

Nif... Niferas...

I am here, Beloved Master.

Mm... mm... stubborn! Where... are... you...?

Right here before you. Are the eyes not working?

No! And speech is hard... tongue of... lead. But I hear you. Yes. The spell... gradually... works. Tell me....

Tell you what, Highest of All? *everything*.

Well, we are here in Wisferon. I have won over the *Nithaial Galgaliel* entirely. He trusts no one as he does me. Using the wisdom of the Head of Malamun, I have gradually made him suspicious of all his friends, and brought him to hate some of them.

So you found the coin—

The *Nithaial Galgaliel* enlisted a horde of dragons to destroy Gorzungâd, and seized me there. He then took me with him to where... where you fought the final battle with the *Nithaial Elimiel*. The coin was waiting for me. I rec-

ognized it as something you had left for me and picked it up at once. Then the *Nithaial Galgaliel* brought me here and made me his ward.

So, why did it take you so long to use it? Didn't you realize that I have been suffering in that pit of fire all this time, clinging desperately to my sanity?

I am so sorry, Highest One! It is because of Alcaron, the head steward of Wisferon. He was the only person that Jessan—the *Nithaial Galgaliel*—trusted as much as me. Worse still, Jessan made him my tutor, which meant he was free to spy on me day and night.

He absolutely *forbid* me to bring the Head of Malamun into my own quarters, and watched me like a hawk whenever I approached it. If he had seen me slip the coin into the device's mouth, he might well have had it destroyed.

I see. Well, I did survive and you did finally succeed. How did you escape your tutor's watchful eye?

I finally had my chance. A rainy day was followed by the clearest of nights. Alcaron and I ascended the highest of the stargazing platforms, despite the fact that the stone was still slippery....

Ah, so you pushed him off and killed him.

Well, I *did* push him off. I killed him with by bashing his head in afterwards—he survived the fall with only a broken leg. He knew I had shoved him; by the time I got down the steps he had already dragged himself a good distance, calling for help as he went.

Fortunately, he was too shaken to cry loud enough for anyone to hear. But I did have to drag him all the way back after I killed him. Such a mess he made!

You are all I had hoped you would be, Niferas. And how you have unfettered access to the head?

Better than that, Beloved Master. After a suitable period of mourning, I suggested to the *Nithaial Galgaliel* that *I* be put in charge of the scriptoriam. After all, I had been Alcaron's prize protegée; no one knew the place as I did; and there are so many things of power here that could fall into the wrong hands....

Words fail me. Are you sleeping with him?

Yes. I had been tempting him for years, so when I came of age last year, there was no stopping him. He could barely keep his hands off me during the Coming of Age ceremony. And afterwards! It was weeks before I could sit down without the comfort of a pillow.

Good. So you are finally absorbing his power...

No day passes without his entering me, and some days, it seems, he never pulls out of me. And, who can blame him? I am beautiful and always willing. Otherwise, his days are spent worrying about the Eight, and his nights are wracked by punishing dreams.

The Eight! I was destroyed because of them. They swore they would help me, then provided just enough aid to lead me to a wretched fate. That terrible fire. Terrible. Terrible.

I truly weep for you, Beloved Master. I am here to

become your revenge.

Yes, yes. I will have that, and more. Against every one of them. But for this to happen you **must** let the Nithaial Galgaliel have his way with you, over and over. Each time he does, he will give you power. For us to succeed, you must become the greatest wizard of them all. Do you understand?

Of course. I have already acquired and mastered much of that power already. Is there no end to the amount I can take?

Without me to guide you, yes. Beyond a certain point, it corrodes the spirit, corrupts the flesh. The wizard Hezzakal was a lover of mine. I was young and foolish and took my pleasure with him too many times to count. I made him a great wizard without even knowing. Then, centuries later, he turned his power against me. His was the first blow. All else followed from that.

Oh, Highest One, Hezzakal was manipulated by the *Nithaial Galgaliel* to strike against you. Jessan told me the story, so that I would see that it wasn't only the *Nithaial Elimiel* who brought you down.

Is that screeching noise my laughter? Brought me down! What a fool! If it weren't for the meddling of the Eight, I would have destroyed them both. Like all the others, they are soft, like the Goddess who created them, fighting only when forced to, and then ineptly. Did I hear you say that Jessan suffers from bad dreams?

Ever since he left his fishing village, he told me, but

recently they are a constant torment.

Good. We shall brew a tea for him that will sooth his sleep, while giving you the power to shape his dreams.

You are as clever as you are wise, My Master. May I ask you a question? About the *Nithaial Elimiel*?

Ask me anything you wish, Niferas, always.

Thank you, Highest One. What I wish to know is this: did the *Nithaial Elimiel* perish in that burning pit?

Why would he? Fire and earth, they are his sister and brother. But I know this—his time there did not heal him. My agony distracted him from his own, but only while I lived. Now, without me, he faces nothing but unending pain.

Why didn't he come here, then, to seek help from his twin? Jessan has waited for this—fearing his twin's arrival, even while hoping for it. It is his most frequent dream. And, in truth, I fear it more. From what I have managed to learn, he acquired powers that it took other *Nithaial*—yourself, as always, excluded—centuries to learn. If he came here, he would see through me in an instant.

You need not worry! Niccas is beyond help. What happened to him is his doom, my little legacy. Can you imagine what a constant reproach his very presence in Wisferon—blind, crippled—would be? He knows this as well as I, and he is too kind to add to your bedmate's sufferings. I think, eventually, the Nithaial Elimiel will crawl out of his fire pit and throw himself into the force, thus forever dissipating his mortal remains—and thus remove the only remaining threat to my plans!

Yes, Master! My only regret is that he will return to the spirit never knowing that it is *you* who has beaten *him*.

Oh, he knows! He knows! I taunted him as I burned about what I had done, what I planned for his twin. To destroy them both, corrupt all who follow. Yes, I shall live for ever, and taint them all. Once I have destroyed Jessan as I destroyed Niccas, let this device be known as the Head of Maerdas. Do you hear? The Head of Maerdas!

To me, it already has that name, Beloved Master. I shall seek the magic necessary to shape its features to match your own, just as you were, handsome beyond any.

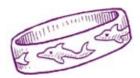
You remember? That pleases me. But now, Niferas, let me rest. I shall gather my powers and learn to use these eyes, this nose. I wish to see my victims, smell them, perhaps even bite into bits of their flesh. I hunger for it all.

And to see me, too?

Of course. Of course. That too. You were such a beautiful boy.

PART ONE ~ TEMPLE COURT

Chapter 1



HE TWO THINGS that I liked most about Nauma were, firstly, that she never asked me if I had chosen yet, and, secondly, that she could comb my hair, even if it was full of knots—which it almost never was—without hurting me. In fact, to be honest, when she combed my hair, if I could, I would purr like a kitten, even a basket of kittens.

Nauma came from a village so far to the north that the people there spoke the common tongue reluctantly, remaining wedded to the old ways, and the old way of speaking that so perfectly fitted them. It was a language, she had told me, that had far more in common with that of the Riders of the Lhennad than our own way of speaking. She would then always add that this was all the two had in common. For example her people had no use for horses—"bear fodder," she called them dismissively. And to live in *tents* instead of solid log houses, is to have no good sense at all.

Nauma was, of course, a witch. She had been a mere

niefaete when she had first come to take care of me when I was a baby. But she was a full-fledged Daughter of the Moon now, and all the more powerful because her diligence had won my mother's favor.

It was Nauma's task, which she did thoroughly but cheerily, to keep her eye on me, night and day, and to make sure that I never accidentally lapsed into boyish ways—which, so far as I had figured this out, meant that I was never, *ever* to touch myself down there.

For, although I was born with a boy's parts, it was my destiny to become a girl, and very soon, too. Tomorrow was my twelfth birthday, the deciding day, and I couldn't wait for it to come and go. All my life I had been treated as a girl, most people already believed I *was* a girl, and it was my mother's dearest wish that I *become* a girl. So, a girl I would be.

For the last three years, I had been given special teas to drink that were meant to repress any boyish urges. They did that, so far as I could tell (how would I know?), but they also left me listless, dreamy, and often half-asleep. Neither my mother nor Nauma nor the girls I sometimes played with were like that. They beat me at games, solved puzzles while I was still staring, and performed acrobatic leaps and flips with a sort of grace I could only dream about.

After tomorrow, once the magic had taken effect and my parts had gone up inside me to become a girl's parts, the tea would be but a memory. This my mother promised me, and, usually, she kept her promises. "What are you thinking about, *Aehíwehama*," Nauma asked me. That was the name she used for me, "pale baby," because my skin was so milky white. My real name, Dionis, was given to me by my father, which was his right—just as it was my mother's never to use it, or to allow anyone else to, either. I only heard it if I said it to myself, and doing that did not make Nauma happy. She didn't forbid it; she just sulked, which was bad enough. But I did *think* my name now and then, just to see if I had forgotten it. Of course, I never had.

Nauma nudged me, and I realized I hadn't answered her question. It was a mistake not to reply, because she could read my mind when and as she chose to. I was slowly teaching myself how to block her from doing this (a little test here, a little test there, all with *great* caution) but it wasn't easy.

"I'm wondering," I said, "if mother will allow me to take lessons from the acrobats, once I have accepted."

Nauma sniffed. "So you can stand on your head during the Annointment?" she asked. "I don't think so."

I sighed, but to myself. The Annointment was the next Huge Task in my life. It wouldn't happen, though, until I was sixteen. Then mother planned to reveal to all the temple that I was the Chosen One, sent by the Blessed Gesryma to take the place of the *Nithaial*, one of them who was fallen and the other who was disgraced.

I had been told this about myself, but I didn't know exactly what it meant, or what would be expected of me. Secretly, I feared the worst. Being a girl was one thing, being The Chosen One—well, it might be all right if it turned out that some higher power other than my mother had done the choosing. Besides, maybe by the time I became sixteen, I would like the idea. After all, it had taken me a number of years, and, I suppose, a lot of tea, to accept that I wasn't really a boy at all, but a girl who had accidentally slipped into a boy's body.

Now that Nauma had combed my hair until it glowed, she was neatly and quickly braiding it up. When I was shown to temple worshippers, I was always dressed in a white shift with gold edging, drops were added to my eyes to make them sparkle, and my hair was spread out over my shoulders, all of which was meant to make me "look as holy as I really was."

However, day-to-day, my hair was braided, then bound to the back of my head in a bun. Of all the things about being a girl, so far this was one of the things I liked least, this never-ending insistence that things be neat. I knew boys did not naturally take to this, because whenever I left anything not just so, about my person or my room or anything, I was told I was behaving like a boy, even a bad boy.

Nauma, I suddenly realized, was sulking. It took me a moment to think of why, which was unusual for me—but no longer than a moment. This would be the first night in my life when she didn't share my bed with me. And she thought I should be upset about this.

Furthermore, she would never share my bed again. This *was* unsettling (not the same as upsetting), because I

had become so used to her warmth, the smell of the herbal soap she used, and the comforting sound of her breathing. On the rare occasion when I woke up and sensed its absence, I would feel a stab of fear. Until now, of course, it only meant that she had slipped away to discreetly relieve herself, and would be back in a moment. Now, she would never be back.

Four years ago, I would have been inconsolable if this had happened, but now I looked forward to it. Especially tonight, my last night as a boy. I was supposed to stay up, all by myself, and to search my soul to make sure I accepted the change with all my being.

(Once, out of curiosity, I asked what would happen if I *didn't* accept it. The silence I got as a reply suggested politely that I had never opened my mouth at all—just as if I had broken wind during a temple ceremony. That, at least, was my mother's reaction. Later, Nauma muttered something to me about warlocks, but not enough for me to really understand what they were, except horrible and doomed, and that I should never let myself become one.)

In honor of this night, I had been given none of the special tea for three days. All during the first day, I felt dizzy and sick. All during the second day, my brain felt as if someone was trying to knead it like a lump of dough. But today I felt... It was hard to put in words. *Unwrapped* is the closest I can come to describing it. Because of that feeling, I couldn't *wait* for Nauma to go.

Naturally, I didn't say this. I wasn't eight years old! I

looked at her, making my eyes soft, and asked, "Will it be as hard for you, Little Mother, as it will for me?"

HE TEMPLE GONG BOOMED, alerting all who heard it that the Numinous Hour had begun, when the spirits are most accessible and spellcasting most likely to succeed. The melodical incantations of the Daughters of the Moon would soon start; in a few days, I would be allowed to stand in the shadows of the silver grove, listening and learning, letting the grove grow accustomed to my presence.

Being alone, I was discovering, was another way of saying "being bored out of one's mind." I had never been left to myself before—now, probably the one time in all my life when this would happen, and I had no idea what to do. It was like the question, "Did I truly want to become a girl?" How could I answer if I had never truly been a boy?

Discouraged and fitful, I threw myself down on my bed (bad—I could almost hear Nauma's disapproving gasp). I lay there in the near darkness—three candles, set into a candelabrum, flickered fitfully on the chest beside my bed—and fought off the temptation to touch my private parts for the comfort that would give me.

I sighed. I wasn't going about this the right way. I got out of bed, threw a covering onto the floor, got down onto my knees, bowed my head, and, spreading out my left hand, pressed my thumb on one side of my forehead and my fingers on the other, so opening the window to my soul.

As always, nothing seemed to open—I lacked the

power for that, or so Nauma told me when I complained. What I should be doing, she told me, is to concentrate on what came in or out of it.

What came out of it tonight was a plea to any god or spirit who might be listening to help me settle this business for once and for all, or at least come and keep me company while I struggled to do so. After as much attentive waiting as I was capable of (not much), I squeezed my thumb and fingers to close the mystic window. However, I remained on my knees, not having the motivation to get off them.

There was an unfamiliar scrabbling noise at one of the casement windows. The high priestess had her living quarters on the roof of this part of the temple, built around an open space containing an elaborate garden, with a spelling circle set in its center. This window, however, didn't look into that, but out over the city, and it was six stories up from the street.

The scrabbling noise stopped, and I heard the light thud of feet, as the intruder dropped onto the floor. This was so much exactly what Nauma worried about happening, day and night, that I had become gradually inured to the fear. And *this* night, an intruder was just what I desired. A flying goblin, a hungry vampire, an extremely dexterous thief—any and all were welcome.

I jumped up to my feet and picked up the candelabrum, as the intruder approached me.

"You were just calling me, I think," said a light voice.

"Sorry I wasn't quicker, but I'm not used to climbing through windows."

To my astonishment, the speaker was a very handsome boy, very much my own age, with flowing blond hair, blue eyes, pale skin, and surprisingly red lips, and dressed in the finest clothing I had ever laid eyes on. Indeed, they brought a pang to my heart—boy or girl, I would never be allowed to dress like that.

"Aren't you going to welcome me?" the boy asked, "or are you too deeply engrossed in your thoughts?"

I looked back at that beautiful face. "To welcome you properly," I answered, almost plaintively, "I would have to know who I was and who you were. And I don't know *either* of those things."

"Hold that candle thing out like this," the boy said, extending his arm out from his side. I did as he requested, and he stepped up, held my head lightly, and gave me a very intimate kiss. Then he stepped back a step.

"I am Sepharan," he said. "You are Dionis. If our places had been reversed, that's how I would have welcomed *you*."

I was blushing so furiously that I thought I would faint. All I could think to say was, "I won't be a girl until tomorrow, you know."

Sepharan grinned. "You live a very protected life if you don't know that boys often kiss other boys, and just like that. It's true that I've heard that kissing girls is very nice, as

well, but I haven't gotten around to try it. Have you?"

I thought of the girls I knew. We kissed each other on the cheek as a matter of habit, but the thought of kissing one of them like *that*—was almost impossible to imagine. But kissing Sepharan like *that*—I realized I was longing to do it again.

"Well, why not?" I thought to myself. "I'll never have the chance again. And he certainly doesn't seem to mind."

I bent down and set the "candle thing" on the floor. Then, shyly but determinedly, I went up to him, leaned forward, and returned the kiss.

"Not at all bad," Sepharan said, once I had finished, "but it's better this way." He took me in his arms, pressed his body against mine, and locked his lips with mine. When he was finished, instead of releasing me, he hoisted up my shift all the way to my chest, then pressed his hand directly against my wildly beating heart.

"I like to know if I'm having any effect," he said. "I'm still learning, too, you know."

I didn't dare respond to that. A saying of Nauma's flashed into my mind: "Only a hero can ask the spirits for help and like what he gets."

Sepharan was looking about the room. "Do you mind," he asked, "if I jump up and down on your bed? I don't get to do that very often these days."

Taking my surprise at the question as an assent, he leapt up onto it, and began bouncing up and down. In a mo-

ment, he lost his balance, and with a whoop, went rolling off the several mattresses of goose down, and tumbled onto the floor.

He was laughing when he scrambled back up. "It's easier if you do it with someone else," he said. "Come on. I'll bet that broody minder of yours doesn't let you."

"What does 'broody' mean?" I asked, as I climbed up onto the bed with him.

"You say it of a hen that won't let anyone near her precious eggs," he replied, "smothering mothering. Now pull that shift off or we'll both be tripping over it."

I did as Sepharan said, took his hands in mine, and we began leaping up and down together. It was true—it was easier with someone else. As we jumped, here and there, around and around, he began chanting, "Smothering mothering, smothering mothering."

Soon we were both shouting out it together, faster and faster, until our legs tangled and we went falling together in a heap. As we landed, there was a ripping sound, and a cloud of feathers erupted.

"Oh, your minder is going to have such a *fit*," Sepharan said joyously. He had found the rent and, with one hand, was tossing more feathers up in the air. It only took a moment before we were both covered with them.

Suddenly, I stiffened. Nauma was frantically trying to read my mind. I tried to block her, but she was too insistent. A moment later, there was the sound of a latch being pulled, and the door between her room and mine flew open. "Throw feathers at her," Sepharan whispered in my ear, "and I'll take care of this." Even as Nauma came bustling into the room, he had rolled off the bed and vanished into the shadows.

I had long ago learned the distinction between acting sullen (bad) and acting regal (encouraged), so I always made sure that when I felt like being bad, I acted like a princess—or, more accurately, since I had never seen a princess, like a high priestess, or, more accurately still, like my mother, who could do no bad.

"Nauma!" I said, in my haughtiest tone. "How dare you violate this sacred time with your presence?"

She was carrying the sort of glow stone the brightness of which can be intensified by the bearer's mind. Hers grew brighter and brigher as her mouth dropped further and further open. For once in her life, Nauma was speechless.

"You are *naked*!" she finally gasped out.

"So I am," I replied, sitting up. "Well, let me make myself decent." I scooped up a mound of feathers and heaped them over my parts. Then remembering Sepharan's instructions, I took another fistful of feathers and launched them at her.

The results of this were amazing: she was hit by a blizzard. There were far more feathers in the air than I had thrown at her. As Nauma let out a shriek, they blocked my view of her completely.

However, I could see the glow of the light as it slowly, slowly, sank toward the floor. Then there was a thump, and,

an instant later, the glow stone came rolling out of the cloud. I threw myself to the end of the bed and grabbed it.

The feathers drifted downwards, until Nauma wore a blanket of them. Sepharan was looking down at her. "Not bad at all," he said, smacking his lips. Then he looked over at me and smiled. His teeth were red with blood.

"You're a vampire!" I cried out, aghast.

Sepharan considered this. "No, not really," he answered. "*This* is the vampire."

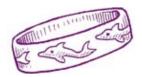
There was a blurring, Sepharan faded away, and, in his place, a naked spindly creature stood before me, with elongated feet and hands, and arms from which hung a pair of nearly transparent wings. Its head was more animal than human, bulging around its brain, then narrowing sharply to a pair of nostrils and a small, sharply fanged mouth. The only appealing thing about it was its eyes, large, luminous, and perfectly round.

The blurring happened again, and Sepharan was back. "And this is me," he said, in the tone of someone who had just offered me a peek into his treasure box, "Sepharan, spirit summoned from beyond the grave."

I sat down heavily on the bed, burying my face in my hands. "What does this *mean*," I moaned.

Sepharan came and sat beside me, and lightly touched my leg. "It means that you have just experienced the start of what should be a *very* interesting night."

Chapter 2



HE FIRST THING WE HAVE TO DO," Sepharan said, "is to deal with her." Although my brain still reeled, I let him drag me from the bed. Whatever Sepharan was, he wasn't threatening, and I sensed no evil in him at all. I felt like someone who had woken up and found himself in a story, and, while completely puzzled, had no desire to roll over and go back to sleep.

Under Sepharan's direction, we rolled Nauma onto a small rug, then dragged her back into her room. There, we left her beside her bed, since we hadn't the strength between us to get her up on it.

"Is she dead?" I asked. Two dark blood stains, a finger's width apart, made oozy patches on her shift where it touched her left shoulder.

Sepharan looked down at her. "With those feathers all over her, she does look like a half-plucked goose," he admitted, adding, "well, she's not supposed to bleed like that, and she was supposed to get woozy, not totally pass out. I

think I bit down a little too hard." He glanced at me. "I didn't want to get an elbow in my gut, and I could tell she was a fighter."

"You have no idea," I replied. "You're lucky you won't be here in the morning."

"Nauma shouldn't have been mind watching you," Sepharan said. "It was a lowly thing to do, on this of all nights—which reminds me, I'm supposed to be bringing you to meet your uncle. If we hadn't done this, she would have roused the temple guards the moment we slipped out the door."

"Uncle!" I exclaimed. "What do you mean? My father lost all touch with his family when he was younger than me."

Sepharan looked at me curiously. "Your *father*?" he said. "You mean Helias?"

I nodded. "Of course," I said.

Sepharan opened his mouth, closed it again before he spoke, and shrugged. "I'm not supposed to be letting any cats out of the sack, so let's just say that *this* uncle is your mother's brother."

I shook my head. "No," I said emphatically. "If she had a brother, I'd know him—or her, as it would be now."

My companion sighed. "They don't tell you much, do they?" he asked. "This keeping cats in a sack is hard work. Do you know what a warlock is?"

I nodded. "Something very evil—a witch gone bad, or something like."

"A witch gone bad!" Sepharan repeated, snorting.

"You must mean a witch gone all moldy and rotten, since surely you know that besides the witches who worship Gesryma, there are others who practice the dark magicks. Have you ever heard *them* called warlocks?"

"No," I replied. "I hadn't thought of that."

Sepharan put his arm around me. "You're going to learn a *lot* tonight, I promise you." he said, then added thoughtfully, "We both grew up as prisoners of a sort, me among men, and you among women. Apart from the fact that I'm dead, I'd say I had the better deal. Do you truly mean to spend the rest of your life like this?"—illustrating what he meant by a wide, sweeping motion of his arm.

I stared at him blankly. Not because I didn't understand the question, but because I realized I was *just starting* to understand it. And I had only four hours to answer it.

"Let's go talk to your uncle," Sepharan said, as if reading my mind. "To do that, you'll need to throw something on—a robe, if you please. I don't think I could *stand* seeing you dressed up like a girl."

Nauma had a cloak that had come with her from the North, of a coarse weave and a dark fabric that was made for traveling, not for beauty. It felt rough and prickly against my skin and I wished I was wearing a shift, at least, but I didn't want to lower myself any further in Sepharan's eyes.

"Perfect," he said. "You should steal it from her."

My eyes returned to gaze enviously at his own clothing. Then, impulsively, I reached out and touched his shirt.

It felt cut of the most delicate fabric, at once soft as a feather and smooth as a polished stone. Still...

"Are you actually *wearing* any clothes?" I asked. Perhaps *everything* about him was an illusion.

"Heh," he replied. "Wondering what I look like without them? I should have showed you, but too late now."

I blushed. I hadn't wanted any such thing. Well, it wasn't why I asked the question, and he knew it. And now I was all confused and stupid-feeling again.

Sepharan, meanwhile, had gone and very quietly cracked open the door that led to the courtyard. He peeked outside, then beckoned me over.

"Fast asleep," he said. "Look."

He swung the door open a little more, so that I could see the *niefaete*, one of whom always spent the night there, in case their services might be needed. Nauma, of course, would have died before calling on them, although it also grieved her that they slept—a constant nagging discontent that had been shared with me almost every day of my life.

"We're going to the Old Temple," Sepharan whispered to me, "and I hope you know how to get there, because I couldn't follow the instructions."

He glanced at me. "You do know, don't you?"

"Yes," I whispered. "I've been taken there only on *very* special occasions, but I can get us to it, even in the dark."

"It won't be *that* dark," he said. "You're going to bring along that temple glow stone. It will protect us as well as a

soldier's pass."

What Sepharan said was true. The glow stones all had different hues to show to what part of the temple they belonged—carrying one from the quarters of the high priestess would make it highly unlikely I would be stopped, unless I was taken to be lost.

THE CITY PLÆCENON was built in a river valley beside the Alsorel, on land that is perfect for farming but not for supporting great stone buildings. Over the generations, the city has sunk, and as that happened, the old became the foundation of the new.

Many believe that the old city lives on under the new one, now a home for thieves and worse. But my tutor, Maliddia, told me that this could not be so, for the old buildings were thrown down, not being strong enough to support the new ones that were being built over them.

Still, some of the greatest edifices, such as the lord of the city's castle and great temple court, were not destroyed. Consequently, the Old Temple actually lay *beneath* the New Temple, and so solidly had its great hall been designed and built that it had supported the new one without complaint for hundreds of years.

The corridors were empty. During the Numinous Hour, all were occupied except the temple servants, and this was a time when their task was to keep silent and out of sight. I led Sepharan down flights of back stairs, until we came to a corridor that was much wider than it was tall, with a line of

large cerulean tiles running down it at eye height, decorated with obscure symbols in scarlet red. This was the frieze that had run around the Old Temple just below its roof.

Up until now, the corridors had been lit, if dimly, with glow stones, but here there were none. I held up Nauma's, but kept it dim as well, not certain whether I was more afraid of the dark or what I might see if the darkness lifted.

Eventually, ahead of us in the dark, two glittering eyes suddenly appeared. I was prepared for these, for I knew what they were, or, rather, to what they belonged. It took us only a few more steps to see this clearly, a seraphic woman's face, garlanded with a wreath of bay leaves, all molded out of dark stone. Its eyes regarded me impassively. Sepharan, I realized, had disappeared.

"Greetings, Sister Glypta," I said. "As you see, I am Dionis, the child of the High Priestess Nassazia, and I wish to pass."

"Dionis," said a clear, high-pitched voice, "who tomorrow would be Diona. Why are you not in your room during this night of contemplation, rather than wandering through the halls with an accursed *viri* as your companion?"

"What you say is true, sister," I replied. "Tonight I must open my soul to welcome Diona with open arms. But I must do this in my own way and in the company of those I choose to help me. If the Blessed Gesryma forbids it, send me away. But if She does not, I ask again, let us pass."

"Trouble, trouble, "wailed the glypta, "but I

cannot gainsay you. Enter, then, into the Old Temple." She closed her eyes, and the door swung silently open.

"I *hate* those things," Sepharan muttered once we were well inside. "Magical devices should never be allowed to think for themselves. They know too much already."

"Diona!" I muttered. "How did it come to know that?" I hadn't thought about my name as a girl, but I would rather have had an entirely different one, like Nacaëla or Ambra. "Dionis" belonged to *me*.

Sepharan took the glow stone from me and held it above his head. "Close your eyes," he ordered, then made it blindingly bright. Then, just as suddenly, he extinguished it, plunging us into absolute darkness.

There was a loud yelp of anguish, followed by a whispered flood of the vilest curses, and the sound of footsteps retreating.

"The Old Temple has no patrols," Sepharan said to me, ever so softly, "and there are *things* here it would be very unpleasant to meet. Light draws them like moths to a candle; fortunately, it can burn them in the same way."

"How can they find their way with no light of their own?" I asked.

"Some do it by smell," Sepharan answered, "and others by... here, give me your hand."

He took it and pressed it to the nearest wall. My fingers touched cool, damp stone; then a strip of something sticky.

"Feel it?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Slide your fingers to the left, then." I did. The stuff was now slippery more than sticky, and my fingers slipped along it easily.

"Move them to the right." I did that, too, and this time it resisted—if I pressed harder, I scraped the substance right off the wall.

"Now run them *down* the wall." I did, and discovered that there were other trails running parallel to the one I had just touched.

"They all have a different smell," Sepharan explained, "to tell them apart. But the stuff is all made the same way, by crushing a certain kind of snail in a mortar and working the result through a sieve. With one hand holding a short sword out in front of you, and the other touching the wall, you can move through these corridors very quickly."

"All we lack, then, is the sword," I said. "Or, better, two swords"

"That, and two bravos to wield them for us," he answered. "Fortunately, we're not going far. Come!"

He took my hand and led me at a fast pace, down corridors, sometimes turning a corner into a new one, while passing others by. Two times he stopped and made the glow stone blaze; both times the silence was broken, once with a hideous growl, the other time by a shriek of rage. I understood why, when the priestesses of the temple came here, they came as many, with temple guards, and blazing torches—and, of course, their magic.

Sepharan said nothing except once, when he missed a turn and we had to backtrack several steps. "Just be glad we don't have to use the stairs," he whispered. "This is nothing in comparison. They're terrifying, and I say it as one who is already dead."

Finally, he stopped, and felt about tentatively until his hand touched the latch of a door. He knocked softly, and we went in.

HE ROOM WAS AS PITCH BLACK as the corridor until the door was closed again. Then three glow stones began to cast a muted sea-green light. I realized with a shock that they must have been wrenched from the wall of one of the back corridors, for that was that level's identifying color.

As my eyes grew accustomed to their brightness, I saw before me a man, leaning back in a chair, his boots propped up on the table that was the only other piece of furniture in the room. The three glow stones had been tossed onto it, which made the room dark above and dark below.

He was dressed in black, which meant I could hardly see what he wore; his face was traced with lines and his hair was all white, save for a widow's peak that was completely black. His eyes held me for some time before he spoke.

"You seem strangely without power, Dionis." When he spoke, his voice was low without being soft, for it had an edge to it, a sharpness that, for the moment, was kept sheathed. "Do they not give you access to it?"

"I don't understand," I replied, realizing again, as I had with Sepharan, how odd it was to speak to someone I had no idea how to address. I certainly had no faith that this was my uncle.

"Or, rather, if I do understand," I added, when he made no reply, "my powers will come to me once I become a *niefaete*, and master the spells that are taught me."

He sighed, took his feet off the table, and sat up, then beckoned for me to approach him. Once I had, he took something out of his pocket and handed it to me. It was hard to see what it was in this light, but it seemed like a lump of lead or some similar substance.

"Hold it in your cupped palm, then spit on it."

My mouth, of course, was dry as parchment, but I licked my teeth for a moment, until my mouth was wet enough for me to follow his directions. I bent over the lump and spat.

Instantly, the thing flared up, creating a savagely brilliant, nearly blinding blue-white light.

Before I could think of what to do with it, the stranger said sharply, "Now set it on the table."

I tried to do so, but since my fingers couldn't get a purchase on it, I tilted my hand and poured it there instead. Immediately, smoke rose up, the wood where the droplets landed burst into flame. Each droplet burnt its way through the tabletop and dropped onto the floor, leaving behind

charred holes with flames flickering around their edges. The floor was also wood, but the liquid was now all but burnt out, and, as I watched, flickered out and vanished without a trace, leaving behind several charred pits.

My eyes slowly moved up from the floor until I met the stranger's eyes again. I was overcome with astonishment, my brain not wanting to accept what my eyes had witnessed.

"You would have to be very spell-learnt and very quick of mind to counter that with an enchantment," he said. "Don't you agree?"

Dumbly, I nodded.

"If you were truly the son of Helias," he went on, "you would now have a burnt stump instead of a hand. I know Helias is a powerful wizard *now*, but he was born a mortal like any other. But you, Dionis, have *power*. Look inside yourself."

Actually, at that moment, I was trying with all my strength *not* to do just that. I was afraid of what I felt in myself, something powerful, untamed, and far stronger than me.

"Yes, it is all those things," the stranger said sardonically, "and your real task in these coming years is to learn how you and it might merge into one. It seems so fearsome now because you have been so cruelly tamed."

He smiled, and as he did so, a flicker of warmth passed over his face. "I am called Ormaël," he said. "Do you believe now that I am your uncle?"

I did. Not completely, perhaps, not yet. But there

was something in the way he was that reminded me of my grandmother, Sophaera, and this little scene had definitely reminded me of my mother. But, even so, it was not the same.

Ormaël had just now shown me something about myself. He had done it in a scarily dramatic way, which was definitely like my mother, but there was nothing about it that said, "Look how powerful I am." Instead, it said, "Look how powerful *you* are." And that was something in all my life my mother had never done.

I smiled back at him. "Yes," I answered. "There's a lot I still need to understand, but I think I do."

Ormaël rose, came around the table, seized me, and lifted me up. Then he kissed me. Not like Sepharan had, of course, but in yet another way that I had never been kissed before, like long-lost brothers.

The strength of his arms, the tart, pungent smells from his clothing, his body, made me dizzy. I lifted a hand and touched his face. It was rough, just the way that Nauma's cloak was. I thought I might get to like that sort of roughness, after all.

After a moment, he sat me down on the table, got back into his own chair, and put his feet back on the table, right next to me.

"Now, Dionis," he said. "You probably think that I have coaxed you here to try to convince you not to yield to your mother and become a girl."

I smiled, thinking this was a joke.

But his face was serious. He looked away at me, studying the tips of his boots.

"No," he said, slowly. "I wanted to see you—to find out if you were really called to become a witch. If I thought you were, this conversation would have taken a different course."

He looked back at me. "And, at the same time, if I thought you *weren't*, it would have taken still another course. But I look at you and see someone who simply doesn't know."

I felt a slight draft. Sepharan had opened the door for the briefest of moments, to make sure no one was listening outside, or, worse, preparing to burst in on us.

Ormaël glanced over at him, and receiving a reassuring signal, continued. "In a way, I blame myself for this. You see, Dionis, I was one of the few boys who decide that they just don't want to become a girl. As for me, I would have been quite happy to become a witch. But I knew I was a boy, through and through."

He pursed his lips, and made a toneless whistling noise. "Nassazia was a little girl when this happened. She witnessed the pain I caused my mother, which was terrible. Not because she was set on my becoming a witch. Not at all. It was because she knew what happened to boys who said no. Have you figured that out yet—what happens to them?"

Our eyes met, and I suddenly I knew. "You're a war-

lock," I answered. "A warlock is a boy witch."

He shook his head with slow emphasis. "No," he said. "A warlock would be a boy witch if he were accepted into the ritual. But he isn't. In fact, the feelings against this are so strong that once he was simply smothered at the moment of birth. In our enlightened time, the boy gets a choice, and if he chooses wrong, then he is strangled. Or, if the mother objects feverently enough, he is turned out."

Ormaël reached down into the darkness by the side of his chair and, after a bit of scrabbling, retrieved a bottle. He bit into the cork to draw it out, then, cork still in mouth, took a long swig, pushed the cork back in, and returned the bottle to the shadows. I didn't know what it was, but it had a poisonous, nose-stinging smell.

"A taste I acquired from the late, lamented Prince Poëstil," he said, but the name meant nothing to me.

"You see, Dionis, sending a warlock off on his own is something done for the mother, not the boy. Because there is a market—necromancers find such boys *very* desirable, at least parts of them."

He suddenly sat bolt upright, and all but shouted at me, "Are you following this? Do you hear what I'm saying?"

I was frightened. When he spoke to me like that I understood what he was saying, I mean, *really* understood it. His fierceness came not from anger but from love of me, of the risk I was facing.

"You survived," I said. "And you wouldn't be here if

you didn't mean for me to survive, too."

Again he vehemently shook his head. "Dionis," he said, "I can't rescue you. If you decide to say no, I'll be the first person on my sister's list, and it will be a very short list. Once you are sixteen, I think I can help you. But until then, I'm no more fit to be your father than Helias is, and you'd be in more danger with me than if you decided to hide yourself down here, and wander the corridors alone."

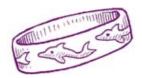
"Did you know my father?" I asked. The question simply burst out of me, and surprised us both.

This time, Ormaël nodded, and a sad smile crept across his face. "Yes, I was with him at the very end. The very, very end." He was silent for a long time, his face cast down, his long white hair falling over it, obscuring it from my sight.

When he looked up, tossing the hair back, I saw that his eyes were wet. "But Helias knew him better, and for much longer," he said. "Helias is the person you should talk to now. He can't help you anymore than I can, but at least he knows someone who might. Someone Nassazia knows nothing about."

He took another drink from the bottle, and in the same manner. "I advise you to talk to Helias *before* you decide on your fate," he said, after he set it down again. "If he refuses to help, your fate is clear: become a girl or die. But for you to even get to him, we need a plan."

Chapter 3



Faith, was in her fiercest mood. She did not know yet what the disorder of the previous night augured, but it was already clear that some sort of rebellion had occurred, and she was not happy. But neither was she a fool.

She woke me from a fitful hour or so of sleep, and examined my body carefully, Nauma hovering in a state of terror just behind her. My mother then said, "Dionis, you had a visit from a vampire last night. It bit poor Nauma rather severely."

I wanted to reply that Nauma had sacrificed herself so that I wouldn't have been bitten, which would have made everyone happy. But Ormaël had cautioned me that this would catch me in an obvious lie, and I would immediately suffer a major defeat.

He had been right, too. Instead, I answered with the truth. "Nauma had no business being in my room last night, and even less business spying on me."

My mother considered this. "She was concerned about you, which is both natural and right. In your position, you must learn that privacy is a luxury you will rarely taste, and when you do, as you discovered last night, its flavor can be unpleasantly bitter."

Her voice was cool, sounding almost amused, but her arms were crossed, and she was rapidly tapping the fingers of her right hand on her left arm—a sign that she was in a state of great agitation.

"In any case, you will be seeing no more of Nauma after this morning," she went on. "What I want you to help me understand is why, after she collapsed, you and the vampire together dragged her back into her room, leaving her on the floor, unconscious and covered with feathers. Did it never occur to you to summon the *niefaete* asleep outside your door?"

It had been a shock when I had realized that, no, it hadn't even slightly occurred to me. Again, Ormaël had been right as to the direction of my mother's questioning, and, again, I was prepared with an answer meant to throw her off her stride.

"It wasn't exactly a vampire, Mother," I replied. "It was a messenger. It only bit Nauma because she had come bursting in on us. Otherwise, it would have just flown away. And we dragged her back into her room, because that's where she *belonged*."

Of course, my mother snapped up the bait. How could she not? "A messenger!" She turned to Nauma, who immediately put her hand over her mouth. "Go pack your things," she snapped, "and close the door firmly behind you."

Nauma literally ran from the room, pausing only to close the door.

"If she had slammed it," my mother snarled, "I would have turned her into a toad. What a little fool."

She turned back to me. "A messenger, Dionis? And one that actually flew in your window? What did it look like?"

I described the *viri*, as best as I could remember it, saying nothing about Sepharan. A colony of *viri* had recently taken root in Plæcenon, and there was much talk of them in the temple, especially as to whether they were a sign, and if so, of what.

My mother digested this, then said, "Very well, Dionis, I now believe you."

She sat down on my bed, her brow furrowed. At this point, Ormaël had promised, the power was now in my hands, not hers. But she was very clever, he added, and I had to be as careful as I knew how to be.

"And who *sent* this messenger, darling?" she asked. "You must let me know," she said. "To use such a beast means that it must be someone very powerful and very evil."

"It said it came from your brother," I answered, adding innocently, "of course, I didn't believe it, since you don't have a brother. Do you?"

She looked at me, her face troubled. "Yes, sweet one,

I did have one. But he died when he was twelve, the same age as you, when I was a little girl. Whoever sent this *viri*, must have known that, intending to confuse you."

She reached out and took my hand. "Now tell me, love, what was the message itself?"

The purpose of everything I said, above all else, Ormaël had said, was to keep my mother so distracted that it didn't occur to her to mind touch me, for then all would be lost. For this same reason, when I gave an answer, I was also to vizualize it, laying the picture out for her to see for herself, thus forestalling any probing.

To that end, my uncle had Sepharan reveal the *viri* he inhabited, and make it speak the message itself, which it did in an eerie, high-pitched voice: "You have the right to speak to your father before you make your decision. It is not only wise but just that you should be allowed to do so."

My mother sprang up from the bed as if I had stabbed her with a dagger. "I forbid it," she said, staring away from me. "I absolutely forbid it! That man has *nothing* to say about your decision. Besides," she said, turning to look at me, "he's gone away. And no one knows where."

She told a lie. My mother directly lied to me. And what's more, when I called her on it, she simply brushed the fact away.

"Mother," I said. "He is right where he has always been, in seclusion in his rooms within the House of the Narrow Blade." "That's what I meant," she replied, making a brushing motion as if sweeping away any cobwebs of confusion. "He won't see you, or anyone."

"Very well," I answered. "Just let me go there and try." I got out of bed, went to her, and touched her arm. "What can he say to me that would change my mind? This visit has clouded my spirit, and I wish to perform the ceremony without hesitation or doubt. All that I ask is your permission to postpone it for one more day."

had never been allowed to leave the precincts of the temple court. Even that is an exaggeration, for the only real freedom I was allowed was to wander as I wished within the high priestess's quarters. If I was to be brought anywhere else within the temple precincts, I was carefully prepared, then led there surrounded by a chorus—essentially singing chaperons.

This, then, was the first time I ventured out into the city of Plæcenon, and it was a sign of the urgency that my mother felt about having the ceremony take place as soon as possible that she agreed to this at all. And, even then, she made sure that the trip was as much under her control as she could arrange, which meant *totally*.

I was to travel in a pallanquin, hung with heavy curtains so that no one could see in, nor I, out. My mother was to accompany me in an identical one, except that hers had small windows of finely spun gauze. Furthermore, I was to be dressed in the pure white robes of a *niefaete*, with the

hood drawn up to cover my face. This was done as much to dampen my spirit as it was to protect me from being seen.

Consider: I was going to my father to ask his opinion about whether I should become a girl, already dressed like one, and being treated as one. It made the whole inquiry faintly ludicrous, which was just what mother intended.

Of course, I could see Plæcenon from my bedroom window, and over the years various landmarks had been pointed out to me, and others from windows that opened in different directions. The city had been destroyed during the Great Demon Wars, and when it was rebuilt, it was not as a citadel.

Wide boulevards ran from the palace of the lord of the city like rays extending from the sun, with those who lived closest being those who were worthy of absorbing more than their fair share of its light. There, naturally, were placed the mansions of the minor nobility (no prince resided in Plæcenon), the embassies of both Lorithar and Tarrusor, several highly ornate gardens, both privileged and public, and, not least, the temple court.

The House of the Narrow Blade was some distance away, in the Enclave of the Guilds. It had never been pointed out to me (too much the question of a boy), but I had contrived to find it (very much the curiosity of a boy) anyway, slipping into the quarters of the Healing Sister, Wisthera, when she was making her rounds. It was a large square, built of reddish stone, with mere slits of windows facing the outside, and what looked like a large courtyard within. Out of that glimpse, I

spun many fantasies about what happened inside and of various adventures that might involve my father.

So, despite my girlish trappings, my eyes glowed with excitement and an imaginary dagger decorated my cheek, as the pallanquins hurried their way through the streets, preceded by heralds who beat on drums to clear the way. Then we halted, there was a short conversation that was too muted for my ears to catch, and we were ushered into the courtyard. The pallanquin was set down on its blocks, and I stepped out with the practiced grace of a girl-to-be.

We were ushered by a servant, bland and unthreatening as any other, into a comfortable sitting room, where we waited for the arrival of Urvasor, the *Koryphaios*, or head, of this House. He, when he came, was disappointingly priestly and not deadly-seeming in the least—a very thin, elderly man with closely cropped hair. He did, at least, have a dagger emblazoned on his cheek, but age had turned it as silver as his hair.

He greeted my mother with great ceremony, and then came over to me. I had pulled back my hood the moment he came in, and, he, addressing me as Dionis, said that he was especially glad to welcome me. As he spoke, he looked at me intently, and I saw that, while his eyes were milky, the intelligence behind them remained ever so keen.

"The wizard Helias is willing to see you," he said, adding when he saw my mother begin to rise out out of seat, "but, of course, alone."

"Then I forbid the meeting," she said shortly. "Pull your hood back on, Diona, we're leaving at once."

The *Koryphaios* must have noticed the humiliation that chased the disappointment across my face, because one of his eyeslids fluttered in a way that was almost, but not quite, a wink.

He turned to my mother. "I apologize, High Priestess," he said in an unapologetic tone that she herself was intimately familiar with, "but in this House, the desires of our resident wizard must take precedence over your own. Since the boy (and here the *Koryphaios* gave the word "boy" a palpable emphasis) has come here specifically to meet with him, and since the boy has not objected to these terms, the meeting cannot now be denied."

Urvasor took hold of my shoulder as he concluded, "I have ordered that refreshments be brought to you. Please tell those who bring them if there is anything we might do to make the wait pass more pleasantly."

Then he took me out into the corridor, closing the door to the guest room once we had done so.

After we had gone several paces, Urvasor said to me, "We do not tolerate mind touching by outsiders within this House, so think and speak as freely as you like."

"Thank you, *Koryphaios* Urvasor," I said, adding impulsively, "Do you really think my mother would do that?"

He was silent a moment, contemplating his reply. "Please understand," he said, "I have a great respect for your

mother, and, particularly, for her... abilities. One does not decide to go against her wishes lightly."

He shook his head. "But in this instance, powers far greater than her own have been set in play, and I, for one, think it unwise that she should be the only person with access to them."

We now descended a long flight of stone steps, Urvasor stepping with care. When we reached the bottom, he said, "You resemble your father rather remarkably, you know," He shot a glance at me. "Well, probably, you don't know. But you do."

I almost burst out with, "You know my father?" But if Helias were my father, that would make me sound like an idiot. I still wasn't sure that I believed Ormaël; it seemed possible that I got my powers from my mother—something he didn't want to admit.

When I pressed him to tell me who my father was, he shook his head. "You can't know until you're sixteen," he replied, "and certainly not until you learn better to block your thoughts."

Even now, remembering his words, I burned. How could I be expected to wait four years? Urvasor and I continued in silence until, at last, my wits came to my aid.

"When did you first meet him?" I asked.

"Oh, I met him only once," Urvasor replied, "at the same time I encountered the Wizard Helias. It was when I was Koryphaios of our House in Shavagar-Yasí." He shook his head. "A long time ago." He looked at me and then immediately turned away, but not before I saw a cloud of pain sweep across his face.

We had come to the end of the corridor, and to another closed door. This one was made of thick wood, bound with stout iron bands. It fit tightly into its frame, and had no latch or any other device for opening it. As we approached it, the door swung open silently, and a member of the Guild stepped out, then made a gesture of obeisance.

"The Wizard Helias sends his apologies, *Koryphaios* Urvasor," he said, "but he has been summoned to the nether city, where one of our patrols has been attacked by a nyche. I have been designated to entertain our guest until he returns. It should be soon, and certainly within the hour."

I was observing him as he said this to Urvasor. He looked only a few years older then me, but those years had pushed him into another world. He had a lithe body, gray eyes, closely cropped black hair, and a stern but very hand-some face—made all the more so in my eyes by the black dagger tattooed on his cheek.

"Bring the boy to me when the Wizard Helias has finished with him," Urvasor said. "It would be better that I deliver him personally to the High Priestess."

He then gave me a pat on the shoulder, turned, and began making his way back from where we had come.

"I am Cursic," my new companion volunteered, once we had stepped through the door. "Well met," I replied politely. "I am called Dionis. Are you really a full member of the Guild? You can't be *that* much older than I am."

"I'm fifteen," conceded Cursic, not unflattered at my noticing this. "In fact, my initiation ceremony was held a year ago. Do you know what a nyche is?"

I shook my head.

"Probably just as well," Cursic said. "I all but shit my smalls when I first encountered one. The reason I ask is that they and things like them are appearing with increasing frequency in the nether city—and more and more of us have been killed battling with them. And so, to answer your question, initiates no longer have to come of age before they're initiated, if they manage to pass all the tests."

Cursic looked at me, and added, "It was my bad luck that I did." He lifted his shirt to show a scar that ran almost all the way down his side.

Before I could comment on it, Cursic said, "Now, it's my turn to ask you a question. Why are you dressed up like a little priestess? You haven't become a girl already, have you?"

I looked down in embarrassment. Even *he* knew. "No," I said. "That will probably happen tomorrow."

"Come," he replied. "You'll feel like an idiot if you appear before our wizard dressed like that." He seized hold of my hand and drew me down a side corridor and then through a double door.

The atmosphere changed instantly. We had plunged

into a warren of tiny cubicles, and as we hurried down a narrow hallway, I saw that while most were empty, others were occupied by Guild members in various stages of undress, some lying idly in their beds with their feet propped up the wall and their hands under their heads, others engaged in various tasks, such as sewing up rents in their garments or sharpening their weapons. Some cells had only one occupant, some two or more, and at others a small group had gathered around the doorway.

Some greeted Cursic and looked curiously at me, but most paid us no attention at all. Shortly, we came to Cursic's own cell, which he shared with another, for there were two beds in it, each with belongings stashed beneath. A glowstone brightened when we entered.

"Now, sit on my bed," Cursic said, pointing to it, "and get out of those things. I'll be right back."

Of course, the moment he left, I jumped back up and began exploring the room. It was barely larger than my own bed, wide enough to hold two narrow beds with a table between them, and just long enough so that you could go in and out of the door without climbing over them. Only the high ceiling kept the room from feeling like a crypt, that and a grating high up on the wall that must let in a flow of air.

Otherwise, there was but one free corner, opposite the door, and this was heaped with dirty—or at least temporarily discarded—clothing. This free wall was covered with a map, drawn directly onto the plaster with bits of charcoal, parts of which had been wiped half clean with a wet rag, and redrawn. Pegs had been driven into the other walls, seemingly at random, and from these hung fighting gear and several daggers of various lengths, plus two truly wicked-looking swords.

Finally, a single shelf was set over the head of each bed, which held anything that was used too often to pack away in the stash boxes under the beds. Cursic's held a leather tossball, a hairbrush, some vials of the sort used to hold medicaments, a broken tile emblazened with a curious device, a withered claw, and other things that were harder to identify. A damp wash cloth hung down from it to dry, pinned in place with a knife.

On his cellmate's shelf, there was a wooden flute, a gameboard for playing draughts, a small pile of scrolls, and what I took to be an reliquary, along with many possessions (brush, tooth twigs, purse for coins) exactly like Cursic's.

I had loosened my garments and wriggled out of them while I gawked at all this covetously. I possessed almost *none* of these things. My room was rich with hangings and had a wardrobe to hold my clothes—none of which I ached to wear, as I did the leather vest with countless pockets that was tossed carelessly over the end of Cursic's bed.

I was contemplating trying it on when he returned, bringing with him a small bundle of clothes—a shirt and some leggings with the smalls to tie them to—which he tossed to me.

"Here," he said. "These belong to an initiate your own age. One size does for all, so don't expect a neat fit. Pull them on as quick as you can. I'll be in deep trouble if our wizard returns and finds no sign of you or me."

The clothing was made of the same strong fabric as his own, but rather than being dyed a dark gray, it was a tan color, faded by many washings to a shade of dust. The shirt did hang loose on my frame, and only after I pulled it on, did I realize the purpose of the ties sewn on its back—they could be tied tighter to make a better fit.

I was reaching vainly around to get hold of them, when Cursic took down a belt from the wall and tossed it to me. "Just strap this around your waist. All those things do is to make you look like a pouter pigeon."

I took it, my eyes wide in disbelief. To wear an actual, *real* belt was a sign of coming of age. Even I, in my temple cocoon, knew that for a boy to put on one was the very height of impudence.

Cursic saw my hesitation, and made an impatient gesture. "Things are different here," he said. "For one thing, even initiates must wear knives, and, for another, we make our own rules."

I was buckling the belt on as I went out the door, and walked headlong into someone coming in.

"Watch out for your betters, mouse turd!"

Again my eyes widened in disbelief. The person who had just spoken was a girl, and she was wearing nothing but

some smalls. I had never before seen anyone in this state of undress, and I turned bright red. I muttered an apology and stared intently down at the belt buckle, as if mystified how such a thing might work.

"Under what stone did they find this one?" she asked Cursic. "I've seen fitter slugs."

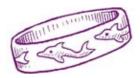
"He has farseeing powers, Delfasa," he answered, speaking of me as if I were deaf. "That type is always soft and white. And now your charms have rendered him paralyzed as well."

She snorted. "Too bad keeping pets is forbidden—he'd make the perfect ornament, curled around your neck. But I stopped to tell you that your evil twin is searching for you everywhere."

"Ah," Cursic replied. "Evil, but, as always, ineffectual."

Delfasa punched him on the shoulder. "Except in bed," she replied. "There he's just... wonderfully... evil."

Chapter 4



hidden behind closed doors. Everything lay in darkness when we came in, which pleased Cursic, but made me a bit nervous. My mother would be quietly stoking up a burning rage; she hated nothing more than being made to wait, and this wait already must seem interminable.

This thought was underscored by the fact that the room in which we now waited was very similar to the one in which I had left her, except that this one had a single chair, massive and elaborately carved into the shape of a beast. However, there were benches set against the walls, and Cursic and I shared one of these.

I should have been happy wearing these clothes, and with a belt besides, but I was, in fact, increasingly miserable. "Soft and white as a slug," I said bitterly, "and *no* farseeing powers. I *should* become a girl."

"Lucky for you that Delfasa can't hear you saying that," Cursic replied. "She's a lot more like me than she is like you. Surely, you noticed those muscles, as well as her nice pair of peaches."

I blushed again, but Cursic didn't notice. "Still, since you have the choice, maybe you should. Girls are ever so much superior to boys."

"That's what *they* say," I answered, shocked. "But I can't believe that you think that." Being with Cursic made me *want* to be a boy. And now he was saying this?

He smiled. "But it's true, Dionis. They're smarter, quicker, take better care of themselves, have more endurance, and live longer than us. Also, the Wizard Malbrumas, who lived half his life as one, claimed they have more fun in bed—certainly, in my experience, they *are* more fun in bed than most boys are."

"Would *you* become a girl, if you could?" I asked. Cursic had me totally confused, and not just about that bed business, of which I knew nothing except that there seemed to be a lot about it to learn.

He laughed and shook his head. "Unlike you, I grew up completely happy being a boy. You weren't allowed even to *be* one. In fact, you probably know more about what it is to be a girl."

I thought about that. "From the outside, maybe. But not inside. Inside, I've just been, I don't know... *dormant*."

Cursic gave me a little poke. "So you've been waiting to see if it would be a prince or a princess who would give you a kiss and break the enchantment, hey?" I thought of Sepharan and blushed again. "That's already happened," I said in a low voice. "But wouldn't a kiss from a princess turn you into a prince? And one from a prince, make you a princess?"

"You're getting the tales mixed up," Cursic laughed. "You aren't a frog! In Sleeping Castle, the hunter chose to kiss the princess, and wake her. But he might just as well have decided to kiss her brother, the prince, instead."

I suddenly wanted to ask him which of the two *he* would have kissed, but the question was afraid to leave my lips. So, instead, I said, "I'm glad you're a boy."

"Thank you," Cursic said, giving me a smile that pulled my heart into my throat.

"Isn't he a bit young for your amorous attentions, you lecherous Tom?" said a voice, and another member of the Guild, the same age as Cursic, came into the room.

"You die, eater of puppies," Cursic hissed, and threw himself at the intruder, pulling a knife as he did so. In a moment, they were both rolling around on the floor, grunting, cursing, and struggling wildly. At last, they came to rest against a wall, the stranger on top of Cursic, each a mirror image of the other, grasping the knife hand of their opponent with one hand while trying to stab him with their own knife in the other. But they were so evenly matched that neither could get his blade close enough to cut his opponent's skin.

"Say it isn't true," Cursic gasped through clenched teeth, "or I'll carve the dagger on your other cheek."

"Which other cheek?" the other grunted. "Can you tell any of them apart?"

They glared at each other for another moment, then both began laughing, Cursic first of all. As if a signal had passed between them, their limbs relaxed, the knives were resheathed, and, as one, or so it seemed, they both jumped to their feet.

"I am Alsdar," said the other as he came over to me, brushing the dust from his clothing and his mop of curly brown hair. He seemed far less serious than Cursic, and that enlivened his craggy face. "And you must be Dionis, the boy rumored to be sired by our wizard."

"You don't look in the least like him," he went on, answering Cursic's gasp with a dismissive gesture. "For one thing, your skin isn't blue."

He smiled to show he was joking. "But, even so, I don't see him in you at all. Do *you* think you're his son?"

I shook my head. "Less and less," I answered. "I hope he'll tell me. He is really going to meet with me?"

Alsdar nodded. "He'll be here soon. A single nyche..." he shrugged. "But he will certainly come back a mess."

He turned to Cursic. "You *have* summoned a servant for hot water and the rest?"

Cursic sighed, then dutifully crossed the room to tug on a cord that hung in one of the corners.

Meanwhile, Alsdar was regarding me intently. "That belt you're wearing is suspiciously familiar," he said. "I do believe it's mine." He turned to Cursic. "And that outfit—how did you come to lay hands on that?"

"Pararas was taking a bath after his excursion down into the sewers," Cursic replied. "These were neatly laid out in wait for him."

"Ever the opportunist, aren't we?" Alsdar said, dodging a sudden jab to his ribs.

"Are you two friends... or enemies?" I asked.

"Oh, sometimes one, sometimes the other," Alsdar answered.

"Sometimes both at once," Cursic added.

"We've been twinned, as we say here," Alsdar explained. "Tied together. Unlike lovers, we get our excitement back to back, but like lovers, we constantly get on each other's nerves."

"Then you chose each other?" I asked.

They both laughed. "Hardly," Alsdar replied.

"Helias probably paired us because Alsdar would be my *last* choice," Cursic said. Then, when Alsdar muttered a name, he went on, "Well, right, *almost* my last choice."

"You don't twin soul mates," Cursic said, "because you're not supposed to get *involved* with each other—or with anyone, really. We keep each other alert, prod each other for weaknesses, watch each other's back."

"And, if we have absolutely no other choice," Alsdar said, "we save each other's lives. Confusing, isn't it?"

I nodded my head. It wasn't really, but it did sound

rather hard to bear. "Well, now I understand about the twins," I answered. "But why did Delfasa call *you* the evil one?"

Alsdar laughed. "Delfasa said that? Well, she, if anyone, knows my ways," When Cursic smirked at this remark, Alsdar added, "so she told you about those, too? I hope you took notes, Master Hopeless In Bed. Ask me nicely, and I might even give you lessons."

At this moment, fortunately, the servant entered, and Cursic told him what was wanted. Then he turned to Alsdar. "Perhaps you could stop babbling nonsense for a moment and give Dionis some advice," he said. "He has to decide whether to become a girl and powerful and great, or remain a boy and become an outcast, and probably fall into the hands of a necromancer and be reduced to body parts."

Alsdar laughed again.

"No, I'm serious," Cursic said. "The fact that it's a rotten choice doesn't mean it isn't a real one."

Alsdar looked at me speculatively. "Among us," he said, "it's the opposite. The girls have to decide to become boys—if they want to be initiated."

Cursic looked surprised. "I hadn't thought of it like that." He turned to me. "They have to agree to take a potion that will keep them from ever having babies."

"It also means that their tits don't fully develop. Cut a pippin in half and there you are," Alsdar added. "Nice to fondle, even so."

I resolutely forced my mind away from Delfasa. Cur-

sic was right in one thing—they *were* much more like peaches. But Alsdar might be right, too, about the fondling part.

"I still don't know," Cursic was saying. "We boys have to take a potion, as well, so that we can't *make* babies. That doesn't turn us into girls. It just makes everything kind of..." He groped for a word. "Abstract."

"That's true," Alsdar replied. "Boys and girls are just different, that's all. So it wouldn't matter which Dionis chose, if the choice was actually between being one or the other. But it isn't. It's between being a *bad* boy or a *good* girl. And that's something very different—and it stinks to heaven."

Cursic nodded slowly. "Do what mama says or kiss your ass goodbye. At least you choose to join the Guild. *Then* you kiss your ass goodbye."

DISTANT BOOM rattled all the doors in the room. Alsdar immediately leapt to his feet and, after yanking down hard on the pull rope, ran to open one of them. Almost immediately, the Wizard Helias came through it, bringing in with him a fiercely revolting stench.

He handed the long sword he was carrying to Cursic without looking at him, pulled the shirt he was wearing over his head and tossed it on the floor with a shudder of revulsion. Then he sank into his throne of a chair, gripped its arms with his hands, and closed his eyes.

I knew, as did all of Plæcenon, that his skin was blue and his hair the color of silver. Even so, to see it was to be freshly amazed. His skin was a deep cerulean, the strands of his hair lustrous, and glinted where they caught the glowstone light. At first glance, he seemed strangely young someone barely into his twenties—which, of course, was the effect of his powers. But his face had a calmness and severity of someone much older. I never knew that someone so beautiful could simultaneously seem so dangerous.

Another door opened and two servants entered, one carefully carrying a steaming ewer, the other a small table and a stack of folded cloths. Cursic seized hold of the table and set it beside Helias; Alsdar helped the servant carrying the ewer to put it down on top of it. He then summoned me, had me stand beside the ewer, and heaped the cloths in my arms, dismissing both servants the moment he took them.

"Dry cloth, first," Cursic said, nodding at Helias's discarded shirt. I glanced over at it. The cloth was... *devouring itself*. Parts of it had liquefied, but rather than spreading out, the way a liquid would, they were drawing the rest of the shirt into them. Because of this, the cloth was twitching and quivering like a wounded animal. Despite the fact that I knew it was only a shirt, it was painful to watch, and I pulled my eyes away.

Helias was clenching the muscles of his neck, shoulders, arms, and torso were drawn so tightly that his body seemed chiseled out of stone. On it, what I first took to be large beads of sweat glistened everywhere, and these, one by one, Cursic and Alsdar were each using a crumpled cloth to pluck—rather than wipe—away. Once they had caught up

several, they took the cloth and threw it on the shirt, then grabbed a fresh one from my pile.

It wasn't *sweat* that they were snatching off his body, but gobs of the same stuff that was right now devouring the wizard's shirt. His body was so tense because he was using all his power to will it not to eat into his flesh.

"Clean," Alsdar finally said, after a careful search.

"Agreed," Cursic replied.

Then fresh cloths were dipped into the still hot water. These, when they were wrung out, released a pleasing scent of costly *palaras*, a fragrant substance also used by the priestesses in their rites, for it was said to soothe the spirit of pain and evil memory.

The Wizard Helias took them, one after the other, and buried his face in them, then permitted his two acolytes to use still others to sponge his arms and torso.

Meanwhile, the vile substance on the shirt and the cloths had devoured everything, and was now a seething puddle. This, in turn, began to vaporize, swiftly turning into a dark, purplish plume.

"Now comes the fun part," Alsdar whispered in my ear. He pointed his finger at it, and spoke a word of command, which ignited the cloud. For a brief moment, it became a mass of flame. Then, just as suddenly, it vanished, leaving behind a scattering of ash that fell to the floor, and lay on it like a shadow.

"Even that is a deadly poison and must be carefully

removed," Alsdar told me in the same soft voice. "To breathe the vapor is to suffer the agonies of the damned."

Servants were again summoned, the ewer and the remaining cloths borne away. They brought with them a small whisk and a small, silver dust scoop with a long handle, which Alsdar used, with infinite care, to sweep up the ashes. When he was finish, a sheet of beaten gold was wrapped around the scoop, and Alsdar himself bore it away, leaving with the servants.

Cursic made his obeisance, meaning to withdraw as well, but Helias signaled for him to stay. One of the servants had helped him into a long dark robe, and he now sat wrapped up in it, a brooding expression on his face.

He examined me impassively, as I stood before him feeling suddenly slightly ashamed of my clothing, which I had no right to wear. I comforted myself by thinking I had no more right to wear what my mother had dressed me in.

"I am not your father," the wizard finally said. His voice was firm, tired, and without emotion. "Knowing that, what would you have of me?"

"If what you say is so," I replied, speaking slowly, thinking furiously, "why does my mother hate you so?"

Helias's eyes widened slightly. "Perhaps it is because I loved your father more than I loved her," he answered. "Perhaps it is merely that I was present at your conception."

I tried to digest this information. "You did know my father, then," I said.

"I was his first lover. I treated him badly, all the more so because he saved my life more than once, and gave me my powers. But, in my way, I loved him. I still do—which is why I have agreed to see you." He paused, then added, "Did *Koryphaios* Urvasor tell you that you look like him?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"Well," Helias said, "when I first saw him, he looked a lot more like you than he did by the time he met Urvasor. By then, he had toughened up considerably."

I blushed. "I know I have no right to wear these clothes," I began, but he waved the thought away.

"Who is to say?" he answered. "In any case, Cursic knows my will better than I. If he dressed you so, he had good reason.

"No," he went on, "I said that because anyone not knowing what I do, would take one look at you and advise you to obey your mother and become a witch."

His eyes seized hold of mine. "Because, above all else, we cannot afford to have you carelessly destroyed.

"You will advise me," I said, astonished.

"I already have," the wizard replied, "as much as I am able. I take it that you have met with others who will actually offer you help?"

My eyes widened. "How did you know that?"

Helias smiled ever so slightly. "I doubt that it was your mother who suggested you visit me. Besides, little goes on in the nether city that escapes us." He made a gesture toward Cursic, who then spoke up. "We followed you and the *viri* in the old temple, and know that you met a warlock there. For one such as he to have the nerve to come there almost beggars belief. You can't imagine the number of wards the Sisters have woven about to prevent just that."

"He has more than a warlock's powers," Helias agreed. Then, speaking to me, asked, "Did he tell you that he was also your father's lover?"

I looked at him in shock, shaking my head.

Again the thin smile. "You are twelve, Dionis. I had my first lover when I was eleven. They soon become a part of life, not an exception to it—even, I suspect, among the Sisters of the Moon.

"In any case, I imagine he was. I wonder if he would join with us. We desperately need another wizard," adding in a softer voice, "not to mention a functioning pair of *Nithaial*."

"Will you tell me my father's name?" I asked. "Surely I deserve to know that, at least."

"Shortly after I met him, he became known as Jaemas," Helias answered. "He was apprenticed to a highly regarded alchemist. Let that be sufficient answer for now. Unlike your mother, who has kept this information from you for her own purposes, your friends keep it from you for your own safety."

"Either way, it is still kept from me," I retorted.

This time the smile was full. "Spoken just like him," Helias replied. "Your father's name is the least of it. You can best know him by looking into yourself. Meanwhile, did this warlock give you any advice?"

"To see you, as you know," I replied, surprisingly calmed by his reply. "Then, if I managed this, to ask you to help me get to someone who could hide me away— until my father's name can be revealed to me."

"Really?" Helias was taken aback. "Did they say who that might be?"

I nodded. "The name was Rabih."

The wizard looked at me in astonishment, then started to laugh. "Rabih? They *are* well informed."

He shook his head, still chuckling. "But that's crazy. Rabih? He's a master thief now, living in..." He tossed his head back, searching his mind. "Heref! Do you know where that is?"

"Of course," I said. "I've been schooled, you know. It's the capital of Pharros."

"I doubt if your schooling went so far as to enumerate the many charms of that fair city," Helias said wryly, "so very much like a pit of snakes."

He was silent for a long time, but his face grew less and less dubious as he did, until, at least, all doubt faded from it. "I'll grant your warlock that his is an audacious notion," Helias said slowly, "one that may beyond the imaginings of your enemies." He sighed. "Your mother would make a formidable enemy if her hatred for me inspired her to turn upon the Guild. They now need me too much for me to leave them, and if I stay here, I can't put them in that kind of risk."

Before, he had been sprawled back in his chair, but now he sat up straight, and when he spoke again, did so in a clear, even resonating voice. "Let me be very clear. I cannot help you, nor can I request of any who serve me that they bring you to Herif, guarding you with their life, and place you in the hands of Rabih, if he consents to take you."

His voice now returned to normal, and he sank back again into a more comfortable position. "He might very well not, Dionis. He was your age when he met your father. His closest friend then was a farseer, who *did* become your father's lover, and who was tortured to death shortly thereafter because of it. Rabih was bereft. *More* than bereft—maddened with grief."

He shook his head and stared down at the floor. "We *all* might well have died that day," he murmured.

Eventually, he looked back up. "Are you still here? Cursic, bring him to his mother, and get him back into whatever sorry stuff he was wearing when he came. You understood what I just said?"

Cursic nodded as he rose from his seat. "Of course, Wizard Helias. There is no doubt in my mind."

"Good," the wizard answered. He too stood up, then reached out and touched my arm. "I'm truly sorry, Dionis, but there is nothing else I can do for you."

I was almost out the door when he called me back. "Wait a moment," he said. "I think I might *have* something for you."

Helias went out of the room and returned with a small bundle. As he approached me, he let it fall open, revealing the inner lining of a cloak.

"Watch," he said, and gestured for Cursic to come to him. When he did, the wizard wrapped the cloak around his body and pulled the hood down over his head.

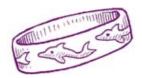
It wouldn't be right to say that Cursic *vanished*, because if you knew he was there and forced yourself to look, you could see him—dimly, unless you exerted *all* your will. But, otherwise, your eyes simply didn't take him in, the way you might never notice a servant, waiting to clear a table.

"It was your father's," Helias remarked, as he removed it from Cursic. "I stole it from him."

He handed the cloak to me. "Still has the whiff of the wraith ghoul to it," he said. "Never could wash that out."

I smelled nothing. Helias, I decided, was a very strange man.

Chapter 5



Y MOTHER was in a mood of near exultation, which told me how much she had been shaken by the events of the last night and by her awareness that letting me pay a visit to Helias, as much as she still believed she held power over him, to be a toss of betting stones.

Her mood had changed the moment I had come back into the waiting room, took her hand, and said, "I have no more questions. You may direct that the ceremony take place whenever you like."

When Helias had said he couldn't help me, I had given up. I was tired, the quest Sepharan had launched me on had become hopelessly confused in mind. I had *tasted* something new and exciting, it was true. But taste gives no instructions.

Perhaps the cape Helias had given me was meant to encourage me to act on my own, but I hadn't the courage to do that. I knew nothing of the world outside the temple court—where would I go? What would I do? The cape wasn't any sort of answer, nor was it any real protection. I had already learned from my trip into the dark corridors of the old temple, that there things that hunted by scent alone.

The cup of hope had been dashed to the floor before I had a chance to sip much from it. I simply sank back into the familiar lethargy. And if my mother noticed my lack of enthusiasm, she gave no sign. All she needed was a mere gesture of assent. She embraced me and, after the palanquins had brought us back to the temple grounds, insisted on accompanying me up to my rooms.

"Behold!" she cried as she swung open the door. "Here is your new life, Diona."

Everything connected with my childhood had been swept away. A canopy had been set over the bed, so that it could be draped with curtains to ensure my privacy. A carpet woven with the ritual markings where "worship in motion"—as the dance prayers were called—could be practiced.

All my clothing had been exchanged for the modest attire of a *niefaete* and the ceremonial robes in which I would now wear when I appeared in public. The smell of attar of roses filled the room; elaborate decorative weavings hung from the walls.

I wandered about in a state of shock. The small world that had once been mine had been entirely obliterated; the small but treasured collection of toys, the plump sheep on which I had rocked for hours, the elaborate puppet show, the mechanical singing bird, all were gone. Furthermore, to my shock, I saw that my window now had solid iron bars set into it, so many and so close together that I could barely insert my hand through the gap between them.

My mother saw that I was transfixed by this. "No *viri* will ever bother you here again, my love," she said. "The window has been sealed shut; carpenters are to carve vents into your door, set high enough up so that no one can peer in, to bring in fresh air from the courtyard."

She clapped her hands and a sturdy woman with a stern face and deeply probing blue eyes entered and made obeisance. She wore the leaf-green gown with brown trim of an adept of the earth spells.

"This is Yasdora," my mother said. "Tomorrow you will be a *niefaete* and tomorrow she will become your tutor for the next two years. Tonight, you will dine with me, but as of tomorrow, you will eat all your meals with her. She has much to teach you, of the practices of women as well as the rituals of our new faith. Learn well, Diona, and much power will come to you, as the Blessed Gesryma sees fit."

She made a gesture, and Yasdora, after letting her eyes linger on me for a moment, nodded, and withdrew into what had been Nauma's private room, closing the door behind her.

My mother put her hand on my shoulder and said, not unkindly, "As a *niefaete*, you will be expected to bathe yourself. Look about the room a bit to learn the many new

things that have been given you, and then summon a servant to bring you water and a bathing basin. Over there, you will find scented oil to comb through your hair, once you have washed out all the smell of that house of death.

"After the sunset chant, I'll send someone to bring you to supper. Since it will be our last together for a while, I have had the kitchen prepare something special. So do be ready."

She caressed my cheek, then turned and left me alone with my thoughts.

EVERAL HOURS LATER, as I was preparing for bed, there was a soft tap at the door and my mother came in. I was surprised to see her, for it had been years since she last kissed me good night. I was even more surprised when suddenly she was all a blur in my eyes, a blur that reformed itself into Sepharan.

Before I could speak, he held a finger to his lips, and hurried across the floor to me. "Quick, a kiss," he whispered. "Who knows when I'll get the chance again."

We shared a lingering one, which I thought would be merely a prelude to another. But he pulled away, pointing at the barred window as he did.

"Do you see that?" he whispered.

"Yes," I answered. "They tried to keep you out. I'm so glad they failed."

"No, silly one." Sepharan shook his head. "Your mother is cleverer than that. Those bars are meant to trap

me inside this room. And soon. So, listen closely.

"At the Numinous Hour, don the clothes that Cursic let you keep, wrap yourself in the hiding cape, and go to the same door to the old temple that we used before. Someone will be waiting for you just beyond it."

He seized hold of my arm and squeezed it. "Get there as soon as you can. Every moment will count."

Even as he spoke these last words I felt a breath of fresh air, heard a door snicking shut behind me. Sepharan vanished, and, instead, a *viri* was scurrying frantically about the room, seeking a way out.

I turned to see Yasdora standing there, her eyes intent on the *viri*, a sling hanging from her right hand. Then, a single spin, a snap of the wrist, and the sling stone whipped across the room. It struck the *viri* sharply on the head, breaking its skull. The poor beast crumpled instantly into a heap upon the floor.

This act of Yasdora's filled me with cold rage. She and I regarded each other, and I made no attempt to hide my feelings.

"I sense that there is more to this *viri* business than you've told your mother, Diona," Yasdora said. "I shall spend the night here and keep an eye on you."

This I would *never* allow. And my anger was such that it gave me the way to prevent it. A witch of her level was compelled to perform a cleansing ritual of prayer and several washings if she allowed a man to show her his private parts. I

immediately lifted up my gown until it was far above my kneecaps. "I am not Diona yet," I said, "and I intend to spend this last night alone. Leave me or prepare to spend the night sequestered in the purification chambers."

Yasdora smiled thinly. "You delude yourself. Viewing a child's parts is not forbidden, or how else could mother's bathe their children?"

"First," I replied, "you are not my mother. Secondly, my nurse, Nauma, would not wash me there once I became six, because of the same prohibition."

I hoisted my robes up further still, and Yasdora averted her eyes. "No doubt you know better than she where the line is—but remember, if you encourage this to happen by lying, it is your reputation that you damage, not mine. After all, I'm just a boy."

Yasdora turned without speaking and walked out of the door, closing it with studied care behind her. I knew that I had deeply humiliated her—a very bad start to a relationship with one's tutor. But whatever happened, she would never be that. I knew this now with complete certainty.

I tossed off the robe altogether, and pulled out from under my bed the clothing I had brought back from the House of the Narrow Blade, and waited for the boom of the gong that ushered in the sacred hour of spell and prayer. Yasdora had been right; she should have stayed with me. But being right, I now saw, was not as good as being clever—at least in the short term.

OURS LATER, I lay in bliss in Cursic's arms, as the sun rose and wrapped the trees that lined this part of the River Alsorel in its red gold light. Birds already skimmed over the water, hungry for their breakfast. Directly behind us, Alsdar held the tiller, guiding the boat. Above us, a sail flapped lazily in the breeze.

