hexagon around him and Matthew, and they all rode back to the camp. He wondered at the origins of that formation. Why a hexagon? Mel said it was an influence from Aronsdale, but that didn't tell him much, it just made him wonder about Aronsdale. Mages and shapes. He had to learn more about them if he was to understand his wife. But not now. He needed time. With his father's death, Cobalt was not only in charge of the army, he also ruled Shazire and Blueshire. He had to establish the Escar presence here.

Hundreds of tents were scattered throughout meadows north of the Azure Fields. Last night most of the remaining sixteen hundred men in the Shazire army had sworn allegiance to the House of Escar. Of the four hundred spearmen from Jazid, over three hundred had survived. Cobalt wasn't certain what to do with them. They had fought for Shazire, but they owed allegiance to Jazid, whose sultan hadn't surrendered to anyone.

With or without its spearmen, Jazid had a big army, three thousand strong. Cobalt's now numbered nearly seven thousand, but he knew the history of Jazid and Taka Mal too well to harbor any illusions. They had long been allies, and Taka Mal claimed an army of at least three thousand. If its queen united with the sultan of Jazid, together they would wield a formidable force.

Cobalt shifted Mel in his arms as they rode. Her presence calmed his agitation and helped him think. If he sent back the spearmen, it was a gesture of conciliation. Was that what he wanted? He and Varqelle had intended to ride on Jazid and Taka Mal, but he was no longer certain. Grief weighed on him too much to make such a decision.

They were passing the first campfire of the camp. A group of men and women, support personnel for the army, were seated on logs around it eating. They glanced up idly, then quickly rose to their feet when they saw the riders. Beyond them, a cluster of soldiers turned. When they saw Cobalt and his retinue, they too came to attention. Cobalt nodded to them and rode on—and everyone they passed also stood to face him. The soldiers saluted him. He wasn't certain if they were honoring Varqelle, Mel, or himself, but their tribute spread like a wave through the camp.

Mel spoke in a low voice. "I've never seen anything like this."

"Nor I," Cobalt said.

"At least they don't hate us."

"Apparently not."

"Cobalt?"

Whenever she said his name that way, he worried. "Yes?"

"What will you do with Prince Zerod?"

"What do you think I should do?"

"Send him to Jazid with the spearmen."

“It will make me look weak.”

“It will make you look compassionate.”

She was a dreamer. “I am not compassionate.”

Mel leaned back against him. “You are wrong.”

He frowned. “If I send him there, he will petition the sultan of Jazid for an army to defeat mine.” As Varqelle had asked Stonebreaker.

“How is that different from what would happen anyway?”

Cobalt recalled when he had asked Varqelle exactly the same question. “It changes Jazid’s stance from defense to offense.”

“Why does it matter?” she asked. “Either way you are going to invade them, aren’t you?”

Cobalt squinted at the top of her head. “You ask too many questions.”

She went very still in his arms. “Does that mean you mightnot move against them?”

He didn’t have an answer for her.

“If you execute Zerod,” she said, “you will earn the enmity of the Shazire men. He is much admired by them.”

“I already have their enmity.”

She answered softly. “Look, Cobalt. Look around. They are all standing. They don’t sit again until you’ve passed. Even the men from Shazire. This is not enmity.”

“They honor you. And Varqelle.”

“Then why are they looking at you? And saluting you?”

It was true. He didn’t know why they were doing it, but he wished Stonebreaker could see such respect given to the grandson he claimed was worthless. He wanted to lean his forehead on the top of her head, but he couldn’t with so many people watching.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” he said. “I need time.”

“Come home with me.”

He couldn’t help but smile. “I cannot.”

“Why?”

He answered wryly. “Mel, perhaps you haven’t noticed, but I have acquired a kingdom.” It was, he realized, why the doctor had called him “Majesty.” Then he added, “And you are my queen.”

She said nothing for a while, absorbing that. After they had ridden beyond all the campfires, Cobalt looked back, but they were far enough away now that much of the camp blurred. He took out his spectacles and settled them on his nose. Then he could see that his people had resumed their activities, breaking their fast, tending weapons and horses, preparing to ride.

“Cobalt?” Mel asked.

There it was, his name again. Turning forward, he spoke warily. “Yes?”

“Now that you have a kingdom, what will you do with it?”

“Check the tax structure first, I would guess.”

“For saints’ sake,” she said. “What about the people?”

“What about them?”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“Nothing.” He knew she wouldn’t be satisfied with that answer, and would interrogate him until he put together many sentences. So he added, “The only real change is that they will pay their taxes to me rather than Zerod or Lightstone. Their armies will combine with mine. I will replace Zerod’s top people with my people, both in the government and the military. But most people won’t notice much change.”

. ‘Not much change’ doesn’t equal. ‘no rebellion.’”

He rubbed his hands along her arms. “We will take things as they come. Perhaps the people will rebel. I don’t know. But they were once part of the Misted Cliffs. Their history is part of me. I know this country in a way Zerod never could. That will make a difference.”

Some of her stiffness eased. “I hope so.”

He thought back to the scrolls he had pored over in the libraries at the Castle of Clouds and the Diamond Palace. He had never liked most of the studies his mother insisted he do, but history was the exception. He had inherited her passion for it. “The reign of the House of Zerod stagnated. They haven’t badly misused the people or the land, but they haven’t done a lot to help, either. I see much that could be improved.”

“Irrigation,” Mel said.

“Yes! You know this country?”

“To some extent.” After a moment, she said, “Actually, rather well.”

“Good.” She would be a valuable adviser. He waited, but she asked no more. Relieved, he lapsed into silence.

After a while, she said, “And Zerod?”

Saints! He did not know what he was going to do with Zerod. “You ask too many questions.”

She sighed, but she let it go.

They soon reached the tents where he had located his headquarters. He dismounted, then reached up for Mel, worried for her health. Although she let him catch her as she slid down, but she stepped away and stood on her own as soon as she was on the ground. Her face was somber when she looked up at him, but then she suddenly broke into a smile.

Cobalt blinked. “What?”

She reached up and touched his eye—except his blasted spectacles stopped her finger.

“So different,” she murmured.

Mortified, Cobalt quickly removed the glasses and stowed them in his hidden pocket. He had crushed more than one pair that way, forgetting he had put them there.

“It is no shame to wear them,” Mel said.

“I don’t really need them,” he said gruffly. He didn’t want her to think his strength less because of them.

Her smile shifted into something gentler. “To need help isn’t a weakness.” She put her palm against his chest. “The part of you that isn’t a fighter is no less valuable than the warlord.”

Cobalt took her hand and held it against his chest. He didn’t know how to say thank you, beyond just the words, which by themselves didn’t mean enough to express what she made him feel. And he feared to sound foolish. He squeezed her hand and her smile returned, so sweet he almost broke inside.

Matthew came up to them, leading his chestnut horse. “I can look after Admiral while you’re inside.”

Cobalt handed him the reins. “My thanks.” It was so much easier to say those words to Matthew. He turned awkwardly back to Mel, uncertain what she would think of him, but she didn’t seem put off by anything, neither his taciturn nature nor having seen him in spectacles. She continued to watch him with those luminous eyes of hers. It rattled him as much as it had the first time he met her, but he would gladly spend a lifetime perturbed in such a manner.

“Ready?” he asked her.

She bit her lip, but then she nodded. They entered the tent, Cobalt ducking his head to fit through the opening. As he straightened, the people waiting inside rose with a clink of armor and mail, and the scrape of chairs on the heavy rugs that covered the floor. Cobalt supposed he could have come in with more flourish, preceded by his honor guard. But he had never liked pomp. He preferred things simple.

Colonel Tumbler and several of Cobalt’s other top officers were standing around a square table, impressive in their white over-tunics emblazoned with the Chamberlight sphere, their mail showing at the sleeves and neck. Each wore blue trousers tucked into boots and a finely tooled sword belt inlaid with sapphires, for they served the Sapphire Throne. Cobalt wore a similar outfit when he rode as a Chamberlight prince. Today, however, he had chosen black. All black, from his boots to his trousers to his tunic to his cape. For the House of Escar. For his father.

One other man was at the table: Zerod. Gone were his plumed helmet and bronzed armor. No sword

hung at his side. His clothes were clean and well made, a russet shirt and darker trousers given to him by one of Cobalt's men, but it was the garb of a gentleman, not royalty.

Zerod inclined his head stiffly to Cobalt. His face showed no expression. If he was afraid, he hid it well behind his carefully composed features.

Cobalt went to the table with Mel at his side. They had only left one chair, for him, but Tumbler immediately brought another for Mel. No one dared question her presence. Zerod stood, his palms on the tabletop, his fingers tensed into claws, a man facing the specter of his execution.

Cobalt spoke to Zerod without preamble. "I have three hundred and forty-two spearmen from Jazid who served in your army. I cannot send them back to Jazid."

The emir waited.

"My men took Alzire this morning," Cobalt added.

Zerod went rigid, his strained muscles pulling his shirt. "And the palace?"

Cobalt knew what the emir was asking. "Your wife and son are in our custody. They have not been harmed."

Zerod's grip on the table eased but his shoulders remained tensed. "What will you do with them?"

A good question. Varqelle had planned to execute the entire family. Cobalt was painfully aware of Mel standing at his side.

"King Jarid let my father live," Cobalt said. "My mother and I were in the Misted Cliffs, so we also survived." Quietly he said, "You see the result."

"Let them go," Zerod said, his voice urgent, "and I will have them swear never to move against you."

Cobalt exhaled. "I know only too well how much—or how little—such a vow means to a son robbed of his father."

"I beg you," Zerod spoke with simple eloquence. "Let them live. Take my life. But not theirs."

Cobalt could feel Mel at his side. He remembered her words: You live on the edge between your own darkness and light. What will drive you as you sweep across these lands? Will you become a tyrant?

Cobalt spoke slowly. "I set you a task, Zerod of Shazire."

"A task?" Zerod asked, wary.

"Deliver this message to the sultan of Jazid," Cobalt said. "His spearmen are prisoners of war. They have two choices: go to my dungeons or swear allegiance to my army."

"I understand," Zerod said. Something flickered in his gaze, an emotion that went by almost too fast to read. Hope? Until now, Cobalt had given him no reason to believe the House of Escar wouldn't wipe out the House of Zerod.



By using Zerod as his messenger, Cobalt also hoped to send Jazid an unspoken message: the Midnight Prince had stripped the potentate of his title. Cobalt the Dark had such great power, he feared no one, not even a sovereign he had deposed. Cobalt did actually fear Zerod, but a plan was forming in his mind.

Letting Zerod live and travel freely implied Cobalt offered conciliation to Jazid, less than if he returned the spearmen but enough to suggest he might wish neutral relations rather than conquest. Cobalt no longer felt certain what he intended. Within one generation, his House would rule the Misted Cliffs, Harsdown, Blueshire, and Shazire, two-thirds of the settled lands, an empire larger than any single realm in known history. Jazid and Taka Mal had tried to achieve a similar goal two-hundred and six years ago, when they had attacked the Misted Cliffs, but they had failed. Now some of the damage of that conflict had been set right for the Misted Cliffs. It wasn't the empire Cobalt and Varqelle had envisioned—but perhaps it was enough. He needed time to think and to recover from his losses.

He spoke to Zerod. "You will also give him a document that you and I have signed together. In it, you will swear to leave Jazid after you deliver your message and never seek their help in bringing an army against me."

Zerod's expression became guarded. "Very well."

Cobalt didn't believe him for one moment. Had he been in Zerod's position, he would have said whatever was necessary to ensure the survival of his family and himself.

"To make certain that you abide by this vow," Cobalt added, "your wife and son will remain here as hostages, under guard at the palace." That had been Jarid Dawnfield's mistake; he had left the son free and the father in prison. Cobalt wondered if his father would have come for him if the reverse had been true. Had it been Stonebreaker, he didn't think so. But Varqelle? Yes, he would have, even if it took him years to raise an army.

Zerod spoke carefully. "I understand."

Cobalt could have stopped there, but he surprised himself. "If you abide by this agreement," he continued, "then in two years you may go into exile with your wife and son." By that time, his business with Jazid and Taka Mal would be done. Either they would have signed a treaty or he would have conquered them. He supposed it was also possible they might depose and execute him, but that wasn't an alternative he chose to entertain.

Zerod's shoulders visibly lowered. "Will you put that in writing about my family?" he asked. "Also your guarantee to grant me free passage to Jazid?"

Cobalt shifted his weight. "If I do that, it is a promise I will not attack Jazid while you take my message to them."

Zerod raised an eyebrow. "You intend otherwise?"

Cobalt frowned. The Shazire prince wanted him to sign a promise that, although temporary, could have long-term consequences. It amounted to the offer of a treaty he wasn't certain he wanted to make. He had little idea what the next years would bring.

He glanced at Mel. She met his gaze, and he knew what she would say: Do this, and he will be more likely not to seek an army against you. No guarantees existed, but Zerod was reputed to be a man of honor. Cobalt wished to be one as well.

He considered the emir. "I will sign a statement to this end, effective for one year, with the condition that I will abide by it only as long as Jazid makes no move against my lands. After one year, the agreement will have to be renegotiated, with no guarantee of continuance except in the pledge that you may rejoin your family in two years."

Zerod inclined his head. "I will carry this message to Jazid."

They wrote and signed documents that afternoon. Cobalt assigned Zerod an honor guard to accompany him to Jazid. When the honor guard returned to Shazire, they would escort back any families of the spearmen who chose to come here.

For now, Jazid and Taka Mal were safe.



22

### The King's Brother

Part of Harsdown's southern border lay along the northwestern border of Shazire, with Blueshire on the easternmost edge. Mel knew the moment their party passed from Shazire into Harsdown. Nothing delineated the border, but these lands were so familiar, she could draw that ephemeral line without a compass or guide. She and Cobalt were traveling with one hundred men from his army. In gentler times, she would have sung with delight, but today her happiness was muted. To the east lay the fields, stripped and trampled, where the Chamberlight and Dawnfield armies had passed only a few weeks ago. The countryside was already recovering, though. Spring had taken over the land and the fragrance of sweet-grasses filled the air.

They could visit her home only for a short time. The process of setting up a new government in Shazire might have little effect on everyday life there, but it certainly affected Cobalt. Patient work and constant diplomacy to avoid flare-ups wasn't part of his personality; he wanted to be out traveling, training, pitting himself against the world. Administration and negotiation wearied him until he paced the halls of the Alzire Palace like a caged wildcat.

So they had come to Harsdown to get Dancer.

Mel didn't wait until the horses went to the stables. As soon as the farmhouse came into view, she jumped off Smoke and thrust the reins at Cobalt, who was still on Admiral. Then she ran toward the front porch.

With one hundred men, their arrival was hardly unannounced. The company had spread itself out over

the land and would set up their camp under the wary eye of the Dawnfield forces stationed here. Chime burst out of the front door before Mel even reached the porch. Her mother ran down the steps, and Mel barreled into her. They hugged hard, crying and laughing, and Mel felt as if she was taking a full breath of air for the first time in months.

A hand clapped Mel on the shoulder, and she turned to see her father. She went into his arms and hugged him, too, forgetting for this moment everything else but these two people she had so deeply missed.

After a while, they separated. Mel smiled and wiped her eyes. "It's good to see you."

"Aye," her mother said, her face wet, too.

Muller's voice caught. "Welcome home."

"I'm so glad to be here." Mel looked back at the gardens and the orchards beyond. She had ridden through them with Cobalt and their honor guard, and they were all waiting about fifty paces back, dismounted, Cobalt holding the reins for Admiral and Smoke. Matthew stood at his side.

Does no one else see it? Mel wondered. Matthew had the same cheekbones and nose as Cobalt. Their features weren't identical; Matthew had a gentler cast to his face and gray eyes. He also dressed in rougher clothes. But if one looked past the external signs of social class, his Escar heritage was obvious.

Cobalt was watching her with his shuttered expression, but she recognized the pain behind his control. Seeing her with her parents, he was remembering his father.

"Cobalt!" The woman's voice came from behind them.

Mel turned to see Dancer walking across the porch, her spectacles in one hand. As she descended the stairs, she nodded to Mel and her parents, then passed them, her attention on Cobalt. He handed the reins to Matthew and went to his mother. Their reunion was quiet. Restrained. Dancer lifted her arms as if to hug him, but she held back. Cobalt looked down at her with a gentleness he so rarely showed anyone. He hesitated—and then stiffly pulled her into a hug. For the first time since Mel had known them, they embraced.

They released each other after only a moment and stood awkwardly. Cobalt said, "You look well."

She seemed to light up from within at the sight of him. "That is because you are here." Her smile faded. "But Cobalt, you look tired. You must make certain to sleep enough. And are you eating enough? It is important that you do."

He laughed, evoking flustered looks from his guards, who had probably never heard him make such a sound. "Ah, Mother, I am glad to see you."

She patted his arm. Then he and Dancer came over to Mel and her parents. While the rest of their honor guard led the horses back to the stables, Mel took her husband into her home for the first time since their marriage.

Mel's dearest friend Shim joined them for the evening meal. It seemed ages since Shim had stood up for

Mel at the wedding, though it had only been months. It gratified Mel that Shim still considered their friendship strong despite all the changes.

It wasn't until after supper was eaten and drinks shared in the spacious parlor that their guests departed and the household settled down for the evening. While Muller retired to his den to talk with his son-in-law, Mel spent some time with Fog. Then she wandered through the house alone and reacquainted herself with her home.

She found Dancer in the library.

The queen was standing by a shelf, reading a scroll about the matrilineal structure of Aronsdale farming households. She looked up as Mel came over to her. "This is astonishing! I had no idea." She showed Mel the scroll. "I've never had a chance to read so much about Aronsdale." Belatedly, she seemed to realize what she had done. Her face reddened and she lowered the scroll. "Good evening, Melody."

If ever Mel had felt her name didn't fit, it had been since she married Cobalt. It was good to see Dancer so animated, though. "Have you enjoyed the library here?"

"It is a fine collection," Dancer said with formality. Then her voice relaxed. "Your parents have so many books I've never seen."

"I spent many hours here as a child." Mel grimaced with the memory. "Always I had some studies or other I had to do."

"Learning is important." It sounded like Dancer was no stranger to admonishing a reluctant child to study.

"My parents said that, too."

"They are kind." Dancer paused. "They have treated me better than I expected."

It didn't surprise Mel. She suspected almost anything would be better than what Dancer had learned to expect. "I had hoped you would like them."

"Why?" Dancer seemed genuinely perplexed.

"They are your family now, too."

The queen hesitated. "They have invited me to stay as the court historian."

Mel thought it was a good idea, if Dancer would consider it. "It isn't a royal court like you're used to." She indicated the sunbask room around them. "No castle or palace. Just this farmhouse. But it is a good place to live."

"I love it here," Dancer murmured.

"I, too." The irony didn't escape her, that Dancer Escar of all people could come to live here, but Mel could never come home again, not to stay. Her fate was too intertwined with Cobalt.

Dancer returned the scroll to the shelf. She stood with one hand against its surface, her gaze averted. "And my husband?"

Mel answered in a subdued voice. "I'm sorry about his death." As much as she had disliked Varqelle, she did regret his passing, though mainly for what it had done to Cobalt.

"Ah, well." Dancer turned to her. "He and I have barely spoken for over thirty years."

"He died with his sword in his hand."

"It is what he would have wanted."

"Dancer?"

"Yes?"

"I wondered about Matthew—" Mel wasn't sure what to ask. Is he Cobalt's uncle? She didn't have the right to pry. Dancer might not know, anyway.

"Why do you ask about him?" Dancer asked.

"I wondered if you would manage all right without him here. He has served your family for a long time."

Dancer walked over to a table where a yellow vase was filled with rosy box-blossoms. A delicate glass sphere stood on a stand next to it. She ran her finger over the vase. "Matthew has asked Cobalt if he may remain here, too, if I stay."

"Do you think you will?"

Dancer looked up. "If Cobalt allows Matthew, then yes, I will stay."

It gladdened Mel to hear. "Does Matthew know?"

"I have told him so."

Mel wondered just how close Dancer and Matthew had become over the decades. "He is a good man."

Dancer's expression softened. "Yes."

So. Matthew had been Dancer's closest friend at the Castle of Clouds. Did they wish it to be more? Dancer could wed again after a suitable time of mourning. In the Misted Cliffs, a queen couldn't marry the man in charge of her stables, but here it might be different.

Mel smiled. "He is also a handsome man."

Dancer's mouth curved upward as she touched the box-blossoms. "That he is."

Mel spoke carefully. "He resembles King Varqelle a bit."

"Do you believe so?" Dancer's face took on its closed expression. "I don't think so. He has a much kinder face."

Mel thought of Matthew caring for Dancer throughout the years, hiding Cobalt from Stonebreaker's

rages, smuggling the boy dinner when his grandfather locked him in his room without food, always there, always helping. "Yes. He does."

Dancer sighed. "He and I are of an age, you know. A couple of old folks."

"Not so old," Mel said.

Dancer turned to her. "You have said nothing about the difference in our stations."

"There is nothing to say." Mel lifted her hand to indicate the library, but she meant all of her home. "This place is enchanted. Anything can happen."

Incredibly, Dancer laughed, a lovely sparkle of sound, a hint of how the queen might have glowed had her life been kinder. "You almost make me believe that."

Mel felt her own face gentle. "I am glad."

Crickets were singing in the night, and the music of a fiddle trickled out an open window of the house. Mel strolled through the orchard and tried to imprint it on her mind so her memories of this place would remain vivid.

She concentrated on the glass sphere she had brought with her from the library. Dim orange light filled it and then faded. It would be a while before she could perform any significant spell, especially with high-level colors, but she was recovering faster this time than the last. She hoped that eventually she could use her powers without knocking herself out in the process.

"It is a beautiful night, Your Majesty," a man said.

Startled by the title, Mel looked up with a jerk and saw a figure under an apple tree a short distance away. "My greetings, Matthew."

"May I walk with you?" he asked.

"Yes. Certainly."

They strolled together under the trees. After a moment, she said, "Dancer told me the two of you might stay here."

"Cobalt has given permission."

"I'm glad."

Matthew paused. "Mel—"

"Yes?"

He had an odd expression, one of sorrow and something else harder to read. Regret? "Cobalt treasures the memory of his father. And he values his heritage, both in the House of Escar and the House of Chamberlight."

“It means the stars to him,” Mel said.

“I would have it stay that way.”

Mel knew what he feared, that the more time Cobalt spent with her family, the more likely he was to hear ill spoken of his father. But they would never dishonor Varqelle’s name to Cobalt.

“My family respects the memory of the deceased.”

Matthew indicated a lawn seat under the trees, one of several set out in the orchard. He brushed leaves off the bench and they sat down together. Enough moonlight sifted through the trees for her to see his pensive expression.

“I would like to tell you a story,” he said.

“Please do.”

“You must promise to repeat it to no one.” He spoke firmly. “Especially Cobalt.”

“If my silence would harm him, I cannot promise it.”

“Will you trust me if I tell you harm will come to no one as long as you never speak of it?”

Mel thought of all she knew about this man. He had given her many reasons to trust him. “Yes. I promise my silence.”

He sat back in the lawn seat. Then he began. “Thirty-five years ago a beautiful girl married a king. Her husband mistreated her, but she knew of no other life, for she had lived with even worse in her home. She was like an injured dove.” He stared into the trees ahead of them. “Another man fell in love with her. He worked with the horses.” His voice softened. “He wanted to take away her pain and show her that she didn’t have to live without love. And incredibly, for one night in the loft of his stable, they shared that love.”

“Ah, no, Matthew,” Mel murmured.

“It was only one night.” He looked at her. “Nine months later she gave birth to a son.”

She stared at him. “A son?”

“Everyone believed the child was premature. It could be true.”

“Matthew—”

He put up his hand. “The son looked like the king. Walked like him. Spoke like him. Paced the keep with the same restless spirit that never found peace. Like the king.”

She spoke quietly. “Or the king’s half brother.”

“His bastard half brother.” His gaze never wavered. “As the king’s only child, and the only male heir to his mother’s father as well, the boy was heir of two kingdoms.”

Heir to two kingdoms—or dead. Mel knew the miserable laws; she had read thoroughly the history of this country. “In Harsdown, the sentence for a queen’s adultery is execution for both her and her lover.”

“And their child.”

Saints above. “And the king suspected? So the queen fled?”

“Never. The king believed the boy was his.” He spoke with difficulty. “And that may be true.”

Mel had seen Matthew’s kindness reflected in Cobalt, but never had she seen such in Varqelle. It might be because Matthew raised Cobalt, but now she wondered. “If the king didn’t suspect, why did his wife leave him?”

Matthew put one elbow up on the back of the seat and regarded her. “The king’s mistress knew. She spied on her rival.”

No wonder Dancer had been so unhappy. “The queen knew about the mistress?”

Matthew snorted. “Everyone knew. It was no secret.”

“And the mistress threatened to reveal the truth if the queen didn’t leave?”

“Yes.”

It made an ugly sort of sense. Dancer’s adultery had given her husband’s lover the ultimate weapon. No wonder Dancer was bitter. Varqelle suffered no consequences for openly keeping a mistress, yet he could have killed Dancer, Matthew, and Cobalt with impunity for the one night Dancer and Matthew spent together. Nor did Mel doubt that Varqelle would have done it.

“Is the mistress still alive?” Mel asked.

“She died years ago.”

Mel thought of Stonebreaker. “Couldn’t the queen go to someone else besides her father?”

Matthew’s hand clenched his knee, gripping the cloth of his trousers. “Her father wouldn’t allow it. Finally he had everything he wanted, a male heir and a weapon to control his daughter—her fear of her husband. He gave her a choice. Either she stay with him or his army would return her to Harsdown.”

Mel felt ill. It fit with what she had seen of the Chamberlight sovereign. “Did he suspect about her baby?”

“No one did. The child’s resemblance to the king was unmistakable.”

“Saints, Matthew. It is a terrible story.”

“Ah, well.” His face lost its harsh cast. “The ending is not so bad, at least for Dancer.” After a pause, he said, “And who knows. Cobalt could have been premature. I might not be his father.”

Mel laid her hand on his forearm. “In every way that matters, you were a father to him. You taught him,



guided him, protected him.” She couldn’t imagine what Cobalt would have become without Dancer and Matthew. The tyrant existed within her husband, but his light had won over his darkness.

“Someday,” Matthew said, “he must face Stonebreaker. They are not done, those two.”

“He isn’t ready yet.” For all that the rest of the world saw Cobalt as invincible, Mel knew otherwise. “But someday.”

“You are good for him.” Matthew’s face relaxed into a smile. “I am glad you came to us.”

“I, too,” she said, and meant it.

Mel was walking along a hallway when her father came out of his study. He stopped and waited, his face lit by a spherical oil lamp in a wall sconce. It comforted her to see him so perfectly arrayed, his buff trousers, polished knee-boots, gold brocaded vest, and snowy white shirt. His hair was gold and thick, with streaks of gray. He had the same slender build and long-legged grace she recalled from her earliest memories. As a small girl, she had liked to run around the yard while he and Chime pretended they couldn’t catch her. It had delighted Mel that she could outrun them both even with her stubby toddler legs.

“Evening, Papa,” she said.

His smile crinkled the lines around his eyes. “It is good to see you prowling about in the halls again.”

“I am not prowling,” she said, indignant.

“Ah, Mel.” He chuckled. “We’ve missed you.”

She hesitated. “So much has changed. I wasn’t certain I would be welcome in Harsdown.”

“You are always welcome here.” He shifted his weight. “I cannot say that all of our people feel such about your husband.”

She didn’t doubt it. “I wish they knew him better.”

“He and I talked for quite some time this evening.”

“What do you think of him?”

Her father winced. “He’s rather alarming.”

She smiled wryly. “That he is.”

“King Lightstone has made his home in Aronsdale. A refuge. If you ever need to come here—” He let the sentence hang.

“Thank you, Papa. But I’ll be all right.”

“Will you?”

She wondered at his mood. “What is wrong?”

“I have heard what people call you.”

“Call me?”

He regarded her steadily. “They are saying you are the Dawn Star Empress.”

“What!” She didn’t know whether to laugh or be appalled. “I haven’t heard that.”

“You will, I’m sure.” He studied her face. “Is that what you want, Mel, to have the world bow to you?”

“Saints, no.” Softly she said, “No.”

“Do you think this peace will last?”

She knew what he was really asking her. Would Cobalt be satisfied with what he had gained? She considered her words carefully. “He is driven. Nothing will change that. But it may be enough. And I do genuinely believe it is in him to be a great leader.”

Muller put his hand on her shoulder. “Just take care. If his dreams become heady and seductive, remember compassion.”

“I will, Papa.”

Although he smiled, he seemed sad. “Yes, I think you will.”

She hugged him then. He and her mother had taught her what she needed to remember, and she would always carry that with her.

Light leaked under the door of Mel’s bedroom as she creaked the door open. A candle was burning on the windowsill. Cobalt lay sprawled on her bed, fully dressed, with his booted legs hanging over the footboard and his head against the headboard.

She closed the door and padded over to him. He stirred, restless even in sleep, and his eyelids twitched. He tried to turn over, but his arm hit the wall on the other side of the bed. Mel sat next to him and traced her hand over the plane of his cheek.

“Eh?” Cobalt grunted, shifted again and smashed his leg against a bedpost. “Damn it all,” he muttered.

Mel smiled. “Good evening, my sweet-natured husband.”

His lashes lifted and he peered at her with bleary eyes. “Your blasted bed is too small.”

“So I see.”

He maneuvered onto his side, almost knocking her over in the process. “I would invite you to share, but there’s no room.”

She toyed with his hair. "We could put the mattress on the floor."

"That would be much better." He looked relieved at first, but then he paused. "Maybe not. Your cat will walk on us."

"Is Fog in here?"

He pointed at the floor. "Under there."

Mel leaned down and peered under the bed. Fog lay with his front paws folded under his body and regarded Mel with large, gold eyes.

"You beautiful kitty," Mel crooned.

"No! Don't do that." Cobalt tugged her back up. "If you encourage him, he will jump up here and sit on us."

"He likes you."

"He walks all over me," he grumbled. "I'm supposed to be the Jaguar Emperor, not the kitty-cat king."

Mel burst out laughing. "Ah, Cobalt, I do love you."

He touched her cheek. "I have thought sometimes that surely you must hate me."

"No." She took his hands. "You alarm me sometimes."

"You terrify me." He sat up on the bed, swinging his legs over the side, and drew her into his arms.

Mel closed her eyes and held him around the waist. She savored the strength of his arms, the clean smell of his clothes, and the rough weave of his shirt against her chin. "Why do I terrify you?"

He answered in a low voice. "Because I've never loved anyone the way I do you."

"Ah, Cobalt." Softly she said, "And I you. It is a good thing."

He rested his head on hers. "Yes, I think it is."

They sat that way as the candle sputtered and melted in its glazed dish on the sill. In a few moments they would have to haul the mattress to the floor; in a few days they would return to Shazire; in the next few seasons they would send part of the Chamberlight army back to the Misted Cliffs and arrange for the protection of Shazire; and in the next years Cobalt would have to make hard decisions about what he intended to do with his new power and influence. And someday he would have to face his grandfather. The future loomed, but its complications no longer daunted her. They would manage, no matter how complex their lives, as long as they had each other.

She sat, content in his arms.

The Dawn Star  
by Catherine Asaro



**www.LUNA-Books.com**

Contents

[1](#)  
[The Sapphire Heir](#)

[2](#)  
[Topaz Queen](#)

[3](#)  
[Sunrise Suite](#)

[4](#)  
[Heart of Ice](#)

[5](#)  
[The Midnight Throne](#)

[6](#)  
[The Draped Room](#)

[7](#)  
[Chamber of the Candle](#)

[8](#)  
[Topaz Mage](#)

[9](#)  
[Ocean and Desert](#)

[10](#)  
[The Misplaced Minstrel](#)

[11](#)  
[The Tawny Barrens](#)

[12](#)  
[The Redwing](#)

[13](#)

[The Fire Opal Court](#)

[14](#)

[Topaz Sphere](#)

[15](#)

[The Sunwood Bargain](#)

[16](#)

[The Sunset Garden](#)

[17](#)

[The Grain Cart](#)

[18](#)

[Sunrise Child](#)

[19](#)

[The Onyx Chamber](#)

[20](#)

[Blue Silk](#)

[21](#)

[Temple of the Dragon-Sun](#)

[22](#)

[The Violet Storm](#)

[23](#)

[Onyx Pact](#)

[24](#)

[The Dragon's Dawn](#)

[25](#)

[The Carnelian Desert](#)

[26](#)

[Dragon Star](#)

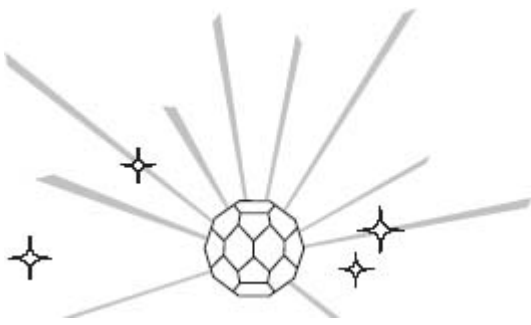
[27](#)

[Empire](#)

[28](#)

[The Conscience of a Conqueror](#)

[Epilogue](#)



1

## The Sapphire Heir

Drummer was in trouble. Again.

He had strolled into town earlier today, his clothes covered with dust and his frayed pouch slung over his shoulder. His glittar was packed in his good travel bag, carefully protected by layers of soft cloth.

He soon found the town's inn. In many towns, such inns also served as gathering halls where townspeople could enjoy shows by traveling theater groups, acrobats, dance troupes—and minstrels.

Drummer smiled. Especially minstrels.

That night, he played in the inn's common hall, on a platform at one end of the room. As he warmed up with his glittar, a few patrons glanced his way, but no one showed much interest. When he launched into a medley of Aronsdale folk songs, some people moved closer to the stage. Several fellows asked him to sing love songs for their ladies, which he obliged.

Within an hour, people had filled the room. Drummer could feel their moods. Glancing at a wooden cube that adorned a post by the door, he concentrated on its shape. It allowed him to create a mood spell that gave his love of his music to his listeners. It was a minor spell, of course; he had never done any of consequence. But it heightened his joy in singing to offer his pleasure to his audience.

The customers seemed to enjoy his singing and his music. The longer they stayed in the common room, buying food and drink, the more the innkeeper beamed. He kept Drummer supplied with ale. The townspeople didn't have many hexa-coins, but they left Drummer other things—breads and beads and a fine leather pouch. All in all, it was a good night.

He was singing the "Crystal Maker's Lament" when a fiery-haired girl arrived with some other young people. As she glided to a table with her friends, Drummer glided over the high notes of his song:

My heart shatters as easily,

As these vases drawn of crystal,

Don't leave me even teasingly,

I live only as your minstrel.

He sang the last line to the fiery girl. One of the young men in her group frowned, a big fellow in the

homespun garb of a farmer.

Drummer waited until the farmer got his dinner and was focused on wolfing it down. Then Drummer sang a ballad to the girl. He drew out the dulcet notes for her, until her pretty cheeks turned the same color as her tousled curls. The big fellow noticed, though, and started looking irritated again, so Drummer switched his attentions to three matrons, who clucked and chuckled at his song. When they left, they set a hefty meat pie on the stage for him. He grinned and they laughed, waving as they made their way out of the inn.

It was growing late, and Drummer didn't want to strain his voice. He rarely had trouble hitting even the highest notes, but they were the first to go when he tired. He finished his song and bade his audience a pleasant night amid calls of appreciation. As he left the stage, he winked at the fiery girl.

Drummer was upstairs, headed for his room, when a sweet voice called from a recessed doorway. "Gentle sir, you do surely sing like an angel."

He peered at the girl in the shadows, wondering if this was a trick to rob him. He was carrying his glitter, his most expensive possession, and he had his take for the night slung over his shoulder in his new pouch.

"And who might you be," he asked, "so shy and sugar-voiced?"

The fiery girl stepped forward, her blush as becoming now as it had been downstairs. "My name is Skybell, handsome sir."

Handsome, eh? His thoughts softened as he ambled over to her. "Dear Skybell," he murmured. "Why are you hiding up here?" He couldn't resist teasing her. "Do you plan to knock me over the head and steal my possessions?" It wouldn't be the first time it had happened to him. However, he had learned to judge such matters, and he suspected the only thing on her mind was far sweeter than thievery. Smiling lazily, he added, "Or perhaps your nefarious cohorts lurk nearby, waiting to do me in."

"Oh! Never." She was aghast. "I would never do such."

Drummer ran his fingers over the strings of his harp, evoking a sensuous ripple of notes. "How can I be sure?"

Her shy smile dimpled her face. "You play with me, sir."

He quit strumming and traced the tip of his finger down her cheek. "Such a vision, with cheeks like blossoms and lips that surely men sing of everywhere. Are you playing with my poor, helpless heart, only to break it tomorrow?"

Her eyes widened. "I would never hurt you, truly." She touched a curl of hair that had fallen into his eyes. "You have nice hair. The color is like corn kernels."

"It's to match your skybell eyes." He wasn't much more than her height, so he didn't have to bend his head far to brush his lips across hers.

"Oh." Her mouth opened like a small O.

He smiled, charmed. "Has no man kissed you before? Surely every fellow in town must be wooing you."

“Only you have been so bold.” Tentative, she touched his cheek. “You looked so beautiful singing tonight.”

He thought of the glowering farmer. “Your young man didn’t think so.”

“My who?”

“The big farmer with the straw hat.”

“Plowman?” Her laugh rippled. “He’s not my young man.”

“No?” Drummer slid his arm around her waist and pulled her well-curved body against his. “You aren’t spoken for?”

“Never.” She sounded breathless.

“Then I am a lucky man.” He held her close as he kissed her again. A thought in the back of his mind warned that such a pretty girl would be this inexperienced only if she was barely out of childhood, which would make her too young for him. But she was warm and sweet, her body supple against his. Surely it was no harm if he dallied just a little—

Someone yanked Drummer away from the girl and slammed him against the wall. He found himself staring up, and up, at the man Skybell had called Plowman. The farmer swung a gnarled fist, and Drummer barely ducked in time.

“Hey!” Drummer slipped out of the man’s grip and backed down the hallway, raising his hands to placate the giant.

“Stop it!” Skybell cried from beyond Plowman.

The farmhand lumbered after Drummer. Muscles rippled under his worn shirt, and his footsteps thudded on the wooden floor.

Drummer kept backing up. “Listen, I’m sorry. But she can choose who she wants.”

Plowman lunged at him, and Drummer dodged out of the way. He held tight to his glitter, more concerned about protecting it than himself.

“Stay put!” Plowman roared. “Fight like a man.”

“Why?” Drummer frowned at him. “She doesn’t want you. What good will fighting do?”

“Wantme?” For some reason, that enraged Plowman even more. He strode forward, and Drummer backed right into a wall.

“Stop this right now!” Skybell had somehow got herself in front of Plowman. “Honestly, Plow, behave yourself.”

“I saw him kissing you,” he snarled. “You don’t even know him at all. No one dishonors my little sister.”

Drummer groaned.irate brothers were worse than rejected suitors. In earlier days, he might have



reacted the same way on his sister's behalf, except she was eight years older and had bedeviled him no end in their childhood—until the day she had wed a prince. He wondered what Plowman would say if Drummer announced that his sister was queen of the country Harsdown and that her daughter had married the notorious despot, Cobalt the Dark. Probably Plowman would pound him into the ground for telling tales.

Drummer spoke in a conciliatory voice. "I have the greatest respect for your sister. I would never dishonor her fine name." He wanted to add, She has a right to choose her men. Women did all the time here in the country of Aronsdale. Staring up at the massive Plowman, though, he kept his mouth shut.

Skybell gently grasped her brother's arm. "We should get home before father starts to worry."

"I'm not done with this puny songster," Plowman grumbled.

"You can finish tomorrow," she offered.

"I can?" He seemed confused.

"You can," she assured him. Drummer wished she didn't sound so earnest. But she was buying him time to get out of town.

Plowman glowered and rumbled a bit more, but Skybell soon had him on his way. Unfortunately, that meant she went, too. She glanced at Drummer with a look of apology so sincere he wanted to embrace her. He wanted to live even more, though, so he stayed put. He offered Skybell his most regretful look until Plowman shot him another hard, angry glare.

Within moments, brother and sister were gone. Drummer exhaled, relieved he hadn't been pummeled. He wasn't safe yet, though.

It didn't take long to pack his belongings and settle his bill at the inn. He hated to leave so soon; the audience here had been generous. But he couldn't sing if Plowman flattened him.

Drummer was soon on his way, sneaking out of town in the middle of the night.

Cobalt Escar stood alone. He had sought refuge on a walkway of an onion tower in the Alzire Palace. His palace. It had become his when he conquered this country of Shazire. He had done it for his father, Varqelle Escar. But Varqelle lay in his grave, killed a year ago in battle. The conqueror had been conquered, and he had left his son to rule in his stead.

Cobalt's hair blew across his face and shadowed him from the streaming sunlight. Far below, succulent grasses carpeted the hills and waterways sparkled. Wildflowers grew everywhere, swirls of color in blurs of pink, gold and blue. Spring filled the world with a profusion of life, and it was too much. He had spent most of his life in the spare, utilitarian Castle of Clouds high in the cliffs of his home, where just growing enough crops to feed the staff and animals was a challenge. The wealth of life here mocked his lingering grief. Today, on the anniversary of his father's death, the memories were poignant.

A door opened behind him. He turned as a woman came through the archway. She was a lovely vision with yellow hair, blue eyes and an angelic face. Cobalt wasn't fooled. As a sword fighter, she trained with his best men; as a woman, she could be dulcet one moment and tart the next. People called him

Cobalt the Dark, the Midnight Prince, but she was the one he found formidable.

“Greetings of the morning,” Mel said.

Cobalt grunted. Then he pulled her over and kissed her. He had to bend down. Although Mel was a tall woman, she didn’t reach his shoulders. Her body had slender curves, ample in the right places and narrow at the waist. He tightened his embrace. She was pushing his shoulders, though, and he thought she was laughing. Laughing! Irrate, he glared at her.

Her lips curved in the smile that could turn his hardened warriors into clay of the type found on the riverbank after a heavy rain. He was immune to it, of course.

“I’m glad to see you, too,” Mel said.

“Which is why you laugh at my kiss?”

“I love your kisses, my handsome husband.”

He never knew what to do when she talked like that. He wasn’t handsome. His countenance frightened people. He and Mel had married as part of a treaty less than two years ago, and they had met as strangers on their wedding day. She continually exasperated him, but for some reason he wanted her to keep doing it. So he kissed her again. The darkness in his heart receded, and the sun’s warmth heated his back.

After a while, they paused. Her eyes had that sensual glossy look he loved so well. But she was also studying his face.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Of course.” He needed to hide his moods better. No one could read him like Mel, and no matter how hard he tried to remedy that, he never fooled her. He had learned as a child to protect his emotions, lest they spur the violence of his grandfather, King Stonebreaker of the Misted Cliffs. His grandfather had raised him. The queen had died and Stonebreaker had never remarried, so he never sired a male heir. That left Cobalt, the grandson he despised and often beat—until the day Cobalt fought back. Stonebreaker never touched him again, for Cobalt had grown larger and stronger, and could have killed him.

As a child, Cobalt would have given anything to live with his father. But he had been thirty-three when he met Varqelle, and they had known each other only a few months.

“You are quiet,” Mel said.

“I was thinking of my father.” He gazed at the countryside. Perhaps if he had grown up here, taking this verdant wealth for granted, he could have enjoyed its richness without feeling as if he had to escape. “I was wondering what it would have been like if he had raised me.”

Mel was quiet. Why should she answer? Nineteen years ago his father, the king of Harsdown, had invaded the country of Aronsdale with no provocation, intending to take the throne and murder the royal family. Mel’s family. But Varqelle had lost the war, and so he lost his own throne, in Harsdown. The Aronsdale king gave it to Mel’s father. It was why Mel was heir to the Harsdown throne instead of Cobalt.

“Varqelle was a hard man,” Cobalt allowed.

“He loved you,” Mel said.

He had no words for that miracle. Cobalt the Dark, hated by so many, especially his grandfather, had been loved by his father.

He held Mel close and looked over her head at Shazire. He had hoped that, like his new realms, his wife would be lush and fertile and give him a son. Or daughter. But still she carried no child.

“Cobalt,” Mel said, her voice muffled. She no longer sounded pleased with him.

“What?” he asked, distracted. In the distance, a group of riders were galloping across the countryside.

“You’re suffocating me.”

Startled, he let her go. “I don’t mean to do that.”

Her lips quirked upward. “You spoke.”

“I speak all the time.”

With a soft laugh, she said, “You grunt.”

Cobalt almost grunted in response, but he caught himself in time. He squinted against the sunshine. Riders were definitely approaching the Alzire Palace. He wished he had his spectacles, so he could see better. He didn’t like wearing glasses, though. Whoever heard of a warrior king in spectacles?

Mel watched the riders. “They’ve traveled a long way.”

“Can you see the pennant?”

“It’s the Chamberlight sphere, blue on a white background.”

The sphere. Saints almighty! They came from his grandfather, Stonebreaker Chamberlight, king of the Misted Cliffs.

He dreaded to learn what new malice the king had for his despised grandson.

Mel waited with Cobalt in the Hall of Oceans, and her thoughts roiled with her unease. Saints willing, the envoy from the Misted Cliffs wouldn’t bring unwelcome news. Cobalt had healed so much here in Shazire, away from his grandfather. But they were never completely free of Stonebreaker.

She and Cobalt stood on a dais of sea-green stone next to the Alzire Throne, a chair embedded with abalone. She couldn’t deny the imposing figure her husband cut, long legged and broad shouldered, menacing with his extraordinary height, his muscled build, and that scar on his cheek. He wore a dark tunic, and his trousers came down over heavy boots. His black hair, straight and thick, fell to his shoulders. Beneath his dark brows, his gaze smoldered.

The Hall of Oceans stretched before them, with its vaulted ceiling and geometric mosaics. Prince Zerod, the emir of Shazire, had held audiences here—before Cobalt deposed him. Cobalt had sent the prince into exile; had he killed Zerod, it would have set the countries of Jazid and Taka Mal against him even more than they were already. Mel had also entreated him to spare Zerod.

Down the hall, men in the aquamarine livery of Alzire heaved open the doors. The visitors from the Misted Cliffs entered with a swirl of motion, ten riders in leather armor and metal breastplates, each carrying a plumed helmet under his arm. Cobalt's men accompanied the envoy, as did Tadamaja Pickaxe, who was one of the few aides Cobalt had kept from Prince Zerod's staff.

The warriors strode down the hall. Mel recognized the man in front: General Agate Cragland. He had stood with Cobalt at the wedding, when the Midnight Prince took Mel as his wife. Agate had iron-gray hair and a hearty physique unmatched by warriors half his age. He stopped before the dais with his men and they each went down on one knee, bowing their heads. Mel knew they knelt to her husband, Stonebreaker's heir and now king of Shazire and Blueshire. They tolerated her only because she was his wife.

"Please stand," Cobalt said.

Agate got back to his feet, his motions stiff. "I bring greetings from the Misted Cliffs, Your Majesty."

"Is my grandfather well?" Cobalt asked.

When Agate paused, Mel's unease grew. Then the general said, "I have a message from him."

Cobalt regarded him with a look Mel would have found hard to read a year ago. Agate's phrasing disturbed him. She understood. What could Stonebreaker want that required a party of ten men, including the highest-ranked commander in his army?

"I look forward to hearing it," Cobalt said. Mel didn't believe him and she doubted Agate did, either, but for once Cobalt was trying to be diplomatic. He invited Agate to share wine with him after the general had a chance to change his riding clothes. It was an accepted protocol for receiving messengers, to offer succor before requesting the message, and Agate expressed appreciation. Mel wasn't fooled. None of them wanted to be here.

As Cobalt and Agate spoke, Mel concentrated on the mosaics in the ceiling. The geometric shapes were too far away and too small to give much power, but she managed a faint green spell. Anything more could create a problem; her spells manifested as light, which tended to upset people. Only the barest green shimmer gathered in the air, faint enough to blend into the sunshine slanting through the emerald-glass skylights in the ceiling.

Agate's dread snapped against her mood spell like a hard blow on a drum skin.

Cobalt watched Mel pace in front of a tall window in the Hexacomb Alcove. It troubled him; he rarely saw her so tense.

"What did you pick up from Agate?" he asked.

“He’s afraid,” Mel said.

He shook his head. “Agate isn’t afraid of anything. Except my grandfather.”

She glanced at him. “He fears you.”

Surely not. But Cobalt could never be certain. Although he had known Agate all his life, he had little idea what the general thought of him. When Cobalt had been small, Agate had stood by while Stonebreaker whipped his grandson. Yet sometimes after the king locked Cobalt in a closet, Agate brought him food or water. The general had risked repercussions even with that; if Stonebreaker had found out, he could have broken Agate, imprisoned him, even executed him. Stonebreaker commanded the loyalty of his army because he was an intelligent leader and savvy in politics, but his top people knew his cruelty. Most had chosen to protect themselves rather than intercede on behalf of a crying boy. Cobalt gritted his teeth. They had stood by and watched a hardened warrior batter a helpless child. He wondered if they had really understood that someday that beaten, angry boy would be their king.

“Why does Agate fear me?” he asked.

Mel kept pacing, agitated and unsettled. “His emotions aren’t simple. More than anything, he is cautious.”

“About me?”

“Yes. He has bad news, I think.” She came over to him. “But his wariness of you goes deeper than that.”

Cobalt grimaced. “Everyone feels that way about me.”

She took his hand and pressed her lips against his knuckles. “You condemn yourself for the sins others committed against you.”

He watched her, as bewildered today as on the first day he had met her. She married him to stop a war. After Cobalt freed his father from prison, Varqelle began to raise an army so he could invade Harsdown and reclaim his throne. Desperate to stop the invasion, Mel had agreed to wed Cobalt and bring the throne back into his line. She ought to hate him. Yet she treated him with a softness no one had ever given him before, and she never broke, never splintered, never shrank away. He didn’t understand why she loved him, but he never wanted her to stop.

“I will remember your warning,” he said.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yes.” Idiot, he told himself. You can do better for her. He tried to smile. It pulled the muscles of his face in ways that felt strange but had become more natural this year. He could think of nothing to say, though, that wouldn’t sound foolish. After a moment of trying to smile, he gave up.

Mel laughed tenderly and touched his cheek. “You have a dimple, you know.”

He stared at her, aghast. “Warriors do not have dimples.”

“I’m sure not.” She took his arm. “We should go meet our guest. He must be done freshening up.”

In Cobalt's experience, men didn't "freshen up." Still, Agate was probably making himself more presentable.

"Very well," he said. "Let us see what he has to say."

Braces covered in gold leaf supported the arched ceiling in the Ivory Room, and mother-of-pearl filigree gleamed on the walls. The pale furniture was upholstered in ivory and gold. Cobalt, Mel and Agate sat in armchairs by graceful tables where they could place their goblets. The beauty of the room only increased Mel's disquiet, for none of this belonged to them. They had stolen it from Prince Zerod. She had never wanted to conquer Shazire. Even though she knew this land had once been part of the Misted Cliffs, the war lay heavily on her conscience. She dealt with it by being the best leader she knew how to be, but it didn't lighten the weight.

Mel spoke to Agate with courtesy. "Is the vintage to your liking, General?"

He sipped his wine. "It speaks well of your wineries."

Cobalt downed his wine in one swallow and clunked the goblet on the table. "So." His deep voice jarred with the genteel room. "How is my grandfather?"

Agate spoke carefully. "I bring you news, sire."

"What?" Cobalt asked.

Mel inwardly groaned. If Cobalt couldn't learn more tact, he would antagonize even his allies.

"I have news of your grandfather," Agate said. "He is ill, Your Majesty."

Cobalt visibly stiffened. "What happened?"

"His doctors say a blood vessel burst in his brain."

Cobalt stared at him in shock, an emotion he almost never revealed. His lapse lasted only a moment; then his mask of impassivity snapped back into place.

"Is he alive?" Cobalt asked.

Agate took a deep breath. "He survived. But his left side is paralyzed. We don't know if he will recover."

Cobalt fell silent. Mel knew he hated his grandfather, and yet, he had also craved Stonebreaker's approval his entire life. The conflicts of his tormented relationship with the king had left deep wounds. He was recovering here, but she had no idea what it would do to him if Stonebreaker died. Would he grieve or rejoice—or hate himself for doing both?

Mel spoke to Agate. "We are sorry to hear of His Majesty's illness and pray for a full recovery."

Relief flickered in Agate's eyes. "The people of the Misted Cliffs share your prayers." To Cobalt, he

said, "We honor the House of Chamberlight."

Cobalt's voice went cold. "The way you honored the Chamberlight Heir while you watched him being beaten senseless?"

Agate looked as if he felt ill. "It was no honor, sire." In a low voice, he added, "It was a nightmare."

Mel froze, afraid of what Cobalt might do. Agate was the only one of Stonebreaker's officers she had ever heard admit the truth. Of all the adults in Cobalt's life, only two had regularly sheltered him: his mother, Dancer, and a stable hand named Matthew Quietland. Dancer had taken Stonebreaker's violence on herself by interceding when Stonebreaker abused the boy; Matthew had hidden Cobalt in the stables or even his home and borne the vicious brunt of the king's rage when Stonebreaker couldn't find his grandson.

Mel spoke into the strained silence. "You have done well to bring us the news with such speed, General Cragland."

"I am sorry it isn't better news," Agate said, his face pale.

"Yes." Cobalt stood abruptly. "Good night."

Both Mel and Agate jumped to their feet, and Agate bowed deeply. Cobalt glanced at Mel, and she could tell he wanted her to come with him. Then he strode from the room.

She spoke quietly to Agate. "Thank you, General."

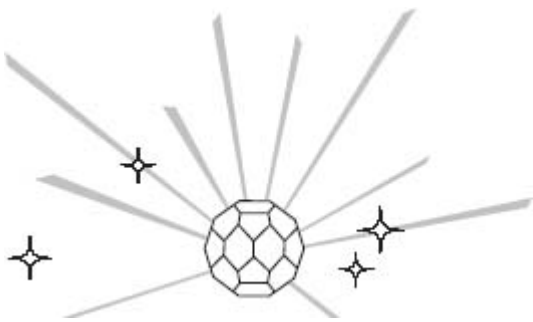
"I deserve no thanks, Your Majesty."

The title disquieted Mel; she was the reluctant queen of Shazire and Blueshire. Would Cobalt soon rule the Misted Cliffs as well? It would make him the most powerful sovereign in the settled lands, similar to the legendary Dragon-Sun Queen in Taka Mal who had lived two centuries ago. She had allied with Jazid, and they had descended on Cobalt's ancestors with their wild, fierce armies, severing Blueshire and Shazire from the Misted Cliffs.

After Mel and Agate parted, she walked to the suite she shared with Cobalt, preoccupied with her thoughts. She knew the lure of the desert lands for Cobalt. Jazid and Taka Mal. It was more than righting the wrongs of an ancient war. Taka Mal and Jazid were prosperous countries. Taka Mal caravans were famous for precious silks, spices, pottery, and jewels, and its architects spread their exquisite works across the settled lands. Jazid had mines rich with ores and gems. How long before Cobalt turned his conqueror's eye to those rich lands? When he spoke of his dreams of empire, it stirred a ferocity deep within Mel, the wildness of her ancestors. She didn't want the temptations he offered, but she couldn't deny the lure of that seductive power.

Cobalt had once told her: If ever I go too far, pull me back. She didn't know if she was capable of being the conscience of a tyrant. At his core, he was a profoundly decent man. But for all that he had controlled his darkness, it simmered within him.

Waiting for a rebirth.



## Topaz Queen

Vizarana Jade, the queen of Taka Mal, felt great pride in her country. The sun beat down on a starkly beautiful land softened by green oases. Quaaz, its capital, was the oldest city in the settled lands, a place of spires, arches, and onion domes. Ancient lanes curved through its center, crowded with oxen-drawn carts, running children, and people on errands. Mosaics shimmered in stained-glass windows, around keyhole-shaped archways, and in columns that supported even the most modest houses.

As her father's only child, Jade had inherited the Topaz Throne. She intended to keep it, even in this country where most women had few rights. Her Topaz Palace rose above Quaaz, golden in the sunlight, a wonder of yellow stone surrounded by a great wall and protected by the Queen's Guard, warriors unmatched in skill or aggression. Today, Jade sat at a long table in the Dragon-Sun hall with her top generals: Spearcaster, her senior advisor, a mentor she had known her entire life; Slate, the least emotional of her advisors; Firaz from the tempestuous Southern lands; and her hot-tempered cousin, Baz Quazera, General of the Queen's Army.

"What I don't understand," Jade said, "is how the Atajazid D'az Ozar could sign a pact with Cobalt Escar and we didn't know about it." Although the atajazid was a king, his title translated into Ozar, Shadow Dragon Prince of Jazid. Either way, he ruled Jazid.

"Prince Zerod took the message from Shazire to Jazid," Baz told her. A large man with black hair, he was thirty-three, a year younger than Jade. Everyone expected her to marry him, but she kept delaying. Baz was like a brother, not a husband.

"I thought Zerod was dead," Jade said. "And why would he carry messages for Cobalt Escar?"

Baz gave her one of his inimitable scowls. "Escar is holding Zerod's wife and son prisoner."

"So Jazid signed a pact with Escar," Jade mused.

General Slate spoke. "It is more an agreement than a formal pact, Your Majesty." He looked tired today. The decades hadn't been easy on Slate; as he entered his sixty-fifth year, she worried that he might soon wish to leave the military. She would regret his loss, for she greatly valued his advice, his wisdom, and his even temperament.

"What does the agreement entail?" Jade asked.

"Jazid sent four hundred spearmen to support the Shazire army," Slate said. "Three hundred forty-two survived the war. The message Zerod took to Jazid concerned them."



Jade didn't know what to make of this news, which Jazid had tried to keep secret. Fortunately, her spies had discovered it, though it had taken them too long. She spoke wryly. "According to rumors I've heard, Cobalt Escar beheaded Zerod, raped and murdered the queen and hung Zerod's son." Tales of Cobalt the Dark were rife with such lurid details.

"Well, hell," Firaz said. "Maybe he tore down the Jagged Teeth Mountains, too."

Jade smiled. "The last I looked, they were still there."

Spearcaster, eldest of her generals and the one she trusted most, spoke in his gravelly voice. "Apparently Cobalt has done nothing worse than put Zerod's family under guard in their summer palace. In return for their safety, Zerod carried the message to Jazid."

"What was in the message?" Jade asked.

Baz leaned forward, his fiery gaze intent. "Escar gave the Jazid spearmen a choice—swear allegiance to him or go to prison."

Bah. Cobalt obviously had ulterior motives. Making Zerod a courier sent another message to Jazid: Cobalt had effectively stripped the deposed ruler of his power. Allowing the spearmen to live implied Cobalt offered conciliation to Jazid, less than if he returned the soldiers to their country but enough to suggest he would consider neutral relations rather than conquest.

Jade didn't like it. Within one generation, Cobalt would rule the Misted Cliffs, Harsdown, Blueshire and Shazire. Jazid and Taka Mal had tried to achieve a similar outcome two hundred years ago, when they attacked the Misted Cliffs, but they had failed.

"Cobalt and Zerod signed a pact," General Spearcaster said. "Zerod swore not to seek military help from Jazid or Taka Mal. If he abided by the pact, then in two years he could go into exile with his wife and son."

Jade doubted Cobalt the Dark had suddenly developed great compassion. "Cobalt must have a motive."

"He probably assumed his business with Jazid and Taka Mal will be settled by then," Slate said.

Baz thumped the table with his palm. "If he expects to conquer us, he is a fool!"

Jade frowned. "He would be mad to seek retribution for a war our ancestors waged over two hundred years ago."

"He's mad all right," Firaz drawled. "With ambition."

Slate's voice was grim. "He will come after Jazid and Taka Mal, don't doubt it."

"The hell with him," Firaz said. "We'll thrash his arrogant ass."

"General Firaz," Jade said, smiling. "You are ever the soul of poetic converse." He raised a curmudgeonly eyebrow at her.

"Cobalt's agreement not to attack Jazid was only valid for a year," Spearcaster said. "That year was

done six days ago.”

“Did the spearmen swear allegiance to him?” Jade asked.

“Over three hundred of them,” Slate said.

Jade had hoped Escar was ignoring her country because he didn’t seek more lands. Her spies had so far found no indications that he planned on going to war again. But if he had held back only because of a temporary pact with Jazid, that could mean trouble.

“How large is Escar’s army?” she asked.

Baz nodded to Spearcaster, deferring to him for an answer. It didn’t surprise Jade. Spearcaster had studied the militaries in the settled lands for decades. Baz was in charge of the army, and Jade considered him an excellent leader. But if the position had been determined solely by merit, without royal heredity as a factor, Spearcaster would be General of the Army. He had twice Baz’s age and experience.

“Including the Shazire forces he has gained,” Spearcaster said, “I’d say Cobalt Escar has more than eight thousand men.”

Damn. She had only three thousand. Perhaps Cobalt expected Taka Mal to roll over for him. If so, his expectations were in for a battering. “And Jazid’s army?” she asked. “Four thousand?”

“At least,” Spearcaster said.

“Perhaps,” Jade murmured, “I should invite the Atajazid D’az Ozar here for a visit.” The time might have come to end their chill in relations. Ozar loathed having to deal with a woman on the throne, but a mutual and bellicose enemy might give them cause to unite.

“It’s a good idea,” Baz said. “But even if we combine forces with Jazid, we still wouldn’t match Cobalt Escar’s forces.”

“He may wish to avoid war,” Slate said.

“He damn well hasn’t so far,” Firaz told him.

“He did, actually,” Slate said. “He married the heir to the throne of Harsdown rather than attack her country for it.”

“If we must fight this Escar king,” Jade said, “then we will. But we should bargain first.”

“Bargain with what?” Baz demanded.

“We need leverage,” Jade said. “Someone in his family.”

Spearcaster went very still. “You are talking about a hostage pact.”

“Of course.” It was a time-honored form of negotiation. In centuries past, sovereigns had regularly taken hostages from their enemies and negotiated peace for their release. Jazid and Taka Mal had avoided several wars that way.

“We probably can’t reach his mother or his wife,” Slate said.

“His wife’s a witch, anyway,” Firaz muttered.

“Oh, Firaz.” Jade had also heard tales of the woman forced to marry Cobalt the Dark. Rumors spread like fire about how she stopped the war in Shazire with a sword of flame that reached into the sky. Jade found it hard to credit. Why would the queen stop her husband from wiping out their enemies? It seemed more likely she knew tricks with light. She would be a difficult target, yes, but because Cobalt would keep her well guarded, not because she wielded fire magic.

Jade looked around at her generals. “We need to find someone we have a realistic chance of stealing.”

Baz’s eyes glinted. “I have an idea.”

Drummer slunk to the window of Magistrate Sput’s house. Tardy Town was quiet now, in this hour after midnight. He had played at the inn tonight to earn his supper. Unfortunately that meant he had been “graced” with hours of hearing Sput boast about his sexual conquests. Drummer sincerely hoped the stories were no more than Sput’s fantasies; if the women really existed, he hated to think how they would feel to have their most intimate secrets bared in public. The magistrate had also denigrated a whole slew of people, including Tardy Town’s visiting minstrel. Sput claimed to have a better voice than Drummer, and after a few pitchers of ale, he had demonstrated it to anyone ill-fated enough to be within earshot.

Drummer winced at the memory. Then he clambered over the windowsill into Sput’s house. He found himself in a den lit only by moonlight flowing through the open window. He padded into the hallway and started his search. Sput turned out to be fast asleep upstairs, sprawled facedown in bed, snoring loud enough to shake down the sky. The drunk magistrate had tossed his garments on the floor, presenting an opportunity of just the type Drummer had hoped for. Drawing on the square shape of a mirror across the room, he made a little orange spell. He used it to send soothing thoughts to Sput and sink the magistrate deeper into sleep. Then he snuck into the room and filched every item of clothing he could see.

Drummer skulked out of the house as silently as he had entered and stashed Sput’s clothes in some bushes outside. Then he took off, headed out of town. As pranks went, hiding the magistrate’s clothes was more extreme than his usual mischief, but it was fitting given the way Sput so crudely claimed to have removed the garments of the women he called “milk cows.”

Drummer cut across the plaza beyond Sput’s house and jogged past the large bell the townspeople used to warn of fires. An idea stirred, and he grinned. No, he couldn’t do that. Really. He couldn’t. Then he thought, Why not? He paused by the bell and looked around the plaza. No one. So he grabbed the bell’s rope—and pulled.

A deep clang cracked open the night. Drummer pulled hard and fast on the rope, filling the plaza with ringing until lights appeared in buildings all around it. Then he let go of the rope and darted off. He climbed the stairs on the side of a butcher shop with no lights inside. Then he sat on the top step with his pouch over one shoulder and his glittar on his back, and watched.

People ran into the plaza, calling in confused voices. Sput’s door slammed open, and he dashed out—as naked as the day he had come into the world. He ran to the bell, the rolls of his large stomach shaking. “I demand to know who rang that thing,” he bellowed. “How dare you disturb my sleep? I insist someone put out this fire.”

“Magistrate Sput!” The gray-haired City Elderwoman stood by the bell stand in a robe and stared at him, her mouth open. “Sir!”

“Why aren’t you doing anything about this?” Sput demanded.

“Good sir,” the elderly woman stuttered. “I do believe—I mean, that is—”

“You believe what?” Sput asked. “Get it out, woman.”

“You’re unclothed, sir.”

“What?” He looked down at himself. Then he jerked up his head and stared at the people gathering around. “What is going on here?”

“No fire,” a man said, joining them. “Apparently the alarm was a mistake.”

“Mistake!” True to his name, Sput sputtered obscenities. Then, darkly, he added, “I’ll bury whoever has done this.” With that, he whirled around and tried to sprint home. He waddled more than he ran, but it was the fastest Drummer had seen him move.

Softly Drummer said, “That’s for all the people you hurt with your words, Sput-man.” Then he slipped down the stairs and set off in the dark, headed out of Tardy Town.

Within moments he had left the town behind. Under a waning moon, he jogged across the low hills. His glittar plinged a note every now and then until he repacked the instrument. He laughed and spread his arms as he ran for the sheer joy of his life. At twenty-eight, he had never held a steady job. During the harvest, he worked in his father’s orchard and the rest of the year he wandered as a minstrel. He rarely had to remember that he was the youngest brother of the queen of Harsdown or that his niece had married Cobalt the Dark.

Soon he was alone under the stars, away from any homestead. He could shout as loud as he wanted and no one would hear. He felt gloriously free.

That was when the strangers grabbed him.

The wagon bumped along the rutted road. The cords that bound Drummer’s wrists behind his back dug into his skin. He could barely make out his jailors; the canopied wagon cut out what little light came from the moon. This wasn’t the first time he had been caught by someone irate over his mischief, but something was different this time, darker in a way he hadn’t yet figured out.

They had grabbed him fast and efficient, more like soldiers than the itinerant merchant family they appeared to be. The men dressed the part of merchants, with billowy shirts and trousers. But where were the women and children? And they all had dark hair. Most people in the settled lands did, but those native to this part of Aronsdale tended toward lighter coloring. These merchants were taller and huskier than Drummer, too—but, well, that wasn’t unusual. Most men were. His slender build had once allowed him to escape a lady’s boudoir by disguising himself as her maid. It had amused him at the time, but right now he would have given a great deal to have the musculature and power to hold his own against his captors.

Drummer twisted his hands in the hopes of loosening his bonds, but it only made the cords bite into his skin. He was sitting on a bench with his back to the swaying canvas wall of the wagon. Five of the six men who had captured him were also in the back—two sharpening daggers the lengths of their forearms, one sleeping, and two watching him. The sixth was driving.

“Well, this is boring,” Drummer said. When no one answered, he added, “I could sing for you if I wasn’t tied up.”

“Be quiet,” one man told him, which was pretty much all they had said since they nabbed him several hours ago. He wasn’t certain about their accent, but he thought it was from Jazid or Taka Mal.

“You know,” he said in a conversational voice, “kidnapping the brother of the queen of Harsdown can get you into trouble.” Maybe he could scare some information out of them.

One of the men sharpening his dagger glanced up. “Being the brother of the Queen of Harsdown can get you into trouble.”

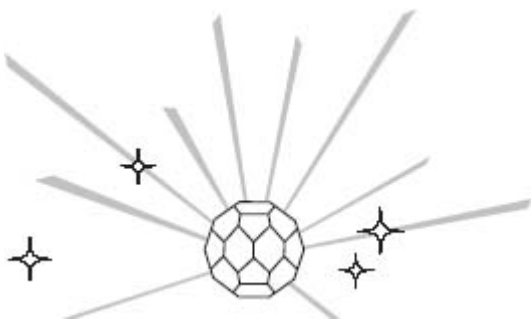
“I’m a commoner,” Drummer said. “If you think you can ransom me for riches, you’re wrong.” His family did fine with their thriving orchards, but they were by no means wealthy.

The closest guard lifted his dagger and touched the tip to Drummer’s neck. “You are going to be quiet, yes?”

Drummer tried not to swallow. Sweat gathered on his forehead. “Uh, yes.”

“Good.” The guard withdrew his blade.

They bounced along in the night, going saints only knew where.



### Sunrise Suite

Mel rode Smoke, her gray stallion, just as she always did, no matter how many earnest stable hands urged her to take a mare. She and Cobalt were traveling through eastern Harsdown with his honor guard of thirty men, two of her sphere-maids, and the Chamberlight warriors. Up ahead, her husband galloped on Admiral, his black warhorse. Admiral wasn’t fast, nothing like a charger, but he was a glorious animal, massive and strong, able to carry even a man of Cobalt’s size for long distances. Cobalt had left Leo Tumbler, one of his most trusted officers, back in Alzire, to govern Shazire while they traveled.

Smoke raced across the hills, and Mel savored the ride. She had grown up in Harsdown, but in the past year, she had hardly been home at all. She longed to see her family at their estate, Applecroft. She missed her parents, and the visits of her grandparents and uncles. Drummer always made her laugh with his pranks and cry for the beauty of his voice. But with Stonebreaker so ill, they had no time to stop.

Matthew Quietland had ridden out from Applecroft to join them, however. Mel was glad to see him. He served as stable master at one of the Chamberlight castles and had been Cobalt's right-hand man during the campaign against Shazire. This last year he had remained with Cobalt's mother Dancer, officially as her bodyguard, though Mel suspected they just liked spending time together. The two of them had been staying at Applecroft as guests of Mel's family. Another Chamberlight envoy had informed Dancer of her father's illness. While she rushed to his side, Matthew had come to let Cobalt know what she was doing.

Right now, Matthew was riding with Cobalt. A mane of silver hair blew back from Matthew's face. Both he and Cobalt were looking northward, their profiles etched against the blue sky, the same straight nose, sculpted cheekbones, and strong chin.

At sixty-five, Matthew was a year older than Cobalt's father, Varqelle. Mel wondered how anyone could have seen Matthew and Varqelle together without suspecting they shared the same father. Cobalt's mother, Dancer, had fled Varqelle only a year after their marriage, and Matthew had been among the servants who helped her return to the Misted Cliffs. Perhaps that was why few people had seen his resemblance to Varqelle; the two men had lived in different lands for over three decades. Mel's spells had given her insights into Matthew's emotions toward Cobalt, feelings Matthew hid from most people. When she asked him about it, he made her swear never to tell Cobalt. As far as she knew, Cobalt never suspected his kinship to his stable master.

It was afternoon when their party reached the cliffs that rose up from the borderlands. They stood tall against a pale blue sky, their tops wreathed in clouds, the daunting namesakes of the country they separated from Harsdown. The Misted Cliffs.

Their party followed a path that wound into the great wall. The higher they went, the thinner the air became. It was hard for Mel to believe only a year and a half had passed since the first time Cobalt had taken her to this country, or that this was only her second trip. The few months she had spent here had been in the Castle of Clouds in the cliffs rather than at the Diamond Palace much farther west, where they were headed now. In only a few days, she would see King Stonebreaker—if he still lived.

Cobalt wanted to turn Admiral around and ride hard in the opposite direction. They had spent a full day crossing the cliffs, and another two days traveling through the pretty dales and hills of his country. Their destination had been a blur during their ride today, but he could finally see it clearly even without his glasses. The Diamond Palace. It was only a short ride away now, high on a hill known as The King's Spring. Cobalt suspected that name had been the wishful thinking of some long-ago sovereign, for the Misted Cliffs had the coolest climate in the settled lands. Today, though, mild weather reigned, and the green meadows swirled with wildflowers.

He looked eastward, back the way they had come. The distant cliffs loomed against the sky. In the north, the Escar Mountains rose even higher. South and west, the land rolled in meadows and low hills. If he could have stood on a balcony in the Diamond Palace and looked farther west, he would have seen sand dunes and the Blue Ocean.

Cobalt dreaded going home. The Diamond Palace mocked him with its beauty. Influenced by Taka Mal

architecture, it cut a graceful form against the sky, with its onion towers and scalloped crenellations. But where Taka Mal was a land of fire and sunsets, here he saw only ice. Prismatic windows sparkled, and bridges arched between white towers. The palace was like frozen lace, a glittering fantasy. He wondered how such a dark place could look so light. But it was fitting that it took its name from the hardest-known substance, diamond, cold and unforgiving.

Mel came alongside of him on her smoky horse. He tried to smile at her, but it didn't work.

She indicated the palace. "It's spectacular."

"Yes." Hated, too, but he couldn't speak of those memories. In his childhood, he and his mother had spent part of each year at the Castle of Clouds back in the cliffs. For a few months, they would be free of Stonebreaker's violence. But if they stayed too long, the king sent soldiers to "escort" them home. After Cobalt became an adult, however, he and Dancer refused to go. Even Stonebreaker realized it would be going too far to have his soldiers drag his family out of his border castle and back to his palace. Instead, he set up conditions intended to make life unbearable for Dancer at the Castle of Clouds. He knew if she came home to the Diamond Palace, Cobalt would as well, to protect her, and Stonebreaker would again have them in his sphere of control. So he refused to allow Dancer any female companions and forbade any man there to speak to her, except her son. She would live in loneliness. With no female servants, she would have to care for herself. He expected her home within a month.

She never went back.

Last year, when Cobalt had ridden to Shazire, Dancer had gone with him as far as Applecroft. Mel's home. And there she had stayed, in that place of warmth and affection. He had hoped she would never have to leave. But Stonebreaker's illness called her home. Just as he was driven to see his grandfather despite—or perhaps because of—the demons that haunted his heart, so too had his mother returned to this chilly universe of ice and cold stone.

Mel fell in love with the Misted Cliffs. Before this visit, she had known this country only by the imposing cliffs on its border with Harsdown. This was her first trip to the interior. The glens, meadows, and small valleys charmed her. She could tell, though, that Cobalt didn't share her enthusiasm. He rode alone and barely spoke to anyone.

They were almost at the Diamond Palace, already passing the sentries who patrolled the area on horseback. She hoped she didn't cause a chill in their reception. Rumors about her mage powers had probably preceded them. She wished she could show Cobalt's people the beauty of the spells without alienating them. Her mother Chime, the mage queen of Harsdown, had once showed her how a prism split light into colors. The order of those colors matched the order of spells, from least to greatest: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and a violet so dark she almost couldn't see it. Red spells brought warmth and light, orange eased pain, yellow soothed emotions, green read emotions, blue healed physical injuries, and indigo healed emotions.

A mage could do spells for any level up to a maximum color, which varied from person to person. Red and orange mages were the most common; Mel knew of roughly twenty-five. Yellow was rarer. The only known greens were Chime and the mage mistress at Castle Suncroft in Aronsdale. The mage mistress at Applecroft in Harsdown was the only pure blue. Iris, the Aronsdale queen, could blend spells of more than one hue, but blue was her strongest color.

Mel's father was an indigo. However, he could only use flawed shapes, which distorted his spells. Instead of warming a room, he could set it on fire; instead of healing, he might cause injury. He had used his abilities during the war eighteen years ago, but he no longer called on his power for fear he would harm those he loved.

Legend claimed that Mel's cousin, King Jarid in Aronsdale, was a violet mage—the color that granted the power of life—but Mel suspected the tales were embellished because of his royal heritage. He was far more likely an indigo. Violet mages were possible, in theory, but she doubted any person could actually wield such a force and survive.

Mel wasn't certain how to define her abilities. Before her marriage, she had never done any spells above green, and she had drawn power only from two-dimensional shapes, which gave a spell less strength than those with three dimensions. But last year, she had called forth a blue spell, and done it with a sphere, the highest shape. She struggled to control her power, though. High-level spells burned her out, and it took days to recover.

Now that Mel no longer lived with her parents, she had no one to train her. Cobalt's people considered her a witch, an object of suspicion. It bothered her more than she wanted to admit, and she hid her spells, wrestling alone with powers she didn't know how to wield. So often she felt inadequate. Sometimes she wanted to write her parents or Queen Iris and entreat them for help. But she always recovered her sense before she sent such a letter. They and their mages had more important matters to attend than the floundering of a confused young woman. If she failed or succeeded, it was her responsibility, not theirs.

Mel's breath caught as their party clattered into a courtyard of the Diamond Palace. Cobalt seemed to crackle with a dark energy, as if he were calling up defenses against this heartlessly beautiful place. Its towers rose above them, white against the sky, and stable boys ran to meet them across the crescent-shaped yard.

After they dismounted and handed their reins to a groom, Cobalt took her through a doorway framed by pillars the size of tree trunks. The tip of its arch was twenty feet above the ground. Her power stirred, nudged by carvings that bordered the arch, circles and hexagons stained Chamberlight blue.

Mel had a sudden memory of her first blue spell. Cobalt had hurt his hands from striking a wall over and over, until the ragged bricks shredded his skin. It happened after he found Stonebreaker hurting Mel. He couldn't strike the king of the Misted Cliffs—so he vented his fury on a wall. Although Mel had mended his physical injuries, no blue spell could heal the wounds in his heart.

Today they were entering Stonebreaker's realm, the icy center of his kingdom where Cobalt would face his dying tormentor.

Drummer jolted awake as the wagon bumped to a stop. After fourteen days in the tedious silence of his guards, any change was welcome. He opened his eyes into the dim sunlight that diffused through the cloth sides of the wagon. His captors had left his wrists tied too long, and his arms ached. Three of the fake merchants were in the wagon, one peering out the back and the other two guarding him. Some cretin had taken off his boots while he slept and bound his ankles as well.

Drummer scowled at the man who sat on a bench across from him. "You must all find me fearsome indeed, that you need so many warriors to guard an unarmed man whose hands and feet are tied."



“You talk too much,” the man said, his voice drawn out in the accent of Taka Mal.

“Where are we?” Drummer asked.

“Here,” the man said.

“That was helpful,” Drummer grumbled. When the guard dropped his hand to his sheathed dagger, Drummer closed his mouth.

The man at the back of the wagon moved aside as someone opened the flaps. A man was standing outside. “You can go in,” he said.

Drummer squinted out and glimpsed a wedge of sky. Onion towers and stone walls the color of amber gleamed in the rich sunlight. He swore under his breath. He knew of only one structure built from stone that color, with such magnificent architecture: the Topaz Palace of Quaaz.

Drummer had a sudden memory from another time he had ended up in serious trouble when he had been fourteen. He snuck out one night to the mill. He just wanted to climb on the wheel. It was fun. But he had fallen onto a stack of grain sacks, which toppled into another, and that into another, until many sacks had spilled. Mortified, he had spent hours trying to clean it up. But one boy could only do so much. In the end, he had confessed and asked for help. It had taken his and the millers’ families all day to put the mess right, and Drummer had spent several days in jail, eating gruel and feeling stupid. When they let him go home, his father had dourly informed him that if he didn’t quit misbehaving, he would end up with a life of doom. His father had been big on overly dramatic proclamations, but now Drummer wished he had paid more attention, for he had apparently landed in even worse trouble. Surely this couldn’t be just because of Tardy Town. But he had no idea what else he had done.

The wagon rolled forward, its back flaps open enough that he caught glimpses of their surroundings. They were rolling through a yard full of people in exotic silks or colorful robes. The wagon stopped so its back faced two doors with black metal braces. The doors creaked loudly as men heaved them open. The driver brought the wagon around and drove into the dim place beyond the door. Cool air seeped into the back, along with the faint scent of wine. Drummer couldn’t see much, but he would have bet his glitter they were riding past kegs of fine, aged wines.

Come to think of it, where was his glitter? The soldiers had left the instrument lying on a pile of rugs in the wagon, but now it was gone. Alarm surged in Drummer. His glitter was the one possession he truly valued. His sister Chime had given it to him years ago, after he wrote a song for her praising her daughter Mel.

He turned to the man on the bench. “Where is my glitter?”

No answer. It was the same every time he asked questions.

“You can’t take it,” Drummer said.

“Your little harp is fine,” the guard growled.

“Can I have it back?” Drummer asked.

“Flaming hell if I know.”

Drummer thought of the stories his mother had told him about hell. It had no colors. Demons lived there. It contrasted with the Land of the Spirits where saints, angels, and deities lived, and especially the spirits of the departed. Spirits only landed in hell if they had committed truly evil misdeeds in their life. Right now, Drummer felt like nominating his guards as prime candidates.

“How about you untie my feet?” he said. “My ankles hurt.”

The man gave a snort. “Think you can run, eh? Think again.”

Oh, well. He hadn’t expected it to work. He wondered how they planned to get him out of the wagon. They had probably tied his feet because the wagon was going slowly within a city, making it easier to escape. However, he couldn’t walk wherever they wanted him to go, either. He hoped they didn’t intend to carry him. It would be mortifying.

The wagon jerked to a stop. Voices rumbled outside, too low to understand, especially with that Taka Mal drawl. Then someone whipped aside the cloth at the back of the wagon. More soldiers waited in the dim cellar.

A hand grasped Drummer’s arm.

“Hai!” Startled nearly out of his skin, Drummer jumped up. He couldn’t stand on his bound ankles, so he immediately fell over. Pain stabbed his ankles. The guard who had grasped his arm held him upright with a strong grip.

Drummer glared up at the husky behemoth. “It would be a lot easier if you untied me.”

“Sit down,” the man said.

The warrior looked vexed enough to flatten him. He was also a head taller than Drummer and probably twice his weight, with all those muscles. Drummer sat.

The guard said nothing more. He did, however, crouch down and untie Drummer’s ankles. With an exhale of relief, Drummer stretched his legs. They prickled with returning sensation, but at least they were free. His arms didn’t hurt much, mainly because they had gone numb.

“How about my wrists?” Drummer asked as the guard stood up.

“No.” The man indicated the back of the wagon. “Go.”

Drummer stood more slowly this time. His legs throbbed, but he managed a tentative walk. Although he felt clumsy with his arms behind his back, he had a good sense of balance. When he couldn’t earn his way as a minstrel, he did acrobatics. He sang better than he tumbled, but he wasn’t bad at either, if he did say so himself. Right now he wasn’t saying anything, though, given how much it annoyed his guards.

Three large warriors waited outside the wagon. One had a ring of keys hanging on his metal-studded belt. Drummer couldn’t climb out with his wrists bound, so the guards lifted him down. Drummer wished they didn’t loom so much. Why bother tying him? He was no match for even one of them. Then again, he could duck, dart and run faster than anyone. Just let them untie him! They would see how fast he vanished into the city.

His three new guards, however, showed no more inclination to untie him than had his kidnappers. One prodded his back with the hilt of a knife. Gritting his teeth, Drummer limped forward in his bare feet. They took him past rows of barrels, all redolent with the fragrance of wine, lovely wine. He inhaled deeply and thought he could get drunk just from the fumes. Eventually, though, they reached a large door with iron braces. One guard unlocked the door and heaved it open, and another nudged Drummer forward. At least these three weren't as rough as the ones who had kidnapped him.

The alcove beyond startled Drummer. It had six walls, like a hexagon. Mosaics tiled every surface in sea-green colors, as if he were underwater. The shapes fascinated him—

The mood spell came without warning. Suddenly he knew what his guards felt. The man with the ring of keys was angry and impatient. Drummer had a sense the fellow wanted to go gamble, though the spell wasn't specific enough for him to be certain. The burly guard felt thirsty and the third guard missed his wife.

Drummer blinked. He mostly ignored his spells, for everyone knew men couldn't be real mages, except for the royal Dawnfields, of course. Centuries of marrying the strongest mages in the land had concentrated the talents until they manifested in the Dawnfield men, too. Drummer had experienced hints of ability since adolescence, but nothing significant, just minor spells like this green one he had made. As the impatient man prodded him forward, he pondered the information the spell had given him about his guards. He wasn't sure what use it had, but one never knew.

After they went through the sea chamber, his spell faded. They came out into a corridor framed by arches. He loved the mosaics on the walls. They started with the indigo of the predawn sky. As he walked down the hall, the colors shaded into the blush of dawn, then into a sunrise, and finally the pale blue of morning.

"This is beautiful," Drummer said.

The guard who liked to gamble grunted at him. "They told me you talk too much. Don't start babbling or I'll gag you."

And you can rot in a crap house. Drummer kept the thought to himself, though. These guards were also a lot bigger than him.

Unexpectedly, the lonely-husband guard said, "We aren't going to gag anyone, Kaj." He glanced at Drummer. With a smile. "And yes, it is beautiful. The whole palace is like this."

Drummer was so amazed by the courtesy, he was momentarily without words. When he recovered, he said, "Do you mind if I ask your name?"

"Javelin," the guard said. "And you are Drummer?"

"That's right." He hesitated. "Why am I here?"

"Even if I knew, I couldn't discuss it." Javelin motioned him into an alcove, this one tiled in desert hues with a sun on the ceiling. No clouds. No shade. He felt hot just passing through. They went up tiled stairs and followed more tiled halls. Before this, he had only experienced such opulence on his visits to Castle Suncroft, home to King Jarid of Aronsdale. Drummer's sister Chime had married Jarid's cousin.

Finally they opened up a locked suite of rooms. The entrance foyer was gorgeous, with aqua mosaics on

its walls. A lamp shaped like a butterfly hung from the domed ceiling and glowed with sunrise colors.

Javelin and the other guard checked the suite while Drummer waited with Kaj, the gambler. Still annoyed with the crack about gagging him, Drummer said, "I'll bet you've never guarded an Aronsdale minstrel before. Aren't you lucky?"

"Shut up," Kaj told him.

"Don't you like to talk?" Drummer asked innocently. "Good conversation is like ambrosia to the human intellect."

Kaj squinted at him. "What?"

The other two guards came back into the foyer. "Everything is in order," Javelin said, with a sharp glance at Kaj. He escorted Drummer into a parlor and indicated a divan upholstered in sunrise colors. "Have a seat."

Drummer had no objection. He was exhausted. As he sat down, Kaj spoke curtly. "Sideways."

Drummer turned to the side, and Kaj sat behind him. When Kaj untied his wrists, Drummer barely restrained his groan of relief. His shoulders ached, and his limbs felt like dead slabs, but he had no doubt sensation would return with a vengeance. He would have winced, except he didn't want Kaj to see his discomfort.

Kaj stood up and looked down at him with his arms crossed. "Don't make trouble. These rooms have no windows and only one exit, which is locked and guarded."

Javelin frowned at Kaj, then spoke to Drummer with courtesy. "You may rest. This suite and everything in it is for your use."

"What will happen to me?" Drummer asked.

Javelin hesitated. "I don't think you will be harmed."

That statement hardly rang with confidence. "Does that mean I might be?"

"Enough!" Kaj said. He spoke to Javelin. "Havej and I can stand guard here while you attend Her Majesty."

So Havej was the third guard, the one who wanted a drink. Drummer sympathized. He could use a good strong one himself.

"Can I get my glittar back?" Drummer asked.

Kaj's face flushed with anger, but Javelin spoke quickly, before the other guard could respond. "I'll check."

After the guards left, Drummer lay on the divan. Closing his eyes, he silently cursed his fate. After a few minutes of dramatic brooding, he decided his time would be better spent exploring his sumptuous prison.

The rooms were gorgeous, with golden furniture and sunrise mosaics. For a prison, he could have done

worse. He had, in fact, many times. At least in those cases, he had known he would be released soon. He had no idea why he was here, though he would lay odds it had to do with his sister being queen of Harsdown. He couldn't imagine any other reason for Taka Mal to bother with him. It scared him, despite his facade of nonchalance with his guards.

He found a bowl of fruit and feasted on bananas, grapes, and oranges. He supposed he should have worried about poison. If they had wanted to kill him, though, they could have already done it plenty of times. In the bathing room, he washed up in the pool, which was tiled with designs of blue roses. His guards apparently didn't consider him dangerous, for they had left the razor on a stand in the bathing room. He shaved the stubble on his chin. Then he wandered naked into the bedroom.

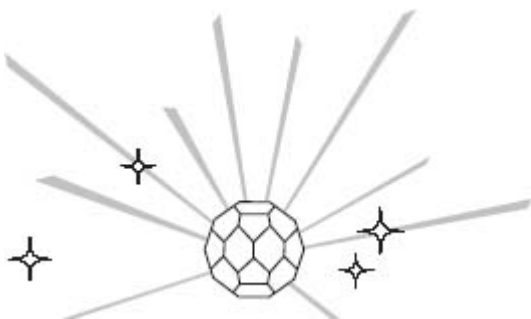
Drummer didn't know whether to be flattered or worried that the clothes in the closets fit him perfectly. Someone had planned his abduction in detail. The garments were far more elegant than his usual attire, they were similar in quality to what he wore when he visited Castle Suncroft in Aronsdale, where he tried not to embarrass his relatives by dressing like a scrubby minstrel. These trousers were deep blue and tucked into boots tooled with vine designs. The silk shirt was white. It fastened at the neck, but he didn't like tying it, so he left it open halfway down his chest. The vest he tried felt constraining, and he put it back in the closet. When he finished dressing, he felt better.

Noises came from the foyer. He went to investigate and found his three guards.

"Greetings," Drummer said.

They regarded him with impassive expressions.

"The queen will see you now," Javelin said.



4

## Heart of Ice

Mel and Cobalt entered Stonebreaker's huge bedroom together. The room was full of people. Mel recognized none of them, neither the guards posted around the dais nor the servants seeing to the king's every need. Stonebreaker was sitting up in bed, discussing a scroll with his scribe. The king's silvered hair swept back from a face of noble lines with a strong nose and chin. He was a handsome man, proud and aristocratic, and even in his sickbed, he had a presence that commanded.

She could see a resemblance between Stonebreaker and Cobalt. But everything about Cobalt was more. It wasn't only that he was taller and more powerfully built than his grandfather. He had a vibrancy that the king lacked. More intelligence. A stronger sense of self. More strength of character, from what Mel had seen. Cobalt simply surpassed the king.

The aides and guards bowed to Cobalt. They darted glances at Mel, but averted their gazes when she caught them watching her. She knew the staff bowed to the royal family, but she was almost certain that when a member of the Chamberlight family arrived at the palace after an absence, people were supposed to kneel.

Cobalt's expression tightened. The older servants had seen him beaten and whipped by the king in his childhood, and she knew he brooded on their lack of intervention. He didn't care if they knelt, but it mattered to him that they gave respect. She had no doubt they feared Stonebreaker, especially now, when the king could misinterpret any honor they showed his heir. If they knelt to Cobalt, his grandfather could take it as a deliberate slight, a wish to see him dead and Cobalt on the throne.

The king, however, looked fine. Mel didn't know whether to feel relieved for his health or angry that he had pulled Cobalt across four countries to attend him. She saw no sign of paralysis. His face seemed normal and he was using both arms as he held the scroll. He looked up as Cobalt and Mel came forward, and he registered neither surprise nor pleasure at the sight of his heir. He just set down his quill. He waved his hand and the men attending him left immediately, pausing only to bow to Cobalt.

When everyone was gone except for the guards posted around the walls, the king beckoned to his grandson.

He didn't acknowledge Mel with even a glance, so she stayed back.

Cobalt went to the bed and bowed, as expected of the heir to the king. "I am pleased to see you looking so well, Grandfather."

"Are you?" Stonebreaker's voice was almost as resonant as his heir's. Almost. He motioned to a dark wing chair by the bed. "Sit. Tell me about your trip."

Cobalt glanced at Mel. She shook her head slightly and hoped he wouldn't press the issue of Stonebreaker's discourtesy to her.

The king spoke dourly. "I see you brought your wife."

"Yes." Cobalt held out his hand to Mel.

Her face was growing hot. She came over and bowed to the king. "It is an honor to attend you, Your Majesty."

Stonebreaker narrowed his gaze at her. But then he indicated another chair. "Bring that one over."

Relieved he hadn't found reason to take offense, Mel moved her chair next to Cobalt's. Then they sat, stiff and formal.

"You look improved," Cobalt told his grandfather.

"How would you know?" Stonebreaker asked. "You weren't here."

Cobalt's jaw tensed. "General Cragland told me of your illness. I am glad the paralysis wasn't permanent."

“Well, then, it wasn’t paralysis, was it?” Stonebreaker studied him as if Cobalt were a bug under a magnifying glass. “I hope that doesn’t disappoint you.”

A muscle twitched in Cobalt’s jaw. “Of course not.”

Mel spoke. “May we do anything for Your Majesty?”

“Like what?” Stonebreaker asked. “Take over my duties? I’m not dead yet, girl.”

Mel stared at him. In the same moment that she said, “I would never—” Cobalt said, “Don’t talk to her that way.”

Stonebreaker turned a hard gaze on his grandson. “You should have left her in Shazire. You only had to marry that rube. You didn’t have to inflict her on us.”

Cobalt clenched the arms of his chair. “You will not speak of my wife in that manner.”

Stonebreaker leaned forward. “And you will not speak to me in that manner, boy.”

“I haven’t been a boy for twenty years.” Cobalt’s voice grated.

“You consider yourself a man?” Stonebreaker asked. “Why? Because you have a pretty wife?” He gave Mel an appraising glance that lasted too long for courtesy, and she sat under his scrutiny with her face burning. To Cobalt, he said, “So where is your heir, hmm? You’ve been wed over a year and I see no sign of any success on your part to father one.”

Cobalt started to stand, his face darkening with a familiar rage. Mel grabbed his arm and held him in his chair. He could have easily thrown her off, but instead he took a slow breath and settled back down.

With stiff control, Cobalt asked, “Has Mother arrived?”

The king considered him. “She is here.”

Relief washed over Mel. At least one person here would properly welcome Cobalt.

“That’s good,” Cobalt said. His posture relaxed a bit.

“Yes, I imagine so,” Stonebreaker said.

Mel’s tension began to ease. Perhaps this would be all right if they kept to neutral subjects.

“How is Mother?” Cobalt asked.

“As well as can be imagined,” Stonebreaker said, “given that you killed her husband.”

Cobalt stared at him, unable to hide his shock. Mel had no love of Varqelle, but she knew Cobalt’s grief. Watching his father die from wounds taken in battle had nearly destroyed him. Her anger brought out her words before her caution could stop them.

“You go too far,” she told the king.

“Perhaps it is you who goes too far, wife of my grandson.”

Cobalt rose to his feet, drawing Mel up with him. “We will attend you later, Grandfather.” The iron control in his voice tore Mel apart. With one sentence, Stonebreaker may have undone months of healing.

“I didn’t give you leave to go,” the king said.

“Nevertheless, we are going.” Cobalt bowed, stiff in his anger. Stonebreaker could have imprisoned him for that defiance. He let it go—for now. Mel had no doubt he would retaliate in ways that made him look noble and Cobalt appear vicious.

After they left the suite, Mel sagged against the wall of the corridor. She said nothing, aware of Stonebreaker’s guards at the entrance. Cobalt urged her forward. They followed an icy hall, so white and brilliant and beautiful, with blue mosaics along the vaulted ceiling. So lovely. So cold.

Mel was upset enough that several minutes passed before she realized they weren’t alone. Four bodyguards in white and blue accompanied them, a few steps to either side or behind. Distracted, she looked up at Cobalt. He seemed as far away as the mountains.

“Cobalt?” she asked.

His voice matched their cold surroundings. “What?”

“Where are we going?”

“My rooms.” His face was unreadable. The husband she had come to love was gone and a stranger had taken his place.

Mel held back her questions. This wasn’t the time. She felt the loss of her former life like a physical pain. Applecroft glowed in her memory, an unattainable dream of warmth. The humble name referred to her parents’ orchards and estate in Harsdown. Her mother Chime had been a farm girl who married a prince, for a Dawnfield heir had to wed the most powerful mage he could find among Aronsdale’s eligible women. Chime had grown up taking her personal freedom for granted, and she raised her daughter the same way. Somehow Mel had to adapt to the icy formality of the Diamond Palace without losing herself.

In pastoral, warm Shazire, she and Cobalt had grown close. Here in the place of his emotionally impoverished childhood, he had withdrawn. He had spent his life both hating Stonebreaker and struggling to prove his worth to his grandfather. She doubted he would ever understand that jealousy drove Stonebreaker to crush his spirit. The king would never forgive Cobalt for being more than him. He would never grant his heir the validation Cobalt sought. Mel feared this visit would tear open Cobalt’s wounds and destroy his hard-earned peace of mind.

What that meant for the two of them, she couldn’t yet see, but she felt as if she were grieving the loss of the man she had known in Shazire. If this visit shattered Cobalt—if it let free the tyrant within him—the citizens of three countries would suffer the consequences of his despair.

Jade met her hostage in a place that gave her advantage. It was an instinctive choice, but she knew her instincts well enough to trust them. She sat on her throne in the Audience Hall, with its golden walls and



columns of rose marble. The ceiling was so high, birds flew beneath the skylights. A Kazlatarian carpet extended from the doors to the dais where Jade sat. Her cousin Baz stood by her side, impressive in his gold-and-crimson general's regalia. She wore a gold silk tunic and pants, and a dagger on her belt.

Three guards brought in her prisoner. Drummer Headwind was less imposing than she expected. His shaggy gold curls needed trimming and had no business being so appealing. He was dressed too informally to meet a queen. He hadn't even fastened his shirt, for saints' sake; she could see his leanly muscled chest halfway to his navel. He had a sensual walk, lithe and supple. Her pulse surged, but she tried to ignore it. His large blue eyes gave him an innocent look. Bah. She wouldn't trust that angelic face as far as a thirsty soldier could spit.

His guards—Javelin, Havej, and sullen Kaj—brought him to the dais and bowed. Drummer stood gaping at Jade until Kaj shoved his shoulder. Drummer went down clumsily on one knee, finally bending his head in the expected deference.

She let him kneel for a while. Then she said, "You may rise."

He looked up, his face flushed. Then he got stiffly back up to his feet. Sweat had beaded on his brow. Either he wasn't used to kneeling, which seemed unlikely given his relatives, or else his trip here had drained him more than it should have. That troubled Jade. A great difference existed between keeping a hostage a bit off balance and mistreating him. The soldiers who fetched him had better not have abused him. He was a tool to use against Cobalt Escar, and his freedom would depend on how well his family negotiated, but she had no wish to hurt the fellow. She hoped eventually to release him, and she didn't want him taking home tales of inhumane treatment.

Jade knew he was trouble, though, with that face of his and his reputation for mischief. She should be done with him as soon as possible. And yet, it pleased her to know he was hers for a time.

"Welcome to Taka Mal, Goodsir Drummer," she said.

"Thank you, Your Majesty." He didn't look at all grateful. "I'm afraid I don't merit the title Goodsir, however. I'm not gentry."

"You are the youngest brother of Chime Headwind Dawn-field, are you not?"

His face paled. "Yes."

Good. He didn't deny the obvious. She got up and went down the stairs. Baz came with her, the jeweled hilts of his swords glinting on his belt. She stopped in front of Drummer. She was average height for a woman of Taka Mal, but the heels on her boots put her eyes level with his. She smiled and he looked alarmed.

"You will be my guest for a while," she said.

"How long?" he asked.

"You needn't trouble yourself with that."

"I'm a hostage for Cobalt's good behavior, is that it?" A bead of sweat ran down his temple. "If he doesn't attack Taka Mal, I get to live."

“You are one of several strategies,” Jade allowed.

An audacious glint came into his eyes. “I’ve heard the queen of Taka Mal is a great strategist. No one ever told me she was also a great beauty.” He made his words a challenge rather than a compliment.

She gave him an unimpressed look. “Don’t bother trying to soften me up with flattery. I’ve heard it from the best of them.”

His grin flashed, an expression so dazzling Jade wondered her hair didn’t sizzle. “It’s not flattery. Just truth.” His smile vanished. “Your men took my glitter. I would like it back.”

“Your what?” She was still recovering from that brilliant smile.

“My glitter. It’s an Aronsdale harp.”

“Why should they give it back?”

He considered that. She thought he would get angry, but then he tried a different tack. His honeyed voice poured over her. “I will compose a ballad in honor of your beauty.”

Jade knew his words were calculated to unsettle her, flattery yes, but also a challenge to her authority. He wielded them like a velvet-coated mallet. But when his lashes lowered halfway over his eyes, she didn’t think he knew he was doing it or how sensual he looked. She could see why he had a reputation for inspiring women to seek his kisses.

Bah. Foolish women. “Why ever would I want to hear you sing?” she asked.

“Because,” he murmured, “my voice is ambrosia.”

“You certainly have a high opinion of yourself.”

“Only when I’m inspired.”

Baz spoke tightly. “Take your blighted inspiration elsewhere.”

Jade knew that tone. If Drummer didn’t watch out, he would end up with a knife between his ribs. She motioned to his guards. “You can take him back to his suite.” Inclining her head to Drummer, she added, “It has pleased me to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mutual,” he said. “It would please me even more if you would let me go.”

Ha. Now he told the truth. “Why? I thought I inspired you to create great music.”

His voice softened. “More than you know.”

Jade blinked. That sounded more genuine than calculated. Flustered, she spoke formally, distancing herself from him. “Goodman Headwind, I hope you enjoy the hospitality of my court. You may go now.”

Before Drummer could say anything more, the guards swept him off down the hall. At the doors, he paused to look back at her. Then Kaj grabbed his arm and pushed him out the doorway.

“That one is trouble,” Jade said. She had never met anyone like him. Men in Taka Mal glowered and strode boldly and menaced with their dark ferocity. Drummer’s differences fascinated her.

“If he doesn’t take care,” Baz said, “he will never see home again.”

Jade could almost feel him seething. She turned to her cousin. “Baz, he is my guest.”

He scowled at her. “He’s not a toy. If you dishonor a queen’s brother, her family could consider it an act of war.”

“Dishonor him?” She had to laugh, though it hurt. “An odd proposition, given how most men view women in this country.” Like property, though she wouldn’t say it aloud. She didn’t want to encourage such thoughts. “But I’ve no such intention.”

“Well, you can’t marry him. He’s a commoner.”

“Oh, for saints’ sake. I just met the man. Stop worrying.”

He scowled at her. “Admit it, Jade. You liked him.”

She didn’t know which irked her more, Baz’s assumptions or the idea that he might be right. He and Jade had grown up together, he the son of her paternal aunt. He knew her better than anyone.

“Baz, listen,” she said. “I’m no naive girl to be swayed by a minstrel’s flattery. I think we should stop worrying about Queen Chime’s brother and work on our plans for Jazid.”

He looked as if he wanted to keep arguing. After a pause, though, he said, “All right.”

But as they headed to her study, where they plotted strategy, he fell silent. It made Jade uneasy. Drummer she could handle.

Baz was the one who worried her.

A pounding roused Mel from a fitful sleep. She peered groggily at the unfamiliar canopy overhead. Someone was knocking. As she sat up, a door opened in another room somewhere, followed by an urgent murmur of voices.

Cobalt rolled toward Mel, restless even in his sleep. When she touched his shoulder, he sat up fast, knocking away her hand. She was used to his abrupt awakenings. His men thought it came from battle readiness, and perhaps that was part of it. But Mel knew the full truth; it was the legacy of a child who knew he could be dragged from his sleep and thrashed if he transgressed in the slightest against an endless and impossible set of rules.

Cobalt pulled her into his arms and held her hard. Gradually the fast beat of his heart slowed. Finally he drew back, calmer now, though he never said a word. He rarely spoke of his nightmares or fevered wakings.

“Someone was knocking,” Mel said.

He nodded and left their bed, pulling on a robe he had tossed across the footboard. As he strode from the room, Mel dressed more carefully in a silk sleep tunic and pants, conscious of the rigid customs here for women. Then she went into the Silver Room of their suite. The moment she saw their visitor, her pulse stuttered. It was Quill, Stonebreaker's scribe. He was speaking to Cobalt in a low voice while one of Mel's sphere-maids hovered nearby. Cobalt had a strange look, as if he were ill.

Mel went over to them. "Is it the king?"

Cobalt turned to her. He seemed to have trouble breathing. "Another stroke."

Mel couldn't imagine worse timing. Cobalt's last words with his grandfather had been spoken in anger. If Stonebreaker didn't recover, Cobalt would torment himself with guilt. Mel wanted to tell Cobalt that it wasn't his fault, it had never been his fault; Stonebreaker was a monster who never deserved a child to raise. But Cobalt would resent her for speaking such words in front of others.

So instead she asked, "May I come with you?"

Something gathered in his eyes, moisture, from Cobalt the Dark who supposedly never wept. But Mel had seen him holding his dead father with tears pouring down his face.

"Yes," he said softly. "Come." Then he turned to Quill. "Wait here, please, while we dress."

Quill bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty."

A chill went through Mel. It was true Cobalt had that title, for he ruled Shazire. But it was a less powerful country than the Misted Cliffs. The heir to the Sapphire Throne outranked the king of Shazire. But as the Chamberlight heir, Cobalt was a Highness; only a king and his consort carried the title of Majesty. Mel remembered how Stonebreaker's staff had responded when Cobalt first arrived at the palace, as if they feared to acknowledge his status. That Quill used the title now spoke volumes about Stonebreaker's condition. Mel wondered if Quill even thought the king would survive the night.

Mel didn't know which she feared more—that Stonebreaker would live and continue to destroy his grandson, or that he would die and make Cobalt king of the Misted Cliffs.

Dancer Chamberlight Escar had hair the color of a raven's wing. Streaked with silver, it framed her alabaster face and fell to her waist. Faint lines creased the corners of her eyes, and her delicate cheekbones gave her an ethereal aspect. Tonight, a pale silk tunic and trousers draped her graceful build. The intelligence of her expression made it hard to look away from her face. As a girl, Dancer had been pretty; at fifty-one years of age, she was a great beauty.

In the dark time of morning, three hours before sunrise, Mel and Cobalt joined Dancer. She had already arrived in the foyer outside Stonebreaker's suite. Cobalt embraced his mother with awkward gentleness. She was small and fragile next to his massive form, and her head came only halfway up his chest. Tears leaked down her face. Then she pulled away, restrained again, and wiped away her tears with the heel of her hand.

It was only the second time Mel had seen Cobalt and Dancer hug each other; the first had been when he returned from the war in Shazire. Now they stood together, the only kin of the man dying in the next room. Mel didn't intrude on the complex waves of their grief. She folded her hand around the sphere that

hung from her neck on a gold chain. It was as perfectly round as metalworkers could make the shape. Dancer and Cobalt had to decide if they wanted the nebulous aid she could offer as a mage.

They spoke quietly for a while and then came to her. Cobalt stood behind Dancer, a wall at her back, and the former Harsdown queen regarded her daughter-in-law with dark eyes. She spoke in her moonlight voice. “My son says you are a mage. A healer.”

“A little,” Mel said.

“Can you cure my father?”

“I cannot give him life if his illness is fatal,” Mel said. Only a violet adept had the power to heal mortal wounds. Only such a mage could use spells to give life—or take it.

The queen spoke quietly. “I understand you helped my husband after the Alzire battle.”

“I tried.” Mel’s voice caught. “I failed.”

“Cobalt says you eased Varqelle’s pain as he died.” Her gaze never wavered. “And that the attempt nearly killed you.”

Mel just nodded, unable to speak. She had poured her last resources into the dying king, but his wounds had been too severe. Her best spells hadn’t been enough.

“You had every reason to hate my husband,” Dancer said. “Yet you offered your life in an effort to save his.”

“It is my oath as a mage,” Mel said. “To bring light. To heal.” No matter how much she abhorred the person.

Cobalt spoke raggedly. “If you help Grandfather—” He either couldn’t or wouldn’t continue. But Mel knew his question; would she live?

“I was too drained then,” Mel said. “I am rested now.” It was true. She didn’t say she had no more training in using her mage powers now than she had that night, for she couldn’t assure him it wouldn’t hurt her to use her ability.

“I have heard other tales of your deeds that day,” Dancer’s voice had a distant quality, as if her words came across a field. “They say you walked through the battle wielding a sword of flame that touched the sky.”

The stories had grown until Mel hardly recognized herself. She had done no more than create a simple red spell. She made light. But she powered it with a catapult ball. A sphere.

The Chamberlight army had already won the battle—but then a Shazire warrior broke through to Varqelle and struck him down. In his enraged grief, Cobalt would have massacred every Shazire soldier on the field. To stop him, Mel had made her desperate spell. She held her sword high, and a pillar of light stretched from it into the sky. In the dusk, it lit the entire battlefield, throwing fighters into sharp relief. She walked among them and no one touched her. It stopped the fighting. Cobalt knew the truth, that she had created no more than light, but the tales of her “sorcery” burned far brighter than her actual spell.

“I don’t know how much I can help His Majesty,” Mel said. “But I can promise I will do no harm.”

“No harm?” Bitterness saturated Dancer’s voice. “He would live. What greater harm could you do?”

Mel froze. Whatever Dancer thought of the king, she had never spoken of him in such a manner.

Cobalt laid his large hand on his mother’s shoulder. “If we don’t try, we will regret it.”

The former queen’s posture sagged. To Mel she said, simply, “Please try.”

A solitary light burned in Stonebreaker’s suite, a lamp on the nightstand by his canopied bed. He lay on his back among voluminous covers, his eyes closed, his breathing shallow, his body seeming to have collapsed in on itself.

The elderly physician was in a chair by the bed, dozing, his bag open in his lap. With his white hair and wrinkled face, he seemed as frail as his patient. Quill touched his shoulder, and the doctor opened bleary eyes. “Eh?”

“His Majesty’s family is here,” Quill said.

The doctor squinted past him to where Cobalt stood with Mel. He rose to his feet, awkward with sleep and age, and his bag fell to the floor. Grabbing for it, the doctor lost his balance. Quill put out a steadying hand to catch him, then retrieved the bag.

“How is my grandfather?” Cobalt asked.

The doctor spoke heavily. “He barely lives.”

The dim light gave Cobalt an even darker aspect than usual. “Do you know why he had another attack?”

The elderly man blanched, and sweat beaded his forehead. “Your Majesty, please believe I have done my absolute best for him.”

Mel knew Cobalt wasn’t blaming him. But Stonebreaker’s staff lived in fear of censure. Nothing could always go perfectly, and when mistakes occurred, Stonebreaker always assigned blame regardless of whether or not it was deserved. In his reality, he never erred; he only meted out punishment, anything from dismissal of his staff to the whippings Cobalt had endured as a child.

Mel spoke gently to the doctor. “I can tend His Majesty.”

The physician’s gaze flicked to Mel and back to Cobalt. He stumbled over his words. “Your grandfather—I...I have done what I can. But he—please give him his last hours.”

Then Mel understood. The doctor feared she meant to speed Stonebreaker’s death. She held her medallion, concentrating on a spell to soothe emotions, and yellow light surrounded her hand. The doctor stepped back, his gaze panicked. Then the spell began to affect him, and some of the fear left his eyes.

“It’s all right,” Mel murmured. The light remained around her hand, but the spell enveloped the doctor, Cobalt and Dancer, Quill, and the bodyguards. “I can help him,” she said. “Ease his pain. Give him more

time.”

The doctor stared at her, his eyes like silver coins, flat and hard. Then he took a breath and his shoulders came down from their hunched position. Dancer stood with Cobalt, her face drawn and pale. Aware of them watching, Mel went to the bed. No one stopped her. Stonebreaker was near this side, and she sat down by his still figure. She imagined a luminous sky, wildflowers scattered across a meadow, her mother’s blue eyes, and the deep, deep lakes of her home. Blue light spilled over Stonebreaker as Mel gave her spell to him. His body glowed in the radiance.

Slowly, so slowly, his lashes lifted. He stared at the canopy, his gray eyes pale in the blue light. His whisper rattled. “Dancer?”

“I am here.” Dancer stepped forward, her silks rustling. Mel moved away from the bed to give her privacy. As Dancer sat by her father and gently brushed the hair back from his forehead, blue light flowed around them.

Stonebreaker took her hand. “Farewell, daughter.” His voice sounded like parchment crinkling. “Remember me...”

A tear ran down her porcelain face. “I will.”

He patted her hand. “You have been a good daughter to me.”

Her voice broke. “Thank you.”

“Is Cobalt here?”

Cobalt stepped forward into the blue light. His face had a clenched look, as if everything within him, every emotion and memory, had tightened into a fist. “Here, Grandfather.”

“Closer,” Stonebreaker whispered. “Just you.”

Dancer hesitated, her forehead furrowed, her gaze going from her father to her son. Cobalt stood like a statue.

“I must speak to my heir,” Stonebreaker said.

No, Mel thought. She knew Dancer didn’t want to leave Cobalt with him, either. But who could deny the king his dying request to speak with the man who would follow him on the throne? And maybe, just maybe, Stonebreaker would offer some words of peace, as he had done with Dancer.

Dancer twisted her hands in her sleeves as she stepped away from the bed. A deep fatigue was spreading through Mel. If she held this spell much longer, she would slip into a death trance like the one she had suffered when she tried to heal King Vargelle.

Cobalt sat on the bed and leaned into his grandfather. Stonebreaker’s lips moved as he whispered to his heir, and Mel saw the bewildered anguish on Cobalt’s face. No! she thought. Don’t hurt him. Desperate, she tried to reach them with a mood spell, but she had stretched her power too far, and she had nothing left. She was a blue flame, flickering, losing its essence. The room rippled in a haze.

As Mel collapsed, Dancer tried to catch her. The doctor hesitated, confusion and suspicion warring on

his face, and Mel slipped out of Dancer's grip, crumpling to the floor. She could no longer see Stonebreaker, the doctor, even Dancer—only Cobalt. He left the bed and came to her in slow motion, his face contorted with fear.

Come back. Cobalt knelt down and gathered her into his arms. He held her head against his chest. His voice seemed to echo in her mind though she was certain he was speaking aloud. Stay with me, Mel.

Suddenly the world jolted back to normal, and with a gasp, she sagged against him.

A rustle of robes came from nearby, and the doctor spoke. His voice trembled. "Your grandfather—"

Cobalt rose to his full height, drawing Mel to her feet as well. The doctor stared up at him, fear in his gaze. Dancer was sitting on the bed next to her father, her head bent, one of his hands in hers.

Her shoulders shook as she wept.

Standing behind Mel, Cobalt gripped her shoulders, his fingers digging into the layers of her tunic. She was too stunned to react. It couldn't have happened. Not yet. Incense permeated the air, though earlier she had smelled nothing. She knew that smell. It was the scent of passing, the scent of endings.

The scent of death.

In the Misted Cliffs, along the sea, across the valleys and hills, people burned a certain incense to mourn a passing from life into the realms beyond. Tonight, in these vaulted rooms of wealth and power and bitterness, a king had taken his final breath and entered the long path walked by spirits.

Quill stepped back from the brazier where he had lit the incense. No one else moved, not Cobalt nor Dancer nor the doctor nor the guards. Mel didn't know what Stonebreaker had told Cobalt, but she had seen her husband's anguish. He had never come to terms with his agonized memories. If Stonebreaker had exacerbated that pain on his deathbed, all the settled lands might pay the price of Cobalt's torment.

Dancer slowly lifted her head. She stood up, her face streaked with tears. Her dark eyes blazed, though whether in anguish or triumph, Mel didn't know.

Then the queen knelt to her son.

Cobalt's voice rasped. "What are you doing? Get up."

She rose to her feet in a graceful motion. "Hail, Your Majesty, King of Chamberlight and Alzire."

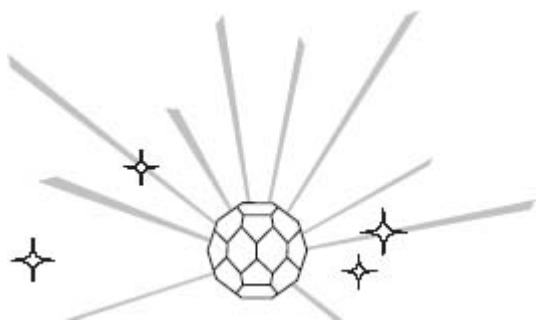
The doctor jerked as if someone had yanked him out of ice. Then he, too, knelt, stiffly, slowly. In her side vision, Mel saw Quill and the guards going down as well. Cobalt froze, clenching her shoulders, and her fear increased.

It's too late to show him honor, Mel thought. The damage has already been done. She had no illusions about her husband. He burned with the fire of a conqueror. If he never vanquished his inner demons, he would pour his anguish into the crucible of war and blaze through the settled lands. What cruelty had Stonebreaker bequeathed him from his deathbed? Nothing could ever appease Cobalt's torment now, for from this moment on, nothing could ever force Stonebreaker to acknowledge his grandson's worth.