As Sepharan had promised, Cursic had been waiting for me just beyond the door; he had hurried me, first down corridors and several stairwells, and then on an ever twisting and turning course through the city sewers, until we reached the place where the several great conduits join to empty their streams of filth into the great river. There we climbed up to a grating that let us out in the dockyards.

Fortune smiled on us. We encountered no noisome attackers underground nor any of the city guards above it. Alsdar was waiting for us in a small boat, tied to a little-used quay where waterlogged, derelict barges were abandoned to rats and rot. He lifted me down, Cursic leapt in after me, and, a moment later, we were out on the river.

The boat had a seat at the very back of the boat, where Alsdar sat, grasping the tiller. A flat platform laid across the bottom of the rest of it to hold cargo. This had been heaped with fresh hay, and on this Cursic and I sat together.

"So far, so good," Alsdar muttered. "The trick is to not get excited. The rudder seems very sensitive, and it would be a mistake to upset it."

"You got it to the quay safely enough," Cursic said

encouragingly.

"That's not *quite* what its previous owner said," Aldsar replied. "But I did get it there, yes, after much shouting."

"Sailing boats is not part of our instruction," Cursic said to me. "But it can't be that hard, seeing that any number of dolts succeed at it."

"Yes," agreed Alsdar. "But we don't know how many of them drowned while learning."

I only half listened to this, entranced as I was by the sight of the city, caressed by the light of a half moon, slowly slipping out of sight behind us.

I was very, very sleepy, but I had one question that I *had* to have answered. "Why did you come for me, when the wizard Helias told you not to?" I asked.

Alsdar snorted. "We'd get nowhere in the world if we let *him* boss us around. We often do exactly the opposite of what he tells us just to spite him."

"Seriously!" I said.

Cursic put an arm around me and pulled me down so that we both were lying on our backs. "Look at the stars!" he said softly. "How clear they are out here."

We all looked at them together for a moment, then Cursic broke the silence. "If you think back," he said, "Helias never told us not to help you. He said that he couldn't request us to do so—because that would break his oath to the High Priestess Nassazia not to interfere with her plans

for you."

"But we didn't take that oath," Alsdar said, as I was digesting this.

"Of course," Cursic continued, "we didn't *have* to rescue you. Or go into the old temple and search out the warlock to learn more about what we were getting into."

"Or buy a boat and learn how to sail it, sort of," Alsdar said, "to get you to Herif."

"Our wizard would have thought less of us, though, if we were too thick to take a hint," Cursic added.

"Not to mention his opinion of us if we turned down the chance for the adventure of a lifetime, or at least for *us*," Alsdar went on. "Out on the river. Visiting a foreign country. Far from nyches, the sour smell of our cubicles, the endless bowls of cabbage and beans."

"In other words, we're not complete idiots," Cursic said, drawing his cloak around us both. "Now stop yawning and go to sleep."

So passed my first night away from the temple court, my mother, and my first night as a real boy.

When Cursic realized I was awake, he got to his feet, and holding onto the mast, peed into the river.

I watched this with astonishment. When he was done, I asked, "Can I do that?"

Cursic turned to me with a puzzled look on his face. "Do what?" he asked.

"Pee in the river," I said, slightly abashed at actually

saying it.

Cursic laughed. "Didn't you ever piss out your window at the temple, in the night?"

I shook my head, thinking what Nauma would have said if she had caught me doing something like *that*.

"Well," Cursic said, "you're among boys now. Peeing is for little ones. We *piss*. Now go wet the river."

Tactfully, he went and sat with Alsdar, and the two of them began talking quietly together. I took my part in my hand and, aiming high, sent a graceful arc out over the side of the boat. At that moment, I was king of the world.

"There's bread and cheese in that sack," Alsdar called to me, once I had shaken myself dry. "Get it and we'll have some breakfast."

I had just lifted it up when a sudden pain shot through my body. For a moment, my mind felt as if it had been cut adrift. I fell down on my knees with a cry.

"What is it, Dionis?" Cursic cried out to me, and hurried across the platform to pick me up.

But by the time he had clutched my shoulders, the feeling had passed. Even so, I took hold of his hand, and let him help me up. He brought me over to Alsdar, and sat me on the seat beside him.

"The tie was just cut," Cursic said.

Alsdar nodded. "They found you were missing," he said to me. "They searched for you and found you had fled. Probably the glypta told them. At that point your mother had

no choice, since it was known to all in the temple. She broke the spell that bound you to the Sisterhood."

Unbidden, tears came to my eyes, and I had to wait for several moments before I could wipe them away with my sleeve. "I'm a warlock now," I said, "and forever. Like Ormaël."

Alsdar looked at Cursic. "We prayed to Mother Gesryma that it wouldn't happen before we were on the river and she answered our prayers."

Cursic nodded. "The necromancers will soon know you have been cut free. Our task is to keep you safe until we find Rabih."

"And ever after," Alsdar said. "You have only to summon us. Just call out—Helias will hear."

"If not, Ormaël will," Cursic added. "We were amazed when we met him. His powers are at least equal to our wizard's, perhaps even greater."

"He needs rescuing himself," I said, not plaintively, but because it was the truth.

Cursic smiled. "We think our wizard can do that. They have a lot in common, those two."

And so I had crossed over from one life to another. In a few days, I would disembark from the boat that carried me from the one to the other, and find out what awaited me on the farther shore.

PARTTWO

DEN OF THIEVES

Chapter 6



ogs barked in the courtyard below, but dogs always bark at night. No one would pay attention unless their noise became frantic, or became the baying of hot pursuit. The night watchman of the house had already come out, looked around, sworn at them, and gone back in.

When we had come over the wall, Azhara had tossed some pieces of drugged meat down to them, but, unfortunately, one dog was faster or stronger than the others, and eaten it all. That dog was now sound asleep, leaving the other two even more enraged. Not an auspicious sign, to be sure, but nothing out of ordinary, either. Thieving, by nature, is a risky business.

In any case, we had avoided the hidden alarms by pulling ourselves up onto an overhanging branch of the courtyard's one large shade tree, and gingerly making our way along the branch to the trunk, then edging out on another branch that was pressed up to the side of the house. Azhara went first, not only because she was the senior of us two, but because it was her task to make a way for us up the side of the house. She wore a bandolera across her chest, each sheathe holding a special sort of knife that we called a pinion. Instead of a flat blade, it had an oval one, so that it could be twisted hard without breaking, and its pommel had been pounded as flat as a spike.

Balancing herself on the branch, she worked the point of the first pinion into the plaster between the building stones, then pounded it in with a thief-jack, a specially made iron tool with an open jaw at one end and a leather-wrapped handle at the other.

This served as a muffled hammer. It still made a noise, but the trick was to make sure there was no rhythm to the blows—it was that which would rouse someone from her sleep. A thud, a pause, a thud, a longer pause, two thuds right next to each other, and the pinion was driven home—then a twist of the wrench end to wedge it in. Then, after a pause to listen, Azhara was ready to start on the next.

The first pinion was driven in waist high, the second pinion went in as high up as she could reach. Then she would pull herself up on that one, find her footing on the first, and begin driving in the third. It took twelve to get to the roof of most buildings; twenty would take you up any.

Most houses in Heref were the reverse of those in Plaecenon. Here, the servants' rooms, the kitchen, the storage rooms, and so on were on the ground floor, the family sleeping quarters on the second floor, and the grand rooms at the very top of the house, sometimes set about a small central patio. There, they could take full advantage of the cooling breezes off the sea.

But this building belonged to a wealthy merchant who actually resided in Lorithar. He used this place to house his agent and to store goods that were waiting to be sold here or shipped elsewhere. Consequently, it was built like a castle, with no windows at all until the third floor, and these heavily barred.

Rabih had been quietly studying the place for months, and had found finally its weak point, a small half circle set in a dormer high up on the roof, meant to ventilate the attic. It was invisible from the street (Rabih had had to climb to the roof of a nearby house to find it), and, although it had bars, these were set into a wooden frame, not encased in stone.

I could see the sheen of Azhara's supple, muscular body as she climbed. Neither of us wore anything except a cloth tucked around our loins, and she the bandolera to hold our gear. Furthermore, our skin had been made slippery with a generous application of oil. A naked, well-greased thief is very hard to grab.

Azhara was sixteen, a year older than I, and she dressed quite modestly when not at work. She liked working with me, because I didn't plague her with overtures like others did, made dizzy by the perfection of her body. I did think occasionally that it would be pleasant to fondle her, but it was

only a thought, and I was quite capable of pushing it away. In truth, I much preferred her regard for my ability to focus entirely on our task.

There was a wind tonight, that came and went in gusts, sending the branches creaking and the leaves soughing. Each time this blew, Azhara moved quickly without stopping, and it wasn't long before she vanished over the edge of the roof. I heard the stuttering call of a nightjar and immediately climbed up after her.

The roof was steeply pitched and covered with slate tiles—a double threat to a thief. If one was dislodged underfoot, it might send him tumbling down the roof and over the edge; if he avoided that, the tile itself would make a crashing noise when it shattered on the ground below. To keep that from happening, we climbed up on all fours, our feet and hands rubbed with rosin to give us a better grip.

There was barely a moon that night, and it was regularly obscured by clouds, riding the same wind that scurried through the leaves. But I had a clear enough idea of my route that I could find my way there with my eyes shut—for that is exactly how we were trained.

By the time I reached her, Azhara had already driven two pinions between the wooden frame and the granite blocks in which it was set. She guided my hand to one of these, and together we pried the frame free, bars and all. Azhara slipped through the open hole we had made, head first, so that she could feel around with her hands for any thief

traps. It was not only legal to kill any thief who entered your house, but it was thought only just that the death be made as painful as possible.

Slowly, her body squirmed through, until it disappeared entirely. I passed her the frame, and climbed in after her. For a long moment, we stood absolutely still and listened. When we heard no sound, together we carefully worked the frame back in place.

We had no intention of returning this way unless we had to—a thief tries never to exit the same way he has entered. But, if we were forced to, one blow would send it flying out ahead of us. The real question was whether Azhara could retrace her steps to the exact point where the pinions were waiting. A good trick, that, and a major reason why we preferred to exit through the front door.

Now it was my turn to lead the way. I had a gift of finding my way in the dark, not of seeing, but of *sensing*. Although the attic was large, it seemed almost entirely empty. In fact, the only flooring was a narrow platform of walk boards laid across the ceiling joists of the floor below and running from the window to the center of the building.

I had squatted down and was advancing slowly, feeling with my fingers and toes as I did so for anything suspicious, like a loose board that might trip a trigger or open a trapdoor. But I reached the center of the building without incident, and found the trapdoor at once, my fingers falling on its pull ring.

"This is too easy," Azhara breathed into my ear.

I nodded. Things can go too well. I felt carefully around the trapdoor for anything suspicious. I took a pinion from Azhara and slipped it between the door and its frame, and cautiously lifted. The pull ring might very well set off an alarm instead of raising the door.

The trapdoor creaked, but not loudly, and nothing seemed attached to it, not even a warning bell. When I had lifted it high enough, Azhara removed a tiny glow stone that hung on a chain around her neck. She whispered a command to light it, then, bending over, lowered it down into the opening. It cast a tiny amount of light, but enough so that we could see that a hall passed directly beneath us, running from left to right.

We listened, both of us, but there was nothing to hear, not even the sounds of a house settling itself in the cool of the night. The silence was absolute.

"I'll drop down first," Azhara mouthed. Directly underneath us was a ladder, bolted so that it was a hand's width away from the wall. But thieves are naturally wary of anything that offers to make their work easier. So, Azhara turned and slid over the edge of the frame until only her fingers clutched at it. She swayed there for a moment before letting go, and as she did, I had a sudden premonition.

My free hand shot down and grabbed her wrist, just as she released her hold. Her weight was too much for my one arm and I had to grab her with the other, too, catching the trapdoor with my forehead. Pressing my head against it, I used it as leverage and hauled Azhara far enough so that she could scramble up beside me.

"What was it?" she whispered, and, sensing how much I was shaken by the effort, took the trapdoor from me, so I could sit down on the platform. Blood was oozing from several places in my forehead where the wood had scraped through my skin. I had nothing with which to wipe it away, so I just smeared it on my forearm.

"Azhara," I mouthed, "the hall has no floor. Smell!"

When she had lowered herself down into the opening, she had sent some of the air in it wafting up. In it I had caught the odor of damp and something faintly foul... like the decomposing body of the last thief who had fallen down the shaft to be dashed against the floor far below.

She picked up a tiny piece of plaster, leaned over, and dropped it. There was a long silence before we heard a tiny, distant plink, when it finally struck the bottom.

"The ladder, then," she whispered.

"I'll go down it," I replied, adding, "this time, though, let's open the trap door all the way."

Standing on the risers, she slowly swung it over, until it rested on the further side. Meanwhile, after another wipe of my forehead, I slid slowly down into the shaft, feeling for the rungs of the ladder with my feet. Then, with Azhara holding onto my wrists, I cautiously went down, rung by rung.

I was certain that if I stepped on the last of them, it

would spring a latch and sending the ladder falling. But if the ladder served any purpose besides being a trap, that rung would be the last or next to last.

So, after I had descended a few rungs, I began reaching down with my feet, to make sure there was a rung beneath me, and another one beyond that. At the same time, I felt everywhere for a latch. I groped along the wall on both sides of the ladder and, when I found nothing, between the rungs. Time passed, my body became coated with sweat, despite the coolness of the shaft. Still, nothing gave.

By now, Azhara no longer was holding onto me. One of my hands held onto the ladder at all times, and I switched back and forth so that I could explore the wall on either side with the other. This time when I did this, instead of grasping the side of the ladder, I took hold of a rung—and felt it turn, grudgingly, in my hand.

I twisted on it harder, a catch clicked open, and, slowly, ponderously, the part of the wall the ladder was attached to swung inwardly, taking me with it into a small storage room. Azhara, nimble as a cat, again lowered herself over the edge of the opening above, and, clutching tightly, swung in the doorway, and, with a small thud, stood right beside me. We had gotten in.

Rabhih had picked up the rumor that a shipment of raw precious stones had recently arrived from mines in the Southern Lands, and set a watch on this house. Every day, a

diamond cutter would arrive first thing in the morning, then leave when the light failed in the afternoon. Furthermore, this was a master cutter, famous for his proficiency with a scaif, a tool that could polish the facets of a jewel at angles that reflected the maximum amount of light. To presence of such a craftsman meant that these were jewels of remarkable value.

The trick, of course, was to steal the jewels the moment the cutter had completed his work—for then most if not all of them would quickly be sent on to Plaecenon, hidden in a shipment of other goods, in a caravan surrounded with armed guards, and, in any case, beyond Rabih's reach.

By now, however, the merchant's agent would have grown comfortable with the presence of the jewels in his house and the daily rhythm of the cutting. The house had never been broken into before, and so was considered by those who lived there to be impregnable.

Naturally, even so, extra precautions would have been taken. But Rabih felt sure that they would not be extreme, and we two were capable of anticipating them and dealing with them accordingly. He was not the sort of thief master who would summarily kill us if we failed, but his trust in us would be shattered, and to Azhara, this would be as bad as death. As for me, I had the confidence of one who knows no better and thinks himself invincible.

Rabih was right in this: as we slipped down the stairs, we had no sense of armed guards patrolling the halls, or any-

one, for that matter. If the night watchman had been that incurious about the barking dogs, he was probably sound asleep. He would have a rude awakening on the morrow.

We found the cutting room on the second floor, a small room with a window facing north. The cutter's implements waited for him, laid out on a solid wooden table. As Azhara and I examined the walls and floor for hidden compartments, a caged songbird woke up, gave a sleepy chirp, and put its head back under its wing.

More important to me, I found a small pitcher of water sitting in a basin on a sideboard, along with several folded cloths. I soaked one and used it to clean the blood off my face, especially where it had caked around my eyes.

"The agent will have a private room of his own, apart from where he meets his customers," Azhara whispered. "Let's look for that next."

As we crept down a side corridor on the first floor, she seized my arm. I saw it, too—a faint spill of light under a door.

"Fondling his jewels," Azhara mouthed in my ear. "Let's take a peek."

Rabih had taught us a few minor spells, among them one to keep a door's hinges from squeaking while it was being opened. Azhara felt for the hinge plates and whispered it at each. Then, ever so slowly, she lifted the latch, eased open the door, and peered in. Then, gesturing me to follow, she slipped inside.

The single source of light in the room came from three candles set in a triangular candlestick, which sat on a large oak table. Azhara had entered so freely partly because the doorway was in shadow, partly because the person sitting at the table had his back to us, and partly because he was a youth our own age, and totally engrossed in a tome of magic. He held an arc caster in one hand, and was using it to trace a series of interlocking circles, copied from the book.

Silently, agilely, Azhara undid her loin covering and slipped out of her bandolera, passing them both to me. Then she silently crept across the carpet, and, being careful to keep out of the candlelight, circled the table. When she was directly across from the youth, she stepped forward into the light, saying, as she did so, "You summoned me, master?"

The youth dropped the arc caster, which fell with a clatter on the table. He was awestruck, and rightly so, for Azhara was a vision to behold. The candlelight made her oiled body glisten; she had shaken her auburn hair free so that flowed down around her shoulders; her face had taken on a look of mystery and power.

When the youth remained speechless, Azhara said, "I am the sprite Azhamaza. Your spell weaving has brought me here from the world of the spirits. What is your name and what is your bidding?"

"M-m-my name is Lyreas," the youth stammered. "I d-d-d-didn't mean to summon you! I was t-t-t-trying to cast a spell that would bring me a lover."

Azhara didn't point out the obvious. Instead, she leaned over the table, and examined Lyreas's tracings.

"Very cleverly done," she said, with a persuasively admiring voice. "But the spell will never work without a large jewel to refract and focus its emanations—a red one by preference, ruby, garnet, sapphire, beryl even. There must be something like that around."

Lyreas was shaking his head. "Yes," he admitted, "but they're in a box under my father's bed. He'd *never* let me use one. He hates my dabbling in magic."

"Which is why you're here in the darkness, when everyone else has gone to bed," Azhara said. "No matter. I shall send a sprite to fetch *all* your father's gems, so that we can find the one that works the best." She lifted a hand over her head and made a circular gesture, intoned "Hax pax max, Dionis adimax," to cover up the sound of me slipping out the door.

I left the things I was holding on the hall floor, and hurried up the stairs to find the master bedroom. There was one door open, which must lead to Lyreas's bedroom. The door across from it, made of oak on which had been carved an elaborate pattern of flowers and leaves, seemed most likely, all the more so when I carefully opened the door and found it led into a dressing chamber. The bedroom was in the room beyond, and its door was halfway open.

The floor under my feet was covered with a thick carpet, so I was able to move in absolute silence. This room had the luxury of two windows, each on a separate wall. The curtains had been drawn enough to let in a whisper of cool night air, and with it came a haze of moonlight—just enough for me to make out the position of the bed, and, in it, two large mounds, which were the sleepers themselves.

I dropped down onto my knees and crawled to the near side of the bed. If luck was with me, this would be the master's side, and the jewel box directly beneath him. But the feminine scent of the arm dangling over the side told me that here was the wife. I would either have to crawl around, or work my way under the bed.

I chose the latter, for the bed was raised up on legs, with sufficient room for me to worm my way under it. This I did, using the greatest caution, a tiny bit at a time, listening intently to every sound in the room, with a part of my mind wondering how Azhara was passing the time with young Lyreas. Surely, by now it had dawned on him by now what a choice plum had dropped into his lap—or near enough to make no difference.

The wife's breathing made so little sound that I could no longer hear it once I was under the bed; that of her husband, however, had a curious rhythm, a sibilant trill, interrupted at intermittant intervals with a wet-sounding snort. My fingers had just touched the side of the jewel box when I realized that that last sound was coming not from a sleeper above me but from someone whose dark back was pressing against the box on its far side.

Again, my nose came to my rescue before my eyes

did. *This* sleeper was a very large dog. I froze, almost in a state of panic. Thieves do not like dogs and this thief totally hated them. I had never known any during my childhood, and those that I had met here in Heref were surly, dangerous beasts, almost supernaturally aware of fear in a victim, however much of a brave face one put on.

True, this dog was asleep, but I could see that its ears were pricked up. It couldn't smell me yet, thanks to the flow of air in from the window, and perhaps the sounds it was attending to came floating in with it.

Then, again, perhaps not. Wisdom told me to silently flee, and live to steal another day. On the other hand, my fingers were touching, *fucking touching* the box of gemstones. And it wasn'tt an iron strongbox, the weight of which would make it almost impossible to drag after me, but a wooden one. If the dog weren't leaning on it, I could probably pick it up and hold it a few fingers above the carpet as my wormed my way backwards, and out from under the bed.

However, the dog *was* leaning against it. My mind was working furiously. When I first came to Rabih, he had two other apprentices about my age, Junayd and Rasil. We all shared a bed, at least until Junayd fell onto a bed of spikes and Rasil became so depressed that Rabih sent him back to his parents.

If one or the other pressed an arm or a leg against me, I soon learned that the trick was not to move away—then they would simply take the space you surrended—but to push back, firmly and persistently. After a while, the discomfort would cause them to shift in the other direction. From this, I decided what I must do is push the box until it pressed up hard against the dog. If I pulled it away, it would sense something was wrong, but if I shoved it against the animal, it would concentrate instead on its own comfort.

So, I held my breath and pushed. When nothing happened, I pushed still harder. First, the dog tried to shift it back. When the box refused to budge, it made a slight groaning sound, staggered sleepily to its feet, and dropped back down on the carpet about a short distance from the bed. In a few moments, the slobbering snorts started up again.

Success! I waited just a bit longer, lifted up the box just enough to keep it from dragging on the carpet, and slowly began working my way backwards. I was about halfway out when something hot and moist rubbed up against my legs.

My heart jumped up my throat. Another dog! And this one was *licking* me. For a moment I thought that Nashida had mistakenly given us goose grease, but, no, we would have smelled that ourselves, and given her the tonguelashing of her life. It was the usual palm oil, seasoned with the salt of our sweat, and it was good enough. Hungry dogs aren't fussy.

Better, of course, that was licking me rather than biting me. The problem was the slappy noise it was making, and the fact that it wouldn't stop. It had made quick work of my legs, and now was licking furiously at the puddle of oil and sweat that had collected in the small of my back. I could

sense its tail wagging in delight. No one, I knew, could sleep forever through this commotion.

"Prince!" It was a sharp voice from the bed.

The dog stopped, wagged its tail, then started licking again.

"Prince! That's disgusting! Go in the other room, right now."

There was a moment of silence, hesitation, then the dog obeyed its mistress. I heard the pad pad of its paws as it retreated to the dressingroom.

I knew what was coming next, and contorted my body with all my strength to move it out of the way, as the mattress sagged, two white feet appeared just inches away from my face. They walked across the room. I heard the creak of a cabinet door, the clink of a chamber pot being taken from its shelf, and then a rush of piss.

Silence, a sigh of contentment, then the reverse of what happened before. The goodwife sank down onto the bed, causing the slats to groan, then lifted herself into it, and pulled the covers up.

I was so afraid that Prince, like myself, was waiting for the moment when she was clearly asleep, that I began creeping out from under the bed before I heard the shift in her breathing. If she heard me, I thought, she might well think I was the other animal, taking Prince's place. In fact, I must have crawled right past him on my way here. How willfully the Goddess Mother bestows her favors on her way-

ward son. I had to smile.

I expected to find the candles in the study extinguised and Lyreas lying unconcious on the floor—Azhara had several ways of accomplishing that. But, no, she was sitting crosslegged on the table, looking at something that Lyreas was showing her.

I decided to play the same trick that she had. I unbound the cloth around my loins and let it fall onto the floor, then stole around the table in the shadows, stepping out suddenly, just as she had done.

I held out the box and bowed low, saying, "As you commanded, Azharina."

"Azhamaza, you idiot," she replied. "What took you so long?"

"I stopped a moment to play with the dogs, not understanding the *urgency* of your request." I replied, giving her a look. "Prince and... well, the other one was too sleepy to tell me its name."

"Rascal," said Lyreas, who, I realized, was staring at me, his eyes wide. I looked back at him, and something so deep stirred inside me that it made me weak. He was certainly appealing enough, with his russet curls, his fair and freckled skin, and his pale blue eyes.

But it wasn't that. For some inexplicable reason, I felt that I was looking at *myself*. And, stranger still, it was the entire picture that affected me this way—the books of magic, the dark study, lit by candlelight at the very end of

night. It couldn't be, and yet something inside me refused to be persuaded it wasn't.

I realized that all this time I was staring into Lyreas's eyes, and that the power of my feelings had somehow passed directly into him. He slightly shook his head, opened and closed his mouth, then muttered something I could barely hear.

"I am Dionis," I said, answering him. "We two are not sprites but thieves, come to steal these jewels. Alert your father if you wish, but we will be long gone, and you will find yourself blamed, instead. I advise you to go to your room, fall sleep, and come down in the morning, as innocent as the dawn."

Azhara suddenly leaned forward and blew out the candles, and in a trice we were gone, leaving Lyreas with his face mazed with incomprehension.

I smiled a thief's smile. The boy would understand what had happened to him soon enough.

Chapter 7



the streets at night. Instead, after dusk, packs of hyenas slink into the city, lured in by merchants who set out chunks of rotten meat for them. There is rarely enough for all, so those who remain hungry hunt anything that moves in the streets.

Rabih, when he first came to Heref, found that here, unlike Shavagar-Yasí, the closed city whence he came, it was impossible to travel far by running along the tops of walls and climbing over roofs. So, he set himself to relearning his craft from the beginning, starting with the hyenas.

His first thought was to establish his own pack, with the idea that these would protect him and those of his band from their wild cousins. He acquired several cubs for this purpose, and gave the job of training them to a woman who had a special affinity with animals.

Unfortunately, one day when they were about two years old, they attacked and devoured her, and Rabih de-

cided to look elsewhere for an answer. He cajoled merchants who traveled in the lands of the south to help him, and finally one of them came across a root, the juices of which repelled the beasts.

This merchant became wealthy, for Rabih paid him not only to supply him with it, but also to not supply it to any of the other thief clans. By means of this trick alone, his own clan quickly grew to one of the wealthiest in Heref, its members living long enough to perfect their skills.

All of us carried a small piece of this root in a special pocket sewn into our loin coverings, and it was when I reached for mine that I realized I had left it behind on the hall floor. Azhara gave me some of hers—after all, I had saved her life earlier—but she did so grudgingly. In the world of thieves, a moment's stupidity is never forgiven.

"I saw you swooning over that boy just as much as he swooned over you," she muttered, as we hurried along, keeping to the shadows, all our senses fully alert. The thick, rank scent of hyenas was hard to miss—if you were downwind of them.

I was too busy extracting what juices I could from the root and rubbing them on my body, then chewing the shreds to mix them with my saliva, and smearing that on me as well. The root was insufferably bitter and probably poisonous, but this seemed a fitting punishment.

When, after several spittings, the taste had faded a bit in my mouth, I replied, "You're talking nonsense, Azhara." She snorted. "I could have rubbed my nipples on his cheeks and he would have hardly noticed. I am vain enough to be hurt when my naked body has no effect at all on a boy his age. It was only when you appeared and he became completely agog that I understood. He couldn't take his eyes off you."

We came to a corner, stopped, and waited silently for any sense of danger, then crossed the street. Once we were back in the shadows, she added, "And I noticed you couldn't keep your eyes off him, either. And *he* had all his clothes on."

Fortunately, in the darkness, Azhara couldn't see me blush, and that fact gave me the words to say. "If you had seen my face—or my nether parts—when you first stepped out of the shadows before him, you wouldn't be spouting such rubbish. He just reminded me strongly of someone in my past."

Azhara snorted again, but it was a mollified snort. Despite my age, apart from some fumblings with Junayd and Rasil, I had made love to no one, and no one had made love to me. I wanted this to happen, but my refusal to become a girl hadn't erased my feeling of apartness—where before I had felt apart from my destiny as a girl, now I felt separated from my identity as a boy. Consequently, the surges of desire that occasionally rushed through me were like waking at night to find a rat walking across my body. They frightened me when they happened and left me anxious and unsettled once they had passed. All that I could hope was that time would sort it all out before I got too much older.

Azhara and I moved as swiftly as we could, but we

had some way to travel to reach our lair, especially since we had to keep to the alleyways and least frequented of back lanes, steering clear as well of any place were we knew scraps would be tossed out onto the street.

Despite our care, I began to have a sense that something—or someone—was following us. In the dark streets of Heref, hyenas were hardly our only worry. When Azhara seized my hand and used a finger to write a single mark on my palm, I already know what it meant: "flea."

This was our name for the thieves who made a specialty of preying on their fellows. They came out late at night, lurking in doorways and listening for quick, light steps, especially from passersby who kept to the shadows.

We sped up our pace until we came to a wall, the top of which was just low enough to reach by jumping. Without a word being spoken, I put my back against the wall, and cupped my hands. Then, Azhara, the jewel box under one arm, jumped from these to my shoulder, and, after checking that the ledge was free of glass shards stuck in plaster, hoisted her self up onto it.

The moment her foot left my shoulder, I turned and leapt up, grabbed hold of the edge of the wall, and pulled myself up. Then we squatted together on the narrow ledge and waited. Dropping down the other side of the wall into complete darkness was, at best, a bad idea, and at worse, suicidal. Our best option was to wait and see if our pursuers passed us by, or, if not, were few enough for us to deal with

ourselves, especially given the chance of surprise.

This had all happened in the time it takes a cat to sneeze, and without the noise. Even so, we had barely settled ourselves when our pursuer came down the narrow lane. No moonlight reached into it; the best we could make out was an amorphous shape, less than a man but more solid than any child, bent over, and making a faintly audible snuffling sound.

It went beyond the point where we had jumped up, stopped, lifted its head, and began turning it this way and that, obviously searching for our scent.

I was pressing against Azhara enough to feel her leg muscles tensing—clearly, like me, she was thinking our only option was flight. But it was already too late. The sniffer, as I named it, had sensed us, and, in a frightening fluid motion, began *creeping* up the wall.

Then, suddenly, a hyena leaped out of nowhere and seized the sniffer from below with its massive jaws. Our stalker had itself been stalked, and when it started up the wall, the hyena thought its prey was trying to escape. The sniffer made an outraged hissing noise, dropped from the wall, and turned on its attacker.

The darkness made it difficult to track the progress of the fight, but the hyena's growling quickly turned into a howling scream. Very soon after, the sniffer stood up, lifting the animal's corpse with it—no mean feat, since the animal weighed as much as a man—then plunged its head into the animal's soft belly. Then came a convulsive motion accom-

panied by horrifying sucking sounds.

As it gorged on its kill, however, it was oblivious to the pack of hyenas that came slinking up on all sides, attracted either by the obscene noise or the stench that was part ruptured intestines and part fresh blood. They attacked as one, and the darkness below became a writhing mass of struggling, snarling beasts.

I was transfixed, but Azhara, seeing our chance to escape, grabbed my hand and pulled me along the wall to its very end. There, I lowered myself down, then took the jewel box for her, so she could descend the same way, smoothly, silently. Then we crept away, walking backwards at first out of sheer terror. But once we came to a street corner, we turned and fled with all the speed our legs could give.

Miraculously, Azhara guided us through the darkness without ever taking a wrong turn. We arrived, breathless, exhausted, but unharmed, at the hideout without any further incident. I let Azhara deliver our plunder by herself, and fell onto my sleeping mat, rolled myself up in as many blankets as I could lay hands on, and, mind wiped blank, fell into a deep, deep sleep.

somehow managed to acquire, legally—or so he said—the half-collapsed temple of some forgotten southern god. He had cunningly restored enough of its cellar to serve us as a bolt-hole. Looters, of course, had long ago stripped the temple of anything of value, including the

the menacingly sinister effigies of the god. These had once been hidden from the eyes of impious, but were now revealed through holes in the crumbling exterior walls, and their visible outrage at this exposure served to keep squatters out.

To get to the cellar, you went past a pair of broken iron gates into a dark, dank tunnel to its end, and then groped for the pull rope that opened a hidden door. This rope was stuffed into the skin of a very poisonous snake, and it would be a brave soul who, encountering it by chance, would think to pull on it, rather than leap away.

The cellar itself was a dark and gloomy place, with thick slabs of stone placed at regular intervals all through it, for these bore the weight of the building above, which broke up the interior into a series of vaults. Some of these served as sleeping quarters, others as storage places, and the like.

The one in the darkest corner had been turned into lavatory that vented directly onto one of the city's sewers—a little too directly for my taste, until I learned to squat on the seat. There was a pile of wiping paper on one side and a dagger stuck into the wood on the other, in case anything below went for your privates.

Naturally, my sleeping place was in the cubicle beside it, separated by a moisture-riddled partition. I could see nothing, but hear and smell everything. This, I was sure, was to keep me—and anyone assigned to share the cubby with me—from loitering, either on the way to, or from, sleep.

So the moment I woke up, I staggered around, voided

myself, then went and splashed water on myself from basin kept for that purpose, pulled on my shirt, and went looking for something to eat.

The room had little in the way of lights ("what do you want to see for?" was Rabih's response to any complaints). However, a fire almost always flickered in the fire pit in the center of the room (unless heavy rain falling through the smoke hole had extinguished it, filling the room with choking black smoke). Old Nashida was almost always beside it, feeding the fire, heating water in a big black pot, and stirring another, smaller pot, in which pease porridge bubbled.

I cajoled Nashida to give me a full bowl of this, and took it to the table, where there was a big hunk of bread and the remains of a mutton ham. The way of eating was to slice strips of the ham, drop it into the porridge, then, when it was hot, fish it out again and lay it on a sopped piece of bread.

Rabih, of course, had a large cubicle of his own, with carpeting on the floor and a long settle heaped with cushions to recline on, when he was here. Usually he was not. In fact, it was rare of anyone to be here unless they needed sleep.

If we had no nightwork, we were to be out and about the streets, looking and listening for anything that might point to new opportunities. There was a sack of coins from which we could help ourselves to further this (we had an account with him for personal purchases)—Rabih wanted no purse snatchings. That was for the rabble.

In fact, we were encouraged to grab hold of such

thieves and return the stolen purse, for there was no better way to win confidence. This was fine when it happened, but it was more usual to find and keep happy a reliable snitch. These were like the fleas, except that the latter stole from you after the theft, while they stole from you before it.

They were especially expert at providing you with minnows, while always promising you a whale. And if information of such a master heist should come their way, their usual way was to sell it to you and several others at once, then disappear for a few months on the proceeds.

Even so, it was our task to learn to hold their own with such, winning almost as often as losing—that being not only coin offered in vain but the results that couldcome from being the second or third to creep into someone's bedroom, or to break another hole in the roof of their shop.

There is a purpose in my telling this, as shall now be seen. I was just wiping out my bowl with the last bit of bread, when Rabih entered, saw me at the table, and came and sat down beside me.

He put his arm around me, and said, "I congratulate you, Dionis. That was almost a perfect job last night."

Rabih said this with such good will that one might think he was happy. But I had the experience to know otherwise. For one thing, he never said anything when one of my thefts went perfectly, just added a portion of the proceeds to my account.

For another, "almost" was a very unsettling word. It

meant something had gone wrong, perhaps even seriously wrong. But *what*? My mind began frantically going through through the whole adventure, one step at a time.

"Yes, you made a little mistake," Rabih said, as if reading my mind. "All you have to do is to tell me what it was. If you can't work it out, I'll have to cut off one of your fingers, as I did to Azhara. If you *can* tell me what it was, I'll give you a chance to set things right."

One never knew with Rabih. He wasn't in any way an *evil* person. But he had a strict sense of how anyone under him had to behave, and he was very unforgiving if any of us failed to live up to it. Furthermore, I remained unsure as to what he felt about me. Only recently, he revealed to me that he himself had almost become a entrant to the Order of the Narrow Blade, but decided that he didn't trust them enough to put his life at their service. That must also mean that he wasn't so sure of me, even though he had taken me on. I was kept apart when Cursic and Alsdar spoke with him, and what was said then I never knew.

I was aware that something was in store for me other than the life of a thief, as much as I had come to live the life of one. Rabih would know that, but he was also not always master of his moods. Cutting off a finger was a serious punishment. If you lost three fingers, the next thing to be sliced off was your head. Azhara and I had done something *incredibly* stupid, and by now I had worked out what it was.

"Well?" Rabih asked. "Need more time?"

I shook my head. "No, Rabih." I looked down shame-facedly into my empty bowl. "We forgot to open the jewel box to see what was inside."

He smiled, and gave a sigh of relief. His whole body relaxed. Then, as mine did likewise, he struck me a blow that sent me flying off my stool. He came and squatted down beside me, as stars flickered in my eyes.

"That was the *result* of the mistake. Where you went wrong was in not asking yourself *how* the son came by the knowledge of where his father kept these extremely valuable jewels, and *why* the trusted agent of a very important merchant would be so stupid as to keep them under his bed, with nothing but two lap dogs to guard them."

He stood up. "No doubt you thought yourself amazingly clever to creep into the agent's bedroom, steal the box right under the noses of the dogs, and escape unscathed. In fact, you were depressingly foolish."

He dug his foot into my side. "Now, get up. I'm far from finished with you."

When I was back on my feet, facing him, he said, "There *were* jewels in the box, all uncut, the last of the collection and the least valuable. Obviously, he thought that you wouldn't be so imbecilic not to look, but that you might not know how to estimate the value a jewel."

"So, even if I had opened the box..." I began, but he silence me with a black look.

"Dionis, even you are smart enough to look at a col-

lection of jewels and realize they were uncut. In that state, they are little more appealing than pebbles. You would have known that either the boy had lied or had been misinformed.

"So the question is..."

"What am *I* going to do about it," I replied, completing the sentence.

"No," Rabih corrected me. "That is *not* the question. It isn't even *a* question. The question is, if the boy was misinformed, *why was he*?"

He turned away from me, waving his hand in dismissal. But as I turned to go, he added, "However, if it turns out he lied, and neither of you caught that, I am going to be even angrier than I am now."

So, there it was. Rabih was, in his indirect way, ordering me to return to the house, find the boy, and get out of him what all this had been about. And he had chosen me, not because he thought I would be better at this than Azhara, but because she had told him that the boy had been attracted to me, and that this was the power I was to use against him. It didn't matter that I hadn't the faintest idea of how this power worked, let alone how to make it work for me.

I pushed these thoughts out of my mind. The first thing I had to do, before anything else, was to get to Azhara.

KNEW WHERE TO FIND HER—down by the sea. Despite the fact that the city sat right beside it, there was no affection in Heref for the great expanse of water that brought the city its wealth. The white sandy beaches were littered

with rubbish as well as the ocean's own flotsam and jetsam; away from the wharfs, there was rarely anyone about, apart from an occasional stray dog, hunting for stranded fish.

When I first came here, I had been astonished by the ocean—how big it was, how alive it seemed, with its leagues of glittering, rippling flesh. But, really, there was nothing to do here but look—at the distant fishing boats, the salt works spread out on the tiny outlying islands, and, when the weather was acting up, the great, rolling breakers smashing against the shore. When storms struck, you could hear their thunder anywhere in the city.

However, I had had enough of looking when I was cooped up in my room in the temple court; now what I wanted to do was to wander among the crowds, sometimes listening, but always watching, trying to see especially what was hidden, by accident or design, from those too preoccupied or somnolent to pay attention to all that happened around them.

I prided myself at not being one of them, at seeing the grabpurse's nimble fingers undo a holding knot while a confederate jostled the victim on the other side; a rat weaving its careful way beneath the feet of diners in an open eating tent, a hand fondling a companion's member as they pushed their way through a festive crowd.

Unlike me, Azhara had had her fill of all this long ago. For her, the regular lapping of the ocean on the edge of the shore, the slow advance and retreat of the tides, were cooling to her mind. I didn't know if they touched her heart.

I found her where I thought I would, on some tumbled stone blocks in the shade of struggling tree, with a trunk so gnarled by fighting the winds that it would take too much effort to cut it down.

I sat down beside her, letting my shoulder brush against hers as if by accident, for any intentional touch would bring down her scorn. She wanted no more to be pitied than to be loved, at least by me.

She was nursing her wounded hand, held tenderly in the other, the finger stump well wrapped in a bandage soaked with some reeking ointment, that failed to totally cover the sweetish smell of seared flesh.

We sat together in silence for some time. Then she said, coolly but with no anger, "I see you saved your finger, at least."

"I knew what we had done wrong," I replied.

She bridled. "And you think I *didn't*?" she retorted.

Our eyes met. I shook my head. "At the moment, I was only too glad that *I* figured it out. But why did he spare me, then, if he didn't spare you?"

She shrugged. "Because I was idiotic enough to be the one who gave him the case. His rage was fresh. I saw his face change the moment he opened it, and I realized what we had done. I was convulsed with shame."

"He wasn't there," I said. "If he had been, he would have seen..."

"That we, first, failed to open the box, and, second,

failed to kill the boy when we discovered he had lied to us. I would have lost *three* fingers, not one." She shuddered. "And chopped off one by one. When Rabih is angry..."

She leant against me a little, and sighed. "Now I'll have to learn everything all over again that involves my left hand. It will make me better, make me more cautious, having this reminder always before me."

What she said was true. Some of the best thieves had one finger missing. None, though, were lacking two. Those were the ones who ran away, knowing there was no coming back with so crippled a hand.

"I think he let me keep my finger because I'm to go back tonight, to seduce the boy and find out what he really knows." This didn't seem such a terrible thing, now that I had seen the alternative.

Azhara glanced at me and smiled. "Well, Dionis, you should have a very interesting night."

I looked at her, eyes open wide. Sepharan had said that very thing to me, or near enough, nearly four years ago.

I then said tentatively, "Azhara, could you explain..." I faltered, made a gesture with my hand, and feebly continued. "You know, what I should..." I now was starting to blush. "What Rabih expects of me?"

This time, despite her hurt, she did laugh. "Oh, Dionis," she said. "What a world that you should have no one to ask but *me*."

Still, she told me what she knew, most of it rather as-

tonishing to me, adding, when she had finished, "If you fail at this, it would be wise of you to not ever come back. Rabih has some secret interest in you. I know, because he uses you so carefully. But this time, I don't think he has enough control to remember that. I'm fairly sure he feels he's been made a fool of, and it's very likely you'll discover this tonight."

She took my hand with her uninjured one. "And heed this, little one. Whatever you find out, make sure that, afterwards, you *kill the boy*. Do that, and Rabih will have had his revenge. And you will be back in his good graces."

Chapter 8



Azhara had come with me as far as the wall that surrounded the house, to boost me up. We both thought it unlikely I would survive this second visit, and she gave me a quick kiss farewell, which moved me greatly. But then I was up on the wall, and cautiously climbing out onto the tree.

This time I knew the way, and was able to move much faster. Given my task, I wasn't coated with grease this time, and I had visited a public bath, refusing the attendant's offer of a dusting with scented powder. This meant that I would alert the dogs only if I made a noise, and apart from some quivering of leaves, I slipped along the branches in silence.

As I had hoped, the pinions were where we had left them—they would be hard to see from the ground and harder still to remove, if they were seen. If a new trap had been set, it would be once I reached the barred garret window.

Not only was my body ungreased but my feet had

no resin on them to help find purchase on the steep-sloped roof—the solution to that was to go up as fast as I could, so that if one foot slipped, the other was already finding some purchase.

This, too, went smoothly, and when I reached the window, I discovered to that the bars were gone. Some work had already begun to strengthen the window frame—when the new bars were put in, they would be much harder to remove. I could smell sawn wood even before I touched the thick slabs that had been fitted around the top and two sides.

However, the bottom piece had not yet been put in, and I found out why when I climbed through the opening, and my foot trod on a broken auger bit. It had broken when they were drilling the holes to hold the iron bars, and the workers had used that as a reason to halt work for the day.

As I made my way, crouching down so that I could feel the platform with my fingers, I already knew that the cut stones were certainly safely out of the house, unless the merchant expected my return and planned to seize me for questioning. Otherwise, anyone lying in wait would have simply prodded me with a pole as I made my way precariously up the slates and sent me skidding off the roof.

Of course, when I thought about it, both possibilities could be true. I smiled grimly, and pushed all such thoughts from my mind. I had reached the trapdoor. This time I used the pull ring to raise it, cautiously at first. But, when when no alarm sounded, I lifted it over and lay it on the platform on

the far side.

Then I began to lower myself into the shaft, feeling with my toes for the first rung of the ladder. They missed it, but found the second one, and, with a little sigh of relief, i eased myself down.

Immediately, there was a snapping sound, and the ladder simply fell away. If I had been with Azhara, it and I would have gone plummeting down together into the void. But, all alone, I was being extremely cautious, and still had a firm enough hold on the platform to catch myself.

Furthermore, by amazing good fortune, the first rung of the ladder was caught by my foot, and I had the presence of mind to keep it there. Pointing my toes upwards, I hauled it and myself up high enough so that I could slowly turn and sit on the edge of the platform. From there, it was a simple matter to lift of my legs, bringing the ladder with them.

What then? I thought for a moment and went back to the window, bringing back with me the part of the frame that had yet to be put into its place. It was wide enough to fit over the opening and I thought it would be strong enough to support me if I hung the ladder from it by one of its rungs.

To keep the ladder from sliding back and forth, I removed my loin covering and wrapped it tightly around both, then knotted the ends as best I could. This done, I took a deep breath and lowered myself down again, even more carefully than I had before.

Nothing I could do would have kept the ladder *and* its support from swinging back and forth, which was not a problem descending the ladder. But once my fingers found the switch that opened the door, the ladder insisted on swinging *away* from the doorway whenever I reached a leg out toward it. There was no other course to make a risky and very inelegant leap.

So I did. The ladder swung the other way, striking the wall on the opposite side of the shaft, while I fell with a thump on my butt. But then it was over. I was inside the house, and no alarm sounded. I sat for a moment until my heart slowed, then crept to my feet, slipped out into the hall, and hurried down it to what I was sure was Lyreas's bedroom.

was right, and furthermore he was there, lying on his bed. The only thing wrong with this picture was that he was also bound and gagged—as well as wide awake. I could see his eyes shining in the darkness. I immediately turned, took out my knife, and pressed it into the door frame with all my strength, wedging the door shut. Then I came back to the bed, sat down, and loosened the gag from his mouth.

Lyreas breathed in and out for a moment, then whispered, "My father knew you would come back. At least he was *hoping* you would—you were supposed to kill me last night, you know."

I lay down in the bed beside him. It was either that or kneel on the floor, and the fact that he was tied up had a strange effect on me. Not only did it heat my blood, but it made me bolder.

"Why are you bound and gagged, then?" I whispered back.

"So I wouldn't flee from the house or cry for help, at least until you came. It didn't occur to him that I would call out to warn you, if I heard you coming." He sighed. "Are you really going to kill me?"

"I was supposed to seduce you and find out where the jewels are, the ones we were supposed to steal," I answered.

"Then kill me," Lyreas said.

"Then kill you," I admitted. "Well, those were my instructions, anyway. I wasn't planning to follow them—well, not *that* far, anyway."

He smiled. "Well, I'm glad to hear that, although it doesn't make our situation much better. If you don't kill me, my father's men will. They're waiting downstairs in the study. It never occurred to them that you would know where to find my bedroom."

"You left your door open last night," I explained, somewhat distractedly. Despite myself, I had begun running my hand up and down his chest. His nipples were very erect, which made me very stiff. My fingers insisted on reaching further down and stroking his stomach.

"Are you actually naked?" he asked. "Something is poking me rather hard down there."

"I had to tie the ladder to a beam from the sill in the attic, and I had nothing else to do it with but my loin wrap. The ladder was a trap, you know. It almost sent me falling down the shaft."

"No... I didn't know... They didn't tell me anything." He gasped, not from the news but from the effects of my fingers. "If you're not going to untie me, would you at least reach down a little lower?"

I got up on one elbow, and took hold of his member, amazed at how hot it was, so rigid and so smooth. I closed my eyes, concentrating on the sensations flowing through my fingers, fires racing through dried grass.

Azhara had told me my options at this point. At the time, none of them had made much sense to me. Now, they all did. I felt for the knots that bound his hands and arms. He was tied with leather straps, and the knots were too tight for me to pick apart, at least not in the dark.

"My knife is wedged into the door," I whispered.

"I don't need my hands if you'll just let me use my mouth," Lyreas answered.

Azhara had lingered on this possibility—for one of us, for both of us. I had no question which I wanted. The thought of burying my face in his crotch made my heart weak—and that, at the same time, he would be....

Silently, I turned and laid on my side, since neither of us could lie on our backs. I moved my loins toward him until I felt his tongue find me. What my fingers had just felt were nothing like this. Indeed, my life before this moment suddenly seemed to burn to nothing in the conflagration of all my senses, my mind aware of nothing except the need to cause the same in him.

Azhara had told me to be bold but gentle—this was an art where tongue was master and throat the slave. Lyreas brought the words to life. His tongue flickered around the edges of my piss hole, bathed my knob in wetness, then quivered against the shaft as his throat muscles swallowed me down.

I did my best to follow his lead. I had never had the chance or any reason to examine my own member, stroking it—once I discovered that pleasure—had always been a means to an end. Unlike my own, Lyreas's was not as thick as mine, but longer, and bent in the middle. My mind whispered to me what it might be like to take in my other end, feeling it as it turned upwards... my whole body shivered at the thought.

Right now, though, I had it in my mouth, and, because of the way it bent, the knob rubbed hard against the inside of my throat and threatened to make me gag. Flashes of panic, I pulled back a little, placed my hand around his member so that I could keep it from plunging in too deep, felt the sweat that had gathered in soft fluff of hair at the base, drew him in and out and in again, feeling at the same time a desperate quivering in my purse, where before it had been merely urgent, like all the rest of me. I tried to hold it back,

to give myself time to pull away, but that effort served only to push things over the edge, quivers became spasms, uncontrollably forcing my spend down his throat. Agony—was this right? would it make him hate me?—but then I realized he was about to convulse himself. Impulsively, instinctively, I seized hold of his own purse, not to squeeze, but to feel this miracle, these palpitations, forgetting that these had consequences, hotness suddenly filling my mouth, sharp and salty, one burst, then another, another... swallowing, swallowing, finally pulling my head away, gasping for air. Then bringing it back to lick, suck, nuzzle, to bury my face in the matted nest of hair, confusing taste and scent, Lyreas's very own musky, salty spoor.

IRST, TO CLEAR MY HEAD, tell me the story of all this, you, the jewels, your father's scheming." I had finally gotten up and pulled the knife from the door jamb, cut Lyreas loose from his bonds, and gotten back in bed with him. I felt that I couldn't live without my hands on his body, my fingers playing in the channel of sweat that trickled down his back. He had just asked in a whisper what was to happen next.

He lifted his head and supported it on one hand, the fingers of the other one tracing the line of my eyebrows. "My father has long wished to become a gem merchant on his own right, not a mere agent," be said, his voice low. "But that goal requires a substantial amount of money. His earnings are good, but not that good—especially since he prefers to

live as if he were *already* the merchant.

"For years this has chafed at him, and finally he devised a simple but, he thought, foolproof plan. Usually gemstones arrive here from the south in very small numbers. But he arranged with a certain dealer to send him a near priceless collection in a single shipment—rubies, emeralds, and some flawless amethysts, for which there is always a strong market in the kingdom.

"Then, in great secrecy, he employed Jahhar, the best and most expensive gem cutter in the city to cut and shape them. Meanwhile, my father had one of his most trusted servants seek out the name of the very best thief in all of Heref. And, once Jahhar had finished with the choicest of these gems, he arranged to have the carrot dangled before this man's nose."

I thought of Rabih scaling the roofs of nearby buildings, scouting for the weak link in the protections set up to guard this treasure, without having an inkling that all had been inverted—what appeared weak was strong and what appeared strong was weak. Thus it is when the deceiver is made the deceived.

Lyreas's voice now grew softer, still. "You see how convincing it was made—a masterful robbery by the city's most feared thief—but my father wanted to leave no possibility for doubt. So, knowing of my interests in the occult, he allowed me to make use of his study for my investigations, once all had gone to bed, during the dark hours when the

spirit world comes closest to this one. He also made mention, in another context, of the small chest of gems hidden under his bed.

"That was his plan: the thieves would arrive, discover me awake, force me to reveal the location of the jewels, examine them, and decide I had misled them, then torture me to learn the truth. No matter where, in my pain, I told them to look, naturally they would find nothing, and kill me in their rage—and thus leaving irrefutable proof of the magnitude of the theft.

"No one who knows me would think I have the courage to withstand torture, which is true; and neither would anyone expect the thieves to show mercy on me once they had wormed out of me what they wanted to know."

This is exactly how Rabih himself would have acted, and what he expected of Azhara and myself. Here was another inversion that happens when the deceiver is deceived: the wise become foolish, and the foolish become wise.

Even so. While I knew little of the ways of fathers—and, of course, what I did know was useless for extracting general conclusions—this seemed... As if he were reading my mind, Lyreas, who had paused for a moment to compose himself, interrupted my thoughts.

"You are wondering why my father would allow his only son to be killed to further his plans." Even had I failed to hear the bitterness in his voice, he made it clear enough by not bothering to make the statement a question. "My mother died giving birth to me, and my father has hated me because of this since I was a baby. And now that he has married again, he expects my stepmother to produce a son more to his liking." His fingers had fallen away from me as he spoke, and now he fell back onto the bed, looking up at the ceiling, concluding, more to himself than to me, "Well, that should be easy enough."

It was time to go. I wasn't going to kill Lyreas, and I wasn't going to leave him, either. That meant that I would have to take him with me—itself no great idea, since we would have to leave by the front door. The back door opened on the courtyard and the guard dogs, and going up to the attic and down that roof....

I got up from the bed and pulled him up with me.

"Come," I said.

"At least let me get dressed," he protested.

I shook my head. "You're among thieves, now," I answered. "Clean smalls, if you wish, but nothing more."

Then I thought of his feet, as tender as mine had been when I had first come to Rabih.

"Bring sandals," I added, "but carry them, until we get out the front door."

I thought he would protest, insist on gathering up some treasured possessions to bring along, and that I would not be able to deny him. But, no, he just pulled on the smalls, tied them, and felt under his bed for the sandals. Perhaps, in his mind, he was already dead, still refusing to trust me. Or, as I had, he was just putting his life naked in to the hands of fate, and a companion he thought he might love. The face of Cursic flashed before my eyes, and the idea that I might be to Lyreas what he had been to me, stiffened my resolve to make this happen, and happen for the best.

It almost goes without saying that I tripped over Prince, who must have caught my scent, and come and sprawled in front of the shut door, waiting patiently for another licking session. The dog yelped in pain, then, finally getting its priorities right, began to bark.

Doors flew open. I seized Lyreas's hand and pulled him after me as I ran for the closet. The door had swung closed, and I realized that I had no idea how to open it from this side of the wall.

However, Lyreas knew. There was a click, and we both stepped aside to let it open. He felt for the ladder, which, of course, was no longer there. Before he could speak, I reached out into the void and grabbed hold of it. I pulled down hard, testing to see if my earlier swinging had shifted the board that supported it from above.

"I'll go first," I said. "Wait until I call you—we can't both be on it at once."

I hadn't thought that once I jumped onto it, my weight would make it swing away, pulling poor Lyreas with it. He kicked out to get a better grip on a rung, making a sharp, short, involuntary cry as he did so. The ladder swung back and forth, the wood squeaked, overhead there was an

ominous creaking.

But then I had my hands on the side of trap door, freed the ladder of my weight as I hauled myself up, and turned to grasp hold of Lyreas. I found his hand just as the first of his father's hired thugs found the door to the shaft, shouting to the others as he did.

Finding strength in me I never knew I had, I hauled Lyreas up, flung him down on the walk boards. Our pursuer had already seized hold of the ladder, and now he jumped onto it. He was heavier than I or less able to balance himself; the ladder swung, the board shifted, and all it took was a sharp shove with the flat of my foot to push it past the edge of the trapdoor.

The board vanished, there was a scream of terror, then a distant crash, as the ladder hit the bottom and the falling man smashed against the ladder. A moment of total silence, then the cursing started. But by then I was helping Lyreas up and we were hurrying across the walk boards to the window.

He was limping, he had lost his sandals, but nothing seemed broken, and he made no complain. We both wormed our way through the window and, clinging to the sill, looked down the steep slope of the roof to its edge. I knew no one would be coming after us; instead, if they had any brains, our pursuers would hurry outside and wait for us to descend.

However, we could still get down faster than they could if... if I only knew where the pinions were. And, of course, I didn't. I had only a vague memory of the point where, the night before, we had climbed from the last pinion onto the roof. I had to guess right—there was no gutter to cling to when I came the roof's edge. I would just slide over, and my foot would find a pinion... or it wouldn't.

Hesitating wasn't going to make things any easier. "Don't come down until I beckon to you," I said, not adding, "and if I just fly over the edge it was nice to know you."

Lyreas must have suspected something like that, though, for he leaned forward and kissed me, our eyes met, I touched his face, then turned and began my descent.

I had gone up the roof on all fours, but it seemed safer to go down it on my backside, using my feet and hands as guides and, as much as possible, as brakes. This worked quite well all the way down, until I got close to the edge.

This was the truth of the matter—I couldn't hope to sit on the edge of the roof and reach for the pinion with my foot. It was too far down. I would have to roll over and go down on my stomach—and *very* slowly, too, because if I slipped, I would go shooting over the edge, and there would be no hope of grabbing anything then.

Carefully, slowly, I rolled over onto my stomach, then, in the barest of increments, I began to turn myself around. I would have to go down head first, because I had to *know* where the pinion was. I would have to slide down, look over the edge and find it, and then...

And then, what? Go down head first, hoping to grab

it as I came down? No. I would have to turn again, and slide off the roof, *slowly*, somehow *slowly*, so that when my foot hit the pinion, I would have enough strength in that leg to stop my fall. Then, Lyreas would have to slide down...

I couldn't think about this. If only there had been a length of rope in the attic. If only there had been time to untie my loin covering before kicking the board down the shaft.

All right, I was now facing down. A breeze had blown up and I shivered as it turned my sweat to ice. My fingers reached the edge of the roof. The slates protruded just a bit, giving me something to grip.

That was something. I realized I was whimpering with terror. I hoped Lyreas couldn't hear me. I edged down a little more. Suddenly, it was my forehead that was freezing. It was over the edge. In a moment, my eyes...

It was just then that the piece of slate I was gripping in my left hand broke away, and, helplessly, instantly, I slid headlong right over the roof's edge.

Chapter 9



HAT HAPPENED NEXT WAS ALL A BLUR. Instinctively, I rolled myself up in a ball. Later, thinking back, I saw the wisdom of this—if there was any chance I was to survive the fall, I couldn't land head first, and it would be no better to stretch my arms out in a futile effort to protect it. But I hit the ground too quickly to have had those thoughts then; I just compacted myself, and hit.

And sank. At first, I thought I must have landed in an open cesspit, but I wasn't floating, and when I struggled to my feet, nothing I touched was soft. Somehow, it had just given way, *caught me*, even, as mad as the idea was.

However, there was no time to ponder on this. The watch dogs had not attacked me, and I soon perceived the reason for this—what remained of their mangled and devoured corpses lay strewn about the courtyard, along with the splinters of what had once been a solid door. A hole gaped in the house wall where it had previously stood.

The remains of the dogs reminded me instantly of

fate of that first hyena last night—and perhaps, subsequently, of all the rest. I had to rescue Lyreas and get us both out of this place. Getting up into the tree was the hard part, since the lower branches had been trimmed away. Fortunately, these had left behind burls in the trunk, and I was able to climb up using these until I could grasp a solid limb.

I wish the light had been bright enough to see Lyreas's face when my head poked up over the roof, but it wasn't. I didn't need to gesture; he started sliding cautiously down the moment he saw me.

He stopped an arm's length from the edge, and asked, "Should I come down head first, too?"

As shaken as I still was, I almost laughed. "No," I whispered back. "Get on your stomach and slide down as slowly as you can, feet first. Do everything you can to keep yourself from slipping—flatten your arms against the roof, even the side of your face.

"As you come over the edge, lower your legs as much as you can. I'll guide you to the first pinion."

To do that, I had to lower myself down to the one below it, which meant that I couldn't grab his foot until the lower half of his body was almost entirely over the edge. If he slipped then...

But he didn't. He wriggled slowly down; his legs came lower and lower, until finally I could get hold of his ankle, and guide it to the pinion.

At this point, I thought things would move swiftly,

but I forgot Lyreas had no experience climbing down walls using spikes which were each an arm's length below the next. Despite my hand to guide him, he moved slowly, and the occasional shrieks and screams of pain that floated down to us from the attic window and out of the hole that was once the back door did nothing to speed him up.

Finally, however, he had a foot on the last pinion, and I was right beside him, lying on a swaying branch.

"Now," I said, "all you have to do is jump down onto this branch. I'll grab hold of you so that you won't fall off it. All right?"

"No," Lyreas said plaintively. "I can barely see it. What if I miss?"

"You won't," I said confidently. "Just jump sideways a bit when you go, so that you'll land closer to me."

"Shit, shit," Lyreas muttered, as I shifted closer to the trunk. That let the branch rise closer to him, and made it less likely that it would snap under his weight.

He jumped. Not only did he land on the branch I wanted him to, he managed to stay on it long enough for me to reach out and grab him. Fortunately, my other hand had a firm grip on the branch above me, or we both would have toppled off. Instead, I simply pulled him to me and held him tight until his feet managed to find the branch again.

I could feel his racing heart as we pressed together and that, added to the pure deliciousness of holding him, made me remember the kisses I had exchanged with Sepharan, so long ago. I locked my mouth to Lyreas's for a long, lingering moment.

"Do that again," he whispered, "and I'll faint and fall out of the tree. Let's get *out* of here."

We had reached the point where everything was easier and easier, rather than harder and harder, and several moments later I was helping him down the far side of the courtyard wall. It was then that I realized with a pang that I had left my loin wrap behind, and with it my bit of hyena repulsitive still tucked in a seam.

"Well," I thought, as I took Lyreas's hand and hurried down the alley, "it's still early. Being scavengers at heart, they hurry around to find the food put out for them before resigning themselves to hunting down dogs, cats, and such as Lyreas and myself."

Furthermore, I wasn't nearly as confident as Azhara had been when she led the two of us home through the pitch-black streets. For home was where I planned to go. I was sure I could persuade Rabih that letting Lyreas live, when his father wanted him dead, was at least the first step of what I knew would be a most elaborately shaped revenge.

However, I had barely turned the corner, when I almost ran into Azhara. All three of us stopped dead in our tracks.

"Lyreas," I said, "you remember the sprite Azhamaza, I hope?"

Azhara gave him a cold look and turned to me.

"Well," she said to me, "I do admire someone who knows how to obey a direct order."

When I started to explain, she silenced me with the same look she had just shot at Lyreas. "We don't have *time*," she hissed. "Something *terrible* has happened. The hideout at the temple has been destroyed, and everyone who was there has been killed except Rabih, and he lost his right hand and most of his arm while making his escape."

ZHARA LED US right through the center of the city, skirting the edge of the great plaza where the Amir of Heref had his palace, a frowning edifice that peered suspiciously over high stone walls. I knew less than nothing about him and cared less—which, for all I could tell, was exactly how he felt about his subjects.

In Plaecenon, plazas were graced with trees; in Heref, they were scattered with obeloi, most of them pointed pillars, as the name (I believe) means. But others were wild fantasies on that theme—pillars with carved heads roosting on their tops, others supporting orbs, and others yet were bent or twisted or split in two.

All of these cast eerie shadows in the moonlight that shifted and vanished as clouds passed over the moon. No torches burnt anywhere except at the palace gates; and nothing moved except for a hyena, trotting quickly on some errand of its own.

I shivered, and not from any chill in the air. The inhabitants of Heref were now promiscuous in what deities

they chose to worship, seeking favor from one, and hurt for their enemies from another, while pushing aside and then forgetting the autochthonous gods. But they remained here still, and I felt their whispering, groping presence as we scurried by.

Lyreas seized my hand. "Do you feel it, too?" he whispered, and when I looked at him and nodded, added, "What does it... *where* is it coming from?"

"Do you know how to wall off your mind from the spirit world?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Neither do I," I answered. "But I was taught that, until I learn to do so, I should never acknowledge its emanations unless I wanted to invite something in."

Now it was his turn to shiver. I lifted his hand and licked it, to give him something else to attend to. However, I barely had time to taste the salt on his skin, for Azhara had suddenly stopped, warily looked about, and vanished into the shadows.

When we came to where I had last seen her, I could see where she had gone—through an open gate that should have been locked, and up a smooth flight of marble steps to the base of the Guardian of the Sea.

This was a tall, narrow tower that rose up over the city, an oubolos in its own right, except far taller than any other, with a winding stairway carved into its side. These led to a large chamber with a multitude of narrow, floor-to-ceil-

ing windows, topped with a cast-iron pyramidal roof. Slaves staggered up the stairs all the day long, carrying logs that would feed a bonfire that was set there in a great fire pit.

Once the fire was ablaze, the cast-iron roof glowed a near-molten red, and could be seen leagues out to sea, and almost as far up and down the coast, guiding ships to Heref's great harbor.

But then an earthquake had rocked the city, and to the terror of the inhabitants, the Guardian of the Sea had swayed back and forth and back again... freeing itself of its great iron roof, as it did. This had gone crashing down onto the plaza (where its rusted remnants can still be seen to this day), but the pillar itself had remained standing, albeit leaning at an acute angle away from the sea.

In this state, there could be no more thought of bonfires. Lighthouses of more modest height had been built at the edge of the harbor, rents had been reduced for those willing to live in the shadow of the canting tower, and city life, as it does, had absorbed all these changes and moved on.

But fate was not finished with the Guardian, not yet. No one is sure when this began, but the top chamber became inhabited with large, batlike creatures. These, at dusk, launched themselves out of the high, narrow windows and disappeared into the shadows of the city. Perhaps if they wrought great havoc, soldiers might have been sent up to deal with them—or, more likely, since it was thought to be unclimbable, a way found to bring the tower down.

Instead, nothing happened, and rumors spread as to why this was so. Chief among them was that the Amir himself had taken one as a lover. That rumor stayed with me, for it made me think of Sepharan, and the creature he had inhabited. Sepharan had never visited me again, but, even so, I wondered.

When Lyreas and I arrived at the base of the tower, we found Azhara squatting down, and using her knife to cut a sapling free of its base. That accomplished, a single, sharp blow freed it of its leafy top. She then unfastened her loin covering, tore a strip from its edge, and used this to knot the handle of the knife to the end of the sapling, thus fashioning a crude spear.

"Why?" I whispered in her ear, as she wrapped her privates again with the cloth.

Instead of answering, she first pointed to some dark stains on the steps, then tapped her nose. I thought she meant that I should smell the stain, but when I bent down to touch it with my finger, I knew at once what it was and what Azhara had meant my nose to find.

The stain was blood, Rabih's blood, and a trail of it ran up the steps. The smell, though, was the feral stink of hyenas. At least one of the beasts had already gone up the stairs, drawn by the spoor. And when hyenas were tracking fresh blood, nothing short of death could slow them down.

Azhara went first, and I came directly behind her, with Lyreas, occasionally touching my back (whether for his

assurance of mine, I didn't know), creeping up after us. It was said that the Guardian was hewn from a single, giant slab of granite, which is why it had not crumbled during the earthquake, and which was why the steps seemed almost cold as ice under our feet. The tilt forced us to lean against the stone side as we went up. I tried to stand up straight, and immediately regretted it—I lost my balance entirely and almost had to fall to my knees. Whether I liked it or not, "level ground" was the cant of the steps.

We came to the first turn. Already we were above the wall that surrounded the tower, with the plaza spread out beneath us. Azhara reached back and squeezed my hand hard, which meant that she had spotted the hyenas, and, when we came around, Lyreas and I saw them, too, crowded together at the very top of the flight.

And heard them. They were making a guttural sound, too plaintive to be a growl, and expressing sheer frustration. The lead animal kept putting a paw onto the downward sloping steps, shifting some weight on it, then thinking better of it, and backing up.

This irritated the hyenas directly behind it. They didn't understand the hesitation of their leader, and kept pushing forward, stopping only when that hyena turned its head and snapped its teeth, a horrible chopping sound. Then it would turn back, and, a moment later, the pushing would begin again.

Azhara turned, handed the spear to me, and made a

sideways twisting motion with her hands. "Shit," I thought, but she was already on her way up the steps, and so I went slinking up behind her, hoping Lyreas had the sense to stay put.

The breeze was from the sea, we were barefoot and silent, the hyenas were totally preoccupied, and, most importantly, the Blessed Mother was smiling upon us. Azhara came up so close to the last hyena that she could have reached out and touched it. She stopped, turned her body to face the wall. I reached forward, dug the knife blade into the hyena's flank, and, using Azhara's body as a fulcrum, pushed my end of the spear right to the wall.

The shock of the knife stab worked as well as the spear's leverage. The hyena yelped and spun around, its claws scrabbling at the stone even as it was swept off the steps into the void, howling as it fell.

Azhara, meanwhile, snatched the spear from my hands and immediately made repeated short stabs into the rear end of the second hyena. It panicked, and instead of turning to attack us, tried to flee by pushing its way past the first hyena—with such force that it sent the other animal right over the edge.

Then, as its companion plummeted to its death, the hyena discovered too late what the problem had been. The tilt of the steps was too steep for it to get footing; its solution was to try to get up the flight of steps before it fell off them.

It failed.

As it vanished wailing into the dark, Azhara turned back to me, gave me a grim look, and said, "That was the easy part. Tell your companion to stay here and wait for us to come down. Leave him with the spear, in case other hyenas climb up after us."

I didn't have to tell him anything, of course, since he was standing right beside me—that was Azhara's way of letting me know she was still angry at me for not killing him, and thus making our situation far more complicated.

I started to pass Lyreas the spear, but he refused it.

"No," he whispered. "I've come this far. I'd rather die beside you than wait here in the dark, not knowing what was happening to you. If I have to take the spear, I'm coming after you to fight this Rabih myself."

He said this with such fierceness that my love for him suddenly knew no bounds. I didn't bother to correct him. True, Rabih had wanted him killed, but at this point, I was starting to think, that was the least of our worries.

"Come on then," I whispered. "But this next flight won't be easy."

T WASN'T SIMPLY that the steps listed sharply: the wall tilted with them. The only way to get across was to face the wall, the top half of our bodies arching out over empty space. What made this possible was a series of handholds cut into the rock at shoulder height, which gave us something to grip as we edged along.

The problem was that this arrangement only made

the impossible into the preciously unlikely. Fortunately, the handholds had been cut at an angle, which gave us a good grip. However, to move along we had to shift from handhold to handhold. It was our grip on the wall that kept our bodies from tumbling off. When one hand went groping for the next handhold, the tenuousness of our situation was frightening enough—pure terror came when our feet slipped on the smooth granite. Instantly, we were hanging out over the void, holding on desperately with a single hand.

When that happened—and it *kept* happening—we had to swing ourselves sideways, get our free hand into the next handhold, then haul ourselves up, toes scrabbling for a grip on the steps. Then we had to somehow fold our bodies toward the wall so that our feet could actually support us.

This, naturally, put an agonizing strain on our arm and back muscles. Every time we moved from one handhold to the next, as we tentatively put our weight on our feet, our heart lifted up into our mouth—because the slipping came with no warning. One moment our fingers were tracing along the wall; the next moment, we were hanging by a single hand over the side of the tower.

The most horrible part of this was knowing that I could do nothing if Lyreas slipped. He was right next to me, putting his own hand into a handhold immediately after my hand vacated it. Each time I had to steel myself to not grab at him if I slipped, and I knew he had to do the same.

We managed this by whispering the vilest obsceni-

ties we could muster, delving deep in memory to find one that would outdo the last. "May a palsied, three-legged hog fuck your mother's shithole," I would mutter through clenched teeth before I reached my hand sideways; "May the pox gnaw the last inch off your pustulated cock," Lyreas would respond, and so we moved along... until, finally, a hand grasped mine, and Azhara guided me around the corner.

I turned to help Lyreas, and only then realized that he had actually brought the spear along, twisted into the lacing on the back of his smalls.

He caught my look as I seized hold of his hand.

"I wanted to give Azhara her knife back," he explained, "and I didn't think that I could make it all the way across clutching it between my butt cheeks." It wasn't much of a joke, but our relief, our greatly diminished sense of our own sanity, made us giggle uncontrollably at it all the way up the next flight of severely angled steps.

Even so, I couldn't help notice that the gouts of Rabih's blood were getting larger. These made the going even more treacherous, but it also impressed on my mind that he had made this climb one-handed and in agonizing pain.

Only loyalty to Rabih—no, really, my love for Lyreas—had made me come with Azhara, wanting to get Rabih to agree that Lyreas should live, if for no other reason than to spite the father who wanted him dead. However—as seemed increasingly likely—if Rabih, for some incompre-

hensible reason, had come up here to die, then it was sheer madness for Lyreas and me to follow after him.

Should I turn around and go back? It wasn't too late—and it might be our only hope to survive the night. The tower was very, very high, which meant that we faced at least two more terrifying crossings just like the one we had only barely survived.

If Lyreas had begged me to turn around, I probably would have, but he continued to struggle along gamely ahead of me. And beyond him, Azhara, her spear clenched in her teeth, forged on ahead of us without a backward glance. I owed it to her to call to her and tell her that we were deserting her, and I found I didn't have it me to do so. Thus, I thought, do men go unwillingly but without complaining to their deaths.

This flight I had made Lyreas go ahead of me so I could keep an eye on him—and, to tell the truth, to just look at him, the smooth, clean shape of his legs; the soles of his feet, now dark with bruises. I then resolved that the night would not end, nor would I let myself die, until I could kiss them, then knead them ever so gently in my hands.

Chapter 10



SHAFT OF SUNLIGHT licked at my eyelids until it penetrated my brain. I shifted to one side to escape it, found shadow, yes, but also pressed my face into a head of hair. Groggily, I opened my eyes, realizing as I did that my left leg and arm were wound around a naked body: Lyreas, still sound asleep.

I hadn't spent nearly enough time contemplating his hair, let alone enhaling its fragrance. In the brighter light, I saw that it wasn't auburn, really, at all, but a coppery orange. And the freckles I had first seen on his face covered his back as well, an archipelago of mysterious islands in a sea of milk. In time, I would explore each and every one of them.

But not right now. I closed my eyes again, and pressed my nose into his curls. Despite last night's ordeal, it had a clean, sweet smell to it—the lingering perfume of hair soap, along with its own deeper, private, animal scent.

I started to stiffen, but then memories of the night before intruded, and nipped *that* in the bud. Azhara, Lyreas, and I had finally made it up the last wretched stretch of stairs, our legs weak. The room at the very top, when we entered it, was illuminated by a faint yellow glow—something magic, for there was no source of light. Rabih sat in a far corner, his arm wrapped tightly around someone I had never seen before, not much older, dressed in the robes of a soothsayer—but not one, surely, for he was far from blind.

Something made me think of Sepharan, the same sense of seeing something close-up that ought to be very far away. Almost instantly, I realized the truth, and fell to my knees before them. Rabih, who had lost his hand and bled all over the stairs, was now using that same hand to stroke his companion's hair.

"Rabih, you're *dead*," I said, then blushed at the rudeness of such a bald statement.

He nodded. "I made it here just in time to make a gift of my blood." He smiled at his companion. "Well, as much as was left." He made a pointing gesture with his head to something white as chalk, heaped in the opposite corner, and said casually as he did so. "My body."

"You're like Sepharan," I whispered.

"Not *too* much like him, I hope," said his companion, smiling. "I am who was Adelantas a foreseer. Iannas is my private name, which you may use. I was your father's lover."

"And, now, at last, you are mine, as well," Rabih said, not to us, but to him, his voice radiant with happiness and pride. I stole a glance at Azhara, who was kneeling beside

me. This was a Rabih that neither of us had ever known.

Iannas turned to him and returned the smile. "Sooner than I would ever have wanted, but I will not let such happiness be dimmed with regret."

He looked back at me. "When I met your father, Rabih was a boy, but we were already bound by deep love. If I had lived..."

"We would both be feeling our way around Shavagar-Yasí," Rabih retorted, interrupting, "blind as bats, seeking clients who wished to learn what they were better off not knowing."

He shrugged. "In any case, here I am. And only thanks to you, Azhara, or I would have bled to death trying to tie that tourniquet."