Mel feared Cobalt would drive himself until no place and no country would be safe from the Midnight



King—no matter what price they paid in blood.



5

### The Midnight Throne

After two days with nothing to do except make futile escape attempts, Drummer wanted to climb the walls. His guards ignored his attempts to talk to them, so he had another desultory lunch by himself. The food was excellent, if unfamiliar, meat with curry, but as with every meal here, he ate alone. He was ready to shout with frustration at the loss of his coveted freedom.

With no warning, Kaj strode into the parlor and dropped a cloth bundle on the divan. As he turned around, a flap of cloth fell off the bundle, revealing a gleam of golden wood.

Drummer jumped to his feet. “My glittar!”

Kaj grunted.

Drummer grinned at the bad-tempered gambler. “I shall compose a song of gratitude for you.”

“Try it,” Kaj growled, “and your harp will be in little pieces all around you on the floor. That’s what happens when you break something over someone’s head.”

Drummer regarded him innocently. “Do people break things over your head so often that you know the pattern?”

Kaj’s face purpled. “You are fortunate the queen wants you alive and happy.” He stalked from the room.

“Nice to see you, too,” Drummer said, but he waited until Kaj was gone.

He sat on the divan and picked up his glittar. Its curving frame fit perfectly in his hand. He tuned the harp and was gratified to hear its mellow sound. They had even polished the wood and cleaned the strings. Apparently someone here appreciated fine instruments.

Carrying the harp, he wandered through his suite, searching for a place to practice. None of the rooms felt right. Too confining. Finally he went to where he could feel fresh air on his face, a balcony he had missed his first day because it was behind a door that resembled a wall panel. The balcony was high up a tower, with a four-story drop to the ground. Drummer had thought for all of two seconds about trying to climb down and realized he valued his life too much. The wall had no handholds, fingerholds, or fingernail holds, and a fall from up here would splatter him all over the royal courtyard.

He loved the balcony, though. He could look out over the palace and city. Quaaz teemed with life—vendors in the streets, carts rolling, children running, news criers shouting and palace guards tromping along the alleys.

Drummer sat on the retaining wall of the balcony. He wouldn't fall; the brass railing on the wall was high enough to lean against. He sat in a corner, his arm resting on the rail, and settled the glittar against his body. When he plucked the strings, notes rippled through the air. It pleased him to have the means of his livelihood back, even if he had no one to play for.

After warming up his voice and his fingers, he eased into a country song that many a fellow had asked him to play for his girl:

On the slide of sweet night,

In the time of drowsing,

In the silvery light,

And the stars carousing,

Beneath a wistful moon,

On the mosses sighing,

O kiss me softly soon,

Love is never dying.

"Such lovely words," a woman said. "False, but pretty."

Drummer nearly jumped off the balcony. Only the rail kept him from plunging to his untimely death. He hopped down from the wall and held his glittar like a shield while he faced the invader who menaced him from the doorway.

The queen of Taka Mal had come to visit.

She wore a silk tunic and trousers the color of topaz. The outfit did nothing to hide her voluptuous curves. Her dark eyes tilted upward, and their lush fringe of lashes made her large eyes look even bigger. Black curls framed her face and tumbled to her shoulders. His jailor had arrived without her scowling generals—in breathtaking form.

Drummer finally remembered himself and bowed. "Your Majesty."

"You play well," she said.

He strummed an impromptu melody and sang. "She glides into the night, or actually my noon/She's really quite a sight, I think I've met my doom."

Laughing, she winced. "That's terrible poetry."

“Thank you. I wrote it while you were standing there.”

“I don’t know whether to be insulted or complimented.”

He answered slow and lazy. “Take your pick.”

Her lips curved upward. “I’ll take it as a compliment.”

“When are you going to let me go?”

“I don’t know. It depends on your relatives.”

At least she was honest about it. He held his glitter in one hand and stepped forward. Her subtle perfume distracted him. Lifting his hand, he almost touched her dark hair.

“If I have to be hostage,” he murmured, “I couldn’t ask for a more fascinating captor.” He was as incensed now as the day her men had abducted him, but when she came near him like this, his ire stirred him to do foolish things. He wasn’t sure how much was anger and how much came from a different passion altogether. With the audacity that had so often landed him in trouble, he said, “I’d die for one kiss from those wine-plum lips.”

Her eyes closed slightly, giving her a sensually dangerous look. In a low voice, she said, “You most certainly would.”

He lifted a curl of her silky hair and brushed his knuckles on her cheek. “Are you going to call the guards?”

“To protect who? Me?” She moved his hand away from her face, but she held on to it for several moments before she released him. “Or you?”

“Do I need protection from you?”

“I think you need it from yourself.”

“I always have.” It was true.

“You could be locked in a cell for touching the queen.”

“I’m already in a cell.”

“A dungeon,” she said in a voice that was somehow sultry and menacing at the same time. “With chains.”

He answered in a low voice. “Your chains are as sweet as they are brutal, desert queen.”

“Never brutal. Not for you.” Her voice poured over him like thick, dark honey, and her eyes had a glossy look, though whether it was a challenge or an invitation, he was afraid to guess. He wondered if she even realized how she appeared to him.

Softly, he said, “You chained me the moment you took my freedom.” He knew he should grab her, use her as a hostage, bluff his way free. The guards were outside the suite, but she had come in without their

protection. Why? He leaned forward, and she watched as if daring him to touch her. So he did something even more perilous than taking her captive.

He kissed her.

For one astonishing instant, her lips softened. Then she gasped as if jolted back to reality. She gave him a hearty shove and sent him stumbling back into the balcony wall. Drummer stared at her, his heart beating hard. He couldn't believe he had been such a fool to take that liberty. Ah, but what a liberty. Eyes blazing, Vizarana Jade stepped up to him, and she was truly an unparalleled sight.

Then she slapped him.

Her palm hit his cheek before he recovered his wits enough to block her strike, and his head jerked to the side. He stared at her, his hand over his smarting cheek.

"Either you have a suicide wish," Jade said, "or your brain is addled."

Drummer knew he should stop. This wasn't some prank that would get him a few nights in jail. But by the saints, what a woman. He coaxed a ripple of notes from his glittar, as erotic as they were sweet. "That's for you."

Jade's cheeks turned red. "I shall be relieved when I can send you back to your poor, put-upon family." She spun around and stalked away like a wildcat, graceful even in her annoyance.

Drummer sagged against the wall. He felt as if he had just stepped out of a whirlwind. Taka Mal's queen was a force of nature that left him spinning.

Jade sat on a polished stone bench. Trellises looped with vines and royal-buds surrounded her. Weeping fronds hung from puff-top trees and brushed the paths that curved through her private garden. Sculptures of cats peeked out of the bushes. It was lush for a desert garden, kept that way by water piped in from underground and fed to the little waterfall.

Today the serenity of the gardens did nothing to calm her. She had a lot to do. Her meeting with the Zanterian caravan masters was in an hour. She had to study a design for aqueducts with the city planners this evening. And she needed more strategy sessions about Jazid. She had no time to brood over ill-mannered minstrels. She ought to have him clapped in chains and locked in a cell.

Either that, or in her bed.

"Bah!" Jade ripped a royal-bud off the nearest vine and hurled it into the waterfall. Mist wafted across her face, but it couldn't cool her mood. Bed, indeed. She wouldn't touch that scoundrel if the House of Dawnfield offered her a thousand urns of gold hexa-coins to take him off their hands.

Leaves rustled. As she looked up, Baz appeared around a stand of trees barely taller than himself. He wore his field outfit today rather than the dress uniform encrusted with medals.

"Light of the morning," her cousin said.

"It's afternoon," Jade grumbled.

His grin flashed. "Glad to see you, too." He sat on the bench and motioned at the ring she wore, with its large topaz. "Your secretary is looking for you. Some scrolls need your seal."

"Yes. I've work to do." She was talking to herself more than to him. "I've been thinking about Ozi."

He spoke dryly. "By whom, I take it, you mean His Magnificence, the Atajazid D'az Ozar of the House of Onyx."

Jade waved her hand. "Yes. Him. Ozi."

Baz leaned back on his hands. "Jade, my dear, I hardly think that calling our moody neighbor 'Ozi' will predispose him to ally with us against Cobalt Escar."

Jade gave him an innocent look. "Why, Baz, whatever makes you think I wish to fight Cobalt Escar?"

"Maybe that glint in your eyes, like you want to pulverize someone."

"Pulverize indeed," she muttered, thinking of Drummer. "I would like to invite Ozi here as soon as possible. Tonight, in fact. The Zanterians can take the letter with their caravan."

"Firaz and Slate have expressed concerns about your plans."

Jade frowned at him. Whenever her generals discussed things without her, she got jumpy. "Such as?"

"Such as, Taka Mal should present a stable appearance to potential allies."

She could see where this was going. They wanted her to marry Baz and "consolidate" the power of the throne and the military. "I am glad, my beloved cousin, that you all agree you should present a united support of your queen."

His gaze darkened. "They're afraid you're going to die without an heir."

"But I have an heir." Jade lifted her hand and curled it into a claw as if she were going to attack him. "You."

"It is my honor." He sounded more annoyed than honored.

"Then be satisfied with that honor."

He didn't miss her meaning. "I wish for you a long and satisfied life, Jade. I've no desire to take your throne."

"I'm glad." She believed his first sentence far more than his second. "I find myself with a certain antipathy to those who feel otherwise."

"Long and healthy. For you. For me." He regarded her steadily. "For our children."

This seemed to be the day for the men in her life to take liberties. She couldn't let her advisors push her around. If she showed any sign of self-doubt, Firaz and Slate would exploit it. Spearcaster would probably stand behind her, but she took nothing for granted.

“You presume much,” Jade said.

“I would do you honor,” he said, taking her hand. “For the rest of our lives.”

Jade pulled away her hand. “It is gratifying to know my kin wish to support me for all our lives.” Softly she added, “I mean it, Baz. I am glad.”

With no warning, he took her shoulders and kissed her, his lips full against hers. For the second time in the last hour, a man had caught her off guard in a most personal manner. But unlike with Drummer, where the kiss had sent the heat of the Dragon-Sun through her body, this was like having her brother kiss her. Mortified, she thumped him on the arm and pulled away.

“Baz, what are you thinking?” Her cheeks flamed. “Stop it.”

Anger flashed on his face. For a moment she thought he would claim he didn’t need her permission. If he set himself against her, the political upheaval could disrupt her government and destabilize their attempts to form an alliance with Jazid.

Then her cousin exhaled. “If I offended you, I offer apology.”

Relief surged over her. “Accepted.”

He spoke with reserve, avoiding what had just happened. “Shall we go meet the Zanterians?”

“Yes. Of course.”

As they walked to the palace, Jade’s thoughts roiled. He had shaken her this time, truly shaken her, and she didn’t think his patience would last much longer.

Mel found Cobalt about a fifteen minutes’ walk from the palace. He was sitting by an abandoned quarry that the sunlight turned gold. She had sought his mood, but she had felt only a vague sense of his disquiet. He was guarding himself too well for her to understand any more. She hadn’t expected her spell to reach this far; her efforts for Stonebreaker had strained her power. But each time she overextended herself, she recovered faster than before.

A forest had grown to the edge of the quarry, and trees hung precariously over its rim. The scent of box-blossoms saturated the air. Cobalt was gazing into the quarry, but Mel didn’t think he was looking at anything. He seemed to have aged a decade in one night. Neither of them had slept. The Bishop of Spheres had presided over the laying out of the king in his most regal robes, his hair brushed back from his high forehead, his body ready for cremation. They would hold the final ceremonies today, and at sunset they would invest Cobalt with the Sapphire Throne.

She paused a short distance away, reluctant to disturb him. He was nominally alone; this was part of the King’s Fields, and neither she nor Cobalt had brought their bodyguards. But sentries patrolled the area, and she glimpsed men in Chamberlight colors pacing through the woods and along the edge of the quarry. If Cobalt noticed, he gave no sign. He had withdrawn until she wondered if he no longer wanted her in his life.

“You don’t have to stand there,” he said, still staring at the quarry.

Startled, Mel walked over and settled next to his side. “I was worried about you.”

He turned to her with a gaze bleaker even than when he had told her how, in his childhood, he would have done anything, anything for a crumb of love from his grandfather. He had set out to conquer a world to prove he wasn’t worthless, but nothing had appeased the jealous king, and nothing Cobalt could do now would ever change that. Mel had hoped the king’s death would free Cobalt from the weight of his grandfather’s contempt, but it had made matters worse.

“Tonight you become queen of the Misted Cliffs,” he said.

A shudder went through her. He had once tempted her with dark promises of power and sworn to lay an empire at her feet. She didn’t want an empire, but telling him that was like trying to hold on to goose down in a windstorm. Yet now when he had come a huge step closer to his goal, he looked strangely defeated.

Mel spoke in a low voice. “What did he say to you?”

“Nothing. A simple farewell.”

“He never did anything simply.” Not when it came to Cobalt.

He looked out over the quarry again. “It isn’t important.”

“Don’t let it get to you! That’s what he wanted. Don’t let him win.” She put her hand on his shoulder and turned him to look at her. “Whatever he said to you, it was malice. Don’t believe his lies.”

Cobalt spoke softly. “The problem, Mel, is that his lies usually have just enough truth to make you wonder.”

“What did he say?”

He gaze had a distant quality. “All my life, I’ve felt as if I were a fraud. A false prince.”

A chill went through Mel. “If he told you that, he lied.”

He spoke softly. “Go back to the palace, Mel.” He took her hand and kissed the knuckles. “Go on. I will see you at the memorial.”

She hated to leave him like this. But forcing her company on him would only make it worse. “I’ll be there.”

Cobalt barely nodded, this man who by day’s end would rule an empire. He sat alone, staring into whatever personal hell Stonebreaker had bequeathed him from his deathbed.

Mel ran to the stables. Ignoring the stares of the grooms, hay-sweeps, and light-bringers, she went to Admiral’s stall, and the great stallion neighed in greeting. He would let no one but Cobalt ride him alone, but he accepted Mel’s presence.

The man she sought, however, wasn't tending Admiral, as he often did at this time of day. Mel left the stables, walking now, at a loss. She had checked the carriage house and training ring. She didn't know where else to look.

A light-bringer came up to her, a youth about her age. He was holding a pole with the lamp dangling from the hooked end, which he would use to aid stable hands and grooms who had to work at night. On a sunny day, when no one needed their services, light-bringers mucked out stalls or did other jobs the stable hands found for them. This fellow had been cleaning the lamp and replacing its oil.

"Your Majesty." He bowed to Mel as he had always done to Stonebreaker, and it troubled her to be treated in the same manner as someone she had so resented. It felt odd, too, that someone her own age treated her with the respect she associated with those much older.

"Are you searching for Master Matthew?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," she said, startled. "How did you know?"

"I have seen you come to Admiral's stall before, seeking him."

She did often ask Matthew for advice, not so much in caring for her horse, which she already knew how to do, but in trying to understand her husband, a far more difficult proposition.

"Do you know where he is?" Mel asked.

He motioned at a glinting white wall around the yard where stable hands were walking the horses. A gilded tower rose beyond it, topped by a spire. "He is at the cathedral."

"Ah." Mel inclined her head to the light-bringer. "Thank you." Then she smiled.

At her expression, the youth turned red, his ragged hair falling into his eyes. "You are most welcome, Your Majesty."

Mel wasn't sure why she unsettled people when she smiled, but it didn't seem to have a negative effect, so she didn't worry about it. As she crossed the yard, she wondered how it would be to live as a light-bringer. She had grown up on an orchard, and her mother had insisted she learn its workings. So Mel had cleaned stalls and fertilized crops, weeded and hoed and planted, and kept books. She had also trained as a junior officer in her father's army and discovered she was better suited to swordplay and archery than to the balls, embroidery, and fashions expected of royal women in other countries.

Had Varqelle never invaded Aronsdale and lost his throne, Mel would never have been the daughter of a king. Her parents would have lived on a farming estate in Aronsdale, and she might even have married a farm boy. Instead she had wed a dark and driven warlord. And saints help her, she had fallen in love with him.

A groom opened a door in the wall for Mel, and she went into the plaza beyond. The cathedral stood in its center, an architectural wonder of arched windows, delicate gold and silver arabesques on its walls, and stained-glass windows. The spire that topped its tower cut a sharp line against a sky streaked with high clouds.

Inside, quiet filled the vaulted, airy spaces of the cathedral. Sunlight shone through stained-glass



windows that portrayed many of the saints revered in the Misted Cliffs: Sky-Rose, who added blush to the sunrise or a girl's face; Fire Opal, who brought flame from the mountains; Citrine, who dreamed the sun into the sky; Verdant, who gave life to meadows and forests; Aquamarine, who lifted the ocean into swells; Azure, who glazed the sky; Lapis Lazuli, who rode the wind on her great steed; Amethyst, who set lovers to yearning; Granite, who cracked the earth to create his thunder; and Alabaster, the celestial musician who strummed stars into the night.

Some legends claimed the saints were ancestors of the people, ancients so far in the past no histories remained of their family lines. Others named the saints as spirits of rainbows and the earth. In Aronsdale, they believed the saints had been the first mages, most of them born from the prismatic hierarchy of spells. The saints formed the court of the Dawn Star Goddess, namesake of the House of Dawnfield. Taka Mal had much the same mythology, though they called Sky-Rose the Sunrise. Instead of a Dawn Star Goddess, they revered the Dragon-Sun. Jazidians worshipped the Shadow Dragon and believed he and the Dragon-Sun fought an endless, daily battle for dominion of the skies.

Sunlight slanted through the windows and left pools of color on the cool stone floors. Dust motes drifted in shafts of colored light. The man Mel sought was kneeling at a railing. His head was bent, and his gray hair had fallen forward to hide his face, but she recognized the breadth of his shoulders, the length of his legs, his gray tunic and blue trousers, well made and well-worn. She went to him, her slippered feet muted in the cathedral.

Mel knelt on the cushioned strip of wood. "Matthew."

He raised his head, his eyes dark with exhaustion. "You honor me with your presence, Your Majesty."

"Ah, Matthew, it doesn't feel that way." Even her low voice seemed too loud in this place. "Have you spoken with Cobalt since this morning?"

He shook his head. "The Bishop of Spheres kept him busy. I went to see him afterward, but he had disappeared."

"He went to the quarry."

Matthew was studying her face. "What troubles you?"

"Stonebreaker told him something before he died." The words were dust in her mouth. "Cobalt won't speak of it. He says only that he has always felt like a false prince."

Matthew's shoulders hunched. "Did he say why?"

"Nothing. Stonebreaker may have lied to him, out of malice." Quietly she added, "Or maybe he knew something."

Matthew regarded her with a haunted expression. "Varqelle."

Mel nodded. She had always suspected Stonebreaker gave Cobalt an army to free Varqelle because he had lost control over his grandson and hoped Varqelle would help him regain it. Instead Varqelle and Cobalt had formed a bond that shut out the late king. "I think he hated that Cobalt found acceptance with his father. He wanted to leave Cobalt a legacy of doubt, and he knew how much it meant to him to have his father's love."

Matthew looked as if his heart was breaking. “He has always had his father’s love.”

She laid her hand on his arm. “And that has made all the difference.”

“What Stonebreaker said—it changes nothing.” Matthew’s posture had the tension of a fighter ready to engage. “Tonight Cobalt will become the king of the Misted Cliffs. Nothing can stop it. Whatever Stonebreaker said to him—it doesn’t matter.”

Mel knew it should be true. But she also knew her husband. It mattered to him.

Matthew had been a stable hand at Castle Escar when Varqelle brought home his child bride, Dancer. And when Dancer fled a year later, Matthew went with her. Tales of Varqelle’s cruelty had proliferated. Mel had no fondness for the king who had led an army against her people, and yes, Varqelle was a hard man who considered kindness a fault in a king, a warrior, and a husband. But he was better than Stonebreaker.

After Dancer left Varqelle, Stonebreaker wouldn’t let her go. No matter where she fled, he sent his army for her. He didn’t care if she stayed with her husband; he had no use for Varqelle beyond the title he brought into the Chamberlight line. Dancer had given him what he wanted, an heir who could claim both the Sapphire and Harsdown thrones. And if he turned that heir’s days into a living hell, so be it.

Cobalt had never understood how Dancer could love him as much as she obviously did and yet let Stonebreaker raise him. She had never told him why, except to say she protected him. Mel knew she would never say more. Neither Dancer nor Matthew would take away his heredity by telling him the name of his true father.

Matthew was kneeling in the slanting light from a window above them with panels of blue and frosted glass. “I came here when I heard of the king’s death,” he told Mel. “I should pray for the late king, but instead I think of the man who will take the throne tonight. I pray the saints will help him—and us all.”

On the third night of summer, when heat lay across the land and weighted the air with moisture, people filled the Hall of Sapphires in the Diamond Palace, all the elite of the Misted Cliffs, their finery and hair glistening with jewels. Their garments shone like a mage’s spectrum: rose and violet and every color between.

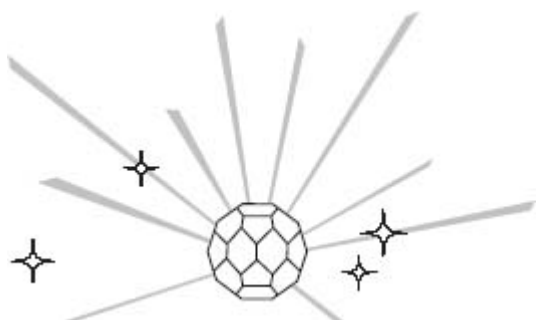
Except blue.

Mel hadn’t seen Cobalt again until they met at this hall and walked with their honor guard down the ranks of gathered nobles. She hardly recognized the man at her side. Gone were his rough riding clothes and armor. The snowy tunic he wore had the blue Chamberlight sphere emblazoned on its chest. His cutaway sleeves showed darker blue cloth beneath, and his trousers pulled over blue knee-boots. Sapphires and diamonds studded his belt. Seamstresses had sewn Mel’s white velvet gown in only hours, with sapphires on the neckline, bodice, and train. Gems encrusted the two chairs on the dais where she stood now with Cobalt, as if they were in the icy center of a glittering, soulless gem.

The Bishop of Spheres raised his staff and spoke the formal words that invested Cobalt with the power of the Sapphire Throne. When it was done, the royal couple knelt before him, and he named them king and queen of the Misted Cliffs. Then they stood and looked out over the hall. The elite of the Misted Cliffs went down on their knees and bowed their heads to their sovereign—the same nobles who had

stood by in Cobalt's childhood while Stonebreaker battered their future king.

Cobalt watched with no emotion. Mel cupped the sapphire sphere that hung around her neck and created a spell that glowed with blue light. She didn't care who saw; let them spread tales of the sorceress queen. What happened within Cobalt mattered more. But she couldn't heal his emotions. His pain went so deep, she questioned if his spirit could ever recover. He dwelled in darkness. She had already heard the whispers: the Midnight King would subjugate all the settled lands.



6

### The Draped Room

The Atajazid D'az Ozar was in his study, standing by the bookshelf, when the tap came at his door. He looked to see Shade, his Master of Scrolls, in the entrance. Ozar's bodyguards flanked the archway, but when Ozar nodded they let the elderly man pass. Hunched and gaunt, Shade wore long robes patterned with diamonds of white and black. He was past the age when most scroll masters retired to an easy life in the royal court or a country estate. Shade had never expressed a desire to leave, and Ozar valued his services, for his loyalty and for his expertise in keeping Ozar's correspondence, both current and in the royal archives.

Even bent over, Shade was a tall man. Yet he came only to Ozar's shoulders. Aronsdale kings married for mage power; Taka Mal for beauty; Blueshire for love; and the Misted Cliffs for political expediency. In Jazid, they selected for physical power. Ozar descended from a long line of sovereigns who chose queens for strength and height so they might pass those traits to their sons. They desired intelligent women, too, for the most successful warriors were also strategists. Ozar's two wives had served him well in that regard, bearing him three strong, quick sons, and also five daughters.

In matters of pleasure, Ozar preferred his concubines. He had recently bought a young one from a merchant who sold only to royalty: himself, Stonebreaker Chamberlight, and, many years ago, Varqelle Escar. Varqelle was dead now, and Stonebreaker far away, so Ozar had his pick of the best girls. He would have been with his newest right now if he hadn't had so much work.

Shade knelt with effort, his robes crinkling.

"Rise, friend," Ozar said. He was tired enough that he would have been tempted to sanction anyone who interrupted him this late at night. But he trusted Shade. If the scroll master disturbed him at this hour, he had good reason.

The older man stood as laboriously as he had knelt. "You honor me with your presence, Magnificence."

"What news do you bring?" Ozar asked.

Shade offered him a scroll. The Chamberlight sphere glinted on the parchment. “This just arrived.”

Frowning, Ozar took the scroll. “Who was the carrier?” He knew of none that would disturb a Master of Scrolls this late at night rather than waiting for a proper audience the next day.

“One of your officers who lives as a fisherman on the coast of the Blue Ocean,” Shade said. “He rode from the Misted Cliffs in less than a month.”

Ozar raised his eyebrows. What could send his spy hurtling from the western ocean to Jazid at such great speed? He pulled off the blue cord and unrolled the scroll. It was a message sent to him only, from his officer. He read it—and read it again.

“Thunder and wind,” Ozar muttered.

“Bad news?” Shade asked.

“It would seem so.”

Shade waited.

“Chamberlight died,” Ozar said. “His grandson sits on the throne.” Cobalt Escar. The Midnight Prince was now a king.

Shade seemed to sag, and Ozar suspected that if the scroll master hadn’t been in the presence of the king, he would have sat down. Ozar knew how he felt. He wanted to sit, too, after receiving this unwelcome news. Neither of them did, of course; it would have shown weakness, like a woman.

Ozar paced his study, thinking. “Do you still have the letter from Queen Vizarana in Taka Mal?”

“Yes, Your Magnificence,” Shade said.

“Good.” Ozar swung around. “I believe it is time I respond to her gracious request that I visit Taka Mal.”

Shade said nothing. They both knew Ozar had deliberately waited to respond. Let the brazen wench stew. He could guess what she wanted: to pool resources. If they worked together, they could push Misted Cliffs merchants out of their export territory; if they combined armies, they could stand against Cobalt the Dark. The latter purpose had suddenly taken on more significance. They would be less tempting to Cobalt if they presented a united front.

So far, Cobalt hadn’t given signs he intended to invade either country. Ozar had sent four hundred spearmen to Shazire during the war. Cobalt could have executed those who survived, but instead he accepted the men willing to swear him allegiance. Although he imprisoned those who refused, their captivity consisted of living on an island, and he allowed their families to join them. Nor had he executed the former royal family. He sent Zerod here, offered a truce, and apparently planned to let Zerod’s wife and son join him in the Summer Isles, where the deposed prince now lived. All in all, Cobalt’s actions didn’t indicate a man intent on hostilities.

However, he hadn’t allowed the spearmen to return home, which would have offered a better assurance. Nor had he signed any agreements beyond the truce, which had expired several months ago. Now

Cobalt had ascended to the Sapphire throne. By itself, the Misted Cliffs was the most powerful country in the settled lands. Add the realms Cobalt had conquered, and it begged the question of whether he was a king or an emperor.

Ozar didn't like it. Cobalt had earned his dark reputation. He was honor-bound not to attack Aronsdale, but his thoughts were surely turning to the rich desert lands—Jazid and Taka Mal.

"It is time Vizarana and I talk," Ozar said. "I must do something about her. She sits on the Topaz Throne acting like a man, which she so very obviously isn't." Vizarana Jade was like a warrior's sex fantasy. She was also a vexation. Having to deal with her as an equal was maddening. Only by combining forces, however, could they stand up to Cobalt. The Chamberlight king might have more men and resources, but his disparate forces had never trained together as a whole and were unfamiliar with the terrain in Taka Mal or Jazid.

"She is a handful." Shade licked his lips. "You cannot deal with her as commander of the Taka Mal army. That takes the word 'unseemly' to heights beyond patience."

"Yes, well, being conquered by Cobalt Escar would be even more unseemly." He crossed his arms. "Is that cousin of Vizarana's still in charge of her army?"

"Baz Quaaazera. Yes."

"Why the hell hasn't he married the woman and locked her up?"

"Apparently she refuses."

"He should do it anyway."

"She has powerful backing from her army. At the moment, more backing than her cousin."

"But not more than I do, eh?"

Alarm flashed across Shade's face. "You would force her into marriage? Surely that would start hostilities between Jazid and Taka Mal."

"Who said force?" Ozar rolled up the scroll from the Misted Cliffs. "She needs my army. I will offer it—on a condition."

Shade's eyes glinted. "She will make a beautiful bride, Your Magnificence."

"So she will," Ozar murmured. "So she will."

The messenger knelt to Mel, and a chill went through her. No longer was this someone else's darkly seductive custom; she would live this way for the rest of her life. Stonebreaker haunted her thoughts. It would be too easy to let this title corrupt her.

The man wore her father's livery, white and purple, a welcome sight. Mel recognized him as an officer from her father's army. She dearly missed her home, that place of light and laughter so different from this chilly world.

“Please rise,” Mel said with warmth.

The messenger stood, his dusty travel clothes out of place in the Reception Hall, almost as out of place as Mel felt in her gown.

He spoke formally. “My honor at your presence, Your Majesty.”

“You are welcome in my home,” Mel said. He was young, hardly older than her. Although he was trying to appear confident, he was obviously exhausted.

“You must rest,” Mel said. As much as she wanted to know what drove him here with such urgency, courtesy required she see to his comfort first. “Would you like food and drink? A place to relax and change?”

“Thank you. I—thank you.” He seemed barely able to stay on his feet. “If I could just sit for a moment?”

“Yes. Of course.” She indicated a sofa with cushions of white brocade with gold flowers. “Please join me.”

He hesitated, looking from the pristine furniture to his dust-covered body.

“It’s all right.” Mel smiled. “I used to annoy my father no end by tramping around in my riding clothes and sprawling on the sofa with my boots on the table.”

He chuckled, his face relaxing. “I recall him grumbling about it.” He suddenly seemed to remember himself. His face reddened. “I mean no offense, Your Majesty.”

“I know.” She started toward the sofa, then glanced back at him. Softly she said, “None was taken.”

He came after her, and they sat at a table tiled with blue circles. The shapes nudged her mage power. Without her intent, a green spell formed, and she felt his response to her, his appreciation for her hair, of all things.

Embarrassed, Mel cut off the spell. She touched her hair, which her sphere-maids had piled on her head and woven with sapphires. They seemed fascinated by its yellow color, so unusual in the Misted Cliffs. To cover her self-conscious response, she opened a gilded cage on the table. The sunbird inside trilled as she gently took it out. When she opened her palm, it perched there, its head cocked. Then it fluttered into the air and flew away, through an archway across the room.

The youth watched with bewilderment. “It’s a summons,” Mel said. “The bird flies to the Welcome Chamber. Then the staff knows to prepare a meal for this room.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He looked confused, and when she smiled, his cheeks turned red.

“I will have someone show you to a suite where you can change,” Mel said.

He was beginning to relax. “This is fine, ma’am.”

“Your name is Lieutenant Kindler, isn’t it?” When he nodded, she asked, “Did my parents send you?”

“With much urgency,” he said. “They wanted to tell you—” He stopped as his gaze shifted past her shoulder. His face paled and he jumped to his feet.

Puzzled, Mel turned around. The welcoming staff shouldn’t cause such a strong—

Oh. Her husband loomed in the archway, his dark hair wild, his eyes intense, his face fierce as he glared at Kindler.

“Your Majesty!” The messenger dropped to one knee, bumping the table, and bowed his head.

Mel stood up. “Greetings, my husband.” Cobalt couldn’t help the way he looked, but it wasn’t helping her put Kindler at ease.

Cobalt stalked to the divan and looked down at Kindler’s bowed head. “You can get up, Messenger.”

Kindler rose to his feet. “I am honored by your presence.” His voice shook, though whether from fatigue or fear, Mel couldn’t tell.

Mel feared Cobalt would answer, No you’re not. Instead, he said, “Why does my father-in-law send you with such urgency?”

Mel almost groaned. It didn’t take a protocol expert to see the discourtesy in demanding information from an exhausted man, even one who had been about to volunteer it, which she had thought Kindler was going to do.

Kindler cleared his throat. “King Muller bids you welcome, Your Majesty. He sends his condolences for the death of your grandfather.”

“He already did that,” Cobalt said.

For flaming sake. Mel scowled at him. It was true her father had sent condolences and salutations to honor Cobalt’s ascension. He showed courtesy by opening his message this way. Mel wished Cobalt wouldn’t be so oblivious.

“Will you join us?” she asked her husband. Perhaps they could salvage this awkward moment.

“I’m not hungry,” he said.

Mel was growing exasperated. Oblivious was kind. Aggravatingly dense was more accurate.

Suddenly Cobalt grinned, his flash of teeth lighting his usually somber face. “You have that look.”

“What look?” She was painfully aware of Kindler listening.

“Like you want to send me to bed without dinner.”

Her face flamed. Saints only knew how Kindler would take that. Tartly, Mel said, “We were going to talk, Husband.”

“Oh. Well, in that case.” He sat in a wing chair by the couch.

Relieved, Mel made an effort to relax. As she and Kindler resumed their seats, two maids bustled in, followed by a sunboy, a youth of about ten with hair falling in his eyes. The maids carried platters of meats, cheeses, and nuts, and a decanter of wine, which they set on the table. They bowed deeply to Cobalt and Mel without disturbing a single mote of the food. The sunboy returned the sunbird to its cage and clipped a treat to one of the bars. They all avoided looking at Cobalt.

Mel poured a goblet of wine for Kindler, her unspoken apology for Cobalt's behavior. After the maids poured for Mel and Cobalt, they and the sunboy withdrew. Cobalt drained his goblet and thumped it on a table at his side. Mel sipped hers, and Kindler sat back, still wary in his manner.

"So." Cobalt considered the messenger. "You come from Applecroft?"

Kindler spoke in the formal cadences of Harsdown. "I do, Your Majesty. I bring you a message from King Muller and Queen Chime."

Mel waited for Cobalt to respond. She didn't think he was being deliberately rude. In his youth, he had avoided the royal court here, and though he had probably learned its ways, he was far more at ease with his soldiers than in the palace.

When Cobalt said nothing, Mel inclined her head to Kindler. "We thank you for carrying the message. What news do you bring?"

Lines of strain showed on his face. "It is your uncle Drummer." He set down his goblet. "Queen Vizarana has taken him hostage."

Mel stared at him. "What? No, that can't be."

Cobalt barely moved, just leaned forward a small amount, but his contained energy was so intense the air seemed to vibrate. Mel would never have thought the color black could be described as burning, but right now his eyes flamed with anger.

"Are you telling me," he asked, "that Taka Mal has attacked my wife's family?"

"Their emissaries claim Goodman Drummer is unharmed," Kindler said. "And that he will remain so as long as no Chamberlight or Dawnfield army marches against Taka Mal."

"Neither my father nor my cousin Jarid has ever coveted Taka Mal," Mel said. But she knew taking hostages to ensure the behavior of a rival sovereign had a long history in the settled lands. Taka Mal sought protection against Cobalt. He and her parents and Vizarana would all debate until they settled on a compromise. She hoped. She didn't want to think what might happen to Drummer if they couldn't reach an agreement.

"Surely we can help my uncle," Mel said.

Cobalt turned his fierce gaze on her. "Drummer is your mother's younger brother?"

"That's right. He's a minstrel." Mel smiled. "He likes to sing and play pranks. He's harmless."

"And well loved by your mother," Cobalt said.

Softly Mel said, "By all of us."



“That makes him dangerous,” Cobalt said. “When a man is loved, those who care for him will do anything to make sure he comes to no harm.”

Mel shivered. Cobalt had met Drummer only a few times, hardly enough to develop any affection for him. “We must help him.”

“Taka Mal is wrong if they think they can control me by attacking my kin.”

Kin. So he did think of Drummer as family. “Then you will send emissaries to Taka Mal?”

His expression darkened. “I will send no emissaries.”

Mel felt as if she had lost her moorings. “No one?”

“Not for an insult this grave.” His voice chilled. “I will send my army.”

Drummer spent the morning playing his glittar. He did scales, practiced old songs, and composed new ones. By midday, he was restless. Bored. He resented the captivity.

After he finished his midday meal, he cleared out the parlor and laid down Kazlatarian rugs, plush and vibrant with sunrise hues. He practiced acrobatics, first warm-ups and then more intricate routines. He was standing on his head, doing splits in that inverted position when Jade entered the room. For a moment he enjoyed the upside-down sight of her gaping at him. She had on amazing clothes, emerald-green and silky. Gold jewelry glistened against her skin, and topazes sparkled in her upswept hair.

“What in a thousand journeys on the cinnamon road are you doing?” she asked.

“The what road?” Drummer somersaulted in the air and landed on his feet. He didn’t even stumble, which usually happened on that maneuver. He felt as if he could fly. “Greetings of the afternoon, Your Highness.”

“Light of the afternoon,” Jade said. “It is what we say here.”

“And you are.” Drummer went over to her. “I have never seen you so captivating. Every day I wait for a glimpse of you.”

She looked unimpressed. “Does this flattery of yours actually work on Aronsdale farm girls?”

He was challenging her, especially with words like captivating, but it was true, too, that he savored their daily meetings. And for all that she insisted he vexed and provoked her, she always found an excuse to see him. She rebuffed his advances, yet never demanded he stop, which only made him try harder. Hot one moment and cold the next: She was tying him in knots.

Drummer came to within a step of her, closer than he had been since her first visit to his suite. “Aronsdale women can’t compare to you.”

Her lips quirked upward. “I fear you will write me more bad poetry.”

“Bad? Never.” He feared he was about to do something much worse. It would undoubtedly involve Jade and her lips and evoke more of her threats to throw him in a dungeon for offenses against the throne. The dungeon, however, had yet to materialize.

He rubbed his knuckles down her cheek. “You deserve only the best verses.”

“And you have a death wish.” But she neither moved nor pushed him away. Her eyes smoldered as her lips parted, and he thought he could die happy right there. Almost. He wanted even more to do alive, vital things with her. He touched her lips, and she closed them to kiss his finger. She stroked her hand along his arm—

Jade inhaled sharply and stepped back. “I am having a banquet tonight. You will attend. A bid-boy will be in later to dress you. You may keep the clothes as a gift.”

Ai! She might as well have doused him in cold water. “What, you want me to dine with your court?”

“You are the brother of the Harsdown queen. It is fitting.” She moved a wayward curl out of her eyes. “I also don’t want rumors to spread that we are treating you poorly.”

“And here I thought you wanted my company.” He meant it as a joke, but it sounded angry. “What the blazes is a bid-boy?”

“Aronsdale men call them valets.”

“Oh.” At Castle Suncroft, they always offered him valets, but Drummer had never liked having someone else dress him. “He can just leave the clothes.”

“Hmm.” Jade made that one sound a commentary on his ability to make himself presentable. “We will see.”

She swept out the door, leaving him alone, and he wanted to pound the wall with frustration.

“You mustn’t!” The force of her own words startled Mel. She never raised her voice to Cobalt.

He stood by the heavy drapes that covered the windows. His white tunic bore the Chamberlight sphere, and slits in its sides showed blue-and-gold cloth underneath. A gold medallion hung around his neck. Sapphires glinted on his boots. It hadn’t taken Mel long to realize he hated the clothes, for they made him look like Stonebreaker. In the privacy of their rooms he let down his guard enough for her to see hints of the emotions he hid from everyone else. It terrified her.

“You cannot storm Taka Mal!” She swept her hand out to accent her words. “Yes, Vizarana Jade wronged my family. But in her eyes, we have wronged Shazire and Blueshire. We started this. Not Taka Mal.”

His face had gone thunderous. No one ever shouted at Cobalt the Dark. He walked slowly to her, tensed with banked physical power. When he looked down at her face, her heart beat hard. She saw the rage he controlled, anger at Taka Mal, yes, but also at the wife who defied him. His grandfather’s death had done so much damage. The Cobalt she had loved this past year was gone, and she feared the late

king's legacy of brutality would play out all over again in his tormented grandson.

Mel held her breath and her ground. She stood taller than most women, but her head didn't even reach his chin. He gripped her shoulders, and his palms covered them completely. She waited, staring up at him, hiding her fear, and hoped she wasn't misguided to trust he wouldn't shake her or raise his massive fists.

Cobalt's face contorted as if he were wrestling a demon within himself. Then he groaned and pulled her into an embrace. For a moment, she was too stunned to react. Then she put her arms around his waist and laid her head against his chest.

He spoke in a low voice. "I need to fight. I need to ride and fight until all the fury in me burns out."

She spoke with pain. "You could raze every village in Taka Mal and it wouldn't be enough. Don't make all the settled lands suffer the vengeance you cannot exact on Stonebreaker."

"His father gave him the wrong name," he said roughly. "It should have been Soulbreaker."

"But your soul survived." She drew back, against the iron pull of his arms, so she could look up at him. "If you unleash your fury against those who have done you no wrong, Stonebreaker wins, for he has turned the good within you to evil."

"Queen Vizarana has wronged your family. And you are my wife. So she has wronged me."

"Her methods have precedent. Saints, Cobalt, you kept Prince Zerod's wife and son as hostages."

"I would never hurt them."

"As I hope she would never hurt Drummer." She had to make him see. "In taking Shazire, you gave her cause to believe drastic measures are necessary."

Cobalt frowned at her. "Shazire and Blueshire were part of the Misted Cliffs. We lost them because Taka Mal attacked us."

"Yes. Twocenturies ago."

"What would you have me do? Negotiate when this desert queen has harmed your family?"

"We don't know she has harmed him." Mel couldn't bear to think of the possibility. "You've never met Drummer. He's a charmer. Women love him. He probably has Queen Vizarana eating out of his hand."

Cobalt gave her a dark look. "From what I have heard of this queen, it is more likely she would feed him to her tigers."

Mel winced. "Don't say that."

"Yet you would bargain with this barbarian queen?"

"I like it no more than you. But you know the history of the settled lands." He had studied it all his life and often talked to her about ancient military campaigns. "Even if what we really intend is to sneak him out of Taka Mal, shouldn't we at least appear to negotiate?"

“Historically, this abduction wouldn’t justify a war,” he admitted. “Not if we haven’t tried negotiation. To attack now would look like an invasion, with Drummer as a weak excuse. It would give the Atajazid D’az Ozar motivation to ally with Queen Vizarana.”

“I fear she is more likely to hurt Drummer if we attack.”

Cobalt considered her for a moment. Then he went to the drapes and pulled them aside. Sunlight slanted into the room, limning his body. He stood looking at her, and she had a feeling he meant it as a message.

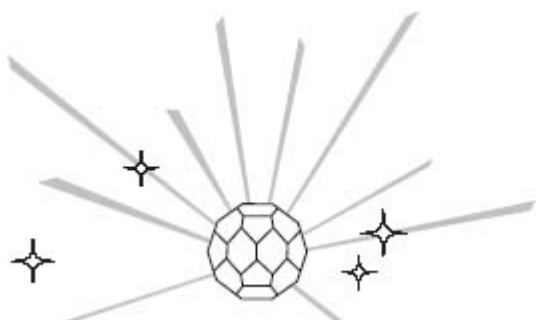
“What is it?” she asked.

“You.” He motioned around at the room. “This is me.”

Mel went over to him. “I don’t understand.”

“I am the room. You are the sun.” He touched her cheek with a gentleness incongruous with his capacity for violent power. “I married you to stop a war. I never knew that war was within me.”

“Ah, love.” He saw himself as a sparsely furnished room, but to her he was a flame. For now, his fire was banked. But even if she had calmed the blaze within him, it still simmered—ready to erupt.



## Chamber of the Candle

Drummer knew he was in trouble when his guards escorted him into the Topaz Hall. The size, the opulence, the incense—it was too much. This place had little in common with the reserved elegance of Castle Suncroft in Aronsdale, named for a simple croft, albeit for the sun. Here columns plated with gold supported a colonnade of arches that bordered the room. Ivory and gold tiles patterned the floor. Mosaics gleamed on the walls and pillars, accented with diamonds, topazes, and rubies. He wondered how any gems could remain elsewhere in the settled lands, for surely Taka Mal had them all here. The Topaz Hall glowed like the interior of a jewel, a vibrant explosion of wealth.

Guests filled the room, all in sumptuous dress, their silks glowing like the sunset, brocades adorned with jewels, scarves bright against the women’s glossy hair. His guards wore dress uniforms with long, curved swords on their belts. Drummer had needed his valet after all; his new attire had far too many buttons and fastenings, especially the gold trousers. The white shirt was silk, and the brocade vest shimmered. He couldn’t believe Jade had given him these clothes. They were worth a fortune. Real gold accented the garments and boots, also topazes and rubies. And jade. As far as he could see, he was the only one who wore the green stone. He didn’t miss the implication; he belonged to the bearer of its name.

As Javelin, Havej, and Kaj discreetly ushered him across the room, people turned to look. Drummer was acutely aware he was the only person without black hair. He was like one of the sparkling ornaments, here to please the queen. The guards technically were keeping others away from him, but it didn't take a genius to see they were preventing him from going anywhere.

Musicians played in one corner and couples danced. Other guests conversed, sipping gold wine from goblets or enjoying delicacies provided by servers who circulated in the hall. No one offered Drummer food. No one attempted to breach the invisible wall his guards created. Women cast him intrigued glances and their men watched him with wary regard. None seemed hostile. Drummer would have liked to think it was because he was a guest, but he suspected it had more to do with how harmless he appeared compared to the darkly powerful nobles and warriors gathered here. Not that he wanted to harm anyone; he just felt outclassed.

His guards guided him past tables draped with snowy cloths, place settings of gold and crystal bowls full of citrus fruit. They ended their walk by a dais at the end of the hall with one table and no people. They waited at the bottom of its stairs.

A man with a tray of garnished lamb-curls hurried by. Drummer's mouth watered. He had been too keyed up earlier, even nauseous, and he hadn't wanted to eat, but now he was starving.

"Delicious," a woman's husky voice said behind him.

Drummer spun around and found himself face-to-face with the goddess who had turned his world upside down. For once in his life, his voice fled. He could do nothing but stare. Jade wore a crimson silk gown that wrapped her body and left her shoulders, arms and the upper curve of her breasts bare. The body-hugging drape had no adornment, but topazes, gold, and rubies glittered around her neck, in her hair and on her wrists. Drummer wanted nothing more than to peel that dress off her. He would make love to the queen while her creamy, dark skin sparkled with gems and her body moved, warm and sensual under his hands.

"Goodness," Jade murmured. "You do look hungry."

Mortified, he stepped back. He couldn't go far, though, with his guards around him. His face heated until he thought it must be the same color as her dress.

"I didn't have any lunch." He barely got the words out without stuttering.

She raised her hand to the dais. "Please join me."

He hesitated, confused. At Castle Suncroft, if he sat with the queen, he would be considered her escort. That never happened, of course; she sat with King Jarid. At Applecroft, the "royal court" consisted of his sister's family and their guests eating around a big table in their dining room. He didn't know the customs here well, but he couldn't imagine it would be appropriate for him to act as Jade's escort. For all he knew, it might inspire her officers to slice him up with their weirdly curved swords.

His hesitation, however, didn't go over well with his guards, either. Kaj grasped his upper arm and pushed him toward the steps.

"All right," Drummer muttered, and went up the dais. His guards took him to a round table even more lavishly set than those below and had him stand by a chair. Jade hadn't come with them, and Drummer

was even more visible up here. At least Javelin, who stood at his right, partially blocked him from view.

Although Drummer heard no announcement, guests were taking seats at the tables below. Maybe his being escorted here was a signal or part of a process where people were discreetly invited to sit down. Jade was walking with two men. The husky one wore the flashy red-and-gold dress uniform of a Taka Mal general. Ribbons and medals festooned his chest. Drummer recognized him; he had been the armored warrior in the throne room where Drummer had first met Jade. At the time, Drummer had thought he looked barbaric. He still thought so, but he realized now that the man had the classic features of Taka Mal nobility. In fact, he looked a lot like Jade.

The other man disquieted Drummer even more. Tall and leanly muscled, he gave the impression he controlled immense destructive forces he could unleash at any time. Gold ribbing accented his dark clothes. The sword at his side was straight instead of curved and heavier than those worn by Javelin, Kaj, and Havej. Drummer didn't like to think what it meant that Jade's guest came armed to her banquet. An older man walked at his side, gaunt in a white-and-black Scribe's robe that hung on his skeletal frame. He seemed thick with shadows.

With a sinking feeling, Drummer realized they were coming toward the dais, along with a handful of other military types, some in the gold and red of Jade's officers, some in gray and black. Sweat dampened his palms, but he didn't want to wipe them on his trousers or otherwise reveal his fear to these large and intimidating people.

Jade and the man with the sword were talking as they came up onto the dais. The general's face went cold when he saw Drummer. Had they been alone, Drummer thought the general might have struck him. For the life of him, Drummer couldn't think why. He was close enough to the table to use its circular shape in making a spell. He concentrated—and the general's mood hit him so hard he staggered. It also came with a picture from the fellow's thoughts, something that happened only rarely with Drummer's spells. He could have done without the image: The man wanted to heave him into a brick-lined pit and chain him to the wall.

The blood drained from Drummer's face. He didn't know what he had done to this man, but he prayed to Azure, the most powerful saint he knew, that he never faced the general without protection.

Jade glanced at him, but he couldn't read her as well. In part, it was because her reaction to him was neither as intense nor as vivid as with the general. But even accounting for that, he had trouble deciphering her mood. It made him wonder if she wasn't certain herself what she felt. More likely, he was foolish to think he could do real spells. He had never shown any consistent or significant ability. Not that he knew how to judge consistency or talent. He just played games with shapes.

Havej pulled out a chair, and Jade stood in front of it, facing the table and the Topaz Hall. If she was at midnight on a clock face, Drummer was at nine. The general stood at eleven o'clock, and the armed man at one, with his shadowed companion at two. The other officers took the other numbers. The guests below were also standing in front of their chairs, twelve to a table.

Jade looked around at them and inclined her head, a study in regal carriage. Then she settled into an ornately carved chair. The armed man sat next, then the general, then the others. In the hall below, the guests were also sitting. Something was missing, but Drummer wasn't certain what. As he took his seat, the other guests at the table glanced at him with curiosity. None seemed overly interested except the armed man, who studied him intently. Drummer wanted to ask why, but he held back. For all that he felt at sea with customs here, he knew enough to keep his mouth shut.

The armed man spoke courteously to Jade. “You have many guests tonight.”

Jade tilted her head as if acknowledging a question. She lifted her hand and turned it palm up with her fingers pointed toward Drummer. “Gentlemen, may I present Drummer Creek Headwind, brother to Queen Chime of Harsdown.”

They nodded as if he were one of them, which would have amused Drummer if he hadn’t been so nervous. He returned their nods, aware of their curious glances at his guards. He felt like an insect under an enlarging lens in a laboratory.

Jade moved her hand to indicate the man with the sword. To Drummer, she said, “His Magnificence, Atajazid D’az Ozar of the House of Onyx, King of Jazid.”

Drummer felt as if he fell twenty stories without moving a finger span. Onyx. Royalty. It seemed he was going to meet every ruler in the settled lands. He wanted only to wander and play his harp, not sit at tables with sovereigns who waged politics and kidnapping and war and looked as if they could eat him alive.

As a server poured wine, Ozar spoke pleasantly to Drummer, or at least as pleasantly as he could sound with a voice like gravel. “Have you been visiting Taka Mal for long, Your Highness?”

Highness, indeed. Jade hadn’t said Drummer was a prisoner, but it had to be obvious. Onyx was mining for information.

“Over a month, Your Majesty,” Drummer said.

Jade turned to Onyx as if to offer a response, which no doubt would be as smooth and as double-edged as his question. Before she could start, though, the Taka Mal general spoke roughly. “He is no Highness. He’s a commoner.”

Drummer froze, aware of everyone staring, not at him, but at the general. Most people knew the Harsdown queen was the daughter of an orchard keeper. Dawnfield kings and princes often married commoners. Mage gifts could occur anywhere. Personally, Drummer thought it was why the Dawnfield line remained strong and hale, unlike many other royal houses. No inbreeding.

Jade frowned at her general, and Drummer was again struck by their resemblance to each other. She was curved and feminine where he was husky and square jawed, but they had similar features, the same arrogant cheekbones, and the same wildness lurking under their civilized exterior. The warrior within Jade was manifest in her commander, who probably headed her army, given his favored position at the table. Drummer would have thought he and Jade were siblings, except Jade had no brothers. If her parents had also had a boy, he would be sitting on the throne.

“Baz, love, Drummer is our guest.” Although her words were as smooth as Zanterian honey, Drummer felt their edge. But she called him love. Who was this Baz? Lover or relative? Maybe both. It often worked that way among the royal houses. If so, and the general knew of the liberties Drummer kept trying with Jade, it was no wonder Baz wanted to dump him in a pit.

Drummer couldn’t block their moods. His spell continued from before, and emotions inundated him. Onyx had guessed his status and viewed him as a disposable tool. Jade appeared confident, but underneath she was aware of her vulnerability and striving to shield herself. She was also worried for Drummer. Worried. She hadn’t brought him here to show him off. She was protecting him. The more

people who knew he was her guest, the harder it would be for anyone to get away with hurting or disposing of him.

The rush of emotions intensified until his head reeled. Baz confused Drummer. The general loved Jade, but he had no sexual interest in her. As much as his love scraped like sandpaper, it wasn't violent. Onyx was another story. He had nothing resembling gentle feelings, only lust and brutality and an intense desire to subjugate the queen. Jade desired someone, too. Drummer felt her mood, but that didn't tell him which man inspired it. He hoped it wasn't Onyx, and he prayed it wasn't him, for these people would roast him alive if they knew he coveted their Topaz Queen.

Jade and Onyx were conversing, something about caravans, but Drummer couldn't concentrate. He had never experienced spells this powerfully before, and he didn't understand why it was happening now. The round table, the round plates, the round bases of the goblets, the cubes dangling from Jade's ears—so many shapes. He couldn't stop the spell, and he couldn't handle the deluge.

Drummer had an epiphany then. He had always assumed his talent was marginal. It had never occurred to him that his struggles might arise because he had too much ability, not too little. He had never learned to control it. Mages typically came into their powers in adolescence, but as far as he knew, it didn't have to happen that way. Hints of his talent had shown in his youth. Tonight, with so many people around him, his spells were surging and he didn't know how to stop them. Panic swept over him. If he couldn't contain this flood, it would drive him insane.

Jade had stopped talking to Ozar and was watching Drummer. On the surface, the atajazid didn't seem to notice; he was sipping his wine and listening to the shadowed man on his left. But Drummer knew Ozar was aware of his every move.

Drummer finally realized what was missing. Women. At the high table in Aronsdale, the king and queen sat with their family and honored guests. Here, the queen and her honored guests apparently sat with her highest-ranked officers. Onyx wouldn't bring his wives; no one ever saw the Jazid queens. Jade was isolated, afloat in an unwelcoming sea where the sharks felt she had no business swimming and vied for the right to tear her apart. No wonder she had never married; it would be like leaking blood into the water. Either she would have to get out then, or suffer the consequences. After a month of dealing with her every day, though, he had no doubt anyone who thought he could control her was deluded.

Vertigo surged within Drummer. He put down his fork and tried to quell his nausea. Jade motioned to someone, he couldn't see who. Then Captain Javelin leaned close and spoke in a low voice. "Are you all right, Goodman Headwind?"

"I'm...dizzy." Drummer doubted they would take him seriously if he said his spells were out of control.

"Would you care to retire?" Javelin asked.

Drummer could have closed his eyes with relief. He didn't, though, not when everyone could see. He just said, "Yes, that would be good."

Javelin must have communicated with Jade, for she nodded. No one else was paying much attention except Baz, and Drummer doubted the general would regret seeing him leave. As Drummer stood up, the other guests turned curious gazes his way. He bowed to Jade and Onyx. He had no idea if that was proper, as at Castle Suncroft, but they would attribute anomalies in his manners to his coming from Aronsdale. Jade inclined her head and smiled, though he felt her underlying worry. Onyx asked her a question, and she turned back to him. With relief Drummer left the explanations to the queen.



Mercifully, his guards didn't take him past the other guests. Instead, they went to a wall behind the dais. Havej pulled aside the heavy drapes to reveal a door shaped like the lock for a skeleton key. After they left the Topaz Hall, the voices and music receded, and Drummer no longer felt as much. He was aware of his guards' moods, but there were only three of them and they didn't have strong emotions now, just boredom and some concern for him.

They took him to an antechamber deep within the palace. Oil lamps glowed within glass flowers set into the ivory walls. The scrolled moldings around the ceiling and floor pleased the eye, as did the goldwood furniture. The chamber contained a chair, a bed, and nothing with a pure shape except for a little round table. The last remnants of his spell faded.

Grateful, he lay on the bed. He felt as if he had been tossed in a flood and washed up on a beach. Not only was he no longer hungry, he doubted he could keep anything down. He didn't intend to sleep, but as soon as he closed his eyes, lethargy settled over him. . . .

"Come on," the dusky voice coaxed. "You don't want to stay all night in these stiff, scratchy clothes, do you?"

What he didn't want to do was wake up. However, the voice kept at him, and after a while he comprehended that it was Jade.

Drummer opened his eyes. He had sprawled across the bed on his stomach. Only a candle on the table lit the room. His guards were gone and the door closed, probably locked. Jade was sitting next to him, her hip against his elbow. She still wore her red silk dress, and in the candlelight, her creamy skin glowed.

"Greetings," he murmured, unsure if he was awake. This sensual vision of Jade had to be a dream. He rolled onto his side and reached up to trace his fingertips along her cheek. So soft. She took his hand and set it back on the bed—but she didn't release his fingers. So he lay there, gazing at the queen in the candlelight, and held her hand.

He wondered if she had any hint how lovely she looked in the dim golden light. "How long have I been here?"

"Most of the night. It is two hours beyond midnight."

"I'm sorry I was such a poor dinner guest. I don't know what happened." He couldn't tell her about the spells. People in Taka Mal believed magecraft was quackery or else thought mages perpetrated only evil. Jade would probably think he was crazy.

She touched his arm. "You look better now."

"Much better." Drummer stroked her fingers. So long and elegant. He wanted to kiss them. "Where are my guards?"

"I sent them outside." She hesitated. "For a Topaz Pact."

"Pact?" He looked up at her face and her full lips.

“A pact with Topaz. It means an agreement with a person who stands in representation of the throne. In the Misted Cliffs, they call it a Sapphire pact. In Harsdown, the pact is with the Jaguar. Here it is with Topaz. Me. If you agree.”

Drummer had never heard of such a thing. Not that he had ever listened much. During his visits with Chime and Muller, he usually fell asleep or slipped away when they talked of politics.

“What do I have to do if I agree to this pact?” he asked.

Amusement flickered over her face. “Nothing, beautiful singer. Just stay put.”

“Beautiful, eh?” He wouldn’t argue with that. “I like your Topaz Pact.”

Her smile softened her face. “I’m glad. Then I won’t ask the guards to come back in.”

So. She wanted to be alone with him. A slow smile came to him. “You’re a lot better company.”

She was silent for a moment. Then she spoke in a neutral tone. “Ozi has offered me a pact.”

“Who?”

“Ozi. The atajazid.”

He couldn’t imagine anyone daring to call the Jazid king “Ozi.” Then again, Jade wasn’t just anyone. “What did he propose?” As soon as the words came out, he winced. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it to sound like that.”

“Like what?”

“A marriage proposal.”

“It was.”

His drowsy contentment fled. He sat up abruptly, taking her other hand as well. “You told him no, didn’t you?”

She went very still. “I have given him no answer yet.”

He was suddenly aware of how close they were. He didn’t stop to think; he just bent his head and kissed her. She stiffened—but this time she didn’t push him away.

Drummer held her hands and took his time kissing her, savoring the warmth of her response. Finally he lifted his head the barest amount. “Think about that when you make your decision.”

“You mustn’t touch me,” she murmured. But she showed no inclination to slap him this time. Even so, he knew he was insane to take such a liberty. Baz would flay him alive for touching her, and saints only know how Ozar would react. But he couldn’t think straight around Jade. What rationality he had to start with, which many declared was little indeed, fled.

Drummer pulled her close and filled his embrace with her voluptuous body. She tensed as if to pull away. But something had changed. Maybe it was the wine, or the jeweled night, or just the right time, but

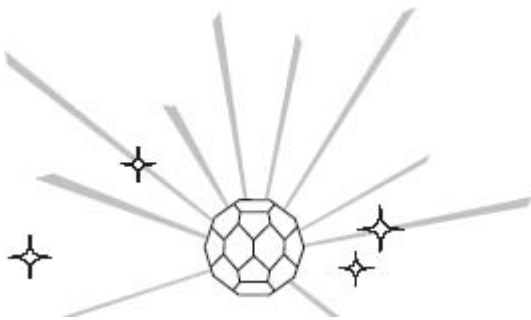
she relaxed against him, her body pliant. He held his breath, afraid if he moved, it would startle her into a retreat. As much as he had pursued her these weeks, deep inside he had believed that she, a queen, would always reject him. Yet desire had simmered within her at the banquet, and now she was in his arms.

He laid his cheek against her head. Her hair slid against his skin, soft and perfumed. Bending his head, he searched until his lips brushed hers. Then he froze, sure she would object. When she parted her lips instead, he groaned and deepened the kiss, urgent rather than tender. He slid his hands onto her shoulders, gauging how much she would accept. Waiting for her protest. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him more.

The night felt like a spell, unreal, an enchantment within a filmy soap bubble that would pop if he thought about it too much. He peeled her dress all the way down to her waist, and still she didn't protest. With her body pressed against his, he felt her heartbeat speed up. He held her breasts, and his control slipped for the second time that day, but this had nothing to do with mages, except that ageless spell woman had woven over man since the first humans walked the settled lands.

They stretched out on the bed, side by side. He tugged at her dress, and her hands wandered his body, fumbling with his clothes. It took a while to take his off and much less time to unwrap her silk. Finally they lay with bare skin on bare skin. He wanted to caress her tenderly, and he wanted to shove her down and impale her body. He rolled her onto her back and eased between her thighs. Then he buried himself in her warmth, and she pressed against him with her hips. He knew he could be signing his death warrant if Baz or Ozar found out what he had done. But he couldn't have stopped even if the palace were collapsing around them.

With the candle guttering in the dim light, a minstrel from Aronsdale loved the queen of Taka Mal. No dalliance this; Vizarana Jade had taken his heart.



8

### Topaz Mage

Clouds churned in the vast sky above Harsdown. It wasn't raining enough to soak anyone whose garments were slicked with wax. The wind and moisture exhilarated Mel as she raced Smoke through the rare summer storm. She felt more at ease in her riding breeches and thick shirt than in all those lovely gowns she wore at the Diamond Palace. She let Smoke gallop for the sheer joy of it, and her hair streamed in the gusting air. Cobalt came alongside her on Admiral, riding with her in the wild day, and Mel felt closer to him than she had since they had learned of Stonebreaker's illness.

Eventually the horses spent their pent-up energy and slowed down. Cobalt also seemed calmer, as if he, too, had needed the release. The rest of their party caught up: Matthew and General Cragland; Kindler,

the messenger from Harsdown; and thirty warriors in an honor guard. Most of the guard had kept pace with Cobalt and Mel, but far enough away to give them privacy. Now, as everyone slowed down, they gathered into a tighter group.

It was late afternoon on their fifth day in Harsdown. The sun behind them stretched their shadows in long silhouettes. They were heading toward the Boxer-Mage Mountains that separated Harsdown from Aronsdale. What they sought lay at the base of those mountains in a fertile dale, and with every step closer, Mel's spirits lifted.

"Look!" She pointed down the long slope ahead of them. In the distance, endless rows of pear trees spread out, rich with the verdant foliage of early summer.

"Come on!" Mel urged Smoke into a gallop, and he took off with renewed energy. Cobalt raced with her down the slope. When they plunged into the familiar rows of trees, Mel didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She reined in Smoke, and the horses walked through the misty orchard while the storm rumbled above them.

It took over an hour for them to come out of the trees. They rode into a grassy field in front of a farmhouse with many wings, arched eaves, and round windows with glass pictures of apples and pears. The house was built from sunbask wood, warm and golden, so vivid it seemed to glow in the wet, overcast day. Mel didn't know how she looked, but Cobalt's face gentled as he watched her.

"Welcome home," he said.

Mel's parents met her in front of the house, her mother crying as they hugged, her father putting his arms around them as tears wet his cheeks. The bustle of people soon filled Applecroft. They couldn't all fit inside, so the Chamberlight honor guard set up camp in the fields, and Mel, Cobalt, Matthew, and Cragland stayed at the house. Mel's father also had a company of his own army stationed around the orchards. It was the trade-off they made for living in a farmhouse instead of a castle; they had to have men guarding the house and lands. The Fortress of Bones was only a few minutes' ride from the house, however, and protected the village of Granite. If necessary, the royal family and the villagers could retreat within the stone walls of that keep.

Mel's reunion with her parents was bittersweet, filled with the joy of seeing them but also with the knowledge of the crisis that brought them together. Her mother and father looked alike with their yellow hair and blue eyes, but more gray showed at her father's temples than Mel remembered. He was forty-seven, nine years older than her mother.

Mel had never known a man who enjoyed fine clothes as much as her father. He was impeccable in his tailored trousers of gold suede, his amber-suede knee-boots, elegant white shirt, and the gold vest with fastenings imported from Jazid. Her mother wore blue leggings under a tunic with fluttering layers of silk. Her parents were beautiful, she supposed, but that didn't really matter to her. She knew many exquisite people who were cold inside. The Misted Cliffs were full of them. She loved her parents for the warmth of their hearts and their unconditional love.

Before dinner, Mel went in search of Fog. She found her cat curled up on her parents' bed, obviously in command of the room and probably the house as well. Mel scooped him up in her arms. He gave a mew of protest and squirmed until she set him back on the bed. Then he sniffed at her hand and rubbed against her fingers, purring as he welcomed her into his house.

That evening, they dined at the big table. Afterward, they withdrew to the study: Muller, Chime, Mel, Cobalt, General Cragland, and Sphere-General Fieldson of Harsdown. Mel thought it strange to see the two generals in the same meeting. Had she and Cobalt never married, Cragland would have fought Fieldson when Varqelle invaded Harsdown to regain his throne. Yet now they sat as allies. Neither looked comfortable with the situation, but they kept their reservations to themselves. They were cut from the same cloth: rugged and intelligent, with a natural ability to lead.

Cobalt asked Matthew to sit in on the meeting. As stable master at the Castle of Clouds and a horseman for decades, Matthew had a natural instinct for strategy that involved horses, and he understood cavalry with an expertise few could claim, including most career officers. Mel suspected Matthew was also the only person in the meeting Cobalt fully trusted.

They sat in wing chairs or couches drawn into a circle, with sunbask tables between their seats and glasses of mulled wine. Candles on the mantel and tables shed golden light. Night had fallen, the time to retire, but this meeting was too important to delay until morning.

Mel could see her parents' fatigue. In the past year, her father's role as commander of the Harsdown forces had demanded more and more time, as he and his cousin Jarid trained their armies together. They called their efforts exercises, but everyone knew they were building a military capable of standing against Cobalt. Muller also had his other duties as king of Harsdown. Chime carried some of those responsibilities and ran the orchard, but it was a demanding life even in peacetime. With Drummer's abduction added to the mix, it was no wonder they were exhausted.

No one wanted the houses of Dawnfield and Chamberlight to go to war, but the tension in the study tonight gave mute witness to the lack of trust between their leaders. Mel sometimes felt as if she were a cord stretched between the two, one constantly pulled, twisted and strained until she felt as if she would snap.

"We must negotiate with the House of Quaazero," Chime was saying. "Otherwise they might hurt him."

"We all wish to see your brother free and well," General Cragland said. "But we cannot buckle to the demands of those who seek to control us."

Mel noticed how he addressed Chime with respect even though she had been his enemy during the war, nineteen years ago. People tended to like her mother. Chime had been wild in her youth, full of mischief, or so Mel had heard from her grandmother. Since then, Chime had matured into the leader who had spent the last two decades developing programs to help impoverished farmers and bee tenders in Harsdown learn techniques that would increase their output and better their lives.

"How much military training does Drummer have?" Matthew asked. "If we can get him out of there, can he ride a horse?"

"A bit, I believe," Fieldson said. "No military experience."

"He's impulsive," Chime said. Wryly she added, "He doesn't always show the best judgment."

Mel spoke the fear that had gnawed at her since they received the news. "They won't torture or execute him." She made it a statement, but they all knew the question in her words.

Fieldson shifted in his seat and Cragland averted his gaze. Even Matthew wouldn't look at her.

“We’ll have him back soon,” Muller said. His gentle tone hurt, for Mel knew what it meant. He couldn’t give the answer she wanted to hear.

“If they harm Drummer,” Cobalt said flatly, “we harm them.”

Matthew scowled at him. “Wage war against Taka Mal, and we make Jazid our enemy as well.”

“I have seven thousand men,” Cobalt said. “Taka Mal and Jazid combined have little more than six.”

“More than numbers matter,” Fieldson said. “Your forces combine two disparate militaries, Shazire and the Misted Cliffs. The armies of Jazid and Taka Mal are more used to working together. They also know how to fight in the desert. Yours don’t.”

Mel thought of her sword practices with Cobalt’s officers. She noticed differences in her training and theirs, and the training in Shazire differed even more. “We need to consider weapons, too. Shazire is less well equipped than most armies, with older swords and bows, less durable than our more modern weapons.”

Cragland nodded, his face thoughtful. “That won’t be true of Taka Mal or Jazid, though. They consider fighting an art.”

Cobalt settled his gaze on Muller. Mel knew what he was about to say, and she wanted to shout her protest.

“If Harsdown and Aronsdale join forces with us,” Cobalt said, “we would have an army unlike any ever seen in the settled lands. Twelve thousand strong. Discrepancies in training and equipment would become trivial.”

Muller considered him. Mel knew that, decades ago, people had questioned her father’s ability to command an army, not because he lacked training or intelligence, but because they saw his graceful, almost pretty appearance as weakness. But Mel knew him as a seasoned leader who inspired confidence, and she saw it in his unwavering gaze as he regarded Cobalt. Generals Cragland and Fieldson were taking each other’s measure, and Mel could almost feel them wondering what would happen if they combined their armies. She felt the heady power in that idea. No one would stand against such a force!

No.No. Cobalt seduced her with his thirst for conquest. How many would die for his unquenchable need? It would never end. If the armies of Dawnfield and Chamberlight defeated the armies of Quaaazera and Onyx, who would rule the new empire? Not so long ago, Dawnfield and Chamberlight had bitterly opposed each other. Mel’s marriage had given them a truce, and Drummer’s abduction pushed them together as wary allies, but she could never imagine either giving way to the rule of the other.

Muller finally spoke. “I will not ride against Taka Mal.”

“And if Queen Vizarana executes Drummer?” Cobalt asked.

Chime rose to her feet and faced him, slender and pale in the candlelight, a wraith compared to his might. “As far as we know, Drummer is alive. We must negotiate. We must do everything we can to bring him home.” Her voice shook. “Alive.”

“We won’t let them hurt him,” Cobalt said.

“But if they do, despite our best efforts—” She took a deep breath. “I will personally argue your case for combining your armies with ours.”

He went very still. “You would support such an alliance?”

Her normally melodic voice hardened. “If they kill my brother, then you destroy them.”

“Mother, how could you do it?” Mel kept her voice down, even out here in the stable, away from the others. “Do you have any idea what you could unleash by saying that to him?”

Chime regarded her with a bleak stare. A lamp hanging on the wall flickered in the otherwise dark stable. Horses stamped in their stalls, and the smell of hay saturated the air.

“They took Drummer because he was the easiest to grab,” Chime said. “He’s my brother, and that made him a target. It’s my fault.”

Mel couldn’t believe her mother had evoked Cobalt’s darkness. Of all the people she thought posed a danger to the unstable peace their countries managed, she would never have included Chime.

“It’s not your fault that they took Drummer,” Mel said. “You can’t blame yourself for their misdeeds.” She went over to Chime. With a start, she realized she was taller than her mother. Before she had left, they had been the same height. Mel knew most Headwind women didn’t finish growing until her age, but it still unsettled her to be taller than her mother, as if the proper order of things were reversed.

“He never grew up,” Chime said.

Mel knew she meant Drummer. “He’s happy. And harmless.”

“He’s a beautiful singer.” Chime wiped away her tears before they had a chance to fall. “Sometimes I want to tell him to shape up. Then he looks at me with those big blue eyes and I just can’t.”

As a child, Mel had loved Drummer’s pranks, tickled by his irreverence. As an adult she could see his lack of judgment. Saints only know what trouble it could bring him now. She prayed he used more wisdom in his dealings with his abductors than he had done with his life in Aronsdale.

In their meeting tonight, they had discussed many options. Cragland wanted to send spies to free Drummer. Fieldson thought they knew too little about the Topaz Palace. He proposed sending an envoy to hear out Vizarana Jade. They could scout the palace and give any rescue attempt a better chance of success. Cragland thought it would tip their hand and the queen would guess their intent. Muller wanted to at least appear to negotiate, lest the House of Quazera become impatient and take drastic measures.

They had finally decided Fieldson would take a company of thirty Chamberlight and Dawnfield men to Taka Mal, supposedly to negotiate. Cragland would choose fifteen of Cobalt’s honor guard, and in return Muller would send fifteen Dawnfield men back to the Misted Cliffs with Cobalt, as an act of good faith.

Chime wanted to go to Taka Mal. Mel wanted to go. Muller wanted to go. Cobalt wanted to take his

entire army. Mel knew those weren't the best choices, but it ate away at her that she could do so little.

"He'll be all right," Mel said, as much to reassure herself as her mother. "He could soften up even Taka Mal's iron queen."

"That's what I fear," Chime said. "Then what, after he trespasses against the House of Quaaazera?"

It was a good question. Mel didn't have an answer.

Be wise, Uncle, she thought. Be wise.

Drummer awoke alone. The candle had burned down, and someone had set a glazed basin and a pitcher next to the stump. Jade was gone. He lay on his stomach, thinking about her. How could she be so tough in public and so soft in bed? Maybe that was why she put up a shield with everyone; her softness was her vulnerability. One mistake and she could lose her throne.

His contented smile faded. One mistake. Him.

Drummer groaned and rolled over, throwing his arm across his eyes. What had he been thinking? What if she told Baz or that shadow-on-shadows king of Jazid? Baz would probably want to do a lot worse now than just chain Drummer in a pit.

She won't tell. He couldn't bear to believe anything else. Surely she knew what would happen if she revealed the truth. Nor would it go poorly only for him; she would endure censure as well, from Baz, from Ozar—

No! He swore vehemently, remembering, and sat up fast. Ozar had proposed to Jade. She couldn't marry that sadist. Besides, he already had a wife. Two, in fact. Surely that was enough. It wasn't even legal in other settled lands.

"Not with Jade, you don't," he muttered.

He felt nauseous. Maybe he needed food. He went to the table and found the pitcher full of water. Soap carved into a dragon rested by the basin. He didn't have a razor to scrape off his stubble, but his beard had never been heavy, and it was blond, so it didn't show much yet. He washed up and dressed, trying to look civilized. Then he tried the door. To his surprise, it opened.

Outside, a hall stretched out, ivory and topaz, with arches that framed the corridor. Arched doors, all closed, appeared at intervals. Drummer hesitated in his doorway. Despite its elegant decor, it was obviously a cell. Had they forgotten to lock him in? Perhaps Jade had sent away his guards. This could be a trap.

He stepped into the hallway. No one appeared, so he headed toward the hall where they had held the feast. When he thought of all the food he had missed, his mouth watered. It was hard to believe a few spells had so overwhelmed him. Last night he had imagined he might wield exceptional mage powers, but in the light of an ordinary day, he felt foolish for harboring such thoughts. Surely someone would have noticed by now if he was a powerful mage. Not that he had ever made spells for people; they just seemed to happen, especially lately.



A memory came to him. He had been dozing in an easy chair during a visit with Muller and Chime and overheard them discussing Mel's mage talent. Apparently it had been taking a long time to mature. Nor was it only spells. At seventeen, Mel had still been growing. It was a family trait. Chime hadn't reached her full height until eighteen. Drummer had been twenty-four. With things taking so long, he had hoped he would be tall. But no, he ended up average for Aronsdale, below average in Taka Mal, without the husky build his father and older brother enjoyed.

Maybe what he lacked in bulk he had in mage power. His assumption that men couldn't be real mages was based on what he heard from other people, but none of them were mages. He wasn't even sure what qualified as a "real" mage. Those he knew best were Chime and Muller, and neither had ever said he couldn't be like them. If it had taken him so long to grow, perhaps it had also taken his mage abilities a long time.

Drummer had lived his life like a leaf floating on the river, drifting from year to year. His abduction had jolted him in many ways; perhaps that stirred up his mage abilities. Historians claimed the powers developed as a means of survival among his people. If that was true, it would make sense that his responded when he felt his survival threatened.

The Topaz Hall was empty, its tables cleared, its floors swept and the musician stand gone. No hint of last night's festivities remained. Unfortunately, that meant no food, either. He found a pitcher of water and slaked his thirst, but that was it. Beyond the hall, he encountered two maids carrying linens and giggling with each other. They quieted as he walked past, and one smiled. He didn't understand why Jade had left him to wander. For all he knew, he could find a horse and leave. If he could manage; he hadn't paid good attention when his father had taught him about riding. He knew how, but he had wanted neither the expense nor the responsibility of owning a horse. In Aronsdale, he had either walked or bargained for rides in someone's cart.

After last night, though, it was no longer so easy to consider leaving. He didn't know what to think. Maybe it had been a dalliance for Jade, before she took the politically expedient action of marrying the Atajazid D'az Ozar. Even Drummer, who made it his business to be apolitical, could see the advantages of such a union. Although never enemies, Jazid and Taka Mal had never been strong allies, either. But they had reason to unite against Cobalt. And here Drummer was, a hostage for Cobalt's good behavior, as if the Dark Prince were capable of good behavior.

Neither are you, Drummer told himself. If he thought Jade would throw away all that power so she could have him, he was an idiot. She had used him last night, and if he was lucky, she wouldn't tell anyone. Nothing held him here.

Drummer didn't want to leave his glitter, but he couldn't risk returning to his rooms where someone might catch him. He had no idea where to find the stables. He roamed through a maze of arches, pillars and corridors until he came out into a courtyard. Five children were playing chase around the fountain that bubbled in its center. When he entered, they all stopped to stare at him.

"My greetings," Drummer said cheerfully. They clustered together and watched him with wide eyes.

He slid his hand over his vest and secretly ripped a topaz off the cloth. Then he strolled over to the children. "What do you have there?" he asked the oldest boy, a fellow of about nine.

The boy tilted his head. "What did you say?"

Drummer had a hard time understanding his accent, which he suspected worked two ways. He spoke

more slowly. "There." He indicated the boy's ear with his right hand, letting the children see his palm. The topaz was hidden in his shirt cuff.

"Nothing!" the boy said.

"Are you sure?" With his palm closed, Drummer let the topaz slip into his hand. He reached behind the boy's ear and touched the skin. Then he withdrew his hand and opened it. The topaz glittered in his palm. "You're sprouting gems."

"Hai!" The boy gave a whoop. "How did you do that?"

Drummer grinned. "They must grow with your hair."

One of the girls giggled. "Sparklies don't grow in hair."

The children all gathered around Drummer. A thought came to him, spurred by the circular fountain. He wasn't certain how to make spells; usually they just came to him. But it seemed to work when he thought of shapes. He held his palm open to the sky with the topaz sparkling in its center.

"Behold!" Drummer said with a flourish. He concentrated on the shape of the fountain.

Nothing.

The children waited, earnestly trying to behold something. Feeling foolish, Drummer wondered what he had done wrong. Maybe the fountain wasn't a pure shape. Looked like a circle to him, though.

"It feels good," one of the girls said.

Drummer blinked. He did feel good. Healthy, glowing, awake, refreshed. Of course. Orange spells eased pain. Since none of them were in pain, it just made them feel better. It wasn't a particularly dramatic effect, though.

He offered the topaz to one of the girls. "Can you hold this for me?"

She took it with special care. "I won't let anything happen to it, Your Highness."

Highness? They thought he was a prince. He supposed it was a logical assumption given his clothes and unusual coloring. They probably figured he was visiting from Aronsdale. Which was sort of true, though it hadn't been his idea to come here.

Drummer pulled a big ruby off his vest. It was probably worth a small fortune. Balancing it in his palm, he focused on the fountain. He thought of red things, apples and strawberries and blushed cheeks. Red spells made light—

A column of red light shot up from his hand.

"Saint Rose almighty," Drummer muttered, stepping back. The light came with him, connected to the gem in his hand. He didn't want to drop his arm for fear the light would strike the children.

"Look at that!" one of boys whooped, while the others oohed and aahed in appreciation.

Drummer stared up at the column. “Stop,” he whispered, terrified. His palm was heating up. He curled his hand around the ruby and the heat intensified. With a gasp, he dropped the gem. It clattered on the ground and the light vanished.

The children scrambled for the ruby, and one scooped it up.

“Don’t touch it!” Drummer cried.

“Do more!” a boy said. Another shouted, “Do that one again!”

He took a shaky breath. Apparently the gem was harmless again. He spoke carefully, so they would understand his Aronsdale accent. “I’m afraid I can’t this morning. I have to go.”

With undisguised disappointment, they gave him back the topaz and the ruby. A small girl looked up at him. “Will you visit again?”

“I hope so.” For the first time, he wondered what it would be like to have a child like that. He looked around at them all. “I was hoping you could tell me how to find the stables.”

Most of the children looked uncertain, but the oldest boy said, “I don’t know how to say. But I can take you there.”

Relief swept over Drummer. A child guide was the perfect solution. The boy wasn’t likely to get Drummer in trouble, and if people saw an adult with a child, they were less likely to be suspicious than if he were wandering around on his own.

Drummer swept a deep bow to him. “Thank you.”

“Can we come, too?” one of the girls asked.

“Not today,” Drummer said, smiling and looking apologetic.

The girls giggled and ran off, but not before Drummer overheard one whisper to another, “He’s handsome.”

His guide rolled his eyes. “Girls.”

Drummer chuckled. “Just wait a few years.”

The boy took him into another wing of the palace, keeping up a stream of chatter. They were, Drummer realized, in a servants’ wing. The boy’s clothes were well-made, nicer than any Drummer had worn at his age, but they weren’t extravagant, which suggested his parents were on the palace staff. It could explain why the boy hadn’t hesitated to be his guide. He wouldn’t challenge someone he believed was a prince. Discretion and accommodation protected one’s livelihood; Drummer knew that principle well, after having followed it most of his life. He suspected the staff here knew a lot more of the palace goings-on than most people realized.

He didn’t want his guide to get into trouble for helping him. When the boy took him outside, into a lane between this wing of the palace and a wall, Drummer drew him to a stop. They stood in the arch of the doorway.

“How much farther is it?” Drummer asked.

The boy motioned to where the lane curved around the palace. “Just after you turn the corner.”

“I can find it from here.” He gave the boy a conspiratorial look. “Listen, I have a secret for you.”

“A secret?” His gaze widened. “What is it?”

“Princes aren’t supposed to do magic tricks.”

“Why not?”

Drummer tried to think of a reason. “It scares people.”

“Why?”

“They don’t understand it, I guess.”

“That’s dumb.”

Drummer laughed, though he wasn’t so sure it was funny. That last spell had shaken him. He could have burned himself. When his niece Mel had visited Aronsdale last year, she had confided in him that her legendary spell at the Battle of Alzire had been only light, without heat. That had been a large spell, one much more demanding of power than his pillar. Apparently on a smaller scale, he had enough power left over to make heat.

“Will you make me a promise?” Drummer asked. “You’re a grown-up fellow. I can trust you.”

The boy drew himself up straight. “Certainly, Your Highness.”

“Don’t tell anyone you saw me or that I did spells.”

“I won’t.”

Drummer clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re a fine fellow.”

After his guide ran off, Drummer walked up the alley and turned the corner. A courtyard lay ahead of him, and stables lined its outer wall. Grooms, stable boys, light-bringers, and hay-sweepers bustled with their work in the yard. A man with a rake was passing the alley. Seeing Drummer, he froze, his face startled. Then he knelt, the rake held awkwardly in his hand.

I have to get out of these clothes, Drummer thought. He was drawing too much attention. Neither Chime nor Muller expected people to kneel to them. Aronsdale was more formal, though, and people knelt to royals at the court there.

“Please rise,” Drummer said, copying the tone he had heard King Jarid use.

The man stood up, his gaze averted. Drummer wasn’t sure how to act, so he just said, “Please proceed.”

“Thank you, sire.” The man walked on, and Drummer let out a breath, hoping he hadn’t made mistakes.

The fellow hadn't seemed any more certain of what to do than Drummer, which made him suspect they didn't often see visiting princes here. If he went to the stables like this, people would notice. But he had no other clothes, and the longer he spent figuring out what to do, the more chance his guards would discover he was gone. They might already be searching for him.

Well, so, he might as well brazen it out. He drew himself up and strode toward the stables.

A stable boy ran out to meet him. "Can I get your horse, Your Highness?" He was a youth of about fourteen.

"No thank you," Drummer said. "I can manage."

The boy kept running alongside him. "I can help."

It occurred to Drummer that the fellow might hope to get a reward for helping him. Well, Jade had said these clothes were his, and the gems were on the clothes. It seemed he was, rather suddenly, quite rich.

"Very well," Drummer said. "I require a horse. One I might purchase to take home with me."

"To Aronsdale?" the youth asked.

"Yes, that's right," Drummer said. "How did you know?"

"Your hair."

"Ah." He needed a hat, too, if he was going to slip away unnoticed. It didn't worry him too much that the grooms or stable hands saw him, but he was concerned about the army officer talking to a sweeper by the first stable. Sweat gathered under Drummer's collar. As the boy led him over, the officer glanced up. Drummer nodded to him and went inside the stable, aware of the officer watching him. Did he suspect Drummer was a prisoner rather than a guest? Drummer's guards knew, obviously, as did Baz. Others at the banquet might have guessed. Or maybe they had just thought he was strange, given the way he had disappeared.

Inside, the air was rich with smells of hay and manure. The youth led him past many stalls, some empty, others the home to gorgeous horses, Jazidians, the most coveted breed, sleek stallions with glossy black coats. The "smaller" mares were larger than warhorses native to Harsdown and Aronsdale. It was an advantage Jazid and Taka Mal had over other armies: stronger, faster, smarter horses. Jazidians were exorbitantly expensive, though, which was why few people owned them. Drummer had seen some at Suncroft, but they hadn't filled the royal stables the way they did here.

The boy stopped at a stall. "This one, Your Highness."

Drummer stared at the horse. "Yes," he managed to say. "He will do." He hoped he could ride it, because it was the most glorious animal he had ever seen.

"His name is Vim," the boy said.

"Vim, eh?" Drummer eyed the horse. "Does that mean he's full of energy?"

"He's a steady one, Your Highness. One of our best."

Drummer grinned at the boy. "Thank you, then."

The youth led Vim out of the stable, earning annoyed glances from the grooms, who probably wanted first shot at attending Drummer. At Suncroft, the staff had an established hierarchy, and grooms were higher than stable boys. Drummer had no doubt he was breaking unwritten rules here, but he had no time to figure it out. The officer was watching him, and Drummer didn't want to give the fellow time to decide to intervene.

As the boy saddled Vim, Drummer looked up at the horse. It was big. Really big. How would he get up? Well, yes, he knew how to put his foot in the stirrup, but he had never done it with an animal this size. He wasn't dressed to ride, he had no supplies, and he was probably insane, but if he planned on escaping, he had to go before someone realized he was loose—and before Baz or Onyx figured out he had taken liberties with the queen. The worst of it was, if she asked him to stay, he would do it. He was a fool.

Drummer turned to the boy. "Well done, young man." He knew the youth believed he was taking Vim for a trial ride and would return to discuss his purchase with the stable master. Drummer had no intention of coming back, but he didn't want to steal the horse. Although in his younger days, he had snatched fruit from the market, he had outgrown that spate of misbehavior. He had a rough idea how much a horse cost, having watched Muller haggle for animals, but a Jazidian was worth far more than workhorses.

Drummer took the topaz and ruby out of his pocket and handed both to the boy. "Give the ruby to the stable master, as payment for the horse. You may keep the topaz."

The youth stared at the gems with his mouth open, which made Drummer wonder if he had underestimated their worth. He put on a stern face. "You will see that the stable master receives that ruby."

"Yes, sire! I will." The boy held up the topaz. "Is it really for me?"

"Of course."

"But it's so much."

"Well, you could get me a tier-stool." Drummer coined the last word on the spur of the moment.

The youth squinted at him. "Sire?"

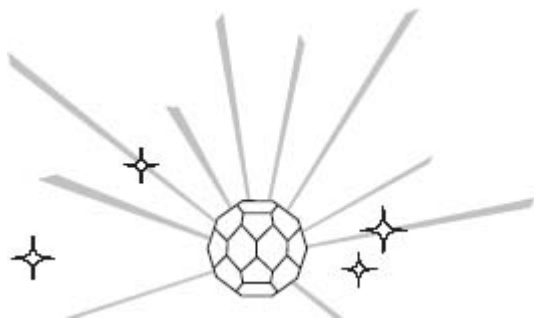
"For getting on the horse," Drummer said. "We use them in Aronsdale." He hoped the boy knew too little about Aronsdale to realize Drummer had made it up.

"Ah!" The youth beamed at him. "Of course. Right away."

Drummer blinked. Maybe he hadn't made it up after all.

The boy ran off and soon returned with a three-legged stool. Drummer used it to swing up on Vim, and the horse nickered. The stable boy had chosen well, though; Vim controlled his energy and responded to Drummer's touch on the reins. It was a good thing, because Drummer didn't doubt the horse sensed his uncertainty. He held the reins stiffly, aware of the powerful animal under him. He was so high. The youth was watching, as was a groom walking horses in the yard and the officer by the stable. Striving to appear nonchalant, Drummer rode toward the gate. Mercifully, Vim obeyed his directions and trotted out,

headed into Quaaz.



9

## Ocean and Desert

“Gone?” Baz stared at Jade, and she thought she might incinerate under the heat of his anger. “How in a flaming dragon’s hell could he be gone?”

“He seemed sick at the banquet,” Jade said. “Apparently he was healthier than we thought.”

Baz stalked back and forth in her library, a cozy room with bookshelves, windows, a globe of the world in one corner, and an abacus on the table. Jade kept the table between her and her incensed cousin and wondered how she could have been so stupid as to believe Drummer would honor a Topaz Pact. He had said he would stay put and she believed him. She was a fool. He used trickery as old as the human race to get past her guard, and she had fallen for it like a lovesick idiot.

Of course she hadn’t left his room guarded while she slept with him. She couldn’t risk anyone knowing she was there. She should have locked him in when she left, made it a cell instead of their love nest. But the unlocked room had a long history in the settled lands. It spoke of trust, particularly in situations such as this. That was the Topaz Pact she had offered Drummer last night: the hostage agreed to stay put and the host agreed to treat him as a guest instead of as a prisoner. Drummer had accepted. Then he threw it back in her face.

She couldn’t tell Baz. He would want to know where she got the idea that Drummer would honor such an oath. If her cousin ever found out what she had done with Drummer last night, his anger would outdo even the mythical flames of the Dragon-Sun.

Maybe if she had told Drummer his family was sending an envoy to negotiate his release, he would have trusted her enough to stay. No, she couldn’t make excuses. He had betrayed the pact, and even worse, he did it after making love to her. She had always hesitated to let any man close, wary he would covet her title. In her youth, she had felt crushed by the hostility of those who thought she had no right to the throne. Baz had supported her with the military, as had her father’s top officers. She learned from them, learned from everyone. Over the years, she had even developed affection for her three contentious generals, Firaz, Slate, and especially Spearcaster. But always she balanced on an edge. One misstep and she could topple from power.

Drummer hadn’t been one misstep—he had been an entire march of them. A misjudgment of colossal proportions. What did he think to accomplish, riding off with no equipment, no maps, no plans? She didn’t want to care what happened to him, but she couldn’t help it. He was going to get himself killed.

“He has spent a lot of time in Aronsdale jails,” Jade said, dredging up what her spies had discovered. “He probably learned how to pick locks and escape cells.”

“Then you should have guarded him more closely.”

She had no argument with that. “We’ll find him.”

“We had better.” He strode to the door. He stopped, though, before he opened it. Facing away from her, with his hand on the knob, he said, “Have you thought on Ozar’s proposal?”

Jade had no desire to marry Ozar. But they needed his army if they were to face Cobalt Escar’s growing dominion. She spoke carefully. “I may not have explored every alternative.”

Baz turned, his hand on the knob as if he were prepared for a quick escape. “Marrying him would be an abomination.”

Jade hated the thought of Ozar touching her, especially after the sweetness of her night with Drummer. Not that she was thinking about Drummer, curse his fickle soul.

“We need Ozar’s army,” she said.

“We had another option with Cobalt.” He growled the words. “Now our option has stolen a Jazidian stallion and ridden away.”

“He didn’t steal it.” Drily she added, “In fact, he overpaid.”

“For the sake of the winds, Jade. He tore a ruby off his clothes. It belongs to you.”

“I gave him the clothes.” Another weakness on her part, lavishing gifts on her deceptively beatific guest.

Baz’s expression darkened as if he were a thundercloud. “Why such an expensive gift?” He was so angry, he almost spat the words. “What did he do to earn such a treasure?”

“Stop it, Baz.”

“What did he do?”

“Nothing.” It was true; at the time, he hadn’t yet been in her bed. “We kidnapped him. Then I insisted he dress up and let us put him on display so people would know I wasn’t mistreating him. The least I could do was give him the clothes we made him wear. It was a gesture of good faith.”

“Such terrible hardships we’ve inflicted on him,” Baz said, “forcing him to wear magnificent clothes and attend a sumptuous feast. What evil shall we commit next? Give him one of our most valuable horses? We are truly vile people.”

“Oh, stop.”

“My men have probably found him by now,” he said. “And saved his irksome hide from dehydration in the Rocklands.”

Jade hoped so. She dreaded having to face Drummer, but it would be far worse if the envoy from



Harsdown arrived and discovered the House of Quaaazera had lost their queen's brother.

The hill known as the King's Spring was green with the first days of summer. Mel rode down behind the Diamond Palace, past the spindle trees, narrow and tall, that grew only in the Misted Cliffs. She was in the King's Fields, a large tract of land where supposedly no one ventured without the king's permission. In theory, she didn't need bodyguards here, so she had tried to send them away. They came with her anyway, but at least they were discreet enough to give her the illusion of being alone.

Twenty days had passed since she and Cobalt had returned from Harsdown. She would have liked to stay with her family until they heard about Drummer, but it could take as much as two months for the delegation to reach Taka Mal, negotiate, and return. Cobalt had duties to attend, and he had asked Mel to come back with him. That he asked instead of trying to order her mattered a great deal to Mel. So she had come.

In the countryside below the hill, she gave Smoke his head, and he galloped through fields dotted by starflowers. The air smelled of honey-dust blossoms. Spindles stood by the path like sentinels, and she passed groves of heliotrope trees, heavy with blue-green foliage. Her maids had told her that soon a profusion of purple fruit would hang from the branches, helios, sweet and tart at the same time. Until Stonebreaker's illness, she had never visited this part of the country. The land was beautifully strange, so much more lush than Harsdown.

The path changed, more sand mixing with the soil. Up ahead, hills spiked with reed-grasses hunched beside the road. Mel heard a new sound, a low rumble. She reached the top of a hill—and reined to an abrupt halt. Before her, the grasses petered out into sand dunes and then into a primeval beach; beyond that, the Blue Ocean roared into the shore. Waves reared up, crowned with froth, then curled over and crashed on the beach.

Mel stared, unable to move. She had never been this close to an ocean before. Her trance broke when Smoke whinnied with impatience. Inhaling deeply, she took in the salty scent of the ocean. She nudged Smoke forward, and he picked his way along the path. It occurred to Mel that she didn't know if horses were supposed to walk in sand. Smoke didn't seem bothered, but she slid off anyway and walked along with him. Her boot heels kept sinking into the sand, so she took them off and rolled her leggings to her knees. As they neared the water, a wave swirled up the beach and around her feet. With a snort, Smoke backed up a step.

"Sorry," Mel said. "You stay here." She offered him an apple she had stashed in a pocket of her tunic. He gave a forgiving snort and chewed contentedly. Mel knew him well enough to trust he wouldn't wander away without her.

Mel walked to the sea. She didn't know whether to be afraid or fascinated by its rhythmic power. Water splashed her ankles. She went deeper, and it surged around her knees, making her stumble, splattering foam against her body. She stopped then. The receding water dragged at her legs like a spirit trying to pull her under. Much farther out, a wave towered at the height of two men. So wild and beautiful. The ocean was an enigma, as were her mage gifts. She had come to the privacy of this wild place hoping to learn more about both riddles—the sea and her power.

She opened the pouch she carried over her shoulder and lifted out her sphere. Tadimaja Pickaxe, a palace aide in Shazire, had personally selected the metal for her. Blacksmiths had tooled it to be as perfectly round as possible, and it shone with the iridescent sheen found on a smear of oil after the rain.

Over the past year, Mel's abilities had developed in fits and starts. If she pushed a spell too hard, her head ached, her vision swam, and her heart beat too fast. She didn't understand why it hurt. Her mother had never been that way. But each mage did spells in her own unique style. Chime was among the strongest adepts in the settled lands, a green mage who could draw on a twenty-sided ball. A few years ago, Mel had thought she would also be a green, with a faceted sphere as her highest shape. Unlike most mages, though, who had finished developing by her age, Mel continued to grow in ability. Only Cobalt knew, and he didn't understand. However, each time she pushed hard, the spells were a little less of a strain and her recovery a little faster.

Mel thought of the blue spell she had made for Cobalt. If she really was a blue-sphere adept, she would be the strongest mage alive after her father and Jarid. But her father needed flawed shapes, which created flawed spells. Historians thought that the Dawnfield mages had bred the trait into their line thousands of years ago, creating a weapon. After centuries of dormancy, it had manifested in Muller. He had no wish to harm his family or his people, so he rarely performed spells. Mel knew even less about Jarid, only rumors of his immense power.

Mel had no mages here to help her learn. If she told her parents, they might send their mage mistress, Skylark, but that would leave them without her advice at a time when a mage's input was important in training the army. And Skylark was too elderly to travel. Mel thought it better she manage on her own, though at times she felt like flotsam tossed in the tumultuous seas of her nascent abilities.

Mel stood gripping the sphere while the ocean splattered her with froth and seaweed. She focused on the colors of the water, green and blue, and imagined her power rolling in waves, surging in force but then retreating again.

A blue light glowed around the sphere. Mel concentrated, letting her spell build and recede. . . .

Ebb and flow. . .

Ebb and flow. . .

The rhythm became part of her, hypnotic. It eased the strain, for each time her spell built, it receded. At its highest point, her head ached, but then the spell eased. She closed her eyes and the spell flowed through her. Gradually, she became accustomed to the high points. Just as she warmed up before she practiced swordplay, so now she warmed up her spells.

Ebb and flow. . .

Ebb and flow. . .

Higher. . .

Higher. . .

Mel opened her eyes—and froze.

Blue light filled the beach. She hadn't even realized she had backed out of the water. Birds cawed overhead, soaring through the spell. Smoke stood nearby, and crabs had crawled out of the sand or water to gather around her. All glowed blue. The light saturated her, not just soothing, as would an orange spell, but giving health. In the past, a spell this powerful would have exhausted her. But she felt

good. Ready for more. A little more.

Except she tried a lot more.

“Indigo,” Mel murmured, though it was beyond her—

Indigo light exploded around Mel. Agony shot through her head and she dropped the sphere as she fell to her knees.

“No.” Mel pressed the heels of her hands against her temples. Tears gathered in her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she whispered to the animals that surrounded her. “I’m sorry.”

Smoke nickered and butted her shoulder. Bleary-eyed, she peered at the horse. He seemed serene. The crabs scuttled away, and the birds sailed in circles that took them farther out on each circuit. That incredible burst of power may have hurt her, but it had done no other harm she could see. Legends said indigo spells healed emotional pain. Her father never tried, for he feared his flawed spells would create despair rather than heal anyone.

The sorrow that had plagued Mel since the war last year remained. Fear for Drummer still filled her heart. But...somehow, incredibly, it had become more bearable.

“Papa,” she whispered. “You gave me your power.” From her mother, she had inherited the ability to make pure spells with pure shapes. Her parents had each given her the best of themselves.

More had happened with the indigo spell, though. Mel felt...extended.

Too extended.

Her head swam and her sight dimmed.

With a sigh, she collapsed onto the beach. Darkness closed around her, replacing her colors with nothing.

The Tapered Desert had a stark beauty unlike any place Drummer had ever imagined. It was a world of red and gold stone. Rock spires rose from the earth instead of trees, and the land buckled in terraces the size of hills. When he rode along the top of a ridge, he could see for leagues in every direction. The astringent quality of the air exhilarated him. He had always thought of deserts as parched, but this one was full of oases, spots of green that flourished around water holes or rivers.

He followed a caravan trail. Vim ran easily, putting the city of Quaaz behind them with gratifying speed. Drummer kept expecting to see Baz’s soldiers in pursuit. He doubted they could catch Vim, but he couldn’t run the horse for too long, lest he hurt the magnificent animal.

His clothes chafed and his legs ached from riding. His muscles weren’t toughened up for this. He needed to stop, to buy food, water, a map if possible. He wished he could wait out the day’s heat in a shaded place, but he feared every lost second. He would find somewhere to hide after sunset. He doubted he would sleep much, but neither he nor Vim could go all day and ride at night, too, without rest.

He crested a ridge and looked down at a village on the other side. Tents clustered around one of the

creeks that kept this part of Taka Mal habitable. He descended the ridge, riding warily from terrace to terrace, uncertain how the people would respond to a foreign visitor, apparently wealthy but without bodyguards. Were he wandering Aronsdale as a minstrel, he could charm the locals with song. He doubted a singing prince would inspire much confidence in Taka Mal, though. Far easier to knock him over the head and steal his clothes and horse. He didn't even have a sword. Not that it would help much. He didn't know how to use one.

As he neared the town, he realized it had no permanent buildings. Just tents. Even dusty and worn, they were beautiful, designed from dyed canvases, mostly red and gold, also some blue. Their peaked roofs overhung their walls. Tassels hung off the roofs and dangled in the wind, woven with sparkling threads.

Drummer rode down a lane of tents. Families had set up campsites, but in the heat of midday, none had fires. A few people sat in the shade or stood in tent entrances, with the flaps pulled back to let in air. It looked like a nomads' village, temporary and easily moved. The men and the women wore similar clothes, billowing trousers dyed blue, red, or brown, with colorful shirts and vests. Their garments were well kept, and a gleam of jewelry showed here and there. They looked healthy, a bit thin but not starving, which he hoped meant they were less likely to attack a seemingly rich stranger. He nodded to the people he passed and they nodded back, but no one smiled or greeted him.

He soon saw why the nomads were here. They had set up a market along the riverbank and were doing thriving business. Customers probably came from leagues around to bargain and socialize. Near the market, he dismounted and led Vim. The first thing he needed, after food and water, were clothes that wouldn't draw attention. People flowed past him and watched with veiled curiosity. Women smiled. In the past he would have flirted in the hopes of charming a kiss later, but it was no longer a game. After Jade, he had no interest in anyone else. Men rarely saw him as a threat as long as he left their womenfolk alone. His pale coloring and slender build made him look harmless compared to these weathered, toughened hulks. He had never thought much before about how anyone viewed him, but his life now could depend on his ability to put people at ease.

He strolled with Vim along a row of produce stalls, and his mouth watered. Fragrances of spice, oil, and baked goods wafted out from an open stand of yellow-white wood. As soon as the merchant saw him looking, he called out, "I've fresh bread with cinnamon from the Mazer Narrows, my lord! It will charm your lady and sweeten your dreams."

Charm his lady indeed. Drummer doubted anything so simple could beguile Jade. He went over to peer at the breads and pastries, some steaming, probably fresh out of the oven in the stall. Drummer was salivating so much, he had to swallow. He hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon. He hadn't wanted food earlier, with his stomach so queasy, but now he felt famished.

"It looks edible," Drummer allowed.

"Edible?" The baker, a husky man with a black mustache and large belly, sounded scandalized. "You won't find any better, not even at the palace itself." He beamed at Drummer. "Seeing as you're such a fine gentleman, I'll give you two full rolls." He indicated his succulent loaves of spice-and-butter bread. "Plus a pastry, all for only two gold tinars."

Drummer almost spluttered. Two tinars could buy this entire stall. The baker probably thought he didn't know Taka Mal coinage, since he obviously came from another country. Not that it mattered; he had no coins of any type.

"That's ridiculous," Drummer said. He pretended interest in nearby stalls, as if searching for better

prospects than the baker's woefully overpriced goods. He actually had another purpose in mind.

"Do you know the other merchants here?" Drummer asked.

"My lord," the baker said with dignity. "I have superb bread. Better than anything else you will find." He waved his hand dismissively at the other stalls.

"I'm not going to give you even a little piece of a tinar," Drummer said. "Not for two clumps of bread and a pastry."

The baker stared at him with dismay. "You wound me greatly." Then he added, "But I will let you have them for one tinar."

Drummer was tempted to laugh. The fellow was audacious in his extortion attempts. "I could eat better bread at home for free," he said, which was true. No one could bake like his mother. He didn't visit his parents often, though, because they were always urging him to settle down, get married, and make them grandparents. They were very specific about the order of marriage and then babies, which made Drummer think they feared he misbehaved even more than he actually did. He was no innocent, but neither had he wanted to mislead women into believing he sought a permanent tie. His dalliances rarely went farther than kisses and cuddling. Until Jade, when he had lost all his sense.

He shifted his weight, playing the bored nobleman with nothing to do. "Of course, I'm not at home right now."

"My delicacies are just out of the oven," the baker said. "So much more interesting to eat here, eh, than someplace you see all the time."

"Perhaps." Drummer stood as if considering his wares. "I'll tell you what." He pulled a gold cord off his shirt cuff. "I will give you this for a certain trade."

The baker's eyes gleamed. "What might that trade be?"

"Talk to your cohorts here." He indicated the stalls around them. "Provision me for three days on the trail, plus get me good riding clothes that won't stand out." Drummer held up the gold. "For that, this is yours." He was overpaying, if the gold was as pure as he thought, but it was worth it if the merchant would bargain while Drummer stayed out of sight.

"How do I know that's real gold?" the baker asked.

"It is." Drummer held it out on his palm so the baker could examine it. When the man tried to pick up the cord, Drummer snapped his hand closed. "After I get my provisions."

"Done!" the man said, fast enough that Drummer suspected he could see exactly how much the gold was worth and wanted to agree before the bored lordling changed his fickle mind.

"How long to put everything together?" Drummer asked.

The merchant checked his timepiece, a scuffed watch on a copper chain. "I can manage in an hour."

"Too long," Drummer said. "Fifteen minutes."

“Fifteen minutes! I can’t wrangle what you need out of these thieves that fast. Forty-five.”

“Thirty,” Drummer said.

“Thirty. Who can do anything in thirty?” The merchant sighed, but he also looked smug. “All right. Thirty.”

“Good. I’ll be back then.” Drummer broke off part of the cord and set it in front of the baker, between the spice-butter loaves. “For a loaf. If you have everything I need in thirty minutes, the rest is yours.”

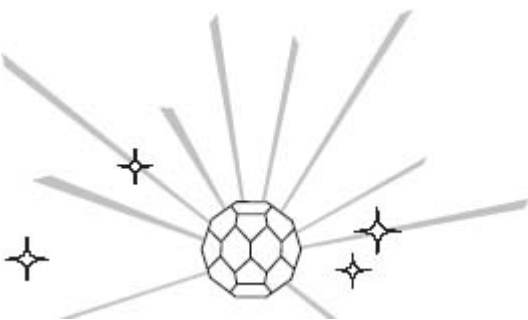
“My pleasure, sir.” The baker picked up both loaves and wrapped them in a white cloth. “Take both. My compliments.”

“My thanks.” Drummer accepted with more gratitude than the baker would ever guess, and then he moved away, leading Vim. He couldn’t slink off to hide, lest a thief slink after him and cut his throat where no one could see. But he didn’t want attention, either. He stopped once to buy a battered watch, which he paid for with a little copper cube from his vest. After that, he wandered with Vim along the edge of the market, visible but out of the crowds. He kept his wits, which he had cultivated over the past ten years, and twice he outfoxed pickpockets who tried to steal jewels off his clothes. He knew the moves, having tried them himself a few times in his youth. He had spent several nights in jails as a result, but now his savvy kept him awake and aware.

The bread tasted heavenly. After half an hour, he returned to the baker’s stall. True to his word, the fellow had purchased him supplies for three days’ travel, also travel bags and sturdy but nondescript clothes. He accepted the rest of Drummer’s gold cord with enthusiasm, gave him all the directions Drummer requested, and effused at great length, bidding Drummer a pleasant trip.

When Drummer finally escaped, he found an outcropping of rock down the river from the market and hid behind it to change his clothes. He was soon on his way, his fine garments folded in his bags, his saddle covered by a threadbare blanket, and his yellow hair tucked into a worn cap. Although he obviously had a superb horse, he had otherwise disguised his identity, the wealthy and foreign visitor. It hadn’t been a real identity to start with, but that was who Baz and his men would look for.

Drummer rode west, toward the infamous Taka Mal Rocklands.



“Come back,” the man said. “You must come back. I cannot do this king business without you.”

Mel turned over, heavy and cold. Sand scraped under her cheek. Groggy, she opened her eyes and peered toward the voice. Her husband was crouched next to her, his hand on her shoulder. Her bodyguards stood behind him, and also Smoke, his coat sweaty.

Cobalt sat down and lifted her into his arms. He unfolded his legs so he could hold her body against his chest with his arms around her in an enveloping embrace.

“Cobalt,” she muttered against his vest. “Can’t breathe.”

“Oh.” He loosened his arms. “I seem to do that a lot.”

“What happened?” she asked.

“Smoke came home without you. So did two of your bodyguards. The other two stayed here, with you, after you collapsed. I rode Smoke back.”

She thought of the sweating horse. “I must tend to him.”

“I’ll do it.”

Mel closed her eyes. Nausea was bothering her, and she had to swallow the bile in her throat.

“You must stop these spells,” Cobalt said darkly. “They do terrible things to you.”

“I’ll be all right.” Softly she added, “I don’t think I’ve even reached my limits.” Such astonishing mage discoveries. Could she really be an indigo? She was a Dawnfield, as were the only other two indigos. But it seemed too incredible.

“I don’t like it,” Cobalt said.

“It is a good thing.” She paused. “I think.”

His arms stiffened around her. “You think?”

She nodded and just that slight movement caused her nausea to surge. With a jerk, she pulled away, leaned over his leg, and lost her breakfast into the sand.

“Mel!” When she finished, he spoke in a low voice, more to himself than to her. “Must tend my wife.”

Her lips twitched upward. “You make it sound like I’m a horse.”

“Mel.” He actually sounded relieved to hear her tease him.

He buried the evidence of her illness, then carried her a ways down the beach and laid her down. Smoke and her bodyguards stood over her while Cobalt went to the water. As Mel sat up, her guards tactfully moved back. Cobalt strode into the waves, pulled off his shirt, and dunked it in the sea. He came back in his loose undershirt, a half-dressed king with his wet trousers plastered to his well-muscled legs. Warmth pooled within Mel. Saints, but this husband of hers was pleasing to look upon.

He gave her his wet shirt, and while she cleaned herself up, he wiped down Smoke with reed grasses. By the time he finished, she was standing again and felt stronger.

Cobalt scowled at her. “No more spells.”

“I cannot stop doing them.”

“They hurt you.”

“Truly, Cobalt. I just need sleep.”

“I’ve never seen you be sick that way.”

“I’ve been feeling queasy,” she admitted.

“Queasy?” He froze like a stone-bird, which hid by not moving. “In the morning?”

“Morning? No, the afternoon—” She stopped, realizing his real question. “Oh. No, I’m not pregnant.”

“More than one moon-cycle has gone by since your last time.”

“It has?” That gave her pause. “Are you sure?”

He was watching her with the oddest expression, as if she had grown an extra arm. “You must see Velvet.”

Mel wasn’t ready to be pregnant. “Who’s Velvet?”

“The midwife at the palace. Come! We must hurry.”

She smiled at his frazzled expression. “It takes nine months, love. A few more minutes won’t matter.”

He was already swinging up on Smoke. “Ride behind me.”

Mel glared at him. “It’s my horse. You ride behind me.”

“What?”

She suspected that if she went on about what she believed customs in the Misted Cliffs symbolized about the subjugation of women, Cobalt would either stare at her in bewilderment or get annoyed. So she just said, “Help me up. In front.”

He helped her swing up, and she straddled the horse. Cobalt had changed the saddle to a riding blanket, probably realizing they might have to ride together. He put his arms around her as if she were breakable pottery, which she thought was exasperating and endearing, given how hard she had been training lately to develop her upper-body strength and her ability to fight on horseback.

They headed back to the palace to find out if the Sapphire Throne would soon have another heir.

Drummer saw the soldiers when he was on a ridge above the Tapered Desert. Seated on Vim, resting under an overhang, he looked across the land he had traveled earlier today. Twenty men were crossing



the tawny desert in a dispersed formation that covered a wide area. If he didn't get moving, they could catch him before evening. He had left no trail on the slabs of rock, which made it harder to track him, but he would be easy to spot on these ridges. To stay hidden he would have to slip from cover to cover, which would slow him down.

He shaded his eyes from the glare. His body hurt from all this unfamiliar riding. He felt worse than yesterday, and he hadn't even reached the Rocklands yet. Sweat soaked his clothes. He had planned to hide up here and sleep during the afternoon heat, but that was no longer an option. It would take him days to reach Aronsdale, and he had no guarantee Baz's men wouldn't pursue him in his own country. They had kidnapped him from Aronsdale once before. He had to go now, as fast as he could travel.

He spent the rest of the day sneaking from outcropping to outcropping, slinking through the lengthening shadows. It wore him out, and he was covering less distance than he would have even if he had slept through the heat and then ridden in the open later in the day. His water was low and he feared he wouldn't reach the next oasis before he ran out. Supposedly it wasn't far beyond these buckled ridges, but if the baker's directions turned out to be faulty, he would have no leeway with his water.

With the sunset flaming in the west, he finally crested the last ridge and looked down the other side. The Rocklands of Taka Mal stretched out before him, sere and flat. Stark. Gray. Foreboding. But a line of green on the western horizon marked the waterway he sought, the Saint Verdant River.

When he started down the other side, he was no longer in view of the searchers, so he rode in the open and made better time. Even with that, the sunset had cooled to embers by the time Vim reached the Rocklands. The moonless night darkened the land, and Drummer had no torch. He kept going as long as he could, but as the darkness deepened, Vim began to stumble. They had to stop; otherwise, he might cripple the horse. Miserable, he guided Vim off the trail and into an eerily jagged forest of rock spires.

It didn't take long to find a hiding place in the cavities among the spires. He walked Vim into a ragged cave and did his best to rub down the horse, check his hooves, and otherwise care for him the way his father had taught him. After he gave Vim the last of his water, he hunched on the ground and pulled the saddle blanket around his shoulders. The temperature plummeted when the sun went down; he shivered even when he wore both his riding garb and the clothes Jade had given him.

In the distance, a blackwing called out its haunting, cruel song. Drummer huddled against the wall and wondered how he would make it to morning with no water, no food, and no warmth.

Cobalt had never been comfortable in the parlor outside the suite where Velvet saw patients. He didn't belong in this female room. He feared he would break the delicate furniture or porcelain vases. He had almost never come here; just a few times to keep his mother company while she visited Velvet for whatever reason. Today he sat on the edge of a flowered divan, feeling oversize and brutish. At least the midwife had admonished his bodyguards to keep anyone else from visiting until she finished with the queen. No one else waited in the parlor. Only Cobalt. The king. The nervous king.

After an eternity, the inner door opened and his wife appeared. She stood there with her yellow hair tousled to her hips, freed from its braid. He thought perhaps he would keel over from nerves. He couldn't bring himself to ask what he wanted to know, so he said, "Where is the midwife?"

"I wanted to talk to you alone." Mel came and sat by him.

“And?” He was too tense to say anything more.

Mel watched him with an expression he recognized. Affection and amusement. He never understood her views of him, only that he somehow liked them even when they seemed unflattering. Which made no sense. Nothing about loving Mel had ever made sense.

“What?” he asked. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I’ve seen you in combat,” Mel said. “I’ve seen you fight for your life and battle murderous highwaymen. In all those times, I’ve never seen you look so nervous.”

“Mel!”

Her face gentled. “Yes.”

“Yes?” His heart beat hard. “Yes what?”

Softly she said, “Yes, you’re going to be a father.”

He felt as if the room were spinning. “Saints almighty.”

“It startled me, too.” Her smile curved, full of mischief, the look of hers that spurred him in the night. “But given how ‘friendly’ we’ve been, it isn’t that much of a shock.”