Azhara, more than I, was hit hard by Rabih's death, and perhaps even more so by his being here anyway. She was kneeling beside me, and I could feel her body shivering. When she said nothing, I asked Rabih if he had been attacked by the same thing that we had seen the night before battling the pack of hyenas.

He nodded, his face losing some of its glow. "It was terrible," he said softly. "One look at them and I knew it would be futile to fight. Now I see how hopeless it was even to flee, although I'm glad I did. I made it to the secret passage, and tried to fend one off with a dagger while I pulled on the lever that would free a great block of stone, allowing it to fall and totally block the way. But the thing wrenched the dagger

away from me and sucked my hand into its mouth just as the stone block fell. The thing was crushed, but its teeth had bit deeply, and I was pulled down to my knees.

"I fought to free my hand, but the teeth kept *chewing*. By the time I grabbed my dagger and hacked the head away from its body, it had already devoured my hand, and was working it's way up my forearm."

"By then, I knew was going to die, but not that way. I took the dagger and severed my arm at the elbow." Rabih shuddered and closed his eyes. "I was already in such pain that I hardly felt it."

He opened his eyes again, and looked at Azhara. "I had staggered out onto the street was trying to make a tourniquet with my torn shirt, when Azhara found me. She did what she could, which at least slowed the bleeding. Then, after sending her to get you, I used what strength I had left to come here to die."

He fell silent, and after a moment, Azhara finally spoke, asking the question that was on all our minds: "How could you get up here with only *one hand*?"

Rabih looked at her as if he couldn't quite grasp what she was asking. Then he produced a wry smile. "I have come up here so often in the past twelve years—all you need is balance and quickness, and, of course, to learn, when it finally happens, how to survive the fall."

Azhara muttered, more to herself than anyone else, "You forget tenacious obstinacy. Yours is so strong that it

made the Fates step aside."

HERE WAS A CHANGE in Lyreas's breathing, it became softer, less regular. His body shifted. His hand lifted up and, after a moment's groping, took hold of mine and held it. He groaned, stretched, then thought to ask, "Dionis, are you awake?"

I nipped the nape of his neck in reply, perhaps a little harder than I intended. He immediately rolled over to face me, his eyes wide with alarm. "You haven't become one of *them*, have you?" he whispered. "Have *I*?"

I shook my head, kissed him, ruffled his hair, kissed him again, this time on the tiny puncture wounds on his neck. "No," I said. "Not likely."

He sighed and turned onto his back. "Look at them," he whispered, "so many."

The colony of *viri*, a near solid mass, hung high above us from rafters put there specifically for that purpose. Over the years, Rabih and his recruits had first built a crude roof over the room to replace the iron pyramid that had been there before. It was made of thick, rough-hewn boards, caulked with tarred rope to keep out both rain and light.

Below this were the rafters, far more than any roof needed. The viri gripped hold of these with their feet to slept through the day. There they were now, wings folded around them, heads hanging down like apples on a branch.

In appearance, they were not unlike elongated, winged, and wizened humans. It required no great stretch

of the mind to imagine them as inhabited by spirits of the dead—unless you happened to know that spirit when it was alive.

Here, I shook my head. One of these was inhabited by the spirit of *Rabih*—that was what was amazing. He and Iannas nestled among predators who survived on human blood and had the amazing ability to persuade their victims to willingly surrender it.

Well, I thought, Rabih's spirit had found the right home—it would be hard to discern where he ended and the *viri* began. I felt my neck for my own little puncture wounds.

Last night, Rabih had experienced his first feeding, starting with Lyreas, then going on to me. Each of us in turn had swooned, once we were released from his embrace—although I was aware enough to embrace Lyreas before the darkness swept me away. The dreams that followed left a sweet taste, but nothing else I could remember now.

Lyreas reached out an arm, and I snuggled up close so that he could wrap it around me. "Last night is such a blur," he sighed. "I wish I could remember it better. I was never so tired in my life. Are we really supposed to stay up here? For days?"

I nibbled at his ear. "Yes," I whispered into it. "Only Azhara was exempted. Rabih has things he wanted her to do, and obviously she couldn't go climbing down the stairs in daytime, with the whole city watching."

Lyreas groaned. "Getting up here was hard enough—can you imagine what it will be like when we have to go *down*?"

"Perhaps when we leave here we'll be *viri*," I said. "Then we can just fly away."

"After we toss each other's corpse over the side of the tower," Lyreas replied.

We had to do that to Rabih's remains, which was easy enough with all the blood drained away. The hyenas would do the rest, and all traces of the living Rabih would vanish—thus, it was hoped, throwing off the pursuit.

Anyway, what Lyreas said was true. Coming up, the pitch of the stairs on the two sides forced us to crawl up on all fours; coming down, which meant going *with* the tilt, would be like sliding down the roof at Lyreas's home. It was not going to be fun.

It wasn't much fun getting up, either. Not only were our heads merely a few fingers' distance from those of the *viri*, but the tilt of the floor made walking difficult. As Iannas had promised, food and water had been brought to us, as well as a squat pot for relieving ourselves.

It had a cover. Iannas had told us that the *viri* find human excrement highly offensive, their own being treated almost like a sacrament. And, indeed, you would think the floor would be heaped with it; but while not exactly clean, it was far from foul.

After we ate our pressed bean cakes and drank some

water, what was there for two naked boys in an empty room to do, except lie back down on the floor and contemplate each other? Iannas had promised explanations to us the following night, and such news as they could gather.

"The magus and the thief," Lyreas murmured. "What a perfect pair we make."

For the first time I felt self-conscious. My black hair was close-cropped and none too stylishly, in the manner of the poor, which made my features seem doltish. And, where his body was pleasingly dappled with freckles, mine was like the pelt of a badger, or some other fierce little animal—covered with scars from new wounds and scrapes, and the faint markings of others—not to mention a bevy of bruises from my escapades of the last few nights.

This reminded me of the state of Lyreas's feet, and that I had not comforted them last night, as I had promised myself to do. Hard as it was to pull away from his kisses, I turned myself entirely around, so that I could examine them. They were, I saw, in desperate need of some soothing lotion, but there was nothing like that up here, not even some simple body oil.

All I had was my hands. To use them, of course, I had to sit up, and take his feet in my lap. I did so, picked one of them up, and began to knead it, sometimes with my fingers, sometimes, leaning harder, with the palm of my hand.

Again, I was impressed how soft and tender they were. The soles of my own feet were like leather—supple

leather, for I kept them oiled, but still thick and hard. His were like the palm of my hand, if not smoother. How much he was like me, I thought, when I first came to Heref, with my long black hair and my pale white skin. Now my hair was chopped off and I was brown as a nut.

Lyreas's body, however, was not as soft and formless as my own was then. No one would call him muscular, but he was well-knit and pleasingly shaped. He was also moaning with pleasure, his eyes closed, his arms thrown above his head, his member fast thickening but not yet erect.

I thought of our lovemaking the night before, and the impulse seized me to suck on his big toe. It was, of course, not very clean, but I had nothing to wipe it with, and, besides, I didn't much care. I bent down and took it in my mouth, caressed it, slipped my tongue in and out of the crevice between it and the next one.

Lyreas groaned louder, and began saying my name. Just as excitingly, he reached down and took hold of himself, and began drawing his hand up and down his shaft, pulling his foreskin free as he did so.

Suddenly, I became aware of a hissing sound, and lifted my head to see the round, liquid eyes of several *viri* fixed on me. A muttering sound moved through them, first here, then there, then in several places at once. I quickly set Lyreas's feet down, and he, just as quickly, stopped stroking.

"Shit!" he said, as I flopped down beside him, "I was

so close to pumping seed..."

I barely attended. My mind had latched onto the image of two dogs copulating in the midst of some human gathering, and my excitement had ebbed into a sea of embarrassment. As it did, I remembered Iannas's admonishment to try to sleep through the day, and, if that wasn't possible, to be as still as possible.

"That was so... *special*," Lyreas was saying. "Being a thief, you must know lots of tricks like that."

I nodded. "We thieves fuck like rats—three, sometimes four times a day. You couldn't guess all the different things I've done."

"With Azhara, too?" he asked.

"Especially with Azhara," I replied. "After her, you have proven a bit of a let-down. Girls are so much more fun in bed than boys." This, of course, was something Cursic had told me, but I said it with amazing conviction.

Lyreas bit his lip. "Dionis," he said, half in anger, half in pain, "you didn't *have* to say that."

"No," I answered, "and you didn't have to say what you said about thieves, either. You don't know anything about them, and even less about me. For your information, you're the *first* person I've had sex with, and I don't know *any* tricks at all. Sorry to disappoint you." I then rolled over on my side, facing away from him, and pretended to go to sleep, while in fact I wallowed in a swamp of self-pity, confusion, and rage.

RABIH HAD COME UP HERE often to get away from the cellar and to be with Iannas, and he had carried up the sleeping mat on which Lyreas and I now lay. I was used to such minimal comfort and soon my pretense of sleep slipped into the real thing. I woke once in the afternoon to take a piss, and found Lyreas turned away from me, his body a distance from my own. He neither moved nor spoke while I relieved myself, and I simply lay down beside him again and went back to sleep. I now felt badly about my behavior, but I was too tired to make the effort to set things right. Exhaustion had caught up with me and now had no intention of letting me go.

The next time I woke, dusk had settled and the viri were gone. Lyreas was standing beside one of the windows, looking out over the city. I saw he had left me a little of the seed cake, but I didn't feel like eating. I got up and silently went to the window next to the one Lyreas was at.

"Why do you think they fly out at dusk?" he asked. "I would think they would wait until the darkest hour of the night." His voice was without emotion apart from curiosity; it was as if we had just climbed up and were taking in the view.

Not that it wasn't worth taking in. This was the moment of the day when the sky was not yet black but the earth was in shadow. Torches were being lit, lanterns hung outside the doors of taverns and such, and candles made little pools of light in darkened rooms—soon to be shut safely away behind locked shutters. The air was still; the smoke of cooking

fires rose up out of the dark like gray ribbons, bringing with them the scent of charcoal and roasting meat.

"Who could they find at that hour out on the streets?" I replied finally. "Only hyenas, or you and me."

"Worse luck," he said, without turning his head.

I felt a pang, whether or remorse or irritation, I wasn't sure. Still, there it was: I was still in my own world, even though that had radically changed last night, but Lyreas was surrounded by unknowns, serious danger, and all he had to cling to was me—until I had suddenly, impetuously, shoved him away.

Not knowing what to say, I just let the words say themselves. "I was supposed to be a girl," I began, "and when I was born a boy, I was supposed to choose to become a girl. My mother meant to use me somehow to disempower the *Nithaial* and replace them with the Seven Sisters of the Moon, of whom she was the first."

Lyreas turned away from the window and look at me with astonishment. "You are the Pale Child, hidden and someday to be found? But you're a boy."

I nodded. I didn't know about the "hidden and someday to be found" business, but it certainly sounded like my mother.

"I refused to become a girl," I said. "I escaped the temple; I came here and hid with Rabih. So, I'm not exactly a thief. Somehow I thought you would know that..."

"Without your having to tell me," Lyreas said, saying

it for me. He stepped toward me, reached out his hand and touched my cheek. "I thought you were special, but because my love for you made you so. I couldn't see beyond that."

He dropped his hand; tears formed in his eyes. "To be honest, I was afraid to try, afraid of what I might find."

"A little thief who fucked like a rat and smelled of the sewers he came from," I said.

"Well, mostly, who preferred Azhara to me, which was something I could completely understand. After all, she is amazing. And you smell like, well, like a bitter herb, sharp and fragrant all at once—like nothing else on this earth."

I smiled, but secretly. He was describing the hyena repulsitive—and that applied two days ago. He might think differently if it had been fresh.

I took him in my arms, or maybe he took me in his. The same wave—relief, desire, love—swept all doubts and hard feelings away; our open mouths locked, our bodies tried to meld together. In a moment we were on the sleeping mat together; in another moment our hands were on each other's member, in another, we were drenched in each other's seed.

"No sex, and you're what? Fourteen? Fifteen?"

"Close to sixteen," I admitted with embarrassment. "How old were you when you first made love?" I could feel jealousy ready to pounce.

"Well," Lyreas hesitated. "Twelve, I guess. It was with a crew member on a sailing vessel—I was traveling

down the coast with my father. At the time, I thought it was all part of the excitement of being at sea, where you could do things you would never do on land."

He laughed. "Of course, then I found out you *could* do it on land as well, even up in the air... in towers, at least."

I smiled. Yes, you could.

Lyreas ran his finger over my stomach and scooped up some of the creamy glop we had just deposited there.

"Taste?" he asked. "It's better when it's still warm. I think this is mine."

I licked the stuff off his finger. I remembered the taste from sucking him the night before, but, eaten like this, I didn't think much of it.

"All the more for me, then," Lyreas said, reading my expression correctly. And I felt his warm tongue licking and nuzzling my chest and stomach. That I *did* like, and soon I was taking my time sucking it off him.

"Mine is whiter than yours," I said, eventually, "and tastes better."

"Well," Lyreas said, "it *could* be mine. And I don't know if it *is* better."

"I remember shooting this streak that runs right up to your nipple," I answered, catching some up on two fingers. "Here... now admit it. Mine is more delicious. Yours is more... fishy."

"Fishy!!" In a moment we were rolling around the floor in mock combat, and what seed was left on us got all

hopelessly intermingled.

In other circumstances, we might have had to do the whole thing all over again, just to sort it all out. But a sound made us lift up our heads, both at once, to find Rabih setting a small traveling pack down on the floor. When he stood up, his face was very grave.

Anticipating his scolding, I spoke before he could. "Rabih, we're sorry that our silliness disturbed the viri this morning. If there is any way we can make our apology known to them, please tell us what we should do."

He sighed, then shook his head. "You are boys. Why shouldn't you behave as boys? You stopped soon enough when the unsettling brought you to your senses.

"No, we must deal with much more serious matters than that." He turned to direct his attention solely on my companion. "Lyreas, son of Arribas, I am sorry to tell you that Dionis's enemies pursued him to your house, and slaughtered every living thing they found there."

He paused to let this sink in, then added, "Don't blame Dionis for this—he could not have known that this would happen. And by bringing you here, he did save your life, not once, but twice. For I had instructed him to kill you, as you no doubt already know."

He shook his head. "The Fates have spoken, and, as always, they have bound us in ways we could never expect."

To my surprise, Lyreas answered him, speaking with equal gravity. "Spirit of Rabih, because of what you have

done for us since, I have asked the Holy Mother to forgive you and to bless your soul."

He glanced at me and then added, "I have already worked out that Dionis must be a warlock. Is it agents of the sisterhood that have done these terrible things?"

Rabih shook his head. "If they once sought him, they do so no longer. Terrible news has spread through the bazaars today, and people are talking of nothing else. The Amethyst Throne has been overthrown, and the kingdom has been seized by a cabal of necromancers who call themselves The Eight. None can withstand them, and those who tried were slaughtered without mercy. And, even so, the flowing of blood has only just begun. Necromancers have no need of living subjects.

"The only exception to the carnage may be the forces led by Prince Caelas, protected by the mountains and the Gates of Karn, not to mention the magus Orien. But..."

Rabih shrugged. "Who knows? Nothing we hear is certain or complete—chaos is everywhere and rolling towards us like a cloud. Iannas may know more when he comes, if he has time to speak with you at all."

I put my arm around Lyreas. His body was shaking. My own head was reeling, but whatever I was experiencing must be a hundred times worse for him. It was one thing to know your parents hated you, another to learn they had been murdered in cold blood.

"The news grows still worse," Rabih continued.

"This news arrived on the heels of an emissary, sent by the cabal to speak to the Amir himself. Despite the rumors, no *viri* among us has been taken by the Amir as a lover. But the fact that this messenger is a summoner leaves no doubt that the purpose of his visit is to have you, Dionis, captured and brought back to the Kingdom."

Rabih stared at us. "Do you doubt what the Amir will do? He may be debauched, but he's not an idiot. Nor is he known for his compassion. The search for you will be massive and ruthless, and any who knew you in the slightest will be tortured until they reveal all they know."

"Azhara!" I exclaimed in horror.

Rabih nodded. "Her especially, but the *viri* as well. The Amir has let them be because of his belief that fear of them augments the presence of the hyenas—which, after all, can't climb up on roofs. But their connection with the *Nithaial Galgaliel* is well known. And, while they can't be questioned, slaughtering them all will certainly keep them from interfering with the search."

A fluttering motion broke the silence that followed after that statement, and almost instantly Iannas appeared before us. He, too, had brought a small pack, which he laid beside the first.

He glanced at Rabih, who nodded in reply. "I have told them everything except for the plans we have devised."

Iannas turned to us. "The tide turns later in the night, and you two have passage on a ship that will be sailing then

to the lands of the south."

He sighed. "I had hoped, Dionis, to tell you some things, about your father, and about your circumstances. But the summoner who is seeking for you is very powerful, and our powers can deflect him only for so long. It is absolutely *imperative* that he not know you are heading south; the Amir has armed sailing vessels that could easily chase you down at sea."

"Azhara..." I began, but he immediately interruped.

"She will be coming with you, of course," he said.
"Rabih has long believed that she is a rogue witch, sent by a
group within the Sisterhood who has rebelled against your
mother. Having talked to her last night, I think he is right.
You could have no better ally on your side."

I was stunned by this. "You cut off her finger!" I exclaimed, looking at Rabih in confusion and anger.

He met my look without a change of expression. "I had my role," he said. "She had hers. In the world of shadows, that is the way things must be done. You'll see this for yourself, soon enough."

"No time for any more talk," Iannas said, "however much we would all welcome it. We are all returning to the mountains around Shavagar-Yasí, and we have a long flight. The other *viri* are gathering at the edge of the city, and I must hurry to join them."

He embraced Rabih, and they held each other for a long time. "We shall be waiting for you in the western foothills," Iannas said.

Rabih laughed. "I'll catch up with you long before then, beloved."

Once Iannas had bid us farewell and vanished, Rabih pointed to the two traveling packs on the floor. "Your clothes are packed in those, along with other things you may need," he said. "Dress quickly—Azhara awaits us below."

PART THREE COYAGE TO RASTAYMA

Chapter 11



HE STORM HIT *The Seventh Virgin* on our fourth day out of Heref. During the first three days the sea had been smooth as glass, and Lyreas, although a bit unsteady, had managed to stay up and about, moving from one patch of shade to another, where he would sit on the deck and nibble on a little piece of sweetmeat that the ship's master would send him, "to keep him nourished." He had a lascivious interest in Lyreas, and I expected he was lacing these with some philter, but, if so, the reward was all mine.

Only a life spent wholly at sea would cause anyone to make love in a ship's cabin—the blankets always damp, the air always thick and sour, the bunks far too short and much too close together, one on top of the other. But, at night, we had brought our blankets up to the deck where we had lain together under the stars and had found silent ways to give each other pleasure.

On the third night, there had been no stars. We had barely snuggled together under our blankets when the sea had grown rough, each wave hitting the ship's hull with a hard thump. Fat drops of rain came smacking down on the deck, and by the time we found refuge in our tiny cabin, the storm was fully upon us—and Lyreas threw up his supper all over the cabin floor.

What followed was a sleepless night. There would be a lull, Lyreas would fall asleep, I would get the cabin floor half mopped, and then the storm, which was toying with us as a cat does a mouse, would pounce on us once more. The seasickness would return, and Lyreas would be leaning over his bunk, retching, long after there was nothing but yellow bile left in his stomach to send up.

Furthermore, he was too weak to hold onto the vomit bowl; if I relaxed my attention for a moment, it would slide out of his reach and under the bunk, where it evaded capture until I was forced to get down on my hands and knees. Thus the hours passed, with me sponging the sweat from Lyreas's body, wiping the bile from his lips, and comforting him as best I could.

Groans and cries could be heard from the cabins on either side of us, sometimes punctuated with crashes. At the worst of it, when the ship twisted as it tossed, anything not actually tied down had its turn being tossed onto the floor—and if it broke, the pieces were left there to scatter as they chose.

Finally, toward dawn, Lyreas fell into a fitful sleep, and it seemed to me that if I didn't get some fresh air, I would faint dead away. So, judging my movements by the tossing

of the ship, I managed to get past our cabin door and up the companionway, until I was clinging to the clamps that opened the bulkhead door.

Here, I hesitated. The door was heavy and dangerous; in a storm like this it was simply deadly. And the clamps that held it shut were hard to shift. Luckily, I didn't have to deal with it—two of the crew came in while I stood there, drenched to the bone, and made no effort to stop me when I slipped past them while they were wrestling the door shut.

What I found outside in the ash-gray light took my breath away. The waves towered over the ship. To survive, it had to head directly into them. It was like going the wrong way down a corridor jammed with sheer-faced mountains hurrying the opposite way. Each one picked you up and tossed you over it, and you barely had time to get to your feet before the next one grabbed you.

Every time this happened, the ship shuddered from bow to stern. And, all the time, the rigging howled, the small amount of sail unfurled to keep us underway strained at its seams. Already, one had been ripped into pennants. And the rain fell in torrents, and with such ferocity that it bruised the skin.

Fortunately, the door opened under the overhang of the poop deck, which provided at least the illusion of shelter. I seized hold of one the life lines that stretched here and there across the ship, and, clinging onto it for dear life, moved to join a dark form crouched down on the deck: Azhara. Azhara was sharing a cabin with a woman and her servant. The woman had come to Heref with her daughter to arrange a marriage, had succeeded, and was now heading home. She had been as stricken with seasickness as Lyreas, and Azhara spent all her waking hours (and, until the storm hit, all her sleeping ones) away from the cabin, the stench, the gratingly piteous moans.

I crouched down beside her. Unlike me, who had foolishly come out all dressed, she wore nothing but a cachesexe. Consequently, while I was sodden, she was glistening, and when she turned to me, I saw nothing but excited joy in her eyes.

She said something to me, but the words were snatched away even as they left her mouth. I shouted back that I couldn't hear her, and she laughed, reading my lips, then shrugged. It was fine with her.

Azhara had taken to life on the ship like a fish to the sea, quizzing the crew on everything they knew, helping them in even their most noisome tasks, all while fiercely and summarily repulsing any amorous advances. In response, they adopted her as a mascot, admiring the nonchalance of her courage and the quickness with which she absorbed what they taught.

Light flickered fitfully in the sky, first to our left, then to our right, then right over us—a brilliant flash of lightning, followed instantly by a thunderous boom that rattled the ship. Then, more slowly, we heard the terrifying sound of

breaking, splintering wood, and the main mast, shattered by the bolt, broke away just above the deck, and went crashing into the sea, pulling the ship over sideways as it did so.

Out of nowhere the crew appeared, shouting at each over the storm. They gathered around the splintered stub, used axes to hack apart the wood that hadn't broken clean away, cut loose the rigging, then looped lengths of it around their waists, and tied themselves together. Only then did they make their way down the dangerously listing deck, to manhandle the mast into the sea.

The ship, bucking like a horse, righted itself, knocking the men over like cloutpins as it did so. However, the dragging mast had cost the ship its headway and so it could not be steered. Now, the waves buffeted us this way and that, and with a sinking heart I realized we were swinging broadside to the waves. You did not need to be a sea dog to know what would happen then—the ship would capsize and sink.

The seamen were struggling with the remaining mast, attempting to raise a bit of sail. But, really, it was hopeless. The jerking, twisting motion of the ship sent the sail spar flying one way and then the next, swinging out over the sea on one side, than, with a snap, whipping back to swing out over the other side.

Azhara gave my arm a squeeze, got up, ducked under the life line, and started walking across the deck. When she reached the first of the ship's hatches, she got up onto it, lifted her hands above her head, and bent her wrists until her fingers touched over her head. When she drew them apart, a blue flame flickered between them, fragile and threadlike; these, by moving her fingers, she spun into a glistening fabric, which grew larger and brighter until, with a clap of her hands, she sent it draping down over her body, where it clung like a second skin.

Wrapped in this web of power, she walked to the side of the ship where the mast had fallen. It had smashed through the railing boards and crushed the deck at its edge, making a distinct declivity, where the sea rushed in and out.

Azhara slowly stepped down this, the water lapping around her ankles, until she reached the very edge. But with every step she took, the effects of the storm receded, which is not to say that they stopped, or even slowed down. The rain continued to pour, the wind to blow, the waves to roil the sea. But for those on the deck, it all seemed an astonishing illusion—as the ship was dreaming the storm, and we were privy to the dream.

Once Azhara had effortlessly balanced herself at the very edge of the declivity, her hands extended, her fingers spread apart. Out in the water, heads emerged from the churning waters, the heads of women with translucent skin and long, streaming lengths of radiant hair.

Sea witches! They had gathered here because they knew the ship was about to go down and that they could have their pick of the drowning. So they took their lovers, and in many other devious ways, as well, luring handsome young men out of boats or down from the shore, into their arms and a watery doom.

In the stillness, I heard a scrabbling at the door, and sensed that it might be Lyreas. The ship was now motionless, so, between the two of us, we got the door open, and he staggered out onto the deck. Immediately, I wrapped my arms around his shivering body.

"You'll freeze to death out here," I whispered in his ear, but he shook his head.

"I couldn't stay another moment down there. When I dragged myself up the companionway, all I could think about was fresh air and filling my mouth with rainwater."

As he spoke, though, he was staring at Azhara. "I guess there's no doubt now that Azhara's a witch," he whispered, "and a *very* powerful one."

"What do you think she's doing?" I whispered back.

"Bargaining with them, witch to witch. Can't you feel the flow of power, back and forth? It's almost like music."

Now that he said this, I could feel it, and, furthermore, found I could make myself more... *attuned* to it. Lyreas was right, it was like music, as the mind would hear it, listening without ears.

"I think they want her to join them," Lyreas whispered, his whole body tensing from his effort to understand. "To become a sea witch, too, and leave the rest of us to drown."

He shuddered. "They're very cold. Not evil, exactly,

just heartless."

"Well," I said, "remember that they're fish."

One part of my mind was struggling to perceive these things, too; another part was impressed that Lyreas was managing to do this at all. 'Magus and thief' might be exactly the right description of us—although, right now, one could say that *he* was doing the stealing, since none of this was meant for us to know.

Now, it was clear, they had come to an understanding. The back-and-forth flow of force had ebbed. Azhara, making a gesture of respect, she stepped back a bit, and aside.

Then, one of the sea witches swam up to the side of the ship and began to sing, a song that fell on the ears but played with the listeners' minds as well. It worked its magic on the heart and the groin, promising undying love and sensual pleasures beyond imaging.

And, one by one, the crew moved across the deck to her, but one especially seemed to be touched, for he stepped ahead of the others, disrobing as he did. In a moment, his naked body leaped into the sea—and into the sea witch's arms. She caught him, pressed her lips against his in an open-mouthed kiss, and they sank together under the sea.

Now, another sea witch approached, and the same thing happened, and again and again, until six men had gone overboard, and the sea was empty.

The flickering power that had wrapped itself around Azhara faded, then went out. The rain became palpable again

and the wind pushed against us, but a circle of calm surrounded the ship that the waves seemed unable to affect. The ship rose and fell with them, but that was all. They didn't strike it or toss it about.

The seamen who hadn't been chosen turned away from the edge of the deck and walked aimlessly about, their eyes vacant, their faces masks of disappointment and disbelief. Azhara walked over to where we stood, me with my arms still wrapped around Lyreas.

"Well, that certainly let the badger out of the sack," she said. "We'd better go see the master of the ship."

BDAÊL-NEPHAL was the ship master's name, which, he had already told us—or, rather Lyreas—meant "servant of the sea." After he had given the commands for the ship to be pumped out and a jury mast rigged, he led us into his quarters, which were far more opulent than anyone sequestered in one of the ship's cabins could have ever imagined. But for us the important thing was that they were warm, well lit, and dry.

He ordered his cabin boy to bring us drying cloths, which proved of a coarse soft texture, ample enough in size to serve as robes to wrap ourselves in once we had mopped away the wet. Then we settled down onto the circle of cushions set in a circle on the carpeted floor. As we did so, Abdaêl-Nephal directed the cabin boy to make up a pot of *kavi*, and sat down himself across from Azhara.

"How long will this magic of the sea witches last?" he

asked her, placing a friendly hand of Lyreas's knee.

"Until the storm abates," she answered, "or so they promised. They cast a spell before they carried their lovers down to their lairs below the sea."

Abdaêl-Nephal nodded slowly, rubbing his chin with his free hand. He had the brawny body of a brawler and shrewd eyes set in a face that had long ago learned to give none of his thoughts away.

"I would have lost that many seamen overboard by the time we got the sail up," he said. "At least, now, if half of what I hear is true, they will have a very pleasurable death."

"They would never have gotten the sail up before the ship capsized," Azhara pointed out. Her tone was polite, but it held little deference. "You know that as well as I do. This conversation is not about their deaths, but the fact that I have just saved your ship and your life—and what reward you care to offer us for this slight service."

Abdaêl-Nephal snorted. "I knew you were a witch the moment I first saw you," he replied, "and that this one," and here he nodded at me, "was something worse. Still, I let your party come aboard... and I am still awaiting *my* reward." He gave Lyreas's leg a caress, moving his hand up it as he did.

"Perhaps, in the blindness of desire," Azhara answered, "you failed to notice that our friend is a magus. He is about to turn your hand into a toad."

Abdaêl-Nephal turned in surprise to look at Lyreas,

who met his glance with one of cool disdain. The ship's master lifted his roaming hand to accept a small cup of *kavi* from the cabin boy. I accepted mine and, mindful of the hotness of the liquid, took a cautious sip. It proved a dark, sharp-edged beverage made palatable by much sweetening.

"This Rabih who arranged your voyage is a thief," Abdaêl-Nephal continued, after tossing down the entire contents of his own cup and handing it back to the cabin boy for a refill. "I do services for him, but we have no other bond. I planned to sell the three of you as slaves when we reached Ras Tayma—how would he ever know? So, this then is your reward: the freedom to leave the ship as freely as you came aboard."

A hand touched mine. It was the cabin boy's, taking my cup from me to refill it. The liquid had some sort of potency to it, for my brain felt as if it had been just slapped awake. When the boy handed the cup back to me, our eyes met, and there was a warning in them.

I had paid no attention to him before, but I regarded him now. He was at the cusp, twelve years old, and could soon be fairly called a youth. His face, like his master's, was guarded, but there was intelligence in it, instead of mere cleverness.

I turned back to the conversation as if nothing had happened. Azhara was saying, "Why do you play these games with us? We know Rabih paid you—and paid you well—not only for our voyage, but to hide us when we reach Ras Tayma until someone comes to fetch us away."

Again, the ship's master fingered the stubble on his chin. "When I entered into this agreement," he said at last, "I was told that you would be three thieves. That is a simple matter. I have no problem with thieves. After all, in a manner of speaking, I am one myself."

"We *are* a party of thieves," Azhara said, holding up her hand, "and I have the wound to prove it."

Abdaêl-Nephal nodded his head. "Yes," he said, "I see you are a thief, and that your companion," and again he nodded at me, "is a thief as well. But I would have to be blind to be made to believe that this one," now Lyreas got the nod, "has ever stolen a thing in his life."

He turned and summoned the cabin boy. "Nimr! Does he have the powers the witch claims for him? And, if so, how did you miss this?"

The boy closed his eyes for a moment, his face growing pensive. When he spoke, his words were tentative. "It is confusing, Master. As I told you before, this one is a witch, and that one, a warlock, or so it seems. There is much about him that is cloudy.

"But about the youth—yes, I can sense them now. I doubt that he is a magus, because he has not yet learned to give them shape. They are cloudy and difficult to perceive. Even so, I am sorry that I failed to notice them before, and beg you to forgive me."

It is doubtful that Abdaêl-Nephal even heard the boy's last words, for he had already turned back to us.

"You see why I am confused," he said to Azhara, "and why, despite the fact that you saved my neck along with your own, I remain reluctant to help you."

My mind suddenly made sense of Nimr's warning look, and I burst out, "You had no intention of selling us as slaves. You planned to turn us over to agents of The Eight. Indeed, I think you still do."

For the first time, emotion shot across the ship master's face—a flash of anger, immediately tamped down.

"This is no ordinary gift the gods have put into my hands, boy," he snapped. "If I sell it my rewards will be great. If I hide it away, not only will it lose all its value, it might also bring me a horrible death. I've already said that you to are free to leave my ship the moment it reaches port—with luck, you will be lost in the city before word gets to those who wish to capture you."

Abdaêl-Nephal emptied the cup of *kavi* he held and tossed it down onto the rug. "On the other hand, if they are waiting for you at the quai—well, you have your magic, just as they have theirs."

He looked sardonically at Azhara. "Or perhaps you can call upon the sea witches to protect you once again. All I know is that it is out of my hands."

And with that, he got up and strode out of his quarters. When we exited ourselves, he was already shouting orders to the crew.

HE DAY PASSED QUICKLY. By the time the storm had passed, the waves had died down, and the wind, although still gusty, no longer threatened to rip our sails to tatters, the jury mast had been put up, the rigging untangled and mended and strung up, and a sail raised.

During this time, the ship had only the sail on the second, much smaller mast, to drive her, and while it kept us from being driven onto the shore, we made hardly any progress down the coast. But, as evening came, all sails were up, a brisk breeze carried us south, and the night promised to be clear, showing all the stars the ship's master needed to steer by.

Even better, the smell of supper cooking filled the air. Few would call the aromas appetizing, but they were certainly promising, and we—crew and passengers alike—were starving.

None of us had known when we came aboard that passengers were expected to supply their own food during the journey, and, if they wanted to eat well, bring their own cook. Fortunately, Azhara had coin enough for us to pay to eat with the crew, meals that proved to be a monotonous round of ship's bread—round, flat loaves, coarse and dry, with a hole through their center that allowed them to be strung up out of the reach of rats—and bean porridge, made with chunks of dried fish and pieces of fermented cabbage.

This vegetable was packed in a great tun, and the liquid it produced was drawn off into a large mug and passed about, separately from the porridge, for all to drink from, as

it was supposed to fend off the skorby. The captain allowed no alcoholic beverages aboard, so our choice was to drink that or the scum-laden water from the drinking barrels, and, having tasted both, the cabbage squeezing prevailed. No wonder that when the rain had begun falling again, Lyreas had stood on the deck, face up, mouth open, drinking in as much of that sweet, clean water as he could.

Perhaps because we were paying for our meal, or perhaps because the crew preferred to have us eat at a distance, our porridge was served to us separately. But otherwise, we ate like the others, squatting around a common bowl set down on the deck, and eating from it with our fingers.

At first, because of porridge was boiling hot, we scooped up small amounts. But, once it had cooled a bit, we took as much as our hands could hold. It was pongy stuff, to be sure, but we ate it greedily, spitting the fish bones onto the deck between our feet.

When the bowl was finally scraped clean, we swept up the detritus and tossed it back in, then fell backwards onto the deck, where we lay and sucked on our fingers.

"Azhara," I said eventually, "you are the most amazing person I have ever met and probably ever will. If you were a boy, I would be hopelessly in love with you."

"For all the good it would do you," she replied, her face turned toward the stars over our head. "Anyway, I was a boy once, and I never saw much point to it."

My jaw dropped. "You were a boy! You chose to

change!"

"I wanted to be a witch," she replied. "If that was what it took, so be it."

Now she did turn her head to face me. "So you see," she said wryly, "all this could have been yours."

My mind bubbled over with questions, but the one that demanded asking was, "And you are helping *me*?"

"A bitter potion," she answered, "but it had to be swallowed. Fortunately, you're not as horrible as I had expected. But to answer your question, no, I am not helping you. I am one of a group of the Sisters fighting your mother's attempt to transform the Sisterhood into a new religion."

"Wouldn't if have been simpler, then, just to kill me?" I asked, unable to prevent a drop of bitterness from falling into my voice. That I was alive at all seemed so *accidental*.

Her eyes met mine and held them. "On the contrary. I would give my own life to keep you alive. There are things you don't know, and that I'm not about to tell you. But when you hear them, all the parts of the puzzle will fall into place."

I started to speak, but she made a hissing sound to stop me. "Not now," she whispered. Then she yawned, stretched, and sat up, saying in a louder voice, "Look at the sky! We can sleep out on the deck tonight."

I had glanced over at the crew several times both while we were eating and then when Azhara and I were whispering, watching for hostile glances, listening for voices muttering dark thoughts. It would take only a few words from the ship's master to turn them all against us. But they gave no sign of anything apart from the general exhaustion—and these were not the sort who could feign anything, let alone a desire to do us in.

Still, Azhara had a point. If Nimr had the powers he seemed to, he might be able to overhear us from a distance. Besides, she had already put enough in my mind to all but guarantee a sleepless night.

So, I nudged Lyreas, who had fallen sound asleep, and we all went down to get our sleeping mats and blankets to make a nest for ourselves on the deck. This time, Azhara joined us, suggesting that we keep watch, one of us waking another when the ship's bell sounded the hour.

Azhara took the first watch, then woke Lyreas, who disentangled himself from me and sat against the mast, for otherwise he knew he could never stay awake. I groped for him, grumbled, and dropped back into my dreams. It was some time later that I felt a hand gently shake my shoulder.

Thinking it was Lyreas, I seized hold of it, and pulled him down on top of me. But even as I wrapped my arms around him, I knew I had got it wrong. My eyes flew open, to see Nimr's face a hand's breadth from mine. He was smiling so widely that his teeth shown in the moonlight.

He put his hand over my mouth as I opened it to speak, whispering as he did, "I want to speak with you for a moment. Will your lover kill me if he finds us like this?"

Chapter 12



Y SMILE MATCHED NIMR'S. Lyreas was fast asleep, his head hanging down so low that his chin must be digging into his chest. So much for vigilance! The boy had already settled down beside me, where he would be completely invisible should anyone on the night watch cast an eye our way.

"Mmm," Nimr whispered, "you're lover is lucky. It's nice lying close to you. However, I haven't come to steal you away from him, but to offer you my help."

"We would accept it gladly," I answered. "But what can a cabin boy do that the ship's master could not?"

The boy smiled again. "Many things, I think. Yazan—the person you were supposed to meet in Ras Tayma—is a dealer in stolen goods and a clever man, but for you three a *very* dangerous ally, even if he would be willing to help you at all. I think your Rabih must have been at his wits end, to send you to him."

That, I thought, was probably true. Our flight to Ras

Tayma was obviously something Rabih had improvised in haste, trusting to Azhara to see us through. Thinking of her reminded me that she was asleep on the other side of me. Slowly, I shifted my foot until it pressed against her leg. Immediately, she pressed back, letting me know that she was awake and listening.

Nimr had paused to let me take his warning in. "Go on," I whispered. "What you say reflects our own fears."

"Let me tell you a little about me, first, which might help you trust me more." He reached down and took my hand. "My powers come to me from my mother's side of the family. Her brother Salamah is a respected mage, and, it is rumored, more than a mage, although how that might be I don't know.

"When I was ten, he told my parents that I also possessed the gift, and this was a dangerous thing for a boy to have, since I would soon become prey to the necromancers. To my joy—for I was much more interested in becoming a seaman than a mage—my father arranged for me to become a cabin boy on this ship, for its master, Abdaêl-Nephal, owed him a large debt."

He sighed. "When I am your age, I am to go to my uncle and become his apprentice. Meanwhile, when our ship is in port, he summons me for lessons, and to check the development of my powers. Eventually, Abdaêl-Nephal learned of this, and he has used my abilities to his advantage. I agreed to this, in part because it eased his urgings that I pleasure him, and in part because I am curious about them myself."

He laughed softly. "I hadn't thought of using them to keep him away. When your witch said your lover might turn his hand into a toad, I had to put my own hand over my mouth, to stifle my laughter. It is like a toad so much already."

I recalled the ship master's hands, rough-skinned and speckled with warts, and almost laughed myself. "Azhara is her name," I said, "and if she were performing the spell, it wouldn't be his *hand* that suffered the transformation."

Nimr now laughed aloud, a bright, merry sound. "So much for secrecy," he whispered, once he had conquered it. "You shouldn't say such things when you're *conspiring*." But we were both smiling at each other.

There was the sound of steps approaching, and Nimr buried himself under my blanket. The night watch came down from the poop deck and walked about the deck, passing close by us as he did so. He then went up to the foredeck, and, a moment later, walked past us again on the port side.

Silence returned, and, after a bit, Nimr's head slowly emerged from the blanket. "Well, he or the steersman heard *something*," the boy whispered, "and they're under orders to report anything unusual to the master. I'd best slip back to my hammock. We'll be in port the day after tomorrow. If by any chance I can't talk to you by then, you should all three wait for me in your cabin. Don't come up on deck, and, above all, *don't leave the ship without me*." He leant forwards, gave me a light kiss, got to his feet, and vanished into the shadows.

I listened for a moment, then rolled over to face Az-

hara. "What did you think about all that?" I whispered.

"Two more hapless conspirators I can't imagine," she replied. "You might at least have asked him *why* he is risking so much to help us."

"I hadn't thought of that," I admitted. "Nimr warned me that Abdaêl-Nephal was up to something when we were all drinking *kavi* in his quarters, so when he woke me up now, I just assumed that he was on our side."

"Whatever *that* might mean," Azhara responded. "I doubt if Nimr, however psychic, knows who he's helping, let alone why."

"He's a boy," I answered, "and he has a boy's quickness in attaching his loyalty to someone he admires. Here we are, young like him and possessing powers like his. And there's the ship's captain, a randy old reprobate who importunes the boy to stroke him. At his age, who would *you* choose?"

I was, I realized, remembering my own feelings for Cursic and Alsdar. Things may have been very different for Azhara, and I suddenly feared I might be intruding where I had no right to go. But Azhara simply shrugged.

"Waiting for him in that cabin—we might as well be rats in a barrel." She sighed. "Well, we shall see."

HE NEXT DAY PROVED FAIR, with a crisp breeze that hurried us southward. When I noticed the ship's captain standing on the poop deck, looking out to sea in a meditative way, his hand wrapped about a cup of *kavi*, I seized hold of Lyreas, and called out, asking if we might

ascend. He gave an assenting nod, and I dragged Lyreas up the companionway behind me.

Abdaêl-Nephal accepted our salutations of respect with an amiable nod. "We have a fine day for sailing, and so there is little for a ship's master to do, except keep out of the way of the crew. Let me summon Nimr to bring us all some *kavi*, and we shall chat."

And with this, he stamped his foot on the deck. Nimr immediately came scurrying up the companionway, smiled at us, received the master's order, and went back down again to fulfill it. Then Abdaêl-Nephal turned to Lyreas.

"You are looking almost as good as when you stepped aboard, Magus," he said, wrapping the title in irony. "I congratulate you for outliving your seasickness."

"If I survived," Lyreas replied, "it is because of the sweetmeats that you had the kindness to send me. I could swallow nothing else."

The ship's master lifted a hand. "And, even so, you would have turned this poor thing into a toad?"

Lyreas smiled at the mock-plaintive tone. "You know full well, Honorable Master, that I wouldn't do that, even if I could. That was just Azhara's way of needling Dionis here. She thinks he could do more to defend my honor."

"Indeed?" Abdaêl-Nephal glanced at me as if noticing me for the first time. "Well, such a rebuke was easier to take, coming from her," he answered. "She is a..." he groped for the word, "do you say *spitfire*?"

"Not to her face," Lyreas replied, and he and the ship's master laughed together.

I hadn't dragged Lyreas up here to watch him flirt with Abdaêl-Nephal, and I interrupted, asking the ship's master when we might arrive at Ras Tayma.

He glanced at me. "I thought that might be on your mind," he said. "If the breeze keeps up, which it will not, we'll drop anchor there sometime late in the night. Most likely, though, we'll arrive tomorrow.

"However, as to when you will *disembark*—that, my young friends, will depend on the state of the tides. A ship like this doesn't just sail into the harbor. It must quietly float in on a rising tide, and take on a pilot who can guide us precisely to our waiting berth."

He pointed toward land, which was nothing more than a thin dark line on the horizon. "If we were closer to shore, you would see that we have sailed beyond the Great Desert and are now passing what we call the Parched Lands.

"Furthermore, if you were to stay on board, I would take you beyond those to a very different world—the *Jaangala*—where heat and rain have made a dark, green, tangled wilderness. A most dangerous place to go, or so I'm told."

He made gesture that dismissed this dark phantom. "My own visits down there have been limited to the ports of call, and they are sleepy enough. It is there that one trades for spices, exotic wood, gem stones of every description, tyger skins, and, best of all, *kavi*."

Nimr, who must spend his day brewing fresh pots of *kavi*, appeared with a tray, from which he expertly served us all. Master Abdaêl-Nephal practically inhaled his, then closed his eyes and sighed. As Nimr took the cup from his hand and refilled it, he asked us, "It is my impression that you of An-Namsa know little about the lands of the south."

"That's true," I answered. "Is An-Namsa your name for Heref?"

Abdaêl-Nephal's eyes widened. "Our name for Heref is... *Heref.*" He laughed. "No, no. An-Namsa is what we call your own country, 'The Blessed Land.' That is because the Holy Mother of All has shown it such special favor."

I considered insisting that Lyreas and I came from Heref, but I suspected it would be a waste of breath. So, instead, "There has always been trade..."

This, too, he brushed away with a gesture. "What I am telling you," he said, "is that to you, we southerners do not exist; whereas we all know of you, and we hate you for your good fortune—rich and arable lands, abundance of water, centuries of peace, the presence of the sacred palaces of the four powers."

He turned his head away from us to look out to sea. "All we know have known over the endless centuries is struggle and war—and the torment of knowing that somewhere else these things are merely bad dreams."

I was amazed and shocked by these words. If there was any truth to them, it was a very distant truth from the

world I knew.

"Surely, Honorable Ship's Master, you have seen and heard enough to know this "Blessed Land" that you speak of is mostly a fantasy. In truth, it is a dangerous place, lashed hard by evil these past years."

Abdaêl-Nephal turned away from the sea, met my eyes, and shrugged.

"What you say about me is true enough," he replied. "I am both a ship's master and a merchant, and I know that men are the same, wherever you meet them. Their hates may be different, but they themselves are not. I don't believe these things, myself. I simply tell you this to warn you.

"All the dark magic in the southern lands has but one purpose—to throw down the *Nithaial* that protect you and hold your people true to the Blessed Mother. If She, in Her wisdom, did not see fit to accord us the same protection, who is to blame for the evil that has grown up unhindered among us? We are all just as invisible to the *Nithaial* as we are to you. And for this, I think, the time has come for a price to be paid."

"Well," I said, once we were back down on the main deck, "you two certainly got along famously."

Lyreas smiled sweetly. "He is rather a dear, once you get to know him. Perhaps I'll slip into his bed tonight, when that little cabin boy slips into yours."

What followed then was a chase across the deck, Lyreas in flight and me hot on his heels, around the mast, up and down the bulkheads and finally up the ladder to the forecastle, where I cornered him in front of the carved and brightly painted image of Posedeia, goddess of the sea. She was placed so that she looked back over the entire ship, watching over all who sailed with her.

A small shrine had been placed beside the statue, on which sat a simply glazed urn, broad of base to keep it in place. Each morning at sunrise, this was filled with fresh sea water. A small dipper hung from the rim. During the day seamen would come and bow down before the statue, then use the dipper to sprinkle some of the water over their heads, thus seeking the goddess's blessing.

To my surprise, Lyreas got down on his knees, touched his forehead to the goddess's feet, then gestured to me to anoint him with the dipper. I filled it, and discovered as I did that it was perforated with tiny holes, so that the water trickled out out of it in a shower of tiny drops.

Lyreas got to his feet as I returned the dipper. "Now you do the same," he said. His voice had a determined, urgent note that surprised me. He had always seemed no more serious about his religious duties than I, which was hardly at all. In my mind, I had done enough of that sort of thing the first twelve years of my life to have satisfied the Blessed Mother's needs from me forever.

Even so, I got down on my own knees, calmed my mind, and pressed my forehead against the statue's feet... and felt a current of force sweep through me, so strong that

it took my breath away. It was as if Lyreas had suddenly picked me up and thrown me overboard. Except here I had no legs to kick, no arms to flail. I could only dive deeper into myself, seeking for power that would help me counter this.

When I found it, the storm eased. At first it seemed to take all my strength, but I learned quickly, and then it was simply a matter of leaning into the wind. As this inner current swept past me, I sensed something that I can only explain as the way a child experiences language before he learns to speak. Unlike, say, the sighing of the wind, there was meaning here to be understood—once you learned what meaning actually was.

All of a sudden, the flow was punctuated with brilliant flashes—Lyreas was now sprinkling me with sea water! All that had happened before had taken place in the time it takes for an acorn to fall from a tree.

Now the flashes came faster, brilliant splotches of color that began running all together, forming a face. A shudder ran through me. I was looking directly at the living image of Gesryma herself. Our eyes met, a feeling of nearly unbearable yearning rose from my heart, met with an equally unbearable feeling of endearment from Her.

It was too much for me—for my mind to take in, for my heart to endure. I swooned, if only for a moment. The next thing I knew, Lyreas was drawing me to my feet.

I had only to look at his face to know that he had not experienced any of this. He was saying something; his lips were moving. I saw them move, I heard what he said, but I couldn't grasp what he was telling me. He reached into the pocket of his shirt, and withdrew two objects, one of which he placed in my hand.

I gazed at it, and slowly I realized what it was: a ring, yellowish white, carved from the tusk of some sea beast. I now saw what was carved there, one dolphin following in the wake of another. The dolphin was the emblem of fidelity, of a loyalty that surpasses even love.

Finally, it dawned on me what was taking place. Lyreas was asking me to be his *twerë*! I barely knew of *twerën* at all, let alone anything of the ceremony. But Lyreas was happy to guide me. He took my hand and kissed, first it, then the ring, then took it and slipped it on the third finger of my left hand. Now he held his hand up to me, also holding a ring, similar but not identical to my own. I kissed his palm, kissed the ring, then, as he had done, slipped it onto his finger.

He took the ring and slipped it on the third finger. We stood facing the goddess, one arm wrapped around the other's waist; the other arm crossing our chest so that we could grasp hands.

Lyreas spoke first. "I, Lyreas, son of Arribas, swear before you, Posedeia, and through you to Gesryma, the Blessed Mother Herself, that I take my beloved, Dionis, as my *twerë*, as close to me as a twin brother, both in love and the claims of blood."

Then he paused and gave my hand a squeeze. It was my

turn to speak. "I, Dionis, of unknown father, swear before you, Posedeia, and through you to Gesryma, the Blessed Mother Herself, that I take my beloved, Lyreas, as my *twerë*, as close to me as a twin brother, both in love and the claims of blood."

Lyreas turned his head and whispered in my ear. Together we chanted, "Let our vows be joined and kept in the Hallowed Halls, for all future years to witness."

Then, of course, came the kiss.

HEN, FINALLY, WE LET EACH OTHER GO, we found to our surprise that Nimr was standing to one side of us, his face split with a huge grin. He made a mock obeisance, and said, "The ship's master sends his felicitations to you both, and wishes to offer you the privacy of his own quarters so that you might consummate your union in comfort and privacy."

Lyreas and I both turned our heads. The foredeck is raised up over the main deck, but, even so, the poop deck is higher, so that the steersman and navigator could have a view of the sea ahead. There stood Abdaêl-Nephal, eyeing us like a wolf who has just been set loose in an abattoir.

I looked first at Lyreas, then at Nimr.

"I would accept my master's offer," the boy replied to my unspoken question. "First, you will insult him if you decline; second, it is our tradition—as are other things you are about to discover. Grasp hands and walk slowly to the cabin door. I shall come with you to usher you in—and explain anything you need to know."

I shrugged. Some time with Lyreas was just what I wanted then, and, compared to our cramped and stinking cabin and the crow's-nest—which had its own problems, including the fact that Azhara spent most of her time there—the ship master's quarters would be like a field in springtime. Nor did the hand-holding seem all that onerous.

I glanced at Lyreas, and look he gave me melted any remaining hesitation. I seized hold of his hand and we made our way to the ladder down to the main deck.

What Nimr hadn't bothered to mention was that the whole crew—even those who were usually asleep at this time—had turned out to line up in two rows, forming an alley through which we would be forced to pass.

The moment our heads appeared over the edge of the foredeck, a roar went up. I could hardly make out the words, but Nimr tugged at my sleeve and I bent my head so I could hear his words.

"Tradition also demands that you remove each other's clothing here," he told me. "The ship's master will provide you with two of his clean shirts, both for your comfort and to keep his bed clean."

I gave this but a moment's reflection, then lifted Lyreas's shirt over his head. Once I had, Nimr took it from me and waved it like a flag, to cheers of the seamen. These grew louder when he had my shirt in to wave as well.

I untied Lyreas's smalls, and let them drop to his feet. As I bent down to retrieve them and unlace his sandals, I kissed my lover's member. A roar of approval went up, which grew still more boisterous when Lyreas, not to be outdone, while performing the same tasks, gave my own a quick suck, blushing brightly as he did.

We, all three, descended the ladder, and, with Nimr leading the way, and Lyreas and myself, holding hands, following after him, we walked the gauntlet.

There, as I had expected, we were greeted with a hail of ribald comments, few of them flattering: "Better stroke *that* a bit, laddie, or he'll think it's a mouse!" "Look at the angle on the redhead—I'll bet he can shoot his cream and catch it in his mouth!" "Just wrap your legs around his waist, boy, and his cock will pop right in."

What I hadn't expected was to have greasy fingers slid up our holes, to cries of "Grease 'em well, lads, it's always tight the first time." These fingers did more than grease us, they made their way up us as deeply as they could and wiggled all around, and in some instances I could feel that I was taking more than one.

The last seaman in line had fingers the size of sausages. He stepped behind us and took us both at once, lifting up so that we had to stand on our toes, while the crowd shouted with delight. At that moment, Nimr swung open the door to the master's quarters, and, with a deep obeisance, ushered us in. Then, when we passed through, he closed door behind us.

Chapter 13



HE MOMENT LYREAS SLAMMED THE BOLT SHUT, he turned to me, his eyes blazing. "This was supposed to be about you and me," he said, "not *them*." There was something wrenchingly poignant in seeing him at once so angry and so aroused. Both our cocks were stiff as cudgels. Surely, this helplessness before our bodies' wanton betrayal is what ignites the rapist's lust.

In truth, we *had* been raped. And I had an idea as to why. When you join a gang of thieves, you are forbidden to join in *twerën* with anyone, because your loyalty is sworn to the group. With a ship's crew, that's enough the case for this ceremony. It takes the desire to link your destiny with another and uses it to enforce the understanding that, at sea, fate holds us all in the same hand.

As I explained this as best I could to Lyreas, I was searching about the master's quarters for some clean rags or other cloths. Finally, I came across a small cubby that held such things, took two, and passed one to my lover. We both

began to wipe away the grease that coated our members and literally filled the crevice between our buttocks.

"What is this stuff?" Lyreas muttered, as he wiped a massive glob of it off his fingers.

I sniffed it, expecting it to smell of the sea, supposing it was made of the scrapings of jellyfish or something. But no, it had a faint, sweet vegetative smell. I shook my head. "I don't know," I said, "but perhaps we should find a little crock or vial to keep some in."

Lyreas snorted, then shot me a glance when I told him I wasn't joking.

"Well," I said, "what were you planning to use?"

Lyreas's mouth fell open. Then he began to blush. "You mean, you want to...you want *me* to...?"

"I do," I said. "Both. But starting with the second. As soon as I saw your cock, I could think of nothing else." I took his hand and drew him over to the ship master's bunk.

"Bunk," is not quite the word, since this one was half again as long and at least twice as wide as the ones in our cabin. But, like ours, this one was framed in wood, with a cabinet built above it and two ranks of drawers set in below. Quickly I made a pile of pillows and floor cushions on the mattress, and sat on the edge of the bunk. I leant back and lifted my legs. In this position it was easy for me to reach around and spead myself open.

Lyreas's cock was rigid as he stepped up to my outspread legs, but he wanted to put something else in me firsthis fingers. Not one, but *all* of them at once. He pressed the tips together and began to work them inside me, then spread them slowly apart.

I gasped. The sensation of being opened like that was so intense and powerful I couldn't tell if it was pain or pleasure. I felt helpless, overpowered...like a deer in the jaws of a wolf. This must be what it is like to touch death. And yet it was so amazingly wonderful. My mouth gaped open, I groaned, my eyes were barely able to focus.

But I made them do so, meeting Lyreas's own. He was in a state of rapture not unlike my own, swept through with the deliciousness of the power he had over me.

He muttered something, then pulled his fingers out. To my astonishment, my hole stayed open.

He smiled. "A spell," he said. "Look, I can open and close you at will."

And he was right. I felt my hole close, then spread open wide again, as if it had a mind of its own.

"You're wide open now, aren't you, thief boy?" Lyreas whispered. "I can look right up inside."

"Stop looking and start fucking," I gasped, "before I spend all over myself."

Lyreas maneuvered the head of his cock until it pressed right against my hole. "Open wide," he said, and, sure enough, I felt the muscle ring surrender to the spell, felt myself gaping wider, felt his knob sliding inside, then, astonishingly, heard slurping noises. He was actually making my hole suck him.

"Lyreas," I groaned, slurring the words, "you have transformed me into such a *slut*."

"I just flung open the door to let your true nature out," he said, smirking. "Now, take it all in."

My asshole began rhythmically pulling his cock in, deeper and deeper inside me. Because of the angle of his cock, his knob was pressing up against me. Suddenly, it brushed hard against something and the sensation was like being struck by a lightning bolt. I cried out.

"Did I touch something?" Lyreas asked.

"Yes, yes," I gasped. My eyes were glazed and I could feel a line of drool running down my chin.

Lyreas pulled out a little and then pushed back in.

"Was this the place?" he asked. "This little bump?"

"Oh, Goddess!" I panted. "Lyreas, please! Don't, don't!" The sensation was making my whole body quiver so much that my teeth chattered.

Again, he pulled his cock in and out, rubbing the bump with each stroke. This time I couldn't contain myself. My body thrashed about, my purse felt as if a fist had seized it and went into spasms, and my cock began spurting wildly, sending my cream all over my chest and my face. I never knew I held so much. And, indeed, the convulsions continued even after everything I held had been spent.

My body's violent thrusts had forced Lyreas's cock inside me right up to its hilt. He was grinding against me, moaning now himself. Then his cock began quivering even as it thrust in and out, Lyreas cried out, and a hot flood came gushing deep within me.

Now it was his turn to spasm. His whole body shook like a leaf in the wind. Then, as quickly as the storm had come, it passed. Lyreas went limp, and collapsed in a swoon into my arms. We lay there, panting together, speechless, bodies damp with sweat.

Finally, after a moment, my wits gathered, I kissed him, and asked, "Wherever did you learn that spell?"

Lyreas's eyes met mine. "I worked it out, practicing on myself."

"On yourself?" I asked, astonished.

He nodded, then gave me a wickedly licentious smile. "Want to see?"

Of course I did. But any chance of that was ended when a violent pounding shook the door on its hinges. "Let us in, my pretty lads," a voice bellowed. "It's our turn, now! And don't make us break down the door, or we won't be so gentle with you as we might."

Lyreas and I looked at each other, our eyes wide. I realized that while he and I had been making love, *their* ears had been pressed against the door.

"I'd rather die first," Lyreas hissed, and jumped out of the bed. "There *have* to be some weapons stored in here."

"Yes," I thought. "And they'll take those away from us as easily as a bully takes seedcake from a schoolboy." Magic would be better, but neither of us knew how to wield what powers we possessed in a situation like this.

Just then, there was a soft thud against the cabin's stern window. It was the only window in the master's quarters, and it was glazed with bottle glass so thick that you could barely see through it.

"Great!" I thought. "They're breaking in from both sides." As if in response, another pounding shook the door. Fortunately, it opened outwards, or by now they would have simply kicked it down. Instinctively, we both backed away, until we were right up against the rear of the room, right by the window.

Again, a soft thump, and I turned quickly enough to see the motion of something snakelike as it recoiled from the impact. Immediately, I knew what it was. The window was hinged at the top, so that it could be raised up and fastened open with a hook.

I grabbed hold of Lyreas. "A rope!" I whispered. "Help me open the window." When he hesitated, I added, "It's not the crew! A door is one thing, but they wouldn't dare smash the ship master's window. He'd cut their throats." A window like this in the airless, lightless confines of the ship was worth its weight in gold.

The window was latched shut on both sides. Lyreas released the one and I, the other, then we lifted it open. It took a great tug to free it from its frame, but then it swung up easily, and we secured it to the hook.

Sure enough, just beyond the open window, a thick, knotted rope was dangling, swinging slightly to and fro, in rhythm to the waves. I reached out and grabbed it, motioning to Lyreas that he should go first.

Again, he hesitated, and I knew why. Sharks often swam in the wake of the *Seventh Virgin*, waiting to devour any slops that were heaved over the side. Neither of us knew whether they could leap into the air, to pluck a tasty morsel being dangled over their heads.

Behind us, we heard a loud splintering noise, followed by a cheer. The crew had got hold of a raven's beak, an iron wedge with a curved neck, and were wrenching the door away from the frame. In a moment they would be rushing inside.

Lyreas closed his eyes for a second, took a deep breath, then grabbed hold of the rope, stretching his arms up and out to seize the highest knot he could reach. Then he was out of the window.

I grabbed hold of one of his feet, and guided it to a lower knot, and once both feet were pressed against it, began hauling himself up to the poop deck, the edge of which overhung the back of the ship a short distance.

The moment he was on his way, I hauled up the end of the rope, took it in my mouth, and launched myself out after him, even as, with a loud and tortured crackling noise, the door was ripped free of its bolt.

The moment the crew burst into the room, they saw

what was happening, and came rushing to the window, arms outstretched. But a knotted rope to a thief is like a flight of stairs to one used to ladders; I didn't climb—I flew, so fast, in fact, that I found myself dodging Lyreas's feet. And with me came the rope itself.

There was a good chance that the crew was already racing back to catch us when we emerged on the poop deck, but for this sweet moment, buffeted by a stiff breeze, with the sea surging below us, we were free.

P ON THE POOP DECK, we found no one but the two steersmen, staring out to sea, moving as one when the great tiller needed to be shifted. They barely glanced at us as we passed by, cautiously approaching the ladder down the main deck.

Peeking over the railing, we saw that Azhara and a seaman were bracing a heavy spar against the door, with Nimr looking on. When he saw us looking down, his face broke out into a broad grin, and he beckoned us to come down.

"I think my sailing days are over," he said, laughing, "at least on *this* ship."

When we stood on the deck, it was easy to see what had happened. The moment the last of the crew had gone inside, Azhara had slammed the door shut and wedged it tight with the other (straight) end of the raven's beak, which had been tossed aside the moment the door gave way.

"Won't they find something in the cabin to use as a battering ram?" I asked.

"I can't think of what," she replied. "This door is made of planked oak, the spar of some even stronger wood. Besides," she nodded her head at the door, "they have started ramming each other. Listen!"

It was true. From the sounds of it, the crew was quickly dividing itself between those who meant to do the battering and those who were to take it, some of the latter clearly chosen against their will. If you yourself have just been fucked until nearly blind, the sound of a rampant plugging can be a bit queasy-making, and Azhara, Lyreas, and I retreated a safe distance, accompanied by the seaman. Only Nimr remained behind, his ear glued to the door. After all, when Lyreas was fucking me, he was surely pushed away from the door by all the others who wanted to listen in.

I would be lying to say that the whole experience had left a bad taste in my mouth—far from it—but that taste was there if I were forced to look for it. But Azhara seemed unfazed by our newest display of undisciplined behavior. In fact she was quite pleased how things had worked out. By sheer good fortune, we would be sailing right to Ras Tayma with the ship's master and most of the crew locked up tight.

"I was watching you two making your vows," Azhara was explaining, "and I also saw that Abdaêl-Nephal was doing the same. I wondered why he was stroking himself as he did so, since you and Lyreas were the very picture of chaste affection. But it soon became clear that he was anticipating what was to come."

Lyreas groaned. "I can just see the randy old reprobate, tugging on his cock as he slavered like a wolf let into an abattoir."

Azhara snickered. "A pack of wolves, actually. He made a sign to one of the seamen, a moment later, they were pouring onto the deck, and passing around their little cask of Seafarer's Friend."

She glanced at me slyly. "From the mess oozing down your leg, I take it that the stuff lived up to expectations?"

I blushed furiously. Not only were the two of us standing there stark naked, but I hadn't had the wit to wipe myself clean—believing in my innocence that Lyreas's discharge would remain hidden up inside me.

Lyreas, however, was smiled beatifically. "We're not leaving the ship until we lay hands on a keg of our own," he said.

This time Azhara laughed out loud. "A whole *keg*, hey? Well, go check the ship's stores. I'm sure they keep an ample supply on hand."

"Let's get on with the story," I muttered, using my fingers to wipe off as much of the sticky stuff as I could.

"Well, you know most of it," Azhara answered. "When you two went inside the ship master's quarters and they gathered round the door, I thought things might turn ugly. I shinnied down the mast, grabbed hold of Nimr, and between us, we figured out what had to be done.

"That's when we noticed a seaman who was hang-

ing back from the others, and Nimr suggested we enlist his help." She paused, and gestured to him.

"This is Karlas," she said. "Karlas, this is Dionis and Lyreas, the two you have sacrificed your job to save."

Karlas smiled at us. "Lyreas I already know," he said, and the two of them smiled at each other.

Karlas, it turned out, was the one who had carved the bone rings with which Lyreas and I had celebrated our *twerëing*. Lyreas has seen him working on a kraken's tusk on our first day at sea and had shyly approached him. The carving of such rings was a task he was well familiar with, but he was both surprised and pleased when Lyreas made it clear that the carvings he wanted were not the usual erect phalluses carved around the entire ring. It was he who suggested the dolphins, and Lyreas, understanding that they symbolized lifelong fidelity, had been most pleased.

As, of course, was I. I had taken my lover's hand in mine as Karlas explained all this to Azhara. Then, when we settled together on one of the hatches, I held him close. We all sat where we could all keep an eye on the door and lazed away the afternoon. Azhara had unearthed a cutlass from somewhere, and she sat idly honed the blade, while Karlas, Lyreas, and I took our turn singing to the wind, urging it to hurry along the *Seventh Virgin* on its course to Ras Tayma.

HE EDGE OF THE SETTING SUN burned darkly orange at the horizon, and above it bands of yellow faded slowly into pink. The Star of Wishes already glittered above

our heads in the darkening heavens, but I was too weary and happy to think of a request.

My arm was still around Lyreas, and his around me, the remains of a meal littered the deck in front of us. My other arm was wrapped over Nimr's shoulders, and one of his hands was clutching mine. Beside Lyreas sat Karlas, who turned out to be one of the few crew members not from the southern lands. In fact, he came from Lorithar, the same city as Lyreas himself did, and the two of them were lazily sharing memories of their lives there.

The shouting from the ship master's cabin, which had burst out again once the orgy was over, had long since died down. But now that Azhara had lowered their supper to them down from the poop deck to the cabin window, it had broken out afresh over the division of the rations. This time, though, the voices were querulous rather than angry—there are worse places in which to be locked up than a ship master's cabin, even if the ship master is locked in with you.

Just then, one of the steersmen gave a cry, and we all turned at once to see the city of Ras Tayma glittering like a jewel in the near distance, its towers and domes catching the last of the sunlight. Even as we watched, that light shimmered and went out, but—just as the night has its stars—Ras Tayma had a glittering spectacle of its own, tiny bright pinpoints of light of every imaginable color, so many of them that you would think a lantern perched on every window sill in the city.

"Glow stones," explained Karlas, who was standing beside us. "They are mined in the hills beyond, and many magicians earn their living setting the enchantments on them that release their light. In the kingdom, they are so dear that most of us use candles or oil lamps, but here each house competes with the next for the richness of its display."

The harbor, too, was scattered with the same lights, affixed to boats of all sizes, and bobbing gently up and down to the rhythm of the waves. Some of these were as far out to sea as were we ourselves, which Karlas identified as mostly fishing boats, returning home after a day at sea.

Pointing to these, he said to Azhara, "Esteemed Sister, you will have to release the crew soon, for we shall have to lower the sails and find ourselves an anchorage for the night."

"In a moment," she replied. "Let us get all the way into the harbor. The breeze that carries us has been summoned by my powers—when the time comes, I'll release it and send it on its way."

Karlas pursed his lips. This was not the way a seaman would think, but he could think of no argument to counter it. So, he shrugged and said, "Even so, I'll light the warning lamps. Should I also hang up the one that invites the bumboats?"

Azhara was caught out by that question, perhaps imagining, as did I, that this was a summons to love boys. But Nimr answered for her.

"Yes!" he said to Karlas. And then to us, "They're just boats with hawkers onboard, selling a taste of everything to be gotten on shore to those among the crew too impatient to wait until we dock. But they'll sell us a ride to the shore just as willingly as hotcakes or fresh fruit."

As he explained, I could see that Azhara was only half listening. When Nimr finished, she nodded, but took hold of Karlas's arm. "Before you light the lamps, come with me. I have business with the ship's master while there is still some twilight left."

The two of them crossed over to the barricaded door, which Azhara pounded with the hilt of her sword.

"We have almost reached Ras Tayma," she called out in a clear, penetrating voice, "and in a few moments we shall set you all free. But, first, I want the ship's master to come out unarmed and alone. It would be wise to do just as I say."

Azhara placed the flat of her free hand against the door and spoke a spell; immediately, there was a crackling noise and loud cries of fear on the other side.

"That was just to singe your hair a little," she said. "I can do much worse."

She gestured to Karlas, and the two of them shouldered the spar aside. Then she prised out the raven's beak where it wedged the door to the frame, and handed it to Karlas. "As soon as the ship's master comes out, wedge the door shut again," she whispered.

Then, in a louder voice she called, "Abdaêl-Nephal,

please step out."

There was a muttering within the cabin, then the ship's master emerged, looking disheveled and wary, glancing nervously behind him when Karlas quickly closed the door and wedged it.

Turning back to Azhara, he said in a petulant voice, "So, witch, you have defeated me. Must you now rub it in? Call your bumboat and go."

She shook her head. "I have no feeling of triumph, ship's master. Tell Karlas he will suffer no punishment for siding with us, and we are through with each other."

Abdaêl-Nephal turned to Karlas. As soon as he did, Azhara lifted the cutlass she was holding behind her back, and with a graceful, powerful, two-handed sweep, freed the ship master's head from its body. She struck with such force that it was not only severed completely, but rolled across the deck to the starboard side and fell overboard, even as the body, gushing gouts of blood, fell onto the deck.

Nimr gave out a cry and fell to his knees. Karlas turned white as a ghost, perhaps thinking he was next. But Azhara followed the trail of blood to where the head had vanished and tossed the cutlass into the ocean after it.

She stood there silently for a moment and then came back across the deck to where Lyreas and I stood, still too astonished and shaken to speak.

Azhara's face was grim, but when she spoke, her voice was calm. "He simply knew too much, and before our

enemies he would have been helpless. In that regard, I did him a favor. Perhaps."

She lifted a hand to wipe away some of the blood that had splattered on her face. She looked at it, then reached out and rubbed a smear of it on my cheek.

"Abdaêl-Nephal's blood is on you, too, Dionis," she said in the same calm voice, "whether you approve of his death or not. He had to die so that you might live. And now the time has come for you to find out why."

Chapter 14



can see why this is the guest room," Lyreas muttered. We were in the house of Salamah the mage, and had been left together to settle ourselves in and dress for supper. In Ras Tayma, that meal was eaten late, and the mage had assured us that feeding two sudden guests would be no burden on his cook.

I turned to him, puzzled by what he had said. The room seemed fine enough.

"It's the next best thing to a prison cell," Lyreas went on, "as far as keeping us put. Could *you* find your way back through all those rooms?"

I shook my head. "I guess the idea of a hallway is unknown in the Southern Lands." Each room was connected to the next either by a flight of narrow stairs or a doorway. The last in any series of rooms was the only one that offered any privacy. Thus we had been greatly honored to be given this eyrie, hot as it must be when the sun beat down on it.

I pulled the curtain across the window from which

I had been gazing out on a moonlit sea of roofs, and turned to Lyreas, who had given up trying to brush the wrinkles from his one good shirt, and was now carefully adjusting the leather belt that he had just fastened around his waist.

Both of these had come out of the travel packs that we had been brought us by Rabih and Iannas on our last night in Heref, and which we had remembered just before we clambered down into the bumboat and were rowed ashore.

By then, of course, we had pulled back on the clothing we had stripped off in front of the crew, but they were much too stained and smelly to wear to supper in the house of a mage. As, indeed, were we. But we had been brought hot water in a basin, and had already given each other a good washing, not neglecting any of our parts.

Lyreas's shirt was dyed a rich forest green. It and the belt of pigskin set off his pale skin and russet shock of hair to great advantage, and I felt quite proud of him. My own shirt was the pale, wave-washed color of seashells, meant to compliment my own deep tan and dark hair. Not yet of age to wear a belt, I had been given a bronze chain to ride on my hips—not quite a belt, but at least the promise of the one I could don when spring arrived.

I told myself to remember to thank Azhara for the care she took in these purchases—for surely it was she, not Rabih, who had done the choosing. She had slipped off into the city almost the moment we had landed on the quay, saying only that she would find us in a day or so, and allowing

Lyreas and me to give her a hug. She didn't explain her errands, or why these were more important than the explanations I had been promised as to why it was somehow my fault that the Abdaêl-Nephal had to lose his head, or even why she was putting us into the hands of the Mage Salamah, sight unseen.

Lyreas took the bright red riband from my hand, turned me around, and sat me on the bed. "You aren't binding that around your hair until I give it a good combing. Not only is it all in a tangle, but I can see bits of lint—at least I hope that's what it is—from the ship master's bedsheets."

I smiled, but his words merged into what I had just been thinking enough to give me a pang.

"Poor Abdaêl-Nephal," I murmured.

"Beheaded by a witch on the open seas," Lyreas said, picking up on my thoughts—even as his tone trod hard on my feeling of pity. "A far more memorable way to go than to be buggered to death by his randy crew, the fate that he really deserved."

I couldn't stop myself from laughing. "Lyreas," I chided, "that is a *very* unkind thing to say of the dead."

"Ordinarily, you'd be right," he replied, "but that is probably the nicest thing that has ever been said of *him*."

Before I could think of anything to say to that, he changed the subject.

"I love combing your hair. Even with the tangles and, um, *lint*, the comb just slips along, as smoothly as a

cat through tall grass. If you tried doing this to my hair, the comb wouldn't even budge."

"Do you have a special comb, then?" I asked, genuinely curious, for I could see the truth in what he said.

"Yes, I do, silly child," he replied, giving my hair a tug. "It's called a *brush*."

I smiled at Lyreas's older brother tone. His combing was not as practiced as that of Nauma, my nurse, but he was equally as patient and gentle, and I surrendered to the intensity of a pleasure that was one of the first I ever knew.

"Is it as nice as this," I finally asked, "having your hair *brushed* by someone you love?"

He gathered my hair in one hand, lifted it up and kissed the nape of my neck. "I very much doubt it," he said. "But let me get this riband tied, and we can find out."

EVERAL MOMENTS LATER, there was a knock on the door, and Lyreas got up from my lap to open it. A young man, perhaps three or four years older than Lyreas, with a handsome face and bright, curious dark eyes, stepped inside. "Ah," he said, his eyes moving appreciatively over Lyreas, "your beauty honors our house."

He then made a graceful obeisance. "I am Diya, one of the Master's apprentices, and am here to escort you down to our humble table." We responded in the same way, after which he then took one of our hands in each of his, and led us down to supper.

One curious thing that I had noted the moment we

had stepped into the mage's house, was how pleasantly cool it was, compared to the lingering summer heat that had baked into the stone outside. And Ras Tayma was *all* stone, great slabs of it: both the buildings and the streets. Furthermore, this coolness had pursued us up the stairs, ebbing only when we reached the guest room, which had been hot and airless until we threw open its two windows to the fresh night air.

This same coolness was waiting for us when we began to descend, and I mentioned this to Diya, asking him if the mage had cast a spell to keep his house so comfortable.

Our guide smiled and shook his head. "All of Ras Tayma is built on top of an underground river. The water travels down from the mountains through a network of caves, and emerges deep beneath the harbor. Because of this, the water is accompanied by a flow of sweet cool air."

"In our cities, streams are diverted to flow underground where they serve as sewers," I said. "This seems a much better solution."