Cobalt couldn’t smile. He couldn’t do anything. In fact, he was having trouble breathing. With a lurch, he roused himself and jumped to his feet. He had to escape. He strode away, across the room, until a gilt table blocked his way and he had to stop.

Mel came over and put her hand against his back. “Cobalt?”

He would shatter. A father. His boyhood memories were a nightmare of violence, both physical and emotional, of fear he would be beaten or locked in the closet or whipped with the same royal belt his valet had tried to put on him yesterday. The valet hadn’t understood why Cobalt yanked the belt from his hand and hurled it across the room. To that valet, the new king had surely seemed violent, harsh, even crazy. He didn’t know what that belt had done to a small boy cowering on a stone floor. Cobalt would never forget. Stonebreaker had forged him into a monster, and now Mel wanted to give him a child. He would die before he inflicted himself on a small, helpless human being.

Mel had her most unbearable expression, the one full of compassion. He loved it desperately, and it terrified him, for he didn’t deserve it. He always feared he would lose control and hurt her, and she would leave him. To have her love was painful, for when he loved her, he became vulnerable to losing her.

She was watching his face with those eyes of hers that saw far too much. With tenderness, she said, “You will be a wonderful father.”

“No.” He spun away and strode across the room. The door was closed. He wanted to hit it, not in anger but in fear. He yanked it open and strode outside.

Cobalt didn’t know where he went. Walls passed in a blur. He kept going, up narrow stairs, back stairs, seeking a place to hide from himself. He finally came to a balcony that circled a watchtower. He clenched

the rail and looked out to the Blue Ocean and the beach where he had found Mel earlier, lying in the sand.

Cobalt didn't know how long he stood there staring and seeing nothing. Gradually he became aware he wasn't alone. He turned and found her a few paces away, watching him, one hand on the rail, the wind tugging at her clothes and hair. His wife, the mother of his heir. He, the false king, would become a father.

Mel spoke quietly. "You aren't Stonebreaker."

"I am what he created."

"You are a good husband and you will be a good father."

He remembered the things she had said during his campaign to reclaim Shazire. "I thought you considered me a warmonger."

"I never called you that." She paused. "Not exactly."

"You certainly implied it. Quite eloquently."

Mel came over and took one of his hands. "I didn't agree with your decision to invade Shazire and Blueshire. But I do not think you are a warmonger." Lifting his hand, she pressed the back of it against her cheek. "No matter how much you insist otherwise, I think you will be a wonderful father."

He rubbed his knuckles against her soft cheek. "You would have more luck convincing me I could pull clouds from the sky."

"But look." She motioned at the beach. "The fog comes in."

The fog was indeed rolling in from the ocean. He sighed, stymied by her refusal to see the truth. "Mel, when you look at me, your vision is clouded." He drew her near, holding her hand between their chests. Then he told her something he would admit to no one else. "I am afraid."

She held his hand tightly. "I, too."

"You're really going to have a baby?"

"Really. Probably a little less than eight months."

"A boy, do you think?" He blanched. "What if it's a girl, and she is like you? I will be the most henpecked man alive."

She laughed softly. "If it's a boy, I will be surrounded by people who grunt at me."

Cobalt embraced her, his head bent over hers. He was still afraid, but the knot had loosened enough for wonder to soak into his heart. The Sapphire, Jaguar, Alzire, and Blueshire thrones—and any others that became his—would soon have an heir.

His child.

Baz came to tell her about the disaster.

It was late afternoon, and Jade was in her study with the city builders going over plans to extend the aqueducts that brought water into Quaaz. Ozar's visit had slowed their work, but now her coercive suitor was gone and she had a great deal of business that compelled her attention.

Baz, however, compelled attention even better than aqueducts. He strode into her study in the middle of the meeting, holding his helmet under his arm, his uniform dusty from riding, and his face flushed by the sun.

"Your Majesty," he said crisply.

The moment he entered, Jade went as tense as a coil. "What happened?"

He spoke bluntly. "We've sighted the Harsdown envoy. They will be here tomorrow morning."

Jade stood slowly, her hand clenched on her stylus. "And Drummer?"

Sweat beaded on Baz's temples. "My men haven't returned."

The stylus snapped in Jade's fist. She looked down with a start, then let the pieces fall on the table. If the envoy discovered Drummer wasn't here, they would have reason to assume the worst. Jade doubted they would believe he had betrayed a Topaz Pact and run off. They would assume she was trying to cover up reprehensible acts carried out against the brother of their queen.

Her aqueduct team sat still and silent, their gazes going from Baz to her. Jade spoke with an even tone that belied the tumult of her thoughts. "We will have to reconvene tomorrow. My scroll master's clerk will arrange a time and let you know."

"Certainly, Your Majesty," the head of her team said. They all rose to their feet and bowed.

When Jade and Baz were alone, she spoke without preamble. "We must get Drummer back."

"I never expected him to last this long." Baz shifted his helmet restlessly from hand to hand. "He has no experience traveling in these lands."

"He makes his living as a wandering entertainer. He'll be fine." She spoke more to convince herself than him.

"Aronsedale is not the Rocklands." His scowl darkened his face. "When we get him back, I swear, I will personally see—"

"Baz," she warned. "We want our guest alive and well."

The thought of Drummer traveling alone in the Rocklands shook her deeply. That journey had killed far more seasoned travelers.

"And if we don't get him back?" Baz said.

"If he reaches Aronsedale, we lose our negotiating tool."

“We will look foolish if he outwits us.”

“Better he outwits us,” Jade said grimly, “than he dies and the envoy takes it as an act of war.”

“My men have been out for three days,” Baz said. “Even if they catch him tonight, they won’t get back until at least a day after the envoy arrives.”

“We will put off the envoy.”

“And if we can’t?”

They both knew the rumors, that Cobalt coveted Taka Mal and Jazid. So far he hadn’t shown signs of attacking, perhaps because he wasn’t the relentless conqueror of his reputation—or perhaps because he wasn’t ready. He knew he would have a hard-fought war if Taka Mal and Jazid joined forces.

Jade grimaced. “I may have to marry Ozi.”

“Only in a flaming hell!” Baz clunked his helmet on the table. “Ozar knows our countries can’t stand against Cobalt if we don’t unite. You think he will refuse the alliance if you refuse marriage? You are a lovely woman, cousin, but I doubt he considers you worth losing his throne.”

“No, he doesn’t. He wants mine.” Her anger flashed. “Ozar is gambling with me. He wants to see how high I will push the stakes. If we do it his way, combining forces, we may dissuade Cobalt from war regardless of what happens with Drummer.”

Baz was looking at her oddly. “Is that the only reason you would join with him?”

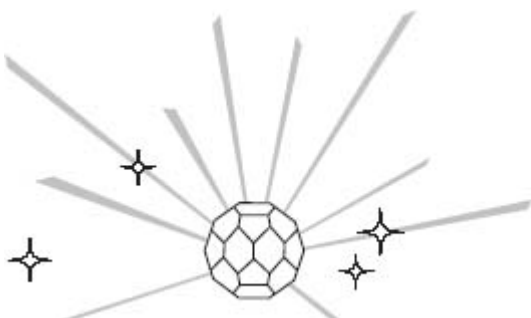
She frowned at him. “What other reason would I have?”

“If you marry Ozar and your armies vanquish Cobalt Escar, you could become the queen of Taka Mal, Jazid, Shazire, Blueshire, and the Misted Cliffs.”

Jade stared at him. It was a heady thought—and dangerous. She could envision such an empire, but she also knew Ozar would never stop trying to break her spirit. She longed for something far simpler than those grandiose dreams—something much farther beyond her reach. Happiness.

She couldn’t imagine achieving that goal.

Marry Ozar, go to war, lose her throne, lose Drummer. She loathed her choices but she saw no others.



## The Tawny Barrens

Drummer slept fitfully through the night. Knowing he had no water, he couldn't stop thinking about his thirst. At first he felt chilled, but then he felt as if he were burning up. As soon as the sky lightened, he was up and about, preparing to leave. His body ached. Muscles hurt that he hadn't known he possessed. His thighs were chafed raw, and he couldn't walk with his legs completely straight. The last thing he wanted was to get back on Vim. But he needed water and food, and he wasn't going to find them if he didn't escape this eerie landscape of jagged stone.

As he saddled Vim, the horse stamped and snorted angrily. Drummer spoke soothingly. "I'll get you food and water soon. I promise." He walked Vim to a shelf of rock and stepped up on the flat area. It took a while to settle the horse, but finally Vim let him mount. Drummer groaned as pain stabbed his muscles. Then he rode out into the predawn murk.

When Drummer reached the caravan trail, he headed west. A dark line rimmed the horizon, the greenery he had seen yesterday. A river should be there and settlements where he could purchase supplies. He hadn't expected it to be so far. In Aronsdale, with its swells and dips, he never saw a distant horizon, just the next ridge or valley. Things were closer. Here, the open sky and endless, barren land bewildered him. He obsessed over the distant greenery and its promise of water. Water and food. Water and rest. Water and...water.

He mentally shook himself. He needed to think. It wouldn't be long before Baz's men came over the ridges Drummer had crossed yesterday. From the top, they could easily see these flatlands. He had nowhere to hide. He would have to be so far ahead they couldn't catch him before he reached cover. Normally Vim could probably outrun most any horse. But nothing was normal this morning. Without food, water or enough sleep, neither he nor Vim could last long. And he felt as if he were burning with fever.

Drummer leaned over Vim's neck. "I'm asking a lot, I know. But I need for you to give me everything you have."

Vim snorted, but he did speed up. They galloped through the cool morning. As the sun rose behind him, the day heated up. He wished his spells could conjure water, but he couldn't create something out of nothing. A red spell could only provide light or heat, which he needed right now about as much as a mallet to the head. Orange and yellow soothed pain, but they didn't fix anything. Green spells were useless here. In fact, he saw little use in them at all. Knowing how people felt just got him in trouble. Were he powerful enough to make a blue spell, he could heal his injuries. In his current condition, he would be lucky to manage even orange. He had to try, though.

He needed a shape. Weary, he rummaged in his bags until he found the clothes Jade had given him. The faceted gems were flat compared to true shapes, but a little cube dangled off the vest. A larger cube would give more power. If he remembered correctly, though, the shape determined the strength of the spell more than the size. Chime claimed that invoking three-dimensional shapes was as far beyond most mages as scaling a mountain in one jump. He didn't see what mountains had to do with it; that sounded like one of his sister's daft ideas from their childhood. He knew she was greatly respected by her people, but he remembered the tomboy he had chased through the orchards.

"It can't be that difficult," he told Vim. He had used cubes in the past, after all, to enhance his interaction with his audience.

He considered the small cube in his palm. “Red.”

Nothing happened.

Drummer imagined red light—and the cube glowed.

“Ha! Chime was wrong.” He wasn’t certain, though. Chime was usually right about mage matters. But if that were true, then he was a more powerful mage than he had ever imagined.

Drummer tilted his head, considering. Gold was a shade of orange, the color of soothing. He imagined gold light. Nothing visible happened—but the ache in his legs receded. Although he knew it was there, it no longer bothered him as much.

“Think I can do blue?” he asked Vim. Chime said that was even beyond her. He had managed the cube, though, so maybe he could also manage blue. If he could heal himself, it would be a gift from Saint Azure.

Blue sky. He imagined it flowing into the cube—

Hai! Fire lanced Drummer’s temples and he cried out. Sagging forward, he bent his head and squeezed his eyes shut while pain surged over him in waves.

After a few moments, the pain subsided. Drummer blew out a gust of air. So much for a healing spell. He opened his eyes and slowly straightened up. They were still traveling toward the line of green, which looked no closer than it had yesterday when he had come down off the ridge.

With no warning, a spell flared through him, unexpected and indistinct. A green spell. Belatedly, he realized he still held the cube. He didn’t seem to have much control over his spells. But he definitely felt someone’s mood. Triumph.

“Where is that?” Drummer muttered. He looked around the barren lands but saw no one.

Then it hit him. He reined in Vim and stepped the horse around to face the way he had come. Silhouetted against the sky, three riders sat on horses atop the now distant ridge. The distinctive sunrise plumes on their helmets rippled in the wind.

Baz’s men.

“No!” He wheeled around and prodded Vim forward. “Come on, Vim! Run!”

The horse took off with a fluid gait that devoured the land. Drummer bent low over his neck so he would drag less against the hot streaming wind. He didn’t know how long Vim could keep this pace in his depleted condition, and he didn’t want to injure the Jazidian. But he had felt what Baz wanted to do to him the night before last—and that had been before Drummer slept with Jade.

A thought came to him. Was that why she had let Drummer go? She realized Baz would kill her lover. He didn’t want to believe she would tell the general what she did with their hostage, but he didn’t doubt Baz had riddled the palace with spies. Frantic, Drummer looked over his shoulder, nearly losing his balance on Vim in the process.

The soldiers were sweeping down the ridge after him.

“Cobalt can’t be gone,” Matthew said. “I overheard his secretary talking to a scribe when I delivered the stable reports to his office. Cobalt is expected to meet with the Historian of the Realm today. Then with the High Judge.”

Mel walked with him past the stables, where she had hoped to find her husband. “You haven’t seen him at all?”

“Not today. He has much to occupy his time.” The lines on Matthew’s craggy face had deepened since Cobalt assumed the thrones of Blueshire and Shazire, and now the Misted Cliffs. Although Matthew had spent the last year in Applecroft with Dancer, he often visited Alzire. He saw how Cobalt was spreading himself too thin. So had Mel. Her husband had to learn to delegate his growing authority before he drowned in the deluge of responsibilities. He was a warrior king, not a statesman: He needed to bring people into his government who had the expertise he lacked. She thought he should appoint Baker Lightstone, the former king of Blueshire, as its governor. She had liked and trusted Lightstone all her life, and he had been more like a governor than a king, anyway. His country was so small a person could cross it on horseback in less than two days. But she had made no headway with Cobalt on the idea. He had met Lightstone only twice, first when the king surrendered to him and the next day when Cobalt had sent him into exile with his family.

She stopped by a well with a peaked roof. The liquid inside rippled with a reflection of the roof, the sky, and the filigreed edge of the palace, as if it were a dream place reachable only through the water. It was a bittersweet fancy, for in dreaming of enchanted places, she could imagine a simple life without the crushing mix of power, duty, aggression, and love she dealt with in Cobalt. And she did love him, despite everything.

The stables at the Diamond Palace housed more horses than anywhere else Mel knew, including Applecroft, the Castle of Clouds, and Alzire. Many riders walked their animals in and out of the courtyard; grooms tended Jazidians, cooling or exercising them; stable hands ran in with water; and hay-sweeps cleaned. The place bustled with life, yet a buffer existed around Mel and Matthew, as if a glass sphere isolated them. It had been this way since Mel had become a queen, in Shazire after Cobalt assumed its throne and even more here. She missed the days when people treated her like a normal person.

“What time does Cobalt meet with the Historian?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Matthew said. “He doesn’t talk to me much anymore.”

“He’s grieving.”

“For his lost childhood. Not for Stonebreaker.”

“For both,” Mel murmured, gazing into the dark well. “I wish I knew what Stonebreaker told him that night.”

“He hated knowing his grandson could be a better king,” Matthew scowled. “He wanted to undermine Cobalt’s confidence. He probably told him he would fail as a king.”

She considered him. “Or about you.”



“Cobalt has given me no reason to think so.”

“You’ve hardly seen him.”

He paused a moment before answering. “I would like to think he would seek me out, if he suspected our relationship might be more than king and stable master.”

Mel leaned against the well, facing the courtyard. “Cobalt needs your guidance. He will listen to me in some things, but he needs a man he trusts.”

“I’m a horseman,” he said gruffly. “Not a king’s advisor.”

“You’re far more to him than a horseman.”

Longing came over his face. “When he was a child...” Then he stopped himself. “No. It is not my place to play the role of Varqelle.”

“No, you cannot be Varqelle. BeMatthew—who comforted a terrified child, who hid him from the king even knowing you could be executed if Stonebreaker found out, who taught Cobalt the good in himself.” More quietly she said, “You were more a father to him than anyone else alive. You and Dancer are the reason Cobalt isn’t a tyrant. Perhaps me, also. But he doesn’t want to talk to his mother or his wife. He needs you.”

“I will talk to him. But remember this. When he is done building his empire—do not look a denial at me, Mel. We both know what he is doing. When he has run out of places to conquer, he will have to rule. It is not I who will rule with him, nor Dancer. It is you. You believe he needs to talk to me, and maybe you’re right. But it is you who sit on the throne at his side.”

She folded her arms, feeling cold. “I just wish he would be satisfied. He has Shazire, Blueshire, and the Misted Cliffs.”

Matthew looked east to the distant cliffs. Beyond them lay Harsdown, Aronsdale, the Barrens, Jazid, and Taka Mal. His spoke with sadness. “I don’t think he knows how to stop.”

He was dying.

The Rocklands were killing Drummer. His lips were swollen and cracked. He was burning up. Vim plodded across the dry land. At first, Drummer had looked back often, to see if his pursuers were gaining on him. At first, Vim had outdistanced them.

At first.

Drummer knew now that he couldn’t outrun his pursuers. Vim had slowed down, and the flatlands had no place to hide. He would die of thirst before he reached that distant green line, if it even existed and wasn’t a mirage. Vim might die as well, because Drummer had known too little about the Rocklands to provide for his horse.

“Ah, Vim, I’m sorry.” He scratched the horse’s neck, as if that would achieve something. Then, wearily,

he reined Vim to a stop and brought him around to face their pursuers.

The soldiers weren't far behind, five of them leading extra horses, warriors with desert robes over their clothes and scarves to protect them from the sun. They weren't pushing their mounts. They knew they had him. They wouldn't risk injuring the animals just to catch him a little sooner. Perhaps Baz would kill him when they got back and perhaps he wouldn't, but if he stayed out here, he would die for certain.

With a sense of futility, he sat watching as the soldiers approached. The capture was over in moments. One soldier came alongside Vim and took the reins. He spoke with an accent Drummer barely understood. It sounded like, "Horse something no weight."

Drummer just looked at him, too worn-out to react.

The man spoke more slowly. "Your horse must rest. And have water. You have to get off."

"Oh." Drummer wearily slid to the ground. He lost his balance and sagged against the horse, too sick to move. Vim waited, his head hanging, his sides going in and out as he breathed heavily.

The soldier dismounted and grasped Drummer's arm, holding him up. Another came over and led Vim away.

"Take care of him," Drummer rasped. "He's a good horse."

"We will," the man at his side said. He sounded respectful, which confused Drummer, who had expected hostility. He was having trouble thinking. His mind hazed and his vision blurred. When the soldier gave him a water bag, he fumbled with it, desperate to drink, and dropped the bag. The man picked it up and helped him raise its narrowed end to his mouth. Drummer gulped convulsively as warm water ran down his throat, and swallowed so fast that he choked.

"Slow down," the man said gruffly. "You are valiant to brave the Rocklands, but you must go easy now or you will get sick."

Drummer knew he was already sick. He slowed down, but he drank half the contents of the bag before they took it away. Even when he tried to focus, he couldn't see more than a shimmer of heat and merciless sun.

"What are we—?" Drummer lost his thread of thought.

"We will set up a tent," the soldier said. "You rest. Your horse, too. Sleep out the heat. We start back this evening."

Drummer swayed. "Baz will...kill me?"

The man caught his elbow. "Saints, no."

Drummer didn't know whether to be relieved—or terrified of why Baz might want him alive. His legs were melting. The Taka Mal warrior caught him as he collapsed.

The envoy from Harsdown clattered through the Sentinel Gate, the largest entrance in the wall that

surrounded the Topaz Palace. The powerful riders, the stamp of their horses, the plumes of their helmets waving in the hot wind—oh yes, it was an impressive sight. Jade didn't miss the intended message, the subtle threat of more to come if these negotiations failed.

She and Baz stood on a balcony in a tower far enough removed from the yard that their visitors wouldn't see them clearly. The overhang of the tower's onion bulb shaded them from the morning's heat, but the palace baked in the sun, a gruesome reminder of what Drummer faced in the Rocklands. Jade had gone beyond worrying; she felt sick. His betrayal no longer mattered. She didn't want him to die. She wanted him back. Unfortunately, what she wanted was moot. He wasn't here, and they had run out of time.

A man on a magnificent silver stallion was leading the envoy. He wore a helmet shaped like the head of a jaguar. The deadly cats weren't native to these lands; legend claimed merchants from across the sea had brought them to the Misted Cliffs thousands of years ago and sold them to an ancient Harsdown king. Now the cats stalked the warmer regions of Harsdown, hunted and hunting, the symbol of the throne. The name Escar meant jaguar in High Alatian, a language spoken long ago. Farmers and woodsmen had always hunted the jaguars, but the House of Escar limited the number they could kill and so managed to keep the cats from dying out.

Baz indicated the man she was watching. "Sphere-General Fieldson."

"So that is the infamous general," Jade said. "Why Sphere?"

"Ranks in the Dawnfield army are based on geometry." Baz leaned on the balcony wall and studied the men below. "Shapes subdivide each rank. The more sides a shape, the higher the rank, except that all two-dimensional shapes are lower than all three-dimensional shapes. A square-lieutenant holds a higher rank than a triangle-lieutenant, but less than a triangle-captain because all captains outrank all lieutenants."

"It must take ages to progress through the ranks."

Baz shrugged. "Not really. Shape promotions don't take long. I don't think they include every possible shape, either. Just up to eight sides, and also circles and spheres."

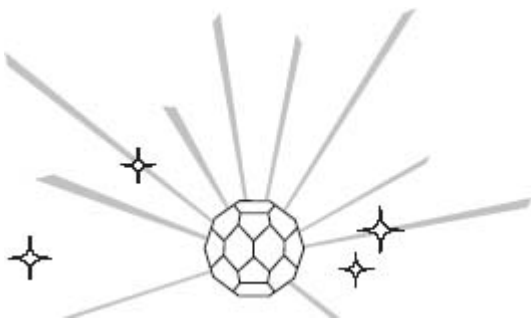
"How strange," she said. "But logical, I suppose. The sphere is a three-dimensional shape with an infinite number of sides, yes? So sphere-general is highest rank."

He nodded. "Fieldson is the only one."

"They have such pastoral names," she mused. "Dawnfield. Harsdown. Aronsdale. You would never think they would be so imposing."

Baz narrowed his gaze at the general. "Never underestimate that one."

Jade watched the riders with foreboding. Harsdown had sent its most formidable general to discover that she, Jade, had misplaced his queen's brother.



12

## The Redwing

Until Mel saw the Chamberlight army gathering below the King's Spring, she hadn't fully comprehended its size. They spread across fields and trampled meadows in every direction. Soldiers were setting up camps with the help of day-tenders, the men and women who came with an army to look after their needs while the warriors trained and fought.

As Mel watched the ocean of people and horses, a fierce exultation stirred within her. She fought it; she wanted peace rather than conquest. But she would defend what was hers. And she would train with the army as had mage queens of ancient times.

Cobalt's conquest of Shazire had swelled the ranks of his army. Many of the survivors had sworn allegiance to the new king. Some refused, however. Cobalt could have executed them, but he exiled them instead. Mel's father had done the same with the Harsdown soldiers who refused him allegiance nineteen years ago, after Aronsdale defeated Varqelle and took over Harsdown.

The Chamberlight army numbered eight thousand, five thousand here and three thousand in Shazire. Cobalt divided them into companies of a thousand each: Carnelian, Andalusite, Alexandrite, Aquamarine, Sapphire, Tanzanite, Iolite, Diamond.

Every company trained in many disciplines, but each had a specialty. Carnelians were superb archers. Alexandrites fought well at night and were torchbearers as well as soldiers, which was why Cobalt named them for a mineral that changed color in different light. Andalusites had many martial arts skills, just as andalusite showed many shades of orange. Historically, Aquamarines had specialized at sea warfare, but now they were foot troops. Iolites excelled as swordsmen. Tanzanites rode as cavalry, as did the Sapphires, including the king's flag bearers. Mel trained with the Sapphires. The Diamonds included all classes of soldier and guarded the palace and the Misted Cliffs. Cobalt had sent the Carnelians, Alexandrites, and Sapphires back to the Misted Cliffs after the Shazire campaign, to join the Diamonds and Aquamarines.

Mel wondered if he realized the names followed the same color scheme as mage spells, from red through violet. Cobalt had reorganized and renamed the other companies this past year. That he chose rare minerals made sense to her; they were hard, valuable, and striking, especially diamond, the hardest known substance. But the names had a certain harsh poetry she hadn't expected from Cobalt.

Today she wore the scuffed armor she donned for sword practice. Leather pants protected her legs, and she wore a leather vest. An undertunic covered her arms. Her boots came to her knees but were supple to allow for motion. Her sword hung in a tooled sheath on her belt. The quiver on her back held arrows she had brought from Harsdown, and she carried her bolt-bow.

Mel was standing on a walkway on top of the palace wall. She went to a doorway in a nearby guard tower. Inside, the watchman was sitting on a stool by an arrow-slit, gazing out the narrow opening. He glanced over as she came in and stood up to salute, knocking his fist against his rib cage. He froze in midgesture as he registered Mel's face.

The guard bowed with a jerk, his fist still against his breastbone. "Your Majesty!"

She smiled at him. "My greetings of the morning."

"My honor, ma'am." He seemed bewildered. She was growing used to such reactions; in Stonebreaker's court, women never took part in what the late king had called "affairs of import," which as far as she could tell included everything in existence except sex, child rearing, planning balls, and liaising with the domestic staff.

Mel ran down the stairs that spiraled inside the tower. At the bottom, she entered a small courtyard. Matthew was waiting on his horse, Hawkspare, an amber-hued beauty from the Goldstar breeders in the south. He handled the high-spirited horse with a confidence that calmed the animal. He had also brought Smoke.

Matthew smiled as she came over to him. "You look like an avenging angel with all that gold hair and black leather." He handed her Smoke's reins. "For someone with such an aversion to war, you outfit yourself quite well for it."

"I have an aversion to invading innocent lands." She swung into Smoke's saddle. "Not to defense."

A soldier cranked open the gate and they left the yard. Mel donned her helmet, but she left the faceplate open. Within moments, they were riding through the outskirts of the army. She wanted to get a feel for this immense force her husband was gathering just in case, as he put it. She didn't believe him. One didn't bring thousands of men together "just in case."

Soldiers glanced up as she and Matthew passed and some nodded to them, but Matthew was the one they called by name. Mel doubted most even realized she was a woman rather than a youth. Not many of these soldiers knew their king's wife rode with the army.

"Cobalt told me that you counseled him to negotiate for your uncle," Matthew said.

"I did." Mel scowled. "He is amassing this army anyway."

"It seems so."

"I'm worried for Drummer." Then she admitted, "Saints know, if harm comes to him, my heart will want vengeance."

"I've never met your uncle," Matthew said. "But I know the drive to protect one's own." In a voice that reminded her of Varqelle, he said, "That fire can consume everything in its path."

"Aye." Mel thought of the child she carried, and a fiercely protective instinct came over her. She would do anything to protect the life within her.

Some fathers bequeathed their home to their children. Others might leave a farm, a dairy, a smithy.

Almost all sought to provide a legacy for their family.

Mel doubted Cobalt had consciously defined that idea in his thoughts. He would tell himself that he took his army forth in case the negotiations for Drummer failed or Taka Mal decided to resume the war they started two hundred years ago. But his drive had a more ambitious edge now that pushed him even harder than before. He sought a legacy.

He would leave his child an empire.

In the Urn Parlor, Sphere-General Fieldson sat across a table from Jade. Tall vases stood in every corner, priceless works glazed in amber and yellow hues, set with turquoise, rimmed in gold. Fieldson's iron-gray hair and severe uniform made a jarring contrast to this place where Jade entertained dignitaries. He seemed primed with energy, like a jaguar ready to strike.

Her staff had set fire-lily incense on the mantel, and plumes curled up from fire-dragons enameled in sunset colors. The scent was subtle but astringent, none of the cloying fragrances favored in many noble houses. Fieldson was a warrior. She would honor him with an appropriate scent. Besides, she abhorred those sugary flower smells.

Jade knew Baz was standing behind her chair, imposing in his red-and-crimson uniform. A Dawnfield man stood behind Fieldson, sober in gray and violet. Quaaazera, Dawnfield and Chamberlight officers stood around the walls of the room, their uniforms reflecting their countries: Taka Mal bright and hot, full of vigor; Dawnfield elegant and more severe; and Chamberlight, icy and gem-hard.

A bid-boy served them dark red wine in crystal goblets shaped and colored like fire-lilies. The decanter was a larger version of the fiery blossom. Fieldson waited until the boy left and then said, "So where is Goodman Headwind?"

Jade sipped from her goblet with forced calm. "His party will return from his tour tomorrow or the day after." By the Dragon-Sun, she hoped that was true! If Baz's men hadn't found Drummer, it could mean he had reached Aronsdale—or expired. Fieldson's concern over the minstrel's absence couldn't come close to what Jade felt. She didn't know whether she was angrier that Drummer had taken actions that could start a war or that he had risked his life. If he died, she would never forgive him.

"I am sorry he wasn't here when you arrived," Jade said. "We hadn't expected you so soon."

Fieldson was studying her closely. She met his gaze with the same outward confidence she presented to her own generals when they sought a weakness in her defenses. He set his goblet on the tiled table. "I will tell you something, Your Majesty. I've never been a political man. The convolutions of royal intrigue are beyond me."

Jade doubted he would have reached such a high rank if that were true. She sipped her wine. "We are in accord, then. I have never had much patience with intrigue." Which was true. It didn't make her royal court any less saturated with it, unfortunately.

"Then I will speak plainly." His gaze hardened. "Drummer should be here."

Jade gave him a look that could make even her most seasoned officers pale. It never worked on Spearcaster, but it could rattle Generals Slate and Firaz. She spoke coldly. "It is not yours to decide who

should or should not be in my palace.”

He didn’t flick an eyelash. “It was not yours to kidnap my queen’s brother.”

“You misunderstand.” She settled back in her chair. “He is touring my country as my esteemed guest. When he returns, you may speak to him.”

He didn’t smile. “I await your fulfillment of that promise.” His hand tightened on the end of his chair’s arms. It was a nuance Jade might have missed in her younger days, but she hadn’t kept her throne by being oblivious. People said a great deal more than they realized with gestures, facial tics, and tone. Fieldson was angry. And worried. He had probably expected her to be more solicitous. But until Drummer returned, this was a gamble, and her game had better be good. First be hard, then generous. It kept people off balance. She had learned that from her parents, who kept each other unbalanced for their entire marriage. Theirs had been a union born of economics, joining the royal family with the powerful Zanterian nobility that owned the caravan guilds. It greatly benefited both Houses, but her parents had never liked each other, and they had spent their years in a constant battle of wills.

She switched smoothly into her role as host. “General, in honor of your visit, I am holding a feast tonight. My staff has prepared our best guest suites for you and your men, where you can rest and prepare.”

Fieldson gave her a long, considering look. “Very well, Your Majesty.”

Very well, indeed. At least he didn’t keep insisting she produce Drummer. For tonight, she had a reprieve. But if Drummer didn’t show up tomorrow, she would have serious trouble.

Jade was on her way to meet Baz, her escort for the feast, when her ginger-maid came running. A woman in her early forties, she had been Jade’s companion for decades. Her family had named her Clovemoon because she was born under a full moon the night before they sold the cloves for their spice trade. Her blue tunic and trousers fluttered in drapes bordered by silver stars, and a blue scarf covered her dark hair.

Jade waited in the corridor while the maid caught up with her. She always felt better with Clove. In fact, Jade liked her far more than her “friends” among the nobility.

“A redwing!” Clove cried out. “At your window.”

That spurred Jade into motion. She headed toward Clove. “Does it come from the army?”

“I think so.” Clove hurried along the hall with her. “It flapped about the window. Then it went into the loft.”

Jade tried not to hope. Any bird could fly to the recessed window in her tower, but only the trained birds knew how to enter the Message Loft, a chamber in the tower wall. To open the loft, a bird had to peck a code on the mesh that blocked the entrance. The army used redwings because they learned to tap patterns as easily as parrots learned to repeat words.

She and Clove sped into the Ginger Suite, bustled through Jade’s bedroom, and entered a round chamber. The ginger-stone floor had concentric circles cut into it, and gold filigree curled on the walls, the only adornment in the otherwise empty room.

Jade crossed to the window. No birds fluttered outside, but the mesh door on one side of the recess was open. Jade could reach the loft from here using a round portal set in the wall at shoulder height and enameled with a redwing in flight. She pulled the little door open by the crystal knob in its center. In the chamber beyond, a redwing ruffled its feathers and squawked at her.

“Come, sweets,” she crooned. She gently took out the bird. Its red wings contrasted with the blue under its body and its gold beak. It didn’t peck at her hand, which suggested General Spearcaster’s bird-adepts had trained it as a carrier.

A metal tube was attached to the bird’s leg. Jade removed the tube and released the redwing, which flew up to a perch under the domed ceiling. As Jade pulled a tiny roll of parchment out of the tube, Clove watched, her face flushed. The ginger-maid was the only one Jade had confided in about her concern. Holding her breath, Jade read the parchment:

Found Drummer. Very ill. Needs doctor. Back on Ringday. Javelin

“Hai!” Jade leaned against the wall, uncaring if it tore her dress. Her relief that they had found him was tempered by the rest of the letter. Very ill. What had happened? She would have her physician ready. Ringday. Fifth of the week. The day after tomorrow. At least she had a definite time to give Sphere-General Fieldson. But she couldn’t have Javelin bring a sick Drummer into the palace. If Fieldson or his men saw, they would think her soldiers had perpetrated nefarious acts against the minstrel. She supposed having his honor compromised by the queen might be construed as a nefarious act, but she didn’t think it counted if they had enjoyed the act so much.

Jade turned to Clove. The ginger-maid had anticipated her needs, and she offered Jade a parchment, quill, and a scribe’s board with a bulb of gold ink. Jade wrote quickly:

Good work, Javelin. Doctor Quarry will be ready. Take Drummer to guard tower, South Gate. Don’t come inside the palace. Vizarana

Jade blew on the ink until it dried, then rolled up the message and slid it into the tube. When she whistled, the redwing fluffed its plumage, squawked irately at her, and flew down. As Jade raised her arm, the bird lighted on her wrist, claws digging into her skin. A drop of red ran down her arm.

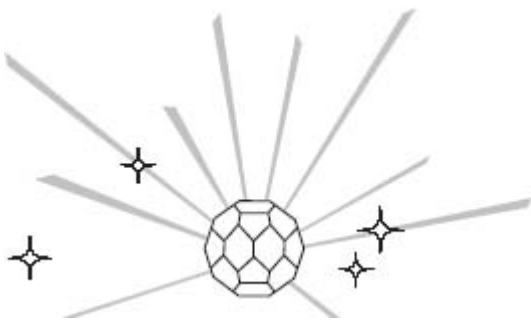
“Sealed in blood,” she murmured. She attached the tube to the bird’s leg while Clove opened the window. Jade released the redwing, and it soared away, heading for the Rocklands and—she hoped—Captain Javelin.

She would have the Master of the Guard keep close watch on the South Tower and tell Physician Quarry to be ready.

Be well, Drummer, she thought. She had to bluff two more days out of her guests and pray Drummer came back in time—

And alive.





### The Fire Opal Court

The Chamberlight army flooded the land like a drowning sea. It swirled around forests of droop-elm and spindle trees and eddied in valleys as if they were cups filling with water. Two days later, it reached the base of the cliffs that gave their country its name and the soldiers piled against the base of the mountains in waves, the blue-and-white plumes of their helmets like froth on the breakers.

Mel mostly rode with Cobalt or Matthew. Dancer had remained at the Diamond Palace to govern in Cobalt's absence, an authority Stonebreaker would never have granted her, though after half a century as his only child she had the experience. Mel missed her company. Although Dancer had mistrusted and disliked her at first, she had gradually thawed. They would probably never be close, but Mel enjoyed Dancer's scholarly bent and dry humor.

Cooks and maids and seamstresses accompanied the army, and the wives of some soldiers, but none of them seemed comfortable with her. It wasn't only her title, but also that she was riding as an officer. Her commission was actually in her father's army, but she wore Chamberlight armor to downplay her many differences. Until recently, it had been rare for women to serve in the Harsdown army, and it was unheard-of in the Misted Cliffs.

Mel had tried to cultivate friendships among the women of the Diamond nobility, but she had little in common with them. She hadn't expected so many similarities between the Misted Cliffs and Jazid and Taka Mal. Although their countries were geographically distant, they exported and imported many goods from one another, and apparently customs came with the tangible items. As in Jazid and to a lesser extent Taka Mal, the royal court at the Diamond Palace maintained a rigid separation between men and women. Stonebreaker took it even further; in his court, women had gone veiled, a custom followed nowhere else in this modern age. Mel thought Dancer had done it as protection; the more she hid her face, the less the king could discern her thoughts. But she had always been watching, silent and unseen, navigating Stonebreaker's capricious emotional politics.

Dancer had spent the past year at Applecroft with Matthew and Mel's parents. In that place of warmth and burgeoning life, she had changed. As a historian, she was writing a treatise on the role of women in the Misted Cliffs, an aspect of history she felt was neglected. When she had returned to the Diamond Palace, just before Stonebreaker died, she no longer wore veils. The Diamond Court knew her better than they knew Mel. Perhaps in time, they would follow Dancer's more flexible ways.

The army stretched out along the cliffs that separated them from Harsdown. They took a steady but easy pace that didn't tax the horses. Oxen drew supply wagons. The horsemen passed the soldiers on foot, but when the animals rested, the troops caught up. Cobalt had left Diamond Company behind and taken the other four thousand soldiers plus about a thousand day-tenders. They would go over the cliffs in the

south, where the mountains were smaller, cross southern Harsdown, and enter Shazire. At Alzire, the capital of Shazire, they would rendezvous with the rest of the army, another three thousand men.

Cobalt was riding ahead, taller in his saddle than the other warriors, with his helmet under his arm. Mel rode up alongside him. "A fine morning."

"Yes." His face was more relaxed than it had been in days.

"You seem satisfied."

"Yes."

Mel sighed. "You know, love, you are allowed to speak more than one word per sentence."

His grin flashed. "Yes."

"Oh, stop." She pretended to pull an arrow out of her quiver and knock her bow.

"What is this?" he asked. "You look lovely, trying to shoot me through the heart."

Mel lowered her lashes and contemplated him through their fringe. "Now that I know what stirs your passion..."

Cobalt rode closer. He said nothing, but his gaze told her what he wanted. Her body always heated when he looked at her that way.

"So." She cleared her throat. Then she ran out of words.

He smirked at her. "You can say more than one word, too."

Mel laughed, and they rode on together. He continually scanned the riders, troops, wagons, everything. She was one of the few people who knew that the more distant parts of the army were a blur to him. He could see fine at moderate distances, but he needed his glasses for anything far away. He disliked people knowing he wore them. It didn't really matter now; although he would never be much of an archer, he could see well enough for most everything else. But if his sight continued to worsen, someday it could interfere with his ability to command the army.

A thought came to her: Could she help his eyes? A blue mage could speed and deepen healing. But his sight wasn't injured, so she had nothing to heal. Still, she was willing to try if he didn't put too much hope in the result. Far better that than what she feared, that she would someday have to heal him after battle. She couldn't give life where it had already been lost. At night, she tossed with nightmares where he took a mortal wound and she burned out her mage powers trying to heal him while he died in her arms.

Stop it, she thought.

She couldn't help but worry, though. Supposedly Cobalt was bringing his army to establish a more permanent presence in Shazire. It didn't take a genius to see he didn't need eight thousand people for that. He intended to leave only the Andalusites in Shazire and take the other six companies and their day tenders toward Jazid, then north along the Aronsdale-Jazid border to Taka Mal.

"I've never been to Jazid," Mel mused. "When I was small, my family visited Queen Vizarana, and I met

King Ozar at the Topaz Palace. But I don't know much about him. He never allows women to join discussions of state policy or governance." She gave a short laugh. "He does not like my parents."

Cobalt smiled. "Everyone likes your parents."

"They break Ozar's rules," Mel said. "He supposedly has said my mother would make a good concubine and my father is 'too pretty' to be a king." Mel hated the stories. She had no doubt Onyx liked her no more than her parents, and she dreaded to think how warriors in Taka Mal would treat Drummer. Her father might look innocuous, but he was a seasoned commander. Drummer had no military training. In Taka Mal, he would be a gazelle among wolves.

"Ozar and my grandfather got along well," Cobalt said.

"That figures," Mel said dourly.

His smile turned wicked. "It is a pity Ozar won't meet you. I should like to see how he reacts to my warrior wife."

"Why wouldn't he meet me? We will travel along the border of his country." She already knew what Cobalt would say, but it wouldn't do him any good. "It is customary in such situations for sovereigns to confer, lest one side assume hostilities."

Cobalt stopped smiling. "Whether or not Onyx and I meet is irrelevant. You will be in Shazire."

She met his gaze. "No."

"Yes."

"What, are we going to argue with one-word sentences?"

He scowled at her. "Someone needs to govern Shazire while I am busy." Drily he added, "You are better at it than me, anyway."

"Leo Tumbler has governed Shazire fine. He can continue."

"He is a colonel," Cobalt said, as if that explained something.

"You have to appoint a governor. You can't live in both Shazire and the Misted Cliffs." The situation had been worrying Mel. "You need one for Blueshire, too."

His face darkened. "I am not going to put Lightstone back on the Blueshire throne after I deposed him."

"What deposing?" she demanded. "You rode in with six thousand men. He had fifty. You bullied him."

"I did no such thing."

"He would make a good governor."

"No."

"If you leave me in charge in Alzire," she said, "I shall appoint Baker Lightstone as Governor of

Blueshire.”

“Mel!” Cobalt glowered at her. “Do not bedevil me this way.”

Mel had expected he would want her to stay in Alzire. She had also noticed he tended to defer to her in the day-to-day process of governance. She appreciated his trust, and she had no intention of endangering their child. But a mage queen rode with the army. Her own mother had ridden against Vargelle when she was pregnant. Good reason existed for kings to marry adepts. Mages brought light, literally and figuratively. Mel wouldn’t help Cobalt overthrow countries, but she could minimize harm to his men, improve morale, increase health and strength, heal wounds, sway fighters not to slaughter if they were winning and calm panic if they were losing.

Cobalt claimed he had no intention of invading Taka Mal. Prior to Stonebreaker’s death, she might have believed him. His fire had cooled this past year. But his grandfather had died before Cobalt could come to terms with him. In his own inarticulate way, her husband had wanted an accounting for all those years of torment. She doubted he could ever have made peace with Stonebreaker, but he might have with himself. Now she questioned if that would ever happen.

The envoy should arrive soon in Quaazero. Fieldson would send his fastest horsemen with news of the negotiations. And if they were lucky, truly lucky, the volatile mix of countries, royal houses and Cobalt’s suppressed rage wouldn’t explode.

When the disaster hit, Jade and Baz were taking Sphere-General Fieldson and his officers on a tour of the palace winery. They had gathered in a courtyard to watch tenders load barrels into a wagon as the Wine Master described various vintages. Jade planned to offer one of their finest bottles to Fieldson, with the hopes of appeasing his growing frustration. She sympathized. Today was Ringday, but still no word of Drummer.

“Our merlot from Kazlatar has a particularly rich flavor,” the Wine Master was saying. The envoy listened politely. Baz looked bored, having heard this every time he and Jade went over the scrolls for the winery.

A commotion came from an archway across the courtyard. The two soldiers on guard were talking urgently with someone there. Then one strode toward Jade, his breastplate gleaming in the sunlight, his armor and curved sword an impressive sight. Which was the intent, of course, with Fieldson here.

The soldier stopped in front of Jade and saluted with his fist against his breastplate. “Your Majesty!”

“Is there a problem?” Jade asked.

“A day-runner is looking for you,” he said. “He claims he has important news.”

Jade inwardly swore. If this was about Drummer, the Master of her Watch had bungled their plans. They were supposed to let Jade know when Javelin showed up, but only in a manner that drew no attention, particularly in front of the sphere-general.

Maybe it wasn’t Drummer. It could be another emergency. Her subjects thought she lived a glamorous life, but in truth it involved an unending stream of problems that had to be solved.

Jade turned to Fieldson with a look of apology. "I'm terribly sorry. I'm afraid I must see to this." To Baz, she said, "Please do finish the tour with our honored guests. I will return as soon as I see to whatever problem has come up."

Baz inclined his head, for once raising no objections. They had already discussed what to do when his men brought in Drummer.

Fieldson was watching them closely. "Perhaps Goodman Headwind has arrived."

"I hope so." She spread her hands out from her body to indicate her puzzlement. "We will see."

The guard escorted Jade into an adjacent courtyard. The day-runner was there, a boy of about nine with black curls that flopped over his ears. Seeing Jade, he pulled himself up as tall as his small stature would allow and pulled on his shirt, straightening his clothes. Jade couldn't help but smile at his earnest face.

"Your Magnificence!" The boy bowed. "Your Gloriousness! Your Esteemed—"

"Goodness, I'm not all that!" Laughing gently, Jade said, "What is your name?"

"Spark, ma'am." He gazed at her with a rapt face.

"Did you have a message, Goodsir Spark?" Jade asked.

"Oh! Yes." His cheeks turned red. "Captain Javelin said to run as fast as possible to let you know he had arrived. He is in the Fire Opal courtyard in the north wing of the palace. He sent for the physician, too, but Goodsir Quarry isn't here. Captain Javelin says to please bring another doctor. It's urgent."

Jade felt as if the ground dropped beneath her. What had happened to Drummer? And why the blazes had Javelin brought him here? He must not have received her message. Redwings were well-trained, but even the best of them didn't always fly true. Unfortunately, Quarry was at the South tower in the city wall, waiting for Drummer. Javelin must have come through another gate.

Jade turned to the guard. "Please find Mica and take her to Captain Javelin's party." Mica was the best healer at the palace after Quarry, and also the midwife for women at the Quaaazera court. "I will meet you there."

"Your Majesty," the guard said. "I should accompany you to Captain Javelin. In case there is trouble."

Trouble, indeed. It was an apt word, but no guard could protect her against the kind of trouble Drummer posed. He might have used her that night they spent together, but even if that was true, and even if for some bizarre reason he attacked her in front of Javelin, she could probably fight him off. Her parents had ensured she learned to defend herself at a young age. But Drummer wasn't going to attack anyone. He was no warrior. Why she liked him so much was beyond her, but she did, far too much.

"Thank you for your concern," Jade said. "But I'll be fine."

Although the guard hesitated, he couldn't insist. So he saluted and strode toward the palace.

"Lead on, Spark," Jade said.

"Yes, ma'am!" He set off, clearly determined to do a good job, and she smiled as he hurried her across

the yard.

Spark led her through courtyards she rarely saw, those used by domestic staff at the palace. They ended up at a yard shaped like a Fire Opal blossom with scalloped sides. People filled it: soldiers from the search party, grooms and horses, more soldiers at the entrances. Smart fellow, Javelin, to post guards so no one could enter uninvited.

The captain stood across the yard, leaning over a litter on the ground. Mica was kneeling by it, talking to whoever lay there. Jade hurried through the bustle, and people bowed as she passed. She barely nodded to each, her attention on the litter. Had they carried Drummer? The possibility that he had been too ill to ride scared her more than any Harsdown envoy.

When she reached the litter, Javelin turned and bowed to her. Grime and sweat streaked his face, and she suspected neither he nor his men had rested on the journey here. His face was grim as he moved aside. Jade knelt next to Mica—and her breath caught.

Drummer lay in the litter, his eyes closed, his face pale, his breathing shallow. Jade felt as if her world stopped. She was aware of Mica and the others, but everything dimmed except this minstrel.

“Drummer?” she asked. “Can you hear me? It’s Jade.” Belatedly, she realized how that sounded. No visitor could use her personal name, especially not a hostage from Aronsdale. At the moment, though, she didn’t care.

He slowly opened his eyes. “My greetings...” he whispered.

“You foolish man,” Jade murmured, furious and terrified. “What were you doing, running off to the Rocklands?”

“Baz...?”

“We’ll fix it,” she said. She glanced at Mica. “How serious is his illness?”

The healer was staring at her, but she quickly found her voice. “He has the patters.”

“Patters?” For saints’ sake. Most people caught that as children. The name came from the way small children curled up with their parents, seeking pats of comfort during their illness. Patters came with a terribly high fever and nausea that lasted several days. With rest and liquids, the child usually recovered. It could be fatal, though, if not treated—and running around in the Rocklands sure as blazes wouldn’t help.

Jade knew Aronsdale children didn’t catch all the same illnesses as those in Taka Mal. Drummer’s body might not have the strengths of someone from Taka Mal to fight the disease.

“Will he get better?” Jade asked.

After a pause that lasted too long, Mica said, “I think so.”

Jade knew too well how to interpret that pause and response. Mica was afraid for her patient and didn’t want to tell her queen.

Jade brushed the sweaty blond curls off Drummer’s forehead and spoke to him in a soft voice she rarely

used. “You really were sick that night at the banquet.”

“I guess so,” he whispered.

“Why did you run away?” Dismay welled inside of her. “You made a pact with me. A Topaz Pact. How could you break it?”

“Pact?” His breathing rasped. “I don’t understand.”

Didn’t he know? It had never occurred to her that he might not realize the significance of their agreement. He was a queen’s brother; she had assumed he would understand. “You promised not to leave the palace.”

“I did?”

“That night, after you left the banquet. We talked about the pact. I said it meant you would stay put. You agreed.” She hesitated, unable to remember if he had actually said yes. “At least, I thought you did.”

“Jade...I thought General Quaaazera would kill me.”

A harsh voice came from behind them, and the scrape of metal on leather. “Why would I do that, minstrel? What have you done with my queen that would justify your execution?”

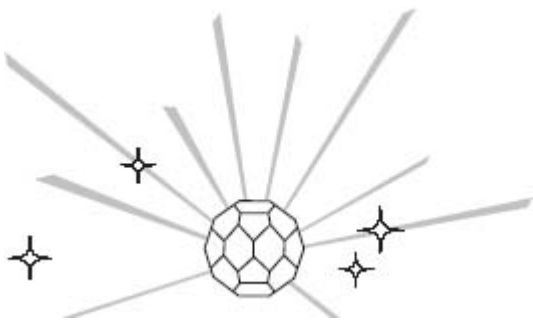
Jade jumped to her feet and whirled around. Baz stood there, his face red, his curved sword drawn and glittering in the sun. His words leaped at her like daggers. “You trusted him with a pact? What possible reason could he have given you to believe he would honor that trust? And why, my untouchable cousin, is a common-born minstrel from Aronsdale calling you by your personal name?”

Everyone around them had frozen in a tableau, staring at her and Baz—the soldiers, healer, grooms, stable hands, palace guards. Baz was breathing hard, and she knew he was one beat away from murdering their Aronsdale hostage.

“My cousin.” She spoke with exquisite formality, knowing Drummer’s life balanced on her words. “Goodman Headwind is unfamiliar with our customs and does not realize he may not use the queen’s familiar name or the implications associated with that familiarity.” Which was true. That those implications happened to be true was better left unsaid. “As to the pact, I misjudged his intent.” With a silent apology to Drummer, she said, “I was misled by his apparent weakness and assumed he couldn’t venture beyond the palace. His smooth ways led me to believe he would honor the agreement. I was wrong and am humbled by my mistake.”

No one moved. A horse snuffled and went silent. Far away, a redwing cried. Every person there knew Drummer’s life hung on whether or not the general of the army, possibly the future king of Taka Mal, would accept her words. No one was watching the west gate. And so no one saw another man enter the yard—until he stepped past Baz and fixed Jade with an icy stare.

“You lied to me,” Sphere-General Fieldson said. “To torture and threaten the life of my queen’s brother are acts of war.”



14

### Topaz Sphere

The blood drained from Jade's face. "Sir, you misunderstand."

"Stop it, Samuel," a hoarse voice said behind her.

Bewildered, Jade turned around—and found herself eye-to-eye with Drummer. He looked ready to crumple, but he was standing. Those rasping words were his, what the illness had done to his golden voice. Jade wanted to reach out, but if she touched him, even just to help him stay on his feet, Baz might finish what he had started when he drew his sword.

"Your Majesty." Drummer spoke with formal cadences. "I apologize deeply if my lapses in courtesy during my illness have offended you or any member of your court." He looked past her to Fieldson. "And Samuel, for the sake of the Azure Saints, I am neither tortured nor dead. Just sick, which is no one's fault."

Jade didn't know how he managed that entire speech when he was on the verge of collapse, but he said it beautifully. And who would have thought that the sphere-general had a personal name as exotic as "Samuel." She had never heard such.

"I apologize that my country gave you this illness," Jade said. It was a bit silly to apologize for a country making him sick, but it was the first thing that came to her mind.

Mica was standing next to Drummer, obviously ready to catch him if he collapsed. Jade turned to her, "Healer, please have Goodman Headwind taken to your apothecary and see that he receives the best treatment."

Mica bowed. "It would be my honor, Your Majesty."

Drummer didn't object as Mica and Javelin helped him lie on the litter and pulled its flapping sides closed to shade him from the sun. Fieldson and Baz watched with suspicion, and Jade didn't think either was fooled by the little play she and Drummer had put on. But she suspected neither knew whom to accuse of what.

Jade spoke to both generals. "Let us continue our discussion inside, where it is cooler." Including their tempers, she hoped.

A muscle twitched in Baz's cheek. Never taking his gaze off her face, he slid his sword into the curved sheath on his belt.



Jade let out a silent breath. She caught a barely visible relaxing of Fieldson's posture. The others in the yard stirred, looking after the horses or carrying Drummer's litter. Jade lifted her hand, inviting Fieldson and Baz into the palace. It appeared that, at least for today, no one would lose his life—or hers.

The atajazid paced along the Obsidian Hall. He had come to his fortress in the Jagged Teeth Mountains to think. Shade watched from the niche where he sat on a stool carved from onyx and inlaid with mother-of-pearl imported from the Misted Cliffs.

"What do you think?" Ozar asked. "She wishes to say no. But she hesitates."

"What I think," Shade said sourly, "is that if Queen Vizarana agrees to marry you, General Quaaazera will skewer you with a shish-kebab stick."

Ozar smiled. "I believe the general would rather skewer his beloved queen. In more ways than one."

Shade arched an eyebrow, but he refrained from commenting on his sovereign's inelegant humor. "She won't marry him. She won't marry you. She likes power too much. She won't give it up."

"Ah, but that makes wresting it from her all the sweeter." Ozar reached the end of the hall, a wall of black stone, and stood considering it with his hands clasped behind his back. Then he turned and resumed pacing. "She hopes to negotiate with Cobalt Escar's envoy, using that Headwind boy as a bargaining point."

"Boy?" Shade waved a bony hand with skin like parchment. "I thought he was a girl."

"They are weak, these Aronsdale and Harsdown men. They let their women run them. If they were all like this Drummer, it would be easy to defeat their armies. Unfortunately, there is Cobalt Escar." He reached the end of the corridor, another black wall, and turned to Shade. "Vizarana wishes me to ally with her. If her need is dire enough, she will accept my conditions."

"The need does not appear dire enough."

"It would if Escar attacked Taka Mal." Ozar thought of the Taka Mal queen. She was a taunt to his life and beliefs. "It is a simple exchange—I get Vizarana's throne and Taka Mal survives. With our forces joined, we can defeat Cobalt. Take his lands. Even the combined armies of Aronsdale and Harsdown won't be enough to stand against us then."

"They might ally with Cobalt if you attack him," Shade said. "His wife is a Dawnfield. And heir to the Jaguar Throne."

Ozar grimaced. The words were a sour taste. "I can't fathom this business of giving a throne to a woman. It invites problems."

Shade's voice rattled in the dry mountain air. "I have heard Cobalt's wife is like a man."

"Behaves like one, maybe." Ozar walked over to him. "I saw her when she was a child. She was unbearably beautiful. All that yellow hair. And blue eyes. Very strange. But attractive."

“Perhaps she hasn’t aged well,” Shade said.

Ozar slowly smiled. “Perhaps we should find out.” He continued down the hall. “Chime Headwind is an offense against nature. Such a woman should be in a man’s bed, not his office. But at least her husband rules Harsdown. The same won’t be true when their daughter takes the throne.” He stopped at the wall and tapped a code on the polished surface.

A clink came from within the stone. When he tapped more of the pattern, more clinks reverberated, stone pins hitting stone pins. He pushed the wall, and a lopsided section slid inward. When he leaned his weight into it, the section moved forward. He was making a tunnel. A scratching came from behind him, the noise of Shade struggling to his feet, followed by the rustle of footsteps.

The slab Ozar was pushing swung ponderously aside. It opened into a chamber over a thousand years old, built by one of his ancestors. The chamber had been modernized, but it retained its original function as a place to question prisoners. Manacles and chains hung on the walls. The spiked objects on the tables had only a thin layer of dust, and the whips remained supple. The cell was in excellent condition, ready for use.

Shade came to Ozar’s side. “You have a plan.”

“You asked what would provoke Cobalt Escar to attack Taka Mal,” Ozar replied. “The House of Quaaazera has already kidnapped his wife’s uncle. Perhaps they will take his wife as well.”

“Ah.” Shade’s eyes glinted. “And when Escar finds out they have mistreated her?”

“I imagine he won’t like it,” Ozar said mildly, studying a rack across the room.

“This plan of yours has a problem.”

Ozar spoke wryly. “It has many.”

“If she is here,” Shade said, “why would he think Quaaazera took her?”

“How would he know?” Ozar walked to a table and picked up a metal rod with serrated edges. “Especially if he’s told that the House of Quaaazera abducted her, just like her uncle.”

“And when his wife reveals the truth?”

“She will say nothing.” Ozar tapped the rod against his palm, lightly, so the serrations didn’t rip his skin. “Sadly, I’m afraid she won’t survive her treatment at their hands.”

Shade didn’t look surprised. “Quaaazera will deny it.”

Ozar turned to him, suddenly angry. “The Quaaazeras condemned themselves when they took her uncle. My spies say he ran off and almost died in the Rocklands. Escar is far more likely to believe Taka Mal committed this atrocity.” His voice hardened. “Especially when he sees her body.”

Shade’s gaze darkened, an expression that had given Ozar nightmares in his youth. “And when Escar descends in fury on Taka Mal, you will come to the aid of the nubile Vizarana. With conditions.”

“If it works, I get everything—Cobalt Escar’s realms and Vizarana’s throne.” Ozar struck the table with

the rod, gashing its scarred wood. "The plan, however, has a flaw."

Shade's frown deepened the web of wrinkles on his ancient face. "Getting Cobalt's wife." He didn't make it a question.

"It won't be easy," Ozar said. Even so. He had contacts he had been cultivating for years in many countries. Ozar spoke in a shadowed voice. "Nothing is impossible."

Jade knew she should stay away from Drummer. He had lain in bed for three days, delirious or unconscious, fighting a fever that raged. She wanted to sit at his side every moment. If she did, though, everyone would see the truth. Baz didn't believe nothing had happened between her and Drummer, but he had so far had enough sense not to kill Drummer and start a war. Fieldson didn't trust her, and the guards she had posted at Drummer's suite made the general more suspicious. If she neglected her duties to attend their hostage like a love-addled girl, it would only inflame the situation. It surely violated some law of the spheres that Drummer mattered so much to her. But he did. She felt starved for him.

Jade spent the morning with her planners going over the upkeep of roads, bridges, footpaths, caravans, fire league, city jails, and the temples, where the people worshipped the Dragon-Sun and the spirits of the sky and sunset. Personally, Jade would have rather honored the sunrise, a more optimistic proposition, she thought. But the pantheon was what it was regardless of her preferences.

She met with Fieldson over a meal of spiced pastries and shrimp imported from the Misted Cliffs. The sumptuous food did nothing to pacify the taciturn sphere-general, who waited with impatience for Drummer to recover.

Finally Jade could take no more. After her midday meal, she slipped over to the Sunset Wing. Captain Javelin and grumpy Kaj were on guard at Drummer's suite. Going inside, she recalled the time she had found Drummer here, standing on his head with his legs scissored in the air as if that feat of athleticism were the most natural thing in the world. Beautiful, limber, dulcet-voiced Drummer, who sang like ambrosia. Now he was dying. If only he had stayed put. Javelin had told her of Drummer's resourceful trip across Taka Mal and his courage. Her minstrel had depths she doubted even he knew, and if he died, it would be a crime.

Jade found Mica in the parlor, at a table tiled with gold-wing mosaics. The healer was intent on a scroll that listed medicines they were using in Drummer's treatment.

"How is he?" Jade asked, standing next to her.

Mica looked up, her face drawn, and started to stand, until Jade lay a hand on her shoulder, implicit permission to dispense with formalities.

Mica settled wearily back into her chair. "We've given him malo herbs and cold compresses for the fever. Nothing helps."

Jade's heart felt as if it stuttered. "Is he eating?"

"We've roused him enough to take liquids. Water. Broth."

The room pressed in on Jade. She did her best to hide her intense reaction, for Drummer's sake. For his

life. As she thanked Mica and headed to the bedroom, it was all she could do to keep from running.

Inside Drummer's room, Doctor Quarry was sitting by the bed, blocking her view of Drummer. Quarry was an older man, heavier than most, with gray-streaked black hair. He dipped a cloth into a basin on the lacquered nightstand, then wrung it out and applied it to Drummer's forehead.

Jade went to stand by Quarry. Drummer lay on his back with a gold sheet drawn across his chest. Given his fever and the heat, they had dressed him in the thinnest possible sleep clothes. The only light came from candles on the mantel above the rarely used fireplace. In their dim glow, his face was sallow, his cheeks sunken. Someone had shaved his scraggly beard, which made him look even younger and more vulnerable. His pale lashes glinted against his even paler skin.

She spoke in a low voice. "Has there been any change?"

Quarry looked up at her. "None."

Jade managed a nod. She had to restrain herself from twisting the silk sash on her tunic. "I will sit with him for a while."

Quarry looked relieved for the break. He didn't question the situation even if the queen herself offered to sit in for him. It was why Jade liked him; he accepted her as herself without questions.

The doctor left the room, his footsteps muffled on the Kazlatarian rug. As he closed the door, Jade settled stiffly in the chair. Then she thought, Enough of this, and sat on the bed. She laid her hand against Drummer's cheek. Saints, his skin burned! She moistened his compress again and laid it back on his forehead.

"Ah..." He sighed. "That helps."

Jade froze. Then she leaned over him, her hand braced on the other side of his body. "Drummer? You are alive?"

His lashes lifted, unveiling his blue eyes. In that moment, Jade understood perfectly the desire of Taka Mal kings to seclude their women. Maybe it was in her blood, passed down by generations of desert rulers, but her wish to protect Drummer, to hide him away from any possible harm, hit her with such intensity it hurt.

"Your Majesty..." he said.

"Ah, love, call me Jade."

"Where...?"

"You're in the Topaz Palace."

"And Baz?"

She winced. "He is in a bad mood."

"Are you all right?"

Jade couldn't believe he asked such a question. He, the man they had kidnapped, whose life she had endangered when she took advantage of his honor, the man who had nearly died in the desert and then lay here on the edge of death for three days—he asked if she was all right.

"I am fine," she said. "It is you we're worried about."

"Just woke up..." He reached up and cupped her cheek. "I know I'm not supposed to touch you. But, Jade...I've thought about you every moment since that night." His arm dropped back to the bed.

Something strange was happening inside of her. Desert men never revealed their moods. If she married Baz or Ozar, she would live the rest of her life with their lack of affection, their harsh worldview, and in Ozar's case, his wish to subjugate her will and body. All her life, she had assumed that her marriage would be a political and economic arrangement. She had accepted that. But with Drummer, that knowledge became a weight she loathed.

She longed for affection. Her parents had seemed to like her, or at least they never beat her. But neither had they shown love. No one had ever spoken to her like Drummer. No one looked at her the way he did, whether he was playing his glittar or standing on his head. He wouldn't try to conquer her. He would make her laugh. He would sing. Why the bloody blazes did she have to settle for a lifetime of misery? Was it too much to want happiness? She was tired of it all, so very tired.

Jade took his hand. She knew she should stop touching him. But she couldn't. She couldn't walk away.

"Drummer?" she began. But then she stopped.

He managed a wan smile. "That's me. Not that I ever drum anything."

She went to the cliff edge—and jumped. "Marry me."

His smile vanished. "Don't mock me that way."

"I'm not." She bent her head and kissed him lightly.

Drummer stiffened. Then he groaned and pulled his other arm from under the covers so he could embrace her. His passion had a subdued quality, banked by his illness, but that only made it sweeter. Right now, Jade would have promised him the world if he asked.

After a moment, though, he laid his arms back on the bed. When she raised her head, he said, "If your cousin comes in here, or if anyone sees us and tells him—truly he will kill me."

Jade knew what she had to do. "Drummer, listen. Fieldson thinks we've committed terrible offenses against you. He's ready to declare war. Your niece's husband hurls at our borders. Both Taka Mal and Jazid covet the export trade of the Misted Cliffs. Jazid offers me a military alliance in return for marriage. Aronsdale is sitting in the middle of it all like a target. The political landscape isn't stable. Something has to give. Someone is going to launch an invasion, and I can't even guarantee it won't be me."

"I know it's a mess."

"Taka Mal needs a treaty. With Aronsdale."

"Saints almighty." He stared at her. "You meant it. About marrying me."

“I can make a case that might convince at least some of my generals. It could bring peace between the Houses of Dawnfield and Quaaazera, just as the marriage between your niece and Cobalt brought peace between Dawnfield and Chamberlight.”

“You’re forgetting one thing.” His voice was growing stronger. “My niece is heir to the Jaguar Throne. That’s why it worked. I’m heir to what? Nothing. I’m just a poor relation.”

It was true, however much she wanted to deny it. The treaty between Dawnfield and Chamberlight succeeded because each party brought enough into the marriage to make it worth the union. It put the Jaguar Throne back into the House of Escar and guaranteed Harsdown and Aronsdale wouldn’t unite against Cobalt the Dark. In return, Cobalt swore he wouldn’t seek dominion over Aronsdale nor invade Harsdown to reclaim the Jaguar Throne for himself. The next heir to the throne would be both Escar and Dawnfield.

It was a dangerous alliance. Taka Mal and Jazid needed to counter that threat. If Jade married Ozar, it might be a union forged in hell, but it would anneal their power. Their child would be heir to both the Topaz and Onyx Thrones. What offer could Drummer make? He had no throne, no riches, no army, nothing.

“Even so,” Jade said. “You are a Dawnfield through your sister’s marriage.”

“No one would let us marry. Not your cousin. Not the atajazid. Not Cobalt.”

Jade scowled. “What will Ozi do? Attack Taka Mal and carry me off?” Knowing Ozar, he might try it if she pushed him too far. He wouldn’t like it if she chose Baz over him, but she doubted he would try to stop the union. It didn’t threaten his country, and it had been expected for decades. But if she married a Dawnfield, it posed him an entirely new set of dangers.

“Jade, this is crazy.”

“Perhaps not.” The more she thought about it, the more angles she saw. “Such an agreement would bind Aronsdale and Taka Mal to support each other. My House would agree not to align with Ozar against Cobalt. Cobalt would agree not to attack us. Aronsdale would agree to support my army against Jazid if Ozar protests my marriage and against Cobalt if he tries to stop it. Aronsdale will no longer be isolated, Taka Mal and Jazid on one side and Harsdown and the Misted Cliffs on the other.” She considered him. “It could stabilize the political landscape.”

He slowly pulled himself into a sitting position. One of his curls stuck up over his ear. He didn’t speak, though, and Jade felt her face grow hot with mortification. Her recitation about politics was probably about as romantic as having patters.

“I don’t understand politics and military campaigns,” Drummer said. “I never have.”

“I didn’t mean for it to sound so blunt.” Jade felt foolish. He didn’t seem to want her.

Then Drummer said, “If you want me to marry you, and you think it will work—” his sudden smile was as brilliant as it was sweet “—I would be honored to be your husband.”

Jade felt as if a heavy carpet lifted off her shoulders. She wanted to laugh, to shout, to tumble in the silk sheets with him. But she could wait. They had their whole lives—which she hoped would be more than a

few days.

“I’m glad.” Her smile broke through. “Very glad.”

Even with his face pale and drawn from his illness, his gaze could still dance with mischief. “But I’m too young for you.”

“What, twenty-eight?” She laughed, feeling light. “Five years. Almost six. I’m ancient.”

“Ah, Jade.” He pulled her into his arms and laid his fevered cheek against her head. “I can’t believe this is happening to me. Maybe it’s a delirium dream.”

“Then I’m having it, too.” Holding him, she pondered how to proceed. She couldn’t tell Baz until she could ensure Drummer’s safety. Nor did she want her cousin harmed. She did love him, as a sister would love a quarrelsome brother.

Ozar would be a greater problem. Given a chance, he might haul her off to that fortress of his and do saints only knew what to her. Before she could announce any betrothal, she needed to ensure no one killed, abducted, or tortured anyone else. She wasn’t certain who to trust. If anyone. General Slate tended to align with Baz. Firaz could go either way. Spearcaster usually supported her, but he didn’t respect Aronsdale, a country he considered weak. All her advisors would object to Drummer’s lack of title.

Jade drew back and considered him. Drummer chuckled, a pallid echo of his laugh, but a blessing after her fears for his life. “Why do you gaze at me as if I’m a puzzle?”

She tapped his cheek. “I have to fit the pieces together so I can marry you without getting either of us in trouble or dead.”

His smile faded. “I don’t see how.”

“I have an idea.” Jade kissed him soundly. “I have to take care of some matters.” She slid off the bed. “Wish me luck.”

Drummer was watching her with a strange expression, as if she were a wraith that would soon dissipate. “Do you have a shape?”

She peered at him. “Shape of what?”

“A ring, cube, anything like that.”

Puzzled, she took off one of the gold hoops that hung from a smaller ring in her ear. “Will this do?”

“It’s perfect.” He held out his hand, palm up, and she set the earring in its center. Then he just sat. Jade shifted her weight, uncertain what this meant. He looked so drained and pale, she felt certain he should lie down again.

A sphere of gold light appeared in his hand.

Jade gaped at the sphere. “What is that?”

“For you,” he said softly. “A topaz sphere.” He lifted his gaze to hers. “I didn’t understand about the pact. I’m sorry I betrayed your trust. But I give you my word now.”

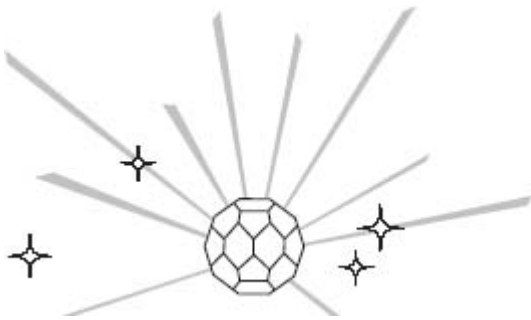
The blood drained from her face. “How did you do that?”

“It’s a parlor trick,” he murmured, seeming to tire. The light faded.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Jade said. Quietly she added, “But I will honor your pact.”

He offered her the earring. “Good luck, my Fire Opal.”

Fire Opal indeed. She liked the name. Soon she would give him hers. Quaaazera.



15

### The Sunwood Bargain

Cobalt leaned over the rocks and looked down at the base of the cliffs. About ten feet below him, a large warrior in leather-and-bronze armor was swinging his sword—at Mel. She blocked the strike, but the force of the blow backed her up a step. As the warrior came at her with another swing, Cobalt’s hand tightened on the spur of rock he was clenching, and he barely held back his shout.

Mel parried with her blade at an unusual angle and caught her opponent’s sword in a twisting motion. It was a strange move, one she had used against Cobalt, odd enough that it slowed him down. It had the same effect on her opponent below. He hesitated, and she used her advantage to drive him back. He recovered fast, though, and his next parry knocked the sword from Mel’s hand. He followed up with a thrust that Cobalt’s heightened instincts comprehended could cut off Mel’s head if it struck home—

Cobalt vaulted over the rocks and landed with a thud next to Mel, in front of the blade the warrior brandished at his wife. In reflex, Cobalt drew his own sword. His awareness of time jumped as it did in battle, where he felt as if he acted at normal speed and everyone around him moved in a strange, incredibly slowed time. The other man froze, his sword a hand’s span from Cobalt’s breastplate.

The warrior flushed and lowered his weapon. Apprehension washed across his face. With the threat to Mel past, Cobalt’s time sense slowed to normal.

Mel sighed. To the warrior, she said, “Thank you.”

The man bowed deeply to her. “You fight well, Your Majesty.” He looked as if he feared Cobalt was about to slice him up.



“You may go,” Cobalt growled at him.

“Your Majesty.” The man bowed again and quickly set off toward the fields where the Chamberlight army had camped.

Mel turned a dour gaze on Cobalt. “What was all that for?”

He crossed his arms. “How do you expect me to react when a man waves a sword at my pregnant wife?”

“Ah, Cobalt.” She sheathed her sword and adjusted her armor. It bewildered him that she could dress so much like a man and look so womanly. Black leather did erotic things to her body. It made him want to take her to Taka Mal with him, and he couldn’t do that. He had to broach the subject again, and he would have to say many words to make his point, but if he didn’t put forth his best effort, his formidably articulate wife would talk circles around him until he ended up agreeing with her. This was too important for him to let that happen.

“Mel,” he began.

“Yes?” She was resting her palm on the ball that formed the end of her sword hilt. Green light glowed around her hand.

“Stop that,” he growled.

“It’s only a mood spell.” But she released the ball, and the light faded. “Sometimes I think you make them.”

“Spells of emotion?” He couldn’t think of anyone less likely than himself to wield them.

“Not emotion.” She hesitated. “Maybe not spells. But saints, Cobalt, when you fight, it’s as if you have supernatural powers. I didn’t think it was possible to move that fast.”

Ah. So. He pulled himself up. “I am indeed formidable.”

Her lips quirked upward. “And modest.”

“What did your emotion spell tell you?”

“You fear for me.”

“Yes.” Knowing one-word responses wouldn’t be enough, he forced himself to continue. “You must stay in Alzire. I know you feel you must ride. You have the heart of a fighter. I know you can help the army. But you must, this time, listen to me.” No, that wasn’t right. She always listened to him. She was always respectful. Then she went ahead and did whatever she wanted. “You carry our baby.” He didn’t know how he could ever be a good father, but now that he had absorbed the thought of his child, he wanted intensely for it to be born.

“The army won’t go into combat,” Mel said. “You’re going to Taka Mal only as a warning, right?” She made the question a challenge.

“Yes,” Cobalt said, aware of the sun heating the hollow where they stood. Sweat gathered on his brow.

“But any time you take an army somewhere, combat is possible. We will march along the Jazid border. The Atajazid D’az Ozar will bring out his army. Just in case. Queen Vizarana will gather hers. Just in case. It is too volatile. You must not come.”

She rested her hand on her abdomen in a gesture that seemed so instinctual Cobalt wondered if she realized she had done it. “I wouldn’t fight.”

“Even so. You could be hurt.” He took her hand, awkward with the gesture. It wasn’t that he didn’t feel the affection it implied; sometimes he filled up with so much emotion for Mel, he didn’t know where to put it all. He never knew how to express it; his attempts were foolish and clumsy. Nevertheless, he had to try. He could just forbid her to come. He could have his men hold her in the Alzire Palace. But if he trampled her spirit, she might take away the love that for some miraculous reason she gave him.

Mel was watching his face, and he suspected she was using her sphere to make mood spells even if her sword wasn’t making light. Actually, he wasn’t sure it didn’t have a faint glow.

She took his hand in both of hers. “All right.”

Cobalt wasn’t certain he had heard properly. “What?”

“I will stay in Alzire.”

“You will?” Now he knew his hearing had problems.

She laughed softly. “Don’t look so shocked.”

“You never agree that easily.”

“You are more convincing than you know. It comes from your heart.” She placed his palm on her stomach, which as of yet showed no sign of pregnancy. “You are right, I must think of the child.”

Cobalt didn’t realize how much he had tensed until his body relaxed. “It is good, is it not? Having a child.”

She smiled. “It is.”

“You will be a good mother.” He had no doubt about that.

“I hope so.”

He pulled her to him. Since they had been traveling with the army, they had less time for each other. Soon they would return to their duties, he to overseeing the Chamberlight forces and she to governing Alzire. But for a few moments on this warm afternoon, they could spend time with each other.

“Let us walk for a while,” he said.

She took his hand. “I would like that.”

As they strolled together, a thought came to Cobalt: He should enjoy this walk because it would be his last with her. He shook off the strange mood. They would have many such times. Of course they would. He couldn’t bear to think otherwise.

He would annihilate anyone who threatened her.

Jade walked down the Sunwood Corridor. Its floor-to-ceiling windows let sunlight slant across the yellow wood. She passed mosaics depicting scenes from the history of Quaaz. Here was one that showed her many-times-great-grandmother from a thousand years ago holding a baby, the child who grew up to be Kaazar the Mighty, also called The Wise, the Quaazera king who had built this city.

She stepped through an archway into a large hall. On her right, a small arch opened discreetly into her Sunwood study, a comfortable room with an antique surveying glass mounted on a gold stand in one corner.

Sphere-General Fieldson had already arrived, escorted by the two men she sent to request his presence—her bodyguards, in fact. Leadership was about judicious governance of course, but having good bodyguards never hurt, either. They now stood posted at the door. She trusted these two, not only to protect her, but to watch that her cousin Baz or his palace spies didn't "happen" by and eavesdrop. Fieldson was across the room gazing out a floor-to-ceiling window bordered by murals of her ancestors. Sunlight slanted across his face, highlighting the lines around his eyes. His strong profile reminded Jade of statues she had seen during her visits to Castle Suncroft in Aronsdale.

She went over to him. "Light of the noon, General."

He turned with a start. As he bowed, his tension seemed to crackle. "My greetings, Your Majesty." His deep voice could have sounded threatening, except he always sounded like that. He was, she had to admit, an impressive envoy.

Jade gave him her most disarming smile. "Drummer woke up."

Fieldson remained wary. "He is recovering?"

"He is indeed." Anticipating his next question, she added, "You can see him if you would like. But first I wish to discuss something with you."

The hint of a smile had started to show on his face, but now his defenses snapped back down. "I will engage in no negotiations, Your Majesty, until I am assured he is well."

"It isn't a negotiation, exactly. Drummer and I have come to a decision." She thought of the strange, unsettling light her intended had created. Then she put the disquieting memory out of her mind; she would have time to worry about it later. "That is why you and I need to talk."

"I'm not sure I should listen to this," Fieldson said. "But I confess, you have my curiosity. What is this decision?"

Jade felt as if she were walking down a gauntlet of words. One misstep and they could demolish her. "I can't tell you yet." She held up her hand when he scowled. "I don't mean to be coy. You and I may want similar things, but neither of us is ready to trust the other. Please hear me out."

"All right." Despite his guarded manner, he seemed intrigued, as he often did in their talks, as if she were some exotic and beautiful animal. "What do you wish to say?"

“It has to do with protection.”

“For Drummer.”

“Yes.” She took a deep breath. “And for me.”

His gaze sharpened. “Protection against who?”

Jade gazed out the window at the garden, though she hardly saw the trellises heavy with fire-lilies or the dragon fountains outside that breathed water instead of flame. She didn’t know how to broach the subject of her betrothal. If she misspoke in any way that could be interpreted as a betrayal of her throne or the House of Quaazero, it could have disastrous consequences.

“Has something happened to Drummer,” Fieldson asked tightly, “that you fear reprisals?”

“If only it were that simple.” She turned to him. “Aronsdale is in an unstable position, some might even say untenable.”

“People say many things,” he answered. “Talk costs nothing.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” Jade regarded him steadily. “It can cost a kingdom.”

His face revealed nothing. But he had to know what she meant. He came from Aronsdale and had been a king’s advisor even before he went to Harsdown to serve Muller Dawnfield.

“Go on,” he said.

“Consider geography,” Jade said. “On one side of Aronsdale, Taka Mal and Jazid are poised to challenge Cobalt Escar. On the other side of Aronsdale, the Misted Cliffs and Shazire are united to move against Taka Mal and Jazid.”

“I will believe an alliance between Jazid and Taka Mal,” Fieldson said, “when I see it.”

Jade knew he was probing. “Is it any less likely,” she countered, “than the devil’s bargain the House of Dawnfield made with the House of Escar when Mel Dawnfield married Cobalt Escar?”

“You would know better than I,” he murmured, “what devils Taka Mal is willing to endure for the price of conquest.”

Devils indeed. She didn’t want to dwell on her brutal suitor. “Aronsdale is ruled by the Dawnfields, and they are bound by their treaty with Cobalt. But suppose he conquers these desert lands? You don’t know that he will respect the treaty when nothing is left to stop him.” She took a breath. “If the atajazid and I join forces, we might defeat Cobalt. Would we then turn against Aronsdale? Should they ally with their sometimes enemy, Cobalt the Dark? No matter how you look at it, Aronsdale is caught in the middle, and if they fall, so will Harsdown.”

“You paint a rather dire picture.”

“Do you dispute it?”

He didn't answer. Instead he asked, "I take it you have a point in outlining this state of affairs?"

"Perhaps a solution."

Jade had the gratification of seeing his surprise. "If you have that," he told her, "you are far ahead of the rest of us."

"Aronsdale should ally with Taka Mal."

He gave a startled laugh. "Why not? While we're at it, we could move the Blue Ocean to Aronsdale and flood the desert."

She smiled slightly. "I'm not joking."

"Never, in known history, have Taka Mal and Aronsdale allied. How would you convince your advisors? Your military?" He waited a moment. "Your cousin?"

"They aren't stupid," Jade said. "We must ally with someone, or we are going to end up just like Shazire."

"Why would you choose Dawnfield over Onyx?"

"The House of Onyx offers much to my House. An alliance has merit. However, I am a realist, as are my advisors. If I marry the atajazid, I could lose my throne to him."

"You don't have to marry him to ally with him."

Jade grimaced. "Apparently I do."

Fieldson took a moment to absorb that. Then he spoke with care. "I would think that if war threatens Taka Mal and Jazid, the atajazid would form an alliance with less demanding terms."

"Perhaps. One would hope to avoid such a threat."

"How?" he demanded. "By kidnapping the queen's brother?"

"No." She mentally braced herself. "By marrying the queen's brother."

Fieldson stared at her. It was the first time she had seen him truly speechless. She waited.

Finally he said, "That is—unexpected."

He was a master of understatement. "If you find it so," she said wryly, "imagine how my generals will react." One in particular.

He stood thinking. "If the Houses of Quaazero and Dawn-field were to ally, Cobalt couldn't invade Taka Mal. It would violate the treaty he signed guaranteeing he wouldn't attack any country ruled by the House of his wife's family."

"He would also have a guarantee that Taka Mal wouldn't turn against him," Jade pointed out. "The same treaty that would forbid Cobalt from attacking Taka Mal would stop us from attacking him."

Fieldson looked incredulous. “It’s brilliant. Impossible, but brilliant.”

She regarded him steadily. “Nothing is impossible.”

“I came here to protect Drummer, not make him the target of every assassin in Taka Mal and Jazid.”

“He won’t be a target if he is no longer in Taka Mal when I announce the betrothal.” Jade knew she had gone too far to turn back in this discussion. “Unfortunately, the announcement may put my top military officers in the unenviable position of having to choose between their queen and their commander.”

“You are their commander.”

“Yes, well, as you may have noticed, not everyone here considers the throne an appropriate piece of furniture for a woman.” She leaned against the window frame and folded her arms. “Some will support me, some will support Baz, and most won’t know what to do. My honor guard might have to protect me against a forced marriage to their commanding officer. Who do they obey? It would be a mess.”

“So you need bodyguards without that loyalty conflict.”

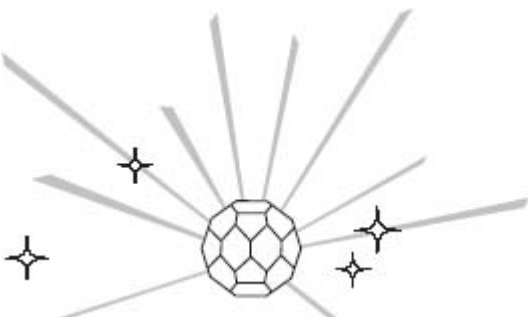
“Even better, guards with a vested interest in keeping me betrothed to Drummer Headwind.”

He exhaled. “I see.”

“Sphere-General Fieldson.” She lapsed into the more formal cadences she used in negotiations. “Goodman Headwind’s situation has given rise to concerns for his health, even his life. I offer him into your custody so that you may escort him back to Aronsdale. In return, you will leave your honor guard here, as hostages for the negotiations we wish to continue.” Hostages indeed. They would be protecting her from her own kin. “Taka Mal will provide you with officers for your return to Aronsdale.”

He inclined his head. “Your Majesty, I believe we may be able to find a common ground in this.”

“I am glad.” Jade felt as if she were falling off a cliff. This could backfire spectacularly if her new bodyguards had to fight to protect her. She sincerely hoped her truculent suitors, Baz and Ozar, had the sanity not to kill an honor guard of high-ranking officers from the Misted Cliffs and Harsdown—for that would be tantamount to an act of war against Cobalt the Dark.



Twenty-four days after Cobalt's army left the Misted Cliffs, it flowed around Alzire, the capital of Shazire, like a flood swirling around rocks. As the companies spread across meadows vibrant with summer grasses and wildflowers, the three thousand men Cobalt had left in Shazire joined them.

Alzire was one of the largest cities in the settled lands, after Quaaaz and the capital of Jazid. It boasted five thousand people. But even Alzire couldn't support such a big influx of warriors tramping about its streets and carousing in its taverns. The companies set up a rotating schedule, allowing smaller groups to visit the famous city, view its exquisite arches and bridges and soaring temples, and drink its ale. With the flood controlled, the army offered an economic cornucopia to the Alzire merchants, for the soldiers had wages to spend, and gold hexa-coins were worth just as much in Shazire as in the Misted Cliffs.

Mel rode into Alzire at Cobalt's side with Agate Cragland, Matthew and a retinue of officers. Cobalt sat on his huge black warhorse and wore his Chamberlight helmet. Its faceplate was open to let the sun strike his face, and its plume rippled. With his breastplate gleaming, his already broad shoulders widened even more by leather armor studded with metal, and his broadsword strapped across his back, he looked every inch the conquering warrior king.

Their horses clopped down cobblestone streets, and pedestrians jumped back. People watched from windows and roofs and alleys. Mel felt strange riding into the city this way. Her family had always maintained good relations with Prince Zerod, Shazire's former sovereign. At her urging, Cobalt had let Zerod and his family live, but he was keeping the queen and her young son under guard in their summer palace, to ensure Zerod's behavior. If nothing went wrong, he would soon let them rejoin the deposed prince in exile. Cobalt's year of truce with the atajazid had ended last spring, and all waited to see how he and Ozar would deal with each other.

Today Cobalt took Mel to the Hall of Oceans in the palace. He laid his hand on one of the two thrones inlaid with turquoise and mother-of-pearl. "It is yours."

Mel thought of Zerod. "I cannot sit there."

"You must, in spirit if not in body."

"I will govern here as best I can while you go to Taka Mal. But I won't take that throne."

Cobalt frowned. "It was yours long before Zerod's House stole it from the Misted Cliffs."

She blinked. "Mine?"

"Thousands of years ago, a Dawn Star Empress ruled these lands, including what we now call the Misted Cliffs, Harsdown, Aronsdale, Blueshire, and Shazire." Cobalt glared as if daring her to refute him. "It is the legend of your name—the field of stars left by the empress when she rose into the sky at her untimely death." He stopped, seeming disconcerted by his own words. "I would much rather my queen sit on a throne than turn into dots of light."

She smiled. "I promise not to turn into any dots."

"Good." He seemed satisfied, and she didn't think he even realized she was teasing him.

"Do you leave tomorrow morning?" she asked.

"Before dawn."

“I will miss you,” she said, which was true.

He hesitated. “Most people are glad when I am gone.”

She took his hand and held his knuckles against her cheek. “I would rather have you here.”

He drew her in, his arm around her waist, and pressed his lips against the top of her head. “Good.”

“I’ve been thinking,” she said, musing. “What shall we name our child?”

“Name?” He sounded confused again.

She held back her smile. “Most people have them.”

“I know that, Mel,” he growled. “But we don’t know if it is a boy or a girl.”

“It has to be one or the other.” It bemused her that he could be such a brilliant military commander, yet find the simple domestic aspects of life bewildering. “Cobalt for a boy.”

“Ach! No. He could do better.”

“I like it.”

“Well.” He sounded pleased.

“Maybe Chord for a girl.”

“What, likeRope?”

She smiled at his outraged tone. “I meant a chord in music. But I see your point.”

“Not Stonebreaker.” His voice darkened. “Never Stonebreaker.”

Mel had no argument with that. She could still see, in her mind, the dying king on his deathbed, whispering to his grandson. “Cobalt?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t let Stonebreaker follow you from his grave.”

His posture stiffened. “He follows me everywhere.”

“Whatever he said that night—” She paused, unsure how to continue.

For a while he was silent. Then he said, “Chamberlight raised me. Not Escar.”

“That’s true.” She wondered what he was about.

“My grandfather hated me.”



“Cobalt, no.”

“Perhaps it is because I am not a true heir.”

“Of course you are!” She drew back to look up at him. “Just look at any picture of Varqelle. You have the same profile, same cheekbones, same hair, same eyes.”

He paused, his gaze intent on her face. He started to speak, then hesitated. Finally he said, “People often remark on how much I resemble him.”

“Because you do.” Mel shook her head. “If Stonebreaker said you weren’t an Escar, he was lying. He tried to hurt you. To undermine your confidence.”

“Mel—” His face showed a vulnerability he let no one else see. “It is hard to hear my own voice instead of his.”

She brushed back a straggle of hair that had escaped his queue. Was this what had haunted him since Stonebreaker’s death? It was no wonder he brooded, if his grandfather had claimed he was a bastard with no right to any throne. Stonebreaker couldn’t really believe it; otherwise, he would never have made Cobalt his heir. She doubted he had mentioned Matthew, for she had seen no change in how Cobalt treated him, and she knew her husband too well to believe he would be so unaffected by such news. But for Stonebreaker to plant a seed of doubt that could grow and plague his successor: yes, it was a cruelty she could imagine from him.

“He has no power over you,” Mel said. “He is gone.”

“I try to remember that.” Cobalt seemed calmer. It was good. The more settled he felt, the less likely he was to let his torments drive him into battle. She had been fortunate in how he phrased his words: Perhaps it is because I am not a true heir. She could assure him without hesitation that he was of the House of Escar. He hadn’t posed the crucial question, the one that would have forced her to silence or false assurances.

He hadn’t asked if Varqelle was his father.

Breezes stirred Jade’s hair, which she wore down today. She loved these hidden gardens, accessible only through guarded doors. They attached to the most cloistered rooms in the palace, the Sunset Suite, a place of gold and rubies, and exquisite landscapes painted on the walls. Her mother had lived in seclusion here during her marriage. Jade’s ginger-maids kept these rooms spotless and gleaming, but they had been empty for years, since her mother’s death. Empty, that was, until she gave them to Drummer.

Today she walked with him among a profusion of sun-snap bushes sculpted to resemble goldwings. Their scent gave the air a sweet fragrance with a dash of spice. The sunlight made his curls shimmer, and his face had regained its healthy glow.

“Sooner or later,” she said, “we will have to admit you are well enough to travel.”

“Later, I hope.” He strummed his glittar, and its notes sparkled like drops of water flying up from a waterfall. Jade wished he could stay here forever. Supposedly he was convalescing. She had to sneak in to see him, but fortunately no one else could come here. After a grueling session with the envoy

negotiators, she had “reluctantly” agreed to let Harsdown and Chamberlight men guard this suite rather than her own officers. So none of her own people saw her visits. She and Fieldson were playing a dangerous game; if anyone found out he was helping her, the situation could explode with accusations of treason.

Jade knew the time had come for Drummer to leave. These past twenty days had been idyllic, a happier interlude than she could ever remember. If he left, she feared she might never see him again, that their plans would fall apart and violence would inflame the settled lands. If she married Ozar, she might become an empress, but she would rather have Drummer, happiness and peace.

He drew her over to a bench under a trellis heavy with yellow and red lilies. A vine-draped wall behind them curved around the bench, creating a living alcove. Within it, a fountain shaped like a lily bubbled with water.

“I love it here,” he said as they sat on the bench.

Jade slid her fingers into his hair, which brushed his collar in an unruly mop. She hadn’t been this relaxed since—well, since she didn’t know when.

He caught her hand and planted a kiss in her palm. Then he settled the glittar in his lap and braced it against his chest. “I wrote you a song,” he said. “But I won’t sing it unless you promise not to make fun of my poetry.”

“I’ll try not to misbehave.” In truth, she loved listening to him sing. It was almost as much fun teasing him, though.

His grin flashed. “I didn’t say you had to behave.” His fingers danced across the glittar strings and a trill of notes filled the air. He warmed up with a melody of nonsense syllables. He could sing both baritone and tenor, though he seemed most comfortable as a tenor. He slid into a song with a haunting, chantlike quality:

Opal stone, moonstone,

Jewel of the night,

Glowing bone, rune stone,

Cruel inner light.

That speaks of darkness,

And never of you.

Opal stone, fire stone!

Jewel of the flame,  
Never lone, dear stone,  
Mine heart you can claim.

I long for your kiss,  
Forever with you.

On the last word, he hit a high note and held it beautifully. Then he let it fade into the burble of the fountain. Jade didn't realize they were leaning closer until he brushed his lips across hers. Closing her eyes, she molded against him and her mouth softened. He sighed as he kissed her, and he ran his fingers over the glittar. He was touching the strings, not her, but it was as erotic as if he were strumming her body.

Finally he set down the harp and pulled her close against him. Times like this with Drummer were the only instances in her life when she let herself be soft. He was the first suitor she had trusted with her vulnerability, perhaps because his was as deep as hers. He seemed defenseless compared to the other men in her life, and it made her want to protect him with a visceral fierceness. Was this what her father had felt with her mother, why he locked her away and let so few people see her? Perhaps Jade had inherited more than his throne and his wild dark eyes.

After a while, Jade laid her head on his shoulder and stared out at the gardens beyond their bower.

"I wish I didn't have to go," Drummer said.

"I also." At least when he reached Suncroft, he and Fieldson would take her proposal to King Jarid. "If we receive the response we hope for from Jarid, I can announce the betrothal."

"He better agree," Drummer said.

"Fieldson thinks he will."

He drew back, and she straightened up to look at him. "I will memorize your face," he said. "Everything about you. The way you talk. And laugh." His wicked grin sparked. "The way you growl and stalk when you don't get your way."

She glared at him. "I never growl and stalk."

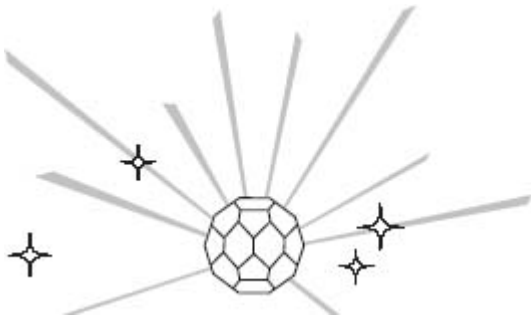
"You do." He kissed her again. "I've never met anyone with such passion, Jade. I love it."

Her breath went still inside of her. "You do?"

For a moment he didn't seem to understand her reaction. Then his voice softened. "I do, beautiful queen. All of you."

She traced her fingers along his lips. “And I you.”

He held her close and the day was sharp and clear. Yet it also felt like a dream that would fade just as the last note of his song had disappeared from her garden.



17

### The Grain Cart

The Chamberlight forces were half-a-day's ride from the Jazid border when Cobalt's scout rode to him with the news: The atajazid had gathered his own army and was on the move within Jazid. It didn't surprise Cobalt. If someone brought an army to his borders, he would meet them with his forces even if both sides professed no hostile intent. The Misted Cliffs had an advantage; its borders were a wall of cliffs to the east, the Escar Mountains in the north, and the Blue Ocean to the south and west. It made the country relatively impregnable compared to his adversaries.

Potential adversaries, he reminded himself.

The land gradually became more arid. Although they passed patches of greenery around small lakes or along rivers, lush Shazire was giving way to harsher terrain. It was a land of wild beauty, of deserts and needled peaks interspersed with valleys that nurtured the increasingly rare oases.

By the time the sunset coalesced on the horizon, the forward ranks of Cobalt's army were massing on the Jazid border. He had brought six companies: Carnelian, Alexandrite, Aquamarine and Iolite on foot, and Tanzanite and Sapphire on horseback. Although the cavalry could travel faster, the horses needed rest more often, so they didn't arrive much ahead of the troops. They spent the evening gathering in a plain of rock slabs and patches of meadow.

He rode up on a spiky knoll where he could view his army spread all around. Beyond them, the shadowy lands across the border were a blur. He put on his spectacles and peered east. The distant campfires of the Jazidian army flared in the foothills of the Jagged Teeth Mountains, and the peaks above them jabbed the purple sky.

Agate Cragland rode up alongside him and indicated Ozar's army. "My scouts estimate they are four and a half thousand."

"We underestimated their numbers." Cobalt scrutinized the distant campfires, as if he could decode their secrets. "I must send an envoy to Ozar."

"A wise precaution."

“If he doesn’t kill the envoy,” Cobalt said.

Agate glanced sharply at him. “You have reason to believe he would commit such an act?”

In truth, Cobalt had heard of no such dishonor from the House of Onyx. But a dark history surrounded the atajazids. They had never been known for their adherence to codes of war, nor had they ever fully shed their reputation for the barbarism that had flourished in ancient times. They no longer committed atrocities, at least none they let be known, but in recent times, no hostile conflicts had offered them the opportunity, either.

“No specific reason,” Cobalt admitted. “But the House of Onyx has a brutal history.”

Agate regarded him curiously. “Dancer tells me that you’ve studied military history for decades.”

“A bit.” Cobalt started to assume the nonchalance he had always adopted with Stonebreaker, who ridiculed anything Cobalt valued. Then he remembered Stonebreaker was gone. After a pause, he said, “I read it all the time, actually.”

“It is good for a leader to know such chronicles.”

The comment startled Cobalt. He hadn’t thought Agate viewed him as much of a leader. The older man had said nothing when Cobalt became a general at the young age of thirty-three. Stonebreaker gave him the title just before Cobalt led his men to free Varqelle. The king had never made it a secret that he promoted his grandson for heredity rather than merit. Cobalt could never claim he earned his rank. No other general commented, of course, but Cobalt had assumed they felt it was unearned. His grandfather had never hidden his dissatisfaction with his heir. Cobalt had spent his life trying to prove the king wrong, but he could have conquered the world and it wouldn’t have satisfied Stonebreaker. The damn old man could say nothing more on his deathbed than to swear Cobalt was a bastard who deserved no title at all, let alone the Sapphire Throne.

Cobalt raged inside at his tormentor, who blighted his life even from the grave. He could never tune out his grandfather’s voice; he would hear Stonebreaker until the day he died.

He had never told his grandfather about his fascination with history. Cobalt had learned a great deal about Shazire, once a part of the Misted Cliffs. He had read widely about Taka Mal and Jazid, contrasting their campaigns to the more conservative Chamberlight approach. It had helped him envision how Shazire might have changed since Jazid ripped it free of the Misted Cliffs.

The war two centuries ago between the Misted Cliffs and Taka Mal had ended with no clear winner. Most historical accounts credited victory to Jazid and Taka Mal, which together had wrested land from the Misted Cliffs. The conflict had depleted them, though, and they couldn’t hold their new acquisitions. The provinces soon became independent. The larger turned into Shazire and took many influences from Jazid. The smaller named itself Blueshire, after the meadows it shared with Aronsdale, and became like a younger sibling to that pastoral country.

Cobalt’s familiarity with the complex histories of Shazire and Blueshire allowed him to see how they might react to changes. Establishing a government wasn’t his forte, but Mel was good at it and she knew Shazire. If he hadn’t needed her in the Misted Cliffs, he would have appointed her governor of Shazire.

Cobalt smiled. He should put Mel on the Sapphire Throne. She could run things and he could stay with the army. She wouldn’t approve of his campaigns, though, and dealing with her displeasure was more

daunting than ten thousand Jazidian warriors.

In the past, Cobalt had taken for granted the constraints on the women in his life. They went veiled. Their men owned them. Many lived in seclusion. He knew women in other countries enjoyed more freedoms, but he had never thought much about it. That changed with his marriage. Even before he knew Mel, though, he had thought Stonebreaker was mistaken to deny Dancer the Sapphire Throne. Such a waste. She had far more talent for governance than her son. She would make a good Chamberlight queen.

Taka Mal had a history of queens who ruled. For all that the culture restricted women, it was a hotbed of progressive ideas compared to the Misted Cliffs. That was even truer of Harsdown. Aronsdale was in between; although women had freedom in rural areas, they had no history of power on the throne. Or maybe he should think of the “crown”; Aronsdale was the only country that gave its ruler a fancy headpiece. Cobalt didn’t see the point, but the practice had a long history. He had once researched it. He traced the custom to ships that had come to the Misted Cliffs long ago from across the Blue Ocean, but he couldn’t find much about them, and few visited now. In fact, he couldn’t think of any in his lifetime. These days, any ship that sailed off into the Blue Ocean ended up coming back to the shore, though the sailors swore they never changed direction. Either that, or the ship vanished.

According to legend, an ancient mage had cursed the settled lands: Each century they would become more hidden from the world, until one day they would be forever cut off, with no link to other lands except for globes of the world that were centuries out of date. Cobalt found it unlikely. He was willing to admit mages existed, given that he had married one, but he had never known Mel to do harm with her spells, except to herself.

Mage queen. He didn’t understand it, but his formidable wife clearly wielded some sort of power. He wished his mother had a similar focus in her life. She could have done so much given even half the chances Stonebreaker had denied her.

“Agate,” Cobalt said. “You’ve known my mother a long time?”

The general shifted his attention from the army below to Cobalt. “Since she was born. I was eleven, then.”

“What do you think she would say if I asked her to govern Shazire?”

He looked perplexed. “But she is a woman.”

Cobalt smiled slightly. “Yes, I noticed.”

“It seems...atypical.”

“Why? She is in charge of the Misted Cliffs.”

“Temporarily.”

“Shazire has had queens on the throne.” Cobalt suspected the people would be more willing to accept Dancer than him. “They called Zerod a prince instead of a king because he married into the royal family. He only became the ruler after the death of the previous king, his wife’s brother.”

“Buthe took the throne,” Agate said. “Not his wife.”

“Even so.” The more Cobalt thought about it, the more he liked the idea. Dancer could govern both Shazire and Blueshire, which might stop Mel from this confounding idea of hers to put the deposed king of Blueshire back on his throne.

“Do you think she would do a good job?” Cobalt asked.

“I don’t know.” After a moment, Agate said, “I don’t think Her Majesty would do a bad job.”

He appreciated the respect Agate showed by using Dancer’s former title, from when she was the queen of Harsdown.

“I get my interest in history from her,” Cobalt said.

“She is intelligent.”

“She has more patience than I do.”

Agate wisely refrained from any response. Cobalt knew his temper and dark moods were often cause for comment among his men.

They remained on the knoll while the sky turned from purple to black, with the moon half-hidden behind streamers of cloud. This felt right, a place he belonged. And yet...Cobalt found himself thinking of home. He missed Mel. When she came with him, he didn’t miss her, which was good. He could concentrate better. But then he worried for her safety, and now he thought a lot about the baby. This marriage business was a distraction, but such a sweet preoccupation. More and more lately, he wanted to concern himself with matters of state and fatherhood. When they reached Taka Mal, he would sign a treaty with Queen Vizarana and the Atajazid D’az Ozar. His army would be a good bargaining tool. But Mel was right: He had done enough. He had healed the two-centuries-old wound that had sundered the Misted Cliffs. His world was whole.

It was time to go home.

Across the border, in Jazid, the fires of the Jazid army burned orange, harsh in the night.

In Shazire, they celebrated the Citrine Festival with bonfires, honoring the saint who added brightness to the land. The festivities heralded the summer and their hope for a good year.

Mel hurried to her palace suite. She had been busy all day, and people had kept coming to her about the festival events, especially Tadimaja Pickaxe. He was the aide from Zerod’s staff Cobalt had kept, because Mel had trusted Tadimaja all her life. He knew the palace and its workings, which today unfortunately meant he was continually reminding her of chores she hadn’t realized needed to be done. Now night had fallen and she wasn’t ready to appear at the ceremony in the Alzire Plaza. She was expected to wear a yellow gown and dress her hair in citrine gems. If she missed the opening or arrived in inappropriate clothes, it would be taken as an insult by the people here. She had a chance to ease their hostility toward Cobalt, and she didn’t want to bungle matters.

Unrest had simmered in Shazire since the invasion, especially in the capital. In the ten days she had been here, Mel had made inroads in setting a better image for the Chamberlight presence. It had to do with

diplomacy, kindness, and attention to detail, and it didn't hurt that she had a more appealing demeanor than her husband. She didn't want to hamper those efforts by appearing to scorn a celebration of such local importance.

Mel sped around the corner, into view of the royal suite—and groaned. Tadamaja was waiting outside the large double doors.

She slowed down. “Tadi, surely it can wait.”

“I am terribly sorry, Your Majesty.” He bowed nervously. “It’s about the trainers for the horse show. We have to sign the scrolls for their payment.”

“We can’t. They have the scrolls. And they aren’t here. They went to the plaza for the ceremony.”

Tadamaja winced, his sharp features scrunching up. “Their tender is down at the stables. With the scrolls. He insists he will take their horses and leave if he doesn’t receive your seal. He thinks my staff is trying to cheat him.” He looked mortified. “I truly am sorry. It is my fault. I mixed up their contract with one for the fire jugglers.”

Mel inwardly swore. She couldn’t go to the ceremony dressed as she was now, in a flimsy tunic and harem pants. The clothes were comfortable but hardly appropriate for tonight’s pageantry. “Can you get the scrolls while I’m changing? One of my maids can bring them in. I’ll add the Chamberlight seal and you can take them back to Goodman Barker.”

Lines of concern creased his face. “Yes, of course.”

Mel recognized his expression. “Why won’t that work?” She felt seconds drizzling away like sand through her fingers.

His worry lines deepened. “It’s just…”

“Tadi, please. I must hurry.”

“Barker doesn’t trust you. If you don’t come, he may leave.”

The last thing she needed were rumors she had cheated Barker. She pushed back her tousled hair. “All right. Get my bodyguards and meet me here in five minutes. Let Clerk Abacus know I can’t meet him on my way to the plaza.”

He hesitated. “Yes. Of course.”

Damn! She knew that look. “Tadi, what is it?”

“Your bodyguards went to the main entrance to meet you.”

Why the blazes had they gone there? “We were supposed to meet in the Hall of Oceans.”

“I’m sorry.” He sounded miserable.

Mel made her decision. “It will take too long to reach the stables. If Barker leaves, we’ll have to live with it.”



He cleared his throat, hesitated, then said, "Of course."

Mel sighed. "But?"

"I am but a simple servant, Your Majesty."

"Tadi, just tell me."

"Barker will spread tales of deceit."

She knew he was right. But worse tales would spread if she spoiled tonight's ceremony. "I don't have time."

His face brightened. "I know hidden ways through the palace. Very fast. We will get there in no time."

"Hidden passages?"

He gave her a conspiratorial smile. "Keeping on a few of the old guards has its advantages."

"So it does." Maybe she could make it after all. And she was curious about these hidden ways. "Show me."

"Right away!"

As they hurried along the corridor, she said, "Do you remember when I came here with my parents, when I was six? I always asked you about secret tunnels. You never breathed a word." She pretended to scowl. "Shame on you."

"Now you know," he offered, smiling.

They ended up in a secluded alcove shaped like a royal-bud blossom. Tadimaja traced his fingers along a molding at waist height. Mel struggled for patience while he pressed and pushed various ridges. "Tadi, it's taking too long—"

"I've got it!" He tapped a molding, and pins clinked inside the wall. With a grunt, he pushed. A slab moved inward with the scrape of stone on stone, then swung aside to reveal a dark space.

"There!" He turned to her. "This will take us to the yard behind the stables."

"We need a light." She had no shapes to make spells.

"I know the way. Just hold my belt and follow me."

This was making her uneasy. "I don't think so."

"Your Majesty—"

"No. Please give my regrets to Goodman Barker." Mel spun around. If she ran fast enough back to her suite—

A blow slammed her head. She staggered and barely stopped her fall. Twisting around, she raised her arms in a defensive move. Tadamaja's face contorted in a snarl Mel had never seen from him before. Behind him, a lanky man with sun-weathered skin was leaving the passage: Barker, the master horse trainer. Motion blurred in her side vision, and she jerked her elbow up barely in time to block the lunge of a wiry man, another of the trainers, as he came at her from the left. Her head was spinning from the first blow, and the slippery silk of her clothes hampered her. Harem pants were made for lounging, not fighting.

Mel kicked up her leg and caught Barker in the side, knocking him into the passageway. As Tadamaja backed up, Barker yelled at him, and the wiry man struck Mel, knocking her forward. Tadamaja tried to grab her arm, but Mel turned the move against him. She caught him on her hip and rolled him over her shoulder, then brought him down hard onto his back.

Barker aimed a blow at Mel's head. As she blocked it, the wiry trainer grabbed her from behind. Tadamaja was struggling to his feet, and Barker caught her arm. Mel could hold her own against one of them, maybe two, but three? They had a great deal of strength, and the wiry one moved even faster than Mel, negating her biggest advantage over fighters who outweighed her in muscle.

Someone wrested her wrists behind her back. As he bound her, Mel shouted for help. Normally people would be in the halls: her guards, a maid or butler, a member of her staff. Tonight no one answered. Tadamaja could have arranged to have the halls cleared, but she shouted again anyway. Surely someone would hear.

Barker shoved a cloth in her mouth and Mel spit it out. Moving fast, she kicked him in the stomach. He gasped and doubled over, his face knotted. Tadamaja—Tadi, her lifelong friend—slapped her hard across the face. Her head snapped back against the man who had bound her wrists. Before she could recover, Tadamaja forced the wad back into her mouth and tied a gag around her head to hold it. She felt as if she would choke. She struggled, but Barker had recovered enough to grab her legs. While she fought them, Tadamaja took off her sandals and Barker tied her ankles.

"Come on," Tadamaja whispered, urgent. "We have to go."

Barker grasped Mel by the waist and heaved her over his shoulder so her torso hung down his back and her legs down his front. Then he strode into the dark passageway. Mel yelled, but it only came out as a muffled grunt. She struggled furiously, pounding her feet against Barker's front. The trainer swore and hit her across the thighs.

Her other two attackers followed Barker, and Tadamaja closed the stone door. Then they were closed into the passage—and complete darkness. "Go straight ahead," Tadamaja said. "About fifty steps. Then the path forks. Go left."

Barker moved into the darkness, gripping Mel's legs.

"She fights like a man," the other trainer said.

"I warned you," Tadamaja told him.

Barker grunted. "Sure as hell doesn't look like a man." He moved his hand between her legs. Furious, Mel twisted hard and kicked his stomach.

Barker let out a stream of profanity that would have out-done any soldier in Cobalt's army. "Listen to

me, girl. Our employer wants you alive, and he'll pay more if we deliver you that way. But he can achieve his ends just as well if you're dead. You kick me one more time, and I'm going to put my hand over your nose and hold you down until you suffocate."

His employer? What maniac would pay these people to kidnap the wife of Cobalt the Dark? Surely they knew Cobalt would kill them. If this was an insurgency, she couldn't see what they hoped to accomplish. They had to know Cobalt would retaliate.

"She isn't to be touched," Tadimaja said.

"How am I supposed to carry her," Barker asked, "if I can't touch her?"

"You know what I mean," Tadimaja said.

"Why would you care?" the other trainer asked. "You're the one who betrayed her."

Tadimaja spoke with a hardness Mel had never heard him use before. "It is she who committed the betrayal. She rode in with that monster, cursed our warriors with her witch's light and took Prince Zerod's throne." Anger desiccated his voice. "She deserves whatever they do to her. But it is their decision. Not ours. They said she wasn't to be touched."

Nausea surged in Mel. She hadn't even thought Tadimaja was capable of violence. He knew her "witch's light" had stopped the Chamberlight army from massacring Shazire's warriors. He had never given any sign that he believed otherwise. He had wept with her after the battle.

"Fine," Barker muttered. "I won't touch her." Giving the lie to his words, he pushed his hand up her thigh. "But she shouldn't have kicked me."

Mel wanted to kick him again. She didn't doubt he would kill her, though, if she provoked him.

The other trainer spoke uneasily. "I hadn't realized she was so young. She can't be more than sixteen."

"Nineteen," Tadimaja said.

"It doesn't seem right. She's so, I don't know. Pretty."

Tadimaja made an incredulous noise. "That excuses their crimes, that she is young and beautiful?"

"I don't claim it does." The trainer paused. "In a way, it makes it worse. She is Cobalt Escar's greatest weapon, the lovely child-bride who never wanted to marry him. The sorceress who stopped the war. Everyone who sees her adores her. If she had gone to that festival tonight as their Citrine Queen, half of Alzire would have fallen in love with her."

"Escar uses her for his own ends." Tadimaja sounded as if he were gritting his teeth. "And she lets him."

Mel fought her fear. Before she had convinced Cobalt to keep Tadimaja at the palace, she had formed a mood spell for the aide. She had been certain his fidelity was genuine. Now she realized she had read too much into his responses, based on her knowledge of him. At one time, years ago, she had realized he was half in love with her. Had she unconsciously let that sway her into trusting him? Such a love could turn to hate with her return as the bride of a man Tadimaja saw as a despot. He had suppressed his reaction well, enough even to hide it from her spells. He knew her as well as she knew him; he had

known how to evoke her trust.

She had no shapes now to form any spells. They were meant to heal, to offer light and warmth, but they could be reversed. It wasn't just out of goodness that mages swore to do no harm. Whatever they did with spells, they experienced, too, to a lesser extent, but enough to matter. If they healed others, they felt better: if they injured others, they suffered.

Even so. Better to endure pain than die. She could reverse a blue spell. What about indigo? Such spells healed emotions. Would a reversal cause insanity? She had heard tales of a power beyond indigo. Violet. The power to save a life—or take it. She had no violet and she didn't know what to do with indigo, but she could wield blue. If she had a shape.

Barker carried her through the dark. The tunnel smelled of mold. She strained to remember everything she knew about the palace. The Taka Mal architects who built it had probably put in these passages. If Tadimaja were a Taka Mal spy, that might explain how he knew about them.

They finally halted, and it sounded as if Tadimaja were going through the involved process of opening another secret door. He knew these passages well indeed, to do this all in the dark.

Barker carried her out into the night and a cramped yard behind the stables. They hurried to the smallest stable. Inside, a solitary lamp lit the darkness, so dim she could barely make out three waiting merchants. They looked like grain sellers come for the festival market. Their cart was piled with sacks of feed and hitched to a team of two horses. They would blend in all too well with the torrents of people pouring through the city tonight.

Everyone moved fast. Barker heaved her off his shoulder and set her against the cart. He yanked the blue scarf off her head, and she gasped when he ripped out a long tendril of her hair. Then someone pulled a sack over her head and down to her feet. Before she could catch her breath, they hoisted her into the cart. The rough weave smelled of grain, and it scraped her face and stomach where her tunic pulled up. Panicked, she kicked hard, trying to get free. Someone tied the bottom of the sack, and then she was caught, lying on top of other bumpy sacks.

Something heavy landed beside her body. A second sack. A third thudded against her side. With horror, she realized they were covering her. With sacks on top of her, weighting her down, Mel screamed. Or tried. She barely made a sound. She couldn't breathe; she would die—

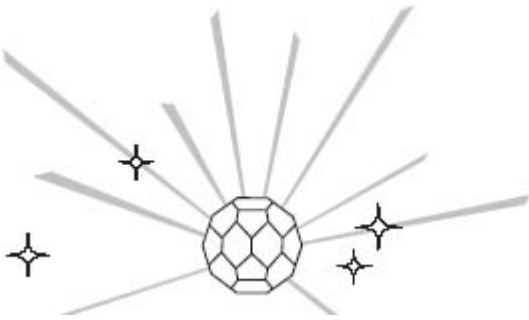
"Listen, Dawnfield queen." Barker's harsh voice came through the layers of grain and burlap. "Every one of these men lost someone he loved in the war. A son. A brother. A father. They all have good reason to wish your husband dead. It wouldn't take much for them to extend that to you. I suggest you be as still and as quiet as you know how. If you do, you might live."

Mel froze, breathing hard. She could survive this. She could manage. Schooling herself to calm, she repeated in her mind a nonsense chant from her childhood, over and over. Gradually her pulse slowed and her mind cleared.

Rustles came from somewhere. Then Tadimaja said, "Barker, go to the plaza. Say nothing about contracts." His voice faded as he moved away. "And you there, cut a pig for the blood. Leave her scarf and hair with the dagger."

The bags shifted as someone sat near Mel. She lay stiff and terrified as the cart creaked and rolled forward.

To where, she had no idea.



18

### Sunrise Child

Mel didn't realize she had fallen asleep until someone dragged the bag off the cart and jolted her awake. Her muscles protested with stabs of pain. Dim light came through the sack and enough of a chill to suggest they were outside at dawn or in an overcast day.