Diya laughed. "Ah, but you live in the land of green fields and gurgling brooks! Here, even at the beginning, the purity and plentifulness of this water was considered too much of a treasure to defile. We prefer to use honey buckets, as we call them, to hold our waste, and there is a multitude of honey waggons to bear it away."

The laughing tone vanished from his voice. "In Ras Tayma, anyone caught defiling the river is stoned to death."

There was a moment of silence while we digested

this. "So the coolness comes up from the river?" Lyreas asked.

"Yes," Diya replied. "This is why the city's buildings can be crowded so tightly together, without the people being poisoned by a miasma of foul air. And since everything is built out of our endless supply of stone, fires, when they break out, rarely spread."

He now stopped in front of the next narrow flight of stairs, squeezing our hands as he did, so that we would halt as well. "I could tell you many things about our city—and if you don't stop me, I surely will," he said. "But now it is time for you to meet the Master himself, and Yusri, the senior apprentice," and he gestured that the two of us should descend first.

We stepped down into a room softly lit with glow stones and hung with rich fabrics. I couldn't remember coming up through it when we were led to our room, so Diya must have taken a different turn. In any case, I was completely disoriented. Imagine what it must be like to thieve from houses like these!

There were two men waiting there, and one of them, the younger, who must be Yusri, rose from his cushion to greet us. He bowed and touched his forehead with his middle finger, a greeting of a higher order, I thought, than the obeisance we had received from Diya.

I decided to simply bow my head, partly because I was now flummoxed as to how I was expected to respond, partly because of a certain grimness in Yusri's manner. In

any case, Salamah was beckoning me to sit down beside him, and for Lyreas to take the cushion on his far side. At first glance, he seemed a rather frail old man, with a long white beard and a mustache that concealed his mouth. He wore an embroidered skull cap and a dark green robe of costly material, decorated with mystical symbols in silver thread.

Once I had settled in beside him, Salamah placed his thumb against my chin, and looked deeply into my eyes. He was old but too vital to be ancient; his eyes were surrounded by wrinkled skin, but they themselves were intelligent and full of curiosity. The moment he touched me, I could sense his power lightly dancing about me.

"May you be safe in my house and in this city, Dionis, born of Nassazia," he said. "It is my honor to share my bread and salt with you. You and I have much to discuss. But now you must excuse me, while I greet your friend."

Salamah then turned to my lover, examined him in exactly the same way as he had me, and spoke the exact same words of welcome. Even so, I noticed that they had a tone different from the one he had used when he spoke to me. That had an enigmatic quality impossible to place; now, speaking to Lyreas, it had only the simple kindness one reserves for the companion of a friend—if he loves you, then so shall I.

Yusri was watching these exchanges keenly, and when they were done, he said something to Salamah in the Southern tongue. The mage held up his hand. "Yusri! We should not speak what our guests cannot understand," adding to my surprise, "although one of them knows more of our tongue than he cares to let on."

He turned to Lyreas and asked, "Could you make out the meaning of what Yusri said?"

Lyreas was blushing, and for the moment his tongue was tied. But he gathered himself together and answered, "Barely, Master Mage. My father was the agent of a trader, and once took me with him on a trip here. The seamen took a liking to me, and taught me as much of your language as I could absorb."

Now I remembered him telling me of his first amorous adventures, and I almost burst out laughing. To speak their language was the least of what they taught him.

Meanwhile, Lyreas was saying, "I believe what Yusri said what, 'One is a torch but the other is a glow stone.' I suppose Dionis is the glow stone, because of his amazing sea gray eyes. And I am the torch, because of my red hair."

Salamah burst out laughing. "No doubt, young man. No doubt! You may not have noticed, but poor Diya can't keep his eyes away from you. Hair like yours is an amazement here in the South, and when it adorns a handsome youth..." He threw up his hands in mock surrender.

Lyreas was truly blushing now. I could see the truth of what Salamah was saying. Tanned and raven-haired, I could easily pass as a Southerner myself, whereas Lyreas stood out like a poppy in a field of grain.

"But," Salamah was saying, "what kind of host is it who teases his guest before feeding him!" He clapped his hands, and, speaking in a louder voice, said, "Let the meal commence."

And so it did, and after a brief invocation to the Holy Mother to bless us and our meal, we all fell to. What wonderful eating it was, too, after days of ship fare: a whole roast baby goat, nestled on a bed of scented millet, into which any number of pickled fruits had been pressed. With this came a cloth-covered basket heaped with large, hot wheaten disks, which I thought were some sort of cake, but which proved to be a tender and very tasty bread.

Following the lead of our hosts, I took one of these, set it before me to serve as a plate, then took another and tore it in half and then in half again. These quarter loaves were each used in turn to scoop up some of the millet and transfer it to our mouths. Meanwhile, Salamah deftly carved the goat and, using the tip of his blade, portioned it among us, heaping it upon the tranche that lay on the table before us.

There were other delicacies brought in as well, the only seeming austerity to the feast being the drink, which was simple water, pure and deeply chilled, drawn, I was sure, straight from the river below. When I thought about this, however, I realized how rare it had been in my life, at least since I escaped from the temple court, to drink such refreshing stuff. The water in Heref was always brackish,

and sometimes not even clear—one never drank it except out of desperation, unless it had been boiled to make tea.

Salamah was a most gracious host. There was no more teasing, and his inquiries about our voyage were couched in a way that allowed for the most general of replies. Nothing was asked or offered about the death of Abdaêl-Nephal, and while we talked a bit of the great storm, Azhara and the the sea witches did not come up.

For his part, Salamah told us more of the city in which we now found ourselves, for I saw only enough of it in our hurried trip from the waterfront to know that it was the very mother of mazes.

When I admitted this, the mage laughed.

"That is more true than you know, for you are but a visitor, but it is just as true for those who have lived here all their lives. More than once, an invading army has poured into Ras Tayma, ravaging, burning, and pillaging, only to vanish into its depths and never be seen again."

He shook his head. "Not that the warriors were slaughtered, mind you. We have never been a warlike people. First they strayed apart from one another, then they became totally lost, and remained so. Eventually, they tossed down their weapons and made a separate peace, soon forgetting why they had been brought here and from where they had come."

Yusri and Diya were nodding their heads in agreement.

"What the Master says is true," Diya said, not taking

his eyes off Lyreas. "It is said that if you want a map of our city, just drop an earthern platter on the ground and consult the shards. No street is any longer than you can throw a stone, and each has as many names as the people who live on it. So, for example, if you wished to find this house and asked someone who knew where it was, they would answer, 'Oh, that's on the street where Mazra the barber has his shop'; whereas if you were seeking Mazra the barber, you would be told, "you will find him where the great mage Salamah also lives."

"And if you ask for both, your advisor will be struck dumb," Salamah added, to much laughter.

"True," Yusri said, adding in a serious tone, "what this means is that every inhabitant must carry his own map of Ras Tayma in his head, which is subtly different from that of his next-door neighbor. The making of this map starts in early childhood, and never ends."

"As must the map of one's own home," Lyreas muttered. "A child must be judged ready to take outside once he can find his way alone from his bedroom to the kitchen."

They laughed at this, Diya a bit more than I felt necessary. As my *twerë*, Lyreas was not sworn to sexual fidelity, but I wasn't quite ready for him to fall into someone else's arms, especially someone as seductively admiring as Diya. From where I sat, I couldn't see whether Lyreas was returning the apprentice's far from covert glances, but from his occasional shy and comely downward glances, I suspected the worst.

Salamah once again clapped his hands sharply, say-

ing, "I think that now that we've all eaten our fill, it is time to clear away the mess."

It was true. We had devoured the goat, the millet, the tasty little side dishes the exact contents of which were a mystery to me, and, almost, the juice-sodden flat bread that had been our plate. I had just reached for it when the mage whispered in my ear that, with my permission, this last bite would be reserved for the servants, who, in this way, participated in the feast they had worked so hard to prepare.

Then, once the table had been wiped clean and a lovely fresh cloth spread over it, our last surprise of the evening occurred. Nimr had vanished once he had brought us to Salamah's door, and gone off to see his family. But now, smiling from ear to ear, he came in bearing a brass tray on which sat several cups and a large steaming pot.

"You know already, I think, my new apprentice," Salamah. "He brings to our house a gift that many would consider magical enough for him to made a mage directly—that of preparing perfect *kavi*."

He smiled at Nimr. "Now that you have worked your spell, you may sit with us and enjoy the pleasure of it." And so, after years of making it for Abdaêl-Nephal, Nimr was at last able to taste it for himself.

We drank *kavi*, all of us, and talked some more, and after a while my mind wandered back to Ras Tayma. I had lived in two cities in my short life, and neither had prepared me for this place. In my tired mind, the only way I could make

sense of what I had been told was to think of Ras Tayma as not a city at all, but a forest, with buildings instead of trees.

To untutored eyes, a forest may seem impenetrable, but each beast that makes its home there knows where it wants go and how to get there as safely as possible, and each does this in its own way and shares this knowledge with no one, not even those of its own kind. Ras Tayma, then, seemed a fascinating place, but also a rather scary one.

with a tray holding a small pile of the same sort of flat bread we had eaten at supper, one bowl of a soft cheese and another of honey, and a pot of very fragrant tea. Lyreas staggered over to the corner where the pisspot sat. The best I could do was to sit up in the bed.

Nimr put the tray on the bed before me, poured two cups of the tea. As I took one of these and sipped cautiously from it, he picked up one of the bread rounds, tore it in half, and spread the interior with some of the cheese and a spoonful of honey. This he handed to me and set about preparing one just like it for Lyreas, so that it was ready for him, when he returned and sank down on the bed.

He looked at it dumbly for a moment, as if not quite sure what it was, took a bite, and brightened. He was discovering what I had just found out myself—that the bread was still warm from its baking, the cheese rich and delicately tangy, the honey flowery and sweet.

He then picked up his own cup of tea and blew on

it, took a sip, sighed, and said, "We must take Nimr with us wherever we go."

Nimr smiled at him. "Alas, Honorable Lyreas, I am only the messenger; it is the cook that you really want."

Lyreas, who had already wolfed down his first piece of bread, snatched up the one that Nimr had just finished preparing, before I thought to reach for it. I had assumed, in the fair ordering of things, that it was mine already.

Lyreas saw my look, hesitated, then tore it in half, handing the smaller part to me.

"We'll take you both, then," he said to Nimr, "if you can manage to work just a little faster. Otherwise, I'll never get anything to eat, Dionis being so greedy."

The only proper reply to that was a pillow in the face, and that would send tea all over the bed. So, I kept my peace, and said to Nimr, "I liked Diya, even if he prefers Lyreas to me, and I can easily see why anyone would be devoted to Salamah. But Yusri is a closed book—although I would guess he is not all that happy that we are here."

Nimr nodded. "He keeps to himself, as is the way of mages and those who mean to become one. Diya is the exception—even the master is usually far more reserved than you saw him last night."

The boy looked at me curiously. "He behaved toward you as he does guests that he wishes to honor especially. Why he would treat *you* that way is a complete mystery to me."

Lyreas burst out laughing, and ended up sneezing tea

out of his nose.

Nimr looked shocked when he understood why. "I meant no offence, Dionis, truly I didn't."

I passed Lyreas the end of the sheet to blow his nose on, and as he did, took the next piece of bread out of the boy's hands.

"Don't worry, Nimr. I'm as puzzled as you are."

Lyreas looked at me, his face suddenly serious. "Do you mean that, Dionis? From your heart?"

I looked back at him. "What are you saying? Of course I have no idea."

"Don't play games with me, Dionis—I'm not Nimr," he responded, a touch of anger in his voice. "That thing that Yusri said to Salamah about torches and glow stones, it had nothing to do with our looks. I just said that because I was taken aback by the mage's perceptiveness, and it was the only thing I could come up with... except what I actually thought."

He took the next piece of bread from Nimr, who, as instructed, was preparing them more quickly.

There was a pause while he swallowed half of it. "Yusri is not the sort to pay attention to our looks. He was telling his master that we both have power, but mine is all on the surface, while yours comes from deep within you, like the light in a glow stone."

I shook my head vehemently. "Even if what you say is true, a better interpretation of Yusri's comments is that your powers are great, while mine are weak. Remember, you're the mage; I'm just the thief."

Lyreas punched me in the chest with such force that I fell off the bed. I jumped up, ready to fight him, and found him with his face buried in his hands, and tears streaming between his fingers, and Nimr staring wide-eyed at us both.

What had I done? What did I say? I stood there, rubbing my chest, which ached from the blow, half furious and half terrified—my mind simply refused to grasp what this stupid fight was about.

I got onto the bed on my knees and reached out a hand to Lyreas, but he shrank from my touch.

"I don't *want* to have more magic powers than you," I said, "if that's what you think. I never did and I never will. I just want to be with you."

Lyreas groaned, but he did take his hands away from his face. "I can't believe you're so fucking *thick*," he said in a thin voice. "You—who fell head first from a three-story-high roof onto the stone pavement of a courtyard, and was none the worse for it. I mean you weren't even *bruised*."

"You're being ridiculous!" I protested. "How could anyone survive a fall like that? I felt into a cess pit or something like that. I didn't look because I had to get back to you."

Lyreas looked at Nimr, and said bitterly, "He falls out of the sky into a cess pit and comes out smelling like roses."

Then he turned to me and almost shouted. "I *lived* in that fucking house. There was no open cess pit in our court-yard! There wasn't even a fish pond! Believe it—you fell on

thick flag stones, and you should be dead."

Now it was my turn to turn away, and my turn to have tears seeping from my eyes. How could Lyreas not be telling the truth? I hadn't ever told him—had never thought to tell him—about my encounter with... I had to root in my memory for the name, the man who said he was my uncle.

"Ormaël." Unintentionally, I spoke the word out loud, but Lyreas, of course, wouldn't know it. He just looked at me blankly.

I shook my head. This wasn't the time to bring *that* up, the liquid fire burning through the table and then the floor after I had just been holding it in my hand.

"All right," I admitted. "Maybe you're right about the fall. Ever since it happened I've just pushed it out of my mind. We had other things to think about, like saving our lives, being with the viri... being with each other."

I looked at him with pleading eyes. "Why are you throwing this at me now? Even if I have the powers you think, why should it come between us? Are you jealous? If I could give them to you, I would. Like *that*!" and I snapped my fingers.

Lyreas was now sitting hunched up on the bed, his arms wrapped around his knees. "At first," he said softly, "I was simply jealous. No, more than that—I felt like a fool. That's why I got so angry when you brought up that thing I said about me being a mage and you a thief. It was stupid and condescending and I know I deserve to have it rubbed in my face—even if that wasn't what you mean to do when you said it."

Now, for the first time, he turned to me. "I thought if that if you let me be your *twerë*, that you might trust me enough to finally tell me *who you are*."

There was a moment of silence, and thinking I should try to answer this, I tried to speak. But Lyreas waved my attempt away.

"No, Dionis, don't bother," he said, his voice shaking. "I've already figured it out. You don't have a clue as to what all this is about, why we are in such danger, or even what sort of powers you possess."

Our eyes met, but I couldn't reach out to him, because his words had sent me falling into a bottomless pit. I could barely hear or comprehend what he said next.

"I love you Dionis, but I'm so frightened. What is going to happen to us? And whatever can *I* do?"

Chapter 15



HE SANCTORIAM OF SALAMAH THE MAGE had the floor above it removed, to make it twice as high as it was wide. Tiny windows with panes of bottle glass were set in a row of six at the very top of one wall. These filled the room with a green-blue luminescence, as if we were at the bottom of a pool.

Rich hangings covered three of the walls; the fourth supported row after row of shelves, on which were placed scrolls, leather bound volumes with blank spines, many objects of magical virtue, and a large owl that I thought was stuffed until it opened its eyes and gave me a haughty glare.

Salamah's study table, large and solid, also supported several large tomes, all of them open, as well as a variety of magical devices, a few of which I recognized, either from conversation with Lyreas, who was enamored of all such, or from my childhood in the temple court. Among these were a black ebony wand decorated with silver filigree rested on the open palms of two lifelike wooden hands, a wide but shal-

low scrying basin made of brightly polished gold, and a luminous crystal globe the size of a child's head.

Nimr was supposed to bring me here as soon as we had broken our fast. This partially explained his increasing anxiety at the testy exchange I was having with Lyreas—which, come to think of it, he shouldn't have heard at all.

In any case, as soon as he could, he seized hold of my hand and brought me here, my mind still in a state of hurt and confusion. Salamah must have sensed this, for he sat me down on a comfortable pile of cushions, and took a bottle and then, after some groping, a clean drinking glass from a cabinet that sat on his study table. He poured out a thimbleful of a lustrous amber liquid, and passed it to me, saying, "It will settle your emotions and clear your mind."

I took a cautious sip, and discovered that a sip was all there was. A glowing warmth spread down my gullet, even as the liquid's vapors seeped into my head. For a moment, I felt the same dizziness that came when Lyreas and I first shared a lingering kiss. And, just as that kiss had done, my inner clouds dissipated and all became bright.

"That must be called 'The Mage's Friend," I blurted out, then blushed at the analogy.

But Salamah just laughed, saying "It would be better named 'The Mage's Temptation.' Fortunately, it is an elixir demanding equally the talents of the alchemist and the herbalist, so it is not easily come by."

He recorked the bottle, put it away, and came and sat

beside me. "So, Dionis," he said, "we must both be grateful to Nimr for bringing you to me—you because much worse could have befallen you and, I think, little better. And me, because you are something I have never encountered before, nor even ever imagined I would."

Salamah reached out his hand and laid it on mine. "One thing I shall teach you first before anything else is how to shield your mind from those who have the power to look into it. I have that power, but I hardly needed to use it when Nimr brought you in. You and your Lyreas had just been caught up in a painful conversation about this very thing... but for you, at least, a not very illuminating one."

I nodded. "That is true, High Master Mage. I feel what he said was true, but I still can't make sense of it."

"This is just as well," Salamah said, patting my hand and resting his own back on his knee. "The part of you that is 'Dionis' shares a house with something of incredible power. So, naturally, you have built a wall to keep it from invading your own, fragile space."

He smiled. "Not that it would attack you, of course, or willingly do you damage. But it would be a great strain to share a cage with a tyger, however affable, especially if you had no idea why you were there at all. Even good-humored tygers do roar now and then. It is their nature, just as it is our nature to quake when they do."

I thought about this. It seemed a much better description of what was happening to me than anything I had been

able to come up with myself. And I was afraid it might also turn out to be true.

"High Master Mage," I asked, "is it then my task to tame this tyger?"

"When we are alone, Dionis, you may simply call me Salamah," he said, adding, "actually, I would prefer it if you would. I wish you to speak to me as a friend, not as a Master Mage. As to your question, my suggestion would be this: for the moment let's just try to get to know it a little better, and certainly understanding why it's cooped up with you."

I nodded. This made sense to me. However, since Salamah had invited me to think of him as a friend, I had a question I was burning to ask, and decided to ask it.

"Before we start, Salamah, may I ask you: does Lyreas have the promise of becoming a mage?"

Salamah exhaled slowly and forcefully through his mouth, which made his thick white mustache flutter.

"Hmm," he said, then something like "Hmm-hmm-hmm." There was another period of silence, as he looked up at the ceiling, as if seeking divine assistance.

"Well," he said, drawing out the word, "you see, we've already begun. You think that this might be a simple question, but nothing that concerns you escapes complication.

"Consider well how to broach this subject to your *twerë*, but you have already given him powers that he seems most adept at recognizing. Since no tyger shares his space, he can afford to be bold.

"But, to answer your question—no, he cannot become a mage, although at one time I'm sure he would have made a very excellent one."

He paused and looked at me almost shyly. "You and he have made love as men do? Sharing each other's seed?"

I blushed. "I think I have had more than my fair share, so far," I said, "but, yes, what you say is so."

Salamah nodded. "Well, there it is. You have passed some of your power on to him. And since your source is inexhaustible, each time he absorbs your seed, you will give him more. Because of this, he has already taken on certain superhuman qualities, and has become a..." he paused and groped for the right phrase. "A *fledgling* wizard."

Salamah peered at me to see if I understood what he was saying. "In other words, he already has more magical power than I possess, even after a lifetime of study." The mage smiled wryly, and added, "Then, again, I flatter myself to think that it will be a while before he can wield his as effectively."

I was stunned. Salamah was right—explaining this to Lyreas was *not* going to be easy. But worse, it seemed to mean that anyone I made love to would be changed, and in ways neither of us could control. What if my first lover had been someone who lacked Lyreas's courage and cleverness? It was a *terrifying* thought.

I groaned and buried my face in my hands.

There was a light tap on the door, and Salamah said, "Come in, Nimr." I looked up as the boy slipped in, carrying

a tray holding cups and another pot of tea. The mage made a gesture with his hand, and Nimr poured us each a cup, then made a quick obeisance to his master, smiled at me, and left, closing the door behind him.

Salamah sniffed his tea, blew on it, took a cautious sip, then sighed. "It is brought here from the south, in ships like the *Seventh Virgin*. I find it far superior to anything our poor shrubs can produce. Inhale it before you drink; that way its powers go straight to the brain."

I did as he directed. This cup was not as fragrant as the earlier tea, but the aroma, sharp and resinous, did seem to scour the brain. I drank it down; I could tell it was scalding hot, but I wanted the shock of the heat to help clear my head.

I reached over to return the empty cup to the tray, and saw that Salamah was observing me. But he said nothing, so I spoke instead.

"You mentioned the *Seventh Virgin*. Nimr told you of our adventures and the fate of Abdaêl-Nephal?"

The mage shook his head. "Not yet—although I do intend to hear his account. No, I spoke with your companion, Azhara, after you and Lyreas had retired."

When he saw my astonishment, he pointed to the scrying bowl. "I felt an unexplainable urgent need to consult it," he said, "and when the mist cleared, I found her waiting for me. She wanted to make sure you had arrived safely, and all was as it should be. We ended up conversing long into the dark hours.

"Mostly our talk was of what has recently transpired in your country, which, as best as I could grasp it, is much the same as what I hear of the land of the demons, which has also fallen under darkness."

His expression was grim. "Because the mages and magicians who dwell in Ras Tayma were never hunted down and destroyed as they were in your own kingdom, we have dealt with our own necromancers, destroying all who dared challenge the Sacred Balance. However, elsewhere—well, the demons became be sotted with them, and Maerdas made alliance with them, at least until he was destroyed."

Salamah sighed. "Getting rid of him was surely a fine thing, but it gave the kingdom to the Eight, as the alliance of necromancers have named themselves. Death feeds their powers, and already many have died in your land so that they may gorge on it. Right now they feed mainly on the helpless, but soon they will have the power to take on anyone who stands in their path."

I was aghast. "But what do they want?" I cried.

The mage looked at me in surprise. "Like all things evil they are want itself. Until now, they had to reach into susceptible minds to foment war and all other kinds of slaughter, and feed from that. Then, when there were not enough deaths to nurture their presence, they had no choice to return to the Land of the Dead, and scheme afresh. But now that they have found the power to stay among the living, who knows what will happen? Terrible, terrible things, and with-

out end—this is what happens when the Great Wheel falls out of Balance."

Salamah glanced at me. "I had forgotten that you have been living hidden in Heref these many years, and that this would all be news to you. I am sorry to burden you with it, for we have more immediate things to discuss."

I brightened up immediately. "Did Azhara tell you much about me?" I asked. "She promised to explain what was going on, why I am in such danger, and who everyone imagines me to be, and..." I made a helpless gesture.

"Then she ran away?" The mage smiled ruefully. "Who can blame her? But in truth I think you misremember what she said. Can you recall her words exactly?"

I cast my mind back to the night before. Immediately the cloyingly rich smell of the ship master's blood came back to me, and I blenched. But words returned as well.

"And now the time has come for you to find out why," I said, speaking slowly, and looked at Salamah in surprise.

"She meant you?" I asked.

He smiled and shook his head. "No, no," he replied, "although I can give you some clues, I think. However, the High Sister Azhara was not deceiving you. The time *has* come. Now all we have to do is get you to the right *place*."

NE OF MY HANDS was clasped firmly over Nimr's, the other manipulated a skewer of grilled goat entrails. Salamah had sent me away to clear my mind, and, passing Nimr some coin, had directed him to take me out

for a view of the city. When I asked if Lyreas could come with me, the mage firmly shook his head. I could easily pass as another city dweller, but Lyreas's exotic good looks, even if they didn't cause a riot, would certainly be noticed. And gossip had never had any trouble quickly finding its way all over the city.

Nimr was good company, but I held him fast not because of that but because if I were to lose sight of him, I would never be able to find my way back to the mage's house. Ras Tayma had been confusing at night. Astonishingly, it was *more* confusing in daylight. No street is long and few are straight. The blocks of buildings they enclose are rarely simple geometric shapes, like squares or triangles.

Occasionally, Nimr himself had to cast about to find his way. He explained that after a single voyage on the *Seventh Virgin*, he would come back to discover that a familiar street no longer existed. Someone had dug up a deed allowing him to erect a building at one or the other of its ends, and the street became an alley. Then someone else took advantage of the fact that it was now little used to build a house at its other end, and the alley, or what was left of it, became a courtyard.

The reverse can happen as well. A neglected building collapses out of sheer age. The rubble is carted off, claimants appear to battle over the property, and, while they fight, the space becomes a market square. When builders finally arrive, they are driven off with stones. And so it goes.

It felt good, this taste of my former life, wandering the

city streets with some small coins in my pocket, looking about while eating whatever tasty bits happen to come my way. Because the streets of Ras Tayma were so narrow—at least in this neighborhood—carts were pulled or pushed by hand, so there was no danger of being crushed to death by a waggon. And since I had no purse to pinch, the pickpockets ignored me along with everyone else. So I was free to wander and look about, and, half listening to Nimr's chatter, let myself be swept away by the pleasures of city life.

I suppose I was attending even less to what the boy was saying than I thought, for when he pulled me to a halt in front of a swordsmith, I thought for some reason he wanted to spend some of the loot that Salamah had passed him on a dagger or some other small knife.

But no, this was the house where Nimr was born, the swordsmith was his father, and two youths who assisted him were not apprentices as such, but Nimr's own brothers. I was greeted as an honored guest; the molten sword they were pounding on with heavy iron hammers was thrust into a bucket of water and left there to cool, while I was led up to a room that had windows on all four sides, all of them shaded with flower-covered vines.

Nimr's mother brought us bowls of a deliciously cool and sweet drink which contained the juices of several fruits, all blended together, and a plate covered with honey cakes made with layers of flaky dough rolled thinner than parchment. Then, as was the custom in this city, Nimr's mother and

sisters sat on a low bench set beside the wall, while the men ate and drank, and, of course, talked.

Here was the flaw in Salamah's plan, or in Nimr's execution of it. For while I might look enough like an inhabitant of this place, I had only to open my mouth to reveal I was a stranger here. None of the family besides Nimr spoke my tongue, and I, of course, knew not a word of their own.

This was a good thing and a bad thing—good, because Nimr and I could conspire together as to how he was to explain me, and bad, because there could be no doubt that I came from the north... at least as far north as Heref.

The best story I could concoct was that I was the companion of someone who had come to visit with Salamah, in whose home we were both staying. I, naturally, had no magical powers or much interest in them, which was why Nimr had been dragooned into showing me a bit of the city.

The conversation at this point continued upon lines that need not be pursued, for they contained nothing but the usual politenesses that are the way one makes conversation with a total stranger.

Nu'mas, Nimr's father, might have had arms thick with muscle and sinew, but his eyes were intelligent and alert. He observed my conversation with Nimr, and was clearly drawing his own conclusions about what was to be believed in what he said. There was nothing hostile about this—he was taking my measure exactly as a successful merchant might, before he set out to sell me an expensive carpet.

In fact, I was just thinking that very thing when he said something to Nimr, which, when translated, almost made me laugh.

"My father asks why you carry no dagger," the boy explained. "It is something most youths of Ras Tayma do."

Rabih frowned on us carrying weapons. A thief's feet were his weapon, he said, and nothing should interfere with the impulse to run away. Street fighting was for fools. Naturally, cutpurses used knives, but they were specially made, with very thin, short blades welded to two rings, so that they could be worn on the inside of a single finger—invisible if you didn't know what to look for.

However, I could hardly tell Nu'mas any of this. Instead, I answered, watering the truth, "Once, I was meant to serve in the temple of Gesryma, and so was brought up to imitate priestly ways."

Nimr had a hard time relaying this with a straight face, but the swordsmith heard his translation of without blinking, and made an immediate answer.

"He means only that if you wish to seem, for safety's sake, to be one of us," Nimr interpreted, "that would help you do so."

I recalled Abdaêl-Nephal's comments about the enmity Southerns felt toward the Kingdom and saw that Nu'mas had a point. I also saw that his words could indicate he understood much more than I had told him about myself.

"He's probably right," I said to Nimr. "Tell him that,

and apologize for the fact I can't afford such a purchase at the moment."

"I would *never* say such a thing to my father," Nimr said, a touch of anger in his voice. "He isn't trying to sell you anything. You couldn't afford one of my father's blades if you *had* money."

There was a flurry of conversation between Nimr and Nu'mas, which made the swordsmith smile slightly.

"My father wishes to present you with a dagger," the boy said, "as an expression of his happiness that I am now an apprentice of Salamah's, and not far off at sea."

"Have you told him of our adventures?" I asked.

Nimr grinned. "You mean if he knew the truth, he might offer you the dagger point first?" He shook his head. "No. Salamah said it would be wise for me to keep all that to myself for a while. But my father has his own powers, although he has never shared his knowledge of them with me. Mostly, I think, he uses them as part of his blade-making."

Needless to say, I accepted the offer, and quite humbly, for I realized that, once again, I was in over my head.

So it was that, after a time, Nimr's brothers went back to their furnace, Nimr sat with his mother and sisters to chat with them, and I accompanied Nu'mas down into a locked chamber where he stored his finished weapons.

At his command, several glow stones burst into light, making me catch my breath. For Nu'mas's blades were special—to look at them was to know that they commanded the

highest prices. Instead of the dull sheen of other swords, the surface of these had a wavy pattern on the surface that shimmered in the light, conveying a highly complex forging.

I picked up a short sword and gingerly touched the edge. Immediately, almost painlessly, a thin line of blood appeared on my thumb.

Nu'mas smiled, took the sword from me. I saw as I released it to him that his hands covered with scars and mottled with burn marks. He tapped the flat of the blade with his index finger. "*Ukku*," he said.

I supposed he meant the name of the metal, not the name of the sword. To be sure, I reached out and tapped the blade of a broadsword. "*Ukku*," I repeated.

Nu'mas grunted. He set the short sword he was holding back in its place, then reached into a box on the floor, groped around, and pulled out an ordinary short sword. He showed to me, then lifted it up and brought it down with all his strength on a small anvil that was set on a block of stone. The blade snapped in two, making a ringing sound that hurt the ears.

He then picked up the same short sword that had nicked my thumb, and did the same thing with it. This time there was only metallic snick—the blade had actually cut into the anvil. Nu'mas took his hand away, leaving it stuck fast.

"*Ukku*," he said, this time with a touch of pride. Looking at the anvil, I saw other notches on it. Obviously, this little demonstration had been performed before. But none could

deny its impressiveness.

Nu'mas then turned and began searching about his blades for the one he thought right to present to me. I watched him as he touched one, then another, and so on until he seemed about to pick one up. Instead, his hand froze and he muttered something under his breath. And out from the collection of daggers, he plucked what must have been the most ordinary and cheapest blade in the whole room.

My heart sank—and did so despite the fact that I hadn't even *wanted* a dagger. I'm not sure if my feeling of disappointment came from the fact that I was not getting an *ukku* blade after all, now that I had come to greatly desire one; or because this choice was testament to Nu'mas's low opinion of me. I made an effort to push these feelings away, so that I could receive the gift with proper gratitude.

But Nu'mas seemed far from ready to pass it over. He kept turning it over and over, his fingers stroking the metal, muttering to himself. Finally, he yanked the sword free from where it was still stuck in the anvil, and set it aside. Then he grasped the dagger's handle with both hands, and brought it down with all his strength.

The moment blade struck the surface of the anvil, it gave off a burst of light that half blinded both of us. My eyes regained their sight just in time for me to see that the anvil had been split in twain, and the blade of the dagger sunk deep into the block of stone that had been the anvil's base.

Nu'mas closed his eyes for a moment, then opened

them to look directly into mine. In my eyes he saw astonishment; in his, I saw confusion and disbelief well stirred by agitation. He flung open the door to the room and shouted for his sons, or at least three words, the last of which was "Nimr."

They arrived to find their father attempting to draw the dagger out of the block of stone. At last, defeated, he gestured to the oldest son, who had such powerful muscles in his arms, chest, and neck, that he looked half man, half bull.

He took hold of the handle and gave it a sudden, violent yank. When that failed, he pulled over a stool, sat on it, braced his feet against the stone, and pulled until his eyes seemed about to pop from his head.

He let go, slumped back on the stool and rubbed is arms. Then he summoned the next youngest, and had him reach around and seize hold of his wrists. The two then pulled as one, and after a moment there was a screeching sound. Together, they were dragging the stone block across the floor.

Nimr, meanwhile, had come up beside me, stood on tiptoe and whispered in my ear. "You must do it, Dionis. They don't understand what's happening, but I do. Go and pull out the blade."

Then, when I shook my head and refused to move, he gave me such a hard push that I practically fell onto the stone. Both brothers immediately let go of the dagger's handle, and moved back, staring at me in confusion.

I felt like an idiot, but with everyone staring at me in

total silence, I had no choice. I clasped the dagger with both hands and pulled with all my strength—and went flying onto my back, fortunately without losing hold of the thing. It had slipped out as easily as if the stone had been a block of soft cheese.

Gingerly, I got back on my feet, and handed the blade to Nu'mas, but, instead of taking it, he almost jumped away. Dumbfounded, I turned my eyes back to the dagger, and saw now that there was nothing about it at all. The blade had a silvery sheen that made looking at it difficult, even in the relative darkness of Nu'mas's armory.

When I looked away from it to ask Nimr what this was all about, I saw something that so unsettled me that I grabbed hold of the boy, and said to him so fiercely that it felt as if my eyes flashed fire, "Take me back to Salamah! *Now*!"

As we hurried out of the house, I realized that I was still holding the dagger in my other hand. I thought of tossing it into the street, but I found I couldn't. In any case, caution demanded that I bring it with me to the mage, and let him untangle everything himself. Let him put the damnable thing on one of his shelves, amongst all his other curiosities.

PART FOUR

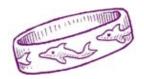


THE MARK OF THE NYCHE



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Chapter 16



YREAS WAS TURNING THE DAGGER over and over in his hands, having already tested its sharpness by plunging it into various items in our room, succeeded in getting it stuck, first in the table by our bed, then, more seriously, by shoving it right to its hilt in the wooden floor. He was able to tug it out from the table himself, but I was needed to extract in from the floor.

As I took hold of its handle and somewhat sullenly pulled it free—Lyreas was showing *much* more interest in the blade than in my agitated state—he put words to my thought.

"Well," he said, "it is a most puissant blade." Then he glanced at me as if I might need the word explained.

"I know what puissant means!" I replied testily. "But that doesn't explain what happened when I pulled the dagger from the stone. I felt like I had just seen a ghost—except, right then, I was the ghost."

I was, of course, still holding the dagger as I spoke,

and Lyreas, although his nodding seemed to mean that he was absorbing my words, couldn't take his eyes off it.

"Look!" he whispered. "Draw your hand back over the blade."

Actually, I had just flicked my hand over it to *break* Lyreas's concentration, not *intensify* it. But, sighing, I did as he directed, this time looking myself... and saw that a symbol had appeared, traced in gold, on the blade just below the hilt. I turned the dagger over and found another golden symbol on the other side.





"The first means 'earth'; the second means 'fire," Lyreas said softly. Finally, his eyes lifted and met mine.

He let out a long breath. "And you say that when you held it up, everyone in the room had fallen to their knees, and were banging their foreheads on the floor?"

"Even Nimr," I assented. "I was so unnerved by it that I turned and fled."

"Not so rattled that you left the dagger behind," Lyreas observed, "clever thief that you are."

I couldn't tell if these words were laced with irony, but I didn't like them anyway. The dagger had attached itself to me, not the other way around. Even so, Lyreas had a point–that wasn't the way it would look to the swordmaker.

"Fuck," I said. "Nu'mas must have already set a price

on my head. Thanks for reminding me of that."

My companion, ignoring me, continued to examine the dagger. "It must be the very *king* of blades," he said in an awed voice. "The symbols, taken together, are meant to say, 'I was born of earth and made by fire; he who wields me, need fear none."

Although I knew Lyreas had no more idea what the symbols meant than I did, he said this incantation with such wizardly solemnity and authority that I believed him anyway. Sweet relief flowed all through me. I thought Nu'mas and his sons had been bowing down to *me*. I almost confessed this to him, but I was too embarrassed to admit it.

Instead, I said, "Well, it must mean *something* that I was the one who pulled it from the stone."

"And from the floor, too!" Lyreas added, putting his arm around me. "Well, maybe you are destined to rule over all of us." He smiled at me and pulled me close for a kiss. "If so, you'll have to learn to be a bit more imposing. When you hold the blade now, you look more like a boy with a vicious dog on a leash, half afraid it's going to turn and *bite* you."

I kissed him back, then carefully laid the dagger on the table. That was *exactly* how I felt. Lyreas didn't know about the tyger—all I needed now was one dangerous animal inside me and another without. Whether I was its rightful wielder or not, I couldn't wait to get the dagger into the hands of Salamah, and out of my own.

Indeed, I was upset that I hadn't been directly taken

I arrived panting at the door that the mage was in a state of rapture and could not be disturbed. So, he had a servant take me back to our room, where I found Lyreas and Diya sitting on the bed, facing each other. A blue ball of spun glass floated in the air, midway between them.

There was no start of guilt when I came in. In fact, Diya gave me a welcoming smile, after he had plucked the ball out of the air with a practiced motion of his hand.

"This is an exercise we perform to heighten our powers of concentration," he explained. "My master has allowed me to share some of my training with your *twerë*."

His smile now shone on Lyreas. "And he is a won-derfully fast learner."

Diya opened his fingers so that the ball was balanced on the palm of his hand, and nodded to my lover.

Lyreas's face tightened. I could see him clenching his teeth.

"Relax, relax," Diya said, laughing. "You should only look like that when lifting a boulder!"

The delicate globe quivered, rolled back and forth, and finally launched itself into the air. It rose ever so slowly, still made little darts to the left and right, as if it wanted to go anywhere but up.

Lyreas's features lightened once the globe cleared Diya's hand, and despite his look of intense seriousness, a small smile of triumph slipped onto his face. I was still shaken from my own adventure, but as I watched my lover nurse his fledgling spell, a warm glow spread inside me, a strange mix of pride, love, and the stirrings of desire.

Diya made a slight pulling gesture with his fingers, and the ball floated away from Lyreas and came to rest in the apprentice's palm.

"Enough of this for the moment," Diya said. "Remember, with magical powers as with walking a tightrope, balance is everything."

He placed the sphere ever so carefully in a small, padded wooden box, and, seeing me watching him, added, "A mere sneeze could shatter it. When I was learning, I swear I made a glassblower a wealthy man. Salamah would say, 'He should just make them and smash them himself, rather than bringing them here for you to do it."

He turned to Lyreas. "When should I come back, my brother?"

"Soon," Lyreas answered, glancing at me. "I'm enjoying our little sessions, and I'm sure Dionis won't be staying long. He's so much in demand these days."

After Diya left, Lyreas pointed at the knife. "Is that a souvenir of your travels?" he asked coolly, "or did you bring it along in case I wasn't in the mood to make amends?"

NLIKE LYREAS, Salamah showed no inclination to examine the dagger, but had me place it on his work table, then listened gravely as I told him the story of my visit to Nu'mas. Once I finished, he got up, went to a

cabinet at the far end of the room, took something from it, and returned.

What he had gone to fetch could only be a magic wand. It was made of ivory, bound in silver filigree, which also clasped a precious stone at the wand's very tip.

"This is very ancient and very precious," Salamah said. "Mages are fussy about such things, and however demanding you think yourself to be, there was always a mage before you who was even more exacting. So, we mages have a habit of searching out a wand that might teach us not to be so impressed with ourselves.

"This one, well, for a long time, I thought it was a fake. Usually, the more powerful a wand is, the less impressive it looks—not because of false modesty, you understand, but from the necessity of concealing its value. But, the truth is that, for years and years, I simply hadn't the skill, the insight necessary to wield it."

Salamah made a quiet barking noise that I eventually realized was laughter. He stroked the wand affectionately with a finger, as one might the back of a pet snake. "You were just ignoring me, weren't you, my beauty?"

He shook his head at his own foolishness, then looked up at me. "However, eventually, I caught on. Whoever made it disguised it so that any right-thinking mage would disdain to even pick it up—and, of course, such a mage was the only person who could ever learn its secrets."

More soft barking. "You have to admire such subtlety.

We mages tend to be too self-important for our own good. I'm just like all the rest, and I, too, almost failed the test. For years this wonderful thing lay ignored in my cabinet of curiosities."

Salamah muttered something, lifting up the wand as he did. I saw nothing change, but I could sense the power emanating from it. The wand had woken up. Now the mage reached over so that the wand was directly over the dagger, and slowly began to lower it. When it was about an arm's length away, the wand began to glow, softly at first, then with increasing brilliance.

The mage lowered his arm still further, and the wand began to sing in a liquid, enchanting voice. There seemed to be words in its song, but they were nothing I could understand. Even so, they had an effect on me, making my heart swell with awe and wonder. This, I realized with a shock, was exactly what the wand was feeling.

I whispered this to Salamah.

"Yes," he said. "The language is old, older than old, the very tongue of magic. The wand has taught me some of it, but every word is fraught with peril, so I tread softly. Still, I understand enough to know that it sings a song..."

He paused, trying to find the words, saying at last, "It sings as a child might, that had been lost and now, at last, has found its mother."

This made no sense to me. "Why would it sing such a thing to a *dagger*?" I asked.

Salamah smiled, this time so much that I could actu-

ally see his old and mottled teeth. "Because it *isn't* a dagger," he answered. "Behold!"

He spoke something to the wand, which then began to suffuse the dagger with its crystalline light. The words of the song changed: to my astonishment, I could sense that the wand was now singing about *me*. As it did so, I felt a very different power stirring in the room, in me, at once apart and yet somehow the same. The dagger began emitting a radiance all its own, with hues of the deepest imaginable red.

Then, suddenly, it was a dagger no more. It had become a wand, starkly simple, beautiful, made of the same metal as the blade.

Salamah lifted his own wand, and silenced it with a command. Then he gestured to me. "Go, Dionis, and take it up. May the two of you always be in harmony."

On the one hand, I felt a deep reluctance. Every finger's width that I moved closer to this wand took me over deeper, darker waters. On the other hand, though, I could feel it calling out to me.

For some perverse reason, thinking of Lyreas and his glass globe, I lifted my hand and summoned this wand to me. Without a moment's hesitation, it rose up from the table and, moving so fast I could barely see it, pressed itself against my palm.

Even as my fingers closed around it, its power started flowing into me. My eyes were wide open, and yet I couldn't see. All my attention was pulled inside myself. That tyger Salamah had described was frantically feeding. At first its very hunger seemed ferocious, limitless.

However, in what must have been a mere instant but which seemed much longer to me, it calmed itself, started casually lapping, like a cat enjoying a bowl with a splash of cream. All this was overwhelming enough, but as it was changing, I could feel that I was, too. The uncertainty, the emptiness in me had been replaced with something firm, confident, and thick with resolve. A moment before, I had been a boy; now, I was a man. And I knew what I wanted to do—to climb on the back of this tyger, and ride it to wherever it was we were meant to go.

I sent the wand flying up to the very ceiling of this room, had it give out a burst of light, then fall back into my hands. "Become a dagger again," I said to it, and it did.

I set the dagger back onto the work table where it had been lying before, and turned to the mage.

"Now tell me, most puissant of mages," I said, "what all this is about."

YREAS WAS SITTING ON THE BED, his arms wrapped around his knees, leaning back against the wall. I was lying alongside him, one of my hands grasping his ankle. I wasn't spying on him, exactly, but I was aware that by simply touching him I could sense what was going on in his mind—or, rather, how much of a ferment his mind was in.

"Salamah had a glow stone," I was saying, "which was crafted by special magic to give off a light that is exactly

the same as that cast by the moon. He had me bare my left arm, and exposed it to this light. He made it shine so brightly that I had to shield my eyes from it, since the mage had only the pair of spectacles with darkened glass that he was wearing himself.

"Then he suddenly extinguished the light, and told me to look at my arm. And there this was, shining almost as brightly as it is now."

I lifted my arm, although Lyreas had seen the mark already, and barely looked at it.

"Salamah said that when I am reunited with my twin,"
I went on, "the sign will complete itself on both of us. It will

look like...."

Lyreas interrupted me with a groan. "I *know* what it will look like," he said, tossing himself down beside me, and wrapping his arms around his face. "The problem, Dionis, is that this *can't be*." His voice was angry, disbelieving, and, most of all, full of misery.

"You *can't be* the *Nithaial Elimiel*. He may have vanished into a fiery pit, but he has the power over fire, so he's still down there burning, or *not* burning. And he has the

power over earth, as well, so if he has succeeded in burning Maerdas to cinders, he could just *come out*."

"Salamah knows that. Before I become the *Nithaial Elimiel*—if that *is* my fate—I have to be baptized in forces of fire and earth, at two very distant temples—Faeÿstirran and Ernfardast, where the fire pit is. Anyway, at this point, by any measure, I'm *not* the *Nithaial Elimiel*, so your argument is beside the point. The plan is to get me to Faeÿstirran, as soon as possible, and see what happens then."

"We won't be let in and while we stand there, looking stupid, we'll be devoured by giant earthworms," Lyreas said, adding, "if we're lucky."

I shrugged. "Probably. My mother told me it was all lies. She said that Niccas was destroyed by his own folly, and the line of the *Nithaial* has come to an end."

Lyreas groaned again. "And I think she was also lying when she said she slept with him," he said. "The *Nithaial* have always preferred men."

"So do I," I said, "but I would sleep with Azhara. At least once, anyway."

Even before Lyreas answered this, I realized that it the wrong thing to say, and the wrong time to say it.

"Well, you just go and do that," he said. "Then we can have a third little *Nithaial Elimiel*. When the *Nithaial Galgaliel* learns of this, he'll be *so* jealous. He'll have to go out and father some baby *Nithaial* himself."

"Cut it out, Lyreas," I said through clenched teeth.

"You told me you wanted to understand what was going on with me, and now that I've found out and told you, you're being a total shit about it."

"That's because if I punched your head, I'll be vaporized by a flash of lightning," he replied.

"No, you won't. Salamah said you can punch me as hard and as often as you want. It seems you get special dispensation."

Lyreas shifted his arms so that one of his eyes appeared. "Special dispensation?"

"That's what the mage said. Then he pushed me over in my chair to prove it."

The arms fell away. "He did not!"

I nodded. "And he wasn't content with that. While I was struggling to get up, he bounced the moon globe off my head, just so he could say that he had."

Lyreas jumped me even as I was finishing the sentence, and in a moment we had rolled off the bed. I was stronger than he was, but I loved it when he had his dander up like this, and, while I made him fight for it, I let him be the victor. We ended up with him sitting on me, his legs pinning my arms, his hands each filled with a fistful of my hair. Which he yanked, making my eyes fill with tears.

Convinced he could really hurt me, he let my hair go and sat up, leaving my arms pinned under his legs, even so.

"I don't want to the plaything of a god," he said. "I can't be your *twerë* if we can't be equal. I *won't* be."

"Lyreas," I whispered, "if I could make you the *Nithaial Galgaliel*, I would, in an instant. But I can't. So we'll have to find what equality means when it comes to you and me. I know it won't be easy. But I *want* to."

"What if we can't?" Lyreas whispered back. "It seems impossible that we could."

"That's what I said to Salamah," I replied. "And do you know what he told me?"

Lyreas made a motion with his eyes that meant, "How *could* I know, you idiot!"

"He said, 'You have many powers, Dionis. Just find the one that makes it possible for you to be one with him."

"Was that before or after he bounced the moon globe off your skull?"

I smiled. "Actually, he said that *while* he was doing it. To emphasize the point, I think."

There was a knock on the door. Diya slipped in.

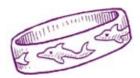
"Oh!" he said. "Should I go away?"

Lyreas's eyes met mine.

"Yes," my *twerë* replied, still unaware of how intimately I could now read his feelings.

"No, Diya," I said, not shifting my eyes. "Since you're here, why don't you join us."

Chapter 17



LAY ON THE BED, ALL CLOTHING CAST ASIDE, holding Lyreas's hand and watching Diya as he bent over my lover's body. Diya, too, was naked, but he had begged to be given the pleasure of undressing Lyreas himself. He was now doing so, slowly, marveling over everything that he uncovered—the delicate bone structure just below his neck, the milk-pale, freckled skin, the copper-colored bush that was now appearing as he untied and pulled away Lyreas's smalls.

To be honest, I felt fresh excitement as Diya discovered these things, as he kissed the freckles and russet nipple plates, and sucked on the nipples themselves to make them swell. And Diya's own body was pleasing to stroke. His skin was smooth and creamy brown, and I loved the thick black patch of hair that sprouted under each arm, and the dense thicket of it around his cock.

Furthermore, Diya had no foreskin, a state of affairs I had never encountered before. Had he been born without one? That seemed a more tolerable thought than that

someone had cut it off—which was too horrible to contemplate. By now, Diya had uncovered Lyreas's own cock—well, it had uncovered itself, rising and flinging aside what little fabric still covered it. Diya was obviously as fascinated with Lyreas's foreskin as I was with his own lack of one, pulling it down, then up again, until the cock was too swollen to allow him this pleasure.

Because of the bend in Lyreas's cock, Diya had to get astride him to take it into his mouth, letting his own cock hang over Lyreas's face as he did. Now Lyreas, too, had a close view of its shameless nakedness, and I watched with amusement as his eyes widened. He stared at it like a boy at a sugared plum, and, also like that boy, opened his mouth to envelop the whole thing, then began sucking with total abandon.

Diya, who was working Lyreas's cock down his own throat, managed somehow to moan around it. I reached over with my free hand and stroked my lover's member, just below Diya's lips.

Lyreas turned his head to me, freeing his mouth as he did so. "Dionis, I want to watch you fuck his hole as he sucks me. Get up and mount him, and I'll guide you in."

Our small jug of Seafarer's Friend—not at all the whole keg that Azhara had laughingly urged on us—was beside the bed, and it took but a moment for me to smooth some over my cock. Meanwhile, Lyreas had seized hold of Diya's cheeks, and spread them wide. I bent down and nib-

bled at the exposed rosebud.

"No time for that," Lyreas gasped, "my cock is almost all the way down his throat. I don't know how much longer I can hold on."

So I got up behind Diya. Immediately, Lyreas seized hold of my cock and positioned it right against Diya's puckered opening. "Push," he said. "Push!"

The moment my cock began spreading Diya open, a wave of sensation swept through me, flooding my mind with delicious confusion. Then I understood—somehow, I was as attuned to Diya's sensations as to my own. At the same time that I felt the sensation of my own cock forcing Diya open, I also experienced the feeling of being spread, the rush that came with taking a cock deeper and deeper inside.

Even as I felt all this, I also savored the fact that Diya, now that he was being fucked fore and aft, was quickly losing any capacity to contain himself. This thought was interrupted by yet another nerve-tingling sensation, that of Lyreas sucking on my purse.

In fact, each time I shoved into Diya, our two purses pressed together, and both of them dangled directly over Lyreas's mouth. I stopped shoving in and out, and instead pushed into the boy as hard as I could, letting Lyreas take both into his mouth and suck them together.

This sensation was simply more than Diya could handle. He reached down, seized hold of his own cock, and began frantically milking it, his balls pumping, cream shoot-

ing all over Lyreas's chest.

Lyreas let go as well, giving me the astonishing sensation of experiencing two climaxes simultaneously, and neither of them my own! Diya's was perhaps the strongest, since his submissive surrender to two cocks touched something in him that pushed him to his limit. But Lyreas had certainly melted into a puddle himself.

There was no reason for me not to join them, except that my *twerë* was holding me back, disengaging me from Diya as the apprentice slumped forward, then, with a happy groan, rolled over onto his back.

"Prop me up with some pillows," Lyreas said, once I turned around. "It's time for that fat pig of yours to root around in *me*."

had never seen Lyreas's powers displayed, and so he and I both watched in amazement as my lover opened himself wide enough for us to see right up his pink tunnel.

"He could take us *both* at the same time," Diya whispered to me. Then, realizing Lyreas could hear him anyway, said it to him directly. "Want to take both our cocks at once?"

Lyreas considered this. "Is that *possible*?" he asked at last, sitting up.

"Well," Diya admitted. "I've never heard of it. But the idea practically makes me swoon."

"It hasn't made your cock swoon," my lover responded

with a smirk. "Look at it!"

It was true. A moment ago, what had been a little mouse nestled in its nest was now as thick and hard as a post.

"Diya and I would have to lie on our backs," I said, thinking it out, "with my legs over his. Then we could press our cocks together, and you could lower yourself..."

"Well, do it," Lyreas said. "However, Diya's legs should go over yours, because his legs are thinner and your cock is longer."

Diya smiled. "Good thing it isn't bent like yours, or this would *not* be easy."

We took the position I suggested, and, sure enough, with a little wriggling, my cock was pressed firmly up against Diya's.

"This is insane," Lyreas said, but I noticed that he was just erect as we were. He got astride us, facing me. His eyes were shining.

Once he was squatting down, he reached around and took both of our cocks together in his fist.

He whistled. "I'm going to be so fucked."

He closed his eyes and began to concentrate, positioning our two knobs as did so.

"Diya, spread my cheeks," he gasped, and as the youth did so, Lyreas's hole began to quiver, then open up. I could feel it brushing across the top of my knob, an indescribably exciting sensation, that got only stronger as, stretched to the limit, Lyreas squeezed us into him. My cock and Diya's throbbed as one; the boy's arousal shuddered against my own. Linked as we were, we were the passive ones, Lyreas the active one. His leg muscles knotted from the effort, he sucked us in, then slid back up, until we could feel the tight, stretched ring of muscle at his opening pressing against our knobs.

All in all, I preferred the intimacy of having Lyreas to myself, and being able to match his movements with thrusts of my own. But for sheer intensity of pleasure, this was unique, not least because Lyreas, filled as he was, had reached the point of delirium. His eyes had lost their focus, his mouth was hanging open, his body shaking.

Even if I had not been inside him, the sight of this would have driven me over the edge. The fact that I could feel what was happening to him right to my very being, shoved me past any hope of self-control.

I shot, and my cream mingled with Diya's own, for he was spending too, our sacks, crammed against each other, pulsing in unison. Dizzy with the force of it, I managed to focus my eyes on Lyreas, and saw his head thrown back, his hair spread out behind him, his mouth wide open and uttering a long and sobbing cry.

HE TWO OF US LAY ON THE BED TOGETHER in a state of total collapse, legs entangled, his head on my shoulder, one of his arms lying limply against my groin. Neither of us had the energy to move or to talk, but a shared radiant glow wrapped us into a single entity, like a double-

yolked egg safe and warm under a broody hen.

Lyreas seemed to be hovering at the very edge of sleep; his head would nod, then make a little jerk, then nod again, his breath licking at my cheek. I was half asleep myself, except that my mind was gently turning over, and after a bit a thought made me quietly quiver with laughter.

"What?" Lyreas whispered.

I glanced at him. "Diya, after he staggered out the door—I just had this image of him melting into a puddle and flowing down the stairs."

Lyreas returned my smile. "It would take Nimr all afternoon to mop him up. Did you see his prick?"

My *twerë* meant Diya's cock, of course, not Nimr's. I nodded. "How could I not? A marvel—but not, I think, to be envied. It seemed rather immodest, somehow."

It was Lyreas's turn to shake with laughter. "Don't say that to *him*. I imagine they think quite the opposite."

I turned my head a little toward his. "*They*?" Our eyes met.

"Didn't you know?" he asked. "All the men in the Southern Lands are trimmed like that! It is meant to remind you that you are different from an animal—really, not unlike the reason that our priests shave their heads."

The similarity of the images—bald head, bald cock—made us both giggle. "Well," I said, "at least *they* don't shave everybody's head, just their own. Before someone sliced off *my* foreskin, I would at least want to be asked."

Lyreas shrugged. "They do it to a child when he is still very young—a moment of pain in exchange for a lifetime of pure thoughts. A small price."

"When you put it that way," I said, "I can't imagine why you're not in line for a clipping, yourself."

"It's far too late for me," Lyreas replied sadly. "I haven't had a pure thought since..."

"You met me," I said, turning my head and lightly nipping his ear.

"You wish!" He seized hold of my cock and gave it a yank. "Although I'll admit that your influence hasn't made me any purer." He snorted. "Some *Nithaial* you'll make."

I removed his hand from my member, replying piously, "I *do* set an example for others—for example, my willingness to share your hole with another cock. Surely that counts for something."

"Only you would pretend to find virtue in that."

"You don't understand," I answered. "The virtue was in the sharing, even while my mind reeled at realizing my *twerë* was such an utterly shameless slut."

Lyreas struggled, albeit a bit feebly, to repossess my cock. When he failed, he dug his elbow into my ribs, instead. Before I could retaliate, he sighed. "To be honest, I was just finding that out myself."

He turned his head toward me and whispered in my ear, "I was a total, *total* slut, wasn't I?"

I nodded, grinning. "It felt good?" Because of my

newfound powers, I already knew the answer, but I found perverse delight in getting my *twerë* to admit it out loud.

"Mmmmm." Lyreas nuzzled his face into my neck. "It was *glorious*. I'll be sore for weeks, and I don't even care."

A long silence followed, punctuated with little gasps of sleep. This bout of lovemaking had wiped away all thoughts of daggers and wands and destiny from my mind. Like sparrows twittering about in a thicket, they made known their presence without showing themselves, and I was still wrapped in too much bliss to pay them much mind.

Lyreas returned to consciousness with a little shudder. His eyes opened and met mine. He moved his hand to my chest, took hold of one of my nipples, and gave it a tug.

"Thank you," he whispered.

I knew what he was saying. "Instead of being jealous and fretting about it, which I had been doing," I said slowly, "it seemed a better plan to just join in. So, from that perspective, I should say, 'Thank *you* for sharing."

Lyreas found my other nipple, and tugged on it, too. "Don't be silly," he said. "First of all, I could feel your pleasure in Diya's hapless adoration of my freckled carapace. If you had been in a jealous snit, well..."

He paused to stretch one leg, then the other, after which he continued in a considering voice, "I guess it *still* could have been exciting, but I wouldn't feel so good about it now."

I was still smiling at what he said—and couldn't help

pointing out, "I think you meant 'helpless adoration."

"Dionis!" Lyreas suddenly got up on top of me, pinning my arms under his legs. "You fucking street urchin! Please remember that *I'm* the one with the education! 'Hapless means," and, he emphasized each new definition light slap across my face. "Out-of-luck.' 'Ill-fated.' 'Star-crossed.' Forlorn.' And, more precisely, 'In love with a boy who loves someone else *much* more."

Lyreas slid down, off my arms, so that his legs pressed against my side. The import of what he was saying flooded through me, and to my astonishment, made me rigid all over again.

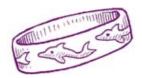
"Ah," Lyreas said, "I think the lesson is taking. Perhaps there is something to being a tutor, after all."

He reached back and lifted his ass to guide me in.

"Can you? Aren't you too...?" I gasped, although doing nothing to keep him from enveloping me.

"What? For this little thing? You must be joking." He clamped onto me, groaned—half in pleasure, half in pain—then muttered, "All right, *not* so little. Ohhh. Not so little. Yes, fuck my slutty hole."

Chapter 18



HAND SEIZED MY SHOULDER and shook it violently, and an urgent voice spoke next to my ear, ordering me to wake up. To wake up. I opened my eyes, my brain still heavy with sleep, reeling from a terrible dream. Something pursued me. At first, I eluded it easily, but it persisted with dogged determination, and gradually I began to realize that run and hide as I might, *I was not going to escape*.

I turned at once to Lyreas, an apology on my lips, sure that I had been crying out. There was no moon, but the faint glow of starlight fell on him from the open window, and I saw that he was sprawled on his back, motionless, so deeply asleep that he barely breathed.

I smiled and was about to lean over and kiss his arm, when a piercing scream rent the air, followed immediately by the crackling discharge of a powerful magic spell.

"Your wand of power, Dionis. Use it NOW."

The same voice, at once familiar and unknown. I

grabbed the wand from the table beside the bed, but using it was another thing. On what? And *how*?

I could feel the answer to the first question before I saw it, for its smell came wafting out of the ventilator. I had just enough time to throw my half of the mattress over Lyreas and press my back against the far wall, before it smashed in the door.

The nyche—I knew that unforgettable stench from that long ago cleaning of Helias—was a misshapen bloated thing with three large glowing eyes. Each of these cast a stabbing beam of greenish fluorescent light, and each moved independently. Two of the eyes immediately fixed on me while the third quickly searched about the room for anyone else.

Then, just as I was taking all this in, the nyche struck my mind a blow that should have shattered it. It was like being hit full force on the head with a sledgehammer... except you're still standing there, gaping. Even so, the blow had its effect—its own blow had rebounded on the nyche. It staggered backwards, then fell down the flight of stairs.

"Turn your wand of power on the nyche the moment it reappears. You aren't strong enough to suffer another blow like the first one, and it can deliver many such."

The voice again. Clearly not Lyreas.

"How *can* I wield it?" I whispered helplessly. "I don't know any spells!"

"You are soon to become the *Nithaial Elimiel*," the voice replied. "You don't *need* any spells. Just *use* it."

The nyche was climbing back up the stairs, or rather squelching its way up them. The moment it could, it fixed both its eyes on me, blinding me with their light. I lifted up my hands to shield my eyes, and realized that one of them was, in fact, holding the wand. I raised it over my head, then swung it down as if meaning to throw it at nyche with all my strength.

What I threw instead was a blazing fireball that burst from the end of the wand and few across the room at the nyche, expanding as it did. By the time it reached the door, it was so large that it brushed against its wooden frame, setting it on fire.

The nyche opened its body as if it were a fist and seized the fireball, enclosing it completely. Then it went into a frenzy of writhing as it attempted to suck the power into itself. But it failed. Its eyes went dull, it threw its head back, opened its mouth and screamed, then exploded into a hail-storm of slimy phosphorescent globs.

These flew everywhere and adhered everywhere they struck—to the ceiling, the walls, the floor, and, I realized with sudden horror, to *me*. Now, I *fully* remembered Helias's return from the city sewers, and frantically flipped over the mattress, freeing Lyreas. The nyche's dying scream had already shaken him awake, and he staggered to his feet, startled and confused.

"Mother of life," he groaned. "This place *stinks*." His turned in wonder at the constellation that glowed from every

surface of the room. "What the fuck is all that?"

"Gobs of nyche," I replied. "And they're eating into my flesh. Go get the wash bowl, and *don't step on any*."

Lyreas plucked the phlegm-like globs from my face then my arms and chest, moving quickly and methodically, scooping small bits together to make best use of our limited supply of cloths.

As he did so, I told him about Helias appearing in his rooms of the House of the Narrow Blade, and how Cursic and Alsdar had gone to work in tandem to clean him up.

Lyreas was only half listening, so intent was he to get the stuff off me while not transfering any to himself. However, in a moment he muttered that *I* didn't seem to be making much mental effort to keep the stuff from burning into my flesh.

That was true, but the reason was easily explained. I had turned the wand of power back into a dagger to cut the mattress cloth, and still clutched it in my hand. Power was trickling out onto my skin, where it gathered under each of the gobs, and kept them from eating into me.

A thought came to me. I put my hand on Lyreas's shoulder and moved him aside, then took the blade of the dagger and cautiously used it to flick away one of the gobs. The moment the blade touched it, the gob made a crackling noise and vanished in a tiny puff of violet smoke.

"Stand aside, and don't breathe any of those vapors,"

I said, and quickly disposed of the remaining gobs, shaving away half my bush in the process.

"Such sacrifices you're forced to make!" Lyreas said as he watched me. "Try to leave some hair on your legs, otherwise it will be like stroking a plucked chicken."

I was too absorbed in removing a large gob from between my toes to respond to this jape, but almost sliced one off when Lyreas suddenly screamed in pain and terror.

A large gobbet had dropped from the ceiling onto his back, and while he fought it with what power he had, I could already smell the stench of burnt flesh.

I reached for a square of the cloth, but Lyreas stopped me. "Too slow!" he shouted. "Use the fucking *knife*!"

He was right. The stuff had formed into the shape of a claw, and each of these was digging into his skin. Even so, he had no protection from the blade, and despite my care, it bit into him, lifting away a patch of his skin.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!!!" Lyreas cried, his body trembling from the pain.

Unnerved, I threw the scrap of skin onto the floor and we both watched with horror as the nearest blobs slithered over to where the one that I had cut away was already consuming its feast.

"We have to get out of here!" Lyreas shouted at me. The reason for his urgency was obvious: everywhere, on the walls, the ceiling, the floor, the gobs were sliming toward each other, merging, growing in size. In fact, one of the larger ones on the floor was already struggling in form itself back into a nyche, and the rudiments of three eyes were already forming.

Lyreas, blood oozing from the gouge on his back, grabbed our packs and gear and threw it all out the nearest window, then followed it, jumping onto the roof just below.

When I failed to move, he stuck his head back in. "Dionis! Do you want me come back in and *drag* you out?"

"But the others..." I gasped, thinking of Nimr, Diya, the Mage Salamah. "We can't just *abandon* them."

Lyreas actually lunged at me from the window, caught my arm, and yanked me to him. "They're all dead or gone, you idiot!" he said fiercely, on the verge of tears. "Can't you sense it?"

I could. Even as I reluctantly climbed out on the roof, my mind went wandering through the house—down the flights of stairs, through the halls, into this room and that—and found no flicker of awareness, no sense of body heat, no pulsing course of blood. The nyche had slain all it had encountered on its way up to me.

A sense of despair struck me so hard that I dropped to my knees and buried my face in my hands. Rabih, Lyreas's parents, Abdaêl-Nephal, and now Diya, Yusri, Nimr, and Salamah. I thought of the splotch on Lyreas's back that I had had to cut off him, and groaned aloud.

"Yes, you're right," Lyreas said, not without feeling. "It's a dangerous thing, making your acquaintance." He had

picked up my dagger from where it had slipped out of my fingers, and was using it to vaporize the few gobs that remained on our packs and other things.

"All I can say," he continued, as he started tossing items of clothing at me, "is that both duty and self-interest tell me to get the two of us as far from here as we can possibly get, *if* you will just get dressed, and *if* we can find a way down from the roof."

HE NYCHE HAD ATTACKED during the very last hour of the night, and now dawn was creeping over Ras Tayma. Even as we both pulled on our clothes—keeping a wary eye on the window from which we had just fled—black turned to gray, then gray turned pink around the edges.

I had nothing to treat Lyreas's wound except for some Seafarer's Friend, which at first he refused to let me try. I could see the pain he was suffering was terrible.

"There is a whiff of medicament under the fragrance," I said, "and at least it should help soothe the pain. Please, let me put some on. I can't stand the idea of doing nothing."

So, reluctantly, he turned his back to me, and with infinite lightness, I spread some over the raw wound, then helped him pull his shirt down over it, since we had no bandages or any way to secure them. Finally, I held up his pack so that he could get his arms through the straps. Awkward though it was, he would have to have it rest against his chest, for there was no way it could be borne on his back.

When we turned to look for a route over the sea of

roofs, we realized that we might be better off *not* finding a way down to the streets. There, we would be lost in a maze, and might well end up traveling in circles; up here we could at least keep heading in the same direction.

"Back to the waterfront?" I asked.

He made a dismissive noise. "You're thinking that the new captain of *The Seventh Virgin* might welcome us on the trip back north? That's the *first* place they'd look for us. There must be caravans that head to the northeast, since trade still comes into the kingdom through Shavagar-Yasí. We may have enough to pay for our passage."

"Great," I said. "I look like a native but can't speak the language; you speak the language, at least a little, but stick out like a sore thumb."

"It isn't my *thumb* that's sore," Lyreas said, Then, when I ignored this juvenile sally, added, "Anyway, I'll cover myself with a robe and hood like a penitant."

I looked at him to see if this was yet another joke, and, when it was clear to me that it wasn't, swore.

"Dionis," Lyreas said, taking hold of my arm, "there are no good plans. We have to choose the one that seems the least bad. Should we try to find Nimr's father?"

"I don't think I could lead us there," I answered, considering this, "and even if I could..." I shrugged. There was no way I could tell Nu'mas the fate of his youngest son."

Lyreas and I looked at each other.

"To the caravansary, then," I said, grudgingly, "if

we're lucky enough to ever find it."

"Just use your nose," Lyreas said. "We should catch a whiff of it from a league's distance."

Traveling from roof to roof was tiring, and jumping from one to another over the narrow lanes was risky. My training as a thief made me more adept (and quieter) at this than Lyreas, but as we often had to climb up a story or lower each other down one, our progress was slow.

Furthermore, since we couldn't leap the width of a street, we had to either follow along the edge of one, hoping for a building that bridged it, or else backtrack a considerable distance to find another route.

And, as the sun rose, it beat down on us hotly, and we had no water to ease our thirst. Finally, we came to a patch of shade and, without saying a word, Lyreas went and sat down in it. I hesitated, then joined him. It was deliciously cool to be out of the sun.

"I think I hate highly *stupid* situations even more than highly dangerous ones," Lyreas complained. "At least *those* are exciting. Now, with every step I take, I curse myself, you, my parents, the Blessed Mother Herself, for letting things become so... so... fucking *pathetic*."

He glanced into the sky and pointed as he added bitterly, "See for yourself. The vultures are already circling."

I didn't bother looking up. Of course they were. They circled above the city all day long, hoping for a chance to pick through someone's garbage. They might keep an eye on someone staggering across the desert, but here in the city they would no more expect to dine off us than from a platter of freshly roasted squab.

Still, I felt the same frustration. Perhaps this wasn't the best plan, after all. "I think," I said slowly, taking Lyreas's hand, "we should climb through the nearest window, find our way down to the street, and take our chances there."

My lover nodded slowly. "We might find something to drink, even to eat, as we do so."

He was about to continue in this vein, when he suddenly stopped speaking and squeezed my hand. There was a scrabbling noise, then the sound of feet dropping down onto this same roof.

Softly, I eased my dagger loose from its scabbard—then, with a sigh of relief, pushed it back in again. Our pursuer was none other than Nimr.

IMR'S SHIRT WAS DRENCHED IN SWEAT; his face was twisted with panic and grief. In fact, tear tracks were visible on his cheeks. He had seized a cloth sack between his teeth to free his hands while climbing down, and he left it there as he turned his head one way, then the other, eyes squinting against the sun's glare, trying to determine in what direction we had gone.

The same blinding brightness kept the boy from seeing Lyreas and me where we sat in the shade, so I stood up and stepped out in the light. He gave out a yelp of joy, letting the bag fall unheeded onto the roof, and ran over to throw

his arms around me—even as I embraced him and lifted him up into the air. Then, after a moment of hugging and kissing, I brought him into the shade, where Nimr squeezed in between Lyreas and myself, and grasped both our hands.

He closed his eyes for a moment and sat with us silently. I thought he was fighting off tears. When he opened them, they were indeed wet, but it turned out he had been thanking the Blessed Mother.

"I promised Her I would wrap Her in loving prayers of thanks if She guided me to you," he explained, "and that was the first of them."

Then he looked first at me, then at Lyreas. "Which of you is wounded?" he asked. "Without the traces of blood you left the Holy Mother would have had to lift lift me up and set me down right in your laps for me to ever find you."

Lyreas and I told him about our encounter with the the nyche, and the resulting wound to my lover's back.

Of course, the boy had to see it. When Lyreas lifted up his shirt, Nimr gave a cry of horror, then asked, "Is that slime the remains of the nyche?"

I explained about the Seafarer's Friend.

He stared at me at one would a halfwit. "That's disgusting!" he said, finally. "We have to get Lyreas to a competent healer before *anything*."

That Nimr had tracked us this far was astonishing, and said much for his cleverness and determination. Now, here he was confidently and unselfconsciously taking charge

of our party, despite the fact that he was by far the youngest. The young are easy to underestimate.

I put my arm over his shoulders. "Good plan," I said. "But rest a bit, first—you must be at least as tired as are we. Anyway, it's your turn to tell how *you* escaped the nyche."

"I wasn't there," Nimr replied simply. "The day after you arrived in his house, Salamah called me into his private chambers, and directed me to sleep each night with my family. That way, if anything happened in his house over night, someone would remain to look after us. He knew that you—or at least Lyreas—would notice if Diya vanished every night, and Yusri was cold toward you both, and so not the best friend in need."

Nimr bent his head. "For that simple reason, Diya and Yusri are dead and I am alive. Truly it is said that every twist of fate leaves someone hurt and someone dead."

"You needn't say any more," I replied.

But Nimr shook his head, wiping away his tears as he did. "No. What happened to me was nothing compared to what happened to you, let alone all the others."

"When I arrived this morning, I instantly realized what Salamah had failed to take into his calculations. Of course, he knew of such as wraith ghouls and nyches, foul servants of the Eight, but it was the former that he feared, since your witch friend Azhara had warned him that such are now stalking our streets at night.

"He was counting on the impenetrable maze of our

city to protect you from their finding you in the short time that you would be staying with us. Even so, each night he sent seeking spells about the city, meant to return and warn him about anyone meaning to do you harm."

Nimr sighed deeply. "But nyches Salamah dismissed. They are known to inhabit dark and foul places like sewers and catacombs, never where fast-moving water flows through channels of hewn stone, water so pure and clean that even mold finds no nourishment in it."

His voice now became tight with anger. "From child-hood, we are brought up to revere the purity of the water that flows in the caverns beneath us. Those of us who can afford to do so, draw up our drinking water with special vessels made of pure gold. That some foul being would be allowed to go below and wander through those channels, using the cooling vents as a way to search you out...," Nimr paused and shuddered, then concluded, "Even Salamah, with all his wisdom, failed to think of this, and so he was outfoxed."

Nimr got to his feet, and went and retrieved the sack he had been carrying. "Even so, he *felt* the danger, and knew it was near. Last night, after supper, he called me to him, and before sending me home, prepared me for what I might find when I returned. Also, he gave me this sack, which he had packed with things he thought might be useful on the next leg of your journey."

The boy settled back into the space between Lyreas and myself, opened the bag, and reached into it.

"First and foremost," he said, "I was instructed to give Lyreas *this*," and presented my *twerë* with the jewel-tipped, silver-filigree-bound ivory wand, the most precious of all the ones that Salamah possessed.

For once, Lyreas was without words. He looked at the thing in astonishment, disbelief, and, eventually, immeasurable pride and happiness. Since he had no knowledge of these things, he had no suspicion that such a wand was too beautiful to be powerful. Perhaps, in part, because he saw no problem with himself being both, so why would a wand be any different? Somewhere, Salamah was having a good laugh.

"This is a wand to live up to," Lyreas said, then, turning to Nimr, asked, simply, "Why?"

"Because of Diya," the boy replied. "who persuaded Salamah that you were already master of wizardly powers he had never seen or imagined."

"Let's hope Diya didn't describe those in detail," I muttered, and received a sharp slap on my leg in reply.

"I imagine Diya told him everything," Lyreas said.
"Just because he was venerable and wise doesn't mean he had lost interest in the pleasures of life, or how our powers might enhance them."

"You're right," I assented. "No doubt Salamah was, if anything, filled with awe."

Our eyes met, and, although it hardly says anything good about us, we both burst into helpless laughter, leaving Nimr to look on in uncomprehending surprise. MONG THE OTHER USEFUL ITEMS that Salamah had bestowed upon us was a purse full of coins, and so it became a simple matter, once we had found a way down to the street, to purchase food and drink for all three of us.

Then, stuffed with a skewer each of goat meat, washed down with some sort of fermented milk, we searched out a healer to attend to Lyreas. Nimr was now as lost as we were, but since healers offer their services by attaching a display of fragrant herbs wrapped in a clean bandage to their doors, I couldn't see any problem in finding one.

It was then that Nimr pointed out that prospective patients were supposed to know the healer's specialty by the nature of the herbs displayed—one assortment signaled treatments for biting belly, the gallop, and similar digestive upsets; another promised the healing of acute wind, catarrh, and comparable breathing problems; still another indicated a healer whose specialty was weeping puss, blinding cramps, dug ache, and other women's complaints.

Moreover, Nimr was no more able than Lyreas or myself to tell one from the other—even though we had all been exposed to most of them (including those meant specifically to treat women, which were constantly present during the early years of my life).

Brewed into a tea, yes, I could have told one from another by their aroma. But the actual leaves were like words in a foreign language: knowing what they were didn't help one bit in reading what they actually said.

Luckily for us, as we stood gaping at one such assortment hung from a healer's door, a patient came out and found us blocking her way. Nimr spoke to her, and she answered him in a scolding tone, plucking a leaf from the one of the sprigs and crumbling it between her fingers.

At once, all three of us recognized the scent of *heäl-lemot*, the most potent and effective of healing herbs, and looked suitably abashed. Satisfied that she had made her point, and after examining Lyreas's face with unabashed curiosity, making clucking noises all the while, the woman went on her way and we entered the healer's chambers, setting the door bell a-jangling as we did.

The anteroom into which we stepped turned out to be much the same as any found in the kingdom—a small room divided by a counter. On our side of it were two benches where patients could wait; on the other side, the far wall was lined with several rows of drawers, each of which was marked with the name of the herb or potion it contained.

These rows were divided by a curtain-hung doorway leading to the back, and we had barely had time to gaze about when the hanging cloth parted and the healer emerged. She had a round face with lively, amused eyes, and long black hair tied in a braid, and carried the weight of one with authority, though she stepped lightly enough.

She looked intently at the three of us, then said in the common tongue, "I am the healer Ghaniyah, and it is my wish to help you with such powers are at my command. The one among you who suffers needs not be pointed out, since a nimbus of suffering surrounds him."

She was looking directly at Lyreas as she said this, but she then turned to me. "Your aura is blindingly bright, Lordling. Be aware, if you aren't already, that your chrysalis is melting into air. Has it been revealed to you who shall emerge? Dare I guess?"

I looked at her, stunned. When I said nothing, she simply smiled and took Lyreas's hand, saying, "Come, all of you, up the stairs to my dispensary, and let me examine your friend's wound. It is grievous, and needs all the attention we can give it."

Ghaniyah's inner sanctum was much like any other healer's I had visited, dominated on one side by a long work table where she had been concocting some herbal mixture in a large stone mortar when we had summoned her. The crisp, penetrating scent of the bruised simples seemed to go straight to the brain and give it a shaking.

"A palliative for melancholia," she explained to me, as she perched Lyreas on a padded stool. My lover began to remove his shirt, but she stopped him, sending Nimr to fetch a wide but shallow metal bowl, not unlike a scrying mirror. He brought it to her, carrying it in one hand and the tripod on which it rested in the other.

As he set it up beside Lyreas, Ghaniyah went to the shelves that held her potions, and brought back a small vial, almost covered with sealing wax. This she carefully broke away, and, holding the vial well away from her face, wriggled out the cork, then emptied its milky white contents into the bowl. Immediately, like a dagger ripping through fabric, our nostrils and eyes were savaged by a violently acrid stink.

Ghaniyah held her hands spread out high above this, and began to speak an enchantment. She spoke the words quickly, but I could see Lyreas's ears were pricked. Even in pain, he was intent on missing nothing—while the healer was either not aware that he was a wizard (unlikely), or felt that if such a one wished to learn healing magicks, so much the better for the world.

Now, using only the very tips of her fingers, she drew off Lyreas's shirt, and once he was freed of it, she lowered it gently into the metal dish. I was surprised that she was doing this, since I thought I had already destroyed all traces of the nyche's remains.

It was quickly apparent I had much to learn. The uncontaminated parts of the fabric simply dissolved, but other tiny patches—which appeared exactly the same to the naked eye—caused it to roil furiously.

"Shield your eyes," Ghaniyah cried out, doing so herself as she spoke. Her voice was so urgent that we immediately followed her example, including Lyreas, despite the fact that he was facing in the opposite direction. Immediately afterwards, the room was filled with a brilliant flash of pure white light, so bright that its dazzle penetrated palms and eyelids both.

When I dared to open my eyes, the room was dim. Ghaniyah had already moved behind Lyreas, and was bent down, carefully examining his wound, blocking my own view. When I stepped where I could see it, my heart felt as though it had been dropped into a very deep, very cold well.

The wound was in no way better; in fact, it was rather frighteningly worse. The gouge I had cut into his back was still there, but it was no longer raw and red, but had turned the same putrid purple as rotten meat.

I glanced at Nimr and saw that his face had turned white. He glanced at me and immediately looked away, his eyes wet with tears.

It was Lyreas who broke the silence. "What do you see, Ghaniyah? Dionis, love? I'm fighting something with all my powers—am I even holding my own?"

I was glad he couldn't see my face. I bent and kissed his neck. "We're just finding out," I answered. "All I know so far is that we're dealing with a truly vicious enemy."

Ghaniyah touched my shoulder, and I drew back.

I thought she was then going to apply some ointment or some such medicament to Lyreas's back. Instead, she took my wrist, then adjusted my hand so that the palm faced outwards. That accomplished, she pulled my arm so that my hand was almost touching Lyreas's back.

My powers stirred inside me; all at once I felt hesitancy, then fear... a *questioning* fear. I looked at Ghaniyah.

She already knew what was happening inside me,

and the look she gave me back was compassionate but firm. "To help him, you have to hurt him," she said. "But to not help him is to watch him die."

I nodded grimly, reached out with my free hand to seize Lyreas's shoulder. To her, I said, "Guide me," then closed my eyes, took hold of my power and gave myself to it. At once, the hesitancy vanished. A mere moment later, my palm burned as if acid had poured on it.

Lyreas screamed, then screamed again. I felt his pain through the hand that touched him, and cried out myself. It was as if every nerve in his back was being sliced open with a razor. I didn't dare open my eyes, but I could smell a horrid cloying stink that turned my stomach, and I wished I hadn't eaten so recently. It was all I could do to keep myself from bringing it all back up.

"Enough!" Ghaniyah commanded, moving my palm away as she did. As I opened my eyes, I realized that Lyreas had fainted—my hand was no longer just touching him, it was holding him up.

The good news was that no trace of rotting, putrid flesh remained on Lyreas's wound. The bad news was that beneath the vulnerable, blood-oozing layer of flesh, something worm-shaped was squirming deeper into the flesh. Like a centipede suddenly exposed beneath an overturned rock, there was a fluttery motion, and it was gone.

Again my eyes met those of Ghaniyah. This time, there was only compassion in her eyes, that, and buried deeper, fear.

"You see the problem," she said. It wasn't a question but a statement of fact.

I nodded. "I failed to cut everything away," I whispered. "And what was left is now beyond my reach."

"The wound will heal," she said. "But that... what you saw... will make it's way to his brain. When it does, if you love him, you must kill him. *Especially* if you love him."

There was a moment of silence as I digested this.

"How much time do I have?" I asked, not knowing if I could bear the answer.

She thought about her answer before speaking. "It must eat first, make itself stronger," she said slowly. "This will be terrible enough. But, soon, it will begin to poison him. It can't directly fight against your lover's powers, so, instead, it will leach those powers away.

She shook her head, then lowered it, speaking as if to the floor. "I have never seen this happen—I can tell you only what I have been told. But it happens quickly. In a matter of hours, he will change. He will grow angry, violent. Then his mind will go mazy, and he will fall into a deep sleep.

"From that, he must not waken. I will give you a potion to slip between his lips the moment he loses consciousness. He may ask for it before then, if he is strong enough. Give it to him without question."

"It will kill him?"

Ghaniyah shook her head. "Alas, no. It will para-

lyze him merely, so that you can burn him—alive, or so it will seem to you. But he would rather *you* took his life, than *that*."

She lifted her head, so that her eyes met mine again. "Are you traveling to the House of Fire?"

The sudden question took me by surprise, and I had no answer.

"If so," she went on, "let him perish in the primal flame. That would be best for him, and I think, for you." She reached out and touched my forehead. Through her fingers I felt the compassion of the healer, but also the mettle that gave her compassion meaning. She said softly, but in the prescribing tone of a healer, "Let nothing else matter to you until it is done."

the light had been darkening outside, but so slowly that until the healer turned to the window I had failed to notice it. There was no mistaking it now, though, for the light was was flickering strangely, as if the sun had become a candle, and the candle was about to be snuffed out.

Ghaniyah stepped over to the window, and drew aside the thin gauze curtains that covered it, looked out, gasped, and pushed the curtain closed again. "Vultures!" she whispered. "A siege of them!"

I thought of what Lyreas had said, when we were up on the roofs: "The vultures are already circling." I had dismissed his words, but he had been right. I strode to the window, pushing Ghaniyah aside as I did so, threw back the curtains, and unlatched the window frame.

The window looked directly onto a roof, and that roof was covered with vultures. Others swooped down, hoping to—and succeeded in—in frightening one of those on the roof into flying off, thus freeing up a space. Still more churned up the sky above.

The moment I appeared, all of them began to hiss and screech, crowding toward the window as they did, their naked necks stretched toward me, their sharp-hooked beaks clicking as they snatched at me.

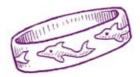
I said nothing; I made no inner command. Fire didn't come shooting from my fingers. Even so, one by one, they began to burst into flames. The force that did this came from me, but seemed to act of its own accord, leaving me dumbstruck and feeling slightly guilty. For I had only to look at a vulture for it to be consumed in a searing flash that left nothing but a puff of ashes—and I made no attempt to close my eyes.

Now the churning air became a sea of chaos, as vulture fought vulture, trying to escape. Few did. When the sky was finally clear, it was no longer blue but a sullen gray, stinking with the smell of burnt feathers.

My rage passed. I latched the window shut again turned away. As I did so, a familiar voice, icy with sarcasm, said, "Good. Now *all* your enemies know *exactly* where to find you. No easy thing to accomplish in this warren-ridden city, but you managed to do it."

"Hullo, Azhara," I replied. "I wondered when you were going to turn up." But my mind was elsewhere. I went to Lyreas, gently took his hands in mine, rested my head on his shoulder, and began to sob.

Chapter 19



he river that flowed beneath Ras Tayma was named Muhyi, which meant "giver of life." Access to it was forbidden for fear of despoiling its purity, so the ways down to it were hidden by magic, and the spells that worked it were kept warily and well. Even so, Azhara had managed to learn them, which showed not only her powers of persuasion, but the importance some placed on our—on my—survival.

These doorways were far from hidden; each was a neighborhood shrine, decorated with one of the most precious of gifts—fresh flowers, which were as costly in Ras Tayma as glowstones were elsewhere. Each of these shrines had a door set in its center, in the shape and size of two human hands, pressing against each other.

Azhara placed her own hands over them and spoke the words of command. In a gesture that combined both grace and obeisance, the hands spread apart, tossing upwards as they did an open space, which grew larger and larger until we could easily pass through to the stairway beyond. Before this, she had ordered Nimr to return home. The boy, however, refused to go. He said, rightly, I think, that his presence would bring death to all his family, and that he would be tortured to learn how and where we had escaped. And if he had neither the age nor the strength to survive the journey, he was even worse equipped for *that*.

For a moment, Azhara looked as if she might strike him dead then and there, resolving both issues. But seeing that Lyreas and I both wished to allow him to come, she relented, although she was none too pleased, and probably rightly so. But I had enough grief to contend with already. So down the stone stairway we all went together, descending soon enough into the secret cavern where flowed the River Muhyi.

Our way was lit by the soft blue light of glowstones, which cast just enough illumination for us to find our way, but not enough to sully the mystery of pure and fast-flowing waters. If anything in this world was holy, it was this river, the purity of which you felt right down to your very bones. The rush of the water seemed akin to the blood flowing in your veins, but it moved with the strength and surety of time itself.

I had imagined the river flowing through a vast cavern, with towering stone pillars supporting a great roof high over our heads. In reality, we found ourselves in a maze of tunnels hewn from stone. Along these, walkways had been carved into the rock, without railings and just wide enough for us to pass single file.

As we made our way along these, we came across

passageways cut through the stone, allowing those who worked here to pass through to the next channel. Thus, by tunnel and by bridge, you could cross the river from one side to the other.

We ourselves were somewhere in the middle of this labyrinth, but we needed no thread to guide us—or, if you like, the river itself was the thread. For we had only to walk in the opposite direction of the flowing water, crossing over a bridge when we reached the place where this particular channel began.

Azhara set a fast pace, and while there was no easy way for us to gauge distance or time, we gradually began to sense a narrowing, as branching tunnels met and joined together, then met and joined together again. Each time this happened, the breeze that swept over the water grew stronger, and colder, until we were all thoroughly chilled.

Azhara led, followed by Lyreas, then me, with Nimr tagging along behind. Azhara had wanted me to be directly behind her, but I would not allow Lyreas out of my sight, and Nimr, of course, had no desire to take my place.

Indeed, he, nimble of foot and small in size, was most at home down here, since he could keep the pace without fearing that a misplaced step would send him over the edge into the water. Consequently, he was free to look about and behind us, and so it was he who first spotted the nyche.

I felt an urgent tugging on my shirt, and so paused and turned around. The light of the glowstones was bright enough for me to see Nimr pointing, but it took me a moment to make out what he wanted me to see. The glowstones were blue; the eyes of the nyche were bluish green, and though it had three of them, at a distance the light they cast seemed to come from a single source.

Unlike the glowstones, though, the nyche was moving, and as soon as I saw it I knew just what it was. In any case, we knew they were down here, and that they would quickly sense our presence here. Our task was to outwit them long enough to get to our destination—the last stairway up from the river, which was in the desert beyond the city limits.

We had to outwit them because we were forbidden to do battle with them. It was one thing, Azhara said, to hack them into gobbets in the city sewer, as Helias had in Plaecenon; it was another to do so where their (or our!) remains would befoul the sacred Muhyi. She had to swear an oath to protect the water above all things before she was given permission to take us down here at all.

Even so, knowing Azhara, I was sure she had a plan. I seized hold of Nimr's hand and we hurried after the others. Once we had caught up, I told Azhara what we had seen. Immediately, she stopped Lyreas, moved several strides ahead of him and turned around, She lifted her arms, and began moving her hands in a rhythmic pattern, chanting as she did so.

Once she began, the rest of us turned to watch the nyche as it hurried toward us. There was no hope that we could outrun it—even in this short time it had gotten so

close that we could see all three of its eyes, and its hulking shape each time it passed by a glowstone.

Then it was gone. In fact, for a dazed moment, I thought *everything* was gone. The tunnel behind us had gone completely dark. Azhara had called a thick mist from out of river, and the wind whipped it downstream from us, a sold wall of moisture that enveloped all that it encountered.

Like us, the nyche was no match for the river's powerful current, so it had to tread just as carefully to avoid falling in. To catch up with us, it would have to go through one of the tunnels to the next channel, and pursue us up that. Meanwhile, we could cross over a bridge, and thus put more than distance between us and our pursuer. It was an excellent plan, and I told Azhara so.

"I wanted to cast the spell at the end of this channel," she said, "so the mist would spread out further—I think I have enough power to cast it one more time. But we need to hurry; we have no idea how many nyche there are."

Hurry we did. The further we went, the fewer the channels, the lower the ceiling above our heads, and the stronger the wind became, until it howled about us, and chilled us to the bone. Furthermore, the river now surged past us almost at our very feet, dampening the walkway, which the cold wind then froze into a coating of rime. This forced us to edge our way, backs pressed against the wall.

In short, we were increasingly vulnerable, and it was surely no accident that the pursuing nyche had waited until now to launch its second attack. It had been waiting for us across the river, invisible in the gloom, its eyes shut or turned aside. Nimr saw it crossing the bridge we had just passed moments after we had gone by it ourselves.

This time, when the boy tugged at my shirt, I didn't even bother to turn around. I shouted over the wind to Azhara, who cast her spell a second time. As before, mist shot out of the river like a water spout. But this time the wind seized it and flung it down river before it had a chance to spread out and blanket the sides. Mist still floated over the walkway, but the light cast by the nyche's eyes ripped through it like a saber slashing at gauze.

As it approached us, though, it began to move more slowly, warily, while I wrestled with the desire to pull out my wand and dispatch the thing, despite Azhara's oath and the knowledge that letting the wind sweep away a hailstorm of nyche fragments up the ventilating shafts all through Ras Tayma would afflict countless others with what now contaminated Lyreas.

Meanwhile, just ahead of us, the last glowstone glittered. Beyond it was nothing but absolute, utter dark. Strangely, the walkway continued, or seemed to, but anyone going further would have to light the way themselves. More importantly, right beside that final glowstone was an open doorway, and beyond it the stairway leading out.

Lyreas stumbled. He caught himself, but not before I had seized hold of his arm. To my surprise, in the short

time since I had touched him last, his body had started trembling uncontrollably, so much so that he could barely keep moving at all.

"It's calling me," he shouted. "Can't you hear it?"

I listened, and there it was: a dreadful mewing sound, such as a cat might make after its rear legs had been crushed under a waggon.

Lyreas began to pant, then bent over double in pain. I was about to try to pick him up and carry him the last short distance, when Nimr cried out. The moment I was distracted, the nyche began its attack.

I spun around, whipping out my wand of power as I did. Azhara had said we weren't to fight the nyche, but to try to outwit it: well, let it figure out this little trick. I pointed the wand, commanded my powers, and the walkway beneath suddenly crumbled away. A slurry of gravel slipped into the fast-moving waters, and with it went the nyche, flabby arms flailing. Then it was gone, caught in the current, and swept away into the lingering mist.

"Oh, shit," Lyreas was saying, "shit! shit!" But he was standing straight again. He held my hand for a long moment, even as Azhara took hold of his other one.

"Come, Lyreas, just a few more steps," Azhara said to encourage him; on me she bestowed a genuine smile, for her the very highest of compliments.

We reached the doorway. Inside, glowstones illuminated the stairs, which wound around, higher and higher, as

if within a tower—a daunting sight. In the condition he was in now, Lyreas could never make it up them. I groaned inward-ly—my life was a doom of difficult stairs. I bent down, seized Lyreas around the thighs, and hoisted him over my shoulder, and began to climb, Nimr just ahead of us, leading the way.

Behind us there was a crash, then a terrible cry. This doorway had no closing spell but it did at least have a door, and this Azhara was pushing shut when another nyche suddenly appeared. It had either leaped across the shattered stretch of the walkway, or else had been waiting for us, hidden in the darkness beyond.

Azhara was chanting a closing spell, pouring into it every bit of magic she could still summon. The nyche had no such power, but its strength was enormous, and, after so many years of the saturating moisture, the hinges to the door had rotted.

The stairs were too narrow for me to turn around with Lyreas over my shoulder, so I didn't see what happened next. But Nimr saw, and told me later, his voice weak with grief. The door had broken free. The nyche had picked it up, meaning to swat Azhara with it, as one would flatten a fly. And Azhara had launched herself forward, sending the two of them over the walkway and into the river with a resounding splash.

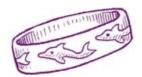
As the water swept her away, I heard Azhara's voice crying faintly, "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!"—the last word all but drowned by the howling wind.

Hurry, I could not. But climb I did, up and up and up, until my legs wept with pain. All the while I worried, and Nimr worried, that we would need to know a spell to open the door that waited for us at the top.

By the time we reached it, I was barely able to stand. It was Nimr, going on ahead of us, who discovered that no spell was needed, who pushed open the door, struggling with all his might against the desert sand that had been blown up against it, and who let in a shaft of late afternoon sunlight that flooded down and gave me the last bit of strength I needed to make it to the top.

Dizzy, weak, blinded by the light, I knelt down and lay Lyreas on the sand. Only then did I make out the shapes around me—a band of demons, waiting for us there, one of them holding Nimr by the neck.

Chapter 20



here were six of them, the demons, standing in a half circle around the door, all holding swords, or some weapon like a sword, but with tip of the blade twisted about like a fish hook, and with a fish hook's nasty barb.

Motionless, their reptilian faces as inexpressive as masks, they watched as I eased Lyreas to his feet, and held him until he found his balance. His eyes were glazed and nearly vacant, until he bit his lip, using the pain to force himself back to consciousness.

"Give me more of your power, beloved," Lyreas whispered. "This thing devours mine as though it were snacking on nobble nuts."

Facing me, he had yet to see the demons, and I hadn't the heart to tell him to turn around. As I hesitated, there was a motion behind us, and a claw suddenly clutched Lyreas's shoulder. His eyes bulged out, he gave out a cry of pain and astonishment, threw his head back, and collapsed onto the

sand before I could catch him.

"You should kill him, if he is too weak to do it himself, *Nithaial Elimiel*," the demon said in the common tongue, though it sounded as if it came from a mouth full of gravel.

"What did you do to him?" I demanded hotly, transforming my wand of power into its dagger shape as I drew it from its sheath.

The demon barely glanced at it. "I gave your lover some of *my* power," he replied, "since you seem to have exhausted your own."

He then looked down at Lyreas, who had fallen unconscious, while something inside him could be seen writhing just beneath his skin. "You see how it is," he went on. "Make it suffer, and it fights back by attacking its host."

It lifted its massive head. "Still, the nyche spawn is no match for the Almighty Ra'asiel, Sword of the Universe. When your lover awakens, he will be better for awhile. But even I, Do'arma'ak, Right Arm of the Avatar Himself, cannot cure him. I say again, kill him now, as he sleeps."

I gritted my teeth. "If I am doomed to slay him, demon, I shall do it at his request, and I shall find a gentler way than using this," and I shoved my weapon back in its sheath.

"Now, if you have met us through arrangement with Azhara," I said, my voice shaking a little as I said her name, "tell your minion to release the boy."

Do'arma'ak grunted. "We were expecting only the

witch and you, *Nithaial Elimiel*—not your lover and, even less, some *nestling*."

The demon then said something in his own tongue, and Nimr was flung in our direction.

He scrambled to his feet, then, to my complete surprise, made a low obeisance to Do'arma'ak. "Greetings, Highest One," he said. "I am Nimr, son of the master swordsmith, Nu'mas. It was he, I believe, who forged the very blade you wield. May I have the honor of examining it?"

Do'arma'ak squatted down and looked carefully at the boy, then spun his weapon about so that he could hand it over hilt first.

Nimr took it and, handling it with great respect, held the blade up to his eyes. "Yes," he said. "There is his mark." He turned to me. "In the demon language, this is called a *krókur*. See how sharp the blade is inside the hook? The demons wield them from their riding beasts to behead their opponents—or scythe off their arms at the shoulder."

The boy stepped backwards, and clutching the handle with both hands, whipped the *krókur* through the air. It emitted a high-pitched shriek that stung the ears.

Nimr, his eyes sparkling, made a second obeisance as he returned the blade. "Thank you for this honor, Highest One. Since all in your company bear the same weapon, might I assume that you have mounts at hand?"

Do'arma'ak grunted. "Ha, little rabbit, you know all our secrets. Perhaps you were not brought along to make our supper, after all." He snapped an order to the other demons, then, turning to me, explained, "We felt it wise to hide our mounts a few leagues away, since all this slope is visible to the city."

He then pointed behind me and, turning, I noticed for the first time that Ras Tayma was spread out below us. From the distance, the intricate complexity of its design appeared not unlike some old and valuable rug, taken outside and spread out to air in the somnolent light of the lingering afternoon.

Beyond it, of course, spread the very carpet of the world, dyed the deepest of blues and made to sparkle by the sunlight that danced across its surface. I felt a pang; it was easy enough to bid Ras Tayma farewell, but the ocean still held me in its thrall. I might be the embodiment of earth and fire, but that didn't keep me from yearning for the sea.

I turned to Do'arma'ak. "Let us set off, then. Can one of your company carry Lyreas? I don't think I have the strength left to even lift him from the ground."

"It will be faster and easier if we carry all of you," he replied. "Here, climb on my back—it would be undignified for the *Nithaial Elimiel* to hang dangling from my shoulder like a slain gazelle."

And so Lyreas, Nimr, and I were carried off on the backs of demons, who bore us as lightly as if we were sacks of lettuces, even though they trotted uphill the entire way.

s Do'Arma'ak had promised, Lyreas did seem much better once he gained consciousness. He was able to eat a little after we had ridden all night, even though it was demon fare—dried entrails of some swamp beast, washed down with the water in which it had swum.

Do'arma'ak would only let us rest during the middle of the day, when the heat was at its worst. We had crossed the hills during the night and by midmorning found ourselves in a barren landscape of parched ground and broken rock.

We rode, of course, on the legendary riding beasts that the Demon Lords—which all of our party were—called *gräzk'vor*. These stood upright upon two massive hind legs, on which the beasts ran like the wind.

Riding them was a very different matter from riding a horse, for these were meat-eaters of the fiercest sort, a nature that the demons admired and did nothing to tame. Their upper limbs were meant for holding prey while the *gräzk'vor* devoured it, and so the demons lopped off the claws, leaving them with only stumps.

The *gräzk'vor's* real danger lay in its massive jaws, lined with three rows of dagger-sharp teeth. These the demons encased in iron muzzles, which were removed only when the beasts were ridden into battle. Consequently, enough room had to be left to allow them to drink and to feed on the dried slabs of meat they were given when we rested. This opening was narrow enough to keep them from getting a grip on the thick hide of a demon, but—Do'arma'ak

pointed out—quite enough to let them rip a chunk out of us. We were to keep our distance from them at all times, and to ride behind the demon lords when we mounted them.

I rode behind a demon named Tzas'norc, who never spoke a word to me all the time I was behind him. Naturally, I was meant to accompany Do'arma'ak, but I begged him to take Lyreas, instead. That way, the demon's power could keep what he called the nyche spawn at bay.

This had worked well the whole night, but as the morning came on, Lyreas's condition grew worse, and he began to struggle and cry out, forcing Do'arma'ak to pin him down with one arm, while guiding his beast with the other.

Unfortunately, this behavior attracted other *gräzk'vor*, who, alerted to Lyreas's weakness, kept sidling over to Do'arma'ak's beast in hopes of a quick snatch. It is my own belief that their riders were indifferent to this, for it was a Do'arma'ak who had to beat them off with the back of his *krókur*.

Because of Tzas'norc's broad back, I had only intermittent views of this—except when our own beast made an attempt—but I was filled with terror. This agony increased as the sun beat down on us and the heat intensified, eating away at Lyreas's strength.

Tzas'norc must have sensed my frantic state, since he reached behind and slapped me hard on the leg. His meaning was clear; if I kept on like that, the *gräzk'vor* would be after me, as well. I closed my eyes, bent my head, and called on all my inner strength to calm myself, clinging to

my own hope— Do'arma'ak had told me that we would halt and rest during the hottest part of the day, and surely we had reached that by now.

Then the pace of the *gräzk'vor* slowed, and I opened my eyes again to find that we had come to a narrow gorge, a parched mouth spread open in the desert's stark and dismal face. Do'arma'ak's beast led us down in a series of jolting leaps from ledge to ledge, and suddenly we were in cooling shade, beside a spring that trickled out of the rock wall into a shallow pool.

Immediately, the *gräzk'vor* jostled among themselves in the narrow space to drink, and the demon lords dismounted. Do'arma'ak himself lifted Nimr, Lyreas, then me up to a ledge out of beasts' line of sight. Then, taking our water bottles with him, he left the three of us alone.

With Nimr's help, I examined Lyreas's back, and found that despite the long and difficult ride, Ghaniyah's treatment had kept the wound from suppurating, but it could not be said to have healed. Instead, the wound had formed itself into a tight pucker, like a belly button, or, worse still, a tiny anus.

When I reached out a finger to touch it, Lyreas's eyes bulged out and he gave a strangled cry. "Dionis, no!" he whispered through pants of pain. "It says if you continue, it will make me beg for death."

I jerked back my hand, exclaiming at the same time, "It says?!"

Lyreas nodded, his eyes refusing to meet mine. "Yes," he whispered, "it has started speaking, breaking my thoughts, taunting me, turning my brain against me."

We were both silent for a long moment, then he added haltingly, "Do'arma'ak was right, beloved. Not now, not yet, but I must not live beyond sundown."

Still not opening his eyes, his face contorted with effort and pain, he seized hold of my hand. "This is the last time I can speak to you as myself, and even now I can barely manage it."

He squeezed my hand harder. "Any words out of my mouth will come from *it*, not me. Do you hear me, Dionis? Do you understand?"

I couldn't speak. My throat had closed shut. I took him in my arms and held him, stroking his hair, until, at last, I got the words out. "Yes, beloved, yes, I hear you, and will do as you say. No matter what. No matter what."

Just then there was a commotion among the demon lords. As I turned my head to look, I realized that part of my mind was already aware that an altercation had sprung up among them, and now it was turning ugly. Weapons had been drawn. The demons faced off, three of them directly confronting Do'arma'ak, the other two standing by his side.

Suddenly, Do'arma'ak's *krókur* blazed with red light, and with eye-dazzling speed, he smote one of his challengers, cleaving clear through his skull. The other two immediately stepped back, and without giving them a glance, Do'arma'ak

resheathed his weapon and summoned the *gräzk'vor* that he and Lyreas had been riding. When it came to him, he pulled off its muzzle and set it to feeding, watching impassively as the beast reduced the slain demon lord to gobbets of flesh.

Then he bent down, retrieved our water bottles from where he had dropped them, and handed them to one of his recent allies. To the other he passed over the iron muzzle, then he turned his back to all of them, and came striding over to us.

"We must make new plans, *Nithaial Elimiel*," he said, hunkering down on the ledge beside me, and passing over the water. "Things are not working out."

He turned his massive head to Lyreas, then looked back at me. "We People of the Egg think very differently from you, the People of the Womb, but it is easy to forget this when I am not among you.

"My followers assented to come with me, believing that you were a half god, and that you traveled in the company of a powerful witch. However, they have found nothing about you that is godlike, for you show no power. And instead of the witch, they found themselves traveling with a boy and a wizard who is so weak that the *gräzk'vor* compete among themselves to eat him."

Do'arma'ak sighed. "I knew your father well. He was much like you at your age, and his power was also unrevealed, although the Avatar saw it at once, and taught me to do so as well. And your father and I became..." and here the

demon paused to grasp for the right word. At last he said, "friends," giving me a peculiar look as he did so.

Although I had the grace (or wit) to hide it, I winced at these words. Everyone who met my father seems to have had sex with him... even this *demon*? It was much too much to think about, at least at the moment. Besides, Do'arma'ak was still talking, and I needed to attend—I was very afraid of where his thoughts were leading.

"... can perceive what my companions cannot," he was saying.

"Aren't you their commander?" I asked. "Can't you just order them to follow your commands?"

Do'arma'ak seemed taken aback. "I lead them," he answered slowly, "but the People of the Egg do not like to be ordered. You must beat them into submission, first. As their leader, I offer them something that, should they consider it worthy of them, leads to a pact. I offered them the glory of bringing the *Nithaial Elimiel* to his temple palace, Fæÿstirran, in the very face of the army of the *Eizh*."

I shook my head in bewilderment.

Do'arma'ak extended a claw and scratched out a symbol on the rock face behind us.



"That is the name of the league of necromancers who

seek to force our world to submit to the realm of Utter Darkness and the black things that come from it," he explained. "They are the ones who devised the nyche; it is they who have released the wraith ghouls from the Land of the Dead."

Do'arma'ak shook his head. "They have been pursuing you all this time and you didn't know their name? Who was it that was assigned to protect you?"

A good question, and one to which I hardly knew the answer. "They felt the less I knew the safer I would be," I replied. "What does *Eizh* mean in the common tongue?"

"The Eight," the demon replied. "They were The Nine, but your father destroyed one—one reason they are so eager to capture *you*."

The demon lord who had been given charge of Do'arma'ak's *gräzk'vor* was approaching, bringing the beast with him, its maw still glistening with blood.

My companion stood up, gesturing that I should do so, as well. "*Nithaial Elimiel*," he said, "you must decide now: abandon your two companions or continue on alone."

"That is no choice," I replied, "and you know it well."

Do'arma'ak glanced at me. "One of my people would say the same thing," he said, "and mean the opposite. You lack the discipline to make the difficult choice."

When I gave him nothing in reply but a shrug, he went on. "Very well, then. This *gräzk'vor* once carried your father from Fæÿstirran to Shavagar-Yasí. Niccas named him *Nisn'zahsk*, which in *our* common tongue means Dune Rider.

He knows the way and will bring all three of you to your destination swiftly and safely."

The beast extended its neck so that its head was level with my own, and we eyed each other. To my surprise, I saw a glint of intelligence there.

"Do these beasts speak?" I asked.

"After a fashion," Do'arma'ak replied. "But only to us. You would have to speak our tongue to do it, and know how to engage their attention—not an easy thing."

"I appreciate the greatness of this loan," I said, "and hope some day to make good my debt to you for all that you have done, that which I know about, and that about which I have no idea."

Do'arma'ak made that rumbling sound, which I now knew to be his laugh. "Spoken like your father," he replied. "May you die a death that makes him proud."

After a moment of stunned silence, I realized this was politeness speaking, not augury, and replied in kind. "May your death also be a great one," I replied. Then, when no one moved, I added, "will your demon lord not muzzle the beast?"

Do'arma'ak shook his head. "No, *Nithaial Elimiel*. If *Nisn'zahsk* decides to devour the three of you, the muzzle will not protect you. But he has just fed well and will not be hungry again for some time. And, remember, his duty is not just to carry you to Fæÿstirran, but to fight for you as well."

And with those ominous words echoing in my mind, we mounted up, Lyreas ahead of me, and Nimr clinging on behind. Do'arma'ak spoke a word of command and the beast bounded up the side of the gorge, leaping from ledge to ledge until the desert was underfoot.

There, *Nisn'zahsk* paused just long enough to lift his head, open his jaws, and shriek at the heavens. Then he set off at a fierce pace, leaving us to hang on as best we could.

The sun beat down. After the first few leagues we seemed to be running in place: all was sere and barren, and nothing changed. But then, finally, stone and baked earth began to give way to sand. At first there were patches of it lying here and there. But the space between these patches narrowed, vanished, and sand was everywhere—and no longer as thin as a cheap carpet, but thick, deep, covered with ripples that extended to left and right as far as the eye could see.

When that happened, the pace changed. *Nisn'zahsk* no longer ran but began to advance in a series of wide, graceful leaps that freed his feet from the drag of the sand. The jolts from these shook Lyreas out of the stupor that had overcome him, and he began to twist his body, muttering all the while in a way that was both fierce and inaudible, the words slurred out of recognition.

At first I thought he was trying to wrest himself from my arms, but as time passed, I realized, first, he had no awareness of me at all, and then, that he was growing increasingly weak, until the twists were reduced to tremors, and the incoherent ranting to intermittent mumbling.

Early on, however, I could get him to drink a little every

now and then from his water bottle, although these were just sips, and half of it dribbled down his face. Later, I was reduced to wetting my fingers and pressing them against his lips.

I tried to focus my thoughts and enter his mind; something that before I would never have even imagined doing. But, of course, I had no practice at this—when I closed my eyes, all I discovered was how easy it would be for me to fall asleep and tumble from my perch, dragging Nimr and Lyreas with me.

After hours of seeming reluctant to move at all, the sun began perceptibly creeping down the sky behind us. The shadows cast by the dunes got longer and darker, and fear grew ever greater in my heart, for I knew that if we hadn't reached Fæÿstirran by dark, I had given my oath to Do'arma'ak that I would put an end to Lyreas's misery.

In fact, the demon wanted me to cut off my lover's head, and bear it a league or two before dropping it in the sand, well away from Lyreas's body. I saw the reason for this; I knew with all my heart that Lyreas would reproach me forever if I let him become a deathling, an animant, instead of giving him a decent death. But I thought of myself riding through the dusk, holding his head in my arms, and I knew that I would go mad.

It didn't come to that, of course, but it was very, very close. Before we saw the glittering outlines of Fæÿstirran, we saw the glow the palace cast in the sky, a shimmering haze of colors, shaped in a half globe, curled up like a nap-

ping rainbow, on the very horizon line ahead.

My heart leaped up, and I prodded Lyreas. "Look," I cried, "Fæÿstirran! We're near! We're so near!"

Lyreas slowly lifted his head, opened his eyes, looked, and shook his head. "Mirage," he muttered, and closed his eyes again.

His reaction was so dismissive that I almost believed my eyes were deceiving me. But Nimr got to his feet, clinging to my shoulders with all his strength, so that he could see over my head.

He was silent for awhile, but when we crested a large dune, the boy cried out, "I can see the palace! It's *not* a mirage."

With Lyreas's head blocking my direct vision, I didn't see Fæÿstirran myself. But I did see something else—lazily floating in the air high above. They rode the air currents like vultures, and Nimr may have taken them for such. But I knew what they were, and fear suddenly gripped my innards and gave them a vicious twist.

"Skalgür," I hissed at *Nisn'zahsk*. And when the beast gave no sign of hearing, I leaned around Lyreas as far as I could and shouted the word in his ear. Again there was no response, but Lyreas himself suddenly jerked his head up, and scanned the sky ahead, with much more interest than he shown before.

"Don't worry, beloved," I said, astonished and moved by this renewed sign of life. "We'll get past them—I'm sure they're the reason that Do'arma'ak insisted that *Nisn'zahsk* be left unmuzzled."

Lyreas, however, ignored me. Lifting himself up as high as he could, he cupped his hands around his mouth and began keening a high-pitched, ululating scream. It went on and on and on, as if his lungs were conjuring up more air as fast as his mouth could shriek it out. Finally, unable to bear it any longer, I clapped my hand over his mouth.

And, just as quickly, he bit into my fingers, so savagely that I cried out in pain and yanked my hand away. Through the haze of pain, I could see that the skalgür were no longer soaring, but winging their way in our direction. In comprehension turned to horrified understanding, and the hurt of my fingers became as nothing. Lyreas had been *summoning* the skalgür.

The sun had not yet set but he himself had fallen into shadow, his heart and mind no longer his own.

skalgür, then jerked to a sudden halt almost at the moment they were on us—stopping so short, in fact, that he sent all three of us tumbling off his back. Then, standing on one leg, the beast dug into the sand with his other foot. Three or four great swipes and a furrow appeared, and a few more and it was a hole.

Deftly, roughly, he used the same foot to scoop us up and shove us into the pit, immediately covering us with sand, hissing threateningly all the while. I buried Nimr's face into one of my armpits and Lyreas into the other, my fingers leaving a smear of blood across his back as I did. My own face was covered with sand, but, because of my powers, air flowed to me right through it—bringing with it the odor of warm, powdery stone.

There was a thump as *Nisn'zahsk* jumped away, and directly after that the battle commenced, reaching us as a jumbled roar of shrieks and cries. The *gräzk'vor'*s forearms were useless in such a fight; it had to depend on its agility and the strength of its jaws and mighty legs. We could see nothing, but I could tell much of what was going on by the sounds, and more still when a half-dead skalgür fell writhing onto the sand nearby, and its flailing claws threatened to eviscerate us.

This heightened attention on my part shifted something in my mind and a portal opened. I could hear that the thing inside Lyreas was still calling out to the skalgür—and when I used my own will to silence it, I felt the rage with which it fought me, until, all of sudden, it was still.

This wasn't because I had overpowered it but because the battle was over. Here and there, broken bodies still struggled, but otherwise a heavy silence had fallen.

Caution told me to wait, but the fear of suffocation was stronger in Nimr, and he thrust his head out of our pit, then scrambled out of it altogether. I sat up, heaved Lyreas free of the covering sand, and warily got to my feet.

We were surrounded by slaughter. Nisn'zahsk's

method of attack was to duck under the skalgür's stabbing beak and rip out its belly. In fact, because of the *gräzk'vor*'s size and swiftness, the skalgür had no chance, and probably would never have attacked it had it not been for Lyreas's summoning call.

Certainly *Nisn'zahsk* seemed to have survived undamaged. He was a short distance away, devouring the entrails of one skalgür while pinning another, still fluttering as life drained from it, to the sand. It glanced briefly over at us, then returned to its meal.

Nimr and I glanced at each other.

"I think we should proceed to Fæÿstirran on our own, and let *Nisn'zahsk* follow when he's ready," I said.

"I think that would be very wise, actually," Nimr replied. "But I'll tell you something else—*Nisn'zahsk* is a she."

I looked at him in surprise. "How would you ever know *that*," I asked. Like the demons, the sex of the gräzk'vor was concealed until they had reason to reveal it.

Nimr lifted one leg and scratched the dirt with his foot. "Burying her eggs," he said. "That's what we became for her—fragile, vulnerable, not-to-eat."

My mouth fell open. "So, in her eyes, we just..."

"Hatched," Nimr answered, completing my thought. "Now we're her fledglings."

I was still trying to wrap my mind around this thought, when Lyreas reached up and seized hold of my hand. I thought he wanted help getting up, but no, he pulled me back down with him.

When I was beside him, he leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Send Nimr on to Fæÿstirran to get help; stay here and make love to me."

"Lyreas!" I whispered back, shaken to my core. "We can do that in the safety of the palace. But here? If you lean back, you'll be resting on the bleeding corpse of a skalgür."

He shrugged. "They're all dead—what does it matter?" Suddenly, he raised his voice. "Do I no longer attract you? Is that what it is?"

I was stunned into silence. The muscles in his face seemed to have taken on a life of their own; his pupils shifted erratically in and out of focus; his hands were limp and lifeless one moment, and the next clenched so tightly the flesh went white. Even if Lyreas had been himself, at that moment sex would have been the last thing on my mind.

Nimr stepped beside me and tugged on my arm, not looking at Lyreas. "Come, Dionis," he said. "Fæÿstirran isn't as close as it looks. If we don't leave now we won't get there before dark."

It was true. The sun was already setting. "Lyreas, stop this. We *have* to go."

"No we *don't*," he replied. "It's too late to do *me* any good, if that's what you mean."

He turned to Nimr and spat. "Run off to your fucking palace like a good little rabbit, or I'll summon *Nisn'zahsk* to make a meal of you."

And when Nimr refused to move, Lyreas snarled, "You think I haven't the power?" He turned to the *gräzk'vor*, contorted his head and stretched opened his mouth.

Before any sound come out it, I struck him with all my strength, knocking him flat on his back. Then I flung myself on him and pinned his shoulders to the ground.

He struggled to free himself, then fell back. "So you want it rough?" he gasped. "I can make it even rougher." He lifted his head, bared his teeth, then lunged at one of my arms. His mouth was just about to clamp down on my wrist when I slammed my head against his with all my strength.

Stars shot about in my head; the pain almost made me faint. But Lyreas, far weaker than I, was knocked totally unconscious. I staggered to my feet. Then, with Nimr's help, I heaved him over my shoulder, and we started on our way.

The dunes made it hard for me to keep my balance, let alone move forward. I let my head drop, concentrating totally on putting one foot ahead of the other, and letting Nimr lead the way.

So it was that I was taken by surprise when he suddenly stopped, and almost fell over him. I lifted my head and saw two figures directly ahead of us. One I already knew: Ormaël. The other at first glance seemed a youth much like myself, almost like a long-lost twin. But when I focused my attention on him I saw a face aged far beyond its years, and two eyes in which diamonds glowed with a soft blue fire.

I burst into tears and fell to my knees.

A moment later, Ormaël had hoisted Lyreas onto his own shoulder, and his companion was gently lifting me up.

"I was too impatient to wait for you to cross the sands, Dionis, son of my heart," he said, "and so insisted that we come meet you and share your burden."

He stroked my cheek as I stared at him, then we fell into each other's arms. "Father, father," I said, over and over, the tears running down my face and falling onto his shoulder. Then, after a long moment, we turned and, arms around each other's waist, Niccas and I followed after Ormaël and Lyreas, and made our way to Fæÿstirran.



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"Nimr! Can't you sleep?"

"No, I can't. I don't like these so-called palaces of yours, Dionis! No beds or bedding, no chairs, no tables, and, worst of all nothing to *do*."

"Well, you could go explore."

"I've already done that. Empty room, empty room, empty room. The only thing to see here is the force, and I saw that practically first of all. And that..."

"Go ahead. You won't hurt my feelings."

"Well, it's *creepy*. It was like a giant snake, coiling up and up and up, with scales of green and brown and black. And when you stepped into it you completely disappeared—which didn't happen when you and Niccas entered the force at Fæÿstirran. *That* was fantastic! Suddenly, you both were all aglow and so dazzling my eyes hurt; I could hardly watch as Niccas slowly melted away...

"Oh, Dionis, I'm sorry! It must have been terrible to meet your father one moment, and then in the next have him immolate himself right... beside you."

"Nimr, don't you cry, too. Here, come snuggle beside me. I've thought enough for one night. Let's lie here and talk until the sun comes up. There, that's better."

"Why did he have to do it?"

"Well, he *had* to, if I was to become *Nithaial Elimiel* in his place. When he stepped into the force together at Fæÿstirran, he passed that (what *that* is!) onto me. Then he went to be with the person he loved most in all the world. And, of course, there are things he wants to do in the Realm of the Dead."

"I know. Bring the war to the home of the enemy. But how can you fight the dead?"

"It's not the dead he's fighting. In fact, in a way, he's fighting *for* the dead."

"Let's talk about something else. Thinking about that hurts my head *and* scares me silly."

"All right. What did you think of Breddan?"

"He was great! He is exactly the way I imagined a *Nithaial* would be like, until *you* turned up and spoiled the picture. Ouch!"

"Serves you right, smartikins. But I'll try to grow up to be just like him."

"Well... You have five hundred years. You *might* make it... Don't you dare!"

"You're safe. Tickling seems only to encourage you. Anyway, you're right. It would take a lot to live up to him." "Do you think Breddan can cure Lyreas?"

"No. He said he couldn't, and he was being truthful, not modest. What he *can* do and what he's probably doing right now is getting the nyche poison out. He warned me that, even if he succeeds, I'm going to be devastated by what remains. If I had known what I know now, I would have killed Lyreas right away and gone with Niccas to be with him on the other side."

"Dionis! Please don't say that! Breddan didn't say it was *hopeless*."

"He didn't say it *wasn't* hopeless, either. He just told me to take Lyreas to the Holy Wood, tend to him, and wait. Which is pretty much what Niccas told me when we had that long last talk at Fæÿstirran."

"I slept through all that."

"Of course you did. Ormaël cast a spell on you to make sure. We talked about things that could be dangerous for you if you knew them.

"Still, you can know this: Niccas told me that he had many mistakes, but the one that haunted him the most was not making absolutely sure that Iannas was beyond the reach of Prince Poëstil. When his lover was taken and destroyed, the thought of being *Nithaial Elimiel* became nothing but ashes in his mouth.

"He begged me to learn from his mistake and devote myself to saving Lyreas—no matter what that might mean, or what might befall the world because of it." "But Dionis! You *can't*! You're destined to become the greatest hero the world has ever known! Lyreas wouldn't want you to sacrifice that for him. I *know* he wouldn't."

"I'm sorry, Nimr. I know what Lyreas would say, and he would be noble but wrong. I'd rather be ignoble and right. Stop shaking your head. As far as I'm concerned, *Niccas* is the greatest hero you or I are ever going to meet, and it's his advice that I'm taking."

"It might have come a little too late, you know."

"What do you think I've been tormenting myself with all this long night? If it is, then the Blessed Gesryma will have to find Herself another *Nithaial Elimiel*. Where are you going?"

"I think lying in your arms and chatting is worse than wandering around an empty palace in the dark. Did Ormaël leave any food behind when he set off to get that carriage?"

"Yes, but I forget where he left it."

"I'll find it. Can I bring you something?"

"I suppose so. I'm not hungry, but I doubt if Breddan would be pleased to see me at this early hour."

"In Ras Tayma, we have a saying: 'It's hard to find a welcome in a snore.' And while you ponder that one, Master of All, tell me this: why do we have to travel all the way to Wisferon in Ormaël's carriage, even if it is magnificent? All we have to do is step into that magic puddle of yours and we'd be there in a flash."

"Because Niccas told me that that would be the worst

thing we could do. We're going to arrive as Lyreas's caretakers, sent by Breddan, both of which are true. That way we can see how the land lies. Jessan doesn't know anything about me, and Niccas said it would be best if we let him figure it out in his own time."

"Good! While you take care of Lyreas, *I* can hang around Gostranar and play the spy."

"There's no playing involved. You'll be a real spy, and you'll have to be very, very careful. I don't think your life will be at risk, but more important things *will* be."

"Thanks *so much* for putting it like that. You can go get your own crust of bread. I'm going to lock myself in one of those empty rooms and sulk until I die."

"No, no, come lie here and I'll go find the food. We can eat and then sulk together. I'm sorry I said that. I was trying to be funny. I'm such a *failure* as a friend."

"Oh, shut up! And stop that! We've cried enough for one night. Here, take my hand and get up off that cold floor. We'll go find the food and the sun together."

PART SIX

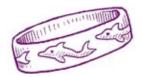


THE SIMPLETON & THE THIEF



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Chapter 21



SCREAMED, and, as often happens, the scream woke me up. I lay drenched with sweat in my huge bed, and tentatively reaching out first to one side, then to the other, discovered that I was alone. Niferas had always slipped away once I had taken his potion, but recently he often didn't bother to return at dawn. He knew the power of his hold over me, and he liked me to know that he knew. Was that the reason he left me to sleep alone? To be alone at night can drive me to despair. Perhaps that also excited him.

Well, nothing to do about it now. Once, for several nights, I merely pretended to take the dram, and cautiously followed him when he left. He knew he was free to take other lovers, and when he did, he hardly hid it from me. These late night hours he spent in his own chambers, as far as I could tell, alone. In any case, he had placed wards of subtle power through the walls and windows and around the door, expressly to keep me out.

He is a great wizard now, despite his youth. I, the

Nithaial Galgaliel, am more powerful still, but perhaps not as clever: I doubt that I could elude his wards without his finding out. And, more to the point, why should I? If he wished to spend his nights exploring his powers, that was his privilege. It seemed he never slept, but he was never dozy during the day, even if he was often, all too often, bored—whether in my company, or out of it.

As for myself, I wanted no more dreams that night. So I rose, wrapped a robe about myself, and slipped out. There were attendants who could be summoned to serve me or even amuse me if I wished, but I was no mood for their company.

Besides, I had no need of it. Something unexpected and had happened here in Gostranar, and I couldn't get it out of my mind. The living quarters of the *Nithaial Elimiel* had inexplicably appeared.

It had never occurred to me to wonder why they hadn't been there before. Gostranar is a strange place and there was no easy way to sort it all out, despite the fact that I ruled over this place and had done so now for more than a decade. Alcaron could have told me, but Alcaron is long gone.

And how I miss him. When I returned that day from Ernfardast with Niferas, I asked Alcaron to take the boy under his wing and educate him as befitted a ward of the *Nithaial Galgaliel*. Niferas was reluctant at first—indeed, he told me that he hated Alcaron. But, since this was for his own good, I refused to relent. And the head steward was a gifted teacher,

more than able to amuse and beguile his student, and Niferas stopped complaining—no, more than that. Unexpectedly, he became a prized pupil.

That itself raised certain doubts. More than once, the high steward obliquely queried me whether Niferas and I were having sex—which would explain his affinity for all things arcane. But I hadn't taken the boy, despite his obvious desire to jump into bed with me. For all my faults, that was a temptation I resolutely kept at arm's length, increasingly difficult as that became as the boy grew older, ripening before my eyes.

In any case, Alcaron must have finally won Niferas over, for he grieved deeply when, one night, the high steward slipped and fell to his death while teaching the boy the subtle meanings that lay behind the movements of the stars. Still, the boy's grief was nothing as was mine. Alcaron was his teacher, but for me he was the rock on which I stood. His advice was both considered and deferential; he never preened when I took it nor showed any pique when I set it aside.

Most importantly of all, Alcaron knew more about Gostranar and the Holy Wood in which it sat than any other living soul. He would know at once what was meant by the sudden appearance of these quarters under the loveliest of Gostranar's many gardens.

This was another reason why I might never have noticed them; even in existence they hardly disturbed the land-scape. The only clue to their existence was the stairway that led down to them and the patterns of crystals, clear as as lim-

pid water, inserted here and there in patterns about the garden, that let light sparkle down into the rooms below.

To tell the truth of the matter, when all this came about, I was convinced that Niccas would be waiting for me within, and still my heart quailed every time I went down the stairs to wander through the lovely but empty chambers that would have been his home.

"Quailed," though, might not be the most apt of words. In fact, my heart was near twisted into two. Ever since I learned of his existence, I had wanted nothing more than to find him and be with him. It was a yearning both spiritual and emotional, and beyond any other the most powerful feeling of my life. Now, after what happened that day outside of Ernfardast, my fear of meeting him had become equally as strong.

It made no difference whether I imagined him to be kind, sweet, and forgiving, or angry and accusatory. Of the two, I preferred the second: I would answer hotly back; we would fight until the sky blazed and the earth trembled; we would fall apart, exhausted, and all guilt and rancor spent. Then, in my imagination, we would gently treat each other's wounds, and become the brothers in love we were always meant to be.

It was a sweet fantasy, to be sure, but even it troubled me in the end. Words of regret can never gainsay a bad deed—at least not for the person who performed it. And my failure has proven so slippery as to be—so far—beyond my ability to expatiate.

The same crystals that let in the sunlight during the day cast it themselves during the night. They were, no doubt, glowstones, but of a higher and more perfect sort. The walls of these rooms were made of black marble shot through with veins of sanguine-colored translucent stone, and the light from the glowstones made these traceries glow as though lit by their own molten fire—a glow that lingered behind even when the lights dimmed and went out as one left the room.

Tonight, I observed all this without relish. I walked restlessly from one part of these quarters to the next, my mind absorbed by thoughts of its rightful occupant.

Niferas has spent much time and effort tracing Niccas's long and miserable last journey from Gorzungâd to the Deep Dwelling. He then left it to me to calculate where I was and what I was doing when each horrid thing—the blinding, the death of Niferas's precursor, Sepharan, the final battle with Maerdas—took place. Especially, I needn't have tarried so long with Páli on the Plains of the Lhennad. Páli. Páli.

"His name is the last one I'd think you'd have the nerve to mention within these walls."

I knew the voice, but I was taken aback all the same, thinking myself alone.

"Niferas!" I said. "What are you doing down here! And I wish you wouldn't go poking into my mind."

Niferas, unlike many beautiful children, had held onto his beauty right through puberty and into his twenties.

His hair was long and silken and always slightly tousled, his features well-shaped, his body still slender but with the hard muscles of a man. As a boy, his chin had been slightly weak, but enchantment had fixed that soon enough, once he mastered the power. Indeed, from day to day there would be subtle differences to his handsomeness that told me he had just been regarding himself in his transforming mirror.

In any case, to look at him was to melt the heart, to touch his body was to drive away any black thoughts—especially once it had opened itself to me. We had been lovers since the day he came of age, and still the simple thought of entering him made my member stiff.

I wasn't the only person Niferas had this power over, and that fact was hardly lost on him. Over the past few years, he has left behind the calculating, secretive boy to become this coolly seductive charmer—fully aware that his sexual parts are the chariot that will take him wherever he wishes to go. It chafed him, I think, that, having won the *Nithaial Galgaliel* as his lover, he had nowhere to ride it but around in circles.

He took my hand and pulled me to him. He was, I suddenly realized, excited and very pleased. "I'm here because you weren't in your quarters so I came looking for you. And as for prying into your thoughts—you know you can close your mind to me anytime you wish. But in this instance, silly idiot, you were speaking out loud."

What Niferas said was only partly true. I could close

my mind to him, but he often knew when I did and wouldn't rest until he found out why. In any case, perhaps I *had* been speaking out loud. So I apologized for the imputation, then asked him, "What news is so important that it has torn you from your conjuring?"

Niferas released my hand, stood back, and regarded me coolly for a moment before speaking. "I bring you answers to the two questions that you hadn't the nerve to ask," he said. "The first is: Why did these chambers appear? And the answer: Because Niccas has finally left the pit of fire where he imprisoned Lord Maerdas. This means, we can suppose, that the Dark One has surrendered, and abandoned his physical presence."

I started to speak, but Niferas held up his hand, then continued to speak. "The second question is: If Niccas is free, why hasn't he come here to be with you? And the answer to that is: Niccas has gone to Fæÿstirran, where he has just now stepped into the force and let it consume him entirely. Strange is it not? Two *Nithaial Elimiels* consumed the same way in a matter of days?"

I stared at him in astonishment. My head spun. "How could you know all this?" I stammered.

"And you not?" There was a hint of mockery in Niferas's voice, his usual way of teasing. "Because all this time I have been keeping watch in the most potent of my scrying mirrors waiting for it to happen. The two were in that pit together for a decade. And in the end, who won? Who lost?"

We had all lost, I thought bitterly, but particularly me. Never had I thought there would be no *Nithaial Elimiel* to finish this era with me. How could my heart have hardened to the point where nothing inside me felt the pang of his departure? Or had that been the subject of my dreams? the reason that I had come here in the middle of the night?

I had been abandoned to almost five hundred years of loneliness—the weight of that now fell upon my mind, but the worst thing of all was that he had ended his life of his own accord. What punishment could be worse? Or more cruelly just? I despised myself for even thinking this, but I couldn't help myself. Why did he do this to me?

This time I *had* spoken aloud. In answer, Niferas seized hold of my hand and dragged me out of that place and back to my own quarters. And once we were under the night sky, he said something that so astonished me that I was literally struck dumb.

"Niccas abandoned you, my love, it is true. But surely the gods will not allow there to be *no Nithaial Elimiel* for many years left to you, and at a time when their very rule over our world is challenged.

"Jessan, beloved, I have now come to believe that *I* may be destined to replace Niccas and rule by your side—that it is *my* doom to become the new *Nithaial Elimiel*."

He paused after he said this, letting the thought sink in. Perhaps he hoped for a response. But I was without words; I was even unable to turn and meet his eyes. It wasn't that I thought he *must* be wrong. Not at all. I simply thought that I must be mad.

I thought I had at least always known what the *Nithaial were*, however hard it might be to bear that burden. But now that certainty failed me. I loved Niferas, it was true, but if *he* could conceivably become the *Nithaial Elimiel*... I *was* going mad. There could be no other answer.

Niferas, oblivious to what was flooding my mind, or perhaps all too aware of it, continued speaking. "Think, Jessan. No one knows anything of my origins. Lord Maerdas supposedly seized me to be his catamite, but the gods intervened and left me untouched and unspoiled. You, the *Nithaial Galgaliel* rescued me, even as Niccas destroyed Lord Maerdas, and now he has immolated himself."

Niferas put his arm around me, lowering his voice to a near whisper, as when he had first spoken. "Thus, the debt owed to the gods was repaid in full, granting the new *Nithaial Elimiel* the chance to begin anew. As your lover, I have absorbed the ways of the *Nithaial*; at twenty-three I am the already the greatest wizard who ever lived; I am beautiful beyond any mortal. Why would the gods choose anyone over me?"

I had no answer to this. Worse, I felt a stab of fear that he would ask me if *I* didn't want him as my immortal companion, a question that, to my surprise, I didn't want to face. And why not? Niferas was everything to me.

His hand, meanwhile, had left my waist to pull away my robe. In a second, it lay crumpled on the ground at our feet.

He liked to parade me naked around our quarters, letting others witness the power he had over me. He pulled the sash from the robe and bound my hands with it.

"You have waited too long to answer," he said, his voice as cool as ever. "I shall have to take you to my rooms and beat you until you submit."

HAD NEVER SPENT THE NIGHT in Niferas's bed, but I was often splayed out on it, as I was now, my feet bound with rough cord to his bed post, a fat pillow pushed under me to lift my buttocks up into the air. Sometimes he liked me gagged; tonight I was free to cry out when the blows came. My hands were free, but only because he had plans for them.

Niferas knew that as the *Nithaial Galgaliel*, any bodily damage he inflicted on me would be soon healed, and, because he was my lover, he would not be deflected by my powers. And he had learned to take advantage of this.

For beatings, he preferred a leather strap. It stung like fire and left beautifully violent welts. I knew he had one end tightly wrapped around his hand; he was letting the tip of the loose end slip back and forth across my ass. The caressing touch of it made me stiffen, even though I knew what was to come.

"You know why you are here," he said.

Even though it wasn't a question, I knew that I must answer. "Yes," I replied. "Yes."

"Because you are the Nithaial Galgaliel, I alone can

punish you for your failure before your doom," he went on. "So it has become my task, as the gods have witnessed. Unfortunately for you, I also enjoy it.

"So, where shall we start?"

Again, I knew I must answer. "Faryn," I whispered.

"Louder!"

"Faryn."

There was a hissing, then the slapping sound of the belt hitting flesh, leaving behind it a burning ribbon of pain.

"Yes, Faryn," Niferas replied. "Your first lover. A mere youth, a poor fisherboy, and you stood and watched his body ripped apart, doing nothing to save him..." another hissing sound, another ribbon of fire blazing across my buttocks. "... until it was too late."

Niferas never held back, striking each blow with all his strength, one after another after another. I think if I were a mortal, I might have died under his hands. As it was, I could feel blood already tricking down my side; the hurt was so excruciating that already my body was shaking.

One reason why my hands had been left unbound was to tempt me to try to protect myself by spreading them over my bottom. Niferas knew how much I fought to keep myself from doing it; just as he relished the moment I surrendered, and he could strip the skin off my fingers.

The beating stopped. "Well, Faryn is accounted for," Niferas said. He was panting slightly, but his voice remained even. "Who shall we do next?"

There was a silence. Then he slashed the belt across my bare legs and I cried out in agony.

"Who shall we do next?"

There were other names I could have mentioned, Timon's, for example, but tonight Faryn's name, the anguish of his death, connected so directly with what had been on my mind all this night, that my thoughts dragged me directly to Niccas. I said his name, then fearing I wasn't loud enough, repeated it in what was almost a shout. "*Niccas*."

"Of course," Niferas agreed. "Your own twin, left to his terrible fate because of your slutty ways. The sex with Pàli was just too delicious, wasn't it, that big cock up your behind?"

"Yes," I answered, although it was as much a sigh as a word. How often had Niferas and I gone over this, and still it stabbed my heart.

"Well, in this case the punishment shall match the crime," Niferas said. "Spread your ass apart."

This was the second reason my hands were free. I reached back. My fingers slipped on the mingled blood and sweat, but finally I managed to do as he ordered.

"Wider!" Niferas commanded. "Expose it all the way!"

What he meant was that I should thrust myself up, so that my asshole was not only exposed but protruded.

"Yes! Perfect!" The mattress sagged a little as Niferas put one knee on it. "Now, remember," he said, his voice as cold as ice, "if you let go, we'll have to start all over again."

Then he struck. He had wrapped more of the strap

around his hand, leaving just a tongue of it hanging loose, short enough so that he could precisely aim his blows; long enough so that each blow would make me scream.

Each one slapped viciously against my asshole, and no pain could be worse. Again and again, he hit, until the agony flooded my brain, and my cries seemed to come from some other place.

Finally, the beating stopped. Niferas got astride me and shoved his cock into the very center of the hurt.

Of course, I knew he would do that. The bolt of searing fire would have been unendurable had I not known that it meant we had reached the end of the punishment. The pain still lapped at every nerve, but the storm itself was over and, better, rescue was at hand.

Now, through the agony, I could concentrate on his cock as it pushed down deep inside me. Fiercely beaten and now forced open, the inner pain began flowing out of me, leaving me naked and helpless, my body now shuddering with helpless lust. By the time Niferas convulsed, sending his hot seed spilling into me, I was stiff, ready to take him in turn.

He tugged the slip knots and freed my legs; I rolled over; he eased himself down onto my cock. My body was too roiled with pain to thrust—I simply lay there and let his asshole suck at me as I looked up at his face, met his eyes. His look now was neither of tenderness nor triumph, but intense in another way. He was like an artist regarding someone he meant to paint, absorbing everything so that he could transfer

it to a waiting bit of distempered board.

It was only when I came that he would close his eyes, savoring the power I freely gave him. And as my own seed filled him, a tenderness, a surrender, flowed out of his body, his guardedness evaporating for the moment, just as my own had. It was then that I loved him most of all.

That moment was always short, and tonight it was even shorter, because he wasn't happy how our conversation had ended, just before.

He had slumped down beside me, and had made no effort to push away my embrace. But now he seized hold of my caressing hand like a beachcomber pinioning a crab.

"Jessan," he whispered, "beg the goddess to make me your companion and twin. You're Her favorite—it you'll only ask, She will make it true."

"You're wrong," I whispered back. Even if She means to replace Niccas, the Blessed Gesryma has a web to weave and I would be fool to try to meddle with it.

"Besides," I added, "no *Nithaial* has never been allowed to pick his twin."

Niferas snorted. "No *Nithaial* was ever in a position to do so, until now, until you." He suddenly sat bolt upright, casting my hand aside. "I can feel you hesitate, Jessan, and it makes me *hate* you. Who are *you* to judge me? The *Nithaial Galgaliel* is the fair twin; and the *Nithaial Elimiel*, the dark one, or so they say. But we both know your fairness is tinged with dark. Well, my darkness has its buried light."

I sat up, and winced from the pain. I would spend the rest of this night and all of the following day lying on my stomach. as I struggled to get up, my eyes met Niferas's, and I saw that his were wet with tears.

I touched his cheek. "I know, beloved," I said. "You show my soul the way out of darkness. I'll ask for you."

Chapter 22



e certainly didn't waste a moment before he shared this revelation," Orien said. It was three days later, and we were sitting on a bench and looking out on the sea together, I in the shade and he soaking up the morning sun.

I had come to Sondaram to consult with the venerable mage, something I had not done for several years. Orien had finally begun to show his age; his eyes were rheumy, he actually used his staff now for support, his hands trembled when he lifted his cup of scented tea. But his mind was as sharp as ever—and his tongue as well.

"Niferas is perhaps overly eager for this doom to be true," I admitted, "but I haven't come here to listen once again to your litany of his flaws. I want to know whether there could be any truth in what he says."

Orien thought for a moment. "There is a proverb of old," he said at last, "which tells us that the gods first drive mad those whom they mean to promote. This makes it diffi-

cult, at least from a distance, to separate the wheat from the chaff."

When I refused to rise to this bait, he continued. "It goes without saying—but I feel compelled to say it anyway—that you have the power, as always, to look into his heart and mind and read all that it contains."

"Yes" I replied. "But let me remind you of something you also already know, that you warned me early on that I should save that power to deal with monsters, because if I use it on those I love I will become a monster myself. I would rather be hurt and betrayed, as happens to any human, than to shape myself into another Hezzakal."

"Sometimes the best advice works best when broken," Orien said, but he then shook his head and sighed. "Still, I accept what you say. I have no desire for you to pry about in my mind, even though there is nothing there but cobwebs and fading memories."

The mage thought for a moment. "You said that he referred to 'the gods,' and not simply to the Blessed Gesryma? That can't be by accident. Perhaps his magic has revealed to him that Almighty Ra'asiel has begun to take an interest in the *Nithaial*. If so, Niferas would be a more likely candidate."

"Still," I began.

"Still," Orien interrupted, "the simple fact of the matter is that the forces of fire and earth will either welcome him or they will not. He must know this, too."

"He claims to be the most powerful wizard who ever lived," I said. "Given that, what would happen if he stepped into, say, the force at Fæÿstirran?"

"He'd be instantly fried to a crisp." Orien snorted. "Perhaps because he's such a powerful wizard, he might be seasoned with a pinch of salt before he was consumed."

"Damn you, Orien," I said with some heat. "I came to you for help, not the usual needling."

Orien, whose face had turned up to the sun, sighed, then pounded his staff on the ground. Somewhere inside Sondaram, a silver gong chimed.

"Very well, my dear *Nithaial Galgaliel*. Your wish, as always, is my command. We shall go do what, if you had your wits about you, you would have done before coming here to me."

He paused, savoring the fact that I hadn't the faintest notion of what he meant, as Telo came hurrying up, giving me a radiant smile as he did. I couldn't help but smile back; we saw each other rarely now, but our feelings for each other were undimmed.

"Help me to my feet, Telo," Orien said, "then come assist me up the stairs." Jessan and I are going to step into the portal and go to Fæÿstirran. Something seems to have happened there.

As we made the slow, painful ascent up the stairs one step at a time, I understood, with a pang, one very good reason why Orien did not come to Gostranar. Even climbing this flight of stairs was more than he could handle. Of course, I could spin an enchantment and lift him up, but I knew he was showing me this weakness because he was too proud to speak of it. Besides, I think he enjoyed having Telo's arm wrapped firmly around his waist.

"Jessan, have you ever been to Fæÿstirran?" the mage asked, pausing and half turning his head.

"Just once," I replied. "It was very hot and very unwelcoming." I didn't add that I had made the visit that terrible day to see if Niccas was there, after I discovered that he had not come to find me at Gostranar. Needless to say, he wasn't at Fæÿstirran either, and I left immediately.

"The time to be there is at night, when the moon is full," Orien said, spacing out the words so he could attend to where he placed each foot. "The flames dance, a cool breeze comes whispering off the desert, the acolytes softly play on lutes and..."

The mage quickly glanced back at me, and when he saw my smile, he let the sentence just fade away. Orien was teasing me, bringing back to memory our conversation on the deck of the Tejj, now so long ago.

I had asked him about the depressing emptiness of Sondaram, and he had advised me to give it time to regain its former life. And, under Telo's guidance, that was just what had happened. And so, someday, this would be the happy fate of Fæÿstirran as well.

When we reached the top of the tower and stood be-

fore the portal, Telo took his arm from around Orien's waist and looked questioningly at me.

"The stairs at Fæÿstirran are less onerous," I said in answer, "since the tower is barely one at all. However, do come with us, Telo. You've never been there—and besides, it will remind the three of us all that you have done to make Sondaram such a beautiful and welcoming refuge."

don't think that even I have the talent to transform this into anything remotely *habitable*," Telo said, shading his eyes against the blinding glare that met us when we stepped from the portal. "With all due respect, this place is a fucking *monument*."

I nodded in agreement. There was nothing remotely *comfortable* about Fæÿstirran. And to try to make it so would be untrue to its nature. "Well," I said, "Caelas would be at home here."

Telo looked at me. "Exactly," he said, and we both began to laugh.

Orien, who had taken no part in this conversation, was busy surveying the landscape. Suddenly, he caught hold of my elbow and point out over the desert.

"Curse my old eyes!" he said. "What do you see out there?"

I looked, and was taken aback. "The ground is littered with what look like the corpses of skalgür," I replied. "And feeding on them is a... a..." I hesitated. I had seen one before, but in a terrible nightmare I had one night in Gedd.

Well, I didn't have to read Orien's mind to give him access to my vision. I placed my hands over his eyes, then did so.

"Ah!" the mage said. "It is one of the demon riding beasts, and a terror to any fighters who face them. They are called..." He paused to wrack his memory. "*Gräzk'vor*."

Telo, whose ordinary eyesight was better than Orien's, was also regarding the beast without any assist from me.

"Look!" he cried out. "The beast has spotted us!"

"No matter," I answered. "Whether it sees us or not, it can't get into Fæÿstirran. Let's go down and see what we can discover in this empty place."

Fæÿstirran was surrounded with pillars of different height and width; the portal was set in the shortest and stubbiest of these. Even so, there was a flight of stairs to descend, and, at the base of these, I sat Orien and Telo on a bench and pulled off my shirt.

I had never approached the power in either of the two temples where the *Nithaial Elimiel* held sway. I expected little, remembering all too well my experience in the pool of the forces in Gostranar, where Páli had assumed his eagle shape to pluck me from disaster. But, still, I *was* the *Nithaial Galgaliel*, and if my twin was truly dead, the force here might be more willing to acknowledge me.

Despite the blistering sun, the paving tiles beneath my feet were cool to the touch, and I strode across the small plaza to the swirling column of pure, colorless fire. However, as I approached, colors did appear—or, rather, the single fire splintered apart in a rainbow of different-colored flames, which spun about each other in an rhythmical dance, dazzling and enrapturing my eyes.

I came closer, and began to feel heat, not a scorching blaze but an intimate warmth that made my body glow. It was as if were not the fire that was hot but the world around us that was cold, and the closer I came, the more comfort it wrapped me in.

Finally, I stood at the ring that surrounded the flame and served as its border, an intricate pattern of every imaginable red and orange precious stone, barely as wide as a hand. I had planned to stop there, but, no, the fire parted before me, opening a portal through the flame.

I stepped into this and walked to the very center. The portal closed; only a small space remained free where I was standing. The force rushed about me, calling me and denying me at the same time, like, I suppose, the bedroom of a twin might feel, if you entered it alone.

The power fed me even as it kept me apart, and with the force came a great yearning, so powerful that it almost dropped me to my knees. Before, my feelings for Niccas had been fed only by imagination and the pull of our shared destiny; but at that moment, I felt his very blood pulsing through my veins. I wept from both joy and grief until I could weep no more, the tears melting the moment they coursed down my cheeks. Then I turned back and went out as I had come in. The moment the flame closed behind me, I heard Telo's frightened shouts, and turned to see the very same *gräzk'vor* that had spotted us from afar trying to shove its head through the doorway to where Telo and Orien were waiting for me.

I felt a stab of fear, for I thought that the mage had been wrong and that this was a strykul, and in the act of poisoning my two friends even as one had once poisoned me. I bent my mind to the beast and, once I had got a grip, pulled it away so fiercely that, despite its scrabbling feet, it skidded across the plaza, stopping just an arm's length from where I stood.

The *gräzk'vor* spun about, but then went completely still when its eyes saw who had summoned it. In fact, it clearly knew who I was. At the same time, I saw that, whatever *it* was, it was not a strykul, but some sort of distant kin—dangerous, yes, but not a rabid killing machine.

That being so, I opened my mind to it. The beast had no words as such, but it thought in patterns, shapes of understanding, emotion, and all the base desires. Slowly I sorted among these and learned that it had been given access to Fæÿstirran by what had to have been Niccas, and that it has stayed here for the access to water—for it seemed, somewhere, this place had a pool—at least until it had eaten its fill of the slaughtered skalgür.

Since the *gräzk'vor* hadn't met Orien and Telo, it had decided they were a snack that had been sent its way—or

at least a snack no one would miss once it was eaten. Now, it understood that it had been wrong, and while, of course, impenitent, was no longer dangerous to any of us.

There was more to discern, but I found it harder and harder to make out what that was. I did the best I could, then—with a little reluctance—told the beast to drink its fill and leave Fæÿstirran for good.

short time later, we were back in Sondaram, seated at a table in the shade upon which stood a large carafe of chilled sparkling wine, and I told Orien and Telo what I had learned, as best I could.

"Years ago, this same beast," I was saying, "had carried Niccas away from Fæÿstirran; now it had just brought him back there again. But this trip was from a different place and Niccas was ill, or was bringing someone with him who was ill, and Niccas himself had changed, had a different smell, and didn't recognize Nisn'zahsk, for so she was called, for who she was.

"This had puzzled her greatly. But then when they had come to Fæÿstirran, after battling a hunting pack of skalgür, and Niccas was himself again, and greeted her properly. She went off after this to eat some more skalgür, for she was very hungry from running for so long across the desert. While she was feasting, a great light rose from the temple of fire and filled the sky, fading almost as quickly as it had appeared. When she returned to the place after that, no one was there... including her nestlings."

Orien, who had been downing some wine as I said this last, sprayed the mouthful back onto the table, then coughed out the rest, which had gone into his windpipe. When his breath came back to him, he waved away Telo and gasped out, "Her *nestlings*?"

"Well, that's what I *understood* her to be telling me," I answered. "I tried to get her to explain this more clearly, but either I didn't convey what I wanted, or else she couldn't make me understand."

"Well," Orien said, speaking slowly. "We can rule out the literal interpretation. And since it's doubtful that *gräzk'vor* are much given to metaphor..." He paused, shook his head, and went on, "The only possibility that remains is that she had intentionally taken the riders she had just carried under her wing, so to speak."

So much for the metaphor-challenged *gräzk'vor* theory, I thought, saying instead, "That is a plausible explanation, to be sure, but it gets us exactly nowhere."

At one time, Orien would have given back a retort as sharp as he had taken, but today he just sadly shook his head in agreement.