They untied the bottom of the bag and set her on her feet, holding her up. Someone pulled off the sack. She swayed, nauseous from the miserable ride. Sunrise hadn't yet touched the horizon, and predawn light softened the barren countryside. This had to be eastern Shazire; it was the only region of the country this empty and this harsh.

Her three captors all had the brown hair, stocky builds, and medium height common to Shazire farmers. The oldest wore a beard. One of the younger men had a bent gold hoop in his ear, and the other a thick belt with metal studs. For lack of any other names, she thought of them as Beard, Hoop, and Belt. She concentrated on Hoop's earring, but the shape was too distorted for a spell.

"All right," Beard said.

Mel tensed. All right what?

The other two seemed to know what he meant. They picked her up unceremoniously and sat her on the back of the cart. Then Beard leaned down and untied her ankles. Mel could barely feel her toes or move her legs, but at least they were free.

"We're going to eat." Beard straightened up. "I'll take off the gag, but if you scream I'll put it on again and you won't get food or water. Do you understand?"

Mel nodded, relieved they didn't intend to starve her. Hoop stepped closer and untied the cloth, then pulled the wad out of her mouth. She focused on his bent earring—and a spell stirred. Then he drew back and the spell faded.

"Better?" Beard asked. They were all watching her.

Mel tried to answer, but her mouth and throat were too dry. So she nodded.

Beard spoke uncomfortably. "I want you to know something. It is true, what Barker said, that we each

lost someone in the war. We have no wish to see your husband rule our country.” He paused. “But it is not true that we desire to kill you. Unless you force our hand, we will deliver you alive.”

“To who?” she rasped. “Where?”

“Can’t say,” Hoop told her.

“Taka Mal?” she asked. No one answered.

Beard indicated a campfire they had set up. “Over here.”

After spending a night tied up, Mel could barely move. Hoop lifted her from the cart and helped her over to the fire, putting his arm more tightly around her body than necessary. He sat her next to Beard, who stayed put, taking advantage of his seniority while Belt and Hoop cooked food in dented tin pots. Mel shivered in the chill morning. She had nothing to warm her except her thin pants and tunic, and she hurt everywhere. She could barely sit up. Until her body recovered, she needed to guard her strength, not only for herself, but for her child. She would do anything to protect that fragile life. Anything.

Mel had never used spells for harm, but she wouldn’t hesitate now. She needed a shape. She had never realized before how few perfect shapes existed in nature. Nothing in this broken landscape came close. For that matter, neither did the utensils or supplies of her captors.

Mel spoke to Beard. “Will you untie my wrists? I won’t fight.”

He jerked, startled from whatever thoughts preoccupied him. Then he fumbled with her wrists. It took him several moments to loosen the thongs, but finally her arms fell free. She was so relieved she didn’t even care when pain shot up them.

Belt brought her a cup of water. Her arms shook, and she had to hold the cup in both hands as she drained it. Hoop gave her a bowl of meal. Just looking at food nauseated her, but she forced herself to eat. The others sat around, chewing in silence. Belt stared at her avidly while he ate. He had a scar on his chin and another on the back of his hand.

Hoop suddenly said, “You married him for a treaty.”

“Do you mean Cobalt?” Mel asked.

“The king.” He spoke awkwardly. “You wanted to stop him from doing to your country what he did to ours.”

“Yes,” she said simply. It was true, after all.

“Do you hate him?” Hoop asked.

“No,” Mel said. It was none of their business.

“Pretty bride,” Belt muttered.

Hoop persisted. “His Majesty’s a lot older than you, eh?”

“Fifteen years.” Mel wished they would stop asking personal questions. She didn’t want to antagonize

them, though, especially not before she found a good shape. If she incited them with a spell but couldn't hold them off, they might change their minds about killing her.

Belt's eyes gleamed. "Gets young wife. Every night."

"Shut your mouth," Beard said. "She's your queen."

Anger flashed on Belt's face. "No more." He jerked his chin at Mel. "When she wed him the Dark, her kin swore never to attack his. They all of them stood by an' watched while her husband come and took our land."

Mel had no answer. Her father had faced a grim decision when Cobalt invaded Shazire. If Muller had sent forces to defend Shazire, it would have violated his treaty with Cobalt. Then nothing would have stopped Cobalt from invading Harsdown. In the end, Muller had made a choice that haunted him. He protected his country at the price of leaving Shazire undefended.

"I don't see her attacking you," Beard said crossly.

Belt regarded him sullenly. "She's a witch."

Hoop smirked. "So how come she don't make you a pig, eh?"

"Isaw her." Belt's face contorted. "At the Alzire fields. She walked with a sword of fire that reached into the sky and no one could touch her. If we don't put her back in that sack, she'll burn us alive."

Hoop shifted his weight. "You're crazy."

"You know what Pickaxe said." Belt was clenching his cup so hard the scar across his knuckles turned white. "Don't let her see or touch anything. It's the only way to stop her spells."

Mel shifted her weight uneasily. It was true, if she couldn't see or touch the shape, she couldn't do anything with it. She hadn't realized Tadimaja had figured that out. She had never told him.

"If I could make spells," Mel said, "I would. But I can't."

"Liar." Belt spat at the fire. "Witch."

Beard stood up, shaking out his clothes. "I don't know about hexes or witches. But we have to get moving."

Belt jumped to his feet. "Put 'er back in the sack."

"If you want her in," Beard said, "you put her there."

Belt sneered. "You're afraid of her."

"Maybe we better put her back," Hoop said.

"Please don't," Mel said, pulling herself to her feet. Her whole body protested. She didn't think she could bear an entire day in burlap. "I won't do anything."

"I have ether," Beard told her. "We were going to use it on you if we had trouble at the palace."

Her pulse stuttered. "I don't understand."

"It will knock you out," he said. "Then we won't have to cover you with the bag."

"You don't need to do that," Mel said quickly, afraid. "I won't make trouble."

A frown hardened his face. "Choose. The bag or the ether."

Mel didn't want to be unconscious. But she wanted even less to be bound and gagged and suffocating. Finally she said, "Ether."

Beard glanced at Hoop. "Go get it." Then he took Mel's arm and dragged her toward the cart. As Mel limped with him, she thought furiously, trying to see a way out of this.

At the cart, Beard put his hands on her waist to lift her up. Mel was about to push him away when his shirt shifted. She saw it then: he wore a talisman around his neck. A metal ring.

I get one chance. She could see Hoop and Belt coming back. Make it fast.

She regarded Beard with what she hoped was a helpless look. She didn't do helpless well, but she was scared enough to make it work. "I'm afraid."

"It shouldn't hurt you." He spoke gruffly. "I'll look after you while you sleep. No one will touch you."

She improvised frantically as she went along. "I don't have anything for good luck. I usually wear a charm around my neck." She never had in her life, but he wouldn't know that.

His gaze dropped to her chest. "You do?"

Mel wanted to sock him for staring at her breasts. "I'm afraid of bad luck."

Hoop came up to them, carrying a cloth that was soaked in some liquid. "You going to get us with bad luck?"

Beard shot him an irritated look. "Stop it."

"Sorceresses kill," he said.

"For saints' sake," Beard said. "She's not a sorceress."

"Please," Mel whispered, focusing on Beard.

"Pickaxe said not to let you see," Beard said gruffly.

"I don't need to see it," she said. That wasn't true for making a spell, but she had to say something to convince him. "I'm so scared." She added a catch to her voice. "I'll feel less afraid if I know it's there."

"You should be afraid of us," Belt said harshly.



Mel didn't like the way he was watching her, as if he enjoyed her terror.

"Don't got no luck charms," Hoop told her.

"I have a ring at home my mother gave me." Mel tried to sound as young as possible. "I always keep it close."

Beard made an exasperated noise. "Enough of this."

"I'm scared," Mel whispered.

"Hell and damnation." Beard yanked the cord over his head, pulling his ring out from under his shirt. "Here. This is all we got. Now be quiet." He dropped the cord around her neck and laid the ring on her chest, stroking her breasts in the process, which made her grit her teeth. Grasping the ring, she focused. A ragged spell formed—

Hoop slid his hand behind her head and plastered the wet cloth over her mouth and nose.

No! Mel tried to jerk away, but he held her head in place with the cloth over her face. Fumes saturated her...sickly sweet...her spell was dissolving...

And then her consciousness did as well.

Her Majesty's Army assembled in the Rocklands near the Saint Verdant River. The Citadel of the Dragon-Sun stood on Sharp Knife Mountain above them. Within the citadel, in the Narrow-Sun Room, Jade met at a circular table with all the commanders: her cousin, Baz Quaazero, General of the Taka Mal Army; Generals Spearcaster, Slate and Firaz of Taka Mal; Sphere-General Fieldson and Sphere-Colonel Arkandy Ravensford, formerly of Aronsdale and now from Harsdown; Penta-Major Jason Windcrier of Harsdown; and Colonel Leo Tumbler from the Misted Cliffs. And Drummer. The meeting was contentious and hot, and Jade liked none of what she heard. Her world seemed determined to implode.

"We're talking almost fourteenthousand men." Firaz was shouting at Fieldson. "Six thousand Chamberlight, more than four thousand Jazid, and three thousand Taka Mal. Onour borders. Blazing hell, man, it would be insane to take an envoy of thirty men out there."

"Thirty-one," Drummer said, including himself.

Fieldson met Firaz's glare with a steely gaze, his iron-clad calm a striking contrast to his fiery Taka Mal counterpart. "Those armies hulking at your door are why wemust leave." He motioned at Drummer. "This man is the reason we came. If I take him home, it defuses the threat."

"Then you admit Cobalt's army is a threat," Jade said tightly. She kept asking herself the same question: Had he known Escar was coming? He claimed not, but she saw no reason to believe him. She should never have trusted him.

Fieldson's answer was guarded. "Cobalt has concern for his wife's uncle."

"We have dealt with you in good faith," Spearcaster said, his craggy face furrowed with anger. "Yet

Cobalt brings an army.”

“And you brought the Jazid Army,” Leo Tumbler said.

“Ozar marches by his choice,” Jade said. “Not mine.” Her anger threatened to overtake her calm. What was Cobalt about, bringing his entire flaming army to meet a little envoy? If that didn’t qualify as a hostile act, she didn’t know what did.

General Slate practically snarled at Tumbler. “Cobalt marched up the Jazid border. If we took an army up your border, you expect me to believe you wouldn’t bring yours, too?”

Baz hit the table with his palm, and the strike reverberated in the hall, which had heated with sun and tempers. “Send the boy back. Let them take their chances.” He gave Drummer a scathing look. “You have been far too much trouble.”

Drummer met his gaze. “I never asked to ‘visit’ Taka Mal.”

“It’s too dangerous to send him back!” Firaz said. “The envoy will be traveling with our men. Sphere-General Fieldson is the only one in that party Cobalt might consider an ally, and given the strain between Harsdown and the Misted Cliffs, even that has doubt.”

“I’ll go with the envoy,” Tumbler said. “Cobalt trusts me.”

“But I don’t,” Jade said flatly. The last thing she needed was a Chamberlight officer taking Drummer to Cobalt.

“The way to Aronsdale is swarming with Chamberlight men,” Sphere-Colonel Ravensford said. “If Colonel Tumbler doesn’t go with the envoy, you’ve no chance of getting through.”

“It’s also swarming with Jazidians,” Slate countered. “If anything happens to the Headwind boy, it could infuriate Cobalt. Saints, man, it will look as if we are taunting him.”

“I’m twenty-eight,” Drummer said, exasperated. “Hardly a boy.”

Fieldson exhaled, and Jade could guess his thoughts. If they tried to send Drummer to Aronsdale, he could be killed or captured. If they didn’t send him, she couldn’t announce the betrothal. Without the betrothal, they couldn’t stop Cobalt from attacking Taka Mal. Jade didn’t want Drummer to go. She didn’t want to see his life endangered. She would die first. Unfortunately, she couldn’t wait with the betrothal, either.

Baz turned a hard stare on Jade. “What I want to know,” he said, each word slow and distinct, “is why you are having clandestine meetings with a Harsdown general.”

Jade blinked. “What?”

“You heard me.”

She frowned at her cousin. “I have no flaming idea what you’re talking about.” In her side vision, she saw Leo Tumbler turn red. She supposed in the Misted Cliffs they spoke with more restraint. Fieldson kept his face composed and slightly puzzled. Not only was he a strong commander, he was also a good actor.

Baz braced his palms on the table and leaned forward. "I heard it from your guards. You met with Fieldson in your study."

"Oh, that," Jade said, thinking fast. Damn Baz. He learned too much of what went on in this place. He couldn't know about Drummer, though, or he would never sit there even this calmly.

"Drummer had just woken up from his illness," Jade said. "I wanted the envoy to know."

"They said you talked for fifteen minutes," Baz challenged.

"Possibly. I didn't keep track." In an unfriendly voice, Jade added, "Perhaps you have better things to do with your time, cousin, than to spy on me."

Baz clenched his fist on the table. "And I would hope you had better things to do than socialize with enemy generals."

Fieldson spoke quietly. "General Quaaazera, I asked after Drummer." He was doing a superb job of portraying the carefully controlled ire of someone trying his utmost to show tact in the face of absurd suspicions. "We thought he was going to die."

Baz started to answer, then mercifully thought better of it. Drummer had nearly died trying to escape, and if Baz intended to push Fieldson, he would have to answer for that.

Baz sat back and crossed his arms. "What if Drummer stays here," he said to Fieldson, "and you go to Cobalt with a contingent of officers, one third Taka Mal, one third Harsdown, and one third Misted Cliffs."

Tumbler straightened up, and Jade could see he liked the idea. As the ranking Chamberlight officer, he could vouch for the envoy's safety better than anyone else in this explosive room. It was an excellent idea. Except it wouldn't work. The envoy had to talk to Jarid, not Cobalt. If Cobalt intended to invade Taka Mal, the last thing he would want was an alliance between the Houses of Quaaazera and Dawnfield. She could almost feel Sphere-General Fieldson searching for a plausible reason to resist the idea. He had told his Harsdown officers about the plan because they would be guarding Jade, but she doubted he had revealed anything to Tumbler.

"It just might work," General Slate said.

Jade almost groaned. Why did Slate, usually the quietest of her generals, have to choose this moment to speak? He was the one she could most rely on to keep an even temper, but at the moment that was no help.

"It's a stupid idea," Firaz stated. "What if some hothead attacks the envoy and murders Fieldson? Killing the commander of the Harsdown military is a hell of a lot worse than killing an itinerant minstrel who happens to be related to Cobalt's wife."

Drummer scowled at Firaz, and Jade wished her generals would show more tact. She could have hugged Firaz, though, for giving her an excuse to argue against sending the envoy to Cobalt.

"We have no wish for our honored guests to experience harm," Jade said. "The safety of Goodman Headwind and Sphere-General Fieldson must be our priority."

They all argued, of course. No one had a good plan. Listening to them, Jade knew what she had to do. She had hoped another possibility would present itself, but she still saw no choice. Finally she rose to her feet, and their debate trailed off. Aware of everyone watching, she went to the floor-to-ceiling window at the end of the hall. The gardens outside blazed with fire-lilies and sun-snaps that created the effect of a sunset.

Baz spoke behind her. "Jade?"

She turned around. "We have another matter to consider." She suddenly felt tired. So tired.

"Well, out with it," Firaz said.

Jade returned to the table and stood in front of her chair. She wished she could have seen just one female face.

"I haven't had my menses this month," she said.

They stared at her blankly, all these warlords from so many places. She couldn't look at Drummer.

"Your what?" Firaz said.

"Hermenses." Spearcaster scowled at him. "You know. When a woman bleeds."

Firaz turned red under his dark complexion. "What the hell kind of comment is that to make in the middle of a war council?"

"Firaz." Baz was staring at Jade. "Shut up, General."

"I'm never late," Jade added. This was excruciating.

They looked as if they had no idea what to say. Firaz wasn't the only one who seemed confused. But not Baz. Oh no, not Baz. His face hadn't gone red this time: It drained of color. He rose to his feet, his fists clenched. Then, incredibly, he turned to Fieldson and said, "You saints-damned bastard." Fieldson's mouth opened. "You think I'm the father?"

"Father?" Firaz demanded. "Whatfather?"

"For saints's sake," Jade said.

Everything happened too fast. Baz lunged around his chair and Fieldson leaped to his feet. When Baz swung his fist, Fieldson brought up his arms, but at twice Baz's age, he barely managed to block the blow, and its force drove him back. Arkandy Ravensford, Jason Windcrier, and Leo Tumbler surged in to defend Fieldson, and Firaz and Slate were on their way from around the table, ready to launch into the fray. Spearcaster made an exasperated noise, sat back in his seat, and crossed his arms.

"Stop it!" Jade shouted. "All of you!" Drummer was looking at her, but she couldn't meet his gaze. Not yet. Not now.

They all stopped, but no one looked at her. They were too busy glaring at one another. Fieldson's gray-eyed stare had gone so cold Jade wondered it didn't freeze her hotheaded cousin. Spearcaster was

still in his chair, shaking his head.

“Sit down,” Jade said sourly. “All of you.”

Fieldson turned to Jade and spoke with impeccable formality. “Your Royal Majesty, I apologize for the insult given to your name, to suggest I am the father of your child. I am flattered beyond belief that anyone would imagine you would bestow your interest upon my unworthy self, and I do hope the offense of that assumption has not gone beyond hope of repair.”

“I thank you for your gracious words,” Jade said. “You have given no offense.” She scowled at Baz. “I wish I could say the same for my relatives.”

“Vizarana, you go too far,” Baz told her.

“Will you all please sit the hell down?” Jade said.

Spearcaster snorted, and the visiting officers reddened. Jade suspected their war councils didn’t have this much excitement. No one was paying attention to Drummer, and she avoided his eyes.

They did all sit, though. The room simmered with hostility. Fieldson caught her eye, and though he gave no outward sign, she understood his message. They were there for her protection.

Jade spoke wearily. “General Fieldson is not the father.”

Spearcaster leaned one elbow on the arm of his chair. “Let me guess. You are twenty-three days late.”

A chill went up her back. How could he know? Mica, the midwife, had just told her this morning.

“Where the blazes do you get that number?” Firaz demanded.

Spearcaster continued to watch Jade. “A woman gets pregnant halfway through her cycle. Fifteen days. Thirty-nine minus fifteen is twenty-three. And thirty-nine days ago, the Atajazid D’az Ozar came here and proposed to our queen.”

Slate thumped the table. “No wonder he brought his army to our door. We must have the wedding immediately.”

Baz’s words exploded out before Slate finished. “Saints, Jade, I don’t believe you let him touch you. Not only was it a loss of honor, you also lost your most powerful bargaining point. Now you have to give him the beetling Topaz Throne.” He hit the arm of his chair. “The throne should stay with the House of Quazera. You and me.”

Jade hated discussing her private life this way, but she couldn’t put Baz off. She spoke with a gentleness few people ever saw from her. “Cousin, I love you like my life. But as my kin. To marry you would be like marrying my brother. I could not.”

“That may be.” He looked neither stunned nor upset by her words. “But it would have been better than seeing our House bow to Onyx. To get his help now, it must be on his terms.”

“Not necessarily,” Slate said. “She can negotiate. She carries his heir, after all.”

“Oh, stop, all of you,” Jade said. “It isn’t his damn heir. I never let Ozar touch me.”

Everyone blinked at her, even Fieldson, who did a remarkable job of looking puzzled, and Ravensford, who managed a reasonable facade of confusion. Jason Windcrier only looked uncomfortable, but as the lowest-ranked officer, he wasn’t getting much notice from the others.

Jade finally summoned the courage to look at Drummer. His expression melted her heart. He was radiant, his eyes full of warmth. One might have thought she had just given him the wealth of the eleven deserts instead of news that could bring his death in any number of violent ways.

“Hell’s fire,” Baz said, watching them. “Tell me that what I’m thinking is wrong.”

Slate spoke dourly. “Perhaps you might tell us what you’re thinking.”

Jade knew she had to prepare them before she revealed her explosive news. She sat down and spoke in formal tones. “The House of Dawnfield rules Aronsdale. They are bound by the treaty signed by Escar and Dawnfield. But if Cobalt conquers Taka Mal and Jazid, what will stop him from violating that treaty and attacking Aronsdale? Even the combined armies of Harsdown and Aronsdale couldn’t stand against him if he added our forces to his own.” From what her spies had told her, Jade thought only one thing could have stopped Cobalt the Dark, something forever impossible now—the words, Well done, my grandson.

“If the atajazid and I form a union,” Jade said, “then we might defeat Cobalt. Perhaps then we would turn on Aronsdale.”

Slate raised an eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware we were planning a campaign against Aronsdale.”

“If you were them,” Jade said, “what would you think?”

Fieldson spoke. “It has only been nineteen years since Varqelle invaded Aronsdale and tried to kill Jarid’s family. I doubt he is ready to form an alliance with Varqelle’s son.”

Baz was having trouble breathing. “Jade, you can’t do it.”

“Do what?” Firaz asked, irritated. “This is a war council of riddles.”

Baz never took his gaze off Jade. “If you try this, I will have my officers drag you to the temple and marry you myself.”

“I would take care,” Slate said, “before you pledge your officers to committing treason.”

“Hear her out first,” Baz said. “Then tell me that.”

Spearcaster focused intently on Jade. “You want an alliance with Aronsdale, is that it?”

Jade started to answer, but Slate cut her off. “Surely you can’t mean Prince Aron fathered your child. He hasn’t visited here in years.”

“Besides,” Leo Tumbler said, “he is only eighteen.”

Firaz snorted. “It’s no wonder all you people in the Misted Cliffs are so constipated, if you think

eighteen is too young for a man to want a woman.”

“General Firaz,” Jade said, exasperated. “Enough.” To all of them, she said, “I wasn’t referring to Jarid’s son Aron.” Just say it. But she couldn’t get the words out. So she took a deep breath, stood up, and walked to Drummer’s chair. He watched her with a luminous expression. She sat in the chair next to his and took his hand. Then she spoke softly. “I am sorry. I would have rather told you any way but this.”

His eyes were bright and wild with a happiness she had never felt in her life. “You couldn’t have given me a greater gift.”

Jade was aware of Fieldson on Drummer’s other side, of Ravensford beyond Fieldson, of Jason Windcrier on her left. She was surrounded by Harsdown officers. She couldn’t see their hands, which made her suspect they had snuck weapons into this meeting, perhaps daggers in case her hot-blooded generals blew up. Drummer held something, too, an odd metal cube.

The room was ominously quiet. Jade shifted her gaze to Baz. His eyes smoldered, and she thought they might catch fire.

“That minstrel is your child’s father?” Slate asked. He didn’t even disguise his bewilderment.

“Well, hell,” Firaz said. “Someone ought to just kill the boy now and get the agony over with.”

Jade answered coldly. “Firaz, that isn’t amusing.”

“Maybe he wasn’t joking.” Baz’s voice was deadly quiet.

“You cannot marry a commoner,” Slate told her. “Especially not one like him.”

“Like what?” Drummer asked. He was no longer smiling.

“You have yellow hair,” Firaz pointed out, as if this explained everything.

Baz focused on Fieldson. “Our queen,” he said, “appears to be surrounded by people who stand to gain should she marry a man of Aronsdale. Remarkable coincidence, that.” He considered Leo Tumbler. “Except you. I would imagine your commander, Cobalt Escar, would be highly interested to learn of this development.”

Tumbler kept his face neutral. “I cannot claim to know his Majesty’s thoughts.”

Slate pushed his hand across his graying hair. “Vizarana, this is...unprecedented.”

“True,” Jade said. “It’s also a good idea.”

“That remains to be seen,” Slate said.

“What remains?” Spearcaster asked. “I see no downside.”

Baz flushed an angry red. “I can’t think of anyone less appropriate to be the consort of the Topaz Queen.”

“And why is that?” Jade demanded. “Because he won’t try to replace me on the throne?”

Baz leaned forward. “That entertainer—” he waved his hand at Drummer “—is not good enough for you.”

“I may not be,” Drummer said, “but I’m the one she chose.”

“You bring nothing to the marriage,” Slate said. “No title, lands, wealth, or power. Nothing.”

“Oh, nothing much,” Spearcaster said drily. “Just a possible alliance that could stop Cobalt from attacking Taka Mal.”

Jade was glad one of them understood. “Yes. Exactly.”

“Flaming improper, if you ask me,” Firaz stated. “Besides, how do we know Dawnfield will agree? Someone has to go ask him.”

Spearcaster grimaced. “Sending the envoy to Aronsdale right now could be a disaster.”

“I’m willing to try,” Fieldson said.

As much as Jade wanted him to go, she couldn’t agree. “I thank you. But you cannot risk your life.” Getting Fieldson killed would land them in battle rather than in an alliance.

Jason Windcrier suddenly spoke up. “I’ll go.”

They all looked at the young man. Then Fieldson said, “The risk is the same to you as to the rest of us.”

“Sir, I’m only a low-ranked major. We can risk my loss. If I go alone at night, I’ve a chance of sneaking through.” Jason took a deep breath. “If I’m caught by Cobalt’s men—well, I’m native to Harsdown. His wife’s country. They would probably let me live.”

“Ozar’s men might catch you,” Jade said.

“I’m willing to risk it,” Jason replied.

“The Chamberlight queen may even be here,” Tumbler said. “She often travels with Cobalt’s army.”

Jade’s interest perked up. “Then it is true what they say? She is like a man?”

“She fights like a man,” Tumbler said. “Sure as blazes doesn’t look like one.”

Jade wanted to meet this queen who defied the strictures of the Misted Cliffs. “I shall appreciate being her kin.”

“Like hell,” Baz growled.

“Well and all right, let the major go,” Slate said. “Let us find out what Jarid Dawnfield has to say.”

Jade spoke with respect to Jason. “You have our gratitude.”

He awkwardly bent his head. “I will do my best.”



“It could be a while before he gets back.” Firaz peered at Jade. “How soon before, ah...” He cleared his throat.

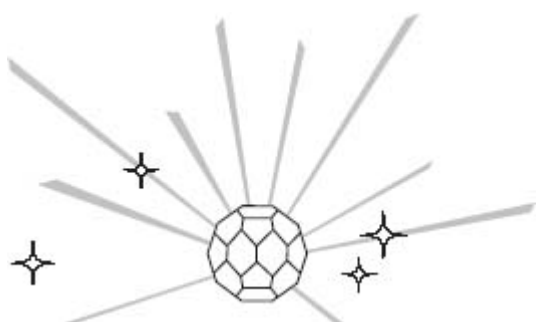
Jade held back her smile. Apparently Firaz didn’t mix well with women’s matters, even as a father of four. “I’ve a few months before I begin to show.”

“Ah.” He flushed. “That leaves a bit of leeway.”

It wasn’t much. They needed to know if Jarid was willing to make this pact. If he refused, and Cobalt attacked, she might have to accept Ozar’s proposal. Bah. She would rather suffer the raging hives. Ozar might refuse her, given her condition, but she doubted it. He coveted her throne too much. He would want her child gone, though. She suppressed a shudder. He might try to force a miscarriage. If she carried to term, she could send the child to live with Drummer in Aronsdale.

If Drummer survived this mess.

“Very well,” Jade said. “Let us see what King Jarid says.” She met Drummer’s radiant gaze and wished to the saints their prospects weren’t so bleak.



19

### The Onyx Chamber

Nothing lit the cell. It had to be completely enclosed, for even after her eyes adjusted to the dark, Mel could see nothing.

She couldn’t move. Her hands and ankles were chained to a distorted loop of metal rammed into the floor. She had spent hours kneeling by the wall with her arms pulled behind her back, semiconscious and nauseated. She couldn’t reach the ring that hung around her neck inside her tunic, couldn’t touch, feel, or see it—which meant no spells.

Mel had only blurred recollections of the trip here. They had drugged her with wet cloths over her nose and mouth. She drifted in and out of awareness, sick most of the time. True to his word, though, Beard kept the others from assaulting her.

She wasn’t certain how long the ride had lasted. Days, more than the five it would take to reach Jazid, maybe enough to reach Taka Mal, but not as far as Quaaz. She was either in western Jazid or else in the Rocklands of southern Taka Mal. It was certainly hot enough in this saints-forsaken place to be the desert. Sweat drenched her clothes and trickled down her face.

Mel had no idea of the time. She had awoken here, her mind fuzzed, her body aching. She was no longer gagged or blindfolded, but she could barely move and shouting had produced no results. Slumped against the wall, she prayed to Azure, the saint who brought healing, for the well-being of her child.

The scrape of stone came from nearby.

Lifting her head, she looked toward the sound. Another scrape came, louder this time, hard on the ears. It reminded her of Tadimaja opening secret doors in the Alzire Palace. A vertical line appeared in the darkness. It was only gray, but after the absolute black of the past hours, it seemed bright. The line widened until it became a tall, jagged opening.

It took Mel several moments to interpret the scene. A lopsided slab of rock had opened like a door about ten paces away, and two figures were entering, one holding a candle. They moved forward like wraiths. The one in front wore a black-and-white Scribe's robe, but he was otherwise gray, his hair, his eyebrows, even his essence, it seemed. His skeletal face had skin stretched over bone, and his eyes were hollows of shadow. He had a stooped posture, but even with his back bent, he was taller than most men. The sleeves of his robe draped from his wrists. He carried the candle, and it lit the bottom of his face as if he were a ghoul.

A second man walked behind him, larger and taller, even more threatening in his size. Where the first man was bent and gaunt, this one stood straight, with a warrior's carriage. Shadows hid his face, but the outline of a large nose showed, hooked and prominent. He was darkness and hard glints, from his black hair to his dark clothes studded with metal.

They brought shadows. The cell turned gray, its blurred outlines half-hidden, and murk gathered in the corners. The chamber wasn't normal. The walls met at odd angles and the ceiling sloped. Every surface was unrelieved black. None had the geometric designs so popular in other places. Several tables stood nearby, and none had a symmetrical cut. The shadowed objects on them had jagged outlines. Nothing in the room offered one of the most common features of human architecture—a pure shape.

This cell had been designed to hold a mage.

Whether the intent was deliberate or the architect had been crazy, Mel had no idea. But in centuries long past, the queens of Aronsdale had ridden as war mages and used their spells in ways of violence that the histories only hinted at. If an atajazid had wanted to imprison such mages, he would need such a cell.

The gray man set his candle on a table. The other man strode forward, his boot heels thudding on the stone floor. He stopped in front of Mel, and she looked up, trying to see his face. She felt ill, and she would have thrown up, but she hadn't eaten in so long, she had nothing to lose, and damned if she would give them the satisfaction of seeing her fear.

He spoke. "So it is Chime's little girl, grown up."

Melknew that voice. The gravelly rasp and low timbre were distinctive enough to recognize even after ten years.

"Ozar?" she asked.

He knelt down, coming out of the shadows. The Atajazid D'az Ozar had changed little in the past decade. His high cheekbones were more pronounced and new lines showed around his mouth, but his face had the same arrogantly chiseled look she remembered from ten years ago. They had met at the

Topaz Palace when he and her family were guests during a negotiation about export rights. He had frightened her then and he terrified her now.

“Mel Dawnfield.” His face showed no trace of emotion.

“Why have you brought me here?” Mel asked.

He stood again, his upper body receding into shadow. Then he turned to the other man, who waited by the table. “Put her up.”

What did that mean? Mel twisted her hands in the chains, but it did no good. Her efforts only sent pain shooting up her limbs.

As the older man came forward, he took a ring of keys from within his robe, which he wore over a tunic and trousers. The ring was deformed, squashed from a circle. Ozar understood better than the grain merchants how to neutralize her spells. He needed no blindfolds or gags: just keep her away from pure shapes.

The ring that Beard had given her was inside her tunic. She couldn’t see it, and she barely felt the metal against her chest. Closing her eyes, she tried to sense the shape and make a spell.

Nothing.

Think. She had to find a way to touch or see the ring. But if she did, she would have the advantage of surprise only once. Her first spell would have to defeat them. How? She could reverse a blue spell and cause injury, but that little ring wouldn’t provide enough power to do serious damage. It might only antagonize them.

The robed man knelt behind her and unlocked the manacles that held her ankles and wrists. Her arms were shaking. As soon as they fell free, before she could otherwise move, the gray man grabbed her upper arm and heaved her to her feet. She gasped as fire stabbed her shoulder and through her body.

“Why are you doing this?” she rasped. Surely they knew Cobalt would crush Jazid for this. Ozar was deliberately provoking him.

They dragged her into the center of the cell. As Ozar reached for a shadowed object hanging in the air above them, the gray man pulled her arms over her head. He held her hands with the palms outward, and Ozar snapped manacles around her wrists. The metal locked with a clink that echoed.

Mel hurt so much she sagged, hanging from the manacles. As they stepped back, she strained to see their faces in the shadows. The older man turned toward the wall, she couldn’t see what—

A harsh grating filled the room and Mel’s arms jerked. Terrified, she looked up. All she could see was the chain hanging out of the darkness. The grinding intensified, and with a wrench, the chain hoisted her into the air.

“No!” Mel gasped from the pain. She was in some madman’s hell. She had no dispute with Ozar. Neither did Cobalt. Why would Ozar take actions guaranteed to put him at war with them?

It was excruciating to be lifted by her arms after she had been chained for so long. She bit the inside of her cheeks to keep from screaming. When the gears stopped, she was hanging from the manacles by her

wrists. Ozar came back and stood considering her, his eyes level with hers, which meant her feet were dangling more than a hand's span off the floor.

"I do regret this," he said.

Mel swallowed past the dryness of her throat. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm afraid I have to hurt you."

"Why?"

"It doesn't matter. Not for you." He turned to the other man. "Leave evidence. Marks. Many bloodstains on her clothes."

"Why won't it matter to me?" Mel's anger and terror surged, for herself and for her unborn child. "Ozar, answer me!"

He looked her up and down, his gaze lingering on her body. "I hardly think you are in a position to give me orders."

Mel groaned from the pain. "At least tell me why."

Ozar spoke bluntly. "After we hurt you, I will enjoy you, leaving evidence of my acts. Then Shade will kill you." He shook his head. "I would have rather kept you for myself. A woman like you should be enjoyed, not executed in a war. Nevertheless, we will have a war, and you will be its first casualty."

"Why?" The horrific death he described petrified Mel. If he intended to inflame Cobalt, his method would work beyond question, better than he probably realized. When Cobalt and his army were done, Jazid would be a wasteland.

Mel thought of her child and an ancient rage stirred within her. It had come down through the Dawnfield line, through the millennia, from the misty age when a mage's battle cry inspired terror. The fury rose from a buried place. It piled up like the giant waves in tales told by aging mariners, the tsunamis that towered in monstrous cliffs of water. She wouldn't war for power, wealth or land—but she would protect her child even if it meant laying waste to a thousand kingdoms.

Ozar was watching her uneasily. Mel had no idea how she looked, and hanging from chains she was no threat. Yet he moved back from her.

"Do it," Ozar said.

Shade stepped into the light holding a long-handled whip. Mel inhaled sharply, and that was all she had time to do before he cracked the weapon. It struck her around the torso, and she screamed from the pain.

You will die, Mel thought as he drew back his arm. He struck her again and again and again, on her arms, her torso, her hips, her legs, and she screamed and screamed. It went on forever, and she thought surely she must die, because she could bear no more. But she didn't die, and the agony continued.

When Shade finally stopped, Mel was sobbing. Shade stood watching her as if he were hungry and she was feeding him.

Ozar spoke from the shadows. “I’ll need her clothes.”

Shade set the bloodied whip on a table. Then he came to Mel. When he was near enough, she spit on him. She was shaking, tears running down her face, but she would spit on him a thousand times.

He slapped her across the face.

Ozar’s voice rumbled in the darkness. “Just get her clothes. Hurry. I want my messenger to leave soon, and I want to be back with the army by tonight.”

Shade ripped off the bloodied scraps of her tunic and pants. His gaze was avid as he touched her body, and it nauseated Mel. But when he uncovered her torso, he freed the ring around her neck. She could see it by looking down. In that instant, she formed a spell. She had no time for finesse; she just blasted him. Flame leaped from the ring, and he gasped and stumbled back. His pain reverberated in Mel, but she hurt so much already, it hardly made a difference.

“Get the ring!” Ozar shouted.

Shade looked around, confused.

As Ozar strode forward, Mel hurled another burst of flame. She hit him with it, and his overshirt caught fire, a blaze that threw the cell into sharp relief. He kept coming even with his clothes burning. Grabbing the ring around her neck, he yanked and snapped the cord. With the ring hidden in his fist, her spell flared and died, leaving only his burning clothes.

Ozar tore off his overshirt and threw it to the ground, then stamped on the flames with his boots. Shade stood to the side, stooped and bent, staring at him.

“She is a witch,” Shade said. “Evil.”

Ozar swung around to him. “Never let her near a perfect shape. Never! Do you understand?”

Shade’s answer whispered in the cell. “Yes.”

Ozar took a deep breath and ground his boot in the last of the embers. Then he faced Mel, and his gaze burned. He held the bloodied remains of her clothes in one fist. “Shade,” he said, never taking his gaze off Mel. Malice crackled in his voice. “I’m going to take these rags to the messenger. While I’m gone, you have my leave to make her pay for her deeds in any way you wish.”

Shade bowed deeply. “Thank you.”

Ozar spun around and strode into the tunnel. His clothes blended into the darkness until nothing showed. His footsteps faded to silence. Shade wet his lips, watching Mel, and she wanted to scream her protest. Mage power roiled within her, but it had no outlet. They had built this cell with nothing a mage could use.

Except.

She was the child of an indigo sphere mage—one who could use only flawed shapes. He considered it an aberration, for it also distorted his spells. But his court scholars had found hints in the oldest histories of other Dawnfield mages who wielded such power—ancient, furious mages whose spells blazed.

War mages.

Shade raked Mel with his gaze, and she hated him for the lust in his hollowed eyes. He didn't pick up the whip. Instead he went to a table and selected another object. The blood drained from her face. She wouldn't survive if he used that on her the way he had wielded the whip. It was a heavy flail, a large metal ball covered by spikes. A chain connected the ball to the handle that Shade gripped in his fist. He raised the ball over his head and swung it in a circle, around and around, catching glints of candlelight, letting her see what he intended.

If he meant to terrify her, he was succeeding. But Mel saw what he didn't. A sphere. A misshapen sphere. The highest known shape, yet of no use to a mage because spikes deformed it.

But she was also her father's daughter.

Mel's fury built. Higher, higher, like a wave rushing toward the shore, the ancient power rose. Her spell grabbed the imperfect ball—and slipped. Shade swung the gruesome weapon toward her, and Mel reached —

Her spell caught the spikes.

Power exploded out of Mel in a burst of violet light so bright it blinded her. Unlike with perfect shapes, this spell didn't hurt. It blazed through her as if she were a crucible for its terrible force.

A scream cut the air, not from her, from someone else, high and terrified. A thunderous crack shook the cell, and debris pelted her body. She dropped abruptly and landed hard on her knees. Her manacled hands slammed down in front of her. Mel went rigid, terrified the collapsing cell would crush her beneath tons of stone.

The violet light faded. Mel knelt in the dark while pieces of stone clattered around her. A shard of rock bounced off her cheek. Then all was still and dark. She choked in a breath. She couldn't think about what had happened—what she had done. Not yet. Not until her baby was safe.

Feeling around, she realized she was kneeling in debris. She edged through the wreckage toward Shade. It took only moments to find his body. He had no pulse. As far as she could tell, nothing had hit him, but he was very, very dead.

Mel started to shake. Violet. Violet. It was a legend, the power to heal mortal wounds, to pull back the dying. To give life.

And to take it.

Tears slid down Mel's cheeks. Her body had gone numb. She no longer felt the welts and gashes. Later sensation would return, and with it the full knowledge of what she had done. Now she couldn't let herself think. She searched Shade's body and found his squashed key ring. She tried to make a spell of light, but the ring was too bent and the spell slipped off it. She pushed and pulled, straining the metal. It still wasn't a true circle, but better—

Her spell caught on the ring and light flared. With her arms trembling, she lifted them so she could see the manacles on her wrists. Maneuvering Shade's keys into the lock with her palms facing outward was impossible. She rotated her wrists, gritting her teeth as the metal scraped her skin, until she could get in a

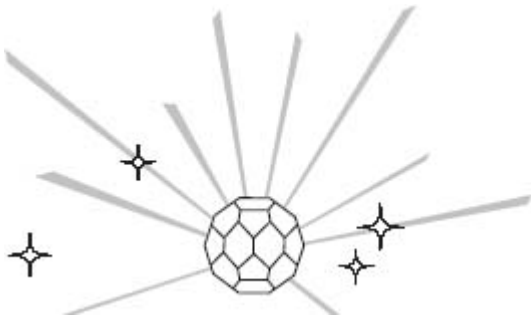
key. The first one didn't work, nor the second. She could almost feel the seconds rattling by; every moment brought her closer to discovery. This torture chamber was deep in the walls, probably so screams from inside couldn't be heard outside. That might have covered the noise of the cell's destruction, but Ozar would come back.

The fifth key unlocked the manacles, and Mel threw them on the ground. If she found a better shape than the key ring, she would try healing her injuries, but she didn't dare with one this deformed; her distorted spell might hurt her or her child.

She forced herself to take Shade's clothes. They were too big, but the trousers had a drawstring she pulled tight around her waist, and she rolled up the legs and the sleeves. She gave up on the boots. She took the spiked ball and stood over Shade, gripping the handle, the weapon hanging by its chain.

"That was for my baby," she said.

Then she left the cell and its destruction, taking the weapon, her mage power—and her rage.



20

### Blue Silk

The knock came in the evening. Jade was in the Starflower Parlor of her suite. As soon as she heard the knock, she lifted a vase out of the niche where it sat in a starflower depression. She pressed the petals of the flower in a pattern only she knew, and a narrow section of the wall swung open. Drummer stood framed in the opening, a candle in his hand and his grin audacious, as if he had personally built the secret tunnel.

Jade pulled him into her parlor. "Did you have any trouble?"

"None at all." He clunked his candle on the table and drew her into a kiss, deep and warm and hungry.

After a while, when they separated, she laughed and thumped him on the chest. "Light of the evening to you, too."

"I can't believe you told them today." His smile turned into a grimace. "Baz is going to roast me over a fire."

"He has to get you first."

He spoke intently. "Spearcaster and Fieldson came to see me. They want to talk to you. They will return later tonight. They don't think we can make it until Windcrier returns from Aronsdale."

She snorted. "So they are sneaking around to see you?"

He took a breath. "They want us to marry tonight."

"What?" This didn't sound like those two generals, who were among the most cautious of the whole group. "Why?"

Sweat gathered on his forehead. "Once we're married, your army is sworn to protect me as well as you. Assassinating the prince consort is far different than killing a minstrel who dishonored the queen. And if anything does happen to me after we're married, our child will be your legitimate heir."

It made sense, but that only made her more wary. "Why did they go to you instead of to me with this idea?"

"Baz is having our suites watched. Yours more than mine."

"They told you this?"

"Yes."

She crossed her arms. "Why should we believe them?"

"Why would they bother to lie? It's not as if I have any power here."

Jade sighed. "Because, love, everyone knows you are naive and inexperienced. They asked if you had a way to get to me, didn't they? And they wanted you to show them, yes?"

"Yes to the first. No to the second. Jade, listen. I can tell when people are lying." He folded his hand around a pendant he wore. "I'm good at reading moods."

Jade took his hand and opened it so she could see the pendant. It was the gold cube he had been holding this afternoon.

"What is this?" she asked. "A talisman?"

"For luck."

"Is it?" She looked into his face. "I too am a good judge of when people tell the truth, Drummer. To survive, I had to learn well and learn fast."

"Why would I lie about a cube?"

She remembered when he had awoken from his sickness. "You once asked me for a shape, and I gave you my earring. You held it in your hand and made light." She rolled the cube in his fingers. "Is that why you have this, too?"

He hesitated. "I can do tricks with it."

Jade studied his face. She didn't think he was lying, exactly. He was an entertainer, and it made sense he would know flashy magic tricks. But something was wrong. Or maybe not wrong, but missing.



“I have a question,” she said.

“Which is?”

“You aren’t telling me something.” She let go of the cube and raised her hand when he started to protest. “Just tell me this. Is your secret a danger to us, our child, or Taka Mal?”

His posture relaxed. “No, insomuch as a person can answer that question. You’re the queen of Taka Mal. I can’t guarantee nothing I ever do, if I become your consort, will pose a danger. But to the best of my knowledge and intent, the answer is no.”

Jade had to decide: Either she trusted his word or she didn’t. Perhaps she was blinded by love, but she believed him. “So you think Fieldson and Spearcaster genuinely wish to see us married.”

“Yes.”

“What if King Jarid refuses the treaty?” Jade paced across the room. Only a few steps took her to the opposite wall. She turned to Drummer. He was watching her, his unruly hair tousled over his collar, his large blue eyes distracting. She couldn’t think straight when he looked at her like that.

“If I marry you and Aronsdale turns us down,” she said, “and then Cobalt attacks, we will have no ally. Cobalt will crush us.”

“You have Jazid,” he said.

“That alliance requires I marry Ozar.”

His face twisted. “You can’t marry that monster. He wants to hurt you.”

She spoke quietly. “I know.”

He looked as if he was going to explode. “Then how can you even consider it?”

She felt ill. “If the choice is subjugation of either myself or my country, it is no choice. I am a queen first, Drummer, and a woman second.”

He came over and grasped her shoulders. “He would be crazy not to ally with you if Cobalt attacks. He knows Cobalt will go after him next. I don’t believe Ozar would give up his own throne just because he can’t have yours.”

“You can never tell with Ozar.” She regarded him uneasily. “He may have another plan we know nothing about.”

“If we don’t do this now, I don’t believe we’ll get another chance. Too much is set against us.” He implored her with the unfair advantage of his eyes. “For the sake of our child. Even if Ozar has me killed so he can have you, I would die knowing my child’s heritage is protected. He can’t get rid of your heir.”

She touched his cheek. “He would try, love.”

“And if we weren’t married? What then?”

“It would be much worse,” she admitted. “The child would be the illegitimate offspring of a forbidden liaison rather than heir to the Topaz Throne.”

He waited, watching her face. She knew what she wanted. But what was best? No matter what they did, it could bring disaster. Nothing was certain—except how she felt about Drummer.

Jade took his hands and spoke softly, letting what she felt for him warm her voice. “Then let us marry. Tonight.”

Cobalt sat on Admiral, high on a ridge, and Matthew sat next to him on his gold stallion, Hawksparr. As the sun set behind them, their shadows stretched out and spilled over the edge of the ridge. A panorama spread all around them. To the southeast, the Jagged Teeth Mountains cut bleak silhouettes against the purpling sky. The starkly beautiful Rocklands of Taka Mal stretched east before him. The Pyramid Foothills of Aronsdale were behind them, mounded and rocky, but greening as one looked farther west.

Ozar’s army, over four thousand strong, had massed along Jazid’s northern border with Taka Mal and its western border with Aronsdale. Cobalt’s army was camped across from them, just within Aronsdale, and the Taka Mal forces had gathered along the Saint Verdant River, which all three armies were using for water. It was an untenable situation, almost fourteen thousand soldiers and another three thousand tenders, all living off land that would have trouble supporting one-third that population for any sustained time.

“Maybe I should send another envoy to Taka Mal,” Cobalt said.

Matthew frowned at him. “What was wrong with the one Sphere-General Fieldson took there?”

“If they could return to us, they would have done so.”

Matthew didn’t look convinced. “Samuel Fieldson is one of the highest-ranked generals alive. Maybe Queen Vizarana fears for his life.” He indicated the massed armies. “If I were queen of Taka Mal and I had all these people hulking at my door, I wouldn’t be sending an officer that valuable anywhere right now, either.”

Cobalt couldn’t help but smile. “If you were the queen of Taka Mal, Matthew, I do believe her suitors would be rather upset.”

The stable master laughed. “I imagine so.”

Cobalt’s smile faded. “She might be using caution. Or she might be holding the envoy hostage.” He studied the armies that stretched as far as he could see both south and east, until they became dark blurs. “I will give her one more day and then send another envoy.”

“You should see this.” Matthew’s voice had a strange sound.

“Hmm?” Cobalt glanced at him. Matthew had twisted around in his saddle to look behind them. Cobalt maneuvered Admiral around to face west. All he saw was the same Aronsdale landscape as always. In the distance, its misty green and blue hues promised a gentler land than this harsh landscape. A haze spread across the countryside, giving it a mystical quality. It was attractive, certainly, and he saw no

problem.

“What?” Cobalt asked.

Matthew gave him a strange look. “Your Majesty—”

Cobalt scowled at him. “You never call me that unless you plan on saying something I won’t like.”

“Maybe you should put on your glasses.”

So that was it. Reluctant, Cobalt took his spectacles out of the hidden pocket in his tunic. Settling them on his nose, he peered west. The misty blue resolved into ranks of men and horses extending across the land for many leagues.

“Oh,” Cobalt said. The Aronsdale army had arrived.

Matthew shifted uneasily in his saddle. “Jarid promised us safe passage.”

“They haven’t denied it,” Cobalt said, as much to convince himself as Matthew. “They’re coming to make sure we keep our battles out of their country.”

The older man gave him a dour look. “What battles?”

Cobalt was barely listening. With his glasses on, he could see the beauty of Aronsdale much better. “Now that,” he murmured, “is a country worth having.”

“Cobalt, for saints’ sake.”

He pulled his attention back to his scowling stable master. “I’m not going to invade Aronsdale. If Taka Mal gives back Drummer and Jazid minds its own business, I won’t attack anyone.”

“And if they don’t?”

“We will see.” Cobalt felt the thirst within him that nothing quenched. He had promised Mel to use restraint, not in so many words but in his silences, when she looked at him and believed he could be more than he thought possible, as a king, a father, and a husband. His wife wanted a man of peace. He would never be that. But today, he would try.

Hooves pounded on the path that led up the ridge. Admiral snorted, and Hawkspar stepped nervously. A lieutenant rode around a spur, a young fellow with his hair pulled into a queue. He came forward with caution. Cobalt had noticed that many of his officers approached him in such a manner. He didn’t put people at ease. Well, he was their commander. They weren’t supposed to be at ease. Oddly enough, they seemed to trust him anyway and follow him with loyalty, despite Stonebreaker’s years of scorn.

The youth saluted Cobalt, his fist against his rib cage. Cobalt returned the salute, curious as to what brought the lieutenant up here. “Do you have a message?” Cobalt asked.

“Not I, Your Majesty.” The youth motioned down the ridge. “A man rode here from Alzire. He says he must speak with you.”

Cobalt’s unease stirred. Mel was in Alzire. “Bring him up.”

“Yes, sir.” The lieutenant wheeled his horse around and took off down the slope.

“What do you suppose it is about?” Matthew asked.

“I’ve no idea.” Cobalt didn’t want to speak. He never did when he was on edge.

The lieutenant soon returned with another rider, a man Cobalt recognized from the Alzire Palace. What was his name? Abacus. He was a clerk who kept records, also a horseman who carried messages to other towns. Cobalt couldn’t imagine what brought him all the way out here, a journey of thirty days. His foreboding deepened.

Dust and dirt covered Abacus. His beard had grown out and his clothes were trail-worn. The pouch he wore strapped across his torso had frayed. He looked as if he hadn’t stopped during the entire ride here from Alzire. In fact, he looked like hell.

“I am honored, Majesty,” Abacus said hoarsely.

Cobalt felt like a wire pulled tight. “What is your message?”

“Sire—it is your wife.”

The world suddenly went silent. Cobalt no longer heard the low thunder of seventeen thousand people. “What about my wife?”

“She—” Abacus took a shuddering breath. “She is gone. Kidnapped, we think.”

Cobalt wanted to ask him to start over. He couldn’t have heard properly. The one constant in his life, the one person who gave him reason to live, couldn’t be gone. He had left her in Alzire for her protection.

“How long?” Cobalt’s voice sounded strange. It belonged to someone else. It couldn’t be his, because he was screaming inside.

“Twenty days.” Abacus was shaking from fatigue.

Matthew stared at him. “You made it here in twenty days?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell me what happened,” Cobalt said.

“She vanished the night of the Citrine Festival,” Abacus answered, trying to sit erect in his saddle, though he swayed. He reached into his bag and took out a packet of blue silk. “We found signs of a struggle in one of the stables. And this.”

Cobalt took the packet. He recognized the vivid blue silk and silver embroidery. It was Mel’s scarf, torn, with blood on one corner. Somehow he kept his hands steady as he inspected what the messenger had wrapped within it. Those strands of hair had to be hers; he knew no one else with hair to her waist of that bright yellow color. He had a sudden memory of the first time he had touched her hair, in his coach the night after their wedding. He had feared he would hurt her. He had seen the pretty young woman and

hadn't known the strength behind that angelic face.

The scarf held one other object: a dagger with blood on its tip. Whose blood? Its curved blade and the hilt enameled in sunrise colors were both distinctive. In his too-quiet voice, Cobalt said, "This dagger is from Taka Mal."

Abacus spoke miserably. "Yes, Your Majesty."

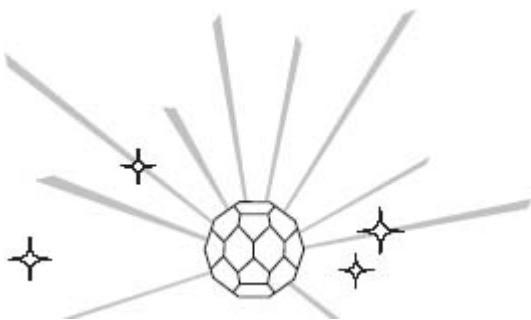
"They took Mel?" Matthew asked, incredulous.

Cobalt felt as if he couldn't breathe. "They made a mistake." His calm was threatening to break open.

"We don't know anything for certain," Matthew said.

Cobalt spurred Admiral forward and took off down the slope, leaving the others behind. He had to arrange search parties, send investigators to Alzire, ride hard, scour the land, do something. He couldn't leave his post here, but until he knew what had happened to Mel, he would have no rest.

He swore an oath: If she had been hurt—or worse—those responsible would pay a price beyond their imagining.



21

### Temple of the Dragon-Sun

The rough passage, thick with grime, had seen little use for centuries. Light from Jade's candle bounced off the coarse brick walls and the stale air smelled dusty. The tunnel twisted around the citadel and narrowed in places until its walls touched her. She kept a blanket around herself so she didn't rip or destroy her garments as she squeezed through the hidden passage.

Finally she reached a panel with an eyehole too high for her. She stepped on a brick jutting out from the wall and peered through the hole. A few candles lit the room beyond. It resembled the parlor in her own suite, except here the walls were red by the floor and lightened into rose and then gold as they shaded upward. The ceiling was blue with a few gray clouds. The citadel builders called it the Sunset Room, but Jade silently beseeched the Dragon-Sun to make it a sunrise tonight instead of an ending.

This door bore a carved starflower. She pressed its petals in a different pattern than the one she had used in her suite. Her father had taught her the secrets of this citadel, just as he had in the Topaz Palace. She carried the knowledge alone; he had told no one else but her mother. Not even Baz. Especially not Baz. Her father had known the challenges Jade would face. He had given her every tool within his power to help her hold the throne.

Jade rested her hand on her abdomen. Someday, saints willing, she would bequeath those secrets to her child. Determined, she pushed the wooden panel. It opened with a creak, and she stepped into the Sunset Room. Her candle chased away shadows in the corners, but she blew it out. She went to a small table enameled with a fire dragon and blew out the candle there. That left only the one on the mantel across the parlor, and it only lit that side of the room. Satisfied, Jade hid in the corner farthest from the mantel, behind a cabinet that displayed porcelain fire-dragons.

Then she waited.

It wasn't long before the others arrived: Drummer, Fieldson, Spearcaster, and Arkandy Ravensford.

"She's not here," Fieldson said.

Drummer looked around with obvious unease. "She'll come."

Spearcaster picked up the doused candle on the table. "Do you have a flint?"

"Somewhere." Drummer sounded distracted. "Maybe she went to one of the other rooms."

"She said she would meet us here," Spearcaster said.

Drummer wandered restlessly around the room. He was a captivating sight. His elegant gold trousers had a row of topaz buttons up their outer seams. His suede belt fit low on his hips and glinted with rubies and gold. His white shirt was Zanterian silk, and his vest had sunrise designs worked into it with gems and blue thread. Gold edged his shirt cuffs and the seams of his amber-suede boots. Someone had dressed the groom well indeed.

The officers also wore their finest. General Spearcaster was resplendent in his dress uniform, dark gold and red, with gold braid up the trousers, and his sword in a jeweled sheath. Fieldson and Ravensford wore uniforms of white and violet, with knee-boots and those oddly straight swords that seemed less deadly to Jade, less efficient in gouging the guts of an opponent. If they were lucky, there would be no eviscerating tonight.

Jade never paid much attention to her own clothes. Usually she let Clove pick them out. She couldn't tonight, though, lest the ginger-maid wonder what was going on. So Jade had chosen a sunset silk, mainly because everything in the citadel had that theme. The floor-length silk wrapped her body and had a slit up the side revealing far too much leg. The sleeveless gown shaded from crimson up through sunrise colors and into pale blue across her breasts. With her hair up and threaded with gems, her head felt heavy. She wore the Dragon-Sun jewels, a necklace of topazes, rubies, and sapphires, with earrings that dangled down her neck and bracelets on her wrists. She felt overdressed, but maybe Drummer would like the effect.

Before she married anyone, though, she wanted to hear more of what these crafty generals had to say to her charming but naive groom. He had a great deal of savvy when it came to earning his living at the market or in taverns, and she didn't doubt he knew how to charm his way out of trouble, but in her opulently cutthroat royal court, he was an innocent. She hoped he stayed this way. It was one reason she liked him so much. Even...loved him. It was true, though she had trouble saying it. She couldn't imagine life without him, and she was glad they were to marry, but given how many people wanted to stop them, she wasn't about to trust anyone.

Ravensford braced his hand against the mantel and gazed into the empty hearth. He was a burly man, probably in his forties, with a wide face and a shock of golden-brown hair that gave him a stoic appearance. Jade knew little about him except that he was a close friend of the Harsdown king and had distinguished himself during the war nineteen years ago.

“Do you ever use these fireplaces?” Ravensford asked.

Spearcaster was opening a drawer of the table. “Not often. It’s usually too hot.” He searched through the drawer, probably for a flint to light the candles.

Fieldson was leaning against the panel Jade had used to enter the room. “Why is it,” he grumbled, “that women take so much longer than men to put on their clothes?”

Spearcaster glanced up and smiled. “The result is usually worth the wait.”

“Maybe someone got to her.” Drummer was pacing, his forehead creased with worry, which made Jade feel guilty. Not enough to reveal her presence, though. For all she knew, they were the ones about to “get” to her, using Drummer as their foil.

“Baz looked ready to melt the sky today,” Spearcaster said. “He’s letting emotions blind his logic. Any fool can see how many problems this marriage will solve.”

“If Jarid agrees to the treaty,” Ravensford added.

“I’ve known Jarid for years,” Fieldson said. “I think he’ll agree.”

Drummer spoke darkly. “Baz and Slate and Firaz are probably somewhere right now plotting how to steal Jade away.”

Spearcaster closed the drawer. “They’re down with the army, discussing strategy.” Drily, he added, “But then, so am I.”

Drummer raised his eyebrow at the lanky general.

“Firaz is there,” Spearcaster allowed. “Baz, I doubt it.”

“And Slate?” Drummer asked.

Spearcaster considered the question. “He’s probably with the army. He’s always had a soft spot where Vizarana is concerned. If she wants to marry you, I don’t think he would try to stop her even if he disagreed with the decision.”

“What about the atajazid?” Fieldson asked. “He has as much stake in this as Baz Quaaazera.”

“But no idea of Her Majesty’s condition,” Spearcaster said. “My guess is that Ozar is out there with his army.”

“That close?” Drummer stiffened. “You mean, Baz could get him? Tonight?”

“Possibly,” Spearcaster said. “But I don’t think he would.”

It didn't sound to Jade as if they were conning Drummer. In fact, their assessment of the situation matched hers. She could wait until they left the room to look for her, and then she could come out. That would be more diplomatic than just stepping out of her hiding place, which would reveal she had been spying on them. But waiting for them to leave the room would take too long. She wanted this wedding done as soon as possible, a finished act no one could stop.

So much for diplomacy. Jade stood up and stepped out from behind the cabinet. "Light of the morning, gentlemen."

They all spun around, the officers drawing their swords fast, Spearcaster's glinting and curved, Ravensford's and Fieldson's straight and heavy. Drummer stared as if she had risen out of the ocean on a plume of froth. The candlelight gilded his face, and his eyes seemed lit with an inner glow.

"Why the weapons?" Jade asked, cool outside, jumpy inside.

Spearcaster exhaled, a long breath, and sheathed his blade. Fieldson and Ravensford followed suit.

"My apologies, Your Majesty," Spearcaster said. "We are on edge tonight." He was staring, too. They were all looking at her that way, as if she were something scrumptious to eat, like a clam or a mussel or some other delicacy from the Blue Ocean.

Drummer came forward and took her hands. "Saints, Jade."

Self-conscious, she answered in a low voice only for him. "Is something wrong with me?"

"Believe me, no." He raised her hand and kissed her knuckles. "You are devastating, love. If you were to walk among all those armies right now, their warriors would be so helplessly smitten, they would fall to the ground and swear allegiance to you forever."

"I would hope not," Spearcaster muttered, going behind the cabinet where Jade had been hiding. "The ones who aren't ours would be violating their oaths of fealty."

Jade slanted an annoyed look at the general. "He was being poetic. It's allowed with grooms, you know."

Spearcaster tapped on the wall. "How did you get out of here? It doesn't sound hollow."

"Hmm," Jade said.

"If you know a secret way out of this citadel," Fieldson said, "we need to know. Your cousin has all the entrances guarded."

She took Drummer's hand. "In another room of this suite."

In the main room, Jade went to a niche similar to the one in her parlor. Within moments, she was opening another secret door. They filed into the tunnel beyond and closed the door. Ravensford carried a candle. It cast their shadows ahead of them in a rough passageway of large, old bricks.

"I had no idea this was here," Spearcaster said.

Jade detested having to show them. Now he would search for other passages, and knowing him, he



would find them.

“You are sworn to tell no one,” Jade said. “All of you.”

They each gave their word. She trusted Drummer. Spearcaster maybe. He had been the closest she had to a father since the death of the king. Actually, he had been more like a father to her than her own father. She had great affection for him, but she had long ago learned that what he considered her own best interest didn’t necessarily coincide with her own thoughts on the matter. If he decided to map these hidden passageways for the army’s use, she might have a hard time convincing him to keep the secret from even his top people. No matter what he decided, though, she knew he would make that choice to protect his queen and her country.

Fieldson and Ravensford were another story. She had no reason to trust them, and as impressed as she had been with both of them, especially Fieldson, she knew they would act first in support of their sovereign, King Muller. As she led them through a maze, she chose as confusing a route as possible.

Finally Jade reached the wall panel she wanted. She turned to the others. “This opens into an alley in Sun’s Breadth, the town around the citadel.”

Spearcaster stood with his arms crossed, frowning. “If this passage lets us sneak into town, that means it could let someone in town sneak into the citadel.”

“That’s why no one knows about it,” she said. “And why you are sworn to secrecy.” She knew Spearcaster would set up a guard system now that Fieldson and Ravensford knew about the entrance.

Jade pressed a pattern into the starflower on the door and cracked the portal open. Spearcaster leaned past her and set his palm against the wood panel. “You are sure Baz doesn’t know about this exit?”

“As far as I know,” Jade said.

He stepped past her, then edged open the door and peered out. After a moment he beckoned to them. They followed him into an alley with high walls on either side. Dust drifted around them, and the air smelled of night-blooming desert weed. A small animal ran past Jade’s sandaled foot. She grimaced and stepped back, but she didn’t cry out or even jerk.

With Drummer at her side, Jade led the way along narrow lanes hidden between buildings. She knew the route well, having often come here as a child. She had played in the alleys, accompanied by her taciturn bodyguards. Apparently it had never occurred to her parents to provide their child with friends her own age.

The Temple of the Dragon-Sun stood in a secluded area amid gardens and terraces with water flowing over the stone. The layered design of its roof matched the gardens. Pots hung from every level, lush with vines: fire-lilies, red pyramid-blossoms that opened at dawn, snap-lions, sun-orbs, and scalloped fire opal blossoms with petals as bright as flames.

As temples went, this one was small. The interior was one room, with a stone table at the far end and benches arrayed before it in curving rows. The cool spaces, all stone and air, soothed Jade’s nerves. Candles shed gold light around the table but left the rest of the temple in shadow. People prayed here to the dragon spirit who put the sun in the sky, the flames in the sunset, and the fire in the souls of men and women.

The dragon priestess stood by the table, one hand resting on a scroll tied with red and gold cords. She was an older woman, slender and frail, dressed in a sunset-hued robe. Jade recognized her; she had served at Jade's fifteenth birthday celebration, when the Topaz Heir officially became an adult. Back then, the woman's hair had been mostly black, her posture straighter, her face less lined. But her otherworldly quality and her serenity were the same.

The priestess beckoned to them. "Come out of the shadows." Her voice was rich, though thinned a bit with age. "Let me look at you. I don't see so well—" She stopped as Spearcaster came up to her. "Oh, my. You?"

The craggy general knelt and bowed his head. She rapped him on the head. "Stand up, young man. Goodness, Ravi. Aren't you married yet?"

Drummer hung back in the shadows with Jade. "Ravi?" Amusement washed across his face.

"His personal name is Ravel," Jade murmured. She was glad Spearcaster was here. She wished things could have been different with Baz, too, that he would have also stood at her side. And Firaz and Slate. They meant a great deal to her despite how they always argued with her, or maybe even partly because of that.

"Doesn't the priestess know who she's going to marry?" Drummer asked.

Jade shook her head. "It was a precaution. Ravensford dressed in old clothes and went to talk to her. He didn't say anything more than a 'young man and woman.'"

The priestess surveyed Spearcaster as he stood up, looming over her. "I've never seen you so glossed up," she said with approval. "You look quite the groom. But I would have thought a man in your position would want a formal wedding in Quaaz with all the pomp and the big temple."

His face creased with an affectionate smile. "I'm not the groom, Blessed One."

"No?" She raised her eyebrows. "These young folks must be quite something, to have you attend their wedding, especially at such an hour." She peered into the shadows. "Well, well, I can't see anything. Come forward, all of you."

Jade glanced at Drummer. "This is your last chance to escape marrying me."

He smiled at her. "I'm not so easy to get rid of, Dragon Princess." He used her dynastic title, from the ancient tales that named a queen of Taka Mal as a princess of the Dragon-Sun.

As they walked forward, holding hands, the priestess squinted. "Goodness! What a beautiful couple. Here, here, let me see bet—" She broke off as they came into the light. "Saints above," she murmured. With a grace that belied her age, she went down on one knee before Jade.

"I am honored, Blessed One," Jade said. She touched the priestess's head far more gently than the elderly woman had conked Spearcaster. "Please stand."

The priestess rose and looked over their party, including Fieldson and Ravensford in their white and violet uniforms. She spoke quietly. "Are these the witnesses, Your Majesty? For a royal wedding, at least one other besides myself must be a citizen of Taka Mal."

“I stand as her second witness,” General Spearcaster said.

The priestess nodded. “We are honored.”

“Have you prepared the scroll?” Spearcaster asked.

She indicated the parchment on the table. “Everything is here, as requested.”

“Shall we proceed, then?” Jade asked. Incredibly it looked as if this wild plot would succeed.

“Do you wish any extra readings?” the priestess asked.

“Nothing.” Jade spoke with gentle urgency. “The faster you can marry us, the better.”

“I see.” The priestess paled, and Jade didn’t doubt she understood the significance of a royal wedding done in secret, in the depths of the night, while three armies faced each other across a narrow strip of land that defined the border.

With Jade and Drummer standing before her, the priestess sang the Dragon-Sun chant in High Alatian, a ceremonial language with stricter rhythms than modern speech. It was a prayer to the spirits of the sky and the wind and the flames of life, wishing love and good fortune for the wedding couple.

When the priestess finished the chant, she lifted a string of fire-opal blossoms off the table. They glowed as vibrantly as Jade’s silk dress. She touched Drummer’s forehead with the petals. Softly she said, “What is your name, son? I need the formal version.”

“Drummer Creek Headwind,” he said. “Son of Appleton by blood and kin to Dawnfield by marriage.”

The priestess’s hand jerked, scraping the petals across his forehead, but to her credit she showed no other shock to the news that she was about to wed a Dawnfield to a Quaazera.

“Drummer Creek Headwind,” she said. “Her Majesty, Vizarana Jade, Queen of Taka Mal, would take you as the Topaz Consort, her husband and the father of her heir. Do you accept?”

“Oh, yes.” Drummer’s face had a glow Jade had seen only twice before—yesterday when she revealed her pregnancy and tonight in the Sunset Room. He exuded a joy she would never deserve, not if they lived a century. As her consort, he would see grief and war and death, politics and deceit, treachery and violence. He had lost forever the days when he could wander the dales of his home with no concerns except to feed and clothe himself. She could offer him a throne and her kingdom and shower him with gems and gold, but she could never give him back that freedom. Perhaps if she loved him well enough and long enough, someday she would earn this joy that he gave so freely, without condition.

The priestess anointed Jade on the forehead with the fire opal. “Vizarana Jade Quaazera, do you accept this man as the Topaz Consort?”

“Yes.” Jade wanted to tell the stars. “I accept.”

“No!” The shout came from behind them.

Jade whirled around. Warriors were pouring into the temple, armored men with swords and snarling dragon-sun helmets. They strode up the aisle, weapons clanking, boots thudding on the stone floor—led

by their commander, her cousin, Baz Quaazera.

“You’re too late,” Jade said. “The ceremony is done.”

Baz had his gaze fixed on Drummer. He unsheathed his sword, and it glittered in the candlelight.

“Baz, no!” Jade was aware of Spearcaster, Fieldson, and Ravensford drawing their weapons. Her voice echoed in the spaces of the temple. “Think well before you wield arms against your queen and her consort, for you would be committing treason.”

The warriors stopped around the table, cutting off escape but coming no closer. Except Baz. He strode into the candlelight. With dismay, Jade realized she may have underestimated how far he would go to stop this marriage. Seeing the desperate rage on his face, she knew he was capable of killing Drummer.

“Baz, no.” She started forward, but Drummer and Spearcaster both grabbed her by the arm, one on either side of her, and pulled her back. Every man in the temple had drawn his blade, and she knew they were going to fight. Someone would die here, and whoever survived would face execution for murdering a queen’s officer—or for assassinating her consort.

Then Drummer pulled his cube out from a pocket of his vest. He extended his arm forward at chest height with the cube resting in his open palm. With his gaze on Baz, he said, simply, “Stop.”

“You cannot fight me with a little block of metal,” Baz said.

With no warning, gold light flared around Drummer’s hand. Baz took a fast step backward.

“It is the Dragon-Sun,” Drummer said, his minstrel’s voice full and resonant. “The sunset has blessed this marriage.”

The light around his hand intensified and filled the temple. It turned fiery orange, then red, and finally the deep crimson at the end of the sunset as day passed into night. It lit them all with its ruddy glow.

“The Dragon breathes to protect the queen,” Drummer said, and flames erupted from his hand. Jade felt their heat, yet they had no effect on him. He stood bathed in their light and stared at Baz as if challenging him to defy the dragon in its own temple. Baz didn’t move.

Gradually the flames faded, leaving only candlelight. Drummer lowered his arm. Everyone stared at him; no one moved or spoke. Even Jade, who had seen his “parlor games,” was frozen. This was no trick. Either her husband truly did have the blessing of the Dragon-Sun or else she had just married one of the notorious Dawnfield mages. Apprehension swept over Jade, for she didn’t believe Drummer had miraculously communed with the Dragon-Sun. By the saints, what had she done? Her new husband was a sorcerer.

Baz let out a long breath. He slid his sword into its curved sheath, and at his action, the other warriors sheathed theirs. He came forward then, and Jade knew her cousin truly was a man of great courage, for she doubted any of his warriors would approach Drummer right now.

Baz spoke to Jade. “The marriage is done?”

She answered in her throaty voice. “It is done.”

“Then I will mourn.” His sense of betrayal was written on his face. “And tomorrow Taka Mal will fall to Cobalt the Cruel.”

“We are not at war,” Jade said.

“You don’t think so?” Baz beckoned to someone among the warriors in the dimly lit temple.

Jade had been wrong that no other would come forward, for one of the men approached, tall and broad shouldered in his black leather and iron-gray breastplate. A massive sword hung on his belt, and a black plume topped his shadow-dragon helmet. Then he removed his helmet, and she knew this was no ordinary warrior who dared the wrath of the Dragon-Sun. The Atajazid D’az Ozar had come to her wedding.

He spoke in a shadowed voice. “When Cobalt descends on your country and your life, Vizarana, you will fight him alone.”

“If Taka Mal falls,” Jade said, “you are next.”

“Escar will come,” Ozar said, “for as people must breathe, so he must conquer. He will ride across Taka Mal like the Dragon-Sun’s fire, burning all in his path. He will make Taka Mal pay for this alliance you committed tonight, until he has burned Quaaaz to the ground and cut your head from your body.”

Jade met his hard stare. “Your words cannot terrorize me.”

“He will massacre your people.”

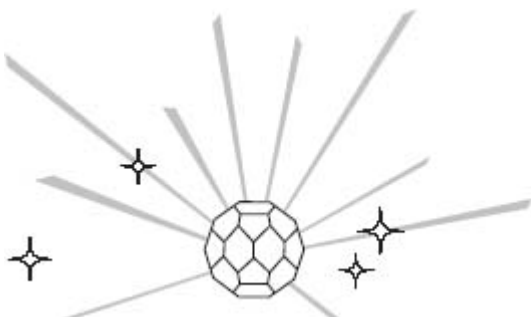
“You can’t have me, Ozar, even if you threaten Taka Mal with annihilation.” Her gaze never wavered. “Abandon Taka Mal now and you will lose your throne as well. If you think otherwise, you know nothing of Cobalt, and all of Jazid will suffer for it.”

“You know my terms.”

Her fist clenched, small and delicate compared to the warriors around them. “I have given my vows to another.”

“Then fix it.” Ozar’s face hardened as he turned to the man at her side. “If your consort has to die so that you can fulfill your obligations, so be it.”

With that, the Shadow Dragon Prince spun around and strode away, his boots ringing on the stone floor. He swept out of the temple and left his threat hanging in the air like a blade poised above Drummer’s head.



## The Violet Storm

Dawn was seeping through cracks in the walls as Mel dragged herself awake. She couldn't remember why she was lying on the floor of a rough shack.

Her memory stirred painfully. She had escaped Ozar's fortress and run, her bare feet slapping on stone. The cell had finished its collapse, and the thunder of its destruction had followed her as she raced down a corridor with its walls toppling behind her. She sped down the spiral staircase of a tower while the stairs above her fell in a traveling wave of wreckage. Just before the tower crashed down into rubble, she had run out into a courtyard beneath an overcast sky.

Mel remembered shivering in an underground storage bin with daggers and maces. She had hidden in an armory on the other side of the courtyard while Ozar and his men investigated the ruins. She couldn't even remember now what supplies she had taken from the armory. When night came, she had slipped past the wreckage of the fortress and run through the barren terrain, run and run, clenching the handle of the spiked metal ball in one hand and her stolen gear in the other.

With a groan, Mel rolled onto her side. Black leather armor was piled up nearby, with a Jazid breastplate and a Shadow Dragon helmet. She wondered dully at her priorities. She had taken a sword, belt, and dagger, but no food or water. Filled with her mind-slamming rage, she had thought only of fighting.

Of killing.

In the past, Mel had never believed the accounts of those ancient war mages. The histories were thousands of years old. Surely time had distorted and magnified the tales. Now she knew otherwise: The years had softened the truth. She had never desired the power to destroy, but she would bring down every fortress in the settled lands if that was what it took to protect her child.

She didn't understand how she had survived the collapse of her cell. Huge chunks of rock had fallen, yet miraculously none hit her. Perhaps the spell protected its maker. It made a grim sort of sense. Those mages whose spells kept them alive were more likely to have children who would carry on the trait.

Mel had found no wounds on Shade's body. She would never truly know how he died, for the destruction had buried him. Ozar probably thought she had died as well. She didn't think any stone had hit Shade, but that left only her spell. It made her sick to think she could wreak violence with gifts meant to heal.

Violet. The power of life and death. Mages felt the spells they made, not as intensely as those they created it for, but enough to matter. She knew warmth from her red spells and health from the blue. She should have felt Shade die. But she remembered nothing of his passing. Did flawed spells distort away from their wielder? It was a horrific prospect, for it suggested she suffered the least for using the worst of her abilities. The power had surely been bred into her ancestors to counter those kings who sought to contain the war mages. In the centuries since, the marriages of Dawnfield kings to the strongest mages they could find had concentrated the mage abilities. For centuries this particular trait had slept within the Dawnfield line, gathering strength.

Now it had awakened—with a vengeance.

She pushed into a sitting position. Her wounds hurt miserably, and her legs ached from her long run. She had scrambled in the dark, afraid to fall into a crack or crevice, even more afraid to make light lest someone see. The half-moon had appeared and disappeared behind streaks of cloud, her only guide.

She slowly limbered up, working through the aches and pain. Then she put on the armor. Her supplies were spotty; she had no water, but she had grabbed two pairs of leggings when she only needed one. At least she had chosen better with the armor. The leather was old and supple and fit her well. She pulled the pants over her leggings, then tugged on a vest and fastened the breastplate over it, leaving her arms bare except for the wrist guards and armbands. Metal studs riveted the belt together. The leather boots were scuffed and pitted. The armor was designed for a man of her height, but with broader shoulders and chest, which was fine; she needed the extra space in the breastplate for its namesakes.

Mel hung the dagger sheath from her belt and strapped the helmet to her back. She hefted the sword, as she had done during those long hours while she sweated in her hiding place. The blade felt well balanced and suited to her upper-body strength, which was less than that of many warriors. She compensated for that lack with her fast reflexes, but she needed a weapon light enough to utilize her advantage.

The spiked ball lay on the floor, glinting where a trickle of sunlight hit one of the sharpened points. Mel picked it up by the metal handle and swung it over her head. The chain clinked as the ball whipped in a circle. Although it was heavy, she had no problem wielding it as a flail. But for her, its greatest value lay in another aspect; its shape could unleash her mortal spells.

She wrapped the ball with the extra leggings so it wouldn't gouge her thigh, and then she fastened it to her belt. A search of the shack turned up a strip of smoked meat, a water bag, and the snares of a trapper. The bag was empty. With an apology to whoever used the shack, Mel hung the bag from her belt. She had seen oval-leaf bushes outside last night, which meant there had to be water nearby. She would fill the bag and break her fast with the meat and whatever game or edible plants she could find.

Finally, Mel peeled a strip of bark off the wall and sat down to whittle it with her dagger. She needed an exact shape, and she had trouble cutting one. Her disks and polygons came out crooked. The square was better, and it caught her spell, glowing with blue light. The weak spell barely lit up her hands, but it was better than nothing.

Mel sat with her back to the wall and cradled the square in her palms. Running her fingers along the shape, she imagined blue sky. Blue water. Blue silk. Blue eyes. Like Drummer's. The glow around her hands deepened. With no formal training, she didn't know if she could direct her spell to specific injuries. She thought of her wounds—and the light flowed into her body like a river filling a vessel. With a sigh, she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.

She struggled to maintain the spell, however. To use such a high color, even with a low-level shape, wore her out. Finally she released the spell and opened her eyes. The last of the blue light faded from her hands. But...her aches had also receded. When she stood up, her muscles didn't protest as much. The whip had cut deep gashes yesterday, and dried blood hadn't even finished flaking off her arms, yet the wounds looked as if they had been healing for several days.

Mel let out a long breath, steadying herself. It was time to leave, to face her precarious future. Sword in hand, she opened the door. A rocky clearing fronted the hut, and several oval-leaf bushes jutted out of the ground. Beyond the clearing, the mountains cut downward in a panorama of angular slopes. To her left, peaks sheered upward; on the right, they dropped down in ridge after knife-edged ridge. She could see for leagues, and everywhere the land stuttered in the jagged-teeth formations that gave the range its

name. It was beautiful in its harsh grandeur, and it took Mel's breath.

A waterfall cascaded down the peaks behind the shack. After she drank deeply and filled the bag, she ate some bitter oval-berries. She saw no wildlife; the world seemed deserted. Wind keened among the peaks and through the deep gullies between them. The sky had shed its clouds and stretched above, parched and blue.

Her best hope of survival was to find the Chamberlight army. If they were where she expected, she had more than a day's journey on foot, and to reach them, she would have to go through the Jazid forces. As long as she hid her yellow hair, she might blend in with the other soldiers. Her face didn't look masculine, but with the helmet on she could probably pass for a youth.

Mel set off, heading north.

Seventeen thousand strong, four armies gathered in a great confluence of men and horses. Cobalt rode Admiral up and down the lines as his companies trained, but he spoke to no one. He barely contained his agitation. Mel was out there. Her kidnappers had slithered past the armies, probably east into Jazid and then north into Taka Mal. His search parties had found nothing, and it would be days before his men returned from Alzire with news. His wife could be anywhere, and it was killing him.

As of yet, he had given no order to strike Taka Mal. Rumors abounded: Queen Vizarana had killed Drummer, she had brought him to the Sun-Dragon citadel, she had left him in Quaaaz, she had sent him home. Cobalt hadn't intended to attack if Taka Mal negotiated in good faith. Now he no longer cared. Even if Drummer walked up to him, it wouldn't matter. Taka Mal had gone too far when they took his pregnant wife and left behind her blood.

Matthew galloped across the camp and came alongside of Cobalt. "You must prepare! We've spotted an envoy headed here from the Dragon-Sun citadel."

Cobalt gazed past the solitary peak with the citadel to the much more distant eastern mountains. Quaaaz lay beyond that barrier. Was Mel there?

"Listen to me!" Matthew grabbed Admiral's reins and pulled the horse to a stop. Admiral neighed in protest, but he knew Matthew well enough that he didn't rear or bolt.

Cobalt spoke in a hard voice. "Let go of my horse."

Matthew gave him back the reins. "You don't know that Taka Mal had any part in Mel's disappearance."

Cobalt realized he was gritting his teeth. He forced his jaw to relax. "Have Agate Cragland bring the Taka Mal envoy to me."

"You must treat them as emissaries," Matthew said. "Not prisoners of war."

Cobalt wanted to pull his sword and fight, not Matthew, but someone. Anyone. It took a concentrated effort to keep his voice even. "I will treat them as appropriate."

Matthew didn't look reassured. His gaze went beyond Cobalt. "That was fast."



Cobalt brought Admiral around to face the way Matthew was looking. Agate and several Chamberlight officers were approaching him. An unfamiliar soldier rode in their midst, a man in the gold and red of a Taka Mal lieutenant. Cobalt rode forward, aware of Matthew at his side, and they all gathered in a group, their horses stamping and snorting.

Cobalt looked from the lieutenant to Agate. “Only one man?”

“He isn’t the envoy,” Agate said. “He came from the south.”

Cobalt narrowed his gaze at the man. “Why are you here?”

The lieutenant spoke with the drawn-out Taka Mal accent, exotic in its unusual rhythms, different from the cool, clipped tones of the Misted Cliffs. “Your Majesty, please accept my humblest pleas for your mercy. I set my life before you and beg your beneficent compassion for myself, your lowly servant.”

Cobalt had never mastered the flowery, convoluted language of court intrigue. Beneficent compassion, indeed. What the blazes did that mean? If this fellow had done something wrong, he should just say so.

“Why do you need mercy?” Cobalt asked.

“I have done no evil!” The man paused. “No, that is false. I have committed a great crime. I deserted my post to come here.”

Either the fellow was a consummate actor or he genuinely felt agonized. “Why did you desert?” Cobalt asked.

“I couldn’t stand by while—while such atrocities—” He took a ragged breath. “I had to choose between my conscience and my post. I chose my conscience.”

Cobalt frowned. “How do I know you aren’t a spy sent by Queen Vizarana to infiltrate my camp?”

“Ask the envoy,” the man said. “It will be here soon.”

“I will,” Cobalt said. “Now tell me why you came.”

He blanched as if Cobalt had asked him to impale himself on his own sword. “Please know, I am only a messenger—”

“If you don’t tell me soon,” Cobalt said darkly, “my beneficent compassion will be all used up.”

The man reached for his saddle bags, but stopped when the Chamberlight men drew their swords.

“Let him get whatever it is,” Cobalt said.

His men lowered their swords, and the lieutenant exhaled. Cobalt didn’t think he was pretending to be afraid. The man opened one of his bags and pulled out a bundle of brown-and-yellow cloth. With shaking arms, he held it out to Cobalt.

“I am sorry,” he said.

“About what?” Bewildered, Cobalt took the bundle. It was rags, some yellow, some an ugly brown—

With a horrific sense of falling, Cobalt realized two things. The brown stains were blood. A lot of blood. And the rags were the remains of a pair of harem pants and a tunic.

Mel’s clothes.

A roaring began in Cobalt’s ears. He couldn’t see clearly, only brown stains on yellow silk. He raised his gaze to the man from Taka Mal. Cobalt didn’t know how he looked, but it wasn’t only the deserter who recoiled; all of the men, even Agate, went pale.

Cobalt spoke slowly and heard his voice rumble like a distant storm. “Where is the woman who wore these clothes?”

The lieutenant swallowed, tried to speak and failed.

“Answer me,” Cobalt said.

The man spoke in a burst. “She is dead, Your Majesty. She—she didn’t survive—what they did to her.”

“And who,” Cobalt said, enunciating each word, “did it?”

“The man I was expected to serve, but cannot,” the lieutenant said grimly. “General Baz Quaaazera, at command of the queen.”

Thunder exploded inside of Cobalt. The roaring in his ears stopped as suddenly as it began and left him in a deadly calm. He had thought Stonebreaker injured him with his cruelty, but those decades of torment were nothing compared to this moment.

Someone was speaking. Agate Cragland. “What proof do you have that General Quaaazera did this?”

“I saw it,” the lieutenant said.

“And who are you,” Agate asked, “to see such an act?”

“Lieutenant Feldspar Kaj, of Her Majesty’s personal guard.”

“Well, Kaj,” Agate said. “You are also a deserter. How do we know you don’t bring this story out of spite?”

Kaj indicated the silk Cobalt held. “She was wearing that when they brought her in. I watched them whip her to death. I was assigned to guard her uncle, the man called Drummer, and I have also watched them torture him. Call me what you will, but I could not stay there after what I witnessed.”

Cobalt found his voice. “General Cragland, where is the envoy from the citadel?”

“I told the men to take them to your tent,” Agate said.

Cobalt jabbed Admiral’s flanks with his heels. Despite the unusual behavior, the horse took off with a practiced gait. They had been together a long time, he and this horse, and Admiral knew what he wanted. He raced through the camp. The other men came with Cobalt, but he ignored them, for if he spoke, his

control would shatter. People stared as he galloped past: cooks looked up from steaming pots, grooms stopped tending their horses and watched him with the reins hanging in their hands, archers sharpening arrows rose to their feet.

Warriors crowded the area around Cobalt's tent. His soldiers were guarding eight men in the fiery red-and-gold uniforms of Taka Mal. It took a concentrated effort for Cobalt to keep from drawing his sword. He reined in Admiral, and the black warhorse stamped up swirls of dust. As Cobalt dismounted, a groom ran up. Cobalt handed him the reins, never taking his gaze off the envoy. He strode forward, and Matthew and Agate joined him. Cobalt was aware of his men bringing Kaj, but he kept his attention on the emissaries. With a start, he realized one was General Spearcaster, a Queen's Advisor.

Spearcaster bowed. "My honor at your presence, Your Majesty."

"Is it?" Cobalt stretched out his arm and pointed at Kaj, who stood a few paces away with his Chamberlight escort. "Who is that man?"

Spearcaster frowned at the lieutenant. "Kaj? What are you doing here?"

Kaj lifted his chin. "I cannot serve commanders who commit what I have seen."

Spearcaster visibly tensed. "What are you talking about?"

Kaj looked frightened. "I can't countenance what is going on. Drummer Headwind—"

"That will be enough," Spearcaster said sharply.

"It's wrong," Kaj said.

Cobalt turned to Spearcaster, and the explosion inside him swelled. "What is it that he thinks is wrong?"

Spearcaster spoke carefully. "It isn't my place to speculate on what he may or may not have said to you."

"What was his position?" Cobalt asked. "The one he deserted?"

"He was a guard for Drummer Headwind," Spearcaster said. "But if he claims Goodman Headwind has been harmed, he lies."

"Then why did this lieutenant desert his post?"

"I cannot speak of such matters."

"Whynot?" Cobalt demanded. "Where is my wife?"

Spearcaster blinked. "Your wife?"

"Where have you taken her?"

"Your Majesty, I know nothing of your wife." Spearcaster narrowed his gaze at Kaj. "This man in no way represents Queen Vizarana, and if he claims we have news of your wife, he lies. I have come to discuss Drummer Headwind and to request safe passage for Sphere-General Fieldson, so he may join us

as your envoy.”

Cobalt spoke tightly. “Take your queen a message.” He whirled around and strode to where the groom was holding Admiral’s reins. Cobalt swung onto his horse. To Spearcaster, he said, “She has until sunrise tomorrow to return my wife and Drummer. If they are not in this camp when the first rays of the sun touch the earth, then I will break your army, loot your country and burn Quaaz to the ground.”

He wheeled Admiral around and galloped away then, riding hard through his camp, knowing that if he paused, even for one moment, he would incinerate in the flames of his rage.

Cobalt didn’t know how far he went. He left his army behind and pounded south, with the Dawnfield army to the west and his own to the east. Finally he stopped, threw back his head, and shouted at the merciless sky. His anguish rolled across the land. But the shout couldn’t quench the storm within him or lessen his agony over Mel’s disappearance and the gruesome tales of her death.

Hooves rustled the grass behind him. Bringing around Admiral, he saw Matthew on Hawkspar, waiting a few paces back as if Cobalt were a wild beast that might attack. Cobalt said nothing.

Matthew rode over to him, slow and cautious. “You have no proof they did what Kaj claims.”

Cobalt was clenching the reins so hard his fingernails cut his skin. “Spearcaster was hiding something.”

“Yes, I had that impression. But torture and murder? It didn’t seem so.”

“They have one day to bring Mel and Drummer.”

“And if they don’t have them?”

“I attack.”

“It is a tricky proposition,” Matthew said. “Even if Kaj is lying, even if Mel and Drummer are fine, why would the queen give up her hostages? If you attack, they lose their value. She may have them killed.”

“I will see mywife.” The explosion was building again within Cobalt. He wheeled Admiral around and took off. But no matter how hard or how far he rode, it wouldn’t purge the demons of fear that haunted him.

Jade paced the long balcony. She and Drummer were staying in this citadel tower, guarded by the Harsdown envoy and Spearcaster’s men. She was meeting here with all her generals for the first time since before the wedding. Baz stood by the glass doors with his arms crossed and ignored his guards. They were loyal men who had refused his orders when he sought to stop the marriage. He was the only obvious prisoner on the balcony, but several soldiers were discreetly keeping watch on Slate and Firaz, who stood with Fieldson to her right. Only Spearcaster, who stood by the railing, had no guard. And Drummer. Her new husband leaned against the wall to the left and watched her pace.

“I will not be threatened,” Jade said. “Harsdown sent an envoy to speak with us.” She motioned angrily at Fieldson. “We have spoken to him. We agreed to negotiate according to terms he proposed. Is

Cobalt so hungry to fight that he refuses the envoy hesent? No! I will not be coerced by this tyrant.”

“You would go to war instead?” Baz demanded.

“What choice do we have? He will never rest. Not until he conquers every country from the Blue Ocean to the Endless Desert.”

Baz stalked over to her, ignoring his guards. One of them reached to stop the general, but Jade shook her head.

“You had to marry your pretty minstrel,” Baz growled. “Now Ozar refuses us the support we need.”

Drummer stiffened, but he shook his head slightly at Jade. She wanted to lash out at Baz, but she said only, “Ozar will not stand by while Taka Mal falls.”

“Don’t know about that,” Firaz said. “He wanted your throne. Now that he can’t have the blasted chair, maybe he doesn’t care what happens to it.”

“You would have had me marry him?” Jade demanded.

“Hell, no,” Firaz said.

Startled, she said, “No?”

“The Topaz Throne belongs in the House of Quaazera,” he said. “Besides, this treaty business with Aronsdale is a good idea.”

“If it is so brilliant,” Slate said sourly, “why are we facing a war with no allies?”

“Have we any news of Jason Windcrier?” Fieldson asked.

“Nothing,” Jade said, disheartened. She went to the railing and looked out at her army, which was camped in the Rocklands below the Sharp Knife Mountain where this citadel stood. The Chamberlight forces were beyond hers, an ocean of warriors churning at her doorstep. The Aronsdale forces were a gray cloud on the horizon. An enigma. They might have come to ensure Escar left Aronsdale alone. Or they might be ready to support Taka Mal. She just didn’t know.

“We haven’t managed to get a single spy out,” she said. “We think either Cobalt’s or Ozar’s men are catching them.”

Drummer spoke. “I should go to meet Cobalt.”

Firaz scowled at him. “You’re the blasted Topaz Consort. After all that excitement getting you married to Vizarana, we hardly want you dead two days later. Defeats the whole purpose of the thing.”

Jade would die before she put Drummer in danger. If she told him, though, he would insist on protecting her and her country. So instead she said the other truth she knew. “If we give in to Cobalt, we are showing weakness. He will see it. He also wants the Topaz Throne, and apparently he is willing to take it by force.”

“Mel won’t let him,” Drummer said. “She’s the water that cools his fire.”

“Yes, well, what is this manure about us returning her?” Firaz growled. “Can’t the man find his own wife?”

“Kaj has lied to him,” Spearcaster said.

“Why would he do this thing?” Jade asked.

“We investigated him,” Baz said. “It seems he had gambling debts.” He gave a snort. “Someone has mysteriously paid them.”

“Treason for money?” Jade said. “I cannot believe it.”

Slate spoke in as gentle a manner as his gruff voice would allow. “Men have betrayed their sovereign for less.”

Jade clenched her fist. “We must find out who paid him.”

“We will,” Spearcaster said. “But whatever troubles the king goes beyond Kaj’s lies. Cobalt doesn’t strike me as a man who is easily tricked.”

“He isn’t,” Fieldson said. “But when it comes to his wife, he has no shades of gray. He would level the Jagged Teeth Mountains if that was what it took to find her.” Strain deepened the lines on his face. “As would any of the rest of us who watched her grow up from a child of sunlight to a woman.”

Jade wondered who was this Mel Dawnfield that she inspired such intense emotions. “I offer my hopes that she will be found, well and alive.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Fieldson’s voice crackled with tension. “Cobalt needs to know that.”

Jade looked around at her advisors. “We will send an envoy at dawn to tell him and swear we know nothing of his wife. General Fieldson, half the men in your envoy are from the Dawnfield armies. If we can get Cobalt to talk we should say we’re ready to commence negotiations with him and King Jarid.” Who just happened, conveniently, to be available.

“We’ll try to arrange the meeting here,” Slate said. “In the citadel.”

“A good idea.” Jade turned to Drummer. “If we do, you’ll attend the negotiations, yes? It will put to rest Cobalt’s suspicions that we harmed you.”

His blue eyes, which had filled with such passion when he held her last night, were like ice this morning. “I wouldn’t miss them for anything.”

Fieldson came forward. “I should go with Spearcaster. I was one of the people in the Harsdown meeting when we decided to send an envoy here. I can remind Cobalt of our discussions. And he may be more willing to believe me about his wife.”

Jade regarded the gray-haired warrior from Harsdown. He was older than her generals, even Spearcaster. As fit and hale as he seemed, she feared for his safety as she would for a grandfather. She liked him even if he was the enemy. He was restrained compared to her fiery Taka Mal commanders, but just as formidable.

“King Cobalt didn’t grant you safe passage,” she told him.

“I don’t think I’ll be in danger,” Fieldson said.

“Send Drummer,” Baz muttered.

Jade scowled at her cousin. “Stop it.”

Drummer joined them. “He’s right, much as I hate to admit it.” When Baz turned the full force of his irate gaze on the minstrel, Drummer raised his hands, palms outward. He didn’t look too concerned, though. Jade suspected he had plenty of experience pacifying irate authorities.

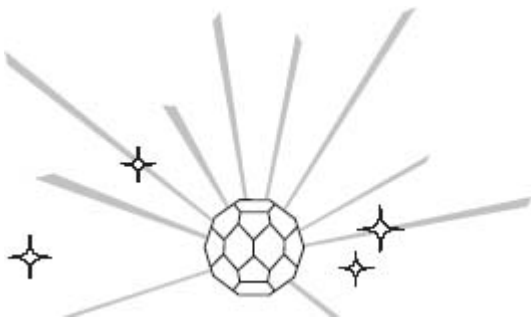
“You can’t go into the Chamberlight camp,” Firaz said. “Let Fieldson and Spearcaster set it up. I will go with them.”

Jade almost groaned. Firaz was a brilliant commander, but he had never been known for diplomacy. More than likely he would end up inflaming Cobalt.

“I thank you for your wise and magnanimous offer,” she told him. “But I am greatly in need of your invaluable services here.”

Firaz gave a curmudgeonly laugh. “You insult me so nicely. All right. I won’t go muck up your negotiations.”

Although Jade managed a smile, she felt anything but light. Maybe Cobalt had never intended to negotiate. The envoy could have been meant as no more than a distraction. Tomorrow he might seek to end her reign—but she would die before she surrendered her throne.



23

Onyx Pact

Drummer slipped into Vim’s night-dark stall, his feet rustling in the hay, and the Jazidian neighed.

“Didn’t know if you would want to see me again,” Drummer said in a low voice. He offered Vim a piece of apple, and the horse munched away.

It took a while to saddle the horse, but he managed. He pulled up the hood of his jacket, then walked Vim across the yard outside the stable, their way lit by pale moonlight. A few workers were around, and a light-bringer came forward with a lamp swinging on his pole. Drummer held up his hand, declining the

assistance.

Within moments, he was cantering through the town of Sun's Breadth that surrounded the citadel. He shared the cobbled lanes with scattered pedestrians on night business, even with a few other riders. Enough people were about that his passing elicited little notice. He approached the gate in the city wall amidst the bustle of arguing shop owners and their helpers, and the tower guards let him through as part of that group.

Outside, the merchants went about setting up a market near the city walls, for tomorrow. With the army in the Rocklands, and soldiers going up and down the mountain, businesses in the town were thriving. The merchants kept their impromptu market close to the wall, however, so they could quickly retreat into the protected town if hostilities erupted among the armies.

Alone, Drummer took Vim down the mountain. The well-worn path would come out in the Rocklands along the Saint Verdant River, the line of green he had struggled to reach during his first escape attempt. Tonight, he would succeed. This time he would ride right past the Taka Mal army. He knew many details about them. In fact, he had heard nothing else for the past few days. He could evade most of their sentries and posts. For those he couldn't, he knew the passwords and expected behavior, and he even had the same type of horse used by Taka Mal officers. He didn't expect anyone to stop him. But beyond that? Ozar's men were patrolling the border; to reach Cobalt's army, Drummer had to get past them.

He understood why Jade and her advisors didn't want him going with the envoy at dawn. Their plans were logical. Knowing Cobalt through Mel, however, Drummer understood him in a different light. Cobalt needed to see Drummer to believe he was all right. More importantly, he needed to see Mel, or have tangible proof of her situation. If Drummer could verify Jade had no connection to Mel's disappearance, he felt certain Cobalt would listen. But that was a leap of faith neither Jade nor her commanders were willing to make, especially given how few times Drummer had actually met the Midnight King. He understood that. But they were wrong. If he could reach Cobalt, he had a chance to stop this madness.

Unfortunately, he had to get through the Jazid lines first. Ozar's men might capture him. He had a plan for that, too. A good plan—if it worked. If he didn't lose his nerve. If he could convince Jade to go along with him at the necessary time. If, if, if.

Cobalt or Ozar: Either way, Drummer would soon face one of the most formidable warlords among the settled lands.

The atajazid had yet to sleep, though midnight had come and passed. Ozar paced in his tent. He still heard the words of the messenger from Taka Mal who had come today: Cobalt threatens to attack at sunrise. The business with Kaj had not gone as well as Ozar hoped, for Cobalt had given Vizarana time to produce his wife. It would have worked better had Kaj delivered the queen's body, but she lay buried under tons of rubble. Although it would take time to dig out the remains of the people killed in that collapse, Ozar would have it done when this was all settled, not for the Chamberlight queen, but to honor Shade, who had been Ozar's confidant, loyal servant, and friend.

Regardless, Vizarana had trouble. Unless she convinced Cobalt that she had nothing to do with his wife's death, he would invade Taka Mal. It would be a crime for him to take the Topaz Throne. Ozar faced a difficult choice: Join with Vizarana or face Cobalt on his own.



The Jazid army was nearly five thousand strong and he could add another thousand in a year's time. They were well trained. Fighting in the desert and the Jagged Teeth Mountains would be easy for them and new to the Chamberlight army. They could, conceivably, defeat Cobalt. But if Cobalt took Taka Mal, he would gain what remained of their forces. Chances were he would massacre them, if he believed they had tortured his wife to death, but no certainties existed in that. Although Ozar had a chance to defeat the Chamberlight king, Cobalt could end up with the Onyx Throne, and that would truly be a perversion of nature.

Ozar knew if he supported Vizarana, they had a good chance of defeating Cobalt. Jazid could reabsorb Shazire, perhaps even the Misted Cliffs. It was a worthy goal, and he would take satisfaction in vanquishing this conqueror. And who knew, maybe Drummer Headwind would do everyone a favor and die in the fighting. Then Ozar wouldn't have to have him assassinated.

Damn Vizarana. He couldn't fathom why she had married that boy. Drummer was no match for her. She would walk all over him. She had been a fool, and she deserved to pay a price for her betrayal.

A rustle came from the entrance of his tent. "Sire?"

Ozar recognized the voice: General Dusk, his top advisor since Shade's death. But no one could replace Shade. The late scribe had looked after Ozar in the atajazid's childhood, a confidant when Ozar's parents gave him no outlet for his dreams or nightmares. Shade had followed him with loyalty, always at his side. Now he was dead. Ozar didn't know why the tower had collapsed. The queen had died, too, but it was paltry revenge, for she had to die anyway. He had no one to exact vengeance on except her husband.

"Sire, shall I return later?" Dusk asked.

"No." Ozar mentally shook himself. Then he went to the entrance and pulled aside the flap. "What is it?"

Dusk stood outside in his rough-hewn sleep clothes. "My apologies for the disturbance. You have a visitor."

"So late?" Ozar frowned at him. "Who is it?"

Dusk cleared his throat. "Drummer Headwind Quaaazera."

Ozar stared at him for a good five seconds. Then he murmured, "Well, well. Bring him in."

Dusk bowed with the deference of a general for his commander rather than the subservience expected from the lesser officers. It was appropriate for his station, but it felt strange to Ozar. Shade's reverence had always had a pointed quality that kept Ozar alert. He had been the only one who could respond to the atajazid in that manner; Ozar would accept it from no one else.

Ozar walked across the tent to a table, his manner deceptively casual, his shirt open at the neck. The flap rustled and he heard footsteps. Ozar knew it looked as if he were presenting his back to the people coming inside, but he was preternaturally aware of them and able to judge whether or not they posed him a risk, at least in the physical sense. He turned to see Dusk standing by the entrance, his hand on the hilt of his sword. The other man wasn't as tall. He wore a jacket lined with rich Kazlatarian fur, with the hood pulled up to hide his face. Ozar knew him anyway.

"You may wait outside," Ozar told Dusk.

The general bowed. “Yes, Sire.”

As Dusk withdrew, Drummer pulled down his hood. He looked like an expensive item Vizarana had bought, with that exotic hair and his rich clothes, which she had undoubtedly given him. No common entertainer could afford such lavish garments, not only the jacket, but also the suede trousers and boots. That she might dally with such a toy, Ozar understood. He didn’t approve of women having that freedom, but Vizarana was no child and she had ruled Taka Mal for nearly a decade. But why the flaming sun had she married him? Ozar didn’t believe for one moment Drummer had the blessing of the Dragon-Sun. This whole business stunk to the mountains.

Drummer spoke wryly. “Judging from your expression, I take it you find me offensive.”

“Oh, you’re fine.” Ozar waved his hand in dismissal. “It’s your new title I find offensive.” He went to a table and poured wine from a copper flask into a pair of tin cups. He didn’t believe in taking luxury items to the battlefield, whether they be goldware, crystal flasks, or expensive consorts.

He offered Drummer a cup. “Care to drink?” He smiled darkly. “Pity I didn’t poison it. I could be rid of you then.”

His visitor didn’t laugh. Ozar wasn’t even certain it was a joke. Although Drummer came forward, he didn’t take the cup.

Ozar set the second cup back on the table. “What do you want, Headwind?”

“Cobalt is going to invade Taka Mal tomorrow.” He put his hands in the pockets of his jacket. “He says his wife is gone. Without Mel he is—a difficult man.”

“My sympathies. It looks as if your status as consort will last a total of three days. Pity.” With malice, he added, “Unless Escar likes boys. You’re certainly pretty enough.”

“What is it with you all here?” Drummer seemed more puzzled than offended. “You think having darker hair and more height makes you more masculine?”

“No.” Ozar had to admit the fellow had courage. “I think being a man makes me masculine.” He sipped his wine. “So why are you here?”

“To offer a bargain.”

“And what sort of bargain might that be?”

“Support Vizarana tomorrow and I will annul the marriage.”

Ozar narrowed his gaze. “How?”

“I married her under false pretenses. I’m a commoner.” Bitterly he added, “Apparently in Taka Mal, that is enough to dissolve the union.”

“What false pretenses? She knew what you were.”

“Not if I claim otherwise.” Drummer’s face clenched. “I will swear it under oath.”

“I suppose it might work,” Ozar mused. “Everyone would know you were lying. But if you ‘confessed’ in a tribunal, they would have to annul your marriage.”

“I have one condition.”

“Do you now?”

Drummer dug his hands deeper into his pockets. Although Ozar had thought the jacket was gold-hued, he realized now it had a green tinge around the pockets. Odd that.

“My condition is this,” Drummer said. “You do nothing to harm our child. If Vizarana agrees, give me the child to raise.”

It was an intelligent solution. Perhaps the fellow had some brains after all under that yellow hair. Annul the marriage and Vizarana’s baby was no longer heir to the throne, which meant her first male child with Ozar would carry the title. And he knew she was fertile. If Drummer took the baby to Aronsdale, Ozar wouldn’t be plagued with that reminder of Vizarana’s lover.

“If I agree to this bargain,” Ozar said, “what guarantee do I have that you will uphold your part of it?”

“My word is good.”

Ozar laughed shortly. “Your word.” His voice hardened. “You will return to the citadel with a contingent of my men and tell Vizarana you have offered me this bargain, so she sees it is your idea and not coerced by me. Then my men will bring you back here, where you will be a hostage. When your part of the bargain is fulfilled, you will return to Aronsdale.”

Drummer didn’t look impressed. “How do I know you won’t kill me?”

Ozar set his goblet on the table. “You don’t.”

“Then why should I agree?”

“Because if you don’t,” Ozar said, “you and your beautiful wife are going to die tomorrow.”

Drummer’s face tightened. “Cobalt will come for you next.”

Ozar shrugged. “It won’t matter to you. You’ll be dead.”

“Have your men guard me in the Citadel of the Dragon-Sun.”

“So Vizarana’s bad-tempered cousin can kill them and let her renege on the bargain?” Ozar snorted. “I don’t think so.”

Drummer shifted his hands in his pockets. “Then let her send some of her royal guards back with me.”

Ozar had to admit, the boy knew how to bargain. It was a livable compromise. He had no desire to kill when it didn’t suit his purposes, and if he let Headwind live, Drummer would take the child. He regarded the young man with curiosity. “Why not go to Cobalt and give yourself up to him? That is why he came, after all. To negotiate for you.”

Drummer spoke quietly. "I would have laid my life at his feet to stop this war. But I couldn't get through. Your men caught me."

Ozar went over to him. "So you were already my prisoner."

"If you want to see it that way."

"I like it that way. It solves so many problems." He spoke briskly. "Very well. You will get your child. I will have Vizarana." He held his hand out, palm to the ceiling, in the classic offer of a bargain. "Sealed?"

Drummer pulled his hand out of his pocket and set it palm down on Ozar's. As they clasped, Ozar felt a tingle, like a residue of power. Then it vanished, and he suspected he had imagined it. No matter. It wouldn't be long before he had far more than a residue of power. Soon he would rule an empire, for even Cobalt Escar couldn't stand against his army and Vizarana's combined.

Cobalt sat with Matthew on a log behind his tent, in the dark, with a flask in his hand and a bundle between his feet that included both Mel's bloodied clothes and the packet with the dagger and her hair. Unfortunately, the ale was having no effect on the agitation that had gripped him since he saw Mel's silks.

"Did they think taking my wife hostage would incline me to negotiate with them?" he asked, incredulous. "First Drummer, then Mel, then blood and torture and death." He laughed harshly. "And they call me 'The Dark.'"

"I believe the idea was to extract from you a promise not to invade Taka Mal," Matthew said, for at least the fourth time.

"By killing my wife?" Cobalt took another swallow of ale. "This vile brew doesn't help." He stared into the night. With the moon out, it wasn't really dark, but he wanted no fire, no light, nothing that would bring his pain into sharper focus.

"She was pregnant," he said.

"You mean Mel?" Matthew asked.

"That's right." Cobalt glanced at him. "You could be like a grandfather to the baby, eh?"

Matthew's voice caught. "I would have liked that."

"Will like. Will." He downed the rest of his ale. Then he wiped his arm across his mouth. "Ah, saints, Matthew, if she is dead, I will die as well." He dropped the bag onto the ground. "After I destroy Taka Mal."

"What if they claim they never had her?"

"Lies."

Matthew pushed his hand through the gray mane of hair that fell to his shoulders. "How can we know? Maybe Kaj lied."

“Look at this.” Cobalt picked up the bundle of silk and showed Matthew the dagger. “Taka Mal.”

“It looks Zanterian.”

“The famous Zanterian caravans. They will travel no more.” He rummaged through the bundle for answers, but all he found was a ring on a broken cord.

“Is that Mel’s?” Matthew asked. “I’ve never seen it.”

Cobalt handed him the ring. “Neither have I.”

Matthew ran his finger over the metal. “It has an inscription inside.” He peered in the dark. “I can’t read it.”

“Come on.” Cobalt stood unsteadily and walked toward his tent. Or staggered. He had a hard time keeping to a straight line. Perhaps he was drunker than he had realized.

Inside, Matthew lit a torch and held it up. Cobalt squinted at the ring. “It says... ‘Remember Brazî, love Flutter.’”

“What?” Matthew scowled at him. “You’re drinking too much.” He pulled the ring away and held it close to his face. “Always remember Baraza, love Flower.”

“Flower, Flutter,” Cobalt grumbled. “It’s some woman’s name—” He stopped abruptly. “Not Melody. Flower.”

Hope flared in Matthew’s face. “Those silks belonged to someone else.”

He wished it could be true. “Only if they took them from Mel. I had them tailored and embroidered especially for her.”

“Then who is Flower?”

“Hell if I know.” Cobalt studied the ring. “Baraza is a lake in Jazîd. It’s beautiful. This sounds like something a woman would give a man in memory of an, uh, pleasant time.”

“Then why would Mel have it?” Matthew asked, perplexed. “I doubt she ran off with a woman named Flower.”

“For the shape. She took it from someone.” He stared at Matthew. “Someone in Jazîd.”

Matthew sat heavily on the trunk that served as a table. “You think a Jazidian kidnapped her?”

Cobalt felt ready to lunge, to attack, to move, but he couldn’t, because he had even less idea than before where to find Mel. “If they took her, the atajazîd may be part of this.”

“You’ve seen his army. It’s big. If he and Vizarana join forces, they may defeat us.”

“More evidence points to Taka Mal than to Jazîd.” Cobalt began to pace, though he couldn’t keep a straight line. “Is Kaj lying? Blast! If Mel were here, she could make one of those green spell things to find

out if he is telling the truth.” He stumbled on the edge of a carpet. “If Mel was here,” he muttered, “it wouldn’t matter what Kaj had to say.” He stopped, breathing hard, and felt a damnable wetness in his eyes. He angrily wiped it away. He wouldn’t humiliate himself by crying.

Matthew came up next to him. “Go to bed. Sleep. You have several hours until dawn.”

“Can’t sleep.” If he stopped moving, he would have to think. If he thought, it would be about his wife. The wife that Kaj claimed he saw die. Cobalt wanted to shout his protest.

Matthew pushed him toward the pallet. “If you plan on invading Taka Mal tomorrow, you need rest.”

Cobalt lay down on the pallet. He felt like a mammoth tree being felled. Matthew crouched at his feet and pulled off Cobalt’s boots. Then he pulled the blanket over Cobalt. “Sleep.”

“Not tired...” Cobalt mumbled.

“I know,” Matthew said softly. “Good night, son.”

Cobalt drifted with the heavy sensation that came before he dropped off at night. Then he slipped into the oblivion of sleep.

“No!” Jade whirled on Drummer, her night robe shimmering in the candlelight in the Narrow-Sun Hall. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. He couldn’t have done this. “I won’t allow it!”

“Jade—” Drummer started toward her, but his Jazidian guards brought down their ornate staffs, blocking his way.

The doors at the end of the hall slammed open and Firaz strode into the room, his robe flying out behind him, his sleep clothes wrinkled, his hair disarrayed. “What the beetling hell is going on?” he bellowed. “Vizarana, these guards of yours dragged me out of—” He broke off when he saw eight Jazidian warriors in full battle armor surrounding Drummer.

“Ah, hell,” Firaz said.

Baz ran into the room, also in sleep clothes but with his sword gripped in his hand. He jolted to a stop as he took in the scene. Spearcaster and Slate entered behind him, Spearcaster with his sword belt buckled around his sleep trousers, and Slate, who seemed disoriented as he pulled a robe on over his rumpled clothes.

“He made a pact!” Jade wanted to shout her anger at the sky. She stalked to Drummer and glared at the Jazidians when they blocked her way. “Let him go. He’s not going back with you. I don’t care what deal he made with Ozar.”

“For flaming sakes.” Baz strode over to them. “You went to see Ozar?”

“I tried to see Cobalt,” Drummer said. “I never made it. The atajazid’s men caught me.”

“See Cobalt for what?” Slate asked. His gray hair was mussed and he looked tired, older, worn down. “We were dealing with this.”

“You should have flaming stayed put,” Firaz said.

“For what?” Drummer demanded, with an intensity Jade had never seen him show before. “So I could watch Taka Mal fall to Cobalt because of my marriage?” His eyes blazed. “Ozar and I made a bargain. If he supports Taka Mal, I will annul the marriage.”

“Annul it?” Spearcaster asked. “On what grounds?”

“We have no grounds,” Jade told him.

“False pretenses,” Drummer said. “I’m a commoner.”

“Oh, this is delicious,” Baz said. Jade wanted to slap him.

“What pretenses?” Firaz demanded. “We all knew.”

“He’ll swear it under oath,” Jade said.

Drummer focused intently on her, and Jade was certain he was trying to tell her something, but he didn’t want his Jazidian guards to hear. He wanted her to go along with this for reasons he couldn’t say aloud.

“Jade, listen.” Baz took her arm. “I must talk to you.”

Spearcaster stepped forward. “Your Majesty?”

“It’s all right,” she said.

Baz scowled at Spearcaster. Officially Baz was his superior officer, but Spearcaster was thirty years his senior and Jade’s most experienced commander. It didn’t surprise her that Baz didn’t challenge him. Besides, Baz was supposed to be under house arrest. Given that he would lead her army tomorrow, though, the arrest didn’t carry much weight.

Baz drew her to the tall windows. Outside, stars glinted in the arid desert sky. He addressed her with atypical calm. “I have done a great deal of thinking.” When she started to speak, he glared. “Do not say, ‘What a change!’”

She smiled wryly. “I was only going to ask about what.”

“About you.” He spoke as if his words were daggers. “All my life I have assumed you and I would marry.”

“Baz—”

“Hear me out.” When she said no more, he continued. “Commanding the army suits me. And I won’t deny it—sitting on the throne, as your consort or as king, would have suited me.”

Would have. Past tense. “But?” she asked.

“It was true what you said the other day.”

“I said a lot of things.”

He didn’t answer directly. Instead, he said, “I could have pushed harder for marriage. I could have demanded it long ago. Slate and Firaz would have supported my claim, maybe even Spearcaster if he were convinced you would remain on the throne.”

“Perhaps.” Jade had always wondered what they would have done. She had expected one day she would find out. Yet here she and Baz were, both in their mid-thirties, and it had never happened.

“Why did you wait?” she asked.

“I have a great love for you, Jade. I always will.” He spoke softly. “But as a sister. Not a wife.”

Jade suddenly felt lighter. “I, too, cousin. For you.”

He grinned. “I would make a terrible wife. Or sister.”