"Yes," he said. "But at least now we know that something of significance did happen at Fæÿstirran."

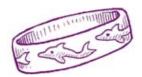
Telo, who had been waiting on us while listening to the conversation, finally spoke. "Perhaps what the beast was trying to tell you, Lord of Water and Air, is that the new Lord of Fire and Earth is a just-hatched *gräzk'vor*. I can't *wait* until that shows up at Gostranar."

Orien burst out laughing—indeed, he was about as merry as I had ever seen him. "That," the old mage replied, "would give Niferas something to chew on... or vice versa."

Even I had to smile at that, and so the conversation came to a close. "You two go off and let an old man rest," he said, using a single economical gesture of his hand to both wave us away and take possession of the wine carafe.

As we left him, I heard him mutter, as if to himself, "I've gotten too old to be having adventures."

Chapter 23



T GLADDENS MY HEART to see Orien laugh," I said, once we were out of earshot. "You are obviously very good for him." Telo had taken my hand and was leading me up the stairway to my rooms. I didn't protest much, even though I hadn't planned to spend more than a few hours at Sondaram. I hadn't forgotten that time here passed as quickly or slowly as I directed it to.

Telo shrugged. "I am that, I suppose. But what he *really* needs is a disciple. Someone young he can shape into a mage who might follow in his footsteps. He has enough years left in him to do that, if you would but look for such a person and bring him here."

To my surprise, we strode right past the doorway to my rooms. I was about to say something, but Telo went on, pursuing his same thought. "That means someone you haven't already impregnated with rank wizardry—if such a youth can be still be found."

"Well," I replied, "that does rule out all the good look-

ing boys. But I don't suppose Orien would be as particular."

Telo gave me a push. "Really," he said, "haven't you learned yet that it's not the length of the wand that matters but how well it's wielded?"

"No," I answered, pushing him back. "Because I've always been able to have boys who managed both those things at once. Starting, as I remember, with *you*."

We had arrived at the last door of all, and Telo placed his palm on a golden template set into the wood. There was the sound of a lock turning—Telo, of course, being one who possessed no small amount of rank wizardry himself.

And these were his own rooms, a place he had never invited me to enter before. As we went in, he removed the elaborately decorated robe that was his official garment, leaving him in his undertunic and smalls.

Telo slipped into an inner room, so I walked about his living room. It had its comforts—most notably the bed—but it was nothing as grand as it could have been. In fact, it was rather ascetic. A reading table held stacks of books—his first, the one I had given him—resting on simple but lovingly carved stand. On a separate table were swatches of material along with sketches of architectural designs. Sondaram's outbuildings, the kitchens, the pilgrim hostel, the various workshops where temple appurtenances were crafted, were still in a state of construction, and Telo supervised it all.

He now emerged carrying a small earthen crock, and as he stepped back into the room I took him in as well. There was no doubt that being Head Steward of Sondaram agreed with Telo. Perhaps as more years passed he would grow plump, but for the moment he was as close to handsome as his features would ever let him become. His body had filled out; it was only in his gestures, his stance, that I could still find a glimpse of the thin and delicate youth of our first meeting. I found it warmed my heart merely to be in his company.

"Have you no room servant at your beck and call?" I asked, "that you must go and fetch things yourself."

Telo smiled and shook his head. "No more than you was I a raised as a little lord. I have a servant who comes to dress me in the morning and scrub my back when I bathe at night. But otherwise, I treasure the quiet here. I get very little of it, otherwise."

He made an imperious lifting gesture with his hand. "Now, then, gracious *Nithaial Galgaliel*, I must insist that you remove your shirt."

"Telo!" I said. "As you as commanding as that with all your lovers?"

"I'm serious," he said. "Just do it."

Then, when the garment fell onto the floor, he grasped my shoulder and turned me around. I suddenly realized what he was looking at, and, despite myself, I blushed. "Punishment for my sins," I said.

Telo's voice was sharp with indignation. "You were *not* the sinner when *that* happened," he said. "I couldn't get it

out of my mind when you first revealed it to us at Fæÿstirran even when that... that *gräzk'vor* was baring its teeth at me. Bend over the bed."

"It will heal itself," I began, aghast that Orien must have witnessed the marks of the beating as well. If only I would just *think* before acting. Telo, impatient at my lack of response, had placed both his hands on my back and was now propelling me across the carpet. When we reached his bed, I accepting my fate and leaned over it, bracing my hands on the neatly draped bedclothes.

Telo's fingers were already unfastening my smalls, with the unhurried ease of long practice. When these fell away, he uncorked the container of unguent and began smoothing it over the wounds.

As a matter of course, I had blocked away the pain, and now that I opened myself to it, I realized how raw the lashes still were, even after three days.

"If you were a mere mortal, or even as merely mortal as I am, you would have been marked forever by this beating," Telo said, as he reclosed the crock and wiped his hands clean. "It is not my place—or my desire—to comment on how you lead your life, but at least consider this: to continually put yourself in the way of punishment that would maim or kill a man is to gradually make yourself less human, not more. In the end, it is vanity, however little it *feels* like it."

I groaned. "So this is how you heal—by soothing the wound while tongue-lashing the wounded?"

There was the fluttering of falling cloth, then Telo's naked body was pressing against me. I started to roll on my side, but he pinned me down.

"No!" he said. "If you get that unguent on this priceless bed covering, I'll have to kill you myself. Just lie still and let the stuff dry."

Despite his tough words, when I turned to face him I saw there were tears in his eyes.

"What?" I said, in a tone that was half tender and half annoyed.

"It's just that I know you're in trouble, sweetest Jessan, and I know there's *nothing* I can do about it. I *hate* that phrase, 'nothing I can do.' It's so *contrary* to my nature."

I had to smile. "Telo, you idiot!" I said, kissing him. "I'm not exactly in trouble. It's just that I'm so tangled up in my doom I barely know up from down."

"That's bad," Telo said solemnly. "Because right from wrong has *always* eluded you. If you lose your sense of up and down as well, there's no hope."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," I said. "More importantly, what can we do with me lying on my stomach?"

"Silly question," he replied. "How could you forget our intimately matched powers."

Telo squatted beside me and placed a hand gently into the hollow of my back. His touch was like a kiss, not in its tenderness so much as in its penetration—his powers slipped under my skin and made my muscles quiver with

pleasure. He began to lift his hand, and my body, hungry for more of that touch, floated up after it. When it was level with his head, Telo spun me slowly around.

"You can help a bit if you want, lazy boy," he whispered in my ear. I smiled and let my own powers hold me up, while he swung his leg over me, then guided my cock into his waiting hole.

I entered him, slowly, slowly, and we moaned in unison. Our powers had knitted together; he could feel the fierce ecstasy radiating up from my knob as it spread him open; I could feel his ring of muscles yield to its pressure, then squeeze against me, as if to keep me out.

There was no way I would let that happen; I shoved firmly up into him, and we both savored the surrender, the sudden vulnerability, the thrust inside him.

He took charge of both our powers and used them to lift our bodies higher; his feet no longer pressed against the bedclothes. Then, a moment later, we were floating in space.

Telo leaned forward, grasping my shoulders, wrapping his legs around my own. I opened my eyes and looked into his; our mouths met and sucked in rhythm to the thrusting down below. I was in him as deeply as I could push, but his spasmodic contractions drove my cock to such a frenzy that it grew longer still, or seemed to, shoving further up into him until its presence was so strong that his body collapse against me, his lips slipping away from mine, his head

falling onto my shoulder, as he whimpered and moaned.

The inner convulsions began to shake his whole body. When his cock began spurting seed between us we barely noticed, its shuddering jerks so much a part of the whole. But it was the deliciousness of Telo's body's complete surrender that drove me to follow suit; I wanted to join him there in that release, our bodies wrapped together, slowly turning in the air, our forces in full ebb, rushing and bubbling into nothingness, leaving us melded, slipping out of consciousness, becoming one.

ATER, LYING TOGETHER, seed, sweat, and unguent all smeared together on the precious counterpane, I lay awake while Telo slept, letting my mind wander as I caressed his dreams, basking in the steady beating of his heart, the warmth of his arms wrapped tightly around me.

All the while, his spirit exuded his pure love for me, his desire to be in all ways worthy of me, unspoken always but here in helpless display. Here was a sweetness I rarely, if ever, let myself savor these days, and it would be a lie to pretend I completely gave myself over to it now.

Still, I knew that this was sex as I never knew it with Niferas—nothing held back, nothing claimed after, an absolute and willingly offered gift. Because of this, Telo suddenly seemed infinitely fragile to me, and to my shock I realized that I believed that in that gift lay the seeds of his own destruction. This was what I had come to fear for all my lovers, and, perversely, Niferas was precious to me because it was my own de-

struction I played with when I was with him. He would never give me everything; he would always remain safe.

This realization shook me badly—not because the insight was so profound, but because it seemed so... *inexo-rable*; and because if I ever had to choose between the two, it was all too clear where my doom must lie.

Telo's room was dark, dark as night. That meant it was night. In the swoon that had followed our sex, I had let slip my hold over the hours, and time had reclaimed all that I had been holding from it.

I deepened Telo's sleep; then gently extracted myself from his arms. The water in his wash jug was cold but clean, and after I mopped myself as best I could with the small cloth that had been left beside it, I pulled on my clothes and found my way back to the portal, and thence to Gostranar, where everything was deeply wrapped in sleep.

Well, everything but not everyone; Niferas was waiting for me in my bedroom, holding a leather pouch, and sitting in a chair that he had set beside the small table where a cold supper had been left for me. I realized I hadn't eaten anything this day, and that I starving. I kissed my lover on his forehead, then sat down and began to eat.

"Where have *you* been?" Niferas asked, before I could even bite into the wedge of meat pie I had lifted to my open mouth. I bit off a good mouthful, then answered through it.

"Fæÿstirran," I mumbled, which was certainly true. Niferas knew when I lied, but had to guess when I glossed over the entire truth. It wasn't the sex with Telo that I would rather not have him find out about, but the conversation with Orien. Niferas hated the mage for his disdain as much as he did the fact that I went to him for advice.

However, the word "Fæÿstirran" was enough to capture his entire attention. "Oh," he said, adding in a plaintive voice, "You should have taken me with you."

I nodded, washing down the pie with some quite decent wine. The vintners who supplied Gostranar had nothing to fear from those that Telo dealt with.

"I meant to be there only a moment," I said. "I hated the place the first time I visited it, and found nothing to improve my opinion this time." Another bite of the pie.

Niferas could tell I was hungry, but I suspected he could also sense that I was teasing him. But all he said was, "Even so, you stayed."

I nodded, drank some more wine, then answered. "Yes. I hadn't gone to discover whether your scryings had been accurate, but what I might find there that might build on them." Then I told him about the *gräzk'vor*.

I had Niferas's attention before, but if at this moment Gostranar had crumbled into dust around us, I doubt that he would have noticed. In fact, by the time I was finished telling him what the beast had told me, he had jumped to his feet and was pacing back and forth.

"If Niccas came to Fæÿstirran on a *gräzk'vor*," he exclaimed, "he *must* have come from the land of the demons.

But why?"

"Why go there, or why come from there?" I asked. "Neither makes any sense to me."

Niferas glanced my way, but his eyes were almost blank. I had seen him in this state before—it always came when some important event had surprised him.

Even so, he registered the question. "That he would *go* there makes complete sense," he replied. "It is well known that he has made common cause with their Avatar. But, that he would then return to Fæÿstirran and immolate himself in the flame—you're right. That *is* a puzzle."

Again the blank look, and I realized I was serving him as would a stuffed cuddle bear he was pretending to talk to in order to focus his thoughts.

"He might have simply been making his farewells," Niferas said thoughtfully, "but that doesn't explain why the *gräzk'vor* was carrying more than one rider—and it becomes all the more perplexing if Niccas was sick. The Avatar would have ordered an escort to accompany him, and probably come himself."

"Perhaps he discovered that the Avatar had cast his lot with the Eight," I said. I had encouraged this conversation for ulterior reasons, but now that we were in the thick of it, I found myself being drawn in. I was surprised that Orien hadn't made the connection between the riding beast and where it must have come from.

"And fled—for the sake of his companions, if not for

his own." Niferas completed my thought, this time gracing me with a look of surprise: the cuddle bear could think.

I nodded. "That would explain skalgür. The desert is the last place you would ordinarily find them."

Niferas stopped pacing and threw himself back in his chair. "I need to do more scrying," he said. "I haven't the knowledge yet to penetrate the wards the demons cast to keep out prying eyes, and I have no desire to attract the attention of the Eight."

This was more than Niferas had ever told me of his magicking, but Gostranar had its own wards, and very powerful they were. Still, if he were lured into the Other World....

But his thoughts had carried him somewhere else.

"Jessan," he said, in a voice of honeyed milk, "there is now no doubt that Niccas has gone. You do agree?"

Reluctantly, I nodded my head. Certainly, the one clear thing that I had learned from my interaction with the *gräzk'vor* was that this was so.

"Did you plead my case, then, with the blessed Gesryma?"

"No, I didn't," I answered, speaking firmly but calmly. "I haven't yet grasped the import of Niccas's act, and I can't go to Her until I do. She will expect no less."

Niferas waggled his head, a way he had of indicating neither agreement nor disagreement, but rather that he was holding them apart, like one would two battling dogs.

"I can wait," he said, with surprising calm. "I know

full well that I can't become the *Nithaial Elimiel* without your full support, and that won't come in a day, or a month, or a year. Then, when I have it, it will take longer even to win over the Blessed Mother. But all these things will happen, for I know my destiny."

He reached over and touched my hand. "I tell you again, beloved, that to put Niccas behind you, you need only put me in his place. Then we will be one and you will be granted peace."

Niferas took up the pouch he had been holding when I had first come in, and which he had set on the table beside my supper when he had been pacing up and down.

"You haven't asked me why I was waiting here for you, and in all the talk of Fæÿstirran, I forgot, myself."

"I thought it was to give me my sleeping draught, as always," I answered.

He shook his head. There will be no more of those, dearest one. From this night on, I shall be spending the night here with you."

I was surprised and touched. This was a Niferas I didn't think existed. "And your nightly spellcasting?"

He shrugged the words away. "I've done with that. I've gone as far as I can go, at least until I become a *Nithaial*. Now look at this..."

He opened the bag and carefully poured its contents into the gold plate that had previously held my supper. There was no need to clean it first; my fingers had already

performed that task, and willingly.

A scattering of gears and bits of metal came clattering out of the sack, until there was quite a little mound of them.

"Do you remember that Head of Malamun that Alcaron was so dead set against my having?" he asked.

I nodded. I did remember the mechanical head, a horrid device, from my first visit to Gostranar, and Alcaron's warning regarding it. And now that my memory was prodded, I remembered that Alcaron had forbidden Niferas to toy with it. Then, of course, Alcaron had died.

I looked at Niferas, my dawning understanding written clear across my face.

He laughed. "Yes," he said, "I was fascinated with it, once. But I have come to see that Alcaron was right: it was an odiously wicked thing, and today I smashed it into all these pieces."

He picked up the plate, saying, "Now watch, and I shall show you some real magic." He tossed the fragments into the air, saying words of power as he did so. The gears began to cohere; around them a phantom replica of the Head of Malamun appeared. The thing opened its mouth and its eyes at once, uttering a thin but terrible scream.

Then it began to melt—not only the features, but the gears themselves. Niferas continued to cast his spell, and the metal parts lost their shape, dissolving into a molten puddle. This Niferas shaped into a ring of gold, and his fingers,

while never touching it, first made the outer half into red gold, then covered all its surface with sculpted scales, until at last it had the complete appearance of a snake swallowing its own tail.

"Jessan, cool this for me," he said at last.

I summoned a cool breeze from outside. One of the windows in my room flew open and suddenly coolness was all around us, and I sent it streaming through the golden snake. Gradually the metal stopped glowing, and, more quickly now, it became cool enough for Niferas to pluck from the air with his bare hand.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A circlet," Niferas answered, "and you shall put it on my head the day when I become the *Nithaial Elimiel*. When I was a boy and lived in Gorzungâd, I saw this sigil, and loved it, and swore one day it would be my own. And now it is, and ever shall be."

He slipped it into the pouch that had held the broken bits of the Head of Malamun, and tied it shut.

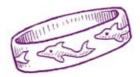
Finally, he came to me, linked his arm in mine, and

said, "Let us go to bed. You look exhausted, dearest one; the heat of Fæÿstirran has sucked you dry. I wish I could use the portal by myself. I want to go and spend some time there; it already feels like home."

I yawned. "Just tell me when, sweet boy, and I'll take you there and leave you to explore its pleasures all by yourself."

Niferas looked at me to see if I were joking, but I wasn't. Instead, I was asleep on my feet.

Chapter 24



Word in the word, Niferas was in bed with me when I woke up the next morning. He was still sound asleep, his golden hair spread over the pillows, his limbs spread carelessly in every direction, like some ragbaby a child had left where it had been tossed onto the bed.

Every part of Niferas's body had the beauty of youth, the skin firm and soft and glowing, the limbs graceful. His stomach was softly rounded, his chest well-defined, his nipples as thick and firm as the tip of an infant's finger. His sex was slightly swollen—not, I thought, from erotic dreams but from the gentle pressure of his bladder. The nest of hair around it was as golden as that on his head.

Knowing what would happen if I let my eyes linger much longer here, I glanced further down, absorbing the perfect turning of his legs, the delicacy of his feet, with their graceful arches and insolent toes. Then, with a long, soft sigh, I turned my back to all this beauty, and left my sleeping chamber, and summoned Levanar to serve me my breakfast and then help me with my toilet.

I had chosen him many years ago, and we went about our business together like two dancers long familiar with both the steps of our dance and the eccentricities of our partner. For example, I liked to wash my own face, but enjoyed having him sponge down my body; I saved washing my hair for the evening bath, but had no objection to having it carefully combed now, then bound behind me inside a simple torc hollowed from a single piece of blue jade.

Because today was the Day of Entreatment, I wore one of my finest robes, spun of the finest wormthread and dyed ice blue with the emblem of the cronnex shimmering in silver over each breast. Finally, Levanar set a thin circlet of light gold on my head, as plain and simple as the one that Niferas had cast for himself the night before.

All this time not a word had been spoken. One of the reasons I had chosen Levanar was that he was companionable even while silent, with a tenderness to his touch that was comforting without ever being intrusive. He did have a lovely voice, and now and then I would ask him to sing to me while I dressed, and on even rarer times I would join in with him, for I had long learned the words to all his songs.

Today, however, my mind was brooding over Niferas, and the difficulty I had gotten myself into by agreeing to supplicate the Blessed Gesryma on his behalf. It is hard to explain to those who have not experienced such a thing, how I could be so sure that Niferas was not and never

would be the *Nithaial Elimiel*, while at the same moment being half willing to believe he *might* be. It would be far too paradoxical for him to have been chosen since birth for the role; the signs—as when the Cronnex had appeared on my arm—simply weren't there. If such things had happened, it would mean that Gesryma had known that Niccas would die and had put his successor in this world even while he lived.

There were those who believed the gods knew everything that would happen as well as everything that had happened, but I was not one of them. It seemed to me that to be a god would be to suffer infinite boredom if you already knew how every play would end even before the curtain was hauled aside. No: if I were a god, I would set things in motion, then settle back and watch how they played out, not just for the sake of entertainment, but to ponder how I would do it differently the next time. Humans were so fallible; one could fiddle with character and plot for eons, and still not have it all work out.

Still, for Niferas to be made *Nithaial Elimiel* would mean that the Blessed Gesryma had a side to her she had never cared to show me before. But, if Orien was right, and the Almighty Ra'asiel had a hand in this... then, all bets were off. But, in that case, too, petitioning the Holy Mother was certainly beside the point.

I groaned and shook my head. Niferas was asking of me something that, obviously, I had neither the desire to do, nor the courage to refuse. It was a ridiculous position for the Nithaial Galgaliel to be in. If I couldn't say no, then I should push myself to understand why I was unwilling to say yes.

I had groaned aloud, and Levanar gave me a sympathetic smile as he swung open the master door from which I exited my quarters. My groans were not unknown to him, especially when I faced this day, which came at the start of any of the several yearly festivals.

On the Day of Entreatment, people came from the kingdom over to ask me to use my powers for specific purposes. In the old days, both *Nithaial* would hold court in the High Meet, sitting side by side on matching thrones. The High Meet was an amphitheater where gatherings concerning the *Nithaial* were held, although for the all the time I had lived here in Gostranar, the only time people came there was for this single event.

And come they did. By the time I was to arrive, every seat would be filled, mostly with spectators who only wished to set eyes on me, to watch the proceedings, listen to the requests and to my response to them, and then go home and share what they saw with all their neighbors. Also, the fact that food and drink were offered to all after the ceremony probably had its affect on attendance as well.

Two wide aisles passed down the rows of seats to the proscenium at the bottom. I could never go down my aisle without being conscious of my missing twin. When both of us were present, we would be brought along these aisles—the *Nithaial Galgaliel* coming down the one to the left and the Nithaial Elimiel down the one on the right—by a procession of acolytes, both male and female, singing hymns of praise. The voices would pass back and forth, then harmonize, then, at the very end, merge in gorgeous polyphony. Today, of course, my procession went down its aisle alone, although the singing still kept to the old pattern, with haunting silences replacing the answering voices.

The acolytes were either dressed in robes of deepest blue (symbolizing water) or else were clad in a diaphanous fabric (symbolizing air) so nearly invisible that only the chastest of sensibilities refrained from appreciating the lovely bodies of those who wore them. Some of them carried banners decorated with insignia symbolic of the two elementals—birds and fish, for example; others were touched with magic, so that they captured the movement of waves or clouds.

Those without banners played on musical instruments, flutes, finger drums, and lutes. The tunes were cheerful and merry when we first came into the High Meet, but grew more meditative as we went slowly down the many steps, thus setting the mood for the gathering.

After I was settled in my throne, two cantors stepped forward, again one a man and the other a woman, to intone the appeal the Blessed Gesryma, at which time I sat with my eyes closed and my head upraised, so as to feel her blessings caress my face.

This was the myth; I had yet to have that actually happen. But today I could sense something was different,

something it was very hard to put into words. There was a feeling of *completeness* in the High Meet that had never been there before, as if something missing in its spirit had been magically restored.

This happened entirely in the spirit of the place, and the image that came to my mind to describe it was what a horse would feel when, after a winter of eating nothing but straw and hay, found itself at last let to graze in the new spring pasture. It still dined on straw and hay, but those things were now suddenly *alive*.

I had no time to think about this further. Once the cantors had finished, after a long moment of silence, the acolytes began to bring me the supplicants, one by one, and I had perforce to listen to their tales.

In the larger scheme of things, the *Nithaial* were given to the world to promote harmony in all things. We were musicians of the spirit, Alcaron had told me, playing tunes together that stimulated the blood in the spring, soothed the wounded after a battle, cooled ardors that had grown too hot, and brought peace to the hearts of those who suffered.

Without the company of the *Nithaial Elimiel*, I was unable to do any of this. What I could do, however, was to address particular situations where the free flow of water or air had somehow been impinged, or were denied.

Of course, a frantic messenger might arrive at any time day or night to beg for succor from brush fires sweeping across the Plains of the Lhennad; or from the Alsorel in full flood, bearing away entire towns, and such as these I dealt with at once. Sometimes this disaster was part of the Great Balance and I could do nothing. But, more often, it had happened because of chance, and I was able to set things right.

The Days of Entreatment, however, were the time when I would hear from individuals who had suffered by an imbalance of the elements, at least those I had control over—a miller whose millpond had gone dry; a group of farmers whose fields were parched with drought; a town without water because all the wells had somehow become foul; even a poor soul whose chimney had been blown over during a fierce windstorm.

These grievances, though deeply felt, were rarely of any great interest nor did they pose much difficulty. The petitioner approached, kneeled, and spoke. I lifted my hand, and the matter was resolved. In the greater scheme of things, nothing was accomplished, but little ripples of relief and gratitude spread far and wide, and those for whom metaphysics held no interest found reason to celebrate the existence of the *Nithaial* and to feel more at home in this world.

And so it happened on the day of which I speak. It was only when the acolytes were gathering to perform the rites of closing, did something untoward happen. A group of three approached me directly. When one of the acolytes attempted to restrain them, their leader spoke directly to me, asking my permission to approach. They had not come, he said, for the same reason as all the others, and so had waited

until the end to plead their case.

Usually, I would have sent them to see one of the people whose sole purpose was to protect me from chance visitors seeking my ear. But I was still under the influence of that sense of completeness that I spoke of earlier, and so I surprised both the acolytes and myself when I told them to sit and wait while the Day of Entreatment was formally brought to an end, and that we could then talk in private. The gathering was now looking forward to their refreshment, awaiting them on tables set in one of the gardens, and I saw no reason to keep them from it.

y name is Dionis," the stranger said. "Formerly I was a thief, but now I am the *twerë* of the Mage Lyreas, who is the reason for my entreatment. Here with us, too, is Nimr, who has come with us all the way from Ras Tayma."

As he spoke those last words, I looked at him in honest surprise. To those who plied the ocean from Gedd to Heref and back, Ras Tayma was spoken of as if it were some sort of magical dream, the city that glowed in the dark.

We were walking together back to my quarters, and away from the merriment in the garden. I thought that I would be done with these three by the time we reached my door, but I found myself drawn to this Dionis—dark-haired, deeply tanned, and comely, and touched by the care with which he guided his *twerë*, whose own fiery handsomeness was marred only by the blankness of his eyes.

"You have traveled far," I said, "and in those few words, I hear the start of a long tale. It would be only courteous to have you and your *twerë* sup with me; my attendant can find a place for your servant to eat and rest as well."

Dionis smiled. "I accept your invitation with pleasure, *Nithaial Galgaliel*. However, Nimr is not our servant but our friend and companion, nephew of Salamah, one of Ras Tayma's greatest mages, and son of Nu'mas, a master swordsmith."

I blushed, and turned to apologize to Nimr. But he stepped up to me and, taking my hand, placed it against his forehead. "It is my youth and the rags that adorn me that confused you, Great One. I take no offence."

He made to release my hand, but I seized hold of his. No one his age in all the kingdom would dare speak to me so directly, and yet with such perfect courtesy. "You must become my friend, too," I said to him. "Dionis and Lyreas will have to share."

We smiled at each other, and I turned to Levanar, who was waiting at the door. Our eyes met, and he understood that there would be three more to fit in at the table. He ushered us in, relieved me of my formal robe, and slipped away.

This room was furnished with a raised platform heaped with cushions, and I invited my guests to make themselves comfortable on them. Dionis carefully settled Lyreas before he sat down himself. I was curious as to what had befallen this mage, but it would be best to start at the beginning.

A servant appeared with honey-sweetened tea

brewed of dwellen leaves and cristberries. As he offered the cups around, Dionis took two, setting one carefully on the rug behind him.

"Are all three of you from Ras Tayma?" I asked.

Dionis shook his head. "No, *Nithaial Galgaliel*. Only Nimr is from there. I met Lyreas in Heref, and accompanied him to that city, where he became an acolyte of a sort under Salamah."

I nodded. "And that is also where you met Nimr?"

The boy laughed. "You might well think so, Highest One, but at the time I was a cabin boy, and we met at sea, when they took passage on my ship."

"His uncle sensed that Nimr might make a great mage," Dionis added, "and arranged for his father to send him to sea for his own protection. There are forces even in Ras Tayma that seek out those with magical power, and either suborn and corrupt them, or slay them out of hand."

As he said those last words, his voice broke, and he added softly, "What befell Lyreas happened during an attack by a nyche, who had already slain our host."

While Dionis had been speaking, I had been gently probing his mind, just enough to confirm that he was telling the truth. I touched on images of his life as a thief in Heref, and one in which he and Lyreas were lying together. It pained my heart to see him as he had been, his eyes bright, his face animated and handsome.

Just then, Niferas came in. He looked without curi-

osity at the others, and said to me, "I'm hungry. Are we not to eat?"

"At any moment," I replied. "These three have come from afar to ask me a boon, which, I suddenly realize, I have not yet heard."

Niferas sighed somewhat theatrically, and, ignoring both my remark and my guests, sank down on the cushions that were as far from us as he could get. As he did, Dionis read this behavior correctly, and said to me, "Truly, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, I can put it simply. We needn't detain you."

I shook my head. "You are my guests," I replied. "And, in any case, your story fascinates me. I take it that Lyreas survived the attack, but only barely."

"I couldn't summon the strength to tell you how close it was," Dionis said. "That he is even as he appears is due to the healing powers of Breddan the *hælan*."

"Dionis!" I cried. "Breddan the Hermit? The healer mage of the Tarn of Subtle Waters?! If you went there, you have traversed the entire Kingdom! And from Ras Tayma! There are few indeed who can claim that feat, and none with a boy and a simple in tow. And now you have come to me! Is this the end of your pilgrimage?"

"That wholly depends on you, Nith..."

I interrupted him. "No," I said. "I am Jessan to you, and to Nimr, as well. Even so," and here I frowned and shook my head, "what can *I* do? I have no healing powers that will help your *twerë*."

Just then, I noticed that Levanar was standing by the door that led to the dining room. I held up my hand to stay Dionis's reply. "Let us go eat," I said, rising. "We shall eat as we talk."

In that spirit, all the food had been set out on the table at once, in the style of the people of the Lhennad, as I preferred it to be when eating with enjoyable company. The centerpiece of the feast was a platter bearing a spectacularly plump roasted fowl, stuffed with sopped bread and herbs. Levanar must have sent someone to the celebration to steal it away, since, worn out by responding to so many requests, my own repast this day was usually far more modest.

As we took our seats, I took this opportunity to introduce Niferas to our guests, and they to him. With food laid out before him, my lover was in a better mood, and graciously acknowledged their greetings. Then he lifted up the carving dagger and, instead of sticking it into the bird, waved the blade above it. Immediately, it fell apart into portions, releasing as it did a mingling of enticing aromas. And so we fell to.

Lyreas, I noticed, was capable of feeding himself, but had to be prompted by Dionis to take each bite. He then chewed each mouthful methodically and swallowed it, occasionally, when prompted by Dionis, drinking down a bit of the wine. But then, suddenly, Lyreas lifted a hand and said, slowly but distinctly, "I've never had a tastier bit of fowl." He then reached down, seized up a gobbet, and shakily placed in his mouth.

There was a dead silence at the table. The expression on Dionis's face, however, was not one of joy, but of shock, then willed placidity. He turned to Niferas.

"I heard you were a most powerful wizard," he said, speaking with care, "but I would ask you to grant me the favor of not magicking my *twerë*."

I looked at Niferas in horror, and he met my gaze with an unrepentant but only faintly discernible smile. "They are, as you said yourself, merely a boy, a thief, and a simpleton," he said, speaking in my mind. "If you can entertain such as *guests*, you can also allow me my bit of fun."

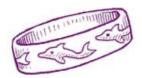
He turned slowly to Dionis. "I did not mean to offend you, surely," he replied, "only show you something you might not already know. You friend is capable of speaking and eating on his own. What he lacks is the animating spirit that in the healthy mind causes that to happen."

Dionis, who had pushed aside his plate, spoke, not back to Niferas, but directly to me. "What your honored companion is saying, if not directly, is that Lyreas is utterly vulnerable to any spirit that might wish to inhabit him. The nyche prepared its bed; we succeeded merely in preventing it from lying in it."

Now I understood. "It is only in the Holy Wood that Lyreas can be kept safe," I said. "*That* is the boon you mean to ask for."

Dionis nodded. "That, Jessan, and one other thing. Breddan told us of a lake here that has powers similar to those of the Tarn of Subtle Healing. In fact, many centuries ago, Breddan lived beside it in a tower—which he thought might still be standing. He, through me, asks that you grant us permission to reside there."

Chapter 25



T TOOK ME BUT A MOMENT to remember that lake and thetower beside it; Páli and I had ridden past it during that giddy trip on the backs of Saiphar and Ouras. But I also remembered that the tower was in complete ruin.

"I shall find someone to take you there tomorrow," I said, needing time to think about this. "It is a long journey from here, and there are only a few among us who could guide you there. Meanwhile, I shall ask Levanar to find you accommodations in one of the pilgrim halls.

To my surprise, Niferas spoke in protest. "Jessan," he said, "by all means let your servant find them a bed for the night. But darkness is still hours away. Let us take your guests for a stroll through Gostranar."

"Haven't you already done enough mischief for one day?" I asked him, touching his mind.

Again the smile. "Perhaps Nimr wouldn't mind waiting here with Lyreas," he said, "while we converse with Dionis." He turned to Dionis as he said this, saying to him, "And

don't say that *you* would prefer to stay with Lyreas and have us chat with the boy. I have never had the chance in all my life to talk directly with a declared thief, even if he is now a reformed one."

Dionis met his gaze. "You will find that I am no more reformed than you are yourself, Niferas. I have just set aside my talents for the moment, since they are of no use, yet, to Lyreas. But, yes, Nimr can wait with him here. Since Jessan has granted us our boon, I owe him much, and so, in that fashion, I would please you, too."

So we set out, with Niferas quizzing Dionis about the life and training of a thief, and Dionis answering him in bounteous detail, while looking about him with great curiosity. And so I heard about Dionis's life as a boy, trained in thievery by a master of the art, and that he became skilled enough himself to have kept all his fingers, a greater feat than never getting caught.

If Niferas had suggested this walk to goad Dionis some more, this intent was quickly forgotten, so delighted was he to learn of a realm where, had he not become a wizard, he might well have prospered himself.

Niferas caught me thinking this, and laughed, not put out in the least. "I am tempted to travel to Heref myself," he said to Dionis, "to try my hand at this—the Goddess be my witness. I would be so good at it. Even Jessan thinks so. And you say you met Lyreas while stealing from his father's house?"

Dionis had *not* said this. Niferas had been entering Dionis's mind, and had no qualms about revealing that. But if Dionis noticed this, he said nothing about it. On the contrary, he simply nodded and began telling the tale of that burglary, and the fact that its failure had cost his companion a finger. Even so, this had not kept him from returning to the house the next night to find Lyreas, and, eventually, from running off with him.

I myself was curious about Ras Tayma, and so, as soon as I could, I had Dionis jump ahead in his narrative to describe that city, which he did in such amazing detail that, for the first time in many a year I felt the desire to travel—Niferas could go to Heref, if he wished, and I would go this maze of a city and lose myself.

I said as much to Dionis, and he laughed. "You would be followed by crowds of the curious, for your hair would be just as much a curiosity there as Lyreas's was. We would have to dye it first with nut oil, and," he added, giving me an appreciative glance, "your whole body as well."

In our wanderings, we had come to the atrium where the four forces resided, a place that Niferas visited often these days. Slowly, we walked around the empty pool where the forces would flow when summoned by the *Nithaial*, and where I had sealed my fate by badly burning Páli, when he was forced to fly into the force to rescue me.

I did not like coming here, myself, but I gamely walked with them, and, as always, the two dragons, the ones carved of

aquamarine and citrine in which my own powers reposed, lit up from within as I went past them. This time, however, as we circled about the pool, the other two dragons, the ones made of fire opal and onyx, also began to glow.

Niferas stopped dead in his tracks, and grabbed my arm. "Look, look," he cried, then, releasing me, ran to nearest of the two and put his hand on it.

"It lives! I can feel it!" He thrust both his arms into the air and began to caper about, hooting with joy.

Dionis looked at me.

"He thinks that it is his doom to be made the *Nith-aial Elimiel*, now that..." the words tapered into silence.

But Dionis finished the sentence for me. "Now that your original twin, named Niccas, has passed over to Ais Dysmassia." As if realizing just then the import of what he said, he impulsively took hold of my hand.

"That must have been a terrible, terrible blow," he said. "I hope the Goddess gives you the strength to recover from it." He glanced over at Niferas, who had quit his dancing about, but was still lost to the world in the glory of his thoughts. "I suppose it provides some comfort if your *twerë*..."

I turned and stared at Dionis, feeling myself turning red—from anger or embarrassment I didn't know. "Niferas is *not* my *twerë*," I said in a low voice. "He was first my ward, and now he is my lover. But I shall never again make anyone my *twerë*."

"I understand," he answered quietly. "These are dangerous times to take someone close to your heart."

I thought of what Dionis was suffering because of what had happened to Lyreas, and, strangely, felt comforted. I kept hold of Dionis's hand as Niferas approached us. If he noticed this, he said nothing about it.

"The darkness is falling," was all he said. "I think it is time to send our guests to their beds."

hat do you make of these 'guests' of yours?" Niferas asked, once we were back in my quarters and Dionis, Lyreas, and Nimr were getting settled in theirs. "I rather like the thief, although he is a fool to keep clinging to his idiot. Nothing can ever make him better."

"Apart from *you*," I answered, with more shortness in my voice than I meant to reveal.

Niferas, of course, was unfazed by my disapproval; indeed, the recollection of his little triumph made him smirk.

"Admit it," he said. "That was a neat trick. And so seamlessly done. Dionis's face was a picture—I had to admire his self-control. Of course, it would have been unseemly to throw himself across the dining table of the *Nithaial Galgaliel* in order to get his hands around my throat."

"But why, Niferas, why?"

"Apart from my annoyance that you had invited these vagrants home with you? Because I was suspicious of them, and the more of their story I heard, the more suspicious I became. Who in The Kingdom has ever visited Ras Tayma? The count could be done on the fingers of one hand. And then to come back and go all the way north to the Tarn of Subtle Waters? A journey like that would take over a year, especially with a simpleton in tow."

"I expect that they took the river boats that ply the Alsorel all the way to Tarrusor," I replied. "From there, on horseback, they could reach the Tarn in a month or so."

Niferas shrugged. "Did you touch their minds? You should have—it would have been prudent of you, especially in these times."

"Enough to know that what Dionis told us was the truth," I replied. "But I think you know that yourself."

Niferas glanced at me. "What good are powers if you don't occasionally put them to use? I have no qualms about entering the minds of strangers and seeing what there is to see. I found enough residue of power in Lyreas to suspect that he was a bit more than a mage."

"You mean that he was a wizard?" I hadn't entered Lyreas at all, seeing no point to it. When it came to this sort of thing, Niferas was well ahead of me.

"Meaning just that. And if he didn't sleep with you, then he must have slept with Niccas, and more than once. And how did that come to pass, I wonder."

"Niccas had a reputation for being... generous with his seed," I answered.

Niferas gave a short laugh. "Delicately but wrongly

put," he said. "Niccas had a reputation for having sex with demons. *You're* the one who is rumored to be promiscuous with ordinary humans."

"Ordinary! Meaning like yourself?" I retorted. "I may be wanton, but I have taste. Besides, since Maerdas killed as many wizards as he could; it seems only fair that I should create at least as many to replace them."

"The Wizard Telo? The Wizard Alfrund? The Wizard Caelas?" Niferas made a rude noise. "The only *real* wizards you've managed to produce are Páli and myself, and I'm being generous when I include him."

"Well," I said, deciding to end this talk, "when it comes to wizardry, you've made up for all the rest."

Niferas snorted. He liked flattery best when it served his purposes. "Maybe so," he replied. "But I won't be a wizard for much longer, if you would only keep your promise."

We looked at each other in silence for a moment. When he felt he had sufficiently twisted that dagger, he returned to the subject of Lyreas. "What I can't understand," he said, "is how the two could have met. I've traced Niccas's every step from his boyhood in Lorithar to the moment he entered the pit with Maerdas. There's no sign at all that he ever went to Heref—and, indeed, why should he?"

I thought about this. "Remember," I replied, "what Dionis said of Lyreas's father—that he was the agent for a wealthy trader who resided in Lorithar. Someone like that would never travel to Heref to consult with a mere agent. He

would summon the man to him."

Niferas nodded. "Any boy worth his salt would beg to come along so as to see that great city, and to find out what life was like outside of the borders of Pharros."

He smiled wickedly. "And so, it seems, he did."

I got up. There was something I had to do, and I wanted to do it alone. At least this once. "I need some air," I said. "I'm going out for a walk around the gardens. Want to come? You could use the exercise."

The invitation had been couched in a manner that would leave Niferas honor bound to refuse. The look he gave me managed to combine revulsion and incredulity—as if I had suggested he might want to take a large dose of hagfish oil.

"No, I think not," he answered. "I think I'll get a horse and ride over the bridge to Tarrusor, and take *my* exercise in a dark alley with some willing soldier... or maybe a whole regiment, if I can find one with sufficient... *equipage*."

ITH THAT BOAST ringing in my ears, I left Niferas to his fun and slipped off to the portal, where I returned to Sondaram. This time, however, I had no intention of speaking to anyone there, or, for that matter, of even entering the palace itself. Instead, I went past the doorway out to the narrow flight of stairs that continued downward, leading to the catacombs beneath, where all the *Nithaial* from time immemorial were entombed.

My first visit here, in the company of Caelas, had been very different from my later visits, after I had assumed the powers of the *Nithaial Galgaliel*. Then, the graven images of my predecessors that rested on top of their catafalques seemed carved of stone. Now they appeared as though the *Nithaial* had simply reclined on the stone and gone to sleep—which was reflected in the postures they assumed. Some lay on their backs with their arms outstretched; some were curled on their sides, their arms cradling their heads; a few even lay on their stomachs, one arm hanging down the side of tomb.

The first time they appeared like this, I was terrified of touching them, lest I wake them up. But now, after repeated visits, I let my hands caress each as I passed him, taking pleasure in the sensation, which was not of touching flesh but smooth, sun-warmed stone.

I had come for two purposes, one easy and the other so very hard. I went first to the tomb which was meant for Maerdas, for I meant to confirm that he was dead. And there was a body there, opaquely black, as if carved of soot, but with a deep cavity in its chest, where the heart would have been.

This figure I had no intention of touching, but the missing heart bothered me, for I couldn't explain it. Whatever evil Maerdas had done, he was still half immortal; I couldn't believe that the Blessed Gesryma would intend that his image be defaced: that it was pitch black was surely enough to signal her displeasure.

Furthermore, the *Nithaial* whose souls Maerdas had eaten had not, at his death, been made whole. Surely, when he died, the souls would be free to return? All this was

puzzling—no, it was deeply disturbing, and very contrary to what I expected to find.

On the other hand, when I reached the catafalque on which Niccas lay, all was as I expected it to be, and how it tore my heart. How young his body was and how old his face! The other *Nithaial* appeared ageless, the way one imagines benign spirits who assume human form. But Niccas was different. His face was peaceful, but it was peace that had come to soothe great pain.

I fell to my knees and took hold of his graven feet, and kissed them, wetting them with my tears as I did. Finally, my body was shaking so much from grief that I clung to the feet for support. And in this position I stayed for a long time, so much so that all the feeling went from my legs.

Then, a soft voice said, "Jessan." A hand fell on my shoulder, gripped me, drew me up. The voice inspired no fear, but, even so, this place was forbidden to mortals, unless brought here by me. So, more puzzled than angry, I turned to face the intruder—and my heart leapt into my throat.

Niccas smiled. "Who else were you expecting, my brother, my twin?"

When I stood there frozen, he reached out and took my hand. "I am not flesh and blood, exactly," he said, "but close enough. Gesryma has allowed me this visit—although, in truth, She is not wholly pleased with you."

He said those words like a brother would, in gentle conspiracy against our mother, and that affected me strongly. But it did nothing to help me speak. Each time I opened my mouth, I could only babble.

"Come," Niccas said, "let's go sit on the bench—our throne, I suppose it is, for meditating before our predecessors. Solemn in here, isn't it? But beautiful, too. I'm glad I was allowed to see it."

We settled on it together, but not before Niccas examined it carefully. The gems that served as his eyes didn't move the way that living ones would, but you could sense that they pulsed with energy.

"It's very beautiful," I said, surprising myself. "Would you like to see it through my own eyes?"

Niccas turned to me, and gave me the most beautiful smile. "I would, very much so."

So, I put my arm around him, opened myself to him, and together we looked at this throne of ours, made of various costly woods, that had been artfully joined, then decorated with faint tracings of silver that spelled out arcane signs and ancient runes. The faces carved into the ends of the arms became mobile and opened their eyes.

"I hope they aren't going to speak," I said. "I don't think I want to hear what they have to say."

Niccas nodded. "Probably it would be something along the lines of, 'Don't scratch the finish, and don't dangle your legs over us."

I smiled. "More likely, it's a message to any ordinary human who would dare think to sit here: 'Beware! We bite!"

Niccas pulled me down with him onto the throne, then took my head in his hands. "Now, I need someone else's eyes to truly see your face," he said. "But my fingers will tell me much," and he gently brought them down from my forehead to my chin, and then back to my eyes, and nose, and lips. I caught them in my own hand and kissed them, then pressed my lips against his.

The feeling was beyond words, but having nothing else to describe it, I can only say that it was not like kissing a lover or a brother but the missing half that is torn from us when we are born, and that we futiley go searching for all the rest of our lives. I opened all my spirit to this moment, for I wished never to forget the smallest part of it.

Then, at last, Niccas drew apart.

"I have imagined our meeting more times than I could count," I said. "But I never thought of it happening like this. Yet, had I been in your position, This is exactly how I would want it to unfold. I was such a *fool* to fear this moment."

"A fool in more than this, alas," Niccas agreed, in a soft voice that left no wound behind. "But as regards what happened before, there you had no choice. It was my doom to pay in suffering the damage that Maerdas wrought, and to have him taunt me for years in a fiery pit while I paid it."

Niccas bowed his head for a moment, never easing his firm grip on my hand.

"So, while it was your doom to suffer, it was mine to play the thoughtless wanton," I replied, not without a flash bitterness.

"Exactly!" Niccas replied, lifting his head up again. "And, admit it, you did it *very* well."

I looked at him in shock. Then we both burst into laughter. "So it is said," I eventually managed to say. "But the worse part of the doom is spend all my remaining years without your company."

Niccas nodded slowly. "That is a terrible price, if pay it you must," he replied. "I must tell you that Gesryma allowed this visit only after I swore to keep from you any knowledge of your fate—and I do know much I would wish to tell you, were it not for that.

"So, let's do this. You ask me the question you came here to ask, and I'll avoid answering, and we'll see what comes of that. Speak: you need hide nothing from me."

This truly took me by surprise. "You mean Niferas," I said, haltingly. "I promised him I would ask the Blessed Gesryma to make him the *Nithaial Elimiel* in your place." I had noticed that Niccas spoke of her simply as "Gesryma," but he had earned that right, or assumed it after his death. I could not do the same, even if directed to.

Niccas laughed. "You know," he said, "Niferas is one of the very few people who has met us both. Your *twerë* Alfrund being another, and darling Matheas being a third. I don't count Teshnar'ad or Ormaël, since that meeting was more like mourners gathering at a funeral party."

"There's also Lyreas," I said.

Niccas looked at me in surprise. "Yes, I did meet Lyreas—once."

"Long enough to make him a wizard, and a very powerful one," I retorted.

Niccas sighed. "Not high praise, considering what happened to him. But your question was about Niferas, and I bring you an answer to your supplication."

"You were sent to bring me an answer even before I asked?" I looked at him in surprise, but a growing realization made me suddenly wish not to hear his response.

And I was right to feel so. "I came of my own volition to save you the price you would have paid had you asked it," Niccas replied, looking at me in silence long enough for this to fully sink in. Then he added, "You may tell your lover, and in truth, that the Holy Mother's response is this: 'If Niferas wishes to know whether I am willing to accept him as the Nithaial Elimiel, let him step with the Nithaial Galgaliel into the force at Fæÿstirran and find out."

I looked at Niccas in complete shock. "But that would mean... if She *doesn't* mean for him to be..."

Niccas was still looking at me with those glittering jewel eyes. "It means he would learn the price of such presumption—or, perhaps, in his case, *more* than presumption."

I bowed my head. "Niccas," I said. "I am only beginning to realize what you meant when you called me a fool. If I refuse to step into the force with him, he will hate me; if I agree to do so, he will most likely be reduced to a cinder."

"Less even than that," Niccas agreed. "Less even than a mote. You have met Dionis and Lyreas?"

I lifted my head, surprised at this turn in the conversation. "Yes," I said. "They came to me today asking for refuge in the Holy Wood."

Niccas nodded. "If he did not tell you so, Dionis is tortured by the fact that he is responsible for what happened to Lyreas, for various reasons, but first among them is his failure to act with sufficient courage when it was demanded of him. A bit of the nyche had burrowed its way into Lyreas's back, and Dionis shrank from pressing the point of his dagger into his lover's flesh quickly and deeply enough to root it out.

"Also, he blames himself for not discouraging Lyreas from making the trip to Ras Tayma at all. The Eight are more powerful in the south than they are here, and one of the first tasks they have set themselves is to track down and bring over to their side every wizard they can find."

"Well, he is safe now in Wisferon—as is Niferas, for that matter."

"True enough. Indeed, Niferas is powerful enough to protect himself almost anywhere he chooses to go."

Niccas shook his head. "But I'm not telling you this out of concern for either of them, but for you. If you look hard at Dionis and Lyreas and then look hard at yourself and Niferas, you may find something in common. You have all the clues spread out before you—it's up to you to figure out how they fit together."

As he said these words, he began to rise, and I knew that he was about to depart. "You're going," I said, my heart sinking. "At least give me one last kiss."

Niccas smiled. "Gladly," he said. He wrapped his arms around me; our lips met and held; and again that feeling of completeness, so fragile, so powerful, filled me up.

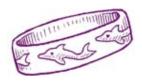
Then Niccas pulled away, but touched my cheek to soften the bitter taste of what he now had to say. "Our doom now separates, beloved, and we shall not meet again until it is time for you to come meet me in the place beyond."

"Can't you come *here*, at least, so that we can be together like this?" I cried out. I reached for that hand, but my fingers met only mist. Only the touch lingered—that and his voice, just long enough to answer my question.

"Not unless the Blessed Mother wishes it, which I doubt," he said. "But don't despair—there are other ways that I can be with you, if you watch for them."

Then, truly, he was gone.

INTERMEZZO THE SECOND



"Well, here we are again, stuck in another place with no beds or bedding, no chairs, no tables, and..."

"Worst of all, nothing to do."

"Yup, same, same. Besides, compared to Ernfardast, this place is a *dump*. Good thing Breddan gave you the reawakening spell, or we'd be sitting on rubble, soaking wet from the rain."

"It does seem a little grim. It never occurred to me that towers wouldn't have chimneys, let alone fireplaces."

"Dionis, you are so *hopeless* as a *Nithaial*! Don't your powers include command over fire?"

"Nimr, I just don't know how... Maybe, if I..."

"Ahh. That's so much better! And it wasn't so hard, either, was it? Lift it up into the air a little—it doesn't *have* to burn on the floor, you know."

"Here, let's toast some seedcake. I'm glad you grabbed a sackful. Otherwise, we'd be chewing on our shirt-tails.

"That's actually due to Ruaold. He went to the kitchens and got them to put up that bag for us. There's more than seedcake in it—cheese, dried pippins, honey knots...."

"But no folding table or compressable stools."

"Ruaold said that wherever we were in the Holy Wood, the Waldrônur would find us and care for us. I bet that includes the loan of some furniture. Anyway, *he* certainly knew who you were, even if Jessan didn't."

"I hid it from Jessan and, more importantly, from Niferas. And I probably would have from Ruaold, as well, if I had known how quickly the two of you would become fast friends. Did you stay up the whole night with him?"

"We parted when light first broke in the east. If I am destined to love boys, I shall seek Ruaold out and spend the rest of my life with him—although we might have to flee Wisferon to do it. Most Waldrônur look down on mere mortals like us... like *me*."

"The Waldrônur?"

"That is the name they call themselves, the people who serve the *Nithaial* here in the Holy Wood. Ruaold says that Jessan thinks of them as servants who, over the centuries, have absorbed some of this place's powers. But the truth, Ruaold says, is that the Waldrônur gave up their powers so as to make Wisferon a refuge for the *Nithaial*."

"Truly! They must have been a very magical folk, if *that* is true."

"I guess. He wasn't very clear about it. The best that

I could understand is that their powers were like Breddan's, only larger, somehow."

"Why did he urge you to get me to take Lyreas and leave with you first thing in the morning? Doesn't he trust Jessan? I feel badly that when he went to look for us yesterday morning, he found us long gone."

"Jessan? He probably had forgotten about by then. Anyway, the Waldrônur would never speak ill of a *Nithaial*, except for Maerdas, whom they hated, and who hated them right back. But I do think that Ruaold doesn't care for Niferas—although he wouldn't explain why. I think even that amount of disloyalty was painful for him."

"Well, I agree with Ruaold! We must do our best to keep Niferas from getting too interested in us, or spending too much time with us, which might be the same thing."

"I was hoping you'd say that. Niferas is such a little *shit*. I didn't like him at all, and with all due respect—since he's your twin *and* a *Nithaial*—I wasn't much impressed by Jessan, either."

"Nimr!"

"Well, I wasn't. He was nice enough, I don't mean that. In fact, as a person, I liked him a lot. But as a *Nithaial*, he has a long way to go. Just compare him to your father. Niccas was *totally* a *Nithaial*, someone you could really *pray* to."

"Hmm. I don't know if that's fair to Jessan, but I do see your point. He's more like a prince who wakes up one morning and finds that his father and older brothers have run away and now he's stuck with being king."

"Exactly! Now get your seedcake before it burns, unless you have a taste for char."

"This one's for Lyreas, if he'll eat it. The ride on the two stags exhausted him, and me, too."

"That made my brain spin, it was so amazing! It's the best thing that's happened to me since I left Ras Tayma... Apart from meeting Niccas, I mean. Can you imagine if we had to walk all that distance?"

"Heh. Our feet would be covered with blisters, and Jessan would realize we didn't exactly hike all the way from Ras Tayma to the tarn."

"He probably guessed that right away. We looked tired, but we didn't look all that *tough*. If we had traveled that far on foot, our legs would resemble braided vines. He probably figures we traveled by horseback."

"Uh oh. I've never been on a horse—have you?"

"I think riding bareback for hours on a stag must count for *something*. I don't think I'd hesitate now to mount something as paltry as a horse."

"I hadn't thought of that. Well, if you dare, I'll dare not that I expect Jessan to put us to the test. Did Ruaold tell you anything else?"

"Ruaold told me *lots*. His father was high steward before he fell to his death, and so he knows pretty much everything about Gostranar *and* Wisferon."

"Really? Perhaps we could get Jessan to lend him to

us as a servant. I'd love to talk to him."

"Dionis! That is the *dumbest* idea! Plus, you forget that the Waldrônur aren't really servants, anyway. Ruaold can just slip away any time he wants. The Waldrônur call it 'tree haunting.' It's something they do all the time, even if they're my age. And if they work at Gostranar, some other Waldrônur just comes along and takes their place—knowing just what to do, besides."

"That's amazing! But how can Jessan not be aware of all this?"

"If Jessan thinks of them as servants, he probably doesn't bother himself about their doings, except for the few he deals with every day. Another example of how lost he is as a *Nithaial*. However, he *does* have one really good point."

"And that would be...?"

"I'll bet he can teach me to swim. Not only does his power extend over water, but he grew up by the sea. That's different from being actually out on it. When I was a cabin boy, I refused to learn, because it would mean that if I went overboard, it would take that much longer for me to drown.

But if I'm going to hang around here doing nothing, I might as well do it afloat. I'll bring Lyreas along and maybe he can learn to do his business in the water."

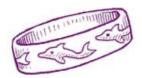
"Yes, I just started smelling it, too. Poor Lyreas. But here he can go about in just a shirt. That should make it easier for us."

PART SEVEN REVELATIONS



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Chapter 26



GAIN THIS MORNING, I woke up to an empty bed. I had felt Niferas climb in with me hours after I had slipped under the covers myself, and, sure enough, he had left behind stains on the bedclothes to show not only that he had slept here, but that he had perhaps found the regiment he had gone off to find.

I was tempted to lie here in the sweetness freshness of first awakening, but I resisted this, forcing myself to get to my feet. The groan that I gave off as I did so, alerting Levanar that it was time for my ablutions. I groaned again when he came in bearing a steaming ewer—this was the morning of my weekly shave.

My facial hair was still so fair and light that I could have shaved but once a month, were I anything but the *Nithaial Galgaliel*—or perhaps if I had chosen an attendant less captivated by propriety. As the well-stropped blade slid over my face, I imagined whom this person might be, and had decided on Acwellen, a rider of Lhennad and my table compan-

ion the night of the welcoming feast.

The thought of that burly horseman attempting to shave me made me smile so widely that I was lucky that Levanar was so deft at it. But, when all was done, I felt in a much better humor, and sent my attendant to go fetch Dionis and company, and bring them back here so that we might break our fast together, then make plans for how I might help them find their way to the lake.

However, Levanar returned not with them but with an unfamiliar and rather gangling boy of Nimr's age.

Levanar made an apologetic obeisance, and said, "It seems that the party departed on their journey at the very crack of dawn. Niferas, too, had come to the lodge in search of them, and he missed them as well."

I was disappointed, but, I think, even more relieved. I had a difficult conversation with Niferas lying before me, and now I could focus entirely on it. Still, it was puzzling.

"And this is?" I asked, nodding to the boy. Etiquette required that I ask, since it was impolite to assume. If I had said nothing, Levanar would have done nothing more to call my attention to him by hesitating in a barely perceptible manner. If I didn't catch the hint, the boy would be sent away.

"He is Ruaold, if it please you," Levanar replied. "It was he who witnessed their departure."

I looked at the lad. He seemed strangely familiar to me, but as to why I couldn't say. "Have you broken your fast, Ruaold?" I asked. "Before the sun rose, Highest One," he answered, in a voice as pleasing as his face was homely.

Some of the attendants at Gostranar were more used to speaking to me than others, although most avoided it if at all possible. Spoken to directly, they replied respectfully, but shortly. I had soon learned that, for all of them, chatting with me was not a pleasure to be enjoyed but a task to be performed.

"Well then, by now you must ready for something more," I replied. "Come sit with me, at least, for I am starving," and I took him with me into my dining room, where a pleasant array of food was already waiting.

As we sat down, I thought of yesterday's meal, and prepared myself to shield Ruaold from Niferas's disdain, should he arrive while we were eating. But this was a short meal for me, and my questions for the boy were few.

I passed him a plate heaped with sweet cakes. I was more in the mood, myself, for a boiled egg or two—to be dipped, as I ate it, in a crock of melted butter.

"Have I not spoken to you before?" I asked, after eating my first egg and wiping my fingers on the tablecloth.

"Yes, Highest One. It was at the farewell ceremony for my father."

"Alarcon!" I exclaimed. I didn't remember the meeting; what was familiar were the features of the boy's face. "You look much like your father. Why are you working at such a lowly task? I would gladly allow you to apprentice for any posi-

tion here at Gostranar."

The boy eyed me cautiously, then replied, "Truly, Highest One, there is no lowly work at this place. All of us do what we are called to do, and what we are called to do always interests us. Being among the pilgrims gives me glances into the world beyond, where we who serve you rarely if ever venture. And thus it was that I met Nimr, and was able to do his party a few small services."

I began on my second egg, this time eating it slowly so that the boy could take the liberty of finishing his sweet cake. He did, and, after a covert glance at how I was doing, polishing off another.

"Nimr is an unusual boy," I said at last, "and just about the perfect friend for someone interested in what life is like outside of Wisferon. Did he tell you he was a cabin boy?"

Ruaold's face brightened. "Yes! To have actually sailed on a ship! I can barely imagine it. Then to have the chance to ride across the desert on the back of a *gräz*..." The boy suddenly choked on a rogue crumb of sweet cake, his face turning bright red from the spasm of coughing. Niferas had come in.

This time, there was no feigning a lack of interest. "Is this the boy named Ruaold?" he demanded. And when I nodded, added, "Why am I surprised? I've been searching for him all over Gostranar."

I glanced at Ruaold, who having failed to stifle the fit, was trying to drown it in sips of honeyed tea. "Levanar brought him to me," I answered. "Apparently he was the last one to see our party before they left."

"And aided and abetted it, as well," Niferas replied with a cold voice. "Boy! What do you have to say for yourself?"

Ruaold spoke clearly but deferentially, his eyes never leaving the tablecloth. "I apologize, O Master Wizard, if I have displeased you. I work as an attendant in the hostel, and I was told to care for them specially, as they were the guests of the *Nithaial Galgaliel*. Before they slept, the boy Nimr asked me to wake them before sunrise, for they had a long journey ahead of them, to a lake deep in Wisferon.

"So, meaning only to obey my instructions to be of help to them, I woke them, got them provisions, and took them to the best path from which to start their journey."

"So you know of this lake?" I asked.

Ruaold lifted his eyes just long enough to look at me in surprise. "Of course, Highest One. I have been there more than once to fill flasks with its water. We who serve you use it for healing purposes."

"And then you gave them directions?" Niferas asked.

Ruaold shook his head. "No, Master Wizard. There was no need. No one gets lost in the Holy Wood—although they might be taken to a destination they did not choose."

I raised my hand, giving Niferas a warning look as I did. "Thank you, Ruaold. You have served me exactly as I would have wished. You may return to your duties, and take

the rest of the sweet cakes with you."

"Let him take boiled eggs, if he must have *some-thing*," Niferas said, before the boy's hands could even move. "I fancy the sweet cakes this morning."

Thus it was that Ruaold departed with his pockets empty, and, perhaps as I need not bother to explain, Niferas then ignored the sweet cakes—and everything else on the table as well.

"You were a bit hard on the boy," I said. Somehow I had managed to eat every one of the boiled eggs in the bowl; the crock of butter was wiped clean. Was it possible for a *Nithaial* to actually get *fat*? I might yet find out.

Niferas made a dismissive noise. "And you were pathetically easy on him. I'm sure he told you the truth, but I'm not so sure it is the *whole* truth. Why would Dionis decide to leave without saying farewell—at least to *you*. At the very least, it was discourteous. You should be suspicious of him."

"Niferas!" I exclaimed. "Why do you say that?"

"It Lyreas was a wizard," my lover replied, "then either he was hiding that fact from Dionis by pretending to be a mage, or else Dionis chose to deceive us about it."

"You must have poked around inside of Dionis, as well as Lyreas," I said. "I doubt he could have hidden any such lie from you."

Niferas hesitated. He hated admitting any limitation to his powers, even to himself. "Dionis was an open book to me," he said slowly. "But on reflection, I now wonder if he wasn't a little *too* open. Even ordinary mortals have the means to shut their minds to you if you want to peer into their deepest secrets. Not that this has any effect on me, but I do have to *push* a little." Niferas said the word with relish; I could imagine how the "ordinary mortal" experienced that pressure.

"But with Dionis," he went on, "if those doors existed, they were not only shut but hidden, and I wasn't looking all that closely."

Our eyes met. "This morning I thought I would spend a little more time with him. Of course, I can seek him out with the scrying mirror, but that's more work and not nearly as satisfactory as having him right in front of me."

There was a moment of silence. Then I abruptly got up from the table. "If you're not having anything to eat or drink," I said, "then come with me. I have something to tell you, and we're going to the proper place for it.

HE BLAZING SUN was not yet high enough to drive away the cool mantle that the night had laid over Fæÿstirran; in fact it was quite lovely there, with the play of shadow and the dance of light. Niferas and I went up the steps to the plaza and to the force, as I began to explain what Niccas had said.

As I had expected, Niferas was furious.

"You asked Niccas?" he shouted. "Niccas *hates* me! I was there when Maerdas sent him and that other boy plunging to their deaths. I know *he* survived, but I'll bet the boy didn't. Sepharas was his name; something like that. Niccas

had seduced him and persuaded him to turn against his own lord and master."

"First of all, I didn't ask Niccas. He came to forestall my asking the Blessed Gesryma, which he said would have disastrous consequences. And whether he hates you or not, he wouldn't lie to me—not ever, and not in that place under any circumstances whatsoever. If he wished you ill, he could destroy you even from Ais Dysmassia."

Niferas thought about that, then asked, his voice still thin with rage, "So what did the *former Nithaial Elimiel* tell you to say to me?"

I shivered inwardly as I spoke. "He said that the Holy Mother's reply to such a request from me would be: 'If Niferas wishes to know whether I am willing to accept him as the Nithaial Elimiel, let him step with the Nithaial Galgaliel into the force at Fæÿstirran and find out."

By now we had come up the force and stopped. Niferas was deep in thought, his eyes intent on the flow of power as it rushed upwards just in front of us.

"This is a test," he said, at last, speaking slowly. "It is a cruel test, but that is only fitting, since I am a cruel person myself. But I am no coward. I accept the challenge, since I will never rest until I know my doom."

Now he turned to me. "I have only one question to ask you first. The other day, at the Pool of the Powers, did you cause the other two dragons to come to life, in order to mock me? I admit it, I will hate you through all eternity if you

did, but I would like even less having you watch me go to my death, knowing that this was so."

I shook my head. "No, beloved, I would never do that to you, although I understand why you might think so. To be honest, I couldn't understand how what happened came about, but it was not caused by me."

Something in Niferas lightened, and he sighed. "Very well. I believe you. My eyes now are clear. Step into the force first, then reach back and give me your hand. I don't think I have the strength of will to enter it without you going first."

I hesitated for a bare moment—how could this end well?—but I owed him the attempt, no matter my secret fears. I hadn't brought him here to decide for him, but to let him make up his own mind. And now he had.

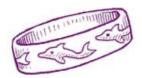
As before, the force parted before me, opening a portal into which I stepped. I then turned around and reached out my hand to Niferas, who clasped it in his. I stepped slowly backwards, and he moved with me, not letting me draw him to me, but entering the force of his own accord.

In that short moment, his hand and arm were burned into ash. For an even briefer moment, the ash retained the shape of what they had been. Then that cruel simulacrum crumbled and dissolved into a puff of ash.

Niferas began screaming and did not stop, even when he fell onto the plaza. His body writhed there, his face was distorted in an agony so great that mere physical pain could never have caused it. I had leapt at once from the force and gone to him, but something held me from him. His body convulsed, then went rigid. A dark cloud rose up from him, not ash this time but something spiritually as foul. This was sucked down through the tiles at our feet, straight, I think, to Ais Dysmassia.

The rigidness left Niferas's body, even as the force that kept me from dissipated and was gone. I knealt down and picked him up; he seemed light as feather to me. Quickly, in a state of shock, I carried him up the flight of stairs to the portal, and from there to my bed, calling out for help, still calling, even after it had come.

Chapter 27



iferas lay on the bed, unconscious, hovering at the edge of death, his skin unnaturally white, near translucent even, with the tracery of his veins painfully visible. I sat beside him all day long and slept beside him through the night, which made me ideally placed to call for help when he wet himself.

I mention this only because each time it happened, it completely unnerved me. Since Niferas was drinking nothing but the few drops of water we sent trickling down his throat, his urine was a thick and foul liquid, necrotic almost, like something that might ooze out from a corpse.

The healer came to examine it, but mostly to change the wound on what was left of Niferas's right arm. The cauterized flesh at the end of his stump had kept him from bleeding to death while I carried him back, but then it had to be pared down to the living flesh, so that the wound might heal.

The healer had been gentle and very careful when she had treated Niferas's wound, but much blood had been lost, and he had become feverishly hot. The real damage, however, was from what the force had done to him deep within. Compared to that, the blasted arm was as nothing.

I had been told this woman's name again and again but couldn't keep in my mind, despite the fact I liked her very much. She was an elderly woman with hair as white as snow, a face as wrinkled as badly dried parchment, and blue eyes as bright as two evening stars. When it became clear that Niferas might well die, I asked her why the boy's magical powers weren't coming to his rescue.

She turned away from him to answer, fixing me with those brilliant eyes. "He may once have been the most powerful of wizards," she said, "but now he has no power, at least that I can discern. None at all."

After she left, my mind went back to that time on the Tejj, when I had touched the piece of *mythrad*, and all but had my life sucked out of me. There, I had no one but Alfrund and Orien to tend me; and yet I had survived. I remembered the tea that Alfrund had brewed for me, recalled the very taste, broke it into its components— iacynder and dorras root, yes, but the important ingredient was... ufforsta.

A surge of affection for Alfrund filled my heart. How long it had been since I had last practiced as an herbalist. I went and found my *enkiridion*, along with my treasured bag with all the tiny bags of simples, each in its proper place. All of them were quite stale by now, I realized, which was all for the best—since I was the last person to be treating Niferas.

Again I asked the healer's name, Estarna, and this time committed it to memory. Then I sought her out, and told her about what had happened to me, and the subsequent effects of that tea, and before that, I now remembered, tincture of temerith, drops of which had been rubbed on my lips.

She listened with respect, then interest, then brought me into the room where she prepared her concoctions, so much like Grysta's. Indeed, I thought, Estarna appeared for all the world like Grysta's sister: older, wiser, perhaps, but cast from the same mold.

The treatment was tried on Niferas, first the tincture, then the tea, some of which was dribbled into his mouth from a spouted cup made for just that purpose. And it had an effect, if an unexpected one. Niferas began to murmur, as if talking to someone. I put an ear just above his lips, but I could catch none of the word. His face, which had before been a mask, now became faintly animated, first with confusion, then—impossible to believe, but there it was—amusement.

Estarna beamed and squeezed my hand. It was one of the most precious moments of my life.

HE FOLLOWING DAY, Niferas was still unconscious, but he was clearly doing better. I allowed Levanar to bathe and shave me. Then I put on a clean shirt, and sent him go find Ruaold, for there were things I wanted to ask, and now had the leisure and peace of mind to do so.

There was a bench in a small arbor outside my quarters, and I met him there, had him sit beside me, and took

his hand, lest he be frightened by what I was about to ask.

"Ruaold," I said, "when you and I last met, Niferas came and sat with us, and I saw you look at him with utter hatred. I ask you to speak honestly to me, without fear of reprisal of any sort, and tell me why that was so."

The boy did look very frightened, then very sad, so much so that I thought he would refuse to answer, and that I wouldn't have the heart to make him do so.

But, after a moment, he cleared his throat, wiped his eyes with his fist, and said, with a hoarse but stolid voice, "It is because he killed my father."

I looked at him in astonishment. "I know Niferas was with him when he fell," I said, "but none grieved more for your father than he. Never have I seen him so overcome."

Ruaold nodded slowly, then asked, "Can I go now?"

I thought to release him, but something in me balked. If I didn't face this now, I never would. "No," I said. "I'm not saying that you're wrong, only that it is hard for me to believe you. Can you persuade me of this in any way?"

The boy thought for a long time. There was something akin to pity in his voice when he finally answered. "Niferas didn't know this, but there was a witness to what he did. This witness was too frightened of Niferas to come forward, and, indeed, I had to swear never to reveal his name, come what may, to learn what he knew. And if you care to mind touch me now, I shall share what he saw with you."

I closed my eyes and placed my palm on Ruaold's

forehead, then waited as the memory began to unfold. It was an eerie experience, like looking in a scrying mirror, but without that device's framing shape. I was in darkness, there was a wail, then Alarcon's body fell out of nowhere, landing in a crumpled heap. The viewer looked at him, then looked up the side of what I could barely make out to be the tower, then stepped several paces backwards, until hidden behind a bush. Alarcon began to drag himself across the grass, groaning in pain, his leg broken. Niferas appeared, young, still really a boy. He looked at Alarcon, who started calling out for help. Niferas looked about, then disappeared into the dark. In a moment, he was back, carrying a large rock. He lifted this up and smashed it against Alarcon's head. The first time the rock fell to one side; the second time it smashed the skull.

Niferas looked carefully at what he had done, then pulled off his shirt and tucked it under Alarcon's smashed head, tying the sleeves over the dead man's face. Next, he grabbed hold of Alarcon's feet and dragged him back the distance he had previously crawled, until his body lay beside the tower again. Finally, Niferas retrieved the stone and set it beside the head, so that it would appear that Alarcon had hit it when he fell. He put his shirt back on, drenched though it was in blood, then sat down, put the head steward's crushed head in his lap, and began to shout for help.

The memory continued but I could stand to watch no more. I pulled away from Ruaold and put my head in my hands, shaken to the core. The boy sat with me for a bit, but then when I continued to say nothing, got up and left. Later, when I sent for him again, no one could find him and no one knew where he had gone.

At that moment, though, my mind was too caught up with what I had seen to think of him. Eventually I got up and staggered into my bedroom, and sat down on a chair there, staring dumbly at Niferas. Even now he was beautiful to me; even now I had to struggle to see him as evil. I had always known he was deeply flawed, and in time I had also come to admit the streak of cruelty in him. But *that*. How could I explain *that*?

Later that night I roused myself. I went to Niferas's rooms and let myself in, wiping the wards aside as if they were mere cobwebs. I had been in his rooms before, although he rarely let anyone in, even to clean them. He kept the rooms dark and ignored the dirt. Only the room that held his clothing was passably neat—he must have let someone come in there regularly enough to collect his dirty clothes and care for his clean ones.

This, of course, was not the room that interested me, but at least it was lit. I went to the glowstone responsible for that and pried it off the wall. This I carried with me into the inner chamber, where Niferas practiced his wizardry. This room was ordinarily illuminated by candlelight, and the glowstone's brightness seemed to make it wince.

It had been many years since I had been invited in, but it was much as I remembered, a large room made to seem small and cramped by all that had been stuffed into it. Niferas had been especially drawn to alchemy, and here were all the devices and long-necked vessels of blown glass that I associated with that art, shoved onto shelves and mostly covered with dust.

His scrying mirror rested on a round table built especially to hold it, with a top of polished black marble which was in turn supported by three legs, each of them carved to represent some particularly ugly mythological beast. The mirror had obviously been recently used, but I passed by it and went to a large worktable set against the far wall. This was where Niferas had smashed the Head of Malamun.

Here I found the broken pieces of the circlet, and also something else, a metal tongue, fabricated of tiny pieces of jointed metal, fixed to the table by a dagger, which had been hammered through it.

I prodded this with the tip of my finger, half expecting it to waggle. But, no, the spell was broken. Even so, the fact that Niferas had stabbed it so violently was interesting. Perhaps it had spoken one foul thing too many, even for him.

I left it as I had found it, and held the glowstone so that I could look about the room, my eyes moving restlessly from one object of supposed virtue to the next, until they lit on something so unremarkable that it must have called out to me, for it was almost invisible in its ordinariness—just a little piece of carved wood.

I felt my heart freeze. It was the little dolphin that

Faryn had carved and given me the morning I left our village. That Niferas should have come upon it seemed so impossible that I kept turning it over and over in my hands, looking for anything that would make it into another ordinary good luck charm, for almost every fisherman carried one, and the number of such in the world must be near countless.

But with each turn, my fingers brought out more of the wood's soft luster, revealed more of the tiny details that I knew so well, and my heart twisted tight in my chest as I tried to unravel the mystery of how Niferas had got hold of it, and for what purpose.

In my agitation, the glowstone fell from my fingers, and when I stooped down to retrieve it, something glittering caught my eye. It was a coin that was caught between the wall and one of the table's rear legs, and I had to crawl under the table to get hold of it. Once I examined it closely, I recognized it at once: the coin that Niferas had found when I first brought him to Ernfardast.

I stared at it while I did my best to recall the circumstances of its finding. Páli had claimed that Niferas had spotted it in the grass; Niferas had said he had dropped it there, and was only retrieving it.

Then I said something to Páli that gave offence—in fact, from that moment things had gone sour between us. I hadn't understood why then, and I had even less of a clue as to why that had happened now. But it *had* happened.

I also remembered that the coin had a spell buried

in it, deeply cloaked, and for that reason I thought it would cause Niferas no harm. It was waiting for someone who knew how to release it. But, as I turned the coin over in my fingers, I realized that the spell was no longer there. It had been activated—and Niferas alone could have done that.

The coin had runes engraved on it, and a portrait as well—a face that for some reason seemed familiar to me. I held the glowstone right up next to it and saw that it was Niferas's own face. Or, rather, it was the face that Niferas had slowly, over time, reshaped his own visage to mirror.

Furthermore, to add surprise to surprise, I had seen another graven image of this face recently somewhere else, and in a context where it hadn't made me think of Niferas. How could that be? Where had that been?

The answer, when it came to me, made my blood run cold. In fact, it shocked me so thoroughly that I had to confirm the memory at once—or, to be more honest, discover that my mind, rattled by the events of the day, was playing a cruel trick on me. I hurried from Niferas's rooms, and from there went once again to the portal, passing through it to Sondaram.

The agony I felt, stepping again into the Hall of the Nithaial, was almost crippling. In the ordinary course of events, I would *never* have come here again so soon, when the visit with Niccas was still so palpable to me, and his present absence so stark as to tear my heart.