“Baz!”

His expression sobered. “As the commander of your army, I must advise you to consider this bargain Drummer offers. We need Ozar. We have had no word from Jarid Dawnfield, no hint he will support us if—no, when—Cobalt attacks.”

“And as my cousin? What do you say?”

He spoke as if his words gouged his heart. “I have never seen you so happy as these past few days.”

Tears welled in her eyes. Angry at herself, she brushed them away. “I have never been this happy.”

“It is Drummer.” He didn’t make it a question.

“I love him.” She had been frantic when Clove had awoken her tonight to tell her Drummer was in the Narrow-Sun Hall—under Jazidian guard. “How can I give up my husband and my child?” Miserable, she said, “If I thought it would help, I would go to Cobalt myself and beg that he leave us alone.”

Baz grasped her upper arms and looked intently into her eyes. “Never beg, Jade. Never.”

“The Quaazera pride.” She laughed bitterly. “Don’t worry, I will not destroy it, though it may end our House. But begging Cobalt will achieve nothing if he believes we killed his wife.”

“You couldn’t get to Cobalt anyway.” Baz released her arms. “Ozar has too many patrols. They would catch you, too, just like Drummer. The only way to get through is with a full envoy of armed warriors, and even that may not be enough.”

She looked to where Drummer stood watching from across the room, his forehead furrowed, too far away to hear them. “I have no proof Ozar would honor his part in this hateful bargain.”

“Until your husband swears in a tribunal that he married you falsely,” Baz said, “Ozar must keep him alive and well. If you assign your soldiers to Drummer, they can escort him to safety after the tribunal. That way, you are better assured of his reaching Aronsdale.”



Jade averted her eyes, unable to look at Drummer while they discussed the end of the miracle he had brought into her life. "Ozar swears to spare my child if Drummer takes it."

"The child will be much safer in Aronsdale."

"I cannot give up my child!"

"And if the alternative is its death?"

A betraying tear ran down her face. "I hate this."

"Maybe Cobalt won't attack." He spoke with difficulty. "I will go with the envoy at dawn and talk to this subjugator of lands. See if I can convince him to negotiate. If he agrees, Drummer's bargain with Ozar becomes meaningless."

Jade knew how much it cost him to make such an offer on behalf of her consort. Sending the head of her army into the camp of her enemy was a risk if Cobalt chose not to honor the codes of war that protected conferences between opposing commanders. So far Cobalt had struck her as harsh, driven, and relentless, even obsessive, but he hadn't acted without honor. And sending a royal son of Quaaazera would show him respect.

She spoke quietly. "Thank you. It is a courageous offer."

"Don't thank me yet. Cobalt hasn't agreed. And we would be wise to ensure Drummer is well guarded before telling Ozar of any agreement to negotiate." He regarded her steadily. "But if you don't send Drummer back tonight, we will lose Ozar's support completely. It will be the final insult after you answered his proposal by marrying another man."

Jade knew what she had to do, however much she hated it. She forced out the words. "I will send him with my best warriors."

"And I will do my best with the envoy."

"I am indebted to you."

He reddened. "Just have a healthy, hearty baby, eh?"

She managed a smile. "I will."

Slate came over to them, limping, which worried Jade. "I'm sorry to interrupt," he said. "But the atajazid's men want to take Drummer back."

Jade laid her hand on his arm. "Are you all right, Aqui?" She rarely called him by his personal name, though she had known him almost as long as she had known Spearcaster. But tonight everything was tangled up. For all that Slate debated with her about everything from politics to the best spices in food, she felt great affection for him, as she would for a stern but good-hearted uncle. It worried her to see him so drained.

"Just tired," he said, more gruffly than usual. "I don't move as easily these days as you young people."

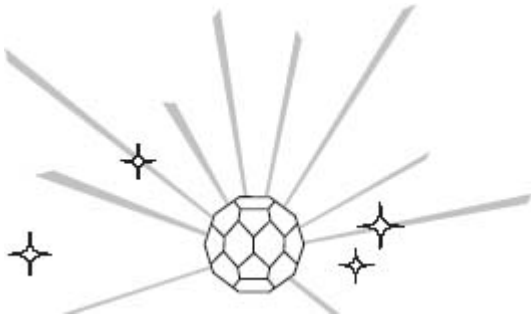
"You'll outlive us all," Baz told him. Jade could see he shared her concern. Slate and Spearcaster were

both getting older, but the years weighed more heavily on Slate.

“Stop worrying so,” Slate told her. “Come. Let us deal with your husband.”

In the hushed hours before dawn, they arranged for Drummer’s return to Ozar’s camp. Although Drummer seemed relieved she hadn’t refused, she sensed his fear. She felt as if she were dying.

Soon the sun would rise.



24

### The Dragon's Dawn

Mel scrambled to the top of the ridge. It was no thicker than a fortress wall, as if some monstrous deity had pushed up giant sheets of rock in row after row. She looked down the way she had climbed, and the drop made her stomach roil. If she lost her grip, she would fall a long way before she struck the bottom of the ravine between this ridge and the previous. She was clinging to a wall of the sky. All around her, more walls reached for the heartless roof of blue that capped the world. Behind her, the sky was lightening to herald the sun that would soon edge above the Jagged Teeth.

With one last heave, Mel sprawled across the top of the ridge. It extended barely more than the length of her body before it plunged down on the other side.

She looked west.

The ridges continued in rows stretching north and south, each lower than the last. It was an incredible and untamed vista. But the panorama wasn’t what made her breath catch. She had seen such vistas endlessly for the past day. What made her sit up and stare—what caused her swell of emotion—was that in front of her, to the west, she could finally see beyond the ridges. The foothills of the Jagged Teeth lay before her and an army stretched along them. Beyond that, in the misty reaches of Aronsdale, another army had gathered, one even larger than the Jazid forces. Chamberlight.

“Thank you,” Mel whispered to Azure, to Lapis Lazuli who rode the wind and turned diamonds into waterfalls, and to Verdant, who tended the edible plants that had kept Mel alive. Today she could reach Cobalt—if Ozar didn’t find and kill her first.

In the dimness that preceded dawn, Cobalt stood in his tent. He had lit no candles or lamps. The still morning cooled his feverish mood. Despite his few hours of sleep, he had awoken early. He broke his fast on battle rations and dressed in armor. He held his helmet under his arm, and his sword hung at his

side. Soon he would know what Taka Mal had to say. He feared their words, but he feared even more to hear nothing at all, to have Mel disappear with no trace except a bloody rag.

The flap of his tent rustled, and Matthew spoke. "Cobalt? Are you awake?"

"Come in," Cobalt said.

Matthew pulled aside the flap, and predawn light poured through the opening. He was wearing the scuffed leather armor of a cavalry man. He glanced around the dark interior, then fastened up the flap to keep the light flowing inside.

"Why are you standing in the dark?" Matthew came over to him. "Have you eaten?"

"Yes." Cobalt answered only the second question. He couldn't say he sought the calm darkness because otherwise he felt as if he would explode.

Matthew spoke quietly. "An envoy approaches from the Citadel of the Dragon-Sun."

Cobalt's pulse jumped. "Is Mel with them?"

"I don't know." Matthew started to reach out, but when Cobalt stiffened, he dropped his hand. "Cobalt, you have to be realistic. She could be in Jazid. Even if Taka Mal has her, they won't send their hostages to negotiate for the release of their hostages. And they may truly have no idea what happened to her."

"I will not negotiate for Mel," Cobalt said. Yet if they gave him evidence she lived, he would do anything to get her back. He had questions about the Jazid ring, troubled questions, but he had more evidence against the House of Quaaazera than against Onyx.

Matthew was watching him with that strange expression, as if his heart were breaking. "Shall we go outside?"

"All right."

Matthew stood aside to let Cobalt go first. Cobalt didn't care about protocols. Matthew had been his childhood protector, the man who dared the king's wrath. Matthew was his confidant. His mentor. Matthew and Agate Cragland had stood up for Cobalt at his wedding. Mel had once asked him if Matthew was his friend. Had it only been a year and a few months since then? He had known so little about friendship, he hadn't understood what she asked. He had said, He is my stable hand. It was what Matthew called himself until Mel gave him the title of stable master, which Cobalt acknowledged was a better description of Matthew's job. Even that seemed paltry, though. How did he define their link? Matthew was one of the few people Cobalt trusted. The only others were Mel and his mother.

He is my stable hand. That had been so very wrong.

Cobalt glanced at Matthew as they walked through the muted predawn. "Thank you."

Matthew blinked at him. "For what?"

Cobalt wanted to say: For granting me more than three decades of the love that Varqelle, my father, could never give me.

“For making sure I was awake,” Cobalt said.

Matthew harrumphed. “After all that ale you drank last night, I thought I’d find you snoring on your stomach.”

On another morning Cobalt might have laughed or growled good-naturedly. Not today. He had nothing in him but this horrible waiting sensation. Waiting to know if his wife had died.

A man approached them in the predawn dimness. Agate Cragland. The general wore armor and carried his helmet.

“My men met the envoy outside of camp,” Agate said. “They are waiting for you.”

Cobalt felt his pulse hammering. “Who came with them?”

Agate spoke with difficulty. “Neither your wife nor Drummer.”

The morning crashed around Cobalt, in silence. “I see.”

“That doesn’t mean they aren’t alive,” Agate said.

Cobalt started walking, and Matthew and Agate joined him. The army was awakening around them, the foot soldiers and cavalry and tenders, breaking their fast, donning gear, seeing to their mounts, sharpening weapons.

Preparing to fight.

A dry wind blew across Cobalt’s bare chin. He had shaved this morning in case he would see Mel. Now he wondered what his razor would do to the person who had tortured his wife. He tried to shut the images out of his mind, but his imagination didn’t fail him, however much he wanted that to happen. He saw Mel screaming, and he couldn’t escape that agony.

They walked on, and soldiers rose to salute him. After he passed, they settled down to their meals or tasks. They were well trained. Ready to fight. In his mind, he was already giving the order to move against Taka Mal. Or Jazid. Ozar and Vizarana were probably working together. Someone had taken his wife, and the maggot was out there in the Rocklands or the Jagged Teeth.

They hadn’t brought Mel. Nothing they said would change that. If he invaded Taka Mal, he would start a war of far greater proportions than the one in Shazire. Jazid would probably fight with Taka Mal. The Aronsdale army remained a cipher. They might stay put, they might ally with him, or they might go against him. He didn’t know. He had sent envoys to Ozar and Jarid, and they had sent envoys to him, and no one was committing to anything.

In his mind, Mel screamed as the whip struck her.

“No,” he whispered. He remembered vividly why he had spent so much of his life locking his emotions in a mental fortress. If he kept everyone out, he was safe. Then Mel had shattered the walls of his inner citadel and taught him to love. Now he was paying the price, because he couldn’t wall away his anguish.

The campsites became few and far between, and still he walked with Matthew and Agate. Up ahead, a cluster of riders were dismounting. Some of the men and horses bore the red and gold colors of Taka

Mal; others the blue and white of the Misted Cliffs. He thought he also saw the Dawnfield violet and white. His unease grew. Had Jarid allied with Taka Mal?

As Cobalt approached, they turned to him—and he gave a start. The man in Dawnfield colors was Samuel Fieldson. Cobalt didn't know him well; they had spoken only a handful of times. But those interactions had impressed Cobalt. He trusted the Dawnfield commander more than any of these Taka Mal officers.

General Spearcaster had returned, but today he deferred to a man in bronze armor and a red-plumed Dragon-Sun helmet. The diagonal line of six enameled disks across the stranger's chest marked him as a Taka Mal general. Cobalt had never seen so many disks, even more than Spearcaster's five. The hilt of the man's sheathed sword glittered. The Chamberlight army had spent this past season training to counter those strange curved blades.

The man pulled off his helmet. He had dark hair, a strong chin, a hooked nose and the large build classic for a Taka Mal warrior. He held himself with the ease of someone confident in his authority, and he nodded to Cobalt as royalty would to royalty. His voice, rough in its nuances, rumbled with the Taka Mal drawl.

"I am Baz Goldstone Quaaazera," he said. "General of the Queen's Army."

Saints almighty. They had sent the Quaaazera prince himself. Cobalt didn't miss the implied honor. But Lieutenant Kaj claimed this man had whipped Mel to death.

"What have you come to tell me?" Cobalt's words scraped with the strain of controlling his emotions. "That you will negotiate for my wife? I will not bargain. Release her." His voice nearly cracked, but he kept it steady. "Or my army will march against Taka Mal."

Baz's forehead furrowed. "Your Majesty, we know nothing of your wife. I swear this to you on the honor of my House."

Anyone who tortured a pregnant woman had no honor. Cobalt pulled out the bundle he had stuffed in his helmet. Yellow silk. He spoke with difficulty. "Twenty-three days ago, my wife was taken from Alzire. Yesterday, Lieutenant Kaj deserted your army to bring methis." He shoved the silk at Quaaazera. "Perhaps you recognize it."

The general took the cloth. As he examined it, his face paled. "It is soaked with blood."

"Those are my wife's clothes." Cobalt didn't know how he kept his voice steady. "Kaj says you tortured her to death and are doing similar to her uncle."

"He lies! We did not kidnap your wife. No one has tortured Drummer. Vizarana is a civilized and decent human being."

"And you are a good actor."

Baz flushed an angry red. "You believe a deserter before the commander of the Queen's Army?"

"He gave me evidence." Cobalt took the silk from Baz and clenched it in his raised fist. "Give me evidence that he lies! Bring my wife."

“When I last saw your future wife,” Baz said, “she was nine years old. I have no idea where she is.”

Agate spoke. “Then bring Drummer Headwind here.”

Spearcaster and even Fieldson paled. Baz said, “We don’t bring hostages to negotiate their own release.”

“We need only see him,” Agate said. “To know he is well.”

Baz nodded his acceptance of the compromise. “He will be at the negotiations.”

Cobalt didn’t want to compromise. “Bring him now,” he grated.

“We will not be coerced!” Baz said.

“You are not such a good actor after all,” Cobalt said. “Your lies are obvious.”

“Wait,” Fieldson said. He looked from Baz to Spearcaster and back to Baz again. The Quaazera prince scowled at him. Then Baz spoke to Cobalt with a formality that indicated respect, though it sounded strained. “I would like to confer with Sphere-General Fieldson, your envoy.”

“Why?” Cobalt demanded. “So you can plan more lies?”

“Your Majesty.” Fieldson addressed him with similar formality, albeit more polished. “As your envoy, I wish to speak with you in private. But I must present it to the rest of this Taka Mal envoy. I cannot act unilaterally.”

It fell within accepted protocols. Cobalt wanted to refuse anyway. Had it been Baz asking, he would have, but he knew Fieldson’s reputation for veracity.

“Very well,” Cobalt said coldly. “Five minutes.”

Fieldson bowed, followed by Spearcaster, and after a minuscule but detectable pause, Baz did, too. The men withdrew a short distance away and spoke together. The rest of the envoy and the Chamberlight guards had stepped back, holding the horses, which left Cobalt standing between Matthew and Agate.

“They’re hiding something,” Matthew said.

“Yes.” Cobalt spoke to Agate. “You lead the foot troops. I will go with the cavalry.”

Agate didn’t have to ask what he meant. “You cannot fight with your men. We can’t risk your death.”

Cobalt clenched the silk rags. “I must go.”

“Your father told me the same thing when we went into battle in Shazire.” Agate’s gaze never wavered. “And he died.”

Cobalt just shook his head. He couldn’t sit by while his men went to war. Especially not when it involved Mel.

The three generals were coming back. They looked grim, but they seemed to have reached a consensus.

Perhaps they had simply ensured their lies were consistent.

Fieldson nodded to Cobalt. "May we speak privately?"

Cobalt indicated an outcropping of rocks that jutted up like giant teeth. The sky had turned a vivid carnelian hue that painted the air and land around them red, as if they were already bathed in blood.

He and Fieldson walked away from the others, to the outcropping. Fieldson spoke without preamble. "It is true, what they told you. They know nothing about your wife."

"Why won't they show me her uncle?" Cobalt asked.

"He is no longer their hostage."

"What?" Cobalt stiffened. "Why not?"

"He is the atajazid's hostage now, by his choice." The lines on Fieldson's face were deeper than when he had left Harsdown. "Ozar refuses to ally with Queen Vizarana unless she marries him. If you attack, and Vizarana has no help from Jazid, she fears her country will fall to you. So she has agreed to marry Ozar."

It all made sense, but it also made absolutely no sense at all. "This has nothing to do with Drummer."

"It has everything to do with him. He is the reason you are here. The negotiations are to free him. Ozar knows Vizarana has no wish to marry him. He believes she seeks to trick him, and he wants assurance that any negotiation with you includes him as well as Vizarana and King Jarid. So he is keeping Drummer. It was his condition for promising to support Taka Mal if you attack."

"It's all convolutions," Cobalt said. He didn't believe Fieldson, though he couldn't pinpoint why. "What does Jarid have to do with this?"

Fieldson gave him an odd look. "Half my envoy consisted of Dawnfield officers. Jarid Dawnfield is here. We assumed he would participate in the negotiations."

Cobalt had assumed no such thing. He saw the logic, but he trusted none of this. "It is all smoke screens. I don't see my wife. Only bloody clothes."

Fieldson raked his hand through his silvered hair. "Saints know, I want to find Mel, too. I've known her since her birth, and I would lay down my life for her. But attacking Taka Mal won't tell you what happened to her."

Cobalt couldn't bear the words. "Drummer isn't here, either."

"I saw him last night. He was fine."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Let us meet at the citadel to negotiate," Fieldson said. "Yourself, Vizarana, Ozar, Jarid, and any associated officers you want to include. We will bring Drummer."

"Bring him now."

“Sire.” Fieldson spoke with respect, but his voice was strained. He looked exhausted. “He is a hostage for a reason. We came to negotiate for him. I entreat you, let us negotiate as we had planned.”

Cobalt wanted to hit something. He needed to release the anger and fear building inside of him, and all this talk rang false. “My condition was this—bring Drummer and my wife at sunrise or I will invade. They are not here.”

“Saints, man, look.” Fieldson waved his hand at the massed armies in every direction. “If you do this, thousands will die.”

Cobalt’s voice hardened. “I’m not the one who kidnapped a queen. And her uncle.”

“No, you didn’t. You invaded Shazire and Blueshire with no provocation.”

“Taka Mal invaded the Misted Cliffs—with no provocation—and tore it apart.” Cobalt felt as if he would explode. “I put it back together.”

“That was two centuries ago.”

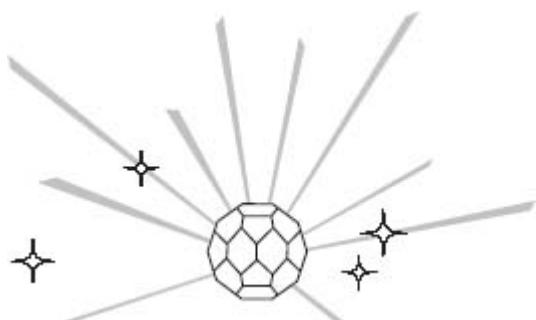
“Two days. Two centuries. The offense remains the same.”

“I implore you,” Fieldson said. “Talk first.”

Cobalt looked at the lightening sky in the east. He waited, and soon the edge of the sun appeared above the Pyramid Foothills like a rim of molten bronze.

“Sunrise,” Cobalt said. “Your time is up.”

With that, the Midnight King spun around and strode back to his army.



## The Carnelian Desert

Jade raced down the corridor, her tunic rippling in the wind of her passing, her soft-soled boots pounding the ground. She reached the courtyard as the envoy entered, their horses kicking up gravel. Men shouted, armor clanked, and stable hands ran to meet them. Baz wheeled around his horse, calling to his groom while he dragged off his helmet. The moment Jade saw the grim set of his chin and his battle-ready posture, she knew the envoy had failed.



“Saints, no,” she said, though no one could hear her.

Baz swung off his horse, followed by Spearcaster and Fieldson. Jade stood in the archway of the citadel with the wind clutching at her clothes while the generals strode across the yard. When they reached her, Spearcaster and Fieldson bowed and Baz nodded, but she cared nothing now about formalities.

“Cobalt refused to meet?” she asked.

“He walked away,” Baz said harshly. He turned to Fieldson. “Tell her.”

“I couldn’t get through to him.” Fieldson looked more tired than Jade had ever seen him. “He heard what I said, but nothing would bend him from his course.”

“Kaj had his wife’s clothes.” Baz clenched his fist as if he held the garments. “Shredded and soaked in blood. He told Cobalt we tortured her to death and are doing the same to Drummer.”

“What?” Jade stared at him. “Ozar has agreed to let Drummer attend the negotiations. Let Cobalt know.” Drummer was his own best proof of his well-being.

“It won’t matter,” Fieldson said. “Not if we can’t produce his wife.”

“This is insane,” Jade said.

“Kidnapping his wife was brutally effective if someone wanted to provoke him into a war,” Spearcaster said.

“That may be,” Fieldson said bleakly. “But I doubt whoever planned this realized what he was unleashing. Cobalt isn’t just a man, not when he fights. He’s more. And he’s angry, that deep, burning rage that nothing cools.”

“I watched his men running maneuvers while we rode through his camp,” Spearcaster said. “They’re more than well trained. They’re like gears in a machine he has oiled until it hums.”

Jade felt as if she were sinking. “You don’t think we can beat him even with Ozar’s army, do you?”

Fieldson regarded her with a weariness that seemed much deeper than any sleep could help. After a long pause, he said, “Nothing is impossible.”

Baz spoke bitterly to her. “Think who has the most to gain if you and Cobalt go to war.”

“Even Ozar wouldn’t go that far.” Jade wasn’t certain if she was trying to convince them or herself. “Bloody saints, Ozar has Drummer! And Kaj claims we’re torturing him. What if Ozar agreed to let Drummer attend the negotiations to prove we were doing exactly that? Baz! We have to get Drummer back.”

“Jade.” Her cousin spoke with pain. “Cobalt is preparing to march. I must join our forces. I will go to Ozar and speak to him about Drummer, but our first priority must be the battle.” Baz laid his hand on her arm. “Ozar has nothing to gain by hurting Drummer. The damage was done the moment the Chamberlight queen disappeared. And remember eight of our best men are with Drummer.”

Eight wasn’t enough. She needed eight thousand. Her voice hardened. “Ozar better have his own

bodyguards. Because if he is behind this, I will kill him myself.”

Drummer sat on a trunk covered by a Kazlatarian rug holding his glittar. The tent swayed with the early-morning winds. Four of his Taka Mal guards and four of his Jazidian guards were present. Two were sitting on stools, one polishing his weapons and another breaking his fast, and the others stood posted around the walls of the tent. The place was bursting at the seams with soldiers. At least the other eight of them were asleep in another tent.

Drummer idly strummed a tune on his glittar. He had laid his jacket on the trunk, and now he reached into its pocket. The cube felt solid in his hand. He took it out and set it on the rug. Then he went back to playing.

“What is that?” the guard eating breakfast asked.

Drummer regarded him innocently. “A glittar.”

“Not the harp,” he said, with disdain. “That.” He pointed to the cube.

“Oh. That.” Drummer shrugged. “A good luck talisman.”

The guard grunted and went back to eating his mush.

Drummer let his music wander into a rhythmic melody he played for parents who wanted their children to sleep. He concentrated on the cube. The music focused his abilities and the spell came so easily, he would have laughed had he been alone. He wove a yellow spell, hypnotic, soothing, soothing, soothing. It spread throughout the tent, invisible. That was one reason he had assumed his spells were minor. Mel’s showed as colored light, and she was the strongest mage he knew. But the talent apparently manifested differently in different people. For him, colors appeared more rarely than for his niece, unless he was deliberately making a spell of light.

He played a song of sleep and dreams, and one by one, his guards drifted off. The heads of the two on stools sagged to their chests, and the men posted around the walls sat on the ground. Several lay down and the others nodded off while sitting up. He played a bit longer to make sure they were out. Then he picked up his cube, eased off the trunk, and slipped out of the tent. So far, his plans had worked as he expected. He had feared Jade would resist his coming back here even more than she had, but she seemed willing to trust him.

The morning was young and clear and hot, though the sun was barely above the mountains. It didn’t reassure Drummer that so few people were about this early. The army must have moved out, a prospect that chilled him despite the day’s heat, for it could mean they had gone to fight.

He slipped across the camp, staying in shadows. This was the most dangerous part of his plan, for he was clearly recognizable right now. He made a spell to shunt light around his body; unless someone looked closely, he would be invisible—he hoped.

Drummer soon reached a tent used to supply the warriors with weapons and armor. At first he thought he was in luck; no one was inside. He soon discovered that neither was the equipment; they had taken it all. His search turned up only some old leather leg guards and boots. He found a breastplate that would be too small for most Jazidian warriors, with their muscle-bound physiques. It fit him fine, though he

suspected he would look like a boy to the other soldiers. The helmet had a broken faceplate, but it hid his yellow hair. His blue eyes would be visible, though; he would have to hope no one came close enough to tell.

They had taken the swords, bows, axes, and other instruments of mayhem. It didn't much matter, since he had little experience with weapons, except for a dagger. He would have liked to carry his glittar and play more spells, but he could imagine how it would look, a warrior strumming a harp. He stuffed it in a saddlebag. His search turned up nothing else useful, so he went back outside, for all appearances a Jazidian warrior. The armor felt strange and uncomfortable, but at least it protected him.

Getting a horse turned out to be more difficult, not because none were left in camp, but because several stable hands had remained behind as well. Although he found the gear he needed in a tent, he couldn't reach the horses without anyone seeing him. Finally he gave up slinking around and strode boldly into a pen with a gray stallion. It nickered while he saddled it. Two stable boys of about twelve were sitting on the fence across the pen, watching. They looked confused, uncertain whether to protest or to help him. He finished outfitting the horse and swung into the saddle, and they still hadn't figured out what to do. So he blithely rode past them, out of the pen, headed west, toward the army.

Drummer had known he might fail to reach Cobalt when he set out last night. Since he hadn't been able to sneak through the Jazid lines, he was doing the next best thing: He became part of those lines. He had used mood spells to gauge Ozar's response and determine, to the best of his ability, that the Jazid king wasn't planning to kill him. He had tried turning the spell around to influence Ozar, but the reversal had hurt, somehow. Whether or not it worked, he couldn't say, but when Ozar had agreed to the bargain, he hadn't been lying. Now Drummer would ride through the Jazid army from within it and achieve his goal—to see Cobalt—before the king lost his head and attacked Taka Mal.

On the morning of the fifth day in the second month of summer, the Chamberlight army marched across the western border of Taka Mal, six thousand men. The Onyx and Quaazera forces joined, over seven thousand men altogether. The armies met in the Rocklands. Each had a distinctive commander: One fought as his cousin's protector; one fought for greed; and one was driven past all reason, just as the mythical dragons of Taka Mal were driven into the mountains to mate—and then die.

They met with volleys of arrows, with the inexorable push of cavalry and foot troops, and with a crash of swords. War cries split the desert calm. So began the Battle of the Dragon-Sun, the largest war in one thousand years.

Mel pulled herself up to an outcropping and struggled to her feet. Sagging against the rocks, she closed her eyes, breathing hard. The morning had blurred into a haze as she crossed the mountains, searching desperately for paths through the sheer walls and deep ravines.

She was fortunate Ozar's fortress hadn't been higher. Had she been farther up, where no trees grew, it could have taken her weeks, even months, to come down, if she hadn't died from a fall, or starvation and thirst, or a mountain cat that had too little prey in the hollowed spaces of the Jagged Teeth.

When the fire in her overtaxed muscles eased, she walked around the outcropping of rock and found—another outcropping. She climbed over it. On the other side, a rocky slope dropped down from her feet, but it wasn't steep like the inclines higher in the mountains. With wind blowing the hair that had

escaped her braid, she looked across the jumbled foothills to the flatlands beyond—and her breath stopped.

“No,” Mel said. “No!”

They were fighting. In the Rocklands, an ocean of soldiers seethed and boiled. Ozar had carried through with his threat.

The madman had provoked Cobalt into war.

“You can’t go out there!” Matthew tried to grab Admiral’s reins as he rode up alongside Cobalt.

“You go too far.” Cobalt yanked away the reins, then wheeled Admiral around and galloped away from the camp where he had been conferring with his commanders. It didn’t matter that he was the king of three countries. He would not stay in safety. His fire wouldn’t be denied.

Cobalt rode hard and soon outpaced Matthew. He passed the outskirts of the fighting, his sword gripped in his fist. His “experts” claimed the weapon was too heavy and too long, but they were wrong. Lighter swords felt like toys. After the experts watched him train, they said no more, though their faces had paled.

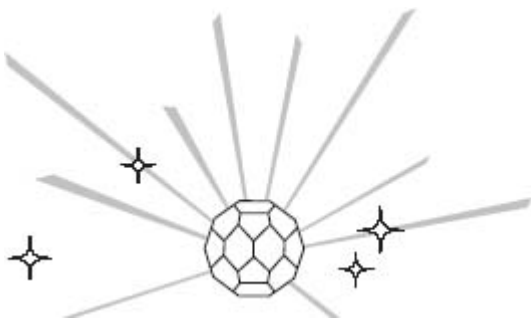
A man in Jazidian armor rode at him, large and broad shouldered, astride a bay horse. A shadow-dragon helmet hid his face. He shouted his war cry and swung his mace in an arc toward Cobalt, the power of his strike obvious in the speed of the heavy weapon as it descended.

The fire that blazed in Cobalt happened only when he fought—truly fought—for his life. It was unlike anything else he experienced. Mel said it was a spell. He knew only that it filled him with greater strength and speed, and heightened senses that surpassed even his normal intensity.

Time slowed as Cobalt leaned back from the mace. Despite the speed of the descending ball, he easily evaded the blow. Admiral dodged as well, with an innate understanding of his needs. In that instant, Cobalt brought up his sword, his gaze locked on the sliver of skin above the man’s breastplate and below his helmet. He swung at his opponent’s neck—and felt his blade hit. The blow threw the warrior off his horse, and the man took an endless, endless time to fall. He hit the ground in a sprawl of armor and blood.

Cobalt kept riding, burning, caught in his fury. He wielded his sword and men fell. None were worthy opponents. None had strength, speed, or skill. He shouted his war cries and Admiral surged ahead. At first warriors engaged him, but soon they were wheeling their horses to flee. Foot soldiers ran. He kept on, driven by the thought of his wife and his heir dying by torture—and he, Cobalt, had done nothing, nothing to stop that horror.

Now they would pay, every Taka Mal and Jazidian warrior alive. He would soak the desert red with their blood.



26

### Dragon Star

Drummer knew what had happened before he saw it. The shouts, the clank of mail, the scream of men and horses—it roared in the parched morning air. He was too late, too late, Cobalt had already gone to war.

Drummer rode through jagged formations, the lowest foothills of the range that towered behind him. He came around a thicket of rock spires and reined to an abrupt stop before a nightmare. The same Rocklands that had almost killed him were host now to the deaths of hundreds. Men churned across the plains as far as he could see to the north, west, and south. They wore the armor of Quaazera, Onyx, Chamberlight, but nowhere did he see Dawnfield, which meant that either Windcrier had never reached the Aronsdale army or else King Jarid had refused the treaty.

He clenched the reins. Cobalt shouldn't be in combat, but Drummer had no doubt he was out there, wreaking havoc on anyone unfortunate enough to come within reach of his inhuman speed and strength. Drummer doubted he could reach the Aronsdale army now. He couldn't go around a battle this extended. Nor could he ride through; with neither weapons nor training, he would be slaughtered within moments. If he could have reached Cobalt last night, his plan might have prevented all this, but now it was too late.

He had to do something. But what? He knew the tales, that Mel had stopped the Shazire battle with her magecraft, wielding what many believed had been an ensorcelled sword of fire. He also knew the truth she had told almost no one else; she had created no more than light. Anyone could have killed her had they had dared to try. No one had gone near her, but that had been at twilight, when the battle was essentially over. This was the heat of the morning and the first blast of hostilities, and no sword of light was going to stop this insanity.

Drummer retreated into the forest of rock spires. He had an idea, but he would be vulnerable, easily killed, undefended while he concentrated. He needed a vantage point where he could see the battle but not be seen, where he could create magic unlike anything he had ever tried, probably beyond his ability, but for his child and the wife he might never see again, he had to try.

He rode deeper into the spires until he was picking his way up a shallow slope with outcroppings jutting around him. He found a cave above the fighting. He led the horse to the back of the cave and rubbed it down, then left it to nibble at grass growing out of cracks in the rock. After he removed his armor, he took his saddlebags to the mouth of the cave.

He could see the fighting from here, but he had to be careful. A sheer drop-off fell from the mouth of the cave. If he exhausted himself, he might lose his balance and slip, roll or topple over the edge. Settling

cross-legged at the mouth, he gazed out across the Rocklands. From this high, the battle looked even worse, for he could see the full extent of the carnage. He felt ill and wondered how Ozar could consider killing a more noble purpose than music.

Drummer set the cube on the ground. When he tried to settle the glittar in his lap, he was so tense, he nearly snapped one of the strings. He felt foolish and ineffectual, trying to stop one of the worst battles in history with a harp. He played a few notes and focused on the cube. Almost immediately, he realized he had too little strength to create a green spell substantial enough to influence the soldiers in any significant numbers. He might convince a few men to stop fighting, but that would only get them killed. He had to work with red, orange, and yellow spells, which meant he could make light and heat, and he could soothe but not heal. The lower the color level, the greater the spell he could make.

He closed his eyes and centered his spirit, seeking whatever resources gave creativity to his spells. When he opened his eyes, a gold haze surrounded him, and he saw the combat below through a curtain of light.

He began to play.

The music came from an inner place he had never drawn on before, a well of depth and sorrow. The notes saturated the air as if they were liquid, and they wept with grief. He tried to enlarge his spell to cover the battle, but it was so hard, a strain so far beyond what he had ever done that he wondered at his audacity to believe he could do anything at all with it—except fail.

But he kept playing.

Jade stood on the balcony of the citadel and watched the battle with horror. Her army, her people, her country: All would suffer from this insanity. Baz, Spearcaster, Firaz, Slate, so many others—would this be their last day of life? Just a little longer, and her marriage might have established stability in the settled lands. All that was gone, and she would never see her husband again, not even at the tribunal, for Ozar would never allow it, afraid she might change her mind.

The Aronsdale army had marched to the border, but no farther. They gave no indication they intended to join any army. The cavalry had indeed arrived at the last minute, but they didn't intend to fight.

Jade put her hand on her abdomen, and tears wet her face.

Mel slid down the slope, bringing a miniature avalanche with her. She could see the battle raging. Her chest heaved with exertion, and her hands scraped the ground and sent pebbles cascading away from her body. The slopes she had to traverse were no longer sheer, but the broken land hampered her until she thought she would shout her frustration to the sky—or at the commanders who had started this saints-forsaken war. If she were lucky, she would reach the Rocklands before the father of her child destroyed three countries.

Jason Windcrier huddled in the tent, chained to a pole. The Jazidian soldiers who had caught him called him a spy. They had beaten and starved him, and they threatened to throw him on Ozar's mercy when

they had a chance. When they were done with him.

This morning they had vanished, leaving him for the first time since they had caught him two days ago. He had struggled since then with the manacles that chained him to the post. He was a strong man, hale and hearty, but the chains held him well. Finally he managed to yank the post out of the ground and collapse the tent. He staggered to his feet and fought his way out from under the canvas. A chain hung from his wrist manacles, but he was free.

He found himself on a mass of rock the height of a tower. To the south and east, the battle raged. To the west, the Aronsdale army watched, rank upon rank of their soldiers in the polygon formations adopted by Dawnfield armies, shapes their mages could use during combat to aid the army with their spells.

Jason climbed laboriously down to the ground. He was leaving a trail, he knew, but he no longer cared. By the time his captors returned, if they survived, he would have reached his goal—or died trying.

With his wrists still manacled, Jason Windcrier ran for the Aronsdale army.

Cobalt recognized Baz Quaazero by his magnificent armor and dragon helmet, which shone gold in the harsh sunlight. The prince was surrounded by his officers as they cut a swath through the battle. The Midnight King urged his horse forward.

Cobalt fought like a man possessed, for he was crazed, overcome with hatred for the monsters who had brutalized his wife. He cut down Baz's officers quickly. He acted on instinct, swinging, striking, dodging with a rhythm so natural he was barely aware of his actions. Then he was facing Baz, and for the first time he met a foe who challenged him. They fought on horseback, Cobalt with his straight sword, Baz with his curved blade. Every time Cobalt drove him back, Baz surged forward. He came in too close for Cobalt to effectively use his long sword, and their blades clanged together. He and Baz ended up alongside each other, their horses facing in opposite directions, agitated by the proximity, Baz's sword hooked around Cobalt's weapon.

"Your wife isn't in Taka Mal!" Baz told him, furious.

"Liar." Cobalt strained to break their lock. The ring with Mel's clothes had roused his suspicion of Jazid, but it didn't matter: Taka Mal and Jazid fought together. The battle fury was on him, and he saw no differences in his foes, only enemies.

"Escar, listen!" Baz said. "Ozar set it up. Kaj lied for him because Ozar paid Kaj's gambling debts."

Cobalt finally managed to break their impasse. He shoved Baz away and brought up his sword.

But he remembered the ring in Mel's clothes.

"He wanted to force concessions from Vizarana," Baz said, his chest heaving with exertion.

Cobalt went at him with a hard swing, but Baz parried and drove him back.

"Damn it, Escar!" Baz shouted. "Ozar is the one who killed your wife. Not me." Intent on his words, he lost his momentum and his defense faltered, just for an instant—but it was all the opening Cobalt needed. He swung his sword in the perfect arc to exploit his foe's exposed neck. One blow, and Baz would die.

But—the ring.

Cobalt pulled his strike and just sat on his horse, heaving in breaths. Baz froze in mid-swing, staring at him, his eyes barely visible behind the faceplate of his helmet. Then he lowered his sword, only a bit, but enough.

“You tortured Drummer,” Cobalt said. “That’s why you wouldn’t let me see him.”

“Drummer is Ozar’s hostage.”

“You’re hiding something.”

“I’m telling you the truth,” Baz said. “Drummer is a hostage to force Vizarana’s behavior.” In a voice full of pain, Baz said, “She only treated Drummer the way women have been torturing men since the beginning of time. She gave him her love.”

Cobalt couldn’t stop fighting; he was like a machine that once started had to finish. He was literally shaking from his efforts to contain his murderous rage. But all his talking with the Taka Mal envoys these past few days, with Fieldson, with Matthew, with Cragland, even with Baz, it all kept pointing in the same direction, away from Taka Mal and toward Jazid.

With a jerk on the reins, Cobalt wheeled Admiral around and set off across the field—leaving Baz alive. Admiral’s hooves pounded the rocky ground. The fighting was sparser here, and he encountered fewer soldiers. He struck down those who attacked him and raced past those who fled, galloping toward the Jazidian command post on a plateau above the battlefield.

Cobalt couldn’t have said how long it took to cross the battlefield. The fighting went in slow motion. Aeons passed in an instant. Yet almost as soon as he started, he was reining Admiral to a stop below the command center. He rode up the trail to the plateau, and Admiral neighed in challenge as they approached the guards at the top. Cobalt shouted across the open area to the tent on the other side. “Onyx! Come out!”

Warriors blocked his way, eight men in armor and helmets, black plumes restless in the wind. A man exited the tent, an officer of high rank judging from the braid on his uniform. He took one look at Cobalt and disappeared back inside. With the Jazidian guards as his escort, Cobalt rode Admiral across the plateau. This place wasn’t for battle. The ancient codes of war decreed such a post an area of truce where one commander could approach another to confer or surrender. No one could come up here to interfere, neither Cobalt’s men nor any more from Ozar’s army. If Cobalt violated that code, these guards could kill him with impunity. However, they were in full view of the battlefield, which meant they couldn’t violate the code, either; if they did, Cobalt’s men would sweep over this post.

“I will speak to Onyx.” Cobalt’s voice rumbled.

One of the men came forward with careful respect. “You must first relinquish your sword.”

Cobalt had no intention of relinquishing anything. He kept his weapon gripped in his hand. “I come to see your atajazid.”

“Do you wish to surrender?” the man asked.



“I will speak to Onyx,” Cobalt said. “Not to you. Not to Quaaazera. Not even to your damned Shadow Dragon.”

The officer stiffened at the insult to the dragon, and for a moment it seemed he would challenge Cobalt. Then he spun around and strode into the tent. The others remained outside, hands on their sword hilts.

Ozar didn’t come out of the tent. Instead, he rode from behind it on a magnificent charger. He sat as tall in the saddle as Cobalt, and his shoulders were almost as broad in his armor. The stones in the hilt of his monstrous sword were black.

Onyx.

Ozar spoke coldly. “You come here armed to kill.”

“You kidnapped my wife,” Cobalt said.

The atajazid answered with scorn. “It is not my problem if you cannot keep track of your wife.”

Cobalt gritted his teeth. Stonebreaker used to talk to him that way, full of ridicule for the grandson he subjected to so much pain, physical and emotional. It had filled Cobalt with a rage that had driven him to pound his fists against the stone blocks of a tower until his shredded skin dripped with blood.

“You took my wife.” The storm built within Cobalt. He had to know the truth. “You whipped her to death.”

Ozar considered him. Only his eyes showed through his helmet. The distant roar of combat echoed below them, and Ozar’s warriors stood back, watching.

The atajazid spoke with deliberate, calculated malice. “She did have a beautiful body. I’d never seen yellow hair in a woman’s crotch. And those breasts. Although they were less attractive with blood all over them.”

Cobalt had his answer.

He thought he would go insane. Maybe he did. He raised his sword, and the others moved through invisible molasses. As he closed the distance between himself and Ozar, riding Admiral, his sword descended toward the king. From horseback, Ozar countered in slow motion. The responses of his warriors on foot were even more delayed, so belabored that Cobalt could judge where every one of them would be well before the man reached that position.

A man to his left was raising his blade, and Cobalt saw it would hit Admiral before Cobalt’s blow connected with Ozar’s sword. In mid-swing, Cobalt changed direction, slashing at the man. He cut the warrior’s arm off at the shoulder. The man screamed, a drawn out sound that went on a long time.

Cobalt raised his sword to counter Ozar’s blow. Incredibly, the atajazid hadn’t finished his swing. Cobalt had no idea how fast he was moving, but he remembered Mel’s words:

Saints, Cobalt, when you fight, it’s as if you have supernatural powers. I didn’t think it was possible to move that fast.

Except Mel was dead.

His blade met Ozar's with an eerie drawn-out crash. Cobalt felt the immense power and reach behind that swing and knew the atajazid was no ordinary opponent. The warriors around Cobalt assailed him, but they moved so slowly, he could engage them between his swings with Ozar. He knew what Ozar had intended; incite him into a precipitous attack so the Jazid warriors could kill him without violating the code. Except they misjudged their opponent, and the price of that mistake would be their deaths.

As Cobalt fought, his sense of time sped up and his strikes became blurs. He cut, parried, slashed, countered, and one by one the warriors fell. Then it was only he and Ozar facing each other. Ozar's men lay on the ground, incapacitated or dead, none able to fight. Two were dragging themselves and several others clear of the area before the horses trampled them.

The sky had turned crimson from horizon to horizon, or maybe it was the fire within Cobalt. The day blazed, as if the Dragon-Sun had come to earth, but it burned within him and exploded outward at this man who had murdered his wife and unborn child.

He drove Ozar toward the tent, intending to entangle him in its sides, but the atajazid rallied and backed him toward the edge of the plateau. Cobalt had never fought an opponent with such power or speed, and his arm was tiring. Admiral stumbled on the mace of a fallen warrior, and for a brutal instant Cobalt thought his horse would topple off the plateau. Ozar came to this combat fresh, whereas Cobalt had been fighting for most of the morning.

Then Admiral lurched forward and regained his footing.

Ozar suddenly switched his sword to his other hand and lunged at Cobalt from the left. Disoriented, Cobalt faltered, and Ozar's blade skidded on his shoulder, scraping layers off his jerkin and cutting into his arm. With a shout, Cobalt jerked the reins and backed up Admiral. He had never seen anyone change hands during a fight with such ease. His own arm ached, and blood dripped down it to the hilt of his sword.

Ozar pressed his advantage, coming in fast. He wielded his sword in his left hand with as much speed as with his right. Cobalt blocked his strikes, and every time Ozar's blade rang against his sword, Cobalt's injured arm shook with the impact.

Admiral screamed and reared, a reaction so strange that Cobalt froze, gripping the reins as he stared at the receding ground. In the same instant, a jagged sheet of light split the red sky, followed by thunder so loud it sounded as if it could crack the world in two.

The atajazid tried to cut across Admiral's legs. Infuriated, Cobalt slashed at him as the frenzied horse came down, but Admiral side-stepped when his hooves hit the ground and it threw off Cobalt's strike. Ozar came at him from the left, and Cobalt was having trouble judging his angles of attack. Ozar wasn't purely ambidextrous; he didn't fight as well with his left hand as with his right. But combined with Cobalt's weakening arm, it was enough to give Ozar a pronounced advantage.

They fought beneath a sky that flamed. Ozar wore away Cobalt's endurance, whittling it down. Back and forth, back and forth, until Cobalt's vision hazed. Still Ozar kept at him, his left arm strong, and Cobalt knew he was facing his death in the shape of a man with a dragon helmet and black armor.

Desperate, Cobalt let his arm sag, just enough to draw in Ozar, tempting him. It was a feint; to take advantage of Cobalt's "lapse," Ozar would have to leave his right side undefended for just an instant. Expecting the atajazid's swing, Cobalt dodged the blow and came in with his own. His sword rang on

Ozar's breastplate. The blow disrupted the atajazid's defense for only a second—but that was enough. With a surge of power, Cobalt let go of the reins and threw his last strength into a swing with both of his hands gripped on the hilt of his sword. He caught Ozar in the space between his breastplate and his helmet. With the sheer power behind his swing, his blade kept going—

And sliced Ozar's head from his body.

Cobalt groaned as his arm fell to his side, his sword hanging. The atajazid's severed head rolled across the bloody ground and hit a tent pole. As Ozar's horse faltered, his body slowly toppled out of the saddle and crashed to the ground.

Cobalt stared at the atajazid's body. He barely kept one hand on the hilt of his sword. Gasping with exertion, he looked around at the plateau, at the carnage and death, and he knew that if Mel had lived, she would never have forgiven him for the horrors he had wrought today. He had truly become the Midnight King.

A scar ran down Jarid's chin, giving his face a harsh quality. He otherwise had the classic Dawnfield features, the straight nose and sculpted cheekbones. His dark hair grazed his shoulders.

"He is a Harsdown officer," Aron was saying. Eighteen years old, Aron was Jarid's heir and his joy. Jarid didn't want his son to die in the furious combat across their border. He dreaded the news brought by this Harsdown major.

"And you say this man was in Taka Mal?" Jarid said.

"Yes." Aron's face darkened. "He came here in chains. He's been beaten and starved."

"Will he live?"

"The healers say yes," Aron said. "He insists he must see you. He says his news cannot wait."

"Very well," the Aronsdale king said. "Bring in Penta-Major Windcrier."

Like the sea whipped by a hurricane, with waves of violence that crashed on the shore of humanity; like a tornado that tore apart the land; like a wildfire that would blaze until nothing remained—so the fighting raged across the land of the Dragon-Sun. Mel stood on a ridge high above the battle, and she wanted to shout her protest to the sky.

She was too late.

In one year, Cobalt had lost his father and the father's love Cobalt had so long craved; his grandfather, who had left him with a legacy of pain and fury he could never reconcile; and his wife and heir, or so he believed. He would destroy entire countries in his grief and his thirst for revenge.

Taka Mal, Jazid, and Chamberlight men fought below. Cobalt's forces had the upper hand, but the Aronsdale army was approaching, banners flying, ranks of cavalry and foot troops. If they joined the violence, this would become the largest battle in the history of the settled lands. The destruction could be

incalculable.

“Stop!” Mel said. She was three stories above the plain, much too far away for her words to carry over the roar of battle. To anyone below, she would be no more than a figure on a ridge silhouetted against the sky.

The red sky. It blazed. Far across the field, on a plateau as high as this ridge, two men were fighting, dark against the carnelian sky. Above them, the air flamed, gold and red and orange. Mel knew then that she had hiked too hard and too long, that the lack of food, her injuries, and desperation were making her hear things. A haunting melody wove through the clamor. It was like the music Drummer wrote, except those tunes had been playful and lacking depth. This was full of grief and power, so mournfully beautiful that it hurt.

The colors in the sky were forming a luminous figure. Vague and insubstantial, it looked like a dragon in sunset colors. She didn’t understand how she could hear music, but it filled her the way a spell filled a shape. Down below, the battle raged beneath the dragon, so much killing and so much misery.

Mel took the flail off her belt and removed the cloth that protected her from the spikes. Standing with her feet planted wide on the rocky spur, she clenched the handle and extended her arm straight up with the ball hanging by its chain.

She swung the ball.

With a strength honed by years of training against soldiers heavier and more powerful than herself, Mel whirled the ball in a circle, around and around, a three-dimensional shape tracing out a two-dimensional shape. Except the ball wasn’t perfect. Spikes marred its symmetry. She delved within herself for a power that had nothing to do with light or softness. Her spell caught on the circle created by the swinging ball, and the circle deepened the effect, but it wasn’t enough to focus her true power. Her spell scraped across the spiked ball and didn’t catch.

Swing.

Swing.

Swing.

The spell built.

The music saturated Mel. It became part of her. In the sky, an incredible figure was forming, a dragon of fire and sun. Mel drew from the music and filled her spell with power. It scraped across the spiked ball—

And caught.

The spell formed with a power unlike anything she had ever known, bigger, more intense even than in Ozar’s fortress. And this time she controlled it. She stood on the ridge, swinging the flail above her head, and the ball focused her power—

It exploded outward.

A sheet of lightning cracked in the sky, though no clouds marred the roof of the world. The lightning forked in hundreds of branches that hit all over the battlefield and thunder crashed, deafening. Warriors

surged away from the strikes in waves of people. The ground where the lightning hit was burned and shattered, and cracks ran out in all directions, zigzagging across the Rocklands, fast and furious.

In that instant, the dragon roared and filled the sky with the fire of his breath. Mel knew such spells. It was light, only light, created somewhere, somehow, by a mage of great power, but paired with the very real lightning, it was terrifying.

Her fury poured through the ball. She swung it and jagged sheets of lightning hammered the land as if nature had gone mad. Mel controlled the spell, hitting rock rather than people, striking again and again while the dragon roared flames across the blazing sky. The entire world, everywhere Mel could see, had turned unbearably brilliant.

Soldiers ran for shelter, desperate waves of humanity pounding off the Rocklands, seeking cover. The spell blasted through Mel until she thought it would tear her apart. Her helmet was suffocating her; she ripped it off her head, still swinging the ball. Her hair whipped around her body in the wind created by the force of her spell.

The battle fell apart in ragged patches all across the field. Warriors took shelter in the foothills or their camps. People pointed at Mel and the dragon in the sky as they ran, and their mouths opened in shouts she couldn't hear. She scorched the field with lightning, and thunder roared across the land while the Sun-Dragon bellowed its fury.

Mel didn't know how long she stood with the ancient forces blasting through her. Aeons seemed to pass. Gradually she comprehended what had happened.

The fighting had stopped.

With a groan, Mel tried to release the spell. It dragged off the ball, trailed down the spikes, and sparked into the air. She couldn't stop swinging the flail; it would fall down her arm and tear apart her limb. So she did what it was meant to do; she swung it hard and struck her target—the ground. It shattered rock where it hit, and spikes bit deep into the ridge. Cracks spidered out from the impact in an explosive burst.

In the sudden silence that followed, Mel could hear her ragged breathing. She jerked the handle and pulled the ball free. With the spiked weapon hanging at her side by its chain, she straightened up and looked out at the shattered battlefield. Everyone who could run had left. Those who remained, and who still lived, were huddled on the ground. Nothing stirred.

Except one man.

He was racing toward her on a giant black horse, beneath the blazing dragon.

Across a splintered land, beneath a lurid sky, Cobalt rode. Whatever demon had cracked open the world could destroy him as easily as a horse flicking a gnat off its haunches. But he didn't care—for he saw the figure on the ridge, her molten hair streaming around her body, and he knew that either the Dawn Star Goddess truly had descended to earth, or else his wife had come back from the dead to create the monster of all spells.

Cobalt stopped below the ridge. He jumped to the ground and set his palm against Admiral's neck.

“Wait for me.”

The horse nickered, but he stayed put. No path led up the sheer, rocky walls of the ridge, so Cobalt grabbed a handhold and climbed. He didn’t feel the exertion. He didn’t care when footholds crumbled beneath his feet or his hands slipped. He would climb this ridge, and nothing would stop him.

Finally he reached the top. He pulled himself up and stood facing the woman.

Mel.

She stared at him, her face streaked with dirt, her hair wild, her armor battered, gripping a profoundly ugly flail—and he wanted to shout, to grab her, to crush her against him, to roar his joy to the Dragon-Sun above them. Since he had never learned how to express such emotions, he did all he could do, which was say, “You’re alive.”

She was watching him with a strange expression, as if she were dying and full of joy at the same time. “So are you.”

He had so many words for her, he jammed up and could say nothing.

“By the Saints, Cobalt,” she said. “What have you wrought?”

“Vengeance.”

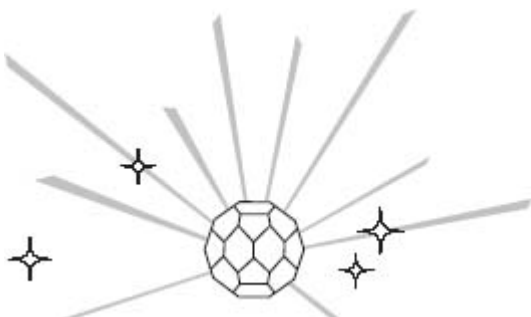
“For me.”

“Yes.” He touched the armor where it covered her abdomen. “And our child.”

She put her hand over his. “Our child lives.” Her voice cracked. “And so do I.”

The battle madness that had gripped Cobalt since he touched her bloodied silks finally released its grip. He made a choked sound and grabbed her into his arms. Mel groaned, and he could only guess what had driven her these past days. He saw the welts on her neck and hands, and knew he would find more under her armor. Ozar may not have whipped her to death, but those silk clothes had been on her when the atajazid bloodied them. His dismay and fury poured out of him, but then another emotion replaced them, something so much more powerful that it humbled and terrified him. He didn’t know how to name it, except to call it love.

Mel put her arms around his waist and laid her head against his chest. They stood that way, high on the ridge, while the dragon faded in the sky. He bent his head over hers, and for one of the only times in his adult life, Cobalt the Dark wept.



## Empire

Wind keened across the Rocklands and past the balcony where Jade stood. She clenched her spyglass and took a shuddering breath, the first she was aware of since that moment when the Dragon-Sun had roared in a sky of fire, and lightning had torn apart the world. Never in her life could she have imagined those sheets of jagged light sweeping the land, sweeping the battlefield free of soldiers.

Until today, she had never truly believed the Dragon-Sun existed. Yet no legend spoke of a rain of lightning. She had heard music, Drummer's music, but so mournful. She had seen him create tricks with light, yes—but a gigantic dragon in a red sky? Even that, by itself, she might have believed. But not that plague of lightning.

The armies below had retreated, and Aronsdale had stopped its march. People were trickling across the field, tending the injured and taking the dead to bury. Jade couldn't stop staring at the ridge where two figures had stood, silhouetted against the red sky. A dark warlock and his warrior goddess. They were gone now, Jade didn't know where, but she knew the world had changed.

Footsteps thudded behind her—she knew that tread—

Jade whirled around. "Baz!"

He was holding his helmet under his arm. Grit covered his armor and the dark stains on his hands chilled her. This wasn't the cousin she had known all her life. But he was alive.

They embraced, and tears slid down her face. When they separated, his cheeks were wet, too. He tried to smile and failed.

"We must meet," he said. "All of the leaders in this war. You, Chamberlight, Onyx, Dawnfield."

"And Drummer?" Her heart felt as if it stopped. Waiting.

"I haven't seen him."

Jade managed to nod and keep her calm, though she wanted to run wildly looking for him. Her country had to come before her consort, and until she faced Ozar and Cobalt, she wouldn't know what that meant. She set her hand on her abdomen, wondering what heritage remained for her child. "Who won?"

Baz exhaled. "I don't know. Cobalt went to fight Ozar."

"Two monsters facing each other."

"I'm not so sure." He spoke quietly. "Cobalt could have killed me. He didn't."

Jade didn't believe for a moment that the Midnight King had shown her cousin mercy. "You would have killed him."

"No." He lifted his sword hand and flexed his fingers as if they hurt. "He was inhuman. Faster and stronger than any man. I've never seen the like." Grimly he added, "I hope I never do again. He let me

live, Jade, for I couldn't have bested him. No one could."

A knock came behind them. Turning, Jade saw a sergeant in the doorway, worn and battered. He had an odd look, one she couldn't read well. It wasn't fear. Sorrow? He bowed deeply. "I am sorry to disturb you, Your Majesty."

Jade heard the tension in his voice. "You have a message?"

"Downstairs," he said. "Your officers are returning."

Jade's pulse surged. She and Baz went with the sergeant down the tower stairs. He led them through the tiled halls to a side entrance of the citadel. When Jade saw who was there, she cried, "Ravi!" and broke into a run.

Spearcaster was talking with a group of men, battered but very much alive. He turned as Jade called, his face creasing with a smile. She flung herself into his arms and the aging warrior hugged her. Jade didn't care if it was inappropriate to embrace her military officers. She was too happy to see him alive.

"Well, damned and dust," a grouchy voice said. "Don't I get any of this squeezing, too?"

Jade pulled away from Spearcaster to see Firaz glaring at her. Laughing and crying at the same time, she hugged him as well. Her generals looked like hell, but they had survived.

Except...she looked around. "Is Slate with the army?"

Spearcaster exhaled and Firaz glanced away.

Baz came to her side. "I'm sorry."

"No." Jade stared at him. "Damn it, no!"

Spearcaster spoke quietly. "He died as he would have wanted, Vizarana. On horseback, defending Taka Mal."

Tears ran down her face. Moisture showed in Spearcaster's eyes, even in Firaz's. She didn't understand how people from the Misted Cliffs could be so restrained. She wanted to weep her grief to the stars. But she couldn't. Not yet.

"And Drummer?" she asked.

As soon as they all exchanged glances, her heart lurched. Spearcaster hesitated. "Vizarana—"

She felt as if her world stopped. "Tell me."

"We had word that he left Ozar's camp disguised as a Jazidian soldier. But—" He seemed to run out of words.

"But what?" She didn't want to hear, didn't think she could bear this, but it would be even worse not to know.

"I just got the report." Spearcaster laid his hand on her shoulder and spoke softly. "His body was found



at the base of the cliffs. He apparently fell from a cave.”

“No,” Jade whispered.

His voice caught. “I’m sorry.”

“No.” She hugged herself, arms around her abdomen. “No!” He couldn’t be gone, not her golden light. “It can’t be him!”

Firaz spoke gruffly. “One of our men identified him.” Miserably he added, “I so much wish I could say otherwise.”

More tears ran down her face. She hated Cobalt and Ozar with a passion that filled her heart. They had taken her husband, and she wanted them to rot in a thousand hells for eternity. Now they would try to take her throne and her heir. She would kill them first, or die in the attempt, before she would let them wrest from her the legacy for her heir, the child born of the only happiness she had truly known.

“Come.” She steeled herself. “We must face these kings who would destroy my country.”

They met in the Narrow-Sun Hall in the Citadel of the Dragon-Sun: Escar, Onyx, Quaazero, Dawnfield. Men filled the room and guards stood posted around the walls. Few empty chairs were left at the great circular table.

Cobalt strode into the hall alone, in full armor, except for his helmet. He brought no generals. This was the man who had set out to conquer the known world and dared face a vengeful goddess. His dark eyes burned with a fire that would incinerate them all.

Jarid Dawnfield, the Aronsdale king, arrived with his son Aron, both tall and strong, though beside the Midnight King no one looked as imposing. The Aronsdale generals had strange names and geometric ranks. Jade brought Baz, Spearcaster, Firaz, and Fieldson. Dusk, the General of the Onyx Army, came with four of his generals—and without Ozar.

When they were seated around the table, Jade glanced at Baz and just barely tilted her head toward Dusk. He shook his head slightly, his face puzzled.

Jade addressed the assembly. “We cannot commence without the Atajazid D’az Ozar.”

“His Majesty is injured,” Dusk said. “He cannot attend.”

A murmur went around the table. His news startled Jade; she hadn’t expected Ozar to fight.

Cobalt’s unusually deep voice rumbled. “Ozar is dead. I cut off his head.”

A silence followed his words. No one seemed to know how to respond. Then Spearcaster said, “You have proof of this claim?”

Jarid Dawnfield spoke. “I saw them fight using my spyglass. What Cobalt says is true.”

Jade couldn’t absorb it. Dead? Ozar had inflicted this war on them with his brutality and his greed, but he

had also been a strong leader. Such a painful irony that his death freed her from her oath to marry him. It no longer mattered.

No. It mattered. Her marriage remained. The child she had made with Drummer would sit on the Topaz Throne.

Jade regarded Dusk from across the table. "I would call the lack of a head more than an 'injury.'"

Dusk met her gaze, but he spoke wearily. "The injury is to all of Jazid."

"Do you represent the House of Onyx?" she asked.

"I do. The atajazid is only seven years old."

Jade hadn't realized Ozar's heir was that young. Jazid would have a child king for some years. She spoke formally. "We honor the memory of the Atajazid D'az Ozar and welcome his son to the Onyx Throne."

Jarid spoke. "The House of Dawnfield honors the memory of the Atajazid D'az Ozar and welcomes his son to the Onyx Throne."

Dusk exhaled, his tense posture easing, and relief showed on the faces of his officers. "We thank you," he said. A politician might have added more, but Dusk's answer was enough.

"No." Cobalt's voice rumbled. "The House of Onyx is defeated by the House of Chamberlight."

Jade silently swore. She had feared this. "You claim the Onyx Throne?"

He met her gaze. "And Topaz."

"You did not cut off my head," Jade said tartly. "If you try to take my throne, tomorrow we will go to battle again." She leaned forward. "You may call down the wrath of the Dragon-Sun himself, but I will never relinquish my title."

"Your men will not fight," Cobalt told her. "Not after your dragon roared in the sky."

Baz spoke sharply. "They will fight."

"If mine refuse," Jade told Cobalt, "so will yours."

"Why?" His hard gaze never left her face. "The goddess of the Dawn herself supports them."

"No!" The voice came from behind Jade.

They all looked up, and as Jade turned around, her breath caught. Mel Escar stood in the doorway like a warrior queen out of the ancient legends. She wore Jazidian armor and an iron breastplate. Welts and gashes covered her bare arms, and her yellow hair fell in wild curls around her body, down to her waist. She had the face of an avenging angel.

Mel walked into the room, never taking her gaze off her husband, and he rose to his feet. Mel stopped in front of him. "I will not be used for a war."

Incredibly, he didn't challenge her. Jade thought he had forgotten the rest of them were in the room. He stood, taking in the sight of his wife as if she truly were the Dawnfield goddess.

His eyes flicked to her torso and back to her face.

Ah, no. Jade suspected she was the only one in the room who fully understood that look—for Drummer had often done it to her these past few days. It felt like a dagger in the grief she was barely keeping at bay. Saints help them, the Midnight King would soon have an heir.

"If you go warring tomorrow," Mel told her husband, "it will be without me."

Everyone remained frozen. Mel might be the only human being alive willing to naysay Cobalt the Dark in front of such a council. What would he do now that she refused him in this public manner? Incredibly, he didn't threaten her or raise his hand in violence. He simply inclined his head. Mel nodded, then stood by the chair at his right and faced the table. No one protested her obvious assumption that she would participate in the war council.

The Midnight King turned his burning gaze onto Jade. "If you insist on going into battle tomorrow, our men will die. Relinquish the throne and you will spare them."

Jade rose to her feet. He terrified her, but she wouldn't be cowed. "I will never relinquish my throne to you."

Dusk also stood up. Jade could guess his thoughts. Cobalt had killed Ozar. Whether or not he had a valid claim to the Onyx Throne became a moot point if no one could stand against his army.

"Perhaps we should discuss this more," Dusk said.

Jade felt a sinking in her stomach. Without Jazid, she had no chance. She didn't know if even their combined forces could resist Cobalt's well-trained army.

Jarid Dawnfield stood up. "If you pursue the Topaz Throne, you will face my own men as well as those from Taka Mal." He met Cobalt's gaze. "My army is whole and fresh."

Relief swept over Jade, and she sent a silent thanks to the Dragon-Sun. Jason Windcrier must have made it through after all.

Cobalt stared at Jarid with an expression that at first Jade thought must be anger. Then she realized he was more puzzled than anything else. "Why would you fight for Taka Mal?" Cobalt asked, baffled. "That has never happened."

"We have a pact with the House of Quaaazera," Jarid said.

Cobalt frowned at him. "How could you have a pact?"

"Because of me," a voice said.

Jade whirled around. A man stood in the entrance to the hall, his clothes covered with dust, his shirt ripped, his boots cracked, his hair tangled—and he was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen.

“Drummer!” Jade cried the word as her heart leaped. She ran to him, and he strode toward her, and she didn’t give a flaming sun if it looked undignified. When they met, she threw her arms around him, and he held her close, his arms tight around her. She wanted to laugh, then cry, then shout. He kissed her, and Jade returned the kiss with fierce joy.

General Firaz’s curmudgeonly voice came from behind them. “If you two are done, do you think we could continue?”

Jade drew her head back from Drummer, tears pouring down her face. “They told me you were dead.”

He touched her cheek, his expression tender. “Just knocked out. Acrobats learn how to fall without hurting themselves.”

Jade wanted to kiss him again. It was all she could do to restrain herself. Instead, she drew him to the chair next to hers. Half the people at the table were already on their feet, so she stood with Drummer facing them, defiant—and overjoyed. Even if Cobalt hadn’t set a precedent here by having his consort attend the war council, Jade would have brought hers to the table.

Mel raised an eyebrow at Drummer. “It appears, Uncle, that your time here hasn’t been boring.”

He smiled like the sun. “My greetings, Mel.”

“You do not look as if anyone was torturing you,” Cobalt growled.

Baz jumped to his feet. “No one here tortured anyone!”

“Would you all sit the blazes down?” Firaz said. “I’d really rather not conduct this meeting on our feet.”

Everyone blinked at him. Then a rustle came from around the table as everyone took their seats. Jade wanted to sing, and she barely held in her exuberance. She and Drummer would have time for that later. Plenty of time. Their whole lives.

General Dusk spoke to Jarid. “Quaazera had a pact with Onyx. Queen Vizarana and her consort agreed to an annulment. The atajazid supported the Taka Mal army because the queen agreed to marry him. We have witnesses to this pact.”

“You’re married?” Mel’s astounded voice rippled across the table. “Drummer, what have you been up to?”

He grinned at her. “I’ve been busy.”

Jade spoke formally to Mel, unsure how to take the measure of this queen. “His Majesty became my consort three days ago.”

“What majesty?” Dusk demanded. “He’s a commoner.”

“Not after his marriage,” Baz said.

“His marriage is annulled,” Dusk told him.

“My pact was with Ozar.” Jade paused. “Ozar is dead.”

They all looked uneasily at Cobalt. He didn't seem to talk much. Jade would have felt sorry for his wife, except she was just as alarming. Perhaps he was the brave one, to spend his nights with the reincarnation of a warrior goddess.

Cobalt spoke to Jarid. "You cannot fight my army. You have a treaty with us."

"The treaty works both ways," Jarid said. "You cannot fight us." He nodded toward Jade. "Queen Vizarana has wed a member of my House, through my cousin Muller's marriage to Chime Headwind. My oath to defend my kin supersedes my treaty to you."

"You would fight me?" Cobalt demanded.

Jarid met his gaze. "Yes. And I would call on Harsdown."

Sphere-General Fieldson spoke. "As General of the Harsdown Army, I would recommend we support Aronsdale."

"I would rather die," Mel said flatly, "than see my House go to war with itself." She glared at her husband.

Jade thought surely Cobalt would rebuke her for challenging him in front of three other sovereigns. However, he didn't seem to follow any protocols except his own. His forbidding face softened when he looked at his wife. Then he turned and spoke to Jarid. "I would not like my father-in-law go to war against me."

"It would be unfortunate," Jarid said.

"I have a solution," Jade said.

They all turned to her, guarded in their response, even her own generals. She hadn't discussed this with them. She would have preferred to, but she needed to speak before all these growling kings decided to slice up her country among themselves.

"Cobalt defeated Ozar," Jade said. "It is less clear what army triumphed in the field of battle. Cobalt has won the right to the Onyx Throne but not the Topaz Throne. Let Jazid become a realm of Escar and Taka Mal align with Aronsdale."

Dusk leaned forward, flushed with anger. "King Cobalt violated a truce of surrender—one he himself called—and murdered the atajazid."

"I called for no such truce," Cobalt said. "Why would I surrender when my army was winning?"

Anger snapped in Dusk's voice. "You came to the atajazid and called on him during battle. The codes of war apply, Escar. It was a truce. You attacked without provocation. You should be tried and executed for war crimes."

Cobalt watched him with a gaze so dark Jade prayed he never focused it on her. "Your atajazid tortured my wife. He sent a man to tell me she had been whipped to death. He gave me the bloodied clothes he ripped off her body. Off my pregnant wife. My queen and my heir. I consider this provocation to kill him and every general in his army, and to grind Jazid into the earth until nothing remains of its towns, its

merchants, its caravans, or its so-called wonders except broken, burnt ground.”

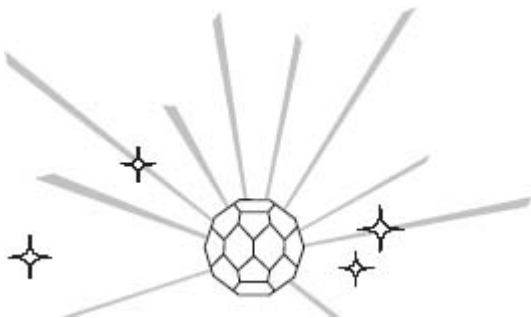
Silence followed his words. Jade had known Ozar was capable of cruelty, but she had never thought he would go so far. She believed Cobalt and his sorceress wife could do what he threatened.

And this time, Mel didn’t refuse him.

In the end, they signed a treaty of unprecedented complexity. Jazid would become Cobalt’s realm. He surprised Jade and spared the lives of the generals and the children of the atajazid. Harsdown, Aronsdale, and Taka Mal established a pact that bound them together. Cobalt agreed not to attack them if they didn’t move against him.

No one bothered to deny the obvious. Cobalt had become the Midnight Emperor. He ruled the Misted Cliffs, Blueshire, Shazire, and Jazid. Someday his wife would rule Harsdown, and the child she carried would reign over it all. Jade expected Cobalt to call his realms after his name—Escar or Chamberlight. Instead, he named it for his wife.

So the Dawn Star Empire was born.



28

### The Conscience of a Conqueror

Jade left her bodyguards at the entrance of the Narrow-Sun Hall and walked into the long room alone. The antiqued sunlight of late afternoon slanted through the tall windows. It was hard to believe that only yesterday, four sovereigns had made history in this room. Today, they mourned their dead. Hundreds had fallen. But it could have been far worse; had the fighting not stopped, thousands would have lost their lives. Today they began the painful journey to recovery and the complex process of establishing peace in the settled lands.

The hall wasn’t empty. One soldier stood at its other end, before the tall window, looking at the Rocklands or even farther, to Aronsdale, a misty green line on the horizon. The warrior was alone, imposing in black knee-boots, black leather pants, and no breastplate, just a leather vest with nothing under it. The skimpy vest and tight pants left no doubt about the soldier’s sex; her curves filled out her armor, and her gold hair, brushed now and sleek, fell down her back. Jade would never have thought armor on a female would be sensual, but even she could see why men stopped and stuttered and ran into things when Mel Dawnfield Escar walked by. She was a most unusual woman.

As Jade approached, Mel turned around. Jade joined her at the window, acutely aware of the younger woman’s height. Faced with Mel’s unadorned, spectacular beauty, Jade felt insubstantial, even vulnerable in her emerald silks, with bangles around her neck and wrists, kohl on her eyes and gems in her hair.

Jade inclined her head. "Light of the day, Your Majesty."

Mel returned the nod. "It is my honor to meet the Atatakamal D'or Vizarana."

Jade blinked. Jazid kings used their formal title—Atajazid D'az, or Shadow Dragon Prince—but Jade rarely went by Atatakamal D'or, or Dragon-Sun Princess. It was too hard to pronounce, for one thing, besides which, she preferred to be a queen of real humans rather than princess of a mythological dragon.

"We are kin now," she said. "Please call me Jade."

The empress nodded, accepting the honor. "I am Mel."

Jade spoke carefully. "I would wish to begin again."

Mel regarded her curiously, much as had Fieldson, as if Jade were an exotic wildflower. "Begin again?"

"We have been foes. I would like to begin again, as allies."

"Ah." Mel smiled, and it lit up her face, changing the barbarian avenger into a lovely young woman. "Yes. I also."

"I am glad to meet you," Jade said. It was true. The Escar queen fascinated her.

Mel spoke quietly. "You have made my uncle happy."

"As he has me." Jade wanted to speak of her joy, but she held back. Everything about the empress was reserved, cool, aloof. She was so unlike Drummer. Cobalt and his Dawn Star Empress frightened her.

Mel was watching her face. "Know one thing."

Jade steeled herself. "Yes?"

"As long as I live," Mel said softly, "no one will harm my uncle or anyone he loves." She paused. "Or their country."

Jade didn't know how to answer such a declaration, especially given that the empress could make it true. After a moment, when she found her voice, she said, simply, "Thank you."

Mel nodded. "Honors of the day, Your Majesty."

Jade needed a moment to interpret the phrase. It was a custom in Aronsdale and Harsdown, a way to indicate respect. Jade set her palm against her collarbone and extended her hand, palm up, the Taka Mal equivalent of the Empress's farewell. Mel smiled, and her face was transformed like sunlight warming an icy day. Then she left, striding from the hall.

"Saints above," Jade said, stunned by the empress but relieved the meeting had gone well. She gazed out the window toward Aronsdale. Soon another tread sounded in the hall. She smiled, seeing the reflection of its owner in the window. He came up behind her and put his arms around her waist.

"Light of the day, my Wife," Drummer murmured, his greeting in the custom of Taka Mal.

“My greetings, my Husband,” she said, using the Aronsdale custom. She leaned her head back against him, her dragon mage, who had created a myth in the sky to dissuade his kin from conquering her lands. It would take time to understand this side of her husband. But they did, truly, have those years.

For the first time in so long, perhaps in her life, she looked toward the future with a belief that it held happiness as well as duty, that along with the hardships, she would also know joy.

Mel couldn't find Cobalt. He wasn't in the citadel or the courtyards. She walked through the town with her guards and found no trace of him. Using a glass sphere from the citadel, she formed emotion spells and focused on him, but they told her little. His moods were diffuse, distant, hard to pinpoint.

She saddled Smoke and rode down the mountain, guards riding behind and ahead of her on the steep trail. When they reached the Rocklands, they pounded across the shattered plain as fast as they could manage while avoiding the fissures and cracks, a mute testimony of the destruction Mel had wrought yesterday. Even now, heat rose from the ground, though the sun was low over the green hills of Aronsdale.

Mel focused another spell on Cobalt. His presence felt stronger. But her mind was tired. She had used all her resources yesterday, and she needed time to recover. It would take time to come to terms with this power. Ozar had jolted to life a part of herself she had too long denied.

She found Cobalt on Admiral, high on a crag that overlooked the battlefield. Warm winds blew his hair across his face, and he brushed it out of his eyes. Her bodyguards stayed back with his guards, giving her and Cobalt as much privacy as they could ever have when they weren't within the protection of a fortress.

Admiral nickered as Smoke drew alongside of him. Cobalt smiled at Mel, an expression few people ever saw from him. It was barely discernible compared to the passionate responses that came so naturally to the people of Taka Mal, but for Cobalt it was an immense display of emotion.

“Your uncle astonishes me,” Cobalt said.

She knew he meant Drummer. Who would have ever guessed her uncle was a green cube mage? He didn't seem to realize just how rare a power he held. It came far more gently to him, though, than hers did to her, especially when he played his music. “I think he will enjoy learning his abilities.”

“It is good.” The relaxed cast of his face tightened into a colder expression. “Unlike the situation with certain other people.”

“What people?”

“Tadimaja Pickaxe.”

Mel recognized his look. “You must give him and the others a proper tribunal. You cannot do to them what Ozar did to me.”

“Why the blazes not?”



“Cobalt, don’t.” She wondered if anyone could contain this force that was her husband. “Don’t make me responsible for the torture of other human beings.”

“They are responsible for the crimes they committed.”

“Then put them on trial and let a judge convict them.” She scowled at him. “Be civilized.”

“When I think of what they did to you, I do not feel civilized.”

“Ozar paid with his life, his throne, and his country. They will pay with their freedom and possibly their lives.” She spoke firmly. “It must end there.”

He watched her with his dark look, that one that would have terrified her two years ago. She knew now just to wait.

“Very well,” he finally said. “You have my word.”

Mel would have closed her eyes with relief, except she didn’t want to stop looking at him. “Thank you.”

“My mother agrees with you about Baker, you know.”

She didn’t know where that came from. “About a baker?”

“Baker Lightstone. The former king of Blueshire. Or mayor, you claim.”

“Your mother thinks he was a mayor?”

“No,” he growled. “She agrees he should govern Blueshire.”

Ah. Mel smiled. “Your mother is very wise.”

“I hope so. Shazire needs wisdom.”

“You will make her governor of Shazire?”

“If she agrees.” He squinted at her. “If the idea is good.”

“It’s excellent.”

“Well. So.” He paused. “I will send Leo Tumbler and many troops to govern Jazid.”

“Another good choice.” Mel suspected the military presence in Jazid would be important for years to come.

Cobalt was silent for a while. Then he indicated a group of men searching among the crags and fissures on the plain below. “They’re looking for—well, for anything that remains.”

She knew he meant bodies. “You must stop this warring.”

“Do you remember what you said to me about conscience?”

Mel would never forget. “You told me that if you ever went too far, I should pull you back. I said, ‘Do not ask me to be the conscience of a conqueror.’”

“And yet, you are.”

“You have a conscience.” But she also remembered what else Cobalt had told her that morning, before he rode into Blueshire: I cannot stop being what I am.

“To conquer is easy,” Mel said. “That challenge is to lead well. You can be a good leader. A great leader. It’s time to silence Stonebreaker’s voice. Don’t let his legacy drive you to darkness when you’re so much more than you know.”

Cobalt didn’t answer at first, he just looked at her as if memorizing her face. Then he said, “My eyes are getting worse. In a few years, I will need glasses all the time.” He smiled drily. “I can’t be a warrior with spectacles. They might get broken.”

She knew that in his own oblique way, he was responding by telling her that he would no longer lead his armies out to war. And saints almighty, he was teasing her. She hadn’t thought he knew how. Yet it came from a kernel of truth. She had tried to heal his eyes, but they weren’t injured and didn’t respond to spells. If they continued to change as he aged, in ten or fifteen years he wouldn’t see well enough to effectively lead an army. He could turn over many tasks to Agate Cragland or another officer, but she knew he would feel those changes as deep losses.

Mel gentled her voice. “Spectacles make a king look wise.”

He snorted, but she could tell her response pleased him. He motioned at the men below them. “I see them fine. That is Matthew in the brown trousers and green shirt.”

She peered at the man. It was indeed Matthew. Yes, Cobalt could still see well enough—yet he missed the obvious.

Matthew Quietland had been born at Castle Escar, the son of a seamstress for a former Harsdown king, Cobalt’s grandfather. Matthew was one year older than Varqelle, the king’s only son.

His only legitimate son.

Had Matthew been born on the other side of the sheets, he would have sat on the throne instead of Varqelle, for his true father had been the Jaguar King. Varqelle had been a prince, Matthew a stable boy. Matthew had gone with Dancer to the Misted Cliffs, so he and Varqelle had lived in different countries for most of their adult lives. Varqelle died only a few months after he came into Cobalt’s life, so Varqelle and Matthew hadn’t been together enough for people to note the similarity. Mel had seen, aided by her mood spells, but at Matthew’s request, she had sworn never to reveal the truth.

Cobalt had heard rumors of Varqelle’s cruelty to Dancer, his child bride. He would never know it had driven her to seek solace in the arms of a stable boy. Varqelle’s mistress discovered the queen’s infidelity and threatened to reveal the truth if her rival didn’t leave. In Harsdown at that time, the penalty for a queen’s adultery was death—for herself, her lover, and any child of that union. Dancer had fled to the Misted Cliffs to save the lives of her son and his father.

Cobalt spoke in a low rumble. “To silence Stonebreaker’s voice within me—it is not so easy, Mel.”

It took her a moment to realize he was responding to her previous comment. “Stonebreaker saw the truth, that you were more than him. His jealousy consumed him.”

He answered in an oddly distant voice. “Have you never wondered why he took no other wife after my grandmother died?”

“I assumed he didn’t like marriage.” Stonebreaker’s fondness for concubines had been well known.

“He hated the Castle of Clouds,” Cobalt said.

She wondered what he was trying to tell her. “Because you and Dancer went there to escape him, yes?”

“In part.” He stared at the Rocklands. “My grandmother died in a fall above the castle.”

“I hadn’t realized it happened there.”

“He never spoke of it.” After a long moment, he said, “Until the night he died.”

Mel went very still. “Everyone knows it was an accident.”

“Of course they know,” he said bitterly. “He said it was an accident. He was the king.”

Mel knew of Stonebreaker’s violence, had even experienced it herself. But to kill his wife? Surely he wouldn’t lose control and go that far. “Your grandfather was one of the most controlled people I’ve ever met.”

“And controlling.” Cobalt shifted his haunted gaze to her. “How do you think a man like that would feel if he discovered he couldn’t sire an heir?”

Her heart was beating as hard as if she were running. “But he had a child. Dancer.”

Cobalt regarded her steadily. “Certainly he would never discover Dancer was actually the child of his valet, that the only reason he had a daughter was because his isolated, beaten wife had slept with another man.”

Mel stared at him. Had admitting he couldn’t sire an heir been even worse to Stonebreaker than acknowledging as his heir a boy who didn’t carry his blood? Saints help him, had he killed his own wife to keep that secret?

“Cobalt—” What Stonebreaker had inflicted on him the night he died was even worse than she had thought. “He lied to you. To hurt you.”

“It is only a story.” His voice caught. “Nothing more. In the story, the queen dies and the valet disappears.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

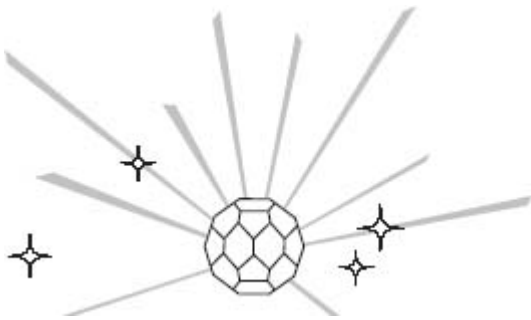
“Perhaps the grandson would realize such a terrible story is a blessing.” Softly he said, “It would mean he doesn’t carry the blood of the monster who drained his life for so many years.”

Mel wiped away a tear on her cheek. “That is a gift.”

“When I thought you had died—” Incredibly, his voice shook. “I realized how little anything else meant.” He took a deep, shuddering breath. “It is time to let go of Stonebreaker.”

“Yes.” Her voice broke on the word. “It’s time.”

They sat looking across the Rocklands, east to Taka Mal, west to Aronsdale and Harsdown, and the Misted Cliffs beyond. Toward the future. The daughter of a farm girl and the son of a stable hand, the grandson of a valet: Together, they had come to rule the largest empire ever established in the settled lands.



## Epilogue

On a bright winter day in Quaaz, the people gathered in a grand plaza, below a balcony of the Topaz Palace. It was a cool day, at least for Taka Mal, enough so that some of the hundreds who crammed the plaza wore shirts under their tunics. The sun shone in the sky, and musicians played rollicking tunes. Street vendors circulated with delicacies imported from Aronsdale.

The queen appeared with her consort, that golden prince the people found so easy to love, with his quick grin, his music, and his lively charm. The queen stood tall, a dark-haired beauty in topaz silks. She cradled in her arms the baby her people had come to see, just born the day before. Vizarana Jade held up her daughter and her heir, and the people cheered.

Drummer held a cube in his hand. No one could see; indeed, it looked as if he were simply standing with his wife and child, beaming. But topaz light surrounded him and spread to his family. A luminous dragon rose into the sky, breathing golden light, and the people roared their approval. The Dragon-Sun had blessed the birth.

So the heir to the Topaz Throne came into the world, loved by her parents and celebrated by her people.

On a bright winter day in the Misted Cliffs, snow lay thick on the land, glistening and white. People gathered before their hearths while outside their homes, lakes and rivers froze. The sun shone in a crystalline blue sky, and icicles hung from eaves.

In the Diamond Palace, in the royal suite, the Empress and Emperor sat on their bed. Mel cradled her infant son, and Cobalt leaned next to her. So she offered him the baby. Uncertain and more careful than he had ever been in his life, he took the tiny boy into his huge arms and held him with wonder.

This child would be heir to the Sapphire, Jaguar, Alzire, Blueshire, and Onyx Thrones. His mother was the most powerful mage in the settled lands, a war mage as well as a healer. His father was a warrior of such ferocity, many believed him a warlock. What Mel and Cobalt bequeathed to their child, only time would tell. For now, they quietly rejoiced for the health and strength of their young son.

Finally Cobalt Escar Chamberlight put to rest the demons that had haunted his soul.

The Fire Opal  
by Catherine Asaro



[www.LUNA-Books.com](http://www.LUNA-Books.com)

Contents

[1](#)  
[A Final Sunset](#)

[2](#)  
[Darz](#)

[3](#)  
[The Unseen](#)

[4](#)  
[Confrontation](#)

[5](#)  
[The Trespass](#)

[6](#)  
[Sand Shadow](#)

[7](#)  
[Judgement](#)

[8](#)  
[Day Five](#)

[9](#)  
[Dragon's Claw](#)

[10](#)  
[Forbidden Sands](#)

[11](#)  
[The Claw](#)

[12](#)  
[Fire Trial](#)

[13](#)  
[Flames of Glass](#)

[14](#)  
[Desert Oath](#)

[15](#)  
[Topaz Passage](#)

[16](#)  
[Sun King](#)

[17](#)  
[The General](#)

[18](#)  
[The Tent](#)

[19](#)  
[Shadows](#)

[20](#)  
[The Topaz Sword](#)

[21](#)  
[Sky Colors](#)

[Epilogue](#)



1

A Final Sunset

Ginger-Sun feared her own power.

She was alone inside the RayLight Chamber, a circular room two paces across with stained-glass walls. Afternoon sun hit skylights in the roof far above her, and mirrors reflected the light down to where she stood. She craved the radiance that bathed her body, for as long as it shone, she was safe from her inner darkness.

She served as a priestess for the Dragon-Sun, who blazed in the sky and lit the world. Her people

worshipped the day. Her duties in the village of Sky Flames were concerned with offering comfort to her people and carrying out ceremonies in praise of the sun. She could do no magic now. She knew this to be true—for it was the middle of the day.

Her spells worked only at night.

Ginger opened her hand and stared at the fire opal on her palm. Such a dangerous gem. Her grandfather had given her the four-sided pyramid on her fifth birthday. Years ago, she had discovered it allowed her to create spells of heat and light. She had never heard of anyone with such abilities. No one knew about her power; she guarded that secret as she would her own life. It would be dangerous enough if her people suspected she could do spells; if they realized she could do them only at night, gods only knew how they would deal with that trespass against her calling to the dragon.

“Ginger-Sun?” a man called, using the honorific that named her as a priestess. “Come quick!”

His urgent tone jolted her. Whoever called couldn’t enter here; this chamber was forbidden to all but the priestess. As she opened the door, the rumble of men talking rolled over her. The presence of so many rough voices unsettled Ginger. She felt suddenly conscious of her vulnerability; this building was a ten-minute walk from the village and she lived alone.

Ginger entered the main temple, a large room with a roof of inverted terraces high above her head. A fountain bubbled nearby, fed from the village irrigation system, and a statue of the dragon stood within it, his wings spread. Instead of fire, he breathed water. It rose into the air from his upturned head and cascaded down his body into the square basin.

Across the room, five men had gathered by the wall. They wore coarse trousers, shirts and boots encrusted with sand. The sun had weathered their faces, and heavy muscles corded their arms. Tools hung from their belts. They had shovels strapped to their backs—and massive axes.

Ginger’s pulse leapt. Why did they want her? She took a breath, steeling herself. Her calling required she tend anyone who came to the temple, no matter how threatening. She walked toward them, seeking to appear calm, though sweat dampened her palms. Her bare feet made no sound on the floor. She wore the traditional garb of a priestess, a gold silk wrap that fit her snugly from neck to ankle and constrained the size of her steps.

As she reached the group, a stocky man with gnarled muscles spun around and grasped the handle of the axe sticking up over his shoulder. Ginger gulped, her gaze fixed on the blade as he pulled it above his shoulder.

Then he paused, and the clenched set of his face eased. With a start, she recognized him as Harjan, who had been a friend of her parents before they passed away. Now that she could see the others better, she realized they were miners who worked the ore flats outside the village. They kept watch over the temple, too, for her protection. The relief that washed over her was so intense, it felt visceral.

Harjan lowered his arm. “My apology for disturbing your evening, Priestess.”

“Are you all right, Jan?” she asked. His pallor worried her. Behind the miners, someone was lying on a stone ledge that jutted out from the wall. A makeshift litter lay on the floor, and blood stained the men’s clothes. The miners averted their gazes more than usual when she looked at them.

“Has there been an accident?” she asked.

“Not an accident,” Harjan said. “This man was stabbed.”

“We didn’t want to bring him here, Priestess,” another man said with a look of apology. “But only you can do the rites.”

Ah, no. They wouldn’t have come to her if the man lived; the village had another healer who treated the men. But only Ginger could give the Sunset Rites to a person whose spirit had left his body to walk among the dead.

Afraid of what she would find, she walked forward, and the miners moved aside. A large man lay on the shelf. She sat next to the body and pulled a knot of black hair off his face. The man looked in his midthirties, with a square chin and strong nose, but that was all she could see. Bruises covered his face, and deep gashes had gored his torso, his arms, even his legs. Blood soaked his clothes. She pulled away scraps of his shirt and winced as coagulated blood smeared her hand. The ragged pattern of his wounds told a gruesome tale, that he had fought hard against his assailants—and lost the battle.

“Gods,” someone muttered. “Why would anyone do this?”

A tear ran down Ginger’s face. “Only the Dragon-Sun can answer that.” She couldn’t imagine how he could burn in the sky while such a monstrous crime took place below him. “Do any of you know this man?”

“Never seen the poor bastard,” another man answered. “We don’t know what happened.”

“I’m sorry we had to show you this,” Harjan said.

She looked up at him through a mist of tears. “You were right to bring him.”

“Ach, Ginger-Sun.” He lifted his hand as if to lay it on her shoulder, offering comfort, but he stopped himself in time, before he touched her.

“Could you bring him to the Sunset Chamber?” Her voice trembled. If she didn’t perform the rites before sundown, the man’s spirit could be condemned to wander the site of his murder until his killers died.

The miners seemed relieved to take action. They lifted the body onto the litter and carried it across the temple, past the RayLight Chamber, which no longer glowed now that the sun was too low in the sky.

At the far wall, Ginger opened an arched door with a window at its apex that depicted the setting sun. The floor, walls and ceiling in the chamber beyond were bare stone in the red and ochre hues of the desert, a stark but fitting memorial to those who lost their lives in this harsh land. Here the dead received their blessing before their spirit traveled to the realms beyond.

They laid the body on a stone table that filled much of the chamber. The only light came from slits where the ceiling met the walls, and shadows were filling the room as the day aged into night. She hoped she could complete the rites in time; otherwise she would have to remain here all night with the corpse, to ensure its spirit didn’t become trapped in the realm of the living.

Harjan was watching her. “We can stay.”



His offer touched her, but they both knew she had to refuse. If she allowed the uninitiated to stay while she performed the rites, she risked stirring the wrath of the Dragon-Sun.

“Thank you.” Her voice caught. “But it isn’t necessary.”

He twisted his big hands in his sleeves. “It’s not right you should have to face this alone.”

“I must.”

“But you’re so young.”

She almost smiled at that. He had always been a big bear of a man with a kind heart. But she would celebrate her eighteenth year in only a few tendays, which put her two years past the age when young people were considered adults.

“I’ll be fine,” she told him, though she wasn’t sure who she wanted to convince, Harjan or herself.

He nodded with reluctance. He and the other men bowed and quietly took their leave, closing the door behind them.

Ginger sagged against the wall. Despite her assurances, she feared being alone with the body. Her service in the temple mostly involved offering succor to the people of Sky Flames, who eked out lives in the harshly beautiful desert. She gave blessings, performed rituals to honor the sun, presided at marriages and christenings, comforted mourners, listened to those who needed to talk and tended the health of women and children. It was a calling she loved, one well suited to her. She needed to perform the Sunset Rites less often than other ceremonies, and she had never done them for someone who had suffered such a brutal death.

Ginger drew herself up, determined to do well by this man’s spirit. She went to a wall niche and lit the fire-lily candles there. Their spicy scent wafted around her, and in their flickering light, the scrolled carvings on the walls seemed to ripple. As she picked up a bundle of cloths, she realized she was clenching her opal. Startled, she set it down. Then she changed her mind and took it up again. The opal gave her a sense of confidence, which right now she very much needed.

One of the candles sputtered and died, and a tendril of smoke curled in the air. She thought of doing a flame spell, then shook her head, angry at herself, and relit the candle from one still burning. In her childhood, she had discovered by accident that she could do fire spells by concentrating on the opal, but she didn’t understand why it happened. She used her abilities rarely and strove to do only good with them, but deep inside she feared they were a curse.

Ginger took the bowl of water in the niche and a soap carved like a dragon. She would clean the body to give the man dignity for his trip to the spirit lands. She returned to the table and looked down at his ravaged face. Softly she said, “May you have more peace among the spirits than you had among the living.”

The dead man opened his eyes.



2

Darz

Ginger froze. The man was staring at her with a bloodshot gaze. Her heartbeat ratcheted up, and the urge to run hit her hard. She took a shaky breath. Then she laid her palm on his neck—and felt what she hadn't seen before: a faint pulse.

"Gods above," she murmured.

"Who...?" The man's voice was barely audible.

"I am Ginger-Sun, the temple priestess in Sky Flames."

"Too young...for priestess."

"Not here." Her elderly predecessor had passed away two years ago. Ginger had been the only acolyte, so at fifteen, the age when most girls began training, she had taken on the full duties of a priestess.

She set down her supplies and went to work. Bathing him had suddenly become much more vital; she needed to tend his wounds. It flustered her to feel his skin, for no living man could touch a priestess. But the temple was too far from the village; it would take her thirty minutes to bring back the male healer, and that assumed he was home. She didn't dare leave her patient untended. She entreated the Dragon-Sun to understand; she couldn't let this man die.

Her patient closed his eyes. He breathed so shallowly, she couldn't see the rise and fall of his chest. She felt no exhalation when she held her hand in front of his mouth.

With care, she pulled away scraps of his shirt. He truly was strong, to survive after suffering such horrendous gashes in his chest and abdomen. The stab wounds must have missed his vital organs; if he had suffered internal injuries, she doubted he would still be alive. The bleeding had stopped, but she feared he had already lost too much to live.

As she treated him, the water and her cloths turned red, and she had to fetch more of both several times. It shook her deeply, for she had never treated anyone with such horrible injuries. She rolled him carefully on his side to treat his back. He also had lacerations on his calloused hands, as if he had grabbed the dagger of whoever was stabbing him. She flinched at the images his wounds conjured, the violence of the fight that caused them. It was no wonder they had left him for dead.

Night descended as she worked, and shadows filled the chamber. She fetched the dagger she used to shave a body during the rites, but instead she used it to slice away his trousers so she could treat his legs. She could tell little about his shredded clothes except that they had a simple cut. He lay still as she worked, never flinching, though his pain was surely terrible. Only one time, when she pressed too hard, did he lose his iron control and groan.

Her voice caught. "I truly am sorry." He probably wouldn't survive the night, but she would stay at his side to tend his life while he breathed and his spirit if he passed away.

Her opal remained where she had set it on the table, a small fiery pyramid. She could use it to create light in many ways, including symbolically, by giving comfort. Still she hesitated, agonized. She was a sun priestess. But the sun had gone down and power stirred within her.

Forgive me, Dragon-Sun, she thought. I must help when I can, even if it is by the night rather than by your incomparable days. She couldn't heal—but she could ease this man's pain.

Ginger picked up the opal, and it warmed her palm. Closing her eyes, she drew on the power she always concealed, knowing it would estrange her from her people, just as her red-gold hair and hazel eyes set her apart from everyone else, with their dark coloring. A spell grew within her. When she opened her eyes, golden light surrounded her and bathed the man. She poured the spell into him, offering it to soothe his pain.

Ginger called on her deepest resources and let the spell go on longer than she had ever tried before. She had finished tending his wounds, and this was all she had left to give him. Although he never opened his eyes, the set of his ruined face seemed to ease.

She finally sagged against the table. The opal fell out of her hand and rattled on the tabletop. As her head dropped forward, she braced her palms on the cold stone to hold herself up. The last candle sputtered, and night filled the room, waiting to stake its final claim on this man.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice breaking. "I can do no more."

Then she crumpled to the ground.

Ginger awoke slowly, disoriented, gazing at the ceiling. The stone floor hurt her spine. She rolled onto her side and found herself staring at the base of the Sunset Table.

Her patient!

She struggled to her feet, afraid to find that he had died while she was unconscious. The man lay exactly as she had left him, his torso, arms and hands covered by bandages, and more on his legs and face. Incredibly, his eyes were moving under their lids, and his chest rose and fell more naturally than last night. An intense blend of emotions rose within her, part gratitude, part relief and part astonishment. She stroked his forehead, and he exhaled, restless in his sleep.

"Will you live, after all?" she asked. Perhaps today the Dragon-Sun would be kind.

She needed to feed him if he was to rebuild his strength. Rubbing her eyes, she walked into the main temple. It was dark except for a tinge of dawn that set the RayLight Chamber glowing faintly, as if the embers of a fire burned within it like a heart. Several redwing doves had flown inside through vents up in the roof and were cooing their dawn songs.

Ginger went to her private rooms. Sunrise mosaics tiled her parlor, rosy near the floor and shading up into the blue of a dawn sky. Lamps on fluted poles opened in glass fire-lily blossoms. A pot hung from the rafters, bright with sun-snaps. The ceiling was white, giving the room an airy feel, and light poured

through the windows. A fiery glass sculpture of the Dragon-Sun sat in a niche above her bed.

Ginger exhaled, grateful to be here. These rooms were so unlike the cell where she had lived as an acolyte. She had come to the temple at an unusually young age; when she was nine, she had lost her mother to a fall in the cliffs, and her father had died a year later from the hacking-cough. Despite her brother's adamant protests, the village elders decided a boy of fifteen couldn't rear a girl child. So they sent her to the temple. She had cried in her cell every night, drowning in grief, certain the dragon had punished her by taking her family. She hoped that by devoting her life to him, she could atone for her night magic.

When Ginger had taken over as priestess five years later, her brother had entreated the elders to let her live in this suite. It drained her to toil all day and sleep on the floor in a barren cell at night. She tried to hide her exhaustion, but her brother knew. Even so, the elders denied his petition. They feared to offend the dragon by giving a child these rooms, which were among the few privileges granted a priestess. It enraged her brother, who pointed out that Ginger had all the duties, that indeed, she had done them for years. The elders remained firm: she must wait until she was sixteen to formally assume the title.

Ginger quickly washed up and brushed her hair, which fell down her back in waves. She changed into a rose-silk wrap. The wraps were exquisite, but confining; for everyday wear, she wore an old tunic and leggings so she could do her work. With a patient in the temple, though, she might have visitors and had to observe proper protocols.

In the kitchen, she prepared a tray with rose-glasses and a carafe of water. Given the man's injuries, she didn't think solid food was a good idea, so she cooked two bowls of rice-cream with brown sugar. Carrying the tray and a sheet, she went into the main temple and walked through the dawn of bird song. Inside the Sunset Chamber, the stranger was as she had left him, asleep on his back.

Ginger set her tray on the table and covered him with the sheet. Then she murmured, "Wake up. I have food."

No response.

Ginger caught her lower lip with her teeth. She had already touched him too much. But he needed to eat. Dragon-Sun, she thought, forgive my transgression. Then she brushed her finger alongside the bandage that stretched from the outer edge of his eye down his cheek.

The man stirred, then sighed. After a moment, his lashes lifted and he stared at the ceiling. He shifted his gaze to Ginger.

"You'll be all right," she said gently. She lifted his head and tilted the glass to his mouth. At first he didn't respond, but when she ran a trickle of water between his lips, he swallowed convulsively. Although he drank with difficulty, he drained most of the glass before he sagged back. Ginger held his head, aware of him watching her with his dark, intense eyes. The swelling on his face had receded, and he looked a lot less like a corpse this morning.

"Where...?" he asked.

With apology, she said, "You are in the Sunset Chamber."

His lips quirked the barest amount, far too little to qualify as a smile, but an astonishing ghost of humor. "Not ready for my sunset...yet..." His breath wheezed and he coughed, his face contorting.

“Shhh.” She laid her finger on his lips. “You must rest. Build your strength. Here.” She set down the glass and offered him a spoonful of the creamy rice cereal. He even managed three swallows before he gave up.

“Can you tell me your name?” she asked.

“Darz...”

She brushed the matted hair off his forehead. “Well, Darz, you and I are alone here, and I’m not strong enough to lift you. So I’m afraid I can’t move you somewhere more comfortable.”

His lashes drooped closed. “This’s fine...”

After a moment, she realized he was asleep. She gently set down his head, relieved to stop breaking the taboo. Or so she told herself. Her urge to keep holding him, offering comfort, disconcerted her. She leaned on the table, more tired than she wanted to admit after having spent the night crumpled on the floor. It couldn’t be any better for him on this hard table. As soon as he was strong enough for her to leave, she would run to the village for help.

She sat on the floor against the wall where she could watch Darz. She tried to eat her rice, but her head lolled forward. She brought it up with a jerk and set her bowl on the ground. Within moments, she was nodding again.

Ginger dozed, never fully asleep, always aware of her patient...

“Is anyone here?” The call resonated in the temple.

Ginger jerked awake. She jumped to her feet and hurried out of the chamber before she even fully knew what she was doing. Four miners were standing by the fountain.

“Harjan!” She couldn’t run in the wrap, or even stride, but she managed a fast walk. “I’m so glad you came!”

Relief suffused his face as he and the others turned to her. “Have you been in the Sunset Chamber?” he asked.

“All night.” She spoke quickly. “Can one of you go for the healer? We need a stretcher, too. We can use one of the acolyte’s rooms. They’re all empty, and I have no trainees. I’ll get bedding from the storeroom.”

“Ginger, slow down.” Harjan’s face crinkled with affection. “We can help you move the body, if that’s what you’re asking. But the healer can’t do anything for him. We’ll bring someone to help prepare him for burial.”

“No!” She stared at him, aghast. “He lives! I thought surely his spirit would leave during the night, but it stayed. He sleeps on the table. We must move him.” Another thought hit her. “Oh! If he turns over, he’ll fall on the floor.” She spun around and headed back to the Sunset room.

Darz had not only avoided rolling over in his sleep, he was awake when she entered the chamber. He pushed up on his elbow and stared past her, his expression hardening.

Glancing back, she saw the miners following her into the room. She went over to Darz. "It's all right. These are friends. They will move you to a more comfortable place."

Darz narrowed his eyes as Harjan came up to the table.

"You must lie down," Ginger told Darz firmly. "You could start bleeding again."

He looked as if he wanted to refuse, but his face was pale and his breathing labored. With difficulty, he eased back down. The entire time, he watched Harjan as if he expected an attack.

Harjan spoke cautiously. "I'm gratified to see that you live, Goodman..." He let the title hang like a question.

"Darz Goldstone," the man said. His voice sounded creaky, as if he wasn't ready to use it.

"Goodman Goldstone." Harjan nodded in the greeting of one villager to another.

Darz stared at him strangely, but he returned the nod as well as he could while lying on his back.

Ginger laid her hand against Darz's cheek, painfully aware of the miners watching her break the taboo. His skin felt cool. "You don't have a fever. That's good." She had feared his wounds would fester and become inflamed.

Harjan glanced at the other men. "Can you get the stretcher?" Firmly he added, "And the healer?"

Perrine and Tanner went for the litter, and the third man headed to Sky Flames for the healer. Harjan stayed with Ginger and kept a wary gaze on her patient. He was the only one of the miners she knew well, though she often saw them working in the bluffs outside the village. They sold ores to the Zanterian caravans that came by Sky Flames, or else they journeyed to the far cities themselves to find buyers. Her brother, Heath, was doing exactly that right now; otherwise, she had no doubt he would be here, too, hulking suspiciously over Darz.

Perrine and Tanner returned with the stretcher, and Darz tensed as they lifted him onto it. She wanted to assure him they wouldn't hurt him, but if he was anything like the men of Sky Flames, such words would offend his pride. So she held back.

They carried him to a cell. Darz lay completely still, his eyes closed, his face strained, and she feared they had moved him too soon. They certainly could risk nothing more. The miners had apparently understood her hurried words, for they had brought in a bed and blankets from storage, which no acolyte would have been allowed. After they set him in bed, she set a stool by the bed and sat down to check his bandages. Blood had seeped through the cloth on his torso.

The miners hovered behind her like a trio of wary hawks. She knew they didn't want to leave her alone with Darz, but the more people who crammed the room, the more it would disturb her patient. She could tend the sick and was expected to do so for women and children. Surely they realized she needed to look after Darz, as well, however uncomfortable it made them all. Nor did she feel right keeping the men away from the work that provided their livelihoods.

She spoke gently. "I thank you all for your generous help. But you needn't stay."

“It is our pleasure to help, Blessed One,” Tanner said.

“We can stay,” Harjan said. “It’s all right.”

Their solicitude both touched and flustered Ginger. She was used to looking after the temple on her own. It was grueling, and she often wished she had help, but most people in the village were struggling to support their own families.

“I don’t want to keep you from your work,” she said.

“It’s no trouble,” Tanner told her.

Harjan looked past her at Darz and frowned. “None at all.”

It took some time, and many reassurances, but she finally convinced Tanner and Perrine they could go. After they left, Harjan indicated the corner. “I’ll sit over there.”

Ginger stood up. “I’ll bring a chair.”

He reached out to stop her by putting his hand on her arm. Then he realized what he was doing and dropped his hand. “My apology!” His face turned red.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” she said. He hadn’t touched her, after all.

“You needn’t get a chair,” he said. “Surely if half-grown girls can live in these cells with no soft things, I can manage for one day.”

She smiled at him. “You would make a fine acolyte.” When he glared, she shooed him away. “It’s all right, Harjan. You don’t have to stay.”

“I don’t mean to intrude. I’m just not easy leaving you with him.”

“He can barely move,” she said.

Harjan raked his hand through his unruly black hair. “All right, Ginger-Sun. But if you need us, we’ll be at the bluffs.”

She inclined her head. “My thanks.” His concern touched her, and she did feel reassured to know they would be close.

When she was alone, Ginger watched Darz for a while. Eventually, though, she had to resume her duties, which today consisted of dull chores such as sweeping floors, dusting furniture and tending the fountain.

Darz slept soundly and roused only when the healer came. Brusque and efficient, the healer cleaned his wounds, stitched them up and gave him sky-wood tea to ease his pain. He cautioned against moving Darz and reluctantly advised Ginger to keep him in the temple until Darz recovered enough that they felt certain he would survive—if that happened.

Later, Ginger carefully woke Darz to give him water and spoonfuls of sweet rice-cream. He seemed so disoriented, and he barely ate anything before he dropped back into sleep. The only time he stirred on his own was when Tanner, one of the miners, came to check on Ginger. She wasn’t sure what woke Darz

that time, unless it was the clink of the tools on Tanner's belt. They sounded like weapons.

After she finished her chores, she retired to the archive room. She loved to read the scrolls, learning about her country of Taka Mal, where the Topaz Queen reigned in the ancient and splendorous city of Quaaz. Nothing ever happened in Sky Flames. It was a full day's ride to the nearest town and half a country away to any major city. But Sky Flames usually had a priestess, which was more than many such isolated settlements could claim. The women who had served here before Ginger had recorded their thoughts about the land, nature, science, even mathematics. She most enjoyed reading their historical accounts.

Ginger was working on her own history. She had little to write about in her short life, certainly no land-shaking events, but she recorded the days in the village and temple. She wrote for the pure joy of capturing beauty with words. Perhaps her scrolls might offer some future historian the same pleasure that those of past priestesses did for her.

She took an antique scroll to Darz's room and sat by his bed, reading as he slept. When she came to a fine evocation of Taka Mal, she read aloud, even knowing he couldn't hear. If beautiful words could heal, these would surely help him.

The next day was the same, except she wore leggings and a tunic. It would anger the village elders if they caught her dressed this way, but it was too hard to work otherwise. She was alone except for a patient who did nothing but sleep, and she had no appointments. It seemed absurdly impractical to toil in a tight silk wrap.

Toward midday, when even the temple became uncomfortably warm, she went to the fountain and asked the Dragon-Sun for his blessing, that she might use his bounty. Then she carried a ewer of water into Darz's room. Sweat soaked his sleep-trousers. She eased them off and removed his bandages, then bathed him with dragon soaps. She had never touched a living man, not this way, and her hands wanted to linger on his muscled form. She knew it was wrong, and she struggled to resist the temptation. He was powerfully built, and hairy, too, which made her blush. His beard grew fast; thick black stubble already covered his chin and cheeks. She wondered what kind of violent life he endured, for his skin had many scars much older than his wounds from this attack.

He stirred while she cleaned him, but he didn't seem in pain and he didn't awaken. She dressed his wounds and clothed him in fresh sleep-trousers the healer had left. Then she just sat at his bedside. She truly didn't want to leave, though she had no more reason to stay. It was a while before she could make herself return to her chores.

In the evening, Ginger stood by Darz's bed, watching him sleep. "I hope you're resting better," she murmured, though he couldn't hear. "I'm sorry I had to wake you earlier to eat."

The hint of a smile touched his face as his eyes opened. "To wake up to such beauty is worth a thousand sufferings."

She jumped back. "Goodness! You're awake."

"It seems so."

"I should let you sleep," she said, mortified.

"Don't go. 'S boring. The morning...so long."



“Morning?”

“It’s morning, yes?”

“No, actually, it’s night.”

“But those men...brought me here this morning.”

She finally came in and sat on the stool so she could be closer to him. “That was two days ago.”

“Gods. No wonder I’m so sore.” He pushed up on his elbow. “I should get moving...”

“You must stay put,” she said firmly. “You are sore, Goodsir, because you have many injuries.”

His smile quirked. “Now I’m Goodsir. Your friend Harjan called me Goodman.”

“You have a fine way about you,” she assured him. In truth, he seemed rather rough, but her philosophy had always been to err on the side of courtesy. Goodman was the address for most people, with Goodsir reserved for those few families such as the Zanterians who had a heritage of wealth and authority. Although he didn’t look Zanterian, one could never be sure.

“You’re a diplomat,” he said wryly. “Goodman is fine.”

“Are you a merchant?” It could be why he had been out in the desert.

“Not a merchant. Soldier.”

Ah. That explained his scars. The calluses on his hand were probably from wielding a sword. “Is that why you were attacked?”

“I’ve no idea. I had just woken up and gone to pi—” He stopped and cleared his throat. “To, uh, relieve myself.”

Ginger smiled. “I’ve heard the word before.”

He squinted at her. “One never knows what will offend a priestess.”

“We’re not so delicate.” She hesitated. “Is the army coming here?” She had heard nothing of such events.

“No. I was on leave...before the attack.”

“Do you know who attacked you?”

He shook his head. “It was dark. And they hid their faces with scarves.”

The thought of masked assailants creeping up on him in the dark disturbed her. Perhaps they had been soldiers from another country. With all the recent upheavals among the settled lands, she wasn’t certain who allied with whom anymore. Taka Mal had survived the war last year, but battles had destroyed much of the Rocklands, and the queen had to marry a prince from Aronsdale as part of the peace treaty.

Ginger lived so far from the population centers of Taka Mal, it was hard to stay informed about the events sweeping their land. She did know that Jazid, the country to their south, had been less fortunate than Taka Mal; it had fallen to the conquering army of the Misted Cliffs.

“Do you think it’s because you’re in the army?” she asked. “Maybe they were Jazid soldiers.”

His brow furrowed. “Why attack me? Jazid was our ally.”

She leaned forward, uneasy with her words. “We’ve heard rumors that minions of the Shadow Dragon have crept to the lands of the living and wander the night.”

He looked more amused than worried. “Indeed.”

“It’s true,” she assured him. “They are deadly.”

“Do you mean the Shadow Dragon Assassins?”

“Is that their name?” She laced her fingers together, the sign for warding away evil. “I hope no demons come here.”

“They’re human, I assure you.” He seemed more alert now. “Supposedly they’re a covert group of assassins that served the late king of Jazid. After his death, they may have escaped into Taka Mal with several of his generals.”

“Oh!” She put her hand over her cheek. “They tried to assassinate you.”

He smiled slightly. “Even if they exist, which is doubtful, you ascribe far more importance to my existence than it deserves.”

“You’re a soldier.”

“So are thousands of men.” He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his bandaged hands. “Besides, I’ve nothing to do with the army that conquered Jazid. Hell, the Misted Cliffs tried to conquer us, too. And how would they have even known I’m in the military? I was just traveling to Taza Qu to visit family.”

Ginger had to admit, her theory did sound unlikely. “Taza Qu is a long way from here.” She knew little about the city besides its name. It had always sounded exotic and exciting, but also frightening, because it was the unknown. “Will your family know where to look for you?”

“I doubt it.” He spoke grimly. “Whoever stabbed me didn’t want to leave my body where searchers would find it. That’s probably why they brought me here. To hide the corpse.”

“Not very well. Our ore diggers found you.”

“I was near a mine?” He tilted his head, his face puzzled. “I would have thought they’d bury me near a cemetery.”

That surprised her. “The cemetery isn’t far from the mine. But why bury you?”

“Camouflage. Even if my body was found—which isn’t likely—who would know I wasn’t from here...?”

His voice was drifting, and it worried Ginger. She plumped up his pillow. “I shouldn’t keep you talking. You need rest.”

His tone gentled. “I’ve always time to talk to a pretty girl...”

A flush heated her cheeks. Apparently he had forgotten or didn’t realize he shouldn’t speak that way to a priestess. She didn’t answer as he closed his eyes. His breathing soon deepened into the slower rhythms of sleep.

His forbidden words unsettled Ginger. She didn’t want to enjoy them. She knew it was wrong. But they gave her a tickling sensation in her throat that always came when she was nervous—or full of anticipation. She had little sense of how she appeared to other people; she wasn’t allowed objects of vanity. The elders expected her to be well-groomed and provided her with brushes and soaps, but no cosmetics or mirrors. Although they had never seemed to care with her predecessor, they forbade Ginger to look at herself, which bewildered her, because Elder Tajman and Second Sentinel Spark both stared at her when they thought she didn’t notice.

The only time she saw her reflection was in the fountain, which didn’t offer a clear image. As much as she wanted to please the elders, she couldn’t help chafing at their restrictions. She had been so young when she came to the temple, she had never known what it was like to have a man court her.

Lost in thought, she watched Darz sleep. With his bruises dark and purpled, it was hard to see his full appearance, but she didn’t think he was from this part of the country. People here had inter-married for generations and had similar looks.

Ginger’s grandfather had come from Aronsdale, the country west of Taka Mal. He was the reason she had exotic hair, golden-red instead of black. Her brother called it fire hair. He believed it was why she had dedicated her life to the Dragon-Sun even though she hadn’t come to the temple by her own choice. She never told anyone the temple was her refuge from the dark magic. In Sky Flames, any differences could spur the townsfolk to shun a person. The strange color of her hair was bad enough; she dreaded what people would do if they discovered her night magic.

She sometimes wondered if her grandfather had suspected. She had always been curious about him. He had moved far across the settled lands to marry his lover, her grandmother. People said Ginger was like him. He had died when she was five, and by then, only a few streaks of fire remained in his silver hair. She would never forget his kindly voice or loving nature. He told her that someday she would want to go to Aronsdale. As much as she had adored him, she never understood why he believed such a thing. She had no desire to leave her home and travel to a distant land with too much fog and too many trees.

Eventually, she returned to her suite and brewed a pot of the tea that helped dull Darz’s pain. She carried a tray with the tea and dinner back to his cell and set it on the floor—

A scream shattered the night.



## The Unseen

Ginger scrambled to her feet and ran out to the main temple.

No one.