Still, I had to know. Slowly, as if wading against a fast

current, I retraced my footsteps to the catafalque on which the image of Maerdas reposed. It had completely changed. The cavity in the chest was filled; the statue itself, which before had resembled compacted soot, was now composed of glossy black stone.

My attention when I had gotten this far on my last visit turned almost immediately to the statue of Niccas; I had given that of Maerdas, once I saw that, indeed, there was one, had been quick and cursory. Such attention as I had given it had been directed at the strange hole in it, and the stranger substance of which it was then made.

The face I had barely glanced at. This time, though, I stared at it long and hard. And there was no question about it; here lay Niferas, who had so wanted to be the *Nithaial Elimiel*. But Niferas was still alive; he never was and was never meant to be the *Nithaial Elimiel*.

I had seen enough. If I stayed for another moment, I would start to scream, just as Niferas had when his arm was eaten by the force. I looked around one last time, hoping desperately to find Niccas smiling at me, waiting for me to come sit with him on the shared throne. But I was alone and I fled.

I was in no better shape when I returned to Gostranar. I had meant to go straight to bed and bury myself in the covers. But I couldn't. Niferas was in my bed. And to be in his presence right now, especially in the shape he was in now, speechless, absent, his being charged with so many

loathsome images, would drive me mad.

The glowstone that I had taken from Niferas's rooms lay on the ground where I had dropped it, just before I had stepped into the portal. As I bent down to pick it up, a phrase suddenly came into my mind, something I had heard said earlier this same day. "No one gets lost in the Holy Wood—although they might be taken to a destination they did not choose."

That phrase seized hold of me and hurried me across the grounds of Gostranar. When I reached the edge of Wisferon, the trees parted, and a path appeared before me. I held up the glowstone to light my way and began to run. As soon as I began to do so, I knew I would continue running until I dropped, or until I reached the destination I hadn't chosen, but was waiting for me.

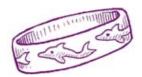
Right then, I would have been happy to run forever. And so I did, never tiring, as the path lead on and on and on, never straight but never confusing. It wound past coppices where branches were so intertwined you couldn't see where one tree started and the next began. I ran through meadows where fireflies sparkled, and my passing was like a comet shooting through a field of stars. I startled a herd of deer asleep and invisible in a mist-shrouded dell, who nonetheless sprang up and scattered in all directions.

And finally I came to the shore of a lake just as the moon rose, and I ran over the silver path it laid across the water, for I am the *Nithaial Galgaliel*. As I crossed over, I

could feel the healing power in the water tenderly caress my bare feet. For I had run my sandals into pieces.

Now, ahead of me, a dark spire with the moon behind it, stood the tower I had once seen partly hidden by mist. But it was fallen then, and now it was repaired. And inside it slept the person I had come to talk to, and the thought of seeing him lifted my heart, although, even then, I hadn't a clue as to the reason why.

Chapter 28



FOUND DIONIS SOUND ASLEEP, his body cradling Lyreas's. Impulsively, I knelt down and kissed Lyreas on the cheek. I thought of what Niccas had said about Dionis and myself, and realized their truth. Both of us had lovers all but destroyed by the worst sort of evil, even if Niferas had brought this on himself. Before, Lyreas had seemed to me little more than a terrible burden, but now I understood much, much more.

Niferas had said that Lyreas was an empty shell, but the moment my lips touched him, I felt something sleeping within him, something that my own power seemed eager to touch. I withdrew my lips and, tentatively, touched the same cheek with a finger, letting some of my power seep through it to make the contact it so desired.

All of a sudden, Lyreas's eyes opened. They were dazzled for a moment by the light of the glowstone, although I had dimmed it as low as it would go. But then they focused, saw me, and, to my astonishment, registered who I was.

"Nithaial Galgaliel," he whispered, "you come at last." Shocked, I broke the contact, and he fell back asleep.

Confused, I sat back on my heels, and when I did, saw that Dionis was wide awake and looking at me. The expression was unreadable, but I sensed no hostility—only a profound confusion. I gestured to him that he should come outside with me. He nodded, gently disentangled himself from his lover, and, wrapping himself in a blanket, followed me out the door.

When we were far enough from the door to speak, I said, "I meant no harm. I was..."

But Dionis stopped my speech by taking hold of my arm. "That was no magicking," he said, "and it lifted my heart. For the first time since I was outside of Fæÿstirran, I have hope again."

Dionis had led me down to the shore, where a large rock stood right beside the water, and we climbed up on it and sat down together. The moon was higher now, and it was peering over our shoulders. A breeze had risen with it, and I suddenly felt a chill. When I shivered, Dionis put his arm around me, bringing the blanket with it, so that it now wrapped me as well, and bound us together.

"Fæÿstirran!" I exclaimed. A thought suddenly burst into my mind, but it was so ludicrous I felt like an idiot putting it into words.

"Ruaold started to tell me that Nimr revealed to him that he had ridden on a "*Gräzk'vor*," I stammered. "The other day, I met one myself at that very place, and it almost devoured my companions. Surely..."

"Hmm," Dionis said. "It certainly sounds like *Nisn'zahsk* to me. I'm sorry; I shouldn't have invited her into Fæÿstirran. I expected that she would drink her fill and head for home."

I looked at him dumbfounded. "You let her into Fæÿstirran? How could you have done that? Was Niccas there when this happened?"

Dionis sighed. "This conversation isn't going the way I imagined it *at all*. Let me start it again with a question: despite yourself, you never doubted that Niferas wasn't meant to be the *Nithaial Elimiel*. If you had to give one good reason why you knew this, what would it be?"

I took my left arm and held it so that the moonlight fell directly upon it. Early on, I learned that I could will the Cronnex to appear or not appear at will, but the one time when I had no control over it was in bright moonlight. And, sure enough, it immediately began to glow.



"Both the Nithaial are marked by this sigil," I replied.
"If Niferas had been the *Nithaial Elimiel*, his arm would have

displayed the missing half of it. When I told him this, he just said that when the Blessed Gesryma made him a Nithaial, it would appear then—if I would only intercede for him. In fact, that's why I've come to talk to you…"

Dionis raised his own left arm from out under the blanket, and when the moonlight fell on it, the words I was speaking stopped making any sense. They just fell from my lips and fluttered away, like leaves caught up in the late autumn wind. Struck dumb, I could only turn and stare at him, my mouth hanging open like any simpleton's.

Dionis saw this, and smiled. "You *are* a little slow on the uptake, my brother. It turned out I was more in danger of Niferas finding out—he definitely smelled something. Did he finally figure out what it was?"

When I still sat there silent, he went on. "I swore to the Blessed Gesryma I would not reveal myself until Lyreas spoke again. Miraculously, thanks to you, that happened tonight. But it does little good if, at the same time, *you* become speechless."

My head reeled. This day, now almost the day after, was now absolutely too much for me. Tears began streaming

down my face. "You were the reason the dragons came to life at the pool," I whispered, more to myself than to him. "That was the moment when Niferas went completely mad."

Dionis clasped me more firmly, and when he spoke, it was grave with concern. "I've been a *fool*, Jessan," he said. "You didn't come here in the wee hours of the morning to learn who I was—something terrible has happened and you needed to talk to me. And look what's happened. I've made everything much *worse*."

"No, no, no," I said. I didn't have the words right then to say what *had* happened, but "worse" didn't come into it. "No, Dionis, in some country, far, far away, I am jumping up and down with joy, even if tears are also streaming down my face. But right now, on this rock here with you, I find I am so terribly tired that I must give in to it.

"Can I come and lie down with you and sleep, then sleep some more? In the morning, just roll me into a corner and go about your business, singing, dancing, pounding on the walls with your fists. None of it will have the slightest effect on me."

"Amazing how you know how we live our lives here," Dionis replied. "Come. You shall lie on one side of Lyreas and I shall lie on the other, and when Nimr and Ruaold come down from the top of the tower in the morning, they won't be able to believe their eyes."

He then stood up, took my hand, and brought me back to the tower and to my bed.

HE FOLLOWING MORNING I found myself lying alone on a straw mat, half buried in a bunched up pile of blankets, reluctantly slipping out of the arms of the sweetest of dreams. Sun came streaming through a narrow window with a steady brightness that told me I had slept long into the day.

I couldn't remember those dreams now, but I did have a lingering sense of the same completeness I had felt when Niccas and I had embraced. I hadn't doubted for a moment that Dionis was now the *Nithaial Elimiel*, but now, in a way that penetrated my very being, I *knew*.

Near at hand was a plate-size seed cake and a jug of water. I sat up against the wall and washed down the first with generous swigs from the spout of the second. Then I got to my feet and went to the door, which had been left slightly ajar, probably in the fear that closing it firmly might wake me from my sleep.

There was no sign of Dionis or Lyreas, but Nimr and Ruaold were floundering about in the water right beside the rock where Dionis had revealed himself as the *Nithaial Elimiel* the night before.

The moment Nimr saw me, he called out, "We thought you might sleep the day through! Ruaold said he knew how to swim, but all he does is try to fling the water out of his way. There must be more to it than that!"

I came down to them, climbed up on the rock, and dove cleanly into the lake. The water was warm at the surface

but grew quickly cold as I descended—a sharp chill that drove all traces of sleepiness away. I shot to the surface and emerged with a whoop. Then I quickly swam to where the two boys stood watching me, Nimr with an expression of envious respect on his face that I could never have earned being merely a *Nithaial*.

"It's not magic," I said as rose from the water right beside them, "it is thinking like a fish. They don't part the water; they fly through it as birds do the air. We can't be as adept as the fish, but we can at least imitate them, something the birds have so far not allowed."

So the lessons began. First I had them mimic the fish, using only their feet, then I raised them to the level of the seals, by allowing them the use of their arms. Then, completely exhaused and chilled to the bone, we went and sprawled on the rock and baked a bit in the sun.

"All in all," Nimr said eventually, "I'm glad I'm not a fish." He stretched himself, then raised himself on one elbow and looked around.

"I wish Dionis and Lyreas would return, and summon the Waldrônur to bring us nuncheon. I'm starving."

"Who are the Waldrônur?" I asked.

Nimr flopped down on his back. "Ruaold would be your nearest example," he replied.

It was my turn to hoist myself up. Ruaold was lying on the other side of Nimr, his eyes closed. He opened one and regarded me, then closed it again. "It is the name by which we, your humble servants, know ourselves, *Nithaial Galgaliel*." "More than that," Nimr began, and stopped when Ruaold gave him a good kick.

When primed, I thought, Nimr could be quite the little chatterbox. But I wasn't on good enough terms with Ruaold to pursue the matter now. So, instead, I asked, "Do Dionis and Lyreas often go off like this?"

"Not at all," Nimr said. "But Lyreas was different this morning. Better, I think."

He turned to Ruaold for confirmation. "You know him far better than I do," the boy replied. "He seemed *very* confused."

"Which *is* better than being blank as a slate," Nimr shot back.

Ruaold thought about this. "Yes, I guess," he said. "Now Lyreas is a slate with something written on it, and Dionis is trying to read what it says."

"No!" Nimr replied. "He's trying to get Lyreas to read it for himself. At least I *hope* so."

He turned to me. "Why are *you* here, Jessan? Chasing after Ruaold? He said you might. Shit! That *hurt*." This last bit was in response to his receiving another, harder kick.

"Ruaold," I said, "it would be fairer if you kicked me. I owe you a debt of thanks, which I was in no way fit to express when I saw you last."

And to Nimr I said, "I came to see Dionis. Niferas tried to step into the force at Fæÿstirran, and was all but killed."

Ruaold now opened both his eyes, and looked straight

at me. I returned the look. "I imagine you wish that he had been totally destroyed," I said.

"If I were given the chance to push him in, I wouldn't have hesitated," Ruaold agreed. "But now, I'm not so sure. What happened to him?"

"His right arm was burnt to a crisp," I said, "and the force entered him and ripped away all his power, and possibly his mind, as well. He has yet to wake, but when he does, he may be as blank of mind as Lyreas was."

"I hope not," Ruaold said. "It is strange to say, but it would be easier to forgive him if he knew what happened to him. Becoming an idiot would be too easy."

Then Ruaold realized whom he was talking to, and had the grace to blush. "I beg your pardon, *Nithaial Galgaliel*. I know you loved him as much as I hated him."

"I take no offence, Ruaold," I answered. "Perhaps we shall end up meeting somewhere in the middle. I certainly no longer know *what* I feel for him. But at the least, I think, I shall have to send him into exile."

Both boys were now sitting up and giving me their full attention. "Wow!" Nimr said. "What did Dionis say?"

"Dionis was too busy revealing himself as the *Nithaial Elimiel* to bother about minor worries like that," Dionis himself said. He had come up behind us unnoticed, followed at a bit of a distance by Lyreas, who stopped when he saw me looking at him. He returned the look intently, then smiled.

"Nithaial Galgaliel!" he said with careful but confident

enunciation, then came to me for a kiss.

"Leagues better," Nimr whispered.

Lyreas now looked about expectantly, and, not finding what he sought, became somewhat dejected. "No food?" he asked. Then, again, addressing Dionis, "Food?"

Immediately, Nimr and Ruaold took up the word, and began chanting it, with Lyreas quickly joining in. "Food. Food. We want food."

Dionis laughed and lifted up his hand. Almost immediately, out the trees around came several of those who lived in the Holy Wood, distinguishable from those who served at Gostranar by the simple weave of their garments. What had Nimr called them? Waldrônur... which, it came to me, meant "wood sprites" in the Old Tongue."

Nimr and Ruaold immediately seized Lyreas's hands and ran off to where the table was being set up in a leafy bower.

In turn, Dionis caught my hand, and drew me from my perch on the rock. "Nimr and Ruaold may choose to eat with nothing on," he said, "but it is a bit unseemly for the *Nithaial Galgaliel* to do so."

I laughed. I had totally forgotten that I was stark naked. In fact, until a few moments ago, I had also forgotten Niferas and all my woes.

"It would be seemly if you disrobed as well," I replied. "Then it would become protocol, and everyone else would have to do the same."

Dionis looked at me in mock astonishment. "I have so much to learn about the workings of Gostranar," he said. "But I can see one lesson to learn immediately: beware of precipitous decisions."

I laughed. "That is the best lesson a *Nithaial* can learn. Too bad it took you so long to come and give it to me." I had gone and picked up a blanket, woven of many bright colors, that Nimr and Ruaold had brought down to the shore with them, shook it out, and wrapped myself in it.

I pulled two of the corners over my shoulders and knotted them so it hung like a cape, then pulled the sides of the blanket around me. If I had had a belt, I would have been in fine shape, but now it was clear that if my fingers slipped, I would be exposed to the world. Still, once I was actually sitting down, all problems would be resolved.

"Good enough?" I asked.

He regarded me carefully. "You were more modest when you were naked," he said, with a slight smile. "But you wear this quite regally, so no matter."

As we strode together to the waiting meal, Dionis took my arm and said, "Make the Cronnex visible."

I did—and there it was, complete.



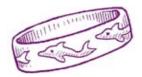
"Shall we make a precipitious decision, my beloved twin?" I asked.

Dionis gave me a hug. "Yes. Let the sign of the Cronnex be on display on both our arms for now and forever. The time for hiding is done."

He glanced downwards. "And speaking of hiding..."

I groaned. In my excitement, I had let slip the edges of the blanket without even noticing. "All right," I said. "For this once the world can stare at my arm, instead."

Chapter 29



ATER, AFTER THE EVENING MIST had covered the lake, we gone indoors. Nimr and Ruaold had climbed up to their eyrie, and, generously acceding to his begging, took Lyreas with them. Dionis conjured up a flock of tiny flames, each as bright as a candle's, but each of them a different color. Some of these he sent up with the boys; the others stayed with us, fluttering about the room like butterflies. When it came to little tricks like these, I saw that the *Nithaial Elimiel* had it all over the Lord of Wind and Water.

I said as much to Dionis as we settled down cushions that had been arranged beside the wall.

He laughed. "All this is through the importuning of Nimr, who thinks that a day without getting me to do some new trick is a day wasted. Actually, I'm glad you're here; who knows when one of these little flames will flutter down and set afire the straw matting laid over the stone floor. You can establish your own credentials by summoning a tiny shower to extinguish the blaze."

"Interesting thought," I said. "I think that *I* should have been made the *Nithaial Elimiel*, seeing that I am the one who seems to be always setting fires that others must come along and put out."

Dionis nodded thoughtfully. "Niccas was well matched with fire and earth, but I am less easy with them. And when I first saw the sea I wished from that moment on it would never be out of my sight. Don't you miss it, living here in Gostranar?"

"Ah," I said, "I would, were it not so easy to step into the portal and find myself in Sondaram. As soon as you come to live in our palace, I'll bring you there and introduce you to Telo. After that, he'll have a room waiting for you whenever you care to visit. And we can also go together to Wethrelad. For all your travels, you haven't been up in the mountains. I find it a lonely place when I'm there alone, but Páli, my *twerë*, loved it more than anywhere."

The pang I felt in my heart stopped these thoughts in their track, and so I turned to something Dionis had just said. "You mentioned Niccas. I was with him, or with his spirit, at least, given form by the Blessed Mother, only the night before last." And I told him what had transpired.

Dionis sighed. "You were with him almost as long as I was," he said sadly. "What strange lives we *Nithaial* lead, where nothing begins to make any sense until we're almost men." He gave a forlorn smile. "You know, my sixteenth birthday came and went without my even noticing it. I first

girded myself with a belt when I needed one to sheath my wand, and gave not one thought to the significance."

That afternoon, lolling in the shade when the other three returned to the water, Dionis and I had told each other the stories of our lives. In the telling, mine seemed like the lay of some hero prince, who had grown up among fishing people, and then had set off to face a series of trials, culminating with his becoming king.

On the other hand, Dionis's tale had been more like a romance, full of surprising plot twists, impossible dangers and near escapes, and, of course, risking everything to rescue his one true love. One story called for the sonorous declamation of a bard, while the other demanded to be sung by a sweet-voiced minstrel.

I reached out and took Dionis's hand in mine. "It is strange," I said, "feeling so happy in your presence, but also so shy. And I am not by nature a shy person."

He burst out laughing. "Not if half the rumors are true! And it is the same for me. I hesitate to bestow intimate names on you, feeling that somehow improper, while it seems overly formal to call you my brother. Perhaps the problem is that neither of us had brothers or sisters in our lives. Your father and mother couldn't have children of their own, and as for Nassazia having another child..." He shook his head at the thought of it.

"That's true," I said. "And very well put. From my limited experience in the way siblings treat each other, I would not call you 'brother' but 'hapless puppy."

Dionis grinned. "And I would call you 'itch-dick,' or 'bluntskull, or..."

"The cuckoo in the family nest," I added. "But you seem to have more experience in this than I."

"Ah," Dionis said, "a nest of thieves is a family, but where the tongue knows no restraint. You wouldn't believe how many skewering endearments I've just spared you."

I leaned toward him and kissed him, at first softly then quite hard, our tongues melding together. When we finally pulled away from each other, both of us were panting, and both of us were stiff.

I pulled up my twin's shirt to free him. "You've seen what I have," I said, "and now it's my turn to look."

"Yours has the edge when it comes to thickness," he replied, "but I think I have you as to length." He reached over and drew my shirt up to my waist. "See for yourself."

Surprisingly, Dionis revealed a delicious paleness beneath his shirt. I had imagined his skin to be everywhere brown as a nut, but where it had not been tempered by Heref's blazing sun, it was deliciously pale and smooth. And, as for his rod, what he said was true. His was longer by at least two fingers, a solid, narrow shaft with a gracefully tapered top. The very thought of it sliding up inside me made me weak with lust.

Dionis was eyeing my own fittings with equal interest. As I had progressed from a youth to a young man, my

cock had thickened as much as lengthened. Now, even when limp, it made a fomidable bulge in my smalls, or, let hang loose, as it had earlier that day while I gave my swimming lessons, I could feel its weight as it swung—something that had not been true when I was younger.

His eyes lifted up to meet my own, and we both smiled. "Since I am the youth here," he said, "and you the man, it is only seemly that I offer myself to you. Would you prefer me on my back, or to enter me from behind?"

"This first time from behind," I answered. "If I look you in the eyes I don't think I could contain myself."

Dionis got on his knees and, bracing himself by pressing the side of his face against the wall, reached both hands back to spread himself, revealing a pouting rosebud so perfectly shaped that my immediate desire was to wrap my lips around it and give it a suck.

I pressed my face between his buttocks to do just that, but the moment my mouth grasped that tender little mound, nausea flooded through me with such violence that I had to fling myself to one side, to keep myself from retching all over his body.

Even so, vomit I did, my body convulsing even after my stomach had emptied itself and a stinking mess was spreading across the straw-strewn floor. As I lay there gasping, Dionis sprang to his feet, swept all this up into a mound of straw, and took that to the door, and flung it out into the night.

Then he went to the water jug, and brought it over

to me. "Here," he said, offering it to me. "Rinse out your mouth."

I did so, then spit it out—transforming it into a cloud of mist as it emerged, which I sent spilling under the door to join the rest of my foulness outside.

Dionis sat down beside me, and I could sense at once that he was filled with shame and self-disgust—much more so than I was myself.

I reached out my hand, took hold of his chin, and turned his face toward me. His eyes remained cast down.

"Dionis," I said as firmly as I could, "look at me."

Slowly, reluctantly, he glanced at me, then quickly looked away again.

I tried again. "You've gotten it all wrong. This wasn't because of *you*. It came from inside *me*."

He glanced at me. "How could it *not* be because of me? My smell, something..."

I groaned. "No, no, no." I seized his shoulder and pulled him to me. Holding him close, I could feel that he had been struck by the same force, but because of my violent reaction, he thought it had come from me.

"Shit," I cried out. "We are forbidden this."

Dionis now wrapped his arm around me, and we held each other in silence. Finally, he spoke, his voice tinged with bitter sadness. "That's so *unfair*. We are supposed to spend our lives together and never consummate our desire? Because this is some sort of spiritual *incest*?"

I shook his head slowly. "No, love," I said slowly, working out my thoughts as I spoke, "it isn't that, I think. Rather, we are meant to procreate, but not in this way."

He pulled his head from my shoulder to stare at me. "What?" he exclaimed. "*Procreate*?"

I laughed. "Perhaps that isn't the best word," I replied. "You know the legend that the Cronnex originally showed the *Nithaial* sucking each other?"

He shook his head.

"It's true," I went on. "And when I first came across that legend, I thought, 'well, if that's the way we *have* to do it..."

This time Dionis who laughed, and he punched my shoulder besides. "You are truly incorrigible," he said. "But I'm following your thoughts. A sigil doesn't depict the real, it *uses* the real to reveal a spiritual meaning. I've often wondered why the *Nithaial* are both men. Now I see something of the reason: a man and a woman come together to procreate a child. But when two men have sex, their purpose, beyond pleasure, is to bind themselves into one, to make what was broken apart whole again."

"A man and a woman do that as well," I replied.

"Yes," he answered, "they do. And so do two women, when they lie together. It is another question as to why the *Nithaial* are male and not female."

"Perhaps the Blessed Mother prefers boys over girls," I replied.

Dionis, who knew much more about girls than I, shook his head vehemently, saying merely, "More likely, it is because boys have so much more to prove, and She has given us the chance to do so."

"It was a silly jape," I admitted. "What you are trying to tell me is that the *Nithaial* are here to repair what is broken, not to bring forth the new. But because boys are so easily distracted by the pleasures of fucking, we're not allowed to do that to each other, or we would never pay attention to what we were *supposed* to be doing."

Dionis nodded. "Hence the violent reaction when we tried," he said. "But if that is the stick, what is the carrot?"

"I've already figured that out," I replied, "but I would prefer to show you rather then tell you."

T THAT MOMENT, Ruaold appeared, leading Dionis's twerë by the hand. Lyreas's face was streaked with tears, and his lips were tinted with blood.

"Don't be alarmed," Ruaold said to Dionis. "We were teaching him how to scrub his teeth with a chewed twig, and he somehow stabbed himself in the tongue. Mostly, he is just tired and ready to be tucked in. Shall I take him down to the lake? He has grown fond of shitting in the water, and so now perhaps the water will inspire him to shit."

Lyreas shook his head. "No, Ruaold, but thank you. I'm afraid he might catch a chill. I'll take care of what happens—although if you could find us some more straw..."

The boy glanced down at the expanse of bared stone

beside us, but said nothing. He went back up the stairs and, in a moment, came down with an armload of straw, some of which he spread on the floor and the rest he shaped into a sort of pallet for Lyreas.

All this was clearly a familiar routine designed to minimize the effects of Lyreas's incontinence, and now I understood the practiced alacrity Dionis had displayed dealing with my own voiding.

I watched as Dionis spread a well-washed length of cloth over the straw, had Lyreas undress, then lie down on his bed, draping him tenderly with blankets once he had. Lyreas accepted all this and returned Dionis's good-night kiss, but seemed, nevertheless, strangely unattached, like a boy spending the night in the house of an acquaintance.

Once Lyreas fell asleep, which was almost immediately, I commented on this.

Dionis nodded his head. "Yes," he said sadly, "even though his mind is opening, I have no sense that he knows who I am. He accepts me without question as a kind of parental figure, but he would rather be with Nimr and Ruaold."

"His mind is still too weak to bring him to himself," I answered. "You must give this process more time. Shall we sleep with him as we did last night?"

Dionis looked uncertain. "I'm torn about that," he replied. "He was very agitated this morning—something is wrong. I want to believe that it's nothing more his inability to grasp how much better he is, only that his world was sud-

denly turned upside down. But I fear something worse."

"There's nothing wrong with letting him come back to himself at a slow and easy pace," I replied. "But now that he is improving, I wish you would come back to Gostranar. Your quarters are waiting for you, although," and here I nodded my head to indicate the tower room in which we sat, "I admit the accommodations aren't quite as grand."

Dionis looked undecided. "I do want to be with you, Jessan, but also I need to do what is best for Lyreas. Breddan said that I should take him here, and so here I feel I must stay. With Nimr and Ruaold here to watch over him, I can come to Gostranar when you need me. But I'm afraid this humble tower will be my home for some time."

There was no arguing with that. And so we performed the usual homely preparations for sleep, washing ourselves and scrubbing our teeth. Then I picked up the wash basin and went out on the stoop to toss the water onto the grass.

The moment I stepped out the door I was drenched—Nimr or Ruaold or both had been waiting and dumped their own slops onto me. I could hear shrieks of laughter from their tower room.

I closed my eyes, gathered their slops and those in my basin into a large whirling ball, and sent it flying right back up to where their heads were poking out of the the tower's highest window. There was a loud splash and more shrieks—equally as happy as the ones before. I ducked into the doorway just in time to dodge the deluge that came falling down after.

"That'll teach them," I said to Dionis, who was watching all this.

"I hope so," he replied. "I've been afraid to go out the door for fear of just such a drenching."

I looked at him in mock outrage. "You dog!" I said. "You *knew* that was going to happen to me?"

Not even bothering to reply, Dionis pulled a blanket over his head. I had summoned up another ball of water, this time the size of a pippin, and flung it. It hit him with a satisfactory splash, drenching the blanket where it hung about his head.

At once, a cloud of steam appeared. Dionis was using his own powers to dry the blanket out. Unfortunately, he overestimated the spell, and the blanket suddenly burst into flames. Cursing, he leapt up, ran to the door, and flung the blanket outside, then incinerated it in a ball of flame before it could hit the ground. More cries of delight from above.

"We're definitely teaching them a lesson," Dionis said as he closed the door, "albeit not the one we wanted."

"Come," I said. "You won't need the blanket with me to keep you warm."

E LAY TANGLED TOGETHER in a state of sleepy bliss, our powers as interleaved as our limbs. Occasionally, one of us would pull the other closer and take a kiss; it appeared that tumescence was acceptable if it was a side affect and not something intended. Even so, the thick-

ness of our members and the pleasure that came when they were pressed together made it hard to sleep. The more so, because the intensity generated multicolored bands of energy, which swirled about our bodies, glowing brightly then ebbing like a display of the Northern Flames.

"We'll *never* sleep unless we lie back to back," Dionis whispered in my ear. "But before you turn over, tell me now the purpose of your visit. Is it because of Niferas, or is there something else?"

I sighed deeply. Immediately, the pulsing lights flickered and went out.

"As bad as that?" Dionis asked, my despair as palpable to him as it was to me.

I nodded. Without saying a word, I set the memory vision of Alarcon's murder unspooling, and, once it had finished, displayed one of my own of Niferas's entry into the force and what resulted from that. My memory vision was not as clear as the other, since I hadn't mastered the knack of doing such things, but it was clear enough.

When that was done, we lay in silence for a long while, Dionis softly caressing my hair. When he spoke, his voice was thick with misery. "Poor Jessan. Poor Niferas. And, most of all, poor, poor Ruaold. What a terrible burden to be carrying all this time, seeing Niferas almost every day."

Another long silence. Finally, it was I who spoke. "I don't understand why you include Niferas. Once I saw what he had done to Alarcon with my own eyes, I couldn't bear the

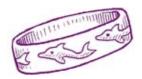
idea of being in the same room with him. Whatever suffering he has just gone through, it is nothing, *nothing* to what he has caused—including the life he led with me that was nothing but an endless malicious lie."

Dionis sighed. "Yes, that's true. Although you must take some of the blame for that onto ourself."

The anger in my voice when I replied surprised even myself. "I know that." Then, when I had calmed myself, added, "That's why I fled. The very thought of Niferas is enough to make me feel as if I've lost my mind. I'm terrified of doing something that I'll regret the rest of all eternity, but just as much, I fear doing nothing at all."

"Then," Dionis said, pulling me even closer to him, "tomorrow, first thing, we shall have to go together back to Gostranar, talk to Niferas if he is conscious, and, after that, figure out what to do... about him, and everything else."

Chapter 30



IONIS DID ACCOMPANY ME back to Gostranar, but I left him to explore his quarters in the palace, thinking it best for me to approach Niferas on my own. Knowing that my twin was close at hand made all the difference, as did those two words, "poor Niferas." I didn't feel that way at all, but it had impressed me that Dionis did. It was like having a restraining hand resting on my shoulder.

I passed the healer Estarna, accompanied by an attendant carrying a pile of dirty sheets. She caught my look, and interpreted it correctly.

"No, Highest One, he is much better. Weak, but finally awake. Even so, his wound pains him, and he is very subdued. I'm sure he'll be glad to see you, though. Just be sure not tire him."

I thanked her, pressing her hand with mine. I knew she had made heroic efforts to get Niferas to this stage, and naturally she would know nothing of my current thoughts. We went our separate ways, and, girding my loins, I stepped into my bedroom.

Niferas lay on one side of the bed, his face pale, his features wan and melancolic. His head was turned toward the window. I could tell that he had registered my arrival but he made no gesture of welcome, nor did he turn his head in my direction when I took a seat beside the bed.

"Estarna says that you are well enough for a visit," I said. "I spent the night consulting with Dionis."

"I was right about him, wasn't I?" Niferas asked. His voice was listless and barely rose above a whisper.

"More than you knew," I said. "It turns out that it is *he* who is the *Nithaial Elimiel*," adding after Niferas said nothing to this, "and has been all along."

Niferas shrugged, then closed his eyes. "Why have you come?" he asked. "I never expected to see you again, once you learned...."—he made a helpless gesture—"everything. It would have been kinder to have bailiffs come and toss me out. Unless, of course, you plan to have me hanged."

"It may yet come to that," I answered, in a calm but in no way sympathetic voice. "I came because I want to understand, and because you owe me the explanation. I don't mean a *confession*—how you murdered Alcaron and the no doubt many other foul deeds that stain your conscience—but how all this came about."

Niferas sighed. "By now you must know the answer, but if you truly wish for me to spell it out...." His voice faded away again, and I couldn't tell if he meant that as a question.

If so, I let my silence answer it.

"Do you know," he said, in the tone of voice of someone who is suddenly changing the subject, "who came to me when I was on the verge of dying—yesterday, it must have been, or the day before? Sepharan, my predecessor at Gorzungâd. As you know, he died young, so he was still the boy who said farewell to me in Maerdas's chambers."

Niferas smiled mirthlessly. "I even remember what he said to me then: 'I wish you the joy of my room.' It was a wondrous place, that room, but it was destroyed by dragon fire long before I got much joy from it."

"Why did Sepharan visit you?" I asked.

"Because he and I shared the same doom," Niferas whispered. "Except he was old enough to have figured out what Maerdas was all about. And, also, I suppose, Sepharan was a rather special person, for all the good that did him."

"You escaped as well," I said, my voice neutral.

Niferas shook his head. "No, you don't understand. Sepharan *escaped*. I was *rescued*. In fact, I was a piece of bait hung out in the hope that you would snatch it up. Maerdas's plan dangled from the thinnest of threads, but, against all odds, it didn't snap. You scooped me up and brought me to Ernfardast, and there I found the coin he had left for me, with the enchantment that would allow his spirit to enter the Head of Malamun, to take it over, and, once that happened, to make me his string dancer forevermore."

Niferas paused a moment to gather his breath. "Seph-

aran was good company. There I was hovering at the edge of death, and he made me laugh. About life in Gorzungâd, about how similar we were: two golden boys."

Sepharan glanced at me. "We were chosen, you know, because we resembled *him*. And now my looks mirror his, or at least how he remembered them, and I've lost all memory of what *I* looked like before this happened."

These words shook my memory, and I looked at him closely. No doubt that part of the change in his looks came from the violence that was done him at Fæÿstirran. But that would not have changed the shape of his nose, the contours of his cheeks, the width and fullness of his mouth—when the magic was sucked out of him, so went the spell that had perfected his looks. The next time he saw himself in a mirror, he would see himself again.

Meanwhile, Niferas had fallen into another silence. I thought he had gone to sleep, since his eyes were shut, and I was about to leave him when he started speaking again.

"The reason he came was to push me back toward the living. He said I would be better off if I tried to pay my debts before I died, the consequences of not doing so were so much worse. But he was gone before I could ask him how I could ever make up for what I *did*."

"I doubt if he knew," I replied. "You will have to discover the answer to that question all on your own."

Niferas merely nodded his head. "In any case, Sepharan pushed, and here I am."

He glanced at me again, and again looked away. "Maerdas could never quite believe that you weren't touching my mind, that you didn't know what was going on. I knew you weren't, and part of me was still human enough to understand what he could not. But I remained numb, and that understanding failed to touch my heart.

"That is the difference between Sepharan and myself. *He* overcame his numbness, and he did it in Gorzungâd. I was *here*, completely safe, and yet I let Maerdas pull my strings and I danced just as he wished, because I lacked the strength to do otherwise."

"And played me for a fool," I said.

Niferas nodded. "I began to hate you, because you made it so easy. After I killed Alarcon, all I wanted to do was *punish* you. And I *did* punish you."

"For your crime?" I asked, astonished.

Niferas shook his head. "No," he said. "Not for that. For not perceiving what I was doing, you who kept telling me how much you loved me. Maerdas mocked that, and I mocked it to please him, but another part of me..." He made a slight gesture with his hand, as if brushing away crumbs, but a tear leaked out of one of his eyes.

I put my face in my hands. Where Dionis's hand had gripped my shoulder, now I needed his arm wrapped around it. What Niferas was saying was true. He was a boy when I took him in, and I had just assumed he would be grateful—more than grateful. That he would be *happy* now that he was

safe in Gostranar. In fact, I considered Niferas to be the one ray of sunshine to emerge from the whole debacle.

"My little ray of sunshine," I muttered half aloud. And then, helplessly, I started laughing.

Niferas looked at me in surprise, then with a real grin when I couldn't stop. Even when I managed to suppress the noise, my sides still heaved and my own eyes filled with tears.

I wiped my eyes with my sleeve, and seeing that Niferas was staring at me, managed to gasp out, "The sleeping potion you started giving me...?"

"It was devised by Maerdas," Niferas replied. "It didn't stop the terrible dreams, because he had no control over them. The potion just made you forget them when you woke in the morning."

"If I forgot them, what purpose did the potion serve?"

"The *memory* of the dreams might have been wiped away," Niferas explained, "but not the effect of them. They were sent to warn you, but by keeping you from remembering them, I was able to shape the wordless unease with which you started every day.

"I convinced you that your friends were mocking you, and encouraged you to distance yourself from them. You fought with Páli until he despaired and went back to his people. Often you shut yourself in your rooms for days at a time. With Alcaron dead, I could send other visitors away, saying you weren't in the mood see them."

I remembered the carving I had found in Niferas's rooms. "Matheas came to return the dolphin," I cried, "and I never saw him."

Niferas looked puzzled. Obviously, he had simply taken the carving and tossed it aside. "I think I remember that name," he said, "a comely man. And the herbalist Alfrund—I had to deal with him more than once."

I could take no more. I got up and left, slamming the door behind me.

IONIS WAS IN HIS ROOMS, discussing something with one of the palace attendants, but as soon as he saw me, he dismissed the woman with a smile, and came and wrapped his arms around me, and listened intently as I told him all that had just transpired.

"It is said of those with great power," he said at last, "that the moment they stop using it, *it* immediately starts using them. For you and me, who never sought power, those two things started happening at once. What a bitter lesson!"

I thought about this, but my mind was too mazy to chase after it. So I seized hold of his hand and pulled him out into the sunshine, where we could walk together through the several gardens.

"Yes," I finally said. "I always thought that our power was a terrible fate, but that was because I didn't want to wield it. Little did I know that avoiding wielding it would prove a worse one still."

"Is this the tower from which your head steward fell to his death?"

"You mean Alcaron?" I said, thinking foolishly of Telo—he was "my" head steward. "Yes, it is."

"Let us climb up," Dionis said, and I realized I had never been on it since that night. Gostranar spread out beneath us in the sunlight, like the bed of exotic blossoms that it truly was.

"All this wondrous beauty," he said, turning around to take it all in, "with us in the center of it. You should have a plinth put here, and on the plinth set an urn with Alcaron's ashes. Thus he could oversee in death what he did in life. I would be happy to have his company when we come here."

I smiled. "You are the *Nithaial Elimiel*," I replied, "and you are as able as I to have such a wish fulfilled."

Dionis poked me. "I thank you for reminding me," he replied. "But let us ask for this one together, for I think it will make the Waldrônur all the more happy, and Ruaold especially."

We sat down at the very edge of the platform, and let our legs dangle over the side, and Dionis told me of how he had fallen from the roof of Lyreas's house, and not been injured, thus giving him the strongest intimation yet of what was to come.

He and I talked in this vein for a time, until I dragged the conversation back to Niferas. "The fact that Sepharan came to him," I said, "suggests that his doom has not yet played itself out. And, truly, we *Nithaial* were not put here to exact vengeance, although I would take great pleasure in wringing his neck."

Dionis smiled. "Once you had your hands wrapped around it, you would start to think differently. But what you say about Sepharan rings true, and we need not doubt that Niccas had a hand in this, as well.

"However, what truly impresses me is the nerve that Maerdas had, risking so much on what had so little chance of happening."

I thought about that. "He probably never remotely imagined that dragons would devastate Gorzungâd," I agreed, "but not that I would go there to free anyone still imprisoned there, and look about. And if I had, I would surely have found Niferas, and take him away with me."

Dionis looked dubious. "There is still the enchanted coin that Maerdas dropped into the grass for Niferas to find. That is the truly unlikely thing."

I smiled. "For an ordinary coin, that is so. But enchanted coins have a way of ending up in the hand of the one destined to possess it. Certainly, anyone else, finding it on the outskirts of Ernfardast, would bring it to me—and once it did, Niferas would recognize and claim it at once.

"What amazes me, is Maerdas's immeasurable *gall*—hurling taunts at Niccas in the flaming pit, even as his spirit is slowly seeping out of his body to take refuge in the Head of Malamun, then gloating that his spirit, at least, was

back in Gostranar, despite having been banned from there by the Blessed Mother Herself.

"Why She allowed it is a question I'll have to ask Her when I join Niccas in the afterworld—perhaps it was a test for me, perhaps it was to allow Maerdas's madness the chance to fully blossom and utterly destroy him."

Dionis shook his head. "Only someone totally besotted with his own cleverness could think that, by inhabiting Niferas's mind and body, he could become the *Nithaial Elimiel* once again—in defiance of the will of the gods and the turning of Great Wheel."

"I suppose you're right," I agreed. "Maerdas was right to think that if the choice had been mine, I might have succumbed to Niferas's pleas. But the choice was *never* mine to make. On the contrary. As Niccas warned me, to even ask would be to sully myself in Holy Gesryma's eyes forever."

Dionis suddenly pulled back from the edge and jumped to his feet. "Enough of this depressing talk, beloved. I have decided to bring Lyreas here, at least for a bit. Brilana, the Waldrônur I was speaking to, knows of his difficulties and is more than willing to take them on. Nimr should have some other occupation to absorb his days, although I haven't yet discerned what that might be, now that he has rejected the idea of becoming a fish."

We both laughed. As we descended the tower, I said, "Let me come back with you for the night, since Niferas is still ensconced in my bed. I can continue my talk with him

tomorrow, although I still have no idea as to what should be done to him."

"As to that," Dionis replied without turning, "you should consult with Ruaold. After all, it was *his* father that Niferas killed. The Waldrônur have very different ideas about retribution then do men, and I think you should heed them."

HE FOLLOWING MORNING, I learned that Niferas had asked to be carried to his own rooms, and Estarna thought he was in good enough condition for the small trip to take no toll. She had obviously drawn her own conclusions from the fact that I had not spent the last two nights with him.

So, I went to Niferas in his own rooms, and entered after knocking briefly. He was sitting up in his bed, his back propped up with pillows. I expected to find him wrapped in murky gloom, but, no, his windows had been uncovered, and even washed. The effect of the sunlight was to rob what charm the rooms had had; it was like visiting an aging harlot in the cruel brightness of the day.

I found Niferas examining his stump. When I approached his bed, he did not look up, but continued to look at it as he swung it back and forth a few times.

"Does it pain you?" I asked, drawing up a chair and settling into it. "The wound seems to be healing nicely."

He shook his head. "It is just *strange*," he said. "It will take me some time to get used to it—to learn what it can do and stop trying to make it do what it can't, like scratch the

top of my head."

He then let it drop and turned to me. "I keep thinking I've seen the last of you," he said, "and yet here you are, once again, and still no bouquet of flowers."

To my surprise, he then gave me a wry grin. "Have you not tired of my endless depravity? It doesn't improve with the telling. And if it is your idea of punishment, I can tell you that it only succeeds in the total boredom of it."

"Is that how you feel about your wickedness?"

He shrugged. "If it had been thrilling when I did it, I would feel remorse—and I do feel remorse for the few times when it did excite me. But, for the most part, it was Maerdas who rejoiced. And how can I be bitter, when I was in every way complaisant? I disgust myself. If that's any comfort to you, I offer it gladly."

I thought about that. "I think I come to see you for the same reason that you were examining your stump when I came in. To make myself believe that my world has turned inside out. When I am away from you, the thought stabs at me; when I'm here, the pain is dulled. Did you never love me, even a little?"

Niferas looked surprised at the question, as if it were something he had never even considered before, which, in itself, was as good an answer as I would ever get.

Even so, he replied. "The oddness of your question comes from your thinking that I have ever felt love in all my life. I certainly didn't 'love' Maerdas. I was terrified of him, and soothed that terror by shaping myself so that I could fulfill without questioning his every whim.

"With you, knowing that this is where he wanted me to be, and knowing I was safe from him for the moment, I felt like a dog must, when let out on a long leash—loosened, yes, but not *loose*.

"But as to what you ask, remember that you were my *task*. If I had belonged entirely to Maerdas, I would have been entirely loving to you; that I treated you so cruelly was for me a way to be myself—against *you*, against *him*. Either way, there was no possibility of love, and what hate existed was, in the end, without meaning.

"Once Maerdas was wrenched out of my being, there was very left in me to feel anything. Now, when I look at you, I see a fellow survivor of the same terrible shipwreck. I don't in the least blame you for my lost arm, and I don't blame my-self for your broken heart."

He gave me another wry grin. "Those, I've heard it said, do tend to repair themselves."

For the first time he caught and held my eyes with his own. "As to what I would have felt or done if none of that were so, neither of us shall ever know."

Niferas's voice was neutral when he said this—as if he almost managed to grasp the concept of "regret" without knowing what it felt like. And, although I wasn't in the least unaware that there was no reason to trust him after his painful metamorphosis, I sensed nothing deceitful in what he was saying. Indeed, the words were too barren to be lies. He didn't feel sorry for himself; he didn't seek pity from me.

Nor did I give it to him, but I felt more comfortable sitting in his presence—although Niferas's analogy might be better if changed to "marooned for our deeds on the same desert island." For now I had no doubt that we deserved to be stuck there together.

None of this, of course, helped me decide what I should do with Niferas, or, if it came to that, do *to* him. But, following Dionis's advice, I had talked to Ruaold earlier that morning, and what he said seemed increasingly right to me, although I had never heard the like before.

So I stood up and for the first time since the revelation about Alarcon, I was able to touch my former lover, and gently. I brushed a lock of hair out of his face, and said, "On my next visit I'll be bringing the person I have granted the right to decide your doom."

Niferas looked directly at me. "Lyreas?" he asked. "He is in no state to pass judgment on me!"

"No, not Lyreas," I answered, puzzled. "Why would it be he?"

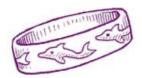
But Niferas shook his head and closed his eyes. A look of pain crossed his face, but he said nothing, and so I took my leave.

PART EIGHT RESTORATION



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Chapter 31



NTELLING NIFERAS that I had granted someone (Ruaold, of course, although I didn't say this) the right to pass judgment on my ex-lover's murder of Alarcon, I displayed my complete lack of understanding of the Waldrônur's concept of justice. This was despite Ruaold's best efforts to explain it to me, and it was not he who was at fault. Indeed, he was one of those rare souls who think things through, then explain them deftly and carefully—something rare enough in a man, and almost unheard of in a boy his age.

I had expected, for example, that we would be bringing Niferas to some sort of Waldrônur court or its equivalent. But, no, what was to take place was strictly between Niferas and Ruaold, with two witnesses attending. These, in this instance, would be Dionis and myself. And so it was just the three of us who came to Niferas's rooms on the following morning—sending a servant on first to prepare him for our visit and to arrange the room as was proper for the occasion.

When we arrived, we found four chairs had been set

out, two of them close together, half facing each other, and the other two placed a short distance away, and well apart from each other. These were where Dionis and I would sit. Niferas was already waiting for us in one of the other two, and when we came in, he looked at Ruaold warily, nodded to me, and ignored Dionis entirely.

Ruaold came and sat beside Niferas, and when Niferas refused to meet his eyes, Ruaold tapped his leg.

"Niferas, I ask you to look at me," he said, in a calm but certain voice. Niferas shot me a quick look, then turned his head so that his and Ruaold's eyes met.

"Thank you," Ruaold said. "First of all, I want to explain to you that no tribunal is to take place, since you have admitted that you murdered Alarcon, Steward of Gostranar."

Niferas smiled thinly. "So we skip the trial and go straight to the sentencing. Why are *you* chosen to pass it?"

"Alarcon was my father," Ruaold said, "and because of that it is my doom to sit here beside you."

Niferas flinched slightly at the word "father," but his eyes never left Ruaold's. "Proceed then," was all he said.

To my surprise, Ruaold took hold of Niferas's hand. "Two things happen now," he said. "The first is that you must lift my hand and press it against your forehead, and I shall share with you what I know of my father's death, as it was given to me by one who witnessed it."

Niferas jerked his hand free. "I can't," he said. "I'm not strong enough." He turned his face toward me and added,

"Really, I'm not."

I just looked at him. As a witness, I was to observe and not to participate in any way. I looked from him to Ruaold, and, after a moment, reluctantly, so did Niferas.

Ruaold said, "Niferas, you are sufficiently strong for this, whether you believe it or not. And you will never be strong *enough*, which is to your credit. Only a monster would possess that much strength."

Niferas regarded Ruaold, and a bitter smile slipped across his face. "I see," he said. "The old Niferas would have said, 'What fun!" — but I am no longer made of such stuff."

He looked down at Ruaold's hand, which rested, waiting, on the arm of his chair. Slowly, he reached down, took hold of it, and, even more slowly, drew it up and turned it to press Ruaold's palm against his own forehead.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Niferas's pupils began to jerk about convulsively, as if he were in the middle of a fit. And, also as if in a fit, his body at first went rigid, then, a moment later, slumped down and might have fallen from the chair, if Ruaold's hand hadn't been pressing it back.

But Niferas's own hand never let go, even though his arm was shaking—until, finally, it was all over. Ruaold let him go, and Niferas covered his face with the released hand. In fact, he lifted up his stump as well, at that moment forgetting he no longer had two hands.

At this moment I glanced over at Dionis, and saw that he was staring at Niferas, his mouth agape, shock in his eyes. I realized that he had been mind-touching Niferas during all this, and had witnessed just then everything that Roauld had shown me previously; the terrible fall, the far more terrible bloody deeds that Niferas had done after it, ending with the crushing of Alarcon's skull with a rock.

At first, I was shocked that Dionis had entered Niferas's mind without permission. But, on second thought, I realized that we were here as witnesses, and that Dionis had more fully entered into that role than I. In fact, I don't think I could have borne it. Experiencing it from the mind of Roauld was hard enough. But the very idea of experiencing it as it unfolded inside of Niferas scalded the mind.

Again, Ruaold tapped Niferas's knee; and, again, Niferas uncovered his face and looked into Ruaold's eyes.

"Last night," Ruaold said to him, "the nurse Estarna came to you and explained to you what would be asked of you now. And, because you are not one of us and so do not naturally have this capacity, she provided you with a potion that would give you the ability, at least for this short time. Have you taken it? Did you then do what was asked of you?"

Niferas nodded. "Yes, as best I could. My mind has been broken into shards—a jumble of half memories wandering in a sea of fog."

"No matter," Roauld replied, and took Niferas's hand and began lifting it up to his own forehead.

"Wait!" Niferas cried, halting the process in midair. "What are you doing!? I thought that the task was for me to

do alone, as part of my punishment."

"No," Ruaold replied. "This is not about punishment, but about restoring balance. You have done your part in that—now I must do mine."

"I don't understand," Niferas said. "Haven't you suffered enough? Why *this*?"

Ruaold sighed. "You don't understand because the human concept of justice is not about balance, but punishment. And we Waldrônur see this and ask: what has punishment ever set to right? So, there it is: we don't understand your way; you don't understand our way. In this instance, though, you must accept... and hope to comprehend later."

And he pressed Niferas's palm to his forehead.

HIS TIME, I was expressly summoned by Ruaold into his mind, to experience with him what Niferas was about to reveal. I must say I did so with a sinking heart. For what Ruaold had revealed was what he had been told; what Niferas was about to disclose was what he himself had thought, had felt, when he had murdered Alarcon.

Icy hatred was the first thing, a stain as pervasive and indelible as if my mind were a cloth of raw weave just after it was dipped into a vat of *indikos*. Maerdas was that dye, and it was his sudden, violent shove that propelled the High Steward over the edge of the tower. Not that Niferas would have refused to do it, but Maerdas wanted that pleasure for himself, and for the same reason he used his power to hold Alarcon suspended in midair, for just long enough to let him

grasp the cold inevitability of his death. Then, Maerdas let go, and the high steward dropped like a stone and hit the ground with a sullen thud.

Already, Niferas was racing down the stairs. When he reached the bottom of the tower, he looked about, then went round the corner to where he expected of find Alarcon's body spread-eagled on the grass. But, no, the high steward lived, and though his legs were fractured and the pointed edge of a broken bone stuck out from one of his thighs, he was using his hands to drag himself, painfully, slowly, across the lawn, calling out weakly for help as he did.

Now the icy hatred inside Niferas burst into flames of rage, as if a single burning coal had been heaped with pulverized tinder. This rage was so great that even in the darkness of night everything became tinged with red, as if his eyes had filled with blood.

Near to the tower was a flower garden edged with rough-hewn blocks of white marble. Niferas seized one of these, brought it to where Alarcon was struggling, raised it up, and smashed it down onto the high steward's head. The skull shattered with a sick-making splintering sound; the crawling stopped.

At this point, there was no discerning between Maerdas and Niferas except by the heat of the rage, which no one as young as Niferas then could have sustained. Pausing only long enough to see the damage the stone had wrought, the boy quickly removed his shirt, slid it under the high steward's crushed head, and tied it with the sleeves. Then he took hold of Alarcon's feet and dragged him back to the tower, made as strong as a grown man by the storm of rage. Then he retrieved the stone and set it by his victim's head so it would appear as if Alarcon had hit it when he fell.

Finally, Niferas freed his shirt, and put it back on, soaked as it was in blood and scattered with bits of the high steward's brain, laid the broken head in his lap, and began to shout for help.

It was at this moment that Maerdas abandoned him, pulling back into the depths of Niferas's mind. So it was that when help arrived, they found a hysterical boy, shaking violently from stress and what seemed much like anguish, barely able to speak and not at all able to stand. With infinite tenderness, he was separated from Alarcon and carried away, his mind in a state of raging fever.

Niferas's forehead, bowed his own head, and was silent for a very long time. Niferas, who was panting slightly, sat slumped down, his eyes tightly closed. Dionis and I looked at each other, then looked away again, as if this mere glance could release an uncontrollable torrent of grief and pain.

Eventually, Ruaold bestirred himself, sat up straight, and lifted his hand so that the palm faced Niferas. This motion, slight as it was, caused Niferas to open his eyes, then raised up his remaining hand, so that palm faced palm, with only a slight distance between them. Suddenly, there was a

flash of blue light, the sharp smell of burnt flesh, and both Ruaold and Niferas involuntarily yanked their hands apart, their faces contorted with pain.

Ruaold then rose from his chair and walked out of the room, passing by Dionis and myself without giving either of us a glance, his face a mask of exhaustion and grief.

Slowly, Dionis and I also got up. I decided to stay with Niferas for a moment and let Dionis go to Ruaold, but before I could communicate this to my twin, Niferas spoke.

"I wish Dionis to stay a moment," he said. Then he looked at me, and added, "and you, Jessan, also, if you will."

Dionis went and sat down in the chair that Ruaold had vacated, and, after a moment, I drew up my own chair so that it was beside his, so that we both faced Niferas. I reached down and seized hold of my twin's hand, and found myself clinging to it like a drowning man clasps hold of a floating spar.

Niferas contemplated the runemark—no larger than a small silver coin—that the burst of power had left on the heel of his palm. When written horizontally, it was the sign of the Cronnex; but when written vertically, as it was here, it simultaneously signified the Great Wheel of Balance and the flow of the forces that kept it true.



The mark was understandable enough, but I struggled to grasp

why Niferas and Ruaold had been identically marked. Niferas killed Ruaold's father, and for *that* they were now linked for the rest of their lives? Shouldn't the mark have been emblazoned on Niferas's forehead—and on him alone?

"Many, *many* of my other bad deeds will eventually come to light," Niferas began interrupting my thoughts, "and not because I'm unwilling to admit to them but because they are hard for me to identify, my memory being, as it might be said, all plum and no cake."

He spoke without lifting his eyes from the rune, so softly that we had to lean forward to hear his words. "Even so, there is one injustice that cries out inside me, and black as my heart had become, it cried out in protest even as this black deed happened, and it has been on my mind ever since."

He then glanced up at Dionis, then dropped his eyes again. "When you and Jessan first met," he continued, "he invited you and your party to our quarters, to break fast with him and tell him about yourselves. At this point, as if by accident, I came in and joined you at the table."

Niferas paused for a moment to massage the back of his head. "The spirit of Maerdas was uneasy that morning: he felt the presence of the *Nithaial Elimiel* without yet knowing what it was. He sought everywhere for it, and cursed me for being such a poor vehicle from which to exercise his powers.

"Even when I sat down with you, he still did not recognize Dionis for who he was. Partly, I think, he couldn't conceive that Niccas had outwitted him, or, rather, that the Blessed Mother was well aware of what Maerdas had been scheming, long before the scheme ever took shape in his own mind.

"Lyreas, however, was another matter. Maerdas immediately recognized that he had recently been hollowed out, as it were, to become a vehicle for some evil force, and he decided at once to turn this to his own advantage... before anything could be done to prevent it."

Now Niferas looked directly at Dionis, and it was my twin who found it hard to hold his gaze, his face growing pale and his eyes widening in horror. For he had not entirely broken the link between their minds, and knew the thoughts as they blossomed into words.

"So, at the same time he made Lyreas into a puppet, he cast a spell that would prevent your twerë from ever regaining his own will—so that he would remain a bolthole for Maerdas, if he ever had to abandon me."

Tears flooded into Niferas's eyes. "At that moment, I knew I meant nothing to him; that he saw no difference between me and Lyreas, apart from the fact that I was now the puppet of choice. Before, of course, I knew that I was damned, but now I knew I was *nothing*—a garment to be discarded at the merest of whims."

Niferas wiped the tears away with his sleeve, and again smiled that bitter smile. "Of course, it was Maerdas himself who ended up discarded, ripped out of me by the force at Faeÿstirran, cast into Ais Dysmassia, from where there is no return."

There was silence. Dionis struggled to speak, but could not find the words, twice opening his mouth and then closing it again.

So, it was I who spoke. "And what about the spell?" I asked. "Surely with Maerdas destroyed, it no longer has any potency."

Niferas looked at me. "Jessan," he answered quietly, "Maerdas was not *destroyed*, not by Niccas and not by you. His spirit endures, if condemned to roam the shadows of the Darkest Place."

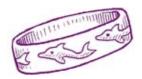
"He and Niccas both," Dionis said, speaking at last, his voice harsh with pain and fury. "What justice is *that*? And Gesryma—I cannot call her 'blessed'—allowed not only this to be but also let Maerdas stab me in the heart, leaving a wound that will never cease to bleed. Is there no end to his evil?"

Dionis sprang from his seat, seized hold of his chair and threw it against the wall, where it shattered into pieces. Then he turned to us. "I shall pursue Maerdas through all of Ais Dysmassia until I force him to break the spell and free Lyreas, if it takes me all eternity. If he cannot be destroyed, then neither can I." He then stormed out of the room.

Niferas watched him leave, then shook his head. "He won't find that an easy task," he muttered.

"True enough," I thought. I rose and went out as well, leaving Niferas staring at his runemark.

Chapter 32



HEN I CAME OUT INTO THE SUNLIGHT, I found Dionis waiting for me, pacing back and forth, his arms clenched tightly across his chest, with so dark a look on his face that passersby, who ordinarily would smile and touch their forehead with their left palm to acknowledge the presence of the *Nithaial Elimiel*, instead averted their eyes and hurried past.

He stopped pacing when he saw me. "I meant to go to Lyreas once this meeting with Niferas was over, but I think if I did so right now I should lose my mind."

I could think of nothing to say to that, so instead simply put my arm around his waist. He put his around mine and we walked together through the gardens, letting the cool breeze and the lush carpeting of flowers do their best to soothe us.

Finally, after we had done several turns, I said tentatively, "We should go to the Hall of the *Nithaial* at Sondaram and see if Niccas will come and advise us."

Dionis shook his head. "You're right, beloved, but not

yet. My mind has cooled but my thoughts are still in tatters and my will has been shattered into bloody shards. I'm going to Fæÿstirran to bathe in the force and be alone for the rest of the day. I shall watch the sun set over the desert and let the night chill sharpen my thoughts."

I hugged him close, then released him, saying, "In that case, I'll seek out Roauld, and see how he is Faryng."

Dionis almost smiled as he shook his head. "I think you'll find he has gone off into the forest with Nimr, to find solace with him. I envy them, Jessan, I swear I do. May their love flower many times over before it bears bitter fruit."

He turned to go, but paused as he did to say, "Perhaps you should go by yourself to Sondaram, where you have both the Force to bathe in and the warm arms of the steward there awaiting you afterwards."

"You already know too much about me," I retorted. "Go broil yourself in your desert retreat." This time, smile met smile, and my heart sighed for him as I watched him walk away. Going to Ais Dysmassia would be terrible thing, if he held to what he had threatened, but nothing like the mockery he would suffer trying to persuade Maerdas to break his spell. The living have nothing but memory to pay the dead, and Maerdas had all he could use of that.

Dionis's suggestion that I go to Sondaram and to Telo was a notion I had already considered, and in doing so, realized it was something else that I wanted far more—as unlikely as it was that I might get it.

Still, still. I went to my rooms, where I found that my request had been obeyed and all traces of Niferas's life there with me were gone. I went to a chest from which, at the very bottom, I took the robe of dark and lustrous colors that Caelas had given me when we first became lovers, so very long ago.

I was not going to Caelas; I was not going to wear the robe. But as I lifted if out, I couldn't help but think of him and how he was now, bitter and disappointed, honored by the new king but also kept on a short chain—which meant he now lived in a palace in Tarrusor, where he waited vainly for a new command.

The robe tucked under one arm, I went to the shrine in Gostranar where the wind spirits were honored, and there asked that one of them come and bear me away.

This was always a favor implored, never a command, and it was always implicit that, if they were wrapped up in something that required all their attention, they might not come at all. Who came was also a matter left up to them—whether this was because one was closer, had no other business, or was just in the mood for a gallop, I never knew.

This time it was Ouras who came, one of the two spirits who had brought Páli and me through the Holy Wood when we first stepped foot in Gostranar. This pleased me, for I had a question, and of all the wind spirits, he was the most willing to converse.

As usual, he came in the form of a great stag. I stroked his muzzle for a bit, then requested that he bring me



to the hilltop where the *dagmast* stones lay—now used by dragons to come and go from Wyldmast Druim—and, more to my purpose, also the highest place in all of Wisferon.

I leapt up onto his bare back, and once we had plunged into the shadows of the Wisferon, gently touched his mind. "Ouras," I said, "when we first met, you told me that your fellow spirits were the 'guardians of this place but the shepherds of it, also."

"That I did, Nithaial Galgaliel, for it is true."

"Well, then," I asked, "what is the story of the Waldrônur? Why are they here at all? At first I thought they were

men who, having lived in Wisferon for generations, absorbed some of its magic into themselves. But I have learned that they consider themselves a race apart. And, although the differences are subtle, I think this to be so."

Ouras said nothing for a bit, and I let myself be distracted by the smooth and flowing motion of his body, and the patterns of light and shadow that beguiled the eye as we swept beneath the forest's great trees, the cool, sweet breeze sweeping across my face. Usually, this experience drew me into a peaceful trance, but this time I clung to enough consciousness for my ears to perk up when Ouras spoke.

"When the Age of Men came to this world," the stag began, "the Waldrônur retreated into the forests. In fact, their name means 'Wood Wanderers' in the old tongue, for that is how men experienced them—as shadows seen, if rarely, flitting silently among the trees.

"However, in time, men began to encroach on them even in the deepest forests—which drew hunters, charcoal burners, trappers, hermits, even outlaws. The Waldrônur could easily avoid these interlopers, but they felt that this very act was beginning to define them. They were becoming exiles in their own land.

"So, a delegation came to Wisferon and asked for permission to dwell here, free from any intrusion by men. In return, they promised to serve us in any way they could, which meant caring for Gostranar and attending on the *Nithaial*. This is why, while those in service at the other palaces

that house the forces are men, here at Gostranar they are solely Waldrônur."

I thought about this. "Did men take against these people? There are no legends of wars with them that I have ever heard."

Ouras gave out a long and rolling snort, in the manner of stags. "The Waldrônur are *not* a warrior people. But neither have they any wish to become slaves. They quickly decided that men were noisy, smelly, unsightly, unpredictable, and, above all, dangerous. Thus, if you like, it was they who took against men, and not the other way around."

I sighed. "I take your meaning. It is the tale of the clay pot and the iron pot, and the refusal of the first to make common cause with the second, no matter how fervent the other declared its good intentions."

"I do not know the tales of men," the stag replied, "but the image is clear enough. The Waldrônur are at once too much like men and too different in spirit to ever find accord. Deer and wolves both have fur and four legs; they both live in clans ruled by the most powerful male. Even so, they are not destined to lie down together."

I thought of Nimr and Ruaold lying down together, and had to smile. Still, what Ouras said was undoubtedly true. Those two were both boys, and Nimr was a wolf only to the extent that he was an endearing pup.

Then my thoughts wandered into a mazy quiet. The trance cast by the ride had never stopped nuzzling against

my mind, and now, at last, I surrendered to its importuning and let it take me in its arms.

HE HILLTOP was called Drendas's Brow. So Ouras informed me—and would have told the story behind the name, were we not already there. I slipped from the stag's back and, after proffering thanks, asked it to listen for my call when I wished to return to Gostranar.

The stag vanished into the forest; I climbed to the very top of the hill. There, I set the folded robe on the ground, gathered my thoughts, and lifted my eyes to the sky, which spread out in all directions, a great inverted dome of crystal blue. Indeed, it was so clear that, despite the sun, my eyes could just make out the stars—invisible to mortals in this light, but ghostly presences to me.

Stars, though, were not what I was searching for. First, I carefully scanned the vastness above me, quadrant by quadrant, each as empty as the one before. I had expected this, and, undaunted, turned so that I was facing southeast, lifted my arms, and called. Not with my voice, which would hardly reach beyond the clearing, but with my spirit, which would travel to the ends of the earth and back, if I bade it to. The call was a wordless summoning, wrapped in longing, and came equally from my heart and mind.

For a long time there was no answer. But I had learned some patience by now, and simply waited as the time crept past. Then, in the far distance, high, high up, I saw a black dot, and I sent a wind for it ride on. In mere moments,

I could make out the widespread wings, then the black feathers, then the noble, hook-beaked head.

The eagle soared on until it was directly over me, then dropped out of the sky, wings thrust back, talons extended, trailed by a shrieking cry. So Páli had always come to me, and so did he come to me now, thrusting out his wings at the last possible moment, sending a wave of air snapping against me, and transforming himself into human shape just as he touched the ground.

It had been a long time since I had seen him, so long that he had changed entirely from youth to man—slender as always, but now his body was hard-edged and thick with muscle, and his chest was covered with several runic tattoos. But, at the same time, the sharpness of his features had been tempered, and the fierceness of his glance was not quite as flinty as before.

Or perhaps he was actually glad to see me.

I dared not believe this, but the hope came, and with it the words, "Páli, most beloved, thank you for coming."

Páli's mouth pursed slightly. "A summons from the *Nithaial Galgaliel* is not to be taken likely," he said coolly, "no matter how unexpected."

Then seeing my face fall, he added, "And one from my twerë, if even *more* unexpected, is a cause for joy." Páli smiled, his eyes softened, and he reached out his hand and lightly slapped my face, just as he had done (if much harder) the first time we met.

"Yes, I am glad to see you," he said, answering my thought. "Although you hardly deserve it. Do I have to go get that robe you brought and put it on, myself?"

I blushed for my discourtesy (or perhaps for my obvious interest in all that Páli's nakedness had revealed), and helped him into the robe. I was just tying the gold-threaded waist rope, when the silence was broken with an ear-shattering shriek, and a great dragon materialized out of nothing in the center of the ring of *dagmast* stones. It swung its head about, cast its fiery eyes on us in for briefest of moments, then flung out its wings and thrust itself up into the sky, simultaneously sending its reptilian reek washing over us.

"I forget how much dragons smell," I said, as Páli and I watched the beast pull itself into the air. "Still, their grandeur is truly like nothing else."

"We of the Lhennad are somewhat immune to it," Páli replied. "We see them so often, flying off with another of our horses."

I sighed. "For which the Riders of the Lhennad blame the *Nithaial*," I said, "who freed the dragons, and invited them to use the *dagmast* stones here in Wisferon."

Páli glanced at me. "Well, none of us is *happy* about the situation. We expected that the dragons would limit themselves to the occasional gazelle. But we do appreciate the fact that—so far—none of the horses was also bearing a rider. That, at least, shows some...." he paused to grasp for the word.

"Tact?" I suggested.

He shook his head. "Diplomacy."

We both laughed. "That robe truly becomes you," I said, standing back a little to enjoy the effect. For indeed it did, its lustrous, shifting colors at once softening and enhancing his angular beauty.

"It does make me feel like the spitting image of a spell chanter," he replied, looking down at the golden runes that floated on the cloth. "And it is very comfortable. Still, perhaps the best thing about it surely you know somewhere private where you can take it off me again."

SUMMONED OURAS, who, this time, came with his companion Saiphar, and the two stags brought us the short distance to the tower by the lake. Now that Dionis had summoned that edifice out of its ruins, the Waldrônur had taken it under their wing, and we found the linen clean, the mattresses sweet with fresh hay, and a side table set with bread, cheese, and a small cask of ale or cider, waiting to be broached.

All this—even, for the moment, the summoning mattress—we ignored. Removing the robe turned out not to be quick at all, so pleasurable was the feeling of its soft material caressing my hands and arms as I slowly moved these up and down his back, tracing the muscles, learning anew the lineaments of a body that I had once known as well as my own.

Our mouths were locked together, open, grappling, our loins pressed hard together, our members, straining almost to the point of agony, trapped in between. Then Páli let go of my buttocks and shrugged his shoulders, so as to make the gown fall away.

With that around our feet, he took hold of my head, pulled my mouth away from his, held my eyes with his own, saying, "This time, I'm going to fill you with my own magic," and toppling me onto the bed.

The Waldrônur, here as everywhere, left nothing to be desired; their unguent, in a small, lewdly ornamented pot, was somehow made to be warm on application. The moment Páli's finger slipped inside me, the concoction's delicate, tingling heat instantly aroused me. Sensing this, he worked in another finger and another still, flexing and turning them, then spreading them apart, opening me wide.

When he started to pull them out, I reached down and grabbed hold of his arm. "No," I said. "Don't pull out." Then, seeing his hesitation, I added, "I want to take in your whole hand."

Niferas had penetrated me this way; nothing excited him more than to savor my vulnerability as he thrust his arm halfway up inside me, watching my face as he did so, his mind licking up the taste of my helpless vulnerability.

For Páli, this was something new, but nothing aroused him more than dominating his lover, and the very idea of what I was asking stoked his lust. He worked more of the unguent over the outside of his hand and up his arm. Then, squeezing his fingers and thumb all together, began, ever so slowly, to work them inside my hole.

His hand was larger than Niferas's, and, as I felt myself spread open, I reached down and seized hold of his arm. This was not—as he first thought—to stop him, but to retain some sense of control. Never had I been opened this much before, and were it not for the powers of the unguent, I might have lost my nerve, both from fear and the increasing pain.

However, the pain, though intense, was not sharp of tooth; there was no ripping or tearing of flesh, just the sense of being stretched, beyond the point of comprehension.

Suddenly, the hand was in; the ring of muscles contracted tightly on his arm. I felt the bump of his wrist pass through, the pain receded, and a flood of mingled sensation and emotion swept over me—vulnerability, helplessness, dizzying intimacy.

This was nothing like having a cock inside me, for a cock has but a single goal. But Páli's hand was active, his fingers extending, exploring, flexing. They caressed my love knob until my whole body shuddered, they fluttered gently like the wings of a bird. And all this time our minds were meshed together, so that Páli felt what I felt, knew me in my utter nakedness. Until, at last, my face went slack, my eyes rolled upwards—me mind, in a manner of speaking, had begun gasping for air.

Carefully, slowly, Páli eased his hand out of me, wiped himself clean, and took me in his arms. I laid my head against his chest and closed my eyes. I felt as though my whole body had become my cock, as wave after wave of erotic sensation flowed through me. My heart beat wildly like the wings of a caged bird, and all else in the world was as nothing.

ATER, WE LAY TOGETHER ON THE PALLET, listening to the birds twittering as dusk fell, letting our hands relearn the contours of each other's body. My fingers had more to discover than his, for so much about him had changed. His skin was not nearly as tender, except where the tattoos marked him, and there it was smooth as glass.

"Each emblematizes another level of initiation," he said, feeling my fingertips lingering on them. "We seers among the tribes of the Lhennad gather in secret once a year, make binding spells, summon Wise Ones from the past, and are taught the full magic of our people."

He tugged my hair. "For some reason," he said, "my powers are greater than any of my fellows, but that has meant that more has been demanded of me." Without looking, he tapped each tattoo in the order he had received it. "If you look at them, you'll see that each is edged in red. That is a sign of higher mastery."

He touched my hand. "Sometimes, of course, I am sure that this prowess is due to my inherent superiority. But then the effect of the drink wears off, and I am faced with a simple fact: whatever my gifts, I am what I have become thanks to powers the seeds of which were planted by you."

I smiled at the image. Education would be a simple thing if knowledge could be passed along so easily. But Páli was right: he had taken my gift, nursed it, shaped it, and turned it to a fine purpose. It was for me to thank him.

Our minds were still mingled together, and I could sense the presence of this new and different magic, muted and quiet, but still entirely present, like children sleeping together on the hearth while their elders chatted over the last of the ale.

After a bit, I lifted his hand and kissed it. "And do you find anything different about me?" I asked. "I fear that anyone seeing us together would take me for a handsome but callow youth and you for a wise old man."

Páli suddenly leapt up on top of me, pinning me as he had in days long past. "Care to find out how untrue that calumny is?" He demanded. "Or," he added, "half-calumny, for what you say about yourself is accurate enough."

I smiled. "Say that in two hundred years," I said, "and I'll wrestle with you then."

"If I'm still alive, I'll pin you to the floor then, too," he replied. "Do I take it you surrender?"

"Of course," I said. "I may be callow, but I'm not a numb-brain. And besides, you like winning too much for me to have the heart to deny you."

Páli opened his mouth, as if in shock, then closed it again before bursting out into laughter. "You are so ever much the same," he said, getting off me.

Once he had stood up, he offered me his hand. "Let's have something to eat and drink. This table is too nicely set

to be ignored forever.

I joined him, and together we made short work of the repast that had been left for us. It was more than ample, but I had had nothing to eat since daybreak, and Páli had just been just dragging the entrails out to a rabbit when my call had come.

"I ate them as I flew," he said. "They are the best part of the meal, but—even for a eagle—not nearly filling enough."

He poured us both some more of the cider, still fresh enough in its brewing to send sparkling bubbles up our nose when we drank.

When I set down my cup, I saw that Páli was regarding me. "No, not callow," he said. "Your eyes have grown old ahead of you. Even when you smile, a melancholy lurks behind them. I can see that things have not gone well for you, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, since I left you to rule over Wisferon with that lovely, calculating catamite."

And so I told him all that had taken place since we had been together, all the time wondering what it would have been like had I found a consort the equal of Páli, if it turned out that I couldn't have kept Páli himself.

The more I told, the darker his face became. When, at last, I told him of the arrival of Dionis and the events that had happened since, he was muttering curses under his breath.

"This is a grievous tale," he said. "Especially for Dionis and his lover, of course, but plenty enough for you. If Dio-

nis carries out his plan and goes to seek Maerdas in the Dark Place, you will have the rare distinction of having lost a *Nithaial Elimiel* twice over."

I shook my head. "I couldn't stand that," I said in a low voice. "Dionis has given me a taste of how much I need a twin, of how stupidly incompetent I've been without one. He is firm where I am fluid and fiery where I am so... flippant."

I paused, hesitating, then blurted out, "Dionis is exactly what you were for me before I lost you."

Páli turned his face away. "You didn't lose me," he said slowly. "And if I knew what Niferas was I would never have left you...then. It's just that..." Now it was his turn to hesitate, and when he spoke again he turned toward me again. "I knew I was not meant to be your consort—and you, even less to be mine."

He smiled at the thought, which hurt me a little, until I thought about it for one eye blink and realized it was true. In fact, it was so true that I had to smile myself.

"Do you have a consort among your own people?" I asked, willing myself not to be jealous when I heard his reply.

He shook his head. "No, no. There is a necessary ascetic aspect to my calling; it doesn't require abstinence—as you have just learned." Now he smiled at me, fondly and fully. "But when I'm among my clan there is a belief that a seer should keep as much of his seed to himself as he can, all the more to empower his visions."

He shrugged. "It is of little matter, really. As time has

passed, I spend more of my life as an eagle—and as such have found a mate." He gave me a quick glance. "Apparently the sterility that comes with the gift of a *Nithaial's* power doesn't affect my other being, for I have sired hatchlings."

My eyes widened. "You're a father!"

"Many times over." Páli regarded my shock with amusement. "Perhaps you are wondering why I haven't chosen a male as my nest mate. Such things do happen, after all."