Chill air breathed on her neck. She spun around, but saw no one. Turning in a circle, she looked everywhere. Across the temple, a spray of dragon-snaps gleamed on a table in the light of two candles. Shadows otherwise filled the building, and the RayLight Chamber was dark at this hour of the night. Someone could hide behind it, or if they were truly impious, within the chamber.

She folded her arms protectively around herself. That scream had been real. It hadn't sounded like one of fear or of pain, but something vicious. Inhuman.

"Who's here?" she called. Her voice trembled.

No answer.

"Don't go out there," a harsh voice said behind her.

With a cry, Ginger whirled around. Darz was standing in the entrance of the cell, sagging against the arch, one hand clenched on the door frame and the other crossed over his torso, holding his side where he had sustained the worst stab wounds. His face was pale and drawn.

"You mustn't get up!" She hurried over to him.

"Stay in the light. I don't—I can't—" He groaned and slid down the frame.

Ginger caught him around the waist, then glanced over her shoulder to make sure no one was creeping up on them. "I'll help you to bed."

The ghost of a smile curved his lips. "Can't argue when a beautiful woman says that."

Saints above! Again he violated the taboos. If only his forbidden words didn't sound so sweet. He draped his arm on her shoulders, and his weight almost knocked her over. His muscles were like rock. She tried to ignore how his body felt against hers. She couldn't let herself notice.

It was only a few steps to his bed, where she eased him down onto his side. "Here you are."

His eyes drooped. "Don't put your back to the door."

She straightened with a jerk, expecting to see a killer or bloody victim in the doorway. But it was empty. The only light came from the candles across the temple, and their dim glow barely reached Darz's cell.

"I should search the temple," she said uneasily. "Someone may need help."

"No!" He pushed up on his elbow. "That scream—it was familiar. Can't remember—that damn tea fogs my mind." He fell back as a cough wracked his body, huge and wrenching.

A terrible memory rushed over Ginger, from when she had been ten: her father, coughing violently, trapped in his killing deliriums. He too had kept trying to get out of bed.

He had died soon after.

Darz kept struggling to get up. She sat next to him, saying, "Please, you mustn't." Then she grasped his arm.

Darz reacted incredibly fast, throwing her facedown on the bed. He shoved her into the mattress and pinned her as if she were an enemy soldier. Her mind reeled at the illicit contact of his body against hers.

Just as suddenly, and with a mortified oath, he released her. "I'm sorry, Ginger-Sun! Don't grab me that way! I can't always control my reflexes."

Rattled and confused, she rolled over and came up against him. He leaned over her with one hand on either side of her shoulders, and she stared up at his face. They were so close, she could see individual hairs on his chin and the tiny creases in his full lips. He gazed at her as if he were hungry, and his lips parted.

Frantic, she ducked under his arm and sat up.

"Ginger..." His eyes were glazed from the pain-killing herbs. He tried to pull her back down, and the feel of his hand on her arm sent a jolt through her as if she had touched a cat after it rubbed its fur on a carpet.

"You must stop," she said, her voice shaking. As she wrested her arm away from him, she looked up—

A man stood in the doorway of the cell.

"No!" Ginger jumped off the bed. Darz lurched to his feet and pushed her behind him.

"Move back!" the man said. He had drawn a dagger, and the candlelight from the temple glinted on the long blade. His grizzled face was in shadow, and his husky frame filled the doorway. Tools hung from his digger's belt—

Digger's belt?

"Priestess, move back." He entered the room, turning so his back wasn't to the doorway. His gaze fixed on Darz. "Make her scream again, you filthy bastard, and when I'm done with you, you'll wish your would-be killers had finished the job first."

Now that Ginger could see him better, she recognized the man. It was Tanner, one of the miners who had brought Darz to her. "It wasn't me who screamed," she said. "Darz was trying to protect me. He dragged himself out of bed, half dead, to do it."

"Then who screamed?" Tanner kept his blade drawn. He gave her clothes an odd look, and she remembered she had on the tunic and leggings instead of the wrap.

"It was out there." She motioned toward the main room behind him. "But I didn't see anyone."

Tanner lowered his dagger. "Neither did I."

“Did Harjan tell you to watch the temple?”

“We’ve been taking turns.” With apology, he added, “He says it makes you uncomfortable. I’m sorry, Ginger-Sun. But we must guard you.”

She spoke quietly. “I am deeply grateful, Goodman Tanner.” She took a breath. “I need to search the temple.”

“You’re not going out there,” Darz growled.

“He’s right,” Tanner said, grudgingly. “I’ll do the search.” He frowned at Darz. “You’re a soldier, yes?”

“That’s right.” Darz watched him as if he hadn’t decided whether or not the miner was an enemy.

Tanner spoke to Ginger, his voice gentling. “If I leave you here with him, will you be all right?”

“I’ll be fine. Truly.”

Tanner gave Darz a hard look. “It will be safer if she stays here under your guard. But if I find out you even looked at her wrong—” He lifted the dagger.

Darz scowled at him. “I would never harm a priestess.”

“See that you don’t.”

It was embarrassing for Ginger to realize Tanner considered a man who could barely stand up better able to protect her than she could herself. Even so. He meant well. And she had no desire to search for someone who screamed like a banshee.

Tanner left them in the cell and crossed the temple to the table with the candles. He lit another for himself, then paced along the wall until he moved out of view. Uncertain what to think, Ginger turned to Darz. He stared at her—and crumpled.

She caught him before he crashed to the floor. He was too heavy for her to hold up, but she managed to change his direction so he fell on the bed. Blood had soaked through the bandages on his chest and into her sleeve.

“Can’t lie down,” he said thickly. “Have to stand guard.”

“I know.” She nudged him onto his back.

“You shouldn’t trust that man. He might be the one who screamed.”

“I’m sure he isn’t.”

“You know him?”

“Not well, but he’s always lived here.” She went to the tray she had left by the wall. It held bandages, plus sticky patches the healer had given her to hold them in place.

“You don’t have to do that,” Darz said.

“It’s no trouble.” Ginger needed to do something or she would pace and worry. She set the tray on the stool and poured pale blue liquid from the glazed pot into a mug. Steam rose from the drink and curled around her cheeks, reminding her of times long ago when she had been sick and her mother brewed sky-wood tea. It could blunt the worst of Darz’s pain.

She sat next to him, taking care to keep space between them. Then she offered the tea. “This will help you.”

“It makes my brain muzzy,” he mumbled. The steam from the mug blurred his haggard face.

“We’ll take care of you,” she soothed.

Although he looked as if he wanted to refuse, he took the mug. He tried bending his head forward to drink, but then he groaned and dropped back on the bed. She barely caught the mug before it splashed hot liquid over them both. Acutely self-conscious, she slid up the bed and turned so she could lift his head into her lap. The more she touched him, the more it unsettled her, but she didn’t see what else to do. His shoulders stiffened against her leg, and she sensed his physical power. He drew her as if she were a moth pulled to the flame of his forbidden masculinity. Holding his head up, she tilted the mug to his mouth. As he drank, his lips moved against the mug, full and sensual.

After a few swallows, Darz let his head fall into her lap and closed his eyes. She had to fight her desire to stroke his hair. Setting the mug on the floor, she told herself she was trembling because of tonight’s events. It was partly true; she balanced on a honed edge of fear. Tanner’s footsteps had receded as he searched, and she could barely hear them. What if it wasn’t him? She was as tense as a drum skin pulled too tight.

Ginger eased Darz’s head onto the bed and moved back to sit at his waist. She peeled the bloodied bandages off his torso. The gashes looked terrible, even closed with the healer’s neat stitches. Blood oozed from several gashes. He grunted as she cleaned and dressed the wounds, but he never complained.

After she finished, he dropped off immediately despite his attempts to stay on guard. Even asleep, he looked barbaric, with his massive size, grizzled black beard, and harsh features.

“You must be a fine warrior,” she said. “Such strength and courage.”

His lips curved upward. “I’m a terror in battle.”

“Oh!” She put her hand on her cheek, mortified. How could a man look and sound as if he were sound asleep and yet be so alert? Perhaps it was a survival mechanism; no enemy soldier would find him defenseless in sleep.

The footsteps were growing louder, and candlelight flickered outside the cell. Ginger stood up, keeping her hands free in case she needed to defend herself. It was Tanner who appeared in the doorway, his face lit from below by the candle, his knife drawn.

“I went through the entire temple,” he said as he came into the cell. “I found nothing.”

“Did it look as if anyone had been here?” Ginger asked. “Anything broken? Signs of a struggle?”

“Not a thing.” He held up his candle and frowned at Darz’s sleeping form. “This building has several exits, though. And windows someone could climb out.”

“Or into.” Ginger shivered in the night’s chill creeping through the stone walls. She felt cold in a way no braziers could ever warm.

Tanner spoke earnestly. “I won’t leave you alone, I swear it. No one will get past me to you.” He lowered the candle so it didn’t shine on her face, she who could never be gazed at too long or with longing. “Please forgive my presumption, Ginger-Sun. But the three of us should stay in here until morning. It would be difficult for me to watch two places at once.” Quickly he added, “I’ll leave the door open.”

“It’s all right,” she said, awkward, but grateful for his presence. “We’ll need blankets. These cells get icy.”

He nodded and stepped aside for her. They walked together through the main temple, Tanner holding up his candle so he could scan the area. Wax dripped into its pewter base. Ginger hated leaving Darz alone, and she increased her pace.

“Priestess,” Tanner said. “Where is your wrap? Such a walk is—” He glanced at her body, then quickly looked away.

Ginger flushed and slowed down. She knew what he had meant to say. Unseemly. She wasn’t even sure why people cared about her clothes. The loose tunic came to her knees, and she wore it with heavy leggings; together, they revealed far less of her shape than a wrap. But priestesses had always worn the ceremonial garments. In fact, in earlier centuries, the women who served the dragon had been rigorously secluded in their temples. They were brides of the Dragon-Sun, after all. It was a symbolic distinction; the justices had long ago repealed the laws that forbade a priestess to marry. But the elders adhered rigidly to tradition. No man could woo her; only the elders could choose her husband, and then only after a sign from the Dragon-Sun that he allowed and blessed the union.

Tanner stopped at the entrance of her rooms, his blush visible even in the dim candlelight. Ginger paused, uncertain what to do. It was forbidden for him to enter, of course, but it was even more forbidden for him to let her get killed while he waited outside.

“I’ll just be a moment,” she said. “I’ll leave this door open. You can see from here into my bedroom.”

He cleared his throat. “Don’t be long.”

She ran to her bedroom despite what he had implied about her immodest walk, yanked the covers off her bed, and hurried back out. They returned to the acolyte’s cell and found Darz still asleep. He didn’t look as if he had stirred.

They settled down with as much separation between them as possible, Tanner by the door, Ginger against the cold back wall. She gave him the blanket and wrapped the quilt around herself. Ill at ease, she settled in for an uncomfortable night.

The bright chirps of birds tickled Ginger’s hearing as she awoke. She sat ensconced in the quilt,



bleary-eyed. Light with the fresh clarity of dawn sifted into the cell from the temple. Tanner was gone, and Darz was asleep.

After a while, comprehension that she was awake seeped into her mind. Standing up, she stretched her stiff limbs. Tanner had left a note on the tray, saying he and the other miners would watch the temple. She remembered then; he could read and write, and taught children in the village when he wasn't mining.

Ginger leaned over Darz. Mercifully, no blood stained his bandages, and his forehead felt cool. She had discovered that if she cleaned wounds with water and soap, the Dragon-Sun often spared her patients the killing fevers.

Out in the main temple, with dawn lighting the windows, her fears from last night seemed overblown. She knelt on the lip of the fountain and murmured a blessing to the Dragon-Sun. Then she cupped her hands full of water. Bathing her face, she thought, May your ride through the sky shine today, Ata-TakaMal D'Az.

One of Ginger's duties as an acolyte had been to memorize titles for the Dragon-Sun. Most formally, he was the Ata-TakaMal D'Az or Dragon-Sun King. The queen of Taka Mal was Ata-Takamal D'or, or Dragon-Sun Princess. The late king of Jazid had been Atajazid D'az, or Shadow Dragon Prince. After the Misted Cliffs had conquered Jazid, some people claimed the Shadow Dragon no longer stalked the land. Ginger wasn't so optimistic. Jazid's conquerors knew nothing about the Shadow Dragon and could unknowingly release his dark forces.

Ginger shivered at her thoughts. In her suite, she changed into a red silk wrap and prepared rice for Darz. He was still asleep when she returned to his cell, so she left the bowl on the tray by his bed. She was startled to find her opal under the bandages there. In last night's excitement, she had forgotten it. She could have eased Darz's pain with a spell rather than tea, but Tanner might have seen and named her a witch. She had never harmed anyone, but that wouldn't matter; that she could do spells at all could turn people against her.

She left the cell and went to the RayLight Chamber. The light within it was faint this early in the morning, but enough to make the stained glass glow. Radiance gathered in pools of color on the floor.

"Dragon-Sun," she said. "Help me understand. I wish to serve you, not the Shadow Dragon." As much as she longed to believe the Dragon-Sun had granted her these abilities so she could bring a glow of his brightness into the shadows, she feared her power came instead from the dragon who ruled the night. Her dedication to the sun was the best way she knew to turn her powers to the day, but her calling demanded a painfully high price.

"Dragon of light, I swear my life to you. Always will you have my devotion." Tears gathered in her eyes and she wiped them away with the heel of her hand. "But I'm so lonely. Please, Great Ata-TakaMal D'Az, give me a sign I won't spend my life alone. I am honored to be your bride, truly I am. But I—I—"

Ginger stopped, afraid to offend the sun. She thought of the last priestess who had served here, elegant and slender in her wrap, with white hair curled around her face. She had told Ginger the dragon never chose a mate for her. Perhaps that was true, but Ginger thought her predecessor would never have let herself see such a sign, for she liked her independence. Had this confused yearning ever burned within her? The loneliness was crushing Ginger.

"Darz seems a good man," she said. "He's a soldier in the queen's army. So strong and brave. Is this the sign, Great Dragon? Or do I cause offense by wanting an injured man whose life is entrusted into my

care?”

Nothing changed. If the dragon had an answer, either she didn't see it or he had chosen to wait. She hoped he would show tenderness. The hard life in Sky Flames left so little of that for her people, and it was why they came to her for blessings, to ease their lives. But sometimes she ached for warmth. Who would tend the priestess? Maybe the sun was punishing her for using a spell to help Darz in the Sunset Chamber. Had the Dragon-Sun sent a demon to frighten her? That scream last night hadn't sounded human.

Ginger shuddered. Her Aronsdale grandfather would have said demons didn't exist, that dragons of the sun and night were myths. He had to be wrong. She saw the sun in the sky every day except when he pulled a blanket of clouds over his face. He was as real as the desert breezes that whispered sensually across her skin. He was a harsh lord to serve, and maybe a possessive one who would answer her wish for companionship with severity rather than compassion. But she had to believe he was real. Otherwise, she had dedicated her life to nothing.

“Oh!” Ginger stopped in the doorway of the cell.

Darz looked up at her, a spoonful of rice-cream halfway to his mouth. He was sitting on the bed against the wall with the glazed bowl of cereal in his lap. He had pushed the bandages back from his fingers so he could hold the spoon.

He grinned at her. “This cereal is good. Did you make it?”

“Yes,” she said, blushing. “I did.”

“You're a good cook.”

“Thank you.” She loved to cook, but she rarely had anyone to do it for besides herself. “How do you feel?”

“Better.” He swallowed the spoonful of cereal.

She sat on the stool by his bed. “Are you in pain?”

He paused a moment too long before saying, “I'll be fine.”

She took that to mean yes, he was in pain, and he was too stoic to admit it. “Well,” she said, “if you would like some sky-wood tea to wash down your breakfast, let me know.”

“I'll do that.” He didn't look the least interested in drinking any tea, though.

“I was wondering,” she said. “You mentioned you were going to visit kin. Would you like us to send them word?” She hesitated. “Or to your wife, to let her know you're all right?”

“It isn't necessary.” He ate more of the rice. “I'm not married, and I hadn't told anyone I was coming.”

It pleased her far more than it should have to hear he had no wife. “So you were just traveling?”

"I do sometimes, to clear my mind." With a rueful smile, he added, "Your temple is ideal for clearing the mind, Priestess, but I would have preferred a less drastic method of arrival."

"Aye," she murmured. She wanted to add, I'm glad you are here, but she bit back the inappropriate words. She felt so nervous. She had asked for a sign and found Darz awake. Could it be the sign she had hoped for? More likely, she was reading what she wanted to see into his recovery.

"Your face changes so fast," Darz said. "What troubles you? I hope I haven't too sorely disrupted your life."

"You've nothing to apologize for." She wished her moods weren't so easy for people to read. "I'm sorry your visit here had to be under such terrible circumstances."

"Ah, well. I've seen worse in battle."

"You must let your commanders know what happened, yes? So they don't think you deserted."

He set down the bowl as if he had lost his appetite. "I'm on indefinite leave. No one expects me back."

It sounded odd to Ginger, but she was too unfamiliar with the military to know if it was unusual. Maybe his attackers had tried to kill him because he had forsworn his oath to the queen. She didn't think so, though. She had no facts, just intuition, but he didn't strike her as someone who would desert.

"I wasn't discharged," he said, watching her face. "My commander has the notion that I need a rest. So it seems I'm on leave whether I want to be or not."

She wondered what had happened to him. "Did you fight in the Battle of the Rocklands? The stories we've heard are awful."

"Aye." He let out a breath. "Many men died." He looked tired. "I lost a friend and mentor I had served with for years."

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

He tried to smile, but it resembled a grimace. "Taka Mal survived. That's what matters."

Ginger wished she had better words to say. She knew so little about the war. The fighting had taken place far away, on the western border of Taka Mal with Aronsdale. They had battled the army of the Misted Cliffs, though it wasn't clear to her why.

"We heard that King Cobalt from the Misted Cliffs beheaded the Atajazid D'az Ozar," Ginger said. She shivered. "They say Cobalt the Dark is a monster, nine feet tall, a demon who slaughters his victims without mercy."

"For flaming sake," Darz grumbled. "He's only six foot seven." Then he said, "But yes, he did kill the Jazid king."

"I've heard—" She hesitated. "People say the Dragon-Sun appeared in the sky and roared flames to stop the battle."

He shrugged. "The sky lit up with what looked like a dragon."

His offhand response to such a manifestation bothered her, but she was glad for the affirmation that the dragon she served existed. “He wouldn’t want his people to die fighting.”

Darz rubbed his eyes with his bandaged hand. “Some say this dragon in the sky was no more than a trick of light created by the queen’s consort.”

“No one could do a trick that big.”

“He’s from Aronsdale,” Darz growled, as if that explained everything and none of it good.

“You don’t approve of Aronsdale?” she asked curiously. He was a veritable wealth of information. “Or the royal consort?”

“I would never speak ill of our glorious queen’s consort,” he said dourly. “Or our new ally, Aronsdale. Gods forbid.” He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

Guilt washed over her. Here she was, pumping him for gossip when he could barely sit up. She was about to leave when he added one last comment. “But it can’t be true about these people from Aronsdale, that they make spells of light.”

Ginger felt as if the ground spun beneath her. Spells of light? She waited until she could speak calmly. “Whatever are you talking about?”

Darz sighed, slumped against the wall. “Supposedly their queens are mages...” He opened his eyes and stared across the room. Then he eased down to the bed and lay on his back.

“Ai, I’m terrible.” Ginger was appalled at herself. “I shouldn’t keep you up.” She leaned over him. “Would you like more tea?”

“I never drink tea,” he grouched. “I need ale.”

She smiled. “I’m afraid I have no ale.”

His lashes drooped over his eyes, dark against the pallor of his skin. “Would you read to me...as before?”

So he had known she was reading. “Yes, certainly.”

Ginger fetched a scroll from the archive. Then she sat on the stool by his bed and read to him about life in Sky Flames a hundred years ago. But her mind was whirling with what he had said. Spells of light. Could it be she wasn’t the only one who could make them? Her Aronsdale grandfather may have bequeathed her something far more complex than his fiery hair.

A disquieting thought intruded. If her spells did come from her Aronsdale heritage, from a people who didn’t worship the sun, would the Dragon-Sun be angry?

What he would do, she had no idea.



## Confrontation

“And if the killers return?” the Elder Sentinel demanded. “We must be ready.”

Rumbles of assent rolled through the crowd in the Tender’s Hall where the village held meetings. Hundreds of people filled the room, and many more stood by the walls or in aisles between the benches. Sky Flames had a population of about five hundred, and a good portion of the adults were here. Ginger stood against one wall trying to be inconspicuous. She was too agitated to sit. The stone room was designed to provide a cool refuge, but crammed with so many people, it became stifling. Oil lamps shed light, and their smoke blurred the scene, adding to her claustrophobia. She longed for the serene, spacious temple. She couldn’t leave, of course; she was responsible for the man who had inspired this meeting.

The Elder Sentinel, or just Elder, stood on a platform at the front of the hall. His name was Tajman Limestone. White hair swept up from his forehead, giving his gaunt face the aspect of an avenging angel from the Spirit Lands who kept a stern eye on the living. Three others sat at a table behind him: the Flame Sentinel, a brash fellow tasked with seeing to civil order in town; the Archivist, a woman with a severe face and gray-streaked hair; and Spark, the Second Sentinel, a shorter man with a bald head and beefy arms. The Elder Sentinel, Second Sentinel, and Archivist served as elders for the village.

Personally, Ginger thought the Archivist would have made a good Second Sentinel, helping the Elder to govern. But tradition forbid such an idea. Precedent did exist for a woman in a position of authority; a queen ruled in Taka Mal. Vizarana Jade Quazera had inherited her throne as the only child of the previous king. But here in Sky Flames, it could never happen.

The Archivist was a historian. She, too, had trained as an acolyte, but only because they kept archives in the temple, not because she intended to become a priestess. She had left the temple to assume her duties in the village long before Ginger became an acolyte. Ginger sometimes sought her out with questions about the history scrolls. Although the Archivist seemed to appreciate her interest, she never hid her disapproval of the priestess. Ginger didn’t know why the elder disliked her. She treated the older woman with respect and tried to be friendly, but it didn’t help. Maybe her personality grated on the somber historian; Ginger’s independent ways had put off others in town. Many people expressed goodwill toward her, but at times she wondered if some would prefer a more conservative priestess. She was the only choice, however; in a village as small as theirs, it was difficult to find women willing to assume the temple duties.

“We don’t know what this stranger did to provoke an attack,” the Elder was saying. “If his assailants return, one of us may be their next target. We must protect ourselves.”

“The soldier should leave!” a man called.

In the packed hall, Ginger couldn’t make out who shouted, but many people were nodding their agreement.

“Turn him out!” someone else yelled.

“If we turn out an injured man to die,” another man said, “we are no better than the bandits who attacked him.”

Bandits? Ginger blinked. Darz had never claimed such. It was a reasonable assumption, though, and more realistic than her theory about shadowy assassins who might not even exist.

More voices rose, until the room rumbled in argument. The Elder raised his hand, palm outward, and the people quieted.

“It would be wrong to turn out a dying man,” Elder Tajman said. “When he is able to walk, we will send him away.”

Rumbles of assent started up as people nodded in agreement. It alarmed Ginger. Being able to walk and surviving the desert were two very different matters. Darz would die if they turned him out too soon.

Ginger hadn’t planned to speak. No one expected her to; it wasn’t so long ago that priestesses had been rigorously confined to the temple. Public presentations made her nervous, and she gladly avoided them. But she couldn’t remain silent if they intended to turn Darz out. Her pulse jumped as she stepped away from the wall. The people around her stopped talking and stepped aside with formal nods. Her bare feet whispered on the stone floor, and her wrap rustled with her small steps. The men took care not to touch her even by accident, lest the dragon smite them for sullyng his devotee.

She continued past the benches, aware of everyone staring. Silence spread like the ripples from a pebble dropped into the temple fountain. The quiet washed through the crowd and up against the walls. She clutched her opal for confidence. Now, in the afternoon, it wouldn’t flare with light, as could happen if agitation caused her to lose control of her night spells.

It took her a while to reach the platform. She went to the staircase on the left. As she set her foot on the lowest step, she realized the wrap was too tight for her to climb the stairs normally. She had to put one foot on a step, then the other, then repeat the process for the next step.

The crowd remained silent. Kindle Burr, the Flame Sentinel who served as the head of the village guard, rose from his chair at the table on the platform. A husky man with short hair, he was tending to a little extra weight these days. He came to the top of the stairs and watched Ginger with concern. She only had to go up a few steps, but it took eons. When she reached the top, he flexed his hand as if he wanted to offer her support. He couldn’t of course; if he even just barely touched her in front of everyone, his own men would clap him in irons.

Ginger managed to incline her head to him without shaking or otherwise revealing her fear. She hoped. Elder Tajman was waiting at the front of the platform. She walked forward, and the stares of the people were like sparks against her skin.

The Elder bowed when she reached him. Although he showed respect, she knew him well enough to read the way his mouth tightened. He hadn’t expected this, and he didn’t like it.

He spoke in a low voice only she could hear. “You honor our meeting, Ginger-Sun.”

She answered with the same formality. “I thank you for your gracious words.”

“Do you wish to speak?”

She could tell he didn’t want her to address the assembly. The twitch of his mouth gave him away.

“I do,” she said. She had to stop herself from apologizing. She had the same right as any citizen to speak. In theory. In practice, the people expected silence from their priestess, which suited her fine, given her shyness and youth. But this had to be done, before distrust pushed them to send a man to his death.

The Elder stepped aside, offering her his place. One spot on the platform was the same as any other; his action was a symbolic acknowledgment from the town’s highest authority that she had his support. She stepped forward and faced the crowd. They sat like a pond with no ripples disturbing the surface. She knew many by name; a few, like Harjan, were cherished friends. Yet now they were all strangers, for she had never come before them this way.

She took a deep breath. “I would speak on behalf of the stranger.”

Gazes narrowed and people shifted in their seats.

“This man has done us no harm,” Ginger said. “He is a soldier who fought bravely in the Battle of the Rocklands. He serves Queen Vizarana and, as such, he serves the Dragon-Sun, who brings life to the deserts. If we turn him away, we are turning our backs on duties tasked to us by the dragon, and by the Sunset Goddess who watches over travelers. They guided this man to our temple.”

The weathered faces of her listeners showed the intense concentration distinctive of her people. She hoped they were hearing what she had to say. They couldn’t let fear drive them to shun Darz, for if they did, they were shunning the dragon and sunset. And without those, life ended.

When nothing happened except that everyone kept staring at her, relief washed over Ginger. She wasn’t sure what she had feared; perhaps that they would explode in anger. None of them had ever raised their voices to her, but she had never before so openly broken with tradition.

Just as she was about to leave the platform, a man near the front rose to his feet. Her pulse stuttered. It was Dirk Bauxite, who built and repaired houses. He had a hard-edged view of the world, especially for those who didn’t agree with him. The few times he had come to her temple for a blessing, his cold manner and avid scrutiny had frightened her. But he was also well respected in Sky Flames, a hard worker who was often willing to help others.

“Priestess,” he said. “I have a question.”

She couldn’t refuse to answer, not if she wanted the respect of the people here. “Please ask, Goodman Bauxite.”

“You speak of duty.” His voice, like his name, sounded as hard as a mineral. “But what of danger? It would be a cruel task set to us by the revered dragon, should this man or his enemies kill any of us because we opened our temple to him.”

It was a good question. Although she doubted Darz planned to harm anyone, she had no proof. And whoever had left him here might come back.

“I can’t promise no danger exists,” she admitted. “But if the dragon always smoothed our path, it would

weaken us.”

“You could be in danger,” Dirk said. His eyes glinted.

“The soldier won’t hurt me.” His manner made her more uncomfortable than Darz had ever done.

“Your gentle nature is well known,” Dirk moistened his lips as he stared at her. “But virtue is a poor defense against brutality.”

She flushed, unsettled. He called her gentle, yet it made him angry. Or not angry exactly, but hungry somehow. “It is true, we must be careful,” she said. “The Dragon-Sun has set us a trial. We must rise to that challenge.”

“How can you be sure the sun sent him?” Dirk demanded. “More likely he deserted from the army, and we should send him home for punishment.”

“I can’t guarantee he is neither evil nor a deserter.” Ginger knew she had no business contradicting such a respected citizen, someone nearly three times her age. But she plunged on. “I can say this—I have no sense either of those things is true.”

The Elder spoke, and his voice carried. “Ginger-Sun, your kindness and sweet nature are well known and appreciated. But that innocence can lead you to misjudge danger.”

Sweat had gathered on Ginger’s palms. “I wish I could offer proof. I can’t, I can only ask you to trust my judgment.”

Grumbles came from the crowd. Dirk continued to stand, his gaze harsh, and she knew he wanted to escalate his confrontation. Nothing like this had happened to her before. She was certain he wanted to hurt her. Why? Surely not just because she spoke in public. She was out of her depth here, and she felt as if she were sinking into the sand.

When Ginger said nothing more, simply stood, waiting, Dirk frowned. He started to speak, then scowled. Finally he took his seat. The Elder stepped forward and stood with Ginger as he addressed the meeting. “If our priestess is willing to risk her own well-being, surely we can support and protect her.”

The tensed set of Ginger’s shoulders relaxed. He wasn’t going to censure her. But she felt his disapproval; she had known him for too many years to be fooled. Too late, she realized he might feel she had shamed him with her willingness to confront this danger after he had counseled otherwise.

Hoping to defuse his anger, she spoke in a low voice. “You honor me, Elder.”

Tajman studied her with a penetrating gaze. He said nothing, and she was suddenly very afraid of him. But then he inclined his head to her with respect.

Ginger took her leave of the platform, walking in the small steps forced on her by the tight wrap. In her side vision, she could see Dirk Bauxite watching her with an intensity that made hairs on her neck prickle.

Kindle, the Flame Sentinel, was hovering at the stairs, still looking as if he wanted to help. She smiled unsteadily at him, glad someone in the room didn’t want to condemn her. Then she made her way down the stairs, step by excruciating step. When she reached the bottom, she saw Dirk wet his lips as he stared at her. If a person’s gaze could have burned, she would have been engulfed in flame.



The meeting ended soon after, but Ginger felt no relief. She feared she had made enemies today.

Harjan took Ginger home in his cart, then joined his mining crew, which was gathering to work on a bluff not far away. Ginger felt reassured to know they would watch the temple now that she had returned.

The main temple wasn't empty. Darz was sitting on the ledge of the fountain, staring into the water. She hadn't realized he would be up and about, and she tensed, worried he could have passed out while she was gone. After the way the meeting had gone today, she was disillusioned enough to wonder if people would be relieved should he fall in the water and drown, for they would no longer have to worry about him.

He had been at the temple for five days. He looked less strange today, dressed in an old pair of trousers and a work shirt Harjan had given him. His face was easier to read now that his bruises were clearing. He seemed lost in thought. He trailed his fingers in the water, then cupped his hands and drank.

Ai! More offenses against the dragon. Perhaps she should just give up and run away to join a caravan, given how angry the Dragon-Sun would be if he was watching her today.

She came up next to Darz. "You do realize," she said, "that you just committed sacrilege."

"Ho!" He jumped to his feet and spun around, reaching across his body for his nonexistent sword, his face twisted into a snarl. If she hadn't spent the last five days feeding and cleaning him, she probably would have been terrified. After the town meeting, though, an enraged warrior paled in comparison. Either that, or she was too frightened to register the emotion.

"Goodness," she said.

"Gods almighty, woman!" he bellowed. "Never sneak up on me!"

"I did not sneak up," she said. "And don't shout at me."

Unexpectedly, he winced. "Sorry." He glanced at her feet. "Don't you wear slippers? I couldn't hear you."

She shook her head. "It is forbidden for me to wear them."

"Why the blazes for?"

"It says in the ancient scrolls. 'The chosen of the Dragon-Sun will walk softly on the soles of her feet, so as never to disturb his exalted mentations.'"

"For flaming sake," he said. "Those writings are a thousand years old. No one even knows what they mean." He gave a snort. "I'll tell you what. Your elders don't want you to wear shoes because that makes it easier to keep you penned in the temple."

She shrugged. "I've gone barefoot for years. It doesn't bother me."

"You walked all the way to town like that?"

“Harjan gave me a ride.” She smiled at his annoyance. “Don’t worry. If I need slippers, I use them.” The elders would disapprove if they knew how often she wore what she wanted, so she didn’t tell them. She couldn’t completely hide it because people often came here, but she downplayed it as much as possible.

“It just all sounds so arcane,” he said.

“Have you never visited a temple before?” She indicated the fountain. “This water is blessed by the Sunset Goddess and goes back out pipes to irrigate crops. We can’t use it for ourselves without the proper rites.” The sparkling liquid came from underground springs, the village’s most valuable resource. The water source wasn’t extensive enough to support more than five hundred people, but that was enough for Sky Flames. Just barely.

“I’ve spent little time in temples,” Darz admitted. He didn’t look as if he thought that situation should be rectified, but he did seem contrite about the water.

“Well, I suspect no harm was done.” She blinked at him. “You certainly have a loud voice.”

To her surprise, he burst out laughing, a rich sound unlike any she had heard before, robust and unaffected. “So people tell me,” he said. “I must say, you’re a brave one. I’ve had people practically jump out of their clothes when I bellowed.”

“Well, then, I suspect you bellow far too much.” Flustered, she added, “And I never jump out of garments.”

His face reddened. “Ah. Well. I didn’t mean—that is, I would never think—” He cleared his throat, obviously trying not to think whatever it was he never thought.

After a moment, he said, “That dress is gorgeous.”

“Thank you,” she said, self-conscious.

Darz rubbed the back of his neck. “I noticed that, uh, you don’t seem to have any, well—young man who visits.”

Ginger wasn’t certain what he meant, that young men didn’t visit the temple, or that no one in particular came to see her. She spoke carefully, aware she was skirting the limits of what was proper. “Anyone of any age may seek my blessings.”

“Yes, well, I’m surprised crowds of suddenly pious young fellows aren’t out here seeking them daily.”

Her cheeks heated. “They go for their ten years army service when they are seventeen. Many don’t come back.”

“It’s mandatory here for men to do ten years in the army?”

“Isn’t it everywhere?”

He snorted. “It’s not mandatory to do ten seconds. We’re encouraged to go for one tour, and many men do, but that’s five years.”

It didn't surprise her. "Heath told me that, too, when he came home. He only stayed in five years. He was furious at the elders. He said they were taking advantage of me to do all the work in the temple because he wasn't here to protest."

"Who is Heath?" Darz hardly seemed to have heard the rest. "Your young man?"

She gave a startled laugh. "Goodness, no. He's my brother."

"Ah." His posture relaxed. "Didn't you have acolytes?"

"I was the acolyte." She shook her head. "I haven't found any girls interested in taking on those duties. It's frustrating. Everyone seems to feel I'm young enough that they don't need to worry about it."

"Your elders should send you help from the village."

In her less generous moments, similar thoughts had occurred to Ginger. She said only, "It's forbidden."

He made an exasperated noise. "No, it isn't." He stopped, then said, "Well, yes, I suppose you can't have the uninitiated mucking about a temple. But it's always possible to find help. You shouldn't have to shoulder the responsibility for this entire place alone."

"Heath does the heavy work," she assured him. "Harjan, too. Jalla, the Archivist's daughter, comes to visit, and she helps me inside."

He looked mollified. But then he said, "I know exactly why you can't get help."

She smiled, amused. "Now you are an expert on Sky Flames?"

Darz glared at her. "Don't laugh. I'm serious."

"Do tell."

He crossed his arms. "Most girls your age can't help you because they're married, with husbands more than ten years older and children. Others went with their young men to wherever the boys were stationed with the army. And that's not all I've figured out, Ginger-Sun. A stream of single men comes here to set up mining claims, don't they? Friction exists between them and the townsfolk, especially among unmarried men, because there's a shortage of women. Sometimes the newcomers carouse and cause trouble, which makes your people even more suspicious. That's why no one wants me here."

She gaped at him for a full five seconds before she found her voice. "How did you know all that?"

"Partially guessing," he admitted. "I've heard it happens in these mining outposts near the Jazid border. This area is rich with minerals, but it's a rough life. So you see a lot more men than women." Wryly he added, "It's no wonder your elders send all those restless young bucks off to the army."

Although Ginger had never thought about it in such terms, she knew Heath kept his friends away from her. "When my brother came back, three of his army friends came with him. They're all miners now." She gave him a rueful smile. "The only reason Heath isn't hulking around here, keeping an eye on you, is because they took a shipment of silver to J'Hiza, to negotiate with the merchants." Wistfully, she added, "You'll probably be gone by the time he returns."

To her disappointment, he said, “Probably.” Then he scowled at her. “You shouldn’t tell strangers that one of your main protectors is gone. Gods only know what could happen to a girl like you, alone, out here.”

“But I’m not alone. The villagers protect me.” She hesitated. “And I guess I don’t think of you as a stranger.”

His expression softened. “Thank you.”

“Would you like some water? I can bring you a carafe I’ve prepared. It’s all right to drink it if I’ve done the rites.”

“Yes, that would be excellent.”

“I will make a bargain with you,” she decided.

He watched her curiously. “And what might this entail?”

“If you go back to your room to rest, I’ll get the water.”

“Rest!” His smile turned into a glower. “I’ve been resting for five days. I’m going mad. I shall be a raving lunatic soon.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “Soon?”

“I thought all you priestesses were the embodiment of sweetness,” he grumbled.

She made shooing motions with her hands. “Go on. Go back to your room. I’ll be there in a moment.”

“I can’t believe you talk to me this way. Me, a soldier of Her Majesty’s army.” When she started to tell him what she thought about that, he laughed and held up his hands, the age-old request for mercy. “I’m going!”

“I’ll see you there.”

Darz went off, grumbling good-naturedly, which for some reason made her feel soft inside.

As Ginger headed to her rooms, she mulled over everything that had happened. The elders would never let him remain in the temple if they saw him up and about. And he wouldn’t stay put much longer. But he wasn’t ready to set off in the desert. J’Hiza, the nearest town was more than a day’s ride from here, and he had no supplies or horse. Moving him to town was the sensible option. If Tajman knew Darz was well enough to move, though, he would probably decide their guest was well enough to leave.

Deep in thought, she walked into her suite—

And slipped in a pool of blood.



## The Trespass

Ginger's cry rang out. Confined by her wrap, she couldn't jump back or even swing her arms for balance. She fell on the stone, hitting her hip as she caught herself with her hands. In front of her, in the doorway of her parlor, a pool of blood had spread in an ugly red blotch.

Frantic, she struggled to her feet and backed away, leaving bloody footprints—until she thudded into someone.

“No!” She whirled around, trying to bring her arms up to defend herself, but the tight sleeves of the wrap made it impossible.

Darz. It was Darz. He had put up his hands to stop her from knocking him over, and now he took hold of her upper arms. “Saints, Ginger-Sun, what happened?”

“On the floor.” Her arm trembled as she turned and pointed to the blood.

It suddenly hit her that he was holding her. This wasn't like when she had tended his injuries; now he deliberately put his hands on her. It was also the first time they had stood together when she wasn't supporting him, and she was acutely aware of his height, that he was taller and heavier than most men and she smaller than many women. The situation rattled her so much, she lurched back from him.

He was staring past her to her room. “Wait here,” he said.

“I've taken care of this temple for years,” she said, edgy with the turmoil of her thoughts. “And I've taken care of you for five days. Now that you can walk, don't treat me like I'm some helpless female you have to hide in silk wraps and bare feet.” Until she said the words, she didn't realize how angry she was, not at him, but at the elders. She always held her anger inside and told herself it didn't exist.

“All right,” he said. “Show me.”

She was so stunned, she just stood and gaped at him. She had once—only once—spoken with such anger in the village. She had lashed out at Second Sentinel Spark when he refused to let her tend an injured miner. Her defiance had infuriated him, and she had feared he would hit her. As much as she resented it, he had that right as an elder of the village. He restrained himself, but later Elder Tajman had come to the temple and told Ginger she must spend two days in penance, meditating on her “unseemly behavior.” It angered her that they punished her when she had only wanted to help someone who was suffering, and two days locked in an acolyte's cell had been dreadfully boring, but it was better than having Spark beat her.

Ginger took a deep breath and led Darz to the archway of her parlor. As he knelt to examine the blood, she stared at the streak of red her foot had left on the tiles.

He looked up at her, his face drawn. "This could be from a goat or a sheep. But we'll have to check your suite to see if anyone is inside."

His pallor worried Ginger. "You shouldn't be taking such risks when just a few days ago you were the one who was dying."

He rose to his feet, and his lips curved upward. "Don't treat me like I'm some helpless invalid you have to hide in sleep clothes and bare feet."

She gave a startled laugh. Had she really been so bold to say the like to him? "Fair enough."

He raised his hand, and for a moment, she thought he would touch her. Then he flushed and dropped his arm.

Ginger wasn't sure which bothered her more, that he had almost touched her again or that she wished he hadn't held back. Torn by her confused emotions, she walked inside, scanning the parlor. Her vases from Kuzla Quian stood half as tall as a person, but they were too thin for someone to hide behind. The chairs and divan were woven wicker that she could see through. The tables were simple affairs, enameled in blue, white and rose, with no parts that could provide a hiding place. The arch to her bedroom had no door, and its curtain of beads was tied up on either side.

"Is anything out of place?" Darz asked.

Startled, she realized he had followed her inside as if it were perfectly natural. She knew she should tell him to leave, but she was afraid to be alone.

"Everything looks normal," she said.

He went to the archway of her bedroom. The room was much like this one, except for the bed, which at the moment lacked its fluffy quilt, blankets and cushions, leaving a bare mattress on a frame reinforced with sunwood slats. Seeing Darz look at the place where she slept set her cheeks burning.

"Gods," he muttered. "You could stay here, and you've been sleeping on the floor in my room?" He glanced at her. "I owe you even more thanks than I knew."

"It's no trouble. I slept on the floor of that cell for six years."

"Gods almighty, why?"

"That's what acolytes do."

"It sounds cruel to me." He motioned at her bedroom. "Does anything look out of place there?"

"Not a thing." She walked into the sunny room, sweeping her gaze over the furniture, vases, her scrolls, the walls, the dragon in its niche—

"Wait." She crossed to the head of her bed and peered at the blown-glass dragon. It was tinted like the sunrise, pink and gold with a touch of blue. But today, not all of its color came from glass.

Ginger felt sick. She sat on the bed and laid her hand over her abdomen, as if that could hold down her bile.

“What is it?” Darz came over to her. “Are you all right?”

She stared across the room at one of the windows and the sky beyond. “Look at the dragon.”

He leaned past her to peer at the sculpture. “I don’t see—” Then he swore loudly. “Flaming hell. That’s sheer malice.”

She spoke dully. “Smearing blood on a symbol of the sun is sacrilege. I’ll have to destroy the statue.”

“No, don’t do that. It’s such a beautiful work.” He was standing over her, studying the sculpture, so close his arm was brushing her shoulder. Touching her. Her longing for him had brought only grief, yet even now it simmered within her, and she despised herself for it. She couldn’t let herself feel. If she did, the fear and shock would be too great.

Darz lifted up the sculpture and sat next to her. “It shouldn’t be hard to clean this.” He used his sleeve to wipe at the blood smeared on the wings. “The glass isn’t damaged.”

Ginger had gone beyond dismay to a numb calm, as if that could protect her. The calm wouldn’t last, though. She would soon crack open, and she didn’t want Darz to see her fall apart. If he were sitting here, so close, so strong and warm, she would end up in his arms and take her transgressions beyond what the Dragon-Sun would ever forgive, if she hadn’t already gone that far.

“Darz, look at me,” she said.

He met her gaze. “I don’t know why this is happening. I swear it.”

“Someone is trying to scare me.” They were succeeding extremely well. “And Darz.” It amazed her how steady she sounded, because she was on the verge of breaking.

“Yes?”

“Do you have any idea how much trouble we would be in if anyone found you in my bedroom, sitting next to me on my bed, holding a desecrated ritual object?”

“Oh!” He jumped up and started to leave, but then he came back. With care, he set the dragon in its niche. “You go into the temple. I’ll clean up the blood here.”

She shook her head. “You can’t be in my rooms.”

He looked as if he wanted to argue. But he was studying her face, too, and whatever he saw kept him from protesting. He limped across the room and turned in the archway. “I’ll be nearby if you need me. Just call out.”

“Thank you.”

“Promise me you won’t destroy that lovely sculpture.”

Her voice shook. “I promise.”

“Take care, lovely fire opal.” Then he left, before she had time to be scandalized. Except she couldn’t

summon outrage. She had never known the simple pleasure of a man finding her pretty. No man in Sky Flames would dare take such liberties, but she thought Darz didn't even realize what he was doing. He knew as much about temples as she did about military maneuvers, which was next to nothing.

When Ginger was alone, she pulled out her opal. The orange color could have been fire solidified into a crystal. Its banked power waited for release. Except the power wasn't in the opal; it was inher. She wasn't certain how she knew, for her spells never worked with any other gem. Yet she felt certain the stone unlocked something within her. But only in the cold night. It could do nothing now, offer no comfort.

The dam holding her feelings broke and tears poured down her face. The events of these past days were shattering her life. The scrolls of the Dragon-Sun taught that he protected a priestess from the flames of his power, so that if she were ever in his presence, she wouldn't burn. But what of these flames destroying her heart? Nothing shielded her from their searing pain.

After a while, Ginger wiped away the moisture on her face. She put away the opal and set about cleaning her rooms. Even after she scrubbed the floor until the tiles shone, they didn't seem clean. She cried while she washed the dragon. How could someone commit such an offense? She didn't know which would be worse, that whoever tried to murder Darz had violated the sanctum of her private rooms or that someone in the village had done this.

Darz had been here when it happened, but she knew he hadn't done it. People thought she was naive, and maybe they were right, but she trusted her instincts. They had always guided her well, and now they told her Darz was innocent. If his attackers had done this, surely they would have tried to kill him again. He had probably been sleeping in his room, so they might not have known he was here, but if that were true, she couldn't see why they would go after her.

More likely someone in the village had left the blood. After today's meeting, she knew all too well how people felt about Darz. But they had violated her room, not his. It couldn't be because she had spoken today; this had to have happened while she was gone. She had come straight home afterward and seen no one else along the way. Although it wasn't impossible for someone to have run back before her, she thought it unlikely. If what had happened here with the blood became known, her people would assume Darz had done it and drive him out into the desert to die.

Ginger stood by the bed and watched Darz sleep. He must have dropped off as soon as he lay down. He looked boyish, his great power and strength momentarily lulled. He hadn't changed his clothes, and he even had one foot on the floor. Shadows of night filled the cell, barely challenged by the candle out in the temple. Caught with an affection she shouldn't feel, she lifted his leg onto the bed and set it next to his other one.

Darz opened his eyes. "Light, Ginger-Sun..."

She straightened up. "You're awake!"

He pushed up on his elbows. "Are you all right?"

"Fine." It wasn't true; she was tired, scared, and confused. She sat on the stool by his bed. "How about you?"



He scowled darkly. "I am not fine. Someone is harassing you, and I don't like it."

Ginger knew that to most people he probably looked large and dark and menacing. But he didn't frighten her. "They must have come in while I was at the meeting."

"I was asleep." He sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, only a few handspans away from her. "Has anyone ever hounded you this way before?"

"Never." She hesitated, distracted by how close he was sitting to her. "It isn't because of me, I don't think. It's you. People are scared." With apology, she added, "They want you to leave. I convinced them not to turn you out, but you shouldn't stay in the temple with me anymore."

He grimaced, pulling the stitches on the gash that snaked down his face. "I sometimes forget how provincial these isolated villages are."

Ginger bristled. "We may be small and far from Quaaz, but that doesn't make us worth any less than other places."

His face crinkled with a smile. "You should see how you blaze when you're angry."

"Don't patronize me."

"I'm not!" He glared at her. "Can a man do or say nothing around you without getting into trouble?"

"Pretty much not," she admitted.

He motioned around them. "I never know what to do in these places. It's why I avoid them."

"You mean a temple?"

"The last time I was in one, I thought the priestess was going to skewer me with my own sword."

She raised an eyebrow. "Why am I not surprised?"

His eyes glinted. "I tried to stop my cousin Lima from getting a nuptial blessing."

"You didn't like his bride?"

"Her groom." He glared as if she had invoked an offense of great proportions. "Her skinny husband who wouldn't know what to do with a sword if it jumped into his hand. What the blazes kind of man is that for Lima, eh?"

"I can think of far worse traits for a husband," she said. "For example, a man who glares and yells and interferes in the lives of his family because he doesn't think thin grooms are worthy of his kin."

She thought he would shout at her, but instead he burst out laughing. "Saint Citrine, you sound just like Lima. She does what she wants no matter what I say."

That made Ginger feel like a cat with a bowl of cream. "I think I would like her."

He regarded her warily. "I don't know if Taka Mal could survive putting the two of you together."

She smiled, relieved he had decided not to shout. “Is she happy with her skinny husband?”

“Yes, actually,” he said grudgingly. “She loves him. He loves her. They have a baby. They are quite happy.”

She heard what he didn’t say. “But you aren’t.”

For a moment she thought he wouldn’t answer. Then he said, “I was supposed to marry her.”

No wonder he was upset. It wasn’t unusual for cousins to wed, though she had heard it was less common in the cities. Here in Sky Flames, it happened all the time. She was probably related to half the people in the village.

“You must love her very much,” she said.

“Well, no. I mean, yes.” He glared at her. “Yes, I do. Like I would love my kin. Not as a wife. But still. It’s the principle. That she would choose him over me.” He scowled and crossed his arms.

Ah. Male pride. “Perhaps she felt no one could ever measure up to you, so she had to settle for less.”

Darz gave a hearty laugh. “I very much doubt that.” He lowered his arms. “So you think your people will throw me out?”

“I hope not. We need to make you less threatening.” She considered his large build, bulging muscles, and scars. “Or if that won’t work, at least convince them you need time to finish your recovery and arrange travel.”

“Why aren’t you afraid of me like the others?”

“Should I be?”

He answered in a low voice. “Yes.”

He caught her off guard; she had expected him to say Of course not. She was suddenly aware of the dim light, how it added intimacy to their meeting, as if the shadows offered a veil to hide forbidden behavior.

Darz traced his fingertip down her cheek and across her lips. “You’re so damned beautiful.”

She couldn’t answer. The Dragon-Sun would surely send flames to smite Darz. Except apparently the dragon was asleep or paying no attention to her inconsequential temple, because no fire appeared. Ginger knew she should push Darz back, turn him away, banish him. Instead, she sat like a deer hypnotized by the glow of a campfire in the dark. Wind keened across the sands outside, and black-wings called through the night.

Darz cupped his palm around her cheek. He had taken the bandages off his hands, and his stitches scraped her skin. A flush of heat went through her. He bent his head, and when his lips touched hers, it jolted her body like a shock of heat. She had to stop! If anyone walked in right now they would probably kill Darz and maybe her as well. But she wanted so much to hold him, to know at least once in her life how it felt to be kissed by a man who desired her.

Darz apparently had no fear, or else he was too innocent of temple strictures to know how badly he sinned. When he pulled her off the stool, she broke away from the kiss. He easily lifted her to sit next to him on the bed and engulfed her in his embrace, his arm muscles corded against her back, his bandaged torso pressing against her chest. He was too strong, too big, but she couldn't make herself tell him to stop. She wanted so badly to believe the Dragon-Sun wasn't punishing them because he had chosen this man for her.

Darz kissed her as if he were stranded in the dunes, parched for water, and she was the oasis. His beard scratched her cheek. She felt hot, then light-headed, then wobbly, and she never wanted it to end. He laid her beneath him on the bed—and Ginger finally came to her senses.

She jerked away her head. "No!"

He nuzzled her cheek, his body stretched out on top of her, his breath coming faster as he tried to kiss her again.

"Stop, please." She struggled, pushing at his shoulders.

He inhaled sharply. Then he pushed up on his elbows and looked down at her with heartbreaking affection. "Why, Ginger? I can tell you want me."

"This is sacrilege."

"A beautiful fire-lily should be cherished, not imprisoned here like a dead flower pressed in a book."

She stared up at him. "The dragon will punish us both."

He searched her face, and she could see details of his eyes. They weren't truly black, but dark brown with the thinnest veins of gold. His low voice rumbled as if it were a spell of desire. "Would it be so terrible if I made love to you? Surely the Dragon-Sun doesn't wish you bereft of companionship." He brushed his lips across hers. "It's a crime to isolate such a lovely girl."

"Darz, get off." She hit at his shoulders with her fists. "Now."

With a groan, he pulled away from her and sat up on the edge of the bed. Cold air filled the space where his body had been. She sat up next to him, tugging her wrap, which had slipped off her shoulders. Then she stood up, miserable, her eyes downcast.

"Priestess," he said. "Look at me."

She raised her gaze to his. "You're right," she said. "I'm so lonely here, sometimes I feel as if I'll die of it." Tears gathered in her eyes. "And if you seek to take advantage of that for your own pleasure, you are cruel beyond all measure."

She turned and walked to the archway of the room. As she reached it, Darz said, "Ginger."

She paused, one hand on the door frame as she stared across the shadowed temple. She knew if she turned, she wouldn't be able to leave. So she walked out of the cell, the floor cold against her soles as she left behind his seductive warmth.



## Sand Shadow

Ginger stood on the crest of a sand dune with her tear-streaked face tilted to the heavens. Stars filled the night. The sky glittered like a black sea saturated with diamonds.

“Why is he here?” she asked, her voice muted in the immensity of the night. She was alone, far from the village, far from the temple, hidden among endless mountains of sand. “Are you punishing me for wanting another besides you?”

Now that she was away from the temptation of Darz’s passion, she could think. After what had happened in the town meeting today she knew she could never marry Darz, even if he had wanted it, which she doubted. The people of Sky Flames would never sanction her union with such a stranger. She could defy their will, but then she could no longer serve as their priestess. They would turn her out, just as they wanted to turn Darz out.

He was toying with her. A naive girl alone and a bored warrior; she probably seemed like a water-peach ready to pick. But if he took her from the vine that nurtured her—her home and the temple—she would wither.

Her solitude was like a great glass sphere closing her away from life. She could see the rest of the world, but never touch it. Tradition cloistered her, and the miners guarded her. Even tonight, Tanner had been posted outside the temple and had followed her into the dunes. At least he was discreet; she hadn’t seen him after she started walking.

The wind rippled her shawl around her body, over the tunic and leggings she had donned in defiance of everyone. At night, temperatures plunged. With a shiver, she pulled the shawl around her body. Then she lifted her hand out of its folds and opened her palm to the sky. The opal lay there. A glow lit its center, as if it had an ember of fire in its heart.

“What are you?” she whispered. Her focus on the gem caused the light to flare, and radiance streamed out of the pyramid. Her apprehension surged; if Tanner saw, he might condemn her.

Ginger spoke in a low voice. “Warmth!” She had discovered that single words helped focus her concentration. The light faded, and her hand grew warm.

“Soothe,” she murmured.

A sense of well-being seeped through her. It didn’t take away her loneliness or her grief. She wasn’t even sure why she grieved; maybe for the glimpse Darz offered of a life she could never have. But her sorrow somehow became more bearable.

Perhaps it was time to tell the elders she wished to marry. They would select an acceptable husband. She could imagine the type they would pick, though, an upstanding citizen in Sky Flames, perhaps

Kindle, the Flame Sentinel who had helped her up the stairs at the meeting. Or they might choose someone like Dirk Bauxite, the house-builder who had challenged her that day and watched her with that covetous hunger. Dirk frightened her, with his hard attitudes that left no room for softness. She knew the elders would consider it in her best interest to have someone take a “strong hand” with her. The dragon only knew what someone like Dirk would do if she became his wife. She grimaced and knew she would never bring up the matter with the elders.

Her focus slipped, and the opal’s vestigial glow faded. Closing her hand, she took away its last sliver of light. She began the long walk home. The moonless night wasn’t truly dark, not with the glitter of stars overhead. The shushing of her tread in the sand was the only sound in the vast landscape.

In fact, it was too quiet. She stopped, listening. The deep silence was unnatural. Then a black-wing cried somewhere, and with an exhale, she resumed her walk.

A figure appeared on the next dune.

Ginger went stock-still. He stood on the ridge, silhouetted against the stars. She couldn’t be certain, but she thought he was staring straight at her. She was on the crest of a dune, so she would be as visible to him as he was to her.

Darz. He had come looking for her. She clung to that hope though she knew he was in no condition to wander the desert. Just limping across the temple had taxed him.

As soon as the figure started down the dune, she knew it wasn’t Darz. He couldn’t run in that fast, sliding gait. It didn’t look like one of the miners; something about the way he was approaching, with such deliberate speed, was wrong.

Where was Tanner? She backed up along the ridge, then realized she had nowhere to go. The temple was to the south, exactly in line with the figure, and the village lay beyond that. No one wandered here except animals that lived in the dunes. Sand-cats rarely ranged this far east, and they were the only predators that posed a danger. Except human ones. He might mean no harm, but if his intentions were benign, why hadn’t he called out or identified himself?

Ginger slid down the ridge until it hid her from the figure. She knew this desert well, for she spent many hours here meditating to the Dragon-Sun. He never answered, unless Darz was his idea of a response. It would be a cruel one, bringing more pain than anything else, but then, a sun god had neither to be comprehensible or kind.

The color of her clothes and hair were similar to the desert; in the starlight, she hoped that made it difficult to see her. Moving as fast as she could manage in sand that slipped and poured under her feet, she climbed toward a notch between two dunes. Within moments, she reached the small pass and slid down its other side. She stopped, breathing heavily, her hand pressed to her side while she scanned the ridges above her. No figure showed against the starred sky. The night darkened the valleys between the dunes, but as far as she could see, no sign of movement showed down here. No sounds came, either, except the wind. She didn’t dare let herself feel safe, though. Not yet, not until she was home. Moving slowly to conserve her breath, she headed for the temple. She rounded another crest of sand—

Someone ripped the shawl from her shoulders.

The violent motion spun Ginger around, and she sprawled onto her stomach. Catching herself on her hands did no good; they sunk into the dune. She tried to cry out, but her mouth filled with sand. A hand

shoved her down and someone lay on top of her, heavy and wide, covering her body.

“I saw you, whore.” His breath was suffocating, thick with the smell of wine. “Kissing him.”

She spit out the sand in her mouth. “Get off!” He didn’t sound like any of the miners. “Who are you, spying on me?”

“You offend the sanctity of your calling.” He was gripping her waist hard, and pain flared through her.

“That isn’t yours to decide,” she cried. “Stop touching me!”

He flipped her over and slapped her across the face. “You will not speak to me that way!”

Reeling from the blow, she clawed at his face with her opal. When he let go of her to protect himself, she grabbed a handful of sand and threw it into his eyes.

“Ai!” His yell flew across the desert.

Ginger twisted and toppled him sideways. They were on the slope of a dune, one steep enough that he fell hard and rolled down it, away from her. She scrambled to her feet and lunged into a run, slipping and scrabbling, staying below the crest so she wouldn’t be visible against the sky. Usually she loved the constantly shifting sands, but now she cursed them for dragging away her speed. She couldn’t tell if the stranger was following; the sand muffled footsteps. Except stranger was the wrong word. She knew his voice. She couldn’t place it, but he was from the village. Someone wanted reason to throw out Darz, and now he had plenty, not only against Darz, but against her as well.

It was only a fifteen-minute walk from home, but it had never seemed so long. When she reached the temple, gasping for air, no miners were outside; apparently they thought Tanner was with her. She ran inside, into the barest light from the dregs of a candle on the table. She raced to her rooms and found the cutlery where she had left it, in a wedge of goldwood by her cutting board. She grabbed the largest chopping knife and spun around, half expecting to see the bulky figure behind her.

The kitchen was empty.

Ginger gulped in air. Her heart was beating so hard she thought it would burst. Alert to every noise, she returned to the table in the main temple where she put out candles every night. She was clenching her opal so hard, it cut her skin. She opened her hand, ignoring the trickle of blood, and concentrated until a flame leapt from the gem. She used the spell of fire to light candles until the table blazed with golden light.

“Ginger?” Darz asked. “What happened?”

“Ah!” She snapped her hand closed and doused the spell, so only the candlelight remained. She retreated to the other side of the table, keeping it between them. “Don’t you sleep?”

“It’s all I’ve been doing.” He walked toward her, barely visible in the shadows.

“Stay back.”

He stopped about fifteen paces away, at the edge of her sphere of light. “I won’t trespass.”

“It’s a little late to decide that.” Her voice cracked. “Someone spied on us. He followed me into the

desert.”

“Gods almighty! Are you all right?”

She laid her palm against her right cheek. It was already swelling. “I’ve been better.”

“He hurt you!” Darz started toward her. “I’ll kill—”

“Stop! Don’t you see? You can’t come near me. I can’t stay in the same building with you. But I don’t dare walk to the village. He might be out there. You can’t walk to the village, either. It’s too far.” Her voice was shaking. “Why would he attack me? If he wanted to discredit us, he needed only tell the Elder what he had seen.”

“Maybe he’s not from your village.”

“He is. I’m sure.”

“What did he say?”

Ashamed, she said, “He called me a whore.”

“Anyone who calls you that answers to me!” In a calmer tone, he added, “That does make his motives obvious, though.”

“It does?”

“To a man.”

She regarded him dourly. “Well, maybe you could make them obvious to this woman.”

“He saw me doing what he was forbidden to do. So he got angry. He probably wants to smash in my face.”

“But I told you to stop.” She felt dishonest saying it, because she hadn’t wanted him to stop. But if someone had been close enough to see them, he must have heard.

He spoke quietly. “I am deeply sorry, Priestess, that my inexcusable behavior caused this trouble for you.”

It was impossible to be angry when he spoke that way and looked so appealing, standing there in his sleep trousers and shirt, with hair falling into his eyes as if he were a boy instead of a formidable warrior. Of course, that was how she had landed in this mess, by finding him so appealing.

“He might be in here,” she said.

He gave an angry snort. “Where the hell are those miners who are always hulking around?”

It was a good question. “I thought Tanner followed me into the dunes. But I’m sure he wasn’t the one who hit me.”

He limped forward, keeping his hands at his sides with his palms out, as if to show he had no weapons.

She wasn't certain he even realized he was doing it; the gesture seemed automatic, the soldier seeking to make himself less imposing. But it wasn't his military skills that threatened her.

Darz stopped at the other side of the table. "If you want to search the temple, we should each take a candle. Also, I could use one of those knives, if you have another."

Ginger breathed out slowly. "I'll get it." She ran to her kitchen and grabbed another knife. When she returned to the main temple, Darz was waiting with two candles.

They searched the entire building, even the Sunset room, and they called for Tanner and Harjan. As before, with the scream and the blood, they found no trace of anyone. Ginger wanted to feel relieved, but she feared it meant the spy could hide so well, they couldn't find him even with such a thorough attempt.

Eventually she and Darz sat on the ledge of the fountain, holding their candles, and stared at each other. He asked the question first. "What now?"

"Dawn is in a few hours. Then we can go to the village." She wasn't certain he could get that far, but she had no better ideas.

"And after that?"

"I don't know." She rubbed her eyes. "It depends if the person who hit me tonight says anything."

"Why wouldn't he?" Darz asked. "He has a lot to gain."

"Gain what?" she asked angrily. "My humiliation?"

"Yes, actually. And my exile." He lifted his hand to her cheek, then realized what he was doing and set his palm on the ledge. "It won't help his case when people see that black eye he gave you."

She probed her face and winced as pain shot through her cheek. "Unless he says you did it."

"I did it?" His voice rose. "I'd like to give him one."

"Darz, don't yell."

"I'm not yelling," he said loudly. But he did lower his voice. "I'm speaking with resolve."

She couldn't help but smile. "Do you think you could be a little less resolved?"

"Very well. I'll try to speak better."

"Actually, you speak very well."

He squinted at her. "Why do you sound surprised?"

She gave him a look of apology. "I suppose I had some ill-conceived ideas about soldiers, that they trained with weapons and fists rather than their minds."

He tapped his temple. "A fighter needs this if he is going to stay alive."



“It’s more than that.” She searched for the right words. “You remind me of Elder Tajman. It’s your confidence, I think. He assumes people will follow his lead. So do you.”

“Why does that bother you?”

“It doesn’t fit my picture of soldiers, I guess. They are trained to obey, yes?”

“I’m just like everyone else. Nothing special.”

Softly she said, “I wouldn’t agree with you on either of those claims.”

His look gentled. “It only seems that way to you because I have some veneer from living in Quaaz.”

“You live in Quaaz?”

Darz swore under his breath. “When I’m not in Taza Qu.”

“You use far too many oaths,” she chided. “Especially inside the house of the Dragon-Sun.”

“I do believe you are trying to civilize me.” He sounded intrigued. “It’s a hopeless goal.”

Her face warmed with a smile. “Why didn’t you want me to know you live in Quaaz?”

It was a moment before he answered. Finally he said, “I command a company in the Queen’s Army. That doesn’t mean I’m particularly valuable, but some people might think so.”

“I knew it!” She beamed at him. “You didn’t seem the type to quietly take orders.”

“I have to take my orders like anyone else. I just happen to give a few, too.” He grinned at her. “Though I’ve heard it said I never do anything quietly.”

“I imagine not.” Her smile faded. “Surely you don’t think any of my people were involved with the attempt on your life.”

He stared at his reflection in the water and touched the healing gash on his face. “I don’t know why those men attacked me. Maybe they were bandits. But why go after someone who had just woken up and was carrying nothing of value?”

“They might not have realized that.”

“It’s possible.” He raised his gaze to her. “I don’t want anyone here to think I might have anything worth taking.”

“I don’t think anyone wants to steal from you.” With apology, she said, “They just want you to leave.” She wanted to add, Except me, but she couldn’t make that admission.

His face darkened. “Not until I stop whoever is tormenting you.”

“Darz, it’s a matter for my people to deal with.” Softly she said, “But thank you.”

“For what?” He made an incredulous noise. “Causing you this trouble because I was an unconscionable

lout?"

"It's not your fault someone tried to kill you." She couldn't respond to the rest. It hadn't felt unconscionable, it had been delicious, but if anyone overheard her say such a thing, she would be in even more trouble.

Darz rubbed his eyes. "Even if we could risk walking to the village tonight, I doubt I could. I think I'm going to fall asleep sitting here."

"Aye. I also."

"You should sleep in the acolyte's cell tonight," he said. "It's safer. It has no windows. I'll sleep on the floor in front of its door." He indicated her knife. "I don't think you should keep that, either, not unless you know how to use it, and I don't mean to chop food."

Her grip tightened on the handle. "It's a good defense."

"It would be easy for someone to take it from you if you're half asleep. You need training for weapons like that."

"What makes you think I don't have it?"

"Do you?"

After a moment, she said, "No."

He regarded her intently. "Could you use it? Because if you can't, what you're really doing, by keeping it with you, is giving your attacker a weapon."

She stared at the glinting knife. "I can't imagine stabbing a person." She met his gaze. "But I would defend myself."

"Hide it under the mattress. Don't pull it out unless you're sure you can use it. That goes for any weapon."

"I'll remember." She wished she could say more.

In the morning they would have to deal with the aftermath of this night.



## Judgement

Ginger and Darz set off for the village at dawn, soon after the dragon breathed fire into the sky. Neither of them had slept much. Darz had dark circles under his eyes, and his limp was more pronounced. In the

temple, he had moved with relative ease, but he hadn't had to go far. Now he remained silent, his energy focused on their trek. For once she was glad the wrap and her bare feet constrained her steps, for it gave her a reason to walk slowly without hurting his pride.

The village up ahead was a cluster of houses built from sunstone and a few larger buildings with onion domes in the center. Several miners were hiking up the ridges north of town, toward the rock fields where they dug for ores. They had almost exhausted the surface veins and were digging shafts, but they needed a better way to excavate.

This last spring, Ginger had found an old scroll with a fanciful tale. It described how a man named Charles Carter had stumbled into Sky Flames, not from the west where most of the country lay, but from the east, across the killing deserts where no one lived. He must have been strong indeed, for he had survived the journey from the eastern coast. The scroll was less clear on where he came from before that, just that he had been shipwrecked. He didn't know how he ended up here; he claimed their small continent couldn't exist.

The man stayed the rest of his life in Sky Flames. On occasion, he traveled west through the settled lands and beyond the Misted Cliffs to the Blue Ocean. There, he would find a ship to take him home. According to the tale, the ships always came back to the shore, though he and the crew swore they never turned around. It saddened Ginger to think of the seaman stranded in a place he didn't believe existed.

She thought now of the scroll because of a substance Carter described. "Gunpowder." It exploded. The priestess who had penned his story dutifully recorded the ingredients and procedures, but she wrote as if the powder were a figment of his imagination. Although Ginger didn't see how it could work, either, she was studying it in the hopes of finding something useful. If it were more than a tale, it might help Harjan and his men dig mines. That would have to wait, though, until this turmoil settled.

"You're quiet," Darz said.

"I was thinking how people might react if word has spread about last night." She had worn her opal on a chain around her wrist, and now she touched it for luck.

"If they mistreat you, they'll have to deal with me."

She couldn't think of much that would make this worse than Darz threatening people. "I thank you for your support. But I don't think you should. It could make it look even more as if we, well—" she reddened "—you know."

"Your attacker may not have said anything."

She slanted a glance at him. "Then everyone will believe you gave me this bruise."

"For flaming sakes. I've barely been able to stand up. That's the only reason they let me stay this long, right?" When she just looked at him, he grimaced. "All right, so they won't believe me." Then he said, "I have no coins or goods to trade for a horse."

"I won't let anyone strand you in the desert." She wasn't sure how she would stop them, but there had to be a way.

"If you speak up for me," he said, "won't that make people suspicious, too?"

“It might.” Disheartened, she said, “No matter what we do, we have trouble.”

“I think so. People are staring at us.”

She saw what he meant. They had reached the edge of Sky Flames, where villagers were coming out of their small houses to tend gardens, look after goats or fetch water. Others stood in their doorways and watched as she and Darz followed a dusty lane between the huts.

“They don’t look antagonistic,” Darz said. “Curious, more.”

“It’s a good sign.” Ginger hoped she was right. If news had spread, surely she and Darz would be seeing more hostility.

As they went deeper into the village, the meandering lane became a street. They passed a girl herding a flock of tough-coated sheep, a hardy desert breed that could survive on far less water than their fluffier cousins in more hospitable climates. A gourd-tender walked by carrying his hoe, probably headed for the fields of gourds, corn, and beans, or the orange and lemon orchards. Crops never grew as large here as in wetter regions, but it was enough to feed Sky Flames.

People trickled into the streets: butchers, chicken-tenders, coppersmiths, merchants. Although she didn’t know most of them well, she recognized many faces and nodded to those who greeted her. Although no one challenged them, their gazes flicked to Darz, often with distrust and suspicion.

Ginger paused at an alley behind two rows of shops. “Here.”

“Is it far?” Darz’s usually robust voice sounded strained.

She felt like a cretin, pushing him to walk. “Not much farther.”

As they headed down the alley, memories rushed over her. These yellow-stone walls, the crack by a faded red door—it was so familiar. She had often hidden in that recessed doorway playing Seek-me. The crooked awning above it provided shade during the hottest hours of the day. Even the dusty ground, hard-packed and yellow with sand, seemed to welcome her.

The alley angled past the back of a house. She went to the door and knelt. Or she tried to kneel. The wrap kept her from bending her legs, so she had to bend over from the waist with the wrap pulled tight over her back and hips. When she ran her palms over the wall by the ground, a brick tilted under her push. She found an ornate key in the niche behind it, then replaced the brick and stood up.

Darz was leaning against the wall, watching her exertions with undisguised pleasure. His grin flashed. “Are you breaking into this house, sweet priestess?”

She raised her eyebrows at his cocky smile. “Well, my brother says I don’t visit enough.”

“He lives here?”

Ginger nodded as she unlocked the house. “It’s where we grew up.” She pushed open the door. The interior was cool and dark, but across the room, sunlight slanted through an archway that opened onto a garden within the house. A fountain in the garden spilled water out of a raised bowl into a basin.

“This is nice,” Darz said.

Nice. Such a simple word for a place that held so many complicated and loving memories. “You can stay while my brother is gone. I’ll ask the healer to look in on you.”

He spoke quietly. “You’re very generous.”

She reddened, and motioned him toward the sunny archway. They walked out into the garden. Flowers grew in profusion: snap-lions, rosy box blossoms, and fire-lilies. Pillars that supported balconies bordered the yard, painted red near the bottom, shading into rose, gold and then sky blue. Above them, the real sky arched, like an extension of the yard. The redstone path was smoothed by years of children running and adults walking.

“You look content,” Darz said.

“I remember so much,” she murmured. “Laughter and light.”

His face gentled. “It’s who’s lived in a place that draws the memories, eh?”

“Aye.”

His walk slowed as they crossed the garden. Finally he said, “Perhaps...I might lie down somewhere.”

She could tell the admission cost him a great deal. Such a proud man, this commander in the Queen’s Army. “You can use my brother’s room.”

“He won’t mind?”

“Heath? No, never. He’s a sweetheart.”

Darz spoke dryly. “I have noticed, over the course of my life, that when a lovely young woman refers to a man as a ‘sweetheart’ or some such similar term, he usually turns out to be a hulking monster.”

She laughed amiably. “Heath may be large, but he is never a monster. You’d like him.”

Darz just grunted.

She took him under an archway and into a foyer with a high ceiling. The hall beyond ended at a room with dark red drapes and a four-poster bed. The ends of the posts were carved in figures of the Dragon-Sun with his neck arched and wings spread.

Darz barely looked around; he just went to the bed and lay on its burgundy spread, sprawled on his stomach, but favoring his wounds. With a sigh, he closed his eyes. Watching him, Ginger felt even worse about dragging him out here. She knew she should check his bandages, but she no longer dared touch him.

“I’ll go for the healer,” she said.

He lifted his head. “You will come back, won’t you?”

She knew she should say no. But what came out was, “Yes, I will.” Then she left quickly, to find a safer place than a bedroom that contained him.

As Ginger walked down the hall, a gong rang, its mellow tone echoing. Puzzled, she went to the front of the house and opened the gold door there. Tajman Limestone, the Elder Sentinel, stood outside on her doorstep with Kindle, the Flame Sentinel. Both men had unreadable expressions. The last time Ginger had seen Kindle, at the town meeting, he had seemed solicitous, even wanting to help her up the stairs, but now he was guarded. It discouraged her to think she may have lost yet another person's goodwill.

Tajman nodded formally. "Light of the morning, Priestess."

"And to you, Goodsirs." Someone must have run to tell him she was in town. Although it was natural for him to visit, he had showed up unusually fast, and it didn't bode well. Usually he would have given her time to rest and clean up after her walk from the temple.

She stepped aside, inviting them into the house. "Will you join me for tea?"

"Thank you." Tajman walked inside, his posture as stiff as his voice. Kindle followed him with a brief nod to Ginger. As he walked past her, something bothered her, but she wasn't sure what. The way he moved...?

She ushered them into the parlor, simply furnished with wicker chairs and wine-red cushions. "I'll go for the tea."

"Ginger-Sun." The Elder put up his hand. "Perhaps you shouldn't." The lines at the corners of his mouth and eyes seemed deeper.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"We should ask you," he said. "Who hit you?"

She put her palm over the bruise on her cheek. "I don't know. It happened last night when I was walking in the dunes." Better to get it all out, so they didn't think she was hiding anything. "Someone came after me. He said he had been watching me, that I had acted improperly. When I protested, he hit me."

Kindle spoke sharply. "That's absurd."

The moment he spoke, she recognized his voice. "It was you!"

Tajman spoke sternly. "Ginger, you won't help yourself by fabricating stories against the people sent to guard you."

"I'm not," she said. "You know me better than that."

"Darz Goldstone was all over her," Kindle said.

Tajman narrowed his gaze at Ginger. "Is that true?"

A rough voice spoke behind her. "If you were spying, Flame Sentinel, you also know she repeatedly told me to leave her alone. Or have you conveniently forgotten that?"

Ginger spun around. Darz was standing in the archway of the room, his hand braced against its side for

support.

“You.” Kindle started toward him. “You defiled her!”

“Kindle, stop,” the Elder said. “Are you going to hit a man who can barely stand on his own feet?”

“No one defiled me,” Ginger said, annoyed. “I’m perfectly capable of telling someone to stop. And if you did see, Kindle, then you know he respected my wishes when I said no.”

Kindle fixed her with a hard stare. “It took you too long to push him away.”

Tajman was watching Kindle closely. “You didn’t tell me she told him to stop. You just said they kissed.”

Kindle crossed his arms. “The essence of their trespass is the same.”

“Your trespass is far worse,” Darz said, “to strike the priestess.”

“Did you hit her?” the Elder asked Kindle.

Kindle gestured toward Darz. “It was him.”

“That’s not true!” Ginger said.

Darz spoke in a quiet voice, and in that moment Ginger knew, without doubt, that he was far more dangerous when he was quiet than when he was loud.

“I’ve dueled with men for impugning my name,” Darz said. “To the death.”

“You speak with disrespect,” Kindle told him.

“You called me a whore,” Ginger said angrily.

“Enough, all of you!” Tajman held up his hand.

She took a deep breath. “My apology, Elder Limestone.”

Kindle spoke through gritted teeth. “And mine.”

Ginger glanced at Darz. He met her gaze and said nothing.

The Elder spoke to Kindle. “I understand why you felt that you rather than Tanner should guard her in the desert last night. You’re a sentinel.” He glanced at Darz. “Maybe where you come from, men treat priestesses without respect. But not here.” He considered both of them. “I see no excuse for either of you to strike a servant of the Dragon-Sun, especially since everyone seems agreed she told this man to stop touching her.” Dryly he said, “And I assume neither of you plans to claim the dragon miraculously appeared and ordered you to abuse his priestess.”

“I don’t need any claim,” Darz said. “I don’t hit women.”

“It’s easy to lie,” Kindle said, “when the only witness to the truth is a woman you dishonored.”

“For saint’s sake,” Ginger said. “If he had dishonored me, why would I defend him?”

Kindle narrowed his gaze at her. “That’s a good question.”

“This arguing achieves nothing.” Elder Tajman walked over to Darz. “Do you admit your trespass against the priestess?”

Even leaning against the door frame, exhausted and bandaged, Darz’s presence outweighed the Elder. “I attempted,” he said. “I didn’t succeed.”

“But you admit you tried.”

Darz regarded him warily. “Yes. I do.”

The Elder glanced at Kindle. “If he’s lying about striking her, why wouldn’t he lie about touching her?”

“I’ve no idea.” Kindle’s gaze shifted away from the Elder.

Tajman turned to face them all. “We have a difficult situation. This man admits to a trespass we cannot ignore.”

“He doesn’t know our ways,” Ginger said.

“Our ways?” Kindle demanded. “The last I knew, the proscription applied everywhere, not just in Sky Flames.”

“It’s a stupid proscription,” Darz said.

Ginger almost groaned. He wasn’t helping matters.

The Elder’s voice hardened. “And why is that, Goldstone?”

It startled Ginger to hear Darz called by his second name. She had grown used to thinking of him by his personal name, an intimacy that reminded her why he had to leave the temple.

“Please don’t argue,” she said. “Elder Limestone, I brought Darz here so he won’t be in the temple. When he’s well enough to travel, we can give him supplies and send him on his way.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Kindle said. “We reward his offense by giving him a fine house to live in and valuable supplies?”

“He has a point,” Tajman said. “In ages past, the sentence for defiling a priestess was execution.”

Darz’s voice went quiet. “I wouldn’t try it if I were you.”

“No one has been executed in over a century,” Ginger said. “An attempt to steal a kiss is hardly grounds for such a threat.”

“Perhaps,” Tajman said. “It is grounds for prison.”



She blanched. "We don't have a prison."

"We could use the cellar under the Tender's Hall," Kindle said helpfully. His spirits were obviously picking up.

"You can't lock me in a cellar!" Darz said loudly.

Kindle rounded on him. "You admitted your trespass."

"Better that than lie." Darz's voice was rising.

"You should be locked away!" Kindle said.

"You hit her." Darz's face flushed with anger. "That's a hell of a lot worse than my kissing her!"

"She deserved it!" Kindle shouted.

Everyone went silent, staring at Kindle.

After a moment, the Elder spoke. "Then you did strike her."

Kindle paled as he realized what he had said. Watching Darz, Ginger suspected he had far more control over his temper than it had just appeared. He had deliberately provoked Kindle into his admission.

Kindle motioned at Darz. "He tricks us with sly words."

The Elder raised an eyebrow. "They sounded a lot hotter than sly to me." When Kindle started to respond, Tajman held up his hand. "I'm not going to lock either my Flame Sentinel or an injured soldier in a cellar. But penance must be done." He spoke sternly to Ginger. "You should have been more modest."

She didn't see what she had done that was immodest, but she couldn't deny she should have been more careful. She had never expected the constraints on her life to hurt so much. Even so. She had always known what her service to the dragon required.

The Elder looked around at them. "We will let the Dragon-Sun decide."

She wondered how he planned to do that, given how little attention the dragon seemed to be paying them. "Do you wish me to go to the RayLight Chamber and petition him?"

"No." He frowned as he sometimes did, as if everything about her dissatisfied him. Then he turned to Kindle. "For the next ten days, you will tend the temple."

Kindle squinted at him. "I know nothing of attending the Dragon-Sun."

"I didn't say the dragon. The building. Sweep the floors, repair breaks, clean the fountain, whatever else is needed."

Kindle's face turned red. "Those are a woman's chores!"

Tajman answered firmly. "They are revered tasks done in service to the sun."

Ginger almost smiled. This punishment she could live with. It would give her time to read. It also meant she would have to be around Kindle for ten days, but she didn't have to stay in the temple. She would go on many visits to town.

The Elder was watching her. "You will remain in seclusion during those ten days. You won't leave the temple for any reason. Kindle will be your guard." His gaze brushed over her wrap. "Spend your time in meditation and penance to the Dragon-Sun, and perhaps he will forgive your indiscretion."

She barely managed to bite back her protest. Ten days with Kindle underfoot sounded awful. Nor did she like that Tajman considered him an appropriate guard even after Kindle admitted to striking her. She had to remind herself Tajman could have done a lot worse, such as publicly humiliating her or ordering a physical punishment. She also recognized his impassive expression. He wasn't going to change his mind.

"And you." The Elder's voice chilled as he turned to Darz. The soldier met his gaze steadily.

"You will do the Trial of the Dragon-Sun," Tajman said. "If at the end, you are still alive, you may go on your way."

"What? No!" Ginger wanted to shake the Elder. "He's hurt. He can hardly walk. He'll freeze up there!"

"Up where?" Darz asked. "What are you talking about?"

"It's a promontory," she said. "A natural rock formation like a tower. It's called the Dragon's Claw because it looks like a claw open to the sky. The Trial of the Dragon-Sun means you stay there for ten days. Alone. With nothing more than what you can carry up with you."

"It's an excellent suggestion," Kindle said. "Let the dragon decide his punishment."

"He can hardly walk!" Ginger said. "He could barely even get up there, let alone carry food and gear."

To her unmitigated surprise, Darz laughed, that familiar deep-throated rumble. "I appreciate your championing my cause, Ginger-Sun, but I could do with a little more confidence in my survival abilities."

"You don't understand," she said. "It isn't—"

"Enough!" Tajman said. "You should look to your own piety, Ginger, instead of nay-saying my decisions."

"The Elder Sentinel governs here for a reason," Kindle told her in a sonorous voice. "His wisdom is well known."

Amazing how fast his mood changed when Darz was the one who suffered. She had enough sense, though, to keep the protest to herself. Her outbursts wouldn't help anyone.

Darz considered Tajman as if he were taking the measure of the older man. "I have a concern," he said. "Someone tried to kill me. I don't know why. It may be they intended to rob me and became enraged when they realized I had nothing to take. But I can't say for certain, and I don't want to be defenseless at the top of a mountain."

"How would they know you were up there?" Tajman asked.

“How did they know I was crossing the desert?” Darz said. “I need weapons if I’m going to stay for ten days. A sword and two daggers.”

“You demand valuable items as part of your sentence?” Kindle asked. “I can’t believe this.”

“He has a point,” Tajman said. “But we have few swords here, and I doubt their owners would part with them for a man convicted of desecrating the temple.”

“He desecrated the priestess,” Kindle said.

Tajman cocked an eyebrow at him. “You have a sword.”

From the look Kindle gave him, Ginger suspected it would take the entire village to get that sword away from him for Darz. Tajman apparently saw the same, for he said, “No matter.” He turned back to Darz. “I can provide you with a long dagger. It isn’t a sword, but it comes close.”

Darz nodded. “That will help.”

“Then it is decided.” Tajman’s manner became crisp. “Kindle, you walk Ginger-Sun back to the temple. I will take Goldstone to the Claw.”

“I need to gather my things first,” Kindle said, “if I’m to stay with her for ten days.”

“I need goods in town,” Ginger added, miserable. Darz didn’t seem to realize the demands of the trial. If he thought he could leave the promontory, he was mistaken. Tajman would post guards. “Goodman Goldstone needs salves and a change of bandages. My supplies are at the temple, but I can get more from the healer.” She paused as she remembered something else. “The healer had planned to remove Darz’s stitches in a few days. He can’t if Darz is on the Claw.”

“I’m sure Goldstone can manage it,” Kindle said sourly.

“Actually, I probably can,” Darz said.

Tajman glanced at Darz, and Ginger had the feeling he respected how Darz handled himself. In that, she warmed to the Elder. It was always that way with Tajman; one moment he could make her angry enough to clench her fists, and in another he could impress her with his judgment. He was a good leader for the village, and if she chafed under his attitudes, well, it could have been worse. She could have been dealing with Spark, the beefy Second Sentinel who had wanted to beat her for tending a wounded man.

“I’ll call on the healer,” Tajman decided. To Kindle he said, “Escort Ginger to the market, then collect your things and take her back to the temple.”

Unexpectedly, Kindle blushed. “It would be my honor to escort you to the market, Ginger-Sun.”

She blinked at the unexpected courtesy. “Thank you.” She hadn’t put much credence in Darz’s theory that Kindle liked her; she couldn’t think of a worse way to show it than spying on her, scaring her, and hitting her. Men often bewildered her, though. Living in the temple gave her an independence she valued, but it also isolated her until she no longer remembered how to be part of the village. Or so she told herself. It was either that or admit she didn’t fit in here anymore, in this place that was the only home she had ever known. She couldn’t bear such a thought, so she put it away, deep in her mind where it

wouldn't afflict her spirit.



8

## Day Five

Ginger didn't see Darz again that day. She and Kindle went to the Seller's Festival, a big market the village set up once every ten days. Kindle was a quiet companion, saying little and standing back while she haggled with produce-tenders. No one seemed surprised to see them together; indeed, many people gave them approving glances.

When she and Kindle did talk, she dropped hints about the blood, mentioning stains at the butcher's shop, wondering if anyone had recently slaughtered a sheep, that sort of thing. He reacted to none of it, and she was soon convinced he had nothing to do with the blood in her suite. She wondered if she had misjudged him. When he had followed her that night, he had been drinking. It didn't excuse his behavior; she would have the bruise for days as a reminder. But he had none of the submerged anger she felt from Dirk Bauxite or Second Sentinel Spark. Mostly Kindle seemed shy around her. It eased her apprehension about spending the next ten days under his watchful eyes.

In the past, Kindle had avoided her. He was fourteen years older, and she had never known him well in her childhood. After she became an acolyte, her ties with the town had receded. A mystique built up around the priestess, isolating her. It was the price she paid for having more freedom than most women.

Ginger had heard that in Quaaz, where the queen lived, women had less constrained lives. She couldn't imagine what it must be like to rule Taka Mal as a woman. Did Queen Vizarana struggle with her generals and advisors? If they wished a man on the throne, their discontent wasn't enough to stir rebellion. Far from it. The tales Ginger had heard about the queen glowed with praise. People considered her the daughter of the Dragon-Sun. Perhaps that was why it worked; most people viewed her as a priestess at the highest level, which allowed traditionalists like Tajman to think of the Dragon-Sun as the true ruler of Taka Mal. It softened his objections to a female sovereign.

Sometimes Ginger thought she should travel to a place like Quaaz where no one knew her, where she could be like anyone else. But the urge always faded when she thought of leaving home. As much as she longed to see the world, she couldn't face that much change. The prospect of the unknown had always unsettled her, especially after she had lost her parents at such a young age.

Ginger shook off her gloomy thoughts and concentrated on marketing. People usually exchanged services or goods for what they bought, but she had only her temple services to offer and they were free. So the village provided her a stipend of hexa-coins to pay for goods. Kindle carried her sacks of fruits, vegetables, cheeses and wine. She appreciated his help; lugging around the bags was exhausting. Today she only had to carry a sack with her purchase of candles, parchment, quills and ink.

On the way out of town, they stopped by Kindle's cottage. She waited in his parlor while he packed. It was a pleasant house, if a bit spare. The whitewashed walls had no adornment, but many windows let in sunshine, and red curtains billowed around the open ones. Red cushions were plumped on the wicker

furniture. The room's most striking feature was a sunwood clock that hung from a scrolled bar on one wall. The timepiece had copper numerals, and it ticked. She doubted it came from Sky Flames; no one here could craft such an intricate work. He had probably bought it in Quaaz during his army days. It had a strong, masculine look and gave her an insight into him, that he liked fine, elegant works.

Kindle came out of an inner room carrying a blue sack. He had exchanged the dark trousers and red shirt of his sentinel's uniform for rough blue leggings and a blue overshirt with a rope belt like other men in the village wore. Apparently he didn't think of himself as a sentinel for this visit. She wondered if Tajman was putting them together in the hopes of encouraging a marriage. Although she had warmed to Kindle today, she had never felt attracted to him in that way. He was cordial now, but what about the next time he drank? She didn't want to think what a lifetime of that would mean.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "You look pale."

"A little tired," she said. "All this heat."

"We can take my cart." He seemed pleased to offer it.

He took her into his cactus garden and brought a wheeled cart around from the side of the house. After they loaded in their sacks, they set off walking with Kindle pushing the cart. They soon left the village behind. The desert surrounded them, and the land buckled in ripples and up-thrust crags striped by yellow rock. The bluffs were too rocky to call dunes, but in the distance, hills of sand shimmered like topaz against a parched blue sky.

"I do so love this land," Ginger said. "It's beautiful."

"It'll kill you if you aren't careful."

"It's an austere beauty," she acknowledged. "That's why it's so compelling." She stretched her arms, working out kinks from the long day. "I could write for hours about the colors, how shadows turn from yellow to red, and the hills hunch up like sleeping giants with only their shoulders above the ground."

Kindle snorted. "Such fancies are a waste of time."

Ginger deflated like a torn bulb on a water-cactus. After a moment, she said, "I like writing."

"I would think you have more important duties. Like attending the Dragon-Sun."

She frowned at him. "What do you think 'Attending the Dragon-Sun' means?"

"Cleaning his house. Tending his fountain. Meditating. Helping people." He glanced at her. "Speaking with respect."

"I always speak with respect."

"You spend so much time alone out there." He sounded as if he didn't know whether to be angry or worried. "You've forgotten how to be a woman."

She couldn't help but laugh. "How could I forget to be what I am? I'm just not the way you want me to be."

“You also talk a great deal,” he grumbled.

“And if I talked about how great I thought you were, would you tell me I talk too much?”

“I didn’t say—” He tilted his head as if he were confused. Then he glared at her. “You’re twisting my words.”

“Oh, Kindle.”

He gave the cart an extra shove that toppled the sacks against one another. “You twine words around until it’s all muddled. It’s not right. You shouldn’t do it.”

Ginger didn’t know how to answer such a comment. His way of looking at the world was foreign to her.

It was going to be an interesting ten days. Unfortunately.

“You’ve been in here all morning!” a man accused.

Ginger jumped out of her chair, and her opal skittered across the table. She spun around to see Kindle in the doorway of the room, holding a knife in one hand and a broken table leg in the other. He had been at the temple for two days, and she still wasn’t used to his presence.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her heart beating fast.

“I’m fixing the leg on your damned knickknack table.”

She spoke carefully. “Thank you.”

“What are you doing?” he demanded. “I clean and mop, and you sit in here.”

Ginger hesitated. She had been looking for references to abilities such as hers, poring over history scrolls in search of clues. She couldn’t tell him about her spells, though, so she spoke another truth. “I’m working on something for the ore diggers.”

Kindle came in and waved his knife at the scrolls scattered over the table. “How can crinkled parchment help a miner?” He stopped in front of her, standing too close.

She backed up. “It may help them dig mine shafts.”

“Oh, Ginger.”

“It’s true!” She took a scroll off one chair. “This describes something calledgunpowder. ”

“Powder?” He came over to her, again standing too close. “Cosmetics are for women.”

“Not that kind.” She slipped away and went around the table, putting it between them. Unrolling the parchment, she indicated a section of calligraphy. “This tells of a powder that explodes.”

“It sounds like you made it up,” he said.

She straightened up, bewildered. “Why would I do that?”

“So you can say you’re working when you waste the day.”

She frowned at him. “Studying isn’t a waste.”

He struck the table with his piece of wood, making scrolls jump and rattle. “Don’t talk to me that way!”

Ginger stared at him. He had blown up the same way this morning when she had asked if he knew what was happening with Darz. She hadn’t dared ask again.

“I mean no disrespect, Sentinel Burr,” she said.

Kindle lowered his club. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m just so flaming tired of housekeeping.” He pointed his knife at the scroll. “What does it say?”

She offered it to him. “You can read it.”

His face darkened. “I would rather you did.”

It wasn’t the first time he had avoided reading in her presence. She wondered if he had never learned how. It wasn’t unusual in Sky Flames. That might explain why he resented her time in here. “It says to combine sulfur, saltpeter and charcoal,” she explained. “Sometimes it says ‘potassium nitrate.’ I don’t know what that means.”

“Neither do I. But the others are easy to get. I’ve never heard of them exploding.”

“Have you ever seen them mixed?” She couldn’t imagine why anyone would do such a thing.

“No. But I’m sure it’s happened. If it exploded, don’t you think people would know?”

“I suppose.” It had been her thought, too. She read to him from the scroll. “Charles told me today he doesn’t understand why we haven’t invented this powder.” She looked at Kindle. “Charles Carter was shipwrecked here.”

“Odd name, that.”

Ginger liked the exotic name. “I’ve never heard any other like it. A priestess wrote about him a century ago.” She read from the scroll. “Charles says we are isolated and get only bits of ‘modern’ knowledge. He sounds demented, talking about the ‘British Empire.’ He believes we are a lost land cursed so no one can find us, and that neither can we leave this continent. I’ve told him ships from our settled lands sail the wide seas and visit other lands, but he doesn’t believe me. He asks when I last heard of such a ship. What can I say? We live in the desert. We have no ships. But my explanations don’t convince him.”

Kindle shrugged. “He probably heard that tale about a curse from someone in the village.”

“Probably. It’s such an old yarn.” Ginger rolled up the scroll. “It’s true, though, I’ve heard nothing in my lifetime of ships from our lands trading with others. Histories tell how they have in the past, but never today.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Kindle said. “But I do know those powders won’t explode.”

“You’re right,” she said glumly. “I tried mixing them. Nothing happened.” She paused. “I didn’t do what it said with ‘pressure’ or heat, though.”

“Why not?” he asked, more curious now than hostile.

“I don’t know how.” This was the first time in the past two days he had shown an interest in anything she did. She prepared their meals, but their dining was awkward and strained. If the Elder hoped to promote matrimonial bliss, it wasn’t succeeding. Exploding powder seemed to appeal to him far more than domesticity.

“I don’t suppose you would have time to look at it,” she said, deliberately taking an offhand tone. “I know blowing things up wasn’t part of your duties here.”

His eyes lit up. “I could make time.” He leaned over the scroll. “Tell me more of what that says.”

She motioned him to a chair and sat down next to him. Then she began to read.

On the evening of Ginger’s third day in seclusion, the Archivist visited with Jalla, her oldest daughter. Jalla had just apprenticed to a baker in town and wished to embark on her new craft under good auspices. So they came for a blessing.

Ginger seated them on the fountain, where a fine spray filled the air. As they settled down, she went to her rooms for her amulets. She chose two figurines, a dragon and a woman. Her opal matched the tinted glass of the figures, so she set it next to them. In the daylight, it was no more than a pretty rock.

She carried out a tray with her amulets and some cold tea. Walking to the fountain, she thought how much Jalla resembled her mother. They had the same dark hair, of course, though Jalla’s wasn’t streaked with gray. Jalla also had her mother’s focused manner, intent on every detail. It was a trait common to adults in Sky Flames, and Jalla was a young woman of fifteen. Although Ginger admired her, she couldn’t help but regret Jalla’s loss of youthful exuberance.

“You look well today,” Ginger said to the Archivist as she offered her the tray.

“Thank you.” The historian took a mug of chilled tea.

Ginger smiled as Jalla took the other mug. “And you! You’ve grown again.”

Jalla grinned at her, open and friendly. “Just wait until next year.”

Ginger sat next to her and set the tray on the ground, then put the figurines on the ledge between herself and Jalla. After a pause, she added the opal. It gleamed against the gray stone.

Ginger touched her thumb to Jalla’s brow, and the girl closed her eyes. The only sounds were the musical flow of the fountain and chirps of redwing doves on the roof.

“Jalla Bluewing,” Ginger said. “May your spirit be blessed for all your days.” She withdrew her hand, and Jalla opened her eyes. Ginger picked up the Sunset figurine, a woman with hair the color of dusk and



a flowing dress in sunset colors. Ginger brushed the statue up Jalla's right cheek and down her left. "May the goddess bless you with wisdom, long life and insight." She touched the statue to Jalla's brow. "May she grant you healthy, happy children."

Ginger set down the figurine and picked up the dragon. Its red wings spanned her hand, and the fire-hued body glittered like her opal. Its fanged mouth was open, trumpeting to the sky. Held under its body by huge claws, the yellow orb of the sun gleamed. The stand for the figurine was colorless, so the dragon seemed to burn with a flame all its own.

Jalla watched her with curiosity. And confidence. Ginger had never felt she earned that trust, yet people came to her and the town prospered.

She turned Jalla's hands up to the ceiling and set the dragon on the girl's right palm. "May the sun favor you with strength and bring light into your days." She moved the statue to her left hand. "May he ward off evil and protect you throughout your life." Then she folded Jalla's hands around the figure. "May you always keep his spirit within you, to guide your life and your heart."

"Thank you," Jalla murmured.

Ginger opened her hands. As she set the dragon on the ledge, the opal seemed to glow more brightly. On impulse, she picked it up and pressed Jalla's hands around the stone. "May you always be joyous," she said, "and find delight in your life."

The opal flared, and yellow radiance streamed around Jalla's fingers.

"Oh!" The girl lifted her rapt gaze to Ginger. "That's lovely!"

NO. Ginger barely held in her cry. Had the sun already set? She released the spell and the light faded. As she took back the opal, she tried to smile as if this were normal. The girl seemed to glow herself.

The Archivist, however, was watching Ginger closely. As the town historian, she would know their priestesses didn't normally create yellow light.

The Archivist said nothing, however. She and Jalla stayed a while to chat, and Ginger gradually relaxed. Kindle remained in the background, repotting plants that hung from the terraces. Ginger knew her guests were aware of him, but neither mentioned the Flame Sentinel.

"I haven't had much time for my studies," the Archivist was saying. "I've been recording the ore shipments we'll send the army later this summer. It's important we keep good records to ensure we get full payment."

"Is it a problem that we don't?" Ginger asked, intrigued. This was a glimpse into the exciting world beyond Sky Flames. She grinned at the Archivist. "Surely the officers of the Queen's Army can do their sums!"

The historian spoke coolly. "Even the best number-tenders can make mistakes."

Ginger regretted making the joke. She should know by now the Archivist wouldn't laugh. Jalla was listening with a smile, though, which encouraged Ginger's spirit.

"How is that soldier you've been tending?" Jalla asked. "Is he healing?"

“Actually, he’s not here anymore,” Ginger said.

The Archivist pressed her lips together. “That’s enough, Jalla.”

The girl glanced at her mother with surprise and a hint of annoyance. Ginger wished the Archivist hadn’t shushed her so fast. She was bursting to know how Darz fared. Taking a chance, she asked, “Have you had any news of Goodman Goldstone?”

The Archivist answered in a voice heavy with disapproval. “I assume he is doing whatever a pilgrim asking for forgiveness does during his penance.”

Jalla looked from Ginger to her mother, her gaze alert. Ginger could almost feel her soaking in every word.

“He needs rest and tending,” Ginger said. “He could die up there.”

“Darz Goldstone is no longer your concern.” The Archivist’s voice could have chilled an ice dragon. “Perhaps you should look to your own penitence rather than inquiring after that which has no proper place in your life.”

Ouch. Ginger wished she wasn’t so sensitive to disapproval. If the elders had their way, which they probably would, she would never see Darz again. But it was for the best. Her interest in him could only hurt her.

As the Archivist and Jalla were leaving, walking with Ginger to one of the entrances, the Archivist spoke in an overly casual voice. “I’ve never seen that yellow light before.”

Ginger improvised quickly. “It happens when sunlight reflects off openings in the roof.” Which was true in the RayLight Chamber.

“How unusual,” the Archivist said. “Especially since the sun had already gone down.”

Ginger flushed, too disconcerted to think of an excuse. “I don’t know, ma’am.”

After her guests left, Ginger stood in the temple entrance and gazed beyond the rock gardens toward the village. Jalla and her mother were red-robed figures barely visible in a landscape lit only by the ruddy light of a fading sunset.

An anomaly registered on Ginger. South of the village, two mounted figures on a ridge were silhouetted against the red sky. They were too far to see clearly, but she thought they wore peaked cowls similar to those used by Jazid nomads. Unease rippled through her. From their vantage point, they could be gazing straight at the temple.

Kindle joined her. “So Jalla is going to be a baker.”

“I guess so.” Ginger indicated the cowed figures. “Do you know who they are?”

He squinted at the ridge. “Nomads? Or miners.” A scowl creased his blocky features. “They won’t find a welcome here.”

“No, I imagine not,” Ginger said dryly. Darz certainly hadn’t. “Do you think they’re dangerous?”

He pulled himself up straighter. “Not with my sentinels guarding the town.”

She smiled at his pride in his men. Whatever she thought of Kindle personally, he was a good Flame Sentinel. “We are fortunate to have them.”

“Indeed.” He regarded her curiously. “The Archivist didn’t look happy.”

“She’s always in a bad mood around me,” Ginger grumbled.

“She’s jealous.”

Ginger would have laughed if she hadn’t been so disheartened. “Of what? I have nothing. She has a family and a high position in the village.”

“Ginger, you truly can be dense sometimes.”

She glared at him. “What does that mean?”

“She has a lot to envy.” He wiped sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. “You’re young, beautiful and voluptuous for starters.”

“What does voluptuous mean?”

“For flaming sake!” His face turned the color of the sunset. “The Elder is right. You’re too naïve for your own good.”

“Come on, Kindle. What does it mean?”

He cleared his throat. “You have a, uh, womanly form.”

“Oh.” She doubted the Archivist could care less. “That sounds like something a man would think.”

He looked exasperated. “In case you hadn’t noticed, that’s what I am.” His voice took on an edge. “Maybe our Archivist found it offensive that a priestess doing penance would be so shameless as to ask after the man who had soiled her.”

She felt as if he had slapped her. “That’s horrible.”

“Why him?” He sounded hurt as well as angry. “You never show such interest in—in anyone appropriate. Maybe if you didn’t spend so much time alone out here, you wouldn’t have so many inappropriate ideas.”

“Inappropriate ideas? About what?”

“You should stop thinking about the interloper.” He turned his head and spit in the rock garden. “Do what I tell you. Or else one of these days, the people who think you go too far will have enough fuel to make your life far hotter than you would ever like.”

She stared at him. “Are you threatening me?”

“By the Dragon!” He looked as if he wanted to shake her, and he even started to reach for her. Then he swore and dropped his arms. “I’m warning you. Get yourself married to an acceptable man, Ginger-Sun, and soon, or the things people say about you could get a lot worse. If your behavior shames us before the dragon, it won’t go easy on you.”

With that, he turned and walked away, his back stiff. She stared after him, stunned. They condemned her when she had done nothing wrong. It was true she had hesitated when Darz kissed her. But she told him to stop. Even if the Dragon-Sun begrudged her companionship, she knew she couldn’t have Darz. She couldn’t hide from the dragon; surely he realized she accepted the realities of her life.

Perhaps she had done wrong by performing spells. Night magic. She felt worn down. If the Archivist suspected her of witchery, gods only knew what would happen. She dreaded to think how the people of Sky Flames would react if they decided she had so severely transgressed against the sun.



9

### Dragon's Claw

Six days after the Archivist’s visit, a crash reverberated through the temple. Alarmed, Ginger ran into the rock garden just as a thunder of falling rocks sounded.

Then it was quiet.

She stopped by an arch. The garden looked fine. Paths of blue gravel wound among cactus plants and beds of red pyramid-blossoms that opened at dawn. Vines with brilliant fire-lilies draped over graceful stone arches. Nowhere did she see anything that had crashed.

“Huh.” She walked through the garden, listening. In the distance, someone swore vehemently. That sounded like Kindle. So she went in search of her truculent guest.

Ginger found the source of the noise beyond several ridges; a small bluff had collapsed into rubble. The air above it swirled with dust, and grit tickled her nose. She didn’t know why the ridge would fall; it had looked perfectly stable the thousand or so times she had passed by this place.

“Kindle, where are you?” she shouted. Had he been under the bluff when it fell? “Are you all right? Kindle!”

A man walked out from behind the debris. When she realized it was Kindle, she gulped in a breath. How had he brought down the hill? Granted, it wasn’t a big one, but even so. She couldn’t fathom his purpose.

He grinned as she reached him. “You were worried about me.”

“I heard the crash,” she said, embarrassed now by her outburst. “I just came to see what happened.”

He laughed good-naturedly. "You don't fool me. You were afraid I was hurt. Admit it."

Here she had thought he perished under a ton of rubble and out he comes, smirking. "Of course I came to check. I would be worried for anyone who brought a hill down on his head." Then she added, "Although some heads may be hard enough to survive."

He regarded her with innocence. "Why would I have anything to do with the hill?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, hands on her hips. "Maybe because you are standing right here, looking guilty."

"Not guilty. Frustrated." He motioned at the rubble. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

Ginger had no idea what he had been doing. Although they had been together for nine days, she had avoided him since their argument about the Archivist. She left his meals in the room he had fixed up for himself, and she ate alone. Kindle, in turn, was gone for most of each day, ignoring the work Tajman had sent him here to do.

"Whatever are you doing out here?" she asked.

"What I promised you."

"I didn't ask you to crash rock."

"Not crash. Explode." He frowned at the collapsed hill. "I can't figure how to control the powder."

"You mean it works?" She gaped at him. "It really explodes?"

"Not very well." He squinted into the air, which smelled of acrid chemicals. "It makes more smoke than bang. Unless I use a lot." He turned back to her. "I followed the steps from the scroll. Even with that, it didn't work at first. Or second. Or third." Ruefully he said, "Or thirtieth. But I'm nothing if not persistent, eh, Ginger? I kept fiddling with ingredients, spark, trigger, confinement, everything. And finally it worked."

Her smile broke out. "Gracious, you did it! Kindle! You're brilliant. I never believed it would work."

He stood up straighter, as if he felt taller. "It wasn't that much." Then he scratched his head. "I can't make it do what I want, though. It'll take time to figure out the details. And I've no idea why this fellow Charles calls it gunpowder. I'd think dragon-powder would be more apt." He considered her. "Maybe all that reading you do has some use after all."

"I'm glad you think so." Ginger would take a qualified approval over scowls any day. She wasn't all that comfortable having the worth of her scholarship determined by her unearthing such a violent powder, but they might do a lot of good with it. The possibilities piled up in her mind. "It could help miners dig shafts. And we should send news to Quaaaz! Tell the queen." When she realized what she had said, her face heated. "Not that I mean to imply we have such importance."

The entire time she spoke, Kindle was staring at the rubble. She wasn't even sure he was listening. But then he said, "You're right, we should write to Quaaaz. No! Not a message." He swung around to her. "I'll go myself, to the army. Just think of the weapons this could make."

“Weapons?” She didn’t want her discovery to hurt people.

“Right now, I can’t control it. It could just as easily blow up us as the enemy. But I can work on it. It will be a magnificent project.” His face flushed with excitement. “Perhaps they will call it kindle-powder.”

She smiled. “Or ginger-powder.”

He blinked. “You can’t call a weapon by a woman’s name.”

In truth, she didn’t want her name attached to a means of death. It just bothered her that his plans didn’t include her, after she had discovered the recipe for the powder. Knowing Kindle, by the time he reached Quaaz, his descriptions might leave her out altogether.

An idea came to her. She would have to present it with care, though, or he might blow up at her instead of blowing up hills. “Do you know how to see the queen? It must be difficult.”

He wiped his perspiring face with his sleeve. “I’ll have to go to an audience she holds for the public and present a petition to someone on her staff.”

She beamed at him. “You’ll write a great petition! I know it.” Lest she get in trouble for bypassing proper protocols, she added, “You’ll have to discuss it with the elders first, though.”

He stiffened. “They can’t stop me from going.”

She wasn’t so certain; in her experience, their decisions were often based on keeping things the same. But they all liked Kindle, so he would probably have a lot less trouble convincing them than if she suggested the trip.

“I’m sure you can win them over,” she said. “Just show them your petition. If it can persuade a queen, it will certainly work on Tajman and the others.”

“Queens don’t know weapons, I’m sure. It’s her generals I’ll have to convince.” After a long moment, he added, “Perhaps you could help me prepare the petition?”

His request didn’t surprise her. She was almost certain he couldn’t read or write. He had a good spoken vocabulary, though, and she had no doubt he could learn to read. She had thought she might offer to teach him, if she could find a way to suggest it without hurting his pride.

“I would be honored to help,” she said. It would give her a chance to include details about the discovery of the powder. Wistfully, she added, “I wish I could go with you. To see Quaaz! It would be so exciting.”

He was watching her oddly, with that intent focus so common in Sky Flames—and with something more. Hope?

“Do you mean that, Ginger-Sun?” he asked.

She suddenly realized what she had said. A woman couldn’t travel alone with a man unless she was his wife. She thought frantically for a way out of her gaffe. “I know it would be improper,” she said. “I didn’t mean to offend, Sentinel Burr.”

“No. You didn’t.” He seemed uncertain what to make of her. “Well, I should clean up. I’m starving.”

Ginger nodded, relieved to escape the uncomfortable moment. “I’ll have dinner ready when you get back to the temple.”

“Thank you.” As she started to leave, he said, “Ginger?”

She turned around. “Yes?”

“Would you—” he cleared his throat “—will you dine with me tonight?”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” Caught off guard, she added the formal words. “It would be my honor.”

He smiled, his teeth flashing white, and he scratched his stomach through his sweat-drenched shirt, where his once flat muscles were tending to fat. With no more preamble, he went back to his rubble, climbing up the mound.

As Ginger walked to the temple, she went over what had just happened. Could she marry Kindle? He did seem to want her, even if he was awkward in showing it, and the elders would probably approve the match. She just couldn’t imagine living with his mercurial temper, always afraid to say the wrong thing lest he become violent. She would also lose her independence; he would expect her to serve him as she served the temple. It was the way of things with her people.

Ginger rubbed her eyes. Tomorrow was Kindle’s last day here, and Darz’s last on the Claw. No one would tell her how Darz was doing, and it enraged Kindle if she mentioned him. But if Darz had died, surely someone would have let her know. At the least, she would have noticed a change in the behavior of those who visited the temple.

She didn’t know what would happen after tomorrow, but she could guess. Kindle would go to Quaaz, Darz would go to the army and she would be alone with the disapproval of Sky Flames.

Kindle and Ginger dined at a table in the gardens, under an arch heavy with yellow sun-snaps. She put her opal on the table as decoration, hoping Kindle would become so used to it that he stopped noticing it. She made curried lentils and rice and sweet-grain pancakes with honey, and she served it with cider from kegs in the cellar. She didn’t realize until she took a swallow of the juice that it had fermented. Kindle had already consumed more than a glass. Fortunately, though, he didn’t seem too affected. He wolfed down his meal with gratifying enthusiasm. Then he sat back in his chair, his face ruddy with the sunset, a glass of cider in his hand.

“That was really good,” he told Ginger.

“I’m glad you liked it.” She enjoyed cooking, especially when someone appreciated it.

He took a swallow of the cider, then gave a loud burp. When Ginger glared at him, he grinned. “It’s a compliment.” He drank more cider. “I could get used to living like this. At home, I have to eat my own cooking. Believe me, it’s not a treat.”

“I’m sure you do a fine job,” she assured him, not because she had any idea, but because it was almost automatic for her to soothe with her words and deeds. She liked to help people feel better.

“Ginger.” He was looking at her oddly. “You know...you could come to Quaaaz.”

She heard what he didn’t say. As my wife . Awkwardly, she said, “Darz—I just don’t think—”

“What?” He slammed his cider on the table. The glass shattered and gold liquid splattered everywhere.

She jumped up and grabbed her cloth napkin. As she sopped up the cider, she said, “Why the blazes did you do that?”

“Don’t use that language with me,” he shouted, his face red. He pushed back his chair and stood up, looming over the table.

Ginger backed up. This wasn’t like when Darz got loud. She never feared he would strike out; he was just noisy. But she had no doubt Kindle would hit her if she angered him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t understand what’s wrong.”

He spoke tightly. “My name is Kindle. Not Darz.” He spit out the name as if it were an oath.

“Ai, I’m sorry!” She could have kicked herself. “That was stupid of me.”

His fist clenched at his side. “You think too much about this intruder.” He came around the table toward her. “I want to know why you keep bringing him up.”

She took another step back. “He was almost dead. Now he’s had to stay on the Claw. He still could die. I feel responsible.”

He kept coming at her. “Why do you care, Ginger? Hoping he will take more liberties, is that it?”

“That’s horrible to say.”

“You make me say it! The way you act, tempting a man when he’s forbidden to touch you. You’re wicked.”

“I’m not tempting anyone.” Her anger flared. “If you like me, Kindle, that’s something in you. Not me.”

“Don’t talk to me like that.” He looked her up and down in a way he would never have done when he was sober. “You act like one of those Jazid pleasure girls.”

“No I don’t!” Not that she had the least idea how a Jazid pleasure girl acted. “I’m not interested in you that way.” Too late, she realized how her words sounded, that it was probably the worst thing she could have said.

“Don’t talk like that!” he shouted. His face blazed as he strode toward her. She tried to dart away, but her wrap caught her feet and she stumbled against the arch. Sun-snaps crushed around her, cloying in their sweet smell. Backed up against the stone, she stared up as Kindle loomed over her. He weighed twice as much as she did, and most of it was still muscle.

“You make me do this.” He slapped her across the face, and her head snapped to the side, into the mashed flowers.



“No!” Frantic, her cheek burning, she shoved against his arms. It caught him by surprise, and he jerked back. She started to run for the temple, but the wrap tripped her. As she fell, he caught her around the waist and swung her back to the arch, lifting her off the ground. “Stay still,” he shouted.

Her sense of time slowed down. She saw his hand descending and knew he wouldn’t stop at a slap this time. She twisted hard and clawed her fingernails down his face. As he swore at her, his grip loosened. She lunged away and yanked on her wrap so hard that it ripped up her legs. Then she ran.

The thud of Kindle’s boots pounded behind her. It took her only seconds to reach the temple, but it felt like forever. Her wrap ripped more with every step. She raced across the main room and threw herself into her suite. When she whirled around, he was only a few paces behind her. She heaved the door shut with a bang and slammed the bolt home.

“Open that up!” he shouted.

Gasping for breath, she sagged against the door and pressed her hands on its lacquered surface, as if that could push him away. She couldn’t fathom his rages. No, she shouldn’t have called him Darz. But no one, no one, had the right to beat her. If he didn’t like the way she spoke, he could walk away, withdraw his marriage hints, refuse to eat with her, anything. She didn’t make him hit her. He could have held back. She was so angry, she was tempted to yell that all through the door. She bit back the impulse, knowing it would only make matters worse.

“Ginger, open the door,” he said. “I won’t hurt you.”

“That wasn’t how it looked,” she said.

“Why do you push me that way?” He hit the door. “Why can’t you be as sweet to me as you are to other people?”

“I guess I’m not the right woman for you.”

“Don’t say that.” He rattled the doorknob. “Let me in!”

“No! You can’t come in my rooms. Go away.”

“You don’t give me orders. And you can’t run around with your dress pulled up to your thighs, showing your legs.” He pounded on the door. “You come out here. Don’t make me break the door.”

“No one makes you,” she said. “You decide to break things. If you don’t like the way I talk, fine. Just go away.”

His pounding got louder. “Let me in! Or I’ll—I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” she shouted. “Beat me until I can’t walk?” The frustration, her loneliness, and her fear burst out of her. “That’s brave, Flame Sentinel. Make war against someone who has half your strength and size.”

“You’ll regret treating me this way.” His voice turned ugly. “I’ll make sure you can never have what you want. Never.”

“What does that mean?” When he didn’t answer, her panic sparked. “Kindle! What does it mean?”

No answer.

“Kindle?” She was breathing hard, and it was loud in the sudden silence. Had he gone away? Or was he trying to trick her into coming out?

Ginger turned her back to the door and slid down until she was sitting on the floor. She pulled her knees to her chest and crossed her arms on them, then laid her forehead on her arms. She feared she could never leave her rooms, that he would always be out there waiting to punish her for saying things he didn’t want to hear.

Tears filled her eyes. Her thoughts unrolled scenarios of what he meant by I’ll make sure you can never have what you want. He could take so much: her independence, her life at the temple, the respect of people in Sky Flames, her freedom. The days when they burned women at the stake were long in the past, or she might have even feared for her life.

Ginger wiped her palm across her cheek, smearing the tears. How had such a quiet dinner gone awry? The cider, probably; the last time he had hit her, he had been drinking, too.

She couldn’t hide forever. Nor could she live in fear of the people she had dedicated her life to serving. Right now she couldn’t help but wonder why she had done such a thing. She had to remind herself the behavior of a few didn’t negate the goodwill of the village. If she still had their goodwill. The dragon only knew what Kindle was doing.

Ginger climbed to her feet and leaned her ear against the door. The temple was quiet. Making as little noise as possible, she eased back the bolt. Then she edged the door open and peered out. She saw no one. She left her suite, alert to every sound: the scratching of birds on the terraces, the shoosh of the fountain, her own heartbeat. She held her breath, convinced Kindle would appear.

Silence.

After a moment, she breathed more easily. She crossed the temple, her bare feet silent on the stone. Outside, the sun had gone down and the horizon was a vivid wash of crimson and gold. In the rock garden, the remains of their dinner were untouched. She picked up her opal and squeezed until heat flared in the gem. It glowed in the same colors as the sunset.

“What are you trying to tell me?” she said softly.

Of course the stone had no answers. She tilted her face to the darkening sky. “Lord of the Sun and Lady of the Sunset, did you gift me with these spells? I will use them in honor of your greatness. If I presume in daring to hope you granted me this power, I entreat you to forgive my unconscionable presumption.”

Ginger returned to the temple and set every candle she could find in a circle around and outside of the RayLight Chamber. Then she stood, holding the opal, and closed her eyes, envisioning flames. When she opened her eyes, a hundred candles were burning in the dusk-filled temple.

She entered the chamber. It symbolized the protection the Dragon-Sun gave his priestess, bathing her in fiery light as if she were immersed in his flames and yet unharmed by them. To meditate in the RayLight Chamber symbolized the trust a priestess gave the dragon, her faith that his fire wouldn’t destroy her.

This evening, no sunshine poured down from the skylights, but the candles shone through the glass and lit the lower portion of the room with tinted light. With the opal, Ginger added her own light until she flooded the chamber with radiance. So she sought to honor the Dragon-Sun and the Goddess. The colors filled her heart as if it were a stained-glass goblet, and she offered them her devotion in the hopes they would forgive her magic.

Ginger formed a spell of comfort greater than any she had tried before. It filled more than the chamber, more even than the temple. When it was ready, she sought Kindle with her thoughts, to allay his anger. She knew the moment she touched him. He blazed. His rage, his hurt, the pain of her rejection—it flared through her.

And in that instant, she knew what he intended.

“No!” Ginger broke off the spell. The light surged as if she had thrown oil on a fire, then sputtered and died. She threw open the door and ran out of the chamber. To the blazes with her seclusion. She had to stop Kindle.

If it wasn’t too late.

Ginger had no time to change her wrap. She ran outside, not to town, where they would stop her, but north through a desert red with the lurid sunset. In the east, cactus fields stretched to the village; in the west, stone formations rose like teeth. She ran hard, and ignored the rocks stabbing her calloused feet. She had wasted so much time! She could only hope Kindle was too drunk to carry out his plans or that he had sobered up enough to regret what he intended.

Time flowed like molasses—it was taking forever—she would never arrive—and then the tip of her destination rose above the bluffs like a misshapen spire. The Dragon’s Claw.

Her side burned with a stitch and the rocky path tore her feet. But she kept going, clutching the opal. She ran up the bluff, and the Claw rose before her until she reached the top of the hill. She was aware of two figures silhouetted against the red sky on a distant ridge, riders on horses. She kept running, though she was stumbling from exhaustion.

The Claw stood in the center of a rocky plain, jutting up like the crooked talon on a giant bird—or a dragon. It was a natural formation taller than any building in Sky Flames, taller even than the distant hills. The giant pillar ended in a huge claw of rock formations, eerie and desolate. She wouldn’t be surprised to see the dragon himself rise out of the ground.

As she neared the tower, she looked for the sentinel who should be on duty. The barren plain left no place to hide, but no one was in sight, and the station at the base of the tower appeared empty. Foreboding rose within her. Either they had taken Darz down before his ten days were up or else the sentinel had deserted his post. She couldn’t think of a good reason for either, but plenty of bad ones came to mind. Darz may have died. They may have locked him up in the cellar after all. Or Kindle had sent the sentinel home.

She slowed down as she reached the guard station, a small mesa at the base of the tower. Ten steps were carved into its side, and she took them two at a time. At the top, an overhang on one edge offered shade during the day. Only red shadows filled it now. No guard. She stopped and bent over, bracing her hands on her thighs while she gulped in huge breaths. Sweat had soaked her wrap, and it clung to her

body. With the onset of night, a chill descended like the swoop of a black-wing hawk, and she shivered in her wet clothes.

Ginger descended from the mesa more slowly. She stood at the base of the Claw and stared bleakly at the trail that wound around it. If she was wrong in what she believed and she went up there, she would be in more trouble than she knew how to handle. Not only had she broken her seclusion, she was going to an isolated, unguarded place to see the man forbidden to her. But it didn't matter. She had to warn Darz, even if it meant she would lose her position as priestess. If he died because she had feared to act, she could never live with herself.

"Dragon-Sun, please understand," she said. Then she started up the trail.

Night settled over the land. It was dangerous to hurry in the dark, but she didn't dare take too long. So she made a spell. A dim sphere of red light formed, nothing like what she had done in the RayLight Chamber with her energy high, but it was enough to show the steep path. The way up circled the Claw, with the tower to her right and a precarious drop off to her left.

As she went higher, the wind tossed her hair around her shoulders and arms. She had no protection except a ripped, damp wrap, and she shivered terribly. She tried to do two spells, heat and light, but she couldn't hold both, and the warmth faded. By the time she reached the top, she was so cold, she could barely walk. The apex was flat in the center and about thirty paces across. The outcroppings around its edges resembled twisted talons grasping at the sky. Although she saw no one, the eerily twisted rock formations offered plenty of places to hide. She wanted to call out, but the words seemed to freeze in her throat.

"What the hell?" a man said. "Who is that?"

"Darz!" She cried out her relief. "Where are you?"

He walked out from behind a crooked finger of stone. "Ginger? What are you doing here?" He came over to her with no trace of his limp from before. "Gods, you must be frozen!"

"I'm s-so glad you're all right." She barely got the words out. "We have to leave!"

He peered at her oddly. "How are you making that light?"

"It's not important. We must go. Kindle is going to make an explosion."

"I'm sure we're safe here."

"No! He brought down a bluff because he used too much. It d-doesn't always work, and he can't control it." Her teeth chattered. "He's furious. He thinks I won't marry him b-because of you. And he's drunk."

"Ginger, slow down." He seemed bewildered. "If we leave, we're violating our agreement with your Elder. I've only this one night to go; then I can come down, and he's said he'll help me get supplies so I can be on my way. If we leave now, it will infuriate everyone." His voice softened. "I wish you could stay. You truly are a welcome sight. But if anyone finds you here, gods only know what they'll do."

"Please. I know it sounds mad. But if you stay here, you could die." Unless Kindle couldn't get the powder to work or he changed his mind. But she couldn't risk Darz's life on that hope.

He rubbed his face, which no longer had any bandage, just a stubbly beard. His bruises were almost gone. He would always have a scar, but it no longer looked as dire.

“I know this much,” he said. “It’s freezing here. I don’t see how you can stand it, with that thin dress.” He motioned to the boulders behind them. “I’ve a blanket back there. You can wrap it around you when we go down to the tower. I’ll take you most of the way, but I don’t think I should leave.”

“You can’t stay.” She willed him to believe her. “Please.”

“Ah, Ginger.” He sounded torn. “Why are you so sure? And how the devil are you making that light?”

“I’m sure. I know Kindle.” Self-conscious, she added, “The light is a gift from the Dragon-Sun and Sunset goddess.”

“For flaming sake,” he said. “You really believe all that pantheon nonsense, don’t you?”

“Darz, don’t.” She couldn’t bear the thought that he might offend the sun and sunset on what could be his last night of life. She knew how her people would react to any disaster here. If even someone as worldly as Darz didn’t believe Kindle could cause trouble, no one would listen. They would find Darz tomorrow, burned and torn apart, and they would assume the dragon had meted out his punishment. If she accused Kindle, she would look either crazy or vindictive.

“Please,” she entreated him. “No one was on guard below.” She blanched as a thought hit her. Kindle could have come up earlier and was waiting for night so no one would see him. “We have to go!”

Darz’s forehead furrowed. “You’re sure about this?”

“Yes!”

After a long pause, while he stood frowning at her, he said, “Very well.” He didn’t sound happy. “I’ll get my things.”

She pulled on his arm. “We don’t have time.”

He took her hand. “If you’ll forgive my touch, Ginger-Sun, I think we should hold each other, to ensure neither of us falls off the path in the dark.”

“A-all right.” Her skin tingled where he touched her. A nervous tickling started in her throat, and she had to swallow to make it go away. But as they walked toward the path, relief washed over her. They would be all right.

The night exploded below them.



## Forbidden Sands

Light flared, followed by a great thunder—except that it was below them. Ginger and Darz stared at each other while the rumbling swelled.

“No!” she cried. No. Kindle wouldn’t destroy the tower. She had expected him to come up here. She had no doubt he could kill if he thought it justified, but he would never attack the Dragon-Sun. He must have misjudged his efforts, or maybe he sobered up enough to change his mind, and the powder went off in the wrong place. Whatever had happened, rocks continued to fall beneath them in the aftermath of the explosion.

The Claw began to shake.

“Gods above!” Darz said. “It’s going to come down.”

“It can’t come down!” she said. “It wasn’t that big of an explosion.”

“It wouldn’t take much. This structure isn’t stable.” He drew her into the center where no pinnacles loomed over them. Then he crouched down, pulling her with him. “Sit with your head under your arms.”

His voice was calm, but she heard his fear. She had gone beyond fear and turned numb, her only defense against terror. When she had done as he asked, he sat with his legs on either side of her body and pulled her into his arms. Then he bent his head over hers, making himself a shield. She could just barely see under his arm.

The rumbling grew louder, and the Claw shook. A spire of rock cracked at its base and crashed across the Claw only a few paces away. It shattered when it hit, and rock shards rained over them. As the shaking grew worse, Ginger squeezed her eyes shut and scrunched herself into as small a ball as possible.

“I’m sorry,” Darz whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

The world fell beneath them—they dropped through air—

Rocks crashed on top of them.

Her last thought was that she had died before she had barely even lived.

Cold.

Pain.

Ginger opened her eyes. The world was dark.

Time passed. Her body hurt. That didn’t seem fair, if she was dead, that she felt pain.

“Darz?” she croaked.

No answer.

Her fingers twitched. She couldn't move them; they had spasmed around the opal. Rocks jabbed her legs and a weight pressed on her body. When she tried to move, boulders shifted and pebbles clattered somewhere. She went still, afraid to start a rockfall.

A man groaned.

"Darz!"

"Gods be damned," he muttered, along with several other choice oaths that normally would have left her ears burning. Right now she was just glad to hear him speak.

"The Claw must not have fallen all the way," she said.

"It feels like the whole cursed mountain is on my back."

Her grip on her opal had relaxed enough for her to set it down. She stretched out her arm, past rocks and under Darz's leg. Her fingers scraped dirt, then passed through open space. "I don't think we're totally buried."

"Must be a cavity."

Her pulse was racing. "Does that mean if we move, the rocks could fall the rest of the way?"

"I'm afraid so." He sounded as if he had to push out the words. "But if I don't move whatever is on top of me, it'll crush me anyway."

She knew she couldn't lie this way long, either, under the weight of his body and whatever pressed on him. Claustrophobia lurked at the edges of her mind.

"Can you move?" she asked.

"Maybe—"

She held her breath as he eased off her. Each time he shifted, dislodged rocks pelted their bodies. Grinding noises came from above them, and a miniature avalanche started. She bit her lip so hard, she tasted blood.

After the rain of pebbles stopped, Darz muttered an oath. "I'm stuck. Something is jabbing my back."

"Can you push it off?"

"I'm afraid I'll bring down the ceiling. But—ah! It hurts. I have to—" With a grunt, he gave a jerk. The rocks above them grated against one another as if gnashing their teeth. Ginger clawed the dirt and held her breath.

Then the rumbling stopped. After it was silent for a few moments, Darz squeezed down behind her with his front against her back. The air around them smelled dusty and hurt her throat, but she could breathe again.

"No more moving," he said raggedly. "Whatever is holding these boulders off us isn't fixed in place."

“Are you hurt?” she asked.

“Bumps and bruises. I don’t think anything broke.”

“It’s the same for me.”

He leaned what felt like his forehead against the back of her head. “Now what?”

“Maybe someone will dig us out.”

“Maybe.” He didn’t sound optimistic. “I wish I had my blanket. It’s so blasted cold.”

Ginger slid her hand to where she had put the opal—and it was gone. “No!”

Darz tensed behind her. “What happened?”

“I lost it!” The talisman was a rock, not their salvation, but right now it was her touchstone. She couldn’t lose it.

“Please,” she said, entreating whatever god would listen.

“It’ll be all right,” Darz said softly.

Her fingers nudged a pyramid of stone.

“Thank you,” she murmured to the dragon and sunset, and to Darz as well, for being alive. She closed her fingers around the opal. “It wasn’t lost.”

“What is ‘it?’”

“A good luck charm.” What she said now could affect the rest of her life, even destroy it. If she antagonized Darz, he could cause great trouble. But he hardly seemed the type, besides which, she might have no life left. So she spoke.

“Which would you like more?” she asked. “Light or heat?”

His laugh sounded frayed. “How about light, to see where we are.”

He thought she was joking. She smiled wanly and focused on the opal. Slowly, a red glow spread around them. It wasn’t much, but she could see.

“Gods almighty,” Darz said. “How did you do that?”

“I don’t know. It’s a spell.”

“A spell? That’s impossible.”

She smiled slightly. “Well, perhaps we have just imagined this light.”

“You brought a candle with you.” Awkwardly, he added, “A, uh, red candle.”



“I have no candle of any color,” Ginger assured him. She peered into the dim light but saw nothing promising, just a lot of rock.

“I don’t believe in spells.” He sounded more stubborn than certain. “Not yours and not those in Aronsdale.”

“Why Aronsdale?” She had little to lose now by telling him about herself, and as long as they kept talking, it held her panic at bay. “My grandfather came from there.”

“So that’s where you get that hair.” He leaned over to see what lay in front of her. “Surely you have a lamp there.”

“No.” She could hardly move with the two of them crammed together, but she opened her hand to show him the stone. “Just my opal.” She was enormously aware of his muscled self pressed against her body.

He leaned farther to see the stone. “How does it do that?”

“Darz, you’re going to flatten me.”

“Oh!” He pulled back. “Sorry.”

“I can’t hold this light much longer. It tires me.”

“You don’t have to hold your, uh...spell.” He grunted at the word. “I mostly wanted to see where we were. Look up if you can. I think those slabs are the reason we’re alive.”

She had enough room to maneuver onto her back, with Darz lying on his side next to her, propped up on his elbow. Above them, two slabs of rock had hit each other at an angle and leaned together in a sort of peaked roof. A projection on one jutted into the cavity and was probably what had jabbed Darz. Another portion had buried itself behind him, forming a wall at his back. On Ginger’s other side, a fall of rock blocked their way. They were trapped, but with space to breathe.

For now.

“It doesn’t look as if it will fall,” she said with more confidence than she felt.

“Not right away.” The dusty air blurred the contours of his face. “If we try to dig out, the rest will go. Our safest bet is to stay still and hope someone can get to us.”

Her voice caught. “I don’t want to die.”

“Ach, Ginger,” he murmured. “We’ll be all right.”

“I should never have told Kindle about the powder.”

“You really think he caused this?”

“The explosion, yes.” She thought back to what Kindle had told her. “I doubt he meant to destroy the tower. I think he just wanted a small explosion that would affect you. Maybe he sobered up and changed his mind. But something must have gone wrong. He says he hardly knows what to do with the powder,

how much to use, how to control the results.”

“Well, it sure as hell works.”

Claustrophobia was closing in on her. She needed to think about something else besides the collapse. Anything .

“We must be a mess,” she said. It was a ludicrous comment, but it was the best she could do.

His face gentled. “You look beautiful, even after a tower fell on you.”

Ginger’s eyes filled with tears. She heard tender words so rarely. Never, in fact. She wanted to tell him, but she didn’t know how to say it, and the spell was tiring her. With a sigh, she let it fade into darkness.

“I meant no offense,” Darz said.

“You didn’t give any.” Softly she added, “And I doubt the dragon will hear.” He seemed to have turned away from them, leaving her bereft.

Darz brushed his lips across her forehead. “You take this dragon business so seriously.”

“Don’t you?” She should have just said, Don’t, but if she was going to die, she wanted to know at least a few moments of affection in her parched life.

“The tales are pretty,” he said. “But hard to credit. The sun is just a ball of fire and the sunset a lot of colors.” He sounded frustrated. “People can’t even be consistent. In some places, they call the goddess Sky-Rose. In Aronsdale, they worship Verdant, who gives life to meadows and forests, and Azure, who supposedly glazes the sky. In the Misted Cliffs it’s Aquamarine, for the ocean. There’s Lapis Lazuli, the wind; Granite, for thunder; and Alabaster, who strummed stars into the night. It’s too many. It makes my head hurt.”

She didn’t want him to die without the good graces of those deities. “Even with an aching head, you must pay proper homage.”

“Always homage, to some myth,” he grumbled. “The Aronsdale man who married our queen does tricks with light. But I certainly don’t believe he’s a warlock.”

She wondered if the prince consort would know a way to free them from this nightmare. “Have you ever seen him?”

“They sometimes stand on a balcony of the palace above a plaza. They wave. People cheer.”

“But not you.”

“I am honored to serve Her Majesty. I would lay down my life for her.” His hair brushed her cheek as if he were shaking his head. “It’s this alliance with Aronsdale that bothers me. But we need it, even if it is unpalatable. The king of the Misted Cliffs, the man they call Cobalt the Dark—he frightens me. Before last year, Jazid had never been conquered. Now Cobalt rules there instead of the rightful heir to the Onyx throne.”

“Poor little boy,” she murmured.

Darz snorted. “That ‘poor little boy’ would probably have grown up to be a despot, just like his papa.” Then he added, “But at least he would have been our ally.”

“Darz—” She couldn’t keep up this distracting talk.

“We’ll be fine,” he said.

“Do you think anyone will find us?”

He was silent for too long. Then he said, “They will.”

“I can’t breathe .”

He pressed his lips against her temple. “It will be all right, Ginger-Sun.”

She fought back her panic. “Tell me a story. Tell me about Quaaz and all the fine happenings there.”

He stroked her hair and switched into a storyteller’s voice. “It is a fine city, full of people and excitement and life. The queen is beautiful, and the people love her.” After a moment, he spoke in his normal voice. “Well, most of them. Some wanted a man on the throne. No longer, though, given who she married. No one wants her husband to rule.”

“You mean the man from Aronsdale?”

“That’s right,” he growled.

“He must be very handsome.”

Darz gave an exasperated snort. “Why do women always say things like that? Why must he be very handsome?”

“It makes a better story.” Her voice caught. “Just as it does in the tale of the priestess caught in a rockfall with the handsome soldier from Quaaz.”

“Don’t cry.” Darz put one arm over her waist and the other behind her head, as close as he could come to an embrace in their confined space. “Everything will work out.”

She turned her head toward him, seeking a comfort older than any taboos. Her cheek brushed his chin, and his beard scratched her skin. Bending his head, he searched until he found her lips with his. His kiss stirred her like the colors of sunset or the sensual nighttime landscape of dunes under the stars.

But when he slid his hand over her breast, she stopped him. Even now, she couldn’t break her oath to the sun. Tears ran down her face for what she had given up in her life. The topaz desert under the glazed sky sheltered her people, yet it also scoured their spirit. She would never know tenderness, for here beneath the claw of the dragon, the pitiless desert would claim their lives.



## The Claw

They slept in the dark. Ginger lay curled into Darz, and he kept his arm across her body. How much time passed, she had no idea. When the cold became unbearable, she formed spells of warmth to keep them alive.

She knew when day arrived. Its heat came gently, relief from the icy night. It seeped into the rocks, and they were finally able to rest with a respite from cold.

Then it turned hotter.

Trapped under the stones, their cavity became an oven. Just as the rocks had held the cold during the night, now the heat became smothering. Hours passed, and the temperature rose, relentless and unforgiving.

“Darz.” Sweat drenched Ginger’s body. “I can’t bear it.”

“I thought we would die from suffocation.” His words were a croak. “Or thirst, or crushed. Never this.”

“I would do anything for ice.”

“If you can create heat, can you take it?”

Her brain felt dull. “Take it?”

“Make it cold. If you can make heat, can you make cold?”

“I never have.” His idea soaked into her charred mind. “I can’t do spells during the day. Only in the dark.”

“We haven’t any light. It can’t get any darker.”

Ginger didn’t know if it was the lack of light or the position of the sun that affected her spells. “I’ll try.” She closed her eyes, though she could see nothing anyway. This time, as she focused, she imagined cold. It felt strange, as if she were plowing through sand. Spells had never been this difficult. So hot...so very hot...

Cold, she thought. Cold as a desert night ...

She lost track of time and floated in a haze. Only gradually did she realize the heat had receded. It wasn’t cold, but it was bearable.

“Did the sun go down?” she mumbled. Her lips were swollen.

“It hasn’t been long enough.” His breath stirred the hairs at her temples. “Thank you, Ginger-Sun.”

“I wish we had water. Food, too.”

“You know what I would like?” His voice cracked. “A haunch of boar roasted over a pit. And a jug of wine. No, a lake.”

“Wine comes in lakes?”

“In my fantasy, it does.”

A smile creased her dusty face. “In mine... I am riding through Quaaz, past houses with gilded roofs. The streets are ankle deep in gold hexa-coins.”

“That many, eh? Riding would be hard.”

“I could just go with the gilded roofs.”

“Would you go with me?” he said softly.

Tears gathered in her eyes for what she could never have. “It would be an honor. We could call on the queen.”

“Bah,” he muttered. “She would throw me out of her palace for tracking in mud.” He caressed her hair. “But I do wish I could take you to Quaaz.”

“I couldn’t go. A priestess may travel with no man except her kin. Or her husband.”

He didn’t answer, and she felt stupid, fearing he would think her comment a clumsy ploy to gain a vow from him.

But then he said, “I do think you would be so very good for me. In Quaaz.”

Ginger flushed, knowing he spoke that way only because he would never have to follow through with the suggestion implicit in his words. She could just imagine how people would respond to his comment. Her ears burned, thinking about it. “The elders would never let me leave Sky Flames like that and still be priestess when I came back.”

“The Elder Sentinel doesn’t seem so bad.”

She kept her thoughts about Tajman to herself. He led the village well, but he dealt better with men. Sometimes he stared at her when he didn’t realize she knew. Later he would bring his wife to the temple for a blessing or his children or even his grandchildren. It was as if he were reminding himself of what he valued. His decision to put her with Kindle felt that way, too, as if he were pushing them together to protect himself. She knew Tajman meant well, but he had been suffocating her as surely as this oven of a prison.

After a while, Darz spoke in a rasp. “Are you sure you can’t make water?”

“I don’t think so. With light and heat, I’m not creating anything, just changing it. I don’t know why, but

light seems like little invisible particles to me. I gather them into a small place. With heat, I speed up the air. To cool it, I slow it down. With water, I would have to add something.”

“Ah, well.” He sounded disappointed but unsurprised.

Ginger sighed. “I might as well try. We’ve nothing else to do.” She concentrated on the air, feeling its excited motes, hundreds, thousands, millions, an uncountable number, like stars at night. She soothed them as she would soothe a person. They calmed and the air cooled, as it had done before. Perhaps she could gather them into water, not creating something new, just rearranging it. She imagined recombining motes, but it was difficult. In fact, only when she let them speed up again did the spell even feel as if it might work. But the air was mostly the wrong motes. It was absurd, anyway, invisible particles in the air and the sky and the clouds—

Clouds! She needed clouds. She had only a tiny bit of what she needed, but it was here...

“Gods above,” Darz whispered. “It’s raining.”

A drop landed on Ginger’s nose; another splattered her cheek. She opened her mouth, and water drizzled over her cracked lips. She gulped convulsively. Liquid ran down her shoulders, and she tried to catch it in her cupped hands.

The rain lasted only a few minutes, but it was enough to drink, and it dampened their clothes, cooling them. After it stopped, Ginger gave thanks to the dragon. She actually had no idea if he was punishing or helping them; she knew only that she was glad to be alive. She hadn’t expected to survive this long.

“I thought you couldn’t do that,” Darz said.

“It was hard. And I think I used up whatever I needed to make the water.” Fatigue settled over her like a cloak. “The big spells tire me out...”

“Sleep, Ginger-Sun,” he murmured.

She closed her eyes and slept.

Night came, even colder than before. Darz held her while they shivered in the dark. Exhausted from creating the rain, she could manage no more than a weak spell of warmth. They clung together, wracked by hunger, thirst and cold, until she wondered if she had done no more than prolong the misery of their dying.

“Darz?” she said.

He rubbed his forehead against the top of her head. “Yes?”

“If—if someone does try to dig us out—won’t the rocks fall and crush us under them?”

“I have to believe that won’t happen. I can’t lie here with no hope.”

She had no answer for that, for she had begun to lose hope. Instead she said, “Thank you.”

“For what? Getting you killed?”

“For holding me. No one else ever has. No man, I mean.”

He pressed his lips on her forehead. “Not a single kiss?”

“Not even a touch.” Her voice caught. “At least I won’t die wondering what it was like.”

She thought he would insist they were going to live. Instead, he said, “If I could have given you the sunset itself, the fire in the sky and the fire in my heart, I would have done it.” His voice cracked. “Goodbye, Ginger-Sun.”

“Goodbye,” she whispered.

Thunder crashed. Ginger started awake, lifting her head in the dark. The night’s chill had eased but the killing heat hadn’t yet descended. Above them, the world rumbled. It was only when it kept going that she realized it wasn’t thunder. Rocks were falling.

“Do you hear?” Darz asked when she tensed against him.

Ginger had gone beyond panic. “The Claw is collapsing.”

He put his arm around her. “I think it’s stopping.”

The rumble was indeed petering away. She lay still, afraid to breathe.

Someone called out.

In the same instant, Ginger said, “Did you hear?” and Darz said, “Someone is out there!”

“Help us!” Ginger shouted.

“Down here!” Darz bellowed with his wonderfully loud voice.

More rumbles came from above, then scrabbling, and the clatter of stones falling over stones.

“Careful!” Darz shouted. “The rocks aren’t stable.”

“Can you hear us?” someone called.

“We’re here!” Ginger shouted.

“Down below you!” Darz yelled. “Careful with those rocks!”

The scrabbling continued. Ginger wanted to laugh and then cry, her relief all mixed in with her fear of what would happen when their rescuers disturbed their precarious roof.

The thunder started again, this time almost on top of them. Darz pulled Ginger’s head against his chest and curled over her, protecting his own head with his arms. With a groan of rock, the slabs above them

shifted, resettled—

And fell.

Ginger gasped as the ceiling collapsed. Rocks piled up on top of them until she was suffocating. Even with her face pressed against Darz's chest, dust clogged her nose and mouth. She couldn't believe they had been buried this close to help. Rocks entombed them.

"Here!" someone shouted.

A terrible weight suddenly lifted off her body—and light flared around her. Someone or something hauled her up into the open air. The light blinded her. She could barely see the men crowded around the hole. Someone was holding her up, and dirt and pebbles rained away from her body. Voices blended around her, a cacophony of noise.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you."

"I can't believe they're alive!" someone said.

"It's a miracle!" another voice exulted.

"Or something else," someone said, more darkly.

"They're a mess," someone else said.

She managed a smile at that last. She wanted to shout, cry, laugh and exult all at once. Her eyes were adjusting to the light better now, enough so she could see them helping Darz out of the hole. Dirt covered him, and his clothes were soiled and rumpled. She had never seen such a beautiful sight.

Someone handed her a bag of cured hide. She fumbled at it with one hand, too dazed to do more, until the same someone took it away. Belatedly, she realized it was Harjan. He opened the bag and helped her tilt it to her lips. Water, beautiful water, ran smooth and cool down her throat. She gulped convulsively until he tugged it away with gentle hands.

"Not so fast," he said. "It will make you sick."

Ginger sagged, and Harjan put his arm around her shoulders to keep her from collapsing.

"Don't touch her," someone snapped. It was Dirk Bauxite, the builder who had challenged her at the town meeting.

Harjan frowned at him, but he let Ginger go. Unable to stand on her wobbly legs, she sat down on a crag of rock. She was uncomfortably aware of Dirk staring at her, but she kept her gaze away from his and her opal hidden in her hand.

Harjan offered her the bag again, and this time she drank more slowly, closing her eyes with relief. When she opened them, she realized the day was nowhere near as bright as she had thought. Dawn tinged the sky, but the sun had yet to rise.

"How did you survive?" Dirk was asking Darz. "It seems impossible."



“I don’t think we could have much longer,” Darz said.

“It’s incredible,” another man said. It was Spark, the Second Sentinel.

“Here, Priestess.” Harjan spoke in a low voice. “Cover yourself before they complain.” He offered her a linen shawl dyed in rose and yellow hues.

“Thank you,” she said softly. The falling rocks had shredded her already torn wrap, and the rips revealed stretches of skin on her torso and legs. She pulled the shawl around herself and shot Harjan a grateful look.

“Where is Kindle?” she asked.

“We finally got him to rest,” Harjan said. “He insisted on working every shift, looking for you. We had to force him to go home or he would have collapsed.” He motioned toward the edge of the Claw. “The Elder Sentinel has another team over there.”

She followed his gaze and finally took in the surroundings. It was a sobering sight. They were still up high; the Claw had about two thirds of its former height. Rubble from its partial collapse had scattered so far, she could see mounds of it on the plain below even from up here. Great portions of the tower probably lay heaped around its base. The Claw itself had vanished, the magnificent spires buckled into a twisted landscape of debris.

“It’s such a great loss,” she said.

“It’s only rock,” Harjan said. “You lived. That’s what matters.” His eyes were glossy, as if filled with tears.

“It’s not normal,” Spark said. “No ordinary human being could survive being buried that way.”

His stare unsettled Ginger. Emotions played across his face: relief, but also anger and an ugly quality that frightened her. She had a sudden feeling he hadn’t wanted her to live.

“Their survival is a blessing.” Harjan indicated the dust-laden sky, which was turning red-orange, the color that gave their village its name. “From the dragon and the sunrise.”

“Is it a blessing?” Dirk asked, his gaze hard. “Or an omen?”

“Hasn’t Kindle talked to anyone about the dragon-powder?” Ginger asked. They all just looked at her blankly.

“Why were you on the Claw?” Spark demanded. “Tajman clearly specified you were to remain in the temple until after the intru—” He glanced at Darz. “Until after Goldstone left the village.”

“Stop interrogating them,” Harjan said. “We need to get them back to the village before they collapse.”

Ginger shivered, though the dawn wasn’t cold. She rose slowly to her feet, stronger now, but still exhausted. As they walked forward, she fell in with Darz and discreetly pushed her opal into his hand. When he started to speak, she just barely shook her head. She wasn’t certain why she gave it into his safekeeping; she knew only that she didn’t feel much safer now than she had before their rescue.

Led by Dirk Bauxite and Second Sentinel Spark, the rescue party brought Ginger to her brother's home. However, Harjan went with Darz, taking him to some other place. Tanner, one of the miners who worked with Harjan, was waiting at Ginger's house. His face lit up when he saw her, and he greeted her with joy. Dirk Bauxite was another story. His censure saturated the air like an acrid dust.

Second Sentinel Spark assigned Dirk and Tanner to watch Ginger and told her not to leave the house. She had no intention of going anywhere; she could barely stay on her feet. After declining Tanner's kind offer to bring the healer, she went to the bathing room and washed away the grit of her ordeal. She had scrapes and bruises, but nothing serious. When she finished, she retired to her old bedroom and slept like a stone.

Ginger awoke into shadows. She dragged herself out of bed and slipped on her robe. The colors of the room seemed muted in the dim light, which fit the way she felt.

She wondered what had happened to Darz. She wished she could go to him, but she knew it was impossible. It would only hurt to see him anyway. Sky Flames wasn't his home. He had spoken of a future with her only when he thought they had no future.

She walked into the front parlor, yawning, and found Dirk relaxed in what had been her father's favorite chair before he died. Dirk was whittling. Ginger stared dully at the wood shavings all over the tapestry rug.

He rose to his feet. "Light of the evening." His knife glinted in the glow from a candle on the mantle. The window behind him showed the purpling sky that followed sunset and the glitter of the first few stars.

Ginger returned the traditional greeting. "Light." She was too tired to say more.

"Elder Tajman was here earlier," Dirk said. "He and the Archivist want to talk to you tomorrow. I imagine they will ask how you survived being buried."

"Well, we weren't that deep," she said, rubbing her bleary eyes. "I'm surprised it took two days to find us."

He stepped forward, clenching his knife, his face red. "Take care with your accusations!"

Dismayed, she backed away. What had brought that on? She knew he and Spark believed she had broken her oath to the dragon, and they wanted her to suffer consequences. But it was more than that. They were afraid of her, and it made them like fuel ready to ignite.

Dirk's voice hardened. "You better have a good explanation for why you were on the Claw, why it fell and how you lived."

She stared at him, and the rest of his words finally soaked into her sleep-slowed mind. The Archivist wanted to talk to her. The Archivist. The person who had seen her make yellow light.

Ginger spoke with a formality she hoped hid her fear of him. "I regret if I misspoke, Goodman Bauxite. I will be ready tomorrow to meet with the Elder and the Archivist."

"See that you are." He opened and closed his fist as if he were preparing for something. She didn't

intend to find out what. With a nod, she retreated from the room.

Inside her bedroom, Ginger slumped against the wall. She could see what was happening, but she didn't know how to stop it. They believed she had done evil, experimented with forbidden arts and that the Dragon-Sun had brought down his claw in retribution. They might strip her of her title, even exile her.

Surely Kindle wouldn't stand by while they accused her of evil. Or would he? She had felt his anger when she rejected him. They all seemed bent on seeing her pay for what they considered her misdeeds.

Dirk was the only guard at the house when Ginger awoke in the morning. Someone had sent Tanner home. It disquieted her, for Tanner was the only one of them who seemed sympathetic to her. When the Elder and Archivist arrived, the Elder looked exhausted, with dark bags under his eyes, and the Archivist watched Ginger with her lips pressed together. Second Sentinel Spark came with them, stout and frowning. Ginger sensed no support from anyone, only suspicion and hostility.

She offered them chairs in the parlor, but no one wanted to sit. So she also stood, though she was still tired. She didn't dare ask after Darz; she could think of little else that would inflame the situation more. Gods only knew what would happen if they found out he had kissed her again. She wanted to believe they would understand how two people who thought they were going to die would comfort each other, but seeing their faces, she knew that would never happen.

"We must decide what to do about your crimes," the Elder said. Anger edged his voice. "I told you to stay in the temple. The last place I expected you to go was the Claw, to see him. Now we have to deal with the aftermath of your behavior."

"Elder Limestone, I greatly respect your judgment." She spoke quietly. "That is why I ask you to hear me out. What appears as a transgression on my part was an attempt to save his life. I went to warn him about the explosion. I was too late. But I had to try, even if it meant going against your just and fair ruling that I stay in the temple." The words felt like dust in her mouth, saying "just and fair" for a sentence he had given her because Darz had broken the temple taboos and Kindle had hit her. But she had to protect herself.

"How did you know the Dragon-Sun intended to lower his claw?" the Archivist demanded. "What did you do to bring his wrath upon us all?" Her voice rose as she spoke.

"I did nothing wrong." Ginger hoped it was true. She had never sought harm with her spells; she sought only to heal and give comfort. But they were still night spells. "Hasn't Kindle explained about the powder?"

"What is this prattle you keep on about a powder?" Spark snapped.

Tajman held up his hand. "Enough. As long as she remains our priestess, you must speak with respect."

Ginger didn't miss his phrasing, and she doubted anyone else did, either. As long as.

"Ask Kindle," she said. "He's done something great, worthy of the queen's notice. But it's hard to control."

"What are you talking about?" the Archivist asked. "It makes no sense."

“The dragon-powder,” Ginger said. “I found a description in one of the old scrolls. The powder explodes. Kindle was going to present a proposal to you for his taking it to Quaaz.” She left out his request that she help write it; that would go over right now about as well as another collapse of the tower.

The Elder was shaking his head. “He has said nothing.”

“Nothing? But—but surely he told you.”

The Archivist spoke. “You blame Kindle for the debacle at the Claw? I would have hoped you had more integrity. But we’ve seen the truth of that these past days.”

Ginger met her stare, and the Archivist’s gaze slid away from hers. And then Ginger knew. Kindle had told someone. The Archivist. And she had no intention of revealing it to anyone. Like Spark and Dirk, she wanted Ginger punished. They would say it was because Ginger had done evil, but other currents were swirling here, dark and cold.

“Elder Tajman, please,” she said. “I ask that you speak with Kindle again.”

He looked as if he were in pain. “I wouldn’t have thought you would deny responsibility for your actions. To manipulate the affections of a man who loves you in an attempt to make him shoulder the blame for your offenses is appalling.”

“I’m not doing that! I’m telling the truth.”

The Elder glanced at the Archivist, and she shook her head.

Tajman spoke wearily to Ginger, as if he were under a weight greater than he knew how to bear. “I had hoped to avoid this.” He straightened up, seeming to gird himself. “There are those who demand you stand trial. We will commence immediately.”

“Trial?” This was the worst she had feared. “For what?”

The lines on his face were deeply etched. “For breaking your vows to the temple and the Dragon-Sun, for your suggestive behavior—” Quietly he said, “And for witchcraft.”

“You can’t mean that,” Ginger said. Had her attempts to hide her spells failed that badly? She had thought that except for that moment with the Archivist, she had protected herself.

No one answered. Their stares chilled her. Ginger looked at them and felt as if she couldn’t breathe. “No one has been tried as a witch for ages.”

“This will be the first such trial in one hundred and ninety-two years,” the Archivist said.

“Witch,” Dirk said, low and ugly. His gaze raked her body.

“No! I’m not!” Ginger’s heart was pounding. “Has—has the sentence ever been changed?”

“No.” The Archivist met her gaze. “It is still execution.”



12

## Fire Trial

The Tender's Hall had been crammed the last time Ginger was here. Now no one was present except the elders: Tajman, the Archivist and Second Sentinel Spark. Dirk Bauxite also came at their request, to ensure Ginger didn't try to run. With alarm, she realized they intended to hold her trial in secret.

The elders sat at the table on the platform at the front of the room. Ginger stood in the open space below them with her wrists bound behind her back and Dirk directly behind her, on guard. The high neck of her wrap felt as if it was cutting off her air; she couldn't breathe.

"Ginger Clovia," the Elder said, using her full name instead of the honorific "Ginger-Sun." "You are sworn to tell the truth. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said.

"Then we shall begin." Tajman looked at Spark to his left and the Archivist to his right. "Are we agreed on the charges?"

"I believe so." The Archivist rose to her feet and picked up one of two scrolls on the table. She untied the black ribbon and unrolled the parchment. "Ginger Clovia, you are accused of sacrilege, of violating your oath and of lascivious behavior." Her voice hardened. "Moreover, you stand accused of witchery and dark arts."

"I'm not evil." Frustration bubbled into Ginger's voice despite her intention to stay composed. Even with her own doubts about spells, she would never believe she deserved todie . "You all know I'm not!"

"Ginger." Elder Tajman looked as if he were dying inside. "You must not interrupt. You will have a chance to speak."

The Archivist stared down from their high platform as if Ginger were a bug rather than the priestess who had served them for years and blessed the Archivist's own daughter. Then she took her seat and set the parchment in front of the Elder.

Tajman turned to Spark, whose beefy face had turned red. "Please present your evidence."

Ginger blinked. Evidence? What could Spark possibly have?

The Second Sentinel stood and regarded her with a pitiless stare. "Three days ago, while the accused was supposedly serving her sentence, she left the temple. She ran with abandon through the desert. Her wrap was slit to her hip, showing her legs. It became soaked with sweat, and she made no attempt to cover herself." His eyes glinted. "The cloth clung to her body. You could even see her nipples through it."

Heat flushed Ginger's face. What the blazes had Spark been doing, spying on her? Protection was one

thing, but this felt invasive.

“She went to the Claw,” Spark said. “Despite your order forbidding her to see the stranger. She ran to him. Almost as soon as their illicit tryst began, the Dragon-Sun smote the Claw and buried them. They were under the earth for over a day and a half, yet when we found them, they were hardly affected.” He stretched out his arm to point at Ginger. “That woman was dressed in even less when we pulled her out. Much of her body showed through tears in her clothes.”

The Elder was staring hard at Ginger as if he were seeing her in a new and unwelcome light. She couldn’t believe what Spark was saying. It wasn’t that any of it was untrue, but he twisted everything around.

“Of course my clothes were torn,” she said. “A tower fell on me.”

“You were in remarkably good shape for someone who had been buried under a mountain!” Spark shouted. “Amazing that your clothes suffered, but you were fine. What were you doing under there, witch?”

“Spark, enough,” the Elder said. He sounded exhausted. To Ginger, he said, “Do not disrupt these proceedings.”

The Second Sentinel said, “My apology, Elder Tajman.” He nodded to Tajman and the Archivist. “That is my testimony.” Then he sat down.

Ginger barely controlled the protests roiling within her. Her clenched fists caused the thongs binding her wrists to bite into her skin, but she was so tense, she couldn’t relax her hands.

Tajman turned to the Archivist. “Present your evidence.”

She rose to her feet. “I saw the accused create light out of a rock. She had no candle, no flint, no flame. And she did it to my daughter. We came for a blessing, and instead she cursed Jalla.” She took a deep breath. “I have other times suspected her of working with such witchery. She always does it at night, in hiding. She fools people into thinking she is sweet. Men lose their good sense, lie for her, even destroy their lives for her. It is bad enough she dabbles in forbidden arts. But to do such spells of darkness within the sun temple is a desecration so great, it is no wonder the dragon smote her down.”

“That’s not true!” Ginger said. “I would never harm—”

“Enough!” the Elder warned. “Ginger, if you cannot respect the rules of this trial, I’ll have to have Dirk gag you. Do you understand? This is your last warning.”

She stared in disbelief. Never had he spoken to her this way. He knew she wasn’t evil. Was it such a terrible crime to want tenderness and love?

“I asked a question,” he said quietly. “You may answer.”

“Yes, I understand.” She hated the way her voice trembled. “May I ask a question?”

“Now, no,” he said. “But in a few moments, you will have the opportunity.” He glanced at Spark. “Did you have anything else to present?”

“I could detail more of her behavior,” Spark said. “But it’s all similar. She’s grown brazen and wicked.” His face paled. “She will bring evil here if we don’t protect ourselves.”

His fear dismayed Ginger. He genuinely believed she had enraged the Dragon-Sun. All of them did.

The Elder turned to the Archivist. “And you?”

“If you need more testimony, I can provide that for the record,” she said. “It is all of a similar nature.”

“Very well.” Tajman turned to Ginger and spoke with pain. “I have known you all your life, since when you were a charming if unruly child, throughout your years as an acolyte and then as priestess. You’ve been well-liked, Ginger, and you’ve served well. But some folk have raised concerns. In the past, I have let my fondness for you overrule my judgment. I must not let that happen now. The severity of your behavior demands we respond.” He took a breath as if to steady himself. “If you have anything to say you may speak.”

She struggled to restrain the explosion of words within her. “I deeply regret if anything I have done has appeared inappropriate in thought, word or deed. Please know, all of you, I would never seek harm against anyone.” She turned to the Archivist. “Jalla is dear to me. I would never hurt her.”

“You speak your lies so convincingly,” the Archivist said.

“I sought to save a life. Kindle can tell you.” Ginger looked at the hall behind her with its empty benches. Dirk was watching her, his gaze implacable. Rattled, she turned back to the Elder. “Why is no one here to speak for me?”

“You mean Kindle?” He looked disappointed, as if he had hoped she wouldn’t bring up the Flame Sentinel. “We cannot allow you to sway a good man into falsely taking blame on himself so you can avoid justice.”

“If you won’t hear those who would speak in my defense,” she said angrily, “the Dragon-Sun will know. He’ll punish you.”

The Archivist jumped to her feet. “How dare you invoke the name of the dragon you have dishonored. You’re an abomination!”

“I have done nothing wrong!” Ginger cried.

Spark was on his feet now, too. “You’re lewd and wicked!”

“Stop it!” The Elder stood between them, his face red. “Silence, both of you!” He raked his hand through his hair, his gaze fixed on Ginger. “Do you repent your actions?”

“Yes,” she said, desperate. “I swear, I do.”

“She lies!” Spark said.

The Archivist spoke. “We cannot endanger the village by keeping among us someone who has so angered the sun, he brought down a mountain in retribution.”

Watching Tajman, Ginger realized even he believed what the Archivist said. Her voice trembled. “What

must I do to convince you I mean no harm?"

The Archivist spoke severely. "If you are genuinely true to the Dragon-Sun, it will be impossible for you to burn, for he protects his priestesses from the inferno of his power."

Ginger felt as if the room were whirling around her. "From the fire of the sun. Not the fire of man."

The Elder narrowed his gaze at her. "You would reinterpret the ancient scrolls for your own benefit?"

Ginger felt as if she couldn't say anything right. She had spent her life avoiding speeches, and now she had no compelling phrases to roll off her tongue. She struggled for the words. "The fire referred to in those scrolls is symbolic."

"The scrolls say fire," the Archivist said flatly. "Not 'fire as a symbol' for the convenience of blasphemous priestesses."

"I would never speak blasphemy against the dragon!"

The Elder pushed his hand through his hair, moving as if he carried a great weight. "I have heard the evidence, Ginger. I do not want to believe. But it is damning. We cannot ignore it, not after the dragon himself has smote the land." He pulled himself up straighter. "But the Dragon-Sun has also heard your claim of repentance. If you speak truly, he will grant you mercy. We must leave it in his hands." Still looking at Ginger, he said, "Archivist, do you have the sentence?"

The Archivist picked up the other scroll in front of her. She unrolled the aged parchment, taking care with its frayed edges. "In the last trial with such charges, the sentence was thus." Holding the ancient document with both hands, she read, "For lewd and licentious behavior, the accused is sentenced to twenty lashes. For the charge of witchery, she will be bound to a stake at sunset, the time where both the Dragon and Goddess reign. Peat, brush and desiccated fire-lily vines shall be piled around the stake. They shall be put to flame with three torches. If the Dragon-Sun so wishes to punish the witch for her misdeeds, she will burn."

"You can't do this!" Ginger cried. She stepped toward the table. "Tajman, surely you can't mean this!"

Dirk pulled her back. "Stay away from them, witch."

"No, let me go!" She tried to wrench out of his grip. As he caught her around the waist, she twisted in his hold to face the others. "If you go through with this, you're murderers."

"Silence her!" the Archivist shouted. She looked panicked. "Before the Dragon-Sun brings this hall down on all of us!"

As Ginger struggled, Dirk shoved a cloth in her mouth and tied another around her head in a gag. Spark came down from the platform and strode over to her. He took one of her upper arms while Dirk held the other, and they swung her around to face the table where the Elder and the Archivist stood.

"Take her to the cellar with the riding gear," Tajman said. He looked as if he were ill. "We must be quick. It's almost sunset."

Ginger struggled as they pulled her to a door behind the platform and onto a landing with one candle burning in a niche there. Tajman lifted a torch off the wall and lit it with the candle. Holding the torch high,



he descended the cracked stone steps. Ginger planted her feet on the ground and resisted when Spark and Dirk tried to pull her forward. Even if she hadn't balked, her wrap would have kept her from descending the stairs as fast as they were trying to go. They finally lifted her by her arms and carried her down the stairs, her toes just barely hitting the stone.

At the bottom, despite her struggles, they dragged her down a tunnel with crumbling walls. The smell of wine permeated the air. They stopped at a stone door braced by strips of black iron, and the Archivist heaved it open. In the cellar beyond, kegs of ale stood in front of racks that held wine bottles. Big copper serving plates hung on the far wall. Closer by, bridles, saddles, ropes and riding quirts dangled on pegs.

When Ginger saw the Elder take a quirt off the wall, panic swept over her. Instead of fighting, she suddenly let herself go limp. It caught Spark and Dirk off guard, and their grip loosened. Wrenching free, she lunged for the door. She could have raced upstairs ahead of them if only she had been wearing her leggings. But she tripped in the wrap, and Dirk easily caught her.

Spark and Dirk dragged her to a table and bent her over it, face down. When Spark unbound her wrists, for one heady moment she thought she could wrest free. Then he pulled her arms over her head, ripping her sleeves, and he and the Elder held her down. In the copper plate on the wall to one side, she glimpsed Dirk's face. The hunger in his expression terrified her. He grabbed her wrap where it stretched across her back and yanked. It ripped to her waist, leaving only scraps of cloth and the wires that held it in place over her breasts. The Archivist stayed in the corner, watching. Ginger saw her fear, but also her satisfaction that they were dealing with the threat she thought Ginger posed to Sky Flames.

Ginger cried when Dirk lashed her. The leather shredded her back, and the pain was unbearable. By the time he finished, she was sobbing. They pulled her to her feet, and the Elder wrapped a shawl around the tatters of her wrap. Tears poured down her cheeks as she stared up at him. He looked as if he had aged twenty years. She hoped this gave him screaming nightmares for the rest of his godforsaken life.

She could barely walk. Her ears rang as if thunder had crashed too close, and her back was on fire. No, not fire! Anything but fire. She hurt too much to struggle, and she knew then the purpose of the lashes. Whipping someone they were about to execute made little sense in terms of justice, but it served them well by decreasing her ability to resist. If only she had her opal! She would blast them with fire the moment the sun went down. She was becoming exactly what they feared, and she dreaded that knowledge, but if she could have attacked them, she would have done so in an instant.

They exited the Tender's Hall into an alley. Brackish water ran down the center of the lane. The strip of sky above them was darkening; they had timed her trial so they could carry out the sentence immediately. Did they fear she would have more chance to fight back if they didn't finish this as fast as possible? They were right. Except she had never formed a spell without the opal. Had she not given it to Darz, they would have taken it away. Gods, she hoped they hadn't also sentenced him to die.

The alley ended at a pavilion that shaded the village water-well. The central square lay beyond the well, but she was hidden from the view of anyone there by columns that held up the pavilion roof. She heard a buzz of voices. The people might not know they were about to see their priestess burned, but they surely realized something was about to happen.

Dirk and Spark leaned her over the retaining wall so she was staring down into the well. Moist air wafted up, and she caught a faint splash of water. The Elder and Archivist were standing in front of the well, blocking Ginger's view of the plaza. She knew why they were hiding her: to minimize the chance anyone could interfere in their plans.

With a strength driven by desperation, Ginger twisted with a great heave and jerked free. The gag muffled her cries, but she made enough noise to rise above the hum of voices beyond the well. Spark and Dirk caught her, and she cried out when Dirk's hand scraped the lacerations on her back.

Tajman groaned. "By the dragon, let's get this terrible business over with."

Dirk dragged her from behind the well—and she inhaled sharply. People filled the plaza. Sunset wasn't normally a busy time; by now the buildings of commerce here were empty and most everyone had headed home. But it took very little to start rumors. Word must have spread that something was happening, for the square was as crowded as midday, though twilight was descending. Some people held torches. The smoky glow barely chased away the encroaching night, and it lit their faces with inconstant flares of light.

It was too much. She couldn't handle it all. When she sagged, Dark and Spark lifted her up until her feet barely touched the ground, so they were practically carrying her. At the edge of the crowd, two cowed figures stood watching, tall in their charcoal-gray robes. Peaked hoods covered their heads and gray scarves wrapped around their faces. Nothing showed except their dark gazes, which followed Ginger as Dirk and Spark dragged her past them.

Then she saw what had drawn the onlookers. A platform stood in front of one of the buildings that bordered the plaza. Constructed from uneven boards, the stage had the unfinished look of a structure thrown together too fast.

In its center, stood a stake.

The pole was taller than Ginger and as thick as a tree. A base and supports held it in place, and coils of rope lay beside it. Two women were climbing the stairs of the platform, their arms loaded with stripped branches and dried fire-lily vines.

The sight jolted Ginger out of her shock. She renewed her struggles with such vehemence, Dirk and Spark had to stop. Spark swore vividly under his breath. "Why won't she give up?"

Ginger had no intention of making it easier for them. She would never give up as long as she could breathe. They believed that because she was tender, she must also be weak, but if they thought she would go to her death without protest, they were mad.

She kept fighting as they took her to the platform. Dusk was spreading, and ruddy torchlight lit the plaza. Her shawl caught on the top step and dragged off her shoulders, flapping in the rising night wind. A multitude of faces were turned up to watch her, and rumbles of shock stirred among the crowd. It may have been the harsh, wavering light, but the people seemed avid to Ginger, hungry for the gruesome spectacle.

The stake loomed before her. Several villagers now were piling firewood around the base, and a man came to help Dirk and Spark pull her forward. No one would meet her frantic gaze. They forced her to stand with her back to the stake so she faced the crowd. She moaned as the wood scraped her wounds. They tied her wrists behind the thick pole and bound her ankles to the bottom.

Please, Ginger thought. Stop, please. Did Harjan know what was happening? Tanner? Her brother was gone. This had happened so fast, most townsfolk wouldn't learn until tomorrow that the elders had executed their priestess. Heath would come home to find his sister dead.

The crowd fell quiet. For one heart-stopping instant she thought someone had come to light the firewood at her feet. The acrid smell of torches, with their oils and cinders, saturated her senses, making her ill. But no, too many people were on the platform. They couldn't light the flames yet, because when they did, this entire structure would burn.

ElderTajman walked into view, to the front of the platform, and she understood then why everyone had fallen silent. They were waiting to hear what explanation he could possibly offer for this atrocity.

He spoke in the resonant voice that had earned him such renown as an orator. His words rolled across the plaza. "Good people, listen well!" Wind blew his silvered hair back from his face, accenting his sculpted profile. "You all know the Dragon-Sun brought down his Claw. He toppled a tower that has stood sentinel over our people for thousands of years!" He turned and stretched his arm out to point at Ginger. "He has smote this witch for her sacrilege! His wrath came down, and so will it come down on us all if we cannot appease him."

Cries rose from the crowd, and Ginger knew then she had no hope. Until this moment, she hadn't really believed Tajman would go through with it. Deep inside, she had trusted him. She was a fool. She had trusted themall, assuming the gratitude they expressed for her work meant she had their goodwill. She had been so achingly naïve, and learning that truth hurt at a level so deep, she felt as if she broke inside.

They were afraid. In a village this small, the tale would have circled a hundred times, embellished and twisted until she no longer recognized herself. The malevolent sorceress, the temptress who committed unspeakable evils and lured men to their deaths. They believed the Dragon-Sun would strike Sky Flames as he had struck his Claw, and that only her death would satisfy the angry god.



13

### Flames of Glass

A chill wind buffeted Ginger, and the torchlight wavered. With dread, she realized Tajman and everyone else was leaving the platform—except two men and a woman who held torches. The Archivist's words came back to her: The wood shall be put to flame with three torches. Nothing was going to stop them, no protests, no sudden rain, no clemency from the dragon.

If only she had the opal. If only she could bring water out of the air. But that drizzle she made would never put out the inferno they were preparing. She had neither the means to create a spell nor the calm to focus on even a small one, let alone downpour the size of what she needed.

Tears streamed down her face. Dragon-Sun, don't let me die this way. If I have offended you, give me a chance to make it right. But if he heard her plea, he gave no sign. The fiery colors of his setting were gone from the sky.

As the torch bearers came forward, Ginger stared over the crowd, trying to distance her mind from her body. The Arch-Tower stood across the square, the tallest building in Sky Flames. It had the only stained glass window in the village proper, a large circle depicting a black-wing hawk soaring through the

sky. Set under the bulb of the tower, the glass caught torchlight and glowed red, as if it were on fire. Gazing at its round shape, she willed her mind to recede from the flaring torches.

A spell stirred within Ginger.

The torch bearers stopped in front of her. They blocked her view of the tower, dousing her spell, and she was suddenly more aware of the pain in the gashes and welts on her back, especially where her skin pressed into the pole. Had she imagined the spell in her desperation? The trio with the torches watched her with fear. She tried to speak, to entreat them to stop, but her cries were lost to the gag and the rumble of voices below. The smell of burning hemp and the oil that soaked the torches nauseated her. Ashes twirled in the air, and an ember singed her bared shoulder.

Together, in a single motion, they dropped their torches into the firewood around the stake.

“NO!” Ginger screamed.

The torches crackled at her feet, and the trio backed away as if she had cursed them. They strode from the platform, out of her view, and their feet thudded on the stairs.

Ginger could see the clock window again, and she stared at it, struggling for a spell, any spell, while the torches burned at her feet. With a whoosh, dried branches caught fire, and flames jumped in the wood piled around her. Heat licked her legs. It would only be moments before the fire caught her clothes.

As the flames rose, so did the cries of the crowd. Yells came from somewhere, but the lurid torchlight left too many shadows for her to see who was shouting, and the crackle of the flames drowned out whatever they were yelling at her. She focused on the window—

And a heat spell rose within her.

The window was glass, not opal, but it was so much larger. It stoked her spell. In a strike of insight that came far too late, she realized it wasn't the opal that catalyzed her spells, but its shape. The circle couldn't do it as well, but it worked.

For one incredible moment Ginger thought she could bring rain. But that spell was beyond her reach. She inhaled smoke instead of air and choked for breath. She had no time to focus, none of the calm she needed; she was heat, terrible, terrible heat. In the past, she had created spells of comfort and light to honor the dragon, but now he had deserted her. Flame seared her legs, and she screamed. In this terrible moment, as she burned alive, she grasped the roiling power within her and let a spell surge out, huge and wild, driven by fear, with no control.

If I am to burn, then so shall you all.

The buildings surrounding the plaza erupted into flame. Fire leapt into the sky, red against the night. People shouted and ran from blazes that suddenly were everywhere. Through the veil of flame around her, Ginger saw them pointing toward her, their faces contorted with fear.

The hem of her wrap caught fire. She cried out as heat engulfed her calves. Everything was burning, her clothes, the platform, the buildings, the sky, the entire world. The crowd had turned into a panicked mob. Through the flames, she saw a running mass of people on foot and horseback—

Horses?

Someone on a horse was slashing with a sword! No, it was a mirage; no one in Sky Flames had a horse but a few sentinels and the elders. The flames were leaping too high for her to see anything but a red blur. Something gouged her ankles, and the ropes binding her feet to the stake scraped her legs. She sobbed from the heat as her hair caught fire.

A sharp edge scraped her wrists—and her arms fell free! She lurched forward, her ankles tearing away from the stake. Even as heat blasted her face, something jerked her back, out of the flames. She couldn't move—she had been tied too long—but someone kept pulling her, and she stumbled into the area behind the stake. The fire hadn't yet caught the platform here. Wild with the fear pumping through her body, she stared up into the face of the person who had freed her from the stake.

Heath!

Her brother's hair whipped around his head in the wind. He ripped the gag off her mouth and yelled, "We have to get down." He half carried, half supported her as they ran for the stairs. Ginger coughed raggedly, heaving in breath after glorious breath. Right now she would have run on broken legs if necessary. Fire roared behind them, but cool air blew across her face like a gift.

Two men were at the bottom of the stairs, fighting against four of the village sentinels. She recognized one of the men immediately: Harjan had come to help. And the other—was Kindle! Incredibly, the Flame Sentinel was battling his own men.

Ginger swallowed; she and Heath could go no farther with the sentinels blocking them. Heath took her halfway down the steps, then set her against the rail and jumped down into the midst of the fighting. The four sentinels had Harjan and Kindle backed up against the platform. Her giant of a brother took on two of them while Harjan and Kindle grappled with the others.

Ginger had no intention of staying here while they fought for her life. She grabbed the hem of her cursed wrap and ripped it so she could move. Agony stabbed her burned and scraped feet as she stepped down the stairs. When she moved, two of the sentinels stopped fighting Kindle and looked up.

Ginger went utterly still. They stared at her, their faces streaked with sweat and lit in orange by the fires. One of them looked at Kindle, who was breathing hard, poised to take them on again. Then incredibly, the two sentinels stepped back. The others had noticed and stopped fighting Heath. They looked at Ginger, at Kindle, back at Ginger. Then they all moved away.

Ginger couldn't believe it. She limped down the last step, painfully aware of the sentinels. They were, miraculously, letting her go, but they could change their minds at any moment.

With all the noise of the flames roaring behind them, Heath had to shout to make Kindle and Harjan hear him. "I don't know how much longer he can hold them off! Get his attention while I take Ginger. We have to go now."

He? Ginger looked to where he pointed—and gasped.

A man on horseback was fighting in the center of the plaza, surrounded by armed sentinels on horseback and more on foot. None of his assailants had backed off; their faces were drawn in snarls. The man reared his horse, raising his curved sword high over his head, and the garish light of the fires glittered on its edges like molten lava. His horse pawed the air, and his war cry tore through the air as if it were the scream of dragons. Then he came down, slashing with his sword, and the sentinels scattered like chaff

before a blazing wind.

Darz.

He was one man, alone, fighting three others on horseback and six on foot, yet he held them off. He struck harder and parried faster. He advanced, blocked their moves, backed away when they surged against him, then came at them again.

“He’ll catch up with us,” Heath said, urging Ginger forward. She stumbled with him toward a lane between two burning buildings. When hooves pounded behind them, she summoned up an extra spurt of speed. But still the horse gained. It pulled alongside of them and a sentinel leaned down to grab her.

“No!” She strove to run faster on her burned, aching feet.

“Ginger!” he shouted. It wasn’t a sentinel, it was Darz. Leaning down, he reached for her. She had no time to think; she grabbed his hands with hers as she had often done with Heath when they were children practicing mounts on the horse owned by their father, who had been a sentinel. Darz heaved her up in a practiced motion, and she scrambled astride the bare back while Darz held her in front of him.

“Go!” Heath shouted. “Get her safe!”

With one arm clamped around Ginger, Darz kicked the horse and leaned forward. It raced into the alley and thundered past the blazing walls on either side.

They rapidly left the flames behind. Darkness closed around them, but not the full night, for the burning plaza cast a glow that reddened the shadows. The fire bell in the plaza began to clang, calling fire-tenders to battle the inferno. Ginger was clenching her fists so hard, her nails tore her palms.

It wasn’t until they had left the plaza far behind and were riding through the outskirts of the village that her grip eased. She drew in a deep, shuddering breath. Her head swam and she swayed until Darz tightened his hold, keeping her from falling off the horse. As her head cleared, she recognized the animal as Grayrider, Kindle’s fine stallion.

They were riding too hard for normal conversation, but Darz bent his head so his lips touched her ear. “Are you all right?”

She managed a nod. She wasn’t all right; welts, gashes, lacerations and minor burns covered her body. Nothing was left of her clothes but scorched, bloodied rags. She hurt everywhere so very much, but it was far better than burning alive.

They soon reached the desert. When she looked back, the village was no more than a glow in the sky. Out here, only the moon lit their way, and Darz let Grayrider slow down.

“The Flame Sentinel told me he left supplies for us in the Flint Maze,” Darz said. “Do you know where that is?”

“West of the temple.” Her voice caught. “I can’t think of enough ways to thank you.”

“I owe you, Ginger-Sun,” he said gruffly. “I almost got you burned alive because I couldn’t keep my hands where they belonged.”

“You didn’t make this town brutal.” She had always known the harsh life of the desert could harden people, but she would never have believed they could turn on her this way. She spoke with a pain that bandages and salves could never heal. “They’re responsible for what they did, Darz. Not you.”

“How could they do it?” His voice crackled with disbelief. “It’s so illegal to burn someone alive, I can’t count the number of laws they’ve broken.”

“They’re scared.”

“They ought to be. When I report this—”

“Darz, don’t.”

“Why the hell not?”

“It hurts too much,” she whispered.

“Ginger—”

She just shook her head. “Not yet.” She was too upset to think through what had happened, not only what the elders had done, but her final act of fury. She needed time. Right now, she just wanted to fold up and nurse her wounds.

“Is that the temple?” Darz asked.

It took her a moment to recognize its terraced roof against the starred sky. “Yes, that’s it.” Moonlight glinted on the skylights at the tip of the RayLight Chamber where she had spent so many hours in meditation. Or making spells.

“Maybe they’re right,” she said dully. “Maybe I am evil.”

“What? That’s absurd. You’re one of the kindest people I’ve ever met.” He punctuated his assertion with colorful oaths expressing his opinion of Sky Flames. He caught himself midway through one. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m too used to traveling with the army.”

“It’s all right.” She motioned up ahead. “The Maze is a five-minute ride past the temple.”

“I mean it, Ginger. You aren’t evil.”

It would have been easy to let him reassure her. But she couldn’t lie. “I do the things they claimed.”

“Like hell.”

“I make spells, Darz.”

“I don’t believe in spells,” he said. “But if I did, I would have to point out that the kings of Aronsdale choose their brides for their ability as mages. Whatever that means.”

She smiled wanly. “But you don’t believe it.” After what had happened to them in the cave, he might accept far more than he was willing to admit.

"I know this much," Darz said. "You had nothing to do with the Dragon's Claw falling. Your Flame Sentinel says he did exactly what you thought. Apparently he sobered up enough to change his mind, but this powder of his blew anyway. He lost control of it."

"Then he admitted everything?"

"To me. To your Archivist. To your brother." In a wry voice, he added, "To the guards confining him in his house. That was before he beat them up and left."

That sounded like Kindle, but for once she was grateful. "Then he found you and Heath?"

"Me, yes. One of the miners, a man named Tanner, went yesterday to get your brother. Tanner says he was at your house when they brought you back from the Claw."

"I remember." She tried to collect her thoughts. "When I awoke today, only Dirk Bauxite was guarding me. Tanner was gone."

"Yes, well, he got suspicious when the elders sent him away and left you with Bauxite."

"But how did he find my brother? Heath was in J'Hiza. It's half a day's ride from here, and Tanner has no horse."

Darz cleared his throat. "He, uh, borrowed one from a sentinel."

From his tone, she suspected the sentinel hadn't known about the loan. Softly she said, "I am in their debt. And yours. I thought you were gone for good."

His voice quieted. "Your elders turned me loose yesterday with nothing. They told me never to come back." He sounded annoyed. "Did they really think I would just walk away after what had happened? I snuck back last night. I was looking for you when the Flame Sentinel caught up with me."

That surprised Ginger. She had thought Kindle hated Darz. "After he tried to kill you, he asked for your help?"

"He feels guilty as hell. He ought to." Awkwardly, he added, "He also seems to believe you prefer me over him."

"I hardly know you."

He gave a snort. "Your hulking monster of a brother thinks otherwise. He gave me quite a speaking to. He's furious."

She could well imagine. "We've always been close."

"So I gathered." He shifted behind her. "You can't return to that town."

"I know." She couldn't bring herself to think farther ahead than that. "Do you see those shadows up there? The tall ones?"

"I think so."



“That’s the Maze. It’s a lot of rock slabs sticking up out of the desert.” To Ginger, it had always looked like it could be an ancient palace of the gods blasted into ruins.

“It’s hard to see anything in this dark.”

She paused, thinking of the stake. But Darz already knew about her spells. “I could help with the light.” A disheartening thought came to her. “Unless you didn’t keep my opal.”

“I kept it. It was all I had to remember you by.”

She was glad he had cared enough to want a keepsake. “I hope you don’t mind my asking for it back.”

He let go of her, and a rustling came from behind her, the scrape of the ties on a suede riding pouch. Then he pressed the opal into her hands. “It’s yours. But I don’t think we should use a light. It would make us easy to spot.”

“Oh. Yes. Of course.” The opal warmed her palm, so very welcome, as if in some subtle way it increased her well-being. She formed a spell of succor. It couldn’t heal her, but her pain receded to a more bearable level.

She wondered if Darz might prefer the opal to remember her by rather than have the responsibility of her person. He was right: she couldn’t go home. That thought came with such pain. If she could reach J’Hiza before anyone heard about what happened here, she might arrange passage to someplace safe. Where, she didn’t know, but she couldn’t give up. She couldn’t ask Heath to leave with her, though; he needed to stay and protect their family’s mining interests, lest the elders challenge his claims after what he had done tonight.

“Could you take me to J’Hiza?” she asked. “I won’t trouble you after that. But it’s too far to walk.” She didn’t know how they had expected Darz to make it without supplies, a horse, or a guide, especially after all he had been through. Maybe they had hoped the desert would finish the job his attackers started.

He spoke awkwardly. “I don’t think you understand.”

“Understand?” she asked, distracted. They were almost to the Maze, and the tall, uneven slabs of rock were easier to see. So was the yellow glow leaking around them. “Darz, you may not have wanted a light, but someone else out here does.”

“I see.” He guided Grayrider in the other direction around the Maze, away from the light.

Ginger squinted at the yellow glow. “I see a man walking. He has a lamp.”

“You can see that from so far away?” Darz asked.

“Definitely. Two people. No...three. And two horses.” She was suddenly aware she had no weapons. Darz had his sword, but she had nothing more than her fingernails.

Darz walked the horse behind an outcropping of slabs on the edge of the Maze. The night was silent, without even the call of a black-wing. Voices drifted to them.

Relief washed over Ginger. “That’s Heath.”

“Your brother?”

“Yes. The other two are probably Harjan and Kindle.”

“Either that, or the sentinels caught your brother and tortured him until he told them where they could find you.”

“They would never—” Then she stopped. Today people she had known all her life had condemned her, whipped her and tried to kill her. She had blessed Dirk just last year when he wanted luck for the houses he built. Yet he hadn’t hesitated to lash her in the cellar. She blanched, remembering the hunger in his face as he tore off her wrap. He had wanted to hurt her.

“You’re sure you saw two horses?” Darz asked. “I thought only your village sentinels had them.”

“Heath has one,” she said. “Not Harjan. You have Kindle’s.”

“Where would they get a second?”

“I don’t know.”

“We shouldn’t just go over there. I’ll check first.”

Grayrider stood quietly as Darz dismounted. Alone on the horse, Ginger shivered as the wind chilled her bare arms and shoulders. She hadn’t realized until Darz moved away that his clothes had a familiar smell of the red dye used in Sky Flames. Would she ever smell it again? For all she knew, they didn’t even have the same dye in J’Hiza.

In just a few days, she had lost everything. She was still a priestess; they hadn’t stripped away her title. Why bother, when she would soon be dead? But she no longer had a temple to serve. She didn’t want to blame Darz; she had meant it when she told him it wasn’t his fault. Yet she couldn’t help but think that if he had never come to Sky Flames, none of this would have happened. She might have married Kindle or spent her life alone, but she wouldn’t be exiled from everything she loved.

“Ginger?” Darz said.

She realized he had reached up to her. With a sigh, she eased off the horse. Darz caught her, holding her in his arms, and she groaned when his sleeve scraped her back.

He turned her around. “Gods! What did they do to you?”

“Twenty lashes.”

“Bastards.” His touch was unexpectedly gentle. “You need a healer. If these wounds aren’t tended, they’ll fester.”

“I’ll be all right.”

“No, damn it, you won’t.” He turned her to face him. “My men say the same thing when they’re injured. ‘I’m all right.’ Stop being so stoic. If we don’t tend your wounds, you could die. I don’t let my men get away with that knuckleheaded bravery, and I won’t let you, either.”

The hint of a smile softened her face. “Are you comparing me to a soldier in Her Majesty’s army?” He had called her brave. Knuckleheaded, too, but she could live with that.

“Ach!” he muttered, sounding loud even when his voice was barely audible. “I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“You didn’t.” She touched his cheek. “Go see who came to meet us.” Her eyes filled with moisture. “If it’s safe, I would like to say goodbye to my brother and the others.”

He folded his fingers around hers. “I’ll leave you with a dagger. If anyone comes, scream.” Bluntly he added, “And stab the hell out of them.”

Even a few days ago, she wouldn’t have believed she could stab anyone. Tonight she had seen a violence within herself she had never known existed. She could have burned every person and building in that plaza. Part of her believed the elders were right, she was a dark witch. Another part of her raged. They were responsible for their cruelty and their lust, not her. And they were the ones who had decreed: If the Dragon-Sun so wishes to punish the witch for her misdeeds, she will burn. Well, she hadn’t burned, so the Dragon-Sun hadn’t wanted her punished, and the hell with all of them.

She recognized the dagger Darz withdrew from his belt; it belonged to the Elder, who had lent it to Darz for his stay on the tower. She closed her hand around the roughly cast hilt and didn’t miss the irony, that Tajman’s weapon would help her escape the execution Tajman had ordered.

Darz slipped into the Maze. Just like that, he vanished. She couldn’t even hear him. Whether or not he would return, she didn’t know; this was his chance to escape the burden of her dependence on him. She didn’t think he would turn from someone in need, but her confidence in her ability to judge the good in people was gone.

Grayrider stood motionless, drawing no attention. Kindle had bought the horse after he became a sergeant and trained Grayrider as a cavalry mount. Silence pressed on Ginger. The night shouldn’t be so quiet. No sand-chirpers. They were similar to crickets but even noisier, and usually they clacked until dawn. They must have gone silent because of her and her brother’s group. No one else was here.

She had to believe that. Folding her arms against the chill, she scanned the hills beyond her hiding place.

On top of a ridge, two figures on horseback were silhouetted against the sky.



Ginger gulped in a breath. The silhouettes had vanished—if indeed they had been there at all.

Voices drifted to her. “...have to stop them from taking our family’s holdings, or we would ride to J’Hiza with you.”

She closed her eyes with gratitude. That was Heath.

“Many people in town will stand against them,” Harjan said. “Ginger is well-liked.”

“People fear her, too.” That was Kindle. “The Archivist didn’t believe me about the powder. She thinks I’m bewitched.”

“Well, we should reach J’Hiza tomorrow,” Darz said. “If we ride most of tonight.”

Light leaked around the slabs, and a large man appeared between the two great stones. The light from his lamp nearly blinded her. Shielding her eyes, she clenched the hilt of the dagger and raised her arm to strike.

“Ah, Ginger.” Heath came forward, lowering the lamp so she could see him. He carried two travel bags over his shoulder. “They truly have done malice, if you fear even your own kin.”

“Never you.” Her voice caught. “I wasn’t sure who you were.”

Darz and Kindle stepped through the opening, then Harjan. Kindle had a sword strapped across his back, which was odd, because Darz had been using Kindle’s when he fought the sentinels, and as far as she knew, Kindle only owned one such weapon. It wasn’t until Heath pried her fingers off the dagger that she realized she was still threatening him with the blade. She sagged against the slab next to her.

“Ginger, honey, are you all right?” Heath asked.

She tried futilely to smile at him. “I will be.” Her voice felt as unsteady as her legs.

“She needs the salve,” Darz said.

“I have it here.” Heath set his lamp on a shelf of rock and dropped one of the travel bags on the ground. Opening the other, he rummaged through its contents.

“I saw someone on the ridge,” Ginger said. “Two riders.”

Kindle scanned the area, or at least as much as he could see between the slabs of rock. “Are you sure?”

“Actually, no.” She shivered and crossed her arms.

“Would you like the riding blanket?” Darz asked.

“I’m all right,” she said. Heath was watching Darz with a narrowed gaze, and she didn’t want to aggravate their tension. Besides, the blanket would scratch her back.

Kindle climbed up on one of the slabs and crouched on a ledge behind its jagged top. “It’s hard to see with that lamp. Can you douse it?”

“I’ll do it,” Harjan said quickly. He stepped around, putting himself between Heath and Darz.

Ginger glanced from Darz to her brother. Darz’s fist was clenched and his face dark; her brother had that look he wore when he defended someone he cared for. Harjan was pretending to be engrossed in

the lamp, but she wasn't fooled. He had positioned himself so he could intervene if Darz and Heath came to blows.

Harjan doused the lamp, and darkness surrounded them. Heath finally found what he was looking for in the bag, a vial she recognized, one of the salves from her supplies.

"We should treat your wounds," he said.

"We don't have time. What if someone comes after us?" She blanched. "Those riders could have been from the village."

"I don't see anyone," Kindle said from his post above them.

"I'm afraid of their fire," she whispered.

Heath reached out to touch her cheek as he had so often in her childhood, when he offered comfort. Then he stopped, caught by the strictures of her title. "We'll take care of you."

She rubbed her palm across her cheek, wiping away tears.

"Don't cry," Darz said. He also reached for her, and also stopped, though in his case it was because Heath put out an arm to block him, his gaze hard.

Darz frowned at him. "If you give me the salve, I'll tend her injuries."

Ginger had absolutely no doubt Heath would refuse—so she almost fell over when he handed the vial to Darz. Her brother spoke stiffly. "See that you take care with her."

"You have my word," Darz said.

Ginger squinted at the two of them. They were talking about more than salve. Currents of meaning and intent were flowing here that she didn't understand.

Heath took a bundle out of the bag and gave it to her. "We brought your tunic and leggings."

She nodded her thanks, too full of love and grief to speak. He looked as if his heart were breaking. "You'll be well again," he murmured. "Harjan, Kindle and I will set things right in the village before anyone can spread false tales about you."

"Can you go back?" They were only three against a town. "It isn't safe."

"We have support." His eyes were dark in the moonlight. "They went too far, Ginger. And still you survived. It is a sign from the Dragon-Sun. They cannot deny it."

"It's flaming blasted illegal," Darz said, along with several other choice oaths.

Heath scowled at him. "My sister is a priestess, Goldstone. Show some respect."

She expected Darz to growl, but instead he reddened. Then he said, "My apology, Ginger-Sun."

"It's all right..." She was just barely keeping to her feet. "I think I should sit down."

“Ach,” Darz muttered. “I’m an insensitive clod.” He reached for her tunic. “I’ll spread that out, so you don’t have to sit in dirt.” Then he stopped. “No, I can’t do that. You’re going to wear it.”

Even now, Ginger couldn’t help but smile at his confusion. He could fight off nine men in Sky Flames and face ten days on the Dragon’s Claw without a flinch, but when it came to the details of women’s lives, he seemed completely lost.

“Here.” Heath withdrew a bulky roll from the travel bag and gave it to Darz. “Use this.”

Darz opened the roll into a riding blanket. “Yes, that will do.” He knelt and spread out the cloth. Then he awkwardly held out his hand to Ginger. “You can sit here.”

With his help, she let herself down. Heath stood watching, his posture so stiff, she wondered his muscles didn’t crack. She could tell he wanted to punch Darz. Harjan’s worried look was plain even in the moonlight. Kindle watched from his post as if he were ready to jump down at any moment. Yet they let Darz help her sit. Maybe after everything that had happened, the proscription against touching her seemed as ludicrous to everyone else as it did to her.

She knelt on the blanket, exhausted. Darz fumbled with the vial, and the honey-scent of the salve wafted around her.

“Do you have water?” he asked someone. “Soap?”

“Soap?” Heath asked. “Why soap?”

“She’ll heal faster if I clean and debride the wounds.”

Heath didn’t look convinced, but he seemed willing to take Darz’s word. He dug out a soap and water sac and several cloths, and gave them to Darz. Then he and Harjan moved away, leaving Ginger and Darz in privacy. Their behavior bewildered her, that they would let Darz do this, but she was too worn out to worry about it. Closing her eyes, she bent her head.

Darz knelt behind her and laid a wet cloth on her back. It caught on a shred of her wrap, and she flinched when the cloth pulled a gash in her skin. Darz fumbled with the material, then slipped his hand under the ribbing that held the wrap over her breasts and clumsily snapped the wire. Even knowing he had to remove the cloth to clean her wounds, it was all she could do to stop herself from knocking away his hand as he peeled off what little remained of her wrap. Excruciatingly self-conscious, she folded her arms across her breasts.

“Ginger-Sun, I’m sorry.” He sounded as dismayed as she felt. “I don’t know how else to clean it properly.”

“It’s all right.” It wasn’t, and she didn’t know if anything ever would be again. For the second time in her life, the elders had torn apart her family. She knew Heath didn’t want her to go away, and she kept expecting him to challenge Darz. She needed help to clean her wounds, but it baffled her that they allowed Darz to give her that aid.

Then, suddenly, she understood. Of course. It was obvious. Darz had tried to tell her earlier: Your brother has spoken to me. Darz had compromised her. Then they had lain together under the Claw for over a day. And she would have to travel with him. Heath and Harjan had probably told Darz that if he

didn't marry her and restore her honor, they would kill him.

A flush of shame went through Ginger. She turned her head. "You don't have to do this. If my brother is forcing you—"

"Ginger-Sun." He spoke in a low voice. "It's my honor as well as yours. I did this to you, even if I wasn't the one who raised the whip or lit the fire." Awkwardly, he added, "I can't promise to be the husband a woman like you deserves. I'm a firebrand who knows curses far better than words appropriate for a highborn woman. But I'll do my best."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For having to marry me, I can see why. But I'll endeavor to be tolerable." When she gave a small laugh, he kissed her cheek, the barest touch of his lips to her skin. He was such a study in contrasts, rough yet gentle; full of rude oaths one moment, articulate and well-spoken the next; hot-tempered, yes, but he had never directed it against her. So far.

"We don't have any marriage documents," she said.

"Your brother and Harjan wrote the scrolls while they waited for us. They'll keep a copy and give us the others." He parted her hair and put it in front of her shoulders, then went to work cleaning her back. "They certainly got here fast. Apparently someone named Jalla lent them her horse. They say it's the fastest in the village."

"Jalla? You mean the Archivist's daughter?"

"That's what they said." He paused in treating her wounds when she flinched. "She thinks you're a treasure. She told your brother the blessing you gave her was a gift."

"I've always liked her." Bitterly she said, "Her mother hates me." At least Kindle hadn't said I told you so .

"They see you as a threat." He spread salve over a burn on her shoulder. "And they can't control you because of your status as a priestess. It frightens them."

"But it doesn't bother you?"

"Why should it?" he asked. "Hell, people claim our queen married a warlock or some such nonsense. And look at Aronsdale. The royal house of Dawnfield is supposedly full of mage women. If their kings can choose their brides that way, so can I."

She started to smile, then jerked as he dressed the cuts on her lower back. It was hard to make spells of soothing when she hurt so much, but she managed a small one, and the pain receded.

When Darz finished her back, she turned around. She kept her eyes downcast and her arms folded over her breasts, too self-conscious to look at him. He cleaned the cuts on her face and the outer side of her arms, and smoothed salve over the burns. She couldn't bring herself to unfold her arms or legs. He didn't push; he left it up to her what she would allow.

Finally he set down his cloth and vial. "I can wait out there while you change, if you would like."

“Yes,” she said softly. “That would be good.”

He went to join the others, leaving her alone in the pocket of rock. With relief, she peeled off the remains of her wrap and did her best to treat her other wounds. Then she put on the tunic and leggings, wincing as they scratched her skin.

When Ginger rejoined the others, Darz was readying Grayrider for travel. She hugged Heath hard, uncaring about the taboos, and squeezed Harjan’s hand. It was the first time she had touched either of them in years. None of them could hide their tears. She promised to send news after she and Darz were settled.

When Kindle climbed down from his post, she laid her hand on Grayrider’s flank and said, “We’ll send him back with a caravan. Your sword, too.”

Kindle sounded subdued. “I never meant for this to happen. If I could have taken your place at that stake, I would have done it in a second.”

Ginger shuddered. “I’m glad you didn’t have to.”

He reached over his shoulder, and for a moment she thought he was drawing a weapon. But instead of the sword she had thought he was wearing, he pulled out two scrolls. “I got these from the archive at the temple.”

Puzzled, she took the scrolls. “What are they?” It couldn’t have been easy for him to fetch them; from what she knew of his reading, he could barely recognize enough symbols to piece out their titles.

Kindle indicated Darz, who was watching from the other side of the horse as he fastened the bags across Grayrider’s flanks. “He serves in the army. He thinks he can get a hearing with the queen, or at least her officers.”

Ginger knew then what one of the scrolls contained. She hadn’t expected him to give up the powder. “I don’t know what to say. Thank you.”

“If they have an interest in developing it—” He was stuttering. “I know I have no right—after what I did...”

“I’ll tell them you can develop it,” she promised. She lifted the other scroll. “And this?”

“I don’t know what it is—I mean, I do.” He spread his hands. “It’s your history. I always meant to ask you about it. But I didn’t want you to know I—well, I couldn’t read it.”

Never in an eon would she have thought Kindle, of all people, would realize how she felt about her meager attempts at scholarship. She had assumed she would lose the history. Her voice caught. “I can hardly tell you how much this means to me.”

He pushed his hand through his thinning hair. “It all turned out so differently from what I had hoped.”

“Be well, Kindle. Promise you won’t drink so much ale, yes? And don’t be embarrassed about the reading. Talk to Tanner. He can help you.” Then she added, “Don’t let the elders take away your title over this. You’re a good Flame Sentinel.”



“I’ll miss you, Ginger-Sun.” His flush was visible even in the moonlight. He stepped back as Darz came around the horse.

“We should go,” Darz said.

Ginger bit her lip, uncertain with her new husband.

Darz wasn’t quite ready, though. He pulled out the marriage scrolls to check the wording and added two statements. After his name, he penned Ar’Quaaz. It meant “Of Quaaz.” It seemed unnecessary to Ginger, until she realized other cities might have other Darz Goldstones. He started to rewrite his entire name, but after he smudged Darz, he gave up and left it alone. He also wrote that she and their children would be heirs to his name and all he owned. The marriage already made that true, and from what he had told her, he didn’t own a great deal, but it touched her that he wanted to be certain.

Ginger wasn’t sure how to be the wife of a soldier. So far he had been rough but kind. It could bode well for the future. She didn’t want to think about the other possibility, given what she had seen of his temper, that he would be prone to rages. Although he had never been violent toward her, she had never seen him after he had been drinking.

Darz packed the scrolls, then mounted Grayrider and helped Ginger up in front of him. They rode out into the desert and the night, headed into the unknown.



15

### Topaz Passage

Ginger hadn’t expected to sleep, but exhaustion weighed on her, and she dozed as they rode. Several times she jerked awake when her head nodded forward. Another time she didn’t stir until Darz shifted her upright after she started to slide off the horse. Although the moon gave some light, they couldn’t ride fast. She thought Darz would stop, but either he didn’t need sleep or he managed to do it sitting up, too. Maybe he had learned in the army how to sleep on a horse without falling off. Grayrider plodded onward.

The next time she awoke, dawn was lighting the sky. A simmering arousal pulled her out of slumber, and gradually she realized Darz was stroking her breast. With each caress, he pulled the scooped neckline of her tunic down a little farther. Much more, and her nipples would be exposed.

Ginger made a noise of protest. With a sigh, he slid his hand to her waist and gave up his campaign on her beleaguered neckline.

“Light of the morning,” he said.

“And you,” she mumbled, too groggy to think of anything more intelligent.

“You’re my light,” he said, bending his head to kiss her cheek. Flustered, she pulled away.

“Ah, Ginger,” he sighed. “You torture me.”

Torture, indeed. He didn’t sound the least bit agonized; his voice had a drowsy, sensual quality that suggested pleasure more than anything else.

“I’m sure I don’t,” she said.

He laughed good-naturedly. “Ah, well, I suppose horseback isn’t the most pleasant way to spend your wedding night.”

Ginger wasn’t certain what to think about it all. It was strange to feel his touch after years of solitude, but not unpleasant. Now, however, she hurt all over. It would be days before she could imagine lying with a man. No, not “a man.” Her husband. He wasn’t part of the violence she had suffered in the village, but those events darkened everything in her life, including her response to Darz. Her sentence supposedly had nothing to do with sex, but an ugly current of lust had run through the way Dirk Bauxite treated her, Spark, even the Elder, though he tried to hide it, even from himself.

She couldn’t tell Darz all that, though. So she said only, “I need some time.”

He didn’t answer. Nervous, she focused on her opal to make a spell of soothing—and realized it was gone.

“No!” she cried. “My charm. We have to go back—”

“Ginger-Sun.” He stopped her by laying his fingers on her lips. “Don’t you remember?”

The moment he touched her mouth, she thought of when Dirk had gagged her. With a frantic reflex, she shoved away his hand. “Remember what?”

“You dropped your rock while you were asleep,” he said sharply. “I stopped to retrieve it and let the horse rest. It’s in the bags.” Then he added, “And damn it, don’t push my hand. I don’t like it.”

Ginger froze. “My apology.” With tense formality, she added, “Thank you for picking up the opal.” Would he be like Kindle after all? Her mood dimmed.

The desert stretched endlessly around them, shimmering. Heat hadn’t yet parched the day, and the golden rolls of land were just touched by the lightening sky. It was beautiful, but unfamiliar. She had no idea where they were and recognized no landmarks.

“Do you know where this is?” she asked. Immediately she regretted the words. If he didn’t like her pushing his hand, he would probably resent even more any implication that she doubted his judgment. Spark always reacted that way, and the Archivist.

Darz just said, “Yes, I’m pretty certain. We’re traveling southeast, which is the right direction.”

“Ah.” She heard how stiff that sounded.

He swore under his breath. “Listen, I’m not the most tactful man alive, all right?”

Bewildered, she said, “All right.”

“Someone once shoved my hand like that,” he said. “Several times, actually. I was eleven. It was my father’s cousin. He told me I was stupid, and he knocked away my hand because I was trying to wear armor and I couldn’t get on the helmet. It’s a silly memory that shouldn’t bother me, but it did. So I yelled at you. I shouldn’t have.” He sounded relieved, as if he hadn’t been sure he could get it all out.

Ginger had no idea how to react. No man in Sky Flames would ever offer an explanation. It just wasn’t done. It took her a while to find her voice. Finally she said, “I thought you were angry at me for saying I needed more time before we, well...” She couldn’t so easily forget the taboos, even of speaking about such subjects. “You know.”

“For saints sake! Do you think I’m a monster?”

Ginger winced. “No. Just loud.” Too late, her common sense caught up with her mouth and she realized how much tact that reply lacked. This morning her mind was full of cotton. It wasn’t surprising given the way she had spent the night, but she didn’t want to alienate Darz before she even had a chance to know him.

To her surprise, he let out a hearty laugh. “So everyone tells me.” He leaned forward so he could see her face. “Take as much time as you need. You are so delectable, though, I can’t promise I won’t misbehave. If I do, just slap me, eh?”

It took her a moment to comprehend he was teasing her. Men in Sky Flames never teased. They also rarely gave compliments. She knew her father had loved her mother, but she had never heard him tell her so or say she was beautiful.

Her shoulders came down from their hunched posture. She was beginning to suspect that behind Darz’s bluster was a man with more kindness than he felt it appropriate for a warrior to show.

“If you misbehave,” she said, her lips curving upward, “I shall send you to your room without dinner.”

“Is that a smile I see?” He sat up straighter behind her. “You should do it more often. It’s lovely.”

“Thank you,” she said softly.

They continued in silence, but it was less strained. Darz let Grayrider walk, to rest the horse. Sunrise, another aspect of the Sunset, spread her rosy glow across the desert. Every now and then Darz brought Grayrider around to face the way they had come. For several moments he would scan the desert. Then they would continue on their way.

Eventually he said, “No one seems to have followed us.”

“Good.” If they were lucky, the elders wouldn’t send anyone after her.

“Those riders last night,” Darz said. “Have you seen them before?”

“I think so.” His question felt off, she couldn’t say why. “I don’t know where. I don’t think they’re from Sky Flames.”

“How can you tell?”

She realized what was odd: he listened to her. The Elder and Archivist often dismissed her observations. Spark never paid attention. Darz just talked to her, naturally, without strain. It was a good question, too. She wasn't sure how she knew the riders.

After a moment, she said, "Their manner of dress."

"You could tell from so far away, in the dark?"

"It's their hoods, with those peaked cowls. No one in Sky Flames wears those." Suddenly it hit her. "They were in the plaza! Two men from Jazid, I think. Nomads. They had those charcoal scarves knitted from a thick yarn."

"Saints almighty," Darz said. "You could get all that while you were being dragged to your death?"

"Well, they were right in front of me."

"I wish my trail scouts were that observant," he muttered. "Why would two nomads from Jazid be in Sky Flames?"

"I've no idea. But we aren't that far from the border."

Darz was quiet for a while. Then he said, "Your brother's group was carrying lights. We weren't. If the nomads followed anyone, it was probably them. They might not have seen us leave."

She shifted uneasily. "Why would they follow us?"

"Did they see you in the square?"

"Dirk and Spark dragged me right past them."

"So they saw you bound to that pole up on the platform?"

Her face heated. "Yes. They and half the village." It hadn't actually been that many, but it felt that way. "Why?"

"I should think it is obvious."

"It's not to me."

He cleared his throat. "You are very pretty and very, shall we say, womanly in your shape, Ginger-Sun. You also obviously didn't have anyone's protection. They probably wanted to see if I was going to strand you in the desert. They would have picked you up."

"You really think they would have helped me?"

He gave a harsh laugh. "Hell, no. The T'Ambera nomad tribe in Jazid sells pleasure slaves."

"Oh." The more she learned about the world she had thought would be so exciting, the less she liked it.

"Do you remember that scream in the temple?" Darz asked.

“It was awful.”

“You’ve reminded me where I’ve heard it before.” His hand tightened on her waist. “In battle. It’s a Jazid war cry.”

It made no sense to Ginger. “Why would a Jazid warrior come into the temple and scream? Were they chasing you?”

“It’s possible. But it doesn’t make sense. Why attack me? We and Jazid fought on the same side. Besides, if they were after me and knew I was there, they would have killed me.”

“Then why scream in my temple?”

“To frighten you. Same with the blood in your room. They hound their targets. You were guarded, so they wanted to panic you, drive you into the open or into doing something unwise.” He spoke grimly. “You’re lucky Harjan posted guards that night. You’re even lucky Spark followed you to the Dragon’s Claw. If you were the one the nomads wanted, those guards are probably the only reason you’re here with me instead of in chains.”

She didn’t want to believe her freedom could be that ephemeral. “They wouldn’t kidnap a priestess.”

He snorted. “They would damn well take any woman they wanted. Besides, Jazid doesn’t have priestesses. Their temples serve the Shadow Dragon.”

“The Shadow Dragon is evil.”

“Oh, Ginger.”

“He’s not a myth.”

He wrapped his arms around her. “I certainly have no doubt the nomads exist. They won’t get near you. I swear it.”

“But I don’t understand why they were in Sky Flames.” It was ludicrous to think they would travel to some isolated village in Taka Mal on the off chance they might find a nubile priestess to carry off.

“They might be the ones who attacked me,” Darz said uneasily. “I was actually glad your Elder sentenced me to stay up on that promontory. It was the most inaccessible place in this region, and he posted guards to ensure I didn’t sneak off. I was safer there than in town.”

“But it gets so cold! And how did you bring supplies?”

His voice lightened. “You should have more confidence in your husband. I’ve dealt with worse conditions in training exercises.” After a pause, he admitted, “Carrying my gear up wasn’t easy. But once I was there, I just wrapped up in the blankets and slept for most of four days.”

“So even if the nomads knew, they couldn’t get to you.”

“Apparently.” He shifted his arms protectively around her. “Or they might have nothing to do with me. They may just be travelers looking for Taka Mal women.”

“Whatever for?”

He answered obliquely. “Jazid is an incredibly wealthy country. They have even richer mineral deposits than we do. But the population is sparse, given the rough land and climate. They’ve long offered incentives to miners to immigrate—free land in the most lucrative areas. In return, the miner gives a portion of his profits to the government.”

“It sounds sensible,” Ginger said. “But I don’t see what that has to do with Taka Mal women.”

“Only men come. Few women want to go to a country with such harsh laws, where legally they’re property.” He shifted her in his hold. “And girl infants don’t always receive the same care as boys. So their mortality rate is higher. Add it all together, century after century, and you get an imbalance. Estimates of their population range from sixty to eighty percent male.”

“Gods,” she murmured. “That’s even worse than Sky Flames.”

He guided Grayrider more to the north. “Taka Mal had similar problems in the past. We’ve changed a lot, though, and the balance is much better here. But in Jazid the customs are too entrenched. The rarer women become, the more restricted their lives.”

It sounded unpleasant. “I can’t imagine Sky Flames would be a place to look for more. There’s so few of us.”

“It would be an odd choice,” he acknowledged.

She shivered in his arms, though the day was warming as the sun rose. “Maybe those riders were spirit executioners sent by the Shadow Dragon to find you.”

“Shadows, eh? I better watch out.”

“Don’t laugh. You were the one who told me about them.”

“I did?”

“Yes. Or perhaps you said assassins.”

“Oh. You mean the political sect.” The humor faded from his voice. “They’re very much men, not spirits. Supposedly the former King of Jazid, the Atajazid D’az Ozar, formed their sect. It could just be a story, though.”

Her alarm surged. “Darz! They must be looking for you. They might try to assassinate you again.”

“Slow down,” he said, laughing. “We don’t even know if the assassins exist, much less that two Jazid nomads who happen by your village are secret killers out to get me, of all people.”

“Have you ever antagonized anyone in the Jazid army?”

He didn’t answer, and that made her wonder.

Eventually he did say, “No, I don’t think so.”

She spoke uneasily. "Why did you wait so long to answer?"

"I know nothing about you. Yet you want me to trust you."

She blinked at that. "You mean you don't?"

"How do I know you have nothing to do with those nomads?"

"How can you even ask such a thing?"

His breath stirred her hair. "What happened to me was no robbery that escalated into violence. They wanted me dead, and the harder I fought, the more viciously they ripped me apart. Now you're bothered because I don't trust the lovely, vulnerable maiden who tended me back to health and I somehow ended up married to her under threat of death from her brother. A girl I really don't know at all. Would you trust you, if you were me?"

"Probably not," she admitted. Softly she said, "We live in such a violent world. It's a wonder any of us survive."

"I know. And something else." Tension crackled in his voice.

"Yes?"

"We had trouble getting to you in the plaza last night. It wasn't just the sentinels trying to stop us. The place was crowded with people who wouldn't let us by."

"But you got through." She would be forever grateful.

"Well, that's just the thing, Ginger. Everyone suddenly started to run away. Not from us. From the plaza."

"Oh." She knew what he was getting at now. Sweat broke out on her brow.

"I might believe that sparks from the stake started fires in one or two of the buildings around the plaza," he told her. "But all of them? At exactly the same moment?"

"The Dragon-Sun was making his displeasure known."

"Like hell."

Ah, well. She hadn't really expected that to work. She gazed at the topaz desert with its rolling landscape. "What do you think caused it, Darz?"

"What I think," he said, "is that you don't need that rock to do spells."

She decided that was better left unanswered, lest she provoke him into abandoning her out here.

"Ginger, answer me," he said.

"I don't know what you expect me to say."

“This dragon-powder Kindle created—I think it may have a great deal of military potential.”

She wasn't sure why he switched topics, but it relieved her. “You saw what it could do.”

“He says you told him how to make it.”

“Not me. A scroll in the archive. The one he gave me last night just before we left.”

“Did you make that up so he wouldn't suspect you caused the explosions?”

“What!” She saw what he was getting at. “I absolutely did not cause any explosions, Darz Goldstone.”

“No explosions.”

“None!”

“Just fires.”

“Yes.” Too late, she realized what she had admitted. “Damn,” she muttered.

He chuckled. “I thought priestesses didn't know such language.”

He was devilishly clever. Would he condemn her now that he realized the extent of her transgressions?

“How do you do it?” Darz said.

Ginger blinked. In Sky Flames, they had only one response for unwelcome behavior: censure the guilty person. A simple, “How do you do it?” was outside of her experience.

“I don't know,” was all she could say.

“I had thought it was linked to your opal,” he mused. “But I had the rock when the fires in the plaza started.”

“I thought it was the opal, too.” She felt defenseless, exposing her vulnerability. “But it may be the shape. A round window in the Arch-Tower worked. It wasn't as strong, but it was larger, so it gave—gave me—” She stopped. After years of hiding, she couldn't reveal so much, especially not here, where she had nowhere to go if he cast her off.

“What's wrong?” he said.

“Are you going to turn me out?”

“Gods above, why would I do that?”

“They did in the village.” To put it mildly.

“That was their stupidity.” His hair rustled as he shook his head. “Look at what they had. A priestess who genuinely wanted to improve their lives, someone who enjoyed dedicating her life to them. A girl who shouldered far more responsibility for their temple than they had any right to expect, and who has done it since she was a child. Without complaining. Someone who found time to educate herself, and



who knew how to unearth valuable knowledge in their archives. Someone who might have abilities that could benefit their entire village, gifts of warmth, light, comfort. An incredibly beautiful girl that the men in that town should have been down on their knees courting. And what did the idiots do with this gift from the gods? Try to burn her at the stake. Right. They didn't deserve you, Ginger-Sun."

His viewpoint was so different, it took a while to turn it around in her thoughts. Finally she said, "You have an unusual way of seeing things."

"That was tactful." He gave his vigorous laugh. "Better than,. 'You're a strange man, Darz Goldstone.'"

Ginger began to relax. Apparently he didn't plan to turn her out. In fact, he didn't seem angry at all.

"Tell me something," he said. "If I had asked you to go away with me before all this happened, would you have?"

Leave the familiar? He had the allure of the unknown, of exciting places and events, but she couldn't have imagined her life away from Sky Flames.

"The elders would never have allowed it," she said.

"What about what you wanted?"

"They choose a husband for the priestess."

"For flaming sake. That practice stopped ages ago."

"Not in Sky Flames."

He gave a snort. "You know why? Because they all wanted you in their bed. They didn't want to admit it, though, because they aren't supposed to think of you that way."

"Darz!" Her face was hot. "You think about sex too much."

His laugh softened. "What do you expect, when I have my sexy bride sitting in front of me with her body rubbing mine every time the horse takes a damn step? It's driving me mad."

She couldn't help but smile. "Is this where I get to slap you?" She would have never dared tease a man in Sky Flames that way. She didn't know what possessed her to do it now.

"I shouldn't have said that," Darz grumbled. "You'll never let me forget." Although he kissed the back of her neck. "I saw you smile, Ginger. Someday yet I may get you to laugh."

She flushed, and this time it wasn't from embarrassment. He stirred reactions she wasn't ready for, she enjoyed them.

But then she said, "I think not yet."

"Why the blazes not?"

"We have more to worry about." She pointed west where, shimmering in the pure light of early morning, the bulb towers of a city glistened.



16

## Sun King

J'Hiza was the first town Ginger had ever seen besides Sky Flames. It was gigantic, teeming with life, over a thousand citizens. Grayrider's hooves clopped on the yellow cobblestones as Darz rode down a street, guiding Grayrider through people, sheep, geese, and squawking rock-hens. Signs creaked on poles, and merchants stood in front of their shops, gossiping with their neighbors. Scents filled the air: spices, perfumes, and the stink of animals crammed together.

"What do you think?" Darz asked. "Too noisy?"

"It's different." She hesitated. "But interesting."

He laughed in that easy way of his. "I'm not sure that's an accolade to J'Hiza."

She wasn't certain, either. "Where are we going?"

"To the guilds, to find merchants who are about to travel. They might let us go with them if we pay."

"We have no coins." They had nothing to trade, either, except the horse and sword, neither of which belonged to them.

"Your brother gave me your dowry," Darz said.

She hadn't expected that. "What dowry?"

"One hundred silver hexa-coins."

"Really?" It was a decent amount, more than she had ever seen. "I didn't know. I hope you aren't disappointed." She had no idea if he came from a well enough placed family to expect a larger dowry.

He brushed his hand over her hair. "It's fine."

"Darz?"

"Hmm?"

"Will it disappoint your family when you show up with me?"

He was quiet for so long, she wished she hadn't asked. Then he said, "I don't think so."

That wasn't exactly a ringing assertion. "You aren't sure?"

“It’s complicated. My family is small. But intense.”

“Oh. I see.” She didn’t really, but she was too tired to pursue it, even if he had been willing to tell her about them. It hurt too much to think about facing more censure. Nor was that her only concern. Now that the sun had risen, she couldn’t create spells of succor, and her injuries hurt terribly.

“Can we stop first, before we go to the guild?” she asked.

He sighed, and she thought he would tell her no. Instead he said, “Aye, Ginger-Sun. I meant to.” He bent his head over her. “You are different from other women I’ve known.”

She wasn’t certain how to take that. “Why?”

“They expect coddling. You keep going, always stoic, and hesitate to make even the simplest, most reasonable request.”

“Oh.” That didn’t sound like he was disappointed. “Thank you.”

So they went, looking for an inn.

Darz dumped the bags on the floor of their room, which was on the second story of the inn. Logs were stacked by the fireplace, but Ginger couldn’t imagine needing a fire. The morning had barely started, yet already the heat sweltered, making it hard to remember how cold the desert became at night. The room had a table with two rickety chairs, and a bed against one wall with a chamber pot beneath it. A washstand in one corner held an earthenware bowl, a ewer, and a metal tray with soap. High in the wall, a window glowed with early morning light, though the sun was too low to slant through the glass.

“You rest,” Darz said. “I’ll find the guilds. I’ve seen signs for glass-makers, weavers and crop houses.”

“You need to rest, too.” She stood in the center of the room, acutely aware she was alone in a strange town with a man she had known for less time than anyone else in her life.

Now that she could see Darz in the light, she realized how awful he looked. A ragged black beard covered his face, bristly and thick, and sand crusted his clothes. The scar snaked from the corner of his eye to his ear. His hair hadn’t been washed or brushed since the last time she had done it, fourteen days ago. He was a mess. She didn’t even know what he actually looked like. He had been injured at first, covered with bandages, and then the two of them had been buried.

Perhaps that was why neither Kindle nor Heath recognized him. She had hoped one of them might know Darz from their time in the army, to corroborate what he had said about himself. She told herself he looked different with his beard. Besides, thousands of men served in the army. Their chances of meeting him were slim. She could almost believe that explanation. Almost.

“Why are you staring as if I am a misbehaved boy?” he asked.

She felt her face redden. “My apology.”

“Accepted,” he growled. “Now please answer my question.”

“It’s just that—are you going out like that to see if anyone will let us travel with them?”

“Like what?”

She cleared her throat and shifted her feet. Watching her, Darz squinted. Then he went to the wash table and dumped the soap off the tray. Holding up the metal, he peered at his reflection. With a wince, he said, “Ah, Ginger-Sun, you are ever the soul of diplomacy. I look like an ogre someone dug out of a mine.” He glanced at her. “Don’t worry. I’ll make myself presentable.”

She hesitated. “Perhaps a bath, too, if they have one.”

“Ach! All right.” Laughing, he said, “I am not usually this scruffy, wife. You haven’t married a scalawag.”

A tentative smile curved her lips. “I’m glad.”

He stretched his arms. “Do you need more salve on your back?”

“Later.” Shyly, she said, “I would like to clean up now.”

“Ah.” He stood and smiled at her. After a moment, though, he said, “Oh! Do you want me to leave?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“Ah, well,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to be around my smelly self, either, if I were you.”

This time she did smile. “It is good for everything about a man to be strong.”

He burst out laughing. “All right! I’ll find a bathhouse.”

“I’ll wait here.” She heard how soft her voice was next to his robust style. She hoped he didn’t think she sounded as if she were in need of coddling.

“I’ll try not to be long.” He hefted up one of the bags and went to the door. Pausing, he looked back at her. “Don’t open this for anyone. I’m going to lock it, and I have a key, so you won’t need to let anyone in. Don’t go out, not even down to the common room. It looked a little rough.”

“I’m just going to sleep,” she said.

“Good.” He grinned at her. “I’ll see you, then.”

“That sounds fine.” It felt unreal to be with him in this strange place. She had to remind herself the taboos no longer applied. Yet as strange as this felt, it wasn’t unwelcome. For the first time in years, she looked forward to her life. She felt apprehension, too, for the unknown and her uncertainties about Darz. She had no idea what to expect, whether they would suit each other or struggle to eke out a living. But her new life held promise, if she and Darz could find their way together. Right now, on the doorstep of a future she had never imagined, she could hope, for reality hadn’t yet given her a reason otherwise.

After Darz left, Ginger undressed and washed with the soap and the water in the ewer. She treated her injuries as best she could, steeling herself against the pain. To dry off, she used a clean shirt she found in the travel bag, and silently promised Darz she would wash it later. It was odd to think she would be doing such tasks for him now, too, as well as herself.

It was too hot to wear anything. Nor did she want garments to abrade her wounds while she slept. So she slipped under the sheets in her bare skin. Although worn and patched, the linens smelled of soap. It wasn't such a bad place, nothing as pleasant as the temple, but she could adapt.

Ginger didn't know what wages an army officer earned. At least she and Darz had her dowry to help them get established. She might be able to join a temple in Quaaz, not as a priestess, since they would have their own, but as an assistant. She and Darz couldn't live in the temple if she wasn't the priestess. Perhaps he lived in a barracks. Or maybe he had a house. She didn't need anywhere grand, just a home where they could raise their children.

The thought of making those children made her body tingle the way it had this morning when she awoke to his caresses. Her thoughts drifted....

Light awoke Ginger. She sensed it even with her eyes closed. Heat surrounded her, and she should have been afraid after what happened in Sky Flames. But this inviting warmth didn't hurt. She could burn in this fire unharmed and survive as if it were a crucible.

Disoriented, she opened her eyes to find that golden light filled the room. Holding the sheet in front of her body, she sat up with her back to the wall. Through the glare, she could just make out the door; it was still closed and bolted. Sweat beaded her forehead and palms and dripped down her body. No candle glowed in the room. No lamp burned. Nothing showed anywhere to cause this incredible radiance.

A shape took form within—and of—the light.

At first it was no more than a swirl of color: gold, red, yellow, topaz. Gradually a figure of fire emerged. Its long neck arched to the high ceiling. The great reptilian wings spanned the room and went through the walls, unconfined by barriers. Its gigantic tail curled around on the floor and ended in a deadly ball of spikes. Flaming scales covered its body.

"Dragon-Sun," she whispered. "Have you come for me?"

The colors coalesced into a new shape, no longer a dragon, but a form she had never seen in any statue or picture. He had become a man. He wore clothes of flame and his skin glowed with the luminance of the sun. He was twice the height of a mortal man, and his head reached the ceiling. His hair of flames wavered in the air. When he stepped forward, fire rippled along his body. She shrank against the wall and clenched the sheet to her chest.

The man blazed, yet nothing burned. He sat on the bed, and the sheets didn't burst into fire. Flames from his body enveloped her with warmth but caused no harm. Even sitting, he was taller than any man, his head larger, his shoulders broader, his legs longer. He reached out his arm, and she pressed back against the wall.

Ginger-Sun. His voice filled her mind.

She didn't try to speak, knowing her voice would tremble. I am your priestess, she thought.

He touched her shoulder. I am pleased.

I'm sorry I transgressed against you.

You have not. His thought darkened as he lowered his arm. The others have transgressed.

Would you have let them burn me?

I am a ball of fire, not the conscience of man. I cannot control the minds of you who call yourselves humanity. You are responsible for your choices and the deeds you commit, whether they be great or heinous. The flames around his body flared until they blinded her. She lifted the sheet and covered her eyes.

Look at me, Ginger-Sun.

Shaking, she lowered her hands. She could see, but his light filled the room, radiant and terrifying. Will you burn me?

No. His voice rumbled within her. Seeing you in agony did not please me. Had no one taken you from those flames, then when I rose the next morning I would have burned the land until it set the village afire.

Then you aren't angry with me?

No. You are my bride, Ginger-Sun.

Ah, no. It was true, she had taken the vow. But she had assumed it was symbolic. All priestesses are your brides .

This is true. But you please me more than the others.

Dragon-Sun—I am sworn to another.

Anger saturated his thought. He calls me a myth. A tale. A lie.

He doesn't understand! Please, don't kill him.

I shall not. The light brightened, so brilliant she could barely make out his shape. I have another punishment for him. He reached forward and pulled off the sheet she was holding. Terrified, she grabbed for it, but it burned away in front of her, leaving the bed untouched, no ashes, no sign it had ever existed. She crossed her arms over her breasts.

You are not his wife yet.

We have documents—

But you have not yet been wife to him. So you shall be to me. His punishment will be to lose his bride to the sun.

No! Ginger thought she must be mad to refuse the sun-god. He is my husband. I must be true to him.

His radiance vanished. Nor did any light come from the window outside. The room went dark. Nothing showed in that blackness but the burning gold orbs of his eyes.

You dare to defy the sun?

She was shaking too much to speak. But she could form words in her mind. I cannot betray my vow to him.

And what of yours to me?

But... I thought it was a symbol. Not literal.

For other priestesses.

I am not worthy to be your consort.

If I choose you, then you are worthy.

She wanted to entreat him to change his mind. But she had given her oath to him before she ever met Darz. She couldn't deny that promise. Never in a thousand years would she have presumed to think of herself as the sun's true consort. She had no right to want Darz instead. Knowing that didn't change how she felt about Darz, but she couldn't break her vow.

A tear ran down her face. Dragon-Sun, I am honored beyond words .

Do not cry, Ginger-Sun. His light returned, softer than before. With reluctance, he added, He is a fortunate man.

Her breath caught. Did he mean what she thought?

If you want him, you may have him.

An intense relief washed over her. I thank you .

He leaned across the bed, his torso so large that the space between them was nothing. I can be generous. But not quite yet—He put his blazing hand behind her neck and drew her forward. She tried to turn away, but he caught her chin, and flames flared around her face. Heat surged in her. When he kissed her, and touched her, she blazed in an erotic fire.

Don't! she thought. He tempted her with a passion that could consume her if she let it. Stop.

I will not force you. His thoughts faded as he let her go. You are true to him. It is good. The light was almost gone. But, ah, Ginger-Sun, I have wanted to do that since the day you pledged yourself to me....

Then the room was empty, and outside, the sky was light again. Trembling, she lay down and pulled the other sheet over her body. She closed her eyes, not because she thought she could ever sleep again, but to hide from the sunlight slanting through the window.

Sleep, his thought whispered.

Ginger awoke knowing she wasn't alone. The sunlight was gone from the room, and the sky outside had darkened into purple twilight. The air had cooled with the onset of night, and the one remaining sheet on

the bed wasn't enough. But someone was lying behind her, his body warm against hers, the contours of his chest ridged against her back. She lay still, afraid the dragon had changed his mind and decided against generosity.

The man behind her snored.

Her lips curved upward. She knew that noisy sound from when she had sat vigil over her patient in the temple. She turned over—and almost screamed.

A stranger lay with her. She started to push him away, then stopped with her palms on his shoulders. The “stranger” had a scar running from the outer corner of his eye to his ear. It was Darz, but unlike she had ever seen him. No trace of his beard remained. His clean-shaven face revealed his high cheekbones and regular features. He had washed, brushed and trimmed his hair. He smelled good, too, like soap.

He grunted in his sleep and snorted, sounding like scalawag Darz instead of this finely apportioned stranger. She smiled, grateful to find him alive and well, instead of burned to death by an angry dragon.

She sank back into sleep.

“Ginger?” Darz’s voice curled into her sensual dreams.

Opening her eyes, she looked up at him in the moonlight that flowed through the window. She was lying on her back, and he was stretched out alongside her, his head propped up on one arm as he looked down at her.

“Light of the moon,” she said.

“How do you feel?”

“Better.” She wouldn’t have expected to recover so fast, but her wounds hardly hurt at all. She was aware she was bare under Darz, but in the moonlight, it didn’t embarrass her.

“You look very fine,” she said.

His expression softened, and he kissed her, though just lightly. Perhaps he was waiting to see if she really would slap him. She put her arms around his neck and returned the kiss. Having almost lost him had made her realize just how much she wanted him.

With an exhale, Darz lowered himself on top of her. When he caressed her, she felt as if she were an instrument tuned by the dragon and then left unplayed. She pulled him closer, and his kiss deepened.

He moved his lips to her ear. “Your skin is hot. Like you have a fever.”

“For you,” she said. She had refused a sun-god for him, and in return, or perhaps retaliation, the dragon had left her with this unquenched fever.

Darz explored her in ways she had thought no one would ever know. Then he slid down and took her breast into his mouth. She was so startled, she almost pushed him away. But his lips closed around her nipple where the Dragon-Sun had touched her, and heat burst over her, exquisite. Her fingers tangled in



his hair while she sighed.

“Ah, Ginger, I can’t—” He pulled himself up along her body and kissed her some more. When he touched her below, at first she thought it was his hand. Then he groaned and thrust hard, tearing into her. She cried out, not only from pain, but from the blaze that flared through her. She pressed against him and he responded with a powerful rhythm, until the heat broke in a surge of pleasure. He covered her mouth with a kiss and muffled her cries.