"I think I would like the idea of that even less," I answered with a shudder. "I imagine male eagles as being *infinitely* possessive. I can just see myself going to Drendas's Brow to call you, and coming away missing an ear."

Páli laughed. "*That* is very true. But my reason is far more prosaic. I wanted offspring. Or, rather, I wanted to create offspring who would have the spirit and intelligence to take on any dragon who hunts our horses."

He waved away my protest even as I opened my mouth. "Such a dragon would never fear for its life, but it would certainly have to worry about its ears."

He took my hand. "Jessan, beloved," he went on, "I'm yours until sunrise. But if you summoned me for a reason, you should share it now, before we tumble into bed again, and you completely forget it."

I smiled at the teasing, even as I shook my head. "You already know the reason, Páli. I have never been so alone as I am now. Learning the truth about Niferas was one thing, but Dionis is another. It is like finding your long-lost brother, only

to discover that he is about to march off to war."

"It's even worse than that, actually," I added, my eyes flooding with tears. "I know that I failed Niccas in his time of need, because I didn't try hard enough to get to him in time. Now Dionis is facing something equally dangerous. If he decides... No. Why fool myself. Since he *has* decided to go to Ais Dysmassia, I have to summon the courage to go with him."

Páli sighed. "Courage' is one way to put it, 'dereliction of duty' is another. If you go with him, all the world will have to survive with no *Nithaial* at all for hundreds of years. By the time the next two are born, we will have forgotten why they come to us, why we need them to keep the balance. There may not even be any balance left by then."

He paused for a moment, then added softly, "Perhaps what the Blessed Gesryma means for you to see is that Niccas was yours to save, and now Dionis is yours to lose, in consequence."

I moaned aloud. "Oh Páli, how can you say that! The very words sink claws into my heart."

He put his arm around me. "I'm not saying you should stay and tough it out, beloved; I'm simply pointing out that you are in a danger that befalls all too many, trying to rectify a past mistake when all you're doing is repeating it."

There was truth to what he said. But, looked at closely, what this truth revealed is that I never had the strength of character to succeed as the *Nithaial Galgaliel* without the support of a twin. I fell back onto the bed as if into the pit of de-

spair, and threw one arm over my eyes. As usual, I had made no effort to block my thoughts from Páli, and, because of our closeness, he had let himself experience them.

He lay down beside me and stroked my arm. "I am here to sustain you," he whispered, "not make your heart turn cold. As your *twerë*, I think you must go, and if you fail I shall make a lay that will keep your love for Niccas and Dionis alive for all the generations of men."

He leant close and kissed me. "And you may succeed. I have powers of prophecy, but they don't penetrate into the Dark Land. And even if they did, the thought that the *Nithaial Elimiel* and the *Nithaial Galgaliel* might descend into Ais Dysmassia is a thought beyond human imagining."

My heart was eased by these words, by his touch, and by the strength of his seriousness. I took my arm away from my eyes, lifted my head and kissed him for a long time.

This had its effect, and after a bit, Páli took my cock in his hand while he whispered, "Surely we owe it to our members to fuck each other in the usual way. Otherwise they will sulk for the rest of the night."

I nodded and whispered back, "Once may not be enough, for I find that when they are of a mind to be difficult, it is not so easy to soothe their heat."

Páli sighed. "If it must be, we shall have to do our best. But," and he he took his hand away from my knob so as to have my complete attention, "I have one piece of advice for you, and I feel so strongly about it that I wish I could make it

a command, for I know you will not like it."

"Páli!" I said. "Whether I like it or not, a command it shall be."

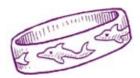
"Very well," he replied. "It is this: Take Niferas with you when you go to Ais Dysmassia."

"No! Wait!" he added instantly, putting his hand over my mouth. "Think—Niferas knows Maerdas better than anyone alive, and Maerdas may yet have unfinished business with him that we know nothing about. Any of these things may be of use, and you are in no position to check the teeth and gums of any help you can get."

This last image made me laugh. "All right," I said. "If Dionis assents, I shall ask him to come."

Páli had seized hold of my shaft again, even as he got astride my loins. In a moment he had placed it in that sweetest place of all and, as I closed my eyes, he began to take me in.

Chapter 33



AWN CAME. Páli went, launching himself from the rock where, just a few days ago, I had soaked up the sun with Nimr and Ruaold. Wings beating fiercely, Páli shot over the water, gained altitude, swerved and came back, hovered for a mere moment over the tower, me—then shrieked and was gone.

Since I embodied the powers of air, I could, in a manner of speaking, fly, but as I had discovered when I had faced the hordes of walking dead just outside of Wethrelad, this took great effort. Perhaps if Páli had become my consort, I would have learned to soar like an eagle.

From childhood I have had an affinity for water, through which I can move like an otter. Once up in the air, however, my arms and legs are all but useless, and so flying becomes all magic and no skill. Perhaps the Blessed Mother should have given me wings to fly and gills so as to breathe underwater. But, if so, what would Dionis have? The skin of salamander and the pointy nose of a mole?

This time it was Boreas, spirit of the north wind, who came to carry me back to Gostranar. Were I not still smiling from the image of this transformation of Dionis and myself, I would have groaned within. Boreas, like his namesake, was cold and silent. Not that he wasn't courteous enough, but it was the kind of courtesy that managed to convey how much he would rather be doing something else.

Sometimes this provoked me into prodding him to talk to me, but not now. I was content to slip back for awhile into that pleasing state of being awake but not having yet to do anything, with the additional pleasure of watching the world come awake on every side.

When we arrived at the palace, I bade Boreas farewell and hurried to the quarters of Dionis, hoping to find him still at breakfast, and hoping even more to share it with him. But, to my consternation, I found that he had arrived back from Fæÿstirran before dawn, and, taking Nimr in tow, had gone without me to Sondaram.

Well, Telo could feed me there.

It turned out he would have to do more than that, for I stepped out of the portal into a raging storm—wind howling, rain lashing everything, and the sea surging and crashing against the rocks far below.

There was no door where the stairs descended, so the rain chased me down the steps, which themselves coursed with water like a spring freshet. Sondaram was open to the sky and the water, and on a day like this wind and rain simply came rushing in, the floor in the great hall made into a roiling lagoon, while the Force became a geyser erupting imperiously from its center.

It was stunningly beautiful. Forgetting my errand for the moment, I shook off my soaking apparel, went straight to the rushing column and let it bear me up. While all four powers were present in Gostranar, only in their special homes were their forces entirely manifest. The difference was between a country thunderstorm and a raging ocean tempest.

Now that such a storm was actually raging without, to enter the force was like like stepping into, and then becoming, the center of a cyclone. When lightning flashed outside, tiny bolts of it flickered and cracked from my fingers and danced across my body. When the thunder bellowed, the explosion roared through me like an avalanche of sound.

When I finally staggered out, every filament in my body was pulsing with energy; a sheen of blue light covered my body, and it had barely faded even after I had gone up the stairs, pulled open the door, and entered my room.

There, a table had been set, and around it sat Dionis, Nimr, and Orien, with Telo himself attending. They turned as one, their mouths fell open, and all but Dionis bowed their heads and pressed their right palms to their foreheads.

There was a long silence, while, in the manner of a wet dog, I shook the power away, sending it scattering about the room in droplets of energy.

It was Telo who broke the silence. "Oh, it's you," he

said. "I took you for the spirit of the storm, dropping in for some hot barley tea. And I thought, 'Shit. I'm going to have to give him Jessan's chair."

He pulled that out from the table for me, adding, "Frisson of terror aside, I *do* admire your entrance. Unfortunately, your guests arrived completely soaked and bedraggled, so I had to practically empty your wardrobe to clothe them."

He sighed. "Well, you might as well put on this," and began to pull off his own—quite elegant—tunic.

"No, Telo," I said, stopping him. "I'm quite dry, and I can't have my high steward waiting on such important visitors in his smalls." I sat down in the chair, and pulled myself up to the table—and so making myself decent enough.

"You can, however, pour me some of that tea. And you," I said looking at Nimr, "can pass me those buns. I'm *starving*."

After I had eaten every one of them and several seed-cakes besides, washing it all down with the hot barley tea—a common beverage, to be sure, but exactly what anyone would want when coming in from a raging storm—I turned to Dionis, who sat at one side of me, and kissed him on the mouth.

"Welcome to Sondaram, beloved," I said, "although given the weather that greeted you, I fear that your first visit may also be your last."

Dionis smiled and kissed me back. "You forget that

Nimr and I weathered such a storm at sea. We felt quite at home—or would have if your palace had been tossing about like a maddened horse."

Nimr was deep in conversation with Orien when I came in, and had gone back to it. However, he heard his name and turned his head. I used this opportunity to ask him whether he had succeeded in comforting Ruaold.

I had meant the question as a bit of teasing, but instead of blushing, Nimr sighed and cast his glance down to his plate. "I hope so," he said, his voice near to a whisper. "I told him about the death of my father and my brothers, and of my uncle Salamah and his apprentices. We embraced and wept together—the first time I was able to truly grieve. Perhaps it was the same for Ruaold—I know it was easier for me to mourn when it was for him as well as for myself."

He lifted his head now, and I saw his eyes were wet with tears. He wiped these away with his sleeve. "I want to ask Ruaold to be my *twerë*—but I am ignorant of so many things in this country. May I do so before I come of age?"

I thought of Faryn, and, as always when I did so, my eyes became as wet as Nimr's. "Yes," I said. "It is a matter of knowing your heart. Nothing else."

Impulsively, I rose from my seat, went to him, and kissed him, too. "We are all brothers when it comes to sorrow," I said. "I saw my first *twerë* ripped apart before my eyes when I was only a little older than you. I had someone to comfort me then and I'm glad you and Ruaold have each

other now. When the time comes, Dionis and I will together perform the joining and wrap you in our blessings."

I turned to Orien. "I think I have heard of Salamah," I said. "Wasn't he a powerful mage in the lands of the south?"

Orien nodded. "A great mage, indeed. And Nimr was to become his apprentice. Don't you know the boy's story?"

The tone with which he asked this was rebuke enough, and I flushed as I shook my head.

"It is my fault, not Jessan's," said Dionis, coming to my defense. "I found it too absorbing talking about myself and Lyreas, to have found room yet for Nimr."

Hearing his name, Lyreas looked up from his plate, where he had been carefully arranging the crumbs, and took Dionis's hand. "You talk to me," he said. "Nimr talks to me. Jessan talks to me." And he gave us all a brilliant smile.

OON THEREAFTER, Dionis and I descended to the crypt, leaving Lyreas to rescue what morsels remained on the other plates and add them to the pile on his, and Nimr and Orien to talk on about Salamah. It had been years since I had seen the mage so animated, and I said as much as we went down the stairs.

"Or Nimr so confiding of his past life," Dionis agreed.
"Part of that must have been freed up by his night with Ruaold. But he asked me to take him with me this morning when he learned my destination—specifically that he might meet Orien. I think he still holds onto the dream of becoming a mage's apprentice. Do you think Orien could face the

prospect?"

I had no chance to answer the question. We had now stepped into the Hall of the *Nithaial*, and I saw that Niccas was already waiting for us on the marble throne at the center of the room. He was clearly lost in thought, and he lifted his head from where it rested on his palm only we were standing before him. However, he then got up and embraced us both, then gesturing for us to sit on the floor before him as he reclaimed his seat.

"I am sorry you have come," he said, "but it is part of a foretelling, which, apparently, is not to be denied."

"You know why we are here?" Dionis asked.

"Well," said Niccas, his imperturbable tone now edged with a hint of amusement, "since we are joined in spirit it would be hard for me *not* to know. The question in my mind was whether you *would* come, given the consequences that will come from it, as night follows day."

Dionis nodded slowly. "That put a heavy weight on my decision, but I remain wedded to it. Jessan, I think, doesn't know what we're talking about—although Páli, seer that he is, must have alluded to it."

I felt like a child sitting with two adults, completely perplexed by what they were saying, although they were obviously talking about me.

"My *twerë*," I said, "told me that where I sent you to your fate by lacking the will to act quickly and decisively to your aid, I would impell Dionis on to his by displaying, for once in my

life, those very same qualities."

Niccas smiled. "Said like a true seer. Even so, we should parse his words carefully. Do you take as his meaning that if you gather your courage and go with Dionis to Ais Dysmassia to help him in his quest, you will bring the long line of the *Nithaial* to an end?"

I nodded my head. "If we fail, how could it be otherwise? And Páli also said that after another five hundred years of our absence, all faith in us will be lost."

Dionis took hold of my hand. "Beloved," he said, "it is not as simple as that. If you decide *not* to come with me, you will remain the *Nithaial Galgaliel*. However, if you do come with me, whether we succeed *or* fail, *neither of us* will remain *Nithaial*, but become mortal, and die as they do—all too quickly, be it by chance or fate or act of will, and with little chance of entering the Hallowed Hall."

He squeezed my hand. "I must do this for Lyreas, but it breaks my heart that I would have that fate fall upon you. Think hard on this before you decide."

I felt my entrails turn to water. "Even if we *succeed*?" I stammered. "Why would the Blessed Mother punish us so terribly for doing what our hearts demand?"

Niccas looked at me for a long time before he replied. "The love of which you speak is not one of the four forces," he said at last, "not even nearly. Yes, it seems to partake of all of them—hot as fire, capricious as any breeze, treacherous as currents too swift to swim, and yet, when it wants to be,

strong as tempered iron. But in the end, it is only memoryand memory is not the stuff of enduring power.

"If for love, you and Dionis willingly descend to the Land of the Dead, you must face the consequences: you will shatter the Great Balance, and cause the reign of the *Nithaial* to come to an end. The four forces will withdraw from the mortal world and become a matter of rumor, or, as some would have it, faith. The Great Wheel will wobble on its pivot, and chaos will again govern the ways of men."

Niccas said this calmly and sadly, not like a judge but like one brother to another. Because of this, I felt nothing but love for him, and said, "You are the one who will suffer the most from this, Niccas. You set an example for us, facing your fate, not rebelling against it—despite the loss of your family, the destruction of those you loved. And we have chosen to learn nothing from that…"

"No, Jessan," Dionis said, interrupting me. "We did learn something: that my father's path is one that neither you nor I can follow. We simply don't have it in us."

He turned to Niccas and said, his voice shaking, "Father, *you* were the last true *Nithaial*. You bore the suffering that negated the evil that Maerdas did, just as... Ruoald suffered the wickedness that killed his father."

These words brought with them a flash of understanding that at last illuminated for me the exchange between Ruoald and Niferas. True justice was a bitter medicine.

However, Dionis was still speaking. "Jessan and I

have the powers of the *Nithaial*, but the reason for being them has failed to take root. Each of us was thrown into the world and forced to become an outcast in order to survive. We know chaos all too well, balance not at all. That one of us managed to become a true *Nithaial* is miracle enough. I honor you for it, and beg in return that you accept us for who we are: mere portents of their demise."

Niccas reached over and touched Dionis on the cheek. "Fate never offered me the chance to choose between saving Iannas and defeating Maerdas, and if it had, who knows which I would have chosen. But you have been offered the chance to save Lyreas *and* bring Maerdas his final doom. Since this is your choice, I am here to help you as much as I can."

He reached into his tunic and withdrew a scroll from a hidden pocket. "Since you speak of chaos, Dionis, I shall tell you a little of my own experience in its maw. As Jessan was apprenticed to an herbalist, so was I to an alchemist, a decent man named Porphoras. But, foolishly, I put myself where I caught the eye of Lidaeas ffÿr Lissator, the dissolute son of the High Lord of Lorithar..."

Seeing my knowing look, he laughed. "No Jessan, it wasn't my beautiful looks that captivated him, but the grace and speed of my horse Whynnya. However, the contemplation of the horse led to closer examination of me, and he concluded that I might be the very boy his father had turned the entire city upside down in an attempt to capture—as, indeed,

I was—and it would be a pretty coup indeed if he, Lidaeas, caught me instead.

"But, fortunately for me, Lidaeas continued to think, wondering why a mere boy like me should occasion such a hunt—and decided that I must know a spell that would unlock some book of power or the like. For someone like him, to imagine such a spell was to crave its possession for himself, and so he forced Porphoras to sell him Whynnya, then "borrowed" me to ride her for him to his hunting lodge in the Forest Grymaeld.

"So, there it was, he had my horse and he had me, but he still didn't possess the thing he now desired above all else—not the spell he believed I knew, for he believed that to have me was to have it, and no matter that a little torture might be needed to extract it from me—but possession of the thing the spell was for."

Niccas paused. "I know this is a long story," he said, "but we're coming to the end. Lidaeas recited two stanzas of verse to me and asked me to give him the third and last. He said it was a rhyme his nurse had taught him as a boy.

"Here," he said, passing us the scroll. "See for your-self." Dionis unrolled it and held it so that we could both read it at once.

This aye night, this aye night

Every night and all

Fire and fleet and candlelight,

The dragons claim their toll.

When thou from hence away art past,
Every night and all,
To Forest Grymaeld thou com'st at last;
The dragons claim their toll.

Dionis and I looked at each other blankly. "My nurse, Nauma, told me many an odd rhyme," Dionis said after a little reflection, "but none so odd as this."

Niccas nodded. "I agree. Those lines are a bit deep for the nursery, but very much in keeping with the cryptic conjurations of necromancers. I hardly had time to think about this at the time, but Lidaeas had somehow come upon them and decided that I must know the third and last stanza, and that it was the key to some secret power."

He sighed. "Well, Lidaeas was wrong only in thinking I knew it. The third stanza does possess a key to a *very* powerful bit of knowledge. And, as my powers have grown, I have learned how to summon it."

He reached out his hand and pointed a finger. A flame sprang from his fingertip to the parchment, where it began to dance and wriggle about, leaving behind a black-scorched trail of script. This read as so:

The World of Death hath a secret door,
From which to free a soul,
The dragons know the way and more,
If thou'st can'st pay their toll.

We barely had time to read it before the burn marks turned

to ashes, and the ashes sifted from the parchment, leaving that part of it as blank as it had been before.

Dionis turned from the scroll to Niccas himself. "The payment of that toll has already been promised," Dionis said. "And now it shall be paid."

Niccas shook his head. "You are right that it is high time that my promise to remove the spell that encircles Fyrewourmhaem be kept—but that is not the 'toll' mentioned in the rhyme. If it were, the third stanza would have revealed itself the moment the scroll came into my possession."

He sighed. "The situation is much more complicated than that: The rhyme is a mystery from the Necromantic Rites. As such, it is recited only to initiates, and the revelation of the meaning behind the words is known only the highest of that order."

These words left Dionis stunned. "This way is hopeless, then," he finally stammered. "Even if I could find such a necromancer of that power, he would refuse to have any dealings with a *Nithaial*—indeed, he would gloat in my plight."

"Easy, beloved," Niccas answered, "As often happens, the plight itself points the way to the solution. The Darkest Arts are practiced mostly by demons, and their powers ultimately derive from the Almighty Ra'asiel."

He paused and looked at the two of us.

"Teshnar'ad!" we both said at once, and Niccas nodded again.

"But, Father," Dionis said, speaking for the two of

us, "Why would Teshnar'ad help us in a quest that would cause even Ra'asiel to frown?"

Niccas hesitated—not long, just long enough for me to notice. Then he said softly, "Because, in a certain sense, you are his son as well as mine. The Avatar and I were lovers, and we exchanged seed. His enhanced my powers in the realm of the spirit, especially my awareness of the powers of darkness. And, of course, I absorbed enough of *him* to find the shape my eyes recast after his own.

"Whatever gifts my own seed gave to him, I know that they have made his heart more like our own. This has not made him less of a demon—on the contrary, it makes him a more *interesting* demon, even to himself."

Niccas paused long enough to let us, and, especially, Dionis, absorb all this. "So," he concluded, "the first step of your quest is to go to Teshnar'ad, and beseech him summon a necromancer for you—the highest of them all. That one may not be willing to help you, but he will have no choice but to obey the Avatar of Ra'asiel."

Niccas smiled again, but this time with a trace of bitterness. "As for the spirit of Maerdas, it pursues me everywhere in the Dark Land to mock me for my failure. So I shall come to wherever the dragons bring you, and Maerdas will follow after, as night follows day."

FTER NICCAS EMBRACED US for what I feared might be the last time, I began to feel faint, or, more truthfully, lost at heart. Now that I stared it in the face, I found I

was loath to surrender the life of the *Nithaial Galgaliel*. Like many another, I was discovering the difference between making a promise (even if that promise is to yourself) and keeping it.

Dionis had discerned this change in my mood—how could he not?—and he put his hand on my shoulder when we reached the top of the stairs.

"Stay awhile," he said gently, "and talk to me, before we join the others. Let us just sit here on the top step."

We sat in silence for a time, neither of us finding any words within us that seemed worth the uttering. We were twins, we knew each other's heart, but words come from a lonely struggle that we each had to perform on our own.

"So," Dionis said at last, "Do you think I should now address Teshnar'ad as 'Uncle Avatar?'"

I smiled, even though my twin's question was not meant entirely as a jest. I had met Teshnar'ad only once, many years ago, but he was not someone you could easily forget—let alone think of as your uncle. Strangely, it was easier to think of him as love partner—or at least for *me* to do so. That was not what Dionis was getting at.

"Of course, there were rumors about your father and him," I replied diplomatically. "You might have heard some of them yourself. But it's a lot different to think that some... some *essence* of demon might have had a part in your inception... even if it was a very *little* part."

Dionis nodded. "You're right—'uncle' isn't the prop-

er word. Not that there is one, even for Niccas, really. He made love to my mother, but, even so, she was made pregnant by a spirtual gift, not his seed."

He looked at me, deeply serious. "You and he simply appeared under the proverbial cabbage leaf; I don't know why my arrival had to be made so complicated. What a mother! What a father!"

I nudged him in the ribs. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself," I said. "All children say that of their parents, at least once in their lives. At least you aren't haunted by their deaths, the way Niccas is of his."

Dionis sighed. "Yes, yes. And, really, I don't mind being part demon—at least now I know why I was born with a forked tongue."

I looked at him in shock. In response, he stuck out his tongue at me, and, of course, it wasn't split at all.

We both laughed. "That was *mean*," I said. "You made me jealous for nothing... just think of how you could use such a thing to drive your lovers wild—and in more than one place, too."

"You are *disgusting*," he said. "And all the more so because you're absolutely right, and I'll never get that image out of my mind for as long as I live."

"You're still young," I replied. "It *could* still happen—say, when you start growing some hair on your chest."

It was his turn to nudge me in the ribs, and not gently, either. "If we're going to talk like this, we might as well go

back and join the others. I need Telo to stand up for me."

I looked at him in surprise. "Telo was on my mind before, when we were just sitting here." I gave a small laugh. "It is truly strange," I went on, "but what devastates me most about surrendering our powers is what this will do to Telo. He has been so *happy*, so *wonderful* as the High Steward of Sondaram. And the last thing he would ever suspect..." I was unable to finish the sentence, for I had burst into tears.

Dionis said nothing in reply, just brushed each tear from my cheek as it coursed down. We both knew that the dam had broken not where the argument against this act was strongest but my resistance to it was the weakest. I lapsed into silence again, and buried my face in my hands, for my brain was twisted into intricately painful knots.

Dionis massaged the back of my neck for awhile, then said, softly, thoughtfully, "Jessan, if I had not met you, my own decision would have been thoughtlessly easy. It isn't even that I love Lyreas more than you, for my feelings for both of you are bottomless. But I feel an obligation to Lyreas that far outweighs any sense of duty to remain the *Nithaial Elimiel*."

He stared down the flight of stairs that led back to the Hall of the *Nithaial* and said fiercely, "If greatness demands that we throw aside those we love for a greater cause, then I have no wish to be great."

He paused, then added in a voice where the fierceness gave way to genuine sadness. "I do wish, even if for the briefest of moments, I could have experienced what it means

to be the Nithaial Elimiel. Everyone calls me that, and it is true I do feel the power, but nothing makes it whole. Do you think that is what it means to be a king: to perceive your royalty only in the eyes and the behavior of others?"

I looked at him, stunned—stunned because I now knew *exactly* what needed to be done. It would solve none of our problems, but it would imbue them with lustre, where now they were only sullenly gray. I jumped to my feet and, pulling Dionis up with me, took us both up the long flight of stairs to the top of the tower, where the portal waited.

The storm was still raging outside, the dark clouds bunched into menacing fists directly above our heads. I stepped out into the midst of all this, lifted my arms up high, and discharged all the power I had absorbed less than an hour ago when I had been lifted up inside the force.

A blindingly brilliant bolt of lightning shot upwards, punching a hole in the clouds above our heads. Before the echoes of the ensuing thunder had fallen silent, all of Sondaram was bathed in brilliant sunlight.

I turned to Dionis. "Now, you," I said. And when he looked back at me, perplexed, I added, "Discharge all the power you absorbed at Fæÿstirran."

He, too, lifted his arms, not straight up but pointing over Gedd. A huge ball of fire shot forth, a trail of sparks glittering behind it. It flew over the city with a roar and plunged into the sea beyond. A great column of steam rose out of the water, swirled furiously about, then slowly melted away.

I took my twin's hand. "Come," I said, and drew him to the portal, and through it back to Gostranar.

BROUGHT DIONIS TO THE ATRIUM that housed the four powers, down the long flight of stone steps to the empty basin and the statues of the four dragons. He had come here on his first day, but then he had been incognito, and now he was not.

The statues sensed our presence and began to glow with their particular colors and pulse with life. Even the onyx dragon radiated what I can only call a darkness visible, like the space between our shadow and ourselves.

I brought Dionis to the spot just outside the pool that was equidistant between the red dragon and the black, and pointed to the sigil made of fire opals and onyx that showed the two dragons entwined.

"This is where you enter," I said.

Dionis, who now understood what I meant to do, began to speak, but I put my hand to his lips. "No," I said. "You must do this for me, if you can't see why you should do it for yourself. Let us fully understand before we walk away."

I left him then and went to my own sigil, where I disrobed and turned to face my twin. He stood there, already naked, and so beautiful that it caught my breath, so perfect of limb and beautiful of face that he might have been carved of stone, were he not so radiant.

His eyes met mine, our minds touched, and we stepped as one over the rim.

Just as before, the moment my feet touched the surface of the basin, the dragons—this time all four of them—came to life. Their bodies shuddered, their eyes blazed, their wings stretched out. They lowered their heads and, opening their mouths, sent each of our powers surging after us.

On my side of the basin, the bluish glimmer of the one power meshed itself with the golden glimmer of the other, creating a shimmering spectrum of every conceivable blending from the palest yellow to the darkest blue, and between them myriad shades of green.

On Dionis's side, a play of fire and shadow came rushing over his feet. At one moment these were veins of fire shimmering out of night, at the next they were raging flames burning over a sea of black.

The forces broke against the two of us like waves crashing against a light tower, surging up, then falling back, then surging up again, this time higher than before. And, as they did this, the powers sang. Their voices were eerily melodious, unearthly, making harmonies so complex that they were at once sad and joyous, profound and profane. These voices grew louder, the surges grew higher as Dionis and I grew closer, while before us, quickly contracting but holding its perfect shape all the while, was a circle of stillness.

Because, as each step brought me closer to Dionis, my desire for him became more intense. I had never felt desire like this before, a consuming fusion of raw lust and heart-melting need. I fought to keep some part of my mind clear, for always I was mindful of what had happened the time before, when Páli had been so terribly burnt, rescuing me from my folly.

We met at last. Dionis held out his hands, his palms facing me, and I lifted my own arms in the same way. Our hands touched, and as they did, all four powers met, and the storm broke. Now all was fire and darkness and flux of light, a rushing dance of color and shadow.

In unison, Dionis and I lifted our heads and directed it skywards, at first to keep from drowning in it, then to play with it, creating a spiraling play of rainbows that reached for leagues up into the sky.

We watched all this with joy. But, even so, our heads slowly lowered until our eyes met again, and then we spread our arms wider, moving closer to each other, surrendering to the magnetic force that drew us together, but slowly, because that much resistance was almost intolerably delicious.

Finally, our lips met, our minds and bodies melded together, our souls touched, and the force lifted us up inside it, high into the sky. As we rose, we wrapped our legs together, wound our arms around each other, pressing our bodies together, our mouths joined in a devouring, open-mouthed kiss.

But then, from instinct or divine intent, we opened arms and held them out straight, Dionis's resting on mine, and let the forces, now commingled into one, flow from our fingers out over the world.

As the column of power slowly spun us around, this

flow spread out in all directions, spreading the blessing of the Great Mother over all the land. And all who recognized it breathed in deeply, receiving peace and healing, and for some time afterwards felt a glow deep within. Such was the last gift of the *Nithaial*.

FTERWARDS, at once emotionally wrung out and satiated with a fullness of power I had never experienced before, Dionis and I stepped out of the basin, left our clothing where it had fallen, and went and collapsed together on the lawn outside.

In Gostranar, we always had the choice of being part of the ordinary world or insulated within a private one. Thus we could lie there and bask in the sun, oblivious to the worshipping crowd that had gathered to watch the astonishing display of the powers, and who could not, now that it was over, bring themselves to leave. To say it another way, it was not only that we were invisible to them, they—except in the most tenuous way—were also invisible to us.

After a long while, Dionis groaned, rolled onto his side, and placed his head on my arm, letting his fingers slip down my chest and over my stomach, until they reached the soft, light patch of hair that had recently started to sprout just above my groin. He caught some of this between his fingers and gave them a tug.

"Was all that to seduce me into abandoning my plan?" he asked in a teasing voice. "If so, it was a *brilliant* notion."

"No, beloved," I answered, smiling. "Although it was

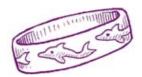
beyond all my expectations—and those were very, *very* high. I simply couldn't leave this world behind without experiencing it once. It was, after all, what we were brought here to do... and now we have done it, if only this once."

Dionis sighed. "I also think that you meant for me to understand what I am forcing you to sacrifice; indeed, to finally grasp from within what it means to be a *Nithaial*."

I thought about this for awhile, for there was more than a little truth in what he said. Even so, the real force behind it was something closer to the Waldrônur's notion of justice. If I had come directly to Niccas's aid, Dionis would never have been born. But he had been, and I loved him beyond all measure, and only by understanding it fully would the sacrifice I was making for him be clear to me in all its infinitely painful purity.

But this was between my doom and myself, and not something I needed to share with Dionis. So I took his hand and told him another truth. "What you say is so, beloved," I replied in a voice barely louder than a whisper, "but more than anything I wanted to experience just once the union of the *Nithaial Galgaliel* and the *Nithaial Elimiel*, bodies and souls mingled together, the complete consummation of our powers and our love."

Chapter 34



eled to *Fyrewourmhaem* the following day. We had gone over our conversation with Niccas again and again, looking for some other plan to find our way to Ais Dysmassia without having to deal with a necromancer. After all, the most powerful necromancers were now the Eight—and we could all too easily imagine the consequences if they learned the two of us were hoping to visit the Land of the Dead.

So, like many another who quarrels with good advice, we proceeded to discover its truth the hard way. As soon as the *dagmast* stones transported us to Wyldmast Druim, we went to the edge of the hilltop, and sent a message through the spirit realm, begged Dracon Æledléoma to grant us an audience.

This was the dragon on whose back I had ridden, those many years ago, to the destruction of Gorzungâd. There, he had rescued Niferas at my request, and then carried us to Ern-

fardast. For Dracon Æledléoma, that would still seem like yesterday, for dragon time moves very, very slowly, and I knew he would remember me well. Whether he would consent to speak to me remained to be seen.

And it seemed that he did not. We lingered for over an hour, vainly watching *Fyrewourmhaem* for any sign of life—all the while knowing that Teshnar'ad was fully cognizant of our presence, and was becoming increasingly insulted that we had not come to pay our respects. So, finally, we gave up, and dejectedly started our way down the hill. It was then, of course, that the dragon consented to grant our wish, sending us scrambling back to the summit.

Dionis had done many things in his life, but he had yet to meet a dragon, and Dracon Æledléoma was as about as impressive—or, if you like, terrifying—a member of that species as once could wish. He drew in his great scaly wings the moment he touched ground, and coiled up his long snaking tail like a carter's bullwhip.

He then lifted his head haughtily and swung it about, to the left and then to the right, even though we approached him directly from his front—thus leaving us feeling as though we were too insignificant to be noticed, even when we stood directly in front of him.

Etiquette demanded that we stand there with bowed heads until the dragon deigned to notice us, but Dionis was so struck by the dragon's magnificence that he could only stare—and no wonder. Every scale on the dragon's body was

a thing of beauty. Those were a lucent cerulean edged with cinnibar, but those on his chest, from throat on down, were a dark, translucent gold. And, like the pennant of a castle, a bright vermilion crest flared up between his sharply pointed ears and ran like a banner partway down his neck.

At last, Dracon Æledléoma condescended to notice our presence. He bent down and regarded us one at a time with his fiery eyes. "We meet again, *Nithaial Galgaliel*," he said in its croaking voice, "and this time, unless my eyes deceive me, you have brought along the new *Nithaial Elimiel*, as well. Be careful not to lose *this* one as easily as you did the last."

That single cruel sentence told me that all was lost even before the meeting began. "Hail to thee, Dracon Æledléoma," I replied, my voice reeking politesse, "mightiest and wisest of all thy kind. I thank thee for granting us this meeting."

The dragon snorted. "Fair words, *Nithaial Galgaliel*. The other *Nithaial Elimiel*, when he came here, addressed us with equal respect. He also promised us on oath to free us from the spell that keeps us prisoner, and yet the years have passed and still it encircles us. So much for fair speech."

Dracon Æledléoma lowered his head, turning it sidewise so as to almost touch me, and glared at me with his closest eye. I tried to match his look, but none can equal the glower of a disdainful dragon.

"And do not insult me," the dragon hissed, "by mentioning that *mouse hole* you allowed us after we demolished

Gorzungâd."

I lowered my head. "You speak the truth, Most Puissant One, but I beg you to consider: It takes both *Nithaial* to lift the spell, and, as you well know, my twin was lost in his final battle with Maerdas. It is only in the past few days that the new *Nithaial Elimiel* arrived at Gostranar—and he is only now coming into his full powers."

The dragon closed his eyes, or at least the one I could see. When he opened it again, the ice was still there, but with an admixture of shrewdness. "And so have you come to fulfill the oath? Or have you come as beggars, hoping for *more* alms—despite the fact that the first favor we gave you cost the life of Dracon Wælfyra?"

This time is was Dionis who replied. "Perish the thought, Sublimest of All Created Things. We have come to study the spell, to learn how we might end it. We asked for this audience only to tell you why it has taken so long for the promise Niccas made you to be carried out, and to beg your understanding and forgiveness."

Dracon Æledléoma drew his head back, rose up on his hind legs, and spread his wings. "Very well," he croaked. "We *Fyrewourm* accept your apology—or, rather, *will*, once the deed is done. But seek no further favors from us—we have no love for men, and even less for the *Nithaial*." And with those parting words, thrust out his wings and flew away.

Dionis, when he turned to me, had the expression of someone who had just received an unexpected—and unex-

pectedly painful—blow. I, too, was stunned by the dragon's overt hostility. Men feared dragons for their power and coldness, it is true, but they also venerated them for their wisdom. Dracon Æledléoma had displayed much of the former and nothing of the latter—and this unsettled me.

"I guess it will be Necromancers, after all," Dionis was saying, shaking his head. "We had best go to Teshnar'ad and find out how welcoming *he* will be."

"We need not wait long to discover the answer to that," I replied. "The Avatar is coming to us."

I pointed down the side of the hill. Three tygers were hurrying in our direction, the first of them ridden by a demon. Even at that distance, I could tell that the rider was Teshnar'ad, not because I recognized his features, but from the imperious way he held himself—the very embodiment of the highest sort of Demon Lord.

It took but a moment for the tygers to bound up the hill. Teshnar'ad leaped down from his and approached, staying the tygers where they were. Dionis muttered something under his breath as he came up, perhaps a short prayer. For the Avatar was a massive, terrifying presence. Even his loping walk radiated aggressive malevolence.

"So." Teshnar'ad had a deep rasping voice, which used every consonant as a weapon. "The *Nithaial* do not deign to pay the Avatar of Ra'asiel the courtesy of a visit; therefore he has decided to come to them."

I sighed and reached within myself for what courte-

ousness remained from what I had just lavished on Dracon Æledléoma.

"Hail to thee, Greatest of Warriors and Highest of Priests," I then replied. "Forgive us any slight, for we meant none. We wished to assure Dracon Æledléoma that the promise Niccas made to lift the imprisoning spell on Wyldmast Druim was finally about to be kept."

Teshnar'ad considered this. "Why didn't you simply lift the spell rather than repeat the promise?" he asked. "Surely Dracon Æledléoma must have wondered the same thing."

It was my turn to think. "Well," I said at last, "for one thing we haven't the faintest idea how to do it, and, for another, that wasn't really our purpose for coming here."

Teshnar'ad opened his mouth, shut it again, then made a noise that sounded as though he were coughing up a toad. He was, I realized, laughing.

"You are truly the twin of Niccas," he said, after the spasm passed, the voice still harsh but no longer hostile. He then turned to Dionis and added, "While *you* are the *Nithaial Elimiel*, and more importantly, Niccas's son."

Dionis bowed his head in assent. "Yes, Avatar of the Almighty Ra'asiel, you speak truly. I am called Dionis."

Teshnar'ad nodded. "So Do'arma'ak told me. You earned his respect, although he thought you mad. Did your nest mate survive, after all?"

"Lyreas?" Dionis answered. "Yes... he did survive.

But his spirit was stolen."

"So." Teshnar'ad looked hard at Dionis, then nodded his head toward the tygers. "Come ride with me to the temple. Ra'asiel, Mightiest of all Gods waits impatiently for your obeisances."

He then bared his teeth into which I guessed must be a sort of smile. "Then we shall feast and you shall tell me the true purpose for your visit."

Teshnar'ad turned to Dionis. "Nithaial Elimiel, Do'arma'ak has told me how masterfully you rode a gräzk'vor—mounting a tyger will be nothing for you."

HATEVER DIONIS'S EXPERIENCES, the following ride surely topped them all, especially clinging to our riding beasts as they bounded up the endless flight of temple stairs, between rows of Demon Lords brandishing their swords and shouting at the top of their lungs.

Indeed, as I dismounted, I surreptitiously tried to rid myself of the tufts of fur I had pulled from my tyger's pelt, so fiercely had I been clutching at its back. The beast turned and fixed me with a baleful eye as it was being led away—no doubt fixing me in its memory on the chance we might meet again.

We came and knelt before the circle in which Ra'asiel took form when He deigned to show Himself at the temple. Whether he gave us his blessing I do not know, for he chose not to appear before us as he had to Niccas. Perhaps He felt that neither Dionis nor myself were worthy of His company. Certainly, I heaved a silent sigh of relief when we finally rose

and were led by Teshnar'ad down into the dark and gloomy depths of the temple.

Again to our good fortune, the "feast" the Avatar had promised us was, in fact, a short and quiet meal, brought by temple servants. It was eaten by ourselves alone, and consisted of what Teshnar'ad snortingly called scorched flesh and beggarly drink, which is to say roasted beef, washed down with clear, cool well water. We were very grateful for it.

The only difficult moment came when the last course arrived, where we might eat sweetmeats to gild the pleasure of the meal. What was set before us, however, was a clutch of leathery eggs. When we looked at them uncertainly, Teshnarad showed us by taking one, cracking it open against the edge of the table, then deftly tossing its contents up in the air and snatching them with his jaws.

It was a living, squirming, unhatched baby turtle. Dionis and I watched spellbound at the Avatar rolled it about in his mouth, then we looked at each other.

My twin touched my mind. "Would it help if I used my power to cook them in their shell?" he asked.

"Not much," I answered. "Cooked or not, the moment one enters my mouth I'll toss up my meal all over the table."

"Well," Dionis said, "use your ingenuity then."

I thought for a moment, then remembered the feast I had eaten among the Riders of the Lhennad, and the way the food was speared into the mouth of a tablemate. I turned to Teshnar'ad and said, "Among our people, this dish is eaten dif-

ferently." I picked up another of the eggs, broke it open as he had done, and spreading the shell halves apart, flipped out its contents. I then levitated the wriggling baby turtle and its pink yolk sac high up into the air and let it drop right over Teshnar'ad's head.

Instinctively, he lunged for it, snapped it out of the air, and gobbled it down.

"Ah," I said. "I made it too easy for you. Once again."

I repeated what I had done, but this time, at the last moment sent it veering to the left. Again, Teshnar'ad lunged, and again he caught it and ate it.

I turned to Dionis. "By the Blessed Mother," I said, "the Avatar is good at this."

"Make it harder still, then," my twin replied.

And so I did—and harder still the next time. And so it went, with Teshnar'ad becoming more and more pleased with himself as the snatches got progressively more challenging... until, suddenly, there were no eggs left.

"You win!" I cried.

Teshnar'ad nodded, at first looking pleased, then puzzled. "I could better accept your praise," he said, "if you explained how anyone could ever *lose*."

"That is easily explained," Dionis answered. "We don't have jaws the size of yours, so Jessan was unprepared for that, as well as for your skill. But at a real feast, several of us would join in tossing at once—and that would *really* put you on your mettle."

Teshnar'ad's eyes lit up as he imagined this. "By the holy light of swamp fire," he bellowed, "that is a *good* game. You people of the womb are not all imbeciles, after all."

He turned his head, and for a horrible moment I feared he was going to demand more turtle eggs. But no, he was summoning a servant to clear away the remains of the feast.

Now he looked directly at Dionis. "Nithaial Elimiel, you may already know that your father and I exchanged fluids, and with them certain essences of ourselves. So is it then that I am to him as though we had sprung from the same egg. And, since some part of this essence must have been passed along when he created you—I look upon you as my own hatchling."

He paused a beat to let this sink in. Dionis smiled. "I do know this, Avatar, and am honored to share even a touch of your great spirit, and, with your blessing, to claim you as kin."

Teshnar'ad was clearly pleased with this reply, and regarded Dionis with an intentness that might be the closest a Demon comes to affection.

"Well said, hatchling," he rumbled. "Now you may tell me the purpose of your visit."

And so Dionis did, starting at the end of the tale that Do'arma'ak had already told to the Avatar, from the battle with the skalgûr at Faeÿstirran to that moment at the breakfast table when Maerdas, inhabiting Niferas, had put a locking spell around Lyreas's emptied mind so that not even the powers of the *Nithaial* could ever heal him.

When that was all told, Niccas revealed his oath to

return Lyreas to himself, no matter the cost. To do this, he must confront Maerdas in Ais Dysmassia, which meant finding a way there that would allow them to return. It was Niccas who had revealed to them how this might be done, that it required the help—or at least the knowledge—of a mighty necromancer, and it was for this reason that he and I had come here to seek the Avatar's help.

Teshnar'ad listened to all this intently, querying Dionis when he needed to. After my twin had finished he sat silently and turned the matter over in his mind, his face hardening into a mask, his eyes fixed on Dionis as he did.

Finally, abruptly, he spoke. Always his voice was harsh, but now it was all shards of glass. "*Nithaial Elimiel*, only the fact that Niccas knows all this keeps me from rejecting you out of hand. How can you be reconciled to an act of impiety so great that it may dethrone Gesryma—the goddess you deem Holiest of Mothers?"

Dionis grasped my hand hard beneath the table, but when he spoke his voice was clear and certain. "It is my doom, Avatar. The Blessed Gesryma appeared to my father as he was about to set out on his trials, to warn him how difficult they would be. She was right: each proved more terrible than the next—but Her hand was thereafter invisible to him, either in help or in hindrance. In the end, despite Her visitation, he could act only as his heart directed. If my father supports me at all, it is because he accepts that I have undertaken this quest for the very same reason."

The demon thought about this, his massive head set to one side. Then he clicked his teeth and asked, "The strength of this thing you people of the womb call 'love' seems dangerous to me, clouding the mind and weakening the spirit."

Dionis smiled and shook his head. "You are hardly alone in thinking this, Mighty Avatar, but it is not so. I weep at the thought, but Lyreas may never forgive me for what I am about to do. He, too, has his honor. Besides, what mortal could receive such a gift, and not be crushed by its weight? The price of giving Lyreas back to himself is dear in every way, and it requires that I summon all the courage and clarity I possess."

Teshnar'ad slowly lowered his head, not so much in disagreement as in testament to Dionis's implacable logic. "And if the Blessed Gesryma appeared to you now," he said at last in a low voice, "and asked you not to do this?"

Dionis's eyes were suddenly wet with tears, and for the first time his voice quivered as he replied, "I can only say that I am infinitely grateful to her that she has not."

Teshnar'ad lowered his head and closed his eyes, which said much for his feelings for Dionis. The Avatar's question had brought my twin to the end of his tether. If the Blessed Mother *had* spoken, Dionis's mind would have shattered, for obeying or defying Her were equally out of the question.

I heard words, realized that Teshnar'ad had begun to speak. So strongly was I affected by what Dionis had just said that I had to force myself to puzzle out their meaning. Even so, it was like hearing something being said in another room, to another person, with little import to me.

"We, the People of the Egg, honor a certain kind of madness," Teshnar'ad was saying, "believing that when the Mighty Ra'asiel chooses to speak through a living being, their own spirit is as shattered as a tree is when struck by lightning. This is how I choose to see *you*, *Nithaial Elimiel*, as I expect your companion does—preferring to set aside his qualms about your decision in order to honor the god who crazed you."

The Avatar looked in my direction as he said these words, then turned back to Dionis. "I should also say that the Most Mighty Ra'asiel may have given *me* a sign to show that he, too, at least tolerates your quest."

Again Teshnar'ad paused, his brow wrinkled from the effort of organizing his thoughts and working out how to put them in our own tongue. "You see, despite the fact that the necromancers supposedly honor Ra'asiel, Father of All, as their god, they have as little to do with me, His Avatar, as they deem safe. Because of this, their ways have remained closed to me, and they come to me neither for my blessing or my advice.

"Hence I was not overly surprised to discover that certain powerful members of their order had been coming here in secret to visit with the dragons, using all their stealth to keep me from discovering this.

"At first, I thought they hid their comings and goings to keep me from learning of their mastery over the *dag*-

mast stones. Because—despite the spell the Nithaial had cast—these powers allowed them not only to come here, but to leave as well. From that I concluded that it suited their purposes to keep the Avatar of Ra'asiel imprisoned here without hope of visitors, since the Nithaial had given me the power to use the dagmast stones to let anyone travel here but not to let them leave.

"Accordingly, they made these visits to *Fyrewourm-haem* only rarely, silently, on moonless nights, using various tricks to keep themselves hidden from me. And they would have continued in this manner, undetected, had it not been for the death of the Dracon Wælfyra, your father's bearer, at the hands of Maerdas.

"Huëfælda, the First of Dragons, thought Maerdas to be a necromancer, or at least the puppet of one, and so the next necromancer to visit the dragons was rather rudely received. I came across him, scorched all over and writhing in pain, halfway up the road to Wyldmast Druim, where the last of his strength had deserted him. He was too far gone to answer any questions, so I let my tyger make a meal of him. Still, now I had a puzzle to ponder at my leisure... and my incarceration here has given me all I could ask of that."

The Avatar now made a low grunting growl of satisfaction. "So I waited patiently, the right dark night came at last, and the necromancer who appeared this time became *my* guest. I treated him somewhat better than the dragons did his predecessor, but the tygers were not so generous

when I turned him over to them.

"Needless to say, they had to wait for their dinner. I had many questions for my guest, and—after I ripped off his hands with my teeth and ate them in front of him—he had almost as many answers."

Dionis cast a quick glance my way. Uncle Avatar was going to take some getting used to.

"His replies," Teshnar'ad was saying, "eventually trailed off into incoherence, but I had learned enough. To put it briefly—and without all the screaming—it came down to this: Centuries ago, the necromancers discovered that dragons have an unquenchable and irrepressible lust for a certain extremely rare metal called *mythral*. The necromancers not only knew of this metal, but had learned how to make use of it in a variety of diabolical ways. If they had had a ready source of it, the world would be a much sorrier place. Even so, when the necromancers learned how much dragons coveted it, they intensified their efforts to accumulate even more—eventually managing to assure a small but steady supply.

"Here is where the story touches on the rhyme you have just recited, and the reason it was composed. The necromancers have always been diligent in seeking out what they want, and never more so in searching ancient writings for anything they might put to their purposes. And written in runic letters on the wall of a buried and forgotten tomb, they came across a forgotten bit of lore—that the dragons control a secret doorway that opens directly into Ais Dysmassia.

"Why it exists and why the dragons have possession of it is an even older mystery—perhaps even the dragons themselves have forgotten. What they also seem to have trouble remembering is they were forbidden to ever use it or to allow anyone else to do so. Their task was simply to guard it, and for that purpose it was set in the most impregnable of places—*Fyrewourmheall*, the Great Hall of the Dragonfolk, where Huëfælda, the First of Dragons, has his roost.

"Furthermore, the tomb message I just mentioned ended with a peculiar rune found in none of the lexicons the Necromancers possessed. I say 'peculiar' because, besides being unknown, it was also much larger than the others, which were all the same size."

Here Teshnar'ad closed his eyes, displaying the satisfaction the storyteller feels when he reveals a pivotal moment of his tale to the astonishment of his listeners. "Only after many years of fruitless study did the obvious answer present itself: *It was an exact tracing of the door's key*."

The Avatar opened his eyes. "So here you have the dragon's lust for *mythral*," he said, extending one claw. "And here you have the key to a door the dragons are meant to guard with their lives." He extended the other claw. Then, making a loud clap, he brought them together.

"The necromancers wrought a copy of the key out of *mythral*, brought it to the dragons, and said, 'Let us use this key to go through the door and you may keep it afterwards. And in the end, of course, the dragons couldn't refuse them."

Teshnar'ad bared his teeth in a rictus that could have been a smile or merely signaled his approbation of such malevolent cleverness.

"Up until then," he went on, "the necromancers had considered it a major feat to dip a foot into the River Cyll, the waters of which grant great powers to any mortal—and necromancers are mortal—who survives the contact.

"Now, with this secret doorway in their power, they could actually enter Ais Dysmassia itself, and then, after they had gotten what they had come for, *return to the living*. That is something no mortal has *ever* done."

There was a silence after Teshnar'ad finished his tale, until Dionis spoke up. "And the dragons weren't punished for this grave act of disobedience?"

"Not as yet," the Avatar replied with a shrug. "The dragons reasoned that if there were to be any punishment, it would be visited on the necromancers. Until that happened, their pile of *mythral* would continue to grow. As for the necromancers, while some of them did perish when they went to the Dark Lands, most survived. And those who returned came back with great powers.

"It is to the dragon's eternal shame that their greed led to their turning a blind eye to these new powers—even when they resulted in the creation of the Nine, or, rather, thanks to Niccas, the *Eight*."

There was another long silence, and this time I was the one who broke it. "So there it is," I said. "We have only to convince one of the Eight to give us a copy of this key and then convince the dragons to let us use it. And how are we supposed to do *that*?"

ESHNAR'AD, it turned out, had already worked out the answer to my question. And so it was that on the following morning, Dionis and I were back on the top of Wyldmast Druim, keeping our promise to the dragons by picking apart the complicated chain of spells that had summoned the imprisoning ring into being.

Niccas could have done it in a moment. Dionis and I *did* possess the requisite power, but neither of us had the mental discipline to easily bend the interwoven strands of force to our will. So, instead, we had to laboriously seek out a single one among the myriad, seize hold of it together, and jointly work it free.

The task was endless, or so it felt. Hours passed before we could convince ourselves that we could actually see some diminishing in the great rainbow-colored ring that flickered and pulsed in the sky around. It never dimmed, but eventually it began to shrink. Finally it became a single strand, then a single thread... then nothing at all.

As each of the strands snapped and vanished, it sounded a tone that had caused all the others to reverberate in response. The last of them made only its own pure, heart-melting sound as it vanished, like the last note of a wood thrush's melodious call as it floats through the gathering dusk.

The sound still echoed in our ears as Dionis and I

stumbled apart—then threw our arms back around each other when we realized we were too exhausted to stand on our own. We staggered to edge of the hilltop and sank down into the grass. And stared.

For all of *Fyrewourmhaem* had taken wing—a flock, a swarm, a throng... those words capture the sheer density but not the resplendent, breath-stopping majesty of the spectacle: green dragons, blue dragons, scarlet dragons, black dragons, their scales burnished by the slanting afternoon light.

They circled about in close formation, spreading out slightly as each new dragon joined them, until the sky overhead was dark. Then, after circling about like a slowly revolving plate, the edges began to unravel. The dragons veered away, soaring over the Forest Grymaeld until they had all vanished into the hazy distance.

I sighed. "I didn't really hope that a choir of them would come shower us with precious jewels and sing a hymn to our glory," I said. "But my feelings are a *little* hurt that not even *a single dragon* flew over to thank us."

Dionis laughed. "That's like asking a prisoner, set free from years of rotting in a dungeon, to stop on his way out to thank his jailer."

He pointed in the direction of the great temple. "But at least," he went on, "as promised, our ride is coming."

However, this time it wasn't Teshnar'ad who rode the lead tyger, but a demon lord unknown to me—but not to Dionis, who waved to him from where we stood. Do'arma'ak, for

there was no question that it was he, returned the salute, and grasped arms with my twin the moment he was off his tyger.

As I came up, the demon turned toward me, and regarded me with great interest.

"Hail to Thee, *Nithaial Galgaliel*," he croaked in quite passable common speech. "I have had the great fortune of serving the *Nithaial Elimiel* in both his incarnations, and I put my services at your disposal as well."

There was something so... I had to grope for the word, it being so unlikely... *suggestive* about the way the demon said this that nearly made my jaw drop—all the more so when I realized that this had come, not from any tone of voice, but from an unmistakably lascivious brush against my mind.

"Niccas, you *dog*," I thought. I replied with the simple phrase that demon etiquette demanded, and found myself blushing at the words. "You do me great honor, Do'arma'ak. Your blood has become as precious to me as my own."

We each grasped the other's forearms, and I found to my surprise that the demon's scales were pliant and warm not, as I had imagined, hard and cold.

Do'arma'ak must have read my thoughts, for he then said, "We are not like dragons—in this or any way, *Nithaial Galgaliel*."

Fortunately, Dionis interrupted, asking the demon about the necromancer, and Do'arma'ak was immediately all business. "He awaits you at the temple, *Nithaial Elimiel*! His name is Sgryl'grulk. He is the most powerful of any who have

not succumbed to the blandishments of the Eight, but, even so, you would be wise not to trust him much."

He summoned the three tygers, and added, "But come and see for yourself." And to me, "Nithaial Galgaliel, your people have a maxim, I think, that the anomaly verifies the principle? You will find that Sgryl'grulk is *very much* like a dragon."

I wasn't sure exactly what saying Do'arma'ak had in mind, but there was no doubt that the necromancer was unlike any other demon I had ever seen. When we arrived, we went directly to the same room where we had talked with Teshnar'ad the day before. Beside the Avatar sat a demon whose scales were bone white, set off by a long black stole that hung down from both sides of his neck, on which glittered an array of arcane signs, each one more ominous than the next, and none of them familiar.

This demon also carried an onyx staff topped with large crystal skull. When the necromancer turned his head in my direction, the skull opened its mouth a made a shrill cry, and at the same time I felt a force try to seize hold of my mind. Just as quickly, I shook it off, but not without a struggle. The demon then lifted his lips in a sneer that revealed golden teeth as sharp as dagger points.

I was filled with rage, but Dionis murmured, "Not now, not here, love," and gripped my shoulder until I calmed myself.

While all this was going on—for it happened in the blink of an eye—Teshnar'ad had risen from his seat, the necromancer reluctantly following his example.

"This," the Avatar said, "is Sgryl'grulk, the mightiest of all our necromancers—at least of those not turned to the service of the Eight."

I looked at Sgryl'grulk and wondered why he was not one of them. What necromancer could resist the chance to visit Ais Dysmassia? There could be two answers only: the first was that he knew he lacked the power to survive the visit; the second was...

I mind touched Dionis, saying: "Has it occurred to you beloved, that Teshnar'ad has been deceived—that Sgryl'grulk has visited the Dark Land, and is one of the Eight?"

"I am sure of the first," he replied. "I hadn't thought to ask myself about the second. But it might well be so. Have you tried mind touching him? His thoughts are sealed within a block of stone, tightly bound with seven bands of wrought iron."

It was true. Niccas might have been his match, but not I. Sgryl'grulk knocked me away as easily as he would a fly. He must also have caught at least the gist of my exchange with Dionis, because, for the blink of an eye, he let me see into his mind, and it was as if a sheet of ice had parted to reveal a pit of molten fire.

I shuddered, the eyes opened and closed, and once again his look was as cold and opaque as frozen marble.

This exchange, too, passed as quickly as a shooting star, and, once again, Teshnar'ad gave no sign that he had noticed it, but simply stood there—it was now the necroman-

cer's turn to speak.

Sgryl'grulk, however, remained pointedly silent, and after a bit the Avatar turned to him, and they exchanged sharp words in their own language.

The Avatar turned to us. "Sgryl'grulk says that he will not speak in the common tongue. You have already seen that he has no love of the *Nithaial*. But it matters not, so long as our plan unfolds as we wish.

"Indeed," and here he shot me a glance, "it may be best that I play the intermediary."

"So be it," Dionis replied. "His noisome presence makes us equally unhappy. But this is your house, not ours, and we submit to your wishes."

In response, the crystal skull on the top of the necromancer's staff again opened its mouth and shrieked something in its high-pitched icy voice. Teshnar'ad frowned, but did not translate. Instead, he gestured for us all to sit at the table.

"Today, for the first time in all its history," he began, "Fyrewourmhaem is empty. All the dragons have taken flight to celebrate their liberation, and the hundreds of years they have been imprisoned here have made them forgetful of security. The master of darkness has brought you a key to open the door to Ais Dysmassia. Bring it into the great hall of the dragons, you can then make your way to Ais Dysmassia and attempt to complete your quest."

Teshnar'ad turned to Sgryl'grulk and spoke a command in a voice where authority was wrapped in but a tissue

of civility. The necromancer bent his head slightly in reply, and undid a purse of pale white skin that hung from his belt, and removed something from it. He slapped it onto the table so that it was covered by his claw, then slowly withdrew it to reveal an elaborately wrought medallion—not at all in the shape of a key, for it was meant not to be turned but fitted into place.



I had seen *mythral* before, of course, but this object had been polished to a rare luster, beautiful beyond even gold. I could see why the dragons would covet it. Still, the allure of the thing made a question that had long been nagging in my mind become all the more urgent.

I mind touched Dionis. "Why is he giving us this?"

"Because he knows what he is purchasing," my twin replied. "The end of the Nithaial for a pretty piece of jewelry." And he reached over to pick the medallion up.

Dionis, I suddenly realized, had no idea of the metal's danger. I leaped upon him sideways, hitting him so forcefully that we both tumbled onto the floor.

My twin was too surprised to be angry at me, and let me help him back to his feet. When we got up together, I found that Teshnar'ad had sprung from his seat, and I made my explanation to him as well as to my twin.

"When I first touched *mythral*," I said, "it drew away all my power and left me for dead. I was young then and not yet fully the *Nithaial Galgaliel*, but..." I put my arm around Dionis. "As long as it is in my power, neither of us will touch that thing."

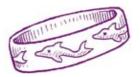
I shot a look of pure hate at the demon necromancer; surely he knew this and was hoping that we might not—thus having the pleasure of seeing Dionis stricken and brought low.

Sgryl'grulk, however, merely closed his eyes.

I turned to Dionis. "Niferas is waiting with Lyreas. Let *him* carry the key, and *he* may be of use to us in dealing with Maerdas."

Thus did my twin first learn of my plan to bring Niferas to Ais Dysmassia—or, to put it more truthfully, that I finally summoned the nerve to tell him! And, for once, the cowardly way was the best way. For right then he was too shaken by what had just happened to protest, let alone wonder what my motive could be. So we left at once for the *dagmast* stones to fetch Lyreas and Niferas both, and then go to the great hall of the dragons and try to find our way in.

Chapter 35



ons, was like a great white egg stuck end up in the ground, glittering brightly—almost blindingly—in the afternoon sun. The entrance, also oval, opened like a gaping mouth at least halfway up its side. The dragons, after all, flew in and out, and they had no reason to provide an entry for those lesser beings who got about on legs.

Getting up to it would be no problem, of course. It was getting down from it afterwards, with all our powers stripped away, that worried me. I said as much to Dionis.

"Teshnar'ad thinks you and I will emerge from Ais Dysmassia—if we *do* emerge—as great mages, for our powers are as much a part of us as our bones," he replied. "If *those* are stripped away from us along with our divine status..."

He strugged and glanced at his lover. "Lyreas may find it is now his turn to take care of a simpleton." Suddenly he smiled and rumpled my hair. "*Two* simpletons, I mean, beloved! I'm sure it's no more difficult to care for two as one. At

least I've heard that said of children."

We both laughed. But I found it hard to shake off the image of the two of us wandering hand in hand the rest of our lives, lost in mazy innocence.

Still, push it away I did, and had all four of us gather together in a line, arms wrapped around each other. We carried no supplies—no food, no water, no spare clothes. There would be no long search. We would either find Maerdas at once, or we would die. So Sgryl'grulk had said, and with such satisfaction that we could only believe him.

All we brought with us were demon torches made of lignum vitae, which the Avatar had shoved into our hands at the last moment, saying that they burned hot and bright. They came with thongs that let us hang them from our belts. Dionis could summon fire here, but who knew what he or I could conjure in *Ais Dysmassia*.

But now was a different matter. I summoned my power and lifted us up, up, up, right to the open doorway. There I checked our flight, leaving us suspended in the air. Just because the dragons had all flown away hardly meant that *Fyrewourmheall* had been left unguarded, and so it proved. The doorway was protected with wards spun of dragon magic, which I would rather not tamper with if possible.

I turned to Niferas. "Show the key," I said to him, "and keep it well away from Dionis and myself."

Teshnar'ad had given Niferas a clasped chain with which to hang the medallion around his neck. He seized hold of this with his good arm and pulled the device out from under his shirt. There was a flash of silver light, the wards fell away—yet another example of how the necromancers were usurping dragon magic—and we floated through the open doorway, riding a bright stream of sunlight down into the enormous darkened hall, or, if you like, inside the shell of an enormous egg.

Even when our eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, we could make out nothing clearly, so Dionis sent a brightly glowing ball of fire floating through the air. Suddenly, multicolored stabs of light sparkled everywhere. Countless gemstones, each larger than the next, were embedded all over the inner wall. They were not so much set *into* the wall as fixed to extrude *from* it, like barnacles on the hull of a boat.

A single tall pillar, ornately decorated, rose up from the very bottom of egg—there was no floor—in shape much like a giant scepter. A gigantic crystal ball rested on the top of the pillar, and, resting on that was a smaller globe—held in place with golden bands studded with more precious stones.

"What do you make of all this, beloved?" I whispered to Dionis. As far I could see, this vast place was empty of dragons, but it was so strange and coldly beautiful that I barely dared to speak aloud. "What sort of meeting hall is this?"

"Well," he whispered back, "I was thinking that we should have no trouble climbing out of here, thanks to those jewels embedded in the wall, Then it came to me: when the dragons gathered here, they seized hold of the gems and so

clung to the wall all about, while the First of Dragons perched on the golden ball on the top of the pillar... and summoned light from the crystal globe to illuminate the proceedings."

I gasped. "What a thing to see!" I replied. "The walls covered with dragons, jewels glittering all around them, their own scales glimmering, their eyes glowing, while Huëfælda, First and Most Ancient, glowers from his golden roost in the center of it all."

Dionis nodded. "I'm just as glad that we weren't invited here to present our case before an angry moot of dragons!" He shuddered. "Dracon Æledléoma did us a favor there, dismissing us out of hand."

All this while we had been drifting down, the fireball floating just above us, until, at last, we reaching the bottom of the egg. Sgryl'grulk had told us what to look for—a large mirror set into the base of the pillar. We circled the column until we found it, then set down, doing our best to keep our balance on the gemstone cobbles—no accommodations having been made even here for anyone merely ambulatory.

The mirror was made of white gold polished to a shimmering lustre. It captured our reflections perfectly. But as we came close to it, the flesh on these reflections began to melt away, revealing the muscles beneath, dripping with blood. And when we came closer still, these muscles and other bodily organs began to turn to rot and fall away in noisome gobbets, uncovering the skeleton within. Only the eyeballs resisted this corruption, staring back at us out of a bloody skeletal mask.

Lyreas was so agitated by this that Dionis had to put his arm around him and draw him away. As my twin murmured comfort into his lover's ear, Niferas and I exchanged a glance, the same thought on both our minds. Was *this* what was waiting for us on the other side? If so, it would be madness to bring Lyreas with us—or even to pass through ourselves.

Niferas shrugged. "If necromancers can do it," he muttered, "I don't see why you and Dionis should have any trouble."

I could think of several reasons. But I kept them to myself, not sure whether his words were edged with mockery. Instead, I merely said, "This is surely nothing but a spell meant to frighten off the faint of heart, as well as anyone with a whit of common sense."

A hint of a smile flickered across Niferas's face. But before he could reply, Dionis was back with us asking, "Have you found where we are supposed to fit the key?"

Niferas pointed to the frame at the top of the mirror. The frame was made of a dark, almost sullen gold, wrought in the shape of a skein of skeletal arms, hands all reaching upwards. At the top center of the frame, hands met from both directions, their fingers interlaced.

If you looked at this carefully, as Niferas clearly had, you saw that the fingers were also bent in ways that would fit exactly in the medallion's empty spaces.

Dionis nodded. "So then," he said, "go fit it in. I've had enough of this dragon pit."

Niferas struggled for a mere moment to undo the clasp with his one good hand, then pressed the medallion tightly against his side with his stump, while he ripped the chain away and flung it into the shadows. Then he took the medallion, reached up, and pressed it into the waiting golden hands. In the blink of an eye, the mirror's surface began to shimmer, then roil, then melted into acrid steam. The portal was open.

HE WORLD OF THE DEAD IS NOT LIKE OURS. To start, where in our world the realm of the spirit is invisible, here it is the realm of the real that takes magical power to reveal—and more magic to illuminate. It is black there, a syrupy darkness that yields reluctantly to light. Dionis brought his ball of flame along with us—thus showing that our powers would work in this place as well—but it shone as though through a mist of ink. So he put it out, leaving Niferas and Lyreas in the dark, while he and I brought ourselves into the realm of the spirit, where we saw clearly enough—even if everything about us was dreary and fell.

I had imagined *Ais Dysmassia* as a great barren plain, over which spirits moved, moaning in despair. But that was not quite so. Cities also came here when they died, bringing their ruins with them. The portal brought us to what seemed to be the top of a tower, flat and flagged with stone, with a monolith standing in its center and a broken parapet circling its edge.

A tower, yes, but one where the wreckage and ruin of a hundred cities had been heaped around its sides, until it towered not at all, but rose barely an arm's length out of the rubble of broken walls, fallen roofs, gaping windows, doorways without doors.

The spirits of the dead inhabited all this, passing through it like a restless sea beating against a broken shore. Their souls gave off a flickering light, a faint pulse of spirit energy that was less like the glow of a firefly than the momentary glints of moonlight reflecting from agitated water.

The sky above us—if sky it was—was lit by murmurous flashes of power, various in color, and as indistinct as marsh gas, if much greater in size. We could also sense the passage of spirits, some moving swiftly, many more just flitting about.

These latter were drawn to us—and this no idle analogy—as moths to a flame. For the power within Dionis and myself produced a brilliant light that, unlike anything else, illuminated everything around us for a great distance in all directions, like a signal beacon.

It took the two of us a moment to realize what was happening and what folly it might be. But, unlike Niccas, neither of us had learned to shroud this display, and our efforts were haphazard and shortlived—and, if anything, made it look as though we were actively signalling. No wonder Niccas was confident of finding us!

I was anxiously casting my eyes from one side of the tower to the other, when something about the pillar in the center of it caught my eye. Several small shiny discs were embedded on its surface, and these sucked into themselves any bit of power that passed nearby. In fact, as I watched, I could see that they were pulling in strands of our own power—not much of it, but some, and constantly.

However, as I moved toward the pillar to examine these, a hand fell on my shoulder—formed of spirit only, but spirit palpable. As it did so, a familiar voice said, "Never in the history of this place has there been a grander entrance. Every wraith ghoul in *Ais Dysmassia* is now hurrying our way."

Before either Dionis or I could reply, a second voice whispered in reply, "Let them come! Let them come!" Niccas had come, and another spirit accompanied him, albeit one so wan that no soul-glow emanated from it at all.

Even so, somehow it found the will to pull itself into a faint ectoplasmic resemblance of its former self, a sort of ghost's ghost.

"So, Maerdas, we meet again," Dionis said evenly to this manifestation. "We were hoping to find you here."

"Not as much as *I* was hoping to lure you here," Maerdas whispered, "although in my wildest dreams I never thought I would ensnare the two of you.

Maerdas's ectoplasmic head floated toward me, unaware that it had left its "body" behind. Indeed, by the time the head reached me, the rest of him simply evaporated.

"So noble, Jessan," the head whispered, "and so stupid. I always liked that about you, your incapability of learning from experience."

Before I could think of a reply—if any such were pos-

sible—Dionis spoke up. "If it is truly through your scheming that we are here," he said, "then you know the reason why. All that remains is for you to reveal the price you mean to collect from us."

The head floated toward Dionis. "The price?" it whispered. "The *price*? It is you who are to pay *that*."

Dionis replied, "And I mean to pay it—in exchange for giving Lyreas back his being, and letting him leave this place. Then you may place what doom you wish on me."

"And on me, too," I said, speaking for the first time. "You will have destroyed the last two *Nithaial*. What more could you want?"

"What I want is to leave this place and to return to the *living*," Maerdas hissed. "I mean to enter Lyreas and go back—and let the wraith ghouls take their pleasure with you."

"I will destroy Lyreas before there is any chance of that, Maerdas," Dionis replied, "which means the moment you try to enter him or when the wraith ghouls arrive. Then Jessan and I will leave *Ais Dysmassia* and you will have lost your wager. So think on that, while you still have the chance."

"To watch you destroy the one you love the most is *something*," Maerdas whispered. "When you're dead, you must learn to settle for the consolation prize."

There was a long silence after that. I knew Dionis was absolutely determined to do what he said; I feared Maerdas would settle for nothing less than what he demanded.

No doubt he knew the price Dionis and I would pay for coming here. We would return to the living, perhaps, but not as the two *Nithaial*. His plot had already destroyed them.

Then, suddenly, Niferas stepped for ward from where he had been standing behind Lyreas.

"There is another solution, Master," he said, "for I have come to you."

"Niferas!" Maerdas whispered. "I have missed you! And there you are, as beautiful as ever."

The ghostly head floated up to him, and as it did, I noticed that Niferas had let the sleeves of his shirt fall down, so that the fact that one arm had been reduced to a stump was well hidden.

"Niferas!" I cried out angrily. "I trusted you, and you mean betray me a *second* time?"

Niferas turned to me, and smirked. "No, Jessan. I mean to betray you for the fiftieth time, or the hundredth. As my Master said, you suffered much and you learned nothing."

Maerdas uttered a whispering laugh. "Ah, my lovely one, how much I treasure you! But how can I enter you, when your own spirit is in residence? I have no power here to cast it out."

"Ah, Master," Niferas replied. "I still remember the spell that drew you into me from out of the Head of Malamun. Shall I speak it?"

"Yes," Maerdas hissed, his delight in this news so palpable that his floating head, before as nebulous as a cloud, now sketched out his features. "Yes!"

I made a grab for Niferas, but like an idiot forgot about his stump and seized onto an empty sleeve. He danced away, abandoning his shirt, even as he chanted the magic words.

The floating wisp of head suddenly flew up Niferas's nostrils and vanished. As they did, his body began to contort, his limbs flailed, his eyes went blank, and his face became twisted out of recognition. But then, using all the will he possessed, he brought himself back. His eyes focused, he turned to Lyreas, and spoke four words of command.

This time it was Lyreas who cried out, at first weakly, then with a voice I had never heard before. "Dionis! Where are we? What has *happened*?"

Even as Dionis turned to him, Niferas grabbed hold of me. "Destroy me, Jessan," he shouted. "For the love of the Blessed One, destroy me *now*."

He looked me full in the eyes and I saw in his a depth of sorrow beyond anything he had ever shown before. Suddenly I understood everything. My heart was sawn in half by grief's rough-edged dagger; I wished as much as I had ever wished anything that I could take him in my arms—but that was not to be. I had only to look at the boy's face to know that Maerdas was quickly gaining the upper hand.

With a cry of mingled rage and pain, I seized hold of Niferas and, half lifting him, shoved him backwards right to the edge of the rampart, and with a great shove, pushed him over. As I did, I summoned all the power that remained in me and brought down a bolt of lightning like none that had ever struck the earth before. It struck him even as he fell; in a blinding flash, he and Maerdas were but a sift of ash.

The tower sides and the rampart absorbed much of the blast, and the shiny discs embedded in the pillar drew the rogue strands of lightning that had broken away from the main bolt. In spite of that, Dionis, Lyreas, and I were swept off our feet and onto the flagstones. When I opened my eyes, stars flittered wildly before my eyes.

Niccas was shouting something; when it was clear none of us had made out what he had said, he shouted it again. "I must go," he said. "The wraith ghouls are almost upon us! Set the return key into the base of the pillar and return to *Fyrewourmheall...*." The last words of his warning drifted out of empty space. Niccas was gone.

Dionis and Lyreas crawled to where I was, and together we all struggled to our feet. Then my twin and I stared at each other, aghast. Sgryl'grulk had give us but a single medallion.

Those were not stars I had seen dancing before my eyes; they were souls fleeing in terror. And because the wraith ghouls were hurtling towards us from all points of the compass, the terrified souls could only bury themselves in the rubble around us. So what we saw as we looked out was a sea of tiny lights vanishing just below our feet, while streaks of utter blackness ravenously devoured their way toward us,

like sharks cleaving a sea of minnows.

We were all in the clutch of terror, moving backwards step by step toward the pillar. I was only an arm's length from it when, all of a sudden, and clear as day, I had the sense of Sgryl'grulk watching and gloating.

And I understood it all.

"Dionis," I cried. "Light our torches. Light them *now*!" My twin looked at me as though I had lost my mind—it was folly to think we could fight off the wraith ghouls with torches, eve torches made of lignum vitae. But that was not my plan. And when he was slow to reach for his, I ripped it from his belt, and thrust the heads of both, his and mine, into his face.

I had spent my power on the bolt of lightning, but Dionis had plenty enough; in the glint of a moment, both were burning like two little suns.

I shoved on into his hand, and spun him about. "Melt the discs!" I cried. "They're *mythral*!"

That was why the necromancers had come to Ais Dysmassia! It was for the same reason that Maerdas had put a band around Niccas's neck—to draw power. As Maerdas had done, they had artfully split the discs in half, so what entered in one half came out the other. This was how the Eight gained their power: taking it as they wished from the Land of the Dead. Sgryl'grulk was one of them—and now his malice—or, rather, his enjoyment of it—had given them away.

We shoved the torches as close as we dared to the discs in the pillar, one by one, and one by one each disc formed itself into a silver tear, and each of these tears slid down the face of the pillar. And Dionis, who now understood what I did, used his power to guide them into the little declivity where the medallion was meant to fit, and shaped the molten *mythral* into a perfect simulacrum of it, albeit one that was tissue thin.

It was enough. The door opened and we fled through it, then shut it hard on our heels—our ears deafened by the horrid screaming of the wraith ghouls, their stench turning our stomach and loosening our bowels. How close they came to seizing us, though, we'll never know, none of us being so stupid as to even think of glancing over our shoulders.

So, we brought our own stench of fear and shit into *Fyrewourmheall*, and found that the dragons had all returned to assemble there, and made a great clamor when we appeared. Dionis looked at me aand suddenly his face was transformed by a look of righteous fury.

"After what we had just gone through, facing these fire-breathing vipers will be nothing," he shouted into my ear. Then he stepped forward, turned so as to stare boldly up into the disdainful face of Huëfælda, First and Most Ancient, and shouted so loudly and confidently that all the dragons fell silent: "Listen well, ye *fyrewourms*, for I have come from Ais Dysmassia to give you the excoriation you so richly deserve."

END OF BOOK FOUR