Ginger slowly came back to herself, enough to realize Darz was still on top of her, his body flattening hers. She shifted under him and he grunted as he rolled onto the mattress. He lay alongside her with one leg thrown across both of hers. She turned her head toward him, and her forehead scraped the hint of stubble on his chin.

“I liked that,” she whispered.

He gave a low, uneven laugh. “I could tell.” He kissed her forehead. “So did I.” He lay for a while, his breath calming. Then he said, “Did I hurt you?”

“No...a little. It’s fine.” With a yawn, she added, “I would have thought it would bother my back more.”

“We should make sure it’s all right.”

“Tomorrow...”

Sleepily, he said, “I know. But we should check now. You may not feel pain, but if anything tore open, we should treat it. Or it might get worse.”

Too drowsy to protest, she rolled onto her stomach. She felt his hand on her back, exploring. His palm moved over her behind, where she had no cuts at all, and between her legs, where she still tingled. She lay enjoying it for a while, until finally she murmured, “Behave yourself.”

He laughed softly and slid his hand up her spine, over her shoulders, and along her arms. “That’s odd.”

“Hmmm...?”

“The cuts, the welts, the burns—they’re almost gone.”

“They can’t be already.”

“I know. But they are.” He paused. “Maybe you just needed sleep.”

“I’ve tended people with similar injuries. Sleep helps, but never this much, this fast.” She hesitated, not wanting him to become angry or ridicule her. “Darz?”

“Yes?” He lay down and turned her over so he could pull her into his arms.

“You mustn’t get upset.”

His arm muscles tensed. “About what?”

“I had a visitor today.”

“What?” He pushed up on his elbow. “I told you not to open the door!”

“I didn’t.”

“Then how did someone get in?”

“He didn’t need the door.”

“He?” He grasped her arm. “What happened?”

“It was the Dragon-Sun.”

His grip eased. “Oh, Ginger.”

“It’s true. He came here at noon. He said he would punish you for not believing in him. I told him I was promised to you. He was angry. At first. Then he wasn’t anymore.”

She expected him to say she had dreamt it all. She wasn’t even certain she hadn’t. When instead Darz just kept looking at her, she blinked.

“What is it?” she asked.

“You said this happened at noon?”

“Yes. The sun was shining through the window.”

“How long did it last?”

“Maybe fifteen minutes.”

“And then what?” His voice had an odd quality. Fear?

“He let me go and went back into the sky.”

“Gods above,” he said. “It can’t be.”

This certainly wasn’t the response she had expected. “What do you mean?”

“Something impossible happened today. At noon, for about fifteen minutes, we had an eclipse.”

“A what?”

“When the moon passes in front of the sun.”

“I don’t understand.”

He spoke uneasily. “I’m not sure I do, either. The palace astronomers in Quaaaz claim the earth goes around the sun, not the reverse. And the moon goes around the earth. Sometimes it gets between the earth and the sun. When that happens, we cannot see the sun. So it gets dark.”

“And that happened today?”

“Yes. It scared a lot of people.” He shook his head. “We had a full moon last night. If it was on that side of the earth, how could it get between the earth and the sun today?”

She just looked up at him.

“I’m not saying it’s true,” he added. “But if it were...”

“Yes?”

“You would really defy the Dragon-Sun for me?”

“Yes.”

His grin flashed. “Brave woman.” He lay down and tickled her belly button. “You were as fiery as the sun tonight.”

Her lips curved upward. “I thought you were sleepy.”

“That was before.”

He drew her closer, and she responded with an intensity she wouldn’t have expected even a few days ago. For so long she had thought she would never know a man’s embrace. Darz was a gift. She didn’t know if this passion had always been within her, waiting for its time, or if the sun had released it, but she soon stopped caring, or thinking at all, as she and Darz celebrated their own fire.

The potter’s caravan was small, only six merchants and a handful of helpers. They were headed to Quaaaz instead of Taza Qu, but Darz seemed reconciled to the change in his plans. They agreed to take the newlyweds if Darz would guard the caravan. Although Ginger could see it was an equitable arrangement, it meant he spent all day riding up and down the procession. She hardly saw him, and she missed his company.

The merchants wore cowed robes over leggings and tunics, similar to Jazid nomads, but they dyed the cloth yellow and topaz rather than charcoal. They all looked the same; she recognized Darz only because he was taller and huskier than the other men. No one seemed bothered when she adopted their style of dress. Even if they had known she was a priestess, which they didn’t, she doubted they would expect her to wear the wrap. If she did, they would have to carry her in a litter, which would be annoying for everyone. She gladly quit the ceremonial garments; she loved this freedom.

The days stretched out as they traveled west, and the sun blazed. At night, temperatures plummeted, but she and Darz didn’t mind, ensconced in their tent. She learned the ways of his touch and his scarred body, yet not of his heart. She wanted to believe he had begun to trust her, but he remained silent about himself.

He also bought her a horse. In Sky Flames, no one had wanted her to ride. She had learned by coaxing Heath, who could never tell her “no” on anything. These merchants took it for granted that anyone who traveled with a caravan could ride and do it in sensible clothes. For now, the lifestyle of the caravan suited her.

Ginger missed the temple and her work, though, tending to people and the village. She missed the cool stone spaces and burbling fountain. She longed for the serenity of those days, before reality had shredded her illusions.

Today Darz patrolled the heavily laden wagons on horseback. He intended to return Grayrider to Kindle as soon as he and Ginger were settled and he found an army company or caravan traveling east. As Ginger rode up alongside him, he maneuvered Grayrider to give her room. Only his dark eyes were visible; he kept a scarf over his face as protection from the sun and wind-driven sand. Far up ahead in the topaz desert, the green line of an oasis bordered the horizon.

“The caravan master tells me we will reach Quaaz the day after tomorrow,” Ginger said. “Maybe tomorrow night.”

He nodded, surveying the land around them. “It will be good to be home.”

“Do you have a house there?” She had tried asking more obliquely, with no success.

He continued to scan the desert. “I live with my cousin and her husband.”

She hadn’t expected that. “Do you mean the cousin you were pledged to marry?”

“That’s right.”

No wonder he avoided talking about his living arrangements. “Isn’t that awkward?”

He glanced at her, his eyes enigmatic. “No. Should it be?”

“Her husband trusts you?”

He gave a snort. “Her husband doesn’t like me in the least. But that would be true regardless. He knows if Lima and I had wanted to marry, we would have done so long ago.”

It still sounded thorny to Ginger. But maybe they couldn’t afford separate households. “Will there be room for me?”

“Enough.” He went back to studying the desert. He always seemed on guard these days, alert for an attack. It might be his normal state. Or maybe he was tense because of what had happened to him. She wished he would talk to her more.

“Is there a temple near where you live?” she asked.

“I think so.”

“And?”

He peered at a ridge to their south, shading his eyes with his hand. “And what?”

“Will you tell me about it?”

“Nothing to tell, really.”

Dryly she said, "Perhaps I should try to extract one of your teeth. You might be more willing to let me do that."

He shot her a startled look. "I should hope not."

"Why won't you talk to me? Don't you want to?"

"Well, yes." He sounded bewildered.

"But?"

"But I think I should pay attention to my duties instead of chatting with my distracting wife."

"Oh. Of course." She flushed with embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I will leave you to your work."

"Ginger—"

She nodded formally, then wheeled her horse around and rode toward the end of the caravan. She felt like a fool. If she kept making such mistakes, he would rue the day he ended up saddled with her. But saints, she dreaded the thought of living in the same house with his former betrothed, especially if Darz was often like this, so distant and preoccupied. She kicked her horse into a gallop and sped past the end of the caravan, her robe billowing out behind her.

After a few minutes, she took a deep breath and slowed her horse to a walk. It wasn't Darz's fault. He had never asked for a wife; Heath and Harjan had forced her on him. She knew other men who didn't talk to their wives. Perhaps, because he held her so close at night, she read more into his interest than existed.

In the ten days they had been traveling, thoughts of Sky Flames had haunted her. She couldn't believe they had sentenced her to die. Darz expected her to demand vengeance, but that felt hollow. She wanted justice. She wanted the elders to know what they had done was wrong and abhorrent. She wanted them to have no choice but to face the truth, now and for as long as they lived. That would mean more to her than any act of revenge.

The power to exact vengeance simmered within her, ready to erupt. She had never before comprehended her ability to do violence. Calling forth the killing spells of fire had left her feeling ill, but if she ever was that desperate again, she might again evoke that dark power. It was within her, and she didn't know how to deal with it. She turned away from revenge because she feared herself more than those who had wronged her.

Ginger brought her horse around and headed for the caravan. It had moved ahead, and it would take a while to catch up, but as long as she had them in sight, she wasn't worried. She valued her freedom out here in the vast desert.

After a few minutes, a man came galloping back to her. She wasn't sure who; without a comparison to others, she couldn't tell if he was large enough to be Darz. As he drew nearer, though, she thought it was him. It wasn't his size so much as the way he held himself, as if he could command the world from horseback. She thought he was probably a cavalry man. He wouldn't talk about his military service, though. If he hadn't been willing to go back to Quaaaz, she would have wondered if he were a deserter after all.

As he reached her, the man reined in his horse, and it stamped its hooves, impatient. "Never come out here alone!" he bellowed. "Gods only know what could happen! Stay with the caravan!"

That was definitely Darz. "Don't yell," she said, rubbing her ear. "I hear you fine."

"Someone could pick you off the desert," he thundered. "Just like sand-cats prey on stragglers from the goat herds. Ba-zing! You're gone."

Ba-zing? She tried not to smile, because he was obviously upset. "I'm sorry."

He spoke more quietly. "You worried me. You shouldn't let yourself be separated from the others."

She hadn't meant to trouble him. "I'll be more careful."

"Good." He rode with her toward the caravan. "Why were you angry with me before?"

"I wasn't angry." She felt at such a loss. "My whole life has been turned around and spilled out until I have only the unknown. And you. But the only time we do anything together is at night."

"It's good," he said, his voice warming.

"I need more."

"More?" He grinned. "You'll wear me out." He didn't sound at all displeased with the prospect of his imminent exhaustion.

Her face heated. "That's not what I meant."

"You are my wife. It is what a man does with his wife."

"You can talk to me, too."

"I do!"

"But you say so little."

Frustration leaked into his voice. "Women talk a great deal to one another. All this gossip and such. I am not a woman."

"What do you do when you have to command your men?" she inquired, exasperated. "Grunt?"

"That's different." His voice lightened. "They at least do what I tell them."

She couldn't see his face, but she recognized his tone. He was teasing her. "They have my sympathy."

He brought Grayrider in as close as he could to her horse and leaned over to her. "If you bedevil me," he said in a low voice, "tonight I will find a suitable way to return the favor."

She couldn't help but laugh. He would undoubtedly tickle her mercilessly, which he had discovered made her laugh and struggle. "Darz, it is you who bedevil me."

“Hah! I will see you tonight.” He took off then. They had reached the caravan, and she rode in back while he ranged ahead. She wondered who he thought could threaten them out here. She could see for leagues in every direction. Spears of rock jutted up in places, but it was mostly flat ground. It wasn’t as dry as the area around Sky Flames; they had passed a river this morning, and tonight they would camp at a real lake.

Water mirages rippled across the sands, obscuring details. The robes everyone wore out here were the same color as the desert. It made a person hard to see from far away. That was true for the colors worn by the Jazid nomads, too, among the rocks. Unsettled by the thought, she spurred her horse closer in to the caravan.

They reached the oasis in midafternoon, as the sun slanted long rays across the sand. Cook, the man who prepared their meals, had told her to expect only a small lake, but it was more water in one place than she had ever seen. Cliffs overhung it on one side, and a waterfall cascaded down them. She sent thanks for this haven to the dragon as he descended in the sky.

They weren’t the only ones at the lake. It was exciting to see groups from all over Taka Mal, from solitary travelers to another caravan as large as theirs. Riding past them, Ginger felt like a wide-eyed child on festival night. All too soon, she had to dismount and help set up their camp. She unloaded supplies with Cook. On her first night with the caravan, she had prepared supper for her hosts, and afterward Cook had asked if she would do the meals with him. She was glad to have a skill she could offer in exchange for their letting her and Darz accompany them.

Before they started cooking, she wanted to clean up. Darz was busy checking the other groups at the lake, so she asked Cook if he would mind doing guard duty. He came along good-naturedly, telling her rowdy jokes and terrible puns, and helped her find a spring in a pocket of rocks above the lake. He waited outside the enclosed area, positioned so he could see her as he blocked the view of the pocket to anyone else. Kneeling down, she washed her face and hands. The water was bliss. The air had a different smell than in Sky Flames, with a sweet scent of jasmine. Standing up, she stretched her arms—

Someone yanked her backward. It happened so fast, she had no time to shout. He clamped his hand over her mouth and pinned her arms to her sides with his other arm. She rammed her elbow into whoever was behind her, and he grunted.

“Hurry up,” someone said.

As she fought, someone came around in front of her, his features shadowed by the cowl of his charcoal robe and masked by a dark scarf. He was a wraith without a face, inhuman in robes that blended with the rocks.

He pressed a wet cloth over her face. Caught off guard, she gasped in a breath. A cloying smell saturated her senses, sickly sweet. He kept pressing the cloth...She couldn’t breathe...



## The General

A continuous bumping shook Ginger awake. She opened her eyes into the dim interior of a wagon. It resembled those used by the gypsies who wandered the borders between Jazid and Taka Mal. She lifted her head, then groaned as vertigo hit her.

She was lying near the front on a pile of carpets woven in blue and gold, with red accents that in her dazed state looked far too much like blood. Blue canvas walls enclosed the wagon. Its roof was patterned in gray-and-charcoal triangles, with red tassels at the edges that bounced as the wagon jolted. She couldn't have been out long; daylight sifted through the canvas walls, and she didn't think she had been unconscious long enough for night to have come and gone. The light had the aged feel of late afternoon rather than the freshness of dawn.

One of the nomads was sitting on a bench several feet away, deftly sewing a hole in a shirt despite the unsteady ride. His hood was pushed off his head, and the scarf hung down around his neck. He had sharp features, with small pox scars marking his skin. Black stubble covered his jaw. Another nomad was sitting across from him, a giant man with tangled black hair. He held a whetstone in one hand and a dagger in the other. He was staring, however, straight at Ginger. The hairs on her neck prickled.

"She's awake," the giant said. His voice was so deep, it seemed to boom even though he spoke at a normal volume.

The man stitching his shirt glanced at her. "So she is."

"Where are you taking me?" Ginger asked. She sounded like she felt, thick and dazed.

The stitcher narrowed his gaze at her. "You've given us a lot of trouble."

"I don't even know who you are," she said. "How could I give you trouble?"

He didn't answer; he just went back to sewing. She pulled herself up to sit cross-legged on the rugs. Bile rose in her throat, and she willed her stomach to settle. When she felt steadier, she said, "What did you do to Cook?"

The stitcher shrugged. "Nothing."

She clenched her fists in the carpet. "You didn't kill him, did you?" She had grown to like the plump cook and his bad puns.

He smiled slightly, the barest lifting of his mouth, his attention still on his repairs. "I told you. We did nothing."

She didn't believe it. "How did you get past him to me?"

"It was easy." He finally looked up at her. "You shouldn't travel with such greedy people."

"Youbribed him?" She couldn't believe Cook would sell her.

This time he smiled fully, and she wished he hadn't. It was an ugly expression, derisive and covetous at the same time. "He sold your freedom for what he thought was a lot of gold. It's nothing compared to



what we've been promised for you."

A sense of betrayal swept over her, followed by anger at herself. When would she learn to stop trusting people?

"You can't sell me," she said.

"Of course we can." He went back to sewing. "We've had a buyer ready since we told him we had seen you in that temple."

"You're a hard one to catch, priestess," the giant man rumbled. "Too many people around."

Ginger felt as if she were spinning. "No. You can't. My husband will look for me." She wasn't certain that was true. Sometimes he seemed to care for her, and he had braved a frenzied mob to free her from the stake. But she didn't know how much of that had been his idea and how much Heath had forced him. For all she knew, this provided him with a convenient way to rid himself of an unwanted bride. She didn't want to believe that about Darz, especially not after their nights together, but he had told her so little about himself, she was constantly on edge with him.

"Your husband, eh?" The giant laughed. "Is that the story?"

She stiffened. "It's true."

"What wedding?" the stitcher asked. "Those people were going to burn you alive. Some fellows rode off with you. We found the inn where you stayed, and they didn't say horse-shit about a wedding. You sure as hell didn't marry him on the caravan. You're a concubine, girl. Don't pretend otherwise."

"That's not true," she said.

"She could have married him while we were looking for her," the giant said. "It's not impossible."

The stitcher glanced at him, then at Ginger. "Whatever your man is, he would be a fool to chase us. He's just some rube from a little town. And he's only one against many of us."

She wanted to tell him what she thought of the "many of us," but she bit back the retort. The giant was sharpening his dagger, and the scrape of metal against stone grated. She didn't doubt he found opportunities to use his weapon. She felt cold. Was that the knife that had left so many wounds in Darz? She stared at it, then lifted her gaze to the giant. He regarded her with no hint of sympathy.

Ginger had felt constrained in Sky Flames, but she realized now she had taken for granted a level of safety that didn't exist in most places. She questioned whether it had ever existed at home, either. Naïve and idealistic in her airy temple, she had seen the world as if the sunset gilded it with rosy colors.

The giant was watching her. Holding up the dagger, he touched its edge and blood welled out of a cut on his thumb. Then he went back to sharpening the blade. With a shudder, she looked away.

If only she had brought her opal to the water hole. In daylight, for such a short stop, it hadn't occurred to her. She couldn't make spells with the sun up, but it couldn't be more than few hours until sunset. In the plaza she had used a large circle to focus her spell. She didn't know if she could use the ragged shapes here in the wagon, but she was ready to try anything.

And then what? She had spent her life using her talents to nurture people, to create light, real and symbolic. She truly enjoyed her calling in the temple. Before that night in the plaza, she could no more have imagined committing violence than she could have envisioned the sky breaking apart. But if she didn't disable or kill her guards, they would catch her again.

She rubbed her eyes. Her head ached from whatever they had used to knock her out. Regardless, she had to escape soon, before they traveled too far for her to get back. She couldn't set out without a map, horse, or supplies; if she did, the nomads would recapture her or the desert would kill her.

"You think he will pay the price he agreed to?" the giant asked the other man. "She's a mess."

Ginger squinted at herself. She wasn't a mess. She had just bathed. Her leggings and tunic were clean and well kept. Sand covered her boots, but what did they expect in a desert?

"You dress like a man," the stitcher told her. "You looked better in the temple."

"Well, since I'm so unattractive," she said sourly, "you might as well take me back to my unfortunate husband."

"Oh, I didn't say that," he answered. "Just that it isn't showing properly for us to get the best price."

She regarded him uneasily. "My clothes are fine."

He studied her. "We need to leave some mystery. We don't want to be too obvious." He got up and walked over, his gait uneven with the swaying of the wagon.

"What are you doing?" She slid back on the carpets.

The giant lifted his dagger. "Priestess, do you see this?"

She froze, her gaze on the blade. It glinted in light that leaked between two panels of the canvas walls. "Yes," she said.

He leaned forward. "A little blood on the purchase isn't going to dissuade our buyer. In fact, given what I know of him, he might pay more."

"Don't," she said.

"Don't what?" he asked, turning his dagger.

Somehow she kept her voice steady. "Don't use that on me."

"Then cooperate."

She swallowed. "I won't fight."

"Good." He sat back and continued sharpening the blade.

I lied, she thought. She would fight—when she had her weapon, the spells of fire. He was making it easier for her to face what she would have to do. If she could find a good shape. If the spells worked. Too many ifs.

The stitcher sat next to her and put his arm around her waist, pulling her against his side. Then he reached under her tunic and pulled her leggings off her hips.

“Don’t!” Her face heated as she pushed him away.

“Hey!” The giant’s voice snapped like breaking stone. He towered when he stood up, and he reached the carpets in one step. Kneeling behind Ginger, he touched the tip of his dagger to the nape of her neck, through her hair. “I thought we had an agreement.”

She went still. “Don’t cut me.”

“Don’t balk, then.”

She forced herself to remain still while the stitcher took off her boots and leggings. The giant lifted her arms, the flat of his blade scraping her skin, and the stitcher pulled off her tunic. They left her in the undertunic, a translucent shift that came over her hips and thighs.

“That’s better,” the stitcher said. “Give him something to think about while we’re settling terms.”

Ginger crossed her arms in front of herself, her palms on her shoulders. She wanted to fold up and hide.

A shout came from outside. At first she didn’t understand the caller’s thick Jazid accent. Then she realized he had said, “Which pavilion do you want?”

The stitcher leaned past her to the front of the wagon and rapped on the wood that separated them from the driver. “The large gray one on the south end.”

“Aya,” the call came back. The wagon lurched as it changed direction, throwing Ginger against the stitcher, away from the man with the knife.

“Heh.” He pushed her into the giant, lifting and resettling her so she was kneeling with her back against the huge nomad. She grasped the carpet at her sides while she stared at the stitcher. The giant put his hands on her shoulders, holding her in place, the hilt of his knife pressing her skin. His breath rustled her hair, with a strong smell of onions.

Only moments ago, it seemed, she had been with Darz. The future had been uncertain, but also exciting, filled with promise. That couldn’t all be gone. It couldn’t be. Life couldn’t be that cruel.

The stitcher traced his finger along her lip. “Priestess, you should learn to hide your outrage. It will only get you hurt. Accept the way of the desert. It has always been like this. Men die and women suffer. Those of us who are strong survive. The rest of you serve our bidding.”

She wanted to tell him he could rot in a slime lair. The way he was leaning over her, with his hands braced on her thighs and the giant holding her in place from behind, she feared they would hurt her before they reached their destination. So instead of an oath, she reminded him why they should do nothing to her.

“You kept saying. ‘he’ before,” she said. “You’re taking me to. ‘him.’ Towho?”

The stitcher sat back on his haunches and rested his palms on his knees. “You wouldn’t know him, I

don't think. Not unless you're familiar with the generals from Jazid who fought in the war against the Misted Cliffs."

"I don't know much about Jazid," she admitted. "Why is he in Taka Mal?"

"Why are any of us anywhere?" the giant said behind her, holding her shoulders. "We have no army to fight for anymore. Only conquerors who occupy our country."

"And take our lives." The stitcher's voice crackled with anger. "The king of the Misted Cliffs has demanded our soldiers swear allegiance to him or face execution."

"You're soldiers?" she asked. "I thought you were nomads."

"We are." He motioned to the man behind her. "He comes from the Kublaqui tribe. So does our driver. I'm of the T'Ambera. Our tribes have always supported the Jazid army."

She tried to remember what Darz had told her about the war. "But your king, your atajazid—he is dead now, yes? His seven-year-old son would sit on the throne but he has been imprisoned by the king of the Misted Cliffs."

"So you've paid attention, eh?" He spoke grimly. "Yes, Cobalt the Dark murdered our king and put himself on the Onyx Throne. But he does not have the boy."

She didn't know whether or not to believe him; the boy's freedom could be a rumor the displaced army had started to lift the morale of their people. If the claim were true, it didn't bode well for the Misted Cliffs. Either way, as long as the nomads were talking about armies, they were leaving her alone. "Where is the prince, then?"

"In a place you'll never see," the stitcher said.

"And the general?" Sweat gathered on her palms, and she rubbed them on the carpet. "Who is he?"

"Dusk Yargazon," he said. "Do you know of him? His family takes their name in honor of the Shadow Dragon."

She shook her head, disquieted by the fierce quality of his gaze when he spoke of the general. She knew people in Jazid took names such as Dusk and Shade to honor their shadow god, just as they favored the gray-and-charcoal patterns, but it had always seemed a dark choice to her.

He leaned forward, trapping her between himself and the giant. "You should know of him. Everyone in your ungrateful country should honor his name. He is a general greater than any who fought in Taka Mal. It is he who sat in the war council after the Battle of the Rocklands and faced down the atajazid's murderer, Cobalt the Dark. It was he who won the prince's life." His eyes blazed with the too-bright gaze of fanaticism. "And it is he who will put the boy back on a throne."

She shrank away from him. "Then why are you in Taka Mal? We cannot put him on his throne."

The stitcher put his hands on either side of her hips, on top of her hands, pinning them to the carpet. "Maybe we're here to find a reprieve from the hardships of our exiled lives." He was so close, his lips were almost touching hers.

She turned her head away. "The desert is as harsh here as in Jazid."

"Oh, I don't know." He put his palm against her cheek and turned her head so she had to look at him. "They say you Taka Mal priestesses are forbidden. No man may touch you." He slid his other hand up her thigh. "What happens to a man who does, eh? Shall your Dragon-Sun smite me down?" He glanced up at the sky, pretending to crane his neck. Then he looked back at her. "It seems not. Perhaps it excites him to see the taboos violated."

She spoke through gritted teeth. "Leave me alone."

Outside, the driver called out. The wagon jolted to a stop, knocking the stitcher back from Ginger, and she fell forward, catching herself on her hands. As the stitcher stood up, someone pushed aside the blue canvas at the back of the wagon. A third nomad looked in, this one with a hood shadowing his face.

"General Yargazon is in a meeting with his men," he said. "He'll see us when he's done." He nodded toward Ginger. "Best make sure she doesn't cause a ruckus."

Ginger recognized the man's voice. He was the driver.

"We'll take care of it," the stitcher said. "Let us know when he's ready."

The driver nodded and withdrew, leaving the flap swinging in his wake. The stitcher went back to his sewing and took several lengths of cord from his pile of yarns and cloth. He came back to Ginger with the leather cords looped around his hands and gave them to the giant behind her.

She tried to turn around. "What are you doing?"

"Stay still." The giant turned her forward, then handed his dagger to the stitcher. Standing in front of her, the stitcher held the dagger by his side, level with her eyes. She stared at the glinting blade and shuddered.

The giant pulled her arms behind her back and crossed her forearms, one on top the other. He bound them together with two of the cords, then tugged the third tight around her upper arms, drawing her shoulder blades together until it forced her to arch her back slightly. She felt ill. She wanted this to be over, to be away from the nightmare. The nomads seemed balanced on the edge of violence, ready to erupt, and she feared by the time the sun set, she would be too injured to do anything at all, let alone call up the capricious spells that were her only defense.

The driver opened the back flaps and looked into the wagon again. "They're ready for you."

"Good." The stitcher grasped Ginger's arm and heaved her to her feet. The effects of the drug they had used to knock her out hadn't worn off as much as she thought, and her head reeled. He returned the dagger to the giant. Then, holding her upper arms, the two nomads walked her to the back of the wagon.

They came out into an evening even hotter than in Sky Flames. Although she didn't recognize the land, she thought they had gone south. The desert was no longer flat; it stepped up in stark ridges, higher and higher until they became the razor-thin foothills of the Jagged Teeth Mountains that dominated northern Jazid. Beyond them, in the purpling distance, the Jagged Teeth towered against the sky. It was a cruel landscape, like the people who lived in it, their souls parched and starved.

The area below the foothills formed a basin that might have once held a shallow sea. If water had ever

softened this land, it had long since dried away. The sun was low in the west, and shadows stretched across the desert. Tents filled the basin. Soldiers moved down there, hundreds, even thousands, and the many tenders who served an encamped army. A good portion of the Jazid military must be there, in exile, hiding in the badlands of Taka Mal while they plotted against the usurpers in their land.

Only a few tents stood here, one large pavilion and several smaller ones. To the north, away from the camp, horses were drinking from a trough in a corral. Closer by, a group of soldiers had gathered around a fire to cook a meal. They watched the three nomads bringing Ginger to the pavilion. Her face heated as the wind molded the under-tunic to her body and rippled it around her legs.

A man in leather and bronze armor with a heavy sword on his belt stood at the entrance of the pavilion. He wore a dragon helmet with a point on the top shaped like a tetrahedron. Power shifted within Ginger. She couldn't call it forth yet, for the sun still shone, but if she could see one of the helmets after sunset, she might use the tetrahedron to drive her spells.

The guard either expected them or recognized the nomads, for he didn't call challenge, he simply stepped aside. Inside, the pavilion was larger than the garden in the house where Ginger had lived as a child. Plush cushions were strewn across the carpeted floor and around low tables tiled in charcoal and black. Torches on poles added light and smoke. Across the tent, a wall map of Taka Mal was tacked to a beam support, and a large group of men were gathered before it. They all wore the black-and-silver uniforms of Jazid military officers. A painful thought hit Ginger; she had never seen Darz in his Taka Mal uniform. She didn't even know if he was a full officer, and unless she managed a miracle with her spells, she would probably never find out.

The warrior motioned them over to a corner of the tent. The nomads drew her with them, and they waited by a brazier that curled smoke in the air. The giant stood behind her, tall and silent, with the tip of his dagger against her spine. Across the tent, the officers were deep in a debate.

Sweat gathered on Ginger's forehead and ran down her neck. The heat from the brazier bothered her, but after the sun set and cold rushed in, she would welcome its warmth. She looked around the tent for shapes. Although she saw no pyramids or circles, triangle patterns were everywhere. But they stirred no response within her, not even a sense of potential. Usually in daylight she could feel the banked power of her spells waiting for release. It worried her; the triangles seemed too weak to drive her spells.

As the officers argued, she caught the words "Quaaz palace" and "Topaz throne." She picked up only fragments, but it was enough to dismay her. They intended to invade Quaaz, the capital of Taka Mal. She didn't understand; Jazid and Taka Mal weren't enemies and had often allied in their violent histories. They had fought together in the last war to drive back the Misted Cliffs. She couldn't fathom why Jazid would plot against the country most likely to support them against their conquerors.

She had to warn Darz! It sounded like Jazid agents were targeting commanders in the Taka Mal army, kidnapping the highest-ranked officers for interrogation and killing the rest. If they found out Darz had survived—and was headed to Quaaz with tales of murder—they would go after him, and this time they would make sure they finished the job.

One of the men rubbed the small of his back and glanced around the tent. His gaze scraped over Ginger. He turned to another man, a tall officer, probably in his fifties, with a great deal of silver on the shoulders and sleeves of his uniform. The first man said something, and the tall one glanced at Ginger. Then they returned to their discussions.

After a few moments, though, they brought their war council to an end. The officers left in groups of

three and four, still deep in discussion. The tall man remained and conferred with two younger soldiers who had far less silver on their uniforms. After they departed, the older man walked to where Ginger stood with the nomads. The giant nomad moved the point of his dagger against her back, and the stitcher and the driver flanked her, each holding one of her upper arms. She was trapped and vulnerable, unable to retreat.

When the officer reached then, the stitcher bowed deeply. "You honor us with your presence, General Yargazon."

Yargazon inclined his head in acceptance of the formal words. He was staring at Ginger, however, and she flushed under his scrutiny. Her shoulder blades ached from being pulled back by the cord. She wanted to fold her arms over her torso, as if that meager effort could protect her against Yargazon's formidable presence.

The general spoke in a voice like rust. "It appears, Ji, that I owe you an apology. I had assumed you exaggerated when you described her. I was wrong."

The stitcher, who was apparently Ji, said, "Makes it worth the chase, eh?"

"Indeed." Yargazon stepped forward and slid his hand into Ginger's hair. "Is this color real?"

She looked up at him, unable to speak. With the giant behind her, Ji on one side, the driver on the other, and Yargazon towering over her, she felt suffocated.

The general yanked back her head by her hair. "I asked you a question."

"Y-yes," she said. "It's real."

"I've never seen such a color."

Staring at him, she knew he was more dangerous than any sentinel. The sun had weathered his face and prominent nose, turning his skin leathery. Wrinkles creased the corners of his eyes and bracketed his mouth, but he otherwise had the robust appearance of a man half his age. His uniform accented his height and powerful physique. Its stark black lines and silver ribbing gave him a shadowed aspect. The heavily corded tendons in his neck slanted into the muscles of his shoulders and under his stiff tunic. His expression had a steel quality, as if he had seen too many wars and killed too many men. Ginger shrank back and felt the nick of the dagger against her spine.

The general took her face in his hands. She froze as he bent his head. When he kissed her, she tried to pull away, but the nomads held her in place.

Yargazon took his time kissing her, stroking his thumbs on her cheeks and then her nipples. Then he pulled the undertunic up to her shoulders and touched her more. She tried to disassociate herself from it, as if she were someone else, but it was hard when her arms ached.

After a while he lifted his head. "Such sweetness," he murmured. Stepping back, he pulled down her tunic. "You were a priestess in one of those temples, yes?"

"Yes." She lifted her chin. "I serve the Dragon-Sun."

"Do you now?" He seemed amused. "It is a quaint idea, to have sun priestesses bless and nurture

people. Rather charming. Take a lovely, innocent girl, put her all alone in a temple, and then say no man may touch her. One wonders if the people of Taka Mal are deliberately provoking us or just plain stupid.”

Gritting her teeth, she held back the urge to tell him their temples didn’t exist to serve the whims of Jazid warlords.

He glanced at Ji. “She is the one who tended the body?”

“That’s right,” Ji said. “They brought it into the temple.”

Yargazon rubbed his chin while he considered Ginger. “What did you do with it?”

“It?” She endeavored to look blank. “What do you mean?”

“The corpse the miners took to you.”

She shuddered at the memory of when they had brought Darz into the temple, believing him dead. She didn’t miss the irony, that the nomads had spied on her, even invaded the temple, yet didn’t seem to realize Darz had been asleep in one of the cells, recovering from his stab wounds.

“I gave him the Sunset Rites,” she lied. “We cremated him.”

He spoke to Ji. “Can you verify that?”

“We didn’t see any smoke,” Ji said. “But they never carried him out for a burial, and his body wasn’t in the Sunset Room.”

“Perhaps next time,” the general said tightly, “you will take care of the burial yourself instead of hiding when you hear a few harmless miners.”

Ji’s gaze never wavered. “We completed our mission.”

“Your orders included burying the body,” Yargazon said.

“We’ve brought you the girl.”

“At an exorbitantly high price.”

“You’ve seen her,” Ji said. “She’s worth it, for the information as well as the pleasure.”

Information? What did that mean? Ginger had a sense of under-currents here she only partially understood. The general and Ji were parrying. They continued their veiled battle of words, and she listened intently, though she hid her attention by acting dazed. The lives of women in Jazid were even more limited than in Taka Mal, but it offered an unexpected advantage; they didn’t seem to consider her presence a deterrent to their discussions the way they would have if she had been a man. She suspected it didn’t even occur to them she could pose a danger to their plans.

It was difficult to sort out the hierarchy between them. Yargazon was obviously in command, but the nomads weren’t soldiers. It sounded as if they were part of a covert sect he had hired to kill certain Taka Mal officers. At Sky Flames, the miners had appeared unexpectedly, forcing the nomads to hide while



Harjan and the others carried the body into the temple.

They had no idea Darz was alive. Incredibly, they had stood in the plaza less than two tendays later and watched him fight off the sentinels, never realizing they were seeing a man they had left for dead. With his beard, on a horse, Darz had looked too different for them to recognize.

Although the general censured Ji for his failure to bury the body, she had a feeling he agreed with the way they had dealt with the situation. But he was using it to claim that bringing “the priestess” was part of their mission, so he could question her. The nomads didn’t consider it a military matter. They served Yargazon by choice but had other livelihoods, including this transaction. Ji saw it purely as a matter of selling a commodity—Ginger—the general had arranged for him to acquire.

It was chilling how well they knew how to bargain. Both clearly understood the purpose of their supposed disagreement. Within moments they settled on a price, less than what Ji wanted, but an amount of gold coin and gems so large, it bewildered Ginger. She had never seen even a tenth that much wealth.

When they finished, Yargazon turned to her. “Were you the only witness to the cremation?”

She hesitated. If they had been watching the temple, they would know the miners guarding it had stayed outside that night.

“Yes,” she said. The shorter her answers, the better. She tried to keep her face blank, so they wouldn’t suspect how closely she was following all they said.

“What did you find on his person?” the general asked.

His person? “Nothing.”

He spoke sharply. “Answer my question. I want to know what you saw when you gave. ‘sunset rights’ to this man.”

She was growing confused. “Nothing.”

His voice turned cold. “We’ve heard rumors of actions by the Taka Mal army in the area of your village. Are you people sheltering anyone? Do they have a base of operations?”

She shook her head. “I know nothing of such things.”

“You priestesses hold a high position among your people. Don’t expect me to believe you’ve heard nothing.”

“I’ve nothing to tell you.” She doubted the army had been in the area doing something hidden. “I don’t know anything about the military.”

The entrance flap of the pavilion rustled, and an officer pushed aside the canvas. “Permission to speak with you, sir.”

Yargazon walked over to him. “Go ahead, Lieutenant.”

“I think we have all we’re going to get,” the lieutenant said. “We have scrolls for you.”

“Very well.” The general glanced at Ji. “I must attend to another matter.” Motioning at Ginger, he said, “Bring her. I’ll have my men get your payment.”

Ji drew her forward. She wanted to resist, but the driver took her other arm and the giant followed them, a looming presence at her back.

Outside, the sun was almost to the horizon. Ginger thought the dragon was truly a harsh deity to serve, that he would burn in the sky knowing such cruelty took place below him. She could hear his voice: I am a ball of fire, not the conscience of man. I cannot control the minds of you who call yourselves human. You are responsible for the deeds you commit, whether they be great or heinous.

Yes, she thought, they were responsible for their deeds. But it was the people like her and Darz who paid the brutal price of those who chose what was heinous.



18

## The Tent

Yargazon and his aide walked ahead, conferring in low voices. Neither wore a helmet, nor did Ginger see other shapes she could use. They went to a small tent under an overhang of rock. As they reached the entrance, a ragged scream from inside shattered the evening.

Ginger stopped, terrified. This wasn’t the bloodcurdling war cry she had heard in the temple. It was a scream of agony.

The general and his aide went inside, and the nomads dragged Ginger after them. The interior was dim, lit only by one torch, and the overhang outside blocked what little of the aged sunlight might have filtered through the canvas. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust enough so she could make out the scene on the far side of the tent. A man was lying on a slanted surface, and several Jazid warriors were gathered around him. None of them wore helmets.

As her group approached, she inhaled sharply. The man wasn’t lying down, he was manacled to a rack that stretched him out, his arms and legs spread-eagled. What remained of his clothing was ripped and bloody, and welts crisscrossed his torso and legs. But she could make out enough to know he had worn a uniform with gold and red colors. He was an officer in the Taka Mal army.

One of the Jazid warriors came over to Yargazon and showed him a scroll. “We got troop and cavalry deployments, postings for twenty officers, and the names of two covert operatives, one in Aronsdale and the other in our army.”

Yargazon raised an eyebrow. “A Taka Mal spy is here?”

“Not here. He’s with a regiment in Jazid.” The man tapped one of the scrolls. “His location, cover identity and assignment are all here.”

“You’ve done well.” Yargazon glanced at the man on the rack. “You can take him down and finish matters. Make it quick, so he doesn’t suffer anymore. And cremate the body.”

Bile rose in Ginger’s throat. She had read accounts of military campaigns, but they always described battles, which invariably were either glorious or dire, depending on whether the historian was from the winning or losing side. They never revealed this side of war, the bitter stories of soldiers who lost their lives far from the field of battle.

The warriors released the Taka Mal man and two of them took him out of the tent. They had to carry him; he was incapable of walking. Tears gathered in Ginger’s eyes as she turned to Yargazon. “Can’t you let him live?”

The general answered with a softness that jarred with the orders he had just given. “Such a sweet, gentle priestess.” He put his hand under her chin and wiped the tear on her cheek with his thumb. “Are you really so innocent?” His expression hardened. “Or is it all an act?”

“An act?” Her voice caught. “Why?”

“A good question.” He glanced at the three warriors who still stood at the rack. “She was the one in the temple who tended the body. See what you can find out.”

With horror, she realized what they intended. As Ji took her arm, she panicked. “No! I have nothing to tell you. I swear it!”

“They always say that,” Yargazon told her. “And they always lie.”

“It’s true!” She struggled frantically as the interrogators laid her out on the rack. “How could I know anything?”

“You tell me.” He watched while they untied her arms and pulled them out onto the frame. Their lack of remorse chilled her; they worked with efficiency and showed no sign of humanity. She could have been an animal rather than a human being. The worst of it was, she did know things they would want—the existence of the dragon powder, and that one of their targets had escaped and was even now headed to Quaaaz to warn the Taka Mal army.

The manacles dug into her skin, hard and unyielding. As they closed the shackles around her ankles, another crushing thought came to her; she couldn’t use her spells to attack, for she would be trapped in the blaze, as well, chained to the rack while the tent and everyone within it burned.

The interrogators stepped back. The nomads had moved away and were clustered by the entrance. Ginger stared at Yargazon, and he watched her with narrowed eyes, as if he had measured her behavior and found it wanting.

One of the warriors stepped out of view, behind the rack. A creak groaned, followed by the grate of gears turning. Ginger’s arms jerked, and the chains stretched her out. At first it didn’t hurt, but he kept cranking the wheel, stretching her farther, until she gasped. She felt as if she would be torn in two.

The general stood near her head. “You saw what happened to the last person we used this on. Better to tell me the truth now rather than make us do to you what we did to him.”

“I don’t know anything to tell you.” She stared up at him. “How could I?”

He motioned to someone behind her—and the wheel creaked. She cried out as the rack stretched her limbs.

“Eventually it will dislocate your joints,” Yargazon said. “But if you cooperate, I will take you off.”

“I am cooperating.” She choked out the words. “I don’t have anything to tell you. I swear.”

“What did you see outside your temple the night the miners brought in the body?”

“I was in the temple. I didn’t see anything outside.”

“What did the miners tell you they saw?”

“Nothing.” When Yargazon lifted his hand to the soldier behind the rack, Ginger said, “I swear it! They said nothing.”

“Nothing?” His voice cut like a knife. “You expect me to believe they found a dead man and said they saw nothing?”

She strained to recall what Harjan and the others had told her. “They thought he had been attacked.”

“By who?”

“They didn’t say. We didn’t know—no!” She groaned as the wheel turned. “It’s true. They had no idea who killed him.”

“You’re lying,” Yargazon said. “What did they see? Who did they tell? What did you see?”

“Nothing, I swear,” she said, desperate. “What could we see? It was dark. They found a body. They brought it to me. That was all.”

The general motioned to another of the interrogators, and the man went to the table where several objects glinted. She couldn’t discern what they were, but he picked something long. As he came back into the torchlight, she saw what he held: a cat-o-nine tails.

“No. Please,” she pleaded. “I have nothing to tell you.”

“Not that one,” Yargazon told him. “It leaves scars.”

Ginger hoped that meant he didn’t want her limbs dislocated, either. It wasn’t much help; they could cause her a lot of pain before the effects became permanent. But she would take anything that might help her hold out longer.

The man exchanged the whip for a leather belt. Yargazon gestured to the warrior behind the rack, the wheel scraped—and Ginger screamed.

So they interrogated her. Yargazon kept up a relentless stream of questions: what did she know, what had they seen, what was the army doing, who were their contacts, what was she hiding. He asked about everyone his men had seen at the temple, the Dragon’s Claw, or the village. At first she thought he was looking for something specific, but she soon realized he was fishing for anything he could force out of her.

And she talked.

It poured out of her, between her screams and sobs, details of her life, her service at the temple, even how she cooked her supper and cleaned the fountain. She told them every detail of her trial and why they accused her of witchery—except the most important fact, that their accusations were partly true, she could do spells.

When they asked about Darz, she said she had married a village man who rescued her from the stake. She described every meal she had supposedly cooked for him during her last nine days in the temple. She told them he was a farmer, that he lost his temper when he drank, and how he had been a respected member of the village before he threw it away to save her from burning alive. And she knew the general couldn't care less.

She didn't tell them about the powder. She claimed an earthquake toppled the Dragon's Claw. In an excruciating irony, they accepted her lies and thought her truths were false. Yargazon obviously had no patience with those who believed in sun dragons, witchery, or spells.

Never once did he ask her if Darz was alive. Somehow she kept from saying it, though so many times she barely stopped the words from spilling out with all the others. When she came close, when the revelations were mixed up in what she was saying, she switched into long descriptions of the most boring facts she could recall, the soap she used to clean floors, how hard it was to keep mice from eating the tallow candles, how the squash crops this year came in too early and tasted bad.

And the sun went down.

She knew when the night descended because power roiled within her. But even if she gained enough reprieve from the agony to focus a spell, she had no shape. It was too dark to see anything except the general and the man with the leather belt.

Yargazon leaned over her and spoke in a deceptively gentle voice, a sharp contrast to his questions. "Tell me what I need to know. Then this will all be over. All you have to do is tell me the truth."

She wanted to blurt it all out, give him anything, anything to stop the agony. She could feel her joints straining, ready to break. Bruises and welts covered her body. The shackles cut into her, and blood seeped over her skin, mixing with her sweat. His words were too much. She almost believed him: if she would just tell him everything, he would stop the pain. But she knew he was lying, that if she revealed she had held back, they would intensify their efforts. Gods forgive her, she didn't know how much longer she could keep her secrets.

"Sir?" The voice came from across the tent.

Yargazon straightened up and turned toward the entrance. "You're early," he said, beckoning to someone.

Footsteps crunched and another officer appeared, a gangly man with a black mustache. "We're ready to leave," he said.

The general nodded with approval. "You should make Quaz easily by tomorrow." They were speaking quietly, but with Yargazon so near the rack, Ginger could hear.

“My messenger arrived from Quaaz at sunset,” the man said. “He says our people are positioned and ready within the palace. We expect them to move at noon tomorrow.”

“Good.” Yargazon rubbed the back of his neck. “We march in the morning, both the cavalry and foot troops. We should arrive in the late afternoon. By then, the assassinations must be done.”

“They will, sir.” The man started to speak, then stopped.

“What is it?” Yargazon asked.

“It’s the queen, sir. She would make a valuable hostage.”

“So she would.” Yargazon exhaled. “More than that. It would be fitting to have her as my prisoner. It’s an abomination she ever ascended the throne.” He stood thinking. Then he shook his head. “We can’t risk it. As long as she lives, she might escape and rally her people. Look what a symbol the atajazid offers to ours, though he is only seven. No, she must die, and all her heirs. No one with a claim to the Topaz Throne can be left alive when the atajazid takes it as his own.”

“But you still want her Aronsdale consort alive?”

Yargazon nodded. “He’s not native to Taka Mal. Many people object to his being here. But he is related to King Cobalt. We can use him as a hostage in bargaining with the Misted Cliffs.”

Chills wracked Ginger’s body. She couldn’t believe Jazid would turn on Taka Mal and murder the royal family. It was an ugly plan—but effective. No one at the palace would expect it. The queen was probably hosting highly-ranked officers from Jazid even now, offering them sanctuary from execution in their own country. They would be well-placed to betray their benefactors. They could kill the queen and her baby, and gods only knew what they would do to her Aronsdale consort. The addition of the Taka Mal army to theirs would double the Jazid forces. They could attack the conquering army in Jazid with renewed strength to take back its throne for their boy king.

One of the interrogators walked over to the general. As the man with the mustache saluted and left, Yargazon turned to the warrior. “Is there a problem?”

“Sir, I don’t think she knows anything, except how to scrub floors and cook the damn pumpkins. She’s just a girl. If she had anything to tell us, she would have already broken.”

Yargazon looked past him at Ginger. “She seems too slow even to think for herself.”

“It will do permanent damage if we pull her much longer.”

Please, Ginger prayed to the dragon and the sunset. I know you can’t or won’t interfere with our lives. But I entreat you. Make them stop. She didn’t know why she tried; even if the Dragon-Sun or the Sunset could have helped, they were gone from the sky. The night was the time of Jazid’s Shadow Dragon.

The general walked to the rack and stood with his hands clasped behind his back as he considered Ginger. His gaze had a dark hunger that terrified her.

“Very well,” he said. “Take her down and clean her up. Have someone bring her to my tent. I will be in a meeting, so leave a guard with her.”

“We’ll take care of it, sir.”

Yargazon inclined his head. Without another glance at any of them, he strode from the tent. When he went beyond the torchlight, Ginger could no longer see him, but the canvas crackled and metal somewhere rattled. Distorted shadows swung back and swung forth in the torchlight.

As they released her from the manacles, tears ran down her face. She could barely move. They pulled away the scraps of her tunic and bathed her with tepid water from a basin they brought out of the shadows. One of them pulled a soldier’s tunic over her head, and another brushed her hair. The third gave her a tin of water and waited while she drank not one, but four cups. She tried not to think of what waited for her in Yargazon’s tent. She sat on the rack, neither looking at them nor responding to their ministrations. Instead, she turned her concentration inward to the power seething within her. She let it build, but it had no focus. Without a shape, she could do no spells, and it was too dark to see anything but the rack, which was misshapen.

When they finished, one of the men said, “Can you walk?”

She didn’t think she could move. Her skeleton felt as if it would fall apart. She had to force herself to stand up. The tent tilted around her and the edge of the rack rushed up—

Someone caught her as she fell. He kept his hand under her arm, holding her upright until her vertigo passed. When she inhaled, trying to steady herself, another man took her other arm. With two of them holding her up, she stepped toward the entrance. Another step. Another—

And she saw it.

The ring was iron and as wide across as her outstretched hand. She couldn’t see what it was hanging from, only that it was slowly swinging back and forth by the entrance, probably disturbed when Yargazon had left. She stared at it—and the power roiling within her suddenly had a focus.

She envisioned flames.

The spell exploded unlike any other she had done. Driven by her agony, it erupted from every wall of the tent, every surface, every object within, even from the ground under her feet, though the packed dirt had nothing to burn. The world blazed.

Her interrogators caught fire. They shouted and dropped her arms, beating at their flaming clothes. Except it wasn’t just their clothes; fire engulfed them until they became living torches. One of the warriors threw himself on the ground and rolled back and forth. Another stumbled into a table piled high with scrolls. Fire roared across it, destroying the record of secrets the interrogators had wrested from their victims. The third man staggered back and fell across the burning rack.

Their cries pierced the night. The spell flared wildly through Ginger, and she felt a backlash as if it were happening to her. But it wasn’t: she was the only person or thing in the tent that wasn’t burning.

Ginger lurched into a run. She could barely stay on her feet, but the desire to be alive and free were even greater than her pain. She raced out of the blazing tent and darted behind a spur of rock, leaving behind the roar of flames and the screams of the monsters who had tortured her.

People were shouting and running across the camp. Ruddy light from the torches in front of the general’s pavilion backlit them, but she doubted they could see her behind the rocks. The first place they would go

was the tent. She crept away from the inferno, staying low behind the boulders.

When Ginger had put the overhang between herself and the tent, she took off in a limping run, down a slope toward where she had seen the horses. Shouts rang out behind her, but they were about the fire. She had no doubt it was too late for them to salvage the scrolls. She couldn't bring back the Taka Mal officers who had died at Yargazon's hand, but she had at least ensured Jazid would never have use of what they knew.

The calls receded as she ran from the camp. The rocky ground cut her feet, but she didn't care; nothing could stop her from leaving this place. As she approached the corral, she tried to summon a spell to calm the horses. She had no shape, so she felt the front of the tunic until she found a round button. It was too small to give her any real power, but she managed enough to keep the horses from trumpeting her presence to the camp.

With her joints and her battered muscles protesting, she climbed up on the corral fence. The surge of desperation that had fueled her race from the tent had taken its toll, and now she could barely keep moving.

"Closer, sweetings," she murmured to a horse. He nickered and wandered over, then nuzzled at her hand.

"I've nothing to give you," she whispered, trickling her spell over the animal. Her every joint seemed to protest as she climbed onto its back, and the rough hair of its coat scraped her thighs. She had no bridle or riding blanket, nothing to hold onto but its mane. It smelled of oats and mud and horse.

The animal shuffled and shook its head. Her spell was fading; if she didn't leave soon, the horses might become agitated and draw attention. Right now, the roar of flames and the calls of the people battling it masked her small sounds, but it wouldn't be long before they realized she wasn't in the tent.

"Come on," she urged. Using pressure from her knees, she coaxed the animal toward the gate. Too late, she realized she should have opened the corral first. She hated the thought of getting off, but she had no choice; even if she had known how to jump a fence, she doubted they had enough room to gather speed.

At the gate, she laboriously slid to the fence and then to the ground. When she opened the gate, the horse walked out. Another followed and nibbled the sparse grass poking out of the rocky ground.

"No," she whispered. If any horses wandered into the camp, it could alert Yargazon's men to what she had done. She herded the second animal back inside and closed the gate. The one she had chosen neighed, and she prayed no one heard. If anyone was approaching, though, they were doing it more quietly than her ears could detect. She climbed back on the fence and clenched her teeth as splinters jabbed her feet. The horse stamped when she pulled herself onto his back, and she strained to hold her wan spell of comfort. With shouts from the camp ringing in her ears, she prodded the horse into motion and headed north.

Dragon-Sun, Ginger thought. I know these dark hours aren't your time. But I entreat you. If you truly find favor in me, help me keep this precious freedom.

She rode northward, based on the stars. Although the moon gave some light, it wasn't enough to risk letting the horse run full out over the rocky terrain. It was a steady mount, and it accepted her presence, which probably meant it was a pack animal rather than a war steed. A charger might not have let her ride him even with a spell of soothing.



As they sped up, wind ruffled the horse's mane, and a chill cut through her tunic. She could have formed a warmth spell, but she needed to conserve her strength. The silence of the night surrounded them, broken only by the clicks of sand-chirpers. So far, she heard no pursuit. So far.

Her spell finally died. Mercifully, the horse continued without it. As the pound of her heart eased, she sagged in her seat. She hurt so much. She had drained her resources, but she managed a tiny spell that eased the distress in her joints.

An oddity registered on her mind. The air was clammy. In the desert, especially during summer, this much moisture never thickened the air. Puzzled, she lifted her head to look around.

Fog covered the land.

Ginger slowed the horse, and it neighed as if to protest the un-earthly mist. Although the sky overhead was clear and stars shone like crystals, on the ground, a luminescent fog swirled in the moonlight. A tendril curled around them, and the horse balked, then stamped his feet and backed up. She offered him another spell, calming him enough so he didn't bolt, but he stepped restlessly. The mist hid the land, and it was rising, already at her elbows. She could barely see the horse beneath her.

"This isn't natural," she muttered. Streamers swirled around her face, cool on her skin, and the world turned white. The horse was growing even more agitated; if he bolted now, with the ground hidden, he could stumble and snap his leg.

"It's all right," Ginger said, letting him walk. Within moments, though, he stopped. He neighed in protest, yet when she prodded him, he refused to go. Themist was holding them in place. It curled more thickly around her waist and under her arms. When she pushed at it, her hand slid along a huge coil wider than her body.

A scaled coil.

It lifted her off the horse and swung her high into the air. Below her, the fog boiled—and solidified into a figure on the ground. It was huge, longer than a caravan of twenty wagons and higher than the spire of a clock tower. Gigantic wings that could span half of Sky Flames unfurled from its back and covered the land in impenetrable mist. Two silver eyes larger than her head glowed in its elongated snout. Its mammoth tail was even longer than the creature, and its coil gripped her body. It held her by the thinnest portion at the end, yet even that was thick enough to cover her torso.

The Shadow Dragon opened his mouth and roared white flames.



Ginger's mount had bolted and was racing south, beyond the body of the dragon. The horse looked tiny from up here, where the dragon had hoisted her into the air, though he remained on the ground. When she realized just how high he was lifting her, she squeezed her eyes shut.

Cold air blew past her face. She opened her eyes—and found herself staring into one of the dragon's eyes. The silver orb had a slitted black pupil that either reflected the stars or else had stars within it. It also reflected her terrified face. His head was longer than Ginger's body, and fangs thicker than her leg glinted in his mouth. Smoke curled from his nostrils.

He swung her closer.

Priestess. The thought reverberated in her mind.

Why do you capture me, Shadow Dragon?

You called me.

I called the Dragon-Sun!

The sun cannot hear you at night.

She bit her lip. What will you do with me?

I have not decided. He turned his head and studied her with his other eye. The smoke from his nostrils wafted around her, acrid and hot. You are a favorite of my enemy.

Ginger felt a strange calm. She was frightened, yes, but she had survived so much these past days that fear no longer had power over her. I am no enemy of yours, she thought to the dragon. I think I am not so favored by the sun, either, given what he has allowed to happen.

We cannot affect the events of humanity, Ginger-Sun, even when those we favor suffer.

Dryly she thought, Yet here you are, affecting events. Her escape, to be precise.

When a holder of power calls us with enough strength and enough need, we can manifest in the world of humans.

A holder of power? What is that?

One who wields a power of fire or shadows. Such humans are rare. I know of only one in the last two hundred years.

Who?

You. I am no power. Lately I can barely keep myself alive.

You are strong. If you were not, you would be neither free nor coherent now.

She wasn't convinced she was coherent. Maybe what happened in Yargazon's camp had taxed her mind until it snapped. I didn't call on the sun. He came to the earth of his own volition.

You indeed called him, when your people sought to burn you. He descended and asked you to be his wife. You refused him. Why?

I serve the Dragon-Sun gladly, she thought. It is my honor. But in

matters of the heart, I had given my word to a human man. A man like me. How could I be the consort of a fire dragon?

I do not know, he thought. We can rarely manifest.

Why?

It unbalances nature for the sun to leave the sky or the night to become a void. When I formed, it left nothing where shadows had lain. The balance must restore itself.

This was a power she neither wanted nor could fathom. She might be able to call forth the dragons, but she had no say over what they chose to do. I didn't know.

You are a force, Ginger-Sun, one we cannot control. He scrutinized her with one eye. I must decide how I will respond.

She feared he meant to end her life so she could no longer summon them. His tail rested against her hips, and she felt the powerful muscles in the coil. He could easily crush her.

The dragon's great wings lifted into the air and swept down, creating an immense gale that blew Ginger's hair back from her body. Arching his neck, he breathed white flame into the sky. The coil of his tail tightened—and he leapt off the earth.

"Gods above," she whispered as they soared into the sky. Then she clamped her mouth shut, lest she invoke another deity in the pantheon her husband claimed didn't exist.

The ground fell away with heart-stopping speed. The dragon swung her through the air in huge, slow arcs as his tail swept back and forth. Freezing air rushed past her bared skin.

Shadow Dragon! Don't drop me!

I will not.

The ground passed below with dizzying speed. His wings beat the air in great arcs, their span so large she couldn't see far enough to discern where they ended and the night began.

It's a long way down, she thought.

I must fly. He curled his tail forward until she was near his head.

I can waste no time, for when the sun rises, I will become shadows again.

Where are we going?

That depends on whether or not I see what I seek in time.

What do you seek?

If we find it, you will know.

Will you let me live?

Yes, Ginger-Sun. A sense of surprise at her question came with his thoughts. I saw what they did to you, and how you resisted. You have bravery. Goodness. It is fitting you are favored by the sun. His eye blinked slowly. But take care in calling us, for it harms nature. This does not please us.

I'll be careful.

Good. He swung her back in a majestic curve until his tail was once more behind him.

She wasn't certain how long they flew, but he didn't slow down until the horizon had reddened with the first tints of dawn. As the light increased, the dragon became translucent. She braced her hands against his tail to reassure herself of its solidity.

They landed in a desolate landscape of ragged natural terraces, the debris of failed mountains. She barely felt the jolt when his massive tail set her down. He didn't unwind the coil; instead, it faded into the pre-dawn light.

Shadow Dragon, wait! She ran alongside his disappearing form until she reached his head. The dawn sky shone through his body. You've taken me far from the Jazid army. Thank you.

It was not far enough. His thoughts receded. The Dragon-Sun gave him to you, and I have tried to return you, but I can do no more....

His body vanished, and she was by herself in the predawn flush of day. Her own power swirled within her, but it would soon fade as well, when the Dragon-Sun rose.

"Goodbye," she said. His last thought reverberated in her mind: The Dragon-Sun gave him to you ... It sounded like he meant Darz. Right now she would give a great deal to see her puzzle of a husband.

Ginger shivered, alone in the vast landscape with no horse or supplies. Rock formations rose before her in huge steps. She trudged up one, her pace slowed by her bare feet. She had tough soles, but walking on floors and hiking in the desert were very different matters. By the time she reached the top, the sky blazed red and gold, presaging the sun. She needed a vantage point where she could survey the land for a good route north. She limped around a spear of rock, looked out—and gulped.

A group of Jazid cavalymen had surrounded a man in the rough clothes of a Taka Mal commoner. They were playing with him like cats with a mouse, galloping in circles around him, most of the time just out of his reach. The Jazidians screamed their bloodcurdling cries and lunged in to slash at the man while he turned his horse in a circle, trying to defend himself on all sides. They probably hadn't been at it long, given the early hour, but the fight would be over soon, with ten against one. Metal clanged as blades struck. He fought with uncommon expertise, but she doubted he could hold them off much longer.

The Taka Mal man suddenly reared his horse, silhouetted against the sunrise—just as Ginger had seen him silhouetted against the flames of a blazing plaza.

Darz! She almost shouted, then stopped herself. It would do neither of them any good if the warriors captured her. The sun would rise any moment, but until then power thrummed within her. The button on her tunic was no good; she needed a stronger shape.

Ginger squinted in the predawn light. The Jazidians wore helmets topped with tetrahedral points. She focused, but they were too far away, and she couldn't see the shapes well enough to awaken a spell. She headed down the ridge, keeping in the shadows of jutting slabs. Rocks stabbed her feet. At the bottom, she crouched behind a pile of boulders and concentrated on the helmets. She saw Darz's face, the determination and the fear. He knew he was near death. The Jazidians were tightening their circles, drawing in closer. He kept on fighting, his lips drawn back in a snarl.

Ginger focused again. Her spell caught—and slipped. She wasn't close enough! But she could go no farther without being seen, and she had little doubt what would happen if they caught her out here. It would only make them kill Darz faster, so they could get to her sooner. Ji's rough voice grated in her memory: Men die and women suffer.

Not today, she thought. But she had no time! The sky was lightening. She focused harder on the helmets, harder, harder—

The spell caught.

Flames erupted from the men attacking Darz. The spell was neither as large nor as intense as the one she had created in the tent. But it was enough. With shouts of alarm, they turned their attention to themselves. Several jumped off their horses and rolled on the ground, and the others beat at the flames or yanked off the impossibly burning armor.

The instant they let up their attack, Darz wheeled around and took off, galloping south at a hard pace.

Ginger ran out from behind the boulders. "Darz," she shouted. "Here!"

His head jerked, and she knew the moment he saw her; it was as if a spark jumped between them. Veering toward her, he leaned off his horse, his expression fierce. As he reached down, she grabbed his arm. In the same instant she jumped for his horse, he heaved her upward. She scrambled awkwardly as she vaulted up behind him.

"Hang on!" Darz shouted.

Ginger grabbed him around the waist and held on tight, her front pressed against his back. "We have to get to Quaaz!" she called. It was hard to talk with Grayrider running so hard, but Darz must have heard, because he veered north. Grayrider's hooves thundered on the hard ground.

They soon left the Jazid soldiers behind. Eventually, when no sign of pursuit showed, Darz let the horse slow to a stop. In silence, he helped Ginger down, his face so fierce it frightened her. Then he had them remount so she was in front of him. As they set off at a slower pace, he wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair.

"Gods almighty," he said in a low growl. "I thought I'd never see you again."

His intensity unsettled her. "You came alone?" Surely the merchants hadn't stranded him in the desert.

"No one in the caravan would help." Anger crackled in his voice. "They thought you ran off with Cook.

They were furious, both at losing the people who made their food and at me, for bringing you with the caravan. I told them you would never do such a thing, but they didn't believe it."

"You said that?" she asked. "I wasn't even sure you liked having me around."

"Be sure," he said gruffly. "I knew the nomads had you. I've seen how they operate. When they choose a victim, they'll dog her forever. They savor the chase."

"They had a buyer." She hated the words as much now as when Ji had spoken them. "General Yargazon."

"Dusk Yargazon? You mean the General of the Army for the Atajazid D'az Ozar?"

"Yes, him. Except they didn't use all those titles." She shuddered with the memory. "They just called him the general."

"He's the prince's regent." Darz spoke grimly. "Right now he's probably the most dangerous man in Jazid. He escaped executioners from the Misted Cliffs and snuck the prince out as well. Rumor claims he intends to put the boy back on the Onyx Throne."

Her voice cracked. "Not until he takes the Topaz Throne."

"Good gods, Ginger, what happened?"

She told him everything. Even before she finished, he was pushing Grayrider to go faster. When she said assassins planned to murder the queen at noon, he urged the horse into a gallop, and Ginger could no longer speak. They swept across the land. She kept silent about how much she hurt; her discomfort was nothing compared to the danger faced by their queen.

The sun climbed in the sky, and Darz soon had to let Grayrider slow down, lest he tire the horse so much, they couldn't reach Quaazar. After a few hours, he reined to a stop.

Darz rubbed Grayrider's lathered neck. "I know a water hole where we can rest."

Ginger could hear how much that cost him, having to stop. But if their horse died, they would never reach Quaaz in time.

The water hole was a pond fed by a spring and sheltered by enough of an overhang that the sun didn't dry it up. While Darz tended Grayrider, Ginger lay in the shade and closed her eyes. The relief from riding was bliss, but it wasn't enough. She was going to clatter apart in a pile of bones and skin.

"Ginger," Darz said.

She opened her eyes. He was crouched next to her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I should be stronger."

"You've more strength than two of those Jazid monsters combined." He laid his palm on her cheek. "You need a doctor."

She had never known a real doctor; they were people in tales from the cities. She smiled wanly. "Not

too many out here.”

“No.” He looked miserable. “I’m afraid not.”

“When we get to Quaaz, please don’t turn me out.”

“Good gods, why would I do that!” Then he winced. “Sorry. Too loud.”

“It’s all right.”

“Why do you keep thinking I’m going to turn you out?”

“All those men looking at me, touching me...”

“I would like to kill them all,” he said flatly. “Slowly. Agonizingly. Make them scream the way you screamed. But I have no intention of losing you, the treasure I found hidden in a mining town.” He shook his head. “I can’t imagine how you held out against Yargazon’s interrogators. They’re notorious. Never would I have believed he’d turn them against our people.”

“They thought I was too stupid to understand what they were saying.” It took so much energy to speak.

He sat next to her, one leg bent, his elbow resting on his knee. “If you had told them about me, they would be scouring these lands now, searching.” Softly he added, “You saved my life, Ginger-Sun. Again. In more ways than you can imagine.”

She looked up at him. “What about those men you were fighting?”

“They found me just before you showed up. When I refused to turn back, they attacked.” He pushed his hand through his disheveled hair. “It seemed crazy they would threaten a Taka Mal traveler in his own country. Now it makes sense. They don’t want anyone to find Yargazon hiding an army on the border. Killing a solitary traveler here is easy. They could have left my body in the desert, and no one would have ever known.”

She wondered how many other travelers had met their death that way. “Do you think Yargazon can take the Topaz Throne?”

“Not if we can reach Quaaz in time.” He stood up and offered her hand. “We should go.”

She slowly sat up. “You can ride faster without my weight tiring Grayrider. You should go on by yourself.” She didn’t want to be alone in the middle of the desert, but she wanted even less for the queen to die. “Send someone back for me.”

Darz looked at her with a strange expression, as if she had suggested he cut off his head. He pulled her to her feet, then drew her over to Grayrider. She limped at his side, uncertain how to take his silence. When they reached the horse, Darz stopped and regarded Ginger with that fierce expression of his, as if his eyes could swallow her. Then he offered his hands, cupped together, for her to mount the horse. “Darz?”

He spoke softly. “I could no more go on without you than I could cut out my heart.”

Something happened inside of her then, as if a stiff, rusty bolt had released in her heart. Until this

moment, she hadn't realized how much she had locked away her feelings. She touched his cheek with the tips of her fingers. Then she put her foot in his cupped hands, and he helped her up onto Grayrider.

Within moments, they were riding, speeding against time to stop the warlords of a deposed child-king from conquering their land.



20

### The Topaz Sword

It was nearly noon when Darz reached the outskirts of Quaaz. Ginger thought they were riding through a town, the crowds were so thick. But they hadn't even reached Quaaz yet; these were just travelers going to the city. Darz let Grayrider walk to rest the horse, but Ginger felt his impatience as if it were a tangible presence. They rode past adults and children on foot or in oxen-drawn carts. People ignored them or watched with mild curiosity and then returned to their business.

They soon reached a wall taller than any other human-built barrier Ginger had ever seen, with crenellations along its top. Two great towers flanked the gate. Darz took an audible breath—and snapped his quirt against Grayrider's flank. The horse surged into a gallop and surged past the lines of people and animals entering the city. Gatekeepers were stopping everyone and asking questions. Darz raced straight past them, and people scattered out of his way.

“Hey!” The shout came from behind them. “You there! Stop! Sentinels, get them!”

Darz kept going, and within moments they were deep in the teeming streets of Quaaz. Ginger didn't know whether to gasp at his audacity or gulp. They might end up as prisoners of the queen's guard instead of rescuing her.

Buildings clustered on both sides of the street and people leaned out high windows, calling to those in other windows. Pedestrians crowded the streets, shopkeepers called out their wares, carts bumped along, and children ran everywhere. Ginger had thought J'Hiza was big, but compared to this place, it was a tiny hamlet in the middle of nowhere. These streets went on forever, in every direction, each as crowded as the last.

Darz knew the city well. They had to slow down, lest they trample someone, but he maneuvered through the crowds faster than Ginger would have thought possible. People yelled at him when Grayrider bumped them, but no one otherwise paid attention. They were just two more in the multitudes who thronged Quaaz.

Darz immersed them so well in a maze of crooked lanes, she soon had no idea where they were relative to the gate where they had entered. If they were lucky, the same was true for the sentinels following them.

The Topaz Palace rose above the city. Ginger had heard about the golden-yellow stone that gave the structure its name, but until she saw its towers glowing with their golden onion bulbs, she had never



known how radiantly beautiful a building could be in the sunlight.

As they neared the palace, the city changed. Streets became wider and less crowded. They clattered across plazas with fountains. The houses set back from the road were hidden by gates and vine-covered fences abloom with sun-snaps and fire-lily vines.

Finally they galloped into a huge plaza where a reflecting pool stretched out to the palace itself. Darz gave Grayrider his head, and they raced alongside the water. Guards on foot were running toward them, coming around from the other side, and also two riders in gold dragon helmets and red and gold uniforms. They bellowed warnings, but Darz kept going, ignoring them all.

“Darz!” Ginger shouted for him to hear. “You have to stop! They’ll think you’re attacking!”

“They’ll recognize me.” He said something else, what sounded like, “I hope.”

By the time they arrived at the courtyard in front of the palace, the men on foot had almost reached them. They yelled for Darz to stop, yet no one drew his sword. Ginger sincerely hoped that continued, that when Darz dismounted, they didn’t skewer him first and demand to know what he was doing afterward.

Except Darz didn’t dismount.

The two great double doors of the palace were open, and a man in a sunrise-plumed helmet stood in the entrance with his curved sword drawn. When Darz rode straight at him, Ginger groaned. Her husband was mad! Or perhaps everyone here was mad, for she couldn’t understand why the doors were open.

As Darz galloped by the man, he shouted what sounded like, “Get spear caster!” Then they were inside and pounding across a courtyard with a circular fountain. The soaring arches of a colonnade surrounded it, and topaz mosaics covered the walls, arches and pillars. Darz thundered under an arch and into the hall beyond. Ginger had given up being nervous; this was so far outside her experience, she had no referent to absorb it all.

They galloped down the gleaming halls, and tiles cracked under Grayrider’s hooves. People scattered out of the way, servants and soldiers and clerks. From their shocked looks, she gathered they didn’t think this was normal, either.

At the end of an especially wide corridor, two gigantic doors stood ajar. Darz clattered past them and into a large hall with stained-glass windows. A carpet stretched from the doors all the way to a dais at the far end, where two thrones stood side by side, plated in gold and encrusted with gems.

As Darz galloped down the hall, a tall man with silver hair ran into the far end, near the dais. He dazzled Ginger, and she couldn’t take in his full appearance, only his brilliant red-and-gold uniform and the huge curved sword at his side. Then she realized the sash that slanted across his chest bore disks enameled in sunrise colors. She recognized them from descriptions in the history scrolls; he had on the dress uniform of a Taka Mal general. She had read only of ranks as high as four disks; if he had five, he must truly be formidable, perhaps even the General of the Army, the man in command of the entire military.

“Darz, we’re in trouble,” she said. If he heard, he gave no sign. He brought Grayrider to such an abrupt stop at the dais, the horse reared up above the general. Ginger clutched its mane and prayed Darz didn’t end up killing the commander of Her Majesty’s armed forces.

As Grayrider came down, the general shouted at Darz, “What the flaming hell are you doing?”

“Where is Vizarana?” Darz demanded.

Ginger expected the general to call for guards. Instead he said, “In the Sunset Garden. Why?”

“Who is with her?” Urgency crackled in Darz’s voice.

“The Jazid envoy. She and Drummer took him to the lake.”

“Both of them?” Darz shouted at him. “Not the baby, too?”

“Yes, actually.” The general frowned at him. “We’ve been entertaining the diplomats from the Jazid army.”

“Diplomats, hell,” Darz said. “How many Jazidians are with her? And how many guards?”

“Just one Jazid officer. Major Tarcol,” the general said, his face puzzled. “And two of our palace guards.”

“Listen to me,” Darz said. “Yargazon has an army that may be marching on Quaaz. His Shadow Assassins exist, Spearcaster. They’ve been murdering our officers. I want you to put anyone here who has anything to do with Jazid under guard. They aren’t to go near Vizarana. And send a full contingent of palace sentinels to the Sunrise Garden. Now.”

With that, he wheeled Grayrider around and took off. He didn’t even pause to let Ginger off the horse. She was too shocked to protest. What she had just seen, Darz giving orders to a general—no, she couldn’t absorb the implications, not yet.

He raced through the palace and under an arch into a huge garden. Trellises curved everywhere, heavy with red pyramid-blossoms. He raced down yellow gravel paths between flower beds of snap-lions. Fire-opal blossoms blazed on bushes sculpted to resemble gold-wing hawks in flight.

Beyond the flowers, a hill of impossibly succulent grass sloped to a lake. It dizzied Ginger; she had never seen so much green in one place. Sunlight glanced off the lake as if it were a gigantic mirror. As her mind adjusted, she realized people were running under the trees near the shore. It was more than the four General Spearcaster had described. A group of large men in the dark clothes worn by Jazidians were attacking a woman in a green silk tunic and trousers and a slender man with impossibly yellow hair. The woman held a baby in her arms. Two beleaguered Taka Mal guards were trying to hold off the attackers, but they were woefully outnumbered.

Grayrider’s hooves tore up the grass as Darz sped toward the group. One of the taller men caught the woman and wrenched her to a stop. Two other men grabbed the man with yellow hair. The Taka Mal guards were fighting three of the Jazidians, their swords flashing, but they couldn’t break through to the woman. When the man who had caught her tried to take the baby, the man with yellow hair went berserk. He fought furiously against his captors with his fists, but he was obviously outmatched in size, strength, and training.

“Gods almighty.” Darz drew his sword and shouted in his booming voice, “Get the flaming hell off her!”

The fighters spun around, and the woman twisted away from the man who had caught her. She lunged

into a run, cradling the child against her chest, and raced up the slope toward Darz. She shouted something, not “Help me!” but what sounded like, “Help Drummer!”

Darz bore down on them all with his sword held high. The Jazidians regrouped to face him, their blades glinting, and the Taka Mal soldiers ran to the man with yellow hair. Then Darz was in the midst of the group, slashing at the Jazidians from horseback. He faced six of them, but they were on foot, which gave him an advantage. And he was angry. Ginger didn’t think he even realized she was still on the horse. He clenched her around the waist with one arm while wielding his sword with the other, and she held her breath, praying his rage didn’t incinerate her along with the warriors.

What must have looked like an easy kill to the assassins suddenly wasn’t so simple. Darz swung at one of them, and the man parried with a straight rather than curved blade. Metal swords clanged as the swords hit. Darz struck again, and this time he knocked the weapon out of the man’s hand. It arced through the air and landed in the grass.

To Ginger, time seemed to slow, as if they moved through invisible molasses. Darz’s blade descended again, painfully bright in the sun. The assassin raised his arms to ward it off, and his face clenched into a snarl. Then the sword hit, cleaving the man through his arm and from his left shoulder to his right side. Blood shot into the air, splattering Darz’s horse. Ginger screamed, and it echoed in her ears. Until that moment, she hadn’t truly comprehended what it meant that her husband was a warrior.

Everything jolted back to normal speed, and she realized other riders had joined them, the sentinels Darz had called for. It was too many people, too many voices, too much happening. The assassin Darz had killed lay on the ground in his own blood.

Several sentinels dismounted and joined the Taka Mal guards protecting the man with yellow hair. Two of the assassins were crumpled on the grass, and the sentinels were taking the others prisoner. The woman with the baby was trying to reach the man with the yellow hair, but people had surrounded her, talking, hovering, enclosing her and the child in a protective cocoon. Ginger stared at her, knowing she had seen the face before. Her head was swimming. That woman...her face...it was on the gold hexa-coin of Taka Mal.

“Ah, gods,” Ginger whispered. She swayed and started to topple off the horse.

Darz put his arms around her, still holding his bloodied sword. He leaned over, his forehead against the back of her head. “Don’t fall, Ginger-Sun.”

“Sire,” a man said. “We have them all. Four are alive.”

Darz’s head lifted. “Lock them in the north tower. And have Spearcaster and Firaz meet me in the conference room.”

Ginger struggled to get her bearings. The yellow-haired man and the woman were together now, the man with his arms around the woman and her baby, the three of them surrounded by guards. Yellow hair. How could it be? The only person she knew without dark hair was herself, and hers was the color of fire. It was easier to wonder at his hair than to absorb the truth, that she was looking at the queen of Taka Mal and her Aronsdale consort.

It finally registered on Ginger’s dazed mind that a sentinel on a large bay horse had come over to them. He was the one who had spoken to Darz. She couldn’t take it all in, but she didn’t want to pass out, not in front of all these people.

The sentinel was watching Ginger. To Darz, he said, “Do you or your guest need any medical help?”

“I’m fine,” Darz said. “But, yes, bring a doctor.” Holding Ginger, he spoke in a low voice. “I couldn’t let go of her. The assassins—they tried to murder all the heirs.”

“Yes, sir.” The sentinel didn’t seem to know how to respond. Ginger was glad she wasn’t the only confused person here.

After the guard went for the doctor, a man on a sleek black charger rode up to them. He must not have been in the royal party entertaining Jazid diplomats, because he didn’t have on a dress uniform; he wore “only” the day uniform of a Taka Mal general, with four rather than five disks to indicate his rank.

This second general peered at Darz. “Where have you been? We’ve been searching for you for over a tenday.”

“It’s a long story.” Darz sounded exhausted. “Firaz, would Yargazon really do it, ride on Taka Mal?”

“We’ve sent scouts out to see what they can find.” He was staring at Ginger. “Who is this beautiful creature?”

“Do not call my wife a creature,” Darz said sharply.

Ginger hadn’t been fully aware of just how many people were around them, all talking, until everyone went silent. The queen turned from her discussion to look. Although she still had the shawl that had wrapped her baby, her husband held the child protectively cradled in his arms.

“Your wife?” Firaz’s brow furrowed. “I don’t recall any negotiations about you taking a wife.”

“I did the damn negotiations myself,” Darz growled.

“I see.” Firaz didn’t look as if he saw at all.

Darz reached into the travel bags and rummaged until he found the scrolls. “These are the documents. She and I both signed them.”

A memory rushed back to Ginger: Darz, trying to rewrite his name on the scrolls and smudging it instead. Making it look like Baz. And he had added Ar’Quaaz. It was an arcane way to say “of the city of Quaaz.” Except it had one other meaning, even rarer and more antique: Of the House of Quaaz. No one used it, of course, because Taka Mal had almost none of the ancient highborn houses remaining except the Zanterians—

And the Quaazeros.

He had written his true name on that scroll that night, at the same time he wrote that she and their children would be his full heirs. Baz Goldstone Quaazero. Gods help her, she had married a member of the royal family.

General Firaz had unrolled one of the scrolls and was studying it. “Damn thing looks in order.”

The queen spoke from where she stood with her consort. Her voice was husky and rich. “Baz, it would

behoove you to provide your wife with more clothes than the undertunic of a Jazid soldier.”

Ginger shivered and crossed her arms, painfully aware of her clothes. The undertunic was opaque instead of translucent, but she was still sitting in front of all these impossibly important people with her arms and legs bare, and nothing but a light shift covering her.

Vizarana walked over to them, flanked by guards. The image on the hexa-coins hadn’t exaggerated her beauty. Black curls cascaded over her shoulders. At the moment, her very large eyes were also very angry. She frowned at Darz. “If this lovely young woman is your wife, perhaps you might treat her in a more hospitable manner?”

As soon as Darz inhaled, Ginger knew that, saints help them, he was going to shout at the queen of Taka Mal. Before he managed a word, though, Vizarana frowned with an expression that looked exactly like his when he was irate. “Don’t yell at me, Baz.”

“I was saving your damn life,” he growled.

Her face gentled. “And I thank you with the deepest gratitude, dear cousin.”

Cousin. Ah, no. Vizarana was the one he was supposed to have married. Except she wed the Aronsdale prince instead. Her “skinny” husband was the lithe young man who stood watching them while he held his child as if he would protect her from a thousand assassins.

General Firaz was scanning the scroll. “Baz, this says you married her twelve days ago.”

“That’s right.” Darz’s hair rustled as he turned his head behind her. Pinwheels danced in her vision.

Firaz had a strange expression. “Then it is possible she may be with child?”

Saints above! Ginger’s face flamed. Why would he bring up such a private matter? She probably wasn’t pregnant, but it was a matter between Darz and her, not Darz and her and his generals.

“I know,” Darz said. Incredibly, his voice was uneven. He had faced death at least three times in the past few days without a flinch, yet at the mention of the slight chance he might have impregnated his wife, his voice shook. Ginger thought perhaps she understood men even less than she had realized.

In a low voice, she said, “It happens, you know.”

Darz spoke softly. “Aye, Ginger-Sun. Yargazon sought to murder Vizarana’s heirs, never knowing he had as his prisoner the woman who might carry the child third in line to the Topaz Throne, after Vizarana’s child and myself.”

And then, finally, she understood. All of it. Why the Dragon-Sun had tested her fidelity to Darz, and why the Shadow Dragon implied the sun had chosen Darz for her, though he favored her for himself. If you want him, you may have him. The sun had given her the Quaaazera prince, the man of highest rank and title in all Taka Mal, the human embodiment of the Dragon-Sun.

It was too much. She sagged in Darz’s arms. She wanted to say Take me home, but she had no idea what place to call home. She needed somewhere safe, away from all these staring, stunned people, where she could curl into a ball and nurse her injuries.

“Baz,” the queen said. “I think you better let her down.”

Darz, or Baz as they called him, spoke gruffly. “Firaz, I’ll meet you and Spearcaster in the conference room in twenty minutes.” He waved his hand. “Take the sentinels.”

The general nodded and brought his horse around, calling out orders. Many of the sentinels left with him, but six stayed to guard the royal family. One of the sentinels helped Ginger dismount. Acutely self-conscious, she held down the hem of her tunic as she eased off the horse. When Ginger was standing on the ground, Vizarana motioned the sentinel away and took Ginger’s arm, offering her support. Ginger could do little more than stare at Vizarana’s wild curls and fiercely beautiful eyes.

Belatedly, Ginger realized what she was doing. “Your Majesty, forgive me,” she rasped, and started to drop to her knees. Next to her, Darz jumped down from the horse.

“Don’t do that.” Vizarana caught her elbow and drew her back up. She started to lay her shawl over Ginger’s shoulders, but then she stopped.

“Saints above,” the queen said. “What happened to you?”

Darz put his arms around Ginger, and she leaned her head into his chest, grateful for the support. So tired. She was so tired. Every muscle in her body hurt.

“Dusk Yargazon racked her,” he said grimly.

Vizarana’s stunning voice turned icy. “I see.”

Spots danced in Ginger’s vision. Her legs felt odd, as if they no longer contained bones. They melted under her. With a sigh, she slid out of Darz’s hold and crumpled to the ground.



21

## Sky Colors

Time flowed. Hours. Days. Ginger didn’t know. She lay on a soft mattress enveloped by covers. Sometimes a woman hovered over the bed, tending her. Another woman came, older, gentle. She fed Ginger soup from a yellow glazed bowl. Other times Vizarana was there, speaking in her distinctive voice. Guards came in and out of sight. But most of the time Ginger escaped into sleep.

The next time she awoke, the bed had turned hard. Gritty. Lifting her head, she peered around.

She was lying in the desert.

Bewildered, Ginger slowly sat up. She felt as if she were moving in a thick syrup. Whoever had brought her here had left her with nothing, not even water. A chill cut through her shift. She shivered and rubbed her hands on her arms. Surely she would have awoken when they carried her out here. Unless they

drugged her. Did they find her marriage to Darz that abhorrent? Although he wouldn't be the first Quaaazera prince to wed a priestess, it was unusual. They might tell him she died while he was away dealing with Yargazon. But that didn't fit; they had seemed solicitous rather than hostile.

She recognized nothing here and saw no sign of the city or the travelers who thronged to it. Orange ground spread to the horizon, with jagged red rocks. No life showed, not even the virtually indestructible sand-grass. The day had dimmed as if it were overcast, yet the sun burned low on the horizon in a cloudless sky. The light had a red cast, and the desert was dark even where rays of the setting sun touched the earth.

Ginger climbed to her feet and looked around the stark plain. She rubbed her hands on her arms, seeking warmth. The last molten sliver of the sun vanished below the horizon, and the desert reddened even more. The color wasn't in the sky, it filled the air. The luminous hues swirled into a pillar—

And took on human form.

The woman was twice as tall as Ginger, and the layered drapes of her gown glowed like a sunset. Her hair rippled and streamed until it was difficult to tell where it ended and the air began.

Ginger went down on one knee and bowed her head. You honor me, Lady Sunset .

Rise, child. Her voice was like whiskey that had aged for centuries, millennia, eons. It held the promise of beginnings but also the fading of life.

Ginger rose to her feet. I am privileged by your presence. But I did not call you.

You have always called me, Ginger-Sun. She extended her hand, and a fire opal glowed on her palm. With this.

Did you give me the spells? Hope stirred in Ginger. Would she finally understand the source of her power? Then I will always honor them .

If you use them in honor of me, I am pleased. She closed her hand around the opal, and its light shone through her fingers. But the gifts do not come from me. They descend from Your Aronsdale grandfather.

Gifts? I fear they are a curse .

They are what you make of them. Be wise. Her thoughts flowed. Understand the price they exact. The illness you suffer now is as much from the violent use of your power as from what you endured by Yargazon's hand.

Ginger had felt the backlash of her spells. The darkness is within me .

To know light, you must know shadows. They cannot exist without each other.

Ginger spoke the fear that had always been with her, even more since she had created the inferno in Sky Flames. The power makes me less .

Why?

Because I'm capable of terrible acts.

You can choose to reject such acts, except when to do otherwise would be a greater evil. Her ageless gaze never wavered, though her body rippled with light. To do what is right though you are capable of great wrong is a more powerful good than to do what is right because you can do nothing else.

I don't know if I can always choose what is right.

You have said it yourself: If the dragon always smoothed your path, it would weaken you. You choose. That demands more of you, but in doing so, you become more. Remember this.

I will remember. She spread her hands out from her body. But why, if I celebrate the sun, do my spells come only in the hours of shadow?

Perhaps it is for you to bring light into the dark. Her thoughts rippled. So it is that I set you a task.

A task?

Bring light to my daughters, Ginger-Sun. You have come within the highest circles of the land. If you can make a difference in the constrained lives of my daughters, I charge you with that task.

As it is your will, it will be mine. She wasn't sure how she could better the lives of other women, but she would try.

The colors of Sunset's body faded. If your need is ever again great, call on us. I cannot promise we will come; The balance must reassert itself. But we will try....

The light disappeared, and Ginger was alone in the desert. The sky overhead had deepened into twilight, and stars sparkled like a dust of diamonds.

"Wait!" She turned in a circle, searching the barren land. "Don't leave me here."

Only the keening wind answered her.

"Wait!" Ginger sat bolt upright. Voluminous bedcovers fell down to her waist. She was staring at a candle burning in a porcelain holder at the foot of her bed. The rest of the room was in shadow. The window opposite showed the twilight sky with a glitter of early stars.

The pounding of her heart slowed. Maybe she had dreamed the Sunset. Taking a breath, she pushed her hand through her hair.

Orange sand scattered across the sheets.

Across the room, the door swung inward. A woman bustled in bearing a tray with a steaming bowl, and another woman followed, holding a candle. With a start, Ginger realized the light bearer was the queen.

"You're awake," Vizarana said. She motioned for the other woman to set the tray on the nightstand. The smell of leek and saffron soup wafted enticingly around Ginger.

After the maid left, Vizarana sat in the chair by the bed and set her candle on the tray. "Are you



hungry?”

“In a bit,” Ginger said. “I’m a little groggy.” In truth, she was too self-conscious to eat in front of the queen. Vizarana was twice her age, with a matured beauty that came as much from her strength as any arrangement of features. In her presence, Ginger felt callow. Rather than the constraining garb favored by highborn women, the queen wore a red tunic and a pair of Zanterian riding trousers dyed a rich crimson. Gleaming crimson balls dangled from her ears, and a matching necklace glinted around her throat. Her black hair spilled wildly about her shoulders. In the gold sheath on her belt, a dagger with a topaz in its hilt glinted. She looked like a barbarian warrior more than a stateswoman.

“My honor at your presence, Your Majesty,” Ginger said.

“And mine at yours,” Vizarana said. “But you don’t have to call me. ‘Your Majesty.’ We’re cousins, now. Jade will do.”

Jade. Not even Vizarana, but her private name. “Thank you. Please call me Ginger.”

The queen nodded, accepting the name. “How do you feel?”

“Muzzy,” she admitted. Her mind was clearing, though, and filling with questions. “Do you know what happened with General Yargazon? Is Darz all right?”

Jade tilted her head. “Who is Darz?”

“Well, he told me his name was Darz. You all call him Baz.”

“Ah.” Jade drew one of her feet up onto the chair and rested her elbow on her bent knee, a feat few other women of highborn status in Taka Mal could have managed, given their constraining garb.

“It’s a mess,” Jade said. “Thank the saints we had your warning. Yargazon had brought his army to within only an hour of the city when Baz met him with ours.” A fierce satisfaction showed in her gaze. “Yargazon was quite shocked to see my cousin alive and well. Alive, well—and furious.”

Ginger crumpled the covers in her hand. “Did they fight?”

Jade let out a long breath. “It seems that for today at least, we are spared a war. Had their plan succeeded, it would have been different. Who would have led our army? General Spearcaster, yes, but with the loss of the royal family, and Jazid descending with no warning, we would have been vulnerable.” She pulled her hand through her hair, drawing curls back from her face. “As it was, the forces were evenly matched and ours far better prepared than Yargazon expected. Or so I’m assuming. He claims he had no intention of attacking, that he had learned of the assassination plot and was coming to defend us. He says you made up the entire story about his intention to betray Taka Mal.”

Anger swept over Ginger. “He’s lying!”

Jade raised her hand, palm out in the traditional gesture of calm. “We know, Ginger-Sun. A great deal of evidence supports what you’ve said.” Her voice hardened. “Including the murder attempt against my cousin and heir. It also explains the disappearance of several of my top officers.” Grief showed on her expressive face. “Your description of Colonel Aroch was devastatingly accurate. Nor would he have ever willingly told you that information about my covert agents. You couldn’t have known unless you were present where it was forced out of him.”

With a sinking sensation, Ginger realized who she meant. “The colonel was the man they interrogated before me?”

“Yes, we think so.” She rubbed her eyes, then let her arm drop. “I’ve known Aroch for years. To think of what he went through—and that they attacked Baz, my closest kin—” She took a deep breath. Then she said, simply, “Yargazon has made an enemy.”

Ginger suspected the queen was far more dangerous than Yargazon realized, perhaps more than he could even comprehend. But Ginger had also sensed the power simmering within him. She could well believe Darz’s claim that he was one of the most dangerous men alive. “General Yargazon won’t give up.”

“I know.” Jade thumped her fist on her knee. “It was a wickedly effective ploy. If he had succeeded, he would have doubled the size of his army and put the boy atajazid on a throne the Misted Cliffs doesn’t control. Even failing, he creates a threat to the Misted Cliffs that weakens their hold in Jazid. Cobalt has already overextended his forces trying to secure their country. Now he must contend with a threat to Taka Mal, as well, which means he either must extend his forces further or risk losing sway in the desert. He is bound by kinship, too, because of Drummer, my husband.” She shook her head. “I know people see Cobalt as evil. But Yargazon is the one I fear.”

“I can see why.” Those few words barely touched Ginger’s feelings on that matter.

Jade regarded her for a moment.

“What is it?” Ginger asked.

“Yargazon doesn’t deny he bought you as a pleasure slave. In fact, he insists we return you to him.”

“What? No . You cannot!”

“Ah, Ginger-Sun. We would never do such.”

Ginger took a shaky breath. She saw something on Jade’s face she hadn’t seen for a long time, not from the elders or the nomads or the interrogators. Compassion. Lately, the only people who had shown it to her were Darz, Heath, the miners and Jalla. And Kindle, who could be a good person when he wasn’t drinking or trying to blow up people.

Jade spoke quietly. “Dusk Yargazon is no fool. He is well aware that abducting the wife of the General of the Queen’s Army would be an act of war.”

“Baz commands the entire army?” She knew she shouldn’t be surprised, given what she had seen. But still.

Jade smiled wryly. “I take it he neglected to mention that fact, too.”

“Among a few others.”

“Don’t be angry with him. He was protecting himself.”

“Against me?”

“Actually, I think he did trust you. But none of the people around you. He was also worried what you might reveal if you were captured.” She inclined her head. “You have our deepest gratitude, Ginger-Sun. To go through what you did and never reveal that Baz was alive—I will forever be indebted to you.”

“I don’t think I could have held out much longer.”

“Many would have broken sooner.”

She thought back to what Darz had told her so many days ago. It seems I’m on leave whether I want to be or not. “Darz—I mean Baz, said he had been going to Taza Qu.”

Jade spoke in a voice heavy with grief. “I was the one who wanted him to take some time. He lost someone close to him in the Battle of the Rocklands, both a mentor and a friend, another of my generals. I knew Baz needed to mourn. But after he vanished—” She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them. “I blame myself. If I had let him stay on duty, the assassins wouldn’t have found him.”

“He’s the one who chose to slip away from his guards that morning.” Ginger understood much better now why Darz had been so adamant she never go anywhere by herself.

“It wouldn’t have mattered if I hadn’t urged him to go.”

Ginger spoke in a quiet voice. “And you and your baby would be dead now, and your consort a Jazid prisoner.”

Jade stared at her for a long moment. Then she murmured, “Aye, that’s true.”

“General Yargazon is not someone I wish to meet again,” Ginger said, one of the great understatements of her life.

“The doctor and midwife tell me—well, they don’t think you were forced.” Jade spoke awkwardly. “But neither was certain, with all the riding you did.”

“I wasn’t.” Ginger crumpled the sheet in her fists. “He hadn’t gotten around to it yet.”

Jade leaned forward. “Know this, Ginger-Sun. No matter what anyone has said in your village or anywhere else, you have nothing to feel shame for.” Then she said, “But if he did force you, we must know.”

Her face was burning. “He didn’t.”

“Baz says you had your menses on the trip with the caravan.”

“He told you that?” What a thing to discuss with the queen.

“I’m sorry.” Jade looked as if she meant it. “But Yargazon says he slept with you, and that if you have a child, it will be his.”

Ginger stared at her. “That’s horrible!”

“Baz used less repeatable language,” Jade said wryly. “But if you give birth in nine months or less,

Yargazon is going to claim he sired the child who stands third in line to my throne.”

“I can’t believe this,” Ginger said. “He’s telling you he raped your cousin’s wife and therefore he has a claim to the throne? That’s crazy.”

“Apparently Baz had a similar reaction.” Jade’s smile had no humor in it, only an edge like a honed knife. “Firaz tells me they literally had to hold Baz back from trying to kill Yargazon and starting a war right there.”

Ginger scowled. “Then why isn’t Yargazon in a dungeon?”

“Unfortunately, his encampment straddles the border. He claims he was in Jazid when the nomads brought you to him.” Her gaze darkened. “And in Jazid, it is legal to buy women.”

“Except for the ‘small’ matter that I’m already married.”

“I’m afraid niceties like marriage and consent have little to do with this.” Jade shook her head. “It wasn’t so long ago Taka Mal had similar laws. They’ve changed over the years, and I’ve made progress. But it takes time. I can’t just throw around decrees. Too much, too fast, and the people will reject my authority. It’s iffy enough already having a woman on the Topaz Throne.” She looked as if she had eaten a sour fruit. “According to Jazid custom, what happened to you is acceptable, and according to their justice system, it’s legal.”

“But surely he can’t take me back.”

“Not while you’re on Taka Mal soil.” Grimly, Jade added, “Assuming proof exists that he had anything to do with your disappearance.” She gave Ginger a look of apology. “My husband and I always have guards, everywhere, even in our home. I’m afraid the same will have to hold for you.” After a pause, she added, “Eventually you get used to it.”

It sounded like a relief to Ginger, after all that had happened. Hesitant, she said, “I thought you all would object to me as a consort for Baz.”

“Oh, my generals like you, just from what Baz has told them.” She gave an affectionate snort. “Hell, they’re men. They liked you the moment they laid eyes on you. They see a gorgeous woman, they stop thinking.”

Ginger couldn’t help but smile, imagining how Darz would respond to that statement. Definitely loud. “Even so.”

Jade’s grin flashed, so much like Darz. “I’ve never seen my cousin so smitten. General Firaz says he can’t understand why you put up with Baz, but he thinks having a priestess for a wife will be good for my cousin.”

Ginger wasn’t sure they understood. “He told you, didn’t he, that I don’t come from a noble or royal line?”

Jade shrugged. “Neither does Drummer. A priestess is considered a highborn woman, but Drummer’s connections are all by marriage. His father is an orchard keeper.” Wryly she added, “You should have heard my generals complain about that.”

“Drummer?” Ginger asked. “You mean your husband? The man with yellow hair?”

Jade made an exasperated noise. “Why is that the first thing people always say about him? Firaz even gave it as a reason I shouldn’t marry him. A lot of people in Aronsdale have yellow hair.” She paused, considering Ginger. “Or red-gold.”

“My grandfather was from Aronsdale.”

Jade started to speak, paused, started again, then stopped and scratched her chin.

“What is it?” Ginger asked.

“Baz showed me the opal you carry.”

Gods only knew what would happen if the queen thought she was a witch. “It’s a good luck charm.” Ginger smiled, trying to deflect the conversation. “It must work. I met Baz.”

Jade snorted. “You call that good luck? Not for your ears, I’d wager.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “He does have a robust voice.”

“That’s a diplomatic way to put it.” Jade’s smile changed into something harder to read. Curiosity perhaps. “Drummer has such a charm, also. His is a gold cube.”

Ginger recalled one of her earliest conversations with Darz, when he described the Battle of the Rocklands: Some say this dragon in the sky was no more than a trick of light and air created by the queen’s consort. Was Jade trying to tell her something, but holding back just as Ginger would hesitate?

Ginger spoke carefully. “If Prince Drummer was a commoner, how did he end up related to the king of the Misted Cliffs?”

“It’s convoluted,” Jade admitted. “Drummer’s sister married Muller Dawnfield, the cousin of the king of Aronsdale. Later, the king of Harsdown tried to conquer Aronsdale. The Aronsdale king defeated him and ended up in control of Harsdown. He sent his cousin Muller to be sovereign there. Cobalt was the son of the deposed king of Harsdown. It took Cobalt years, but he raised an army to take back Harsdown. To stop the war, Muller’s daughter agreed to marry him. So Cobalt doesn’t get the throne of Harsdown, but his son will. Cobalt’s wife is Drummer’s niece.”

The lives of royal families sounded a lot less pleasant and a lot more complicated than Ginger had ever imagined. “Goodness.”

“I don’t think much of that was involved,” Jade said dryly.

“But King Muller married a commoner, yes? Drummer’s sister.”

Jade met her gaze. “That’s right.”

“They do that in Aronsdale, I’ve heard.” She hesitated. “People say it is because the royals seek mages to be their brides.”

“So they say.”

Ginger didn't know how to ask if it were true. "Does it bother Prince Drummer that people think his sister is a mage?" Or Drummer himself?

"I don't think so." Jade shrugged. "People say all sorts of things about royal families. It's the mystique, you know."

"I guess so." She doubted Jade would say more. Ginger didn't blame her, having almost died at the stake for just the rumor of such abilities. She rubbed her eyes. "It must be late."

"Ach!" Jade sounded just like Darz. "I shouldn't keep you awake."

She thought of what had happened before the queen came in to see her. "Did you see the sunset tonight?"

"Wasn't that odd? I've never seen one with no colors."

Ginger's pulse jumped. "Yes. I wonder why it happened."

Jade shrugged. "My astronomers say the sky had less dust than usual. It seemed the same as usual to me, but they know more about such things."

No colors. A chill went through Ginger, and she brushed at the orange sand scattered on the quilt. Another thought pulled her, too. She spoke shyly, still unsure of her place here. "Is Baz back at the palace?"

"He's been in council with my other generals." Jade picked up the candle and rose to her feet. "I'm going to join them. I'll tell him you awoke."

"Thank you."

Jade went to the door. But then she paused. Turning back, she said, "Sometime, perhaps you would like to discuss Aronsdale with Drummer. He might be able to help you learn more about your grandfather's heritage."

Her pulse leapt. Her grandfather's greatest heritage to her was her mage gifts. "I would like that."

"I'll tell him." With that, the queen departed, leaving one flickering candle. Ginger lay down, worn out, while her thoughts roiled. . . .

She woke into darkness and rolled against Darz. Fast asleep, he gave a snort of a snore and settled deeper into the mattress.

"I'm glad you're here," she murmured. "Even if you do snore too loud."

Apparently he wasn't as deep in slumber as she thought, for he chuckled and turned onto his back. He pulled her into his arms so she was lying with her head in the curve where his arm met his shoulder. "Light of the moon, priestess."

A memory jumped into her mind: his sword cleaving the assassin in two. She didn't know if she would ever reconcile these parts of his personality, the man who touched her with such gentleness and the killer who fought so savagely.

"I'm not really a priestess anymore," she said. "I have no temple."

"Jade is going to ask if you'll serve in the palace temple. We don't have anyone." He yawned. "She's trying to figure how to phrase it so it doesn't sound as if she's taking advantage of your coming here."

"I think you just took care of that."

"Oh! Damn. I'm an idiot."

She kissed his cheek. "But a handsome one."

"You're supposed to say, 'No, you're not an idiot,'" he told her. "Or, 'I would be happy to serve in your temple.'"

She settled more into the curve of his arm. "It would be my honor to serve as priestess for the royal family."

"Ginger!"

"Hmm?"

"I'm going to rue the day I ever introduced you to Jade," he growled. "You treat me just like she does."

Ginger liked being compared to the queen. But then her good mood receded. "She's the one you were supposed to marry, isn't she?"

"Yes. But she's too much like my sister." He rubbed his hand over her shoulder. "I'm glad I didn't."

"She's gorgeous."

He hmphed. "She's impossible. She wouldn't have married me anyway. She was afraid I was after her throne."

Ginger didn't ask if that were true. For him to say anything but "no" could be treason. She had no doubt he was loyal to his cousin. But she could see another reason they never married; it would have been a constant struggle for power. She wondered if they realized they had chosen similar life-mates, a companion who was gentle where they were fierce, someone younger, vulnerable, in need of their protection, a spouse who was like water to their fire. It didn't matter that Vizarana was female and Darz male; their Quaazera heritage outweighed all the rest.

"You said her name was Lima," Ginger said.

"I couldn't tell you her real name." He grinned. "Don't tell her I said Lima. She'll kill me. I used to call her Lima Bean when we were children. She hated it."

"I won't tell." Ginger paused, puzzled. "You also said she and Drummer married for love."

“They did.” Grudgingly, he added, “The treaty business was a good idea. But she didn’t come up with it until after she proposed to him.”

That really woke Ginger up. “She asked him?”

Darz snorted. “He’s a damn minstrel, for flaming sake. An acrobat who’s never wielded a sword in his life. It would have been an insult and presumption beyond redemption for him to ask the queen of Taka Mal to marry him.”

“It all sounds so romantic.”

“Ach! Why do women say that? It wasn’t romantic. It was maddening and damn near got that boy killed three times over.”

“He’s hardly a boy.”

“He’s too young for her,” Darz grouched. Then he sighed, and the tension in his arms eased. “But for some reason, Jade loves him. He makes her happy. So I can live with it.”

“Good...” She closed her eyes.

He turned on his side. “Don’t go to sleep, Ginger-Sun.”

“Darz—”

“I know,” he muttered. “Behave, Baz. She’s been through a lot. And don’t make a baby for at least three months.”

“They told you not to touch me for three months?”

“Let’s just say it was strongly suggested.”

“I need time, but not that much.” Given the way her body was reacting to him, she suspected it wouldn’t be long at all. “We can figure some other way to avoid pregnancy for three months.”

His voice lightened. “I like that idea better.”

She smiled, pleased. “You’re a prince.”

“Yes, I know,” he grumbled. “I assure you, it doesn’t mean I’m a nice person.”

“You try to hide it. But you don’t very well.”

He grouched more, holding her, but she could tell he was pleased. He fell silent, and she thought he had gone to sleep. Then he asked, “Are you awake?”

Drowsing, she didn’t have the energy to answer. After she had been quiet for some time, her breathing deep and regular, he murmured, “I think I’m in love with you, Ginger-Sun.”

Softly she said, “Then I am a lucky woman indeed, to have my feelings returned.”



“Ach! I thought you were asleep!”

“Mmm...Light of the moon, my loud husband.”

He laughed and lowered his voice. “Light always, wife.”

For the first time since the night the miners had brought Baz into the temple, she felt safe.



## Epilogue

Ginger wandered the exquisite wings of the Topaz Palace and marveled at its beauty, the mosaics, the arched windows, the detailed carvings in the woodwork. In one hall, life-sized portraits of the Quaazeras stared at her, fierce men and lushly beautiful women. Her two guards followed at a discreet distance, close enough to protect her, but far enough away that she didn't feel as if they were treading on her heels.

She found the temple in the woods near the lake. It was much like the one in Sky Flames, with inverted terraces for a roof, an airy main room, smaller chambers around the periphery, and the glowing RayLight Chamber in its center. Its size was the same, too, though the temple in Sky Flames had been for an entire village, whereas this one served only the palace.

The craftsmanship astonished her: porcelain vases, engraved arches that resembled frozen lace, lush tapestries on the walls—it was incredible. The basin of the fountain was wider across than two men were tall. Sculpted fire-lily statues opened in the center, and water cascaded out of the blossoms. The sunwood furniture was set with brocade cushions in sunrise colors. It was also covered with dust. She would need to do a lot of cleaning to make the temple presentable, but such a fine place was well worth the effort.

Nor would she be hindered in her work. Instead of a wrap, the maids had offered her an astounding choice of garments, all acceptable for a priestess, they assured her. The yellow skirt they suggested she wear fit low on her hips and hung to her ankles, so full that when she spun around, it swirled in a circle. The yellow silk bodice sparkled with topazes. It covered most of her torso, but left her abdomen bare, and also her lower arms. In Sky Flames, even before she had trouble with the elders, such apparel would have convinced them they needed to lock her up forever. More than so much else, these clothes made her aware of her new freedom.

She sat on the ledge of the fountain, pensive. Although she would gladly serve here, it reminded her of all she had lost. She couldn't imagine returning to Sky Flames even now, when she could ride into the village as consort to the Quaazera prince, with a full company of the army. She could never again see the village without remembering the betrayals of the elders or reliving the terror of flames roaring around her at the stake.

She had written her brother to let him know she was all right, that matters had worked out better than anyone could have expected. She hoped he and Harjan would visit her. Along with that letter, the queen sent a retinue for Kindle, to bring him to Quaaz so he could work with the army on the powder. Whether or not anything would come of this “gunpowder,” Ginger had no idea. Nor did she think she would ever

feel comfortable around Kindle. But he had a lot of good in him, if he could learn to control his temper. And he was an excellent choice to investigate the powder; he had always had a knack for making things work, and he seemed fascinated with the challenge.

Darz wanted to heave the elders and Dirk into a dungeon. But Ginger had checked the legal archives; they hadn't broken any laws. Although no one was burned at the stake anymore, the antiquated law remained part of Taka Mal's legal code. She knew Darz would have them arrested if she asked. She didn't. Given her new status, they wouldn't get a fair trial; if she let them be convicted that way, it was no better than what they had done to her. She wanted to face them, to make them see the wrong they had done. She didn't want them executed; she wanted them to suffer guilt for the rest of their godforsaken lives.

Until she could handle the anger burning within her—and control it—she couldn't see them. She had to deal with the darkness in herself before she faced it in others. She wasn't ready yet. But the time would come. Then she and Darz would go to Sky Flames.

"I forget how serene it is here," a man said.

She jumped up and whirled around. A few feet away, Drummer Headwind stood watching her, his yellow hair gleaming in the light slanting through a stained-glass window. Even without moving, he had an extraordinary grace. He wasn't as tall as a Taka Mal man, barely taller than Ginger herself, and he had a lithe build rather than the bulk she was used to seeing in men. His eyes were blue. The extraordinary color looked unreal. His face was handsome, but in a way that made the word beautiful or even pretty seem more apt. He looked neither fierce nor deadly. By Taka Mal standards, he wasn't at all masculine, but she could see why the queen found him compelling. He was uncommonly pleasing to look upon.

She suddenly realized she was gawking at the prince consort. Mortified, she dropped to one knee and bent her head. "My honor at your presence, Your Majesty."

Footsteps sounded on the stone floor. Then Drummer was down on his knees, peering at her. "Did you drop something?"

"Goodness! You shouldn't be on the floor. I haven't swept it yet." She scrambled back to her feet.

Drummer rose in a fluid motion and smiled, a dazzling flash of white teeth. "Neither should you be on the floor. And Ginger-Sun, you needn't sweep the temple. You have maids to do all that. Acolytes, too, someday."

"Oh." She put one palm against her cheek. She was used to doing everything herself. "It's gracious of you to visit."

He motioned to the fountain. "Would you sit with me?"

"I would be honored."

They settled on the ledge while their guards stood at the temple entrances. The fountain bubbled next to them.

Drummer regarded her with a kind gaze, "I'm just a minstrel. Don't kneel to me."

She spoke softly. "There is much to get used to here."

“It takes awhile.” He pushed his hand through his shining hair. Like the sun. He had sky eyes and sun hair. “But a person adapts,” he said. More to himself, it seemed, he added, “Eventually.”

From his tone, she suspected he was still adjusting. It had to be hard for him, immersed in a culture where he was considered strange and exotic; a place where few people were inclined to trust him; where strength, height and military prowess were far more valued in men than an ability to sing. She couldn’t imagine how he dealt with the royal court after he had spent his life wandering as a minstrel. She had at least learned the protocols in the temple, so she could serve all who came to her.

In the same instant Ginger said, “Queen Vizarana thought you might—” Drummer said, “Jade said you—” They both stopped, and she laughed self-consciously.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“It’s just, well—the queen thought you might help me learn about my Aronsdale ancestry.”

He nodded, seemingly relaxed, but his shoulder muscles were tensed beneath his shirt. “If you would like.”

She took the opal out of a pocket in her skirt and held her hand open with the pyramid on her palm. “My grandfather gave this to me. He said someday I would want to go to Aronsdale.” She regarded Drummer with an apologetic look. “I have never so wished. But I would like to know—to—” She stopped, afraid to say more.

“About this?” he asked. A golden radiance formed around the pyramid, sparkling with points of light.

“Oh!” She stared at the light. “That’s beautiful.”

“It doesn’t frighten you?”

“But why would it—” Ginger stopped, realizing what she was about to say. Drummer had made the light while their guards were here. The soldiers were too far away to hear her and Drummer, or see her hand clearly, so they might think she had a candle, but no guarantee of that existed. She felt as if she were standing on the edge of a cliff with no idea what lay below.

She leapt.

“How can you make light with my opal?” she asked. “Don’t you have to use your own? I’ve only used this rock, except a few times when I was—” She almost said desperate, then stopped. She didn’t want him to ask her why. “When I was trying especially hard.”

His shoulders relaxed, and he exhaled. Perhaps he had feared her reaction as much as she feared his. The light faded around her opal.

“It’s the shape,” he said. “The more sides it has, the greater the power it gives you. And three-dimensional shapes are stronger than those with two dimensions.” He nodded at her opal. “That’s a good shape, a strong one.”

“It’s the most sides I’ve ever used.” The circle and ring were two dimensions.

He didn't seem surprised. "Each mage has a maximum shape."

"And colors, too?"

"Yes! That's right." He beamed at her. "Colors determine the type of spell. Red creates heat and flame. Orange is for physical comfort. Yellow soothes. Green is for sensing emotions, and blue is for healing."

He knew! Someone existed who understood. But green and blue? "I've never done emotion or healing spells."

"Every mage has different talents. From what Baz told me, yours are the hot colors."

Hope unfolded within her. "Will you teach me?"

He gave her a rueful look. "I'm no expert. But I'll try. We can learn together."

"I would like that."

"Likewhat?" a rumbling voice demanded.

Ginger didn't jump this time, though this new voice was, on the surface, far more threatening than Drummer's musical words. She looked up at the scowling warlord who stood a few paces away. The contrast between him and Drummer was so acute, they seemed like different species. Darz towered, his broad shoulders and heavy musculature evident. He wore his day uniform, a dark red shirt with five enameled disks on the chest and brown trousers with heavy boots. His black hair was tousled as if he had been riding, and his eyes blazed. It was only noon, yet already the shadow of a beard darkened his face. Even when he wasn't angry, he looked fierce, as if he were ready to skewer someone.

Ginger rose to her feet. "Light of the morning, husband."

He stalked over to them and glared at Drummer. "You better not be singing to her."

Drummer also stood. "A pleasant day to you, too, Baz." He didn't sound exactly thrilled.

"It was lovely to talk to you," Ginger told Drummer. Then she took Darz's arm. "Perhaps you will join us?"

Darz's smile quirked at Drummer. "She might civilize me yet, eh?"

Drummer gave a startled laugh. He had the tact to refrain from answering.

The three of them talked for a bit, and Ginger watched Darz and Drummer, fascinated. Although they behaved as if they didn't like each other, she didn't believe them. They were so unlike, they would probably never see the world in the same way, but she had a feeling they had come to terms with their differences more than either was willing to admit. It made her smile, but she refrained from any comments that would embarrass them.

Eventually Drummer returned to the palace, and Ginger and Darz strolled outside, where the gardens drowsed in the heat of midday. So much green life: grass and flowers and vines and trees. It cooled the air. More eloquently than all the jewels and gold in the palace, the copious water here spoke of the great Quaaazera wealth.

They stopped at a wooden bridge that arched over a creek. Trees heavy with red-box vines drooped over the water, and sun-dragons grew in profusion on the banks, mixed with exotic blue skybells the Aronsdale queen had sent as a wedding gift for Jade and Drummer. The perfume of flowers drifted on the air. Goldwings trilled, and butterflies with red and gold wings floated over the blossoms. The creek gurgled, part of it routed to the temple and the rest flowing to the lake. They stood at the rail where they could see that body of water, which mirrored the endless blue sky.

“It’s so lovely,” Ginger said.

“Aye.” Darz sounded subdued. “So much in our world is ugly and harsh. A place like this seems ephemeral, as if we could lose it tomorrow to war or treachery or violence.”

His pensive tone surprised Ginger. “The Topaz Palace has stood here for over six centuries. The House of Quaaazera has ruled even longer.”

He smiled at her. “How do you know all that?”

“I read history scrolls.”

“We have many in the temple.”

“I can catalogue them for you.” The prospect appealed to her, and with help in the temple, she would even have time.

Darz kissed her. “I’m glad you’re here, Ginger-Sun.”

“I’m honored.”

“I don’t want you to be honored.” His grin flashed. “I want you to be madly, passionately enthralled by your irresistible husband.”

A laugh bubbled within her. “That, too. Especially by his modesty.”

“Well, he tries.” He moved behind her and put his arms around her waist. “If you’ll be patient with him.”

“Always,” she murmured. In truth, she liked him exactly the way he was, grumbling, snoring loud voice, and all.

They stood together, gazing at the lake that gave life to the desert much as a lonely warlord and priestess had given life to each other.

Copyright

ISBN: 978-1-4268-0626-1

Copyright © 2007 Harlequin Books S.A.

The publisher acknowledges the copyright holders of the individual works as follows:

The Charmed Sphere

Copyright © 2004 by Catherine Asaro

The Misted Cliffs

Copyright © 2005 by Catherine Asaro

The Dawn Star

Copyright © 2006 by Catherine Asaro

The Fire Opal

Copyright © 2007 by Catherine Asaro

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 225 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3K9.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

® and ™ are trademarks of the publisher. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and in other countries.

[www.eHarlequin.com](http://www.eHarlequin.com)